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BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

Emeritus Gatherings

MEMORY, MYTH, AND IDEAS OF COMMUNITY IN MODERN GERMAN AND SCANDINAVIAN ARCHITECTURE

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Delivered May 3, 2001 and based on a lecture given at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University in Fiesole on June 6, 1998.



[figure 1](#)



[figure 2](#)



[figure 3](#)



[figure 4](#)



[figure 5](#)



[figure 6](#)

This talk is an overview of certain themes in my recent book on National Romanticism and modern architecture, National Romanticism and Modern European Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries, published by Cambridge University Press, in 2000. The jacket was designed by Adrienne Onderdonk Dudden. It deals with architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian countries from about 1885 to about 1965. It stresses issues such as memory, myth, ties to history, ideas of community, and their role in the history of architecture, primarily in monumental buildings. These are not the only subjects dealt with in the book, which gives great prominence to domestic architecture and the applied arts. It also explores in much more detail than I can suggest today the relationships between regionalism and nationalism. Thus a considerable amount of what I have written about in the book is left out in this talk.

What I am offering here this morning is an alternative explanation of the origins and development of modern architecture. It is not a total explanation in any sense. It is not intended as the only explanation. It is instead an alternative one. Let me show you what I mean.

Conventional interpretations of the history of modern architecture tend to focus on modernism's total rejection of the past. They emphasize modern architecture's celebration -- even worship -- of technology, and its internationalism. They also often see the French as the principal founders of modern architecture. For example, you see in [figure 1](#) Le Corbusier's plan for a "city of three million" from 1921 or 1922. This was intended as a new city that would be built in central Paris. Central Paris was to be ripped down, cleaned out and then one would build for the future great steel and concrete towers surrounded by highways and green spaces. Automobiles fill the highways; airplanes fill the air. This was Le Corbusier's vision of the future (though in fact he never built it in this way). In looking at Le Corbusier, then, most or many interpretations of the history of modern architecture stress the role of France, the celebration of technology, the affirmation of internationalism, the rejection of history, and of an older sense of community -- a breakdown in older ideas about town, village, and connections among people.

You can see why this has been a compelling explanation when you look at architecture in the period after the second World War. In [figure 2](#) we have a pair of dwelling units by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, his Lake Shore Drive Apartments in Chicago from 1945-51. Oddly enough, in view of what I will say a little later on, Mies had been for a time the director of the Bauhaus in Germany. But when he emigrated to this country, he came to be enamored of the steel, glass and concrete tower, and built some of this country's most famous buildings of this type. These kinds of towers are all over our cityscapes today. Here in [figure 3](#) is a Scandinavian example. This is a series of offices, shops, and apartments in downtown Stockholm called Sergelstorg, built by the Swedish architect Sven Markelius in the 1950s. This is not so typical of the broad sweep of postwar Scandinavian architecture, as we'll see a little later. But it seemed influential and important at the time. The plan for this downtown building complex was accompanied by a plan to tear down and clean out Gamla

[figure 6](#)



downtown building complex was accompanied by a plan to tear down and clean out Gamla Stan, the beautiful old town of Stockholm, which was at that time rather run down. This sort of thing was already happening in this country too. Ideas about urban renewal completely destroyed many of our most cherished older places in the fifties and sixties. But in Stockholm what happened was that people got very excited and upset and said "No, no!", and Gamla Stan was preserved. Now it has been gentrified and is one of the most chic places to live in Stockholm.

[figure 7](#)



I offer a different interpretation of the origins of modern architecture, one that focuses on Germany and the Scandinavian countries, on architects' ties to a particular view of history, on their ideas of community and utopia, on their nationalism, and on continuities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As I said before, this is not an exclusive interpretation but it is an alternative, which I hope that architectural historians will look at more carefully in the years to come.

