

Counteroptical Aesthetics

**Darkness, Breakage and Surplus in the work of Sigurd Lewerentz
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Abstract

According to Graham Harman the non - relational surplus in objects allows them to change. As Harman points out this surplus can never be drained dry. This is essential to understanding that the advancement of architecture is incommensurate with the pursuit of finite truth or absolute knowledge. Harman's philosophy offers a fresh start, and it has confronted us with a new set of questions about the *architectural object*.

There are several concepts in Harman's work that are conspicuously part of architecture –in the northern tradition these are evident in the late work of Sigurd Lewerentz, most notably his church in Klippan and his Woodlawn cemetery chapel. The experience of these buildings offers a similar response - the work is both strangely captivating and poetic. Harman's concept of breakage, is alive in Lewerentz's austere, yet strange disposition of architectural elements, the surplus that permeates his use of common brick, and his turn from the purist white architecture of the 1930's to the dark interiors of his late brick churches. Harman's philosophy offers an alternative discourse to the anthropocentric tradition that has come to define this work.

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Helge Brandt: "Why are the ceilings formed in this way? Is it for the acoustics?" Lewerentz replied with a smile: "Well, yes, it's possible that it is good for the acoustics also, but I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Brandt; it's purely aesthetics. And I'll tell you where I got the idea from, too. When I was young I had a racing boat...."

- Swedish Architect Sigurd Lewerentz speaking to the church warden ¹

Darkness

Over the course of Lewerentz's career his work encompassed many themes, procession (death and remembrance), symbolism (linguistics), construction (tectonics), optics (light and perspective) and geometry (order). These are only a few of the many themes that he explores through his buildings. It also difficult to single them out as they are often combined- where there is 'symbolic geometry' in the use of the Fibonacci numbers, there is also 'symbolic construction,' in his structural incorporation of the cross in St. Peters. Here, the cross is reconceived using standard steel sections to support multiple vaults. The overlaps in these readings produce a poetic resonance. From project to project the presence of these themes resurface to different degrees, but all of the themes are masterfully brought together in his designs for the St. Marks Church, Björkhagen (1956-64) and St. Peters Church, Klippan (1962-66). In the later, he manages to slip these themes into the building, nesting one inside the other as if they were ghosts. As soon as the geometry is recognized it slowly gives way to the other aspirations. Some readings are immediate while others are harder to decipher and there are secrets that remain completely withdrawn. These

become slightly more mysterious if we consider the personality of the architect.² Aside from all the causes it is the imagination of Lewerentz that is at work. There has been plenty of speculation surrounding 'the turn' in his work away from the purism that was associated with the New Empiricism in Sweden during the mid-1930's toward the austere modernism of his late brick churches³. The first evidence of this metamorphosis is his design for the Villa Edstrand where the stucco work is omitted and the exposed steel and brick are used as finished materials.⁴

This change happened abruptly and Lewerentz chose to use the same traditional dark brown Helsingborg brick that had been used in Sweden for the design of public buildings. In her book on Lewerentz, Janne Ahlin provides an interesting insight that the intense beams of light that he observed in the interior of the old brick factory at Helsingborg served as a model for his churches.⁵ Lewerentz's choice of brick is not surprising given his training in Germany during the Arts and Crafts movement, where he worked for Bruno Möhring and Richard Riemerschmid.



Figure 1: St. Peter's Church, Klippan, insulated window details. Photos by author.

Both are known for their refined detailing. However, it is curious that what became characteristic of his modernist churches was inspired by the mysterious atmosphere of an industrial brick factory and the dilapidated bricks that he found there. He felt so strongly that these bricks embodied the image he wanted to portray that he installed a grouping of them, like original modernist relics, near the entrance to St. Peters. There is a strange form of choreography in the architectural elements of St. Mark's. This is due in part to the routine life of the architectural objects themselves – walls, doors, windows, roofs, downspouts, gutters, and floors are routinely estranged through their detailing. Mass produced engineered objects, such as steel sections, are juxtaposed against the irregular handmade bricks. It is representative of an ethics where all objects have the same status regardless of their apparent modernity.⁶ A similar sentiment can be found in Harman's characterization of a flat ontology where all objects are not equally real, but all objects are equally objects. Furthermore, Harman 'treats causal relations between non-human objects no differently from human perception of them.'⁷ A similar sentiment is found in Lewerentz's detailing. There is a watchmaker's mentality that pervades his assemblies. The elements resist being concretized into a new object and each new element emerges from an aggregate of recognizable objects.

