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Exhibition - Building A Future

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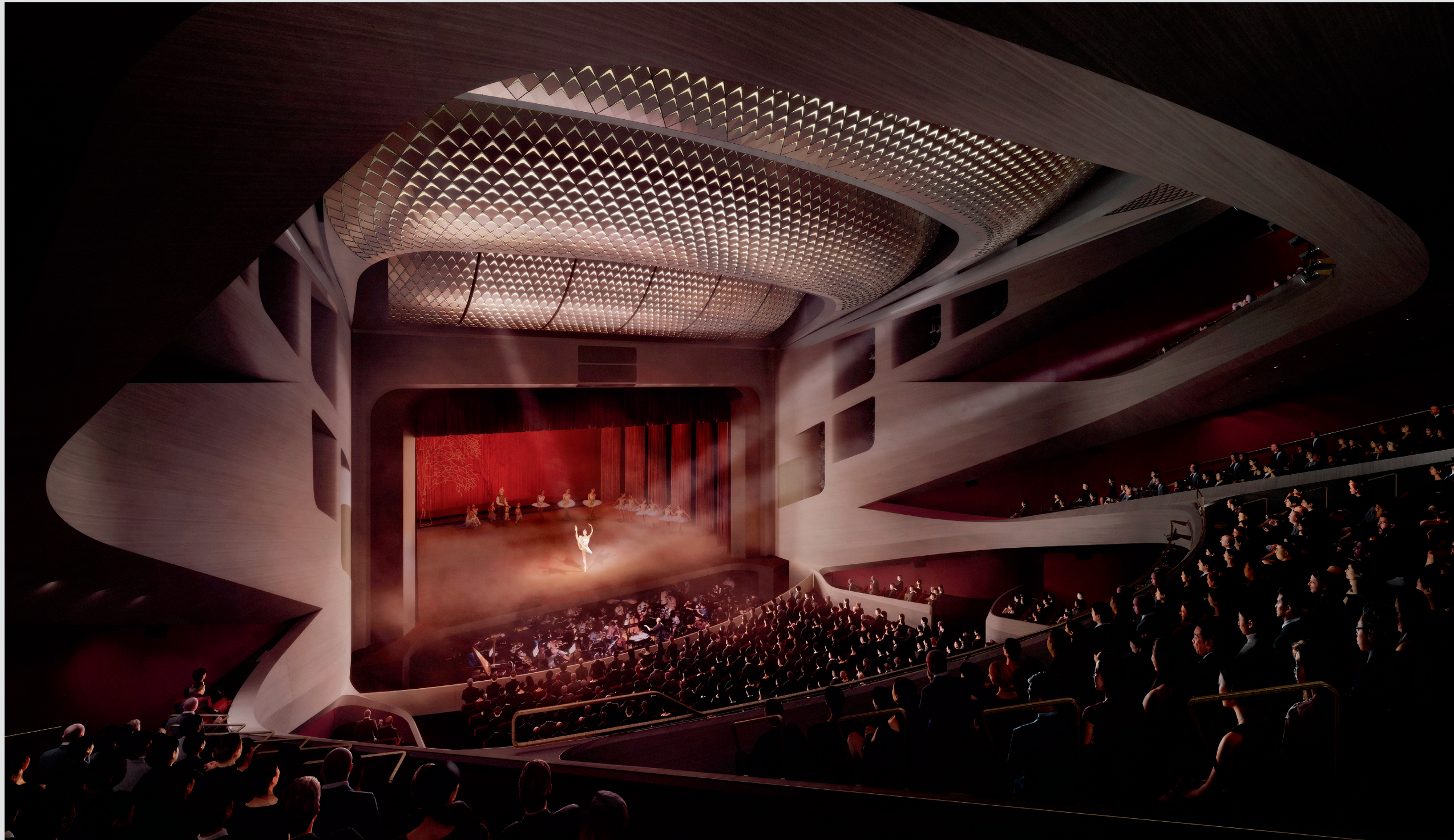


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Ben van Berkel@USM

Building A Future

築夢未來

Text by Zabrina Lo Images courtesy of UNStudio
(All for Lyric Theatre. Renderings by DBOX. Masterplan image : © WKCD A)

