

Domestic Monumentality in the Inter-war Years

Gothenburg Courthouse Extension and Aarhus City Hall

In the vivid interwar years, Scandinavian modernist architects were in search of genuine identity and meaning in the development of international modernism. In the aftermath of the influential Stockholm Expo in 1930 and its manifest introduction of a modernist approach, architects in Sweden, Denmark and the other Nordic countries pursued a critical reorientation and adaptation. The Stockholm Expo was perceived as a turning point by the majority of architects and designers. It incited new architectural visions and perspectives and marked a notable departure from the Beaux-Arts tradition with its stylistic approach, but above all it evoked a fresh connection between architecture and societal issues that became visible in new public buildings.

Modernism in Scandinavia is often characterized by its attention for the spheres of everydayness and domesticity. These qualities seem at first sight to be opposed to the large-scale organisation and the anonymous character of public buildings. However, a number of prominent Scandinavian public buildings of the 1930s seems to move beyond this paradox. In these projects for a new architecture of democracy, civic communication and service, architects countered the conventions of grandeur and power display of traditional public buildings and formulated a critical and alternative approach to monumentality.ⁱ

This essay examines two different public buildings in which a so-called 'new monumentality' is addressed: the Gothenburg Courthouse Extension by Swedish architect Erik Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940) and the Aarhus City Hall by Danish architects Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) and Erik Møller (1909-2002). While contemporaries first and foremost treated new monumentality on the level of the city or through the exterior expression of buildings, these projects found answers to a new monumentality in the interior.

Field of Tension: The Question of Monumentality

In the mid-twentieth-century modernism, the question of monumentality in architecture became a field of critical examination. New architectural approaches questioned the legitimacy of monumental architecture. Could and should monumentality in modern times serve any purpose at all? And if so, how should it then be expressed in order to correspond with the needs of modern society and its altered architectural expectations? While in international architecture discourses these debates would only fully emerge in the 1940s, for instance in the writings of Giedion, Leger, Sert and Kahn, in Scandinavia architectural alternatives to traditional monumentality already were explored in public buildings during the 1930s.ⁱⁱ

Asplund's Gothenburg Courthouse Extension and Jacobsen and Møller's Aarhus City Hall are examples of public buildings in which the novel problem of monumentality was

addressed. Like many other progressive architects of the period, Asplund and Jacobsen & Møller were influenced by modern currents in architecture and felt the need to develop a contemporary architectural language. They searched for new architectural models and expressions that could engage with the open society and its supporting institutions that had started to characterise the modern Scandinavian societies.

Against this background the rearticulation of the idea of monumentality, captured in these two buildings, can in that perspective be seen as an architectural response to broader societal developments, particularly the emergence of social democracy and its specific initiatives towards the reform of society. The policies of the liberal governments of the first decades of the twentieth century in Sweden and Denmark had led to unemployment and housing shortage. The impasse provided the impetus to various political and cultural initiatives, stimulating directly or indirectly an attitude towards the democratisation of architecture and aesthetics and encouraging architects and designers to address their work towards common people instead of the privileged few. In Sweden the Saltsjöbaden Agreement of 1938, a labour market treaty cementing the social norm that two sides shall conclude agreements without interference by the government, as well as the fast developing Swedish Cooperative Union and Wholesale Society (KF/Kooperativa Förbundet), which promoted *Folkhemmet* (People's Home), are examples of other democratic influences.ⁱⁱⁱ Comparable developments took place in Denmark, where the cooperative Association of Social Housing FSB (Foreningen Socialt Boligbyggeri) and the Danish Consumers Cooperative Society (FDB/Fællesforeningen for Danmarks Brugsforeninger) aimed at functional, beautiful and affordable housing and utensils for everyone.

