Afterthoughts on Modernist Necropoles

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The morning flight veers towards Copenhagen. From the window I see the coastline on the other side of the Sound, and can identify Malmö, situated to the south of the nuclear plant, Barsebäck. The bridge looks like a serpent in the water below. A sandy beach and its piers are also visible. Everything looks so small from the air. Memories of my childhood flood my mind. The blue wool blanket, the wet sand, seaweed, my blue lips, the heavy breathing of children running from the sea. The sun is strong and everything seems to have been bleached white. The barrier to the subconscious is also broken, and we can access our oceanic selves. This region of beaches lends itself to the mutual possibility of liberating and formulating identity via the sea. Remembering, I twist my body and break the surface of the water.

The Öresund region can be looked upon as a utopian white-framed evocation of a belief in the future. The artificial beach of Ribersborg, in Malmö, is part of a modernist vision of light, air and clarity. In the 1920s, the former stony beach was transformed into one of smooth sand, and framed by Malmö's first modernist high rise buildings, created by the Swedish architect, Eric Sigfrid Persson.

On the Danish side of the Sound, Bellevue Beach, created by the famous architect Arne Jacobsen in 1932, was part of the same vision. In Eric Sigfrid Persson's and Arne Jacobsen's Mediterranean-inspired ideal of modernity, the beach is bathed in white light and enhanced by a clear blue sky. The seascape horizon always forms part of the view from the large panoramic windows that were an integral part of the functional building style of the Scandinavian modernists.

The beaches, the sky and the horizon now form a double exposure, where seventy years of history is compressed into an image of never changing utopia and converted into a saleable brand. Strong brands depend on the creation of an aura that goes beyond the practical and reaches towards a realm of utopian desires. When place identity is transformed into a static brand that can be sold on the global market, the representation of place becomes one dimensional.

A question arises. Is it possible to take a critical look at this one dimensionality at the same time as being involved in a region building process? Perhaps a solution would be to drive the project of modernity to the bitter end, to the stillness of death, and see whether this leads to a reformulation of identity linked to place? One way of doing this would be to examine the connection with the sandy beach and the dynamic aspect of the modernity project.

Spectral Modernity

The bridge building process can be linked to a notion of modernity as a form of spectral haunting; something that has lost its initial power but still lingers on. But it is also evident that such haunting is not a return in more concrete terms to an economy built on a modernist mode of production. The bridge itself may have been a triumph for modern industrial techniques, but the future management of the bridge is caught

in the trappings of the new economy. Exhaustive media attention to the number of vehicles crossing the bridge creates the kind of monitoring that is usually reserved for companies on the stock market. On the one hand, the building of the bridge was a return to the large scale investment in infrastructure characteristic of industrial modernity. On the other hand, this very return created a framing for all the different branding techniques prevalent in the new economy. The industrial monumentality of the bridge formed a perfect backdrop to the different inaugural events connected to the opening of the bridge. The new economy's insistence on constant change, coupled to the need for brand stability, was perfectly merged into the image of a stable bridge with a constant stream of people moving across it.

With regard to the metropolitan region of Malmö-Copenhagen, one problem is that the bridge links two cities located in two different nation-states. It doesn't really belong to either of the cities, although Malmö has tried to replace the earlier symbol of the city – the redundant crane from closed-down Kockums' shipyard – with that of the bridge. Bridges are, of course, often used to promote visual images of cities. Tower Bridge, The Golden Gate and The Brooklyn Bridge are only a few of the famous bridges used as visual markers of the city itself. Tower Bridge is a prime example of how the interplay between selling the city and selling the bridge unfolds. A brochure on the "bridge experience" describes the bridge as the "world's most famous attraction". While the Öresund Bridge has not yet reached such a status of fame as a bridge experience, it is a powerful symbol for the Öresund-region. That it does not belong to any particular city makes it somewhat problematic.

