

## Rebels on Årsta square – the struggle for polychrome architecture

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### ABSTRACT

Årsta centre in Stockholm was built 1947-53. Architects and brothers Erik and Tore Ahlsén were responsible for the design of the buildings as well as the decorative, polychrome paintings covering the walls facing the square. The paintings were inspired by oriental patterns, Nordic folklore and modern art. The richness in colour was used as a political tool and a theatrical, playful protest following the discriminating use of colours in the 1930's. The result was heavily criticised by powerful men of the functionalistic school. They accused it for being an irresponsible flirt with mass-culture and a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural "masquerade" of ornaments.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"Rebels on Årsta square – the struggle for polychrome architecture" is the second case-study to be included in my thesis considering the colours of Swedish post-war architecture. The first case-study was presented as a paper at the AIC meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil in November 2004: "The colours of architectural structuralism – the office complex Garnisonen, Stockholm."

### 2. ÅRSTA CENTRE – A PRESENTATION

Årsta centre in Stockholm, built 1947-1953, was the first fully developed community centre to be completed in Sweden and was to exercise great impact, also internationally. The basic ideas were introduced in England as an answer to the consequences of war and human senses of alienation in the urban city. Post-war townplanning concentrated on community centres where the architecture should participate in the creation of "a new humanity". The Swedish style developing was named "The New Empiricism" by *Architectural Review* in 1947. The Årsta centre, mainly consisting of two-storey buildings, originally contained a cinema and a theatre, shops, a library, studios for artists, apartments as well as a variety of other cultural possibilities and civil services. The projecting phase had included many contacts with local associations. The architects and other leading men involved in the project wanted it to be a community centre with a clear common touch. They wanted the inhabitants of Årsta to meet – not for passive cultural consumption but in an active spirit of community (1).

Traditional Swedish building-materials were favoured such as wood, wrought iron and red brick (partly set in coloured mortar) but also other materials, like exposed concrete and white marble were used. But the most striking feature were the colourful, exterior mural paintings set in lime-paint "al secco". The murals were designed by the architects themselves to cover the walls around the square. The paint-works were to tie the individually designed volumes together, creating an impression of a space-unity with "the human being as the central figure."

In 1947 the Ahlsén brothers had the first wall of a building by the square covered in non-figurative patterns of green, yellow, white, black and pink-grey. Windows and balconies were surrounded and enclosed by the colours. The next building to be painted was the cinema, which is windows-less. Here triangles and rectangles were drawn out in a vertical effect and painted in green, black, yellow and white on a ground of greyish plaster. The theatre and civic hall (1953) was given a painting in darker colours of red and reddish brown, imitating brick. In this painting it is possible to trace distinct human figures that are moving or dancing.

The brother's cooperation was very close through all their life. Erik Ahlsén (1901-1988) and Tore Ahlsén (1906-1991) are well-known in Sweden for their architecture of every-day use, like for example Örebro civic hall (1965) and the terraced houses at Torsvik, Lidingö (1946) where rational planning is combined with a gentle and sensual design. They often worked sitting just opposite each other and in the case of the first wall painting in Årsta they studied the same drawing, maybe even at

the same time. According to Erik's son Bo, it is possible to trace who did which part of the first wall-painting. Tore, the younger, worked with forms of a smaller and softer character.

Reactions on the completed Årsta square were mainly positive on behalf of the sociological achievements but contained another side of strong criticism. A clear irritation among leading names of the functionalistic school could be found concerning the advanced, unusual colourfulness of the exterior walls. The criticism had elements of moral indignation. One of the more explicit case described the non-figurative design and its colours as a "violent nuisance". Why did the polychrome patterns on the walls cause such criticism? And why did the architects choose this design and the richness in colour?

### 3. AIM AND METHOD

The aim of this study is to understand why and how the colourful walls at Årsta came about and why they caused criticism.

Studies of archival material such as drawings and sketches (Swedish Architectural Museum), other presentation of the centre as well as more theoretical literature starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been a source of knowledge and understanding. Interviews with Bo Ahlsén, who is an artist, architect and son of Erik Ahlsén, have given a lively picture of the post-war art-scene surrounding the project. The criticism and the debate concerning colour and the paintings on Årsta torg were found after a survey of relevant articles in newspapers and journals 1943 – 1957.

### 4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

#### A reaction against white:

The study shows that the painted walls can be interpreted as a revolt against elements in the functionalistic architecture of the 1930's which at the time were being questioned. A general change of focus from an international architectural modernistic scene in favour of an internal, more folkloristic approach was one part of the background to the use of brick and colourful patterns at Årsta torg. Pre-war functionalism was considered being far too formal - *a style* that had forgotten human qualities. Colour was to represent one of these human qualities. Functionalistic living areas built were thought of as being "covered in beige". An interest reawakened for a larger variety, in colour, material and form.

