

Adaptive Reuse as Situated Critical Practice

Torö and Handelsresanden

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Abstract

This paper examines adaptive reuse as a critical and situated architectural practice through two case studies—*Torö* and *Handelsresanden*—developed by Atelier–Heyman Hamilton in Stockholm. Both projects intervene in *typhus*, a typology of standardized prefabricated single-family dwellings produced during Sweden’s welfare era (1930s–1970s). These dwellings, emblematic of the *egnahem* movement—a state initiative to provide land and low-cost loans to sober, working men—entangle vernacular details, industrial production, domestic ideals and the moral ambitions of the welfare state. By engaging with the material, spatial, and ideological legacies of *typhus*, the case studies show how adaptive reuse can reorient the normative spatial and social alignments inscribed in everyday domestic architecture. The interventions are situated within a theoretical framework expanding on discourses of alteration (Scott 2008) and cultural memory (Stone 2019). It draws specifically from Suha Hasan’s analysis of “aesthetic regimes”, Sara Ahmed’s concept of “orientation”, Jane Rendell’s articulation of “insertion as montage”, and Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges”. These perspectives frame the design process as a form of critical inquiry, one that engages questions of identity, orientation, and embodied experience. Through detailed readings of the case studies, the paper shows how precise programmatic, structural, and material interventions operate as critical tools, engaging the social norms encoded in the existing homes while reconfiguring domestic space toward alternative ways of living. Taken together, *Torö* and *Handelsresanden* raise a broader question: how can situated, context-sensitive practices of adaptive reuse reposition standardized housing as a site for critical reflection on the social and political implications—historical and contemporary—of the planning of the *egnahem* movement and the design of *typhus*? By addressing *typhus* not as static artifacts but as active sites of negotiation, the paper argues that adaptive reuse can be a practice of both architectural and cultural critique.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Swedish Welfare-State Housing, Critical Spatial Practice

Introduction

Adaptive reuse is increasingly defined not merely as technical rehabilitation, but as a distinct discipline of poetic alteration (Scott 2008) and narrative “undoing” (Stone 2019; Plevovets & Van Cleempoel 2013). Building on this, by approaching *typhus* as active participants in the preservation and reproduction of domestic and cultural norms, this work frames adaptive reuse as a form of situated architectural and cultural critique, one that opens possibilities for

alternative modes of living within familiar, contested, spaces. Welfare-era housing carries the imprint of the social, technical, and ideological norms of its time, continuously shaping not only the physical environment but also the ways people inhabit it. These prefabricated dwellings embody tensions from the welfare era (1930s–1970s) by combining vernacular aesthetics, industrial methods, and the moral ambitions of the state (Lindgren 1985, 7–10). The affordances of a situated practice are considered through two case studies—*Torö* and *Handelsresanden*, adaptive reuse projects of *typhus* developed by Atelier–Heyman Hamilton¹. Both projects explore how small-scale interventions can produce disorienting effects that unsettle the existing domestic spaces. *Typhus* present a layered set of constraints: their standardized plans are structured around normative domestic arrangements, where mass production, vernacular nostalgia, and modernist ideals coexist. The case studies will explore how reconfiguring plans and making structural elements visible accommodate ways of living that go beyond the limitations of the existing plan. The resulting disruptions of tectonic and material continuity produce moments of pause. These situated interventions attend to the spatial, programmatic, and material assumptions embedded in *typhus*.

Historical Context

By 1980, single-family dwellings, or *småhus* (small houses)—the typological continuation of *typhus* and the *egnabem* movement—comprised roughly 45 percent of Sweden’s housing stock, housing nearly 60 percent of the population (Lindgren 1985, 28–30). Emerging in the late 19th century, the *egnabem* movement, supported by state-backed loans, aimed to provide sober working men the opportunity to purchase land and build *typhus*, blending vernacular aesthetics with ideals of private property and linking individual homeownership to broader social and moral ambitions (Lindgren 1985, 18; Årlemyr et al. 2025). These initiatives spread into industrial cities across Sweden, forming the basis of early garden cities and a significant component to the vision of the Swedish welfare state: *folkhemmet*, or “the people’s home” (Lindgren 1985, 18–19). The architectural expression of *typhus* balanced tradition and industrial rationalization. Early postwar houses were typically modest detached dwellings of one to one-and-a-half stories, averaging around 90–94 m², often with basements and carefully considered layouts (Lindgren 1985, 14–15). Architecture from this period reflects modernism’s forward drive—standardizing materials, forms, and systems for mass production—while nostalgically embracing local and national “traditional” details such as ferrous iron-oxide paint, panel facades, *knutbräda*², and window trim. Even as production became more rationalized, the symbolic significance of the single-family house remained strong: it represented continuity with the cottage ideal, national identity, and the cultural promise of independence and domestic stability. Today, these historical ideals persist even as the housing landscape has shifted, with 41 percent of the housing stock comprising single-family homes (Attefall et al. 2024) and continued aspiration to live in them (Årlemyr et al. 2025). *Typhus* actively encode assumptions about family, gender, and social hierarchy, translating political and cultural values into spatial arrangements that demonstrate the domestic ideals of the *egnabem* movement remain a persistent part of the contemporary social imagination (Årlemyr et al. 2025).

