

Ellen Key's Strand
HEDDA JANSSON



The Strand building site, summer of 1910.
From the Ellen Key archive, Royal Library, Stockholm

Ellen Key's Strand, built 1910 – 1911 is a 25 meter long and 7,5-meter-wide building situated on the south slope of Omberg in Östergötland, central south Sweden. In her notebook "I flera år samlade praktiska ting för stuga och trädgård. 1910" ["For several years collected practical things for cottage and garden. 1910."]¹ Key inserted writings, drawings, clippings and examples of plants as ideas for the interior and exterior in her dream house to be. In the notebook a full layout of the two floors is included. Her brother-in-law, Yngve Rasmussen, an architect based in Gothenburg and married to her sister Hedda, acted as professional adviser.

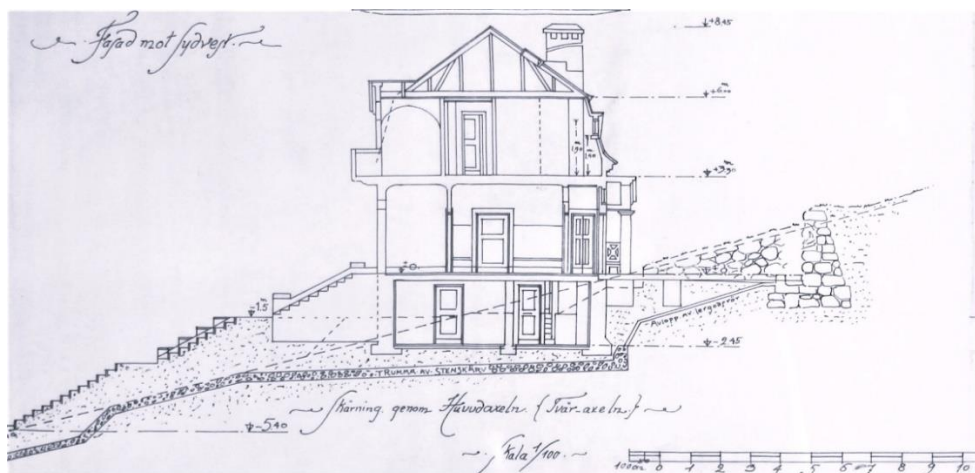
Ever since losing her childhood home Sundsholm, outside of Västervik in south east Sweden, Key's longing for a home had been present. It inspired her writings concerned with the concepts of home and family life, as highlighted in Ronny Ambjörnsson's introduction to the collection

¹ In 2022 published in full, with commentary articles, in the journal *Essä*.

of the Ellen Key essays *Hemmets århundrade* [*The Century of the Home*] published in 1976. During her years abroad and thanks to the sales of her books, especially *The Century of the Child* (1900, in German 1902 and English 1909) she saved enough money to finance the building.

The inspiration to build on this specific site came from her good friends painter Prince Eugen and author Verner von Heidenstam. They were both well acquainted with the Omberg region, and Key had herself visited the area during the 1890's. Both Eugen and Heidenstam built their own ideal houses not far from Strand (Eugen's Örberga and Heidenstam's Övralid). But previous to that Prince Eugen had created several of his famous Östergötland paintings on and around Omberg. While staying in one of the small cottages next to the Strand site he made a painting called *Tomten bredvid* [*The lot next door*] which is said to have inspired Key to build Strand on this spot. The mountain Omberg with its forests belonged to the Crown, and after some delay Key managed to arrange a thirty-year lease of the land and the construction could commence in March 1910.

To be able to build a house close to the water, material had to be transported down the steep slope to the building site by carts on tracks. The lake was too shallow for this kind of transport. Discussions were intense with Rasmussen and the builder Bäck concerning the exact spot for the building (further up the slope to facilitate the transport of material or closer to the water, as Key preferred. Needless to say, Key's idea won.). The digging for the foundation work, as well as the construction of a drainage system under the house and building walls up the slope to prevent the soil from rushing down from the garden above, were other issues which had to be solved. During the building period Key hired a living in the small town of Hästholmen, three kilometers from the building site, and is said to have walked to the site every day to oversee the construction. The building demanded the labor of a total of 100 workers and took about nine months to conclude. On her 61:st birthday, December 11 1910, Key moved into her house. In June the following year she arranged a great party – for the workers and their families.



Drawing by architect Yngve Rasmussen, Strand from south. 1910.
The Ellen Key archive, Royal Library, Stockholm

The house itself is a wood building with riveted facade. It consists of a basement and two floors plus an attic. Total square meters are around 300. It faces south over the vast lake Vättern with an overwhelming view of the water and the Västergötland coast to the west. Both Omberg and Vättern have been objects of sagas and myths going back thousands of years, a fact that inspired Key to make her home here, especially the more recent history of the Vikings and the early Christian kings and queens living in the area. This is also the site of St. Bridget of Sweden, who was a huge inspiration to Key and whom she called a “spiritual power” (Key, 1916).

