

## NORWEGIAN WOOD – WENCHE SELMER STYLE

Wood is the all-prevailing material in the architecture of Wenche Selmer (1920–98), one of the very few women who gained a position among renowned Norwegian architects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her own house, designed in collaboration with her husband Jens Selmer received the Sundt Prize 1964–65 for outstanding architecture, and her wooden architecture in general was granted the Timber Award in 1969. This article, then, will treat the issue of architecture and wood, as it is manifest in the work of Wenche Selmer, thus covering several of the interrelated topics mentioned in the invitation. Responding to the environment, she takes her point of departure in traditional building technologies. Moreover, her work contributes to the making of milieus which combines aesthetic distinction and practical solutions that enhance the quality of everyday life.

Searching for words in order to define the architecture of Wenche Selmer, the term ‘thoughtfulness’ comes to mind. The term ‘architectural thoughtfulness’, incidentally, can be used to imply thoughtfulness meaning technical elaboration and precision, or it

may be used in the sense of artistic refinement. However, what I have in mind using the word ‘thoughtfulness’ in the case of Wenche Selmer is the synergy of these two aspects enhanced by a particular empathy and skill with regard to what can be called social and environmental aspects. The terms ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ are here to be taken in their original and wide sense. Moreover, one could say that ‘environmental’ expresses a particular aspect of ‘social’ since it implies the respect for other people and collective, human ambitions.

Wenche Selmer’s oeuvre comprises more than ninety commissions, thirty-five of them are detached houses, mostly in Oslo, and thirty-five are summerhouses or cabins for recreation, in particular on the southern coast of Norway but also in the mountains. The remaining projects are various refurbishing and extension commissions. I would like to structure the following text in three parts, starting with the summerhouses on the coast, then the suburban detached houses, and finally increasing the focus on architectural detail.



### **Attributes to the maritime cultural landscape**

About twenty of the small summerhouses are located in the area of Brekkestø and Åkerøya between the towns Lillesand and Kristiansand. As part of the entire coastline in southern Norway, this is an area that after WW II, and especially during the last thirty years, has been subject to rapidly increasing pressure and demand for development and exploitation. It is an area for which extensive regulations have been put down. The 1971 Act of Coastline and Mountain Area Planning laid down severe restrictions with respect to the opportunity of erecting buildings near the shore. It required master plans that involved co-operation between owners of several adjoining properties and, as a rule, prohibited building within a distance of 100 metres from the shore. An important issue has been the political demand to secure areas for public recrea-

tion in the shore area; areas that are accessible to the general public for picnicking, sunbathing, swimming, boating and fishing<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, the act implied that local (municipal) guidelines were implemented as part of an environmental strategy, including restrictions with respect to the size and height of buildings, instructions for colour, roof shapes and angles and so forth. The degree to which these intentions were followed up in the municipalities, however, varied.

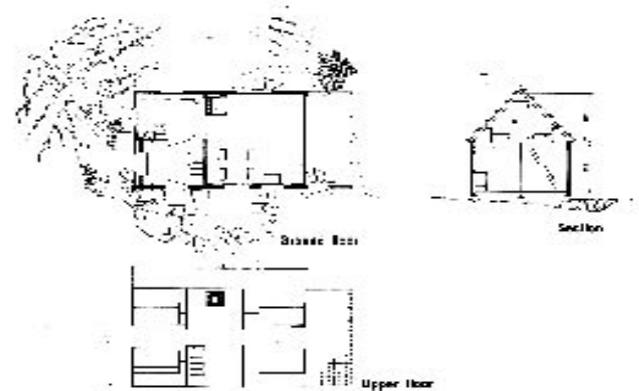
Since her very first summerhouse commission on the small island Fjellaldsøya near Brekkestø in 1953, Wenche Selmer has been looking to the old houses that are typical of the coastline settlements, as a source of inspiration and environmental obligation. She admired especially the small, common one-and-a-half storey wooden houses with rather steep pitched roofs, neat pro-

