

A path to Utzon

Per Otnes

After two thirds of a three day's urbanism conference¹ despair sets in. The urge to desert, to play truant, becomes compelling. Two days confined inside this spacious hall, all windows closed, and nothing but colour slides, maps and blueprints – most of them beautiful and informative but much too many. And further, words, words, words aplenty but far too little real madness behind them. Most architects don't do texts, they don't even talk, they just point at pictures. If you take the slides from an average urbanist, you take his profession away in the process.

What makes a fact a fact? *Others* having remarked and recorded it, preferably photographed it, it seems. Own observations are suspect in comparison, nothing like a consecrated fact fit for lecturing. *Nicht-Befindlichkeit* and

"A garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house in which nobody lives is in fact not a real house"

Marx: *Grundrisse*

Anderswo-Sein, not *Befindlichkeit* and *Dasein*.

But remembering the venerable *Nullius in verba* such views simply have to be wrong. *Nullius in picturas* as much, and *deferor hospes*², certainly, go visiting, see with your own eyes.

So off you go, first extending a lunch break, and next a full morning session. You want to see real, not sliding architecture.

But where, or who, whose? From the back of the mind the name Jørn

Utzon creeps out, his being praised by local guru Christian Norberg-Schultz³ having stuck albeit not very exactly.

Asking your way this grey and drizzly noon right on Copenhagen's Town Hall Square is nothing like easy. A nice glass stall caters for collective transport, not for the general tourist interest. You're politely asked to "go west, past the Tivoli and then turn left after the *Hard rock café*".

You do, and soon you are facing the real Tourist information counter (indeed after the *Hard rock café*, not very audible at noon even if it's Saturday). And do they do a job: Information for all tastes, castes and creeds, Japanese, Canadian, Malinese etc. Most impressive was the Armenian-looking slightly odd gentleman in a red parka asking in broken English for a "free dentist service for my wife, it's

an emergency". And indeed, there is such a service, welfare even for the tourists.

A Norwegian asking for Utzon proves trickier. Come to think of it, his famed church could be anywhere in Denmark. The lady, sweet, blonde and roundish, disappears for rather a long time, then returns with smiling excuses: "My screen says only *Paustian* for Utzon". She puts it on a city map with the information that its "like an exhibition, mostly furniture". Up north, in the harbour, on a pier.

A thin cabman smelling strongly of tobacco talks his way to your destination. Not too well known a place, it appears. And much smaller than you'd think for fame. "It is very nice – in the summer. You can see it now, the name in black written vertically from the ridge down".

Indeed, even if it sort of shrinks facing its great neighbours – the sea, the wide sound to the north, and the gigantic *Svanemolleværket* (literally the Swan Mill Plant) to the west, *Paustian* is there, or

Paustian

boldface Helvetica letters on its white-washed walls. Smallish, a two storey main building with a one storey restaurant annex to the south. Lunch-time, isn't it, so why not start there?

A quick exterior overview first: The water front and pier edge, parked cars, the road, seven small trees set in flint pebble circles. And the building. A very well-proportioned, conscious use of prefabricated concrete elements, seven columns with high windows on the main building, each with another, smaller window to top it. The façade

looks down on you from under the brim of its sloping roof-cap, grey against the white. Definitely modern, old modern, not a trace of post- in it.

The restaurant repeats the same pattern, only much smaller, five sets of windows and no columns. And all square, flat roof and all. As white inside as out, deep windows or thick walls, giving a niche effect. The grey noon light falls in from the east (yes, east because that's where, not the sun but where the windows are), very beautiful. It almost brings you out there, sheltered but not shut in. An outside right there on the inside, even if *Svanemollen* dominates the view almost completely.

