NORDIC NONUMENTALITY

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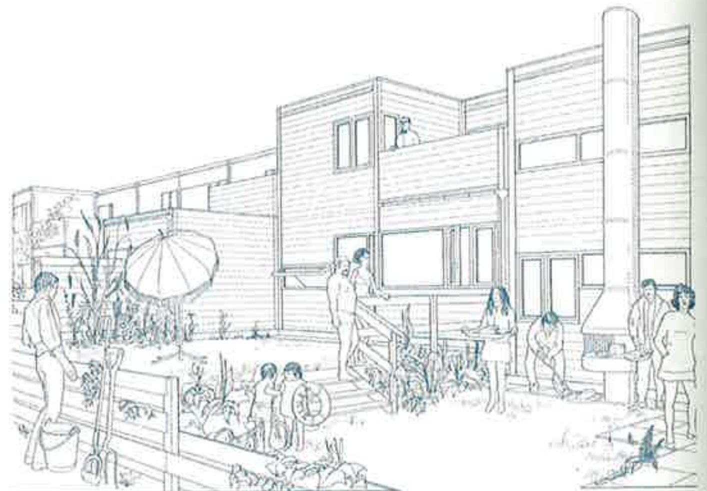
Gordon Matta-Clark, 1973

In the postwar period, CIAM turned towards the monumental. Sigfried Giedion stated it clearly in his much published RIBA lecture from 1946: "The third step lies ahead ... this is the reconquest of the monumental expression."[1] The lecture was printed in *Architectural Review* in 1948 along with contributions from Walter Gropius, Lucio Costa, and others. Under the heading "In Search of a New Monumentality," these texts urged modernist architects to "create symbols which reveal [the people's] inner life, their actions and their social conceptions." Although modernism had been forced to start from man's most basic needs, now was the time to "shape the emotional lives of the masses" through monumental architectural expression.[2]

Despite his eloquent appeal, Giedion's third step stubbornly evaded conquest in postwar society. The masses hardly seemed interested in having their emotional lives expressed—let alone shaped—by monuments, and young architects thought it none of their business to try. Instead of creating architectural super-symbols, the new generation of architects aimed to "come closer to the shifting centre of human reality and build its counterform," as Aldo van Eyck put it.[3] Instead of the monument they sought the background, preferring the "langue" for the "parole," to stick to structuralist terminology. If the monument was expressive, significant, hierarchical, and eternal, the background was mute, neutral, non-hierarchical, and changeable. It was the very antidote to the monumental. The artist-architect Gordon Matta-Clark pinpointed it succinctly: "One of my concerns here is with the Non.u.mental, that is, an expression of the commonplace that might counter the grandeur and pomp of architectural structures and their self-glorifying clients."[4]

Matta-Clark's "nonumentality" may be seen to encompass the concerns of a whole postwar generation, with its fascination for structuralism, low-rise–high-density, user participation, flexibility, organic growth, and open form. As such, it provides a fruitful perspective when revisiting the architectural culture of postwar Scandinavia. That is precisely what we do in this second issue of the *Nordic Journal of Architecture*. Using a key example of Nordic postwar housing as our prism, we probe into the ideals and realities governing the second phase of postwar



Friere ramme om bomiljøet? I Skjettenbyen

SKAL BEBOERNE BESTEMME ALT

Planleggernes siktepunkt: Fleksible boliger. Beboerne kan utvide eller «krympe» huset etter behov, flytte innvendige vegger osv. - innen lovens ramme. De sosiale aspekter ved boligfeltet er viet stor oppmerksomhet; i en boligkatalog får beboerne rede på alles rettigheter og plikter. Friarealer er av virkelig format, serviceinstitusjoner likeså - avhengig tildels av kommunale bevilgninger.
Slik er teorien bak dette betydningsfulle eksperimentet. Praksis? All frihet medfører ansvar og valgsituasjoner, krever evne til samarbeid innen familien og innen naboskapet. Vil beboerne **bruke** de muligheter som er lagt til rette for dem? Vil eksperimentet vise seg å være verdifullt - eller bare kostbart? Bare fremtiden kan gi svaret.

