The small step from formal to ideological beauty

Topics: 7 & 9
Authors: Jørgen Skatland, Ole Møystad, Faculty of Architecture and Design, NTNU, Norway

In this research paper, we aim to show a dramatic contrast between the conceptual framework of aesthetic control of architecture in Norway in the 1920s and the contemporary Planning and Building Act of 2008. Further on, we aim to investigate the development and dissemination of Norwegian architectural theory as a plausible cause for this change in the Norwegian Building Codes’ environmental aesthetics.

This research consists in a three-part approach: Firstly, a distinct development in Norwegian Building Codes’ aesthetic criteria to architecture is demonstrated by means of a document analysis of historical regulations, spanning from the present Act of 2008 and back to the first nation-wide Building law of 1924. Secondly, we connect this observation to developments in Norwegian architecture theory, pre-eminently Christian Norberg-Schulz’ Theory of Place. These theories had direct impact on architecture politics through a series of normative pamphlets advocating a “Norwegian Vernacular” disseminated both by the Norwegian State Housing Bank and governmental agencies in the 1990s. Finally, we compare the aesthetics espoused by the Theory of Place with the conceptual underpinnings of the aesthetic criteria of the 1924 Building Act. Here we also connect Norberg-Schulz’ normative aesthetics to his philosophical sources and their political significance.

In the findings, we continue to argue that the contrast between the Acts of 1924 and 2008 represent a change from a formal concern for beauty to a politicized architectural aesthetics. This situation is still prevailing in 2017. A plausible explanation for this change appears to be a case of coinciding interests: At one point, there appears to have been an overlap between the explicit political aims of the advocates of the Theory of Place (as an ideological reaction to modernity) and municipal building application officers’ need for empowerment in their evaluation of building proposals on aesthetic criteria in the 1990s.

If correct, the implications of these findings call for a critical discussion of the status quo of Norway’s aesthetic regulation of architecture. This can be illustrated by tracing the Theory of Place back to its ideological foundations, namely Hans Sedlmayr and Martin Heidegger and their political positions. The potentially bigoted and un-democratic consequences of the politicization of architectural aesthetics cannot be ignored in the contemporary political climate of Europe.

Keywords:
Historical analysis, Architectural theory, Christian Norberg-Schulz’ Theory of Place, Building Codes, Aesthetics and politics