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## Aristocratic Townhouse as Urban Space

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**Part I**  
**Conceived and Constructed**  
**Spaces**

**Chapter Abstract:** This chapter is a case study of a palace in eighteenth-century Stockholm, the palace of Count Axel von Fersen, who was one of the most powerful French-oriented politicians and high-ranking officers in Sweden in the second half of the eighteenth century. At this time, Sweden was a political ally of France, and the cosmopolitan aristocracy held similar ideals and practiced a similar lifestyle. The Fersen palace, originally built in the seventeenth century in the very centre of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, was totally renovated in the 1750s and 1760s after modern French architectural ideals to meet Count von Fersen's political ambitions as well as the public and social life of an aristocratic family. The chapter explores the gendered division of places and spaces in an aristocratic town palace and examines the role that aristocracy and its lodgings had in the early-modern urban space. It will discuss the everyday life of the Fersen family, the relations between the family, servants and visitors, and the ways that the palace reflects the changing ideas of family and urban political life during this period.

## 2

# Aristocratic Townhouse as Urban Space

## The Fersen Palace in Eighteenth-Century Stockholm

*Johanna Ilmakunnas*

In early-modern European towns such as London, Paris, Vienna, St Petersburg or Stockholm, aristocratic palaces and the townhouses of the haute bourgeoisie occupied visible place and took considerable space. Urban space was, however, dominated by royal and administrative buildings, and the state was omnipresent in the shape of buildings. The elites resided in capitals and other towns where the political power, administration and business were centred, and they emphasized their status by building great houses. In Stockholm, the capital of the Swedish realm, aristocratic townhouses were situated near the Royal Palace, creating mental spatial links between the sovereign and the politically powerful aristocracy.

This chapter analyses the Fersen Palace (*Fersenska palatset*), one of the aristocratic townhouses in eighteenth-century Stockholm, studying its architecture and material culture and exploring what it tells us about the gendering of architectural, familial and urban spaces at the time. It shows the seminal place that palaces had in early-modern urban topography and the key role that private houses played in urban political and social life. It considers, first, how architectural space was created in eighteenth-century Stockholm, and second, how space and material culture were gendered in the reception rooms of an aristocratic townhouse. The example of the Fersen Palace implies that the development and gendering of elite housing was in general similar in early-modern European towns such as Paris, Vienna or London, which had areas of elite residence. However, architectural and cultural practices were appropriated and modified when transplanted to different national and

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political contexts, and architectural ideals or social practises were adapted to different circumstances.

Work on space, spatial order and representations of architectural spaces and places, as well as interconnections between architectural space, gender and material culture in the eighteenth century, have long interested Anglo-American and French scholars.<sup>1</sup> In Sweden, research has concentrated on architecture and art history, giving primary attention to architects, renowned craftsmen, styles and country houses. Research on the royal palace and a few aristocratic palaces and wealthy merchants' townhouses have shown how these buildings were designed and decorated.<sup>2</sup> Research on spatial order and on the actual use of different spaces and places in aristocratic townhouses, as well as on how the transnational cosmopolitanism of aristocrats influenced the use of architectural and social space in towns, is scarce, however. My aim is thus to ameliorate our knowledge of gender, space and place by studying the Fersen Palace as an example of how cosmopolitan, Francophone Swedish aristocracy transplanted French ideals of architecture and material culture to the Swedish context—in this case, to one particular city, Stockholm.

Count Axel von Fersen (1719–1794), owner of the Fersen Palace from 1748, was one of the most powerful politicians and statesmen of his era. His political, economic and cultural contacts spanned Western Europe, extending from Sweden to France, and including England, Italy, Germany and Russia. The Fersen Palace, with its fewer than 35 rooms, was modest in scale compared to aristocratic townhouses in other major European cities. But as an aristocratic social, cultural, political and economic space, it far exceeded its actual size in the vital role it played in the urban life of late eighteenth-century Stockholm.

A 750-page probate inventory in the Fersen archives, compiled in 1795 after the count's death, makes it possible to explore the palace and its spaces, ascertaining not only how the key rooms were decorated and furnished, but also how rooms linked to each other and how hierarchical differences between rooms were displayed. The inventory notes which rooms were used by the count himself, which were used by his wife the countess, and which were reserved for household functions, children or guests, thus underlining the gendered division of elite houses of the time. It also catalogues the goods and chattels in the house, its annexes and other buildings, room by room.<sup>3</sup> When supplemented by Axel von Fersen's account-books and household bills, which give ample additional information on the palace's decorations, furnishing and social life, it offers an opportunity to make a foray into the gendered elite space of eighteenth-century Stockholm.

### **Architectural and Spatial Order at the Fersen Palace**

After a 13-year military career in Germany and France, Count Axel von Fersen returned to Stockholm in 1749 and immediately started refurbishing a

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townhouse he had inherited from his late parents. By the end of the 1760s, the Fersen Palace, originally erected in the mid-seventeenth century, had been transformed from a sober baroque townhouse to an airy rococo palace.<sup>4</sup>

Stockholm was Fersen's birthplace, but it was modest when compared to Paris, the mental home of many eighteenth-century Swedish aristocrats.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, Stockholm was the biggest city in Sweden with 60,000 inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> A substantial number of the nobility living in the capital also owned or rented country houses. In early-modern Europe, the nobility moved between rural and urban environments according to the season or shifts in political life. In eighteenth-century Sweden, political culture was quintessentially urban because the Estate Assembly or Diet (*riksdag*) had its session in Stockholm, and the majority of the state bureaucracy was based in the capital as well.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the royal court sojourned mostly in Stockholm. Thus, living in Stockholm was a necessity for politically active noblemen, just as it was for those in civil and court service. This, in turn, made the nobles and their houses more visible in the topography of the town, since the aristocracy needed to be at the centre of power in Stockholm. For politically or culturally active nobles, manifesting power in urban space mattered: consequently, it was vital to own or rent a townhouse to participate in political and social life.



