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Nordic beauty versus classical beauty: the case of Arne Jacobsen

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ABSTRACT. The architectural concept of beauty is understood differently throughout history and it should be analyzed from specific works, because, from our point of view, we learn about architecture studying other architecture. Thus, analyzing the works of great masters we get closer to actual architecture. In this sense, modern Nordic masters, in their attempt to combine the local tradition and classical Mediterranean style, could help with more clarity and objectivity to perceive what we, in the South, have called beauty.

Thereby, the analysis of the projects designed by the Danish architect Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) permits us to comprehend his concept of beauty. His works combine the ancient Nordic conception of beauty, based on the functionality of art (brugkunst) established by the Vikings, with idealization of beauty, born with Plato and recovered in Renaissance with Alberti's principles. Therefore, Jacobsen's perception of beauty is unquestionably tied to utility, but united with the criteria of proportion, harmony and fair relationship between the parties of a set.

KEYWORDS: Arne Jacobsen, beauty, Viking, Nordic, South, Mediterranean.

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Architecture, like the rest of the arts, is made up of works, characterized by their individuality and particularity. This assertion impels us to analyze beauty from the study of the works and not from philosophical assumptions, because we learn architecture from the same architecture. In this case, the concept of beauty, seen differently throughout history, should be analyzed from specific works. If we can explain what beauty is from practical examples (buildings), leaving aside the theory, it is easier to convey its meaning. So, to bring the concept of beauty to students of architecture is to introduce them to masters who serve as a reference through their works. We use masters because in their projects the architectural concepts are clearly present, transcending time and space. Consequently, analysis and research are the ways to get the knowledge of real architecture and become the best ally of teaching.

In this sense, modern Scandinavian masters, in their attempt to combine local tradition and classical Mediterranean style, can help us perceive with more clarity and objectively what we, in the South, have called beauty. The classical world where Vitruvius developed the concept of *venustas* became very important for artists in the North starting in the late eighteenth century. Since then, the pilgrimages to Mediterranean have modified the ancient concept of Nordic beauty, adding new shades that didn't contain in the beginning.

From this point of view, this paper aims to analyze a specific Nordic master, the Danish architect Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971), to compare the characteristics of Nordic beauty with Mediterranean classical beauty. Studying his works and his few writings, one finds that some of those old standards that Vitruvius used are also a part of modern architecture, which is the basis of contemporary one. Thus, the aim we follow as architects and teachers is explain what beauty is, clearly and objectively. We should think about how we can approach it and how we can communicate it through our buildings.

The concept of beauty that the Danish ancestral culture transmitted to Nordic modern masters comes from the Viking world. This culture is formed by the sailors, traders and warriors who inhabited the Scandinavian lands (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) between the VIII and XI centuries. Most of the year, the Vikings took advantage of the good weather to go on expeditions by sea and river, so the boats were their dwellings. But in winter, they repaired their ships and rested on land in simple structures. They didn't have much time to build their houses but rather preferred to protect themselves from the cold in comfortable wooden houses. They were not disinterested in the beauty of their buildings, they just understood that what was **practical was also beautiful**. In fact, the ships were really the most precious objects of this civilization: their dwellings for half the year and his tool of survival. Therefore, their concept of beauty was inextricably linked to utility, as show the Danish term *brugkunst*, which alludes to the art of creating an object in order to be used.

The Viking postulates reappear in Denmark with functionalism in the early part of the last century. The primacy of what is technical and functional in architectural design seems linked to the old spirit of the Scandinavian people. But Jacobsen, despite being considered one of the promoters of this movement in Denmark, goes beyond and demands of beauty as one of the attributes of authentic architecture, closer to platonic postulates than Vikings:

“If construction is architecture, then it is an art. More clearly, if a building isn’t well resolved from the technical or functional point of view, then neither it’s architecture, it’s just a building. For years, it has been said that when something is practical and functional is also beautiful. I don’t think so because there are many ways to solve functionally one problem without never make it beautiful!”¹

Surely, we would find the source of these words in Jacobsen’s education at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He is trained during a generational change that recasts the continuity of the Danish architecture of the early twentieth century. On one hand, the impellers of the change are Christian Frederik Hansen and Ferdinand Meldahl who find a classicist position mirrored in Mediterranean referents. On the other hand, Jensen Klint and Carl Petersen defend a regionalist position based on the study of the old examples of local anonymous architecture. Although the opinions to reset a new artistic path are divided, the idea of continuity with the past seems to unite them.

