

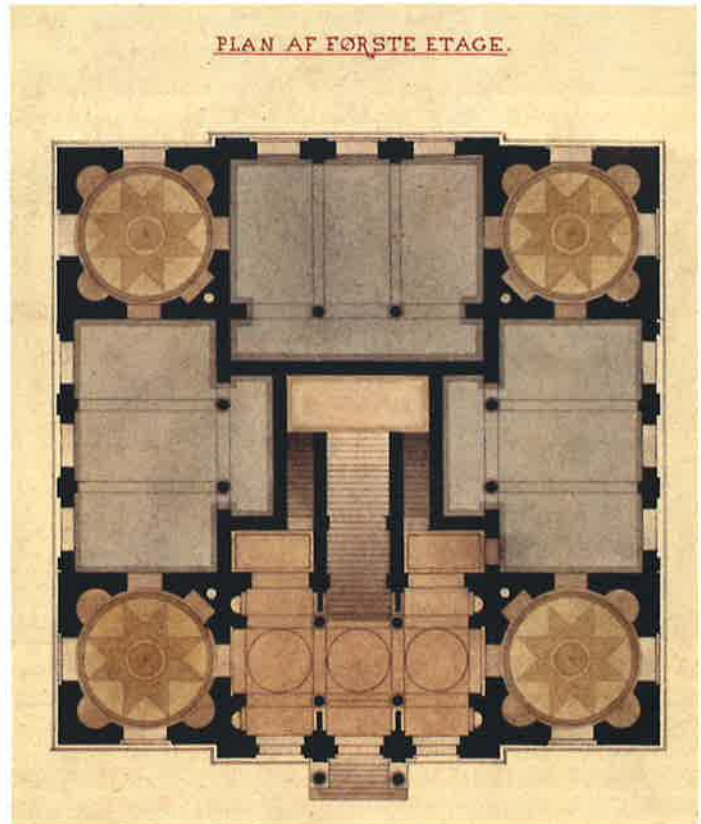
ARCHITECTURE AND THE ARCHIVE

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The studio Architecture and the Archive premiered in the fall 2011 as part of the research project “Nineteenth-Century Architectural Imaginations” and the teaching portfolio of OCCAS (the Oslo Center for Critical Architectural Studies). Informed by a deconstructive impulse and a historiographical critique, this history/theory studio at the Oslo School aims at turning the studio into a space for a critical approach to architectural history. In its first semester, the studio revolved around three monumental structures designed by the architect Heinrich Ernst Schirmer: the Oslo (or back then, Christiania) Penitentiary (Botsfengselet, 1844–51); Gaustad Asylum (1848–55); and the National Gallery (1881);—three central structures, as both monuments in the city and as modern institutions. The next studio will scrutinize the mid nineteenth-century competition for the Norwegian Parliament, before we turn to the complex history of the Norwegian governmental quarter, from the 1889 competition all the way to the ludicrous proposal of tearing down Erling Viksjø’s high-rise from the 1950s, after the terrorist bombing of July 2011.

“All history is contemporary history,” Benedetto Croce famously stated in his 1915 *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. It should hardly be necessary to quote an authority to state this obvious fact. History in the modern sense (and actually the only possible sense, as history is a modern invention) affects not only the way we look upon the past, but also the way we conceive the present and the future, as beautifully captured in the title of Jean-Louis Cohen’s encyclopedic trajectory of twentieth-century architecture, *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889* (2012). Modernist historiography, with all its elaborate genealogies and ideas of new beginnings, relied on a devaluation of nineteenth-century architecture as corrupted, decadent, and backward-looking. This verdict still overshadows the complexities of nineteenth-century architectural culture. From the very beginning, “Architecture and the Archive” takes the burning modernity of the nineteenth century as its premise, exploring the multiple and colliding temporalities that are always at stake when working historically, particularly when students are involved.

