

FANTASTIC NORWAY ARCHITECTS

www.fantasticnorway.no

Two young Norwegians in one red caravan travelling around Norway in search of adventure. Not how you'd normally describe an architectural firm, but this is not normal. This is Fantastic Norway. Rogue architects, Håkon Matre Aasarød and Erlend Blakstad Haffner, scour Norway in their bright office-on-wheels for situations where they can bring about change. Rather than competing for commissioned architectural projects, they abandoned conventional practice and left school to pursue an experimental approach of 'going out' to find their own work. Six years later, their little mobile office is always open to local communities and clients.

With their Norwegian heritage firmly engrained, Fantastic Norway seeks to restore architecture to its communal grassroots. They started together in 2003, working with locals from Brønnøysund to rescue a public square from a private developer. Since then, the creative pair has completed many fantastic projects: from the visually stunning 'Siren', a restaurant on the Oslo waterfront with a transparent, floating façade, to 'Polar Night', light sculptures that warm abandoned public spaces during the 24 hour-long darkness of Arctic wintertime. The guys love to take on urban challenges and sometimes this proves not only difficult, but dangerous. Like having their van shot at to prevent them from revitalising a run-down area in the far North. Luckily, the intrepid architects never accept no for an answer, and are still here to tell the tale.



Working 'off the beaten track' as architectural pioneers, what has been your most important discovery?

We've discovered there is no 'right way' to be an architect; there is only 'your way'. With increasing globalisation, the unique is more important than ever. Together with environmental challenges, this is the most important feature architecture can address. Architecture is a wonderful tool to amplify the strange and powerful notion of local identity.

What have you learnt about your own culture?

Norwegians are scared of the urban. When we regained independence 100 years ago, it became imperative to find something truly Norwegian. Our cities were places built by and for elite outsiders. The romantic idea that nature is good and cities are bad became cemented into Norwegian identity. Most of our celebrated architecture is in contrast with, or inspired by, nature, so it is difficult to create enthusiasm towards urban challenges. This is one reason we bought our caravan in the first place.

Do you think your concept can work everywhere?

Absolutely! For the Venice Biennale, we took our caravan to Italy. We quickly concluded that the caravan as a social arena works well outside Norway. Our initial ambition was to inspire others and spread our way of working. Since then, students in both Sweden and Italy have used our caravan method. Wherever you go, people enjoy talking and being listened to. Actually, I would say, if it works in Norway, it will definitely work elsewhere. Norwegians are famous for being shy.

What do you enjoy most about your work?

Our ambition with Fantastic Norway is to explore the field of architecture, evolve, and have fun at the same time. We don't want to be frozen in one position, and find great joy in discussing and revaluing our company that is founded on being an open and socially aware practice.

Did it affect you that you didn't finish your degrees?

It was great going back to finish them, but we learned more 'out there'. For the most part, students' contact with 'real life' is neglected in favour of abstract knowledge. Students are depressed and shocked by the realities of professional architecture. They feel they have to become machines, leaving behind the interesting debates and creative surroundings they had at school. We want to show students there are many ways to be an architect.

Can you imagine settling down in an office?

Not in a traditional sense. We always want to keep our work socially aware and closely connected to the clients and societies we work in. However, in the last few years we have focussed on self-initiating projects and anchoring them economically and politically. Running a firm this way means finding your own clients, instead of waiting for the next commission. This idea of the caravan, the public architect, is very much part of this way of working, but not necessarily in a physical sense. Moving from town to town isn't compatible with having a personal life in the long run.

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