

# On the Writing of Danish Architectural History

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## Abstract

This paper is about the writing of Danish architectural history. Its aim is to investigate whether there are any particular narratives about Danish architecture that influence the writing of Danish architectural history. I will illustrate this by analysing Knud Millech's and Kay Fisker's work, *Danske arkitekturstrømninger 1850-1950. En arkitekturhistorisk undersøgelse* (1951), and Tobias Faber's *Dansk arkitektur* (1963, 1977) and thereby show how both works present a narrative, which claims that Danish architecture possesses a distinctive something that makes it possible to talk of a Danish architectural tradition. The paper will consist of some introductory remarks on how to regard the act of writing architectural history. This introduction will centre on the British architectural historian David Watkin and his book *The Rise of Architectural History* (1980). Then I will present the analyses of the architectural histories mentioned above. Instead of briefly outlining everything that has been written on Danish architectural history, I have chosen to focus on two works only and do a more thorough investigation of these. Even if the scope of this paper does not allow for an all-encompassing analysis of the two works, it may provide a general understanding of the authors' approaches to architectural history. The two works have not been chosen because they are representatives of any general approach to how Danish architectural history was usually approached, but because the narratives they create belong to a trend, which is common to large parts of Danish writings on architectural history.

## Introduction

There are many ways in which to write architectural history. The author may for instance focus on certain periods, typologies, architects or buildings. The practise of writing architectural history will always be influenced by the author, the subject who, influenced by certain methods, ideals and conceptions, chooses which buildings to include in an architectural history and thus also which buildings to exclude. By selecting and rejecting and later describing, analysing and interpreting the buildings chosen, the author contributes to shaping the reader's perception of architecture. By writing architectural history, the author thus attaches importance to certain buildings and creates narratives that provide future generations with a common understanding of how to perceive Danish architecture for instance. Accordingly, knowledge about how architectural history is written in Denmark is of major importance to one's understanding of Danish architecture. By analysing how Danish architectural history is written, it is thus possible to expose any particular methods or approaches that govern the representation of Danish architecture or whether particular narratives prevail.

The aim of this paper is to investigate whether there are any particular narratives influencing the writing of Danish architectural history. I will illustrate this by analysing Knud Millech's and Kay Fisker's work, *Danske arkitekturstrømninger 1850-1950. En arkitekturhistorisk undersøgelse* (1951), and Tobias Faber's *Dansk arkitektur* (1963, 1977).

The paper will consist of some introductory remarks on how to regard the act of writing architectural history. This introduction will centre on the British architectural historian David Watkin and his book *The Rise of Architectural History* (1980). Then I will present the analyses of the architectural histories mentioned above. Instead of briefly outlining everything that has been written

on Danish architectural history, I have chosen to only focus on two works and do a more thorough investigation of the works in question. Even if the scope of this paper does not allow for an all-encompassing analysis of the two works, it may provide a general understanding of the authors' approaches to architectural history. The two works have not been chosen because they are representative of any general approach to how Danish architectural history was usually approached, but because they present different views on the period they describe and because they represent an attitude to the story they tell, which is common to large parts of Danish writings on architectural history.<sup>i</sup>

## David Watkin and Architectural History

During the last two decades, there has been a rising interest in the writing of architectural history. Two of the most significant works on the subject are *Rethinking Architectural Historiography* (2006), edited by Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya, and Panayotis Tournikiotis' *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (1999). The first work maps out various suggestions for new ways of writing architectural history, and the second work analyses the most important presentations of international modernism. A somewhat older but still interesting book is David Watkin's *The Rise of Architectural History* (1980). Despite its being more than 30 years old, this book remains one of the more comprehensive works on architectural history viewed from a historiographic perspective. As Watkin writes in the introduction, the primary focus of the book is the English writing of architectural history from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but he also includes two background chapters on the writing of architectural history in Germany, France, Italy and in America.<sup>ii</sup>

