

## Art without a Boundary

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During a visit to the railway control tower in Fredericia with Signe Guttormsen, I overheard one of the staff ask her if she would mind people hanging pictures on the oak panelling that comprises the core of her work in the building's atrium.

This says something about how architecturally integrated art can be experienced, and something about Signe Guttormsen's art in particular. Art that is neither overbearing nor self-important; that can merge so well with a building, and in this instance the covering of a wall – yes, the art constitutes the very cladding of the control tower's atrium – that some people in the building experience it as existing at the same level as the other architectural elements in the building. The art has become so much part of the aesthetic, functional framework made available to them, that to an extent the staff feel they are able to personalise and decorate it.

The integrated art in the railway control tower takes responsibility for healing the technological breach between the surveillant and the surveilled that has taken place with the digitalisation of train traffic control. Whereas in the past the control tower at the railway yard was in direct, visual contact with the tracks, today all train traffic control takes place digitally on computer screens in rooms with reduced daylight.

In reality, the control of train traffic today could take place in any bombproof building. But with its tower and fine outer cladding of dark, hand-moulded bricks, the control tower designed by Tranberg Architects is a continuation of the tradition of the Danish State Railways and Rail Net Denmark for using brick buildings of high architectural quality to house their technical facilities. And whilst the architecture draws on this architectural history in its materiality and design, Signe Guttormsen's integrated art literally draws railway tracks – the leitmotif of the lofty atrium – into the building.

She matches elements of the architecture with forms from the world of railways. She thus sees the round footprint of the control tower as a parallel to the revolving platform in front of an engine shed, emphasising the likeness by sinking brass rods into the floor at the same width and intervals as railway tracks. Along the same track, she has had a layer of intersecting tracks like those at a railway yard milled as a decorative pattern into the vertical oak panelling on the walls, and the handrail of the spiral staircase is also formed like a rail. When you go up the stairs and take hold of the banister, you feel the rail in your hand, an emphatic way of making what the staff here otherwise only experience as an abstract, digital representation literally and tactilely present.

The art is thus not based on office work, but brings its displaced and repressed materiality into the building, giving it an almost healing role by recalling the physicality of the railways the staff in the control tower only have an electronic, symbolic relationship to today.

## Architecture and Modern Art

In modernism, art was usually seen as an aesthetically fenced-in garden with an invisible sign saying 'Keep off the Grass'.

This is clearly seen in the isolated sculpture *Grisebrønd* ('The Pigs' Well') by Mogens Bøggild in front of the modernist city hall in Aarhus, which was designed by Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller from 1937-1941. The sculpture behaves in an entirely different way to the architecture. It is behind a boundary of heavy chains on a solid platform slightly elevated above the surface of the town hall square. The aesthetic and narrative form of the sculpture stands in contrast to the primarily practical and functional nature of the architecture, which nonetheless has a high aesthetic awareness of the effect of its materials. With Aarhus Town Hall, Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller created a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the lamps, pillars and even ashtrays were all designed by the architects. Every surface, every corner and every joint was created as part of a whole. But art was given designated areas, like the ceremonial hall, where Thorvald Hagedorn-Olsen's mural *Menneskesamfundet* ('Human Society') was to hang. The mural is painted on a wall that was purpose-built and suspended beneath and between the external galleries of the hall, making the vast painting look as if it is floating in the room. The mural is kept free of the building's architecture, which is characterised by the specialisation and functional divisions of industrial society.

Everything is in its proper place, and just as everyone in society had clearly defined roles, from the director to the office worker, and the secretary to the labourer, art also had its well-defined role as a realm of exclusively aesthetic contemplation and reflection, something that was an end in itself and therefore possessed a freedom opposed to and at a remove from the more bound existence of the building.

Autonomy held sway in modern art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in art museums and art commissions in public buildings and private workplaces, where art was limited to clearly defined objects like sculptures or paintings. This changed with architecturally integrated art, which usually – and definitely in the case of Signe Guttormsen – operates on an entirely different and far subtler plane. Art has become functional and relates to its location.

In integrated art, it is as if the boundary around the garden has been removed. It is still a garden, but now the grass can be walked on. Or at least that is what the member of staff was asking Signe Guttormsen. But in what sense is her art free and autonomous, and in what sense bound to and part of the architecture?

## A Terrace of Templates

Signe Guttormsen has created the paving for the roof terrace of Frederik VIII's Palace, the residence of the crown prince and princess at Amalienborg Palace. It was her first architecturally integrated work, based directly on the architecture by using grey templates from

the palace architect Eigtved's sketches of cornices and facade details inlaid in a green surface, where they float like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that cannot be assembled. They accentuate and elevate details of the architecture intended to protrude from the facade to create shadows, dividing it graphically and giving it depth. Even though the cornices are drawn in profile, this is not how they are experienced on the building itself. But this is how they appear in Signe Guttormsen's terrace paving, where they form a tribute to the abundance of details in Eigtved's architecture. The juxtaposition of these asymmetrical profiles also creates a pattern of its own, ornamentation embedded in the surface so the figure and background cannot be distinguished.

Here Signe Guttormsen uses emblems from the palace architecture to create an image. In her art at Ringsted High School, it is symbols from the students' everyday lives that provide the materials for her artistic and architectural work.

She has collected text messages from the students and sentences from their curriculum and converted them into wall panelling. The text messages are printed in colour on acoustic fabric, cut out of plywood, and layered on top of each other to create a three-dimensional torrent of text and colour that reduces noise levels.

