



Evoking a Sense of the Sacred: Memory, Imagination and Meaning in Carl Nyrén's Vitlycke Museum

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"Nothing old is ever reborn, but it never really disappears either. And anything that has ever been always re-emerges in a new form."

-Alvar Aalto

Spanning more than five decades of practice, Carl Nyrén has designed some 130 buildings of virtually every size, type and style. Nyrén's popularity among both the general population and his professional colleagues can perhaps be traced to the fact he has managed to balance and integrate the dominant polarities of the Swedish soul: the rational and the romantic, the traditional and the modern, the local and the universal, the poetic and the practical.

Nyrén's ability to evoke a sense of the sacred through the use of culturally situated building forms and materials, sacred geometry, and metaphoric modes of signification is best exemplified in Vitlycke Museum (1997) which is located in Tanum, a United Nations World Heritage site containing many 3,000-year-old rock carvings. The primary function of the museum is to provide visitors with the information necessary to understand and appreciate the ancient carvings located in the surrounding landscape and the peoples who created them.

Coming to a deeper understanding of this deceptively simple museum requires something like an archaeological dig of an ancient site. The tools for this excavation of levels of architectural meaning are a careful reading of the three levels of experience and metaphoric association the building presents: the *Functional*, the *Typological* and the *Archetypal*.

The Functional: Vitlycke Museum is a rational, practical and economical solution to the design task. It blends in with its site and responds appropriately to sun, wind and light. It accommodates and expresses programmatic functions in both plan and section. It is energy efficient and uses abundant, locally available, low energy, healthy and renewable building materials. In short, Vitlycke Museum is a beautiful example of modern functionalist design and sustainable architecture.

The Typological: Nyrén makes skillful, yet decidedly non-traditional, references to culturally and historically codified building forms, elements and types to create in the mind of the visitor an initial sense of comfort and familiarity. But, this sense of ease is soon undermined by what could be described as deconstructionist strategies which have the effect of de-automatizing perception and conception through a two-fold operation of familiarization and defamiliarization. Thus Vitlycke stands as a prime example of what Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre call "critical regionalism", an approach to design that avoids both the easy seductions of historicism and the inherently meaningless forms of merely abstract modernism.

The Archetypal: Vitlycke Museum transforms chaos into cosmos, opening up, in Juhani Pallasmaa's words, "a view into the second dimension of our consciousness, the reality of images, memories and dreams." Through concrete metaphors of the material and formal imagination, this small museum leads the visitor on a journey back through layers of time to the Bronze Age and beyond, and back through layers of consciousness from the outer surface of the waking mind to the depths of what Carl Jung calls the collective unconscious.

Through the use of the universal language of qualitative number and sacred geometry, the museum also puts the visitor in touch with levels of consciousness and order that are the basis of all sacred architecture as well as the forms of the

living world. By making use of the *Vesica Piscis* in both plan and section, which according to Pythagorean and Platonic traditions is the geometrical figure that arises in the transition from one (unity) to two (multiplicity), Vitlycke Museum can be experienced as a threshold form, a place of emergence between levels of consciousness and being. Thus, in addition to being a functional building that uses historically and culturally situated materials and forms, the museum is, at its deepest level, a building that joins the present and the past, the temporal and the eternal, the secular and the sacred.

What is particularly significant at Vitlycke is that all the possible metaphors and meanings that can be read into the building, from the functional to the typological to the archetypal and symbolic, constitute a coherent family of resonant images that harmonize like the overtones and undertones of a single note sounded by a well-crafted musical instrument. Every reading adds richness and depth to one's understanding of the larger purposes and meanings of the building.

While Vitlycke Museum always feels familiar enough to impart a sense of comfort to all who visit it, it also always remains strange enough to suggest mysteries just beyond, and perhaps forever beyond, the reach of science, discursive reason and conscious awareness. This is exactly the state of mind one should have in order to enter receptively, imaginatively and appreciatively into the world of the Bronze Age peoples who have left behind only their the rock carvings for us to contemplate both their mortality and our own. Thus, in the ways described in this paper, Vitlycke Museum fulfills its most important purpose: to create the possibility for the attentive visitor to come to a deeper, more intuitive and fully participatory understanding of his or her connection to the countless generations of peoples who have lived and died in the past as well as the countless generations who will follow us in the future.

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