

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Below the Surface

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/54v1q33k>

Journal

Places, 1(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Lerup, Lars

Publication Date

1984-01-15

Peer reviewed

Below the Surface

Lars Lerup

Like all respectable modern cities, Stockholm has a subway. Much of the lore of a city originates in its subway—the Metro in Paris, the Tube in London, the subway in New York. In fact, a visitor would understand more about Stockholm if he took *tunnelbanan* (the subway) from the Old Town to Vällingby than if he climbed the tallest building in town, since to understand the modern city is not only to see but to possess it.

I used Stockholm's subway for the first time in 1960, when I was on a 24-hour leave from a navy vessel. Environmentally there was not much difference between the eerily lit tunnels of the city and the corridors of my ship, but the subway meant freedom, access, wheels. The stations reminded me of no more than large restrooms, but the hardware was good (designed by Sigurd Lewerentz) and it did keep us navy boys out of the snow. And it did more. Democratic, efficient, and far-reaching, the subway stretched its tunnels out into the new suburbs—Vällingby and Farsta—populated by an army of young office workers from the provinces, among whom were the only women willing to be seen with a sailor in a café or dance hall. Thus, we rode those wonderful green cars, dressed in our ridiculous Donald Duck uniforms, filled with dreams of possessing the city.

The subway system has expanded since 1960; several new lines and many new stations have been added. Sailors still ride the cars, but my own interests have shifted from worldly possession to a more subtle search for what is below. Stockholm's local transport authority, SL, seems also to have changed its goals from simple



I Half-cylinders form an artificial waterfall; in the back, opera events are posted on a giant pilaster.



2



3

efficiency, speed, and reach to a more poetic concern for the depths of the bedrock that forms the datum of the city.

The internal politics that lead SL and the city to devote both attention and capital to the new stations are complex, but clearly two architects, who successively headed the design division within the transport authority, had much to do with the shift from sheer transport to the art of the underground caverns. Michael Granit, the first of the two architects, brought a distinct obsession with the depths of the city to his job, as if he had unconsciously understood that art could only take place underground. Above ground, building was governed by an increasingly turgid and standardized attitude, leaving all innovation stranded on the shores of rules and regulations. Granit's successor and partner in many exhibits and competitions, Per Reimers, shared the obsession with the bedrock. Again, new stations—each more inventive than the other—resulted.

The official policy and the technical reasons for the new attitude were stated in one of the many documents about the new additions to the system

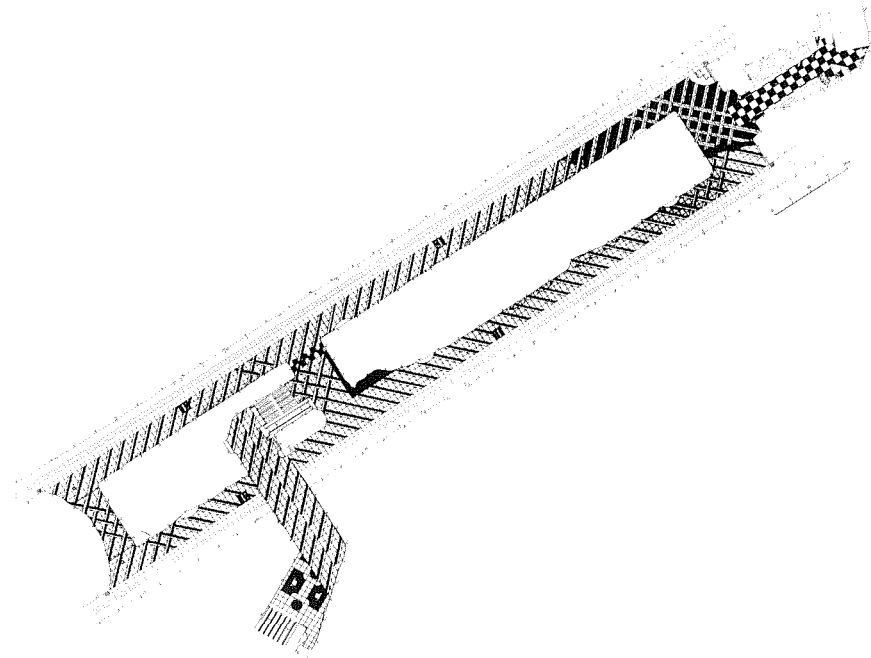
written by Michael Granit:

