

## 09

## Inner Life. Sweden House. Madrid, 1950s-60s

Ismael Amarouch García

This article focuses on the interior life of the Casa de Suecia (Sweden House), a building in Madrid designed by Mariano Garrigues in 1953, completed in 1956, and now damaged beyond repair. It is therefore a matter of recovering a lost reality; of studying the building as it was originally conceived, based on the few interior images that have been preserved. The analysis is carried out from the experience of use and goes from general to specific considerations. Firstly, the physical space of large group meetings in the assembly hall is portrayed; secondly, the social space of small informal gatherings in the hotel lounge and bar, and finally, the emotional space of Ernest Hemingway in one of the hotel suites. The text claims the movement of bodies, the recreation of environments and the activation of memory as evidence of the art of inhabiting.



### INTRODUCTION

Alvar Aalto was one of the first and most distinguished visitors to the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition. In response to criticism of the radical style of the pavilions, he argued that it was not so much the architectural language as the living environment, created for the occasion by his admired Gunnar Asplund<sup>1</sup>. In fact, Aalto's review, written in Swedish in the historic Turku newspaper *Åbo Underrättelser*, was aimed at recalling his pleasant experience in Djurgården Bay: the summer festival-like atmosphere that only transparent and to some extent weightless architecture could offer at its best; an intense but fleeting experience.

A few years later, in August 1955, Carl Theodor Dreyer explained in Edinburgh his craft as a filmmaker, following the premiere of his film *Ordet*. In this event, later transcribed in the Copenhagen newspaper *Politiken*<sup>2</sup>, Dreyer defended the artistic renewal of cinema in the transition from silent to sound; a quiet evolution which, in his opinion, should be introspective: carried out from a certain abstraction or disconnection from reality, in order to delve into what is really important to convey: the emotions of the characters.

These two Nordic references would be used to introduce the Casa de Suecia (Sweden House): the Madrid building designed by Mariano Garrigues in the 1950s, of which today only part of the façade remains. Although it is an architecture strongly rooted in the place, it reproduced a dynamic, vibrant, and welcoming atmosphere inside, suitable for everyday and special moments. This

atmosphere has gone unnoticed by academics and researchers, mainly due to the successive renovations that have stripped the building of its character since 1975, but also due to its secondary location in the city, which for many years fuelled myths and legends about the activities that took place behind closed doors (fig. 02).

In this context, we propose to recall the Casa de Suecia as it was conceived, using interior images, the few that remain, from its early years. The analysis will refer to the most representative spaces: the public rooms on the ground floor and basement, and one of the suites on the fifth floor, where Ernest Hemingway stayed (fig. 01). The research, thus approached, complements other studies carried out on the building in general<sup>3</sup> or on the ground floor in particular<sup>4</sup>.

### BELLMAN

One of the first signs of life in this building were newspaper advertisements for the Bellman Restaurant. This use was located on the upper-ground floor, with direct access from Madrazo Street or through the hotel's common areas. The culinary

attraction was the Swedish traditional *smörgåsbord*<sup>5</sup>, which was not served in the main room, but in a multi-purpose room six metres below, in the first basement (fig. 03).

This multi-purpose room was firstly conceived as a hall for celebrations, without natural light, but totally open-plan and of regular dimensions. It was based on a rectangle measuring 15.75 x 7 m, connected at its ends to the dais and one of the three rooms of the Scandinavian Centre. Acoustically prepared for conferences and other solemn events, its walls were entirely clad in wood, making use of decorative marquetry on the side front.

In addition to special events, the room was soon used as the restaurant's reserved area, taking advantage of the location of the kitchen in the basement. The *smörgåsbord* was usually served on Thursdays and Fridays during the winter season. It was one of the first *buffets* in Madrid. Despite the novelty of the self-service system for the Spanish customer, the Bellman's *smörgåsbord* eventually became one of the most popular gastronomic destinations in Madrid, chosen by those who worked in the city centre and were looking for a break from the hustle and bustle.

