

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Permanent Collection of 1925: Oslo Modernism in Paper and Models

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In 1925, architect Georg Eliassen took the initiative to establish a collection of drawings, photography and scale models in response to an increasing frustration among Norwegian architect of not being able to participate in international architectural exhibitions. The so-called Permanent Collection was founded on a principle of absolute contemporaneity, making de-acquisition as important as acquisition in the management of the collection. Nevertheless, the collection kept increasing. By the mid 1930s it included hundreds of models and innumerable drawings and photos and was seen as nucleus of an entire museum of Norwegian architecture. This ambition failed, and the material that had been so intensively displayed in Kiel, Budapest, Helsinki, Berlin, Prague, and Paris, before making its last appearance at the World's Fair in New York in 1939, was buried in storage, dispersed, or destroyed. Based on extensive archival research, this article chronicles a forgotten collection, framing it within a modernist culture of collecting and exhibiting architecture.

In November and December 2013, Mari Lending and Mari Hvattum salvaged parts of the Permanent Collection in the exhibition "Model as Ruin" at Kunstnernes Hus (House of Artists) in Oslo, the venue that hosted the most important display of the collection in 1931.



Fig. 1: In 1931, the audience of the grand architecture exhibition at the House of Artists in Oslo was mesmerized by the miniature of the new Kunsthalle. Designed by architects Blakstad & Munthe-Kaas and inaugurated in 1930, the building was at the time celebrated as the most modern exhibition space in Europe. Photo: Andreas Svenning, 2013.

When proposing to establish a Norwegian museum of architecture in 1934, Harald Hals, head of the Oslo planning department, pointed to a precious material 'stored

away in basements, accumulating in attics, shoved into drawers and stuffed into cans'. Prominently placed in the envisioned museum was a collection of photography, drawings, and 'nearly 100 models of projected and executed works from our own time, individual buildings but also sections of streets and cities, even complete cities. [...] This still developing collection is located in an attic never

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intended for such use, fully exposed to the destruction of time' (Hals 1934: 132).

Hals' proposal was indeed visionary. Fulfilled, it would have been one of the first modern architecture museums in the world. The collection suggested as the contemporary core in an otherwise historical museum was established in 1925 according to the exact opposite of any known museological principle. The so-called Permanent Collection was based on the idea of continuous replacement, aspiring to an absolute contemporaneity, and should at all times be ready to be shipped on short notice and adaptable to a variety of exhibition spaces in Norway and abroad. However, less than a decade later the result of this enchanting ambition is described as ruinesque and deteriorating; still growing whilst in alarming decay, 'not even enjoyed by a cat (but perhaps a rat)'. Hals is slightly exaggerating, as updated versions of the collection were in fact enjoyed by audiences abroad a few more years. It was displayed in the Norwegian pavilion at the *Exposition universelle* in Paris in 1937, in Prague in 1938, and, in its final appearance, at the world fair in New York in 1939, before taking on a new existence of archival diaspora. Hals nevertheless feared that the invaluable objects would soon 'be 'filed' and disappear under a carpet of dust and hidden and forgotten in some mysterious place'. History certainly proved him right on the last point. Dust can serve as a euphemism for what the surviving parts of the collection have been covered with in the post-war period, in various unfortunate storage spaces. For the filing, he was overly optimistic. Hals saved the Permanent Collection by including it in what was later named the 'Hals Collection', an amorphous mound of projects of different origins, agendas, and quality, in which the Permanent Collection somewhat drowned. As the collection and its international exhibition trajectory during the 1920s and 1930s soon fell into oblivion, parts of the material remain unregistered, and those inventories that exist acknowledge neither the provenance of the objects as exhibits nor the collection's rare exhibitionary apparatus. Regrettably, as it has not been recognized as a collection,

the paper material and the scale models that were once intimately intertwined have also been divided due to a split, and still somewhat unresolved, ownership between the Oslo City Archives and the Architecture Museum (part of the National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design). When it was being exhibited, in the 1920s and 1930s, a project was normally presented with a model accompanied with a set of three plates combining plans, sections, façades, and photographs.

'Original models from the 1920s are a rarity', curator Oliver Elser states in the book accompanying *The Architectural Model: Tool, Fetish, Small Utopia* exhibition at the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt in 2012 (Elser 2012: 13). Despite the cumbersome history of the Permanent Collection and the misfortunes that have befallen it, important parts of the collection have miraculously survived. In fact, it encompasses an abundant assortment of models – from huge and heavy plaster models to light, elaborate miniatures, detailed down to lavish vegetation, ornaments, tiles and handrails – evoking complexities and contradictions far beyond the aesthetics of the white, cubic, purist, and austere versions of modernism recorded in the style-based evolutions of mainstream historiography.¹

The collection was part of an architectural culture obsessed by dissemination and propaganda, and there are traces of the forgotten Norwegian collection in thoroughly canonized exhibitions of the time in Europe and the US. Some of these connections are easily explainable, some are not: How a photograph filed as 'Norway: Eindride Slaato: Three-family House, Oslo; ca. 1930' (*sic*) found its way into the photo archives of the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1932 belongs to the somewhat unruly meandering of the collection.²

The recovered parts of the collection immediately give an impression of its years en route. In addition to the small metal plates identifying forgotten model builders, the models are marked with various labels and different sets of numbers, tags, and stamps, hints of their changing



Fig. 2: A remnant of a sticker on the huge topographical model (1: 200, 70 x 301 cm) of Ole Lind Schiestad's Ingierstrand Bad (1934), confirms that the model was part of the collection as displayed in the Norwegian Pavilion at the World's Fair in New York in 1939. Photo: Andreas Svenning, 2013.



Fig. 3: Ole Øvergaard's Hotel Continental (1932) was originally conceived with vibrant colours, as shown in the model. The building is today 'restored' to a fictional modernism, in a dull, monochromic light grey. Photo: Andreas Svenning, 2013.

