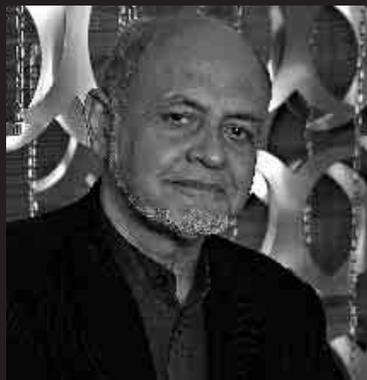
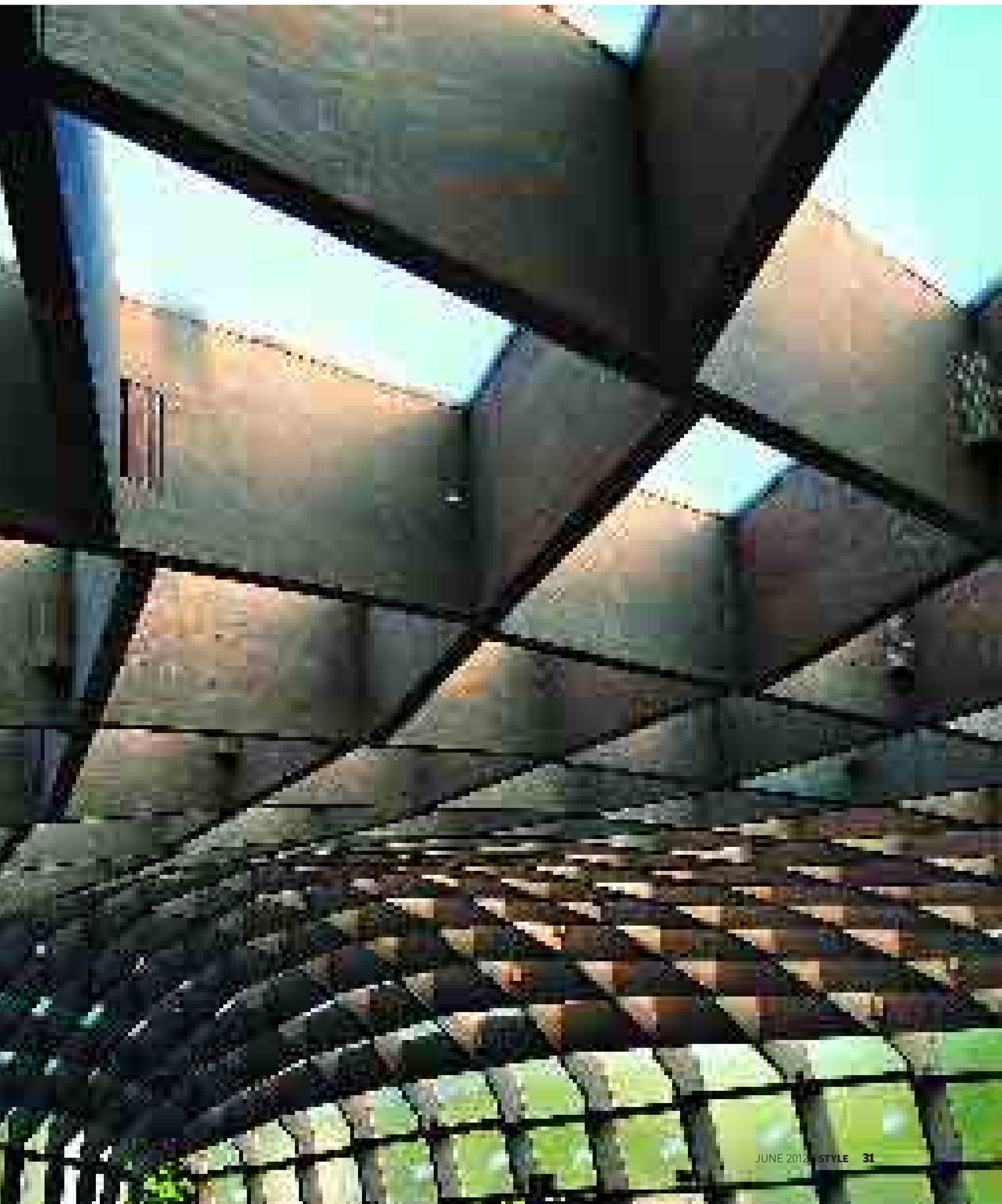