We do not have any photographs of the *smörgåsbord* in Bellman, but we do have photographs of one of the highlights of the Swedish calendar, the *kräftskiva* (fig. 04), which marks the start of the crayfish season in Sweden at the end of summer. Both festivities have their own rituals. In the case of the *kräftskiva*, the tables are arranged lengthwise, one next to the other, covered with tablecloths decorated with cheerful patterns of crustaceans. Luminous paper moons can hang from the ceiling, just as bright as the Swedish summer nights are. The guests should also wear white. When seated, they complete their attire with a white cloth bib, also printed with crab motifs, and a cardboard hat, different for each guest. With bowls or trays overflowing with the delicious food and *aquavit* ready to drink, the ritual begins. First with a toast, *skål!* Second, with applause and thanks. Third, with everyone saying in unison *att äta!* ("let's eat!") It is then that the typically Swedish formality and sobriety break down, giving way to a rowdy and noisy environment that keeps the memory of the distant homeland alive.

Three reflections can be drawn from this episode of life in the Casa de Suecia. The first has to do with the hidden nature of this canteen-like room. On traditional Swedish farms it was customary for there to be a type of room, called a *herrstuga*, which, being close to the dwelling, usually in a separate building, was reserved for special occasions. As these rooms were closed for long periods of time, their interiors, in many cases, remained untouched, decorated with frescoes, stencils or wallpapers<sup>6</sup>. The furnishings were minimal: just a wooden bench running along the wall, a few tables or chairs and the ubiquitous fireplace. If the room was

sufficiently clear, the guests could dance after the meal, but if not, and when the weather conditions were favourable, as in *Midsommar*, the dancing took place outdoors. As these celebrations usually lasted for several days, some rooms near the *herrstuga*, usually on the upper floor, were reserved for the accommodation of the guests. In the building under consideration here, the Casa de Suecia, the 63 rooms available between the fifth and tenth floors certainly fulfilled that function.

The second reflection concerns the extension of the public space on the ground floor to a higher level in the case of the Bellman restaurant (+2.00 m) and a lower level in the case of the assembly hall (-4.07 m). Access to these rooms through the interior of the building led to immersion in a particular atmosphere where architecture takes on its most stage-setting aspect, bringing about episodes of warm welcome (fig. 05). Taking advantage of the absence of vehicles, the stairs replaced the parking ramps in the back-and-forth movement above or below the ground line; a movement which, together with the immersive experience, prepared the guest for the collective ceremony, making the difficult transition between exterior and interior more bearable.

The third reflection requires some clarification beforehand. These itineraries through the interior of the building were the consequence of a previous functional approach, in which the celebration hall shared the surface of the first basement with a sports and bathing area, which in turn led to the consideration of a certain ritual of preparation. In that initial design, the canteen was located well above ground level, on one of the upper floors, in the transition between the offices and the hotel. But the project for a sports and bathing area was cancelled and this decision led to the relocation of all the representative functions of the building around the street level. The idea of standing water would remain, however, as a sign of life for which it is possible to dive into the depths.

#### IKEA

On the way between the first basement and the ground floor, there was a lower half-floor that housed the *bastu* (Swedish sauna), replacing or rather compensating for the more ambitious bathing and sports programme that had preceded it. Next to

the *bastu* was an agora or meeting space: the hotel lounge and bar. Due to its strategic location around a central vertical space, to which the courtyard of the upper floors gave continuity, this agora served as a resting place on the itineraries going up or down.

Concerning the Greek agora, the Swedish academic Gregor Paulsson argued that the difference with the Roman forum, being both two public typologies of Antiquity, lay in the fluid and disorderly character of the agora: a place for democracy<sup>6</sup>. This description of the agora, understood as expanded domesticity, would be validated by the expression of another academic, Witold Rybczynski: "homeliness is not neatness"<sup>7</sup>.

Following this idea, the agora of the Casa de Suecia became a curved, interface-exchanging space. As such, it lacked formal unity, and its limits were blurred. For Maurice Holland (fig. 06), the Swedish interior designer who collaborated with Garrigues in its design, the agora was organised into two concave environments in continuity: the lounge area, vertically elongated, and the bar area, somewhat more secluded. The floor, carpeted throughout, reinforces the union. Its texture incorporates the light filtered by the skylight on the upper floor. The flowerpots, which overlook this void, show that this space, the true heart of the building, is not only home to gravity and light, but also to an intense shared life.

