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What was, what is and what will be

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What was, what is, and what will be

The conception of the universal is a conception that we can detach things from their context and by doing so enable them to function and act freely in other contexts. A similar conception prevails in structuralist architectural thinking; the point here is that the structural level should have a universal and timeless character, as fixed patterns that can exist in themselves, independent of the specific situations and contexts in which they are manifested, and constitute a general and stable foundation for various situative and fragiley particular qualifications. But when we take a closer look at the best structuralist works, we find that the contextual, the problem-specific, the particular, etc. – considered too small, insignificant, and random in thinking that strives toward the universal – nonetheless are not only offered a place as exchangeable “software” in the universally structural “hardware.” In the best concretized works they are allowed more directly to exert a transformational effect with regard to form and significance upon the generally structural.

A good example is Berlin Freie Universität¹ (called BFU below) (fig. 1), which, as a “classical” structuralist *mat building* appears to live up to the dogmas that would hold true for a universally oriented structuralist architectural work. But if we focus more closely, we discover that despite the fact that it was constructed as a seemingly highly rational grid-structured building system on an almost flat field, where the easiest and at first glance most rational thing would have been to build without modifications to the terrain, they are found nonetheless in the form of angles and displacements (figs. 2+3). And that in the otherwise rational and effective infrastructure, we can sense and see the displacements and discover a surprising complexity despite the rigidity of the plan. For example in the several hundred meter-long “K-Strasse,” where it is impossible to see from one end to the other because of the undulating progression that the displacements create (fig. 4). To emphasize and expand the displacements’ local potentials, for example, small sloping gardens were laid out (figs. 5+6) as distinctive, highly intimate places in the structure. Places that express another, more situative thought, that establish differences in the structure. Places that refer beyond the universal system, as a play of particular nuances, as “beauty spots” on an otherwise “universal body,” in order to give the building an indefinable distinctiveness that leads

one to view it as a unique identity, as something different from and more than a neutral, generalized grid-structure. Despite the fact that this distinctiveness might not have an especially big or comprehensive influence on BFU's general organization, I would nonetheless maintain that a decisive counter movement opens up in the work in these places. A counter movement that gives a situated tension, qualifying and involved inertia, and criticism of the work's seemingly non-context-related, abstracted universal character. A reflexive complex counter movement, which, brought together with the generally structural, means that as an overall effect, the work can be conceived and understood as more than simply an empty universal structure. But rather as a more complex and reflexive interpretation of reality that knows that in order to function effectively, it must be rational, open, oriented toward the future, and oriented toward the universal, but also integrates and expresses its doubt and its distrust of itself as all-controlling, all-embracing universal rationality. An interpretation of reality that does not seek to have its universal aspect confirmed on every level, but recognizes that man, architecture, and the world are more than universal rationality. That man, architecture, and the world also encompass other and important *particular* and *situative* dimensions and potentials that are suppressed by an all-embracing universality, but in contrast can be furthered by putting it at risk.

If we do as the structuralists did and criticize Functionalism for being only three-dimensional, in this case meaning oriented toward finding static solutions in the space's three dimensions without time as architecture's fourth dimension – the transforming dimension of the future that the structuralists endeavored to integrate² – we could say that BFU, with its open, functionally adaptable grid-structural approach, might indeed add the dimension of time, that is the future, but that BFU's "beauty spots" make it more nuanced. These "beauty spots" add yet another dimension of time that is not only the future, but in a certain sense also the past, to denote that *what already exists* functions as an element in the work. Not as a nostalgic, contextual adaptation, but as a mutually transformational exchange between the existing and the new, the locally rooted/ conditioned and the universally future-oriented. This reading is inspired by the Danish painter Asger Jorn, who proposed³ that time, like space, has three dimensions; what was, what is, and what will be – or the past, the present, and the future – correspond to space's length, width, and height. Jorn viewed the present as the "part" of time that is created when the past and the future overlap and that the *fullness* of the present depends on how much of *what was* and of *what will be* are part of *the present*. And whether and how *what was* (that which anchors) and *what will be* (that which

opens up), as elements that have complex opposite effects, are brought together in the concretion of the present and the work. And based on a consideration of this kind, we could perhaps criticize BFU for not having much of *the past* that is allowed to fill the work's *present*. Architecture that is able to expand all these dimensions must consequently, according to Jorn, be six-dimensional, and not only three-dimensional, as in Functionalism, or four-dimensional, as in the universally conceived, non-context-related, structuralist architectural works that are only prepared for the future.

