

Sigurd Lewerentz: The paradox of Construction

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The project as a negotiation of “impossible” dichotomies or as a place capable of fusing contrasting approaches shall remain always as an element of distinction and coherence throughout Lewerentz’s work, in spite of the linguistic decline adopted over time. This is the specific character of the Swedish master’s work which arises clearly and unmistakably from two buildings, distant from each other in time, but which became contemporary due to the issues they deal with and the manner in which these are resolved: the Resurrection Chapel, in the Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm (1915 and after) and the church of St. Peter at Klippan (1962-66).

The Resurrection Chapel is, in fact, also the demonstration, in built form, of Lewerentz’s interest in hyperbolic research of the academic rules, stretching them to the limit of absurdity, with the purpose of seeking solutions which could mediate and allow opposite realities to coexist: the angular misalignment between the “street of fountains” and the entrance to the chapel, the classic order of the building and the position of the portico off to one side, detached and rotated; the “floating” roof and the “niche” window, the internal decorative division, made of classical columns and pilasters but also of “impossible” relationships. Concrete evidence of a manner of working which privileges and seeks liminal spaces in order to constantly put to the test the very principles of classicism and the coded languages: an intellectual agitation which would set him apart, on the borders of the architectural culture of the twentieth century.

Thus, already in the Resurrection Chapel, he symbolically declares through the arrangement of specific contradictions within the building itself, his interest for the indispensable process of verification to which the rules themselves of the art of building must be challenged.

Analogously, fifty years after the Woodland Cemetery competition was awarded, already towards the end of a long career, Lewerentz faces the design of a parochial complex in Klippan, a little town on Sweden’s southern peninsula of Skane. Again, according to the evidence of a career in which ethics and aesthetics coincided, it is possible to discover the

same tension in the design, stubbornly directed towards testing the inner order and the very laws of architecture construction. While in Stockholm the research was focused within and around the language of classicism, in Klippan the work appears free of stylistic conditioning or influences and is totally directed at the nature of the art-of-building itself: construction seen and interpreted as language and representation of architecture.

If tradition recognizes as architecture those buildings which can be considered not only as pure construction but, quoting Schelling, as a “metaphor of construction”, Lewerentz makes an incursion which unbalances this line of thought from the very inside, assuming the constructive data as a paradigm, and investigating its inner structure and its deepest behaviors: the brickwork at Klippan is “destroyed” by its own texture. All the building process impregnates every detail giving to birth a non-orthodox representation of an orthodox construction language, wisely handled. Nevertheless, it is at a closer look which the building unveils its revolutionary contents totally opposed to “what it appears to be”: brick walls become matter through the texture of the coursing and the mortar, as do floors, and openings are de-materialized adopting the minimalist dimension of cuts in the walls while the roof becomes an autonomous architectural and constructive figure. Floating over the tsunami of the church very dark space.

The syncopated rhythm of the brick texture manifests its decorative nature and constructive and functional sublimation, preparing the epiphany of the sacred space. The one nave, with a square floor plan, is split on the floor by a baptismal font which deforms its direction. A few perforations light the substantially dark space dominated by the presence of the iron structures of pillars and beams which organize the curved roof.

If in the Resurrection Chapel it was the light which linked the elements of the space, here it is darkness, a darkness only interrupted by the dripping of the baptismal font. The very first encounter when accessing the church: while eyes are blinded the other senses are focused on hearing.

The investigation into the rules of the art and of building leads to the execution of a work which asserts the denial of the process which has made it possible. Free from the need to interpret a canon and only with the materials of construction, in Klippan Lewerentz goes beyond

Schelling's definition and manifests through his work a completely new "metaphor of construction", or better said "architecture as paradox of construction". Here in Klippan, we can recognize the seeds of Lewerentz next and ultimate step towards the investigation of the discipline through his practice, the very only research he had never exploited during his long lasting career as testified by the almost total absence of any writing. All he had to say about and on architecture was written only with the language of architecture: a built architectural theory refusing any other media than the one belonging to the discipline. And the Flower kiosk at Malmoe cemetery is his ultimate essay: a powerful and hermetic theorem where the dialectics between construction and decoration, recognized as Lewerentz main research interest in his practice, reaches its most sublime representation: here, in Malmoe, Decoration is not any more used to express or deny any content related to Construction, but it is just representing autonomous material and formal values of Architecture, totally freed from any constrain and language rule. Anticipating what later would become the future of architecture and, on certain extent, still is our present.