

Resonance

– How Architecture and Public Spaces Respond

«We are the 99%» OCCUPY WALL STREET

Nowhere can the right to make one's voice heard be taken for granted, so just before the Swedish elections of 2010 a group of artists, musicians and singers set out to test this right.¹ The first place we chose for our experiment was the walkway beneath Centralbron running from Tegelbacken to the City Hall, one of Stockholm's most famous and popular buildings. Wordlessly, we called to one another over short and long distances, sang together or separately as our surroundings changed, in a rhythm that was perpetually drowned out by the noise of motor traffic on nearby streets and of trains on the bridge above the pedestrian tunnel. Increasingly exhausted and disheartened, hoarse and windblown, we tried to get the place to respond to our calls but our voices found no support either in its architecture or in its function. Only by using cow horns and the ancient calling technique known as kulning – both used in rural parts to summon cattle and scare off wild animals – were we able to make ourselves heard above the massive sound environment. At a time when cities are increasingly organised in the form of a scenographic backdrop to tourism, commerce and spectacle, the question is what freedom of expression means if we can't hear one another's calls – and if the environment is not able to respond, who is to be responsible (responsible) for the common good? Where are the places and the architecture that lend support to a variety of voices and modes of expression and to personal interaction?

On Tahrir Square in Egypt, the 1960s architecture lent power to the revolution by disseminating and strengthening people's voices, according to one of the country's sound artists, Mahmoud Refat. The cries of protest echoed between buildings, while rhythmic song, stamping feet and hoisting car horns called people together, at the same time scaring the savages of authority into flight. The voices of the Arab Spring echo across the world and public places are being occupied everywhere as sites for action and interaction.

Democracy in fact originally evolved as a function of architecture and urban organisation; the marketplace in ancient Greece

did what the name agora implies – gathered or summoned people. The marketplace and its surrounding buildings for trade, meetings, rituals and the administration of justice became synonymous with public life, in which a free man could represent his entire household, the economic unit within which women and slaves provided for the family's need of care, food and sleep in the home – the private sphere. Today, in an age when economics have gone beyond the essentials and are no longer about housekeeping and the distribution of common resources, people are supporting themselves on the basics that the streets and squares can provide, eating, sleeping, singing and making themselves at home there. Deprivation is bringing together those who – poor, unemployed, homeless and without rights – are raising their weak voices in demand for a different future replete with citizenship, homes, jobs, education and care. The architectural contrast between the simple tents that offer almost no protection against weapons, cold or the forces of nature, and the marble, stone, glass and steel buildings that surround them highlights the colossal differences in people's circumstances but also the power-holders' weak points: the instability of an economy that embraces only a few and the power of the masses' fury.

In the middle of the Arab Spring and the collapse of the finance market, a central Stockholm square, Brunkesbergstorg, was also activated as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. I'm reluctant to use the word occupied since the square has never been as public a space as it was during the «occupation» – carefully tended and safe to move about in. Glass was swept away at night, fights were averted, and quiet discussions about our common future went on round the clock. It was a brave attempt to take back public space, which has been privatised and built over to satisfy market interests, and the low rent camp surrounded by the massive stone buildings housing the Riksbank and the head offices of Swedbank, forming a backdrop to the city's commercial centre, strikingly symbolised the division of power. The square, with its (literally) stone-faced architecture enclosing a small wedge of trees, grass and a round fountain, is populated only once a year, during Stockholm's August culture festival, by cultural institu-



Above: Occupy Wall Street at Brunkesbergstorg from above in February, 2012.
Left: The barricaded square after the eviction of the tent camp in March 2012.
Right: The social transformation of the square during the autumn 2011.

tions that move their activities into tents for the occasion. We're not alone in wondering what purpose the square serves. The City of Stockholm wants to solve the problem of prostitution and drug trading by transforming Brunkesbergstorg from what it describes on its website as a lifeless rear space into a space for experiences and enjoyment.

It is this kind of «consensus of pleasantness» that first bites the dust when someone actually puts public promises to the test, and in early March, after a cold, dark winter, a decimated troop of «squatters» were brutally driven out of the square and all visible traces of human life were eliminated. A new, ephemeral architecture moved into the square with a language as hard as the place itself. Riot fencing of above human height was erected, complete with signs reading «No entry for unauthorised persons», and people could no longer cross



the square. And – let's use the term honestly – it was then that the square was occupied, with no clearly defined sender. The question is whether it is us, the city residents, who are unauthorised, and a further question is what authority possesses a mandate to close a public square in the middle of Stockholm?

On April 3, 2012, the riot fencing was taken down, and the square is now as abandoned and messy as before, while waiting to be filled with the street life that according to the Stockholm city council only commercial activity can generate.

TEXT: MONICA SAND

1. *Rösträtt* (Right to Vote), performance, 2010: vimeo.com/15317765

1968

MASSOR (MASSES)

Masses was the Swedish entry at the 14th Milan Triennale, which focuses on the international art industry, architecture and design. The exhibition was a collaboration between the Swedish Museum of Architecture, the Swedish Institute and the Swedish Handicraft Society (Svensk Form as of 1976), and opened at Moderna Museet in 1968. In technical terms, the exhibition, which consisted of 2 900 skoptikon slides or light images projected onto screens, was an elaboration of the museum's 1966 exhibition *Hi, City!* Masses also had specially commissioned music, again by Ralph Lundsten and Leo Nilsson. The theme was the problems of the mass/consumer society. In 1969, the exhibition was staged as a travelling exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The exhibition architects were Sture Baljgård and Jöran Lindvall.

