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# Towards the 'People's Home' First Housing Districts in Stockholm



The apt metaphor “People’s home” (*Folkhemmet* in Swedish) was first employed in 1928 by Per Albin Hansson, leader of the Swedish Social-Democratic Party, to express the first step in the developments of the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, which would make the novel Swedish achievements in urban policy and spatial practice an inspiring model for the rest of war-ravaged Europe. Starting from the “modernism’s breakthrough” (Rudberg, 1999) marked by the 1930 Stockholm exhibition and favourable socio-political circumstances, Sweden had progressively impressed the world at large, embodying a peculiar marriage of capitalism and socialism applied in many respects. The ambition was also to build good homes for a new society, “a nation-family living under the shared roof of social equality and welfare solidarity” (Creagh, 2011, p. 5). Functionalism and social-democratic ideals have often been considered as overlapping concepts, but this observation is only partly true. Functionalist ideals were imported and properly interpreted in the first green settlements of parallel-sited houses scattered in the suburban areas of the 1930s.

However, this architectural framework does only partial justice to Sweden’s modern mass-housing production, since the two poles “people” and “home” caught the attention of planners, architects, co-operatives, and politicians well before the celebrated advent of functionalism. In fact, the “collective resolution to individuals’ problems had deep roots of the Swedish society, a striving towards a loyalty that found partial expression in the cooperative movement” (Rudberg, 1998, p. 110).

In this regard, Gregor Paulsson – theorist, social reformer and mastermind of the Stockholm exhibition – pointed out in the preface of the volume *Ny svensk arkitektur / New Swedish architecture*<sup>1</sup> how the Swedish “social emphasis” (1939, p. 5) and working-class focus had already found expression in an earlier exhibition *Hemutställningen* (The home exhibition) in 1917 and went from strength to strength in the ensuing years gaining momentum in the housing projects of the 1930s. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to trace the origins of the Swedish social core-concern as well as the first instances of promoting land policies, programmes of mass housing and improvements in living standards.

Beyond any merely stylistic interpretation of Swedish architectural movements in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (National romanticism, Modern classicism or Swedish Grace, Funkis<sup>2</sup> and New Empiricism), one can recognize a certain degree of continuity, especially in the first three decades. The transition between tradition and modernity can be regarded as soft and painless (Ortelli, 2014) unlike other European countries. By the 1910s, Sweden started seeking a common language to frame the character and identity issues related with the emigration to the United States, and, mainly, with the imported cosmopolitanism. It was not merely a question of stylistic purification from the past, rather an urgent need for a proper formal language being able to span over a variety of new themes and circumstances.

**Frontispiece** HSB organised an exhibition into one of Röda Bergen’s furnished apartments in the block Humleboet for the members of the housing cooperative, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1925.

Source: Digitala Stadsmuseet.

In the same preface, though, Paulsson lamented the little participation by leading architects of the 1920s in designing the first mass housing complexes. The whole enterprise, Paulsson argued, was rather taken over by “less qualified and less capable architects” showing “a fault both of the community and of the architect” (1939, p. 6). Considering Paulsson’s blunt allegation, it is thus important to bring about the work of some of the few “capable architects”. This was the case of Sven Wallander, who became undoubtedly the more distinguished architect as well as the driving force of the housing cooperative *Hyresgästernas sparkasse -och byggnadsförening* (Savings and Construction Association of the Tenants, henceforth HSB)<sup>3</sup>. Next to discussing the work of people like Wallander, this paper will also give special attention to the “minor” planners and architects – a label coined by historians generally denoting a secondary role –, who nevertheless played an important role in the Swedish context. These names contributed actively to transforming the face of the outskirts of the modern city – as is still visible today – contributing to create a real continuity between the existing urban pattern and the peripheral housing developments.

