

IN CONVERSATION

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Boris Brorman Jensen I often meet with colleagues around the world who are taken by Nordic architecture. In a way this is paradoxical, in a Danish context at any rate, since there have been discussions over the past few years about how meaningful it is to use a term about Danish architecture as an autonomous entity.

Not because there's anything wrong with Danish architects' self-esteem, nor because national identity markers are considered invalid, but because globalization has changed the way architectural offices operate. Most major Danish firms earn the greatest proportion of their revenue from projects "abroad." The daily working language at the offices is often English, because quite a few staff members are recruited internationally—just as many partners in the various offices have undergone part of their training in Europe or the United States. And perhaps it is only a postulate on my part, but for me, as a Danish "insider," it can often be difficult to see whether a new building in Copenhagen has been designed by a Danish, German, or Dutch architect. How do you see the situation in Norway? Is there a specific Norwegian architecture?

Reiulf Ramstad I think there are some particular cultural and geographical circumstances in Norway that are significantly different than in Denmark and many other European countries. Denmark is a relatively small, homogeneous, and densely urbanized country in comparison to Norway. Norway has one of the longest coastlines in the world but has a smaller population than Denmark. Denmark is not much bigger than Finnmark, the largest of Norway's nineteen counties, and it's clear that Norway's radically different geography is significant to how we perceive ourselves. In my view, Denmark is much more integrated into continental European culture. Norway also has a history that is much more patchwork-like and disjointed than Denmark. We have been relatively poor since the Middle Ages, and this has obviously influenced our culture. Economic poverty and the fact that Norway makes up Europe's northernmost fringe, its provincial backwater, have generated a cultural peculiarity, which still plays a certain role.

BBJ Norway's huge oil resources have made it one of the richest countries in the world. Has that not changed Norway's self-identity? Is Norway still a nation on the fringes of Europe?

RR Prosperity has, of course, changed the country's prospects and what it means to be peripheral, both physically and culturally. But it is relatively new and what we are seeing, in many respects, is a cultural revolution. Nowadays, when we have modern communications technologies at our disposal and when globalization and increased prosperity affect virtually all aspects of social development, being on the fringes in a sense offers a new kind of luxury. And what I find so interesting is the

change in the significance of the notion of periphery. The studio is based in Oslo, where I live, but most of our commissions are spread across the whole country, often in places that previously were regarded as extremely remote.

Our efforts to maintain an ideological consistency at many scattered points have made us specialists in a kind of surgical urbanism, where we use precise design interventions to implant various urban programs in completely remote areas. And we are far from the only ones operating in this extended cultural field. While we were building Trollstigen, for example, we met a team from 60 Minutes that was filming BAS E jumpers. One of the most popular TV programs on the planet had already directed the world's attention to this "tiny place" in the back of beyond. I recently read an article about "the new village yokel" in a serious Norwegian newspaper that indirectly supports my thesis. The caricature of the village yokel as a strange, sad-looking character no longer fits the bill. Over the past decade, the country yokel has almost turned into its opposite. The new "village yokel" is at times an ultra-mobile, avant-garde figure. Trollstigen is in the Åndalsnes area, which can provide great skiing and climbing. Out in the back of beyond is where you will find the very best skiers, climbers, and the most dedicated adventure freaks. This is also the place sought out by all kinds of base jumpers and dogsledding enthusiasts. This new form of cultural fluctuation and lifestyle migration is really interesting, and as I see it, there are special opportunities here in Norway to explore the architectural possibilities of the current globalization processes. It's not just about revitalizing a deprived peripheral area. What we are involved in at the studio is a far more radical intervention. We currently have three projects underway—Trollstigen, Norsk Tindesenter, and Selvika—where we are trying to devise new ways in which an area can be inhabited. In that sense, there are opportunities to explore themes here in Norway that are not found in many other places.

BBJ It sounds a bit "new frontier"-like!

RR Well, it's an expression of a new interface between increased mobility, technological development, highly specialized skills, and the particular character of this specific geographical area.

BBJ Are these very special programs the ones that give the new "glocal" backwater periphery architecture its distinctive character?

RR Yes, to a certain degree, but it is also one of the challenges. We won a competition a while ago on the formulation of a "Norwegian Peak Center." The program focused primarily on satisfying some very specific interests. The professional extreme sports athletes are very well organized, and the center was supposed to be their meeting-place. We saw it as our task to give the project an extra

dimension, so that what is an elitist center on the surface could also serve as an urban hub for the whole community.

