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978-1-107-03392-4 - Ibsen's Houses: Architectural Metaphor and the Modern Uncanny

Mark B. Sandberg

Excerpt

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Introduction

In the fall of 1877, just after Ibsen had published his contemporary prose drama *Pillars of Society*, his fellow Norwegian writer Arne Garborg wrote this critical response in a weekly periodical:

He has torn down (been “negative”) without building up . . . Anyone can tear down, even if not as successfully as Ibsen has; but to build up, which is needed much more – there are few who can do that, Ibsen included. It is a bad sign when a young nation not even close to finishing its social edifice [*Samfundsbyggverket*] gets razers before builders, as we seem to have done with this Ibsen.¹

Garborg's nationalist critique was essentially this: Ibsen cannot build something lasting for Norway because he can only pose questions and express doubts; he cannot come up with the constructive answers that distinguish truly great authors. By invoking this commonplace metaphor equating building with positive action (i.e., “builders of the nation”), Garborg taps into a long-standing discourse of architectural thought that enables his criticism of Ibsen's negativity. Ibsen, he implies, is a Master Razer, not a Master Builder. According to this seemingly inherently persuasive metaphorical system, consensus and positive social engagement (especially of the nationalist variety) resemble a construction project, while doubts and critiques are like demolition.

Granted, when Garborg gets past his initial complaint and actually reviews *Pillars of Society* in this article, he wonders if this new play might be different: “It is as if Ibsen were tired of all the tearing down now and wanted to try building instead.” In historical retrospect, those who know Ibsen's work might be surprised to find that in 1877, before writing any of the prose plays in which he would most famously devastate the “social edifice,” he had already developed a reputation among his Norwegian compatriots as a “razer.” One might be equally amused by Garborg's obliviousness at this early point of just how severe Ibsen's socio-architectural

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skepticism would become in the following plays. Even with the full benefits of historical hindsight, however, one might nevertheless find Garborg to be justified in his eventual conclusion about this particular play – namely, that when Ibsen backs away from his usual demolition project, he generally has less interesting ideas to offer, no matter how one feels about the targets of his relentless dismantling. If *Pillars of Society* was an attempt to build, Garborg suggests, its solutions were too tame and routine. In Garborg's view, what Ibsen was best at – unfortunately – was pure destruction.

Critiques of this sort only intensified after the publication of Ibsen's next two plays, in which the central architectural metaphor of *Pillars of Society* – society as an edifice – continues prominently. *A Doll House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) both elicited similar critiques across the Nordic region, as this Swedish response to *Ghosts* makes clear: “Many complain that the representatives of the new ideas tear everything down without managing to put anything in its place, and Ibsen especially has been the object of this kind of reproach.”² A German review from 1908 joked that the North had produced two dynamite specialists, Alfred Nobel and Henrik Ibsen.³ Another Swede dubbed Ibsen's writing “Nordic nihilism” because of his relentless and exclusive pursuit of questions intended to pull back “the covering of habit and everyday language from the abyss that they hide.”⁴ Similarly, a particularly prescient Swedish review of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (1886) described reader anticipation in this way, inadvertently predicting the later central metaphor of *The Master Builder* (1892): “Each of his new works in recent years has been anticipated in our country with a certain anxious trembling. What new crack in our social building [*samhällsbyggnad*] will he reveal this time?”⁵ Again and again, Ibsen's contemporaries spoke the language of architectural metaphor in their defense of society's *foundations*, its *edifice*, and its *homes*.

Ibsen himself, it should be noted, framed the discussion that way by relying consistently on building imagery in his writing. One can start with the overtly architectural titles of several of the plays: *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll House*, and *The Master Builder* are only the most obvious examples. A persistent and foregrounded attention to the peculiar properties of built structures pervades his other prose plays as well, even if not advertised so directly in their titles: the Rosenvold villa and its accompanying memorial building project in *Ghosts* spring to mind, as does the theatrical attic space in *The Wild Duck* (1884). One might add to the list of unusual imagined structures a hybrid modern-Gothic haunted house (*Rosmersholm*); a starkly territorial house and garden (*The Lady from the Sea*, 1888); an overly mortgaged, accidentally occupied villa (*Hedda Gabler*, 1890); a two-story

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house with strictly segregated living space (*John Gabriel Borkman*, 1896); and a ramshackle hunting shack that is claimed to be a castle (*When We Dead Awaken*, 1899). Ibsen's use of architectural tropes precedes his prose plays as well: the early play *Brand* (1866) devotes considerable attention to figurations of home and to the main character's church-building project, and *Peer Gynt* (1867) can be seen as one long evaluation of the resonances of "home" and "abroad," ranging from the idealized cottage where the faithful Solveig waits to the asylum in Egypt where Peer is crowned king of the lunatics.

