

# The Pritzker Architecture Prize

## Sverre Fehn 1997 Laureate Biography

Sverre Fehn has long been recognized in Europe as Norway's most gifted architect. Now, as the recipient of the 1997 Pritzker Architecture Prize, his profession's highest honor, the rest of the world will be exposed to his talents.

Categorized as a modernist by most architectural writers, Fehn himself says, I have never thought of myself as modern, but I did absorb the anti-monumental and the pictorial world of Le Corbusier, as well as the functionalism of the small villages of North Africa. You might say I came of age in the shadow of modernism.

I always thought I was running away from traditional Norwegian architecture, says Fehn, but I soon realized that I was operating within its context. How I interpret the site of a project, the light, and the building materials have a strong relationship to my origins.

He has no built works in the United States, but is not a total stranger since he has been a guest lecturer at The Cooper Union in New York City; Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts all in 1980. He has also lectured at Harvard, Cornell, and Yale. His work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, and at the Architecture Association of Minneapolis in 1983.

He received international attention for his Norwegian Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Brussels, Belgium in 1958, and again in 1962 for his Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Otherwise, most of his works are in Norway, with some in Sweden and Denmark as well. He has won commissions for other structures in Italy, France and Saudi Arabia, but none of the latter have yet been built.

When asked what is the most important part of his architecture, Fehn has replied that it is above all, the construction, be it wood or concrete, and harmony, rhythm, and honesty in the use of those materials. He calls the act of building brutal, and elaborates, 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 that will make people more aware of the beauty of the setting, and when looking at the building in the setting, a hope for a new consciousness to see the beauty there as well.

Fehn considers light another material of construction. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Venice Biennale Nordic Pavilion. The building consists of concrete bearing walls, with a two-way concrete clear-span roof with openings for tree trunks where necessary. The building is literally built around growing trees. The leafy branches of the trees, and the design of the roof beams to diffuse the light from the sun, provides the interior exhibition space with a soft light that has been characterized as Nordic.

Fehn, at 72, was one of the post World War II generation of architects who emerged from the Architectural School of Oslo, receiving his diploma in 1949.

At that time, Finnish architect Alvar Aalto was a strong influence on European architecture, and in particular, Arne Korsmo, one of Norway's leading architects who became a great friend and mentor to Sverre Fehn. Fehn now lives in a house designed by Korsmo.

Korsmo, who built Norway's pavilion at the 1937 exposition in Paris, traveled extensively and knew most of the world's leading architects of the time. He introduced Fehn to many of them, including Jean Prouvé. Fehn worked for Prouvé part of the time, and it was through Prouvé that he met Le Corbusier. It was while working for Prouvé, that Fehn discovered the artistic use of materials and construction so characteristic of the French tradition from the Eiffel Tower to Gothic cathedrals.

Fehn, along with Norberg-Schulz, Grung, Mjelva and Vesterlid, all other Norwegian architects of the same generation, and Jørn Utzon (the Danish architect who later gained fame for the Sydney Opera House, Australia) formed an organization which was the Norwegian branch of CIAM (International

## **Sverre Fehn, 1997 Laureate** (continued)

Congress of Modern Architecture), called PAGON (Progressive Architects Group Oslo Norway) that had a profound influence, creating architecture which had a firm foundation in the Modern Movement, but was expressed in terms of the materials and language of their own region and time.

It was fortuitous that Fehn received the French State Scholarship which allowed him to live in Paris in 1953 and 1954. In reminiscing about that period, Fehn recalls that it was his generation that distanced itself from Le Corbusier and his urbanistic world.

Mies van der Rohe was a strong influence on Fehn. "My Okern Home for the Elderly was inspired by him," says Fehn. As a teacher, Fehn tells his students they should be more relaxed about copying the things they like in design. He elaborates, I haven't actually seen many of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings, but on a trip to California, I saw several of his smaller houses that I was familiar with from books. It was like wandering from poem to poem. And so his influence on me is acknowledged along with those that influenced him, including the Japanese.

When he returned to Norway after his two years in France, Fehn established his own architectural practice which he has maintained ever since. The following architects assist Fehn: Knut Aasen, Eilef Bjorge, Per Olaf Fjeld, Tore Kleven, Bjorn Larsen, Truls Ovrum, Jon-Kare Schultz, Tom Wike, Thomas Willoch, Bruce Bergendorf, Henrik Hille, and Ervin Strandskogen.

Fehn's work has always been described as having a poetic quality. In fact, an interview in the German magazine, *Der Architekt* (5/94), is headlined Sverre Fehn: A poet of the straight line.

