

# Modified knowledge in the field of architecture

Lars-Henrik Ståhl

In architecture, the concept “practice-based research” implies not only an alternative to traditional academic research but also highlights questions concerning artistic implications in architecture and prepares the ground for new aspects of architectural knowledge. Architecture is by definition the art of designing buildings, and therefore a stable and self-evident discipline. At the same time, certain architects, closer to the experimental, have transgressed boundaries, and sometimes even developed subversive understandings of artistic experiences. In these cases the concepts of art and knowledge achieve an extended meaning in architecture. Parallel to this, it is also interesting to note the impact of architectural issues in contemporary works of art. In art academies and exhibitions all over the world, themes now appear that have much to do with architecture or urban planning. Some works may even be considered as reliable alternatives to proposals from professional architects.

My opinion is that this type of artistic approach may modify our understanding of architectural know-

ledge and its stock of conventions, mostly based on intra-professional conceptualisations. What is important here is that different artistic approaches to architecture might be considered as good examples of practice-based research. In my paper I will therefore present some examples of artistic elements in the field of architecture. Further I will examine the ways in which such works may modify architectural and artistic knowledge. My examples come from different sources, but are mainly based on my writings in exhibition catalogues and art magazines. I will at this juncture select works from three different young artists, each of whom treats architectural issues in their work.

## Subtle shifts

Today there is considerable interest in the built environment, not least among contemporary artists. There is also great potential for a transformed view of architecture in which concepts like centre or margin seem to be on their way to being rendered meaningless/disavowed. As well as artists who work directly in structures or in building-like processes, the activities



1. Magnus Bærtås, Granne (Neighbour), 1992



2. Magnus Bærtås, Satellite, Budapest, 2000

of other artists bear witness to their contemplation of architectural phenomena in general. Several of Magnus Bærtås's projects belong to this latter category. In the projects All over the world, Farsta, Akalla and Husby, Granne (Neighbour), AMUland and Satellite, Bærtås portrays different types of building which more or less highlights the difficulties associated with the concept of architecture. This may be a matter of representing major architectural projects of the sixties and seventies that, over time, have lost their visionary force and

been forgotten or remembered only as social planning failures.

By hand-tinting black and white photos of typical Swedish suburbs like Farsta and Akalla, near Stockholm, Bærtås creates a medium in which he can play with a sort of reconstituted image of a utopian stage, which reveals itself as an appendix. The result gives rise to ambivalent feelings. One can feel fascination, disgust and wonder at his pictures. The latter is extraordinarily important in that it creates the interpretative space that the fragile phenomena of the margin require if they are not to disintegrate, even if they are the most commonplace things imaginable. This is even more true of the project Granne (Neighbour) from 1992. [1] Here too we are faced with hand-tinted photographs of buildings. Yet it is no longer the visionary mass-housing project – instead Bærtås has chosen to describe how family houses are built onto in the southern provinces of Sweden. This type of building connotes a Sweden in which teashops have been turned into pizza restaurants and in which soap operas are the predominant offers from television. Nonetheless, the field that Bærtås describes in this work is controversial. Among architects it is almost de rigueur to express horror at one-family houses that show evidence of non-professional involvement. Granne (Neighbour) could even be read as a taxonomy of uglified family houses though this would also be a severe over-simplification of the work. Here, too, the colouring technique helps to widen the interpretative possibilities. If the documentation itself could serve a disparaging purpose, this is compensated by the relatively large format (145 x 100 cm), which in itself awakes admiration, and the special colouring of the six different pictures.

Even if the works AMUland and Satellite deal with marginal phenomena to an even greater extent, Bærtås's interest has shifted to how different basic functions generate specific types of buildings. AMUland is a photographic documentation of simple and seemingly insignificant sheds and huts, which are placed alongside the architecture of various AMU (Labour Market Board) premises. In this way a special dimension is created in which one is obliged to see some minimal similarities between the large premises and the little

shed.

In the recently-initiated project Satellite [2], Bärtås has left the Swedish “folk home” and instead has chosen to record a type of Eastern European plastic hut which is usually used as a kiosk or market stall. The plastic huts come in various styles and sizes largely depending on the country of origin. They are the result of modular thinking, which also reflects a special vision of modern architecture. Like the portrayals of Farsta and Akalla, these portraits provoke ambivalent feelings. One can understand the visionary force of the plastic huts. At the same time they also represent a kind of failure. In Satellites Bärtås has isolated the various plastic modules and shows them against a yellow background. In this way he wants them to lose their links with the eastern block. A further effect of this process is that the model character of the represented objects increases considerably which, in turn, makes them the point of departure for a discussion of a future architecture.

