"A home is not a house" –
ascetic Swedish naturism meets luxurious American modernism

In 1960, the Swedish furniture designer Bruno Mathsson built a summer house for himself and his wife Karin at Frösakull, Tylösand. The house is an experiment and was also dubbed the "House of Tomorrow" and was used by the family until Karin died in 1999. The couple had no children, and since the house was not passed on to any other relatives it has stood uninhabited and virtually untouched since then. All the furniture and fittings are still in their original places and only the most pressing repairs have been carried out. Both international and Swedish architects have praised the house and highlighted its innovative architecture and, as Martin Friedman writes in *Design Quarterly* in 1965: "Constructed over sand dunes and tucked into a forest of dwarf pines, it is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable buildings in modern Sweden".[1] Outside the architectural scene, however, the house had a cooler reception, as Jan-Olof Nilsson writes in a local daily paper on visiting "this classic" after attending a course in Swedish architecture in 2004: "And suddenly we're standing in front of… a shed."[2]

The architect Thomas Sandell and his colleagues Ulf Sandberg and Joakim Übel, who bought the house in 2000, thereby ensuring its future existence, intended to use Frösakull as a holiday home for their employees, but no one showed any particular interest. So the house was put up for sale again. Before this, however, Sandell initiated a process to get the building listed, which meant it could not be pulled down while awaiting the decision, and definitely not if it indeed was listed. It was also hoped that the new owner would not merely be interested in the plot of land, which was worth a great deal on the market. Things were looking bleak – nobody seemed to want the house. To the estate agents it was a shed, to the owners a burden, and to most potential buyers something to be demolished.

If Frösakull was not considered a real house, perhaps it qualified as precious art? The owners decided to put Frösakull up for auction as art at Stockholms auktionsverk. Bruno Broberg, who was still officially the estate agent, made a statement in the press: "This is a derelict building, a shed, and now they're planning to sell it as a work of art. That's just bullshit."[3] In November 2004, Frösakull was advertised amongst several lots of Danish 1960s furniture, as "House", and this was the first time in Swedish history that a building was classified as a work of art. But the estate agent was right, nobody made a bid over the reserve price and the house was returned to the commercial real estate market. It was eventually evaluated at zero kronor and sold in 2006, with all the original fittings

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[1] Martin Friedman, "Notes on Swedish Design", *Design Quarterly,* 1965, no. Xx, p. 25.

[2] Jan-Olof Nilsson, "Bruno Mathssons spis", *Hallands Nyheter,* 18 November, 2004.

[3] "Ingen vill köpa formgivarens hus", *Göteborgs-posten*, 7 November, 2004, p. 18.

and inventory at the price of the land, to a Swedish woman and her American husband who is an architect.

Interactive architecture

Bruno Mathsson did not begin studying architecture until the mid-1940s, after designing furniture for 20 years, and in the 1950s he was a designer and self-taught builder of homes and exhibition buildings.[4] These works reveal him as an original designer working in a style influenced by his personal lifestyle ideology: fitness and naturism. The summerhouse in Frösakull is the most distinct exponent, where exclusive postwar modernism meets rugged outdoor living verging on asceticism. In Mathsson's summerhouse you live your life outdoors, in harmony with nature, the climate and the light. This is a house that very concretely has dissolved many of the material and functional boundaries of architecture. The climate and light change throughout the day, the kitchen has no stationary location in the house but is spread out and mobile, the ceiling is transparent and lets in the sunlight. The windows cannot be opened but have an open passage between inside and outside. The walls are on rails and can be opened and closed to change the layout.

Throughout its existence, Frösakull has attracted attention and been regarded by many as a "useless" house and even less viable as a home. But what, then, defines a house, and what makes it a home? We like to define and value architecture on the basis of tectonics, materials and aesthetics. Modernism gave priority to the visual aspect, and the exterior – the facade that can be abstracted and becomes graspable at a distance – was more interesting than the interior elements of the architecture, such as lighting, ventilation and heating, qualities that needed to be experienced rather than seen. Although this approach to architecture was under fire in the postwar era, and concepts such as amorphousness and anti-aesthetics were introduced, our taste is still largely governed by the visual elements, while the more invisible qualities remain obscure: how is the room organised, what potential is inherent in this architecture, what lifestyles and situations are favoured by an environment? Are not these amorphous qualities, the potential social lives that the environment enables, what constitute the idea of both the home and the house?

