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### Author

Lyndon, Donlyn, FAIA

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Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA

## Danish Modern, Then and Now

The American  
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Committee on Design  
Historic Resources Committee

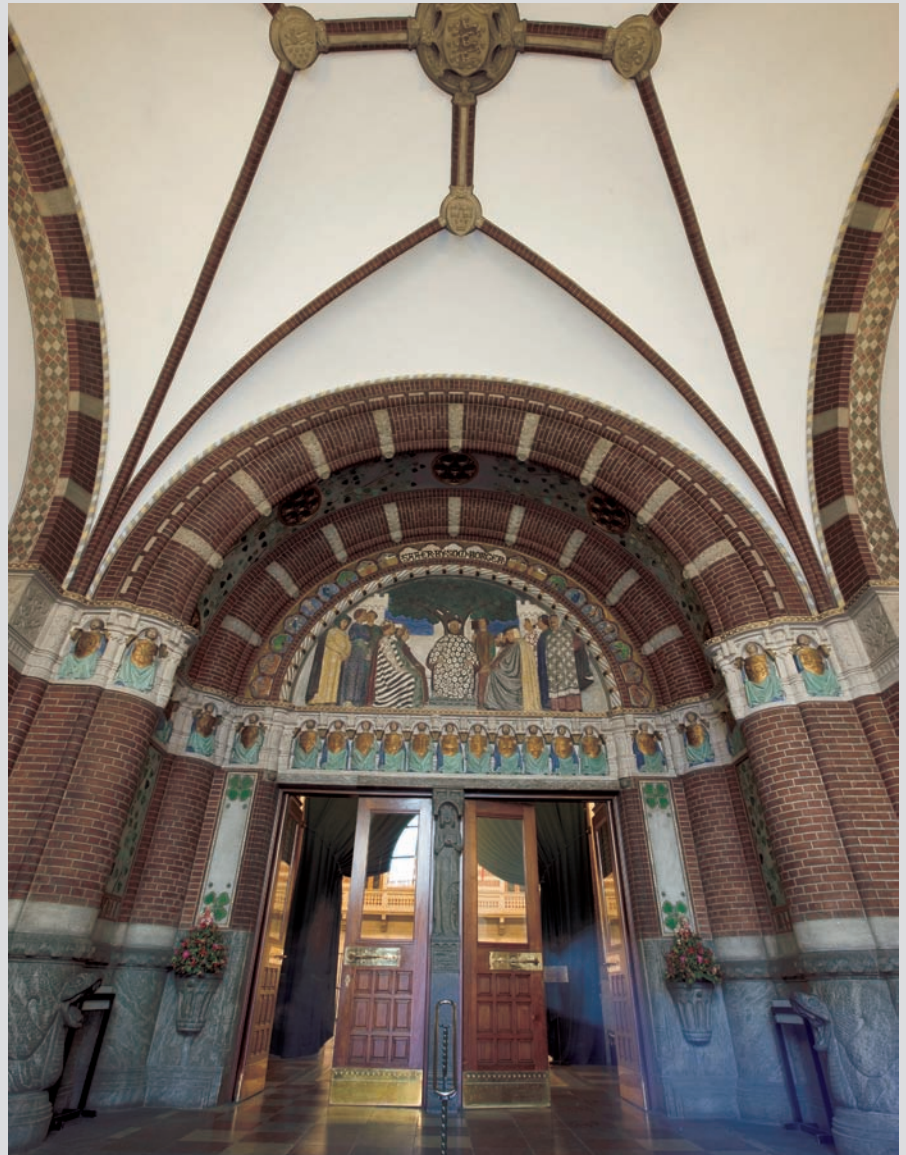


These Forum pages were printed under an agreement between *Places/Design History Foundation* and The American Institute of Architects. They report on the conference “Danish Modern: Then and Now,” held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in September, jointly sponsored by the Committee on Design (2008 Chair, Carol Rusche Bentel, FAIA) and the Historic Resources Committee (2008 Chair, Sharon Park, FAIA). T. Gunny Harboe, AIA, served as Conference Chair. For additional conference documentation and photos, go to: <http://aiacod.ning.com/>.