If we use this dimensions model to compare BFU with a never-built work by the Danish architect group Studio Chiasmus – *Fra Husterritorium til Bykosmos - integreret bolig- og erhvervsbebyggelse på Dokøen i Københavns Havn* (from house territory to urban cosmos – an integrated housing and commercial complex on Dokøen in Copenhagen Harbor), referred to below as the *Dokø project*,⁴ we could say that an effort was made to integrate *the past* in this work in a much more comprehensive and pervasive way. And that the particular and situative are not just “beauty spots” on a universal body, but were raised to a more decisive level. Like BFU, the complex was laid out as a kind of mat building that extends over a large area (figs. 7+8). But to a far greater extent, the Dokø project has an exchange and bringing together of the structure's serial, non-qualified and consequently functionally “future-oriented” open forms and potentially mutable pattern and the situative “past-oriented” existing identities, particularities, bindings, and potentials. Or perhaps when it comes down to it, there is no distinction. A very large element in this interplay is made up of the structure's gliding between horizontal and vertical, between the tension that exists contextually between the harbor's horizontal opening onto the sea and the horizon, on the one hand, and the city's verticality in the buildings' stacked planes and towers striving toward the sky, on the other. The Dokø project endeavors to accommodate and bring together tension in and as a gliding movement between horizontal and vertical. A movement that has a decisive influence on the building's overall form and the individual, specific area in the structure that is qualified with special characteristics as themselves and as part of a course of transformation. A literal structure of transformation with a gliding progression of architecturally qualified differences, a metamorphosis construction that in a slow inversion is stretched out between horizontal and vertical. The Dokø project is largely serially organized, but unlike structuralist architectural works, this seriality is subordinated to a contextually based logic of metamorphosis that transforms the lack of difference and lack of transformation in the structuralist primary structures into a *progression* of difference and transformation that breaks down the structural

unambiguity as a result of the internal complexity that emerges as a result. Other important compositions, for example, involve 1) the sea bed, which like a gently rolling, amorphous geometry is sent from the harbor, over the island's artificial surface, and inside and up into the building, 2) the city's asphalted infrastructural floor, which is brought from Holmen behind and taken inside and up into the building, to end as a large parking deck on the building's roof, and finally 3) a large, but more locally effective feature that is made up of the large downward spiraling movement through the building (fig. 9), which in a kind of reversal "retells" its contextual "past" in the spiraling tower of the Church of Our Savior, ever-present in this locale. The project has many other compositions with the existing *past* both on pervasive levels and on more locally effective levels, but these are probably the most important. All these "past" levels meet the generally structural in a far more pervasive way than BFU, and these compositions consequently result in a building that seems in a much more comprehensive way to have an awareness of time and identity and be able to enter into a dialogue with and contribute to the surroundings and the situative. This is why we might be justified in claiming that *the present* in the Dokø project, in keeping with Asger Jorn's dimension model, has great fullness and a cohesion between what already exists and what is yet to come.

