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Landscape and Architecture: The Work of Erik Gunnar Asplund

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Landscape and Architecture: the Work of Erik Gunnar Asplund



E. G. Asplund with Sigurd
Lewerentz, Woodland
Cemetery, 1935-40,
Crematorium and landscape
from cemetery entrance.

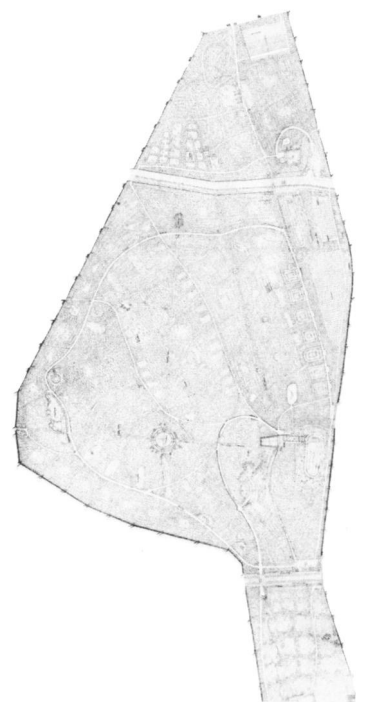
Landscape was not on the agenda of the Modern Movement, except as a sanitary or recreational concern, as a greenbelt or "tapis verte." The aesthetic and symbolic dimension, which had traditionally been a central concern of garden and landscape design, was essentially discarded by the Modern Movement in favor of utilitarian concerns. This largely accounts for the fact that landscape architecture in modern times has found itself in a subordinate position to architecture and that a vital modern garden or landscape tradition can hardly be said to exist. The few good examples in existence, the work of Barragán or Burle Marx, are in fact the exceptions that prove the rule.

In the work of both Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, attention to landscape design remains most often schematic, though Le Corbusier shows a classicist's concern and sensitivity to the siting of his buildings in the macrolandscape. While early Mies integrated house with landscape via walls extending out into nature as well as by the use of extensive areas of glass, late Mies used plantings and trees as a subordinate system for extending the all pervasive grid-like order created by his buildings. Frank Lloyd Wright, drawing on English picturesque and Japanese traditions of sensitivity to the melding of building and landscape, has perhaps been the chief modernist model for integrating architecture with the natural landscape. But Wright's, Le Corbusier's and the Modern Movement's bias in general was for the natural landscape. Underlying this bias was the Modern Movement's urge to discard history and begin at the beginning. The traditional garden and park were seen as artificial, products of an obsolete culture which was no longer relevant to the needs of a utilitarian era. The rare design by Le Corbusier or Mies that can be seen as anything near a prototypical modern garden—the Beistegui roof terrace, or the courtyards of the Barcelona Pavilion—have been internalized in the building, and in a sense privatized. Or, as in the case of the roof playground of the Unité d'Habitation, they have been given an apparent utilitarian purpose.

Of the major twentieth century architects who were part of the Modern Movement, Erik Gunnar Asplund offers us some profound lessons in landscape architecture, and in the relating of buildings and landscape. The design of the landscape, the integration of building and land, and the design of particular architectonic ele-

ments in the landscape, both in untouched nature and in urban settings, preoccupied him throughout his career. For Asplund, landscape does not assume the passive or secondary role it does elsewhere in the Modern Movement, and rather than make a revolutionary break with the past, Asplund sought to renew and revitalize landscape traditions. Asplund's landscape sensibility received its first major challenge with the competition for the Woodland Cemetery that he did together with Sigurd Lewerentz in 1915. Though that project was to be his (and Lewerentz's) central landscape achievement, and was to preoccupy him over his entire career, his landscape abilities manifested themselves elsewhere in subtly brilliant ways as in the designs for the parks surrounding the public library, the siting of his summer house, and the plan for the paving of Gustaf Adolf's square in Gothenburg.

While looking at each of the projects separately, and giving a brief background to their development, this paper will discuss Asplund's concern with nature and landscape at three levels: his concern with the design of the larger landscape and park, as evidenced in his work at the Woodland Cemetery and the public library parks; his concern with the integration of building and landscape which, of course, is not altogether inseparable from the first concern; and finally, as a separate section at the end, his concern with the subsidiary architectural elements of landscape.



1

Woodland Cemetery

Asplund's approach to landscape and the relation of building and landscape is best exemplified in the extensive work with the design of the Woodland Cemetery that for over twenty-five years he and Sigurd Lewerentz carried out, as well as in the two individual buildings, the chapel and the crematorium he designed by himself for the grounds. Asplund and Lewerentz's competition entry, which was chosen over fifty-five other entries, clearly stands out in its intense romantic naturalism. The winning scheme was the only one that turned the existing, essentially untouched Nordic forest on the site into the dominant experience. While civilized and well-groomed English parks mixed with *allées* on axis, and informal and formal open areas were features typical of the other competitors, Asplund and Lewerentz evoked a much more primitive imagery. The intervention of footpaths, which meandered freely through the forest, was minimal. Graves were freely and informally to be laid among the existing wild forest. The interventions they allowed themselves, such as the moulding of the two old gravel pits and the ordering of the area surrounding the main chapel, became all the more charged because they existed hidden within and in contrast to the raw and untouched forest surrounding them. This contrast is well captured in their as yet quite romantic competition sketches.

It is the evocation of raw Nordic wilderness that constitutes a radical departure in landscape architecture, not to speak of cemetery layout at this time. Asplund and Lewerentz's sources were not high architecture or landscape planning, but rather medieval and ancient Nordic vernacular burial archetypes. Freely mixed in were elements from the Mediterranean and antiquity whose effects are again heightened by becoming isolated elements in the Nordic forest.

But in terms of its organization, Asplund and Lewerentz's scheme clearly grew out of the English romantic garden tradition, which in fact had flourished in Sweden since the days of Frederik Magnus Piper, the designer of both the English gardens at Drottningholm and at Haga.¹ The interest in ancient Nordic burial archetypes also had precedents. Erik Dahlberg's monumental *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna* compiled at the end of the seventeenth century featured etchings of many of the most spectacular ancient burial and ritual sites of the country. The runic hill in the gardens of Rosersberg, probably conceived by Olof Rudback, Professor of Botany at Upsala, for Axel Oxienstierna dates from the mid-seventeenth century.² Piper himself was to evoke similar primitive imagery in his monument hill at Drottningholm. But the runic hill at Rosersberg existed at the periphery of a formal French garden, while monument hill was placed in the well-groomed and most civi-

1 See *Frederik Magnus Piper and the Landscape Garden*, Exhibition Catalog, (Stockholm: The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, 1981).

