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Swedish architecture published and discussed in Germany: Reception of Swedish architecture by German traditionalism before 1930

Introduction and background

In Swedish architecture, international engagements are primarily found in the traditional proximity shared with Nordic countries, as well as with the German cultural sphere. Noteworthy encounters with the wider European cultural scene occurred, mainly through large-scale art and craft exhibitions, where subsequent reviews and presentations of each participating country's exhibits and pavilion architecture were often featured in specialized journals. Notwithstanding, the dissemination of knowledge was also facilitated through journals and books, which played a pivotal role in exchanging ideas.¹

Background - The German architecture and its influence in Sweden

German architecture, architects and architectural publications have a given and established place in the presentation of Swedish classicist architecture: books such as Paul Mebes' *Um 1800*, Heinrich Tessenow's *Hausbau und dergleichen, Kulturarbeiten* by Paul Schultze-Naumburg or even Heinrich Tessenow's *Handwerk und Kleinstadt* are included in the narrative of the architectural ideas that formed the basis for Swedish architecture in the 1920s. German ideas influencing architecture in Sweden are thus well-researched. However, how Swedish architecture has been perceived in other countries has not been looked at.

German architecture in the beginning of the 20th century

The above-mentioned books, which have had an influence on Swedish architecture, originated in an architectural movement that was later called "Reformarchitektur"² or "Traditionalismus"³ and that made up the majority of architecture in Germany during the decade of the Weimar Republic.⁴ It was a very heterogeneous movement, best described by a framework of ideas to which individual architects responded in very individual ways.⁵ The central point of departure, however, was a rejection of the architecture of the late 19th century and a desire for change, which was a common sentiment at the time. The criticism was directed at the style of architecture with its abundance of decoration. The desire for change looked for models in the (near) past, in the early 19th century, before the process of 'decay', as turn-of-the-century architecture was seen, had begun. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were a number of reform groups in most areas of life in Germany, including the Deutscher Werkbund. The ideas that existed in architecture at this time are usually represented by a more fixed grouping, the Bund für Heimatschutz, and a looser school of thought labelled after the period from which they sought inspiration, the period around 1800. "Around 1800" is best represented by Mebes' book of the same name. The heritage movement was concerned with the preservation of buildings, with particular attention to local materials and traditions. In the case of "Around 1800", it was Mebes' book, in which, as has often been mentioned, Walter Curt Behrendt, in the preface to the second edition, advocated the characteristics of classicism.

The architecture that made up this “reform architecture” was diverse, the reform architects cannot be organised into a single stylistic direction. Moreover, it existed all the time in a more diverse environment in which the more avant-garde movements were also present. However, this does not necessarily mean that there were strict boundaries between them; contacts and cooperation were common.

Reception of Swedish architecture in Germany

In the second half of the 1920s, Swedish architecture gained recognition in Germany. It was presented in various German journals of building and architecture, a touring exhibition, and the book *Moderne schwedische Architektur*. This highlights the connections between the Swedish and German architecture-events during the period from the German side.

Architectural publications in Germany

The extensive and multifaceted German architectural scene was reflected in an equally extensive array of architectural journals. The journals reviewed here can be counted among the representatives of the so-called reform architecture – that had similar ideas and concepts to the Swedish architects of the beginning of the 20th century. Journals representing these were journals that were oriented to the traditionalist architecture. Presentations of Swedish architecture were found in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, *Deutsche Bauhütte* and *Deutsche Bauzeitung*.

Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst (WMB)

Most central in the German reception of Swedish architecture is the publishing house Wasmuth. The journal *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst (WMB)*, had since its foundation in 1914 had the ambition to present international architecture. The magazine’s international profile was reinforced in 1924, when Werner Hegemann, who was seen as an advocate of traditional architecture, became editor-in-chief.⁶ Hegemann had international experience from an extended stay in the United States and was familiar with Nordic architecture from his responsibility for the catalogue of the 1923 *Stadsbyggnadsutställning* in Gothenburg.⁷ Scandinavian architecture was well represented among the journal’s articles on foreign architecture during the years of Hegemann’s editorship. A review of the magazine by Caroline Flick shows which countries and architects Hegemann chose to present. The position of the Scandinavian countries among the presentations is significant: Denmark, Norway and Sweden together make up 5.9% of the presentations in the booklets under Hegemann’s leadership and are thus more represented than any other country (after Germany). The next largest foreign contributors are Switzerland, USA and France.⁸ Hegemann had established regular contact with the Danish architect and magazine editor/publisher Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who also wrote for Hegemann’s *Montatshefte*. The extensive presentation of Danish architecture can also be traced back to an agreement between Hegemann and Kay Fisker (who was Rasmussens’ predecessor as publisher of *Architekten*) to take over eight picture pages per quarter from the Danish magazine.⁹ Common to the texts on Swedish architecture are the recurring expressions of “simplicity”, central as an ideal also in the German architectural discussion, and thus in these articles also found in Swedish architecture.

