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## RATIONAL INTUITION IN SWEDISH ARCHITECTURE – BETWEEN THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE REVOLUTION

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### RACJONALNA INTUICJA W SZWEDZKIEJ ARCHITEKTURZE – MIĘDZY AWANGARDA A REWOLUCJĄ

#### Abstract

In the 1920s, apart from two trends in European avant-garde architecture – purist and rationalist, there appeared the third one – functionalist, formulated in the environment of the Swedish avant-garde. All these trends were characterized by an industrial provenance, because they had been tightly bound up – “with the idea of an upturn in social existence, using industrial production”. However, the principles of Swedish functionalism and of the housing were different from those propagated at the international congresses of modern architecture. Moreover, the aesthetic advantages which arise from it were subjected to a social discussion. In this way the economic aspect of functionalist housing architecture was not an obstacle in the way of its intuitive creation – the frugality of means of arts expression and small range of colours became the synonym of progress and they achieved universal recognition in Sweden.

*Keywords: industrial art, Swedish functionalism, Swedish grace*

#### Streszczenie

W latach 20. XX stulecia oprócz dwóch trendów w europejskiej architekturze awangardowej, purystycznej i racjonalistycznej, pojawił się trzeci – funkcjonalistyczny, sformułowany w środowisku szwedzkiej awangardy. Wszystkie te trendy charakteryzowała industrialna proveniencja, bowiem były one ściśle związane „z ideą poprawy społecznego bytu przy wykorzystaniu produkcji przemysłowej”. Jednak pryncypia szwedzkiego funkcjonalizmu i takiego mieszkalnictwa były odmienne od tych propagowanych na międzynarodowych kongresach architektury nowoczesnej. Ponadto wynikające z niego walory estetyczne zostały poddane społecznej dyskusji. W ten sposób użyteczność funkcjonalistycznej architektury nie stała na przeszkodzie intuicyjnemu jej kreowaniu – oszczędność środków wyrazu plastycznego i niewielka gama barw stały się w Szwecji synonimem postępu i zyskały światowe uznanie.

*Słowa kluczowe: sztuka przemysłowa, szwedzki funkcjonalizm, “szwedzki wdzięk”*

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## 1. The economic and political background, as well the social development of Swedish architecture and art

The geographical location of Sweden and the prevailing climate in this country have meant that until the end of eighteenth century it was the most poorly urbanized part of Europe (similarly to other Swedish outskirts – Russian Empire, the Balkans and the western part of Iberian Peninsula). Finally, the Enlightenment had not arrived in Sweden, which in consequence caused a solidification of the feudal social relations. Poverty was a universal occurrence in this country, and because of lack of the institutionalized forms of social assistance – acute as well. A modest increase in the material culture of the Swedish population meant that the influences of other states had been intersecting incessantly in this country – *In Napoleonic Times, French culture was imitated; when Bismarck's Germany grew stronger – the Prussian and German models were accepted*<sup>1</sup>. The neo-antique trends then appearing in European art won the recognition of the petty bourgeois and wealthy people as well. Swedish supporters of neo-historicism in architecture, claimed that “*the beauty of creating is based on reason and on a distinct separation of art from wealth and lavishness*” [...] (G. af Sillén, K. F. Sundvall, F. Blom, 1840)<sup>2</sup>. This kind of treatment of a matter on the threshold of second industrial revolution, doubtless might seem incredible. Certainly, similar demands had been propagated by utopian socialists. However, in this case the slogans of social equality fell apart at the basis of a sense of national togetherness. The egalitarian architecture and art (as social medium).

That is why at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (after the brief rule of the eclecticism in Swedish architecture) the modern style in Sweden recognized that which displayed native tradition and aesthetic patterns taken from Austrian and German secession (F. Boberg, W. Klemming). It was a way to smooth out the distance of Swedish architecture (and art) from that in the most developed European countries. On the other hand, the Swedish historical urban layout showed the archetypical similarity with Austrian-German – *Housing estates Bagaregården and Kungsladugård showed the biggest and the most consistently prearranged undertakings, inspired by Camillo Sitte's conception. Little houses with stone storeys and two with wooden storeys* [so-called gubernatorial houses; Swe. *guvernörs*] *create a characteristic style for Göteborg*<sup>3</sup>. Both of these housing estates characterized the extensive building development. It alluded to the “romantic” Austrian-German old-town arrangements (arched streets of which the beginning is on high ground and gently going down to a centrally located market square). From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to its end, a large part of the housing resources in Swedish cities was made up of multistorey rental buildings (Swe. *hyreskasern*). This reached almost a third in Stockholm and Göteborg. Tenement blocks downtown usually had 5 overhead brick storeys, however these were located further from the city centre. The last two storeys in the tenement houses as a rule were built from wood. In the beginning water wasn't been supplied to them and sewage was channelled – water was drawn from street wells, lavatories were in wooden stands inside the districts of building development. *The first toilets were canalized in Stockholm in 1861, but the broad area of applications appeared after 1880. By the end of the*

