The built environment in Iceland has become a concretization of an exaggerated version of patterns belonging to capitalism; a cycle of boom and bust. Not only did Iceland experience an economic decline, its banks collapsed completely and needed to be reconstructed from scratch. October 2008 was the end of an era where the cooperation of these same banks and building companies (which also went bankrupt), with the help of engineers and architects, had created a construction bubble of unimaginable proportions, benefitting actors with financial clout but proving to be a burden for the general public. On these pages, guest editors from the Iceland Design Centre reveal how the far-flung European nation is slowly getting back on its feet. More humble, but also more sustainable, and with some difficult problems still to tackle.

**Design as a tool to make a better world**

**TEXT ARNA MATHIESEN**

It has been a while... for many, the global economic decline which started some eight years ago might be fading into a distant memory. For the generation now growing into adulthood, the crisis has become an integral part of the world they inhabit, even if they have not heard all much about it, or might think it doesn’t really concern them. Icelandic households, however, do not have that option. Still immersed, living in the realities that triggered the financial meltdown. It is the work of the participants in the case study for small developments that prove to be most beneficial in the long run, and help to turn scattered initiatives into a transformative urban movement. When sprawl has already become a fact, it is urgent to address the half-built neighbourhods and adapt them for changed needs in a more prosperous future. This is a challenge, however, since they represent a political taboo. Here, the architects’ specialty – seeing opportunities where others only see obstacles – can be a useful resource. So might rational spatial thinking and contextualisation also be, debunking political jargon which can lead to new catastrophes for the city, such as further densification of the historical, fine-grained city centre, which in this case caters for big agars building hotels, and threatens further damage to the old city fabric.

A long-drawn dream of Icelandic designers and architects has become a reality with the foundation of the Iceland Design Centre in 2008. This is largely attributable to the establishment of the Iceland Academy of the Arts in 2008, and the Faculty of Architecture and Design, shortly afterwards in 2001. Ever since, Iceland’s design has been developing a clearer identity and establishing a unique character. The nation has an abundance of promising young Icelandic designers, who have infused the design environment with new, lively, characterized by curiosity, optimism, and daring.

Accordingly, one of the principal objectives of the Iceland Design Centre is to create an image and a unique status for Icelandic design, to nurture innovation and promote development in Icelandic design. The success of both the centre and the academy has largely contributed to the instalment of the Icelandic Design Policy 2006-2018. The first national design strategy for Iceland will enhance the importance of design in the conception, development, and manufacture of products, with the aim of strengthening Iceland’s companies’ competitive position and increasing value creation. Unlike most other similar organizations, the Iceland Design Centre brings together every field of design. While it is funded by both the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Industry, it is owned by the Association of Architects, Furniture and Interior Architects, Landscape Architects, Product and Industrial Designers, Ceramic Artists, Fashion Designers, the Textile Guild, the Goldsmith’s Association, and the Association of Icelandic Graphic Designers. According to managing director Hjálmar Halldórsson, what seemed like a complicated structure turned out to be a strength. ‘We have a direct link to the grass roots, but also to the policy makers and the government. For a young industry such as ours, this role is vitally important. Besides, the different fields learn from each other’s problems and methods, which sometimes are very similar,’ explains Halldórsson. Currently, the centre partners with Aurora Design Fund for ‘Wind of Change’, a conceptual project that explores the possibilities for developing Reykjavík in the future. In this project, the City Council of Reykjavík, Federation of Icelandic Industries, Iceland Design Centre, four major Icelandic Housing Associations, and the Iceland Academy of the Arts together aim to define innovative housing options for the future development of high-density living areas in the far north. The results should include ideas that bring about environmentally friendly, socially aware, economic, and progressive solutions to the traditional challenges of urban development. ‘Promoting architecture and design to the general public is a challenge everywhere. It is both present and pressing. Yet there seems to be a gap between environmental and political awareness and design. That is why it is important to develop tools and projects that bring city planning and architecture to the public, too,’ says Halldórsson.

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**Iceland Design Centre**

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The collapse of the Icelandic banking system in 2008 also marked a standstill in architecture. The pause has given the local industry the opportunity to reinvent itself. Where does it find itself now, six years later?

‘The mindset of the community has changed a lot,’ says Kristján Örn Kjartansson, a partner at KRADS, a Danish-Icelandic architecture practice located in Reykjavik and Aarhus, and a member of the board of directors at Iceland Design Centre. ‘The key word is respect,’ he continues. ‘There is more respect for other people, for nature, for our urban spaces, as well as the historical and cultural aspects of our cities. The overall ideology has changed towards more sustainable living in all ways, be it denser cities, less commuting, or greener planning.’

