



Arrogantly modest Sweden

On Swedish post-Wallpaper emptiness
and why you shouldn't bother to go to
Sweden for modern architecture – yet.

🇸🇪 SWEDEN — TEXT: CLAES SÖRSTEDT

‘Nice, but uninteresting.’ The A10 editor’s repeated reply to my various suggestions of contemporary Swedish architecture was quite accurate. To be honest, the great majority of projects built during the past 25 years aren’t even nice. They are just exceedingly ordinary and forgettable. Which is rather strange, as Sweden – at least from a distance – is thought of as a quite rewarding destination for architectural excursions. The abstract classicism of the 1920s has always been popular and in the 1990s the crude material minimalism of Klas Anshelm, Bernt Nyberg and the late Sigurd Lewerentz inspired quite a few architects to travel to obscure destinations.

So it was agreed that I should try to explain why Sweden’s contemporary architecture is so unexpectedly unobtrusive. In a way, Sweden shares the rather tragic fate of Brazil in that buildings produced in the last decades are dwarfed and ridiculed by an unquestionably more glorious architectural past. Of course, Sweden was never exotic or exciting like Brazil; it was more of an acquired taste. But both countries were the topic of an optimistic Kidder-Smith book: *Brazil Builds*, published in 1943 and *Sweden Builds* from 1950. Today the past is both a blessing and a curse. It is hard for anyone to understand why they should bother to look beyond Bo Bardi and Reidy or Asplund and Lewerentz, when so much more exciting things are happening elsewhere in the world.



arrogantly modest air of a superior – always indulgent and sympathetic towards others. It is the superiority of a country that was a superpower in the 17th century, that has enjoyed two centuries of uninterrupted peace, uninhibited economic confidence and the self-righteousness that comes from 65 years of socialism. Although hard to admit, Sweden likes to think of itself as better than most, as a leading figure in world politics. Once it may have been true, now it is just an embarrassing exaggeration. For all that, Swedish patriotism is remarkably low key. The country has only had a national commemoration day since 1994, and only this year (2005) did it become a national holiday. Nationalism tends to assume a quasi-scientific form. Sweden still appears in the World Top 5 or 10 in various surveys and listings: growth rate, happiness, the mathematical skills of 10-year olds or domestically produced car brands per capita. World class, but nowadays in increasingly obscure categories. And only on average: Sweden has never been more than mediocre in specifics. In architecture this meant that while plans have often been radical and challenging in scope and ambition, in real life they have turned out to be a yawn at best.

But things are changing. A survey of the architecture of the late 20th and early 21st centuries reveals certain signs of a shift. The long term goals of the good-quality-for-all ideology have been abandoned. Instead, a sudden need for signature buildings has appeared. The last years have produced structures like Moderna Museet in Stockholm (Rafael Moneo, 1998) and Turning Torso in Malmö (Santiago Calatrava, 2005 – see A10 #2) that are used to show, unconvincingly, that Sweden is still a prominent member of the international architectural community.

Mediocrity no longer means modest, practical and slightly boring socialist-flavoured ideals. Instead it is wealth which is no longer gorgeous and power without dignity. Nothing is more telling than a comparison of social democratic Prime Ministers' dwellings. In the 1930s Per Albin Hansson lived in a then new, now iconic, modernist terraced house (Paul Hedqvist, 1932) in Bromma, a suburb of Stockholm. Until today, his successors maintained this slightly absurd low profile for their homes, preferring terraced or semi-detached houses. The present Prime Minister – Göran Persson – has just unveiled the designs for his own future home. On his newly acquired country estate he is planning to demolish the existing main building, a fairly anonymous structure in vernacular classicism. Its replacement is an ersatz creation, rooted in the fresh yet apolitical aesthetic conservatism of the early 21st century. It is a manor house loosely based on one of the many grand estates in the vicinity with a corps de logis, topped with a mansard roof, equipped with a spa, and flanked by two service buildings. But it is not the fastidious classicism of Quinlan Terry et al.; rather a slightly less ambitious version designed by non-architect Björn-Olof Köllner.

Sweden's building stock is probably the best insulated in the world. Unfortunately such things are invisible to outsiders and seldom photogenic.

