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4. Reading the Site at Sverre Fehn's Hamar Museum

Suzanne Ewing

‘At this point I can cut out the mass where the shadow screens the construction. This gives me my place, and time stands still’.

‘Outside, the tree fractures the horizon. Time will allow it to grow and add to its room. The tree mobilises light and casts its shadow on the earth, a realisation of place [...] It is here the story is told’.

Sverre Fehn in 1988.¹

Following the completion of the Archbishopric Museum at Hamar, Norway in 1979,² numerous references to ‘horizon’ and ‘trees’ appeared in the writings of architect Sverre Fehn and in publications of his work by others.³ The image of the tree fracturing the horizon is important, both in defining conceptual and physical limits in relation to a particular place such as the Hamar museum, and more broadly as an architectural device which is fundamental to the choreography and ordering of inhabited spaces. It can be seen to relate directly to the conception of architecture as captured space or realised place. Sites are always, to some extent, invented. The invention of site in Fehn’s work is a significant element of his process of making architecture – and therefore in the experiencing, understanding and interpretation of his buildings where ‘the story is told’.

Sverre Fehn suggests that his work has come of age ‘in the shadow of modernism’.⁴ His built work, mainly in Scandinavia, and recognised by the 1997 award of the Pritzker Prize, has been described as poetic, sculptural, humanistic and

inclusive. Following media exposure early in his career, in the 1950s, with the publication of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice, wider acclaim for his work came in the 1980s and 1990s. Peter Cook who, in 1981, included Fehn's work in a series on 'unappreciated architects', noted that in 'Sverre Fehn we have a believing architect, and we ignore his quiet and lyrical approach to modern architecture at our peril.'⁵ Fellow Norwegian Christian Norberg-Schulz commented in 1997 that 'the belated recognition of Fehn is due to the fact that his works suddenly appear to "adapt" themselves to the international situation and to offer compelling answers to difficult and complex conditions'.⁶

The invention of site

It has been suggested that the subject of site has been 'systematically ignored by both architectural and urban design discourse'⁷ and is subject to the dualisms which, it is claimed, are inherent in modernism:⁸ before/after; above/below; new/old; urban/landscape. The writings of Steven Holl are preoccupied with the anchoring of buildings in their sites. He argues that:

'Architecture is bound to situation [...] The site of a building is more than an ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation [...] Today the link between site and architecture must be found in new ways, which are part of the constructive transformation of modern life'.⁹

Andrea Kahn observes that we are usually 'in the midst of site' rather than 'hovering over', as in most modernist conceptions.¹⁰ She unravels the myth of the contained and controllable site – an assumed 'blank canvas' which requires erasure or cleansing – and challenges the assumption that site analysis is merely a scientifically objective, neutral description of data. She suggests instead that interpretation, assumption and invention are critical to how an architect responds to a particular place. Similarly, David Leatherbarrow notes in *The Roots of Architectural Invention* that 'the existence of a defined building site is always taken for granted in contemporary architectural design, yet attempts to understand the reasons underlying its definition are surprisingly rare'.¹¹ He presents three partial understandings or assumptions which are prevalent: site as a division of space, site as context and site as real estate. Like Kahn, Leatherbarrow argues that site, in relation to the act of building, is always a matter of

invention. He cites Alberti and the notion of site platform, which may order and limit vertically, and the mediating, staged sites of Borromini that influenced the external configuration of spaces adjacent to a site, as different from modernist notions. He cites early modernist experiments with axonometric projection, such as Van Doesberg's, as being aimed at removing 'the composition from the horizon of perspectival experience, which confers frontality on whatever (object or person) reciprocates the "frontalism" of one's body'. This abstraction dislocates from real time, with the potential confusion of horizon and perspective, or vista, as 'a view on reality' rather than understood implicit presence.