*The residential district is a piece of the city's form. It is intimately bound up with the city's evolution and nature, and is itself constituted of parts, which in turn summarize the city's image. [...] In social terms, it is a morphological and structural unit characterized by a certain urban landscape, a certain social content and its function* (Rossi, 1982, p. 65).

This study focuses on unbeaten paths, practically unknown outside Sweden: the first spatial experiments with housing districts located on the outer fringe of Stockholm, conceived in the 1910s and 1920s. It is in this period that some Swedish planners and architects started to shape the social and aesthetic identity of Swedish housing by proposing new urban and architectural models, as Paulsson points out. Acknowledging the existence of multiple modernities, this article will discuss some “forgotten” experiences, such as the Modern classicism or Swedish Grace (Elmlund, Mårtelius, 2015). The label attributed to the movement was coined by the British architect Morton Shand at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, which was held in Paris in 1925, to describe the Swedish simple, light and elegant interpretation of classicism. Further, others critics alluded to their timelessness and humanist approach to the classical architectural vocabulary.

Despite their struggle to cope with the housing shortage, housing estates developed in those years could reveal a pre-history of the subsequent successful spread of the *folkhem* concept. From a quantitative point of view, the Swedish solutions dating from that time were less numerous than other coeval European experiences, e.g. the

noticeable case of the municipality of Vienna<sup>4</sup>. Those Swedish housing estates, however, deserve attention for their peculiar ability to combine Sitte and Unwin's theories, which present some points in common. The attention here goes to two valuable examples: Röda Bergen (1909-1929) and Vasastaden (1913-1924) situated in two nearby North-West hilly sites of Stockholm, where the previous East-West oriented grid-plan (*Lindhagenplanen*) actually ended (Fig. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1 Map of the regular urban fabric pattern and natural surroundings of Stockholm archipelago, 1891. Röda Bergen and Vasastaden have been highlighted with black contours. Source: Digitala Stadsmuseet, Stockholm, edited by the author.

### **Metamorphosis of the urban block and the practise of space**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden was still viewed as a separate province on the fringe of the European debate. Nevertheless, together with the rest of Europe, Sweden tackled the issues of accelerated metropolitan growth, acute housing shortage, dramatically unhealthy living conditions and soaring building costs. The response came first in the form of high density and congested buildings (*hyreshuset*) and provisional wooden barracks (*nödbostad*). In 1916, Paulsson devoted a chapter to the issue of tenement houses in his *Den nya Arkitekturen*

(The New Architecture). Their current form was less the result of city growth than of dire urban policy, where land speculation went ahead unregulated by authorities. *Hyreshuset* were built following basic building requirements focused on sanitary standards and fire safety. Social, spatial and aesthetic aspects were not taken into account (1916, p. 106).

The demand for land reform became acute as housing gained the status of a public utility, unquestionably one of the most important issues of modernity, involving many actors and vigorous public initiative. It thus became crucial to seek an alternative urban planning and architectural answer to the over-exploited town, the result of 19<sup>th</sup> century speculation. Sweden's housing revolution was triggered by a Building Decree (*Byggnadsstadgan*, 1874) and a Town Planning Act (*Stadsplanelagen*, 1907). In 1903, a few social democrat representatives entered the City Council and the *Centralförbundet för Socialt Arbete* (National Association of Social Welfare) started to hold meetings fostering co-operative housing and social reforms.

Starting from 1904, the national government devised a mean of controlling the urbanization of suburban sprawl by granting direct support for small cottage settlements. The so-called *Egnahemsrörelsen* (owner-occupied home movement) encouraged agricultural workers to acquire small cottages with the municipal supply of a certain plot of land. Later, other social groups became involved, like industrial workers and middle-level officials, attracted by the neighbourhoods' real potential as an alternative to the congested metropolis. They were inspired by English Garden City ideals, though now tailored to urban dynamics. Since 1917 the Parliament took several measures to facilitate and support the municipalities in planning and housing construction. Tenant societies became vital organizations, as shown by the first housing cooperative *Stockholms Kooperativa Bostadsförening* (SKB), established in 1916. Throughout the 1920s direct state housing subsidies were progressively reduced, so that co-operative ventures, principally through the prominent HSB founded in 1923, emerged as an alternative to private construction. Röda Bergen was mostly built by HSB, while Vasastaden by SKB.

