

## The art of breathing life into a building

by architecture editor Karsten R.S. Iversen

Copenhagen's former free port has now been transformed into an area for homes and businesses. An urban quarter has sprouted forth around the newly established Amerika Plads, following the guidelines of a unified plan laid out by the Dutch architect, Adrian Geuze. The intention is to achieve a dense and varied neighborhood, which is marked out at its north end by a copper-plated tower and on its southern end by a tower of slate.

The buildings here are vast and dark-colored. As far as any action or nightlife in this part of the city goes ... well, it's still so-so around here. This area just hasn't become the attractively lively quarter that the planners were dreaming about – not yet, at least. And as is the case with other newly developed sections of Copenhagen, as of now the successes can only be tallied up on the level of construction.

Nevertheless, one of the incontestably obvious successes around Amerika Plads is the apartment house, Nordlyset. In its choice of colors, the building embodies a clear optimism as well as a dash of cool-headed luxuriousness in its design. It was designed by architect Lone Wiggers, for C.F. Møllers Tegnesteue, and features a fully integrated site-specific decoration conceived and executed by Ruth Campau. In 2007, the building was nominated for the prestigious Mies van der Rohe Award.

The building's body is a seven-story apartment complex, which carries the mind back to the 1920s' and -30s' functionalism by virtue of the deep horizontal rectangular notches that punctuate the white-colored, plastered facade.

The pattern of notches resembles a grotesquely enlarged brick bond, where the plastered concrete takes on the role of the mortar. In this way, the building itself with the tradition of heavy, brick-built storehouses in the immediate vicinity and simultaneously introduces into this new urban quarter another familiar typology related to construction by the waterside, the light and airy Mediterranean modernism that we already know, for example, from Arne Jacobsen's development by the seaside in Bellevue, north of Copenhagen. Nordlyset is accordingly a building that stands out conspicuously against the backdrop of the surrounding buildings' darker construction materials without breaking away entirely from its connection to these more storehouse-like structures.

However, the most striking detail about the building is the site-specific "decoration," with its colored glass plates that function as partition walls dividing each of the apartment house's various balconies into two parts. In most all cases, the two halves of the balconies belong to two

different – adjacent – apartments. The colors of these plates vary according to the facade's orientation: they make their appearance in varying shades of yellow, green and blue.

The partition plates jut out a little farther than the facade's smooth surface. Not only do they act as cursors for the separation between different halves of the balconies; they actually also tone and tint the daylight and they suffuse the building with an ethereal lightness, which is foreign and which is badly needed in this densely built and otherwise heavy part of the city.

Nordlyset is not perceived as a building that has been embellished or decorated after-the-fact. Come to think of it, there is something that happens with art when it becomes an integral part of the architecture. And there is also something that happens (especially) with architecture when art takes on the status of something more than being merely an aesthetic *pause* in the architecture's functional surfaces but actually comes to be an essential part of the building's most important effects, as is certainly the case with Ruth Campau's largest realized site-specific decoration assignment to date. The plates have been printed with the striped patterns that are characteristic of Campau's visual expression, her "signature," created by a paint broom's regular and even brushes slowly moving across the surface.

Here, Campau's art has been transformed into a serial building material, which preserves its aesthetic qualities and transposes these into the experience of the building. The art possesses a specific and concrete visual function on the level of the building's construction. The facade is perceived as being distinctively stratified by virtue of the horizontal balcony notches. All the decoration's stripes, on the other hand, have been installed so that they run *vertically* and thus function visually as columns that are keeping the apertures stretched out and distended. They are mellow columns of light and color.

The panels mediate and mitigate the transitions between the outside and the inside. And not only are they found outside, on the balconies. In fact, the decoration continues *inside* the building where other important transitions take place. The lobbies' double-glazed windows have accordingly been imprinted with a grayish black silk-screen print, with varying degrees of density in the brushstroke. Peering in behind the windowpane, one gets an inkling about the red-glass elevator shaft. From outside the building, the red is glimpsed through the black and this aggregate vision is sensed, somehow, as a kind of layered painting. The red-colored broom-brush strokes on the elevator shaft appear to be progressively graduated as they ascend through the building's volume, in such a way that the higher you move in the building, the more open and the more transparent these strokes become and the more they allow the light to penetrate and permeate the space. As a result, the trip up to the seventh floor is transformed into an experience where the red hues gradually open themselves toward the incoming light.

Every time light is invited inside Nordlyset, it is escorted by Ruth Campau's colors. In this way, her chosen hues orchestrate the delicate nuances and the transitions in the building's openings. Over the course of the last few centuries, the relative sizes of windows have regularly been swaying back and forth but a general tendency has been that windows have become larger while the transitions between the outer wall and the window are simultaneously becoming effected with a lesser degree of finish. This is typically the upshot of a precarious coalition between minimalist aesthetics and economic considerations.

The window frame is an area that, ever since the stucco era's excessively embellished frames, has become enclosed with a certain stance of dissociation. For the aesthetically-minded architect, the issue has often involved a will to reduce the window frame, and even to make it invisible, as can be seen in the work of Jørn Utzon who in his summer residence on Mallorca, *Can Lis*, mounted the "framed view" windows in such a way that the frames were attached to the *outside* of the stone facade, with result that the frame was invisible from within and the viewer accordingly enjoyed the illusion of not having a window blocking his/her vista but felt rather that he/she was sitting inside a stone cave and gazing out over the water and the sky without any visual obstruction whatsoever.

And there has been a tendency in modernism all the while to create *lighter* buildings, thus constituting a form of de-materialization which, in certain instances like Philip Johnson's truly transparent glass house, from 1949, completely reduces the outer walls to the barest necessity of being a climate screen, which ideally could have been completely invisible.

However, glass is *not* completely transparent: dirt and reflections cause the material to appear hard as they mark up its smooth surface which, in more than a symbolic respect, delineates a sharp boundary between outside and inside.

Here, Ruth Campau's striped fields are more than a mere decorative effect on the facade. The light's color oscillates, all according to whether it is the yellow light appearing in connection with the directly southern exposure or whether we are sensing the tinges of bluish light when facing north. Ruth Campau's panels amplify these differences in the light's color temperature.

Her stripes have been brought forth by variations in the color layer, after a fashion that could call to mind a curtain fabric's sinuous folds projected across a surface. They come into being when the painting-broom's bristles are deflected and gather themselves into clumps as they are guided over a surface. The concentration of stripe formation depends on both the bristles' stiffness and the paint's viscosity. With the technique of serigraphy, the patterns are subsequently transferred to glass plates but despite all these mechanical doings and meticulous repetitions, the panels are experienced as being organic: they are breathing.

Accordingly, the patterns are not experienced merely as softening details on the building:

they are actually *breathing into the building* – animating and inspiring it with life. The traces of the rendering's organic physical movement massage life right into the industrial building development.

This is not something you notice as being overbearing. Maybe it's only seldom that the individual dweller will come to stop and contemplate the striped surfaces, but he or she will constantly be able to sense and feel these plates' way of toning the light, both on the partitioned balconies and down in the lobbies. It is simply a breath that can be felt: a respiration conveying inspiration, which is right here and right now.

*translated by* DAN A. MARMORSTEIN