Kyrjkebakken

/ A design proposal for the Pilgrims Center in Røldal, Norway

Joong-Min Kim
Master Thesis 2011-2012
Matter, Space & Structure
Dep. Architecture
Chalmers University of Technology
“... work in architecture – is really more a working on oneself.”

/Wittgenstein
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A master thesis can be seen as a unique opportunity to implement a project that reflects what you have learned throughout your studies. It can also be seen as yet another chance to explore something new, which in turn will bring more knowledge to prepare you for the life outside the academic world.

After my studies at Luleå University of Technology, I have tried to focus more on developing conceptual design here at Chalmers. When I think about my design process, I can be both frustrated and surprised at how varied it can be from time to time. The creation of a design proposal is not as simple as a linear phenomenon, going from one problem to one ultimate solution. The process can be both irrational and arbitrary, while the architect over time accumulates a number of tools and guidelines to make it more orderly. With each project our understanding will increase further thus add new tools in creating architecture. My desire is to get more knowledge of my own design methodology, while avoiding falling into the same old patterns in the creative process. Hopefully others can see what I’ve done and get inspired for their own thesis, competition work, or when designing a Pilgrims Center.

I have chosen to work with Røldal Pilgrim Center, which was an open architectural competition during summer-fall 2011, due to the project’s unique and exciting content but also because I had not participated in a competition before. The idea was to hand in the competition material and then continue working with the design. While the thesis has been to design a building, it was also an attempt for me to work with my own design process and the tools, techniques that I have learned during my studies.

Last but not least, I would like to express my thanks to those who helped me in the process. Thanks to Martin Jonsson and grandmas for being the strong support at home, thanks to Morten Lund and Daniel Norell (studio teacher and tutor) for pushing my design closer to its concept, thanks to my thesis buddies in the studio for your support and inspiration, and I would also take this opportunity to give a special thanks to all you working at this school; cleaning staff, caretakers, technical support and at the wooden workshop!
View from the highway E134 in a south/east direction towards the site
Røldal is a little village in Norway with a population of 354 permanent inhabitants (January, 2011). The village is situated 210 km west from Oslo along the popular route (E134) that goes from Oslo to Stavanger.

Røldal is located in a valley and is surrounded by high mountain walls. The mountain ridge extends in a north/east to south/west direction and is met by a lake, Røldalsvatnet. The project site is at the lower part of the valley next to the stave church.

The Pilgrim Center is to convey the history of the medieval stave church in Røldal and the pilgrimage while giving room for different user groups. The Centre will act as a social gathering place that tells the story about the church and to serve with functions such as; exhibition, café, education etc. As a support building for the stave church the Center will also provide spaces for storage, offices, burial ceremony and maintenance of the cemetery. The project was originally an open architectural competition, with deadline in November 2011, but has been worked on continuously until January 2012.

Røldal was one of the most famous pilgrim destinations in the Middle Ages, due to the healing powers of the crucifix in wooden stave church. The pilgrim walk is a way to find the inner road from the earthly life to a spiritual insight and a rewarding experience in both a physical, mental and social way. In recent times the pilgrim walks resurrected and is not only a religious experience but a way to relax and enjoy the nature. Røldal is today the country’s most important pilgrim destination in terms of the amount of walkers.

Traveling to the site, the stunning Norwegian landscape made a big impact with its high mountain ridges in contrast to the low depth of the valleys and fjords. You could see small traditional cottages with grass growing on their roofs appearing in clusters in the landscape along the road. These little mysterious houses seemed to randomly appear here and there in the fog and you started to wonder how these could look like inside.
LOCATION

On-site observation was made to get a personal impression of the environment. This method is one of the most effective tools to collect essential insights and own interpretation of the environment and gain a firsthand knowledge of the site.
SITE ANALYSIS

Røldal is situated in a valley enclosed by the steep hillsides that extends north/east to south/west direction and is met by a lake. The competition site is located at the bottom of the valley on a flat surface in contrast to the rising mountain walls. It seems natural for the new Pilgrim Center to be horizontally oriented on the site and follow the rhythm of the valley rather than express itself vertically. By having a low building on site, the proposed Center will not only have a balanced dynamic with the church building but also connect to the existing houses in the village.

