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Slow Architecture

Spawned by the slow food movement, slow architecture reflects a return to the roots of the master architect tradition.

Words by Reed Glenn

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When Italy's first McDonald's poised to open in 1986—a stone's throw from the fabled Spanish Steps in Rome, no less—it ignited not only a protest but a counterrevolution. Italians, so proud and protective of their exquisite centuries-old cuisine and culinary traditions, rebelled against not only the first McDonald's in their iconic city but the decades of culinary collapse spawned by the "fast-food revolution" of the 1950s—that reduced food, along with its preparation and consumption, to its lowest common denominator.

Political activist and journalist Carlo Petrini took part in the initial protest and is credited with the creation of the slow food movement. Three years later, in 1989, the manifesto of the International Slow Food Organization was signed in Paris by delegates from fifteen countries with the goal of promoting local foods and time-honored traditions of gastronomy and food production. It opposed fast food, industrial food production, and globalization, with the goal of preserving traditional and regional cuisine, and encouraging farming of plants, seeds, and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem.

From slow food came the whole "slow" movement, with slow cities, slow living, slow travel, slow design, and slow architecture—a label credited to the Japanese.

"It is a cultural revolution against the notion that faster is always better. The Slow philosophy is not about doing everything at a snail's pace. It's about seeking to do everything at the right speed. Savoring the hours and minutes rather than just counting them. Doing everything as well as possible, instead of as fast as possible. It's about quality over quantity in everything from work to food to parenting," writes Carl Honoré in his 2004 book *In Praise of Slowness*, which has become the new-millennium bible of the movement.

Environmental Roots and "Deep Ecology"

So what is slow architecture? The Tvergastein Hut in the Hallingskarvet massif in Norway epitomizes the concept. It's a simple wooden mountain cabin in harmony with its surroundings that took several years to build with appropriate, readily available local materials—think small carbon footprint. The idea of slow architecture includes proper context, materials, sustainability, and affordability while still retaining aesthetics.

A lifelong mountain climber and Norway's most famous philosopher and a professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo, Arne Næss was influenced by the writings of seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Spinoza and twentieth-century ecologist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, the groundbreaking environmental science book published in 1960. *Silent Spring* documented pollution from the chemical industry and its detrimental effects on the environment, particularly birds, along with other negative human-caused environmental impacts. The book cartwheeled into scripture for the environmental movement of the 1960s.

Næss was convinced of the impending ecological disaster for planet Earth, and in 1969, he retired from his university position and built his Tvergastein Hut, where he lived and developed the philosophy of "deep ecology," which sees the complex interconnection and web of all life-forms, objects, and events. Shallow ecology seeks solutions to economic problems through technological fixes; deep ecology demands fundamental economic, political, cultural—and spiritual—changes.

"It's a whole different perspective of our place on Earth," says Carolyn Strauss, a California-born, Columbia-educated architect who created the Amsterdam-based slowLab, a research platform for slow knowledge in design thinking and practice. "We work with individuals, architectural firms, architects, and students," she says. "Næss's hut isn't an aestheticized version of anything. For him the beauty and quality comes from the environment. And understanding himself as one small part, and not a native of that ecosystem.

"It's about understanding ourselves as part of larger systems and moving humans out of the center of things. We're part of a much larger, complex system, which we can never fully understand. We tend to ignore that fact. And this leads to our fragmentation of the world, versus gestalt thinking—perception of the whole and interdependence. This type of human-centered thinking and fragmentation has generated a lot of the problems in the world," Strauss says.

Naess's hut was built from 1937 to 1943, the pieces carried by horse and sled in sixty-two trips up the mountain. He also built a smaller climbing hut on the very edge of a cliff that required one to enter by

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climbing up through a trapdoor in the floor. Næss and his mountaineer companions climbed and dragged the planks and other materials up the mountain wall to build it. Næss died in 2009 at the age of 96. He lived at his cabin full time—this was no second home.

Spas and Churches

On the opposite end of the slow-architecture spectrum is Therme Vals, a hotel/spa complex in Vals, Switzerland, built over the only thermal springs in the Graubünden canton. The architect was Peter Zumthor, who received the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2009. Completed from 1993 to 1996, the building is made from stone taken from the mountain, plus concrete and glass. Designed to look like a cave or quarry-like structure, it has a turf roof and resembles the foundations of an archeological site, half buried into the hillside.

The locally quarried Valser quartzite was the driving inspiration for the design, and the building’s cladding is made from 60,000 one-meter-long thin slabs of the greenish-gray stone. Zumthor was fascinated by the mystic qualities of a world of stone within the mountain. He wanted to capture the light and darkness, the light reflections on the water and steam-saturated air, the unique acoustics of the bubbling water in a world of stone, the feeling of warm stones and naked skin—all to enhance the ritual of bathing. So that time would be suspended for those enjoying the baths, Zumthor wanted no clocks in the spa, but three months after the opening, he was pressured to install two small clocks. Zumthor carefully designed a path of circulation to lead bathers to certain predetermined points with areas and views to enjoy along the way. “The meander, as we call it, is a designed negative space between the blocks, a space that connects everything as it flows throughout the entire building, creating a peacefully pulsating rhythm. Moving around this space means making discoveries. You are walking as if in the woods. Everyone there is looking for a path of their own,” Zumthor explains.

