

Buildings in Stockholm: The Impact of Socio-cultural Environment on Swedish Cinema

Shuxiang Wang

School of Humanities and Arts, Xi'an FanYi University, Xi'an, 710105, Shaanxi, China

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Abstract: This essay examines how changes in Stockholm's architecture between the 1960s and 1980s reflect the evolving socio-cultural environment of Sweden's welfare state and influence Swedish cinema. Drawing on a range of non-fiction films and selected feature films, it analyzes three key dimensions: the modernisation of building exteriors and interior layouts, the cinematic re-creation of realistic spaces, and the symbolic meanings attributed to urban landmarks. The findings indicate that economic prosperity, housing policies and shifts in everyday life are visually embedded in film settings, spatial narratives, and characterisation. In turn, Swedish cinema not only documents but also reinterprets these architectural transformations, enriching its aesthetic and expressive possibilities. This study highlights the reciprocal relationship between urban built environments and national cinema within a specific historical and cultural context.

1. Introduction

After the Second World War, Nordic countries were in a recovery phase. However, Sweden was largely unscathed and its social cohesion was stronger than ever [1]. Into the 1960s, Sweden was an era of massive economic development, with economic gains being used to pay for the welfare state [1]. During this period, the social environment of Sweden changed dramatically, with the rapid progress of urbanization and the growth of industrial production. As a result, people's living standard in Sweden are improved. Under the influence of the economic boom, many tall buildings have been built and the traffic in the city is increasingly developed. Besides, international trade also promotes the way of consumption, people begin to enjoy entertainment life and pay more attention to spiritual and cultural needs. At the same time, the Nordic countries developed an expanded public cultural policy and established the institutions needed to implement it. This development paved the way for increased financial and artistic cooperation in the audio-visual industry, particularly among the Scandinavian countries [2]. Moreover, the socio-political objectives of this new cultural policy are linked to the principles of democratization in the welfare state [3]. In response to this policy, in 1963, the Swedish film association (SFI) established the national film support agency, which means the government will provide the necessary support and promote the development of film production, distribution and screening [2]. Besides, the establishment of the Swedish film academy meant the emergence of a new kind of film discourse and the artistic quality. At the same time, SFI successfully promoted the concept of independent film and developed a short film policy, which introduced the concept and discourse of "free film" [4]. Therefore, in the next

two decades following this stage, the political, social and cultural changes in Sweden as a welfare state with the growing urbanization process brought about a new wave of cinema. During this period, many excellent films were made, not only feature films, but also many non-fiction films, such as educational films and advertising films. Therefore, the combination of film and urban construction produces one of the most obvious manifestations of economic development - the buildings on screen. This essay will particularly focus on the buildings in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, is also known as the “Venice of the North” as the part of the city built by the sea. “The various representations of Stockholm have been of importance for Swedish cinema’s projection of ‘Swedish’ identity and its particular specificities.” [5] This quote illustrates the irreplaceable significance of Stockholm in Swedish cinema. Besides, the Swedish Films Institution (SFI) is also located in Stockholm, where produced and distributed most Swedish films. During the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, the representative buildings in Stockholm showed a rise in the standard of living, which was inseparable from the Swedish-style welfare system. This remarkable change has occurred in one of the most successful social engineering projects ever undertaken, often referred to as the people’s home (“folkhemmet” in Swedish), during which the economic income has remained almost constant [6]. Due to the relevant policies with mass housing construction, the Swedish city represented by Stockholm has taken on a new look. In this context, architecture, as one of the manifestations of social and economic changes, brings its characteristics into the film, which has an impact on the expression, spatial structure and symbolic meaning of Swedish cinema.

2. Modern Buildings and Indoor Layout on Screen

One of the most important problems to be dealt with in Sweden after the Second World War was the shortage of housing [1]. Therefore, with the rapid growth of the economy in Sweden, great changes took place in the process of urbanization. Construction sites can be seen almost everywhere in Stockholm. To be precise, many tall buildings sprung up and many modern houses appeared on the suburbs, all of which have changed the urban landscape. Before focusing on new buildings, one should first explore the landscape of Stockholm. According to Constant [7], the “natural” landscape is considered a soothing backdrop for the new buildings. Thus, the modern landscape has symbolic potential and contributes to a broader architectural vision. This change is reflected in the background environment of the film. For instance, in the beginning sequence of a short documentary *Ditt Stockholm* (1960) directed by Curt Strolmad, a boy rides his bicycle along the harbour in Stockholm, with buildings under construction in the background. This scene as reflection of the urbanization of Stockholm in the 1960s. The construction site is used as the background in the film, which further illustrates the social development status at that time. Meanwhile, the landscape also appears in the film as an indispensable sign of that time. In another documentary *Secret Stockholm* (1963), there are many shots showing the urban landscape, such as buildings, courtyards and streets in the city, especially the representative harbour scenery in Stockholm. Obviously, the social changes brought about by the economic prosperity are showed in the urban construction, which as a link in the development of history also reflected in the film space. As Constant argues that [7], landscape is a cultural phenomenon with a public resonance that, in our modern sense, emphasizes not only our identity and existence, but also our history. In *Secret Stockholm* (1963), As the camera rises from the alley, buildings under construction appear at the top of the frame, with modern industrial attributes that are out of place with the old alleys. This image suggests that historical traces will gradually be replaced by industrialization in Stockholm. Besides, when the voiceover tells the story of the architecture, the images of embossed faces on many ancient buildings are quickly edited together to create a visual impact. Precisely, as real objects in physical reality, buildings accurately reflect the historical and social conditions of this period in

