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^{*)}This is an interview. It has not undergone the same review-process as the scientific papers.
Photo on the front cover: Shelley Smith. *Relief – plaster and pigment*, Shelley Smith.

SNØHETTA WORKS – A CONVERSATION ON SITE DESIGN

INTERVIEW WITH JENNY OSULDSEN

BY LEA HOLST LAURSEN AND DITTE BENDIX LANNG

In Snøhetta's work site is a constructive player for the design process. It is more than the edge condition of a building. Sites are rendered unique and inconstant, with stories yet to be told, and latent potentials to be unfolded. At times, site works as a driver for design. At other times, program, design and site must be wrestled with to come together in the shaping of projects for the future.

We met senior landscape architect Jenny Osuldsen (Figure 1), partner at the internationally recognized Norwegian architectural office Snøhetta, at the 2013 research seminar Transforming Site Methodologies, to have a conversation on site design.



Figure 1
At the interview with
Jenny B. Osuldsen

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A site is always unique

In Snøhetta's work the specificities of each design site are important. Below Jenny Osuldsen tells how *latent potentials* are sometimes unfolded through the design process of working with site, how no site is the same, and how site's active agency in a design assignment can be very strong. Yet, site's influence on Snøhetta's designs differs in each case, and at times a tense dialogue between site and program is needed to generate the design project.

Jenny: A site is always unique. Even if you can find similarities with other places and it has the same atmosphere – a site is unique.

Of course there is a regulation or a boundary that you have to work with, but learn the rules and then break them. It really depends, where do you want the site to end? A site has so many layers, and sometimes it is important that you can get totally surprised, that there are hidden dimensions in the site that you did not see at first - or nobody saw it. But you put a layer on top and that makes the site from sort of nothing to something specific.

Usually when we go into a project, if it is in a competition or a regular project that you start from scratch, most projects has a program. Somebody asks for something. So you have to take that in consideration when working with the site. Sometimes the site does not say that it wants this program; the program is too big, what the client wants is too extensive. Then it is really about how you then transform the program to an idea suitable to the site and how you say "okay, this site, what kind of analysis do you make on this site to make it to fit to the program?" And sometimes it is really the other way around: sometimes the idea comes very fast and you cannot really answer why it came so fast. Sometimes you cannot really get a good idea but you solve the program anyway. So, I would say that – hopefully – most of the time the site contributes to the program. But other times the program itself may release something that says that the program is more important than the site. This actually also makes the site really important.

Lea: Is your Petter Dass Museum project (Figure 2, 3, 4) an example of such a situation where program and site does not fit – where you actually address, with your proposal that the original chosen site was not the correct site for that specific museum?

Jenny: Yes, we tried, but ended up saying, “we can’t really do it good, we don’t get a good idea, the museum shouldn’t be placed there” and we then looked for something different. It was not a dense built up area so we did not really need to demolish anything, except maybe demolish a mountain. But, still we were looking at a bigger context and even though we tried to be good architects and do our job the site boundaries told us to differently. In the end, we said “no, this is not really working and we changed the site”.



Also in a competition for the Turner gallery at the west coast of England (Figure 5), we could not really use the site boundary. We discovered the duality in Turner’s paintings and combined that with the drama of the tide and the, sometimes, extreme weather conditions of the site. Therefore, we actually made an object in the ocean. We extended the site into the sea. Placed an object into the sea, and left the “conventional” program on the quay. The gallery – his art works, were in the ocean, and the administration, café and lobby, were left on land. This was an extremely dramatic choice and I thought, “okay, we think that this idea is good, but it is totally outside the boundary – maybe we will get disqualified.” Nevertheless, we won the competition! Then many other things happened and sadly enough, it was not built. But, still, it was a way of looking

Figure 2
Petter Dass Museum the site
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Figure 3
Petter Dass Museum
COPYRIGHT HOLDER © NIL ARBOK

Figure 4
Petter Dass Museum
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The Petter Dass Museum – a tribute to the Norwegian poet Petter Dass – was completed in 2007 at the historic site of Alstadhaug, Norway.



into the site, the drama of the tide and the duality in Turner's work, together. So, the site together with the program made something new. One plus one made three instead of two. Sometimes that happens. I mean, to go outside the boundary, we do that quite a lot, I have to admit.