As they started their studies and archival search around Schirmer’s buildings, two things quickly became clear to the master students. One was that the structures we studied in the fall of 2011 were not, as is often taken for granted, part of a specifically national endeavour. The concept of the national as it surfaces in architectural theory in the late eighteenth century was, in fact, a completely international construct. In Norwegian political history, the national has been interpreted locally, territorially, and in relation to the state, and the establish-



The building of the National Gallery (1836–1924) has a long and drawn out history. This is an early version of the gallery, whose site and program was subject of immense public debate for half a century. Tracing the contemporary debates, controversies, competitions, and proposals carefully, as well as the many sites involved as the various proposals moved around in the city, the students excavated unknown projects for the National Gallery, thus making a valuable contribution to the history of the institution and to the discourse on museums and their proliferation in Europe and the US, mid nineteenth century.

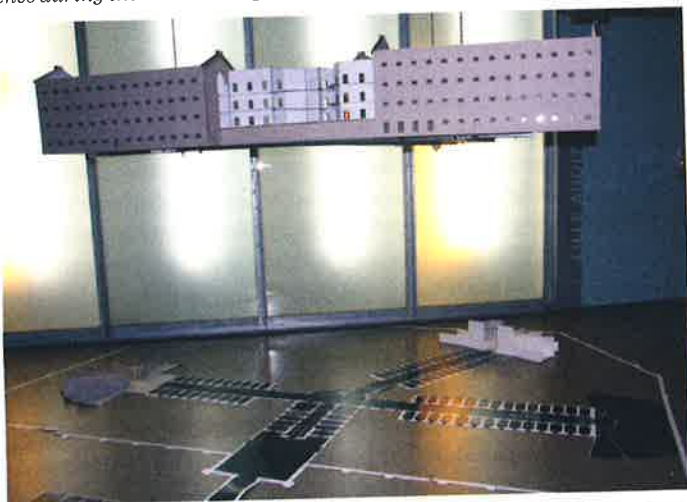
ment of autonomous political and cultural institutions in the nineteenth century has been conceived as a quest for national identity. Contrary to this established constellation of institutions, nation building, and architectural expression, we chose to see these monumental structures as part of an entirely cosmopolitan culture. Studies of the buildings, the programmes, the public debates, and the publication culture (visually and intellectually), all testified to a modernity far transcending a national scope.¹ Therein lies the possibility for historiographical critique performed from the architectural studio. The material excavated and processed by the students in the form of essays, models, and exhibitions, have already brought forth



The archive in motion: intense negotiations over the archival material.



The students made an innovative conceptual model of the National Gallery, focusing on the unbuilt, the lost, and the hidden spatialities of the building, to reveal unfulfilled potentials and spaces lost over the course of history. The model was based on archival material such as drawings, letters, and public debates, retrieved at several local and national archives. Here we see Mathilde Dahl and Linda Nikolaysen demonstrating the model to the audience during the exhibition opening.



