

It was the urban expansion of the 1940's and 1950's that triggered an incomparable church building activity in a Swedish society on its way towards secularization. New suburban neighbourhood units were connected to the Stockholm city core by a far-reaching subway system. New congregations, created partly through the division of older existing ones, needed new congregational spaces. The architect Bengt Lindroos, in the early part of his career at the time, describes this task put forward by society as an architectural refuge. The concurrent increased demand for housing, propelled by the immigration to Stockholm from the rest of the country, was eventually formalized into a political mandate - one million dwellings in ten years. This so called Million Program mutilated the flexible design process, with its mutual and beneficial relationship of architect and client. This important relationship was replaced by the presence of an unbiased project leader, bypassing the dominant role of the architect and ignoring both parts interests in values besides cost-effectiveness. But in the realm of the suburban churches, the project leader became a mute figure, unable to formulate the needs of the church, in terms of values in which form interconnected with intangible qualities. The space of the suburban churches of the late 50's became safeguarded for a continuous architectural exploration.

The three most notable churches of this period were built during the same years, from 1958 to 1960, each one influencing the others' realizations. St Markus Church in Björkhagen by Sigurd Lewerentz as well as the Söderled's Church by Bengt Lindroos and Hans Borgström, in Hökarängen, were both results of the same splitting congregation and proceeded by parallel competitions in 1955. St Tomas Church in Vällingby was on the other hand a direct commission to Peter Celsing the same year as the competitions.

The church of Sweden -Evangelical Lutheran, and a state church at the time- encountered in the late 1940's serious crises, being criticized from the cultural establishment as fundamentally unreliable, and loosing its previously prominent position in relation to the Swedish people, which had been strengthened

during the war times. In the midst of the 1950's the foundation of the religious freedom law, allowed people to leave the state church without having to affiliate with any other religious belief. The Swedish church lost members and expressed the need for new meeting grounds, new bridges, in order to address a modernizing society. Internal debates of new transformations of the ceremony and the ceremonial space, as a high or low church, e.g. a revival of liturgical traditional symbols and processions or a focus on the individual member and his possibilities and responsibilities within the congregation, surface in the embodiment of the churches of a new society. The complicated nature of being both Christian and modern was something that these architects were certainly aware of, and they embraced and investigated it with their own interpretations of these new needed spaces.

It might be a stretch to include the actual expansion of the subway system into the formation of these ceremonial spaces. But nonetheless the subway with its public facilities became a new parallel design task, engaging the same group of architects, in particular Peter Celsing and Sigurd Lewerentz. Although the subway expansion of the 1940's and 1950's was primarily a surface running system, located in the open meadowlands of the Stockholm periphery, it did at times penetrate the rocks and hills and needed underground spaces for its public functions. These underground structures, which took into consideration wide span constructions, lighting, and an understanding of materiality, together with a combination of public character and a decided monumentality, could arguable be said to share ground with, or at least be considered profane siblings of the new suburban churches.

Concrete, steel detailing and robust pine-wood composed the vocabulary of the subway. These same materials found their way into the churches. Ronchamp was of course an omnipresent companion, representing concrete's transformation of the gothic religious space and light. One striking example of this influence is Carl Nyrén's Västerort's Church. The small Methodist chapel is a beautifully modelled concrete space, dramatically lit from above, and interestingly enough, enhancing the lighting with odd mundane light fixtures, as if they were picked right from the nearby subway station. It was rather the brick-construction

that became a common feature and the means for the architect to explore the space in terms of its devotionally. How did brick find its way so evidently into the religious spaces? The Swedish national romanticism embraced brick and its potential for creating a craftsmanship expression, referring to Medieval forgotten building knowledge, differing strikingly from, for example, the Finnish stone architecture of the same era. The architects of the 1940's and the 1950's returned to brick, after the abstract light surfaces of the 1920's and the 1930's, to reassure a new humanism in a war frightened society. Architects such as Backström and Reinius, important architects of the Folkhem-bygget (the Swedish welfare society) as the architects of the ABC-towns Vällingby and Farsta, used the brick for embroidering their structures, softening space and bringing architecture physically close to its inhabitants. But in the suburban sacred spaces we meet a new understanding and investigation of the material. The dark brick set a new sentiment and was filled with associations to religious spaces preceding the Lutheran tradition, speaking to an early Christian understanding, and to ceremonial spaces of a Middle East ground. Witnesses from the period tell us how the architects found ways to reach an almost textile quality of the brick walls and surfaces. Lewerentz' love for the bricklayers is well documented, directing them to never cut a brick, rather using the mortar as if it was a structural material in itself. During the construction of St Thomas, Celsing preferred the bricklayer apprentices to the masters, to achieve a soft imperfectness of the walls. Lindroos and Borgström seem to have been more pragmatic in their methodology, ordering 15% of the bricks to be turned with the back-side facing the church interior to reach a "raw and lively appearance". The dark brick with its plastic explorations turned the parameters of the suburban churches into ancient walls and remains.

