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Introduction

Architextures. Building, Writing, Speaking in Nordic Literatures and Languages

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Abstract

This special issue of *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia*, "Architextures. Building, Writing, Speaking in Nordic Literatures and Languages", explores intersections of architecture, literature, and language. It investigates writerly responses to architectural styles, architecture as narrative settings, as a model for textual construction, and as metaphor for language structures. The contributions are grouped into three sections. The first section addresses the narrative potential of buildings and urban environments in the authorships of Hjalmar Bergman, Kjell Westö, Lotte Inuk, Mads Peder Nordbo, Simon Stålenhag, and Jonas Karlsson. The second considers textual structures as architectural forms, from saga archetypes to the organisation of Nordic *svartebøker*. The third focuses on the building blocks of language through studies on Old Icelandic word order and Swedish verbal polysemy. Through a variety of perspectives, this volume fosters new connections between space, structure, literary and linguistic discourses in Nordic studies.

Keywords: architecture, Nordic literature, Nordic language structures, narrative patterns, buildings in literature

In *Förhoppning* (*My Hope*), a short free verse poem dated September 1918, the Finland-Swedish modernist writer Edith Södergran (1892–1923) compares the composition of a poem to the construction of a cathedral:

Förhoppning	*My Hope*
Jag vill vara ogenerad –	I want to be free and easy –
därför struntar jag i ädla stilar,	that's why the noble styles mean nothing to me, and
ärmarna kavlar jag upp.	I roll up my sleeves.
Diktens deg jäser...	The dough of poetry is fermenting...
O en sorg –	O, a sorrow –
att ej kunna baka katedraler...	I cannot bake cathedrals!
Formernas höghet –	Elevation of form –
trägna längtans mål.	the goal of my hot yearning.
Nutidens barn –	Child of today –
har din ande ej sitt rätta skal?	has your spirit not found a fitting shell?
Innan jag dör	Before I die
bakar jag en katedral.	I will bake a cathedral.
(September 1918)	(September 1918)
(Södergran 1925:45)	(Södergran 1980:138)

At the heart of the poem is a baker who challenges tradition. Sleeves rolled up, hands in the mix, the lyrical 'I' engages in a daring act of creation with many unknowns: what will happen if well-proven recipes are disregarded? Will a masterpiece of spectacular dimensions rise from dough made with a new set of ingredients? Can contemporary baking techniques produce a classic *chef d'oeuvre*? Although the project may be open-ended and the goal well-nigh overwhelming – cathedrals are notoriously the culmination or endpoint of an architect's career and can take centuries to be completed – the two concluding lines exude the ambition of a master builder aware of human mortality, but confident in the immortality of a work of art.

In spite of its brevity, *Förhoppning* captures the buoyancy of a young poet and can be said to measure up to a long line of novelists who have constructed volumes of prose around cathedrals, some of which are discussed in Jöran Mjöberg's book *Arkitektur och litteratur* (*Architecture and Literature*; cf. Mjöberg 1999:109–224). Furthermore, in a highly concentrated form, the poem exemplifies one of the two main approaches to the literary use of architecture identified by Mjöberg (1999:7). In Södergran's metaliterary verse lines the 'baking of cathedrals' is, in fact, used as a linguistic-architectural metaphor to reflect on the process of modernist composition, not unlike those writers who have employed architectural structures as analogies for literary creation, to express allegories, or to uncover symbolic patterns. On the other hand, constructions, more commonly, also play a role as material settings in literature. Not only do they reveal their dwellers' personalities or ambitions – as in the Naturalist theories of the close relationship between individual and environment – but they also appear as characters in their own right, subjects with agency, most notably in Gothic literature.

To Mjöberg's preliminary, though foundational, observations, one could add other considerations on the interaction between architecture and literature: the long-standing tradition of architectural ecphrasis, an important subcategory in the genre of ecphrasis, according

to Carole Newlands (2013:55); a writerly interest for specific architectural styles, which can take the form of *ut architectura poesis* (cf. Frank 1979); the representation of architects, building contractors, or builders in fiction.

