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EDITORS' NOTES ON NORDIC SINGULAR IDENTITIES – IN PRACTICE AND IN RESEARCH

STEN GROMARK, MARIUS FISKEVOLD AND
MAGNUS RÖNN

Are there any typical characteristics or singular features in Nordic architecture? And if so, how should these be identified and best described? This is a question many are asking themselves and looking in many directions for valid answers. To initiate such a discussion, we can note for a start that this journal is run by a Nordic association. However, this fact does not provide much guidance to the question of whether there is a special Nordic feature in the world of architecture, nor in explorative research on architecture. But we still think it is a valid question to be discussed and portrayed in the columns of the NJAR.

The name of the journal, *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, is based solely on the publisher's geographical location – not on published articles and their themes. The journal has a pluralist approach to research according to the statement of its homepage, and “publishes original academic contributions in architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture”.¹ The journal is open for contributions and publishes articles by international scholars. The scientific quality of the manuscripts is guaranteed by international reviewers holding a PhD. Also, the target group for published articles and essays is international. For this reason, the published contributions are mainly written in the English language, although we also publish articles in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish languages. From this point of view, the language policy may appear as special from a global perspective.

1 See: The homepage under the section “The journal”, <http://arkitekturforskning.net/na>

Can exhibitions inform us of typical characteristics or singular features in Nordic architecture? Let us investigate the question. In 2012, three events were arranged where the titles of exhibitions bear witness to an apparent international curiosity for profiles of Nordic architecture:

Firstly, one large architecture exhibition took place this year at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art north of Copenhagen with the title, *New Nordic: Architecture and Identity*. Secondly, the Museum of Finnish Architecture in Helsinki organized a summer exhibition called *Light Houses: Young Nordic Architecture*, showing contemporary work by young Nordic architects and their offices.² This latter exhibition was an expanded version of the joint event by Norway, Sweden and Finland curated by Peter MacKeith for the Venice Biennale, celebrating the fifty years jubilee of the Nordic Pavilion designed by Sverre Fehn. Thirdly, the theme of Nordic architecture was launched in 2012 at the 3rd Moscow Architecture Biennale and at the State Museum of History of St Petersburg. This Russian exhibition was named *Nordic ID: Contemporary Nordic Architecture* and was organized by Project Baltia Magazine through Vladimir Frolov and the Swedish architect Ylva Frid. The showcase consisted in selected projects from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Norway – five projects from each country – intended to express aspects of contemporary regional identity.³ This exhibition was also shown in Riga 2014 at the Latvia Museum of Architecture, as well as at the Estonian, Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish embassies in Riga.⁴ Let us see what these three events have to say about Nordic architecture.

The exhibition at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art was curated by Kjeld Kjeldsen. It was the first in a series of events exploring architecture's role in relation to culture and identity. The Swedish critic Claes Caldenby highlights that Kjeldsen raises the question whether there is any meaning at all to talk about a Nordic identity or a Nordic way in architecture.⁵ His answer seems to be “yes”. A transgressive culture of its own has unfolded in the Nordic region since the 1990s, including design, architecture, fashion and music. Presented as contemporary characteristics of Nordic architecture as he conceives them, Kjeldsen points out items like sustainability, craftsmanship, materiality, sensibility to place and landscape, development of the welfare state and reclaiming public space.

Kurt Foster, professor of the History of Art and Architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology, provides an additional outsider's view on the exhibition. He finds a new type of vitality in Nordic Architecture, which catches attention at home as well as abroad. According to Foster there is a particular feeling of public ownership of public space, contrary to a “global epidemic” of large, aggressively iconic buildings. Caldenby also observes that Foster sees a youthfulness in Nordic building culture, both in the form of openness in contemporary architectural projects and in the history of modern urban design in Scandinavia. The Modern Move-

2 See: <http://www.osterlund-ark.fi/archives/light-houses-exhibition-at-museum-of-finnish-architecture/>

3 See: <http://projectbaltia.com/en/news-en/3154/>

4 See: <http://projectbaltia.com/en/news-en/7284/>

5 Caldenby, C. (2012). Nordic-Baltic experience. Survival of modern. In Caldenby & Wedebrunn (Eds.), *Survival of Modern from Cultural Centres to Planned Suburbs*. Malmö: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture.

ment manifesto in 1931 was a showcase and a breakthrough moment for young architects finally getting commissions formerly entirely out of reach.