BBJ I remember you spoke before about how market rules, budget management, legal requirements, and other bureaucratic obstacles are so restrictive to architectural development opportunities in Norway. Are working conditions at what you call the extreme fringes more privileged compared to the situation elsewhere in the country? It seems, at least, that these special tasks free you from many of the rigid rules and restrictions that you otherwise come up against—for example, in Oslo?

RR Exactly—and it's really interesting! You can certainly find exceptional buildings in Oslo that are beautiful, such as the Snøhetta opera house, for example. However, although Oslo was "rated" by a major, international lifestyle magazine as one of the most exciting cities in the world, the general architectural standard is not particularly high, in my view. The general contemporary urban development is lacking specific qualities reflecting the unique context. Norway has a particular character, and in my opinion it would be interesting to explore Oslo as a kind of extreme periphery. We should focus more on the unique relationship to the fjord and explore the border to marka, the surrounding woodland. I also think that we could be better at exploiting the quality Oslo possesses of having so many different neighborhoods, each with their own unique character. The Grünerløkka district, a former working class area where our office is located, is very different to Frogner, a more bourgeois area, which differs from other neighborhoods, and so on.

But to me it seems that this feature is not exploited enough. That's one thing. Another thing is that Oslo has quite a complex topography that offers some unique features. The city does not revolve around one privileged stratum or one monumental axiality, such as you find in Paris or Berlin. Oslo is quite hilly and consists of many different plateaus and vantage points. For me, the city has a real landscape quality. What's at play are its unique topographical origins. Oslo is in many ways an exciting arena for the exploration of architecture and landscape.

BBJ I would like to return to your interest in peripheries...

RR It's fascinating that, nowadays, we can live almost as urban of a life on the periphery as at the center of the great metropolises. What matters today, in one sense, is our attitude toward the environment, mobility, our ability to use modern technology, and the individual's general level of knowledge.

BBJ Do you think that urbanity has escaped the city as a physical setting?

RR Yes, in a way. It is clear that many of the most isolated villages and settlements will disappear. It is by no means all peripheral locations that are sustainable. Not all locations situated away from economic powerhouses possess the required combination of specific resources and unique attractiveness. However, at least for me, it's an exciting and relevant issue to work with as an architect. It's the extremely low demographic density characterized by loosely connected urbanized points that, at the local level, very often also have an incredibly scattered settlement infrastructure. At the same time, the converse is also true: that the landscape and nature are always there and very much present, even right in the center of Oslo. We had an intern from London with us some time ago, which thought it was really exotic here. She described it as a feeling of luxury and clean air. I get a similar feeling whenever I come home from a trip. Norway may be on the fringes, but it is extremely luxurious to be able to live a comfortable, modern life in the middle of this fantastic landscape. So, the periphery has changed from representing culturally low status, characterized by ignorance and the absence of concentration of skills, to representing something potentially exclusive.

I think that architecture can play a strategic role and provide an important instrument in the physical realization of these new opportunities.

It's a theme, at least, that we return to again and again here at the office. And it gives me immense pleasure as an architect to be allowed to explore the subject like this. It's hard to develop architecture here in Norway because, traditionally, architecture has been held in low regard compared to many other places in the world. I wish it were otherwise, but in Norway we have always worked with small, tight financial budgets in architecture.

Yet we have been fortunate to find another kind of generosity in many "outlying projects." Trollstigen did not have a big budget to begin with. It was not an upscale project in monetary terms, but there was a great builder with whom we established a good dialogue. Good clients or builders are in many ways more important than extensive financial resources! For me it is more interesting to develop architecture based on a clear idea: to create architecture with a background in humanistic thinking, rather than to manage a building project with good finances that ends up being a paraphrase of something else, because there is no determination or willingness to experiment.

BBJ That's interesting! What if luxury could be redefined in a more sustainable sense: an approach to luxury that would not require flashy decisions, extravagant budgets, and an unrestrained consumption of scarce materials—but which was based on something else: an exclusiveness that instead would be more about a nonmaterial resourcefulness!

RR In this Western society of ours, where everything is so heavily characterized by material values, I think it is important that architecture be able to provide experiences that are not solely material. And that architecture can offer another dimension that allows a more elevated relation to existence. In my view, good architecture is actually characterized by some very basic elements: the quality that is derived from someone sitting down and thinking through how a particular place can be developed.