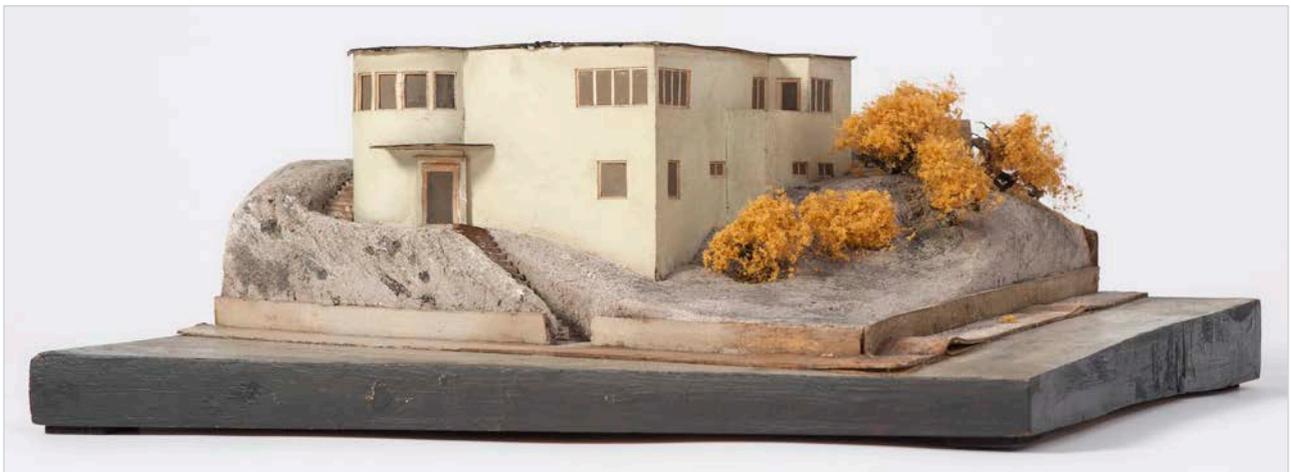


Fig. 4: With all the accessories of the international style – flat roof, corner windows, unadorned render façade – Ole Eindrude Slaatto's lustrous Villa Figenschou (1932) meanders gently up irregular rock steps and steep slopes, as the model clearly shows. Slaatto's new work was continuously included in the collection; nevertheless, the production of this fine architect lingers on the outskirts of Norwegian historiography.

venues. The paper material, including the frames and passe-partouts, display a rich curatorial paratext. An archaeology of labels, tags, and emblems are clues to the collection's shifting contexts of display, such as labels in English superimposed over older labels in German. One nearly illegible trace of a sticker on the huge topographical model of Ole Lind Schiestad's public bath at Ingierstrand (1934) – with scars indicating lost miniature boats on the water, missing cars on the parking lot, and the absence of the famous 10 meters tall diving board – confirms that the model attended the 1939 World Fair in New York.

Collecting a collection

By the early 1920s, the many missed opportunities to take part in architecture exhibitions abroad created an almost palpable frustration among especially Oslo architects. 'We were always too late', architect Georg Eliassen noted laconically in May 1925, explaining that the lack of Norwegian participation in international venues was because 'the work and the expense which each exhibitor must contribute apparently do not match the advantages offered by participation in short term exhibitions'.³

The architects' journal *Byggkunst*, founded in 1919, published reports on international exhibitions on a

regular basis, and constantly lamented the absence of contemporary Norwegian architecture. In 1925, the architects were annoyed that the Norwegian Society of Applied Arts curated the Norwegian pavilion at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs* in Paris, and embarrassed by the poor contribution in a show on Swedish, German, and Norwegian industrial architecture at the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Oslo (Moestue 1925: 92; Øvergaard 1925: 93). The same year, the architects failed to accept invitations to participate in a show in Chicago, as well as in a large exhibition at the Grand Central Palace in New York, organized by The Architectural League in April. The Ministry of Public Works had been notified about the New York exhibition in August 1924 by the Norwegian embassy in Washington D.C., and the call for participation was mentioned in *Byggekunst* (*Byggekunst* 1924: 176). However, all efforts to plan a contribution collapsed. The lack of efficient routines to manage the organization of international exhibitions is evident from a hectic and disoriented correspondence between several ministries, the Norwegian Association of Architects (NAL), the Architecture Associations in Oslo (OAF), Bergen (BAF), and Trondheim (TAF), and the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen.⁴ Even the Trondheim chapter, which in the course of the next few decades was able to contribute only sporadically in exhibitions, announced a few days after having received the invitation from The Architectural League that they had 'decided to participate in New York'.⁵ The Oslo architects were excited by the opportunity as well, and Georg Eliassen, Gudolf Blakstad, and Finn Bryn formed a committee to 'consider the question of participation'.⁶ The initiative led to nothing. In January 1925, when OAF had to 'accept the poor prospects for arranging a really good exhibition of Norwegian architecture within this short timeframe', they implicitly expressed a severe

criticism of NAL's ability to facilitate the international presentation of Norwegian architecture.⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was notified a month before the show in New York opened that 'due to the lack of a program and the short time available, the Board of the Norwegian Association of Architects regrettably feels obliged to give up its anticipated participation in the exhibition'.⁸ This capitulation propelled an explicit acknowledgment of the importance of exhibitions in contemporary architectural culture. In sum, this series of failures were decisive for George Eliassen's initiative to establish a permanent and portable collection of drawings and photographs.⁹

Permanent and ephemeral

'The committee for the permanent collection of drawings and photographs of modern Norwegian architecture', or 'The committee for the acquisition of a collection of architecture', as the committee's letterhead read, met for the first time early in the fall of 1925. Headed by Georg Eliassen, the other members were the editor of *Byggekunst* and the secretary of the Architecture Academy. The prospectus drafted at the first meeting laid out detailed specifications for how the exhibition material should be designed, delivered, transported, stored, and displayed. Extracts were published as early as the September issue of *Byggekunst* 1925 (Eliassen 1925: 134–35) with supporting comments from the Oslo and Bergen associations, and it was later reprinted and circulated on many occasions.