Also architecture and language intersect profoundly, moving beyond mere metaphor to reveal structural and compositional analogies. Both organise meaning: just as language arranges words and sentences within syntactic and semantic frameworks, architecture structures physical space to fulfil functional, symbolic, and aesthetic purposes. This analogy is not merely formal, but also semiotic and narrative. Umberto Eco shows how architectural elements function as signifiers, in that "the architectural object denotes a 'form of inhabitation'" (1997:176). He adds that architectural elements "may connote an overall ideology that has informed the architect's operation" (177). Here, Eco draws a distinction between *denotation*, the utilitarian function of elements like stairs or windows, and *connotation*, which encompasses historical, ideological, and symbolic layers, hence aligning architecture with the semiotic complexity typical of language.

Beyond linguistic parallels, architecture also resonates with narrative structures. Literature, like architecture, organises spatialities – textual, symbolic, and temporal – to guide the reader's orientation, attention, and emotions. Eco's theories on the openness of interpretation are particularly relevant here. In *Opera aperta* (1962; *The Open Work*), as Panza observes, Eco recognises the defining mark of modern aesthetics in the freedom to create, with every new work, a new linguistic and expressive system (cf. Panza 2016:9). Like a modernist building that reconfigures spatial logics, each literary text creates a unique compositional structure, open to multiple interpretations and shaped by evolving cultural contexts.

These parallels have concrete implications in literary theory. For instance, in 1987, with *Seuils* (*Thresholds*), Genette enriched the analogy by exploring textual architectures as structures with distinct narrative thresholds, which function similarly to architectural thresholds, guiding readers' experiences and interpretations. On the other hand, Hillier's concept of 'spatial configuration' highlights how cultural patterns of inhabitation parallel linguistic rules governing speech and writing, and how built environments narratively encode societal structures (Hillier 1996:3). Thus, architecture not only communicates but also narrates, with buildings and urban spaces embodying stories, historical memories, and collective identities. These interdisciplinary insights consider architecture, language, and literature as intertwined systems that, through symbolic representation and narrative expression, structure human perception, experience, and meaning-making.

This special issue of *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia* brings together three ways of looking at the intersections between architecture and Nordic literature and languages. A first group of articles (Storskog, Bassini, Turri, Iuliano, Za) discusses the narrative potential of buildings by departing from the impact that twentieth-century architecture and urban planning has had on writers. A second group (Ventura, Taglianetti) considers architecture in terms of formal organisation, as narrative patterns and compositional structures specific to certain types of texts. Finally, the third perspective (Longo, Zalesky) focuses on the building blocks of language, especially on the syntactic and lexical level.

Within the literary field, Camilla Storskog discusses Hjalmar Bergman's response to Swedish functionalism in three texts from 1930: the play Bergman was commissioned to write for the opening ceremony of the Stockholm Exhibition; his radio play titled *Tankar om funktionalism* (*Thoughts about Functionalism*); and an interview with *Dagens Nyheter*. Following the inauguration of the Exhibition, an avalanche of writings 'for' or 'against' the functionalist doctrine emerged, to the extent that the reactions of the Swedish writers came to form their own literary genre with its distinct history. While Bergman has previously been dismissed as an uncomprehending observer of the new modernist architecture, Storskog positions him between enthusiasts and sceptics, referencing the sharply ironic opinions

he expressed in 1930. She proceeds to discuss Bergman as a writer who constructs buildings, with special attention to the dark room at the heart of the Borck family home in the novel *Farmor och Vår Herre* (1921; *Thy Rod and Thy Staff*), here interpreted in relation to the architectural context of the 1920s.