In all of these plays, Ibsen foregrounds the qualities of built structures beyond what is minimally necessary for any drama to "take place," which is to provide a physical set. In a limited sense, of course, the realization of written dramas on stage is always architectural, concerned as it is with the interaction of bodies in articulated space and with the representation of built environments. Ibsen's architectural imagination exceeds the rudimentary requirements of theater, however; his dramas call attention to themselves both meta-theatrically and meta-architecturally. One finds the same insistent attention to architecture in many of his poems as well, which bear titles such as "Building Plans," "A Church," and "The School House" and explore pervasive themes about national edifices, burned houses, ruins, suddenly estranged interiors, and lost homelands.

Significantly, when Ibsen composed his only (fragmentary) attempt at autobiography in the early 1880s, he narrated his earliest memories as a dawning phenomenological interaction with the buildings of his hometown, Skien, Norway. His entry into consciousness was strikingly framed on all sides by built structures; after describing the spatial relationships of all of the buildings surrounding his first home near the marketplace in Skien, Ibsen wrote: "This perspective was thus the first view of the world that presented itself to my eyes. Architecture everywhere [*Altsammen arkitektur*]; nothing green; no open rural landscape."⁶ The date of this composition is significant, coming as it did just after his most celebrated theatrical critique of architecture's confining qualities, the 1879 *A Doll House*, had taken Europe by storm. He was also in the midst of composing *Ghosts*, which carries out its own relentless destruction of an elaborate building project. "Architecture everywhere" could well serve as the guiding compositional principle throughout Ibsen's career – this particular "Nordic nihilist" remained in the grip of an unusually lively architectural imagination throughout his life. For most of his career, despite his notorious desire to "gladly put a torpedo under the Ark" as he expressed it in his most revolutionary poem,⁷ it is probably more accurate to say that his work remained poised on the threshold to the void; no matter how powerful the critique of the structured interior and all that it represents,

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he never abandoned his fundamental socio-architectural questions, even in the seeming negation thereof. Late in his life, he famously identified strongly with the metaphor of the master builder when he told the Norwegian painter Erik Werenskiöld in 1895 that he was not only interested in architecture but that it was in fact his profession.⁸

This book examines the architectural imagery and accompanying thought structures in the discourse generated by Ibsen and his immediate commentators during his lifetime, with a special emphasis on discussion within the three Scandinavian countries. It seeks to investigate the expression of a persistent interest in architecture in that increasingly influential public discussion. Ibsen's position at the cusp of modernity is one fruitful area in which to seek explanations, since architecture's durational qualities make it a powerful symbol of intransigent tradition. The shifting attitudes toward family, sexuality, and gender are another, since theatrical figuration of the home can concentrate these issues with a spatial and material immediacy. Ibsen's voluntary separation from his Norwegian homeland for the twenty-seven years he lived in Italy and Germany between 1864 and 1891 is yet another explanatory rubric, since his double vision of "home" from his memories of Norway and his life in continental Europe endows his architectural imagination with the extra cultural and political resonances of a lost homeland as well.

Ibsen's attraction to the figuration of built structures should be seen as part of a more general "thickening" of architectural metaphor in late nineteenth-century Western culture and literature. He was not the only writer with a particular interest in houses; one might equally turn to any number of other writers for whom built structure was anything but a simple and transparent setting for action: E. T. A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, and August Strindberg spring immediately to mind as examples of writers for whom architecture takes on special emphasis and agency. The variety of that list, however, ranging as it does from Gothic haunted houses to Victorian hearths to proto-modernist ruins, is the best argument for a sustained and careful study of individual cases and authorships, with Ibsen's drama landing in the heart of the question as one of the most sustained career explorations of architectural metaphor.

