

A Swedish Critique of Welfare State Architecture

- 1 Arkitekturupproret, "About," accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.arkitekturupproret.se/om-au/about-english/>.
- 2 *Miljonprogrammet* (The Million Program) was a large public housing program implemented in Sweden between 1965 and 1974 to boost the availability of affordable housing. The goal was to construct one million new dwellings in ten years which was achieved.
- 3 Gösta Alfvén, *Ohälsosam arkitektur: En annan sida av funktionalismen* [Unhealthy architecture: Another side of functionalism] (Stockholm: Balkong förlag, 2016).
- 4 Per I. Gedin, *När Sverige blev modernt. Gregor Paulsson, Vackrare vardagsvara, funktionalismen och Stockholms-utställningen* [When Sweden became modern: Gregor Paulsson, Better things for everyday life, and the Stockholm Exhibition] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2018), 10.
- 5 Eva Eriksson, "Myten om Sveriges rasistiska arkitektur," *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 19, 2019.

Writing in 2024, it's been more than fifty years since a thorough historical assessment of the modern architecture associated with the welfare state commenced. But still today, long after it was called into question and much of its welfare framework was dissolved, modern architecture stirs up sentiments in contemporary architecture discourse. The phenomenon "Arkitekturupproret" (the architecture uprising) dates ten years back to 2014 when it started as a Facebook group, counting among its members students from the KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm. With the explicit aim to fight modern (and neo-modern) architecture and the "uglification"¹ of cities, and to do so in the name of the public interest, the movement has spread to neighboring Nordic countries and the Baltic Sea region. The group focuses almost exclusively on aesthetic and visual qualities, targeting, with the vocabulary of a raging press, predominately selected examples of building stock from the late 1960s and 1970s, and heralding a short moment of architecture and planning from the 1920s. By considerable media coverage and polemic polls (rating, for instance, the "most beautiful" to the "ugliest" building), the movement has raised public awareness around architecture in general and modern architecture in particular.

A similar tendency to critique modern architecture has lately also become evident in a number of popular science publications, which have been disseminated widely by established publishing. In 2016, medical doctor Gösta Alfvén wrote about how the design and building practice of modern architecture had created "unhealthy" environments. The physiognomy of the right angle was critiqued as "anti-human" in a narrative that linked Le Corbusier with extensive postwar demolitions of historic Swedish town centers and the Million Program,² while promoting a historic, varied townscape.³ A couple of years later, similar trajectories surface in Per I. Gedin's award-winning *När Sverige blev modernt* (When Sweden became modern), a biography of Gregor Paulsson (on whom more below). Perhaps more than a biographic portrait, it describes Swedish modern architecture as an amalgamation of scientific racism, and, again, the influence of Le Corbusier that led to demolitions, new urban schemes, and the Million Program.⁴

Without wanting to debate Alfvén's and Gedin's contributions in detail—the topic of this article brings us elsewhere—the point I wish to make here is that theirs is a criticism that equals a specific architectural design with a specific ideology. However, it tends to stop at the level of ideas and does not take actual implementation into consideration; nor does it consider the other actors and the politics—the *society*—that fostered the built environment of the postwar years. Architectural historian Eva Eriksson rightfully mentions the eerie feeling of an unnamed scapegoat in-between the lines of Gedin's book, referring to Social Democracy or even the welfare state as a whole.⁵

- 6 Thomas Paulsson, *Det stora sveket* [The great betrayal], radio broadcast, Swedish national radio P1, May 28, 1972. Excerpts from the show were published in *Arkitekttidningen* 2 (1972): 7 and commented on by Göran Ekblad. See Göran Ekblad, "Vilka är ansvariga för 'det stora sveket'?" [Who is responsible for "the great betrayal?"], *Arkitekttidningen* 2 (1972): 8.
- 7 Original phrases in Swedish: "den folktomma skräckens betongvärld," "sveket," and "skönhetstro," Paulsson, *Det stora sveket*.
- 8 Researchers such as Kristina Grange, Johan Rådberg, Ulf Sandström, and Lisbeth Söderqvist are among those who have analyzed responsibilities in Swedish postwar architecture more recently. Despite some variability, their work supports a reading that is similar to Paulsson's, arguing that many Swedish architects followed the prevailing conditions without voicing notable objections or experiencing conflicts. This is also confirmed by various writings in which architects are heard, such as Claes Caldenby's book about the offices A4 and ELLT or Ragnar Uppman's "professional memoirs." See Claes Caldenby, ed., *Arkitektur i förändring: A4, ELLT, Coordinator 1954–91* [Architecture in transition: A4, ELLT, Coordinator 1954–91] (Stockholm: Svensk byggtjänst, 2000); Ragnar Uppman, *I arkitektens öga: minnes- och debattbok* [In the eye of the architect: a book of memories and debate] (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2006).

The disputes of the present-day debate are not new. In putting the responsibility on the architect, questioning the entire profession's *raison d'être*, and presenting a genealogy of modernism which immediately links politically radical ideas from the early twentieth century with a negative assessment of the building stock of the 1960s, they echo arguments from both the 1930s, and the late 1960s and early 1970s, which were equally harsh and irreconcilable. This text will revisit a politically invested debate from the 1970s, to shed some light on the arguments surrounding the physical environment of the postwar welfare state, and the commencement of the historicization of modern architecture in Sweden.

1972: THE GREAT BETRAYAL

Det stora sveket (The great betrayal) was the title of a radio show broadcast on Swedish national radio on May 28, 1972.⁶ The show would debate Swedish architects' actions in virulent terms, putting a finger on one of the most burning points of discussion in the contemporary debate: the architects' responsibility for developments in Swedish architecture and urban design since the 1930s, and results that were considered undesirable, especially in postwar housing.

The radio program was produced by the art historian Thomas Paulsson, who criticized what he described as a denial of the city and the street, broadly speaking, and the environmental shortcomings of this neglect in postwar community building. Paulsson spoke of "the horror of the deserted concrete world" and put the play, the children, and the inhabitants in focus. And this is where "the betrayal" comes in: according to Paulsson, the architects, and their profession at large, had betrayed the actual clients, the people who were to live with and live in postwar Swedish architecture. And, furthermore, not only were the citizens let down, but architecture as a field of knowledge was betrayed. Paulsson pointed to shortcomings in architects' education and described how visions were lacking and architecture's "aesthetic credo" had been sidelined.⁷ According to Paulsson, architects seemed willing to carry out whatever the client had ordered without reflection or objection, regardless of who it happened to be.⁸ In this agitated tone, parallels were drawn all the way to an Albert Speerian technocracy and the Third Reich.

There are various reasons for examining *Det stora sveket* in the context of welfare state architecture. Firstly, the radio program illustrates clearly the rejection, established in the early 1970s, of the large-scale housing and community-building projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps less obvious, but nonetheless significant, is Paulsson's way of explicitly connecting the problems of contemporary architecture to architectural modernism or "functionalism," which is the preferred term in Swedish, established in the 1930s. In other words, it links the formative years of the welfare state with its mature present-day (early 1970s) condition. Evidently, Paulsson's overall analysis of the course of events in architecture was negative. Moreover, Paulsson's reasoning resonates with the overtly political nature of Swedish modern architecture: he argues that the political radicalism of the 1930s was watered-down, resulting in postwar environments that had very little to do with the social

- 9 Hans Pettersson [also known as Hans Hayden], entry in Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Presentation.aspx?id=8074&forceOrdinarySite=true>; see also the doctoral dissertation: Hans Pettersson, "Gregor Paulsson och den konsthistoriska tolkningens problem" [Gregor Paulsson and the problem of interpretation in art history] (PhD diss., Uppsala University; B. Östlings bokförlag, Symposium: Eslöv, 1997).
- 10 Gunnar Asplund et al., *acceptera* (Stockholm: Tiden 1931).
- 11 Gregor Paulsson, "Den glömda staden: svensk stadsplanering under 1900-talets början med särskild hänsyn till Stockholm: idéhistoria, teori och praktik" [The ignored city: Swedish town planning at the beginning of the twentieth century particularly regarding Stockholm: history of ideas, theory and practice] (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1959).
- 12 Paulsson reported on architecture on national radio and produced several themed shows during the 1970s. See, for example, *Det var på 30-talet* [That was in the '30s], broadcast on Swedish national radio P1, January 23 and 29, 1972, or the series *Den nya staden* (The new city), which was broadcast in nine episodes between 1979 and 1980.
- 13 See, for example, Thomas Paulsson and Gregor Paulsson, *Ny stad: människans miljö* [New city: people's environments] (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell/Geber, 1958); Gregor Paulsson, *Vägar till konsten: från målarkonst till stadsmiljö* [Roads to art: from painting to urban environment], radio broadcast on P1, January 23, 1972; and Gregor Paulsson's autobiography: Gregor Paulsson, *Upplevt* [Experienced] (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1974).

incentives of modern architecture and left citizens to tackle a very different situation regarding their environments, where other interests were at stake. In the midst of this crossfire stood the architect, who, by abandoning the social ideas of modern architecture, as well as the aesthetic creed of the architect, had let people down and *betrayed* them.

ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS BEFORE THE WELFARE STATE

Thomas Paulsson was the son of Gregor Paulsson, one of the leading figures and ideologues of modern Swedish design and architecture. An art historian and critic, Gregor was director of Svenska Slöjdföreningen (the Swedish Society of Craft and Design, today Svensk Form) during the interwar period. The organization was strongly influenced by the Deutsche Werkbund's work to improve the quality of industrially produced utility items. Alongside its active effort to enhance standards, Slöjdföreningen acted to establish collaborations between artists and manufacturers as well as educate the public. The social and radical dimensions of the Werkbund's program strongly engaged Paulsson, and he developed the notion of *social aesthetics*—how to make art, design, and architecture available to the largest number of people—in response. According to Hans Pettersson, for Gregor Paulsson, this was ultimately a political question: industry, trade, housing, and social conditions were to be refined through political work and the enhancement of society.⁹ Paulsson's and Slöjdföreningen's activities embraced multiple aspects of the domestic environment, including architecture, and their influence on the housing production of the welfare state would become significant. In 1930, Gregor Paulsson acted as Commissioner General of the Stockholm Exhibition, the event that is considered to have launched modern architecture more widely in Sweden and the Nordic countries, and the following year, he contributed as one of six authors to *acceptera*, the closest we get to a manifesto for modern architecture in Sweden.¹⁰

As a prolific writer and critic of architecture and urbanism, Gregor's son Thomas would follow in his father's footsteps. At the time of the radio show in 1972, his engagement, especially in planning issues, was already long-established. His 1959 doctoral dissertation, "Den glömda staden" (The ignored city), which deals with Swedish urban planning in the early 1900s, marks his position as a hardline interrogator of Swedish functionalism as a social project.¹¹ While taking a particular interest in urban form and its effect on inhabitants and citizens in the 1960s and 1970s, he targeted the ongoing demolitions of the historical building stock.¹² Father and son also collaborated in various publications and radio programs on several occasions.¹³

Paulsson's argument is characterized by an explicit social reading that directly connects his claims with objections that were introduced from the political left as early as the 1930s. The act of making such a linkage between the modern avant-garde and contemporary architecture was not unique among critics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and authors debated whether there was a gap, or disruption, in theory and practice between modernism then and

- 14 *Kulturfront* (published 1935–38) gathered several renowned culturally progressive thinkers, artists, writers, and architects. Architects Sven Markelius and Gun Sjödin, who worked at Markelius' office at the time, were both members of the board. Gun Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma" [The dilemma of functionalism], *Kulturfront* (1936).
- 15 Gun Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," *Ord & Bild*, no. 1–2 (1972).
- 16 Peter Sundborg, ed., *Svensk arkitekturkritik under hundra år* [100 years of Swedish architectural criticism] (Stockholm: Arkus, 1993).
- 17 Original quote in Swedish: "Den tillkom som ett led i de kapitalistiska rationaliseringssträvandena, men den bygger på principer som konsekvent tillämpade kan genomföras först i ett samhälle organiserat enligt behovsprincipen – i ett *socialistiskt* samhälle." Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," in *Svensk arkitekturkritik under hundra år*, ed. Peter Sundborg (Stockholm: Arkus, 1993), 119.
- 18 Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," 117.
- 19 Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," 117–18.

now. Similar inquiries also became prevalent in the historical and scholarly accounts that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

To illustrate this critical political perspective, which proposed deviating from the ideals of the 1930s already at that time, architect Gun Sjödin's 1936 article "Funktionalismens dilemma" (The dilemma of functionalism) can serve as a case in point. The article was originally published in *Kulturfront*, the journal of a socialist and anti-fascist association of the same name.¹⁴ In 1972, it was reprinted in a facsimile version in *Ord & Bild*, one of Sweden's oldest cultural journals that operated as an influential platform for the intellectual left in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵ However, Sjödin's article was published one more time, in 1993, in an anthology on twentieth-century Swedish architectural criticism, which points to its relevancy not only for the contemporary discourse but for historiography more generally.¹⁶ Alongside other Swedish contemporaneous accounts such as the keystone publication *acceptera*, Sjödin's article illustrates the politically charged positions at the time of Swedish modernism's implementation. Sjödin's critique centered on what she described as modern architecture's "political dilemma"—namely, the discrepancy between its social aims and conditions of production; functionalism, she writes,

was created as part of the capitalist rationalization efforts, but it is based on principles that consistently applied can be implemented first in a society organized according to the principle of need—in a *socialist* society.¹⁷

The blurring of the line between modern architecture on the one hand and industrialism and metropolitan culture on the other, she argued, veiled the fact that modern architecture was linked to a particular trajectory within capitalism: namely that of *rationalization*, a global process dependent on colonial exploitation. The profit-driven escalation to simplify and cheapen turns "necessity into virtue," thus creating modern architecture, Sjödin claimed. Entrepreneurs, soon realizing the commercial value of the new "style," called everything between heaven and earth, fresh and fabulous "funkis," disregarding whether it was rational or not, and the public soon followed suit. In the same ardent tone, she explained how resistance to modern architecture was to a large extent a *chimera*, as an alleged scapegoat called "the traditionalist" was made up only to be revealed.¹⁸

But what about the architects who were accused of betrayal forty years later? Gun Sjödin argued that the socially progressive young architects of her own generation were also caught up, knowingly or unknowingly, in this capitalist architectural machinery. According to Sjödin, the new design principles attracted many architects who sought more personal designs than the classicist schemes allowed—these architects' work was often characterized by sheer artistry. At the same time, others so passionately adopted rationalization that they reduced everything to fundamental facts. Housing and urban planning became particular targets in such problem solving.¹⁹ For this reason, rationalization was made into a guiding star on the wrong merits, Sjödin argued. Soon, a whole generation could witness how their progressive housing ideas remained on paper since:

Architect Gun Sjödin's 1936 article "Funktionalismens dilemma" (The dilemma of functionalism), initially published in the anti-fascist magazine *Kulturfront*, was given renewed attention in the politically charged debate on modern architecture in the 1970s.



Viewing platform for the press at the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition. The history of this exhibition that launched modern architecture in Sweden was primarily written in the 1960s and figured frequently in debates on the condition of postwar architecture.



- 20 Original quote in Swedish: "hyran är en funktion inte av byggnadskostnaden utan av avkastningsprocenten; kort sagt, att bostadsfrågan, som de betraktar som ett tekniskt problem och sökt lösa inom det kapitalistiska samhällets ram och med kapitalistiska metoder, i själva verket är ett socialt problem, en fråga om fördelningen." Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," 118.
- 21 Sjödin, "Funktionalismens dilemma," 119.
- 22 Socialdemokraterna formed a minority government between 1932 and 1936. From 1936, they were in power until 1976, in periods in coalition with center-conservative Bondeförbundet (Farmer's union). During the Second World War, a government of national unity was led by social democratic prime minister Per Albin Hansson.
- 23 Original quote in Swedish: "att dess problem är våra, att dess debatt är vår." Editorial, *Arkitekten* no. 8 (1969): 217.
- 24 Original quote in Swedish: "En passning mellan eliter." Kurt Bergengren, "Arkitekterna – hur dribblar dom?" [The architects: how do they dribble (the ball)?], *Aftonbladet*, August 8, 1972.

The rent is an equation based not on building costs but on revenue; in other words, the housing question that they [the architects] consider a technical problem and sought to solve within the framework of capitalist society and with capitalist methods is actually a social problem, and a question of distribution.²⁰

Writing in the 1930s, this political contradiction in modern architecture was obviously a tangible and dangerous one that threatened to overthrow capitalist society's stability. Sjödin pointed to the developments in early 1930s Germany, where the advancement of modernism was halted under Nazi rule. She did not detail the German situation further but argued that the solution for democratic nations like Sweden had become a more subtle political neutralizing of modern architecture. She observed how the task of the architect-designer was becoming increasingly apolitical, how modern architecture was not practiced fully, and how architects retreated to formalism. So-called social aspects were added to all sorts of tasks only to prevent the young architects from engaging with modern architecture's most burning issue: housing.²¹ Sjödin's conclusion is deeply pessimistic, stating that as modernism was undermined in this way, the movement's capitalist foundations were increasingly difficult to reveal, ultimately leading to the impossibility of modern architecture as a project.

FUNCTIONALISM THEN AND NOW

At the time of Sjödin's article in 1936, Swedish society was still to introduce the social democratic welfare state—Socialdemokraterna (the Social Democratic Party) came to power in 1932²²—and her account still reflects the politically charged nature of the late 1920s, of which the fierce debating of the Stockholm Exhibition was part. However, the political complexities of modern architecture were no less acute in the lead-up to the 1970s. As Sweden's forceful responses to the housing crises (including increased mass production and standardization) started to materialize in the mid-1960s, attention again turned to architecture's underlying ideology and politics. The professional press paid the situation a great deal of attention, frequently drawing parallels to the 1930s: "Their problems are ours, their debate is ours," stated a 1969 editorial in *Arkitekten*, the architects' union's magazine.²³ These political aspects were not least brought up in a critical revisiting of the Stockholm Exhibition and reminders that support for the exhibition and its modern architecture mainly came from the conservative press. The architects' societal loyalties were thus scrutinized, and previous generations' bourgeois values were recapitulated in a tone that could be both agitated and rhetorical: one article said it was probably the architects of the 1930s who had passed the ball to the production system of big business: "a pass between elites."²⁴

Architecture was also highly present in the daily press throughout the 1960s and 1970s, where critique was voiced not only by specialized architecture critics but also by way of evaluations of architecture made by diverse cultural actors. With the establishment of the Swedish Museum of Architecture in 1962, a whole new public institution for the dissemination of architecture was

- 25 Thordis Arrhenius and Christina Pech, "The Swedish Museum of Architecture 1962–1978: The Making of a National Museum of Architecture," *OASE* 99 (2017), 46–55.
- 26 The thesis was originally published by The Swedish Museum of Architecture in a simple edition in 1970. In 1972, it was published by Norstedts publishers with a new title: *Funktionalistiskt genombrott: radikal miljö och miljödebatt i Sverige 1925–1931*. The debate surrounding the Stockholm Exhibition was also analyzed in Råberg's 1964 licentiate thesis. See Per G. Råberg, *Funktionalistiskt genombrott: en analys av den svenska funktionalismens program 1925–1931* (Stockholm: The Swedish Museum of Architecture, 1970); Per G. Råberg, *Funktionalistiskt genombrott: radikal miljö och miljödebatt i Sverige 1925–1931* [The breakthrough of functionalism: Radical environment and the environmental debate in Sweden 1925–1931] (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1972); Per G. Råberg, "Stockholmsutställningen 1930: debatt och kritik" [The Stockholm Exhibition of 1930: Debate and critique] (licentiate thesis, Stockholm University, 1964).
- 27 Original phrase in Swedish: "intuitiv visuellt upptäckt." Råberg, *Funktionalistiskt genombrott*, 204.
- 28 Råberg, *Funktionalistiskt genombrott*, 304–6.
- 29 Råberg, *Funktionalistiskt genombrott*, 11.

installed. Founded by the Swedish Association of Architects (SAR), the museum soon became a beacon of debate, especially casting a critical eye on urban development and the substantive demolitions of the historic building stock. Importantly, this contemporary critique went hand-in-hand with the historical analysis of the early stages of modern architecture in Sweden, making the critique a historiographical project as well.²⁵

Among the more scholarly accounts, art historian Per G. Råberg's research stands out as one of the first and arguably still most thorough investigations of Swedish modern architecture. Råberg's doctoral thesis and publication *Funktionalistiskt genombrott: en analys av den svenska funktionalismens program 1925–1931* (Functionalism breakthrough: An analysis of Swedish functionalism's program 1925–1931), examines the stakeholders, events, writings, and buildings leading up to the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930.²⁶ Råberg's analysis of the explicit intentions of Swedish architects and the actual results of their work, like Gun Sjödin's, demonstrated discrepancies between theory and practice in Swedish modern architecture. Contrary to what was claimed by the main protagonists themselves, the movement, he argued, primarily resulted in the launch of a new aesthetic. The social and rational motives that the actors strongly emphasized were, according to Råberg's reading, merely a rhetorical packaging to carry out an "intuitive visual discovery."²⁷ Råberg argues that despite an official rejection, the architects, in fact, retained much of a traditional artistic subjectivism. The resulting modern architecture was more than the consequence of a particular ideological conviction—rather, it was prompted by architects' adaptation to a new market dictated by technology and industry.²⁸ Again, this echoes Sjödin's concern from the 1930s: what was packaged as a social project of architecture with the users' interests in mind turned into a project of form and aesthetics that could not, or was never intended to, meet the users' needs.

In relation to our current concerns with historicizing welfare state architecture, Råberg's observation that the discrepancy between theory and practice had also cast a shadow over the prevailing historical studies is of particular interest. He describes available accounts of functionalism's breakthrough as "puzzling," arguing that the authors of those accounts neither reflected on nor abandoned a formalistic analytical approach. Rather, functionalism was treated as a style despite its pronounced "rationalist theories" and "anti-aesthetic programs."²⁹ In this respect, Råberg's research would point to a political lacuna in the historiography of modern Swedish architecture, exposing how the rhetorics of the architect-pioneers were taken for granted and not sufficiently analyzed. Indeed, this may have contributed to suppressing the politically heated debate of the 1930s later on, in a history that voices like Sjödin's can help to unpack and nuance.

Per G. Råberg's research would strongly influence ways of describing and analyzing functionalism in the 1970s. The thesis was first published by the Swedish Museum of Architecture and became an essential theoretical starting point for the museum's major critical review of Swedish functionalism, i.e., the traveling exhibition *Aufbruch und Krise des Funktionalismus: Bauen und Wohnen in Schweden 1930–80* (The breakthrough and crisis of functionalism: Swedish housing 1930–80), which premiered in Munich in 1976. By

- 30 See Christina Pech, "Arkitekturmuseets utställning Funktionalismens genombrott och kris: ett bidrag till historieskrivningen om svensk 1900-talsarkitektur" [The Swedish Museum of Architecture's exhibition "Functionalism's breakthrough and crisis: A contribution to the historiography of Swedish architecture in the 1900s], in *Forskning i centrum* [Research in the center], ed. Monica Sand (Stockholm: Arkitekturmuseet, 2014), 33–64.
- 31 The debate included the following articles: Torsten Ekbohm, Motroten (column), *Dagens Nyheter*, June 5, 1972; Hans-Erland Heineman, "Är sveket arkitekternas?" [Is it the architects who committed the betrayal?], *Svenska Dagbladet*, June 8, 1972; Björn Linn, "Arkitekten kan inte lösa politiska problem" [The architect cannot solve political problems], *Dagens Nyheter*, June 21, 1972; Torsten Ekbohm, "Skräckhusen – är det politikerna som har ritat dem?" [The horror houses: Is it the politicians who designed them?], *Dagens Nyheter*, June 27, 1972; Bengt O. H. Johansson, "Arkitektur – eller kosmetika?" [Architecture – or makeup?], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 4, 1972; Torbjörn Lundgren, "Hyvla inte bort naturen!" [Don't chisel away nature!], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 7, 1972; Hakon Ahlberg, "Arkitekturkris i den västliga välfärdsvärlden?" [Architectural crisis in the western world of welfare], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 11, 1972; Björn Linn, "Vem är den svenske arkitekten?" [Who is the Swedish architect?], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 14, 1972; Torsten Ekbohm, "Arkitektens estetiska ansvar" [The aesthetic responsibility of the architect], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 20, 1972; Sune Lindström, "Visst kan arkitekten påverka!" [Of course architects can exert influence!], *Dagens Nyheter*, July 26, 1972; Kurt Bergengren, "Arkitekterna – hur dribblar dom?".
- 32 Original phrase in Swedish: "Etablerade arkitekternas svek." Ekbohm, Motroten column.
- 33 Original phrase in Swedish: "förbluffande fräscht och modernt." Ekbohm, Motroten column.
- 34 Ekbohm, "Arkitektens estetiska ansvar."
- 35 Ekbohm, "Arkitektens estetiska ansvar."
- 36 Heineman, "Är sveket arkitekternas?"
- 37 Original phrase in Swedish: "Kvasivetenskaplig vokabulär." Hans-Erland Heineman, "Arkitekt i föränderligt samhälle," *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 23, 1972.

