

The no-style  
style shapers

Snøhetta



Photos *by* Oliver Godow

How a multimedia juggernaut called Snøhetta is driving design world-wide—and incidentally changing our perception of collaboration on an equal footing. An interview with founder Kjetil Trædal Thorsen.

## Snøhetta

Snøhetta is an out-of-the-ordinary architect's office and the creative force behind globally acclaimed cultural edifices including the Oslo Opera (Norwegian National Opera & Ballet), Lillehammer Art Museum, the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion and Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria. Snøhetta is a cultural supertanker, carrying in its hold a kind of a matrix for our age: a crew of mixed teams from 32 different countries, made up of industrial designers, architects, graphic designers, sociologists and landscapers, all working on the texture of the world around us. The various strands of their work take the form of parallel, non-linear processes in five locations around the world, autonomous and largely free from hierarchies. Snøhetta thus extends far beyond any conventional idea of architecture.

*Our style is to h*... says co-founder and gallery owner (h... Thorsen, even if investors would perh... otherwise. Everything is created from... the spot. Others who propagate botto... ns often do little more than scatter items... ure architecture over a

slew of destinations; Snøhetta takes the road less travelled, visiting locations, listening and involving before decisions are taken by the whole team.

No wonder the resulting works are such hybrids. These are buildings that are not simply an opera house, say, but simultaneously a public place, a skate park or a destination for a Sunday outing with the family. Take the example of Alexandria, where fans of the library protected the building during the riots out of a profound awareness of what had been created there: a phenomenon extending beyond books and catalogues, a place of transformation that unlocks spaces of freedom and connects Egypt with the world.

With versatility as its driving principle, it's only logical for Snøhetta to design Norway's new banknotes or trial Europe's first underwater restaurant, develop interiors for concept store YME ([ymeuniverse.com](http://ymeuniverse.com)), and produce trade show architecture and even cutlery sets (<https://snohetta.com/projects/411-barr-cutlery-set>). These are tools of change; some clearly visible, some subcutaneous, but all effective.

Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, Commander of the Royal Norwegian Order of Saint Olav (Den Kongelige Norske Sankt Olavs Orden), brings an attitude of forensic focus to our interview. The motto of the Order, RET OG SANDHED (Justice and Truth) could have been devised by him. But his personal maxim is even more trenchant: *working on creating a better world*. Few can claim this and retain their credibility, but Kjetil Trædal Thorsen is one of them.

## Oslo





Would you call yourself an optimist?

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Yes. In our profession you have to be.

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Architecture always seems to deal with tomorrow. What was your vision of the future when you started the company in 1987?

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If you look at the long-term perspective of change we are dealing with, because the time span of a project is quite substantial——just imagine the library in Alexandria taking twelve to thirteen years from idea to realisation——it's quite obvious that some of the ideas we have today have to be projected into a possible future. Otherwise the project will already be outdated the very day it is completed. In the end this means taking the combination of looking at a place, its history, its topography, its climate and its culture, and then trying to project that into some sort of understanding of the future, which then creates the relevance for the project on the day it opens.

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And if you think back to 1987 in general——we still had the Cold War, didn't we?

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We did. When we started in 1987 we were a mixture of landscape architects and architects. So one of our visions at a very early stage was to combine more than one profession into a practice. At that particular point in time, I would say there was very little awareness about public space and how the public per se should interact with the immediate surroundings of buildings. Because of this, budgets were usually for the buildings only. And we wanted to change the status of integrated professions, trying to look more at the totality of things, away from object-related planning and design issues and instead striv-

ing to integrate more professions and produce more holistic solutions. That was really the starting-point.

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Crossing boundaries

Transdisciplinary working that combined architecture, product and graphic design, landscape architecture and sociology was quite unusual at that time, wasn't it?

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It was completely unusual. I think that as we've developed over the last 30 years, we have been able to integrate even more professions. What we are seeing right now is the huge effect of getting different professions to pull together in certain directions and, by doing that, also informing the other professions about what they are doing. You need to work with more than your own profession before you can see the problem from two different positions, or three, or four ...

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Would you say there is a specific Nordic way of communicating that helped you bring together different combinations of people in order to solve complex problems?

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There are certain elements in the post-war development of social democracies that have engaged project thinking about education. At the same time, there has also been change——starting with the oil industry, where certain areas of specialisation became so important that the overall view of things almost started to disappear. So to some extent I should probably say *yes and no*. However, since the mid-eighties we have seen a lot of knowledge-based industries commit to becoming increasingly broadly based as they searched beyond their borders to establish a better knowledge base for the decisions they were going to make. This more horizontal, more bottom-up thinking that emerged from social democracy definitely influenced how businesses are or-

ganised, especially in the knowledge industry. Don't forget Norway is a small country; we're more like a mid-sized city. Lines of communication between people, decision-makers and politicians are very short.