In this process of searching for adequate answers to monumentality, the visions of architects and of the public often clashed. While the general public was ready to accept new forms of social organisation, they were far less open to new forms of architecture. The public representatives were generally not ready for new interpretations and concepts of public buildings; they clung to the conventional perception of civic architecture as monumental, an iconographic representation of power and often an important landmark in the city.

Gothenburg Courthouse Extension

When the Gothenburg Courthouse Extension opened its doors in 1937, the building caused considerable controversy and was subject to agitated public debates on traditional versus modern interpretations of monumentality. Asplund, the architect of the new courthouse extension, had experienced difficulties in finding an appropriate architectural language for the building's façades. It turned out to be an almost impossible task to attain a contemporary solution – in harmony with the original classicist courthouse from 1672 and in accordance with official's desires and demands. The final design of the exterior caused a marked commotion and negative reactions towards Asplund, whose reputation became stained in Sweden. Later Asplund's extension received an almost general acclaim, both nationally and internationally, because of its subtle typological, compositional and material formula that

introduced the new while adapting to the existing building. Asplund offered a strong stance on what a modern monumental architecture in the urban context might be. However, it is the extension's interior that, even more explicitly, demonstrates Asplund's innovative approach to the question of monumentality.

Instead of holding on to the traditional courthouse typology, which represents sovereignty and rule, power and repression, Asplund intended to create a 'democratic interior', characterised by openness and friendliness. He was dedicated to creating a public decorum that would temper the typical state of worry and anxiety that users experience when facing a lawsuit. At the same time, Asplund was committed to designing an interior for the courthouse that embodied veneration and imbued respect for the court. To achieve this balancing act between what we can describe as an anti-monumental and monumental approach to architecture, Asplund made use of a series of specific architectural strategies.

Asplund merged old and new – the extension is right next to the historical courthouse building – by adding an equally tall building volume, with at its centre a large atrium surrounded by courtrooms and other facilitating spaces. The atrium was a favoured spatial figure in the earlier monumental architecture in Scandinavia, known from, for instance, Martin Nyrop's Copenhagen City Hall (1892-1905) and Ragnar Östberg's City Hall in Stockholm (1913-1923). In Asplund's building the atrium, however, becomes an element of visual connection and openness. It visually connects to the existing courtyard, which is only divided by a delicately framed glass wall. From here natural light pours into the atrium from the south. To supply sufficient natural light for the depth of the atrium, Asplund also provided it with a large south-facing skylight. The size of the atrium establishes a monumental quality. Its bright spaciousness and its position in the building's organisation is emphasised by the transparent surrounding galleries. Its monumental character, however, is subtly downplayed by Asplund's consistent use of soft natural materials on all surfaces, in details and for furniture. The use of wood is omnipresent in the entire interior and offers the inside of the courthouse a visually warm glow as well as a very favourable acoustics. Wood is applied at all vertical surfaces. At ground-floor level walls are covered with smooth plywood, the upper-level walls are dressed in oak, while the courtrooms are clad in vertical slats of Oregon pine. The materiality indicates the differences in functions, as well as discretely signifying the semantic status of various rooms – such as in the courtrooms, where the noble wooden finish underlines the honorific character of the place. In addition, Asplund pays attention to the balancing of forms. Hence, the severe form of the courtroom is countered by rounded corners. The resulting balance between gravitas and informality can also be found in the main public staircase that connects the waiting areas and the courtrooms. This architectural element, which at first sight offers a clear element of monumentality, is designed as a comforting figure: its very form allows the users to take slow sliding steps, while ascending towards the moment of trial.^{iv}

Asplund's concern with the experience of the citizen shows in his continuous attempts to moderate the inherent strained atmosphere of the courthouse. From this perspective, he furnished the waiting areas with (seemingly) random clusters of chairs that invite informal,

eased waiting. The wicker chair, an interior element from the domestic sphere, which Asplund designed especially for this public interior, supports this idea of an atmosphere of informality. It demonstrates the intention to introduce homely and everyday qualities into the interior of a severe courthouse. In *Experiencing Architecture*, the Danish architecture critic and writer, Steen Eiler Rasmussen captured this atmosphere in a well-known photograph.^v He noted that Asplund, in order to avoid harsh shadows, softens the usually sharp edged I-columns by rendering them with concrete – yet another example of the balancing act between the formal and the informal.

