

'Restoring the Public: The Case of Fittja Suburb' by Thordis Arrhenius (School of Architecture, Royal Institute of Technology KTH)

Restoring the Public

Architects are no longer solely occupied with making the new from scratch but also with making the new out of the past. This relates fundamentally to a shift in our contemporary understanding of spatial and material resources. A central effect of global capitalism is the pressure of change. Urban patterns and building programs are increasingly becoming redundant, demanding change to accommodate new functions and identities. Indeed, driven by contemporary concerns with scarcity and overflow, the building stock is constantly altered. In this situation, architects are progressively concerned with adjusting and reprogramming what is already there. This in turn raises a new urgency for contemporary architectural culture to start addressing the pressure of change in alternative modes. Preservation offers such an alternative and has, in that sense, won a new relevance for architecture that goes beyond saving its canon of buildings.

People's Palace

A contemporary ongoing project by the Swedish architectural studio Spridd exemplifies a new engagement in preservation from the architectural field. The project is neither advocacy for or a protest against preservation, nor the acting out of any paranoid position of "preservation is overtaking us" (Koolhaas and Otero-Pailos 2014), but rather suggests, in its complexity, how cultures of preservation can be explored in intriguing and novel ways in today's changing field of architectural production.

In 2013, Spridd won the Nordic Built Challenge idea competition for finding a new solution for the sustainable renewal of social housing stock ("Fittja People's Palace" 2013). Their case study of Fittja, a run-down 1970s housing estate in the municipality of Botkyrka, suggests employing strategies of preservation as part of the renewal scheme. With its indistinct, anonymous architecture and urgent need of modernization and technical



Figure 1 Fittja Housing Estate, Botkyrka Municipality
Courtesy Spridd, Photograph by John Håkansson

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upgrade, Fittja is not, however, a conventional preservation site. No outstanding historical value was identified, nor were a unique set of buildings at risk of being lost. To the contrary, the repetitious housing units built with prefabricated slabs are ubiquitous in this period of mass housing in Sweden, Europe, and beyond. Built as part of Sweden's ambitious housing program that began in the mid-1960s, they have been, along with their European counterparts, harshly criticized for their low architectural quality and blamed for the social segregation that marks this period of public housing.

The urgent call and expectation for Fittja, then, was for renewal and change, not preservation. Indeed preservation is often looked upon with scepticism by both developers and architects when social housing areas, such as Fittja, are to be renovated and upgraded, as any historical values identified in the fabric forestall possibilities of change and alteration. Economic constraints for the renewal, determined by the competition program of Nordic Built Challenge and the municipality's objective of keeping housing rents low, did not however allow for the excesses of total reconfiguration and identity change that tends to be the solution when architects are called upon to "turn around" postwar housing developments. For example, Frédéric Druot and Lacaton & Vassal's Tour Bois-le-Prêtre in Paris and Hawkins & Brown and Studio Egret West's Park Hill in Sheffield are ongoing, successful examples where "architecture," in the form of new spatial organization, material, and colour schemes, is brought in to generate change - change that in turn introduces new temporalities

of "befores" and "afters," creating discontinuities and ruptures rather than continuations.

One intriguing aspect of the Fittja People's Palace project is that it specifically challenges this temporality by introducing an element of resistance to the overwhelming pressure of change and renewal characterizing the market-driven housing policies of today's deregulated European welfare states.

With an objective of contributing to an economic and socially sustainable solution for public housing, Spridd's strategy was to look again at the already there, to identify existing values rather than suggest alterations. Meticulously documenting the housing development, from the history of the welfare-state housing programs to the system and variations in the construction to the condition of each individual apartment and housing block, Spridd identified spatial and programmatic values worth preserving and emphasizing. Documenting and drawing the material fabric of the run-down estate at a level of detail never before attempted for such mass-produced housing, Spridd carefully visualized the spatial and material qualities of the estate without suggesting radical changes. The extensive survey resulted in a proposal for a modest, low-cost renovation and technical upgrade that is hardly noticeable and was based on reinstating—rather than altering—lost qualities of the welfare state's housing scheme. Services and features of the housing development, long devalued or neglected, such as traffic separation, direct access to garage parking, communal playgrounds and gardens, laundry facilities and

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Figure 2 Axonometric of Fittja Housing Estate
Image Courtesy Spridd



Figure 3 Section of Fittja Housing Estate
Image Courtesy Spridd

recreation areas, were upgraded and reemphasized, along with well-planned kitchens, bathrooms, and generously sized floor plans—all identified as qualities specific to welfare-state housing schemes.