There are potentials both in the future and in the past, but first and foremost in the present, which links and expands implications in and for both. Or as Asger Jorn writes, "The future becomes real by colliding with the past and becoming the present.... The future is questions without answers and the past is answers that no longer have question marks. The reality is the dialogue."⁵ Architecture's *real* space comprises an immediate, living present in direct contact with the past and the future – continuously composed with and as a situation in a continuous dialogue. The condition for a dialogue of this kind is *difference*, and "without identity, there can be no difference."⁶ We are consequently obliged to endeavor to establish some kind of identity in architecture and the places and contexts⁷ of which architecture is part (and a striving for neutral universality is also a striving for a lack of identity). This does not mean that I believe we should upgrade the concept of *heimat* or a conservative cultural thought that is rigid and self-assured in some other way. As I elaborated upon in my Ph.D. thesis,⁸ I do not believe that we can maintain a stable "identity" in an architectural work or a place. A place never becomes frozen in a single identical existence; it never becomes closed. On the contrary, it lives by having its identity move in a fluid, conflict-filled, and disputative field. A place's identity is never an isolated entity; it is always part of a larger

temporal context. A place's identity is established in a situated but always unresolved interplay of the past, the present, and the future. The important lesson learned from both BFU and the Dokø project is that the existing identity is not just consolidated or replaced by a new one, but that the existing opens up to a *renewed* identity. And that compositions with the context take place as a varied, supplemental, and cohesive "extension" of the context that consequently is not just "repeated," but on the contrary is taken further evolutionarily in a living, creative, and actualizing movement.

Any interest in the past – and the existing context – is closely linked with current problems. And as the present is transformed, and its typical features change, so do our conditions for interpreting and understanding the past, and in this way our present conditions and activities in a certain sense change the past. Time never stops; the different way we use, interpret, and understand the past changes the significance of the past. Even the most important place is always subjected to constant reevaluation. Every age transforms and adapts places, and at best also takes into consideration and uses experiences from what already exists. The significance of what already exists is constituted by how each new architectural work adapts it. Each new architectural work must consequently study the potentials that arise when, based on its own premises, it picks up the thread and composes and organizes itself not in a repetition, but in a varied adaptation. And this is where the potentials exist for a genuine dialogue, in contrast to unconsciously adopting universal or local truths from one time for use in another. The successful architectural work does not materialize only as a purely spatial three-dimensionality. It also possesses three time dimensions, in which the orientation past/future is understood not as a static pair of opposites, but as a living condition for one another and for the present. We live in a world that inevitably undergoes change and cannot return to the past unchanged, which is why we cannot insist on the place and the context as immutable. But we can insist on the place and the context as a *precondition* – that there are and must be differences in places so that we can establish an identity relationship. But also that this relationship is grounded in relevance and a cohesion with the inevitably mutable life that is lived as an inseparable and constantly opening part of the place, which is why the place's means must continually be recreated in a modification that continually corresponds to it.