Eliassen's vision was neither a historical panorama nor a corroboration of tradition. His perspective was entirely contemporary: 'The provision of such a collection at all times ready to be exhibited should – in order to obtain the best result – be undertaken without regards of any specific exhibition'.¹⁰ In other words, the idea was a

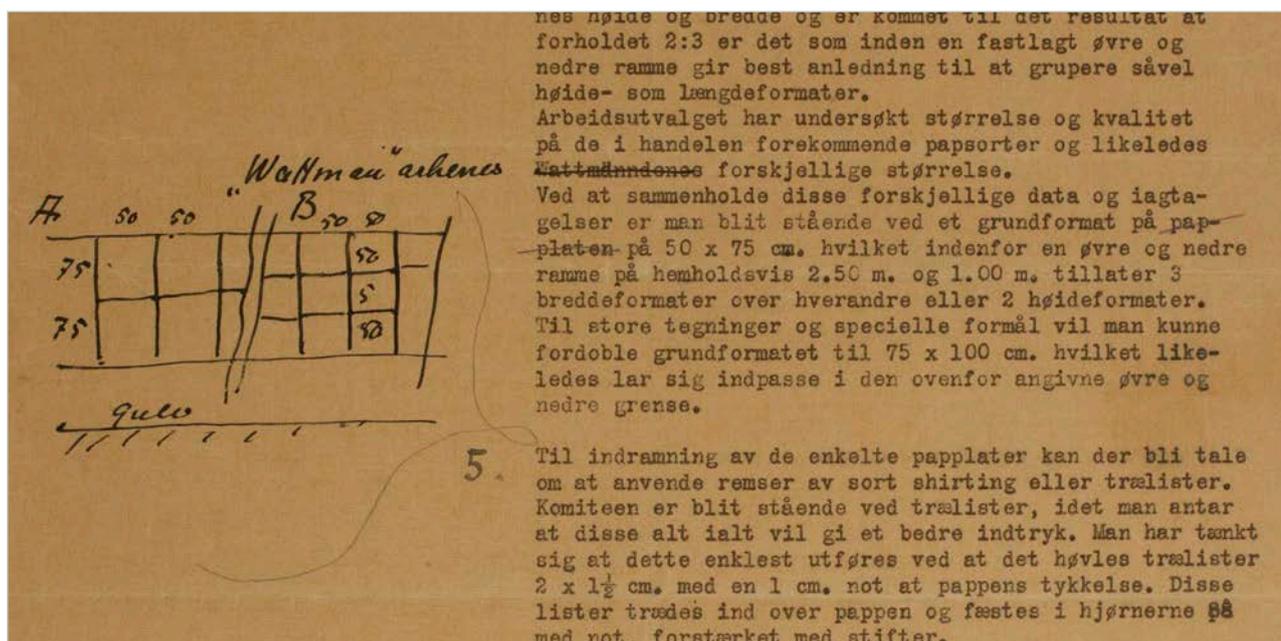


Fig. 5: The modular system for the mounting of paper material was sketched by hand in the margins of the committee's first prospectus from 1925 and later circulated in print.

permanent alertness. The Permanent Collection was never intended to be permanent in the meaning that its content was fixed and as such would grow over time. If so, it might have anticipated a future museum collection. Quite to the contrary, the ideal was an absolute contemporaneity, and as a consequence, de-acquisition was as important as acquisition in the management of the collection – a quintessentially modernist principle rigorously pursued by the collective of curators and organizers that operated this exhibition machinery over the next fifteen years: ‘The collection will be permanent and at any time include the best of modern Norwegian architecture. Thus, new works will be included in the future while older projects will be excluded’ (Eliassen 1925: 136). Dated works were to be omitted and new works added on an annual basis. Accordingly, ‘permanent’ here reflects the collection as an institution, while its content was ever changing.

Frames and frameworks

Further, the prospectus presented a selection principle and a plan for funding, and insisted that all exhibition material should be standardized. In fact, the most permanent feature of the Permanent Collection was its ingenious mounting system. Initially, the collection contained only paper material, framed, scaled, and mounted in accordance with the plan devised by the 1925 committee. This modular system was sketched by hand in the margins of the committee’s first prospectus and later circulated in print. The works ‘should be elucidated by plans, façade drawings, and photographs.’ ‘In order to provide the collected exhibition material sustainability beyond the present, it should be made on guaranteed durable paper,’ and it was decided that photographs and drawings were to be mounted on a specific type of cardboard. For the frames, the committee ‘landed on the use of wooden frames, which, all things considered, are assumed to give a better impression.’ The decision to use ‘2 x 1 ½ cm planed wood frames’ was given technical as well as aesthetic consideration: When a ‘drawing is separated from the surroundings by a simple (black) frame, the individual drawing will attract notice without distorting the totality’. Formats were related to a modular system based on 50 x 70 centimeter cardboard plates, allowing for variation within the system: ‘Regarding drawing formats it was agreed not to establish precise measurements, only to standardize the size of the cardboard plates and leave it to the individual architect to group various drawings in the best-looking fashion within this determined frame size’. It is assumed that by leaving some decisions to the exhibiting architects ‘a certain variation will be achieved’, such as to what degree drawings and photographs should cover the surface of the plates. The ideal was ‘a uniform impression’, while avoiding a ‘boring monotony’. Photographs were recommended to be placed one or two in each frame: ‘Experience shows that many small photographs are less suitable as exhibition material’. The plates were to be mounted as a 1.5-meter-tall frieze starting 1 meter above floor level. The upper and lower levels were set at 2.5 meters and 1 meters, respectively, for pictures

mounted on the wall, with some flexibility to vary heights and lengths: ‘For large drawings and special purposes one may double the size of the plates, as a 75 x 100 cm format still can be fit within the upper and lower limits set out above. [...] The committee has experienced that these measures are suitable and permits the study of the drawings without the spectator having to adopt uncomfortable positions’ (the original prospectus reprinted and signed by Berner 1926: 44–46). Exactly what the committee’s experience was based on remains a mystery, as the system seems to be without any obvious precedents. Photographs from the 1923 Bauhaus show, for instance, reveal plans and photos framed with almost similar black frames, yet the modular mounting system of a continuous frieze was not used in Weimar.¹¹

Installation design is often seen as an exhibition’s unconscious ‘present – and powerful – but often unseen, overlooked, and unacknowledged’ (Staniszewski 1998: xxviii). For the Permanent Collection, the early and highly conscious efforts to standardize the exhibits gave permanence and character to the ever-changing collection. The 1925 guidelines provided strong leads for future exhibition frameworks, and functioned as an inbuilt installation design that proved to be adaptable in the most different venues. And the specifications were never lost from sight. For the works shown in Budapest 1930, the call for submissions stated that drawings, photographs, and models ‘are to be executed consistent with the standard set out in *Byggekunst* 1926 page 44’.¹² When housing projects from the collection were prepared for display in the riding hall at Grev Wedels Plass in Oslo during a fair in September 1932 the committee emphasized that ‘the plates must conform to regular standard formats’ (*Byggekunst* 1932: 19). The framing of the paper material and the flexible modular system for mounting it remained surprisingly robust and sustainable. With small variations it became the signature of the collection as installed in a variety of spaces, including the *Triennale di Milano* in 1933, the *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne* in Paris in 1937, a show at the Museum of Applied Art in Prague in 1938, all the way to the 20-meter-long wall displaying photography during the *World’s Fair* in 1939 in New York.

