# Ralph Erskine: an organic architect?


Peter Blundell Jones



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perspective

# Contrasts of inside and outside, centre and periphery

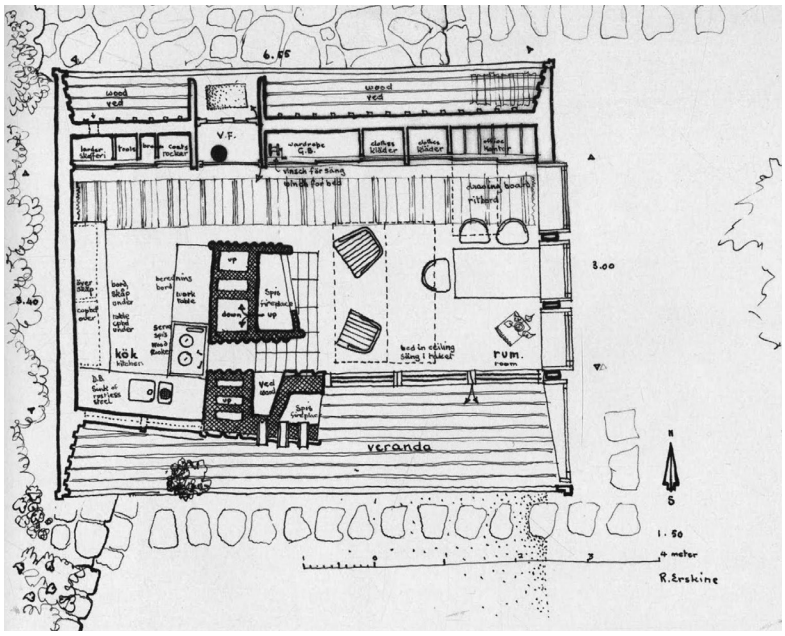
# Environmental and circadian rhythms

## Ralph Erskine: an organic architect?

***Peter Blundell Jones***

**I cannot recall when and how I first heard of Ralph Erskine, but by 1975 I was well aware of his work and included Byker in an article on architecture for the *Chambers Encyclopaedia Yearbook*, setting it among the most significant British architectural events of the year.**

Two years later my knowledge of Erskine's *oeuvre* was radically increased by the publication of Mats Egelius's double issue of *Architectural Design*, in which I saw for the first time not only the Ski hotel at Borgafjäll and the early houses, but also Erskine's graphic presentations about architecture and climate, and his project for an Arctic town. A year later I met him. Emerging from studenthood in 1972, I had spent a couple of years compiling my first monograph on Hans Scharoun, and was following in the footsteps of Bruno Zevi in the attempt to establish organic architecture as an alternative Modernism.[1] So it came about that I got together with John Sergeant, author of *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses*, to organise an Organic Symposium in London in the autumn of 1978,[2] jointly funded by the Architectural Association, where I had been doing some part-time teaching, and by the Bartlett School, where John was a lecturer. As major stars of the show, we invited Bruce Goff, Lucien Kroll, and Erskine. Goff we invited as a continuation of the line of Wright and for his extraordinary inventiveness: he gave lectures both on his own work and that of Gaudí, the latter by far the better. Kroll had burst upon the world as leader of a self-generating architecture with his extraordinary Mémé in Brussels, copiously published by Dennis Sharp in *AAQ*.[3] He showed beautiful slides of lichens on rocks and sheep on mountain sides, pointing out how everywhere is a habitat, then going on to human landscapes. By our definition organic architecture was responsive architecture, and Erskine seemed to us the leading world figure in making architecture responsive to climate.[4] But though he was courteous to us, he used the occasion to protest about 'organic' and inclusion in any such grouping, even though much of what he said we agreed with. I was later told that he always tended to do this, it was characteristic of his independence and scepticism. He had, however, taken some trouble over his paper, and later published it in Sweden, as Claes Caldenby has described.[5]




1 The Box, floor plan

### Erskine, Scharoun and Häring

Although Erskine's denial did not help our cause at the time, I still feel I was justified in seeing parallels between his works and those of Hans Scharoun and Hugo Häring. As a fundamental consideration there was the functionalism of highly specific planning, and Eskine's own tiny house, 'the box' *[1]*, is surely comparable with Häring's designs for economical courtyard houses of the same period. They share first of all the graphic importance of plan and section, as opposed to attention devoted to object or facade. It was design from the inside out, with consideration of every detail, careful thought about every seat, bed and table, every glimpse of view, floor textures and changes of level, the loving accommodation of each domestic ritual. Photographs of Erskine's personal workplace with its surrounding storage *[2]*, and of the fireplace next to the suspended



