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Art, architecture shine along the fjord in Oslo, Norway



Oslo's prizewinning architecture includes its Opera House that opened on the Oslo Fjord in 2008.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



"The Horse Thief" by artist Richard Prince is among a wide-ranging collection of modern art on display in The Thief, Oslo's hot, new hotel.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
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It's a cow all right. White with black spots, a calf sliced open head to tail, preserved with Formaldehyde and suspended in a clear case, its innards revealed for all to see. Animal lovers might freak, but this passes for art in an edgy museum in the toniest neighborhood of Oslo.

Shocking, perhaps, but not nearly as OMG as Damien Hirst's other installation nearby. "Adam and Eve Exposed" depicts a man and woman on a surgical table, a sheet covering all but their genitals.

Norway's capital once was considered a fuddy-duddy, a boring straight-laced Scandinavian city. No more. Oslo has become one of Europe's fastest-growing cities, its population of 640,000 increasing 21 percent in the last decade. It's young, it's hip, it's out there.

And nowhere is Oslo's transformation more apparent than along the waterfront of the Oslo Fjord where redevelopment prompts art and architecture to blossom.

Stealing away to Thieves Island

Oslo's hottest new neighborhood covers a rocky outcropping where criminals were executed in the 1700s. Thieves Island, now connected to the mainland by a network of canal bridges, glitters with the work of 20 architects. They designed apartment and office buildings, a luxury hotel and the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art where Hirst's art provokes comment along with the work of other artists from the 1960s to the present.

The building itself ranks as a work of art. Designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, the man behind the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago, the \$100 million museum opened in 2012 in two wooden buildings separated by water and topped by a dramatic, double-curved glass roof. One building houses the museum's permanent collection, the other temporary exhibitions, a cafe and shop. A sculpture park stretches along the shore of the fjord and an observation tower designed by Piano yields interesting views of Oslo.

Art has a big presence inside Oslo's leading hotel, The Thief, opened on Thieves Island in 2013. Owned by environmental activist Petter Stordalen, whom an Oslo tour guide called "the Donald Trump of Norway" for his wealth -- not his politics -- The Thief has the priciest hotel insurance in the world thanks to the art inside. Some is on loan from the Astrup Fearnley next door, some part of a permanent collection, including Richard Prince's cowboy-themed "The Horse Thief" dominating the two-story lobby. An Andy Warhol screen print of a drag queen from his 1975 series "Ladies and Gentlemen," worth a cool \$2.7 million, hangs in the hotel's organic Fru K restaurant. Another wall of the restaurant has been given to a work composed of lines of pornographic writing. The wait staff is careful not to seat families with children next to it.

Each of The Thief's 118 rooms contains works of contemporary art chosen by the hotel's own art curator. If that's not enough art, guests get free admission to the Astrup Fearnley just by showing their room key.

Admiring architecture

A short walk over a pedestrian bridge links Thieves Island to Aker Brygge, a former shipyard that's become Oslo's hot meeting spot. In 1999, the city decided to redevelop the harbor along the Oslo Fjord after much of the shipbuilding business moved elsewhere. Here old shipyard structures pair with modern architecture in buildings housing dozens of upscale shops, restaurants, bars and night spots.

Patrons of these establishments soon discover Norway ranks among the most expensive countries in Europe, packing a real wallop to a wallet. To lessen the blow, visitors buy the Oslo Pass granting free entry to more than 30 museums, free use of public transportation, and discounts on sightseeing, restaurants and shops.

Walking on the roof of the Opera House, though, is always free.

The sharply angled building, clad in white marble, seems to rise from the water like a cresting wave. The largest music and performing arts venue in Norway, the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet opened in 2008 at a cost of \$840 million. It won the culture award at the World Architecture Festival in Barcelona and took the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture in 2009. Guided tours can be booked of the horseshoe-shaped main hall and two other stages, but anyone can stroll the foyer, take a coffee or a meal in one of its restaurants, and yes, climb to the roof for a panoramic view of the city and the fjord.

Not all of Oslo's notable architecture is new. Works from 1830 to the present are represented in an exhibit at the National Museum of Architecture. Christened in 2008, the museum is a repurposed 19th-century bank building designed by the leading architect of the day, Christian Heinrich Grosch. It was adapted and extended by Norway's Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Sverre Fehn, who designed a modern pavilion on the back of the classical main building to house changing exhibits.

Working toward peace

Oslo's City Hall has been derided for its somewhat staid architecture. The red brick 1950 building stands like a fortress at the mouth of the harbor. A 49-bell carillon in the east tower plays every hour as teens skateboard alongside bronze sculptures on the waterfront plaza.

But what art lovers treasure lies inside.

The recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize is honored every December in the Great Hall, the dignitaries dwarfed by monumental works hanging over their heads. The oil painting "Work, Administration, Celebration" covers the back wall, "The Occupation Frieze" on the east wall depicts Norway's occupation by the Nazis in World War II and art on the north wall portrays Norwegian workers. Upstairs, in the building's smallest reception room, "Life" by celebrated Norwegian expressionist Edvard Munch of "The Scream" fame, depicts children and their elders gathered around the tree of life.

Anyone who wants to know more about the Peace Prize goes next door to a renovated train station housing the Nobel Peace Center. Exhibits present the work of laureates past and present as well as current threats to world peace.

No one walking along Oslo's waterfront can overlook one of the city's oldest structures. Akershus Castle dominates a headland jutting into the Oslo Fjord. When Oslo replaced Bergen as capital of Norway in 1300, King Hakon V had it built as a medieval castle and royal residence. In 1592 it became a fortress and was rebuilt as a Renaissance castle in the 17th century. No longer the home of Norway's royal family, it's used for government events, but the grounds, chapel and mausoleum where kings and queens are entombed are open to the public.

It also represents a modern art form: animated film. The exterior of Akershus served as the model for Elsa and Anna's castle in Disney's "Frozen."

Oslo, Norway

Where to stay: The Thief, double rooms in July and August range from about \$315 to \$480 a night, thethief.com/en/

Oslo Pass: About \$40 for 24 hours, \$60 for 48 hours, \$75 for 72 hours with discounts for ages 4-15 and 67 and older. Available at most hotels, through the Oslo Pass app on Apple/Android and online at visitoslo.com/en/activities-and-attractions/oslo-pass/.

Details: visitnorway.com or visitoslo.com

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Visit Norway.*

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