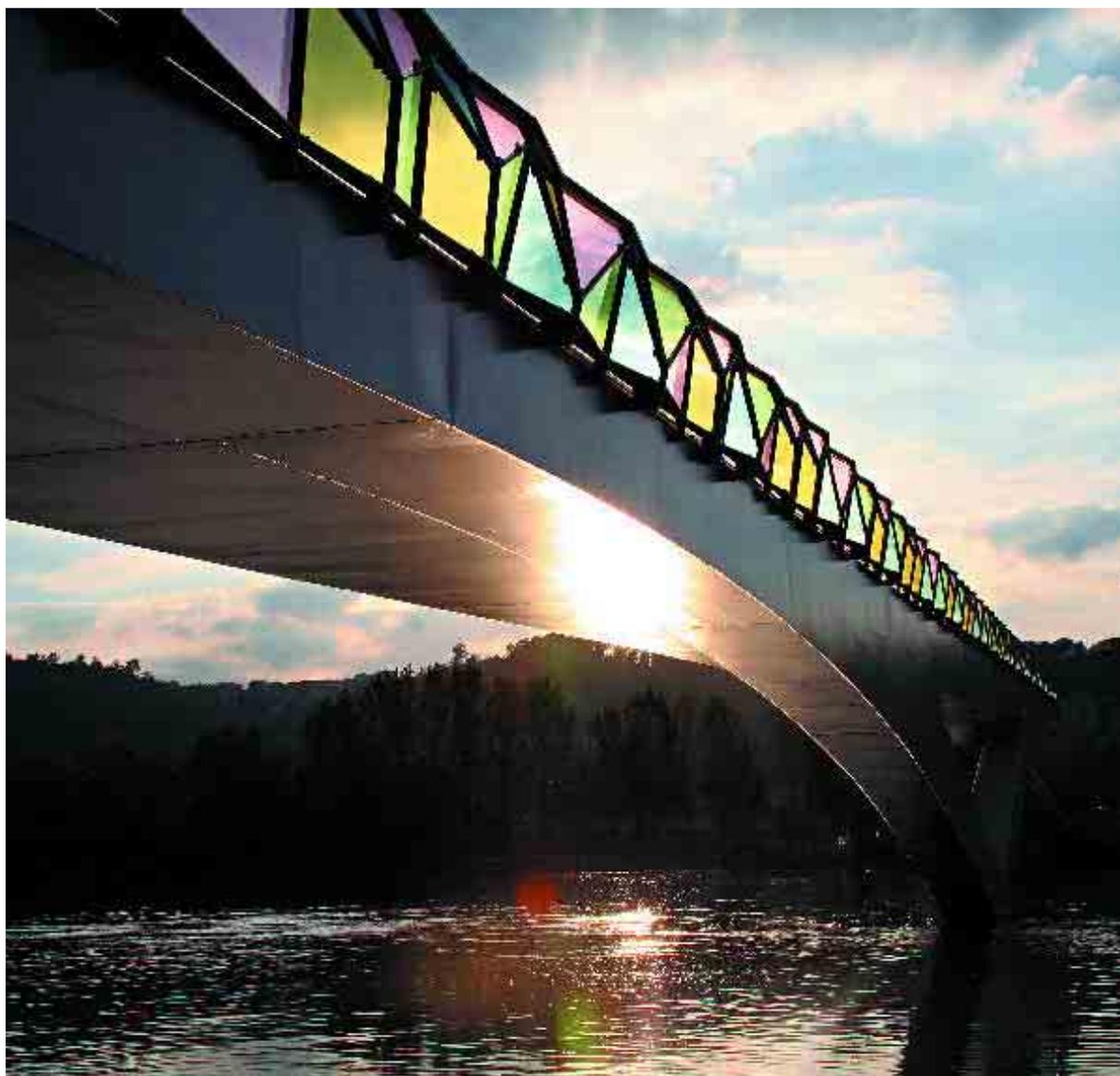


