Craig Dykers’s architecture career took off at the age of 28 after his team—a collaboration from contemporary young professionals from different parts of the world—won the international design competition for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt in 1989. The win led to the formation of the today renowned architecture firm Snøhetta. Along with Kjetil Thorsen, the founding partners established themselves in Oslo, Norway.

Since then, Snøhetta has continued to evolve, winning multiple competitions and branching out into design related fields such as landscape architecture, interior architecture, graphic design, and product design. A few of the most recognized projects include: Oslo Opera House in Norway with its sloped and habitable roof, National September 11 Museum and Pavilion at the World Trade Center site in NYC, SFMOMA’s addition with its horizontally rippled exterior facade, and Under—Europe’s first underwater restaurant in the Norwegian coast. The firm’s evolution has led them to establish a permanent office in New York since 2004, as well as offices in San Francisco, Innsbruck, Paris, Hong Kong, and Adelaide with around 240 employees in total.

Dykers directs the New York office and has led the design of multiple Snøhetta’s prominent projects, and beyond his practice, he has been an active academic and lecturer. In 2018, he became a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, AIA’s highest honor given to members of exceptional work and contributions to architecture and society. In our conversation, Dykers shares his thoughts on collaboration, what it means to be a young architect today, contesting building codes, taking risks, and how their proposals impact human behaviors while creating environmental conscious solutions.
Norwegian National Opera and Ballet. Photography by Gerald Zugmann. All photography courtesy of Snøhetta.
The inception of Snøhetta began after winning the competition for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. How significant was winning that prize so early in your career, and how did it help create Snøhetta?

There are many characteristics that are important to us surrounding the competition and the inception of Snøhetta. First thing I’ll say is that the Bibliotheca Alexandrina—in the ancient world—was an important hub for people from around the world, where knowledge and the development of culture was at the core of their interests. There wasn’t a national boundary, the library was open to all, it was created by many peoples of many cultures, including hellenistic people, later Arabs and Christians alike. It passed through multiple layers of development, and so that was an important lesson for our studio: to see that a place built by so many people and so many cultures could lead to something of lasting value up until the present time. We built our practice around the same idea in which the library of Alexandria was built.

In terms of the practical issue of winning a large competition like that, we were very grateful, obviously; it was an anonymous competition, they didn’t know who we were. They were shocked and surprised when we arrived because we were so young—all of us were in our late twenties, early thirties. They couldn’t believe that a such a young company could win this kind of competition, and furthermore, that we would have the capacity to build it. So that was a very funny and odd situation for us. In retrospect, our youth—and in a way, our general ignorance to the world—made it possible to finish this project, because we pushed forward, we had no fear.

What were some of the challenges that came with winning a project like that when you’re still starting out?

When you’re a very young studio like ours was, having a large project to build your practice on is quite useful. You learn a lot about the ways of the world; about the processes of building, making, and designing; you learn about the psychology of human interactions; and about money and how not to go bankrupt—which happened. We worked ourselves from the ground up and it was a great way of starting a practice. The challenge was that after we finished the Alexandria Library we were still very young and we thought about whether it was possible to have another project of that magnitude again in our lives. For a short period of time, there was a type of nervousness about whether or not we would be a one hit wonder. But we kept working, and the reason we survived is because we opened up our practice to different insight from different groups of people. We always have a fresh perspective in the office and even though I have a loud mouth and scream a lot, there’s a whole lot of people that are doing great things here—often not aligned with some of the original founders’ intentions. This is what keeps us fresh.
It’s certainly harder for a young practice to acquire a project like the Library of Alexandria today. In the past it was somewhat more achievable—there were more similar competitions around the world. You can certainly be a smaller younger practice and acquire smaller projects and that’s very good too, but if you want to explore a world of larger society and larger cultural influences, it’s more difficult now. And of course the pool of trades have changed a lot; education, for instance, has changed a lot. Also, there are more architects in the world now then there were 35–40 years ago, when I began. Computers have changed, as well as the way which we approach architecture. There has been a very healthy evolution that allows us to explore or research more quickly and effectively but in other ways it has also removed us from reality, so this is a negative consequence of computers. By that I don’t mean that previously technologies were any better. I mean, a pencil and a beautiful watercolor rendering of a beautiful piece of architecture is just as surreal as a computer rendering. The differences are that the computer rendering today tend to be more realistic, so people get lost in what they think is real but actually is not. In a watercolor or a pencil sketch, you can tell that the image not real; and you don’t want it to be real so you can use your imagination more.