Two well-known twentieth century images come to mind.¹² The first is Le Corbusier's 'eye of man to see a wide horizon', constructed in the grass floored 'room' on the roof of the de Bestegui apartment in Paris (1932) which – by maximising the sense of being in a room beneath the vast expanse of the sky – effectively obscures the urban landscape of Paris, except for a top slice of the monumental *Arc de Triomphe* in the background. The context is edited to enhance the switch between fireplace and triumphal arch, suggesting that the partially-bounded white-walled room is encircled by an imaginary territory marked by the city monument. The second image is the roofscape of the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles (1945-1952), where sculptural forms are set against the clean horizon of the mountains and clear sky in the background, the whole on an elevated plane or platform. There is a heightened sense in these two images of what is near or far, and of the bounding of a room located in relation to a surrounding horizon. The modernist conception of 'hovering over', noted by Louis Kahn, is combined with some sense of Holl's 'expression linked to idea joined to site'.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger's rethinking of the nature of space, place and inhabitation is also relevant. His work from the late 1920s to the 1960s arguably freed the question of space from its previous disciplinary boundaries, breaking from a Cartesian ontology of neutral, flattened space – site as a division of space – reasserting instead an investigation into the spatiality of the world in which we find ourselves; what he called 'the concrete context of actual life'. It has been suggested that Heidegger's concepts of '*horismos*' (horizon) and '*raum*' (space) are preoccupations of Fehn's work.¹³ Heidegger observes:

‘What the word for space, *raum*, designates is said by its ancient meaning. *Raum* means a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept of *horismos*, that is the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into bounds’.¹⁴

Confrontation and control

Confrontation and struggle are recurrent themes of language used by Fehn. He calls the act of building ‘brutal’, suggesting that it acts ‘violently in order to emphasise [...] latent, secret, hidden qualities’. Fehn says:

‘[W]hen I build on a site in nature that is totally unspoiled, it is a fight, an attack by our culture on nature. In this confrontation I strive to make a building in the setting, a hope for a new consciousness to see the beauty there as well’.¹⁵

Analogies with ships and conquest recur in Fehn’s writings, as do his diagrams of the line of a boat forging through the sea [4.1]. The implicit analogy of conquest has been read as a male-female interaction, with the site viewed as potentially fertile for building.¹⁶

There is resonance here with both Norwegian tradition and the Vitruvian identification of sites, as described by Leatherbarrow, where the soil is literally ploughed and cut to mark-off a site from its surrounding expanse, and the resulting boundary wall denotes ‘not a line but a container symbolically equivalent to the wall of a ceramic jar or vase, a limit that served as a receptacle of civic life, generative and abundant because female’. The horizon ‘without’ was perceived as an open expanse, an unbounded and formless field, perhaps analogous to the sea. The notion that the boat sailed to ‘fight the horizon’¹⁷ reveals, to some extent, a fabricated modernist dualism of nature versus culture – with the implication that the marking vessel is the focus in undifferentiated ground, rather than the balancer of territory enclosed or exposed, within or without.

Fehn refers to ‘the dramatic confrontation between earth and sky’ which he called ‘the point of intersection’. Referring to an old idea of horizon, he noted that:

“[In those days] the horizon was an instrument of architecture determining the large exterior “room”. The vista then served the practical purpose of defence, extending no further than the eye could see. The sight on the weapon was an extension of the eye and its view was a definition of mortality [...] The conversation with nature was not based on aestheticism or sentimentality, for every opening not only admitted light, but also determined survival in relation to topography’.¹⁸

It is not, perhaps, a surprise that this invention of site seems somewhat instrumental, loaded with military overtones and supposedly ‘primitive’ attitudes to surroundings. ‘Survival in relation to topography’ recalls the act of building as a primal confrontation with nature.