In his introduction, Watkin introduces three aims: "the practical", "the historical" and "the aesthetic", all of which he believes readers and

writers of architectural history ought to consider.<sup>iii</sup> According to Watkin, “the practical” must be understood as a concept which covers the architectural historian’s establishing what was built, when it was built, who the architect was and who the client was. The information in question is all hard, historical facts, which may be found in the building itself, in architectural drawings, photographs and documents, for instance books, diaries or letters. By considering the aim of “the historical”, it is possible to understand why a building was built in the first place. What were the motives of the architect or the client? Here, the architectural historian may draw on for instance religious, cultural or sociological knowledge about the time when the building was designed and built. Finally, the architectural historian must consider the aim of “the aesthetic”, which has to do with describing and accounting for the visual or stylistic differences between different buildings and explaining how and why different styles change and go out of style.<sup>iv</sup> When reading architectural histories, it cannot be expected that every author will pay attention to all three aims or pay attention to them in equal measure. The author will naturally select or emphasise the angle on architectural history, which he or she thinks is most interesting. For instance, he or she may focus on constructions, materials or styles.<sup>v</sup>

In the following, I will not use Watkin’s three aims to assess the quality of the two architectural histories in question as to whether or how they take the three aims into consideration. This means that my analysis of the selected works is *not* based on the three aims as such, but that I will comment in the final part of the paper on how each architectural history relates to these aims and thus gain insight into how Danish architectural history was written. The analysis will in one of the cases be based on the introduction chapter of the book because it centres on the purpose of the text and I will, in the other case, use an interview I had with the author in the summer of 2007. Furthermore, I will include reflections on the structures and time

periods of the books. Based on my reading of the architectural histories, I will likewise investigate whether there are any particular narratives that influence the two works.

### **Knud Millech and Kay Fisker: Danske arkitekturstrømninger 1850-1950. En arkitekturhistorisk undersøgelse**

As the title of the book suggests, Knud Millech and Kay Fisker attempt to investigate currents in architectural history over a period of a hundred years. Millech’s and Fisker’s book was and still is regarded as the main work of reference on those hundred years of Danish architecture and building. In the book, the authors point out the most prominent architects of the period and investigate their influence on the development of Danish architecture. It is important to note that Millech’s and Fisker’s book, unlike Tobias Faber’s *Dansk arkitektur*, only covers a period of one hundred years, and that the most recent buildings they mention were brand new at the time of writing. This last fact is essential, because their ability to see the interconnectedness and development of Danish architectural history is limited to a short period historically speaking.

Millech and Fisker examine architecture from their recent past and immediate present. As such, they only address architecture from before the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a limited extent. They begin the book with a chapter on the architectural preconditions of the period reaching back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in a few instances, they draw lines back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The authors state their reasons for choosing to focus on this period in the preface, pointing out that the period in question has not been thoroughly and exhaustively examined.<sup>vi</sup> The purpose of Millech’s and Fisker’s examination of Danish architectural currents seen from a historical perspective is not merely to throw light on a particular chapter in the history of Danish architecture, which had not been treated

with any great interest at the time, but rather to examine the *connection* between the architectural characteristics of different periods with a special emphasis on the connection between the architecture of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, they are predominantly occupied with the history and development of residential housing. As such Millech and Fisker have a dual purpose in writing architectural history: firstly to throw light on the connection between the architecture of their present and that of their recent past and secondly to present the history of ordinary residential housing and, as we shall see, the history of *the Danish house*.<sup>vii</sup>

The book consists of 10 chapters, which for the most part have been named after a period, an architect and usually a style as well. Thus the title of a chapter states its focus, presenting the architecture of a given period through the presentation of a single architect and afterwards elaborating on the most significant buildings and themes of the period. The structuring of the chapter “1855-70: Herholdt and the free historicism” illustrates this. In this chapter, the authors briefly outline the most significant architectural and conceptual currents and their interconnectedness. They then introduce the architecture of J. D. Herholdt using the University Library in Copenhagen (1855-61) as an example and afterwards elaborate on the style called free historicism. In their description of the University Library, they emphasise that the architecture and the building should be seen as parts of a greater context. They compare the architectonic details and the visual expression of the library with that of other Danish and foreign buildings and extends the comparison to the thoughts on architecture of this period. As such, the chapter forms a mosaic of information about Danish as well as foreign buildings, reflections on the architects’ sources of inspiration and their motives and on the visual expressions of the buildings.