The underground railway of the 1970s is, in fact, underground. The stretch between the Central Station and Hjulsta, with its 11 stations, is one continuous cave 14 kilometers long, and between 20 and 30 meters below the earth's surface. Mainly because of improved methods of blasting, it costs approximately the same to build a railway in a tunnel as on the surface. The land cost is less, the environment is less noisy, and the effects of climatic changes are reduced.

After blasting, a 7 centimeter thick layer of cement was sprayed onto the rock. By reinforcing this, and when necessary draining it, a satisfactory surface treatment of the rock was obtained. Moreover, this results in a coarse uneven surface which gives an exciting contrast to the smooth easily cleaned surfaces of the terrazzo used to cover the floors and dados. In order to compensate to some extent for the loss of direct contact with the landscape, the whole space formed by blasting the rock has been transformed by the artists. The resulting works of art give each station its identity and help the passengers to find their way in it.¹

2 Harlequin's tights sweep along the ceiling next to the modern Altamira cave.

3 The stairs leading to the street.



4

To select one among the one hundred stations in the system seemed difficult at first, but after many trips Kungstradgarden (the King's Garden) stood out as the most generic and the most unique. Its central location under a popular public park surrounded by some of the most important cultural institutions in the central city makes the station imminently accessible. But since it does not serve many work places, there are no large throngs of people, and the station's own splendor is thereby made more accessible.

The station at Kungstradgarden was done in cooperation with the artist Ulrik Samuelson, who had established himself as one of the foremost painters and sculptors of the decade. Samuelson had worked on the architecture of the Central Bank with Peter Celsing, the most prominent Swedish architect of the 1960s, and was, therefore, concerned not only with sculpture but with the built world.

The sense of a newfound liberty below the surface of the city is visible in the work but also explicit in descriptions by both the artist and the architect. In quoting the architect below, we should keep in mind that a bureaucrat is speaking, and it is unthinkable that he

would speak the same way about any building above ground.

In (the station) nature stands as naked bedrock, after a long journey a wish has been fulfilled. The vegetation is there in the sprayed concrete, and down across the tracks in an under-ground baroque garden. Geometric patterns are brought out of the terrazzo floor, fossils from the past and present speak of the nature of things. Green, white and red becomes red, white and green—or did it go wrong?²

Each station follows the same basic principles: two parallel platforms about 180 meters by 8 meters in plan and access paths equipped with escalators and stairs from at least one street. The artist must stay within these simple outlines. Samuelson elected to create a shadow world, establishing a set of symmetries between the park and the institutions above. Certain aspects and themes ranging from operatic references, museological fragments, to stylized debris from the park are to be found in the station. In addition, actual displays of the activity of the various institutions are placed on the platform inside giant fragments of columns emerging from the rockwall—the

4 Kunstradgarden: the plan of the station.

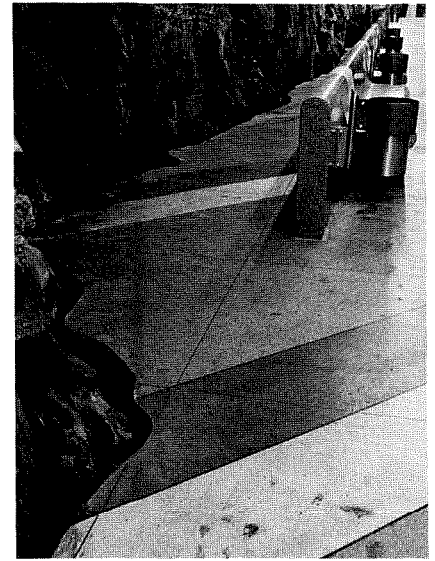


5

pillars of culture reach deep down into the underworld. But the sense of liberty established by SL allowed Samuelson to feel completely free to establish the links with the surface world. The very grammar of the 'real' world has been altered for a freer and more inspired structure in the depths of the city. Ulrik Samuelson writes about his intentions:

