

Montreal Architectural Review

Book Review 1:

Andersen, Anna Ulrikke.

Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film

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A windowpane shattered, fallen snow and conflicting frame rates, silently draped over trees, ground and archetype; modern monolith tight-lipped looming; a baby in utero hears muted music performed at his father's funeral; the dissonance of sound and image, an operatic voice-over; father and son, father and daughter; fragmentary histories enframed amid the musicality of landscapes and lecturing styles; crisp snow crunching underfoot, a glass house aurally divided.

This short opening passage conveys something of the reflective impact of the thought-provoking new book by Anna Ulrikke Andersen on the life and theoretical contribution of the influential Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926-2000). The book is divided into ten chapters, or 'Windows,' that creatively frame, reflect, and relate to key moments in the life of Norberg-Schulz in order to critically consider his continued relevance within the field of architectural phenomenology. These windows are accompanied by ten film essays accessed via QR codes at the start of each chapter.

Andersen's films function on multiple levels. They are quiet and restrained but manage to serve as potent forms of critical spatial practice; creative ways to simultaneously draw near and create distance between the author and her subject. The films manage to emplace the study, enabling the reader to follow the author to frozen Trondheim, the *forre* of Calcata, Piazza Navona, and a rooftop in Rome. Along the way, these films serve as touchstones connecting the biographical information and theoretical stance of Norberg-Schulz to broader movements and tendencies in film studies. There is also a strong self-reflective vein that courses through the films, metaphorically drawing on the fact that, depending on the direction and quality of light, transparent windows often become reflective. In the most general sense, the films subtly accustom the eyes and ears of the reader towards a more nuanced form of noticing.

The films are paired with telling moments in the life of Norberg-Schulz through an analogical window motif. For instance, the segment on the rooftop in Rome is linked with the windows that Norberg-Schulz designed at The Norwegian Institute in Rome; the soundscape of his domestic writing life in Norway is paired with the iconic view from his window used to open his book *Genius Loci* (1980); and the moment Norberg-Schulz realized how Rome relates to its surroundings is questioned through a filmed re-enactment on Piazza Navona, with a sea of windows reflecting in the background. In some of the later chapters, Norberg-Schulz's friendship with Italian architect Paolo Portoghesi, and their shared love of the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, is evinced in the landscape of Calcata and then questioned in a Norwegian translation of one of Rilke's poems about a window. While some of these connections to windows are tangential, the motif is not so much about looking through windows as it is concerned with dwelling amid their capacity for relating and dividing. Above all, the films and associated windows provide an opportunity for reflective pause amid the author's acts of following.

As the title suggests, this book asks many questions about the notion of *following*. Across a spectrum of followings, Andersen's approach can be bookended by two terms: framing and re-enactment. On the one hand, she is weaving a narrative from wide-ranging ideas, finding obscure fragments of information and choosing to frame them within the field of film studies, editing them according to her will. On the other hand, there is a strong focus on re-enactment, on trying to understand the positions and prejudices of her subject. This tendency is particularly evident in those films which literally follow in the footsteps of Norberg-Schulz and even re-enact certain moments in his life. The outcome is a productive ambivalence where Andersen can simultaneously appreciate the "deep, inevitable and intimate connections with place"¹ characterizing the dwelling lives of so many, while also feeling uncomfortable with the static conservatism evident in Norberg-Schulz's "dismissal of mobility and emphasis on belonging."² In this ambivalent state, the author is free to question the potential connections between the way Norberg-Schulz's (real and metaphorical) windows seem to "watch and control"³ and his often universalist tone that so liberally employs the word "we"; thereby inciting Andersen to admit that "I do not like the way Norberg-Schulz talks about *me*."⁴

Despite her reservations, Andersen finds many productive ways to follow. She follows Norberg-Schulz linguistically and brings the implications of various archival and published material written in Norwegian to an English-speaking audience. She follows up personal connections through interviews with key figures in his life, including his wife, Anna Maria Norberg-Schulz, and his close friend, Paolo Portoghesi. She also takes a refreshingly personal tone (in response to the universalist claims often made by Norberg-Schulz) and reflects on fragmentary minutia, facts, and events that at first appear peripheral. This kind of following is able to let gaps in knowledge linger and “expose the uncertainties at play in the work of the historian, rather than smooth them over.”⁵ It is an approach that might exasperate some, but while her following is open to detours and skepticism, it is neither indifferent nor willful. Instead of the grand, timeless narrative and emphasis on ‘strong places’⁶ so characteristic of Norberg-Schulz’s writings, Andersen’s attempts at following act as an intra-epochal listening and answering that is mobile, interdisciplinary, and open.

