Between earth and sky
The sports pictogram on the slope of the Ski jump as background for the act of ski-jumping; the orientation of the athlete’s Shadow in contrast with the footprint of the pictogram, sensibly captured by the photographer, speaks of the act of flying as defiant towards established norms. Source: Elton, L., and Moshus, P. Norwegian Olympic Design. Norsk Form and Messel Forlag, Oslo, 1995. 42. Credits: Jim Bengston on behalf of LOOC, Lillehammer, Norway
visions of sustainability. local and global in the 1994 winter olympic games

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Two interpretations of the concept of sustainability will be approached in this paper by offering a reading of one key photograph produced on the occasion of the Lillehammer Winter Olympic Games held in Norway in 1994. The image by American photographer Jim Bengston, taken during one of the ski-jumping sessions in Lillehammer, is constituted by an interesting combination of elements that fuel a forensic investigation into two visions of sustainability. The Olympic event has been used as a catwalk for what was at that time the recently adopted green agenda of the United Nations, Agenda 21, materializing the international aspirations towards the concept of sustainable development. But the vision of sustainability prescribed within the pages of the green agenda issued by the United Nations opposes another interpretation of sustainability manifested at a local level, one that draws on specific geographical, traditional and cultural constraints. Therefore, the role of the local affiliation to Nature in the international debates around sustainable development, theorized by Christian Norberg-Schulz and translated into architecture by the designers of the event, will constitute the object of study of this paper. Key writings by Carlo Ginzburg and Roland Barthes produce the means to handle the clues available in the image by Bengston. The concepts within these texts will enable us to place them in a context that allows for a profound understanding of the tensions that led to the configuration of this edition of the Winter Games. Photography was not only central to representing the multiple facets of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games held in Lillehammer, but also played an important role in the construction of the event's legacy. Its functions both as a critical instrument and as a key provider of historic documentation is highly visible on the occasion of this historic mega-event. Therefore, the comprehending analysis of this photograph cannot be dissociated from a thorough understanding of the event itself in all its complexity, an event characterized by an interlocking of distinct tendencies.

keywords Lillehammer, Punctum, Clues, Sustainability, Agenda 21, Phenomenology
About 18 months ago, as I initiated the process of research on the subject of the Winter Olympic Games held in 1994 in the town of Lillehammer, Norway, the conclusions of which I would like to share with you on this occasion, I stumbled upon a very interesting photograph that immediately drew my attention. Despite the very austere composition as well as a much reduced chromatic spectrum, the photograph managed to transmit a set of very clear ideas. This image became central to my research and I turn to it every time I need to remind myself of the aim of my investigation, namely the role that the local tradition plays in the debates on the notions of ecology and sustainable development. I would like to take the opportunity of this symposium on photography and architecture to try to reveal, for myself and to the audience, the reasons for which this piece of evidence has had such an impact upon my study and continues to fascinate whoever has access to it.

The photograph in question depicts an athlete performing the act of ski-jumping (f1). The picture seems a carefully designed collage of elements. Once the complex spatial relationships depicted in the photograph are perceived (the ski-jumper’s position is closer to the observation point than the shadow projected on the snow and higher so that the skis are seen from underneath), a set of questions emerges in the mind of the observer. Did the artist simply portray the act of ski-jumping, visually describing its inherent dynamic beauty? Or did he, by masterfully taking advantages of the convergence of a series of geometric alignments, consciously aim this piece as a critique of the Olympic event? What role did the photographer’s artistic vision play in the production of this photograph?

To me, the image is like a strong breath of fresh air that blows away the heavy layers of descriptive imagery usually provided by the photographs and texts depicting the event (f2). The colourful, aesthetically pleasant compositions that are characteristic of the overwhelming majority of the photographs we see spread out in the pages of the book “Norwegian Olympic Design” (1995), describe an ambience of joy and celebration, the mere façade of an event that was truly the result of a myriad of antagonist forces and interests.
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This imagery, rich in compositional elements and abundant in colour, comes in strong antithesis with the economy of expression of the photograph under analysis here. It appears that there is more to this photograph than the description of a scene taking place in a sports event. It seems that this image goes beyond what Roland Barthes defines as studium in his book *Camera Lucida*.