I have chosen these things—because they allow room for a human existence. That is, out of the petrified time we call history and with the petrified life that we call rock, concrete and earth, rooms emerge that somehow diminish our own petrification.³

Once one is below the surface, space is linear, pedestrian pace picks up, sounds are muffled echoes, the artificial light ranges from blue to glowing yellow. The ground plane takes on a new importance; both world and horizon, all else is close, the rock is almost too close. When you leave the escalators descending from the street, the ground plane, smooth as a ballroom floor, turns to the left and widens. The bare rock surface in front is covered by hundreds of posters advertising cultural events above ground—a modern Altamira cave,



6

now with men and machines. Sweeping by the ancient rock wall, lightly sprayed with concrete but still moist, another set of escalators takes us down on the main platform. The cries and whispers of distant trains fill the caverns. The ground plane sweeps around a rock formation in the middle of the platform along the sides to where we cannot yet see. There are very few people because it is a cul-de-sac station. You hear water dripping.

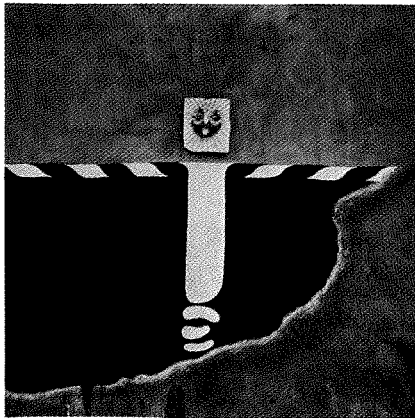
The floor made of exquisitely constructed terrazzo appears in this underground world as a natural gyroscope—the only bearing, our only means of navigation—a great petrified sea. The same sea that Henri Bosco encounters when he describes the descent in the cellar—the cosmic cellar that is below each house and every city. In Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Bosco writes:

Water! . . . An immense body of water! . . . And what water . . . Black, stagnant, so perfectly smooth that not a ripple, not a bubble, marred its surface. No spring, no source. It had been there for thousands of years and remained there, caught unawares by the rock, spread out in a single, impassive

5 **Almost clumsy** fantasy figures emerge from the rock.

6 **The smooth terrazzo** floor meets the rough rock wall along a miniature river.

6



7

sheet. In its stone matrix it had itself become this black, still rock, a captive of the mineral world.

The stylized ripples on the terrazzo plane, a matrix of red and white, hover as if they had floated to the surface just before the petrification. Hard, yet transparent, the great surface allows us access to the cavern. The walls of the cavern are sheer bedrock, the ceiling stabilized by a thin film of sprayed concrete, that—like a cocoon—allows the real nature of the rock to emerge or contour itself the way a body would under a blanket. On the walls are painted endless red and white swags that rope themselves around the walls. Parallel to these bands are the marks of the drills that scar the rock surface. Here on the vertical wall the sprayed concrete is kept away and the raw rock is exposed. Real water trickles and drips, occasionally following the drill marks, then the rock crevices, to end on a set of cascading granite half-cylinders. Here the water forms an almost unbroken bent surface. A crack along the floor leads the water back into the granite—back underneath the *terra firma*.