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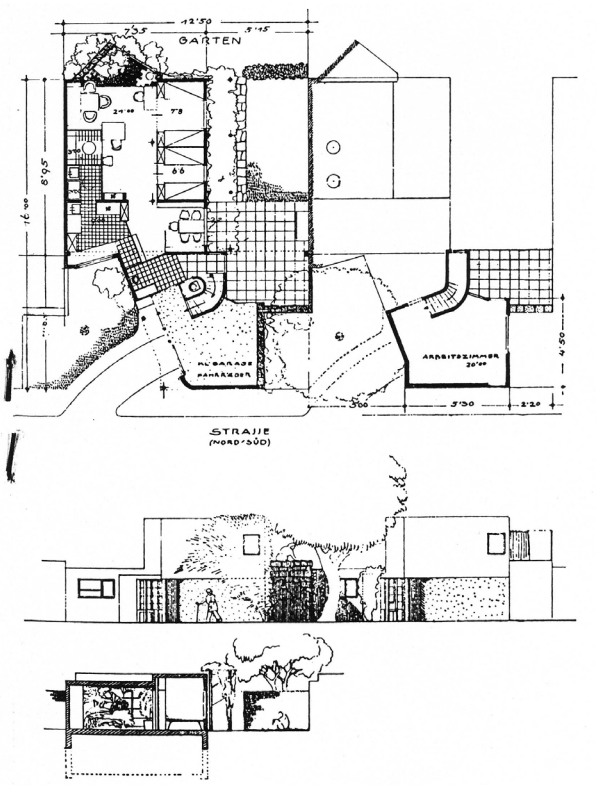
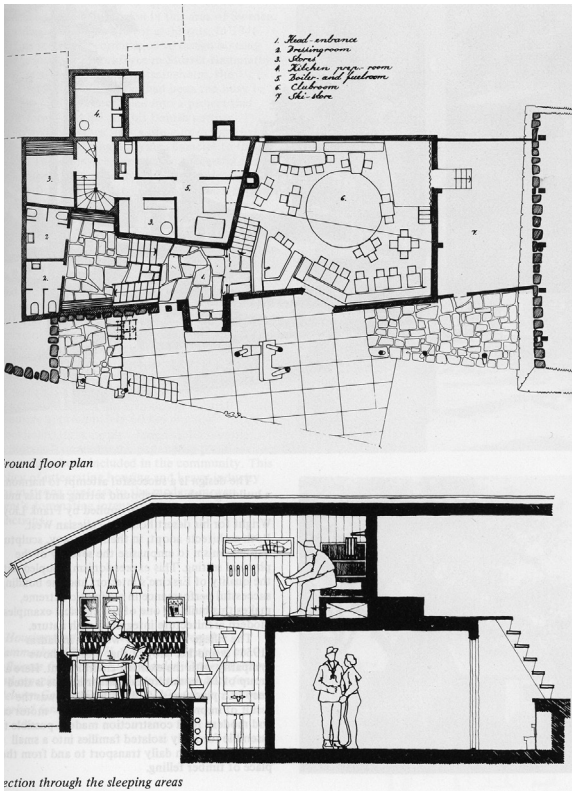


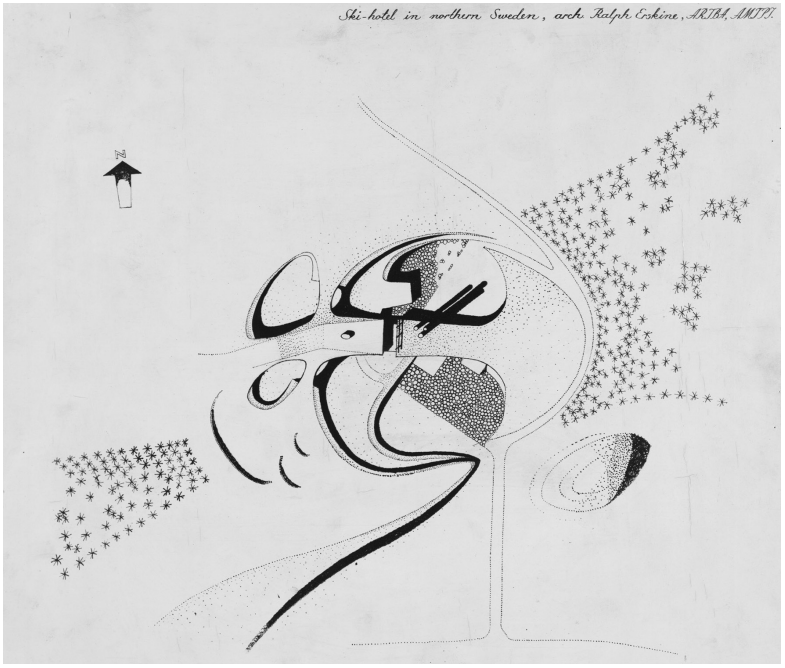

2 Häring Courtyard House, plan and section




3 Ski Hotel, plan and section, 1948

bed, give a powerful sense of this projected habitation as a starting point. There is also, with both architects, a strong sense of contrast between centre and periphery, of inside and outside. In Häring's case it is a matter of looking into little courts and getting glimpses of sky, in Erskine's the retreat to the fire versus expansion towards verandah and lake view. Both sought intensive integration of storage and equipment, making advantageous use of wall thicknesses and showing the economy of a tight fit. In Erskine's house the outer recess in the rear wall becomes the fuel store, keeping logs dry and easily accessible in snow, adding to the insulation, and making a kinetic facade in celebration of wood-gathering.