Parallel to such predisposing factors, one must also take into account the peculiar morphology of Stockholm, to which it historically owed the appellation of *staden vid vatten* or *staden inom broarna* (city on the water or city within the bridges). Stockholm had always stood out from other European cities for being scattered over the islands of an archipelago. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new infrastructures and the *Lindhagenplanen* from 1866 shaped the appearance of the metropolis of the North. This urban plan did not cover the whole area of the city's fragmented structure, though. Extended areas at the fringes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century urban fabric remained unplanned.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new planning principles imported from England and Germany made a strong impact causing a sharp break with previous ideals. As previously stated, the Garden



**Fig. 2** Map of the central parts of Stockholm elaborated by the Stockholms stadsingenjörskontor (Stockholm City Engineer Office) in 1938. The two nearby housing complexes are here highlighted. Source: Stockholms Stadsarkiv, edited by the author.

Cities model was a source of inspiration for garden suburbs around cities, but it also held significant potential for application to the design of urban residential districts on the rocky fringes. One thinks of Unwin's exhaustive contribution in cataloguing house groupings, particularly the "close, this collective space surrounded by houses and separated from traffic, which reinterpreted the traditional courtyard of the farm of manor house" (Panerai, Castex, Depaule, 2004, p. 145). What was fascinating for Scandinavians was how curving streets, parklands and gardens, and residential buildings contribute to marking out spatial differences.

As for the German influence, the urban planner Per Olof Hallman<sup>5</sup> was the first to introduce Sitté's theories in Sweden. He produced overall plans of a traditional kind for inner parts or suburbs of many cities. In Stockholm, Röda Bergen and Vasastaden are valuable examples of his numerous projects.

In the German magazine, *Der Städtebau*, he stressed his aim to combat the old gridiron planning system and replace it by new town planning ideas as displayed in the two schemes depicting the opposite urban patterns (1905, p. 106). Street patterns differing in terms of shape and width played a key role in giving variety and vitality to urban blocks.

The importance assigned to greenery would help to create a peaceful atmosphere, a complete novelty when it came to enclosed spaces and city blocks. Few years before, in the essay “Großstadt-Grün” (Metropolitan Greenery), Sitte had already turned the attention on improving the “sanitary greenery” in the interior recreational spaces of large blocks centred on human activities and relations, rather than in amidst the dust and noise of the streets (Collins and Collins, 1986, p. 319)<sup>6</sup>.

Sitte’s town planning model “appealed to Scandinavians in a pragmatic way, because of its ethical content and interpretation of the city as a unitary expression of collective identity [...] They tried to balance practical urban requirements with artistic and civic needs” (Porfyriou, 1990, p. 103). The search of this peaceful coexistence aimed to wear collective spaces and squares in their “Sunday best” in order to represent the pride and joy of district inhabitants and to awake their civic spirit (Collins and Collins, 1986, p. 230).

Hallman exercised a long-lasting influence on town planning until the late 1920s, although many of his plans would be partly revised, like Röda Bergen by Wallander and Sigurd Lewerentz.

Before the World War I an extensive portion of Röda Bergen South blocks – particularly those T-shaped buildings facing onto the wide alley of Karlbergsvägen – were built. They stressed symmetry and regularity more than before. However, the separation between traffic-bearing roads and residential streets remained. The merging of two topographically different areas – the two halves of the hexagon – by means of two main orthogonal axes was kept as well. What really changed was the dwelling type employed: multi-storey mass-buildings substituted semi-detached houses. In Hallman’s proposal there was a kindergarten, a church and a school, but afterwards buildings for the community (featured in black in the first row of schemes in Fig. 3) were changed in position and function. Also, the layout of the ten housing blocks (Humbleboet, Sigyn, Verdandi, Kakelugnen, Urnan, Pokalen, Kannan, Fatet, Bikupan and Myrstacken) was slightly modified, especially in the N-W portion of the neighbourhood.

