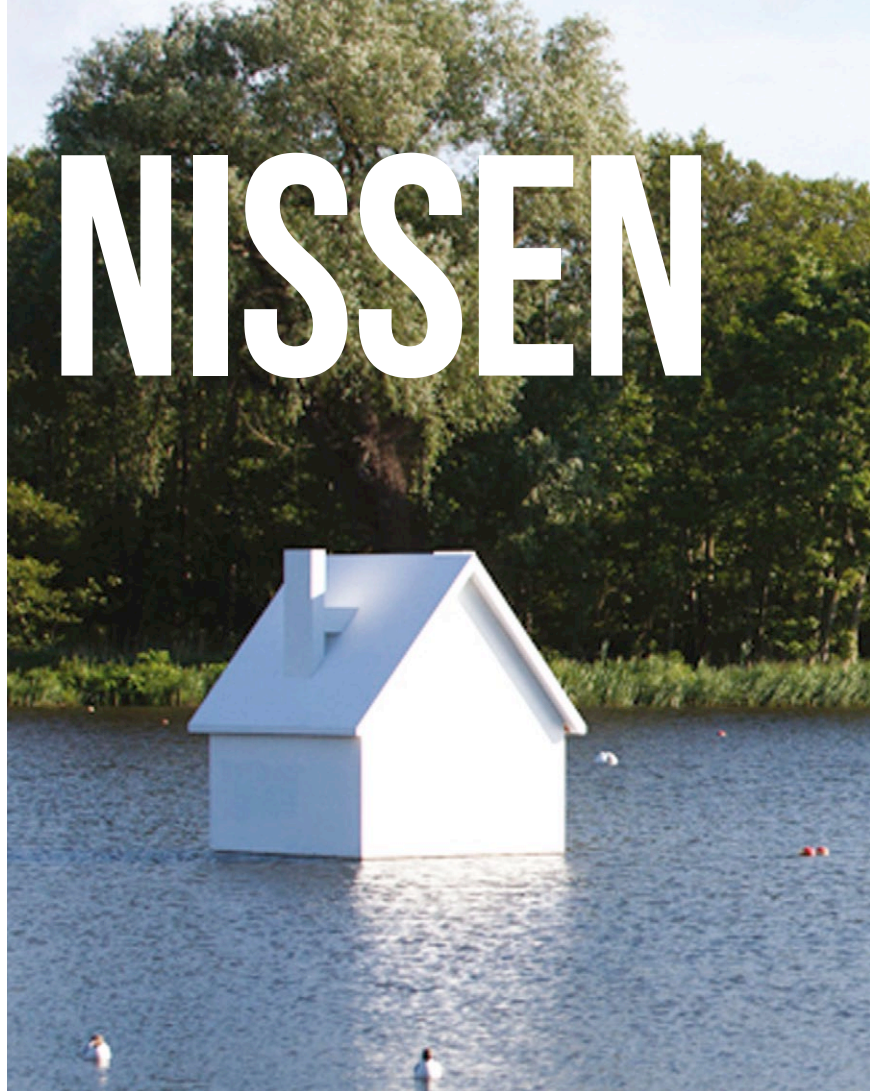


PIPPA NISSEN



Director and Co-Founder of **Nissen Richards Studio**, Pippa chats to Jade Tilley about her work in theatre design and bonkers projects that pull together the studio's various professionals

Pippa is a trained architect and a theatre designer, having studied architecture at Cambridge University and also completed an MA in Theatre Design with distinction, at the Slade School of Fine Art.

Her recent work focuses on exhibition work, where her theatre and architecture background come together. She particularly enjoys collaborating with other artists as part of the design process. Her clients have included: the British Museum, Natural History Museum, British Council, Southbank Centre, Design Museum London, the V&A and Imperial War Museum.

Pippa is a Design Fellow at Cambridge University where she teaches undergraduates. She has been teaching architecture for over 18 years, previously at Kingston University. Here, Pippa shares her early influences in theatre design, her extensive list of educational credits and the wonder of working with a trusting and collaborative client list.

What is your earliest memory of design and architecture?

My dad is retired now but he was a civil

engineer and specifically worked on bridges. I was really aware of visiting these spots when I was growing up. He's Danish so we would visit Denmark looking at bridges; I think that fusion of technical craft and art creating something functional and beautiful is captivating. The thing is about bridges, when you think about them, they are a gesture to the landscape and I think that this gesture in design is something that has made its way into our practice today. My mum was a slide librarian at the Tate Gallery when I was young. She was responsible for collating and curating slides for research. Seeing how she and her colleagues would curate these slides to create a narrative must have had an affect on me.

