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THE FALSE UNIVERSALITY OF THE MYTHS OF MODERNISM IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

POZORNA UNIWERSALNOŚĆ MITÓW MODERNIZMU W KRAJACH NORDYCKICH

Abstract

The 20th-century Nordic architecture devalues the myth of modernist universality. The worldwide admiration for Modernism did not root with its original character in the northern countries. The author will analyse and interpret the source materials and theories of 20th-century architects and theorists. It will show how the Nordic architects transformed the myths of modernist architecture, which led to the creation of new architectural trends that reached both phenomenological and regional values and transformed universalism of Modernism.

Keywords: myths of architecture, Nordic architecture, phenomenology, romantic modernism, 20th century

Streszczenie

XX-wieczna architektura nordycka dewaluuje mit modernistycznej uniwersalności. Ogólnoświatowy zachwyt modernizmem nie odnalazł się w pierwotnym charakterze w krajach północnych. Analizując materiały źródłowe oraz wypowiedzi XX-wiecznych architektów i teoretyków, Autorka wskaże sposób, w jaki nordyccy projektanci przetransformowali mity architektury modernistycznej, dając tym samym początek nowym nurtom w architekturze, które sięgały zarówno do wartości fenomenologicznych, jak i regionalnych, a także przekształcały modernistyczny uniwersalizm.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura nordycka, fenomenologia, mity architektury, romantyczny modernizm, XX wiek

1. INTRODUCTION

The universal and international character of Modernism is one of the most widespread myths in the architecture of the 20th century. Modern postulates proclaiming the technological progress have spread to the farthest corners of Europe, reaching the countries of the Scandinavian Peninsula. Nordic architects, seduced by modern architectural thought, quickly adopted a new style that broke with the architectural tradition. Nevertheless, Modernism was strongly criticized by the greatest minds of the local region. Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish architects criticized Modernism for the impossibility of adaptation to the unusual climatic conditions of the Scandinavian Peninsula and materials which were unnatural for their homelands. This critique gave rise to the new trends in Nordic architecture which 20th-century theorists called Romantic Modernism and domesticated functionalism. The Nordic point of

view transformed modern postulates of Modernism into a traditional architectural language, reaching both phenomenological and regional values, and transformed the machine aesthetics of Modernism and gave it more natural character.

2. THE MYTHS OF MODERNISM

20th-century architecture had many names. Its early form corresponded with the beginnings of rationalist thought,¹ which turned into more specific trends called: international style, functionalism or Modernism. The common factor of each trend in 20th-century architecture was the rejection of the ballast of the past – the building tradition and architectural historicism. Architecture created at that time was represented by simple forms without unnecessary detail, rejecting the context and cultural threads. According to many theorists, the buildings built in the first half of the 20th century were a manifesto foreshadowing the new spirit of the times. The technological progress and mass production contributed to the standardization of architecture. Le Corbusier should be distinguished among many architects who created the theoretical ground for the new trend. His early teachings on the basics of shaping modern architecture were written down in the form of the Five Points of Modern Architecture (Ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Ville Savoye by Le Corbusier – the Five Points of Modern Architecture, France, 1931, photography made by Author.

The values proclaimed by the Pope of Modernism became the guidelines for the next generations of designers. Outwardly universal postulates regarding the architectural form spread across the Old Continent and resulted in the creation of buildings with specific aesthetics, regardless of the region. Simple, cubist forms, which reject the ballast of the past, have been

¹ R. Banham, *Rewolucja w architekturze. Teorie i projektowanie w „pierwszym wieku maszyny”*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1979, p. 10, transl. by the Author.

transformed and created a new trend of modern architecture called the International Style proclaimed by Philip Johnson. The international style was to become a universal trend, regardless of the region, culture, and the context. The second trend that evolved in line with International Style was the Bauhaus school represented by Walter Gropius. The German school promoted the ideas of standardization of architecture and industrial design, which were to combine technical and artistic thought. Although Walter Gropius denied that the Bauhaus was supposed to disseminate any styles, systems, or dogmas,² it cannot be denied that it created a certain universal character of architecture taking advantage of the technological progress of the 20th century and emphasizing the function of objects. The myths of the universality of modernist architecture quickly spread to the farthest corners of European countries, which adopted modern postulates in their area taking in the advanced freshness of its architectural thought.

