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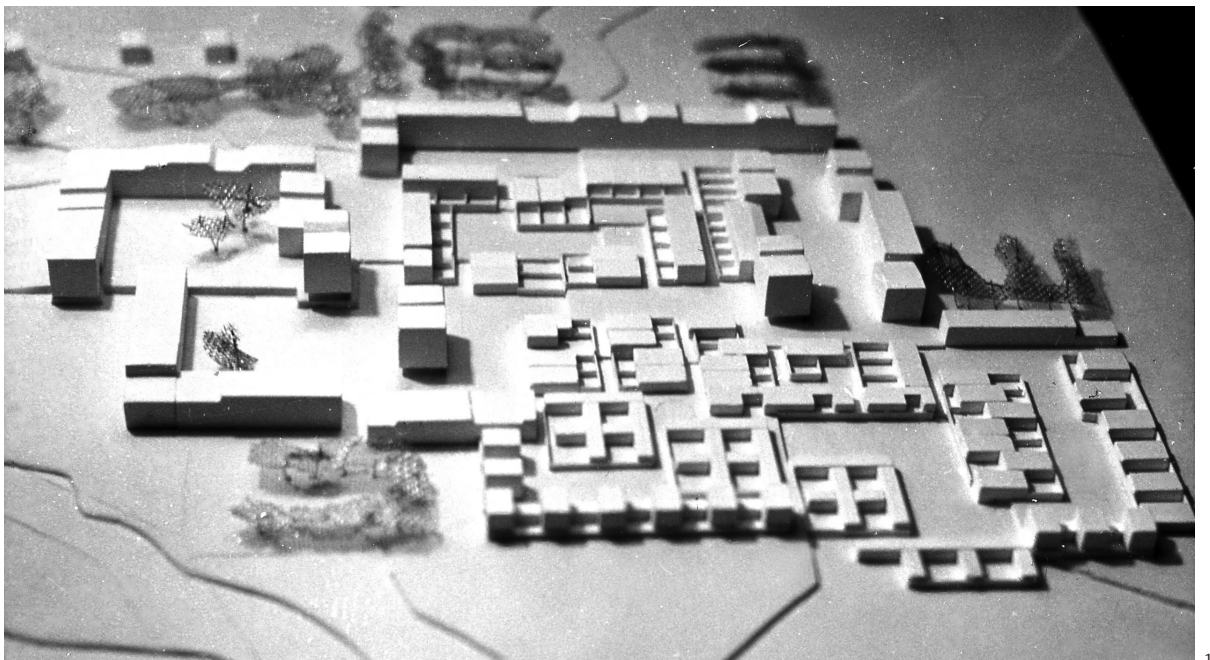
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1a



1b

Ralph Erskine’s lifelong commitment to a Nordic model of environmental and social sustainability is discussed with reference to four Swedish projects from four decades.

A loyal architecture? Ralph Erskine and the Nordic way

Claes Caldenby

Out of over one hundred Erskine projects in Sweden and abroad, I will select four from four different decades to discuss some aspects of the Nordicness of Ralph Erskine’s architecture.¹ The focus will be on what nowadays is called sustainability, a theme that was central to his work throughout his long life. The first example is the 1960s Brittgården housing estate in the small factory town of Tibro, typical of his early career, on the periphery of Sweden. The second will be his first major works in Stockholm, the buildings for Frescati University from the 1970s that earned him the title of being ‘our internationally most well-known architect’. The third is his handling of a late 1980s landmark building for a private client, the large building company Skanska, in Gothenburg. As a coda there will be a brief discussion of the 1990s Aula Magna at Frescati University and the ‘blue hour’, with architecture merging into the surrounding landscape. The argument is about the relation of architecture to its environment and its users, what with free interpretation of a formulation by Erskine in a 1978 lecture could be called a ‘loyal’ architecture.

