Special Issue Article

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The Bricks of Fiction. Architecture and Scandinavian Literature

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Abstract: This thematic section titled *The Bricks of Fiction. Architecture and Scandinavian Literature* brings together five international scholars of Scandinavian studies. Stemming from an interdisciplinary research project titled *Pappershus, luftslott, ordsmedjor. Arkitektur i nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur* conceived by Andrea Meregalli and Camilla Storskog at the University of Milan, Italy, the five articles presented by Aldona Zańko, Massimo Ciaravolo, Luca Gendolavigna, Andrea Romanzi, and Joanna Cymbrykiewic explore the design, patterns, and structures of fiction, and analyse the role and function of architectural elements in two nineteenth-century classics — H.C. Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard — and in the work of contemporary Scandinavian writers such as Jan Roar Leikvoll, Maria Gerhardt, Zulmir Bečević, Thomas Engström and Margit Richert.

Keywords: Scandinavian studies; literature; architecture

Architecture, according to an entry in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is "the art and technique of designing and building", a practice "employed to fulfill both practical and expressive requirements, and thus it serves both utilitarian and aesthetic ends" (Collins, Gowans, and Ackerman 2025). In a play with interart analogies, this thematic section of *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* can be said to experiment with the idea of replacing the term 'architecture' in the above-mentioned definition with 'literature'. We are asking ourselves in what ways literature, too, can be synonymous with an art and a technique of designing and building, an art employed to fulfill both practical and expressive requirements, serving both utilitarian and aesthetic ends.

According to David Spurr in *Architecture and Modern Literature*, the philosophical tradition of comparing literature and architecture emerged with full force in the eighteenth century, in a moment of time "when the aesthetic dimensions of

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both cultural forms began to take precedence in the discourse surrounding them, that is, when architecture could be conceived as a fine art rather than essentially the science of building and *literature* began to refer to those particular forms of writing that make a claim to consideration on aesthetic grounds" (Spurr 2012, 2; italics in the original). And, just as architectural terms have had a certain relevance in literary criticism, where they have served as analogies to describe the organisation, structure, or framework of prose and poetry, the language of literature has tapped into the architectural discourse and enriched it by stressing the narrative properties of architecture, its use of metaphors, quotations, focalisation, anachronisms (Szpakowska-Loranc 2019).

Less abstract relations between architecture and literature also exist, points of intersection where the former attempts to render the latter, and vice versa. Stephen Holl's award-winning Hamsun Centre in Hamarøy, Norway, is one (rare) example of a building that interprets literature, while (the more common) literary representations of architecture have buildings figuring, for instance, as background and setting for the plot, as characters with their own agency, as allegory or symbol, or as expressions of an ideological stance. In 1999, in a research overview of the literary use of architecture, Jöran Mjöberg summed up the state of the art by distinguishing two main trends, one employing architectural structures as metaphors for composition, and another, where architectural phenomena and constructions play a role as subjects in the narration (Mjöberg 1999, 7). Twenty-five years ago, the Swedish scholar found the secondary literature dealing with the connections and interrelationships between architecture and literary fiction "very limited" (Mjöberg 1999, 7; "mycket begränsad") and lacking a holistic approach.

Next to the studies discussed by Mjöberg (Frank 1979; Bullen 1986; Hamon 1989; Chandler 1991), a strand recognisable in more recent contributions to the field is the interest for the architectural uncanny, as in Vidler (1992, 2000), and in Mark B. Sandberg's *Ibsen's Houses. Architectural Metaphor and the Modern Uncanny* (2015). Concentrating on what he calls Ibsen's "cumulative drama of architectural unease" (2015, 176), Sandberg puts special focus on how domestic architecture descends into unhomeliness within the culture of modernity. The modern condition, and the responses given to it by literature and architecture, is also at the centre of the aforementioned study by David Spurr, *Architecture and Modern Literature*. Spurr notes that the responses are diverse, sometimes even formally in opposition: "functionalist and rationalist elements appear diametrically opposed in spirit to the value that so much of the twentieth-century literature places on subjective, nonrationalist experience" (2012, 5).

