

Detour as Destination: An Architecture of Wandering

Introduction

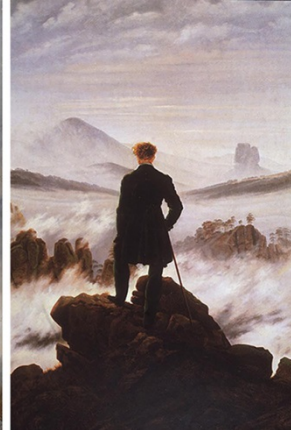


Fig.01a. *Soria Moria* by Theodor Kittelsen c. 1900

Fig.01b. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich c.1818

Source 01a: www.samling.nasjonalmuseet.no/no/object/NG.M.00546

Source 01b: www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/nineteenth-century

The painting *Soria Moria*, ca. 1900, by Norwegian artist Theodor Kittelsen, (Fig.01a) depicts a scene from a Norwegian folk tale about “Ash Lad,” a wandering suitor, trying to find his way to the golden Soria Moria Castle (in the distance) to rescue the princess before she must wed her betrothed. With his back to the viewer, one cannot help but associate this painting with works of the earlier 19th century Romantic Movement, including the notable *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, by German artist Caspar David Friedrich in 1818 (Fig.01b). In both instances, the men - one young, one older - hold walking sticks and gaze across the distant landscape. By concealing the faces of their subjects, the artists invite the viewer to participate in what the protagonists’ experience: a moment of “pause” in the land. Although the suitor in the Norwegian fable ultimately succeeds in winning the hand of the princess, the essence of Kittelsen and Friedrich’s paintings is not about the conclusion of a journey. Rather, their respective work suggests a powerful suspension of time – a mere moment - where the individual is one with nature and a broader wilderness. One feels both apprehension and awe in the vastness of the natural world: man’s sense of individuality and communion with a greater whole is revealed in these paintings.

Our intimate connection with the physical environment has dramatically changed since the Romantic period where walking may have been a primary mode of transportation. In the wake of the current technical revolution,

automotive and technological dependencies have altered the speed of movement and information resulting in a displacement of our bodies in time and space. Convenience, ease, and efficiency govern our decisions as to whether we walk or drive, and often replace the need to wander and explore for pleasure. Author and activist Rebecca Solnit writes in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, that, “on foot everything stays connected...one lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it.”¹

Against this backdrop, many caution that the enticement and addictive qualities of the ubiquitous “screen” disconnects us from the physical world. Personal relationships to place carry less meaning: the physical act of walking and thinking has been limited through the two-dimensional experience generated by our hand-held devices, with us at all times. The increasing reality that the “lure of the screen” is keeping children, in particular, indoors, has become an urgent subject of discussion. Many educators see a worrisome disconnect – or alienation - between children and the natural world. In his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv singled out this problem as a significant concern today and went so far as to coin the phrase ‘Nature Deficit Disorder.’ He argues that there are qualities of imaginative play, reflection, and even humility that only nature can stimulate and presses for more active learning and interest in the natural world.

Complexities of wandering in the 21st century

Louv and Solnit’s arguments remind us of the need for balance between pragmatic, societal needs and the romantic, singular needs of an individual in nature. The authors of this paper pose the question: If human nature requires both social contact and romantic individualism, how can architects – both as practitioners and educators - advance this necessary equilibrium? Juhani Pallasmaa asserts that, “architecture slows down, halts, reverses, or speeds up experiential time, and we can appropriately talk of slow and fast architectures...It gives limitless and meaningless space its human measures and meanings, but it also scales endless time down to the limits of human experience.”² If a work of architecture can provide a deeper sense of self in time and place, then we might consider ways in which a minimal intervention can provide comprehensible scale within vastness and humble stillness within motion.

With this objective in mind, this paper examines the Norwegian National Tourist Routes as valuable precedents which allow visitors to reconcile the complexity and pace of our current technological environment while providing opportunities to realign ourselves in nature. Sponsored by the Norwegian government, these tourist stops are designed to appeal to the automotive traveler and to bring tourism to rural communities while preserving formerly

¹ Solnit, 9.