In that interview, Fehn said, "Anytime you write a poem, you need to find the balance between your thoughts and your language. Nothing should disturb the essence of the idea. It is the same with architecture. Whoever cannot put his poetic ideas into a built structure has no architecture basics. Structure is the core of architecture, and it cannot be expressed in numbers. It is the original part of the story an architect can tell about life and people."

One of Fehn's first buildings, the Handicraft Museum at Lillehammer in 1953, truly expressed this new direction in the country's architecture. According to Fehn, however, vandalism and carelessness have taken their toll on this project.

The year before, in 1952, Fehn married Ingrid Loberg Pettersen. In 1960, they celebrated the birth of a son, Guy, who has studied architecture, but is concentrating on video productions about his father's works at the present time.

1952 was the same year that Fehn went to Morocco to study North African primitive architecture. Fehn reported at the time, I discover, and I am what I discover. Today, when one visits French Morocco to study primitive architecture, it is not a voyage to discover new things. One recognizes. He went on to describe the recognition of elements of Frank Lloyd Wright's house in Taliesin; Mies van der Rohe's walls; Le Corbusier's terraces and roof. Fehn explains that he discovered built realities in Morocco, not abstract forms, and it was this realization that led to his conclusion that architecture is essentially the art of building, i.e. construction, which in turn led to his monograph with Per Olaf Fjeld, *The Thought of Construction*. In that book, Fehn is quoted as saying, "The use of a given material should never happen by choice or calculation, but only through intuition and desire."

Fehn has said in numerous interviews, "For me, there is no architecture without construction. We work with our alphabet materials such as wood, concrete, bricks with them, we write a story which is inseparable from the structure. And the structure is supported by the poetic idea."

Perhaps the most poetic, according to Fehn, is the idea that man has a possible life after death. This idea seems to have driven some of the greatest architectural achievements, from the pyramids

## **Sverre Fehn, 1997 Laureate** (continued)

to Gothic cathedrals. Fehn has been carrying on this poetic idea with his own designs for churches and museums.

Most recently, his Glacier Museum, the Aukrust Museum, and the archaeological museum at Hamar exhibit his total commitment to form and materials, but at the same time, allow his free exploration of new horizons in design.

His Glacier Museum has been hailed as a major landmark in contemporary architecture. The building stands on the plain carved out by the Josetedal Glacier at the mouth of the Fjaerland Fjord. The museum is the center of a panorama formed by the steep mountainsides and the fjord with the glacier on top. As you approach the site by boat, the white concrete of the museum seems to lie as a rock on the mountain-side, says Fehn. The rocks that lie on the hills of the Scandinavian landscape have always had an attraction for me. These rocks were the inspiration for building in concrete.

In *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (6/93), the Glacier Museum is described as follows: two monumental stairways express the upward movement towards the plateau, the entrance like a fissure between them; the interior lit by an opening in the roof; the light fading and diminishing as we penetrate further into the interior; the slope of the roof, creating a false perspective. The concrete slabs of the exterior walls create a dialogue with the steep cliffs, and the green translucency of glass, contrasting with the heavy concrete, echoes the ice-green remnants left by the calving of the glacier.

The same publication described his Hamar Museum (also known as the Cathedral Museum): a suspended itinerary, made up of ramps or wider galleries, overhanging the ruins and excavation. It never interferes with the ancient and is always offset or at a tangent to it. This confrontation reveals the story of passing time, the unchanging pursuit of its course, the confrontation between new and old is even more poetic in the sheets of glass that cover the irregular openings. Strictly speaking, they have no function as thermal proofing, since the museum is open mainly in the summer. They are veneers, overlapping the openings like frames, a delicate underscoring simply by setting glass and stone together in masterful fashion, Sverre Fehn reveals the gap that the years have scored into the medieval wall.

Fehn's own notes recall, "Only by reincarnating the moment can we begin a dialogue with the past." This thought gave him the courage to confront the medieval walls with slim concrete pillars, and to protect the irregular openings in the ruins by sheets of reinforced glass, to conceal in the laminated wooden constructions of the roof the fruits of contemporary technology. This he recorded in a magazine article in *Byggekunst* (2/92).

In the Museum of Aukrust in Alvdal, a long horizontal concrete wall acts as a borderline. It was created to house the works of the painter, Kjell Aukrust, a native of the region. Because the area is subject to periodic floods of the Glomma River, Fehn has placed the museum on an embankment that becomes an island during flood stages. The layout of the building is based on a wall spine. On one side of the wall is a service section, on the other side, the exhibitions. The service side is covered with a skin of traditional roofing that slopes down to ground level. The exhibition side is penetrated by many windows. The spine is contrasted with wooden columns, which Fehn likens to the Norwegian forests, and relates to Louis Kahn's idea that a structure has a spatial function.

Fehn says, "In this era, objects seem to have more importance than people. The material world keeps increasing in value, while we no longer count on ideals or religion. We are in some ways, denying death by making museums for our possessions, those from our past as well as the present."

In 1971, he became a professor of architecture at his alma mater in Oslo, where he taught until 1993. In addition to the lectures in the United States, Fehn has spoken at the Architectural Congress Imatra, Finland in 1954; Vasa University, Finland, 1964; Denmark's Architectural School of Aarhus in 1967 and

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1970; the Stockholm Architectural Association in 1967; the University of Trondheim in 1970 and 1979; the International Laboratory of Architecture & Design in Urbino, Italy in 1979; at the Geoarchitectural Institute, Brest, France in 1979; and at the Architectural Association in London in 1981 and 1982. He has also lectured in Paris, Stuttgart, Germany; Barcelona, Spain; and Rome.

As this announcement of Fehn being awarded the 1997 Pritzker Architecture Prize is being made, a retrospective exhibition of Fehn's work is being readied to open at the Basilica by Palladio in Vicenza, Italy on April 18. A new book on his architecture, published by Electa of Milan, Italy, is scheduled to be released simultaneously.

His international outreach includes exhibitions in France at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in 1965 and the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1952; in Brazil at the São Paulo Biennale of Architecture in 1957; Vasa University in Finland in 1964; and in Norway at the Munch Museum, Oslo in 1973; Gallery Palladio, Oslo in 1981 and at the Bergen Festival in 1982. In 1992, he was included in an exhibition titled Five Masters of the North, which toured Helsinki, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Reykjavik, Madrid and Barcelona. Projects by Sverre Fehn were exhibited in 1995 in Rome, Naples, Milan and Goteborg, Sweden. He also exhibited at the Biennales of Venice in 1992 and 1996.

In June of 1993, the distinguished French publication, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, praised several of Fehn's projects, adding that with his works, modern Norwegian architecture has gained true artistic status.

Besides his many museum projects, Fehn has built a number of private residences. He does not believe that his rooms should dictate how people will live there. He explains that at the beginning of any project, he has a discussion with the client about what they want, how they see the site. Then I study maps, photographs and the topography of the site, he says, and I might make a model. Only after my dream of the building has had a chance to grow in my own mind, do I visit the site.

In 1991, Fehn was the winner of a competition to build 250 holiday houses of various sizes and two golf courses in the area of Norrköping, Sweden, an area where at one time there was a small castle with beautiful surroundings called Mauritzberg. A further technical requirement was, says Fehn, that we use non-traditional materials. In this case, that meant the walls would be made of 10% clay and 90% straw, a composition similar to the mud houses of Morocco, but in different proportions. The roof is built as a vault with finely cut plates which are notched and screwed together. Large glass walls at the rear of the house, the atrium and even in parts of the interior make the house seem quite transparent. As a result of this unique building material, the house was dubbed Eco house.

Fehn has completed numerous other residential projects, including a house at Ski, the Villa Kiso, the Brick House, the C. Bodker house, the A. Bodker house, the Sparre house, the Underland house, Villa Busk and the Schreiner house. Of the latter, the distinguished writer and teacher Kenneth Frampton called it, Fehn's homage to Japan ... an L-shaped court formation, yet the bulk of the internal volume falls within a rectangle. An open timber framework surrounds the basic prism on three sides while no Japanese features are literally replicated save for the unhewn rock pedestals on which the perimeter columns take their bearing the exuberant display of exposed timber joints could hardly be closer to the architectonic spirit of the *shoin*.

One of Fehn's latest projects is the enlargement of the National Theater of Copenhagen in Denmark which has been described as having the magnificent spaciousness of cathedral-like character.

It is interesting to note that like many other architects, including previous Pritzker Laureate Frank Gehry, Fehn involves himself in the design of arts exhibitions. For an exhibition at Hovikodden of five life-sized clay soldiers, two horses and archers, from the burial grounds of the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang, Fehn devised a unique display that gave the feeling of the clay figures as they were found with thousands of others.

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Fehn's plan conceived a high mirror tower in the center of the exhibit with its sides parallel to the walls of the museum. The walls too were mirrored, so that the reflections of the few figures were endlessly echoed back and forth, creating the army of which they were once a part.

As Fehn's work progressed over the years, he became more sensitive to the quality of the Nordic light, as well as the relationship of building to the site. More recently, he has varied his approach to different projects, with added emphasis on the choice of materials for construction, adding concrete and steel to his palette of wood timbers. In his most recent designs, it seems he has unified all that has gone before achieving works that become a source of inspiration for everyone.

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