Clarity and simplicity were the key concepts acknowledged in the presentations in an article on “Neuere Baukunst in Schweden” in 1927.¹⁰ Leo Adler, who had written the article, had compiled various buildings - including different building types, houses designed by familiar and less familiar architects: small houses from Bygge & Bo 1925, Konserthuset, and a school in Malmö by Sörensen etc.

Some of the buildings shown in this article had not been presented in the Swedish journal *Arkitektur/Byggmästaren*, and the fact that he includes them into his article demonstrates that he had some inside-knowledge. Adler described the Swedish architecture as having "a valuable, purposeful striving for clarity and moderation", "a will to self-cultivation and clarity" (about Zetterström's villa), or simply the smooth judgment "very clear and simple" (on a school in Malmö by Sörensen).

Later that year, Walther Karbe presents some of the HSB/Wallander residential buildings in the Rödaberg area.¹¹ Here, the solution to housing problems and the organisation and activities of HSB take center stage. He summarizes that Sweden's architecture is more uniform than that of Germany. He notes that "even Sweden, with its healthy conditions, knows the pressing housing problem." He also knows that the housing problem in Stockholm was never as great as in Berlin. Describing the organization and activities of the HSB, he sees in the buildings a "principle of thrift, in which he did not understand how marble columns could be used in the stairwells, but the fact that decoration was only placed with great care was a sign of objectivity in the overall picture". He concludes by saying that the architecture of Sweden gives the impression of far greater uniformity than that of Germany.

In 1929, much Swedish architecture is featured in the magazine. The articles were published on the occasion of the completion of Asplund's City Library and in honour of an exhibition in Kiel, "Die nordische Woche", which featured architecture from the Scandinavian countries. However, similar to the mood in both Germany and Sweden, a change in attitude towards classical architecture can be seen here. The photographs from the Kiel exhibition show a mixture of buildings typical of the early twenties and those that already seem to belong to modernism through their straighter lines, such as Ivar Tengboms proposal for Esselte House, as well as Asplund's watercolour sketches for the Stockholm exhibition.

Gunnar Asplund's City library was presented in 1929 in *WMB* through a translation of Uno Åhrén's report in the Swedish journal *Byggmästaren*, the presentation is supplemented with comments by Ernst Serck. He refers to Åhrén's statement that the City Library was the end of a period. Serck agrees with Åhrén's statement that the building stands between "logical and factual intentions and the formal conception that has form and beauty as its goal". He concludes by writing that "the house stands on the border between two periods of profound diversity of spirit". He sees the plan as successful but is more critical of the facade where 'the clear language of the floor plan loses its persuasive power'. He agrees with Åhrén's criticism that the glazed surfaces in the facade, except at the main entrance, do not feel justified. He compares it to Corbusier's way of "dissolving the room", which he sees as contradictory to Asplund's room. He is favourably disposed towards the building and finds the rooms beautiful. Åhrén's statement in the article that the City library represents the end of a period was commented on by Walter Hegemann, who countered this view that neoclassicism in Sweden "certainly has a future" and that the library would therefore not represent the end of the period.¹²

In the same year, the article "Neuzeitliche Baukunst in Stockholm" was published, written by the Danish architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen.¹³ The article mentions The City Hall, the Concert Hall and buildings by Gunnar Asplund: the City Library, Skandia cinema and the Woodland Chapel. Rasmussen's attitude to the City Hall was highly critical: "the romantic and the representative" had made Swedish architecture famous, but he does not seem convinced by this. He criticizes the romanticism, mannerism, saying that Östberg tries to create an interesting effect through seemingly random shifts and "coquettish details". He sees the City Hall's romanticism as symptomatic of all Swedish architecture, as well as a preference for the representative. How-

ever, he praises the interior of the City Library, but the exterior is too monumental for him. He also praises the Skandia cinema, where he considers the lighting to be well used and designed. From this room, he moves on to the Concert Hall and compares the two theatre rooms that are supposed to represent an open-air room. He concludes by stating that this may seem to be a final point in the history of Swedish architecture, which is already showing signs of a new spirit.

