

# Sigurd Lewerentz and a Material Basis for Form

## Adam Caruso

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I have been to a very small number of buildings that are almost perfect. They are characterised by a mastery of the act of building that has nothing to do with displays of virtuosity and everything to do with an all pervasive, existential character that fills their every pore. This character is usually indistinguishable from that of their architect, not in the conventional manner of the artist-genius and the work of art, but as a result of a completely internalised, synthetic way of working where issues of construction and thematic intent become one. The perfect buildings that I have seen are the work of old men.

St Peter's Church in Klippan was completed when its architect, Sigurd Lewerentz (1885-1975) was eighty-one. It is the middle, and arguably the masterpiece, of a trio of late buildings that was initiated by the commission for St Mark's Church, Björkhagen in 1956 and concluded with Lewerentz's last structures for the Malmo East Cemetery -the Flower Kiosk and the caretaker's house- in 1969. Lewerentz was one of five architects invited to prepare designs for the church at Björkhagen. Through the auspices of the professional members of the jury, his almost hesitant proposal, containing several alternatives, was accepted by the lay jury members who felt unable to oppose the considered opinion of the architects.<sup>1</sup> St Mark's was completed in 1960. It is the building that made Lewerentz's name known to a larger public and consolidated his position as the living master amongst Swedish architects.

Lewerentz's late projects represent an unprecedented integration of making and thought. Like Matisse, who advised young painters to cut off their tongues and communicate with brush, paint and canvas, Lewerentz was famously laconic. He did not teach and few of his own project descriptions survive. He built.

Having spent half a century concentrating on problems of building, these late projects have a palpable, tectonic eloquence. They embody an intellectual struggle in which ideas of material assembly are inseparable from the formation of intensely characterful spaces. Places which engage with and articulate their situation and purpose. As Heidegger writes in 'Building Dwelling Thinking', dwelling is how we most fully can occupy this Earth. In building we are able to locate, to create the space in which dwelling can occur. 'Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build... Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable of dwelling. Building and thinking belong to dwelling and the one as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice.'<sup>2</sup>

The two church projects, both built almost entirely in brick, share a tectonic language. Only standard bricks are used; no brick is cut; brick is used to make walls, floor, ceiling and furniture. In order to accommodate these strictures a very strong and variously sized mortar joint is used, resulting in walls where bricks are more like the aggregate within a conglomerate structure, rather than distinct, stacked masonry units.

Bricks were often used for public buildings in Sweden at the turn of the century. Perhaps in common with his teachers in the National Romantic movement Lewerentz was attracted by the commonplace status of brickwork in Sweden, as in Denmark, Northern Germany and England. By using an ordinary material, Lewerentz gains the greatest possibility of achieving a renewed reality within the material condition of the building. To make an extraordinary material special, is banal. To heighten one's awareness of a humble material like brick, is poetic. In this, Lewerentz is drawing on a similar underlying ethic as Mies van der Rohe in his Krefeld villas. Both architects are concerned to reveal the secret life which lies latent within their material. Both suppress structural expression to give the material an autonomy from technique, intensifying the idea of the material. Lewerentz and Mies are making the case for a material basis for form. Lewerentz is more extreme in his development of a wall syntax. The massiveness of his brick walls displaces all other issues. The presence of brick subsumes detail and becomes an enveloping surface on which we walk, which covers us, which surrounds us. Lewerentz's brick fabric achieves a seamless web in which material and shape result in spatial character.

Descriptions of Lewerentz's late buildings have concentrated on details where different tectonic systems come together. Windows, at Klippan, where the glass passes over the brick wall assembly with seeming aloofness. The timber doors, which are similarly disengaged from their associated masonry openings. The subtle slope of the sanctuary floor which urges the congregation towards the altar. The steel joists of the brick ceiling which twist and heave like a breathing ribcage. These descriptions do speak of the strong 'otherness' that pervades St Peter's. Unfortunately they also emphasise separate details which in reality have little presence apart from the organic whole.

At Klippan, we experience the church as one. The strangeness of the enveloping brick fabric, the brutality with which openings are made in that fabric, do not have a fetishising or iconographic intent, but rather effect an equivalence between the different parts that every inhabitable structure must have. The relative muteness of the church's exterior and the darkness of the interior reinforce the 'all over' and intensely spatial character of the building's physical condition.

By questioning the role of the most basic elements of construction, Lewerentz removes the possibility of our forming easy or conventionalised associations within the church. Instead we are confronted with brooding walls and spaces whose darkness make us strain to even understand their extent. When the rich variety of spatial conditions begin to emerge from this darkness they appeal directly to our emotions, bypassing an understanding of the building within our personal inventory of experience.

In attending to the raw, existential nature of his materials, Lewerentz privileges a subjective and shifting experience of the world. In this, he is making a decisive break with the tradition of western sacred architecture which relies strongly on convention to embody a particular ontology. Even Ronchamp makes explicit reference to neolithic ceremonial structures in order to assert its continuity with a sacred tradition. At Klippan, Lewerentz rejects iconography as a basis for form. In the same way that he makes us look at bricks as if they were a new material, each of us must confront the spaces of St Peter's anew, and on our own. The severely reduced palette of materials has the same effect as a silent space, and we gain an enhanced awareness of the physical presence of the church, a presence onto which we can project meanings. By adopting a phenomenological approach, Lewerentz recognises prayer as an individual, meditative activity. St Peter's is a church to humanism.

Paradoxically, the material intensity of St Peter's is almost too much to bear. In this, the church all too closely reflects the character of its architect. The earlier church at Björkhagen has more tectonic variation, which offers a sort of release from the insistent concentration of Klippan. St Mark's location within a lively suburb of Stockholm also serves to balance one's experience of the church, its social busy-ness introducing a welcome sense of the everyday. Klippan is a tiny community in the flat south of Sweden. The rigorous brick tectonic is applied throughout St Peter's, in the sanctuary and in the smallest office. Only the community hall offers some small relief in the form of an exposed timber roof structure. It is as though Lewerentz is compelling us to confront the condition of our existence, all of the time. This is understandable in the mind of an eighty-one year old architect, but one senses it is something of a burden on the small congregation.

## References

1 Janne Ahlin, Sigurd Lewerentz Architect, The MIT Press, London 1987, p 152

2 Martin Heidegger, Poetry Language Thought, Harper and Row, New York 1971, p 160-91