There are similar parallels between Erskine and Scharoun, for the Ski Hotel of 1948 *[3]* disdains the orthogonal rule of the drawing board in much the same way as most works by the German master, who by the 1950s had become the leading exponent of deviating from the right angle. Erskine also used the expanding and contracting communal spaces as an internal street in a similar way.[6] Such shifts of angle were utterly alien to the grid-bound British architects of the period and were uncommon in Sweden, though they had been seen significantly in the work of Gunnar Asplund and




4 Ski Hotel, site plan

his mentor Ragnar Östberg, the most probable sources for Erskine.[7] With the Ski Hotel there was no compelling local reason for the switches of angle since the virgin site was open and free, but an orthogonal version could not have produced the sense of embrace at the approach, and in the wider context the topography, snow and wind had to be taken into account. Erskine's beautiful site plan *[4]* indicates how he expected the snow to drift into enticing curves, and the roof served as a junior ski-slope. The drama of shelter as a dominant theme could hardly have been more appropriate.

## College planning and Clare Hall

By the time of the Organic Symposium I had just taken up a teaching job in Cambridge, and soon came to know Clare Hall, visiting from time to time because various friends lived there *[5]*. The old Cambridge colleges follow the tradition of a monastic

5 Clare Hall, Cambridge

6 Clare Hall, Cambridge

cloister, with surrounding wall, controlling gates, formal dining in hall, and rooms on staircases disgorging into closed courts. The most celebrated modern one, Harvey Court by Leslie Martin, Colin St. John Wilson and Patrick Hodgkinson of 1962, merely intensified this tradition with an inward-looking stepped section again focused on a monastic court. Erskine was the first to break the mould. His little college on the Backs was housing only for postgraduates, all the more reason for a relaxed approach, and instead of the traditional court he created a patchwork of houses and flats linked by informal alleyways and punctuated by small courts. The plan looks dumb and rectangular, for nearly all the changes are wrought in section, bringing the whole complex to a masterly climax in the westernmost alleyway set against a great sloping overhanging roof *[6]*. The exaggerated raingear disgorges into an open channel which turns into a brook in heavy rain, again an architecture that celebrates the weather. The changes of scale, transitions between inside and out, and relation between community and privacy were well-judged and produced an enduringly friendly atmosphere, so when an extension was wanted the college turned confidently to Erskine again. My friends were happy living there, even if the conservative architectural historian David Watkin liked to dismiss it as 'that Scandinavian slum'.

## Erskine's essential humanity

I met Erskine again and went out of my way to see examples of his Swedish work on my first visit to that country in 1987. Peter Carolin and Dan Cruickshank had invited me to contribute to the *Masters of Building* series on Asplund in the *AJ*, my primary reason for the visit,[8] but I was by that time also writing frequently for Peter Davey in the *AR*, and following my visit we published the restaurant for St Göran's Hospital *[7]*. In Stockholm I telephoned Erskine and he invited me to his house the next day, where I arrived in the early evening. We had a wide-ranging conversation and certainly discussed the influence of Swedish forebears such as Asplund, but I no longer recall the detail. What does stick in my memory is his reason for being in Sweden and his positive endorsement of the welfare state. He told a long story about the lenient treatment of prisoners, which he found very civilised. Asked about his recent work, he explained how he had set members of his former office free to work on their own, retreating to masterplanning and an advisory role.

Welcoming and friendly, he treated me to a meal at a local restaurant, but what impressed me above all was his kindness and attentiveness to his wife Ruth, who went along with us. She was already at an advanced stage of Alzheimer's, locked in a timescale of five or ten minutes, and he had warned me on the phone that she would behave oddly, but not to worry. So when I arrived she greeted me and offered us tea, but he said no, we would soon be going out to eat. Ten minutes later she again offered us tea and once more he gently refused. After she had left the room he told me he was lucky, as often the disease makes people aggressive but she had retained her sweet nature and was merely confused: even so, he had to keep her out of the office since it had been her role to file things and now she only created chaos. We walked to the restaurant and were conducted to a table, whereupon Ruth declared she had eaten already and could not possibly take any more, but he ordered for her all the same, and

7 St Goran's Hospital

when the meal arrived took two thirds of hers onto his own plate, then moved it back as she ate, which she did without difficulty. When the meal was finished she was convinced that it was her role to clear the table and wash up, and by prior arrangement with the waiter she was allowed to participate in taking the things out. Later, on the walk back home, she was caught short and had to go behind a bush. Erskine took it all in his stride, with touches of gentle humour, guiding her through her day without a moment's resentment that this had become his lot. For me this was the clearest proof of his essential humanity.

