

# North and South: Tradition, Symbol and Surface in the Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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In 1914, Asplund traveled to Italy. The importance of his trip to the South, and its relevance to the architecture that he produced over the next several decades, has been clearly documented in numerous articles by various architects and theorists. It was a trip in the tradition of the "Grand Tour" of the academies, but also a trip he financed himself. So it was more in the spirit of the trips that students of the Ecole des Beaux Arts had made to Greece in the early part of the nineteenth century, before academic acceptance of the islands was made. Asplund's was a trip that could be better understood as experiential rather than as academic. Unlike the official trips of the academies, it had more to do with his personal interests. He had no reports to make. Instead, his records of this trip consisted of volumes of journals filled with notes and sketches made as he traveled throughout Italy and the Mediterranean. These journals offer a glimpse of a tendency that was to develop in the work of Asplund. This tendency seems also to have been derived, at least obliquely, from debates and discussions that began about a century before his trip, and that centered on the discovery of color in ancient temples.

Since the early years of the sixteenth century, scholars had begun observing pigment on the remains of several temples. Stuart and Revett, in their first volume of their *Antiquities of Athens*, published in 1762, had noted painted decorations on the frieze of the Temple of Ilissus. It was not, however, until 1815 when A.-C. Quatremere de Quincy published his observations on the use of color on antique sculpture that a general interest in the use of color in antiquity came to the forefront. It was a work that studied the use of ivory, semi-precious and precious stones, gold, bronze and paint in ancient Greek sculpture. The text, which was readily accepted, had a number of illustrations. One of

these was a hand colored plate in which the sculpture included color. What is equally significant is the fact that the surrounding architecture remains uncolored. It retains the purity that Winckelmann and other eighteenth century scholars had aspired to. This aspiration was in fact pervasive throughout the eighteenth century. According to Harry Francis Mallgrave in his introduction to his translation of Semper's *The Four Elements of Architecture*, this aesthetic form had by the end of the century been extended to every fine art. But in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the growing interest in classical studies in conjunction with the new discoveries of color being applied to ancient works caused this "white" view of architecture to be challenged.<sup>1</sup>

In 1834, Gottfried Semper published his pamphlet titled *Preliminary Remarks on Polychrome Architecture and Sculpture in Antiquity*, and in 1851, *The Four Elements of Architecture*. Where Hittorff had set the stage for the argument of color as a basic element of antique architecture, as an "order" that could be understood as a single system of color to be used in all of classical architecture, Semper used this order as a point of departure to describe a theory that had its essence in the surface, where the surface could be understood as architecture.

The pamphlet came on the heels of the great polychrome debate that was taking place in the academies and which was centered primarily on Hittorff's colored renderings of Temple "B" at Selinus. This debate would become the catalyst for the Grands Prix winners' interest in ancient Greek polychromy. No longer did the pensionnaires of the Villa Medici wish to remain in Italy. It was not until 1845, however, that travel to Greece

was officially sanctioned by the Ecole. Prior to this, students could only undertake projects in Greece outside of their official duties or after their five year stay in Rome. Such trips would prove to be among the most consequential for the polychrome argument.

In 1828, Henri Labrouste studied three temples, during his fourth year as a pensionnaire in Paestum. In his envois, the renderings were reserved, with coloring limited to the corona. What was more significant was that he rearranged the accepted chronological sequence of their construction, effectively changing the evolution of the Greek Doric order.<sup>2</sup> While executing the Paestum envoi, Labrouste was concurrently working on a series of reconstructions of ancient cityscapes. Particularly interesting is the one that is inscribed Agrigentum, 1828 on the back. It is a watercolor fantasy in which polychromy is "...laid over the architecture substructure as a shell."<sup>3</sup> Each monument within the representation is painted distinct from the other. This polychromy emphasizes the relationship to the Attic models. Half columns, for example are painted to stand out from the wall, as if they were free standing.<sup>4</sup> A line of triglyphs is painted on a red wall behind a gate. We understand this detail as painted because Labrouste shows the paint chipping off the stuccoed wall. Labrouste seems to be suggesting that the carved motifs (the triglyphs for example) that were to follow "... had their origin in the effort to make permanent the more primitive and immediately meaningful painted and attached adornment."<sup>5</sup>