However, the problem of standardization of architecture and its international or universal character was more and more often raised on the national forum. Sigfried Giedion claimed that the influence of the environment and tradition was much more important than theorists proclaiming theories of the universal character of modernist architecture:

those countries which accepted contemporary architecture as a kind of universal coinage – a collection of particular shapes which retained their full value wherever they were transplanted – invited architectural bankruptcy. Modern architecture is something more than a universally applicable means of decoration. It is too much the product of our whole period not to exhibit some universal tendencies, but, on the other hand, it is too much concerned with problems of actual living to ignore local differences in need, custom, and materials.³

For Giedion, the best example of the development of architectural thought on the Scandinavian Peninsula is the architecture of Alvar Aalto – “Finland, under the leadership of Alvar Aalto, has shown how contributions can be made to architecture universally through solutions adapted to the specific conditions of their native setting.”⁴ Although the theorist focused mainly on Finn’s activities, Nordic architecture and its Romantic Modernism trend developed in different directions in the territories of each of the three discussed countries. It had, more or less, transformed universal myths of Modernism for its own needs.

3. ROMANTIC MODERNISM

3.1. THE ORIGINS OF MODERNISM IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

The 20th century was a turning point for the Nordic countries. In the first two decades, Finland and Norway regained full independence, thus giving rise to the national movements in architecture and art that dominated the beginning of the new century. Herman Major Schirmer was an important figure for the Norwegian architecture of that period. He created the theoretical foundations for the national trend combining tradition with modernity.⁵ In

² W. Gropius, *Pelnia architektury*, Karakter, Kraków 2014, p. 26, transl. by the Author.

³ S. Giedion, *Space, Time, Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1959, p. 608.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ T. Barucki, *Architektura Norwegii*, Arkady, Warszawa 1982, p. 35, transl. by the Author.

Finland, national trends intertwined with the foundations of the international style, but the domination of national romanticism lasted until the 1930s. The essence of national trends in Finland was the extraordinary maturity of architects who placed national romanticism in a rational and logical framework simultaneously referring to Finnish culture. From the beginning of the 20th century, Swedish architects proclaimed the slogan *vackrare vardagsvara*,⁶ which referred to the eclectic forms of the 19th century. Until the 1930s, this slogan was gradually being replaced by a new phenomenon described as *Swedish charm*. This referring to classical forms trend created the foundations for proto-functional architecture.⁷ The end of the 1920s foreshadowed the emergence of new architectural trends in the Nordic countries. Sweden was considered to be a pioneer⁸ in popularizing Modernism in its early functionalist form. However, the first presumption of a strong European influence on Scandinavian architecture can be found at the beginning of the 20th century. Already in the first decade of the new century, the Finnish theorist Gustaf Strengell “expresses new internationalist tendencies (...) by postulating the usage of simple materials and an undistorted structure.”⁹ On the other hand, the first modern-style buildings in Norway arose already in 1929. However, Sweden’s domination on the ground of functionalism was related to the organization of the Stockholm exhibition in 1930 and Gregor Paulsson’s, Gunnar Asplund, Uno Åhrén, and Sven Markelius manifesto called *acceptera* which was published a year later.¹⁰ The rejection of historical styles and the adoption of new postulates of modern architecture dominated the design sphere for the next few years.

3.2. THE CRITIQUE OF THE MYTHS OF MODERNISM – THE NEW TRENDS IN NORDIC ARCHITECTURE

The Nordic countries are characterized by a strong bond with nature that derives from the history and traditions of the countries in question, as well as cultural conditions. Although Nordic architects were fascinated with the new architectural postulates, which were presented at many international congresses, Modernism quickly encountered a wave of criticism. Many designers began to question its universal assumptions, cubist forms, and the limited range of materials and colours. This criticism arose mainly from the lack of adaptation of modern forms to the harsh climatic conditions of the Scandinavian Peninsula. White buildings, often supported by columns (*pilotis*) giving the impression of being detached from the ground, quickly lost their aesthetic value because of high humidity and constantly changing weather. In addition, the architects emphasized the machine aesthetics of the buildings,¹¹ the lack of human factor in modernist designs, and the separation of architecture from nature. These factors caused the domination over the existing landscape,

⁶ *More Beautiful Everyday Things*.

