

Ralph Erskine’s special kind of arrogance

Erskine’s white Sweden

Working with Erskine

Your recent issue with four articles on Ralph Erskine (arq 18.3, pp. 210–56) has prompted my own reminiscences of this remarkable architect, whose work I first encountered as a Cambridge undergraduate, in the shape of the graduate college of Clare Hall, under construction in 1967. I remember accompanying one of our studio teachers, working in Leslie Martin’s office at the time, on a visit: it had insulation-filled cavities (though single glazing), which were a novelty at the time, but what horrified my teacher was the casual detailing: long strips of window with apparently unsupported brickwork above, asphalt flowing over the steps like lava. But I was enormously impressed by this miniature village, and it was partly to see Erskine’s work in Sweden that I hitchhiked around Scandinavia the following summer. I visited his projects at Kiruna, Svappavara, and Luleå, taking a detour a few miles to see the church houses at Gammelstad, little single-storey buildings set along grassy lanes, that are surely one precedent for the academic village at Clare Hall.

Some fifteen years after Erskine’s original building had been completed, the college was in a position to expand, and architects were interviewed who would be prepared to work with him for the next phase. I was a partner at Hughes and Bicknell at the time, and we were fortunate enough to be appointed for an extension. During its design period, Clare Hall, which until then had only been an ‘approved institution’, gained full collegiate status, and its President Michael

Stoker gave much of the credit for its success to the design, and its architect. Not many buildings of the 1960s have received that kind of endorsement.

Ralph had already produced sketches examining various

different sites for a further building; they were rapid freehand 1:200 plans and sections. The favoured site was a narrow south-facing strip along Herschel Road, and we met with Ron Lewcock, the architect fellow



1 and 2 Clare Hall, Cambridge

of the college, and a large bottle of whisky, and Ralph doodled further alternative solutions, including for the other sites that had already been discounted. He was prepared to examine all sorts of unlikely possibilities. Eventually we agreed on about four options, which were costed. Unsurprisingly the cheapest were deep double-sided corridor buildings that blocked views from the existing west-facing range. The best were single-banked, with galleries on the north side and all rooms facing south. I wondered whether we should offer all these possibilities: it would be very difficult to make a good building out of the most economic diagrams. 'Listen', said Ralph, 'there are two types of architect – arrogant architects who say: "there is only one way to do it and that is my way", and bloody arrogant architects who say "I am so clever I can do it any way you want".' Ralph placed himself in the latter camp. In the event the college agreed to the best, and most extravagant scheme, not only single-sided but rising to a fourth floor of only one room and a roof terrace.

A young Danish assistant in Ralph's office made about five drawings, which were submitted for planning. But the Royal Fine Art Commission required more detail and we took over from then on, sending Ralph copies of everything we did. Ralph was remarkably trusting, and when I showed him the final result, he reassured me that it was all fine. The most difficult lesson we had to learn was not to tidy up his elevations: few of Erskine's windows sit above each other since the wall is expressed as a hovering plane, not as a tectonic element. Indeed the fixed frames of timber windows were set behind the outer skin of brickwork, a sensible weatherproofing strategy and dimensionally tolerant way of detailing everyday elements that further serves to express the wall as a skin.

Subsequently, for twenty years or so, my practice worked at Clare Hall on a number of projects, both on the original site and at West Court, my fellow-director Ken Caldwell being principally involved. Whenever we planned a new building for the college, we let Ralph know, and sent him our drawings. (Subsequently, the college have altered the main entrance, installing automatic sliding metal doors, rather like a supermarket; the effect is unfortunate, but Erskine's

aesthetic can take it.) He never attempted to intervene, but occasionally rang up with a droll comment. On one occasion he had just returned from addressing a disorganised UIA conference in Barcelona, the plenary session of which had had to be moved to Isozaki's stadium. 'And do you know what – I suddenly realised I was speaking in a work of architecture', he said – you could almost see the twinkle in his eye. And we exchanged Christmas cards. One from 1987 that I retained has a drawing of a village in Dalmatia with this caption (his emphasis and spelling):

In old towns and villages in all parts of the world I observe and analyse the important elements of an Humane Architecture and Planning by and for People!