Life at Skjetten, as presented in Bonytt 7/1971.

reconstruction in the Nordic countries. In this period, social democratic politics and anti-monumental aesthetics came together in a rare convergence. While architects of the late 1970s would abandon form for politics, and those of the 1980s would leave politics for form, those of the late 1960s and early '70s seemed able to pursue political ideals of democratization and empowerment without denouncing their responsibility as form-givers. This short-lived equilibrium has undergone many attempts at categorization. Critics and historians have spoken of the "low-rise, high-density" movement, about structuralism and open form, about altered production systems and the architecture of the welfare state. All these concepts and categories will be encountered in the articles that follow. However, rather than looking for overarching conceptual designations, the authors approach the topic in a staunchly empirical, almost micro-historical manner by using the competition and realization of Skjetten Town, north of Oslo (1965–1973), as our

point of departure. One of the most ambitious experiments in European postwar housing, Skjetten is an apt case for exploring postwar architecture, for discussing its ideological and theoretical presuppositions, its architectural qualities, and its continued relevance for contemporary architecture.

Skjetten revisited

Accompanied by a cheerful drawing showing a relaxed company of neighbours lounging in their row house gardens, the Norwegian journal *Bonytt* used one of their 1971 issues to introduce Skjetten Town, still under construction:

> The aim of the planners: Flexible housing. The residents can expand or shrink their dwelling according to needs—move internal partitions etc. The social aspects of the housing situation are emphasized—the residents are informed about their rights and duties in a resident's manual... Such is the theory behind this significant experiment. In practice? The freedom entails responsibilities, and requires cooperation both within the family and the neighbourhood. Will the residents use the possibilities laid open for them? Will the experiment prove useful—or merely costly? Only the future can provide the answer.[5]

Forty years have passed since *Bonytt* published its cautiously optimistic review of Skjetten. Did the experiment prove useful? Well—we are the future, and the questions put to us by *Bonytt* in 1971 remain acutely relevant. The articles in this issue will all try, albeit in very different ways, to provide answers.

With its progressive planning ideals and its innovative, prefabricated module system, Skjetten Town is one of the most ambitious low-rise, high-density housing projects ever built. Its architecture, consisting of almost 2,000 housing units, combines a firm belief in modernist rationality with an equally staunch critique of modernist planning principles. This duality was typical of postwar modernism as it developed in Scandinavia in the 1960s. Already in 1952, PAGON, the Norwegian chapter of CIAM, warned against modernism's reductive principles. The high-rise satellite towns in particular were at the receiving end of this criticism; their soulless environments were seen as the product of a static and paternalistic social vision. The shortcomings were put down to CIAM's narrowly scientific criteria, reducing man's social and psychological well-being to a question of functionality and efficiency. As an anonymous PAGON member sarcastically remarked in *Byggekunst* in 1952: "What does it matter if you save the housewife two steps, if she has gotten divorced in the meantime?"[6]

While the combination of economic growth and a modernist building programme had succeeded in covering the acute housing shortage of the immediate postwar period, the new welfare state had become "a giant fridge in which people are condemned to opulence... A society of well-fed and handsome guinea pigs, awaiting—yes, it is difficult to say which—progress. They live in a mechanized and chromed world, where each man receives his destiny like a railway ticket, and where every independent thought represents a pathological case".[7]

The vehemence of the diagnosis is in many ways surprising. After all, Norway of 1952 had hardly witnessed many crass examples of soul-destroying satellite towns. Yet for the PAGON group, drawing on international debate as much as on local experience, the satellite town represented a principle which seemed outdated even before it was realized. Based on the static principle of zoning, it was an urban form incapable of adapting to the rapid changes in postwar society. Furthermore, the mass-produced and standardized dwellings were both causes of and contributors to the dreaded social conformity which was turning modern man into a well-fed guinea pig in a giant social experiment.

