Norse Gods Now Have His Number
An Interview with Craig Dykers of Snohetta

By LINDA LEE  OCT. 22, 2014

Craig Dykers, a principal, with Kjetil Thorsen, in the Norwegian and American architectural firm Snohetta, was born in Germany and has lived 33 of his 53 years abroad. His father, an Army corporal, and his mother, an English seamstress, met in London after World War II. Having earned his architecture degree at the University of Texas, Mr. Dykers received international acclaim after winning the $350 million commission for the Library of Alexandria in Egypt when he was only 28. Snohetta was founded in Oslo in 1989 and now encompasses landscape, interior and graphic design.

Snohetta projects include the National September 11 Memorial Museum Pavilion at the World Trade Center site, a remake of Times Square into a pedestrian-friendly zone, the Norwegian National Ballet and Opera House in Oslo and, most recently, Norway’s currency.

Mr. Dykers and his wife, Elaine Molinar, an architect who heads Snohetta’s New York office, live in Brooklyn, but he spoke to a reporter from Italy, where he is on a two-month residency at the American Academy in Rome. (This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Q. So let’s start with the name Snohetta, which sounds as if it has something to do with snow.

A. Snohetta is a mountain in central Norway that holds the palace of Valhalla in Norse mythology. It’s not the tallest mountain in Norway, but it’s
very beautiful.

**Is it true that winning the competition for the library in Alexandria came about even before there was a Snohetta?**

We were a bunch of designers in Norway and the United States, all 30 or under. When we came together, we didn’t think that we would win. We had very little money and rented a small apartment in a Los Angeles building for the elderly. They liked having young people around; we opened jam jars for them. Fourteen hundred people registered for the competition, and 500 were eligible to be judged. We turned in our entry in the fall of 1989, and then we all went back to our ordinary lives. I was in the shower in my apartment in Culver City, Calif., when the phone rang. I was in such shock, I walked outside my apartment. Onto the lawn. Naked. Yelling, “We won!”

**You certainly started with a splash, but even now you take on modest projects.**

We’ve done little things all over the world, but people are nervous about asking us to do small jobs. We’ve done some private houses. We’ve even made a dolls’ house for children. We’ve done a beehive for the top of buildings.

**Snohetta recently designed one face of the Norwegian kroner bills to be introduced in 2017. Do the pixilated graphics have a special meaning?**

There is a Norwegian word “hildring,” about the boundary between horizon and sky. The colors and variations of the bills were inspired by the interesting things that happen when sky meets sea. When you place all the bills side by side, they also create an interesting pattern, like a mosaic. In our work, we often try to take reality by surprise.

**What thinking allowed Snohetta to win the Times Square competition?**

Times Square was so crowded, and dangerous, with cars close to the sidewalk. There were very few areas of comfort, and old, redundant pieces of infrastructure, stuff everywhere. Some people thought, “Times Square, you
have to have a lot of lights.” We saw the opposite: no lights. There’s enough energy there already. We wanted to change the pace. The blocks are almost done, and I hope people will soon return there, or at least be happier when they are there.

You have a way with melting pots.

I know a little Chinese, Norwegian, Spanish, German and tiny amounts of Arabic. Being in Rome, I’ve been trying to learn Italian. I fell in love with the Chinese language when I went to China 15 to 20 years ago. It’s so beautiful. Speaking Chinese is harder, but I was recently in China and I wrote poems in Chinese for my hosts, who gave me very good marks.

Tell us about your home.

We used to live in Manhattan, and we made a conscious choice to move to Brooklyn. We are in an old warehouse on the waterfront in Dumbo. It’s a fantastic feeling as an architect to watch so many tons of steel float by. But architects are always shocked when they come into our home, because we have so many tchotchkes, a lot of tiny things we’ve collected.

Some people define tchotchkes as things a burglar wouldn’t steal.

Yes, they are eccentric and sentimental, of no monetary value.

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