

Open Mic

A Conversation with Casper Mork-Ulnes

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KENT STATE[®]
UNIVERSITY
FLORENCE PROGRAM

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by professor Marco Brizzi at Kent State
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Biography

With offices in San Francisco and Oslo, Mork-Ulnes Architects approaches projects with both Scandinavian practicality and Northern California's 'can do' spirit of innovation. Rigorous and concept-driven, the practice is based on built work characterized by both playfulness and restraint, and informed by economies of means and materials. Mork-Ulnes Architects have worked on projects ranging in scale from masterplans to 100 square foot cabins, and have realized buildings on 3 continents. Mork-Ulnes Architects has been the recipient of numerous national and international honors, including Architectural Record's 2015 worldwide Design Vanguard award. Mylla Cabin, a retreat they completed in the Norwegian forest, was nominated in November 2018 for The European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture – Mies van der Rohe Award. Norwegian born, Casper Mork-Ulnes was raised in Italy, Scotland and the United States, which has brought a broad perspective to his eponymous firm's work. In 2015, Casper was named one of "California's finest emerging talent" by the American Institute of Architects California Council. He was selected by the Norwegian National Museum as one of "the most noteworthy young architects in Norway" with the exhibit "Under 40. Young Norwegian Architecture 2013." Casper holds a Master of Architecture from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Architecture from California College of the Arts.



INTERVIEW WITH

CASPER
MORK-ULNES

FLORENCE 2019

The contents of this interview focused initially on Casper Mork-Ulnes' current work and his personal experiences designing internationally. These are topics that relate very much to the student's semester abroad in Florence, therefore they formed the starting portion of the interview.

VMA / Thank you for coming and speaking with us; we are excited to have you here. You have had an amazing amount of success in a short period of time since starting your studio. Is there a method or strategy you used to achieve everything that you've done so far?

Mork-Ulnes | “Well, I wouldn’t say I’ve had an amazing amount of success, although it has been 10 years, a little over 10 years and time really flies, but at the same time, you know architecture is a very slow, slow business. And it takes a long time to build a portfolio and to get anything built. I think, quite honestly, the method is simple in the sense that we have really set out to get our projects built, and worked really hard at actually getting them executed. And I think the end results are a big cultural difference; a little bit between Europe and the United States, the

way architecture functions, not to stray off, but with everything from the involvement of the state, versus in the United States there is no state-sponsored government. To that effect, we’ve really just been focusing on executing our work and not going the route of competitions. For example, seeking out clients, seeking out good projects, working really hard on trying to make good projects, even on some projects where the clients don’t have the same aspirations you might have as an architect and pushing the clients along to do good projects. The earlier part of my career, a lot of the projects I got were friends or family: a bathroom here or small projects. But pushing it along is part of what I think has allowed us to get a lot of things built in a relatively short period of time.”

VMA / You mention your nordic spirit and the california free spirit approach on your website. Did you find that there was a culture shock that either hindered or inspired you and how did you approach the differences when you first encountered it, and how did you turn that into a design process?



Patrick Hickey.Justin Meikle.Reis Petrovich.Jonathan Bonezzi.Tim Jockers.Michael Randza.
Casper Mork-Ulnes [Center]

Not Pictured | Abdullah Samarin.Trisha Kreydt.Caitlyn Wolford.Keyarash Montazeri. Marco Brizzi

Mork-Ulnes | “I was actually 16, so I was in high school when I moved to California. Prior to that, I spent four years in Scotland at a very strict school where we had to wear a suit and tie and I couldn’t have hair below my collar. I had long hair, my hair was down to here [gestures to shoulders] I didn’t cut my hair for five years before that. [Laughter] I think it can have a tremendous impact on you. I think that is why these certain programs exist; because you should be hopefully blown away by what you see here and also the challenges that you face in trying to design something in a city that has this incredible and rich history of the renaissance that you have only heard in history books and to be able to actually attack that. I think it is incredibly challenging. I don’t know any words of wisdom other than maybe to take a step back and try to look at it freshly with your own perspective because you have different perspectives from whichever state you come from too and what you can bring to the table with your upbringing, so I think that is what I would instead be trying to do. Don’t try to design like an Italian architect who has lived here most of his life, try to design with what your family brought you up to be and that sort of thing. I have always kind of gone back

to myself and projected myself onto how to solve a problem, so don’t try to fit in.”

VMA / What are the most important considerations when you are given a project or approaching a design for something, and where do you draw most of your influences from?

