

11° east:

The intersection of Scarpa and Fehn

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ABSTRACT: On the advice of Jørn Utzon, Sverre Fehn travelled to Morocco in 1952. The influence on his own work of the architecture he experienced in Morocco is well documented by Fehn and scholars alike. His own essay published in the same year of his travel on the architecture of Morocco is a testament to the influence. It is clear from the scholarship that Fehn learned as much about himself and his Norwegian identity as he did the “primitive” architecture of Morocco. A decade later, Fehn travelled to Venice for the opening of the Nordic Pavilion at the 1962 Biennale. While in Italy he met with Carlo Scarpa and toured the recently renovated Castelvecchio museum in Verona. Less studied is the influence of Fehn’s trip to Venice and, for example Scarpa’s museum on Fehn’s own work and, specifically, the Storhamarlåven in Hamar.¹ This essay will demonstrate the intersections that exist between the two museums designed by Scarpa and Fehn. Importantly, the intersections reveal as much about the specificity of place and identity as they do the ability to transcend both. Oddly enough, both museums intersect at 11 degrees east.

KEYWORDS: Fehn, Scarpa, Storhamarlåven, Castelvecchio, precedent.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to a monograph on Sverre Fehn from 1977, Francesco Dal Co makes the link between Carlo Scarpa and Fehn directly. He stated, however, that,

It is useless to try to establish precise analogies with the work of Carlo Scarpa, with whom Fehn, during those years, became acquainted while working on the Pavilion of the Nordic Nations in Venice. The relationship with Castelvecchio, Scarpa’s museum masterpiece, is direct and unequivocal. But this is only the result of a dialogue between two architects who share analogous ideas. Like Castelvecchio, Hamar possesses a critical intelligence and a selective culture. Every choice during the planning process was the result of an interpretation; each choice implies a risk. (Norburg-Schultz and Postiglione, 1997, 15)

Notwithstanding this “direct and unequivocal” correlation between the two architects and their work, Dal Co does not name, describe, critique, analyze, or demonstrate any such relationship. To do so would be, as he states, useless. It is simply taken as fact. Oddly enough, the direct relationship between Fehn’s work in Hamar and Scarpa’s in Verona, however undocumented, persists. Many authors reference a relationship between the two architects as a clear statement of fact without ever definitively demonstrating any correspondence or dialogue.²

We do know, however, that Fehn was in Venice intermittently from 1958-62 while working on the pavilion that Dal Co references. Their meeting, as described by Fehn years later, was not exactly rich in dialogue. As Fehn recalled,

I remember my short meeting with Carlo Scarpa in Venice. I had an appointment, but he arrived very late. I talked about Oslo, but for Scarpa it was somewhere beyond the Alps, and he remarked, “For me, there is no culture north of the Alps.” (Fjeld, 2009, 64)

The dialogue mentioned by Dal Co, I would propose, was less between the two architects than between Fehn and Scarpa’s work. Fehn was certainly a keen observer and admirer of the Italian’s projects. In an article from 2003, Fehn references Scarpa’s approach to situating objects in the new context of a museum.

Carlo Scarpa had a fight with an object’s place over the horizon. How many fittings of iron, metal, marble, tree, and concrete were created to hold the crucifix in one specific location in a room where it would meet its new light. (Fehn, 1982, 165)³

In an undated interview transcribed by Kirsti Krekling of the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, Fehn responds to a similar question concerning the placement of objects.

It is a new room. There you are touching on an object’s placement. How should you operate in the new room? How high should the object be placed above the ground? How do you re-create the object in a different environment? That is what it is. That is where Hamar is different. There I was inspired by modern Italian museums, where they work with objects that are torn from the context and entered a new, literary, form.⁴

It is easy to assume that Scarpa designed the “modern Italian museums” mentioned by Fehn—the Canova Plaster Gallery in Possagno and even, perhaps, the many exhibitions and gallery renovations that occupied Scarpa through the early 1960s. It is also clear, however, that not much direct evidence exists to support a rich and varied dialogue between Fehn and Scarpa. In the following sections I will demonstrate the similarities both situational and intentional between Fehn’s Storhamarlåven in Hamar and Scarpa’s Castelvecchio in Verona. In doing so, I hope to shed light on a more productive approach to precedent.

