

Paper for 'The Complexity of the Ordinary' Conference, Fall 2006

The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture

A New Ordinary Ground: Utzon's Kingo Houses

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This paper considers building cultures as an aspect of context in reference to the architecture of Jørn Utzon, particularly the Kingo Houses.¹ Three different aspects are introduced in the first half of the paper: Kay Fisker's post-war doubt about the tradition, Doreen Massey's notion of uniqueness, and Utzon's Kingo Houses. They are followed in the second half of the paper by some more general considerations on building cultures in the work of Utzon.

Fisker's perhaps

I would like to start by introducing a prevalent understanding of building traditions in Denmark in the post-war period. A key figure in those years was Kay Fisker, who was editor of the magazine *Arkitekten*, professor at the Academy, and a practicing architect with his own office.² In 1950, Fisker published the article "The Moral of Functionalism,"³ in which his influential view on architecture was unfolded. Commenting on the post-war development, he rejected both the architects who "have reverted to historical forms" and the "attempts to make functionalism more palatable through decoration and other camouflage."⁴ Instead he believed that "we should be concerned with the development of the more vigorous and human side of architecture: a clear and functional frame around modern existence, created with new means; further development of the tradition, perhaps, but not a return to forms past and gone."⁵ The ethical stand suggested by the article's title was here expressed as a 'human side' within the contemporary lifestyle.

Fisker included a 'perhaps' after the phrase on the development of the tradition. There could be several reasons for this. For one thing, it seemingly plays down the importance of the tradition. It also calls attention to a more general doubt, which was not uncommon in the aftermath of the war, and indicates that not all kinds of developments were acceptable. As it is well known, Fisker did not at all give up the development of tradition. Elsewhere in the article he argued, in line with many other architects, that "the study of the art of building in previous ages is our best guide for the teaching of

¹ This paper is based on my PhD research at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture 2003-06. A part of my paper has previously appeared in "Inhabited Landscapes" in Michael Juul Holm et al., eds.: *Jørn Utzon. The architect's universe. Louisiana Revy 2* (2004)

² For an examination of his work and life, see Steffen Fisker et al., eds.: *Kay Fisker* (Copenhagen: The Danish Architectural Press, 1995)

³ Kay Fisker: "The Moral of Functionalism" in *Magazine of Art 2* (1950) pp.62-67

⁴ Fisker: "The Moral of Functionalism" p.66

⁵ Fisker: "The Moral of Functionalism" p.66

form, but it must be seen against the social and cultural background of its time and not, as in periods of eclecticism, be regarded as a basis for imitation. The architecture of the past should be studied as the classical scholar studies Latin: not in order to speak the language but to understand its structure and coherence.”⁶ The interest in the architecture of a particular place with its specific mode of building and living was maintained by Utzon in his work, although with a further questioning than Fisker’s subtle doubt.

On a far larger scale

The second aspect that I will introduce here is an understanding of the uniqueness of place (and of context) as it has been discussed by Doreen Massey, written in part as a reaction to the interpretations of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Massey writes: “The uniqueness of a place ... is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of ... relations, ... processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, a region or even a continent.”⁷

Central to her argument is that “[s]pace/place is characterized, after Heidegger, as Being; and, as such, as a diversion from the progressive dimension of Time as Becoming.”⁸ From this reading, she points out three particular problems. The first one is “the idea that places have single essential identities.”⁹ She refuses both that place has only one identity and that it is permanent. Secondly, she argues against “the idea that the identity of place ... is constructed out of an introverted, inward-looking history.”¹⁰ Lastly, she considers notions of place that “require the drawing of boundaries”¹¹ as highly problematic. In response to these three aspects, Massey states that “places are processes, ... [they] do not have to have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures, ... [and they] do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal differences and conflicts,” concluding that “none of this denies place nor the importance of the specificity of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced.”¹² From these arguments, her above notion of a ‘uniqueness of place’ is defined.

⁶ Fisker: “The Moral of Functionalism” p.66

⁷ Doreen Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” (1991) in Jon Bird et al., eds.: *Mapping the Futures* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.66. The full quote is: “The uniqueness of a place, or a locality, in other words is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, a region or even a continent.”

⁸ Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” p.63

⁹ Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” p.64

¹⁰ Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” p.64

¹¹ Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” p.64

¹² Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” pp.66-68

According to Massey, this definition “allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.”¹³ Her viewpoints have been critiqued from several positions, especially within sociology and geography. It has been questioned whether they are “establishing an orthodoxy of the contingent and the open.”¹⁴ Also, it has been noted that it can be “hard to point to anything specific about it [place, as she defines it]. ... Is it no more than an accidental coming together of many different flows in one location?”¹⁵

The Kingo Houses

Thirdly, I would like to present aspects of Utzon’s Kingo Houses with the courtyards as the focal point. In collaboration with Ib Møgelvang, Utzon won first prize in the architectural competition ‘Scanian House Types’ in 1953 with a proposal for concentrated residential projects on the outskirts of the towns. The proposal, entitled ‘Private Life’, was further developed over the following years in a succession of housing projects, only some of which were built.