1980—the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the Stockholm Exhibition—the exhibition reached Stockholm, and the revised catalog remains a notable scholarly contribution to the history of Swedish twentieth-century housing. Neither book nor show is presented in more detail here, but they form an essential backdrop to the simultaneous architectural debate in the national media.³⁰

A BETRAYAL OF WHOM? DEBATING ARCHITECTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

The above account has attempted to lay the foundation for a detailed discussion of the architectural discourse around 1972, which centered on the merits of Swedish modern architecture, its authors, and their responsibilities. Thomas Paulsson's radio program was followed by a debate in *Dagens Nyheter*, one of the major daily nationwide newspapers which would bring the issues to an even wider public and last well beyond the summer of 1972.³¹ While contributors to the debate initially went on to address professional vocations and competencies, including education and artistic ability, it was the author and critic Torsten Ekbohm who turned up the temperature by advancing the most combative opinions. This included Ekbohm's call for a new Stockholm Exhibition as a kind of protest exhibition against the "betrayal of established architects."³² He drew attention to the merits of early Swedish functionalism and highlighted the buildings along the street Askrikegatan in Gärdet district in Stockholm as exemplary and still "astonishingly fresh and modern."³³ According to Ekbohm, the first generation of functionalists were too far-sighted and radical to have their ideas realized in their time. The original ideological aspects had been disregarded or even misinterpreted and misused by later generations.³⁴

While Ekbohm argued along the lines of Paulsson (and Sjödin), he would go back further than the Stockholm Exhibition to a time and place even more politically and aesthetically radical, proposing a connection to the Russian constructivism of the 1920s.³⁵ To find a way out of modern architecture's dilemma, he sought nourishment in an allegedly less ambiguous, more politically radical period. But was this the time for a reboot of functionalism, forty years later, to realize the visions that had not been realized? There, opinions differed sharply.

Architect and KTH professor Hans-Erland Heineman picked up on the idea of betrayal. Heineman—a longstanding critic at the other major national newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, who had been consistent in his emphasis of artistry as the architect's particular area of expertise—acquitted the architects by saying that the fault was not theirs but rather that of a society that didn't value creativity enough. He was explicit about the devastating social and cultural effects that the modernist architect's comprehensive role in planning had had on the environment.³⁶ However, the architect must also come clean about this professional vocation, and he later argued that it was time not to hide aesthetic arguments behind a "quasi-scientific vocabulary."³⁷

Architect and urban historian Björn Linn relieved the architects, too, of responsibility, rather tracing the problem to an outdated view of the architect's role. In a historical exposé of changing conditions

Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Aufbruch und Krise des Funktionalismus*, 1976. This traveling exhibition, which premiered in Munich, was curated by the Swedish Museum of Architecture and offered a scholarly and critical account of developments in Swedish housing from the 1930s through the 1970s.

Highlights of 1930s housing were mentioned as exemplary in the 1970s polemical debate. Journalist Torsten Ekbom described Askrikegatan in Stockholm as astonishingly fresh and modern.



- 38 The article is an elaboration of a column in *Arkitekttidningen*. See Björn Linn, "Har arkitektyrket någon framtid?", *Arkitekttidningen* 21/22 (1971): 15; Linn, "Arkitekten kan inte lösa politiska problem."
- 39 The "horror houses" mainly referred to the 1960s government blocks around Tegelbacken, but the School of Architecture's new building in Östermalm (opened 1970) was also included. Ekbom, "Skräckhusen – är det politikerna som har ritat dem?"
- 40 Original phrase in Swedish: "estetiska frågor, eller utopiska, politiskt aningslösa arkitektdrömmar." Johansson, "Arkitektur – eller kosmetika?"
- 41 Original terms in Swedish: "skenlösningar" and "planeringsdogmer." Johansson, "Arkitektur – eller kosmetika?"
- 42 Johansson, "Arkitektur – eller kosmetika?"
- 43 Linn, "Arkitekten kan inte lösa politiska problem"; Ahlberg, "Arkitekturkris i den västliga välfärdsvärlden?"; Johansson, "Arkitektur – eller kosmetika?"
- 44 In a survey focusing on the assessment of 1960s multi-family dwellings in architectural press and architectural competitions, Kristian Berg has argued that articles and presentations focused on a wide range of societal and technical questions, and rarely on design matters or aesthetics. The content of Berg's study precedes the present text chronologically and the results form an interesting backdrop for understanding the change of criticism in the 1970s. Kristian Berg, "Ideal i arkitekturen" [Ideals in Architecture], in *Rekordåren – en epok i svenskt bostadsbyggande* [The Record Years—an epoch of Swedish housing], ed. Thomas Hall (Karlskrona: Boverket, 1999), 59–94.
- 45 Ahlberg, "Arkitekturkris i den västliga välfärdsvärlden?"