The exhibition at the Museum of Finnish Architecture had a clear focus on young architects and their professional ideas. The event provided a wide spectrum of contemporary Nordic architecture. Thirty-two young architects from Finland, Sweden and Norway were invited to present conceptual projects that encapsulate the respective office's philosophy of architecture. The objective was to illustrate how young architects develop pioneering approaches in dealing with global challenges, which in turn may be seen as an extension of the classic hallmarks of Nordic architecture – simplified form, frugal use of materials and sensitive treatment of daylight, the site and the natural setting – all aspects and key points that embody the core principles of a responsible, sustainable architecture.

In an interview, two Swedish architects presented in the exhibition, Stefan Sjöberg and Lena Viterstedt, expressed the common ground for designing in the north. They underline that daylight and nature influence design in a kind of compensational thinking: "When the winter darkness comes through the season and brings melancholy, it's time to transform the ambience into something lighter, more colourful and magical. That is the Light, as a filter that affects the perception of objects' shape, colour and meaning."⁶

In the introduction to the Russian Catalogue, Vladimir Frodov, editor-in-chief of the Baltic Project Magazine, characterizes Nordic architecture in contrast to the stars of global architecture, describing the Nordic attitude as closer to an Enlightenment ideal, staying as close as possible to this truth of nature. Furthermore, he sees a loyalty to social ideals in the building culture, avoiding "iconicity". Nordic architecture is considered simultaneously both modernistic and paradoxically contextual. Caldenby believes that Frodov's comments are aimed at a Russian audience, "...weary of the truly Eastern, kitschy, and garish luxury...".⁷ Frodov admonishes them to "...listen to the proud but humble northern voice."⁸

According to the architectural critic KirillASSE, *Nordic ID* was an elegant and intelligent exhibition at the Moscow biennale, showing welfare buildings of quality, respect for nature, simplicity rather than complexity and humbleness rather than garishness, which are all seen as significant aspects of the northern architectural tradition, that is to say of "northernness".⁹

The above-described profiles of Nordic architecture could be said to be evoked in five articles of this issue: as investigations on everyday architecture, in studies of colour and in renovation of housing. The added

6 <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/light-houses-magic-light-in-stockholm>

7 See: https://www.spbmuseum.ru/exhibits_and_exhibitions/93/4478/?sphrase_id=63931

8 Caldenby, C. (2012). Nordic-Baltic experience. Survival of modern. In Caldenby & Wedebrunn (Eds.), *Survival of Modern from Cultural Centres to Planned Suburbs*. Malmö: The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, p. 7.

9 See: https://www.spbmuseum.ru/exhibits_and_exhibitions/93/4478/?sphrase_id=63931

critical remarks on sustainability in the waterfront development in Aarhus may also be an expression of a significantly Nordic approach to urban design. So, there is reason to see a distinct link between research and practice in the context of Nordic Singular Identities.

And now to editors' comments on the articles in this issue.

This mixed issue of the journal is made up of five scientific articles and two reviews, one review of a dissertation and one book review. We start the presentation with an article by Ruth Stevens, Ann Petermans and Jan Vanrie entitled "A human-centred strategy explicating and designing hidden programs in architectural design." All three authors have teamed up with Nordic Universities and professional partners. For instance, Ruth Stevens has built academic and designerly connections with partners at an architectural firm in Sweden. In the fall of 1999, Jan Vanrie performed an Erasmus-research stay in the Centre for Visual Cognition at the University of Copenhagen. Ann Petermans has been engaged in a research stay at Lund University.

The authors note that the development of programs in architecture, the very first step in a design process, do not play an important role in professional practice and contemporary architectural research. They want to change this fact and start the discussion in the article by looking back. During the 1970s, several scholars pointed to the need for a human-centred program in architecture design. The term "hidden program" meant in this context that architects should pay more attention to the building performance, a shared understanding with users of the place and the nature of activities that the space was intended to support by design. This is the starting point for the authors in their development of "Design for Human Flourishing", promoting a long-lasting impact on users and creating meaning in their interaction with the environment. The authors propose a theoretical approach in order to provide a nuanced understanding of the architectural program as a concept, and as a research-based guidance to practitioners and users of place. The result is presented as a four-phased process characterized both as a manner to practice "Design for Human Flourishing", and as actions intended to promote enriched programming in architecture.

