

THE PATH OF KHAN

There was a sense of shock when it was announced that Asif Khan was in the running to design the new Guggenheim in Helsinki, one of six shortlisted firms for this most coveted of projects. Who was the man behind this east London studio, who despite a slim portfolio of built work, was hearing his name spoken of in the same breath as those two legendary Franks – Gehry and Lloyd Wright?

But those who knew Khan's work were not surprised. His Beatbox pavilion for Coca Cola at the London 2012 Olympics – a dead-ringer for Superman's Fortress of Solitude in the 80s films – was a smash hit with the public. Its interactive walls throbbled with samples from DJ Mark Ronson every time you touched them. More importantly, by allying himself with corporate sponsors, the project was credited to Khan (and then-partner Pernilla Ohrstedt) on a signboard alongside it, a feat bigger names such as Zaha Hadid and Hopkins

had failed to emulate because of the Olympics promotion ban.

There was another sign of great things to come when Khan won a Cannes Lions award in June for his MegaFaces pavilion at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Another interactive 'building', it scanned visitors' faces and recreated them in three dimensions on its facade using thousands of telescopic cylinders. The project was largely ignored by the architectural press, but his victory in Cannes was significant. Why? Because Cannes Lions is the world's biggest annual awards show in the communications industry, and architects and their work just don't figure there. Other winners, for example, include Pharrell Williams, and a Volvo advert starring Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Such company, however, is normal for Khan. As well as building for Coca Cola, he has blogged for Vogue.com, been a designer in residence at the Design Museum and – just last week – was shortlisted for the 'Olympicopolis'

cultural scheme at Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. But Khan is also remodelling a school playground in London's impoverished Tower Hamlets, working with both the pupils and their parents. It is this mix of local grit with international glamour that sets him apart from his east London peers, whose ambitions in comparison look introverted and slight.

Khan is an ideas man whose work blends architecture with technology, branding with PR, the physical with the virtual, and pop-art with populism. You could argue that this strategy – which has included carrying the Olympic torch during its tour of Britain – signals the future for a profession lost in space.

For those of us who have been watching his ascent, Khan designing the next Guggenheim seems a logical quantum leap. It is, of course, pure happenstance that he shares a surname (almost) with a bona fide starchitect of old.

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