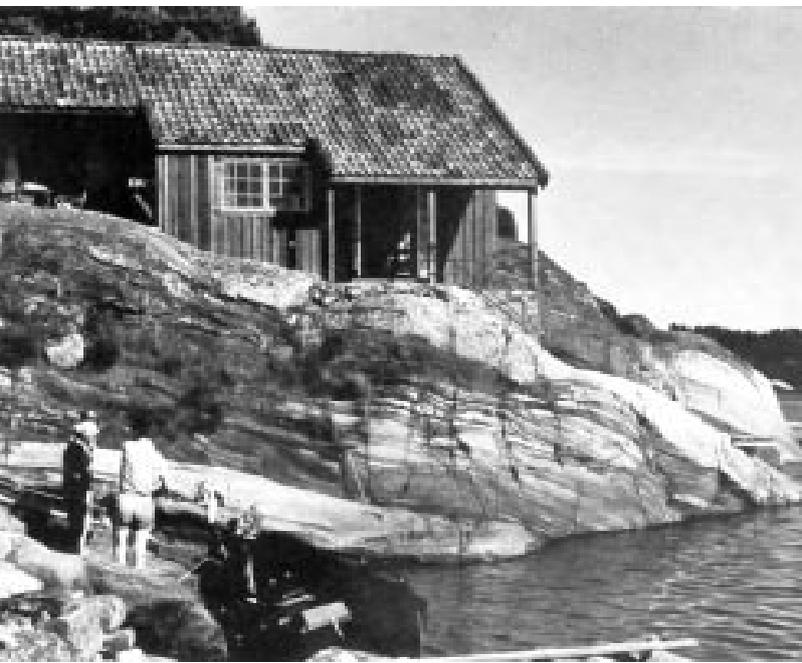
portions and bare lineaments, features that are found in both residential houses and outhouses. Along the coast these houses are either grouped together in tiny villages or clusters (fig. 1), or they are solitary houses such as for instance that of a (former) farmer-fisherman family surrounded by rocky hills, woods and grazing areas for cows and sheep<sup>2</sup>.

From an environmental point of view, and I am here talking primarily of architectural environment, a typical feature of these settlements is the manner in which the buildings are placed in the terrain. Among several important factors are the advantage to protect the living spaces from extreme exposure to seaward wind, yet to have a view of the sea and good access to the shore, to boat and fishing equipment, as well as to other everyday occupations. Extensive encroachments in the hard rocky landscape were avoided. Wharves, cart roads and foundations for wooden constructions were built of stones that were found on the site or pulled out of the ground, out of grassy meadows or marshes that were cleared for the purpose of farming. The landscape of the region is hilly or broken in a rather small scale: small hollows or ravines intersect the rounded rocky parts, which dominate the image. The climate is mild and the vegetation is luxuriant for Norwegian standards. Pine, spruce, juniper, oak, ash, aspen, rowan, birch and various other species grow in the forests.

The summerhouse that Wenche Selmer and her husband Jens built in 1957 on the tiny island Beltesholmen is a tribute to the local building tradition and the way of life it encourages (fig. 2). They said it was also what could be achieved, their financial resources at the time and the capability of the local builder taken into consideration. Until the nineteen sixties there was a shortage of materials and rationing, especially on materials for the purpose of building for leisure. The overall design of the Selmer project on Beltesholmen makes the house look as if it was always there, pulled back from the shore on a small plain between the rocks and the old alder tree.

A closer look, however, quickly reveals the ingenuity of a clever architect who has treated the spaces and the constructions with competence and subtlety. 'Experience from primitive outdoor life has shown what is necessary and what is not', they explained as a guide-



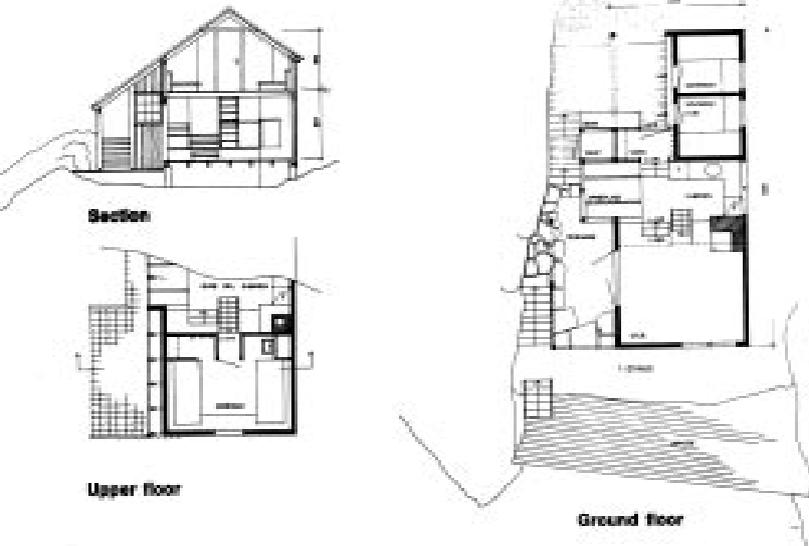


line for the architectural choices that they made. 'In such a place a collapsible table large enough for five games of patience and numerous place settings, is a useful piece of furniture. A spacious entrance where all the fishing gear can be stored, is a blessing. It becomes especially comfortable if one provides exits with different orientations, so that one can choose that which happens to be leeward'<sup>3</sup>.

People took notice of the Selmer summerhouse, and it became the prototype for several other summerhouses as new clients appeared and requested similar qualities, which were then adjusted to the various sites and situations.

A few other of the summerhouses Wenche Selmer designed in the area have similar features but different approaches. The house for Aarnas at Fjellaldsøya (1962) has a more dramatic situation on the rocky site (fig. 3), and the small group of houses, Kisteglad, on Hellersøya (1965) is more intimately related to the sea (fig. 4). This is the only one of Selmer's houses in this area that is not painted: the pressure-impregnated wood cladding has been left untreated since 1965, and displays a silvery grey colour similar to that of old worn pieces of wood having been left exposed to the open air. Generally the summerhouses Wenche Selmer designed on the coast are painted in a particular red colour, deep red with a touch of bluish.

It is appropriate at this point to inform that the buildings in this region normally are painted, the residential houses most often white nowadays, and outhouses red or ochre. During the period after paint was introduced in Norway around 1700 and up until the nineteen sixties, these villages and settlements were even more colourful. In addition to white, various grey or light yellow colours were used on the walls, and even darker colours such as ochre and red were used on residential houses, too. Rear walls on residential houses could be red or ochre (cheaper than white paint) by contrast to the 'repre-



sentative' white front. Moreover, moulding around windows, doors, corners and cornices were often painted in various colours<sup>4</sup>.

It may seem remarkable that during the post-war period, in which modernism was the prevailing ideal, a renowned Oslo architect designed houses that were a tribute to tradition to the degree that Selmer did. However, she followed up the line of influential architects such as Magnus Poulsson, Fredrik Konow Lund and Knut Knutsen. They practised the difficult art of making tradition contemporary, of innovation and selection in the treasurehouse of history without being trapped by sentimentalism. Knut Knutsen was her teacher, and she always mentioned him as the architect that had influenced her work most deeply. It would be a failure, however, to underestimate the innovative dimensions and refinement of modernist architectural spirit in her projects: the lifestyle they advance is definitely modern<sup>5</sup>.

Parallel to the architecture that was clearly alluding to tradition, Wenche Selmer developed coastline projects with distinctly modern architectural features from around nineteen sixty. The summerhouse for Tank Nilsen (1960) and for Grete Alm at Brunlanes (1968) are examples; the latter built in an area subjected to detailed regulations requiring flat roofs, tar brown colours and so forth (fig. 5).

In later projects from the nineteen seventies and eighties in the Brekkestø area, her explicitly modernist approaches are modified towards the more traditional style. These summerhouses have pitched roofs, but the windows are different from the old houses; large sliding doors and several other features testify to a clearly modern architecture.