There is a renewed sense of equivalency amongst the most recognizable elements of Lewerentz's buildings. The sanctuary of St. Peters has a monolithic quality, the ceilings, floors

and walls are all made of brick. The dark walls disappear and the floor tiles and windows hover in the dimly lit space never completely revealing how they make contact with the brick walls. Colin St John Wilson points out that the darkness of the churches is entangled in a unique set of optical problems. According to Wilson, “Lewerentz stated that subdued light was enriching precisely in the degree to which the nature of the space has to be reached for, emerging only in response to exploration...And it is only in such darkness that light begins to take on a figurative quality.”⁸ Lewerentz’s effort to make the buildings dark and mysterious emerges from a new set of aesthetic principles. The darkness of the churches presents a counter-optical architecture that stands in direct opposition to the optical foundations of classical architecture. The optical distortions in his buildings such as afterimage, absorption and pulsation contradict the Greek truths of, perspective, relief and entasis, all of which Lewerentz had mastered in his execution of the Resurrection Chapel thirty years earlier. Harman’s proposition of the counterfactual is important for architecture.⁹ With respect to this Harman states, “...we might easily make a science of changing the relational events in any work of literature or even the visual arts in order to shed light on the possibly underutilized power of the internal elements of those works.” Like the misshapen and molten character of the Helsingborg bricks, object-object interactions hold the potential for new futures.



Figure 2: Left, Leader detail, St. Marks, Björkhagen, Figure 3: Lamp designs, St. Peters, Klippan. Photos by author.

Gaps

There are numerous similarities between Lewerentz’s materialism and Harman’s idea of breakage. These include a wide range of items from broken objects to broken relations. There are objects in Lewerentz’s work that appear to be broken apart and reconnected, such as lamps, leaders and misaligned floor tiles. Then there are broken relationships, such as the detached portico, and the face mounted glazing and door frames. This separation of objects allows the parts of the building to be reevaluated and it reveals the inherent gap that exists between matter and order. Perhaps the most unusual example being the delicate offsets between the pairing of steel columns and beams in St. Marks where the paired steel sections are separated by a sliver of light. Peter Salter refers to these methods as a ‘strategy of tolerance.’ According to Salter, “These rules are about tolerances: they determine the slight angle between the portico and body of the church

in the Chapel of the Resurrection in the Woodland Cemetery. They determine as well the concept of the 'poché' he uses for designing the graveyards under the trees."¹⁰

Perhaps another way to consider these unusual offsets is to simply accept them as gaps. In many cases, Lewerentz manifests the gaps with so much finesse that they too become objects. It is remarkable how the smallest misalignments catch your eye and force you to look twice to see if things are amiss or if it's the result of an illusion. The most illustrious example of this is evident in his modulation of the brickwork and the amplification of the vertical mortar joints. The modulation of the light mortar joints against the dark brick makes the wall mysteriously pulsate. When you look at the walls it is clear that something is amiss, but the cause is not immediately clear. According to building chairman Nils Roth, "One day the architect was discussing a task with a tile-setter, who maintained that if he did as Lewerentz wanted, he wouldn't get it straight. Lewerentz responded: 'Straight, straight. Why does everything have to be straight? It can be beautiful even if its crooked.'" Whereas Neoclassicism and Modernism were practices that focused on eliminating gaps, covering them up or rationalizing means of order to conceal them, Lewerentz recognizes that gaps are real objects and he reserves a place for them in his aesthetics. It is worth returning to one of the significant aspects of Harman's argument; simply that if we set aside causal relations a more vicarious form of reality can be explored. After so many years of building Lewerentz recognized there is no world order that can sufficiently bind objects together. The poetry in his work is often directly related to the way that he inserts and amplifies the gaps between various architectural elements and this ethos orchestrates how objects touch in his buildings.



Left, Figure 4: St. Peters, Klippan, Figure 5: drainage details, St. Peters, Björkhagen. Photos by author.

