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The ecology of urban tectonics – studied in everyday building culture of Hans Christian Hansen

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT: This paper is related to previous research by the authors that examine the phenomenon of tectonics as architectural design theory and method. These studies have shown that the notion of tectonics at large is associated with exclusive architecture, and that, as a profession architects have difficulties to extract, mature, and apply tectonic knowledge to everyday practice. This circumstance challenges the development and range of our discipline, a problem that we raised in 2015 (Hvejsel et al. 2015). With reference to Kenneth Frampton's notion of *arrière-garde* we find that there is a need to develop methods for applying tectonic knowledge extracted from significant existing examples for developing future practical methods (Frampton 2002: 81). The specific intention of this paper is to push the understanding of tectonics further, into the scale of the urban context and thereby to discuss it as part of an everyday practice and regional building culture. "Can material interest and tectonic aspiration inform the urban scale and how can the urban context call for tectonic qualities in ordinary buildings?" We ask, and "Can we speak of an 'ecology of urban tectonics' where the scale of the urban context relates to the tectonic scale of construction details?" These questions are examined in two selected works by the Danish Architect, Hans Christian Hansen (1901–1978), The architecture of Hans Christian Hansen is little known to the international community of architects. His work has also been unfairly neglected when accounting for the great modern heroes of Danish architecture. Just recently, examples of his work have been thoroughly presented in the Danish architectural magazine; 'Arkitekten'. (Keiding 2013) This paper analyses two works of Hansen: Bremerholm Transformer Station and Bellahøj Transformer & Control Station, both everyday buildings that hold an immediate ability to address connect the urban fabric to the human scale by means of tectonic innovations.

In the opening paragraph of his "*Towards a Critical Regionalism*", Kenneth Frampton states that: "Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an *arrière-garde* position, that is to say, one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment's myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the pre-industrial past" (Frampton 2002: 81). This notion of the critical *arrière-garde* reflects our interest in the work of Hansen and our motivation to study whether a critical analysis of his work can inform the tectonic challenges that characterize today's everyday architecture – where we see a growing inability to utilize construction elements as spatial features that link the urban fabric to the human scale. Consequently, the paper studies how meta-level concepts as *everyday building culture*, the *regional* and the notion of *ecology* link together and the commonalities they share that often happen to be mutually interdependent: culture /tradition, locality, and scale using Hansen's work as a case study. (Beim & Madsen (ed.) 2014) Methodologically this has been done by applying the notion of 'urban tectonics' inspired by the work of Eduard F. Sekler, as a critical lens. (Sekler 1964, Sekler 1965) Through this lens we study how Hansen was able to treat culture/tradition, locality, and scale as part of everyday architecture by embedding them into the construction elements.

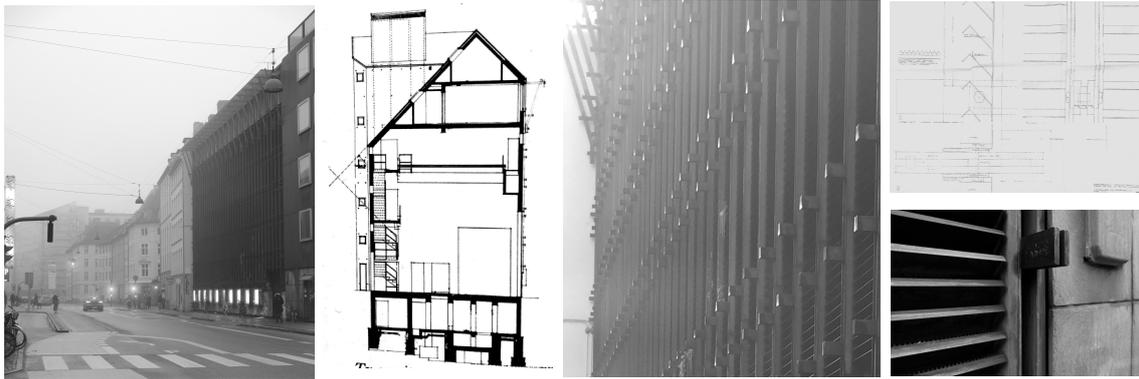


Figure 1. Bremerholm Transformer Station, 1962-63. The material properties and detailing of the bronze lamellas, capture the subtle light reflections of both the gray sky and the low sun angles.

According to Frampton “only an *arrière-garde* has the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique.” (Frampton 2002: 81). In addition he stresses that the *arrière-garde* is NOT to be understood as a conservative or sentimental state of mind, but consists in a high level of critical self-consciousness. In studying Hansen’s buildings we have found that they are humble and unfashionable yet they refer to a strong building culture that is deeply rooted in a regional understanding of materials, traditions of construction and the specific properties of a given urban context. Bremerholm Transformer Station and Bellahøj Transformer & Control Station document a capability to reinvent traditions in construction and material use, and translate the challenges of contemporary construction industry he was facing into modest, long lasting building designs that link culture/tradition, locality and scale around the human experience of the work. One could argue that his buildings define an ecological tectonic approach that addresses the urban scale in a direct unimpressed and highly original manner, outlining a direction for an ‘urban tectonic’. In this way Hansen’s work sets an example in itself as built heritage, but in addition, they set a methodological example when valued in relation to Frampton’s notion of the *arrière-garde*. Hansen’s work witnesses a critical and reflective ability on his behalf that enables him to act in everyday practice and to shape construction elements into spatial experiences that link the urban fabric to the human scale. In this way the notion of the *arrière-garde* sets an example for future architectural research as well, by demanding of it to feed practice with such a critical reflective approach, skills, and methods. In concluding, it is our finding, that it is exactly here that research into the field of tectonics holds its potential. NOT as “optimization of advanced technology” and visual occupation with structural elements as such and NOT as “the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative” to use the words of Frampton (Frampton 2002:81). But as a critical theory that questions the methodological foundation of architectural practice; how we go about the task of uniting aesthetics and technique in the creation of viable living spaces?

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