[figure 8](#)



I begin here not with a French apartment tower but with the Bauhaus, the school that was founded in Weimar, Germany in 1919 by Walter Gropius. The Bauhaus can be looked upon as the fountainhead of the modern movement in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries. I show in [figure 4](#) the cover of the first Bauhaus Manifesto, from 1919. It is a cathedral. It is actually a Romanesque cathedral. The text that accompanies this image talks about a new architecture, which is going to create new ideas of community. In fact, the cathedral itself was described in Bauhaus publications as the "cathedral of socialism" or the "cathedral of the future" or the "cathedral of freedom." Here and in other places at the same time Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, summoned contemporary artists to join in the "cooperative work" of "kleinen fruchtbaren Gemeinschaften, Verschwörungen, Bruderschaftern . . . Bauhütten wie im goldenen Zeitalter der Kathedralen!", to join, that is to say, in small communities or brotherhoods such as those that built the medieval cathedrals. So the "cathedral of the future" in the Bauhaus Manifesto was a metaphor for a temple to secular regeneration after the war, for the creation of small new communities, led by artists, that would then be the basis for spiritual regeneration. And that as you can see is a very different beginning point from the Corbusian towers I showed you earlier.

[figure 9](#)



[figure 10](#)



Let us trace this idea back a little bit. I am just going to give you a couple of examples. I want to show you some of the sources of this idea before the first World War.

[figure 11](#)



In Germany and in the Scandinavian countries we find, before the first World War, a proliferation of secularized images of religion. Religion is brought into the service of ideas of the nation and ideas of the national (and local) community. Scholars writing about nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century have often noticed this. Nationalism itself becomes a kind of secularized religion. My first example, shown in [figure 5](#), is familiar to many of you, I am sure. It is the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche in Berlin. Those of you who have been to Berlin since the second World War have seen the ruins of this building, which is in the background in [figure 5](#), preserved after the War as a monument. A monument perhaps against war itself, although not everyone agrees about this. Here it is as it was when it was built in 1891-5 by Emperor William II. It is called the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche because it is dedicated to William II's grandfather, William I, the first emperor of Germany. Already in its dedication, the church is kind of a secular monument. By the way, of course, it is a Protestant church, which is important. It is a neo-Romanesque church, which is also important. In Germany at this time the Romanesque was seen as especially Germanic -- as especially archaic but also as artistically generative. The church is thus a monument to a secular figure, but it makes many references to the great German medieval empires as well so there is a constant reiteration of references to what was thought, at the time, to be the earliest Germanic past. In popular writings, William I was said to be the "white beard on the red beard's throne." That meant that he was a reincarnation of Frederick Barbarossa. Other writing about this church talked about Charlemagne and Theodoric, the

[figure 12](#)



[figure 13](#)



[figure 14](#)

Barbarossa. Other writing about this church talked about Charlemagne and Theodoric, the Ostrogothic emperor, seeing them both as Germanic forebears. That kind of discussion came out of a great deal of historical scholarship in both Germany and the Scandinavian countries, scholarship that looked for early, early, early origins of the modern nation -- whatever that might mean.



figure 15



figure 16



Figure 5 shows not just the church, but the surrounding Augusta-Victoria-Square, which William II caused to be built at about the same time. These buildings are apartment buildings and places of entertainment. In the front foreground on the right is the so-called Romanishes CafŽ, a famous gathering place for Berlin artists in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. So around the church was built a kind of small community, populated largely by artists. In Germany and the Scandinavian countries, it was fairly typical of the period that a church, or church-like building, becomes a monument to a secular ideal and then becomes the focus of some sort of new community. Other new communities formed around a secularized temple before the first World War in Germany included the new garden city at Dresden-Hellerau (an artists' colony with, as its focus, a school of modern dance). The memory of these communities persisted after the first World War in Germany.

