1930 is Year Zero in Modern Scandinavian Architecture. The famous Stockholm Exhibition that year, with Gunnar Asplund as its main architect, introduced a new world to a broad mass audience. The white buildings along streets of Djurgårdsbrunnsviken convinced the general public that this future was a very desirable world. After that, Modernism, or Functionalism as it was called, was the dominant building style in the Nordic countries.

1930 is also the year that Lars Backer died. Like Moses he got a glimpse of the Promised Land. Backer was the pioneer of modern architecture in Norway. His restaurant Skansen in Oslo open in 1927 and he managed to erect two more buildings in the new style and write a manifesto before his untimely death at the age of 38 years.

The 1930s was a very good period in Norwegian architecture. Ove Bang, Blakstad & Munthe-Kaas, Bjercke & Eliassen in Oslo and Leif Grung and Per Grøg in Bergen producing building of the first order, but none of them became international stars like the Finn Alvar Aalto, the Dane Arne Jacobsen or the Swede Gunnar Asplund.

The end of the Second World War in 1945 saw the return of pragmatism and common sense. In the patriarchal Social democracy of the period the emphasis was on «building the country» after the destruction of the War, and there was little room for youthful utopianism.

According to Christian Norberg-Schulz the war destroyed belief in newness. After the war, many of the interwar period's eminent pioneers were gone. Lars Backer died in 1930, Ove Bang in 1942, and Frithjof Sundahl in 1948. The war destroyed belief in newness.

The most influential post war architects in Norway have been Kjell Lund (b. 1927) and Nils Slaatto (1923-2001). They set up their practice together in 1956. They had a huge production of high quality. Only Sverre Fehn has won more prizes than them.

The Norwegian parallel to the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition was the "Vi kan" (We can) exhibition in Oslo in 1938. The two main architects for the exhibition were Arne Korsmo (1903-68) and Knut Knutsen (1900-68). They were both young, promising modernist architects in the 1930s, but after WWII they went separate ways. They came to epitomize two alternative tendencies: An internationally focused architecture and an architecture that was locally rooted. Korsmo was well known in CIAM and internationally very well connected. He became the father figure for the young architects in the PAGON group and design houses inspired by Charles Eames.

Knutsen was close to vernacular architecture and wrote very early pre ecological statements. He designed buildings that were anti-monumental. His Norwegian Embassy in Stockholm (1950) is rhythmic division of volumes, and his own summer cottage at Porter (1949) has a topological shape making it nearly invisible. Both Korsmo and Knutsen became professors and had many followers. The most important Korsmo-inspired architects may be Wenche Solheim (1930-1998). Her wooden houses and cabins scattered along the picturesque coast of Southern Norway blend in with the landscape.

Lund & Slaatto

Two of the most influential post war architects in Norway have been Kjell Lund (b. 1927) and Nils Slaatto (1923-2001). They set up their practice together in 1956. They had a huge production of high quality. Only Sverre Fehn has won more prizes than them.

In the 1960s, Lund & Slaatto designed compact buildings that often took on cubic or pyramidal shape. In the 1970s, they developed a structuralistic mode of operation that was redeveloped in the 1980s to accommodate new assignments and urban environments.

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In 1992, Åse Kleveland, the minister of Public ambitions and new talents published a paper called Kultur i tiden (Culture in our time) where there, for the first time in Norway, was a separate chapter devoted to architecture. This can be seen as a first seed for a Norwegian architectural policy. The Winter Olympics at Lillehammer, two years later, also had an ambitious architectural profile. Then in 2009 the government issued a proper architectural policy paper. We will have to wait and see what the effect will be. The one thing that the state has done that undoubtedly has bee very positive, is the project for National Tourist Routes and originality in their work. Carl-Viggo Hølmebakk concentrates at great depth on re-fining his few but very sensitive buildings. In 1989 a very small Norwegian practice of young architects named Snøhetta (meaning Snow cap, the name of a mountain top in central Norway) won the prestigious competition (650 entries) for the new library in Alexandria, Egypt. The importance of the competition had of cause to do with the mythical status of the ancient library in Alexandria that tried to gather all knowledge in the world and is considered the mother of all libraries. The old library burnt down 1600 years ago, and everyone understood that the new library had to have a design that invoked the greatness of the myth. Snøhetta° had won no competition in Norway and had built nearly nothing before the Alexandria library, so this was a classical fairy tale story. When the building open in 2002, it was recognized as a masterpiece. One of the partners, Craig Dykers, described it as “grand but not simple”, and that is correct. It is a tilted cylinder cut at an angle and facing North. The outer skin is a stone wall with letters and signs from all over the world cut into the granite. The semicircular reading room has a diameter of 160m and is divided into 7 terraces.

