Michael Grice talking
to Peter Carolin

Working with Asplund



'I thus became a kind of surrogate son for Asplund'

Michael Grice died last year, aged 91.[1] *The last survivor of the founding partners of the Architects Co-operative Partnership (ACP), he was also almost certainly the last member of Gunnar Asplund's office.*[2] *He gave this account of his period working – and living – with Asplund in November 2006, at his Highgate home.*

In 1935 I worked for Mendelsohn and Chermayeff on the Gilbey building for three months in the summer – and Birkin Haward[3] took me under his wing.

By 1937, I'd finished my first three years at the Architectural Association and felt that I wasn't getting anywhere – producing schemes overnight. I wanted to work on real buildings.

I was up in the AA Library – then presided over by Enid Caldecott – thumbing through an old *AR* when I came across an article on the 1930 Stockholm exhibition.[4] I thought it looked interesting and decided that I'd like to work with that man, Asplund. So I wrote to him, never expecting to get any response. But, a week later, I received one. It was a very enthusiastic letter saying, 'Yes, I'd love you to come and work with me as a student' and, pinned to the letter was a photograph of a pretty woman with a note, 'This is my wife – nice, eh?'

That sort of sums up Asplund – an extraordinarily nice man. He had been divorced by his first wife (Gerda) who was very religious. Asplund was not religious. Hans[5] was his son by his first wife but she wouldn't allow him access and I thus became a kind of surrogate son for Asplund, living in the flat at Stureplan 4 with him, his second wife Ingrid, and Johan, their one year old son. Per and Oloy, Ingrid's sons from her first marriage (to Lars Israel Wahlman[6]) also lived in the flat.

I set out for Sweden in August 1937 travelling by boat from Harwich to Esbjerg, thence by train to Copenhagen, across to Malmö and by train again to Stockholm – where I was met at the station by Gunnar in his Adler. Adler also made typewriters and this was a very noisy car, a bit like a typewriter. Gunnar liked his car.

The office was also in the flat.[7] We were all working on the Woodland Crematorium. There was Lennart Bergvall,[8] a consumptive engineer whose name I can't recall and myself. I was put to work on the viewing room where the coffins went and the relatives could have a last peek at the departed. One was allowed to work only in pencil – so my drawings used to become somewhat smudgy. My drawing board was about the size of a flush door with a T-square about 6 feet long.

While I stood, Gunnar would sit on my stool and sketch something for me to develop over the next two or three days after which he would come and stand with his hand on his chin in total silence looking at my work. I would start to sweat slightly, wondering what I'd done wrong. The point was that he was a perfectionist. After a time he'd start saying, '*Ja, ja, ja*', and then, 'I think we'll do it like this'. And then, perhaps, '*Nej, nej, nej* – I don't think this is any good – we'll start again'.

Once, he asked me to draw a perspective of the organ in the big chapel. It was very difficult to draw because it had glass louvres for the swell and the floor of the chapel is dished in two directions so one had to work from spot levels.

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I don't think I made a very good job of it.

I found working in metric and in centimetres rather than millimetres rather trying. Most of the drawings were done on the equivalent of A3. We would scribble notes on them and the secretary would insert the drawings into the very wide carriage of her typewriter and type the notes in: it did nothing to help my lettering skills.

Gunnar's secretary was vetted by Ingrid. He used to say 'Ingrid will not let me have a pretty secretary'.

The Archbishop of Uppsala would come to the office and explain the details of funeral services. Gunnar was a very untypical Swede. He could be very devious too – like all architects. He had a bit of a spat with the Crematorium clients over the altar in the large chapel. He came along with a design for an altar finished in gold and they blanched at the cost. Returning a week later he produced one in silver, which they accepted. 'You know, I wanted that all the time.'

I had my own room in the flat and used to get up at about 7 when the maid, Vera, would bring in coffee and *hardbrod* after which Gunnar and I would go for a walk up the road, past the theatre and opera house to the site of the exhibition at Djurgården.[9] After which I went into the office and Asplund either joined us or went out (he was a Professor at The Royal Institute).

On St Lucia's Day[10] I was woken in the middle of the night by a blaze of light and candles. Vera came in with a trolley on which there was coffee and cat's-eye biscuits and a gramophone playing a record of St Lucia. On her head she wore a crown of illuminated candles. It was amazing.

At this time, in 1937, Gunnar was finishing the house at Stennäs. On Fridays, after work, before driving out there, we'd drive round to his various friends, collecting the week's copies of *Dagens Nyheter* – so that they could be used as insulation in the walls of the timber frame house. Gunnar was not a rich man – I was paid the equivalent of about £1 a week.

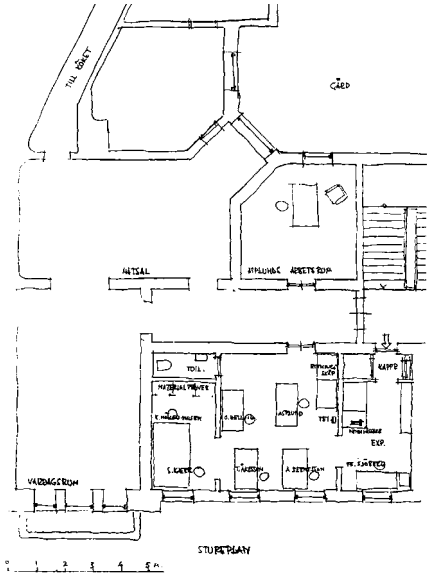
The cottage at Stennäs was extraordinary – but Gunnar didn't like the back side.