However, the overall architectural attitude remains the same: the buildings are not 'invisible' but designed with an utmost care in shaping the relationship between building and terrain, manifesting a modesty in terms of limiting the



Figure 4.

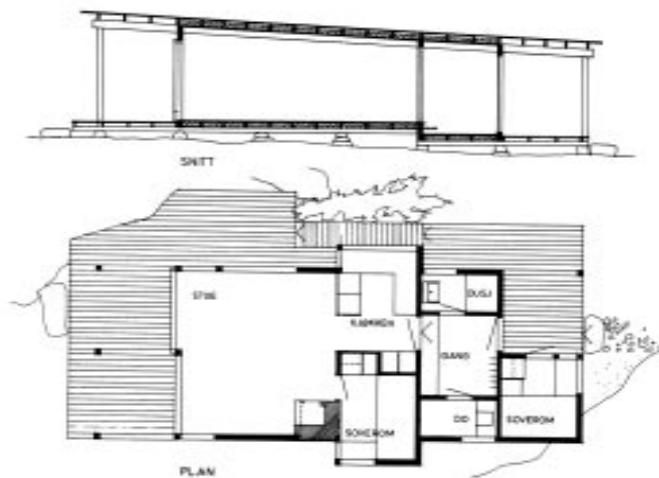


Figure 5.



extent of construction and encroachment in nature. Above all, the manner in which wood is used as a medium of architectural design make them into outstanding participants in the cultural, architectural manifestation of the region. Thus Johan Kloster, curator at the Norwegian Maritime Museum, was able to say that Wenche Selmer's numerous small buildings are attributes to the maritime cultural landscape.

### **Suburban delights**

As indicated above, Wenche Selmer emphasised two aspects as particularly important for her architectural work: the environmental context and the people who would use the house.

Firstly she stressed the importance of establishing a context, to see the surroundings, take them into account and work with them. She claimed that respect for the place and the existing buildings often are lacking when something new is built in a place: 'Even if the houses that are neighbours are uninteresting, or unattractive, and one does not think they matter, they do mean something'<sup>6</sup>. The manner in which the building is placed in the terrain is a major issue. Almost always she perceived the site as a matter of form, it could be a rock, or a small plain; some particular quality that got the project going. When teaching architectural design at the school of architecture, she tried to explain this phenomenon to the students when they had trouble

getting started<sup>7</sup>. She said that one had to sit down on the site, look around, sense the entire environment and take it in as part of oneself.

Then the students (kindly) made fun of her, saying that 'Wenche just sat down and the ideas dropped from heaven'. In some cases, she even slept overnight in a sleeping bag on the site in order to experience the sunrise on the spot. This attitude, naturally, goes for both types of commission – cabins and residential houses.

Wenche Selmer's residential, and suburban, architecture is built in surroundings that are diverse, architecturally. The sites are pieces of land, usually not very big, in areas that have been developed according to individually owned properties and individually designed detached houses. I would like to mention a few issues with respect to the environmental aspects of these projects.

One issue is the manner in which she relates the house to the surroundings, in particular the access or the public side. Using architectural measures such as a carport, a wooden fence, vegetation and different materials on the ground, she is able to create a simple and astonishing spatial differentiation on the site that enhances the qualities of each particular part. The public side becomes well defined, friendly manifesting the presence of ownership and dwelling. A bush, for instance, growing against a piece of rock or a wooden fence endows the place with beauty. The boundary between public and private space is not brutal or exaggerated, but articulated with carefully shaped hints of mediations across and between the two spheres. Wood is the dominating material in the entire architectural complex, which thus would comprise various components including house, carport, and other outdoor arrangements such as fence and weather screens or pergolas. The sameness of material and treatment of it enhances the sense of architectural identity. Examples of this contextual treatment are the house in Sondreveien 18 (1954, fig. 6) and the house in Heierstuveien 3 (1978), both in Oslo .