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<sup>1</sup> T. Griffiths, *Skandynawia: wojna z trollami. Historia, kultura, artyści od czasów Napoleona do Stiega Larssona*, AMF Plus Group, Warszawa 2011, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> [...] »*det vackra uti byggnadskonsten är grundat på det förnuftiga och vida skilt ifrån det rika och prälande*« [8, p. 55].

<sup>3</sup> R. Wærn, *Architektura Szwecji*, Kultura Szwedzka, Instytut Szwedzki, 04/2002, p. 3.

80s bathrooms installed with a bath or a shower appeared as well, however, only in enormous and expensive apartments<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, slums appeared as well in the capital and additionally in the downtown area (so-called Siberia; Swe. *Sibirien*). They were built by incomers from rural areas, who were looking for employment in Stockholm. Nonetheless it was difficult to recognize contemporary housing conditions of the Swedish “rabble” as inhumane; for example in the capital, almost a fifth were housed in one chamber with a family (17%), twice as many took a room with a kitchenette (which acted as a living space) (42%), and a quarter of two chambers with a kitchen (26%) (1895). In Swedish conditions apartments which were occupied by more than 2 persons were recognized as overpopulated. On the other hand, homelessness was a widespread occurrence at the time. To moderate it, the local authorities undertook many campaigns of which the main purpose was quartering of the population in adapted manufacturing and public apartment buildings – factory halls, dormitories and even bedrooms in hospitals (Ill. 1).



Ill. 1. Tenement houses. Stockholm (the beginning of the XX century). Source: [11]

The architecture of tenement houses referred to Prussian patterns (rusticating elevations of the first storey, a cornice between storeys, the moulding concrete window surround, an attic protruding from the face of the wall, etc.). However, an architectural Swedish detail, similar to the Netherlands, for example, was “intuitively” simplified. The creators of architecture in these countries were motivated by the same frugality in the expression of art from protestant

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<sup>4</sup> H. Syrкус, *Spoleczne cele urbanizacji. Człowiek i środowisko*, PWN, Warszawa 1984, p. 563.

rationalism. There were more resemblances in architecture and in urban planning. The density of city development, in contrast with that carried out in Western European countries and in the United States was almost 40% lower – the out housing developments were not built. In Sweden, this kind of development had been recognized as inelastic and uneconomic, and, similarly to the Netherlands, it was increased by constructing the buildings inside a quarter. In consequence, rental charges in Swedish cities (and in the Netherlands) were the highest in Europe.

Nevertheless, the Swedish economy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was one of the most developing in the world. In the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the tempo of development was even stronger – *In March 1919* [prime minister] *Nils Edén* (...) *adopted a law on the eight-hour work system. In the 1920s and 30s Swedes improved the system of governance which from the outside seemed approximate to paradise. (...) Moreover, in 1928 the law banning strikes for a period stipulated in collective contracts was concluded by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish Employer's Association*<sup>5</sup>. In the beginning of the 1930s, the social democratic prime minister of the Swedish government found that “*we go ahead – on the strong basics of democracy – with the support of the majority (...) with closing down the divisions of social class. This way has made Sweden a good home for all Swedes*”<sup>6</sup>. A saying then appeared – “the house of the people” (Swe. *folkhemmet*). It pertained at that time to a sense of national bonding. In this regard, it was indispensably necessary to define an interesting means of aesthetic medium, which inhabitants could identify with. Simultaneously, they should associate with this country abroad.

## 2. The Swedish aesthetic and avant-garde architecture

Gaining power since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the process of Swedish industrialization in the 1890s brought changes in local art to the scientific view of the surrounding direction of the world.