Let us turn now to Scandinavia. Here painters were very important in the developments that I trace. I talk about a great number of painters in the various Scandinavian countries: Swedish painters Anders Zorn and Carl Larsson and the Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela are just a few among them.

figure 17



figure 18



figure 19



In **figure 6** you see a watercolor by Anders Zorn of 1890. Zorn lived in central Sweden in a region called Dalecarlia. Dalecarlia played a vital role in the development of Swedish nationalism during this period. Zorn and his friend Carl Larsson were centrally important in creating a national myth around the local region of Dalecarlia. What you are seeing here is the tiny town of Mora where Zorn settled. Zorn was an internationally known artist at this time. He was, among other things, the Swedish commissioner to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. He chose to settle in Mora, in Dalecarlia, and there he often painted the church and bell tower at the center of the town. He thought that that church and bell tower, especially the bell tower, went back to the earliest times, even to the pagan period, and he saw in its simplified forms references to an ancient Nordic past. He often depicted the church and bell tower together with the midsummer night's festival, which leads to some rather excited dancing late at night during the summer solstice. He thought that the midsummer night's festival was also a pagan ritual that came out of the deepest and darkest recesses of the Swedish past. Actually, and interestingly, he and his wife did a great deal to revive these customs and maybe even to create them. In any case, **figure 6** is one of these paintings, entitled Mora Fair.

figure 20



Around the center of Mora, Zorn built his own house. He assembled a group of buildings near his house that served as an open air museum of the Swedish medieval past. For the museum he used rural buildings that he imported from the distant recesses of Sweden's wilder parts. He also used similar ancient log cabins for his own studio, shown in **figure 7**. ("Ancient" here is a relative term because in Sweden not much remains that is earlier than the fifteenth century.)

figure 21



So Zorn created around the Mora Bell Tower, which was already there, a kind of a little town that celebrated an early past. His ideas were very influential for a wide variety of people. I will mention just two, both again Protestant. (Protestantism was powerfully linked to nationalism in Germany and the Scandinavian countries.) **Figure 8** shows the Engelbrekt Church in Stockholm of 1909-14 by the architect Lars Israel Wahlman. The Engelbrekt Church uses neo-Romanesque forms, but is extremely innovative as well. The interior displays paraboloid arches and new uses of reinforced concrete. The forms are both innovative and somehow archaic. Around the church is LŠrkstaden, a small community,

[figure 22](#)



[figure 23](#)



[figure 24](#)



[figure 25](#)

innovative and somehow archaic. Around the church is LŠrkstaden, a small community, bound to the church by its decorative features and by its materials. Wahlman used brick, native brick. This makes one feel that the church is somehow local and rooted in the local past. Engelbrekt too was a secular figure. Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson (c.1390-1436) was a fourteenth century squire from Dalecarlia who led a peasant revolt against Danish rule. He achieved high authority until he was murdered in 1436. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he was celebrated in many, many paintings and many, many buildings. So here again is a church which is a monument to a secular figure who represents a kind of nationalism, a nationalism that was itself rooted in a particular regionalism, located in that central region of Dalecarlia I was mentioning a minute ago.

Turning to Denmark, we see in [Figure 9](#) the Grundtvig Church, on the northwest boundary of Copenhagen, built by Peder Vilhelm Jensen-Klint in 1913. The Grundtvig Church is reminiscent of medieval precedents too. And look at the housing around the church. It is executed in the same brick as the Church and creates again a sense of a new community. The church and its small community represented a monument to another secular figure. Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) was a great leader of Danish Romanticism. He was a theologian. He was a nationalist, a reviver of old Norse literature and mythology, a church reformer, a creator of something called the folk high school movement (which was important in adult education), and the sponsor of efforts to conserve the true "old Norse" past and claim it for modern Denmark. Notice that each of these Scandinavian countries is claiming a Nordic or Germanic antiquity as its own, just as Germany was doing. So we are looking at an international movement in varied northern nationalisms. This is very peculiar and extremely interesting.

That leads me to my main theme. These churches and new communities were part of a late nineteenth and early twentieth century movement in Germany and the Scandinavian countries that I have called National Romanticism. They are not similar in stylistic detail at all, but they all refer to a distant, almost archaic, past -- a past which was seen as profoundly anti-classical. The attitudes of the artists and architects I have been discussing were anti-bourgeois and anti-urban. This was an international movement, as I said, of nationalisms. It was not just nationalist, but hyper-nationalist. Most historians who write about this period have seen these kinds of ideas as backward-looking. But that is not really so. These buildings and thinkers were innovative. They were also pro-labor and pro-feminist, so we can speak of National Romanticism as a kind of "national socialism" without the Nazis. One has to try very hard not to read the Nazis back into this period because in the years before 1914, "national socialism" or "National Romanticism," if we may call it that, was a profoundly progressive movement. It is only later -- I will come to that in a minute -- that the converse was true. And then only in Germany.

