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«You've got time»*: Discovering Léonie Geisendorf's Investigation on Prison Cells

Felicia Liang, William Wikström

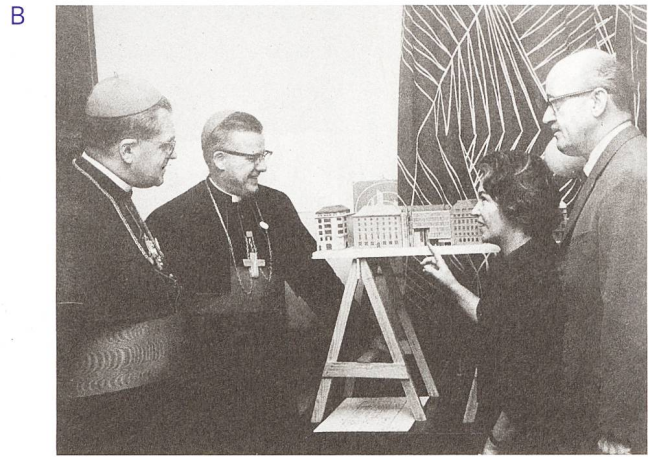
For a few weeks every summer, when the sun never seems to set and Stockholm goes on a vacation state of mind, the office at ArkDes – Sweden's national centre for architecture and design – becomes empty. This is an opportunity to really unfold and give space to examine the extensive volumes of materials that can be found in ArkDes' collection. This summer we had the opportunity to finally open and look through the boxes filled with architectural treasures left behind by architect Léonie Geisendorf.

I HER NAME WAS LOLA

Léonie «Lola» Geisendorf is, for many people, a completely unheard-of name. She was a Polish-born architect who lived most of her professional life in Stockholm, Sweden. After finishing her studies at ETH Zurich in 1938, she went on working for Le Corbusier, to whose ideas she became forever faithful. In 1950, she established an architectural office together with her husband Charles-Edouard Geisendorf in central Stockholm; and seven years later, a satellite office in Zurich when Charles-Edouard was appointed professor at ETH.

Shortly after Lola passed away in 2016, her legacy was transferred in its entirety to our collection. We received more than 80 moving boxes containing working material, personal belongings, such as books and letters, along with six chests, each with ten drawers of architectural drawings and a large amount of drawing rolls. As often with this type of acquisitions, some parts are ordered and catalogued, while others remain untouched and messy for several years.

Geisendorf lived past 100, leaving behind an architectural heritage covering almost an entire century. Some of the more famous works consist of St Görans gymnasium (1960), originally built as «Main school for domestic science and professional needlework», (1) with an entrance hall framed by slim concrete pillars rising through three floors; (2) the dazzling Villa Delin (1970) was a commission she received through a direct recommendation by Le Corbusier, as he considered himself too expensive for the young female client, Ethel Delin. (3) There are also spectacular projects that were never built, such as the proposal for a daring new parliament building in central Stockholm and the catholic church, Lola thoughtfully worked with for 13 years (4). Overwhelming in



A Coming across Léonie Geisendorf's work in the ArkDes collection. Image: by the authors

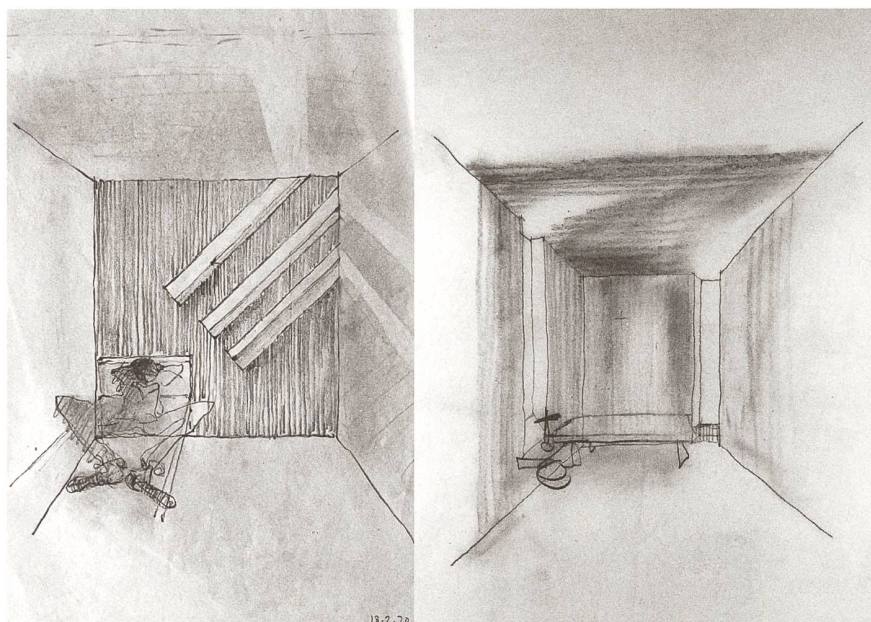
C Her fundamental idea is to create a centre for human contact between everybody involved, that is the convicts themselves, the medical staff, the teachers and the guards. Envisioned through an interior perspective of Vännäs centralanstalt. Sketch: Léonie Geisendorf (ARKM.2005-02-53-)