Stockholm, and project them into films. The history of this landscape reflects the changing social values and conflicting goals of its inhabitants [8]. Filmmakers have chosen modernist spaces as venues for murder, gangsters, adultery, and other illegal acts. Although this kind of visual symbol was rarely used in Swedish cinema of that period, the expression of increasing the sense of distance with modern architecture is also reflected in the film *The Girls* (Zetterling, 1968). As Liz stands under a modern building, which is a symbolic architecture in Stockholm. An overhead shot highlights her helplessness and her lack of understanding in life. She is just a dot in the image, standing in a vacant lot surrounded by tall buildings, the glass wall shining in the sun oppressing her. Therefore, the appearance of modern architecture as a cinematic prop appears in the film, which enriches the expression and characterization of the film. Overall, these new buildings in Stockholm appeared on the screen and influenced the expression of Swedish cinema during that period, and they are not only different from previous buildings in appearance, but also produces new changes in interior layout.

The rise of new buildings after the 1960s coincided with changes in the internal structure of housing. Details such as the layout and decoration of the rooms show the changes in Swedish lifestyle during that period, which are also reflected in the film. To be specific, any type of modern home emphasizes the need for flexible solutions: small individual apartments are equipped with corridors; bathroom with flush toilet and bathtub; a small kitchen; and a balcony [9]. This space is also sometimes featured in many later Swedish films, such as the scene that shows the character washing up in the bathroom. The changes in life have been incorporated into the expression of the film. According to Hard [8], the good apartment suggests a more open kitchen with a bar and a dining table. Such a kitchen provides a new gathering space beyond the living room, with dining tables that can accommodate four to eight people, which in a way changes Swedish everyday life and promotes family relationships. There is a scene in *Ditt Stockholm* (1960), which reveals changes in the kitchens of modern houses in the early 1960s. The kitchen in the frame has an open bar, with two people peeling fruit and vegetables and one person cooking at a counter. The most important message from this scene is that the three of them are communicating and enjoying that moment, and apparently cooking together in the kitchen is part of everyday life in Stockholm at that time. As the capital of Sweden, the living conditions of Stockholm can almost represent the social environment of the whole country at that time. At the same time, the tone of the colours of the film is brighter, not the grey tones in films about half a century ago. This also illustrates the change of social environment reflected in the colour, and the impact of this detail attached to the architecture on Swedish cinema. As a result, the internal structural layout of the building and the house influenced the expression of the Swedish cinema of that period, while the kitchen, furniture and colour were involved in the film as concrete objects. To sum up, the changes in urbanization and modernization of the new buildings and new layout in Stockholm, have influenced many aspects of Swedish film settings and expressions.

3. Film Recreates the Realistic Space

With the rapid development of society and economy in Sweden from 1960s to 1980s, there are more and more modern architectures in Stockholm, and these new buildings are involved in and influence the texture of Swedish cinema in that period. However, while these buildings affect the content and expression of the film, the film also plays a significant role in reshaping these realistic spaces to illustrate the influence of social environment changes on it. Among them, one of the most obvious aspects is film reshape the private space in Stockholm residence and adding new meanings to it in cinematic way. In 1965, the government promulgated the “Million Program” at the peak of Swedish housing policy, which was aimed at building one million apartments within ten years, and

