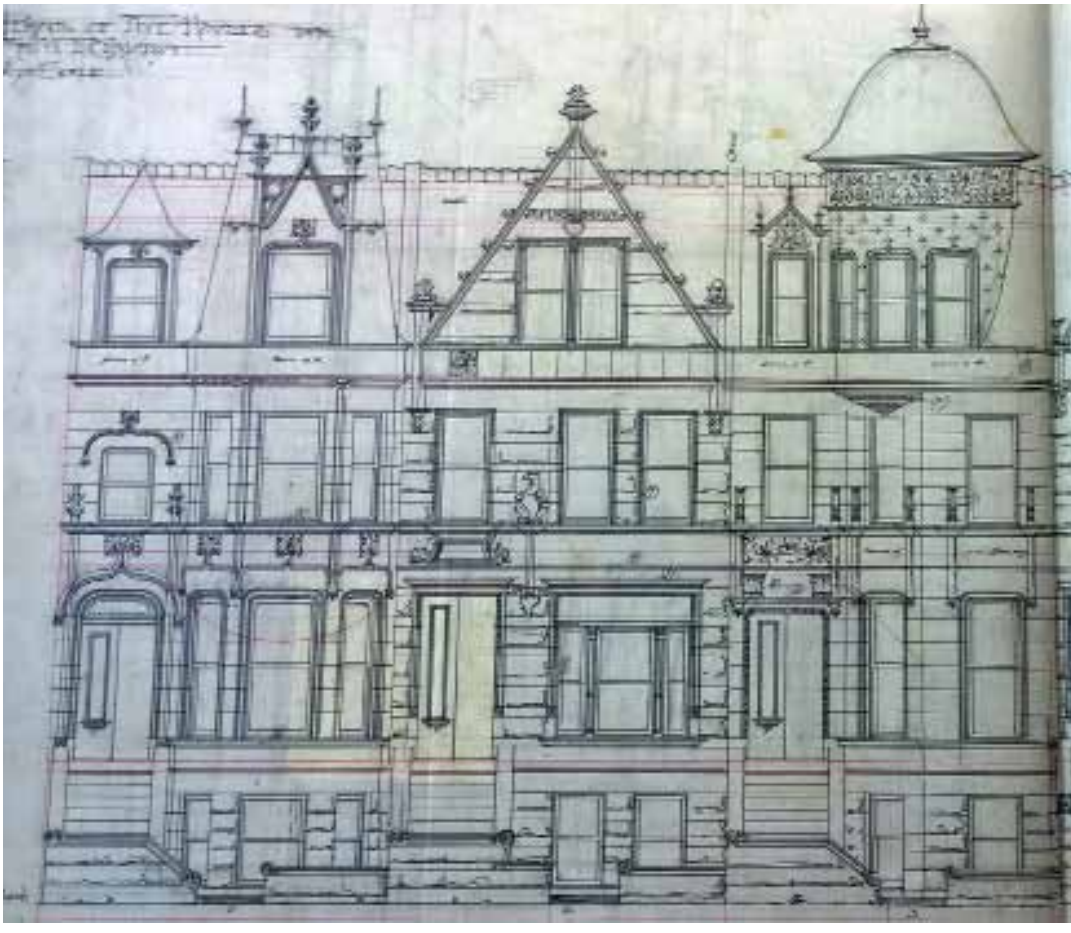
A Swede Grows

Architect Magnus Dahlander's Fantastic Journey from Sweden to



Architect's drawing of a building façade on Bainbridge Street in the Bedford-Stuyvsant-section of Brooklyn

in Brooklyn

Brooklyn and Back *By Gregory Dietrich*

PHOTO: SÄTER MUNICIPAL ARCHIVE

THE MENTION OF MAGnus Dahlander's name may not inspire a reaction, while the mention of Brooklyn may inspire many, whether it is jokes about bearded hipsters on bicycles, obscure artisanal foodstuffs, or skyrocketing real estate prices, to name several.

However, the physical landscape of the Brooklyn of today owes much to architects like the Swedish-born Dahlander, who played a significant role in shaping its neighborhoods during the mid-late nineteenth century. Once renowned as "The City of Homes" and "The City of Churches," today's Brooklyn is a captivating collection of eye-filling neighborhoods, from Park Slope to Prospect Heights, from Bedford-Stuyvesant to Crown Heights, bearing the mark of this largely unsung Scandinavian architect. But who was Magnus Dahlander?

