

1943

In the 1940s Swedish architecture was watched closely by architects elsewhere in the world. Having remained neutral during the war, Sweden continued to build—although in reduced circumstances—at a time when architecture in most other European countries had come to a standstill. International functionalism, espoused by six of Sweden's leading architects in 1931 in their manifesto *Acceptera*, had belatedly overtaken the country in the early 1930s. By the end of the decade, however, a reaction had occurred in both domestic and public architecture against an overly rigid and formalistic interpretation of *funkis*. The new watchword was *spontanitet*, signifying a more naturalistic, informal way of working. The seminal work was Erik Gunnar Asplund's last major project before his death, Woodland Crematorium near Stockholm (1935–40). Also exemplary of the new manner were Asplund's summer house, Stennäs, in Lisön, Sorunda (1937); Sven Markelius's Swedish pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1939); and Sune Lindström's Town Hall and Hotel at Karlskoga (1940).

Nowhere did this architecture find as warm a reception as in England, where building and town planning would be as tightly controlled by the welfare state as in Sweden and where a temperamental affinity was felt with the Swedes' commonsensical, down-to-earth, empirical approach. In September 1943

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Architectural Review, having become the style's major exponent, devoted a special issue to "Swedish Peace in War," in which a selection of work appeared that had been designed and built since 1939. In their introductory note the editors declared, "Swedish housing is the most progressive in Europe in its social organization. The Cooperatives build better than anywhere else. Most buildings, especially the smaller accessory ones, are pleasant, lighthearted, almost playful, and yet strictly contemporary. A few larger public buildings have achieved a true monumentality in terms of the twentieth century. Detail is as generally sensitive as any of the eighteenth century. And even where, as sometimes occurs even in Sweden, the design of the buildings is not particularly distinguished, the way they are placed on the site and set off with rocks and conifers or silver birch—the way in fact they are landscaped—provides an object lesson for the English town planner and landscape architect." In June 1947 the *Review* coined the label "New Empiricism" to describe this style. Eric de Maré's article in the *Review* of January 1948, "The New Empiricism: The Antecedents and Origins of Sweden's Latest Style" followed. So pervasive was the influence of Swedish architecture over the next decade that the architect James Stirling was once led to comment in exasperation, "William Morris was a Swede."

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Sven Backström, one of the most talented members of the younger generation of Swedish architects, was invited to contribute the following article to the "Peace in War" issue. In the 1940s and 1950s Backström and his partner Leif Reinius designed a number of important housing estates. Their Gröndal scheme in Stockholm of 1944–45 was an arrangement of star-shaped low-rise blocks, offering a honeycomb of intimate and sheltered courtyards and making economical use of the available land. The architects reused this plan type in their Örebro housing (1948–50), disposing the blocks more naturalistically in the landscape. In a subsequent article on Swedish housing entitled "Now—and After" (published in *Swedish Housing of the Forties*, 1950), Backström noted the "complete change" in conception that had occurred since the 1930s from the indefiniteness of the open plan to spatial enclosure: "People are no longer disposed to make their bed on the balcony of a living room or to work in a study which is open to view from outside because of its wide expanse of glass."

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A Swede Looks at Sweden
Sven Backström

Although Sweden has so far managed to keep out of the war, it has, of course, affected us in various ways. Social and economic changes are taking place, and the isolation from which we suffer is very keenly felt. Imports have diminished, and a number of goods have disappeared from the market altogether. This is not least noticeable in the building trade. Iron girders, copper, asphalt, and much else are almost unobtainable. We are obliged to have recourse to home goods such as timber, bricks, cement, and iron for the reinforcement of concrete. The chief reason for their use, however, is that they do not require too much fuel for their production, since coal, being one of the items on our import list, is scarce.

The limitation of material has naturally had its effect on building. The war has also entailed limitations of another kind for building. The scarcity of material and labor has made it necessary to confine all civil building to a minimum. This means, for us, that factories and perhaps in the first place dwellings are what is chiefly built. There is much building of small unattached cottages, small flats, and to some slight extent also attached houses in rows and a few residential hotels.

Dwellings of the kind here referred to must of course be made cheap. By rationalization and standardizing we have tried to keep costs as low as possible. But the state and the municipalities have been obliged to grant loans at low interest so that flats may be let at reasonable prices. This has also made it possible to exercise a certain control. Thus, for example, the following minimum sizes of flats have of recent years become increasingly general.