Selection

The 1925 committee established criteria for ‘worthwhile’ works, built or unbuilt: ‘One finds’, they stated, that unrealised projects might be included ‘as far as inclusion is justified by architectural merit’.¹³ One searches in vain to find dramatic proclamations beyond the characteristics ‘quality’ and ‘modern’; neither polemic deliberations on style, generation, or ruptures, nor discussion of spatiality, technology, or aesthetics. The effort to shape the collection hardly echoes the strategic launch of newness that characterized many better-known American or European architecture exhibitions of the time. Rather than promoting certain schools, styles, programs, or interests, the Norwegian exhibition material is characterized by a discreet pragmatism. When a version of the collection was exhibited at the Artist’s Association (Kunstnerforbundet)



Fig. 6: The Permanent Collection displays an undogmatic modernism, and the ease with which Norwegian architects moved between a variety of different stylistic idioms in the 1920s. Lars Backer's sumptuously classical Villa Larsen (1924), here surrounded by huge deciduous trees made from natural sponge on metal wire, was completed as he was working on the Skansen restaurant in Oslo, an icon in Nordic modernism.

in Oslo in 1929, a critic remarked that 'it is hard to imagine that Haugesund Town Hall and The House of Artists in Oslo are designed by the same architects, and also that Fritjof Larsen's Villa on Drammensveien and the Ekeberg Restaurant are signed by the same author' (Fürst 1929). The heterogeneity may of course be explained, as this critic does, by the 1920s being a period of idiomatic transition: 'We stand in the middle of a roaring surf, we find ourselves in a period of change, where old and new collide.' However, the Permanent Collection shows the ease with which two generations of Norwegian architects moved between different expressions and stylistic idioms, not as a matter of dialectical evolution from historicism to modernism, but as a multitude of equally legitimate facets of modernity. Oslo experienced a building boom in the 1920s and '30s, and the rapidly expanding capital faced a series of new and urgent building tasks. This undoubtedly contributed to the heterogeneity of the solutions, allowing an eclectic array of modernist architecture to be planned and built. Rather than an Oedipal rebellion, the collection reflects modernism in Norway as a project pursued across generations, which again might explain the strikingly undogmatic nature of the collection. Accordingly, the Permanent Collection was less concerned with masterpieces and individual careers, presenting instead modern architecture as an all-encompassing and collective phenomenon, reflected in the managing of the collection as a collaborative effort.

Thus, the diversity of the collection appears conscious, well considered — and realistic. The committee might easily have launched formal, stylistic, or aesthetic criteria, to effectively present novelty and dramatic change. Of course, this way of styling and curating architectural modernism reached a climax with the MoMA's 1932 *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, where the refined use of black-and-white photography has contributed

to consolidate the architectural avant-garde as homogeneously white and cubistic. The curators Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock cultivated this visual rhetoric in both the catalogue and the following book, *The International Style: Architecture from 1922*, to a degree Terence Riley has characterized as 'heavy editing' (Riley 1992: 80). Rather than promoting a certain and consistent modern look — which in the New York show led to omission of for example Buckminster Fuller's work — the Norwegian collection defined modern architecture undogmatically, in style, construction, materials, and typologies. In fact, style never became an issue in the selection process and as a result, the Permanent Collection displays a surprising stylistic diversity. The collection certainly transcends the narrow confines of the 'international style' ricocheting from the US back to Europe in the early 1930s. For sure, it included ribbon windows and roof terraces, but in sum the Permanent Collection displays a remarkably situated modernism, concerned more with the quality of everyday life than with political or stylistic gestures.

Thus, the first call for projects was generously defined, basically inviting architects to submit recent and interesting work. The individual architects were to cover costs for the production of drawings and photographs, while the local architects' associations were to share other costs in proportion to their share of the collection at any time. Even though an important ambition for the Permanent Collection was to relieve busy practitioners from unexpected requirements and sudden deadlines, the first approved schedule for assembling the material was soon eclipsed by daily routines, exactly what the collection was intended to alleviate. The Trondheim architects promptly declared as impossible the deadline set for handing in material — January 1, 1926 — while the representative for the Bergen architects called it 'hopeless'.¹⁴ *Byggekunst* published a letter from the OAF Board requesting the



Fig. 7: The model of Frithjof Reppen's elegant Rowhouses in Professor Dahl's gate (1930) displays a situated modernism. The model sits on a wooden base, with facades in cardboard and paper, and with wire railings. The terrain is of painted papier-mâché, the grass in textile fibres, while wire covered with paper and lichen forms miniature trees. Photo: Andreas Svenning, 2013.

members 'to seriously make note of the fact that the success of this endeavor – to create a permanent collection of exhibition material which will serve the architects' interests – depends on each member's concern and effort'. Eventually, a new deadline, May 1, 1926, was set for 'blueprints, amateur photographs or whatever else is at hand, as long as it is sufficient to judge the architectural merit of the work' (*Byggekunst* 1926: 46). For the selection of works the same method was proposed as already established for the Houen's Prize – this and the Sundt Prize were and still are the most prestigious distinctions granted in Norwegian contemporary architecture – namely, that the local association would propose works to the NAL board, who would make the final decision.¹⁵

The first list of 'buildings and spatial art of outstanding architectonical value' was presented in September 1926. In total, 90 projects from 57 firms were included: 42 from Oslo, 8 from Bergen, and 7 from Trondheim. With the exception of the Bergen architect Ole Landmark, whose works were included in most displays of the Permanent Collection, the Bergen and Trondheim architects rarely handed in material, even though they received numerous reminders. This regional asymmetry was recurrently criticized, despite the committee's persistent efforts to build a national collection.¹⁶ In fact, the first tentative list was accompanied by a comment indicating frustration that only Oslo architects had responded to the first invitations to submit works. The committee regretted that the list had been subject to the members' 'own knowledge of the material', making it impossible 'to guarantee that all works of interest for the collection have been included'.¹⁷

Still, the list, which was largely based on works presented in *Byggekunst* since its establishment in 1919, gives important hints about the committee's mind-set. The collection should give 'a multi-faceted representation of

modern architecture', and presented a broad typological and geographical outlook. It comprised dwellings (villas, semidetached houses, housing for workers and students, corporative dwellings, summer houses, and sports cabins), monumental structures and public buildings (such as museums, galleries, archives, libraries, banks, churches, schools, and memorials), industrial architecture, factories, transportation and tourism facilities, restaurants and hotels, and a few city plans. In other words, all kinds of commissions and tasks.¹⁸ Quality and contemporaneity remained the dominant criteria. The initially stated constraint, that no architect could exhibit more than three works, was in the end not applied.

