

# DESIGNING ELEGANCE

US Architect Olle Lundberg talks about his quest for simplicity and love for detailed elegance in this interview with Niranjan Mudholkar

**With which architectural philosophy do you identify yourself? Is there any particular architect or school of thought that has influenced or interested you?**

Our work is firmly modernist, although much of our attitude springs from the Arts and Crafts movement. I have always appreciated Scandinavian design, particularly Aalto's work, and I love the elegance of detail one finds in Carlo Scarpa. Recently, I have found myself searching for the simplicity you see in Peter Zumthor's work. Because, much of our work is highly detailed,

and because we love the craft of building, it is easy for the result to become complex. The hardest thing is editing your ideas down to the essence of what is important—keeping the execution of the idea as elegant as the idea itself.

**You are well known for designing elegant modernist homes for high profile clients. But you live in homes built using reclaimed material. Please explain this phenomenon.** That is easy, my clients tend to be wealthier than I am. I should say that is part of the



Bar at the Slanted Door Restaurant

reason. I like reclaimed materials; I like the patina of age, and at least with my own projects, I tend not to be too fussy about imperfections that come from use. I am more of a perfectionist when it comes to my client's work, although I design all of our buildings with the idea that they will improve with age, that they will grow gracefully old. We have used reclaimed materials in many of our other projects, but probably not in as dramatic fashion as my redwood tank swimming pool or a rescued Icelandic car Ferry. Often times, recycled materials will give an effect that is not possible with new, like the golden honey colour that Douglas fir turns after about 50 years.

**What do you think of new materials like titanium or plastic that, until recently, no one imagined could be used in architecture? Have you considered using them?** I consider all materials fair game, and we are

always looking for new ones. That said, I do think as designers, we have a responsibility to limit the amount of toxics we encourage. We try to limit our dependence on products that require petroleum or glues. Actually, I tend to have more of an affinity for solid materials, such as stone and steel and glass, rather than veneers. Developments in material engineering have enormous potential for architectural expression, and materials like titanium are incredibly strong and weather beautifully, but it is also very expensive, as are most newly developed products.

**Developments in material engineering have enormous potential for architectural expression, and materials like titanium are incredibly strong**

But we are always looking for new materials, which then lead to new forms.

**What does experimentation mean to you? How experimental would you say your work is?**

Experimentation is about trying something that has not been done before. It can be a new use of material, a new detail, a new form, or even a new way of thinking about a particular building type. We try to do all of that, but we don't do things just to be new. Again, it is a matter of tempering the end result so that you do not end up with too many ideas or too many gestures. Hopefully all of our work is experimental on some level; that is certainly our goal.

**The great thing about practicing architecture is that your inspirations come from everywhere; literature, sculpture and even the pattern of the noodles**

**To what extent do you/your firm get involved in the actual process of construction?**

We have a 4000 sq feet metal shop that is at the centre of our office, and we use it both for experimentation and fabrication. On every project we build at least one "signature" piece, something that we feel is emblematic of idea behind the design. It can be a front door, as staircase, a fountain, or a paper towel holder, the scale doesn't really matter; what matters is that we actually build it, and in doing so, change our relationship to the typical building process.

Design is intellectual property, and inherently arrogant as a result: it is my idea and I want you to build it! Building is inherently a humble act; something crafted from your hands—always a gift, no matter what the cost. I feel it is important that we embrace both, that we understand what it means to build. I think it changes our relationship to our work, and in that change, the process becomes more collaborative between us, the owner and the contractor.

**Your work can be described as elegantly simple. Moreover, there's an element of poetry to it. Something to do with your literature background?**



Olle's cabin - Made out of recycled material

The great thing about practicing architecture is that your inspirations come from everywhere. The smallest thing—the pattern of the noodles in your plate of spaghetti can be the start of a wonderful building idea. I am sure my literature studies have and continue to influence me, but it is not a direct, definable effect. I like modern poetry, I love the sparseness of Hemmingway's language; perhaps there is a connection to my desire to edit our work, to keep it concise.

**You have also studied sculpture. How has this influenced your work as an architect?**

It is all just part of a consuming desire to see things get built. I am not a very talented sculptor, but I find it exciting to attempt. My brother Peter is a wonderful sculptor; I think he got all of the family talent in that arena. Some of my best architectural work has what I hope can be seen as sculptural gestures, and certainly my sculpture background first made me aware of the interplay of form and light. I like the limitations that the programme of a building exerts on a design; for me, sculpture is almost too limitless.

**Apart from being involved in the design and construction of the building, you also do a lot of fabrication. Tell us something about this aspect of your work.**

I think I have already answered this, but it is important to note that our shop is primarily involved with metal fabrication, and mostly in steel. I have a real fondness for the qualities of steel—its strength to size ratio, its colour and its weight. And good welding is like magic, such an amazingly strong connection. Many of our most successful details are executed in steel, because it is a material the shop has enabled me to know so well.

**Of the many projects that you have accomplished, is there any project that you are really fond of?**

Probably my cabin, in part because the design is so personal, and in part because I actually built it all myself. The act of building one's home is something that is for the most part lost to us as a society, and with that loss comes a loss of the connection to the family homestead, and the land that it sat on. For the most part, Americans see their house as something temporary, not a legacy. Hopefully the cabin will always be with me, for



Ellison garden-stair

in crafting it, I find that it now defines me, which is perhaps both a curse and a blessing.

**At present, which projects are you doing?**

We are doing some wonderful houses right now—a fully sustainable house in Hawaii, a townhouse in San Francisco which will be done this year, and a barn inspired dwelling in the Napa valley. We are also doing some restaurant work as a result of our slanted door project in San Francisco's ferry building, and we are doing the new corporate headquarters for Virgin America airline. So, we have a nice mix of different projects.

**Have you ever thought of taking your work across the Atlantic?**

I would love to, but to date we have not had the opportunity. We did interview with Disney for a housing project in France, but we didn't get the job. Perhaps one of your readers will change all that!

**We hope so too. Thanks Olle, it was a wonderful interview.**