

NORDIC IDENTITY REVISITED

In fact, few things are more easily ridiculed and discarded in the contemporary cultural situation than national and regional identities as the 'basis' for their architectural expression. Does it make sense to try to define essentialistic or enduring features of design and planning in a world of new and changing cultural frontiers, global networks of meaning and relevance, and new political constellations through European integration? Perhaps not, but if one resists the temptation of too obvious and immediate criticism, we can still admit that there are still relevant and unexplored questions around themes such as the Nordic identity.

For instance, if identification is becoming more fragmented and restructured throughout Europe and globally, these new tendencies will obviously meet the more enduring traditions of identification that have dominated the education and professional understanding of architecture in the Nordic countries. As demonstrated in many of the articles in this thematic issue, even contemporary architects have to posit themselves with respect to the original combination of modernity, sincerity, naturalness and authenticity that are often mentioned as the defining features of Nordicness, as opposed to traditionalism or post-modern irony, playfulness, artificiality or historicity. And there is an evident continuity in this tradition: One can indeed write the history of Nordic architecture not only through design but also through the cultural constructions that have been used to differentiate Nordic design and planning from that of the South, as well as the different Nordic countries from each other.

On the other hand, this dominant tradition has always contained paradoxes. The very combination of modernity with its emphasis on abstraction and objectivity, and the Nordic emphasis on nature and local landscape is symptomatic. How can one be entitled to combine some contradictory elements but not others? How can one claim to follow inevitable "laws of nature" or cultural archetypes and still

claim to be avant-garde? Since the architectural education and profession have not been theoretical or critical by their nature, such problems may not have bothered the dominant architectural discourse very much. But since the emergence of critical research in our universities, and also since new cultural challenges questioning the *doxa* of the established elites, this silence or satisfaction is having a hard time. One such challenge is multiculturalism, which is still on its way to redefine the way that our cities and communities are built and used.

Without digging the graves of nationalism or ethnocentrism, thus, and without providing any final answers, the attempt of this thematic issue is to revisit the ideas of identity and identification in the Nordic architectural context. The articles are based on a selection of papers from the Nordic Symposium “Living in the North – Nordic Reflections on Architecture” organized by the Nordic Association of Architectural Research and Helsinki University of Technology, in Espoo, Finland from the 23th to the 25th of April 2004.

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