*Figure 2.1* Johan Sevenbom, *Stockholm, view towards Blasieholmen and townhouses of aristocracy*, c.1780. The Fersen Palace is on the left from the mast of the fishing boat in front. Behind the mast are the terraced garden and the almshouse for old servants, which both belonged to the block that was the Fersen Palace.

Source: Stockholm City Museum, CC-BY.

Aristocratic townhouses had many functions: they were places for living, working and socializing, and they often acted as political arenas. During the eighteenth century, homes and housing architecture changed profoundly. Earlier elites had lived in large rooms without specific purpose, through which

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servants passed. In the eighteenth century, rooms took on different functions according to different moments of the day or different social occasions. New houses combined functions of representation and comfort, thus offering elite members dwellings that were cosier, warmer and easier to illuminate than enormous baroque palaces. Dining rooms, bedrooms, dressing rooms, reception rooms, libraries and ballrooms were invented for the first time and became rapidly essential spaces in a house. However, a room might still be multi-purpose, serving as a drawing room for the ladies during the day, and in the evening, by throwing open doors which linked it to an adjoining drawing room or dining room, becoming a concert or assembly space. These new rooms were female- or male-dominated spaces at a specific time of the day, usually in the mornings, whereas they might be repurposed as social, mixed-sex spaces at other points of the day. Certain rooms, such as a dressing room or bedroom, could in the evening be reserved to the use of its occupants or opened to visitors, whereas in the morning, the ladies of the house could receive there both female and male visitors, friends, merchants or craftsmen. Other rooms, such as the dining room or ballroom, were used for social occasions that did not differentiate the sex of the users. Children's spaces were divided from the social rooms and were often situated far from their parents' rooms in order to keep small children near to their nurses, tutors or governesses. This differentiation of domestic spaces—from all-purpose rooms to specific rooms for specific social occasions—also brought greater distance between masters and servants. Servants had their own spaces, rooms and corridors for service, and the paths of masters and servants no longer crossed in the same way that they had in the past.<sup>8</sup>

These transformations of domestic spaces and places took place throughout Europe during the eighteenth century, and Stockholm was no exception. The renovations made to the Fersen Palace in the mid-eighteenth century reveal how the homes of the European elites developed parallel in different countries and how the French ideals were adapted to different milieus and circumstances. They serve as a reminder of how similar the cultural values of the European nobility were at the time.

During his sojourn in France and the princely states of Germany from the 1730s to the late 1740s, Count Axel von Fersen had acquainted himself with the newest architecture, the modern, spacious, light palaces of the elites. In early-modern Europe, building a house was a sign of the cultivation, taste and gentility of the commissioner.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when Fersen returned to Sweden, he sought to manifest his cosmopolitan cultural capital, his growing influence in politics and his wealth by renovating his townhouse with the help of two most eminent architects of the time, Carl Hårleman and Jean Eric Rehn. Both had been educated in France and Italy, and both introduced modern ideas of architectural design in Sweden. The choice of such well-known architects stresses the need Fersen felt for an elegant, modern and representative home that would house him and the family he was about to start.

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With Hårleman and Rehn's help, Fersen created an aristocratic urban space whose model came from France. When compared to its archetypes in Paris and the palaces of affluent aristocracy in London and other European cities, the Fersen Palace was no bigger than a wealthy gentleman's townhouse. However, as scholars such as Joan DeJean have stressed, an ideal Parisian townhouse was not necessarily large, either. Elegance in the distribution of rooms and the decoration of the house was more important.<sup>10</sup> In this context, the Fersen Palace provides a representative picture of how the French architectural ideals were transplanted in other countries. Hårleman, who introduced the new French architectural theories in Sweden,<sup>11</sup> modified the French ideals to meet his own ideas and the requirements of climate and his clients. At the Fersen Palace, contrary to the majority of elite French or English townhouses, the ground floor was given over to household offices, not reception rooms. Perhaps there had not been enough space on the site to build wings for the offices; however, a more important reason was, arguably, that in the cold climate of Stockholm, it was simply more comfortable to live on the first floor, which was never as cold or as humid as the ground floor. Thus, in the Fersen Palace, the first floor served as main living space, the importance of which was accentuated with bigger windows, typical for eighteenth-century architecture. The second floor roofed children's rooms and guest rooms.<sup>12</sup>

As a Northern example of a Parisian *hôtel particulier*, or private aristocratic townhouse, the Fersen Palace exemplified how exigencies for status buildings differed between town and country, even though the architecture of the ideal house was similar both in town and in country.<sup>13</sup> At an aristocratic country house, gardens, parks and agriculture dominated the scenery, whereas in town, there was less space to create ideal buildings, wings and gardens. The Fersen Palace and its annexes occupied a whole block in a prestigious part of central Stockholm. Apart from the palace and a terraced garden with a pavilion and orangery, the plot also contained stabling for 12 horses, sheds for carriages and saddles, a laundry and mangle house, brewery, bakery, outhouse or outdoor loo and storehouse, with rooms for servants upstairs. On the kerbside, Fersen built a long, two-story wing, which housed shops and small leasehold flats. There was also a small building that served as his estate office and employed a steward, clerk and office boy. At one end of the block, there was a private almshouse, established by Fersen's grandmother in the 1710s for old women who had been working for the family.<sup>14</sup> Having shops adjacent to a townhouse was not unthinkable in Parisian *hôtels*, but it was certainly an exception to the accustomed architectural and aristocratic understanding of the ideal dwelling;<sup>15</sup> thus, it is unsurprising that Fersen was criticized by theatre director and anecdote writer Adolf Fredrik Ristell for disfiguring his elegant *hôtel* with a commercial building.<sup>16</sup>

