

Sigurd Frosterus [1876–1956], architect and essayist, was a notable Finnish intellectual of this century. He was an innovative and versatile architect as well as an art critic and writer on philosophical issues. One of his main contributions, at the very beginning of this century, was the clear formulation of the idea of 'the modern', which was to a degree inspired by his close association with Henry van de Velde.

Frosterus developed his ideas in a tension between Vitalism and Decadence. He had a strong need to clarify his position vis-a-vis the heritage of the 19th century. He wanted to formulate a theoretical programme representing the goals and emotions of his generation with respect to the new century. A particular challenge was presented by his need to distinguish his position from that of a group of architects who, although only a few years older than him, were already internationally recognized. The most prominent member of this group was Eliel Saarinen.

A lucid, severe Rationalism combined with an emphasis on masculine energy was Frosterus' weapon against the values of the fin de siècle. Together with his friend and colleague Gustaf Strenzell, in 1904 he published a pamphlet criticizing National Romanticism and summing up his new programme. [Sarje, 1994] In effect, this manifesto accelerated the erosion of the cultural values of the turn of the century. The pamphlet consisted of two previously published and ideologically parallel articles by Frosterus and Strenzell. The basic tenets in Frosterus' polemic ran as follows:

– Rationalism, even Scientism: "... we have the science. Through arduous work we have gained supremacy over nature. Why leave it at that?... We want rationalism that does not hesitate to call a task by its right name ..." [Frosterus 1983, 72 & 77]

– Masculinity and Vitalism: "We want a brain and brawn style... We want a vital mobility, answering the violent pulsating of the capital city, buildings like bared nerve bundles, *Power in equilibrium but not in repose...*" [Frosterus 1983, 77 & 78]

– The ideal of the machine and technocracy: "We have more to learn about form from the construction of machinery, bicycles, cars, from battle-ships and railways bridges, than from historical styles." [Frosterus 1983, 75]

– Faith in progress: "Architecturally, station buildings play about the same role as churches did in the Middle Ages, as thermae did in Antiquity. Thus they number among the very buildings which must break new ground, *quite simply because the task exceeds the limitations set by the expressive potential of old styles.*" [Frosterus 1983, 76]

– Internationalism: "We want internationalism on the basis of what is common in western culture. Science and art are international, the socialist movement too..." [Frosterus 1983, 76]

– Universal and Classical values: "It is the great mutual, universal interests that we in the arts must uphold, to ensure that they are sustained on an adequately wide scale. We do not need to underline idiosyncrasies: differences in temperament and race will vouch sufficiently for this." [Frosterus 1983, 76]

– Honesty: "*The modern architect must submit to learning gradually to see beauty in those forms to which honesty has directed him.*" [Frosterus 1983, 71].

Frosterus' programme was radical, but the fact that he preferred continuity to a complete break gave it a certain moderation. He believed that fierce changes caused by technical innovations would ultimately produce organic evolution. "Breaking with tradition is an empty phrase in nine cases out of ten – but in the tenth it is folly. It is not opposition to earlier ideas that contributes to producing new styles – in our era no more so than in the past – but the grafting of their vital, empirical results onto a healthy, toughened stem." [Frosterus 1905, 440]. Comparing Frosterus' attitude with, say, the rhetoric of Le Corbusier almost twenty years later, when he declared an absolute rupture with the tradition of architecture, the difference is clear. Le Corbusier writes: "If we set ourselves against the past, we are forced to the conclusion that the old architectural code, with its mass of rules and regulations evolved during four thousand years, is no longer of any interest; it no longer concerns us: all the values have been revised; there has been a revolution in the conception of what Architecture is." [Le Corbusier 1986, 286–288]. Frosterus, however, like Henry van de Velde, considered breaking down barriers as well as freedom from prejudice necessary: "We want dilettantism, with its strong stimuli and burning enthusiasm, we want dilettantism in contrast to routine." [Frosterus 1983, 76]

Frosterus made his debut in architectural criticism with a thoroughgoing introduction of Otto Wagner's ideas. [Frosterus 1901] He had also become acquainted early on with the thinking of van de Velde when studying and working at the Belgian architect's bureau in Weimar in 1903–04. The two architects formed a lifelong friendship, and van de Velde even offered a partnership to his Finnish colleague who was more than ten years his junior. [van de Velde 1962, 258–263] For various reasons, the idea never materialized. Frosterus appreciated his independence, as he frequently reiterated in the letters he sent from Weimar to his mother, Ida Frosterus (Frosterus Nov. 3 & 10, 1904), and was tempted by the thought of building projects in his home country. In Weimar he drew up his remarkable competition entries for the railway stations in Helsinki and Vyborg. One can see how Frosterus' fluent – but still van de Veldean – Art Nouveau architecture developed towards a more original, dynamic

expression tinged with 'machine romanticism'.

