

THE RENTAL PALACE: A BUILDING BY BACKSTRÖM & REINIUS AND KRUPINSKI/KRUPINSKA

Since its completion in 1937, Tegelslagaren 12 has held a modest yet striking presence in Stockholm's Södermalm district. This brick-and-teak 'rental palace' offers a unique take on functionalism, balancing whimsy with rationality, tradition with surprise. It also marks the beginning of the productive partnership between architects Sven Backström and Leif Reinius and the builder Olle Engkvist, a collaboration that would profoundly shape welfare-state housing and postwar architecture in Sweden as well as internationally.

Originally commissioned and still owned by the same family, Tegelslagaren 12 has recently undergone its first major renovation led by architects Krupinski/Krupinska. This book is a record of a remarkable building and its many makers, stewards and users: a testament to the enduring value of architectural craftsmanship, collaboration, and care.

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Looking Over One's House

As mentioned in the introductory essay of this book, Nils Westerdahl's granddaughter's gable window with a garden view carries metaphorical weight. However in the case of Tegelslagaren 12's renovation, the act of looking over one's house should not be confused with a distant, cursory glance. Rather, the looking has been carried out with large-format lenses and loupes; by means of surface scratches and deep digs; through prisms of times past and telescopes towards the future.

Tegelslagaren 12's idiosyncratic architecture and reputable creators are acknowledged in its listing as 'blue': Stockholm's highest possible heritage grade, denoting "exceptionally high cultural and historical values".[1] A rare honour for an apartment building, particularly a modernist one. Nevertheless, its well-preserved state is not primarily owed to this classification, which was not awarded until 1995. The fact that Tegelslagaren 12 is, and always has been, a family-owned rental property has spared it from the usual cycles of speculative, short-term investment. When decades of partial patch-ups and *ad hoc* adaptations reached their saturation points, prompting the first wall-to-wall renovation in almost a century, it was again the property owners' lasting commitment to the building that favoured careful interventions over quick-fixes.

Under such auspicious conditions, this renovation really had no excuse not to be exemplary. That is not to say that the process was easy, or that everything was done right. The following text offers insights into the dedicated work, as well as difficult choices, negotiations and trade-offs required to prepare Tegelslagaren 12 for – at least – another 90 years of service. And, perhaps more importantly, it aims to present the building not simply as an exceptional architectural object, but as an agent in a broader field of practice and discourse about how, and why, we should all look over our houses.

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After extensive prototyping, the new guillotine windows were lifted into place by crane and fitted snugly behind the existing teak panelling.

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Hands-On and All Ears

Having initially been brought onto the project to advise on the upcoming garden and kitchen renovations, Krupinski/Krupinska's role soon grew into that of veritable in-house architects. Given the office located a stone's throw away, and even a short stint living in one of the two-bedroom apartments, near daily site visits came as naturally as they were necessary to truly get to know Tegelslagaren 12. Any question floated in the abstract found its answer by strolling over and literally pointing to the already-built, to archive footage or to original drawings. Having direct access to the 'end result' did not, however, make the task less creatively demanding. As always, an architect's job consists not so much of *ex nihilo* design, as of interpreting parallel dialogues with the client, tenants, craftsmen, manufacturers and consultants. And in this case – the building itself.

A close collaboration with heritage officers added more opinions to a crowded debate, but their insistence on historical accuracy as well as experiential qualities helped raise the project's already high ambitions. Although a heritage listing does restrict one's room for manoeuvre, Tegelslagaren 12's 'blue badge' has acted less as an obstacle than as a lever for improving how the building works, looks and feels.

Heritage as Leverage

Firstly, technical modernisations have had to subordinate themselves to the building's 1930's image. This prompted not only an artful integration of new wiring, plumbing and ventilation, but also a meticulous restoration of the three passenger lifts. Their gently rounded, teak-clad cars, manoeuvred with backlit Bakelite buttons and hoisted up and down by Graham Brothers cast-iron engines, otherwise risked being replaced by catalogue contemporaries. Furthermore, additional insulation of the kitchen bay windows could not be performed without considerable alterations to either the facades or to the interior spatial geometry. Instead, the localised leaks were compensated for with high-performance glazing as well as improved heating and ventilation.