One characteristic of the individual residential unit in the competition proposal and of the subsequent projects was an interior courtyard with buildings on one or more sides, surrounded by a sheltering wall. This created a wealth of possibilities for individualizing and varying the dwelling unit through rebuilding and extensions according to changing needs, without spoiling the totality of the project. As the name of the competition proposal suggests, the surrounding wall gives the residence a mainly closed exterior, while the glass facades towards the courtyard mean that each unit is given its own close outside space, where family life can unfold. For Utzon the courtyard is a way of grounding the building and of creating a dialogue with the landscape within which it forms a part. Utzon was also aware of various types of courtyard houses from other building cultures; but it is crucial, as Tobias Faber has noted,¹⁶ that the inspiration and references always undergo a metamorphosis that results in a new, personal architectural idiom.

Over the next few years the ideas for the courtyard house were realized in two major projects in Elsinore and Fredensborg, where the landscape and social aspects were refined. In the Kingo Houses near Elsinore from 1956-59 the courtyard houses are organized on different levels that follow the contours of the terrain around a lake and a valley. The characteristic Danish moraine landscape is emphasized in a playful sequence of the courtyard houses in displacements and changing heights

¹³ Massey: “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place” p.66

¹⁴ Felicity Callard: “Doreen Massey” in Phil Huppard et al., eds.: *Key Thinkers of Space and Place* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) p.224

¹⁵ Tim Cresswell: *Place. A short introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) p.74

¹⁶ See Tobias Faber: *Jørn Utzon. Houses in Fredensborg* (Berlin: Ernst and Sohn Verlag, 1991) p.6, where Faber writes: “Utzon conducted studies in the Mediterranean countries, southern France, Spain and Morocco, as well as Mexico, China and Japan. It is difficult to point to [a] direct influence in any of these cases. Utzon has always managed to convert his impressions into personal, imaginative ideas through a kind of metamorphosis.”

with varied, rambling greenery in between. A similar quality is found in the Fredensborg Houses, started in 1959, where the courtyard houses are organized in one long, winding formation on a south-facing grassy slope. In both housing projects the courtyards, each demarcated by an L-shaped house on two sides, are oriented either towards the south west or the south east to get as much sunlight as possible into the dwelling.

Differences and exceptions make the recurrent figures of the houses possible. The encircling party walls split, fold and assemble in continuous processes throughout the building complexes, where the same side of the wall alternates freely between forming the outside of one house and the inside of another. Within each dwelling unit the walls have varying heights adapted to the amount of light and view available at that particular place. From the wall a chimney rises for each home unit as a recurrent marker, and in repeated displacements these link the homes in a collectivity. The many variations anchor the individual home to its specific place in the landscape and give the complex as a whole a unique, singular appearance. The walls, floors, and roofs of the buildings are constructed in brick/tile, which gives them a unitary, monolithic character with the bonding and tactile surface of the brick functioning as decoration. The use of one consistent material for all the main components of the building, and the social and spatial interweaving of the housing units, are recognizable from other building cultures, for example adobe architecture and North African kasbahs.

Foreign building cultures play a significant part in Kenneth Frampton's understanding of Utzon's work. He argues: "A prominent element in Utzon's architecture is his transcultural intention, his tendency to seek inspiration outside the Eurocentric domain. This critical, cross-cultural stance informs almost all of his architecture ... [The] courtyard house is a synthesis of many cultural strands, in part Islamic, in part Chinese, in part an antique type of Mediterranean or African origin."¹⁷ But as Frampton rightly notes "the deeper impulses lying behind such hidden, possible unconscious references are as elusive as they are complex."¹⁸ While the influences on Utzon are of importance, even if elusive, it is equally imperative how building cultures are experienced today in his projects and what implications they have on the sense of place.

Building cultures

Building cultures are inseparable from places in Utzon's work and an important part of the context. In the following, they are considered as three kinds: building cultures of the regions of the project, building cultures of other disparate regions, and building culture transcending any particular

¹⁷ Kenneth Frampton: *Studies in Tectonic Culture. The poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995) pp.247-48

¹⁸ Frampton: *Studies in Tectonic Culture* p.287

region.¹⁹ Building cultures are not granted or given, but rather constructed through interpretations and usage, whether these are tacit or explicit. The different interplays of the three kinds of building cultures display the changing importance between them in various projects.

