

# Social spatiality according to Lefebvre applicable to Helgo Zettervall's architecture

## Abstract

This essay applies Lefebvre's theory in a historical context and analyses the floorplans of two residential buildings by Swedish architect Helgo Zettervall. The analysis pertains to traces of social structures and classifications of people. Henri Lefebvre emphasized that in human society all "space is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to social relations. Social space has thus always been a social product. Social space becomes thereby a metaphor for the very experience of social life - society experienced alternatively as a deterministic environment or force (milieu) and as our very element or beneficent shell (ambience)." In this sense social space spans the dichotomy between "public" and "private" space. These concepts are also linked to subjective and phenomenological space.

If social space is the metaphor for the experienced social life then can we elaborate upon 'psychic' relationships (i.e. relating to the psyche) to understanding how a specific building relates to the socio spatial ideals of today? In *The production of space*, Lefebvre presents a number of spatial (material) relationships to investigate as they arise in connection with the (material) body/subject and the (material) mirror/object.

Key words : Lefebvre, social space, milieu, psychic relationships, body, object

## Introduction

I decided quite quickly, which is typical for me, after reading the first chapters in "*Brain landscape...*" to focus on working with social space. At the time I was using an old building "Rosenska huset" by Helgo Zettervall

as a reference for a housing project that I was engaged in and as I detected Zettervall as belletristic, I thought it would be interesting to compare the manifestations of humanism in neo-renaissance architecture with contemporary architectural design. In my research, I came to focus on Lefebvre's work.

*The production of space* can be interpreted as a search for reconciling mental space (the space of the philosophers) with real space (the physical and social spheres in which we all live). In the course of his exploration, Henri Lefebvre moves from metaphysical and ideological considerations of the meaning of space to its experience in the everyday life of home and city. He seeks, in other words, to bridge the gap between the realms of theory and practice, between the mental and the social, and between philosophy and reality. In the book, Lefebvre presents a number of spatial (material) relationships to investigate as they arise in connection with the (material) body/subject and the (material) mirror/object that follows:

1. Symmetry (planes and axes): duplication, reflection – also asymmetry as correlated with symmetry.
2. Mirages and mirage effects: reflections, surface versus depth, the revealed versus the concealed, the opaque versus the transparent.
3. Language as 'reflection', with its familiar pairs of opposites: connoting versus connoted, or what confers value versus what has value conferred upon it, and refraction through discourse.
4. Consciousness of oneself and of the other, of the body and of the abstract realm of otherness and of becoming other (alienation)
5. Time, the immediate (directly experienced hence blind and unconscious) link between repetition and differentiation.
6. Space, with its double determinants: imaginary/real, produced/producing, material/social, immediate/mediated, milieu/transition, connection/separation and so on.

## Did Helgo Zettervall work with social spatiality?

The idea for this assignment is to analyze two buildings by Helgo Zettervall through careful comparison between the relationships presented in Lefebvres *The production of space*, to see whether or not I as body/subject can comprehend the qualities of the mirror. In that case would I understand the

buildings' heritage and intentions genetically – that is according to the sequence of productive operations involved and how these relate to today's ideal for planning physical space for social justice?

## Method

In order to fulfill my line of inquiry, I focused my work on representations, i.e. floorplans, elevations and views, of Helgo Zettervall's architecture.

In order to analyse spatial orders in this historical examples, I used my own understanding of these images to elaborate upon what actually deducted from zigzags of the neo-renaissance, and to what degree those ideals of humanism relates to our contemporary ideals of esthetics and ethics.

## Findings

### Corps de logi in Lidsjö

The site is located in the western landscape that slopes downwards the lake "Målen" in Lidsjö, a small community between Växjö and Jönköping in middle Götaland in Sweden. When parts of the railway was drawn through the landscape in the 1860s', it cut off the connection to the water side, but at the same time opened up for a new and more contemporary way of thinking. The title deed books show that the estate was sold and shared by "Mr. chargé d'affaires" and knight Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius and baron W. Gyllenrook.

In 1866, the baron hired Zettervall to emphasize the new era that his takeover would imply. To manifest it, he wanted to build a completely new corps de logi – a farm house.