Where did you study?

When I studied it was a completely different time to be in education. You could still get your fees paid and therefore your options were endless. I did a ridiculous amount of studying as a result, including a music diploma at the London College of Music, a three-year BA at Cambridge, and a Foundation at Central St Martins (as it was then known). I then decided that the Slade

School of Fine Art was for me, so I went there to study for an MA Theatre Design (it was actually part of a Fine Art degree where you could specialise). I then returned to Cambridge for my Architecture Diploma and to finish, qualified at Bartlett!

It was a huge privilege and I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to experience all of those ways of teaching and studying. A lot of the work I do now straddles the boundaries of





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art, music and architecture so I like to think I am using my education everyday.

How do you feel the architectural education system has changed in recent years?

I taught for 20 years (I stopped last year) so I saw it shift from a time when education was really supported, a time where you could take risks and experiment, to how it functions now. More recently, it feels like there is more stress,

generated by the financial commitment that comes with a university education. University has become something of a commodity that you buy into nowadays.

When I was teaching I taught second year, which was a great year to teach – it feels the most experimental year. I do feel that the willingness to take risks now as a student has been diminished.

It's important to remember that I was also studying before computers. In my third year Apple sponsored the year group by running tests that looked at how computers could aid education and design.

I think there is a balance of skill needed between the computer and the hand. The gesture of both traversing the industry is a difficult one to keep balanced but worth the work and investment so that you're always providing for your client, whatever the situation. I think we are returning now to what an image really is through hand-drawn methods. Having said that, sometimes when we pitch for work, there is an expectation to produce a complete image, so CAD will be utilised. You have to remain mindful of what the client requires from you per project.

What kind of architect did you aspire to be?

I think it took me a long time to find my voice because it was a complex, multifaceted voice with not a lot of precedence for it in the UK at that point.

When I started working I worked initially for a bigger practice, which was lovely but didn't really speak to my heart. I also worked as a theatre set designer as an assistant for Hildegard Bechtler, which was an amazing moment for me; we were using architecture to tell stories. I got the chance to test out ways to use the language of architecture in a gentler way. Bechtler also did a series of amazing productions with Deborah Warner, utilising really difficult buildings to get the most amazing sets out of the spaces. These are the early moments that shaped me.

When I was at the Slade, they would leave you to your own devices to discover and experiment, they basically left you alone to come to your own conclusions, therefore, when I got to Bartlett and they had the Garage Theatre (I'm not sure if it's still there) we got to go and do these architectural theatre experiments in this space and I felt very influenced by Bechtler. It was probably very pretentious and not very good but I think some of the ideas we still use today, so that kind of experimentation never dies in you. Cambridge, by comparison, was much more research based. They would make you learn the practice of everything first. Now, we also begin our studio projects with massive research periods first so I think this idea of research and experimentation go hand in hand and have all influenced the type of designer I am now.

Colour and Vision, The Natural History Museum. Photography - James Stephenson



Interview

Who are your design/architecture inspirations?

I am interested in those who paint a picture and dream a bit. Le Corbusier for me created whole visions, which I love, and Victor Horta (who I actually did my dissertation on) was a fantastic Art Nouveau architect. His stuff was like walking through a fantasy set.

What does Nissen Richards Studio represent as an architecture firm?

I started this practice with Jim Richards almost exactly 10 years ago. I came out of a straighter architecture practice but while I was there (at Nissen Adams) I was asked to design the Telling Tales exhibit at the V&A and I had this 'wow' moment. So, starting this practice (Nissen Richards Studio) became about art and projects I would enjoy working on.

We now have found different niches, interpretation, graphics, film-making and architecture and have developed it into something where we can tackle different design elements, but as a team. More and more of our work now is in the music venue arena too. I think we are unusual in that our process is quite open in the sense that, when we take on a project, we do a lot of research because we want to work really clearly with the clients' vision. As a multidisciplinary practice, we like to work on a project and surrender ourselves to the process to get the very best outcome. As an example, we've recently just done

the Wordsworth Museum, which was part interpretation and part graphic design. What we do is always sensitive and always connected.

How do you continue to carve your own path in the industry as a studio?

I do think it's important to keep moving and to not settle on a way of doing things. We rethink projects all the time. It's about exploration and consideration, never sitting still on one idea.

Where is the majority of your work based?