Can we learn to create – without nostalgic imitation – similar qualities using the constructions, materials and aesthetics of today and of the future?

The question he raises, and the way it is framed, seems to me symptomatic of Erskine's priorities and personal qualities, so well brought out in the four **arq** articles. Erskine was no Luddite, welcoming technical innovation and the freedoms it gave to ordinary people. At Clare Hall, he regretted having to bury the cars below (even though he did it so skilfully using the undercroft to make a south-facing stepped deck above); he would rather they could have helped animate the little streets. When he revisited, his principal concern was the planting – he wanted the buildings to be covered with foliage. At lunch in the college, which has no 'high table' and where graduate students mix freely with visiting scholars and fellows, Ralph used the opportunity to cross-question everyone about their views of the building. He also asked them about their research, and was not afraid to tell them that they should redirect it into socially more responsible fields.

As the plans of Clare Hall and the Brittgården scheme illustrate, making 'humane' architecture does not necessarily mean using organic geometries, but it does involve prioritising social and environmental over aesthetic concerns – or rather adopting an aesthetic that can allow for a richer vocabulary of form when required. And behind that practice lies a personality: Ralph Erskine could be seen as that most

unusual phenomenon, a modest architect – or one, as his remark during our whisky-fuelled sketch design session suggested, who was arrogant in the right way.

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Erskine, Frescati and whiteness

I spend much of my time in white institutions such as universities and art galleries. In these milieus, whiteness is rendered invisible while all attention is focused on non-whiteness. Any faint awkwardness I might sense is to do with my class background – I was raised in Hammarkullen, a working-class suburb north of Gothenburg. And it is nothing compared to the unpleasantness that non-whites can experience, as is described so well by the likes of bell hooks, Frantz Fanon and Sara Ahmed. Class is not immediately perceived by others, whereas different skin colour is.

One main purpose of critical whiteness perspectives is to make whites visible – to study the problem-free: those who see themselves as normal; who are extremely sensitive to how others differ, homing in on foreign accents, dark skin colour or habits, but who are blind to their own way of speaking, looking and being. I am one of this crowd, sometimes at least. And this is the thing about being white in a white society: you go with the flow. It is only upstream, to borrow from Joseph Conrad, that whiteness becomes visible.

The place where I am working, the Department of Art History at Stockholm University, must be among the whitest imaginable. All of the professors are white, so are most of the staff and the students. White is also the colour of most of our offices, the corridors, the lectures halls, and the doors we hide behind. Until a year ago I had my working space in one of the blue tower blocks described by Claes Caldenby in **arq** 18.3 (pp. 234–44) as 'a student factory', and by Eva Eriksson as a building for 'education consumption'.¹ The tower block is labelled, rationally, the D-house. In my room, D748,

my whiteness was made invisible by the architecture. The early buildings at Frescati, designed by David Helldén, manifest a firm belief in structure and rationality. Long, narrow passages connect the offices, which are effectively separated from the lecture halls below in an attached, vertical building. Behind windowless closed doors you are literally separated from the world.

Also the design for the lecture venues is rational. Corridors and ramps facilitate fast movements from one place to another. The modern man, the architecture enforces moves quickly, and is always on the run, heading for the next meeting, the next lecture. Although it is possible to stay for a chat in the corridors with a colleague or student, this is not a voluntary or predetermined meeting place.

Quite the opposite could be said about the 'agora' Ralph Erskine located (together with Bengt Ahlqvist, Peer-Ove Skånes, and Erich Mühlbach) between Helldén's tower blocks and his own new library. It is like a pedestrian area in a busy city, with a few calmer resting points articulated by some

whimsical wood sculptures by Torsten Renqvist. Passing here, I believe the official statistics saying 25% of the students at Stockholm University have migrant backgrounds.³ Back at my department residing there in a sea of whiteness, I doubt it.