2 It thus antedates the Druids cell at Stourhead by 100 years, which itself presages one of the distinct motifs of the Romantic garden landscape.



1 Competition entry, Woodland Cemetery, 1915 site plan.

2 Competition entry, Woodland Cemetery, sketch plan showing layout of graves.



3
Burial mound at Inhinge in Smaland, from Dahlberg's, *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna*.

4
Frederick Magnus Piper, Monument Hill at Drottningholm.

3
The return to the land and the interest in more primitive cultures was widespread as witnessed for instance by Gauguin's move to Tahiti. For an excellent discussion of the Scandinavian aspect of this movement, see *Northern Light, Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880–1910*, the catalog of an exhibition of the same title held at the Corcoran Gallery and the Brooklyn Museum in the fall of 1982.

4
For an excellent discussion of the Northern Romantic tradition in painting, see Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

lized English garden at Drottningholm. In each case the primitive landscape element had been isolated and removed from its original context and placed in an artificial one and thus, in a sense, tamed. In being out of character with the larger surrounding context, it lost some of its aura and tended to become a mere curiosity.

Thus it is the shift to a more Nordic, more primitive and untamed context that makes Asplund and Lewerentz's scheme new, and the fact that the landscape was a cemetery and not a royal pleasure park lent it authenticity. The architects found a receptive audience in the jury, whose key members were Ragnar Ostberg and Lars Israel Wahlman, two of Sweden's leading national romantic architects. The interest in the raw Nordic landscape, while a new phenomenon in landscape architecture and relatively new among architects, was widespread in the national romantic culture of Sweden from the 1890s onward. The writings and poetry of Verner von Heidenstam celebrate the Nordic landscape as well as the primitive vernacular building culture that was an integral part of it. Heidenstam, who saw the intimate and inseparable connection between building and landscape, also spoke of the soul of, and the emotional content of, landscapes and buildings. These concepts were to be central to the idea of the cemetery.

Among artists the Nordic landscape became the focus of interest for a group of painters, contemporaries of Heidenstam who, having absorbed the realistic techniques of *pleinair* painting in Paris, reacted against the city's cosmopolitan

culture and returned to Sweden to re-discover their native land.³ Rather than being concerned with realistic detail, a characteristic of their Parisian schooling, they sought to capture the mood of the landscape, and like Heidenstam, its emotional content. As such, their work, along with their Nordic contemporary, Edvard Munch,⁴ may be seen as a revitalization of the northern romantic tradition in painting which had an important source in the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), the German romantic painter and contemporary of Goethe and Schinkel. Born in Griefswald on the Baltic coast (in his youth still Swedish Pomerania) and educated as an artist in Copenhagen, Friedrich had close Scandinavian connections. Through his friendship with J. C. Dahl and others, Friedrich was to be an important influence on his Scandinavian contemporaries. While Friedrich was not rediscovered in Germany until 1906, he was apparently re-discovered for Scandinavian artists much earlier through the writings of the Norwegian art critic and historian, Andreas Aubert, who discussed Friedrich extensively in two articles on J. C. Dahl in 1893 and 1894. Thus such Swedish painters as Prince Eugen and Karl Nordström possibly drew direct inspiration from Friedrich, resorting to a kind of *répétition différente* of the same themes that had animated the culture almost a century earlier.

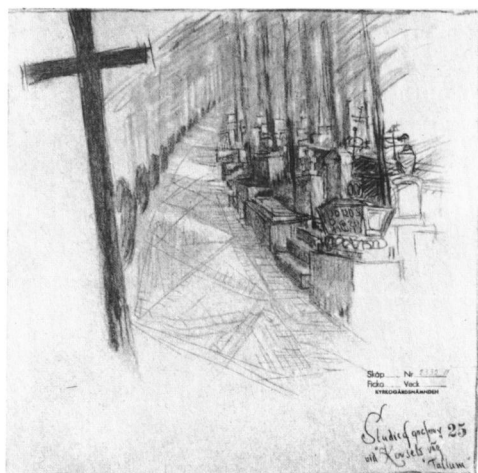
Friedrich brought into conscious usage for the first time in painting certain archetypal Nordic landscape images: the deep evergreen forest with graves set in the wilderness, the church with surrounding churchyard, and the dolmen and earth mound on the heath surrounded by oaks

and the wayfarer's cross. But rather than being naturalistic documentations, Friedrich's landscapes, in their intensely concentrated imagery and often elementary symmetrical compositions, took on transcendental and symbolic dimensions.

In the images evoked, the wayfarer's cross, graves and chapels in the wild overgrown forest, and in the associations to an earlier and more primitive age of faith, Asplund and Lewerentz's competition scheme was close to Friedrich, yet still perhaps overly romantic, lacking the concentration of imagery and paring down to essentials that characterizes

Friedrich's work as well as the best work of Prince Eugen. However, their scheme would evolve.

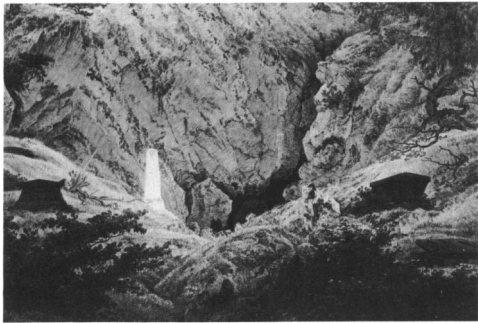
While the scheme draws on Pompeii's Via Sepulchra and other elements from antiquity, it is the primitive Nordic landscape and archaic Nordic burial archetypes that dominate. Thus Asplund and Lewerentz's scheme also stands in contrast to a popular motif in continental European cemetery design at the turn of the century which drew inspiration from the symbolist paintings of Arnold Böcklin, especially his famous "Island of the Dead." Böcklin's landscapes, with their classical fragments



