

# Climbing a mountain from different sides

In the transdisciplinary process of Snøhetta, various professionals – from architects to graphic designers, product designers to interior designers – exchange roles in order to explore differing perspectives. *Nook* spoke with *Kjetil Thorsen* and *Craig Dykers*, two of Snøhetta's founders, about how this stimulating new way of working leads to deeper content.

Under is more than a magnificent underwater restaurant in the south of Norway; it also functions as a marine biological research centre. Photo: Ivar Kvaal



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The idea behind changing roles is to build empathy for each other's perspectives.

N: *Could you explain how this idea of changing roles was born?*

KT: In 1989 we started as a landscape and architectural practice because we believed that landscape architecture could be a possible end product of architecture. At that time there was no real coherence between the two. The general idea was "if there's anything left in the budget then we'll spend it on trees or objects around the buildings." We thought about what would happen if we start integrating landscape and architecture into one. How would that impact the decision-making processes for defining new typologies of architecture?

professionals exchange roles in order to explore differing perspectives. You leave your professional responsibilities behind and bring your knowledge base as a person into the creative process. Someone's personal interest in music, dance, or art can be valuable in informing the process. Later, in the design and production phase, everybody returns to their own profession. I compare this to how orchestras sometimes rehearse. The players shift instruments in rehearsals, for instance, for a trumpet player to get a sense of the forces in the strings of a violin or the other way around.

N: *So in this process the graphic designer can take the role of the architect?*

KT: Yes, but not in the actual drawing or production phase. The graphic designer is not going to draw the stairs of a building, but we bring them on board to use the

person's skill in the creative process of creating these stairs. We release ourselves from disciplinary conventions or habitual thinking and seek to enlarge our perspectives. We are quite keen on trying to figure out how we can climb a mountain from different sides.

N: *Is the idea behind this to build empathy for each other's perspectives? Does it foster good collaboration in the office?*

KT: It does, but it is also stressful. People have different work methodologies, different education, or cultural background. So this cannot work without an overall culture in the office where you continuously follow up this diversity of thinking with people coming from different locations, training, or religious backgrounds. You have to utilise this kind of drive or force that comes out of this diversity. It's both extremely giving and extremely hard.

N: *When it works, it must be very good for the morale in the workplace.*

KT: Definitely. One of the reasons why we were doing this is so when our employees come home after work, they feel the day has been worthwhile because they discovered something new. It's part of lifelong learning. It pushes the individual and the collective. You need forces to work against; it shouldn't be just a smooth ride. If it is smooth, you probably become ignorant of the result.

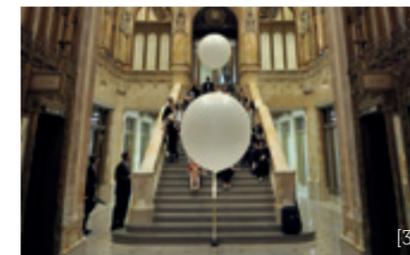
N: *Does your design methodology produce smarter, unexpected design solutions?*

KT: I would say solutions with deeper content. For instance, the library of Alexandria in Egypt, where we collaborated with the artists *Jorunn Sannes* and *Kristian Blystad*. For this project, with support from the Norwegian Aid Agency (NORAD), we taught a new generation of Egyptian artisans stonemasonry. This allowed us to actually reopen an old quarry. We taught twenty young Egyptians how to hand-carve stone walls and split stones.

[1,2,3] For Stillspotting Guggenheim, Snøhetta created calm spots in New York with composer Arvo Pärt. All photos © Kristopher McKay, Courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. [4] For Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, a new generation of artists was taught how to carve stone by hand. Photo © Gerald Zugmann



[2]



[3]

Not only the way of carving it, but how to bring the stone out of the quarry as well. An unexpected outcome of this project was that through art and collaboration we established almost a whole new artefact industry. Bringing artists deep into projects is a massive deep-end experience. Very often we see that artists have a strong viewpoint on how they see architecture. Working with artists helps us to expand the boundaries of our profession.

N: *Does your trans-positioning process involve the client as well? Are they part of the creative process?*

KT: How much you should involve the client is a bit of a double-sided sword, right? On one hand, they're very often coming to us with a programme but without knowing what they really want. On the other hand, they think they know what they want but they haven't seen it. By involving clients on a very conceptual basis, we very often create together a common ownership of the concepts and different levels of ideas together with them, without moving into the design, the shape, or the form.

N: *Could you give an example of this?*

KT: The concept for the Oslo Opera House is thresholds. The client agrees that thresholds are a theme that we are going to follow all the way through the project. Then you have a massive amount of ideas coming from this threshold position, such as a roof to walk on, a narrow entrance bridge, a wider entrance plaza, a lower entrance sequence that gets higher and higher before you come into the main hall. All these thresholds start to become conscious elements in developing design ideas that then infiltrate the project. The client understands how we move from A to B to C, all the way to Z. That normally creates fewer problems in the continuous decision-making within the project, once it gets more detailed.

N: *During this process, is it sometimes difficult to keep the client on track?*

KT: It can be. This process is extremely dependent on a certain stability in the team. It can go wrong when changes in people, ambitions, or money start to matter more than following the overall concept all the way through the project. That of course does happen, but I think it happens less often if we involve the client from the very beginning. We talk a lot with our clients,



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[1,2] Images of the extraordinary project Lascaux IV, a life-size facsimile of the prehistoric cave that people can visit © Boegly + Grazia photographers. [3] Stunning views from the Norwegian Wild Reindeer Pavilion photo © Ketil Jacobsen. [4,5] Both the Wild Reindeer Pavilion and Under are box-shaped forms placed in the middle of nature. Pavilion photo © Ketil Jacobsen, Under photo © Ivar Kvaal

and first project images into their minds before we actually start designing.