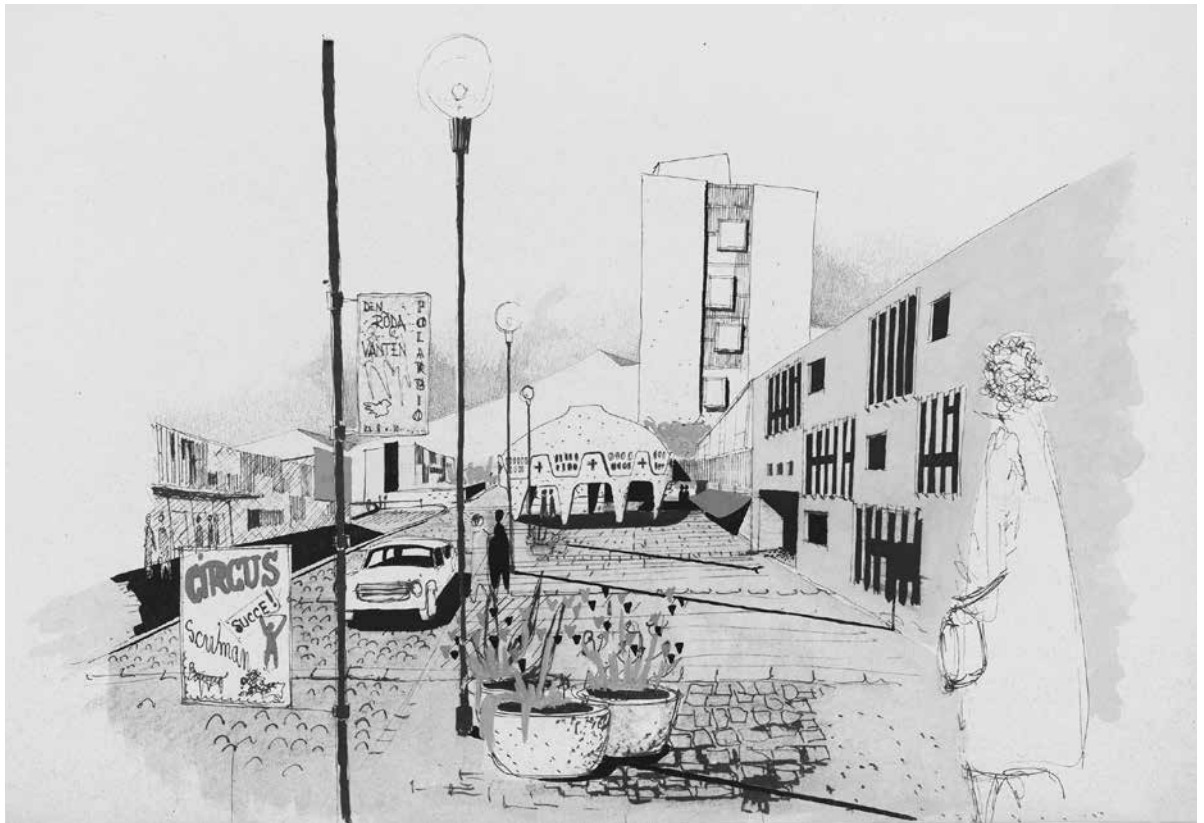
Official Swedish statistics offer no information about race. In the 1960s, the concept of race was abolished by the state of Sweden, for good reasons. But, as Tobias Hübinette has argued, this means that we today lack the necessary tools to analyse statistically the effects of racialisation at, for example, universities. Neither are there any statistics about the students' class backgrounds. What could be read from the official statistics is that the composition of students not only reflects recent migration streams, but also their parents' level of education. Students with lineage from Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iran, from well-educated families, are dominant among migration groups at Stockholm University. They have obviously had easier paths than many others to be admitted into Swedish hegemonic whiteness. Passing as white, to

speak with Sara Ahmed, in a white hegemony, facilitates an academic carrier.

Architecture could be said to produce and preserve whiteness in at least three senses. First, it can contribute to the production of meanings which enforce white values, such as a belief in the modern project and in a narrative that traces Western culture back to the Athenian democracy. Nineteenth-century museum buildings, with their visual references to antiquity, remain a distinct example of this. Second, architecture may neutralise some bodies and visualise others. I have already mentioned David Helldén's office towers, whose whiteness is further emphasised by their furnishing with Scandinavian Modern design. Such furniture was deliberately designed to suit white, northern bodies, both ergonomically and visually, a topic which I have discussed elsewhere.³ But meaning also is produced and preserved in the interaction between architecture and its users. This is the third way that architecture could act as a producer and preserver of whiteness.