When a series of international guides to contemporary architecture was being planned in the 1990s, Stockholm was at first included as an equal among London, Paris, Hong Kong and Amsterdam. A 15-year time frame was set by the editors. However, it was discovered that the book on Stockholm needed a much more generous definition of 'contemporary'. Despite the addition of an extra 15 years, the Stockholm guide still lacked enough decent projects. The book was accordingly transformed into a Swedish guide, incorporating Gothenburg and Malmö. But still there was a shortage of suitable buildings. While the other books were successfully published, the Swedish guide failed to appear. Things have not improved since then.

Conspiracy of goodness

Sweden might be the largest and most populated of the Scandinavian countries, but it is also the least spectacular. It has nothing to match Norway's fjords or the bourgeois hedonism of Denmark. But Sweden still behaves with the

Form follows you

Ask any architect in Sweden why interesting architecture is so scarce and they will either deny that this is so or admit that they have not – yet – built any publishable projects of international standard for one or more of the following reasons:

a. The Original Sin.

The 1965 political decision to produce one million dwellings within ten years has had a big impact on Swedish architecture. First and foremost an instant hatred of the late modernist buildings erected in old as well as in completely new suburbs. Second, construction companies made a quantum leap in size, from medium sized to king sized with trebled efficiency. The previously trusted architects were blamed for everything deemed inhumane and ugly. It was as close to a national architectural trauma as one will ever get and architecture never fully recovered its good name. Architects themselves retreated into ecology, romantic summer cottages and dreams about a recent heroic past.

b. Historical nostalgia and morphological angst.

Closely linked to the Original Sin is the vague yet constantly invoked notion of tradition. Local authorities have in recent years gained great power over the final appearance of a building. In an anxious-to-please-all atmosphere, a production-friendly traditionalism is promoted and buildings are often regulated down to specific details and materials. After years of demolishing the old urban fabric, tradition has become a magic wand wielded by city architects and laymen. The pitched roof is not an option; it is an imperative.

c. Big is beautiful.

The building industry is dominated by a few very large construction companies; medium scale firms are non-existent. The largest, Skanska, is currently ranked as the third biggest construction company world-wide (outside Japan.) For these companies architecture is not a selling point. It is usually just a nuisance, at best something extra for special occasions.

d. Efficient architects.

The ascendancy of size applies almost as much to architectural practices, except that they very seldom work abroad. The big firms (Sweco/FFNS, White, Nyréns) dominate the market and tend to win an embarrassingly large number of competitions, both open and invited. Unfortunately these practices focus on business rather than design and enjoy recycling projects according to budget.

e. Diminution of the architect.

It is important to stress that the architect's role has been marginalized. There are almost no formal requirements for an architect that cannot be met by a civil engineer, technical draughtsman or even by a layman. The architect is reduced to a slightly arty consultant, never fully responsible. The virtue of professionalism is highly praised while design integrity is not a core issue.

f. Techno-functionalism.

The idea of the high-performance house is a distant and perverted relative of the functional and technical studies of modernism. It does not reflect a concern with programmatic or architectural performance, nor an interest in new materials or hi-tech buildings, but merely a desire to reap the economic advantages of new technology. Triple-glazed windows and insulation are of course among the nuts and bolts of architecture, but in many projects also the only focus. Sweden's building stock is probably the best insulated in the world. Unfortunately such things are invisible to outsiders and seldom photogenic.

g. Consumer failure.

The new class marker is size (big) and material (expensive), but not tectonics. The prestige previously enjoyed by architecture has been reduced. A corporation would rather spend big money on an upgraded website visited by many, than on a building visited by few.

h. DIY.

One company, Ikea, has changed attitudes more than anything else. Generations of Swedes have grown up with a company that delivers low prices, instant availability and self-assembly. The next step up from self-assembly is do-it-yourself, tweaking and tuning your own home, a phenomenon more or less independent of class. Motorway intersections are today thronged with enormous stores like K-Rauta, Bauhaus, Rusta, who sell building materials to DIYers in a seemingly ever-expanding market.

i. Absence of craft.

Swedish architects tend to stare enviously at countries with an impressive craftsmanship in details, like Switzerland or Denmark. The usual argument is that if Sweden could produce buildings like theirs, everything would be fine. Builders can't build and the architects have forgotten how to.

