

GUNNAR BIRKERTS: THE WORK SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

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ABSTRACT

Gunnar Birkerts was the last twentieth-century architect of international acclaim to have practiced out of the Detroit, Michigan region of the United States. This text was written as an introduction to my essays and building descriptions in the book, *Gunnar Birkerts, Metaphoric Modernist*, published in 2009 by Edition Axel Menges. These observations and descriptions of a few of Birkerts' buildings, were deleted from the final book publication. Birkerts died in 2017. I have updated this essay to reflect the passage of time and the occasion of his centenary in January 2025.

KEYWORDS

Gunnar Birkerts, metaphor, twentieth-century architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike many other prominent and accomplished architects of the twentieth century, Gunnar Birkerts never settled into a singular style or rigid set of motifs from which his projects were generated. He did not, as we say these days, “brand” himself. Instead, he worked in the manner of a small number of twentieth-century architects at the top of the profession, including Rafael Moneo, Renzo Piano, Eero Saarinen, Jorn Utzon, and Peter Zumthor, who find each

project to be particular enough to demand architecture that is, if not wholly different from what he or she has done previously, at least worthy of a significant recombination of his many closely-held enthusiasms. Like those other distinguished architects, Birkerts' work was not a demonstration of the validity of a single theoretical position, save that, for Birkerts, architecture was capable of a meaningful expression of program, topography, daylight, and culture. His architecture was a demonstration of his process, of finding meaningful correspondences in form, of intuitive energy informed by professional craft. His search for meaning led him to find practical solutions.

2. THE WORK

Nor did Birkerts specialize. He completed many kinds of buildings, including several libraries and churches. However, he did not narrow his work to those building types or repeat his design solutions for them. Despite this, Birkerts' designs may often be identified as his. Themes overlap years and some strategies and motifs span his entire career. Ideas recede and emerge again later. He explored several approaches to buildings and cities throughout his career, such that his interests and a few formal themes are explored in multiple works. He employed modular structural and spatial units to regulate planning; he took an interest in energy-saving building performance; he composed with elementary geometrical as well as irregular forms; visual references and image metaphors inspired his design process; he was skeptical about historicism and pastiche but maintained a respect for history and context. Several of his buildings were generated with structural objectives in mind; he explored subterranean structures and several that hovered above the landscape. Birkerts favored and frequently drew wandering and zigzag lines to define spaces sharply and suddenly. The closest relatives of those motifs may be found in the Expressionist architecture of the early twentieth century. Still, it would be a mistake to consider Birkerts an “Expressionist,” in that sense. Instead, his work was “expressive.” And, consistently, overwhelmingly, Birkerts generated interior

spaces with his knowing incorporation of the qualities of daylight.

We find cousins in his families of projects but never clones. His willingness to allow his several enthusiasms to simmer in an intense, individual design process within projects and throughout his 50-year career makes the work difficult to summarize, impossible to pigeon-hole, sometimes too personal to analyze, but more interesting and committed, more vital, than that of most architects.

Birkerts questioned the restrained vocabulary of Mies, which prevailed in architectural practice at the beginning of his career, in the post-World War II years, an attitude certainly nurtured by his early experience in the Eero Saarinen office, recognized for the range of its formal approaches as well as its innovative and influential technical research. The breadth of Birkerts' interests was almost certainly formed earlier than his tenure in the Saarinen office and out of personal inclinations and interests. However, one need only have looked around that office to sense the emergence of an ever-widening set of choices not sanctioned by what became known as the "International Style." The viability of an array of modern architectural approaches was likely confirmed by his experience with Saarinen and the sparkling team of young architects that Saarinen assembled there. In addition to Gunnar Birkerts, there were John Dinkeloo, Anthony Lumsden, Cesar Pelli, Warren Platner, Kevin Roche, Niels Diffrient, Chuck Bassett, and Robert Venturi, among others. These young practitioners advanced to the forefront of architectural practice in the years after Saarinen's death and gained reputations as originators of their own provocative architectural approaches.

Birkerts said that he "wanted to (defy) Mies." They all did, in that office. At the same time that the glass box triumphed in the post-World War II period of optimism and a rising wave of new technologies, the criteria for an advanced, articulate, humane, and questioning modernism were being established. Historians, indeed, most of us, prefer consistency. It is easier to discern patterns and to understand and critique that

which is constant. Yet the difficult path toward new understandings and the great satisfaction inherent in discovery lead a few artists and architects to realize that each new inquiry is an opportunity to learn more about the world. The Saarinen office nurtured this attitude.

Romaldo Giurgola once observed that, of the Saarinen office architects, "Birkerts is often considered to be the most uncompromising interpreter of programs, shapes or forms..." (Giurgola 1983) In the tradition of that office, Birkerts considered each commission an individual opportunity. However, instead of marshaling his staff to produce an extended stream of alternatives, as did Eero Saarinen, Birkerts practiced more in the manner of Eliel Saarinen. Kevin Roche wrote that "...one sensed that (Birkerts) prized Eliel's lifestyle as a model over Eero's. Eliel represented the individual architect working alone in his studio, a traditional image..." (Roche 1983) Birkerts' individualist path may have been eased by his choice, until the last years of his life, to remain and work in the Detroit area. Roche wrote that this location is "no longer, as it was in the fifties, a central element in the American consciousness...Gunnar utilizes this isolation, however, to buffer him from the influences of the East Coast...from the sober intellectual life of Chicago, and from the more bizarre environs of Los Angeles...so that he can achieve the objective which should be desired by all architects—that of making a significant contribution to society and to the history of architecture." (Roche 1983)