3 Photograph of Erskine with Byker children in his site office



4 Erskine's plan for Kiruna, Sweden

Spaces, as Sara Ahmed has put it, 'acquire the "skin" of the bodies that inhabit them. It is important to note here that it is not just bodies that are orientated. Spaces also take shape by being orientated around some bodies more than others. We can also consider "institutions" as orientation devices, which take the shape of "what" resides within them. After all, institutions provide collective or public spaces. When we describe institutions as "being" white (institutional whiteness), we are pointing to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces.⁴ One of Ahmed's sources of inspiration, and indeed mine, is the American feminist bell hooks, who shows how spaces can be analysed according to how they are associated with class, gender and race, and just how sticky such conceptions are.⁵

However, this means that the process by which architecture gets coloured, depends on its users. By providing spaces with low thresholds for non-white users, the potential for being less monochrome increases. Not only actual users have an effect on the spaces, so do the imagined or implied ones. Therefore, it is not innocent or insignificant what

colour people have in architect drawings, photographs or advertisements.

During recent years, a new and unexpected category of visitors have found their way to Frescati. Officially labelled 'EU migrants', they are extremely poor people from southern Europe, mostly Romani from Romania, who live in the parking spaces or in the woods close to Frescati. They show that whiteness is not entirely, and often not primarily, a question of skin colour, but of power and hierarchies. Moving discreetly through the basement of the venues after office hours, using the facilities at the university, they are a twilight people, the dark shadow of the white Europe.

Regarding the first instance by which architecture produces whiteness, its symbolic meanings and historic references, Erskine's buildings at Frescati doubtless enhance notions of Nordicness and Swedishness, in an uncritical way. Erskine firmly embraced the Swedish self-image both in his architecture and in his rhetoric. References to a small, scattered people in a harsh climate are prevalent. The use of light-coloured, unpainted wood, and white-painted steel structures, are in line with a moderate Modernist Swedish aesthetic with roots in the 1930s. So are the sun-

balconies attached to Frescati's library, helping the students get a tan while reading. Although all skin types develop darker pigmentation when exposed to ultraviolet radiation, tanning is chiefly associated with whiteness. The white Swede has the choice to voluntarily and temporarily adopt others' appearance. In the twentieth century, a tan became a signifier of health, freedom and naturalness. Such temporary skin colour was read as a mask, an embellishment, an addition, not an essential part of the white, Swedish body. In this way Erskine's 'climate filter', discussed by Peter Blundell Jones (*arq* 18.3, pp. 210–17), could be understood as an apparatus for the white body – non-white bodies were never on the agenda. The Swedish myth about being a homogeneous country was not questioned by Erskine.

Moving to Sweden, Erskine lived his dream. His design for Lådan (his 1940 house nicknamed 'The Box') is often read as an adaption to Sweden's long, cold winters. (There's no doubt that Ruth and Ralph Erskine were actually freezing, during the extremely cold winters in the early 1940s). But could not the emphasis put on the fireplace and the storage of firewood just as well be interpreted as a British feature, dressed in Swedish rhetoric?

Something similar could be said about Erskine's ideal of gathering residents in narrow neighbourhoods, sometimes even behind a wall. In Sweden, the traditional countryside-structure small hamlets were dissolved in a deliberate modernisation process during the nineteenth century, creating a country where the farms are dispersed in the landscape. This has over the years become part of the Swedish self-image, as a country where it is not only far between houses but also between hearts. Although many Swedes might think that the villages in the British TV series *Midsomer Murders* look cosy, open spaces and a free horizon are more commonly seen as an ideal, and frequently used in sales promotion by estate agents.