Upon its establishment, it was decided that the collection should be organized under the auspices of the National Association of Architects and that the NAL Board should make immediate arrangements to establish and manage the new collection, thus securing 'future Norwegian participation in international exhibitions of architecture'.¹⁹ The curatorial responsibility was assigned to the committee. In practice this meant the committee had to 'decide the quality of drawings and photographs, formats, size and installation, arrange for participation in exhibitions, etc.'. In fact an Oslo initiative, this explains the change in signature when the extract from Eliassen's seminal prospect that had been printed in *Byggekunst* in 1925 reappeared in the same journal in 1926, but this time dated March 1, 1926, and attributed to NAL president Carl J. Berner (Berner 1926: 44–46). Likewise, in the 1930s, the collective of organizers and curators presented themselves as NAL's 'Permanent Exhibition Committee'. As a matter of principle, NAL was in charge of the material. In practice, however, the same group of Oslo-based architects remained in charge of the collection's content and itinerary during the 1920s and '30s, and the press

kept referring to it as the Oslo collection, even as 'OAF's beautiful collection' (E. G. 1931: 242).

Occasionally, the slightly unclear question of ownership of the collection caused some tension between the different institutions involved. For instance, NAL wanted to present parts of the Permanent Collection at the *Berliner Bauausstellung* that ran from May 9 to August 9, 1931: We 'would appreciate receiving from the Oslo Architects' Association at the earliest opportunity a confirmation that the material owned by this exhibitor may be sent to Berlin together with the material which the National Association now possesses, together with new contributions from Bergen and Trondheim'.²⁰ However, Harald Hals, who curated the Permanent Collection on many occasions, declined the request, as the same material was planned to hold a central place in the OAF's twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition at the House of Artists (Kunstneres Hus) in Oslo in the fall.²¹ As a result, NAL, having already obtained partial funding for bringing the collection to Berlin, was forced to notify the Ministry of Public Works that the organization 'unfortunately is not in position to accept the honorable invitation to take part in the Berlin exhibition in 1931'.²²

Also, a correspondence between architect Ole Landmark and NAL throws some light on a somewhat complicated relationship between the collection as an institution and the individual exhibitors. In 1930 in Budapest, Landmark presented a gallery and four villas in Bergen, of which some dated back to the first version of the collection. Upon the return of the material Landmark received a letter from NAL: 'We have also returned the frames, as these possibly may be used for the Bergen exhibition. Regrettably, a few have been damaged during transportation from Budapest, but we return these as well in case you may make use of them. You are kindly requested to return the frames afterwards'.²³ In other words, NAL indicates that while the architect owned the drawings and photos, the equipment belonged to the collection and thus could be disposed of by the national association. Landmark's response provides further information: 'My photographs from the Budapest exhibition have been received, and I thank you. On the other hand I have not received the most important objects, namely 6 drawings of Cabinet member Gjerdt Meyer Bruun's villa in scale 1: 50. [...] The frames are mine. They were acquired for the Kiel exhibition and were paid for to the Committee back then'.²⁴ The committee's role as facilitator is further confirmed by Harald Hals, who a year earlier assured one of the exhibiting architects that 'the drawings you have submitted for the Kiel exhibition have been sent to bookbinder M. Fredriksen for framing'.²⁵ Prior to the 1930 Budapest exhibition it is announced that the committee will review the material and make sure that 'the accepted works are framed accordingly'.²⁶ What remains in the archives of correspondences, receipts for framing, and repairs of damaged frames and models leads to an understanding of the facilitation of the objects during the collection's most active period, and also to the thorny and apparently often unresolved question of the ownership of the collection and its apparatus.

A circulating collection

The international premiere of the collection took place at the 1927 Comité Permanent International des Architectes (CPIA) congress in Brussels, where the Norwegian delegate Andreas Bugge presented a slide show of the projects included on the first list.²⁷ While the collection was founded with drawings and photography, models were introduced early on, and presented internationally the first time at the *Nordischen Ausstellung* in the Thaulow Museum in Kiel in 1929, during a German-Norwegian week of science, art, music, theater, film, and sports.²⁸ The Kiel exhibition aptly demonstrated the Permanent Collection's principle of continuous replacement. While the oldest project included in the first version of the collection dated back to 1909, it was by 1929 presented as a fully contemporary endeavor, including unbuilt works. After the collection's most comprehensive version was exhibited at the House of Artists in Oslo in 1931, the section on dwellings was sent to Helsinki and 'significantly supplemented during the preparation'.²⁹ When the Helsinki exhibition committee proposed to restage the same material at the Oslo Trade Fair in September of 1932, they emphasized the opportunity to make the collection 'if possible even more complete'.³⁰ The 1933 exhibition at the Technische Universität in Berlin, curated by Sverre Pedersen, professor at the Technical University in Trondheim, presented almost 350 plates and a selection of models of city plans, regulations as well as recent restorations (partly on loan from the Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments), and thus represented a significant thematic expansion of the collection.³¹ The restoration works, especially on medieval structures, became part of the Permanent Collection, framed according to the 1925 guidelines, thus presenting new restoration works as an indisputable and significant part of contemporary architectural culture. Immediately after the show in Berlin, the curator hosted an exhibition of contemporary German architecture in Trondheim, including works by Mies van der Rohe, an exchange typical for a modernist scene marked by the rapid movement of ideas and internationalist aspirations. When the collection was displayed at the *Triennale di Milano* the same year, the selection of works changed again.³²