In 2009, the COD theme will be “The Roots of Modernism and Beyond” (2009 Chair, Louis R. Pounders, FAIA). The spring conference will take place in Boston and the fall conference in Berlin, with visits to pivotal buildings and institutions in both cities, including the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany.

For more information on the 2009 conferences go to [www.aia.org/cod](http://www.aia.org/cod).

Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA, is Eva Li Professor of Architecture and Urban Design, Emeritus, at U.C. Berkeley and Editor of *Places*. He is a recipient of the AIA/ACSA Topaz Award, and with his partners in Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker, received the AIA's Twenty-Five Year Award for Condominium One at The Sea Ranch. He is author, with Jim Alinder, of *The Sea Ranch*, published by Princeton Architectural Press.



The five-day conference and tour “Danish Modern, Then and Now,” organized jointly by the AIA Committee on Design and the AIA Historic Resources Committee, was a true, well-fashioned, and elegant *smorrebrod*, with artfully arranged, visually stunning morsels put together in sensible courses: a feast of experiences and information assembled in collaboration with the Danish

Architecture Center, in Copenhagen, and the Danish Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs. Although the demanding pace of the tours and seminars often left too little time to fully savor the offerings, it allowed for thoughtful exposure to both the heritage of Danish design and the vitality of current explorations.

Above: Radhus. Photo by Tom Rossiter, FAIA.

## The Program

For an excellent view of the program, with the basic information and photographs of projects visited on the trip, see the illustrated convention program that can be found on the Web at [www.aia.org/SiteObjects/files/COD\\_fallo8\\_conf\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.aia.org/SiteObjects/files/COD_fallo8_conf_brochure.pdf).

The tours included a boat trip, which provided an overview of many recent developments along the harbor; a full-day walking tour of significant historic buildings in the center city, including the magnificently conceived and crafted Town Hall, completed in 1905; and a bus tour of iconic buildings representative of Danish Modern from the 1920s through the 1960s, including the Louisiana Museum. It also included a tour using the Metro to visit examples of new developments at Orestand and the revitalization of older areas of the city, including reclaimed Navy Yard buildings that now house the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Architecture. That day ended with visits to the recently completed opera house and the new Playhouse, striking buildings, which bracket the harbor channel in a figurative display of cultural investment. The five-day conference and tour concluded with a suitably festive dinner held in the frolicsome Tivoli Gardens, in the heart of the city.

For a sense of the depth of design studies and the concern for engaging public interest in design and planning for Copenhagen, see the Web page for the Danish Architecture Center: [www.dac.dk/](http://www.dac.dk/). It was a partner in the organization of the conference. Especially valuable is Copenhagen X: [www.cphx.dk/](http://www.cphx.dk/), which has an effective interactive page, with access to photographs and descriptions of several of the projects highlighted in the conference, as well as to many others, and links to the firms that have produced the work.

In addition to visits to an array of very interesting and sometimes provocative sites, as well as background talks that set each of the days' visits in context, there were smaller group visits and dinners, hosted by several architecture firms in Copenhagen, where more intimate discussions took place among colleagues. There were also informative visits to the headquarters of the Fritz Hansen and Louis Poulsen companies, which manufactured some of the earliest and most widely noted examples of Danish furniture and lighting, and which remain actively involved in the evolution of Danish Modern design. On the final day, there were workshop sessions involving selected AIA visitors and speakers and architects from Copenhagen, who together explored six themes that had been laid out by program organizers. Notes on those sessions are included at the end of this report.

In reflecting upon it subsequently, I found the achievements of the city of Copenhagen and its design community all the more impressive. During those days we learned how rewarding it can be to inhabit thought—to be in places where disciplined imagination is evident throughout. We learned

also about inhabiting community: about being in places where there has been a common understanding of what the environment can give us, and where many carefully considered opportunities are provided to encounter and experience other activities and people.