Allow me an example to illustrate the way Andersen interweaves the diverse facets of her following. The passage at the start of this review is inspired by the scene set by Andersen’s opening window.⁷ The first chapter opens with a film about the death of Norberg-Schulz’s father, who tragically perished by falling through a skylight of the old chemistry building at the Norwegian Technical University in Trondheim. The film presents the sound of Andersen and the caretaker searching for the skylight over a long shot of the exterior of the old chemistry building played at 50% reduced speed. This disjuncture between image and sound – an *acousmètre* in cinematic parlance – is used to knit various aspects together: the tragic event, where students heard the glass shattering, but no one witnessed the fall; Rilke’s use of the cinematic capacities of the window in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910); the relational implications of listening in feminist criticism explored by Jane Rendell; the destabilizing impact on film essays when confronted with the Deleuzian sound image; even the imagined experience of Norberg-Schulz as a fetus, hearing the music performed at his father’s funeral; before considering the need for skepticism in assessing the way historians make sense of historical events and persons. With this cross-referenced scene set, Andersen then considers the use of *acousmètre* in Federico Fellini’s *And the Ship Sails On* (1983), only to reveal that the singing parts of the character Ines Ruffo Saltino, while acted by Linda Polan, are performed by Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz, the famous opera singer and daughter of Christian Norberg-Schulz; an *acousmètre* Andersen uses to reflect on the role music played in the life of Elizabeth’s father. More than merely linking somewhat tangential details, Andersen then interprets these interwoven musings to contrast the way Norberg-Schulz presented the *genius loci* as a “unified whole” with her own attempts to “underscore contradiction, uncertainty, fissure and *interstice* [in the] experience of place.”⁸

Andersen’s approach is unconventional, but also compelling and timely. On the one hand, it draws on recent attempts at developing critical spatial practice in postgraduate practice-based research programs, where the designer’s skillsets and creative output are utilized as research method. Simultaneously, her book

is published amidst a wide-ranging questioning of the assumptions underpinning the field of architectural phenomenology.⁹ Yet Andersen manages to practice phenomenology in an open and self-reflective way, able to critically re-engage the difficulties and failings in Norberg-Schulz's approach while displaying a poetic sensibility that allows for a more refined appreciation of his position. Within this kind of open stance, poetic participation can be understood as an act of reflective measuring in which the ambivalent follower both "belongs to Being and yet, amidst beings, remains a stranger", as Martin Heidegger put it. Heidegger continues: "Humans will know the incalculable . . . only in creative questioning and forming from out of the power of genuine reflection."¹⁰ Andersen's book is a welcome invitation to follow this venturesome path, in both critical and creative ways.

Notes

- 1 Anna Ulrikke Andersen, *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), 60.
- 2 Ibid., 79.
- 3 Ibid., 83.
- 4 Ibid., 93.
- 5 Ibid., 161.
- 6 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 179.
- 7 Anna Ulrikke Andersen, *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022), 17-29.
- 8 Ibid., 29.
- 9 For example, see the Winter/Spring 2018 issue of *Log*, entitled "Disorienting Phenomenology".
- 10 Martin Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, 222-223. Translated by Kenneth Haynes & Julian Young and modified by Jerome Veith. In: Günter Figal (ed.) *The Heidegger Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 207-223.

About the Author

Hendrik Auret is a senior lecturer at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and registered as a professional architect. His research interests revolve around architectural moments that reveal the *seldsame* concerned relationships between dwellers and their emplaced existence as instances of caring, thereby making the case for attentive, appropriate ways of designing and building able to dignify this lived totality, architecture as an art of care. In 2019 Routledge published his first book, *Christian Norberg-Schulz's Interpretation of Heidegger's Philosophy: Care, Place and Architecture*.