

A Norwegian design magazine editor's love for emptiness and vacuum, unspoiled canvases, photographing people's homes. And his adoration of the surprising elements of something like a ceramic dinosaur hanging out on a shelf or rococo furniture:

# Amor Vacui

I'm walking down one of the streets of a particularly prosperous area in the west side of Oslo called Frogner. The stone facades whisper in the same old-school upper-class voices as the ones lining Parisian avenues, with ornate carvings and gargoyles and impeccably symmetric hedges slowly shimmering as the wind takes them on. Small fluffy dogs live the good life from the comfort of the carriages they pulled in by their owners and school kids carry designer handbags that cost more than half a year's rent. To my surprise, it's in these decadent and undoubtedly maximalist surroundings, with homes where you'd expect to find crystal chandeliers and huge oil paintings of Norwegian romantic nationalism—and most of them probably do—that Hans Petter Smeby lives. A founding father of numerous successful Norwegian interior and architect magazines since the 80's, he has brought his clean cut aesthetic and love for white open spaces and *Amor Vacui*—the love of nothingness—to this part of town. A true Scandinavian minimalist, with his current magazine, *NYTT ROM*, displaying modern *Scandi-homes*.

—Scandinavian minimalism was founded on the old culture of farmers and fishermen, who depended on the mercy of the weather and seasons, constantly aware of the adverse consequences if their equipment, their land or home were to be damaged. A life of Yin and Yang, of using the senses. Norway used to be a very poor country, and we had to take proper care of and appreciate our possessions. Our wealth arrived only a couple of generations ago, and before that we were much more dependent on the functionality and sustainability of our things, since we weren't able to replace them right away like we can now. The aesthetic of that, of the sparse rooms, the simple looking design, the white surfaces, the untreated wood, is what all of it is about.

For Smeby, it all started out with the education in architecture he refers to as absolutely formative in terms of becoming aware of and gaining perception of room and space, angles and lines—an in-depth study he recommends every esthete with aspirations of a creative career to pursue. After graduating, Smeby had no urge to follow the path of an architect, so instead he started a free monthly magazine called

*Arkitektguiden*—The Architect's Guide—and then, as the end of the previous millennium crept closer and closer, he embarked on a new adventure, as the founder and editor of a magazine called *Design & Interior*. Although Norway historically has had successful design manufacturers and architects, the word 'design,' even in the nineties, was quite a foreign word to most Norwegians. The magazine *Design & Interior* made the word more apparent through the newsstand and subsequently undeniably a household word.

In 2005 a new idea started prowling in Smeby's mind and he decided to give birth to it, calling it *NYTT ROM* (New Room), a niche publication solely dedicated to Scandi-homes and living, meaning Smeby would have to waltz throughout Scandinavia, knocking on people's doors and asking kindly and humbly if he could enter into their most private sphere, their home, and photograph it for the magazine. Fifty issues later the idea was obviously the seed of a plant that was meant to grow and blossom for a long while.

Thinking you'd only find Scandinavian architects and designers in the magazine would be a mistake however. The homes of modern creative Scandis, either in a 30-square-meter flat in Oslo's happening area Tøyen, or in a grandiose apartment taking up several floors of a building in Vesterbro in Copenhagen, are as much a result of staying in, yin/yanging with the seasons, the weather and spending our 'kroners' on going abroad, bringing back artifacts and new inspiration. Also, thinking you'd exclusively find monochrome rooms with white walls and streamlined Spartan interiors in the magazine would be wrong.

—Although Scandinavia is very much linked with minimalism, we don't want to be snobs and steer away from anything that's not white and simplistic. Andy Warhol once said 'I feel sorry for all of those people with impeccable taste, cause you lose out on so much!' During my 11 years of visiting people's homes, I've found that some of the most interesting places are owned by people who don't have heaps of money, and instead are pushed to being creative with what they find: a mix of inherited things, *Ikea*, a few

expensive items, their inspiration coming from a huge variety of sources. Mixing in something like a piece of very bombastic Rococo furniture in a Scandinavian home can be so interesting. With our magazine, we'd like to provoke your eye a bit, presenting apartments with elements that are perceived as ugly, but might inspire you or surprise you, rather than showing you places that look like they're perfectly styled and something you could anticipate, Smeby tells me.

His own home in Frogner goes hand in hand with what he's looking for in those of others. Third floor, high ceilings, white walls, earth colors, warm, inviting, soft, quiet, soulful and lived in, in the most positive sense of the word. A mix of very expensive and extremely inexpensive furniture. Beautiful but not boring. Scandinavian in style, but not overly so. A ceramic dinosaur growls at me from its shelf in the office and the stacks of colorful arty magazines encircle me as I stand in the middle of the room, popping with color without being a tedious and obvious color-pop statement. The apartment has several white canvases, unspoiled, pure, saying nothing while stating the obvious at the same time; that its whiteness was not a mistake. This was not something they forgot to do in all the hustle and bustle of everyday life—this was an allotted space for them to rest their eyes on, allowing you to breathe.

Smeby says that his number one tip for people moving into a new place is to allow for the place to breathe and in return you'll be able to breathe. The empty space is not a temporary open space, waiting to be filled. It is a place that is already filled by its emptiness. *Amor Vacui*, love the emptiness. A corner stone of modern Scandinavian minimalism, and an inspirational term to linger over.

Words  
CAROLINE KRAGER

Photography  
SIGRID BJORBEBKMO