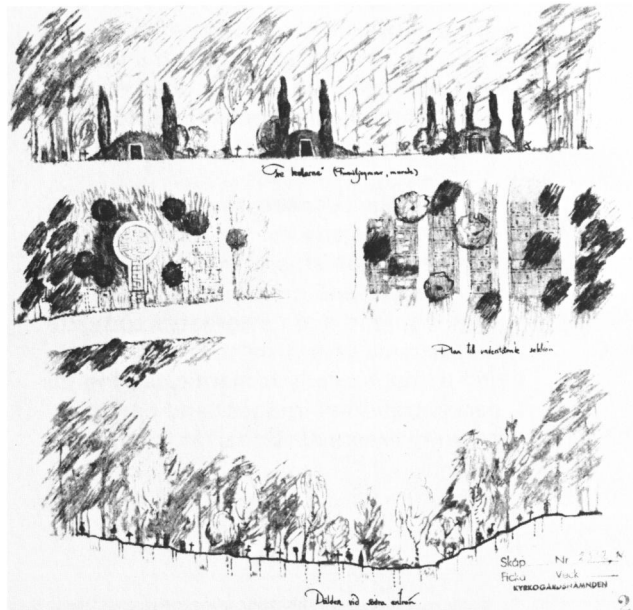
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Competition entry, Woodland Cemetery, perspective of "The Way of the Cross".

6
Caspar David Friedrich, "The Cross on the Baltic", 1815.

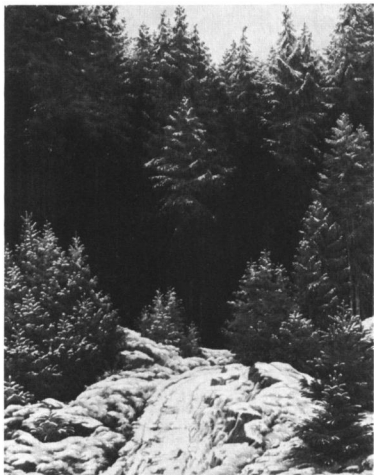




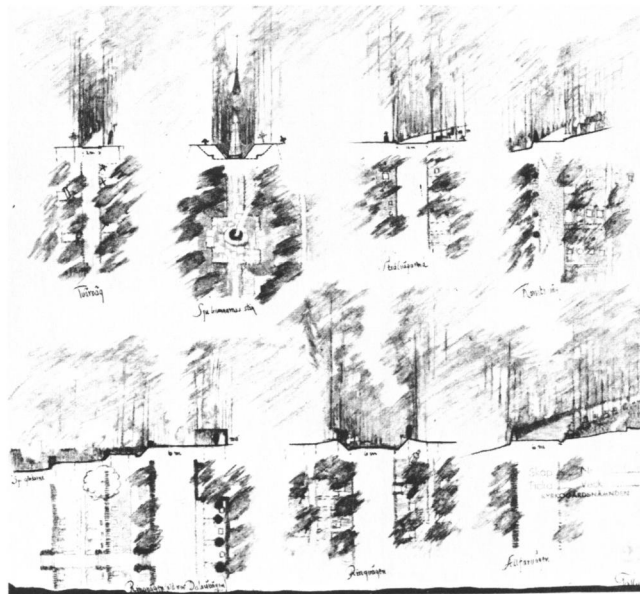
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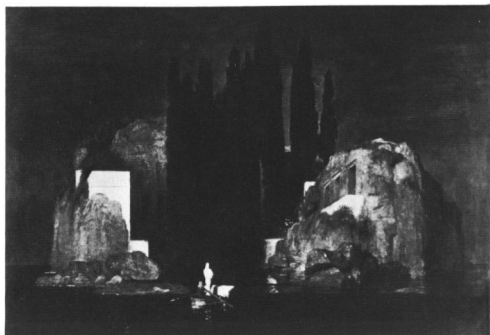
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8
Caspar David Friedrich, "Old Heroes' Graves", 1812.

10
Caspar David Friedrich, "Early Snow", 1828.

7
Competition entry, Woodland Cemetery, above: "The Three Mounds", below: dell at south entrance.

9
Competition entry, Woodland Cemetery, path and road profiles.



11
Arnold Böcklin, "Island of the Dead", 1880.

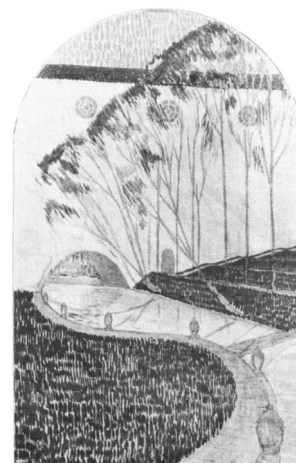
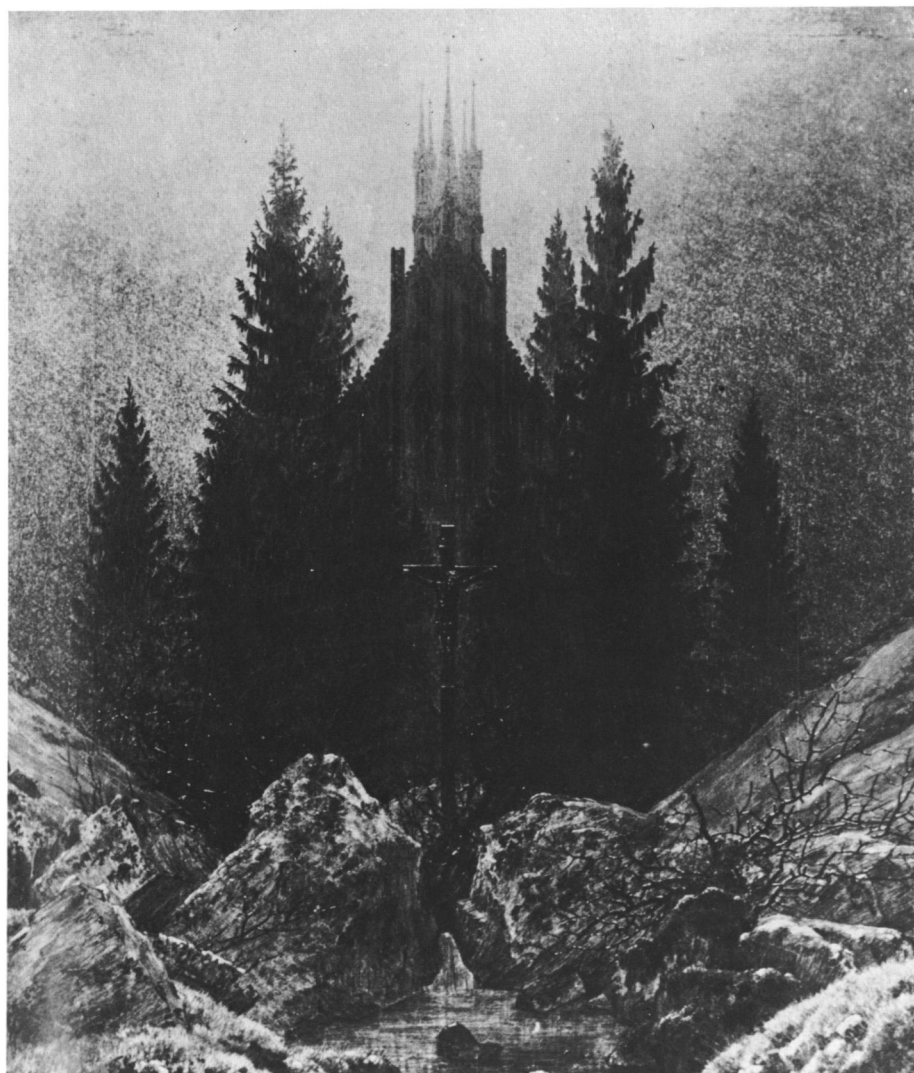
and their enigmatic figures, evoke a sense of decadence and an undertone of the sinister. That the jury preferred the northern romantic scheme of Asplund and Lewerentz to one pursuing Böcklinesque motifs, is probably a good indication of the different stage in cultural time Scandinavia found itself vis-à-vis the rest of Europe.