Birkerts did not seek a "right style for the job" as did Eero Saarinen, who set his staff to work on a variety of approaches to an individual commission. (Birkerts 2004) Setting the direction of a design by himself, for his associates, Birkerts occasionally used visual metaphors and vernacular architectural devices to link programs, clients, and landscapes, and thereby find meaning. The work is usually tied to a program and a particular context, a place and its geography, to the extent that the work often becomes part or reflective of, the surrounding landscape and accommodating to existing buildings. In his several underground or earth-

covered projects, for example, the landscape is manipulated, earth is strategically removed, to create and reveal the presence of inhabitable space, to bring daylight inside, and to maintain a sense of orientation for inhabitants. Birkerts' underground buildings do not hide. They express their presence forthrightly by means intended to daylight spaces or to provide views. Consequently, Birkerts' underground interior spaces are better illuminated than many of the above-ground buildings designed by others.

Even though there is no great architecture that does not address light and shadow as primary themes, interest in its strategic use often seems restricted to architects who practice in extreme climates where its consideration is critical. A native of Latvia, Birkerts shared this interest in the imperatives of daylighting with his colleagues from the Scandinavian and Baltic region of the world, including Aalto, whom he admired, as well as Asplund, Utzon, Kahn (who was born in neighboring Estonia), and others. Because of his consistent attention to the subtleties of daylighting, and beyond its formal qualities, above or below ground, Birkerts' architecture is expressive of a place through its appropriation of the character of the local sky. He was fully aware of the design-generating potentials of sun and skylight. He understood the advantages and techniques of reflected daylight, the qualities of daylight, which vary according to cardinal direction, and of daylight when it enters a space from opposite directions. By the end of Birkerts' career, there was probably no other architect practicing in the United States equally committed to generating architecture from the need to receive, gather, and manage daylight. (A recent, notable exception might be Steven Holl's ongoing interest in light and architecture.)

Gunnar Birkerts considered himself to be a modern architect. But he concluded, earlier than some others, that modernism could have a rich tradition, incorporating a multiplicity of approaches and moods that could be generated from one's intuition as well as one's professional experience. Traces of the International Style were frequently implicit in his work, but was always subject to his mischief and search for meaning. In his search for meaning, Birkerts

continued the work of his parents, who were both folklorists. He employed local forms, icons (in the traditional sense), and stories to make architecture. He used the shepherd's crook as inspiration for the form of the great skylight at the US Army Chapel at Wildflecken, Germany. He considered the end-over-end flight of a football to shape the skylights at the Schembechler football practice facility at the University of Michigan. His United States Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela echoes the stratified face of a stone quarry in the slopes of the Andean foothills, to the north. (Birkerts 1994) Most notably, he drew upon the Latvian liberation fable of the Crystal Mountain and Castle of Light to generate his last work, the National Library of Latvia.

The expressionist architecture of the early twentieth century, the work of Hans Scharoun, Hugo Haring, Erich Mendelsohn, and others, interested Birkerts, and he admired the work of Alvar Aalto. Those architects incorporated a speculative, moving line, the occasional curve or zigzag in plan or elevation in response to local circumstances, evidence of the architect's hand and pencil. Frequently, in the work of both Aalto and Birkerts, the broken line or unexpected curve becomes the servant of a daylighting idea. Both architects accepted the functional, good sense of the modern architectural box and similarly found it difficult not to adopt a playful attitude toward it.

Wit, a rare commodity in architecture, appears frequently in this kind of work. Walking through or around a Birkerts building, there is always something to discover: surprising views, space extended vertically, elegant details, or an infusion of light where you would least expect it. Having concluded that architecture is capable of conveying meaning, but having qualms about mimicking either the International Style or the literal historicism that post-modernism became known for, Birkerts' work, like that of his fellow late-modern eclectics, represents doubt about absolutes. Doubt inevitably follows dogma, particularly when that dogma has degenerated into banality as modernism did in the World War II years, and later as post-modern historicism did, rapidly and to no one's surprise. In Birkerts' work, doubt evolves into a willingness to probe and to question. Wit, in the playful intelligence of

Birkerts' best work, is a way to offer visitors the opportunity to question and learn, along with the architect, and it invites engagement with the architecture.

Birkerts' visions could not be realized without formidable technical skills. The buildings are skillfully detailed and constructed, and as Romaldo Giurgola has said, "...in Birkerts' projects, materials appear with great integrity, extended in surfaces to form enclosures, technically accomplished in detailing...materials appear so splendid, absolute, and indispensable..." (Giurgola 1983) Birkerts would not be able to pull off the formal collisions, gentle curves, or collected angles without his ability to identify appropriate materials, where they might be deployed, and how they should be assembled. Without these technical skills, Birkerts never would have been able to engage his "conceptual gift," as Giurgola has called it, an aptitude for the invention of architectural forms and spaces with personality and identifiable, individual character. (Giurgola 1983)

3. CONCLUSION

Finally, when the building is complete, when the architect walks away, after the chroniclers have had their say, something of character must be revealed or there is no architecture. In a career of varied and complex works and personal thought, in which ideas are not simply reflected, but refracted—bent and shifted—turned over and examined, shaken rather than just stirred, Gunnar Birkerts' work speaks for itself, or as he said, "Everything I say comes after." (Birkerts 2005)

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