Magnus Dahlander

Born in Säter, about 110 miles northwest of Stockholm, to a chemist and his wife in 1862, Magnus Emil Dahlander attended elementary school in Lindesberg and Gothenburg, middle school in Stockholm, and high school in Örebro. He studied architecture briefly in Paris and at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm before transferring to the Technical Society's School in Copenhagen, where he studied under Martin Nyrop, the architect of Copenhagen's City Hall. He then returned to the Royal Institute and graduated with an architecture degree in 1888. At the age of 26, he immigrated to Brooklyn, where he met and married a fellow Swede named Naemi Pettersson and worked as a draftsman and an architect for the next eight years before returning to Sweden for the rest of his life.

Dahlander's time in Brooklyn between 1888 and 1896 is not only extraordinary for the work he did in shaping its neighborhoods, but also for the moment in which it occurred. Prior to the early 19th century, Brooklyn mostly consisted of a series of scattered farming villages. In 1814 inventor, Robert Fulton established steam-powered ferry service running between Brooklyn and Manhattan, which initially spurred suburban development in Brooklyn Heights that eventually expanded into other neighborhoods during the mid-to-latter part of the century and established Brooklyn as a commuter suburb to New York. However, this widespread suburbanization did not deter Brooklyn's commercial and industrial growth as it also evolved into a leading center for manufacturing, storage, and distribution. By 1833 Brooklyn had incorporated as a city and by the mid-late 19th century, it was the third-largest city in the United States after New York and Philadelphia. Moreover, the opening of the

Addresses 872 to 880 on Park Place in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn

PHOTO: GREGORY DIETRICH

Addresses 264 and 266 on Decatur Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn

Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 resulted in a physical link between Brooklyn and New York, and in doing so, signaled an economic interdependence between the country's third- and first-largest cities. This link was later emboldened by the annexation of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx to New York City in 1898, resulting in a cultural and economic superpower that redefined the concept of the city.

PERHAPS JUST AS REMARKABLE AS BROOKLYN'S ECONOMIC and cultural evolution was the role that immigrants played in contributing to its architectural development. By 1855, nearly half of the city's 205,000 residents were foreign-born, with more than half of the population from Ireland, and less than a quarter from Germany and England each. These sizable immigrant populations not only led to a demand for housing, but also to a demand for churches and other charitable institutions to serve their needs. Although Brooklyn's Swedish population was overshadowed by these other immigrant groups during the first half of the 19th century, it steadily grew from 800 in 1860 to nearly 20,000 by 1890. As more and more Swedes moved to Brooklyn during the mid-late nineteenth century, they initially settled in the Cobble Hill section and worked as merchants, carpenters, longshoremen, clerks, servants and cooks. By the 1890s the western section of Atlantic Avenue, separating Cobble Hill to the south from Brooklyn

Detail of a façade at 250 Decatur Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn

Heights to the north, became known as the "Swedish Broadway," while signs on streetcars were printed in English and Swedish and featured regular announcements by the conductor about passing through the "Swedish Colony." Profiled in an article by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the Swedish community was praised for being thrifty and industrious and for already possessing a skill or trade before seeking work here.

IN ADDITION TO ITS COMMERCIAL AND DOMESTIC WORKFORCE, Brooklyn's Swedish population also included prominent businessmen, institutional leaders, architects and engineers by the late 19th century that included Magnus Dahlander. Similar to the churches and cultural institutions that had been organized to address immigrant issues and promote community, professional organizations were established to foster networking opportunities and professional development within a particular immigrant community. In particular, the American Society of Swedish Engineers, of which Dahlander was a founding member, was the product of a merger between the Swedish Technical Society of New York and the Swedish Engineers of Philadelphia and had a membership base that grew to include: civil, electrical, mechanical and mining engineers, building and naval architects, and chemists. In March 1890 it became a national society, with chapters in Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Chicago. Although national in scope, the initial years of the American Society

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In the early part of the 19th century . . . an architect was considered a needless expense

of Swedish Engineers numbered only 123 members, with 85 of them belonging to the Brooklyn Chapter. Dahlander served as the General Secretary of the Society before becoming a Board Trustee.

According to Dahlander's memoirs, he arrived in Brooklyn on a Saturday in 1888, and the following Monday he had secured work as a draftsman with the Parfitt Brothers architectural firm. The Parfitt Brothers were from England and consisted of Henry, Walter and later, Albert. Henry and Walter opened their practice in Brooklyn in 1875 and by the late 1880s had distinguished themselves as a leading design firm in Brooklyn. They were also prolific and designed a magnificent array of row houses, town houses, apartments, churches, firehouses and commercial buildings in a variety of styles that included Italianate, NeoGrec, Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival. Working for the Parfitts would have been a formative experience for the 26 year-old Dahlander, who not only would have gotten a crash course in the popular architectural styles of the day, but also in the business operations of a highly successful design firm.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR DAHLANDER WAS EMPLOYED AS A foreman and draftsman with the architect, P.J. Lauritzen, for $25 a week. Peter J. Lauritzen was born in Jutland, Denmark in 1847 and educated in Copenhagen. Prior to establishing his practice in New York, he had a distinguished career as a public architect in the nation's capital, first in the late 1860s when he was appointed the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, and later, in 1875, when he was appointed the Architect of Washington. In 1885 he won a prestigious architectural competition to design the Manhattan Athletic Club, which was followed by another prestigious commission in 1889 to design the Union League Club in Brooklyn's Grant Square—a project that Dahlander not only worked on, but also presented to the American Society of Swedish Engineers in its inaugural year.

