4

Swedish Modernist Architecture and the Critical Antithesis of History

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The first half of 1930s marked a number of radical changes in Swedish society and culture. In 1932 the beginning was seen of an uninterrupted era of Social Democratic government, to be continuing for more than four decades. Also during the early 1930s a financial crisis was successfully turned into economic growth. In several ways the self-image of the modern welfare nation was formed during those few years, and not least its embodiment through built environment. These facts also form a basis for the evaluation of modern Swedish architectural heritage.

Paradoxically however, the key architectural work to be commemorated from the period was the short-lived constructions from the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. The exhibition was not only the starting point of functionalist housing and spread of the formal language of the modern movement. It was also a major public event, in which modern architecture was successfully given connotations of festivity and delight as well as, no doubt, of progress. Even though many critical voices were heard, in retrospect the over all image is that during those warm summer weeks of 1930 modern architecture successfully entered the Swedish public scene. The exhibition has remained a major point of reference in debates on Swedish architecture and society ever since.[1]

In fact, one may guess that the temporary nature of the event, whose buildings were all demolished after the closure of the exhibition, helped to mythologize its architecture. In any case it prevented all those problems of climate and maintenance that have so often negatively affected the evaluation as well as the attempts at conservation of the modern heritage.

In addition, two key personalities involved helped to form convincingly the image of modernity and progress. The first of these was Gregor Paulsson, head of the Werkbund-influenced Swedish Society of Industrial and Crafts Design (Svenska Slöjdföreningen). Paulsson had been eloquently arguing since the 1910s in favour of rational, high quality design and architecture for the general public.[2] The housing section of the exhibition, designed by a number of young radical architects, was the logical response to these endeavours. The most important architect involved in the exhibition, however, was Gunnar Asplund, who had emerged as the artistically leading architect during the 1920s, with highlights of neoclassical works like the Skandia cinema and the City library, both in Stockholm. Paulsson had persuaded him to embrace the avant-gardist architectural language in accepting the commission for the major layout and architecture of the exhibition.

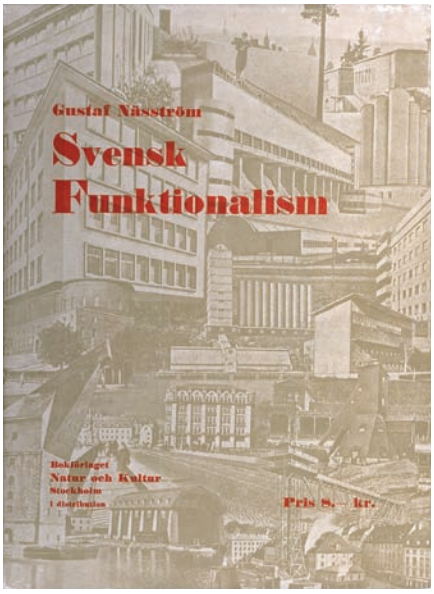
In his architecture of the exhibition Asplund managed to form an ensemble of pavilions, on the one hand uncompromisingly modernistic, on the other forming an urban atmosphere based on traditional concepts, forming a major set of public spaces along the suburban waterfront.

In the total oeuvre of Asplund the exhibition buildings remained in a sense the most radically avant-gardist structures. But the consistency of Asplund's works from early 1910s through the 1930s always featured innovative handling of traditional features. The teachings by Lars Israel Wahlman during the early years of the century, of structural principles in vernacular timber architecture, had formed the roots of Asplund's architecture as well as of the younger generation entering the scene around 1930. Asplund himself had developed this connection in his work, in collaboration with Sigurd Lewerentz, for the Woodland cemetery to the south of Stockholm (a Unesco World Heritage site since 1994). The early chapel by Asplund, of 1920, radically combines a primitive classicism with some echoes of the Nordic forest, forming an expressive spatial sequence. In the major set of chapels at the Woodland cemetery, formed by Asplund in the 1930s and completed just before his early death in 1940, modern interpretations of classical typology and spatial relationships recur in a new version, embracing the experience of the international modernism of the Stockholm exhibition. The modern reinterpretation of classical and Nordic prototypes appear also in other late work by Asplund, such as the Law Courts extension in Gothenburg and his own summer cottage at Stennäs.