In fact, this image provides the ideal conditions for a study that involves Barthes’s other, opposing notion, the punctum. Punctum, according to Barthes “is [that] element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces […]”. In the words of the French philosopher, “punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole –[…] a cast of the dice”¹. So, on the one hand punctum is a small window through which hidden meanings can be observed, and, on the other hand, we see this process as the emergence of random interpretations of a photograph when confronted with other contexts. The relatively simple definition of punctum as being “that accident which pricks [...] (but also bruises [...]”, is poignant [...]”)² entails the existence of a greater load of information than what is immediately perceivable through vision. The relations between the reduced number of elements present in the frame of the photograph (i.e. the athlete, the shadow he projects on the white snow, the logo of the event represented using pine branches, and the white matter of the snow itself, which acts as the background of the composition) enable by means of various associations, a deeper understanding of the mega-event on the occasion of which it was captured. In other words, the configuration of the image presents a set of clues that open up the possibility for a gaze into the substrata of the complex context of the 1994 edition of the Olympic Games held in Lillehammer, Norway.
But there is an alternative way of looking at this photograph. Departing from A. Warburg’s famous phrase “God is in the details”, Carlo Ginzburg performs an accurate demonstration of the relevance of the clue in the historical investigation. In his essay “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm” published in 1989 in his volume “Clues, Myths and the Historical Method”, Ginzburg highlights the unusual nature of the work of art critic and historian Giovanni Morelli whose “books look different from those of any other writer on art”. Instead of depicting whole paintings and their frames, “they are sprinkled with illustrations of fingers and ears, careful records of the characteristic trifles by which an artist gives himself away, as a criminal might be spotted by a fingerprint”. Morelli, according to Ginzburg, proposes that an art historian and critic “should not depend [...] on the most conspicuous characteristics of a painting, which are the easiest to imitate [...]. [He] should examine, instead, the most trivial details that would have been influenced least by the mannerisms of the artist’s school”. We shall approach the image under investigation here in the same manner. We will observe beyond the visible characteristics of the image that the author himself describes as “neither made by coincidence, nor [...] carefully prepared”, and we will look at the conjuncture of elements within the frame. Following on these reflections on method, I would argue that Bengston’s photograph represents a vehicle for interrogation into the conditions of the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympic Games. By carefully extracting clues from this visual piece of evidence, connections with other documents, texts and images can be drawn. In the light of Ginzburg’s theory, however, the overlapping of key compositional elements within the image could be thought of as pointing towards the complex network of interests implied in this Olympic event, even if that was an unintentional reflex.

In order to place the photograph in the right context, we need to have a look at a key concept in Jim Bengston’s work. His interest in the themes of “action and movement” can be traced back to the time when he produced the series titled ‘slow motion’, between 1977 and 1985, before the Olympic event took place. On the occasion of an interview performed for this particular piece of research, he explains that, as a consequence of the success of this project, he was commissioned by the LOOC (Lillehammer Olympic Organization Committee) to realize the material for an eight posters series to promote the event. Bengston confesses that on this occasion, too, he attempted to portray what he considered to be “the inherent aesthetic of motion common to all the various athletic events using still photography”. Although shot in another register that does not draw on the effect of blurring to transmit movement through still image, the “Athlete in the air” photograph represents no exception from this vision. The protagonist of this frame seems suspended, trapped between earth and sky. The absence of any material connection to the surrounding elements as well as the aerodynamic posture adopted, specific for flight, communicate the idea of displacement. The aesthetic contradiction between the dynamism of the act of gliding through the air that is light, liquid, and the stillness of the image in time, is meant to invite the observer to notice the spatial relations between the elements described, thus gaining access to the unexpected clues that stand out as possessing the quality of punctum. Let us now look through the minute piercing (or punctum) opened up by this tension and analyse the specific compositional configuration of this image. In what follows, I shall try to reflect on each clue individually as well as on the ways in which the one relates to the other in order to return to the event and provide a different reading of it. In this way, I will try to demonstrate how this photograph not only embeds the essence of the Lillehammer edition of the Winter Olympic Games, but also represents its most effective criticism.