There is a commitment to the regional building cultures of a project's location in Utzon's architecture. It is an aspect that Christian Norberg-Schulz has capitalized on in his interpretation of Utzon. However, there are also projects, like the Sydney Opera House, which indicate that it is not always a point of departure or a predominant aspect. A project can be observed as part of not just one, but several regional building cultures. As 'cultures', they are akin to Fisker's 'tradition'. For Utzon, building cultures were a condition as well as a resource for a project. He approached them without a desire to nostalgically recover them, to entirely grasp them, or to uncritically become part of them. This did not mean that he was careless or superficial in regard to building cultures. Rather, he was thoroughly engaged with selected aspects of them, whether it was organizational principles, construction methods, or something else. Utzon's approach was characterized by a unorthodoxy and lack of prejudice. The building cultures were utilized as an opportunity in the design process to explore the uniqueness of the location. The ability to comprehend and alter a few, central aspects of the regions' building cultures into new, yet recognizable structures is outstanding in Utzon's work.

Apart from the regional building cultures of a project's location, there are also aspects of other disparate building cultures in Utzon's architecture. Other building cultures, like ancient ones, are not primarily manifested figuratively, but integrated into the architecture.²⁰ Often the location of a project does not have any prior connection to those building cultures; instead, they are geographically and temporally distant from it. The echoes, or resonances, from disparate building cultures are potentially evoked indirectly, but not necessarily. The exact sources of the resonances are of less importance when experienced. What matters here is that they destabilize places in Utzon's architecture by their dissimilarity with the building cultures of the project's location, providing a sense of otherness and unfamiliarity. In gathering aspects of disparate building cultures, the projects renounce a single, predefined identity and do not produce any definite new ones. Rather, they make opportunities for the creation of multiple tentative identities through evocation. The destabilization through disparate building cultures also liberates the places from their settings.

There are also aspects of building cultures in Utzon's architecture that are not specific to just a single or a few building cultures. Some of these aspects could be considered as a sort of archetypes, principles, or prototypical diagrams; not in the sense that they are fundamental or essential, but as

¹⁹ As the differentiation between regional building cultures, whether local or disparate, and a transcending building culture is gradual the division of them is simplifying their relation. Also, a distinction between local and disparate building cultures is not always possible.

²⁰ There are also examples of direct figurative use, thus Weston writes: "The Islamic inspiration at Farum [City Centre] is almost too obvious to need comment. ... At Farum, the Islamic inspiration produced a conspicuously Islamic image, too overt to find favour in Denmark." from Richard Weston: *Utzon* p.255

they are present in many past and contemporary building cultures. Among the most archetypal aspects in Utzon's work are courtyards and platforms, as well as dualities such as platform versus roof and refuge versus exposure.²¹ These and other archetypes are not just formal, but also linked to, for example, social usage and construction methods. Archetypal aspects were studied by Utzon in countries that he visited or was interested in, and they are evident in his projects, no matter the location of these. Utzon might very well have considered archetypes as part of the "common languages of building."²² If the archetypal aspects of building cultures are considered to have a transcending quality, they arguably provide places in Utzon's work with a kind of universal and even archaic character.²³

It is partially in the interplay of regional, disparate, and archetypal building cultures that Utzon's architecture is created and potentially experienced. The building cultures are highly integrated with one another and therefore not easily separable in the work. The differentiation into three kinds is nevertheless useful in detecting various resonances. The differentiation could be considered as a further qualification of Frampton's description of Utzon's architecture as 'transcultural', which was to suggest a 'critical, cross-cultural stance'. In much of Utzon's architecture, there is a synthesis of some aspects of the building cultures, while there is also a tensional relationship of other aspects.

The impact on place from the various building cultures in Utzon's work could be considered in reference to a part of a lecture by Michel Foucault, who argued that "[w]e are in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered."²⁴ As the architecture of Utzon brings together aspects of temporally and territorially distinct building cultures, it could be argued that the places contain a degree of 'simultaneity', or co-presence. It is a co-presence that lets 'near and far' come together, either 'side by side' or by synthesis, and provides a potential for different experiences of place in his work. One experience is a kind of otherness within the place caused by an indirect presence, or reminder, of elsewhere. Another is a kind of expanded, boundless place 'on a far larger scale', to use Massey's words. However, when discussing the impact of building cultures, it could also be argued – which I will not be able to do here – that it is the latency in the indeterminate of them and their relations, which is most significant in the emergence of places in Utzon's architecture.

²¹ The former, 'platform versus roof', is rather common in research on Utzon. The latter is suggested by Richard Weston: "From place to Planet: Jørn Utzon's earthbound platforms and floating roofs" in Sarah Menin, ed.: *Constructing Place. Mind and matter* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.251-52. The notion of refuge versus exposure was discussed in landscape architecture by Jay Appleton: *The Experience of Landscape* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1975)

²² Richard Weston in a conversation with me on April 12, 2006 in Copenhagen; see my PhD dissertation (available soon) for a transcription of the conversation.

²³ Both 'universal' and 'archaic' have been used by other researchers to generally describe Utzon's architecture.

²⁴ Foucault, Michel: "Of Other Spaces" (1967) in Joan Ockman, ed.: *Architecture Culture 1943-1968. A documentary anthology* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and Rizzoli, 1993) p.420. Using this quote is not to argue that the places discussed here are necessarily heterotopias.