

Peter Celsing, Stockholm

Local Heroes #10
Peter Celsing
1920-1974

By Giles Townshend
March 2014

Color photos:
Giles Townshend

Local Heroes is
an initiative of
Office Winhov

My introduction to the work of the Swedish architect Peter Celsing was a series of photographs of Harlanda Church (Gothenburg, 1959) taken by Kalle Söderman. The small cluster of buildings seemed to be supportive of each other, possessing what Florian Beigel might describe as “something like the awkwardness of a good friend”. A group of distinct characters they were unified by their use of a single material: a robust Helsingborg brick. The formal simplicity was enriched by a loose, asymmetrical arrangement of windows tempering their monumentality and making them seem friendly and approachable. The subtle way in which the material was handled spoke of a consistent but undogmatic approach.



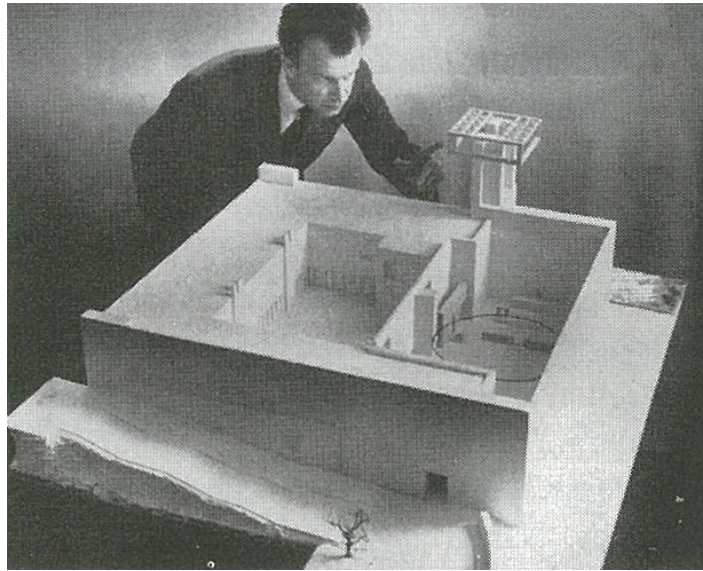
What struck me most strongly was that they clearly embodied the traces of someone who took pleasure in looking carefully and making adjustments. They retained the freshness of a sketch; the small shifts in scale and proportion suggesting someone working from intuition rather than a rigidly defined set of rules.

My enthusiasm for the church led me to explore Celsing's work further and in 2012 I was fortunate to be able to make a trip to Stockholm to experience it in person. Celsing lived and worked for most of his career in the city and it is here that the majority of his buildings can be found. His body of work was diverse encompassing everything from individual houses to some of the most prominent public institutions in the city. No matter what the scale or programme there is a clear line through the work; it is a quiet, robust architecture realised in a limited material palette. There is always a clarity to the architectural ideas but they also possess a relaxed quality, never seeming overworked.

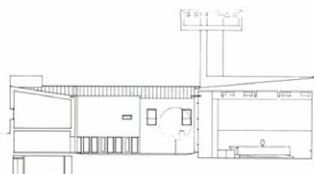


Harlanda Church, Gothenburg (1959)



