

Remembering Audun Engh

I was looking through my photographs tonight to find a characteristic one of Audun to accompany this tribute to him – I can picture him laughing, alert, joyous, ready for fun and sharing ideas, amusing stories, urbanism high points and horrors, food and a drink (or two) - and I realised how few pictures I have where he takes centre stage. When Audun does appear its often a figure at the back of the shot, tall and imposing, standing in his (misleadingly) conventional looking uniform of dark jacket, and pale open-necked shirt, ready to move fast as needed to sort out problems, connect up people who look lost or who by speaking together will spark something new, making sure everything fits together and we all get to talk and think about places with no impedimenta in the way.

The other reason my partner and I realised we have so few pictures is that often Audun was taking the photographs – documenting an alternative history of urbanism in which he has, despite his own modesty about his role, been a central figure: a thinker, a polemicist, a doer, a convenor and connector, passionately, indefatigably and often very amusingly advocating for civilised place making everywhere. “The modernists!” I can hear Audun declaim in mock fury at some new architectural outrage. Through symposia, field trips, congresses, charrettes and counter charrettes, drawing trips, dinners, parties, pubs and clubs Audun has blazed a trail of light, energy, enthusiasm, joie de vivre and ideas.

Audun’s reach has been huge: his writing, proposals, projects, pictures and actions on urbanism have influenced people globally through INTBAU, the Council for European Urbanism, and his many other initiatives in Norway, Romania, Cuba, the USA, Italy and other places. For me, Audun is someone who produced space within which ideas could flourish and he also had things to teach about living bravely and well, rather than settling for the safe, comfortable and conventional.

Recollecting some extraordinary experiences shared with Audun reinforces my sense that he had the art of extending what is possible: pushing against limits to making life and places better. In no particular order, I definitely would not have stayed at the Chelsea Hotel in the early 2000s without Audun’s promptings (he remembered his early visits in the 1970s to CBGBs with huge nostalgia), or worked on community-based charrette design projects in villages in Transylvania, or connected with urbanists at the Venice Biennale for the first time, or walked around talking urbanism in the crepuscular summer light of a Norwegian town at 3am in the morning during a design charrette in a former military barracks, or stayed at an extraordinary place on the Oslo Fjord sleeping in one of a collection of summer houses, or frozen at an outdoor congress dinner in April in Paris preferred over a quotidian indoor table for its fresh air, Norwegian style.

So I will remember with love, affection and appreciation the unique urbanist, Audun Engh, a singular force of nature, whose passing is a great loss to us all and to urbanism.

Susan Parham
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