



Citizenships and Identities: Inclusion, Exclusion, Participation / edited by
Ann Katherine Isaacs. - Pisa : Plus-Pisa University Press, 2010
(Transversal Theme. Citizenships and Identities)

323.6 (21.)

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CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa

This volume is published thanks to the support of the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission, by the Sixth Framework Network of Excellence CLIOHRES.net under the contract CIT3-CT-2005-006164. The volume is solely the responsibility of the Network and the authors; the European Community cannot be held responsible for its contents or for any use which may be made of it.

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Published by Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press
Lungarno Pacinotti, 43
56126 Pisa
Tel. 050 2212056 – Fax 050 2212945
info.plus@adm.unipi.it
www.edizioniplus.it - Section "Biblioteca"

Member of



Association of American
University Presses

ISBN: 978-88-8492-739-2

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The Acropolis of Icelandic Culture

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses a central feature of the first urban plan for the town of Reykjavík and how ideas associated with it aimed at reflecting or influencing the identity of the Icelandic population. The general plan was endorsed in 1927 but designs of the proposed main square and accompanying buildings had emerged three years earlier. The project only materialised to a limited extent and in the 1930s it was finally abandoned. The discussions about the proposed function of the piazza do however offer an example of how architecture, perceptions of history, governance and identity interact. Drawing on speeches given by two university professors at respectively the fifth and sixth anniversary of Icelandic sovereignty in 1923 and 1924, the chapter seeks to illustrate how the project was seen as being instrumental in shaping the identity of the national population.

Árið 1924 voru kynntar teikningar af skipulagi torgs á Skólavörðuholti sem þegar var farið að vísa til sem 'háborgar íslenskrar menningar'. Í kaflanum er fjallað um hugmyndir tveggja háskólaprófessora um gildi þessarar hugmynda um borgarskipulag og hvernig þeir sáu fyrir sér að hún tengdist heilbrigði og sjálfsmynd þjóðarinnar.

On the first Sunday of December 1924 Ágúst H. Bjarnason, professor of philosophy at the University of Iceland, addressed the celebrating public from the balcony of Parliament House in Reykjavík. After discussing the duties of the nation that had gained sovereign status he turned to the proposed square at the top of Skólavörðu-hill just outside the town of approximately 20,000 inhabitants. The designs had recently been made available for public viewing in a store window on the capital's main street. Its image prompted Bjarnason in his anniversary speech to dub the complex approvingly "The acropolis of Icelandic culture"¹. On the following Sunday the design featured in the daily "Morgunblaðið" along with an interview with its author, state head architect Guðjón Samúelsson. Even though the idea of building a cluster of public buildings and cultural establishments at this site was not new, it now gained momentum as it was to be integrated into the first comprehensive city plan of Reykjavík.

ACROPOLIS OF THE NORTH

Icelandic historians and philologists at the turn of the 20th century held the language and cultural product of "the golden era" of the middle ages in high regard. As cultural heritage, "the manuscripts" had special status for them and for the identity of the nation and its rationale in the nation-building process. At that time safeguarded in Copenhagen, the manuscripts were eventually – and partially – returned to Iceland in the 1970s and 1980s as the "final stage" on Iceland's "road to independence", as a testament of the nation's cultural sovereignty².