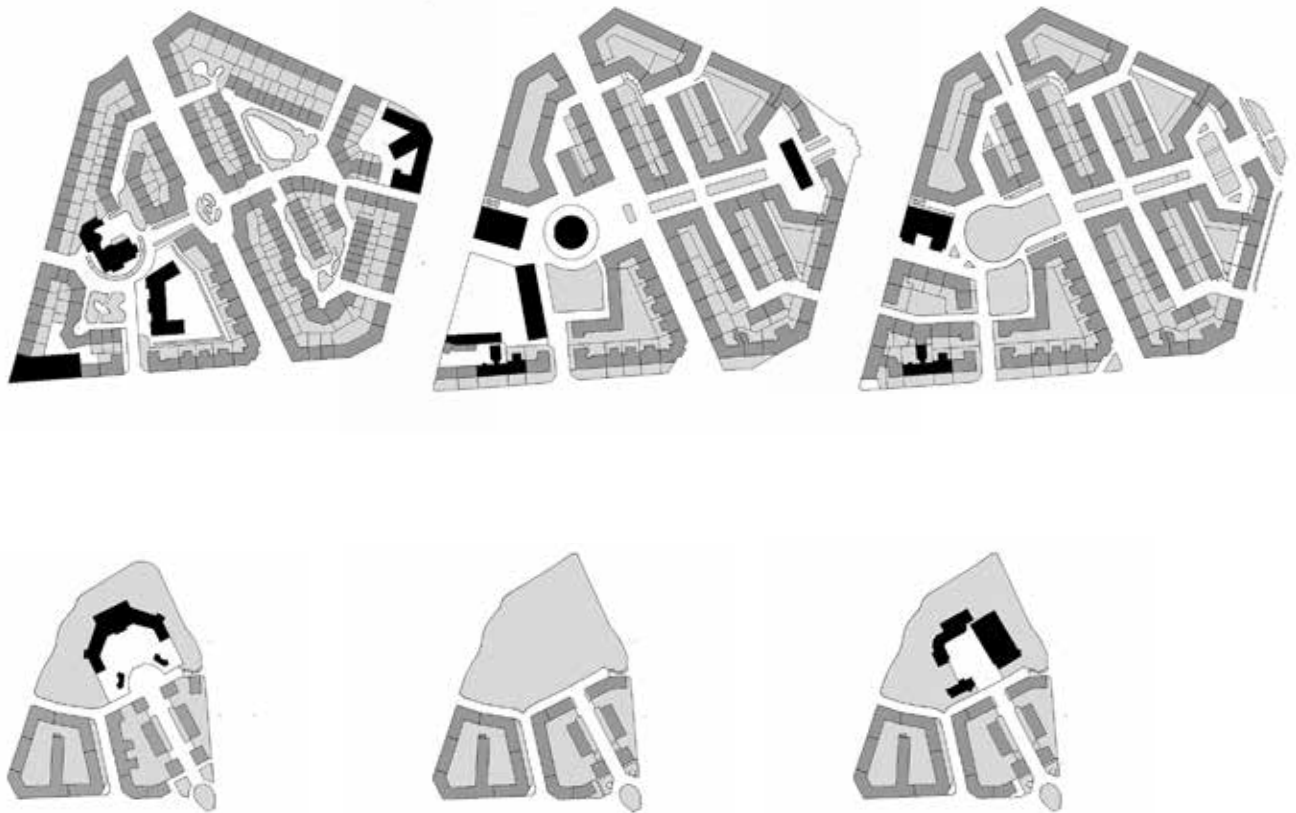
Due to its extensive size, Röda Bergen called more than forty architects, of which Wallander, Erik Lallerstedt, Cyrillus Johansson, Albin Stark, Björn Folke Hedvall, Åke E. Lindqvist, were the highest qualified and brilliantly capable. Unlike the layout of Röda Bergen, the Vasastaden housing blocks remained nearly unvaried, especially the form of the three large courtyard blocks (Bälgen, Motorn<sup>7</sup> and Vingen) and the N-S axis of Upplandsgatan which splits Motorn and Vingen. The monumental building proposed on the peak of the hill, occupying one of the ends of the axis, was never built. In the 1950s a kindergarten / primary school took its place. Hallman revised the first plan proposal by designing a park in that northern area, thus slightly reducing the key role of Upplandsgatan (see second row of schemes in Fig. 3). The intervention was designed by two figures who mostly worked for the SKB: Edvin Engströms and Gustaf Larson.