When you arrive at the site from the main highway, from the north, you can see that the church is located in the center at the bottom of the valley. The church clearly expresses the transition between the earthly horizontal and the heavenly vertical, with its rising roofs which is pointing more and more vertically the higher you get. The stave church is in its proportions more high than wide and the dark tarred facade makes the church fall back into the mountains in the background visually. The church stands out against the other buildings in the village through its verticalness and the surrounding open green landscape. By maintaining a distance to the church building with the low vegetation, you will enhance the respectable relationship between the proposed Center and the stave church.

Everywhere you look you get reminded of the magnificent hill sides and because of the site being positioned at the bottom of the valley, the views of the mountains are in an upward angle. The views in eye level from the west to the north are blocked by the camping place and the tourist information building (Panorama 3). But when looking above the trailers you can see the view of the valley run to the south/west direction towards the lake Røldalsvatnet. Looking straight to the south from the site you can see waterfalls coming down the mountain side but the view to the creek running along the southern side are blocked by the trees.
The concept emerged from three key components of the project: Cottage in the mountain (contextual awareness), The inner journey (pilgrimage) and A set of functions (pragmatic approach to the program).

One of the main influences for the proposal was the traditional cottages in the Norwegian mountains and how they related to the landscape in terms of scale and shape. I felt a strong need of incorporate that into the project because of it being a significant part of the contextual identity. I also liked the idea of coming in to something that is warm and inviting. There is a liking in recognizing a buildings language and make it coexist with the surrounding buildings, especially when the goal is to not dominate the site.

The pilgrimage is the main reason for this whole project and is one of the most important elements for the proposal. The original essence of the pilgrimage is to find a inner road to a spiritual insight by walking a physical demanding journey on earth. I wanted to explore the meaning of this journey both in a physical term but also as a inner state of mind. Like the pilgrims journey with the spiritual inner and the physical earthly, the designed proposal reflects this dynamics with a having more earthly exterior and an abstract interpretation of the inner journey in its interior.

The purpose of the Center is to work as a support building for Røldal stave church. This includes functions that should be provided for in the best way and solved pragmatically. I believe that every building should have a system that works and be practical for every day usage. It feels logical to think of the people that are daily using in the building.

Traditional wooden cottages in the Norwegian landscape was seen on my way to Røldal, and was one of the main influences to the proposal.

The pilgrim journey is a way to find the inner road from the earthly life to a spiritual insight. I wanted to explore the dynamics of this journey.

The existing support building at the site is small & humble and works well with the church. The building serves functions such as; public restrooms, storage and mortuary. With the growing needs and demands for more space, this will be replaced by the new Pilgrim Center.
Whether you arrive on the site on foot, by car or by bus the visitor is gently directed towards the church. The church is the natural destination and is in focus when you arrive. The Pilgrim Center is humbly placed next to the church with proportions that makes it harmonize with the other houses in the village. By having most of the building mass integrated into the landscape the visible parts are kept at minimum. The parts of the building that are visible entreat the visitors for further exploration. The proposal is placed within a respectable distance to the church and keeps most of the green area so it does not dominate the site. The positioning of the building is made by consideration of the main axle from the church towards the direction of the valley and also for creating an open outdoor place just outside the entrance of the cemetery. The outdoor walking paths create a natural circulation connecting the entrances and the church with the site. Car parking is located along the western part of the competition area. For the visitors this means that the focus is on the church and center, and that the parking lots are arranged aside.
View from the Churchroad east towards the designed proposal
To keep the visual impact of the building mass on the site as little as possible, the proposal has most of its mass integrated into the landscape. Volume and space are then added on significant areas in the building program. The roofs of the added volumes are cut to accentuate the relation to the church and the public. Openings in the ground mass are made for access and light. The overall building mass of the proposal complements the houses in the village and keeps the integrity of the site.
I wanted to place the building in a respectable distance from the church and that the church would be in focus as you arrived the site. So I decided quite early in the process that the new building should be placed towards the creek or the camping site, as you can see on the pictures.