The lawns between the buildings at Frescati allude to British and American campuses. During the summer months, when the university is more or less closed, they can be used for picnicking. The rest of the year they are empty spaces that haunt the passers-by with unpredictable winds and rain. In early autumn, some newly arrived students might use them for camping, waiting to finding a decent place to stay. The distinction between the student's campsites and the Romanis' camps at Frescati is clear. There are white ways of living outdoors – and there are non-white ways.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of democracy in Erskine's buildings at Frescati. Almost everything happens in open spaces. There are few private areas, giving the venues a feeling of transparency. Here, apparently, no decisions are made behind locked doors. This is, of course, an illusion. What is visible are the student activities. Hereby the real power is hidden, in secluded spaces at the lower floors of Aula Magna, and behind the security locks at the Library. The open spaces might encourage studies, understood as reading and writing, but not necessarily individual reflection and thinking. There are few places to hide away. It is a design in line with protestant ethics.

But the democratic spaces are graded. Some places are marked as more important than others. Lecture halls, such as Aula Magna, are designed to focus attention on the speaker. This might be the most functional way of designing such a venue, but why has Erskine incorporated a rostrum outside Allhuset? It is a structure made for talking to the people, rather than with the people. I have never seen

anyone using it, but its elevated position and similarities with both pulpits and Mussolini balconies, seems to be at odds with the ideal of all being equal in dignity and rights. But then, it runs in line with Swedish Social Democratic thinking about the democratic, but strong, leader, speaking both for and to his people, and thereby embodying consensus.

A more democratic and potentially even more non-white feature at Frescati are the heavily projecting eaves on several of Erskine's buildings, providing space for informal meetings protected from snow and rain. This is also the function of the gullwing-shaped canopies that Erskine added outside Helldén's entrance roofs. The later ones were too narrow to shelter anything but the doors, whereas the gullwings serve as convenient places for a quick smoke (until it was forbidden in 2008) or outdoor coffee.

Democratic, sometimes even informal, as argued by James Longfield (*arq* 18.3, pp. 218–33), Erskine's architectural thinking nevertheless constructs a white centre. Sure, he was considerate to minorities, especially marginalised and disabled people, but these concerns may nonetheless construct otherness. Although Erskine believed that the architect's aim was to put his competence into use designing better buildings, ideally in dialogue with the users, he did so with a sensitive ear to the commissioners' demands and world-view. A clarifying illustration of this, though taken from a place far from Frescati, is his plans for Kiruna, discussed by Michael Asgaard Andersen (*arq* 18.3, pp. 245–56). The spaces outside the city are marked by reindeers and the word *vildmark* (wilderness). This sub-arctic animal is associated with the Sami people and their land Sápmi, but the natives are almost invisible in the design, constructed as it is around the demands of the mining industry. Erskine declares, quoted by Andersen, that this is *not* an ethnic region – it is a region defined by its climate. Harsh climate, however, could be conquered with the help of modern building techniques and design. In other words: modernity is brought from the south, with the assistance of white Swedes. As if to underline this, one of the reindeers stands in a geometric area beside a train and an aeroplane. The caption reads 'Från Sverige' (From Sweden)! Seldom

have the northern parts of Sweden been visualised as more remote, more foreign and less white – despite the snow.

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Notes

1. Eva Eriksson, 'Stockholm: byggt för föreläsningkonsumtion', *Arkitektur* (6) 1976, 7.
2. Statistiska Centralbyrån and Högskoleverket, *UF 19 SM 1201*, p. 12; *Rapport: Kartläggning av Stockholms universitets studentpopulation 2010*, attachment 1.
3. Jeff Werner, 'Blond Design', *Skiascope 6: Blond and Blue-Eyed. Whiteness, Swedishness, and Visual Culture*, pp. 181–40.
4. Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8 (2) 2007, 157.
5. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (London: South End Press, 2000), 56.

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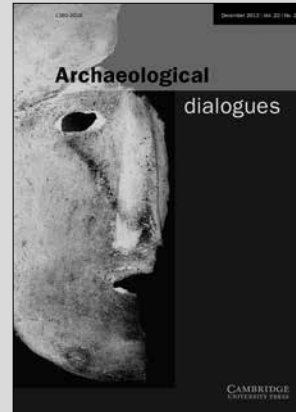
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