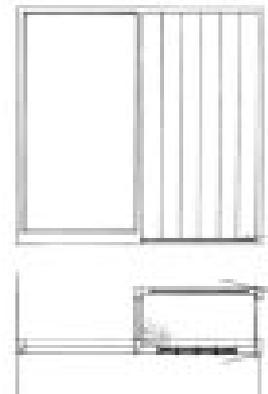
Furthermore, I would like to point out the thoughtful manner in which Selmer inserts a new building in a difficult and tight situation. This is the case in Stjerneveien 8c (1973) where a very small house was to be

built on a narrow site between a house designed by the renowned architect Knut Knutsen on the one side, and a house by Bengt Espen Knutsen on the other. Selmer's solution can be summed up metaphorically in that the house 'does not require a large space in front of or around itself'. It expresses a strong and particular combination of modesty and self-sufficiency.

Several architectural means are used to achieve this. One of them pertains to the relationship between the building and the outdoor space. The ground appears to be common to the three houses; there are no marked boundaries. The sloping ground is treated carefully around the Selmer house, near the walls in order to articulate the building and the transition between the building and the terrain, whether it is rock, gravel, paving stones or grass. The fact that the overall dimensions are moderate and well modulated does not impede the living qualities: doors, windows, terraces are shaped in order to achieve both optimal protection and views and good spatial connection between the interior and the grass outside. Needless to say, the tar brown wooden cladding responds to that of the two neighbouring houses.

Wood as building material represents a particular problem with respect to adapting a building architecturally to the terrain, at least in Northern climates. Owing to the physicochemical conditions of modern buildings and nature, it is not recommended to use wood that enters into the ground. The wood would simply rot. Hence the parts where the wooden constructions above the ground meet the constructions that are on and below the ground, are important architectural elements that must be considered and designed in detail. Selmer's solution was to let the wooden cladding follow the contours as low as possible to the ground. This, again, is dependent on the overall design principles that are used, the principles of composition, the type of panel boarding and so forth.

Now, Wenche Selmer's thorough and empathic concern for the site and its potential was conducted with one major purpose: that of providing spaces with optimal qualities, indoor as well as outdoors. This leads us to the second aspect that Selmer mentioned as important for



her work, that is the usage of the house and the people who would live there, and their needs and desires. The beautiful and friendly inviting way of arranging an access as in Heierstuveien 3, mentioned above, solves at the same time the practical problems of accommodating the car, the bikes, the skis, storage of wood for the fireplace and gardening tools. The building itself is pulled to the edge of the site, to the downward slope, and

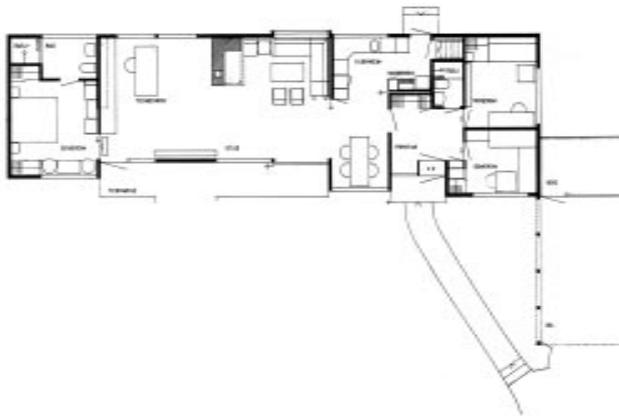
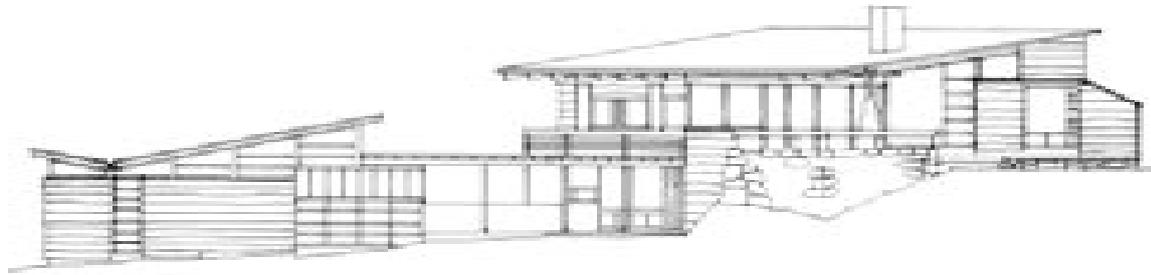


Figure 8.

thus provides a large outdoor space exposed to sun in the afternoon, which is located in connection with the kitchen and the dining place in the house. In the Norwegian climate, people appreciate sun and light and views and spots protected from the wind in outdoor spaces near the house.

