

# Gustaf Strengell and Nordic Modernism\*

Kimmo Sarje

Suffice is to say that his personal influence extended far into the North; in Finland it was particularly notable thanks to Sigurd Frosterus. We may credit the influence of van de Velde's personality for the tremendously healthy, intellectual influence for that Frosterus and Gustaf Strengell had on Finnish architecture.

Alvar Aalto, 1957<sup>1</sup>

In her inspiring book *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture* (2000) Barbara Miller Lane studies the development of modern architecture in Germany and Scandinavia as growth from National Romanticism to Modernism.<sup>2</sup> She has good arguments to underline this kind of organic change, but there are also serious reasons to see the development in a more complex light. The role of rationalism of the turn of century as represented by Gustaf Strengell and Sigurd Frosterus had a crucial effect on developments especially in Finland.<sup>3</sup>

I start with a broader introduction to Strengell's work as architect, critic and writer to tell a different kind of narrative about Nordic Modernism, and finally to make some critical notes about Barbara Miller Lane's interpretation in the end of my essay. Writing in Swedish, Strengell's influence was not limited to Finland, but instead he also had a Scandinavian audience. As a recent echo of the past, in her academic thesis Catharina Gabriellsson, a Swedish architect and critic, has paid positive attention to Strengell's work.<sup>4</sup>

## **Art nouveau: Rationalism of the early 20th century**

Gustaf Strengell's life's work is a rich, though currently not so well known, chapter of the Modern Movement in Finland and Scandinavia. Born in 1878, he entered the cultural scene at the very beginning of the 20th century, declaring the principles of rational *art nouveau* in his astonishingly mature essay *Nya skönhetsvärden* (New Values of Beauty) in 1901. Strengell wanted to reform *art nouveau* and make the movement more "simple and

honest”, formulating a program which is here called rational *art nouveau*. It was an industrial, practical, and functional approach of construction and design emphasizing the role of machine production and iron, and it demanded to abandon natural references of decoration instead of abstract and mathematical ornamentation to express the rational play of forces and masses of construction.

The author was only 23 years old and still studying architecture at the Polytechnic Institute in Helsinki and practicing in the offices of Eliel Saarinen and Lars Sonck, the leading architects of Finnish National Romanticism. Besides Strengell’s great talent, an explanation of his literary brilliance was that he completed his Master of Arts degree in 1899 at the University of Helsinki before starting his professional studies. In his essay, Strengell called for truthfulness in materials and structures, and he stressed that machines would change the world: “The material itself was precisely that which would define the forms; ... Machines reshaped the world and the introduction of iron as building material on an unprecedented scale provided architects with tasks that could not be solved in a day.”<sup>5</sup> Rationalism and industrialism were to provide the image of the new century just as architects such as Henry van de Velde and Victor Horta had shown. According to Strengell, priority should be given to the practical aspects of design and historical and archaeological references should be forgotten, and he formulates the principle of functionalism in the following terms in his early essay:

A chair is beautiful once it serves its purpose to the utmost. It can lack any kind of ornament, as long as it is comfortable to use and constructed in such a manner that the functions of its various parts are clearly expressed; as long as it is well “built” it will be beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

Strengell finished his studies in Helsinki in 1902 and founded an office together with Sigurd Frosterus (1876–1956), another talented architect and critic, and the future designer of the Stockmann department store in Helsinki.<sup>7</sup> Both of them travelled abroad to study and practice in the offices of distinguished architects: Strengell went to London and worked in Charles Harrison Townsend’s office and Frosterus to Weimar to work with Henry van de Velde.<sup>8</sup>

The young architects put their rationalist programme in practice first by designing in 1904 a sculptural villa in Helsinki in the spirit of Joseph Maria Olbrich and Henry van de Velde, pointing out that the façades of the house contained no sign of ornamentation. At the same time, they concentrated on an architectural competition for the Helsinki railway sta-