After his return to Finland, Frosterus continued to develop his critical and architectural ideas. He enthusiastically reviewed the zestful books of H.G. Wells, Frank Norris and Johannes V. Jensen. [Frosterus 1906; 1908; 1909 a; 1915 a, 165–197 & 229–239] Frosterus' heroes were active and efficient self-made men, preferably with a touch of the Nietzschean Superman about them. In a letter to his mother [November 6, 1903], Frosterus described van de Velde as such a hero: "The unerring logic and penetrating vision with which he carries out even the smallest detail is truly impressive. For always before he puts pen to paper he has already solved the mathematical problem in his mind or simultaneously worked out how it will translate into practice. This is an intellectual and super-refined kind of art which will certainly rank among the foremost achievements of our era in this direction. Rarely, or never before, have I received such an impression of harmony between personality and art as I have with van de Velde; they are one, impossible to keep apart, the man a mirror image of his ideas and works, the works a faithful reproduction of the man revealed. His way of talking, of moving, all is infused by the same rhythm as the very slightest drawing from his hand."

Frosterus took a keen interest in questions of modern technology. He wrote articles about the engineering of the Panama Canal, ocean liners that crossed the Atlantic ever faster, the London underground transport system, the dreadnoughts, which revolutionized the concept of the battleship; about aeroplanes, zeppelins, torpedoes, armour plating and guns. He juxtaposed technical innovations with the greatest achievements of cultural history, and rated the best among them – as did Frank Lloyd Wright, too – as works of art. [Wright 1960, 59] The vital functions and technical capabilities of the human body were expressed in sports like tennis, the aesthetics of which he analysed. [Frosterus 1909 b; 1915 a, 31–43 & 245–289; 1915 b] Frosterus published two collections of writings in 1915, *Olikartade skönhetsvärden* [Different Kinds of Aesthetic Values] and *Moderna vapen* [Modern Weapons], giving expression to his Modernistic outlook on the world. By studying weapons, he sought to penetrate to the heart of the modern 'Machine Age' and to the sources of new architectural forms. Stylistically, *Moderna vapen* has a cool matter-of-factness, but for a text by an aesthete it represented a pointed gesture. In his books, Frosterus examined in detail many of the same questions Le Corbusier later wrote about in the 1920s. The difference between the two authors is that while Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* is filled with passionate agitation and rhetoric on behalf of the new engineering culture, Frosterus really explains how the new weapons are made and how they function, or how

fast the ocean liners cross the Atlantic and why. Frosterus took van de Velde's idea that „the engineer is the architect of the future“ seriously, whereas Le Corbusier substituted metaphors and attractive illustrations for factual analysis. Without question, Le Corbusier's contribution was to provide a successful aesthetic formulation of the strategies and principles of the new style.

Frosterus' thinking had already changed by the mid 1910s, however, as he began to doubt the value of an uncritical adulation of science and technology. He first expressed his doubts in a 1914 essay on London's Westminster Cathedral, designed by John Francis Bentley. The text was first published in *Arkitekten*, a Finnish architectural review, and later included in *Olikartade skönhetsvärden*. He admired the Byzantine conception of this building, its proportions and brickwork. History and handicraft now became his crucial concerns, alongside or even before the new technology. The Cathedral was to him "the greatest triumph of church architecture since the High Renaissance". [Frosterus 1915 a, 65] The Cathedral, however, was synthetic and pseudo-morphic in character, as it had a modern reinforced concrete structure. This is experienced particularly in the monumental dimensions of the interior. [Ricardo 1963, 299]

In the 1917 article 'Järnet och teglet' [Iron and Brick], Frosterus all but repudiated, for both aesthetic and practical reasons, uncovered iron structures and the machine ideal as the starting point for buildings, which are immobile. According to him, the laws of gravity on solid ground required simple rectangular forms instead of sinuous curves, especially in the north, where the effects of ice and snow on structures and facades must be minimized. Van de Velde's mistake had been to try to apply the forms of mobile constructions, such as steamships and locomotives, to static buildings: "It would, however, be both thoughtless and blind to deny the style-forming qualities of iron, its potential for artistic expressive force and satisfaction. But we should seek these results not in the architecture of buildings, but in areas where it reigns supreme as the bearing frame but likewise as the shell or casing: that is, in the steamship or locomotive, if we discount the lighter forms of transport. We here find a new style and a timely sense of beauty quite equal to that provided by any of the great epochs of architecture in the past; we here meet a beauty that has freed itself entirely from the world of forms of stone and wood.... It is no coincidence that van de Velde, the greatest genius among the advocates of the new stylistic demands – even in his breakthrough years – primarily sought movement [*Bewegung*] in ordinary fixed buildings, with soft curves, s-lines and parabolas, combined with sharply angled intersecting lines. What else is this in essence than a rhythm of lines taken over subconsciously from