Most of Wenche Selmer's commissions concerned small houses, houses with fairly low financial budgets. For this reason, she said, it is important not to waste one square metre on something that is not attractive or useful<sup>8</sup>. She was especially concerned with the spatial coherence or continuity as a strategy to achieve favourable spatial quality. Hence she hardly ever designed a corridor with doors, and she avoided spaces that were exclusively for circulation. Some particular features illustrate how she managed these principles, for example the way she solved the problem of the entrance to a house, the so-called vindfang, the room to 'catch the wind'.

The point with a vindfang is to have two doors between the outside and the living spaces inside in order to prevent cold air and draughts to enter and impoverish the indoor living. Wenche Selmer detested the conventional vindfang filled with rubber boots, outdoor things and clothing one had to stumble over to get in. She used to minimise the vindfang to a space about 100 cm wide and 60 cm deep, the outer door opening towards the outside and the inner towards the inside (fig. 7). In addition there would usually be a roof outside protecting the door, and people as well from rain and snow while the door was being opened. A special carpet on the floor in the vindfang would remove mud from under the shoes. Then the entré usually has a large window to the outside to allow ample visual contact. Often there are ceramic tiles or slate on the floor with heating underneath, so that water from wet shoes can dry. Another typical feature in Selmer's houses is the arrangement



of wardrobes for coats, hats, shoes and gloves: cupboards in general are not detached components but arranged as part of the walls defining the spaces. This principle contributes to the effect of spaciousness and spatial harmony in houses that in fact are minimised, spatially. Wood remains the dominant material.

The house in Trosterudstien in Oslo that Wenche and Jens built for themselves in 1963 displays an outstanding example of the delicate play of deducting and selecting measures of architectural articulation (fig. 8). The relationship between the size of windows and openings and the space inside is balanced effectively so that the actual dimensions of the rooms can be reduced. The dining place or niche, only 2,40 metres wide, takes advantage of a large window placed at a height that enables the people seated at the table to have a panorama view of the garden. Then the entire table can be wheeled a few feet to the kitchen area, and serve as an auxiliary table for kitchen work.

Windows in bedrooms are placed and shaped in such a manner that one does not notice that the rooms in fact are narrow. And, central of course, is the combined spaces for living and working, in which the large sliding doors make the garden, which is sheltered from the road by an evergreen spruce hedge, into a part of the interior.

A look at the interior confirms how the use of wood as a structural principle constitutes the main architectural, and even ornamental, components such as in the system of double main beams and secondary beams. Pinewood is used in panel boarding on the walls and ceiling, as well as in cupboards, shelves and other fittings in the entire house.

Now this house is rare in its denial of bourgeois li-



Figure 9.



graphic studio on the left was added after a few years. A few words suffice here to accompany the illustrations: Kitchen, dining and living areas constitute a continuous space, in which the kitchen and laundry facilities are visually protected from the sitting room. The sliding doors available for partitioning the spaces are hardly ever used, the owner informs<sup>9</sup>. Large windows and sliding doors connect the spaces to the wooded knoll outside, providing opportunity for using two terraces sunlit at different hours, and, most importantly according to the client, to bring the view of the woods into the house. Moreover, the client got what they wanted next, a large fireplace in the middle of the sitting room<sup>10</sup>.