Ben van Berkel and Hannes Pfau, the brains behind Hong Kong's ambitious Lyric Theatre set to open in mid-2025, look at the future of architecture and its impact on the cultural sphere and global health.
西九文化區將於 2025 年年中為演藝綜合劇場揭幕，本刊專訪了宏偉建築的幕後功臣，了解他們對未來建築、文化與全球健康的獨特見解。

"I've been reading this urban design book called Happy City by Charles Montgomery, who thinks that Hong Kong is one of the happy cities because of how accessible the urban area is to the countryside," said Ben van Berkel, the founder and principal architect of Amsterdam-based architectural firm UNStudio, who was in town for a week in mid-July this year. His visit to the city, however, came with different reasons for excitement: as well as stopping by his newly renovated and expanded Hong Kong office in Central, he was here to check the progress of the biggest cultural project he has ever undertaken in his 25 years of practice—the Lyric Theatre in West Kowloon Cultural District.

Set to open in mid-2025, the theatre,

which planning and construction started in 2014, will be Hong Kong's first permanent arts space dedicated to dance. It boasts a large-scale theatre with 1450 seats for dance shows, a 600-seat medium theatre for spoken performances, a 270-seat studio theatre for experimental theatre productions, 8 dance and rehearsal studios for resident dance companies and another large rehearsal room connected to the main stage.

"It is not only a lyric theatre," says Van Berkel. "If you want to have a normal theatre experience, it is possible here. Or if you want to stage a musical, you can. These are all part of how the team is showing [that this space has] incredible flexibility." Hannes Pfau, the partner and

senior architect in charge of UNStudio's Asia branch UNSAsia, adds, "We are very happy that the dance community in Hong Kong can enjoy such facilities soon, because they have always had the problem of not finding the space to rehearse and perform and the dance groups have been quite scattered across the city."

Compared to the rest of the arts venues in West Kowloon, this theatre is specifically designed to accommodate the needs of dance artists. For instance, the large rehearsal room is installed with seats that can retract to create more space for dance rehearsals when the public does not use it. "You can adjust it to different forms," Van Berkel explains. "In a [typical] circumstance, dancers can get stage-ready in this rehearsal space, which is right next to the stage, and can just move inside when it's time for the performance."

The rest of the theatre space is also designed in accordance with the international standards laid out unofficially by a community of top dance companies around the world: the seat sizes for comfort, the optimal sightlines, the size of the backstage, an enormous tower for storing props and art supplies; and the transportation area for trucks that can go directly onstage to unload decorative materials.

The team has further sunk the large auditorium below the ground level so as to connect it with the airport via the underground transportation system. "When it comes to where the theatre stands [on the ground], it's just half the size of the whole complex," says Pfau.



Hannes Pfau@USM

"The Lyric Theatre is so different from all the other theatres we've worked on in the rest of the world."

Given the theatre's proximity to the dense network of underground and road traffic, the theatre's acoustics control becomes a great challenge. To tackle this, the complex sits on almost 650 giant springs that protect the venue from vibrations. "The three big theatre spaces can operate at the same time on a recording studio level," Pfau says.

Van Berkel adds that meeting the international standards is important to creating a world-class theatre in Hong Kong that will host events by visiting companies. He names the National Dutch Ballet as an example, which tours different cities to perform and has particular requirements for theatres to realise their artistic visions. "But not all the cities are up to date with the latest international standards," he says. "So we even go beyond the international standards [at the Lyric Theatre] because we predict these will change over the years."

But the team doesn't stop at the technical support for performances. They feel that this state-of-the-art theatre can have a breakthrough in deepening the connection between dance artists and spectators. Pfau explains that in traditional grand theatres, the auditorium and the stage are separate, and the balcony, most of the time, is located behind the circle; experimental theatres, invented in the 1960s, move the stage to the centre of the auditorium so that the audience surrounds the performance.

For this Lyric Theatre, the team has moved the stall seats so close to the stage that the stall audience sits right in front of the orchestra. The balcony is built over the lower layer of the seating area. "In this way, you have more audience members in the balcony who look at the performance [from above] and a few right above the stage," he explains. "This is a one-of-a-kind setup."

Even when it comes to the overall design of the theatre, the team has made an emphasis on the public theatrical experience. The entrance is designed with a decompression zone, where there is noise reduction to create a calming mood for visitors before they see a show. There are also several levels of interconnected lobbies in the building, which are installed with curved staircases that resemble runways. This setup gives visitors in the lower lobbies the illusion that they are at the centre of a stage being looked at by visitors on the balcony levels. "When you step into this building, it's as if you enter a different reality with an uplifted feeling. The whole public space is all about the visitors becoming the performance too," says Pfau.