Asplund's courthouse interior received mixed critical attention. Some critics found the interior 'peculiarly enchanting', praising 'the variety of decorations and the comfortable furniture'^{vi}, while others felt that it was not sufficiently particular, that it was reminiscent of a hotel lobby and that its details were too fine, elegant and ingenious. In the opinion of some critics, the design clashed with the users it intended to accommodate, the ordinary people, who would feel alienated and misplaced in the interior.^{vii}

Aarhus City Hall

Danish architect Arne Jacobsen is reported to have been notably enthusiastic about Asplund's extension and paid it a visit soon after its inauguration. His design for a new city hall in Aarhus from 1937, together with his colleague Erik Møller, implies a number of similar properties; they shared an intention to accommodate a new civic realm and a large interest for the public interior. Although both programme and context were rather different from Asplund's Courthouse extension, Jacobsen and Møller were faced with similar problems regarding monumentality. Also in Denmark, the public demand for public buildings with a monumental character was strong and informed by traditional visions, which clashed with the ideas of modern architects.

Jacobsen and Møller's Aarhus City Hall of is situated on a corner site in the old city centre of Aarhus. It is a freestanding building with a tall clock tower. Instead of proposing a 'solid' building volume, maintaining the traditional idiom for monumental building, the architects created three distinct volumes determined by the different programmatic functions of the city hall. In 1942 the Swedish critic Gregor Paulsson pointed out this 'dissolution of the solid block' as *the* tendency to conceive of modern monumental architecture in the 1930s. For Paulsson it represented a clear rupture with traditional monumentality and 'the liberation of the straitjacket of the 1800s'^{viii}. Initially the design did not include a clock tower, another typifying trait in monumental architecture, which provoked a lot of criticism among the citizens of Aarhus. In the local newspaper *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, critical voices lamented the proposal's lack of monumentality. Some critics explained this as the result of the rejection of tradition and predilection of 'the conscious Puritan and unadorned', while others saw it as the expression of the architects' pretentious Internationalism and its neglect of 'national differences in terms of climate, building materials, tradition and needs'.^{ix}

Under the pressure of public opinion and on the demand of officials – who desired and claimed more representative, monumental features— the architects had to modify their design and add a clock-tower. The initial modest plaster cladding of the façades was also exchanged for more exquisite Norwegian marble – again as a reaction to the wishes of the public.

Contrary to the exterior, and just as in the case of the courthouse by Asplund, public opinion had practically no impact on the design of the interior of the Aarhus City Hall. In any case, it seems that Jacobsen and Møller were able to express and pursue their architectural aims in the interior space quite autonomously.

Despite the fact that Aarhus City Hall is programmatically more layered and is of a larger scale, it bears a number of interesting similarities with Asplund's courthouse, addressing monumentality through the general interior layout and its detail. As in the Gothenburg Courthouse Extension, the atrium becomes the turning point where the delicate balance of monumentality versus what I propose to call 'non-monumentality' is at play.

While the intimate and the small scale prevails in the Gothenburg Courthouse, Aarhus City Hall is marked by its large size, its multi-functionality and a strong organisational character, supporting and distributing employees and users in an efficient manner. The resulting sizable building, provides a more monumental expression and formal character to the spatial experience than in the courthouse. Jacobsen shared with Asplund, however, the idea that public buildings should be egalitarian; they should serve the public and be a place where ordinary citizens feel that 'good architecture' was not only a prerogative of the higher classes^x. As a result, he designed the monumental atrium of the City Hall as a place that was comprehensible and inviting to all.

