

# CONTESTED SPACES OF NOVELTY AND HERITAGE

## REPRESENTING AND BUILDING NEW UNIVERSITIES IN POST-WAR SWEDEN AND BRITAIN

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Building a new university or a university college is to materialise ideas of higher education. It is also an act that forms spaces of heritage, novelty and education. Although these spaces are formed, and continually transformed, by international developments, they have their basic roots in local circumstances. In this article British and Swedish post-war efforts are compared by concentrating on the British examples of the University of East Anglia in Norwich and the University of Essex in Colchester, and on the Swedish university colleges, Södertörn University College in Flemingsberg-Stockholm and Gotland University in Visby. The aim is to examine how the built milieu transforms space, and how university space is represented through the dialectics of novelty and heritage and of local place and international space. The differences between the British and Swedish examples are vast, and the objective of the comparison is to single out features which explain the main issues of the forming of spaces of heritage and novelty in both university milieus.

The British *Robbins Report on Higher Education* of 1963 can be seen as one of the major starting points of the transformation of the higher education system throughout Europe.<sup>1</sup> In many European countries, a social demand for university-level education was rising from the 1960s, emanating from the post-war era's growth in population numbers, the welfare state systems, and an emerging industrial crisis – which demanded more skilled labour. General attempts to democratise the universities were the result.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the interest for universities was growing as a way of boosting regional prosperity, and thus becoming an important part of regional politics.<sup>3</sup>

Major reforms in higher education started in Sweden a decade later than in Britain, but a similar shift in the attitude towards universities and university colleges

had taken place already in the 1960s. To harbour this new form of higher education and to create new spaces of science and education, new buildings and new milieus had to be built in both countries. In Britain, financing and controlling the outcome of the building programmes was initially a national matter.<sup>4</sup> Also in Sweden this was the case through the foundation of new universities in Umeå (1965) and Linköping (1975) and a number of decentralised university branches throughout the country which have their early history in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Even greater efforts took place from 1977 onwards, by the transformation of small university branches and teacher training colleges into university colleges or proper universities.<sup>6</sup> And although most of these new institutions in Sweden were rather small in contrast with the new British universities, their

building programmes included the idea of how the modern university system should be represented and how the university colleges should be understood in the context of representation of novelty and heritage.

Building seven new universities in Britain in the 1960s was the largest singular investment in higher education ever conducted and has been described as the formation of the first “university system” in Britain.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, the investment in new universities and university colleges in Sweden in the 1990s was small. Still, there are a number of similar ideas and political decisions in both countries leading to these investments in university education.

## THE BUILT MILIEU

In the architectural community of the 1960s, British university buildings were the most prestigious projects at hand.<sup>8</sup> In Sweden, in the 1990s and the early 21st century, building projects for higher education also became major tasks.<sup>9</sup> The need of the universities to make themselves noticed through prestigious projects often led to an architecture visualising more of the ideas of the universities than of their realities.

Let us start with the inner city renewal of Birmingham and the architectural and urban planning community of the 1960s. “Somehow, like much Swedish town planning, it is correct seemly, yet dull.”<sup>10</sup> And who wants to be dull? The author in *Architectural Review* found Birmingham too correct, not a city to remember and even less a place where you would like to move to.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1960s, the fear of being dull, not being able to compete, was immanent in many British cities threatened by the decline of industry and the fear of what the future had to bring. A way of offering an alternative had been to build a university, or at least, new spectacular buildings within the old

university campuses. The University of Birmingham commissioned Arup Architects to design their new Arts and Commerce building as a skyscraper, or as *Architectural Review* described it, “an elegant urbane tower”.<sup>12</sup>

However, the critics were not yet satisfied. The building did not fit in “to what is already an ill-assembled cacophony of architectural voices”.<sup>13</sup> To be perceived as a university the buildings needed coherence. Building new universities in Britain during the 1960s implied building all-embracing concepts as campuses and not ill-fitting separate buildings, even though they were spectacular. The opposition against single entities had grown as soon as the plans for new universities started to be realised. In the early years of the decade, a new, modern and distinctive university building could be seen as an example which “[...] reinforces the impression that a kind of Darwinian, laissez-faire is mandatory in hammering out new buildings”.<sup>14</sup> The need of realizing the built university space as a novelty, as something which could harbour and construct a new and modern university system, could in the long run not be comprehended through a single building. A university system needed a system of buildings to be properly framed.

