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ORGANIC DESIGN IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORDIC ARCHITECTURE

Erik Champion



FOREWORD

The analogous evocation of nature in architecture dates back to ancient antiquity and was the basis for early architectural form and expression, as exemplified by the origins of the primitive hut, as proposed by Marc-Antoine Laugier in his *Essai sur l'Architecture* of 1755. Various iterations and variations of the nature-inspired classical language of architecture continued into the nineteenth century and the dawn of the modern industrialized era, which was heralded by the building of Sir Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851. This building echoed nature not merely decoratively but also more profoundly in terms of its form and structural integrity, using industrial methods of production. While the technological advances of the early twentieth century gave rise to the monumental organic visions of the German Expressionists, as well the dynamic utopian architecture of the Russian Constructivists and Italian Futurists, it also led to an unquestioning fascination with rationalized industrialization and mass production, which in turn led to the universal anonymity of the International Style of architecture that became ubiquitous in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In contrast to this overwhelming tendency, there were significant notable exceptions in the expressively sculptural later works of Le Corbusier and self-termed organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, among others. However, it is perhaps the work of Alvar Aalto and other notable Nordic architects, channeling a deep Nordic appreciation of nature, that provided a significant alternative to the banal conformity of the more widely dominant International Style. As Colin St. John Wilson's book title makes clear (Wilson, 1995, p. 7), Aalto was the leading pioneer of "the other tradition of modern architecture." Through a more organic approach to architectural design and use of traditional building materials, Aalto moderated and humanized modern architecture, inspiring many of his fellow Nordic colleagues to follow in similar, but not identical, organic directions in architecture.

Within Finnish architecture, Reima and Raili Pietilä were Aalto's immediate successor. Taking an organic approach to a more expressive extreme, the Pietiläs believed that Euclidean geometry was merely a passing cultural invention in the broad arc of history and developed what he referred to as Zoomorphic architecture, which was directly informed by forms and phenomena in nature. It was an approach that infuriated modern architectural purists as much as his civic works delighted a wider public with their underpinning narrative.

At the more abstract and rationalized end of the expressive organic spectrum is the work of the leading Danish architect, Jørn Utzon. Utzon was inspired, as were many of his colleagues, by *On Growth and Form* by D'Arcy Thompson, first published in 1917, and the close-up plant photography of Carl Blossfeldt. Utzon stated early in his career that "the true innermost being of architecture can be compared with that of nature's seed, and something of the inevitability of nature's principle of growth ought to be a fundamental concept in architecture" (Utzon, 1948). This idea of organic growth, and what Utzon described as "Additive Architecture," underpins all of his work and reached its zenith in the Sydney Opera House. The sheer scale and complexity of the Sydney Opera House required Utzon to rationalize and refine his organic approach to architecture, using geometry and as few pre-fabricated components as possible: the resulting level of abstraction and organic narrative underpins the enduring iconic status of the building.

That notable Nordic architecture has been defined by an organic approach is not surprising, as Norwegian architect Per Olaf Fjeld has noted: "In the North, architecture was always responding to or acting on or in nature" (Fjeld, 2009). This organic approach complimented the other underlying direction in Nordic architecture and design, which is a strong adherence to the principles of Functionalism. As Juhani Pallasmaa states, "architecture has a dual focus. It provides metaphorical responses on artistic level at the same time that it solves the practical requirements of function, structure, execution and economy" (Pallasmaa, 2005). Sverre Fehn put it eloquently: "the bird's nest is absolute functionalism, because the bird is not aware of its own death" (Pallasmaa, 2005).

As the Digital Era increasingly allows us to emulate the forms of nature, ushering in a new wave of sculptural, organic architecture, Erik Champion's book provides a timely reminder and a highly engaging, comprehensive understanding of the significance of the organic design approach within Nordic architecture. The early origins, development and variations of approach between the leading architects in the Nordic countries are in differing directions, but they are closely interconnected and share a humanistic functionalist approach. Colin St. John Wilson referred to the "other tradition of modern architecture" (Wilson, 1995) as "the uncompleted project," thus inferring an ongoing direction within architecture. This book is thus not only a highly fascinating study of outstanding Nordic architecture but also a valuable source of inspiration and precedent for a humane, environmentally responsive organic architecture going forward.

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