N: *An extraordinary project is the design of Lascaux IV, a life-size facsimile of the prehistoric cave that people can visit. What was this project's biggest challenge?*

KT: One of our biggest fears was that the copy of the cave would be seen by young people as the real cave. We are producing some sort of fake imagery, but we didn't want people to believe that we're doing a Disney version of the cave. We put a lot of thought into the routing of the Lascaux centre; you first walk into the reception area before you visit the cave. When you come out of the cave, you walk into the workshop and the *Theatre of Parietal Art*, where all these pieces and elements of how the cave was built are shown as artefacts themselves. I think that sequence works very successfully.



N: *You are currently completing a library in New York City together with the artist José Parlá. It will be one of the largest integrated contemporary artworks in the city. Why did you want to work with him on this project?*

CD: The new library will be built in Far Rockaway in Queens. This area was one of the wealthiest suburbs of the city, but lost its economic capacity in the 1950s. The racial and ethnic diversity has grown in time and is now seen as an important component of New York life. The library project is meant to reawaken civic interest in a forgotten neighbourhood and energise social life in the area. We had worked with José Parlá before, with the Hunt Library mural in Raleigh, North Carolina, and this foundation was important in considering a collaboration at Far Rockaway.

Parlá began his career working in similar environments in Miami and New York. He directly associates with the vitality of diverse urban communities from this history, infused with a profound

understanding of art. He is inspired by the history and layers of meaning that streets and constructions contain, especially the vitality of walls and writing on walls, in the public realm. This made for a natural connection to the site and character of the building. We began discussing the design of the project from the beginning of the process, so the collaboration was heavily integrated throughout the life of the design. His art and our architecture are fused into one identity. The exterior of the building is composed of large glass panels imprinted with one of his works, designed specifically for the scale and magnitude of the library on its specific site. The colours were inspired by the sunsets along the waterfront, facing east towards the Atlantic. The long, arching calligraphic lines created by Parlá express the idea of language, communication, and city life the library represents.

N: *Another fascinating project is Stillspotting with Arvo Pärt, which created calm spots in one of the world's busiest cities. How did the collaboration come about?*

CD: The Guggenheim organised a citywide artist/architect collaboration project. They curated the mix and contacted us. Our area of focus was Lower Manhattan, the areas around the World Trade Center site. Their reasoning for connecting us was due to our work with the rebuilding of the site, in combination with Arvo's work with the contemporary requiem. At the time there was still a very strong sense of loss in the streets of Lower Manhattan, and our work helped place a new perspective on this feeling.

The project focused on finding places in the city where one could stop and experience silence. Arvo could not come to New York to scout locations for the works, so we had to do it ourselves. We

took some headphones with us and tested locations with some of his music in our ears. We expanded the project to include Governors Island, just off the southern tip of Lower Manhattan. We eventually discovered several places that were also unknown to us and that seemed like the best fit. These unusual locations would be a surprise to both us and Arvo.

Our idea was to use weather balloons inflated with half helium and half oxygen. Arvo liked the simplicity of the sketches, and we proceeded with that direction. Unfortunately, the technical staff of the Guggenheim Museum refused to handle both helium and oxygen in the same location. No reason was given, since the two gases are inert when used together. In the end we had to inflate them ourselves. The challenge was to get the right mix of oxygen and helium so the balloons would float but not fly away. We sent Arvo a

One of our biggest fears with the Lascaux project was that the copy of the cave would be seen by young people as the real cave.

message about it, and I think this may have influenced his selection of sounds.

N: *Did Arvo Pärt compose new material specifically for the project, or was existing music used?*

CD: Pre-existing. We sent Arvo sketches of what we were thinking about creating to frame the physical space around his music and curated the music to be used. For the locations in Lower Manhattan we used *In Principio* at Labyrinth in Battery Park, *Tabula Rasa* at the Fort Jay Magazine on Governors Island, and *Hymn to a Great City* on the 31st Floor of 7 World Trade Center at 223 Greenwich Street.

N: *Under is a magnificent underwater restaurant you built in Norway, where guests can dine five metres below the surface and are exposed to the wonders beneath the sea. But it is more than a restaurant – it also functions as a marine biological research centre.*

KT: Yes, the building is a concrete structure half sunken in the sea. Underneath the water it is an artificial reef. Shellfish are growing on this porous and uneven concrete surface and it creates an extreme biological diversity. We worked with marine biologists on this project who were looking for a fixed platform to observe continuous change in the sea life. So the window of the restaurant becomes a viewing platform for biologists to observe and follow fish behaviour on a daily basis. One of the funny things that one of the biologists discovered was when he played his favourite music, Dire Straits, while he was feeding the fish. When he took away the food and only played Dire Straits, the fish were still coming. [laughs]

So you could assume that now the fish are looking at the inside [of the restaurant]. It is the opposite of a zoo. The first time we did this was with the Norwegian Wild Reindeer Pavilion outside of Dovre, where people gather in a box to observe animals in the wilderness. Sometimes they come up and look at the people sitting inside the box. People told us that when they observed nature in the pavilion, they felt even closer to nature than when they were walking freely in the nature of Dovre. It's a total surprise. I think it has to do with the fact that you can comfortably sit down in the pavilion and put yourself in an almost meditative position to take in the environment. Something similar happens with Under.

