IN THE SAME WAY AS THE NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE HAS SOME PECULIARITIES like the letters Æ, Ø and Å, Norwegian architecture does not look exactly like any other nation’s built culture. Dating back to the Middle Ages, the Norwegian stave churches have their distinct profile which stands out as something special in the history of European architecture. Looking at the present time, one can say that Norway’s architectural identity comes from its close relation to the landscape and nature.

That does not imply that Norwegian architecture is romantic, contrary to what is commonly understood of the close relation between nature and romanticism. This modern misperception is unnatural to Norwegians, living in a sparsely populated country with a long and exposed coastline. The capital Oslo, Norway’s biggest city with a population of half a million inhabitants – a little more than ten percent of the nation’s population – is smaller than many European cities. But being the nation’s capital gives Oslo an international flair that few other cities of its size can match.

The major part of Norwegian architecture is, as in most other western nations, founded on the modern understanding of...
today's building methods and language. The Oslo Opera House, opened in April 2008, shows that the close relation to nature leads to some very specialized solutions.

THE OPERA HOUSE IS COMPARED TO AN ICEBERG rising from the fjord. We are a nation known for weekend hiking in forests and mountains, but the Opera House with its roof sliding at an angle into the water has made urban hiking popular. I have seen people on the roof in the middle of the night, and outdoor summer concerts attract massive crowds to the top of the roof.

Contrary to this popular picture of the Opera House, its foremost quality is in my opinion the way it connects the building's interior with the urban grid surrounding the Opera. With its huge glass wall that cuts through the roof, the interior wall surrounding the theatre hall lights up at night and becomes visible. It sends its visual impact through the glass walls into the neighbouring city streets, making the interior wall an integrated part of the urban scene. With both these qualities (the walkable roof and the lighted interior) the opera architect Snøhetta has managed in a majestic manner to give a monumental piece of architecture a human touch.

THESE QUALITIES ARE IN ACCORDANCE WITH POETIC MODERNISM, a term attributed to the famous Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926–2000). It implies a «soft» or human touch to the architectural expression arising from Norberg-Schulz' other important term «Genius loci» or the soul of the place. The most famous interpreter of these terms internationally is Sverre Fehn, who died last year at the age of 84. Being the first Nordic architect to receive the Pritzker Prize (often referred to as the «Nobel-prize» of architecture) in 1997, he has left his mark on generations of Norwegian architects. Being a teacher most of his life his most productive years architecturally came later in life. In the last ten years of his life he was given im-

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important commissions, e.g. the renovation and extension of the National museum of Architecture and the headquarters for the publishing house of Gyldendal, both in Oslo.

But contemporary Norwegian architecture is not dominated by old or dead men. On the contrary, Norway has a long tradition for giving young architects opportunities and that has led to a constantly renewed interpretation of architecture and the built environment’s relation to humans and nature.

One example is the National Tourist Routes, a public initiative to enhance the experience for those who travel by car or bus through some of the most beautiful landscapes of Norway. From platforms and architectural installations the public are offered spectacular views of the scenery in a built environment often designed by young architects. In combination with art and sculptures like the publicly funded «Artscape Nordland» this gives modern-day tourists a spectacular experience.

Norway’s oil-generated economy has in many ways boosted the nation’s possibilities over the last decades. The advanced technological constructions in the North Sea have in a strange way also given the Norwegian society a special awareness of sustainability (the term was promoted or even invented by Norway’s former Prime MinisterGro Harlem Brundtland when she headed a UN committee) and the environment.

Traditional Norwegian buildings like the stave churches as well as private homes and farm-houses were built in wood. Today a lot of experimentation is going on with different wooden constructions, and an example is the Sami Parliament in Karasjok, a modern interpretation of the sami people’s «lavvo» (a tent they live in when they follow the migration of their reindeer herds). Wooden constructions appear in all shapes and forms. The young architects of Brendeland & Kristoffersen Arkitekter in Trondheim attracted a lot of attention when they built a six...
storey housing block all in solid wood. The building’s construction and its odd shape have made it into a landmark for experimental design with traditional materials.

Oslo is regarded by many as one of today’s most interesting cities for architecture. The Opera House is only the first stage of a huge development. In the 1980ies and the 1990ies the western part of the city centre was developed with the commercial and residential area «Aker Brygge» on the waterfront. This development is now being extended with «Tjuvholmen», and at the same time office blocks, residential housing and museums are being planned and built around the Opera House in Bjørvika, in the eastern end of the city centre.

Norwegians have a genuine belief in the true value of democracy. Therefore high profiled building projects like the «Barcode» office and residential buildings in Bjørvika have raised a lasting debate. The same has happened with the Spanish architect Herreros Arquitectos’ proposed museum for the world-famous artist Edvard Munch’ s art. But the plans for a new library in the same area, by Norwegian architects Lund Hagem Arkitekter and Atelier Oslo, have received little more than general acclaim for the innovative use of new building materials, the shape and the solutions for the interior. So, in a few years time the Oslo Opera House will only be one of many interesting buildings in the Bjørvika area - as well as in the rest of Norway.

Jarmund & Vigsnæs are among the still rather young architects who draw on a mix of classic functionalism and more modern forms. The red villa situated in Oslo is a mix of functionalism and more free cuts in the form, while the Svalbard Research Centre derives its shape from the wind and weather conditions close to the North Pole. (Photo: Jarmund & Vigsnæs)

The Sami Parliament is a modern interpretation of the aboriginal Sami people’s traditions. It is situated in Karasjok on the Finnmarksvidda, in the northernmost part of northern Norway, where temperatures easily drop to minus 40 degrees Celsius. (Photo: Stein Hekkanen AB)

The opera architect Snøhetta are also involved in the Barcode development. This bank office building is yet to be built. (Illustration: White View/Seahetta)

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