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The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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Preface

Erik Gunnar Asplund, who died in 1940 of a heart attack at the height of his architectural career, is today a relatively obscure figure. During the two preceding decades, however, he was Scandinavia's most influential architect, having left his mark on, among others, Alvar Aalto.

A number of books on Asplund's work appeared in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, including a short and sympathetic monograph in Italian by Bruno Zevi.¹ But by far the most comprehensive account was published by the Svenska Arkitekters Riksförbund, well illustrated and with an excellent essay on Asplund's career by Hakon Ahlberg, a friend and colleague.² In terms of illustrative material this book, unfortunately out of print, remains the authoritative text. Ahlberg's comments on the projects are perceptive and display a much broader perspective than the typical architectural writings of the period. But his essay does not attempt any analysis or interpretation of the buildings. More recently books have appeared on Asplund in Hungarian and Japanese, indicating a possible international revival of interest in his work.³ My own text was written in conjunction with a 1978 exhibition on Asplund at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, of which I was guest director.

This book has a twofold purpose: first, to reintroduce Asplund to a generation of architects who have hardly heard of him⁴ and for whom there is no readily available account of his work, and second, to make a new attempt at interpreting the significance of his achievement. In these aims I am motivated by the belief that Asplund's work is highly relevant to the architectural concerns of today. It can serve as a guide as we once again discover the relevance of the past to the present

and as we begin seriously to address the question of meaning in architecture.

A study of Asplund's work also sheds new light on the conflicting cultural forces of the period preceding the Modern Movement. As Uno Ahren, the Swedish architect and polemicist for functionalism, was to observe in speaking of the Stockholm Public Library in 1928,⁵ "The inner conflict of the whole era is apparent in Asplund more clearly than in anyone else because he is so intense," a characterization that from today's perspective we would see him as sharing with Adolf Loos, another architect whose work is receiving increasing attention.⁶

In respect to my second aim I have attempted to analyze most of Asplund's more important projects. My analyses are by no means comprehensive. They concentrate on certain motifs which I have found to be central in Asplund's work and which thread through it from the beginning of his career to its end.⁷ Others might have chosen different perspectives from which to start, and some no doubt will take exception to my conclusions.

Much has not been dealt with, including Asplund's furniture designs, which are a subject in themselves. I would like to emphasize that this brief study by no means does Asplund justice.⁸ His total production is so varied and so complex, both formally and symbolically, that it will warrant, and will no doubt receive, a much more comprehensive study in the future. I would thus like this book to be read as an intermediate report, as an essay whose interpretations and conclusions will need further elaboration in the light of future research and analysis.

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