From a typological point of view, Europe's modern housing experiences showed a determined search for suitable models. The debate "usually accepts as a fact the myth of the dissolution of the dense urban fabric of the 19<sup>th</sup> century city and the subsequent invention of new types of green settlements" (Sonne, 2010, p. 123). The dispersion of urban dwellings was propagated by the avant-garde motto "from the block to the bar" (*vom Block zur Zeile*). But the interwar period also produced other less radical, though modern, spatial experiments. Such was the "intermediary" step<sup>8</sup> of the reformed urban block: "a perimeter block which introduced light, air and greenery into the block with a large courtyard while still defining the public space with continuous facades" (Sonne, 2008, p. 249).

This typology derived from a long-standing tradition in many European cities, Stockholm included. The arrangement around a courtyard employed in the 1920s was "a real transformation, a deep modification not only of the block as a formal, abstract unit, but also of the block as a place for the location of activities with a clear and hierarchical articulation between interior and exterior space" (Panerai, Castex, Depaule, 2004, p. 131).

The metamorphosis of the closed urban block was also described in *acceptera*, the manifesto of the Swedish functionalism published in 1931.

Fig. 3 From left to right: the evolution of the layout of Röda Bergen (1909, 1923, 1974) and Vasastaden (1913, 1916, 1958). Drawings by the author.





In line with the soft transition between movements as previously stated, it can be interpreted as a tepidly positive comment on the intermediary typological step. The group responsible for the Stockholm Exhibition – Asplund, Markelius, Paulsson, Sundahl, Gahn, Åhrén – invoked the need for a radical change in planning and housing, which to a certain extent had already started thanks to the 1920s housing experiments.

*We begin to work from the inside outward, and with the perfect apartment as the building block construct the entirety, the body of the city. Developments in recent decades reveal a clear progression towards a totally new type of town plan. The interiors of the blocks have been cleared of overshadowing protrusions. T-shaped buildings have vanished and instead of a patchwork of small yards and protruding wings, there are now one or two large communal courtyards per block, often with garden. Certainly, there has been long hesitation about taking this tendency to its conclusion and abandoning the closed block? (Creagh, 2008, p. 191).*

Somewhat in contrast to these moderate lines, the group used the scathing rhetoric of an avant-garde manifesto to discredit few examples of perimeter blocks in Stockholm: Nörr Mälarstrand (1917-23) by Cyrillus Johansson and others as well as Wallander's housing block in Helgalunden (1913-1926)<sup>10</sup>. Their words need to be interpreted as critical of the decorative features of so-called Swedish Grace rather than hostile to the typological features of such housing developments.