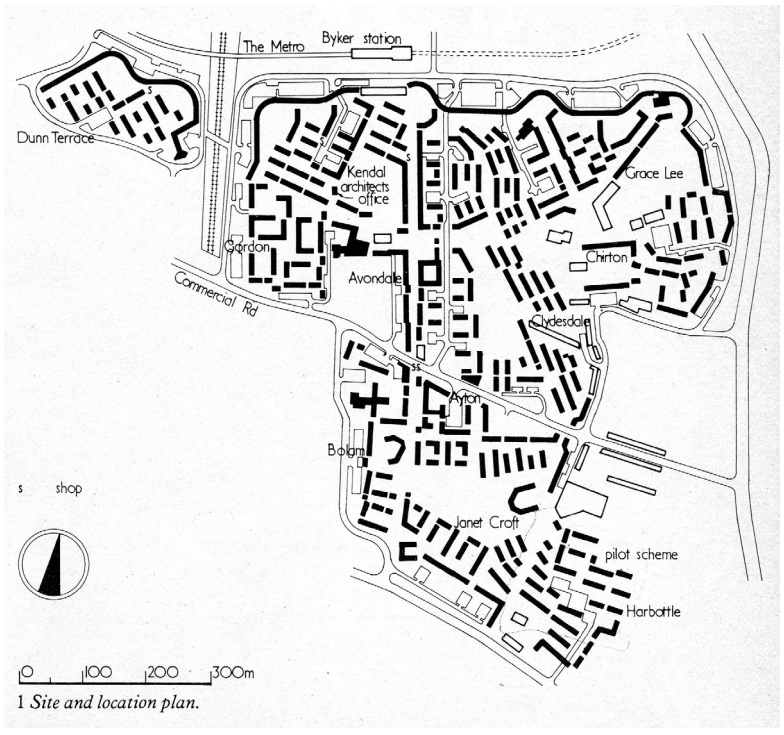
## Byker: participation and consultation

For us in England, an essential aspect of Erskine's work at Byker was his introduction of participation, a theme that came increasingly to interest me in the 1980s thanks to contact with Lucien Kroll, Walter Segal and Giancarlo De Carlo, but it was general knowledge that Erskine had laid the foundation as early as 1969.[9] A tricky situation had developed within the old tight-knit worker community in Newcastle who wanted rehousing but did not want to be dispersed, and who had already been violently disrupted by demolitions for a motorway that was never built. Erskine was brought in to ameliorate the problem, after experience with large housing schemes in Sweden that included consultation with the inhabitants. He set up an office in an old funeral parlour in the middle of Byker which local people could visit at will to discuss their wishes and grievances, and though he was not personally there all the time, his architect daughter was present for a long period, along with Vernon Gracie and other architects, sometimes helping with social problems far beyond their remit. The direct conversational contact was new, offering a radical alternative to the top-down bureaucratic processes normal in local government. It meant both that the architects were better informed and that local people felt their individual voices were being heard. Of course it did not mean that each family could design its own house, but the debate and dialogue enriched the shared social content, criticism of a pilot project resulted in substantial revisions, groups of neighbouring families were rehoused together, and Erskine even at one stage offered the possibility of refurbishing the existing houses instead of demolition.[10]

In books and journals Byker was so consistently presented through images of the Byker Wall that people could be forgiven for not realising that the bulk of the scheme consisted of more ordinary low-rise housing [8,9]. Certainly the wall would have screened off noise and pollution from the projected motorway had it been built, but it also gave climatic advantages by blocking north winds and producing the effect of a traditional