Common to all of the works by Magnus Bärtås under discussion are the subtle shifts that in a highly sensitive manner bring forward different phenomena from a specific background. The approach can be likened to those archaeological processes in which fragile objects are freed from various layers of sediment. This is a necessary condition when one approaches marginal phenomena, even though dealing with the most commonplace objects and events.

### Aspects and perspectives

Roland Beijer is another artist working with architectural issues. His works might best be described as a research on biases in architectural representations. The result is mostly presented in subversive images and models, which also identify alternative ways in descriptions of architecture. The work *Världens största stad* [3] (The biggest city in the world) emerges as an all-encompassing metaphor for Beijer’s artistry: a model of a tree-lined avenue, where the central perspective was powerfully indicated. From a specific point of view, a trompe l’oeil effect appears that reinforces the central perspective. Since it is possible to walk around the model, infinitely diverse aspects arise, thereby under-



3. Roland Beijer, *Världens största stad* (The biggest town in the world)



4a. Roland Beijer, *Tessenows vision*



4b. Roland Beijer, *Tessenows vision*



5a. Mike Bode, Sveavägen 160, the drinking fountain before restoration

mining the hegemony of the central perspective. In this way Beijer's art becomes evident. Marginal phenomena and side effects are highlighted and give rise to a specific understanding of architecture. This aspect is even more apparent in Tessenows vision[4a] [4b], a relatively extensive work of art. In several images Beijer calls into question different but typical themes in architectural representation. One part of the work is a constellation of images, where dull illustrations of the architect's vision are confronted with photographs of the realised building. The apparent discrepancy is not meant to condemn the typical architectural illustration, rather it should be considered as a reflection on a minimalist principle of simplification that became evident during the twentieth century.

The most interesting part of Tessenows vision is where Beijer makes one further constellation of images. Here he has put together figures from famous architects' illustrations. The figures come out as typical modernistic clichés that populate perspectives and elevations. Beijer also has the opinion that even trees and clouds are "covered" with the same style as the architecture that this type of image illustrates. Even if the artist here avoids the semiotic implications, questions about the meaning of the selected illustrations appear; What does the use of stereotypical (?) figures mean in architectural illustrations? Is this type of dehumanisation even prevalent in the realized building?

The works of Roland Beijer, thus far presented in this

paper deal with questions concerning architectural representations. His artwork *Lägenheten som grotta* (The apartment as a cave) is instead an experiment, where an ordinary plan/model of a flat is translated into a plan/model of a cave. The latter is generated from a specific diagram that illustrates people's movement in the flat. The diagram might be considered as a redundant comment on the self-evident fact that we don't stay in the right-angled corners. The cave also becomes a subversive comment on modernistic architecture's addiction to delimitation, transparency and free-floating structures.

### Restoration of a drinking fountain

The third artist that I will discuss, Mike Bode, executed an annotating restoration project, where he worked in situ with a detail of a building known as one of the icons of Swedish modernism, namely the Sveaplan grammar school in Stockholm, from 1936. On the left hand side of the entrance to this school, there is a drinking fountain in the shape of a rectangular table with a concave upper surface covered with blue tiles. Whoever attended the school or worked there over the years could not have failed to notice it. Positioned as it is, the drinking fountain becomes a natural meeting place for people on their way in or out of the building. Prior to the restoration of the building, which had fallen into total disrepair in the 1980s, the fountain still functioned as a meeting place, but also as a colossal ashtray[5a].

The Sveaplan grammar school attracted much attention at its inauguration in 1936, not least because it was one of the first state-financed grammar schools for girls. Furthermore, the building itself is a shining example of functionalist style architecture and can be seen to represent the growth of the Swedish welfare state. With the drinking fountain, the architects Nils Ahrbom and Helge Zimdal created an icon for a functionalist style which can be seen to introduce beauty, proportions and playfulness; an attitude which can be found in other parts of the building, but never quite as strikingly as the drinking fountain. Water from four mouthpieces blend together and flow over the dark blue tiles, only to disappear down a small outlet at one end of the "table top".