A presentation of the building was introduced in July/August 1869 in "Tidskrift för Byggnadskonst och Ingenjörsvetenskap, where they highlighted that Zettervall's drawings were of the kind "whereby a refined taste and sense of effectiveness assert itself". Editor Nerman writes that the building "which certainly in memory recalls the well-known Swiss style, but also show signs that the

Dutch Renaissance style exerted a certain influence, whereby the architect was not obliged to stick to the usual in residential buildings rectangular form and appears to be something quite desirable.

There is a house on the site today – a tall panel covered building of traditional 1880s' type. It is unclear though if Zettervall's proposal ever was performed, but the elevated terrace from the drawings is there and so is the leftovers of the waterworks that was supposed to bring freshness during hot summer days, while gathered outside the dining room, on stationary benches, enjoying the view of the lake and the railway.

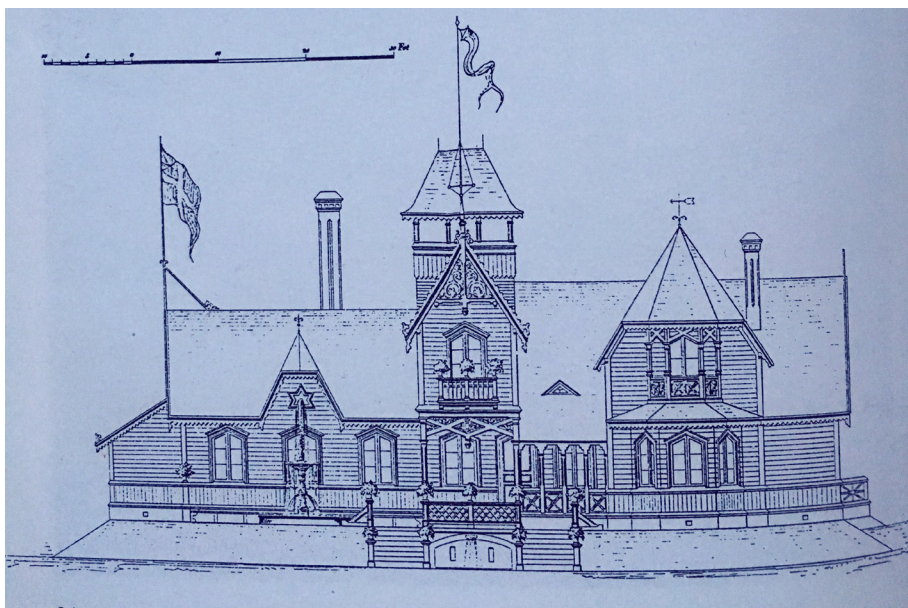
One of the first things you notice in Zettervall's proposal is that the layout of the floor plan is asymmetrical, which, at the time, was considered rather bold. The terrace or base beneath the building, however, is actually mirror symmetrical, except for a corbelling by the entrance to the "master's room".

It is a big and "deep" house so to say. Walking around it, there would be rooms inside the building, which you could not get a visual connection to despite moving 360 degrees around the house. The ratio mass/void in the façade is also to the favor of mass. The windows aren't too big.

It is interesting to look at the connections between individual rooms. As far as I can see, the rooms that are the least connected (or as far from each other as possible) are the Master's room and the larder or the dining room and the wardrobe. Maybe it was seen as something very degrading for the head of the house to have anything to do with preparing eatables, and maybe, there was supposed to be an element of surprise in the transformation of clothing before eating?

