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Slimplexity: a Glimpse inside the Hive Mind of Snohetta

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Simplexity;
A Glimpse Inside the Hive Mind of Snøhetta

Craig Dykers, Snøhetta in conversation with Noel J Brady



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Craig Dykers, the current holder of the CRH Chair in Architecture at the School of Architecture, DIT led students in a regime of play, discussion, workshops and design studio over the course of four days. On the last day, he sat down on the floor in the midst of the junior school to engage students in a simulacrum of the processes Snøhetta use on a daily basis. He was passionate about its importance.

"I think at least my feeling is that many architectural practices today are stuck in a world of the past. I often divide the architectural community into two groups; one is what I call old world modernists and the other is what I call new world modernists. There are still those people who manufacture work within a kind of master apprentice scenario in a studio. That is not to suggest that is particularly bad but if it's left unchecked such processes will not be able to respond to the broader needs of society and will further condemn architects to a secondary role. It may have created power in the past but now it creates weakness. We need flexibility in practice, balanced by a need for more experienced older people in the practice who are able to guide certain discussions so that there is an understanding of the professional needs of our work. It is a Profession after all it isn't an Art."

Snøhetta's unique office profile with its coupling of architecture and landscape at the centre of the design process points the way towards this new world.

"Our office consists of 50/50 architect/landscape architects who work immediately together in the development of the design which tends to create a stronger emphasis and understanding of landscape design in our work. The importance of landscape training and the implementation of that training in the office is a significant factor in the development of our work. While landscape is an important issue, the dialogue between the building and its setting is more so; getting people to move around is important for us, it is an anthropological issue. We talk about how people might experience something in their physical presence, in relation to a design. In the Oslo Opera House, and on our other projects including the World Trade Centre, you will see that there are forms, areas where people move or stop that are clearly not perpendicular to the ground, so that your body has to react physically, different to your normal presence in the city. Your centre of gravity shifts, your body shifts, your neck or head may crane in a particular direction or your hips may move in a particular way. It is about the physicality of being in a place as opposed to an abstract or intellectual conversation."

Because there are universal truths that connect many people in the world, we try not to get hung up on specifics

Observing that this appeared to be an extension of the game environment of Snøhetta's office, where exercises are used to unhinge or upset the normal pattern of things, it appeared to parallel the experience the students felt in the studio.

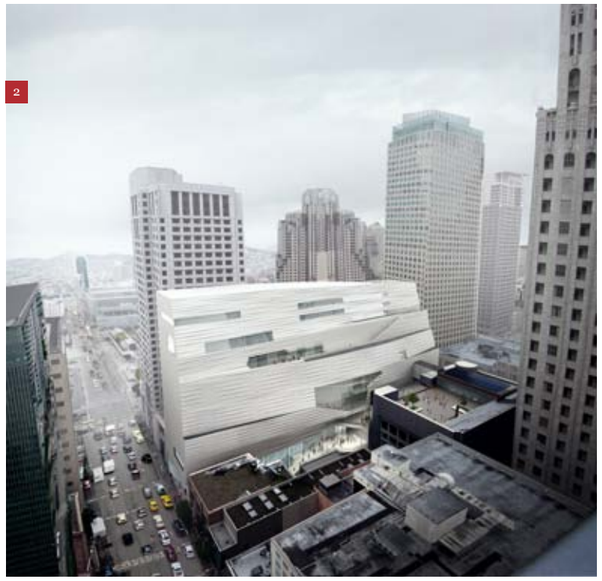
"We try to be physical in the office. We try to ensure that there is enough physical activity during the design process to carry the idea through; lots of models, physical models. While we use technology, we also have a more traditional wood shop where you have to use your hands. We use contemporary technologies in terms of digital model building techniques as the same time as sketching. In order to be valuable, there has to be a connection between the analogue and digital world. I would be resistant to solely focusing on digital technology in practice. In contemporary society the sole use of an analogue medium like sketching has its own pitfalls."

The emphasis on process and in particular dialogue prompted the question whether Snøhetta's work was a concretisation of those dialogues, the social, political and economic relationships. Craig countered with Barthes rather than Norberg-Schultz confirming a fear of inertia.

"Our world, our earth, our universe, our existence is slowly calcifying. At some point we will all become stuck. With increased incidence of arthritis and other diseases our fleshy bodies are becoming stiffer. As a result we put an emphasis on temporariness in our work and I think many architects could learn from creating structures that are not meant to exist for very long. Are we trying to make a stamp of what a society is? Well we do discuss social and political issues when we are working so I would assume that would mean what we represent has some foundation in the current state of a society or a culture. Because there are universal truths that connect many people in the world, we try not to get hung up on specifics."