8 **The wall of the Byker Estate**

9 **Low-rise housing on the Byker Estate**



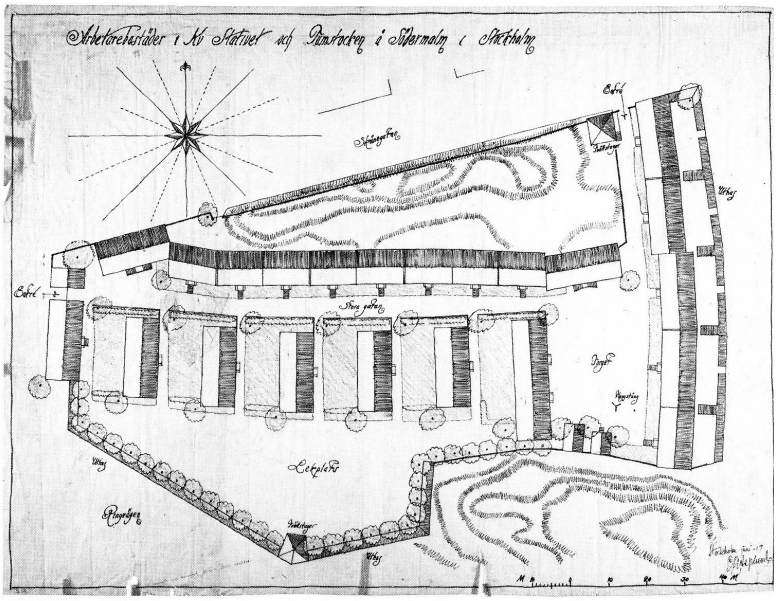

1 *Site and location plan.*

10 **Byker Estate, site plan**

walled garden, which can be the equivalent of about three hundred miles change of latitude. It also produced a strongly bounded edge to the site and prompted dramatic variations in scale and height, which were further exploited by elaborate roofscapes. The flats faced mainly south and west enjoying wonderful views of the Tyne, and the centre of the site was reserved mainly for pedestrians, with streets, squares and alleys, a proliferation of trees and small gardens *[10]*. Many family houses also had private courtyards, and there were places of varying size and character for meeting and children's play. In contrast with other large British social housing developments of the period, there was quite an extraordinary degree of variety, with more than three hundred different dwelling types, even though the individual flats and houses, if examined one at a time, turned out straightforward and rectangular, obedient to the current Parker Morris space standards. One of Erskine's greatest skills was to ring the changes on the house and flat types taking every opportunity to create difference without increases in cost, and to embrace every scale. He knew well how to exploit ends and corners, to make the most of cascading rooflines, and how to add spatial complexity through galleries, balconies and canopies, by alternating small and large windows, and by changing materials, colours and cladding types.

## Site sensitivities

For Walter Gropius and other early Modernists, it was enough to design a house or flat, to determine the relevant daylight section and spacing, then roll them out in serried ranks orientated south. This kind of 'rationality', known in Germany as *Zeilenbau*, prevailed across Europe after the Second World War for quick rebuilding on a repetitive mechanised system, reflecting a sense of discipline that was not without its own pride. But in Sweden the landscape was more difficult to ignore, partly because of the harsh climate, partly because of the far lower population density and the relatively small sizes of even the largest cities. Stockholm's archipelago setting, for example, is everywhere evident, and architects like Östberg with his town hall on the lake, or Wahlman with his Engelbrecht Church on the hill, could hardly fail to engage the topography and consider the skyline. Even with relatively humble works the site required respect, and a small scheme of workers' houses in south Stockholm by Gunnar Asplund is exemplary. Built in 1917 but demolished in the 1950s, it fell in his Classical period, and the simple wooden houses have regular windows, shared central doors, pedimented gables, and even applied giant order columns. The houses were cheap and repetitive, but the site fell from north to south and was interrupted by projecting humps of granite remaining from the last ice age, so that although Asplund managed to give most houses east and west faces with sun pouring into the gardens between, he was obliged to place them in an irregular manner. He walled the irregular site *[11]*, leaving entrances to west and north, ran a street across the middle ending in a square at the east end, and linked it to the other entrance by an alleyway from the north. To the north of his street he set a terrace of south-facing houses approached by steps, and to the south of it eight short rows with gardens between. Further south was a play space edged with trees, and two garden pavilions sat on the wall. Not only does this layout create a distinct set of