All this adds up to the exhaustion of the profession. Some of these excuses are unique, some are common phenomena. But the unlucky combination peculiar to Sweden has left the architects in a cul-de-sac. No one really bothers to challenge the establishment more than once. What makes the Swedish context special is the inability to let go of history and to grasp the possibilities of today. The tendency to complain and then hope that someone else will deal with the problem is a typical symptom of post-welfare state Sweden.

The rise and fall of the Folkhemmet

In the late 19th century, Sweden was sufficiently impoverished to gratefully accept economic aid from a generous →

On the move

The exhibition 'Young Swedish Architecture', showing until 8 January 2006, is the first of its kind in Sweden for as long as anyone can remember. Hosted by Arkitekturmuseet and curated by architecture critic Tomas Lauri, it presents a generation of architects born in the 1960s and '70s. Twenty-two practices were selected according to various criteria, including age (under 40) and at least one interesting built or under construction project. If any trends could be discerned in an otherwise heterogeneous selection, they were the consolidation of analysis (quasi-scientific or not) as a method and a deep pragmatism (so no really visionary projects). A few practices are worthy of mention: Tham Videgård-Hansson, General Architecture, Johannes Norlander and Servo. A shortcoming of the exhibition is the discrepancy between the well-designed graphics (by the practices themselves) on the enormous panels and the difficulty of actually finding interesting built projects.

But since this year is officially labelled '2005 Year of Design', this hasn't been the only exhibition to address architecture. 'Extra-Ordinary' (curated by Stella d'Ailly, Lisa Olausson and Maja Sten), at Kulturhuset, takes a different approach, focusing on a common background – in this case Royal College of Art in London rather than nationality.

www.arkitekturmuseet.se, www.kulturhuset.se



← THAM VIDEGÅRD HANSSON

It is fair to say that Tham Videgård Hansson is the only young Swedish practice that has been able to pursue their architecture with minimal compromise. Since start up together in 1999, Bolle Tham and Martin Videgård Hansson have had a succession of appreciative clients with financial resources, patience and, not least, genuine interest – an enviable situation even by European standards.

They have racked up a considerable portfolio of built projects for an enlightened market segment. Private villas dominate. In Villa Karlsson (2003) they investigated the romantic clichés – the ubiquitous red colour and pitched roof – of traditional Swedish architecture, while Villa Ugglerö (2004) is more of a tweaked modernistic cube aimed at a low production price. Other work includes remodelled apartments, exclusive cafés (various projects for Café Gateau, Stockholm) and the occasional office (Snowcrash, 2001). In late 2004 they won the competition for Kalmar Art Museum. Their proposal, a black box with wooden panels, is scheduled to open in 2006.

www.tvh.se



→ UGLYCUTE →

At the height of Sweden's Wallpaper hype, Uglycute successfully positioned themselves on the Swedish design scene with a fanzine (Katzenjammer) and an architectural practice.

While the contrast was bigger in 1999, they have continued to question the streamlined modernism of the quasi-mythological Nordic blonde design.

Their cross-disciplinary practice consists of an interior designer, an architect and two artists (Andreas Nobel, Fredrik Stenberg, Markus Degeman and Jonas Nobel). Although their DIY Memphis-style movement has been more influential than commercial, there is a string of realized investigations of the ugly and the ordinary.

Commissions have been mainly interiors, almost all from the Swedish art scene. In 2005 they finished Teater Bhopa in Gothenburg. Other projects include the trash minimalist interior for the Konst2 gallery space in Skärholmen, Stockholm (2004) and an exhibition design for continuous rebuilding for Modern Talking at Enkehuset, Stockholm (2003) – the amateurish ugliness – has since been incorporated into the zeitgeist and is now just contemporary.

www.uglycute.com



Projects include wards 109-110 for Psychosis Rehabilitation at Ulleråker Hospital (2003) where in their own words they wanted to 'get a grip on the totality of the visual and psycho-social milieu'. This entailed such diverse interventions as rehanging paintings, producing nesting boxes for birds and building a patio. More recently they redesigned the schoolyard at Olaus Petri School, Örebro (2003-2005) in collaboration with Testbedstudio architects, where their relational art resulted in – among other things – the building of a 'mini art gallery' in an artificial hill.