## TOWN, REGION, AND SPACES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Urban planning and the planning of universities have a lot in common. They have both planned systems, including public areas, transport systems and housing. In their early years, the new universities in Britain were even outstanding examples of a new democratic city planning.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, the universities situated at campuses represented the ideal town, with all the benefits of the city life but in a controlled fashion; where heavy industry, unemployment or

traffic jams could not disrupt the flow of the community.

All universities had a hosting town even though they were often situated on the outskirts. Willingly or not, connective spaces of labour, regional politics and students existed. And the universities also shared and were connected by a built, as well as an imagined space, with their hosting cities. It was expected of the new universities in Britain and the university colleges in Sweden to signal prosperity and a bright future for the cities. Even though they were new entities in the area, they had to connect to, or contest, the local heritage of place. Birmingham had a university which was founded by the city, for the city; Colchester hoped that the city would prosper by the University of Essex; and the municipality of Norwich regarded the University of East Anglia as the long awaited and rightfully earned symbol of prominence.<sup>16</sup> Still, the universities themselves were not keen to be seen as regional universities, rooted in the local context.

In the Swedish examples 30 years later, the Gotland University was established as the result of the county administrative

board's educational policy, and thus from the start it was more local than national.<sup>17</sup> When, in 1998, the county administrative board's educational collaboration with the universities in Uppsala and Stockholm was transformed into a national university college, efforts were made as regards of both buildings and imagination to make the city of Visby a university town. Today, the university college in Visby presents itself to new students as: "Located in the World Heritage city of Visby, the university is naturally enhanced by the rich historical and cultural atmosphere of Gotland."<sup>18</sup> In the case of Gotland University, the city of Visby and the county of Gotland are crucial for the identity of the university college. This lack of conflict in Gotland and the difference in general between new foundations in Britain and Sweden with regard to their local/national character can be explained by the different historical heritage in both countries.

In Britain, there existed a nearly 100-year-old tradition of civic universities with a reputation of being second class, or even third class, in comparison with the so-called real universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The Ziqrats (student housing) of UEA. Photo: Henrik Widmark.



For the new universities of the 1960s it was extremely important to emphasize the difference between, for instance, the University of Birmingham on one hand and the University of East Anglia on the other. Birmingham was founded during the Edwardian era and went down in history as a typical example of a “Red brick university”. Bruce Truscot, author of the book *Red Brick universities* and inventor of the expression, wrote in 1944: “Their foundation is due to local effort, their endowments come largely from local pockets; they are aided from grants of local municipal authorities; and their students, though to a slowly decreasing extent, are drawn from local areas.”<sup>19</sup> Being local or regional included also that they could never compete on the same terms as the Oxbridge Colleges. And above all, they were placed “in the midst of the humblest dwellings – not far removed, to put it bluntly, from slums.”<sup>20</sup> They were built by “[...] a light stone which the coal-dust of the city quickly turned to dismal and depressing grey, or a hideously cheerful red brick suggesting of something between a super council school and a holiday home for children.” In other words, they did not even look like Cambridge or Oxford. Half a century later, they still had “[...] the grinning red brick, the dirty grey stone and the unspeakable blue and yellow tiles”.