Tests were made to study the building mass and the relation between the church and the proposed design.
View from the main road
FACADES
The program was first divided into three areas: public, administrative and churchly. After dividing the program an analysis of the functions were made to locate the necessary connections. In order to rationalize the program I let some functions overlap each other and some for co-usage.

The public part is placed closest to the main road towards north, and the churchly activities are placed more protected in the south towards the nature. The administrative part of the center is located between the public and the churchly part enabling co-usage of common functions such as the dining room/conference room, paper machine room, toilets, etc. for the employees.

The focus on co-usage of the common functions provides opportunities to have coffee and lunch breaks together when working under the same roof. The location of the kitchen in relation to the reception makes it possible for one person to run the Café and reception when it is low season. The positioning of the reception makes it possible for good visual overview of the Center. The flows of the public, churchly and administrative parts are separated. The employees and visitors can park and convenient access from the entrances from the west while the mourners have a more private entrance that faces the church in the east.
The thought behind the sequence of spaces is that to create a value for each room. The program was seen as three parts, each of them having different users.

The Center’s various areas are related to each other and the site by its different conditions. Based on a functional analysis, different functions with strong required connections both spatially and functionally were placed adjacent to each other.
SECTION
Some spatial relations have been investigated to emphasize the concept of the inner journey. The spatial representation of the walk is created by combining volume and movement, then strengthen with light.

With the concept of the journey, I wanted to create a fluent movement in the building with natural transitions between the rooms. Curved walls define rooms in a continuous flow while straight walls meet in angles that mark a border. There are softer transitions from space to space by creating curved walls.

A narrow space creates a more intimate room. Wider rooms in the other hand provide a more social space.

More volume in a room can give a massive impression but also overwhelm the visitor. A narrow and high space can be very effective when combined with light and create a strong vista.
As you enter the Center you will first come into a long narrow aisle which gives the visitor a chance to embrace the concept of the inner journey of pilgrimage. Pilgrims walk starts from within and the proportions of the aisle enable an intimate space. The curved walls guide you in and are accentuated by the lights. As you turn the corner you will be met up by the front desk.

The exhibition continues into a bigger room with a more ambient light before it finally comes together with the café / main hall.
The Café / main hall is divided into a more private room and an open area. The space extends towards the outdoor area and the library.
A pilgrim journey is a spiritual experience so I wanted to create a verticalness by the proportions of the space and a window high up to create a more sacral space. The exhibition starts with a defined tall space with natural light coming in from above.
Entering the churchly part the curved wooden walls embraces you with warmth. The main feature in the waiting room is an intimate courtyard with light from above that gives hope and creates a peaceful and respectable place.
There are birch trees on the site so it felt natural to incorporate it to the project. The birch creates an inviting and light feeling to the Center. Green walls gives restorative and relaxing atmosphere in the library and offices. The site characteristic slate was placed at the cut-outs of the facades while the most of the building mass has a green roof. The zinc sheets that covers the cottage like volumes works as a contemporary feature in contrast to the traditional shape of the buildings.
SKETCHES
**COMPETITION**

The hand-in for the competition was:

- Max. 6 posters in A2 showing your proposal (seen to your right)
- A booklet in A3 with the design proposal in detail
- A CD with your posters and booklet in PDF
De trevæggene og det generelle lys er merknadomfatter en med trygghed og være!
INSPIRATION PROJECTS
It is important that you have inspiration while working on a project. Inspiration that fuels the designing of a concept and gives ideas to continue on. For this project I had two separate inputs. One that worked with the part above ground and the other one with the curved shaped interior.
The six phases of a design project:

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic
4. Search for the guilty
5. Redemption
6. Acceptance

/Joung-Min Kim, January 2012