In pursuit of generalisation, an aesthetic based on functionality and on efficient means of art expression, and concurrently tasteful and inexpensive, could be seen in Sweden many decades before the inception of The German Association of Craftsmen (Ger. *Deutscher Werkbund*) – *In 1846 the frigate Svenska Slöjdföreningen “Eugénie”, was sailing the world's oceans, fully laden with Swedish goodies (“forty two chests of Swedish handcrafted articles”), hoping it would be sold. (...) at the Vienna exhibition of 1873 Swedish fabrics made an amazing impression. (...) In 1897, at an international exhibition in Stockholm, the best Swedish merchandise of applied art. (...) Artist painter Carl Larsson, (...) showed [there] for the first time the watercolours, showing the interiors of his house in Sundborn. (...) Simple interiors with rustic furniture, in bright colours struck a chord and they are still recognized as the quintessence of Swedishness*<sup>7</sup>. All of these found a mirror in publications – *The Beauty of the House* (E. Keys, 1897) and *Beauty for Everyone* (1899). It was about its beauty and all-purpose practicality. *Swedes* [at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] *discovered a uniqueness in a lifespan of their own culture* (...) <sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> T. Griffiths, *Skandynawia: wojna...*, *op.cit.*, p. 166–167.

<sup>6</sup> J. Winiecki, *Ewolucja szwedzkiego modelu gospodarki, Ruch prawniczy, ekonomiczny i socjologiczny*, rok LXXIV, Zeszyt 4, Poznań 2012, ISSN: 0035-9629, p. 126–127.

<sup>7</sup> L. Jonson, *Rzemiosło artystyczne i wzornictwo przemysłowe*, *Kultura Szwedzka*, Instytut Szwedzki, 03/1999, p. 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> T. Griffiths, *Skandynawia: wojna...*, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

In 1916, [G. Paulsson, art historian] published a widely discussed book “*Den nya arkitekturen*” (*The New Architecture*)<sup>9</sup>. When taking up the position as curator of furnishing in Stockholm (Swe. *Hemutställningen*, 1917) he expressed the following, famous at the time – more beautiful equipment of daily use (Swe. *vackrare vardagsvara*). In the 1920s, Swedish appropriate art was associated with the elegance and beauty of unique items (...) <sup>10</sup>. At the international exhibition in Paris (1925) – *Simple forms, bright colours, functionality, wooden furniture and checkered or striped materials* – brought Swedes global fame and respect<sup>11</sup>. It is worth mentioning that in the majority they were industrial merchandises. They discovered a way to create Swedish architecture. In Sweden, its development had progressed in two ways – in public construction (and housing for the well-off) and private (folk). *Up to the First World War* [public Swedish architecture] *leads (...) the wave of national romanticism* [Swe. *nationalromantiken*]<sup>12</sup>. The Nordic aesthetic of the Middle Ages had been connected with the renaissance of the Vasa era and Carolingian baroque (III. 2).



III. 2. “Swedish national romanticism” – the building of the Trygg Insurance Institution (E. Lallerstadt, 1907–1910). Stockholm. Source: [10]

In the latter part of First World War, in architecture under the influence of German aesthetic patterns, particularly Danish, tendencies appeared that were opposed to eclecticism – the new classicism, also called “Swedish grace” (G. Asplund, I. G. Clason, F. G. A. Dahl, F. W. Scholander, I. Tengbom, H. Zettervall). This pursuit meant a breaking down of the straightforwardness of

<sup>9</sup> T. Barucki, *Architektura Szwecji. Mała encyklopedia architektury*, Arkady, Warszawa 1989, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> L. Jonson, *Rzemiosło artystyczne...*, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> T. Barucki, *Architektura Szwecji...*, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

architectural composition and its symmetry and maintaining a minimum of ornamentation. This last was noticed not only in detached houses, but also in urban and suburban residences.

The development of “Swedish grace” in architecture was referenced to all the surnames of its main exponent (I. Tengbom, early phase and G. Asplund, late phase). The first became visible especially in monumental architecture. This was based on historical styles and modern techniques and building technology. Whereas new classicism (G. Asplund) is characterized by meagre adornment and display of the constructional elements of the building (Swe. “proto-functionalism”). Both architectural styles showed a similarity to Netherlands brick constructionism (H. P. Berlage, 1903).

The forerunner of coming changes in Swedish architecture and appropriable art was an article published by one of the avant-garde creators in the year-book of the Swedish Association of Craft (Swe. *Svenska Slöjdföreningens*, U. Åhrén, 1925). He expressed the conviction that – *the world is movement, work, changes, and the ensuing obligation to boost forms cannot be obtained using a past formal and static aesthetic*<sup>13</sup>. In his opinion it was already the right time to make Swedish architecture and art “more functional”.

The avant-garde functionalist trends in Swedish architecture gained many supporters among the youngest generations of designers. The modernization trends, which were making progress in Western Europe and in the United States, had an undoubted impact on it. However, in Swedish conditions, the most important role was played in this case by architects realizing their social life and native value. This last exceeded foreign achievements. That is why in the zenith of growth the Modern Movement in architecture (La Sarraz – Athens) the representative of Swedish architectural environments manifested their creative independence. Additionally – *In their recourse from the main trend of modernism, from main reason of discord for the opinions of Le Corbusier, functionalism had found an asylum in Scandinavia*<sup>14</sup>. Only Swedish functionalism had kept its own qualities.