Truscot noticed that some of them had made modern additions of architecturally high standards, which functioned as indications for the fact that education and academic staff also had raised their standards. However, twenty years later, most of these additions were thought to be problematic, as we have seen. In consequence, the new universities of the 1960s needed new dwellings of the highest architectural standards in order to prove that the educational policies of the 1960s were different. The modern universities were just as universal as Oxford and Cambridge and not local. They were in-

tended to educate the post-war generation of the new civil elite, and most importantly, they were not red brick universities. To conclude, Gotland University could benefit from the tradition and the heritage of the local community, without any risk of being connected with an ill-reputed university type. The British universities of the 1960s, on the other hand, had to dislocate themselves from the local entities to avoid being compared with the tradition of the local red brick universities.

## STUDENT HOUSING AND CAMPUSES

One concrete way to avoid the fate of being provincial was to build campuses outside the town. In these campuses, isolated from the city life, a new democratic student body could develop. While discussing the new universities as places of modern democracy, a commentator wrote: “A number of students living at home are not a university, merely belated children”.<sup>21</sup> One of the important reasons why the university should not be situated in the city centre was therefore to make sure that the students became a student body and not merely individuals being educated.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, they needed to live together. For the same reason, student apartments became one of the most symbolic tasks of the building programmes. They were not mere places to sleep; instead, they incarnated the idea of the modern university. At the University of Essex student tower blocks were built as the tallest brick buildings in England, and at the University of East Anglia spectacular student houses were built, framing the university towards the open fields. Even though in the age of modernism architecture claimed to have no symbolical values, the building schemes left no doubt about the fact that their architectural expression represented much more than just forms generated by function.

The student houses, together with the formation of the campuses as ‘city centres’, with all necessary services such as shops, restaurants and banks around inner squares, formed small towns of their own. By isolating and constructing a 24-hour town life, the students did not need to get in contact with the civil city. And by manifesting this in highly symbolical architecture, where student accommodation was represented as the core of the universities, the buildings themselves should consequently nurture and mediate these values.

In Sweden, student accommodation on university campuses had not been on the agenda. However, especially Gotland University had difficulties in housing students in Visby, precisely because the number of students on the campus was reduced to a minimum.<sup>23</sup> Since the tradition of building colleges or campuses in the British fashion did not exist, the housing problem could not be solved or represented as being part of the university idea. Student housing facilities in Sweden were built by private contractors, civil housing boards or student housing associations, and formed independent “societies”, separated from the university areas. Neither Gotland nor Södertörn have, or plan to have, any student housing associated to the main university campuses. Living and university life are thus regarded as separate spheres. In consequence, students’ spare time and hours of study at home are considered belonging to the private sphere, whereas seminars and going to the library are regarded as part of the university sphere. This distinction between the private sphere and the university sphere also mediates a different idea of what higher education is, and what it expects from the students, compared to the situation in Britain.

Since the reforms of 1977 and 1993, planning of higher education in Sweden has been to a large extent a question of regional politics, and consequently universities were

not necessarily isolated from the towns to the same extent. This becomes obvious by comparing the University of Gotland with Södertörn University College.<sup>24</sup> The campus at Södertörn indicates in its built structure the role of the university as a place of education and research, separated from private life. In Södertörn the university college is totally isolated from local Flemingsberg, and the main buildings form a curved shield towards the nearby housing areas. Although the housing areas and the local centre of Flemingsberg share the railway station with the university, they have different exits from the platform and coincidental meetings between local dwellers and students from Södertörn are thus discarded. The university space in Södertörn is similar to the British examples in its exclusiveness and isolation from the local municipality, but both differ in space and time meant to be spent on the campuses. In its built space Södertörn focuses on the idea of research and higher education, while the private sphere is left to the civil society to take care for.

## TAKING UP OR TAKING ON TRADITION

“Each time we create a new set of institutions intended (rightly) to be different from Oxford and Cambridge, with sometimes more prosaic but equally vitally purposes – whether they be the Post Robbins universities in the 1960s or the polytechnics of the 1970s, a slow unacknowledged status creep gets under way.”<sup>25</sup> According to Lord Annan, one of the major political actors in the field of higher education in post-war Britain, institutions could not ignore tradition and history. Tradition is immanent in the university system, and either you choose your own place in the tradition or a place is given to you.