Citizens are, moreover, the central theme in the work of art *A Human Society*, a large mural positioned above the entrance of the atrium. Danish artist Thorvald Hagedorn Olsen (1902-98) depicted the city and its citizens at work and play, with the family at its centre. Besides its correlation with the egalitarian ideals of Jacobsen and Møller, the cobalt blue and ochre-yellow colour scheme of the mural offers an additional interior quality to the wooden-cladded walls and white-plastered ceilings of the atrium. While the size of the mural supports the monumental character of the atrium, its motif and colours introduce the intimacy of the everyday life world of the citizens and a sense of non-monumentality.

This field of tension between monumentality and non-monumentality, is further explored by Jacobsen and Møller in other parts of the building. A good example is the implementation of *soft contours*^{xi}. Similar to Gothenburg, columns, beams, galleries and corners have no hard edges; they are designed as rounded, smooth-edged and curvy elements. The most explicit illustration is the design of the council boardroom that is expressively and symbolically dominated by softness in every single detail, from walls to furniture. This softness intuitively feels welcoming and informal. It is enhanced by the employment of handcrafted and honestly displayed materials, which resonate with John Ruskin's definition of an architecture of 'truth'. The City Hall is a delicate composition of wood, brass, white painted plaster and metal – evoking an atmosphere of lightness and

elegance that invoke associations with the eighteenth-century Gustavian interior. The use of wood offers another way to introduce intimacy in the monumental structure. Wood appears in many different ways in the interior, as well in terms of type, craftsmanship and detailing. Exemplary is the material expression of the office walls, which are composed of slender vertical beech lists. Seen from a distance, and from a straight-forward position, patterns, partitions and depths appear. Due to its porosity, the panelling also improves the acoustics of the space. A completely different expression is achieved in the flooring of the atrium. Here, a dark 7000-year-old bog oak, originating from the region of Jutland and laid in herringbone pattern, imbues the space with links to a collective past – understood as the surrounding nature and local craftsmanship.

Along with its soft contours and the use of handcrafted and clearly displayed materials, the identity of the Aarhus City Hall is strongly characterised by its furniture, objects, lights, fittings and lettering. Everything in the interior was specifically designed and custom-made for the new public interior. Jacobsen and Møller engaged the young cabinetmaker and furniture designer Hans Wegner to design and produce most of the interior elements because of his capacity to unite modern design and traditional craft. This combination of progressive design principles with longstanding craft techniques was yet another attempt to bring the modern architecture of the City Hall to the everyday life and memory of the citizens. As Witold Rybczynski observes: 'That is why details are important: they express ideas and ideals'^{xii}.

Monumentality and Empiricism: Scandinavian Modernism

Gothenburg Courthouse Extension and Aarhus City Hall express new design approaches to the public interior in a period where a new idea of civic culture emerged in Scandinavia, but neither the public nor architectural culture knew how to relate to architectural monumentality. The two projects exemplify a search for a new monumentality, which expresses the significance and authority of the new civic realm, but without being imposing and intimidating. Architects searched for interior architecture that was more communicative and in service of the citizen. Out of this perspective, public interiors and interior elements were related more firmly to the human scale and the intimate, personal experience of the domestic sphere. Architectural means were activated to obtain this goal. Structural components such as columns, beams, edges were softened. Handrails, door handles, chairs were ergonomically shaped. Everyday furniture elements and arrangements were inserted into the public building. Through the frequent use of handcrafted and honestly displayed materials and of daylight the idea of naturalness, of being in a human environment, was created for the users. All of these properties contributed to a new monumentality, which places the needs and expectations of the modern citizen at centre stage.

