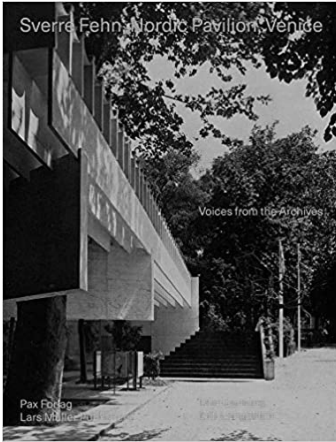


**Mari Lending and Erik Langdalen, Sverre Fehn, Nordic Pavilion, Venice. *Voices from the Archives*, Lars Müller Publishers, 295 pp. – 2021
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In 1958 the Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn won the competition for the design of the Nordic Pavilion in Venice, inaugurated in 1962. Drawing back on a rich archive on this masterpiece of post-war architecture, Mari Lending and Erik Langdalen tell a different story about the building than the commonly spread poetic and critical narratives. The book is composed of two parts: part one *Historicity of a Concrete Object* takes the readers through key moments of the “life of the building”: the cultural or geopolitical momentum, preparing the ground, the competition, the opening, the cooperations, etc. The second part of the book comprises invited contributions by a number of authors such as Adrian Forty, Camille Norment,

Helen Dorey, to mention just a few, who reflect on different aspects of the Pavilion. Straying away from the added mythical interpretations of its Nordic character, the book offers a close look at the densely factual and contextual reality of the Pavilion archive. This results in a meticulous study of the process of production of the pavilion, the site specificity, the materiality, the construction techniques as well as the myriad of actors involved in its making – from kings and ambassadors, through to museum directors, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, artists, gardeners and Venetian dignitaries, to lawyers, architects, engineers, construction managers, local providers and plumbers. What a magnificent crowd indeed gathered around a Nordic building in Venice. The great achievement of Lending and Langdalen’s volume is to turn the archive into a special *locus* where the different voices and technical anxieties of these actors can be heard, and their actions witnessed. Drawing on rare unpublished images and numerous photographs from Fehn’s archive, smartly chosen and analytically re-worked and ‘staged’ by the authors, the book outlines the importance of the archive as a networked entity creatively mobilised in search of *another* interpretation of the Pavilion. Engaging in a careful and erudite “material archaeology” of the archive, zooming in and out, looking at the back of the page, comparing details, juxtaposing layers of archival evidence, trying to find traces that the hands of all

those different participants have left on the yellow scruffy surface of these pages, the book makes two important contributions. First, it sheds light on Sverre Fehn as one of the most notable Nordic architects of the century. While the book accounts for the geopolitics and bureaucratic process behind a collaborative project between Nordic countries for this scale, it does not dwell for long on the context to seek for “explanations” of the Pavilion design. The perspective on Fehn’s work is unique – rather than drawing on the theories and the ideologies behind this masterpiece, it sheds light on the process and the working techniques of the architect and the other protagonists, the material choices and technical challenges. This process-driven and pragmatist interpretation, provided by Lending and Langdalen, deliberately “downplaying the hermeneutics” and restraining themselves from offering one possible interpretation sharply contrasts the common aestheticized discourse on Fehn’s work. In their interpretation the specificity of the building is understood through the small technical actions and challenges such as ‘transporting the Nordic light to Venice,’ “the materiality of Norwegian slate, the problem of ‘calculating the angle of the light’ to be able to create a different lighting, the “trees and the sun”, “the stability of the grid”, the effort to “create a shadowless space to protect the artworks”, the comparison between the engineers’ and the architects’ “interpretation of the roof”, the

attempts to “adjust the lateral stability” and the entire battle of technology and nature that the Pavilion enacted. In addition, the different chapters of the authors capture numerous stories of collaborations, richly documented and originally seized through the lens of the archival materials. Through a careful ‘detective’ epistemic approach to architectural historiography, Lending and Langdalen make visible numerous infinitesimal details commonly invisible in linear historical accounts (dwelling on success stories and architectural intentions rather than contingencies). They all come to the fore and gain life, voice and colour: the mistakes (of a tree wrongly measured), the technical choices, the misunderstandings, the exaggerated details, the unknowns. In the multiplicity of voices enacted, we hear some that are commonly forgotten in mainstream historiography. Be they contactors, plumbers, or Venetian bakers, slate or light, they all contribute to the polyphonic (and hybrid) assemblage that the archive becomes in this volume. The usual ‘suspects’ – engineers, patrons, politicians – are still there but in the background of this powerfully staged pragmatist story of the making of the Nordic Pavilion. Second, archives tell amazing stories – not just of the glorious achievements of powerful humans, but also of the material disobedience of nonhumans – tiles that ‘refuse to stick’, Italian lights that “disagrees” with the way Norwegian light

works, among others. Looking at it carefully, with scrutiny and care, Lending and Langdalen make us see the scribbles, the hidden marks, the scratches, the colour fading, the back side of the plan or the drawings. A true archival experience indeed. We commonly turn to the archive when an architect is effaced from official historiography or in situations of major lacunas, of accidental destruction or accumulation. Thus, the archive does not simply tell a story of architectural intentions but rather reveals complex logistics from the realisation of the project, construction details, various alliances and parentships. Debunking the myth of the Pavilion as an embodiment of Nordic spirit and atmosphere, a true model of Nordic collaboration, this close quasi-archaeological study of the archive illustrates that, in reality, most of the initiatives came from the Venetians and the intricate material and technical choices (ie the panels were not pre-fabricated, but they were casted on site) contributed to the Pavilion’s bespoke design. Treating a canonical example, by undermining the obvious and going against the mythical interpretations, *Sverre Fehn, Nordic Pavilion, Venice: Voices from the Archives*, is a meticulously researched and wonderfully presented inventive archaeology of an architectural archive that will be of interest to historians and theorists of architecture, to anthropologists and archival scientists. Striving to find all missing pieces, Lending and Langdalen turn

the archive on Fern’s Pavilion into an object of study, rather than simply treating it as a ‘source’. This results into a highly original volume that offers an unconventional interpretation of the often overlooked material and technological complexity of architectural production. When it serves the historians, the archive is invisible, mute, unchallenged, a source of materials ‘out there’; when it troubles them it resurfaces, it talks, and it interferes epistemologically. In *Sverre Fehn, Nordic Pavilion, Venice* the archive talks loudly and interferes epistemologically in a spectacular way to foreground a new awareness of “how” architectural archives are made and how their can “talk back” to architectural historians and theorists in a new, fresh and undoubtedly more eloquent, way.

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