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# The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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## *Conclusions*

From the reports of colleagues and former employees Asplund was a man obsessed with architecture, who drove himself and his small staff, which never numbered more than five, to the limit.<sup>143</sup> Two o'clock in the morning was not an uncommon time to find him still at work, and his employees often faithfully stayed as long. Work was never late, and competitions were always finished a few days before they were due.<sup>144</sup> This punctuality, among other reasons, earned him excellent relations with his clients.

Asplund maintained rigorous control over every aspect of a project, which no doubt accounts for the extreme richness of his detailing and for the unity of conception in his buildings, where plan and details complement each other to create stronger motifs.<sup>145</sup> Despite an apparent facility, the creative process appears to have been a slow and arduous one for Asplund, no doubt partly because of the extremely high goals he set for himself. One gets a sense of this struggle from the rich selection of sketches that have been preserved from a few of his projects. Designs often began with the obvious and only gradually evolved after reams of sketches into the richly subtle solutions we know.<sup>146</sup>

Though Asplund's architecture evolved through a number of stylistic phases, there is a clear continuity of motifs and themes, both formal and symbolic, from the early work to the late. Underlying almost all of Asplund's work is a duality which initially grew out of the pairing of the medieval and the classical but soon developed into a broader synthesis with symbolic overtones. Thus the pairing of the organic with the geometric, the cylinder with the square, the Egyptian with the classical came to symbolize more cosmic dualities of man-nature, reason-spirit, male-female, and finally, life-death.

Asplund's fascinating talent for combining formal and psychological essences of different architectures enabled him not only to evoke these dualities but also to give his buildings a wide emotional range. Paralleling this phenomenon was his ability to conceive his architecture in terms of analogies to man, nature, and natural processes. As Alvar Aalto perceptively noted in 1940, "Much can be written about Asplund's art and its different phases, but if one studies them one will always find this underlying direct contact with nature."<sup>147</sup> These analogies, to growth, to birth, and to the body were orchestrated to add levels of meaning to his buildings. Unlike other architects who conceived their buildings in terms of organic forms, such as Gaudi, Häring, and even Aalto (who essentially came to that approach through Asplund) Asplund's work cultivates a restrained minimalism which subtly heightens the effect of each gesture and contributes to the metaphysical dimension of his buildings.

Asplund's career defies easy categorization, particularly any attempt to see a linear progression from early work to late. Though by international standards he was a latecomer to the Modern Movement, his earlier work participates in that evolutionary process of renewal of traditional architecture that started in Scandinavia with the advent of National Romanticism and in many respects anticipates the formal concerns of the Modern Movement. Yet the jump from the Stockholm Public Library to the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 was vast both stylistically and culturally. But Asplund was to be one of the very first architects who, having embraced functionalism, reacted against it. From the mid-1930s onward, he began to reintegrate modern architecture with classical-vernacular and archaic sources. But

though his work of this period clearly broke with the International Style and the tenets of functionalism, it was to remain modernist. Thus the temptation to see Asplund's Stockholm Exhibition and other projects of the early 1930s as aberrations should be resisted. Not only were they to inform his subsequent work, but, viewed in terms of his concern with significance, they are a perfectly logical sequence in his career. Rather one may view Asplund's career as tracing a spiral, where earlier motifs are constantly returned to but in a new context, while other elements continually are transformed. His architecture offers a remarkable study in continuity and change.

Hakon Ahlberg, Asplund's friend and colleague, wrote of him:

His character, though well-balanced and harmonious, was made up of many seemingly conflicting elements. There was an element of softness, of sentimental romanticism, of regard for detail, of airy blossoming. There was another element of daring and boyish impulsiveness. A third was characterized by a craving for the truth, clarity, absolute genuineness, self-criticism. The fourth displayed restless seeking, combativeness and self-assertion.<sup>148</sup>

Asplund's concern with the symbolic and psychological betrays a more complex personality than Ahlberg captures in his description. But this must have been a hidden side, as Asplund never discussed meaning or symbolism in his work with clients, employees, colleagues, artist friends, or even his wife. When he wrote about his work in *Byggmästaren*, he limited himself to discussing functional, practical, and, once in a while, formal problems.<sup>149</sup> Like most modern architects, Asplund would give a functional justification for what he

had done: the shape of the main chapel at the Woodland Crematorium was determined by acoustical considerations, the organic courtrooms in Gothenburg by requirements of lighting.

But, as has been established, Asplund's architecture has strong emotional resonances that play on memories, moods, and associations. His work displays a nineteenth-century concern with significance and symbolism, and yet there is a difference. Traditional symbolism was clearly defined and carried through with a conscious intellectual consistency, but Asplund's is often elusive and ambiguous. It appears to be highly intuitive, based on deeply felt and freely mixed associations, and in many cases there is little evidence that it was conscious, except for the consistency of certain motifs. Yet the overt use of symbolism in his early work as well as his subtle and sophisticated use of forms, would argue against the theory that it was an unintentional aspect of his architecture. Rather, his work appears to have followed a course which closely parallels developments in modern literature and psychology, with their interest in archetypes, dreams, and the unconscious.

If Asplund's symbolism stands in contrast to the certainty of nineteenth-century constructs, the emotional range of his work is equally at odds with the one-dimensional technocratic optimism of the Modern Movement. Thus Asplund appears to define an alternate modernist tradition, one with roots in the past as well as in the modern psyche, with its complex range of emotional needs.

In his short "In Memoriam" for Asplund of 1940,<sup>150</sup> Aalto showed that of all his contemporaries he had the profoundest understanding of Asplund's work when he

wrote: "Sweden—but above all, architecture—has suffered a great loss. The first among architects, who in a wider sense has been both pioneer and pathfinder for his own era's living architecture, has left us," and he concluded:

The motifs of a large proportion of our conventional architecture are still fragments of a bygone era. Another architecture has arrived which builds for man and essentially regards people as a social phenomenon, while at the same time taking science and research as the point of departure. But beyond that a newer architecture has made its appearance, one that continues to employ the tools of the social sciences, but also includes the study of psychological problems—"the unknown human"—in his totality. The latter has proved that the art of architecture continues to have inexhaustable resources and means which flow directly from nature and the inexplicable reactions of human emotions. Within this latter architecture, Asplund has his place.