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The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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Foreword

It would be difficult to imagine a more timely moment to issue a study of the work of Erik Gunnar Asplund. His contribution to twentieth-century architecture has been at once seminal and problematic: seminal because twentieth-century architecture in Scandinavia would have been quite different without his achievement and problematic because the polemicists and historians of the Modern Movement have experienced difficulty in classifying his work. On occasion they have gone so far as to exclude his name from accounts of the period, while in other instances they have been at a loss as to how they should regard him. Should he be seen as a traditionalist for the first half of his career, when he stood somewhat reluctantly on the threshold of modernity until his precipitous entry into the so-called functionalist manner with his famous Stockholm Exhibition of 1930? Or should he be viewed as a modernist in retreat, when, after 1933, his work had the appearance of reverting to the reassuring and acceptable code of tradition?

Most commentators have missed the point that Asplund's whole achievement was set in a particular cultural context of which he was the primary but by no means the sole representative. Only recently have they begun to see that Asplund was part of a general movement in Scandinavia, which at first glance may appear to have been simply traditionalist, but which was, in fact, beginning to come to terms with one of the major problems of architecture in this century. It is possible to formulate this problem as follows: What should be the appropriate architectural code for a newly urbanized society in a constantly changing industrial age? Should it be simply a reinterpretation of the vernacular left behind in the rural past or should it be the necessarily foreign and in most instances imported classicism to

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which an urban populace could hardly be the natural heir? This is the dilemma that Adolf Loos tried to confront in his essay *Architektur* of 1910 and it is surely this which motivated the Soviet Union to institutionalize Social Realism as the party line in architecture after 1932.

Stuart Wrede shows how this dilemma was confronted much earlier in Scandinavia, and with greater subtlety, perhaps, than was the case in most European countries. In Sweden a concern for cultural continuity expressed itself first around 1910 in an impulse to return to a primitive, almost mythical, form of building, to a kind of *Urarchitektur* as Goethe would have understood it; to a proto-Enlightenment mode which would be capable of reinterpreting classicism in vernacular terms and vice versa; an expression capable of circumventing the pathological need to choose simplistically between two equally unacceptable historicist styles, classicism on the one hand and the vernacular on the other. This drive to reinvigorate European architecture by reconstituting classical elements in almost vernacular terms had first come to the fore in the Biedermeier period, and it is hardly an accident that this impulse should have returned with the Scandinavian romantic classical revival, stimulated by the publication of Paul Mebes's book *Um 1800* in 1908. Appearing at an opportune moment, when the Nordic Richardsonian National Romantic manner was virtually exhausted, this *répêtition différente* in neoclassical terms was enthusiastically embraced as a means of revitalizing Scandinavian architecture.

This return first manifested itself in terms which were not quite classical, most notably in Ragnar Östberg's domestic work, in his invention of the skewed plan as a device for reconciling the empirical delicacy of the English Arts and Crafts house with the more monu-

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mental forms of the Swedish manor house tradition. Wrede shows how Asplund derived his own topographic approach from the catalytic lead of Östberg's domestic planning and how this unique development was to have wide repercussions for the evolution of Scandinavian architecture from the earliest essays of Östberg to the last works of Alvar Aalto. He writes: "At its best this approach took into consideration the regulating lines of the site, the dynamics of circulation, and function, and thus came to symbolize a user-oriented accommodation and informality which eventually, via Asplund, was also to become a hallmark of the work of Alvar Aalto."

Apart from the issue of stylistic acceptability and the question of architectural precedent, Wrede emphasizes the role played by symbolic and psychologically disjunctive elements in Asplund's work: the theme of constrictive passage or the simultaneous presentation of mutually contradictory signals such as the adjacent location of the main and garden entrances in the Villa Snellman. The author points out Asplund's peculiarly conjunctive use of constricted and inflated forms that seemingly make subtle and complex allusions to the themes of pregnancy and birth. According to Wrede, Asplund resorted to these themes early in his career with his design for the Lister County Courthouse (1917–1924) wherein, as he points out, ". . . the awkward relationship of circle to rectangle reinforced by the side walls of the lobby, which are splayed, suggests the possibility of an internal force pressing the circular courtroom out of the rectangle, or . . . that the rectangle is giving birth to the circle. The idea is further expressed by the cascading front stairs and by the tautness of the building membrane itself, which evokes internal tensions." Similar evocations of barely restrained

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internal forces seem to occur frequently in Asplund's work; unquestionably in his Stockholm Public Library, completed in 1928, where an atectonic prism gives the illusion of insufficient mass to contain the explosive force of the pregnant form within; that is to say, the strong cylindrical volume of the reading room itself. This theme crops up again in the loosely organized State Bacteriological Laboratories (1933–1937) wherein, as Wrede suggests, the central refrigerator seems to have been rendered as "a monument of our modern power over life and death. . . . the embryo within the womb."

While Wrede explains how this motif was appropriate to the tomb and to the symbolism of the Scandinavian cremation movement—the ancient mound and cavelike forms associated with the archaic, earth mother image of the eternal return—he is at a loss to account for its particular presence in the Lister County Courthouse except in personal terms or as a reflection of a Strindbergian, not to say generally Nordic, preoccupation with procreation and death. In his conclusion, Wrede writes: "Asplund appears to have followed a course which closely parallels developments in modern literature and psychology, with their interest in archetypes, dreams, and the unconscious." While the author does not attempt a psychoanalytic critique of Asplund's work, this suggestive sentence nonetheless reminds us of the critical work of Adrian Stokes, for Stokes might well have been characterizing Asplund when he wrote in his essay *Smooth and Rough* that "a roof overhead is almost as necessary as was the mother herself. Ubiquitous for town and village, buildings seem vast in relation to ourselves: their lower forms are actual to the touch as well as to the eye. A house is a womb substitute in whose

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passages we move with freedom. Hardly less obviously the exterior comes to symbolize the postnatal world, the mother's divorced original aspects or parts smoothed into the momentous whole. . . . Art wins for connective activity a grain of the finality of death. The urgent outwardness, straining to substantiate an image of an independent whole, bears witness to the infantile, newly won, single object whose loss was so feared, whose being, however, imbues the forms of classical architecture."

Beyond its symbolic content the current significance of Asplund's work surely lies in its ability to reflect directly the context in which it is situated, that is to say, in its capacity for creating a sense of place out of the immediate conditions of the environment, be it a particular landscape as in the case of the Woodland Cemetery Crematorium (completed in 1940, the year of Asplund's death) or be it the institutional fabric of the city responded to so sensitively in Asplund's unbuilt proposal for the Royal Chancellery in Stockholm of 1922.

Up to now there have been relatively few accounts of Asplund's career save for the laudatory but long since unavailable memorial volume written by Asplund's friend and colleague Hakon Ahlberg and published in 1943 by the *Svenska arkitekters riksförbund* and two other short monographs: Bruno Zevi's study in Italian of 1948 and Eric de Maré's charming appraisal of 1955, both of which have long been out of print. This work then is doubly welcome, not only for the way in which it fills a longstanding gap in the literature on twentieth-century architecture but also as the first critical appraisal of Asplund's work in any language. While its appearance at a time when the Modern Movement is being reassessed could hardly be more opportune, it

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will no doubt have the more direct and fertile effect of compelling us to reappraise the much neglected contribution made by Scandinavian architecture as a whole.

Kenneth Frampton

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