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RILEY O'FLYNN DANCED HIS WAY FROM NEW YORK TO GÖTEBORGSOPERANS DANSKOMPANI, TO BE WITH THE BEST COLLEAGUES IN THE WORLD, AND A LIFE THAT HE ENJOYS.

BATTERIES CHARGING HERE THE EYES REVEAL IT ALL THE 100-YEAR-OLDS DELIVER

A different kind of narrative

For some people, the path of fate is straight as an arrow. Take Erik Nissen Johansen's career for example. As founder of design firm Stylt, which has transformed the interior designs of hotels and restaurants worldwide, Johansen's signature style has adorned properties from Aarhus to Zurich and Jakarta, to name just a few places.

TEXT ULRICA SEGERSTEN PHOTOS SAMUEL UNÉUS & ERIK NISSEN JOHANSEN

AS A YOUNG STUDENT, Johansen was not particularly adept at academic subjects. And it sure wasn't the writing or mathematics that made him shine at school. "I was the worst in 80 percent of school subjects, and best in 20 percent. The direction of my life was clear then, to focus on that 20 percent," recalls Johansen.

Johansen went on to pursue studies in art and design in Florence, Italy after a teacher nudged young Erik to develop an interest in the Renaissance.

"Sculptors, singers, bridge builders, portrait painters and poets under the auspices of the Medici – people in this Renaissance period believed that poets could improve the bridge builder's skills and vice versa. I believe that cross fertilisation between different disciplines can make each individual better at their craft," claims Johansen.

In Florence, Johansen befriended **Peter Apelgren**, a Gothenburg resident, comedian and artist. Together, they created an artist collective where egos and cultural elitism were banished from the group dynamics.

The collective, which eventually morphed into the Stylt group, blended art, interior design, and advertising into one big pot where everyone was encouraged to paint on each other's canvases, even if it hurt sometimes. The intention was to create a rogue group with this cross disciplinary Renaissance spirit alive.

In the 1980s art world, this free-for-all mixture met with some resistance and engendered some bad blood. In the last 30 years, Erik Nissen Johansen and Stylt have nevertheless thrived by focusing on storytelling and designing for the interiors of hotels and restaurants in the same countercultural and mischievous fashion.

ONE OF THEIR MOST AUDACIOUS and talked about projects is Pater Noster on the small windswept Kattegatt island of Hamneskär, near Marstrand, on Sweden's west coast, where Stylt turned the old lighthouse keeper's residence into a small hotel with nine guest rooms. The project has garnered enormous amounts of free publicity and has been awarded the world's best new hotel concept.

Johansen is one of seven partners in the project and spent a whole summer on the island fishing and taking pictures. Pater Noster's narrative – ancient lighthouse, stormy seas, edge of the world feel – was an easy sell as CNN has featured the island, while *Vogue Magazine* promoted the hotel extensively as the world's most desolate hotel.

"The desire to go somewhere is often quite irrational, so the picture of a place and its story are absolutely central," says Johansen.

But Johansen realised this again in another fateful way. At the beginning of Stylt's history, the

STYLT DESIGN EXAMPLES

- Lydmar Hotel in Stockholm. "It's like being at home with Pelle Lydmar, everything from the fact that it's his cameras and stuff on the bookshelves to the music that's playing."
- The ANDAZ for Hyatt Dubai
- Smoki Korean for Marriott in Dubai
- LEGO House, Billund
- Spedition Hotel Thun, Switzerland
- Klaus K, Helsinki
- The Well in Oslo
- Le Rouge in Stockholm
- Creekside Villa, Canmore, Canada
- House Hotel in Gstaad, Switzerland
- The Grand Poet Hotel in Riga, "Diplohemia"

IN PROGRESS:

- Hotel Draken in Gothenburg
- Hotel in Zurich, which is one of Erik Nissen's dream projects because the hotel will interpret Dadaism. "It's an artist's dream."
- 25 hours hotels in Jakarta, Melbourne and Copenhagen
- Aarhus island, a resort in the middle of the village
- Hoxton Hotel in Hamburg

"Everything is based on stories. We love to consume fiction. And when there's a good story to tell, it becomes easier to create a unique experience. Or interior design, if you will."

