

John Stewart, *Nordic Classicism. Scandinavian Architecture 1910-1930*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018. E-book & print, pp. 208. 75 illus.

Architectural history doesn't usually know what to do with Nordic Classicism. As John Stewart astutely observes, in the opening line of this first dedicated survey in English, "Nordic Classicism is a rather inconvenient period in the history of twentieth-century architecture." The problem is that it doesn't fit comfortably into the heroic, teleological narrative of Modernism that sees World War I as a rupture with the old world, and the 1920s as the heady decade of new utopian social ideas. Appearing in the interwar period, Nordic Classicism is an "embarrassing interlude"; it "represents an apparent break – a backward look – a wrong turning or an unexpected distraction from the development of Modernism" (Introduction). This is further complicated by the fact that much interwar neo-Classicism elsewhere in Europe is tainted by its association with ideologies of rigorous control, from the French *retour à l'ordre* to the totalitarian behemoths of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.

How, then, to explain what is seemingly just another example of retrograde historicism? Some commentators, like Christian Norberg-Schulz or Charlotte Ashby, have explored it in terms of its relationship to National Romanticism. Another, perhaps more popular, approach is to see the seeds of Functionalism in Nordic Classicism's stripped forms, balanced proportions and modular units, a narrative used to justify the striking change of architectural language in the work of Modernist giants like Erik Gunnar Asplund or Alvar Aalto. Others have tried to weave it into the grand democratising mythologies of Nordic twentieth-century design, claiming that it distilled a "universal style" that was simultaneously national and "related both to pan-Scandinavianism and pacifism" (Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries*, CUP, 2000, 282).

Stewart, on the other hand, addresses Nordic Classicism on its own terms. Rather than representing the tail end of, or prelude to, another movement, he presents it as a separate, valuable and distinctly Nordic phenomenon. This is the book that those of us who teach Nordic architecture have been waiting for, a clear and concise account of key works and architects that allows non-native students to access material that was hitherto disparate, patchy and frustratingly underexplored. In Stewart's hands, Nordic Classicism ceases to be an uncomfortable caesura between National Romanticism and Functionalism and is valorised as a unique architectural moment of Nordic civic poise and extremely high-quality design.

The great strength of Stewart's work is that it is written by an architect who intimately understands the nuts and bolts of buildings and the processes of their commission, procurement and construction. He writes with refreshing clarity and concision, giving the reader precise insight into plan, space, function and decoration through deft handling of architectural terminology and detailed analysis of parts. He even provides his own, crisply legible, plan and section drawings of key buildings. In particular, he helps the reader to understand Nordic Classicism in not just its spatial, but also its temporal dimensions, taking us step by step through what he calls "architectural promenades in which the route is

carefully considered in terms of its [emotional] impact on the visitor” (chap. 2). Thus, Asplund’s City Library in Stockholm (1922-27) is presented through its upwards journey from street-level daylight, to darkness, to the literal and metaphorical enlightenment of the glorious, top-lit, circular reading room. Similarly, Carl Petersen’s Faaborg Museum (1915), one of the first works of Nordic Classicism, is seductively unpacked via Petersen’s elegant perambulatory sequences of contrasting space, colour, texture, light and shade.

The structure of the book is straightforward and largely biographical. Chapters focus on a single (inevitably male) architect, beginning with a brief biography and near-chronological discussion of their main works, followed by in-depth analysis of what Stewart has decided is their Classical *magnum opus*. It is a rigid and slightly old-fashioned format that, while easy to navigate, leads to some problems, not least the inevitable frustrating hiccup in the narrative when the ‘core’ work is skipped over. More disconcerting is when an architect is deemed to have more than one key work and, even worse, when it is co-designed. This is the case with Stockholm’s Woodland Cemetery (1915-40) by Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz: Asplund’s chapter already has the City Library as its focus and so the Cemetery is carved up between this chapter, another on Lewerentz (the Resurrection Chapel), and an awkward ‘extra’ chapter on Asplund’s Woodland Chapel and the wider Cemetery project. This final chapter has another function though, effectively serving in lieu of a conclusion by offering the Cemetery as a summative work embodying the ‘special characteristics’ of Nordic Classicism.

