

Sverre Fehn 1997 Laureate Essay

The Paradox of Sverre Fehn

By Ada Louise Huxtable

Author and Architecture Critic, *The Wall Street Journal*

Sverre Fehn is a builder, philosopher, and poet, and an extremely gifted architect. Held in high esteem in professional circles, he is surprisingly little known beyond them; the celebrity circuit seems to stop just south of Norway. At a time when globe-circling stars promote “signature” styles, he has devoted himself to the quiet, undeviating pursuit of a subtle, lyrical, and still stringently rational architecture. His buildings, while well-published, are neither numerous nor easily accessible—deep snow can make the roads to his Glacier museum on the mountainous west coast impassable until May—nothing is exactly on the beaten track. Like the Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, Fehn has never fitted easily into the modernist canon; each has managed to break the rules in a highly individual way, and each has had a singular vision. Also like Aalto, Fehn’s buildings must be visited to understand their conceptual brilliance and aesthetic pleasures, and the particular and universal way they belong to the land.

Sverre Fehn is, in fact, something of a paradox; his self-engendered and sometimes curious contradictions can throw even his admirers off base. A respectful inquiry at the press conference for the announcement of his Pritzker Prize, about his mastery of wood construction in the Scandinavian tradition, brought his somewhat unsettling disclaimer, “I have spent my life running away from wood!” and a brief discourse on his use of brick and concrete. What he did not explain was how he utilizes concrete to anchor a building to a rocky ridge or hold back a forested slope, or the way his brick or concrete walls combine with a light and elegant wooden superstructure for a perfect integration of traditional and modern materials. Praised for his extraordinary sensitivity to nature, Fehn says that the very act of building begins the process of destruction; that every intervention, no matter how careful, contributes to the landscape’s loss. Beyond Oslo, the forests seem endless, only the trees interrupt the line between earth and sky. The horizon, with its mysterious sense of limits and infinity, its mythic and timeless connotations, is a constant presence in his art and life. But he sees breaking the horizon line as an intrusive act of disruption and transformation, although, in his hands, this violation turns infinity into perceived and controlled space and establishes our perspective on the world. He possesses an almost magical ability to emphasize and enhance the natural setting—the work of Frank Lloyd Wright comes constantly to mind—and yet he insists that nature should never be regarded in a romantic way, that the architect must create a tension between nature and his intervention. There is nothing romantic about this idea; it poses one of architecture’s most demanding and enduring challenges.

Fehn has built some of the most remarkable museums in the world, but the very idea of a museum troubles him. He considers the museum an instrument of a society that denies death and overvalues material things; he is convinced that this secular age has transferred the idea of immortality to objects, conferring on them a special power; that we give to museums the position and respect accorded to cathedrals in earlier times. But this has not kept him from creating buildings for this purpose that redefine the museum’s role in the modern world.

Fehn’s style, so unaffected, so bound to the earth, is also a paradox—these deceptively simple designs masquerading as indigenous naturalism are a skilled and sophisticated synthesis of many influences. Although his architecture is rooted deeply in Norway’s forests, mountains and fjords, it owes as much to European modernism as to his intimate understanding of his native land. He came of age as an architect at the high point of the modernist revolution. His teacher, Arne Korsmo, a Norwegian architect who traveled widely and built the Norwegian pavilion for the 1937 Paris Exposition, brought the radical new work to a post World War II generation of young Norwegian architects still immersed in the nostalgia of Scandinavian romantic nationalism. With a grant received from the French government in 1952, Fehn and his wife, Ingrid, a musician, went to Paris, where they stayed two years. Korsmo introduced Fehn to Le Corbusier, whose atelier was open evenings to any who cared to come. He remembers dinners with Fernand Léger, Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Peter and Alison Smithson; he became a member of CIAM, the Congrès Internationale d’Architecture Moderne, and was associated briefly with Jean Prouvé.

The Paradox of Sverre Fehn (continued)

Today, in an act of homage and continuity, he lives and works in the house and studio Arne Korsmo built for himself on a quiet street in Oslo, part of a small enclave of other International Style houses softened by time, remodeling, and the nostalgia of a revolution grown old. The modest entrance leads into a large, double-height, Corbusian space full of light, music, art and books, and the collected artifacts of a creative life.

The winters of the Paris sojourn were spent in North Africa, discovering a world completely different from anything he had known. The simple geometry and rational design of indigenous Moroccan buildings, with their flat roof terraces and unadorned walls, were a dramatic confirmation that the aesthetic principles of functionalist doctrine existed long before modernist theory embraced them. Like many northerners, he reacted strongly to the intense southern light, comparing it to Norway's "horizontal" light and "long shadows—a flickering, sensitive light," he explained later in an interview with *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* ... (that) "offers an infinite number of variations ... architecture is frequently invisible, enveloped in mist." Typically, he extended the description into an analogy of northern light with northern character, where nothing is "exact or direct ... situations are not cut and dried," and to literature, "Hamsun, Gogol, and Chekhov described characters who are intuitive and dual-natured."