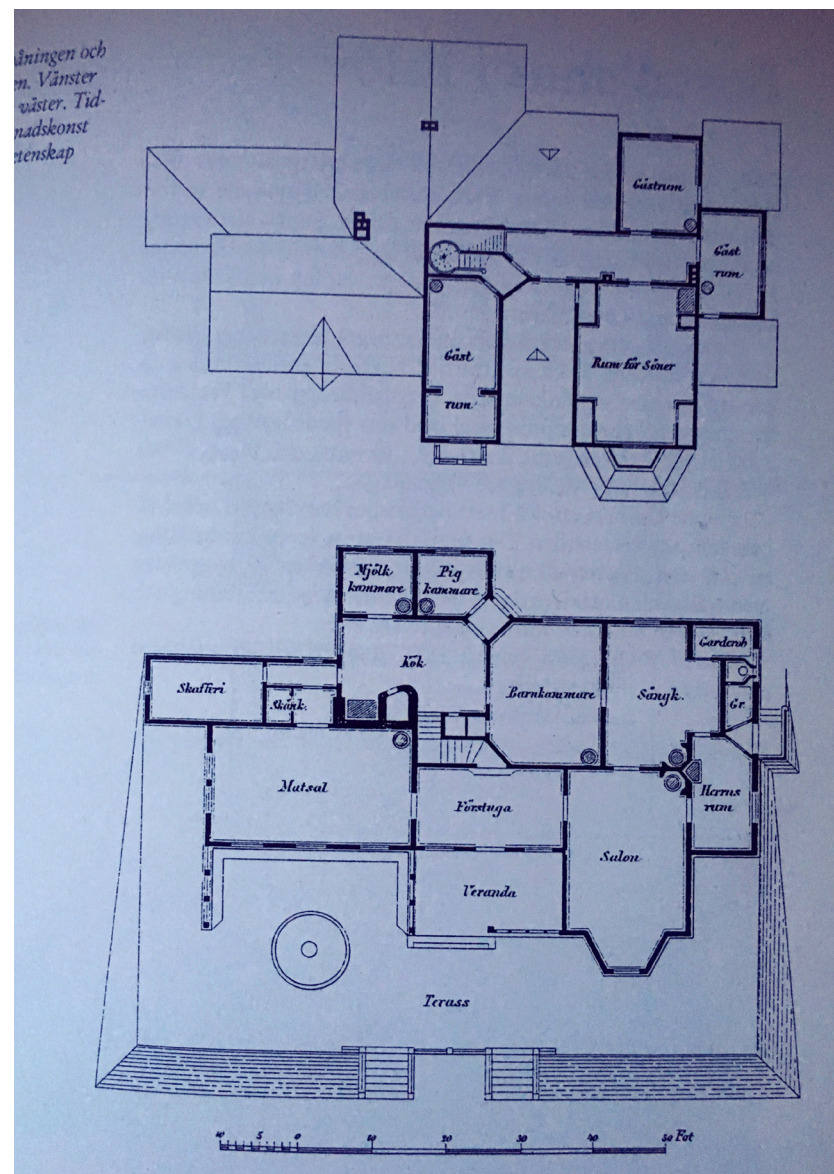
Moreover, the room with most connections to other rooms on the ground floor is the master bedroom and the kitchen (not to each other though). Not even the vestibule has more entrances even though it has a more central position in the house.

I'm feeling rather uneasy on my corps de logi walk through at this point. The smallest room in the house (as big as the milk chamber) is the maid's room. It is safe to say that, even though her workspace is the whole house, her resting room is the most isolated and non-central space in the building. The maid's room is located immediately behind the kitchen but not even connecting to it and wall to wall with the outside and the cold milk-chamber. It has one door to a probably cold hallway. Apart from the maid's obvious marginal position, there are other backwaters in this house in form of guest- and boy's



Elevation 1869

rooms. They are on the top floor and without immediate connection to each other. Had we past the end of the century and skipped to 1910, one might have been eager to discover some kind of Disney scenario here, like the idea of Mary Poppins (a maid herself), moving into one of the guest rooms and the daughters being allowed to play in the boy's room, but because the year is still 1869, I'm bound to believe that this is probably not the case and that we are obviously still in a time where there are clear gender disaggregated spaces and where the exclusive ones accrue to men.



Plans , 1869



## The Zettervall villa in Lund

Zettervall had been living in Lund for fully nine years when he on the 24th of March in 1870 bought a plot at Sandgatan, not far from the cathedral, the university campus and the former botanical gardens. The construction started immediately and the three building floors were set under roof that same autumn. It was occupied in the late summer of 1872.

It could be argued that Zettervall's renaissance villa was a realization of dreams born in the winter of 1968 during his trip to Italy. Here the Zettervall couple spent a lot of time looking at villas – “real life paradises, in which you feel really happy”. There are also signs in the composition and details of the villa that could be derived from experiences in Rome or Nepal. His autobiographical notes tells the story of how the family in the autumn of 1868 ousted money for a fund “for a future own dwelling – a modest lodge in the outskirts of Lund, because I realized now that I shall be citizen of Lund for ever”.