In *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (1961), the noted German historian Fritz Stern wrote that it was possible for intellectuals in the last years of the nineteenth century to see an imaginary past as the springboard to an imagined future. This puts it very well. If you have read Eric Hobsbawm on nationalism or Benedict Anderson on imagined communities, those books make a similar point. Even though at the end of the nineteenth century there was a vast outpouring of historical scholarship about the past, it was an "imagined" past, a "springboard to an imagined future." Thus, nationalism, archaism, and innovation were closely bound together in the thought and work of National Romantic architects and artists.

Now we turn back to the Bauhaus Manifesto ([figure 10](#)) in order to talk about what happened next in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Our discussion of National Romanticism and the architecture that it produced helps us to understand some of the imagery behind Gropius's words about small brotherhoods, new small communities, resembling those that built the great medieval cathedrals, as being a foundation for a new future. But of course the Bauhaus "cathedral" was created after the first World War, at a time when nationalism looked pretty bad to a lot of people, especially in Germany. There,

time when nationalism looked pretty bad to a lot of people, especially in Germany. There, intellectuals of the Left saw nationalism as the main cause of the first World War. After German experiences in the trenches, and after Germany lost the war and deposed the Kaiser through revolution, it came to be very hard for many people to believe in all the elements of National Romanticism at one and the same time.

Nevertheless, many of these elements persisted in various ways. This is the story of the last chapter of my book, the one that most clearly offers an alternative view of the origins and development of modern architecture. The Bauhaus cathedral was, as we have seen, a symbol of a new community. It takes as its basis a medieval cathedral, but places the cathedral in front of searchlights such as were to be found in the trenches of the war, turning the medieval symbol into a symbol of modern regeneration.

In Germany in the early teens and twenties of the twentieth century, there were many, many images of a new kind of cathedral, a secularized cathedral. In fact one could almost speak of a secularized religion. [Figure 11](#) shows the crystal temple that Bruno Taut depicted as the center of the new city in his *Die Stadtkrone* (The City Crown) of 1919. The building was meant to be not religious but quasi-religious, a place where the new community would come together. We find this image over and over again. Then, around the middle of the 1920s, the ecstatic and exaggeratedly utopian tone that characterized the writings and projects of German architects in the early Weimar Republic comes to an end, as architects actually begin to build. They built housing developments mostly. Partly because this is what was needed, but also because they themselves came to believe that housing developments could serve as "cathedrals of the future," as new tightly-knit communities with a transcendent purpose. They could bring a message of a "new architecture" and a new way of life to the rest of the world.

[Figures 12](#) and [13](#), *Siedlung Tšrten* by Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus, built in Dessau in 1928, and *Siedlung Hšhenblick*, built by Ernst May and his staff in Frankfurt am Main from 1926 to 1927, show the kind of buildings that characterized the middle twenties. (In German, housing developments are called *Siedlungen*, "settlements".) Obviously, history is not very apparent here, although the simplified forms of the buildings retain some of the simplicities of archaism. These housing developments emphasized standardization, new technologies, and internationalism. If there was a central focus, sometimes it was just a set of shops and offices such as you see in the tower at Tšrten in [figure 11](#). The central community structure prophesied by Taut remained an ideal, however. In May's *Siedlung Bruchfeldstrasse* ([figure 14](#)), for example, the entire community focuses on a *Gemeinschaftshaus*, or community center [a rather pale translation of this important term]. At *Bruchfeldstrasse*, the community center contained a daycare center, a nursery, and social services. Similar buildings elsewhere contained baths, laundries, and sometimes common kitchens. Such housing developments retained to a great extent the ecstatic and transcendent ideas of the early Bauhaus. And some of the themes of National Romanticism continued too -- the hope for a new kind of closely-knit community organized and planned by artists and architects, for the benefit of artists and workers, and focusing on secular kinds of celebratory places. Of course in Germany, the "nationalism" of National Romanticism either died out, or came to be perverted in various ways. This became clear in 1933.

