

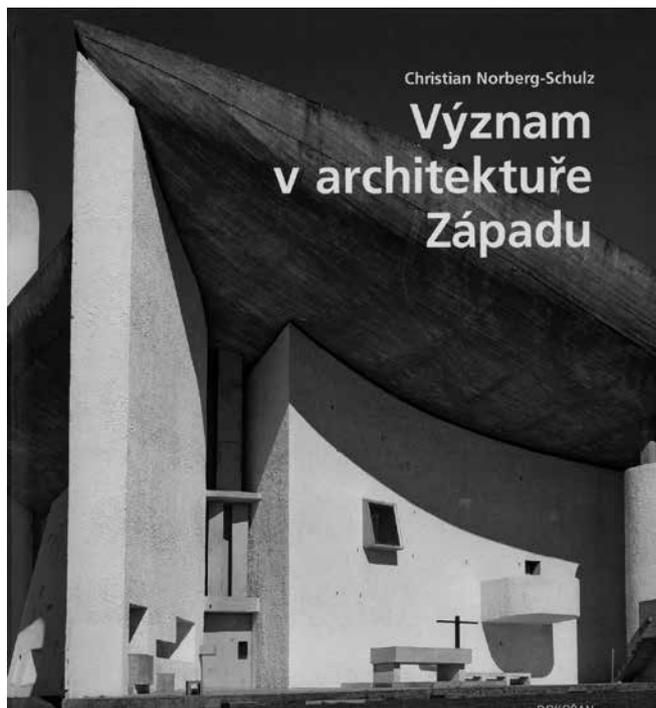
CZECH WAY TO CHRISTIAN NORBERG-SCHULZ ČESKÁ CESTA K CHRISTIANOVÍ NORBERGOVI-SCHULZOVI

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CHRISTIAN NORBERG-SCHULZ

VÝZNAM V ARCHITEKTUŘE
ZÁPADU (MEANING IN WESTERN
ARCHITECTURE)

Translation Jiří Tourek
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For Czech and Slovak readers, Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926 – 2000) is a thinker now accessible through three published volumes: following *Genius loci*, for which the Czech translation is enriched by the afterword of Petr Kratochvíl,¹ came *Principy moderní architektury* (*Principles of Modern Architecture*, 2016). Completing the group is *Význam v architektuře Západu*, translated by Jiří Tourek, a graduate of Charles University's Faculty of Humanistic Studies whose areas of interest include both philosophy and the theory of modern and contemporary architecture. As such, we are presented with a unique situation allowing for the observation of the significance of the publication of this translation in a wider perspective.

Norberg-Schulz is commonly assigned to the category of *architectural phenomenology*. Of the three translated texts, this characterisation applies only to the first,² and unquestionably the most widely known in the Czech-Slovak context – while *Meaning*, the development of which is described in the author's foreword from January 1974, represents a return to Norberg-Schulz's structuralist principles of reflection; more precisely, Norberg-Schulz never fully abandoned this stance, so that the phenomenological tendency forms one intellectual line interwoven with a structuralist one. Of course, the division of Norberg-Schulz's writings into phenomenological or structural is in

itself both oversimplistic and factually incorrect (it is, nonetheless, surprising that much more has been said about Norberg-Schulz in relation to phenomenology than has been said, indeed at all, in relation to existentialism), yet it is also not without significance, since at the least it indicates one of the possibilities for orientation in the exceptionally complicated interweaving of standpoints in his approaches.

Should we wish to untangle this interweaving, we should at first recognise that these texts mix a strictly scholarly approach with poetic evocations, reflected even in the author's handling of his terminology. In the 'scientific' passages he takes pains to deploy the most precise designations, sometimes even choosing words with clear historical meanings that today appear unusual (e.g. *pentyrigion*, *ricetto*) – here I should point out one error in the Czech translation: in place of *trigidarium* the correct word is *frigidarium*. By contrast, in the more poetic passages he uses standard terminology (*meaning*, *existence*, *structure* etc.) without always implying the same thing in each instance. Here, his aim is evocation of a situation, an experience to be called forth within the reader, an idea with a strong associative potential – while in the first instance the linguistic means are motivated exclusively by the need to arrive at a precise description, selective in the details yet simultaneously underscoring the analysis towards the essential

argument, reaching towards a striking, often authoritative conclusion. Before attempting to answer the question why the author acted in this way, it is worth looking at those aspects of *Meaning* that contradict the phenomenological approach.

