

# The future of small things

In Iceland and all over the world, governments are frantically looking for the big solutions to solve their financial, economic and ecological dilemma. Likewise, the people hope for the big sweep, the one big move for change. However, what happens if the bright prospect of utopia does not come to find them? Does their interest in a paradigm shift wane at the same rate as the old status quo returns?

Could it be, that the history of *stóriðja* and bigness is still there, but the future of small things has already begun? The *vatnavinir* project provides some answers with a view to Iceland's biggest value – its nature and its water.

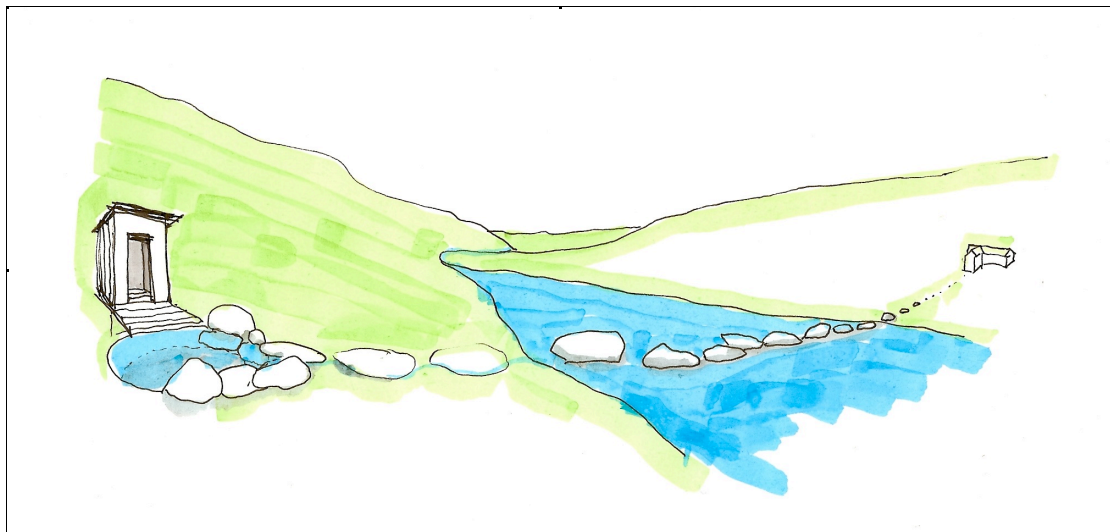
Jörn Frenzel In her essay *The city of small things* architect and architectural historian Irénée Scalbert writes: "The city of small things [...] is an invitation to imagine space not as a diagram but as a concrete entity, to turn scale on its head [...] ". This statement demands a higher regard for detail and complex phenomena as the legitimate components of our communities – whether rural or urban – and to imagine the myriad of sustainable ways in which they can (co)exist. If one looks closely enough at this pixelated and diversified picture it should become possible to make out an image close to nature itself. It is never diagrammatic, it is context driven and surprisingly unique. It is not big and clumsy, not built on approximations, abstractions and statistics. It is an image made of small things. The *vatnavinir* initiative gives fresh impetus to a similarly multifaceted approach to the natural wealth of water in Iceland in its many forms and the national heritage of bathing and health related water wellness. Starting from the exploration, analyses and mapping of existing small baths it strives to establish a versatile, organic network of independent tourism and health spots, which are self-sufficient and are treading lightly within their natural environment. Using their multi-disciplinary background the team will provide holistic ideas and strategies going beyond mere design; it combines socio-economics, business models, public relation, philosophy with architectural strategies of place-making for any particular given site. However, the overall vision of a sustainable Wellness Country Iceland stands at the centre of all efforts. The project does not strive to harness, exploit or exaggerate the value of water and bathing to achieve maximum, short-term effects (as has been the case for aluminium smelting, aggressive investment banking and the like). Much rather, it uses the existing architectural, natural and socio-economic context of well or lesser known *laugar* in order to promote the ideas of conservation and well-considered interventions at an appropriate scale (and speed) and induces short, mid to long term sustainable communal development. What follows is a short record and description of the first achievements of *vatnavinir* in terms of architectural place-making to date.