Deutsche Bauhütte

In the magazine *Deutsche Bauhütte* the Swedish architect Gösta Rollin publishes two articles in 1929, one is a presentation of the City Library, the other is about "Modern classicism in Stockholm" and is illustrated with photographs of the Stockholm School of Economics, the Matchstick Palace and the Faculty of Humanities.¹⁴ The article about the City Library is more of a thoroughly architectural presentation of the library, while the second article rather discusses classicism in architecture. Gösta Rollin presents Stockholm as a city in which one finds, when it comes to architecture, a "noble ... classicism in architecture", unlike the architecture on the continent not least Germany, where major "upheavals" would characterize the construction. The "principles of symmetry" of classicism and the strict sense of form are, according to Rollin, crucial to this architecture, the "classical motif material in the decoration" itself being secondary. The interaction and collaboration between architecture, sculpture and craftsmanship contributed to the popularity of this architecture according to Rollin. He also believes that classical architecture with its "principles of symmetry" was a kind of counter-reaction to national romanticism. He gives Swedish architecture an international dimension when he writes that the "classical ideal of art" was also present in other countries - in American architecture, in France, Spain and especially Italy - and concludes that the classical forms correspond to the "global feeling" of the time.¹⁵

Deutsche Bauhütte presented Swedish architecture also in 1930. In focus of the article were apartment buildings, with examples by Wallander and Hedquist. The classicist orientation of the architecture is acknowledged and the facades are praised and seen to have a "calm expression".¹⁶

Deutsche Bauzeitung

Between February and April 1923, a series of articles on Stockholm was published in *Deutsche Bauzeitung* by Heinrich Seeling.¹⁷ The background for the articles was a trip to Stockholm he had done in 1922. The articles give a chronological account of Stockholm's urban and building history from the Royal Palace to the City Hall, the illustrating photos, however, are dominated by newer buildings, especially Westman's Town Hall. Other buildings that are shown include the Stadium, Villa Geber, Högalidskyrkan, Tengbom's and Josephson's bank buildings, and the northern King's Tower. The buildings are described briefly, usually with reference to the materials used. Ragnar Östberg's Town hall was featured in the same magazine a year later, in July 1924, with two articles on the exterior and interior.¹⁸ Sweden was also the destination of several study trips, for example Paul Bonatz and Paul Schmitt-henner, architects from traditional Stuttgart circles, traveled to Sweden with architecture students.¹⁹

The book *Moderne schwedische Architektur* by Hakon Ahlberg

In terms of books, Swedish architecture was communicated in Germany through Hakon Ahlberg's *Moderne schwedische Architektur*.²⁰ It was the Wasmuth publishing house, publisher of the *WMB*, which published the German version of Ahlberg's book in 1925. 1927 saw the publication of the similar Danish book, Kay Fisker's *Moderne dänische Architektur*. *Moderne schwedische Architektur* is a compilation of Swedish buildings, presented mainly through photographs and an introduction that provides a historical overview. In this brief presentation of the history of Swedish architecture, Ahlberg refers to Denmark as a model for Swedish architecture, since Denmark had "defended itself against Germanization" and studied antiquity. The preface to the book was written by Werner Hegemann who praises Swedish architecture for its "efforts ... to save the art of building from the decay of the 19th century". In Swedish architecture, Hegemann finds further "clarity and calm, dignity and strength".²¹ He described the relationship between German and Swedish architecture as the "decay of German architecture" having had a bad influence on Swedish architecture, which could only "recover" after overcoming the German influence. He agrees with Ahlberg's hope that "the preference for the classical models" was not just short-lived. He describes that Swedish contemporary architecture was inspired by Italian, French, etc. and Danish sources, and that it was only after overcoming the German influence that it could "recover". On the contrary, Denmark had always 'defended itself against Germanisation' and instead studied Greece and Rome. He highlighted some works by Clason, Östberg, Johansson, Asplund and Ryberg that are characterised by "clarity and calm, dignity and strength" ideals that are also shared by German architects who "have turned their backs on the rhapsodising". He echoes Ahlberg's hope that „the sterling performances and the preference for the classical models“ is not just a fashion. He also hopes that the same ideals will become prominent in Germany, so that 'individualistic fantasy and design power, spinning logic, audacious imitation of foreign fashion architects' does not replace "solid architectural training".²²

Final remarks

In conclusion, the examination of German reception of Swedish classicism in architectural publications during the late 1920s provides a unique perspective on the cultural and intellectual exchanges between these two countries. By analyzing influential German architectural publications, including *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, *Deutsche Bauhütte*, and *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, we can observe the ways in which Swedish architecture was presented to German audiences, emphasizing both the similarities and differences between Swedish and German architecture of the time. The resulting presentations stressed the ideals of simplicity and clarity, which were central to the German architectural discourse and also present in Swedish architecture.