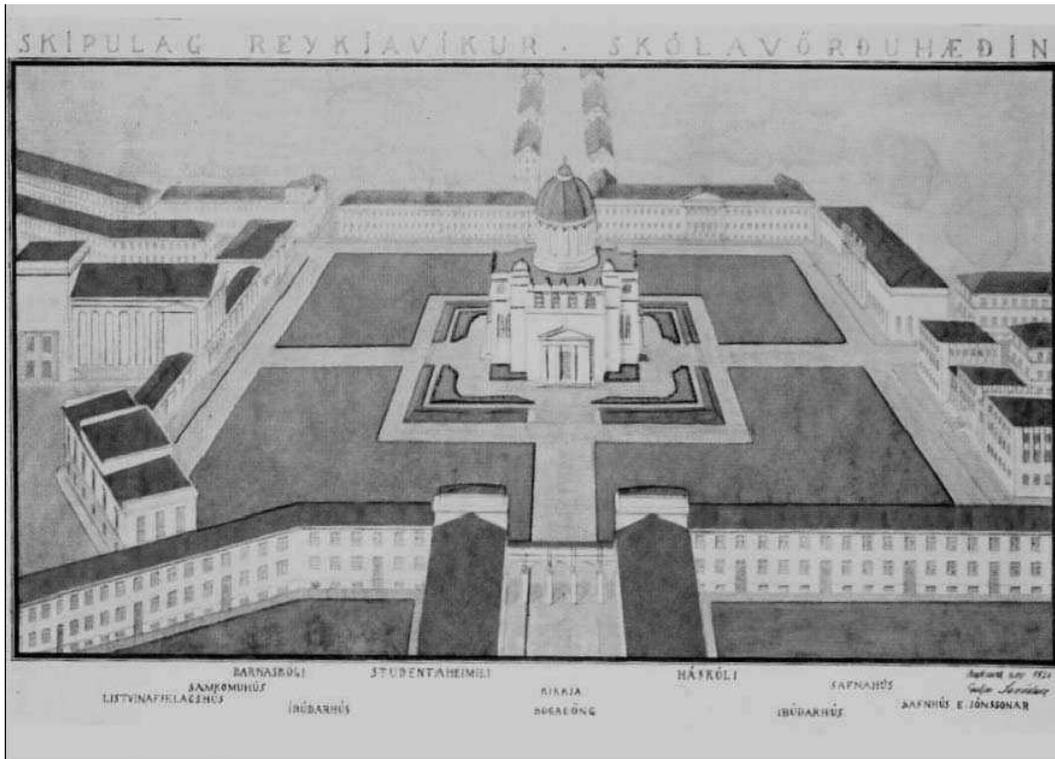


Fig. 1
A 1924 drawing of the proposed “Acropolis of Icelandic Culture” by state head architect Guðjón Samúelsson.

High regard for the nation’s past contributed to the inclination of 19th- and early 20th-century Icelandic intellectuals to align medieval Icelandic society with that of ancient Greece³. Medieval Icelanders had produced literature second to none but that of the ancient Greeks, and Iceland was, like Greece, the cradle of democracy – or so the story went. Indeed the comparison did not stop there, as Greece, ancient and modern, remained an important reference in Icelandic nationalism throughout the period⁴. The comparison did without doubt – as was intended – enhance the cultural self-assurance of this small emerging nation-state. However, the comparison was less inspiring for the Icelanders when the focus shifted from intangible to tangible heritage. “Great buildings made of stone”, Guðmundur Finnbogason, professor of applied psychology at the University of Iceland, told his audience at the fifth anniversary of Icelandic sovereignty in 1923, “have from ancient times been one of the channels that the spirit of nations has flowed through from one generation to the next, fertilising and sustaining life”. Solemnly he concluded: “Until recently we have only had language”⁵.

Iceland could not boast any grandiose examples when it came to buildings or physical memorials. In the minds of local intellectuals in the 1920s who had first hand experience of European capitals, Reykjavík did not manifest itself powerfully as a cultural metropolis. This unfavourable comparison was spelled out in Finnbogason’s speech: “Can we imagine a more bitter scorn than a comparison of present day Reykjavík and the Athens of Pericles?” The townscape of Reykjavík, consisting predominantly of modest, low-rise wooden lodgings of fishermen and labourers, a few recent villas of the emerging bourgeoisie, and only a handful of more imposing buildings, was not seen to be in synchrony with the marvel of the Icelandic golden age and its literary achievements. But all was

not lost, Finnbogason told his fellow countrymen from the balcony of parliament house, for those who know “claim that the view from Acropolis is not, as regards nature, to any substantial extent, more beautiful than it can be from the Skólavörðá”⁶. The historical dissonance could still be rectified: “We possess the foundations for an acropolis. Let us build it as soon as possible”⁷.

The proposed plan of 1924 for “the acropolis of Icelandic culture” framed a piazza at the highest point within the proposed future city centre. Similar to the ideas of the German architect Bruno Taut, the square constituted a “stadtskrone”, a “city crown” or zenith, where public buildings tower over the surrounding city⁸. The public buildings proposed at the square included the residence of the nation’s central cultural establishments. Apart from public offices, the main building of the University and students’ hall of residence, the plan proposed a community hall, an elementary school, a theatre, an art museum dedicated to the most renowned Icelandic sculptor, the building of the Friends of the Arts Society, and a building housing the National Art Gallery, Natural History Museum and the National Museum. According to the plan a cathedral in a Greek cross design was to be constructed in the middle of the square⁹.

The idea of collecting such buildings and institutions around a central square seems to have been in vogue at the time. In Gothenburg, for instance, Götaplatsen was completed in 1923 when the city hosted an international industrial exhibition. Götaplatsen forms the closure of the city’s main street; a square enclosed on three sides by the city’s concert hall, museum of fine art, theatre and municipal library. As in the discourse on “the Icelandic acropolis of culture”, reference to ancient Greece is eminent; a great statue of Poseidon is situated in the centre of the square, a statue that has since become a symbol of the city¹⁰.

