Cerebral design for Hebrew University's new brain science building

This week the cornerstone will be laid for the building, designed by Fosters + Partners, which will be sheathed in cast aluminum netting shaped like a network of neurons. But the London firm's Spencer de Grey explains why one can't design an iconic building in advance.

By Keshet Rosenblum, Ha'aretz

On Thursday the cornerstone will be laid for the new Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Brain Sciences at the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, designed by the London firm of Foster + Partners. Head of design Spencer de Grey, one of the five partners piloting this great ship ? which has more than 1,000 employees around the world ? is waiting impatiently for his approaching visit to Israel.

"Rather a miserable day," he says in a phone conversation from his office in London. "Well, it's not like Jerusalem, I'm afraid. Cold and gray."

In the course of his flying visit of under 24 hours, de Grey will deliver a lecture about the firm's work Tuesday in the framework of Cinema and Brain Week at the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

This is Foster + Partners' first project in Israel. Their invitation was a rather odd choice on the part of Hebrew University, which wanted to bring a foreign super-firm straight to the meticulous landscape of modernist architecture at Givat Ram, a choice that sprang in part from the desire to encourage fundraising.
"I'm ashamed to say," says de Grey, "that when I first came to the university I didn't know a great deal about the architecture, but I was entranced by the wholesome architectural style and the relationship of the buildings and the rather beautiful landscape and the location. I thought it was absolutely amazing? it's a very beautiful place and it's a great privilege to be building a building there."

De Grey, 69, has been an integral part of Foster + Partners for four decades now. Before becoming a partner at the start of the 1990s (when the firm changed its name from Foster Associates) he established and led the firm's local branch in Hong Kong. Today he is in charge of the area of design and is one of the three founding partners, along with Norman Foster and David Nelson. At the London office alone, he says, there are 900 employees, and another 150 or so scattered at the firm's branches? in Hong Kong, Beijing, Abu Dhabi, Madrid and New York. The three founding partners, along with senior partners Mouzhan Majidi and Stefan Behling, personally supervise the hundreds of employees and the projects running at the office at any given moment.

"It works very well," says de Grey, "because I think the most important thing is maintaining high design standards and I think that the review process is the best way we've found of maintaining design standards. And we believe very passionately that when you approach Foster + Partners to do a building? that you get a Foster + Partners building. And that, to do that when you are working overseas, is not easy."

A green spine

The project in Jerusalem, which will be completed in another two to three years and is going up with the help of the Israeli firms Baer, Shifman-Nathan Architects and Sherman Architecture & Programming Ltd., will be built on an area of a bit more than 10 dunams and will include laboratories, classrooms, a lecture room and a research center. Though the building will contain laboratories specifically for brain research, in de Grey's opinion the greatest importance of the building is in the common spaces.

Though the first images that were published upon the selection of the firm showed a building with rounded walls reminiscent of an eye, the building that will actually go up is a rectangular building with a wide roof, divided in two at its center by a spacious courtyard. The ground floor, most of the walls of which are transparent, will serve as a public space with a cafeteria, study centers and sitting corners. The courtyard will be covered by a transparent roof during the winter.

"The ability to use outdoor space," he says, "adds a new dimension to the architecture. Here in London we can never presume that the weather is good enough to plan a building around being outdoors. So I think what makes this building is partly the Jerusalem climate."

The prominent location of the building, on the main axis of the campus, motivated the desire to create a building through which visitors to the university will pass and to whom it will be exposed, in part by means of works of art that will be displayed there. The façade of the building, which will include a large number of solar panels, will be sheathed in cast aluminum netting shaped like a network of neurons, testifying to the contents of the building.

Was your aim to create an iconic building?

"I'm very nervous about the use of the word iconic," says de Grey, "because I think? I am absolutely convinced? that when Jorn Utzon built the Sidney Opera building he didn't set out to build an iconic building. I am sure he set out to build a very good building, a first-class, excellent building. But I would be surprised if the word 'iconic' entered his vocabulary. I think 'icon' is a state that is after a building has been built for many years. I think it's something that emerges in time whether the building is iconic or not. I think
it's a word that is being misused rather a lot at the moment.

"Having said that? I think the building is an important building in the university. It's one of the strongest departments in the university and it will be a statement of the importance of brain research in Jerusalem? so all these things are critical for us as architects to respond to. But I think also we were very keen to build a building related to the overall sort of feel of the campus, and I think the campus has a strong integrity of buildings that relate to a landscape and raise the form of a green spine in the middle which is the high point of the site and the buildings are arranged on either side. I think we very much wanted to maintain that."

However, the firm of Foster + Partners is a serial creator of iconic buildings? the very fact of the choice of such a firm arouses certain expectations.

"But I think you can't set out to design an iconic building. You can set out to design? and I hope we always do? a good building, but I think it's the public and critics after a building has opened who give it the title icon or not? and it's interesting because it has been so very commonplace now for some clients to come and say they want an iconic building. You can say you want a very strong building with a strong image? it's absolutely fine? and I think it's very difficult to do, but simply using the word 'iconic'? it's the word that's not correct, that's all. It's a cliché."

How can such a large firm work in changing local contexts?

"All our buildings are very different from each other and this is partly if not mainly due to the fact that when you build in a particular locality, I think you have to try to understand the traditions and the influences of the locality you work in. And of course another thing you've got to take into account is the climate? designing a building in London is very different from designing a building in Israel. We very much avoid having a sort of universal module that we apply across the world? that we fight very hard and we don't think this is the right way to approach the international world. And of course, it is quite difficult in the relatively short period of time during which you are developing a strategic design at the beginning of a project, to absorb...local customs, local trades, local design." Some clients, he notes, want this done very quickly. "We don't believe in just importing northern European design into other countries," he says.

The architecture produced by Foster + Partners could be defined as corporate architecture in the spirit of high tech with extensive use of materials like metal and glass. In London, the firm's home city, Foster + Partners created a number of buildings that can indeed be called icons, among them the Millennium Bridge, the London City Hall and one of the outstanding landmarks in the city? the Swiss Re building, known as the Gherkin, which was completed in 2004 and garnered the prestigious Stirling Prize. However, alongside projects like these, the firm specializes in re-readings and new interpretations of historic buildings. Most famous among these are the Reichstag dome in Berlin, the British Museum in London and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

Despite the vast experience accumulated around the world, de Grey says the fact of building in Jerusalem is especially exciting for the firm. "I think building in Jerusalem is a fascinating change? obviously it has an incredible history but it has an incredible, sort of, uniformity? the use of the Jerusalem stone," he explains. "It's very powerful coming there for the first time, it's incredibly sort of consistent. I can hardly think of another city that is so much one piece. Even though the buildings date from all sorts of different times, it's very integrated, and as an architect I particularly enjoy that."
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