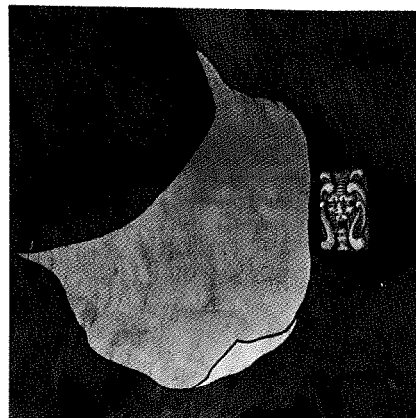
On the sprayed concrete in the vaulted ceiling, great, reckless swaths of



8

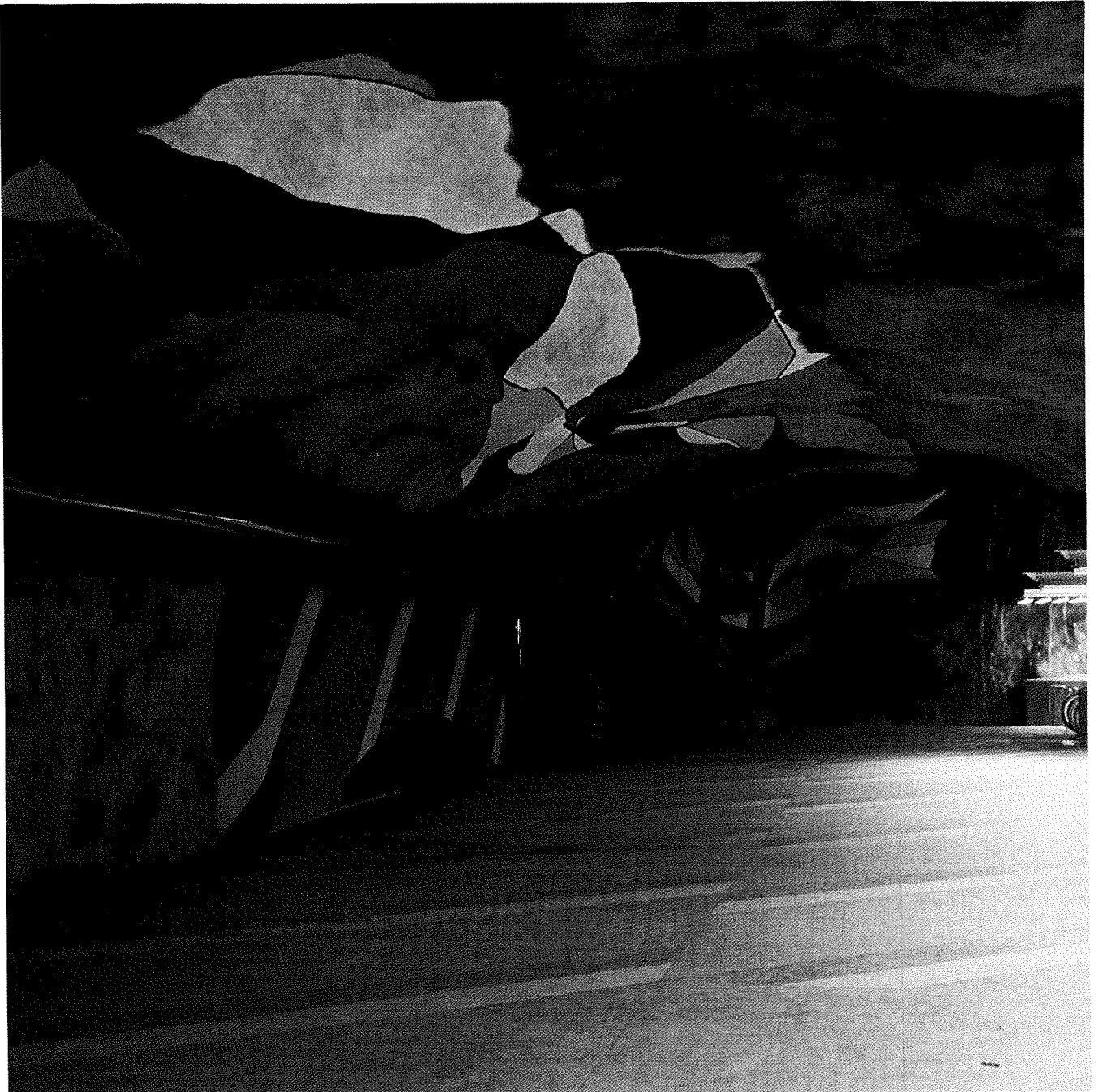
Harlequin's parti-colored tights are laid out. Giant cola tabs are represented on the floor next to equally flat, but almost real, fossils. Cast cement figures occupy almost-niches in the walls. All these fragments from the world above have been brought underground, but the 35 meters has disfigured, transformed, and displaced them. Almost insubstantial, both painted and cast objects have lost not only some of their form but also their meaning. Their petrification has given them new life, radically contradicting their insubstantiality. Harlequin's tights have gained new force, their rude flattening has burst the seams so that his body has been fully erased—the references to the opera above fade away; liberated, the cloth of the buffoon is no longer a mere wrapping but rock itself.

