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Ralph Erskine (1914-2005)

24 MARCH 2005 • BY AJ CONTRIBUTOR

Ralph Erskine, who died last week in Sweden, epitomised the pioneer spirit of the post-war generation of Modern architects. He brought people together with a sense of place and enriched that with an original approach to forms and materials.

He will be remembered as an architect whose humanist values were transferred to a large number of original, innovative, spacious and well-detailed buildings, and to community schemes that transformed people's lives, such as the hospital restaurant environment at St Goran's, Stockholm, or the public-housing

A year later he became an associate of the RIBA. He worked, inter alia, for Louis de Soissons from 1937-39, before setting out for Sweden, a country he was inspired to visit by the keen interest that had been shown at the poly and in London generally in 'Swedish Modern' design.

He was to stay in Sweden for the rest of his life. This was due initially to a default of circumstances, but later by conviction, as he developed a unique interest in the regional northern architecture of Scandinavia. At the time, however, it proved to be both a cultural shock to his mind and a climatic shock to his body. He was to recall later that he did try to get away, but his efforts to return to England from a neutral country at the outbreak of war failed.

In 1940, finding himself with little or nothing to do and still struggling to master a difficult language, he constructed his first house – a timber cabin in the woods – with his wife Ruth. In 1946 he started a private practice on his own, and by 1950 he had begun to develop his ideas for revising the precepts of the Modern architecture of the inter-war period. He claimed Functionalism had become sterile and he saw two ways to enrich the Modernist cause. The first was to do with people and the way they use buildings and participate in the design process, and the second was with the

the extreme cold.

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The practical outcome of this work was demonstrated clearly in his design for a Ski Hotel at Borgafjall (1948-50), which was then under construction and became well known for the fact that it melted into the landscape and had a dramatic ski slope on its roof.

Another impressive project from this period was the cardboard factory at Fors, Sweden, of 1950-53. It was followed by the design of housing projects, apartment blocks, schools, a church and then his own experimental eco house in Drottningholm, which demonstrated his ideas about the local vernacular and climatic architecture. It has a ventilated black metal roof to keep the snow and rain off the main insulated barrel vault below. This allows the snow to lie on the top roof and prevent icicles forming.

Byker was a shot in the arm for English architects interested in selfhelp and community-participatory projects. It was large-scale, yet had areas of low-rise and individual housing. The outer wall of tall housing was introduced into the design to protect the inner, individual low-rise units from traffic noise and fumes. The idea of tenant involvement in the design and occupation process saw the establishment of a pop-in, one-stop consultancy service for residents.

Erskine's work after the English phase came mainly from Sweden, although there were some impressive projects in Italy (the renewal of Ancona), Austria (housing in Graz) and Canada (township, Resolute Bay).

However, he was back in the UK with his extraordinary idea for a new kind of ship-shaped office block, aptly termed The Ark, for the Ake Larson Company, set against the forbidding, inhospitable curves of the high-speed Hammersmith Flyover (1988-92). There was nothing quite like it in London. The result was a fluid, dynamic structure faced partly in a special brick, while inside the belly of office space was an atrium, with a high-level pastiche of an Italian hilltop village at its navel.

Erskine's Millennium Village in Greenwich, won in competition in 1998, will be completed by

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