this goal was achieved after that [8]. Under the implementation of this policy, the massive growth of apartments has changed the urban structure of Stockholm. At the same time, Sweden became a model for architects and planners on the European continent, and Stockholm attracted visitors from all over the world [8]. In terms of film, these houses and apartments are given new meanings by using cinematic methods. To be precise, the house in the film often refers to the concept of home or family, and as a space for family activities on screen. For instance, at the beginning of the film *The Girls* (1968), it presents a living room, with a natural landscape outside the window. The audience knows from the following sequence that this is the backstage room of the performance. Three women sit comfortably on the sofa smoking and chatting about the script. Such a scene that can represent the “family” brings the three characters closer, even though they are not exactly family, they are a group under the theme of this film. “The central space of the house features a living room and bed area.” [10] Besides, another sequence from this film also worth mentioning is that Marianne goes to a furniture store with a man and playfully lies in every bed. It is noted that these beds are not located in any bedrooms of any houses, they imply the possibility of forming a family between Marianne and this man in cinematic way or expresses the secret hope from Marianne’s heart. In contrast, in this sequence, the voice in the background is her onstage oath, which praises the independence of women from men. This scene shows each bed by moving camera to follow the characters, thus completing the recreating of this space and still endowing it with the meaning of “home”. Meanwhile, images like this, in which the room alludes to the home or family, also appear in *Faces of Sweden* (1979), directed by John Dooley. That is a hotel room in the film, a sofa on the left and a TV set on the right, with a couple sitting on the sofa. Although this is not the home of these two people, it conveys the concept to the audience through the layout in the room and warm colours on the wall, while emphasizing that this hotel in Stockholm will feel like home. On the other hand, film also reveals the Swedish lifestyle at that time by giving new meanings to space. Therefore, in the context of urban modernization, the film’s reconstruction of space in modern apartment is showed in giving it new meanings. In addition, the development of economy and society also brings about the construction of public places outside the apartment, which also has an impact on the expression of film on space.

In addition to the Million Housing Project, Sweden was also working to repair and build more public places during the 1960s, especially in Stockholm, such as airports, docks and shopping malls. The changing social environment requires improved infrastructure, which helps to provide a wide variety of public facilities [1]. Apparently, these places are represented in films, and the film reconstructs these public spaces on the basis of their physical existence. Initially, the different occasions in feature films can shape the identities and social status of characters. There is a significant distinction between the image of people who live in apartments and those who live in fancy houses [10]. For example, when Liz in *The Girls* (1968) goes to visit an upper-class couple, the first scene showed the surrounding where the couple lives in. It is a high modern building with spacious gardens. The following images reveal the couple’s identity and social status through the elaborate interior layout and placement of luxury decorations. This film completes the characterization of its figures merely through the concise construction of space, even though none of these figures actually appear on screen. Besides, in another film *En dag i Stockholm* (1980) the director shows the main character’s office, which reflects the identity of him through the creation of this space. It is a small office in an ordinary but modern building with a window facing the street, and a simple desk and office supplies in the room. This shows that the protagonist is just a small staff in a big company, doing boring but busy work. These living and working places in Stockholm influenced the shaping of characters in films, while other public places also influenced the presentation of film space during that period. According to Hard [8], the Swedish social democratic “consumption regime” gradually emerged in the 1930s and established in the first three decades

after the war. Under the influence of consumption patterns stimulated by commodities, shopping became a part of daily life for people in Stockholm, and the shopping mall “Kulturhuset” became one of the city’s landmarks at that time. Naturally, this place also provides new possibilities for the film to create the cinematic space. For example, there is a sequence in the short documentary *Secret Stockholm* (1963) shows the shopping mall in Stockholm from a unique angle. Unlike modern apartments, the shopping mall is an open building that covers a wide area with a complex interior structure. This film leads the audience to dive into the mall at night by using the plastic models as clue to reveal the space, which not only creates a visual freshness, but also reflects that such a place brings a new way of expression to the film. However, another documentary *Stockholm – Nordens Venedig* (1981) directed by Dag Bengtsson shows pictures of the mall from a normal perspective by using the camera moving from above. Meanwhile, the mall also appears in the feature film *The Girls* (1968) that involves in the narrative. Gunilla, one of the main characters, is shopping at the mall when she chased by a group of children. In this sequence, several shots were spliced together by editing reveals the structure of the spaces inside the mall: intersecting staircases and sales areas separated by tall columns. Moreover, as the characters run, the camera gives the audience a full view of the mall from different angles. Therefore, it is the presence of architectures such as the shopping mall in Stockholm that adds to the dramatic tension of the film. Therefore, in this aspect, the analysis of the architectural space in Stockholm can also reflect the social situation of the whole Sweden at that time, and the way of reshaping the space and its significance in film also reflect the impact of this socio-cultural environment change on Swedish cinema.

