

A few words about the Main Hall and the Ambulatory

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I have been asked to say a few words about the Main Hall and the Ambulatory.

They are both part of the Main Building of the university.

The Main Building was inaugurated in 1946.

But: At the time of the inauguration, the main building already had a dramatic history.

The architect C.F. Møller had been responsible for the construction of university buildings in Aarhus since 1933.

And he had been employing a functionalist style with yellow brick and absolutely no decoration or ornamentation. Form had been secondary to function.

But at a meeting held in 1939 about the future main building, the architect was encouraged to use more 'noble' materials and a less stringent style, - and by way of inspiration, he was shown a photograph of the Sapienza University, which had just been erected by Mussolini in Rome.

C.F. Møller did not consider the Italian dictator's marble university worthy of imitation, but he *did* agree to give the Main

Building a more ‘romantic’ form than the earlier university buildings in Aarhus.

This ‘romantic’ form includes details such as the columns and arches inside and outside the ambulatory – and the ambulatory is the long room to the left when you leave the Main Hall – and if you go into the ambulatory, you should also note the very special way in which the floor has been constructed - and the way it interacts with the roof.

In fact, these details – and it has something to do with wave motions (going) in different directions - can have an almost dizzying effect on you, when you walk through the room. You should try it!

But, maybe most of all, the ‘romantic’ form of the Main Building is expressed in the basic form of the Main Hall. As you can see, there are six angles, and the height is almost 20 meters.

Together the six angles and the height make the room look rather churchlike – and in fact, the architect was – partly at least - inspired by a new church in Copenhagen. But in contrast to that church with its number of very high windows, the architect chose to have only one window here. And in 1946 this window was the largest window in Denmark!

All of the original furniture was designed especially for this room. The name of the furniture architect was Aage Windeleff. The lamps hanging from the ceiling were also designed especially for this room, and the designer was the famous Danish architect Poul Henningsen.

When construction of this building had progressed so far that the roof was finished, the pace was slowed down to prevent the German occupation forces from confiscating the building. However, the Germans did confiscate buildings in the University

Park. They confiscated the student residence halls right outside here behind me in the University Park, and there the Gestapo established its headquarters.

The Gestapo's activities in the residence halls came to represent a very serious threat to the Danish resistance in Jutland, and therefore the Royal Air Force was asked to destroy the headquarters.

The air strike took place on the last day of October 1944, and although the precision attack left the Gestapo headquarters in smoking ruins, it also damaged the main building severely, and ten construction workers lost their lives.

C.F. Møller himself was buried under rubble from the collapsed building, but he was rescued, and he survived, and after the end of the occupation, the damaged parts of the main building were rebuilt.

Now, most of our yellow university buildings have been erected since then, and they are all more or less in the – so to speak – 'original' style, the basic functionalist style with no decorations or ornamentations at all.

In 2006, when the Danish Ministry of Culture established a canon of 12 Danish architectural works, Aarhus University was included in this.

The reason for the inclusion in the canon was not the exceptional architectural beauty of the Main Building, but – in short - the beautiful simplicity of the hilly landscape campus with homogeneously constructed yellow brick buildings in the original 'functionalist' style.

On that background, there is a certain irony in the fact that the Ministry always uses photos of the Main Building in publications of the canon.