We turn now to National Socialism of the Nazi kind - not the National Romantic kind but the Hitler kind. The new Nazi regime, as we know, gave great prominence to architecture. There were many official styles, and each was emphasized in Nazi propaganda as an expression of the National Socialist "revolution." In many of these official buildings there were clear resemblances to the nineteenth century form of National Romantic architecture. The Hitler youth hostel shown in [figure 15](#) revives vernacular and peasant themes just as the regionalists had in Sweden. Official Nazi architecture also glorified the Middle Ages. [Figure 16](#) shows an interesting building called *Ordensburg Vogelsang*. It looks like a medieval castle

16 shows an interesting building called Ordensburg Vogelsang. It looks like a medieval castle although of a rather modernized sort. It was used as a training place for the SS, who were thought of as a new knightly order. So those themes of archaism and medieval enthusiasm certainly persisted in Nazi National Socialism as did glorifications of Germanic antiquity or what was thought to be Germanic antiquity. The building in **figure 17** is a so-called Thingspieltheater, or "Thing play theater." I think that probably requires some explanation. It was believed that the earliest Germanic and Nordic peoples met to elect their leaders in a gathering called a Thing. They all sat around together dressed in animal skins or whatever, with spears and so on, and elected their tribal leader, or king. This was thought to be a form of primitive democracy and was very much talked about in the later nineteenth century. It came to be believed that these Thing assemblies also produced great art and drama -- although that is nonsense. So there was a movement in Germany in the 1930s to produce "Thing" plays and quite a few of these open-air theaters were built. This one was erected for the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

Underlying and running as a thread through Nazi architecture and Nazi propaganda was again the promise of a new kind of community, which Nazi writers spoke of as a Volksgemeinschaft, "people's community," or perhaps, "racial community." (Volk came to mean race in Nazi writing and speech.) Earlier architects, both before and immediately after the first World War, had called for new communities, but they saw them as small. For them, the small, close-knit community would produce either a new national community (the National Romantics) or a new international one (the German modern architects of the 1920s.) For the Nazi leaders, on the other hand, the Volksgemeinschaft was defined by biology -- by German "blood". It was exclusionary, and supremely expansionist (since it was thought to include all "Germans" everywhere). It was neither national nor international. The reality of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft was demonstrated at the party congresses that took place every year in which regimented masses marched toward war and holocaust, joining in exclusionary and racist hatred. This is clearly visible in Albert Speer's Party Congress Grounds. **Figure 18** shows a nighttime rally, with marching men choreographed in such a way that they reflect the lines of the architecture. The surrounding searchlights promise a return to the battlefield. Nazi architecture and Nazi ideology perverted the ideas of National Romanticism.

This brings me to the period after the Second World War. I argue that in the two decades after the end of the War, modernism developed very differently in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries precisely because of the experiences of Nazism.

The experience of Nazism in Germany made it difficult after the War for Germans to think about the medieval past, or about archaism, or about rural architecture, or even to a considerable extent and for a long time, about history itself. On the other hand, in the Scandinavian countries, which were either at war with Nazi Germany or feared that they would be, nationalism was reinforced and became an anti-Nazi nationalism, at the same time as these countries more and more endorsed socialism. So in these countries, the heritage of National Romanticism was reinforced at the same time as their architects embraced modernism. Here, nationalism became, after 1933, socialist nationalism, and modern architecture retained a link to national roots and history, and to the ideas of National Romanticism.

