

Mattsson, Helena; Wallenstein, Sven-Olof (Hrsg.): *Swedish Modernism. Architecture, Consumption and the Welfare State*. London: Black Dog Publishing 2010. ISBN: 978-1-906155-98-8; 192 S.

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Twentieth century Europe experienced 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt) and the so-called Swedish model – capitalism tempered by the rise of an interventionist welfare state – was one of them. Recent years have seen an increase of scholarly interest in the Swedish attempt to cope with the risks and problems, both perceived and real, generated by modernity in the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish case defies the reductionist division of interwar Europe into pluralist democracies and exclusionist authoritarian regimes. It proves that states could be both democratic and radically interventionist, or to speak in Foucauldian terms, disciplinary and liberating at the same time.

Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, editors of the collected volume „Swedish Modernism. Architecture, Consumption and the Welfare State“ have adopted precisely this approach in their introduction in an effort to 're-read' the Swedish model. Much of the scholarly literature on this topic, they argue, contains a normative bias. Academics have either adopted an a priori positive attitude towards the Swedish welfare state and lauded its emancipatory nature, or they have criticized its interventionist nature and underlined repressive aspects, such as compulsory sterilisations. By applying Foucauldian concepts like govern-

mentality, biopolitics, and the production of subjectivity, they aim to perceive of the state as both limiting and liberating and plead for a more 'dispassionate' attitude towards the Swedish case.

The editors have selected three fields in which the state's drive to administer the life of its citizens was clearly at work: architecture, consumption and the welfare state. Architecture and consumption are both perceived as strategies to shape the 'people's home' (folkhemmet). Architects, home designers, and public exhibitions were all to 'educate' the people and produce a responsible and 'rational' citizen (or consumer) who is him-/herself able to distinguish between 'false' desires and 'true' needs, between functional items and superfluous objects of luxury. Only in this way could Sweden become part of industrialised 'A-Europe' and not slide back into the dismal state of 'B-Europe'.<sup>2</sup>

The collected volume comprises twelve essays that address various aspects related to the three main themes. The division of the book into three parts corresponds to these thematic focuses, with titles 'Constructing the Welfare State', 'Consumers and Spectacles' and 'Towards a Genealogy of Modern Architecture'.

The first essay, written by Urban Lindberg and Mattias Tydén, provides a useful historiographical overview that follows the main argument of the editors. Two strands can be discerned in the historiography on the Swedish welfare state: one traditional (democratic), the other critical (constitutional) and both are normative in nature. By noting the emergence of a novel, third approach – one that avoids grand narratives, tries to place ideas and practices in a historical context and favors a comparative outlook – the authors confirm the impression that this volume will tread new ground by applying this perspective to the topics examined.

Unfortunately, and this is my main point of critique, the conceptual coherence is rapidly

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Etzemüller, *Die Romantik der Rationalität*. Alva & Gunnar Myrdal – Social Engineering in Schweden, Bielefeld 2010; David Kuchenbuch, *Geordnete Gemeinschaft. Architekten als Sozialingenieure – Deutschland und Schweden im 20. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld 2010; Carl Marklund / Peter Stadius, *Merging Modernity with Nationalism in the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930* in: *Culture Unbound* 2 (2010), S. 609-634. On a topic stronger related than the title suggests: Lucy Creagh / Helena Käberg / Barbara Miller Lane (eds.), *Modern Swedish Design. Three Founding Texts*, New York 2008. reviewed by David Kuchenbuch, in: *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 25.05.2010 <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2010-2-143>> (21.04.2011).

<sup>2</sup>In the 1931 functionalist manifesto acceptera, the art historian and architects Gregor Paulsson, Uno Åhrén, Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius and Eskil Sundahl urged readers to accept 'the reality that exists' and adapt to A-Europe. This important manifesto can be found in: Creagh / Käberg / Miller Lane, *Modern Swedish Design*, S. 140-347.

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lost in the course of the book. While some authors do apply this approach to their topic of interest, others make no reference to it at all. This is in particular the case with the two essays written by three representatives of the 'older' strands in historiography: Henrik Berggren / Lars Trägårdh and Yvonne Hirdman. It remains somewhat unclear how they fit within the larger framework of this volume.

