

INSIDE CECIL BALMOND'S SPACE

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Coimbra Bridge, Portugal



The futuristic artist talks about modern design and challenging the rules of architecture

Whether he's contributing to the 2012 Olympics with Anish Kapoor or creating emergency relief structures, Ceceil Balmond has a unique sense of style.

Tell us about your project with Anish Kapoor - the ArcelorMittal Orbit a 115m observation tower in the Olympic Park.

The Arcelor-Mittal Orbit is not just a viewing platform but it is a narrative in space. The form is one line that goes up and comes back down and as it passes itself, it overlaps and connects. All buildings that go up are simply connected continuously. Here we have a set of points in space joined up with curving lines. For the first time, we have a tall structure that does something different, instead of going up in a line like the Eiffel tower or the Empire State - it's a completely different reading of space. At the entry Anish Kapoor has put in a canopy that obscures the view up. At the top we cut a large hole in the platform so you can look back down. And then there are two mirrors Anish Kapoor has designed for the upper spaces to bring the sky in - it's so much more than a viewing platform.

Your revolutionary modular housing for disaster relief has impressed everyone across India and the East. Tell us more.

The brief was initially for a very high-end market. That still stays but I was interested in also using the idea for shelter homes that could be quickly put up in disaster relief areas. That means we could come out of pre-packaged containers quickly and put it up with minimum framework and some kind of skin for cladding. These forms can be clipped together and built quickly, both in high-rise terms up to three storeys and along the ground. Given the nature of the assembly it can also climb up the side of mountains, so it is very adaptable. I cannot reveal the details yet because they are under patenting by the client.

How much time do you spend in India?

Nowhere near enough. I used to travel a lot to India when I was young, but in the last 20-30 years only 2 or 3 trips as a tourist or making the program for the BBC on the Taj Mahal amongst other famous monuments in the world.

You are often quoted talking about the hidden geometry in the Taj Mahal of Agra. How has that influenced your work?

The hidden geometry of the Taj Mahal is based on the cubic form and the square and the partitioning of the square into thirds, which turns it into what is called a nine-square problem. I have taken these concepts into a contemporary digital format, both into a 2D square and 3D cube where the gridding is a series of algorithms that are leading to amazing forms in my current research. We hope to publish this research from the studio next year.

Tell us more about your work in Sri Lanka and your new studio opening there.

The work in Sri Lanka is mainstream architecture of very large projects. The swimming pool is a particular design of mine that shifts perspective as you keep swimming in it, so it is a testing of certain architectural principles. There is also an area to build an architecture school. This will run for two weeks in spring and two weeks in the autumn where I will be stay and run workshops and also build small prototypes from the teaching. I'm hoping to link up with regional architects from Sri Lanka, India and Malaysia for this in the future.

You've often been described as a mystic. How do you feel about this description when your work is all about precision?

Being brought up in Sri Lanka I have been surrounded with ideas of mystery and magic and I think all good work cannot be reduced to total understanding, there has to be something in it that you can't quite understand. That's not mysticism but it's a kind of deep meditation on form. Certainly that's what I do most of the time, I think deeply about how something can get made.

How do you stay fresh in terms of inspiration and ideas?

By listening to music! And also reading the great exploits of others in the past, such as scientists and artists. It keeps you refreshed because you know there's never an end to finding things and inventing.

You are often dressed all in black. Tell us about your personal aesthetic and style?

I like clothes to be neutral so that I don't have to fuss over them so I can only focus on what's out there and not on me. So black, yes, but equally brown, blue and purple. Dark shades. But black because Johnny Cash wore black. Can't beat him.

Follow Cecil on Twitter: @CecilBalmond and @BalmondStudio

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