A Spanish icon and UNESCO World Heritage Site, Barcelona’s extraterrestrial-looking Sagrada Familia basilica and Roman Catholic church is a classic and very literal example of slow architecture—still under construction 120 years after architect Antoni Gaudi first began it.

Urban and Third-World Slow Architecture

Japan is among the leaders in slow architecture, and a renowned, award-winning example is Hillside Terrace in Tokyo’s trendy Daikanyama neighborhood. This internationally famous residential-commercial complex spanned three decades in its construction and evolution. Its creator, Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, was awarded the Prince of Wales Prize in Urban Design for reflecting the changes of time and giving life to the urban scenery. He also received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1993—a year after completion of Hillside Terrace.

“The flow of time can be measured against its diverse buildings and their relationship to the city of Tokyo as it grew to envelop them,” writes Maki. “The singular sense of place that people strolling among the various buildings and outdoor spaces of Hillside Terrace feel is no accident. It is the result of a deliberate design approach that has created continuous unfolding sequences of spaces and views, taking advantage of the site’s natural topography and, indeed, enhancing it with subtle shifts in the architectural ground plane.”

Butterfly Houses

From the Norwegian Alps to the rainy highlands of northern Thailand, the architectural firm TYIN tegnestue, based in Trondheim, Norway, performs humanitarian aid through architecture. Their slogan is “architecture of necessity,” but that still embodies aesthetics. Started by five architect students from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, the firm’s third-world projects are financed by more than sixty Norwegian companies, as well as private contributions. TYIN has worked with planning and constructing small-scale projects in Thailand. “We aim to build strategic projects that can improve the lives for people in difficult situations. Through extensive collaboration with locals, and mutual learning, we hope that our projects can have an impact beyond the physical structures.” The architects use such readily available materials as old tires and locally grown bamboo.

“The Soe Ker Tie House is a blend between local skills and TYIN’s architectural knowledge. Because of their appearance, the buildings were named ‘The Butterfly Houses’ by the Karen workers [an ethnic group from southeast Myanmar]. The most prominent feature is

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the bamboo weaving technique, which was used on the side and back facades of the houses. The same technique can be found within the construction of the local houses and crafts. All of the bamboo was harvested within a few kilometres of the site,” write the architects on their website, tyinarchitects.com. “The majority of the inhabitants are Karen refugees, many of them children. These were the people we wanted to work for.” The architects hoped to foster a more sustainable building tradition for the Karen people in the future.

Form Follows Function

“Anybody who is practicing architecture right now, and has been practicing the last thirty years, has seen the profession become so much about style, formmaking,” says Colorado architect ml Robles of Studio Points Architecture + Research in Boulder. “Form is the result of special interactions of space. If you start with form, it’s very limited.” “Form follows function,” was the mantra of twentieth-century “starchitect” Louis Sullivan, who admired Henry David Thoreau and Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (80–70 BC), who said a structure must be solid, useful, and beautiful. Sullivan’s assistant was Frank Lloyd Wright.

“You don’t start with the box and stuff everything in it,” says Robles, who explains that the three-dimensional modeling computer program SketchUp has become the fast food of architectural design for too many versus careful, thoughtful design.

“So much of what’s happened in the last thirty to forty years was about consumption,” says Robles. “What’s happened is that architecture has become a commodity. So you’ve got, sort of built in, this turnaround—anything that’s a style is going to be out of style...and that’s why we have the crazy environments that we have, and most people are so dissatisfied with their built environments. It’s because they have been designed for a little tiny space in time, with little regard for the past, or really, a long-term future. They’ve been designed for the moment.”

Given all that, Robles says, “Slow architecture I think was a pushback to architecture that was about a trend, a pushback to architecture or urban development that was about erasure, and it was a pushback to the commodification of interior finishes and furniture.”

Sustainability and Sensibility

The other thing that happened, says Robles, was the sustainability movement, “which was trying to reground the built environment—to be responsible.” So there are LEED buildings, green buildings, and gold buildings. “I think what is happening—and slow architecture is illuminating this—the thoughtfulness of doing what architecture has always been doing is becoming important again. It’s kind of sad that that’s the way the profession has gone.

“The idea of thoughtful, responsible, meaningful—that’s what architecture is. That is the definition of architecture in the master tradition, period. That those things now show up under a label is an interesting reflection of our time, in that we need to be reminded of what architecture is. Those of us who practice architecture in this way have always known.

“If you’ve ever entered a building and you catch yourself and realize you have slowed down just to be in that building; you’re in wonder, awe, you’re pulled through the space, usually by light, and you’re changed,” Robles says. “This happens to people when they go into cathedrals. Amazing places where people just, ‘Whoa.’ It happens when you go into a museum, or Union Station downtown in L.A., or Grand Central Station in New York. That’s the essence of slow architecture. What it does to the world. That’s what great architecture does. It causes you to pause and be present.” ◢