Everything is spotlessly white, except the floor tiles. Another, a minor exception is the lamps, bright pastel-coloured, wafer-cone shaped shades sitting like birds on strings across the room. Almost a touch of post- after all. On each white tablecloth (textile covered by as white paper, changed after each guest) are oil lamps, one large and one small. Remarkable design as well as craft(wo)manship; the wick and container is put inside a bigger cylinder, all glass, all transparent, to be lit from the top and refilled from the side, through the glass tube which also holds the weight of the drop-formed lamp within.

A well-bred young waitress, bright grey eyes and white attire, serves you marinated salmon for a quick lunch. Even the butter is in a design container, another slim cylinder (white) in a bowl. When you turn it upside down, dew-fresh butter appears from out of the well-tempered moisture of the bowl inside, in perfect condition for spreading.

Some 20–25 tables in all but not many guests, an elderly couple having finished a bottle of wine at the window facing you. A younger couple with two small boys at the (not so) far south window. Two female friends finding a table at a window in between. The boys, three and five, play around the tables and in and out of the window niches, but quietly, well-bred too.

There is a smell of grilled food from the kitchen, oddly carnal in the general whiteness. A willed contrast, or just poor ventilation?

Next into the much larger room of the shop, which proves to contain prestige modern (still no post-) furniture, including replicas of famous design pieces, available right away or on order. There are two heights of galleries on all four sides, all nicely lit from above – a slimmish window following the roof ridge – as well as from the eastern front windows.

In the center is the sales counter, circular and slightly sunken, bar-shaped, but no bottles – catalogues, computers and a very discreet cash register. And clerks, who politely answer your questions. And customers or visitors, though very few of them.

A look around, and suspicions confirmed: A lovely big sofa (off-white) at £ 2500. A hall-stand or rather bedroom-stand at £ 250. The next lower room is dominated by beds, single and double, which can be motored into any form or position, elevated, sunk or broken. With heating added, £ 5000, thank you.

It's clear, now, what kind of a place this is, its use if not its "tuning" or *Befindlichkeit*. It's an ultimate post- (after all) or anti-IKEA – as Nordic

but exclusive, not inclusive, both for taste and for wallets' sizes. A stronghold, or HQ, of the Scandinavian modern, epitome of un-homeliness according to a Canadian colleague of the 80ies⁴. Or perhaps change metaphor, church or bethel of that sect or congregation, not fort of troops.

A soft toy elephant, grey, at £ 10 is what your accounts can afford, a souvenir or a gift. The staff is very polite; a real snob is much too snobbish to let people, even inferiors, realise clearly the extent of his/her snobbishness. But politeness notwithstanding – bye, bye, Paustian.

Another talkative taxi driver takes you past the old fort (*Kastellet*) on the way back. After which the Swedish church with an old windmill for a nearest neighbour, but your “how very appropriate” doesn't bring laughs.

They're digging up The King's New City Square – archaeology, it appears, not preparations for Fehn's prizewinning expansion of the Royal Theatre. Further south the cabman is speaking about a much larger, or longer, invisible hole, the *Oresound* tunnel, well on its way from the Danish side “while the Swedes hardly have begun”. Next the beautiful old bourse, slightly faded? “where real Money used to be but only paper now. Or PVC cards”.

Christianshavn, Christiania, Fredriksholm. Back behind the drawn conference windows a local architect is knowledgeable about Utzon and his church. It's at Bagsvaerd, not far by S-train. “Inconspicuous exterior but marvellous interior vaulting. Oh, absolutely, you should go and see it”.

*

The next day, Sunday morning, as grey and mild, is perfect for seeing a masterpiece church. And in proper action, a mass even for a very confirmed atheist (no problem with the housing, just with the idolatry). Very well, the S-train from Norreport to Bagsvaerd at 9.56 a.m. does its job. Well lit in their way the wagons too, once you're back over ground. Not many co-passengers, a mulatto boy of two, dimples and curly hair, in a pram, and his mother and a girlfriend. He's very demanding, trading nuisance for attention to little effect – his mother keeps talking to her friend, so he finally climbs her lap. Later great joy! when another mother with pram and two small girls enter, his friends obviously. Joy turns to tears very soon, though. Bad temper, or just not enough sleep last night?

