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## BRINGING SPACE DRAMATICALLY TO LIFE

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ARNE KVORNING □ Kvorning Design & Communication, Denmark

Interview by: Lada Dražin-Trbuljak □ Museum Documentation Centre, Zagreb

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**LADA DRAŽIN-TRBULJAK:** You studied architecture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. Although we are not familiar with the practice in other countries, what seems a bit unusual to us is the fact that an Academy of Fine Arts also includes an architecture, design, and artwork conservation school.

Your biography says that you are an architect, designer, and set designer. During your studies, did you have units related to set design and dramaturgy, and how much did that affect your future profession and the better understanding of the narrative aspect of museum exhibitions and permanent displays?

**ARNE KVORNING:** The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen was founded hundreds of years ago and it was originally an art school. But at a very early stage, the School of Architecture became part of the Academy, which explains the name. We have two schools of architecture in Denmark – the one in Copenhagen is the oldest. Over the years, there have been numerous collaborations between artists and architects – a unique benefit for both educational programs.

Today the school changed its name to something even longer: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts – Schools of Architecture, Design, and Conservation!

During my studies, I worked with set design, specializing in scenography for both theatre and television. My thesis was actually on television scenography and the special interest for combining dramaturgy with spatial design laid the ground for my work in exhibition design from the very start.

**L.D.-T.:** Do you think that exhibition design has its own specific characteristics? Which ones would you point out?

**A.K.:** Absolutely yes – exhibition design is very different from working with architecture. Exhibitions should tell stories through artefacts, interpretation, and scenography – and this requires you to manage and combine the different means of expression.

**L.D.-T.:** Your design bureau Kvorning Design & Communication, has offices in Copenhagen, London, Oslo and St Petersburg, which employed about forty professional staff members. What qualities in your staff would you highlight as most important to you: good communication skills, good abilities to organise, the capacity to work in a team, creativity, independence, responsibility...

...? What in your practice would be crucial for the development of a good team?

**A.K.:** All what you mention here is actually key, I would say. Working with exhibitions like we do requires a sense of making rooms come alive in a dramatic way – the ability to analyse the room and let it become an active part of the storytelling. Of course, working internationally like we do also includes a lot of travelling – and the staff should be ready to travel, often at a short notice.

**L.D.-T.:** Working in your team are experts who, apart from the basic disciplines of architecture and design (creative concept management, graphic design, exhibition and product design), also have very specialised knowledge, such as an interpreter and creative concept manager. Can you tell us what their functions are?

**A.K.:** Our staff members have many different backgrounds – architects, designers, graphic designers, interaction designers, communicators etc. We have an interpreter – or, maybe you can call him a storyteller. His special role is to talk with museum professionals, work with the contents, and get the stories across. And our creative concept manager works closely together with the interpreter and the rest of the team to ensure that the physical exhibition design is in full dialogue with the creative content.

And the huge network of international partners we have around us includes some of the most professional and experienced experts in their special fields. Working as exhibition entrepreneurs like we often do – providing full turnkey solutions – we need the best you can get. And we always build on our network to improve it.

**L.D.-T.:** How much are teamwork and the understanding of the client crucial for your project? What kind of experience do you have in communication with clients? Do your ideas always get accepted smoothly? Are decisions made unanimously, or is there sometimes resistance, meaning you have to explain things carefully to the customers?

**A.K.:** We work actively with a co-creational model – based on workshops with client. This helps the process very much. We always listen carefully to the clients – we go in depth with the contents – and we normally establish a very open-minded atmosphere with the clients. So based on these methods we have rather smooth processes.

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**L.D.-T.:** After your first encounter with a new project, that is, with the clients, what do you expect in the next phase of your association with museum professionals? In your opinion, what, in that conceptual phase, should a well-prepared brief contain (apart from the written instructions of the curator, which refer to content and perhaps the idea of presentation, the kind of exhibition, time and venue, target users, instructions related to the recommendations of the conservator and, of course, the funding that the project has at its disposal)?

**A.K.:** I would respond – as I did to the previous question – that it is crucial with a well-established co-creational process. Then people listen to each other – respect each other's knowledge and backgrounds.

**L.D.-T.:** Can you tell us something about the organisation, planning and setting of priorities while a project is being implemented?

**A.K.:** To align expectations in all phases – that is important. Talk, talk and understand each others' ideas and needs...

**L.D.-T.:** What, in your opinion, would be the most effective manner of collaboration? Do big teams of museum professionals take part in this phase? Do you think that museum conservators or educators also ought to take part in the initial phase during the creation of the design concept?

**A.K.:** Normally we organize a workshop session with all stakeholders – that is important. Then the group is narrowed down – and further down again. And that is also important to keep the group operative. But it is just as important to keep them all informed during the whole process to avoid misunderstandings.

