

Fantastic norway

Interview with Håkon Matre Aasarød

Fantastic Norway is a collaboration between Erlend Blakstad Haffner and Håkon Matre Aasarød. Founded in 2004, the firm balances a commercial office in Oslo with a nomadic public service component – a red caravan the firm drives across Norway to small towns they feel could use architectural consultation. Using a variety of media, Fantastic Norway creates a dialogue with local residents and politicians to identify possible design problems and realize their completion. The staff conducted this interview in April 2009.

We have heard two versions of how Fantastic Norway began. One involves you and Erlend dropping out of the Bergen School of Architecture and hitting the road in your caravan. The other has you waiting to graduate before starting your partnership, working on a firehouse project in Brønnøysund during your last year of school. So, which is it? It sounds like either way there was some dissatisfaction with the education you were receiving. Could you set the record straight as to how and why Fantastic Norway came to be?

Our interest in finding our own way as architects truly began during a project in our third year of school at Bergen. During a class excursion to Brønnøysund, we found the only public space remaining in the town. The space, which was incidentally the town's birthplace, was being sold to private investors. We dropped out of the excursion and worked together with local artists to save the space. We made small booklets, held lectures and workshops with politicians and local





residents, and constructed installations, all to propose different strategies to make the place a rich and important public heart of the city. After half a year, the politicians decided to cancel their plans and develop the space into a 100-meter-long strip for markets, recreation, and public festivals.

This process brought to our attention the importance of public interaction and active use of media and local resources. We realized the inertia and power we had as architects. We wanted to refine this process to determine whether it could be a valid way to work as professionals. We finished our third year of school, bought a caravan, and started Fantastic Norway. We looked for more towns that could use architectural aid and contacted these places, searching for client groups. After we found our first client, our momentum continued and our method of working slowly came to life.

We should mention that after two and a half years of this, we went back to school to complete our masters degrees, while continuing to run the firm.

If we could move into a discussion about your current practice, we are quite intrigued by the dual nature of the firm. On the one hand, you have a remarkably socially-responsive, do-it-yourself aspect to the studio, embodied by the Fantastic Norway caravan. You arrive in more isolated Norwegian communities with free coffee and waffles and design a project based on your conversation with the local residents. And all this is completely funded and organized by you.

It seems the other side to Fantastic Norway is a practice devoted to securing "proper" commissions to fund your more innovative projects. According to your website, you've even recently taken on a new chairman. Is there such a distinctive split in the studio's interests? And if so, what is the dialogue between these two facets of the studio? Do you think you could ever operate with just the "caravan" side of the firm, and would you even want to?



1. Walking Berlin was an event created as part of our exhibition at the DMY International Design Festival 09 in Berlin, Germany.



2. The walking houses are man-sized models of our latest architectural project: a tourist destination located on the northern west coast of Norway. As our project depends on the idea of traveling, we decided it was only fitting that the houses got to do some traveling, too.



3. The project consists of a group of narrow high-rise modules welcoming the guests of the Norwegian west coast. The systematic and flexible module system allows the outdoor spaces, the miniature highrise modules, and the interiors to be designed in collaboration with the future inhabitants and selected artists.



4. Interacting with the locals of Berlin, the event emphasizes the project's social and local ambitions.



5. While exploring the streets of central Berlin, the walking houses chatted with the locals, danced at Alexanderplatz, traveled on the u-bahn, and even shared a curry-wurst with the Berliners.

We get this question a lot. It seems to us that we are very often perceived as a purely ideological, and at times almost naïve, practice. However, it is important for us to emphasize the fact that we have never worked without a client or someone to pay for our work. Our clients have been local governments, national organizations, private clients and other establishments. Our point has been to show that architecture needs to be a public and accessible issue, but also that it's possible to run an architectural studio commercially, without abandoning ideology and a strong public presence. The public caravan stands, mobilization processes, our use of media, and interactions with local inhabitants are not only what we believe is a right and interesting way of dealing with architecture, it's a part of our business plan, and has been from the start. Hence, running both the caravan and a professional architectural firm at the same time is not as contradictory as it may seem.