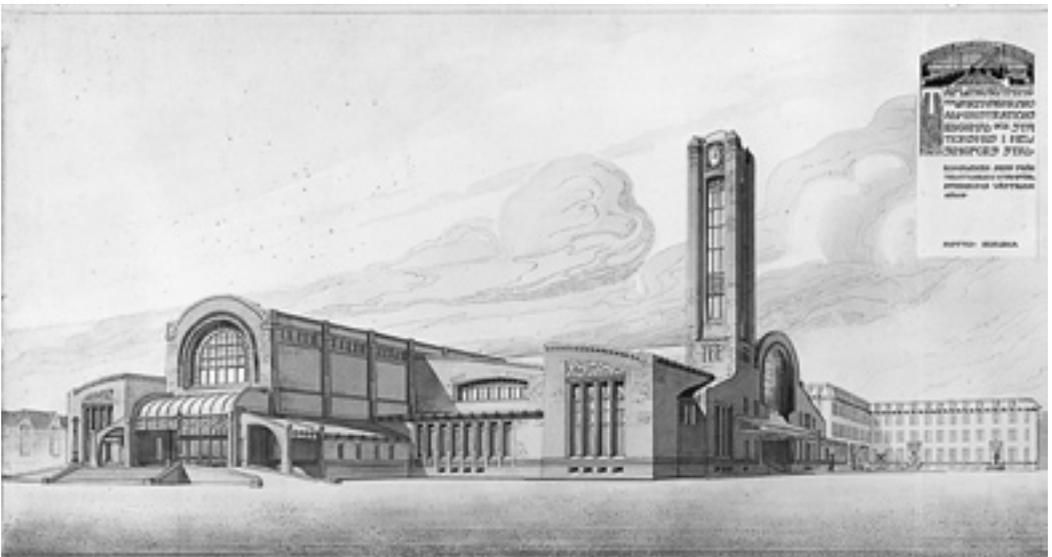
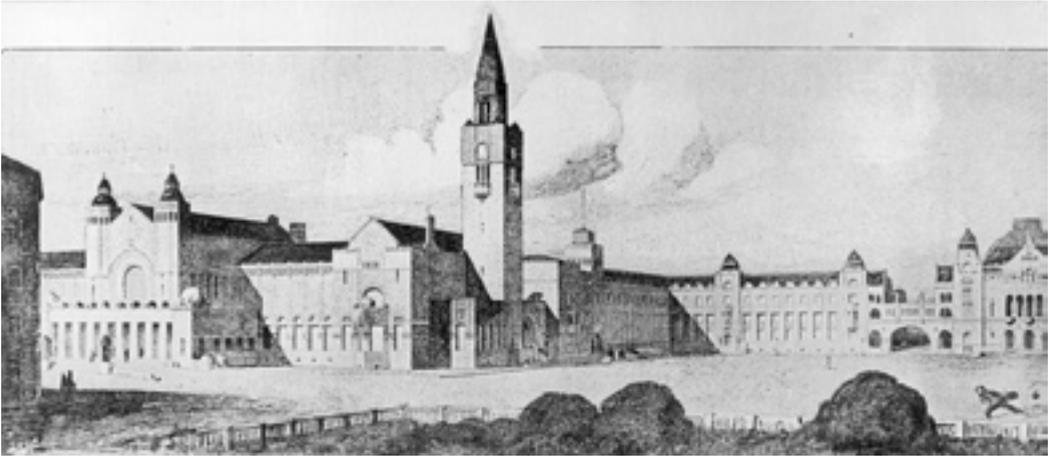
tion. Frosterus's innovative proposal designed with mastery bravura culminating the rational *art nouveau* style of van de Velde with locomotive metaphors was unfortunately not successful. The first prize was given to the office of Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen for a castle-like railway station design with medieval references. This setback forced Frosterus and Strengell to defend their ideas of rational *art nouveau*, and in 1904 they published an elegant and sharply-worded manifesto entitled *Arkitektur en stridskrift våra motståndare tillägnad af Gustaf Strengell och Sigurd Frosterus* ("Architecture: a challenge to our opponents by Gustaf Strengell and Sigurd Frosterus"), which effectively questioned the values of National Romanticism. Strengell declares:

Thus the use of archaistic forms, unless there are very strong grounds for doing so, is as absurd as wearing skins and eating with fingers, or if a gamekeeper were to shoot with a crossbow instead of his Winchester rifle. ... Thus, the future architect has far more to learn from the Atlantic steamer and electric tram, from the racer and motorcar, from American office interiors and English lavatories, than he does from art forms belonging to the past. He will find a far more reliable point of departure in these engineering products than in the Gothic or Renaissance in his endeavours to reflect the spirit of the age – it is there he will find the seeds, the beginnings, from which his new, dreamt-of style may one day germinate. ... We have plenty of decorative and 'artistic' talent here in Finland at present. What we need is some guiding, clear and rational force. It is men we need, men who are prepared to break irrevocably with the past, to look boldly and resolutely to the future.<sup>9</sup>

Strengell's analytical (and male-focused) thesis went without compromises to the point, but this did not mean that he was blind to the values of National Romantic architecture. On the contrary, the question was about the context. Strengell highly appreciated the historical and archaeological design of the National Museum of Finland by Gesellius, Lindgren, and Saarinen of 1902. The ornamentation and narrative solutions of the building expressed the historical and archaeological facts of the country. That is why the museum was "a masterly attempt" and "true" according to Strengell. "It is thus on what one could almost call its ethical element, that the greatness of this building is based", he writes.<sup>10</sup> He understood also the carnivalesque decoration of the Pohjola (The North) House of the turn of the century "as a farfetched paraphrase on a theme suggested by the name itself".<sup>11</sup> Pohjola was a business building with grotesque mythological figures hewn in its stone façade relief symbolizing the power of national capital and entrepreneurship.