The furniture in the agora creates small, cosy rooms within the collective one. Most of them are of Nordic origin. Following one of Paulsson's mottos, *better things for everyday life*<sup>8</sup>, they combine modern design with simple lines and a sense of craftsmanship. Ergonomic surfaces and a mix of natural and

industrial materials delight the senses. Each piece of furniture has been purposely designed with these qualities of beauty and functionality in mind. However, their labels do not name the authors of the designs, only their generic designation of origin: Nordiska Kompaniet (NK)<sup>9</sup>.

Although the black and white of the photographs (fig. 07) unifies all the furniture under a single chromatic appearance, we notice a variety of colours and a lively and cheerful character of these designs in later catalogues or museum exhibitions. In terms of colour, the same applies to finishes and coatings in general: the green of the carpets, the black of the pillars, the white of the walls, etc.

In the lounge area, the easy chairs, with or without armrests, arranged individual or in series, were designed by Bengt Ruda. Very characteristic of all of them is the angular, inverted V-shape of the legs and the beech wood material. In the case of individual armchairs, the armrests rest on the upward extension of the rear legs. The coffee tables and floor lamps, designed by Yngvar Sandström and Alf Svensson respectively, are placed next to these various seating arrangements. The coffee table design features four tapered legs on which rests an elongated top beautifully crafted from solid birch and teak strips. Like the Ruda armchairs, the floor lamps are made of beech wood.

In the background of the image, in the bar area, two sets of furniture stand out: the spherical lamps hung at different heights from the ceiling and the wicker chairs. The first group corresponds to the *Pia* model, a sphere of about 50 cm in diameter, framed with silver wire and covered in white cotton fabric with small, embroidered holes. It was designed by Tore Ahlsén for the firm Gärnsås. The second group corresponds to *Stora Kraal*, a model designed by Kerstin Hörlin-Holmquist that combines lightness, ergonomics, and simplicity, where the shell-shaped seat is fixed to the black lacquered metal base by means of leather straps. *Stora Kraal* was launched by NK in 1952, but it was after its exhibition at the *Design in Scandinavia*<sup>11</sup> show in 1954 that it achieved international fame. The presence of this piece of furniture in the agora of the Casa de Suecia highlights a way of life for which the sleepy post-war Spanish society was probably not yet prepared.

Most of these objects were part of the *Triva* or *Triva-Bbygg* series: a path-breaking collection of knock-down furniture launched in 1944 by Elias Svedberg, Lena Larsson, and Erik Wortz, with the emerging working class in mind. This furniture left the Nyköping workshops flat-packed, with the necessary tools and assembly instructions, thus anticipating what IKEA would develop a few years later. By doing so, *Triva-Bbygg* not only reduced transport costs, but also fulfilled an important social function: it was the customer who ultimately closed the assembly line<sup>12</sup>.

But the agora of the Casa de Suecia was much more than the objects kept inside. Above all, it was a social and meeting space, where a group of architects (fig. 08) could have a friendly chat after attending a talk on the future of Madrid in the assembly hall; a strategic place where after a delicious *smorgasbord*, and before playing *bridge* at the Scandinavian Centre, business initiatives such as Tafisa<sup>13</sup> could be launched; a place where the writer Ernest Hemingway used to arrive punctually at the bar in the evening.

#### HEMINGWAY

Hemingway stayed at the Hotel Suecia several times between 1959 and 1960. The last of these was a year before he ended his life at his home in Ketchum, Idaho. The reason for these visits was a commission from *Life* magazine to examine the rivalry

between the two most famous Spanish bullfighters of the time: Antonio Ordoñez and Luis Miguel Domínguez<sup>14</sup>. At first glance, the hotel must have been a good choice for him, not only because it was part of a new building with modern facilities, but above all because of

its central location<sup>15</sup>. Walking down Madrazo Street, he would soon reach the Prado Museum to enjoy Goya's paintings. In addition, near the Casa de Suecia, there was the Bar Chicote, the restaurant El Callejón or the Cervecería Alemana, places with a long tradition where he is credited with being present, either alone or in the company of Dominguín or Ava Gardner. Finally, taking a taxi on Alcalá Street, he would soon arrive at the Las Ventas Bullring<sup>16</sup>:

"(...) But if you really want to learn about bullfighting, or if you ever get to feel strongly about it, sooner or later you will have to go to Madrid".

