In the 30 years since the first issue of Azure, we’ve seen a boom in paradigm-shifting architecture. Here are 10 of the best buildings – à la Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao – that prove how cities can be dramatically transformed by architecture.
In the mid-1960s, Paris planners broke with the city’s architectural traditions to establish a new downtown economic hub, resulting in Tour Montparnasse, a monolithic skyscraper quickly condemned as a visual blight on an otherwise picturesque skyline. So the stakes were high when, two decades later, President François Mitterand launched a competition for a structure that would anchor an all-new economic hub in the city’s less developed northwest corner.

Johann Otto von Spreckelsen’s winning concept opened in 1989, two years after the architect’s death, extending the string of landmarks aligned with the Champs Elysées, from the Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe. The white window-like box of La Grande Arche soon began to draw the energy of the city towards its far-flung district, enticing new hotels and corporate towers like a feeder attracting birds. Today, La Défense is a thriving financial centre: Morphosis’s sinuous Phare tower (http://morphopedia.com/projects/phare-tower) is currently under construction right next door.

Tadao Ando has earned accolades for various reasons, which include bringing global attention to Japan’s post-war architecture and its refined minimalism, and turning reinforced concrete into architectural poetry (http://www.azuremagazine.com/article/tadao-andos-concrete-poetry/). Completed in 1989, the building that achieved both was a modest one, not much bigger than a house, located in a quiet suburb 25 kilometres outside Osaka, Japan. The Church of the Light is made entirely of Ando’s preferred material. Its most striking feature is its east-facing altar, where two gaps between a wall of four concrete slabs allow daylight to seep into the interior in the form of a cross, creating a dramatic contrast between the concrete and weightless light. Ando himself has referred to the effect as an expression of the dual nature of existence. Low-tech and completely devoid of ornaments, the church is one of the most significant contemporary expressions of divinity.
The original Jewish Museum was erected in 1933, and shut down by the Nazis in 1938. Five decades later, in 1988, in an effort to reopen the institution, the Berlin government put out an open call for the design of an addition to the original Baroque building. One year later, it chose Polish-born architect Daniel Libeskind’s concept: a radical zigzag of a building that earned the nickname “blitz.”

It was Libeskind’s first commission and a personal one – his parents were Holocaust survivors. In the basement, visitors encounter three axes symbolizing paths of Jewish life in Germany, including the Holocaust, represented by a 24-metre-high empty silo. The voids in between represent “humanity reduced to ashes.” One of the largest Jewish museums in Europe – and one of Berlin’s most frequented – the structure forms a visual reminder for the jaggedness of Germany’s past. After Libeskind’s creation, other controversial monuments would follow, including Peter Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.
In 2004, Urban-Think Tank (along with architects Matías and Mateo Pintó) pulled off one the most remarkable social development projects of our times: a vertical gymnasium, four storeys in height, inserted into the barrios of Caracas – one of the most densely populated and impoverished areas in the world. Just as it sounds, the gym is a multi-level prefab with the same footprint as a basketball court, though its stacked layers further accommodate space for other fitness facilities, including an indoor soccer area, a weightlifting section and a running track. By building upwards, and with light, bolt-together construction, the gym can be inserted into almost any environment, technically speaking. “You could put it on top of a Wal-Mart if you want to,” says Alfredo Brillembourg, one of the two founders of the firm. Since it opened, crime in the surrounding neighbourhood has dropped 30 per cent, and a second gym has been built. With more than one billion people in the world living in slums – a reality that U-TT tackles in its lab at ETH Zürich – the need for more vertical gyms is clear.
For this historic district site, where an IRA bomb had leveled the Baltic Exchange in 1993, Sir Norman Foster originally proposed what was to be Europe’s tallest building. But plans for his Millenium Tower, unveiled in 1996, were scrapped due to Heathrow’s objections. When the lot was then sold to Swiss Re, Foster refined his tower, and the 41-storey Gherkin was planted. It quickly became a London icon, attracting worldwide attention for its contemporary design and energy-saving methods, which includes an innovative natural ventilation system in which the air shafts built into the floors, the double-glazed operable windows and the passive solar heating system all work in tandem to maximize the building’s energy-efficiency.