Surplus

To discuss the idea of surplus it is necessary to return to the role of the bricks.¹¹ Lewerentz's mastery is a product of his ability to intensify the relationships between things by clearing out space for them to be encountered, yet his work is far from being minimalist in character. The encounter with the walls resonates with a strange disequilibrium. In an attempt to avoid the tolerances of the modular brick wall he manages to transform the texture and character of the brick walls through a strange, self-imposed rule of never cutting a brick. There is a sense of irony behind this. Traditional modular construction emerged from the modernist dogma that the

whole was determined through the module, there is striking similarity here to what Harman refers to as undermining – the reduction of the wall to its parts. One might suspect that such a rule anticipates a logical formation for the entire building, but that is not what transpires. In retaining the brick module, Lewerentz did not build the portions of the walls between the openings to modular dimensions, so while the sanctity of the bricks was retained the widths of the vertical mortar joints were free to change. He assigned his favorite bricklayers to the task. This is one of the ways that Lewerentz places a *gap* into the relational framework. Through the revaluation of the mortar he establishes an aesthetic framework that is partially contingent and inaccessible to architectural representation. This assignment gives the wall an optical pulse and a sense of fluidity that is hard to see, particularly at close distances.

By recognizing the *gap* in their potentiality objects like mortar, bars, and openings enter into new relations. As one critic described it, the walls are more like concrete where the bricks more closely resemble the aggregate. There is evidence that this proves to be true, not only did rebar have to be inserted into the wall, but a special mortar recipe had to be developed. There is an often peculiar negation behind many of Lewerentz's rules, 'not cutting a brick,' and 'not doing it the way you did it before' are ways of destabilizing our relationship to building.

Conclusion

For Lewerentz building became a way to access the surplus of the architectural object. His architectural accomplishments far exceed what I have touched upon here. There are numerous technical achievements in his buildings and they all point to fact that hard questions demand hard answers. Through his revaluation of the elements of architecture Lewerentz constructs a counterfactual narrative -an alternative modernism - that is less burdened by causes or technicalities, but by a pursuit of a new aesthetic imagination that resonates from the interactions of objects themselves.

¹ Ahlin, J., 2014. *Sigurd Lewerentz, architect*, Zürich: Park Books. p 156.

² See *Sigurd Lewerentz, architect*. Janne Ahlin's work is full of insights about Lewerentz's personality, design endeavors and quirks. For her 2014 reprint she constructed a detailed 'Curriculum Vitae' that sequentially pairs the endeavors of the 'person' with the 'work.' p 184-194.

³ See Wilson, C., *Sigurd Lewerentz The Sacred Buildings and the Sacred Sites*. In: N. Flora, P. Giardiello and G. Postiglione eds., *Sigurd Lewerentz*. London: Pall Mall. St. Marks was eventually dismissed from the Brutalist canon by Reyner Banham who referred to it as "other", "an enigma" and that which "poses a question but illuminates no possible answer".

⁴ Ahlin, J., 2014. *Sigurd Lewerentz, architect*, Zürich: Park Books. p 122.

⁵ Ahlin, J., 2014. *Sigurd Lewerentz, architect*, Zürich: Park Books. p 187.

⁶ A similar marriage between the arts and crafts tradition and post war concrete highway construction occurs in the Chiesa dell'Autostrada – 'the Highway Church,' by Giovanni Michelucci completed in 1964 in Italy. The masterworks of Michelucci, Lewerentz, and Utzon were all completed during this time period. Their work combines an Arts and Crafts sensibility with a fresh approach to the formal integration of new forms of construction. Utzon and Lewerentz were both influenced by boat construction.

⁷ Harman, G. 2011. *The Quadruple Object*, Washington USA: Zero Books. p 5.

⁸ Wilson, C., 2013. *Sigurd Lewerentz The Sacred Buildings and the Sacred Sites*, In: N. Flora, P. Giardiello and G. Postiglione eds., *Sigurd Lewerentz*. London: Pall Mall.

⁹ Harman G., 2013. *Bells and Whistles More Speculative Realism*. Washington: Zero Books. p 216.

¹⁰ Salter, P. 1997. Tolerance as Strategy, In: *OASE Journal for Architecture, Essential Architecture*, No. 45-46, p 103.

¹¹ According to J. Ahlin, the use of modular brick was considered an innovation in the construction industry during the 1960's. Lewerentz used the new modular dimensions in the drawings of St Peters, but due to a mix-up smaller bricks were manufactured for the job and the location of the openings had to be recalculated.