



{ LONDON }

## Architecture *of the Unexpected*

Asif Khan and Pernilla Ohrstedt are celebrated prodigies of London's design scene. They speak for a new generation of architects who believe that boundaries are meant to be crossed. | By Jonathan Lerner

A temporary structure erected for last summer's Olympic Games had all the radiance and vigour of a triumphant medallist. It was composed of several hundred translucent plastic "pillows." They looked as if they'd been joyously tossed in the air—think confetti or pick-up sticks—and then fixed in place as they fell back to earth. The Coca-Cola Beatbox was a corporate pavilion without a logo in evidence (although it was coloured in the brand's signature red and white). It relied on its astonishing appearance and interactive media to engage spectators. ♦ A seductive spiral ramp led in and up for a view over the Olympic park. As they mounted it, people who came into contact with the "pillows" triggered sounds: maybe the squeak of a basketball shoe, an arrow hitting a target, >>>

Photography courtesy Asif Khan and Pernilla Ohrstedt

## Ohrstedt explains the general purpose of the duo's work as "allowing people to reimagine their own surroundings."

or a fleeting sample from "Anywhere in the World," Coke's own hard-driving Olympics anthem.

Visitors found themselves joining in the creation of an aural experience as unpredictable and ephemeral as a stadium erupting into cheers. "You'd just come out from seeing someone do the hundred metres in nine seconds, or you'd seen someone win gold," recalls Asif Khan, one half of the design team behind the Beatbox. "It captured that emotion."

Khan and his collaborator Pernilla Ohrstedt are among the Brightest

Young Things on today's London design scene. Born in 1979 and 1980, respectively, they became friends at architecture school. In the few years since they graduated, they have both been dizzyingly productive, as the following much-abbreviated résumés suggest: Ohrstedt was a designer and

producer at New York's Storefront for Architecture, a cutting-edge exhibition space and think tank, where she co-originated the satellite Pop-Up Storefronts that appeared in London, Milan and Los Angeles. Later she was project director for the Canada Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. Meanwhile, she co-founded FLOCK, a collective aimed at promoting the work of emerging female practitioners in art, architecture and design. Khan has designed a lighting system for an Italian manufacturer and furniture for Malawian schools. He was designer-in-residence at London's Design Museum, and he was named Designer of the Future by Design Miami and one of the *Telegraph's* Amazing 15. In 2011 Khan and Ohrstedt—or Asif and Pernilla, as everyone in the design world breezily calls these whiz kids—established a joint studio to produce the Beatbox.

Everything they do, individually or together, could be called exploration. For the MAXXI/Museum of Modern Art's PS1 Young Architects programme, Khan dreamed up *Cloud*, a kinetic installation that used helium-generated soap bubbles to create a floating,



**Asif and Pernilla**  
The London whiz kids exemplify a new architectural approach, less concerned with conforming to the rules.

employed sand and ice to propose what Ohrstedt calls "a re-reading" of the culture and climate of that city and, by extension, of cities in general. Sand represented the engineered topographies, such as infilled wetlands that extend the boundaries of coastal cities. Ice referred to the 19th-century practice of shipping ice from New England to Singapore, which helped make dense settlement bearable in that sweltering location, as air conditioning does for a warming world today. She explains the general purpose of the duo's work as "allowing people to reimagine their own surroundings. New things are possible; you can change your own setting."

It's not architecture in any traditional sense. The Beatbox is certainly a building, but it has a cheeky radicalism and is also both entertainment venue and marketing tool. *Cloud* and *Future Memory Pavilion* might as easily have been conceived by artists or sculptors. But the work of Khan and Ohrstedt is grounded in architectural concerns. "We have an intrinsic interest," Ohrstedt says, "in looking at spaces, how people live, how environment shapes us, how we shape environments."