www.loveanddevotion.org

← LOVE & DEVOTION

Love and Devotion are four artists (Ingrid Eriksson, Carina Gunnars, Karin Johnson and Anna Kindgren) who have been working together since 2000, enhancing the everyday and focusing on modifications of physical locations from a position within the art discourse. In their work as government-funded artists they use methods unavailable to ordinary architects. They can spend weeks just registering how a particular building or site is being used, avoiding all fancy graphic analysis and focusing instead on basic qualities. Their method recalls Lacaton & Vassal's project for Léon Aucoc Square, Bordeaux – tuning, tweaking and modifying the existing fabric rather than redesigning just for the sake of a consistent portfolio.



(Arrogantly modest Sweden)

Uruguay. Since then it has evolved into an impressive success story with a growth unrivalled among the OECD countries. Starting in the 1870s, the economy had a steady annual growth rate of two to three per cent for almost 100 years. In a relatively short span of years, the country progressed from a primitive rural economy to a thoroughly industrialized, urbanized and exporting society. A pivotal event in its development into a modern welfare state, was the Social Democrats' victory in the 1932 election. Since then the party has not only dominated the political scene – 65 years in power, 44 of them consecutive – but also life and thought in general, irrespective of political opinions. Socialism and the market economy were merged into a pragmatic consensus paradigm that became synonymous with Sweden's successes in the mid 20th century and that is often referred to as the 'Swedish Model'. One of the socialist elements in the agenda was the ubiquitous Folkhemmet, a concept often and slightly inadequately translated as 'the people's home'. Implicit was the notion of the state as a strict but fair provider and distributor of resources; an iconic home with the state as father figure taking care of the inhabitants. A natural side-effect of rapid urbanization were cramped living conditions in all larger cities, and housing was one of two major political issues, the other being unemployment.

Another socialist agenda item was the ambition to create an equal society. This was actively pursued in all fields: in education, social class and, of course, in buildings. In architectural terms it was not a matter of the exquisite for the few but the adequate for the many. Which is why buildings of the era are not very spectacular, rather a low key vernacular version of contemporary modernism. It certainly has its charm but the period is better appreciated as a methodology and a grand design for a whole nation. After first managing to dodge the depression of 1930s and then the Second World War, Sweden emerged as an economic achiever in the post-war era. The '50s were literally a golden decade, in economic as well as architectural terms. During these years Swedish architects had a very important role in society. They were well-trained, confident, had appreciative clients and plenty of projects. Although nothing spectacular was produced during the era, the consistency is still very impressive.

Just like everyone else

Economic growth slowed during the 1960s, but Sweden's self-image as one of the richest countries in the world was never revised. Public expenditure continued to grow despite an economy in decline and by 1970 it had reached 43% of the GDP while nominal wages in industry rose by 40% between 1974 to 1976. By then the casual economic lead over the rest of Europe was over and serious problems arose. The international recession triggered by the 1973 oil crisis was in reality a late modernist crisis. Tellingly, the Swedish state had just then finally achieved its long pursued goal of eliminating the annoying and embarrassing housing shortage. It was not quite the success it was supposed to be. The general public gave it an ungrateful reception. The new housing estates in the suburbs were condemned by almost everyone and soon many lapsed into slow but steady decline. They marked the end of an era – social democracy as a continuous political regime was over.

After the election of 1976 the conservatives tried their luck fighting the recession. This political shift also marked the end of a period of – despite later aggressive postmodernist critique – very good architecture. Modest – yes, boring – sometimes, ambitious – always. The combination of political conservatism, deregulated markets and the rise of postmodernism proved here as elsewhere a fatal one. No one can recall a single decent building from the 1980s, except for a few of Ralph Erskine's projects. People shunned the heavily politicized late modernist projects and the romantic notion of tradition as subversive and progressive re-emerged and has not diminished since. The private market's demand for housing was met by a growing prefab house industry, which – without assistance from architects – satisfied the clients.