1) It is the *quality of the work* that Norberg-Schulz stressed; its authenticity in the sense of preserving its historical integrity. Wherever this integrity is in any way disturbed, he does not hesitate to criticise – in Alberti's Basilica de Sant'Andrea in Mantua, he rejects the "somewhat confusing interior decoration" (p. 122) along with Juvarra's Baroque cupola; the pilgrimage church in Santiago de Compostela is disparaged for the surrounding of its core in "rather dubious Baroque", (p. 83) yet wherever he finds an intact whole, he never hesitates to call this fact out explicitly (the cathedral in Speier). When working with a building unfinished or altered, he adds the missing elements in the reconstruction sketch.

2) It is the developmental model that he finds determinative. Development occurs a priori and architectural history registers the individual phases of the developmental continuum as it is displayed through significant buildings.

3) It is the political, social, or even generally cultural significance of a given building, which does not belong to the enclosed world of architecture but is fully integrated into a wide range of extra-artistic relations.

4) It is the authorial subjectivity in descriptions and evaluations. Norberg-Schulz gives full rein to his enthusiasms and never refrains from generalising judgments (for instance, his claim about Michelangelo that "his works belong to the few truly fundamental creations of mankind") (p. 122), in other words believing in the lasting validity of a canon of values, embodied by works and artistic personalities. No less definitive, though, is his ability to rehabilitate a neglected work, even if earlier research cast doubt on it (most notable for the complex Medinet Habu), though always performed for a defined and specific reason.

5) It is the psychological motivation of architectural and urbanistic work. The authorial depictions of buildings cannot avoid the word *desire* (in such phrases as desire for spatial integration, desire for linking spaces, et al.), or in other words, the task of the architectural historian is to uncover the untamed, emotional side of creation, something not personalised but emerging as a historical constant, as the trait of a finished era yet simultaneously

a principle that in a different epoch is applied anew with undiluted intensity. In mannerism, of course, the psychic role changes significantly: the human subject entering into contact with architecture ceases to be its mere observer and becomes its victim and – fully in the spirit of literary existentialism – tragic figure, for whom the vestibule (ricetto) of the Biblioteca Laurenziana "becomes an unendurable place", from which the "only escape" is the staircase (yet beware, "this too is a hostile element"), not to speak of the Piazza de Campidoglio, with its frightening "tension between the enclosing trapezoid and the expanding oval". (p. 138 and 141)

There is yet another noteworthy aspect – provocatively anti-phenomenological – that calls into question the meaning of the author's writings and his motivation: this being the consistently composed and strict formal structuring of the entire text. The book comprises twelve chapters; each has six general sections and always four examples, of which three are buildings and one is a complex or urban grouping. And the chapters can be divided into four groups of three: the first three determined by territories as ancient cultures, the next three belonging to Europe's medieval age, followed by the Renaissance and in the final three chapters addressing modernity with three concepts that can be viewed as developmental stages: *enlightenment*, *functionalism*, and *pluralism*. In other words, the structure of the text strikingly displays the principle of the triad. If the explication is given dynamism through its continual referencing of the examined phenomenon to the initial state while also presenting it as the anticipation of further development, then the principle of succession of two phases, where the first is surmounted by the second, then gives way to the generalisation that we encounter in all chapters: the start represents the analytical phase, while the finale belongs to synthesis. There is always the temptation of the opposition of developmentally oppositional steps and the triadic principle as a method of spanning the heterogeneous material with the arch of synthesis, connecting with the Hegelian dialectic; yet this is clearly only an external similarity. We should keep in mind that Hegel invariably gave first place to the mere concept, as the philosophical representation of reality in chronological perspective, yet Norberg-Schulz never – even for a moment – abandons physical materiality, which to him appears historically active yet

also present in its concrete, sensually perceptible uniqueness.