Regarding our commissions, they are direct results of our methods of working. Some of them are direct outcomes of our mobilization processes, and some of them are related to these processes. These last years we have focused on self-initiating projects we believe are important and interesting, and anchoring them economically and politically. Running a firm this way naturally means you need to seek your own clients, instead of waiting around for the next competition or commission, so to speak. This idea of the caravan, the public architect, is very much a part of this way of working, but not necessarily in a physical sense. Moving from town to town and spending months in each place isn't compatible with having a personal life in the long run.

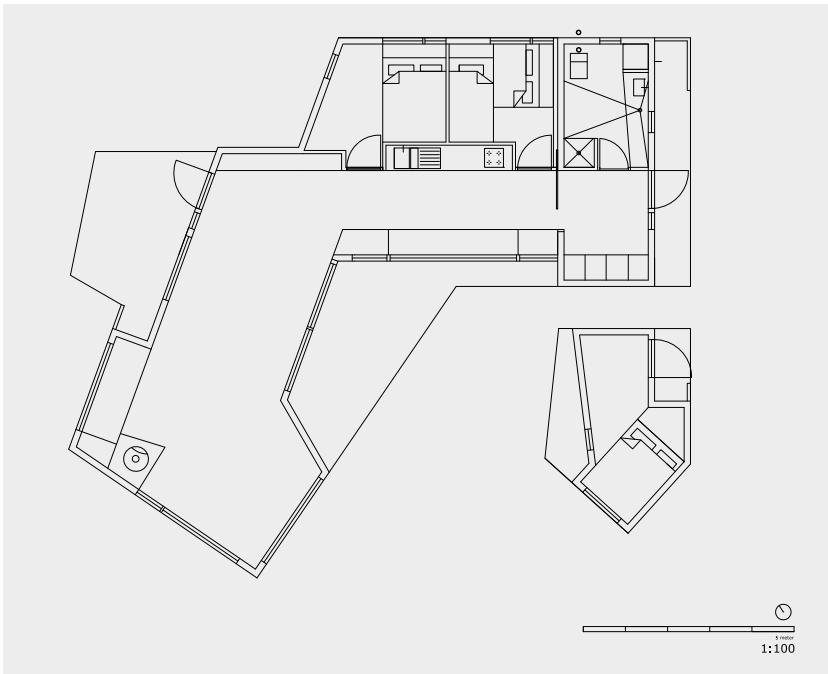
Our main ambition with Fantastic Norway has been to explore the field of architecture, evolve, and have fun at the same time. We don't want to be frozen in one position. We find great joy in discussing and reevaluating our



6. Cabin Vardehaugen is located at an outcrop by the mouth of the fjord at Gröttingen on the Fosen peninsula. The planning of the cabin was executed during a year of regular trips to Vardehaugen. It was done this way in order to get the most complete impression of the varying climatic conditions affecting the property. Given the exposed position of the property and the strict demands of the regulation plans, neighbors and local authorities were included early in the design process.



7. Many of the drafts were drawn full-scale in the snow, in order to visualize the size and exact placement of the building. Local wind information on the property was registered with the help of windsocks and conversations with local inhabitants.



8. The cabin is shaped in a pose similar to a mountain fox curling up to avoid the wind. The body of the building lies snugly by a low mountain ridge and embraces the polished rock furthest out on the property. A small annex helps define an atrium and to shelter the outside spaces from cold and wind.



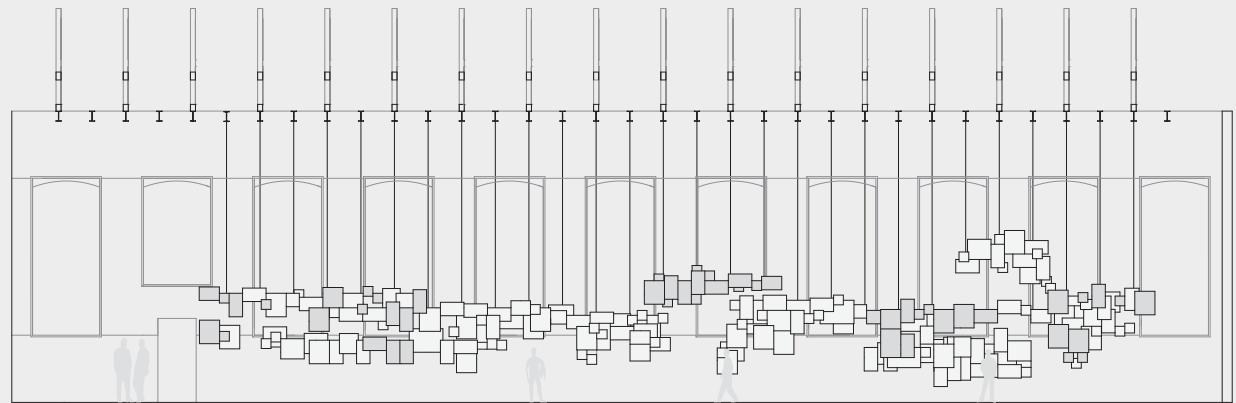
9. The kitchen is the spine of the building and ties together the different rooms. From the work bench one can see the cabin, the atrium, and the panoramic sea view. To provide maximum protection for the cabin, the black roof folds in and becomes wall surfaces towards the most exposed directions. The wall surfaces are placed at the angle that will give least access to the wind.

