

North and South, the Journey and the Return.

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Abstract

Asplund was neither the last nor the first Nordic architect to travel to the South. Indeed, the territories and the different cultures that have existed in the Mediterranean - whether in the Italian peninsula or in Greece, including North Africa, that South with over a thousand years of history, was the "destination" for most men (and women) of culture, architects or not, from Northern and Central Europe. This trip, known as the Grand Tour, was perceived, from the end of the eighteenth century, as a unique time of passage between the education period and the period of life that would ensue. It was the time to move from scholasticism and the restricted condition of being a young apprentice and student and to realize that "moving" and seeing the world with some maturity would be paramount to perceive the other, the meaning of his Culture, places and customs, and then reach the status of "citizen of the world".

Keywords: Asplund, Grand Tour, Contamination, North, South

Full Article



Fig.1 - Asplund in Villa Adriana in 1914.

Erik Gunnar Asplund, the Grand Tour and the contamination of the North by the South.

“...How beautiful it is to see a temple erected, still, surrounded by green, with trees around it and with a free arena square in front of it, not too big! A wonderful day...” (Peláez; Mansill, 2002, p. 295)

E.G. Asplund, Agrigento, 15 February 1914

Asplund was neither the last nor the first Nordic architect to travel to the South. Indeed, the territories and the different cultures that have existed in the Mediterranean - whether in the Italian peninsula or in Greece, including North Africa, that South with more than a thousand years of history, was the "destination" for most men (and women) of culture, architects or not, from Northern and Central Europe. This trip, known as the Grand Tour, was perceived, from the end of the eighteenth century, as a unique time of passage between the education period and the period of life that ensued. It was the time to move from scholasticism and the restricted condition of being an young apprentice and student and to realize that "moving" and seeing the world with some maturity would be paramount to perceive the other, the meaning of his Culture, places and customs, and then reach the status of "citizen of the world".

Thus, the emphasis on the North-South trajectory and contamination is not made outside the consciousness of globalizing culture, where Asplund was educated in the city of Stockholm. Indeed, the Mediterranean was the perfect stage for several of the most important globalizing cultures throughout history, ranging from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Renaissance. For Asplund, who had done many other trips, this was in fact his Grand Tour, so that he could stop being just an architect from the North - as we can see in his travel records, whether written, photographed or drawn, as well as in the constant references, more or less direct, that we will later find in the various projects and works that Asplund designed and constructed throughout his short life as an architect. Works that soon gained a meaning, far beyond the Nordic culture.

It is therefore in this sense that the case of Asplund's Grand Tour is exemplary, since it was perhaps one of the last working architects to make this long journey in a single continuous period, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century Neoclassical Romanticism. He visited, in a systematic way, most of the sites, landscapes and works of reference of the past and the present - whether



classical, scholarly or vernacular, from architecture, painting, sculpture or other possible cultural universes, as well as the daily life of much of this Southern Mediterranean that he visited.

Asplund left all this remarkable testimony in a single notebook, or travel diary. There we find the sites that many architects and others have visited before or after him, such as Rome, Villa Adriana, Florence, Siena, Venice, Naples, Vesuvius and Pompeii, the Greek Temples of Paestum not far from Naples, or Agrigento in Sicily. Just like the dazzle of the Arab cities of North Africa.

Those were places where Sigurd Lewerentz, Arne Jacobsen, Alvar Aalto, Jorn Utzon, modern architects also from the North, or John Soane, Viollet-le-Duc, Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, among others, also went to. They all came from other cultures, times and latitudes, not to mention the famous voyages of Byron or Goethe with their "Journey to Italy".

So, in November 1913, Asplund, then a young architect aged 28, after a year of hard work completing his education in 1912, departed for his "Grand Tour" accompanied by his friend and fellow student Bensov.

The journey started in France, where in mid-December, in a letter to a Swedish fellow countryman, Asplund expressed his displeasure at what he had seen so far, referring to France as "a lost peasant country" (Peláez, Mansill 2002, p.20). Thus, he quickly went to Italy, embarking in Marseilles on a boat passing through Genoa and Livorno, landing at Civitavecchia and arriving in Rome at the end of December.

