

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Asgaard Andersen, editor

Nordic Architects Write: A Documentary Anthology

Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008, 418 pp., many black and white illus., \$53.95 (paperback), \$149.95 (hardcover)

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The publication of a broad range of Scandinavian architectural texts in English is an event to be welcomed wholeheartedly. Few are determined enough to spend the time learning these “minority” languages and Scandinavian mastery of English—the “new Latin”—is so impressive that the struggle is not even rewarded with friendship; the relationships have already been built in English. Non-Scandinavians, therefore, have tended to study Scandinavian architects and architecture as through a long lens: related only in the most general way to social and political events and barely linked to the complex internal Scandinavian architectural discourse. Will the appearance of thirty-six texts written over the twentieth century translated into English have an influence on the way Scandinavian architecture is studied? One would hope. Certainly translations of writings by Poul Henningsen, Henning Larsen, Nils Ahrbom, Leif Reinius, Peter Celsing, Knut Knutsen, Håkon Vigsnaes, Marku Komonen, and Reimo Pietälä can only help.

But now the problems begin. Thirty-six texts divided equally between four countries means nine texts per country—not quite the same thing as thirty-six (or even twenty) per country. And which texts? The recent translation of the central Swedish texts of modern architecture by Ellen Key, Gregor Paulsson, and the collective treatise, *acceptera* in *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008) rather rips the heart out of the Swedish section; there is no point in duplicating material published elsewhere in English, one might think. But in the case of the Finnish section, almost everything of importance by Alvar Aalto has already been published in English (including the text the editor has

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decided to publish). Could one contemplate a volume dedicated to Nordic architects without Aalto? Probably not. But in fact, of the thirty-six texts published here, fully one-quarter have already been published in English, and some have no Scandinavian language original.

Additionally, texts have been silently edited, footnotes or marginal notes removed and illustrations suppressed. A reader coming fresh to this book would not know that the texts had once been illustrated. Take something as basic as Gunnar Asplund's professorial installation lecture of 1931, "Vår Arkitektoniska Rumsuppfattning," (freshly translated here as "Our Architectonic Perception of Space"). As originally published in *Byggmästaren* the first illustration of almost a dozen was of a Japanese villa: in this book the only illustration is from the Stockholm Exhibition. Indeed, the possibility that Asplund's illustrations and those of Peter Celsing, for his installation lecture of 1960 "Om Rummet," published here as "About Space" could form a critical intergenerational dialogue is not something a reader of this book could speculate about. I apologize for singling out the Swedish section—the lack of illustrations veils an interesting historical parallel—but the same editorial rule applies throughout. The bitter truth is that a note buried on p. 412 should be on the title page: "The texts have been edited for clarity and length." To revert to the old Latin: *Caveat lector!*

Each national section is preceded by an excellent introduction that orients readers to the texts setting them within the country's own tradition of theoretical debate. Inevitably internal links are subtle and hard to explain. Parachuting in on one text, how much, for example, should a reader be told about Aulis Blomstedt's Canon 60 system (no part of which is reproduced) and his role in Finland during the discussions of the 1960s? Anni Vartola in her introduction links Blomstedt to Pallasmaa and debates around Pietäla and the organic, so a careful reader can catch the references another time. Johan Mårtelius provides a multi-layered context for the Swedish section, filling in readers on gaps in the book's documentary record, notably on the major missing text (*acceptera*) but he also includes essential thumbnail descriptions of events in the 1960s and 1970s. Christoffer Harlang (introducing the Danish section) and Elisabeth Tostrup (introducing the Norwegian

section) make similarly heroic efforts. An epilogue by Wilfried Wang summarizes the history of Nordic writing stressing the continuities between the countries and nicely emphasizing their “subtle rebellious positions” and the many other virtues of Nordic architecture.

Nicholas Adams

Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY