

Wittgenstein's House at Skjolden: Conservation and Interpretation

David Connearn and Dawn M. Phillips

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In the elder days of Art
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part,
For the gods are everywhere.¹

During his preparation of the manuscripts which were later published as the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein considered using this stanza, from Longfellow's poem 'The Builders', as the book's motto. In the event, the *Philosophical Investigations* was published posthumously along with other books drawn from the manuscripts brought together after his death. Wittgenstein's literary trustees and subsequent editors thus faced the inter-penetrating ethical and aesthetic challenge raised by the poem's metaphor.

One of the practical challenges facing Wittgensteinian scholarship is that the documentary record of Wittgenstein's work can never arrive at completion. Some records, such as papers left in Cambridge during his first residence in Skjolden, Norway, have at his insistence have been destroyed. Others were discarded during the process of composition, such as those he folded and stuck in the cracks in the beams of the cottage at Rosroe, Ireland and left to be cleared away by the Caretaker.² By its very nature, Wittgenstein's method of doing philosophy required a constant revision; to borrow his metaphor, a constant re-treading of its terrain in order to see and understand it from not one, but many perspectives. Wittgenstein spent much time selecting, rejecting and reordering the recorded strands of his mental peregrinations in order to be able to present them as related threads of thought, woven into the larger rope or fabric of their purpose. There is a natural wastage of material, but this is unavoidable. Wittgenstein said that he was not teaching the answers to philosophical problems, but methods to disperse unintelligible questions and in this way to answer the problem of philosophy itself. The Bergen *Nachlass*³ is an invaluable aid to interpretation precisely because it provides an opportunity, in some measure, to reverse-engineer the

¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), 'The Builders', in: *The Seaside and the Fireside*, Boston 1850.

² Reported to the writers in November 2000 by Mr Mortimer, handyman to the Caretaker Tommy Mullerkins, who attended Wittgenstein while he was resident in Maurice Drury's cottage at Rosroe between April-August 1948.

³ *Wittgenstein's 'Nachlass'*. *The Bergen Electronic Edition*, Oxford 2000.

processes of composition integral to Wittgenstein's methodology.

Such interpretation should be cognisant of the intellectual tools and methodological practices that Wittgenstein brought to his philosophical work, both from his educational and research experiences and from the professions to which he dedicated himself before he returned to Cambridge in 1929 to undertake his philosophical career. These comprise his Engineering education at the Technische Hochschule Charlottenberg, his aeronautics research at Manchester and his vocations as a school teacher and as an architect.

Wittgenstein attests to architecture in particular having central importance: "Working on philosophy is really working on oneself - as is often true of architecture. Working on one's own perception, on how one sees things (and what one demands of them)."⁴ He later told Maurice Drury that whereas they both understood the difficulty of doing philosophy, "it's nothing compared to the difficulty of being a good architect".⁵

There is a conspicuous piece of un-researched evidence worthy of at least the level of documentary treatment afforded to fragmentary items of Wittgenstein *Nachlass*; it is larger in scale, of far rarer incidence and crucial to Wittgenstein's work. The fragment in question is the house produced by Wittgenstein at Skjolden in 1914. It was the first of only two buildings for which he was responsible; the second being the Palais Stonborough in Vienna, completed for Wittgenstein's sister Margarethe in Autumn 1928. Although the importance of the Palais Stonborough is now widely recognised, it was saved from demolition in 1971 only by the efforts of the Architect and Sound-artist Bernhard Leitner; however, it sustained damage during repair through municipal complacency. The material remaining from Wittgenstein's first architectural achievement at Skjolden has also endured poor regard and treatment that is inadequate to its status. In stark contrast to the quality of treatment afforded to literary artifacts, this documentary material of immense and unique significance has been permitted to degrade and now faces an uncertain future.

[Photograph: The Skjolden house from Lake Eidsvatnet, Photograph by Ben Richards, 1950. Reproduced with permission from Michael Nedo]

The house at Skjolden was built following Wittgenstein's precipitous exit from Cambridge in November 1913, to provide the material conditions for the personal working environment that he required for doing philosophy. Its deliberately remote location, then accessible only by boat, is perhaps best explained by the scale and demands of his project. Russell later characterized the

⁴ Ms VIII. Bemerkungen zur philosophischen Grammatik WA4. 124.10.

⁵ Rush Rhees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, Oxford 1981, pp. 121-2.

task he had handed over to Wittgenstein as "a subject matter so exceedingly difficult and elusive that any person who has ever tried to think about it knows that you do not think about it except perhaps once in six months for half a minute."⁶ Although the *Tractatus* manuscript was eventually completed under the yet more extraordinary circumstances of his active service in the Austrian army, the house at Skjolden nevertheless provided the template to which he would return, or as at Rosroe, replicate, at the most significant creative periods of his career. It was also the place to which he intended to return to work when he was dying.⁷

Construction began in the Spring of 1914. The house was used by Wittgenstein at several different periods: during the summer school vacation of 1921, in the company of Arvid Sjogren, his personal and family friend; for three weeks in 1932 with both Marguerite Respinger, who was until that visit his fiancée, and Cambridge friend Gilbert Pattison; between August 1936 and December 1937, at one point briefly accompanied by his lover Francis Skinner, during the work on the manuscripts which became the *Philosophical Investigations*. Letters to Skjolden in the later 1940's indicate a desire to return which was finally achieved in 1950, for a month, with his friend Ben Richards. Finally, Wittgenstein bought a boat ticket to return to Skjolden in December 1951. Uncertainty regarding the availability of support and the development of his terminal cancer determined otherwise. In all, Wittgenstein's residence amounts to less than two years continuous use, but each visit proved pivotal to the direction of his life and philosophic work. Wittgenstein's use of the house at Skjolden places it within a venerable tradition of intellectual refuges that stretch back to Plato's dwelling beside the Athenian Gymnasium.

The building faced Skjolden due West across Lake Eidsvatnet. Its shaded aspect and orientation from the outset required a consistent schedule of maintenance which fell to Arne Bolstad, to whom Wittgenstein had given the house in 1919. After Wittgenstein's death in 1951, it lapsed into increasing disrepair. It was bought and dismantled for less than the price of its timber, and moved to Skjolden by Gunnar and Nils Bolstad, across the ice of Eidsvatnet, during the winter of 1956 -57. The building reconstructed from the original interlocking log beams remains intact but with several significant alterations, the most important of which is the rotation of the roof axis through 90 degrees. The layout of rooms and the ceiling height of the interior have also been changed. The original interior walls have been used to construct the property's outbuilding. The external timbers of the reconstructed house have been protected by asbestos slate cladding, first fixed with the help of a local school-boy Harald Vatne, who has

⁶ Bertrand Russell, *Lectures on Logical Atomism*, Number 4, 1918 Open Court Edition, p. 44.

⁷ See Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford 1984, p. 79. Letter 52, 1st December 1950, p. 129 and Letter 53 2nd January 1951, p. 130.

subsequently recovered the majority of the discarded original doors and windows.

[Photograph: The original interior walls 2009]

The most significant unresolved question about the Skjolden building is the degree of Wittgenstein's architectural authorship. No plans survive but Wittgenstein's correspondence puts beyond doubt the possibility that it was the sole product of the builder, supervised in Wittgenstein's absence after June 1914 by Skjoldener Harvald Draegni. Research is required to establish the construction detail, also its relation to examples of local vernacular architecture and to that of the Wittgensteins' country estate, the Hochreith. A further point of departure must be Paul Widjefeld's suggestion that elements of the Skjolden building, such as its shutters, were said to be prototypical of those later developed for the Palais Stonborough.⁸ Of broader import is the question of the history and significance of Wittgenstein's relationship with the architect Adolf Loos, with whose work and opinions Wittgenstein's family were familiar since the inception of Loos' criticism of the decorative art of the Secession, coincident with Wittgenstein's father's sponsorship of the Secession building in 1900.

From 1908, whilst at Manchester and Cambridge, Wittgenstein read the Viennese journals *Die Fackel* and *Der Brenner*, which were central to the Viennese cultural debate in which Loos participated. He continued to receive them whilst in Skjolden during 1913. On arriving in Vienna from Skjolden in June 1914, Wittgenstein immediately arranged his first meeting with Loos. At this time, Loos had recently completed the design of one of the first buildings known to exhibit a Raumplan: the concept of three dimensional spatial organisation, determined by room function, which was one of the revolutionary guiding principles of Loos' newly inaugurated architectural school.⁹ The building was the Janitor's house of the Schwarzwald School, Semmering. This was, by coincidence, a modest log-built structure. Although no detailed record of the discussion between Wittgenstein and Loos survives, a close relationship ensued, which moved Loos to declare to Wittgenstein 'You are me' and led to Wittgenstein's wartime friendship with Loos' pupil Paul Engelmann.¹⁰ Eventually, Engelmann was invited to commence the design of the Palais Stonborough.

Leitner's and Wijdeveld's scholarship on the Palais Stonborough attest the

⁸ Paul Widjefeld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Architect*, Thames & Hudson 1994, p. 30.

⁹ 'Der Raumplan im Wohnungsbau von Adolf Loos', in: *Adolf Loos. 1870–1933. Raumplan – Wohnungsbau*, ed. Dietrich Worbs, Berlin 1983, pp. 64–77.

¹⁰ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, ed. Brian McGuinness. Wien/München 1970, p. 128.

immense intellectual scale and sophistication of the standards of its design and delivery. Their work dispels any doubt that Wittgenstein's dominant contribution could have occurred without substantial antecedent experience, and indeed suggests Wittgenstein's critical absorption and re-working of Loos' architectural program. Evidence for this may in part reside in the design of the Skjolden house. To take one example, scrutiny of its primary facade reveals a subtle but significant asymmetry of the ground floor fenestration, confirmed by its record in the corresponding facade of the reconstructed building. In all other known aspects the exterior of the original house displays expected symmetries. A reason for such primary facade asymmetry may be the external expression of internal organisation, consistent with the hierarchical articulation of space explicitly required of Raumplanung.

[Photograph: Rebuilt house (original front) facade 2009]

As the centenary of the construction of Wittgenstein's house approaches, other aspects of Skjolden's once vibrant history are also undergoing rapid development and these factors look set to intersect, bringing the Wittgenstein legacy to the forefront. Skjolden has acquired a cruise liner terminal. This coincides with the creation of a new National Park, the third in the area, which together with the proximity of the World Heritage Site of Urnes Church, project a reinvigorated future for Skjolden as a significant portal for tourism. But across the lake, the stone plinth of the original house site on the spur above Eidsvatnet and its means of access from the lake are now showing signs of considerable dilapidation. The condition and exposure of the site raise the issue of responsibility for public safety as the privately owned land on which they sit lacks a current maintenance obligation. There are however planning measures in progress to develop the proximate shore of Lake Eidsvatnet, including a feasibility-study for the provision of a new road and parking area adjacent to the house site. The house site has, for the first time, been made subject to a development control which puts permission for any further building development under the direction of local government. Developments that are desirable for the future of Skjolden are not incompatible with a principled conservation of the Wittgenstein site and its associated fabrics; however, with a population of 139, Skjolden currently has limited public amenities and financial resources.

During the 1990s Luster Kommune, Skjolden's local municipal authority, was approached concerning the possibility of its purchase of the reconstructed house. An acceptable resolution was not achieved and the house remains in the possession of Gunnar Bolstad's widow, without the provision of any conservation regulation. It is estimated that its restoration or replication on the original site, should the acquisition of either become possible, would require an

input in the region of €1million. Except in extraordinary circumstances, the provisions of Norwegian National Conservation Policy do not extend forward beyond the year 1900. The Wittgenstein house thus falls beyond its general remit, creating a possibility of costly precedent. Consequently, the response of the Riksantikvaren, the National Conservation Agency, has been to await the result of local development. In Skjolden, an unprecedented responsibility currently falls on the shoulders of a very small group of local people who, without external assistance, have by default inherited the Wittgenstein architectural legacy.

[Photograph: Original stone plinth 2009]

The Skjolden site and its associated fabrics have an importance comparable to Thoreau's Walden;¹¹ to Nietzsche's Sils Maria; or to Naess' house, Tvergastein. It has a manifest international, national and local significance which require its consideration according to corresponding and commensurate international conservation protocols, like the Burra Charter. Such protocols call for the implementation of comprehensive conservation planning in advance of any material intervention which might lead to the compromise of overall conservation potentials. Precedent for Norwegian conservation initiatives to this standard has been set, for instance that of the internationally acclaimed development of the Knut Hamsun Centre in Hammeroy. As with the Hamsun farm, the Wittgenstein house site, its fabric and original purpose are by design unsuitable to large scale public access. It should surely be conserved, but as a place of activity related to its original use. Of this Wittgenstein said to Malcolm: "It was the only place where I could have real quiet."¹² To Basil Reeve: "Then my mind was on fire."¹³

[Photograph: View across Eidsvatnet Lake from the original house site]

In the spirit of Wittgenstein's methodology, differing requirements which impact on his architectural legacy should be openly assessed and discussed from all valid perspectives, an ongoing task that will have to meet the same interpretative challenges as any of his most important texts. For: "Everything is what it is and not another thing."¹⁴

¹¹ Wittgenstein read Thoreau's journals together with Engelmann, Arvid Sjogren and Count Schonborn-Buchheim during their summer meetings as guests on the family estates. See Paul Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Architect*, p. 52.

¹² Letter from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Norman Malcolm 12th January 1950 in Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford 1984, p. 129.

¹³ In Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Vintage 1991, p. 455.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein also considered the use of this phrase, from Bishop Joseph Butler, as the motto for the *Philosophical investigations*. See Ray Monk *ibid.* p. 451.

Author Biographies

David Connearn, born 1952, was a medieval historian until 1973, when he was bitten on 'the Backs' by someone carrying Wittgenstein and never completely recovered. He is now an artist of some repute, and lives with his wife and daughter in the house they rebuilt in London. He makes drawings of nothing, maintains an interest in apophasis, and takes refuge in things.

Dawn M. Phillips is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow in Philosophy at St Anne's College Oxford. Her work on Wittgenstein includes articles on the logical clarification of thoughts, the 'say-show' distinction and the picture-theory of language. She also writes on aesthetics and the philosophy of images and is currently preparing a book on the Aesthetics of Photography.

In collaboration, David Connearn and Dawn Phillips are endeavouring to inspire local, national and international support to protect and conserve the legacy of the Wittgenstein House at Skjolden.