The building is set against the panorama of Victoria Harbour, which serves as a stunning backdrop. The theatre has an internal walkway that directs visitors from the Artist Square to its north to the waterfront to its south. Pfau says, "The theatre has been designed from the inside out and from the outside in. From the outside in, we want the Lyric Theatre to highlight what Hong Kong is. When you enter the building, you always go towards its waterfront side and you always have the skyline of Hong Kong with you." Then, as visitors head out and look back at the theatre, the façade, which is made of brass and wood, evokes the image of theatre curtains in a subtle way.



As well as aesthetics, the Lyric Theatre comes with a broad spectrum of functionality. The complex, which will be the first building that visitors see in West Kowloon, has an information and ticketing centre and F&B venues. "It's basically the business hub of the district," says Pfau.

Van Berkel, who also teaches architecture at Harvard University in the US, observes that multidisciplinary buildings like the Lyric Theatre is "a whole new thing right now in the world," which he believes the world should adopt, especially a dense city such as Hong Kong where space is precious. Existing examples in his practice include university campuses, which are asking for multi-faculty buildings to facilitate students and scholars to move between departments to exchange knowledge. He believes this concept can be expanded to the city. "You can make cities more interactive by creating spaces where people can meet and do things together," he says.

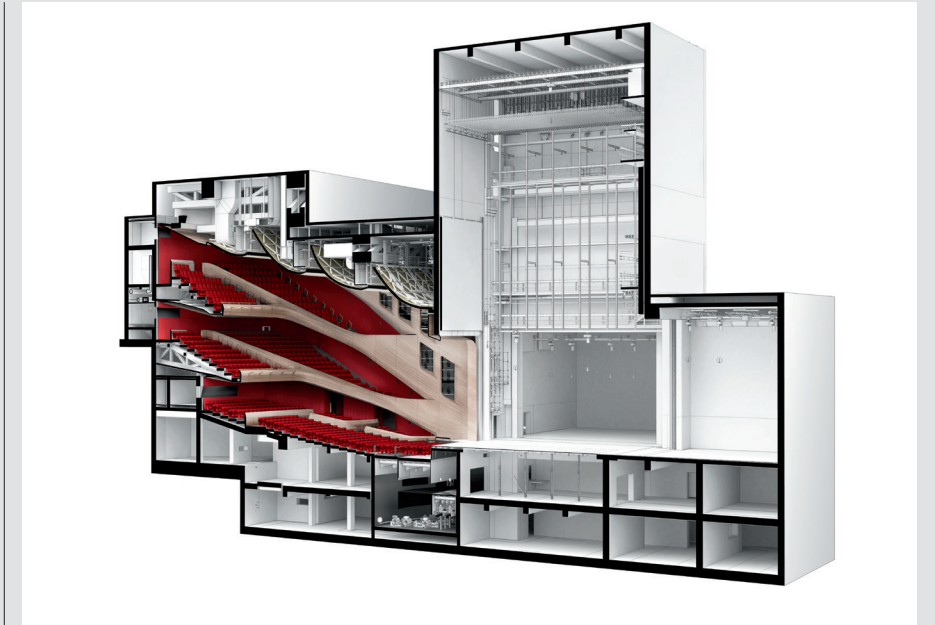
UNStudio launched UNSFutures a few years ago as a strategic design agency in which its team of "futurists" specialises in mixing together design, communications and technology and works with other departments of UNStudio to bring these potential visions into reality. Some of its projects include incorporating European Hyperloop train stations with cities and towns of different sizes (a vision in 2018 in Hardt, the Netherlands) and coming up with a hybrid of domestic and office environments in the age of digital nomads (a collaborative project with Swiss furniture brand USM in Milan, Italy in 2018). "We believe in changing the way we live, work and consume culture. In the case of Hong Kong's Lyric Theatre, it's designed as a cultural hub instead of just a theatre," Pfau says.

Sustainability is another aspect that UNStudio focuses on today. In December 2021, they completed a building at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, which solar panel roof creates more energy than it needs and generates energy for other buildings in the neighbourhood. The building is 80% circular, meaning all the steel elements have been designed so that they can be taken apart for reuse.