Heritage concerns also permitted deviations from accessibility norms, which would have normally required that chairlifts be bolted to the marble stairs at each street entrance. Not providing a fully accessible entry is an admittedly debatable move. This trade-off aside, efforts have been made to make everyday life a little easier for tenants with or without reduced mobility, such as installing automatic door openers and sensor-controlled lighting, as well as moving the shared laundry rooms from the non-accessible basement to the ground floor. The latter also freed up much-needed storage space for the commercial tenants of the building.

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Other adaptations come as a relief for occasional workers of the building, such as mail carriers. Since affixing letterboxes to the teak-panelled hallway walls was out of the question, a free-standing piece of custom-made 'furniture' regrouping all 60 boxes has been installed in the outdoor loggia, right next to the new laundry rooms. Through such small gestures, daily routines become potential social events. In the same vein, the three roof terraces previously intended for carpet beating have been renovated and made accessible as shared outdoor spaces overlooking the roofscape of Södermalm.

Secondly, the listing called for the meticulous inventory, restoration, and in many cases recreation of original components and finishes. A dark lacquer that dulled the natural warmth of the exterior teak wood panelling has been carefully sanded off and replaced with an oil coating, as prescribed in the original material description. Additionally, while scraping the stark-white window frames an older hue somewhere between grey, green and brown was revealed. Renovated and repainted, the frames not only blend nicely with the surrounding teak, red brick and aged copper window sills; they also make the windows appear as generous wall openings rather than punched-out holes. A crumbling garage deck required that the walled garden be remade from scratch, which permitted a thoughtful integration of new technical systems as

well as the renovation of artist Karl Hultström's sculptural fountain and the recreation of a water mirror that figures on garden architect Sven Hermelin's Baroque-style plan.

Interior circulation spaces needed little work other than replacing flickering fluorescent lights with warm-white ceiling lamps, and re-painting landings and stairwells in a pale green that was found hiding under thick blankets of 1960's speckled 'plastic paint'. Preparing the apartments for a complete facelift, every original piece of oak parquet and limestone tile, coat-hanger and countertop, lock and handle, moulding and window sill were documented, categorised and tagged in a BIM model. Upon removal, they were collected in a makeshift basement workshop. This hybrid physical and digital archive kept a precise tally of elements to renovate, replace or replicate – either by sprucing them up on site, or by sending reference objects to carpenter's and casting shops. Complete sets of original elements from various parts of the building were assembled in the two so-called historical apartments. These were restored to a 1937 state, with an absolute minimum of contemporary additions.

When it comes to the other 58 units, the idea was never to have people living in a museum. Like at the time of its conception, Tegelslagaren 12 should aspire to modernity and comfort, while staying true to its architectural intentions. Purists might object to the strategy of replicating lost elements, concealing new additions and emulating a historical style. Admittedly, there are moments – such as the new steel security doors clad in teak veneer, with frames camouflaged in a *trompe l'oeil* wood pattern – that border on pastiche. Yet whether one agrees or not, the project has deemed the overall character of Tegelslagaren 12, as a specific piece of architecture from a specific point in time, to be more important than radical honesty and visible temporal layers. Below, two of the more impactful interventions exemplify the various facets of this approach.