Even before the events of last autumn, a shift of focus took place in many people's perception of the very values of what society and, indeed, their own lives should be built on. Under the pressure of the prevailing economical hardship these values now come to the fore: the perpetual economic mantra of *GDP growth* suddenly does not seem so almighty anymore. The concept of unsustainable, all-consuming *bigness* is faced by its antipode – sustainable, self-sufficient *smallness* forming part of a detailed bigger picture. This

smallness thrives on the fertile ground of the endless possibilities and creative efforts through which these particles of society can be interlinked, networked and developed.

But what does networking mean for the project? With the formation of common interest alliances being the core of our efforts, vatnavinir have initiated first steps in cooperation with local businesses, authorities and initiatives in the Westfjords to implement a vision of communal and self-induced action. For a number of places driven by characters that are willing to shape their local environment vatnavinir have developed architectural, marketing and business related ideas for a sustainable development in balance with nature. Within the context of vatnavinir the term *sustainability* does not merely involve generally accepted best practice for energy efficiency, but debates questions about the quality of life, the necessary scale of projects and the concentration of resources by local networking. The individual projects – each in its own unique way - will involve the integration of existing businesses, the use of local resources, respect for architectural and natural context and an entrepreneurial spirit driven by the idea of cooperation and mutual support.

### Small steps



One of the biggest concerns of the project is the protection of the natural environment and a sustainable development of the registered locations. One way to do this is the declaration of so called "hidden gems" – baths and landscapes, which should remain untouched and that should not be advertised or published to avoid them being spoilt by tourism or otherwise. Another important point is the concept of *smart responsive simplicity*. There is a little anecdote about the start of the Westfjords projects: This spring during a workshop with one of the participants of the vatnavinir Westfjords cluster, Gisli – co-owner of the hotel and restaurant operation in Heydalur – a possible bridge over the river connecting the Heydalur farm premises with the old *laug* on the other side was discussed. The discussions of possible architectural solutions went on for two hours. After consideration of all prevailing natural forces and economical circumstances it was decided *not* to build a bridge at all. It was rather decided to put heavy rocks there that people can jump one to the other to the other side. Gisli set out to do this right away – and within a further two hours to crossing had become a reality. No doubt, the rocks will be washed away by next spring, but then Gisli will simply put them there again. This anecdote illustrates two important concepts: one is that not building or building very little can be environmentally *and* economically the simpler solution. The second is that Gisli and his mother Stella have

decided to take one step at the time when it comes to the development of Heydalur. They want to keep it as a family business and they only make sustainable decisions for the future that meet their actual needs there and then. Over the years, this strategy has seen their estate grow into a successful business with fairly sized hotel, restaurant, camping and bathing facilities that could be called sustainable in the true sense of the word.

As explained above, the actions of vatnavinir are governed by the idea of a *new simplicity*. This simplicity involves locally sourced, inexpensive and low-carbon range of materials and recycling of existing fabric. As described above, the concept of *smart responsive simplicity* under particular circumstances could even mean that *not building at all* might be the better solution. This also means that building forms themselves and the range of technologies and materials are kept simple to keep cost low and derive the projects' complexity and high quality from their interrelation with the other parts of the puzzle, their tailor-made programme and high attention to detail. In the case of the Westfjords the contemporary adaption of vernacular building types such as simple corrugated-metal farmhouses, stone and turf houses and green houses has been applied. This leads to a win-win situation: smart, high-end solutions at low cost to the client and nature. Any actual building activity within the project will be planned and examined with utmost care to the particular site, its greater context, community, cultural heritage and local building methods and materials. To achieve this goal a multidisciplinary team of architects, designers, philosophers, communication and business experts will actually help to *define* the brief in close cooperation with the clients. This means, the process emphasizes the definition of the task to start with. From the master plan to the last detail, client and consultants engage in a participatory mode of cooperation that is quite different to the usual work especially of architects. Hence, the large number of small and mid-range interventions that are fairly simple in nature themselves will (over time) form a richly textured organism of great complexity and flexibility.

A further mode of sustainable operation introduced by vatnavinir is to work with the land itself and with its heritage. Echoing the tradition of Land Artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and the beauty and clarity of nature itself, many projects incorporate an approach to enhance, integrate or trace natural features within the programme and design of the place itself. Architecturally, this may involve small functional interventions such as paths, walls within the landscape or expression of defining natural features. Thus, nature will play the main part and come to the fore instead of being harnessed within the confinements of the project. What else would be better suited to protect the environment and portrait the beauty of nature – but nature itself?

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