Throughout the chapters, Millech and Fisker have structured their text partly around three different currents of architectural history and partly around the concepts of the national and the international. The three currents of architectural history are presented in the first part where the authors present some introductory reflections on the currents of society in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. They then present a brief account of those conditions of architectural history and theory, which they believe will form the developmental basis of Danish architecture in the next hundred years. Millech and Fisker start out by outlining and contrasting two of the three currents, a Romantic and a rationalistic one.<sup>viii</sup> The Romantic current relates to the historical styles, while the rationalistic current relates to the functionality and independence. In spite of the sharp contrast between the two, it is worth noticing that it is usually only possible to set up such a distinct division on a very general level. Besides these two currents, the ideals of classical antiquity expressed in classicistic architecture lived on from the preceding period albeit in a slightly different interpretation.<sup>ix</sup> This third current is presented as late classicism and is regarded as a conservative current.

One of the authors’ main goals is to show that there is a *connection* between the architecture of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and that of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the very beginning of the book, they take great pains to point out that it is the rationalistic current that leads directly to the architectonic development that takes place in the decade before the 1930s when modernism emerges in earnest in Denmark. This connection, which the authors attempt to illustrate by means of the rationalistic current, also manifests itself through their description of the development of *the Danish house*, a term which transcends the period subdivisions, but which relates to the rationalistic current. Throughout the text, the authors attempt to explain how the expression of *the Danish house* manifests itself during different

periods. They look for the reason why a number of Danish architects could make *the Danish house* into a generic type in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They explain how the architects drew on Danish tradition to work out a definition of the Danish house, which they define firstly by the lump – i.e. the proportioning of the building – secondly by the lack of any specific style and the emphasis on functional and utilitarian aspects, and thirdly by the use of locally available materials.<sup>x</sup>

Though a thorough survey and description of the Danish architecture of the period, focusing on residential housing in general and *the Danish house* in particular, Millech and Fisker show that during the period in question, a revolutionary development occurs in Danish architecture, which is based on a certain continuity – a tradition which, when it comes to *the Danish house*, has its roots not only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but may be traced as far back as the Baroque. Millech and Fisker are very concrete in their description of *the Danish house*, but they are somewhat more vague when it comes to pinpointing the Danish architectural tradition. To understand how Millech and Fisker perceive the Danish architectural tradition, one must closely read their descriptions of buildings characterised as either the Danish house or as springing from the rationalistic current, because to some extent the Danish tradition is the basis for the development of, for instance, the Danish house as a generic type. Millech and Fisker use terms like simplicity, unity, cosiness, naturalness, artlessness and expediency. Furthermore, they stress the importance of the most important representatives of Danish architectural tradition, i.e. architects such as M.G. Bindsbøll and Ivar Bendtsen. In spite of their frequent use of concepts such as *the familiar*, *the Danish characteristics* and *the tradition*, it is important to point out that they also show that Danish architecture is often influenced by international currents as well. This is not only true of the international currents during, say,

historical period but also of the architecture influenced by the rationalistic current.

Accordingly, the influence from international currents must be seen as an underlying condition of all Danish architecture. The Danish architects of the period get their inspiration from international architects, buildings and books on architecture. The inspiration from abroad is adapted and during the translation process, it gets some familiar or Danish characteristics, and this adaptation becomes part of Danish architectural tradition.