INSPIRED THINKING

At last architect Cecil Balmond is getting the recognition he deserves, writes Daniel Scheffler.







IN THE WORLD of design, two beliefs frustrate Cecil Balmond more than anything. "The assumption that space is empty and can be subdivided and gridded," he says. "And the assumption that straightness is efficient and essential." For a man who has spent most of his career rethinking, reshaping and revolutionising his field, those aren't surprising.

What is surprising is how long it's taken the world to appreciate his talents. With this year's Olympic Games in London, Balmond's collaborative work on The Orbit at the heart of the Olympic Park has garnered much attention. It was only six years ago, in 2006, that the near-70-year old architect and designer stepped out of the shadows and finally claimed a project as his own: the much-celebrated Coimbra Bridge in Portugal. The five decades before were spent toiling away as an "engineer" - industry lingo for "making things possible" - for such

celebrated design names as James Stirling, Rem Koolhaas, Rafael Moneo, Daniel Libeskind and Anish Kapoor.

Not that Balmond really minds; his motivation has always been selfless, not celebrity seeking.

"My goal has always been to establish a firm belief set in non-linearity and its efficiencies, plus aesthetics in architecture and design as a whole," he says. "So that our sense of space is fundamentally altered." In other words: "A better sense of design".

Born and raised in Sri Lanka, Balmond came from a family that embraced creativity. "I began drawing and sketching from a young age, and won a national architectural prize for designing an ideal home villa," he says. "When I was at university, my interest in design kept going, but my interest in engineering only grew later."

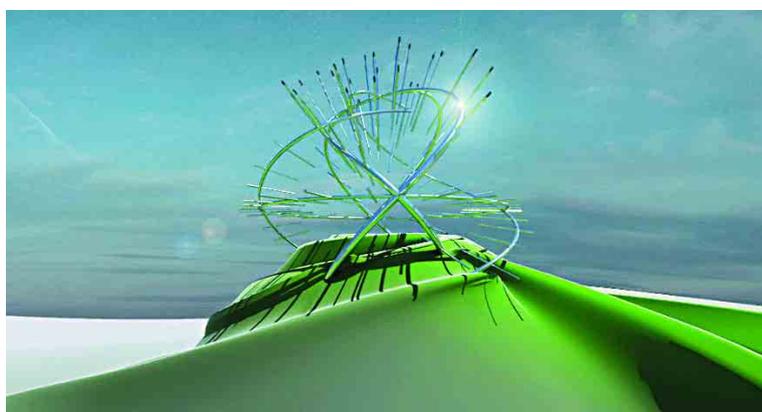
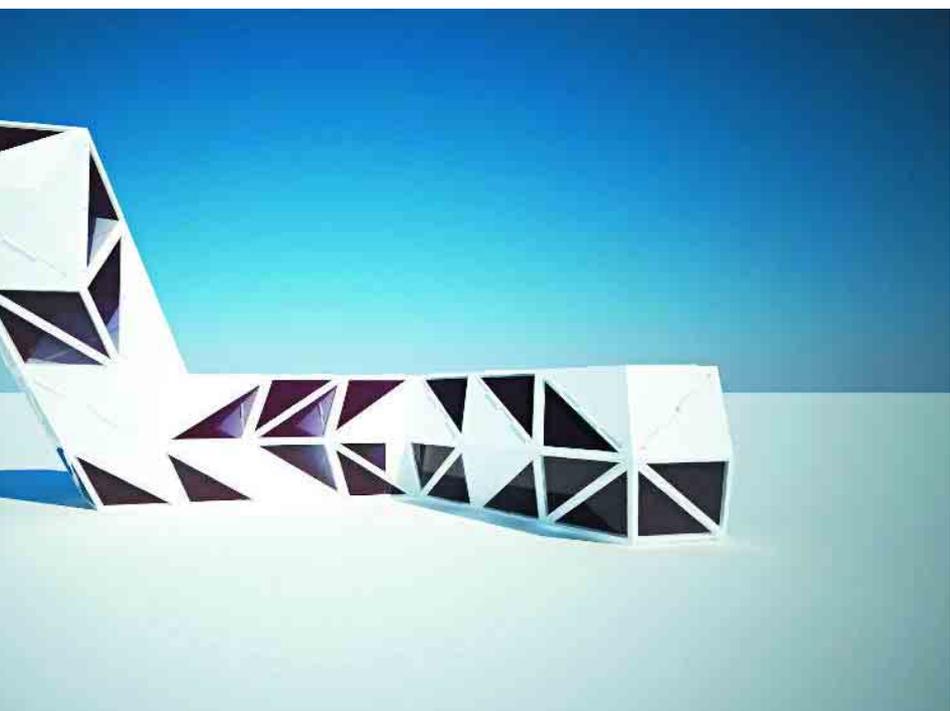
It was a combination of different fields - astronomy, literature, religion - that eventually offered engineering as

