

Something to Sing About

Oslo gets a striking new opera house.

With its recent sea-oil revenue and late urbanization, Norway tends to play the role of Scandinavia's nouveau riche cousin from the sticks. And the postwar urban aesthetic of this sparsely populated country of 4.7 million has, with the exception of the work of Pritzker Prize-winner Sverre Fehn, been stuck in a time warp. But all this is set to change now that Oslo has a slick new opera house designed by local breakout firm Snøhetta: The elegantly expansive structure, inaugurated on April 12, is expected to pull the Norwegian capital out of cultural obscurity and put it on the map as an architectural hot spot.

Norway's ministry of culture held the international competition for a new national landmark eight years ago, and Snøhetta was a natural choice. Though internationally known for the Alexandria Library in Cairo and for landing the commission for a visitor's center at New York's World Trade Center Memorial, the firm had never built a large-scale project on its home turf. "We were given the task to create a monumental building that would represent the abilities of contemporary Norwegian society," says Tarald Lundevall, who worked with fellow partners Kjertill Thorsen and Craig Dykers on the project.

Although the white stone-and-glass building has already radically transformed the city's coastline—with its sweeping roof platform that descends into the fjord on one side and extends into a public plaza on the other, it looks like an immense formation of ice floes rising out of the water—Snøhetta's interpretation of "monumental" was focused more on program than scale. All aspects of the building are designed for public use. "We wrapped the building in a carpet of widespread planes that are open to everyone," says Lundevall. "You can sit on the roof and take in some sun, or you can stroll around and dip your toe in the water." www.snoarc.no

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