shipbuilding, in which it provides an adequate expression for real, tangible functions, whereas in buildings of stone and iron it is, at best, no more than an ingenious feint in a battle against imaginary forces." [Frosterus 1917, 84]

Paradoxically, the severe critic of Finnish National Romantic building and design – although Frosterus always appreciated Gallen-Kallela's paintings and adored the music of Sibelius – became a warm supporter of Swedish National Romantic architecture. Frosterus praised Swedish handicrafts and the Swedish sense of materials almost in the spirit of William Morris. Fine stonework and brickwork were the special achievements of the new Swedish architecture which, in the opinion of Frosterus, left the rough aesthetic of bare iron structures far behind. As living organisms have a skeleton, muscles and epidermis, so the iron structures of buildings are best hidden, in a metaphor Frosterus was fond of using. Discussing the sensibility of the new, moderate Swedish architecture, he wrote: "Brick is a warm and sound material; in our severe climes it requires neither insulation like granite nor any extra support like a wall put together from various materials does... This professional skill and professional ambition, which strikes us Finns, in particular, with amazement, is the solid ground on which modern Swedish architecture in all its ruggedness has grown so steadily. It is less on the drawing-board than at the construction site..." [Frosterus 1917, 87]

At about the time of the First World War, Frosterus also began to abandon van de Veldean Art Nouveau in favour of pluralism in his own architecture. In his chief work, the Stockmann department store in Helsinki [1916–1930], he mixed Rationalism and Classicism with Swedish National Romanticism [Sarje 1995]; the power stations he designed, have a simple, almost religious brick architecture; his apartment buildings display a monumental Classicism; and his mansions and the outbuildings for them are in a luxurious style influenced by British architecture. In designing the interiors of his own new flat in 1927, he settled on a mixed style, whose principles read like the programme of the *transanguardia*: "The room accommodates a Babylonian confusion of styles. Chippendale and Sheraton chairs mingle in perfect harmony with a Russian drop-leaf table, which leans against an English club sofa right facing a bare brick fireplace. A Baroque ebony chest of drawers from the days when St. Peter's was built... is flanked by a pure Renaissance table with marble mosaic and a Japanese lacquered folding table; in the window bay an oval Neoclassical table is placed between a Gothic gilt-leather chair and a contemporary armchair. The ensemble includes table lamps in modern ceramics – Finch and van de Velde – whilst the cement-grey walls are hung with strongly-lit open-air paintings in such a way as to bring out certain rhythmic wall patterns without

sacrificing the individual character of the paintings. The Orient is represented by carpets, and the influence of the Far East, apart from the ornamental frame of the Chippendale chairs and the pattern of the sofa upholstery, blossoms forth in bronze, cloisonné and porcelain. The materials, too, show a more than liberal open-mindedness: ebony, palisander, jacaranda, walnut, mahogany, oak, beech, olive and lacquerwork; linen, silk and brocade; brick, plaster and marble... But all this hodgepodge is layered in a Functionalist spirit: function influenced the arrangement more strongly than considerations of either style criticism or aesthetic detail. The scheme is fixed, although the individual objects could be replaced." [Frosterus 1929, 192–193]

Frosterus' critical attitude towards Modernism gradually extended to embrace the whole Western civilization, as the Finnish writer Sven Willner has observed. [Willner 1994, 30 & 38–39] In the book *Jorden krymper, jorden växer* [The Earth Is Shrinking, the Earth Is Growing; 1930], in which Frosterus discussed steel, steam, engines and the Panama Canal, he arrived at a relatively pessimistic vision. While new means of transport had made the Earth smaller, new sources of energy had multiplied the availability of resources. Man's ethical improvement, however, had not followed pace with the giant leaps made by technology. World wars, class conflicts and exploitation of natural resources, according to Frosterus, had called mankind's whole future into question: "Like a child who has unexpectedly received a mechanical toy whose meaning it cannot understand, a curious humanity fingers its sharp tools. The machines are about to rise above their makers ... There is not such a very big difference in methods between the Spanish conquistadors' way of winning gold and the modern-day exploitation of the natural resources of the equatorial belt. In both cases, quick plunder and profit with little thought of the morrow is the rule. On account of the altered nature of resistance, horses, armour and gunpowder have been replaced by more peaceable tools, but the rapacious instincts remain, and the primaeval forests are being as mercilessly raided as the sacred cult sites ever were." [Frosterus 1930, 22 & 26]

