



MARC J. NEVEU |

## On Stories: Architecture and Identity

In an interview in the January 1964 edition of *Playboy* magazine, Vladimir Nabokov was asked about his identity. He replied, “I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England, where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany.”<sup>1</sup> It is a playful response to our shared condition within a truly global world. As the question of “where one is from” becomes more and more complicated to answer, so too does the identity of architecture. It is not unusual today for a project in Dubai, for example, to be designed by an architect born in Iraq, trained in London and now teaching in Vienna. Typically, such a building is designed by one office, while yet another carries out working drawings and construction administration. The article you are now reading is printed in a journal named specifically as *The “Norwegian” Review of Architecture*. Though the journal also publishes articles regarding built work from other nations and cultures, the focus is clearly on architecture constructed in Norway or by Norwegians and not, for example, “concrete” architecture, or “colorful” architecture, or “contemporary” architecture as such. So what might it mean to be a Norwegian architect or to make Norwegian architecture? In the long (Nordic) shadow of Christian Norberg-Schulz, this is still a loaded question.

The program of a national pavilion locates this issue squarely in architectural terms. The Nordic Pavilion for the Venice Biennale (1958-1962), designed by Sverre Fehn to represent Sweden, Finland, and Norway, is a project that one can presume deals in some way with the issue of a Nordic identity. Though much has been written – specifically in this journal – about the pavilion and the Pritzker Prize winning architect, few authors have approached it through

**“I have all my life tried to run away from the Nordic tradition. But I realize that it is difficult to run away from yourself.”**

Sverre Fehn, *Architecture + Urbanism*, januar 1999.

the lens of storytelling. This absence is curious, because in many interviews and articles, Fehn makes an analogy between building and storytelling, and between materials and language.<sup>3</sup> I propose that the two issues – identity and storytelling – are indeed connected, and in this essay I will explore the nature of an architectural identity through storytelling. To do so, I will refer to the conclusion of Richard Kearney’s wonderful essay, *On Stories*. In the text, Kearney responds to the ever-present call for the death of storytelling by invoking five summary headings drawn from various models of narrative theory: plot (mythos), re-creation (mimesis), release (catharsis), wisdom (phronesis), and ethics (ethos). Though Fehn does not specifically name these themes in discussions of his projects, it is my wager that the same topics apply to and enrich an understanding of his work and, more specifically, the issues of architecture and identity.

### 1. PLOT (MYTHOS)

All stories, according to Kearney, are situated and told in time. Kearney references Aristotle to develop the meaning of plot (mythos) to include a telling, a fable or fantasy, and a crafted structure. Dostoevsky’s *White Nights*, for example, could not take place in a city near the equator where the summer nights are dark, nor could we know at the beginning that the unnamed protagonist will end the story waiting alone on a bench. Kearney relates this understanding of plot to the making of our own lives. A narrative marks, organizes, and clarifies our experience from when we first begin to speak until we die. This structure, however, is not an a-priori condition imposed upon us; like an author, we are active in organizing and naming our lives. Kearney refers to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur who describes the ability make the story of our lives into an understandable whole as the “synthesis of the heterogeneous”. This is also true for architecture, and certainly true for Fehn, working in Venice.

