Bright Colors Beneath a White Shroud: Scandinavian Postmodernism and the Conservative Imaginary

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Both academia and popular culture have neglected the movement of Scandinavian Postmodern architecture (ca. 1975-1990), a tradition eclipsed by Modernism as the prevailing aesthetic and social project in Scandinavia. In light of the last decade of Postmodernism's resurgence in the architectural academy globally, and recent uses of Postmodern architectural principles by right-wing movements in Europe, it is a crucial time to revisit this obscured regional Postmodernism. The movement of Scandinavian Postmodern architecture coincided with political shifts in the region which were supported by both the right and left of the political spectrum causing a shared space of conflict and imagination. The political dimensions of Scandinavian Postmodernism will be explored primarily through a close reading of Danish Postmodern Architect and Writer Ernst Lohse's 1986 manifesto "Our Construction Should be Based in the Irrational" (translated into English for the first time for this paper), where, despite Lohse's own sympathy for the environmental movement, he adopts familiar conservative rhetoric, bemoaning the loss of Western culture and the limitations of the welfare state. This paper will reconstruct the obscured history of Scandinavian Postmodernism, using the case of Ernst Lohse to locate discourse that reveals the movement as a site of contention and overlap between diverging political groups and its particular appeal to the conservative imagination.

A WHITE SHROUD

Modernism lives on in Scandinavia. In most Western countries, Modernism's aesthetic project began to unravel in the 1970s and '80s into a more diverse set of experiments that have been termed "Postmodern", and the Modernist social project more or less died with the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe. However, in Scandinavia, the popular consumer imagination is constructed with terms like "Scandinavian simplicity" that help depict a continuous legacy of aesthetic Modernism beginning with early luminaries like Aalto and Utzon and evolving seamlessly into the minimalist home goods retailers of the present day; meanwhile, the social project of Modernism lives on through the Nordic Model. (1) Nevertheless, there was a dynamic Postmodern movement in Scandinavian architecture (ca. 1975–1990) that remains obscured by these dominant narratives. Scandinavian Postmodernism is crucially erased by academic historiography, as widely read surveys of both Scandinavian architecture and global Postmodern architecture fail to include Scandinavian Postmodernism. (2) The movement's obscurity is compounded by Postmodernism not being as commercially successful in Scandinavia as it was in North America; instead, Scandinavian Postmodern architecture remained small and oppositional, with most of its work being concentrated in forms of cultural production such as exhibitions like ARARAT at Stockholm's Moderna Museet (1976), The Presence of the Past at the Venice Biennale of Architecture (1980), and journals like Arkitektur (1976–2008). (3)

While the design work of Scandinavian Postmodernism challenged Modernism's puritanical aesthetic regime with colorful graphic sensibilities similarly to other western Postmodern movements, Scandinavian Postmodernism differed from most other contexts in that it also had a precise political agenda, challenging the Modernist model of a functionalist welfare state for universal subjects through the style's association with emerging political and economic forms. Scandinavian Postmodern architecture coincided with regional political shifts such as the centrist Swedish "Third Way"-a government structure based on concepts like personal freedom that was supported by radicals on both the left and right of the political spectrum who sought to escape the Modernist politico-economic regime. This paper seeks to build on Helena Mattsson's prior work in describing how political and economic shifts in Scandinavia in the '70s and '80s shaped the discourse around Postmodern architecture, causing it to become a site where "emancipatory movements like feminists, environmentalists and radical left-wing movements, overlapped (unintentionally) with conservative forces struggling towards a more liberal society."(4)