The Windows Are 'Done For' – Long Live the Windows

Referring to weak thermal and acoustic properties, wood rot and dimensional instability, an initial inventory judged all apartment windows to be unsalvageable, or in layman's terms: 'done for'. Thus the 210, near 90-year-old, solid pine windows were headed for the scrap heap, to be replaced with replicas of purportedly superior quality. Anyone familiar with comparisons of typical wood cross-sections dating from the beginning and end of the 20th century respectively – the former displaying a dense bundle of year rings while the latter appears almost porous – knows that such arguments make little sense. It is rather a question of cost and logistics: window renovation requires



The almost 90-year-old windows were leaky and worn, but by no means beyond repair.

careful removal and reinsertion, as well as near-surgical remediations to re-place damaged wood and slot insulated glass units into former single-pane frames. Luckily, a second assessment argued for renovation, and prototypes for new windows were unanimously deemed inadequate in terms of proportions, finish and detailing. Suddenly, the old windows were not 'done for' after all – at least not those installed in 1937.

In 1979, the single-hung sash windows of the kitchens – aptly called 'guillotine windows' – had been ripped out and replaced by conventional, inward-opening casement windows. Such a radical and costly intervention had its reasons: the archives point to problems with rainwater leakage and jamming sliding mechanisms. The new additions were of poorer quality than their 1930's counterparts, and although they did a decent job mimicking the facades' overall window syntax, their 4-pane layout significantly reduced the glass surface area.

Their most apparent flaw, however, was that they deprived tenants of the pleasure of sliding up the bottom half of their kitchen bay window before having a seat at the breakfast table, level with the window sill on which one's elbows may rest while peering over the bustle of the street, or, depending on the apartment's orientation, the verdant calm of the courtyard. In a building lacking private outdoor spaces, the possibility to transform the bay window into something reminiscent of a balcony is a feature that is as important as any.

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New kitchen furniture has been developed in collaboration with craftsmen who specialise in mid-20th century style carpentry. Like in 1937, factory-made modules are assembled on-site, combining efficient production with artisanal detailing.

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By recreating the guillotine windows from Backström and Reinius' drawings, the project restores the building's historical image, but also its relationship to the surroundings and its tenants' ways of inhabiting the facade. On warm summer days, private life spills into the public through a mosaic of openings. The fact that prototypes for a considerably cheaper option – a visually very similar, horizontal casement window with limited opening range – were scrapped in favour of the 'riskier' guillotine, suggests that form cannot stand in for function. As an added bonus, rather spectacular XL guillotines in solid teak replaced the updated but worn-out aluminium sash windows of one of the corner shops, improving the visual coherence of the ground floor while retaining its porous relation to the street.

Kitchen Sink Realism

On ArkDes' archive drawings, against a backdrop of yellowed paper, the kitchens are rendered in Backström and Reinius' neat linework and cursive handwriting. Plans, sections and elevations reveal intricate features such as naturally ventilated pantries, cooker hoods with industrial inspiration, and a little slit at the base of the wall cupboards intended for tray storage. From the curved teak handles, to the raised bullnose edge of the sink, to the lip of the rebated cupboard doors, rounded shapes with radii adapted to each individual function give off a robust, ergonomic, and discreetly decorative feel. At the start of Tegelslagaren 12's renovation, however, these drawings did not correspond particularly well to reality.

Whether it be due to generations of home improvement enthusiasts, the lack of a long-term maintenance plan, or evolving needs (or all of the above), the 60 apartments had come to contain almost as many types of kitchens. While a handful displayed near-intact sets of original elements – solid-wood cupboards, stainless steel sinks and backsplashes, teak worktops and handles, hoods in fluted glass, custom wall shelves for spices and grains, pull-out cutting and baking boards, and drop-leaf counters – many were partially or completely gutted. To this patchy stock, a series of challenges of a more technical nature were added.

Firstly, renewed plumbing and waterproofing would have an impact on the 'wet' half of the kitchens. Secondly, the old configuration did not meet contemporary minimum requirements regarding for example ventilation, bench heights and storage space. Thirdly, the renovation budget depended on raising rents according to a so-called maximum 'standard increase'; a concept which will be further discussed below. This means that the kitchens needed to not only tick the boxes of required minimums, but integrate additional modern conveniences such as full-height fridges and dishwashers.

