

TRACES AND TRANSLATIONS

A NORWEGIAN FENCE, A TAHOE SKI SLOPE: HOW MORK-ULNES ARCHITECTS CARRIES INHERITED BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ACROSS OCEANS.

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Translators know that word-for-word fidelity is hopeless. At best, the result is decipherable; at worst, unintentionally comic. Parroting stylistic flourishes ends in pastiche. But consider Daniel Mendelsohn's 2025 translation of *The Odyssey*, which recreates the rolling, oceanic rhythm the original listeners would have experienced while revealing the culture that produced the poem. Brilliance comes from understanding why a word was chosen in the original—what was the context, the human condition? That is the kind of translation at work in the grounded design sensibility and far-flung projects of Mork-Ulnes Architects.

The living room at Staggered Cabin in South Lake Tahoe, where expansive glazing and pale plywood interiors connect the compact house to the surrounding forest. Photo by Joe Fletcher

On a summer afternoon in Oslo, I spoke with Casper and Lexie Mork-Ulnes—partners in both practice and life—about their work in Norway and California. Their approach is sometimes described in terms of regionalism, craftsmanship, and landscape. Those labels fit, but are incomplete. Mork-Ulnes Architects' buildings respond to place but draw on so much more. Translation, for them, is less about carrying forms from one site to another than understanding how previous builders dealt with a world of gods and monsters (or maybe just weather, the scarcity of materials, and a small work crew).

I ask Casper Mork-Ulnes the standard question about influences. At first he lists the expected: architecture at California College of the Arts (CCA), an M.S. Advanced Architectural Design at Columbia, then back to the West Coast to work at Miller Hull Partnership. Among his mentors, he names the Norwegian-American architect Henrik Bull, whose signature A-frame Tahoe cabins demonstrate that modern structures can emerge naturally from mountain landscapes rather than loom over them.

Then the conversation takes a turn. Some of his greatest teachers, Casper reflects, have been unnamed observers and inventors: Swiss herders who angled and elevated their structures against wind and snow; fishing communities that developed wood-preservation techniques; farmers who built into granite outcroppings and fenced their herds with the timber on hand. Most recently, the practice developed a plan for Manzanita Lookout that draws on remote fire watchtowers. Where many architects are trained to look at existing buildings to see forms, Mork-Ulnes looks and finds a response to questions—what was the context, the human condition? The answers are rarely found in monumental buildings. They are found in fences, cabins, fishing sheds, and the *xenia* of generous kitchen tables.

Lexie Mork-Ulnes—a designer and fifth-generation Californian—provides a vision of California equally rooted in place and culture. Her own path ran through furniture design, and her conversation runs to kitchens, tables, thresholds, and the bodily



experience of rooms. "What is important for me," she reflects, "is to make interiors feel appropriately placed." She gives two examples from opposite ends of the practice: finding furniture for Skigard Hytte, the family's cabin in Norway, that felt as though it had come from an old barn in Gudbrandsdalen; and back in California, finding a J.B. Blunk trash can for the founder's office of a young company in a brick-and-timber building on San Francisco's Barbary Coast. "Those little things," she explains, "make you realize where you are."

The facade of Skigard Hytte holds my eye long before I understand it. High above the slopes of Kvitfjell—White Mountain—the family's own *hytte* (cabin) appears to wear a curious skin of diagonally arranged, quartered spruce logs, striking and almost graphic when it appears against the snow.





Interior and exterior views of Skigard Hytte in Kvitfjell, Norway in winter, photos by Juan Benavides; Lexie and Casper Mork-Ulnes at the cabin in summer, photo by Bruce Damonte



Skigard Hytte's outer skin of diagonally arranged spruce logs draws on the traditional Norwegian skigard, an agricultural fence made from locally available timber.



No wall arrives at the diagonal by default. It would be easy to mistake this for an aesthetic flourish—a contemporary architect quoting rural Norway. It is much more. The diagonal belongs to a traditional *skigard*, a simple agricultural fence that has long marked fields and clustered livestock in rural Norway. Farmers used the timber available to them. Gravity held the rails in place. Saplings became bindings, and imperfect lengths of wood could still be put to work. The fence could be repaired easily from the surrounding forest. Even its construction belonged to a season: *håbolla*, the lull between sowing and haymaking, when there was finally time to mend fences before summer's next demands.

Casper describes the result as "a log cabin skin that sits outboard of the building." The traditional fence becomes a detached rainscreen, the weatherproof wall lying behind it—a technical decision that reveals a philosophy. Because the weather barrier sits inside, the outer layer retains the looseness that made the original fence such elegant rural engineering. The logs may overlap imperfectly. Their ends remain rough. Snow drifts between them in winter, softening the building's silhouette. The design did not simply borrow the function of the *skigard* but the questions about materials, cost, and technique that produced it.

