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## EDITORS' NOTES OFFERING A VISIONARY REALITY – ARCHITECTURE AS FICTION

STEN GROMARK, MARIUS FISKEVOLD AND  
MAGNUS RÖNN

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This mixed issue presents five scientific articles and three book reviews. The articles have been framed by the initial phase of a potential theme discussion on architecture as fiction.

### Beyond Nature

For most people, the experience of architecture, landscape architecture and urban space takes place in an environment we know well. It can be on the way to work or studies, on holiday or visiting friends. We walk, we observe, and we notice much of what presents itself to our senses and our body. Independent of surroundings like the city or the countryside, nature is simultaneously part of our activities and experience of architecture. Light and shadows fall on facades, floors, and ceilings. Sun and rain make the colours saturated or diluted. Daylight highlights and mutes the contours of built or natural surfaces.

However, when we would like to *tell* others about the impressions and experiences we have received, we start *imaging* our built or natural environment. At the same time, nature's presence vanishes. Then we stand back with our language, our concepts, values and beliefs. Buildings, urban spaces, and landscapes are given meaning through history, political processes, people's involvement and literary interpretations, ultimately expressed in design drawings, illustrations, models, photos and gestures.



In this issue of *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, some of the articles point to such procreations of meaning. Architecture as fiction, reality as illusion, engages architecture in two ways: on the one hand, architecture seems to evolve beyond time and space, as we may experience the environment from the timeless point of view of eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis*, without consideration of local or temporal conditions. On the other hand, architecture is bound to contemporary human imagination, to natural sites and to critical interpretation. Man-made environments then become home to a multi-layered reality in which we might also include our *illusions* and profound desires, along with our quest for meaningful narratives.

### The Potential of the Illusion

Briefly, this fictional creativity could be summarized as a *play-up to reality*. The word *illusion* originally has this meaning of imitating or to play against something else. In the aesthetic literature, Hans-Georg Gadamer has taken up play, *Spiel*, as one of his three terms for characterizing the beautiful (Gadamer, 2009, p. 29). Together with *Symbol* and *Fest*, the notion of *Spiel* attempts to express the relevance of beauty in society. Illusion can thus be understood as a play of beauty on some form of reality.

Any form of planning activity could be described as fictional. Drafts have never been exposed to nature's random whims or sudden changes. On the contrary, the play-up to reality will lie in the planning proposal, in the draft as a primary generator in design (Darke, 1979). In the proposals, planned objects are just illusionary, imaginatively playing with nature, neighbourhoods, and the surface of earth.

And in this play, there is potential as well as diversions. Images we have never seen before can be mediated through a building, an urban space, or a landscape. In the transition between reality and illusion, fiction opens new spaces. However, these spaces might be restricted to the virtual domain.

### The Power of the Illusion

Today, traditional material illusion is challenged by its virtual twin. Through new electronic tools, we have increasingly become able to simulate elements and processes in material space. A *parallel* reality thus arises. This alignment might be amusing, but also confusing. References become unclear and authenticity is thereby much debated.

We observe this ongoing change of reference between material and virtual space particularly well in architectural competitions. Design proposals are models, visualizing the foreseeable future – not as it is but how the world of tomorrow would look like if they would be fully imple-

mented. On the one hand, the proposals yearn to be realized, but on the other hand, they make our longings come true. Competitions project virtual possibilities, making the seemingly impossible possible.

Neither the luminous facades in the winning design of 2009 for the *Munch Museum* in Oslo nor the alabaster hall in the *National Museum*, as proposed in competitions originating from 2010, will ever be possible to observe in real urban space. Their reality remained as illusion in the virtual space of the competition. Both the luminous facades and the alabaster hall were abandoned in the construction process. Nevertheless, these key design elements had a decisive impact on the conditions for implementation of the project. The once so vague, evoked illusions ultimately led to the material reality we can experience today.

## The Potential to Keep Nature as a Non-Human Corrective

When the virtually created illusion becomes decisive for our predictions of future experiences, but still does not keep what it promised at the moment of decision itself, the entire relationship between illusion and reality is put into play.