Just like the corps de logi of baron Gyllenkrok, this villa is an asymmetric composition, a rectangle with a rear corbelling towards the yard. Two sides of the house are missing windows on the bottom floor. Also this house has rooms with which there is no visual connection to from the outside. It appears massive, with thick walls and rather few windows. A distinct line is drawn between what is outside and what is inside, with the veranda, that actually is rather big, as the only transition zone.

There are pictures from the interior of this house taken from the salon and oriented upwards to the upper floor. Unfortunately the furniture are not from Zettervall's days so I will focus more on the construction elements and the murals. The room seems to consist of beautiful vaults and pillars and with the folding in the ceiling it feels almost like an ancient basilica or a church. The murals also remind of some sacred narrative with rather eerie looking angels, wreaths, bouquets and wild animals. Geometric patterns and ribbons are also part of the painted ornaments.

Helgo was a very diligent originator of churches and restorations. It is not surprising that his own home seems to bear traces of his interest in the sacred and exotic.

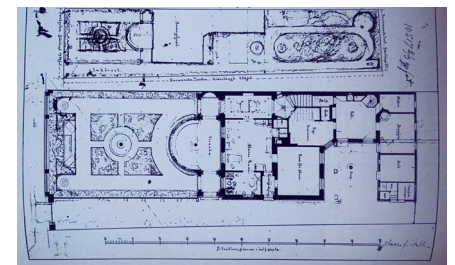
To my surprise though this house is contemporaneous to the prior building I described, this house seems to have a more a equitable or functional view upon the maid's position in the house. Her room has the most central position

in the building and is considerably larger than the former one. She even has the privilege of some secondary area in form of a wardrobe.

Overall this building seems to be eclectic and inspired by the Mediterranean and the mystique. Hexagonal and octagonal rooms, religious patterns, broken mirror symmetric, circles, arcs and the obvious need for privacy (as the building also is covered with greenery), creates a rather suggestive environment as the structure seems ambitious and proud, yet still somehow hiding.

All the rooms on the ground floor seem to be private and defined for the people inhabiting them, except for the Master's room, which is both private and representational at the same time.

The purely representational rooms are reserved for the upper floor, which poses the interesting question whether one was able to be both representational and physically challenged at this time?



Front, rear and site plan (see larger in appendix), 1870

## Reflections on Lefebvre and Zetervall

During the late 19th century, there were a variety of philosophies. At the time humanists were not secular and believed that they were all just different ways of looking at a single truth. They tried to come up with new ways to explain this truth in a more scientific way. However, it is difficult to see humanism as a unified philosophy, most humanists had their own way of looking at things. But common to them all were their interest in the ancient ideas and culture as well as their belief that each person is unique and has a special value. The core of the ideology of all humanists of course, was always the human being and her sense of reason.

Instead of educating professionals in strict practices, humanists were to create a well-pleasing and knowledgeable society. This could sometimes mean that some women could get the chance to educate themselves. Through this kind of training more people could be more involved in the community and have opinions about what happened. To achieve this, they let people study grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. Which later came to be called the humanities.

Today, in a philosophical sense, humanism is an ethical-aesthetic approach based on a human-centered approach to life and society. Depending on the degree of religiosity of humanity and humanism can in practice get very different expressions. Common to all directions is a belief in human rights and a universal morality. Humanism is generally a private or personal decision, and does not necessarily membership in any particular association.

Similar between

rennaissance humanism and modern humanism are the pronounced view of human equality and the craze for antique values. Now as then, there seems to be a permissive attitude towards different interpretations of what these values are about.

Nowadays, however, humanism is not only directed towards and allowed interpreted by upper classes, but seems to be rooted in society. Neither is it by nature religious anymore.