² Pallasmaa, 53

inaccessible wilderness. In this case, ‘inaccessible’ is not just driven by forbidding terrain; it also includes the government’s focus on access for all. On a romantic level, the designs often reveal places of silence away from the road. However, moments once discovered through walking are now available by car at high speeds via structured pull-offs, and are identified with a piece of architecture or sculpture to frame views. The implications are many: How does the cadence of each experience inform the experience itself, from 90 kmh to a halt, vs. wandering and finding perhaps the same moment in space? How can the specifics, including sight, sound, smell - and, to a degree, contact with the earth - generate memory and association?

In an effort to convey the greater meaning of the tourist route as related to the tradition of Norwegian architecture, Karl Otto Ellefsen, Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, recalls theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, who “developed his theory of place or ‘locus’, saying that architectural space should not be understood as something produced, rather architecture ought to be comprehended as a process of unveiling what is already there – the task of the architect being to search for the essentials in a specific place and develop its hidden qualities.”³ These hidden qualities inextricably connect structure to place, and, by extension, place to meaning. This raises the question of how architecture can foster personal experience, at a particular time and place, in nature. Can the “noise” of our daily lives be temporarily silenced through a choreographed architectural experience in the land, as is evidenced by the Norwegian Tourist stops? It is not unlike Martin Heidegger’s lecture, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” regarding the bridge as a place making entity:

“The bridge swings over the stream ‘with ease and power’... The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge expressly causes them to lie across from each other...With the banks, the bridge brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.”⁴

In Heidegger’s estimation, no place is understood until it is somehow marked, registered. The construction of a bridge, for instance, creates a place in the world that then gathers space. Similarly, the architectural markers of Norway’s National Tourist Route, by their existence, gather the ground and views around them. They provide a portal through which to comprehend nature and to invite further exploration into the wilderness.

³ Berre, ed., 22.

⁴ Heidegger, 354.

Case Studies: Norwegian Tourist Stops

The 18 Tourist Routes provide a collage of amenities such as rest stops, viewing platforms, visitor centers, picnic benches and bird watching shelters. Despite this variety, the common experience in all locations is that nature is being made accessible by the car, whether on roads shared with those who use them every day or those that are more remote. Most, if not all, are tightly responsive to the specific place in nature as they ‘gather’ the unique qualities of place to them, scaled to the human. This overall approach to the natural world, given the varied landscapes of Norway, creates unique architectural responses for each location.

The following four attractions, that roughly span the length of the country from North to South, were selected for study because together they create a distinct story for both individual and larger groups to have brief, but intense encounters with the land: The attraction on Senja Island near the village of Bergsbotn, the Dalsnibba Skywalk in Møre og Romsdal county, the Hellåga rest area along Helegelandskysten, and the Sohlbergplassen viewing point along the Rondane mountains. They are organized into two thematic categories: viewing - from a distance and within vastness, and embedding - direct, intimate connection to the place.

Viewing the Terrain

Despite recognizable differences in scale, the smaller viewing platform at Bergsbotn and the more extensive Dalsnibba Skywalk are similar in that they invite visitors to pull off the road and take in the unique views to the fjords and mountains that would be difficult to access without the built form.



Fig.02a and Fig.02b Cantilevered viewing bridge at Bergsbotn, Senja by Code: Arkitektur.
Source: www.architecturenorway.no/projects/travelling/bergsbotn-2010

Located along the coast, the linear viewing platform at Bergsbotn is visible along the sharp curve of the adjacent road (Fig.02a). Once out of the car, there is a small threshold between the road and platform that denotes the moment of passing to a new territory. From this subtle edge, the cantilevered long platform

is detached from the road and extends in opposite directions with the support of steel columns below. The wooden walking surface divides into three strips, with the middle strip rising upward over the fjord, mimicking the heaving forms of the mountains beyond, and creating an uninterrupted 360 degree panoramic view of the rugged Norwegian landscape (Fig.02b). At the other end of the cantilevered platform, the middle portion descends downward, exposing the precarious relationship to the ground. By floating both the structure and the visitor above the land, Code Arkitektur creates a quality of tension where the built form places the individual into a remarkable natural scene. The diminutive scale of a person is in sharp contrast to the vastness of this grand site, at once awe inspiring and humbling.