But what Van Berkel believes hasn't been thought through within the industry is how architecture can have a huge impact on public health. "Before the Covid pandemic, my co-professors at Harvard said I was crazy to do research on health because it was not an [architectural] academic topic," he says. "But I believe it is necessary to look into the future as architects."

While in the medical world, there are research projects on public health and longevity. Van Berkel believes that architects, who usually design urban spaces and buildings with considerations for the next 5 to 10 years, have a considerable part to play. These considerations can be anything from adding stairs or walkways that encourage an active lifestyle to modify ventilation systems in buildings to reduce the risk of pandemics.

The architectural world's impacts on health can be further expanded to the mental and social aspects. Van Berkel names the headquarters of booking.com in Amsterdam as an example. "Its office isn't a traditional work environment anymore. A post-occupancy research shows that people



who worked there felt that they were in a resort or a university," he says. "So you're not sitting behind your desks anymore but in breakout spaces. Your community building is very important. In the future, health and the environment will be fully integrated." To this end, UNStudio and UNSFutures continue to actively seek mixed use projects that target the enhancement of people's quality of life, community integration and workspace efficiency.

"I'm not saying that everything that architects do can be predictable. I'm not saying we can predict the future," says Pfau. "But we have to train ourselves to think how the world is going to evolve."

Both architects believe that technology, artificial intelligence and parametric designs can help—and long in the architectural world have helped—come

up with brilliant suggestions. "But the role of an architect remains important," says Pfau, who teaches at the University of Hong Kong. He advises the next generation: "As an architect, you still need to provide a human solution to the problems of a human society. Use technology as a tool to get there but not as a solution. Technology can never replace this integrity of your profession and what you believe it should be."

Ben van Berkel 是阿姆斯特丹建築公司 UNStudio 的創始人兼首席建築師，最近他在《Happy City》一書讀到香港因為交通便利而被視為快樂城市。然而，他7月中到訪香港卻有其他快樂的原因：除了為中環辦事處擴張誌慶，也巡視了西九文化區演藝綜合劇場的工程進度。這是他25年事業中最大型的文化工程。

演藝綜合劇場由2014年開始規劃建設，2025年年中落成後，將是香港首個以舞





蹈為主題的永久藝術空間，設有三個分別可容納1,450人、600人和270人的劇場，可供舞蹈、話劇和實驗戲劇等演出，還有8個方便駐留舞蹈團使用的排練室，以及另一個與主舞台相連的大型排練室。

Van Berkel 表示：「這裡不只是演藝劇場，除了一般戲劇和音樂劇，還有許多意想不到的靈活性。」UNStudio 的亞洲分部，公司合夥人兼高級建築師 Hannes Pfau 補充說：「香港的舞蹈界一直面對排練和表演場地不足的問題，城中的舞蹈團也不集中，但是他們很快就能享受到演藝綜合劇場的新設施。」

有別於西九其他場地，演藝綜合劇場專門為舞蹈藝術家而設計。大型排練室安裝了伸縮式座椅，方便騰出更多排練空間。Van Berkel 解釋說：「座位可靈活編排，一般的設定是舞者的準備場，只要稍移玉步就能進入相連的主舞台，投入正式演出。」

劇場的世界級設備還參考了國際頂級舞團的意見，包括舒適的座椅尺寸、最佳視線、後台大小、存放道具和美工物品的大樓、方便直接把裝飾建材送到舞台的上落貨區。

團隊更特別把大禮堂降至低於地面，方便透過地下運輸系統與機場連接。Pfau 說：「演藝綜合劇場的地上建築只佔整體一半，與我們在世界其他地方的劇場工程有很大分別。」

劇場靠近高度密集的地下和道路交通網絡，音響控制難免是重大挑戰。為了回應這個難題，建築物底座安裝了近 650 個巨型彈簧來提升避震效果。Pfau 說：「三個演出場地可以同時公演劇目，音響效果媲美錄音室。」

Van Berkel 補充指，香港這個世界級劇院必須與國際標準接軌，因為日後將迎來很多國外藝團。他以荷蘭國家芭蕾舞團的巡演為例，為了呈現舞團的藝術願景，對劇院也有很高要求。他說：「並

