

SWEDISH ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH UNDER RENEWAL

by Örjan Wikforss in Sustainability 2011

Swedish architectural research now has the chance of rejuvenation. In April 2011, Formas resolved to allocate MSEK 80 to the Schools of Architecture at KTH, Chalmers, Lund University Engineering Faculty and Umeå University for a common national researcher training institute and for research on architectural theory and methodology. As a creative discipline with social dimensions, architecture has a long reach.

The term sustainable urban development is used daily, but it lacks both a theoretical core and definition. It is therefore impossible to evaluate all the solutions that are now launched in a steady stream. There is need for a fundamental theoretical development that discusses the concept of sustainability in its social, ecological, economic, physical and cultural dimensions. The great issues of our times regarding the development of societies and cities require new knowledge in the areas climate, energy and transport. It is only through creativity in architecture and planning that holistic solutions can be created and realised in practice. There are no short cuts.

Schools and offices

The primary task of architectural research is to deepen architectural knowledge. It is architects themselves who need this – both in teaching at the schools of architecture and at the office in professional work. Good architectural research puts into words the quiet knowledge that prevails in practical professional work in both projects and relations with clients. It is primarily through providing the educators with these new concepts and theories that it will be possible to carry out teaching of frontline knowledge in a way different from the antiquated master/pupil forms in use heretofore. Putting the new knowledge into words also makes it possible to carry on systematic knowledge management in the office.

Architectural research is also needed to spread architectural knowledge in society. It provides us with a language which makes it possible for architectural issues to be important and comprehensible outside the professional domain also. It is a matter of being able to talk of the interaction between people, objects and space in a way that is comprehensible to the community. Strong clients and users who are knowledgeable about architecture are essential if architecture is to have a strong status in a society. It is also an aspect of sustainability.

Critical consumers

Much can also be gained through an architectural research that has a constructive, consumer critical perspective. To scrutinise and evaluate a newly constructed building from the inhabitants' perspective can produce new knowledge as a basis for the development of new forms of housing, better plans and knowledge of how we can make it possible for everybody, especially for children, to live in the dense city.

A consumer critical research is necessary as a complement to the producer and production focused research that today dominates building research. The customer perspective must at all times be present. There is need for free and independent research that dares talk about what quality is like in Swedish construction.

Have a new approach to housing

Swedish housing construction is lagging behind, in spite of great efforts to facilitate the planning and implementation processes, and extensive endeavours to lower production costs. There is a danger that this results in monotonous housing construction that does not satisfy its future task. A new approach and innovations in several respects are needed here. It is a matter of investigating and understanding how housing in the future multicultural and integrated city can be organised.

Housing construction is an urban planning task. It is also a matter of developing new forms of housing, tenancy, finance and management. Finally, it is also a matter of developing new types of housing, housing construction systems and planning solutions with carefully designed spaces for people – that is to say, a new architecture. This presupposes an interaction between research and practice. In a future powerful Swedish innovation system in Swedish urban planning, researchers, practitioners and producers collaborate.

Laboratory of the future

There is also a need for an experimental, artistic research that advances the positions of architecture and further develops the language and liberating power of architecture. Quite simply, a kind of laboratory of the future for the development of new architecture. An example of this is parametric design and digital fabrication which joins up advanced design and industrial production and creates opportunities for constructing things that had not previously been possible. There is a risk today that we focus far too unilaterally on

effectivisation, to build more cheaply. We must also go in for innovation and dare to revitalise construction.

Many people talk about “the process” and how it can be made more efficient.

Few people talk about “the product” and how it can be renewed. It is one thing to build more cheaply, another to create value by a new approach. Here, architectural research has a strategic duty to provide new knowledge for practical work.

Since much of research today is commissioned and has its given stakeholders with the associated reference and steering groups, there is also need for a risk taking exploratory development activity. In this way, researchers will solve not only problems that are already formulated but will also create new problems. They participate in setting up the issues that are developing for the future. In this kind of experimentation there is also a proper breeding ground for the development of new forms of communication for collective problem solving.

Naturally, there is also need for further development of the knowledge, working methods and tools of practising architects. It is hard to think of a medical profession without medical research. In the same way, architectural research is needed to develop the architectural profession. It is therefore good that Formas has allocated funds for the schools of architecture. A close association between research and teaching means that newly developed knowledge can be implemented in training and in this way benefit the profession.

Close association with practical work

There is a very promising definition of the concept “close association with practical work” in the applications for which Formas has now allocated research funds. The researchers are interested in practical work and want to study architecture as a creative discipline. They also want to bridge the apparent contrast between theory and practice by making practice an object of study and cooperating with practitioners without losing the theoretical depth in their research.

This is an altogether notable challenge, even though of a large scale. Because – as the saying goes – what is more practical than having a good theory? What is a clever practitioner if not a person who has a clear idea of how a good job is to be carried out – that is to say, a person who practices theory?

The grant of Formas is of such magnitude and has such a degree of freedom that researchers have now been given a real opportunity to bring about a necessary rejuvenation of Swedish architectural research.

Author

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