

Jérémie Michael McGowan

Ralph Erskine, (Skiing) Architect

In this paper I focus on Ralph Erskine's enduring image in architectural discourse as the Arctic Architect of Modernism. My interest lies with the relationship between portrayals of Erskine – both in textual accounts and images – and the way his sub-Arctic projects, especially his unrealised utopian projects for an 'Ideal Town' north of the Arctic Circle, have been canonised in architectural discourse as exemplars of an architecture that is truly regional in character and, moreover, ideally suited to the unique cultural – especially with regard to indigenous populations – and environmental habitats of Arctic and sub-Arctic environments.

Ralph Erskine (1914-2005), an English architect educated at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London during the 1930s, emigrated from Britain to Sweden in 1939; by all accounts, a move made earnestly. In the decades that followed, Erskine intimately associated himself with Sweden, causing his identity to become something of an enigma for architectural critics and historians in his native Britain, his adopted Sweden and internationally. But while writers on Erskine sought an answer to the question of Erskine's identity – were the man and his work British, Swedish, or something in between? (Collymore 1981; Pearman 1993: 12) – Erskine himself was typically clearer on the matter. His public lectures, in particular, cast him as Swedish – more precisely, as someone or something ambiguously Northern. That is, his frequent use of 'we', 'our' and 'us' in, for example, his *Eric Lyons Memorial Lecture* of 1990, established a clear distance – geographical, cultural, ideological – between Erskine and his typically more southern audiences (e.g. Erskine 1990). As early as 1977 Mats Egelius, a Swede who worked under Erskine in his architectural offices in Stockholm, labelled Erskine 'Arctic Architect' – an alias that has dominated our understanding of Erskine and his work ever since (Egelius 1977; cf. Egelius 1988, 1990).

Still today, as in the late 1950s when he first began to enjoy a measure of international acclaim for his building projects in Sweden, Erskine occupies a unique role in the history of modern and contemporary architecture, especially with regard to the practice of Regionalism – an approach to architecture that seeks to develop built form out of, and in response to, the traditions, needs and demands of a particular climate, locale, and culture – which grew in strength and popularity during the post war period, often in opposition to what were seen as the homogenising and globalising tendencies of the International Style of Modernism. Erskine’s uniqueness in the history of post war architectural history is this: while English by birth and education Erskine is, nonetheless, a predominant authority on the relationships between architecture, identity and the North. He is historically and critically understood as an architect who ‘captured the Scandinavian aesthetic more successfully than any of his contemporaries’ (Pearman 1993: 12).

In 1993 the Norwegian architectural historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz referred to Erskine as ‘the Swedish-English architect’, claiming his work, ‘alone’ was truly Nordic in character. For Norberg-Schulz, Ralph Erskine’s ‘projects for subarctic settlements’ were ‘both new and representative of a Nordic interpretation of place’ (Norberg-Schulz 1996: 193). In the architectural press of Europe, as well as that of North America and Japan (e.g. Oshima 2005), Erskine is similarly and consistently portrayed as the ultimate insider – architect and bona fide native of the North. It is Erskine’s insider, or native status in relation to the Arctic that I want to question in the rest of this paper.

Swedes have, perhaps, played the largest part in constructing Erskine’s northern identity. Authors like Mats Egelius have convincingly presented us with an Erskine who spoke Swedish, adjusted ‘his life-style to Swedish conditions’ and shared ‘the Swedes’ love for nature’ (Egelius 1977: 763; cf. Egelius 1990: 13). Egelius consistently delivers up a true Swedes’ Swede, an Erskine who was ‘out and about almost every day, in summer on a training circuit of the park at Drottningholm and in winter skiing, or skating on Mälaren during an extended lunch break’ (Egelius

1990: 13). Karin Winter likewise gives us the rather sensational story, with an accompanying storyboard of images, of an architect who taught himself how to ski ('Arkitekten som lärde sig åka skidor'); skiing presumably being a defining characteristic of Swedish-ness – more generally, of Nordic-ness – and therefore, a legitimisation of Erskine's de facto northern identity (Winter 1988). It is worth noting how, outside Sweden and the rest of the Nordic world, the trope of the skiing architect only seems to grow in importance. For Oscar Arenales-Vergara, for example, a Spanish architect who worked in Erskine's Stockholm offices in the 1980s, 'The quintessence of Erskine's character is exemplified in the manner in which he practiced one of his favorite sports, skiing, which he enjoyed up to his seventieth birthday' (Arenales-Vergara 2005: 98).

