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Nordic Visions of a Classical World (1901 – 1966)

Charrington, H.

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TEXT

An Emancipated Tradition

Steen Eiler Rasmussen's remark, "On the whole, art should not be explained; it must be experienced", befits what has come to be called Nordic Classicism, and the determinedly non-doctrinaire approach of its practitioners.¹ At the same time, the ambiguity inherent in this comment frustrates those critics for whom the classical world is something less mutable and more certain. Francesco dal Co berated, "...the many clichés utilized [...] to explain the architecture of Aalto, [...] vague and disappointing expressions, as generic as they are void of meaning: 'northern classicism', 'Italy', 'Mediterranean', 'Greece', 'classical architecture', 'Renaissance palazzo', '*architettura minore*', 'the holy land of Tuscany' etc.?"²

Nordic Classicism is, arguably, just such a vague term, covering everything from the unrelenting repetitiveness of Kay Fisker's Borups Allé flats in Copenhagen (1922–23) to the festive decorativeness of Hakon Ahlberg's Pavilion for the Gothenburg Jubilee (1923). The name emerged at the start of the 1980s, and interest in the movement stemmed more from abroad than from within the Nordic countries as part of a wider post-modern re-evaluation of pre-Modern Movement twentieth-century architectural history that also included Adolf Loos, Edwin Lutyens and Jože Plečnik. The eponymously titled 1982 exhibition that defined Nordic Classicism, and set its dates as between 1910–1930, posited it as a 'classical interlude' between National Romanticism and Functionalism in one of those neat conceptions of architectural

history in which architectural periods hand-over to each other as if a baton in a relay race.³ Its assumption of a singular classical movement covering the Nordic countries was largely inherited from the earlier National Romantic movement, which, despite its name, was a supra-national undertaking. Rooted in the Arts and Crafts, its tenets would frame the ensuing classical movement; a material culture rooted in an appeal to nature, a free use of history, and the conception of buildings as organic unities in harmony with their sites.

What had changed was the expression of such values, which were no longer to be found only in the inherent worth of an isolated vernacular, but around the Mediterranean. This transference was made possible by National Romantic architects such as Armas Lindgren identifying a classical interplay of nature and civilization, and for whom, “Classicism and antiquity remained as the backbone of culture from which deviations in whatever direction were possible”.⁴ In oscillating between the local and the international and bridging the perceived remoteness of the North from the South, an inflected classicism was seen to conjoin “two mirrors of harmony”. In his 1915 thesis on decorative arts in Skåne, the Swedish theorist Gregor Paulsson explored how an imported classical style might become a regional one, and thereby a bulwark of assimilated tradition against both industrialisation and historicism.⁵ Following, Paulsson, seven years later in *Motifs from Ages Past*, Alvar Aalto noted “a traditional streak” of architecture that developed slowly, responding to climate, technological advances and expectations of both comfort and aesthetics, and a more ‘emancipated streak’ that pursued “architectural luxury, external and foreign influences, details and general trends”. However, instead of colliding, the two strands

were complementary, as the latter approach radiated impulses that took root in the former.⁶

The British educator F. R. Yerbury undertook two books, *Modern Swedish Architecture* (1925) and *Modern Danish Architecture* (1927), with texts by Hakon Ahlberg and Kay Fisker respectively, which attempted to hold up a mirror to the neo-classical movements in each country. The books accentuated differences over similarities, presenting more eclectic and diverse Swedish works in contrast with the Danish volume that presents works that adhere more rigorously to the austere architectural ideals from “around 1800”.⁷ The reality was more nuanced. Nordic architects had established contacts at personal, professional and institutional levels since the late nineteenth century, reinforcing the sense of a common narrative despite differing histories and situations; connections that the small numbers of architects in each country heightened. With the close relationship between Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, and with Finnish architects either Swedish-speaking Finns or fluent in the language, journals were widely read across borders. Regular events such as the ‘Nordic Building Days’ also transmitted developments, while three exhibitions in Sweden acted as catalysts to the spread of new directions in architecture: the 1918 Danish Decorative Art, Architecture and Craft exhibition, the 1923 Gothenburg Tercentennial Jubilee Exposition, and the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition. Architects frequently worked across borders, particularly in Sweden. For instance, the Finn Hilding Ekelund worked for Hakon Ahlberg, the Dane Kay Fisker for Sigurd Lewerentz, and the Norwegian Sverre Pedersen for P. O. Hallman.

A restricted number of architecture schools intensified the impact of any change, or resistance to change. In Finland and Norway, the countries' single architecture schools, established in 1873 and 1910 respectively, included staff drawn from the National Romantic movement, among them Armas Lindgren. In Denmark and Sweden there was a palpable sense of a reaction against the well-established academies. In 1909, Gunnar Asplund was among students who on graduating from the Royal Institute of Technology, refused to continue to the Academy for Liberal Arts. Joined by Sigurd Lewerentz, newly returned from Germany, they set up a 'free school', the Klara School, and invited Carl Westman and Ragnar Östberg from the Institute of Technology to teach, as well as Carl Bergsten and Ivar Tengbom.