It is a recognised fact that the concept of "region" has become increasingly important when it comes to gaining access to the EU's structural funds. It is, of course, also a fact that the national states, at least in rhetoric, are losing more and more of their former power. Attempts to create a branded regional identity for the Öresund region are therefore of crucial importance (cf. Ristilammi 2000). Having said

this, one must also remember that the concepts of regions and nation states are not the only ones at stake. The bridge is also a connection between two cities: Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, and Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden. For both these cities – but especially for Malmö – the concepts of a "new era" and a "new future", as expressed in the rhetoric of the Öresund Committee, are important indicators of a strong desire to disconnect from a recent past marked by economic recession and a growing number of social problems. These terms are also a symptom of a strongly held belief that the only way out of economic stagnation is to connect to the new economy. It is this connection to the new economy, with its claim on strong identities, that makes the connection to the sandy beaches of Öresund so alluring.

The Power of Sand

The seductive power of a sandy beach is closely connected to modern notions of bodily movement that emphasise natural movement and freedom from constraint. Within this notion, movements and emotions flow from the solar plexus to the limbs in natural wave-like movement. The false pose or the rehearsed expression is not as important as the power that flows from the centre of the body. When it comes in contact with the warm sand, the modern body reaches its potential for movement and pleasure. At the birth of Scandinavian modernism in the 1920s and 1930s, the body was evoked through a paradoxical fascination with the oceanically organic. One of the founders of modern dance, Isadora Duncan, claimed that one of her greatest inspirations was her childhood memories of the ocean and watching the waves moving. Body and nature were one, and authentic body movement was something to be celebrated. At the same time, however, Sigmund Freud saw as his task as protecting the individual from the threat of disappearing into the oceanic. (Ristilammi 1998, 2003).

Here we have a paradoxical formulation of modern identity whose rationale is *the expression* of a non-reflexive core built purely on bodily desire. The foundation is laid for a specifically

modern form of structured liberation that continuously moves between two poles; one about being imprisoned in a controlling structure and the other about being liberated from that same structure. Paradoxically, when the regional project in Öresund focuses on the freedom of a global place, the structure that connects identity to place and body is activated. In this process, those who don't fit into the modernist vision risk being outdefined. We then have a choice. Should we use globalised regionalisation processes to tie identities (and bodies) to place, or should we use them to liberate the potential movement of all the region's inhabitants? (See Ristilammi 2000, 2002.)

Necropolis

The sea and the waves have further potential. The beach is not only a place for recreation and frolicking, but is also a spatiality that is uncontrollable, dangerous and treacherous. The sea threatens to devour the shore line. Drift wood is exposed to the forces of nature. Debris left on the beach gets blasted by waves and sand. The sun blinds and burns. When the sounds of the wind and waves disappear, and all is still, all that remains is the white noise of death.

Paul Virilio has written a dystopic account of the modern city where everything is bathed in a monochrome, almost obscene, light so that the dynamic scenic nature of the city disappears. This state comes close to the stillness of death; where everything is still, without contrast and meaningless (Virilio 1986). Just like the overexposed city, the beach is a realm of death and life. The modernist beach vision is also a necropolis where purity reflects the purity of death.[1] Divine order rules in the necropolis. Everything is in its rightful place and accords with its rightful function. The longing to return to the white order of modernism that has been latent within the vision of the Öresund region risks being stranded on the beach like driftwood. Perhaps the future does not lie in modernist purity? Perhaps what we experience in the necropolis is only phantom pain.

The Beach as Rebirth

In the necropolis, divine order makes the order visible. What is not visible, however, are the hidden processes of putrefaction; the life that exists after death. In reality, the humanly created necropoles have never been about death, but always about life. The necropoles functioned as matrices of the perfect society (see Foucault 1986). The philosopher, Christine Battersby, has suggested the metaphor of birth as an analytical tool with which to understand processes that are still in their emergent state (1998). The metaphor of the matrix (womb) gives us an opportunity to understand how change takes place in a society where so much weight has been placed on the tension between structure and movement. If we could create a metaphor that can explain structure and change within the same conceptual framework, we might find ways to include every inhabitant in this identity project, and not only those identified by the monocultural vision of modernity.