1.0 SITE

Many similarities exist in both the site and program of each museum. To start, both were designed within existing buildings with a long history of use and re-use. In the mid 1950s, Castelvechio's newly appointed museum director, Liciscio Magagnato, first enlisted Scarpa to renovate the west wing of the original building and clear away the partially demolished Porta del Morbio, a gate that had originally dated from the 12th c. This was simply the most recent in a long series of transformations to the complex. The Castelvechio was originally a 14th c. fortified castle built into the city wall alongside the Adige. It was then converted to a military barracks while under Austrian rule and then finally transformed into a museum in the early 1920s. At that time the architect Ferdinando Forlati was hired by Antonio Avena to *restore* the building in a more appropriate manner. He did so by decorating the interiors to resemble an early Renaissance palazzo and masking the exterior with faux gothic details to include pointed, ogive and trefoil arches. Scarpa's renovations, radically different than Forlati's, removed the false Renaissance trappings and continued through 1973. The first exhibition designed by Scarpa was "Da Altichiero a Pisanello" in 1958. The work, along with the famous equestrian statue of the Cangrande, established the museum as one with direct affinities to the cultural heritage of Verona.⁵

Similar transformations occurred in Hamar. By roughly 800 CE Hamar was a regional center of religion and trade. After the introduction of Christianity into the region, Hamar was chosen to be the location of the bishop and the royal estate was taken over to become a cathedral and bishop's residence. This is one reason why so many archeological sites are in the region. The bishop's residence was fortified with a ring wall, ramparts, embrasures, palisades, and gate towers. The Reformation, in 1536, transferred political power to the King from the Church, and many bishops were then exiled to Sweden. The Bishop's palace in Hamar was converted to an estate for a feudal lord. During the Nordic seven-year's war, the estate was partially destroyed and then, at least 100 years later and under control of the crown, the barn buildings were constructed that form the basis of the existing museum. In 1947 excavation began and continues to this day. The Storhamarlåven was intended to house the ongoing archeological discoveries of the site. Evidence of at least three buildings existed prior to Fehn's intervention and the detritus from each is still being unearthed. The objects on display are not considered, necessarily, to be art but do tell a very specific story relating to Norwegian identity.

2.0 ENTRY

In both museums the entry must be found. A visitor to Castelvechio leaves corso Cavour and enters under a flanking tower on the south side of the original castle. One of the most fraught design decisions was to place the Cangrande to the far left of the courtyard where it is somewhat precariously raised up on an exterior platform. Arguably the most symbolic piece in the collection, the Cangrande becomes the keeper and guardsman of the museum and, indeed, this is how Scarpa referred to it. In counterpoint to the Cangrande is the actual entry, located on the eastern edge end of the façade. Scarpa moved the entry from the center of the façade to this new location. A double row of hedges prevents the visitor from making a direct route to the entry. The axiality of the hedges is parallel to, and foreshadows the organization of, the galleries. To enter, one makes a quick right and then left, goes past and around a small fountain, makes another left then right turn and, finally, enters into the museum. The entry half-wall directs the visitor to the museum and away from the exit stair descending from the second level. (See Fig. 1) The entry is certainly intended to slow the pace of the visitor prior to entering the museum and also to offer a variety of perspectives.

At Storhamarlåven, Fehn has located the entry at what appears to be the back of the building. One leaves the parking lot on the northeast side of the complex, walks along the north wall and turns left directly in front of the ruins of the cathedral. Opposite the ruins, an opening in the stone wall is shrouded by a plate of glass in which a glass door sits and demarcates entry. Once inside, visitors find themselves under a large concrete ramp, standing on a dirt floor and looking out to a similar opening in another stone wall that now sits in front of them. Exiting through the glass door opposite the entry one finds a concrete ramp that extends up and around the courtyard and then, finally, back into the interior of the building. Once again inside and turning left, the ramp continues through the middle portion of the museum. (See Fig. 2) Along the ramp sit three concrete boxes inside of which are medieval artifacts uncovered from the site.

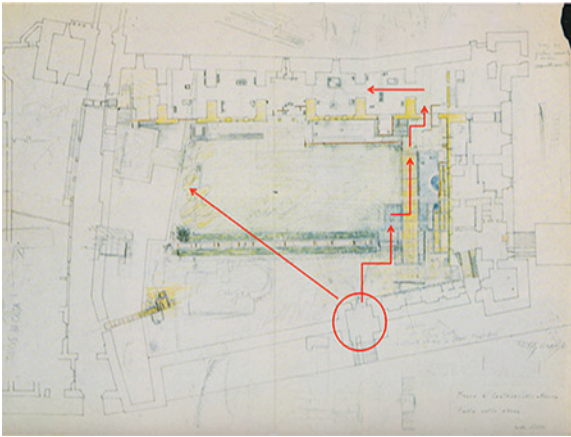


Figure 1: Entry sequence, Castelvechio.

