Corporate architecture – one mirror of business

Buildings reveal what we value. In this way, corporate architecture can be interpreted as a means of communication of business activities, which refers to factory, office and other buildings made for the use of a business enterprise. Here we concentrate on the factory buildings that have a double character for business. First, they are material investments that are – at least indirectly – presumed to accumulate profit. In that sense, the foremost use of factory buildings is to protect the production process and to contribute to the rational organisation of the production flow. Secondly, they are important factors in shaping corporate image and expressing identity, which are directly connected to the overall business goals.

This presentation is based on my PhD thesis on corporate architecture in Finland (forthcoming in September 2005)¹ and the study that I have carried out within a joint international multidisciplinary project called “Industry & Modernism” with participants from northern Europe (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia). This research project concentrates on industrial companies, their architecture and identity in the Nordic and Baltic countries during the highly industrialised period. One of the hypotheses of the project is that industrialists and their professionals (engineers and architects) were the driving forces in the development of Modernism, directly through the built forms they produced and indirectly through the ideals and forms of organisation they reproduced. The Swedish economic historian Maths Isacson describes the highly industrialised period as the most intensive time of modern industrial development and activities. The period started in Sweden about in 1935 and ended in 1985.²

The main target of this paper is to show what business enterprises have expressed by factory buildings, how architecture has revealed the identity of the company and how buildings have

² Read about the highly industrialised period, for example, in Isacson, Maths, The Highly Industrialised Period in the Nordic and Baltic Countries, Yhdyskuntasuunnittelu – The Finnish Journal of Urban Studies, 2003:3, 32-41.
manifested the corporate image. On the one hand, the study deals with architectural history and, on the other, business history. I will first discuss corporate identity and image and then show through some examples how companies have used buildings to express their identity. The time span of the study covers the post-war decades, from about 1950 to 1980.

Methodologically, factory buildings are interpreted as an abstract or symbolic production of meanings, whereby the company sends messages to its customers and other interest groups. The buildings are studied partly as artefacts, partly as investments of a business enterprise.

The Nordic countries

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) have been grouped as the Nordic welfare societies. However, the level and the pace of economic development in these countries differed considerably. Characteristic for the post-war period in Finland was to tackle with the problems caused by the war. As a neutral country Sweden and its industries were not faced by the losses of the war. On the contrary, Swedish companies were able to receive big orders even from abroad because of the difficulties in many other European countries.  

In this paper, we look closer at the factory buildings and their role as business communication in two companies: Strömberg Corp. in Finland and ASEA Corp. in Sweden. They both have been leading electro-technical enterprises of their countries. Their products – transformers, generators, motors and devices – were mainly directed to other industries (business-to-business or business-to-government). The companies were established in the late 19th century – Strömberg in 1889 and ASEA 1883. In the 1980s, ASEA was among ten largest concerns in the world within electro-technical sector with more than 30,000 employees, while Strömberg’s highest employment figure from 1974 was 7,500. In the late 1980s, they both were merged with the Swiss corporation Brown Boveri & Cie (BBC) forming a new corporation ABB (Asea Brown Boveri Ltd).

Corporate identity and image

Central concepts of this study are corporate identity and corporate image. David Bernstein, a specialist in corporate communications, regards corporate identity as a planned assembly of visual

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3 For the industrial development of the Nordic countries see, for example: Convergence? Industrialisation of Denmark, Finland and Sweden 1870-1940. Ed. by Hans Kryger Larser, Helsinki, 2001.
cues by which the audience can recognise the company and discriminate one company from another and which may be used to represent or symbolise the company. Identity must be visible, tangible and all-embracing. Everything that the organisation does must be an affirmation of its identity. Consequently, belonging is an important factor of identity.

Corporate identity is the personality of the company. It comprises the company’s basic values, such as corporate culture, the mission of the company, business idea, visions, strategies, narratives, myths and rites that all make the personality of the company, while corporate image is the picture that the company’s interest groups form about the company. In conclusion, we can say that the identity is the ‘real’ personality of the company which is seen by the interest groups as an image. Here we examine how different companies have used buildings to express their identity in order to form a desired image. We consider architecture and buildings as mass communication and have a look on how to “read” the international language of buildings.

Strömberg – a historical “guide” to architecture and construction technologies

Strömberg started its production in Helsinki in the 1880s and in 1940 the company decided to move part of its production to Vaasa, the western coast of Finland, for military reasons. In this new production unit building technologies and trends followed the general development of the building industry. Therefore, the site can still today act as a show window and “guide” to the post-war architecture.

In 1945, Alvar Aalto, the first rank modernist architect in Finland, draw up a master plan for the site, where he underlined the importance of natural forest. According to his plan, factory buildings were placed in small, separate units in three curved rows throughout the 70 hectare site in the same way as suburban housing areas were planned in those days.


Architecture and construction technologies followed contemporary trends. In the 1940s, the assembly plants for piece goods, small-scale motors and apparatus, were built in three- or four-floor factory buildings. The composed frame consisted of loadbearing exterior walls in brick and a column and beam system in concrete. The façades were plastered in order to hide the low-quality brick.
The most expressive building of the Vaasa factories at the end of the 1950s was the High Voltage Laboratory (Bertel Liljequist, 1951/1955), which became a show piece of the company. The design work was a challenge because of the large measurement of the hall (height 19 m, floor space 30 x 40 m).