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Early on, it was clear that a case-by-case renovation of all kitchens – as recommended by the heritage officers – would not be financially viable. Nor would a catalogue kitchen – initially preferred by the property owner, who had already installed a rather disappointing prototype in one of the apartments – be a defensible choice in a listed building aiming for long-term durability. Eventually, a compromise was reached. On-site study, archival explorations and mock-ups informed the development of new, bespoke, solid pinewood cabinetry that accommodates modern appliances within the logic and dimensions of its predecessors. Existing teak countertops and handles were reused and replicated where missing. The original wall shelves, replaced with proper cupboards, were offered to tenants to install elsewhere in their home. New sinks, backsplashes and cooker hoods are nearly identical to their original counterparts, while some features, such as the wall-mounted faucet, proved incompatible with modern standards and warranties. Grey-checkered quartz vinyl floor tiles stand in for the original dark-green Tile-Tex, of which only written traces remained: the mix of asphalt and asbestos was not ideal for a domestic environment. Factory-built cupboard modules were finished with mouldings and hand-painted on-site, and fitted with doors and drawer fronts in either neutral white or warm grey, according to the tenants' wishes.

Alongside the guillotine windows, the two restored kitchens become important historical documents, whereas the 58 new ones prove that modernisation does not necessarily entail a break with history. Yet, however ambitious the end result – especially for a rental property renovation – the fact that fully functional kitchens, or any other building elements for that matter, have been discarded in favour of new ones remains problematic. Such decisions have to be considered in light of circumstances beyond the individual project, one of which is the 'utility value system'.

For What It's Worth

Since the late 1960's, Swedish rent levels have been based on comparative utility value rather than market value. This means that apartments of equivalent standard shall have equivalent rents. In theory, this principle upholds the general quality of housing, and defends end user interests when the Tenants' Association negotiates rents with landlords without government intervention.[2] However, as the utility value system is faced with an ever-more speculative housing industry, and a building economy aiming to transition from a linear to a circular model, serious friction ensues. Historically, equating 'new' with 'increased standard' has made perfect sense: after all, modernist ideals of equal access to light, air, cleanliness and comfort lifted people out of urban slums and into welfare estates. Today, however, so-called standard increases have long since stopped being means of meeting basic human needs. Instead, they have become vehicles for maximising profits. Swedes enjoy modern comforts with a margin, yet standard increases are almost impossible to refuse.

Since rent is the quantified measure of how well a particular housing unit conforms to a relative sense of 'modern' or 'best practice', rent negotiations tend to centre around checklists where different amenities are given different monetary values. These lists change from case to case, but will generally have a bias towards 'newness'. And since the Rental Law is as good as blind to concepts such as context, quality or atmosphere, generic quick-fixes and careful craftsmanship risk being valued alike. Needless to say – if induction hobs, recessed spotlights or re-tiled bathrooms offer an immediate return on investment, the incentives for owners of older properties to maintain a 'lower' standard for heritage or sustainability reasons are weak at best.

In a system unintentionally rigged against adaptive reuse and preservation, the heritage grade of Tegelslagaren 12 and its committed guardians have shielded it from many adverse effects. Nevertheless, as previously alluded to, each architectural intervention embodies the conflicts between economic values, utility values (standard), document



The various stages of inventory, salvage and refurbishment required a bespoke approach, not only to the built elements themselves, but also to each apartment.

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values (historical characteristics) and experience values (aesthetic and functional characteristics).[3] A large portion of the renovation was within the scope of regular repair and maintenance: facades, technical systems, communal areas, windows, finishes... Costly and cumbersome to begin with, such efforts encourage doing as much as possible 'while we're at it', favouring interventions with an impact on future rents. To name one example, the original apartment doors were deemed to have high document and experience values: typical for their era and made from high-quality, gracefully patinated materials. As for their utility value, however, even the cleverest retrofit could not boost rents as much as a brand-new security door with superior acoustic, fire, energy and safety performance. Similarly, the restored 1930's kitchens have less storage and no dishwasher, and will therefore be cheaper to rent regardless of the meticulous work put into them. Finally, since the new, custom-made kitchens in themselves hold no greater utility value than an off-the-shelf, flat-pack equivalent, the ambitious end result is owed entirely to passionate architects and property owners willing to aim high and think long-term. And most of all – pay.

