

## **Jan-Erik Andersson**

Demonstration of Knowledge and Skill for the Doctorate in Fine Arts, 8.11.2008

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***Life on a Leaf* – Rummet som ikon.  
Mitt hus som ett arkitektoniskt konstverk.**

***Life on a Leaf* – Iconic Space.  
My house as an architectural artwork.**

### **Summary**

My doctoral demonstration of knowledge and skills consists of the planning and construction of the leaf-shaped owner-occupied house, *Life on a Leaf*, three books, *Dagboken* and *Teoriboken 1 & 2*, as well as the curating of the WILD – Fantasy and Architecture exhibit at the Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art.

The *Life on a Leaf* house, the production part of the doctorate work, is developed together with architect Erkki Pitkäranta and is built at Hirvensalo in Turku. The planning of the house began in 1999; the building permit was obtained in 2004. In 2005, the ground work was done and in 2006 the building of the house began; it will be ready in the summer of 2009.

I am exploring the interface between architecture and art, and at the same time, the opportunities to build a house based on a personal dream. How does – these days – a house look when it is built based on a need to adorn it with ornaments and works of art? How can nature be represented and reflected in the house? Can various aesthetic viewpoints co-exist in the building? How does the final result look when an artist and an architect collaborate on equal terms? Can you live in a picture? What is the role of ornamentation in creating “mental space”? These are the questions for which I am looking for answers in my doctorate work.

In *Dagboken*, which together with *Teoriboken 1 & 2* constitute the theoretical part of my doctorate work, I give an account of my – that is to say the artist’s – view of the collaborative process. The architect’s point of view is different; that however is outside the scope of this study. I have chosen the journal form, because I feel that it is the form which is best suited to giving a correct and at the same time emotional description of the long and complicated planning and building process. Parallel with the text, the same story is told in pictures, which I took during the course of the process. In addition to the concrete building process, *Dagboken* also gives a thorough account, with accompanying statements and documents, on how the process progressed up to when the building permit was granted in 2004.

In *Teoriboken Del 1*, I describe my view of the “mental space” which is formed by the sagas and stories we hear as children and give an account of the ornamentation and the fantasy-inspired architecture’s task in providing reflex surfaces for recreating these spaces and in opening up new ones. I am looking for a connection in the *Life on a Leaf* house to *Art Nouveau* architecture, which regarded physical space as a protection for the human “soul”, as opposed to the view of space held by modernism, where it is a machine

for living. In the chapter *Huset och naturen* (The House and Nature), I describe the differences between how nature is experienced in a modernistic house by George Veronda in comparison with an Arts and Crafts house by Howard Shaw and assert that modernistic architecture symbolically distances itself from nature, whereas in the Arts and Crafts house it is gradually negotiated into the house. The core of *Teoriboken Del 1* consists of an analysis of the role of ornamentation in and on the building. I demonstrate, with the support of the other researchers, that in spite of the modernists' negative attitude toward traditional ornamentation in the beginning of the 20th century, one did not abandon ornamenting, rather replaced it with refined material surfaces as well as with architectonic details, which referred to the construction of the building. These details are however often used *without* being necessary to the building's construction.

By referring to architectural theorists such as Owen Jones and Louis Sullivan, I am trying to demonstrate that the ornamentation's, and then especially the figurative ornamentation's, and the art's roles in a building are at least as important in creating *architecture*, as is the viewpoint emphasising the abstractive qualities of architecture, where the architecture is understood as an arrangement of building masses in relation to each other and how light falls on them. I maintain that ornamentation and artwork incorporated in a building opens doors for our fantasy spaces and creates "mental spaces" which are vital to our physical health. Modernistic architecture, with scaled-down surfaces without figurative ornamentation, gives me a sense that something is lacking. In order to understand this feeling, I look for support in Derrida's argument surrounding the inherent lack in a work of art, which requires a frame.

I am also attempting to test a concept, *Iconic space*, which I formulated during the process. With *Iconic space*, I am trying to describe an expanded concept of space, based on a collaboration between architects, artists, tradesmen and clients, where art, ornamentation, details, humour and sound all contribute to creating stimulating environments, which have an ecological dimension, in order for people to *feel at home* in them. I conclude *Teoriboken Del 1* by giving two concrete examples, in text and pictures, of what I mean by *Iconic space*: Lastenlinna ('Children's Castle') hospital in Helsinki by Elsi Borg and the IIT Campus building in Chicago by Rem Koolhaas.

In *Teoriboken Del 2*, I describe the concrete ideas behind the ornamentation of the *Life on a Leaf* house. I start by presenting *SOL världen*, a project where Pitkäranta and I together with interior design architect Jari Inkinen created a scale model for the SOL cleaning company's headquarters in Helsinki. The project was halted by Helsinki City Council, but it was the introduction to my cooperation with Pitkäranta. As an already completed project, I present *Gerbera*, the Kiiipula Foundation's building in the shape of a gerbera flower, where many of our ideas were tested for the first time.