At Nordhavn (near the Paustian) a group of young “vikings” board. College boys cloaked and clad in homemade Saga style, including mock plastic weapons, axes, daggers, and a giant two-hands' sword etc. They joke good-naturedly with an old lady, who takes it in style, smiling as she leaves.

Ryparken, Emdrup, Dyssegaard (“dysse” means tomb, for the vikings? No), Vangede, Kildebakke, Buddinge (yes, Danish for pudding), Stengarden, and then finally Bagsvaerd. The station is inconspicuous, brick, stairs smelling from last night's pee. Outside a shop, a ticket machine, and a bus and taxi station.

Very few people out at this hour. And the first old man you ask “could you tell me where to find Bagsvaerd church?” just shakes his head. He's not impolite at all, only mute or deaf or both, it dawns. An architect deprived of his slides, perhaps?

Next an old lady, grey hat and blue coat, stocky but very up and going, has the gift of the gab: “To the traffic light, then turn right, about ten minutes, I'd say”. You start walking, past two and three-storey buildings, including some shops. Decent but not classy. The old pub has a few customers even at this hour. An old jingle passes the mind: “Say, why is't so cold in the Minster, Mom dear, while the pub on the corner has lights everywhere, and pintfuls of beer?” Other (near) colleagues' work⁵.

After a zebra crossing on the long, straight, flat road, a slab or block of grey (*toujours ça!*) finally appears. Can it be ...? Or an Army storehouse, or only a sizeable power transformer? But no, it *is* the famous Utzon church, of modest scale once more, and truly not very conspicuous on a first external view. The metaphor of a small power plant – dove, not swan mill? – is rather apt, only with rudimentary chimneys. Or perhaps (for the “chimneys”, towers, have pointed tops) a big grey (oh) cat or panther, resting sphinx-like. And facing west, as any decent church (or any sphinx for all that you know) should.

Concrete elements once more, covered by an inexpensive-looking coating, rectangular tiles, some white in the grey, repeating (or nearly) in miniature the roof pattern of the entire building. The west front roof, steeply sloping, is made of corrugated asbestos cement, or so it seems. A nice but modest temple, no pillars, no towers worth mention, no statues or external decorations whatsoever. There are offices and meeting-rooms and atrium-like gardens in the hind part of the sphinx.

About to enter, curiously, by a northern door marked "Entrance", a man comes out all of the sudden, a round, curly figure in a sweater (guess which colour!), a touch of the Indonesian in him? Eying you eagerly (or slightly hung over) he asks for a fag, to which "sorry, don't smoke" is the only possible answer.

Inside finally, there's first a long, low corridor-vestibule having an oak-and-glass rectangular pattern on both sides covering all of the west front. Doors in the middle lead out on the western wall, into the nave on the eastern wall. You enter.

Lots of bewildered glances meet you, not least from a man next to the door, a verger maybe. "A total stranger, here in our own Bagsvaerd?!" No miracle, perhaps, but quite noteworthy – Proust's aunt, remember. And wary – will the visitor behave?

You will, absolutely, quietly finding a seat apart on a pew on the north wall. Seated on other pews or heavy oaken benches are some 50 churchgoers, most of them old, one in a wheelchair, only two children.

There is presently one dominant centre of attention inside this softly lit room – the Vicar of Bagsvaerd in the pulpit (or at the lectern rather) preaching, in black robe and white ruff. On closer look, it's a vicar, and is she a beauty with her pageboyish blonde hairdo and big glasses! To her right, less conspicuously dressed but in black as well, is her sexton or church clerk, svelte, dark and as beautiful. You remember the old saying, "feeling the evil desire in your heart", but you disagree⁶. Desire is good, and beautiful too – there's no such thing as evil

desire, especially as long as it's remaining in your heart only. And sin similarly – virtual, not real, unknown to pagans and atheists.

