

# THE Global Reach of Norwegian Architecture, 1877-2017

By John Bechtel  
Freelance culture and travel writer

There is no way pedestrians who turn the corner of Avenida Cordoba onto Riobamba in a quiet residential neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina, could be prepared for what is about to confront them. Larger than any embassy, each side of the building almost the length of a football field, taking up an entire city block, surrounded by an 8-foot- (2.4 meter) high green iron fencing encompassing immaculate but shallow lawns and gardens, massive doors more numerous than it could possibly need, the exterior walls punctuated with elaborate and brightly colored ceramic tiles, this structure screams not merely opulence, but unapologetic ostentation. There is no sign disclosing its purpose, and on the weekend, there is no sign of life. If Argentina had a king, this would surely be his primary residence, but there are no guards. Too elaborate and beautiful for a prison; a museum perhaps?

## Olaf Boye The Water Company Palace 1877-1894

This four-story structure, built with 180 metal columns inside, six feet apart from each other, and designed outside in the ubiquitous Second Empire French architectural style of the late 19th century, took seven years to complete. Its purpose: to house the city's new water supply in twelve giant water tanks on the top three floors. This was the late 19th century equivalent of the community water tower—Argentine style. The Great Village of Buenos Aires with its new-found agricultural wealth, still



Ornate main entrance of the Water Company Palace—(Aguas Corrientes Palace).

recovering from severe outbreaks of yellow fever in 1871 and again in 1879, was eliminating the use of home water pools by its residents, which were suspected of harboring the source of the disease.

Fueled by the intoxication of new found riches, nothing was too good for Argentina at the time as it widened its streets and boulevards and embraced British railroads and industry, French culture, and immigrant workers from everywhere. No expense was to be spared, everything had to be the very best to be had, and that meant from Europe. Buenos Aires was essentially a small town back then, and even the community water “tower” had to be dressed up in a queen’s jewels. When asked why this gigantic monument to frivolity was designed by a Swedish engineer, Carlos A. B. Nystromer and Norwegian architect Olaf Boye, a recent tour guide blithely replied, because they were the best there was at the time. Today, many of the tanks have been dismantled, but the building still houses some of the administrative offices of the

city water utility, and yes, even a toilet museum.

Few of Buenos Aires residents have any idea of the contents of this startling facility!

The Aguas Corrientes Palace was a product of its time, when Argentina was caught up in a frenzied euphoria and remaking their city in the image of Paris with an overwhelming amount of new construction, materials and expertise provided by professionals from England, France, Belgium, Scotland, Norway and Sweden. There are over 300,000 ceramic pieces and enameled bricks on the outside surfaces of the building, some of them produced by Royal Doulton, that still manufactures beautiful ceramic artwork to this day. Even though it is incongruous that a building of such splendor should house water tanks, its current title as the Agua Corrientes Palace is not a misnomer. It was, and is, the best of its kind, anywhere in the world. Designed by a Norwegian architect, Olaf Boye.

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## The Water Company Palace 1877-1894

The facade of the palace consists of 130 thousand enameled bricks and 300,000 pieces of pottery, imported from England and Belgium. The green slate roof was brought from France. In 1987, the building was declared a National Historic Landmark.





PHOTO: WWW.STATIC.THEREDLIST.COM

“An altar to nature”, the spectacular Norwegian Glacier Museum is architect Sverre Fehn’s best known work.

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## Sverre Fehn

### Norwegian Glacier Museum 1991

Over a century later, the impact of Norwegian architecture is still being felt worldwide. The Pritzker Architecture Prize is generally considered the Nobel Prize of architecture, the gold standard if you will. Sverre Fehn, the only Norwegian to win the prize in the 38 years since its inception in 1979, spoke at length in a 1997 interview shortly after being awarded the prize.

He expressed the opinion that Norwegian architecture is closely tied to their relationship with nature, even calling his best known work, the Norwegian Glacier Museum as “an altar to nature”.

“Norwegians’ worship of nature consists merely of going as fast as you can as far as you can – it’s just an achievement. You climb to the top of a mountain and look at the spectacular view and so on, but this form of belief is really quite a simple one.” He felt that nature was passive; it doesn’t do anything, it’s just there. It’s us humans



PHOTO: WWW.ARCHITECTURAL.ABOUT.COM

Sverre Fehn, the only Norwegian to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

who feel such great satisfaction at a wonderful view from the top of a mountain. Sverre felt that even though our interaction with nature for survival purposes is more removed and indirect than it used to be, we still turn to nature to seek the sacred and the spiritual.