Out of the ordinary

The Brittgården housing estate was built between 1960 and 1969 and it can be used to illustrate Erskine’s then already well-established, but unconventional, ideas about modern housing projects.² The background to the project was the rapid growth of the small factory town of Tibro on lake Vättern in southern Sweden. From a nineteenth-century starting point with farmers producing handmade furniture, it had developed into one of many small towns focused on furniture production (the town of Älmhult 200 kilometres away, famous for IKEA, has a similar background). Given all the new housing built in Sweden in the post-war decades, there was a seemingly never-ending demand for furniture. Tibro was growing and there was a great need for new housing. A conventional housing project for the Brittgården estate by other architects had not been approved by the National Housing Board,

which gave subsidised loans for housing. Erskine, who had designed a small building with shops in central Tibro, was asked to make a new proposal, which met with great acclaim [1a]. Local support, however, was not unequivocal. Four out of ten politicians voted against the controversial mix of apartments and terraced houses, but the need for new housing was urgent and the project was started with the cooperative housing company Riksborgen as developer.

In an issue of *Arkitektur* from 1981, Erskine looked back on Brittgården and recalled the ideas behind the project.³ The starting point was the critique of the more conventional preceding proposal with ‘the usual, lamella blocks all over the place’. He criticised two of the contemporary leading ideas in Swedish housing production as misunderstandings of Modernism: zoning, and the production adaptation. A model was taken from his Svappavaara project in the very north of Sweden with a protecting wall to the north, a device later used also in Byker in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK [1b]. Erskine wanted a dense and ‘mixed settlement with mixed functions’, even if not so much came out of that, no workplaces for example. Identity was important, he argued that you should feel ‘here I live, I know what here is’. The town’s architect criticised the variety of windows, so ‘I found out how to mix apartment types, which gives the facades their varied expression’, said Erskine.

Some sketches, most likely made by Erskine’s Danish collaborator Aage Rosenfold with text in a mixed Danish-Swedish language, explain the ideas in more detail. The importance of the social ‘group’ was underlined, an idea from sociology that had, already in the 1940s, inspired Swedish architects to work with neighbourhood planning. The ‘groupless’ large lamella blocks are contrasted with low-density ‘grouped’ structures [1c]. The ‘gossip group’ of neighbours with the street as its ‘living room’ is a central idea. In the four-storey duplex houses, the ‘streets in the air’ fulfil the same function. In one sketch, a man with a pipe (Rosenfold himself?) walks down a street in Brittgården with the traditional ‘gossip mirrors’ as a sign of the social control of

1a Brittgården housing estate in Tibro, south-western Sweden, designed by Ralph Erskine and built 1960–69. Mix of duplex apartments, atrium and terraced housing, with dense landscaping

1b Model of Brittgården showing the wall of higher (four-storey) buildings towards north and lower, dense housing in the centre



1c Drawing contrasting 'groupless' 'usual' lamella blocks and 'grouped' housing with access with galleries. Drawing likely by Aage Rosenvold of Erskine architects

1d A 'social imaginary' of a streetscape used and controlled by neighbours. Drawing likely by Aage Rosenvold

1e Drawing by Erskine of one of the entrances to Brittsgården, 'the small square' with signs of local social life and the ubiquitous eco-friendly means of transport, the balloon

1f Street in the air as a playground for children





1g Streets within Brittgården reserved only for bicycles, pedestrians and play

1h Atrium houses with movable walls for chosen degree of openness

1i Some of the four-storey houses are on pilotis

the small town [1d]. In a perspective by Erskine himself, we see the main entrance to Brittgården. 'Dancing tonight' is advertised on a poster. All around the 'small square' and on the galleries of the houses, people are present. High above it sails a hot-air balloon, Erskine's environmentally friendly communication icon [1e].

