

## Nordic masters

After recording the death of Jørn Utzon in our last issue, in this we carry an obituary for Sverre Fehn (pp. 11–15), and with it the feeling that their passing marks the end of an era. True, Oscar Niemeyer is still designing at more than 100 years of age, but Utzon and Fehn represented a living link to the mainstream of postwar Modern Architecture in Europe in a way that Niemeyer, despite his sojourn in Paris, never could. As young architects in the early 1950s both Utzon and Fehn revered Le Corbusier and Mies at a time when the Corbusian and Miesian strands of Modern architecture were widely seen as antithetical, and both went on to develop compelling new syntheses that melded Le Corbusier's poetic vision with a Miesian commitment to clarity of tectonic expression.

Although, with their shared commitment to making construction the basis of architectural expression, Utzon and Fehn were by no means typical of the more designerly Scandinavian tradition, in their belief in architecture as a quintessentially social art they most certainly were. And in this they invite us to ponder again why a group of countries (if one includes Finland) whose population totals roughly half that of the UK should have given us a succession of major talents – in order of birth, Lewerentz, Asplund, Aalto, Utzon – and a host of hugely gifted other figures from Jacobsen to Fehn.

It is clearly a matter of culture, not chance. As George Kubler observes in *The Shape of Time*, 'times and opportunities differ more than the degree of talent' – for a budding painter, choosing to be born in fifteenth century Florence or mid-nineteenth century France was astute. The architecture-inspiring virtues of the Nordic countries are familiar: challenging climates that encourage a rare combination of realism and reverie; a level of respect for architecture as a profession that has not, to put it mildly, been so apparent in the Anglo-Saxon world; a healthy competition system for public buildings; an early and distinctive commitment to social democracy and pioneering of social values and practices that are now widespread elsewhere; a strong tradition of architectural education in which leading architects have consistently occupied central roles; and a love of 'the nature' that has acted as a counterpoint to modernity's preoccupation with technology and provided a locus for both national sentiment and family life.

Timing was equally vital: both Utzon and Fehn were born early enough to share in the continuity of the Modern Movement, but late enough to contribute to the post-war re-evaluation of its early ideals. Unlike many of their contemporaries in Denmark and Norway, however, they did not benefit greatly from the boom in public commissions during the 1950s and '60s, and while the soil in which they were educated may have been fertile, neither – for reasons of personality rather than talent – enjoyed the public support their abilities might have been expected to attract. Both were gentle men, keen to let their work speak for them, and as a consequence both needed patrons, not merely clients. But when the circumstances were propitious, as they were for Utzon working with Pastor Simonsen on the Bagsvaerd Church or for Fehn in designing the Nordic Pavilion for the Venice Biennale and the Hamar Museum, the resulting architecture achieved a clarity and poetic intensity that has rarely been rivalled since the death of Le Corbusier.

THE EDITORS

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