Through anecdotal accounts such as these Erskine begins to emerge as something of a hyper-Swede in the architectural literature that has grown up around him – many of Erskine's historians, critics and biographers having been his personal acquaintances or employees. We are almost unanimously presented with an Englishman who was, it seems, more Swedish than the Swedes themselves. Mats Egelius, for instance, sets up this striking contrast between Erskine and his Swedish neighbours: while Erskine's neighbours sat 'enjoying cups of coffee in the spring sunshine', Erskine – conveniently slotted into his role as Swede extraordinaire – was 'biking off with skis and boots to find the last bit of snow on a north-facing slope' (Egelius 1990: 13).

The constant references to skiing and outdoor sport are representative of the overall importance placed on action and adventure in character portrayals of Erskine – an emphasis that has served to single out Erskine 'as an extreme spirited adventurer' in architectural discourse (Arenales-Vergara 2005: 98). At times, Erskine is referred to in almost epic dimensions. His first trip to Sweden has transformed, with multiple retellings, from a routine cycling holiday into a heroic quest: 'his mythic voyage when he was only twenty-five years old in which he departed Britain and cycled through Denmark to Sweden and encountered' not only the architecture of Gunnar Asplund and other Swedish greats, but

also, ‘the “Extreme North Conditions”’ (Arenales-Vergara 2005: 98). Writing in 1988, Karin Winter tells us that Erskine arrived in Sweden during what was apparently the coldest and snowiest winter to date in the whole of the twentieth century: ‘Ralph Erskine som mötte Sverige de kallaste och snörikaste vintrarna under hela detta sekel’ (Winter 1988: 2). A later trip Erskine made by boat from Britain to Sweden has also been eulogised as an arduous encounter between Erskine and the natural environments of the North – this time, ‘the perilous conditions of the North Sea’ (Arenales-Vergara 2005: 98). The trope of the hero – particularly of the hero’s journey – is surely present here. Indeed, Mats Egelius makes that connection implicitly with the title of his contribution to a 1981 issue of *Arkitektur*, a Swedish architectural periodical, devoted to the work of Ralph Erskine: ‘Vår tids hjälte?’ – a hero for our time (Egelius 1981).

Images back up the claims made by the texts, such as the Erskine watercolour included in Mats Egelius’s seminal study *Ralph Erskine, Arkitekt*, published in Swedish in 1988 and English in 1990 (see Egelius 1990: 67). Egelius’s caption for Erskine’s watercolour informs us that Erskine’s wintry landscape showing an *igloo* and a pair of skiers was painted at Tärnafjäll, where the architect ‘took part in a course to learn how to build an igloo and survive overnight in it’ (Egelius 1990: 67). The watercolour is closely followed by a black and white photograph (see Egelius 1990: 68) showing Erskine and another hill walker either departing or passing by a *goahti* – a type of earthen shelter used in some Sámi areas – effectively reiterating the generic claim of the watercolour. Superficially, the message is clear enough here: as with the watercolour, the black and white photograph is visual proof that ‘Erskine is an enthusiastic skier and visitor to the fells’ (Egelius 1990: 67). These images forthrightly say: here is an architect who knows how to navigate, cook, camp and survive in the wild. But the underlying, and more important point of such images – and of course, of the corresponding texts – is more complex. Images like these are the subtext that legitimise Erskine’s self initiated programme to invent a new indigenous architecture for the arctic. The photograph of Erskine in front of a

Sámi *goahhti*, like the watercolour of the *igloo* – which, of course, was built by Erskine – seeks to lend credence to the architect's loosely 'anthropological' research into traditional Arctic dwelling types.

One of Erskine's most famous drawings is a cross-section of 'the Arctic tundra' in winter, wherein an outside temperature of -40 degrees Celsius is contrasted against the +15 degree environment found inside an Inuit *igloo* and Sámi *lávvu*. In Erskine's study drawing, Arctic Canada and Circumpolar Scandinavia are collapsed into one and Sámi and Inuit are lumped into the same category as small animals, plant life, birds and bears – all 'natives' dwelling in harmony beneath the snow pack. Erskine labelled this study sketch: 'Eskimo – Small animals, lemmel, etc. – Vegetation – Birds, ptarmigan – Bears – Lapp. Snow when dry is an excellent insulator which all natives have used' (see Collymore 1982: 28).