Towards a New 'New Empiricism'?

As stated at the beginning of this text, Tegelslagaren 12 had no reason not to become an exemplary renovation project. But if it is to set a new



The nickel-plated window espagnolettes are some of the partially missing original elements that have been reproduced. A minimum order of one hundred units ensures a solid supply of replacements for decades to come.

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benchmark for similar projects that might start off in less favourable conditions, we can neither rely on some mystical power of heritage, nor on the goodwill of individual property owners. It is the speculative housing economy as a system and political project, not the odd house or person, that is to blame for how the already-built is being devalued or even deemed useless. Vilifying the Tenants' Association is no use either. They operate according to the Rental Law, and remain one of very few actors that defend tenants' rights in a time of access and affordability crisis, where landlords are awarded ever-greater power – and ever-greater profits – in return for their services as housing-providers. After all, rental apartments are subject to at least *some* scrutiny and regulation. When it comes to housing bought and sold at market prices, little can be done to prevent property owners or individual home owners from taking the measures 'necessary' for their hard-earned square metres to pay off in the long run.

In Helena Mattsson's introduction, we learn that Backström and Reinius intended to marry functionalist virtues with traditional materials and handicrafts. Unwilling to admit to aesthetic or nostalgic motivations, the architects explained their 'New Empiricist' style as a natural consequence of wartime shortages and economic hardship. In current times marked by the entangled crises of both climate and capitalism, developing a similar kind of empiricist, *in natura* 'war architecture' makes more sense than ever. As resources run scarce, we start stretching what we have: adapting the already-built to our needs and wants, but also our needs and wants to the already-built. As materials need to be sourced locally, and labour power is redistributed from industrial assembly lines to hands-on repair and renovation, we begin to rethink how architecture is conceived, and by whom. As pre-used elements and materials interweave in new contexts and configurations, architectural practices launch a search for new aesthetic expressions, and new conceptions of history too. Like Tegelslagaren 12 in the 1930's, such a 'New New Empiricist' architecture would be born out of turbulent times, and act as a bridge between paradigms.

Whether we can expect wide-reaching social reform and public investment in such an architectural project, on par with the welfare state that carried Olle Engkvist, Sven Backström and Lars Reinius throughout their careers, remains to be seen. In a more likely, business-as-usual scenario, things will get worse before they get better. The 20th-century Social Democratic promise of stability, utility and a few pinches of pleasure – *firmitas, utilitas, venustas*, if you will – provided a more comfortable context for Backström and Reinius to elaborate their light-hearted functionalism than the current predicament in which we will have to build the future from the literal pieces of a broken system.

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Yet regardless of today's bleaker prospects, the oeuvre of the iconic duo – well, trio – continues to provide important guidance and inspiration. In its conviction that long, good lives for both buildings and people stem from the efficient use of space and available resources, collaboratively crafted with care and a wee bit of whimsy, Tegelslagaren 12 is and has always been exemplary. Anyone aspiring to be a master-builder has no excuse to be anything less.

1. Since 1981, the Stockholm City Museum has been commissioned by the City Council to carry out inventories and classifications of the built heritage. The 'blue', 'green' and 'yellow' classifications are not legally binding in themselves, but respond to the 'prohibition against distortion' of the Planning and Building Act (PBL), §8:13.
2. For more information on the Swedish rent system, see Boverket, *Det svenska hyressättningssystemet. Rapport 2013:13* (Boverket, 2014).
3. For more information on value assessment of built heritage, see: Axel Unnerbäck, *Kulturhistorisk värdering av bebyggelse* (Riksantikvarieämbetet, 2002).

Colophon

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