Let me explain how I think that worked out. After the war Scandinavian town planning focused on small communities. **Figure 19** shows center of VŠllingby, outside of Stockholm (1952-6), part of the huge Swedish new towns program of the postwar years. Like other Swedish new towns, the core of VŠllingby is modern looking, but, like each of the new towns built in those years, the core is extremely important. Like many of the German Siedlungen of the middle twenties, it contains offices, shops, and social services. Around these new communities were often very small-scale buildings, sometimes wooden, that created a feeling of neighborhood (**figure 20**). Wooden construction, like that admired by

created a feeling of neighborhood ([figure 20](#)). Wooden construction, like that admired by Anders Zorn that we saw in [figure 6](#) , continued to be important in Scandinavian architecture. In the VŠllingby housing in [figure 20](#) , wooden construction is mixed with steel and concrete construction, to remind people of an older tradition.

Although the Sergelstorg buildings shown in [figure 3](#) were accompanied by ideas of "urban renewal," the focus in Scandinavian town planning after the second World War was not so much on tearing down old towns as on creating new ones that had an identity as communities. As we saw, Swedish public opinion protested immediately and effectively against tearing down the old towns.

Throughout postwar Scandinavian architecture, we can see an emphasis on older ideas of community and on regionalism. We can also observe a sense of a continuous history and a respect for that which is old. There are many examples; I will show just one here. [Figures 21 - 23](#) show the Town Hall by Alvar Aalto in SŠynŠtsalo, in central Finland (1950 to 1952). Aalto was asked to design not just a town hall but a complex of buildings that would serve as a center for a new town. You are seeing just one side of this complex now, in [figure 21](#) . The whole complex is built of native brick. It is surrounded by closely-spaced pines. The ground around it does not have grass or paving but is rather swept dirt so that it feels rural and connected to the local area. The profile of the building that you see in [figure 21](#) looks very modernist in the sense that it makes no specific reference to history. But the entrance from the outside to the main courtyard ([figure 22](#)), which is intentionally kept overgrown with grass, goes back to those ideas of archaism that I see as so important before 1914. You almost have a sense of a group of castle-like structures even though there is no specific reference to any kind of specific medieval building. After going up the stairs in [figure 22](#) , you enter a courtyard, from which you can enter the main parts of the building. You come into the enclosed space shown in [figure 23](#) , which, with its wood, brick, and low pitched roofs, is extremely domestic in feeling. From the courtyard, the Town Hall seems almost like a place in a small brick and wooden town. Behind you rises a two-story structure that contains the council hall for the whole complex of buildings. Aalto's teachers were National Romantic architects, by the way. What he does in the SŠynŠtsalo complex is give you a sense of rootedness and age and permanence and even domesticity and community. He conveys these associations by his use of materials, by manipulations of scale, and by the relation of the buildings to nature, without specific references to the past. Aalto built on the heritage of National Romanticism and took it further in an organic way.

Turning back to Germany now, I want to illustrate how differently architecture developed there. [Figures 24 and 25](#) show the Town Hall of Bensberg, built by Gottfried BŠhm in 1965. BŠhm has been one of the most notable postwar German architects, a winner, among other honors, of the international Pritzker Prize. His father, and his father before him, were architects, and so are his sons. Gottfried's father Dominikus was a leading expressionist architect in the 1920s. The Bensberg Town Hall was built in the 1960s on the site of an older town hall that had been destroyed during the war. You can see that there are older buildings there that have been retained. You see them a little better in [figure 25](#) . There is part of an old castle and obviously the new building, the multi-story concrete building, is meant to have some sort of castle-like feeling about it. Parts of the old castle and its outbuildings are actually used in the new structure. But as we look at the view in [figure 25](#) we see first the old and then the new, with no apparent connection between them. One has the sense that there is nothing holding them together -- they seem juxtaposed rather than joined. In fact, they appear disjunctive. I think that the attitude to history and especially to the medieval past for Germans in the immediate post second World War period was one of distance, commentary, disjunction, rather than Aalto's easy willingness to take the spirit of the past farther in a modernist vein.

Thus I would argue that history, nationalism, utopia, and the ideal of community itself were

Thus I would argue that history, nationalism, utopia, and the ideal of community itself were discredited in Germany after 1945, in ways that they were not in the Scandinavian countries.