The densely built and landscaped area of Brittgården is the opposite of the 'prairie planning' of the 'usual'. Peter Davey has pointed to Erskine's fellow student at Regent Street Polytechnic, Gordon Cullen, as an inspiration.⁴ The 'streets in the air' and the juxtaposition of multi-family houses with terraced houses and atrium houses also point to Erskine's relation with the British architectural scene in the 1950s and to Team X [1f-i]. This was not altogether alien to the Swedish architectural scene at the time but very different from the mainstream of the 'million programme' of the years 1965-74 where zoning and production adaption was the official ideology. No wonder that Erskine was not given any commissions in Sweden during the boom years of housing construction but went to work in Britain instead.

My first encounter with Brittgården was in the spring of 1968 as a second-year student at the school of architecture in Stockholm. We went on a study tour to Denmark and the only piece of architecture considered worth seeing on our way through Sweden was Brittgården. This was like a preparation for the harsh criticism of the million programme that our generation was about to launch in the autumn of 1968.



1g

1h



1i

'Our internationally most well-known architect'

In the early 1980s, a whole issue of *Arkitektur*, the Swedish Review of Architecture, was devoted to the work of Ralph Erskine [2a].⁵ It was one in a series of such monographs, but the first one on an architect who did not have most of his work behind him.

Erskine was introduced then in Sweden as 'our internationally most well-known architect'. His lack of interest in the stylistic debates of the Post-Modern era was underlined in the editorial as well as his loyalty to the users, against 'profit interests'. 'A hero of our time' is the headline of Mats Egelius's article about Erskine's work.

From an early career with relatively small projects in factory towns in the middle of Sweden, then working mainly in Britain during the late 1960s building boom in Sweden, Erskine now had the opportunity to present his first main public buildings from the late 1970s in the capital of Sweden. He had reorganised his office to leave the bulk of design projects to his younger collaborators.

Besides a lot of revisits to earlier projects the Erskine edition of *Arkitektur* presented the 1981 student union building 'Allhuset' together with a preview of the 1982 Frescati University Library in Stockholm. Frescati was a typical 1960s university campus on the outskirts of the city, moving from a location in central Stockholm much against the will of staff, especially those from the humanities. University planning was the task of the National Board of Building, at the time following a 'structural philosophy' emphasising flexibility. The first building, known as the 'Blue Building' after its cool blue greenish glass facade, was an example of systematic planning that met with strong criticism from the 1968 generation moving out to an unfinished campus. It was seen as more of a student factory than an environment encouraging

2a The 1981 Erskine monograph of *Arkitektur*, the Swedish review of architecture, featuring on the cover the student union building of the new Stockholm university, Erskine's first public building in Stockholm

2b 'Allhuset', student union building from 1981



2a



2b

intellectual exchange. The pragmatic attitude of the 'strong society' of Swedish social democracy at its heyday had been formulated by one of the architects of the National Board of Building: 'Utopias don't flourish where you can carry things out.' Suddenly this was not enough.

Erskine took on the task to do things differently, trying to mend the fragmented site and create much-needed meeting points for students. Allhuset is 'informal and playful', argued Erskine's own presentation [2b]. The library has two sides, one more modular and another in a free geometry, with concave spaces embracing as it were the age-old oak trees on the site. A vaulted open entrance space with tree-like pillars functions as a link between the library and the 'Blue Building'. There is a lot of timber both in interiors and exteriors. There are also some seemingly whimsical forms with a clear functional idea, like the reading balconies. The two Erskine buildings on each side of the central axis of the campus have the ambition to bridge the gap between the earlier structuralist buildings and to introduce a new, warmer and more humane atmosphere.

The ambition to make a difference was not lost on the critic, the younger architect Krister Bjurström. His comment starts by saying that 'Circus Erskine' has come to town. 'The materiality is more painterly than constructive. The one believing that a building should be elaborated into delicate harmony gets kicked in the ass. [...] At last Frescati got a large, uniting space for community, chats, discussions and debates.' Erskine's two buildings are refreshing solo artists that give a new meaning to the rational background architecture, with full respect for the users. As the editorial ends: 'we have got confirmed the strength of an architecture that unites an unusual empathy with an equally unusual artistic ability'.