**L.D.-T.:** You have taken part in the production of exhibitions and permanent displays of very different themes and contents. Over time, you must have developed very successful communication skills and acquired knowledge related to the presentation and interpretation of various kinds of material – from the domains of natural history and history, archaeology and fine art, contemporary art.

Does some kind of material require greater care or knowledge?

**A.K.:** That is exactly one of the issues that differ a lot from being a building architect. Every time – no matter the theme – we have to go into depth with the content. Read books – talk with professionals. I would say that it is necessary to become a semi-expert every time if the exhibition is to be professional and tell the right stories – establish the right atmosphere. If the theme is ice-core drilling at the the summit of Greenland or contemporary art – always be interested, treat the themes with care, and listen to professionals.

**L.D.-T.:** The museum projects you have worked on have covered a very wide range of heritage topics, including war, ship-building, sports and climate problems, representation of cultural and natural landscapes, which placed before you a big challenge of learning and creating intelligible, convincing, and even moving interpretations. Apart from initial instructions and elaborations of themes that you get from museum specialists, how much do the members of your team have to deal with these aspects?

**A.K.:** As mentioned above – my team members spend quite a lot of time reading books and having in-depth talks with scholars, etc. Of course, not everyone on the team is especially interested in this – and therefore we have established the two job positions: interpreter and creative concepts manager. They should at least know all the details and be able to communicate them to the design teams.

**L.D.-T.:** How much time do you need for the planning and development phase of a project, and how much for the actual implementation? Can you tell us something about your experience in analysing and assessing results you need in order to choose the best approaches?

**A.K.:** We work with almost all scales of exhibitions – from business cards to World EXPOs, as we sometimes say. But the average program for a – let's say, 1000m<sup>2</sup>-permanent exhibition – is 50% of the time for concept and preparations, and 50% for production and installation. The full timeline varies between 6 months and 2 years – depending on the complexity.

Very often, we invite future users to our workshops – meaning both the museum staff and the typical visitors. They have an active part in the development processes.

**L.D.-T.:** Nowadays, it might be said that exhibitions are the basic form of the communication function of the museum, and as such, one of the most important ways in which museums communicate with their visitors. How important is this factor and to what degree is it present in the initial formulation of the strategy of interpretation?

Do you ask museums to give you precise information about who their visitors are and whom they want to address, or does your team assess the possible audience, and in what way it should be persuaded to be interested in the project? What do you think is crucial in communication with visitors?

**A.K.:** As mentioned above, it is crucial for us that we know the target groups – and that the target groups are an integrated and active part of the development. So we need museums to define the target groups and communicate this information to us from the very start.



**KUĆA LEGO**  
 naručitelj\_Kuća Lego®  
 vrsta\_stalni postav  
 lokacija\_Billund, Danska  
 godina\_2017.

**LEGO HOUSE**  
 client\_LEGO® House  
 project\_permanent exhibition  
 location\_Billund, Denmark

**L.D.-T.:** In creating a story, you do not use only classical methods of narration, with projections, photography, light, but also use interactive elements, sounds, and scents... Many of your projects are characterised by a very delicate use of different media. In a short video made for the Museums + Heritage Show 2016 you mentioned that the ordinary visitor perceives many museums as a little bit boring and old-fashioned, and that it is actually a challenge for you to change that, and bring a new light and new atmosphere into museums.

How much have film and the new media contributed to this?

**A.K.:** Film media and interactives have meant a lot – and we tend to use projections directly on the room's walls and floor, etc. in order to turn the room into an active storyteller. Scents are interesting – but difficult to use in larger spaces – but it really adds a lot to the experience. Smells are something you remember – and smells triggers your memory often much more than sounds and images.

**L.D.-T.:** A very important factor that many designers have to address is the evaluation of the moment at which the process has to be stopped. Once the entire research and creative process of developing the process are finished, do you yourself and your team have time to stop and evaluate what has been done, before the actual realization?

**A.K.:** As we are working with a co-creational method, we take the time needed for evaluation during the processes and, of course, after the project has been realized. This is important for avoiding misunderstandings and going backwards too much. It is also important to learn from the processes so your team just becomes more and more precise every time.

**L.D.-T.:** What are the projects you like best, and why?

**A.K.:** Hard to say – there has been really many... But one still stands out. The Secret Wartime Tunnels at Dover Castle. It combined all the skills we have – and it required our full network of manufacturers and partners. Great project – and it is still one of the most well-known exhibitions in the UK.

**L.D.-T.:** Which project made the most demands on you, whether in transmitting the conceptual design, or in the handling of technical problems?

**A.K.:** The Secret Wartime Tunnels at Dover Castle also stands out in this respect – it was a challenge working 20 meters underground in 2 km-long tunnel systems.

**L.D.-T.:** What are the most common problems you have to face? What kind of constraints do you come upon? How do you cope with stressful situations?

