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The Interplay Between Architecture and Politics in Social Democratic Sweden of Folkhemmet (1932-1976)

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DASP YEARBOOK 2025

ENVIRONMENTS

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Politecnico di Torino
Dipartimento di Architettura e Design

DASP YEARBOOK 2025

ENVIRONMENTS

PhD in Architecture.
History and Project

DAD | Department of Architecture and Design
Politecnico di Torino

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40th

CYCLE

The Interplay Between Architecture and Politics in Social Democratic Sweden of Folkhemmet (1932–1976)

Eugenio Lux



Cycle 40th

Supervisors Filippo De Pieri, Sofia Nannini

How did architecture embody, influence, and mediate the political ideals of the welfare state, and in what ways did it contribute to the construction of a collective identity, social equity, and the everyday life of its citizens?

History, according to the Benjaminian conception of "jetztzeit", is marked by revolutionary moments where things collapse to reorganise into a new order. The 1930 represents for Sweden the "modernism's breakthrough" (Rudberg, 1999) and the beginning of a new transformative era for the country. The process of modernisation of the state, anticipated in the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition and theorised in the book-manifesto "acceptera" (Asplund et al, 1931), was definitively established during the "folkhemmet" (1932–1976), a long term political programme of welfare state policy under the government of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. Since the 30s functionalism, in Swedish "funkis", became the new standard for architecture and planning, as it marked a break from national romanticism and nordic classicism and a way to minimise construction costs and to provide more living space for low-income families. During this forty-year period, societal power structures changed: urbanisation accelerated and infrastructures improved significantly with many environmental implications (i.e. resource exploitation in the Norrland). Thus architecture in Sweden became a tool for the political design of the city to create a more equal, prosperous and fair mass society. Swedish neutrality during both World Wars and the non-alignment during the Cold War allowed the country to live in an incubator-like state and to develop modern architecture and urbanism as a propaganda tool for "the middle way" (Childs, 1936). Swedish architecture and planning became famous for their pragmatic, problem-focused stance. The "social democratic management of the city" (Tafuri, 1973) operated by architects with a strong social orientation, both animated by concerns for ideological (social-democratic) and practical (functional) matters, produced excellent results in the growth of the cities, public building and housing. The country can be seen as a model for the relations between architecture and politics, environment and construction, and "acceptera" could be perceived as a social-democratic programmatic manifesto in terms of architecture and planning for the years to come. Today we are approaching fifty years since the end of the social democratic state model, a sufficiently long period to assess the welfare state in its entirety, complexity, and importance over its 44-year span. The 1932–1976 periodisation, borrowed from politics – the government led by Per Albin Hansson, Tage Erlander, and Olof Palme, each of whom lived in modern mass housing blocks – is relevant to architecture as it encompasses a range of different phases of the urban transformation and building regimes (Gullberg and Kaijser, 2007): the expansion of functional row houses in the inner suburbs (1930s-40s), the creation of satellite towns later called the ABC-stad (1950s-60s), the Miljonprogrammet (1960s-70s) and finally the renovation of "the hearth of the city" (1960s-70s). The chosen ends have also a reflection on the major urban transformation in the city of Stockholm: indeed 1932 is the year of the competition for the masterplan of Norrmalm area (350 participants including Alvar Aalto and Le Corbusier) and 1976 coincide with the conclusion of major urban transformations such as Sergelstorg and Kulturhuset and Sveriges Riksbank. Moreover, the 1932 coincides with the start of construction of the Tunnelbanan and 1976 represents the final phase of the Miljonprogrammet which territorial spread was made possible by the development of large-scale public transport system. The proposed ends could be perceived anomalous as they cross the boundary marked by the Second World War but is motivated by Swedish neutrality and non-alignment in the conflicts. The caesura represented by the war for those belonging to the major belligerent nations, is absent in the Swedish context. It could be argued that Sweden lives its "short century" (Eric Hobsbawm, 1994) even faster and within the proposed periodisation: before 1932 Sweden is a 19th century country, after 1976 Sweden becomes the most "Americanised country" in Europe.

#acceptera, #folkhemmet, #funkis

Captions

Figure 1 - Per-Albinhusen, Ålstensgatan 40, Bromma, Paul Hedqvist with Olle Engkvist (1932–33), by DigitalMuseum.

Figure 2 - Erlanderhuset, Fyrverkarbacken 21, Marieberg, Henning Orlando (1960–62), by DigitalMuseum.

Figure 3 - Palmes radhus, Tornedalsgatan 31, Vällingby, Bertil Karlén, Josef Stäck, Jon Höjer e Sture Ljungqvist (1952–55), by DigitalMuseum.

Sources

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PEOPLE

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The chosen topic “environments” as a title for this compilation is a strong topic. Dealing with changing contexts, the themes under research, analysis and critical interpretation by the PhD candidates epitomize contemporary social issues, reflecting the era in which we live in and demonstrate the power of architecture in addressing the challenges of the future.

Ana Tostões, Afterword