It is a crucial time to revisit this obscured movement. Today, reactionary critiques of Modernism that recall the discourse of Scandinavian Postmodernism are being rehabilitated by both the right(5) and left(6) of the political spectrum. Postmodern aesthetic tactics of pastiche and facadism are being used to prop up right-wing regimes in Europe as Yugoslavian government buildings are covered with vinyl stickers of faux-traditional ornament in what Marco Icev has called a "plan for the destruction of Modern monuments through Postmodernism". (7) Scandinavia itself has become a hotbed for debates around architecture along the themes of heritage, symbolism, and cultural identity in the face of mass refugee asylum-a small but growing right-wing faction challenges the region's longtime liberalism. In our disciplinary context, Jimenez Lai recently periodized a decade of Postmodern revivalism in the American Academy in Log 46 and in the same issue David Gissen observed that a more general return to classical motifs is occurring globally. (8) (9) A whole generation of students have been educated in this (neo)Postmodern regime and now move forward into practice, begging the question of what this tradition teaches and what baggage it comes with. Given this contemporary milieu, this paper's reconstruction of an early discourse of a little-known regional Postmodernism that is uniquely obscured by its own region's dominant narratives might help give broader context to these phenomena. This reconstruction rejects contemporary examples of insidious political uses of Postmodern principles while identifying similar strains of conservative thought within Scandinavian Postmodernism four decades prior, serving as a warning that classical and symbolic forms are always loaded, and we must be careful how we use them. Indeed, Scandinavian Postmodernism's tensions are precisely a result of its use of strong historical symbols which played into conservative aesthetic fantasies while simultaneously signaling towards more liberatory forms of self-expression that appealed to political progressives. Even Postmodernism's attendant political and economic associations in the region-variety, individualism, and the middle class—appealed to both groups, creating a shared space of conflict and imagination that has been obscured by dominant narratives of a continuous Modernist regime.

Like the snow that blankets the region for five months a year, Scandinavian Modernism covers up a more complex and colorful landscape beneath its pristine surface. This paper seeks to remove that shroud, shedding light on a largely forgotten movement through a close reading of the Danish Postmodern architect and writer Ernst Lohse's little-known 1986 essay Our Construction Should Be Based in the Irrational (translated into English for the first time for use in this paper)—an obscure manifesto for an obscured movement.(10) The case of Ernst Lohse will be used to reveal Scandinavian Postmodernism as a site of contention and overlap between diverging political groups, and elucidate the movement's particular appeal to the conservative imagination.

SOME BRIGHT COLORS

Lohse's 1986 manifesto, Our Construction Should Be Based in the Irrational, was written as part of a series of predictive think-pieces called "Our Culture Pointed Towards the 90s" for the Danish newspaper Kristeligt Dagblad. Lohse's decision to publish a piece which was to predict the future of Scandinavian architecture in a newspaper, particularly a centrist one like Kristeligt Dagblad (The Danish Christian Newspaper), was significant, as it marked a departure from his earlier efforts in writing both in terms of the piece's audience and approach. While he had previously written less polemical texts for academic outlets, and had built



Figure 1. Ernst Lohse, The Myth of Saint Sebastian, edited photocopy of drawing (Copenhagen, Kristeligt Dagblad, 1986).

some installations with aspirations to scale up to buildings, by 1986 only his drawings had gained any larger notoriety beyond the region: Peter Cook wrote a review about them for a 1983 issue of Architectural Review-the only English language review of his work to date.(11) Lohse's manifesto well embodies the contentions of the larger Scandinavian Postmodern movement; despite his own sympathy for the environmental movement (his design practice with partner Bente Lohse was named "The Green Studio"), Lohse adopts familiar conservative rhetoric, bemoaning the loss of mythologized Western culture and the limitations of the welfare state. Lohse's critique of Modernism and his proposition for a new regional avant-garde in Our Construction Must Be Based in the Irrational is broken up into three sections: Modernism's Denial, Rediscovering Our Cultural Heritage, and The Myth of Saint Sebastian. These sections will be surrounded with political, economic, and architectural context contemporary to when Lohse was writing in order to shed further light on the movement at large.

Modernism's Denial begins its critique of Modernism with a comparison between the aesthetic sensibilities of the 1980s and the Romanticism of the 19th century, borrowing the term "New Romantics" from the 1980s British music scene—a subgenre that included Boy George, Classix Nouveaux, Duran Duran, Flock of Seagulls, etc.—as a way to characterize the aesthetic preoccupations of the decade, such as sensuousness, theatricality, and symbolism. This affinity between the 1980s, the thenimpending 1990s, and the 19th century is "proven" in Lohse's estimation by the large 1986 renovation of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris to house 19th-century paintings. Lohse argues that the 19th century is so attractive to the minds of the 1980s precisely

because 20th-century Modernism denied the preceding century so consistently, enforcing a tabula rasa approach to history. This is well-covered ground. However, Lohse simultaneously constructs a more novel argument and explicates the title of his manifesto when he links these "New Romantic" tendencies to "the worship of the irrational—both in poetry and decadence". Here we might refer to Frampton's introduction to Towards a Critical Regionalism where he described the avant-garde as at times "virulently opposed to the positivism of bourgeois culture"—it seems that the role of avant-garde architectural movements is to periodically shed logic and rationality in the face of dominant normative regimes.(12)