Sound muted by words has a unique symbolic concision.

In the classrooms the acoustic panels she has designed are speech bubbles perforated with partially comprehensible text fragments from the curriculum and the students' text messages, like 'The intranet has crashed!!!'

This makes normally monofunctional and unobtrusive parts of the building vibrate with meaning, as if the walls speak with the energy of the hectic world of teenage life.

## **The Divorce of Architecture and Art**

This kind of connection between art and architecture is reminiscent of their relationship in buildings prior to modernism. Leading architects like the brothers Christian and Theophil Hansen designed everything from the overall layout to door handles and the art on the walls in buildings like Zappeion Hall and the Academy of Sciences in Athens, the Austrian Parliament Building and Musikverein Concert Hall in Vienna, and the District General Hospital in Copenhagen, often with inspiration from contemporary excavations of Pompeian buildings.

These buildings were *Gesamtkunstwerke*, where art represented the symbolic completion of the architectural vision. Every element of the architecture was part of a natural order, from the foundations to the supporting structure, décor and art. The flowering vines painted on a plastered section of wall refer to the thistle-leaf volutes on the pillars, which in turn form the tree trunks that support the building. Such endeavours reached back in time beyond industrialisation, which was already impacting on architecture in the form of factory-made steel elements and precast facade ornamentation.

This natural order in architecture, décor and art continues to be evident in Martin Nyrop's design of Copenhagen City Hall from 1892-1905, which is decorated with a prodigious profusion inspired by the harmonious collaboration between the master builders, craftsmen and artists of the Middle Ages, who all worked on site. Technical installations like drains end in elaborate gargoyles, carvings and other features represent local fauna and flora, and the walls are used to portray the history of Copenhagen and Denmark.

During the period between the construction of the city halls in Copenhagen and Aarhus, architecture and art were separated. In the architect and critic Adolf Loos' essay 'Ornament and Crime' from 1906, the need to decorate architecture was regarded as the sign of a primitive level of civilisation. Loos believed a building of clean surfaces to be superior to ornamented architecture, and the abandonment of ornament in itself to signal intellectual rigour. Loos' essay was just one expression of the thinking that later spread with functionalism: That modern architecture could and should be cut to the bone, to what was essential in architecture, and in doing so remove all that was superfluous, all ornamentation.

This disparagement of ornamentation as superficial decoration continues in the late modern architecture of today. It is the inherent properties of materials, preferably with traces of their production, that constitute the micro modelling of the surfaces of the architecture. Bricks are given their hue by being fired at different temperatures, the grain of wood veneer reveals the growth patterns of the tree, and the surface of concrete is determined by the casting process. These surface effects are all chosen and prioritised, but it is the process rather than the final result that is under control. Chance is part of the way these materials speak, something promoted in the architecture.

Signe Guttormsen's art penetrates the breach between late modernist architecture's resistance to explicit ornamentation, and the signs and impressions inevitably embedded in building materials. Elements of the architecture become tools in a semiotic exchange between the materials and function of the building. She builds with words, colour and meanings, and she paints with functions, pictograms and building materials. She makes signs into textures, and reliefs into signs.

## **Cells and Stones versus Amino Acids and Lettering**

At the University of Southern Denmark's Faculty of Health Sciences in Odense, Signe Guttormsen emphasises a coincidental overlap between forms in the materials of the building and the microscopic cells scientists study within its walls.

She draws a parallel in form between the materials of the building and the scientific research conducted there, communicating and creating surprising connections between the sea gravel terrazzo of the floor and cells under a microscope.

Slices of large stones are inlaid in the concrete walls, swimming like giant, magnified, colourful cells in the walls, and are at the same time enlarged reiterations of the small stones in the floor tiles. On the opposite wall, there are rows of lettering debossed in the concrete wall of the building, with the same lettering mounted in relief on the plaster walls. The letters are inspired by the researchers' designations for amino acids, which here appear like a secret code that can only be deciphered by the initiated.

The scientists at the faculty study signs in nature, which the art elevates to a new form of manmade nature embedded in the building. The signifier and signified are given the same status in their semiotically vibrating juxtaposition.

There is a discrete, surrealistic sense of humour in the disorientation the magnified letters and stones create on the walls. Like the panelling in the railway control tower and at Ringsted High School, the art traverses the floors of the building, accentuating its construction as surfaces at the expense of the space. There is no single point from which the entire work can be seen, establishing the sense of an invisible, structural context that can only be partially grasped. The artwork continues and constantly points beyond where we stand, something that can be seen to reflect an aesthetic understanding, representation and emphasis on the structuralism that dominates architecture today.

## **Art at the Edge of Architecture**

The boundary between art and architecture is removed or erased in Signe Guttormsen's integrated works. They can be large, yet introvert. They escape any clear, central gaze, lying instead at the periphery of the field of vision. The colours of the doors and text fragments at Ringsted High School create atmosphere rather than invoking any defined, central image. They work, as it were, beyond focus.

In this sense, they operate at the same level as the architecture, which is similarly rarely the focus of attention yet always present at the edge of our awareness, like a framework enabling our actions.

So when Signe Guttormsen's art retires into the background in this way and is located at the level of the building, its effect is atmospheric. It becomes an accentuation of the space, a tone in everyday life that attunes our minds and affects our feelings.

But deploying the functional context of the building in the form of legible text, or recycling architectural elements as citations or marked magnifications, allows her architecturally integrated art to come into focus. It is in this free movement that the boundary between architecture and art is removed.