Case Studies

In these case studies, adaptive reuse becomes a mode of inquiry—a way of engaging

critically with the norms and possibilities of the existing structure. The case studies *Torö* and *Handelsresanden* are understood as sites where such “situated knowledges” emerge (Haraway 1988)³. *Handelsresanden* is a 27 m² extension and renovation of a 72 m² *typhus* in Hökarängen. It was developed in 1947 as part of the future *egnabem* neighborhoods of Långbro, Solberga, and Fagersjö, in the southern parts of Stockholm (SSMB 1947). This adaptive reuse project responds to the specific spatial, social, and economic needs of a fluctuating family size, which included four permanent residents and two teenagers on alternating weeks. The family's varying need for larger social spaces was challenged by the existing plan—a collection of small to medium-sized rooms dimensioned for the needs of an idealized family from the 1940s (Lindgren 1985, 3). The work takes place within a broader context of aesthetic governance defined by *Careful Development of Small House and Villa Neighborhoods*, a planning document published by the City of Stockholm. This document interprets national building regulations to assist in decision-making at the Department of Building Permits (City Planning Office of Stockholm 2021). Despite its ostensibly open language, the document allows little flexibility. Through vague formulations and prescriptive illustrations, it promotes an aesthetic regime rooted in a selective interpretation of the *egnabem* movement that occludes the entanglement of the vernacular and the modern. Specific, often arbitrary interpretations of context are presented as objective guidelines, promising to uphold local and national traditions while obscuring their political, ideological, and aesthetic entanglements. Demolition of a segment of the façade exposed older layers of a soft pastel yellow paint beneath the red iron oxide. The change in façade color from a modern or functionalist palette to the traditional red reveals an earlier shift toward nostalgic references to the worker's cottage and away from the modern. The city's planning documents, intentionally or not, codify an interpretation of past architectural identities that ignores the historical and formal complexity of the area, as well as the site-specific knowledge and informal adaptations that have taken place over time. Knowledge of the specific conditions of a house, gained through practical engagement with its material, reveals the pretense of neutrality assumed by planning documents such as *Careful Development of Small House and Villa Neighborhoods*⁴. As Donna Haraway reminds us, claims to objectivity are never neutral; what counts as “rational” or “universal” knowledge always reflects a particular position (Haraway 1988, 584).

Torö is an 18 m² addition and renovation of a 75 m² *typhus* from the 1970s on the island of Torö. The house is located in an area planned in 1965 for the development of a weekend-home community that includes roughly 215 subdivided plots (Ösmo Municipality 1965). The project responds to the needs of a multigenerational constellation including five women/girls: a grandmother, her daughter, the daughter's partner, and their two daughters. The kind and disposition of the family were contradicted by those of the existing spaces. The structure of the existing house in this case consists of timber stud walls, loadbearing at the exterior, and trussed roof frames, producing a flexibility in plan where non-loadbearing interior walls can easily be (re)moved. Repair and adaptation were necessary to avoid demolition. The house's lifespan was extended by updating essential building functions and adapting the architecture to multigenerational living through structural alterations. The existing hall, kitchen, bathroom, and dining room are clustered together, serving as a meeting point for the two bedrooms but providing no separate spaces to retreat. The extension accommodated the need for a more private bedroom, reading room, and storage volume.

To improve energy efficiency and enable year-round use, the outer walls were insulated, damaged windows replaced, and roof damage repaired by cutting away lower sections and constructing new eaves. The concrete roof tiles were replaced with a continuous layer of roof paper that unifies the old and new structures, folding down to enclose the addition at the northern gable.