Lohse conflates his obsession with the romantic and the irrational with religious devotion, setting up a binary between his own spiritually charged, irrational "New Romanticism" and the dominant regime of "soulless" modern technology as mutually exclusive spheres. Boldly—and I would argue ahistorically(13) —he asserts that architecture and technology are similarly opposed, claiming that in the modern technologized age, "architecture can no longer be called architecture," because concrete construction is "perverted". Rationalist Modernism is therefore merely a fetish while the irrational and romantic Postmodernism is true architecture.

Lohse extends his critique of technologized Modern architecture in Modernism's Denial by touching upon class relations, writing, "Who wants to live in the common modern concrete building? Nobody-except those who can in some way afford to escape it." Here, Lohse's claims intersect with larger economic and social forces changing the landscape of the building industry in Scandinavia, which, in the 1980s, was moving away from Modernist models like the Swedish "One Million Program", where one million new units of suburban low-income social housing were built between 1964-1974, to a more neoliberal model with most new construction being significant renovations of existing inner-city Modernist building stock into single family residences for the wealthy and middle class.(14) These renovations were an "elaboration of Modernistic form through the use of historical motifs" to mark one's individuality against the backdrop of universalist Modern architecture; they existed in a grey zone between Lohse's binaries, at once Modernist in their substrate and Postmodernist in their augmentation.

The next section of Lohse's manifesto, Rediscovering Our Cultural Heritage, engages with history asking, "Can we dream of a new, thrilling architecture of the future with roots in tradition, architectural language, cohabitation, and human expression that represents our cultural tradition and specificity?" Despite the call for specificity, Lohse's engagement with Scandinavian history and tradition both in his writing and his work is quite nonspecific—not once in his essay does he refer to a specific element or tenet of Scandinavian architecture he values nor does he further explain what he means by the Scandinavian "tradition". Lohse's relationship to history is



Figure 2. Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museum (1625)

mediated by a lens of fantasy and reinterpretation that characterizes the larger movement of Scandinavian Postmodernism, uniquely appealing to the conservative imaginary through its myth-making. Reactionary thought, as a particular tradition of right-wing politics, has been described in Mark Lilla's 2016 study of nostalgia's effects on politics, The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction, as precisely about recapturing a vague and idealized past in just the way Lohse is proposing.(15)

Lohse also engages with more concrete disciplinary concerns, casting phenomenology as an immediate populist vehicle, while coding abstraction as an intellectual, elitist pursuit that is too delayed in its decoding: "Art today no longer deals with abstract thought but is immediately concrete and sensual." Lohse addresses materiality, defining white walls and grey concrete as symptoms of "Modernism's ensnaring morality".

He proposes instead that "We bring color back into our houses and onto our walls" in order to "rediscover the entirety of our formidable culture heritage". Motifs from Scandinavia's regional cultural heritage rendered in vivid color are to be the source of liberation from Modernism's insidious morality— "We shall break free!". While Lohse began his manifesto with a well-trod critique of functionalism he marches forward into less familiar territory by introducing a kind of soft nationalism that conflates color and architectural effects with civic freedom and pride for a mythic cultural past.

The final subsection, The Myth of Saint Sebastian, is accompanied by one of Lohse's own drawings which bears the same title. He describes the work:

"I interpret the myth of Saint Sebastian as a picture of resignation: the most exalted resignation. The martyr accepts his fate and thinks of it impassively. Saint Sebastian is moved by the divine spirit so that he no longer feels the terrible physical pain afflicting him. Not only the arrows but also the divine spirit pierce his fragile flesh. This idea resurfaces in my drawing: architecture penetrating mere physical function, symbolized by the ruined concrete building. Simultaneously, there is a resignation present: a recognition that not all architectural visions are realized but must instead exist side by side with the uninspired."