The free span of the laboratory hall was 30 metres, being at that time the largest span ever carried out in concrete in Finland. Looking at Strömberg's laboratory building, one cannot avoid an association with the AEG turbine hall in Moabit, Berlin, designed by Peter Behrens in 1908-09.

For the first time, brick was used fairfaced without plaster in the façades of the laboratory buildings. A new period in architecture of Strömberg started, and the cream-coloured or white limestone brick became the main façade material for the following twenty years. The laboratory building was a sign of the most important product of the company at the time, power transformers, which became the basis of Strömberg’s expansion in the 1960s.

*Illustration 3. The High Voltage Laboratory was a show piece of the company in the 1950s and 60s. Tuija Mikkonen, 2002.*
The Swedish giant invested on the research

ASEA (Allmänna Svenska Elektriska Aktiebolaget) built large engineering shops in Västerås, one hundred kilometres from Stockholm to the west. It became soon the leading producer of electrical equipment in Sweden. Caused by the shortage of labour and raw materials during the WW2 ASEA sold all it could produce. In the 1950s, the main emphasis in the design of production buildings was focused on the Laboratory City and, in the 1960s, on a new production area, Finnslätten, with huge workshop buildings.

Research and product development were central issues of ASEA from the late 1950s onwards, which is well visible in its built environment. Nuclear power started to attract ASEA from the 1940s onwards and a new nuclear-power laboratory was built in 1958.

The Laboratory City was proudly presented in corporate communications. However, in the early 1960s, the situation concerning nuclear power in Sweden was unclear, and, in the 1970s, when nuclear power was mistrusted, ASEA had difficult times.⁶

A new area, Finnslätten, at the outskirts of Västerås city centre, became the 1960s’ face of ASEA. The investment in the large workshop buildings was motivated by the increasing needs of generators for hydro-electric power plants. The new site was occupied mainly for the advantageous transportation facilities.
The first workshop hall, Sigfrid, was built in Finnslätten in 1961. The hall was divided up into four bays and its dimensions were huge: length 215 m, width 110 m, maximum external height 22 m. In those days, the workshop hall was one of the largest concrete buildings in Europe. The importance of the new industrial site and the first workshop building is proved by the fact that the Sigfrid Workshop was inaugurated by the Prime Minister Tage Erlander in November 1961. Finnslätten area grew along the expansion of the business and it was proudly shown as the sign of ASEA’s growth and success.

The expanding business also needed larger offices and, in the late 1950s, the company started to plan a new corporate office in the city centre of Västerås. The newest construction technology was utilised in this modern office building, which was called Melker. It became the new official face of the company. The building was completed in 1960.


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Buildings are mirrors of business

It is evident that both Strömberg and ASEA wanted to be market leaders in electro-technology of their countries. They were operating with the most advanced technology, although we can say that the heavy, large-scale products, such as generators for hydro-electric power plants and power transformers, were regarded inflexible and old-fashioned products at the end of the period.

The 1956 High Voltage Laboratory of Strömberg was the image of the company showing the importance of transformer production that made the basis of business in the early 60s. The prestige of the High Voltage Laboratory was shown in the photographs where important guests stand in the front of the building. The main façade with the arched roof was frequently featured in the company's communication as a symbol of the Vaasa unit.

Alvar Aalto’s master plan was followed at Strömberg still in the 1970s, although large-scale workshop buildings occupied big areas of the forested site. However, natural trees and green areas were left to let even squirrels and hares to move freely in the factory area. The significance of the Vaasa plants was proved by the fact that the new Motor Factory was inaugurated in 1970 by President Urho Kekkonen. Furthermore, the move of the head office to Vaasa in 1972 was an affirmation of the importance of the Vaasa unit. The Head Office was placed on the top of a hill and the stairs from the parking place up to the office gave the visitors a feeling of high prestige.

ASEA was deeply involved in the development of nuclear-power, and its investments in this field were especially extensive in the 1960s. The product development of Strömberg was mainly aimed at maintaining the competitiveness of its main products, while ASEA invested on the development of new types of products. This is clearly seen in the built environment of the companies, when comparing the High Voltage Laboratory of Strömberg with the Laboratory City of ASEA.

ASEA was known as one of the most research oriented company in Sweden. This is easy to notice even in the built environment of the company. The Laboratory City was a show piece of the company. Glazed staircases and entrances gave a special prestige to these buildings. When the Laboratory City, which was later called Central Laboratories, were completed in 1961, the staff magazine Vi aseater wrote: “Ten years’ dream in the final phase”. Furthermore, according to the ASEA Journal, one of the most important tasks of the Central Laboratories was to act as the “eyes of the company into the future”. The generous use of glass, for example, in the staircases acted as symbol of these eyes. Especially the nuclear-power laboratory was an important visual sign of the advanced technology that ASEA worked on.

Special attention was laid on the huge workshop hall Sigurd in Finnslätten and it was often presented in the company publications. Finnslätten area became an important production unit for ASEA when the expansion in the city centre came to an end. These modern, rational, one-floor workshop buildings with large parking areas, offices and modern staff restaurants formed the 1960s’ industrial site emphasising the large scale, typical for the period. The site was exploited at maximum and no natural green areas, such as at Strömberg, were remained.

As these examples show, industrial buildings are important images of business activities and they also reveal the messages of the company. Therefore, architecture and the built environment could be used to give additional information about business activities.

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