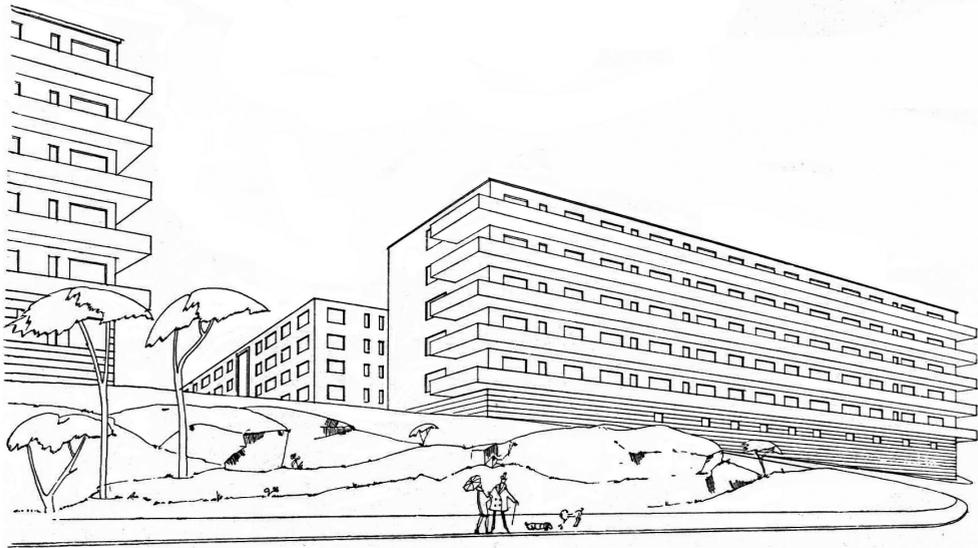
### 3. Swedish functionalism and housing

The main reason hampering all modernizations processes in Swedish housing, skipping the cultural conditions, was its base on the compact building quarters. The apartments located there in the majority cases did not meet hygienic and sanitary requirements. All had fallen down at the beginning of looking for solutions concerning the functional and spatial conformations of apartments that could express the evolving model of the Swedish household (two adult persons employed out of home). Firstly, it sought to improve the structure of the apartment – flats with one room and a kitchenette, with a toilet localized in a backyard, were gradually being replaced with two-room flats with a kitchen and a bathroom. They wanted to achieve this by conferring tax reliefs on social subjects, for example The Building and Saving Society (Swe. *Hyresgästernas sparkasse – och byggnadsförening – HSB*). Members of this society, based on a low entrance fee and a monthly fee, earned the right to possess an apartment (Ill. 3).

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<sup>13</sup> [...] *att vi alltmera uppfatta världen såsom rörelse, arbete, förändring, och att en dynamisk formkänsla gör sig gällande, som icke kan tillfredsställas av den gamla statiskt-formala estetiken* [8, p. 87–88].

<sup>14</sup> J. Melvin, *Architektura. Kierunki, mistrzowie, arcydziela*, Elipsa Publicat S. A., Poznań, p. 109.



Ill. 3. Housing HSB (S. Wallander, 1930). Stockholm. Source: [8]

The search for an apartment for several families that was optimal in terms of functional and spatial plans launched in Sweden at the beginning of the 1920s. However, the dynamics of work in this area ensued at the moment of reinforcement of the cooperative movement in housing and the consequence of these actions, whose goal was to determine the minimal inhabitancy conditions for an individual. Solutions in house plans in multi-family houses appeared (D. Dahl, J. A. Stark, S. Wallander), and even two storey apartments (K. von Schmalensee). In the formation of the building plans the conviction of creating a hygienic and cosy space dominated. In order to provide this first, attention was paid to the necessity of improving insulation in the rooms where people stayed (to increase the space of glazing).

A housing project in detached houses and multi-family building were shown at an international exhibition of industrial art, handicrafts and crafts in Stockholm (Swe. *Stockholmsutställningen av konstindustri konsthantverk och hemslöjd*, 1930). They met with huge interest from visitors.

#### **4. Swedish functionalism in comparison to Western European ideas of new architecture**

By the end of the 1920s, Swedish art and architecture had become (...) *the subject of general interest in the art groups of Europe*<sup>15</sup>. Whereas Stockholm had become one of the world centres in “advanced modern culture”.