B Scale model for the catholic church in Kungsträdgården in Stockholm. Cardinal Döpfner, Bishop Taylor and the architects Léonie Geisendorf and Holger Blom. Image: Bertil Reijbrandt (ARKM.2005-102-28)

D



E



D Scan of diapositives of the «bostadsrum». Diapositives: Léonie Geisendorf (ARKM.2005-102-24-0004, ARKM.2005-102-24-0002, ARKM.2005-102-24-0006, ARKM.2005-102-24-0003)

E Interior sketch from a «bostadsrum», side by side with a sketch from the catholic church in Kungsträlgården in Stockholm. Sketches: Léonie Geisendorf

their sheer quantity, it is hard to not get fully immersed in the assortment of materials that unravel from the masses of boxes. Each object, each drawing, each photo, tells a new story while, at the same time, raising new questions around Lola's life.

II DOING TIME – ON PRISON PROJECTS

«The prison contains besides the dormitories a psycho-somatic hospital, training spaces for several professions, spaces for recreation sports and other activities. It is based on a new concept of care of criminals. The fundamental idea is to create a centre for human contact between everybody involved, that is the convicts themselves, the medical staff, the teachers and the guards. The purpose is to readapt progressively the convicts to life, when out of prison.»⁽⁵⁾

During the years 1971 to 1973, the Swedish Royal Building Board commissioned the Geisendorf office to investigate cells within closed prisons.⁽⁶⁾ The office spent a great deal of time working on different prison projects at that time, they would be labelled as «centralanstalt» or «lokalanstalt». The transition from «fängelse» (Swedish word for prison) to the use of these new terms, could have been a way to unchain the typology from old connotations.

The material is vast – Lola worked across the country and was involved in different phases, from studies to building permits, through which she expressed her ideology. Some projects we want to mention are Gävle (1971), Vännäs (1970), Täby (1980-81), Vänersborg (1983-85), but in this article we are going to highlight a study on how a room in a prison can be labelled by her as «bostadsrum».

III BEYOND BARS – STUDY OF THE ROOM

One of the main types of research was to achieve an escape-safe window wall without bars in a cell, which in this study is referred to as «bostadsrum» (loosely translated to «accommodation».)⁽⁷⁾ The traditional dehumanizing prison cell was transformed into something more like a regular bedroom in a home. From this study, there are sketches of many alternatives and iterations with innovative solutions of light slit windows. There are versions that are both vertical and horizontal, even diagonal, and fused into new constellations.

In her legacy we found a box with diapositives, with an array of many slides depicting different sequences of furnishings, roof types and windows in different cells. In these series of images people are positioned in different, almost theatrical ways, during both daylight and night-time. Apparently, prototypes were made in 1:1 scale and built for this study, underlining the wish to understand the space in the eye of the inmate.

IV «THIS COULD BE A ROOM IN A NICE MOTEL» (8)

In an article from one of Sweden's biggest newspapers at the time, the «lokalanstalt» in Täby was considered Sweden's most beautiful prison. (9) In fact, it was so lovely no one would ever want to escape it. In the article the warden for the facility, Svenne Wallström explained: «Sometimes I feel guilty. The prisoners seem to enjoy themselves so much, and they don't try to escape.» Such articles found in her archive tell us about the ideal of a welcoming prison, with the ambition to make inmates feel comfortable. In one article an idea of a «room made from wishes» was established as a project where inmates themselves could come forward with suggestions. (10)

Lola had a sympathetic way of handling projects and down-playing any threatening impression of a prison, hence one article is actually referring to a cell as a room in a nice motel. Despite the character of a project, she seemed dedicated to the idea of always putting the human perspective in the centre.

There is a compelling similarity between the window slits Lola designed for the proposed Catholic Church in Kungsträdgården in Stockholm and the study of the «bostadsrum», where she replaced the bars with window slits, one of her most symbolic gestures.

For a sinner or a saint: Lola's compassionate approach and commitment to the architectural task as such stayed the same.

Felicia Liang, born 1993, is an architect and assistant curator for the collections at ArkDes. She holds a bachelor's and master's degree in architecture from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm and a bachelor's degree in Art History from Stockholm University. She is currently part of the team working on a new exhibition about Swedish architecture in the 20th century, based on the collection of original material at ArkDes.

William Wikström, born 1995, is an architect and assistant curator for the collections at ArkDes. He holds a bachelor of science degree in architecture from the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and a master of fine arts in spatial design from Stockholm Konstfack. Prior to his current position he worked at ArkDes Library and is one of the people at ArkDes who is most deeply engaged in exploring the Léonie Geisendorf collection.

ArkDes is Sweden's national centre for architecture and design. It is a museum, a study centre and an arena for debate and discussion about the future of architecture, design and citizenship. The collection currently comprises around four million objects, books, journals, models, photographs and drawings that cover Swedish architecture from the 1850s up to the present day, where Sigurd Lewerentz and Gunnar Asplund are just two of around 600 architects represented. The museum will undergo a transformation and present a new exhibition of their collection in 2024.