In 1890 Dahlander left Lauritzen's employ and went into business with another architect named Frederick B. Langston, where the partners operated out of an office on Bedford Avenue in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn. Langston was born into a maritime family in Jersey City in 1859 and graduated with a degree in architecture from Lehigh University in 1884. Four years later he established his own practice in Brooklyn. After taking part in an exhibition sponsored by a leading architectural trade journal, he and Dahlander received multiple commissions. However, as Dahlander recalled, "Langston was lazy and I was the busy bee." Nevertheless, apparently the office was busy enough that the partners engaged two Finnish draftsmen, with Dahlander working as the lead designer and Langston working as the "rainmaker."

Dahlander's prosposal for a country home in Hollywood,New Jersey, for V. Henry Rothschild.

Langston & Dahlander's work mostly consisted of row houses, town houses, and flats (or middle-class apartments) designed in the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles. After the partnership dissolved in 1892, Langston collaborated with his brothers on the invention of the "Langston Mooring" in 1900, a revolutionary anchoring system for maritime vessels that enabled him to retire from architecture and live off the royalties of the family patent until his death in 1919.

In 1892 Dahlander worked independently, assisted by an architect named John A. Davidson, producing designs for row houses, apartment houses, country houses and churches, and then took a trip to Sweden the following year before returning to resume his practice in Brooklyn that same year. His work during this time embodied the imposing Romanesque Revival style with its characteristic round arches alternating with pilasters, rough-faced stone bases, brick corbelling, and machicolated cornices, as well as the highly decorative French Renaissance Revival style with its characteristic pointed arches, intricately-carved entablatures and spandrels, and gargoyles. However, Dahlander's interpretation of these styles also bore the mark of his unbridled creativity. In this regard, his work was a product of what co-authors, Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and John Massengale called "The Cosmopolitan Era."

Defined by technological innovation, such as the introduction of the

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passenger elevator in 1870, electricity in 1882 and the telephone in 1896, the advancements of the Cosmopolitan Era were augmented by the human capital and creativity afforded by the enormous influx of immigrants into New York and Brooklyn during this time. In fact, one critic, writing in *New York the Metropolis*, noted that these cities' architecture was attributable to the diversity of immigrants who "stay long enough to leave some impression of their manners and custom," which ultimately produced a diversity of architecture that was exotic and beautiful rather than moralistic and instructive. On the grandest scale, the German-born John A. Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge was the manifestation of this artistic sensibility with its sublime qualities of beauty, exoticism, monumentality, and permanence applied to a Gothic Revival aesthetic. In Dahlander's work, it was a variety of unconventional motifs permeating

PHOTO: GREGORY DIETRICH

The Gas and Electric Building designed by Dahlander in Orebro, Sweden

his Romanesque- and French Renaissance-Revival designs, such as corner turrets with rounded bays crowned by bell-shaped caps or witch's hats, elongated gargoyles, or plaques and cartouches incorporating Scandinavian motifs such as bears, Vikings, and sea maidens.

DAHLANDER'S FINAL TWO YEARS IN Brooklyn were spent in partnership with another Swedish architect named Axel Hedman. Initially, Dahlander assisted Hedman with some house designs which then coalesced into the two Swedes forming a partnership in 1894, with an office on Fulton Street in Downtown Brooklyn. Hedman was born in Norrköping in 1861 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1880. He designed hundreds of row houses in various parts of Brooklyn mostly before and after his association with Dahlander. A large part of the partnership's success was due to the relationships that they had cultivated with speculative builders. It bears noting that in the early part of the nineteenth century, the engagement of an architect was considered a needless expense and many row houses were designed by the builders themselves, who relied on architectural manuals known as pattern books to design their speculative projects. However, as the architectural profession became more standardized and advanced building technologies came into play during the mid to late nineteenth century, many builders realized that they could increase efficiencies by delegating architects to produce the designs and supervise construction. Engaging architects ultimately expedited the design and construction process, while also producing houses with greater "curb appeal."