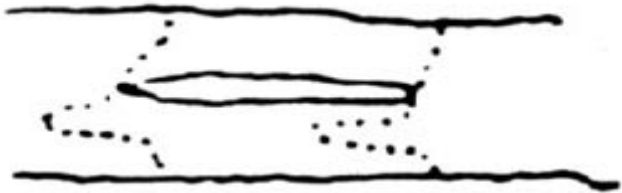
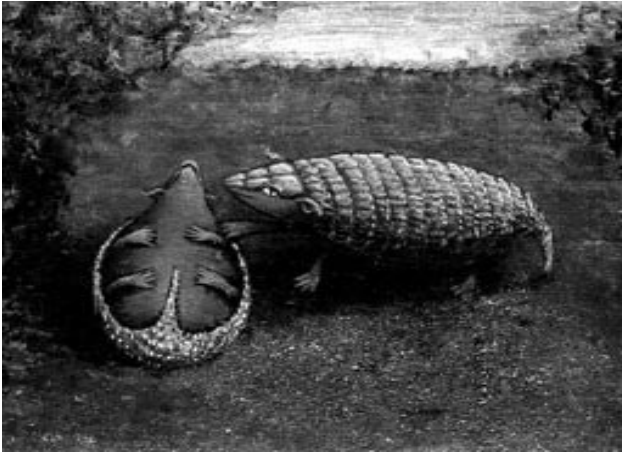


5b. Mike Bode, Sveavägen 160, the drinking fountain after restoration

In spite of its position and particular character, the drinking fountain has consistently been excluded from almost all the descriptions, books and articles, which have been written about this famous building over the years. Not even in the photographic evidence are there any real references to the fountain. There are however a couple of photographs from the 1930s where one can catch a glimpse of the fountain in the background, but here it appears that the fountain ended up in the photographs purely by chance, and therefore is of secondary importance. Moreover the written accounts that exist tend to describe and analyse the building from a more conventional architectural perspective using terms such as light, space, degrees of complexity etc. The contextual aspects focus mainly on the school's social role in the 1930s in Sweden.

From an architectural point of view, the drinking foun-

tain in its context becomes problematic. Does it really belong to the building, or should it rather be seen as an appendix? Might it even be an expression of extravagance, on its way to becoming a baroque effect? It is true that drinking fountains frequently occur in relation to modern architecture, and are most commonly found as free standing public objects? The drinking fountain at Sveaplan grammar school for girls is, however, something else. With its clear utilitarian character, it becomes part of the building's actual construction. On the one hand it shows a tendency to be merely a decorative detail, on the other hand it is purely there to serve a useful purpose. It would have been easy for the architects to use a standard design for the drinking fountain, a mass-produced product, like the ones that can be found in numerous school playgrounds and corridors. Instead they decided to design a specific object,



which is neither a piece of furniture, an interior fitting or a part of the actual building, and this is probably why the drinking fountain appears to have been overlooked in the numerous descriptions of the school.

The restoration of the drinking fountain, which Bode undertook two years ago, is hardly an unambiguous procedure. Rather, the recreation of buildings, environments and objects gives rise to confusion and uncertainty. What should be restored? What should be prioritised – to show the original qualities something once had? Or to succumb to the effects of history and all its wear and tear? A radical point of view is that all restoration involves simulation. In this light restoration is always an impossible endeavour, if the intention is to recreate a unique constellation of material and moment; as if one was trying to let specific ripples on the surface of water reveal themselves once again just as they were. One can, of course, question the practical significance of such a position. What is interesting in this context, however, is that the restored object, being a simulacrum, appears in the same domain as a film or documentation of the original object. Here the aesthetic framework plays a decisive role on how we reflect the values that the reproduction is meant to mirror.

If this argument is developed, then a photograph of a restored building takes on a meta-level, since two simulations are seen to cross over. A superposition such as this tends to disengage the basic forms from the effects of the everyday and the banal. In situations such as these, the image accentuates the aesthetic ideals of the past. Bode's restoration of the drinking fountain shows us another strategy. The cracks in the fountain have been mended and the plumbing has been fixed, so that once again water can flow from the mouthpieces [5b]. The achievement here is not about restoring a piece of architectural history for its own sake. The fountain is now working again, but maybe only for a short while. In a few years from now it may have regained its function as an ashtray.

### **Feedback; an architectural interpretation**

Before my conclusion I will present one further example of an attempt to modify knowledge in the field of architecture. This example comes from an academic



milieu – the Department of Theoretical and Applied Aesthetics, School of Architecture, Lund University, and is a contribution to the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies in Guadalajara, Mexico, 1997. The work bears the title *Feedback; An Architectural Interpretation of a Painting by Meret Oppenheim*, and was made by myself and my colleague Gunnar Sandin [6d]. As a comment of the practice of making models, we developed a concrete situation, itself a model, which could be described as a collection of concepts concerning transgression of borders. The model was derived from four sources: some specific graphs made by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce (Peirce, 1967, L36) [6b], showing principles of demarcation, a painting by the artist Meret Oppenheim, showing two interacting armadillos [6a], the Spaghetti Western movie genre and its transfer of nature and culture, and finally, the Empty Set, a mathematical term treated as symbol [6c].

