Academy travel identity
– Swedish architects studying in Italy in the late 19th century

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Introduction

From its start in the 1780s until 1877 the architecture school of the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm was the only institute offering a higher education in architecture in Sweden. This paper will address the architectural study trips to Southern Europe (Italy) of Swedish architects within the academic school system in the late nineteenth century. The paper covers a period of about half a century starting with the documented improvement of architectural education (and professional competence) in the 1850s and ending with the disputing of its usefulness and partial reorganisation and the subsequent decline of extensive study trips.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate how different aspects of the trips reflect, apart from their individual and professional benefits, what can be described as an academic identity. The trips and their documentation identified by this research were conducted by high-profile nineteenth century Swedish architects within the education system of the architecture school of the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. They are chronologically:

- Fredrik Wilhelm Scholander (1816–1881), academy professor 1848–1881 as well as academy secretary
- Albert Theodor Gellerstedt (1836–1914), first professor of the architecture school of the Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm 1877–1882 and academy secretary
- Claes Grundström (1844–1925), academy professor 1881–1911
- Isak Gustaf Clason (1856–1930), professor at the KTH 1890–1904, academy member
- Ragnar Östberg (1866–1945), academy professor in the 1920s

Identities

In the nineteenth century the image and its printed mass-distribution developed to have an enormous influence on architecture. The importance of the architectural drawing was raised when the building production was increasingly mechanized, allowing precise executions of the drawn projects.1 Architectural students attained highly sophisticated skills in relation to drawing technique.

The drawing was the primary means of communication for architects just as it was the foundation of their particular branch of knowledge. The questions of identity and knowledge type are closely related. In summary, their interconnection can be described as: problem type – knowledge type – identity. Identity is then perceived as the communal product of the knowledge type, which in its turn is developed to solve the types of problems facing the group. On the other hand, identity, once established, may work to block out certain interpretations or understandings of new problems. You may then consider a bidirectional causal chain, from problem type to identity and the other way around.²

The long architectural study trips to the Mediterranean region are associated with the academic identity. A way to chisel out the characteristics of the old identity is to make an analytical comparison with the identity that arguably replaced it, i.e. the technological-scientific identity:

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**Academic identity**

F. W. Scholander serves well as the pivotal figure in a description of the identity of the academy architect. He was widely thought of as the creator of the Swedish academic architectural education and regarded it as his life’s work, serving as its professor for more than 30 years from the 1840s to the 1880s. He was held in high esteem and was considered to be a main authority in most national building matters. He also possessed an extensive network of contacts, being a diligent correspondent, both national and internationally, including leading French architects. He was highly influential in shaping the architects-to-become.

Scholander describes architecture students at polytechnic institutes in European countries of culture, in a response to the suggested reorganisation of the architectural education in the 1870s:

At all these institutions one should note, that they exist in countries where the students have ever since childhood been brought up among numerous and outstanding creations of architecture; that during the years

² Linn 1998.
of training the teachers can refer to these, and therefore the disciples have living art to behold and to be
countn by and that the building practice has a context, and the results of which in a not so insignificant
measure depend upon, pretty extensively abroad, since their practitioners, each in their trade, have had the
appropriate practice; and these circumstances considerably facilitate the work of the architect, as he need not
more than to imply his intention in order to get from the professionals concerned a helping hand with the
complete development of his ideas.\(^3\)

He was adamant about his belief that the environment had a significant impact on the shaping of
human subjects. That which surrounds the architect puts its imprint on him or her, shapes their
mind and judgement. The beholding eyes, the sketching and drawing hands; those were the archi-

tects’ tools to allow for their minds and memories to be imprinted, creating their internal formal
worlds. It was essential for all architects to be subjected to formal expressions of good taste, \(le bon
g\oeut\). With the large printing industry of the nineteenth century and the diffusion of the printed
image good architecture wasn’t hard to get your hands on. However, in the eyes of the Academy, to
try and master the formal apparatus by exclusively applying models from printed sources, was even
worse than having no knowledge of it whatsoever. As such, the extensive study trips were regarded
as fundamental to the aspiring architects in a country as deprived of art as Sweden. Scholander
notes on the Swedish conditions:

The climate drags the body and the senses to the delights of the table and the bottle and the mind to the
scientific pondering, to the world of thought, to that, which matures and brings about results, in which form
and colour need not enter as main factors ...\(^4\)

**Reflections of the academic identity upon the travels**

Reading through the travellers’ letters and logs it is striking how academic architects sought out
and kept company with other academic architects and artists. The two prime locations for such
socializing were of course Paris and Rome. In the latter the Scandinavian Society was an obvious

\(^3\) “Vid alla dessa inrättningar bör dock märkas, att de finnas i länder hvarest de studerande från barndomen
vuxit upp bland talrika och utmärkta skapelser inom byggnadskonsten; att under studietiden lärarne kunna
hänvisa till dessa, och att således lärjungarne hafta lefvande konst till föresyn, uppmuntran och byggnads-
väsendet hafta sammanhang, och af hvilka detta resultat i ej obetydlig mån bero, ganska högt utomlands,
enå deras utöfvarne, hvar i sitt fack, fått den erforderliga öfningen; och dessa omständigheter underlättar bety-
dligt arkitekts arbete, då han ej behöfver mer än antyda sin mening för att hos vederbörande fackmän finna
kraftig hjelp till idéarnas fullständiga utveckling.” Scholander, PM concerning the architectural education,
1876. Manuscript at the Royal Library, Stockholm.