The main artistic inspiration to Strand was taken from four sources. Primarily, Key wanted to build a house which reminded her of her childhood home. She described it as a “long, low, white building, close to the forest and nearby the water” (Ellen Key, 1911, my transl.). But the dramatic landscape of south Omberg is rather a reminder of other, more southern coastlines, and it is not surprising that the second main inspiration was taken from the Italian villa, and Italian scenery.



Interior from Goethe's Garten Haus,
Weimar. Photo: Hedda Jansson.

Key had travelled extensively in Italy and planned at one point to stay there permanently, building her house at the Amalfi coast. But her home sickness took overhand and she decided to come back in 1909. For artistic inspiration she looked to two important trends of the time: the Arts and Crafts movement in England and Art Nouveau or Jugendsyle on the continent, of which she had seen examples while travelling in Europe. The curved lines in both the exterior and interior of Strand, as well as the color setting of the rooms, reveals her well thought through ideas on harmony and creating a house reflecting her own life and ideology about beauty. Her “house philosopher” Goethe is present in several corners of the house, and the similarities between the coloring of Strand and Goethe's Garten Haus is striking.

When entering Strand from the seaside the visitor is greeted by Key's life philosophy in the entrance hall. The color of the interior should remind visitors of the color which was sacred in ancient Rome, deep red. On the walls proverbs of her favorite authors were painted: "Denna dagen ett liv" ("This day a life-time") by the eighteenth-century poet and radical Thomas Thorlid, on the opposite wall "Memento Vivere" ("Remember to live") by Goethe and over the maps of Sweden and lake Vättern words by Runeberg, the national poet of Finland: "Vår forntids land, vårt framtids land, där livets hav oss gett en strand." ("The land of our past, the land of our future, where the ocean of life has given us a shore", my transl). Key's monistic-evolutionistic ideal, explained in her religious manifest *Lifslinjer II* (1905) is also emphasized by the Swastika symbol, painted next to the proverbs, which for her, long before the Nazis used it, represented the sun, life force and development of humanity.

Straight ahead in the entrance hall the visitor will find the back entrance with its typical red doors with heart symbols, and to the right he will enter the living/dining room and book room, where Key entertained her guests.



The entrance hall at Strand.
Photo: Hedda Jansson.

To the left the door leads to the private quarters, with a kitchen, and living quarters for Key's house keeper and friend Malin Blomsterberg, as well as the spiral shaped stair case to the upper floor. Here the visitor will find the two original guest rooms to the right and further down the hallway to the left Key's working area with a writing desk and book shelves. Beyond this, Key's own bedroom. Inspired by Goethe's color scheme Key chose deep yellow for the walls and are combined with purple and deep blue textiles.² But the interior of this room is of course dominated of yet another symbol of Key's life faith: a copy of Arnold Böcklin's painting *Dödens ö* [*The Death Island/Die Toten Insel*]. Key often quoted Gerhard Hartmann's famous sentence: "Death is only a milder version of life", and considered Böcklin's painting both soothing and comforting.³

² The history of Strand's textiles has been investigated by historian and textile expert Tina Ignell in *Textilierna på Strand* (2023).

³ The quotation in German: "Der Tod ist vielleicht die mildeste Form des Lebens", from Hauptmann's *Michael Kramer* (1900).



Ellen Key's Strand from the south. Photo: Hedda Jansson.

In articles and letters Key explains the purpose of building Strand. It is not a place she creates for herself and her family alone, instead the intention is to leave the house and her income to a foundation, which will open up the place as a guest house for working class women from Stockholm. These women should be members of the association called Tolfterna, which she initiated herself in 1892, and the association would provide the possibility for women with limited means to stay in the country side for a month. To enable this kind of freedom from all kinds of work three categories of visitors were not allowed during these weeks: men, children and pets.

The foundation, called “Ellen Keys Stiftelse Strands vilohem för kroppsarbetande kvinnor” (“The Foundation for Ellen Key Strand’s vacation home for manually working women”) began its activity the summer after Key’s death 1927, and accepted both paying guests (the “intellectual” women mentioned in Key’s will who also should have the opportunity to stay at Strand) and the working class women from Tolfterna, who stayed there for free. A caretaker and a housekeeper took care of the daily work, and cooked all the meals.