**Fig. 1.** Sigurd Frosterus & Gustaf Strengell: Villa Nissen, 1905, Helsinki. Photo: unknown. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 2.** Herman Gesellius & Eliel Saarinen: Helsinki Railway Station, competition entry, 1904. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

**Fig. 3.** Sigurd Frosterus & Gustaf Strengell: Helsinki Railway Station, competition entry, 1904. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 4.** Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen:  
National Museum, Helsinki, 1910. Photo: unknown. ©  
Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 5.** Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen: Pohjola Insurance Company, Helsinki. 1898. Photo: Nils Erik Wickberg. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

But the aesthetic requirements of a railway station were another thing. Strengell could not accept the anachronisms of Saarinen's office to represent modern technology and transportation. "Nowadays railway stations are planned like museums and museums like churches," he observes ironically and gives a literary vision about the contemporary urban way of life as a conceptual starting point for the design of a modern railway station:

A railway station in bold, mighty, elastic contours, a building of stone, glass and iron. A station hall, cobweb-light roof vaulted over the crowds, steam rising like milk-white scum in pillars towards the heights. The shrill whistles and deafening din of trains shunting in and out. A flood of people rushing forwards through the barriers, staunch men, formal, business-like figures in one-coloured travel outfits, women of good bearing in outfits more notable for their cut than their colour – this, too, is a harmonious whole, this, too, is a picture.<sup>12</sup>

Strengell was convinced that Frosterus' proposal was in keeping with the times, but unfortunately the jury was not able to accept new kinds of design and was deaf to rational arguments. However, the efforts of Frosterus and Strengell were not in vain. The results were not only great examples of rational *art nouveau* architecture on paper and the most radical manifesto thus far in the history of Finnish architecture, which meant the decline point of National Romanticism. Besides these contributions, the polemic and Frosterus' proposals had a profound influence on the work of Saarinen's office, so that the built railway station in Helsinki resembles more Frosterus' design than the original one of Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the strong companionship of Frosterus and Strengell did not last long. A steam power station in 1905 in Kokkola, a small town on the west coast of Finland, was the last joint project of the two radical architects and close friends – different tempers probably drew them apart to develop their careers independently. An exciting aspect of the steam power station was that a sauna was constructed as a functional part of it. What a symbol of machine aesthetics in our latitudes!<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, Helsinki was in the midst of a construction boom, which made the city one of the leading centres of new architecture in Scandinavia. "Modern Finnish architecture, as it appears in new buildings in Helsinki, is without doubt one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the arts in the Nordic countries and in the present day," wrote August Brunius, an influential Swedish critic, c. 1912.<sup>15</sup> Strengell demonstrated his vast understanding of trends in architecture by publishing in Finland and Sweden already in 1903 a critical essay on the new buildings of the capital. He wrote how some of the best new apartment

buildings grew from within to the exterior, expressing the needs of their inhabitants, how architects had abandoned rigid axial disciplines, and how the simple plastered façades of the buildings without any horizontal mouldings were like a skin on an organic structure. Strengell goes on to analyze the innovations and also some capricious details of a new apartment building by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen built 1901 by the Kasarmintori square in Helsinki:

There is a good deal of rationalism to it: in the façade the weight of which completely gives way for the interior one can note a purism that could hardly have been taken further, even the plasterwork is exemplary in view of the careful consideration of the properties of the material. One could truly not think of a stronger contrast to the ordinary tenement type than the sober, simple, calm building that is so completely free of any knick-knacks. In the interior one further notes the architects' intention of creating real homes, not just rented apartments of rooms marked in squares in a stencilled manner, into which people move in and out without ever experiencing warm feeling of comfort. We can already say that in this respect this building has become a trailblazer in our conditions.

But there are also other elements that are immediately present alongside those mentioned above. The weight of the doors of the entrance and the richness of their mountings, for example, poorly suit the small modern American security lock, the key of which one carries in a waistcoat pocket...<sup>16</sup>

Not only writing about architecture, Strengell was also an active art critic, and he was deeply involved in issues of interior design. He admired the Vienna Secessionists, especially Josef Hoffmann's style, which he considered to be masculine and rational compared with Joseph Maria Olbrich's tendency towards decadent femininity.<sup>17</sup> "Fundamental to Hoffman's design is a conscious simplification of the phenomenon of life – seeking a simplified worldview," wrote Strengell.<sup>18</sup> He remembered Hoffmann himself as characterizing his design as "Nutzstil", which meant "a process of elucidation through which the architecture of the new century must pass in order to be cleansed; a tabula rasa necessary for shaking off old elements of style once and for all". In his own interior and furniture design Strengell combined elegantly playful fantasy with practical discipline. Many of his early projects, which we probably know only through photos and prints, still deserve full respect.<sup>19</sup>

Also positions of trust demanded Strengell's attention; in 1901 he started work as the secretary of the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design and ten years later he became the director of the museum of the same association,



**Fig. 6.** Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen:  
Ab Fabiansgatan 17, Helsinki, 1901. Photo: Nils Wasas-  
tjerna. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 7.** Gustaf Strengell: Interior design Senator A.R.'s study, Helsinki, 1904. Photo Nils Wasastjerna. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

the predecessor of today's Design Museum in Helsinki. In 1914 he was invited to be the head of the collection of the Fine Arts Society of Finland, i.e. the National Gallery.