In addition, the two projects demonstrate an innovative interior architecture that stems from an empirical approach in which tradition and acknowledgement of historical architectural qualities are not expelled – as was the case for many modernists operating in the interwar period. The projects for Gothenburg Courthouse Extension and Aarhus City Hall

illustrate how lessons learned from the past –in terms of culture and craftsmanship— can be assimilated into modern architectural attitudes. In early Scandinavian Modernism the link with tradition through the careful attention for materiality and craftsmanship was seen as a way to humanize functionalism; an attitude that was coined by the English *Architectural Review* in 1948 as ‘New Empiricism’^{xiii}. New empiricism and modern monumentality^{xiv} went, in other words, hand in hand in the architecture of Gothenburg Courthouse Extension and Aarhus City Hall. The projects reveal a crucial period in Scandinavian modernism in which the public interior became a laboratory for relating public buildings closer to its citizens, which resulted in an undogmatic interpretation of modernism and a domestic monumentality.

ⁱ The very first reference to the problem with monumentality was made by the Swedish critic Gregor Paulsson in 1920, see: Gregor Paulsson, *Den ny arkitektur* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Aschehoug, 1920). It included a chapter ‘Ny Monumentalitet’, 110-27.

ⁱⁱ S. Giedion, F. Leger and J. L. Sert, ‘Nine Points on Monumentality’, *Harvard Architecture Review* (1943); Louis I. Kahn, ‘Monumentality’, in: Paul Zucker (ed.), *New Architecture and City Planning. A Symposium* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 577–588; ‘In Search of a New Monumentality. A symposium by Gregor Paulsson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, William Holford, Sigfried Giedion, Walter Gropius, Lucio Costa and Alfred Roth’, *Architectural Review* (1948), 117-128.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Folkhemmet* is a political concept that the social-democratic party under Per Albin Hansson (1885-1946) used in the 1930s for measures to keep Sweden out of the depression (pensions, unemployment benefits, stimulating public works, supporting agriculture, etcetera), with a pronounced focus on the housing shortage. Later the concept was mainly identified with the Swedish welfare state. See: Lisa Brunnström, *Det Svenska folkshembygget: Om Kooperativa Förbundets arkitektkontor* (Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 2004); Anders Isaksson, *Per Albin: I. Vägen mot Folkhemmet* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1985).

^{iv} Carl-Axel Acking, ‘Asplund as Architectural Psychologist’, in: Christina Engfors (ed.) *Lectures and Briefings from International Symposium on the Architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund* (Stockholm: Swedish Museum of Architecture, 1986), 107-09.

^v Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1959), 196.

^{vi} *Göteborgs morgonpost*, 21 October (1940), 3.

^{vii} For an extended insight in the reception of the courthouse extension see: Nicholas Adams, *Gunnar Asplund's Gothenburg: The Transformation of Public Architecture in interwar Europe* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 123-143.

^{viii} Gregor Paulsson, ‘Ny arkitektur’, *Byggmästaren*, no. 23 (1942), 302.

^{ix} Quote from a newspaper, cited in architect M. K. Michaelsen, *Arkitektens Ugehæfte* (1937), 171.

^x Nicholas Adams and Erik Gunnar Asplund, *Gunnar Asplund's Gothenburg: The Transformation of Public Architecture in Interwar Europe* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 69.

^{xi} Expression translated from the Danish *den bløde kontur* and borrowed from: Carsten Thau and Kjeld Vindum, *Arne Jacobsen*, (Skive: Arkitektens Forlag, 1998), 276-77.

^{xii} Witold Rybczynski, *How Architecture Works. A Humanist Toolkit* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 179.

^{xiii} 'The New Empiricism: Sweden's Latest style' *Architectural Review*, No. 606 (June 1947), 199-204; with contributions by Erskine, Makelius and others; 'The New Empiricism in Denmark', *The Architectural Review*, no. 618 (June 1948)

^{xiv} This link between New Empiricism and Modern Monumentality in Scandinavian architecture was already made in 1937 by the Swiss architectural critic Peter Meyer. See: Ákos Moravansky, 'Peter Meyer and the Swiss Discourse on Monumentality', *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism*, vol. 8 (2011), no. 1, 1-20.