'A feeling of belonging'

The late 1980s was a period when the Swedish model of a strong state began to be dismantled. This meant a building boom for commercial real estate, for the production of architecture in service of corporate image, high-rise buildings and the use of public-private-partnerships as a planning method. The regional headquarters in Gothenburg for the large building company Skanska, finished in 1989, is a characteristic case [3]. It was part of a development of former harbour areas close to the centre of the city. Skanska wanted a high-rise building, both as a landmark and as a demonstration project for their ability to build high in the deep clay of the river valley. After an attempt with other architects, Skanska were challenged by the town planning office to come up with something more daring.

Ralph Erskine had been involved for some years in the planning of the north riverside, where former shipyard areas, closed down in the 1970s crisis, were to be turned into new urban districts. His visions for the future 'New River City' featured pyramid-like high-rise buildings, an idea he had tried before but never had the possibility to build. For Skanska, it

was an obvious choice to say to the authorities that if we hire Erskine, 'our internationally most well-known architect', then we must be given the permit to build an iconic building.

There is a video made by the town planning office at a relatively early stage of the project where Erskine explains the design over a model of the area.⁶

'In my first sketches I turned the high-rise down, but now I work with high-rise and think that is great fun. But I am combining it with the district around that is growing up towards the high-rise. [...] We want a feeling of belonging so we don't build completely different buildings, but a city.'

He also explains how the high-rise steps out to the waterfront and, together with the lower part of the building, creates an urban space open to the evening sun. 'The lower part sweeps up towards the tower and finally it flourishes with festivities on its top.' Skanska's project architect then discusses some of the very first sketches with Erskine, expressing his fascination about how similar they are to the final project. 'I don't know how you do it. Either you are very stubborn or else you were right from the beginning'; 72 years old, Erskine answers:

Well I think it has to do with age. When you are young you have to test everything and you don't know how to do it. Now I think you zoom in much quicker with the help of experience of what works.

And he ends by proudly saying 'I think this will be great.'

The high-rise was a spectacular design with a cladding of stripes in red and white and a crown with a public outlook tower, all reminiscent of the marine architecture of beacons and lighthouses. The large office of Skanska was not in the high-rise however, since vertical communications are inconvenient. They used the lower part, which has one of the best of the many covered courtyard spaces of the late 1980s. Offices along the facades are connected with irregularly placed bridges over an atrium space. The ground floor was a public space with a restaurant where you could watch the river nearby as well as the Skanska people at work crossing the bridges above you. Later, Skanska moved to another more conventional high-rise, which has nothing of the public space that was so essential for Erskine.

The blue hour

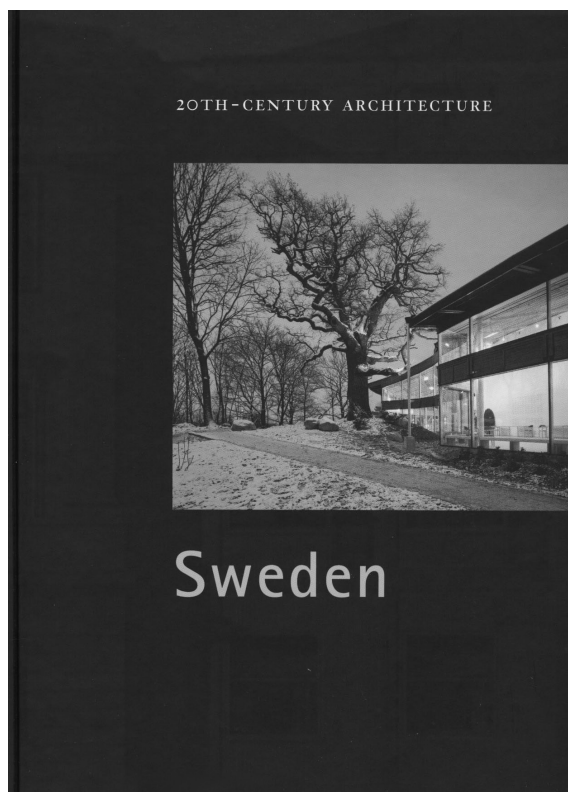
In the 1990s Wilfried Wang, then director of DAM, Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, initiated a series of exhibitions on the twentieth-century architecture of different European countries. The idea was to present the rich spectrum of architectures to be found in some countries in Europe, at a time immediately preceding their deeper collaboration in the European Union. For DAM, it was also an opportunity to get international support for making exhibitions it would otherwise not have a budget for.