It must be stressed that Lewerentz's contribution to the scheme was no doubt as important as Asplund's, though it is impossible to say who was responsible for what. We do know that Lewerentz and Torsten Stubelius's proposed crematorium for Helsingborg served as the model for the chapel. And a study of the Helsingborg proposal shows Lewerentz to be a consummate landscape artist with a similar delicate touch that is discernible in the cemetery competition entry. Brilliant

in the Helsingborg proposal is the handling of the stream passing through the site, which by being directed through a vault under the chapel evokes the Cremation Movement's coupling of death and rebirth. On one side the stream flowing into the vault recalls the river flowing to Hades, the mythological realm of the dead; on the other side, emerging out of the vault and breaking into a cascading waterfall, the stream evokes rebirth and life.

The Woodland Chapel

The Woodland Chapel, designed and built in the years 1918–20, represents both an intensification and a formal disciplining of the romantic naturalism of the competition scheme. The increasing severity and discipline reflect Asplund's developing in-



12

12
Sigurd Lewerentz and
Torsten Stubelius, Project for
a Crematorium in Helsingborg.

13
Caspar David Friedrich, "Cross
in the Mountains", 1813.



14
E. G. Asplund, Woodland
Chapel, 1918-20, front.



16
Woodland Chapel, view of
earth vault.

terest in classicism and classical composition methods. But the point of departure for the chapel, which is set in a grove of mature fir trees surrounded by a wall, is an indigenous vernacular landscape/building type, the country church surrounded by a walled graveyard overgrown with fir trees. Thus, while the plan and major elements are classical, Asplund retains important roots in the vernacular.

Building and surrounding landscape are conceived as an integral whole. One cannot separate the chapel from the carefully chosen setting, or it would lose much of its meaning and resonance. Memory of an archetype and its emotional resonance is of key importance here. But Asplund abstracts, transforms, and intensifies the experience of the original. Not only does the black shingle wooden roof evoke the vernacular country church, but by a subtle shift in its proportioning and by isolating it aloft on Tuscan columns, it becomes, seen frontally, a primitive wooden pyramid levitated amid the fir trees. An example of architecture mimicking nature, the pyramidal roof echoes the slope of the tree branches while the columns echo the trunks.

In front of the chapel is a vault sunken halfway into the ground and covered with earth containing the caskets to be buried that day. It strongly reinforces the death symbolism of the composition, an often recurrent element in the traditional country churchyard. But the earth vault also reinforces the primitive quality of the design. Both the earth vault and the chapel represent basic archetypal human constructs. Contrasted to one another, they also represent a basic duality. The amorphous organic earth shape of the mound lies in contrast to the sharp Platonic geometry of the pyramidal roof. The pyramid floats aloft among the trees in contrast to the rootedness in the earth of the mound. Matter is contrasted to spirit, and in the most elementary and abstract way the Christian notion of the separation of body and soul at death is evoked.

In the Skövde Crematorium project of 1938 (finished after his death) Asplund develops an interesting variation on the landscape scenario of the Woodland Chapel. The two chapels are similar in terms of size and shape. But Skövde is sited on open high ground evoking again a historic building/landscape prototype, the small stone church on the open heath, surrounded by burial mounds. The stone

walls of the octagonal chapel and the steep black wooden roof pulled in behind the roof line, complement the earth mounds in their archaic primitiveness. The driveway, which takes one around the complex, provides a series of varied juxtapositions of mounds and chapel.

The Evolution of the Cemetery Landscape

Initially, Asplund and Lewerentz had planned to collaborate on the design of the crematorium, but when the time came to prepare the final designs, the building committee decided to give the job to Asplund alone. However, if the crematorium took shape from 1935 onward under Asplund's aegis alone, many of the crucial decisions which contributed to its siting were made earlier and involved the joint contribution of both architects. The moulding of the surrounding landscape at the front of the cemetery continued to be the responsibility of both architects and had in fact nearly achieved its final form in a joint project of 1932.

The evolution of the form of the main chapel and surrounding landscape seems to parallel the stylistic development of Asplund and Lewerentz's architecture. In a plan dating from 1922–23, the architects moved the chapel from its picturesque location on the crest of the ridge, as suggested in the competition scheme, and placed it on axis with the entrance in strict classical fashion. This project was done in conjunction with Lewerentz's design for the neoclassical semicircular walled entry into the cemetery.⁵ The proposed chapel was a classical temple form with a rather innovative loggia passing through the building. Like Lewerentz's Resurrection Chapel, the proposed chapel allowed itself considerable freedom with the temple form.