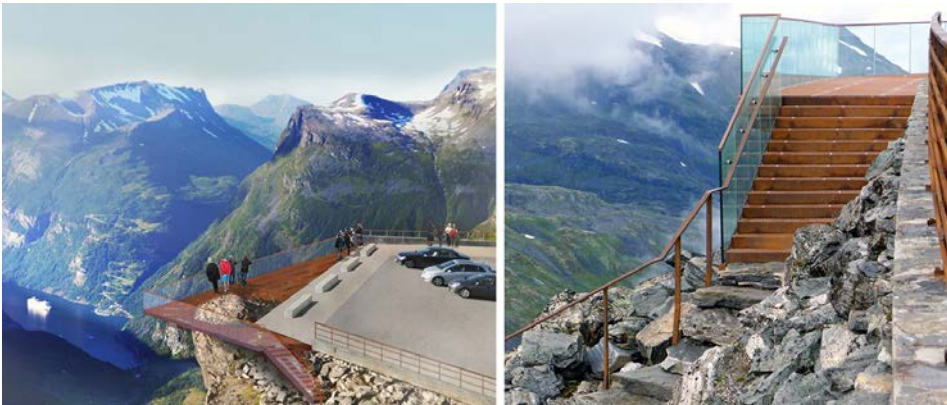


Fig.03a: View from above of Dalsnibba Geiranger Fig.03b: Detail at stair

Source 03a: www.ostengen-bergo.no/prosjekt/dalsnibba-1500-moh

Source 03b: www.landezine.com/index.php/2017/01/dalsnibba-skywalk

The Dalsnibba Skywalk, named for the Dalsnibba mountain near the village of Geiranger, shares a similar goal of place making for the purpose of enjoying exceptional views, albeit in an arguably more spectacular location than Bergsbotn (Fig.03a). In contrast to the more intimately scaled Senja attraction, this tourist stop was designed to accommodate a large number of visitors to a uniquely Norwegian site hundreds of meters above sea level. With roads accessible for only a limited seasonal period, the Dalsnibba stop includes three levels of parking, two of which are pull-offs adjacent to the road along the ascent to the top of the mountain, and the third at the highest accessible point marking the final destination. The skywalk culminates at a corten steel grate viewing platform that cantilevers dramatically off the concrete vehicular arrival. The angular geometries of the platform are edged by a minimal glass guardrail, further simplified to a single metal bar handrail at the point where the steel metal stairs meet the jagged stone stairs connecting the three levels of parking along the steep terrain (Fig.03b). The tactile qualities of the natural and man-made materials, along with the unobtrusive architectural details, intensify the moment of viewing and reveal a landscape with such commanding presence that the individual is insignificant within it.

Embedded Encounters

“... walking is a subversive detour.” Rebecca Solnit



Fig.04a: Hellåga rest area, Landskapsfabrikken. Fig.04b: Stair to the water

Source: www.nasjonaleturistveger.no

In contrast to the stops in Bergsbotn or Dalsnibba, the attraction at Hellåga along the Helgenlandskysten Route and Sohlbergplassen in the Rondane area, are less about the choreographed placement of the individual in a distant scene and more about wandering through and being immersed in the place itself.

Upon arrival at Hellåga, there is a curvilinear bathroom facility close to a tree edge on one side and a picnic area on the other (Fig.04a). A rusted steel platform modestly grips the ground as if a barnacle securing the land to the water below. In contrast to the gray tones of both the road and surrounding stones, this raised surface with subtle, single line metal handrails, is the start of a red metal stair that descends through a zone of low growing vegetation toward the water's edge (Fig.04b). At roughly the seam where wild shrubs can no longer grow on the rock, this stair transitions into buff-colored concrete steps, without rails, which cling tightly to the similarly toned rock face. The concrete stepped path dips directly into the water without a formal landing, suggesting a poetic continuity with the land on the other side of the fjord. The Hellåga rest stop is a place where visitors can fish from the edge of the stair, or wander beyond to a place of their own choosing.



