Enlightenment and Classicism: Public Building Politics in Swedish Rural Areas

Introduction

At the beginning of his reign, Gustav III (1746-1792) of Sweden made provincial tours in his realm. He also visited southern Finland during the summer of 1775. During his trip, the king and his administration gathered information about the material circumstances of this eastern part of the Swedish realm. Gustav III was concerned with the development and improvement of the realm’s economy, administration, and armed forces. While travelling for twenty-seven days across the Finnish countryside, the modest state of the public buildings, especially parish churches, was revealed to his Majesty. Very small, simple, traditional, and most often wooden parish churches situated by the public roads revealed the poverty and simplicity of this part of the realm. Backwardness and poverty were matters that the central government usually wanted to hide, especially from

1. The territories of Finland were part of the Swedish realm until 1809, when they were ceded to the Russian Empire and became the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland.

foreign visitors.\textsuperscript{3} This revelation was probably one of the reasons affecting the Royal Majesty’s conclusion that the realm needed a new public façade and that the quality and standard of public buildings should be improved.

This article concerns the Nordic dimension of the Enlightenment and Classicism, especially in the Finland, the eastern part of Swedish realm. After the fifty-year reign of the Diet, Gustav III re-established royal absolutism in 1772. He presented himself as an enlightened, constitutional king of Sweden who was only interested in implementing the very best decisions for the nation.\textsuperscript{4}

Gustav III was very conscious of how to use public space to present royal power and historical tradition. During his reign, diverse public building projects in particular became part of politics and political culture. The king was personally interested in the Classical arts and architecture, and he showed interest even in the slightest details. Classicism obtained a Nordic form at the court of the king, and this variant became known as the Gustavian Style. In this sense, it was natural that Gustav III used architecture and public buildings as a political instrument to manifest his sovereign power.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{3} Villstrand, \textit{Valtakunnan osa}, p.211.
Public buildings manifested power and were symbols of the crown. The central government used architecture to shape and create the hierarchy and to dominate public space, so public places were also produced to control subjects. Public architecture shaped different kinds of boundaries and pathways, which affected the behaviour and social actions of the realm’s subjects. It created structures and environments for people, for example, to choose courses of action or exercise their rights. In accordance with Hannah Arendt’s concept of the public sphere, the parish churches qualified as a public political space in which parishioners were able to meet one another, exchange opinions and debate, and find collective solutions to their problems. The churches were often the only public buildings in rural areas, so they were used not only for religious purposes, but also as a place for social and political interaction. The church and its courtyard hosted parish meetings, and parish members often stayed at these natural meeting places after Sunday services to socialise and discuss local and national news and politics.6

This article discusses how and why the central government managed to promote and spread Enlightenment and Classical architecture to rural areas of the Swedish realm – especially in western Finland – in the late eighteenth century. The bureaucracy and legislation concerning buildings was gradually developed at this time. All parishes were obliged to send building plans to the Bureau of the Superintendent in Stockholm in order to receive public funds for church construction. These provincial plans were redrawn as classical churches by the superintendent’s office. I investigate this development principally by examining changes in national legislation.

The second part of this article discusses how enlightened and progressive ideas were used to promote and examining changes in the building designs and materials in rural areas of western Finland. The church-building process produced a diverse set of source materials, including the minutes and letters of the Royal Majesty, the superintendent, the proxies of the cathedral chapter, and the governor; and the minutes of parish meetings. I examine these proceedings in particular using the case study of the Kokemäki parish church.\(^7\)

Architecture and the manifestation of power

The development of Swedish public building bureaucracy, politics, and legislation had begun gradually a few decades before the reign of Gustav III. This had much to do with Superintendent (Sw. överintendent) Carl Hårleman (1700-1753), who managed to increase the influence of the office and the volume of the work it did. Hårleman had studied architecture in Italy and France and during his term of office as superintendent, a Swedish form of Rococo-Classicism developed. Hårleman also influenced the legislation that came into force in 1752. According to this statute, all plans for public building projects financed by public funds had to be approved by the superintendent.\(^8\) This rule was extended in 1759, when all parishes were obligated to send their construction plans to the Bureau of the Superintendent in Stockholm in order to receive public funding for their church buildings. Because the parishes were usually poor and in need of this funding, the central government managed to persuade parishes to hand over planning rights from the local or provincial level to the central government and the superintendent’s office.\(^9\) These provincial plans were then redrawn in Stockholm.

\(^7\) Viitaniemi, Yksimielisyydestä, passim.


