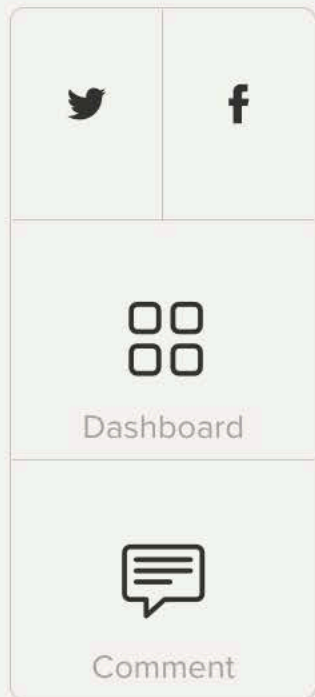


28.11.2016

Stockholm's Uneasy Urbanism

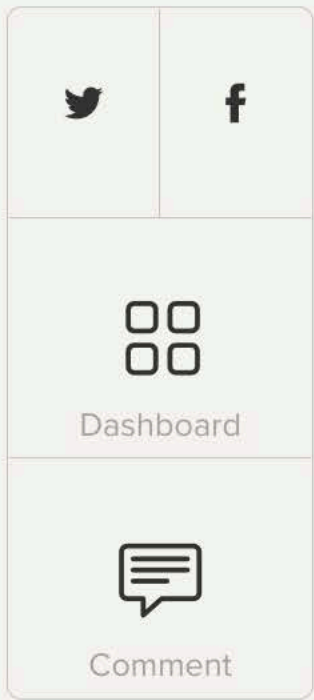
Lone woodsmen between pastel facades and austere wilderness

by [Amanda Wasielewski](#)



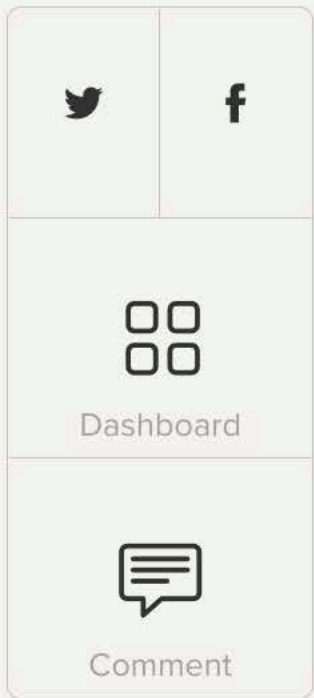
As with all prejudices, [colour's] manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia [...] Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both.

– David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*



By November in Stockholm, the oranges and reds of the autumn leaves have given way to an oppressive grey darkness that will last well into next year. On a clear day, seen from the *fjäll* (or fell, as the Scottish say) along the northern lip of Södermalm, the low-lying sun barely edges above the horizon, casting an intense orange glow on the façades of the buildings lining the waterfront. Across the city, from the eighteenth-century crow-step gabled houses of Gamla Stan to the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century apartment buildings of the surrounding areas, otherwise austere façades are painted in whimsical pastel shades of mint, pink, yellow, and orange.

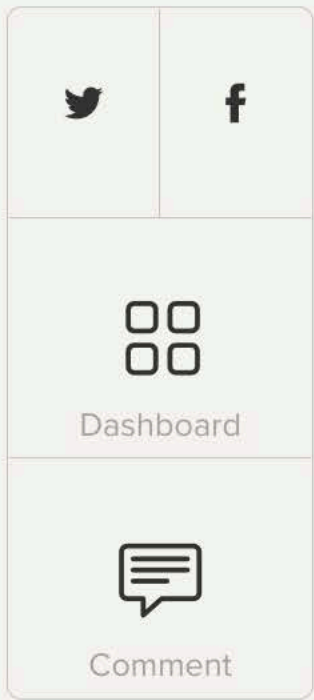
Stockholm's colorful vista stands in contrast to the lack of ornamentation found on many of even its older buildings. Austrian Adolph Loos's pronouncement in 1908 that ornament was a sign of degeneracy, disease, crime, and primitiveness seems to have been intuited by Swedish culture long before. It is a country well-known for white, birch, clean interior design, as perfected by IKEA, that perfectly Swedish mixture of economy, aesthetics, and self-sufficiency. Swedes often claim that the adjective that describes their unostentatious way of life – *lagom* – is untranslatable, but it is, in fact, easily enough translated as not too much or not too little,



conforming to a standard just-so-ness.