The final moulding of the landscape at the front of the cemetery and the final decision on the location of the main chapel, were represented in another joint plan of 1932. The main chapel was moved off axis to the eastern edge of the gently sloping plateau beyond the cemetery entrance. The landscape, which had been cleared of forest between the cemetery entrance and the main chapel, was now further opened up to accommodate larger expanses of lawn. It was in this proposal that the famous grass covered knoll with the meditation grove found its form.⁶



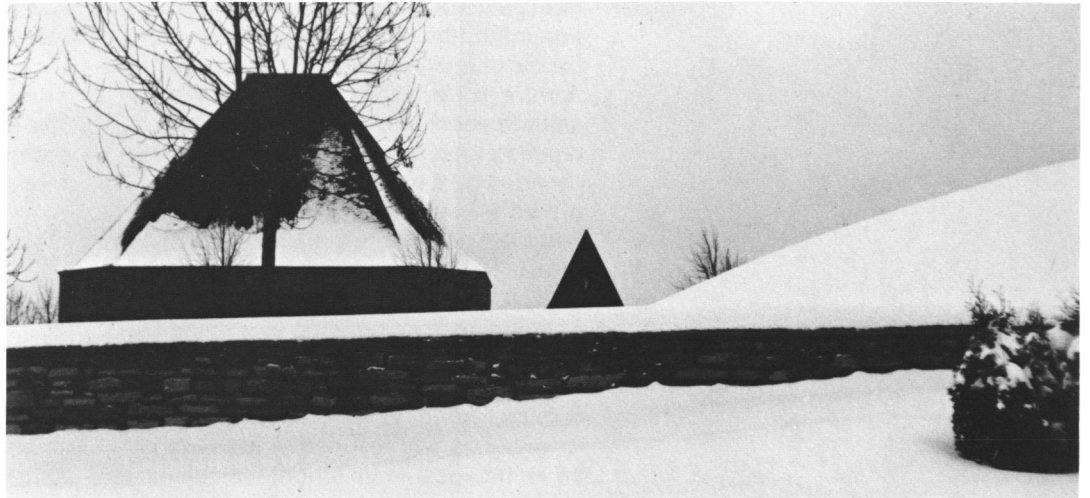
15
Petäjäveden church, Finland,
eighteenth century.

5

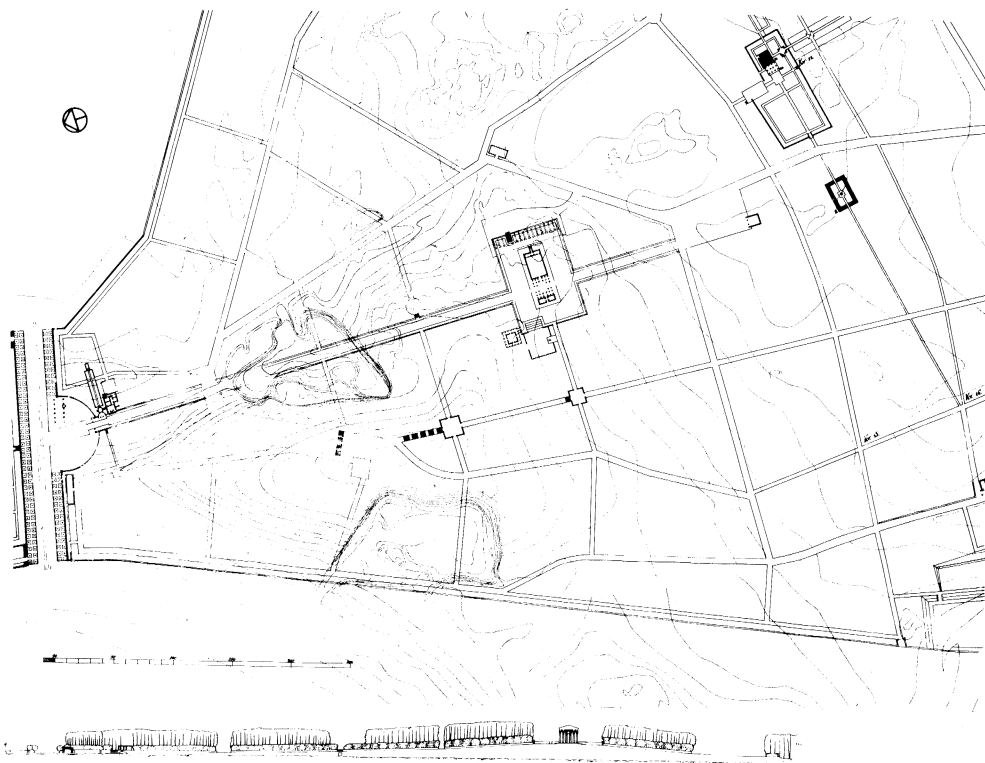
The building seems to indicate Lewerentz's hand as it has close affinities to the Resurrection Chapel then under construction at the cemetery. But if we compare Lewerentz's entry scheme to Asplund's Oxelösund Cemetery layout, we see the latter working along very similar lines at this time.

6

But the creation of a separate hillock out of the ridge had its origin in the 1922–23 proposal when the architects, citing reasons of circulation, were able to cut a service road through the ridge. It was, however, apparently not until the work on the road was in progress that the architects realized its potential as an open landscape. Until the plan of 1932, the hill was to have been forested with graves placed among the trees.