The constant stress on Erskine's 'briskness' (Egelius 1990: 13), risk taking (Arenales-Vergara 2005: 98) and great interest for winter sports and skiing (Winter 1988: 2), that is clearly present in the architectural literature available on Erskine has, of course, little or nothing to do with his actual competence or prowess as a winter sportsman. But the trope of a skiing, hiking, or *igloo* building architect does have everything to do with the way Erskine's projects, particularly his work in northern Sweden and Canada, have been positioned in the history of twentieth-century architecture as exemplars of a way of building that is sensitively, intuitively and appropriately designed for the unique climatic, cultural and geographic conditions of the North – even if, it must be noted, many of the most celebrated examples of Erskine's successful 'Arctic Architecture' are from Stockholm, or indeed, further south.

Erskine enjoyed a rather prestigious international career from at least the late 1950s, when he first began to present his 'theoretical solutions' for 'The sub-arctic problem' (Erskine 1961: 161) to architectural audiences internationally. In 1959, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne – CIAM for short – held a meeting in Otterlo. CIAM had been created in 1928 by leading architects of the inter-war years, such as Walter Gropius

and Le Corbusier. By 1959, it was under the influence and direction of a younger generation of radical luminaries – notably Aldo van Eyck in the Netherlands and Alison and Peter Smithson in England. In the context of CIAM's meeting in Otterlo, Erskine delivered his famous presentation on 'The Sub-Arctic Habitat' – a pseudo anthropological analysis of Arctic and sub-Arctic environments, including the study sketch I discussed above – to the general acclaim and overall delight of his audience.

In the discussion that followed Erskine's presentation – a talk which had showcased many of Erskine's charts, graphs, sketches, diagrams and drawings, as well as photographs of reindeer, tundra and some of his recent building projects in Sweden (Erskine 1961) – the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck declared, 'It was a wonderful experience listening to you describe the situation up there... You could, I believe, probably design anything' (van Eyck, Smithson, and Bakema 1961: 169). To van Eyck and the rest of Europe's architectural elite, Erskine was summarily consecrated as the architect 'from way up there' – a quite singular authority on the art of building and dwelling in Sub-Arctic, Arctic and even Antarctic environments. This was, of course, largely due to the fact that Erskine convincingly presented himself as an architect that was truly one with the North. It seems the architects gathered together at CIAM's 1959 meeting – like most architectural critics and historians in the five decades that have followed – simply bought what Erskine was selling.

Aldo van Eyck, in his talk for the closing proceedings of the Otterlo Congress, reiterated his enthusiasm and respect for Erskine's work, proclaiming 'Erskine's contribution' on 'urban life in the tundra' 'a masterpiece' (Newman 1961: 217). It seems van Eyck and most of the rest of CIAM had fully subscribed to what Hugh Pearman, in 1993, aptly termed 'the Erskine mystique' (Pearman 1993: 7). As Pearman puts it, 'Here was an Englishman who chose to build in the snowbound north, opting for a natural environment even harsher than his own'. Pearman hints that Erskine's 'midnight-sun voyaging', meaning his decision to locate his architectural practice in 'from what, to other Europeans, seems like a peculiarly remote location', might have been 'a calculatedly

alternative route to that taken by his colleagues in the European or American mainstreams'. After all, what 'other architects' can 'include Greenland and northern Canada on their list of sites' (Pearman 1993: 7)?

In other words, did Erskine see – or simply chance upon – a promising niche, and strategically choose to exploit it? There was, it must be said, little to no chance that anyone else present at the CIAM congress would be able to question Erskine's expertise in the area. Who else in Otterlo knew anything about the Arctic, a place that Erskine, already in the first few lines of his 1959 report on 'the situation' in the North, was able to easily – and stereotypically – misrepresent as 'an almost unknown region, far from trade routes, inhabited solely by natives and trappers' (Erskine 1961: 161)?

