

## Outside In: Blurred Boundaries in the Work of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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Throughout his career, Erik Gunnar Asplund pursued an architecture that conveyed a very specific idea about place and space. From the first works to the very last, the discourse within his body of work centered on the expression of blurring boundaries between interior and exterior, private and public, often by creating an impression of expansive space within what would sometimes be considered quite conventional spaces. In many of his works we encounter a deliberate overlapping of a number of territories. His understanding of the Swedish vernacular, of his Italian visions and of the cultural and social changes that were occurring in Sweden over the course of his career, would prove to have a clear impact on his architecture. This paper will investigate these ideas through an analysis of a number of Asplund's projects in order to examine more specifically his contribution to a modernist articulation of the interior. Far from being idiosyncratic, the work of Asplund maintains a line of thought that consistently deals with limitless space, and is very much aligned with the modernism that had overtaken Central Europe just a half a generation earlier, but articulates this space with a sensibility that is uniquely Scandinavian.

### **Sweden, National Romanticism and the Development of a Regional Sensibility**

From 1905 until 1909, Asplund studied at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. In 1910, when it seemed clear that the next step in his education was to attend the National Academy of Fine Arts, he and a

number of fellow students decided instead to set up their own free academy. Citing displeasure with the program and faculty offered at the National Academy, they approached four of the most prominent Swedish architects of the time to become their tutors. These were architects that were already heavily influenced by the national romanticism movement that was sweeping the country.

Throughout his studies and his early career he made extensive visits to the Swedish interior to study traditional Swedish architecture. He was a keener observer of its popular architecture than of its monuments. In his notebooks from a journey he made in 1912 there are representations of humble rural buildings. What is most interesting is that we do not see a direct correlation between these sketches and his designs; that is, they did not have a specific physical manifestation in his work. Rather they seem more to be confirmations of his deep-seated belief in Swedish vernacular architecture.<sup>1</sup> This may in part be due to the fact that by the time that he had begun building he was...“already caught up in the neo-classical counter reaction that followed quickly on the heels of National Romanticism.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Italy and the Mediterranean**

In 1914, Asplund traveled to Italy and the Mediterranean. It was a trip that would prove to have a significant effect on his later work. His days were recorded in over three hundred pages of notes, sketches and annotations,

many of which would eventually influence his work. The examples most often cited are the street of tombs in Pompeii, which emerges as the way of the cross in the Woodland Cemetery, or the farmhouse near the Villa Madama in Rome that would have clear volumetric and fenestrative influences in the Villa Snellman in Djursholm. Another example from his notebooks is the Greek theaters at Syracuse, which has a general influence on his entire body of work, but a more direct influence on a project that comes much later in his career: his own summer house at Stennas. From this trip, there was another clear influence on the work of Asplund: the skies at Taormina and Tunis. In Asplund's diary, concerning his visit to Taormina we read: "It was the last day of carnival there and in the evening there were colored lanterns and funny colored people and a big band on the square, beneath the starry skies up there."<sup>3</sup> And of Tunis we read: "This is the most amusing I have come across in the twenty eight years of my existence...above our heads a sky clear and deep, the likes of which I have never seen, such a tone in color that I am constantly imagining the sky as a vast blue painted dome."<sup>4</sup> This theme of the vaulted sky was reinvented in many of Asplund's projects. Through this manipulation of the ceiling and the roof, he began to engage the idea of spatial extension as a means of blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, between private and public.

### **Social and Cultural Changes**

At the end of the nineteenth century, social and cultural boundaries were being traversed. Technology, as well, had a role in these changes. The culture of Scandinavia at this time was transforming from agrarian to industrial, particularly in the timber trade. No longer was architectural form derived from hewn timber and the resultant tectonic expression associated with this method of construction. Instead, standardized building elements that were fabricated in the factory would allow more freedom of expression.