What these characteristics actually are leads me to discussion of Stewart’s wider arguments. His claims for the value of Nordic Classicism lie, it appears, in his admiration for the empirical achievements of the works themselves: their top-notch design and execution, refined plans, sensitivity to function, carefully restrained decoration, saturated colour and, above all, their simple and apparently effortless ability to create sublime *promenades architecturales*. Although Nordic Classicism became an expression of restrained luxury for the wealthy elite, for example in Ivar Tengbom’s *Tändstickspalats* (Matchstick Palace, 1925-28) for the financier Ivar Kreuger in Stockholm, Stewart believes its most distinctive success was its ability to create civic spaces for the wider population, whether in Asplund’s first open-access public library, Aalto’s Jyväskylä Workers’ Club (1924), Martii Välikangas’s garden suburb for workers at Puu Käpylä (1920-25) or the Woodland Cemetery. Here Asplund’s little Woodland Chapel, according to Stewart, synthesised the inherent contrasts which give Nordic Classicism its originality, blending Mediterranean antiquity and Nordic vernacular, the grand and the rustic, restraint and richness, containment and release, the ancient and the modern, and the earthly and the transcendent.

While gratifyingly articulate in his formalist analysis of individual commissions, Stewart is less willing to engage with the broader theoretical frameworks of architectural history. This is a survey book, rather than a research monograph. It joins the dots and fills the gaps, but it doesn’t offer any new theoretical position on Nordic Classicism, or wrestle in any critical depth with the nuanced thinking of earlier scholars like Peter Blundell Jones, Colin St John Wilson or Stuart Wrede. Stewart’s most promising statement is that Nordic Classicism was not a stylistic revival, but a “radical, outward-looking movement opposed to dominant

nationalist ideology” (chap. 1); this would have been an opportune moment to explore wider questions about the relationship between Nordic Classicism and socio-political discourse, national identity, or new revisions of the centre-periphery paradigm. He constantly stops short, however, of building a broader thesis from the evidence of his individual analyses (the book’s lack of a clear conclusion is testament to this).

There could be more reflection on the wider international context (the statement in the Introduction that “National Romanticism was accepted more fully in the Scandinavian societies than any similar architectural movement was in any other part of Europe” shows no awareness of prolific national style movements in East-Central Europe, for example). More could also be made of the relation between Nordic Classical architecture and the other visual arts. In Denmark, after all, architecture students studied furniture as an obligatory part of their training, leading to their famously integrated approach to furniture and architectural design. This reluctance to recognise the interdisciplinary versatility of many architects produces some flippant dismissals: the fantastically original Thorvald Bindesbøll, for example, whose work as an architect, sculptor, ceramicist, and designer of furniture, silverware and graphics put him at the heart of the Danish *skønvirke* (Arts and Crafts) movement, is characterised as a ‘Classicist’ whose legacy was Carlsberg beer labels. He didn’t design the Thorvaldsen Museum, as erroneously stated in chapter 4 (that honour went to his father). Similar small mistakes pepper the text, including painful misspellings of key names like Carl Larsson, C. F. Møller, Fredrik Lilljekvist, Baillie Scott or Goldman and Salatsch. The referencing of the endnotes is weak, while the brief bibliography shows little awareness of recent Scandinavian scholarship (such as the magnificent tome produced for the centenary of Faaborg Museum: G. Hvidberg-Hansen & G. Hedin [eds.], *I skøn forening: Faaborg Museum 1915*, Faaborg Museum, 2015) and is inexplicably alphabetised according to title rather than author. Presumably some of the blame for the presentational errors must lie with Bloomsbury’s editorial processes, but this lack of polish rather undermines the book’s academic aspirations. One also wishes that Bloomsbury had permitted a broader range of illustrations. It is tiring for a reader unfamiliar with the field (and this is very much an introductory study) to have to perform an internet image search at the beginning of each paragraph.

One final observation concerns the geographical scope of ‘Nordic Classicism’. For Stewart, this means primarily Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Apart from passing reference to Haugesund Town Hall (Gudolf Blakstad & Herman Munthe-Kaas, 1922), Norway is dismissed as “the poor relation” (Epilogue). Iceland isn’t mentioned at all. This is a shame, particularly when one considers how the discourse could be nuanced through consideration of works like Oslo’s Vigeland Museum (Lorentz Harboe Ree & Carl Buch, 1921-24), the classically-influenced urban spaces of Finn Berner in Bergen and Harald Hals in Oslo, or the Einar Jónsson Museum in Reykjavík (Einar Erlendsson & Jónsson, 1916-23).

Such gripes aside, I have put this book on my students’ core reading list. And they like it, drawn in by the author’s obvious admiration for, and professional insight into, the works he presents. Articulate and enthusiastic (albeit in need of a bit more proof-reading) the book

reinstates the value of Nordic Classicism as far more than an architectural anachronism. One now waits excitedly for the development of more critical frameworks for its discussion.

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