1. *Gunnar Asplund, Stockholm Exhibition 1930. Perspecive drawing (Rudolf Persson, 1929) of Festival Square with advertising mast and restaurant*

1. See Rudberg Eva, *The Stockholm exhibition 1930: modernism's breaktrough in Swedish architecture*, Stockholm 1999.
2. Gregor Paulsson's seminal early publication was *Den nya arkitekturen* (The new architecture), Stockholm 1916.

2. *Gunnar Asplund, Gothenburg Law Courts extension, 1934-37*



3. *Gustaf Näsström, Svensk Funktionalism (book cover), 1930*

While modernist architecture was made to hold connections to progress, economic growth, welfare and democracy, the protagonists also had to cope with the deeply rooted concepts of individuality, craftsmanship and traditions of a country that held a strong rural identity.

Generally the modern heritage of the Swedish 1930s bears some stamp of a dialogue with tradition, at times with some antagonism, but mostly seeming to claim an affinity based on common principles of rational economy. Two publications related to the 1930 exhibition, both promoting the new architecture, are worth mentioning in this context. The young art critic Gustaf Näsström in his *Svensk Funktionalism* (Swedish Functionalism), published in the very year 1930, stressed the continuity between the old and the new. The aim of objectivity was inherent in traditional Swedish architecture just as much as in what was now labelled Functionalism. Indirectly Näsström was also reaching back to the National Romantic movement, where Wahlman and others had made the logic of timber construction into a basis for a new architecture.

4. *KF Architects office (Artur von Schmalensee, Eskil Sundahl), Luma Light Bulb Factory, Stockholm, 1930. Cover of Konsumentbladet, the weekly magazine by KF, the consumer's cooperative society, 1931*

The second of the two important books related to modern architecture was the manifesto titled *acceptera*, written by Paulsson and Asplund along with four architects involved with the housing department of the Stockholm exhibition and published in 1931. This seemed in some senses to be a more radical pamphlet, but really also basically defensive, as implied by credo of the title: "Accept!". Justifying the spatial radicalism of Asplund's exhibition buildings, for instance, a comparison was made with the relation to the cityscape in the major monument of central Stockholm by the older generation, Ragnar Östberg's City Hall, arguing that they were really based on similar concepts.[3] Through various historical links the relationship of the new architecture with tradition was claimed to consist not of compromise, but rather of sharing a radicalism in the literal sense of that word. One suggestive image in *acceptera* shows Ornässtugan, a well-known late mediaeval timber cottage, presented in a way that makes it look like a modernist villa, such as Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye.[4]

This all contributed to forming an understanding of the new architecture as the true expression of modern conditions in society, without sacrificing the merits of older generations. These factors certainly promoted a rapid implementation, from the experimental show of 1930 to the shaping of everyday environment. Important in this context was the reliance on modern architecture since its early days by grass root organisations related to the labour movement. Most radically the KF, the consumer's cooperative society, were already before 1930 embracing the symbolism of modernity by reference to large scale industrialism and commerce, and with references to the New World. The KF architects office was formed by a number of radical architects headed by Eskil Sundahl. Besides industrial buildings for mostly food products, they would provide some areas of workers housing as well as not least a great number of shop buildings, many of them in rural areas. In this way their part in spreading early modernist architecture in the Swedish landscape was decisive.[5] On a more pragmatic level, also the housing cooperative, in the course of the early 1930s, were accepting functionalism as being instrumental in their programs for apartments for workers and middle income families.

These two popular movements both had links to the Social Democratic party. When the party took over government in 1932, the modern movement in architecture had already become a part of their ideology. Initially it had been supported by intellectuals rather than by grass roots,

3. Asplnd Gunnar et al, *acceptera*, Stockholm 1931, pp. 192-95.
4. Ibid, p. 144.
5. Brunnström Lisa, *Det svenska folkhemsbygget: om Kooperativa förbundets arkitektkontor*, Stockholm 2004.

but this seemed finally to change when Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson in 1933 moved into the newly built row housing area in suburban Stockholm. The design by the well established architect Paul Hedquist was only modestly radical in its urban layout, but in its architectural language bearing all the signs of white, cubic, abstract international style.