This idea is closely follows the argument that Semper makes in his Preliminary Remarks. Semper follows Bronsted's argument regarding polychromy in ancient Greek wooden temples which suggests that the painted pattern was a substitute for the missing plastic form, that "...color [was] used to create an illusion as a substitute for sculptural effects."<sup>6</sup> Semper however felt that color held formal meaning together. This idea resulted from his belief that decoration in monumental architecture was the direct descendant of natural artifacts hung or draped on a structural framework.<sup>7</sup>

He states:

Decorations of a more definite religious meaning...were appropriately attached to the outside walls and interiors of the sanctuaries... With the further development of worship...they became fixed as typical symbols,... were represented artistically and thereby incorporated into the monuments themselves as a characteristic part.<sup>8</sup>

From this point, Semper went on to develop a theory that would culminate in his book *The Four Elements of Architecture*. Of particular interest is his discussion of the essence of the wall. Here he describes the history of the wall from its beginning as a hedge fence, which would later develop into the weaving of mats, which could in turn be hung from a structural framework. The framework becomes incidental. What is more important to Semper is the surface of the carpet that makes the space. He furthers this argument by stating that even when we have arrived at masonry walls, upon which carpets would be hung as surface decoration, this masonry wall is still only an incidental structural framework to support the surface articulation.

At the turn of the century, these notions of surface articulation as a means of expression of architectural truth were becoming codified. Numerous architects had begun to investigate the separation of the skin of the building from its structure and Asplund's interests concerning these matters seemed clearly aligned with his continental contemporaries.

So by the time he made his trip to the south, many of the fundamental components of his development as an architect were probably already in place. His interest in cladding and surface articulation was already documented, and his understanding of the importance of place was already defined. This trip would soon affirm certain beliefs that he already had, and inspire new ways of interpreting the world in which he would build.

Asplund traveled first to Paris, but quickly moved on to Italy and the Mediterranean. In Pompeii he is moved by the street of tombs at the foot of Vesuvius, and enchanted by its decorations; at Syracuse, the theatres and their relationship to the landscape; and at Tunis and Taormina the festive atmosphere and the people. In his journals, continual references to color and the festive way of life are made.

*Palermo*: "...strong in colours and great in indolence...Boys are splashing... in the blue waters, the harbor is filled with masts and gaily-coloured boats..."

*Girgenti*: "Greek temples and the deep blue sea...the roads and rocks a burning yellow..."

*Pompeii*: "Large surfaces of colour are often to be seen, but always picked out with thin lines and ornamentation in other colours, taking nothing away from the main colouring, but rather playing into it. The large pale walls sparsely divided by thin lines, garlands, small graceful columns, and the like

are a delight to me. Deep yellow skirting, especially if one imagines it against a dark floor and light panels, is good."<sup>9</sup>

The effects that his travels would have on Asplund's work are evidenced in a number of his projects. After his trip south we begin to see a transformation of the references made in his work. In the Villa Snellman, although typologically related to the traditional one and a half room deep Swedish house as well as the traditional Swedish farmhouse, the façade proportions seem to be more in the character of Italian farm houses found outside Rome. In his Royal Chancellery Competition entry, Venetian influences are obvious. Façade studies of palazzi emerge ghostlike from the pages of his journals, with their loggias and porticos floating ever so lightly on the canal. Stairs slip silently into the water, almost as a premonition of the strategy he would later use in the Chancellery project. In this project, the urban influence of Venice is also masterfully demonstrated. An almost medieval quality of tight interconnectedness and shifting axes culminate in paths destined for the water.

In the Woodland Cemetery, references to Pompeii's Street of Tombs appear as the Way of the Cross. In the Woodland Chapel, the transcendent quality of the Pantheon becomes manifested as the dome and oculus gently floating on wooden columns. And even in his small house at Stennas, the large stairs in the main living space facing the view of the fjord is reminiscent of the Greek theatres at Syracuse. Simo Paavilainen, in his notes on the 1985 Asplund symposium, describes ... "how richly and abundantly Asplund ... builds houses within interiors and exteriors within houses..."<sup>10</sup> In all these projects we begin to recognize a certain attitude that seems to speak more about the symbolic use of form to manifest new meaning. This kind of inversion happens not as clever architectural trickery, but as a means to investigate certain trends that were current, in particular the need to define a new reading of public versus private in a culture that was radically changing at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The home of the bourgeois middle class for example, now had to be both private and public, and by extension, these blurred boundaries called for a reassessment of nature of interior and exterior.