Single room	18–24 square meters
One room and kitchen	33–39
Two rooms and kitchen	43–49
Three	58–65
Four	71–79
Five	87

As regards small cottages, these are as a rule made of wood on a concrete foundation. They contain two to four rooms and kitchen, in exceptional cases five rooms and kitchen. Dwellings for land workers also come under this category.

The flats are in three-story so-called "narrow houses" of brick. The depth of the house varies from 7 to 10 meters. The greater depth is from the fuel point of view more economical, so the house depth generally adopted today is 9 to 10 m. The type of flat varies from one room and kitchen to three rooms and kitchen, sometimes even four rooms and a kitchen.

Attached houses in rows are not common in this country. The Swede likes to live in his own cottage and to be able to walk all round it; and if this is not possible he generally prefers to take a flat in a big block. Of recent years, however, such prejudices have been slackening their grip, and a number of good designs have been achieved.

But apart from this development, which has been imposed on us by external factors, our architecture has a line of development to show, as it were, from within. In order to understand this rightly we must go back a matter of some ten years. It was in 1930 that Erik Gunnar Asplund created the Stockholm Exhibition at

Djurgårdsbrunnsviken. This meant for us that the new impulses from France and Germany were in a masterly way translated and developed in the Swedish milieu and adapted to the Swedish national temperament. This was the victorious debut of functionalism in Sweden. The new ideas swept over us like an avalanche and were adopted especially by the younger generation. A clean break was made with the past. There was a determination to clear away all false romanticism and all designing in historical styles. There was a feeling that one was building for new ideal human beings, who were quite different from the older generations. The modern mode of life was considered to be completely new, and consequently the new houses were to be absolutely different from the old ones. Everything connected with tradition was suspect. Architecture was to be objective. The functionalistic principle was the guiding star and everything was to be built in the material of "our time," glass, concrete, and iron, and the building had primarily to be right from the point of view of construction. In one word, the architect was to be an engineer.

The years passed, and one "objective" house after the other stood ready for use. It was then that people gradually began to discover that the "new objectivity" was not always so objective, and the houses did not always function so well as had been expected. The big windows, for example, were all too effective as heat conductors, and people found it difficult to accustom themselves to the heat or cold behind them. They also felt the lack of many of the aesthetic values and the little contributions to coziness that we human beings are so dependent on, and that our architectural and domestic tradition had nevertheless developed. It was difficult to settle down in the new houses because the "new" human beings were not so different from the older ones. It was found that one could not with impunity break out of the natural course of development. It was realized that one had to build for human beings as they are, and not as they ought to be. And for a true understanding of our fellows both the feeling and the knowledge of the artist are essential conditions. It is not sufficient for the architect to be an engineer; he must also be an artist.

Architecture began to seek its way on new roads. Architects began to develop an ear for the shifting values and phases of actual life. Man was once more to become the point of departure and the criterion. And it was discovered that man is a highly complicated phenomenon that is not to be satisfied or understood with the help of any new epoch-making formulae. And one result of this growing insight was a reaction against the all too schematic architecture of the 1930s. Today we have reached the point where all the elusive psychological factors have again begun to engage our attention. Man and his habits, reactions, and needs are the focus of interest as never before. One tries to understand them, and to adapt the building in such a way that it really serves. And there is the desire to enrich it and beautify it in a living way, so that it may be a source of joy. The striving is for the true proportion—the neither too much nor too little. But with the delight in experiment that is part of the Swedish temperament, architecture has already tended to a much too exaggerated differentiation and division. This tendency to lose oneself in petty details of various kinds leads one to forget the whole, and simplicity. People sometimes actually need instructions before they can live in the houses!

The goal must be to reach the essential, the simple, and the objective things in architecture. We want, certainly, to retain all the positive aspects of what the 1930s gave us. A house should of course function properly and be rational in its design. But at the same time we want to reintroduce the valuable and living elements in architecture

that existed before 1930, and we want to add to this our own personal contribution. To interpret such a program as a reaction and a return to something that is past and to pastiches is definitely to misunderstand the development of architecture in this country. Something that to a certain extent leads to a confusion of ideas is perhaps the forced return to building materials and methods of construction that the architecture of the thirties did not need to reckon with, and that for the younger generation of architects are perhaps unknown.

If in our democratic community architecture is allowed to progress without too great interference from without, it should be in a position to develop into a functionalism fulfilling the best and deepest requirements of the term.