The spatial order of both the Fersen Palace and the larger set of buildings on the property emphasized the existence of a variety of places and social



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milieus. The palace was the most significant building on the property, whereas the outbuildings and terraced garden parterres created additional spaces and places used by the family, visitors and, possibly, passers-by. While the Fersen Palace represented the opulence of high society, the almshouse at the other end of the property was its obverse. These two buildings reflected, however, the relationship between the nobility and the destitute in a society where privileged classes had a duty to take care of the less fortunate. In addition, the Fersen office and shops were centres for business life and shopping. Walls and terraces, creating spatial as well as social hierarchies, separated these different spheres of activity.

The variety of buildings, gardens and courtyards with different uses and different statuses made the Fersen Palace and its immediate surroundings a microcosm of urban space: there were spaces of high and low status (the palace itself, the almshouse), places for recreation or display (the terraced garden, the courtyard), places and spaces for merchant activities and estate management (the office, the shops), and places for household functions (the kitchen garden, stables, brewery and bakery). There were male and female places (the stables and office were male; the almshouse and bakery were female), and places without gender division or places where the gendered spaces were more nuanced (the palace, the terraced garden, the courtyard).

### **Gender and Material Culture at the Fersen Palace**

Historians have recently nuanced the gender division of women and men as consumers of material culture, acknowledging the complexity of domestic consumption, suggesting that the consuming choices reflected the status and personal likings of the individual, rather than specifically gender.<sup>17</sup> The Fersen Palace appears to have been largely a male project, as were most of the major building projects in eighteenth-century Sweden.<sup>18</sup> The most important decisions concerning both the building and decoration were made by Fersen himself, beginning in 1748 well before he married Countess Hedvig De la Gardie in 1752. According to bills and account-books in the Fersen family archives, it is not absolutely clear who made decisions concerning interior design after his marriage, but instructions from Fersen to his steward suggest that he had the ultimate decision-making power on the interior decorations.<sup>19</sup>

The probate inventory takes us from room to room in the palace demonstrating how it was decorated after more than 40 years of residence. It is very likely that the reception rooms, servants' quarters and most of the buildings on the property had the same functions in the 1790s that they had had in the 1750s and 1760s, as the ideals in architectural display and the spatial order of aristocratic townhouses changed little during the second half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, Fersen's account-books show that few alterations were made through the years. There is only one major refurbishment: in spring 1785, the count redecorated rooms for his son, Fabian

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von Fersen, and his old friend, Baron Jean Bolemany, who were to return to Stockholm after the son's Grand Tour.<sup>20</sup> The inventory after Fersen's death thus offers an excellent view on an aristocratic townhouse in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The ground floor of the palace housed a kitchen, a china storage room, storage rooms for food, linen and kitchen utensils, and servants' rooms. It also included corridors and small passageways through which servants could move to carry out their daily tasks without encountering the family or their guests. The count and countess's rooms, and the dining room, were on the first floor. Countess Hedvig De la Gardie's apartment included a large drawing room, a smaller drawing room, a bedroom, a garderobe, a toilette *cabinet* (closet) and a lady's maid's room. Fersen's apartment included a drawing room, a bedroom, a *cabinet* (closet) and a corridor leading to a valet's room. Guest rooms and children's rooms were on the second floor.<sup>21</sup>

In the key rooms of the Fersen Palace, the walls were adorned with gilded wooden panels and overdoor paintings, both typical of French rococo, or with tapestries and wallpapers. All rooms were furnished with tiled faience stoves, which stored warmth much better than open fireplaces and became, during the century, an important element of interior decoration as well as comfort. In the reception rooms, the stoves were fashionably decorated with flowers or the Fersens' coats of arms; whereas in the guest rooms, nursery and servants' rooms, the stoves were plain. In the reception rooms, the stoves were pendants to more fashionable open marble fireplaces above which large mirrors reflected the flames of fire and candles, extending the space and multiplying the light.<sup>22</sup> In France and in England, open fireplaces were common in elite dwellings despite their old-fashioned technology and inability to warm efficiently;<sup>23</sup> however, tiled stoves similar to those in Sweden began to find their way to Parisian aristocratic *hôtels particuliers* during the century.<sup>24</sup>

According to French architectural ideals, the apartment of the mistress of the house was often bigger than the apartment of the master of the house.<sup>25</sup> Female rooms had a significant role in the spatial order of the house. The primary rooms for sociability were drawing rooms or salons, which often belonged to the female sphere of a house, underlining that the social arena and elite entertaining were particularly closely linked to women. Socializing in elite houses was usually directed by the mistress of the house in Sweden, as well as in France or in England, and the gender roles were built to the fabric of elite houses in the form of distribution of rooms and spaces. Moreover, these rooms were lavishly decorated to manifest taste, cultural interests and the political power of the occupant of the rooms and owner of the house. This is particularly visible in the social life of high society, where the dining room and drawing rooms were spaces for entertainment and sociability. To display the taste and power of its owner, the Fersen Palace was furnished with gilded sofas and armchairs with silk upholstery, elegant rococo writing desks, tables, bureaux and commodes, upholstered chairs, large mirrors and crystal