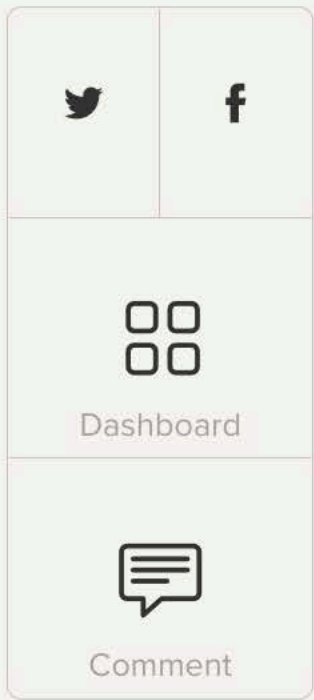
One of Susan Sontag’s lesser-known texts, “A Letter From Sweden” argues that the practicality and austerity of Swedish architecture extends to its people as well. While much has changed in Stockholm since 1969 when Sontag wrote her essay — notably the arrival of trendy restaurants and Brooklyn-esque bars and cafés — much in her description of the people here remains all too familiar. Sontag writes that Swedes are still, more or less, a nation of lone woodsmen, who lived in relative isolation for generations before experiencing a rapid, late industrialization. “Silence is the Swedish national vice,” writes Sontag. Words are used sparingly, carefully. Neighbors are usually to be avoided if possible. Friendships are slow and strong. Those who enter the workplace in Sweden soon find that conformity and consensus are more valuable than standing out and achieving more than one’s peer group. Again, this is somehow explained as the result of long generations of life in small villages, where survival necessitated fitting in and standing out could be deadly.

As you move further north of Stockholm, they say, the people grow more



As you move further north of Stockholm, they say, the people grow more and more silent and the language grows more and more clipped. Houses in the region of Dalarna are famous for their red paint, though you can find these red houses dotted throughout the Swedish countryside. They are painted in what's called Falu red, a pigment that comes from the copper mines of Falun and elsewhere. Some, poetically perhaps, have claimed that the red was used to contrast to the thick green of the Swedish forest, but, in fact, this mineral-rich paint had a very functional purpose: to protect and preserve the wood of the structure from the harsh northern climate. The beauty of the color was a happy accident of nature.

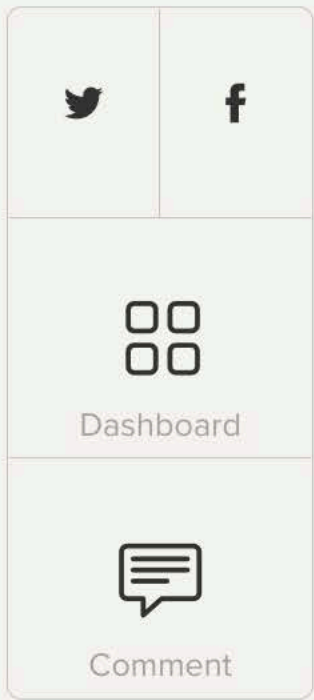
The pastels of Stockholm are, similarly, the result of the mineral composition in Sweden rather than a pointed desire for fanciful color along the city streets. By far, the most common color found on buildings in Stockholm is yellow, which was also produced as a byproduct of the copper industry. Mint and pink may seem less obviously natural, but they too are inspired by the natural landscape of Sweden. Much like the wood-print veneers of IKEA, these and other colors — which began popping up around Stockholm in the eighteenth-century — served not



only the usual protective function but were also economical means to make wooden houses appear more like expensive stone ones: the mint green was designed to mimic the light green sandstone found in Gotland and the pink to match the sandstone from Roslag. Even the occasional use of red was said to be in imitation of more expensive brick.

When it came to twentieth-century modernism – or Functionalism as it was called in Sweden – the Swedes inherited many of the ideas from the modernists of mainland Europe like the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. The mantra for these modernists was that a building should provide for maximum light, air, and space, which would promote the health and wellbeing of populations crammed together in unsanitary conditions in industrialized urban centers. The modernists, following Loos, banished those diseased and depraved ornamentations from their buildings and believed that the form of the building should always follow the function, after the American architect Louis Sullivan.

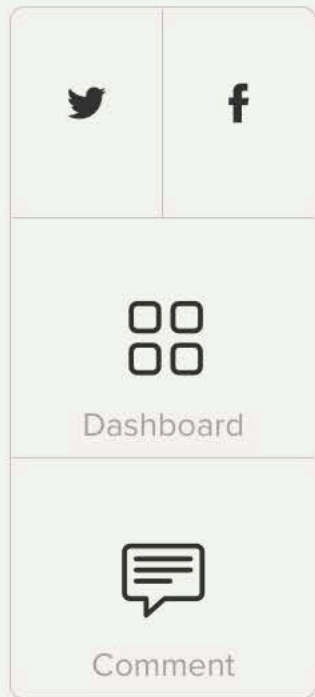
The modernist architects associated with the International Style such as Corbusier, promoted a universally applicable architecture for a universal man. For Sweden, however, universality was not sufficient. The



argument was made that Swedes have, in fact, always been functionalist in their dwelling. Writer Gustaf Näsström argued, in his essay “Swedish Functionalism” from 1930, that the modernist principles of the International Style had always been present in Swedish design. For one thing, Swedes had long valued large windows to let in the maximum amount of light during the short, dark days of winter. Additionally, many Swedish apartment buildings have atriums or courtyards to let light into the center of the building and allow for cross ventilation.