Steps in that direction were taken with Reykjavik’s new master plan for 2010–2030. A binding policy for local city politics according to Pall Hjaltason, former mayor of Reykjavik and a member of the board of directors at Iceland Design Centre. ‘The key word is respect,’ he continues. ‘There is more respect for other people, for nature, for our urban spaces, as well as the historical and cultural aspects of our cities. The overall ideology has changed towards more sustainable living in all ways, be it denser cities, less commuting, or greener planning.’

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The Icelandic design industry provides a strong identity, with droves of promising graduates coming from the Iceland Academy of the Arts. Unlike the Architecture Faculty, the Design Faculty offers a Masters degree, which has led to a generation of designers that better reflect their national identity than those previous, whose only option was to study abroad. The annual DesignMarch event is the prime showcase for Icelandic design and, like the rest of the design industry, it happily mixes all fields. From architecture to product design, fashion to graphics, the festival offers a cheerful smorgasbord of the local creative talent.

Festival director Sara Jónsdóttir says that the 2015 programme will feature architecture seen from various different points of view. ‘Think doll houses in Spark Design Space, design thinking applied to dream up futures for urban life in Reykjavik in the Wind of Change project, and sound absorbers tailor-made from Icelandic wool by Bryndis Bolladottir.’

Bolladottir’s project is another chapter of intensive research into the one material that there is plenty of in Iceland: wool. The lack of available materials is challenging, urging designers to think creatively and seek new possibilities. Eco-consciousness also plays a fundamental role in Icelandic design, as manifested in the recycling and repurposing of objects, as well as the utilization of remnant materials.

Snorri Þór Tryggvason, Pétur Stefánsson, and Snorri Eldjárn Snorrason studied architecture and graphic design together at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, and started working together on maps while still in school. At a time when there were no job opportunities for architects in Iceland, they decided to hand-draw and watercolor a detailed map of Reykjavik’s city centre. The map took 3000 hours to draw, color, and assemble, resulting in a very charming city map.

The project would become the basis for their company, Borgarmynd, which specializes in illustrated maps (now available for tourists, and including various other European cities), event branding, infographics, web design, and 3D modeling, among other things. Like Borgarmynd, many designers initiate their eventual claim to fame at Spark Design Space. The gallery was founded in 2010 by Sigríður Sigurjónsdóttir, who at the time was a professor of product design at the Iceland Academy of Arts, but has switched to focusing on Spark full-time since 2012.

Four days long, with over a hundred events all over Reykjavik, from the fishing harbour to the lava fields surrounding the city: welcome to DesignMarch, Iceland’s annual design festival.
The eerie past of Icelandic rural life

TEXT: ÁSTRÍÐUR MAGNÚSDÓTTIR

The Abandoned Houses Student Research Project, led by Gláma•Kim Architects, R3-Consultants, and Stapi Geology Engineers, maps and documents the built manifestations in rural areas of Iceland through preternatural photographs.

Abandoned Houses is an ongoing student research project that began in 2011. The project has succeeded in mapping over 700 abandoned houses in Iceland in an impressive seven-volume encyclopedia including evaluations and descriptions of individual buildings and short summaries of the history of the various rural areas. An expected eighth volume will represent chosen examples from different areas and provide further discussions on the background of the buildings, history, and typology.

The abandoned houses evince the hard work and perseverance needed by farmers to survive in an inclement region. The physical condition of the structures varies, but the majority can still be restored, reinvigorated, and put to good use. But what to do with all of them? The population in the countryside has decreased considerably, but by restoring selected houses and redefining their use for a changing economy—such as workshops for leathercraftsmanship, or renovating for use as hostels or accommodations for a growing tourist industry—thinly populated areas can regain a foothold and be brought back to life. We inherit this history; we are its guardians, and we must cherish the lessons it teaches us and pass these on to future generations. Some of the houses are full of old, wonderful things and furniture. They have been abandoned fully equipped, and are not just the shells of empty houses. Documenting these conditions must be done with consideration and delicacy.

The Viðborðssel farm building, for instance, shows the construction methods of the early concrete houses in Iceland, using corrugated iron for a concrete mould.

The project should be the genesis of a new Icelandic architectural identity. We should learn from our shared past, and transform and adapt those lessons to contemporary needs.