About this time – on his 50th birthday – Ingrid gave him a fishing rod. Neither he nor I had ever fished. There was a jetty at Stennäs where he kept a rowing boat in which we would go off and fish in the archipelago. It was hilarious – the rod had a spinner and we used to cast very clumsily – the hook would get caught in his beret. There were fish everywhere – we caught so many pikes that Ingrid, who did the cooking, pleaded for no more.

We would also go mushroom picking with Eskil Sundahl, chief of the Co-operative Society's architects office.[11] But, on the whole, I was often left to my own devices. Ingrid's sister, Lilly, taught me how to ski. It was important to be able to do this because I had to get through the snow to pick up the milk from a nearby farm. It was very easy to spill the milk from the pails while skiing.

Christmas (1937) was absolutely magical. In Sweden, it's celebrated on the 24th, when we had a church service. Ingrid had arranged for a horse-drawn sleigh to pick only me up and take me the four or five miles to the church. And, in this beautifully coach-built sleigh, there was a lovely girl under a sable rug. I can't remember her name – she was the daughter of a senior figure in the Swedish Match Company. Afterwards, we celebrated dancing around the Christmas tree in his house. At that time girls kept themselves at some distance from the men.

In those days, alcohol was rationed in Sweden through a pass-book system and people like Asplund got an allowance for entertainment. There was a little



Asplund's flat and office, plan

'The office was also in the flat. We were all working on the Woodland Crematorium'



Woodland Crematorium, Stockholm

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pit in the centre of the living room at Stennäs. This was his 'cellar' and he used to say, 'This is my little secret, Michael'.

Gunnar had lots of friends – almost all architects – and they used to make their way to him (rather than he to them). Aalto would come and then there was Arne Jacobsen, Rasmussen and of course the locals – Sundahl and Markelius. The marriage room in Jacobsen's town hall at Aarhus is almost identical to that in the Gothenburg law courts.

Gunnar was very upset about the law courts' public reception. Once the protective enclosure was removed there was lots of criticism because people had been expecting a Neo-classical extension. 'I don't know what we can do', he would say, 'Perhaps we will have to cover the new part with ivy.' He didn't take criticism well.

I was with Asplund for nearly a year, having gone to Stockholm when I was 19 (I'm 87 now). Afterwards I came back to the AA and had to take on a new lease of life. At the AA our lot were Corb fanatics – Asplund was very critical of Corbu.

My one regret was that I was too young to soak up his attitude, approach and philosophy. He was not a complicated man. He used to say 'I like to be original' – and what he did worked. He used to get the environment – the feeling of a building – absolutely right. I don't think that he had any influence – his work was 'unexpected' and too difficult to follow. I was very lucky to both work and live with him. Despite his Swedish formality he was a very nice person. I returned to Stockholm in 1963. I looked up Ingrid (Asplund) at Stureplan and she cooked a meal for me. She had had two more husbands but said, 'You know, Mike, he was the nicest'.

During this same visit to Sweden, I looked up Gunnar's son, Hans Asplund. It was an unhappy meeting: he accused me of stealing his birthright from his father – it was just like a script from an Ingmar Bergman film.

The author thanks Björn Linn for comments and additional information. Photographs of the Woodland Crematorium and the cottage at Stennäs by Martin Charles.



Asplund's cottage at Stennäs. View from the lake

'The cottage at Stennäs was extraordinary – but Gunnar didn't like the back side'



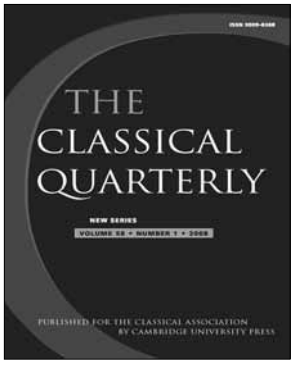
The back side of the cottage at Stennäs

Notes

1. Michael Grice obituary by Alan Powers, *The Guardian*, 5 February 2009.
2. Other accounts of working with Asplund may be found in Engfors, C., *E.G. Asplund: Architect, Friend and Colleague,* Stockholm, Arkitektur Forlag, 1990.
3. Birkin Haward (1912–2002). Worked with Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff in the mid 1930s. Post-war, a partner in Johns, Slater and Haward.
4. *The Architectural Review,* August 1930.
5. Hans Asplund (1921–94). Architect who coined the term 'Brutalism'.
6. Lars Israel Wahlman (1870–1952). Architect of the Engelbrekt Church and parish hall in Stockholm (1906–14).
7. A plan of the office can be found in Engfors, p. 53.
8. Lennart Bergvall (1912–99). Best known for his work on building standards and modules.
9. Djurgården was the site of the 1930 exhibition, the buildings of which were demolished immediately after the exhibition. Traces of the site works can still be found around the Villa Källhagen Hotel.
10. St Lucia's day, 13 December, is a Swedish feast celebrating the coming return of light. St Lucia, 'the Queen of Light', comes in the early morning wearing a crown of candles.
11. Eskil Sundahl (1890–1974) built his summer house at Lisön, close to Asplund's Stennäs, at about the same time.

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