In the housing areas of the early 1930s, besides introduction of compact kitchens and other features of functionalist planning, an element of major concern was daylight. This was considered to be of major importance in Nordic latitude. Its consideration affected orientation as well as layout of parallel housing blocks, but also placing of windows and not least slenderness of housing volumes. Narrow blocks with small apartments facing both sides were introduced by Hakon Ahlberg and Leif Reinius at Hjorthagen, thus basically maintaining the lighting qualities of traditional small scale rural timber housing within a repetitive structure of workers housing for the capital.

The emphasis on effective lighting was also one component in the general stress on hygienism, a major concern in public debate which the new architecture seemed to support practically as well as symbolically.

In this way housing, industrial complexes and small scale commercial buildings became the major fields in which international modernism was widely introduced in Sweden during the first half of the 1930s. Schools, hospitals and office buildings were other exponents. Some significant public representational buildings also contributed, such as Sven Markelius' Helsingborg Concert Hall, completed in 1932. When it comes to museum buildings, the Technical Museum in Stockholm by Ragnar Hjorth, 1934-36, was appropriately adopting the abstract modern language, while the project by Romare and Scherman for the Historical Museum through the course of the 1930s changed its appearance towards featuring signs of a traditional typology. Significantly Ragnar Östberg, the leading architect of the older generation who had been opposing the architecture of the 1930 exhibition, in 1933 designed the Maritime Museum on the very site where the exhibition had stood, in a white abstract mode, yet with a strong axial symmetry and marked classicist features.

On the whole, however, the breakthrough on a large scale of the modern movement during the early 1930s was successful. Some architects, like Ragnar Östberg, Cyrillus Johansson or Hakon Ahlberg – in spite of the latter's ascetically modernist housing area of Hjorthagen – were using traditional elements more explicitly than others. Historical and traditional references seemed to form critical components, but could also be seen as contained within an inclusive modernism, whose widely accepted term in Sweden was "functionalism". Even if the concept of functionalism was claimed by professionals of the following generations to consist in a method and a generally realistic approach in architecture, rather than a formal language, in popular conscience the latter aspect has prevailed.

The early 1930s marked the change not only of the Swedish architectural landscape, but also of Swedish society

5. *Ragnar Hjorth, Technical Museum, Stockholm, 1934-36*

and culture. From having been one of the poorest countries of Europe it was now heading towards becoming one of the very richest. Its strongly rural identity was transformed by rapid urbanisation, while religious values were replaced by secularism. Staying out of the Second World War, Sweden would experience continuity from the early 1930s to the post war years.

Economic growth and transformation of society, which would largely take place in the post war years, were thus often identified by concepts relating back to the years around 1930, such as that of the "people's home" and functionalist architecture. In the architectural debate the ideals introduced with functionalism remained a constant point of reference at least until the appearance of post-modernism of the 1980s. However positions would vary from defence to modification or – less often – rejection.