And it is here in Rome that his passionate journey of “rediscovering” the South and the experience of this "Other World" and its Culture, its facts and artefacts, really started. From Rome he went on to Naples, embarking for Sicily and Palermo, where he visited Agrigento, Syracuse, Taormina, and Messina. He then crossed the Mediterranean up to Tunes, returning to Palermo on 12 March and going north, returning to Naples to visit Pompeii. Back to Rome again, on the way he visited Paestum and Villa Adriana. From there he went to Assisi, Perugia, Siena, San Gimignano, Florence, Bologna, Ravenna, Venice, Vicenza and Verona. In late May he returned to Stockholm by plane.

During this six-month journey, Asplund recorded in his travel notebooks, like in a diary, beautiful and inspired notes and ramblings, as well as expressive drawings and photographs, writing down his various impressions about the landscape and erudite and vernacular architecture of these diverse lands through which he was passing, including examples of the most remarkable works, the ruins of the cities and temples of antiquity, the customs of the people, the light, colour, etc.

As he went ever further south, his growing enthusiasm was evident. It is clear that Asplund's interest was equally and intensely directed, regardless of the nature of the object or subject: whether it was the interior of a Renaissance church or palace, the analysis of the architectural composition, the simplicity, refinement and effectiveness of any conceptual strategy, disillusionment with some work, or the beauty of a landscape, the use of colour and materials, the surprising quality of light, the splendour of nature, or the joviality and peculiarity of life and customs of these places full of sun and shade.

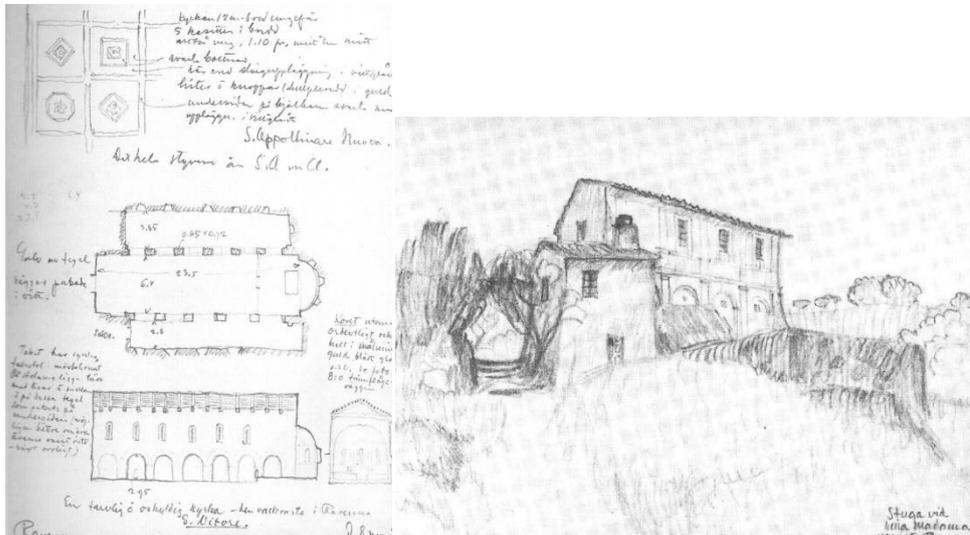


Fig.2 - Travel Drawings [E.G. Asplund- Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.]

Asplund stayed in Rome for about a month, where three particular moments stand out from his travel records. The first one is the visit to the Basilica of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, where he was especially touched by the imposing access staircase, taking us to the staircase that he designed years later for the entrance of the Stockholm Library (1920-1928). He was also impressed with the refinement and the quality of the light of the interior of the Basilica. The second moment was in the Castle of S. Angelo, the grandeur of the large cylindrical volume on a horizontal base, and the relationship of the entrance with the delicate bridge over the Tiber, which reminds us of his project for the Stockholm Library.



Fig.3 - Restaurant in Aventino [E.G. Asplund- Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.]

The third moment was the warm description of the already gone restaurant in the Castle of Caesars in Aventino, in those days considered by many to be the best restaurant in Rome.

Asplund described, graphically, in words or through his beautiful photographs, the delicacy of the structure and the glazing of the large room, with its panoramic view over the other six hills of Rome.

Regarding the way from Rome to Naples, Asplund's words are clear in his particular sensitivity to the theme of the landscape, as we can later observe in his works, especially in the Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm (1915-1940), designed in partnership with his colleague and friend Sigurd Lewerentz, who also made his trip to the South, visiting almost the same places in Italy.