### **Tobias Faber: Dansk arkitektur**

Tobias Faber's book *Dansk Arkitektur*<sup>xi</sup> is one of the few works that provide a comprehensive survey of Danish architecture from prehistoric times until the end of the 20th century. Since the second edition of Faber's book came out in the late 1970s, no other complete, chronological architectural history has been published. A number of works on parts of Danish architectural history have been published both before and since, however – works that either centre on a specific period (Knud Millech's and Kay Fisker's *Arkitekturstrømninger fra 1850-1950*), a specific area (Nils-Ole Lund's *Nordisk Arkitektur*), a specific building (Olaf Lind's *Arkitekturfortællinger om Århus Universitets bygninger*) or specific types of building (Hakon Lund's (Ed.) *Danmarks arkitektur*). Faber's book on Danish architecture thus occupies a central position among the writings on Danish architecture, because readers do not have access to any other modern, comprehensive, chronological accounts of Danish architectural history. Where Millech and Fisker cover Danish architecture in a fairly short perspective, historically speaking, Faber's book covers several centuries, and unlike Millech and Fisker he has the opportunity of searching for and examining connections and developments across fairly long periods of time. Faber begins by examining some of the first known buildings in Denmark, and like Millech

and Fisker, he carries out architectural examinations of buildings all the way to his own point in time. Where Millech and Fisker state the objective of their work fairly clearly, Faber's book interestingly includes neither preface, introduction nor postscript stating the objective of the book. At no point does the author comment on the objective, structure or method of his book, but when I interviewed Faber in August 2007, he explained how, in the early 1960s, he was asked by the Danish American Society to write a book about Denmark and Danish architecture. The result was *Dansk arkitektur*, which was first published in 1963.<sup>xii</sup> During our conversation, I asked him about the fact that the title of the book is *Danish Architecture* and not *A History of Danish Architecture*, even though the book actually looks at Danish architecture from a historical perspective. Faber explained his choice of title and thereby the angling of the book by saying that he is neither a historian nor an art historian. He sees himself as writing within a Danish tradition, which dictates that architects should be the ones to write about architecture.<sup>xiii</sup> He further explained that the objective of the book is to find the qualities of each work or movement and illustrate that it is possible to talk about the existence of connections in Danish architecture between the different periods through concepts like, for instance, simplicity. I asked him to elaborate on the objective, and Faber answered that in his eyes the book is a history of what he calls the Danish architectural tradition.<sup>xiv</sup>

The book consists of 18 chapters, each containing one or several sub-chapters with individual titles. Most of the titles consist of a heading and a period specification, for instance "Renaissance 1536-1660" and "The Functional Tradition 1930-1950". There are exceptions, however. For instance, the first chapter of the book has no time specification and is simply called "The Danish Landscape". The chapters on the architecture of prehistoric times, the Viking age and the Middle Ages have no time specifications in their titles either, but their sub-

chapters do. Where Millech and Fisker structure their chapters around a significant architect and then go on to elaborate on the architecture of the period, Faber is less consistent in his structuring of the chapters as well as in his focus. To use such an approach is made difficult by the fact that Faber's chapters are sub-divided because they usually cover longer periods than the chapters of Millech and Fisker. Most of Faber's chapters begin with a short introduction to the period in question though. The introduction may provide a historical perspective as seen in the chapter on "Medieval Buildings", in which Faber starts off by commenting on the introduction of Christianity in Denmark in the later part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The introductory comments of all the chapters serve to provide information on events or the like which somehow influenced the development of Danish architecture. The introductions are generally very short compared to the bulk of the rest of the chapters. Faber provides historical comments throughout the book, but most of the text focuses on describing architecture. Faber does not focus on residence building like Millech and Fisker but comments on a wide range of different typologies and to the monumental as well as the anonymous kinds of buildings. He lets the period decide his primary focus so to speak; the chapter on medieval buildings is primarily concerned with churches for instance, and he spends an entire chapter on the Danish farm house around 1800 because this period saw a great change in the conditions of the farmers when adscription was abolished. Faber's chapters have the same mosaic quality, albeit less consistent, as those of Millech and Fisker.

