



PROFILE HELEN & HARD

15 YEARS AGO REINHARD KROPP AND SIV HELENE STANGELAND MET ON A POST-GRADUATE COURSE AT THE OSLO SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. BOTH WERE INTERESTED IN RADICAL POSTMODERNISM, AND HAD A DESIRE TO BRING ITS VITALITY TO NORWAY, RATHER THAN THE CALM THEY WERE BEING TAUGHT. OLIVER LOWENSTEIN LOOKS AT AND TALKS TO HELEN & HARD

You can't travel around Norway without being affected by the landscape. It's long, spiny, mountainous topography means many of the largest cities are coastal, nestled around deep, storm-protected waters, beneath the yawning heights of mountainscapes. A car or rail journey between the capital, Oslo, and the country's second city, Trondheim, will take a long eight hours. Geography really matters here.

At times overwhelming in its drama, this landscape has, however, been understood by older generations of Nordic architects. In the latter decades of the 20th century a primarily phenomenological and experiential path was the accepted orthodoxy, represented in Norway by the late Sverre Fehn and Christian Norberg-Schulz, respectively the country's late-20th-century practical and theoretical architecture high priests. More recently younger architects have been challenging the accepted wisdom – with the debate opening up provocatively.

Such muscle-flexing by this younger generation is finding expression in a variety in guises across a number of up-and-coming Nordic studios, one notable example being Norwegian practice Helen & Hard. It has staked out a terrain which is among the more nuanced and interesting, at home »

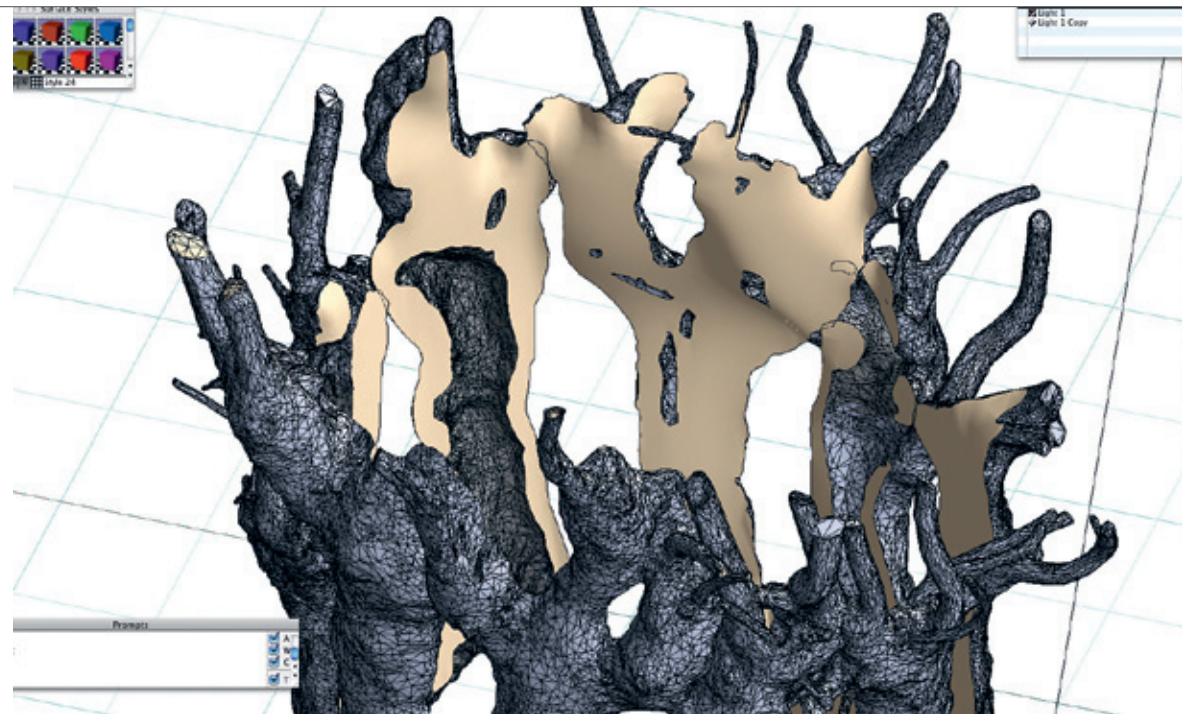
Tempel's
offshore
coatings

Austrian Reinhard Kropf and Siv Helene Stangeland founded Helen & Hard 15 years ago

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THIS IS THE DELICIOUS, SOMEWHAT SURREAL, COLLISION OF AUSTRIAN ARCHITECTURAL ANARCHISM AND SOBER NORDIC PHENOMENOLOGY, WITH ANOTHER BIOLOGICAL RIFF, AUTOPOIESIS, JOINING THE PARTY



and across the larger Nordic backdrop. Last year, Helen & Hard's library, in Vennesla, the latest in a series of CLT (cross laminated timber) buildings, seemed to mark a turning point and new chapter in the 15-year-old practice (more on that later). It opened to blissed-out coverage. Spending an hour in the cafe of the mixed-use community building, I too was smitten, marvelling at the extra-real qualities of the digital/CNC (computer numeric control)-informed (sm)art deco, by way of Calatrava, glue-laminated ribs running over the library's roof.