## Some Great Projects

The Danish heritage of careful thought was demonstrated in projects ranging from the light and spirited eighteenth-century Trinitatis church, to the astonishingly expressive and exuberant Town Hall of the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, to the richly detailed and quietly luxurious Radiohuset concert hall, designed by Vilhelm Lauritzen in the 1930s and opened in 1945. It was also evident in the finely scaled and handsomely sited Fredensborgh courtyard housing complex, designed by Jorn Utzon in the early 1960s, and in the spatially inventive light-modulating forms he employed for the Bagsvaerd Church in the mid-1970s.

At the shore, in Klampenborg, we could imagine from the street similar thoughtfulness in the Belair and Soholm housing projects by Arne Jacobsen, from the 1930s and 50s, respectively. They are two very different collections of forms and materials, yet each is compelling in its own way, and powerfully suggestive for its time. They are joined by the serenely modernist Bellevue Theater, also by Jacobsen. The attentive, inhabiting care of it all has since been assaulted by a crass “gas station from everywhere,” which now stands by its side. The contrast is made even more poignant by the iconic geometric canopy of another gas station, designed by Jacobsen, just a short distance away. Ironically, its clarity of form has seldom been emulated, though it is akin to his plywood chair and its variants, now found throughout the world.

The Tietgen College, of 2005 and 2006, by Lundgaard and Tranberg, shows a comparable investment of imaginative thought, here spent in creating a cylindrical ring that, while distinct and clear in the landscape, is, on further examination, filled with





decisions that suggest the variety of lives lived within. Surfaces on the inside of the ring reflect the organization of the dormitory into clustered living groups, each finding expression in the facade—not as repetitive units, but as varying configurations of common spaces associated with each cluster, often in differing ways and with differing outlooks. The dormitory recalls urban blocks that are relatively undemonstrative as they face the street, but which shelter courtyards of great complexity and improvisation within. Unfortunately, this project is not set among similar clusters of sheltering form, but isolated in a windswept terrain of rectangular slabs and underutilized ground—buildings and spaces fresh from those Modernist diagrams that, while attendant to details of form and geometry, were indifferent to site conditions, local climate, and personal space—in

short, hostile to any forms of urban interaction, or what now would be called city life.

With regard to places of common understanding, our visit took us both to the throbbing pedestrian streets of central Copenhagen, whose rebirth was initiated in the 1960s by Jan Gehl (who this year received honorary fellowship in the AIA), and to more recent localized nodes of activity that bring people together and open the way for community values to be shared among a changing population.

The importance of context was clearly evident in the new Playhouse, also designed by Lundgaard and Tranberg, which has its lobby smoothly joined to a public deck that extends a promenade along the harbor and then leads back into the central city through the popular Nyhavn area. In this, it forms a sharp contrast to the Opera House, designed by the

venerable Henning Larsen, which is isolated from the city's everyday life by its donor's insistence that it take pride of place across the harbor, on axis with the Royal Palace.

Tours through the neighborhood of Holmbadsgad included streets reclaimed for pedestrian use, a long connecting thread of green bicycle and pedestrian paths leading toward the shore, a vibrant library and community center created within an old factory, and a marvelously spirited sports and cultural center by Dorte Mandrup, from 2006, that allows energetic play for youths and meeting spaces for various groups. These formed a convincing example of neighborhood-generated public investment and provided new oppor-

**Above:** Playhouse. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA.

**Inset:** Tietgen College. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA.



tunities for urban living within areas that had once settled into decline but which are now connected to the larger metropolis by the new Metro and other modes of public transportation.

### Forces of Change

Richly conceived and densely packed as the five days were, it is too bad that there was not more time to explore unorthodox examples of Modernism or localized traditions that inform current standards of design and public consciousness. This was especially true of areas of innovation in housing organization and design

that have been central to the development of architecture in Denmark, and also of buildings that attempt an ambitious integration with existing urban fabric. That kind of social engagement seems often now to have been preempted by attention to markets and production and the workings of the global system and its impacts on everyone's lives.

Copenhagen, like Malmo, in Sweden has seen massive economic transformation brought about by global competition. Shipbuilding industries have been removed, and harborside areas are being made into

desirable locations for urban living. This transformation has happened in many large cities around the globe, but here it can be experienced directly within the scope of a small nation. The Danes have also experienced and are confidently integrating the consequences of significant, culturally diverse immigration—a relatively new phenomenon. City life is now often stated as a desired goal, including attempts to reach into communities and deal with problems of social sustainability by means of creative programs and building forms.