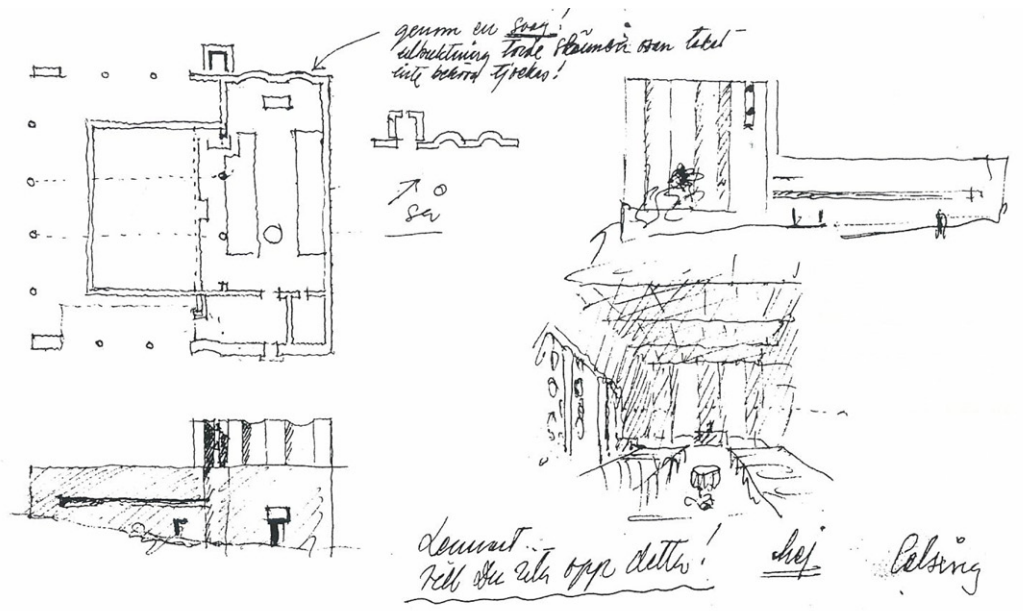


Upon arrival in Stockholm I began to walk through the Norrmalm district of the city and I was immediately struck by the charming idiosyncrasies of the city's 19th century architecture. For me the buildings possessed something of the quality of Belgian houses occupying a rich and evocative space between convention and individuality. There is an echo of this in Celsing's work that I find particularly inspiring: he is someone who can evoke the power of the familiar, drawing strength from a shared language of forms and types. I get the sense that the openness and anonymity of the modern city gave him a position from which he could have an open dialog with history.

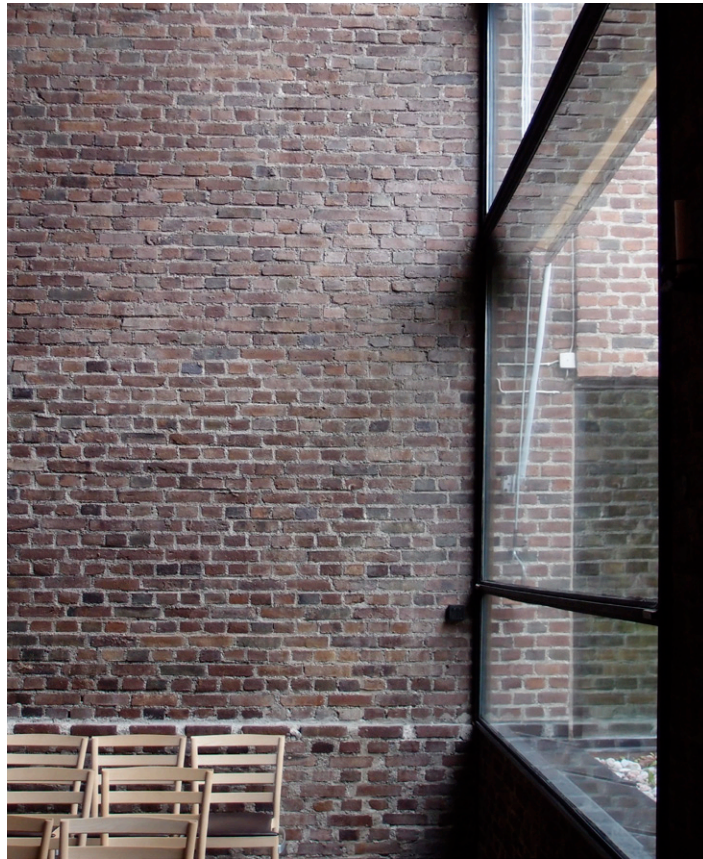


St. Thomas church, Vällingby, Stockholm (1959)