Increasingly, technology is gaining ground on our understanding of reality and our expectations. In the virtual oriented world, we live in metaverses, get our knowledge from hits, trade in bitcoin and speculate in future events. In these fantasy images, we seem to leave the material world we already inhabit. As Baudrillard claims, we lose the imagery that arises from the contradiction between illusion and reality:

*There is no longer a respective position – the real disappearing to make room for an image, more real than the real, and conversely – the remainder disappearing from the assigned location to resurface inside out, in what it was the remainder of, etc. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 144).*

In the virtual world, we don't have to worry about the course of nature and material corrections. Our ideals need no longer resemble a shadow cast by the slopes and precipices of the earth's surface. The Nordic night, which Christian Norberg-Schultz believed was so decisive for Nordic architecture (Norberg-Schulz, 1993, p. 15), the long bright summer nights and the dark winter days are normalized by the ideal day of the software. We do not need the built resistance to nature's fleeting course. The resemblance between human and natural flow totally blends with the existential difference.

But at one point or another, the fantasy images must be exchanged for some material currency. Drafts will become buildings, roads, or other man-made surfaces. Illusions will be incorporated into reality.



As a matter of fact, fiction, reality as illusion, needs to be contrasted by nature. Fiction needs a non-human correcting force, that lies beyond the limitations of any expected and programmed reality.

### The Potential to Keep Public Decision-making processes as a Political Corrective

Likewise, as for example architectural competitions demonstrate, fiction also needs a human correcting force. That means, architecture as fiction is also political.

The government-quarter design in Oslo was selected through an architectural competition. This competition was political, but the programming, the judging and not least the decision to announce the competitions was equally political and professional. They dealt with the rules of the game in society, strongly supported in architecture and urban design by the architects' associations in the Nordic countries. A small jury decided what kind of space citizens would face when the projects were realized. Ideals in design met reality. The arguments for selection of a winner were made public in jury reports and can be criticized. In open competitions, young, inexperienced architects were allowed to meet the sluggers in the industry on equal terms.

### The Potential to Exchange Ideas and Visions

Both the natural and the political correctives of human fictions modify and align the architectural draft to the expectations of site and society. These preconditions are expressed in the actual exchange of ideas and visions.

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has pointed to the central role of fiction during the rise of what he calls the *bourgeois public sphere* in the 18th century. In Habermas' version, fiction plays a central role in the conversation between independent citizens in a free society. For Habermas, fiction is not just a term for a specific literary genre, but also describes a more basic form of communication (Habermas, 2005, p. 69).

Habermas believes that the reader interprets the author's text with his own experiences. At the same time, this interpretation gives the reader motivation to try out new experiences. And together they can take part in this process, discuss their mutual experiences, and drive the world forward as a project of enlightenment. This is how the illusion, the play-up to reality, takes the whole thing one step further. Both by explaining to us where we are, and in favourable areas, pointing out the course ahead.

As professionals, we exchange our ideas about the good place, the smart building or the diverse urban space. We provide the plans and models, or other forms of representations. We present our thoughts in media that can be shared and appropriated by others than ourselves. Architecture is considered of vital importance for society. Understanding architecture as fiction can be a way to continue this investigating approach to explore both natural and man-made environments. As illusion, planning produces the creative impulses that ensures and enriches both a political as well as a natural reality.

## Articles

The *first* article in this mixed issue 2022-2 carries the title “Experimental approaches to citizen involvement in planning: human and nonhuman actors in networks of power-relations”, presented by Gisle Løkken, architect/partner at 70°N architects and PhD Candidate at NTNU in Trondheim, Norway.