Such, however, is not your vicar's sermon. "Today is All Saints and we remember our dead. Not only our close ones but all of them, all those who contributed to making present life agreeable in the kingdom of Denmark". And you wonder, not even a trace of the rotten anymore? but suppress it. *De mortibus nihil nisi bene*, agreed, for most at least, and then even the rest can't fight back.

Your bench is under a gallery which houses the organ and later choristers. But on the opposite, southern wall is another, an open gallery with a congregant or two. You brave it, despite the sermon and the quiet, over and up there for a better view. And it's worth it. The nave and its extraordinary vaulting opens up. It's formed as an internal view of a gigantic wave – a breaker or billow – and not only white-capped but white-washed all over.

In blueprint profile this vault will look like a giant eagle facing west, with windows at its beak. Inside, however, the flame or wave metaphor prevails, extending its unbroken north-southerly parallel over the entire structure. Traces of the shuttering boards, in perfect parallel as well, are clearly visible despite the whitewash. There are two sinister slim folds disappearing into sombre darkness over the main entrance, and two others, bleaker, less deep and more rounded over the altar.

The proportions of this nave are such as to fit nearly perfectly into a cube with sides of c. 20 yards – that is about as high as it's long as it's wide,

though of course much slimmer at the vault apex. The charm of it would seem to be less in its exact shape – a brilliance approaching perhaps the mannered – than in the way it lets the light in, always present, always soft, always distant, with the invisible up above as a main source.

On the ground floor the oak or beech? pews – designed, too, square with no legs – are arranged in five main rows with up to six in each. The central three are in parallel facing the altar, with the outer two slightly curving, giving a semicircle or rather a parenthesis impression. And you remember how influential this basic pattern has been in a number of quite different contexts; schools, concert halls, cinemas, even aircraft, trains and busses. It signifies or even enacts bondage or subordination, one person facing many others who quietly gaze, listen, obey, a sun-sunflower relationship (crowd- or mass-flower would be a better name).

Was there ever a church with the altar or pulpit in its centre and pews in a circle all around? Or a church amphitheatre? Both are so much more modern forms, and yet with more ancient roots: The Greek *agorá* had no fixed seats; the last supper took place around a table – much like a present-day board-meeting where everyone, not just the chair, is expected to speak. The schools' group work are starting to copy it but the churches? even the most modern among them? (and one suspects the post-modern to be unchurchly).

The vicar, undaunted, continues her ritual, supported now by the organist on his gallery, now by choristers,

eight of them, clad in the most horribly ugly electric blue, red and white irregularly large-patterned coats or habits. The music is tolerable but all the tunes unfamiliar, even for an ex-chorister from a neighbouring country. The organist favours regal stops, their fluffy sound matching perhaps the interior? The organ pipes, modern, are set in three niches on the northern wall, with large oaken grid doors, in a pattern similar to the entrance wall (expt the glass) to cover them when not in use.

The congregation behaves, rising and sitting down, singing and co-muttering the words of the so-called lord's prayer etc. The visitor behaves too, not singing or muttering though, and wondering all the while whether you would behave as obediently if it were a Muslim congregation's genuflections and kowtowing. Why not act Mechanic with the Meccans when in Rome like the Romans? And for reasons unknown you suspect, with a trace of guilt, that you wouldn't. Bondage not necessarily stronger for being differently expressed; and isn't even the board-room-table of your preference as or more bounding?

Unnoticed, the leading actors have been off-stage, both returning now, the vicaress in a white and golden chasuble, very becoming. Eucharist is about to be celebrated. A host of little silvery cups are lined on top of a long white wall, waist-high, uniting or indeed separating the altar and the congregation, with a kneeler of matching length in front of it. This is where the real mumbo-jumbo paganism starts and you realise you've never actually seen it at first hand, not ever.