17
E. G. Asplund, Skovde
Crematorium, 1937-40,
side view.



18
Woodland Cemetery, front
portion, plan and section, 1922.

7

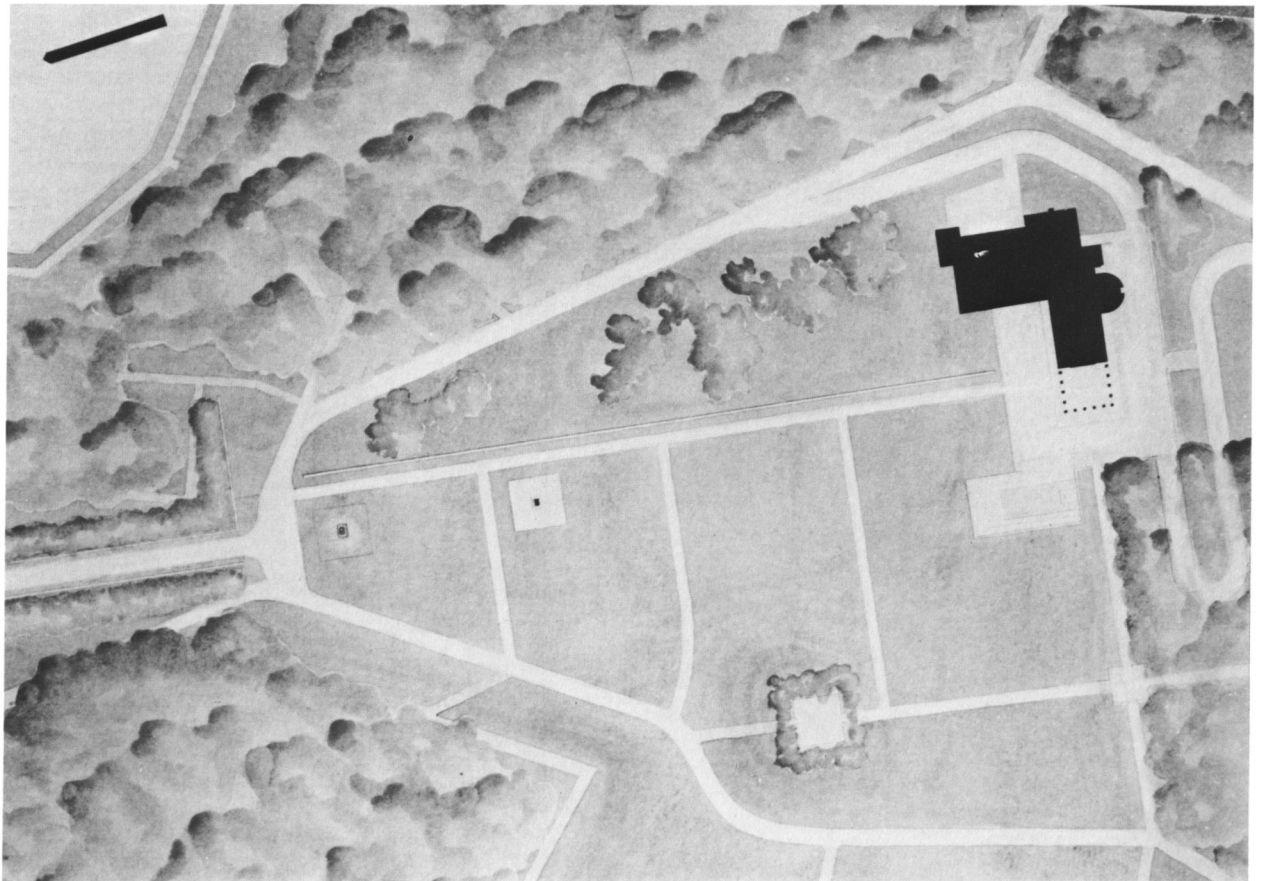
Not found in the gouache, but in the 1932 site plan. This wall had in fact been two walls in the 1922–23 scheme, but one wall was eliminated to open up the view of the landscape facing the chapel.

The scheme of 1932 represents a move from the classicism of the 1920s to a more naturalistic asymmetrical layout with a modernist influence. But, though it may be seen as a move back to a more picturesque direction, the overly romantic scheme of the competition was gone, modified by the severe and elementary classical sensibility of the 1920s and the minimalist asymmetry of modernism. Yet the essence of the original scheme remained—a powerful emotional resonance evoked by the landscape which now once again became the dominant focus of the scheme.

A gouache by Asplund dating from 1932, an aerial axonometric of the landscape around the still sketchily designed main chapel, shows the key elements already in

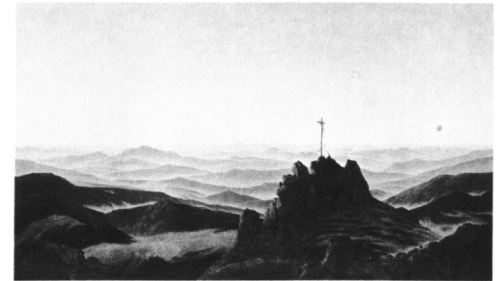
place: the open landscape, the meditation grove and the earth mound, the planted birch forest at the top of the ridge and even the road to the chapel. The main chapel shows two elements which would carry through to the final scheme, the open loggia in front of the chapel and the low wall following the footpath leading up the hill to the chapel.⁷

In 1935, Asplund began the final designs for the building which was now to be a crematorium. The program called for one large and two small chapels. Like the Woodland Chapel, the crematorium subordinates itself to and is an integral part of the landscape. But unlike the intimate forested site of the chapel, the landscape setting of the crematorium is open and has a monumental sweep. Visually tied to

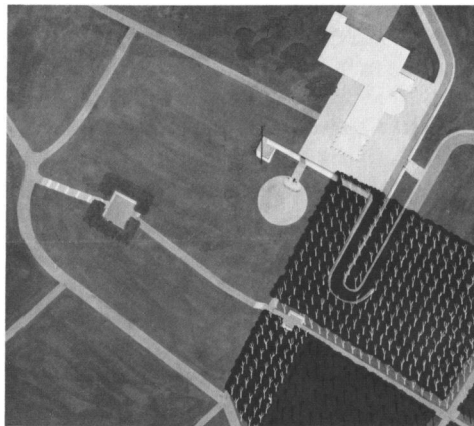


19
Woodland Cemetery,
watercolor, front portion,
1932 plan.

the low wall that borders the footpath up the slope, the building follows the edge of, and blends in with, the forest on the eastern edge of the site, which it defines. Seen from the entry to the cemetery, the strong rising directionality of the low wall is terminated by the static form of the great loggia at the crest. The large stone cross silhouetted against the sky acts as a counterpoint to the linearity of the wall and becomes one of the focal points in the composition.