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chandeliers in the representation rooms, whereas simple painted wooden tables, chairs and beds furnished the children's and servants' rooms.<sup>26</sup>

The probate inventory also gives us a sense of the flow of the reception rooms and suggests the importance of both the dining room and the female rooms in aristocratic lifestyle: the dining room opens to the great drawing room, which leads to the small drawing room, and the rest of the rooms comprising the countess's apartment. Her rooms were situated on the east side of the palace, the count's rooms on the west. According to the inventory, the dining room was in-between the apartments, linking feminine and masculine spaces and emphasizing the importance of dining as a mixed-sex social and political activity. The dining room could also act as a ballroom since the furniture was light and easy to move out of the way.<sup>27</sup> It is not clear if the floorplan of the first floor provided the same kind of social circuit that was being built into great houses in London at the time, where visitors could circle thorough a linked suite of reception rooms that went around the staircase,<sup>28</sup> but the inventory suggests it was very likely.

The countess's great drawing room in 1794 was a representative space for social and political agency as well as for a more intimate family sociability. Its decorations displayed a taste for French luxury, new commodities and fashionable furniture. It was the biggest reception room at the palace and could be reached from either the dining room or the small drawing room, creating an enfilade of rooms and social spaces. Three large windows faced the terraced garden and the bay behind it and were reflected by the room's six large mirrors. Green checked taffeta curtains echoed the view over the garden and its green reflections, and furniture upholstered with green cloth suggest the room had a calm but opulent atmosphere. There were also two paintings, portraits of the daughters of the family. The furniture consisted of a chaise longue, 12 armchairs, two tables with white marble tops, a tea table, a small worktable of mahogany, a varnished tray table, two porcelain pot-pourri pots, three pairs of gilded candelabras and a chandelier.<sup>29</sup> The display of the ultimate luxurious materials, marble and mahogany, manifested the family's status when entertaining and created an aura of comfort that wealth could offer in everyday life. The tea table and worktable marked the room out as a female space where activities such as needlework and social practices such as tea drinking took place together with music, discussion, letter writing and reading.<sup>30</sup>

This green drawing room opened to the countess's small drawing room, only slightly smaller than the great drawing room, hung with rose damask, and decorated in sumptuous French rococo style: it featured a sofa, a padded armchair, 12 armchairs and six chairs, all gilded and upholstered with rose-coloured damask. It also contained a gilded table with a marble top, a pair of corner cupboards with marble tops, gilded candelabras, a bronze mantel clock and vases of porcelain and alabaster. Two mirrors and four portraits in gilded frames hung on the walls, the latter picturing Fersen, his two sons and a

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brother-in-law.<sup>31</sup> This small rose drawing room had more—and more comfortable—seating for guests than the great drawing room, thus reflecting the sort of socializing it favoured. However, the presence of the worktable in the great drawing room suggests that the countess, who often practised needlework, used the great drawing room for daily life, whereas the lavishly decorated small drawing room was used primarily for social occasions. The decorations of these female rooms would have represented to a visitor not only the social capital and social skills of the mistress of the house, but also her wealth and taste as a consumer of luxury goods and possibly her role as political hostess.

In France, crimson, green and gold were ubiquitous colours in aristocratic housing.<sup>32</sup> That the key rooms at the Fersen Palace were decorated with these colours underlines yet again the influence that French practices and tastes had on the everyday life of the Swedish aristocracy. The countess's bedroom opened off the small drawing room and was hung with crimson damask. Crimson taffeta curtains framed the room's three windows, and its four gilded armchairs were upholstered with the same cloth. Other furniture consisted of a corner cupboard, a chest of drawers, a bedside table and a walnut bookcase, one of the few bookcases mentioned in the probate inventory. The bed had a canopy of crimson damask and a silk quilt, which was richly embroidered, presumably by the countess. Her apartment comprised also a lady's maid's room and a dressing room or *cabinet* (closet). This *cabinet* was furnished with a wardrobe and a corner cupboard, a toilet chair, a travel apothecary and an oriental carpet. A toilette table held the countess's silver toilette service. There were 60 engravings on the walls and a large carpet on the floor.<sup>33</sup> While the engravings are not detailed in the probate inventory, it seems likely that they were landscapes from Italy or Sweden, which were fashionable at the time. Print rooms were to be seen and admired by visitors in fashionable society,<sup>34</sup> and this dressing room with its engravings could be opened for social occasions if more space was needed. It was also a room where the countess could receive morning calls. The bedroom and dressing room were thus used both for formal and informal activities and for personal and social use. They could be closed off from the main social spaces of the house or opened for guests to move through. They were female rooms, accessed at certain times of the day, depending on the nature of their business, merchants, artisans, craftsmen and servants, but also spaces for entertaining both female and male visitors of rank.<sup>35</sup> In eighteenth-century Sweden, as in France, the female toilette became a performance for a mixed-sex audience, whereas the male toilette, as public as the female one, remained essentially male-dominated.<sup>36</sup>

The count's rooms were situated opposite those of the countess, facing the kitchen garden. His rooms opened presumably from the dining room, which extended the social space of the palace from the female to the male rooms, giving prospects for sociability in differently gendered spaces. The furniture suggests that the count's rooms were decorated for polite sociability: music

