

Beatriz Colomina

“A Conversation with Mikael Olsson”

Beatriz Colomina What led you to the project of photographing the Summer House in Frösakull? It seems to me like the story of an obsession.

Mikael Olsson As a photographer you're always looking for something that you could go more deeply into. When I was in Japan I got an email from a friend, Catharina Starby, who was working at a well-known architecture firm in Stockholm. They were in the process of buying the house. She asked me if I would be interested in photographing it.

Beatriz Was this the first time you took on an architectural project?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz Did the photographs she was asking for have any purpose? Documentation of the house?

Mikael Yes. When she asked me, they hadn't bought the house yet. They were thinking about it, and they wanted to have some images. I had been interested in architecture for a long time.

Beatriz You were interested in architecture, but you hadn't done architectural photography before?

Mikael I had been interested in houses as homes. I have seen the Schindler house in LA, for example, and it touched me. And when my friend contacted me I was actually visiting Shigeru Ban's home in Japan.

Beatriz You didn't photograph those houses?

Mikael No, not really.

Beatriz You had an interest in architecture, but you were not taking photographs?

Mikael Yes, but not as a project.

Beatriz So photographing architecture started with a commission.



Schindler House
West Hollywood, CA, 1921
R.M. Schindler
© Grant Mudford, 2001

Mikael Yes, though they just wanted a few images.

Beatriz Did they pay for them?

Mikael No. They were supposed to pay, but between you and me, the idea of letting them pay me made no sense at a certain point because they allowed me to spend a lot of time there.

Beatriz Who had the idea of buying the house?

Mikael Thomas Sandell from Sandell Sandberg, a well-known architecture and design firm in Sweden.

Beatriz Why did he buy the house?

Mikael I think they bought it to save it from being torn down. When Thomas was a student, his professor Jan Henriksson told him that this was an interesting house. They even went together to visit the house in the 1980s. It is a funny story. They knocked at the door and Bruno Mathsson was inside, presumably nude, and he said through the door, “Could you please come back in one hour or two?” So they went to a bar, and after a few beers felt like, “Well, let's go to the house next time.”

Beatriz So he didn't see it?

Mikael No, Thomas never saw the house.

Beatriz Never? Not even when he was buying it?

Mikael I'm not sure.

Beatriz So he bought it sight unseen?

Mikael Yes, I think so. Karin Mathsson died, and the Mathsson firm was run by a person who was not so interested in the house. The value of the house was almost zero. He bought it to save it, because he knew that it was an interesting house.

Beatriz I read in Helena Mattsson's text that nobody at the Sandell Sandberg firm used the house, and that nobody was even interested in going there.

Mikael True, but the house was in bad condition.

Beatriz Initially the idea had been to repair the house?

Mikael Yes, and that people at the firm should go there and use it as a summer house. But since it was so run down, people at the firm didn't think you could be there when it was in such bad shape.

Beatriz So the house was abandoned. When did you first photograph it?

Mikael In 2000.

Beatriz And when did they buy the house?

Mikael The same year. The contract was not drawn up until the summer, but they had access to the house before. I was there to take the photographs, and I thought this is more interesting than I had imagined.

Beatriz What did you think was interesting?

Mikael I was comparing it with other houses I knew in the world, like the Schindler House. I had read books on modern architecture, and I thought, "This house is interesting because it is in Sweden, but has similarities to those other houses."

Beatriz Specifically, what interested you?

Mikael The house is both beautiful and ugly.

Beatriz What do you see as ugly?

Mikael It is quite provocatively primitive. It doesn't flirt with you. If you look at a Mies van der Rohe house, it's just perfect, mathematic, and you already know it's good. This house you don't know if it's good or bad, if it's beautiful or ugly. But maybe ugly is a very harsh word...

Beatriz No, no, ugly is a very interesting word.

Mikael It keeps your attention. It is like a person, when it's just perfect it's not so interesting.

Beatriz So you are more interested in imperfections?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz Was the fact that the house was run down and abandoned part of the seduction?