4. The Symbolic Meaning of Architecture

The appearance of modern architecture and public places after the 1960s not only provided the possibility of reshaping the space for the film, but also added symbolic meaning to the film. The process of modernization driven by social and economic development is also the transition from tradition to modernity in Stockholm and the whole of Sweden. During this period, some architectures were used in films and given special meanings. For example, many documentaries feature images of Stockholm’s old town, such as *Secret Stockholm* (1963) and *Stockholm – Nordens Venedig* (1981). These images often show narrow alleys with only a hint of sky above, and the walls of the buildings on either side are outlined in ancient sallow colours. To be specific, these narrow alleys and old buildings symbolize Stockholm’s history in the film and are used as a contrast to the modern architecture that followed, highlighting the impact of socio-economic development on the city. Besides, Churches in Stockholm also play an important role in the film. Among them, at the beginning of the film *Secret Stockholm* (1963), a series of shots are used to show the statues on the top of the church, which gives people a sense of solemnity. Despite the secularization and anti-church movements of the church in Sweden, Christianity has flourished in the past few decades [1]. Thus, as a symbol of faith, the cameras only capture the most distinctive part of the church or display the whole building from the looking-up angle to show its magnificent image in film. However, the architectures in Stockholm not only have such serious symbolism, but also some architectural elements that symbolize the image and relaxing atmosphere of the city, which are the statues and fountains located in the city centre. In *Secret Stockholm* (1963) and *The Riddle of Sweden* (1963), various statues and fountains are used to symbolize the pleasant living environment and cultural atmosphere of Stockholm. In addition to these historic buildings, modern architectures and city infrastructure built in the 1960s and later two decades also play a symbolic role in film. For instance, there are many images present the maze of roads and viaducts in Stockholm in many non-fiction films, such as *Ditt Stockholm* (1960), *Faces of Sweden* (1979) and *Stockholm – Nordens Venedig* (1981). Apart from the roads, bridges are an essential part of

Stockholm, a maritime city. In one scene in *Stockholm – Nordens Venedig* (1981), the camera on a moving ship crossing several bridges. The structure of these bridges is exquisite and neat, and the architectural style is simple and modern, in accordance with the “Modern Swedish”. Specifically, the appearance of the bridge as a symbolic element in the film demonstrates that it is a link between the past and the present, combining the classical and modern architecture of Stockholm with reflecting the process of socio-economic development in Sweden. Hence, this involves the practical and symbolic aspects of architecture and landscape in order to achieve a similar sense of place and to promote the goal of social progress [7]. Meanwhile, these architectures also bring new elements to the film context and enriching the cinematic language.

On the other hand, another symbolic meaning of architecture in the film is that the landmark buildings can represent the identity of the city or the country and the development of the society, economy and culture. To be specific, one of the landmarks that can represent Stockholm is the building of city hall, which have pillars on the doorstep, facing a square. The presence of institution buildings in the film often represent political orientation and meaning. One example from *The Girls* (1968), where the character stands on the steps and make a speech. Before her speech, the film shows the space she is in through the images, which also implied the political meaning of female independence. Besides, another landmark that represents the consumption level of Stockholm is Kulturhuset, the shopping mall and cultural centre in the city, which is used in high frequency in film scenes to identify the location or push the narrative forward. At the same time, the port and ferries are the representative landmarks of Stockholm, which symbolize one of the economic foundations is the developed shipping business. This is shown in *The Riddle of Sweden* (1963) introduced by narrator. Also, as a symbol of economic development, the ships appears several times in this film, taking on the roles of transporting wood materials and glass productions. Meanwhile, in *Stockholmsmiljoer* (1965), the image shows a few ships returning the Stockholm docks, which is a symbol of the “Venice of the North”. Moreover, it also implies the prosperous commercial trade in Stockholm. Overall, these architectures and infrastructures in Stockholm are changing with the development of society and economy. Besides, the cultural and historical significance, as well as the special symbolic meaning of architectures are adopted in the film. Furthermore, these buildings and infrastructure have impact on the aesthetic way of Swedish cinema, enriching the diversity of cinematic expressions.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay explores the influence of changes in the socio-cultural environment on Swedish cinema from the 1960s to the 1980s, using the architecture in Stockholm as a clue. Among them, it mainly discussed from three aspects: the changes of the appearance and internal structure of buildings, the re-creation of realistic space in film, and the symbolic meaning of buildings on screen. In the above exposition, many non-fiction films and a feature film are used as examples to support the argument. Obviously, the economic prosperity and social development of post-war Sweden pushed this welfare state to implement many policies, including the construction of a million apartments and the protection and promotion of cultural industries. Furthermore, during this period, the change of social and cultural environment had an impact on all aspects of Sweden, which also affected the urban construction of Stockholm. At the same time, Stockholm’s landscape, architecture and infrastructure have influenced the audio-visual elements, expressions, sets, narratives and characterization of Swedish cinema. In return, the films also reflected the social development process of that time in Sweden through cinematic methods, such as themes, images and editing. Therefore, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the change of socio-cultural environment in Sweden had a significant impact on Swedish cinema, enriched the development of film art, and

provided more spaces and possibilities for the creation of Swedish cinema at both practical and aesthetic level.

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