We go wherever we need to for the clients. We love working internationally, it's good for us because design is all about context. We've recently worked in Manchester and then the Lake District (Wordsworth) and we have a gallery in Oslo opening imminently, which we've been working on for the last two years. This project has been a lovely experience with a client who works in a very different way. They were so trusting of us with this project. The client really bought into the whole research and development part of the project, so we were able to experiment and work with contractors to develop ideas. We had this idea for a wall texture to be a kind of metaphor for a forest texture and because the client was on board for this kind of experimentation, we were about to take it forward. For us, it is all about the clients and their desire to invest creatively, which is the most important element.

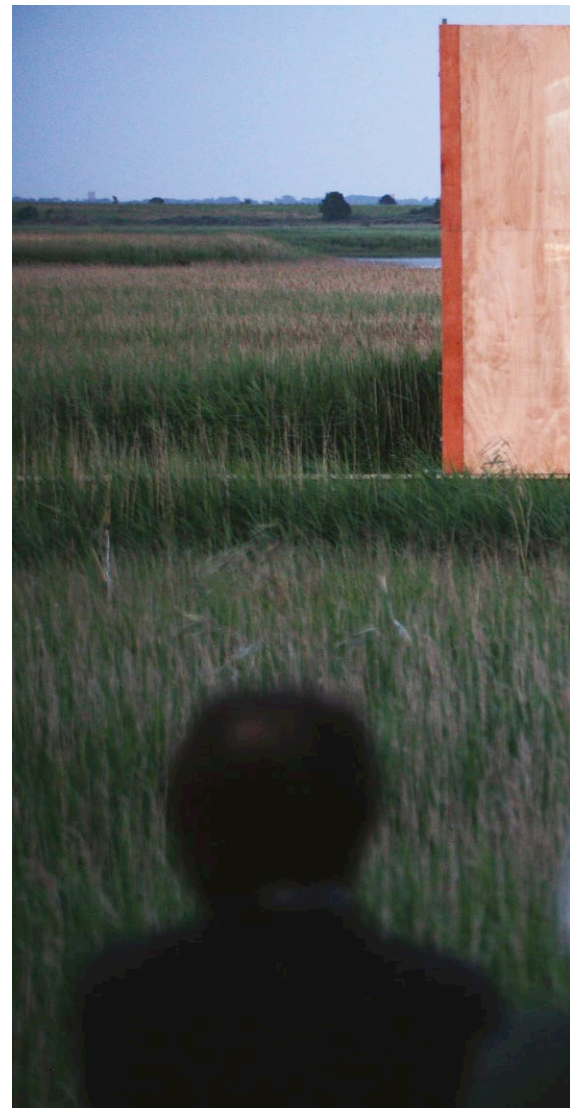
What has been your biggest design commission to date?

There have been many, but I do recall the sense of responsibility I felt when we first got onto the National Library of Norway project. There is also Sutton Hoo, a National Trust visitor centre project for this Anglo-Saxon burial ground. It was a little bit of everything we do; interpretation, 2D design, wayfinding, architecture, landscaping and exhibition design! An absolutely bonkers project! The concept was that you move through a series of buildings, working your way up, and the big piece was to build this tower from which, at the highest point you could view the burial grounds with the map in front of you. In essence, the architecture becomes the interpretation tool. We created pause points with benches and 3D cast concrete models so when you sat down within the landscape you are very much a part of the exhibition and can still be guided in the right direction.

What does the face of architecture look like to you in 10 years time?

For us in exhibition design, sustainability is a big issue, particularly with regards to temporary projects. In some instances, we're thinking about how we can do three projects at once to help.

A celebration of imperfection could help with this. For example, we built a temporary project in Norway out of paper. It wasn't perfect but



it worked so maybe we should consider the quest for perfection versus the need for a more sustainable outlook. Technology enables us to do things that were once only a dream, augmented reality etc. Let's harness these skills more.

If you hadn't become an architect what would you be doing?

I am actually thinking a lot of about this at the moment. I have two teenagers, one is very similar to me in terms of performance and the love of making and art. It makes you look at your own career when you see your children moving through education and finding their skills. Music was always something for me but I could have gone into journalism; the idea of pulling ideas together is similar to what we do. It's about making complex content understandable. I think that's the joy of being an architect actually; every brief is completely different, and your challenge is to work it all out and present it in a new way.

www.nissenrichardsstudio.com

► Opplyst - The National Library of Norway. Photography by Gareth Gardner

► Shakespeare in Ten Acts - The British Library. Photography - Dan Dunkley

▼ Elephant and Castle, Aldeburgh Festival