ARCHITECTURE AND IDENTITY

Architecture enables and regulates people’s movements. City planning and design of the man-made environment is to a degree devised to influence the conduct and mindset of those that live and work within it. The architecture and the works of art that fashion the cityscape become invested with cultural and symbolic meanings that influence and condition the interaction of the residents, prioritizing certain values and norms¹¹.

Through the ages the piazza has had an important function within cities as a place of commerce and interaction. To some extent the proposed square on Skólavörðu-hill was to serve as a place of community gatherings. But both Bjarnason and Finnbogason had more distinct ideas about the effect and role of the Icelandic acropolis, more in style with that of its Athenian namesake. According to the latter it was to “convey for centuries to come the eminence of the generation that constructs it. It is to be a symbol of the Icelandic spirit, designed and decorated by our best artists”¹². It was to be a national treasure in the making, linking together the present generation of its builders, the supposedly primordial Icelandic spirit, and future generations that would be reminded of the profundity of both by daily visual contact with this great monument. Furthermore, Finnbogason stressed the cultural necessity for the nation to go through with the project: “We must understand, that it pertains to the mental wellbeing of each nation, that she [its members] has before her eyes tangible works of art, which she has herself created, infused by her spirit. Else, her life will be like rain that seeps through the sand rather than being ‘a mighty river rushing forwards’”¹³.

It thus became a question of the nation’s sanity and sustainability that the citizens would be able to access and observe great architecture in the capital, designed by great Icelandic architects and visual artists. Simultaneously the construction of “the acropolis of Icelandic culture” became a question of redressing a cultural deficiency or absence in order to fulfil the nation’s claim to prominence, a verification of civilization on par with the greatest of nations. The project was therefore

seen to have direct implications for the identity of the community, increasing the nation's self-confidence and sense of civility.

The wellbeing of a nation translated to the wellbeing of its citizens. To become a healthy citizen, access to art – not least national art – was deemed essential. An element in this quest for grand and beautiful buildings was to enhance communal confidence and self-respect. But the instrumentality of the proposition also postulated that not only the contents of the galleries and museums, the edifying effect of the school and university, but indeed the aesthetic qualities of the buildings themselves, conveyed civilizing and cultivating effects on the citizen, making him or her a better citizen and a truer Icelander.

NOTES

- ¹ Á.H. Bjarnason, *Ræða Ág. H. Bjarnasonar prófessors*, in “Morgunblaðið”, 9 December 1924, p. 5; in Icelandic: “*Háborg íslenskrar menningar*”.
- ² G. Hálfðanarson, *Interpreting the Nordic Past: Icelandic Medieval Manuscripts and the Construction of a Modern Nation*, in R.J.W. Evans, Guy P. Marchal (eds.), *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States*, Basingstoke [forthcoming], pp. 52-72.
- ³ J.J. [Aðils], *Íslenskt þjóðerni*, Reykjavík 1903, p. 238; S. Nordal, *Icelandic Culture*, Ithaca NY 1990, p. 102.
- ⁴ S. Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900-1930*, Reykjavík 2004, p. 52; R. Kristjánsdóttir, *Rætur íslenskrar þjóðernisstefnu*, in “Saga”, 1996, 34, pp. 150-151.
- ⁵ G. Finnbogason, *Ræða Guðmundar prófessors Finnbogasonar*, in “Lögrétta”, 3 December 1923, p. 2.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2; “Skólavörðu” was the name of the small tower-like structure at the top of the hill erected by students at the secondary school in Reykjavík in 1869, replacing an older structure by the same name at that site, hence the name Skólavörðu-hill.
- ⁷ Finnbogason, *Ræða cit.*, p. 2.
- ⁸ P.H. Ármannsson, *Landslag sálarinnar*, in “Landnám Ingólfs”, 1991, 4, pp. 142-143.
- ⁹ *Uppdráttur Guðjóns Samúelssonar af Skólavörðuhæð*, in “Morgunblaðið”, 14 December 1924, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ L. Brodin, M. Bengtson, *Göteborgsutställningen 1923: Hågkomster och Framtidsspår*, Sävedalen 2006.
- ¹¹ R.C. Shah, J.P. Kesan, *How Architecture Regulates*, in “Journal of Architectural and Planning Research”, 2007, 24, pp. 350-359.
- ¹² Finnbogason, *Ræða cit.*, p. 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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