Sweden was invited to show its contemporary architecture in 1998. An ambitious catalogue was to be produced in connection with the exhibition



3

3 Skanska high-rise in Gothenburg from 1989. Marine associations and an outlook tower on the top



4 Aula Magna at Stockholm University on the cover of a 1998 book on Swedish twentieth-century architecture

published for an exhibition in Frankfurt. The 'blue hour' when exterior and interior, nature and culture, are merging

and I was asked to be its editor. Since this was the first summing-up of twentieth-century Swedish architecture, we used the opportunity to make the volume into more of a reasoned history of Swedish architecture than a catalogue. The publisher, Rizzoli, had a format for the catalogue where the cover should feature a recent building on the front cover against a background of an older building in dark colour. The background building was Asplund's Law Courts extension in Gothenburg and, for the piece of architecture at the forefront, we chose Erskine's Aula Magna.

Aula Magna, inaugurated in 1997, was Erskine's last important work in Stockholm, crowning a hill at the Frescati University with a rounded building in brick and glass carefully inserted among the oak trees of the site. The main auditorium is semi-circular like a Greek theatre but its interior is clad with a rich pattern of wooden panels that give it a warm colour. The auditorium space is surrounded by a glazed foyer space several storeys high with places for students to mingle or sit reading. The foyer space has curved indentations to leave the oak trees close to the facade unmolested by the architecture. Erskine's intention was clearly a meeting place under the old trees, with full respect for one of nature's most sustainable species.

The photo chosen for the cover was taken in the 'blue hour', where light inside is equal to light outside [4]. The prolonged blue hour is in itself a Nordic phenomenon due to the angle of the

sun. But it also showed the lamp-lit interior as if merged with the still discernible nature around it. We thought the image was perfect for its purpose. The publisher did not agree. After a long and vivid discussion we decided not to offer any alternative, so this photo is to be found on the book as published. The argument against it was that it was 'too little architecture', not a clear-cut enough object. Here was apparently an interesting cultural difference between German and Nordic minds.

Erskine himself was not involved in the discussion but I think he would have agreed that clear-cut objects never were his aim. Architecture for him was always about spaces for people close to nature.

A loyal architecture?

A kind of manifesto for Erskine's architecture was published in *Arkitektur* in 1979.⁷ It might be time specific in its questioning of the Post-Modern stylistic debates of the 'academic tradition' and in its choice of specific new tendencies to embrace. But its solidarity with the 'real needs of real people' is something that characterised Erskine's work throughout his career. Emphasising 'loyal architecture' in the headline was the editor's choice, not Erskine's. He uses the word loyalty more in passing but with a very clear point: 'We must clearly understand that our hope stands to a relevant change, and our loyalty to radical rather than conservative philosophy and politics, whether from right or left, to the real needs of the deprived and underprivileged rather than to the profitable and questionable needs of the rich and powerful.'

Concepts like 'organic architecture', which had been used about Erskine's architecture, might be amusing he says, but they can also be means to escape from an unpleasant reality. He said he saw no need in the minds of the inhabitants of Newcastle upon Tyne or Resolute Bay for such discussions, and they might even think that 'seemingly only architects don't understand the important applied art of building and its real value'. Why would we be interested in today's dinosaurs, the masters of monumentality, Erskine asks.