These two are not alone in crossing boundaries and merging disciplines. "Younger architects are moving out of the silo mentality of what being an architect is," says Johnny Tucker, editor of the British design magazine *Blueprint*. "Newer generations just don't see the delineation their forebears did." In addition to, or sometimes instead of, making buildings, young people with architectural training and credentials may be found designing

continually fluctuating "ceiling." "If clouds are the simplest way of sheltering from the sun, why can't architecture be light and ephemeral and beautiful like that?" he asks, admitting that "it's slightly tongue-in-cheek as well, because it employs this really familiar and childish material." The piece was reprised in London, with Ohrstedt's help, and also adapted as a Christmas window display for the Paris retailer Colette.

Together they created *Future Memory Pavilion*, installed in a public square in Singapore. It

## Young people with architectural training may be found designing all sorts of “interventions” that often enough are here today and gone tomorrow.

products, events, public sculpture, marketing campaigns and all sorts of other “interventions” that often enough are here today and gone tomorrow. Thus, a young studio in Lisbon, LIKEarchitects, describes its mission as to “involve the community in a critical participation of urban space, having Installation, Happening and Urban Art as daily references,” and is developing a television programme about the use of colour.

Merging disciplines this way is “not a strange role for an architect. We always bring in knowledge and expertise from elsewhere. You have always relied on fabricators, sculptors, stone masons—and you collate all that information,” says Ohrstedt. “In the end it’s about the project, not about which category it ends up in.”

Boundaries between creative professions have become flexible for many reasons. The weak economy is one. “It’s not great times for architects getting commissions, particularly younger architects, and they’ve looked sideways to find ways of expressing themselves,” Tucker points out. Khan terms such initiatives “entrepreneurialism—you generate your own projects, create your own luck really, by being brave.” Meanwhile, digital technology and the Internet are promulgating a global culture in which it seems that anybody can do anything. We’re all publishers now, or critics, or designers, if we want to be.

One symbol of this is that many architectural teams with this outlook are multinational collaborations. A Canadian and a Greek are the principals of Future Cities Lab, which has offices in Athens and San Francisco, and among other things does web design and proposes speculative solutions to ecological crises. In New York, Matthias Hollwich and Marc Kushner, German and American respectively, design not only residential buildings but also merchandising environments, and their installation last summer at the MoMA PS1 Young Architects programme was



### Vaporware

Asif Khan dreamed up *Cloud*—the floating, continually fluctuating “ceiling” made of helium-filled soap bubbles.

simultaneously a sculpture, an event space and an environmental remediation device covered in innovative fabric that neutralises airborne pollutants. In Boston, Eric Höweler, born in Colombia, and J. Meejin Yoon, who is Korean-American, integrate new technologies into their designs for lighting, pop-up buildings and civic spaces. They have also published a book about this approach to architecture called *Expanded Practice*.

Khan is a native Londoner, but his mother is Indian by way of

Tanzania and his father is Pakistani. He says, “I’ve got a Swedish aunt and a Dutch aunt, and my wife’s Japanese. My kids are trilingual. There’s something about having all those potentials which opens your mind up.” Ohrstedt is Swedish, but has lived and worked in several other countries and is now settled in London. “It’s beneficial sometimes not knowing the rules of a place,” she says. “I don’t know the track, so I just have to make up a new direction and find it in collaboration with people I’m inspired by.”

They expect to collaborate again in the future, but Khan and Ohrstedt are now pursuing independent work. For London’s Fall 2012 Fashion Week, Ohrstedt designed a catwalk stage set for the fashion label Antipodium—“an exploration into the relationship between the wall of a building and the skin of a person”—as well as hair combs for the models to wear. Khan is involved in an effort to establish a new university in South Africa. “And that’s not even architecture,” he says. “What we do is not a stylistic thing. It’s about using a different way of thinking to make amazing things happen.”

“They bring that wider thinking to bear on everything they do,” says *Blueprint’s* Tucker, who admires how Khan and Ohrstedt have “telescoped” their accomplishments into a few years. Looking forward? “I expect quite a lot from them,” he says. **AS**

**Jonathan Lerner** is a New York-based writer whose work has appeared in *Metropolitan Home*, *Travel + Leisure* and *Town & Country*.