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BOOK REVIEW:
MARI LENDING AND
ERIK LANGDALEN
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PAX FORLAG. LARS MÜLLER
PUBLISHERS, 2020

REVIEWER: LEIF DANIEL HOUCK



Prologue:

Just to make it clear from the very beginning: this book has extraordinary qualities! It has an overwhelming scientific accuracy, where every fact is documented with references. At the same time, it is as thrilling to read as any crime book. But as a prologue, let us reflect on how other authors have written about the work of Sverre Fehn, like Christian Norberg-Schulz. Norberg-Schulz is famous for developing and placing architecture in a theoretical framework of phenomenology. During the work with the Nordic Pavilion in Venice, Fehn visited his friend Norberg-Schulz in Rome. In later years, they were colleagues at AHO. Still, in Norberg-Schulz's book on the collected works of Sverre Fehn (1997), there are even fewer facts to read about the Nordic Pavilion than Sverre Fehn revealed in his short text, when the pavilion was published in *Byggekunst* in 1962. Norberg-Schulz writes nothing about how the idea about a common Nordic Pavilion emerged, the goals and struggles about the finances. And technically – an architect drawing 6 cm “thick” slabs, one meter high, isn't there some technical innovation needed? How was it solved? And the absence of a normal roof – what did the jury think about it?! What innovations were needed? And did everything work out

according to plan? Norberg-Schulz brings no information on this, and he does not reflect on this. There is also nothing about how the building performed during those thirty years between the opening of the pavilion and the publishing of his book – neither technically nor as an exhibition space. As if this building was its own purpose. What Norberg-Schulz felt the need to communicate to the readers was this (original text in Norwegian): “It is not a coincidence that Fehn keeps the group of trees growing through the roof construction to catch the light. The trees, the only living presence of nature, become the only elements able to communicate with the exhibited art, being witnesses of what man owes to nature, which is an especially important aspect of Nordic aesthetics.” With this in mind, I had great worries what this new book on Sverre Fehn’s Nordic Pavilion in Venice written by two AHO professors would bring. Would this new book be another phenomenological word avalanche? A lot to read, and little to learn? Luckily, I could not be more wrong in my prejudices! All questions above are answered and so much more. Reading “Voices from the Archives”, we learn that the trees were protected by Venetian law, and it was a premise in the competition to keep them.

Architecture does not emerge in a void, but rather in a political, social, financial and technical reality, where these different forces are as important for the realization of a building as the drawings of the architect. “Voices from the Archives” is a book about the political and practical processes leading to the materialization of Sverre Fehn’s pavilion. To give an extremely short version: Sweden, represented by the director of the National museum in Stockholm, Erik Wettergren, discussed the possibility of a plot at the Giardini with the Biennale back in 1949. What distinguished the Venezia Biennale from other international art exhibitions was the concept of exhibiting the art divided into each nationality. This is why, after a while, different countries established their own exhibition pavilions. It was the Swedes who proposed a common Nordic pavilion at the third session of the Nordic Council in 1955. To get the pavilion built as a joint Nordic project was an extreme, bureaucratic challenge. The Swedes had the finances, and the will, the Norwegians and the Finns had the will, but not the finances. Denmark already had a pavilion at the neighbouring site; they had finances, but did they have the will to give cooperation prioritization? And Iceland? As Lending and Langdalen puts it: “Wettergren operated as a spider in a tightly spun web of cultural influence, and the political debate was carefully orchestrated to secure the idea politically, culturally, economically – as well as psychologically.” Finally, the competition was announced on June 28, 1958. The book presents the different proposals and the evaluation of the jury. Then development and construction of the project is described. The reader gets detailed insight into the processes and gets to know the Building Committee, the bureaucratic struggles of Wettergren, the engineer Neegård, the local architect Fogh and the extremely innovative contractor Todeschini. However, the story of the pavilion does not, as often is the case when architecture is

presented, end with the opening of the building and glossy pictures. In this book, a new chapter begins as the building is brand new. This may happen with many relationships - after the wedding and even already during the honeymoon – serious problems occur: The main column was sinking dramatically (82 mm!!). What to do?! Several trees died, and over time the surviving trees grew and needed more space. The experimental roof was leaking, there were storms. The floor tiles loosened and turned into almost deadly traps. Making a child can be fast and enjoyable, raising it is mostly the harder part. And this seems to be the case with this building. It needs people to look after it, to care for it. In most literature on architecture, these people are never mentioned, and their effort and contribution is not investigated nor recognized. But, in the “Voices from the Archive”, the building’s maintenance challenges are explored, and the persons responsible appear on the stage.

With a rich and even subtle entertaining vocabulary, the book describes the political struggles, motives, progress and setbacks as the idea of this common Nordic building moves, or more correctly, stumbles along, forcing a variety of obstacles.