Taking the Stirling Prize in 2004, the London Region Award and the Emporis Skyscraper Award, the Gherkin defined a new London, and galvanized the architectural landscape of a business district now populated with other nickname-worthy landmarks, from the Cheesegrater and the Walkie Talkie to the Shard (http://www.azuremagazine.com/article/london-2012-the-shard-defies-its-critics/). As for the Gherkin, it has been sold twice over the past decade; late last year, the Safra Group, of Brazil, picked it up for £700 million.
This out-there extension to Toronto’s premiere art and design school, the Ontario College of Art and Design University, also changed the game in Toronto. Known for its endless stock of glass and steel condo towers and its preference for grey tones rather than exuberant hues, the city had never seen such a playful structure. British architect Will Alsop (in collaboration with local firm Robbie/Young + Wright Architects) propped the two-storey volume, an elongated tabletop clad in an irregular black and white pattern, atop multi-coloured legs. Rising 26 metres, the form floats above a block of low-rise buildings, announcing its presence as a bold addition to a quiet neighbourhood and making itself visible from many other downtown locations (including Azure’s office). Everything about Alsop’s addition screams to be heard, seen and loved, which it most certainly is.
Like an extension of the landscape, the iceberg-like home of the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet appears to rise from the Oslofjord in central Oslo, a waterway leading to the Baltic Sea. It was the largest cultural building constructed in Norway since the 14th century, making it a politically charged project. After a long debate, the country’s legislature held a design competition in 1999, and local firm Snøhetta was announced the winner from 350 entries. Completed ahead of schedule and under budget, the 38,500-square-metre angular structure is covered in white Carrara marble and granite. The firm’s master stroke was to wrap the building in a large plaza that both concert-goers and passers-by could literally scale right up to the playful sloping roof, and enjoy panoramic views of the city and water. Architecture as a continuation of public space – Snøhetta’s big idea changed Oslo, and can be seen in the firm’s other public-friendly buildings across the globe, such as the pavilion for the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York.
Bird’s Nest Stadium, Beijing, by Herzog & de Meuron with Ai Weiwei (2008)

This collaborative project between the Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron and the defiantly activist Chinese artist Ai Weiwei resulted in one of the 21st century’s most inspired structures, combining Chinese tradition with the principles of geometry and dramatic construction. Designed and built for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, the stadium came to represent China’s economic rise and its unstoppable building boom. The stadium’s circular shape is said to represent heaven, while an intricate steel skeleton – designed for seismic stability – evokes the patterns of crackled pottery. With a capacity for more than 90,000, the interior was developed to ensure a clear sightline from every seat. While it is considered one of the most environmentally friendly stadiums in the world, it was not welcomed by many of the locals, many of whom were displaced to allow for its construction.

An organic, rippling form is atypical for a highrise tower, so this 82-storey mixed-use skyscraper made waves for its undulating system of balconies that curve in unpredictable variations, jutting out as far as 3.7 metres in some sections. Inspired by the striated limestone common to the region, principal Jeanne Gang of the Chicago firm Studio Gang not only earned international acclaim and multiple awards for the project, she also became the first woman to design a skyscraper, and in a city famous for its signature towers no less. The nature-inspired shape is not just for show. The balconies provides functional solar shading, and form part of the building’s eco-friendly measures, which also include a green roof (one of Chicago’s largest), energy efficient lighting and rainwater collection systems.
The population of Beijing grew by more than 2.5-million during the 1990s, a rate of urbanization that placed extreme demands on an already densely populated city, and led to a boom in high-rise development. But it wasn’t until a few years ago that the city saw its first real starchitecture in the form of Rem Koolhaas’s China Central Television (CCTV) headquarters – “an alternative to the exhausted typology of the skyscraper,” in the firm’s words. Thanks to a decade-long construction process, the 51-storey building’s seemingly impossible bent-paperclip shape was already iconic long before it was completed to controversy in 2012; other massive mould-shattering projects in Beijing, including Zaha Hadid’s Galaxy Soho, can thank “big pants” (as it is affectionally known locally) for whetting appetites for new and unusual architectural forms.

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