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and cards for a wider circle of guests and reading and writing in a smaller circle. In 1794, the count's drawing room was hung with green tapestries and furnished with armchairs, chairs, four card tables and a walnut chest of drawers. His bedroom was hung with French painted wallpapers and featured decorative overdoors and a large mirror. It was furnished with a crimson damask canopy bed, walnut bedside cupboard, two walnut chests of drawers with marble tops, a sofa, four armchairs, two chairs and two small mahogany tables. The *cabinet*, hung with green wallpaper, served as Fersen's study and library. It contained a mahogany writing table, a walnut table, a pair of walnut cupboards with marble tops, two sofas and eight armchairs. Fersen's collections of medals, medallions and bronze were displayed in the room. His apartment also included a dressing room, a valet's room and a lackey's room.<sup>37</sup> The decoration and furniture in the enfilade of Fersen's rooms were designed for comfort and display. Luxurious materials, such as mahogany, walnut and damask, testified to the count's wealth and taste, while the display of his medallion collections manifested his connoisseurship and possibilities as consumer as well as his political power in the form of medallions received from the sovereign as rewards and reminiscences of important political events.

One of the most important rooms in aristocratic dwellings was the dining room, which appeared in elite houses in early eighteenth-century France. In the spatial hierarchy of an aristocratic townhouse, the dining room belonged neither to the masculine nor to the feminine sphere of the house; it was a separate, individual space designed for specific use.<sup>38</sup> In eighteenth-century Britain, the dining room, which was a shared space for mixed-sex sociability during meals, became a masculine space by the withdrawal of the ladies after the dinner. The British habit for separate socializing after dinner was, however, never widely adopted in France or Sweden;<sup>39</sup> the Fersen dining room, therefore, would have been a heterosexual space.

The dining room at the Fersen Palace was furnished with 24 chairs, four gate-leg tables and two woollen carpets. The tables and dados were painted in yellow, while the roller blinds at the windows were of simple green cloth. The chandelier was plain metal. The simplicity of the furniture was standard in Sweden at the time but is striking when compared to the luxurious mahogany or walnut furniture used to display owners' status in French or English dining rooms. The probate inventory also lists four overdoor paintings without giving further details of their subjects, which were most likely suited to the room's use, reflecting themes on gastronomic delights. In Sweden and France, the overdoors in dining rooms often depicted flowers, fruits, game and epicurean artefacts, but their theme could as well be pastorals or landscapes.<sup>40</sup> In a British dining room, humorous and comic works or prints of horses hung on the walls, stressing the masculinity of the space.<sup>41</sup> The dining room at the Fersen Palace was unpretentiously decorated at the time of the inventory, but its full aristocratic splendour would have been apparent during banquets, suppers and other occasions. Then, impeccable white table linen, shining

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crystal glasses, blue and white gold-rimmed porcelain tableware, and silver plate—tureens, serving dishes, candelabras, cutlery and plates—would have gleamed in the candlelight, advertising the Fersen's wealth, power and taste. Their silver plate was valued at more than two or three large landed estates, which provides a sense of the importance that contemporaries laid on gastronomic display.<sup>42</sup> The aristocracy would have recognized similar material culture, objects, artefacts and sociability throughout Europe: elite experience on luxurious material culture and cultural codes, such as those linked to the dining room and feasts, was a shared culture, familiar to all members of aristocracy in France, as in Sweden, Britain, Italy or Russia.

Silver plate was a visible marker of the status of the host and had substantial political importance in eighteenth-century Europe. Charlotta Wolff has shown how Swedish ambassadors in Paris, and thus Sweden as a political ally of France, were valued for the splendour and elegance of the receptions they held and for the silver plate they used and displayed.<sup>43</sup> Powerful politicians were similarly evaluated by their peers and foreign diplomats in Stockholm. To mark his political importance, Fersen organized grand dinners for Stockholm society. He also sent his chef to Paris to learn exquisite gastronomy in the best Parisian aristocratic households. After two years of training supervised by the Swedish ambassador in Paris, the Fersens' chef returned to Stockholm in the early 1770s, ready to conjure first-class gastronomic experiences for their guests.<sup>44</sup>

Fersen built his palace deliberately as a stage for his political ambitions in a society where political participation and socio-political influence were not delimited to any particular place or time, nor to a particular form of sociability. The Fersen Palace, as did other elite houses, served multiple purposes. On one level, it was a private home, with places for familial domesticity and material comfort; on another level, it was a manifestation of power, agency, wealth and taste. For Fersen, the palace acted as a political tool, demonstrating in its rooms and decorations his, his family's and his kin's importance as notable political figures and cosmopolitan aristocrats of taste. During the eighteenth century, an essential part of political life was performed at private homes; hence, the Fersen Palace was decorated for these purposes, ameliorating socio-political participation and agency in its interlinked suites of rooms and the dining room. The palace, with its rooms designed to display and manifest not only the political but also the cultural role of the Fersen family, was a space for mixed-sex sociability. Women, most often wives and daughters of the politicians, played a key role in the social life and social politics of the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> This is also visible in the Fersen family's use of the palace: while it was a place for both domesticity and political agency, it also was a place in which Fersen's social and political activity made a space of aristocratic life, in terms of both socializing and working on documents produced for and by the Diet. The countess was highly regarded by her contemporaries, and visits to Count and Countess von Fersen or banquets they

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gave were featured in Swedish elites' letters, diaries and memoirs as well as in foreign diplomats' correspondence. That the couple was mentioned together in the diplomats' reports underlines the status of the countess in political sociability.<sup>46</sup> The Fersens' daughters were also politically active, and they skilfully used a variety of spaces, such as the Fersen Palace or the opera, and their connections and gender in political power struggles between the king and the aristocracy at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>47</sup> Arguably, they had learned the political use of the social arena and space from their parents.

