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 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.

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 buildings. At 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 of the pervasiveness of modern architecture in the Nordic countries lies in the fact that it can be considered the natural development of an already existent building culture rather than a distinct break with the past: The first generation of Nordic functionalists were schooled in the tradition of either Classicism or Arts and Crafts. This meant that many of the properties of these movements were subtly carried over into their formulation of the modern functionalist project. 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 Bauern movement.

Significant in formulating the modern project in Denmark was the influence of two great Danish personalities: C. F. Hansen (1756-1845) and M.G. Bindesbøll (1800-56). To use a term coined by Danish architect Kay Fisker (1893-1965) the formal principles of 20th century Danish architecture can be almost entirely described through the architecture of Bindesbøll and Hansen. In the following I shall explain how the key principles of 20th century Danish architecture may be traced back to the 19th century.

Bindesbøll’s Legacy: The Crystalline Cluster and the Danish House

During the 20th century Danish architecture saw the construction of a range of projects characterized by a combination of pitched roofs and simple architectural volumes. Frequently built from yellow brick, these buildings have an almost prismatic or crystalline expression where traditional architectural features like gabled roofs and brick walls suddenly appear abstract and unconventional. One of the earliest examples of such a formal principle dates back to the mid-19th century where Michael Gottlieb Bindesbøll, the architect behind the famous Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, designed a mental hospital at 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 whose 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 of 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.

The general formal principles of Oringe resurfaced in 20th century Danish architecture with P. V. Jensen Klint’s (1853-1930) unrealized yet epochal 1907 monument the Crystaline Cluster. Like Oringe 50 years earlier, Klint’s monument features a hierarchic composition culminating at the centre and dominated by the figure of the pitched roof. Unlike Oringe however, Klint introduces a dual centre and the gabled roofs are partially anchored by grey buttresses. The entire composition is reminiscent of an organic or crystalline form with the same figure repeating within a given pattern.

Notes:
1. This was not the first modernist building in Scandinavia, as many believe. Edward Heiberg completed his own house in Denmark in 1924.
2. Lars Backer published the article “Vor holdningen til arkitektur” [Our spineless architecture] in the Norwegian journal Byggekunst in 1925. One of its key points was, “We want to create an architecture that’s in contact with contemporary times, natural for the construction materials we use.” Lars Backer mentioned Tessenow, Pötzlitz, Garnier and Le Corbusier as his inspirational sources.
5. Dahlia, Elinar, Bengt Espen Knutsen, Oslo 2005. The book main subject is the son of Knut Knutsen, but a big part of the book deals with the father.
9. Granvold, Ulf, Arne Henrikssen. Oslo 2010
10. Jensen & Skodvin Architects, Oslo 2007
11. Snøhetta (ed), Snøhetta. Works, Baden, Switzerland 2009
12. A+U 469
13. A+U 271
14. Frampton, Kenneth and Sand, Bente, Kristin Jarmund, Oslo 2008
deformed by truncated corners. Klint is more modern than Bindesbøll but his crystal fascination fundamentally stems from the same Romantic origins, now combined with the spirit of the time. Klint's Crystaline Cluster. Klint also used the crystalline cluster theme when working with his colleagues C. F. Møller (1896-1988) and Poul Stæmann (1888-1914). The unadorned yellow brick walls of their Århus University project from 1931 show clear signs of this inspiration, and the project was a popular one among architects in Denmark.

Let us now return to Kay Fisker who in his capacity as Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts let his students build a wooden model of Klint's Crystaline Cluster. Fisker also used the crystalline cluster theme when working with his colleagues C. F. Møller (1896-1988) and Poul Stæmann (1888-1914). The unadorned yellow brick walls of their Århus University project from 1931 show clear signs of this inspiration, and the project was a popular one among architects in Denmark.

Arne Jacobsen's (1902-71) work from the 1940s and 50s also features simple yellow brick walls, abstract detailing and volumetrics determined by the pitch of the roofs as his Saarinen complex from 1950. Correspondingly Jam Utzon's (1915-2008) work from the 1950s and early 60s was very much characterized by pitched roofs as a recurring element. Utzon's work appears even more crystaline than Jacobsen's and like the Romantic Bindesbøll Utzon was very much inspired by the principles of growth to be found in nature.

Returning once again to the 19th century: Another of Bindesbøll's projects varies the Oringe roof motif further although it presents a less homogenous impression: The 1855 Villa Sollie was inspired by traditional Danish farm buildings with their whitewashed walls, thatched roofs and wooden gables. This house reflects an interest in creating an expressive form based on the anonymous and the ordinary, thus producing a heterogeneity that appears almost vernacular. This interest appears to unfold during the 20th century, particularly in the work of architects like Peter Behrens (1868-1940) and Finn Juhl (1912-1989). These architects were influenced by the principles of growth to be found in nature.

The Legacy of C. F. Hansen: Anonymity and Monumentality

This ability to work with anonymous statements alongside the monumental is also characteristic of C. F. Hansen (1756-1845). Unlike the Beaux-Arts architect Bindesbøll, Hansen consistently subscribed to the classical tradition. Having gone unappreciated for the latter part of the 19th century, he was rediscovered by a number of young architects in the early 20th century. Hansen's simplicity and restraint were a direct result of his admiration for the classical Roman architect Vitruvius, who believed that the key to creating a great building was to focus on the essentials, to strip away all ornament and to let the structure speak for itself. This approach was particularly characteristic of Hansen's Copenhagen work in the early 20th century.

Architect and ceramist Carl Petersen (1874-1923) was a significant force behind this rediscovery of Hansen's work: In 1911 he organized a great exhibition on Hansen's work at the Academy of Fine Arts. Hansen's simplicity and restraint were a direct result of his admiration for the classical Roman architect Vitruvius, who believed that the key to creating a great building was to focus on the essentials, to strip away all ornament and to let the structure speak for itself. This approach was particularly characteristic of Hansen's Copenhagen work in the early 20th century.