Common to these architects and teachers was their stress on "depth and content" over simple appearance that enabled a blurring of the Arts and Crafts, antiquity, and the classical world, as well as the lack of separation in the teaching of architectural history and design. Östberg was particularly important, with his inflected, distorted plans and informal facades inherited from the English Free School, and his regard for Italian architecture.⁸ His widely admired Stockholm City Hall, completed in 1923, was simultaneously classical and romantic, Nordic and Venetian, and in the eyes of F. R. Yerbury, proto-modern.

Framing History

Consideration of the 'emancipated streak' of architecture extended from the nineteenth-century approach of viewing history as a quarry. However, what characterised the French and German textbooks in wide circulation, such as Paul-Marie Letarouilly's *Edifices de Rome Moderne* (1857) and Jacob Burckhardt's *Die*

Arkitektur der Renaissance in Italien (1869), as well as the Swedes Torsten & Werner Söderhjelm's *Italiensk Renässanse* (1907), was not an architectural taxonomy, but a scenic rendering of history, where buildings were presented within picturesque, animated, tableaux in which the architecture frames and dignifies the contained activity. The histories reflect Quatremère de Quincy's understanding that type was bound up with "needs and nature", and that classicism might be a product of societal conventions rather than pre-determined historical necessity. This was an apprehension that, through playing down (Laugier's) concern with origins and correctness, liberated classicism to address the particular as well as the universal.⁹ Quatremère's emphasis on architecture's sociality as the basis for its progression, if not his conviction of the need for a unifying style, was furthered in Auguste Choisy's humanist anatomy of architecture, *Histoire de l'Architecture* (1899), whose isometrics and perspectives revealed architectural history to be, not a mine of genres of order and grammars in the manner of J. N. L. Durand, but of poetically rational types and places.¹⁰

Theories of architecture augmented and informed these histories. Originating in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Austria and Germany, these combined thought with feeling and measurement with science and reach back to Semper's *Outline for a System of Comparative Style-Theory* (1853), and beyond him to Goethe. In these conceptions, architecture was no longer categorised in relation to abstract moral conceptions such as Vitruvius' *firmitas, commoditas, venustas*. Instead, art was parallel to the developmental laws of biology, and subservient to an underlying *Kunstwollen* (immanent style-force) that characterised each successive era. It was through analysing the laws which governed the *Kunstwollen* of different eras that

architects could deduce those governing the present time – from which, in turn, they could structure their own response.¹¹

In *Late Roman Applied Arts* (1901), Alois Riegl placed art in the service of artistic idealism: “the work of art can be seen as a result of a definite and purposeful *Kunstwollen* which makes its way forward in the struggle with function, raw material and technique”.¹² It was for the architect to determine the patterns which govern design, however, these were malleable to their situation, and it was not appearance that was at stake, but the social charge that they effected. Accordingly, citing the past could be as evocative as much as it was mimetic, and type could be sublimated. By this measure, for example, Paul Frankl was able to recast Palladio from the Renaissance to the Baroque in his *Principles of Architectural History* (1914); Palladio’s buildings might be formally chaste, but their fugal sequence of spaces exposes an underlying Baroque *Kunstwollen*.¹³

The response of Nordic architects was doubly sympathetic. These readings suggested a form of neo-classicism that could rationally engage with the normative conditions of modernity, but which was also capable of meeting (National Romantic) concerns for the particular. Notably, it also placed responsibility in the hands of the architects.

Writing of Riegl, Gregor Paulsson stated he was freed of the “positivistic straightjacket”.¹⁴

In formal terms, these conceptions were given their clearest expression in Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* (1915) in which he categorised the experience of art into dialectical pairings whose measure is the experience of the individual who

moves through them.¹⁵ The most obvious example of this is the circle within a square that structured Schinkel's Altes Museum (1822–30) and was repeated in, among others, Asplund's Woodland Chapel (1918–20), Lister Court House (1917–21), Stockholm Public Library (1920–28), as well as Hack Kampmann's Copenhagen Police Station (1919–24), Aino and Alvar Aalto's Jyväskylä Workers Club (1924–25), and Lewerentz's Social Security Administration Building (1928–32). Asplund's Villa Snellman (1917–18) follows almost all of Wölfflin's principles with its cranked plan, balanced asymmetries, regular but irregular fenestration, and distortions and inflections to the plan that lend an imperceptible yet beguiling tension to the interior.