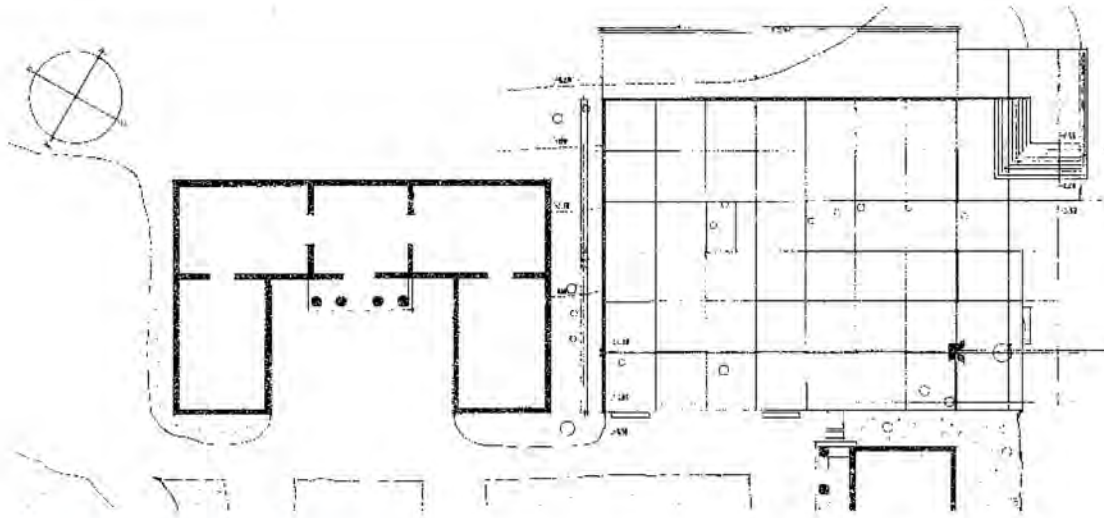
Fehn was given a site in the public gardens between the pavilions for the United States and Denmark on the secondary axis of Viale Trento. The gardens present an unusual sort of urbanism: each of the pavilions is national, the program of each is only for display, all of the buildings sit unused for most of the year, the entire site is within a large park, and there are no full-time residents. From these pre-existing conditions, Fehn has designed a deceptively simple project. The pavilion burrows into the slope of the southeast corner. The opposite walls, on the north and west side, were intended to be open, allowing the pre-existing circulation to continue through the building and exhibits. In the final design, both facades remain openable, with the exception of a stair on the southern end of the west wall. This stair houses a small storage room and gives access to the rear of the site. Large sliding glass walls are set back one bay from the edge of the roof overhang, that with the help of translucent fiberglass draped between the roof joists, keeps the rain out. The walls are capped by an iconic roof structure of thinly articulated concrete joists. Running perpendicular and set on top of each other, the roof structure blocks any direct light from reaching the floor. Interruptions in the grid allow the existing trees to extend through the roof canopy. Seen in elevation, the rhythm of the roof matches the pattern of the triglyphs on the façade of the neighboring pavilion for the United States. Fehn has synthesized an assemblage of existing heterogeneous elements: circulation, trees, topography, weather, context, and natural light into a coherent project to display art from the Nordic counties. The project is well situated and could not be placed anywhere else and work in the same way. But how is this plot, this narrative, constructed and is it different from Fehn’s other work? To respond to this, I will introduce Kearney’s next topic.

---

«Though much has been written – specifically in this journal – about the pavilion and the Pritzker Prize winning architect, few authors have approached it through the lens of storytelling.»

### 2. RE-CREATION (MIMESIS)

The second topic introduced by Kearney is re-creation, named also as mimesis. This is not a passive imitation of reality, or worse, kitsch. Rather, it is an imaginative re-description that captures the real meaning of our lives. Kearney again builds upon the narrative theory of Paul Ricoeur who discussed the re-telling of our lives through a circle of triple mimesis: the pre-figuring of our life as it seeks to be told, con-figuring of the text in the act of telling (described above as plotting),



Plan, Venice pavilion. The USA pavilion to the left.  
TEA SVERRI FEHN SAMLET OF ARBHYGGE, ÖBVLUS FORSLAG, 1991.

and re-figuring of our existence as we return from narrative to go from text to action. When asked how he begins a project, Fehn replied “By falling asleep – dreaming about the theme and the site in an unrealistic way and from that point I begin to gather all information and finally put the story together”.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Fehn moves from the story (text), to making architecture (action). So, to ask again, what is the story that Fehn tells us? How can we read this building?

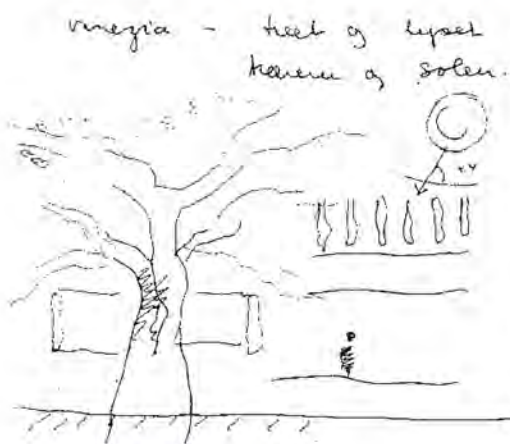
Fehn won the competition to design the pavilion in Venice after completion of the Norwegian Pavilion in Brussels. In many ways the project in Venice echoes some of the same issues raised by its Brussels counterpart. Both are defined by an articulated roof plane, both were originally intended to be produced off-site and then assembled in-situ, both define rooms with a minimum of enclosed walls, both blur the distinctions between interior and exterior, and both rely on the site for clues to organize the projects. However, the projects are clearly distinct from each other. The concrete of the roof joists has been mixed with the typical creamy white limestone of Venice to offer a light that is definite, but familiar. Due to cost issues, the project in Venice was constructed in-situ. The interior rooms are defined by existing trees and circulation patterns more than by walls. In many ways, Fehn’s mimetic re-figuration of the site and of the earlier pavilion in Brussels resembles an act of translation. As a translation, however, Fehn’s pavilion in Venice, offers a very specific approach.