Or seeing if an architectural project can refine that quality, clarify it, or give those who will use it a kind of added value, even if it is not predefined in the program. I think that's why good architects are so focused on developing a concept.

BBJ What does expressivity mean in that context?

RR Architecture does not need to be expressive to bring about valuable experiences. Our projects often appear very neutral. We don't try to be consciously expressive, and we don't see expressiveness as an indispensable accessory. Sometimes, it's there; sometimes it's not. There is no fixed principle that something has to be expressive.

I don't think that architecture needs to be expressive in order to be well articulated. Formal responses are the result of various methods and studies. In some cases, it might be important for a building to create certain associations, or the client sees a need for it to do so. In other instances, the simple answer is best. I think geometry and form depend very much on the project and the context. Sometimes, things happen for other reasons—for example, the summerhouse on Hvaler Island. It is only seventy square meters but seems much more spacious because it opens onto the surrounding landscape. It consists of three small bedrooms, a minimal bathroom, a small storage room, a kitchen/breakfast room, and a living room. The form arose as a reaction to the prevailing wind direction on site, some very beautiful sightlines, and the small rockery on which the building stands. These really simple factors, and the desire to create some usable outdoor space, are what give the building its distinctive snail-shell form. The architecture is a straightforward result of the defined program, a particular sightline, and some general requests regarding interior design. The expressiveness in the architecture of the summerhouse is generated solely by a kind of negotiation carried out under certain conditions, a small budget, the context, and the program.

BBJ When we talked earlier about whether there is a specific Nordic architecture, you mentioned some circumstances particular to Norway. If I were to pick out a historical trend that characterizes Norwegian architecture, what immediately springs to mind is timber architecture. Is that a tradition you're familiar with?

RR We work a lot with timber, but we are really interested in material in general. If you look around the office, you won't find many building material catalogues on the shelves. We work much more with material samples. We get right down to a detailed study of the minutiae in order to understand how the material can be used constructively. Generally, we are looking for answers to very pragmatic questions, such as how things can be integrated into each other. We're very meticulous in looking for the best result. Take, for example, this hardboard cement composite. It is a very interesting material. We are continually exploring how things can be used. We don't just take standard items off the shelf and use them by the book. We often draw up projects in fine detail—far more than is strictly necessary— and we also represent furniture and other project elements at a 1:1 scale.

This means that we are continually exploring the potential of various materials. If a project does come off, we usually continue exploring the potential of the material in another context. Work with materials is very important to us. For me, architecture is very much a matter of the physical arrangement of materials, and wood is just one of the materials that we explore. But what's interesting about wood is that, in one sense, it's a very challenging material. It is an organic material that changes character according to climatic conditions. It twists, it changes color, and its structure is affected by humidity. Wood is a demanding material, plus it burns. But it's also a really interesting material, and I think that the new generation of Norwegian architects will try to reinterpret traditional timber architecture far more than was done in the past. For example, in the office we've been using untreated timber elements in many projects. In the past, they were either oiled or stained—they were always treated—whereas we now use the material in its more natural state.

It's rare for timber used in a project to be surface-treated. What I'm interested in is how timber can be used in a very simple way—in letting it develop patina from being exposed to the surroundings. In my view, this gives it a great quality. And implicit in this is the aim of minimizing resource consumption. Much less energy is needed for wood than for steel, and wood is also very pleasant to the touch.

BBJ Does timber architecture not present limitations in terms of scale?

RR Not necessarily! We are currently working on a twenty-story project in the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, 350 kilometers north of the polar circle, involving solid, loadbearing wooden structures. It is a very interesting project, which has already been approved so it can go ahead. A team of structural engineers, fire engineers, electrical engineers, and acousticians have been helping us with the process. What's so interesting about timber construction is that we are nowhere near finished

exploring all of the applications it presents. The same obviously applies to almost all materials.

But it's really satisfying for us to explore the use of timber. We consider it a modern material, and you could almost say that modern technology has brought about a renaissance in timber construction. It is fascinating how digital processing can create new types of wall paneling.

These are units compiled of separate cuts, which in the past could not be used in such structures. It is a simple sandwich unit, where the outer frame is made up of a slightly better quality timber than that used on the inside. But when they are compressed and doweled using nine tons of pressure, these new timber units make for a very solid construction. In this way, you can produce a supporting framework that saves a great deal in resources. It is interesting that you can create such a strong and beautiful structure and consume so little energy. It can be used for both load-bearing outer walls and other parts of a building.