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You've always been international. Is it getting harder to communicate since you've set up offices all over the world?

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We basically established these offices based on a certain degree of autonomy in the various places, so we've become more and more aware of being partners, of contextualising in the place where we are. That doesn't mean we're not being challenging or experimenting with certain elements where we are, but it means we have to do it with a certain level of insight and maybe, in certain situations, also with a certain level of pragmatism. In a way, we have established different practices to enable us to gain deeper and better insights into the environment in which we are actually working. For more or less the first 15 years, we were sort of a hit-and-run-company. The hit-and-run aspect was that we went in, we did one project and we pulled out. That didn't seem to be a good long-term strategy. Given this, it also seems a much better idea to be locally represented in the places where we are actually working—to get to know the culture in a deeper and better way, gain a richer understanding of the challenges presented by a place. A strikingly different approach to the blanket globalisation of the construction industry.

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Tools for designing a better world

What is your favourite tool when it comes to designing architecture?

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Our favourite tool has always been model-building. The creativity we generate in our office is based on using the whole body. Architecture and design develop out of the full representation of ourselves and our group as human individuals, or as a human group. That means gut feeling alone cannot be relied on, but neither can artificial intelligence. So our creative work is a combination using the whole body. The model workshop has always been crucial to us, and to me in particular.

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Speaking of architecture and design, is there a special relationship between architecture and design? It's not only about scale, is it?

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No, it's a lot of different things, and it depends on what type of design we are talking about—whether we are talking graphic design or product design, social design, political design... There are so many kinds of design professions associated with architecture. And they all have a certain importance in the back and forth of interrelationships. For instance, it's interesting to see that architecture is able to influence graphic design to adopt a more three-dimensional way of thinking. So some of our *solid graphics*, as we call them, started evolving out of the 3D printing used by our architects and influenced graphic design in a more three-dimensional manner.

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When you launched, you almost instantly landed a huge project, and you've won so many important competitions. To what do you attribute your success when it comes to competitions?

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I'm not sure we are more successful than others when it comes to competitions, to be quite honest. I think that with some of the projects we have chosen to participate in, we simply put in the amount of effort that is necessary to win. Of course our passion for culture, for instance, and our passion for the arts have triggered more input into the library in Alexandria, the opera in Oslo and the MoMA in San Francisco. These projects have generated enormous passion in the way we work and the way we operate. So maybe if you can find people who think the same, they give more of themselves to the project than if it were just another building. To some extent, we are looking for meaningfulness in what we are doing, and if you work on a project where meaningfulness coexists with your version of your own life, then maybe you'll get the most out of yourself.

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Looking back at what you have done, what is your favourite project?

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Our favourite project is always the latest we are working on.

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And how about your most important projects?

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If you look at our status in the world of architecture at the moment, some of our more complex projects——like the library in Alexandria——really made an impact, but then so did the 9/11 Memorial Building where the architecture more or less played a negotiating role between the various stakeholders in the project. We slowly started to build a reputation not only for designing——in other words, simple, straightforward design and creation of *nice buildings*——but also for delving deeper into an understanding of what the project as a tool can

actually do for society. We come from a position where we don't really do architecture for the sake of architecture: we are engaged in architecture for the sake of people, and that's a position we cleave to very strongly. In that respect, these bigger projects have borne fruit in terms of relationships to a certain kind of society: more openness, more transparency, more accessibility, more varied strata of users and members of the public. It's not only about complexity, but about how these buildings have started to be used by the public, and this is now slowly taking root in many minds among our clients and the public.

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Would you demand that every architect and every piece of architecture shows such compassion for the public?

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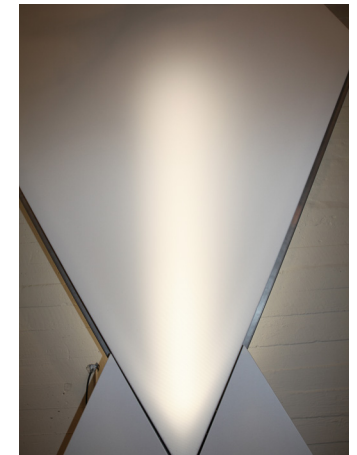
Yes. Absolutely. I really dislike the architectural wars that are happening in certain places, where everyone looks at everyone else as competitors. They need to imagine that we are all working towards more or less the same goal and that goal, if you want to be idealistic about it, is to create a better world. Why on earth would we be so conceited about our own design and artistry that it would blind us to the fact that a lot of other people are contributing to the same thing?