Take, for instance, the sense of paradox conveyed in Ibsen's poem "A Church" (1865), a poem that the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes unfortunately singled out as "flawed and expendable" in his review of Ibsen's poetry collection in 1871.⁹ While the three simple five-line stanzas might leave something to be desired from a purely aesthetic standpoint, the

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poem nevertheless communicates an interesting architectural idea about the simultaneity of constructive and deconstructive forces (my English translation is intentionally literal here):

The king built
all the day long,
When night fell,
the troll came and undid it
with pike and pole.

Thus rose the church
to the top of the spire;
but the king's work
and the troll's prying
produced a double style.

Everyday people moved in
trusting, even so;
because the day's accomplishments,
taken with those of the night,
are of course those of a full day.¹⁰

The final stanza, which depends on a double meaning in the Norwegian, requires a bit of linguistic explanation. The word *døgn* (the “full day” of the final line) denotes any twenty-four-hour period, the combination of day and night, but *Døgn-folk* (translated here as “everyday people”) conveys the notion of people who live day to day, not looking beyond the immediate context. The dictionary definition of *Døgn-folk* in the *Riksmålsordbok* underscores this sense: “people who merely live in and have a sense for the small events of the here-and-now and daily life.”¹¹ Although one can imagine ways in which another writer might turn this lack of concern for the future into a more positive image, in Ibsen's hands it is no better than neutral in valence.¹² The point of the double meaning seems to be that people living for the present moment, *døgn-folk* who are unconcerned with the past or the future, would be unbothered by the “double style” of a church that was built by a king during the day and taken apart again by a troll at night, because the day and night together make up both parts of the twenty-four-hour *døgn*.¹³ *Døgn*-people get a *døgn*-church.

Still, the *døgn*-church is clearly the more interesting part of this little poetic joke, made at the expense of the oblivious people worshipping there. The reader is allowed to see what the short-sighted crowd does not: that the church was created by a process of simultaneous construction and

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demolition, that the earnest, productive work of the king and the mischievous poking and prodding of the troll have both contributed to the church's eventual character and style. By extrapolating more generally from the poem, one can discern a claim that artistic creation requires a balance of both kingly and trollish forces. This is the point made by Nina S. Alnæs in her reading of the poem's folkloric content:

The dark, the troll, or the demonic forces are thus closely tied to creative powers in existence. Even when the king builds a sacred house to the glory of God, evil powers mix themselves in and want to exert influence in their own way, to place their mark on the results . . . The troll's "prodding" has given the building a "double style," a disharmony. But in this lies a virtue as well; the result becomes more exciting. An Ibsenian aesthetic therefore lies concealed in this little poem.¹⁴

Like the troll, Ibsen was not averse to "working the night shift" in his writing projects; one might say that he was most interested in poking around with spikes and poles to test the integrity of the ideas and social structures around him. In this sense, Garborg and others were justified in seeing him as the Master Razer, the writer with a gift for tearing down. But the poem helps remind us as well that Ibsen was equally meticulous with structure and form "by day," also working like the king in the poem to build finely crafted, carefully constructed dramatic works.

His contemporaries repeatedly recognized these building skills as well; even the most vociferous critics of his so-called nihilistic world view often begrudgingly acknowledged the aesthetic achievements of his dramatic constructions. Indeed, the basic vocabulary of dramatic criticism at the time was itself inescapably architectural, emphasizing especially the "construction" and "design" of dramatic compositions. Though Ibsen's debt to the Scribian "well-made" or "well-wrought play" (*la pièce bien faite*) is often noted, it is perhaps worth emphasizing anew that the very formulation of that term reveals the assumed equivalence of playwright and builder in the late nineteenth century.

Manifestations of this assumption are frequent in assessments by Ibsen's contemporaries. One conservative reviewer of *Rosmersholm* wrote in 1886: "A dramatic work can be well built [*fint bygget*], and its knots well tied, without necessarily containing life's best thoughts."¹⁵ The depiction of Ibsen's playwriting as an architectural pursuit was especially irresistible after the publication of *The Master Builder* in 1892, since that play's metaphoric world seemed quite clearly to equate the pursuits of a dramatist with those of an architect. A revival of *The Wild Duck* at the Christiania