The preferred brick was not a local one, but a hard-burnt brick from Helsingborg Ängtegelbruk, re-discovered by Celsing and used by the other two as well, shifting in nuances from violet to black. With the brick, darkness entered into the previous light Lutheran space. The idea of light in relation to Nordic architecture is often discussed as the presence of a certain exotic light -like the white summer nights or even of the aurora borealis, which is seldom

seen south of the 67<sup>th</sup> latitude and unknown to most of the population. But it is rather the absence of light, or the prolongation of darkness slowly turning into light, that should be a starting point for an understanding of a specific northern temperament. The lit candle in the winter morning, and the dusk walks, when the winter working day is over, are private as well as public everyday experiences of darkness, providing a comforting intimacy and a sensation of affinity. This quality of darkness was possible to transfer to a new understanding of spiritual community. In a Nordic Christian understanding, Christ was born on the darkest day in the darkest hour. Replacing the Lutheran bright and rational spaces with a space where light could enter into darkness, didn't only relate the church spaces to the traditional sparsely lit farmhouse and its stables, it also brought the image of the newborn child closer to the worshiper. The infant represented the beginning and origin of the faith, as well as something vulnerable and egalitarian, thereby meeting the need for a new representation of the Swedish church itself.

A similar transformation took place in the organisation of space and in the movement of the assembly. The three churches present individual solutions for the procession of the worshiper as well as for how the church could relate to the nearby commercial centres, sharing common architectural elements. The introduction of the courtyard, the adjacent church hall and a re-programmed church porch balanced the negotiation between the sacred and the secular surroundings as well as between the ceremonial and the communal. The courtyard became a way to organize the growing number of facilities belonging to the church activity, while at the same time creating a semi-protected space for a gradual transmittance from the suburban environment to the concentrated ambience of the interior. Lindroos and Borgström had the unfortunate task of sheltering their spaces from the disturbance of the highway which passed by, using the courtyard as a framed sloping landscape filter which leads to the dark processional serenity of the prolonged porch. Lewerentz' courtyard is less transformative and is accompanied by an extended church porch of less serenity - a "vivid street" furnished with café tables for post-mass activities. A touching story tells how Lewerentz created the courtyard in a way to preserve the track that the school children used on their way

to school, which suggests that the courtyard can be read as a passage rather than as a closed court space. The fact that Lewerentz provides the church with two entrances - one for the mass, opening directly from the outside landscape to the church interior, like the entrance of a medieval countryside church, and one for everyday use, connecting the courtyard and the porch with the ceremonial space only through the church hall - demonstrates the contemporary desire for simultaneously seeing the church as a space for everyday activity as well as a direct and dramatic high religious experience. Celsing gives the most direct duality of response to the relationship of the worship space to the secularity of the modern context, by cutting a minimal and exact hole in the closed entrance façade, as if opening a direct passage to the interior. But behind the austere outer wall the transversal porch dissolves into two possible directions - the courtyard lit corridor leading to the congregation facilities, and the main entrance, set off-axis, so as to be doubly protected from the outside by this twisted movement.

The more interiorly placed courtyards, as in the cases of St Tomas and the Söderled's Church, were often referred to as meditation gardens. But their entrances are subdued and their purpose is rather to provide spaces with a sideways clear or diffused light. This light differs radically from the more traditional vertical "heavenly" clerestory light and relates to the northern winter light penetrating spaces with their long shadows. The sideways light hits the walls and the floors, rather than the ceilings, modelling surfaces and emphasizing their materiality. In all three churches the floor itself has a prominent roll in which light places focus on the materiality - a tactile, worn surface of seemingly ancient origin. With tiles and bricks, or a combination of both, patterns of textile softness is achieved which reminds us of the carpeted non-Christian sacred spaces and, as in the Markus Church where the shifts in floor patterns suggests an almost a ruin-like quality of long-since-forgotten traces. Lewerentz re-introduced the genuflection, an obsolete ritual, by providing sheepskin covered low benches as a means to actually approach the floor physically, if not sitting down directly as in the habit of the mosque. Changes in floor heights for the liturgical space were also eliminated as far as was possible, which brought the priest down towards the congregation - to the same floor and level of worship. The reinterpretation

of the floor and its tactile qualities became a way to present the church as an ancient mystical as well as a modern and equal space.

Lewerentz' personal references were expressly Persian religious spaces. As an architect, Celsing was deeply engaged in the transformation of the Swedish state church, often referring to the pristine quality of medieval churches. Surely his own travels in the Middle East, directly after the Second World War, were an important source for his architectural works. The Söderled's church has a rather early Christian connotation with its stark and high basilica appearance. Worth mentioning in order to give us a historical context is the work of the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf, an important figure in Swedish 20th century literature. Ekelöf's most mature poetry is considered to be the so-called Diwan trilogy, published in 1965-67. This was partly written in the spirit of stream of consciousness during a visit to Istanbul and originated from the undercurrents of Sufi poetry that had been Ekelöf's interests since the early 20's. Ekelöf had as well a great interest in the Swedish painter Ivan Augeli, who had been travelling in North Africa in the late 1890's and eventually converted to Sufism. The paintings of Augeli are often referred to as revolutionary in how they succeed in bringing great monumentality to an intimate format. The art historian Viveca Wessel, pointing out the relationship between Ekelöf and Augeli in many contexts, quotes Ekelöf's writings about the work of the painter "Never simple enough. Never deep enough. And yet a union of monumentality and humbleness. Where wisdom is merely to place each thing in its right place and in its correct light".

Notions are often absorbed, by different people for different reasons, but expressed at the same moment in time. Without pointing to a common source of inspiration, the late 50's and early 60's unfolded a space of mystical depth for a few sensitive persons, in the midst of a society rapidly adapting to modernization and secularization. To put each thing in its right place and light seems like a key phrase to these works as well as a desire to give profundity in time and space - a new centre - to a moment of great complexity and confusion.

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