## Kjetil Trædal Thorsen

### Snøhetta

Although he has yet to win the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize,



PHOTO: WWW.TELERAMA.FR

Snøhetta founder Kjetil Trædal Thorsen

architect Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, one of the founders and original partners of the firm Snøhetta, is certainly one of the best known Norwegian architects in the world today. He graduated from Graz University of Technology in Austria in 1985, and the fledgling firm got its first big break when it entered a contest to design the Alexandria Library in Egypt. The founders Thorsen and American Craig Dykers had moved from Oslo to Los Angeles,



PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

A distinct unity exists between architecture and landscape in Snøhetta’s The Oslo Opera House masterpiece.

rented a flat consisting of three rooms and a kitchen in the downtown area of L.A., and worked, ate, and slept there, and rented all their drawing equipment from the local film industry.

### Snøhetta: Oslo Opera House 2000-2008

The Oslo Opera House about 20 years later set Snøhetta’s reputation. It was eight years from when they won the opera house competition to when the project was completed in 2008. It was only then that they realized they had arrived. Even though they are an international company now, they are still viewed as being distinctively Norwegian. This is not simply because that is where they pay their taxes, and the fact that they have maintained their offices in Oslo as well as New York. Their Norwegian identity is also because they seek a distinctive unity between architecture and landscape in their projects.

Instead of the grandiosity of the Aguas Corrientes Palace in Buenos



PHOTO: WWW.ARCHDATA.ORG

Interior of Oslo Opera House.

Aires, Thorsen emphasizes the generosity of large tracts of land that accompany his public building designs and the potential of flat architecture; the easy accessibility with many ways to enter a public building. People love being able to walk on the roof of the Oslo Opera House, and the intimate relationship between the building and the water is popular. However Thorsen objects to people, especially architecture critics, assuming that the design process was driven solely by metaphors drawn from nature, like saying the opera house was designed to look like an iceberg just because it was constructed with white marble.

Whereas Sverre Fehn strongly emphasized the importance of the

drawing as the key to getting proposals accepted, Snøhetta’s focus is on brainstorming and intense cross-disciplinary discussion before a single line is drawn; and it takes a long time to work through the ideation process. Alertness to recognizing brilliant concepts hidden in plain sight in casual conversation can be the difference between winning and losing in an intensely competitive international environment. At the time that Fehn received his award, of 100 designs he had tendered during his career thus far, only eleven had actually been built. On the other hand, Snøhetta has a long string of dramatic successes against world class competitors.

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PHOTO: WWW.CORPWATCH.COM

**Norwegian state-owned Statoil company offices at Fornebu, Oslo.**

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**Snøhetta: Statoil 2012**

The Oslo offices of Norwegian state-owned oil company Statoil officially opened in October 2012. The odd shaped building housing 2,500 employees consists of five blocks, each one of them three floors high, 140 meters (459 feet) long and 23 meters (75 feet) wide, stacked on top of each other. Large scale art prominently displayed indoors and out is a source of inspiration to guests and staff.

for USD \$65 million, mostly from the Arab states, construction began in 1995 and was inaugurated on 16 October 2002 after a total cost of USD \$220 million.

**Snøhetta: Culture Center & Visitor Orientation Center, National September 11 Memorial 2004-2014**

Once again Snøhetta emphasizes horizontal planes accentuated by

striking geometric configurations. Inclined, reflective, and transparent surfaces invite visitors to walk up close and peek inside. The museum is below grade.

**Snøhetta: Times Square Reconstruction 2010-2017**

Popularly known as the Times Square Bowtie, the area bounded by Broadway and 7th Avenue between 42nd St. and 47th St. is considered by many to be the crossroads of the



PHOTO: WWW.SNOHETTA.COM

**Culture Center & Visitor Orientation Center National September 11 Memorial**

world. Its signature buildings and spectacular signs—the glowing walls of the Bowtie—create an outdoor room right in the heart of Manhattan. The infrastructure in the area for drainage and maintenance was deteriorating and was upgraded as part of the project.

Snøhetta's design created uncluttered pedestrian zones that reinforce the Bowtie's role as an outdoor stage, replete with granite benches. The two-toned custom pavers are embedded with nickel-sized steel discs that capture and scatter the neon glow from the signs above.



PHOTO: WWW.DESIGNBOOM.COM

**Time Square reconstruction**

**Snøhetta: Bibliotheque Alexandria, Egypt 1988-2002**

The library at Alexandria was one of the largest centers of learning in the ancient world. Built by Ptolemy, a successor to Alexander the Great, it contained upwards of 40,000 scrolls. It is perhaps most famous for having burned down, possibly at the hands of Julius Caesar.