However, there is also a shift in



emphasis in discussions of recent work to “opening up to foreign influences” and encouraging internationally famous architects to “bring new life” to the country’s heritage of modern design. This new attitude seemed motivated partly by a restless uneasiness with cohesive traditions of reticence and modesty, and partly by architects’ and clients’ desire to be seen as part of international developments, as players in the global economy and its opportunities.

The hosts were at some pains to point out that changes in style and aspiration brought into Danish culture and planning from outside were not new. Indeed, the great reformations of town layout and building during the Renaissance and its neoclassical aftermath, were brought by rulers like Christian IV, who had their eyes steadily focused on wider European developments and the benefits of maritime trade.

Deference to international architects hardly seems necessary, however, given the spectrum of imaginative energy expressed in recent work by local firms. Among these is PLOT, whose projects range from a lively public bathing pool in the harbor channel, to the much-photographed VM-Houses in Orestad that display an array of pointed balconies that befuddles its simplistic glass wall, to a string of competition entries that demonstrate a seemingly irrepressible interest in reformulating basic propositions and exploring alternative forms. Similarly provocative are the sparkling community-based works of Dorte Mandrup, and, at a more established level, the persistently challenging work of Lundgaard and Tranberg, architects of the new Playhouse and Tietgen College and of tall apartment buildings that insist on establishing individual identities through their massing. The regionally rooted and



inventive works of Vandkunsten, which were noted, but not included in the tour, have been persistently inventive. All these seemed more instructive and pertinent than projects offered up by a few international stars.

#### A Social Compact

An important part of our experience was the recognition of how deeply tied to social developments the movement of Danish Modern has been. For an American, it was surprising to hear several times in the introductory talks that the roots of Danish Modern were firmly tied to the welfare state—surprising, because in the U.S., we have developed a skewed understanding of welfare, forgetting its roots in well-being for all. In Denmark the ideals of simplicity and modesty and of achieving richness and durability through the caring use of natural materials were initially tied to concepts of social welfare, to using resources judiciously. The early Moderns created small, well-formed spaces, suffused with qualities of light that could brighten and ennoble and

make use of the precious sun. These qualities, explained Kent Martinussen, director of the Danish Architecture Center, were closely tied to Danish culture, and to an ethos of “not more than necessary.” The intent was to provide shelter of this sort to a wide spectrum of society by avoiding excess in wasteful provisions for a few.

Martinussen referred to the standards of modern architecture in Denmark as responsible, humane, and concerned with shelter and civic identity; but he also observed that the “offspring of that culture feel trapped,” that the housing that had developed was now criticized as “too homogeneous, too boring, too minimalist,” and that there is now a desire to infuse ideas from outside, to “hold hands with glo-

**Opposite, clockwise from top left:** ellevista housing. Photo by Tom Rossiter, FAIA. Bagsværd Kirke. Photo by T. Gunny Harboe, AIA. Sports and Cultural Center and VM houses. Photos by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA. **Above:** Soholm Housing Estate. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA..



balization.” The goal of sustainability provides a platform for skills that have already been infused in Danish practice through building well and attentively, and through a tradition of working within goals adopted by the society.

In particular, there is a commitment today to increasing dramatically the amount of housing available within the city, thereby reducing commutes. To bring this new housing into being, Copenhagen has made major improvements in the public realm and encouraged concentrated development, including some modest highrises within outlying areas of the city that are linked to transport. Bicycle use is ubiquitous, and there is a network of pedestrian shopping streets that thread through the central city.

More dramatically, there has been significant investment in new transportation systems, including the Metro, water buses across the harbor channel, and the ambitious Oresund Bridge, which carries rail lines and a

highway linking Denmark to Malmö, Sweden, in what is increasingly considered an international metropolitan area. These links and the Metro have increased access to land lying between the center of Copenhagen and the airport, and the government has made a major commitment to its development through the Orestaden project. This large public-private effort spans three Metro stops and includes living and office space as well as new Information Technology university facilities and a much-touted yet unfinished concert hall, designed by Jean Nouvel, as part of the Danish Broadcasting Media Center. However, the more detailed urban design of these areas has been a disappointment to most officials and professionals. They bemoan its nearly complete absence of “city life,” because its areas were developed without regard to human use or comfort and experience. The public realm here was considered almost abstractly and at very large scale.