What emerges from these new stations is a sense of the backside of the city—not its base, nor its inside, but its other, its shadow side. Independent from the block structure of the city, the subways are like ancient cow paths, slowly and gently heaving themselves through the underground. Above is the modern city, the city of the individual, of independent actions, initiative, disorder, ambiguity, change

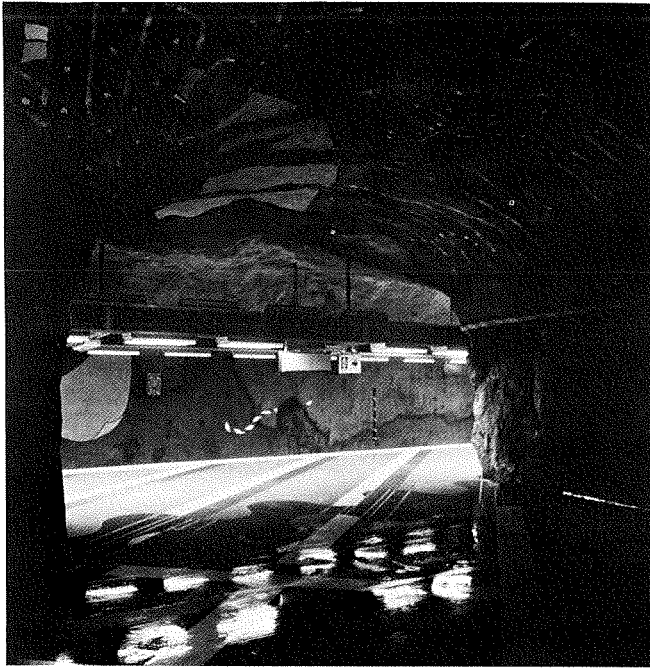


9

7, 8, 9 Fragments of the painted rock world.



10



11



12

and confusion. Here below in the depths of the city a collective atmosphere prevails—Freud’s city, the city of the unconscious. Sheep-like, or as automatons, people form lines, wait for trains and the opening of doors. On the train all are alike. The class system disappears; managers, lawyers, doctors, secretaries, nurses, workers, all follow the same pace—commuters, equals at last! A green train, like an iridescent snake, rushes through the bedrock, steered by some invisible computer. It stops. Throngs of people rush towards the surface as if the momentary collective petrification had given them a chill that only individual motion could repair. Per Reimers writes:

Up in the escalator’s foyer
 Harlequin sweeps his garment
 weaving it with the darkness
 of the sprayed concrete. The
 proscenium has not been raised
 quite yet, but a choir of voices
 from the stages of culture mix with
 traffic noise and the facts of a
 technological world, and down
 there, the trains flash by. We hurry
 through the petrified forest to the
 rat race of the city above.⁴

NOTES

- 1 The Jarva Line (Advisory Committee for Art, SL:1977), p. 3.
- 2 *Kungstradgarden* (Stockholms Lans Landsting: 1981), p. 2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

10 Harlequin’s garment.

11 The platform at midpoint.

12 Man meets caveman.