非所有城市都符合最新國際標準。所以我們追求超越現有標準，加強劇場與時俱進的能力。」

建築團隊還多走一步，構思這個走在前沿的劇院如何在加深舞蹈家和觀眾聯繫方面作出突破。Pfau 解釋指，傳統大劇院會把舞台與禮堂分隔，樓座大多位於堂座之後。至於1960年代才發明的實驗劇院，則把舞台置中，以便觀眾包圍表演。團隊設計演藝綜合劇場時，把堂座放到舞台幾近零距離的地方，就在管弦樂隊的正前。樓座安排於較低層座位之上。他說：「這種編排讓更多觀眾在樓座高空觀演，還有部份觀眾就在舞台正上方，是獨一無二的設置。」

在整體設計方面，團隊也強調公眾的賞劇體驗。例如入口設有降噪減壓區，可營造觀演前的平靜氣氛。建築物內還有幾層設有由旋轉樓梯貫通的大廳，或會令下層大廳的觀眾產生自己位於舞台中央，正為樓座觀眾表演的錯覺。Pfau 說：「走進這座建築時尤如進入另一境界，觀眾都成了公共空間的表演者。」

演藝綜合劇場南臨西九海濱，背景是絕美維港，場內設有行人通道，從北至南連接藝術廣場與海濱。Pfau 說：「我們希望透過劇場突顯香港本色。觀眾步進大樓時一定會朝海的一方，香港的天際線就在眼前。」離場後回望的風景，是黃銅與木材建成的外牆，就像劇院中的帷幕。

美學以外，演藝綜合劇場還具備各式各樣的功能。綜合大樓是人們第一幢看到的西九建築，設有資訊與票務中心和餐飲場所。Pfau 說：「那就是西九的商業中心。」

Van Berkel 是哈佛大學的建築學教授，據他觀察，演藝綜合劇場是「當今世上的嶄新跨界建築」，值得推廣採納，尤其香港一類人煙稠密、寸金尺土的城市。他的建築師行便看過大學校園要求多學院的大樓，方便不同學系的學生與學者交流知識。他認為此概念可以延伸到全城層面。「有凝聚力的新建空間，能大大提升

城市互動。」

UNStudio 旗下的策略設計公司 UNStudio 設有「未來主義」團隊，專注結合設計、通訊和科技，令願景成真。得意之作包括2018年荷蘭 Hardt 公司把歐洲超迴路列車車站與不同規模城鎮合併；同年在米蘭與瑞士傢俱品牌 USM 合作，為數碼游牧民族設計出家居辦公混合環境專案。Pfau 說：「人類的生活、工作和消費文化方式應有所改變。好像演藝綜合劇場便從劇院升格，透過設計成為完整的文化樞紐。」

UNStudio 同樣關注永續發展。2021年12月，他們在荷蘭代爾夫特理工大學完成了一座大樓，屋頂安裝了太陽能電池板，能產生多於大數所需的電力，甚至可為附近其他建築物供電。這座大樓有八成呈圓形，所有鋼構件都可以拆開重新使用。

然而，Van Berkel 有感業界仍未想通建築如何影響公眾健康。他說：「在新冠肆虐前，哈佛的同事認為我一定是瘋了才會進行與建築學無關的健康研究。但我認為建築師有需要放眼未來。」

Van Berkel 指出，既然建築師在設計城市空間和建築物時，一般會考慮未來5到10年的變化，他們參與公共衛生和長壽研究其實能發揮重要作用，例如增設樓梯或行人通道來鼓勵保持身體活躍，又或改建通風系統以降低疫症風險。

建築界對健康的影響可以擴展到精神和社交方面。Van Berkel 以 booking.com 的阿姆斯特丹總部為例。「辦公室捨棄傳統工作環境，企業進駐後的調查發現，使用者覺得自己身處度假村或大學。人們工作時不再因於固定辦公桌，而是在走到不同討論區，致力和其他同事建立社群、互相交流，可見健康與環境將會在未來全面融合。」UNStudio 和 UNStudio 將繼續尋找其他混合用途的專案，積極提高人類生活質素、社群整合，還有工作空間的效率。

Pfau 說：「我不是說建築師的所有工作都可以預測，又或者自己能預知未來。但我們必須訓練自己思考世界將如何發展。」

兩位建築師都認為，科技、人工智能和參數化設計將有助構思更精彩的想法。在香港大學任教的 Pfau 寄語新一代：「建築師的角色仍會非常重要，我們仍然需要想出人性化的解決方案，為人類社會解決問題。科技只應視為輔助工具而不是解決方案，因為它永遠無法取代你的職業誠信。」