The solution to the guinea pig problem was, for PAGON, as it was later for Team 10, an architecture of flexibility and adaptability; an architecture that would make it possible for the individual to shape and change his or her own environment. Fighting orthodox modernism and nostalgic neo-conservatism with equal vehemence, PAGON adopted a distinctly structuralist position. Architecture, they argued, has to tap into the underlying structures of modern society—social, economic, cultural—and translate them into meaningful form. In this, the PAGON group aligned themselves with such international critics as Peter and Alison Smithson and Aldo van Eyck, who were to become central members of Team 10. For this generation of architects, modernism had failed to fulfil its most fundamental duty: to be modern. It had, in the words of Oskar Hansen, become "outdated, even before being completed" because it had failed to respond to change.[8] Modern architecture was no longer modern, because its rigid analytics failed to respond to the fast-changing, fast-growing world of the postwar period. The new focus on flexibility, non-hierarchical structures, anti-monumental compositions, and user-participation—direct or indirect—was part of a strategy to save modern architecture from itself, making it up to date.

The Skjetten architects continued PAGON's structuralist ambitions, translating them into a radically new architectural form. Instead of the paternalistic model of postwar planning, the multidisciplinary "Skjetten team" sought a less patronizing way of making architecture, one that considered the residents as individuals rather than as average abstractions. Rather than the modernist "one size fits all," these architects sought an architecture capable of differentiation. The Skjetten team developed an innovative modular system capable of generating an almost infinite variety within a very strict order, an ideal aptly expressed in the title of the first-prize project: "Variation—Order—Community—Privacy." The rapidly changing postwar society seemed to demand an architecture capable of accommodating transformation on many levels, from changes in the urban demography to alterations in production systems and the building industry. The Skjetten team tackled these challenges head on, including the challenge of making an architecture that could adapt to and accommodate people's needs as they varied throughout a lifetime. As Nils-Ole Lund put it in his Skjetten presentation from 1973:

> At Skjetten, one did not try to find a general housing type, but sought rather a system that could make each house as distinct as possible. In the same way that each family is different from every other family, so is their need different when it comes to dwelling. An open system also allows the planners to leave more decisions to the residents, instead of acting as tailors to people's domestic habits.[9]

However, while they were interested in social dynamics, leav-

ing many decisions to the residents, the architects at Skjetten never abandoned their role as form-givers. This sets them apart from later low-rise, high-density projects in which architecture became a pure "ars combinatorial" of modules and units, with very little design input from the architect. Skjetten was different. It presented an architecture in which form still mattered greatly, and where the architectural detailing carried a vital role, aesthetically, technically, and functionally. This dimension receives thorough coverage in this issue, where we have translated Nils-Ole Lund's detailed presentation of Skjetten Town from the Danish journal *Arkitekten* from 1973 and invited Skjetten's head engineer, Gunnulv Eiesland, to account for the multidisciplinary collaboration in the project group. Structuralism in architecture was not only about political critique and theoretical ideals but also about how this critique and these ideals informed the architectural process, down to the smallest detail of a building. The user manual developed at Skjetten, accounted for in this issue by Margrethe Dobloug, is a good example of this attempt to implement democratization right down to the nuts and bolts of building. This issue's mix of primary and secondary sources, presenting firsthand reports, theoretical analysis, and historical contextualization, gives a unique glimpse into this poignant period for Nordic architectural culture.

