The modern Nordic architect has often been regarded as typically an idealist, and this was certainly true in the decades around 1960. However, understandings of forms of idealism obviously differ, both in a historical, diachronic perspective and in a time-bound, synchronic view, a fact that makes a comprehensive analysis in a brief format hard to achieve. Around 1960 it is particularly striking that universalizing and idealistic interpretations of the concepts of “the individual” and of “humanism” take on very different meanings in two, opposing, attitudes among architects.

In the following discussion of a division of priorities as to current agenda among progressive Nordic architects on the threshold between the 1950’s and the 1960’s, it will have been presupposed that there is no common Nordic approach in architecture, as is often assumed, but instead a particular, inter-Nordic mode of approach. This presupposition is made against the background of my previous research which was most recently formulated in a paper presented at the Utzon Symposium in Aalborg in 2003.1 Equally and on the same research basis, I will continue to maintain here that a displacement of priorities may in fact be observed among the Nordic nations, at different times during the 20th century, as regards architectonic norms in relation to political status. Such national tendencies may concern abstraction in form, versus a concern for the culturally evolved artefact-in-the making, or, as it turns out at the point in time discussed here, a common humanism expressed in universal cultural values rather than in sociopolitical, democratic, imperatives.

And yet period tendencies have been seen frequently to touch and even conflate among modern architects of the different Nordic countries, overriding local/national economic agenda and sociopolitical norms. Such tendencies anticipate present globalization. Thus a preoccupation with the notions of “idealism” and “universal values” is evident among internationally minded, Nordic architects in the years around 1960, at the same time as the architect’s responsibility towards the community of users in the tradition of CIAM continues to be debated and questioned. Here the question that is raised is whether “idealism” as discussed by those same Nordic architects presupposes a concern with responsibility. And further, whether responsibility spells compromise.
Hence the specific question that has motivated the following review is whether – or under what conditions – the Nordic architect allows himself/herself readily to compromise his/her autonomous architectonic formalism, and then, too, if a humane and social orientation may be seen to differ from – or relate to – general period tendencies.

A latent conflict in the normally pragmatic Nordic architect, between architectonic idealism and sociopolitical compromise, may be spotlighted in two citations from Finland and Norway:

The professions specialize more and more. And the hyper-specialist becomes the superman of his line of business. Our business is so close to the reality of life that we receive from the community that criticism and control which keep us away from the lines of specialization... Architecture must therefore [...] seek out the universal phenomena in life and the universal reactions in the human individuals that make up the communities. The architect is the tool of the community, but he must not merely be its slave. Each person, the carpenter as well as the statesman, knows that in all professions there are things where compromise is equal to treason. The striving for a synthesis which is as objective as possible and an inclination for spineless compromise are each other’s opposites.

Aulis Blomstedt, in Arkitehti, 1962.2

In the concluding statement of a brief exposition on the subject of "Measurements and proportions" in exhibition design, Aulis Blomstedt confronts us with what appears to be a dilemma with wider, and inter-Nordic, implications. The artist architect – using measurements and proportions as the painter uses his colours – is held up vis-à-vis the community of individuals. From their subjective standpoints they must generalize, since it is their task to control and criticize the work he does for them. They are each of them members of a larger community of people and this fact is at the same time the very reason for him to insist on offering them a universal synthesis. In pursuing the universal, the architect demonstrates his idealism, and he makes it clear that he has no intention of compromising that idealism.

Blomstedt’s pronouncement may remind us of another one made some six years earlier in Norway on the opposite side of the Nordic region, by Group 5 – Sverre Fehn, Geir Grung, Håkon Mjelva, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Odd Østbye – who were young architects of an avantgarde promoting analysis through abstraction. Even an extract from the concluding lines of what has the appearance of a manifesto expresses their hell-bent idealism:

Modern is that architecture which realizes the possibilities of the era. The possibilities of an era have nothing to do with the conscious wishes of the public, but imply an unexpected enrichment through realization. The conscious wishes of the public will always adhere to detail without understanding that architecture is not motif but environment, totality and interaction...

And they conclude:

Modern is that architecture which provides possibilities of growth for human values. Human values have nothing to do with the idiosyncracies of the individual, but can only be attained through an active attitude towards the environment...

Group 5, in A5, Meningsblad for unge arkitekter, 19563

What Group 5 also had in common with Aulis Blomstedt (1906-79) was that they, led by Arne Korsmo (1900-68), were among the new Nordic bearers of the CIAM banner. Individual representatives from the Nordic countries – major first-generation functionalists such as Sven Markelius, Uno Åhrén, Alvar Aalto, Lars Backer, Herman Munthe-Kaas, Frithjof Reppen – had attended various CIAM meetings as early as the end of the 1920s, as well as Vilhelm Lauritzen in 1951; in 1952 there was even a preparatory meeting for CIAM IX and its Habitat Charter at Sigtuna, Sweden. But what happened now was a different start, and this presentation of their work and aims by Group 5 in fact both reflected and anticipated the shift of initiative – to a young generation – which was to be advised by Le Corbusier in a "Message" to the CIAM X congress in August that same year.4 Parallel to the Group 5 statement, a couple of articles in the same first issue of A5 in 1956, thematizing Modern Norwegian Architecture, focused on the contributions of the Norwegian 1930s pioneering generation; tribute was paid to their buildings, and the demise of their political efforts was debated, respectively, while Arne Korsmo turned directly to the contemporary, young "architect-minds" in an account of his own work.5 And central to Korsmo's approach was the
function of the artistic idea as an illuminator of the greater structure of things, in almost diametrical opposition to the dominant sociopolitical and urbanistic prerogative of CIAM.

At this time, what might be described as local sub-fractions of CIAM had already been established in Norway and Finland – only. The initiative had been taken in Norway through the early, post-war formation of a group of young progressive architects with ideological links to sympathizers in Denmark. Subsequently, in 1949, they declared themselves as the Norwegian PAGON-group (active until 1956); Danish Jørn Utzon was a guest member. In Finland it was Aulis Blomstedt, ably seconded among others by the young Reima Pietilä (1923–87), who became the ideological leader of the Finnish CIAM-group, started in 1953. And Blomstedt on his part predicated "an absolute architecture" which was programmatically anti-intuitive and instead focused on pure, architectonic solutions to spatial problems. It constitutes an even more abstract approach than Korsmo’s.

Meanwhile, against the background of the two statements it is important to recall that at this point the democratic welfare state had been in full flower for at least one generation of architects and planners in the Nordic countries. Since the 1930s social politics had increasingly infiltrated the processes of public building – primarily, of course, within housing and urban planning; from the post-war years until the early 1970s this directed process of modernization was instigated by a Social Democracy that was either in govern-
mental position or frequently allied to it, in all four countries; here meaning Sweden and Denmark as separate from Norway and Finland, where the effects of WWII and Reconstruction were far more thoroughgoing, delaying somewhat the construction of a welfare state into the 1950s. But the basis for a general democratic effort, in spite of party differences, was without doubt an interrelated set of Nordic cultural and sociopolitical norms going back on sufficiently similar geographical and economic conditions – apart from intermittently shared histories. This meant now that in an overall picture the political left had – in company with the centre and the liberal right – generally accepted economic growth as the engine of society. And the wheel of the engine was the open Nordic tradition of negotiations, sufficiently often in a spirit of mutual agreement and democratic loyalty, despite evident divergences between the nations as regards normative ways of perception.7 This produced the Nordic humanist-utopistic model for social planning, and is, I suggest, an expression of what I shall describe as “democratic idealism” in this paper.

What is relevant here, however, is that the actual concept of democracy is in fact absent in the two statements – from differing sources – cited above. A democratic procedure as between client group and architect, or between the architect and other professional consultants representing “the community” and involved in the design and building process, is not even implied. As regards the community of users, according to the 1962 statement they are to be unexpectedly “enriched”, but they are apparently spurned by the “active” architects who will conceptualize and form their environment for them. While in 1962 no compromise is to be expected.

The statements exhibit an idealism which in reality fosters aesthetic autonomy in the architect’s work and is readily characterized by architectonic formalism. One thesis I have put forward, is that in architectonic terms collective, nation-defining agenda in Norway and Finland – resulting from their having achieved national independence in 1905 and 1917, respectively – may explain a directed cultivation of international and rationalist, formal tendencies in their modern architecture.8 In both countries the agenda is pushed by a conspicuous elite. In Finland the additional fact of the shared borderline with Soviet Russia, has also favoured a differing code of demeanour – a political stance of caution and independence.9 It appears, too, that the autonomy of the Finnish artist architect’s vision may coincide with the aesthetic idealism of the state cultural apparatus, disregarding common – Nordic – cultural norms.10

The central question here, then, concerns the way in which such artistic idealism differs – disregarding its universalizing rhetoric – from a democratic-humanistic form for idealism, explicitly interested in the conditions for living of the human community and expressed in universal cultural values. One may naturally ask whether idealism – by definition directed towards an ideal and shunning present reality – could possibly admit of compromise. That means to say, whether the democratic “project” of the welfare state as regards ideals in architecture and planning can be anything but a contradiction in terms? Would a utopistic “middle way” – such as the one between economic individualism and collectivism that the Swedish welfare state and many collaborating architects attempted to take in the 1930s to 60s – be a tour-de-force, a dilemma or even a joke?11

To illustrate the problem, a democratic idealism may be traced in the call for an all-embracing approach in architecture that had been made by the ageing Walter Gropius in a talk at the San Paolo M useum of M odern Art in 1954; it was reprinted in a Danish translation in the January number of A5 in 1955,12 meaning to say here, that it was considered important by the young Danish architects who edited the magazine. The talk has a critical bearing, bringing up two major, and possibly contradictory, aspects of the dream of a humanistic, universal approach.

The first aspect is Gropius’ evident concern regarding the influence of the visual environment on users and the role of architects and planners in the effort to make the lives of men and women happier and more productive. Taking issue with the growing tendency towards specialization, Gropius proposes “a human standard that suits all of society”, but which may at the same time also satisfy the wishes of the individual, through applied modifications. He claims that it is not enough just to defend democracy; instead he states that “we must win the struggle of ideas by making democracy into a positive strength”. For the young generation this should mean finding “a common expression, rather than a pretentious individualism”. “Individualism” is here seen as propagating an autonomous approach.
Gropius' underlying assumption is that the fulfilment of the need for beauty is at least as important for a civilized life, as is the satisfaction of material needs for our physical well-being. Asking himself whether he who creates a rose or a tulip is an artist or a technician, Gropius asserts that in nature usefulness and beauty are integral as well as mutually interdependent; the organic process of creation in nature is the model for all human creation, whether the result is the spiritual endeavour of the inventor, or the intuition of the artist. And this is the second aspect.

In fact Gropius here mirrors the humanistic standpoint taken by Jørn Utzon and Tobias Faber in a joint manifesto in the Danish journal Arkitekten already in 1947, as well as the position of Arne Korsmo – who of course collaborated with Utzon in some competition projects in 1947–49 – in his article to the young architects mentioned above. In both these texts by – different – young, Nordic, progressive architects the point of departure is the logical structures of nature as seen in the plant world, with reference in the 1947 statement also to the mineral world. Alvar Aalto, on his part, had originally used the concept of mutually variant combinations of nature as a model already in 1941 when he developed his ideas on an “archi-technic” art of building. This meant “a system” which was capable of absorbing “the whole scale of dissimilarities that we find among people and groups of people”. Korsmo echoes both Alvar Aalto and, following Aalto, Utzon when he maintains that

... all nature has a clear and logical structure, but at the same time every living thing must adapt itself to changing living
conditions and seek out its form and nuances of growth in time and space.

But Korsmo’s conclusion regarding the inevitable universalization that this insight brings differs from Gropius’ critical stand, and instead foreshadows Aulis Blomstedt’s position of abstraction:

In architecture as in the world of objects we seek for the universal. Geographical position and country give rise to differences according to the law of adaption, therefore we must work first with universal standards. In all parts of the world men are working to-day on such basic principles.\(^{15}\)

One asks oneself if Korsmo’s conclusion in fact reveals a wishful agenda, or whether he believed, simply, that it is only by examining what is universal, that we may understand the variation.

What, then, is the inevitable next stage in the Norwegian discourse as presented in A5? In a special issue, Modern Norwegian Art, in 1959, we find a similar division along parallel lines.\(^{16}\) Writing on the task of the progressive “creators of environment” to respond to Norway’s dominant “beautiful and changing nature” and her cultural treasures, and work towards the creation of a modern culture and society, the Norwegian editor Olaf Liisberg calls for a collaboration with artists. And since “visual culture depends on manifold factors” and groups of people, Liisberg declares that these “require a common direction and a dynamic universal understanding”, and that Norway “accepts a visual evolution”. He follows his declaration up by reproducing a series of abstract art works by several artists, mixing them with photographs from nature. However, the special issue ends with what appears to be a counter statement as regards collaboration with artists. It is an article by an academic on “Co-operation and [the] individual” where a socially oriented humanism is disclaimed and the individual rights of the artist are reestablished. The reason is that Norway already over the last 20–30 years has seen the development of a monumental art that has aimed at integrating “the people”, in a new iconography where the heroes have been “the intellectual, the fisherman, the farmer and the worker”. But the new approach ought to be a different one:

Today the situation has changed. The social moment is losing its appeal. Humanism, which has been at its origin once, has to fulfill another task: work for the rights of the individual against collectivism and standardization.