Simultaneously, the roles of private and public relative to interior and exterior were being questioned. In the work of Asplund, these roles became subverted to create an understanding of the social conditions that

were prevalent at that very time. This tactic seems to be rooted in his training during the National Romanticism movement, as well as the characteristic themes of the burgeoning bourgeois culture, that was taking shape at the turn of the century. According to Claes Caldenby, the home and the family had become the cornerstone of society, superceding the village.<sup>5</sup> The home now had to be both private and public, blurring their prior distinction, while the role of architecture as a means of a larger cultural expression was expanding. By extension, these blurred boundaries called for a reassessment of the nature of the relationships between interior and exterior, and between architecture and culture.

### **Overlapping Territories and Blurred Boundaries**

The Villa Snellman (1917-1918) was one of the first commissions that Asplund received after returning from his trip to Italy. In this building we see one of the first examples of Asplund's use of the sky as a ceiling. From the very beginning, Asplund had conceived of the building as a kind of courtyard scheme, an established building type typical of many Scandinavian cultures. One need only look to the ancient Okthorp Farmhouses to understand the relationship of this type to this new villa that he was designing. These buildings typically enclosed a rectangular farmyard. This farmyard was understood to be primarily a private space, separated from the public realm by the farmhouse.<sup>6</sup> In the Villa Snellman, it is possible to read a reinterpretation and reconfiguration of these spaces to derive an entirely new reading of public and private. Layered over this strategy one sees the formal gestures that he had observed on a farmhouse outside of Rome. Meanwhile, the asymmetrical planning strategies derived from the casual and functional requirements of the new bourgeois culture would further affect the building's articulation.

The entry court of the Villa Snellman has two sides that are enclosed by the building itself, a third side by a garden wall, and the fourth by a large oak tree. In an early scheme, the circulation zone is located along the periphery of both volumes of the house, facing the court. This emphasizes the idea of the house

as a courtyard type. Later schemes eliminate the circulation from the periphery of the service wing of the house, but also eliminate all exits to the garden from that façade so that one is forced to circulate through the court to access the landscape, ultimately manifesting in that court a space of ambiguity. This lack of distinction between public and private is further emphasized by the articulation of the two doors on the main façade of the house. One door leads in to the house, the other leads out from the living room. By placing these two doors side by side, on a small stone stylobate, Asplund reinforces this ambiguity. On the interior of the house he plays with slight shifts of the walls, with the alignment of windows and with the manipulation of thresholds that suggests a desire to create the reading of spaces expanding into one another, and beyond to the exterior.<sup>7</sup>

In a number of other projects, Asplund experimented with the idea of the expression of limitless space. In 1918, he received the commission for the Woodland Chapel. Again, the idea of public versus private would come to bear. Here he would design a space that was essentially public, but that would be used for the most private of experiences...grief. The space was manifested as one that would simultaneously be intimate and expansive, compressive and uplifting.

The compressive component is the heavy wooden roof over the low portico that leads the mourner into the main space of the chapel. Because of its short dimension and the close spacing of the columns, one gets the sense of being alone in the woods. The space is, in fact, a continuation of the woods that surround it. The formal geometry of the space, however, allows a simultaneous monumentality to emerge. Movement continues through the space of the portico, through the metal clad doors, and further through the gates to finally arrive at a chapel that is intimately and ultimately expansive. Here, the spatial articulation has changed, but the essence remains the same. Perhaps an inversion of the peripteral colonnade of the Temple of Vesta that Asplund had seen in Rome, this space may also be read as a clearing in the Nordic woods. It is manifested as a bright space with a dome that, according to Asplund, was to "...hover weightlessly

above the squat portico and entrance..."<sup>8</sup> Asplund makes use of a small dorsoret block to create a shadow between the ceiling and the column. He also makes use of a skylight that, like at the Lister County Courthouse, washes the surface of the dome with light so that it too, virtually disappears. This domed ceiling hovers weightlessly above the space, effectively becoming a nonentity that expands the space vertically.