There is an ambiguity present in this work and its description. Lohse himself seems to want to assume the mantle of the martyr of avant-garde Postmodernism, and his spectacular architectural intervention adopts the splayed posture of the martyr in many Saint Sebastian paintings, yet it is the Modernist concrete building that is actually pierced by Lohse's intervening "divine spirit" in the same manner as Saint Sebastian. It is as if, like in Eisenman's diagram of Libeskind's Jewish Museum that unfolds the "zigzag" against the initial penetrating void to reveal a figure that is almost identical to the original composition, these two subjects are also inextricable and symmetrical in their inversion: the martyr and its piercer endlessly reversing. (16) Lohse acknowledge the importance of the dialectical nature of the motif Saint Sebastian more generally, citing its functional doubling in art historical discourse, where it simultaneously performed religious and homoerotic roles. For Lohse, the martyr is an unstable and double subject: both his own mantle (regional Postmodernism) and that of his opposition (functionalist Modernism). In all this he seems to be partially resigning himself to feeling the "pain" of a practice of paper architecture despite his aspirations to move beyond the page, the object, and the installation—all mediums he had previously worked in and build at full scale in order to shape the built environment of Scandinavia according to his visions. He attempts to imbue the buildings he drew with a kind of vivid perceptual physicality, able to feel pain and commiserate with their author-recalling recent work in the ontology of objects.

Figure 3. Fantoft Stave Church Arson, built 1150, photograph (1992).

AN IGNITION

In the final sentence of Our Construction Should Be Based in the Irrational, Lohse predicts that "A strong symbolism will strike through the architecture of the century's last decade; it will be a time when we will again learn to refer to our thousand-year-old [Scandinavian] myths after sixty years of architectural puritanism." Lohse's prediction for Scandinavian architecture in the 1990s proved only partially true; while there was a reactionary turn towards Scandinavian history, it took a very different form than Lohse heralded. Instead of colorful Postmodern versions of historical motifs, the architectural images that characterized Scandinavia in the popular imagination during the 1990s was 12th-century stave churches set on fire in spectacular, violent citations of Scandinavian myth and architectural symbolism. Before 1992, an average of one stave church burned a year, but between 1992 and 1996 there were fifty stave church arsons that were largely attributed to, and claimed by, youth in the Scandinavian Black Metal Scene, itself a community plagued by political contentions.(17)

The vast distance between Lohse's architectural predictions for the region and the Church burnings which came to pass is significant yet the two are nevertheless partially linked through some shared rhetoric. The ideology of the Scandinavian Black Metal scene was built upon a reactionary rejection of the Modernist "social democrat utopia" afforded by Scandinavia's welfare state under the Nordic Model, and a "romantic nationalism" that rejected "soulless" contemporary Christian ideology in favor of a recaptured a Pagan past.(18) While Lohse did not live to see the maturation of the Scandinavian Black Metal scene (he died at the age of 50 in 1994), in all likelihood he would not have professed sympathy for the movement on aesthetic or any other grounds-especially since the church burnings were covered with extreme sensationalism by the media at the time. Similarly, the Black Metal scene with its commitment to dark, gothic aesthetics, never expressed any affinity for the colorful Postmodern confections of Lohse and



Figure 4. Ernst lohse. Western Gate of Copenhagen, photograph (1985).

others. Nevertheless, the tenets of the Black Metal scene are echoed by Lohse's own words, which, in Our Construction Should Be Based in the Irrational, point to "the welfare state's fantastic propaganda of happiness, a driving interest in therapy, and new religious movements," as symptoms of the disease of soulless Modern architecture that plagues Scandinavia.(19) Lohse also critiques the myth-less quality of contemporary Christianity, writing, "the new churches resemble factories. Or rather, the factories resemble the churches: with their chimneys reaching into the sky, they are far more sacred than the churches of today."(20)

While these two movements are in no way extensions of, nor sympathetic to, each other, the small similarities between the two point to the way in which many alternative culture movements in Scandinavia must necessarily position themselves as a reaction against Modernist principles. Indeed, the youth of the Black Metal subculture asserted their individualism by challenging the universalism of the Modernist Scandinavian landscape with aesthetic devices—makeup and costumes—in much the same way that Scandinavian Postmodernism did. The violent deconstruction of historical churches by members of the Black Metal scene diagrammatically recalls Lohse's own design work (which he boldly predicted as indicative of the future of the region) where a kind of colorful graphic violence strikes through historical subjects. The church burnings literally