Participation in an existing game of models, such as the culture of architecture, triggers general questions related to the degree of naturalness. Is a topology something that has to do with landscape and concrete geometry, or something that has to do with pre-architectural expectations of what a model ought to contain? Is a model natural when it follows a topology known beforehand? What does depth mean in a dia-

gram? To what extent do marginal effects influence a single sign process? This model operates in slow (History) and fast (Aha!) processes. It is not fixed, neither what the position of the elements concerns, nor in the process of making it look more natural. Thus it is a function of time. It carries, though, the possibility of viewing every moment as a (temporary) halt.

When creating the model, we used Peirce's original graph in a mimetic way to produce a foundation or a set-up for a flexible and discursive design event. We decided to introduce depth and we chose to treat it simply as anonymous depth, since topology in or beside the river is irrelevant in the graph. The demarcation lines, in our model represented by a couple of flexible rulers, have become not only borderlines but also connections between the two shores of the represented river and so have come to interact with the introduced depth. Further we saw in Oppenheim's picture a very clear position at a borderline between two conditions, with more or less dramatic futures to come. In our model the armadillos were represented by two counters, made as slightly mimetic representations. Also the "Spaghetti Western" theme was represented in this manner. Even if the mimesis in this case was more far-fetched. Here a single object, a curved copper *cx* directed by Sidney Pink (Ledbetter, C. 1992: ix).

By setting up some trees from a model railway, we also bring in the Empty Set. In our model, the Empty Set simply stands for entities without any significant meaning to the model. This is a paradox: You can always find some type of meaning in a constellation of artefacts. You might find strong subjective points of contact, like memories or emotions. Here we are also close to treating the trees in terms of decoration (that particular pureness, often associated with aesthetic values). It is hard to unfix aesthetic expressions from concepts of meaning. Conversely, when ideas about the full meaning appear, an aesthetic point of view is inescapable. Here the Empty Set characterises such entities. By introducing the Empty Set, we would like to point to and underline the scope and insecurity in a representation. Our suggestion is that the appearance of the trees is a redundant way to express the always-recurring Empty Set.



7. Harald Thafvelin, Vårby gård Church, 1975, detail

## Conclusions

How can the restoration of a drinking fountain, some plastic huts from East Europe, or a model, playing with Spaghetti Western themes, modify knowledge in the field of architecture? My answer will take a detour by comparing some qualities inside and outside the practice of architecture. First, it is important to notice that all projects that I have described deal with a narrative moment, where the artistic motive is directed outside the artwork. The presented works hereby bring in questions from society or examine enigmatic architectural themes and concepts. Among practicing architects this attitude is not unique, even if it was almost

abandoned during the heroic phase of modernism, when architecture was considered as rational problem-solving, without any further artistic implications but purely formalistic deeds.

Here the poststructuralistic turn was a breakthrough, not only for a revival of narrative implications in architecture, but also for humanistic discussions on architecture in more general terms. Architects like Daniel Libeskind or Peter Eisenman have in several projects shown alternative approaches to the discussion of architectural issues. Furthermore, they also expanded the field of architecture to become an area for dealing with ques-

Lars-Henrik Ståhl, Ph.D., Assistant Professor  
Lund University, Department of Architecture  
Lars-Henrik.Stahl@arkf.lth.se

tions of memory, history or representation, which appear as different narrations in their models, drawings, or realised building projects. From a Swedish perspective, I will also mention Harald Thafvelin, whose artistry takes a very special position in his architecture [7]. I will not describe these architects as poststructuralists, especially not Harald Thafvelin, rather I consider the poststructuralistic turn as a distant, but important background.

The same outline was evident in the development of contemporary art. Some decades ago it mainly left the formalistic features behind, and turned its interest towards society, politics, or different contextual aspects outside the artwork itself. Where the work of art that represented itself was one important canon in formalistic art critique, this change toward contextual implications gave rise to a manifold artistic climate, in which the artists presented in this paper represent good examples of how far-reaching this



tendency has become today. Yet there is a big difference at this juncture between architecture and art. In contemporary architecture the multitude of artistic developments is not so obvious. On the other hand, architecture describes a well-defined area in society, a domain that many contemporary artists are hungry to enter. In this respect, traditional architecture might be developed, and could hereby be vitalised by artists like Bärtås, Beijer or Bode. If we consider art as one type of knowledge, then we are here talking about modified knowledge in the field of architecture.

## References

- Ledbetter, C. 1992 "Foreword " in: Weisser, T. Spaghetti Westerns – the Good, the Bad and the Violent: a comprehensive, illustrated filmography of 558 Eurowesterns and their personnel, 1961–1977, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, ix.
- Peirce, C. S. 1967 "Letter draft to Samuel Barnet", L36, in R. S. Robin (ed.) Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce, The University of Massachusetts Press.