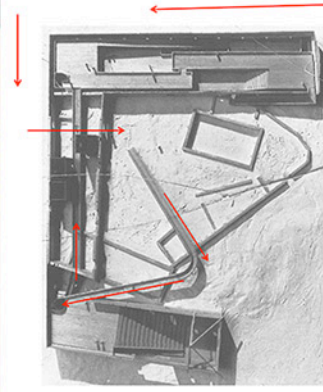


Figure 2: Entry sequence, Storhamarlåven.

In both instances, the visitor is intentionally slowed down. For Fehn, this was central to the design of the museum. He described the museum experience as follows,

Let us stroll up to the barn, pause for a moment, still our lives and allow these ruins to enter our minds. (Fehn, 1993, 139)

The threshold into both projects is elongated and, with each twist and turn, the visitor very much becomes aware of their body in space. Further, both projects situate visitors within a cultural and physical horizon as part of the entry sequence. The Cangrande statue, so important to the story of the museum, was located and relocated many times before Scarpa finally placed it on the pedestal where it now sits. Even though the statue now sits perched at the west end of the northern façade, it is the first thing a visitor sees when entering the courtyard. Though separate from the museum, the pedestal supports the statue at the same level as the first floor of the museum, literally extending the horizon. At Storhamarlåven, the ramp also refers to a horizon, but here it is the actual horizon to which one relates. As you climb the ramp, just at the point where you begin to turn back to the building, your view is directed to Lake Mjøsa, the largest lake in Norway and central to the development of Hamar. (See Fig. 3)



Figure 3: View from ramp at Storhamarlåven.

3.0 INTERIOR

Once inside Castelvechio the visitor is on axis with an enfilade that cuts through five galleries on the ground floor. The organization of the floor was pre-existing and rather than deconstruct the centuries old building, Scarpa chose to work with it. In each of the rooms, however, Scarpa organized objects in very particular ways. Work is placed so that one rarely confronts it frontally. Nor is one able to walk into a room and quickly survey all of the work at once. Objects are placed at differing heights, with different orientations, and even in the floor. One enters and might notice the fall of a fabric in the light, set against another color, or perhaps the profile of a sculpture framed in the next room. One's interaction with the work is temporally varied and not equidistant; in a way it is more dance than wandering. One can see this in an early sketch showing a visitor's movement through each room. (See Fig. 4) From drawings we can also see that Scarpa intended the Cangrande to be viewed from a number of positions and over time. No one view is privileged, but rather the visitor's experience combines to form his or her own whole. It is essential that the experience of the work unfolds and occurs in time. The first floor galleries mimic the organization of the ground floor but Scarpa moves the circulation to the exterior wall alongside the river. At the conclusion of the galleries is a

stair back down to the entry where the visitor is again confronted by the one-point perspective of the ground floor galleries.

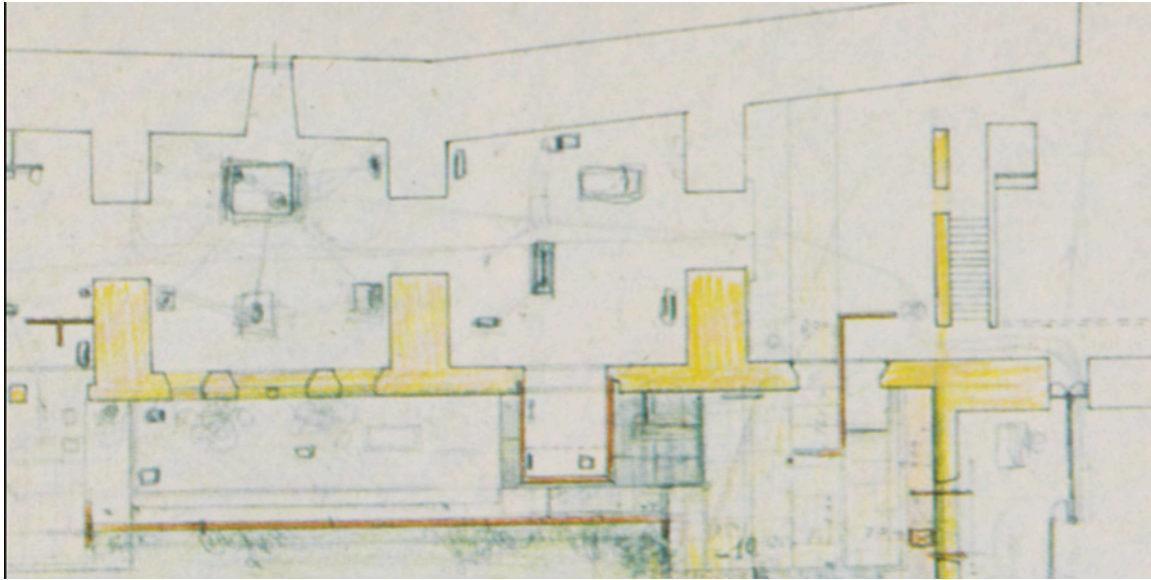


Figure 4: Plan sketch showing object location as well as the path of a visitor. (Olsberg, 1999, 71)