This reading of ambiguity continually resurfaces in Asplund's projects. In both the Woodland Chapel and the Gothenberg Law Courts annex, a kind of lightness prevails that dispossesses the gravity of the events taking place within—we get an impression that Asplund is investigating not only spatial conditions and

their transformations from traditional notions, but also the symbolic meaning of space, form and surface.

But it is not perhaps until one investigates the Skandia Cinema that the importance of Asplund's explorations of expansive space, surface and their relationship to his travels really become evident. For Asplund the theatre held great significance. Of the Greek theatre at Taormina he writes:

It is difficult to imagine a situation more steeped in devotion and gravity. One is struck by the lordly solemnity and the greatness of spirit that must have attuned the ideas and feelings of the ancients for art, both the art of the theatre and the art of sculpture, the one made to provide the framework for the other.<sup>12</sup>

Significant in this passage is his linking of sculpture with theatre, both arts presented in three dimensions. Film on the other hand is presented in two dimensions, and as such the articulation of the Skandia Cinema becomes a play on this idea.

Designed between 1922 and 1923, it was a commission that involved the articulation of a theatre within an existing building. Considering the fact that the cinema at the time was a relatively undefined building type, Asplund was able to be quite inventive.

From its conception, the cinema was understood as a place that was to be for the gathering of people, specifically the new bourgeois. According to Asplund, "...the main emphasis during the process of composition was on the viewpoints clearly stated by the client, who is experienced in this field: the desire of the audience for a gay, unrealistically splendid setting for the fantasy world of film, its need for cosy intimacy."<sup>13</sup> This setting in many ways is based in his trip to Tunis and Taormina. In his diaries of his trip, Asplund describes the public squares that he visited, where people gathered in a festive atmosphere. They were gatherings that could be described as almost primal.

These notions are clearly aligned with Semper's conception of "...the first and most important, the moral element of architecture."<sup>14</sup> Here he states that:

The first sign of human settlement and rest after the hunt, the battle, and wandering in the desert is today, as when the first men lost paradise, the setting up of the fireplace and the lighting of the reviving, warming and food preparing flame. Around the hearth the first groups assembled; around it the first alliances formed; around it the

first crude religious concepts were put into the customs of a cult.<sup>15</sup>

Mallgrave elaborates on this theme. He states that, according to Semper, the origin of monumental architecture is in the festive celebration and improvised festival of apparatus.<sup>16</sup> These ideas are clearly identifiable in the Skandia Cinema, where we encounter ideas about gathering, perhaps not around a flame, but around a source of light. The curtains of the stage are down-lit, and shimmer before being transformed into the pictures on the screen, as the flame shimmers, just as the story is told around the fire. In his articulation of walls, ceilings and floors, Asplund continues to make Semperian references. Throughout the design, the idea of bringing the exterior in and then turning the inside out is consistently reified. The flooring in the portico, for instance is articulated in a stone paving that in color references the pavement on the exterior. Through this quite deliberate use of color, Asplund manipulates space in such a manner that its reading is completely controlled. He has brought the outside in, and in so doing has set the theme for the entire project.

Beyond the portico is the lobby, which again shows evidence of surface manipulation. Within a small rotunda adjacent to the lobby, Asplund creates a space that may be seen as emblematic of the design of the entire project. Here is a space simply for the display of "...pictures honouring — and advertising — famous celebrated film stars, ... In the pale grey plaster of the roof there is a conpluvium, wreathed in a chaste, gilded tracery, through which one can see a dark nothingness."<sup>17</sup> Again, through very specific articulation, Asplund creates a space that is the result of the modulation of surfaces which in the end are signifiers, and therefore, the architecture. The most obvious of these signifiers are the pictures. Without these elements within the space, the strength of its overall conception would be diminished.

When looking at this space, the references to Labrouste's reconstruction of the Basilica at Paestum may at first seem unclear. Upon further investigation, however, it becomes evident that because Asplund was also designing a place for assembly, a basilica of sorts, it would be appropriate to explore some of the same issues that Labrouste had dealt with.