### Conclusion

Count Axel von Fersen's townhouse was built and renovated by the most prominent architects of the time, familiar with French architectural ideals and novelties of the early eighteenth century. Fersen consciously constructed his townhouse not only as a place to live, but also as a space for aristocratic display of rank, identity and political power, as represented through architecture, the distribution of rooms and interior design. The architectural space of the house as well as the decorations and material culture of the key rooms were created to demonstrate the Fersens' cultural and political activity in late eighteenth-century Stockholm. The Fersen Palace was an embodiment of aristocratic power, through which Axel von Fersen negotiated his, and his family's, place in the urban political culture of Stockholm. Through the architectural space and material culture of a house, the Swedish aristocracy, and the Fersens amongst them, claimed their position and status.

At the Fersen Palace, the Swedish aristocracy's taste for French luxuries and commodities was displayed in the rooms of the count and the countess, creating spaces which were gendered through furniture, decorations, colours, luxury goods and the use of space. The apartment of the mistress of the house was a feminine space furnished with comfortable furniture, sofas, worktables and tea tables, whereas the rooms belonging to the master of the house were more masculine spaces furnished with a large writing desk of luxurious wood for working with political and economic documents. As socio-political arenas, the importance of masculine and feminine spaces was, however, corresponding, and there are few significant differences in the display and the purpose of the rooms. The distribution of the rooms and their decoration and furnishing in luxurious French rococo style suggest that the display of wealth, taste and comfort both in the count and the countess's apartments was more about the Fersens' shared social strategies and political ambition than about gendered spaces. Moreover, a pivotal space for eighteenth-century sociability, the dining room, acted as a space for mixed socializing, developing an arena where the social and political importance of the host and hostess were displayed through material and gastronomic culture, as well as through music and conversation. While the reception rooms were decorated in French style, they were not situated on the ground floor as in Parisian *hôtels particuliers*,

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but on the first floor for greater warmth and comfort. The dining room was more simplified in style than the French or British aristocratic dining rooms, furnished with simple painted wooden furniture, as was fashionable in Sweden at the time. Hårleman in his architecture, and Fersen in his display of the Fersen Palace, modified French architectural ideals and decorative arts to a Swedish context, where French opulence was modified to apparently more unadorned Swedish taste.

The example of the Fersen Palace stresses the key role architectural space played in political sociability and everyday life of the aristocracy in the early-modern European town. For politically and socially active aristocrats, it was vital to have a townhouse. A townhouse was a visible manifestation of aristocratic power, rank, taste and values.<sup>48</sup> The Swedish urban aristocracy shared a way of life that was familiar to aristocrats across Europe at the time. The cultural hegemony was, however, not unalterable; architecture and decorations were adjusted to different national contexts determined by aesthetics and taste, concepts of art and architecture, political culture and social life, climate and the economic constraints of the builder.

## Notes

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- See e.g. Dana Arnold, *Reading architectural history* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Denise Amy Baxter and Meredith Martin, eds, *Architectural space in eighteenth-century Europe: constructing identities and interiors* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Natacha Coquery, *L'Hôtel aristocratique: Le marché du luxe à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1998); Joan DeJean, *The age of comfort: when Paris discovered casual—and the modern home began* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Michel Figeac, *La douceur des Lumières: noblesse et art de vivre en Guyenne au XVIIIe siècle* (Bordeaux: Mollat, 2001); Michel Figeac, *Châteaux et la vie quotidienne: de la Renaissance à la douceur des Lumières* (Paris: Armand Collin, 2006); Alexandre Gady, *Les hôtels particuliers de Paris du moyen âge à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Parisgramme, 2011); Mark Girouard, *Life in the English country house: a social and architectural history* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978); Anne Perrin Khelissa, *Gênes au XVIIIe siècle: Le décor d'un palais* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2013); Jane Rendell, *The pursuit of pleasure: gender, space and architecture in Regency London* (London: Continuum, 2002); Katie Scott, *The rococo interior: decoration and social spaces in early eighteenth-century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, *Consumption and the country house* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jon Stobart and Andrew Hann, eds, *The country house: material culture and consumption* (Swindon: Historic England, 2016); Amanda Vickery, *Behind closed doors: at home in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).