The Norwegian representation in Budapest in September 1930 illustrates the dynamics between the Permanent Collection and specific exhibitions, and the extent to which new displays reconfigured and supplemented the collection. 'We believe that Norwegian architects, by exhibiting their excellent and characteristic works, will achieve a significant success', read the flattering invitation from the Hungarian organizers.³³ Prior to the show, the NAL president underlined that 'it is very important that participation on this occasion is as wide-spanning as possible'.³⁴ 'Foreign architects' were recommended to submit 'as far as possible, only such works which have not yet been exhibited or published', as stated in the Hungarian regulations. The architect Eyvind Mostue, who curated the Permanent Collection on many occasions, as did his partner Ole Lind Schiested, mounted 57 Norwegian projects (of which 22 had been displayed in Kiel and at the Artist's Association in Oslo the previous year), in perfect accordance with the



Fig. 8: The most permanent feature of the Permanent Collection was its ingenious mounting system, devised upon its founding in 1925. This photograph from the 1930 exhibition in Budapest shows the paper material framed, scaled, and mounted in accordance with the modular frieze, which proved to be adaptable to a variety of exhibition spaces. Reproduced from *Compte-Rendu: Travaux du XIIIe Congrès international des architectes* (Budapest 1931).

Permanent Collection's module system. An almost complete inventory of the Budapest material has survived, with the mounting plans for drawings and photographs with given formats for heights and widths, a plan of the exhibition room, and six models.³⁵ Even though some of the work had already been exhibited, the comprehensive Norwegian section in the Budapest Palais des beaux-arts (131 items, outnumbered only by Hungary's 522 and Germany's 162) represented an essential update of models, photographs, and drawings, and increased the scope of architects involved in the collection.³⁶ During the preparations the OAF committee decided that the show planned in Oslo the next fall should be 'based on the material that these days is being shipped to Budapest'.³⁷ However, for Budapest 'the architecture most characteristic for Norway has been selected, something which is really not necessary in Oslo': 'New projects will also appear by then'. This illustrates the contemporaneity of the Permanent Collection, but also its versatility in changing contexts.

Even though Norway in the end withdrew its contribution, the 1931 Berliner Bauausstellung, closing just before the biggest display ever of the Permanent Collection opened at the House of Artists in September, came to influence the show in Oslo. During the summer Georg

Eliassen and several of his co-organizers visited Berlin and were mightily impressed by what they saw. 'The Germans are among the pioneers of a new, socially oriented architecture, and the exhibition they had arranged was exceptionally interesting', Georg Eliassen reported in an interview, praising Germany's 'highly developed exhibition technique': 'It was exciting to see how the exhibits were mostly of large format and clearly laid out. Tables and forms were simple and delightful in a way that made them easily accessible to the public. We had considered something similar for our own exhibition, and in Berlin we had the opportunity to see such ideas realized'. (Eliassen 1931). It was not so much the elegant displays by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich that caught their attention, but rather the way the *Bauausstellung* communicated with its audience. Architect Ove Bang's series of prototypical modernist diagrams demonstrating 'bad, mediocre, and good' living rooms and bedrooms presented a visual rhetoric derived directly from Berlin, and was part of the so-called 'propaganda material', promoting the use of architect through a series of installations of various sorts. Other German influences also reverberated in the Norwegian material, such as Ernst May's standardized presentation of modern architecture by means of plans and diagrams in *Die Wohnung für*

das Existenzminimum exhibition, studied by the Norwegian delegates, Lars Backer, Herman Munthe-Kaas, Fridtjof Reppen, and Harald Aars, to the second assembly of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in Frankfurt in October, 1929 (*Byggekunst* 1929: 179). Similar techniques were later employed when paper material from the collection was displayed in Helsinki in 1932.

In 1931 in Oslo, typology became an important principle, as mildly anticipated by the ordering of 'Domestic', 'Monumental', and 'Industrial' architecture in Budapest. When the recently inaugurated House of Artists was filled that fall to the brim with models, drawings, photography, and installations, the galleries were organized by separate sections for villas, semidetached dwellings, shops, hotels, restaurants, schools, hospitals, commercial buildings, public buildings, theatres, etc. Consistent with the collection's implicit intention, this ordering of building types was aimed at demonstrating that contemporary architecture could respond to every demand of society.

The show at the House of Artists was an immense success and required expanded opening hours to accommodate the large and excited audience; and was sprinkled by the press with epithets such as 'a sensation', 'absolutely remarkable', 'an outstanding attraction', 'amusing', 'instructive and beautiful', 'joyful', 'enjoyable and fantastic', 'impressive', and 'highly interesting and instructive'. The House of Artists building, designed by Gudolf Blakstad and Herman Munthe-Kaas, themselves key figures in the Permanent Collection, and inaugurated in 1930, was transferred into a spectacle in itself, with a multi-colored light projection on the façade, described in the press as a 'symphony of colors'. A 33-square-meter city model in the lobby, referred to in the press as 'plastic map', was particularly well received. The plasticity of this massive miniature was well known to the contemporary audience, as the model, commissioned in 1923, had for years

been an important tool for the city planning authorities. In 1931, this panoramic plaster monster filled the lobby with its exhilarating mix of reality and dream. Likewise, the encounter with the model of the new Kunsthalle as displayed within the brand new building – at the time considered to be the most modern gallery in Europe – mesmerized the audience (*Morgenbladet* 1931). Models, it seems, reveal aspects of reality that reality itself cannot show, presenting time, space, and scale in new and surprising constellations.

After the Oslo exhibition of 1931, parts of the material toured the next two years and were shown at almost every architects' association in towns across the country.³⁸ Works by local architects were added as the exhibition moved around, as was the case with MoMA's *Modern Architecture* show when touring the US in 1932–33, and constantly adapted into new local contexts. While the collection kept travelling internationally through the 1930s, its last Norwegian display was probably during the *Vi Kan [We Can]* exhibition in Oslo in 1938. Although this is a canonical event in Norwegian modernism, the presence of the Permanent Collection has so far gone unnoticed.