In the text *Experiences in Translation*, Umberto Eco describes many variations of translations. One of these, re-writing, uses James Joyce’s epic *Finnegans Wake* as an example. The language of *Finnegans Wake* poses serious problems to the typical interlingual translation because, as Eco points out, it is a plurilingual text, conceived by an English speaking (and writing) author dependant upon aural, etymological, and visual play within the English language. In a sense *Finnegans Wake* is already translated from English! When Joyce was approached to have the work translated by an Italian, he insisted on doing it himself, as was also the case with the French version.

To translate the text into another language required Joyce to think and conceive as another. For example, Joyce adjusted the English text to a language (Italian) that does not have as many monosyllabic words, different etymologies, distinct rhythms, rhymes, and references. As a result, the text is not a direct translation, but literally a re-writing, and entire sections do not resemble the original. Fehn has done the same thing with the pavilion in Venice. Rather than simply mimicking the Norwegian Pavilion in Brussels or, even worse, a vernacular wooden hut from Norway, he has made an imaginative translation into a foreign context.

Kenneth Frampton has argued that the square plan of the building, and specifically the corner, is a reference to the Doge’s Palace. He also suggested that the structural efficiency of the roof system is a result of the influence of Jean Prouvé. Frampton even goes so far as to contend that the form of the translucent panels hung in between the concrete joists is derived from the canvas roof of the Citroen 2CV. Perhaps. But it seems more appropriate to propose that the form and orientation of the building is less about specific formal references than a careful re-figuration of the site, the means of construction and the program. In other words, the meaning of the project does not rely upon the reference to a classic French automobile or an iconic Venetian building, but rather on relation to the existing trees, the slope of the site,

«... it seems more appropriate to propose that the form and orientation of the building is less about specific formal references than a careful re-figuration of the site, the means of construction and the program.»



Sketch, Sverre Fehn.  
TEA SVERRI FEHN SAMLET OF ARBHYGGE, ÖBVLUS FORSLAG, 1991.

the pathways that existed before the pavilion, ways of making, and the very nature of the program of a pavilion. But this leads to another question and our next topic: What does it say that is specifically “Nordic”?

### 3. RELEASE (CATHARSIS)

Mimetic action, according to Kearney, weaves together the past, present, and future to recognize events as both cumulative and oriented. Stories alter us and bring us to places that are essentially other. In this way, we may experience a catharsis. The experience of catharsis requires distance and detachment, but also involvement and empathy. According to Kearney, “It is precisely this double take of difference and identity – experiencing oneself as another and the other as oneself – that provokes a reversal of our natural attitude towards things and opens us to novel ways of seeing and believing.”<sup>4</sup> Fehn discussed precisely this novel way of looking at familiar architectural elements after returning from a trip to Morocco. He said, “You suddenly feel as if the walls are not simply to bear a roof or make a house, but at one moment made to provide shade from the sun, the next to be support for your back, in the autumn a rack to dry dates on and in the spring a blackboard for the children to draw on. It is the same with the roof and the floor. The different parts of the whole house are regarded as domestic furnishings.”<sup>5</sup> He continued, “I discover things that allow me to discover myself. Visiting French Morocco in order to study its primitive architecture is not like going on a trip to discover new things. What happens is that one recognizes.”<sup>6</sup> Fehn talked about his trip to Morocco less in terms of a tourist viewing a more primitive culture than as a traveler who recognizes his own experience of making through that of another.<sup>7</sup>

During his travels in Italy, Fehn was moved by the quality of light. He explained, “In the north you are moving in the fog, you are moving in a world which has no shadows, in a way where the shadows do not define anything. If you make a piece of architecture in the south of France or in Italy, the shadow is there immediately, you can make a little curve in the wall and you’ll see it at once. But the sign would be invisible in the North. It is another light in which you walk. And that also makes architecture more mysterious, more romantic, more undefined.”<sup>8</sup> It is here that Fehn, I argue, has experienced a catharsis. Through his travels away from home, he is able to recognize the distinct nature of Nordic light. The project then becomes a way of finding that Nordic quality of light in a different context. He explained that the goal of his project was to “construct a roof to protect the paintings and sculptures from direct sunlight, and to provide an atmosphere of the shadow-less world of Scandinavia, where the work of art had been created.”<sup>9</sup> But it is not only Fehn, but also the visitor to the pavilion that experiences catharsis.