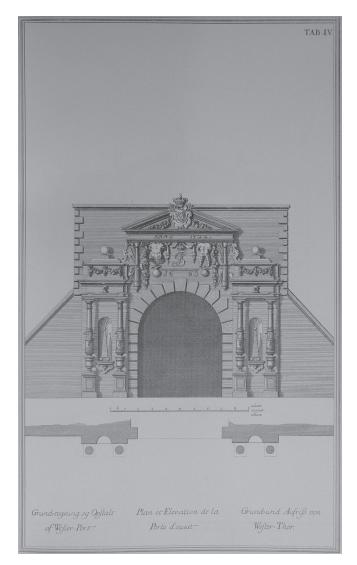


Figure 5. Lauritz de Thurah, Elevation of the Western Gate of Copenhagen: Built in 1668 by Frederik III and renovated in 1722 by Frederik IV, etching, from Den Danske Vitruvius (Copenhagen, 1745).

manifested Lohses's own assertion that "Culture lives where conformity is burned down".(21)

Lohse's imprecise yet nevertheless prescient predictions for the architectural culture of Scandinavia in the 1990s likely stem from his hope for the momentum building in his own work. His first built project, and one of the first examples of a mature and regionally specific Scandinavian Postmodernism, was a temporary gate leading to Strøget in Copenhagen—the longest pedestrian-only shopping street in the world—which was constructed in 1986, only a few months before he wrote Our Construction Should Be Based in the Irrational. The gate was controversial; despite Lohse's own self-professed quasi-religious affinity for Scandinavian history and symbolism, many claimed it was not Scandinavian enough. This sentiment was echoed in other critiques of Postmodern architecture in Scandinavia, a result of the movement designing avant-garde reinterpretations of historical structures rather than earnest reproductions. (22) The original review of the gate in the May 7, 1986 issue of Kristeligt Dagblad, titled And So Copenhagen Got a Gate Again, cast Lohse as a kind of architectural necromancer, a re-animator of long-dead historical structures: "The last time Copenhagen had a gate at this entrance was under the initiative of Frederik III, but that has fallen to the teeth of time and can today only be seen in The Danish Vitruvius."(23) The original design was built as its own kind of architectural curiosity, with cannon barrels used as columns supporting the main cornice, which were later removed during the 1772 renovation by Frederik IV pictured in an etching in The Danish Vitruvius. Lohse's multiple iterations of the gate design seem to reference both the original and its renovation in a careful negotiation of historic fidelity and Postmodern aesthetics—the final result hauntingly recalls images of the Fantoft Stave Church post-arson: both are husks of architectural history, deconstructed and symbolically potent.

However, the context surrounding Lohse's gate was quite different from that of 17th-century Copenhagen. Where the original gate had a guardhouse/customs checkpoint to its left and a market for selling hay and horses on its right, Lohse's structure was flanked by a luxury furs tailor and a Burger King. These adjacencies betray the larger politico-economic aims of the project, which was funded by the city of Copenhagen to increase tourism and promote the shopping district. Lohse originally planned to rebuild not just one entrance to Strøget but three, reviving the other gates Østerport and Nørreport so that the 17th-century fortifications might be reborn together as instruments of commercial spectacle, branding neighborhoods through an early example of the "pop up" format—a now familiar feature of the neoliberal landscape.

Once the temporary structure approached the date of its scheduled demise, the focus of discourse around the gate changed, becoming "no longer about art, but about politics"; a follow-up article in the July 17, 1986 issue of Kristeligt Dagblad read, "The gateway to Strøget has become the gateway to conflict", as opposing political and social groups fought over its demolition or preservation.(24) Tellingly, when the State Art Fund declined to support the preservation of the resurrected historical gate, it was members of one of the more conservative parties, characterized by its neoliberal Third Way politics, that campaigned for state funding of this public art piece writing, "It is pathetic and contemptuous for historical art like 'the Gateway' not to be preserved for the future". This is a reversal of typical conservative attitudes towards public arts funding in countries like the United States, and further proof that this regional Postmodernism appealed to conservative sensibilities that were uniquely Scandinavian.(25) In the end, the gate was destroyed. It is significant that this project, so visible in the public sphere after Scandinavian Postmodernism's initial incubation in academic journals and exhibitions, was such a site of conflict. The gate became a lightning rod, with discourse leaping from the page to the street towards its eventual eruption.