company, as long as it remains founded on our ambition of being an open and socially aware practice.

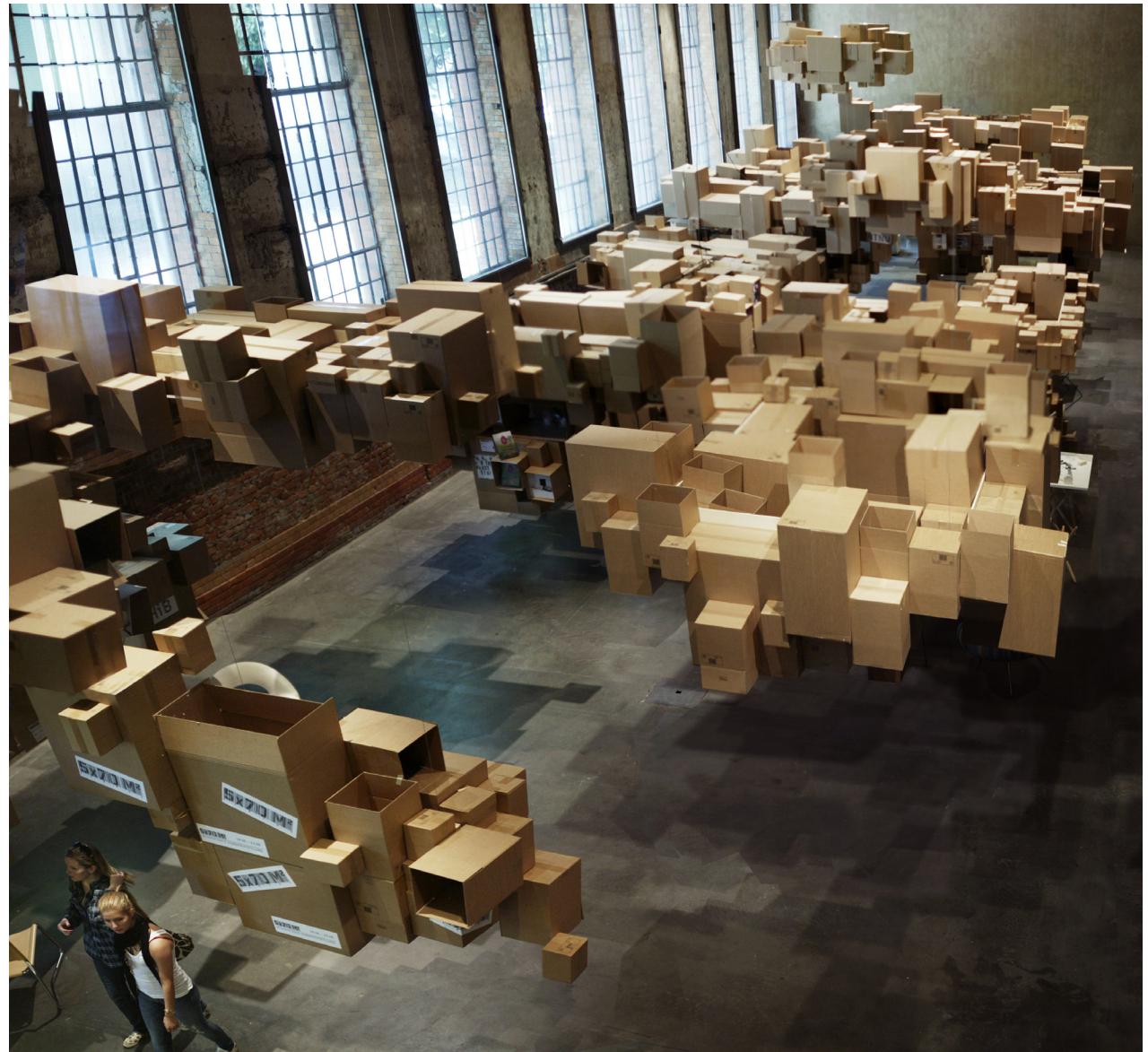
Our last questions return to your relationship with academia. This spring you and Erlend have been given an opportunity to teach a studio at Bergen. How is that going? What are you doing differently compared to other fourth-year studios? What would you do if your authority spanned beyond the one studio to encompass the entire university? Perhaps the real question is, how should students be treated so that they can become free-thinking, socially-integrated architects after they graduate?