Exhibition fatigue

'The art of exhibition is a branch of architecture and should be practiced as such', Philip Johnson famously declared in a review of Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe's installations at the *Berliner Bauausstellung* of 1931 (Johnson 1931). The Permanent Collection belongs to this branch of architecture, promoting the exhibits not just as means of representation but as projects in their own right. The fact that museums, galleries, and exhibition spaces formed an important part of the collection – for instance Ole Lind Schiestad's models and exhibition designs for the Norwegian pavilions in Barcelona in 1929 and Antwerp in 1930 were immediately incorporated into the collection



Fig. 9: The section for villas at the show at the House of Artists in Oslo in 1931 was installed in one of the two imposing sky-lit galleries. Reproduced from *Byggekunst*, 1931.

– testifies to this idea. The collection was exhibited and exhibitions were collected; a reciprocity typical of an era which made architecture subject to a lively international exchange and mediation. Made to travel, programmed to circulate, it was a vivid part of modernist architectural culture before funneled into storage and oblivion. This rare collection was purposely collected to be displayed by the exhibiting architects and subjected to a collective curatorial practice, in opposition to the collecting and exhibition rationale of a museum.

Produced for exhibition, the Permanent Collection is a perfect illustration of architectural objects as ‘collected and consumed, detached and detachable, discreet and unrooted’ (Payne 2012: 11). Intrinsically and intentionally relocated, the collection became part of new spaces, new places, and new contexts, implicitly confirming the autonomy and sovereignty of the dislocated object. The

Permanent Collection was an important venue for the debates on contemporary architecture, and thus the print and publication culture of the period. Slowly the collection obtained a (if though historiographically unacknowledged) canonical effect. For instance, in 1929, the Berlin journal *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* covered several of the Norwegian projects presented in the Kiel show, and a few years later gave a comprehensive presentation of ‘Baukunst in Norwegen’, drawing on the exhibition material. Accordingly, the collection was soon in the process of moving from one form of architecture’s mass media into another – from the exhibition to the periodical.

The Permanent Collection’s principle of absolute contemporaneity, an idea that substantially challenges the inherent psychology of both collectors and collections – was in the end not very successful. Despite the idealistic resolve to exclude outdated projects, the collection grew



Fig. 10: Lars Backer’s mini skyscraper Horngården (1930) became one of the stars in the Permanent Collection and was shown repeatedly. Due to damages incurred during shipping, it was restored once and once completely rebuilt. Thus this model of painted plaster on a wood and steel support structure, and with steel elements on the façade, is the second version of the model in the collection. Photo: Andreas Svenning, 2013.

rapidly, and in the end encompassed more than 100 models. Some of them became stars and were shown repeatedly, among them Blakstad and Munthe-Kaas' House of Artists and Lars Backer's mini skyscraper, Horngården. Yet the idea of a permanent yet ever-changing collection never entirely disappeared from sight. Because the Permanent Collection was no longer sufficiently updated, two 'elite exhibitions', as they were called, did not happen: An exhibition planned in Oslo in 1935 was called off, and an invitation to participate in a show organized by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), apparently in collaboration with the Architectural Association (AA) in London in March of 1936, was declined. The works had already been shown elsewhere and many of them no longer seemed 'above average in quality'.³⁹ The 'absolutely contemporary' collection seemed to have lost its edge and become outdated. In an article on the world fair in New York in 1939, Finn Bryn, involved in the collection from its inception and the designer of the Norwegian pavilion in New York, described a certain 'exhibition fatigue', and lamented the growing absurdity of international exhibitions (Bryn 1939: 146). A similar fatigue seems to have hit the Permanent Collection itself. Despite the inclusion of new works, among them Ove Bang's iconic Villa Ditlev-Simonsen (1937), the selection for New York was marked less by architectural ambition than by a pragmatic and political desire to present the needs and achievements of a modern social democracy.

The failure of the de-acquisition policy has left us with a unique – if not in any sense permanent – collection of models, drawings, and photographs. Already in 1934, Harald Hals found that the idea of a permanent collection implied 'considerable delusion and much of a paradox' (Hals 1934: 131). The constellation of permanence and perpetual change might appear paradoxical – that the idea should be a delusion must, however, clearly be modified. Eliassen's vision of 1925 combined elements of a classical collection with the exhibition logic of the Kunsthalle. Contemporaneity was the subject matter for this rare collection, conceived to at any time reflect and absorb the actual state of things.

Notes

- ¹ The show *Model as Ruin* at the House of Artists in Oslo (November 1–December 15, 2013), curated by Mari Hvattum, Mari Lending, and a master studio from the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, reintroduced 32 of the models from the Permanent Collection, as well as a big selection of the paper material *to the Kunsthalle* that hosted its grandest display in 1931. For an in-depth presentation of the models, see Lending and Hvattum (2014).
- ² Museum Archives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, EX 15.2.46. No Norwegian works were included in the 1932 exhibition and the curators did not visit Norway during their European tours prior to the show.
- ³ Letter from Georg Eliassen to NAL president Carl Berner, May 2, 1925. The National Archives (Riksarkivet), RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.

- ⁴ The Copenhagen Academy had received the program directly from the American exhibition committee. Parts of this correspondence are in RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 4.
- ⁵ Letter from TAF's chairman Hagbarth Schytte-Berg to NAL, November 22, 1924. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 4.
- ⁶ Letter from OAF's chairman Andreas H. Bjercke to NAL president Carl Berner, September 25, 1924. 'OAF archives'. (OAF's correspondences and paperwork from its foundation in 1906 is kept unregistered in a closet in Josefinegate 31 in Oslo, and is in the following referred to as 'OAF archives'.)
- ⁷ 'Opinions may be divided concerning the benefits of participation in international congresses and exhibitions. The board believes, however, that a majority of the society's members shares the opinion that the gains thereby may be considerable, and by far exceed the economic sacrifices and the work required'. Letter from the OAF Board to NAL, January 6, 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 4.
- ⁸ Letter from NAL to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 14, 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 4.
- ⁹ Letter from Georg Eliassen to NAL president Carl Berner, May 2, 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.
- ¹⁰ 'Utstillingskomiteens betænkning', undated (probably August 1925). RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.
- ¹¹ For a planned architecture exhibition at the Kristiania Art Society in 1922, the committee (Andreas H. Bjercke, Lars Backer and H. Backer Fürst) and jury (Carl Berner, Arne Eide, Herman Munthe-Kaas, N. W. Grimnes and Finn Bryn) asked for drawings 'framed by a 2 cm black frame, with or without glass'. Paragraph 7 in the exhibition invitation dated March 1922. 'OAF archives'.
- ¹² Biong, 'Internasjonal Arkitektkongress i Budapest den 7de-14de September 1930'. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 54, 1.
- ¹³ 'Utstillingskomiteens betænkning'. A few works on the first list were not specified, such as 'two area plans' by Sverre Pedersen, 'one house in a Garden City' by Leif Grung, and 'A power station. A summer house or sports cabin' by Thorvald Astrup.
- ¹⁴ Letters from Carl Berner, NAL to BAF and TAF, November 18, and to NAL from the chairman of TAF Schytte-Berg, November 21, and Eigill Reimers on behalf of the Bergen architects, November 23, all 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.
- ¹⁵ An automatic procedure between the two institutions was never established: While the Houen diploma is normally awarded several years after completion; works of subsequent winners were often included in the collection before completion. However, most work rewarded both the Houen and Sundt prizes in the period were repeatedly exhibited as part of the collection, and all works awarded the Sundt Prize were shown at the House of Artists in 1931 (Kielland 1931).
- ¹⁶ The Kiel exhibition of 1929 was criticized for not including professor Andreas Bugge's experimental housing project 'that should raise particular interest in Germany'