The emphasis on addressing contemporary societal needs and nature validated a similarly inventive approach to type, detailing and technology. Deriving from Riegl's idealism, Frankl argued that *Zweckmässigkeit* (purposive intention) was an aesthetic category in its own right. Distinguished from mechanistically functional *sachlich* ('thing-ness'), *Zweckmässigkeit* was premised on the understanding of an active relationship between the spectator and object as the setting for, and frame of, human activity. This attitude was close to the Deutscher Werkbund, and there was a consistent engagement with Germany that catalysed debates about appropriate design and production: the Swedish Society of Industrial Design invited Hermann Muthesius to Stockholm in 1909; Paulsson visited Germany several times; Lewerentz practiced with Bruno Möhring in Berlin, as well as Theodor Fisher and Richard Riemerschmid in Munich; while Sigurd Frosterus worked for Henri van de Velde.¹⁶

Architects and designers maintained the Arts and Crafts emphasis on craft and its assertions of the authority of the vernacular, but eschewed the rhetorical excesses

which characterised the National Romantic era. Instead, mediated by the Werkbund, they tied it to semi-industrialised manufacture as a means to better building standards. A restrained classicism based on repetition and proportion was well-suited to this. Heinrich Tessenow's *Hausbau und dergleichen* (Housebuilding and Such Things, 1916) was widely circulated, and his endowment of political purpose to an aesthetic of stripped-down forms and bare exterior surfaces had an immediate impact. Hilding Ekelund spoke of the inspiration of Tessenow's "prosaic simplicity", and Edvard Thomsen, similarly, wrote approvingly of Adolf Loos' 1913 lecture on *Ornament and Crime* in Copenhagen.¹⁷

Tessenow's work was in sympathy with the cultivation of plainness embodied in Ellen Kay's *Skönnet för alla* (Beauty for All, 1899), which Gregor Paulsson reiterated in his *Vackrare vardagsvara* (More Beautiful Objects for Everyday Use, 1919). These advocated practical interiors with flexible, freestanding furniture that achieved a unity through complementary colours and style, set off by simple backgrounds. Paulsson's book was illustrated with pictures from the Swedish Society of Industrial Design's 1917 Home Exhibition at Carl Bergsten's newly completed Liljevach Art Gallery (1916) which displayed objects using rationalised means of production designed by Gunnar Asplund and other architects.¹⁸

The desire for plainness, and an emphasis on surfaces, eclipsed expression of new structural techniques, and while the lantern-like clerestory of the Liljevach's gallery was made possible by its frame, this is suppressed. In contrast, the influence of Peter Behrens' work for AEG can be clearly felt in the tectonic of Frosterus' work. Dismissing the Nordic classical sensibility as "architectural anaemia" – Sweden with an "affectation" of Italian archaism – Frosterus developed a more overtly structurally rationalist expression in his Stockmanns Department Store in Helsinki (1916-30).¹⁹ Similarly, Lewerentz's Villa Ericsson (1912) exhibited the influences of the Werkbund directly, but his work swiftly gave way to a more Hegelian attitude to type – and technology. Lewerentz's background was in construction technology, which he

studied in Gothenburg for five years before going to Germany, and he eschewed the surface effects of most of his contemporaries, considering each element and material on its own terms, not only for its affects. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the Chapel of the Resurrection (1922-25) in Stockholm where the constructional elements are all expressed: copper sheeting, roof timbers, stuccoed brick walls, and the single piece of turned limestone that forms each of the columns of the portico (**Figure 1: Sigurd Lewerentz, Chapel of the Resurrection, Stockholm Woodland Cemetery (1922–25)**).²⁰

The commissions that concerned the public authorities, and architects, in the first few decades of the twentieth century were the adequate provision, and development, of new types of urban housing, as well as new public buildings such as schools, workers' clubs, and concert halls. Fisker's Borups Allé flats may have been the most monumental, but almost all architects were employed in planning or building relatively large-scale housing schemes constructed of repetitive components and characterised by an Arts and Crafts promise of a simple, unaffected domesticity. These simple elements were formed into unified streetscapes that afforded a monumentality to housing districts, such as Harald Hals' Nordre and Søndre Åsen housing areas in Oslo (1925–31). Explorations of ideas were often backed by the relatively new architectural institutes, as with Paul Holsøe's development of a model Danish house (1923), "a tradition-bound style of architecture developed in accordance with modern demands", or furthered through the architectural competitions that those same institutes administered.²¹

This pragmatism was most explicit in the teaching of town-planning theory. For all that architects applauded the fragmentary forms of historic cities created over time, and stressed the development of the necessary artistic skills to emulate them, they also attended to the practicalities of climate, space standards, public health, and traffic circulation. Amongst all the festive evocations of a classical north at the 1923

Gothenburg Exposition, Ebenezer Howard was still invited to exhibit. This competence enabled Nordic architects to keep town planning within their field, and so ensure an aesthetic or even ethical view prevailed over a more utilitarian one.²² Many designs emphasised natural features with irregular street patterns reminiscent of mediaeval towns and Camillo Sitte's precepts. Others embraced axial planning, as with Sverre Pedersen's provincial town centres in Norway, and, Finn Berner's arcaded Torvalmenningen Square in Bergen (1922–29).