Frosterus' ecological and anti-colonial tendencies and critique of civilization were in sharp contrast to Le Corbusier's naive optimism and uncritical attitude to capitalism in the 1920s, when he proclaimed: "Big business is today a health and moral organism". [Le Corbusier 1986, 284] What furnished the impulse that caused Frosterus to turn against dogmatic Rationalism and narrow Modernism to an attitude closer to the position of the Frankfurt School after the Second World War? In a letter to van de Velde (Oct. 28, 1947), Frosterus states that the First World War had crushed his illusion that the synthesis of European culture he had

hoped for was possible. His experience of war seems to have made science-based Western civilization suspect to him. That civilization was profoundly diagnosed in Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, published in 1922. In this work, Spengler was inclined to demonize and mystify the machine, for he considered it one of the reasons for the decline of the Western world, and an enslaver of people, workers and entrepreneurs alike. [Spengler II 1922, 624–635] Frosterus was familiar with Spengler's theories, and might have agreed with some of his conclusions, but had adopted his critical approach much earlier. Frosterus' pluralistic modernism undoubtedly represented an indiosyncratic view of the world, which may have owed something to British socialist discourse and to various German influences. His rationalist philosophy, a critical attitude towards Romantic tradition and nationalism, and rejection of antisemitism, however, differentiated Frosterus' view from the ideologies of "reactionary modernism", such as National Socialism, which often sought to justify the necessity and character of modern technology in mythical terms. [Herf 1996; von Wright 1974, 119–192]

H.G. Wells' visions of the future, tinged with science, had stimulated Frosterus' imagination for many years. He had published a small book about the British author back in 1906, and had commented on the literary works of Wells in many later essays as well. Frosterus was delighted with Wells' simultaneously scientific and sociological attitude, his mixture of fantasy tempered by science. Without a doubt, Wells also stimulated Frosterus' personal ambition of outlining a survival strategy for mankind. In *Jorden krymper, jorden växer*, Frosterus came to the sceptical conclusion that man's shortsighted greed may finally destroy herself as a species: "Shall man, like so many animal species before him, succumb to changes in circumstances? Is he preparing to refashion his surroundings to such a degree that the essential conditions of human life are destroyed? Where other life forms have died out under the pressure of hostile external natural forces, is man, a victim of his own energy, digging a grave for his whole species? If this is so, he is alone, and great in his fall." [Frosterus 1930, 33]

However, Frosterus did not wish to lose his belief in the capacity of the human species to learn,

to grow mentally and morally. To be sure, he was convinced that only extreme hardship would force mankind to change direction. In 1935 he published the book *Ståålderns janusansikte* [The Janus Face of the Steel Age], in which he presented his rational, telluric Utopia. According to him, the key to a more harmonious future belonged as far as evolution of the species is concerned, to a planetary state which he considered necessary in order to arbitrate the conflicting interests of different nations and races: "Against the background of the thought of the species as permanent, the utopia of a plan-directed world is simply an organizational detail awaiting imminent materialization. If we close our eyes, visions loom up in the distance: Races, in a polyphony of distinctive characteristics, join in the orchestra of the species, conducted in their common aspirations towards goals beyond their vision; where rents and fissures in the human race, once it has ensnared the globe, express the homogeneity of tension like the cracked glazing of a vase. Where the world, unique in its kind within its law-governed occlusion, gives birth to life of an order other than cosmic radiation; where matter has awakened to self-awareness, and through man's longing for clarity spreads a growing shimmer of souls around the passive mirror of the earth's surface." [Frosterus 1935, 163]

A utopian dimension was characteristic of Frosterus' thinking throughout his life. In his early writings from the turn of the century, it primarily applied to technology, architecture and art. The main gist was rationalizing the world and making each art form – painting, architecture, even furniture design – itself, finding its distinctive character. In the 1930s, moral and social issues took centre stage, representing a yardstick of progress. He now sought to examine the evolution and future prospects of the human species from a cosmic point of view. In Frosterus' last collection of essays, *Nordiskt i dur och moll* (Nordic Joy and Sadness), published right after the Second World War in 1946, his attitude was more ambivalent, although he still did not wish to reject his social utopias and moral visions.

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