In Naples, he was charmed by its life, the relation of the city with the port, the sea and the presence of the Vesuvius. When he arrived in Sicily, Palermo, he found a particularly rich and different place, a place of encounter and miscegenation of different cultures, from the Norman presence to the presence of the Orient and the Arab culture, and including the strong Baroque imprint, the magnificent testimonies of Greek Classicism in Taormina and Agrigento.

However, in the course of his journey and in spite of surrendering to the charms of the South, Asplund also made critical, selective remarks, always preferring the examples of the most assertive, clearer, and simpler architectures, distinguishing well when mixtures of several interventions over time did not crudely run over each other.

In Agrigento, Asplund visited, observed, studied and was delighted, for the first time, with a Greek Temple in all its splendour, as it later happened in Paestum near Naples.

Asplund's passage through Tunisia, in the middle of his long journey, was, from his descriptions, a particularly sensitive moment, not so much due to the existence of any singularly remarkable work, but due to the unique experience of being in a place with a light, an environment and a culture completely opposite to his Nordic origins, namely, when he refers to the sky of a blue he had never seen before, like a beautiful dome painted to the scale of the world.

Regarding Arab architecture, Asplund emphasized the contrast between the inside and the outside, between the simplicity and the formal continuity of outer spaces, the delicate proportion of the streets and alleys of the Medina, the strength of the light, and the surprising comfort of the interior spaces, namely in the precise control of light and shade for the qualification of these interior spaces, or in the frontier and transition areas between the inside and the outside, such as those he found in the Kasbah in Tunis.

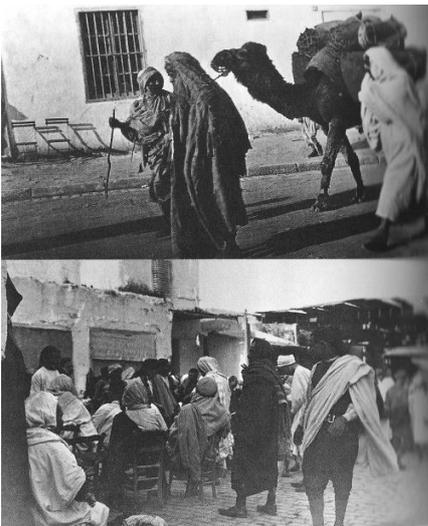


Fig.4 – Tunis [E.G. Asplund- Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.]

On 12 March, Asplund left Tunisia, went through Palermo and returned to Naples, where he remained until 21 March, leaving then to Rome. In this second passage of about ten days through Naples, now with time on his hands, Asplund visited the city more carefully, but this time he was not particularly pleased, with the exception of the local museum, for he described Naples as a noisy and dirty city. While in Naples, his attention and interest were focused on visits to the Vesuvius, the ruins of Pompeii and the Greek Temples of Paestum.

As someone from a culture with a special sensitivity to the facts of nature and landscape, Asplund was obviously converted and impressed by the force of nature, when, after a long walk, he finally reached the crater of the dormant volcano, where respect for the facts of nature is a feeling that remains.

In Pompeii, Asplund became emotional with the signs of the tragic end of the city and its inhabitants, admiring and imagining, with special enthusiasm, the ancient splendour the life in that city would have once been: another testimony of unique classicism, with its own character and obvious links to Greek classicism, not only in terms of urban planning, with its streets and public spaces, but also regarding the domestic architecture, with the refinement and delicacy of its houses, courtyards, and private spaces with their delicate frescoes.

In his description of Pompeii, Asplund gives many clues of how much we can find later in his works, and, of course, offers us his emotional testimony about the memory of the terrible end of the citizens of that ancient Roman city. But fundamentally, in Asplund's description of Roman architecture in Pompeii, we can find his interpretation of a Greek genesis in the composition and architectural form he found there, both constructively and conceptually. However, Asplund found here a human and aesthetic dimension that was quite different from that of the Greek Temples, another dimension closer to the human scale, in his search for domestic comfort and the delicacy of the constructive and decorative

elements. Asplund described a living architectural environment that only a true cultured architecture can enable, an architecture that is also a city and, moreover, describes a humanistic content rooted in its *modus vivendi*, which finds reciprocity in its architectural forms.