In 1913, Asplund won the competition for the Gothenberg Law Courts Annex, but it was not until 1934 that the design, as we see it today, was approved, and not until 1937 that it was completed. In the intervening years, there were many alternate manifestations of the project, but the one thing that remained throughout is the insistence of a large internal courtyard, that is either open to the sky or glazed. In the final scheme, a number of things occur that suggest spatial extension. All elements in the space seem to hover weightlessly, as if they are about to float away. This is due, for the most part to Asplund's skillful detailing – the shallow stairs, the thin floor slabs, illuminated from below, the clock floating in space, or the stairs at the back of the space which ascends into a light blue void. Stuart Wrede writes: "Layered vertically by the cantilevered balconies, lit by natural light filtered from the side and above, and with its free standing staircase disappearing mysteriously into a brightly lit opening in the ceiling adjacent to the skylight, the main interior space [takes] on a Piranesian spaces beyond quality."<sup>9</sup>

The skylight to which Wrede refers is used less as an extension of space than as a means of bringing light into the space to enhance the sense of weightlessness. The architecture, and its very specific articulation, allows us to understand the vertical expansion of space. Asplund has created a courtyard that mediates between the gravity of the place and the lightness of the space surrounding it.

In 1936, Asplund began one of his last projects before he died. It was his own summer residence at Stennas, an archipelago near Stockholm. The site, with its large granite outcropping, is located at the end of a small bay with open meadows sloping toward the water. Here at the edge of the rock, Asplund has placed his small, one story

vernacular cottage – a house that is, like the Villa Snellman, reminiscent of the Okthorp Farmhouses. But if at the Villa Snellman we read a reinterpretation of the exterior spaces of the farmhouse to formulate a new idea about the relationship between private and public, at his own summer residence, we observe the use of the very element that separates these two realms - the farmhouse itself - to redefine our understanding of that relationship.

In earlier schemes for this house, Asplund had divided the house into three blocks, with cross passages running in the short dimension of the house. The influence of the Okthorp farmhouse is clearly apparent. Asplund however, goes on to transform the type so that we are afforded a different reading of it. The Okthorp farmhouse sits between the public approach road and the private yard, mediating between the two worlds. Asplund's summer house, on the other hand, is in no way a mediator. Rather the spaces surrounding it become the mediators. The relationships between the parts of the house also become critical, relative to spatial sequences. That is, the spaces change their roles and values based on the way they are entered. This effect is an oscillation that is more intense than the effect achieved at the Villa Snellman, so that the ambiguity between interior and exterior is even greater.

One enters the house through a sort of courtyard that is defined by the two volumes of the house and a natural feature – the large granite bluff. Similar to the Villa Snellman, the space has a clear reading of a room. Asplund reinforces this reading through the placement of a fireplace, the scale of which suggests an interior condition, on the outside of the house. But is this space an interior or an exterior room? Its reading in the end is ambiguous. By placing a very obviously interior element on the exterior of the house, Asplund affords us a multiplicity of readings of the space.

From this room or rather within it, we encounter the front porch. Here we find four doors. As at the Villa Snellman, the dilemma of the entry door appears. The two doors at the north end of the porch can easily be dismissed as not being an entry. One is completely un-articulated, the other is

buffered by a set of steps that seems to suggest exit rather than entry. Also, because of the way one would move through the space of the entry court, these two doors would be virtually obscured from view. So the dilemma lies in the two doors at the south end of the entry porch. Here again we have two doors placed on equal ground. Both doors are similarly articulated with regard to panel division and so forth. One, however, has an extra half door and is painted dark blue. This is the formal entry to the house. The other door, then, becomes the exit from the main living space of the house out to the porch. So again we have a multiplicity of readings. Before even formally entering the house we encounter one space that creates two separate territories and that blurs the concept of boundary.

