

Patching up houses and tenants in sustainable management, architecture as an asset in private property ownership

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Abstract:

Following upon the Stockholm exposition in 1930 and the introduction of a new aesthetical and architectural thinking, some Swedish building companies and real estate owners fully embraced the new ideal. They started to assemble their own socio-political welfare ambitions concerning housing with additional services into housing projects. From 1930 to the beginning of the Million Housing Project in 1965, innovative building projects by either of these players, especially in the larger Swedish cities like Gothenburg, Malmö, and Stockholm, were realized. The project targeted different user groups in different ages, with different social background and preferences, stretching from collective housing to individualized design solutions. In these projects, both aesthetics and architecture played an essential role as material and immaterial assets for promoting the new housing and the long-term management of the estate. An often-used term in colloquial Swedish for this type of building with subsequent real-estate management is the Master Builder's Management model, in the following MBM model.

The MBM model refers to a former legal requirement of the first national Swedish building act of 1874 that building entrepreneurs had to be approved by the municipal building administration as means to avoid overcrowding in poorly built housing. Even after the reform of the building act in 1931, the title was associated with great societal esteem, but achieved during the rest of the 20th century a connotation of being either obsolete or representing building quality. The MBM model is in stark contrast to management models that have evolved since the 1990s. These models are influenced by new public management in which the practical knowledge of building and maintenance becomes secondary to financial calculations and predictions.

Nevertheless, the large majority of privately owned Swedish rental housing companies are managed according to principles that can be associated with the MBM model. These principles suggest a continuous maintenance in line with the aesthetical and architectural vision, careful alignment between tenant profile and type of flat, and financial planning based on building degradation and local knowledge of market. The present study is focused on a housing company in the city of Malmö which openly adheres to the MBM model. Preliminary findings suggest that the choice of management model can be related to a personal view by the company owners that is motivated by an emotional attachment to the building craft and the building itself. The combination of architecture and an engaged ownership constitutes a complex system of agency in which maintenance, tenants and mutual connections create a specific being-in-the-world-ness of real estate management. This phenomenon seems to be an essential factor for creating successful smaller rental housing companies that are mainly active on a local market.

Key words: real estate management, architecture, MBM model, agency, driving force

Introduction

In his prize-winning novel *La vie, mode d'emploi* [Life, a user's manual] from 1979, the French novelist Georges Perec lets the plot evolve based on the close bond that his many fictional characters have formed with the architectural design and physical configuration of a housing complex in the densely built Parisian city structure (Perec, 1979). The novel supplies architectural features that suggest that the housing complex must be part of the great reshaping of the city that occurred during the reign of Napoléon III, often known as the Belle Époque. The master mind involved in this project, which made Paris into the modern capital we know today, was the French town planner Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Fiercely criticized, the so-called Haussmann plan introduced new wide avenues and boulevards, a new sewage system, and addressed the problematic overcrowding in some parts of the cities by expanding the city outside its medieval city walls (Jallon et al., 2017). New buildings were added along the new arteries, often with a high ground floor of some 3-4 metres to allow for commercial activities.

Following the schemata of classical architecture, the grand floor level, the piano nobile, is on the first storey and contains the luxurious apartments for the elite in the Napoleonic society, today often refurbished into smaller ones. Shallow interconnected balconies, often with railings in cast iron, run along this floor level on the façade that faces the street. Smaller French balconies ornate individual windows of the street façade of the higher floor levels. On the third or fourth floor, the interconnected balconies can reappear as horizontal traits with cast-iron railings over the full facade. A decorated and detailed cornice forms a console which supports the top balcony row. The spatial configuration of the building is an architectural stratification of the surrounding society. Like society, the most humble and private individual of Perec's menagerie of personalities lives in the dim light under the steep roof rafters. The author is omnipresent in the plot and monitors the lives of his characters. In Perec's mind a housing complex is an intertwined web of personal life stories that are closely associated with the architecture of the building (Perec, 1979).

New social ideals and new architectural thinking

Changing focus and looking closely at the evolution that followed the Stockholm Exposition in 1930, the kernel for Perec's view on the close relationship between the housing complex and its residents was very much alive among Swedish architects and builders. In this specific context, the natural focus was on designing innovating buildings for users, viewing architecture as the fit between user needs and building techniques. The outcome was new forms of housing like collective housing equipped with restaurant and laundry services, housing for a specific user groups like younger women or men, or buildings conceived upon the belief that aesthetically appealing buildings will result in happy and content residents (Rudberg, 1999). The root of the modern concepts accessibility and usability is also to be found during this era, since the quest for the optimal architectural design not only focused on the capacities of the fully abled human body, but also the disabled body with primarily acquired disability problems due to accidents or poor work environment.