- 3 Anna von Ajkay, *Fersenska palatset: tradition och förnyelse på Blasieholmen* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & söners förlag, 1977); Ing-Mari Danielsson, *Den bildade smaken: Målade dekorationer hos borgerskapet i frihetstidens Stockholm* (Stockholm: Stockholmia Förlag, 1998); Birgitta von Haslingen, *300 years of the Tessin Palace: a house in accordance with all the orders of architecture* (Stockholm: Stockholmia Förlag, 2003); Bo Vahlne, *Frihetstidens inredningar på Stockholms Slott: Om bekvämlighetens och skönhetens nivåer* (Stockholm: Balkong Förlag, 2012); see also Johanna Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv: Familjen von Fersens livsstil på 1700-talet* (Helsingfors and Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland and Atlantis, 2012), 253–76, Johanna Ilmakunnas, ‘Högadeln bor i staden: Fersenska palatset som urbant mikrokosmos i Stockholm ca 1740–1795’, *Bebyggelsehistorisk tidskrift* 68 (2014), 8–25; Johanna Ilmakunnas, *Joutilaat ja ahkerat: Kirjoituksia 1700-luvun Euroopasta* (Helsinki: Siltala, 2016), 49–84.
- 4 Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, Riksarkivet (RA), Stockholm. The inventory also catalogues Fersen’s estates and country houses with movables.
- 5 Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 253–71; Ilmakunnas, ‘Högadeln bor i staden’.
- 6 Charlotta Wolff, *Vänskap och makt: Den svenska politiska eliten och upplysningstiden Frankrike* (Helsingfors and Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland and Atlantis, 2005); Charlotta Wolff, ‘The Swedish aristocracy and the French enlightenment circa 1740–1780’, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30, 3/4 (2005), 259–70.
- 7 Population in Stockholm, the County of Stockholm and the whole country 1750–2008. Stockholms Stads Utrednings- och Statistikkontor AB. [www.usk.stockholm.se/arsbok/b049.htm](http://www.usk.stockholm.se/arsbok/b049.htm) (accessed 10 December 2012).
- 8 On political culture in eighteenth-century Sweden, see e.g. Pasi Ihalainen, Michael Brengsbo, Karin Sennelfelt and Patrick Winton, eds, *Scandinavia in the age of revolution: Nordic political cultures, 1740–1820* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011); see also Göran Rydén, ed, *Sweden in the eighteenth-century world: provincial cosmopolitans* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).
- 9 Figeac, *La douceur des Lumières*, 115–20; Figeac, *Chateaux et la vie quotidienne*, 248–57; Girouard, *Life in the English country house*, passim; Orest Ranum, ‘Les refuges de l’intimité’, in Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby and Roger Chartier, eds, *Histoire de la vie privée 3: De la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 214–34; Scott, *The rococo interior*, 3; Elisabet Stavenow-Hidemark, ‘Ett nytt sätt att bo’, in Jakob Christensson, ed, *Frihetstiden: Signums svenska kulturhistoria* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 2006), 378; Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the country house*, passim; Vickery, *Behind closed doors*, passim.
- 10 Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641–1770* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 35, 311, 317–18, 326–7; Figeac, *La douceur des Lumières*; Meredith Martin, ‘The ascendancy of the interior in eighteenth-century French architectural theory’, in Denise Amy Baxter and Meredith Martin, eds, *Architectural space in eighteenth-century Europe: constructing identities and interiors* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the country house*, passim; Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley, *The building of the English country house, 1660–1880: creating paradise* (London and New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 47–108.
- 11 DeJean, *The age of comfort*, 35, 56; Joan DeJean, ‘A new interiority: the architecture of privacy in eighteenth-century Paris’, in Charissa Bremer-David, ed, *Paris: life*

and luxury in the eighteenth century (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 40–1.

- <sup>11</sup> See Carl Hårleman: *människan och verket*, ed. Magnus Olausson and Rebecka Millhagen (Stockholm: Bygghuset, 2000).
- <sup>12</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>13</sup> Göran Alm, 'Arkitekturen och inredningskonsten', in *Signums svenska konsthistoria: frihetstiden* (Lund: Bokförlaget Signum, 1997), 85; Ilmakunnas, 'Högadeln bor i staden', 11–12; Scott, *The rococo interior*, 89; see also Arnold, *Reading architectural history*, 139–40.
- <sup>14</sup> Probate inventory after Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; Ajkay, *Fersenska palatset*, 37–8, 52–3; Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 256–9.
- <sup>15</sup> Gady, *Les hôtels particuliers*, 54, 60.
- <sup>16</sup> Adolf Fredrik Ristell, *Characters and anecdotes of the Court of Sweden*, vol. II (London, 1790), 38–9.
- <sup>17</sup> Margot Finn, 'Men's things: masculine possession in the consumer revolution', *Social History* 25 (2000), 133–55; Beth Fowkes Tobin, 'Introduction: consumption as a gendered social practise', in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds, *Material women, 1750–1950: consuming desires and collecting practises* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 1–13; David Hussey, 'Guns, horses and stylish waistcoats? Male consumer activity and domestic shopping in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England', in David Hussey and Margaret Ponsonby, eds, *Buying for the home: shopping for the domestic from the seventeenth century to the present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 47–69; Ulla Ijäs, 'Favourites of fortune: the Hackmans: the luxury consumption of Johan Friedrich and Marie Hackman (1790–1825)', in Marjo Kaartinen, Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, eds, *Gender and luxury in the modern urban economy: a European perspective, c. 1700–1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Kate Retford, 'Patrilinear portraiture? Gender and genealogy in the eighteenth-century English country house', in John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds, *Gender, taste, and material culture in Britain and North America, 1700–1830* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 323; Jon Stobart and Mark Rothery, 'Men, women and the supply of luxury goods in eighteenth-century England: the purchasing patterns of Edward and Mary Leigh', in Marjo Kaartinen, Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton, eds, *Gender and luxury in the modern urban economy: a European perspective, c. 1700–1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Vickery, *Behind closed doors*, passim; Amanda Vickery, 'Fashioning difference in Georgian England: furniture for him and her', in *Early modern things: objects and their histories, 1500–1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 342–59; see also Johanna Ilmakunnas and Jon Stobart, eds, *A taste for luxury in early modern Europe: display, acquisition and boundaries* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
- <sup>18</sup> For instance, country houses Åkerö and Övedskloster, both designed by Carl Hårleman, were ambitious projects on which the builders Count Carl Gustaf Tessin and Baron Hans Ramel had a key role. Selling, *Svenska herrgårdshem*, 95–7, 110–33, 137–8.
- <sup>19</sup> See e.g. Pro Memoria Angående min hushållning 31 August 1757. Axel von Fersen d.ä:s arkiv vol. 32a. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.