Danes have invested as well (and often with greater success) in more fine-grained efforts to create living

places close to the city. Some of these areas received little investment previously or were adjacent to declining or abandoned industrial and harbor areas. But they are now being converted to living and office-work space, often fashioned from industrial buildings or silos. Sometimes they have engaged whole complexes of buildings, such as the plan to reuse many components of the former Carlsberg breweries site, while adding major new elements to them.

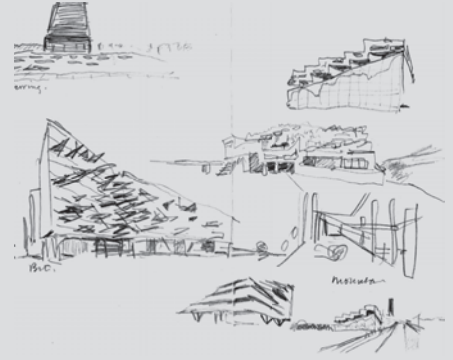
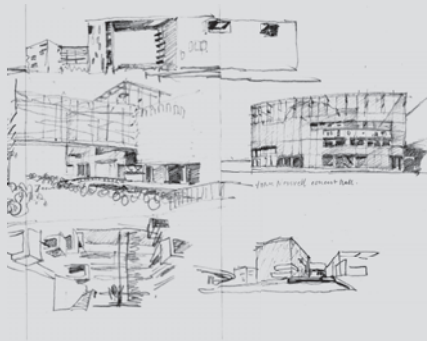
### Hand in Hand

Overall, “Danish Modern, Then and Now” was rewarding and instructive, bringing participants into contact with a rich array of buildings, compelling traditions, strong planning efforts, and lively discussion—all worth studying, all worth remembering, all worth learning. Most valuable to me was exposure to a culture that values the quality and spirit of its surrounds, that is prepared to give better form to its principal city and to extend the reach of that quality and spirit into the lives of all those who live there.

Like others throughout the world, who are bedazzled by the pace of change and the power of capital to transform conditions, some architects, planners, and public officials in Copenhagen have been smitten with the glamour and rigor of production and “branding,” heedless of human consequence. During these days, though, it was interesting to note the attention to light and touch, to the importance of materials and the shaping of experience. I also noted that the term “hand in hand” was frequently used instead of “collaboration.” It’s a compelling phrase—and habit of mind. It brings directness and human contact to the fore. Hand in hand we can strive for a genuinely sustainable future.

**Above:** A pocket of light brings human contact to the fore. Photo by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA.

# Notes from Workshops



At the end of the several-hour sessions, each workshop leader was asked to write down three salient points that emerged from the discussions. These are noted below, with some additional comments.

## **New materials and material systems in current construction: how will they influence architecture?**

Test new materials yourself. Use existing materials and be innovative.

A sustainable material does not have to be a natural material.

In the context of visits to buildings whose quality of materials and care in their use were essential, it becomes especially clear that there are many ways to use existing materials inventively and well. New materials offer many great opportunities, but their durability and their sustainability need to be carefully assessed, through both technical evaluation in a larger context and personal testing that allows the architect to know how they will perform.

## **Preserving Modernism: what are the challenges of material conservation of our recent past?**

The character of Modern buildings makes them difficult to preserve (e.g., they do not age well and they are relatively less tolerant of change).

Where original details do not perform well it may be necessary to change them to meet goals such as

energy efficiency and sustainability.

In achieving a balance between integrity of design and integrity of materials, in Modernist buildings, design may take precedence.

Many early Modernist buildings were made in ways that defied or ignored traditional good-building practices, and now, decades later, they are proving difficult to maintain. Their imagined precision does not accommodate additional layers of insulation without distortions in thicknesses or material surfaces. In some cases, detailed compromises need to be made that will secure the building's continued viability while protecting its light, space, and integrity of form. However, when irreplaceable qualities are at stake, it may be necessary to use materials that will need special care or eventual replacement.