"Sustainability Key Performance Indicators' (KPIs) assessment and visualization aimed at architects in (early) renovation design process" by Aliakbar Kamari, Stina Rask Jensen, Steffen Petersen and Poul Henning Kirkegaard is the second article. One of the societal trends of the time is that complex messages should be presented in a simple way. So-called KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) are taken from the subject of economics, and represent both a way of thinking and a tool for assessing the status of a company, organization or project. The danger of this way of conveying aspects of reality is that the indicators become

more important than they are meant to represent. The means becomes the goal. However, the study presented here nuances both the use and applicability of the indicators. By involving practicing architects in the testing of different ways of visualizing indicator data, both the communicators' ability to communicate and their connection to the underlying architectural narrative are preserved. The reader joins a process where various graphic diagrams are tested both with indicator data and on professionals. The study also shows how the indicators represent an analytical stability that simplifies the comparison of different projects. Here, as the study shows, intuitive, easy-to-understand visualizations graded according to meaning and relevance could help to strengthen the architectural element in the argument and facilitate communication with a larger audience.

The third article is titled "Beyond Vision. Moving and Feeling in Colour Illuminated Space" contributed by Stine Louring Nielsen, Ute Christa Besenecker, Nanna Hasle Bak and Ellen Kathrine Hansen. This research has been supported and developed at Aalborg University, the Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology. The research builds upon the academic legacy of Rikard Küller – a renowned Swedish experimental spatial psychologist – and includes recent influential contributions on the notion of *atmosphere* by Gernot Böhme, besides considerations on architectural philosophies of design, through the writings on the same topic by the architect Peter Zumthor. The article summarizes the results from experimental scenarios, designed to study the bodily non-visual experience of different coloured light situations, to promote different kinds of atmospheres in architectural situations. The experiment confronted test persons with four lighting scenarios to relate their diverse impressions that were extensively registered in interviews and in statistical analysis. The authors conclude that some consistent general patterns in how people experience and move in different spectra of light can be identified, whether blind-folded or not. The findings indicate the potential use of this knowledge in architectural design situations ultimately to incite or to conjure up a specific ambience, sentiment or even bodily movement patterns.

The fourth article by Anne Hedegaard Winther and Claus Bech-Danielsen is entitled "Still entangled adversaries? Understanding today's popular city through perceptions of suburbia". The authors place themselves in the traditional city-suburbia dichotomy and ask whether this is still relevant today. They state that this conceptual dichotomy once grew out of environmental conditions like fresh air, etc., but is in later decades transformed into more socially dependent relations. The study, based on an urban perspective, clearly shows that there still exists opposing images and narratives supporting this dichotomy. Maybe we could notice a kind of delayed imagination, sustaining old images even though the material situation in both urban as well as suburban environments has changed fundamentally.

The article also motivates the reader to ask further questions about the city-suburbia dichotomy. As the authors observe, the members of the five studied households “have actively chosen to live in the city, as opposed to suburbia or the countryside.” It could have been interesting to investigate the dichotomy from the other perspective as well. Maybe the social relations of suburbia also have changed, and no longer meet the stated expectations of the urban city dwellers. And maybe the conceptual dichotomy itself is a remnant of previous industrial ways of organizing civilizations. Watching city life produced by urban residents may be of great recreational interest to suburban inhabitants when this suburbia is within an hour’s reach by car, train – or plane.

The fifth article by Elizabeth Donovan, Sofie Pelsmakers and Urszula Kozminska is entitled “Rethinking Nordic urban harbour development – a sustainable perspective.” Waterfront urban renewal is a common, often challenging feature of Nordic planning and architectural design, accentuated by recent considerations of exacerbated future climate change and prospects of significantly raised sea levels with consequential, severe inundations. This contribution performs a critical assessment of the current status of Nordic waterfront developments from a sustainable point of view. It provides the reader with a general overview and case descriptions of some state-of-the-art projects in the Nordic context, supported by extensive graphical planning material and fresh site photography, while focusing in particular on the ongoing construction of the harbour project *Aarhus Ø*, in Denmark. Starting from the established broad basis of a scoping review of relevant literature, the authors construct a framework grid of twenty key aspects to be applied in the analysis of different parameters of design, as attributes of urban architectural qualities. Three main foci are established concerning, respectively, climate aspects of social adaptation, of materiality and aging and of comfort. As a main result from the research case enquiries and conceptual structuring, a “Sustainable Residential Waterfront Development Framework” is suggested, intended to enable the consistent analysis, comparison and judgment of inherent qualities or characteristic profiles of waterfront projects, to support urban reinvention and critical rethinking. In this tentative procedure, the Aarhus waterfront receives quite a harsh critique by the authors’ instrument of assessment, while in comparing features of Malmö Bo 01 in Sweden, points in a better and more recommended direction.