*Situationsplan 1917. Tusch, 39 × 51 cm. Arkitekturmuseet.*

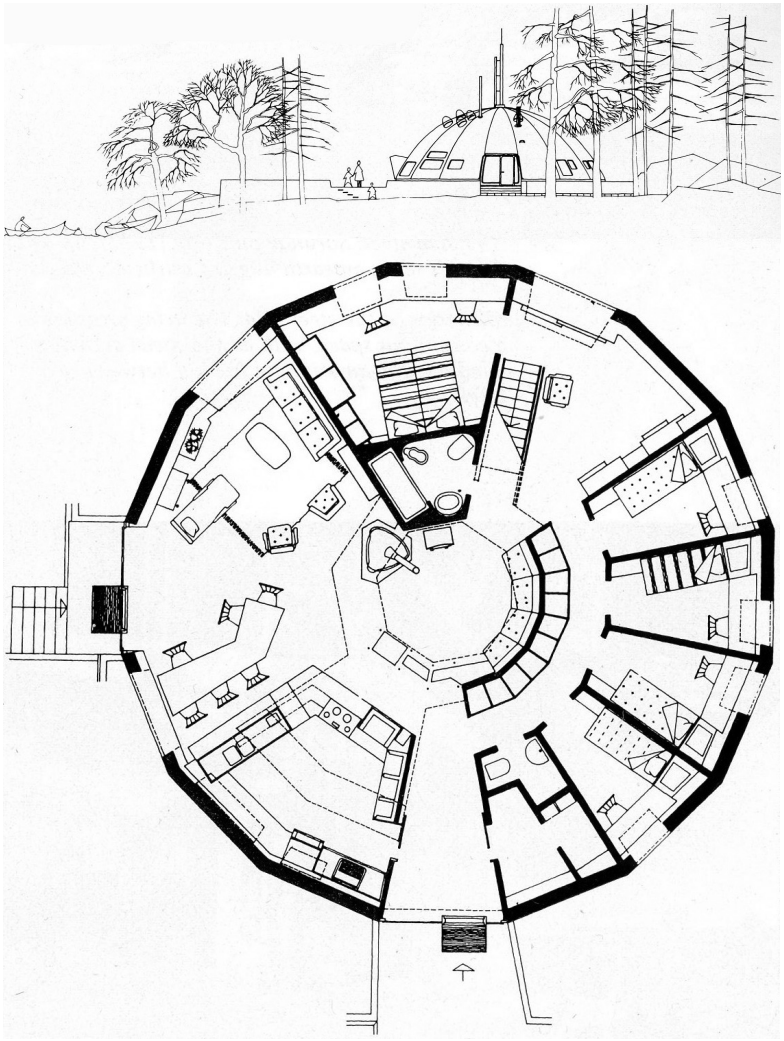
*Site plan 1917. Ink drawing 39 × 51 cm. Swedish Museum of Architecture.*

11 Asplund, workers housing in South Stockholm, 1917

12 An example of bricolage on the Byker Estate

outdoor rooms contrasting in scale and character, but everything is adjusted to the orientation and specificity of the site, including subtle changes of angle in the houses which were an evident fascination for the photographers.

Asplund was the most site-sensitive architect I have studied, and he drew both on the informal works of the National Romantic architects of the previous generation and on the English Garden City movement which was disseminated in Sweden by Albert Lilienberg. Just how this was inherited by Erskine has yet to be researched, but clearly the same kind of sensibility is at work at Byker as with Asplund's much smaller housing scheme, showing the same intention of place-making, the same kind of exploitation of specificities and irregularities, and reaction to the topography and givens of the site. When I returned to Byker in 2005 to write a book chapter about it, I was expecting the worst, since social housing had effectively been stopped in Britain by Margaret Thatcher with the right to buy, and those who could afford it had tended to move out, leaving 'sink estates' in which were concentrated the poor and the disadvantaged. But I found Byker surviving remarkably well despite some degradation of local corners, and the people I spoke to still believed in it. There had been a certain degree of *bricolage* with people changing doors and windows and repainting things *[12]*, but it took these minor changes remarkably well. It was not until later, when going through my photographs, that it struck me that I had seen no graffiti on the great wall, even on the forbidding parts of the outside which should have invited it. The housing scheme has been listed, which should prevent any summary demolitions, though I do hope the inhabitants will still be allowed to express themselves in such minor alterations as are a proof of life.