Mork-Ulnes | “I think there are sort of two questions there. The first question, when you first get a project, I think it’s really important, no matter what you learned in school, to really listen to your client. Try to understand what the issues are and what they are coming to you for. You are here usually to solve a challenge, a very complex problem. To try to do that simply is kind of the most difficult thing in architecture. So no matter what it is: whether it’s budget, whether it’s material interest, whether it’s capturing a view, that’s the most important because I think you can find the clues for the project and that’s what we do - we listen to those clues. Then we go back to the office and that’s where the ideas are formed, where the concepts are formed. So it’s really an ironing solution to a really challenging problem. I think

"Because architecture is a very complex, messy business, it's a lot of things that you have to consider."

the inspiration comes really to try to solve this problem, and to try to solve it simply. Which is what we always say in the office: "how do you solve it simply and elegantly?" Because architecture is a very complex, messy business, it's a lot of things that you have to consider."

VMA / While you were in college what do you think was the most valuable less or piece of information you took away from your learning experience?

Mork-Ulnes | "I think I learned a lot from working at the same time that

I was in college. I took internships (like maybe you guys will also have to take) and the last few years, it actually took me 6 years to do a 5 year degree because I worked actively, in particular the last two years. I feel that having the mix of the professional with the theory was very helpful for me. I noticed that when I went to graduate school a lot of the other students didn't have practical experience. And I feel like, then I really got a lot out of graduate school, for a while, down in the trenches drafting, as they did back in the day, when I was a bit younger."

VMA / Who your favorite architect is and why?

Mork-Ulnes | “I can never really give a straight answer; it’s a really hard thing to answer I think. I alluded to Mies. Obviously, when I was a student I looked to Mies like a lot of students do, but I think as I got a little bit older there is an architect which you probably don’t know, Sverre Fehn. He’s a Norwegian architect who wasn’t very well recognized except for when he was very old. He did get the Pritzker Prize, I think in 1997 or the late ‘90s something like that. He didn’t build a lot of projects, however, he did build a handful of projects in Norway. He did the Nordic Pavilion [in Venice]. But I think he has been someone I have a great deal of respect for because of the way he interpreted modern-ness and made it very humane with the use of the material and detailing and a little bit of the thing we work with - a little bit of the playfulness. The way in which that pavilion, for example, the structure splits at the tree. The tree that you’re probably never going to see. The tree’s now gone, unfortunately, but the main structural beam, the beam that holds the whole roof, splits at this beautiful old tree. He had certain things in his work that I think has

influenced us.

I think at the same time that I am also equally inspired by people of my generation and younger. I think that goes back, as well, to your question on Instagram and representation. Media is something we didn’t have before. When I went to school, we had to walk up there and find the books; literally to get inspired by other architects. We were not exposed to it as you are today. And I think that’s also something very important to also filter out. I find it very tiring sometimes to go through Instagram and identify good work. I think it’s a bit of a dichotomy there because I think there’s a lot of great work that’s out there that wasn’t as easily accessible as it is now.”

VMA / Something that’s very important to us is visual representation. What is your approach to displaying and representing the process and concepts of your work?

Mork-Ulnes | “I think, for better or for worse, it’s very private for us almost. It’s very traditional in the sense that it’s a lot of hand sketches and physical models. So for the representation, it’s something that we maybe should show more to our

clients, but it's something we usually keep within the office, as far as how we work. Then the representation we end up showing our clients are more traditional things like renderings, fly-throughs, and models. Although, it is changing a little bit more and I believe it's changing because our clients are becoming a little bit more sophisticated. So it is something that is changing and evolving in our practice.

VMA / The seamless materiality of your projects are wonderful. What does it create in terms of details in sections and do you do a lot of mock ups materiality wise?

Mork-Ulnes | “My interest in details has come from probably my second year as an undergraduate, where I was first introduced to the work of Mies. I had a professor there, Jim Jennings is his name, he does exquisite, beautiful work with a small office in California. But he really got me to think that ‘god’ is in the details, as well. It’s not just about the initial concept that has to carry all the way through. I think that maybe more how we think of details, it goes from the concept part to the way things are actually executed. The things carry from that moment until

the project is done. And those details are developed throughout the process and they are always in the back of my mind, even when I am working on the initial sketches of what the concept is. But back in the office, yeah, we do build mock-ups and one thing we do is we work very tightly with the builders and we spend a lot of time in the field with the contractors, and that is everybody on the team. That is always something I have enjoyed doing. And sketching on the walls, with a big scale, probably inspired by the big scaled detailed sections that Mies used to do. I have always sort of felt that you needed to draw big to really understand the details.”