Fehn claims to understand architecture as ‘subject to the layout of the ground’. He observes that ‘Sites [...] contain in their profundity the sense of the project, to which the architecture must conform’. Closest, perhaps, to Leatherbarrow’s category of partial understanding of site as context, Fehn describes site as an archive distanced from the present and future, a source of information and knowledge, perhaps to be plundered, and certainly to be discovered. At Hamar, Fehn is conscious of the paradox of intervention, saying ‘[...] the past is suddenly present, the stones come close to you, the ruins look more material and real, because they make up a story at the same time as they are attacked’.¹⁹ In keeping with the myth of the untouched site identified by Andrea Kahn, Fehn – to a certain extent – invents the site at Hamar as untouched prior to the construction of the museum in order to enhance the sense of ‘confrontation’.

The building was described in the 1997 Pritzker Prize proceedings as ‘A suspended itinerary, [...] overhanging [that] reveals the story of the passing of time, the unchanging pursuit of its course, the confrontation between old and new’. John Hedjuk has described the place as:

‘[...] A site where the frozen earth grips in its vice the retaining and foundation walls of past acts and occurrences. The present archaeologist reveals the earth-encrusted tombs of past joys and of past sadness. We know

we are in the presence of an event and we are strangely enough participating spectators. The lake and the mountain are the proscenium'.²⁰

Peter Cook describes Hamar as 'a poised machine in its purest form hanging above the archaeology [...] [W]e are unused to a building that collages together devices, as in the tradition of the clockmaker, so that they seem naturally interdependent'. In describing Fehn as a choreographer, Cook further observes that 'the whole has a fascinating violence in its configuration'.²¹

The site at Hamar – an archaeological site that incorporates medieval and nineteenth century buildings, remains and artefacts – is clearly one that has been touched previously. Fehn's approach of built detachment from the past exaggerates, to some extent, the interpretation of confrontation between old and new, stillness and movement, ground and sky. Movement through new spaces above or below the historic ground, combined with the ramps and gradually sloping floors of interior spaces and bridges, is carefully choreographed. Shifts of movement are articulated within constructed horizons that are fractured by stairs, the main ramp and other elements in order to make interior and exterior rooms for new occupation.

Limits and landscape

Norberg-Schulz outlines a narrative interpretation of the forming of limits and boundaries in relation to building: first, the earth as given territory; second, the marking or making of lines related to cultivation; and, third, enclosure or the containing of inhabited space. In Leatherbarrow's Vitruvian ordering of territory, the line of cut ground primarily separated different presences. In Fehn's work, ordering moves set-up confrontations between nature and man, earth and sky, boat and sea. Architecture is imagined as a charged void contained or bounded in opposition to all that surrounds it in nature. The focus thus moves to the line or the actual boundary itself – on the vessel or architectural space – rather than on the differentiated ground where it is situated.

Despite its usual connotation of visual limit, the term horizon was not, it is claimed, originally connected to seeing and intuition. 'It means, in accordance with the Greek verb *horizein*, what limits, surrounds, encloses'.²² As the *apparent* line that divides the earth and the sky', it is the aspect of imagined or interpreted horizon

which is pertinent to site invention'.²³ The defined limits of the Hedmark Museum site come from previous inhabitation, from previously defined buildings and edges. Where territory is less clearly defined in the semi-enclosed courtyard excavation area, a new visitors' ramp, of the same plan configuration as the remains of one boundary wall, is introduced in a shifted plan location. The ramp, which contains visitor movement, becomes a line cutting through the invented space bounded by the more solid wings of the museum [4.2]. Imagining movement along this ramp, Fehn suggests that:

'When the ground becomes history: man's position leaves the horizon as the bridge brings him in a state of looking down at the ornamental walls from the middle ages. All answers are given by his position in relation to the earth and the sky'.²⁴

The new spaces of the Hamar Museum are positioned in a highly deliberate way within the surrounding landscape of mountains and lake. The external ramp's furthest point from the entrance reveals a view of the wider surroundings. Unlike the Corbusian examples noted earlier, however, this is a position of 'hovering over', more analogous with the theatre of Borromini's staged, mediated sites than with Alberti's concept of bounded platform.²⁵ If the ramp in the Hamar Museum is interpreted as a container, or as a vessel within a wider territory, it can also be seen as a partial boundary which allows the external courtyard to be understood as a series of overlapping spaces within the wider landscape. Just as the shadow of the tree realises a place on earth, or conversely makes a place real, the impact of the ramp within the building and the courtyard gives the internal and external spaces their presence.