There is much about Fehn, also, that is intuitive and dual-natured. Tall and slender, courteous and cool, he holds passionate convictions; as he comments on what he sees as the absurdities and outrageousness of much in art, architecture and behavior today, his tone moves between irony and tragedy, punctuated by quietly incredulous laughter. He speaks in poetic parables about life and art, and his own art in particular, that make Louis Kahn's utterances sound like plain-speak. The ideas and convictions forged in the hot crucible of early modernism infuse his work with a morality and integrity that have been lost in the postmodern pursuit of headline novelties. He has never relinquished the logic and minimalism of the modernist aesthetic; unlike many others who embraced modernism in its early years, he kept the faith. But his work has never dead-ended; there is nothing dated or doctrinaire about it. Those looking for camp or retro-nostalgia will not find it.

He designs without dogma, in human terms, rather than from a theoretical base. He starts a house by measuring his clients. He is aware not only of how light enters a building, but what light means in a country that comes stunningly alive after long months of cold and dark. He has placed clerestory windows in a small house in Oslo built in the 1960s—a thoughtful, modest structure of concentrated use and continuous livability—to capture the luminous glow of the midnight sky. The Busk house in southern Norway, built on a wooded, stony ridge overlooking the water, responds to every aspect of the sun and seasons. Each solution is unique, whether it is fitting a house to a family or inventing a new kind of "deconstructed" plan (although he would never have thought of it that way) for the Skadalen School for deaf children in Oslo, a complex that includes linked half circles set at right angles forming courtyards. The result always involves a departure from accepted ideas and practice. Richard Weston's perceptive analysis of Fehn's architecture in *Building Design*, in 1987, went straight to the heart of the matter: "the power of his work lies in the clarity with which he seems able to identify the conceptual essence of a problem, and the precision of the architectural response." Although he, himself, stresses the primacy of construction and the materials used, the way he builds goes far beyond structural pragmatism to a sensuous celebration of a constantly evolving conceptual ideal. The rationality of these unique and beautiful solutions, as well as the perfect control of every detail, immediately evident in plans and sections, is confirmed by visits to his buildings.

Long before today's emphasis on the design—and experience-expanding innovations of ramps, bridges, rotated squares and multidimensional processional routes through a series of related open spaces, Fehn was using these elements as organizing devices. The Bødtker houses—two residences built at different times for different generations of the same family—stand on a steep slope high above Oslo, with views of the city and the Oslo fjord. For the first house, a platform and walls of brick are topped with a wooden roof structure. A long, narrow entrance wing hugs the slope and leads to the main

The Paradox of Sverre Fehn (continued)

building: a square into which another square, a stairwell, has been placed, rotated at 45 degrees. This rotated square cuts the volume into four diagonal sections, for communal and personal use. The later house, placed farther down the slope, is also a cube; the entrance is from a roof terrace, with the living areas at the top and bedrooms below. Diagonal glass walls open to the view. The two houses, and families, are joined by a pool used in summer.

The Røros museum is planned as a bridge over a river on the site of former copper mines. A long, straight, slender spine, one of Fehn's characteristic design devices, serves display and circulation; the building itself forms the route from the ruins of the furnaces to the cinder hills across the river.

The Hedmark Museum in Hamar is organized around a ramp that provides an even more dramatic trip through time and space. Built within the shell of an old barn over the ruins of a twelfth century fortified Bishop's palace, the museum is inserted into the ruins without touching them at any point; the new construction stands free from the old stone walls. The fabric and the artifacts of the past are above, below, and along side—always within touch, but clearly separated from the present, on another level in time. The ramp's century-spanning route through religious, ethnographic, and simple human history links a series of beautiful, revealing installations of excavated artifacts and remarkable views that skillfully orchestrate the perception and experience of the objects and their origins. The ramp starts from an exterior courtyard, enters the ethnographic section in the north wing, proceeds over the rutted and stony archeological dig, through simply and elegantly displayed secular and religious treasures and items of ordinary daily life, to a new auditorium in the south wing. It widens into gallery spaces, becomes a bridge over the actual dig, and leads to the recovered objects in dramatic, almost freestanding exhibition cubes, or "cells" flooded with natural light from above.