The chapter on the Danish landscape is set apart from the other chapters because it is not concerned with the architecture of a specific period but rather with a prerequisite for the development of the Danish architectural tradition.<sup>xv</sup> In Faber's opinion, the Danish architectural tradition did not emerge from nothing. A number of different prerequisites have been present over a period of

time, enabling various factors to influence architects in a certain direction. This influence has created a relatively homogenous architectural tradition in Denmark.

The two prerequisites, which constitute the foundation for the Danish architectural tradition are: the Danish landscape, i.e. the local climate, terrain and materials, and the mentality of the Danes. Faber describes these prerequisites in various ways. The landscape, as I have already mentioned, gets a chapter to itself<sup>xvi</sup>, and the Danish mentality is commented on continuously in connection with the descriptions of the buildings. These two prerequisites have, along with a tradition for constructing buildings of high quality, established the architectural tradition. Faber has not structured his text around the prerequisites like Millech and Fisker structures theirs around three currents of thought of the period. Faber's book is influenced by the narrative of the Danish architectural tradition though, even more so than Millech's and Fisker's book is influenced by the narrative of *the Danish house*. He regards the Danish architectural tradition as the result of an evolutionary development, and in his attempt to describe the Danish architectural history, he points out a number of connections between modern and older, and often anonymous, Danish architecture. Faber is especially concerned with finding connections related to the concepts of simplicity and functionality. He identifies the simple, functional traits of Danish buildings throughout the ages and shows how modern Danish architects design buildings within a tradition with traits that goes back to prehistoric times. He shows how the architecture of certain periods is closely linked through motifs like simplicity for instance. As such one of the principal elements of Faber's text is the motif of simplicity in Danish architectural history.<sup>xvii</sup> This does not mean that every example in the book has been selected due to its relation to the Danish architectural tradition. On the contrary, Faber describes buildings whose design contradicts the

attributes he points out in buildings he judges to belong within the Danish architectural tradition. The central narrative of the book, however, is about the Danish architectural tradition.

According to Faber, there is a unifying principle in Danish architecture, which transcends periods and styles in particular. This principle cannot be pinpointed and should not be understood as a style in itself but rather as a tradition held together by concepts such as simplicity, proportioning, plainness, clarity, unity and functionality, and which is the result of evolutionary development.

### Concluding remarks

Watkin's first criterion for what an architectural history ought to include is historical facts, such as who the architect and client was and when the building was constructed. Millech and Fisker as well as Faber provide this very basic historical information. Both books are very detailed in this respect, stating dates for when work was begun, whether any changes occurred, when it was finished and if later additions were constructed. Concerning Watkin's second criterion, the authors apply very different uses and definitions of the concept of "historical context". Wherever they find it relevant, the authors consider the motives of both architect and client for inspirations and reasons why the building was constructed at all, although they usually focus mainly on the architect. Millech and Fisker spend a fairly large amount of space in their introductory chapter on explaining the currents of thought and architecture of the period, and they connect the buildings of the period with these currents throughout the text. The historical currents of thought are thus used as a model of explanation for the visual expressions of the buildings. Faber spends comparatively little space in each chapter on introductory historical remarks, but on the other hand he draws many parallels between the foreign architecture of a given period, describing among other things how Danish architects very often rework or adapt inspiration and impulses from abroad. Faber thus