BBJ Now that you have brought up the issue of sustainability . . .

RR I'm not particularly bothered by the issue of sustainability. I believe, basically, that good architecture is sustainable. I think a lot of people who have a narrow focus on sustainability very often end up with quite uninteresting results. Sustainability is not a feature in itself; it should always be seen in relation to something else.

BBJ You talked at the beginning about how your projects always revolve around certain themes that you return to again and again. What are the central themes of your work?

RR There is something about materiality that's central to our work, together with the exploration of connections between places and people's dwelling practices. The relationship between the center and the periphery is also an important theme, and we're interested in our engagement with new technology and the opportunities it presents. I'm also very interested in the craft of architecture. In my opinion, craftsmanship is an important aspect of architecture, along with knowledge of materials. It is really exciting. One of our basic themes is definitely expertise in the use of materials. We are also involved in exploring the orthodox.

In one way, I have a close connection with Norwegian modernism that can be traced back to the inspiration of Sverre Fehn. I worked with him to develop an exhibition of his work at the Venice Biennale of Architecture and have subsequently exhibited work in 2001 and 2012. But I don't have a dogmatic view of tradition and do not focus on being a purist. The thought of reducing a building to only one material is fascinating. Take the temple in Petra, which is carved out of rock. But it doesn't

have to be the ultimate goal. Materials should be used appropriately. If it's not appropriate to use wood, yet you insist on using it, to me that reflects an anachronistic attitude. I think materials should be employed on the basis of expediency, even if it means that a timber house is not built 100 percent of wood.

Dogmatism and the idea of forcing an idea through at any price don't appeal to me very much. I like the pragmatism of craftsmanship. It's fine for me to combine different materials. It might be nice, of course, to produce a construction entirely out of timber without involving other materials, but in reality other materials will always need to be used—glass, for example. The purist notion of consistency and the ideal of never using more than three different types of material may be attractive.

But I am far more concerned with how you can use a material in unfamiliar ways—taking a material out of its usual context and putting it into a completely different situation. That's what we did at Østfold University College, Halden, where we used timber as a primary cladding material to tie building units together and to create some distinctive elements.

Our office is committed to the use of dialogue-based planning as a working tool—applied in a constructive way. In my experience, if too many ideas are involved in the process, clear humanistic thinking is often replaced by disparate inventions and poor compromises, which far too often lead to a lack of clarity. Architecture requires clear strategy, a conscious choice of materials, well defined planning criteria, and unambiguous ideas regarding geometric criteria, spaces, and structures.

BBJ That leads me to a subject I've noticed in several of your recent projects—an architectural idiom that breaks with orthogonal geometry, where the framework of a building gets folded up into an origami-like figure! The best example is perhaps your proposal for the church in Knarvik.

RR Yes. There is certainly a new geometric idiom at play in the church in Knarvik and in some of our other recent projects. I've been a practicing architect since 1995, and for the first ten years I worked mainly with orthogonal geometries. And it has never been boring. When you have been on construction sites and seen what you can do with simple modular systems, then you realize that orthogonal geometries constitute an amazing combination of systems that involve completely valid processes. But I'm also starting to see other options. In Norway, there is something called the "Norwegian standard," which allows deviations of up to fifteen millimeters on a construction site. But with new digital measuring instruments, deviations can now be reduced to two millimeters. It's great! It means that units can be cut out in a factory with pinpoint precision. They can then be shipped to

the site and put together with the same precision as if the whole thing had been done on site. Another reason why we have begun to experiment more with different geometries is that we don't work solely in urban contexts.

In urban settings, you often have to adapt to orthogonal surroundings—such as the infill development along Korsgata in Oslo, just across from our office. You don't encounter these restrictions in the open countryside, where the surrounding landscape curves and meanders in a completely different way. When you are building alongside a river, you begin to be almost forced to consider how you can shape and integrate the architecture in other ways. The topography of the Norwegian landscape lends itself to geometries other than the strictly orthogonal. So the geometric experiments—or the idiom you call “origami-like”—do not constitute formalism, but are the result of a dialogue with the context and an interest in experimenting with what you might call digitalized craftsmanship.

BBJ Is that also a method that can be used when working with monumentality? The composite triangular elements and diagonal lines can break the continuous contours of the construction down into smaller parts, so that the totality does not seem so connected . . . and vice versa. Several of the smaller projects have a clearly identifiable profile by virtue of the origami-like roof structure.