But the new universities in Britain, just like those in Sweden, had no history beyond

the decades of political decision-making and pre-educational efforts. Of course they belonged to the tradition of the educational system of their respective country and to the universally acknowledged tradition of the university with its roots in medieval Europe. But tradition is also based on the dialectics of locality and internationality; in other words the dialectics of *genius loci* or the universality of global space. Also the dialectics of heritage and novelty played a major part in the construction of the new universities and colleges.

Eventually, traditions were, and still are, chosen by the universities themselves or by the different actors in the ongoing debate on university education. John Carswell, who worked for a long time as civil servant in the national administration of the British universities and as Secretary of the University Grants Committee, wrote about red brick universities in the 1930s: "As a result metropolitan style pervaded, and was even exaggerated in academic life of the provinces. Manners were more formal, discipline stricter, innovation of Curriculum less common, eccentricity less acceptable."<sup>26</sup> There was

no way of not comparing the new universities with primarily Oxford and Cambridge or the University of London, but the fear existed, as earlier noticed, to be compared with the red brick institutions.

In Sweden, the new universities and university colleges had no red brick tradition to dissociate them from. Instead, they had to take on the local tradition or the tradition of the established universities. And as always, there was also the possibility of being a novelty. Identity is primarily formed in opposition to something or as a craving to be a part of something.<sup>27</sup> This is most apparent in the foundation of the new universities. Becoming a university in Britain was always at risk of becoming a pale reflection of Cambridge or Oxford. Becoming a university in Sweden in the 1990s on the other hand, meant primarily to challenge the idea of just being part of regional politics. But as Sven Eric Liedman, professor of the History of Science and Ideas at Gothenburg University, describes it: the "frozen ideologies of the universities" prevail inside the university system, in the new institutions as well as in the old; and thus, becoming a uni-



Gotland University, main building. Photo: Henrik Widmark.

versity in Britain or Sweden in the post-war era means taking up or taking on the university tradition.<sup>28</sup> This also had an effect on the built environment and on how the universities regarded themselves as part of a local tradition, a national or even a universal history of universities. A way of holding on to the tradition, and also challenging the tradition, was through built space and the history of place.

## A REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

The new British universities were not seen as regional investments which were intended as compensations or boosters for a district in decline. They were even criticised for isolating themselves from the local industry, for instance, by concentrating on humanities instead of on natural sciences or technology.<sup>29</sup> The new universities were national investments and institutions under the rule of the University Grants Committee. In the years immediately preceding the decision about the University of East Anglia, there was a strong faction in Norwich who wanted to situate the university in the heart of town.<sup>30</sup> The idea was to connect local Norwich with the university, to benefit from exchange between the university and the local town, and simultaneously to shape Norwich into a new Cambridge or Oxford. However, according to the University Grants Committee there was no possible reason to follow that idea. A major part of the new universities were situated close to old towns with a long history, as in the case of Colchester and the University of Essex, or even more favourable, close to old cathedral towns, like Norwich.<sup>31</sup> By locating them in such an environment the Committee aimed to connect these new universities to the European university tradition. But at the same time, the choice of locating the university outside Norwich, in a campus

isolated from the city, “firmly put paid to any such nostalgia”, as the influential architect Lionel Brett wrote in *Architectural Review* in 1963.<sup>32</sup>

The location of the universities was decided after applications from local authorities, but once the decision was made, the role of the local municipalities was nominal. Building the universities on one large campus outside the city centre, underlined this separation between town and gown. Besides, the immense scale of the new institutions also implied that large areas in the outskirts of town were the only possible sites at hand. The University of Essex and the University of East Anglia were both located two miles from the city centre of their respective cities, Colchester and Norwich. Establishing campus universities also indicated a new form of educational practice with new principles of organisation, which harboured everything needed during the years as a student. Representing the modern university stood in sharp contrast with being part of the local town; it was meant to be a community of its own. In the guide to the exhibition of the development plan for the University of Essex, the university was presented as: “[...] conceived as an efficient, modern community for learning and living”.<sup>33</sup> Its novelty had to represent the frontline of the society, as an isolated field of knowledge with democratic values.