In a keynote address to the European Association for Architectural Education, Craig paraphrases the US poet Robert Rexroth's famous maxim, transposing architecture for writing. "I make architecture for my ego, buildings for money and drawings to seduce the opposite sex", before correcting his position by adding …."you cannot want to make architecture for any of these reasons – these are not good enough." In conversation he expanded on avoiding the stylistic end product and the risk of producing iconic or heroic work

"We used to say "Our manifesto is No Manifesto". We took great pride in this. The truth is that after you work for many



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years there is a line of reasoning that starts to appear more clearly. We try to break that line of reasoning by allowing younger people to have a say in how the work evolves. That avoids getting into a little whirlpool of thinking or maelstrom of ideology. That been said there are clear ideas that are beginning to show up in many of our projects. In the past it had been more landscape oriented, now that it is moving more into an anthropological discussion. What ties them all together is the use of narrative. There is often a powerful story associated with the development of a project. Sometimes this can be seen clearly in the design, sometimes it's left up to interpretation."

It was not clear if the lack of a manifesto ran counter to the need to have an author, to keep a project on track, suggesting at the very least the need for an editor. Craig suggested an alternative role of a curator.

"It's a great thing to have a really good editor, one that really understands what you are doing trying to draw it to the surface. A good editor will strengthen a piece and knows when to back off when there is too much resistance from the author. A curator plays a background role in the story so much that you almost don't know that they are there."

In the DIT workshops it was clear that Craig and Snøhetta operate differently than the norm. While unorthodox it is not without ambition or without rigour. Despite this hive mind like activity of the office, it certainly clear that the work of Snøhetta exhibits a strong aesthetic. Sometimes it looks remarkably at ease in the international arena with heroic

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tendencies and has attracted much deserved recognition such as the Mies van der Rohe award for the Oslo Opera House. Perhaps his fear of being undervalued is misplaced or maybe there is another side to the Snøhetta story that is emerging, one divided between the continents of America and Europe, between cosmopolitan New York and geologic Norway, between art and the environment.

"Somebody once referred to us as being "under the radar". I would say that our challenge is might be in the world of architecture but it is certainly in the academic world. We are not often given the same recognition as more academically oriented practitioners are. We often work around a strong academic or theoretical foundation. It is certainly not represented in the same way as the academic work is."

"After nearly 20 years of practice there was a feeling that if we were not careful we would find ourselves in a kind of rut in spite of all the mechanisms that we put into place to keep recharging ourselves. The office began with an odd circumstance. We had some people in Norway and I was in LA and we came together for the Alexandria Library Competition so all of us were out of context when we began and I think we are still out of context. We have heard the heroic comment from other critics. It is just a means in our office to explore different avenues which seem appropriate for those projects. I think that part of the reason why we were commissioned for the World Trade Centre Museum was our otherness."

"I often say that we are balancing environmental sustainability with intellectual sustainability. Intellectual sustainability has as much power as environmental sustainability. The fact is that many of the approaches taken today regarding sustainable use of resources though helpful are not making as big an impact as we would like. They are leading somewhere that might be more valuable in the future but we won't reach a new level of sustainable consciousness unless we are able to manage our own nature; our human nature. Much of our work is dedicated to making people more conscious of their physical surroundings and their physical self."

With an envious project list, high profile clients including a redesign of Times Square for the City of New York, Snøhetta are increasingly an international phenomenon. Craig is refreshingly open about the nature of the challenges the firm, ifs founders and increasingly young workforce face.

"We remain somewhat under the radar even though we are better known now than we were 20 years ago. Because we have such a weird name, it isn't even the name of a person, it's hard to pronounce and it's got a funny letter in it. It is a constant challenge for people to know who we are simply because people cannot pronounce our name. Because we are collective there is the commercial challenge for particular kinds of clients who expect the master architect. There have been several times in interviews when you see people want a face to have at cocktail parties or the want the sketch on the napkin they can sell. That pressure is always there. Sometimes we have to succumb and we make the sketch for them. Maybe in the next twenty years, those perceptions of what is architecture will change. Let us hope that people are open to the idea that they are coming to a group of people rather than a single individual."

"This has provided us with some positive attributes; that is you remain an outsider in a world of stars. When a client is looking for a creative wildcard, they will say I will choose all these famous names and then there is Snøhetta; "they are kind of famous we don't know how they fit in". They let us have the complimentary weird one so it doesn't look like you have the usual suspects."

The flexible, responsive and ethical stance of Snøhetta offers a view into a new office format, a hive mind of anthropologic architecture. It remains to be seen if this approach bears fruit and extends to other practices. Certainly the next 20 years will demand better responses from the architectural community and it is clear Snøhetta will be at the heart of this.

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