Erik Nissen Johansen, founder and creative director of the design company Stylt

"You have to have an emotional business idea, make hearts beat faster with happiness."

Erik Nissen Johansen, founder and creative director Stylt

► company got a big assignment in Gothenburg. They took trips to London for inspiration and bragged about it left, right and centre, to among others the famous architect **Gert Wingård**. For various reasons, the project was postponed and was replaced by a makeshift pub with a limited interior design budget.

"So it was just a matter of going to Myrorna (a second hand shop) to find furniture and ornaments where the same Gert Wingård appeared shopping as well," recalls Johansen, with a smile.

Johansen picked up an old photo album to hide himself and the idea came to him. He would name this makeshift pub based on inspiration he got from an old picture he found showing a man wearing a dress amongst a bevy of seamstresses, dated 1914.

"We became so fond of this man that we called him Farbror Hjördis, (Uncle Hjördis). And that became the pub's name! It was a brave move on the part of the owners, considering that 1989 was the era of fine dining. When the restaurant was in full swing, electricians and stockbrokers alike gathered together around the same crossover menu."

AND IT WAS A SUCCESS not just for the Farbror Hjördis restaurant but for Johansen's Stylt design agency as well.

Besides the friendship with Peter Apelgren (from his early Florence days), it was the stock market and the real estate crash in Oslo that prompted Johansen's move to Gothenburg in 1988.

"Gothenburg welcomed me with open arms. I like that the city has its roots in trade and encounters with the wider world without being the capital. Gothenburg is a bit like Liverpool that way, which gave the world



**ERIK
NISSEN
JOHANSEN**

Born in Oslo.
Graduated
from L'Istituto
per l'Arte e il
Restauro in
Florence.

Founder and
creative direc-
tor of the de-
sign company
Stylt. Under his
leadership,
Stylt's creators
have won a
large number
of international
awards for
more than 400
furnished res-
taurants and
250 hotels.
In addition,
Erik is a valued
lecturer and
an active
artist

the Beatles. We have the industrial cranes left in the middle of town, and when the shipyards shut down, it forced us to get creative. That is perhaps why the advertising agency Forsman & Bodenfors has been named among the world's best for six years in a row in competition with agencies in Los Angeles, New York and London. Four out of 10 of the best web agencies in the world are from Gothenburg," says Johansen.

Signs of Gothenburg's working class roots are reflected in Stylt's new offices, which are located in the middle of Gothenburg's new skyline of high-rise buildings, next to the old iconic cinema Draken and Folkets Hus. The city's epicentre Järntorget is a charming yet clashing blend of different eras which also hosts the world's fourth largest film festival 10 days a year. The city and festival are loved worldwide.

And the glitterati can stay at the landmark Draken Hotel, owned by another Norwegian businessman, **Petter Stordalen**, and which is (by the way) furnished by Stylt, and forms an important backdrop for the Gothenburg Film Festival's international cast of directors and actors who visit the city.

Even **Quentin Tarantino** quickly developed a warm relationship with Gothenburg, it is said, because he was so well received there when he was still a small and unknown director.

"The film industry is bigger and more important to West Sweden than many realise. The majority of Nordic films that have been nominated for Oscars are produced in Gothenburg. Directly or indirectly," says Johansen. ■

Boho Club, Marbella



Niehu Mountain Villa, Riksgården



Stora Hotellet, Umeå



Lydmars Hotel, Stockholm



The Grand Poet Hotel, Riga



Erik Nissen Johansen's TO-VISIT-LIST

Oasis: Palmhuset (The Palm House) located in Trädgården (The Garden) is a nice building where it's pleasant to slip in on a cold day. It is a miniature of the Crystal Palace that was built for the first Great Exhibition in London in 1851 but burned down in 1936. Palmhuset in Gothenburg, was built for the Jubilee Exhibition in 1923, however, it still remains.

Restaurants: Oh, there are so many good ones. The advantage of being a large student city is that there are also cheaper restaurants and space to test new ideas. My own favorite restaurant is **Silvis**, a Palestinian restaurant where they understand that food is community. The owner, **George**, is a real poet. When he came here in the 1960s, he had to buy garlic at the pharmacy.