- (Poulsson 1929: 148). Bugge's *Forsøkshusene* (Trondhjem: F. Bruns bokhandels forlag, 1922) was soon translated into English as *Test Houses* and into German as *Ergebnisse von Versuchen für den Bau wärmer und billiger Wohnungen* (Berlin: Verlag Julius Springer 1924).
- ¹⁷ Letter from the Committee for the Acquisition of a Collection of Architecture to NAL president Kr. Biong, September 14, 1926. NAL had already sent the committee three packages of drawings for consideration; letter from NAL to Georg Eliassen and the Committee for the Permanent Collection of Drawings and Photographs of Modern Norwegian Architecture, June 15, 1926. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.
- ¹⁸ For a full account of architects and works, see Lending (2008a).
- ¹⁹ Letter from Georg Eliassen to NAL president Carl Berner, May 2, 1925, and from Berner to Eliassen May 14, 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1.
- ²⁰ NAL received the Berliner Bauausstellung 1931 invitation from the Ministry for Public Works on November 18, 1930. Letter from NAL to Harald Hals, January 28, 1931. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32.
- ²¹ Letter from Harald Hals to the NAL Board, February 2 1931.
- ²² Letter from NAL to the Ministry of Public Work, February 10, 1931. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32.
- ²³ Letter from NAL secretary Sv. Poulsson to Ole Landmark. January 5, 1931. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 7.
- ²⁴ Letter from Ole Landmark to Sv. Poulsson, January 13, 1931. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32.
- ²⁵ Letter from Hals to Kristian Biong, undated. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 2.
- ²⁶ Biong, 'Internasjonal Arkitektkongress i Budapest den 7de–14de september 1930'. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 2.
- ²⁷ The list of slides is enclosed in Bugge's Brussels report. Letter from professor Bugge, Department of Architecture, Norway's Technical University (NTH) to NAL, December 2, 1927. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 54, 1.
- ²⁸ Models had of course been displayed prior to the founding of the Permanent Exhibition. For the August 1925 *House and Home* exhibition at Tivoli, Oslo, committee members Ole Lind Schiestad and Harald Aars encouraged exhibitors to submit 'photographs or perspective drawings with plans – or preferably models'. Letter from O. Lind Schiestad to NAL president Carl Berner, May 30, 1925. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 3.
- ²⁹ Letter from Harald Hals to NAL, June 11, 1932. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32. The Helsinki invitation asked for 'drawings, photos, models etc., to city plans and housing, built or projected 1927–32' (*Byggekunst* 1931: 279). Hals' lecture on housing was illustrated with city planning projects from the Norwegian section; Harald Aars' lecture on contemporary Norwegian architecture commented on the housing projects on display, while Henrik Nissen's talk on recent developments in housing presented especially smaller apartment buildings from the Permanent Collection. *Nordisk Byggnadsdag 1932, Helsingfors den 4–6 juli. Föredrag och utställningar* (Helsingfors: Akademiska Bokhandeln, 1932).
- ³⁰ Letter from Harald Hals to NAL, June 11, 1932. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32.
- ³¹ The restoration projects are listed in a letter from the exhibition committee's secretary K. M. Sinding-Larsen to the *Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments*, March 8, 1933. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 7.
- ³² During the Triennale di Milano 1933, E. Moestue/Ole L. Schistad, A. Swarz, Aasland/Korsmo, A. Arneberg, H. Munthe-Kaas, G. Blakstad, Lars Backer and E. Slaatto received diplomas for their contributions; Backer and Slaatto were rewarded two diplomas each. Letter from the Royal Norwegian Ministry for Church and Education to NAL, March 1, 1935. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger.
- ³³ Letter from the Hungarian Exhibition Committee to NAL president Kr. Biong, December 9, 1929. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, 1. See also 'Internasjonal Arkitektkongress i Budapest den 7de–14de september 1930'. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 54, 1.
- ³⁴ Letters from NAL President Kristian Biong to TAF and BAF, May 5, 1930. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 9, utstillinger 1930–32.
- ³⁵ Letter from Hals to the Hungarian exhibition committee, August 15, 1930 and Hals, 'Norwegian Architecture'. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 54, 2. The discrepancy between the 131 Norwegian items in the exhibition catalogue and the 125 items indicated by Hals is explained by the fact that Hals' list includes drawings and photographs only, and not the 6 models. *XII Congrès international des architectes Budapest 1930. Compte-Rendu*, 322.
- ³⁶ *XII Congrès international des architectes Budapest 1930. Compte-Rendu: Travaux du XIIIe Congrès international des architectes*, 325. 'Rules and Regulations of the Exhibition'. RA/PA 1005 NAL, Dae 54, 1.
- ³⁷ Letter from OAF to Kielland, July 11, 1930, 'OAF archives'.
- ³⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the 1931 Oslo exhibition, see Lending (2008b).
- ³⁹ Letter from Harald Hals on behalf of NAL's Permanent Exhibition Committee to NAL May 2, 1935. NAL Jnr. 516/35.

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