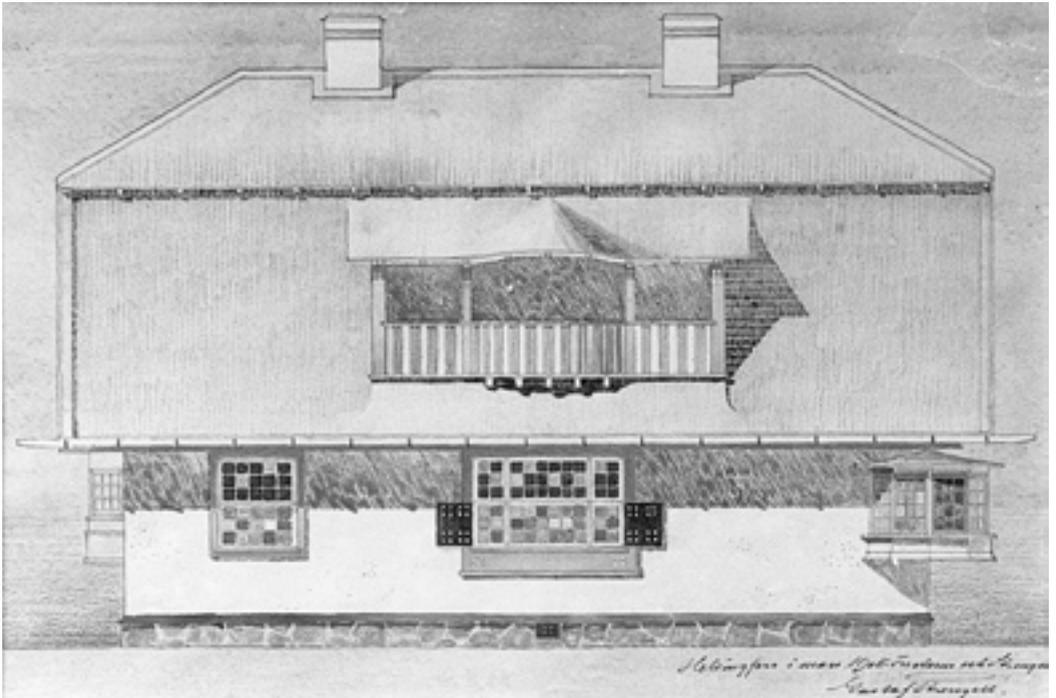
As a practicing architect, Strengell focused on private houses and villas. One of his challenges, in keeping with his rationalist program, was to develop a new type of country house which would draw upon traditional models while avoiding all Karelian or other kinds of National Romantic motives. His starting point was a manor house with a rectangular floor plan and a mansard roof, when designing an experimental house at Kokemäki for Emil Cedercreutz, a symbolist sculptor. The architect wanted to maximize room space, and accordingly the upper floor extended past the façades of the ground floor and the roof was very steep.<sup>20</sup> Using colours, materials, and sophisticated details, such as red wooden mouldings and bay windows, Strengell gave elegance and variety to this cube-shaped building.

Reforming traditional construction technique was also one of Strengell's passions. He was fascinated by American *balloon frame houses*, which were based on practical and economic board construction. This new technology reflected in Strengell's mind the principles and experiences of skyscraper building. He wrote a few articles about frame house technique and applied it with success in many of his projects.<sup>21</sup>

Economical construction, which could add social dynamics and balance the threatening class divisions in society, was in general close to Strengell's heart. He proposed a new method for the middle class to build a cheaper single-family house: a group of families should order several houses from one architect, who could design the complex and supervise construction. Thus, a great deal of expenses would be saved in both materials and the amount of work needed. The architect also regarded this to be an opportunity for artistic gain when a whole milieu was designed at once.<sup>22</sup>

In 1907, Strengell planned a suburban garden area near Helsinki for working-class residents, which would be accessible by train. In this project, he applied the ideas of British models, especially the example of the famous *Hampstead Garden Suburb*. Strengell was involved in many ways in the scheme, being one of the planners and a partner of the company set up for the purpose. The project, however, was not any major economic success for its initiators, but historically it provided experience in city planning for developing urban garden areas in Finland.<sup>23</sup>

Strengell loved new challenges and he was open to opportunities from art, architecture and business. He was also well-liked and was asked to



**Fig. 8.** Gustaf Strengell: Villa Hästebohus, Köyliö, 1906. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

participate and take responsibility. But there were only so many hours in the day. The cost of his work as director of two art museums was that he had left his career as a practicing architect. He grew tired of all his responsibilities and at the end of the First World War he wanted to leave his museum duties. He quit both his posts and moved to Loviisa, a small coastal town east of Helsinki, to concentrate on his literary and interior design interests. The retreat did not last long. Already in 1919, Strengell started a new job as the advertising director of the Stockmann department store for a couple of years. The Stockmann episode, however, did not change Strengell's conviction that his calling as a writer and journalist would be at the core of his activities for the rest of his life.