During the period of 1930 to 1960 and around Sweden, charismatic builders acknowledged the new architectural aesthetics. Claiming a social conscience, often motivated out of a personal experience of poor housing, they started to produce high-quality housing for the rising Folkhemmet. In Stockholm, the builder Olle Engkvist produced architecturally acclaimed buildings (Poppius, 2023), while the builder Anders Diös contributed to update housing and housing standard in Uppsala (Ulmehag, 1991). In Malmö, two builders picked up the new architectural thinking. On the one hand, Eric Sigrid Persson introduced terraced housing in Friluftsstaden, while Hugo Lennart Åberg focused on an improved housing standard in the housing complex Ellstorp. As a significant exclamation mark for Malmö, new housing with a social innovative approach was also built as high-rise buildings.

The high-rise building Kronprinsen, clad in blue façade tiles, is perhaps one the most poignant example of the strive, but also a project that Åberg initiated (Torisson, 2021). Seen as a group, these builders all represented what was termed in colloquial Swedish as master builders, as a reminiscent of a former demand of the 19th century Swedish building legislation: to be allowed to practice as a builder in the pre-industrial society, these persons had to verify their skills by applying to the city board for a licence. Ultimately, this requirement was motivated out of the abolition of the guilds in 1847. The guilds had previously vouched for a necessary level of skills through a system with master craftsman's certificates to practice a specific, often manual, profession.

Architectural quality in relation to wear, tear and degradation over time

What is often overlooked in most architectural visions for new buildings or types of built environment is the influence of wear and tear on the built space. Adding time to the degradation, this natural process will influence primarily the building materials but ultimately also functionality and the architectural design itself (Till, 2009). A successful architectural design can survive the degrading effect of time and

thereby prove the supremacy of the design and its realisation, while others will demonstrate the constraining effects of poor design, material, and construction skills. In the former case, the building requires maintenance to resume its intended use, in the latter case, the building is beyond the financial limits to regain its initial function and, therefore, will have to undergo refurbishment for a potential new usage or demolition as being an obsolete piece of architectural design. In Sweden, the maintenance phase of buildings seems to have gained little scientific interest, but rather be subject to cultural beliefs, practice and routines of the national building industry.

Ever since 1697, as part of the Sweden's claim to be an influential player in European politics, the state has always paid a keen interest to its different buildings, building costs, maintenance, and potential multiple usages (Bedoire, 2015). During the 17th century, buildings were part of the quest to establish the quiet recently formed kingdom as equally important as the large European countries like Austria, France, the heteroclit German nations, the Italian kingdoms, Spain, and Rome with the Catholic Church. Meticulous maintenance plans were elaborated for buildings of the state, so that they on a permanent basis presented the envisioned splendour. They often implied a highly developed an acute awareness by the state commissioner of different materials and building methods to vouch for reasonable investment costs and long-term maintenance plans (Sjöström, 2002). The maintenance plans often relied on a continuous patching up of minor wears and tears to remove any blemishes that would tarnish the Swedish state. During the 20th century, the old system of the 17th century was reorganised into a state authority, the Royal Board for Building, in the following RBB and in Swedish Kungl. Byggnadsstyrelsen that monitored the national building. It was the precursor of today's national board for planning and building, in Swedish Boverket.

Maintenance plans for upholding architectural grandeur

Following the Stockholm Exposition, the Swedish building industry adhered to the idea that standardisation would be beneficial to both building practices, financial building statistics and knowledge development. In 1934, the Swedish Building Service Institute (in Swedish AB Svensk Byggtjänst) was founded by building and real estate companies. Plans and recommendations for maintenance of buildings were mainly adopted from the system that the RBB had already developed and applied to real estate management of buildings belonging to the state. The same applied to materials and building methods. Many of buildings without any connection to the state, residential architecture and commercial space, and erected during the period 1930 to 1965 demonstrated the same high-quality building practice as buildings belonging to the state.

The mantra was that buildings were to have a long-standing building quality and be easy to maintain. In colloquial Swedish, this way of building is often referred to as a 'master-builder thinking' demonstrating a concern for architectural details, genuine materials, and a fit between the user and the architectural design. To a large extent, this thinking coincided (and still does so) with what the Swedish corpus of architects considered representing an appropriate architectural quality, i.e., paraphrasing both Palladio and Vitruvius: *firmitas, utilitas, and venustas* (*durability, usefulness, and beauty* (Palladio, 1570)). Similarly, the maintenance of these buildings relied on a continuous patching up signs of wear, tear and degradation, which in colloquial Swedish received the name Master Builder's Management model, in the following MBM model.