\(^9\) Den 22. Martii (1759) Kongl. Majts Breft til Landshöfdingarne och Consistorierne, angående ansökningar om Collecter til kyrkors byggande och
The central government tried to improve and change provincial church construction not only by controlling the drawings, but also by dictating statutes that forbade traditional structures. On utilitarian grounds, the authorities first banned the construction of separate wooden belfries in 1759 and recommended that parishes build stone towers if the structure of the church permitted it. The belfries were not to be too high or spiked, since such designs did not conform to the aesthetics of Classicism. Since the statute only concerned parishes that applied for public funding, other parishes could keep on building belfries in the local style. A few years later in 1764, the central authorities decided that the porches (Sw. vapenhus) situated on the south side of churches were useless and expensive to maintain. These traditional porches had been used since medieval times, but now parishes were advised to abandon them and enlarge their churches to the west. This legislation was a continuation of the earlier belfry regulation. When the belfry was replaced with a west tower, it could also function as a hallway and entrance and save on building costs and maintenance. In this case, the official architecture also served the utilitarian aims of rational public building.

Gustav III was very interested in maintaining his realm with durable and beautiful public buildings. The king did not content himself with just upgrading the public architecture of
royal palaces, fortresses, the capital city of Stockholm, and other important or newly established towns; he wanted to improve all the public buildings, even in the most distant corners of the realm.\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, from the beginning of his reign, Gustav III involved himself in public-building matters and bureaucracy, and instructed his subjects. In 1776, he confirmed the previous legislation and issued a new statute that required all construction projects for churches, other public buildings, and bridges financed by the king, the state, or public funds to be administered through the building control system. Construction drawings and cost estimates had to be sent through the office of the governor to the superintendent. Gustav III reserved the ultimate right to approve the drawings himself. To secure quality of design and to avoid the wasting time and resources, the central authorities offered the parishes the opportunity to order church drawings directly from the superintendent instead of using provincial building masters, whose drawings were usually rejected and redrawn in Stockholm.\textsuperscript{14}

Gustav III tried to convince his subjects that the construction drawings that had been first examined by the superintendent and by himself would benefit them in many ways. It would prevent the local parishes from constructing impermanent buildings, using inept craftsmen, and wasting money.\textsuperscript{15} However, the young king was not only interested in saving the local resources; he was also very ambitious in terms of his idealistic building politics and love of Classicism. He forbade the use of wood in public buildings without special permission.

\textsuperscript{13} Tandefelt, \textit{Gustaf III}, p.204-205.
and commanded the use of brick, marble, or other local stone in the place of wood. The statute was radical, since large areas of the realm, such as Finland and northern Sweden, traditionally constructed timber churches. After the Reformation, stone church-building projects petered out in Finland, although there are some notable exceptions.17 Despite the king’s strong will and the power of the statute, stone churches remained rare in Finland.

Kokemäki church was the first new stone church-building project in Finland that complied with Gustav III’s legislation. Master mason Johan Schytt made the first simple design at the local level in June 1777.18 In Stockholm, Superintendent Adelcrantz reworked the design and changed it to the Neoclassical style in May 1778. The church eventually consisted of an elongated assembly hall and a west tower with an entrance. Kokemäki church represented the architecture of the Bureau of the Superintendent in its purest form, and Gustav III was pleased with Adelcrantz’s design.19 Still, Kokemäki church, which was named after the king (1786), remained a rare example of a stone church to the west of the Gulf of Bothnia.20

16 Ibid.
17 In Finland, five stone churches were built in the seventeenth century, and three were built in the eighteenth century before 1776. They were situated in south-western Finland and along Finland’s western coastline. Sinisalo, “Suomalaisen kirkkoarkkitehtuurin vaiheita”, passim. Markus Hiekkonen, “Suurvalta-ajan kirkkorakennukset” in Suomen kulttuurihistoria: 1 Taivas ja maa ed. by Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen and Timo Joutsivuo, Helsinki, 2002, p.336.
20 Similar elongated stone churches with a west tower were built in the Iniö and Pyhämää parishes. The stone churches in Pääkkö (1752-55) and Kakskerta (1765-69) were elongated, but they lacked a west tower. Cruciform stone churches were built in the Kangasala, Oulu, Munsala, and Kuopio parishes. The church in Hämeenlinna (1798) differed from other stone churches because of its round shape. It was designed to be reminiscent of the Pantheon in Rome. Sinisalo, "Suomalaisen kirkkoarkkitehtuurin vaiheita", p.71; Henrik Liljus, "Kivikirkot 1600- ja 1700-luvulla” in Ars: Suomen taide 2, ed. by Salme Sarajas-Korte, Espoo, W+G, 1988, p.321-322; Knapas,
Gustav III wanted to create coherent Neoclassical architecture, and was thus concerned with the interiors and decoration of churches. The Royal Majesty insisted that the