RR You might be right there . . . The way I see it, the exciting thing about traditional Norwegian church construction in its development since stave churches is that the churches are almost more reminiscent of Eastern pagoda buildings than Western European stone churches . . .

I'm not particularly religious, but I think it is very exciting to work with buildings whose sole purpose is to manifest a spiritual power. As I see it, the modernist tradition of ecclesiastical construction has been managed far too unimaginatively. It has been far too sober and rational. Take, for example, the Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp by Le Corbusier. It's a fantastic construction that manages to retain something absolutely archaic in its otherwise modern idiom regarding the religious acts involved at pivotal moments in life: baptism, marriage, death, and burial. In a sense, these ancient ceremonies have found their optimal spatial dimension. They are oriented to procession and the symbolism of stepping over life's thresholds by moving through the space, like the way a coffin is carried up to the altar, et cetera. The axial and monumental architectural arrangement carries a meaning that the modernist tradition has found difficult to handle because it fosters a dynamic harmony ideal. For example, in late modernist churches, I don't really like the unceremonious way that you are often led into the space along a diagonal line. There is a shift of focus when you come in from the side.

The slow, anticipatory process of the front-facing movement contains an innate power, and I think it's important to maintain that. The way I see it, the simple, slow walk up to the altar, where you are baptized, married, give names to your children, and bury your loved ones has established a scenographic model that doesn't need to be altered. It is an ancient practice that requires no surprise factor, an institution that goes beyond the individual, and its very power lies in its repetition. The outand-out simplicity found in the historical stave churches is incredibly effective. It is enough just to walk into a small space with pillars, a small altar, a gallery, and some narrow benches.

Everything is reduced to the absolute basics. In contrast, a lot of modern churches have adopted the style of local cultural centers and try to come up with all sorts of original solutions and effective initiatives. I wanted to take up far more simple and powerful motifs in the church in Knarvik.

In a sense, what I'm most interested in are the very basics of architecture. In the past, there was an established tradition of writing about architecture in a very abstract way, involving latent philosophical aspirations that didn't dare to relate to the completely banal profundity of architecture: the beauty of unmediated sensuality. Basically, as I see it, architecture has an incredibly strong narrative character, which does not need to be digested through academic rumination.

BBJ That brings me to the question of the importance of communication. The ability to communicate ideas is certainly a decisive competitive factor, and many successful architects are often gifted communicators. But architecture tends to reflect a host of private passions, which are not necessarily interesting for others. Can that banal profundity you mentioned be enough on its own? Is the profession not obliged to look for legitimacy within a broader contemporary field? Isn't architecture also interested in communicating with wider popular culture?

RR Nowadays, communication is an important aspect of the architect's role. Architects help to give buildings meaning, in a way. We place the built environment in a context. Buildings can certainly be constructed today without architects, and much legislation is about the legal responsibility of the architect. But the most important thing, in my view, is that the architect acts as a humanistic figure. The architect in effect takes responsibility for many of the "soft" values that are difficult to regulate through legislation and budgets. All of those questions (about the hard values) of law, economics, energy audits, the physics of construction, and other contractual conditions constantly make themselves felt. Meanwhile, the things we just talked about are too often disregarded—the humanistic side of the profession, all of those things that I'm really concerned with, about how we live, how we perceive, how we move, and how we experience scale, how we are fascinated by the absolute basics of existence. What makes it exciting for me, and what ultimately gives the

profession meaning, is the work involved in creating a good living environment.

All of these basic parameters are very difficult to define through building programs, budgets, and laws. It might be possible in brutal dictatorship nations, where it is forbidden to be happy without permission! It is basically impossible to create legal and financial specifications for those things that, in my opinion, make up the main elements of architecture.

The realm of construction is very male-dominated, and often we architects are those who—metaphorically speaking—are “the woman” on site. All of the vital questions rest, like an invisible layer, within the bureaucratic stipulations. But they are the most important things. That's why there is so much meaningless construction.

It's not so much about taste; it's more about opening up a conceptual diversity. It's this, I think, that makes working with landscapes exciting. It offers huge variety and provides a rich contrast to the sameness and conformity that is so often generated in Nordic cultures. Out there at the periphery there is still some wildness, some anarchy. It's not safe, of course. You can get hurt out there, and it's kind of liberating to be able to live a life with inherent risks, without too much conformity. Nature exists across a fantastically wide spectrum. At one end, you have a giant rock—at the other, a tiny flower. Scale offers tremendous opportunities in architecture...

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