\(^4\) “Klimatet drager kroppen och sinnena till bordets och flaskans njutningar samt själen till det vetenskapliga
grubblandet, till tankens värld, till det, som mognar och medför resultat, hvari form och färg ej behöfva ingå
som huvudfaktorer…” Scholander, Letter to Claes Grundström, October 9 1878. Archive of the Academy of
Fine Arts, Stockholm.
gathering point for Scandinavian architects. There they consorted with artists and other exiled compatriots. But also on the travels to various locations around Italy, the architects kept company with academic colleagues from Europe and North America. Some examples include: Scholander traveling to Italy accompanied by two Frenchmen, who he had got to know during his time at an atelier affiliated to the Beaux-Arts school in Paris.

Gellerstedt’s numerous portraits of artists and architects from France, Belgium etc. made in Rome and elsewhere tell of their socializing in Italy. One portrays Swiss architect Léo Châtelain, a student of the atelier André (formerly Henri Labrouste) in Paris (see Fig. 1). Another shows H. J. Holm, Danish architect and later professor of the Danish academy school.

Grundström worked together with architects from Belgium in Ferrara and from the U.S. in Assisi. In his documents he also tells of the letters of recommendations that he brought with him from the Academy to be used to open doors in Italy. Thus he was invited to accompany a professor Mantovani, working on the restoration of Raphael’s stanze in the Vatican, in the spring of 1880.

Clason had word from his Swedish colleagues Agi Lindaegren and F. Boberg on how they received a lecture on site from professor Tassi, in charge of the restoration of the Palazzo Comunale in Piacenza.

Some letters convene a sense of the architects being torn between the identities of architect and artist. Some worried that they cared too much about decorative aspects of study objects, not paying enough mind to the buildings as such. The response from more experienced colleagues was to just go ahead and study whatever they desired, the freedom was embedded in the activities. Offering advise that they would never again be as free artists as on their study trip and as such they better make it worthwhile. At the same time, some letters convey comments of disapproval of colleagues from other countries who were too able to depict decoratively or who would claim that the construction was of no importance for the architectural expression.

The study trips worked as a way to reinforce the academic identity. This practice is similar to what could be observed in fifteenth century Italy. That’s when the architects for the first time

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separated themselves from the builders and associated themselves with other cultural practices. They assumed the role of learned humanists, taught in history, literature, art etc. Academy architects of the nineteenth century were simply expected to have had first-hand experience of origins of western culture. It was a form of communal reinforcement being able to refer to, and describe, your own experiences of the places in the treatises of the Antiquity and the Renaissance. This extended into an acquired knowledge of the customs and habits in various parts of Italy, of food and drinking, of dressing habits and etiquette, of politics and societal issues. In the long run the cultural capital acquired on those trips could eventually be exchanged into monetary capital in the situations of buildings projects for the middle-class capitalist commissioners.

It is important to emphasise the moral considerations of the late nineteenth century cultural elites, not least regarding architecture. Academic architects were expected to enhance the national art situation for the good of their colleagues and the public. The funds available to the Academy didn't allow it to send more than one scholar at a time. However, with encouragement from both the school and external sources who were able to provide financing most of the elite architects were able to engage in a study trip.

The moral aspect of Academism should be understood as Art and Architecture requiring that its practitioners honour and respect its high value and meet its high demands of cultural relevance. In this view architecture was regarded as the expression of the deepest endeavours of human societies. Being an architect meant commitments to the contemporary and not least the endeavours of history. While the architect's role was to represent the client, it was also to represent Art before the client. This was especially underlined as new groups of clients emerged not sharing the educated taste of the academic architects.

**Reflections of the travels upon the academic identity**

The academic view of art experienced a dislocation during the period the paper has focused on. During this period the formal languages of the Antiquity and the Renaissance were challenged as the sole models for academic design. The reasons were several: the Enlightenment disabling the older practices of creating meaning through symbolism, the new archaeological finds of alternative formal worlds, Ruskin's way of rivalling form with colour, and Semper's investigations of formal and cultural lawfulness. These new approaches came together to create new conditions for the conservative academic attitude.

The itinerary of this period is characterized by the lost attraction of Rome around the time of the unification of Italy and the creation of a modern European capital.