### **Strengell's books of the 1920s**

The 1920s was Strengell's best decade. He was productive but more focused than previously. His work as a writer and journalist was sufficiently synthetic to cover many of his interests from art and architecture to history and public issues.<sup>24</sup> His first major book *Staden som konstverk* (The City as a Work of Art) from 1922 was his agenda for the post-war world. The main ideas of the book were historical continuity and sensibility. This kind of humble historicity was diametrically opposed to his machine-romantic manifestos of the early years of the century:

Before the prevailing individualism, not to speak of anarchism, that erodes unity is conquered in urban development, no urban architecture of any higher value can be expected to bloom... an appreciation of the significance of urban architecture and a high, ethical view of the urban developer's responsibility that should serve us well before we go about erecting a new house in our towns.<sup>25</sup>

As a gesture, the first picture of Strengell's book was a photo taken by the author of old Porvoo, a small medieval town east of Helsinki. And as a sign of reconciliation, *Staden som konstverk* was dedicated to Eliel Saarinen, the former target of Strengell's criticism in the Helsinki railway station polemic. As has been noted, Strengell's mother tongue was Swedish, and fortunately the book was published by a well-known Swedish company, Albert Bonniers Förlag, which attracted Scandinavian attention from the very beginning. It came out in Finnish translation the next year, which strengthened the book's broad influence in forming the ideology of Nordic Classicism.

*Staden som konstverk* was Strengell's personal introduction to the history of the architecture of European cities. According to the writer, the important sources of inspiration of the book were Camillo Sitte's *Der*

*Städte-Bau* and A. E. Brinckmann's *Platz und Monument*. The first part of Strengell's study was methodological, a kind of *flaneur's* point of view. He analysed the city as a silhouette and as a plastic entity; he went on to define the concepts of *street* and *square*, and finally he presented his interpretation of the city as an *artistic organism*. The latter part of his book was a historical excursion regarding the unifying tendencies of the urban fabric in the 17th and the 18th centuries. "The unified city image", one of the basic slogans of Nordic Classicism of the 1920s, was an idea that permeated Strengell's work. The Nietzschean individualist of the turn of the century now condemned liberal individualism as an enemy of the harmonious townscape:

In the domain of urban architecture liberalism as a socio-political doctrine – the doctrine of the benefits of the free play of forces in society – which can be said to have characterized the second half of the 19th century, has found highly unfortunate expression. ... Individual houses are designed freely without the slightest *artistic* consideration for their neighbours – with regard to material, colour scheme or style. The results are as we all know them to be; from this the townscape has gained its fragmented and discordant character that goes to extremes. ... It will be the prime task of the near future to again try to create such unity.<sup>26</sup>

According to Gabriellson, Strengell's analysis here directly concerned a serious problem of modern urban space, which we can see clearly in the present postmodern society at the latest. "Strengell if anyone predicted this, as he so clearly proceeds from the experience of a *crisis*. He regards it as inherent dissolution in society as such, a result of the individualization of society – the loss of coherence, the whole, and orientation. This crisis is inherent to modernity", she writes.<sup>27</sup>

Pictures and captions played an important role in most of Strengell's books. In *Staden som konstverk* there were 360 small images, and the best of the captions were miniature essays on the issues. Strengell compared the layout method of his book to film; the reader could browse through it and quickly obtain an overview of the subject.

Strengell's next book, *Hemmet som konstverk* (The Home as a Work of Art), came out in 1923, concentrating on interior decoration in the eclectic and conservative spirit of Nordic Classicism. This time, the first picture of the book, as a kind of motto, was a colour plate of the author's living-room in his house in Loviisa. The conventional style was far from Strengell's dynamic *art nouveau* furniture and interiors of roughly a dozen years before. The book itself was dedicated to his wife and seemed to represent "home

sweet home” escapism after the depressing experiences of the civil war of 1918 in Finland. Sigurd Frosterus, however, who saw the book through contemporary eyes, thought that Strengell’s first book, *Staden som konstverk*, suffered from the flavour of an idealized past while *Hemmet som konstverk* had a real interest in the new and the present moment, and he considered it to be the author’s most personal literary work.<sup>28</sup> Strengell himself noted that he owed a great deal to the American design writer Frank Alvah Person’s *Interior Decoration. Its Principles and Practice* from the 1920s.

In his study of interior design, Strengell emphasized the role of colour, which paralleled lively discussions about colour in painting at that time to refer especially to Sigurd Frosterus’ profound and influential books in the analytical spirit of Post-Impressionism: *Regnbågsfärgernas segertåg* and *Solljus och slagskugga* of 1917 and his academic thesis *Färgproblemet i måleriet* from 1920. Strengell tried to define the basic concepts of interior decoration as precisely as possible, as if it was a science, as an effort towards harmony through contrasts and similarities. He presented the laws and rules of how to solve practical problems and how to measure the right compositions. And finally, he presented his theory of symphonic interior decoration, intended to develop and repeat certain decorative motives throughout the apartment in a manner analogous to symphonic form. The result was a kind of designer’s dictatorship in a house where every detail had its definite place as an organic part of the composition:

...In the dining room, the fundamental concord is provided by lavender-blue walls and dark green...The green reappears in the foliate designs of the wall-paper in the hall...The green of the dining room and hall reappears in the study... We find the burgundy of the dining room again in the pattern of the Korassan carpet of the study; this carpet has a natural brown ground, of almost the same hue as the basic tone of the carpets in the hall. The lavender-blue ultimately functions here as only a feeble echo in certain textiles and ornamental objects. All three rooms have floors of old, unpainted wide pine planks.