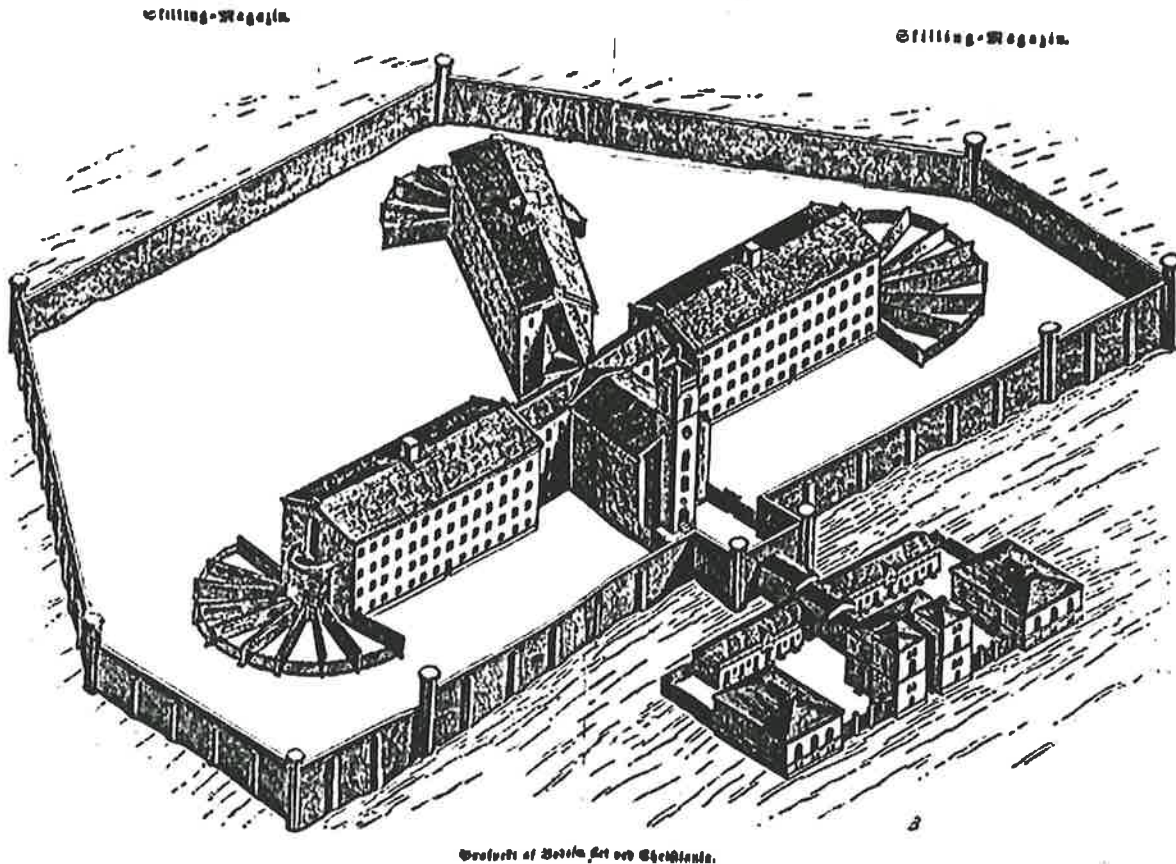
In addition to all the technical-architectural innovations that increasingly captured the students' interest, the model of The Christiana Penitentiary reflects and explores surveillance techniques. They studied the prison both architecturally and ideologically, scrutinizing the built structure as well as the legal and scientific documents leading to the building of the penitentiary.

new facts, contexts, and long-lost designs and drawings—crucial material so far overlooked and unrepresented.² In addition, the cosmopolitan outlook allowed the students to follow paths incompatible with well-established national meta-narratives, which have often left its international, contemporary rapports in a kind of historiographical blind zone. This was the deconstructive impulse at work: With this optics the students became capable of zooming in not only on the obsession with truth, novelty, and ideas of absolute contemporaneity, but also on the passionate discourse on the future at work in nineteenth century architectural culture.

Yet another context for the studio should be mentioned, of a more local sort. It has to do with the ghosts of the two most internationally renowned and influential professors and former deans of the Oslo School of Architecture: architect Sverre Fehn and the architect-turned-architectural theoretician and historian, Christian Norberg-Schulz. The partly phenomenological, partly poetic tradition that has informed the local theory and history habitat in Oslo has, in the context of studio teaching, often taken the form of an inspired, fragmented, and somewhat opaque discourse on history, out of reach of critical discussion. The convergence of personal experience and anecdotal history handed down has left the critical, productive, and maybe even projective dimensions of history basically unexplored in the studio.