If the Cosmopolitan Era captured the essence of Dahlander's earlier designs, the Composite Era that followed characterized his work in partnership with Axel Hedman. The Composite Era embodied the peak of the Metropolitan Age, which was marked by economic expansion and consolidation, resulting in what has been referred to as "America's Imperial Age." This economic consolidation was nowhere more apparent than in the annexation of the five boroughs in 1898 to form modern-day New York City. By the mid 1890s, the vision for the city was to be a composite of many

immigrant cultures that would unify to form a harmonious and homogenous whole. As such, leading designers and planners working in Chicago at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 looked to the great cities of Western Europe for inspiration in order to remake the American city, resulting in the "City Beautiful Movement" and Beaux-Arts planning and design. The outgrowth of this event was a more Classically inspired approach to architecture that was informed by symmetry, balance and order, rather than the freer designs of the Cosmopolitan Era that preceded it.

Hedman in particular was influenced by the World's Columbian Exposition, with his Classically-inspired row house designs executed in the monochromatic materials of the "White City," such as limestone and white brick. He and Dahlander produced Renaissance Revival designs that were more restrained than their Beaux-Arts counterparts, while also providing visual interest within a row. This was manifested in alternating entrance surrounds and bay configurations and other subtle applications of ornamentation. Robert A.M. Stern and his co-authors have referred to this design trend as "Scientific Eclecticism"—that is, being faithful to Classically-inspired principles while retaining an individuality of design, or "copying the effect but not the form."

Dahlander returned to Sweden in 1896, where he had a lengthy career

that encompassed public and private design projects involving new buildings, additions, and restorations mostly in the County of Örebro and in his hometown of Säter. Upon his return to Sweden, he worked as a draftsman on the Stockholm Exhibition of 1897 and then in the office of architect, Ludvig Peterson, who he assisted on the design of the Swedish Artist's House (Konstnärshuset) and on the reconstruction of the Grand Hotel. In 1898 he won the competition to design the Kullen Lighthouse in Höganäs, Skåne County, which would become one of his most recognizable projects. One year later he was appointed the Örebro Municipal Architect, a position that he held until 1914. During his time in Örebro, he designed the Grammar School for Girls, Örebro County Sanitarium, hospitals, the Post and Telegraph Office, the Electric Power Station, and single- and multi-family dwellings; completed additions to, and restorations of, the library and gymnasium of the Karolinska Grammar School; restored the Örebro Town Hall and re-designed a new town council chamber interior; designed churches at Hackvad and Längbro and restored churches at Edsberg, Glanshammar, and Karlskoga in Örebro County, as well as the Örebro Castle courtyard facades; and collaborated with Ludvig Peterson and Ture Stenberg on the local technical secondary grammar school. Between 1914 and 1917, Dahlander served as Sweden's Director of the Army Barracks Building Committee's Drawing

Dahlander produced designs for over two hundred buildings in Brooklyn and beyond

and Construction Division, where he completed designs for new barracks in Växjö, Eksjö, Strängnäs, Linköping, Lund, and Kristianstad.

Following the death of his wife, Naemi, in 1913, he married Wilhelmina (Minnie) Westerberg in 1915 and returned to his hometown of Säter two years later. Between 1917 until his death in 1951, he was involved in a variety of activities, which ranged from co-founding Säter's historical society and outdoor museum known as Åsgårdarna, restoring churches located in Säter, Mockfjärd, Gagnef, Amsberg, Ludvika, and Äppelbo, and serving as the Provincial Architect of Kopparberg County, Västmanland, and Gävleborg Counties. Throughout his career Dahlander was a frequent lecturer and was affiliated as a director and/or board member with numerous organizations, encompassing art and architecture (Swedish Artists Club (NYC), Swedish Artists Society (Sweden), Swedish County Architects), engineering (American Society of Swedish Engineers, Örebro Engineers Club), craft (Örebro County Handicraft Society), history (Örebro County Museum Association), historic preservation (League of the Old Homestead), housing (Hagby Cooperative Housing Association, Säter Housing Committee), and planning (Society of Örebro's Past and Future,).

PRIOR TO RETURNING TO SWEDEN IN 1896, MAGNUS DAHlander produced designs for over two hundred buildings in Brooklyn and beyond, which encompassed urban row houses, flats, tenements, country houses, and churches that were executed in a variety of styles that included Queen Anne, Romanesque Revival, and French Renaissance Revival. Scattered throughout the neighborhoods of Park Slope, Prospect Heights, Crown Heights North, and Bedford-Stuyvesant, these residential buildings in particular have been recognized for their architectural distinction, which is not only emblematic of their designer's expertise, but also of a highly significant period in Brooklyn's history. As a training ground for a practitioner, Dahlander's Brooklyn years provided an invaluable opportunity for learning about the business of architecture in a fast-paced developmental context. As a proving ground for an architect, his work bears all the hallmarks of both the Cosmopolitan and their Composite Eras in their exoticism, beauty, and elegance.

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