### Norwegian wood Wenche Selmer style

Wenche Selmer's architecture over the period of 45 years shows both persistent continuity and surprising variation, in a large number of projects among which only a few is mentioned here. Wood is the dominant material in her architecture. The additional repertory of material is limited. Outdoors, stone from the sites may be used for walls supporting terraces and as mediators between the building and the terrain. In the interiors fireplaces are made of brick, and some times brown ceramic tiles or slate (a particular rusty type from Skjåk) are used on the floors. Pavement of natural (uncut) slate is used on the floor if there are semi-indoor, semi-outdoor rooms in the cabins. The overall idea is that the material itself constitutes a major architectural means, a source of beauty, and surfaces are only treated when they need protection.

The treatment of the timber surfaces in Wenche Selmer's architecture deserves a chapter in itself, but can only be mentioned briefly here. She experimented with different techniques, taking her point of departure in the tradition of Magnus Poulsson and Knut Knutsen. The painted exteriors of Selmer's summerhouses on the coast were mentioned above. Her suburban houses were usually dark brown, often treated with tar (carbolineum) that left an uneven image as it was absorbed differently into the wood structure. The organic quality of wood thus played an aesthetic role. Sometimes the panel boarding was covered more



festyle, in its minimalism. However, the intricate and refined measures of architectural composition that brings about the apparent simplicity, make it all the more interesting. This particular attitude, this skill, is something that Selmer cultivated and displayed in all her works using wood as the main instrument.

The house in Gråkamveien 7, Oslo (1974) is a larger house than Trosterudstien, and has a more compact and complex spatial organisation (fig. 9). The photo-



completely and evenly with a type of dark brown, tar varnish. With respect to the interior, the pinewood was left untreated in the walls, ceilings and fittings. The floors of pinewood were most often treated with a mixture of turpentine, boiled linseed oil and a traditional breaking colour that made the floor brown. For surfaces that were subject to hard usage, such as the workbench in the kitchen, she often chose a harder and more resistant material, teak. For the same reason, thresholds, when they were unavoidable, could be of oak<sup>11</sup>. Oak was also used in the tables that Jens Selmer designed, and which are found in several of the Selmer houses and cabins.

It is important to point out the significance of wood in the integral totality of structural system, surface materials and spatial composition in Selmer's architec-

ture. The timber-frame constructions she employed with studs hidden inside the walls enables great freedom, plastically. Compared to the module thinking and standardisation that had great success in the post-war period, she could shape the rooms more individually. She could for instance move a wall out in order to achieve a passage inside as well as a particular view outward. The very small moves are essential in this architecture, but it requires great finesse to maintain an architectural composition that is pregnant and not disintegrated. Similar to the vernacular wooden architecture, the beams supporting floors and roofs are visible in the interiors. They are important components in the architectural space. The design of their system – proportioning and pattern – is carefully considered.

To a certain degree Selmer's wooden architecture has

some features in common with traditional masonry architecture, that is the way of treating openings and solids in the walls that at the same time are load bearing, protective and representative<sup>12</sup>. Her architecture distinguishes itself from the old houses, be it masonry or wooden, by the modernist manner of composition, which is based on asymmetry and differentiation of size and shape.

Within this basic gamut she displays an interesting variety of architectural design over the period. The first residential houses from the nineteen fifties have func-

others they are fine and even (fig. 11 and 12). Her repertory of composition, including window designs, cornices and so forth, thus manifest quite delightful contrasts as well as calm unpretentiousness.

The timber that Wenche Selmer prescribed in her architecture is predominantly Norwegian wood, spruce and pine, types and dimensions that could be obtained locally and which the craftsmen knew how to handle. Spruce is commonly used in the constructions while pine, which takes longer time to darken, suits the visible constructions and surfaces in the interior. Spruce also wears better than ordinary pine used as external panel boarding. It is thought provoking to reflect upon the availability of material and its influence on architecture. Norwegian wood has limited dimensions, and it wears differently than for instance the huge deals and boards of redwood that are displayed so eminently in the Californian architecture by architects such as Greene & Greene and Julia Morgan.