The largest part of the *Teoriboken Del 2* describes however various aspects of the *Life on a Leaf* house's ornamental and artistic features. In each phase of the building process I have tried to find opportunities for improvised ornamentation. I maintain the expressive form of the house in itself can be regarded as ornamental; the house's floor plan is a leaf, the computer studio on the third floor is a ferryboat and the winter garden on the roof it is a harebell flower.

On the house's plinth and interior concrete walls there is ornamentation such as impressions in the concrete surfaces. The house's windows have the shapes of raindrops, a leaf and a mouth. In order to broaden the house's aesthetics, I have invited about a dozen artists from Chicago, Bologna, New York, Leeds, Helsinki and Turku among other places to make artwork incorporated into the house's architecture. These artists represent various aesthetic tendencies and my thoughts have been that these artists' works

shall not be adapted to the architecture of the house, rather they shall be maximally independent, so that an unexpected and surprising effect, a communication, arises. One example worth mentioning is the work of sound artist Shawn Decker, which consists of some fifty small loudspeakers with their own sound chips, which sit inside an ornamental rail. Outdoor sensors measure the light and temperature changes which change the sound landscape in the loudspeakers. This is one manner in an intermediary form to bring nature into the house, a central theme of the doctorate work. Other ways which Pitkäranta and I have utilised are creating windows shaped like leaves and raindrops and making the interior walls organically formed in order to create in the house a similar feeling to when one is out on a nature hike.

I want to demonstrate that one need not try for a “uniform” or “stylish” construction. Instead, one can make use of combinations and contrasts. In the *Life on a Leaf* house, I am not looking for a uniform aesthetic, but rather a combination of the new, the discovered and the self-made. For example, all of the house’s toilet seats and washstands, as well as the bathtubs, come from recycling centres. The element bringing it all together is that there is a carefully considered idea behind every feature.

In the collaborative project with Pitkäranta, we try to show that one can create architecture by telling stories, painting pictures and playing.

By using pictographic elements taken from nature, I want to show symbolically, that our culture is dependent on nature and point out the vital role of art in order to create living and stimulating spaces, where the inhabitant feels at home. The element of well-being will be important to coming generations who more and more will be compelled to avoid travelling. I want to show that by avoiding building rooms that one does not necessarily need, in my case the car port, cellar and sauna, an ornamental and artistic design of the house can be financed.

In this project, as opposed to the *Kummin* ecological barnyard in Teuva, Pitkäranta and I have concentrated on symbolic, pictographic, formal and emotional methods of connecting a building to nature. However, in the building process I have tried to use as nature-friendly materials as possible. The house is heated, for example, by geothermal energy and is insulated with eco-wool.

An important part of my doctorate studies consisted of the curation of the *WILD – Fantasy and Architecture* exhibitions at the Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art in Turku in the summer of 2007, together with Canadian curator, Jen Budney.

In order to show that the *Life on a Leaf* project is not a marginal whim, I wanted to place the house in an international context, since, especially during the first decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a series of interesting expressive building projects. That is why at the same time as my own house project, I have collected material on others. A portion of this material was presented at the *WILD* exhibition and in the book of the same name, which I wrote together with Budney.

In order to point out the *Life on a Leaf* house’s extroverted dimension, I have concentrated on making the house’s internet page informative. The process could also be followed via a web camera. Both *Dagboken* and *Teoriboken, Del 1 & 2* will be published at [www.anderssonart.com/leaf](http://www.anderssonart.com/leaf)

I hope that the research I have done increases the understanding of an expanded concept of space, an *iconic space*, based on a collaboration between architects, artists, tradesmen and clients, where art, ornamentation, details, humour and sound all contribute to creating stimulating “mental spaces”, which have an ecological dimension, in order for people to feel at home in them. I also hope that my doctorate project

shall contribute to us once more, without shame, being about to use the words “ornament” and “decoration” in the architecture debate and to inspire a more personal construction where play and fantasy are guiding stars.

However, imaginative architecture remains a marginal phenomenon. There is a lot to do before the architectural field is broad enough for each and everyone who wishes to have the opportunity to live in an environment which is playful and expressive. There are many reasons for this. In my doctorate work, I have shown that it is not necessarily cheaper to create “pure” architecture and that it is often a matter of aesthetic choices, not economic ones. However, in the matter of the *Life on a Leaf* house, it has been shown that in terms of time it has taken longer than expected to build, since very little of the house can be made with standardised elements. Yet, since the house will function as a residence and computer studio for my family and me, the building process has, in spite of being long, given meaning to our lives for nearly ten years which stands out as being more and more meaningful in a time focused on sudden whims and instant gratification.

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