Skigard Hytte rests on slender columns, preserving an existing path used by sheep, which also shelter beneath the cabin during the summer months. Photo by Bruce Damonte

The same attention shows up in the plan and on the ground. The cabin rests above the landscape on a grid of slender columns, allowing sheep to continue following an existing path beneath the building. "The land had a pathway the animals used," Lexie explains. "Now the sheep stand under the house in the summer months to protect themselves from the weather." Rather than erasing an older pattern of living, the dwelling entered into one.

Inside, the long, linear organization recalls a farmhouse tradition of Trøndelag. Casper confirms this, noting that his mother grew up in such a farmhouse. His uncle's first reaction on visiting: "This is a *Trønderlån!*" Little else would be mistaken for a preserved farmhouse—tall triple-glazed windows hold winter at bay while framing distant mountains; frustum ceilings lend a feeling of spaciousness; the roof is planted with sod. Casper tells me about sitting inside one afternoon with his father, an avid skier in his younger days, and gazing through the large window onto white drifts of snow. His father could imagine himself moving through the landscape, tracing ski lines as he used to as a young man. I could see on his face that it was a tender memory.

The expansive window glazing is itself an import—the American mid-century penchant for dissolving or softening the boundary between interior and landscape, carried north. It is an act of careful listening, to Tahoe as much as to Trøndelag. But listening is only half the work in translation.

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Staggered Cabin steps down a wooded slope in South Lake Tahoe in four shed-roofed volumes, making room for existing Jeffrey pines and boulders. Photo by Joe Fletcher

At Staggered Cabin, completed in South Lake Tahoe in 2024, the diagonal motif appears again, but here it speaks a different language. The house steps down a wooded slope at 6,000 feet in four shed-roofed volumes, making room for existing boulders and Jeffrey pines. Its footprint is deliberately modest: 1,183 square feet of conditioned space for a family of four. Yet thanks to its height, light, and carefully integrated built-ins, the interior feels expansive. Richard Olsen, writing this past summer in *Forbes*, described Mork-Ulnes Architects' work as possessing "unmistakable quiet elegance and refinement," its houses "equal parts contemporary and rootedness, with each seemingly having been arrived at only via the other."

On the exterior, rough-sawn western red cedar boards run diagonally across the walls, emphasizing the roofs' pitch and the house's movement downhill. Tahoe has its own inherited grammar, and here, too, the diagonal has a lineage. In the American West, before plywood, diagonal board sheathing helped brace timber-framed walls against lateral movement. Later, diagonal cladding became part of the visual vocabulary of ski condominiums and mountain modernism. Whereas the diagonal at Skigard Hytte remembers an agricultural fence, the diagonal at Staggered Cabin remembers the downhill rush of a ski slope.

The technical logic could hardly be more different. At Staggered Cabin, each cedar board must be cut precisely where it meets a corner, window, or eave—a far cry from the overlapping, rough-edged logs at Skigard Hytte—and rainwater travels along each board toward its lower end, delivering moisture to the end grain, the material's most vulnerable point. Diagonal siding wastes more material and demands more labor and detailing.It's a choice that costs something, but is balanced against the modest scale of this dwelling.

Translators distinguish formal equivalence from dynamic equivalence, matching the shape of the original or matching its effect: A shape-driven translation borrows a form while discarding the conditions that gave rise to it; a dynamic one understands which qualities are essential and which may change. At Kvitfjell, roughness matters. At Tahoe, precision matters. One diagonal accepts irregularity; the other turns exactness into movement.



The same holds true inside. Lexie designed the plywood-clad interiors at Staggered Cabin, including the compact, highly organized kitchen and the built-in furniture that allows the small house to perform hospitably. Casper works readily at the scale of terrain, structure, envelope, and light; Lexie tests those ideas at the point of contact. Does the room still make sense when someone sits down, reaches for a cup, opens a drawer, or walks barefoot across the floor? Lexie ensures that the conceptual moves hold their logic when one gets close enough to touch them.

Rough-sawn western red cedar boards run diagonally across the exterior of Staggered Cabin, emphasizing the pitch of the roof and the house's movement downhill. Photo by Joe Fletcher