A similar sequence unfolds at Storhamarlåven. Once inside, a concrete ramp dissects three concrete boxes, inside of which are the objects excavated from the Bishop's manor. The concrete bridge also allows the visitor to observe the walls of the original structure from an elevated perspective. Here, similar to the enfilade at Castelvecchio, one can choose to walk quickly through the exhibits or to pause and linger amongst the artifacts. Continuing along the ramp, past the three small concrete rooms and turning right into the northern wing one finds artifacts unearthed from the period after the site had been converted to a working barn. Objects in the north wing of the museum vary in size – from a boat to utensils – and allow for a much more varied display. The floors are pulled away from the existing walls and are cut away so that the floor only occupies half of the area thus allowing for double height spaces adjacent to each floor. The plan of this wing is a development of the Norwegian Forestry Museum, an unbuilt project that preceded the Storhamarlåven.⁶ Similar to Castelvecchio, the circulation loops back around to the entry.

In both museums, the choreography of movement and the interaction with specific objects opens up to multiple readings of the same work; the visitor has the rare experience to see the familiar in an unfamiliar way. As Fehn stated,

It is the object that is constant, but the visitor experiences the exhibited object differently...The exhibitor injects a new personality into the object, but it is the visitor who decides if it is understood. (Fjeld 2009, 127-28)

For Scarpa, each room offered a dance where the visitor would enter and move around the room in concert with the various orientations of the work on display. The spatial condition of the Storhamarlåven (as a large hall) is different from that of the Castelvecchio (as a series of rooms). As a result of this, the objects on display at Storhamarlåven relate less to one another than those in Verona. Thus, Fehn carefully designed the location, orientation, and situation of each piece.

Fehn was well aware of the dangers in relocating artifacts. He asked,

Does there exist a greater loneliness than in that of a catalogued Egyptian mummy in foggy London lying in a shadow-less world of fluorescent light? All things excavated from the earth demand the magic of history. Artifacts must be reborn and find their 'space' in this new context." (Fehn, 1985 p.10)

Work on the display of the individual pieces was undertaken almost exclusively by Fehn – his office at that time consisted of himself and one assistant. Just as at Castelvecchio where Scarpa directs your gaze to the fall of a fabric in stone on the back of a sculpture, Fehn presents a visual dialogue with the work: a necklace that is set on leather to replicate the touch of skin; a scythe that casts a similarly slender shadow; a plow that cuts through a steel plate; a boat that is set on the opposite side of a balustrade so it can be seen from above as if it were in the water and, then, from below to notice the construction of the boat. (See Fig. 5) Many other examples exist. Though perhaps not unique in the contemporary world of exhibit design, work is not simply hung on the wall but the support acts as a key element in presenting a story of the work. In an interview in A+U, Fehn was quick to point out the deficiencies in the detailing between his work and that of Scarpa. That said, Fehn's approach is indeed quite similar.



Figure 5: Image of boat, outside of the gallery space proper, but able to be seen from above and below.

4.0 RESTORATION

Both projects are renovations to centuries-old buildings. This is a situational similarity. The understanding of the existing and the approach to new construction in Hamar, however, closely resembles that of Scarpa's work in Verona and is a much more intentional similarity. Neither architect attempted to restore the existing buildings to a particular time or period. Indeed, Scarpa's renovation removed the Renaissance interiors but left the "neo-Gothic" façade. Both projects were secured structurally. New construction was then carefully inserted into the old. In both projects the newer construction is often pulled away from the existing. This is seen in the new floor construction at Castelvecchio and the detailing of the glass panels over the openings at Storhamarlåven. There, all of the glass in the project sits proud of the stone. It is important to note that only the south wing is conditioned and occupied in the winter months. At both Castelvecchio and Storhamarlåven, none of the new structural elements come into contact with the medieval walls or ruins. A new roof structure is left exposed in both Hamar and Verona and each relate to respective vernacular barn construction. It was clearly not the intention of either Fehn or Scarpa to restore but to continue, rather, in the process of building.