We are taking great joy in teaching and have gotten a wonderful opportunity to customize the entire semester. We even renamed it “Fantastic Studio.” We designed this course to bridge school with real life. Many students are shocked or depressed when confronted with the realities of professional architecture. Most graduates feel they are supposed to become machines, abandoning the debates, ideas, and creative surroundings they had at school. And this actually happens to many students, because they let it. It’s difficult to be free-thinking and socially aware if you don’t know how to turn attitudes into action.

We show the students that there are a vast number of ways to be an architect. We challenge each student to define their own ambitions and to see themselves as professionals. Fantastic Studio is about bringing these ambitions to life. We provide the students with a “real” arena, where they get hands-on contact with real clients, real founders and real challenges. There is no “right” way of doing architecture, but there is “your way” of doing it. We’re living in a time of globalization and centralization, and the notion of the unique is more important than ever. Together with environmental issues and challenges, this is one of the most important features that architecture can address. Architecture is



10. The Cardboard Cloud was an exhibition designed for the Centre for Design and Architecture in Oslo. The exhibition, Named 5X70m2, displayed work done by the best Norwegian design students. Fantastic Norway Architects designed the architectural framework for the exhibition.



11. Being that the exhibition is set to present brand new design objects, we decided to base the architectural concept on the thrill of unpacking. The installation consists of over 3000 hanging cardboard boxes resembling a large pixelated cloud, hovering over the exhibited material. The cardboard boxes will be recycled at the end of the exhibition, which only leaves wires as leftovers.

a wonderful tool to amplify and clarify the unique, strange and powerful notion of local identity.

Typical architectural education generally offers very little contact between students and society. Contact between the world and the student (in most schools) is neglected in favor of abstract pursuits. We believe a symbiosis of these tendencies, combined with a special focus on the students' subjective narratives and beliefs, would be a *fantastic* school of architecture.

Project Credits

Project: Walking Berlin
Project Team: Håkon Matre Aasarød, Erlend Blakstad Haffner, Magnus Ohren, Tomos Osmond, Anne Busemann, Mathias Steinbru, Anette Flygansvær, Ingeborg Cappelen Lindheim, Renata Barros and Håvard Arnhoff
Client: Bjørn Erik Sørvig
Photography: Håkon Matre Aasarød

Project: Cabin Vardehaugen
Designer and Principal in Charge: Håkon Matre Aasarød
Project Team: Erlend Blakstad Haffner
Consultants: Øystein Aasarød, Thomas Tysseland

Interior Architect: Sigrid Bjørkum
Building contractor: Hallgeir Vingen
Main contractor: Åbygg AS
Client: Knut Aasarød, Synnøve Matre
Photography: Håkon Matre Aasarød

Project: Cardboard Cloud
Project Team: Håkon Matre Aasarød, Erlend Blakstad Haffner, Andrew Jason Linn, Magnus Ohren, Tomos Osmond, Anne Busemann, Mathias Steinbru, Anette Flygansvær, Ingeborg Cappelen Lindheim, Are Fredrik Berg, Håvard Arnhoff and Oscar Quan Lainfiesta
Engineer: Ole Wroldsen
Furniture manufacturer: Glomma Papp AS
Curator: Janiche Sæther
Photography: Håkon Matre Aasarød