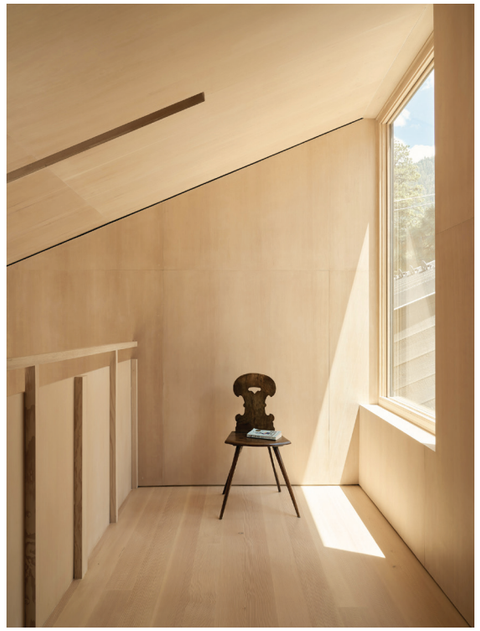
This attention to bodily knowledge is also where her California inheritance becomes clearest. California is not a reference library for Lexie. Her understanding of it is embedded in memory, craft, landscape, material culture, and the informal intelligence of how people live. California's identity has always been bound up with reworking and absorbing what arrives from elsewhere. The question for architecture is not whether to import outside influences but how to engage those influences with an existing culture and its forms. Translation can begin by assuming the original had good reasons for becoming what it became. But that assumption alone is not enough. A guest must also bring something.

When I visit Casper and Lexie in their Oslo home, I bring a bag of local coffee beans from Tim Wendelboe. I expected to learn something by studying Mork-Ulnes Architects' buildings. I did not expect to learn as much from an afternoon in the place where they've raised their family.

If Skigard Hytte demonstrates how architecture can translate inherited knowledge into new construction, Casper and Lexie's home suggests that translation does not end when a building is complete. It continues every time a family chooses what to change, collect, mend, or pass forward.

The home holds several centuries at once. To reach the living room, you walk across a glass panel that lets light into the lower floor. (This is scary for the dog, but a little thrilling for a human.) You then see an eighteenth-century painted desk that has belonged to Casper's family for generations, coming from the farm where his mother grew up. Once, letters were written there and perhaps household accounts kept. Today, its worn blue-green paint answers the leafy park beyond the wide front window. On the walls hang paintings by Casper's mother, four square portraits of the family members among them. The house is filled with objects gathered from different moments and places, yet nothing feels curated in the museum sense. They reflect what Lexie calls "the slow collection of time." The phrase resists the idea that a home is authored by one designer and finished. Most interior design aspires to completion, but Lexie is interested in the opposite possibility: an interior capable of absorbing another decade, another child, another meal, another repair.

She describes visiting the Chinati Foundation, and her admiration for Donald Judd's command of precision, repetition, color, and scale—then wonders what can be lost when precision becomes an end in itself. "There can be a lack of craft and hand that feels un-human," she says. "I like to include the feeling of what it's like to make things. I appreciate imperfection—a slightly wobbly teacup or stack of plates." She prefers the traces of use: a surface that records touch, a chair that still bears the hand that shaped it. "The wonderful thing about wood," Lexie relates, "is that it is a living medium. It moves, ages, and wears over time, telling the stories of where it has been and who it has lived with."





This past year, Casper taught a studio at CCA called “Elemental Assemblies: Wood and the Making of California.” “Both the students and I came away with a much deeper appreciation of just how important wood was in the making of California—from an economic, cultural, and architectural perspective,” he shares. This fall, he’ll continue exploring this topic in a course at Berkeley that focuses more specifically on San Francisco.