Mikael Yes. And it was also quite strange to enter the house that is the estate of a deceased person. Everything was left there. In the beginning, I almost didn't dare touch anything, but after a while I was using his cutlery while eating. I took very few pictures of the house in the beginning, because I thought I should wait until it was restored. But nothing happened. They took down the ceiling and it was down for a year and a half. During that time I didn't take many photographs. I took a few and then I realized that they were probably going to repair the ceiling, and that all the originality would be lost. So I decided we had to put it up again.

Beatriz So you could continue to take photographs?

Mikael Yes. In the beginning my approach was very intuitive, and after a while I became more systematic. My process was to unfold every image. I also made sketches with my small camera. When I looked through the sketches and the images, I saw new ideas I wanted to pursue. Sometimes one image could be in process for a year and a half. That's why I kept going to the house for such a long time.

Beatriz It's interesting that you talk about sketches, like an architect. What kind of camera do you use for the sketches?

Mikael Just a small 35 mm.

Beatriz Digital?

Mikael No, I don't use digital because the sketches might become originals.

Beatriz Sometimes they become originals? You might even prefer the sketches, as do so many architects. So you don't use digital because you prefer the quality of the film?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz And what camera do you use for the ones that you call the pictures or the images, as opposed to the sketches?

Mikael A 4x5 camera. I was not used to the equipment in the beginning, but got to know it better. When I analyzed my images, I saw that the earlier ones had qualities that I liked more. They are not such good architectural photographs. After a while I started to take good photographs, but then I understood that's what I shouldn't do, because that's not interesting. That's only about architectural photography. What were interesting to me were the first photographs I had taken.

Beatriz Less self-conscious?

Mikael Yes. When you see something for the first time, you just look at it and you really see what it is. But when you come back and start thinking, I should make a good photograph of that, then you start to think about light and everything, and then it becomes uninteresting. You are just showing that you are a good photographer. I want to keep the freshness of the first experience. If there is dirt, or if there is anything that is not perfect or correct, that's interesting to me.

Beatriz So you like the imperfections, the dirt in the house for example. And then you like to take imperfect photographs of this imperfect house.

Mikael I like the dirt to be there, and I actually put dirt there sometimes.
Beatriz Is the dirt and the abandonment crucial to what attracts you to this house?

Mikael It's part of the story of the house.

Beatriz So you're interested in telling the story of the house, and the story includes abandonment. But don't you think that this abandonment, this decay, is also something you invariably latch onto? Your photographs show a deep interest in decay, in all the detritus of modern living.

Mikael You can find abandoned houses everywhere, for example Villa Savoye, Farnsworth, I guess?



The Villa Savoye
Poissy, France, 1928–1931
Le Corbusier
© Rene Burri/Magnum Photos 1959

Beatriz Yes, they were also abandoned at a certain point. But what is the difference?

Mikael Here, you have a place that was only ever used by the architect, with all the belongings still there.

Beatriz The house is like the ghost of Bruno Mathsson.

Mikael Yes, and it's also the story of Sweden in a concentrated way.

Beatriz What do you mean?

Mikael The belongings and household are a part of modern Swedish living.

Beatriz Yes, the architect's house is a laboratory for ideas of modern living.



Glass House
New Canaan, Connecticut, 1949
From the book Philip Johnson
by John M. Jacobus, Jr.
© George Braziller, New York, 1962

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz In a sense, you preserve the house by preserving the sense of experimentation. And that makes your obsession with decay very particular. It reminds me of one of Bernard Tschumi's *Advertisements for Architecture* that he did in the 1970s, where under an image of Villa Savoye in a state of absolute disrepair, totally abandoned, he wrote: "The most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is." For Tschumi, the decay was the most architectural thing about Villa Savoye. Did you feel the same way about Bruno Mathsson's house?

Mikael What do you mean?

Beatriz That the ruins of modern architecture have their own poetics that expose the original experiments.

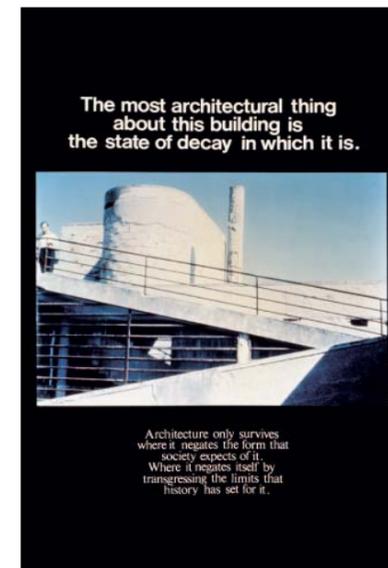
Mikael That's an interesting reflection. I think it makes sense. The house became a studio for me.