The five articles in this thematic issue approach the architecture-literature analogy by reflecting on forms, functions, and representations of architecture in two nineteenth-century classics – Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard – and

in the work of contemporary Nordic writers such as Jan Roar Leikvoll, Maria Gerhardt, Zulmir Bečević, Thomas Engström, and Margit Richert. While all articles are concerned with the structural aspects of building stories – what Massimo Ciaravolo (through Frederik Julius Billeskov Jansen) speaks of as "architectures of expression" in his analysis of Søren Kierkegaard's *Forførerens Dagbog* – the discussion of narrative structures subsequently gives way to the examination of constructed environments in a broader sense, whether in relation to buildings, real or imagined, such as the urban space of nineteenth-century Copenhagen, the hospital and the hospice, or the walls and confined areas of a dystopian Sweden.

With focus on three contemporary English-language reworkings of H.C. Andersen's fairy tale *Den lille Havfrue*, Aldona Zańko considers the interrelationship between changes in narrative structures and fluctuations in the agendas of second and third-wave feminism. In particular, Zańko analyses how the three contemporary authors rewrite the ending of the text to express different notions of female happiness. The narrative units of the original fairy tale are discarded, recombined, and replaced as bricks that build different readings and meanings. Jane Yolen's *The Undine* (1982) portrays the mermaid's development from a submissive sexual object to a self-conscious individual. The contrast between nature and the human world is reread as a male-female dichotomy that opposes patriarchy to female solidarity. The happy ending, when the mermaid reunites with her sisters in the sea, presents sisterhood as a refuge opposed to patriarchy embodied by the prince. The other two texts shift the focus from strictly gender-based relations to a more complex intersection of gender and social class privileges. Jane Gardam's *The Pangs of Love* (1983) is a sequel to Andersen's tale, with the mermaid's younger sister leaving in search of the prince to tell him of her sister's sufferings, while Emma Donoghue's *The Tale of the Voice* (1997) follows the original plotline more closely although the action unfolds in a realistic setting where all characters are human beings. In both texts, the protagonists' empowerment is finally achieved in a marriage on equal terms once they return home.

Massimo Ciaravolo's analysis of urbanity in Kierkegaard's *Forførerens Dagbog* includes a reflection on the breaking down of barriers. Following the Don Juan figure as a flâneur strolling through Copenhagen, Ciaravolo focuses on the urban environment with its diverse components, from streets and buildings to meeting places, such as cafés, shops, theatres, to individual households. All these elements combine to build both a realistic setting, clearly situated in space and time (Golden Age Copenhagen), and a 'possible world' appealing to the reader. As spatial studies have pointed out over the last thirty years, the geographical environment cannot be seen as a passive container, and Ciaravolo investigates how Kierkegaard is able to spot and read urban signs so as to identify meaning both as collective memory and individual identity. The shifting settings elicit and interact with the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, in his mind the boundaries between interior and exterior are

blurred and interwoven with his inner motions. Space also reflects social dynamics both in bourgeois interiors and in the social variety of the city's public places, "where different voices, viewpoints and accents interweave – a plurality and multilingualism that the writer can mould to his artistic purpose". With the contribution of natural elements, especially wind and water, Kierkegaard's novel serves to show how public and private, outside and inside do not exist in opposition to each other.

The opposite is true in Luca Gendolavigna's reading of Zulmir Bečević's *Avblattefieringsprocessen* and Thomas Engström & Margit Richert's *Nattavaara*, where rigid boundaries delineated by architectural structures serve to create complete disconnection between outside and inside. Gendolavigna discusses how architecture in literature can be used to tell a story of power relations, and argues that the internment camps, which correspond to the built environment in these novels, align to Michel Foucault's idea of 'heterotopias of deviation', liminal spaces where Otherness is confined. In these dystopias, architecture in terms of walls and borders represents social dysfunction and state control in a dismal and dehumanising scenario and is used as a metaphor to speak of a near-future Sweden unwilling to acknowledge 'diversity' within its national territory. True to the dystopian tradition – argues Gendolavigna – these novels, problematising the *folkhem* notion, denounce the incivility of our times and unveil political processes, urging the reader to critical thinking.