Founded by Reinhard Kropf and Siv Helene Stangeland, Helen & Hard's design aesthetic – like all of this generation – owes much to computers, though less usually, and also integrates a digital craft aspect. In recent years it has been moving towards a much more naturalistic biomorphic and biomimetic sensibility. The practice's 2010 Rototask installation for the V&A's 1:1 Small Spaces exhibition, involved 3D scans of ash trees in Norway, reproduced through

CNC modelling. The resulting sculpture sat in the museum's courtyard, providing half-authentic, half-artificial gnarled tree trunks. Those children who made it past the V&A's security staff, and got to climb and play on the tree trunks, were taken to Helen & Hard's heart. It was an idiosyncratic melding of playful/performative Nineties' postmodernism with Nordic phenomenology – a kind of ecological postmodernism.

Contrast this with some of their Danish peers, the so-called New Pragmatists or SuperDanish wave, late 30/early 40 somethings, such as Cobe, Transform, and Plot. They take their cues from the punky likes of MVRDV, and appear to be in thrall to Denmark's charismatic starchitect-in-waiting, Bjarke Ingels. His reinvention of the Danish brand is seen as a direct result of an internship at Rem Koolhaas' OMA.

Founded by ex-Koolhaas students and Ingels' friends, Helsinki-based ALA has also

Above: The library at Vennesla marks a turning point for Helen & Hard

Below left: The Pulpit Rock Mountain Lodge, the practice's first CLT building (2008)

Below: Helen & Hard created wild tree structures for the Norway Pavilion at Shanghai's 2010 World Expo

set the city and Finland's architecture scene a-twitter with dollops of 'shock of the new' attitude. That said, ALA's only completed building, the Kilden performance hall in Kristiansand, Norway, isn't exactly the last word in insurrectionary subversion.

By comparison, Helen & Hard isn't about attitude. If there's perhaps a hint of 'sustainable hedonism' there's also serious intent to Helen & Hard, which Kropf and Stangeland are currently explaining as 'relational design'.

Stangeland – a tall, statuesque and classical Nord – hails from Stavanger in Norway, while Kropf – thin and wiry under a squall of dark hair, who wouldn't look amiss in the line up of Franz Ferdinand – is Austrian. 'I'm really glad not to have become a crazy Austrian architect,' states Kropf matter of factly, at one end of a long trestle table on which the studio's young and friendly staff are busy preparing their lunch. He recalls the individualism rife at TU Graz, his architectural alma mater

(Snøhetta's Kjetil Thorsen was in the same drawing class as Kropf). It was 'an extreme experimental climate, redefining what architecture is to be about, turning practice into praxis – a political tool', he says. From Graz, Kropf moved to Oslo.

Stangeland, who had just returned from a long spell studying in Spain, also converged on the Norwegian capital and the two met on a post-graduate course at Oslo Architecture School. They connected in part over the radical post-modernist thinkers such as Manuel de Landa, Michel Serres and Manuel Castells, who they'd encountered in Graz and Barcelona.

This turned them to thinking of how to 'introduce this vitality to Norway'. Instead the course they were on meant studying with both Fehn and Norberg-Schulz, who introduced them to a way of understanding the natural world in a sophisticated, articulate, yet sensual way.

'It was very clear thinking about important things,' they say. Influenced by

their earlier experiences, the pair couldn't help but want to push back. 'We wanted to include a more reflexive and critical sensibility and programme,' recalls Kropf, rather than the 'calm knowledge' that was being imparted.

Today, 15 years on, these encounters are still playing themselves out, not least in their recent, lovely, tactile monograph, Relational Design. The title anticipates Helen & Hard's turn to the naturalistic, with texts framing its interpretation of the relational within the sciences of biology and ecology. This is the delicious, somewhat surreal, collision of Austrian architectural anarchism and sober Nordic phenomenology, with another biological riff, auto-poiesis, joining the party.

