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Creating cities for rainy days

Rain as an asset – a human perspective

JENS THOMS IVARSSON

Designer and Artist, Gothenburg
(Sweden)

Interview by Redaktion COLLAGE

Jens Thoms Ivarsson talks about how he is using rainwater as an asset to create public spaces in Gothenburg (Sweden) where people enjoy spending time when it is neither sunny nor green outside.

Rain Gothenburg – Using the design method for problem solving

COLLAGE (C): What is Rain Gothenburg all about?

JENS THOMS IVARSSON (JTI): Rain Gothenburg was an anniversary project for 2023 when Gothenburg celebrated its 400th anniversary. It rains quite a lot in Gothenburg. That's why we're trying to look at rain in a creative way and not as something that needs to disappear as quickly as possible.

A very important question from the beginning was, how can we look at rain as an asset and not as something negative.

C: Why did you start with this question?

JTI: I'm glad that I was taught a timeless version of the design method at university in the 90s. To this day it's a solid way for me to solve problems. At the heart of the method is the question «What problem are we really trying to solve?»

I applied this method when I started working with Rain Gothenburg and I already used it together with a friend when we worked for our first design company in 2002. We worked with furniture and installations for public spaces in cities. For example, when I set myself the task of designing a chair, the basics are set from the start. The object I want to create has four legs, a seat, and a back. Using the design method, I approach the problem by asking myself what the underlying function is. I ask myself to create seating and this leads to different questions. For example, is it for children, and will it be placed outdoors? Then I create different solutions. I created one seat that I called «Social». I observed how people like to sit when they share a bench with strangers. I wanted the bench itself to both encourage conversations between people, but at the same time you could choose to sit at a distance from others.

C: Later after working at the Icehotel, you started working for the city of Gothenburg. What was one of the questions you wanted to answer?

JTI: When I started working for the Department of Sustainable Waste and Water, they were trying to get developers and property owners to invest more in blue and green solutions. But the private sector was reluctant to pay for something they didn't directly benefit from. So, it's all about communication.

C: How did you choose to approach the communication?

JTI: My department colleague Magnus Mott and I asked ourselves, «What is it like to be a human being in a city when it rains?» Because most of the solutions come from engineers. They create sponge cities where you don't normally see the water. These are very good and necessary engineering solutions. However, there are also many things that are missing. We still have our bodies and our senses that need to be fulfilled. So, I thought, let's communicate about rain without addressing the rational mind. And when we have done that, when people feel the emotional connection, then we can add the facts. That's when people are listening.

Art is a good way to generate this interest. For example, we wrote poetry on the manhole covers and organised a modern version of a rain dance. Another way is to add little features to buildings so that every time when it rains, something fun or beautiful happens. To encourage this, I organised workshops with architecture firms on how to use rain as an asset. The ideas can be very simple, but joyful. The rainwater could just be directed in a fun way. I mean, when it is cold, rainy, and dark we really need something joyful in our everyday life. And the beauty of it is that at the same time we create a positive awareness of rain. This awareness and attention are important if we want politicians, decision-makers, and property owners to invest in more blue and green solutions. As a result, you almost want it to rain when you come home.

Seminarie Park

C: Can you talk about one of your latest projects?

JTI: Just a few weeks ago, we opened a newly renovated Seminarie Park with the aim of becoming the best park in the world when it rains.

The park is publicly owned. It is located under a hill and sometimes when it rained the road below the park would flood and in winter the ice could be dangerous. There were accidents because of this. First, we had to convince the people in charge of the park (HIGAB) to spend extra money on a rain concept. We did this with a presentation where we showed them a Google search of the park as it was at the time. Because all you would find online were pictures of the park with sunshine and pink



[FIG.1]



[FIG.2]



[FIG.3]

[FIG.1-3] Project for the public space:
Social (Photo: Jens Thoms Ivarsson and
Christer Olofsson)



[FIG.4]

[FIG.4] Pavillon at Seminarier Park
(Photo: HIGAB)

cherry blossoms. The cherry trees bloom in May – for two weeks. We proposed a concept for the other 50 weeks of the year when there are no cherry blossoms.

In general, you don't see pictures by architects of parks on a rainy November day at seven o'clock in the evening. But in Gothenburg, it rains for at least 10 minutes on more than 40 per cent of the days of the year. Gothenburg is the second rainiest city in Sweden. But that is not the point.

What matters is how we deal with the rain.

c: What was the concept you proposed?

JTI: Human needs and environmental sustainability were equally important.

There was a small fountain in the park from the 1950s. But it had become a broken, ugly concrete hole. We wanted to bring it back into use and integrate it into a new pavilion. We built the pavilion with a hole in the roof. Now, when it rains, you can sit under the roof and stay dry, and at the same time you can watch the raindrops fall into this little pond [FIG.4]. It's like sitting around a fire with friends or people you don't know. If there's a fire, you can sit next to a stranger, and it doesn't feel awkward. You don't have to talk because you can listen to the raindrops. You get the same feeling here. We also added art inspired by Japanese «Shishi Odoshi». These bamboo tubes by Hanna Klarqvist can move, they tip over when they fill up with rain and fall back again once they are empty. An artist created a modern version of them. The art is very quiet and mellow. Furthermore, we let the water meander down the hill. It slows down and doesn't flood the streets or create icy patches on the road below the park anymore. Running water is also beautiful to look at.

Now that the Seminarier park is open to the public, we plan to activate the park from October to March, when there are no leaves or flowers, or at least very few. It will be dark and rainy. To contrast the darkness, we will work with lights.

The other day I was in Seminarier Park. It was raining and of course all the people gathered under the pavilion. I met people I had never seen before.

c: Let's come back to Rain Gothenburg. What are your and the city's plans to continue working on the best city when it rains?

JTI: Unfortunately, the city won't be continuing Rain Gothenburg. But I get a lot of questions from different developers in the city. They want to continue with the project. It took six years to popularise the concept of rain as an asset. When I started the first two or three years, I was running from one meeting to another with my presentations. They didn't take me seriously. I was the crazy artist talking about rain. But as my ideas began to be understood as a long-term solution for the sustainable management of rainwater, the concept gained momentum.

The good thing about projects like Rain Gothenburg is that they can be applied on different levels. It can be a temporary fun event. At the same time, it can address climate change in the long term. And it's very specific. Now, I get a lot of requests from different cities to work together. I now call it Rain Cities.

ABOUT JENS THOMS IVARSSON

Jens Thoms Ivarsson is a Swedish designer and artist. He has a Master's in Design and Fine Art from Gothenburg and London. He began his design training in 1996. Since then, he has been working with water in its various aggregate states. For twenty years he worked for the Icehotel in northern Sweden, for several years as its creative director.

Since 2016 he has been employed by the City of Gothenburg's Department of Sustainable Waste and Water as creative director for «the best city when it rains» or «Rain Gothenburg» as he has renamed the project. For Jens Thoms Ivarsson, almost everything is about communication. (Photo: Mikael Göthage)



Talk by Jens Thoms Ivarsson: How water from Sweden made Karl Lagerfeld laugh