The Nordic countries all have a strong and much-admired reputation for applying democratic procedures in welfare planning and residential design. This stance follows in the footsteps of general waves of radicalization post '68, marked by substantial cultural turmoil within the profession, as in society at large. Some voices, however, direct a sharp critique of this attitude and observe in those situations nothing but *tokenism* or symbolic participation on less vital, secondary issues. Hegemonic cultural powers always regain their momentarily lost positions in processes of *récupération* – a concept for cultural normalisation of radical ideas also including the hijacking of valid and bright ideas<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the article by Løkken provides a most valuable critical depth of interpretation on the theme as sketched above, firmly based on empirical longitudinal on-site observations. It brings to light a transgressive and fairly unknown locally initiated process of exploration with many qualities, observed over an extended time span, during more than 20 years. It could be perceived as a promotion of an experimental *public decision theatre* enabling broad participation in the fast-growing and thriving region of Tromsø, far up north. The provided relations and connections to several major intellectual endeavours of French urban sociology and philosophy are far reaching, including the notion of *actants* of human or non-humankind that has acquired a surprisingly dominant position in the argumentation. This is besides primarily Michel Foucault's perspectives on the crucial relation between power and knowledge, but it indeed also includes Henri Lefebvre and the prominent notion of *the right to the city* from 1968. The results or effects of the process studied are certainly manifold but perhaps, at least, a huge shadowing high-rise hotel right on the waterfront was apparently avoided and replaced by a green park area.

1 French dictionary Larousse has the following definition: “Fait de reprendre à son profit un mouvement d'opinion, une action collective en les détournant de leur sens original.”

The *second* article is entitled “Art and Politics in Architectural Competitions” and is written by Aleksander Bern. The author explores the mutual interconnection between aesthetics and politics, drawing on some examples from the Fjord City planning area in Oslo, Norway. In this way, Bern provides a space for the fictional aspect of architecture. As he states in the conclusion, “what most clearly separates architecture from other forms of art is that it always must have some end beyond itself”. Architecture is not materialized for its own sake, but to offer different groups of people an aesthetic add-on to their everyday environment.

Architectural competitions are often a step on this path. Architectural competitions might be held as the core area of fiction. When several teams eagerly promote the future image of the city, they all have to rely on the power of illusion. Both the architects, as well as the public board members, are inscribed as participants in this space of imagination, experimentation and vision. Bern studies six different cases in his article: the Munch Museum, the new main library, the new National Museum, The Medieval Park and Vippetangen, and a parallel assignment called B6A/B6B.

As a theoretical point of departure, Bern reads the thoughts of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière into the aesthetic-political discourse. Rancière emphasises the distribution of spaces and those who decide how places should be used and received. “Dissensus” might offer a redistribution of these apparent power relations. And dissensus occurs when people raise their voices to be heard and their sensations of the world to be visible. In his conclusion, Bern finds the dissensus, interpreted as the right to the city, at least in the architects’ approach to the competitions. And as a small consolation prize, he mentions the public access to the rooftop on the Munch Museum. There is no doubt that dissensus still has potential in public decision-making processes.

The *third* contribution raises political issues of professional responsibilities concerning architecture in ageing welfare societies. This article is entitled “Planning for Human Diversity: Design Patterns of Universal Design”. The authors are Lillian Müller, Daniel Wojahn, Ida Sandström and Per-Olof Hedvall. They examine the lack and presence of Universal Design in contemporary architecture and urban design. The study starts with an “in-situ” approach, visiting and documenting accessibility to public spaces, schools and housing. Eight implemented projects have been investigated: an arena for sports; housing on a challenging plot; a park, centrally located; a cultural-historical building; a school; a museum; a hub for public transport; and an urban development site.

The purpose of the study is to contribute to a more developed and nuanced discussion on inclusive design possibilities. The authors are looking for patterns that support the implementation of Universal Design in

architecture and urban design in the built environment. An additional objective is to identify critical phases in the planning and building processes where Universal Design is at risk of getting lost. The investigation has a multidisciplinary nature. In analyses of data, two different patterns could be identified: 1) Patterns supporting Universal Design had solutions that provided citizens equal access to space. This design does not separate people. Instead, design solutions facilitate equal usage by putting low demand on the end-users' abilities. 2) Patterns that didn't respect Universal Design. This environment is characterised by an unequal design for end-users and inequality through increased demands on users' abilities. As an unaddressed, architectonic challenge, the article also highlights the contradiction between universal and site-specific design: In what ways can universal design be incorporated in the nature of the place and thereby create experimental, material fictions?