The experiment at Skjetten didn't go entirely as the architects had hoped. Conflicts with local planners led to the Skjetten team losing control of part of the project, which became considerably more conventional than the original plans. In a heart-rending essay written in the late 1970s, Erik Hultberg, joint winner of the competition and the leading force within the Skjetten team, revisited the area, lamenting how few of the residents had utilized the adaptability of the system: "To us, it has been surprising to see how little the resident's initiatives have actually shaped Skjetten. The variation and local richness that we hoped for has not emerged."[10] The vibrant colours, the purpose-made extensions, the cartwheels, and the flowerpots had failed to materialize, leaving Skjetten Town with the impoverished feel of a barren system.[11] Despite this disappointment, however, the many large housing competitions towards the end of the 1960s and beginning of the '70s were all won by projects promoting similar low-rise, flexible housing structures, in which the architectural expression was to be an outcome of the residents' rather than the architects' design.[12] The ideal of participation and adaptability even filtered through to the competition briefs, becoming, towards the end of the '70s, a matter of publicly promoted and politically correct requirements. The aim was to create a modified modernism—a modernism which was responsive to individual needs yet at the same time uncompromisingly rational, both in economical and social terms. The reality, however, was less univocal. While the architects dreamt of settlements brimming with local initiative and indigenous expression, the postwar suburban dweller seemed less than eager to contribute. The result was areas in which the restrained aesthetics of late modernism, intended as a framework to be filled rather than a complete work in itself, was left as an abstract and skeletal frame.

With its ethical and political engagement and its experimental approach to architectural form, the low-rise, high-density architecture of the late 1960s and early '70s represents a way of thinking which is still relevant and fresh. It is an architecture that avoided the pitfalls of formalism yet maintained the architect's responsibility as a designer, allowing for a complexity and multiplicity as relevant today as it was in the 1960s. The postwar generation challenged the straitjacket of orthodox modernism and looked for an architecture which allowed for difference on both a socio-political and an architectural level. They turned their backs on CIAM's monumental ambitions, focusing instead on the "nonumental" background of human life. They did so, however, from a vantage point firmly within the boundaries of building, balancing political critique with innovative design in an admirably concrete kind of way. To revisit Skjetten, then, is to revisit a crucial moment in Nordic architectural history, which certainly deserves a closer look.

1 Sigfried Giedion, "In Search of a New Monumentality," *The Architectural Review*, September 1948, 126.

2 Ibid.

3 Aldo van Eyck, quoted in *Team 10 Primer*, ed. Alison Smithson (London/Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 43.

4 Gordon Matta-Clark, "Building Dissections," undated statement, circa 1973. In *Gordon Matta-Clark. Works and Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006), 132.

5 *Bonytt*, 7 (1971), 5.

6 *Byggekunst*, 6-7 (1952), 93.

7 Here, the anonymous author quotes what an equally anonymous "obnoxious French voice" (Le Corbusier?) is reputed to have said about Sweden: "Sverige—et kjempekjøleskap hvor mennesker er dømt til vellevned ... Et samfunn av velgjødde og prektige eksperimentmarsvin som venter på—ja det er vanskelig å si—hvilke fremskritt – De lever i en mekanisk og forniklet verden, hvor alle mottar sin skjebne som en jernbanebillett og hvor enhver selvstendig tanke utgjør et patologisk innslag." N.N., "Bolig?" *Byggekunst*, 6-7 (1952), 109; my translation.

8 Oskar Hansen, "The Open Form in Architecture: Art for the Greater Number," *Carré bleu*, January 1961, quoted in *Team 10 Primer*, 45.

9 Nils-Ole Lund, "Skjettenbyen, Norge," *Arkitekten* (DK) 10-11 (1973), 188.

10 Erik Hultberg, "Skjetten Revisited," *Byggekunst*, 6 (1979), 404–405.

11 Ibid.

12 See, for instance, the large competition in 1967 at Risvollan outside Trondheim (*Norske Arkitektkonkurranser*, 140 [1967]); the Tjensvoll competition outside Stavanger from 1968 (*Norske Arkitektkonkurranser*, 161 [1968]); and the Dyster Eldor competition from 1971 south of Oslo (*Norske Arkitektkonkurranser*, 181 [1971]).