Niels Bohr’s Guesthouse: Tradition and Modernity in Denmark

INTRODUCTION

Despite the shift in meaning of the aesthetic expression and the creation of a new architectural image, what Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968) called the “third generation of architecture,” developed in Denmark, shares values with the traditions of buildings of the past. Its roots can be found in Danish tradition: in handicrafts, the skilled use of materials, and the knowledge of vernacular construction. It combines all artistic disciplines and traditional crafts related to building design and construction in order to advance and regenerate itself through the absorption of international influences, thus achieving seamless interaction. It is forged in the emergence of a common ideal of enormous personality that today has come to be valued as an authentic contribution to the world of architecture from a culture that was formerly seen as peripheral. Its objective is to achieve authenticity by maintaining a common cultural identity while renewing itself upon the foundations of the familiar.

The aim of this investigation was to unveil some of the keys to Danish modernity, using Vilhelm Wohlert’s first work, in order to recognize, discover, and revive its legacy, whose lesson is seen as entirely of the present.

METHODS & METHODOLOGY

Backgrounds, figures, and buildings relevant to the Danish tradition were analyzed, along with examples of Japanese traditional architecture and American architecture. Connections and shared interests were identified.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The Dane Jensen Klint (1853–1930), a fundamental figure in Denmark’s journey toward modernity, defended a distinct respect for context, craftsmanship, materials, and the importance of details. He was inspired by mathematics and nature’s rules of growth. His son, Kaare Klint, introduced the elder Klint’s teachings at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, the so-called School of Klint, where Danish architect Vilhelm Wohlert (1920–2007) and others studied. Thus did they share a feeling for the landscape, topography, materials, and climate, and an architecture begotten in part by nature, toward which Jensen Klint had blazed the trail.

Niels Bohr’s guesthouse (1957) was Wohlert’s first building. Built in a period of blooming modernity, rooted in the Danish tradition and the principles of the Skovvirke, it represents a reconciliation of both vernacular lessons and the international impulses of American architecture and Japanese tradition (see Fig. 01, Fig. 02, Fig. 03).

Wohlert’s work encompassed a variety of commissions. Despite their disparate scales and functions, they show his commitment to human comfort, his dedication to precise construction, and a respect for materials. These features are nowhere more evident than in the modest guesthouse he created for Niels Bohr, winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics (1922), in a remote virgin forest in the north of Zealand.

He created an abstract self-contained object that preserves the open space of the clearing around it. The architect’s task is to understand the vocation of the place, establishing a new site where architecture and nature will live together. The individual is readied for the experience of architecture, perception is slowed to deprive the user of mental assumptions, and in this way a level of intimacy is reached.

The building alludes to the modern concept of the pavilion as a piece that is conceptually its own entity. The enclosure is not merely light but confers that aspect of delicate work that sits mildly. The adopted solution seems deceptively simple: a floating timber-clad box over a flat platform, opened to the southwest and closed to the northeast. The wood box has the responsive character of a living organism that is continually changing according to variations in daylight or temperature. It also has the ability to move itself and to mobilize space through the flexible positioning of its layers. It alludes to the fact that everything in nature is constantly undergoing change and evolution. Thus, there is a connection to the surrounding nature and to the variations that take place with the passing of time or with the seasons. But due to an innate sensitivity that can trace its roots to the Dane’s culture of agriculture, the Danish attitude toward nature is not domination but conciliation.
In that connection with nature, natural light plays the part of protagonist. Daylight, the distribution of which varies so throughout the year in these latitudes, marks the architectural spaces and the mood of their users. The perception and the meaning of the Nordic light, which casts no sharp shadows, play a significant role in the experience of space and form. Its effect enables surfaces to manifest their spatial value through their texture. Wohlert is expert in this.

CONCLUSIONS

Beautiful parallels to traditional Japanese architecture are established in the investigation, a culture where the link between nature and life is constant. The pavilion pays tribute to transformation, associated to the change between seasons.

Folding doors and shutters generate extensions of the rooms. The unexpected lack of closure, the air circulation, and the elements that give flexibility create an evocative air of freedom and fluidity, reminiscent of the idea, first formulated by Heraclitus, that the world is in a state of flow. Flow that, at a basic level, is based on trust. The horizontal plane predominates, offering security and order, in the face of the force of gravity. A close relationship with the land is established, and it gives security to users.

The pavilion could be seen as the Japanese art of flowers, ikebana; that is, rigorously constructed, where is produced a circulation of air between its components. Ikebana is “the art of space”; it is something alive whose emptiness projects tension and power. It expresses features that are also present in the guest house: the asymmetrical balance; the third dimension; and an interest in the material—its texture and the emotional effect that emanates from it.

Wohlert knows the material, exhibiting his love for it, taking advantage of the power of the finish, respecting its capacity to provoke emotions. What stands out is the use of natural materials that express their age and their wear together with the enriching experience of time. The wood ages and returns to the earth, and in this way the building disappears. Thus, a connection is made with both ecology and death. The concept of the elimination of the superfluous and the exhibition of a material’s natural aspect are common to East Asian cultures.

The beauty of the building is based on its usefulness, on the proportionality of its parts, and on harmony with the environment, where it is assumed that exaggeration is not needed. Scale is valued. The architecture is adjusted to the human scale, within which lies the aesthetic effect. The building’s commitment to human comfort is shown. It is an architecture to be lived from inside. The connection with American architecture is clear; however, the great American masters of the Bay Area and their work have the closest connection.

The modular framework of the vernacular tradition of building with timber, from Danish rural homes, is present. An anonymous architecture, one where constructive form is marked by structural order, component of its enclosure, where a unified system of construction fits to measures, is simple and well proportioned. The “Long Danish houses,” which perform the more stable structure of the Danish tradition, and projects made entirely from the wood that typifies Danish
functionalism, are a source of inspiration for Wohlert. The study suggests that the look to the vernacular could be a response to the loss of identity brought about by globalization. The vernacular may concern a high level of modernity, supplying buildings and settlements that are more sustainable; it can be an answer to the search for both the identity and the essence of architecture.

Design is developed at all scales, from the plan of situation, to the definition of the construction details and assessment of the joints, where the furniture is integrated, forming a comprehensive work. Users play an important part. A psychological character of architecture emerges. Sensation is used as a tool in the creative process, where the sense of touch is valued above the strictly visual experience. Wohlert’s work is a lesson about the thought that nature, the lives of building’s inhabitants, and architecture itself are united; where a world of relationships is gentle to human beings; it represents an architecture that is needed in the time we live in.

Curriculum Vitae

Carmen García Sánchez studied architecture at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, where she obtained her PhD. Her thesis, “1950 en torno al Museo Louisiana 1970,” analyzes several buildings in Denmark. As a licensed architect, she works to develop architectural design projects at her office in Madrid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


(Endnotes)

1 “Skønvirke” is a Danish version of Arts and Crafts and Deutscher Werkbund.