The architectural theorist Reyner Banham stated in the late 1950s that architecture is a *service*, be it the clothes that warm our bodies, the music that creates a dance floor or a roof that shields us from the rain and wind. He defines architecture not as something material but as a service that enables an activity, and Banham claims that there were two ways in which humans began to control their environment, two strategies that can be seen as the origin of architecture. The first strategy was *avoidance*; by seeking the shelter of a cliff, a tree, a tent or a roof, they could avoid disturbing climate factors such as cold, wind, sun and so on. The second strategy, which has taken a

[4] For a detailed account of Bruno Mathsson's work, see, for instance, Ingrid Böhn-Juhlander, *Bruno Mathsson* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 1992) or Lisa Hogdal (ed.), *Bruno Mathsson* (Malmö: Bokförlaget Arena, 2006).

back seat in architectural theory and practice, involves *interaction*. By interfering with the local meteorology, man created suitable environments, the camp fire being a typical example of architecture as an "anti-house" where the environment is constructed using only non-material services (mainly light and heat). "A home is not a house" writes Banham and goes on to speculate about an environment where function has replaced aesthetics, one ultimate consequence of an American culture where the plumber is king and informality a virtue.[5] Bruno Mathsson's approach to architecture appears to be closely related to what could perhaps be called an American architectural tradition and could constitute a reference point for a study of his work. And in this light, other traditions of an entirely different origin are also revealed.

An American architectural tradition

In 1948, Bruno and Karin went to the USA, invited by Edgar Kaufmann Jr, the then head of the design department at MoMA, New York, and met several of the most prominent American architects of the time, including Ray and Charles Eames, Philip Johnson and Frank Lloyd Wright. Bruno Mathsson was deeply impressed by the American way of building with large glass sections, under-floor heating and other highly developed services. After returning to Sweden he showed a picture of Johnson's recently completed house in New Canaan to a journalist at the magazine *Form*, commenting, "We could live like this in Sweden too… we are hopelessly backward here in Sweden!" The house consists of two elements – a heated brick floor and an upright unit that is a bathroom on one side and an open fireplace on the other, constituting an excellent example, according to Banham, of the "anti-house": "The 'house' is little more than a service core set in an infinite space." [6]

Almost certainly influenced by *New Canaan* and *Case Study Houses* – a range of experimental budget homes designed and built between 1945 and 1966 on the US West Coast – Bruno Mathsson designed a series of glass houses exploring the potential of new building technology. The same elements, albeit with some variations, are used in all the houses: the concrete platform resting directly on the ground, under-floor heating, triple-glass walls, separate windows for ventilation and a simple floor plan where the kitchen and living room are merged and the bedrooms usually in line along a hallway. This floor plan is also found in Frösakull – the bedrooms lined up, but here the kitchen is not open-planned with the living room but dissolved and "spread out" over the communal areas of the house. These homes were cheap to build, thanks to their simple construction that was delivered in prefabricated sections, with no need for foundation work since the houses were built on a platform directly on the ground.

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[5] Reyner Banham, "A home is not a house", *Art in America,* April 1965; *Design by Choice,* ed. Penny Sparke (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), pp. 56-60.

[6] Ibid, 60.

Not only was Mathsson the first architect in Sweden to design and build glass houses on a larger scale, but he also patented and produced an insulating glass unit consisting of three glass panes with nitrogen in between (it is even said that he was the first in the world to come up with this invention). An influential Swedish critic, Elias Cornell, wrote in the late-1960s that: "Not since the middle of the 19th century has anyone studied and developed the glass house as meticulously as Bruno Mathsson has done. (…) It is to the detriment of the country and its architects that Bruno Mathsson has not received more encouragement for his work to develop the art of building."[7] Bruno Mathsson was an explorative builder, and it was the new potential of technology rather than the given order of tradition that guided his efforts. During the war and postwar era building regulations were rigid and it was hard to get building permission, and after less than a ten-year period, 1950-57, Mathsson ceased his activities in the field of architecture, with rare exceptions such as Frösakull, since the process of constantly applying for permission and exemption for every innovation was too expensive.