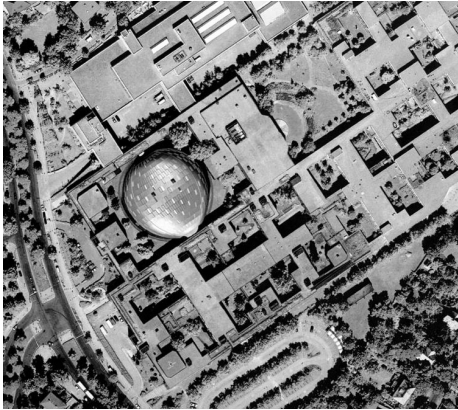


Fig. 1. BFU aerial photograph



Figs. 2+3. Angles and displacements



Fig. 4. K-Strasse



Figs. 5+6. Gardens

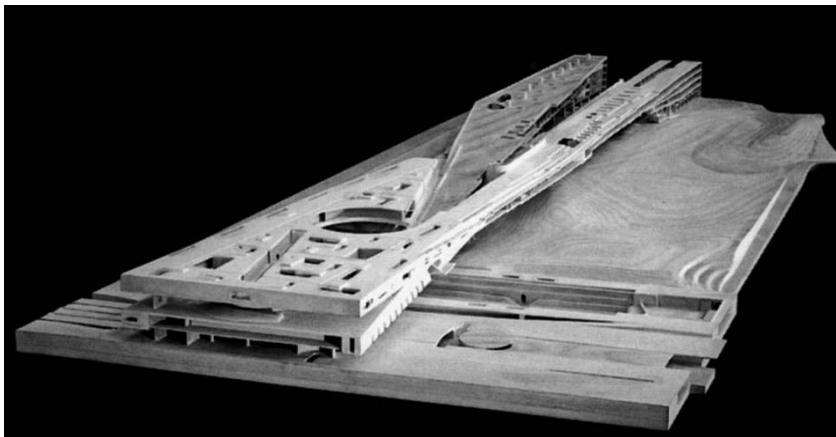


Fig. 7. The Dokø project, photograph of the model seen from the northeast



Fig. 8. Model seen from the southwest

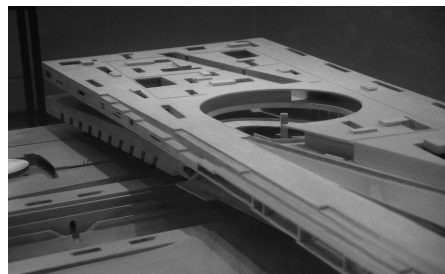


Fig. 9. Downward spiral

¹ 1964/1973 by Candilis, Josic, Woods, Schiedhelm. Located in Dahlem, Berlin.

² A paradox of Structuralism is that an effort is made to carry out this integration of time by planning architecture as a timeless background against which a time-bound mutable action can take place. This is why the structuralist works do not *in themselves* integrate time, but in contrast retreat to an uninvolved, timeless level. (BFU is, as this analysis shows, a more involved exception.) For an elaboration and criticism of this strategy, see Thomas Ryborg Jørgensen: *Det Ustadige i Arkitekturen*, Kunstakademiets Arkitektskole, 2005.

³ Asger Jorn: *Naturens orden, De Divisione Naturae*, Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme, Silkeborg, 1962, p. 80.

⁴ The project covers the entire Dokø area, in the middle of which Henning Larsen's opera house was built on the Amalienborg axis. The project was carried out for the 6th architecture biennial in Venice in 1996, representing Denmark, and exhibited in the Danish pavilion. The project was implemented by *Studio Chiasmus*: Malene Andersen, Peter Bertram, Jan Borgstrøm, Niels Grønbaek, Kristian Hagemann Hansen, Jan Harboe, Kent Martinussen, Thomas Ryborg Jørgensen, and Henrik Oxvig. (See e.g. *Arkitekturgalleriet 1, Studio Chiasmus v/Kent Martinussen*, Dansk Arkitekturcenter, 1998, pp. 38-54.)

⁵ Asger Jorn: *Naturens orden, De Divisione Naturae*, Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme, Silkeborg, 1962, pp. 63 + 65.

⁶ The quote is from G. W. F. Hegel and taken from Steen Nepper Larsen: "Identitet som mellemværende," *Filosofi*, no. 2/2002, which gives no reference.

⁷ In this connection I do not differentiate unequivocally between the concepts "place" and "context." The two concepts are used interchangeably in everyday speech in Danish and it is generally difficult to differentiate between them. One way of doing so might be to note that when the concept "place" (Danish: *sted*) is used, the architectural connections most often plays a decisive role (cf. the concept's etymological roots in the Danish word *stad*, city), while the concept "context" is a more general one in both Danish and English (Lat. *con'textus*, from *con-* + *'texere*, weave) and does not necessarily put any great emphasis on architectural aspects.

An essential aspect of the concepts deals with what delimits and decides a place / context. It might be relatively easy to delimit an architectural work as a physical entity, but concepts such as "place" and "context" might to a greater degree be delimited in relation to an identity that consists of a complex network of physical, cultural, mental, and programmatic connections, which is why it might be more difficult to determine the physical delimitation of a place / context and fix the character of each.

⁸ Thomas Ryborg Jørgensen: *Det Ustadige i Arkitekturen*, Kunstakademiets Arkitektskole, 2005, pp. 164-165.