So how does this manifest within architecture? Generally we see less ornaments, craze for light and a different order in what facilities are changing place/size/shape and are used by whom. Is it possible that though the "Master" of the house has lost his title, the order and the hierarchy are still in his

favor? I believe so. Demonstrably we now have the decency to take into account concepts as accessibility and usability although too seldom and with clumsiness. It is pretty obvious the complete disregard for people with disabilities in the late 19th century. From what I heard, the rich actually sent their harmed children to foster parents in rural areas as injuries were considered shameful and also fresh air was the cure for almost any disease. But never the less, should we not have come further than where we are today? Are we not still designing for the idea of the family and not actual actors? And what about the light as our main element in designing? Is the bright and the "naked" and "honest" shapes of today not only signs of trends but also working as a disguise for ignorance?

## Concluding remarks

For me personally, I believe that Lefebvres list of relationships has been very fruitful in comparing and trying to verbalize what can be read into drawings. Architecture is in many ways a craft and if we do not speak of them, then it is hard to utilize their potency in how well they can describe society. Buildings embody our personal and collective minds and writing or talking about them is a transformative act, just as transformative as actually drawing them.

There are scientists that believe that before there was a universe, there was "super-weird information", in short. In the beginning there was the word. Having said that, I would recommend for everyone to throw an eye on Lefebvres list before or whilst judging or reading a building, for its ingredients and entirety can be a profound tool.

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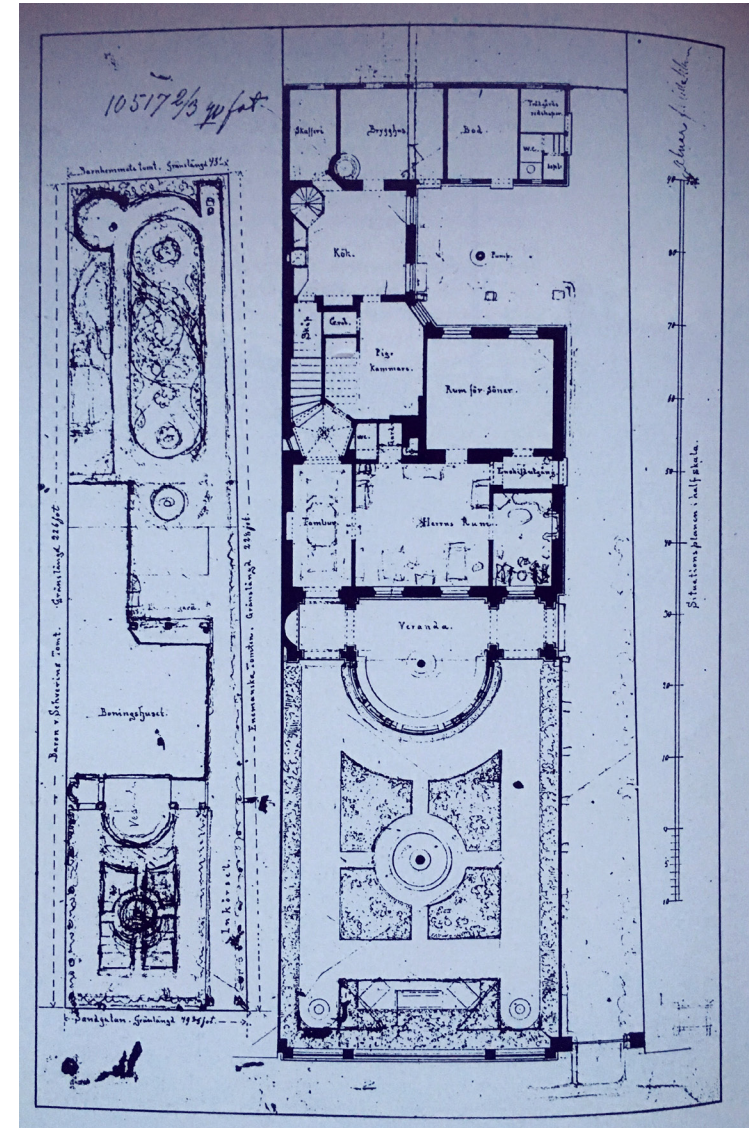
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<https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A4ssanshumanism>



## Appendix



To the left, an interior from Zettervall's salon. Picture from 1976. The furniture does not belong to the architect. To the right, site plan from the same house, drawn by Zettervall.