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Theater the following year elicited a reaction of both pain and admiration for Ibsen's unpleasant "building": "And every time one sees it, its clammy cheerlessness [*klamme Uhygge*] will engulf one more oppressively – to such a degree that at times it almost feels like a physical pain, – at the same time that one's admiration will grow for the artistic perfection with which the dramatic building [*den dramatiske Bygning*] is raised."¹⁶ A commentary on *Little Eyolf* (1894) one year later continues the image:

As one might expect, the great dramatist's most recent work is a new triumph for his unquestioned mastery. Here once again there is conjured up one of these monumental dramatic buildings [*dramatiske Bygninger*], whose pure architectonic perfection and strict symmetrical beauty would be enough to secure for them the entire world's enduring admiration.¹⁷

The dramatic world evoked in Ibsen's following play, *John Gabriel Borkman*, was also likened to a building, but one with a particularly sterile and cold design:

Every stone in the building is in place; it rises before our eyes with the firm lines of a model building. There are no towers shooting to the skies, no golden wing reflecting the glowing sun, there is no bay window for tender words, no halls open to light and warmth. The building stands there, strong, heavy, in iron and stone – one of the modern buildings that society builds with dutiful care for its unhappy [members].¹⁸

The ease with which critics adopted this metaphoric register equating dramas and buildings, society and edifice, world view and architectural plan suggests that both Ibsen and his contemporary interlocutors were fluent in a discourse of architectural imagery. The basic metaphoric system was not in question for either side, no matter how intense the disagreement over ideas and philosophical content.

Interestingly, Ibsen's reputation for architectonic writing persists to this day, though after more than a century of modern drama and postmodern performance, the recognition of his plays' meticulous construction does not always count as a concession to his genius. Today, Ibsen is more likely to appear in dramatic criticism as the all-too-predictable play builder who relied dutifully on the same basic blueprint for most of his prose dramas: the retrospective, analytic, interior conversation drama. He is often placed in contrast to later, more formally experimental and versatile playwrights not locked quite so tightly into the model of "great reckonings in little rooms," to borrow a phrase from Bert O. States.¹⁹ Ibsen's architectural sensibility has in this sense retrospectively become both his strength and his liability; his authorship represents one of the most thorough explorations of

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the architectural aspects of drama and society precisely because he masters the discourse so completely. But perhaps because we no longer inhabit this late nineteenth-century metaphoric system as fully native speakers, the stakes of the discussion are no longer so immediately apparent.

It is precisely this notion that Ibsen's particular form of architectural imagination might be dated, however, that creates the most productive argument for treating it as a richly historical phenomenon. "Dated" is intriguing for historians; it is a pejorative term only when framed by perspectives that demand constant novelty. One goal of this study is to blow some life into this notion of "Ibsen the architect," to show the complexity of his explorations, not only to allow his work to resonate more obviously with concerns today (exile, mobility, homelessness, etc.) but also to measure the distance between his situation and that of the current day. The temporal and cultural gaps, that is, can provide critical leverage and a sense of historical alterity that can bring today's tacit assumptions about house and home more clearly into view.

With this in mind, the present study charts the terrain of a nineteenth-century Ibsenian discourse in which architectural metaphors framed debates about modernization, individual liberty, and free thought. The fact that Ibsen framed these debates so consistently in terms of foundations, pillars, windows, façades, and slammed doors demonstrates the historical existence of a consensus point of departure: for all parties in the debate, society was assumed to be like a building. The burning question was what to do about it: Preserve it? Renovate it? Raze it to the ground? The method I pursue is an analysis of Ibsen's provocative use of architectural metaphor on the one hand and of the discourses of response that formed both consensus and eccentric reception positions on the other. The focus will be on selected prose plays (1877–99), with supplementary attention given to selected poems from Ibsen's only published collection (*Digte*, 1871) and to the dramatic poem *Brand* (1866).

The chapters are organized conceptually around thematic issues rather than thorough sequential readings of individual plays. This approach incurs some obvious costs; the integrity and specific dramatic arguments of individual works are necessarily put under pressure when one disperses material across a thematic argument, as I do. But the advantage of this approach is that a more synthetic critical assessment becomes possible, one whose insights will hopefully compensate for the violation of individual textual boundaries. Moreover, since my interest is in a discourse that in itself tended to see Ibsen's plays as a cumulative argument, frequently referencing earlier motifs and metaphors when

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reading his latest drama, it seems useful to approach analysis of the plays in the same way.