Entering into the pavilion, one senses a change, but it is not the same as walking through the entrance door as in the other pavilions. The light changes, but it is a gradual shift and it is difficult to pinpoint when you are fully immersed. I have sensed this sort of light only a few times before. Once, at the Myyrmäki Church in Vantaa, Finland by Juha Leiviskä, I wandered in on a summer afternoon and was struck by the calm evenness of the light. Perhaps this is the “shadowless” light of the Nordic nations that Fehn described. Fehn, however, does not rely upon tired clichés of Nordic identity – wooden huts and well-patterned wool sweaters – but, rather, he is able to carve out a shadowless light using local means and materials. Like a careful translator he is re-telling a Nordic story in a foreign language. Living in Venice for a while, your eyes adjust to a light that is always being reflected and projected, from the glittering canals to the honey-like golden light of the mosaics in San Marco. For a little while, during the Biennale, one can find a sense of light that is not known elsewhere on the island, but is recognized by the traveler.

### 4. WISDOM (PHRONESIS)

Kearney next asks if there is a truth proper to fiction. His response is that there is, and he defines it as phronesis: “a form of practical wisdom capable of respecting the singularity of situations as well as the nascent universality of values aimed at by human actions.”<sup>10</sup> While there is always a suspension of disbelief in any story, we do need to relate the events of the story to the external criteria of evidence in our world. Simply put, a story needs to be believable. This does not reduce our experience of fiction and our world to a relativistic position; rather, narrative holds

---

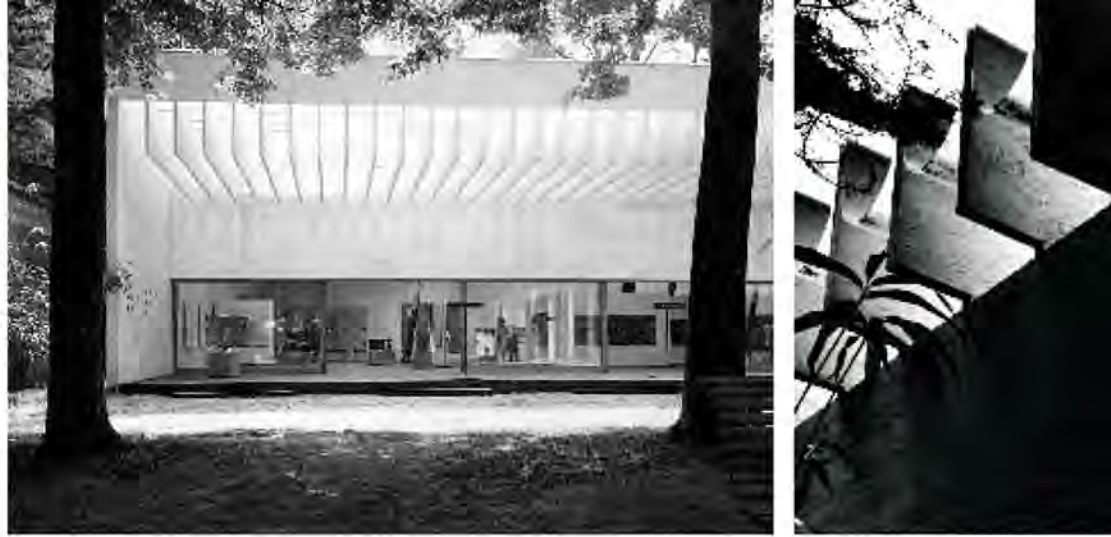
«Living in Venice for a while, your eyes adjust to a light that is always being reflected and projected, from the glittering canals to the honey-like golden light of the mosaics in San Marco. For a little while, during the Biennale, one can find a sense of light that is not known elsewhere on the island.»



Travel sketch from Venice, 1933, Sverre Fehn  
IRA SVERRI FEHN BAARLEDE ARKITEKOR, OPEFOS FODLAG, 1997.

Right: The Nordic pavilion seen from the park.  
Middle: Detail of the roof structure.