Returning to earlier comparisons between interior design and music it can be said that the various rooms comprising an apartment as a whole should to some degree be designed in the same way as the movements of a symphony: there is to be coherence and unity, but at the same time effective variety and fully developed individuality among the various parts.<sup>29</sup>

The third book in Strengell’s series was *Byggnaden som konstverk* (The Building as a Work of Art), which was his most philosophical work. It came out in 1928, mirroring fragmentarily the struggling elements of the

author's worldview and the changes in the *Zeitgeist*. The last of the three essays of the book was on Jean Marie Guyau's dynamic vitalism of the late 19th century, which represented the progressive spirit of the author's youth as well as rational *art nouveau*. Guyau's *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* from 1884 expressed the will to make our lives stronger and richer with the means of art, and it called for a rejection of the decadent inability of the world of *l'art pour l'art*. According to Strengell, the French philosopher was convinced that machines would be a positive and beautiful force of the new expansive life:

What machine then is the one of greatest beauty? Well, the one that reminds us most of a *living being*.

For Guyau, the question of how mechanized industry will, in the aesthetic sense, approach the goal or separate itself from it therefore becomes tantamount to the question of the degree to which machinery created by progressive technological development will associate itself with living beings as a type.<sup>30</sup>

The First World War questioned Guyau's optimism and in its place, Oswald Spengler's cultural pessimism seemed to present a more truthful vision of destiny for Western civilization. Strengell was especially interested in Spengler's theory of architecture, the question addressed in the first essay of his book. He also lectured on this subject at the Art Academy (Konstakademi) in Stockholm in 1924 and at the Academy of Architecture (Det norske arkitektakademi) in Oslo in 1925. Spenglerian pessimism toned Strengell's positions. In some of his articles from the 1920s, he dramatized the new phenomena of Western civilization, for example Saarinen's skyscraper visions against the background of Spengler's *Untergang*.<sup>31</sup> In *Byggnaden som konstverk*, Strengell finishes his essay on Spengler's theory of architecture with speculative thoughts on the role, meaning, and changes of the principal symbols in civilizations:

With continuing cultural evolution, however, it often happens that another genre of art, which is able to renew the primary ideal of the use of form embedded in the essence of the culture – the primal symbol – takes the lead as the central art around which the others are grouped and from which they borrow definitive features. In Ancient Greece, sculpture took the place architecture; this happened immediately after the period of major construction in the Acropolis. In the West, this was done by contrapuntal music. The concept of God of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation could find adequate form only in the storm of an organ fugue or the solemnly proceeding rhythm of a cantata. Bach's organ compositions constitute an analysis of space, the immaterial space

of tones, completely equal to the mathematical analysis of its abstract, infinite space. To a higher degree than architecture, the formal world of music is related innermost with observing pure space...

Architecture became musical. *Measure* had overcome *melody*. ... Is this explanation also correct? Who dares to pass judgment on it? No one, however, can deny that it is magnificent and is distinguished by a deep view of the problem.<sup>32</sup>

The third essay of *Byggnaden som konstverk* was a study on Le Corbusier's book *Vers un architecture* from 1923. In the montage of Strengell's book it must have symbolized a careful promise of the rebirth of optimism and rationalism, the crucial values of his youth, though he did not direct his main attention to the new visions and possibilities of Le Corbusier's architecture but rather reflected its relation to Antiquity and to classical models. "The return to simple geometric basic forms in architecture is described by Corbusier as one of the most important tasks of present-day architecture," Strengell notes.<sup>33</sup>

### **Functionalism: Rationalism of the 1930s**

Barbara Miller Lane's concept of "the Scandinavian Synthesis", the question of how the ideas of National Romanticism continued and were modified in Nordic Modernism from the 1930s to the 1960s, entails roughly speaking three main arguments.

(1) The innovations were conducted by the pseudomorphic architecture of National Romanticism which smuggled rationalist ideas and technology into practice.

Barbara Miller Lane's examples are two churches with neo-Romanesque exteriors and the interiors of reinforced concrete in Stuttgart (1906–1908) and Ulm (1906–1910) by Theodor Fischer, and Lars Sonck's Telephone Company Building in Helsinki (1905) "[B]uilt of reinforced concrete and faced in rough-cut granite". She considers this medieval castle-like edifice to be "one of the most innovative buildings of its era".<sup>34</sup>

(2) Although it had an independent and less authoritarian character in Scandinavia than in Germany, the Classicism of the 1920s was more of a transitional style towards Functionalism. One of the reasons was a political need to mark a distinction from the German tendency. This need also strengthened "the development of a 'Scandinavian synthesis' between modernism and traditions of National Romanticism".