Guiding the discussion of metaphor will be several key concepts that have come out of the rich research on the topic in the field of linguistics over the past thirty years, which found an influential early articulation in the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, especially the book *Metaphors We Live By*. In that pioneering work on conceptual metaphor from 1980, Lakoff and Johnson use as one of their more famous examples the metaphor “Theories (and arguments) are buildings.” They note the frequency with which reference to an argument’s foundations, structure, and strength or shakiness deploy metaphoric terminology that normally passes below the threshold of awareness but implicitly posits a particular likeness between theories and buildings.²⁰ As they point out, a systematic approach to conceptual metaphor can help make one aware of the ways in which metaphoric relations both “highlight” and “hide” characteristics of the domains being compared, a dynamic that Zoltán Kövecses has summarized as “partial metaphorical utilization.”²¹

Seen through this framework, the Ibsenian version of the society-as-building metaphor could be said to use society as a “target domain” and building as a “source domain.” The source domain tends to be rich in a variety of concrete, embodied experiences and lived knowledge, from which only a certain partial subset is activated for the metaphoric comparison. The target domain is a more abstract concept that gains in legibility through the comparison. From this simple observation about partiality proceeds a series of productive analytic questions that guide my thinking in this study, all of which highlight the cultural motivations for making the comparison between society and building in the particular way that Ibsen and his commentators do.

For instance, the idea of “metaphoric entailment,”²² as Kövecses describes it, would in the Ibsenian example involve the particular range of architectural experience available to his cultural interlocutors. On the one hand, the richness of the experience in this source domain would by definition necessarily have exceeded the particular qualities of “Ibsen’s houses,” since all metaphoric relationships are partial. On the other hand, the architectural experience of his Scandinavian interlocutors is nevertheless still culturally bounded; while his readers and viewers in late nineteenth-century Scandinavia would possibly have had historically and culturally specific experiences living in rural cottages, farmhouses, urban apartments, or villas, they would have had less familiarity with suburban tract housing, piazzas, skyscrapers, row houses, or any number of other possible architectural

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experiences of other times and places. The word “building” is thus at once more culturally extensive than Ibsen’s particular imagining of it, yet importantly still culturally bounded in some ways.

Thinking systematically about metaphor also reveals a range of other possibilities for each of the compared terms. For example, if society is a building, what else is a building? I have already suggested that for many of Ibsen’s commentators, his plays were also buildings. One can imagine other conventional metaphors in which a body is a building (with a foundation of good nutrition) or perhaps more specifically a mind (and its well-structured thought). Or to turn the analysis around, if society can be a building, what else can society plausibly be? It seems likely that many will recognize immediately that society can be a body (healthy or sick), or a machine (with its institutions as well-oiled parts), or a plant (when it grows and thrives). To put it in terms of systematic conceptual metaphor, each target domain can have other sources, and each source other targets.

Reminding oneself of the range of possible metaphoric relationships aids in understanding the full historical and cultural contingency of the society-as-building metaphor, but there is more this framework can contribute to the present discussion. The idea of utilization can also help one pose questions about exactly which aspects of buildings are activated in the “Ibsenian house” and which are neglected. As is shown throughout this study, the cultural discussion of Ibsen’s plays that emphasizes architectural metaphor concentrates especially on façades, doors, floors, supporting pillars, and walls, but it is less interested in windows, roofs, stories, corridors, kitchens, bedrooms, cellars, or other possible features of the house. Lakoff and Johnson claim that some of this partiality in the “used” and “unused” part of the metaphor’s source domain is simply a function of convention, but they imply that creative activation of neglected parts of a source domain, as often happens in literary use of metaphor, would be special cases worth investigation.²³

The close rhetorical reading of Ibsen’s prose plays and of his commentators’ reactions in what follows pursues the claim that Ibsen took the highly conventional metaphor of society-as-building and transformed its meaning in ways that called consensus values into question. Throughout Ibsen’s writing, habitual ways of regarding house and home were undermined (proving the point that avoiding architectural metaphors of my own is difficult when making an argument) by a meticulous and deliberate investigation of the metaphors of “home” that tested their limits, extended their meanings, reversed their connotations, and delegitimized their cultural authority.