The assignment for *Life* magazine led Hemingway to travel to different parts of France and Spain during the summer of 1959. Once the bullfighting season was over, Hemingway travelled to Cuba and New York, but at the end of the summer of 1960 he returned to Casa de Suecia to complete some editing aspects of his reportage. He remained there for a few months, secluded among books and bottles of whisky, suffering from depression, insomnia, and delusions of persecution. It would be difficult to gauge to what extent the hotel room conditioned his seclusion, but perhaps the quiet and cheerful atmosphere, more typical of the country house than of the dense city, helped the writer to find his peaceful solitude.

Such a room was probably the corner suite on the fifth floor (fig. 09), the one furthest away from the lifts and stairs. As in the rest of the rooms, the transition between the collective common space and the private one was made by a filter: a threshold space equipped with a bench or cupboard area for taking off one's shoes, leaving one's umbrella or coat. This type of airlock also served to connect the entrances to the bedroom on the right-hand side and the living room opposite. In fact, the two routes were subtly distinguished by the opening of the doors: always outwards, to enter the living room; outwards and inwards, to enter the bedroom.

As a photograph from 1956 (fig. 10) shows, the living room of the suite is divided into three zones: one for reading, next to the window; another for dining, next to the door leading to the terrace; and a final one for resting, next to the entrance. Although the city skyline can be seen in the background, both the Nordic design of the room, with the carpeted floor throughout, the dotted curtain in front of the wall unit and, of course, the individual pieces of furniture, reveal the high degree of comfort of an interior warmed by the midday sun.

In the reading area, in the middle distance, both the high-backed reclining chair and the floor lamp, two objects with a presence in the agora, were designed by Alf Svensson. This armchair, named *Contour* and launched by Fritz Hansen in Malmö, was available in different fabrics and colours, but always maintaining the delicate, lightweight beech wood base. Unlike Bengt Ruda's low-backed chair that accompanied it, the legs of the *Contour* chair do not intersect or articulate at a central point but are joined by a lower bar and a sinuous armrest. In one of its commercial variants, the *Contour* chair also featured an adjustable headrest cushion. Hemingway would sit in this armchair when he received visitors, and the conversation would go on until the early hours of the morning<sup>17</sup>.

In the lounge area, in the foreground, the coffee table that accompanies a three-seater sofa is a work of shared authorship, signed by David Rosén and Stig Lindberg: the *Vågor* model, "Waves" (fig. 11). Formed from an oak frame, this table was enriched by the marine-themed pattern enamelled directly onto the tabletop. Rosén was responsible for the overall joinery and Lindberg for the artistic motif. In their collaboration for NK, Lindberg's designs were always characterised by bright, cheerful colours and a childlike or surrealistic style, as if with a tender freshness<sup>18</sup>. Who knows, perhaps for this drawing, in which the effect of the waves is nothing more than a poetic undulating representation of the movement of the fish, Lindberg was inspired by reading *The Old Man and the Sea*.

## EPILOGUE

The three life episodes narrated in the Casa de Suecia outline a vertical itinerary, which begins in contact with the earth and ends in the air, towards a distant horizon. This route invites an architectural reflection, no longer from formal premises, but from the experience of life, as Aalto recommended in relation to the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930. In the first episode, "Bellman", the focus was on the role of custom and celebration in the collective rootedness of a particular community, the Scandinavian community in Madrid in 1950. In the second, "IKEA", the relevant role played by objects in generating small, improvised, non-exclusionary meeting places was studied. Finally, in the third, "Hemingway", one of the hotel's rooms has been described, based on one of its most renowned guests.