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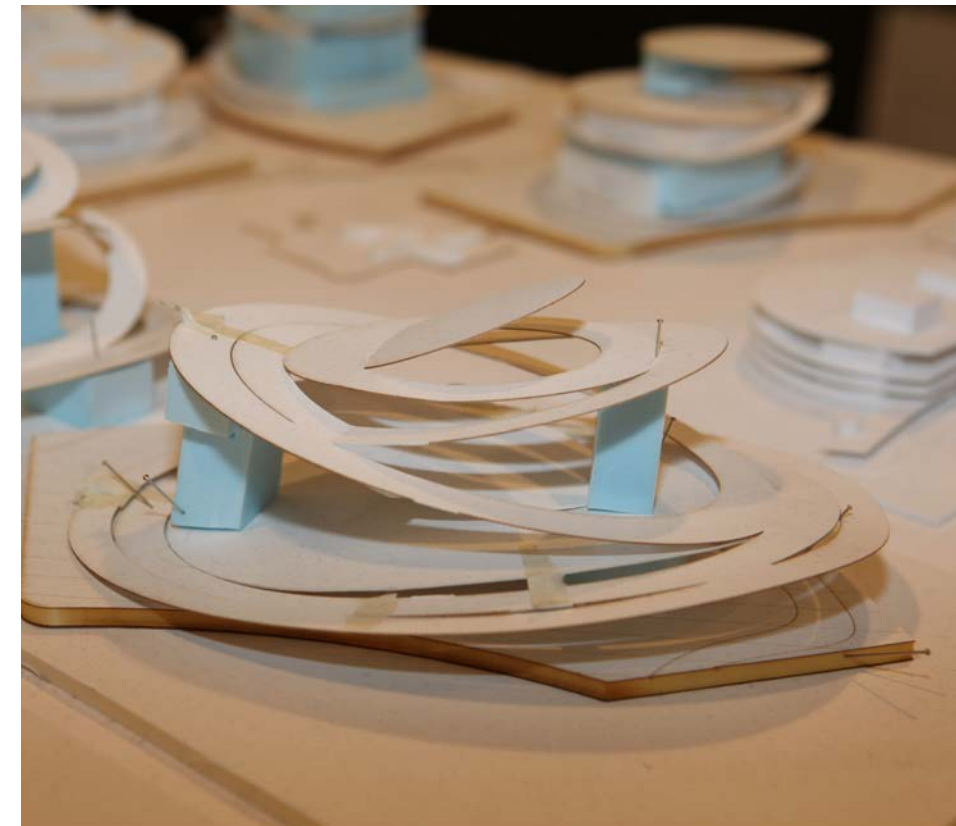
Nowadays investors want to buy a certain style. You seem to reject such a notion.

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I think that with us, *no style* is our style. We are working very specifically out of certain contexts. There is no reason why a library should look the same in Helsinki as in Alexandria. The light is different, the city is different, the culture is different, the history is different, so why would we not recognise that we are like studio musicians? We go into the situation and really start to contextualise and understand the specific setting, and as a result, a certain design comes out at the other end that has nothing to do with style.







Given that architecture is so often reduced to images, styles and people who stand for something, would you agree your way is the hard way?

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Yes, I agree; it's been a hard sell for many years. It isn't easy to get people to understand what you mean. First of all, we are more or less a collaborative which isn't named after a person; it is a fairly horizontal organisation. But at the same time, you have to explain that what we are giving people is not some copy, or an ideology based on a certain way of thinking about the world as such; instead, it's something that is locally embedded and strongly contextualised in order to understand that particular place. So yes, it's been a hard sell——and it still isn't easy.

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What about smart cities? They seem to be pretty much identical in their structure ...

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Even a smart city is contextual. There are certain generic elements of technology that might be the same from one city to another, but something that is smart in San Francisco is not necessarily smart in Helsinki.

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Would you say Greta Thunberg is changing the way we perceive architecture?

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Yes, completely. She's a kind of Astrid Lindgren character——she's like Pippi Longstocking, she is challenging in a very Swedish manner and tradition, but she is turning that focus on the environment. The theme of this year's Triennale in Oslo is de-growth. The big question is whether someone is actually benefiting from our work, or whether it is only benefiting the deep pockets of a developer. I know that sounds a little bit socialist, but if that were the only reason, why is it relevant?

Because of the workspace you are generating, or the number of workers employed? Greta Thunberg is untraditional in the sense that she is challenging a lot of things that we are taking for granted when it comes to understanding our own comfort zone.

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So you'd propose more diverse and regional architecture in the future?

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Absolutely.

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If you were to start afresh, would you change anything?

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The most obvious answer is no. But actually, there is something. Some years ago we started creating a mass-produced housing system——because, you know, every architect has tried to bring down the cost of living and energy consumption——and it failed dramatically because we started selling the product before it was completely developed. On the other hand, we learned so much during that project that the *power house* we are now creating has also been influenced by a lot of the thinking that we were doing during this project. So I would say nothing is ever a hundred per cent failure. A lot of things could have been different, but the fact that they could have been different definitely does not make them failures.

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Kjetil Trædal thank you.