Each year Snøhetta surprises us with new projects, some which extend beyond architecture. Architecture has always been intertwined with other branches of design, and in Puerto Rico we see this a lot with newly graduated architects who find it hard to find building work in our economy. What opportunities exist for architects, especially young architects, to diversify their line of work?

I would say first, I appreciate the comment and the questions since they are very important and relevant. Puerto Rico has gone through great hardship for quite a long time, especially in recent years, and so the environment is really challenging. One thing I would suggest however is that architecture is one of the few professions that specializes in “generalism”, so we are by nature, generalists. That is our specialty. Many other professions focus on a specialization and although there are specialized architects, our fundamental training is to be generalists. As an architect you can leave school—and many of my friends, they went on to do other things that are vaguely related to architecture but are not architecture in the historical sense. They went on to open restaurants, work on logistics of hospitals, they went on to create technology that helps filtrate water, all of this kinds of things. If anybody has that capacity to branch out, it’s the architect.
I would imagine that at the most difficult of economic times, this is when you need an architect the most. But probably the only things that architects are not good at are economy, money, and business. We should be. We should be able to help people understand how to manage the economy of building new things. Beyond that, of course, there are smaller things we can do that are important but don’t normally think about. Improving sidewalks for example, is a very important consideration in various places that had overcome hardships. We did a project in Guatemala City, where we focused only on improving the sidewalks. Sidewalks are people’s common space in many cities, especially where the car takes over. Sidewalks are our spaces of refuge from the chaos of the city.

CD

I’d like to discuss your Times Square Reconstruction and Oslo’s Opera House. The Time Square Renovation provides pedestrian-only space, renovating the area from previously car congested streets, while the Oslo Opera House blends the project’s ramp with the surroundings and waterfront. I think one of the biggest challenge architects face, is how to be disruptive in terms of innovative proposals, and when to abide by regulations as well as getting approval from the powers that be. What are your thoughts on this regarding these two projects?
Well this is also a big question. First, just to start with the idea of regulations. When we built in Egypt back in 1989, there were no clear building regulations to be followed; there were regulations of course but they weren’t clear nor entirely organized, so we couldn’t tell how to use them in a direct way. That’s different now. Part of the reason is because of the completion of that library; it changed the building standards of Egypt. We arrived and we thought, how are we going to design without any clear regulations? How would we know if we were making something that’s safe? But most importantly, how would we know if we were taking regulations that were used in Europe or in America, and bringing them over to Egypt? Is that appropriate? At first you think that a regulation is a just regulation, and that it must mean the same thing to everybody. But when you think about it a little bit more, you realize that no, you can’t have something for everybody, because everybody is so wildly different. The world and every culture is different.

We began to analyze the regulations and we realized that underneath every regulation—in the West, at least—is a scientific study that uses a certain number of individuals to quantify safety dimensions and safety needs. Of course, as you might imagine, there is more than likely going to be a racist proposition based on ethnic ideology. In Europe and in America, nearly all of the safety standards are made around 95% of the needs of a white male, so there’s also gender imbalance. Heights of handrails are based on white male, euro-caucasian physiometrics, but people in Egypt tend to be a little bit shorter in stature. It’s something that makes you wonder, “Wait a minute, if these safety regulations are made for a kind of racist, gender-driven type of thinking, then are we really safe after all?” It sounds like white men of a certain height are the only people that are going to be safe in this world and the rest of us are going to be in trouble. That allowed us to realize that you can’t look at regulations, you can justify changes based on trial and testing. You can negotiate changes based on needs; you really have to learn the regulations from the very, very basics to adjust them. Don’t think regulations control you; you control the regulations, but you must understand how they’re made, how they’ve been adapted, and where they came from.