Captioned “The sports pictogram on the slope of the ski-jump was made of springs of spruce” and published in the book on the Olympics “Norwegian Olympic Design” in 1995, one year after the event’s conclusion, this photograph makes multiple references to the category of the Natural. For instance, the pictogram on the white background of the landing platform representing the act of ski-jumping is different from the rest of the similar logos visible in other photographs from the same source. We see the recognizable logo of the competition represented through tree branches on the immaculate snow of the venue, a
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reference to a hypothetically unaltered natural environment. In fact, the tree that the short branches originate from, most likely those of the species of Norway Spruce (Latin: Picea Abies) is a type of pine that is described by specialists as a “tall, narrow evergreen tree [that] has a tight branching habit with short, dark green needles” and provides “a strong, vertical accent”\(^\text{12}\). Indeed, this material is used in building but was highly valued in the construction of wooden aircrafts as well\(^\text{13}\). For instance, the Wright brothers capitalized on the resilience and lightness of this material when they designed the first aircraft called “the Flyer”. Build of spruce, it realized four flights under the stirring of Orville Wright (f4). The subtle use of the springs of spruce for the pictogram on the Lysgårdsbakken ski jump acquires thus multiple meanings, masterly captured by the lens of Jim Bengston, connecting the ambition to reach the heights embedded in Norwegian culture with ski-jumping, an important component of Norwegian culture and subject of National pride.

f3 Poster from the series commissioned to photographer Jim Bengston by the Lillehammer Olympic Organization Committee (LOOC)

According to the American photographer, the common theme for all eight posters was movement, portrayed using still photography. This poster depicts the sport of ski-jumping. However, we see the image of the athlete in the air discussed in this text, also captured on the occasion of the XVII Olympic edition of the Winter Games, set in a different register. (Fig. 1) Motion is not transmitted using the technique of blurring. The artist gives the sense of movement in the case by the lack of material reference. The only reference to a fixed point in space is that of the springs of spruce logo. Source: Courtesy of Oppland County Archive.

Credits: Jim Bengston on behalf of LOOC, Lillehammer, Norway
Interestingly enough, the vertical accent is characteristic of Norwegian traditional architecture. The idea that earth and sky meet through architecture is an argument Norberg-Schulz already presented in “Genius Loci” (1980), where he so famously developed Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology into the field of architecture. Architecture thus becomes the material expression of the Northern characteristic relation to the above and beneath. This idea is elegantly exemplified by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his description of the log construction system at Kultan where “builder Jarand Ronjom employed timbers laid horizontally to create a secure “cave of wood”, while he united the timber ends to form a springy, rising curve. The result is a building that both rests and ascends, thus embodying the Norwegian relation of earth and sky (f5). The striking similarity of this description with the process that constitutes the act of ski-jumping becomes manifest. The trajectory through the air of the athlete in mid-flight describes a similar rising curve. The position adopted by the athlete aims at maximizing the surface of contact with the air, favouring thus a longer time of suspension in flight. This ambition to stay aloft and aim for the heights, the purpose of the sport of ski-jumping is, interestingly, also a relevant feature of Norwegian architecture.
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The investigation conducted by Norberg-Schulz into what constitutes the image of the “Nordic” precedes the Olympic event in Lillehammer within which it finds the most suitable expression. In this process, the Norwegian architecture historian and critic contrasted the Norwegian tradition to the problems supposed by the relationship of humans and their environment. He invokes the notion of “eco-crisis” in the attempt to promote the idea of a phenomenological architecture as the only possible direction in which a beneficial relationship of architecture and the environment can be sought. Gennaro Postiglione, too, refers to this link. “Between earth and sky” is the title of his introduction to the work on Sverre Fehn that he co-authored with Norberg-Schulz. He believes this to be the strongest recurrent motif in Fehn’s work. Furthermore, the Norwegian Pritzker prize winner always graphically represents the sun, the sky, the line of the horizon as well as the land in his many sketches that were left testimony of his architectural investigation into the phenomenology of architecture.