CONCLUSION

James Joyce published *Finnegan's Wake* in 1939. An Italian publisher approached Joyce to translate the work from English into Italian. Joyce, who spoke Italian, was horrified by the direct translation and set out to write his own. Rather than simply translating the words into Italian verbatim, Joyce rewrote the text so as to capture all of the puns, word play, structure, and even sound and cadence of the original text into a new language. This is, I would propose, the sort of translation at play at the Storhamarlåven. Rather than mimicking form, both museums re-figure an existing building and contain collections that are very much of the place. The issue of identity, however, is revealed in more than the collections. Indeed, both museums offer a constant renegotiation with site. Beginning with the entry sequences and continuing on to the interaction with the displays, visitors to both museums are situated within the larger landscape as well as the constructed interior landscape. And, this mode of translation offers a productive use of precedent. Fehn's translation of Scarpa's museum is not formal, stylistic, or even referential, but rather, temporal, physical, tectonic, and situational. Oddly enough, both museums intersect at 11 degrees east.

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ENDNOTES

¹ As a note, the term Storhamarlåven refers specifically to Fehn's renovations and will be used through the remainder of the essay. Storhamarlåven translates as the "barn of Storhamar," the latter being the original name of what is now known as Hamar. The Hedmark Museum, a term typically used in scholarship refers to the larger complex of cultural museums in Hamar.

² Per Olaf Fjeld is still the best source for scholarship on Fehn and many references exist demonstrating the admiration that Fehn held for Scarpa's work. Very little evidence exists, however, that demonstrates a clear connection or line of influence. Two, of many, references include the following, first from the Store Norske Leksikon and then from the Norsk Biografisk Leksikon:

"Fehns arbeider er selvstendige, men arbeidene fremkommer ikke i et vakuum. Den Italienske arkitekten Carlo Scarpa har vært en viktig inspirasjonskilde, særlig for Hedemarksmuseet, som tydelig er influert av Scarpas museum i Verona." Fehn's work is independent, but his work is not completed in a vacuum. The Italian architect Carlo Scarpa has been an important inspiration, particularly for the Hedemarksmuseet, which is influenced by Scarpa's museum in Verona."

Ketil, Kiran. "Store Norske Leksikon." Accessed November 2, 2013. http://snl.no/Sverre_Fehn.

"Fehns andre store arbeid fra denne perioden, Hedemarksmuseet (1967-79), er hans hovedverk. Med det beveget han seg bort fra den rene modernisme og skapte sitt personlige arkitekturunivers. I møte med en komplisert situasjon og et rikt historisk materiale utviklet han et byggverk som blir stående – sammen med Carlo Scarpas Castelvecchio i Verona – som selve lærestykket på hvordan ny arkitektur kan møte fortidens spor."

Fehn's other large work from this period, Hedemarksmuseet (1967-79), is his masterpiece. With this project he moved away from pure modernism and created his own personal architectural universe. Meeting a complicated situation and a historically rich material, he developed a piece that remains standing – together with Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio in Verona – in itself is a learning piece of how new architecture can meet the past.

Ulf, Grønvold. "Norsk Biografisk Leksikon." Accessed November 2, 2013. http://nbl.snl.no/Sverre_Fehn/utdypning.

³ The original text reads as follows: "Carlo Scarpa hadde en kamp med gjenstandenes væren over horisonten. Hvor mange fitnesser av jern, metall, marmor, tre og betong ble skapt for å holde krusifikset på et bestemt punkt i et rom hvor det skulle møte sitt nye lys." Sverre Fehn, "Fragmenter av et museum og to utstillinger."

⁴ "Det er et nytt rom. Der man er inne på objektenes plassering. Hvordan skal du operere med det nye rommet? Hvor høyt skal gjenstanden settes over bakken? Hvordan skal den gjenskapes i et helt annet miljø? Det er det som er. Der skiller Hamar seg litt ut. Der var jeg inspirert av moderne italiensk museums...., hvor de arbeider med objekter løsrevet fra det litterære, og som har gått inn for deres form. Slik at formen kommer fram mest mulig."

⁵ The equestrian statue is of Cangrande della Scala (1291-1329) who ruled Verona in the early 14th c. and is known for his military conquests. Today, he symbolizes Veronese identity.

⁶ Fjeld quotes Fehn, "The Norwegian Forestry Museum is a forerunner to the museum in Hamar. This building has to do with a map and the river. It has to do with going down to the river, stopping and going back up again." (Fjeld, 2009, 112)