Telling a story

The simple linear buildings of the museum, defined by a timber pitched roof and masonry base, recall the basic form of Norwegian folk buildings. The spatial organisation of the galleries, which house a museum of peasant life, emphasises the linearity of the low-level nineteenth century barns that run perpendicular to the entrance block. Two levels are joined by a sloping concrete floor which appears to float within the space in which the existing stone walls below, and the new timber post-and-beam frame above, are differentiated. There is an ambiguity between the

relative importance of lower and upper levels, one connected with the revealed depth of the earth, the other with the light and rhythm of the sky [4.3].

In the entrance area, it can be seen clearly that the fusion of the historic medieval fort walls with the nineteenth century farm buildings remains unresolved. The new entrance is directly opposite a major opening into the external courtyard, which gives a view of the new ramp that re-bounds the exterior space. The ground is revealed as uncertain. What was assumed to be ground level at the entrance is contradicted by the deepening rough stone trenches that become evident as you move through the building. The smooth concrete bridge linking the gallery areas to the external ramp, and the stair around which it pivots, provides a higher level datum for the insertion of concrete boxes containing especially valued objects and fragments extracted from the rough ground below. Space appears to be compressed at ground level by these monolithic, vertically-oriented insertions in the space. The focus is on the cave-like quality of the excavated ground area, which recalls the underground feeling of Fehn's earlier Venice Pavilion.

Materials are used to orient human experience in relation to both ground and sky. Throughout the building the fundamental relationship of being 'above' accentuates the experience of being 'below'.²⁶ Within the stone walls of the museum, the transition between above and below consistently relates to penetrating light and concrete finish as seen in the stairs, the ramp and in places where what seems to be floor is articulated as bridge, allowing interaction between the two overlapping spaces. Although the highest part of the walls in the central entrance block is related to the highest point of the ramp in courtyard, Fehn's conceptual 'point of intersection' in this building relates to the inserted routes of platform, ramp and stairs rather than the material datum between wall and roof. All below is treated as part of the dark, cave-like, rough terrain. Above is the even rhythm of the articulated timber frame.

Two less apparent spaces above and below are created by the bold introduction of the ramp in the courtyard. The existing ground is read as one area bounded by the wings of the museum and located within the wider context of the lake and mountains beyond. On arrival at the lowest level, a more interior space related to the entrance of the museum is experienced, partially enclosed by the boundary of the turning ramp. In contrast with the medieval walls, this 'space below' is not an

enclosed fortress-like space, but one where the wider archaeological site and landscape beyond the museum wings are emphasised. As Norberg Schulz observes, ‘the project culminates in the development of a route that, uncoiling itself in space, seeks to discover a new horizon’.²⁷ It is only from the highest point of the ramp externally that a sense of the larger space beyond the Hamar buildings is revealed.

The ramp, which carries visitors on a spatial journey around the museum, is also fundamental to the reinvention of the perceived boundaries of the new museum site. Expressed through its plan geometry and form, the ramp shifts fundamentally from being a protective boundary that separates within from without to being an open route, a line cutting through unbounded territory. Its slope, by definition, is about movement and the shifting relationship between suspended route and historic ground. It can therefore also be seen as the line of intersection between the two ‘rooms’ of the courtyard. Moving through the spaces of the museum, participation in the charged void between above and below, between earth and sky, is accentuated by various moments of fracture. At the place where the ramp penetrates the building at high level, vertical proportions and vertical elements invert the spatial horizontality of the other areas of the building. The ramp’s puncture of the building adjacent to the spiral stair can therefore be interpreted as a vertical pivot or fracture, the place of real spatial shift from the end of the linear barn to the outdoor ‘*raum*’.