After the Second World War, the attitude to technology was dynamic and complex, opening the door to architectonic fantasies. Both in the USA and in Europe numerous experimental housing projects were presented, demonstrating in various ways the potential of new technology. In the UK, for instance, we have Alison and Peter Smithson's "House of the Future", and in the USA "Monsanto House". Bruno Mathsson's *House of Tomorrow*, the experimental house he presented as an idea in 1956 in the newspaper *Värnamo nyheter*, belongs among them. "First and foremost, I want to use the heat and energy from the sun. In this respect I have gone one step further by making the roof out of transparent corrugated and bent plastic, which resembles the waves on a lake. If you want, the house can be fitted with a sun screen. The house will be heated by solar energy, so the warm air generated right under the plastic roof by the sunlight can be conducted down to the floor, where the heat will then rise upwards. Naturally, this needs to be complemented with the existing electric under-floor heating."[8] New technology – including the patented glass sections, the under-floor heating and the plastic materials – entailed that the house could be divided according to individual requirements rather than to traditional functional divisions, and consequently the building has an appearance that sets it apart from a traditional family home.

The summerhouse in Frösakull

House of Tomorrow was partially materialised in the Frösakull summerhouse in 1960, four years after it was presented in *Värnamo nyheter*. Like most of Mathsson's glass houses, Frösakull consists of a base platform measuring 10x15 metres, on which a structure of galvanised iron is erected. The walls are made of corrugated plastic, South American wood ("parapine") and glass that have been attached

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[7] Elias Cornell, "Bruno Mathsson och tiden", *Arkitektur,* no 3, 1967, p. 110.

[8] XXXX, *Värnamo nyheter,*

directly to the structure. The roof has been made by flexing translucent opal-white acrylic plastic between the rafters to form six barrel-vaults running across the structure and closing the entire space except for the inner court. Under the transparent vaults and steel rafters a ceiling of angled and mounted wood slats is suspended, sifting the light like venetian blinds. The house has two yards – an inner court enclosed by corrugated plastic and thus screened from view, and a sun patio that is not on the platform but enclosed with the same corrugated plastic and thereby incorporated in the body of the building. The layout is very simple; the building consists of two parts: a closed part with north-facing walls of wood for the bedrooms and bathroom/toilet, and an open part with corrugated plastic walls and a roof covering half of the space, making up the living room and inner courtyard. The only part that is different is the little sun patio, added as an extension to one of the facades.

From the outside the building looks like a plastic box. The entrance is on the west-facing short side, and consists of a sliding segment in the corrugated plastic facade facing the street. It opens onto the large inner courtyard paved with Fjärsås granite.[9] A path of marble slabs leads under the loggia to a corrugated plastic wall that slides aside to join the courtyard and living room into one open space. The largest bedroom in the closed part is in line with the living room, with an opening between the rooms that can be closed with a curtain. The facade of the closed part, which also forms the only fixed wall of the living room, has a built-in fridge, china cupboard and wardrobe. The cooker is on wheels and can be rolled anywhere. A sink and draining-board unit is just outside the living room in the courtyard, under the loggia. The house has evenly spaced electric sockets along the skirting boards, so electrical appliances can easily be moved around. Technology is installed to serve social life and specific requirements on flexibility. Frösakull differs from many of its antecedents, including Johnson's New Canaan, in that it does not have a service core. Instead, technology and other services are spread throughout the plan, which also means that the kitchen can be dissolved and mobile. This potential for change and built-in variability makes the building appear like a stage rather than a house divided according to functional purposes.