f5_Wood detail of the “cave of wood” at Kultan in Amotsdal (c.1790) by builder Jarand Ronjom
In his book titled “Nightlands, Nordic Building” Christian Norberg-Schulz makes a strong case on the parallel between the aspiration towards the heights and traditional architecture within the Norwegian culture.
We have seen that by linking the idea of human flight to the conditions that determine the Nordic architectural credo, the photograph of the athlete in the air speaks about an expression that materializes the traditional way of relating to the environment. Let us continue this study by revealing the connection of this photograph to a particular condition of this edition of the Winter Olympic Games. The athlete suspended in the air stands for the protagonist value of a jump into the unknown. Stripped of identity, he can be seen as a metaphor for the shift in paradigm performed in 1994: the Olympic event has been used as a catwalk for what was at that time the recently adopted green agenda of the United Nations, Agenda 21, materializing the international aspirations towards the concept of sustainable development. The Olympic Games are a mass-culture event that monopolises a great amount of resources, thus restructuring large amounts of land within short periods of time, in order to assure the optimal living conditions for an important number of visitors. The initiative manifested in Lillehammer to implement a set of sustainability principles, highlights an attitude aimed at mediating this extreme situation, at the same time making of the event a model of sustainable intervention promoted in the most violent adversity. It managed to transmit, through architecture, the awareness towards the environment as perceived and described in the Norwegian tradition as well as the aspirations embedded into the green agenda of the United Nations.

The vision of sustainability promoted by the United Nations resumes itself to a global understanding of the environmental crisis. The international green agenda does not draw the so much required connection with the local contexts defined on geographical and cultural parameters. “Agenda 21” embeds only prescriptive guidelines to approach problems such as the use of local materials to reduce contamination caused by construction, to promote a reduced parking and road infrastructure and favour the increase in the use of muscular power transportation means. No reference is made to the ways in which these parameters of sustainability should relate to the inherited cultural and social context of the place they are implemented within. The prescriptive character of the agenda appears to promote a set of universal rules imposed on the local context rather than a model for negotiation and dialogue to achieve the best possible balance between old and new, between modern approaches to the environment and traditional elements or concepts. Furthermore, the UN Agenda 21 has
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a compulsory character, and every argument it contains is subordinated to the generally ambiguous term “Agenda”. It can be assumed that it would be poorly implemented by local authorities under strong political and economic pressures. It seems therefore that the organization of an environmentally friendly Olympics in Lillehammer influenced by the category of the local was entirely the merit of the local architects coordinated under the authority of the Local Olympic Organization Committee (LOOC)²². The later Olympic events point towards the failure of the metaphorical jump. Even after the official publication of the IOC's Agenda 21 in 1999, the organization was unsuccessful in implementing the use of the category of the local to improve the relationship between the material condition of the Olympic mega-events and their environment²³.

