Modern Architecture

Micael Ekberg

Torben Grut. En arkitekt och hans ideal (Torben Grut: An Architect and His Ideal)

Gothenburg Studies in Art and Architecture

Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2000, 332 pp., 11 color and 130 b/w illus. 300 SEK, ISBN 91-7346-388-4

Anders Bergström

Arkitekten Ivar Tengbom. Byggnadskonst på klassisk grund (The Architect Ivar Tengbom: Building Art on a Classical Foundation)


Martin Rörbäck

David Helldén. Modernistisk visionär på traditionens grund (David Helldén: Modernist Visionary on a Traditional Foundation)


Swedish architecture is scarcely mentioned in mainstream accounts of twentieth-century architectural history. Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz were rehabilitated by historians as precursors of postmodernism, and the postwar new towns around Stockholm (Vällingby and Farsta) have always been noted together with the related English new towns. Otherwise, textbooks offer shorthand characterizations but little more, and of recent books for the Anglophone reader, only Barbara Miller Lane's National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries begins to paint a picture encompassing early Swedish modernism.1 To correct these oversights requires more than recasting Sweden within a regional tradition, a characterization that serves only to reinscribe the centrality of the established reading of modernist history and the marginality of the area supposedly being rescued from oblivion. However, given the spadework of a new generation of historians in Swedish, the closest many readers will be able to come to this unfamiliar architecture may well be an English-language book review like the present one, where I will therefore suggest how these books modify the impressions of their architects left by the English-language literature.

Each originated as a Ph.D. dissertation (doktorsavhandling): Anders Bergström received his doctorate from the architectural history department of the Arkitektskolan at the Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan (KTTH); Martin Rörbäck—long a curator at the Arkitekturhistoriska Museet in Stockholm—from the art history department at Stockholms Universitet; and Micael Ekberg from the art history department of Göteborgs Universitet. All are monographs on Swedish architects who would be considered second-rank in comparison with the leading figures of the twentieth century—Asplund, Peter Celsing, Lewerentz, and Ragnar Östberg. The least-known of the three is probably Torben Grut (1871–1945), who was important for the dissemination of the Danish brick tradition in Sweden in the early part of the century. His major building is the Gamla Stan that was almost totally destroyed and rebuilt in the 1960s and 1970s. Helldén became the public spokesman for architectural and urban modernism through numerous appearances on Swedish television and radio. His reputation since then has steadily declined and Rörbäck's book may be of some use for rehabilitation.

Monographic biographies are not uncommonly the choice of dissertation writers. The chronological limits are what they are; the body of material is defined in advance; and in the case of twentieth-century architects, especially in a country that has never seen aerial bombing, the archives are plentiful. As Sweden lacks monographs on many important figures, the field is relatively open. Eva Rudberg, a distinguished Swedish architectural historian who has herself published several significant works in this genre (on Hakon Ahlberg [Stockholm, 1994], Uno Åhren [Stockholm, 1981], and Sven Markelius [Stockholm, 1989]), has argued the virtues of the architectural monograph.2 Yet it is an open question whether the monographic biography is really the appropriate vehicle for a younger scholar, since striking the right balance between the personal and the architectural and between the output of buildings and the issues they engage is extremely difficult. Of varying success in this regard, all three books under review are nonetheless remarkable histories of worthy subjects. Only rarely does one feel that the author has stumbled into the common hazard in dissertation-writing of comprehensive documentation. Finally, all three are distinguished products with extensive...
color plates. Bergström has been particularly well served by Byggförlaget's eccentric tall format, light-cream-colored paper, and generous margins.

As Ekberg demonstrates, Grut practiced in a gentleman's world of connections formed on the tennis court, which kept him going as long as the economic climate favored conspicuous consumption—a milieu not available to the younger Tengbom and Helldén, who instead had large office practices. The architect helped found the Stockholm lawn tennis club in 1891, and there befriended his most influential contact, crown prince Gustav, an avid sportsman; soon he joined the prince's own club. Connections such as this brought him commissions for villas for wealthy Stockholmers, leading to his first design for a tennis hall, AB “Tennis,” in 1900. Given the novelty of the sport (the first Swedish rules were published only in 1884), Grut undertook a number of studies of ball flight and ball lighting, in the end formulating ten rules of tennis-ball lighting (62). This work in turn led to his major commission, the stadium on Valhallvägen in Stockholm built for the Olympics of 1912.

Athleticism and the development of the body were matters of national pride and the selection of appropriate nationalistic imagery was no small matter. Ekberg shows how Grut explored, in consultation with the crown prince, the architectural sources that might befit a stadium in a northern climate, rendering in Helsingborg a brick a blend of the town walls of Visby in Gotland with the Circus Maximus in Rome. His use of advanced concrete methods under the brick facing demonstrates how medieval and modern construction systems, possibly learned from Peter Behrens's work in Germany and from the traditions of concrete construction and other modern sources, as is especially apparent in the bank's eccentric atrium. Later, Tengbom built a number of rationalist buildings in a stripped style, one of which—the Esselte Building (1927–31)—became a symbol of Swedish modernism. Tengbom fits uncomfortably into prior histories of architecture. He receives respectful notice in the exhibition-related volume Sweden of 1998, where he is presented as a neoclassicist.² His near-absence from Lane's National Romanticism and Modern Architecture, however, is a disappointment; she offers only a handful of inconsequential references. Bergström's sensitive account shows how multilayered the architect's reading of historical sources could be. This may be the place to note that the term “National Romanticism,” used with relative insouciance by North American scholars, is not so lightly employed by Swedish writers. The reason for this has to do with a crusade led...
by Björn Linn, professor emeritus of architectural history and theory at Chalmers University in Göteborg, among others. Linn has argued sharply that the proper term for the special blend of historical and modern sources that we know at National Romanticism should be “Material Realism.” His point, briefly put, is that the term “National Romanticism” applied to art, literature, and music is necessarily sentimental and thus inappropriate for Swedish architecture. Rather, what characterizes Swedish architecture in this period, Linn and others claim, is the adoption of materials, like brick, a newly introduced, non-native building material and a new materialist conception of brick architecture. From this point of view, Lane’s book overstresses the “romantic” at the expense of “nationalist” and wrongly privileges “idea” over “material.” Bergström and Ekberg stay out of this controversy, but that context explains why all the authors eschew the “material.”

Bergström’s pages as a complex and subtle architect, one who wielded historical sources with great originality and flair and whose transition to modernism provides us with real insight into the problems of modernity.

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Notes
1. Barbara Miller Lane, National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries (New York, 2000), reviewed by Harry Mallgrave, JSAH 60 (June 2001), 222–23.
3. Lane, National Romanticism, 228–33.