"Kyrkobyggandet i Finland", p.182-185; Suomen kirkot ja kirkkotaide 2, p.73, p.105, 156, 254, 343.

layout of the altar and pulpit, organs, and tombs, like the structure of the buildings, should be controlled and approved by the superintendent and the king himself. The aim was to use the works of academic painters and sculptors, and this was promoted with the enlightened and utilitarian aim of saving public and congregational funds. This statute, however, was not only given to the congregations; it was also aimed at the local gentry. Particularly during the seventeenth century, it was customary for the local gentry to make donations to local churches. Such donations were even recommended in the Church Law of 1686. Small parish churches could therefore be more or less full of mementos and diverse donations from previous generations, like monumental graves, altarpieces, chandleries, and coats of arms. By controlling the donations, Gustav III was able to return the local parish churches to the public realm and erase the glory of private estates. When taking over the control of memorials and donations, Gustav III was actually manifesting his power over the nobility. He was able to define what type of memorial was proper for his subjects to be left. Hence, Classicism was used as a political instrument and a manifestation of power.

Some years later in 1781, Gustav III continued his conquest of public space by issuing a statute instructing every new or rebuilt church to display a plaque at the main door stating when the church had been built and who the monarch was at that time. The original intention was that these plaques should be made of stone (even marble) and inlaid with gold lettering, even when the parishes tended to save on other building costs. This idea was taken from Classical Roman buildings, and it was used on other public buildings, such as courthouses. Sometimes the text was written in Latin and used Roman numerals. These plates mentioning the reign of Gustav III or his son Gustav IV Adolf were installed on many churches across the realm due to the large numbers of church-building projects taking place across the

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kingdom. Since the plates were situated in the most central place in the parish, anybody who passed by on the public road or entered the church would see the name of the king. These plaques were a reminder and a manifestation of the power of the monarch even in distant, rural areas.


**Classicism in provincial rural areas**

When, in public building, the ideas of the Enlightenment and utility were combined with the classical architecture, the result produced widespread admiration of the functional and beautiful public buildings. The efficiency of building politics and the official architectural style were promoted as being rational and grounded in utilitarian and enlightened ideas. The utilitarian ideas were put into effect generally, with Enlightenment ideas particularly stressed in Finland. This eastern part of the Swedish realm had suffered the misfortune of foreign political intervention and war at the beginning of the eighteenth century. By contrast, the second half of the century was a time for development and growth. According to utilitarian thinking, the interests of state had to come first. All decisions and actions were evaluated on the grounds of how profitable and necessary they were, and how much they produced economic profit or fostered general economic development. The enlightened and utilitarian ideas were used to promote and justify the centralised designs and changes in building material. Public buildings, such as churches, had to be not only aesthetic but also efficiently built.

In the building projects, the question of the building material was especially important. The central government promoted the use of stone, but the main building material in Finland (and northern Sweden) was traditionally wood, even in the towns. From a utilitarian point of view, wood should had been saved for use in lumber manufacturing and not for domestic construction. The products of the nascent timber industry – including shipbuilding and tar burning – were the main Finnish exports and required a lot of wood. As forests had been cut down close to areas of habitation, there was a common fear among economic thinkers that the Swedish realm would run out of wood if such reckless practices continued. Instead, the domestic, wasteful use of wood was to be limited. For example, wooden fences and bridges were seen as unnecessary and were to be replaced with stone constructions. Therefore, the central

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government had favoured stone buildings from the 1750s, offering tax reductions first to burghers and later to the peasants who built stone houses for their private use. This tendency is also seen in the stone church-building statute.

On the local level, the new architectural thinking was grounded in utilitarian ideas, but it also emphasised the benefits that the local community would gain by obeying the new statutes. The local proxies of the central government and the Cathedral Chapter declared that stone churches would endure both time and fire. The simply made and unpainted timber churches usually lasted only a few decades before they had to be rebuilt. In comparison, the stone churches were reported to be very durable: when the local community decided to build a good stone church, it would last for generations. Naturally, the stone church would thus benefit the community in the long run.

The local clergy and gentry usually supported the idea of a stone church, while the peasantry resisted such stone building projects. The clergy was responsible not only for ecclesiastical matters; it also managed many of the administrative tasks that the central government sent to the local level, such as the population census, poor relief, and the distribution of public announcements. In this sense, the local clergy represented the authorities and was not in a position to resist the statutes of the Royal Majesty. Rather, it had to encourage parishioners to obey and carry out the will of the central government. Furthermore, the clergy was an educated estate whose task was to promote and exemplify the economic and agricultural development in rural

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areas in the spirit of the Enlightenment. Clergymen were able to follow the newspapers and other publications concerning the latest enlightened and forward-thinking ideas and distribute practical information at the local level.