23
Caspar David Friedrich,
"Morning in the
Rosengebirge", 1810-11.



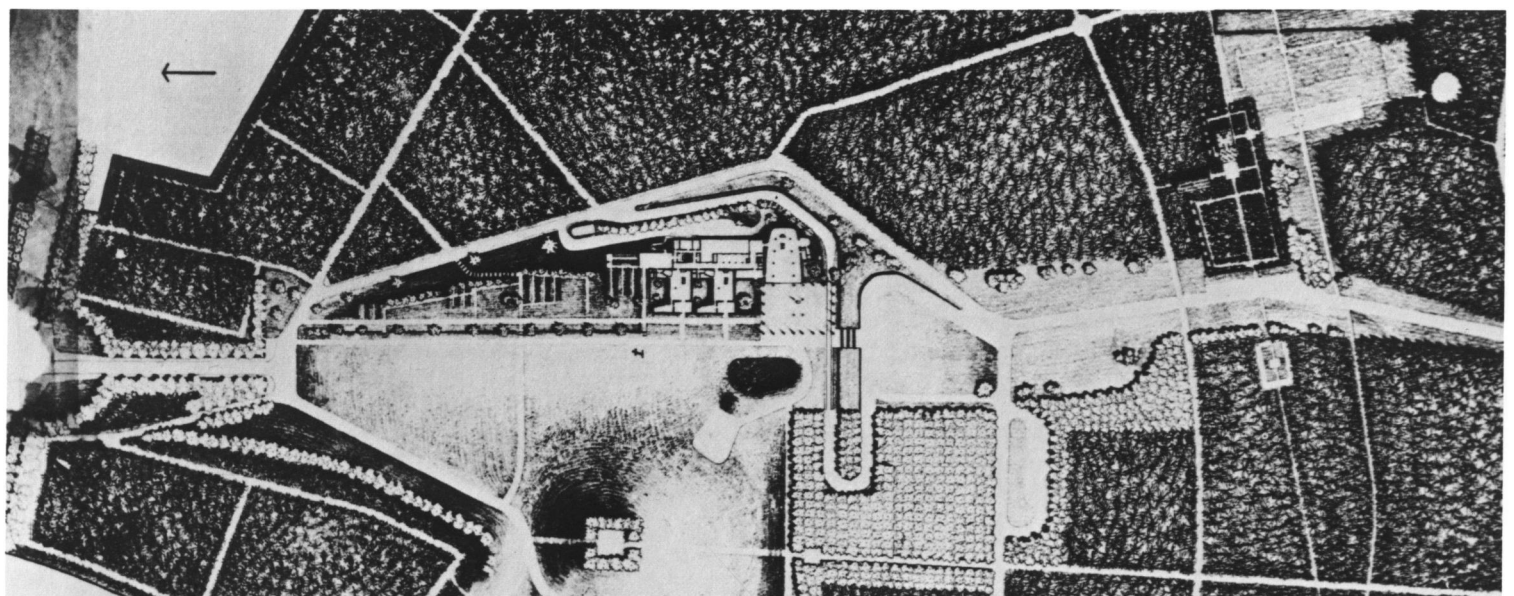
20
Woodland Cemetery, gouache,
chapel and landscape, 1932.

Balancing the crematorium on the eastern edge of the open site is the great earth mound on the southwestern edge. The square grove of trees at its top forms a second focal point in the landscape. These focal points, the loggia, the cross, and the meditation grove, all silhouetted against the sky, exist in a sparse minimalist surrounding of sky and earth. The lawn sloping up from the foreground towards the ridge carries the eye to an empty sky. The top of the fir and birch forest beyond is barely visible. As in the blank, tableau-like front façade of the Villa Snellman, similarly bifocal, the open expanse of grass and the sky becomes the cosmic tableau upon which Asplund composes.

position has excluded all redundant elements. As in Friedrich's "Morning in the Rosengebirge", we stand before a landscape of a profound religious intensity. Asplund and Lewerentz, working for over twenty-five years, had perfected their composition. The lingering connection to the landscape painters of the 1890s is also clear as are additional connections to Friedrich.

While Friedrichian in its intensity when experienced from the oblique approach of the entrance, the building complex when seen in the landscape from the meditation grove, has a classic Poussinesque repose with its layered planes. Thus, from the initial powerful sense of the sublime upon entering, the feeling changes to arcadian repose and tranquility as one moves about the landscape.

For, upon entering the Woodland Cemetery, we are in fact confronted with a cosmic landscape of Friedrichian intensity and power. The sparse elementary com-



21
The Woodland Cemetery, final
site plan of the front portion
of the cemetery with
crematorium, undated.



22
Woodland Crematorium,
1935-40, crematorium and
landscape from cemetery
entrance.



24 Karl Nordström, "Storm Clouds", 1893.



26 Caspar David Friedrich, "Hill and Ploughed Field near Dresden", 1824.



25 Woodland Crematorium, great cross with knoll and meditation grove in background.

29 Woodland Crematorium, view from the loggia towards the meditation grove on the knoll.



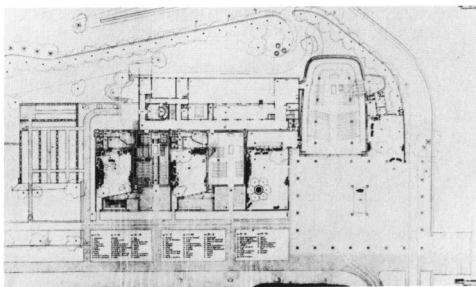
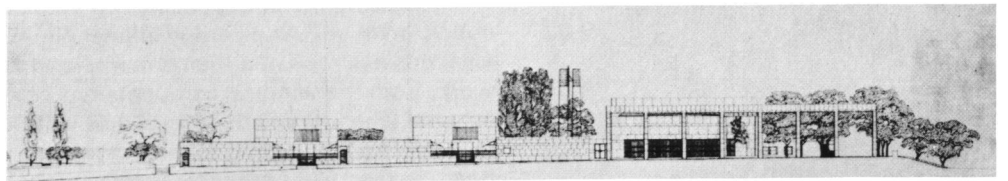
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 It may be noted that the great Bronze Age burial mounds in Denmark have, especially when they occur in pairs, always been referred to by the local population as the "maiden mounds."

As at the Woodland Chapel, architecture and nature borrow motifs from and mimic each other, as well as representing basic dualities that take on symbolic overtones. While the great earth mound in its archaic and amorphous shape contrasts with the planar geometry of the architecture, the strict square placement of the trees of the meditation grove on top of it echoes the shape of the loggia and the trunks of the trees its pillars. In contrast to the frontal geometry of the building, the main chapel takes on a natural "organic" form adding another natural dimension to the building which already represents a complex interlocking of architecture and nature via the extensive set of courtyards. By jumping scale, we may see the three chapels of the building, fronting on the landscape as they do, as side chapels to the main "cathedral space" of the open landscape itself. And in a reversal of an ancient metaphor developed in a number of other

Asplund projects, the sky becomes the ceiling.