The loss in terms of modern heritage of these interiors also entailed the complete erasure of the human activities that gave meaning to each space, to the interrelationship between house and city, between private and public, something that only such a building can offer. It is true, as Christopher Alexander explains, that a living building begins to be alive precisely through the everyday acts of the people, just as "A building or a town will only be alive to the extent that it is governed by the timeless way"<sup>19</sup>. As it is also true that everyday life in the Casa de Suecia unfolded internally within the strict and straight exterior limits, hidden beneath the severe and abstract appearance of its façade, acquiring over time an aura of affection and mystery that would be linked to the very phenomenon of inhabiting. Inhabiting, which is basically what Aalto, Dreyer, and Garrigues proposed<sup>20</sup>:

"What a beautiful project for those who have a real feeling for architecture to show off civic ensembles in which the architectural background, the symbolism of the artists and the people can enjoy a great celebration".

We would close the essay by saying that the great issue of interest in the Casa de Suecia, what we have sought to reflect here, is not that it was conceived in a particular style or styles, nor even that it was built with imported materials. None of these considerations would have as much value as the fact that the traveller, the Swedish businessman or the casual visitor would feel at home when crossing the threshold; a house where the world is intimacy and intimacy is the world.

### Ismael Amarouch García

(Casablanca, 1983) is an Architect (2014), Master in Advanced Architectural Design (2016) and PhD in Advanced Architectural Design (2023), *degree summa cum laude*, all from the Higher Technical School of Architecture of Madrid, Polytechnic University of Madrid (ETSAM-UPM). At this university, he has assisted in teaching Architectural Design between 2015 and 2020, and he has been co-editor of the book series *14 Km*, as well as the book *Spanish Collective Housing*; GIVCO fellow (Collective Housing Research Group, 2018) and research coordinator in the MCH (Master in Collective Housing, 2019). PhD research fellow at KTH (Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, 2022). Author of several articles in indexed journals and oral presentations at international meetings. First prize in the *Renove Fuencarral* national ideas competition (COAM, 2015). He is currently a lecturer at the Advanced Research Laboratory, Faculty of Architecture and Design, Finis Terrae University, Santiago de Chile (FAD-UFT).

Affiliation: Advanced Research Laboratory, Faculty of Architecture and Design, Finis Terrae University, Santiago de Chile (FAD-UFT)

E-Mail: [iamarouch@uft.cl](mailto:iamarouch@uft.cl) / [paraisma@gmail.com](mailto:paraisma@gmail.com)

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2444-8179

### Notes

01. AALTO, Alvar, "The Stockholm Exhibition I", in *Sketches*, Göran Schildt (ed.), Stuart Wrede (trans.), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1985, p. 16.

02. DREYER, Carl Theodor, "Fantasi og farve", in *Politiken*, Copenhagen, 30 August 1955.

03. AMAROUCH, Ismael, "The Art of Discretion. Casa de Suecia in Madrid", in *Pioneers of Modern Spanish Architecture: architecture as inclusive work*, Teresa Couceiro (coord.), Fundación Alejandro de la Sota, Madrid, 2017, pp. 190-209.

04. AMAROUCH, Ismael, "The Ground Floor Arrangement in the House of Sweden", in *VAD: veredes, arquitectura y divulgación*, 2020, n.º. 3, pp. 60-71.

05. SAVARÍN, "Bellman", in *ABC*, Madrid, 18 January 1970, p. 25.

06. It was for this good state of preservation that the farms in the province of Hälsingland were declared a World Heritage Site in 2012. Of the 1,000 farms in the area, seven were chosen as the most representative: Kristofers in Järvsö, Gästgivers in Vallsta, Pallars and Jon-Lars in Långhed, Bortom Åa in Fåglesjö, Bommars in Letsbo, and Erik-Anders in Söderala.

07. PAULSSON, Gregor, "The Past and the Present", in *CIAM 8. The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life*, J.L. Sert (ed.), J. Tyrwhitt (ed.), and E. N. Rogers (ed.), Lund Humphries, London, 1952, p. 26. Together with Uno Åhren, Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius and Eskil Sundahl, Paulsson was a signatory of the *Acceptera* (1930), the manifesto of Swedish functionalism.

08. RYBCZYNSKI, Witold, "Intimacy and Privacy", in *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Penguin Books, New York, 1987, p. 17.

09. PAULSSON, Gregor, "Better Things for Everyday Life", in *Modern Swedish Design. Three Founding Texts*, Lucy Creagh (ed.), Helena Kåberg (ed.), Barbara Miller Lane (ed.), and David Jones (trans.), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2008, pp. 72-125.