Be that as it may, the author's most deeply considered work on the composition of the text is worth mentioning, linking it to the tradition of German art-historical thought that – and this is another trait of the writings of Norberg-Schulz – maintains a strong need for creating typologies (e.g., as his *Genius loci* defines the oppositions between *romantic, cosmic, classical* and *complex* landscapes). (p. 42 – 45) Without making any claims of completeness, let us recall the affiliations with Norberg-Schulz's method, taking as our starting point Heinrich Wölfflin (1864 – 1945) and his oeuvre, reaching beyond his key *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915). Wölfflin is present in Norberg-Schulz's thought in various senses, for instance in his three post-medieval epochs including Mannerism separately from the Renaissance and the Baroque, continuing in the logic of Wölfflin's appreciation of the Baroque and rehabilitation of this epoch; no less similar to Wölfflin is the following of the link between architectural drawings and realisations (Norberg-Schulz supplements his text with reproductions of preparatory drawings); Wölfflin is visible in the division of the examined epochs into three stages, where the triad of archaic-Classical-Baroque stages in Norberg-Schulz's vision is concretised in each individual epoch; and Wölfflin can also be felt in the relationship between psychology and architecture, the explication of which was explored by Wölfflin even in his dissertation (*Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur*, 1886). Let us put aside the Wölfflin – Norberg-Schulz relationship by noting that it is necessary to mark a linking element between these two elements of an intellectual tradition: this being Siegfried Giedion (1888 – 1968), art historian and first secretary of CIAM, inspiring Norberg-Schulz through his connection of a persistent defence of authentic modernity with an awareness of the historicity – and hence the a priori modernity – of every architectonic form. Other names can be added to this lineage, appearing in the text either in passing or arrayed with a stress on their personal approach to a certain question (as for Norberg-Schulz they bore a certain significance at which we can only guess). For comparison, there is the literal wording of the title of Giedion's first work, *Spätbarocker und romantischer Klassizismus* (1922), where one marked trait is the interest in the routing of

light through the building, a problem also addressed by Norberg-Schulz. Similar Wölfflin-influenced texts that might have served Norberg-Schulz in shaping his views, are many: for instance, *Die Entwicklungsphase der neueren Baukunst* (1914) by Paul Frankl (1878 – 1962), a former student of Wölfflin's, whose name is cited by Norberg-Schulz in relation to the analysis of Gothic architecture. Of course, the number of Wölfflin's pupils quoted is far higher – among them the medieval expert Hans Jantzen (1881 – 1967) – and the more aware we become of this link between the pupils and their teachers, all the more forcefully does another question come forward: how did Christian Norberg-Schulz deal with the opposing tradition of the Vienna School? His relation to Alois Riegl is more implicit and deserving of a careful analysis; more certain his that to Guido Kaschnitz von Weinberg and, of course, the highly provocative link to Hans Sedlmayr (1896 – 1984) – in this case, not for Sedlmayr's (it should be noted, ambivalent) stance toward Wölfflin, but instead for the influence of his postwar writings, particularly his *Verlust der Mitte* (1948), which Norberg-Schulz took as his starting point for a critical rapprochement with the 19th century.

Indeed, the relation to this century – in this text severely reduced and consciously suppressed – is one of the key problems in the thought of Christian Norberg-Schulz and could, in the future, form a starting point for the analysis of his ideas in full. As is well known, the 19th century gave the current meaning to the term style, a deeply constitutive element for the history of architecture or art, yet one that Norberg-Schulz rejects. It cannot be said exactly why this is the case – here it is startling that Gottfried Semper is nowhere to be found in the text – yet it can be assumed that the idea of style is, for Norberg-Schulz, overburdened with negative meanings; even Walter Gropius “did not like the word style” (p. 195), as we read. This refusal could be explained by the author's association of style with an a priori aesthetic doctrine, manifested through ready-made formal structures– figures for which the use is dependent on the conventional social structures into which the work is integrated – yet the true sense, or *meaning* of architecture is *symbolic form*, respectively *articulation*, which in a certain sense is an alternative designation for a priori stylistics yet containing something more: both the element of autonomous creativity and the stress on the