An architectural design competition organized by UNESCO in 1988 was won by Snøhetta from among more than 1,400 entries. Originally budgeted



**Bibliotheque Alexandrina—major library and culture center in Alexandria, Egypt.**

**Snøhetta: Lascaux Cave Visitor Center 2010-2017**

The 20,000-year-old Paleolithic Lascaux cave paintings were discovered by a teenager near the Dordogne town of Montignac, France, in 1940. The walls and ceilings were covered with paintings and engravings of large animals that seemed to move in the light of hand-held torches. By 1963, the breath of thousands of tourists plus the installed air conditioning system had so deteriorated the wall art that the caves were closed. This past winter, the *(Continued on page 42)*



PHOTO: CASSON MANN

**Lascaux Cave Visitor Center**





Lascaux Cave Visitor Center interior.

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finishing touches were being put on the landscaping of a new 123,000 square foot (11,427 square meter) International Center for Cave Art on a 16-acre (16.5 hectare) campus.

Snøhetta was selected from a field of 80 international applicants for the design work. There are seven zones to the facility, and you enter a grotto much as the original artists did millennia ago, and the illumination comes on ahead of you and dims out behind you as you move through a full scale and very realistic replica of the caves. The temperature and humidity are controlled and it feels like you are in a cave. Thirty artists have painstakingly re-created hundreds of paintings that are accurate to a millimeter of the originals.

## Niels Torp

Named after the 77-year-old Norwegian founder, son of architect Ernst Torp, and brother of architect Fredrik Torp, this architectural firm employs up to 70 people, depending on current commissions, and the staff draws on a global talent pool of architects, designers, engineers, and other professionals.

## Niels Torp: British Airways Headquarters building, 1998

One of their most notable achievements was the British Airways Headquarters building built in 1998 near Heathrow Airport.

Built at a cost of \$200 million (at today's exchange rate), it appears the 284-acre (115 hectare) campus will have to be demolished, and the cost at least partially borne by British Airways, to make way for a new, third runway at Heathrow Airport, to be completed by 2026. This headquarters complex boasts sections themed after different continents, including cherry trees in the Asian section, and birch

trees in the European section. It has its own lake, restaurant, auditorium, and supermarket. British Airways accounts for about half of all air traffic at Heathrow, but apparently the communication between the two entities is adversarial at times.

Oh well, after twenty years this facility was probably due for a major upgrade anyway. Who will be commissioned for the replacement project? Is this an example of planned obsolescence? Probably not, since British Airways' enraged boss, Willie Walsh, says no one told him they were planning to bulldoze his world headquarters to make room for the new runway.



British Airways headquarters



Fogo Island Arts Colony structure.

PHOTO: WWW.CHANGEASART.ORG

## Todd Saunders

### Fogo Island Inn and Fogo Island Arts Colony, Newfoundland, Canada, 2010-2013

Todd Saunders was born in Gander and raised in Newfoundland, Canada. Since 1977, he has lived and worked in Norway, and he opened his own architectural firm in Bergen in 2014.

With an art gallery, dining room, library, bar and lounge, and 29 guest rooms all directly facing the ocean, this hotel completed in 2013 was designed to encourage the arts and culture in this small community. The guest rooms are all on the top two floors, and public spaces in the first two.

The art studios, separated some distance from the nearest villages, are on stilts, with supports drilled into bedrock, heavily-insulated, powered by solar panels and heated by log burners, and without access to public electricity, water, or sewage. They do have composting toilets, rainwater collectors, and gray water treatment systems. They telescope towards the Atlantic. As is true of so much of Norwegian architecture, inspiration is drawn from the interaction between people and nature. Nature is nature, as Sverre Fenn would say, implacable and unkind. It gives and takes life. It simply is what it is. It is up to human imagination to infer meaning and even

solace from her.

Todd was born and raised in Canada, lives and designs in Bergen, Norway, and builds in Newfoundland and other places. He is considered by some as an architectural rock star. Is he Norwegian or Canadian? Does it matter? He designs because he must. It is his art. Architecture is about spatial relationships between people and landscapes, and considerable thought is given by architects to how they choose to interact with the immediate environment of their projects, whether to seek symbiosis or jarring dissonance. Even the Agua Corrientes Palace was designed in all its magnificence in deference to the affluent community where it was built.

All buildings are designed for specific purposes, and they have to



Todd Saunders

PHOTO: WWW.RELITERAIRE.COM

meet the practical demands of their intended use. Form still has to follow function. But increasingly architects and designers seek to reach ever higher artistic expression as they compete globally and are rewarded handsomely for their imagination. Even as the lines between form and function in design are blurred, so are the national and cultural distinctions among the designers, as architectural organizations increasingly draw from a global marketplace in talent. The landscapes they build on are indifferent to the arbitrary political boundary lines imposed on them. The appeal and inspiration from nature are universal and transcend our squabbles, if we are open to it. Architecture is art, and has potential to touch the highest and best in us.



Fogo Island Inn dining room.

PHOTO: ALEX FRADKIN