10. Nordiska Kompaniet

was (and still is) a Swedish department store. With a factory in Nyköping (1904) and main business in Stockholm (1915), from the 1950s onwards it focused on furniture and interior design for the up-and-coming working class, establishing a specific department within NK: NK-bo.

11. A.A.V.V., *Design in Scandinavia: An Exhibition of Objects for the Home*, Arne Remlov (ed.), Kirstes Boktrykkeri, Oslo, 1954.

12. BRUNNSTRÖM, Lasse, "Prominent Defenders of Good Taste", in *Swedish Design: A History*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London, 2019, pp. 76-79.

13. Tafisa (Tableros y Fibras, S.A.) was a company dedicated to the production of pine wood insulation boards from pruning waste and forest thinning. The company had several factories in Spain, the most significant of which were those located on the banks of the rivers Lérez in Pontevedra and Pisuerga in Valladolid. It was founded in the Scandinavian Centre by the Spanish businessman José M<sup>a</sup> Pena Rich and the Swedish engineer Folke Pehrzon, the first president and main active member of the Casa de Suecia.

14. The story became the book *The Dangerous Summer*, published later posthumously in 1985. Hemingway immersed himself so deeply in the story that he far exceeded the planned length: of the 10,000 words agreed with *Life*, he submitted a first draft of 120,000 words in May 1960.

15. On his previous trips to Madrid, Hemingway stayed at the Hotel Florida as his first choice and the Hotel Palace as his second.

16. HEMINGWAY, Ernest, *Death in the Afternoon*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1932, p. 41.

17. HEMINGWAY, Valerie, "Spain", in *Running with the Bulls: My Years with the Hemingways*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2004, p. 27.

18. Lindberg was also the artistic director of Gustavsberg. He assumed this role between 1949 and 1980, continuing the legacy of his master, Wilhelm Kåge. Gustavsberg was one of the Swedish firms most firmly

committed to the commercial purpose of the Casa de Suecia in Madrid. For this reason, the company offered to supply and install all the sanitary fittings for the building, free of charge.

**19.** ALEXANDER, Christopher, "The Timeless Way", in *The Timeless Way of Building*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979, p. 1.

**20.** GARRIGUES, Mariano, "La Arquitectura en Suecia", in *Boletín de Información de la Dirección General de Arquitectura*, January 1950, N.º 13, p. 18.

### Images

**01.** Hemingway in the bar of the Casa de Suecia, seated in one of Kerstin Hörlin-Holmquist's *Stora Kraal* chairs, September 1959. Marino Gómez-Santos documentary collection, Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid.

**02.** Illustration "Las noches del Suecia" by Mikel Casal. *ABC Cultural*, May 2006.

**03.** Casa de Suecia. Left: first basement and mezzanine. Right: ground floor. *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, February 1957.

**04.** Casa de Suecia. *Kräftstkiva* in the assembly hall. Photograph by Luis Millán. EFE, July 1964.

**05.** Casa de Suecia. Foyer leading to the assembly hall. *Boletín de Información de la Cámara de Comercio de Suecia en España*, 1956.

**06.** Casa de Suecia. Hotel lounge and bar. Drawing by Maurice Holland. *Boletín de Información de la Cámara de Comercio de Suecia en España*, 1956.

**07.** Casa de Suecia. Hotel lounge and bar. Photograph by Martín Santos Yubero, September 1956. Archives of the Community of Madrid.

**08.** Casa de Suecia. Architecture meeting in the hotel lounge. Photograph by Martín Santos Yubero, ca. 1960. Archives of the Community of Madrid.

**09.** Casa de Suecia. Left: fifth floor, hotel rooms. Right: detail of the corner suite. *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, February 1957.

**10.** Casa de Suecia. Living room of the Hemingway Suite. *Boletín de Información de la Cámara de Comercio de Suecia en España*, 1956.

**11.** Stig Lindberg & David Rosén. Vågor Table, Nordiska Kompaniet, serie Futura, 1956. Board Assembly, present image, on an advertisement of the magazine *Form*. *Magazine for Nordic Architecture and Design*.