#### A political protest and a strife for a folksy architecture:

The design and content of ideas at Årsta square were meant to express a protest against fascism and war. In this protest polychromy played an important part. A strong inspiration can be traced to Erik and Tore Ahlsén's contacts in 1946 with Asger Jorn, Danish artist of the Cobra-group, communist and member of the resistance in Denmark. The use of colour was for Asger Jorn a political statement.(2) Only through the liberation of colour could the new era of socialism become reality. At Årsta torg the colours were used according to Jorn, in a spirit of protest, in a spontaneous way trying to reach a natural expression of folklore independent of time and place.

Asger Jorn was also participating in an influential, Swedish debate in 1946 considering the roles of the symbolic antagonists Apollon and Dionysos in architecture. According to Jorn the powers and joy of Dionysos (the people) had for centuries been stifled under the pressure of the intellectualistic attitudes of Apollo (the elite). He was convinced of the founding importance of folklore as a source of art and architecture in favour of classicism.

Erik and Tore Ahlsén participated in an explosive and creative art-life, during and after the war. Founding inspiration came from Denmark and Asger Jorn but also from advocates of Swedish concretistic art (following Art Concret) particularly the artists in the post-war generation (*the men of 1947*). This can be seen especially when considering the paintings achieved later (the last building on the square was erected in 1953).

The architects wanted the square to be understood as a large common room, the largest room among other interior rooms, even if the sky above opened up for a different reality. The buildings seen as volumes with gables and fronts are not of importance, the essential is to understand the space which is created by the buildings surrounding the square. The notion of the square as an interior space

is obviously one of the reasons for choosing a lavish richness in colour. The colours were to indicate a founding and spontaneous sense of life.

Powerful critics:

Many of the founders and believers in the working methods of the Swedish functionalism had achieved important positions in Swedish society. They were in general not at all interested in colour and a variety of forms. They saw it as a step backwards and as a falsification of a true, pure and cultivated architecture.

The Årsta square with its peaceful, intimate character, functioning as an outdoor market, gives associations to an old-fashioned market place in an Italian village. References to Italy are also to be found in the name of the cinema (Forum) and in the sculpture on the square made by Bror Marklund: *Jesters in a farce à la Commedia dell'arte*.

The textile-like, multi-dimensional coloured patterns on the walls indicate a relation to the traditional Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, the masquerade and masks – a provocation to the theoretical foundations of modernism as formulated in *Ornament och Verbrechen* (Ornament and Crime) by Adolf Loos in 1908 (3). Loos argued that

”Decoration is of a sensorial and elementary order, as is color, and is suited to simple races, peasants and savages....The peasant loves ornaments and decorates his walls. The modern man wears a well-cut suit and is the owner of easel pictures and books”.(4)

The colours at Årsta opposed these ideas in coats of paint hiding the facades. The paintings were part of a creation of space where the patterns and colours underlined an uncertainty about where to find the borders of this large, exterior space.

As a consequence the critics accused the architecture for not being honest, the worst words an architect could hear. The critics were all professors, architects or/and influential writers forming an *intelligentia* who vividly protected the founding ideas of the 1920's and 1930's (with names like Gregor Paulsson, Lennart Holm, Gotthard Johansson and Nils Ahrbom). All of them were more or less connected to the Stockholm functionalistic exhibition of 1930 and its polemical pamphlet *Acceptera*.(5) They compared Årsta torg with the 19<sup>th</sup> century “masquerade” of ornaments:

The Ahlséns had “simply let a non-figurative picture *cover* a facade with a completely different design. The incongruity is flagrant and, in all its lack of taste, leaving the worst and wildest ornamental dissolutions of the 19th century far behind”, wrote one of the most influential critics, Gotthard Johansson, in the daily press in 1951.(6)

Colour was criticised as *a layer of paint, hiding* true structure and true architecture.

Apart from this the critics disliked the colours because they thought them to represent low cultural standards (in comparison with “simple races, peasants and savages”) and expressions of massculture. They saw the use of colour and spontaneous forms as irresponsible; an architect should not throw away energy on artistic “escapism”. Instead the time had come for shouldering serious responsibility. An interest in the colouring of architecture was morally condemned in a time of social change and new challenges in society.

To conclude, the decorative and polychrome paintings at Årsta square can be interpreted as a protest and a comment made by Dionysos to his counterpart, the intellectual gentleman Apollon, in an attempt to reintegrate colour, art and meaning (following Gottfried Semper).(7) The ideal was to offer a many-sided modernistic program for living based on experiences in the violent history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century .

## References

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