Crematoria, and the renewed cemeteries that accompanied them, most clearly demonstrated the capacity to reinvent classical types for the present. Stimulated by technical advances in Germany, and an 'hygienic' approach of "flames over worms", the architects of crematoria revived a northern ritual and linked it to a southern sensibility with no schism between intellect and feeling. The form this took began with Lewerentz's 1913 project for the Bergaliden Crematorium Chapel in Helsingborg which incorporates its environment into the composition with the choir arching over a brook – or the Styx. Erik Bryggman and Hilding Ekelund saw the proposal on a visit to the Baltic Exposition in Malmö in 1914. The project stimulated interest in the 'new' classicism in Finland, and Bryggman's own second-placed scheme for the Helsinki Crematorium Competition (1919), in which he further Lewerentz's contextualism with a proposal for a curving nave that followed the line of the semi-circular cemetery.²³

Experiencing History

Teaching at the Helsinki Polytechnic, Lindgren emphasised the need to travel, absorbing the atmosphere and drawing with a soft pencil. Unmediated contact with

historic environments was vital for students and architects, not just as an opportunity to see the South, but, in an argument based in a conformity of ambience and necessity, to locate those places that still have an affective grip on us, and whose *Zweckmässigkeit* must consequently fulfil a continuing need.²⁴

Travels included studying at home where students and architects looked to pre-industrial, vernacular assimilations of classicism, and surveyed the homogeneous architecture of rural areas, small towns, churches and smaller public buildings. These were places in which classical motifs were mediated by master-builders working either in unadorned brickwork or timber. Timber construction lent itself well to surface effects; whether the underlying structure was that of a frame or horizontal laid-logs, it was the separate skin of timber weatherboarding or plaster that carried the building's expression (**Figure 4: Birger Brunila & Otto-Iivari Meurmann town-plan; architecture Matti Välikangas, Puu-Käpylä (1920–25)**). The necessary painting endowed colour with the primary status that it possessed in Venice and the Mediterranean hill-towns that would become the barometer for Nordic classicists' work. The colours themselves came from local pigments, or reflected an already assimilated classical world in the eighteenth-century buildings with their lead-white, greys and blues.

A generation earlier, students in Finland, Norway and Sweden had sought out the most irregular and overtly 'northern' locations in the forest and mountains; in the 1910s and 1920s they sought out the most harmonious. Asplund travelled through the interior of Sweden several times from 1906 onwards, while the Finns travelled to the Swedish-influenced farmlands of Ostrobothnia, and Danes to unspoilt Jutland and

Norwegians to low-lying farmsteads. They imbibed the “Doricist sensibility” of colourful farmhouses, barns and their milieu and their “incessant irresolution between the classical and the vernacular [...] that reveals the primitive force on the basis of which buildings are [formed]”.²⁵ Their artless disposition of simple forms in the landscape became an artful compositional trope for architects as they attempted to give the impression of a similar accidentalism.

Architects also looked back at their own antecedents, particularly those of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Denmark. Nicolai Abilgaard and C. F. Hansen’s buildings in Copenhagen were measures of rational neo-classical correctness, and their austere restraint established a commonality with the domestic tradition. Andreas Kirkerup’s thatched Liselund (1792), displayed how the vernacular could be combined with the classical, and became a touchstone of Nordic classicism, reappearing in Asplund’s Woodland and Lewerentz’s Kvarnsveden crematoria chapels (1920-21).

Gottfried Bindesbøll’s Thorsvaldsen Museum (1838-48), influenced by Schinkel and Franz Gau’s knowledge of polychromatic antiquity, demonstrated an inventive and mannered approach to the past in which illumination and colour are integral to the composition, and outweigh any concern with classical correctness. Unity lies not in the formal plan, but in the passage of the spectator through the atmospheric annulus of rooms of varying sizes and proportions, colours and light-sources, which frame Thorvaldsen’s work. Carl Petersen saw Bindesbøll’s drawings exhibited at a 1901 exhibition of ‘Danish art and architecture before 1890’, and, in turn, his Fåborg Museum (1912–15), which framed the ‘good life’ of the town’s eponymous painters’

colony, is a contrapuntal composition of carefully modelled spaces through which the spectator moves. A journey from street to garden, whose overwhelming sensation is a balance of illumination and shadows, contrasting and complimentary colours, rough and smooth surfaces, and refined and vernacular materials (**Figure 2: Carl Petersen, Fåborg Museum (1912–15)**).²⁶ Concentration on individual experience, and a concern with the connection of one part to another extended into the assemblage of the building itself, as Kay Fisker's remarked in 1927, "A material no longer has worth according to its fineness or historical correctness, but rather in its relationship to its surroundings, colour, and surface treatment; this also constitutes a certain concept of proportionality".²⁷

Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1788), reaching beyond the strictures of more conventional academic itineraries, established the lens through which northern Europeans viewed Italy and the Mediterranean. This was a romanticised, and generalised, view that saw little value in the forms of architectural history for their own sake, but evaluated them as everyday matters in relation to the life they supported; most famously when Goethe asked why children were not permitted to play amongst the ruins of the Verona amphitheatre. The implicit *Naturphilosophie* of Goethe's observations also entwined culture with nature and made the artist's experience of the processes of the natural world their measure.²⁸

Nordic architects' journeys to 'the South' were portrayed as personal and unaffected, nevertheless, they were not undertaken naively. Travel might be individual, sensory and sensual, but it was firmly in the service of culture, and "instinct and reason". This was a frame of mind that was less akin to Rousseau's reveries, and more reminiscent

of Friedrich Schiller's distinction between the state of nature that we are born into, and that which we form "in idea" through independent experience.²⁹ Architects brought back sketchbooks from Italy that record the atmosphere that architects both experienced and willed, and before departure students were tutored to establish northern Italy as a measure of a future life in northern Europe. Like Goethe before them, they ignored the Gothic, High Renaissance and Baroque to focus on the *quattrocento* and the natural formations of the vernacular and *architettura minore*.³⁰

Mediation also came through the study of frescoes and paintings in place, as well as those romantic classical painters who had already reflected on, and conjured, the places they were visiting. In 1921 Hilding Ekelund observed Mantegna's frescoes in the Chapel of S. Eremitani in Padua as "monumentally composed, full of life's pathos held just below the surface", while three years later, Alvar Aalto saw in them "the synthetic landscape [...] in which aesthetic value arose as a by-product...", and praised the "harmony between the figures and the forms of the buildings and the gardens" of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*.³¹

With a certain idea of what they wished to find, and developing and sharing common itineraries, architects sought out the ordinary and variable 'Italia la Bella', and recorded the adaptiveness of its architecture, and its unifying and contrasting effects of materials and surface, rather than any *a priori* abstract or formal qualities.

Returning home, these qualities would be pre-eminent in architects' designs (**Figure 3: Erik Bryggman, Atrium Apartments and Hospits Betel, Turku (1925–29)**). On Asplund's first trip to Italy in 1913–14, he wrote of the Greek theatre at Syracuse, "The key to it all is the open space with the heavens above, all seats assembled around

the stage, the plain and the sea”, and at Tunis observed “...a sky clear and deep the like of which I have never seen...”³² These were observations of milieu that shaped the overall scene of the Skandia Cinema (1922–23).

Observing that culture was grounded in the relationships between phenomena, not the objects themselves, architects sought out topographical environments where there was an equality to building and landscape, and, in turn, treated the *topos* as a design element.³³ This is most keenly realised in the Stockholm Southern (now Woodland) Cemetery (1915–40), in which Asplund and Lewerentz merged the rites of the forest with the solemnity of the classical funerary chapel. Their competition winning scheme was begun shortly after Asplund’s return from Italy, and emerged from a sketch-design made by Lewerentz during a fortnight’s stay in Lugano. Elements of southern antiquity merge with the northern landscape, and the presence of paintings such as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Cross on the Baltic* (1815) is evident in their competition drawings, and the sketches drawn into photographs of the existing woodland.³⁴

Milieu and Continuity

These experiences of a classical past and present, framed by a theoretical approach that stressed their volition, validated twentieth-century Nordic architects unravelling classicism into a morphology of environmental relationships, and taxonomy of new spatial and formal types. Marked by a “cultural sophistication and anonymous sensibility”, proponents of classicism in the Nordic countries promised new beginnings through an assimilative process that was partial and inventive, and

conscious of its place in a wider cultural narrative. A contingent use of history that was rooted in history.³⁵

The Helsinki garden suburb of Puu-Käpylä (1920–25, town plan Birger Brunila & Otto-Iivari Meurmann; architecture Matti Välikangas) synthesizes all these elements. Built of standard typologies structured around shared facilities as an extended *oikos* of a rural household for rental to the new class of workers, its prefabricated log panels are overlaid with polychrome earth-pigment painted cladding and Italianate motifs. These are composed into varying settings that scenically exploit the terrain and are rendered as a unified landscape with continuous, and at times monumental, street frontages of fences and houses that marry old Finnish wooden townscapes to those of Raymond Unwin's Art & Crafts plans, and an archaising classical feel (**Figure 4: Birger Brunila & Otto-Iivari Meurmann town-plan; architecture Matti Välikangas, Puu-Käpylä (1920–25)**).

Suggesting that historical styles had run their course and that modernism was their natural replacement, the famously 'easy' shift to functionalism made by so many leading Nordic classicists is one of the founding myths of Scandinavian modernism. Indeed, many classical works echoed the simplification inherent to modernism, and none more so than Thomsen's Øregaard Grammar School (1922–24) which presents a chaste brick classical exterior that leads into a pared back, rationalist, trabeated concrete hall. Asplund's Gothenburg Law Courts Annex (1913–1937) began as a National Romantic composition, evolved into a classical design in 1917 as part of a design for Gustaf Adolf Square, and finally emerged as a modernist design around 1935.