during the 1900s, Linn painted a picture of a development whereby the freedom that architects enjoyed around 1930 had been increasingly curtailed. In 1972, he argued, architects were bound by different types of governance—legislation, production technology, and political goals—and since the problems were political, not aesthetic, the architect couldn't solve them.³⁸ In a reply, Torsten Ekbom objected to the split between politics and form, claiming that the architects could not abdicate responsibility. After all, it was not the politicians who had designed the "horror houses" in Stockholm, Ekbom pointed out.³⁹ After this round, the director of the Swedish Museum of Architecture Bengt O. H. Johansson sought to clarify the museum's position. The museum's critical activities were motivated by the fact that the power structure of society conditioned architecture, Johansson argued, explaining that this was why the museum devoted little space to "aesthetic issues, or utopian, politically naïve architects' dreams."⁴⁰ For the museum, it was important to criticize, among other things, housing policy and what Johansson described as commercial urban devastation. It also included fighting some "sham solutions" to the societal problems that the 1930s generation of architects had turned into "planning dogmas."⁴¹ Johansson asked if Ekbom hadn't noticed that the modernist architects had actually achieved what they dreamed of and referred explicitly to the results in Per G. Råberg's thesis (i.e., that the 1930s generation were more interested in aesthetic exercises than reforming society with architecture).⁴² The position of the Museum of Architecture was thus clear on the matter: functionalism was a dead-end, and for the future, there was hardly anything to be gained from the 1930s.

Ekbom's first article thus suffered a backlash in the following exchange, and the deliberately pointed claims opened an abyss in different interpretations of functionalism and its relationship to the architecture of the postwar welfare state. To what extent and in what way architects could be held responsible varied. But Ekbom's way of reconnecting with the 1930s to retrieve new visions met with little understanding at all. The sum total of several writers' analysis was rather that one would not search for alternatives in the 1930s if one disliked today's architecture. What had happened in Swedish architecture followed a logical but undesirable chain of development.⁴³

After the first exchanges described above, which still addressed the overall (moral and political) question of social betrayal and the architect's power over the results of welfare state housing, the debate became more technical and retreated toward aesthetic concerns.⁴⁴ Key questions revolved around the architect's area of competence and *raison d'être* as an artist. It was debated whether architects had been given too little or too much power and if the lack of artistically adequate architectural projects had roots in structural, educational, or aesthetic shortcomings. Entries by architects Hakon Ahlberg and Sune Lindström, respectively, should be mentioned as they reveal a generational shift. Both were practicing modernist architects of the first generation (albeit with different careers) and contributed to the 1972 debate by acknowledging the huge responsibility resting on the architect while maintaining a more positive evaluation of the outcome of the modern architecture implemented in Sweden in the 1930s.⁴⁵ Ahlberg built a bridge to the 1930s when pointing out that Ekbom's objections to contemporary architecture

- 46 Original phrase in Swedish: "Bristen på estetisk sensibilitet." Ahlberg, "Arkitekturkris i den västliga välfärdsvärlden?" Ahlberg is not the most obvious representative of Swedish functionalist architecture. See, for example, Eva Eriksson's epilogue in *Den moderna staden tar form* which nuances the relationship between Swedish functionalism and classicism. Eva Eriksson, *Den moderna staden tar form: Arkitektur och debatt 1910–35* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2001), 492.
- 47 Several writers followed with great interest the course of events in Swedish architecture, see, for example, the themed issue of *Arkitektur* 1 (1966), or P. C. Jersild's novel *Babels hus* and Lars Gustafsson's novel series *Sprickorna i muren*, both of which cast a critical eye over architecture as an expression for the contemporary development of society. Stig Claesson, "För arkitekter att läsa" [For architects to read], *Arkitektur* 8 (1965); P. C. Jersild, *Babels hus* (Stockholm: Bonnier 1978); and Lars Gustafsson, *Sprickorna i muren* (Stockholm: Norstedts 1984).
- 48 Emelie Eriksson's doctoral dissertation "Stockholm med modernismen i centrum. Cityomdaningen ur ett aktörs- och ett mediaperspektiv" [Stockholm with modernism in the center: The transformation of the city center from an actor and media perspective] (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2004) provides valuable insight into attitudes toward urban redevelopment in Stockholm by studying articles published in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Arkitektur* between 1955 and 1973. According to Eriksson, the number of articles increase between 1967 and 1972 but decrease sharply after that. Initially, the attitudes toward urban rejuvenation are generally positive but toward the mid-1960s a shift is noted and the negative criticism culminates in 1969.
- 49 Christina Pech, "Arkitektur och motstånd: om sökandet efter alternativ i svensk arkitektur under 1970-talet" (PhD diss., KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm; Makadam: Stockholm and Gothenburg 2011).