The notion of the Swedish Model has shifted. Outside Sweden it is more likely to conjure up the image of a blonde cover girl than of a successful economic system. But as a mentality and myth it is still alive. Ikea is hard to imagine without its particular context. In a way it is a global and late capitalist parallel to the folkhem-ideology. Its uninhibited capitalism coupled

→
Per-Albin Hansson, four-time prime minister of Sweden between 1932 and 1946 in front of his modern 1930's house.

→→
Sweden's current prime minister Göran Persson pointing at the spot of his projected traditional country estate.

Persson's plans
↙



with what at least seems like a genuine fatherly concern with design for all. Design as an economic tool rather than an ideological tool: good design, but just not too good.

Transfiguration of commonness

Not long after the Stockholm architecture guide was shelved, Canadian journalist Tyler Brulé, started to show a conspicuous interest in Sweden. From its inception in 1996, his magazine Wallpaper had a disproportionately high content of Swedish architecture and design. Had things changed? No, but suddenly everything with a Swedish provenance was good, very good. At least inside Wallpaper. Soon the Swedish architect Thomas Eriksson had designed the magazine's London office and Thomas Sandell was later set to work on Brulé's

newly bought summer house on an island outside Stockholm. Besides a personal preference for Swedes, why invest so much attention in one country? What Wallpaper exploited and what fitted perfectly into the ironic postmodern world of jacaranda, modernist mannerism and Riefenstahl aesthetics, was the over-confidence of Sweden. In their approach – architecture/interior as pornography – the arrogantly modest tone of a country with nothing to prove was perfect. Contemporary Swedish architecture was conflated with the potent mythology of Scandinavian design in general.

On the whole Swedish design hasn't fluctuated in quality the way architecture has done. In fact, the interior has been an alternate arena for frustrated architects and is where their best work has been done in the past 15 years. But this unbid-

den (though very much appreciated) media coverage had one fatal effect. It prolonged a distorted self-image as a nation of interesting architecture.

While the inability to grasp its own shortcomings still haunts the architectural community, much more interesting work is taking place outside the traditional boundaries of architectural discourse. In the borderland of design, art and architecture things are happening. Young designers like Ugly Cute, Front, De Fyra, Lagom Bra and artists like Love & Devotion are investigating the possibility of working within the Swedish logic and seeing what emerges from the ugly and ordinary. A similar shift in architectural thinking could bring rapid and radical change. Let's wait and hope. ←

ADVERTISEMENT

Constructing Architecture

Materials, Processes, Structures
A Handbook
Andrea Deplazes, ETH Zurich, Switzerland (Ed.)

2005. 508 pages
610 b/w ills and 920 drawings
23,5 x 29,7 cm.

Hardcover
EUR 78.00 / GBP 60.00
ISBN 3-7643-7190-0 English

Softcover
EUR 49.50 / GBP 38.00
ISBN 3-7643-7189-7 English

A fundamental reference work and textbook on construction.



Building Projects in the European Union

Architectural Export Opportunities : A Manual for Architects and Engineers
Bert Bielefeld; Falk Würfele

2005. 192 pages
10 b/w ills, 80 diagrams and 40 figures
17 x 24 cm. Softcover
EUR 39.90 / GBP 29.90
ISBN 3-7643-7243-5 English

A practical and informative guide to undertaking architecture and engineering projects overseas.



Wood Houses

Spaces for Contemporary Living and Working
Dominique Gauzin-Müller

2004. 159 pages
265 colour ills and 136 drawings
24,5 x 28,5 cm. Hardcover
EUR 59.00 / GBP 45.50
ISBN 3-7643-7077-7 English

New international perspectives on building houses in wood.



Energy Efficient Architecture

Basics for Planning and Construction
Roberto Gonzalo; Karl J. Habermann

2005. 224 pages
180 colour, 120 b/w ills and 310 drawings
23,0 x 29,7 cm
Cloth bound
EUR 79.90 / GBP 59.90
ISBN 3-7643-7253-2 English

An indispensable book on the new trends in sustainable building.



Birkhäuser Publishers LTD
P.O. Box 133
CH-4010 Basel
Switzerland
Tel. +41 61 2050-707
Fax +41 61 2050-792
e-mail: sales@birkhauser.ch
www.birkhauser.ch