"The first Scandinavian effort to achieve a break from the architecture of the pre-war period was itself historicist and revivalist. ... New large-scale buildings of a monumental character in Scandinavian countries tended



**Fig. 9.** Lars Sonck: Helsinki Telephone Association building, 1905. Photo: Heikki Havas. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

for some years in the early 1920s to be executed in the reduced and modernized version of neoclassicism that came to be known as 'Nordic Classicism'. Nordic Classicism gained popularity in Scandinavian countries because it seemed more modern and more cosmopolitan than National Romanticism. In Germany such monumental buildings as memorials to dead soldiers carried on the forms and materials of National Romanticism; these buildings came increasingly to be associated with the nationalists and revanchist views of the radical Right. [...]

The reverse was true in the Scandinavian countries. Here, after a brief revival of neoclassicism during and immediately after the First World War, Scandinavian architects began around 1925 to create their own version of the New Architecture, which they called 'Functionalism', Barbara Miller Lane describes the developments in Scandinavia.<sup>35</sup>

(3) Scandinavian Functionalism was a style of its own, in which the ideas of National Romanticism in applied forms were combined with rationalism and social responsibility.

This mixture happened according to Barbara Miller Lane "between modernism and national and regional themes and materials", when "Scandinavian architects in the thirties and forties privileged the use of brick, stone, and wood; employed kinds of site planning that related their buildings closely to nature; and developed furniture design (and interior design more generally) that was clearly related to the simple peasant prototypes that had been preferred by National Romantic architects." Kay Fisker's simple brick architecture in Denmark and Erik Bryggman's and Alvar Aalto's organic combinations of Romanticism and Functionalism in Finland are examples of the new synthesis by American art historian. She also points out, that "[T]he idea that Functionalism represented a kind of applied socialism was especially attractive to architects and politicians of Sweden."<sup>36</sup>

Lane no doubt sketches aptly the evolution of Modernism in the Nordic countries and the influence of National Romanticism on Functionalism, but she simplifies her model by leaving the significance of rationalist *art nouveau* out of her discussion. Her extensive book does not even mention Strengell or Frosterus who after all were Finland's leading architectural critics and theorists, and who also had considerable Nordic influence. As critics of National Romanticism, they markedly reinforced rationalist values and attitudes in contemporary architecture, as noted for example by Alvar Aalto.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, with their own work as designers they pointed the way for developments like the one of Selim A. Lindqvist, who from an early stage designed buildings in the spirit of rationalist art nou-

veau without National Romantic symbols or ornaments. All this theoretical and practical work laid the basis for Functionalism.

Strengell's importance is also underlined by the fact that he in the 1930s brilliantly interpreted and evaluated Alvar Aalto's masterpieces such as the Paimio Sanatorium (1933) and the Viipuri Library (1935). In an article on the Paimio sanatorium he saw how this building was both connected with and differed from the rationalist ideals of his youth and National Romanticism. The new sanatorium building showed that design once again proceeded freely from within to the exterior to express needs and required tasks, while utilizing the flexible opportunities of reinforced concrete technology:

The Paimio sanatorium is built outwards from within with unrelenting consistency. All elements of the whole have been subjected to the most thorough analysis with regard to all of their future functions and the best possible way of fulfilling them. ... The Paimio sanatorium is realized with a skeleton structure of concrete. The unique opportunities of technology have been utilized to the utmost by the architect, and the impression of rising boldly together with airy lightness given by his sanatorium was largely achieved thanks to this technology, with which no other construction method – with the exception of pure steel construction – can compete in the sense implied here.<sup>38</sup>

In an essay on Jean Marie Guyau from 1928, Strengell reminded his contemporaries that the dynamic principles of Functionalism had their own history. They were already prefigured by the French philosopher Guyau in the mid 1880s and later by many significant architects and theorists, such as van de Velde and in the Nordic countries by Frosterus:

For the time being, no slogan has greater power over the sense that of beauty in the 'functioning' form. The doctrine of dynamism and functionalism are proclaimed in the marketplace by enthusiastic prophets, great and small. It would nevertheless be called for to note that the doctrine is by no means a creation of the present day – as is generally imagined. Its origins extend quite a long way back in time. The Belgian Henry van de Velde, who lived and worked in Germany from around the turn of the century to outbreak of the war, has eagerly propagated it in lectures, articles and books, at the same time applying its tenets in practice in a highly personal way in his double capacity as a designer in applied art and a (self-taught) architect. In the Nordic countries, the Finnish art writer and architect Sigurd Frosterus, who in his early years was van de Velde's pupil for some time in Weimar, spread the gospel a quarter of a century ago with great enthusiasm and exceptional literary talent. The time, however, was apparently yet ripe then<sup>39</sup>



**Fig. 10.** Aino & Alvar Aalto: Paimio Sanatorium, 1933. Photo: Gustaf Welin. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



Fig. 11. Erik Bryggman: Resurrection Chapel, Turku, 1941. Photo: V.A. Wahlström. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 12.** Aino & Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, 1939. Photo: Gustaf Welin. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



**Fig. 13.** Gustaf Strengell portrayed in a Danish newspaper in the mid 1920s. Undated clip from the Gustaf Strengell archive, Museum of Finnish Architecture.