In 1975 Arne Henrisen° got a job at the State Railway Architects Office. At the time he was a left wing Marxist who saw railway buildings as a public architecture that was potential meaningful for the general public. In the 1980s he designed stations and other railway buildings inspired by Alvar Aalto and Louis Kahn and received several Brunel Awards. He was recognised as the great renewer of Norwegian railway architecture. Two young architects came to work with him, Jan Olav Jensen°° (b. 1959) and Carl-Viggo Hølmebakk (b. 1958). Because of them, Arne Henrisen got first hand knowledge of their master, Sverre Fehn, and he started to explore the use of expressive wooden constructions in his stations: Sandvikla (1994), Såpenland (1993), Lillehammer (1998) and Eidsvoll (1999). Jensen and Hølmebakk, two of the most talented Norwegian architects of their generation, have remained close friends with the older Henrisen and the three (Team 3) has joined up for several competitions. They won in Trondheim where half a city block had been destroyed by fire. Their winning project resulted in a mixed-use building divided into three parts reflecting the shape of the old buildings, but with exposed massive wood structure. Jan Olav Jensen was noticed already as a student when he a fellow student Per Christian Brynhildsen designed a leper hospital in Larss in India in 1994. The structure was awarded the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Jensen and his partner Børre Skodvin have received several prizes for Mortensrud church (2002) in Oslo. They have shown great inventiveness and originality in their work. Carl-Viggo Hølmebakk concentrates at great depth on refining his few but very sensitive buildings.

The master and the supergroup

In 1999 a very small Norwegian practice of young architects named Snøhetta (meaning Snow cap, the name of a mountain top in central Norway) won the prestigious competition (850 entries) for the new library in Alexandria, Egypt. The importance of the competition had of cause to do with the mythical status of the ancient library in Alexandria that tried to gather all knowledge in the world and is considered the mother of all libraries. The old library burnt down 1600 years ago, and everyone understood that the new library had to have a design that invoked the greatness of the myth. Snøhetta° had won no competition in Norway and had built nearly nothing before the Alexandria library, so this was a classical fairy tale story. When the building open in 2002, it was recognized as a masterpiece. One of the partners, Craig Dykers, described it as “grand but not simple”, and that is correct. It is a tilted cylinder cut at an angle and facing North. The outer skin is a stone wall with letters and signs from all over the world cut into the granite. The semicircular reading room has a diameter of 160m and is divided into 7 terraces.

In 2008 the new building for the National Opera and Ballet opened in Oslo. It is positioned in the harbour and has a sloping marble plain making it possible to walk on top of the building. It is a great public space that is intensively used by the population. The last 20 years that has seen the raise of Snøhetta, has also been a golden final. For Sverre Fehn, in 1997, two year before Snøhetta won in Alexandria, Fehn got the Pritzker Prize in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, just before it was finished. In the same year there was a magnificent exhibition of his work in Basilika Palladiana in Vicenza and he got the Heinrich Tessenow gold medal in Dresden. At the end of his career he designed a string of museums, The Glacier Museum (1991) in Flåm, The Astrup Centre (1996) in Alvdal, The Ivar Aasen Centre (2000) in Volda, plus Prouh Prouh Photograhical Museum (2001). At the very end two more buildings: Gybedal publishing house (2007) and the Architectural Museum in March 2008, just two months before the Opera open in Oslo. It was as if the torch passed from one generation to the other, from the single master architect to the super group.