<sup>15</sup> S. Sienicki, *Wystawa Sztokholmska 1930 r.*, Przegląd Techniczny. Tygodnik poświęcony sprawom techniki i przemysłu, 8 października 1930 r., Nr 40, Tom LXIX, Warszawa 1930, p. 741.

The Stockholm exhibition was an enormous success for Swedish architecture and art. A group of avant-garde architects and art historians focused on the organizing committee of this exhibition saw the opportunity to use this popularity in the social area. In fact, from the moment when the economic crisis came, the flexibility and universalism of functionalist housing and its high aesthetic qualities gained new qualities.

The ideational premises of Swedish functionalism had been formulated three years after the declaration with La Sarraz in the manifest “Acceptera” (G. Asplund, W. Gahn, S. Markelius, G. Paulsson, E. Sundahl and U. Åhrén, 1931). *In our time the crucial issue has become: quantity and quality, mass and individuality. It is obligatory, to try and solve the issue about the art of constructing buildings and industrial art*<sup>16</sup> (Ill. 4).



Ill. 4. Signatories of manifest “Acceptera” (from the left – S. Markelius, U. Åhrén, G. Asplund, E. Sundahl, W. Gahn, G. Paulsson). Source: [1]

The theses propounded in this manifesto were not identical to the declaration in the Modern Movement in architecture, but they were also not in contradiction with it. In the intention of the authors of “Acceptera”, it became the point of departure in a social debate about modern art in architecture and housing – *It happens that a desire for beauty is unstated by pragmatism; that is why the purism is, in the interim, a typical and right reaction to the epoch of decorative pressures. There is no way to restrain people’s desires to adorn a space, but sometimes it should be cleared*<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> G. Asplund, W. Gahn, S. Markelius, G. Paulsson, E. Sundahl, U. Åhrén, *Acceptera*, Bokförlagsaktiebolaget Tiden, Stockholm 1931, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Måhända har skönhetsinnet emellanåt överröstats av förnuftskravet, men övergångstidens puritanska stränghet är ett typiskt och sunt reaktionsfenomen efter en period av dekorativ överlastning. Den*

The functionalist Swedish architecture was different from that actually propagated by the community, focused around the international congresses of modern architecture, particularly in a reference to the Five Points of the New Architecture (La Corbusier, 1927). It was difficult to find in it the “open” (“free”) plan, because the functional and spatial plan of a storey was an image of the construction plan. The façade of Swedish buildings was an image of its cubature, and the shape of windows (vertical, not horizontal) and their sizes provided hygienic light by natural light in rooms. Composition in this case was a derivative matter. What was in common between functionalistic architecture and that created in the New Movement was the use of appropriable flat roofs (“a garden on top of the roof”). However, in this first case all the utilitarian aspects were examined. In Swedish multi-flat buildings, rooms located on the top storey were used as laundry rooms, or child care points (Swe. *lekstuga*). This last demanded an open space for recreation, and this role was played by the terrace on the top of the building. The characteristic element in the Swedish avant-garde housing architecture of the time was a balcony. It was prominent and not infrequently ceaselessly extended along the whole elevation. The partition between apartments was created by a low translucent balustrade.

## 5. Summary

In the 1920s, in addition to the two main trends in European avant-garde architecture – purist (Le Corbusier and others) and rationalist (W. Gropius, H. Meyer, J. J. J. Oud, L. Mies van der Rohe and others) – a third one appeared – functionalist (G. Asplund, S. Markelius, U. Åhrén and others). All these trends were characterized by an industrial provenance and all of them made an impression in architectural circles. However, the first two had met with social ostracism. Swedish functionalism turned out to be an exception. The architectural avant-garde in this country pertained to Nordic tradition and its art of constructing buildings. Swedish architectural solutions were always extraordinary on the aesthetic and functional level, as well as spatial. At the same time Swedish artists, in contrast to architects focused around the ideas of congresses of modern architecture, based their actions on a didactic discourse with society. In this way they achieved its trust. For that reason, when, at the turn of the 1950s, many European cities had been rebuilt, in the old town in Stockholm, the annihilation of the historical part of housing in the city area took place – in accordance with the “innovative spirit of American corporatism” (Stockholm-Norrmalm, S. Markelius, P. Hedqvist). Also made was a conception of satellite blocks around the capital (Farsta, Järva, Skärholmen, Vällingby and more). This is exactly why the pragmatism had become one of the synonyms of aesthetic.

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*männliga prydnaadsdriften låter sig icke hämmas, men den behöver då och då saneras*, G. Näsström, *Svensk Funktionalism*, Malmö 1930, p. 153.

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