The results of natural science have been sensational since its origins in the eighteenth century, Erskine argued, but only later did a systematic study of man begin. This knowledge must be used by architects, followed by intuition, sensibility and experience to create poetic works, he claimed. Erskine saw new insights and values that he thought would radically change architecture. 'But while the consequences of some of these changes to a large extent already are operative in Sweden, in other countries they still seem less clear.' He then listed four factors that he thought, by being legally formalised, would have a dynamic influence on Swedish architecture:

1. Democratic participation in decision processes.
2. Rights of minorities – for the moment especially disabled people.
3. Energy saving.
4. Other resource saving.

Erskine said that he had had experience of

participation for thirty years, since he designed the factory town of Gästrike-Hammarby in the late 1940s. He claimed to have discovered that 'ordinary' people – whether Swedish, English, Canadian or Inuit – have a clear and exact understanding of their own way of life, which is not always the case with more sophisticated people, trained in argumentation and less open to alternative thinking. Such a process should lead to an architecture that is less 'designed' and more adapted to needs.

Concern for disabled people, he argued, would lead to an architecture that combines stairs with ramps and lifts and which demands considerations of construction economy, cleaning and services. Energy saving would promote large and simple volumes and restrictions on glazing and force architects to relearn the 'subtle art of proportioning'. This goes for cold as well as warm climates, which are both highly energy consuming. He imagined an architecture that 'follows the climate', closing and opening in relation to the sun. Resource saving has been self-evident in traditional cultures, Erskine says, and the artistic quality of modern mass construction can by no means be compared to that.

As if from his own experience, he also said that he regretted the fear of unconventional solutions. It leads to a loss of human values as well as of craftsmanship. 'An ambitious architect's work, careful cost evaluation and well-reasoned priorities can help the situation, but far too often clients avoid problems by turning their back on "inconvenient" architects with too ambitious ideas.'

Erskine summed up: A truly resource-based architecture could mean on the one hand an architects' architecture finding poetry in the economic use of resources at the same time as it meets all the needs of a modern society, and on the other hand a people's architecture made by users with a readiness for the engagement demanded. But such architecture is still scarce. Modernist models seem irrelevant but no new ones have been found. We long for a poetic architecture that 'satisfies and expresses ours and others best insights – and which contains some of the dreams behind philosophies and manifestoes about human rights, dreams of a better future world.' 'When and where will it emerge?' are his concluding words.

The Nordic Way and the importance of being Erskine

At the 2011 World Economic Forum in Davos, a Swedish delegation presented with some success what they called The Nordic Way.⁸ It was an attempt to explain why Sweden, and the other Nordic countries, had managed to survive the 2008 economic crisis without too many problems. Equality and social trust are underlined as important factors for competitiveness. At the same time, individuality and self-expression are presented as Nordic characteristics, supported by findings of the World Value Survey.⁹

Ralph Erskine obviously had a strong belief in the welfare society of his chosen homeland, Sweden.¹⁰ But I am not sure that he would have been very happy with recent developments. Equality is marketed as a Nordic Way to economic success at the same time as the growth in inequality in Sweden since the 1980s has been the largest of all the OECD countries, even if from a very low level.¹¹ Much of the 'strong state' in Sweden has over the same period been dismantled in a far-reaching neo-liberal experiment. 'The streets of Stockholm are awash with the blood of sacred cows', as an issue of *The Economist* formulated approvingly.¹² Certain sacred cows are killed, foremost those tended by politicians, while others, like eternal economic growth or surging income inequality, are left free to ravage the land. Let us remember Erskine's declaration of loyalty 'to the real needs of the deprived and underprivileged rather than to the profitable and questionable needs of the rich and powerful'. It was formulated on the brink of the 1980s, a time of harvest for Erskine after having suffered the consequences of being an 'inconvenient' architect.