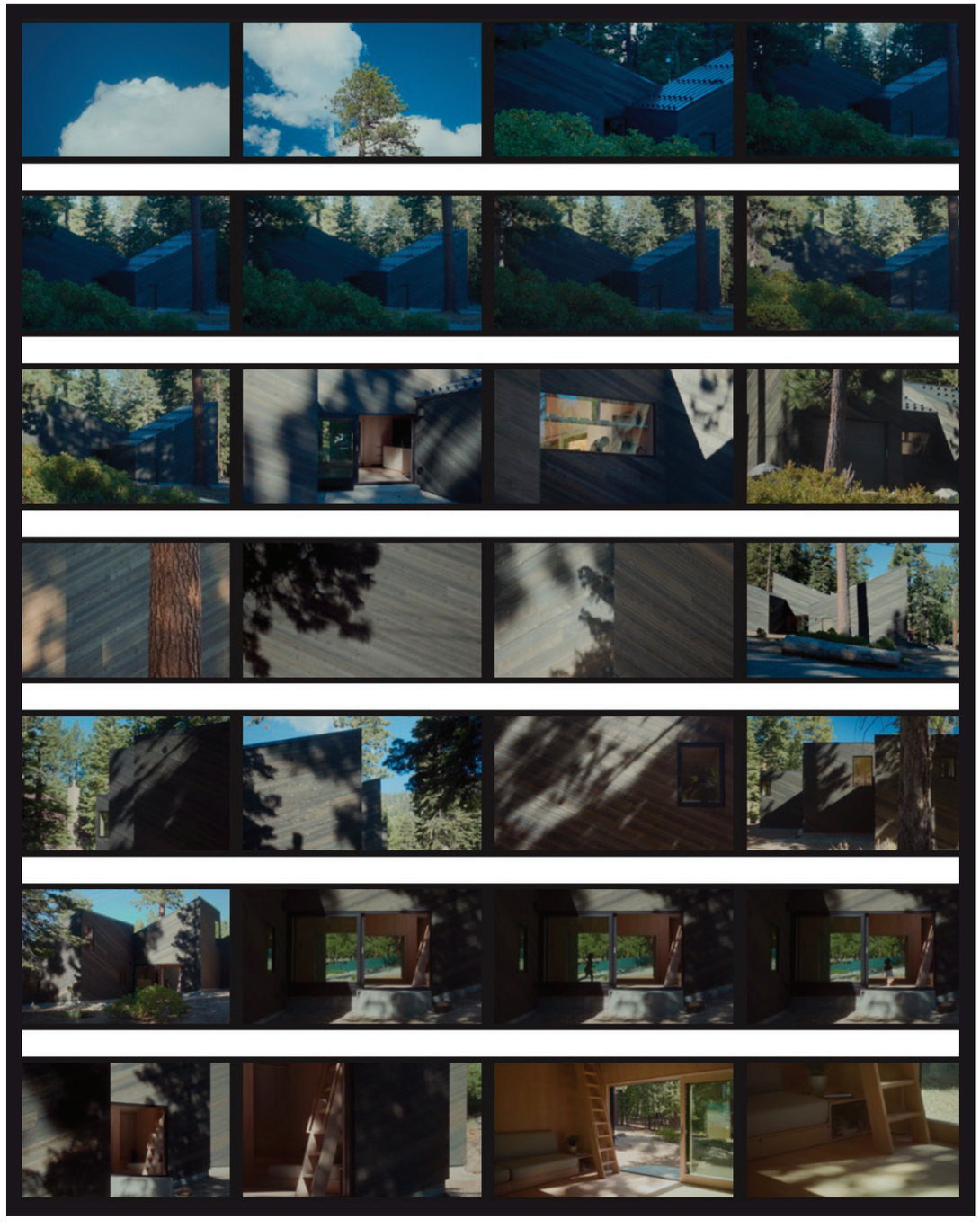
As I began writing this piece, Oslo’s National Museum opened a major retrospective of the architect Wenche Selmer under the memorable title *What Can You Live Without?* The question could have been posed to both Lexie and Casper. Selmer’s dwellings are remarkable for their restraint and intimacy. She chose Norwegian spruce and pine in dimensions local craftspeople already understood. Teak appeared only where hands would wear hardest. Oak marked thresholds. “Her work has been a great inspiration for our interiors,” Casper says. “For example, the way she made every inch of a cabin/house usable and considered, or how she used shelving over kitchen windows to make the spaces feel lighter and more spatially rich than closed casework.”

That sense of usability and care is evident throughout the projects documented in *The Craft of Place: Mork-Ulnes Architects* (Park Books, 2024), the practice’s first monograph. The book also points toward a fuller understanding of site specificity—one in which human habitation matters as much as topography.

Lexie explains how driving through Norway lets her identify a region simply by the color of its farms or the shape of its buildings. “How magical,” she says, “to look out the window of a car and know exactly where you are; how a cultural landscape can be created beyond just the landscape of a place. There is less of that in the United States.”

this page, left to right: A rustic wooden chair punctuates the pale plywood interior of Staggered Cabin; the cabin’s diagonal cedar exterior in summer. Photos by Joe Fletcher

facing page: Stills from Staggered Cabin, a short film by Juan Benavides



Belonging to a place is built over generations, through countless anonymous decisions that gradually make a place legible: the paint chosen for a farmhouse, the proportions of a fence, the shape of a roof, the furniture that belongs in a room, the object that lets you understand where you are. That is why Mork-Ulnes' work feels increasingly relevant. At a moment when architecture risks becoming globally interchangeable, the practice insists that belonging cannot be manufactured through branding or style.

Toward the end of our conversation, Casper mentions in passing that his children occasionally send him photographs of buildings or construction details that catch the eye. It satisfies him that Lucia and Finn notice the world around them. I think back to the long line of teachers that surfaced during our conversations: builders and farmers, mid-century practitioners, objects as wide-ranging as an inherited desk, a Blunk trash can, a child's snapshots. Perhaps architecture, at its best, passes not just forms or styles, but ways of seeing from one generation to the next. And perhaps that is what translation has always been, too—an act of hospitality across worlds and generations: welcoming what arrives while paying close attention to what is already there. ¤

The Craft of Place: Mork-Ulnes Architects is out now from Park Books.

Staggered Cabin, a short film by Juan Benavides, can be viewed at vimeo.com/1016684786.

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— LEXIE MORK-ULNES

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