Curiously, in 1974 the Swedish critical panorama provided an early and important study on the partly understated typology of the reformed perimeter block, testifying its pivotal role in modern housing production. The dissemination of Björn Linn's analysis was limited and it has never been translated. He coined the term *Storgårdskvarteret* (large courtyard block) to describe all such European examples. He put the focus on the form of the block and the inner common space used for improving community contacts and activities. It is also because most of the dwellings are small one-room apartments that they need communal facilities (e.g. shops, ateliers, laundry-rooms and collective showers, etc.) on the ground floor and within the courtyard. The novelty of the collective courtyards consisted also in the progressive elimination of separation walls (Fig. 5 and 7), which were the main features of the external areas of the speculative high-dense buildings. In fact, the practise of erecting walls reinforced the separation in blocks – and consequently the separation of inhabitants too – within the large courtyard block derived from the cadastral system. Due to the greater complexity with its variety of the courtyards layout, often irregular in shape, Röda Bergen can be considered the highest synthesis between English and German models of city planning.

It is a balance between the modern monumental scale and a far more intimate spatial conception. The urban environment is characterized by continuous variation of street-views, attractive squares, parkland and private vegetable gardens. Of the ten large courtyard blocks, the two partial symmetrical ones (Humbleboet and Sigyn) – situated in the Eastern entry side of the district (see second and third schemes in Fig. 3) –, represent the more remarkable examples of this metamorphosis of the closed urban block. In Humleboet five / six-storey buildings encircle wide green courtyards facing the wide roads, while some narrower one-way streets and urban staircases are framed by lower buildings. The block set interrelations between the sequence of three semi-opened spaces of different shapes, sizes and usage (Fig. 5): the trapezoidal urban square and avenue planting between Humleboet and Sigyn, the irregular triangular plot which follows the slope of the terrain and the rectangular garden between the parallel blocks.

Vasastaden presents a more modest scale, mainly 3-storey. It hinges on the relation between curved streets, crossroads and composition in three blocks. As dictated by the rocky lie of the land, the blocks layout (Motorn and Vingen) was non-symmetrical to the road axes.

**Fig. 4** Röda Bergen. Collective green trapezoidal courtyard and the strip of private gardens in the block Humleboet, 1928.  
Source: Digitala Stadsmuseet, Stockholm.



Fig. 5 Humleboet, ground floor plan.  
Drawing by the author.