A dystopian theme is also recognisable in Andrea Romanzi's contribution, dedicated to Jan Roar Leikvoll's dark novels on illness and infirmity. Romanzi identifies a narrative framework in the form of 'cage structures', representative of the theme of captivity. This theme materialises in a series of enclosed spaces – concentration camp, wasteland, monastery, cellar – and eventually coincides with the human body, a particular conception of architecture. As Spurr reminds us, the human body as measure and metaphor for architectural structures is a topos that goes back at least to Vitruvius's treatise *De architectura* of ca 15 BCE (Spurr 2012, 36). In Romanzi's interpretation, which combines autobiographical statements by the author with close readings of passages from four novels, the trauma of the paralysed body experienced by Leikvoll himself is articulated by the architectures of confinement represented in *Eit vintereventyr, Fiolinane, Bovara*, and *Songfuglen*. Drawing on inputs from affective narratology, Romanzi argues that the cage metaphor becomes an emotional architecture representing Leikvoll's confrontation with illness. Underlining the correlation between claustrophobic spatiality and states of anxiety, Leikvoll's works prove to be an example of how both architecture and literature can correspond not only to aesthetic requirements but also to the practical needs of an author coming to terms with his own death.

The investigation of a bodily and emotional response to architecture is central also to Joanna Cymbrykiewicz's reading of the Danish writer Maria Gerhardt's two

novels *Der bor Hollywoodstjerner på vejen* and *Transfervindue*. Again elaborating on the relation between architecture and illness, Cymbrykiewicz questions whether the dwellings of the protagonist in both works – a real hospital in the former novel, an imagined hospice in the latter – can be seen as Foucaultian heterotopias of deviation and Augéan non-places. The hospital is represented as a built environment capable of alienation, a hostile place where the rules of the outside world do not apply. People are not perceived as individuals but reduced to their roles as patients or doctors, and personal communication is discouraged. In the second novel, which features the same protagonist, this reality is discarded by the hospice as an imagined idyllic place, with a society of the ill functioning according to its own rules. This is the result of an act of self-exclusion from the world of the healthy, with which no communication is possible. As Cymbrykiewicz underlines, in cancer narratives space plays a pivotal role for well-being and recovery. As in the case of Leikvoll discussed above, Gerhardt's novels are based on the author's personal experience in her fight with breast cancer. As a consequence, the texts also fulfill a practical, social, and cultural function, giving voice to the perspective of the ill, and come across as a wake-up call to reflect on places of illness, the needs of the ill, and the shortcomings of the healthcare system.

In conclusion, while all five authors isolate design, pattern, and structure in fiction as architectural, they also offer a reflection on how certain architectural elements (the cage, the wall, the places of illness) influence the nature of the narration and stand as metaphors to inform readers about imperatives communicated by the text. They attempt to show how narrated architecture has functions that go beyond the part it plays as pattern or symbol to mirror socio-political issues and the elaboration of trauma. A common trait in their discussions is the reflection on how compositional structures and built environments articulate binary discourses about inclusion and exclusion, norm and deviation from the norm, whether it be a question of gender and class (as in Aldona Zańko's examination of feminist rereadings of Andersen's *Den lille Havfrue*), of intimacy and social space (as in Massimo Ciaravolo's discussion of *Forførerens Dagbog*), of insiders and outsiders (as in Luca Gendolavigna's exploration of contemporary Swedish dystopias), or of the healthy and the ill (as in Andrea Romanzi's and Joanna Cymbrykiewic's looks at pathograpical narratives).

These five articles stem from an interdisciplinary research project titled *Pappershus, luftslott, ordsmedjor. Arkitektur i nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur*, which aimed to investigate different forms of relationships between architectural structures and Scandinavian literatures with case studies from diverse chronological and geographical settings. The project resulted in a conference held at the University of Milan in October 2023, bringing together a motley crowd of more than thirty international scholars in Scandinavian Studies, from Italy in the south to

Scandinavia in the north, from Mexico in the west to Poland in the east. During this three-day conference, literature sessions and language sessions offered many opportunities to reflect on the place of architecture in fiction, the construction of literary canons and academic fields, as well as on the building blocks of ancient and modern Scandinavian languages. In 2025, *Annali di Ca' Foscari* (Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Italy) and *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia* (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland) will host two special issues on the themes of the research project.

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