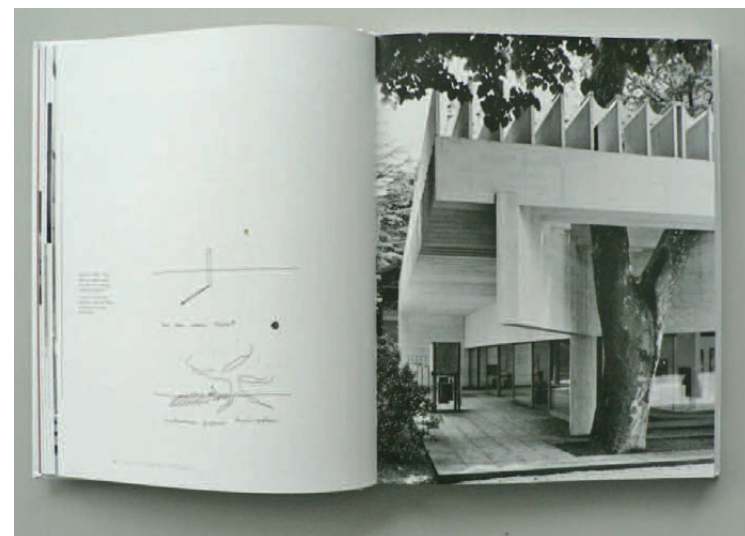


SVERRE FEHN THE PATTERN OF THOUGHTS
by Per Olaf Fjeld



If you think of the Nordic masters: Aalto, Asplund and Lewerentz, their powerful and metaphorical working of their culture, climate, and subtle shifts in light, then it is impossible not to include the Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn in their company of material poetry. Fehn died in 2009 aged eight-five and his work spans a long career that combined practice and teaching. He was a unique voice that was both part of that continuity and sensibility of Nordic values, but also and importantly broadening from a regionalism to an aspirational modernity with deep-rooted social values.

'The Thought of Construction' was a book published in 1983 by Per Olaf Fjeld which introduced me to Fehn's work. There have been many publications, magazine articles and books, but not until now a major book



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I met Fehn once. He was speaking at a conference that was overburdened with postmodern pretensions. American architects were the star attractions of the day, and amidst the speakers, and almost against the whole theme of the conference, Fehn was like a washed up stranger speaking from a different world. He delivered a hesitant, almost

uncomfortable talk, punctuated with black and white images. But he was unquestionably a storyteller by nature, and what he said was evocative and moving. He did not go out to impress: simply telling us the way he saw the world, and how he went about building in it. Afterwards, approaching him rather hesitatingly as a student, he warmly discussed with me the making of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice and recalled his friendship with Carlo Scarpa. He then told me a beautiful story of how the small wooden churches in the landscape in Norway 'cry' when they shed the water that condenses on the wood at a certain time of year. This was what materials were for, he told me, "we feel them, and they are living."

At the age of 34 he produced what is a timeless masterwork: the Nordic pavilion for the Venice Biennale Gardens. Geometric and hovering with its layer of fine concrete beams - that act as horizontal brise soleil- the trees run through it with an almost mystical freedom. Refusing to remove the trees that were on the site, ▶

▶ Fehn's pavilion brings together nature and architecture in a way that has seldom been surpassed. On the drawings, it looks simple, almost unassuming, but as experienced, breathtaking. Completed over 50 years ago, it has never looked better or been more popular as a superb venue for art.

From this early success Fehn built up his reputation and practice with houses and small community projects. Not till the Hedmark County Museum at Hamar in Norway (started in 1967) did Fehn show his considerable abilities to the full. Having met Scarpa in Venice and seen his work contrasting old and new, Sverre Fehn's approach at Hamar was deeply inspired by this. Concrete platforms float over excavations and materials layer over each other to reveal history and time. The Museo di Castelvecchio, in Verona completed by Carlo Scarpa in 1964 lead the way, and Fehn used the same careful and minimal selection of objects set against the explored construction of the building that Scarpa had developed. Hamar as a plan, is beautiful but as a sequence in time and space, the museum is extraordinary. This is the building where all of Fehn's philosophy comes together in material and idea.

"How shall we respond to man and his objects affixed to the surface of the earth? Everything we build must be adjusted in relation to the ground, thus the horizon becomes an important aspect of architecture. The simplest form of architecture is to cultivate the surface of the earth, to make a platform. Then the horizon is the only direction you have. The moment you lose the horizon, your desire is always to reinstate it."