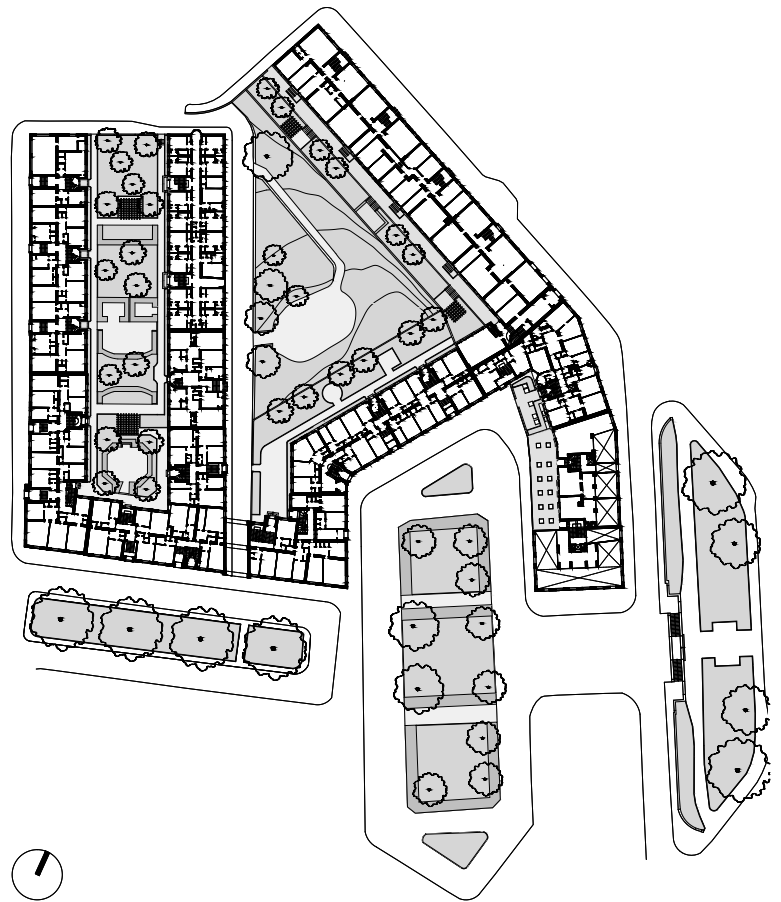


Fig. 6 Humleboet, the arch-passageway giving vehicle and pedestrian access to the trapezoidal courtyard, 2017  
Photo taken by the author.

By contrast, Bälgen marked the boundary between exterior and interior as a separation for the inhabitants between public and private (Fig. 8). Five corridor-passages gave access to the courtyard, matching up with doors on the external façade, while access to dwellings was from the courtyard (Fig. 7).

To sum up, the typological assemblage of the ground floor of Humleboet and of the three blocks of Vasastaden clearly illustrates how housing dictated design and use of space between streets and the courtyard as well as the layout of green and paved areas. One should note that there were courtyards shared by inhabitants of all the quarters and others exclusively accessible to people living in the blocks facing the courtyard. Two housing instances also evidently demonstrate how the Swedish attitude to town planning was based on “a careful study of the terrain: the idea was to adapt the blocks and street networks to the lie of land, and to exploit the topographical opportunities for planning a varied urban landscape” (Hall, 2011, p. 191).

Fig. 7 Vasastaden: Bälgen, Motorn and Vingen  
ground floor plan.  
Drawing by the author.



### Constructing the metropolitan image by housing districts

Besides its morphological and typological aspects, the character and architectural language of the residential unit were also central concerns in the process of “reformation”. Together they would contribute to creating the metropolitan image, in which the individual and society can identify themselves. In this regard, Walter Behrendt in 1911 explored how uniformity (*Einheitlichkeit*) in modern housing block façades would be a key spatial element in the urban design for overcoming the fragmented character of speculative blocks and, consequently to a larger extent, the atomization of individuals too. This was also a revealing feature of the modern metropolitan society which called for a formal upgrading of social status and search of ideals of community. In the contribution on *Hyreshuset*, Paulsson accepted Behrendt’s statement, because employing a uniform character can reinforce togetherness among individuals living around a common courtyard (1916, p. 121). But, he recognized that applying overall uniformity would damage the relationship between dwelling unit and street so that the block might feel closed off, unwelcoming outwardly, for all its lively inward openness. He proposed the remedy of incorporating design principles derived from modest-scale housing into the concept of the



Fig. 8 Vasastaden. A corridor-passage giving access to Bälgen’s courtyard, 2016.  
Photo taken by the author.

residential estate. Tall and low façades, wide and narrow streets, larger and smaller blocks dialogue together in the overall neighbourhood. Anyway, owing to the Swedish cadastral system and the high cost of land, each large courtyard block had to be sub-divided into lots/blocks of different shapes. According to Paulsson, they sought to express variation within the rather uniform architectural language and character dictated by the large courtyard block itself. Legitimately, it recalled the varying shapes and coloured plaster of the historical city, like the central island Gamla stan, whilst avoiding mere imitation or the anarchy of ornamentation.

Looking at Röda Bergen one sees a superior order setting the architectural principles for the entire residential unit, especially thanks to overall supervision of site planning, conducted principally by Wallander. Only secondarily did the architect responsible for each block of the large courtyard block propose slight variations in the overall complex. Both the urban façade and the courtyard-facing side of each block were treated with the same colour of warm range of plasters. On the contrary, Motorn and Vingen of the Vasastaden, presented a continuity in terms of language, colour and motif between exterior and interior, while the block Bälgen set a twofold dialogue: a uniform urban façade very similar to the one of the other two, while inside declared the individuality of each block that constituted the urban courtyard block by painting their façades in different colours.