VMA / Some of your projects include many prefabricated pieces, do you mind if we discuss this further? Do you believe that there is a line to be drawn as to how far prefabrication in architecture can go?

Mork-Ulnes | “I think it hasn’t been explored enough and pushed hard enough. You see a huge difference in prefabrication, for example, in Scandinavia and the United States, where Scandinavia is miles ahead of the United States on that. A lot of

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it has to do with labor costs in the United States. They are a lot lower in the United States than in Scandinavia where it's more of an egalitarian society, where carpenters cost \$75-90 an hour. And so it's a necessity and drive to find these sort of more high tech solutions. So I think it's definitely something that is part of the future and something that we are working with. At the same time, architecture, to me, is also about craft and so where that sort of tension is going to resolve itself. That is also very interesting. But I think artisanal workmanship that we see all over Florence, I don't want that to get lost. So that would be a challenge."

**Troll Hus Norden, California
Single Family Home 2015**

VMA / Where do you think the line falls on prefabrication, in regards to ready-made buildings you just plug into a site and the opposite of the free spirit of design and architecture?

Mork-Ulnes | "I think the ready-made buildings we plugged into the site, have their place. If it's affordable housing or for refugees, and I hope that an architect's hands will always be in it because that is what your education is about and that is the

fear I have with prefabrication is that architects are not going to be involved in building the cities and the urban spaces and the suburban space. I actually just got an email this morning after an interview where we have been hired to build the first 3d printed house in California. And this is for a private client, but the client is an entrepreneur, and they wanna push it and start doing housing in the state of California. So that exact question is what I have in the back of my mind, being involved in this project, and is it the right thing to do. If we can actually figure it out and if we can do it in a seismic zone, and those sort of things. I think it is going to be a big ethical question that my generation of architects, and particularly your generation of architects are going to have to grapple with pretty soon.”

VMA / On a near parallel note, how do you think 3D printing, related to architecture, is going to influence the future of designing?

Mork-Ulnes | Yeah, that is interesting because, you know, back to the initial question about the details, my fear is, ‘will details be lost?’. The tactile qualities of materials and the natural qualities, I think it is a very

difficult question. I think that is why you are being pushed in school to build models out of paper, build models out of balsa wood, and try different types of materials - so you can start learning for yourself how they perform. I understand that if you are just sitting there, printing 3D models out of whatever materials that may be, you may lose a lot of what, in my mind, architecture is. There is a great architect by the name of Carlos Scarpe, using wood, steel, and concrete. I do not know what his projects would be like if his projects were 3D printed, and didn’t have the materiality. It is a very good question, and it doesn’t just come into 3D printing, it also comes in from modular construction and prefabricated construction because you become very limited as to what materials you can use because of what the systems are or the way in which they interlock and so forth. Although there are products, like CLT, which I will talk about later, Cross Laminated Timber, which is also a monolithic material, but I think it has inherent qualities in it that you can manipulate in certain ways. Not that you are unable to manipulate 3D printed materials either, but it is, I think, a very very complicated, but interesting question.”



Ridge House | Sonoma
Guesthouse 2018





Meier Road | Sebastopol, California
Artists Studio 2013



VMA / Do you think that prefabrication and social medias hinder and desensitizes us to appreciating what we are seeing or do you think that it spreads an overall wave of new designs and new ideas, without it cheapening?

Mork-Ulnes | “I think I have this fear, just like on Instagram, it can cheapen it. That’s definitely something I think about everyday. I see a lot of these computer whizzes with all these beautiful renderings, but when I look at it, it’s like ‘how is that going to get built? How does that really

**Meier Road | Sebastopol, California
Artists Studio 2013**

work? What’s the real concept here, other than just a beautiful photo?’ Now back to your question about the details: yeah, it’s always on my mind.

VMA / Prefabrication has been a big topic of discussion in our education today, so we thank you for sharing your thoughts on it with us!

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VMA / To shift gears a little, there are so many wonderful museum's around the world that are incredible and are so unique in their own ways." Which museum is your favorite that you have visited and why?

**Mylla Hytte | Oslo, Norway
Ski Cabin 2017**

Mork-Ulnes | "I think the one that had the most impact on me as a student was Le Centre Pompidou because until then I hadn't seen anything quite like it. This was obviously many many years ago, but even at that point, it was still quite fresh even though it was built in '76. It would be interesting to see what

you guys think because you're so much younger than me and there's so many more. At that time it was long before the Gehry wave of new museums as well, but there are also beautiful ones like the Prada and old historic museums that, since you're in Europe, that's sort of what I would seek out as well because there's not much of that to the same extent in the United States."

VMA / Many of your designs and projects we found to be placed in a natural setting, is it just a piece of opportunity that they're set in a natural setting?

Mork-Ulnes |

“I think it’s a bit personal with me, with my Norwegian heritage. I love to be outdoors. I love to ski. I’ve been fly fishing since I was a kid. I’ve always loved being outdoors, so I think I’ve gravitated towards those types of projects personally. So it’s not totally happenstance. But, I do think now that the office is changing a little bit; our work is also not just these rural natural environments. That’s not necessarily the way the office is going now. I think also cities can be landscapes. For example, San Francisco has its own vernacular landscape. So I think that as an office we’re starting to cope and think about these sort of issues so we can continue with what we’ve been doing.”

VMA / Your designs, in your website’s words, are characterized by playfulness and restraint. These are two things are not normally put together, so in regard to projects like the Troll House

or Mylla Height, could you elaborate on those aspects?

Mork-Ulnes | “It’s really about the cross-pollination of having the Nordic frame-of-mind and California frame-of-mind, where the restraint is the Nordic part and the playfulness comes from the Northern California hippy in me. It’s the tension between those two things that constantly are at play in our projects. Troll Hus, for example, it’s actually an incredibly functional move to lift the building out of the snow because it is at an altitude of 2,500 meters, but it’s also a bit of a crazy, aloof idea. When we showed it to the builders initially, they thought we were crazy but it’s actually purely driven by function. So, there’s always a bit of this tension between the tongue and cheek-ness, and the very strict forward-thinking, Nordic-thinking, in me.”



VMA / Too many people see innovation today as a repurposing of the current or prior ideas. So how exactly does your firm embody true innovation as pure your website claims?

**Mylla Hytte | Oslo, Norway
Ski Cabin 2017**

Mork-Ulnes | “I think it goes back to taking on challenges. In the beginning many years of our practice, always the biggest challenge was to build on a budget because we had young clients and Silicon Valley hadn’t really taken off. I think that forced innovation in us because we couldn’t build the things we designed with the budget

that we had. So that forced us to really dig deep and ask ‘how do we figure [this] out?’ The Moose Road Project, for example, there was no way anybody was going to build that for \$170 per square foot, but then we thought, ‘Well, what if we don’t waste any materials? If we design it around a 4x8 sheet of plywood and a 4x8 sheet of OSB and standard 18-inch on-center framing, and we only spend money on three windows...’ and that’s sort of what I mean with “innovation” with that project.

For example, we really pushed materials and it really is shown in the expression of the building, the shape of the building, the amount of windows, and everything about it. Now we are lucky; we have some larger budgets. We just finished a house that's all concrete. And I think that it might not be innovation in other parts of the world, but it had never really been done before in California - to build something where inside and out, everything was done out of concrete in earthquake country. We were working with the engineers and the builders, but it's really the culture of the office to never say "no". We have a challenge and we're going to figure out how to do it. Sometimes that means thinking out of the box and doing something that hasn't been done before."

We all really appreciate you coming down to Florence and spending time to sit down with us before your lecture. We just have one more question for you, and that is looking ahead, is there something that you want to achieve that you have not yet?

to continue doing the work we do in the mountains and the alpine environment but do larger structures that can do a little bit more than just being cabins and things like that. I think every architect's dream is also to do cultural work and more public work that the general public can enjoy. That's the downside to doing a private residence because no one really behooves you besides the people who commission you but not others. To be able to share what we believe in with other people, to do more public work, that's the direction our office is headed in, it's something we've been talking about these last couple years. We're slowly but surely starting to get those sort of projects but it's very difficult particularly in the United States. You don't have the competition system and you have to be qualified to work with the state university system of Colorado or California and it's a very cumbersome, very tight process. We'll get there."

Mork-Ulnes | "I have only scratched the surface of what we would like to work on. I think we would like

This interview with Casper Mork-Ulnes was focused upon his Norwegian heritage, and its influences on his designs today. It was a collaborative effort among students of the Video, Media, and Architecture course at Kent State University Florence. Guest lecturers were brought in from all over Europe for a Spring lecture series and students were tasked to create an interview before each of these lectures. After analyzing numerous interviews with other architects, students researched and explored the work of the visiting lecturers. Questions were then devised by each student, and these questions were analyzed based upon their thematic similarity and their relevance to the work of each lecturer. The most appropriate questions were chosen for each interview, and the specific students who created these questions then were charged with interviewing our guests, using the chosen questions as a base and posing any other questions that flowed with the interview.