For those indifferent, or resistant, to doctrinaire conceptions of authenticity, the focus on a classical milieu and mood, more than form itself, made a transition into an apparently modern idiom neither contradictory to classical values, nor a particular wrench. In his 1926 essay *From Doorstep to Living Room*, Aalto juxtaposed a photograph of Le Corbusier's *Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau* adjacent to Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. In assessing them, Aalto simply ignored their chronology and praised them as incorporative spaces that act as frames to their inhabitants, and as "latter day classicism [...] the formation of these elements [...] gives the human figure prominence and express her state of mind".³⁶

Östberg's Swedish Maritime Museum (1934) may be considered the 'last' Nordic Classical building in terms of its appearance, but the Stockholm Exhibition, which is usually seen as the harbinger of Scandinavian modernism, nonetheless, has a clear line back to its festive antecedent, the Skandia Cinema. However, where earlier projects had deployed stylistic tropes to impart a suggestive presence, those works that consciously referred to the classical tradition after the hiatus of the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition drew little attention to their sources, nor demanded recognition. When Aino and Alvar Aalto cited Alberti's Rucellai Sacellum at the Jyväskylä Workers' Club it was suggestive, but scenic, whereas the bench from Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai which appears at the National Pensions Institute (1947–55) simply reiterates, and invites, the same use. Asplund's Woodland Crematorium (1935–40), begun five years after the Stockholm Exhibition, is abstract in form, but its conception as a fragment of the wider prospect of the cemetery, with its pivotal loggia facing the Grove of Remembrance on the great knoll, and its sequence of chapels and courts

lining the Way of the Cross, ensure its overall timbre echoes Asplund and Lewerentz's original 1915 competition drawings (**Figure 5: Erik Gunnar Asplund, Woodland Crematorium and Grove of Remembrance (1935–40), Stockholm Woodland Cemetery**).

Following the death of Asplund in 1940, and the 'withdrawal' of Lewerentz to his factory in Eskilstuna in the same year, there seemed little interest in the classical tradition in Scandinavia. Nonetheless, the post-war 'New Empiricism: Sweden's Latest Style' identified by J. M. Richards in *The Architectural Review* in June 1947 maintained the romantic sensibilities of the earlier classicism with overhanging eaves, appliqué surfaces, and vernacular effects, and a deliberate informality to the siting of buildings for picturesque effect. Later, interest in classicism was re-instigated in terms of ongoing debates about standardisation and form, as with Aulis Blomstedt's 'Canon 60' (1960), a proportional system based on Pythagoras' *tetractus* that shadowed of Le Corbusier's Modulor.³⁷

These were all adjustments to modernism, rather than a challenge. However, as early as 1927, in an essay in his journal *Kritisk Revy*, Poul Henningsen had made a critique of the Bauhaus in terms of its superficial formalism and *sachlich* failings.³⁸ In turn, it was the limitations of the modernist city, and loss of the "...immemorial Continental order..." of the recognisable city centre which led Alvar Aalto to reassert the *Zweckmässigkeit* of the traditional city and its communal spaces into the modern world.³⁹ 'The Heart of the City' had been the title of CIAM 8 in 1951, but had been stymied by the worry it might be overtly historicising. However, trusting in what his friend Ernesto Rogers called the *preesistenza ambientale* (pre-existing ambiances) of

the European city, Aalto was more frank, “We find the most original and strongest forms in Delos and Athens, the Roman Forum and nearly all Italian and most French towns”.⁴⁰ In an argument in which form becomes a kind of anamnesis, Rogers had articulated the necessity of a dialogue between past and present and the rooting of architecture in *continuatà*: “a dynamic carrying on, not a passive imitation [...] No work is truly modern which is not genuinely rooted in tradition, while no ancient work has a modern meaning which is not capable of somehow reflecting our modern temper”.⁴¹

Conveying type through affinity, rather than literal geometric reference, Aalto attempted to create the conditions for the life of “private commodity and public elegance” that he, Aino and Elissa Aalto experienced on their trips to the South. “...for Aalto the type [...] already exists as an historical and social reality. As such it is not reflected in his work as formally complete but as an underlying idea capable of almost infinite paraphrase and extension”.⁴² Projects such as the Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949–51) and Rautatalo (1951–55) aim for a conformity of sensations and sentiments that made history a felt present; a touching northern pathos of a distant, idealised southern Europe.