The *fourth* and *fifth* articles are in Nordic languages. The contribution "Torborg Zimmer. Kvinnelig pioner og banebryter i norsk landskapsarkitektur" (Torborg Zimmer. Female pioneer and trailblazer in Norwegian landscape architecture), by PhD student Berit Rønsen, presents the career of the landscape architect Torborg Zimmer. She was one of the first women who, in the 1930s, started their professional careers as landscape architects in Norway. Rønsen highlights Zimmer's ability to introduce new ideas and contemporary design from abroad, and her skill to participate in the professional discourse of her time. We still find some of her ideas materialized in gardens, mainly in the Western part of Norway. The ability to acquire design ideas from abroad, but still give them material expression on a steep, hilly and partly barren surface shows how landscape architecture at its best represents a play on, and play with, known reality. Zimmer also had the ability to create new landscapes by combining the international trends of the time, the natural conditions of the area and the notion of an alternative layout of the surface. Her plans thus convey fictions in the language of architecture. Zimmer gave her clients the opportunity to familiarize themselves with several drafts, to imagine future walks and stays, through drawing and description, and thus to take part in the images themselves, long before the artificial arrangement of natural features gave these images material support.

The final article in the mixed issue is "Vegetationsplanering i Uppsala under 200 år – ideal, funktion och historiska avtryck" (Vegetation planning in Uppsala for 200 years – ideal, function and historical expression), by Roger Elg. In this contribution, Elg deals with landscape architecture in the city over a long period of time, starting from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Elg, new design ideas for green structure in Europe travelled to Sweden surprisingly fast, despite different climate conditions. Their widespread prevalence is due to their form as fiction. Green areas in the cities have been pointed out by the European Commission (2020) and by the United Nations (2015) in "The 2030 Agenda for sustain-

able development”. Elg turns to history to shed light on the contemporary agenda for landscape architecture.

Elg shows in his article the overall objectives for planning and design of parks and green structures in the city. Design ideas have transformed vegetation areas in a longer time perspective. The main task for landscape architecture is separated into four specific historical periods: 1) In the first period, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the planning of vegetation in the city has fire protection and wind shelter as primary generators for the design practice. 2) In the second period, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the landscape was designed to support social meeting. 3) The third period starts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when physical activity and contact with nature is at the centre of design. The fourth period starts in late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is characterized by biological diversity and the development of sustainable cities as typical goals for landscape architecture. Parallel to this transformation in the planning of vegetation, the meaning of aesthetic values and ideas of beauty have varied, with respect to contemporary architecture.

## Book reviews

The recently published book on *Making the Arctic City*, by Peter Hemmersam, is reviewed by Tiina Merikoski, postdoctoral researcher at Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland. The topic in question is recently gaining considerable momentum, following the climate change debate and geopolitical repositioning, while the pace of melting ice accelerates. These profound transformations will certainly alter our perspectives of the Northern and Nordic world for a long time to come. This thorough presentation is a welcome introduction to another unexpected urban future.

➔ Hemmersam, P. (2021). *Making the Arctic City. The History and Future of Urbanism in the Circumpolar North*. Bloomsbury.

The book *Creating Built Environments: Bridging Knowledge and Practice Divides*, by Roderick J. Lawrence, is reviewed by Mattias Kärrholm, Professor at the Department of Architecture and Built Environment, LTH Lund, Sweden. Professor Lawrence summarizes in this book a long academic career with many connections and collaborations with Nordic academia along the way. Lately, he has published widely and internationally on the concept of inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity and has also taken an active part in the EU-wide COST Action project “Intrepid” on this topic.

➔ Lawrence, R. J. (2020). *Creating Built Environments. Bridging Knowledge and Practice Divides*. Routledge.

The new book by John Kraft with the title *Trojas murar – Labyrinter under 3000 år*, in English “The Walls of Troy. Labyrinths for 3000 years” is reviewed by Professor emeritus Rolf Johansson, at SLU, Lund, Sweden. The mysticism emanating in Greek mythology from the *labyrinth* or the *maze* is considered a key concept in architecture. It is as much conceived as an intricate, built urban structure as a symbol of challenging post-modern perceptions of rationality.

➡ Kraft, J. (2022). *Trojas murar – Labyrinter under 3000 år*. PO Flodbergs förlag.

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