Little has changed since 1959. Today Erskine remains internationally renowned as an architect who was uniquely able to capture the essence of the North – an architect who, much like an anthropologist, was presumably able to analyse local environments and cultures and extract their essential qualities. Two black and white photographs showing Erskine posing in front of one of his partially realised utopian community projects in Kiruna, Sweden, reflect this idea precisely (see Collymore 1982: 98; and, Egelius 1990: 101). The caption provided by Peter Collymore reads, 'Erskine experiencing Arctic conditions in front of the wall-building' (Collymore 1982: 99). The photograph shows Erskine 'in action', systematically unlocking the mysteries of the far North. Dressed in a fur hat, mittens and sturdy winter boots, he gazes calmly and knowingly into the distance, seemingly at home in the landscape of almost total whiteness surrounding him. His left boot propped authoritatively upon the fencing in front of him, Erskine appears to be a keen and incisive observer, a man able to quickly discover and comprehend the various data sets available to him from within his immediate field of vision (see Collymore 1982: 98).

In a related photograph we find Erskine standing in something of a variation on the classic 'Thinker' pose, and are left with the same impression: namely, that Erskine is able to capture the

multiple climatic, cultural, social, linguistic, geographic and demographic details surrounding him (see Egelius 1990: 101). This is, of course, the image of Erskine that we are meant to come away with. Charles Jencks, for example, celebrates Erskine's 'primary humane quality' as 'his willingness to get involved in the lives, dreams and petty details, the minutiae, of his clients' (Jencks 1977: 753). Geoffrey Denton similarly applauds Erskine's 'Objective and inquisitive observation of the cultures' and environments he worked within (Denton 2005: 32). Photographs from Erskine's work on a project for an Inuit township at Resolute Bay, Canada, in the early 1970s seem to attest to Erskine's famed 'sensitivity' and 'inquisitiveness' (see Collymore 1982: first photograph, opposite the title page).

But, while Erskine has been unanimously credited in architectural history for inventing an 'Indigenous Architecture' of the North, and widely celebrated for his unique 'attempt to arrive at an architecture appropriate to the subarctic region' (Erskine 1963: 59), his lasting success in architectural discourse has been founded on some alarming misconceptions. I find it difficult, for example, to balance photographs of Erskine consulting with Inuit clients in the Resolute Bay project against the actual content of the famed polemic on 'Building in the Arctic' (Erskine 1960) that he first delivered in 1959 – and systematically repeated throughout the remainder of his professional career. Ultimately, Erskine's Arctic Architecture may be the opposite of what it is supposed to be – an architecture thoughtfully, intimately and appropriately designed for the Arctic and, in particular, its indigenous populations:

'In the sub-arctic zone there is an enormous quantity of space, but no established culture...Up to fifty years ago this area was at the periphery of everything happening in the world. All culture and traffic-trade communications moved around the district without touching it. The natives led their own primitive life there. They had a culture of their own which, in isolation, was sufficient; it was not related to ours, or influenced through any contact with us...It has become apparent that there is a need to find...[a]

method of life – of modern life – in this untried region’ (Erskine 1961: 161-162).

Erskine dreamed of a Northern architectural utopia, drawing plans for entire Arctic communities that would open towards the sun like a flower. While these plans – championed by Erskine’s Team 10 colleague Aldo van Eyck as a solution to ‘lack of place’, ‘loss of identity, isolation and frustration’ (van Eyck, Smithson, and Bakema 1961: 169) – were never fully realised, Erskine’s built legacy in the Arctic may ultimately prove to be something entirely different.

Some of Erskine’s best known building projects in northern Sweden – the Borgafjäll, a mountain sports hotel (1948), the Luleå Shopping Centre (1955) and the Svappavara Ideal Arctic Town (1963) – chronologically intersect with a period in State-Sámi relations when governments of the Nordic countries (Erskine often worked for the Swedish government) typically defined ‘the anomalous social and economic status of indigenous peoples... geographically remote subsistence hunters, reindeer herders, fringe dwellers’ as the ‘Lappish problem’ (Dyck 1985: 3). While Erskine’s ‘regional solutions’ for Borgafjäll, Luleå and Svappavara have been consistently celebrated in architectural discourse as exemplars of an architecture that responds ‘to a particular site, climate and seasonal conditions’ and ‘the reality of local building traditions’ (e.g. Egelius 1977: 763), there remains another history to follow.