Lewerentz’s two late churches, St Mark’s, Björkhagen (1955–62) and St.Peter’s, Klippan (1963–66) are yet more determined. Structured by the need to distinguish the *Zweckmässigkeit* that would fulfil the needs of a church within a modern suburban setting, the buildings extend the consideration of ambience and fabrication of his earlier works. Where the extended threshold of the Chapel of the Resurrection is marked by its detached and rotated portico, and ninety-degree change of direction

towards the catafalque, illuminated by the high side window, at Klippan, a simple doorway leads directly into the sanctuary, but the spectator is arrested by the startling darkness and must wait for their eyes to adjust to the low light levels. As the Grove of Remembrance at the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery echoes archaic Bronze Age burial mounds, here the chthonic interior evokes the earliest churches in the catacombs. Slots in the roof admit light only where it is needed, and lead the spectator to key elements within the space and liturgy. Construction is plain, and brutally refined; rusted steel beams support shallow brick vaults, and imperfect but carefully chosen bricks are laid as aggregate in broad mortar beds. Iconography, so often an embarrassment in modern churches is integral; the central column that supports the vaults is both crucifix and Tree of Life, the font is a conch shell, and the altar a communion table.

Constructed as clearings within the socialised spaces of industrial life, these later works exhibit a faith in the sway of their milieu to persuade their users through mnemonic and suggestion rather than explicit reference. In so doing they perpetuate the confidence in ambiguity that characterised twentieth century Nordic classicism. Whether classicism can be as mutable as Nordic architects wished, and whether it is Rasmussen's or dal Co's assertion that rings true, is a matter of regard, or even belief. Through their attempt to create a classicism that was particular and universal, local and emancipated, scenic and subliminal, artistic and purposeful, architects either trivialised it, or they helped to restore it to modernity. That these pairings, as well as the environments that emerged from them, continue to haunt the architectural imagination, may be the movement's most enduring contribution.

NOTES & REFERENCES

¹ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959), 9.

² Francesco Dal Co, "Aalto e Alberti," *Casabella* 659 (September 1998): 72.

³ Simo Paavilainen states in the exhibition catalogue that it was catalysed by Kenneth Frampton and Stuart Wrede. Simo Paavilainen, "Preface" in *Nordisk Klassicism Nordic Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Simo Paavilainen (Helsinki: MFA, 1982), 7.

⁴ Simo Paavilainen, "Classicism of the 1920s and the classical tradition in Finland," in *Abacus Yearbook 1979*, ed. Igor Herler (Helsinki: Painofoorum, 1980), 99.

⁵ Helena Kåberg, "An Introduction to Gregor Paulsson's Better Things for Everyday Life" in *Modern Swedish design, Three Founding texts*, ed. Lucy Creagh, Helena Kåberg, and Barbara Miller Lane (New York: MOMA, 2008), 61.

⁶ Alvar Aalto, "Motifs from Times Past", in *Alvar Aalto, In his Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt (Keuruu: Otava, 1997), 34-5. Aalto was, later, a friend of Paulsson's, and knew of his work at this time; including *Vackrare vardagsvara* (Better Things for Everyday Life, 1919).

⁷ Henrik Andersson, "Modern Classicism in Norden" in *Nordisk Klassicism Nordic Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Simo Paavilainen (Helsinki: MFA, 1982), 27. Hakon Ahlberg, *Modern Swedish Architecture* (London: E. Benn, 1925), and F. R. Yerbury and Kay Fisker, *Modern Danish Architecture* (London: E. Benn, 1927).

⁸ Stuart Wrede, *The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 2-11.

⁹ Sylvia Lavin, *Quatremère de Quincy and the Invention of a Modern Language of Architecture*, (London: MIT Press, 1992), 176.

¹⁰ Richard Etlin, Auguste Choisy's Anatomy of Architecture, pp.151-181 in *Auguste Choisy (1841-1909): L'Architecture et l'art de bâtir* eds. Javier Girón and Santiago Huerta (Madrid: Instituto Juan de Herrera), 151-81 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings - a Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 240-2.

¹¹ Mari Hvattum, "A Complete and Universal Collection: Gottfried Semper and the Great Exhibition", in *Tracing Modernity*, eds. Christian Hermansen and Mari Hvattum (London: Routledge, 2004), 131.

¹² Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Applied Art* trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Bretschneider, 1985), 21.

¹³ Paul Frankl, *Principles of Architectural History, The Four Phases of Architectural Style 1420-1900* trans. James O'Gorman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 28, 142 & 184.

¹⁴ Helena Kåberg, "An Introduction to Gregor Paulsson's Better Things for Everyday Life" in Lucy Creagh, Helena Kåberg, and Barbara Miller Lane *Modern Swedish design, Three Founding texts*, MOMA NY 2008), 61

¹⁵ Planar and dynamic, tectonic and atectonic, elemental and unified, clear and obscure delineated and painterly. Daniel Adler, "Painterly Politics: Wölfflin, Formalism and German Academic Culture, 1885-1915," *Art History* 27 no.3 (June 2004).

¹⁶ Kåberg, "An Introduction to Gregor Paulsson's Better Things for Everyday Life," 61.