There's a real charm in the slightly down-at-heel feel of Helen & Hard's studio and immediate surroundings, even if it's within spitting distance of the source of Norway's recent wealth – the deep sea port of Stavanger. It was here that the country's

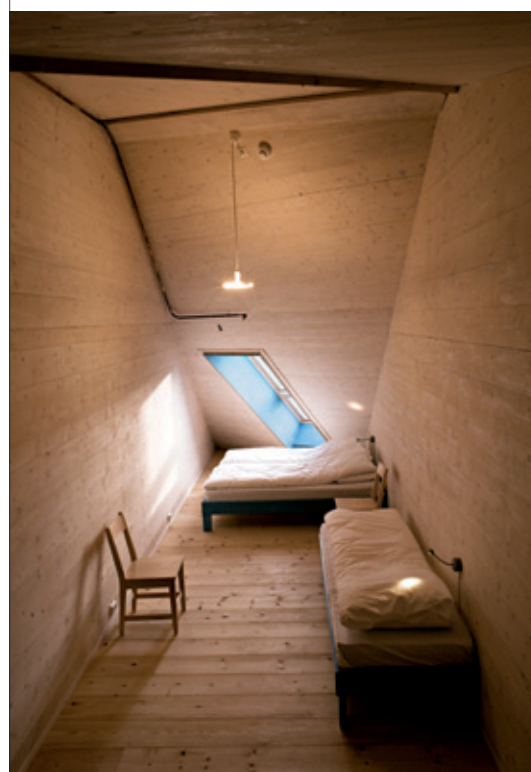
first oil rush began, the receipts from which fuel almost all the country's cultural budget, including relatively generous funding for architecture. Helen & Hard has been a recipient of this largesse, creating wild tree structures for the Norwegian Pavilion at Shanghai's 2010 World Expo. Now, with the country poised on a second oil boom, this time in the Barents Sea with potentially disastrous ecological consequences, the seriousness with which the pair has embraced ecological thinking – through the guise of biological systems thinking as the bedrock of their new ecological aesthetic – remains in question.

The Expo project came midway between the Vennesla library and the practice's first CLT project, 2008's outdoor activities building, Pulpit Rock Mountain Lodge in Strand, Norway. After setting up in Stavanger, the early projects explored Nordic vernacular, with a sizable conceptual element. 'We were intrigued by the city's dynamics and its resources. >>

Above: The 2010 Rototask installation for the V&A's exhibition 1:1 Small Spaces involved 3D scans of ash trees, modelled here

Above right: Children play with Rototask at the V&A

Below: The Flekkefjord cultural centre, due to open later this year





WHAT WE REALLY LEARN FROM NATURE ISN'T ABOUT BUILDING – IT IS DESIGNING, AND HOW EVERYTHING IS MULTIFUNCTIONAL. IT'S ABOUT RECYCLING, BUT ALSO ABOUT DIFFERENT HIERARCHIES, OR THE USE OF LOCAL RESOURCES, OR EMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE IN STRUCTURES, AND HOW THAT KNOWLEDGE CAN BE USED IN ECOLOGICAL WAYS

A big breakthrough was to use Stavanger's oil and timber industry resources,' they say. The first iteration was with Geo-Park, a shoreline children's play area which upcycled oil industry end-of-life materials.

The emphasis on play and performativity has been reprised at Base-Camp (near the Mountain Lodge) a tree-level adventure centre for children. 'The approach we used was always there, but if I became really conscious of it, it was at the V&A. That helped me to be really clear about it. What is so fascinating about children in play is that there is no distinction between the cognitive and the doing,' says Kropf.

The Vennesla library was the next act after the Mountain Lodge announced a radical shift of design and materials focus to engineered timber. And it is only one of several projects either handed over in the past 12 months or about to be completed. In the first half of 2013 the Flekkefjord culture centre will open, likely to add lustre to the practice's already impressive CLT portfolio. Also opening soon in Norway are Skadbergbakken in Oslo, an ambitious housing project designed around social sustainability, and Rundeskogen, three 12-15-storey residential, timber hi-rises in Sandnes, jointly designed with London's dRMM. And finally there's the experimental I-Park project.

There seems to be two paths unfolding before Helen & Hard: digital craft applied to new timber materials, and the biomimetic. At I-Park, a Stavanger tech start-up estate, it's taken Lignotrend CLT hollow-box elements and stacked these judiciously to produce an elegant foyer backdrop and ceiling, again the ad-hoc reuse of a timber product for non-orthodox context.

'What we really learn from nature isn't about building – it is designing, and how everything is multifunctional,' says Kropf. 'It's about recycling, but also about different hierarchies, or the use of local resources, or embedded knowledge in structures, and how that embedded knowledge can be re-used in ecological ways.'

At times these children of the CNC revolution give the impression of finding it difficult to stand still. 'There's so much happening now,' says Kropf in relation to the widening spread of timber research, 'though not so much in Norway.' As it is the yoking of an already impressive portfolio in the still-young field of engineered timberbuild to the biologically informed, post-modern ecology is a singular and surprising melding.

Deepened and rounded, I can't help thinking that this young Norwegian practice is on to something genuinely interesting, a fertile hybrid, which could significantly influence sustainable architecture's evolution over the next decades. ■

Clockwise from top left: There is an emphasis on play and performativity at Base Camp; housing project Skadbergbakken, near Oslo; Geo-Park is a children's play area that upcycled Stavanger's oil industry's end-of-life materials; hollow-box elements are stacked for I-Park, the Stavanger tech start-up estate