In Labrouste's longitudinal section of the Basilica, he has dismissed all of the subtleties of the orders so that only a structural diagram remains (a skeleton, so to speak), with the walls of the basilica in another rendered plane. Labrouste shows these walls as no longer being temple walls, but rather walls of an assembly hall,

which have their own accumulations of decorations: inscriptions recording events, vignettes, the rules of assembly and military trophies. With this rendering Labrouste shows the withering form vocabulary of the Greek Temple which in turn evolves into another decorative vocabulary which clothes the skeleton of the old architecture with the flesh of a new one.<sup>18</sup>

In his small rotunda, Asplund inverts the reading of the space of the basilica, but maintains the signifiers, the pictures on the walls. This inversion could be understood as an operation which converts the representation of the space from skeletal to spatial, and therefore a reversion to the 'temple.' Where the 'basilica' is understood as a specific interior architectural space, the rotunda is understood as, not an interior, but the *representation* of an exterior space, and as such, allows the space to occur without changing the value of the signifier. So now, within the representation of an exterior space the new decorative vocabulary, the sign' takes on the role of architecture. It is the sign here that gives the space significance.

Beyond the lobby, Asplund placed an ambulatory. Here again, the ambiguity between interior and exterior is expressed through a deliberate use of color. But it is not until we reach the interior space of the auditorium that we understand the full impact of Semper's theories on Asplund. Here he has created a space that is a genuine illusion, but which is also understood as genuine architecture. The architecture is the decoration.

In his description of the balconies Asplund states that they were made as wide as possible to reduce the scale of the room, and at the same time the ornamentation of the balcony barriers made as large as possible to give the sense of nearness. The center gallery was detached from the side galleries to give the impression of a longer room. A detailed study of these surfaces reveals a number of explorations of the effect of color and scale on the space.

The oversized Pompeiian motif on the balcony barriers, for example, plays the role of making the room smaller, and therefore offered the "coziness" that was a requirement and a symbol of the new bourgeois culture. A second example is the ambulatory at the upper floor. Here Asplund plays an elaborate game of scale and fantasy. On the doors to the balconies, many openings are suggested, but it is the whole surface that opens. These doors inflect from the surface of the wall toward the main route of circulation, as if beckoning the visitor. Their physical and architectural roles are clear: they are doors, but they are also signifiers of the fantasy of film that goes on behind them. Through their surface

manipulation, relative to the exterior surface of the cinema proper, as well as to themselves, they create new meaning.

And then there is the ceiling. Asplund here elaborates on the theme of expansive space within the realm of a completely enclosed room. The inversion of the space occurs as a result of the bourgeois as well as semperian tendencies previously explained. As with the small rotunda, in the lobby, the inversion of Labrouste's basilica is again evident. But here the explicit signifiers are removed to be replaced by implicit signifiers. The electric stars along with the sky, which was "...achieved by means of a blackish-blue barrel vault painted al fresco..."<sup>19</sup> are referred to, by Asplund, paradoxically as an entirely un-architectural idea. As implicit signifiers, they effectively create the atmosphere of a festivity beneath a night sky.

One could argue that film is a Semperian ideal. As the house lights are dimmed, and the story begins, the flat surface of the screen becomes the viewers' entire world. It is a media that is entirely two dimensional and deals simply with the telling of stories by the light. The Skandia Cinema through all the manipulations of its surfaces, is a representation of this ideal.

Inherent in the building's typology are inferences that have more to do with surface articulation than with formal structure. Asplund, with great ability, manipulated these ideas to create an architectural masterpiece that was unprecedented. It was neither structure nor decoration, and at the same time it was both. Alvar Aalto, upon visiting the cinema stated: "I had the impression that this was an architecture where ordinary systems hadn't served as parameters. Here, the point of departure was man, with all the innumerable nuances of his emotional life, and nature."<sup>20</sup>

At the time when Asplund was building, the use of color in Sweden was nothing new. The wooden farmhouses of the countryside had for centuries been dressed in a deep red. But changes in the application of color were also occurring, which had to do with the development of new methods of construction and new materials, a direct result of industrialization of the timber trade so important to the region. At this time, according to Henrik Andersson, "...wooden and stone architecture were drawing closer to one another...Plank houses were often dressed with plaster, and similar tones were often chosen for the oil paint applied to the woodwork as for the plaster colour layer."<sup>21</sup> This transformation of the skin of the building, from one in which the paint was applied as a means of protection for the highly crafted woodwork to an application of a

skin, is clearly aligned with the development of early 20th century architectural thought. No longer was architectural form derived from hewn timber and the resultant connectivity associated with this method of construction. Instead, standardized building elements that were fabricated in the factory would allow more freedom of expression. With the development of new plastering techniques and materials, the range of colors also changed. "Pure lime plaster was replaced by plaster containing cement, which was both thinner and stronger, but had different bleaching requirements. As the actual plaster was greyer and darker and reflected less light because of the cement and the greater quantity of sand it contained, the result was a naturally darker and duller colour (sic) scale."<sup>22</sup>