Notwithstanding the fact that this opposition against local entities was not directly oriented towards municipal engagement of the Oxbridge colleges, still it was often emphasized that Magdalene College in Cambridge is part of the city of Cambridge, whereas the University of Essex never intended to be part of Colchester and has not become so either. To build the ideal new university, it was apparently not allowed to take into account local traditions or to be part of the municipal life of the vicinities. As has been pointed out before,



### **Kan ett universitet vara tio år ungt?**

another essential feature of these universities was to place themselves in a tradition. In the decades following, this endeavour of the universities became more important, and at the same time the regional factor became stronger.

In 2002, the history of the University of East Anglia was published in an extensive volume, and the story started from Norwich before the Danish occupation in 920. The history of Norwich is presented thoroughly from the middle ages onwards, and in that sense the history of the University of East Anglia is connected to the long history of the town. The university was given a local, old history, but at the same time the idea of novelty was maintained.<sup>34</sup> As such, connecting novelty and heritage became a main feature of the university. The written history of the University of Essex is more modest in size and can only be read on the internet. Moreover, it focuses on recent history. However, in the presentation of facts and figures the university points out to be part of Britain's oldest recorded town, with a history starting in Roman times. Gotland University presents itself as a centre of study which has existed since the middle ages, when the first known school was opened. The only exception in

this line is Södertörn University College. In its campaign advertisements for the application for the university status, there is the rhetoric question if a university can be only ten years old. Södertörn is located in a region where most of the municipalities only have a thirty-year history. In consequence, the university leaves history and locality behind in its presentation, and focuses on excellence and novelty. By doing so, they reinforce what the built campus already mediates.

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<sup>1</sup> On the significance of the Robbins Report for the British system, see: Scott 1998, 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> Scott 1995, 73 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Florax 1992, 5 and Olsson and Wiberg 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Carswell 1985, 17-20.

<sup>5</sup> Olsson and Wiberg 2003, 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> *De första 20 åren* 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs 1963, 233.

<sup>8</sup> *The Universities build* 1963, 231 and Powers 2007, 152 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Caldenby 1999, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ginsburg 1969, 7.

<sup>11</sup> On post-war city planning in Birmingham, see: Bullock 2002, 234-237.

<sup>12</sup> Rock 1969, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Rock 1969, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobus, 1964, 253.

<sup>15</sup> *The Universal University* 1963, 284.

<sup>16</sup> Brogan 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Isacsson 1996, 20-24 and 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Welcome to Gotland University* 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Truscot 1944, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Truscot 1944, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *The Universal University* 1963, 284.

<sup>22</sup> Muthesius 2000, 151 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Högskolan på Gotland* 2003, 4.

- <sup>24</sup> On the architecture of Södertörn, see: Bodin 2002, 28-29; Svensson and Forsmark 2002, 20-27 and Konnander 1998, 83-85.
- <sup>25</sup> Lord Annan in *Cam Cambridge Alumni magazine* (spring 1992), cited in Ellis 1994, 319.
- <sup>26</sup> Carswell 1985, 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Hall 1996, 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Olsson and Wiberg 2003, 41-61 and 193, Liedman 1997, 50 ff.
- <sup>29</sup> Sanderson 1999, 94 ff.
- <sup>30</sup> Sanderson 2002, 73 ff.
- <sup>31</sup> Brett 1963, 258.
- <sup>32</sup> Brett 1963, 258.
- <sup>33</sup> *Guide to the exhibition* s.d.
- <sup>34</sup> Sanderson 2002, 1-5.

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