Ginzburg’s historical method, as well as Roland Barthes’s technique of punctum, offer the conditions for a thorough questioning of the critical load embedded in a piece of historical evidence such as the photograph of the ski-jumper. On the one hand, the idea of flight was associated with the phenomenological approach towards the environment specific to the local culture using the spruce pictogram. On the other hand, the same idea of suspension between earth and sky can be related to the unprecedented recognition at a global scale of the problems posed by the eco-crisis though the media mechanisms of the Olympic Movement. But the true element of surprise in the observation of this photograph resides in the fact that the graphic opposition of the clues visible in this photograph enables the interpretation of a rupture between two visions about sustainability. The shadow projected by the athlete in mid-flight on the immaculate snow that can be read as the materialization of the global ecological aspirations into the Green Agenda of the United Nations opposes the direction towards which the spruce pictogram, a clue relating to the categories of the natural and tradition, is oriented. The first vision is that of a concept of sustainability rooted in the understanding of the complex cultural, social, geographical and climatic local conditions of the environment. The designs of the venues for the Lillehammer Olympic event succeeded in coupling the latest advances in the technology of that time with the traditional expression of the relation to the environment. This idea seems at odds with the way sustainability is thought to solve the ecological issues of modern times through the Green Agenda of the United Nations. The second vision describes a general model of tackling issues related to sustainability that is proposed for any given situation, lacking a refined understanding of the local conditions. The outstanding critical value of this image resides in the fact that it confronts these two readings: acknowledging maybe for the first time, the relevance of the category of the local in the debate around sustainability.

Needless to say, the photograph masterfully expresses the tensions that led to the organization of the Lillehammer Olympics. By carefully choosing the moment of coincidence of a set of compositional elements, Jim Bengston embedded the key to deciphering the two visions of sustainability inherent in the debate around the eco-crisis. The springs of spruce logo, the athlete in the air and the shadow he projects on the snow embody the three agendas of the event: the local or the National, the global or the Inter-National and the economic or the Multi-National. However, the aim of this paper was constrained at tracing the relationships between these elements, opening up a larger debate that has at its core the Lillehammer Olympic event as a model for understanding the forces at play in the process of sustainable development.

We have seen how the act of ski-jumping, the least technological means to defy gravity and surpass the human condition, bridges the local affiliation to nature, translated into a phenomenological approach to construction, and the objectives to promote the Green Agenda at a global scale. Regarding the act of ski-jumping, specialists posit that it opposes two objectives: on the ramp, speed is key. The body must be like a dart that glides down the hill. While in flight, however, the body has to be used as a sail catching as much air as possible to stay aloft and fight gravity²⁴. The interpretation of the idea of flight connects here motion and
stillness, modernity represented through technology and embedded in the international Green Agenda, and tradition in the spirit of the phenomenological approach towards environment and architecture specific for this particular geographical and cultural context. The idea of flight embodies the aspirations towards a world where the scenario for a technological future envisioned by Rosalind Williams in her book “Notes on the Underground” can be avoided. Her description of the term “environmental quality” drawing on the category of technology captures both the conditions for physical comfort and the premise for psychic and social discomfort.

The contrast manifested in the image of the ski-jumper pierces through the plan of the photograph and reveals a set of clues that, in the light of Ginzburg’s comments on historical method, inform the tension depicted by the trained observer between the global and the local way of understanding the notion of sustainable development. This piece of evidence, maybe the most valuable fragment of information inherited from the 1994 event, was reclaimed from the anonymity it was condemned to within the pages of the inform produced on the event by Petter T. Moshus and Lars Elton. Everything points towards the conclusion that the photograph was not intentional, but realized in such manner as to allow for a certain flexibility of interpretation, standing for the quintessential narrative unity of this event.