In their article 'Pippi Longstocking. The Autonomous Child and the Moral Logic of the Swedish Welfare State,' Berggren and Trägårdh argue that 'statist individualism' is a feature that distinguishes Sweden from other Western countries. The state is perceived as an emancipatory force that helped to free individuals from traditional power structures, which ultimately led to a strong alliance between the state and citizens. It is clear that the authors prefer this situation over alternatives, in which families rather than individuals are perceived as the cornerstone of society. Their preferences are particularly clear when they argue that children in the United States (as opposed to Sweden) are considered 'a kind of private property' and warn against the use of children as a means to an end. Unfortunately, their article basically restates their earlier work<sup>3</sup> and does not reflect upon the critique and the possible relevance of the approach adopted by the composers of this volume.

The renowned historian Yvonne Hirdman, who has published widely on social engineering in Sweden and has focused primarily on coercive social policies, provides us with a collage of ideas and measures undertaken during the initial construction phase of the welfare state. Hirdman underlines the ambivalence of the modernizing drive: on the one hand, the utopian aim to create happiness for the greatest number of people (a direct legacy of utopian socialist thinkers of the nineteenth century, she argues) and, on the other hand, the 'hidden problems of happiness' (friction between individual and collective, encroachment on reproductive rights, etc.). Hirdman's article

offers food for thought, but fails to explain how these elements could be reconciled in the minds of social engineers.

People's needs were central to the modernist design of building blocks, standardised commodities and home interiors, yet this new trend entailed an ambiguity in the sense that citizens were to first internalise a specific set of moral values. Or, as one architect put it, 'What we need is not an opinion in general, but an educated opinion.' (p. 165). This ambivalence is well worked out by Helena Mattsson (the production of the 'rational' consumer), Penny Sparke (domestic design), Ylva Habel (the exhibition *Modern Leisure*) and David Kuchenbuch (the architectural discourse in the 1920s to 1950s). Citizens had to distinguish between desires and needs (Mattsson), 'good', that is functionalist and 'bad', that is 19th century bourgeois taste (Sparke), general and educated opinions (Kuchenbuch) and 'free time' and 'dead time' (Habel). The *Modern Leisure* exhibition of 1936 taught visitors by doing, or, as the prospectus stated, 'If the people are unable to fill up their leisure hours in such a way that they derive health and pleasure from it, then the community should help them by advice and action [...]. The Ystad Exhibition will display a new social reality' (p. 124).

Did a particular thing called the „Swedish way“ ever exist or was Swedish modernism an integral part of a broader European movement? This is a question that the editors pose in their introduction. The contributions by Mattsson, Thordis Arrhenius (*Skansen* open-air museum) and Eva Rudberg (an overview of several functionalist undertakings) show that the protagonists made a serious effort to present functionalism as a style firmly rooted in Swedish national traditions. By underlining that the bareness and simplicity of modernist design can be traced back to Swedish vernacular culture, they countered criticism about the funkis' supposed 'un-Swedishness'.

Yet, in order to answer the editors' question, a comparative approach is needed. References to other countries (mainly the United States) are made throughout the volume, but it is only the contributions by Kuchenbuch and Sparke that are of a truly comparative nature. They seem to suggest that a particular

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<sup>3</sup>Henrik Berggren / Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige*, Stockholm 2006.

Swedish modernism existed. Kuchenbuch describes how a democratic professional ethos developed among Swedish architects and empirical tools were crafted to analyse people's needs, whereas German architects were very reluctant to give up their status as architects-as-experts, thus disqualifying themselves for the postwar democratisation of German society. Sparke compares two models of domestic consumption, one that arose in the context of laissez-faire capitalism (United States), the other in welfare states that attempted to control consumption (Sweden). Interesting differences become apparent, one of them being the contrasting interpretations of consumption as an irrational versus a rational phenomenon.

In sum, this volume adopts a very promising approach, while the quality and suitability of the different essays vary somewhat. The articles in which the editors' conceptual approach is applied to empirical research are most interesting. Something similar can be said of the book's layout: its design is a true pleasure, but the substantial number of spelling mistakes in some of the articles could have easily been removed.

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