Fracture

Returning to the image of the tree breaking the horizon, Fehn claims that it is only in the fracturing of horizon that place can be realised. The line of the horizon implies a narrative of pure or original nature, where it is inferred that spatial infinity is analogous with timelessness and purity. Interventions – the shade of the tree, the support of a column, the corner or edge of a room, the beginning of a building – serve to transform, conquer, change and fracture both space and time to enable human inhabitation. Fehn claims his architecture attempts to provide ‘a horizon for man’ so that each project identifies a place between earth and sky which he calls *mellomron*, or the space between, in Norwegian. The ‘point of intersection’ or ‘fracture’ of what is understood physically and conceptually as horizon is fundamental to the act of inventing and making the spaces between, and it also allows the opportunity to

redefine the horizons of earth and sky. At Hamar, the surface of the earth is revealed as having historic depth and the sky's potential to cast shadows is exploited. An ordering is choreographed in which the new raised ground of the contained ramp is established between the redefined horizontal datum of the roof and uneven stone remains.

Fehn's interpretation of horizon draws together an elemental understanding of human beings, building and situation. It is primarily spatial and physical. He notes:

'What was especially lost was the horizon, which human beings forgot with the discovery of the roundness of the earth. And with the loss of horizon we also lost known and unknown space. We have lost the earth underneath the sky and what is beyond [...] Let the people in their individual homes own the horizon. Let the apartment roof be the large piazza [...] for a visual conversation with the elements of the sky'.²⁸

Horizon and the invention of site

Fehn sees the horizon as being critical to the invention of site. While the site at Hamar is reinvented as untouched, the insertion of new layers of ground, and the roof construction, enables the resulting place to develop a series of new relationships relating to space 'above' and 'below'. The articulation and manipulation of concrete and light within these new vessels, or lines of occupation, creates a charged void between earth and sky, a positioning of experience in relation to the visible horizon bounded by the rebuilt stone and timber structure, and also to the imagined boundary of the horizon.

Within the existing boundary walls of the archaeological remains, the ramp emphasises a new orientation, a line inserted into free terrain. The ramp places the visitor to some extent outside or beyond an interpreted sequence of history. A fracture at the point of pivot of the ramp's junction with the upper level walkway and the spiral stair provides the vertical fixing point of the platforms of the interdependent museum spaces. In the Hedmark Museum, Fehn manipulates the horizon in terms of physical limits and experience and uses horizon as an instrument of orientation, movement and engagement. The literal 'realising of the place' is finally a process of participation on location in the reinvented site.

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz and Gennaro Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn: Works, Projects, Writings 1949-1996* (New York: Monacelli, 1997), p.243.

² The Archbishopric Museum of Hamar, Norway, 1967-79, is built over an archaeological site, significant in the late Middle Ages as it lay along the Kaupung trail which was the route of the Bishop of Hamar's journey to Rome in 1302. The remains of an early nineteenth century farm structure rest on the top of the ruins of a medieval fortress, demolished in the second half of the sixteenth century. The building has been well documented, see Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, pp. 129-144, with bibliography of articles 1975-1994 on p.138; also 'Hamar Bispegard Museum', *GA Document*, 11 (1984), pp. 72-81; Richard Weston, 'Nordic Light', *Architects Journal*, 30 September (1987), pp. 25-29.

³ Sverre Fehn, 'L'albero e l'orizzonte' ('The Tree and the Horizon'), *Spazio & Societa* 10 (1980), pp. 32-55; Peter Cook, 'Trees and Horizons: The architecture of Sverre Fehn', *Architectural Review*, August (1981), pp. 102-106; Per Olaf Fjeld, 'The Fall of horizon' in *Sverre Fehn: The Thought of Construction* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); Richard Weston, 'A Sense of the Horizon', *Architects Journal*, 19 November (1988), pp. 38-46.

⁴ From award speech by Sverre Fehn '...about Sverre Fehn', *Sverre Fehn Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate*, Los Angeles: The Hyatt Foundation, 1997, on-line at www.pritzkerprize.com/svbio.htm [accessed 15.08.11].