uses the context of architectural history as his model of explanation. This is not to say that Millech and Fisker do not take the context of architectural history into consideration; far from it. The character of their reflections is just different from that of Faber's. Both architectural histories imply that the nature of the historical context is often related to architecture and architectural history and not as much to the greater or more general history. The third and final criterion concerns the aesthetic aspect, and according to Watkin, this covers stylistic and visual aspects. Here, both architectural histories both reflect on the stylistic and visual expressions of the buildings, but it is important to emphasise that none of the texts focus *primarily* on showing how Danish architecture changes in relation to different styles. None of these architectural histories are histories of style. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but I might suggest that firstly, this may be because Danish architecture does not follow the stylistic changes that occur in foreign architecture. Usually, the style periods of Danish architecture lags a couple of centuries behind the European periods, and furthermore, the differences between styles are often great, as seen for instance between the Renaissance architecture of Italy and Denmark. As such, it often makes little sense to do a stylistic survey of Danish architectural history based on the stylistic characteristics used in European architectural histories. Secondly, Fisker mentions several times that when architects write architectural history, their perspective differs from that of an art historian. This is illustrated by a review by Fisker of Erik Lassen's book *Huse i Danmark* (1942), in which he writes, "architectural history is often written by art historians, who lack the insight into the nature of architecture and the sense of constructive logic and coherent construction that the architects possess."<sup>xviii</sup> Thirdly, the narrative that the authors want to create is clearly not one of evolutionary development of styles but rather one of the development and existence of a specific trait in Danish architecture seen from a historical

perspective. In Millech and Fisker's case, the focus is specifically on the rationalistic current and *the Danish house*, whereas Faber explicitly talks of a Danish architectural tradition. In both architectural histories, the authors make use of the same terminology and concepts and emphasise the catalytic influence of the same prominent architects on the development of a Danish architectural tradition. That both works present a narrative stating that there is something uniquely Danish in Danish architecture does not mean that this is the only possible narrative but merely that this narrative is very prominent within Danish architectural history.

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is based on parts of my PhD project in which I investigate how ideas about the peculiarly Danish features of Danish architecture have



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manifested themselves and developed. This is illustrated by an analysis of selected Danish architectural histories from the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, I speculate whether this unique Danishness of Danish architecture is maintained or exemplified by Danish architects.

<sup>ii</sup> D. Watkin, *The Rise of Architectural History*, London, The Architectural Press Ltd, 1980, p. vii.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p. vii.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. p. vii – viii.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. p. viii-ix.

<sup>vi</sup> K. Millech og K. Fisker, *Danske arkitekturstrømninger 1850-1950. En arkitekturhistorisk undersøgelse*, København, Østifternes Kreditforening, 1951, p. 7.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid p. 7.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. p. 9-10.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. p. 291-294.

<sup>xi</sup> My analysis of the book is based on T. Faber, *Dansk arkitektur*, København, Arkitektens forlag, 1977.

<sup>xii</sup> The 1977 edition contains an extra chapter about the period 1963-1976.

<sup>xiii</sup> He mentioned the works of Kay Fisker og Steen Eiler Rasmussen as examples of this.

<sup>xiv</sup> Interview with Tobias Faber august 2007. A transcription of this interview is enclosed as an appendix in my PhD thesis.

<sup>xv</sup> Besides, it is very short.

<sup>xvi</sup> T. Faber, *Dansk arkitektur*, København, Arkitektens forlag, 1977, p. 5. Besides describing the relation between the Danish landscape and Danish architecture in the introductory chapter, Faber keeps commenting on the landscape and its relation to the buildings he examines throughout the text.

<sup>xvii</sup>For a closer analysis of how Faber describes the motif of simplicity in Danish architectural history, read J. R. Bendsen, *Ideen om den danske arkitekturtradition og Tobias Faber* in H. Reeh, *Når TEKST møder RUM*, København, Årbog 2007 Forskeruddannelsesforum for Urbanitet og Æstetik. Forskerskolen i Kultur, Litteratur og Kunstfag. Københavns Universitet. 2007. p. 52-66.

<sup>xviii</sup> K. Fisker. Huse i Danmark, *Arkitekten Ugehæfte*: 1942: p. 277-278.