

Fehn and the closeness of experience

Incongruities of scale

Fehn in Venice

In response to your obituary of Sverre Fehn (*arq* 13.1, pp. 11–15), I add an echo of admiration for what I know of the man and his work.

Walking up the main axis of the Biennale site in Venice earlier this year, lined with eagerly attention-seeking pavilions, fancy costumes left in store until the next party, the Nordic Pavilion seemed almost arrogantly understated, tolerating an annual sprucing up, a sweeping off of leaves and removal of superficial stains. Looking forward to finally ‘stepping inside’ the well-known black and white photographic image of this watery glade-cave, I was thwarted. Instead, there was a bricolage of boards covering the sliding glass; active drilling, cutting, setting out, building of new ground plinths and troughs for Elmgreen and Dragset’s art installation to open in a month’s time.¹

So I had to circumnavigate, spend time with the outside, imagining the emptiness (silence?) of the pavilion at the moment of the photograph from forty years ago, and the variety of gatherings/groupings it has housed in its life (around the same age as me).² The entrance dominated by a tree cloaked by the bifurcated concrete, with its surprising lowness; the roughness of the bark; the faintly pockmarked boardmarks; the creamy translucence of the scooping roofing. How is the hanging/supporting game of the rare thinness of the roof beams pulled off? Materials and structural logics are deftly imagined and played with, a sophisticated mediation between ground perambulations and striated sky shaping a new world within/without.

Ranald Lawrence described Fehn





as an architect who built on the horizon – a tectonic and topographic architect. The lucidity and clarity implied is evident in his work, yet is balanced by ‘working in the shadow’ – of Modernism, and perhaps also of simplistic, sunny optimism. Confrontation and struggle are recurrent themes of language used by Fehn in his narratives where, ‘acting violently in order to emphasise [...] latent, secret, hidden qualities’, he calls the act of building ‘brutal’. Fehn said, ‘[...] When I build on a site in nature that is totally unspoiled, it is a fight, an attack by our culture on nature. In this confrontation I strive to make a building in the setting, a hope for a new consciousness to see the beauty there as well.’ Peter Cook has called Fehn ‘a believing architect’, his work ‘quiet and lyrical’, yet with a ‘fascinating violence’. What did he believe in? He believed that architects can make places which have their own stories and can add to the collective human story; that architects are involved in the handling of culture and nature, time and place; that architects can do this through both building and educating.

I only spoke to Sverre Fehn in brief telephone conversations a few years ago, when undertaking some reflection and analysis on the invention of site in his work, in particular in the Hamar Museum. As expected, he was courteous and thoughtful. The live voice close through technology, yet distant and disembodied. He seemed as an architect to have an exemplary skill in bringing a necessary distance to situations yet simultaneously intensifying the closeness and realness of experience. Like Utzon, another northerner with memorable work situated in southern light, defined shade, and drier construction, one of his legacies will surely be leaving us with opportunities to ‘see the beauty’ of the settings he contributed to, well beyond his human life.

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Notes

1. <http://i.telegraph.co.uk/telegraph/multimedia/archive/01417/nordic-naked_14170961.jpg> <http://www.independent.co.uk/multimedia/archive/00182/4793399_182231b.jpg> [accessed: 1 September 2009].

2. Another was recorded recently by Manchester students <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIbgV4rKCvg>> [accessed: 1 September 2009]. Also the location of Fehn's retrospective at the Architecture Biennale in 2008.

Reflections on miniature worlds

In “Worlds in Miniature”: Some Reflections on Scale and the Microcosmic Meaning of Cabinets of Curiosities’ (*arq* 13.1, 2009, pp. 37–48), Dagmar Motycka Weston intriguingly invites us to speculate on the power of the miniature and its application in contemporary design practices. Architectural scale has a myriad of meanings ranging from subjective sensibility to objective measure.’ When discussing microcosm and miniature, it is important to appreciate the different meanings of scale implicit within them. Micro is comparatively small, but within the same measure as the macro in the sense that microscopes allow us to see the tiny inhabitants with whom we share our world. Nature encompasses both the great and the small, but is always ‘full-scale’. Mini, on the other hand, is both proportionally small and in a reduced measure from its full-sized siblings. Accordingly, Renaissance scale drawings were measured in ‘small feet’. Thus, the idea of scale as micro is different from that as mini. Scale as a mini-proportional measure in architectural drawings and models has been in use since ancient times.

Weston interprets the array of objects in curiosity cabinets to ‘reveal the order of the natural world seen as an analogical structure’. Indeed, Weston's close reading of the perspective image of apothecary Francesco Calzolari's museum demonstrates, more than a definitive description, joy in the infinite play of interpretation. The casual reader may misunderstand Weston's discussion of the historical shift from scale as magical possession to instrumental operation as a dichotomy between myth and reason, where myth is mischaracterised as faulty proto-rationalism, to be progressively replaced by science. However, a fuller understanding of myth as a foundational structuring of the human world acknowledges its latent presence in modern times. As Georges Bataille insightfully quips about modernity when introducing an exhibition on Surrealism: ‘the absence of myths is

also a myth’.² In this way, the mythic dimension of the miniature continues into the present; however underappreciated, nested beside modern rationalism. Like the medieval image Weston reproduced of a patron saint holding the city, modern photos of architects and patrons holding project models are examples of the mythos of scale remaining in our time.³ Weston rightly criticises present CAD programs that zoom in and out on screen to preclude a sense of scale. Unlike this blurred scalar experience, Weston suggests that juxtaposition allows the rapid change of scale while retaining one's ability to imaginatively inhabit the representation. For example, Beaux-Arts analytic drawings combine overall plans and intimate details.⁴ Refined computer imaging technologies could expand this ability to juxtapose through a virtual dance of perception. The computer evokes a sense of wonder related to the automata of curiosity cabinets of earlier centuries, both of which value miniaturisation.

Citing the work of Giorgio de Chirico and Aldo Rossi, Weston makes a case for the release of memory through ‘ruptures and incongruities of scale’ and finds in the curiosity cabinet an expression of order with the juxtaposition of fragments that allows for evocative play in urban design. Camillo Sitte, writing at a time when the museum as a public institution was being introduced, encouraged the arrangement of cities as a collection ‘as though at an exhibition’.⁵ Through juxtaposition, rather than arbitrary zooming, the invisible order of the narrative which is the urban experience is made manifest. In collecting the city, we recompose its fragments into a coherent expression. Its miniaturisation creates an amulet of the city that continues to operate as a fetish, an exotic object which we may possess but which simultaneously calls to our erotic impulse to be enveloped and possessed by the city. Like sympathetic magic, possessing the miniature allows the designer to have power over its full-sized counterpart.

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Notes

1. Cecil Elliot, 'The Variety of Scale', *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 18.3 (December 1963), pp. 35-7.
2. Georges Bataille, 'The Absence of Myth', in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994 [1947]), p. 48.
3. Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
4. John Harbeson, *The Study of Architectural Design* (New York: Pencil Points Press, 1926).
5. Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities* (New York: Reinhold, 1945).

Illustration credit

arq gratefully acknowledges:
Suzanne Ewing, all images

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