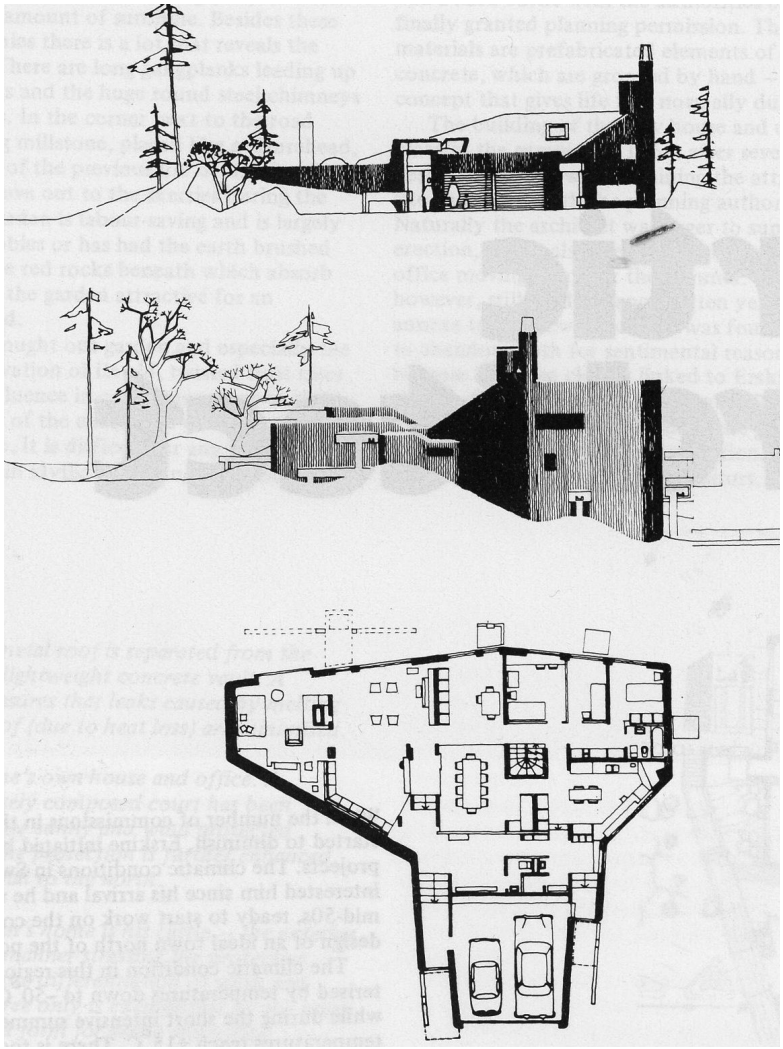


13 Round House, plan and site section

## Responsive architecture

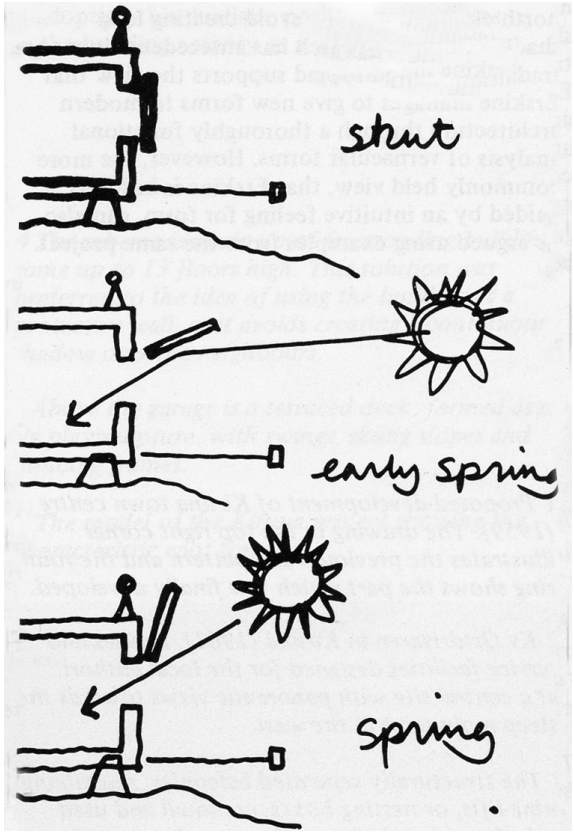
In the heyday of the postwar Modern Movement it seemed a triumph to be able to build the same kind of office block from Reykjavik to Tokyo, and to defy the sun and wind with the same kind of glass wall facing north and south. Mies even planned a glass-sided house around 1950 which promised a serene outlook on nature from a perfectly enclosed interior with no partitions and minimal furniture, a new plateau of dignified and lazy existence. It provided a more generous image for what Reyner Banham called 'the well-tempered environment', deep-plan buildings with artificial lighting and air-conditioning which were intended to solve the problem of climate once and for all, providing a constant 22°C and 300 lux on the work surface, day and night.[11] Around 1970 there was even discussion about whether to have windows at all, since they leaked heat while admitting unpredictable and dangerous sunlight, but that was all before the oil crisis of 1973. We now recognise not only that fossil fuel usage is rising exponentially, and that sources are limited, but also that we are fast changing conditions on this planet and making our current way of life unsustainable. After millions of years of living with the climate and adapting ourselves to every latitude through fire and clothing and wise adjustments of diet, we have come instead to regard it negatively as something to avoid. But we forget the extraordinary privilege of a planet not only with oxygen to breathe but with liquid water, whose temperature swings mostly between about 10°C and 40°C, whereas Mars would freeze us and Venus at around 250°C would fry us. Time and again in science-fiction movies people arrive on alien planets in their ordinary clothes able to breathe, with no more than earth-like gravity and even a twenty-four hour day, but it is hardly likely that we would find earth-like conditions anywhere so neatly repeated. What if the cosmic collision that gave us the moon had left the earth rotating ten times as slow, or if it lacked the tilt that gives us the seasons?