The realisation of the ambitious Swedish Million programme of new housing during the period 1965 – 1975 challenged the 'master-building thinking.' The reliance upon an artisanal competence of the old model was replaced by new and rational building techniques. The need for new housing within a short deadline promoted the use of prefabricated building elements for facades, joists, and walls. The initial standardisation of spatial needs for human needs to be used in the architectural configuration of space of the 1930s now achieved a standardising effect on the architectural design of facades and building

volumes. Consequently, landscape planning around the building also assumed the rectilinear grid of modernist architects like Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer. In addition, building during the 1970s also implied new fittings and installations. These installations often supposed an increased use of new building components and materials in PVC plastics whose lifespan exact lifespan was unknown. New knowledge had to be assembled about how to maintain this new type of new building materials, since accumulated knowledge about more robust building materials like cast-iron had little relevance.

Maintenance processes for buildings and real estate management

During the 1980s, the state administration came under strong influence of what was labelled as new public management, NPM. NPM aimed for making the state to be less bureaucratic and time-consuming and become more agile and efficient, assuming the same characteristics of private enterprises. During the decade, the RBB, or more correctly BB since the royal connection was removed in 1967, was the focus for several parliamentary inquiries in conjunction with works to reform the heavily criticized building legislation. Following the strong, but slow municipal control of building activities and physical planning, private real estate owners had found themselves deprived of the right to maintain and even use their property due to the municipal vision for areas near or located in the centre of the city. The reform of the building legislation aimed for transferring the responsibility for the design and programming of the new building or refurbished building to the builders or real estate owners. Previously, builders and property owners had to follow mandatory requirements that were indicated in building regulations. The new more lenient building legislation was introduced in 1989 with accompanying regulations that described minimum functional requirements for builders to follow or proposing an alternative solution with the same outcome. The municipalities assumed a monitoring control by calling to meetings to discuss key issues that related to the specific building.

The new building legislation also meant that the state administration for building matters had to be organised into new constellations. The BB was split into three new administrations with separate stocks of real estate: public buildings for the state administration, public buildings for higher education and public commercial buildings. Following the general NPM trend, the change also meant the introduction of a new type of building maintenance that related the wear and tear of buildings to financial calculations and investment prognoses. Similarly, the earlier strive towards genuine and long-lasting materials was subject to stricter building costs and break-even analyses. The NPM approach also started to migrate to the private building industry, which also started to change appearance shifting from a market with several charismatic master builders into becoming a field with a few expert companies with competences in most types of building and maintenance of different types of built space. The real estate management went from being mainly a continuous patching up process of worn and torn aspects of the built space into becoming a variety of services procured in public concurrence. The MBM model was challenged by the new NPM real estate management and maintenance model.

National housing companies versus local companies

In 2021, the stock of residential housing in Sweden accounted for about 5 million dwellings, of which the majority was privately owned single houses, about 40 per cent, some 30 per cent were rental flats, and some 22 per cent were condominium flats (Statistics Sweden), see Figure 1. The twenty largest Swedish companies with flats all around the country manages in total some 200,000 dwellings, or 13 per cent of rental flats (Karström, 2017). The individual stock of housing per company is about 3500 – 30000 dwellings. The vast majority of rental housing are managed by local housing companies. Presumably, this number refers to municipal housing companies, since it is the Swedish municipalities that shall provide adequate housing according to the law on municipal responsibilities (SFS, 2017:725). The digital portal for rental housing in southern Sweden, i.e., www.boplatssyd.se, is a municipal company run by the city of Malmö. In the city of Malmö, some 28 larger housing companies lease their stock of flats through the platform. A smaller share represents housing companies with a national stock,

while the majority is local companies. Seemingly, companies with a national stock of housing applies an NPM-inspired model of maintenance, while local companies still implement an MBM-inspired model. For local companies, this model is associated with value-added marketing strategies that appeal to potential client, i.e., attention to the individual client, the strive to create prosperous housing for a group of clients and suggesting a quicker and more direct approach regarding complaints and malfunctions. But most fundamentally, the buildings with its green surrounding looks tidy and well kept.

Figure 1. aggregated statistics about the Swedish stock of residential housing

Overview of housing situation in Swedens)		
total stock of residential housing	5000000	dwellings
individual private homes	2000000	dwellings
rental flats	1500000	dwellings
condominiums	1100000	dwellings
not specified	400000	dwellings

The present text emanates largely from a life as a practicing architect in different positions in private companies, municipal or state administration. Discussions on this topic with builders and real estate owners suggests that building maintenance is subject to either a personality-based fight to defer the influence of time by touching up worn and torn built space on a regular basis or personal trust in financial calculations that allow for the built space to present itself as immaculate new or dignified worn and torn. The text calls for further research to corroborate the accuracy of this impression. The understanding of different maintenance models for residential housing departs from this experience. Therefore, the text has a considerable lack of research-based underpinning which is problematic for an academic text. The work remains to connect the practical experience with research on the matter. However, on the verge of the sustainable society, which maintenance model will be the best:

- The MBM model versus the NPM model - game, set and match, for whom and for which model?

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