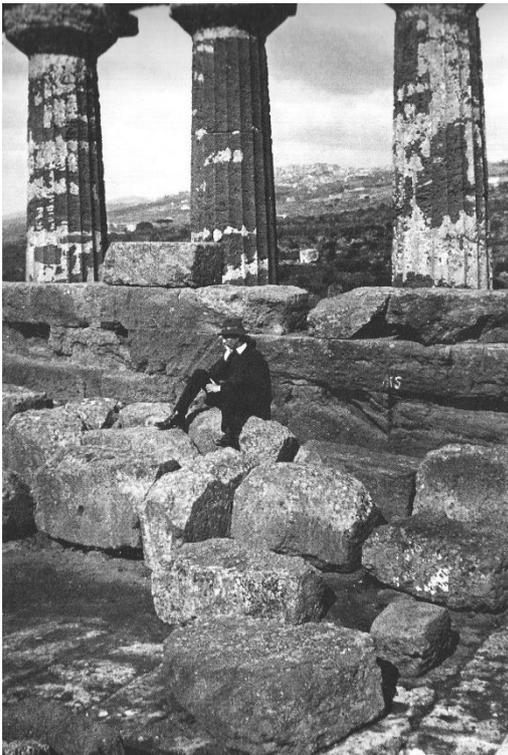


Fig.5 - Paestum [E.G. Asplund- Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.]

In Paestum, while observing one of the ancient Greek temples, Asplund experienced emotions close to those he felt in Agrigento, when he first saw the Temple of Concordia. Asplund's description of Paestum during a stormy spring afternoon reminds us curiously of a synthesis of the aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime, not so distant in time, a synthesis that is also close to the Neoclassicism of the first half of the nineteenth century - where the magnitude of natural phenomena and history become tangible to man as a sentient being, both due to awareness of this magnitude and to its presence. All this when he finally touched an ancient stone, worked by that "Other" builder, coming somewhere from Athens or Crete; all while he felt the raindrops of the refreshing rain in the midst of a brief storm with a thousand years of memories, all there, on that

beautiful island between Southern Europe and North Africa, and in that specific idyllic landscape.

Back in Rome, where he split from his friend Bensov, Asplund headed north through Umbria, Assisi and Perugia. In Assisi, he recorded in particular the relationship between composition, scale, light and atmosphere of the Basilica and of several other churches, such as St. Chiara and St. Francis. Here he described the contrast between the environment and the circumspect penumbra of the crypt, with the Gothic luminosity of the central nave, as well as the beauty and delicacy of Giotto's frescos in the Upper Basilica, illuminated by the large Gothic windows of the side naves.

In Perugia, in addition to the constant observation and study of composition and the proportions of the Renaissance houses and palaces, Asplund emphasized the harmony between life in the streets and squares and the architectures that framed them.

He continued his journey towards the north to the region of Tuscany, Siena and Florence, moving on to the Veneto, Venice, Vicenza and Verona. In his diary, Asplund continued to record the buildings and decorative details, the elegance of the arches and columns, the windows, the canopies and the loggias, as well as noting down his pleasure and displeasure with the composition of this or that facade, the palaces and the churches, the atmosphere in the streets or the beautiful squares of the various cities he was visiting - culminating in the splendour of the canals, bridges, small streets and alleys of Venice, as well as its delicate palaces, and, of course the unique Piazza San Marco, with its geometry, its most appropriate scale, surrounded by the colonnade of the Procuratie Nuove, before moving on to Vicenza and finally to Verona.



Fig.6 - Venice [E.G. Asplund- Arkitekturmuseet, Stockholm.]

From Palladio's Veneto, Asplund, then aged 29, returned by plane to his native Stockholm. Then, in his remaining few years of life, two and a half decades, he designed and built a set of remarkable works, where his memories of this journey and his immense respect for the Culture of the South will forever be present.

In 1940, after finishing the project and work of the Crematorium of the Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm, his last work (undoubtedly the most refined modern re-interpretation of any temple, and of a porch on the landscape), Asplund died in Stockholm at the age of 55, not surviving his last heart attack. He is buried in this same cemetery, in this work that represents the best architectural example of the contamination between the culture of the North and the South in the universe of Western Culture and History of Architecture. A work that in this case was simultaneously modern and classical, of today, of yesterday and of tomorrow, in a word: eternal.

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