- <sup>20</sup> Axel von Fersen to Fabian von Fersen 10 March 1785. Fabian von Fersens arkiv vol. 1a. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; see also Barnard, *Making the grand figure*, 73–5.
- <sup>21</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>22</sup> Special Extract öfwer utgifterne [. . .] 1755, Förteckning på utbetalte Medel [. . .] 1755. See also bills 47, 96, 139, 183. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 39. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>23</sup> DeJean, *The age of comfort*, 95–7, 100; Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: fashionable society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 42.
- <sup>24</sup> Aurélie Chatenet-Calyste, *Une consommation aristocratique, fin de siècle: Marie-Fortunée d'Este, princesse de Contin (1731–1803)* (Limoges: Pulim, 2013), 117–18; Coquery, *L'Hôtel aristocratique*, 140–2; Figeac, *Châteaux et vie quotidienne*, 282–3.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jacques-François Blondel, *De la distribution des maisons de plaisance, et de la décoration des édifices en general*, vol. I–II (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1737–1738), esp. vol. I, 23–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-376>. [www.gallica.fr](http://www.gallica.fr); See also Denise Amy Baxter, 'Introduction: constructing space and identity in the eighteenth-century interior', in Denise Amy Baxter and Meredith Martin, eds, *Architectural space in eighteenth-century Europe: constructing identities and interiors* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010); Martin, 'The ascendancy of the interior'; Scott, *The rococo interior*, passim.
- <sup>26</sup> Special Extract öfwer utgifterne [. . .] 1755, Förteckning på utbetalte Medel [. . .] 1755. See also bills 102, 103. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 39. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>27</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>28</sup> Girouard, *Life in the English country house*, 194–201.
- <sup>29</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>30</sup> On furniture, see Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds, *Furnishing the eighteenth century: what furniture can tell us about the European and American Past* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: Naissance de la consommation XVIIe–XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 183–208; Vickery, 'Fashioning difference'; see also Chatenet-Calyste, *Une consommation aristocratique*, 120–5.
- <sup>31</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>32</sup> Chatenet-Calyste, *Une consommation aristocratique*, 122.
- <sup>33</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; Probate inventory after the death of Hedvig De la Gardie. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 37. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>34</sup> Mikael Ahlund, *Lanskapets röster: Studier i Elias Martins bildvärld* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2011), 235–9.
- <sup>35</sup> Carolina Brown, 'Mode och skönhet', in Jacob Christensson, ed, *Signums svenska kulturhistoria: Gustavianska tiden* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Signum, 2007), 401, 406; Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 266–8.
- <sup>36</sup> Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, 'Dressing to impress: the morning toilette and the fabrication of femininity', in Charissa Bremer-David, ed, *Paris: life and luxury in the eighteenth century* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 53–73; Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 267–8.

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- <sup>37</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA.
- <sup>38</sup> DeJean, 'A new interiority', 37; Michel Figeac, 'Salle à manger', in Michel Figeac, ed, *L'ancien France au quotidien: Vie et choses de la vie sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), 456–7.
- <sup>39</sup> Girouard, *Life in the English country house*, 204–5, 233; Cynthia Wall, 'Gendering rooms: domestic architecture and literary acts', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5 (1993), 349–72; see also Rahikainen's chapter in this volume, linking formal dinners and sexually segregated sociability.
- <sup>40</sup> Scott, *The rococo interior*, 25, 113–14.
- <sup>41</sup> John Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination: English culture in the eighteenth century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 222; Stobart and Rothery, *Consumption and the country house*, 71.
- <sup>42</sup> Probate inventory after the death of Axel von Fersen. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 34. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv*, 156–61.
- <sup>43</sup> Wolff, *Vänskap och makt*, 137–9; see also Figeac, *La douceur des Lumières*, 158–9, and Greig, *The Beau Monde*, 45–6.
- <sup>44</sup> Gustav Philip Creutz to Axel von Fersen, 8 September 1771, 14 October 1771. Axel von Fersen d.ä.:s arkiv vol. 7. Stafsundsarkivet, RA; Johanna Ilmakunnas, 'French fashions: aspects of elite lifestyle in eighteenth-century Sweden', in Johanna Ilmakunnas and Jon Stobart, eds, *A taste for luxury in early modern Europe: display, acquisition and boundaries* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 254–6.
- <sup>45</sup> Elaine Chalus, 'Elite women, social politics, and the political world of late eighteenth-century England', *The Historical Journal* 43 (2000), 669–97; Svante Norrhem, *Kvinnor vid maktens sida 1632–1772* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2007); Julie Schlarman, 'The social geography of Grosvenor Square: mapping gender and politics, 1720–1760', *London Journal* 28 (2003), 8–28; Charlotta Wolff, 'Aristokratiska kvinnor som aktörer i 1700-talets svenska och franska makt- och partipolitik', in Åsa Karlsson Sjögren, ed, *Kvinnor och politik i det tidigmoderna Norden* (Reykjavik: Islands universitets förlag, 2007), 175–93.
- <sup>46</sup> I thank Svante Norrhem for this information.
- <sup>47</sup> Gustaf Johan Ehrensvärd, *Dagboksanteckningar förda vid Gustaf III:s hof*, vol. 1, ed. E. V. Montan (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1876), 34, 148–9, 325, 366, 412; My Hellsing, *Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotte: Hertiginna vid det gustavianska hovet* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2015), passim; My Hellsing, *Hovpolitik: Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotte som politisk aktör vid det gustavianska hovet* (Örebro: Örebro universitet, 2013), passim.
- <sup>48</sup> Cf. Nina Lewallen, 'Architecture and performance at the Hôtel du Maine in eighteenth-century Paris', *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 17 (2009–2010), 2–32.