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Distinctively Danish?

Danish Architecture has often been described using concepts like simplicity, functionality and restraint even in the 20th century by writers like Tobias Faber (1915- ), Nils-Ole Lund (1936- ) and Kay Fisker. These same writers have attributed great significance to climatic, geographical and mental-historical conditions as decisive factors in determining the creation of certain national or regional expressions. However, on examining this discourse in a historical perspective, it soon becomes apparent that it is rooted in 19th century attempts to construct a particular national identity. In other words it is linked to the particular political and national-romantic proj-
ects which characterized several European countries throughout the 19th century. We may well ask whether the works mentioned above are in fact restrained, whether they are particularly functional, or merely expressions of particular regional conditions? Certainly Hansen and Bindesbøll also cosmo-politans and the history of architecture tends to be dominated by a limited number of formal principles, which seem to get stuck for several generations, but which may in fact simply be the random product of influential architectural personae like the two gentlemen mentioned here.

Generally speaking a lot of the projects mentioned -new and old alike-do in fact share certain traits. They are modern yet anchored in tradition. Bindesbøll's psychiatric hospital was an exponent of an entirely new view of mental illness and P. V. Jensen Klint's Crystalline Cluster was innovative even in its references to older building cultures. This also applied to the long residential complex designed by Carl Petersen and Kve Bentsen, which appears simultaneously retrospectively classical in its detailing and radically modern in its repetitions. Another trait shared by many of these projects is that they are apparently capable of absorbing the great narrative i.e. of allowing architecture to appear as an extension of nature's own building activity. In this sense the use of repetition and abstraction vis-à-vis a recognizable set of motifs appears to be simply an artistic trick which nevertheless reminds us that in 19th and 20th century architecture the simple can be radical and the avant garde not necessarily reject tradition.


To pose the question of the 'south'in relation to Finland raises the often asked question of centre versus periphery or south versus north. There have been those who have attempted to 'essentialize'a division between south and north. One could blame this on Von Herder and Goethe at the end of the 18th century: unaware of the French origins of Gothic architecture, they declared it the true German architecture, in opposition to Laugier's French classicism. But even in more recent times Norwegian architecture theorist Christian Norberg Schulz argued that identity has to be understood 'dia-

ritically': the essence of the North is that it is not the South -"the North is a world, scarcely understood, of moods as determined by the light, while the South is the birth of idea and Form, each entity becoming discrete".

One could also talk of debt and gratitude. This is well illustrated by Alvar Aalto's e il Clas-
sicismo Nordico (1998) by Paolo Angelotti and Gaia Remiditi, "Traveling from Italy to the north" in search of the debt, the question arises: "Why is it that it is our northern colleagues and not we who feel united by those communal traits of the classical and Mediterranean traditions?" But their answer comes as gratitude: "This helps us recuperate an architectural and urban sensibility so often reflected within our own country, and if this causes us to feel gratitude to Aalto for his efforts in reviving our own heritage, then it should also induce us to search for other equally important meanings of his particular "classicism".

Classicism as a universal, standard symbol of enculturation is well illustrated by an engraving depicting Finland in Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna, a series of engravings completed in 1661-1753 under the direction of distinguished Swedish soldier-engineer Eric Dahlbergh. The series was instigated by the Swedish crown at a time when Sweden was at the height of its imperialist powers, and depicts the nation's prominent cities and buildings. Ten of the 353 engravings depict Sweden's largest province; Finland. But apart from one medi-

ceval castle, no architecture and only one city (Vyborg) were deemed worthy of inclusion. Instead, the emphasis is on coats of arms and views of rural life. Most remarkable is the engraving for "South Finland". It depicts a clear-

ing in a forest for the construction of a typical modest log farmhouse, but in the foreground is a skilled craftsman carving a Corinthian column. The whole series of engravings was viewed through Dahlbergh's architectural ideal of the Roman Baroque, with overlays of motifs of classical mythology and grand distortions, but here the presence of a classical column is used to signify Sweden's colonisation of Finland, bringing enculturation as signified by classical architecture.

In fact, it was not so much architecture as the founding of engineer-designed grid plan towns in Finland -in order to centralise com-

merce and mark military defence against the threat from neighbouring Russia- that would become the important instrument in the poli-

cies of the centralised royal power in a vast and very sparsely inhabited area. Military engineers also had ambitions to build 'ideal cities' based on state-of-the-art French and Dutch fortification treaties. The only one to be carried out in Finland was the radial plan for the new fortress town of Hamina, bordering Rus-

sia, by fortification engineer Axel von Löwen in 1733. When the town was ceded to Russia in 1743, similar grand plans were drawn up for new fortress towns in Lovisa and Helsinki but few of the Baroque ideals were realised.

Lacking a professional class of architects, up until the latter part of the 19th century 'build-

ing design' in Finland was a matter of master builders, foreign pattern books, military engineering or employing foreign architects. The first leading architects in Finland were foreigners, the first being the Italian-born Carlo Basili, followed by the German Carl-Ludwig Engel. The 'journey-

man architect' Engel had arrived a few years after Russia had annexed Finland in 1809, making it a grand duchy within the Russian empire. In 1816 Engel was made state archi-

tet with the task of designing the new capital, Helsinki. The result was a St. Petersburg in miniature, designed in the prevailing neoclas-

sical style of the day-in Greek and Roman variations where appropriate.

Dahlbergh's engraving brings to mind a far more famous one, made half a century later by M.A. Laugier, "Allegorical figure of Architecture

Gareth Grifths