Behind this plan of “change without change” was a strategy of trying to change the public perception of Fittja rather than the housing estate’s design and to open up the estate’s history and future to public discussion. Spridd’s main “design” for Fittja was innovative curatorial strategies that made evident

the value of the housing estate and argued for its preservation. Their project was first implemented in an exhibition area in one of the leftover spaces of the communal area that was part of the renovation. There, the project was communicated on different scales, from drawings and scale models to a full-scale mock-up of one of the apartments. Participatory workshops and public events took place, ushering Fittja toward becoming something liked, something desirable, and something talked about, instilling a sense of pride in its community. Further, to raise awareness of public housing

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and alter its image, Spridd organised, together with local young people, an exhibition of the Fittja People's Palace beyond the direct locality of the housing development, including international biennales and similar public events (among them the 4th Moscow Biennale of Architecture, 2014; Venice Architectural Biennale 2014; and Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of urbanism and architecture 2015), thus increasing the attention paid not just to Fittja but to this whole forgotten and disregarded period of welfare-state housing.



Figure 4 Exhibition Space K2 in of Fittja Housing Estate, showing table with drawings: kitchen in background. Image courtesy Spridd, Photograph by Klas Ruin



Figure 5 Exhibition Space K2 in Fittja Housing Estate, showing model. Image Courtesy Spridd, Photograph by Antonius van Arkel



Figure 6 Fittja People Palace Exhibition at La Biennale di Venezia - 14th International Architecture Exhibition. Image Courtesy Spridd, Photograph by Mikael Olsson

Dust to Gold

By judging and evaluating the conditions of the existing fabric, writing its history, and documenting its evolution, Spridd acted in Fittja as preservationists rather than architects. More crucially, they acted as preservationists without an evident object of preservation at hand and without any local heritage legislation to relate to. In this heritage vacuum the monumentalising and curatorial aspects of preservation were explored to make a nondescript housing estate step out of the shadow of mass-produced, long-dismissed architecture to become a site representing material and cultural value.

The recasting of the Fittja housing development as a preservation site reveals the political and societal potential of preservation as an alternative to a market-driven architecture of change. Treating Fittja's housing scheme as a crucial historical monument, a palace in fact, involved a nearly alchemical experiment of transforming dust into gold. The space needed for that experiment

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to take place was one of representation. Indeed the power of architectural representation, the image, should not be underestimated in this alchemical experiment. The visual representation of the housing estate in classical (almost naive), perfectly drawn axonometrics and sections elevated Fittja from just one of many suburbs to something special, something with potential cultural value.

Writing on the history of architectural representation, Helene Lipstadt (1989) identifies the power of the architectural drawing, exhibition, and publication in making architecture public in the general and original sense of the word. Lipstadt argues convincingly that it was only through the emergence of an architectural press and the architectural exhibition in the late-nineteenth century that architecture opened up to public inquiry and judgment. On display Fittja, became public in a double sense: documented and exhibited, it entered the public discourse on housing, and its future as public housing was opened up as a subject for debate among an audience beyond the immediate circle of client, developer, and local occupants. The exhibition of drawings, scale models, and mock ups reinvigorated discussions of the status of public housing today. This publication of Fittja in drawings, exhibitions, and debates shows how preservation, though firmly based in the material, the physical, goes beyond brick and mortar (or, in this case, the concrete slab) to become, in a general sense, a curatorial activity.

Preservation Is Now

Spridd's project is one example of how preservation has become an expanded and experimental field for contemporary architecture. Preservation has become a way to practice architecture outside the dominant field of corporate or star architecture. At first glance, this experimental attitude might seem like an anomaly in the field of preservation, which has been circumscribed by regulatory practices since its beginnings in the late-eighteenth century. As a result, historical sites and landscapes are today among the most controlled areas of architecture. The presence of national heritage legislation and strong local pressure groups conditions most preservation projects, large or small, and on an international global level the legacy of the 1964 Venice Charter still dominates the preservation debate.

As preservationists, Spridd productively used the regulatory discourse of preservation to confront the assumed opposition between preservation and architecture, between pastness and contemporaneity. Inventing new monumentalities and values, they reframed or even reinvented architectural projects on which to act—putting, in some sense, preservation to work. On a more fundamental level, this restoration of a “public palace” shows the political force of preservation, how it goes beyond questions of authenticity and materiality to issues of sustainability and resistance.

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