Upon entering the foyer, one encounters the upper living room. To the left is a door leading to the more private areas of the house, and further to the kitchen and working areas beyond that. Moving from the more private work zones towards the public areas of the house, we are made clearly aware of Asplund's fascination with thresholds and boundary manipulation. What we encounter is a consistent visual expansion toward the volume of the main living space at each transitional threshold. From the north entry of the kitchen, we get a diagonal view through the doorway to the hall, through the hall window, directly to the door that leads out from the main living space onto the porch. From the threshold between the private and public spaces, again we get a view to the main living space, but rather than stopping at the door, this time the view expands further to the picture window and the view of the fjord beyond.

If the passages of the Okthorp farmhouses could be understood as mediators between public and private, so too can these axial views be considered mediators between public and private. Asplund has managed to turn these passages ninety degrees, and invert the progression so that all movement is from private to public, and along the long dimension of the house. Because of this articulation, the circulation necessitates the placement of the most important and public room of this volume of the house, the upper living room, at the end of the progression.

It seems necessary at this time to concede that Asplund had originally conceived of the house as an axial progression of volumes that stepped down the slope towards the view, with a number of cross axial operations that mediated between the volumes. But the transformation of the Okthorp farmhouse type had to have been made for the idea of a progression toward a view to work. If Asplund had maintained the cross axes of the earlier schemes, the building segments and their intermediate passages would have had an entirely different relationship with the site.

So the reinterpretation of the relationship between public and private necessitates this perpendicular relationship of house to view. If the house were rotated ninety degrees and placed parallel to the view, then there would have been no reassessment of private to public. The progression would be such that one would enter the public zone of the house, move through the cross passages and enter the private zones. The view then, could be understood as being entirely private, an attitude that Asplund was hardly likely to have had.

In the end, what mediates between private and public are a number of zones that run perpendicular to the view, connecting the most private areas to the most public. These zones – the courtyard, the porch, the axial views and the diagonal passages – are understood as neither public nor private. This system remains intact within the realm of the primary volume of the house. At the south end of the house, however, there is another volume – the main living space. Here Asplund has created a space that is ambiguous. The outside is brought in and its boundaries are blurred.

Within this volume, we see a carefully articulated, very architectural, traditional enclosed space. But upon closer examination the space's definition as an interior "room" becomes more ambiguous. The doors at the top of the stairs, for instance, introduce the dilemma of the paired doors yet again. At the Villa Snellman, he differentiated the doors by their materiality and their opacity. Here at his own house his expression is more subtle. The only differentiation is that the door leading out to the porch has one panel painted light blue, perhaps a color reference to the sky beyond.

In any case, the placement of these doors, side by side, on a flooring material that is clearly an exterior material, makes one question the interiority of this space, particularly when seen relative to the doors of the courtyard in the Villa Snellman.

Another point that contributes to the ambiguous reading of the space is the shaped ceiling. It is the only shaped ceiling in the entire house, and when seen relative to Asplund's other projects with shaped ceilings, one begins to wonder if in fact he was thinking of his own ceiling in a similar manner. Without being quite as literal as he was at the Skandia Cinema, it seems reasonable to conjecture that he may have been making an allusion to the sky.

A third point to consider is the monumentality of certain elements within the space. The steps, whose materiality has already been discussed, are at a scale that refers perhaps more to an exterior condition than to an interior condition. Likewise, the fireplace: One wonders whether this huge fireplace that engages the floor and the monumental set of stairs, should be switched with the smaller fireplace and the wooden stair on the exterior of the house.

And finally the large picture window: this window, because of its dimension and unarticulated quality, captures the exterior and makes it a part of the interior. Asplund, in essence, brings the real sky into the house. And because of this "reality" that is brought into the house, no unreal articulation is needed to make this space read as an exterior space. Asplund, here, has managed to allow us to read a completely expansive space within the confines of a small vernacular cottage, and not through the use of any tricky devices, but by the careful manipulation of architectural spaces, materials and elements. When looking at this space, one recalls the Greek theaters at Syracuse, that Asplund describes in his journals from his trip to Italy. He states: "The Greek theater is imposing in effect and size. The same fine gravity as the temples. The key to it all is the open space with the heavens above, all seats assembled round the stage, the plain and the sea. A simplicity of conception and great unity, with the purpose and meaning binding all, to give it architectural fullness."<sup>10</sup>