The decade of the 1980s paradoxically saw both the economics of Friedman, Reagan and Thatcher and the formulation of the Brundtland Commission's three pillars of sustainability. The economics of the time are maybe manifested in the order of the pillars, starting with economic growth, followed by environmental protection and ending with social equality. This has rightly been called 'weak sustainability' and is often illustrated as three equally important, overlapping circles. 'Strong sustainability' rather depicts the system as three circles within each other, where economy is constrained by society that in turn is constrained by environment, a structure which makes more sense. Sometimes a fourth pillar is introduced, culture, an aspect of society that emphasises knowledge, memory, history. This is not a terminology used by Erskine but his work could easily, I argue, be interpreted along these dimensions:

1. *Environmental sustainability: a resource and energy-saving architecture adapted to sun and wind and following the climate.*
2. *Social sustainability: a dense and socially mixed environment, valuing justness and community and open for participation and minority rights.*
3. *Cultural sustainability: an architecture built on the basic values of a functional tradition and striving for a poetic expression of our dreams through diligent and responsible professional work.*
4. *Economic sustainability: again a resource-saving architecture open for the use of materials as found and solutions ad hoc.*¹³

The sustainable dimension is also what makes Ralph Erskine's legacy as relevant as ever today, a hundred years after his birth. We need, more than ever, architects who firmly stand for long-lasting humane values and whose loyalty is not to the powerful.

Notes

1. Mats Egelius's 1988 book on Ralph Erskine – English version: Mats Egelius, *Ralph Erskine, Architect* (Stockholm: Byggförlaget, 1988) – lists around a hundred built projects by Erskine and more were added later. The vast majority of them are in Sweden but, alongside a number of projects in Britain, he also designed for sites in Finland, Norway, Canada, Italy and Austria.
2. Five articles on Brittgården's history and its present situation are collected in the book *Brittgården: ett bostadsområde av Ralph Erskine i Tibro* (Tibro: Tibro kommun, 2012) including my own article positioning Brittgården on the architectural map.
3. 'Ralph Erskine', in *Arkitektur*, 7 (1981), p. 28.
4. Peter Davey, 'Architect of Democracy', in *The Architecture of Ralph Erskine*, ed. by Matilda Stannow (Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 2008).
5. *Arkitektur* 7 (1981), pp. 2–44.
6. The title of the 25-minutes-long video is 'Området vid Lilla Bommen' ['The Lilla Bommen district'] and it is dated 1986. The background to the whole development is presented. Erskine's sequence, where he explains the Skanska building in his charmingly broken Swedish, is three minutes long. Quotations are my translations [CC].
7. Ralph Erskine 'Den lojala arkitekturen' ['The Loyal Architecture'], in *Arkitektur*, 5 (1979), pp. 4–9. This was originally a contribution to an international conference on 'Organic Architecture' in London 1978, mentioned above in Peter Blundell Jones's 'perspective' in this issue of arq. The manuscript in English has not been found so quotations are my translations from the Swedish text. I was one of the editors of *Arkitektur* at the time but not directly involved in the Erskine article.
8. Summed up in the brochure *The Nordic Way: Equality, Individuality and Social Trust*, <<http://www.norden.se/Global/Infomaterial/The%20Nordic%20Way.2012k.pdf>> [accessed 21 August 2014].
9. The 'cultural map' based on thirty years' international research in the World Value Survey project shows the Nordic countries leading the development towards rational-secular values and self-expression. See for example Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
10. In the foreword to Mats Egelius's 1988 book, there is a reproduction of a handwritten comment in Swedish by Erskine to the manuscript of the book: 'Praised be "traditional" Scandinavian values!! Fight for them'. Egelius, *Ralph Erskine*, p. 6 [my translation, CC].
11. See: <<http://www.oecd.org/sweden/49564868.pdf>> [accessed 21 August 2014].
12. Adrian Wooldridge, 'Northern Lights', *The Economist*, 2 February (2013). The cover has a wild Viking with the text 'The next supermodel: Why the world should look at the Nordic countries'. Maybe he is preparing for the ritual killing of sacred cows?
13. There is, not by chance, a certain similarity in words and still more in ideas with an appeal for an 'Architecture of Necessity' launched by Swedish Virserum Art Museum in 2009. See: <<http://architectureofnecessity.blogspot.se/>> [accessed 21 August 2014].

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