What Strengell observed about his colleague and friend Frosterus could be adapted to apply to himself as well.

In his article on the Paimio sanatorium, Strengell compared Aalto's Functionalist building with Pohjola House (1898–1901) by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen. The critic maintained that these buildings shared the fact they were both extreme cases in their respective genres. He regarded the heavy and dim symbolism of Pohjola House, which drew upon Finnish mythology ultimately to be a liability for a modern commercial building, whereas combining a tuberculosis sanatorium with Functionalism was a successful, "sound", solution.<sup>40</sup>

The First World War drove Strengell – as well as Frosterus<sup>41</sup> – to a crisis of world view making him question strict rationalism and individualism. After the war, he saw the values of architectural history and the harmonious townscape to be morally and aesthetically sustainable solutions. A decade later, after the breakthrough of Functionalism, he tended to regard both Nordic Classicism and also late National Romanticism mainly as a transitional stage at least in Finnish architecture, with a few notable exceptions:

Between the emergence of the former orientation's (National Romanticism K.S.) breakthrough work, Pohjola House in Helsinki and the Paimio sanatorium is a span of thirty years, or precisely the period that has proved to be so significant in the changing of generations. In historical retrospect, which is already possible with regard to architectural output, the interim appears to be fairly dull. With the exception of two isolated works designed in a deeply personal manner, Kallio Church by Sonck and the Helsinki Railway Station by Saarinen rising like peaks over the crowd, hardly anything of more distinct features emerged the rest that was abundantly produced, which of course does not exclude the fact there are a number of proper or charming works among them. This whole time-span appears now to be a typical period of transition<sup>42</sup>

Though more severe, Strengell's verdict approaches Barbara Miller Lane's assessment of the significance of Nordic Classicism. His innovativeness is also shown by the fact that his own attempts in the early 1900s to develop a modern single-family house without National Romantic allusions and taking the traditional mansard-roofed manor house as its starting point in fact prefigured the objectives of Nordic Classicism. The American art historian observes:

Scandinavian architects turned to the small-scale neoclassical buildings of their late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century traditions. The cubic forms of this earlier period suited their desire of simplicity, while neoclassicism's univer-

sal vocabulary of forms seemed to transcend undesirable form of nationalism. In fact, a universal style that was at the same time part of the national heritage in each of the Scandinavian countries suited the way that the Scandinavian intellectuals looked at internationalism in the twentieth century: a national and international at once, as related to both pan-Scandinavianism and pacifism.<sup>43</sup>

This excerpt could have come from Strengell's 1906 programme.<sup>44</sup> With regard to his world view, Scandinavianism and French and Anglo-Saxon views overrode the German aspect in his preferences. This was also true of Frosterus who nonetheless preferred monumental classicism in his architecture after the First World War but condemned National Socialism and anti-Semitism and appealed for world peace in his writings of the 1930s.<sup>45</sup>

Strengell did not underline the debt of Functionalism to National Romanticism, but instead regarded the works with which Aalto made his breakthrough as above all a continuation of the goals of rationalist *art nouveau*, of which, however, many of the methodological points of departure were also shared by the National Romantics. The romantic emphases of Functionalism – a preference for natural materials such as wood, stone and brick, which Strengell respected – were not reinforced until later. Strengell had participated in the experiment of socially oriented building already as a town planner and architect before the First World War, and he thus found it easy to concur with the ideals of social justice put forth by Functionalism.

*English translations of quotes and language checking by Jüri Kokkonen*

## Notes

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24. Actually, poems were the first texts he ever published in an established cultural magazine at the end of 1890s and every now and then a single poem of his was seen in print. Even Strengell's graduate thesis was on Frans Mikael Franzén, a Finnish poet of the late 18th and early 19th century.

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31. Strengell, Gustaf: Eliel Saarinen's förslag till omreglering av Lake Frontområdet i Chicago, *Arkitekten* 2, 1924, 16.
32. Strengell 1928, 81–83.
33. Ibid. 98. Strengell still published four more books of which the most important, *Den nya annonsen* (New Advertising), appeared already in 1924 as a fruit of the author's two years' work as head of advertising at the Stockmann department store. The book was both an introduction to the psychology of selling and an innovative analysis of the commercial montage.
34. Lane 2000, 236–238.
35. Ibid. 281, 253, 281 & 254.
36. Ibid. 288–289, 291, 292, 288 & 254.
37. Aalto 1997, 247.
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42. Ibid.
43. Lane 2000, 282.
44. Strengell 1906.
45. Frosterus, Sigurd: Nuets facit, *Stålålderns janusansikte*, Holger Schildt, Stockholm, 1935.