The house lacks ordinary doors in strategic places, often where there is a clear boundary between functions and degrees of privacy, such as between the courtyard – living room – bedrooms. Instead, whole sections of walls can be opened and closed, giving the house a dynamic layout. If the wall between the courtyard and living room is drawn, the courtyard has the appearance of an empty space in the body of the building, but when the wall is entirely open between the living room and courtyard a new layout emerges – a veritably monumental open space along a long building. The glass wall of the bedroom can also be opened to incorporate the landscape behind the house, leading down to the sun patio which is for private naturism, being nude in the sun without being seen. The patio has a sand floor and a shower. If the curtains between the living room and bedroom are

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[9] Part of the inner courtyard originally consisted of fine sand from Tylösand, but since the house has no thresholds and lets in a lot of air, the sand kept blowing into the house, so it was exchanged for granite.

closed, a private quarter is created: bathroom – bedroom – sun patio for nude sunbathing.[10]

Functionalism and outdoor life

Professionally, Bruno Mathsson was influenced by a turbulent period in Swedish history, the 1920s and '30s, when the modern Swedish state was evolving. Great changes took place both politically, economically and socially, and there was great innovativeness in architecture, art and design, strongly influenced by Europe. The Social Democrats came into power for the first time, and prime minister Per Albin Hansson formulated the idea of a Swedish welfare state: "The benign state does not recognise any privileged or underprivileged, any pets or stepchildren." The mind that would populate the welfare state would be egalitarian and ethically aware – and it would be shaped partly by a new architecture and new commodities. Like many others, Bruno Mathsson saw the buildings, commodities and ideals of this new movement at the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, where architectural modernism was introduced in Sweden. The exhibition applauded the new technology and the growing consumer and media society with illuminated signs, advertising and film screenings, parallel with the emergence of an anti-consumerist body culture centring on hygienism and outdoor sports. This disparate dynamic of affirmation and restriction in relationship to desire and consumption, and ultimately to architecture and commodities, has left a deep imprint on Swedish functionalism ever since the 1930s.

Alongside the emergence of functionalism, another vital movement evolved: the fitness culture. The fitness enthusiasts helped build up "public health" as part of the strategy towards creating a new, healthy, egalitarian human being governed by needs rather than by desires. Although the legal holiday entitlement was not introduced until 1938, the first parliamentary bill on legislated holidays was presented as early as 1917. One reason why it took so long before it was introduced was the scepticism regarding the workers' capacity to utilise their free time constructively. Holidays must not become demoralising "free time" used for, say, uncontrolled consumption. The Swedish Tourist Board's walks and hostels, and the recreation exhibition that Gregor Paulsson participated in organising in 1936 in Ystad as the first of its kind, are examples of attempts to influence and fill free time with structured activities. Largely the same people were engaged in the Ystad exhibition and the debate about free time at the Stockholm Exhibition – Alva Myrdahl, Gotthard Johansson and Gustaf Näsström and others – and, as Näsström writes: "They managed their assignments in the same spirit of pulling along the new welfare state that had inspired the men and women involved in the [Stockholm

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[10] Tylösand is famous for its beach and is popular among sunbathers. Naturists have also frequented the area. The outdoor sports enthusiast Gösta Zadig was Bruno Mathsson's closest neighbour, having built a house there already in 1949 out of several building huts positioned around a central courtyard and a separate, screened patio for nude bathing. Mathsson did not call on Zadig until he had built his own house, but he was inspired by Zadig's patio and added one to his own house. From a talk with Gösta Zadig, 27 July, 2006, Frösakull.

Exhibition] in 1930."[11] There is an ascetic and moralising undertone to the fitness movement, whose primary message is, if not to convert people, then at least to educate them in how to live healthy lives and improve public health, which involves building a new approach to one's own body, the objects one surrounds oneself with, and one's surroundings.