St. Thomas church, Vallby, Stockholm (1959)



During my trip the building that I spent the most time with was the Church of St. Thomas (1959) in the suburb of Vällingby. Approaching the church it seems to adopt a somewhat ambiguous relationship to the commercial banality of its surroundings. While it is at once more archaic and elemental than its neighbours it is neither patronising nor dominant, content to sit comfortably next to them. Like Harlanda, the same rich dark brick is used both internally and externally giving texture and relief to the building's clear geometric forms. The brickwork has an enveloping, fabric like quality which is modulated in a number of subtle ways throughout the building. The material expression of the main hall is particularly impressive as Celsing introduces a series of horizons refining the monolithic expression of the walls. A tripartite division is defined by protruding brickwork bands at the top and bottom of the wall which feature larger mortar joints emphasising their decorative quality. A series of the details found here have been reinterpreted in the Årsta Church by Peter Celsing's son Johan to great effect.

The church is inwards facing with a series of spaces with different uses and distinct spatial characters lit by windows addressing the courtyard which sits at the heart of the plan. This well proportioned garden room offers a place of quiet reflection which feels entirely removed from the more everyday context of the neighbourhood. While Celsing's work has been overshadowed by that of Sigurd Lewerentz (with whom he collaborated for a number of years) there is something about his work that I found more approachable; more tolerant and relaxed. It has some of the same material intensity but feels more directly relatable to as an inspiration for everyday practice.



St. Thomas church, Vällingby, Stockholm (1959)

Peter Celsing







St. Thomas church, Vällingby, Stockholm (1959)





Kulturhuset, Stockholm
(1974)

Towards the end of his career Celsing designed some of the largest public buildings in Stockholm. It struck me that while Celsing's work is a consistent presence throughout the city it rarely dominates, content to provide a backdrop to human activity. It is an egalitarian architecture where high and low culture, roughness and refinement can sit comfortably together. While the scale of Celsing's later works vastly exceeds his early churches they possess a similar loose accommodating approach to material and detail that embodies them with a human touch despite their size. The rusticated granite masonry of the Swedish National Bank (1976) and the film strip like concrete panels of the Filminstitut (1971) for example succeed in softening the extreme repetition of the facades.

Visiting these buildings it is clear that Celsing respected the intelligence and sophistication of his fellow residents. They are not public buildings concerned with dominance and monumentality; they demonstrate a confidence in people and society.

While Celsing often designed furniture and signage for use within his buildings somehow the connotations of a Gesamtkunstwerk seem inappropriate. The buildings never seem to be about control, rather they offer a precisely defined atmosphere which allows inhabitation to take place. The level of care and craft in his buildings never renders them precious but is vital in defining the robustness of their character as elements within the city.



Kulturhuset, Stockholm (1974)





National Bank of Sweden, Stockholm (1975)



National Bank of Sweden, Stockholm (1975)





Olaus Petri Church, Stockholm (1959)



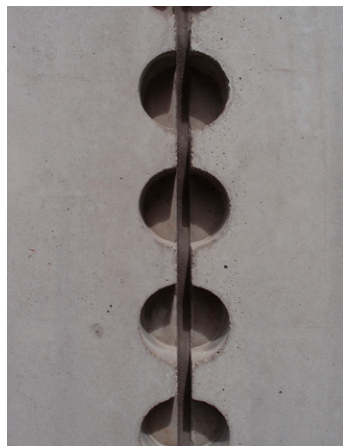
Former Swedish Shell filling station (now tourist information centre), Stockholm (1956)



Blackeberg station, Stockholm (1952)







Filmhuset, Stockholm (1970)



Adresses:

Svenska Filminstitutet 1964-1970
Borgvägen 1 Gärdet (Stockholm)
Tel: +46 8-665 11 00