⁷ G. Wojtkun, *Kształtowanie się nowoczesnej szwedzkiej architektury i mieszkalnictwa - awangarda bez rewolucji* = *Development of Modern Architecture of Swedish and Housing - Avant-Garde without Revolution*, *Przestrzeń i Forma*, 2015, no. 24(1), p. 268.

⁸ T. Barucki, *Architektura Szwecji*, Arkady, Warszawa 1989, p. 75, transl. by the Author.

⁹ M. Piprek, *Architektura Finlandii*, Arkady, Warszawa 1981, pp. 30–31, transl. by the Author.

¹⁰ *acceptera* contained postulates promoting functionalism in Sweden, which was to contribute to the standardization of architecture and provide better living conditions for the citizens of the country.

¹¹ W.C. Miller, *Nordic Modernism. Scandinavian Architecture 1890–2015*, Crowood Press, Wiltshire 2016, p. 63.

disturbing the *genius loci* of the place. Long and numerous discussions taking place in the architectural forum of the Nordic countries led to the creation of new, independent trends that were followed by regional architects. William C. Morris distinguishes two representative trends that dominated the 20th century. The first was modifying functionalism through the regional materials and building tradition, and the second was restoring the importance of the place both culturally and physically.¹² Both trends were characterized by the restoration of the original values of both history and building traditions. Instead of using modern materials, the Nordic architects used local ones – stone, wood, brick. The buildings designed at that time were built on the ground, without the usage of *pilotis*. This led to the recreation of the relationship between architecture and the natural Nordic landscape.¹³ The directions followed by Nordic architects were described as Romantic Modernism, which not only returned to the *genius loci* of the place but also reached the phenomenological values. These values were represented mainly by Finns and became the prototype of critical regionalism defined by Kenneth Frampton. New architectural trends can be found in both versions in each of the three Nordic countries. However, each of these countries used a different key element of architectural thought.



III. 2. Muuratsalo Experimental House by Alvar Aalto, Finland, 1954, source: <https://en.docomomo.fi/projects/muuratsalo-experimental-house/> (access: 10.06.2021).

The majority of architectural theorists claim that Alvar Aalto was a pioneer in creating the new architectural thought in Finland. His work is often called irrational Modernism, tactile

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 74.

¹³ The landscape of the Nordic countries has been described by the Norwegian theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz as the *romantic landscape* where the earth dominates the sky, and the number of elusive details enhances the unprecedented, mystical atmosphere.

regionalism, and even sensual architecture deeply rooted in basic human needs. Local culture and landscape are undoubtedly his main inspiration in the majority of designed buildings. William C. Miller claims that Aalto refused functionalism which was connected with mechanisation, universalism, mass production, and the split between human and nature.¹⁴ In many speeches, Aalto emphasized the fears of following modern architectural postulates, giving vent to dissatisfaction with new trends. Although villa Mairea in Noormarku (1939) and Aalto's private house in Muuratsalo (1954) (Ill. 2) are regarded as the most representative mastership of Romantic Modernism, this trend can be also found in the earlier objects designed by the architect. The sanatorium in Paimio (1939) is very representative for the modern style. It is visible in the form and the materials. However, the main idea of the design was setting a human being, not function, in the centre of attention.¹⁵ The Pavilion for an Exhibition of Forestry and Agriculture in Lapua (1938) is the next example of architecture set in the context of the place. The undulating line of the facade was constructed from rough wood trunks. It is an obvious reference to the Finnish lakes with irregular lines of the banks. This is one of the first examples in which Aalto developed a fascination for the organic undulating lines. The same idea was previously used in the interior of the Viipuri Library (1935) and later in the Finnish Pavilion for the international exhibition in New York (1939). The fluency in creating wooden walls and ceilings became the characteristic feature of Aalto's work for many years.¹⁶ The sensual forms connected with human needs are not the only characteristic features of Romantic Modernism. The Finnish architects combined modern architecture with a phenomenological approach. It is visible in the usage of the light in the buildings and the idea of the building deeply referred to the surrounding nature. The usage of the regional building materials emphasized the tactility of the building and its direct influence on the human being. This was the main architectural thought of Aalto works, which restored the value of the notions of place, experience, or memories.¹⁷ The representative buildings for that period were Villa Mairea and Säynätsalo Town Hall (1951). Each of them presented the mature thought visible not only in the tactility of used materials but also multithreading of meanings hidden in their projects. Mairea was located in the centre of the forest and connected to its surroundings not only by the architectural form but also by the interior. Mairea's delicate form was described as the transformation of local and cultural values¹⁸ visible in balance in combining modernistic ideas with vernacular architecture. Säynätsalo Town Hall which represented the critical regionalism trend was a manifesto of regional architecture. Its brick-made façade gave the tactility features to the whole project. Its complex interior was described by Charles Jencks as the basis for the interpretation of architecture in the context of the theory of information presented by Colin Cherry¹⁹ which was grounded on the contradiction of impressions. Aalto took care of the smallest detail of the project, enhancing the tactile impression of the building and giving it an atmosphere of peace and mysticism. In the following years, the architectural