Fig.05a: Plan. Fig.05b: Sohlbergplassen view, Fig.05c: Underneath the structure

Source: www.holmebakk.no/sohlbergplassen/photos.html

Along the Rondane Mountain route, the Sohlbergplassen attraction is introduced by two separate concrete paths fastened along the length of a vehicular pull-off (Fig.05a). Held at the same elevation, the paths weave through an area of dense pine trees and eventually merge to form a platform with a direct view to the lake and mountains beyond (Fig.05b). This framed view is said to be the location where Norwegian Neo-romantic artist Harald Sohlberg painted his well-known work, “Winter Night in the Mountains.” The relationship between the level, curvilinear platform, the gently sloping hill, and the surrounding trees frames the view beyond. Structurally, the platform is supported by thin steel columns that angle slightly so the foundations avoid disturbing the buried tree roots. One can reach the forest floor by a stair at the outer edge of the platform so that one can experience the moment from the stop or wander through the forest to the lake.

Rectangular openings are positioned throughout the platform, bringing sunlight and rain to the ground below (Fig.05c). Additionally, the thick concrete railing not only acts as a fluid, guiding ribbon, but also it is the stiffening beam at the edge of the structural slab. Although Sohlbergplassen is like an amoeba with no defined shape flowing around the vertical pine trees, the concrete material itself creates a sympathetic relationship between the two. Architect Carl-Viggo Hølmebakk notes that the “project proves fully that concrete does not necessarily have to be a technical, hard, cold and dead material. The concrete here is in fact experienced as a warm, beautiful, soft material that is very much alive.”⁵ The distinctive concrete form does not overpower or control the natural surroundings. Rather, by being embedded in the wild, it offers the possibility for a visitor to wander beyond through less prescribed means.

⁵ Krokstrand, 123.

Intended Conclusions

The architectural detours on the Norwegian National Tourist Routes are undeniably using today's technology, materials, and fabrication in innovative ways that allow for a complex dialogue to occur with nature. Architecture, when characterized by a thoughtful response to the clues of the land can bring us back to nature. Although wandering – in direct contact with the ground – is an intimate form of embodiment, the architectural detour, when sensitively handled, can become the destination that even briefly, slows down time. The routes provide a point from which to comprehend nature and to invite further exploration. In this way, architecture can generate a contemplative and subversive detour that simultaneously gathers a quality of wildness around it. In contrast to an architecture of containment, there is the possibility for the eye and mind to wander, as “a guard on patrol to protect the ineffable.”⁶

With the economic intent of promoting the interests of the tourist industry, it is interesting to speculate on how Norwegians themselves may see these interventions. Culturally, the country prides itself on the close relationship between its citizens and the land they inhabit and treasure. Known for its Viking and explorer's history, wandering through unmarked terrain in Norway *is* the destination and a fundamental piece of Norwegians' cultural landscape. Would they therefore critique these stops as an imposition, an interference, by 21st Century society, corrupting their country's great asset? Given the Nordic legacy of exploration and reverence for its wilderness, one might think that these would be considered mere “follies”; useless for the true native and a prescribed, perhaps extravagant, course of discovery that ultimately limits one's own ability to explore beyond. One can certainly argue about the specific successes or failures of the numerous rest stops, but there is an overriding accomplishment that is worthy of study by both educators and practitioners: They all provide a moment, a pause, from the speed of the car to one's own individual pace, connecting our technologically ‘driven’ selves to the scale of our beings in the places around us. At the stops, one embodies the terrain in front of and around oneself. The built form is not at odds with the landscape; rather it intertwines and elevates the experience itself. Once drawn into these moments, there is an invitation to view, wander, and reflect, not unlike the 19th century images that artists like Kittelsen and Friedrich aspired to reveal.

⁶ Solnit, 11.

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