Finally, we have two reviews in this issue.

The first one is a review by Ira Verma, Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Architecture, Aalto University. She reviews a doctoral dissertation titled “Potential for Ageing at home in the Finnish Apartment building stock” by Tapio Kaasalainen. In 2021 he successfully defended his doctoral PhD-project at the Faculty of the Built Environment,

Tampere University. The ageing Welfare State – in Finland as well as in many other countries around the world – is a huge challenge for architects and urban planners. In the dissertation Kaasalainen evaluates the structural and spatial adaptability of existing apartment blocks. This is done in relation to the needs of the growing proportion of the elderly in society. The dissertation consists of an overall essay (kappa) and four attached articles. This kind of paper-based dissertation has increased during the last decades in architecture.

The second review concerns a book titled “Sverre Fehn, Nordic Pavilion Venice” by Mari Lending and Erik Langdalen, both professors at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design. The book is reviewed by Leif Daniel Houck, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Science Technology, Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Sverre Fehn’s Nordic Pavilion in Venice is regarded a masterpiece of post-war Nordic architecture. The pavilion is a result of an architectural competition in 1958, and the winning design was implemented four years later. The pavilion is used by Norway, Finland and Sweden in a joint venture presenting architectural projects in exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. The Nordic Association of Architectural Research has also used the pavilion. In 2017, the association organized an open hearing at the Pavilion, including a lecture by Henrik Reeh entitled “Architecture: education, research and transformation”, followed by a panel discussion on architectural research.¹⁰

This stimulating, second review contribution presented above invokes a special interpretive comment from the editors’ perspective, concerning diametrically opposed epistemological and methodological approaches in current architectural research. Put beside the additional recent newspaper review as mentioned in the review¹¹, with the pavilion as the common object of investigation at the forefront, the situation invites a crucial discussion on the diverging tenets at the extreme ends of architectural research methodologies and modes of inquiry. At the one end, the once so predominant and fashionable verbal fury of phenomenological interpretations and philosophical explanations, nurtured by Martin Heidegger and followed by Christian Norberg-Schultz, considered “...a phenomenological word avalanche...but nothing to learn...” according to Houck – almost disregarding the building itself and local factual circumstances of procreation as evidence. This approach clashes with the other extreme, as in the new book on the Pavilion: an extensive, forensic enquiry of archives, executed with great merit indeed, potentially treating building, site and context like a crime scene, as the resultant of a fierce test of wills or as a battleground for power capital and cultural distinction. All the minuscule pieces of material evidence, indiscriminately, to the most trivial detail, and regardless of general significance, tell evident and surprising stories of genesis, related to a key architectural project of great dignity and paramount importance, in the singular birth of Nordic identity in post-war modern architecture.

10 See: Reeh, H. (2018), Relational architecture. Education, research, transformation. In E. Toft & M. Rönn (Eds), The production of knowledge in architecture by PhD research in the Nordic Countries. NTNU Grafisk Center: Nordic Academic Press of Architectural Research.

11 See: Brochmann, G. (2021). Mitt kongarrike for en mellomtitel (Sverre Fehn in Venice). Morgenbladet 26.02.2021.

This divergence, or rift between the two extreme approaches, promotes and underscores the suggested notion of a more balanced approach, one of *critical interpretation* as paramount in all humanistic enquiries, where a dynamic analysis must have a specific *axis of orientation* and a certain *depth of interpretation*, beyond the immediately perceived objective reality of things that we all can agree upon. This kind of approach is valid in particular for explorations of architectural research, where solid empirical material and figurative empirical evidence should engage dynamically with critical philosophical interpretations for mutual, reciprocal support, and the closing of extreme outliers for the utmost benefit of a wider frame of knowledge itself.