Vällingby kyrka / st Thomas kyrka Stockhom 1953-1959
Kirunagatan 9-11 162 68 Vällingby (Stockholm)

Sveriges Riksbank 1965-1976
Brunkebergstorg 11 111 51 Stockholm
Tel: +46 8 787 00 00

Kulturhuset 1965-1974
Sergels torg Stockholm

Olaus Petri kyrka 1955-1959
Armfeltsgatan 2, 115 34 Stockholm
Tel: +46 8 442 51 00 ☐

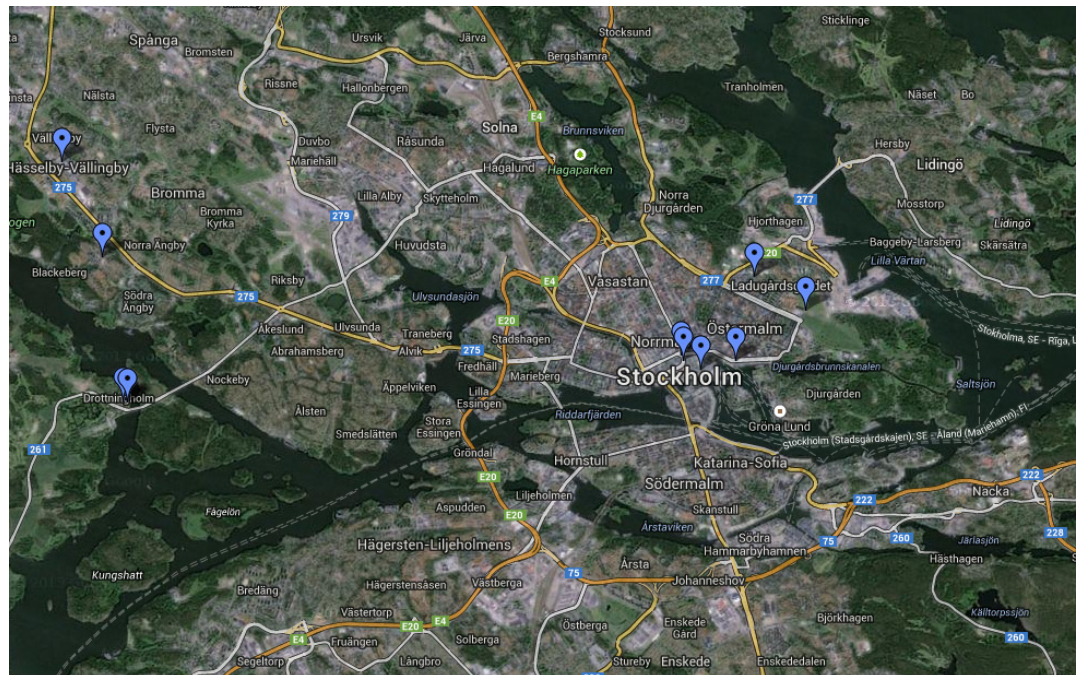
Blackeberg T-bana (metro station) 1948-1952
Vinjegatan 5 Stockholm

Restaurant Operakällaren 1955-1961
(Peter Celsing / Bengt H. Jonson / Nils Tesch)
The Royal Opera House Karl XIIIs torg Stockholm

Villa Friis 1952-1955
Gustav IIIIs väg 1 178 93 Drottningholm Stockholm

Villa Klockberga 1966-1969
Klockbergastigen 3 178 93 Drottningholm (Stockholm)

Shell Strandvägen 1954-1956 (now Tourist office)
Strandvägen Stockholm



Google map:
<https://maps.google.nl/maps/ms?msid=205338011598657162802.0004b8237aa4d21fc35d0&msa=0&dg=feature>

Adresses:

Härlanda kyrka 1952-1959
Härlandavägen 23 416 72 Gothenburg

Biblioteket Carolina Rediviva 1953-1962
Dag Hammarskjölds Väg 1 752 37
Uppsala +46 18 471 39 00