Moreover, the fact that German architects expressed such a strong interest in Swedish architecture, positioning it as a model for their own work, places Swedish classicist architecture within the broader European context of architectural traditions and classicism. During the 1920s, tensions in Germany deepened, leading to the formation of competing groups of modernist and traditional architects, known respectively as "Der Ring" and "Der Block". This context of heightened vulnerability may have contributed to a need to defend and advocate for one's position, which could explain why publications like *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* were so vocal about their convictions. For German traditionalists, Swedish architecture could serve as a confirmation of their position and an affirmation of their values.

Endnotes

- 1 On the dissemination of these ideas see e.g. Atli Magnus Seelow (2016) "From the Continent to the North – German Influence on Modern Architecture in Sweden", *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 2015 or Eva Eriksson, *Mellan tradition och modernitet: arkitektur och arkitekturdebatt 1900-1930*, 2000.
- 2 The term is taken here from Sigrid Hofer, *Reformarchitektur 1900-1918*, 2005, who writes extensively about German Architecture between 1900-1918.
- 3 Traditionalism is V. Lampugnani's concept, see *Architektur und Städtebau*, 1980, p. 123.
- 4 Käßlinger, "Konservative Moderne und Neues Bauen" i Hofmann/Kuhn, *Wohnungspolitik und Städtebau 1900-1930*, 1992, p. 223.
- 5 The heterogeneity of this movement, its protagonists and buildings are described and analysed in detail in Sigrid Hofer, *Reformarchitektur 1900-1918*, 2005.
- 6 However, C. Flick, in an examination of the architects presented in the journal, shows that the image of the "conservative journal" is not entirely accurate and describes the "line" represented by Hegemann as between "a moderate classicism and a moderate modernity". «However, "modern architects" are "under-represented". Flick, Werner Hegemann, 2005, p. 691. Among other magazines focusing on this architecture were *Deutsche Bauhütte* and *Baugilde*.
- 7 Hegemann wrote about American architecture in the books *The American Vitruvius* and *Amerikanische Architektur und Stadtbaukunst*, published in 1922 and 1925 respectively.
- 8 Flick, *Werner Hegemann*, 2005, p. 690.
- 9 Flick, *Hegemann* 2005, p. 681, also *Architekten* 1926 p. 467.
- 10 Leo Adler, "Neuere Baukunst in Schweden", *WMB* 1927, p. 230.
- 11 Walther Karbe about the Rödabergsområdet *WMB* 1927, p. 494.
- 12 He writes that the library stands «between two periods of profound diversity of spirit». *WMB* 1929, p. 65. Ernst Serck comments on the article, agreeing with Åhrén.
- 13 SE Rasmussen, "Neuzeitliche Baukunst in Stockholm", *WMB* 1929, p. 480.
- 14 „Die Stockholmer Bibliothek, ein Beispiel jungschwedischer Baukunst“, *Deutsche Bauhütte* 1929, p. 7f., "Moderner Klassizismus in Stockholm", *Deutsche Bauhütte* 1929, p. 170ff.
- 15 Rollin, 1929, p. 172.
- 16 *Deutsche Bauhütte* 1930, p. 265. The values that *Dt. Bauhütte* stands for are expressed in a page of the magazine, where current events are commented on under the heading "Kritische Bau-Beobachtungen". One of these comments concerns the reactions to the Stockholm exhibition in Sweden in 1930. "Genugtuung" (Satisfaction) draws attention to the reactions to the Stockholm exhibition. With "Genugtuung", it was noted that the Stockholm "Publizistenklub" had taken a stand against functionalism. *Dt. Bauhütte* 1930, p. 422.
- 17 Stadtbaurat Professor Heinrich Seeling "Reiseeindrücke aus Stockholm vom Schluß des Jahres 1922", *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, Nr.17-22 1923.
- 18 H. Seeling, "Das neue Stadthaus zu Stockholm", *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, nr 61, 62. 1924.
- 19 Bonatz traveled with students to Sweden in 1924 and 1926; Schmitthenner participated in the second trip. Paul Bonatz, *Leben und Bauen*, 1950, p.118f.
- 20 The book had also been published in English. In *WMB* the book is advertised and it is promised, that «die Beschäftigung mit den Arbeiten der schwedischen Architektur lohnt, ... [und sei] voller Anregung für den deutschen Architekten». For example *WMB* 1925, p.166.
- 21 Ahlberg, *Moderne Schwedische Architektur*, 1925, preface.
- 22 Ahlberg, *Moderne Schwedische Architektur*, 1925, preface.

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