Beatriz Exactly. The house was a laboratory for you as a photographer. You talked before about going deeper and deeper into the house. But is it deeper into the house, or into yourself?

Mikael Both. In coming back again and again to find new approaches, you are putting yourself to the test. You have to prove a lot to find new ideas. Because everything is not evident, and it takes time to really understand the relation between what is a good image and what is an interesting image. Things in the image can be good, but it may still not be a good image. This is what I realized when taking these early images in 2002 and 2003. So I kept going.

Beatriz How many years were you working on this project?

Advertisement for Architecture
© Bernard Tschumi, 1978



Mikael About 6 years. For Bruno Mathsson the house was a laboratory, and it became a laboratory for me too.

Beatriz Yes, that's exactly what I'm getting at. You also began to use the house as a laboratory, which takes you deep into the mentality of architects. Have you done the same kind of effort of going deeper and deeper, and staying on one subject for a very long time with any other subject?

Mikael In 1992, I did this other project on the harbor in Gothenburg, in the dry docks where they repair ships. But I quit that project because I realized that I was doing photography that had already been done. I didn't find a way to go further.

Beatriz Do you think that if you had stayed longer on the Gothenburg project something eventually would have come of it?

Mikael Probably. But at that time I didn't see the potential. The subject and my approach were quite traditional. Maybe this house project is also traditional, but the subject is more personal.

Beatriz So the subject itself has to provoke experimentation. Tell me a little bit about the process.

Mikael I am trying to provoke myself into new situations. Sometimes it becomes interesting and sometimes less. In this case, I took some pictures and one of them was published in a magazine called *Arkitektur*.

Beatriz And then what happened? What provoked you to get back to the house?

Mikael I contacted one of the owners, Thomas Sandell, to say that I would like to continue, and hoped that would be okay. And he said yes. He is very interested in photography himself, and he liked my images. So he gave me the keys.

Beatriz And would you go there by yourself to take pictures, or was there somebody with you?

Mikael Mostly I was there by myself, but I had an assistant with me sometimes. I was very careful not to invite people to the house because it was not my house.

Beatriz Were you staying there, living there?

Mikael Yes, I stayed there sometimes.

Beatriz Was it always in the summer, or did you also go in the winter?

Mikael All year around. It's peaceful there. To observe and to photograph the place is very meditative.

Beatriz A kind of Zen experience.

Mikael When I enter the house my senses are activated. It's fantastic.

Beatriz So this is your encounter with the house, alone.

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz How long did you stay in the house each time?

Mikael Normally one or two days. Sometimes I was there for an hour, and I felt like I couldn't do anything and I wanted to go home. Maybe it was too cold. The longest I stayed was about a week.

Beatriz One week in the house, taking pictures? How did you go about it?

Mikael Usually, when I am working I focus on one subject, and I try to understand how I can get close to it. And I let the camera stand there, take some Polaroids, and go for lunch, or a run, and then I come back and realize how I want to make the composition.

Beatriz You were taking Polaroids too?

Mikael Yes, just to see.

Beatriz And understand?

Mikael Yes. I wanted to get it. You are there, put on your jogging shoes, and then go for a run, for about an hour and a half, and then you come back and it's great.

Beatriz In a way, you maintained the spirit of the house. The house is like a tent for exercise and healthy outdoor living. You were running rather than just sunning like Bruno Mathsson. But you kept the spirit of the modern house—work, health and exercise.

Mikael I'm a very sporty person. I remember there was this very hot summer week in Sweden. I went down to the beach, played volleyball, swam and then went back to the house and ate some fruit salad. It was really nice.

Beatriz And all this while you were staying alone in the house?

Mikael Usually I was alone.

Beatriz So how many times a year do you think you were going there?

Mikael I don't know, maybe thirty.

Beatriz Did you live nearby?