FOTO: PER NASIONALMUSEETS ARKIV



the potential to both make real possibilities and possible realities.<sup>11</sup> The “truth” of Venice, for example, is revealed in one’s own experience of the city, certainly, but that experience may also be affected and made more rich by the narratives of the city like Joseph Brodsky’s *Watermark* or Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. Both discuss very specific instances of Venice and also comment on our shared experience.

Extending the question, is there a truth proper to architecture? Louis Kahn’s conversation with a brick is always in the architect’s mind. Does Fehn respect the true nature of the material? Is it “truthful” to propose a roof in concrete that resembles wooden joists? The roof has not fallen, so it has proven to be structurally sound. Certainly this is not the only criterion by which Fehn has determined the form. If one looks to the Exeter Library by Kahn, the enormous concrete crossbeams that hover above that building’s central atrium room are certainly not only structural. The cool blue light that the concrete deflects into the atrium below makes a contrast with the warmer yellowish light that filters into the row of individualized carrels found on the edge of the building. The concrete beams are not required to only span an opening and support a roof. Rather, they respond to a number of diverse phenomena, including the quality of light and sense of monumentality. Similarly, in the Nordic Pavilion, the 1 m by 6 cm concrete joists, separated by 52.3 cm to form a 2 m thick brise-soleil, are not employed simply to span an opening.<sup>12</sup> Rather, they help to invoke the “shadowless” Nordic light described by Fehn. The depth of the roof construction, combined with the wafer-like girders, prevents the sunlight from directly reaching the floor. The grid, however, is not continuous. It stops in front of and frames the existing trees. The beam that supports the roof splits just before it meets an existing tree. In this way, the room is evenly lit and the existing trees are able to grow. And so Fehn has solved the specific problem of spanning a room, but the project also helps to frame a shared horizon. This brings us to our final topic.

##### 5. ETHICS (ETHOS)

Kearney reminds us that, “Every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller) telling something (a story) to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world).”<sup>13</sup> We may question where the meaning of such a story exists: with the teller, or the listener, in the structure and form of the story, or even in the listener’s response? Depending on your philosophic bent, you may privilege one over another. Kearney proposes that a hermeneutic approach espoused by such philosophers as Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer may have the potential to hold all four responses (teller, story, listener, reference) in balance. This interplay of agencies not only affords a potentially rich and grounded reading of work, it also provides a particular experience of selfhood and, by extension, identity.

Christian Norberg-Schulz, writing with a more intimate knowledge of Norwegian identity than I, explained, “Even today, the Norwegians are urban dwellers who are nevertheless incapable of relating to urban traditions. The idea of self-sufficiency remains, and with it, the distrust of those who claim to be more proficient in specialized areas. This results in a loss of the capacity to judge according to the qualitative parameters, and to create places that are both contemporary and genuine.”<sup>14</sup> By questioning the relationship between “contemporary” and



The Norwegian pavilion at the World Exhibition in Brussels, 1956–58.

FOTO: FRA NASJONALMUSEETS ARKIV

“genuine”, Norberg-Schulz problematized most urban Norwegian architecture proposed after the Second World War. He himself made the observation that the introduction of Modernism into the vocabulary of Norwegian architects added a patriotic flavor to the debates regarding a “national” or a “classical” aesthetic.<sup>15</sup> The role of the vernacular in that discussion only adds to the confusion.

The public gardens in Venice is a site in which the questions of “contemporary” and “genuine” are as present as they are in the Norwegian context. Fehn has demonstrated that the issue of architectural identity, however, is not solely an aesthetic or referential issue, nor must these terms be seen in opposition; one can be concurrently contemporary and genuine. The meaning of a building, however, can never simply be reduced to a structural, tectonic, aesthetic, or formal analysis alone. Nor is it simply the atmosphere or feeling that the building might evoke, or only the intention of the architect. While each of these issues is important, none quite completely communicate the identity of the building. Each of these criteria together forms the nature and meaning of a building. When one makes architecture it is always for another. It is an immanently social act, just like storytelling. As important, this recognition of “the other” is inherently ethical and leads to a sense of identity and selfhood that is indispensable to any sense of responsibility. I would argue that the Nordic Pavilion reveals this. The project is a fusion of the Nordic and Venetian horizons. The Nordic identity, then, is not imposed upon another, but revealed with the other. When you consider architecture in these terms, identity cannot be understood as a nostalgic style to be imitated but rather as recognition of oneself across time and place through interaction with another. Fehn knew that this is found through storytelling. In a conversation with Per Olaf Fjeld, Fehn noted that “You are part of another’s shadow, and you are no longer alone. It is here that the story is told.”<sup>16</sup> And it is here that the meaning of architecture may also be found.