The project leaders look to similar work done in Norway and Scotland for examples on how to further develop the project. The landscape of the Scottish Highlands and its islands has strong similarities to Iceland, and the vernacular architecture is manifested in similar ways. Human habitation of uninviting landscapes defines them, as opposed to shaping the landscape to their needs.
The lack of construction projects has shifted the focus of the building authorities from large private enterprises of uninvetted housing developments to a more introverted consideration of public space, small-scale infill, and care-taking of the existing city structure. Together with new blood in the political landscape, especially in the capital area of Reykjavík, new initiatives have been launched to spark fresh ideas.

Many young architects find themselves in a catch-22, as official rules have been tightened and now demand a minimum of three years’ experience at an architecture office before they can start their own practice. The modest means, often restricted to the cost of material, has worked as an incentive, so to speak, giving young people the opportunity to start projects that, in many cases, have given (and grown) birth to many other, projects, as well as quite new public awareness of the built environment. This has been the case for Helgi Steinar Helgason and his partner at Tvíhorf, Gunnar Sigurðarson, who graduated in 2009 and have been spreading rumours that all is up and blooming in Iceland, as they have started off by winning proposals for competitions, as well as ignite new public awareness of accessible information on the built environment. Mapping and social consideration in architecture have also contributed to a mind-bending shift for architect Steinunn Eik Egilsdóttir, who graduated in 2005, is one of the few young architects that got a foot in the field before the crisis struck, having been part of the design team for the Iceland Design Centre’s annual DesignMarch, for its impressive publication of ‘Eurovision: Iceland’, a temporary design for leftover agricultural land.

Let it be no secret that Iceland, the hard-to-grasp volcanic island far up north in the Arctic Ocean, has come close to sinking in the aftermath of the financial collapse, commonly referred to as the ‘bank crisis’, that occurred in autumn 2008. Local authorities have been spreading rumours that all is up and blooming again, but in reality this is a far cry from the actual situation. The more optimistic among us had hoped for this country to be a kind of ‘phoenix’, an opportunity to leave behind the mad habits of the pre-crisis period and take up more sensible and socially sustainable structures to build upon. This has not been the case: while the majority of activities and transactions remain paralysed, the field of architecture has almost been wiped out, many established offices struggling to keep their heads above water. In many cases, they have been stripped down to just the owners, and often subset on overseas projects. To make things worse, young and newly graduated architects find themselves in a catch-22, as official rules have been tightened and now demand a minimum of three years’ experience at an architecture office before they can start their own practice. The modest means, often restricted to the cost of materials, has worked as an incentive, so to speak, giving young people the opportunity to start projects that, in many cases, have grown and given birth to many other projects, as well as quite new public awareness of the built environment. This has been the case for Helgi Steinar Helgason and his partner at Tvíhorf, Gunnar Sigurðarson, who graduated in 2009 and have been spreading rumours that all is up and blooming in Iceland, as they have started off by winning proposals for competitions, as well as ignite new public awareness of accessible information on the built environment. Mapping and social consideration in architecture have also contributed to a mind-bending shift for architect Steinunn Eik Egilsdóttir, who graduated in 2005, is one of the few young architects that got a foot in the field before the crisis struck, having been part of the design team for the Iceland Design Centre’s annual DesignMarch, for its impressive publication of ‘Eurovision: Iceland’, a temporary design for leftover agricultural land.

She took a chance, along with three others, in creating the pioneer project Xland (www.xland.is), an interactive mapping of landscape architecture in Iceland, supported by the Association of Icelandic Landscape Architects and Aurora Design Fund for Encouragement of Encouragement, for its impressive publication of deserted places, capturing precise links to the fading notes of cultural history, as well as inspiring the restoration of the old farm houses. She agrees with the other young architects here, speaking of ‘less ego’ and ‘more architecture’ as the way to go. Kristján Eegerson, who graduated 2003, is one of the few young architects that got a foot in the field before the crisis struck, having been part of the design team for the Iceland Design Centre’s annual DesignMarch, for its impressive publication of ‘Eurovision: Iceland’, a temporary design for leftover agricultural land.

These young architects are only a few among the hundreds of architects working in Iceland, and the ones who have escaped the worst of the turbulent times by dividing their time and work between Iceland and countries like Ghana and Palestine. The farm project ‘Eurovision: Iceland’ was selected to participate in the Mies van der Rohe Award, and the work has attracted a number of recognitions, including two nominations for the Mies van der Rohe Award: the first for ‘Eurovision: Iceland’, a temporary design for leftover agricultural land.