Comparative Analysis

In Suha Hasan's terms, the existing conditions of *Torö* and *Handelsresanden* belong to an "aesthetic regime": a field of standardized forms and familiar domestic references through which the nation imagines itself. Drawing on Jacques Rancière, Hasan argues that such regimes are more than stylistic categories—they organize what is visible, sayable, and socially legible within a city (Hasan 2021)⁵. Read through Hasan's lens, *typhus* can be understood as instruments of an aesthetic order that encodes and reproduces assumptions about family, gender, and class. The homes reveal how dominant norms are materially inscribed in housing policy and how adaptive reuse can act as dissenting gestures, redistributing what is visible, opening alternative narratives, and challenging the social logic embedded in the original design (Hasan 2021). Ahmed describes "orientation" as the effect of accumulated experiences through which bodies learn how to inhabit and recognize space (Ahmed 2006, 109–156). "Orientation" offers a complementary perspective to Hasan's, shifting from the structural to the embodied. Read through Ahmed, the spatial arrangements of *typhus* are rigorously dimensioned and organized for the heteronormative nuclear family. The home's dimensions, materials, and spatial composition are socially and politically charged, orienting inhabitants toward specific arrangements (privileging heterosexuality, whiteness, and the nuclear family) and thereby teaching and reproducing social norms through its spatial logic and material form. This orientation depends on forms of "implicit knowledge"—learned ways of feeling at home within certain spatial and social orders (Ahmed 2006, 124). As Ahmed writes, «to think of this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement: at home, 'things' are not only done a certain way, but the domestic 'puts things' in their place. 'The family' itself becomes what we implicitly know, as well as what surrounds us, a dwelling place» (Ahmed 2006, 124–125).

Torö was extended to create a distinct space for the grandmother; *Handelsresanden* to make larger open spaces where the entire family could gather. In both projects, the need for spaces and volumes not present in the existing plan was made possible by structural alterations. New columns and beams are made visible, separated from adjacent walls by 50 mm. These post-and-lintel elements link the new spaces structurally and visually. At *Torö*, two posts and a transfer beam form a portal at the center of the house, where the hall, dining room, kitchen, and living room intersect. At *Handelsresanden*, three columns and two ridge beams allow for the removal of a central loadbearing wall, connecting the kitchen, dining, and new garden-facing living room. The new structure acts at the scale of lived experience: exposed beams and columns interrupt the expected continuity of the domestic interior, reconfiguring how inhabitants move, gather, and perceive their relation to the space. This is a form of "Disorientation," which interrupts the lines that organize habitual orientations, opening a chance for "Reorientation" toward new lines of connection and dwelling (Ahmed 2006, 10, 157–180).

In both houses, structure performs a double role. It enables the formation of new rooms



Fig. 1. Juxtaposition of exposed structure (left) *Torö*, (right) *Handelsresanden* (Isak Berglund Mattsson-Märn, Malin Valušková Najib, 2024)

and spatial arrangements, unsettling the fixed logic of the typhus and allowing for ways of living beyond the limits inscribed in its original plan. The new structure also acts at the scale of lived experience: exposed beams and columns interrupt the expected continuity of the domestic interior, reconfiguring how inhabitants move, gather, and perceive their relation to the space. In *Torö* and *Handelsresanden*, this process is made tangible. The visible structure marks where the domestic order of the typhus was literally broken open, producing a subtle but persistent disruption of the familiar. As Ahmed writes, «homes too can be ‘giddy’ places where things are not always held in place» (Ahmed 2006, 9). Through such disruptions, the projects reorient the domestic interior—materially and experientially—opening the typhus to other configurations of family, relation, and dwelling. The design process centers existing components—proportions, materials, movement and site—which operate through resonance and interruption rather than replacement. At *Torö*, new cast-in-place footings echo the proportions of the existing CMU foundations but lean inward to register the site’s slope and exposed bedrock, drawing the non-site-specific—the standardized plan of the typhus—into a specific relationship with the ground. At *Handelsresanden*, the concrete foundation extends upward between the existing house and addition, situating the new volume in a defined relationship with the existing. New windows at *Torö* mirror and extend the earlier proportions and detailing; at *Handelsresanden*, a strip window and corner detail expose the non-loadbearing nature of the extensions gable facade and introduce overlapping asymmetries in the façade composition, the offset roof, and the structure glimpsed through one window. The façade compositions can be read through Jane Rendell’s concept of “insertion as montage,” which, drawing on Walter Benjamin, describes