A confrontation between the urban architecture of the modern Nordic countries and its literary representation is likewise at the centre of the following two contributions. In his analysis of Kjell Westö's portrayal of the Helsinki suburbs of Munksnäs and Munkshöjden, Alessandro Bassini relates the literary depiction of an area often considered 'peripheral' and 'disconnected' to the transformations of the Finnish nation as a whole. Arguing that Westö's suburbia should be read as a microcosm reflecting the political tensions, socio-economic growth, cultural development, and linguistic battles of Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, Bassini demonstrates its status as a 'storied space', where the post-war vision of a homogeneous residential area, isolated from the dominant city centre, falls short. Focusing on the short story *Melba, Mallinen och jag* (1992; *Melba, Mallinen and I*), Bassini emphasises how the architectural space of the yard – a modern-day agora – functions as a synecdoche for nationwide conflicts, whereas the novel *Drakarna över Helsingfors* (1996; *Kites over Helsinki*), with its attention to domestic interiors, mirrors the gradual commodification and consumerism characterising post-war Finland.

Francesca Turri's contribution looks at the so-called *boligblokke* that have left their mark not only on the cityscape of Nuuk, but also on literary fiction set in the capital of Greenland. As *dansk grønlandslitteratur* has increasingly turned to the anthropic spaces of the island, these prefabricated concrete apartment blocks built in 'the years of modernisation' (from the 1960s onwards) have taken on plot-generating and meaning-making functions in literature. Turri uses Anthony Vidler's concept of the 'architectural uncanny' to discuss the discrepancy between the promises of comfort and functionality of the housing project and its actual outcome, as reflected in Mads Peder Nordbo's *Pigen uden hud* (2017; *The Girl without Skin*) and Lotte Inuk's *Sultekustnerinde* (2004; *Hunger Artist*). Bearing in mind the social engagement that characterises much Nordic crime fiction, Turri observes that the infamous Blok P, which turns into a crime scene in Nordbo's Arctic noir, provides an appropriate setting for both an anti-colonial narrative and a critical examination of stereotypical tropes regarding Greenland. In Inuk's autofictional novel, Turri argues, architecture instead resonates with self-representation: the discomfort and sense of oppression experienced by the adolescent resident of a block of flats echoes the alienation and claustrophobia of the built environment.

As Angela Iuliano observes in her article, Simon Stålenhag's narrative art book *Ur varselklotet* (2014; *Tales from the Loop*) also invites comparison between the real world and the fictional universe. Focused on the construction of a massive particle accelerator and set in a retrofuturistic Sweden at the end of the twentieth century, Iuliano examines Stålenhag's dystopia through the lens of Swedish history. She concludes that the book contains several chronotopes operating on various levels in the narration, also revealed through stylistic choices nostalgically revoking yesterday's future: 1950s Sweden with its targeted industrial policies; the 1960s, a decade of optimistic technophilia; and the disillusionment with social-democratic Sweden and its welfare system, characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s. The condition of the architectural structures in the story world – ruins of technological wonders and infrastructures, arch towers, metal spheres, and machinery – corresponds to the decline of the welfare state.

Giovanni Za closes the reflection on the function of buildings in fiction with an examination of the Swedish writer Jonas Karlsson's short prose collections, published between 2007 and 2021. The lost egos and the unstable selves, trademarks of Karlsson's creative act, are here interpreted in light of the disorienting and destabilising material settings invented by the author. Using Edward Soja's concepts of 'firstspace', 'secondspace', and 'thirdspace', Za shows how physical reality unites with mental representations of spatiality in tales in which the protagonists

are constantly adapting the built environments – corridors, offices, staircases, theatre stages, restaurants – to their individual perception, extending them into their private 'domain of the imaginary'.

With Ambra Ventura's study the focus shifts towards structural aspects of narratives. Starting from Jenny Jochens's reading of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir as the prototypical figure of the 'female avenger', Ventura analyses how this archetype is interpreted in two medieval sagas of Icelanders, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (*The Saga of Gísli Súrsson*) and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* (*The Saga of Hǫrðr and the Men of Hólmr*). In these texts, female characters are torn between loyalty to their family of origin and the one they have married into. Using Meulengracht Sørensen's kinship models, Ventura argues that this reflects the evolution from the 'ancestor-centred' family structure of pre-Christian, Germanic origin to the 'ego-centred' model that had been established by the time the sagas were written and copied. The 'wayward sisters' – as Ventura calls these female characters – subvert traditional roles by acting on their own independent will, intervening directly, and taking revenge in their own hands instead of urging their male partners to action. These episodes are therefore essential building blocks of narrative structures that mirror changing ideologies and social revolutions in the passage of Icelandic culture from the pagan era to Christianity.