existential dimension of the architect's work. Still, this explanation should be regarded only as a working hypothesis, requiring further analysis. In this respect, a useful aid could be supplied to the reader by the visual supplements, which in Norberg-Schulz's book are truly vital. This, of course, works well in the earlier and later eras, yet precisely for the 19th century they can be somewhat confusing – such as when K. F. Schinkel is displayed through the reproduction of only one painted vision with a Gothic cathedral even though the text indicates a completely different work: “in 1827 [Schinkel] designed a Kaufhaus which prefigures the straightforward forms of the technological architecture of the second half of the century.” (p. 169) Today, those with an interest in this work of Schinkel's can view scans of his drawing available through special websites, yet at the time when Norberg-Schulz was writing this book, he had available – as far as I can tell – only one authoritative publication of this project.³ All the greater disappointment that Norberg-Schulz never included in his book a reproduction of an elevation or possibly even a floor plan of this never-executed structure!

After the historians, we should recall other intellectual authorities: overshadowed by the repeatedly invoked Martin Heidegger stands Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1903 – 1991), whose *Mensch und Raum* (1963) even received a critical reflection from a Czech author, specifically philosopher Jiří Sedlák⁴ but is now forgotten, even though this work offers the key to the whole of Norberg-Schulz's thought, or at least that component that extends beyond architectural history. And with Bollnow, we come to a far better-known founding personality of the same intellectual method – Ernst Cassirer (1874 – 1945) and his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which is consciously or unconsciously present implicitly in Norberg-Schulz's definition of architecture as a part of cultural history, “which we might generally define as the history of meaningful or symbolic forms.”⁵ In essence, the position of Norberg-Schulz could be viewed as the intersection of the Wölfflin tradition in German art history with German cultural anthropology. Orientation among these authorities is aided by the index, though its selection criteria are somewhat hard to comprehend; moreover, it is not clear why certain authors are listed only with surname and initial while others are given their complete names. And this is no trivial quibble, since this book will be read by the Czech and

Slovak publics not only for its text but also – metaphorically speaking – for this index, since the references to the cited literature provide a unique resource for grasping the intellectual situation of art history in the Germanic sphere in the early and middle decades of the 20th century. A certain traditionalism of view can, indeed, be gleaned even from the book's title, in which the word *Western* is applied to the geographical region outlined by the 48 examples given detailed analysis alongside many others present in briefer form in the text or its supplementary illustrations. It should come as no surprise that this Western is extended in large measure to Southern Europe; after all, the opposition of South and North is, in the Nordic sphere, an existential question.

Of these 48 localities, two are situated in the Czech lands: St. Barbara's Cathedral in Kutná Hora and Brno's Villa Tugendhat, indicating that for the author, the designation of “West” fully and integrated into its scope part of Central Europe that, at the time of writing, lay on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This is not to say that the author deliberately attacked the political status quo of the era, since the iconic status of the Villa Tugendhat is derived from its place in the exhibition catalogue *The International Style* (1932) by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, which used the house's entrance as its cover image, while similarly St. Barbara's is an integral element of the Sondergotik, assigned to the German (sic!) lands in the region. All the same, precisely the fact that the reader can encounter in the book places that are personally known may retroactively explain the spontaneous need for the translation of Christian Norberg-Schulz into Czech.

¹ KRATOCHVÍL, Petr, 2010. Doslov. In: Norberg-Schulz, Ch. *Genius loci. Krajina, místo, architektura*. Praha: Dokořán, pp. 209 – 214.

² Viz. HADDAD, Elie, 2010. Christian Norberg-Schulz's Phenomenological Project in Architecture. *Architectural Theory Review*, 15(1), pp. 88 – 101; HABID, Farah and SAHAF, Seyyed Mohammad Khosro, 2012. Christian Norberg-Schulz and the Existential Space. *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development*. 1(3), pp. 45 – 50.

³ RAVE, Paul Ortwin, 1942. *Berlin III. – Bauten für Wissenschaft, Verwaltung, Heer, Wohnbau und Denkmäler*. Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, pp. 125–129.

⁴ SEDLÁK, Jiří, 1968. K otázce možnosti antropologické interpretace prostoru. *Filosofický časopis* (16), pp. 179–181.

⁵ NORBERG-SCHULZ, Christian, 2019. *Význam v architektuře Západu*, Praha: Dokořán, p. 226.