In a caricatured and slightly biased version, one could say that the Norberg-Schulz/Fehn tradition has privileged a certain kind of history centering on personal or immediate experience, on the assumption of a timeless natural order of forms, concentrating on expressions that remain constant across time. Two randomly chosen examples might give an idea of what we're hinting at. Both stem from the cornucopia of Fehn's beautiful, rhapsodic deliberations on architecture and man, emblematic for a paradigm of an experienced, uncritical history. In the first case Fehn describes how he always, when in London, pops by the British Museum to admire and contemplate the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He recalls the graphical signs evocative and aesthetically overwhelming, due, in part, to their beauty and age but first and foremost because they point to an enigmatic, lost world: available only by imagination. Then something unfortunate happens: A stranger disturbs the architect in the middle of his philosophical musing on lost worlds, and brutally starts lecturing him on the Rosetta stone and other trivial historical circumstances. Fehn concludes, laconic and crushed: I left the BM and the hieroglyphs in sorrow, never to return again.³ The hieroglyphs lost all attraction the moment they were translated from poetry to history, robbed of their qualities as something to project dreams and impressions upon. What Fehn cautiously stages, here, is a recognizable philosophical-architectural position. Read allegorically, however, his short parable carries some disturbing implications on the architect and history. The other textual fragment comments on the design of "Villa Norköping" in Sweden, and was presented by the architect-as-shaman at a 1979 symposium in Urbino:

I once made a house which everybody claimed was inspired by Andrea Palladio. To be honest, Palladio was not in my mind at that time.
But later, I met him; by seeing the plan of my house, he said to me:



Engraving of the Christiania Penitentiary.

Christiania Penitentiary (1844–51) was among of the most modern in the world, and a product of the ground-breaking Report on the Condition of Norway's Prisons (1841). The prison was patterned on the Pentonville Penitentiary in London (1842), a building which Norwegian politicians and architects visited several times, and which was based on the so-called Philadelphia model in which the prisoners worked and lived in complete isolation. Christiania Penitentiary was celebrated in the Norwegian press and in contemporary tourist guides as "one of Christiania's most handsome monuments" and "one of the grandest buildings" in the Norwegian capital.

"You know, Rotunda was a joke . . . At that time we lost the horizon as a mystery. It was a shock for all of us when we realised that the world was a globe—it was measurable. So I made the earth a labyrinth with a single house of four fronts. When you leave the house facing west and walk around the world, you come back to face the same front. Before my structure, the big labyrinth was the desert—if you are lost in that landscape, trying to get out, you always return to the same spot."⁴

This Palladio lesson rumbles throughout Fehn's oeuvre, through the written, the unbuilt, and the built. It marks the point where Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology of the sky, the horizon, earth, and man resonates most fully with Fehn's poetic-philosophical impressions. Clearly, a phenomenologically saturated approach to architectural history, combined with Bauhaus ideals and pedagogics, has secured a rather romantic handing down of history. Fascinating, for sure, this poetic approach to history carries some strange and striking implications, turning history into personalized fragments, which at the same time might result "at worst as a dangerous form of detheorized history and dehistoricized theory, which takes the critical bite out of intellectual work in order to operatively legitimate architecture's status quo", as Jorge Otero-Pailos puts it in his highly enlightening and institutionally interesting *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology*

*and the Rise of the Postmodern.*⁵ Laying out the trajectory and genealogy of architectural phenomenology from Jean Labatut and the young Charles Moore to Norberg-Schulz, Otero-Pailos shows how the idea of architects as visual thinkers resonated perfectly with the phenomenological tradition as it was transplanted from philosophy to architecture. The result, an anti-methodological method as well as an anti-historical approach to history, makes a lot of sense seen from the Nordic architectural hemisphere where the conviction that too much historical knowledge may disturb the creative processes of designers in spe, has become deep seated. The pedagogics to be derived from Fehn's lovely parables is that buildings speak for themselves through intuitive experiences of poetic images and meanings, and that historical artifacts or buildings serves best as creative sources, from which designs might emerge. Both the encounter with the hieroglyphs in the British Museum and the conversation with Palladio serve as a way of freeing the imagination of architects and students, beyond history in a modern sense.

