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Giving Stockholm a New Profile

By Carin Stahlberg

The mounted police sometimes exercise their horses on Blasieholm Square in the heart of Stockholm, training them to expect the unexpected. Such as encountering two full-sized bronze horses, magnificent and immobile even though caught in full motion, hooves lifted. If happens that the police horses leave little piles behind just by the bronze horses, making Japanese tourists approach the horses with a certain awed apprehension.

Sivert Lindblom laughs at this. He is responsible for the artistic concept of the square. Designed the public space, as it is called.

-- Public? It sounds a bit too authoritarian. I prefer to call it common space.

Sivert Lindblom is a sculptor. He prefers not to be called artist, which he finds too vague, too pretentious. To him, to label something art implies a value judgement, a seal of quality after the fact.

-- No one has been able to explain to me what art is, he says.

If you take a walk in Stockholm, you sooner or later come across his works. His stamp is on the bridge with the urns on the beautifully curved brick walls along the highway at Haga Norra. Also the spiraling brick columns on the university campus. Others are the forecourt of the Royal Library and the subway station at Västra Skogen. And Blasieholm Square. A much praised Italianate renaissance *piazza* surrounded by turn-of-the-century buildings which present their swelling balconies toward the square with its rider-less horses, urns and a fountain that is closed for the winter.

-- Some criticized the fact that I, who call my-

self a sculptor, had copies made of sculptures from antiquity. It was a challenge to my own generation, but I wanted to show them the superb quality of these sculptures, he says, explaining:

-- We have lost the concept of quality, in my judgement, and put up all kinds of junk.

Sivert Lindblom is a quiet man with a gray crewcut that accentuates the sculptural form of his head. His face is furrowed with laugh lines. His style is relaxed, elegant, classical, simple. You find yourself wishing that more men of his age would dress that way, instead of their cloth caps and windbreakers. Every now and then, he resorts to strong language, but, on the whole, the impression is that of a person of calm observation, who thinks before he speaks.

He remains largely unknown outside circles dealing with sculpture, architecture and art. But if you point out his profiles, done on a lathe and seemingly in motion, the reaction is often: ``Oh, I never knew they were *his!*``

Anonymity does not bother him. Likewise, he shrugs when asked whether people on their way to work actually *see* his works, in the sense that they take time to reflect on their expression.

-- Oh, I don't know. The decisive thing, in my estimation, is the subconscious experience. The feeling. It is often not enough to base an analysis on. A Roman boy playing soccer on a classical *piazza*, framed by pillars and columns, will carry a relationship to monumentality with him for the rest of his life. It is nothing he is conscious of, but it is there.

The way we relate to forms, space and material turns into experiences and memories. They function as references to other shapes or as triggers of

emotive responses to similar shapes and materials that we encounter later in life.

-- Take bronze, for instance. Many consider bronze the most beautiful metal there is. But someone whose dog is crushed by a bronze statue falling on it will carry with him a negative relationship to bronze, he says.

He tells me about a woman, a former World War II concentration camp inmate, who called him to complain that the brick columns on the University campus reminded her of the camps and their tall smokestacks, belching smoke. They were also brick.

-- I appeal to the viewer through my idiom, but the experience is his or hers. I shape something whose surface embraces something, a vessel which the viewer then fills with his own brew, his experience.

Sivert Lindblom is not only represented in Stockholm but in many places in Sweden: Malmö, Norrköping, Gävle and Uppsala to name a few. He belongs to the small group of sculptors who receive a constant stream of commissions. Maybe it is partly because he has no need to show off. The most important thing is to get the objects to fit in, as objects, in their setting.

-- I try to activate space. My works do not primarily manifest me as an individual.

He has found and strengthened his idiom in classicist architecture with its roots in antiquity, an idiom that has been described as aesthetic, quiet, timeless and sophisticated. He works with fundamental shapes: circles, rectangles, squares, spheres, columns, spirals and pyramids. The aim of the objects is to activate and participate.

-- I have been snooping, looking and reflecting on the forms of expression of various epochs all my life. How they designed their city landscapes. It has been more inspiring than the study of a single master sculptor, he says, maintaining that he will never grow tired of shapes. My interest is constant, manic and filled with delight.

-- I may walk down a street that I have walked every day for thirty, forty years and suddenly catch sight of something new. An ornamentation or a beautifully shaped attic window. When I travel

and I travel a lot - I always go looking for visual experiences. It does not have to be anything special, epoch-making or magnificent.