These advances in technique and material allowed for a transformation of the way that surfaces were articulated. For Asplund, however, these were not the only reasons for rethinking the surface. Because of his clear understanding of context and place, as well as his understanding of the variety of changes in society, building techniques and the requirements of a new kind of society at the turn of the century, Asplund was able to manifest an architecture that was based on a multiplicity of strategies.

Asplund's trip to the south affected him viscerally, and clearly affected the work that he would ultimately produce. He used these impressions to derive new meaning in a completely different context. These derivations become clearer when understood relative to the context of the pedagogy of travel. As with Labrouste, Asplund used his travels to discover something about the places he visited that were not yet known. Labrouste had re-organized the historic timeline of the temples at Paestum as a means to explore and discover a new conception of architectural evolution. And in his reconstruction of Agrigentum, he uses the drawing as a means to explore an idea about the importance of surface to place. Asplund uses these very techniques to discover new meaning and form in real architectural projects. By recombining time and place Asplund creates an architecture that is neither old nor new. It is understood rather 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 spoke volumes about the methods and materials with which he worked as well as the society for which he built.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Harry Francis Mallgrave, Introduction to Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.4 and p.5.
- <sup>2</sup> David Van Zanten, Architectural Polychromy: Life in Architecture" in *The Beaux arts and Nineteenth Century French Architecture*, ed. Robin Middleton (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982) p. 198.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.199.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.199.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.199.

- <sup>6</sup> Harry Francis Mallgrave, Introduction to Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.9.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.15.
- <sup>8</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Preliminary Remarks on Polychrome Architecture and Sculpture in Antiquity*, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 63.
- <sup>9</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in *Gunnar Asplund Architect 1885-1940*, ed. Gustav Holmdahl, Sven Ivar Lind, and Kjell Odeen (Stockholm: Ab Tidskriften Byggmastaren, 1950) pp. 20-27.
- <sup>10</sup> Simo Paavilainen as quoted in Colin St. John Wilson "Gunnar Asplund and the Dilemma of Classicism," in *Gunnar Asplund 1885-1940 The Dilemma of Classicism*, ed. Vicky Wilson (London: AA Publications, 1988) p. 11.
- <sup>11</sup> At the turn of the century, certain characteristic themes of the burgeoning bourgeois culture were taking shape. Time became a linear concept rather than cyclic, and nature became a refuge from the rational demands of urban life. The home and the family became the cornerstone of society and as such became a microcosm of the dichotomy of bourgeois society, between private and public. 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>12</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in *Gunnar Asplund Architect 1885-1940*, ed. Gustav Holmdahl, Sven Ivar Lind, and Kjell Odeen (Stockholm: Ab Tidskriften Byggmastaren, 1950) pp. 23-4.
- <sup>13</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund, as quoted in Claes Caldenby, "The Sky as a Vault" in *Asplund*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985) p.25.
- <sup>14</sup> Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.102.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 102
- <sup>16</sup> Harry Francis Mallgrave, Introduction to Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of architecture and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.2.
- <sup>17</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Claes Caldenby, "The Sky as a Vault" in *Asplund*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p.28
- <sup>18</sup> David Van Zanten, "Architectural Polychromy: Life in Architecture" in *The Beaux Arts: Nineteenth Century French Architecture*, ed. Robin Middleton (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 1982), p.198.
- <sup>19</sup> Erik Gunnar Asplund as quoted in Claes Caldenby, "The Sky as a Vault" in *Asplund*, ed. Claes Caldenby and Olof Hutlin (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p.26
- <sup>20</sup> Alvar Aalto as quoted in Stuart Wrede, *The Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1980), p. 94.
- <sup>21</sup> Henrik O. Andresson, "Swedish Architecture around 1920" in *Nordic Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Simo Paavilainen (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1982) p. 125.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.125