Where time and decay have left ragged openings in the stone walls, Fehn has closed them with unframed glass cut to correspond to the ruin's rough edges, mounting the glass invisibly for an artfully layered allusion to the passage of time. Huge, laminated wood trusses span the space; everything else is board-formed raw concrete. The deliberate contrast with the textured and timeworn stone creates an extremely strong and evocative aesthetic that dramatically emphasizes the presence of history and the reality of its survivals. In this setting, a Christ figure mounted on a single column casts its striking shadow on an old wall; a reliquary and a Bible isolated in the concrete cubes that function almost as "treasuries" give the past an iconic, and intensely moving presence. Old farming equipment and household objects found on the site bring the past to tangible, intimate life; iron mounts or glass cases of Scarpa-like reductive simplicity make their changed context clear.

The design of the Hedmark museum is brilliant, often breathtaking, its sensitivity matched only by its daring. It is a clear demonstration of the philosophy and vocabulary that Fehn has developed for dealing with problems of preservation; the modern intervention, uncompromisingly of our own time, is meant to reveal and emphasize the nature of another time that is directly related to us, but no longer exists. Imitation or reconstruction to simulate or "animate" history is beyond consideration. "Those who pursue the past will never attain it," he tells us. "Only the manifestation of the present can bring the past to life." For Fehn, the act of building is inseparable from an act of faith. The distinguished critic and historian, and Fehn's fellow-Norwegian, Christian Norberg-Schulz, considers the Hedmark Museum one of the best buildings of the century. Weston calls it "pure architecture of mesmerizing power."

After functionalism had deteriorated into formalism, and even before the revival of the symbolic role of architecture, every one of Fehn's buildings was generated as much by its spirit and setting as by practical considerations. The Glacier museum at Fjaerland, located between the sea and the mountains on a plain created by the Josetedal glacier, just below its great mass of snow and ice, takes the glacier as its theme; it is all about context and message. The building is tight, pure geometry, expressive and absolute. It relies on the definition and strength of its abstract forms to evoke the glacier's awe and splendor, shaping the visitor's experience by precise architectural means. In plan, the museum is a long, thin spine with a circular, drum-shaped auditorium and the angled glass walls of a restaurant

The Paradox of Sverre Fehn (continued)

projecting from it. Fehn says that the vertical slits that split the building's volumes are references to the glacier's cracks; the sharply angled glass suggests green glacial ice. But the signifiers are less important than the way the building functions. A slate-roofed canopy leads to an entrance between two flanking, monumental flights of stairs that ascend to a roof-top viewing platform. The canopy rises dramatically, with the stairs, to join the roof, which allows a corresponding rise in ceiling height inside and the insertion of clerestory lighting. One can go in, to exhibition spaces, a library and the restaurant. Or one can go up for the view of the glacier and its panoramic surroundings—a journey that can seem like a trip into the clouds as the shifting mists sent down by the glacier's cold air alternately conceal and reveal the breathtaking vista, sometimes threatening to envelop the museum itself. Fehn's invention—for it is that—is a personal, poetic interpretation of the subject and the site.

Fehn's houses are fine-tuned to the seasons and the time of day. The owners of the Busk house on the southern coast start their day with the morning light, in an enclosed small pool at the northeast end and finish it around a fireplace at the west end, with the glow of the setting sun. The linear plan follows the building's construction line on a rocky escarpment sloping down to the sea. A cross axis leads over a bridge to a tower containing the children's rooms. The design was generated by the landscape and the owners' lives; they requested, and received, designation for the house and its environs as a protected site almost immediately after its completion.

All of Fehn's buildings have a gentle beauty that belies their remarkable creativity, and an enormous, quiet, assurance born of conviction and skill. There are no formulas, no "trademark" gestures, no loose edges, no incomplete or troubling transitions, no aggressively tricky details, no straining after effect, no imposition of an overriding theory or geometry, nothing that is not fully conceptualized and realized. The originality of his solutions never involves discomfort or sublimation on the part of the user. Identifying characteristics are subtle and generic: a tightly organized and consistently inventive plan unites the client's needs and the qualities of the site with a dedicated belief in structure and materials; an equally tight synthesis of means and ends infuses practical solutions with profound sensuous satisfactions. His houses "live" in nature, and the people who live in his houses are eager to tell you how the way they live in them has changed their lives - an idea that architects once cherished and have now largely abandoned. Writing in the British journal, *The Architectural Review*, in 1981, Peter Cook observed, "In Sverre Fehn we have a believing architect, and we ignore his quiet and lyrical approach to modern architecture at our peril." These buildings are a continuing search for meaning and authenticity. There is not an abstract exercise, ordinary scheme, or false bravura gesture in the lot. This is basic architecture, reinvented.

©The Hyatt Foundation / The Pritzker Architecture Prize

For more information, please contact:

Edward Lifson
Director of Communications
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
edwardlifson@pritzkerprize.com
+1 312 919 1312