Any criticism of Sivert Lindblom tends to be low-key. It never centers on an individual sculpture but on the fact that he, unlike most others, gets so many commissions.

-- What do you want me to do about that?, he says. I was in my forties before I started to get any at all.

How does a commission come about? Well, someone asks for help with designing a public square, for example. If it sounds interesting he starts to produce sketch after sketch. And more sketches. It might take a year. Then he presents his concept, the final sketch. Then follow discussions with the client who sometimes has new views and wishes. Sometimes they give him free reins from start to finish. This is not, however, the ideal scenario for Lindblom. He welcomes limits, restraints and a set period of time. Freedom always has to relate to limits.

Criticism he sees as a challenge that may lead to fresh ideas.

-- As a professional you have to be able to take it if a proposal is not accepted. Peter Celsing, whom I worked with for many years, taught me much about this. When he was turned down, he started all over. He was full of ideas and alternatives.

Sivert Lindblom joined Peter Celsing's architect's office in the late fifties. He worked there evenings, constructing models. During the days he attended the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. How did he get there? Why did he become a sculptor?

A great deal of the credit goes to his old art teacher in Eskilstuna where he grew up. His father was sheet metal worker and his mother a shop assistant. It was during the war and outside pressures reinforced social cohesion in the town, he remembers. Wartime life wasn't all bad.

-- We were a group of boys that played together. We drew pictures, built miniature cities, airplanes and boats and made all kind of inventions. We investigated and availed ourselves of everything, using the imagination that goes with the age. We had plenty of material, there was plenty of industrial

scrap material. It was a creative environment.

His art teacher simply drew up a plan for Sivert Lindblom, her student. A professional plan, the ultimate goal of which was that he was to succeed her in the position of art teacher. So he applied to the College of Art and Design to become an art teacher and was admitted. There he struggled with charcoal still lifes of police helmets, beer steins and stuffed birds.

He also met Marianne Bosshard, a future interior designer, whom he married and who now is his closest collaborator. They had two children and worked hard, as the parents of young children, to juggle children, studies and finances.

When I ask if he remembers his first job he falls silent, thinking hard. It was a crucifix for a chapel at Smögen, on the West Coast. He worked in a carpenter's shop. Lived in a rented room and was given coffee and sandwiches piled high with shrimp every morning. He remembers the shrimp sandwiches very well.

He lived in Switzerland with his family for a spell. There he made the acquaintance of a wood turner, a strange little man, who helped him put into practice his ideas of the turned profiles. And, indeed, the concept has followed him throughout the years in a number of variations, although he is rather tired of it by now.

-- I am past that. If I were a professional, I might have continued to develop the concept and tried to introduce it to a wider audience.

Sivert Lindblom refuses to get stuck in an idiom, mannerism or convention. He refuses to take the easy way out.

During another period he held a chair at the Royal Academy and taught there. He tired of this, finding that it took too much time away from his own creative work.

-- I felt that the students were not interested in the qualities that interested me, he says, adding: there are so many fascinating things so why not learn from them? It provokes me and I find it very sad that we don't give a damn. It is too thin, somehow, and we end up lacking a sense of history.

One of his most recent commissions was a memorial to Holocaust victims next to the Jewish

synagogue by Kungsträdgården in Stockholm. It was the most difficult commission of his life, he says.

-- It was incredibly interesting, but what squabbling! There were many conflicting opinions and wills and proposals before we arrived at today's solution. I personally find one of my earlier ideas better.

Nevertheless, he seems quite satisfied and has every right to be so. Standing in the narrow, cobbled alley of Aaron Isaac a raw winter day with the wind blowing past the 8 000 names carved in the huge blocks of granite creates a sense of tension. Wrought-iron grilles of joined Stars of David span the stone tablets, and on the three-foot pediment, a number of small stones have been left, as is the Jewish custom - along with a frozen bouquet of tulips. In the background, by the entrance to the synagogue, you make out a Menorah of oxidized bronze. Apart from the wind, everything is still but it nevertheless conveys the knocks on the doors, the overcrowding, the anxiety, the sense of being shut in. As it must have been.

-- I also proposed an eternal flame on the site as a many-layered symbol, he says.

But so far, there is no flame. Maybe precisely because it is in the memory of the viewer that his experience of art and place, exist.