The conflation of all these points alludes to a re-evaluation of the boundaries between public and private, interior and exterior. Asplund used his architecture to question the prevalent discourse concerning these issues. He would not simply accept the status quo. Rather, he sought to discover what exactly constituted private and public and what made their distinction important. In his travel journals, notes and sketches were made so that he could better understand why things were. His notes from his travel journals betrayed his interest in the essence of what we perceived through our senses and awareness, and according to Luca Ortelli, express his "...desire to understand and penetrate the *raison d'être* of the works of architecture to which they refer, or what it is that they conceal."<sup>11</sup>

The work of Asplund can certainly be debated on the question of style, which has ample precedent. But his work goes beyond this. It delves into a multiplicity of strategies, often occurring simultaneously, that allow a high degree of complexity to coexist within the austere simplicity of his work. The seemingly contradictory notions of interior and exterior, private and public prove to be some of the most important themes within his oeuvre, and are a prevalent investigation throughout his career. These ideas become manifested as transformations of specific types that lead to a reinterpretation of their traditional meaning and use.

Often the result is one of formally conventional, perhaps even traditional spaces that have the essence of the expansive space of central European Modernism, spaces that "bring the exterior in." But unlike the work of LeCorbusier or Mies van der Rohe, whose work often denied place and whose attention to landscape often remained schematic, the work of Asplund engages place to create space.

In Asplund's work we consistently see multiple territories being traversed. By recombining time and place and by applying design strategies that were based on Swedish tradition, his Italian sojourn and the requirements of a newly formed bourgeois culture, Asplund creates an architecture that is neither old nor new, private nor public. Traversing physical territories and social

boundaries, his work becomes understood as timeless and placeless—and yet simultaneously entirely of its time and of its place. The Way of the Cross is not Pompeii revisited; the Skandia Cinema is not a square in Tunis. And yet by applying these images to a new context in a new age, Asplund was able to manifest an architecture that expresses the methods and materials with which he worked as well as the society for which he built.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Luca Ortelli, "Heading South: Asplund's Impressions," in *Lotus International No 68* (Milan: Industrie Grafiche Editoriali, 1991) p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Blundell Jones, "House at Stennas," in *Erik Gunnar Asplund*, ed. Dan Cruikshank (London: Diemer and Reynolds, 1988), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Elias Cornell "The Sky as a Vault," in *Asplund*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Luca Ortelli, "Heading South: Asplund's Impressions," in *Lotus International No.68* (Milan: Industrie Grafiche Editoriali, 1991), p.31.

<sup>5</sup> Claes Caldenby, "Time,Life and Work: An Introduction to Asplund" in *Asplund* eds. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> The Okthorp Farmstead at the Skansen open air museum in Stockholm was the first open air museum in the world, started by Artur Hazelius in 1891. Its foundation was contemporaneous with the National Romanticism movement that was at its height during Asplund's formative years. For more than a decade, new building was heavily influenced by primitivism, irregularity, and responsiveness to local and regional conditions. Peter Blundell Jones, "House at Stennas," in *Erik Gunnar Asplund*, ed. Dan Cruikshank (London: Deimer and Reynolds, 1988), pp123-4.

<sup>7</sup> See Val Warke's essay "The Plight of the Object" for a more in depth analysis of the planning of the interior of this house and its relationship with the exterior facades, in *Cornell Journal of Architecture No. 3* (1987) pp78-95.

<sup>8</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Elias Cornell "The Sky as a Vault," in *Asplund*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Wrede, *The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980), p.165 and p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Luca Ortelli, "Heading South: Asplund's Impressions," in *Lotus International No.68* (Milan: Industrie Grafiche Editoriali, 1991), p.31.

<sup>11</sup> Luca Ortelli, "Heading South: Asplund's Impressions," in *Lotus International No.68* (Milan: Industrie Grafiche Editoriali, 1991), p.27.