a career, and his belief that different art forms inspire each other continues to this day. "The most fertile ground for getting ideas is to read a fine piece of writing or listen to a great piece of music, or visit a place in nature," he says. "This primes me with an urge to create, and usually something happens - but for it to be effective, I need to be alone for at least a few hours."

He lists the works of Da Vinci, Bach and even chess master Bobby Fischer as inspirations, and those few-hour intervals have planted numerous seeds. From the physics defying Coimbra Bridge to the Marsyas sculpture at the Tate; from the warped form of Britain's Serpentine Pavilion to the extreme aesthetic of the China Central Television Headquarters, they've all started as simple ideas but bloomed into some of the world's most stunning pieces of engineered design.

It's Beijing's CCTV tower, completed in 2008 that presented Balmond's

Previous page: Balmond (inset) and his Serpentine Gallery Pavilion. Balmond's other works include (clockwise from left) the Coimbra Bridge in Portugal; Quartz Crystal; Star of Caledonia in Greta, Scotland (due to be completed in 2014); and Danzer at the Tokyo Opera Art Gallery.



greatest challenge and, as a result, his most rewarding experience.

"Standing on the tip of one of the CCTV's cantilevers, seeing the other one being joined up," he says. "It was the realisation of the most monumental and challenging building in the world coming together."

While the extreme growth of China allowed such a project to come into Balmond's hands, it's not solely where he sees his future. "We've just opened an office in Sri Lanka to handle all the work in Asia," he says, which includes three projects in his home country, as well as a few in India and Japan.

There's also his biggest collaborative work yet: the ArcelorMittal Orbit Tower in the Olympic Park, London, with Anish Kapoor. A £19 million, 115-metre observation tower to celebrate this summer's Olympic Games, it took four years to complete and now stands as Britain's largest, and arguably, most eye-catching piece of public art.

What would be his dream development? Most designers would list gargantuan towers or fantastic structures, but Balmond's a little more humble in his ambitions.

"My ideal project is where the most standard typology, like a factory or hospital or routine functional building, can be turned with minimum spatial intervention into a lovely place of occupation and experience," he says. "That a new concept of efficiency is defined by that project."

It's an altruistic aspiration, but one that shares his limitless ambition. Because after more than 50 years in the field, Balmond wakes up each morning, not with a sense of superiority, but with enthusiasm for innovation. "I'm open to a fresh discovery - I expect one and look forward to it. I don't rely on what I already know. There is always something new to learn, a chance for an insight - it's about not feeling you know everything." 

IMAGES MICHAEL MELLA, ALEX FRADKIN, MASAO NISHIKAWA