

An Artist Wants to Build a U.F.O. Next to Edvard Munch's Studio

By THOMAS ROGERS FEB. 2, 2018



“A House to Die In,” designed by the Norwegian architecture studio Snohetta, will change a view once painted by Edvard Munch. Credit MIR and Snohetta

OSLO — For the last 28 years of his life, the artist Edvard Munch lived in a villa in a hilly, forested area that was then on the outskirts of this city. He completed hundreds of paintings and drawings there, and the estate, [Ekely](#), has become a pilgrimage site for fans of his art. Although Munch’s villa was demolished in 1960, and an artists’ colony now exists on the site, his enclosed winter studio remains, and visitors can walk among the nearby trees to discover the surroundings that inspired many of his later works.

Recently, however, plans by a Norwegian artist and an architectural firm to build an unusual home on a nearby hillock have set off a heated debate over the preservation of the “[Scream](#)” painter’s legacy. The proposed building, officially untitled but generally referred to as “[A House to Die In](#),” is to be the home of [Bjarne Melgaard](#), one of the country’s best known and divisive contemporary artists.

Photo



Bjarne Melgaard in his studio. The artist is sometimes referred to as the enfant terrible of Norwegian art. Credit Andrea Gjestvang for The New York Times

It has raised questions about how far the Norwegian authorities should go to protect the legacy of Munch, one of Norway's most admired figures, and whether the groundbreaking design of "A House to Die In" is an exciting development in Norway's culture or a threat to it.

In the coming weeks, the country's top heritage conservation authority will decide whether to grant a permit for the project. Artists and journalists have raised concerns in the Norwegian news media that it would alter the last remnants of the landscape Munch painted and would overshadow the historical importance of the site.

The design for the house, like a black crystalline U.F.O. resting on several columns shaped like woodland animals, emerged from expressive drawings Mr. Melgaard provided to [Snohetta](#), the architecture firm behind [the opera house on the Oslo waterfront](#) and [the National September 11 Memorial Museum](#) in Manhattan. Snohetta argues that the Melgaard project represents a unique fusion of art and architecture, and that the concerns about the landscape are unfounded.

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Mr. Melgaard, who is gay, also suggested that the opposition was partly fueled by homophobia.

In an interview, he said that the house's unofficial monikerha demerged from his desire to invert Scandinavian architectural ideas around durability. "Nothing continues forever, so I was interested in the notion that you can have a house to die in, where you say, 'It's my end station,' " he said.

He was also inspired by the homes of drug lords, like the poppy palaces of Afghan opium barons, which are not just haunted by the specter of death, he said, but also "have these crazy mixes of architectural styles."

Photo



Edvard Munch's former studio at Ekely, the house in Oslo where the painter lived. Credit Andrea Gjestvang for The New York Times

Snohetta and Mr. Melgaard aim to use burned wood for the house's exterior, and tentative plans for its interior include movable walls and a room that combines an eating area and a swimming pool. Martin Brunner, one of the Snohetta architects who worked on the project, also explained that the firm had tested a prototype for an item of inflatable furniture to be included in the house, which he described as a "sex pillow."

They also built a model for a "drugroom," which the architects said would be suspended from the house's walls and ceiling, and which is intended not for the use of narcotics but to create a feeling of disorientation. Proposals to include a cavernous, tiger-shaped underground studio and a 40-foot tower were rejected by preservation authorities.

Mr. Melgaard, who is known for exploring sexual and drug-related themes in his work, is sometimes referred to as the enfant terrible of Norwegian art. In 2014, [his sculpture of a chair shaped like a semi-naked black woman](#) spurred a mini-scandal, and a 2015 [exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo](#) that juxtaposed his works with Munch's drew outrage from some commentators.

"I believe this talk about the legacy of Munch is ridiculous," Mr. Melgaard said, noting that the deceased artist's property had already been altered by the construction of the artists' colony, and that a building had stood at the site planned for "[A House to Die In](#)" in Munch's day.

Opposition to the project has been spearheaded by the residents of the artists' colony, established in the 1950s and home to 44 working artists. "This is the only place where Munch lived and worked for 30 years," said Halvard Haugerud, a painter who has lived in the colony for two decades. "We just want to keep what's left of Munch."

Photo



Halvard Haugerud has lived in an artists' colony on the Munch estate for two decades. "We just want to keep what's left of Munch," he said. Credit Andrea Gjestvang for The New York Times

Munch, who was born in 1863 in Adalsbruk, a village about 70 miles north of Oslo, left behind an enormous body of work. "The Scream," a series of expressionist depictions of an agonized figure, is among the world's most recognizable artworks, but he also completed countless [landscapes and other paintings](#), and he has become a particular point of pride in Norway.

"On a conscious or unconscious level, all Norwegians are influenced by Edvard Munch," said Stein Olav Henrichsen, the director of the Munch Museum, which regularly hosts events at Ekely. "He's a big part of our cultural history and identity."

Officials in Oslo are hoping that popularity will draw more visitors to the city: A towering new building for the Munch Museum [is being built](#) on the city's waterfront.

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As the debate over Munch's legacy has played out in the Norwegian news media, it has taken on pointed turns. Mr. Melgaard and Per Maning, one of the colony's artists, have insulted each others' work in interviews with the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, with Mr. Maning calling Mr. Melgaard's career "over."

According to Snohetta, a protected plant species was found on the site in the second of two environmental assessments, arousing suspicions that someone might have put it there to derail the project. The foundations of the demolished building at the proposed site for the house were spray-painted with anti-gay graffiti.

Mr. Melgaard says that homophobia has been a driving factor in opposition to the project. “They are not interested in gay men or women taking up too much space in our society,” he said.

Hans Henrik Klouman, the chairman of the board of the Edvard Munch’s Studio Foundation, which had raised questions about the project’s impact on sightlines from the studio, said the group was merely trying to preserve Mr. Munch’s legacy.

The [Directorate for Cultural Heritage](#), Norway’s top authority for architectural preservation, is set to give its verdict on the project within the next few weeks. If the project is approved, it would then go to a building authority and to the City Council for final approval.

“We have to recognize that it’s an emotional debate,” said Kjetil Traedal Thorsen, a founding partner of Snohetta. “If there weren’t any emotional points of view connected to this, then it would have meant most of the Norwegian population would have been ignorant of it.”

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