echoed the criticism once directed at 1930s modern avant-gardism in their underlining of a "lack of aesthetic sensibility."⁴⁶

Beginning with Paulsson's description of a "betrayal," the 1972 debates in different media highlight how architecture, society, politics, rationalism, and aesthetics, or their more viable synonyms, entered an entangled relationship where positions are difficult to single out. The excerpts raised here show that opinions differed on the architects' responsibilities and the underlying reasons for what was described as a failure to respond to the actual clients' needs by Paulsson. But regardless of where debaters put themselves in terms of political, ideological, educational, or aesthetic factors, the overall lesson that can be drawn out of the debate is a shared sense of dissatisfaction with contemporary architecture and a sense of disciplinary crisis as we entered the 1970s.

POLITICS BECOME AESTHETICS

Over a strikingly short period after the Second World War, Sweden's rapid urbanization fundamentally changed living and housing patterns. The physical transformation of society engaged people far beyond the circles of architects and planners. Architecture and urban matters were more present in the public debate in the 1960s than they are today; debaters of culture, writers, and artists voiced their concerns in both national newspapers and the specialized press. Above all, the suburbs were put center stage, and the criticism was harsh—well-known authors described the spread of an experience of emptiness and loneliness in the idyll of *folkhemmet* (the people's home) and pointed out the shortcomings of the suburbs' architectural design.⁴⁷ And as the largest scale of postwar housing initiatives started manifesting in the late 1960s, some Million Program suburbs were met with irreconcilable disapproval. This critique was paralleled by a commitment to the cultural and historical dimensions of urban development, a position present in the extensive criticism that met the ongoing demolitions of historical buildings in town centers.⁴⁸

In all, the discontent with contemporary housing and urban planning extended to modern architecture in general but grew progressively more complex and contradictory in the next decade. By the end of the 1970s, the pendulum had swung so that modern architecture is sometimes still singled out as a deterrent example but, intriguingly, more often hailed as a role model and solution for future practice.⁴⁹ The present brief excerpt from the discourse, which departed from a radio show in 1972, stops short at the threshold of these changes while trying to introduce two tendencies that came to affect the evaluation of modern welfare architecture: its historicization and aestheticization. The historicization was triggered through the critique of the contemporary to better understand the course of events. At that time this was still very much about analyzing what went wrong—and who did wrong, however, slowly but surely, the scrutiny and mapping of stakeholders, projects, policies, and discourses accumulated certain conclusions about modern architecture and whether it was possible or desirable to do modernism right, to make it a fully-fledged tool, also politically, for a welfare society. The relationships to earlier phases of modernism were looked at carefully and intriguingly several of

the arguments and the political analyses that surfaced in the 1970s recuperated critical standpoints from the 1930s, here exemplified by the reprinted version of architect Gun Sjödin's article from 1936.

According to the Swedish debaters in the early years of the 1970s, modern architecture, and the architects' capacities to implement a socially equitable design appeared to have reached a dead-end. Political practice, be it market-oriented capitalism or a social democratic welfare state, was incompatible with the utopian impetus of modern architecture and the architects' role therein. So the question of betrayal surfaced: a betrayal of citizens, which followed from a betrayal of political ideas (be it insufficient political consciousness, lack of accurate tools, or lack of political willingness) that would negatively affect the architect's task to provide citizens with high-quality buildings, in this case, specifically housing.

Returning to 2024, we witness how, in public debates and popular history, aesthetics has become politics in the perception of modern architecture. Design that is considered undesirable is equaled with an undesirable political development. Such linkage was apparent already in the Stockholm Exhibition quarrels in the 1930s and echoed, as we have seen, in the 1970s' analysis of modern architecture's unfolding. Today's debate repeats the mistake of the 1970s of omitting the immediate postwar years in the historical analysis of causes and effects in modern housing production between 1930 and the late 1960s. And the debate doesn't seem to have learned the lesson from the 1970s: that the problem of modern architecture rested in the fact that the utopian and revolutionary rhetoric of the 1930s was taken for granted and insufficiently analyzed in the light of its actual political implications. Architecture's actual effects and real possibilities in reforming society were never exposed. What was left was an anomaly, a socialistic creed that relied on a capitalistic system, which solidified in a certain design aesthetic. The present text has pointed to an awareness and an interest in these political conditions of architecture that were soon lost.

Today, this connection between aesthetics and politics is complete: in Swedish architectural debate, the appearance of modern architecture is oftentimes equated with totalitarian political ambitions without any in-depth analysis of the political system that facilitated the aesthetics. And the idea of betrayal has returned full force when the architects are, more or less, alone held responsible for the shortcomings of Swedish architecture during the welfare state era. But the idea of betrayal seldom goes beyond the individuals, and never asks whether the architects ever wanted to or believed in the possibility of changing society through form in the first place. In relation to welfare architecture, much still remains to be done when it comes to examining the infrastructures of thought and the vectors of power that govern them.