Public ambitions and new talents

In 1992, Åse Kleveland, the minister of culture published a paper called Kultur i tiden (Culture in our time) where there, for the first time in Norway, was a separate chapter devoted to architecture. This can be seen as a first seed for a Norwegian architectural policy. The Winter Olympics at Lillehammer, two years later, also had an ambitious architectural profile. Then in 2009 the government issued a proper architectural policy paper. We will have to wait and see what the effect will be. The one thing that the state has done that undoubtedly has bee very positive, is the project for National Tourist Routes°°. It is a program for upgradi- ng 18 scenic roads with look-out platforms, benches and toilet facilities. All the jobs have been given to promising, young architects and the results have been spectacular: poetic structures in dramatic landscape situations. It is fair to say that at the moment Norway has plenty of talented architects (Jarmund-Vigsnæs, Lund Hagem, Helen & Hard°°, IRIW, Kristin Jarmund°°, Knud Højhøj, Haga & Grov, Reliaf Ramstad, 70 N Arkitekter, Space Group, Code and a-lab, to mention the most obvious ones). It is also positive that Ste- ven Ho has just finished the Hamsun Centre in Hamaray, and that leading international architects like Renzo Piano, Peter Zumthor and Juan Herreros are building new museums in Norway now. This has to do with the fact that in this period of international financial crisis, the Norwegian economy is good and building activity high. So after 80 years with Modern architecture in Norway one may say that it has been a period of growth and that there are promising signs on the horizon.

The Nordic countries are somewhat of a paradox: on one hand, they came quite late to industrialization; they are sparsely populated and located on the periphery of Europe. Hence, historically speaking, the Nordic countries can be considered provincial and fairly rural. Nor were they the exception of western Europe. For instance, the industrial revolution was later in Sweden and the cultural and political influence of the continent was delayed. However, the Nordic countries can be seen as a case of cultural lag where the pace of change was slower, and the adoption of modern ideas was delayed.

In architecture, “the Modern Project” appears to have become manifest through the creation of the welfare state. In this process, political establishments allied themselves with the artistic and architectural elite throughout most of the 20th century. Thus, a progressive elite culture was diffused through large segments of the population through social housing projects and extensive institutional developments. During this period, the political establishment was open to experiments as long as they were at the disposal of the populace.

Another aspect of this history lies in the fact that it can be considered as an extension of an already existing building culture rather than a distinct break with the past: the Nordic functionalists were schooled in the tradition of a variety of styles, including Classicism and Arts and Crafts. This meant that many of the projects of the Nordic Modern movement may have resembled the architecture on which they were modelled, but they were strongly influenced by older traditions and hence perhaps less determined to be avant-garde.

Projects like Oringe were instrumental in making Bindesbøll a significant source for inspiration. The general formal principles of Oringe resurfaced in 20th-century Danish architecture with P. V. Jensen Klint’s (1854–1930) unrealized yet epochal monument, the Crystalline Cluster. The works of the Nordic Modern movement may have resembled that architecture on which it was modelled, but it was strongly influenced by older traditions and hence perhaps less determined to be avant-garde than for instance the German Neues Bauen movement.

The Nordic countries are somewhat of a paradox: on one hand, they came quite late to industrialization; they are sparsely populated and located on the periphery of Europe. Hence, historically speaking, the Nordic countries can be considered provincial and fairly rural. Nor were they with the possible exception of Sweden part of the industrial avant-garde with nations like Britain and Germany. On the other hand, the Nordic countries are characterized by a series of other conditions normally as associated with modernity. According to World Value Studies, the Nordic countries score highly on parameters like secularization and self-expression compared with most other countries worldwide. The general formal principles of Oringe resurfaced in 20th-century Danish architecture with P. V. Jensen Klint’s (1854–1930) unrealized yet epochal 1907 monument, the Crystalline Cluster. Like Oringe, the hospital buildings are designed with simple yellow-brick walls and gabled red-tile roofs. The gabled roofs gradually step up towards the main building where the corners are anchored by grey buttresses. The entire composition is reminiscent of an organic or crystalline form with the same figure repeating within a given pattern.

Projects like Oringe were instrumental in making Bindesbøll a significant source for inspiration for Danish 20th-century architects who were generally critical of historicism. Like Kay Fisker, they were preoccupied with Bindesbøll’s use of simple techniques to create a sober yet artistically valuable architecture. It was felt by many that Bindesbøll’s work foreshadowed functionalism in Denmark.

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