Wenche Selmer's use of wood as building material mediates a comprehensive professional philosophy, which includes a general thoughtfulness towards environment and the everyday life of people. Usefulness, beauty and easy maintenance of constructions are all results of the architectural choices that are made. They are qualities that are highly appreciated by the users. It is noteworthy that the people who live in Selmer houses built in the nineteen fifties, as well as the sixties and seventies still are content, and have done remarkably few changes to their houses. Selmer's architecture represents a stand against the hegemony of consumerism. On the one hand her attitudes can be defied as

tionalist features: pure lineaments, precise panel boarding, either horizontal or vertical. A typical feature is the entrance door and window which is assembled in a section and 'cut' into the surface, i.e. the entire section is pulled in and painted white by contrast to the dark brown walls (fig. 10). Later, Selmer used various types of panel boarding, elaborating this as part of the overall architectural design. We have seen some examples of the cabins on the coast and some of the suburban houses: in short variations of vertical panel boarding and horizontal panel boarding<sup>13</sup>. In some cases the boards are broad, uneven and coarse, their breadth varying, in



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obsolete, puritan, and even moralistic. This raises new and intriguing questions with respect to ethics and human responsibility, which however go beyond the limits of this article. On the other hand her architecture can teach many of us a lesson, and I quote the owner of Gråkamveien 7: 'the quality of the house is the sense of space, the sense of texture and materiality, the relationship to light and to nature. We think it is wonderful that the house ages along with us'<sup>14</sup>.

## Notes

1. Norway has a tradition on this point, i.e. the legal right of people in general to use other people's property for recreation (passing through, picnicking, anchoring a boat etc.). The structure of property and land-use etc. is important factors in the legislation and its system of implementation.
2. Naturally, many aspects of these old buildings are different from today's, and not desirable to be copied. Building methods, for one thing, were in the old houses usually solid log structures with exterior and interior cladding; the spatial dimensions were often extremely small, and the spacio-functional arrangement not satisfactory for modern life.
3. Wenche and Jens Selmer in *Treprisen – Ten Norwegian Prize-winning Architects* (Oslo, 1978), p. 20.
4. In general the 18th century was more colourful than the 19th when it became fashionable to make wooden houses look as if they were made of plastered masonry or stone. In the beginning of the 20th century, more heavy colours such as red and ochre were propagated again, and around 1920, white became an ideal, whereas after WW II white houses with colourful mouldings were common. However, colouring of wooden architecture is also a matter of social class and cultural consciousness; almost a century passed from the first citizen painted his house around 1700 until cladding on timber log walls and paint became common in the same region. (Lars Roede, Norwegian Folk Museum, personal communication.)
5. Modern in terms of individual freedom, gender equality, sharing of house work and pleasure activities, combination of professional and leisure life etc.
6. Beate Hølmekbakk and Tanja Lie, 'Ideas from Heaven', interview with Wenche Selmer, *Arkitektthøgskolen i Oslo, 1945–95* (Oslo, 1995), p. 23 ff.
7. Wenche Selmer was employed as Associate Professor at the Oslo School of Architecture from 1976 until 1987 when she retired.
8. Hølmekbakk and Lie, p. 24.
9. Jim Bengston, personal communication, 7 March 2000.
10. Jim Bengston interviewed by Hans Peter Smeby, 'Chicago-Jim og Biffs revir', *Design*, 3, nr. 4/99, p. 44.
11. Several of the clients in the Selmer summerhouses that I visited, very proudly showed me how the architect had prescribed the garden doors in order to avoid thresholds between the indoor and the outdoor spaces: the thresholds or frames were simply mounted lower than usual so that the top aligns with the surface of the floor.
12. By contrast to the wooden architecture, typical of the nineteen sixties and seventies, which was based on modular systems of posts or columns and beams, both visible in the constructions. Wenche Selmer did in fact design a stone house, not all that different from her wooden houses, in Provence, France for her sister. Born by Norwegian parents, Selmer spent her first 6 years in Paris where her father was a diplomat.
13. Respectively every other vertical board overlapping the boards on each side, so-called tømmermannspanel, and the horizontal boards slightly tilted, the upper overlapping the lower.
14. Jim Bengston in Smeby, p. 46.