In the same time Strand attracted curious and interested visitors, which had been the case already during Key’s lifetime. The first caretaker to handle these groups of tourists was Ellen’s sister Hedda during the summer of 1926. After this a fulltime caretaker, Greta Bennett, was employed.

In the beginning of the 1960’s the association of Tolfterna was dissolved and the Foundation was faced with the question of which purpose to promote – Strand as a museum or Strand as a guest house, and in the latter case, for which kind of guests. It was finally decided that women

should continue to be invited, but now only the intellectually working women paying a fee to stay for a few weeks. This activity is still running, even if the selection of women has broadened to include women from a variety of different backgrounds, whom in their work or studies have a special interest in Ellen Key. The stay is now also offered again for free during a two-week period. The Ellen Key's Strand foundation, as it is now called, accepts around twenty-five guests per summer, and in recent years there have been around four hundred applicants to these guest weeks per year.

Ellen Key's practical preparations together with her greater vision for humanity blends in a unique way at Strand, from the water-run heating system to the symbols and proverbs which should inspire intellectual and spiritual growth within the guests and visitors at Strand. The breath-taking views and dramatic landscape emphasize a feeling of humility before the over-whelming life force, which was Key's definition of the divine, and is sometimes exemplified by the violent waves of lake Vättern.

References:

Ambjörnsson, R. (1976) Inledning in Key, E. *Hemmets århundrade*. Stockholm: Aldus.

Ambjörnsson, R. (1991). En skön, ny värld: om Ellen Keys visioner och en senare tids verklighet. In H. Medelius, S. Rentzhog (ed.). *90-tal* (p. 260-278, 288-289).

Asplund, G., Creagh, L., Kåberg, H. & Lane, B.M. (2008). *Modern Swedish design: three founding texts / by Uno Åhrén, Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Ellen Key, Sven Markelius, Gregor Paulsson and Eskil Sundahl ; edited and with introductions by Lucy Creagh, Helena Kåberg, and Barbara Miller Lane ; essays by Kenneth Frampton*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Bendt, I. (2000). *Ett hem för själen: Ellen Keys Strand*. Stockholm: Bonnier.

Jansson, H. (2013a). *Strand som andligt rum*. Linköping: Ellen Key-sällskapet.

Jansson, H. (2013b). *Där livets hav oss gett en strand*. Ödeshög: Alvastra förlag.

Jansson, H. (2023). *Solbadets Buddha. Buddhism och teosofi i Ellen Keys Livstro*. Diss. Stockholms universitet.

Jordahl, A. (2009). *Jag skulle vara din hund (om jag bara finge vara i din närhet)*. Stockholm: Atlas.

Key, E. (1911). "Hemma" in *Julkvällen*, 14/9 1911.

Key, E. (1985). *Birgitta som andlig makt: föredrag i Vadstena Birgittadagen den 7 oktober 1916*. Väderstad: Ellen Key-sällskapet. Org. publ. 1916.

Key, E. (2014). *Skönhet för alla; med förord av Claudia Lindén*. (Ny utg.) Ödeshög: Alvastra. Org. publ. 1899.

Kåberg, H., Rosenblad, K., Linder, K., Ekström, A., Zetterlund, C. & Sparke, P. (2007). *Förfärligt härligt*. Stockholm: Nationalmuseum.

Lindén, Claudia (2014). "Ellen Keys feministiska estetik", förord i Key, Ellen, *Skönhet för alla*. Ödeshög: Alvastra förlag. Urspr. publ. i Röhska muséets katalog för utställningen *Från Ellen Key till IKEA* (1991).

Lengborn, T. (2002). *Ellen Key och skönheten: estetiska och konstpedagogiska utvecklingslinjer i Ellen Keys författarskap 1891-1906*. Hedemora: Gidlund.

Lengborn, Thorbjörn (1996). *Skönhet och livskamp. Det darwinistiskevolutionistiska inslaget i Ellen Keys estetik vid sekelskiftet 1900-i belysning av Richard Berghs estetiska åskådning*. D-upp. i konstvetenskap. Stockholms universitet.

McCrea, R. (2012). *Building Taliesin: Frank Lloyd Wright's home of love and loss*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

Topelius, A-S. (1982). *Skönhet för alla och Ellen Keys Strand*. Linköping: Östgöta correspondenten.

Topelius, A-S. (1999). "Praktiska ting för stuga och trädgård: Ellen Keys anteckningar om Strand" i Gerhardson, Birgit (red.) *Ellen Key, 1849–1999*. Linköping: Ellen Keysällskapet.

Zawall, E-S. (ed.) (2022) "Praktiska ting för stuga och trädgård". In *Essä*. (2017-). Stockholm: Tidskriften Essä.