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ M. Piórkowska, *The Combination of the Modernity and Tradition in the Work of Alvar Aalto* [in:] Mielnik A. (ed.), *Defining the architectural space. Tradition and modernity in architecture = Definiowanie przestrzeni architektonicznej. Tradycja i nowoczesność architektury*, vol. 8, Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, Wrocław 2019, p. 82

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

¹⁷ W.C. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ M. Piórkowska, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

thought of Alvar Aalto was developed by the duo of architects – Reima and Raili Pietilä. The architects created expressive forms rooted in the landscape. They took care of the tactility of the materials used in the project, the *genius loci* of the place. Above all, they referred to the complexity of Finnish culture. It was mainly visible in their most famous building – Dipoli (1966) (Ill. 3) located in Otaniemi. Although the attention to the form and detail was already visible in the Kaleva church (1966) or the presidential residence Mäntyniemi (1993) (Ill. 4).



Ill. 3. Dipoli by Raili and Reima Pietilä, Finland, 1966, source: <http://hicarquitectura.com/2019/05/reima-and-raili-pietila-dipoli-conference-center-1966/> (access: 10.06.2021).



Ill. 4. Mäntyniemi Residence of the President of Finland by Raili and Reima Pietilä, Finland, 1993, source: <https://finnisharchitecture.fi/mantyniemi-residence-of-the-president-of-finland/> (access: 10.06.2021).

Norse and Swedish architecture was characterized by ideological dissonance. Although the trends of Romantic Modernism were noticeable in both its versions – domesticated functionalism and architecture reaching the phenomenological values, it was still possible to encounter the European influences that dominated in larger Nordic cities. Norse architects exploited modernistic forms, which were not only rooted in the local landscape but were built with local materials and crafts. The abstract character of modernistic architecture was

replaced with architectural forms connected with the romantic landscape. The most important representative of the new modern thought were architects from the Poulsson's and Arneberg's generations. Additionally, theoreticians listed Frederik Lund, Odd Løvset, and Svein Hatløy who were designers of the well-known Norwegian housing estate.²⁰ These architects paid attention to the material palette connected with the local landscape, local tradition, and history which previously was rejected by Modernists. Tadeusz Barucki considered Sverre Fehn's architecture to be the most representative example of the new trend. The Norwegian architect often used wood as the main building material to emphasise its unique, local expression.²¹ Even though he was world-famous thanks to the projects of the Glacier Museum in Fjærland or the Nordic Pavilion at the Biennale in Venice, he gave a local expression to the architecture of his villas scattered throughout Norway. Villa Holme in Hurum (1996) (Ill. 5) was the greatest example of the architect's passion for wood, where Fehn easily connected modern concrete formwork with vertical wooden planks. This method gave the building an impression of lightness and emphasised its natural expression. The Norwegian reverently brought out the natural qualities of the material, referring not only to the local building tradition²² but also processing architectural thought and getting closer to the trend of critical regionalism. Wood was not the sole building material used by the architect. Fehn also presented modern formwork concrete buildings, where wood-imitating surface was often combined with other materials (i.e., Holme studio, Hurum). The architect's portfolio also included buildings made of brick. Fehn exploited tactile materials which enhanced the impression of peace and coherence. It can be found not only in the architectural form but also in the general idea of *genius loci*.



Ill. 5. Holme Studio in Hurum by Sverre Fehn, Norway, 1996, source: <https://www.arkitektur-n.no/prosjekter/atelier-holme-hurum?cat=2710> (access: 10.06.2021).

