

Kalmar Museum of Art

Timothy Tore Hebb describes a new intervention by Tham & Videgård Hansson (TVH) in the medieval city of Kalmar in southeast Sweden. He describes how the 'black box' form of the museum is a metaphor for the contemporary situation while also responding innovatively to its historic setting.

Tham & Videgård Hansson, Kalmar Museum of Art, Kalmar, Sweden, 2008
Hidden among the greenery of the park, as one nears the museum the black, four-storey cube carefully reveals itself.

The design by Tham & Videgård Hansson (TVH) for a new museum of art at Kalmar encountered strong opposition from many locals. The City Park, where the new building is located, is considered an important public space by many of the city's inhabitants, and there were fears that a new contemporary building would interfere with the historic setting, which has had no new architecture since the 1950s, and change the medieval identity of this small city with a population of just 65,000.

In May 2008, after almost two years on site, the new museum was finally inaugurated.

Situated on the Baltic coast and near to the border with Denmark, Kalmar was one of Sweden's most important cities from the 13th to the 17th century. It has one of the best-preserved Renaissance castles in Northern Europe, as well as Storkyrkan Cathedral, which was built by Nicodemus Tessin the Elder, the architect of the royal castle in Stockholm. The new landmark building, however, provides a bridge between the city's prestigious past and the more uncertain and complex challenges of its future.

Moreover, the modest, black-box shape of the museum contains many narratives that today pose urgent and timeless questions regarding the future survival of man. Its entirely concrete form with tight and fortress-like windows could be interpreted as dealing with the fear most of us feel about the consequences of a changing climate, and perhaps also with the risk of nuclear terrorism

A black box, rectangular in shape, also calls to mind the pilots' last discussion before the crash, or a world where oil is rapidly diminishing, or a black hole in space that could swallow up everything, as well as referring back to a Medieval watchtower. All in all, a beacon calling out to the world for reason. Threats and potential disasters seem to be coming at us from all directions these days, and these need to be met and resolved. Yet the museum, both inside and out, does not feel dark and hopeless: it is full of energy and opportunities.

When asked about the foreboding shape and skin of the building, the architects' response was that it was all in the eye of the beholder. They did not have Medieval or Renaissance architecture in mind when they designed the project, instead focusing on the use of light and the building's connection with its surroundings.

Bolle Tham and Martin Videgård, the principals of TVH, are both graduates from the KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm. Since they established their office in the city in 1999, they have alternated between practice and teaching at architecture schools in Sweden and abroad. Their reputation has been built mainly on their domestic work; for example, the rethinking of the villa, using building techniques and shapes in new ways. With an interest in matching the quality and detailing of traditional craftsmanship with

industrial building processes, their villas are constructed from wood and in-situ cast concrete using computed-aided design tools.

The international competition to design the Kalmar Museum of Art attracted 294 proposals. However, the jury particularly liked TVH's design solution, which combined the interaction of a contemporary structure with the historic City Park, well-conceived exhibition spaces and the unusual manipulation of interior light: the second-floor wall, which faces the park, can be totally removed to reveal a large window that can fill the interior space, for contemporary exhibits, with light and at the same time offer glorious views of the park, and the roof is made partially out of transparent glass, bathing the fourth floor in natural light.

'In this context, we wanted to create a building with a strong identity that can hide among the leaves. The exterior surface is covered with dark, large-scale wooden panels, enhanced to bring out the wood vein. Inside, walking vertically up four levels gives people new ways of looking at the park, city and lake,' explains Tham.

The height of the museum was determined, to some extent, by the limited site. The whole building is made out of in-situ cast concrete and the interior walls are mainly especially fine and light Portland cement – a choice made together with the director of the museum. It was also necessary to connect the museum's volume to the adjacent restaurant pavilion, which was designed in the 1930s by the well-known Modernist architect Sven-Ivar Lind. In doing so, the architects have created a striking contrast between the enigmatic black box and Lind's functionalist building that produces a new kind of energy that feels right for today's Kalmar and gives it 'the makings of a big city', as the city's website boasts. **AD+**

Timothy Tore Hebb is an author who writes mainly on Swedish architecture and industrial design, often focusing on how the needs of man and society in general can be met through design. His articles have been published in the Swedish morning daily Dagens Nyheter and leading Swedish architecture magazine Arkitektur.

Text © 2008 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Images © Åke E:son Lindman