This book is full of those wonderful sketches that Fehn did so



spontaneously. Evocations of his own philosophy they focus again and again on his favourite themes: the horizon, the tree, the ship, the space between heaven and earth, the child, below the ground, and time.

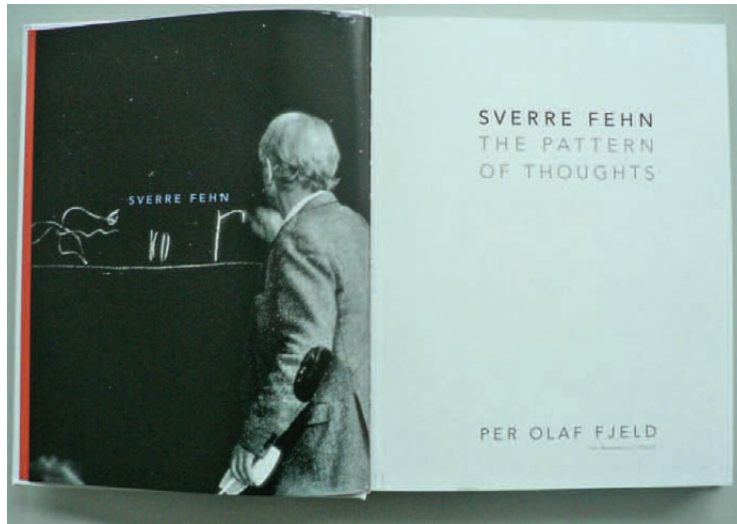
Fehn's own words permeate Olaf Fjeld's book like a running conversation that is woven perfectly together. It seems to pick up and continue the conversation begun in 'The Thought of Construction' and in this sense both books feel like a collaborative journey. There is an echoe in the conversation imagined between Palladio and Le Corbusier by Fehn -for his Villa Norrköping- where the words create a space between architecture and the imagination. This

is essentially what is different about this book from all the others that have been published, as Per Olaf Fjeld has enabled Fehn's words to make up almost half the book.

There is so much you could discuss about the built buildings and the book has carefully catalogued them but some of the unbuilt projects are remarkable too: the Mining Museum for Roros, the church for Honningsvåg, and the stunning Wasa Ship Museum competition for Stockholm -where you would have journeyed down into the earth to encounter the ship floating in time. But it is what is beyond the buildings that this book brings to life: Fehn's personality, his journeys, his ▶

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► important summer retreats and his thoughts. That he did not live in a house designed by himself but by one of his teachers, Arne Korsmo is a mark of his modesty but also in that he liked the relationship of the windows -which did not look directly onto the garden- and allowed him to “keep the garden in my head.”

Per Olaf Fjeld knew Fehn well and having worked with him for over thirty-five years, this intimacy has born a rich sense of detail. While there was little work in the practice, Olaf Fjeld would weekly interview Fehn and compile conversations they had, photographing his sketchbooks and notes. But it is not just a biographical collection and buildings. An architect is so much more than the buildings and bibliography, and Fehn’s life and approach to architecture was a philosophical journey that Per Olaf Fjeld has in part accompanied him on, and which in turn has allowed us a reflective space to consider his work with this book.

He was not without professional and personal difficulties and after a problem with the Skadalen School for Deaf Children, negative press coverage left his office without work for seven years. He was critical of

Norwegian policies but his friendships with the Smithsons and many other European architects brought him into continual contact with much wider debates. He had worked as a student with Prouve in Paris and visited Le Corbusier’s atelier in the evenings where he encountered new ideas and materials as well as absorbing the craft of making and detail, so imbued in the Nordic tradition back home.

While some of the later work, Busk House, Aukrust Centre or Glacier Museum have seemed strangely different from the clarity and power of his earlier approach, they do reveal the same intensity of making and social purpose that was with him throughout his career. He was

passionate that architecture took shape in the making, and like Lewerentz -who struck up a dialogue with every worker on his site- Fehn was known to visit his projects on site up to three times a day.

When Per Olaf Fjeld published ‘The thought of Construction’ In 1983, It was a book that changed the way I thought about architecture. There was nothing quite like it and it opened a window on Sverre Fehn’s architecture and writing. Almost twenty-seven years later Per Olaf Fjeld has followed it with an equally remarkable book: warm with respect for Fehn, his friend and collaborator and meticulously gathering together material over many years. Like Fehn himself this book is full of thoughts to captivate and move us. Carefully photographed and alive with drawings, it is architecture as philosophy. As I finished reading it, outside the light fell away, and with it Fehn’s stories and his dream of the horizon too. ●

Paul Clarke

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