They have to do it in successive teams of 15. Notable in the starting

team is your first friend, the fag-scrourer, gently jumping the queue, as eager for his drop of wine? and the wheelchair-woman with her pusher. The sexton or clerk distributes the wafers and the golden-white vicaress now without her glasses following with the wine in a large beaker, silvery too. Not many drops for each, it appears. And they all leave their cups right there, for the following team to distinguish which are used and which not. Symbolic cannibalism with deficient hygiene to top it! After two teams you leave, as discretely as you came.

Outside a crow sitting on top of a low lamppost is having a meal too. And you speak up, finally, a "Nice meal, eh?" following with "beware of the pies, they're naughty!" but he remembers his St. Franks or Aesops and doesn't deign you with a creak.

Around the corner are more crows, and ravens and pies as well. And mushrooms, lots of them, some fresh, some rotting. And more notably, a ring of low stones about two feet by two, seven in all. A neolithic shrine or court of law perhaps? In keeping with the advice of the first Nordic missionaries, consecrate old places of worship instead of finding new ones to replace them.

Back at the station you despair over the ticket machine, and even with native aid you get it wrong but luckily the controller who boards at Emdrup has mercy on you and the missing five Danish *kroner* is cancelled debt.

Nothing much more to note, expt the occasional wino and bitches in the smokers' compartment. Closer to home there is another baby boy eagerly sucking his comforter, with his

mother, both brown-eyed, and you really want to flap your lips at him but do not dare, his mother being very alert.

And before noon you're back at Norreport, your hotel and conference, catching its last session, still very interesting.

*

If there is a summary it would go somewhat like this: Two outstanding buildings, making the most out of their modest dimensions, the church above all. Still you doubt whether its appraisal is not, as the saying goes, in the eyes of the beholder. A believer preferably. Yes, even though the cross over the altar is so subdued it's hardly visible and six not seven candles, it had better be a believer, in a faith bleak enough to match its soft grey and white interior. Just what the architect's clients wanted, yes, very likely. A Levittown bethel with indirect top lighting. And you remember Tampere's Art nouveau cathedral and Simberg's marvellous stained glass windows all around, red, hot and black *sin* being its main theme. More to your taste despite the non-modernism of its architecture.

And further, light doesn't have to have just one single source. There is a star to outshine any sun, and yet the moon and planets are adding their reflections. And among mortals no less. Light has no single, super-human source. Light arises every where there is *reflection*. And don't we all, even more if we're modern, or post-? So a church had better be a kaleidoscope rather than a single, soft, distant light in the end of the – funnel.

That's my story, then: *There's no architecture apart from the everyday uses of architecture, in which the architects themselves play only a negligible role.* Not so different from the quote with which we began, which goes on:

Thus the product, unlike a mere natural object, proves itself to be, *becomes*, a product only through consumption.

7th–11th Nov 1996

Per Ornes

Professor, Inst. for sosiologi og samfunnsgeografi (ISS), Universitetet i Oslo, Norge

Notes

1. *The urban life-world*, Center for urbanity and aesthetics, Copenhagen University, 1st–3rd Nov 1996.
2. Horace *Epistles*, here after the *Concise Oxford dictionary of quotations* (1985).
3. Its in his *Architecture: Meaning and place*, N.Y. 1986.
4. Grant McCracken: "Homeyness", in E. Hirschman (ed.): *Interpretive consumer research*, Provo, Utah 1988.
5. Ivar Frones, c. 1966, his Norwegian song version of Georg Johannesen's rather free translation of William Blake's *The little vagabond* (1794), here travelling back to English with a twist.
6. Females have fancied preachers for centuries; about time males have their turn.

PS

Det er en betingelse - at en trykt versjon fortsatt får stå uten bilder eller illustrasjoner av noe slag. Ord og tekst er, ihvertfall av og til, en egen slags kunst som tåler å stå aleine. Tekstkunsten kan stå nesten stedløs, men kanskje ikke omvent?

Per Otnes