The next generation, with Kay Fisker and Poul Henningsen, follows the marked path but directed towards modernity, never forgetting its ancestral authenticity. In this generation, a group of young architects joins to claim wisdom, functionality, sensitivity and veracity led to a complete architecture. All these characteristics are the basis for an efficient design while keeping with Danish spirit, reevaluating again *brugkunst*.

(Fig.1) (Fig.2)

During these formative years in the Academy, Jacobsen visits Italy and Greece for the first time, in 1925, where he measures and draws the fountain of Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and a capital of a Doric temple, among others. Then, as an architect, these visits to the Mediterranean continue: 1928, 1937, 1949, 1953, 1955, 1956 and 1962. Jacobsen finds inspiration in wild nature, in the old temples, in rural and urban fragments, etc. Any landscape chosen is measured, fitted and painted using watercolours. The Academy’s inculcation of careful and meticulous observation of art is deeply rooted in Jacobsen, to the point of defining **beauty in terms of proportion**. Thus, the apparently conflicting postulates of Nordic beauty and Mediterranean beauty merge in Arne Jacobsen’s work as he explains:

“The main factor is proportion. It’s precisely proportion that makes the old classic Greek temples beautiful. They are as big blocks, the air which has

been virtually cut between columns. If someone looks at a building of the Baroque, Renaissance or contemporaneous, someone look at them, someone admire them, all of them are well proportioned; this is essential. And then there is, of course, the colours, and all together, the general impression."²

With these words, Jacobsen goes beyond beauty seen as utility, claiming a measurable and tangible quality. It combines the ancient Nordic conception of beauty, based on the functionality of art, with the Platonic idealization of beauty. This Jacobsen formulation would probably be signed by Leon Battista Alberti, who returns the Platonic tenets in the Renaissance and provides more tangible contents. According to Alberti, "beauty is a certain harmony between all parts to conform it, so that you can not add, remove or change any items"³.

We could conclude that beauty for Jacobsen is surely a compendium between what is functional and just relation between the parties of the set. What we can assure is that Jacobsen travelled to Greece and Italy to recognize beauty and to know its relations. For this reason, he measures buildings, annotates its sizes and goes over it again and again in his office. As he explains, "when I travel draw and paint sketches, and it's fun to use them to sit down to work"⁴. These notebooks are filled with notes, measurements, calculations and colours were used to illustrate his own work and provide the just proportion to approach beauty. Re-draw, re-think, re-construct, is the Arne Jacobsen way to study and understand the world. His working method is the constancy and perseverance to find the right shape, the most beautiful shape. As Nils-Ole Lund said:

"(In Jacobsen) The motifs of classical architecture disappeared in the late thirties, but the idea that moderation, simplicity and fine proportions were important virtues of architecture survived."⁵

Notes

Skriver P. E., *Arne Jacobsen*, in «Quaderns d'arquitectura i Urbanisme», n. 157, 1983, page 80.

² Skriver, P. E., Op. cit., page 79.

³ Alberti, L. B., *De re aedificatoria*, Akal. Madrid 1991.

⁴ Ninka, *Las nuevas ideas son siempre criticadas*, in «Arne Jacobsen», Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transportes, Dirección General para la Vivienda y Arquitectura, Madrid 1993, page 70.

⁵ Lund, N.-O., *Arne Jacobsen*, in «Quaderns d'arquitectura i Urbanisme», n. 157, 1983, page 69.



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Legends

Fig.1 Watercolour of a detail of an old Italian capital. Arne Jacobsen, 1925.

Fig.2 Watercolour of a Doric temple at Paestum. Arne Jacobsen, 1953.

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Biography

Berta Bardí i Milà graduated in April 2004 as an architect from the Superior Technical School of Architecture in Barcelona, Spain, ETSAB. Received a grant from Technical University of Catalonia, UPC, for the training of university teachers in January 2006 until 2010. Obtained Research certificate (Diploma d'Estudis Avançats, DEA) in November 2007. Between 2006 and 2009, received some grants to do research at Danmarks Kunsthbibliotek and at the Alvar Aalto Foundation. Currently, preparing thesis "Houses designed by Arne Jacobsen: the courtyard and the pavilion" (*Les cases d'Arne Jacobsen: el pati i el pavelló*) and teaching Architectural Projects at Superior Technical School of Architecture in Vallès, ETSAV.

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"Beauty is a certain harmony between all parts to conform it, so that you can not add, remove or change any items."
Leon Battista Alberti, 1450.

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Arne Jacobsen, 1971.