The book is divided into two parts – the first one about the process and the building as such, and then a second part written by nine invited authors, each part of about four pages, writing about very specific themes such as “The Nordic Pavilion as a Venetian Landscape” by Daniela Moderini, or Maria Dolores Sanchez-Moyes writing about the building’s architect in situ, Fredrik Fogh. By reading the book, you end up admiring not only Sverre Fehn, but also persons like Erik Wettergren who fought for the idea of the building more than anyone. It is far too seldom that a piece of architecture is presented with such a well of facts and details as in this book. It is the result of – what must have been – hard work, meticulous digging in archives, patience and passion. This book may have deserved being a hard back. Having said this, the original Ferruzzi photographs are presented on high quality paper, and the competition drawings are on pages you can fold out. This gives the reader the joy of overview and a closer sense of holding the actual drawings in your hands. If you are a reader not too eager to read texts, this book is amazingly rich in illustrations and photos. Reflecting on the challenges concerning the incorporation of such a variety of illustrations, the designer of the book has to be given credits. There are copies of original letters, the competition minutes, competition drawings, construction drawings in different stages, newspapers and contracts and photos prior to, during and after the construction.

The book does not go deeply into why, or by whom, Sverre Fehn was chosen to be the architect to design the Norwegian competition entry. His design of the Pavilion (1956–58) in Brussels is the most obvious reason. However, this pavilion seemed to be admired internationally, but did not

convince the Norwegians in general. Could one reason be the conscious wish for a young architect? Fehn's role in the group Pagon and his close relationship to artists must have played a role in this, or maybe friendships. Was he recognized as the one to give Norwegian architecture a new and prosperous direction? The methodology of this book is solely to let the archives speak. Therefore, you will not find speculations, reflections or interpretations, e.g. on why Fehn was chosen. This book presents the results of an overwhelming work of digging in many archives, and then leaves the reader to do the reflections. It is a sort of anti-phenomenological approach. This is THE book on the Nordic Pavilion. This book may also be considered THE model on how to approach writing about architecture, namely, to present documented facts, and to show how architecture is dependent on so many more forces and people other than the architect.

Epilogue

For further supplementary reading on the history of the Biennale itself, the book "The Venice Biennale 1895–1968, from salon to goldfish bowl", by Lawrence Alloway is recommended. Although, after reading "Voices from the Archives", this book appears somewhat sloppy in documenting the facts presented. Also, the focus in this book is the art, the visitors, the concept and not the buildings. If you can read Norwegian, the "Norsk deltakelse på Venezia-biennalen" by Anne Milnes, 1996, available at the Nasjonalbiblioteket (nb.no), describes in short the history of the Biennale, and then explains the different exhibitions in the Nordic Pavilion, their artists, cooperation challenges between the Nordic countries and the challenges using the building as exhibition space. According to Milnes, 1978 was the first time not only Sweden, Norway and Finland cooperated, but also Denmark and Iceland. This was the year of the first true Nordic cooperation.

The architectural critic and editor of the Norwegian Architectural Review "Arkitektur N", Gaute Brochmann, wrote a critique on the "Nordic Pavilion – Voices from the Archives" in *Morgenbladet*, February 2021. He praises the archival work of the authors, but also had some major critical remarks, and in the following I will give my comments to the major ones.

Brochmann experiences the book as extremely dry, the storytelling boring and far too scientific. I believe, for a general reader not experienced in scientific writing, the text in some sections may be experienced as too dry. However, if you are familiar with scientific reading, I will claim that this text is juicy in comparison. Also, it makes total sense to read the chapters that catch your attention, and then only dive into the details if you are interested. Pictures and figures are all given meaningful texts, serving as teasers for the main text.

The book fits the reader who prefers texts to present facts, rather than texts presenting interpretations. Some of the sections do have – to use Brochmann’s expression – “pathological” accuracy, about the position of lamps and trees for example, and you may fall asleep while reading it. But in my opinion, these examples are more the exceptions, and not a central part of the book. In Brochmann’s opinion, small coincidental details are given “meaning”. Yes, there are small details and coincidences described, but no – the details are not given “meaning”. There is no Christian Norberg-Schulz voice explaining the meaning of life through a piece of architecture. This is why I personally appreciate this book.

Brochmann experiences a spiritual relationship between the authors and Sverre Fehn – one he does not share. I believe many readers would find it difficult to share Sverre Fehn’s ideas about the horizon, the ship, and how he explains the creation and meaning of his architecture. However, this is not what the book is about, to my relief, and the reader does not have to be part of any spiritual Fehn community to enjoy the texts. Brochmann also finds the process behind the building incredibly uninteresting and lacking drama. Personally I find a lot of drama in this story, but maybe one needs personal experiences of struggling with bureaucracies and building processes to colour it? For sure, the process leading to the architectural competition is not at all a straightforward process. Any architectural competition has its tensions, and so does the Nordic Pavilion. And lastly, the finished building faces more challenges than any average building – both technically and logistically: the sinking column, the leaking roof and dying trees – all problems to be handled by three different Nordic countries in Venice. I believe it is difficult to find a more thrilling plot.