In the late 1800s, when the tuberculosis bacteria had been identified, "evil" obtained a material form and a scientific definition, but it was not visible to the naked eye, giving rise to general, collective fear. Hygienism was not merely a programme conducted by the medical sciences and the state, but also generated popular notions of, and strategies for fighting, this evil, and these so-calledself-practices were to have a great impact in many different fields.[12] Functionalism came to absorb these ideas and link them to a strategy for housing and urban planning. Apart from trying to block or prevent illness by means of barriers, ideas also flourished on how to exterminate these evils. The sun was considered to be a "disinfecting oven" – and both the fitness addicts and the modernists were sun-worshippers.

In the late 1920s, sunbathing, or naturism, grew into a popular movement thanks to groups of men living collective outdoor life in nature, and in 1928 a brochure was published repudiating the swimming costume culture and prescribing nude bathing as an ancient Swedish custom. The skin specialist Johan Almkvist was the figurehead of the Swedish naturists, claiming that it was unhealthy to keep the body constantly covered by clothes and that "we should be naked as often as possible and only use clothes when necessary as protection." Being naked at home was part of the naturist lifestyle, and it was also important to emphasise that nudity in itself was not immoral, that only actions carried out by unsound people could be immoral. Just as free time should be filled with content to prevent people from being deluded into uncontrolled desires, it was also important to have sensible things to do during nudity, such as gymnastics and other bodily exercises. Alcohol and tobacco were out of bounds, of course, and the diet should be vegetarian and healthy. The naturist was, and is, explicitly against consumerism. "The concept of naturism has nothing to do with nudity. It is about subscribing to a lifestyle where one is opposed to all unnecessary consumption in order to live in harmony with nature. There are even naturists who use swimming costumes but who are more moderate in their consumption of other goods."[13] Naturism and nudism could be seen as yet another

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[11] Gustaf Näsström, *Fritidens morgonrodnad,* Särtryck ur Ystads Fornminnesförenings skrift nr XXI 1976, p. 52. Näsström also points out that it was Gregor Paulsson who highlighted the concept of free time. In 1926 there were only two definitions of free time according to the Swedish Academy's dictionary: the time one is free from a periodic illness (especially fever) or the time when a student is not attending school.

[12] Jan Olov Nilsson, "Man måste härda sig", *Möjligheternas landskap:nordiska kulturanalyser,* eds. Anders Linde-Laursen and Jan Olov Nilsson.

[13]Linda Stark, Interview with Inge Gullander chairman of the Swedish Naturist Society; Hallandsposten, 31 July, 2006.

strategy in a disciplinary self-practice where individual desires are controlled in favour of more general needs.

Lifestyle architecture

Bruno Mathsson came in contact with the fitness movement in the mid-1930s, when he read the health guru Are Waerland's articles in the magazine *Frisksport* and used to eat roughage and raw vegetables. Sun and oxygen were as important to the fitness advocates as light and air to the functionalists, and the transparency promoted by the modernists was expressed in very concrete spatial terms by fitness advocates who transferred certain domestic functions, such as sleeping and cooking, from the interior to the exterior. Are Waerland advocated outdoor sleeping and had two beds outdoors, one in an open alcove and one in a treetop. "I have estimated the gain in oxygen during one night to more than one-third of consumption indoors, since the depth of breathing itself stands in direct relation to the freshness, coolness, purity (low dust content) and humidity of the air. The dry, dust-saturated indoor air is one of the main causes of respiratory disease."[14] Following a visit to Waerland's home, Bruno Mathsson built an outdoor bed shaped after his body. It was a sort of metal tub on wheels, light enough to be moved indoors and outdoors, and covered by a body-shaped plastic hood with a zipper that could be heated up with five litres of water in a demijohn.[15] The bed caused a stir when it was shown at the *Vår bostad* exhibition in 1941, and one critic in the magazine *Form* described it as "a typical example, in its meticulous attention to detail, of this fitness furniture philosopher's eagerness to take his life philosophy and professional potential to their utmost consequences."[16]