Mikael It takes me an hour and a half to get there.

Beatriz So you could go and then come back easily.

Mikael Yes. But sometimes, my mood changed when I arrived there, or I thought, maybe I will get into the mood when I arrive, but it didn't happen. Sometimes the problem wasn't me. The house could be so beautiful, but at the same time it could be so ugly. The climate could be very harsh, and when the weather was bad outside, it could be even worse inside. Very humid, like in abandoned houses, even ice on the floor. Nature had taken it over.

Beatriz Because it's a house for the summer, right? How long is summer in that part of the country?

Mikael Three months. But it could be very unstable. It sometimes still snows in March and April. One of the images with snow was the last image I took.

Beatriz And what month was that?

Mikael That was in January. I went down there just to see. I had stopped taking photographs already. The weather was beautiful and I decided to take a trip to the coast. The coastline was covered with snow, very unusual in this area. Just before leaving home, I thought maybe I should take my camera with me. Then I went to the house, and saw that the courtyard was covered with snow. And I didn't have a really good image of that space, so that was just perfect. I'd never seen that before, in six years.

Beatriz So it's with that image of the summer house snowed in that the project ends.

Mikael Exactly.

Beatriz What months did Bruno Mathsson go to the house?

Mikael Just for July and August, I guess.

Beatriz Did you develop any interest in how Bruno Mathsson used the house?

Mikael Yes, I talked to neighbors a lot.

Beatriz Was that part of going deeper and deeper into the house?

Mikael Yes. To learn the story of the house was to get new images to make.

Beatriz You wanted to know everything.

Mikael Yes, I have one image with a flash, if you remember. It was in the sunbathing courtyard, and I got this idea because I had learned that he slept outdoors. So the idea was that he just woke up in the middle of the night. Flash!



FK01.2006
© Mikael Olsson



FK14.2004
© Mikael Olsson

Beatriz So you absorbed this story into an image. How about the archive? Did you go to the archive of Bruno Mathsson for inspiration?

Mikael There is no Mathsson archive, but I visited the company.

Beatriz Do you really have an interest in Bruno Mathsson, or is it just the house?

Mikael I don't know. [laughter]

Beatriz So that means no.

Mikael Not really.

Beatriz Only as far as it gives you a tip as to what to photograph in the house.

Mikael Yes. He really didn't interest me so much as a person.

Beatriz The house is more interesting than the architect.

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz How about the lifestyle provoked or supported by the house?

Mikael It's about how the house reacted to me.

Beatriz Reacted to you, or you to the house?

Mikael Both.

Beatriz So you think a house reacts to you too. I think that is a beautiful idea. Can you explain more?

Mikael [laughter] I think his house likes me.

Beatriz His house likes you? The house is alive?

Mikael Yes. I'm a part of it.

Beatriz You are part of this house? In love with this house?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz Bruno Mathsson had another house, too, that you have also done a series of photographs of. What is it called?

Mikael Södrakull near Värnamo, Sweden.

Beatriz Södrakull. How did you come to photograph that house?

Mikael It was quite funny because one day I was in Frösakull, taking pictures. I had an idea of an image I wanted to take, but there was too much wind. The area is near the coast. So I said to myself, I should wait for tomorrow, or go somewhere else. And then an architect who was passing by told me that I should see Mathsson's other houses. So I decided on that windy day to go there.

Beatriz What year was that?

Mikael In 2001. I went there and it was abandoned. The same day I also passed by a small town called Kosta, looked at a row house by him. I was astonished that it was nearly a ruin. I was shocked.

Beatriz Three abandoned houses.

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz What did you do about the row house?

Mikael I made a film of it.

Beatriz A film?

Mikael Yes, me and my friend Andreas Roth made this film together. We shot it on S16 with static takes with an electronic soundtrack by Carsten Nicolai.

Beatriz Why did you make the film?

Mikael It's a story about Sweden. We mostly wanted to test some ideas about film.

Beatriz Well, you always say it's a story about Sweden, but what about it is Sweden?

Mikael I feel that we don't take care of our history. I thought it was quite incredible that three of his houses, two of them built for himself, were in disrepair.