Fig. 2. Juxtaposition of material and details, (left) *Torö*, (right) *Handelsresanden* (Isak Berglund Mattsson-Mårn, Malin Valušková Najib, 2024)

the juxtaposition of fragments that interrupt dominant narratives and provoke reflection (Rendell 2006, 116-132). In architecture, this introduces new elements that challenge and reinterpret what is taken for granted, producing moments of critical juxtaposition. Material choices also operate as insertions that interrupt continuity, producing reflection and critical juxtaposition at the scale of the detail. At *Torö*, new tar paper on the roof and façade enters into dialogue with the existing dark brown-black ferrous pigment, while pine plywood in the interiors echoes the ceiling's pine paneling—strategies that create resonance through subtle shifts rather than replication. At *Handelsresanden*, where the extension was required to use the same façade material, variations in assembly and detailing—at the exterior corner of the gable facade, the edge of the strip window, and in the layered symmetries in the facade composition—unsettle the apparent continuity of the building envelope. These moments of misalignment turn regulation-driven uniformity into opportunities for disorientation and reflection. The detailing acts as insertion as montage: small-scale interruptions that displace dominant readings of material and form (Rendell 2006, 121). Through the close, tactile encounter with the garden façade and the unexpected assembly of its joints and edges, the tectonic assemblies interrupt the continuity of an expected experience.

Conclusion

The convergence of Hasan's "aesthetic regime," Ahmed's "orientation," and Rendell's "insertion" frames adaptive reuse as a situated act that engages, disorients, and reorients the spatial, social, and material norms encoded in *typhus*. The case studies thus reveal the dwellings as both carriers and challengers of the social logics that shaped them. Extending spaces, reconfiguring plans, making structure visible, inserting gaps, and interrupting continuity in materials and details can be understood in Hasan's terms. They are acts of "dissent",

the pushback against dominant aesthetic regimes and a “redistribution of the sensible”, a re-ordering of which identities are given space (Hasan 2021). In Ahmed’s, they “reorient” bodies and open non-normative possibilities of dwelling (Ahmed 2006). Through Rendell, they are “insertion as montage”, using juxtaposition as a tool of critique (Rendell 2006) and in Haraway’s, they embody “situated knowledges” and “partial perspectives” (Haraway 1988). Taken together, these interventions attend to notions of “situated knowledges”, where practice itself becomes a way of thinking-with the world rather than about it. Rather than seeking objective distance, the work embraces its partiality—knowledge is produced through specific acts of building, altering, and inhabiting. This position frames adaptive reuse not only as a technical operation, but as a mode of inquiry: an embodied, materially grounded way of engaging with the political conditions of domestic space.

Notes

1. As the architects of both case studies, the authors write from within the process of design. Following Haraway’s insistence on “situated knowledge”, this positionality is acknowledged not as bias but as a constitutive condition of the inquiry.
2. *Knutbräda* (Swed. authors translation) are a vertical wooden board covering the corner joints (*knutar*) of a log-built structure, serving both to protect the log ends from weathering and to articulate the building’s corners. In vernacular Scandinavian architecture, *knutbrädor* (plural) often combine functional and decorative roles, sometimes featuring profiled or carved ornamentation that expresses regional craftsmanship. It is important to note that there is no technical need for knutbrädor in the construction of *typhus* due to the modernization and industrial prefabrication of the homes.
3. Haraway develops “situated knowledges” in critique of the “God trick” of universal objectivity in scientific discourse, arguing that all vision is partial and located. Here, her framework is extended to architectural practice as a way of understanding design as a situated form of inquiry (Haraway 1988).
4. “Careful Development of Small House and Villa Neighborhoods” is the author’s translation of *Varsam utveckling av småhus- och villaområden* (City Planning Office of Stockholm 2021).
5. Suha Hasan develops the concept of the “aesthetic regime” through the postcolonial conditions of the modern Arab city, where the visual and spatial orders of the built environment participate in the production of national and cultural identity. While Hasan’s analysis is grounded in the specific histories of Arab urban modernity, her reading of Jaque Rancière in relation to the built environment and its histories offers a broader understanding of how aesthetic and political orders intersect the notion of the sensible.

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