Through this powerful image by Jim Bengston, photography challenges the role of architecture to critically engage with the spirit of the time it portrays. While architecture remains a fixed object in time and space, representations of it may circulate, and acquire various roles in the critical discourse. Robin Evans identifies the main characteristics that allow them to follow the path of de-contextualization. According to the introduction to his book “The projective cast”, representations of an object “alter by continuous deformation” and are “elastic”, therefore apt to be inserted in new contexts. Robin Evans states the principles that guide the process through which the attention “shifted, at first slowly and cautiously, from the object per se to its images: shadows, maps, or pictures”. He continues: “it is easy to appreciate intuitively that any rigid object will propagate a variety of possible images of itself in space, that these images will alter by continuous deformation, not by fits and starts, and that while there can be no fundamental image, we would nevertheless expect to recognize some kind of permanent identity from several such images”. He finally concludes: “it is equally easy to appreciate intuitively that the images of this rigid object are elastic”. The aim of this paper was precisely this: to extract the photograph under study from the series of mere representations of the Olympic event that took place in Lillehammer and to place it as an “elastic” central element of the critique of the event. The techniques of historical traces (Ginzburg) and of punctum (Barthes) allowed us to read through the clues produced by this piece of evidence and offered the pretext to discuss key elements that configured the complex politics of this event. The critical eye of the camera decontextualized the act of ski-jumping and placed it in the space of the debates around the sustainability of the time. The visions offered by such a perspective are no longer global and unifying, but distinguish themselves as particular, often opposing fragments of a complex network of meanings associated with key issues of sustainable development.
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endnotes

2. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Punctum could be defined as a particular case of Ginzburg's method. At the end of his eloquent demonstration, Ginzburg defines three categories of clues: traces, symptoms and pictorial marks corresponding to the fields of criminal investigation, psychoanalysis, and painting respectively. He explains that in "each case, infinitesimal traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality: traces –more precisely, symptoms (in the case of Freud), clues (in the case of Sherlock Holmes), pictorial marks (in the case of Morelli). If we include here the composition inherent to the discipline of photography, the punctum and the idea of clue as a methodological tool can be seen as two intertwined ways of looking at the photograph. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm in Clues", in *Myths and the Historical Method* (London: The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd. 1989), 101.
9. Ibid. footnote 5.
11. As the photographer himself admits in the interview conducted on the occasion of the writing of this paper, his personal project Slow Motion conducted between 1977-1985 and published by European Photography in Germany in 1986 was most likely the reason why he was commissioned to produce the photographs for the 8 images set, that later became the main tool to promote the Olympic event at a local and global scale. Ibid. footnote 5.
19. As Bengston admits, the identity of the athlete was not a defining factor in the construction of the pictures that became the series of 8 poster around which the branding of the Olympic event was constructed. Ibid. footnote 5.
20. John Horne and Garry Whannel explain this recurrent contradiction in the organization of the Olympic Games in their book titled “Understanding the Olympics”. They argue that “substantial parts of cities and other areas designated for the events are disturbed for years by the construction projects, debt accumulation, restructuring and other disruptions of space and time. Indeed, despite the IOC’s apparent wish under Jacques Rogge to move away from favouring gigantism in Games staging (see, for example, the recommendations of the “good governance” Study Commission to the 2003 Prague IOC meeting, Pound 2003: 23, 35), recent decisions for Summer Games hosting have consistently chosen the most expensive and extensive project on offer (Beijing, London, Rio De Janeiro), whilst overlooking relatively compact bids (Paris and, especially, Madrid)”. John Horne and Garry Whannel, *Understanding the Olympics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012) 184.
21. The global concerns regarding the environmental crisis were acknowledged by the United Nations in 1987 when the report titled “Our common Future” was formally introduced. It is on this background of intense debate that, one year later, the host town of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games was announced. By stating that “Lillehammer 1994 wanted to give the Olympic Movement a third dimension -environment- in addition to sport and culture”, the organizers of the Games acknowledged their determination to change the way in which the organization process of such events would be approached. The debates on sustainability already rose in intensity around 1992, when the original United Nations document “Agenda21” was issued during the United Nations Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. It
constituted a model for the global institutions and National Governments to put together their own green manifestos, tailored for their specific needs.

22. The set of principles put forward by the LOOC intended to transform not only the perception of the Olympic Games, but also the way it occupies the land and mediates the relationship between the hosting culture and its objectives, giving the event a strong local character. The origins of this channelled coordinated effort towards efficiency and sustainability can be traced back in Norwegian history within the tendency towards the optimization of available resources.


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CV
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