**A.K.:** It is often technical issues – related to AV solutions, etc. But the solution is always to work with the best in the world – that is very helpful in stressful situations. You know that you have a team that will take care of it – and it will work both during the opening ceremony and in years after.

**L.D.-T.:** What are the most common mistakes you see in your own or other people's exhibitions? Looking from the perspective of a designer, what do you think could or should be improved?

**A.K.:** Integration of AV solutions and interactives. We work hard to integrate such activities as in the most discrete, subtle, and 'invisible' ways as possible – and that is a real challenge for many.

**L.D.-T.:** We know that during the development of a project you will consult many researchers in Denmark and elsewhere, authors and appropriate experts. We assume that you are thoroughly acquainted with many of the world's museum displays and exhibitions.

Do you analyse the successful ideas and implementations of other studios, or do you always and only start with the understanding of the commissioned project brief?

**A.K.:** Personally, I travel a lot – and even during my holidays I visit museums everywhere I go. And, of course, I also look at my colleagues' work. You can get inspired – and you can also learn that this was not the way to do it. It works both ways. So a combination of experience, inspiration, and working in-depth with specific briefs is key.

**L.D.-T.:** You are very aware of the importance of working with first-rate individuals and partners. You have worked with some of the most influential architects and partners in the world, like Norman Foster, Dominique Perrault, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid Architects, and the Norwegian design studio Snøhetta. Currently in development or drawing to a close are partnerships and projects in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, England, Belgium, Italy, Hungary, Russia, Dubai, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, China, and the USA. What do you see as your greatest strength?

**A.K.:** Personally, I always find it easy to talk to people and become confident with all stakeholders. I have met many "starchitects" over the years – and we have developed fine relationships. And we have had very creative collaborations every time. Also it is about being open-minded – being a careful listener – and that makes it easy to understand to work with clients and partners worldwide.

**L.D.-T.:** Your web site [www.kvorning.com](http://www.kvorning.com) contains an impressive list of heritage projects on which you have





**ZATVORSKI MUZEJ HORSENS**  
 naručitelj\_Zatvorski muzej Horsens  
 vrsta\_stalni postav  
 lokacija\_Horsens, Danska  
 godina\_2015

**HORSENS PRISON MUSEUM**  
 client\_Horsens Prison Museum  
 project\_permanent exhibition  
 location\_Horsens, Denmark

**PLAVI PLANET**  
 naručitelj\_Plavi planet/Nacionalni akvarij  
 Danske  
 vrsta\_stalni postav  
 lokacija\_Kopenhagen, Danska

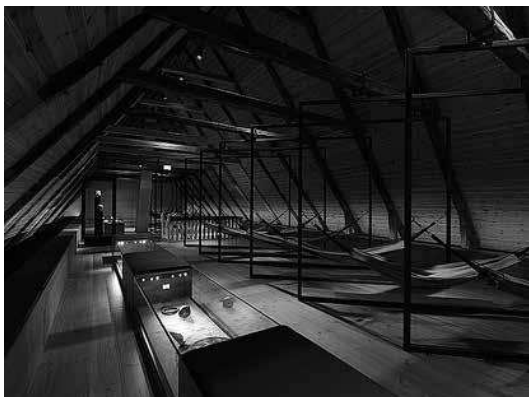
**THE BLUE PLANET**  
 client\_The Blue Planet/National Aquarium  
 Denmark  
 project\_permanent exhibition  
 location\_Copenhagen, Denmark



**CENTAR DANSKOG DVORCA**  
 naručitelj\_Muzej Jugoistočne Danske  
 vrsta\_vitrine i koncept signalizacije  
 lokacija\_Vordingborg, Danska

**THE DANISH CASTLE CENTRE**  
 client\_Museum Southeast Denmark  
 project\_showcases and signage concept  
 location\_Vordingborg, Denmark





worked, and so we would be interested to hear how, after so much experience, you see museums in the future?

**A.K.:** Museums have an important role – but an ever changing role. Also in the future. Museums are primarily a social room – a place to meet and a place to experience. And if you work with finding that right combination every time – the museums will survive. But they will change and they will look, smell, and be experienced by new and changing audiences – very differently in the years to come.

**L.D.-T.:** Do you have any messages for those who would like to become involved in the design of museum exhibitions?

**A.K.:** Develop your sense of room and space, be precise in your use of the many different means of expression – be interested and open to a lot of different themes and knowledge. Be open, and listen carefully...

Translation from English to Croatian: Nada Kujundžić

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**MUZEJ KØGE**  
naručitelj\_Muzej Jugoistočne Danske  
vrsta\_stalni postav  
lokacija\_Muzej Køge, Danska  
godina\_2015  
**KØGE MUSEUM**  
client\_Museum Southeast Denmark  
project\_showcases and signage concept  
location\_Vordingborg, Denmark