We also did the competition for an art school in Bergen in the west coast of Norway in 2005. Bergen is the rainiest city in Norway – it rains at least once a day. The site for the competition is situated a little bit outside Bergen's central area and it is the spot where it rains the most in Bergen. The intention was to work with the water. However, the way we dealt with it was to have a very large, very generous roof that could collect all the water and then make a dramatic waterfall when it is raining. The notion of site and the natural context was extended beyond saying this is a big problem. Instead, we turned it around and made a feature of it.

Ditte: It seems that you are looking to identify the beauty of a specific situation; looking for the unique or the drama of a site. Is this a key for you in order to 'open' the site, where the site and the project and the program come together?

Jenny: Sometimes I am taken by surprise. I am like "wow, how did this happen", but then you see it and it is like "yes, this really fits together". Like the The Oslo Opera (Figure 6) sloping down, to the ocean. I was very surprised when I went to the exhibition of all the competition projects. I thought "come on, it is obvious to go down to the ocean" but there were few that did use the water as part of their projects. The site is right by the ocean and in so many harbour cities around the world, you have container harbours or you have a big highway and you cannot literary get to the water. Therefore, here, by the Opera you really just want to get down to the water.

Figure 5
Turner Contemporary
COPYRIGHT HOLDER © SNØHETTA
The 2001 competition proposal for a new art museum on the work of J. M. Turner in Margate, England



Telling stories through/with site: past, present, future

Sites are characterized by time, and movement and change. Sites rarely stay in place. Snøhetta employs this conception in their work with site's past, present and future, and uses the site to develop narratives which can mold and aid the comprehension of complex situations and build arguments for specific designs.

Lea: If site is the setting for the unfolding of analysis and design in the contemporary urbanity, then what are the challenges that you see when you address a site – what do we have to be aware of?

Jenny: Quite a lot of what we work with are narratives. You could call it storytelling: a way of explaining a concept and a way to simplify what we are doing, making it easier to understand a project. Of course, not all our projects are dealing with *past, present* and *future* [ed.: *past, present*, and *future* were used as three frames of communication in Jenny's presentation at the seminar], but some and, actually, the most important projects are really dealing with that. I think it is so easy to talk about; you can always relate back, because people relate to history. And even if it is a totally new place it still has a history that is really complex. And *present*, everybody who is alive is present. *Future*, we have to plan for the future,

Figure 6
Norwegian National Opera and Ballet
COPYRIGHT HOLDER © BIRDSEYEPIX
The prize-winning Oslo Opera House
was completed in 2008, and is located at
the Oslo harbour-front.

we have to look into the future to see “what can this project do for the future?” Of course, some projects are temporary but most of the projects we are doing are going to remain. So I think the context together with the time line and of course the flow going through is important in order to make a project able to be durable enough to tackle the changes. To think whatever we do we are part of the contemporary world so even if you say it is a long lasting project, what is timeless? I am not sure if that is a very good word because we are living in the time we are living in so we are present. So timeless is maybe too static.

It is important that the ones that come after us have a feeling that the sites we make today are good places. For example, already last year, it was decided to preserve the The Oslo Opera – to keep it as a national landmark. It is not a drive for us that things should remain the same forever, I mean we are in a dynamic world and we have to be able to be part of that flow. I think to design for everyday life, is the most important. And if that is a good stage for everyday life it usually is really good for celebrations as well!

It is a huge ambition to do this. It is almost like a vision and it is a vision that you sort of never manage to get in to. But, specifically with the opera, this is really what we have managed. Nothing is programmed on the 5th façade – the public plaza; it is like you are out there in the landscape, it does not tell you “no, you have to make a left because of...”. I think maybe that is why it is so popular. Many people ask “is it a building or what is it?” because it is not the typology of what they usually call a building. And since you do not have to go inside to do anything – you can just have a walk, you can walk on it. I think that adds something on top that was not asked for. When the program, the complex, the clients, the needs are combined and you manage to make that *extra*, maybe that is when it is good architecture: when you manage to actually lift it up to something that is extra. Even if you cannot point out: “yes, I know exactly what makes it so good”. It is more about atmosphere and how you feel when you are there.

Not all places or projects are pushing the limits even if we say we have an ambition, we want to push the world with architecture, which of course is like “wow, maybe that’s a little bit too much?”. I think the push can be kind of tiny, and still really make a difference. I think, that is the most important thing we can do. That is probably our contribution to the world.

There is never nothing – sites and public space

Sometimes, in assignments, sites are not rendered particularly important. Yet, sites are more than mere context for buildings; they can be treated as essential public spaces, which do not only enrich buildings but also provide the rich places for our lives to be lived. Below Jenny Osuldsen speaks about how buildings, public spaces and infrastructures are merged together in a site.