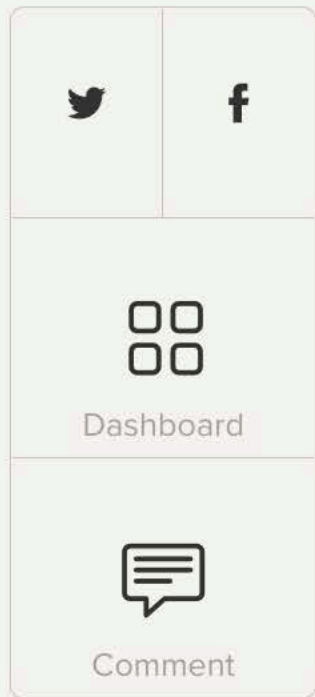
Other writers during the 1920s and 30s, however, took a less friendly view of Stockholm’s historical buildings. Ludvig Nordström, or Lubbe as he was called, had a weekly radio program titled *Dirty Sweden* and, following Le Corbusier’s lead, advocated for the complete demolition of Gamla Stan, the old city center, which would be replaced by modern buildings. The winding, old cobbled alleyways that now attract crowds of tourists in summer were deemed unsanitary and dangerous.

But what about color? Leave it to Le Corbusier to turn color into a schematic decision: he designed the first of two ‘color keyboards’ in 1931, which allowed one to choose color like the keys on a piano, in a way that



was systematic and logical. It seems, though, that the modernist logic of stripping away color never quite caught on in Stockholm and that the architects here were content to continue with their pastel palette on newer forms. Gunnar Asplund, the most famous Swedish modernist, designed the Stockholm Public Library building in a classic Stockholms orange-yellow shade. Lubbe, for his part, seems to have had even less regard for color in the city landscape. According to Sverker Sörlin, Lubbe hated sunsets and false colors, and said: “Grey! That is the modern color *par excellence*. And there are two things in the modern world we, who are living now, have grown up in that have concentrated our minds more powerfully than anything else: railway bridges and warships, and these two things are therefore also the most beautiful that a modern eye can see.” Like other modernists and proponents of *Neue Sachlichkeit* across Europe, Lubbe glorified the machine age and the aesthetics that it brought.

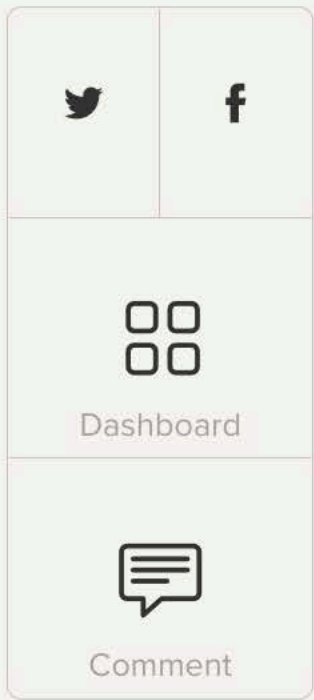
In the face of modernist monochrome, color persisted in Stockholm. The simple reason for this is that Swedes continued to adhere to tradition in their choice of paint, the colors now fully detached from their earlier purpose of imitation. For much of Stockholm’s history, the city was too remote to contribute meaningfully to the culture of Western Europe.



remote to contribute meaningfully to the culture of Western Europe. Feeling this lack in the early twentieth century, along with the rise of national identity, Swedes chose to believe that they had always been modern. Perhaps it was not that Swedes were so modern but, rather, that the austerity of living alone in the wilderness created strangely parallel concerns in the built environment.

Here in Stockholm, there's an uneasy balance between national pride and humility. An apocryphal story on the rationale for the color of Stockholm's buildings says that the black and white photographs of modernist buildings that arrived in Sweden were the basis for Swedish Functionalism. From these photos, Swedes could learn from the building styles of western Europe. The one catch was that, since the photos were in black and white, the poor, remote, backwards Swedes would not have been able to tell if the buildings were actually white or painted in light-colors and so they carried on in the way they always had.

Part of me could have understood Lubbe's celebration of grey if he had instead argued that any man-made attempt at color would be inadequate in comparison to the beauty of Nordic nature. It speaks volumes that Lubbe chose to celebrate the grey of the built environment, instead of



Lubbe hated sunsets, as even the most cynical lifelong city dweller cannot help but be impressed by the long, dramatic sunsets in Stockholm. Perhaps Lubbe's reaction was merely a frustrated rejection of nature in a part of the world where it can be so cruel.

Unlike London or New York, Stockholm does not contain miles of concentrated development alongside strictly delineated parks, but is rather dotted with wilderness throughout. The city is a series of islands that necessitate long roundabout promenades to pass between as if modern convenience was never a top priority. The most notable natural feature of the city is the bulging rock formations that line the pathways carved out for streets. It gives the city an unfinished look, as if Man could not quite conquer this particular patch of Nature. Far from artificial, the candy-colored buildings of Stockholm evoke the rich mineral colors of the countryside, perhaps acting as a kind of comfort to all these lone woodsman crammed together uneasily in the city.