The partially reconstructed discourse of Scandinavian Postmodernism exemplified by Lohse's work and writing prefigures contemporary debates around Postmodernism as a site of contention for diverging political ideologies though its seductive qualities of fantasy, myth-making, and historical symbolism. A re-reading of Scandinavian Postmodernism pushes back against Postmodernism's more generalized historiography. It is not a purely aesthetic movement whose style was seamlessly assimilated into developer-capitalism as late Postmodernism was in the United States, nor does it support Beatriz Colomina's assertion that Postmodernism is fundamentally an American academic product of "graduates of elite universities" that sought to "restore the architect to a position of centrality" in the post-war era.(26) Instead, in Scandinavia, Postmodernism was a movement that became a site of legitimate social, economic, and cultural contention around avant-garde aesthetics that stoked conflict and debate around history, symbolism, and politics that literally ignited architecture itself-it seems we again await an impending ignition.

ENDNOTES

- The Nordic Model is the set of social and economic practices common to the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Finland), which, since World War II, continue to successfully champion the Modernist ideals of a technologically advanced welfare state for universal subjects.
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- There are some examples of built work such as Ernst Lohse's Dybbol Banke Visitors' Center (Denmark, 1990) and Jan Georg Digerud's Thon Hotel Oslofjord (Norway, 1985).
- Helena Mattsson. "Revisiting Swedish Postmodernism: Gendered Architecture and Other Stories." Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History 85, no. 1 (2016).
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- Marco Icev. "The Archive Is Burning." UCLA Urban Humanities Salon Exhibition and Symposium, June 2019, 46.
- Jimenez Lai argues that this period of contemporary Postmodern revival began with the global financial crisis and the release of the first iPhone and continues to the present day. Jimenez Lai. "Between Irony and Sincerity." Log, no. 46 (August 2019).
- 9. David Gissen. "Wake New History." Log, no. 46 (August 2019).
- All Danish texts were translated into English with the assistance of Henry Weikel, an Mst. Candidate in English Literature at the University of Oxford. Ernst Lohse. "Our Construction Must Be Based in the Irrational." Kristeligt Dagblad, July 26, 1986.
- 11. Peter Cook. "The Drawings of Ernst Lohse." Architectural Review 175, no. 1045 (March 1983): 22–25.
- 12. Kenneth Frampton. (1983) Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance. In, Foster, H. (ed). Postmodern Culture. London; Pluto Press. pp.16-30.
- 13. Technology has always defined the frontier of possibilities for a work of "architecture". Though, Lohse seems to be drawing a line between capital-A "Architecture" and "architecture"—the latter being, in Lohse's conception, the product of a technologically determined process and the former being some sort of amalgamated product of aesthetics, soul, and regional history.
- Helena Mattsson. "Revisiting Swedish Postmodernism: Gendered Architecture and Other Stories." Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History 85, no. 1 (2016).
- 15. Mark Lilla. "Introduction" in The Shipwrecked Mind: on Political Reaction. (New York: New York Review Books, 2016.) pp. xii.
- 16. Peter Eisenman and Ariane Lourie. Ten Canonical Buildings, 1950-2000. New York: Rizzoli, 2008.
- 17. Grude, Torstein. Satan Rir Media, 1998.
- Aarseth "Euronymous" Øystein, "Interview with Mayhem's Euronymous", 1992.
- 19. Ernst Lohse. "Our Construction Must Be Based in the Irrational." Kristeligt Dagblad, July 26, 1986.
- 20. Ibid.
- 21. Ibid.
- 22. Mats Tormod, "Venturi in Manhattan", Arkitektur, No , pp. 30-31 1980
- 23. "And so Copenhagen Got a Gate Again." Kristeligt Dagblad, May 7, 1986.
- 24. "Gate to Conflict." Kristeligt Dagblad, July 17, 1986.
- 25. Ibid.
- Beatriz Colomina, "Forward", Neo-Avant-Garde and Postmodern Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT, pp. 2-3