

Barbara Miller Lane

## National Romanticism in Modern European Architecture



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to work on a movement in German and Scandinavian architecture called 'national romanticism'. In the later nineteenth century, architects in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland developed an intense form of nationalism, which led them to repudiate both the gothic and the classical traditions, and to seek the basis for a national style in the very distant past — in the early Middle Ages, or, increasingly, in "nordic" or "germanic" prehistory. The primitive models that they chose permitted them, around 1900, to create new forms: massive masonry buildings, asymmetrically arranged, rather castle-like in appearance; and wooden domestic buildings with heavy roofs, open plans, simple ornament, and a somewhat rural appearance.

The resulting buildings were related to contemporary *art nouveau* and *Jugendstil* work but also distinctively different from it, because of the historic and national elements. They were also innovative. They contributed to the development of an important tradition within modern European architecture that has not yet been fully understood by scholars. This is not

the streamlined, industrially-produced-looking work of the *Bauhaus* and the International style, but another tendency, equally modern, but more sensual, more dependent on natural materials, and thus closer to nature in appearance and implications.

In discussing national romanticism, I have traced the origins of the movement back to German romanticism and the period of the Napoleonic wars. Germany's cultural nationalism with its emphasis on the early history of the northern peoples contributed greatly to nationalist movements in Scandinavia, and to the development of preservation and restoration movements that favored the Romanesque and the prehistoric. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, German scholarship developed a view of German medieval architecture that stressed these early periods and incorporated many references to Scandinavian wooden churches and farm buildings.

Against this background of historical thought, architecture in both Germany and the Scandinavian countries developed revival movements in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. In each country Romanesque revival in larger structures such as palaces, museums and national monuments, and `Norse' or `Germanic' revivals in villa architecture, paved the way for the work of the national romantic architects of the turn of the century. Arts and crafts movements in Germany and Scandinavia, and the so-called *Lebensreform* movements of the later century also reinforced these revivals and were themselves absorbed into the thinking of architects at the turn of the century.

William II in Germany and Oscar II in Norway and Sweden were particularly important in encouraging medieval scholarship and medieval revivalism; they also helped to bring together German and Scandinavian architects. These emphases in German and Scandinavian thought, publications, and patronage then influenced scholarship and practice to a considerable extent throughout northern Europe and perhaps even in the United States.

By the end of the century a complex pattern of interaction existed in the architecture of Germany and the Scandinavian countries. The earlier developments in romantic philosophy, restoration and preservation, archaeology, revivals, historical scholarship (including archaeology) and royal patronage contributed to the work of such architects as Hans Poelzig, Martin Nyrop, Lars Sonck, Lars Israel Wahlman, Ragnar Ostberg and Magnus Poulsson, to name only a few. Some of these architects made the leap to modern architecture, and others remained more closely tied to the historical precedent. They built in a great variety of manners. But they all took as their starting point the monuments of the medieval past, and a sense of national identity derived from these monuments.

My book also deals with the legacy of national romanticism in the twentieth century. In Germany, innovative masonry and wooden architecture with medieval roots continued on into the 1930s, when it was sponsored by those among the Nazi leaders who were ideologically committed to the idea of a nordic race. After the fall of the Nazi regime, this kind of architecture was almost entirely discredited in Germany. In the Scandinavian countries, on the other hand, there has been a more harmonious joining of modern architecture and national romantic traditions, because nationalism was not discredited in the same way.

This study tells a new story, one that has not yet been treated in these terms by architectural historians. It also allows me to examine such issues as the relationship between architecture and other phases of culture, society and politics; the role of nationalism in the intellectual life of Germany as compared to the Scandinavian countries; and the part played by historical consciousness in artistic innovation. My method is more that of the political and intellectual historian than is sometimes true of architectural historians. My writing goes beyond the analysis of the individual building to consider the political context of the work and, more broadly, its relationship to the history of ideas, especially to the history of political thought.

During the past three years I have made extended research trips to Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. At the same time I have been working on a preliminary essay on "National Romanticism in Modern German Architecture". I spent the first months of my fellowship year completing this piece, which will appear in the fall of 1991 in *Nationalism in the Visual Arts* (ed. Richard Etlin, MIT). I visited and studied a number of German buildings and national monuments of the period 1880-1914 and also tried, by frequent visits, to clarify my understanding of medieval architecture in Germany. Trips to Finland and Poland were necessary, too. Some research remains to be done, but I was able to complete a first draft of the larger work on Germany and Scandinavia. I hope to finish the final version within the next eighteen months.

My colleagues were continuously helpful to me. There was no other architectural historian here this year, so the need to explain my work to interested non-specialists greatly refined and clarified my thought. I also benefited from the brief visit of Thomas Nipperdey, who has worked extensively on the subject of nationalism in nineteenth century German architecture.

Initially I had thought that I might also expand on some earlier work I had done on Albert Speer. Instead, I found that I wanted to refamiliarize myself with modern architecture and planning in Germany. I spent considerable time revisiting the buildings of Mies, Gropius and others

from the twenties, and looking at the most recent work in Berlin. I visited the *Bauhaus* several times. In April, I joined the *Stadtforum*, a group that advises Dr. Volker Hassemer, Berlin's *Senator für Stadtentwicklung und Umweltschutz*. As a result of this experience, my interest in Berlin has been powerfully strengthened. I think that my next book might focus on recent developments in the architecture and planning of Berlin.