It is obvious that the more clear-cut, opposing issues of the 1960s are imminent, and that the lurking, autonomous formalism of the new architects is correspondingly present in the arts. The same division and the same formalism is especially visible in Denmark, evident in a troubled relationship between craft design and fine art, as well as in the autonomy of work such as Arne Jacobsen’s, or that of Halldor Gunnlögsson and other Danish contemporaries. But what is about to counter this phenomenon – certainly in Swedish large-scale housing programmes (“Miljonprogrammet” 1965–74) and in the innovative, so-called “low-dense” habitations as developed by the architectural firm Vandkunsten in Denmark – is the emergence in concrete terms of a structuralism that is at one and the same time formalist in character and socially oriented. Vandkunsten’s ambition was to see architecture as a framework for, and around, life.\(^{17}\)

What we of course know as a historical fact, is that democratic-humanistic idealism is under continuous ideological threat, but that the threat changes in appearance, as it is tied to a time-bound, societal and economic situation. In the Utzon Symposium paper of 2003 mentioned above, I had already asked myself the question where the client with the expectations and norms of the local/national community could enter the architect’s – in effect – autonomous picture. The contradiction inherent in the two forms of idealism, democratic and artistic, may be recognized in the “double movement” that has been identified by Claes Caldenby in regard to Swedish late-modern architecture.\(^{18}\) It concerns two sides of modernization. Applying the concept here, one side indicates modernity’s collective faith in progress, sanctioning the architect’s specialization within a collective process, and presupposing cultural access on the part of the community’s average potential client; the other is aesthetic modernity’s assumption of artistic autonomy and self-realization.

An early warning of this contradiction in real terms may be found in a pamphlet, Architecture and Democracy, written by Uno Åhrén and published in 1942 by the Cooperative Society in Stockholm. He saw himself forced to conclude that the ideals of democracy cannot be implemented in an economic system that opposes them in important respects. This circumstance, he deemed, was as much the architects’
dilemma as it was that of the present social organization. We may recall that we are here a good decade into the Swedish, post-1930, social housing programme which had meant a period of upturned architectural norms. What Åhrén regrets now to find is a romantic escape by the architects into old artistic ways and into “other ideals” that may bring easier recognition. But he himself is intent on resisting a “let-go” approach as incompatible with a humanistic democratic system; he is also refusing to accept a more efficient - non-democratic - political and economic coordination as an option at the expense of a humanistic ideal of responsible liberty. Instead democracy’s “unlimited reserves of constructive forces” must be put to increased work to secure human rights and ideals - the same feat of critical will that Walter Gropius was to call for, as in 1954 and particularly in many of his late statements. Åhrén and Gropius both continually raised the ethical problem of the architect’s responsibility vis-à-vis the community of users.

In the context of the present discussion of diverse Nordic reception of international impulses, it should be noted as indicatory that the journal of the Danish architectural association in 1962 published the main part of another talk by Gropius, “Arkitekten i fællesskabets spejl” (Der Architekt im Spiegel der Gesellschaft) from 1961, which explicitly urged
However, what the Swede Åhrén could barely foresee was that the type analysis and urban planning that he set store by, would turn into a bureaucratic wave of inhuman technologization and self-serving building research which was to sweep in over Sweden in the name of a state-run system, and which would break only with economic recession. While, again, in divergent Finland Juhani Pallasmaa was to protest continually over time against planning and technology as international phenomena pursued in their own right.

Åhrén’s critical position may be briefly contrasted for emphasis with the openly market-driven, pluralistic scenario of the permissive 1980’s. Sweden, by tradition fearless of popular and cooperative attitudes now combined with an idiosyncratic, frihetlig or “libertarian” aesthetic approach in her modern architecture, was to take a direct hit by postmodernism; meanwhile sociopolitical factors had contributed increasingly to severe restrictions on her architects’ authority in practice. Norway, too, was hard hit in a combined regional and postmodern urge towards detailing, but here the use of flashy materials was due to technocratic tendencies that had been visible already in the 1950s and were amplified as a result of the industrial exploration of newly discovered oil resources. Conversely, postmodern impulses have been only episodic in Denmark, stable in her hang to a reserved universalism and the anonymous, finished detailing of the culturally evolved artefact-in-the-making, while Finland appears to have adapted again on rational and heroic grounds to an alien, but international, phenomenon. Ultimately, architectonic response may be seen to have been steered in each country by local/national variants of a Nordic communality of norms.

Therefore one still asks if artistic idealism could possibly be consonant with and even collaborate with modern society’s pragmatic idealism? Reformulated from a social viewpoint, might a Nordic, humanistic-and-normative approach be decoded as applied idealism? In spite of different approaches, is the assumption of an undercurrent of communal responsibility common to the Nordic countries correct? When – and only when – an applied idealism seems to hold true, not only in principle but temporarily achieved in fact, we may talk of a tour-de-force on Nordic terms. Yet in a continuously troubled world – of which we are part – the dilemma remains.


The reference is to M. W. Childs, Sweden, the Middle Way, Yale University Press 1936/1974.


The two citations are from the English version of Korsmo’s text in A5; see note 5.

The references are to O. Liisberg, "Moderne norsk kultur", pp. 11–16, and to P. Anker, "Samarbeide og individ", pp. 111–12, in A5, M eningsblad for unge arkitekter, 1959: 4–5–6; the citations are from the English version.