²⁰ T. Barucki, *Architektura Norwegii*, op. cit., p. 42, transl. by the Author.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 54, transl. by the Author.

²² In Norway, wooden architecture is treated with unprecedented care, which results from a long building tradition.

Sweden was considered to be a centre of functionalist thought. Although, the architecture rooted in the region was mainly used in the religious buildings. Erik Gunnar Asplund, one of the *acceptera* authors, preached Aalto's thoughts. The Woodland Cemetery – Skogskyrkogården (1940) (Ill. 6) was a pivotal example of a new architectural thought. The enormous establishment designed with Sigurd Lewerenz contains a full range of material solutions that translate into tactile experiences and embody the presence of nature.²³ Although the project contains the elements of Nordic Classicism, the interior of the main crematorium and chapel reflects the value of Nordic light²⁴ and Swedish culture. This makes Skogskyrkogården Cemetery an example of a return to the original values in architecture. The experience of a contradiction was accompanied by the mystical aura typical for sacred objects. Skogskyrkogården Cemetery was one of few projects realized in phenomenological trend in architecture. The most popular architectural style was domestic functionalism. Swedish architects often used the local materials which gave the building a Nordic character and emphasised its uniform features. The most representative examples of this trend were churches (Ill. 7) designed by Peter Celsing. Its aesthetic form was emphasised by local materials and Swedish light (Ill. 8). The architect was able to create buildings connected with the idea of *genius loci* and used simple, modernistic forms, which did not dominate the landscape but emphasised its romantic values.



Ill. 6. Woodland Cemetery – Skogskyrkogården by Erik Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerenz, Sweden, 1940, source: <http://architectuul.com/architecture/woodland-cemetery> (access: 10.06.2021).

²³ W.C. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

²⁴ The usage of natural light in Gunnar Asplund's designs demonstrates an in-depth analysis of the local aspects which William C. Miller considers indispensable in the context of Romantic Modernism.



III. 7. St. Thomas Church by Peter Celsing, Sweden, 1960, source: <http://hicarquitectura.com/2018/07/peter-celsing-st-thomas-church-1959/> (access: 10.06.2021).



III. 8. Interior of the St. Thomas Church by Peter Celsing, Sweden, 1960, source: <http://hicarquitectura.com/2018/07/peter-celsing-st-thomas-church-1959/> (access: 10.06.2021).

The new architectural trends that dominated in the 20th century on the Scandinavian Peninsula were the result of an in-depth analysis of the climatic conditions of each country. Nordic architects knew the local culture and tradition so they could not allow for designing forms inconsistent with the surroundings and history. Although Romantic Modernism was promoted primarily in Finland by Alvar Aalto and his successors and emphasised the phenomenological values in architecture, the common architectural idea of buildings using local

materials, craftsmanship, and history characterized most of the Nordic theories of that time. Nordic architects were able to transform the rationalism of Modernism into the irrational language of local architecture.

4. SUMMARY

The universal language of modernist architecture turned out to be difficult to master and duplicate in confrontation with the architectural language of the Scandinavian Peninsula. The demands of the international style, along with the break with history, regional tradition, and culture, turned out to be impossible to duplicate myth, which lost the ideological foundations developed by European theorists. The value of local traditions, beliefs, and culture prevented the “transfer of forms from Europe with impunity,”²⁵ which led Nordic architects to confront the problem of the universal language of Modernism and to try to transform it into a regional language. Although the newly emerging architectural trends were dominated by the phenomenological values which were postulated by the Finns under the leadership of Alvar Aalto, they were the result of a multi-layered analysis of fundamental values. The romantic trend in architecture, which postulated “perfect blending into the surrounding landscape, interconnecting the interior with nature, the subtlety of details, the use of wood (...) and softening of contours and forms”²⁶ can be found not only in Finland. It was transformed by Swedish and Norwegian architects and set in a context similar to Finnish, but with a distinct landscape and cultural features. Nordic architects proved that local materials have the same expressive power as modern ones, and usage of them in newly constructed buildings not only allowed for the development of architecture but also restored its natural character. The main task for the 20th-century architects was the restoration of basic human values and the rejection of the unreachable postulates emanating from Central European countries. This task allowed for the creation of a unique relationship between architecture and the region, maintained, according to many theorists, up to the present day.

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A u t h o r ' s N o t e :

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