The kind of imagination at play in the research project *Nineteenth-Century Architectural Imaginations* is of a different sort than an experienced, immediate, ahistorical conception of architecture and architectural history. First: There is nothing immediate about our approach in the "Architecture and the Archive" studio, quite to the contrary. We are equally interested in the *oeuvre* as in the *ouvrage*—that is, the design, to borrow a distinction from French, as concerned with the draw-

| | Journal | Indtægt | Udgift | Beholdning |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---------|---------|------------|
| 1850. | | | | |
| October 29 ^{de} | offen journalen | 109. | 260 mf. | |
| December 31 ^{de} | " | 114. | 260 mf. | |
| 1851. | | | | |
| April 25 ^{de} | offen journalen | 119. | 6 Pst. | |
| December 31 ^{de} | " | 124. | 6 Pst. | |

Christiania Penitentiary was one of the first Norwegian institutions to have modern facilities, such as water closets, several decades before the Royal Palace. The students uncovered hitherto unknown documents regarding the technical installations, ranging from technical drawings to receipts of water closets purchased from England.

ings, the models, the photos, the intellectual work, the reception history, and so forth, as the built structure. We aim thus to deal with the whole media or mediation complex designating architecture's expanded field. As for the apparent lack of poetry in this approach, it obviously depends on how one defines both poetry and poetics. The meticulous study of the avant-garde water closets and plumbing system at the Christiania Penitentiary, for all its technological phantasmagorias, undoubtedly carries a certain poetic flair. Such details capture a core in the studio, showing that mid nineteenth-century architecture was neither backward looking nor eclectic, but a manifestation of hypermodernity. Technologically cutting edge, innovative and international, this was in every way a contemporary architecture.

We started the semester with two to three weeks of an intense lecture-based crash course, presenting theories and histories on asylums, madness, medicine and psychiatry, punishment, prisons, museums, collections, and modernity. We chaperoned the students around archives all over the city, and organized a seminar on archival fever, which was exactly what they came to suffer from for the rest of the semester. Some of them still haven't recovered.⁶ As any researchers knows, archival work can be both boring and frustrating, and even more so for beginners. We were surprised, therefore, to find that not only did our superb students launch themselves enthusiastically into the archives, but they also made remarkable finds.

These archival findings became the basis for a series of models of the selected buildings. All the models and the final installations for the end-of-term exhibition were derived from original material, built and unbuilt designs, pulled from the archives. Parallel with the model work, the students worked individually or in groups with scholarly essays on the respective institutions, printed as a catalogue to accompany the exhibition, with full lists of archival sources and findings, which are

now public and available for whoever might be interested.

Working on historical material with students is a way of demonstrating that history is constructed, in flux, subjected to reinterpretation and reconfiguration. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a way to show history as productive. Empirically based cuts into time might not only allow speculation and diverging perspectives or theories, but also point to lost and unfulfilled potentials to be explored both architecturally and intellectually.

1 For a framing of this cosmopolitan context, see the introduction "Historiske imaginasjoner. Arkitekturen i det norske 1800-tallets publiseringsskulptur" in Lending and Hvattum, eds., *Vor tids Fordringer: Norske arkitekturdebatter 1818-1919* (Oslo: Pax, 2012), collecting 80 texts on architecture by architects, engineers, philosophers, scientists, poets, etc.

2 Hvattum and Lending, eds., *Straff, galskap og dannelse: Tre 1800-tallsinstitusjoner* (Oslo: AHO, 2011).

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4 Fehn, "The Labyrinth"; *Arkitektnytt*, no. 15 1986, 418. The "Conversation with Palladio" presents itself as a topos, recurring in Fehn's writings and lectures. The Labyrinth title carries an obvious intertextuality with Italo Calvino's oeuvre. Sometimes Fehn's interlocutor was Fehn himself, other times Le Corbusier. Several versions are paraphrased in Per Olaf Fjeld, *Sverre Fehn. The Pattern of Thoughts* (NY: Monacelli, 2009), 80-83.

5 Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn. Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.

6 Five of the students continued working with a related material the next semester; two with diplomas and the rest with self programmed assignments. A few of them have also been adopted into our PhD seminars.