Jenny: Public spaces are so important. Sometimes competitions can have very detailed programmes for what the building should be, but very little programme for what the outdoor spaces should be. Maybe the client is not even asking for a public space. But there is always an in-between, there is never nothing. So, how to deal with that in-between zone? That, maybe, is not the most important [ed.: for the actual performance of the final design]. To us, that is important, because that is what we work with. If you can extend the indoor to the outdoor and opposite, that makes it even richer. And then if you say “okay, we will design a street, and yes, the street needs a curb stone”. But if you think of a street only as the function, and solves it with a curb stone to divide traffic from pedestrians you lose the whole essence of the public spaces. Because how will people meet? I think that public spaces will be a big challenge in the future, because people are sitting indoors, they are on their computer out in cyber space, people are getting fat, they are not moving anymore and we will have a health problem, and it is already here. So how to reprogram the urban spaces to activate people and make them meet in the public realm. The further north you go, less people are outside in the public space. But when more people are travelling, more people are getting used to the outdoor spaces. And I think we have to reprogram what the outdoor spaces will be. I think we need to challenge ourselves to think differently when planning and designing public space; how do we make that everyday magic so people actually wants to meet outdoors?

Ditte: Yes, what is your answer to your own question? What is a well-functioning public space, and how can it be designed? Do you consider it an answer to work with surfaces that are multi-programmed or without program?

Jenny: At least we need those. And I think, that we will find new ways of designing and programming and something else will come in the future that we do not know of yet. I think, we get more and more people and we get denser and denser urban environments, so the outdoor spaces where we meet are very important. We need to be responsible to make better outdoor spaces. And again, of course, the green, instead of saying again and again “no, it should all be hard surfaces”. We lose the water, we lose the ecology, we lose the atmosphere. I think we really need all those green and blue layers that are in the nature – we really need that in the city.

When it feels good to be an architect

Sometimes, it all comes together; specificities of site, program, people, culture. In these cases design makes a remarkable positive difference in constructing places that people can relate to, Jenny Osuldsen tells, and brings two examples to the fore: one unbuilt proposal for a university in Gambia, and the much celebrated Oslo Opera in Norway.

Jenny: We made a master plan for a new university in Gambia, in West Africa (Figure 7). The site that we got was in the middle of – not nowhere – but it was far away from the coast and the Gambia River. And we were really thinking “come on, they gave us this site?”. We were frustrated when we started to work on it and then the president said “it should be the best university in Africa and it should be very western and top modern in all ways” and we were like “come on, there is no elevator that operate in more than a week in this country”. And we were thinking what do the people need and how can we really rethink the whole thing?



We started to look into how we could use this landscape and the site. And we were very inspired by the way they have been building traditionally – maybe not specifically in Gambia, but in Africa (Figure 7). The way they use fractals, a pattern that is repeated in textiles and in doing beads for your hair, and in music instruments. Maybe that was actually a way to do the project. We also saw that the traditional way of making the villages was to have an outdoor space, which was the most important space. The kitchen was more or less outdoors, the sheltered area was just for sleeping and for when you needed a shelter for the sun or the cold nights. This is also one of the few cultures that actually builds circular buildings and they were made in fractals, too. So, in our project, we have been repeating that pattern. We decided not to build anything above two floors, and it had to be low-tech, so it could survive.

We proposed to make a concrete factory to make their own bricks, more or less dried in the sun. We chose the basic form to be the super ellipse,

Figure 7
University of Gambia

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In 2008, Snøhetta developed a schematic design for the new University of the Gambia.

not the circle (as their traditional villages structure), but something different. We grouped the two stories volumes into a fractal system. We proposed that we would make modular houses and teach local labour to build the first, so they could build more when needed. In this way it was really imposing something that was traditional, but in a contemporary new way, where the outdoors is as important as the indoors. Just as they are used to, but in a modern way. First, the President said that he wanted something very modern and western but after looking into it, he said something like: "this is very unique and it belongs here". I do not think we could have done that design many other places.

We felt that we actually hit the target to find something that is low-tech and can function but at the same time makes a new atmosphere that is based on what is already there. However, it was never built because they never had the money. But it was something site specific or culture specific, that turned into something new that you have not seen before. Then hopefully (if it would have been built) it could be like the opera – people can relate to it and say "it's mine, it's my opera, it's my white roof that we walk on". It fits in. And sometimes you really get it right, both for the architects but ALSO for the public, the users and then it feels really good to be an architect.

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