Swedish residential districts of the 1920s are often associated with the architectural language of Swedish Grace, but despite some stylistic reservations, their “popular classicism” (Linn, 1987, p. 66) became a useful aesthetic tool to explore. In addition, quite apart from the idyllic appearance of the two interventions, there was a clear rational layout in the apartments: high-standard kitchens and already standardized doors, windows and carpentry.

*The 1910s and 1920s are a period of contrasts and contradictions, and in many respects, are characterized by changes and conflicts at many levels. The creation of the architecture and the design of decoration is a part of the overall character of the period – of the intellectual attitude of the metropolis or the critical reflective attitude to history (Knauff, 2015, p. 100).*

Röda Bergen and Vasastaden accomplished a collective goal sought after by many architects that succeeded in accommodating people from the low ranks of the social ladder in housing complexes conceived as complete organic neighbourhoods, that is, an integral unit for planning, an economical unit for construction and administration, and a social unit for living (Bauer, 1934, p. XV), still successfully performing that function today.



**Fig. 9** Röda Bergen. The corner of Humleboet in correspondence with the avenue planting and the one-way street along the perimeter of one of the Western bars of the block, 2017.  
Photo taken by the author.



**Fig. 10** Röda Bergen. On the foreground, the rocky and green circular area; in the backdrop, the Bikupan block faces the crossroads between the avenue planting of Rödabergsgatan and the wide road of Torsgatan, 2017.  
Photo taken by the author

Fig. 11 Vasastaden. Trapezoidal courtyard of the block Motorn characterized by sloped terrain, 1918.

Source: Digitala Stadsmuseet, Stockholm.



Fig. 12 Vasastaden. Semi-open corner of Motorn and the road axis Upplandsgatan, 1927.

Source: Digitala Stadsmuseet, Stockholm.



1 → As stressed by Paulsson, the book opens with an examination of lower and middle-class housing estates, which were not included in the monumental volume Swedish modern architecture of the Twenty century authored by Hakon Ahlberg and the English photographer F. R. Yerbury and published some years earlier, in 1925.

2 → In Sweden, Funkis is a colloquial translation of “functionalism”.

3 → Paulsson admired Wallander’s efforts and together they engaged in a fruitful dialogue on housing issues. For instance, at the 1930 Stockholm exhibition, Paulsson invited the HSB office to build a series of housing models in order to demonstrate its contribution to modern planning and standardization in the 1920s.

4 → From 1850 to 1930 Stockholm’s population increased from 93,000 to 502,200 inhabitants. The quantity of dwellings built in inner Stockholm down to the end of the 1920s was not sufficient. Most of them were small; around half were comprised of one room and a kitchen.

- 5 → He took part in the first Town Planning Conferences and arranged the first IFHTP seminar in Göteborg (1923).
- 6 → Sitte's masterpiece (*Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, 1889) was translated in English in 1945 for the first time. The translation curated by Collins and Collins (1986 [1965]) includes also two significant essays written by him in the ensuing years.
- 7 → At the *Hemutställningen*, Morton block designed by Gustaf Larsson was published together with other housing buildings in the special catalogue *Svenska stadsförbundetsavdelning Kommunala byggnadsföretag*.
- 8 → "Intermediary" from the position that urban perimeter blocks occupied in well-known schemes of housing layout evolution, drawn up by Gropius and May. See: Gropius, W. (1929). *Die Wohnformen: Flach-, Mittel- oder Hochbau?*. *Das Neue Berlin*, 4, pp. 74–80; May, E. (1930). *Fünf Jahre Wohnungsbau tigkeit in Frankfurt am Main*. *Das Neue Frankfurt*, 2–3, pp. 21–55.
- 9 → The English translation of the manifesto is published in the key contribution *Modern Swedish Design. Three Founding Texts* (2008).
- 10 → Hallman did the *Helgalunden* plan, which it was later revised.

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