The decades following the Second World War were a time of heightened colonialism in Sápmi – the northern territories of Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia traditionally inhabited by the Sámi. The anthropologist Robert Paine, for example, describes the 1950s and 1960s in northern Scandinavia in terms of what he terms the industrial and ‘urban invasion of the tundra’ (Paine 1982: 74). Hugh Beach has similarly argued that, alongside the expansion of the timber and hydroelectric industries, mining and, in particular, tourism – to which Erskine’s Borgafjäll hotel for Swedish holiday skiers and Svappavara housing project for Swedish mine workers are connected implicitly – posed ‘the worst threat...to [reindeer]

herding' (Beach 1981: 270) in the post war period. Today, the architecture of Ralph Erskine, the 'Arctic Architect' – the skiing architect – of Modernism, is firmly canonised as an example of modern architecture sensitively integrated with nature, possessing 'an aesthetic...anchored in the characteristics of the region' (Erskine 1980: 51). We could, however, take the Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's 1971 comment that 'Samiland is full of the great marks of colonialism' as a starting point for rethinking Erskine's Arctic projects of the mid-twentieth century as a type of Swedish – or Swedish-British – colonial architecture which, in line with Swedish assimilation policies of the time, rendered the Sámi 'a vagrant on the scantily-covered hillsides' (Valkeapää 1983: 3, 10).

Bibliography

- Arenales-Vergara, Oscar. 2005. Ralph Erskine on Extreme Environments Design - an "Alternate Universe" and a "Rich Heritage" for the Architects of the Future. *A + U 3* (414): 98-101.
- Beach, Hugh. 1981. *Reindeer-Herd Management in Transition: The Case of Tuorpan Saameby in Northern Sweden*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Collimore, Peter. 1981. Swedish or British? *Arkitektur 7*: 32-33.
- . 1982. *The Architecture of Ralph Erskine*. London: Granada.
- Denton, Geoffrey. 2005. Working with Ralph Erskine and his Office. *A + U 3* (414): 30-35.
- Dyck, Noel, ed. 1985. *Indigenous Peoples and the Nation-State: Fourth World Politics in Canada, Australia and Norway*. St. John's, New Foundland, Canada: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

- Egelius, Mats. 1977. Ralph Erskine: The Humane Architect. *Architectural Design* 47 (11-12): 750-852.
- . 1981. Vår tids hjälte? / A hero for our time? *Arkitektur* 7: 4-9, 49-50.
- . 1988. *Ralph Erskine, Arkitekt*. Stockholm: Byggförlaget.
- . 1990. *Ralph Erskine, Architect*. Stockholm: Byggförlaget.
- Erskine, Ralph. 1960. Building in the Arctic, from *Architectural Design*, May 1960. In *The Architecture of Ralph Erskine*, edited by P. Collymore. London: Academy Editions, 1982: 216-217.
- . 1961. The Sub-Arctic Habitat. In *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Arbeitsgruppe für die Gestaltung soziologischer und visueller Zusammenhänge*, edited by O. Newman. Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag: 160-168.
- . 1963. Indigenous Architecture: Architecture in the Subarctic Region. *Perspecta* 8: 59-62.
- . 1990. *Ralph Erskine: An Egalitarian Architecture. The Eric Lyons Memorial Lecture 1990*. Produced by Monica Pidgeon. London: Pidgeon Audio Visual for Sussex Video.
- Jencks, Charles. 1977. Introduction. *Architectural Design* 47 (11-12): 753.
- Newman, Oscar, ed. 1961. *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Arbeitsgruppe für die Gestaltung soziologischer und visueller Zusammenhänge*. Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1996. *Nightlands: Nordic Building*. Translated by T. McQuillan. Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press.
- Oshima, Ken Tadashi. 2005. Ralph Erskine - Living Legacy. *A + U* 3 (414): 7-135.

- Paine, Robert. 1982. *Dam a River, Damn a People? Saami Livelihood and the Alta/Kautokeino Hydro-electric Project and the Norwegian Parliament*. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA).
- Pearman, Hugh. 1993. *The Ark, London: Architect, Ralph Erskine*. London: Wordsearch Ltd.
- Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak. 1983. *Greetings from Lapland: The Sami - Europe's Forgotten People*. Translated by B. Wahl. London: Zed Press. Original edition, *Terveisiä Tapista* (1971).
- van Eyck, Aldo, Peter Smithson, and Jacob B. Bakema. 1961. Discussion / The Sub-Arctic Habitat. In *CIAM '59 in Otterlo: Arbeitsgruppe für die Gestaltung sozialogischer und visueller Zusammenhänge*, edited by O. Newman. Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag: 169.
- Winter, Karin. 1988. Arkitekten som lärde sig åka skidor. In *Ralph Erskine, Arkitekt: Utställning*, edited by K. Winter. Stockholm: Byggförlaget, Arkitekturmuseet: 2-5.