## **Innovation driven by users: does it ensure livability?**

A client can make you think more innovatively. Be daring! Take user info and transform it. Educate your user.

Engaging with users and listening to their interests and ambitions can lead to solutions that are innovative and that provide real benefits for those who live, work, and play at project sites. Simply responding is not enough; architects need to listen well, take the information that's been given, and transform it in ways that integrate

concerns and forge new relationships. Design is discovery. Educating clients and users so that they are able to share in that discovery and make it real on their terms is essential.

## **Urban design and urban spaces: what aim, whose responsibility?**

When designing a city, be nice to people and start with the public life.

Programming! Programming!

Pharmland! Growing medicine.

In the panel discussion, Jan Gehl said it this way: "Start with activities, then imagine the spaces that will support those activities, then design buildings that will make and house those spaces." Urban design shapes the public realm that is so important to the life of a place. It must be based in programming that seeks a full understanding of what urban spaces can become as they integrate with the city. Urban places and city life serve the interests of many: those who use places casually as part of their daily lives as well as those who have specific tasks and purposes in mind. Urban planning and design also need to look at new relations between urban structure and the landscape. As an example, one presentation noted the dominance of large-scale agricultural areas throughout Denmark and their interconnection with E.U. support. It pro-

Above: Conference/tour drawings by Dan Wheeler, FAIA.





posed that more land might become “pharmland,” growing the ingredients of medicine rather than foods, which in turn may lead to new forms and patterns in the landscape.

**The new generation: what are the sources and inspiration in a global context?**

Collaboration—utilizing others’ experience to see new opportunities.

Society—public vs. private—Danes trust their government and are supported by it.

Proaction—smaller as well as larger offices can create their own opportunities through proaction.

The next generations of architects will be able to garner ideas from many sources, not only their own experience but also that of others. The trust that has been developed between Danes and their government is empowering, because it includes a commitment to sustainable practices and high-quality design as well as an interest in becoming part of the global community. Proactive (instead of reactive) design practices, where architects in both small and large firms explore design possibilities in the public interest, are

a valuable way of increasing public understanding as well as opening new opportunities for design.

**Globalization: what role will architects play in the future?**

Taking a sustainable design approach to the world. Encouraging cultural collaboration. Improving dialogue and trust between peoples. Increasing international design quality through global professional affiliations.

Clearly, our global interconnectedness requires learning to work with concern for developments throughout the world. Denmark has assumed leadership in several areas of sustainability and can use that experience internationally. In an interconnected world of practice it is necessary to encourage collaboration across cultures and to find ways to improve communication among people who do not have shared experience. Developing ideas together and developing trust will be essential tasks for architects who will be working in differing cultures (as well as for those working with a diverse culture at home). International affiliations can provide for fruitful collaboration, allowing many

hands to work together, using skills that have been developed within their place and culture as well as gleaned through wider experience.

**Sustainability: how to build today for tomorrow?**

Sustainability is more than energy reduction. Urban planning should be integrated with city development to include social and cultural sustainability as well as energy reduction and cost.

Values of sustainability can generate exciting design in atrium plans, retention and reuse of natural materials; historic buildings can be as sustainable as new ones.

The conditions that establish a program should seek straightforward, simple solutions based on common sense.

Genuine sustainability has many dimensions, incorporating not only issues of reuse, reduction of energy consumption, and development of renewable energy sources, but also the whole fabric of settlement and the ways in which we move about in cities and landscapes. Creating places that foster sustainable social practices is an integral part of the problem. An example is the atrium building, which has been shown to conserve energy and has developed productive social practices by creating more patterns of use and valuable social encounter. Clear, simple thinking that takes advantage of existing resources, avoids waste, draws benefit from its siting and disposition, and is attentive to the climate should be the basis of sustainable solutions. To it can be added the extra benefit of standards of measurement that show interactions not easily registered or gauged and capable of bringing out new forms.

Above: Fredensborg houses. Photo by Tom Rossiter, FAIA.