

Study 2a: Mari Hvattum (AHO)

Framing nature: the architecture of railway travel, 1845-1910.

When Johann Gottfried Herder extolled the virtues of the North in his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784), he particularly emphasized the 'naturalness' of the Nordic peoples.¹ While mainland Europe was stifled by its century-old civilization, the northern periphery possessed a roughness and immediacy which appealed to the proto-romantic Herder. The association of the north to the natural became commonplace with modernism and still echoes in contemporary architectural discourse, where Nordic architecture is often taken to represent a shunning of artifice and an immediacy of perception.² The association of the north with the natural raises interesting questions both in terms of aesthetic theory and architectural history. In what way may cultural phenomena such as architecture be deemed 'natural', and which are the conceptions of nature governing this discourse? Moreover: in what way does Nordic architecture use this notion of nature and the natural in order to construct and legitimize itself? These are the questions with which the present study engages. Inspired by Wilfried Lipp's study *Natur, Geschichte, Denkmal*, I examine the ways in which a historically constructed conception of nature impacts aesthetic and architectural discourse.

The study's empirical material is the architecture accompanying the large scale railway construction taking place from 1854 to about 1910 in Norway, particularly the railway stations and tourist hotels built in the explicitly naturalizing 'serpent style'.³ This is an architecture which, as many scholars point out, appeals to Norway's medieval past in an attempt to craft an appropriate architectural expression for a new nation.⁴ And yet, this historicizing gesture is bound up with ideas of nature as the origin and guarantor of nation and architecture alike.⁵ The railway architecture of the late 19th century bears witness to this naturalizing impulse on many levels. By making the wilderness accessible, the railway was quite literally framing nature, turning it into a landscape to behold and exploit. The architecture emerging alongside the tracks framed nature in its own way, 'translating' aspects of regional nature into cultural form. The prolific railway architect Paul Due, claiming to have taken both the "lofts and the people" as well as the valleys themselves as his "model" when designing buildings for the railway through Sætedalen, is an apt example.⁶ This was an architecture that promoted 'natural' materials and construction types, and which sought a 'natural' architectural expression for the region and its people.⁷ In the spirit of Montesquieu, Due envisioned architectural style as a translation of given natural conditions – climate, people, vegetation, and topography – into cultural form; an idea which has resonated strongly in modern Norwegian architecture.⁸ This mimetic and naturalizing impulse has received little scholarly attention, and neither its particular manifestation in the late 19th century, nor its forceful *Wirkungsgeschichte* in 20th century Norwegian architecture has been explored.⁹ Analysing key works by railway architects such as Schirmer

¹ Riga and Leibzig: Hartknoch 1784.

² Sigfried Giedion promoted Nordic modernism as a 'natural' alternative to the International Style in *Space, Time and Architecture* (Harvard: HUP 1954, 3rd ed.), an idea which resonates in contemporary scholarship such as C. St John Wilson's *The other tradition of modern architecture*, London: Academy 1995, P. Blundell Jones' *Gunnar Asplund*, London: Phaidon 2006, as well as in *A+U's* recent issue on Norwegian architecture, (no 12, Dec. 2004).

³ The railway development is chronicled in T. Bergh, H. Ryggvik, J. Gulowsen, *Jernbanen i Norge 1854-2004* (2 vols) Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørge. The railway architecture is little documented, with the exception of the guide *Neste Stasjon: en guide til jernbanens arkitekturhistorie*, E. Hartmann, Ø. Mangset, Ø. Reisegg, Oslo: Gyldendal 1997. 'Dragestil' has been translated as 'dragon style' (e.g. Miller Lane, op.cit), yet 'serpent style' covers the loosely serpentine motifs of this architecture more accurately.

⁴ See J. C. Eldal, *Historisme i Tre: "Sveitserstil", byggeskikksromantikk og nasjonal egenart i europeisk og norsk trearkitektur på 1800-tallet*. Oslo: UiO 1998. Both B. Miller Lane in her *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries*. (Cambridge: CUP 2000) and M. Schwartz in *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: CUP 1995) make interesting references to the role of nature in national romantic thinking, yet do not develop the topic further.

⁵ C.f. Lipp's analysis of the republican cult of nature developed after the French revolution. *Natur, Geschichte, Denkmal* op.cit.

⁶ Paul Due, lecture in Skandinaviske Jernvågsmannaselskapet, 1902. This mimetic notion of architectural form is prevalent in 19th century architectural discourse from J. W. Goethe and Quatremère de Quincy to Gottfried Semper, yet is little reflected in Norwegian scholarship.

⁷ Nature as a topos in aesthetic discourse has been studied by among others E. Panofsky, *Idea: a concept in art history* (New York: Harper & Row 1968), and M. H. Abrams in *The mirror and the lamp: romantic theory and the critical tradition*, (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press 1971). The concept's use in architectural thinking has received less attention, with the noteworthy exception of C. van Eck's *Organicism in Nineteenth century Architecture* (Architectura & Natura: Amsterdam 1995) which traces the organic paradigm in 19th century architectural thinking. See also M. Hvattum "Unfolding from within": modern architecture and the dream of organic totality" in *The Journal of Architecture* (4/2006, special issue on organicism and architecture. A. Forty's essay "Nature" in *Words and Buildings* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000) surveys the topic well, while specialized studies such as S. Ringbom's *Stone, Style & Truth* (Finska fornminnesföreningens tidskrift 91/ 1987) provides an insightful analysis of the Nordic cult of natural stone.

⁸ *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, London: Academy, 1980.

⁹ The topic has been interestingly explored in an American setting by Christine Macy and Sarah Bonnemaïson, *Architecture and Nature: creating the American Landscape* (London: Routledge 2003) which provides a major source of inspiration for the project.

& von Hanno, Georg Bull, Paul Due, and Erik Glosimodt, the study inquires into the architectural, historical, and intellectual presuppositions of this naturalizing aesthetics. Furthermore, it looks at the ways in which this naturalizing aesthetics lives on in 20th and 21st century Norwegian architectural discourse and practice, most explicitly in the writings of Christian Norberg-Schulz and the works of architects such as Sverre Fehn, Arne Henriksen, Carl-Viggo Hølmebakk, and Jensen & Skodvin.¹⁰ In this way, a little studied historical material may contribute to throwing new light on the aesthetic presuppositions of contemporary Norwegian architecture.¹¹

¹⁰ The latter are key contributors to the *Norwegian Tourist Route Project*, creating a fruitful link between this study and the post-doc project.

¹¹ An inspiration for this approach is provided by D. Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories: studies in landscape and architecture*. Philadelphia: UPP, 2004.