¹⁷ The Finnish architect Hilding Ekelund obtained a copy of *Hausbau und dergleichen* in 1916. Paavilainen, "Classicism of the 1920s and the classical tradition in Finland," 10. Lisbet Balslev Jørgensen, "Classicism and the Functional tradition in Denmark" in *Nordisk Klassicism Nordic Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Simo Paavilainen (Helsinki: MFA, 1982), 54.

¹⁸ The exhibition was followed by the influential 1918 Danish Decorative Art, Architecture and Craft Exhibition, and the 1920 Italian Exhibition.

¹⁹ Paavilainen, "Classicism of the 1920s and the classical tradition in Finland," 119. Elsi Borg's Taulumäki Church (1925-28) is another example of this tendency.

²⁰ Janne Ahlin, *Sigurd Lewerentz Architect* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 48.

²¹ Lisbet Balslev Jørgensen, "Paul Holsøe" in *Nordisk Klassicism Nordic Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Simo Paavilainen (Helsinki: MFA, 1982), 62.

²² Jere Maula (1992), "Architects and Urban Development in the 1960s and 1970s" in *The Work of Architects*, ed. Pekka Korvenmaa, (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 1992), 179.

²³ Riitta Nikula, *Erik Bryggman 1891-1955* (Helsinki, MFA, 1991), 18.

²⁴ Riitta Nikula, *Armas Lindgren Arkkitehti 1874-1929* (Helsinki, MFA, 1988), 149.

²⁵ Demetri Porphyrios, "Reversible faces: Danish and Swedish architecture 1905-1930" in *Lotus International*, no.16 (September 1977): 5-9.

²⁶ Petersen later wrote down his ideas for the Fåborg Museum in two lectures, "Textures" and "Contrasts" published in *Architekten* in 1919 and 1920, with a third, "Colours" published posthumously in 1923.

²⁷ Kay Fisker, "Tanskalaista rakennustaidetta (Danish Architecture)" in *Arkkitehti* no.10 (1927): 137. Quoted in Paavilainen, "Classicism of the 1920s and the classical tradition in Finland," 107.

²⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey 1786-88* trans. W.H. Auden & Elizabeth Meyer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 57, 199, 482. Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), 113. Nordic intellectuals and artists had already begun to conceive of, visit, and linger,

in during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, most notably Axel Munthe who created the gardens at San Michele on Capri from 1887 onwards.

²⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover, 2004), 28-9.

³⁰ "For Goethe there was no painting or sculpture between Classical antiquity and Mantegna". W H Auden and Elizabeth Mayer; Introduction to Goethe, *Italian Journey 1786-88*, 11.

³¹ Hilding Ekelund, "Italia la Bella" *Arkkitehti* no.2 (1923): 17-27; Alvar Aalto, "The Hilltop Town" (1924) in *Alvar Aalto, In his Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt, 49.

³² Luca Ortelli, "Heading South," in *Lotus 68*, ed. Pierluigi Nicolin (Milan: Electa, 1991), 31.

³³ J. H. von Goethe (1788), p.211.

³⁴ Stuart Wrede, "Landscape and Architecture, the Work of Erik Gunnar Asplund" in *Perspecta: the Yale University Journal* no.20 (1983), 199.

³⁵ Stanford Anderson quoted in Stuart Wrede, *The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund*, 22. Bernard Tschumi: *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 27-52.

³⁶ Alvar Aalto, "From Doorstep to Living Room" in *Alvar Aalto, In his Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt, 50-52.

³⁷ Juhani Pallasmaa, "Man, Measure and Proportion" in *The Art of Standardisation* eds. Kaarin Paatero and Riitta Nikula (Helsinki: MFA, 1992), 11.

³⁸ Poul Henningsen, "Tradition and Modernism" in *Nordic Architects Write* ed. Michael Asgaard Andersen (London: Routledge, 2008), 9-18.

³⁹ Alvar Aalto "The Decline of Public Architecture" 1953, in *Alvar Aalto, In his Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt, 210. Aalto particularly criticised the Swedish new town of Vällingby (1952 onwards), stressing that it was not enough to simply empirically assess and mollify industrialised life; "Can you save me from Vällingby, sir?" Alvar Aalto "In Place of an Article", Interview in *Arkkitehti 1-2/1958, ibid*, 264.

⁴⁰ Jaqueline Tyrwhitt, José Luis Sert, and Ernesto N. Rogers, *CIAM 8 The Heart of the City, towards the humanization of urban life*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), 73-80; Alvar Aalto speech in Seinäjoki, 1961, quoted in Jaakko Penttilä, *Seinäjoen kulttuuri- ja hallintokeskus Rakennushistoriallinen selvitys* trans. Harry Charrington (unpublished, Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2004), 29.

⁴¹ Ernesto Rogers, "Continuatà" in *Casabella-continuatà* no.199 (December 1953/ January 1954): 1.

⁴² Jakob Burckhardt, *The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance* (1869), ed. Peter Murray Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 143. Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 78.