Among fitness enthusiasts it was not only the bedroom/bed that "moved outdoors" to be "disinfected" with air and sunlight, but also the kitchen was often built outdoors, and it was a plain fare that was to be prepared in these simple cooking facilities. Simplicity and anti-consumerism are a form of lifestyle that is often supported by scientific discoveries, as in Are Waerland: "Civilised man has completely forgotten that the pleasure of eating lies not only in the choice and preparation of food, but above all in the body's ability to absorb nutrition, or in the natural, healthy need for 'tissue regeneration', which always stands in direct relation to the functionality of the respective organs. If this functionality is first-rate, then every meal is a feast – no matter how simple. And here simplicity is the fundament of life."[17] Bruno Mathsson also designed an outdoor kitchen in the form of a tent shed on the lawn outside his mother's house. According to Agne Windmark, editor-in-chief of *Frisksportaren*, Bruno Mathsson was a veritable "health architect" who converted the plans of the

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[14] Arne Waerland, *Frisksport,* 1935, 35.

[15] Ingrid Böhn-Juhlander, *Bruno Mathsson* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 1992), p. 107.

[16] Erik Wettergren, "Vår bostad 1941", *Form,* 1941.

[17] Are Waerland, *Frisksport,* 1935, p. 35.

health programme into a new lifestyle, new commodities and new homes. "When I have created for myself, according to Waerland's plans, the perfect health, which I have set as my goal (…) I will start redesigning the interiors of Swedish homes. And not just the interior but also the *houses* themselves. This diet and approach to life that the fitness movement presents to people calls for *a fundamentally new style* – with new, simple, *beautiful* utensils, not least."[18]

This tension between control and encouragement of human desires is discernible already in his very first design commissions, the chairs from the early 1930s. The chairs are functional and ascetic at the same time, while embodying a conscious marketing strategy, with, as he himself puts it, a "psychological price". The first chair that Bruno Mathsson exhibited, an upholstered "baroque" chair, won him a scholarship and, later on, a trip to the Stockholm Exhibition. Influenced by the functionalist architecture and furniture, he stripped the "baroque" chair of its fabric and padding, leaving only the wooden frame and girth straps. Presented like this, the chair was a typical functionalist product, but Mathsson also claimed that this need not be the end product but merely a starting point for different variations of the chair. It could be covered with different fabrics and be made in different styles and price ranges – a modernist object to be dressed in the market status of serially produced commodities, like a 1920s Model T Ford with the potential for conversion into a 1950s GM. In other words, a "type" that serves as a frame for upholstering in precious "skins" in a wide range of prices and styles.

Frösakull is not a typical modernist house from the inter-war period, but rather a postwar expression of the increasing awareness of consumers as a heterogeneous group. By materially structuring a specific lifestyle – that of sunbathing and fitness – the building conveys an approach to architecture and the needs to be fulfilled. This can be interpreted as a direct response to new and improved production technology and commodity markets based on increasingly differentiated serial production. Both products and consumers were divided into smaller sub-categories with increasingly fine differences. Frösakull also reveals a tension between elegant, sleek American mid-century modernism and brutalist anti-aestheticism. A form of merger between the desire-driven consumer product that flirts with our dreams, and the concrete, immediate, brutal object that appears only in its real setting. The large, illusory window sections and the undulating, transparent ceiling co-exist with recycled steel rafters, wood slats nailed on slightly askew, and the most basic steel draining board. The building oozes of pragmatism rather than aestheticism, and the builder underlines this with his affirmation that Frösakull was not built according to the drawing board but that a great deal was left to the handymen to solve. The design and the solutions are usually the simplest and cheapest possible, and they do not consistently adhere to predetermined notions of measurements, proportions or aesthetics.

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[18] Ibid.

The ambivalence characterising modernism, the embracing of a modern commercial culture and desire-driven consumption on the one hand, and a restraining moralistic relationship to goods and architecture based on needs on the other, is nakedly evidenced here. The recreational free time that Frösakull opens up to, a life without work that can be devoted to desires – food, drink and socialising – is constrained by a restrictive moralist lifestyle. Fitness and naturism involve a disciplining self-practice that, combined with innovative architecture, both allows and prevents extravagant living. In this anti-house, postwar new technology and sober modernity meet the shifts in nature, the nude body and the dreams of the primordial state, naturalness and honesty inherent in outdoor life.

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