Lunch: If I'm going to invite people to lunch, I choose the Italian restaurant **Sorellina** on Västra Hamngatan where it's crowded and high volume, but lovely.

When Erik is not working ... he likes to fish around **Pater Noster**, or travel to far flung places, most recently to Papua New Guinea.

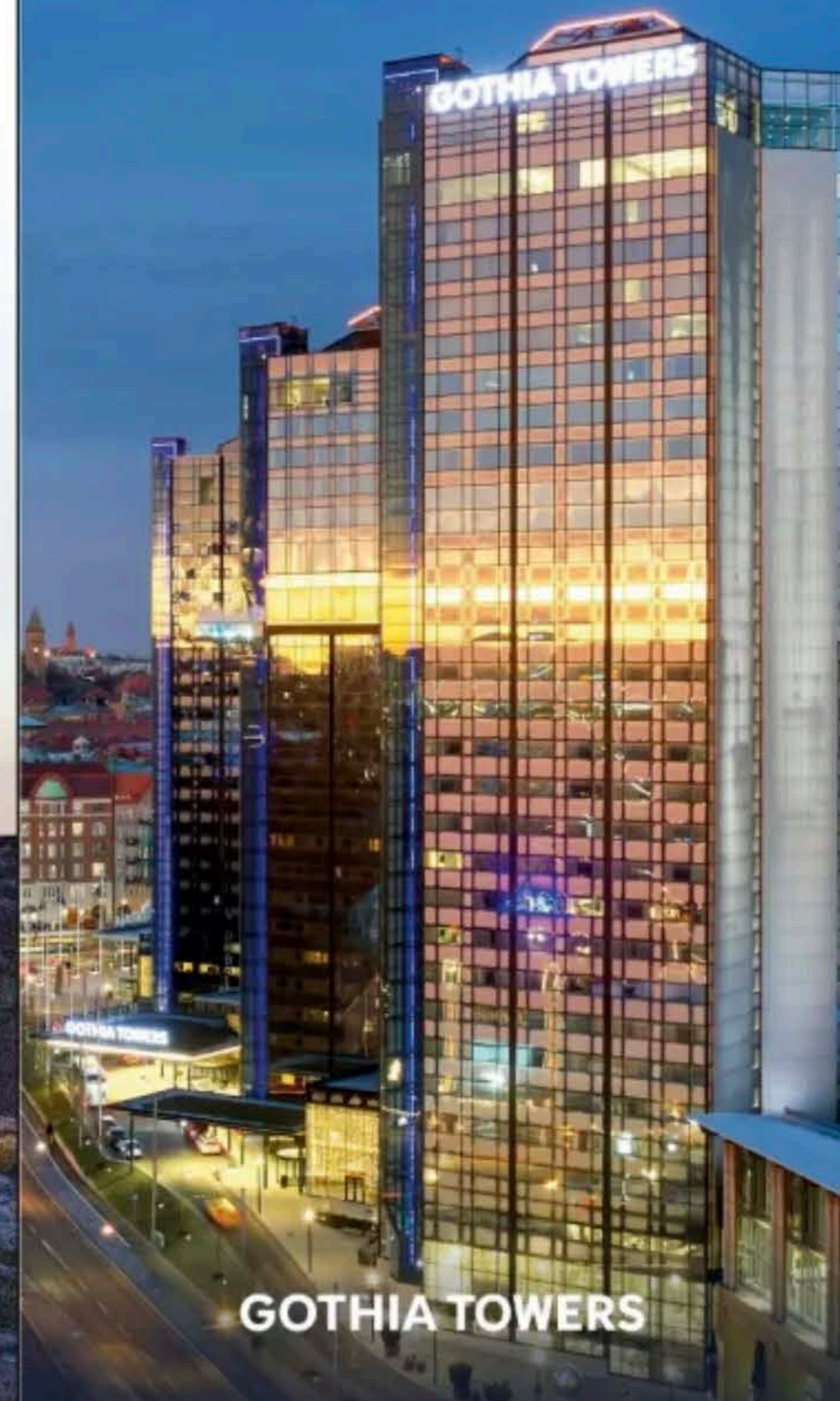
Hotel (bed)
with a view ...



Pater Noster, Gothenburg

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GOTHIA TOWERS