Your body of work is so diverse, and I’ve noticed that your US projects are somehow more ‘tame’ than those abroad. I’m wondering, what is the primary difference in your approach to buildings in the US versus elsewhere, and does the International Building Code have anything to do with it?
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No, the code has nothing to do with it. It’s not about regulations, so much. I would say it’s the way in which the US develops projects and their attitude: the approach clients have to architecture and architects. It changes from place to place. Here’s a great example: in the US you are thought to provide your clients with three options for consideration during the design development, and the three options allows the client to choose what they feel is the best. When you give them two options they feel it’s not enough and that they’re getting an ultimatum. If you offer four options they’re too many, and they can’t make up their mind. So three is the happy number of options.

In Europe it’s not exactly like this. When you provide a client with three options, they don’t understand it at all. They say, “We hired you to give us the best option, why would you give us two that are clearly not as good as one of them and how come you are not telling us which one is best option?” So it’s exactly the opposite in America, where the client wants to have control; in Europe, they often appreciate the general character of the architect’s professional work, and that’s probably the biggest difference. Furthermore, I would say that US architecture schools train people in a particular way in how to avoid risk, and it has trained clients to avoid risk. So as a result we live in a risk-averse climate in the US, where litigation and legal activities can control your thinking—the fear of risk often drives the project.

Unfortunately, I have never been to Puerto Rico and I can’t really talk about conditions there, but I’m guessing that there is the capacity to make interesting things. My appreciation from the culture from afar is that people can come together and work hard together, as a group. There is a connection between the people that are from Puerto Rico that will allow you to build something interesting together even if it’s risky. But that’s just an outside perspective. I have a lot of friends from Puerto Rico.

SG

There is a lot of talent here, the opportunities will slowly come. Let’s see.

CD

You have to make them. John F. Kennedy said, “It’s not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” At a certain point that’s true even for architecture, you just have to go out there and do it. In my case, I went to Egypt and started a company. If you really want to do something, look around what’s going on in the rest of the world; there’s a lot of stuff that you could probably participate.

SG

Talk to me about transpositioning. What is it exactly, where does the idea come from, and how does it work at Snøhetta?
Our practice has always been a mix of interests. We began as architects and landscape architects. We grew to be interior architects, and then eventually we became branding and graphic designers and now product designers. We not only have an international group that founded the company but we're also working internationally with people from around the world with different backgrounds from our own. As a result, transpositioning grew out of this important need to connect across the table with people who are very different from you. Today people like to refer to this as collaboration; we don't use that word so very much because it could mean too many things to many people. Transpositioning is such an odd word that it kind of forces you to try to understand what it means, whereas with collaboration everyone thinks they know what it means. Transpositioning allows us to move across the table to pretend, to role play that we are other people, from different backgrounds and different interest. That way we can connect to those worlds we don't necessarily know, and then we might move back into our own world with comfort at the same time. We are moving back and forth, in and out of our comfort levels as professionals.

Our world is changing so rapidly in so many ways. You have an immense body of work already, but I can imagine there's a lot you still want to do. What's your vision for Snøhetta in the coming years? Where do you want to steer it?

Our biggest commitment, firstly, is the careful development of habitats and biodiversity in and around the projects we create. The second is to be sensitive to carbon-neutral designs, so that we can limit our impact of the architecture industry in terms of affecting the natural climate conditions in the world. Those are the central features of our focus: habitat, biodiversity, and carbon-neutral thinking.

I know you have a meeting to go to now, but I just want to say that 10 years ago you gave a lecture at California College of the Arts and I was studying there. Since then I have been following your work.

Oh yeah! I remember that lecture! That's so nice, that was a long time ago. Wow! That's so nice that you remember that. I remember that lecture very clearly. I was excited to be at CCA because it's a school I really liked, and I could imagine myself going to school there.

I loved it.

It was a kind of crazy place, very bohemian. People where making stuff with their hands and also working on computers. It was just great, so yeah is nice that you remember that. Thanks a lot! I just want to say that with all our places in the world, we are excited to visit and come to Puerto Rico. We tried to go there one time, but the schedules got all conflicted.

If you come, you have to let us know so we can host you in some great places.

That would be great! Hasta pronto!
Norwegian National Opera and Ballet. Photography by Jens Passoth.
Times Square Reconstruction. Photography by Michael Grimm.
Times Square Reconstruction. Photography by Michael Grimm.
Guatemala Bench. Photography by Daniele Volpe.