

Memory, history and fragmented identity: the Swedish ambassador's 1991 Tokyo residence

Introduction

Swedish embassies and residences have been the responsibility of the Swedish National Property Board since 1949, and before that, the Foreign Ministry. The Swedish government itself has only been actively engaged in renting or building property abroad since the 1900s. Previously, ambassadors were expected to make their own arrangements using their own funds.

The Swedish ambassador's residence in Tokyo forms part of architect Mikael Granit's high-rise compound completed in 1991, that also incorporates the chancery and staff accommodation.

The aim of this study is to examine how national values are materialised and expressed in the residence's key spaces. As will be argued, and contrasting this residence's modernist 1960s predecessor, this interior's spaces and their contents, as examined from a set of perspectives, materialise evidence of an increased use of elements of tradition and history, a symptom, in post—Folkhem Sweden, of a national identity crisis¹.

Although this is a mainly design historical investigation, my investigative strategy is also underpinned by a multidisciplinary range of Scandinavian research concerned with nationalism, nation building and nation formation; research mainly prompted by international investigations. Here, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) in particular and amongst others Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) are of key significance to this study.

The residence constitutes a set of spaces that encourage semi-structured interaction. There is an intimate connection between the process of diplomacy and the spaces in which it is conducted. In other words, the tenacity of an institutional domestic model (the salon-dining-room-library triumvirate) and its *habitus* are key forces in the persistence of history.

Within this set of spaces, the Salon is the Tokyo residence's *sale commune*². There are several clues that the inspiration for this room was the drawing room at the eighteenth century Ulriksdal palace just outside Stockholm. The drawing room there was designed by

¹ The 'folkhem' (lit: the people's home). The notion of the 'folkhem' is a political invention and is a metaphor for society as a large family in which the well-off look after the less fortunate. It was used by the Social Democrats from their gaining power in the early 1930s until the 1980s, marking a new phase in the 'Swedification' of Sweden, the 'folkhem period'. (Sörlin: 2006)

² Hanson and Hillier.

Carl Malmsten for Crown Prince Gustav Adolf and Princess Louise (Louis Mountbatten's sister) and completed between 1923-25.³ The same proportions and layout occur at Tokyo. Both rooms are squared 10 metres on a side (one hundred square meters). The most obvious borrowing from Ulriksdahl, is the group of three "islands" (marked out at Tokyo by Kicken Ericson's rugs) that define "social spaces within the space itself", to quote the residence's interior architect Mats Jacobson.⁴ This 'set design' encourages the formation and circulation of groups of social interactivity within and between the islands. One of the islands includes the former embassy's grand piano.

These spatial articulations constitute a 'landscape salon', a variant of the 'landscape office'. This room gives the illusion of a space that has been formed organically through time. The eclectic selection of furniture has its ancestry in the approach favoured by curator Stig Fogelmarck of the Kgl Husgerådskammaren (The Royal Collections) and the Swedish National Property Board's interior architect Göran Faust in the 1960s. Jacobson's carefully detailed watercolour designs, however, reveal the static intentions of the arrangement: the designs depict each piece of furniture, placed in a specific location, and identifiable in the residence furniture inventory.

The presence of Carl Malmsten's *Advokaten* (the lawyer) easy chair suggests home comfort. Jacobson may use the word "modern", but closer observation reveals that the furniture was mainly contemporary updated versions of historical styles, mainly eighteenth century Swedish neoclassicism and Rococo. *Advokaten* shows neo-Rococo references, and the Norell company's so-called Gripsholm armchair is a blend of Rococo and English ladderback and Chippendale (the original is in Gripsholm castle, near Stockholm). Two antique Gustavian neoclassical upholstered chairs were bought for this space, lending a deeper sense of continuity to this stage creation. According to the official guidelines, there are as many chairs in this salon and the adjoining library as in the dining room.

Before examining this phenomenon from a trans-national perspective, it is worth considering a number of possible explanations for this preponderance of period references. The 1980s saw the start of a mythification of the eighteenth century interior as a model interior, a process which continued and intensified in the 1990s. A veritable heritage industry sprang up. Eighteenth century neoclassicism and Rococo were also the focus of academic research at the National Museum, culminating in the exhibition *Tanke och Form I Rokokon* (Thought and Design of the Rococo) 1979-80. As Tokyo opened for business, preparations for the *Solen och Nordstjärnan* (The Sun and Northstar) exhibition of 1993 began. Around 1990, Swedish furniture manufacturers initiated production of a variety of eighteenth century furniture reproductions ranging from replica to pastiche and travesty. The Tokyo residence interior, discussed in this paper, was not a one-off example of official Swedish representation. The appearance of this fashion coincided with the "fundamental uncertainty" that had emerged, as "the image of Sweden as the embodiment of social progress went into decline"⁵. Both Sweden's international image, *Sverige bilden*, and her own self-image were in flux (Agrell, Sjöstedt). This historicist revival, I propose, served to mask this time of crisis, as Hobsbawm and Ranger's theory show. Modern Swedish art was selected by Bo Svensson of the National Arts Council, not just with the intention of complementing the interior design but also, significantly, to

³ This drawing room and its contents was the City of Stockholm's engagement gift to the couple.

