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Slimplexity: a Glimpse inside the Hive Mind of Snohetta

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Craig Dykers, the current holder of the CRH Chair in Architecture at the School of Architecture, CIT 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 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 been 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."
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, its 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.