Beatriz It's common actually. There are many houses by famous architects that are abandoned. What matters is that you were the one who became obsessed with this house. I too became obsessed with an abandoned house, Eileen Gray's E.1027 in Cap Martin, and it became a major project for me for many years. I think for you the question of the decay is particularly important, or perhaps it is the abandonment that is the issue, because you sometimes talk about it as if they had abandoned a child or an old person. You feel it personally. There is some sadness about it.

Mikael Because it's alive.

Beatriz Exactly. And when did the project of photographing Södrakull start?

Mikael The first day I went there, in 2001.

Beatriz The very first day?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz And did you take any pictures of the row houses you saw the same day?

Mikael I just took sketch shots of the row house. I thought I shouldn't do



Beatriz Colomina at E.1027
Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France
Eileen Gray
© Carmen Bonell, 1995

E.1027
Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, 1926-1929
Eileen Gray
© Txatxo Sabater, 1995



anything. Why should I tell the story of all Mathsson's houses?
The idea about the film came later.

Beatriz You only felt like you had to tell the story of two of the three projects. Was it because those are the houses where Bruno Mathsson actually lived?

Mikael I was interested in his homes in this kind of state. I began taking kind of sneaky images of Södrakull through the curtains.

Beatriz That's a completely different approach. Why?

Mikael In Södrakull nobody had invited me.

Beatriz Who are the owners?

Mikael The Bruno Mathsson firm.

Beatriz So the Södrakull house was also owned by the Bruno Mathsson firm? And they did not have any interest in it either?

Mikael I don't know. But they realized they should save that one. They eventually restored it, but not in the original way.

Beatriz Are you interested in the question of preservation?

Mikael I don't know if I'm really interested in preservation of buildings. For me it's more about collecting ideas and memories.

Beatriz How do you preserve them?

Mikael In my pictures.

Beatriz Right, so you don't believe in architectural preservation, you believe in preserving architecture through photography.

Mikael Yeah, and I hope my photographs will contribute...

Beatriz Ideas for preservation?

Mikael I don't know.

Beatriz Ideas for architecture?

Mikael Hopefully. [laugh]

Beatriz In Frösakull you were introduced to the house and your photographs took loving care of the house. Your role at Södrakull was completely different. You were a voyeur.

Mikael Yeah, the photographs were...

Beatriz Voyeuristic?

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz So all the images of Södrakull were taken with the smaller camera?

Mikael Most of them.

Beatriz Even the ones that show the house from the distance?



SK12.2002
© Mikael Olsson

Mikael No, those were taken with my 4x5 camera.

Beatriz But the ones where you are peeking through the curtains were made with a small camera.

Mikael Yes.

Beatriz Also you can be undetected, because the camera is very small. Did anybody see you taking those pictures?

Mikael No. I don't think so. There are only a few houses nearby and the house was just overgrown. It was obvious that nobody had looked after the house for a very long time.

Beatriz Were you thinking it was better that nobody saw you?

Mikael It didn't matter.

Beatriz Did you go many times to this house, too?

Mikael Five, six.

Beatriz When did the project stop?

Mikael In the spring of 2002.

Beatriz And what made you stop?

Mikael One day I went there, and the building had been restored into something different. But really after I got the idea of taking these images the way I did, I thought that's it.

Beatriz Frösakull was recently bought by a Swedish/American couple.

Mikael Yes, in 2006.

Beatriz Have you been back to the house and photograph since they bought it?

Mikael No.

Beatriz Why? Were you no longer interested?

Mikael No. The thing is that I tried to stop before. I understood that this was not, if you like, healthy.

Beatriz You are talking as if it was a drug addiction and you had to go to rehab.

Mikael I like the idea of how deeply can you go into something, because you never know what's next. I remember once when I was running a marathon, and after 25 km I got this runner's high that lasted for the rest of the race. When you enter that kind of zone, you realize that you can go to the next level, and that's what I wanted to do in my work too.

Beatriz So you got a runner's high from this house too, but at some point

you had to tell yourself to stop. Because there was no clear finish line, like in a marathon.

Mikael

Yes.

Beatriz

Why?

Mikael

It was a natural place to stop.

Beatriz

The house was now being taken care of by others. Before, you were the caretaker.

New York, April 6, 2007.