⁴ Interview, 5th September 2008.

⁵ Ruth (1984).

provoke and inspire conversation and discussion. Mats Jacobson: "Art is uninteresting if you are unable to talk about it".⁶ The conversation pieces chosen were specially commissioned: a large-scale textile appliqué shows artist Peter Dahl's interpretations of Swedish eighteenth century poet and composer Carl Michael Bellman's descriptions of the convivial drinking culture and tavern life of old Stockholm, also depicted in a series of lithographs by the same artist, suggesting uncontroversial conversation on Swedish cultural and social traditions with host nation guests and a possibility of self-reflection for Swedish delegations.

Moving away from the Tokyo interior itself, there is a transnational link between the interior's Gustavian-style furniture and trends in the world of visual art that is relevant to the context of the Tokyo interior. Representations, or "collected memories", projected internationally during my period of study are helpful in critical assessment of this embassy material. At the same time as Swedish modernity was being challenged in the early 1980s, a United States construction of imagined Swedish (and Nordic) interiors was being invented within the programme of *Scandinavia Today*,⁷ a series of exhibitions across North America between 1982 and 1983. Swedish (and Scandinavian) domestic tradition (as well as other narratives) were re-discovered and re-constructed. *The Northern Light* touring exhibition which opened at The Brooklyn Museum in 1982-3, curated by Kirk Varnedoe, was the first example of what was in effect a United States' invention. Exhibitions that followed included *The Mystic North*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1984, and *Dreams of a Summer Night*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1986. Although this 1980s construction of a concept of Swedish tradition has so far been overlooked in design historical research, it is nonetheless omnipresent in Swedish embassies.

The primary stimulus for the rediscovery of eighteenth century-style furniture was a series of exhibitions of fin-de-siècle painting. This style was previously revived during the early twentieth century.⁸ The American curators of the *Northern Light* exhibition presented a special 'Interiors' section, in which the mood and style of the rooms and furniture depicted in the paintings were described and analysed in detail. Thus, Swedish Gustavian style interiors and furniture were rediscovered in a series of major international fine art exhibitions. This re-discovered ideal was then re-imported to Sweden and commercialised by the furniture and media industry, at first internationally (in, for instance *The world of Interiors* monthly), then nationally,⁹ to provide the mask for Sweden's identity crisis (Hobsbawm, Ranger). However, this was a case of the revival and rediscovery of tradition, rather than invention of tradition. This salon interior should be seen in the context of this 'revival frenzy'. The example of international impetus continues the twentieth century 'tradition' of international observation (often American commentators) rediscovering and labelling a Swedish phenomenon, before the Swedes themselves.

Interior architect Göran Faust of the Swedish National Property Board, for whom Tokyo was a swansong – and who'd given Mats Jacobson free rein to design the interior – qualified the interiors as "beautiful and purposeful"¹⁰ or in Swedish "vacker och

⁶ Interview, 5th September 2008.

⁷ Exhibition project, celebrating contemporary Scandinavian culture, sponsored and administrated by The American-Scandinavian Foundation, with support from Volvo, Atlantic Richfield Company, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

⁸ Edman (2008).

⁹ Hagströmer (2002).

¹⁰ Tokyo project report, NBPB internal unarchived document, dated 28th October 1992.

ändamålsenlig". To a Swedish design historian, the word ändamålsenlig, meaning useful or purposeful, has resonances with the *Stockholm 1930* expo. "Det ändamålsenliga är det sköna", or "What is useful is beautiful!" was the arch Modernists' battle cry. 1930 had become, it seems, conventionalised rhetoric by 1980.

As for any possible host nation reactions to this interior, no such documentation has yet been identified. There was, however, Japanese response to the embassy exterior, a subject that is outside the remit of this study.

Tokyo materialises a weakened nationalisation of modernity and a historicism that masked an identity crisis. It demonstrates a harking back to what in effect was a rediscovery of a familiar, previously "invented tradition", shared by the imagined community of the Folkhem and welfare state that was currently seen as slipping away. Ideological use of history, in this case a Golden Age in Swedish cultural history, to quote Raphael Samuel in *Theatres of Memory* (1994), "creates a consecutive narrative out of fragments, imposing order on chaos".¹¹ Or in the words of Nina Witoszek and Lars Trägårdh: "A crisis tends to bring the past, or at least an imagined past, into the present".¹² From the early 1980s onwards, both Sweden's international image and her self-image were shifting.

Tokyo exemplifies how this affected Sweden's projection internationally. In seeking a redefinition of embassy interior design, Jacobsson's historicist formula provided a comforting illusion of continuity.

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¹¹ Samuel (1994) p. x.

¹² Trägårdh and Witoszek (2002) p. 4.