The centralisation and the use of architects’ designs and stone materials were promoted as a means of saving public and congregational funds. Actually the centralisation increased bureaucracy, and new building requirements raised building costs significantly. Previously, the parishes had attempted to keep building costs low by using local building masters and traditional, tried-and-tested construction methods. The local peasantry knew that building a timber church required less time and fewer resources than a stone church. Master carpenters were freely available in rural areas, whereas master masons had to be called from the towns, and they and their journeymen commanded higher salaries and travel allowances. The timber constructions were also considered faster to build and easier to work on than the heavy stone structures. A further drawback of stone construction was the difficulty of moving limestone to distant parishes. The peasantry, who had to assist in the building work, was much more familiar with handling timber than doing masonry work.

The Finnish parishes usually complained about the higher expenses, which were far in excess of the congregation’s means. The financial help that the central government promised did not cover all building costs. According to Swedish law, the peasantry had to undertake day-labour, supply the building materials, and pay the outstanding part of the building costs. Therefore, most of the parishes applied for special permits to build a church from

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31 Kydén, *Suomen intendentinkonttorin*, for example, p.61-62. See more about peasantry’s reactions in my forthcoming article.
wood instead of stone. The central government had to relent and to allow most of the Finnish parishes to build wooden churches. The Neoclassical church designs of the superintendent were therefore usually realised as timber structures in Finland. The local master carpenters created a wooden form of Neoclassicism, in which the official architecture was combined with the local building tradition. Master Builder Antti Piimänen from Turku (southwest Finland) in particular became known for his elongated timber churches in southwest Finland. He built his first west-tower timber church in 1765 for Marttila parish. Piimänen continued to develop this applied form of Classicism and it became more common over the next few decades. The clear, calm, and simple Gustavian style was convenient for the Finnish peasantry.33

Classicism also had an impact inside the parish churches. Like the architecture, the decoration combined both practicality and aesthetics. The ideal was to construct spacious and bright spaces in the vein of Classical temples. The church hall thus had to be simple and clear. The colours used had to be soft and calm, like pearl grey and light blue, and the windows were made larger than before. The old, often baroque altarpieces and other decoration were frequently removed and replaced with new, more fitting pieces.34 As white walls became fashionable, the older churches whitewashed the medieval paintings adorning their walls. Thus, the church space became brighter and helped the parishioners to read and use hymnals when singing psalms, whose popularity had increased.35 The Enlightenment also gradually had an impact on the decision to cease burying bodies inside the church building. This move was justified on the grounds of health and smell. Overall, Gustavian-style church halls were designed to create a better space for the social and political interaction of the parish communities.

35 Laasonen, Suomen kirkon, p.317; Villstrand, Valtakunnan osa, p.212; Pirinen: Luterilaisen kirkkointeriöön, p.94-95.
Résumé

As king of the Swedish realm, Gustav III was interested in the Classical arts and architecture, and he wanted to create a new public façade in late eighteenth-century Sweden. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, he sought to improve the quality and standard of public buildings. The result of the combination of the ideas of the Enlightenment and utility with Classical architecture was the production of functional and beautiful public buildings that were met with general admiration. However, the politics of public buildings were also an important part of the political culture and a manifestation of the king’s power. Through legislation and building bureaucracy, the central government gained the power to change public architecture nationally and to shape public spaces in every corner of the realm.

Most of the public buildings were parish churches, and the eighteenth century was an active time of church (re)building. All parishes were obligated to send their plans to the Bureau of the Superintendent in Stockholm in order to receive public funds for church construction. These provincial plans were redrawn as Classical churches by the superintendent’s office. Hence, the politics of public building works gradually brought Classicism and a standardised type of architecture to the provinces.

Enlightenment ideas and considerations of utility were used to promote and justify the centralised designs and changes in building materials. The central government promoted the use of stone as a building material, since it would endure both time and fire. The use of stone was also estimated to save forest resources for the use of manufacturing and export products. Nevertheless, stone churches did not become frequent in Finland. In most cases, the local clergy and gentry supported the idea of a stone church, but the peasantry resisted the stone building projects, as it considered them too expensive and laborious. The superintendent’s church designs were thus usually realised as timber structures. By way of compromise, the Finnish master carpenters applied Classicism to the wooden constructions, and the decorations changed gradually according to the Gustavian style. New church halls were designed to be larger and brighter and to be better spaces not only for the
spiritual, but also for the social and political interaction of parish communities.