#### POSTSCRIPT

The Nordic Pavilion sits across from the pavilion for Venezuela (literally, “little Venice”) designed by Carlo Scarpa, that eminently Venetian architect. The similarities between Fehn and Scarpa require more words than can be offered here, though it is interesting to remember that Scarpa once described himself as “a man of Byzantium who came to Venice by way of Greece.” To continue the story, perhaps, one can claim that Sverre Fehn is a man of Morocco who went to Oslo by way of Venice.



MARC J. NEVEU ER EN AMERIKANER SOM STUDERTE ARKITEKTUR I FRANSK KANADA, FØR HAN FLYTTET TIL ITALIA FOR Å LESE 1700-TALLSFABLER OM ARKITEKTUR. HAN HAR NYLIG FLYTTET TIL USAS VESTKYST FOR Å UNDERVISE I ARKITEKTURENS HISTORIE OG TEORI.

#### NOTER

1. «Vladimir Nabokov – A Candid Conversation with the Artful, Erudite Author of *Lolita*» av Alvin Toffler (*Playboy Magazine*, januar, 1964 vol. 1: 35-45).
2. Se for eksempel sitatene i *Architecture+Urbanism*. (januar 1999) s. 17: «I see materials as letters we use to write poetic thoughts.» s. 17: «We work with letters, an alphabet, we write a story. The story and its structure are inseparable. The poetic idea needs the support of structure to exist. We should have a story to tell. The one that strikes me as being the most poetic is the idea that mankind has a life after death.» Og s. 19: «Detailing is the story of the meeting point between materials.»
3. Det er i denne teksten viktig å skille mellom handling (*plot*) og handling (*action*). I oversettelsen har jeg derfor oversatt den engelske ordet *plot* med det norske «handling», og det engelske *action* med det norske «aktiv gjerning» eller «gjerning». Overs. amm.
4. *Architecture+Urbanism*. (januar 1999) s. 17.
5. Richard Kearney *On Stories*. (London: Routledge, 2002) s. 140.
6. *Sverre Fehn: Samlede arbeider*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz og Gennaro Postiglione (Oslo: Orfeus Forlag, 1997) s. 242.
7. *Sverre Fehn: Samlede arbeider*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz og Gennaro Postiglione (Oslo: Orfeus Forlag, 1997) s. 242.
8. Jeg refererer her til den distinksjonen Paul Bowles trekker mellom en turist og en reisende i sin roman *The Sheltering Sky*. Jeg introduserer boken her primært for denne sammenligningen, men også fordi Bowles på samme måte som Fehn ble radikalt påvirket av sine reiser i Nord-Afrika. Bokens tittel refererer også til sitatet «Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose», som virker særlig passende i forhold til de gjennomstukne takflatene i Fehns paviljong i Venezia.
9. *Sverre Fehn: Samlede arbeider*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz og Gennaro Postiglione (Oslo: Orfeus Forlag, 1997) s. 248.
10. *Architecture+Urbanism*. (januar 1999) s. 21.
11. Richard Kearney, *On Stories*. (London: Routledge, 2002) s. 143.
12. Denne formuleringen har jeg fra min lærer, Alberto Pérez-Gómez.
13. Som nevnt følger dragerendene i oppriss mønsteret i triglyfene i fasaden på USAs paviljong. Selv om triglyfene og metopene i denne fasaden er typiske elementer i den klassiske orden, er de referanser til drager-endene i en trekonstruksjon som siden ble gjenskapt i stein, og «ektheten» i fasaden er derfor problematisk. Sammenlignet med denne er Fehns arkitektur i grunnen mer ekte i sitt forhold til materialene.
14. Richard Kearney, *On Stories*. (London: Routledge, 2002) s. 150.
15. *Sverre Fehn: Samlede arbeider*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz og Gennaro Postiglione (Oslo: Orfeus Forlag, 1997) s. 41.
16. For en kort oppsummering, se Christian Norberg-Schulz, «The Poetic Vision of Sverre Fehn» in *Sverre Fehn: Works, Projects, Writings, 1949-1996*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz and Gennaro Postiglione (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997) s. 32-41.
17. *Sverre Fehn: Samlede arbeider*. Red. Christian Norberg-Schulz og Gennaro Postiglione (Oslo: Orfeus Forlag, 1997) s. 243