Stockholms Nation Uppsala 1963-1968
Resoration, alterations and enlargement (current
staus unknown)
Drottninggatan 11 753 10 Uppsala

Humanistiskt-samhällsvetenskapligt centrum Uppsala
1970-1975 (currently the Library for Economic Scien-
ces)
Peter Celsing, Bengt S. Carlberg and Stig Hermansson
Kyrkogårdsgatan 10, plan 2 753 13 Uppsala

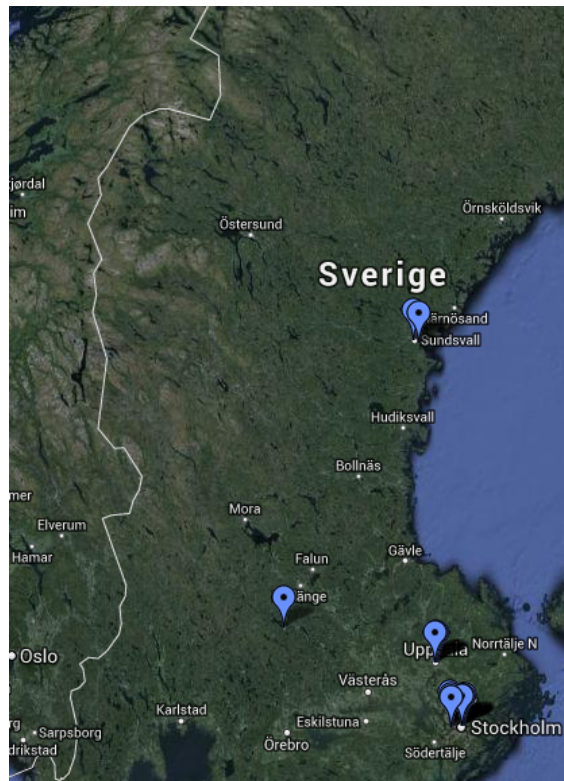
Almtuna Kyrka 1956-1959
Torkelsgatan 2 D Uppsala
+46 18 12 29 37

Nacksta / st Olof kyrka 1965-1969
Midälrvägen 2 Nacksta, Sundsvall

Manager's Residence 1961
Alvagen 1 Sundsvall

Krematorium Ludvika 1956-58
Lyviks kyrkogård ☐ Ludvika

Bolidens kyrka 1955-1960
Södra Parkvägen 8 936 32 Boliden



Google map:

<https://maps.google.nl/maps/ms?msid=205338011598657162802.0004b8237aa4d21fc35d0&msa=0&dg=feature>



Archive material

-Peter Celsing - The Facade is the Meeting between Outside and Inside
Marja-Ritta Norri and Maija Karkkinen (ed.), Finnish Museum of Architecture, 1992
-The Architecture of Peter Celsing
Wilfried Wang, Arkitektur Forlag 1996
- Adversus Populum - Peter Celsing och Sigurd Lewerentz sakralarkitektur 1945 -1975
Lars Ridderstedt
Hallgen and Fallgren 1998

Books

-Peter Celsing - En bok om en arkitekt och hans verk (Swedish), Lars Olof Larsson (ed.), Liber förlag 1972
-Peter Celsing - The Facade is the Meeting between Outside and Inside, Marja-Ritta Norri and Maija Karkkinen (ed.), Finnish Museum of Architecture, 1992
-The Architecture of Peter Celsing, Wilfried Wang, Arkitektur Forlag, 1996
- Adversus Populum - Peter Celsing och Sigurd Lewerentz sakralarkitektur 1945 -1975
Lars Ridderstedt
Hallgen and Fallgren 1998
- Oase #57 - Architecture on the Edge of Social Democracy,
The Stockholm Film House by Peter Celsing
Tony Fretton
OASE Foundation & NAI Publishers 2001



St. Thomas church, Vällingby, Stockholm (1959)