That is why we have to be careful in our nostalgic modernist tendencies. The pure white beauty of the necropolis is seductive. But the re-birth envisaged by the region's building project encapsulates a future that is no longer one-dimensional or monocultural. It is the multicultural that shows us a holographic future, where we can see the whole in every part. That is why it is so important to create symbolic spaces where the inhabitants of the region can be part of a project of mutuality.

Afterthoughts – Phantom Pain

The French ethnologist, Michel de Certeau, has stated that people can only live in haunted places (de Certeau 1984). That is why it is so important to evoke the hidden ghosts and learn to live with them rather than trying to suppress them. One example is the Russian painter, Kandinsky, viewed as one of the founding figures of abstract modernism. In his youth, Kandinsky was a member of several ethnographic expeditions to nomadic people in the innermost areas of Russia. Using this knowledge, an ethnographer

and art historian has analysed his paintings and discovered that the shaman's drum and feathers are concealed in very the heart of these modernist abstractions.The modern is thus haunted, and by the same token, we must allow our history to haunt us.

The death of modernity has been a clarion call for several decades now. We are said to be living in a postmodern age, where our identities are as interchangeable as our clothing. Alterity becomes a product viable for consumption. Tourism, "ethnic food", exotic clothing and "world-music" are among the phenomena said to represent multiplicity.

They could, however, also be examples of what might be called cultural anaesthesia; a longing to block yourself from the pain of the other. In the consumption of the other, there is a longing to avoid being confronted with the classical modern identity question: Who am I? In other words, you don't have to think, reflect, feel, experience or have "kicks" in order to pretend.

I belong to a generation that, in its earliest years, still belonged to the paradigm of modernity. Maybe that is why my generation is so obsessed with cultural expressions of modernity. In our childhood, the future still existed. The break with modernity came when we became teenagers. Perhaps it is only now that we can see that this was a cultural trauma; the trauma of finding the adult within. Trauma is about that which is inexpressible: the silence, the loss and the wound. In one sense we are refugees in our own time. We carry traumas that can only be indirectly expressed

Perhaps this explains our compulsive search for authenticity? Many of us became fascinated with surface phenomena after having been half-hearted radicals. For us identity became a way of shutting out or harnessing, and acquiring armour of safety and security. The surface has proved to be something else – not only a visual mirror but perhaps also a membrane. Membranes such as these can be seen as semi-permeable in that they allow the light and fluids to flow through.

Modernity now fulfils the function of Otherness. That which is not modern threatens to break through, like a pulse in the membrane. This is where we are now. The tactile, the haptic and the longing for closeness, paradoxically hangs onto the compulsiveness of the clean, logical, scientific modern spaceship likes a phantom limb. And perhaps it is this phantom-feeling that makes us fascinated by bridges, high-rise buildings and all that belongs to the modernist spaceship, even though we know, deep inside, that the future as it existed in the 1960s will never return.

If we are to continue with the embrace of modernity, perhaps we can paraphrase the postcolonial feminist, Gayatri Spivak's, "strategic essentialism", a concept that stresses the need for the weaker party in a conflict to hold on to a single and strong vision. Modernity played an important utopian role in the fight against poverty and inequality in 20th century Sweden. It was when the fight had been won that modernist thought began to have negative consequences. That is why we perhaps need to talk about something we might call strategic modernism; a modernism of the present where we reflect on the function and place of utopian dreams in our time.

When we break the surface of the water again and draw breath, we have a choice: We can choose to go into the perfect necropolis. We can also choose to turn away from the monument of death, go past it, and continue with life.

Notes

1. "Necropolis (singular), plural Necropolises, Necropoles, Necropoleis, or Necropoli (from Greek nekropolis, 'city of the dead'), in archaeology, an extensive and elaborate burial place of an ancient city. In the Mediterranean world, they were customarily outside the city proper and often consisted of a number of cemeteries used at different times over a period of several centuries. The locations of these cemeteries were varied. In Egypt many such as western Thebes, were situated across the Nile River opposite the cities, but in Greece and Rome a necropolis often lined the roads leading out of town. One of the most famous necropolises was discovered in the 1940s under the central nave of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome."
Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica.*

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