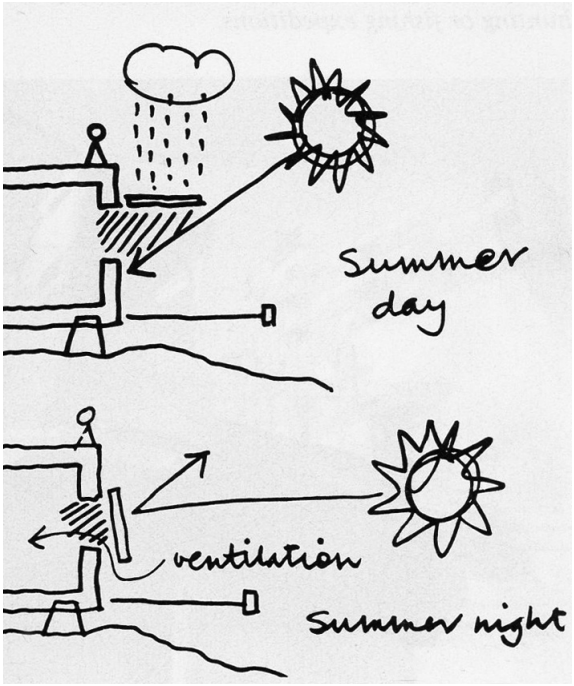
So I return to Erskine more or less where I started in 1978: with climatically responsive architecture. This is surely needed if we are to learn to achieve any real degree of resilience. Erskine worked with insulation, reduced cold bridges, rounded corners and modified building profiles to reduce



14 Villa Gadelius, plan and site sections

prevailing winds and to control snowdrifts. He experimented with a hemispherical house for minimum surface area [13] and another which shrunk to the north but spread itself out towards the sun [14]. He always orientated his buildings and made the most of the given topography, engaging changes of level where possible, and rather than denying the roof in a Modernist manner, he found endless ways of celebrating its sheltering character, even dramatising the falling rain. All this was part of a spatial sensibility that assumed a polarity of inside and outside and celebrated all the transitions between, from retreat to the fireside on a winter's night to skiing, hunting, gathering wood, fishing in the lake. Even within the protection of the house there were views to the outside world and changing shafts of sunlight, but sitting in a bay could allow a greater panorama and a sense of being on the edge. Outside its sealed realm, a house or flat could still offer sheltered spaces to sit out, or balconies on upper floors, and enclosed courts or gardens sheltered from the wind with places to sit or play. So often and in so many parts of the world social life takes place on the borders between inside and out: through the open window, on the balcony or veranda, between the




15 Erskine's climate filter, diagrams

house and the courtyard, and so much traditional architecture was about careful adjustment of local conditions, to prevent too much sun and give a cooling breeze, or to contain a fireplace that sustains comfort in the worst of conditions by allowing retreat from periphery to centre. Erskine's section diagrams presented to Team 10 *[15]* show the section between inside and out with shutters as climatic modifiers that people can control themselves. This is the complete opposite of the technical overkill implied by the 'well-tempered environment', or air-conditioned nightmare, still being pursued everywhere in the name of progress and so-called standards. We should allow ourselves to be aware that it is colder in winter and be ready to put on a pullover, and if we do not see that it is brighter in the daytime, our circadian rhythms and mental health are affected.

*Peter Blundell Jones is Professor of Architecture at the University of Sheffield and author of monographs on Hans Scharoun, Hugo Häring, Erik Gunnar Asplund and Günter Behnisch.*

**Notes**

1. Bruno Zevi, *Towards an Organic Architecture* (London: Faber, 1949).
2. John Sergeant, *Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1976).
3. Lucien Kroll, 'The Soft Zone', *Architectural Association Quarterly,* vol. 7, no. 4, 1975.
4. Peter Blundell Jones, 'Organic Versus Classic', *Architectural Association Quarterly,* 1978. The conference was written up by Bob Allies in *The Architects' Journal*, 8 November 1978.
5. Ralph Erskine 'Den lojala arkitekturen' *['*The loyal architecture'*]*, in *Arkitektur* 5, 1979, pp. 4–9.
6. I have argued that such angularity was a *leitmotiv* of Scharoun's work since 1932: see 'From the Neoclassical Axis to Aperspective Space', *The Architectural Review,* March 1988, pp. 19–27.
7. Peter Blundell Jones, *Gunnar Asplund* (London: Phaidon, 2005).
8. Three articles on the Gothenburg Law Courts and on Asplund's own house were published in *The Architects' Journal* in 14 October 1987, 11 November 1987 and 20 January 1988.
9. I was surprised to find that I had not included Erskine in my essay 'Sixty-eight and After' in *Architecture and Participation*, the book I edited with Doina Petrescu and Jeremy Till published by Routledge in 2005; but that predated my Byker revisit.
10. For a retrospective summary of Byker see Peter Blundell Jones and Eamonn Canniffe, *Modern Architecture Through Case Studies 1945–1990* (London: Architectural Press 2007), Chapter 11, pp. 139–52.
11. See Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, (London: Architectural Press, 1969).

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**Author's address**

*p.blundelljones@sheffield.ac.uk*