



Born to rewrite the rules

Inspired by his mechanical engineer grandad and his artist mother in equal measure, Pål Ross grew up convinced that there was a better way to do just about everything. He went on to become one of Sweden's most celebrated architects, proving that houses can be anything but square.

By Linnea Dunne | Photos: Ross Architecture & Design

"LEGO was different back then. I don't think you got kits with instructions; it was half a kilo of LEGO and you made what you wanted. It was a fantastic universe of thousands of pieces and I built spaceships and cranes and entire little towns," says Pål Ross. Looking back, he describes a creative child to whom there was no such thing as an impossibility. His grandfather ran a factory in Småland, where Ross spent his summers learning all about machinery, technology and construction.

"We came to develop a very close friendship and called each other 'polare' ['buddy']," Ross recalls. "I've always been

very curious and struggled to accept when people would say that something doesn't work or can't be done. I probably get that from morfar [grandad] – when I asked questions, he always explained everything to me in detail, so that I could fully understand. He was the very same; when he first set up his factory, he couldn't order the equipment he needed, so he built it himself."

Born in Stockholm in 1961, Ross grew up making sense of the world through construction. Among his specialties were cardboard spaceships with entire habitats including bedrooms, changing rooms for putting the space suit on and

a control cabin, which he made for himself and his friends. "There are a few still hanging around somewhere," he says. "I realise now that I was very much doing then what I'm still doing today. This thing of spatially creating habitats, I had that with me from a very early age."

Ross Architecture & Design was founded in 1996 and, since then, over 300 exclusive villas have been created, now with a number of office environments adding to the portfolio of 'works of art' as Ross likes to call them. The head architect's razor-sharp vision and determination to find a perfectly satisfying solution to every task has remained as strong as ever, and the result is an immediately recognisable design expression that refuses to, as he says, put life in a box.

"When people say that things should be a certain way because they've always been like that, I ask 'why?'. My artistic

work stands out from the mainstream because, say, I started looking at why we tend to build square houses, and then it turned out that it was just because it was easiest that way – not because it was what was best. And what's easiest can be good enough, but it's not necessarily what's optimal," says Ross. "I guess my work is very much intertwined with who I am as a person. I practise what I preach – and I don't have a lot of time for those who don't."

A champion of longing and listening

When Ross was six years old, his mother received a stipend to go to Spain to work on an exhibition, so the family relocated. Ross recalls spending his teenage years helping his friends decorate their rooms, building furniture from next to nothing. "This was before IKEA came to Spain, and your average Spanish bedroom was just so dull! So I used a few saws and some wood and foam cut-outs and came up with clever solutions," he says. "This was the Franco days and people just didn't have a lot of money. There was no H&M back then and I kept getting hand-me-downs – it looked terrible... so I learnt to sew and redesigned all my clothes!"

That he is a champion of dreams is clear. Not only does he reject the beaten path; he insists that a high price tag says nothing about how beautiful or pleasant a design will be, talks enthusiastically about spaces that provide an energy boost and frowns at the fashion industry's obses-

sion with trends that seem dated within a year. Now with countless accolades and awards to his name, including Best Architecture Single Residence Sweden and Sweden's Most Beautiful Villa, he has proved his point. "I may be stubborn, but I always consider other people's feelings," he hurries to add. "If I find a better solution to your problem than the one you had envisaged, I have the pedagogical ability to explain it to you in such a way that you'll understand and won't feel run over."

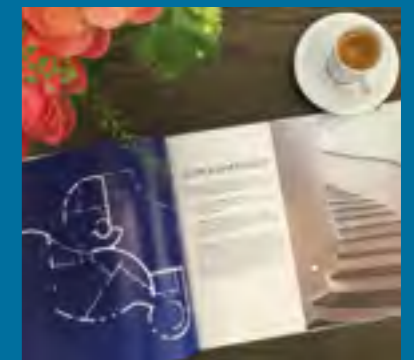
As someone who spends hours on end interviewing his clients in order to understand their desires, habits and needs before starting the process of drawing their future home, or indeed office, Ross certainly takes other people seriously and he admits that there was a time when he considered studying psychology. "This is all about radically improving people's lives," he says. "Just like we can't help but be moved by music, our physical surroundings play a huge role in our wellbeing. Our first major office project has already drastically reduced the sick days among the employees. Great architecture makes people feel better!"

He describes the cathartic creative space he enters when he packs up to hibernate for a few days after the interviews are done – a space where he forgets about time and gets to exist in a bubble – and says that there is a certain nostalgia involved. "I always hit a low after a project

is done. It's like saying goodbye to a close friend; I've then lived in that house, created the space around me, looked at it through their eyes." It is as if Ross the award-winning architect and Ross the child meet in that creative space, that place where everything is possible and nothing brings as much joy as helping people. "I always say during any given project that if we can fly to the moon and walk around up there, then we can do this. And of course we can," he smiles.

The brand-new Ross book

"When I was young, I read a piece of advice somewhere that you should strive to have a child, plant a tree and write a book in your lifetime, and I was quite receptive to that message," says Pål Ross apropos of *Live In A Work of Art: Contemporary Scandinavian Architecture*, the book that is out now on Birch Hill Publishing, printed on a custom-made landscape A3 format. You can order the book on the website.



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