Luca Taglianetti's contribution also focuses on textual construction, examining the structural features of *svartebøker*, the Nordic Black books of magic, thereby highlighting how these manuscripts often follow recurring compositional patterns which point to a kind of vernacular canon of magical writing. Mostly compiled between the 15th and the 19th centuries, these texts combine Latin formulas, folk remedies, and symbolic diagrams into a textual structure reflecting both belief and ritual practice. Based on examples from across the Scandinavian region, the article shows how the reference to authoritative figures such as Saint Cyprian, as well as the tradition of the Black School in Wittenberg, was used to reinforce the authority of the books and their content. While placing the *svartebok* in the context of the broader European esoteric tradition, Taglianetti also highlights its specific Nordic character, especially pointing to its layout and textual organisation. The article thus sheds light on how spatial concepts and structural thinking influence literary composition, not least in texts situated at the margins of official traditions.

Moving to the linguistic field, Michele Longo's contribution starts out by highlighting how the concept of linearity represents a fundamental dimension on which – as pointed out by Ferdinand de Saussure – language, on the signifier's plane, functions and develops in that the linear disposition of syntagmatic elements creates meaning. The object of Longo's investigation is the word order of sentence constituents in Old Icelandic. Discussing the most significant results of previous scholarly works from a both typological and syntactic theoretical perspective, Longo conducts a statistical analysis based on data retrieved from the annotated corpus IcePaHC (*The Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus*), which documents the history of the Icelandic language from 1150 to the 21st century. His comparison of results from different historical periods sheds new light on the discussion on a 'free' word order for Old Icelandic – which the general consensus has long agreed on – and the transition from original OV to modern VO order. On the basis of the collected evidence, Longo argues for the presence of two dominant word orders (SVO and VSO) in Old Icelandic, rather than free word order.

Talmy Givón (2001:233) has underlined how clauses can be studied from two complementary perspectives, an internal one, which considers "[h]ow they are constructed from a vocabulary", and an external one, which focuses on "[h]ow they are combined together into discourse". Alexandra Zalesky's article contributes to our understanding of how the internal construction of the Swedish sentence works through an investigation of two of the most frequent verbs in the Swedish language, *få* (basic meaning 'receive') and *bli* (basic meaning 'become'). Zalesky maps the polysemy of the two verbs both as 'lexical words' and 'non-lexical words'

(Givón 2001:234), at the intersection of the semantic and morphosyntactic language components. Discussing previous studies, she also compares and contrasts the Swedish usage with the Danish and Norwegian counterparts to better describe how the two verbs express grammatical categories, such as verbal aspect (*Aktionsart*) and the passive voice.

From the writers' early response to functionalism to modernist architecture seen through the lens of contemporary literature; from the representation of domestic space to the discussion of what twentieth-century (sub)urban dwelling should have been, could have been, and was not; from narrative patterns as constitutive elements of literary and non-literary texts to structural elements of linguistic systems – it is our *förhoppning* that this issue of *Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia* can contribute to build and restore imaginative connections between literature, language, and architecture.

This collection of articles stems from an interdisciplinary research project titled *Pappershus, luftslott, ordsmedjor. Arkitektur i nordiska språk och nordisk litteratur*, with the purpose of investigating different forms of relations between architectural structures and Scandinavian languages and literatures with case studies from diverse chronological and geographical settings. The project resulted in a conference held at the University of Milan in October 2023, bringing together a motley crowd of more than thirty international scholars in Scandinavian Studies, from Italy in the south to Scandinavia in the north, from Mexico in the west to Poland in the east. During this three-day conference, literature sessions and language sessions offered many opportunities to reflect on the place of architecture in fiction, the construction of literary canons and academic fields, as well as on the building blocks of ancient and modern Scandinavian languages. In 2025, *Annali di Ca' Foscari* (Venice University Press, Italy) and *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* are hosting a special issue and a dedicated section, respectively, on the themes of the research project.

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