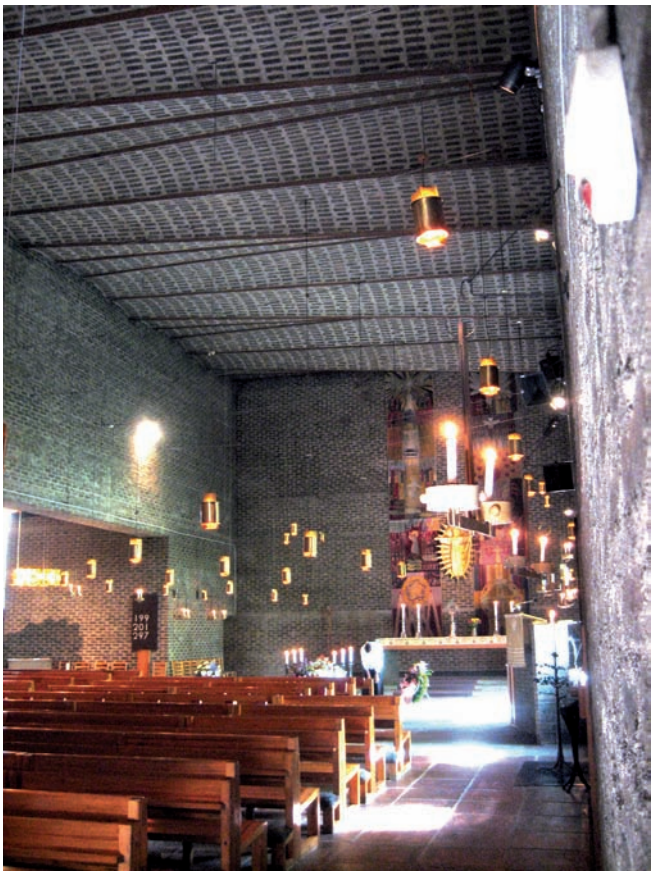
The modification of the language of international modernism introduced by Asplund and others during the 1930s would continue, taking on new shapes in the 1940s and 1950s. Many still highly appreciated housing areas were formed during those decades, such as Gröndal in Stockholm by Leif Reinius and Sven Backström. The approach became known internationally as "the new empiricism", while Sweden could be named the country of the "middle way".[6] This would refer in politics to social democracy as balancing between socialism and capitalism, but also to an architectural identity between purist modernism and historical traditions. Such critical positions within the modern movement were held by among others Sigurd Lewerentz and Peter Celsing, who most expressively in a number of churches of the 1950s and 60s would explore spiritual values of closed space with archaic use of materials and synthesis of cultural references. Some less known architects like Nils Tesch were presenting more purely traditionalist approaches, increasingly in conflict with late modernist standard production.

The crisis that took place in Swedish modern architecture – and society – in the 1960s and 1970s was facing a production of buildings supported by regulations and research that were formed within large scale centralised

6. Childs Marquis W., *Sweden: the middle way*, New Haven 1936.

6. *Ragnar Östberg, Maritime Museum, Stockholm, 1933-35*

7. *Cyrillus Johansson, Mjölby Town Hall, 1938-40*



8. *Sigurd Lewerentz, St. Mark Church, Björkhagen, Stockholm, 1956-60*

bureaucracy, as well as by a likewise large scale industry of building construction. Many areas in central city districts, including that of Stockholm, were replaced by interventions mainly for a new scale of commerce and office buildings. Widespread criticism of late modern architecture and housing would in some cases negatively affect also the early modern heritage. But for the most part the heroic beginnings would now stand out as reminders of ideals that seemed later to have become corrupted. At the same time, this critical period formed the starting point in regarding the modern heritage as belonging to history. The pioneering works of the modern movement were joining those of more distant periods, in likewise being threatened by contemporary developments.

In the year 1980 the half-century celebration of the 1930 exhibition was held, recognizing the historicity of the radicalism represented by the exhibition. Generally its social progressivism was now seen as a path to be continued or expanded, while the industrial rationalism represented by the architectural language and its production was more or less rejected. Today, one generation later, some would argue that development has however gone in the opposite direction. While rationalist production and modernist architectural language has been basically maintained, the socially radical welfare state has been largely deconstructed.

The difficult position of modern heritage lies in the fact that the task of conservation is naturally concerned mainly with the long time values. In this sense the conservation movement was in itself a reaction against the temporariness of the modern movement, its rejection of the past as being out-dated. Consequently, the modernist architecture designed to represent only the spirit of its own age, and no longer the eternal values, should now be replaced by an updated architecture.

On the other hand, the narrative approach has entered the conservation movement. Conservation, it is true, has some of its roots with early protagonists of modernity like Viollet-le-Duc, where the qualities for restoration could be seen in the representations of different spirits of periods, rather than in transcendent values. In this framework the risk is perhaps that conservation will favour the buildings representing the modern movement in its pure form above those representing the counter-movements or the undercurrent of timeless values. But the heritage movement must be open to both attitudes, the open radicalism as well as the critical movements, sometimes in reality more radical in their resistance to sometimes simplistic modernist attempts at rational expressions of their time.