⁵ Cook, 'Trees and Horizons', p. 102.

⁶ Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, p. 19.

⁷ Andrea Khan, 'Overlooking: A Look at how we Look at Site or ... Site as "Discrete Object" of Desire' in Sarah McCorquodale, Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth, *Desiring Practices* (London: Black Dog, 1996), pp. 174-185.

⁸ Ananya Roy, 'Traditions of the Modern: A Corrupt View' in *Traditional Dwellings & Settlements Review*, XII, 11 (2001), pp. 7-19.

⁹ 'A building has one site. In this one situation, its intentions are collected. Building and site have been interdependent since the beginning of Architecture. In the past, this connection was manifest without conscious intention through the use of local materials and craft, and by an association of the landscape with events of history and myth [...] Ideas cultivated from the first perception of the site, meditations upon initial thoughts, or a reconsideration of existing topography can become the framework for invention. This mode of invention is focused through a relative space, as distinct from universal space. It is in a bounded domain'. Stephen Holl, *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), p. 11.

¹⁰ Khan, 'Overlooking', pp. 176-178. Kahn develops a model of Site Constructions in architectural education which acknowledge the interpretative reality of engagement with a particular physical location which is also a conceptual construction.

¹¹ 'We have largely missed the creative aspect of site definition and the architect's responsibility to 'invent' the site of any design project.' David Leatherbarrow, *The Roots of Architectural Invention: Site, Enclosure, Materials* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 7.

¹² Illustrations 46 and 47 in *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century* (London: Hayward Gallery and Arts Council of Great Britain with Balding & Mansell, 1987), pp. 138-139.

¹³ Kenneth Frampton, 'The Constructive Thought' in Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, pp. 253-255. Frampton links Louis Kahn and Sverre Fehn to Heidegger's distinction between evenly divided and distant space.

¹⁴ Heidegger, 1954, quoted in C. McCann (ed.), *Critical Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁵ Sverre Fehn '...about Sverre Fehn'.

¹⁶ Peter Cook describes Fehn's approach to the proposed 1972 National Museum of Fine Arts: 'the city floor is not touched. The new structure "fertilises" the old. The gentle slope of the bridges activate the pedestrian's view [...] a city floor full of life and activities'. Cook, 'Trees and Horizons', p. 104.

¹⁷ Fjeld, 'The Fall of Horizon', p. 256.

¹⁸ Per Olaf Fjeld, 'The Precision of Place' in *The Thought of Construction* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), p. 256.

¹⁹ Sverre Fehn 'An Architectural Autobiography' in *The Poetry of the Straight Line: Five Masters of the North* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1992), quoted in Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, p. 246.

²⁰ Quoted in Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, p. 257.

²¹ Cook, 'Trees and Horizons', p. 106.

²² Dastur, F. 'The Ekstatico-horizonal Constitution of Temporality' in McCann, *Critical Heidegger*, p. 164.

²³ 'The deeper meaning of horizon has its origin in the experience of the imaginary line where the earth meets the sky. The nature of this imaginary horizontal line is revealed in its power to define the boundary of our visible world as well as in the invitation to transcend this boundary'. Vesely, D. 'Introduction' in Eric Parry, *Eric Parry Architects* (London: Black Dog, 2002).

²⁴ Sverre Fehn, *Signs & Insights* lecture, Urbino, 1979, quoted in Cook, 'Trees and Horizons', p. 105.

²⁵ Weston, in 'Northern Light', p. 29, links the parti of this building with Corbusian vocabulary and *promenade architecturale*.

²⁶ Kenneth Frampton cites four primary relationships noted by Holl: *under, in, on* and *over* the earth: 'the surface of earth as self-evident but fundamental datum' in Holl, *Anchorings*, p. 7.

²⁷ See Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, p. 58, on Hamar and the Wasa museum competition project.

²⁸ Norberg-Schulz and Postiglione, *Sverre Fehn*, p. 257.