Instead Pompeii, where more and more buildings were unearthed, attracted a lot of interest among travellers. It boosted an increasing interest in both polychromy and housing issues as design tasks.
Fig. 2. Gellerstedt, Casa di Marcus Lucretius, Pompeii. Wall painting. Academy of Fine Arts.

Fig. 3. Grundström, National Museum, Naples, table support from Pompeii. ArkDes.
Fig. 4. Scholander, Pompeii, wall painting. National Museum.

Fig. 5. Österg, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii. Section. Academy of Fine Arts.
Obvious enough was the architectural attraction of peripheral cultures and the site-specific expressions. The same goes for mixed forms at historic crossroads outside of the evident cultural centres. So Sicily was visited and studied by all architects in my survey, with its uniquely rich blend of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Norman and Spanish cultural marks.

Fig. 6. Gellerstedt, Monreale Cathedral. Detail of ceiling. Academy of Fine Arts.

Fig. 7. Scholander, Cappella Palatina, Palermo. Ceiling section. National Museum.
Fig. 8. Grundström, Oratorio dello Spirito Santo, Bologna. Lower part of facade. ArkDes.

Fig. 9. Gellerstedt, Siena. Elevation of medieval palace facade. Academy of Fine Arts.

Fig. 10. Scholander, Palazzo Fava, Bologna. Courtyard view. Nationalmuseum.

Fig. 11. Östberg, Palazzo del Consiglio, Verona. Facade view and profiles. Academy of Fine Arts.
Also of great interest were the old city-states of Northern Italy with their local building practices of brick and terracotta, of the Medieval and the fifteenth century virginal treatment of the Antique. In Ferrara, Siena, Bologna, Verona and Venice etc. many architects was most inspired and made their finest studies.

Fig. 12. Grundström, Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi, Venice. Partial elevation. ArkDes.

Fig. 13. Grundström, San Giobbe, Venice. Detail of portal. ArkDes.

As H. Labrouste had done before him, Östberg could testify to the impossibility of a formal transfer from one culture to the other. He, like the other late nineteenth century architects, was humbled and expressed shame of the meagre conditions at home. He, like the others, preferred the Greek Antiquity to the Roman.

**Dissolving academic identity**

Discoveries from new areas of investigation during the study trips made their way into the academic education in Stockholm, through the subsequent teaching efforts of the architects returning from traveling. The academic education could sustain for a while the minor blows to its identity. It would be reshaped and stretched into including a larger variety of formal expressions. The idealism, meaning the belief in timeless values and transcendental dimensions, was weakened and largely replaced by the strictly formal, syntactic dimension. That entailed that architectural meaning wasn’t created by means of symbolism, but was instead created with reference to the relations between the elements within the formal system.7

For a brief period, starting in the 1880s, a form of “Realism” (to speak with Swedish scholar R. Josephson) contended with the style historical understanding of architecture in Sweden.8

Fig. 16. Östberg, View of the Greek Theatre, Syracuse. Academy of Fine Arts.

Fig. 17. Gellerstedt, Baths of Caracalla, Rome. Academy of Fine Arts.
During this period the tangible historical buildings, the earthly, material objects, rather than ideal representations of style, were sought out to generate new models for design. Architecture drawn and built with machine-like precision, the hallmark of the 1800s, became less desired among architects, who began to preference the material qualities of the building.

Swedish scholar Björn Linn has gone even further to label this shift a proper “artistic revolution”. He stresses the interest in things in their material tangible sense, in buildings in their own rights. This was new, and after at least a century of dominance of the drawing, the image, the building itself returned into focus.

Even more importantly Linn points to an emerging new knowledge type in the 1880s. In his analysis he discards the outer forms of the architecture of the time. Instead he emphasizes what were the problems that the resulting designs can be regarded as answers to. The increasing amount of new building tasks without precedents, associated with the industrialized capitalist urbanized society, became so demanding that the old problem solving with the Beaux-Arts academic compositional principles and the known models became ineffective. The problems had to be analysed. So we are back with the modern progressive identity associated with technologism and science from which we started.

F. W. Scholander watched with great disappointment the splitting of the architecture education and foresaw the inevitable future identification with the engineer:

[...]

To conclude, the architectural study trips to the Mediterranean were heavily associated with the academic identity. They helped shape and define what it meant to belong as one of the chosen few academic architects. At the same time the academic identity, morally demanding and resting upon heavy tradition, shaped the itineraries. But one can only fill up a cup to the brim: at some point the examples will be abundant; the canon will be sufficiently represented, not offering further exploration. Also, traveling as a practice entails to a certain extent the search of new experiences, of new discoveries to complete the ones already known, of appropriation. It is plausible that the buildings studied during the late nineteenth century trips were one source of influence to the architects as

they became more and more interested in the material, the tangible, the craftlike. It was a first step away from, and a breach with, the ideas of universality and idealism in architecture. When paired with the new scientific-technological knowledge type this new direction would eventually take architecture into the Machine-age.

Bibliography


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All photos by the author.