The forms of both natural and architectural elements take on symbolic meaning. The great earth mound recalls the archetypal Nordic burial mound, but also evokes a great earthen breast;⁸ the double symbolism appropriately echoing the Cremation Movement's coupling of death and rebirth. The main chapel, its organic shape suggesting both burial cave and womb, echoes the same symbolism. While the meditation grove and the loggia echo each other, they also provide a two-way directional force between earth and sky, symbolically a kind of communication system. The trees of the grove reach up towards the sky while the loggia with its inverted roof and impluvium, receiving the life-giving water from above, inflects towards the ground.

28
 Woodland Crematorium,
 drawing of front facade.



30
 Woodland Crematorium,
 ground floor plan and side
 elevation.

27
 Woodland Crematorium, the
 great loggia and two small
 chapels.



27



31
Woodland Cemetery, steps to the meditation grove by Sigurd Lewerentz.

32
Stabelhøj (Bronze Age burial mounds) at Agri on the island of Mols, Denmark.

9
Unfortunately, when built, the wall went straight into the hill rather than climbing up it as originally designed thus destroying an essential element of the composition.

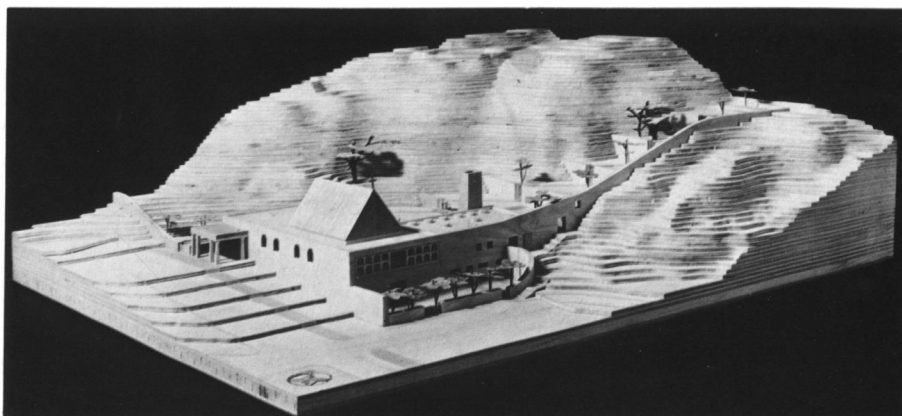
Formally the crematorium represents a head-tail organization with the static loggia acting as head, and the frontal walls of the small chapels together with the wall following the path constituting the subordinate tail. As a compositional device, this is a repeated theme in Asplund's work, from the winning competition scheme where the Path of the Cross was the winding tail leading to the chapel, the head, to the 1938 project for the Kviberg Crematorium, where the wall descends down the hill to fuse with the chapel.⁹ It is also the underlying concept in the articulation and siting of Asplund's summer house, and in the 1926 scheme for Odenhallen, where the Public Library and Sales Hall form a clear head-tail organization. But, in addition to its semi-

anthropomorphic quality, the Woodland Crematorium most clearly indicates another important feature of this organizational device. For here the combination of tail and head, wall and loggia, may also be seen as the combination of the vernacular (the wall) and the classical (the loggia). Thus we may see Asplund as successfully combining two separate traditions, the classical and the vernacular, of siting buildings in the landscape, a phenomenon that parallels their integration in his architecture. The buildings stand as a separate static element in the landscape in the manner of the classical tradition while at the same time are moored to and integrated with the landscape via the wall, in the manner of the vernacular tradition.

34
Stennäs, Gunnar Asplund's summer cottage, Lisön, Sorunda, exterior.



33
E. G. Asplund, Kviberg Crematorium, Gothenburg, 1936-40, project model.

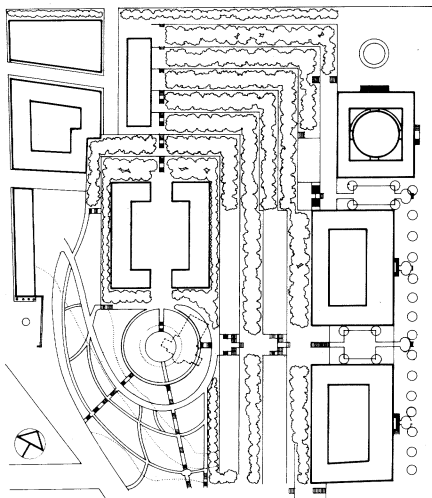


The Stockholm Public Library

The Stockholm Public Library posed a challenging siting problem for Asplund. Set in the middle of central Stockholm, the library not only had to adjust itself to the surrounding multistory apartment buildings along Sveavagen and Odengatan, but had to deal with a large untamed hill adjacent to it in the center of the block. In conjunction with the library design, Asplund was asked to work out a master plan for the block. The first plan of 1922 was the most elaborate and exploited the block rather heavily. Asplund turned the slope of the hill into an extensive set of terraces to the north and east, with the terracing extending all the way to Odengatan. A year later Asplund produced a revised scheme for the block. A number of important changes occurred. Not only were a number of unspecified buildings left out, creating a much more park-like setting, but the focus of the

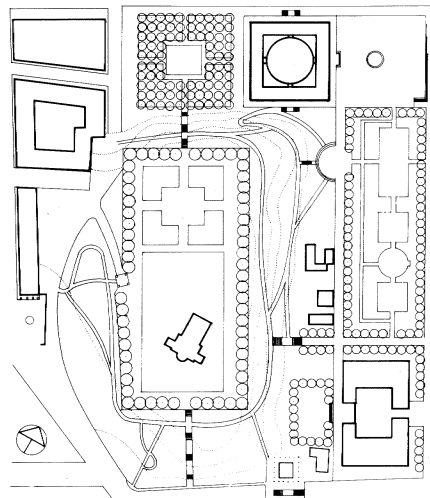
block had changed from Odengatan to Sveavagen, which, because it connected to the center of the city, was the more important street. Asplund also abandoned the effort to order the slope of the hill through terracing and instead created a kind of walled acropolis at the top of the hill, leaving the rest in its natural state as a complement to the otherwise formal park layout.

Two library related projects of 1926 focused Asplund's mind on the final articulation of the site, one of which unfortunately did not get built as planned. Whereas the first two schemes were still diagrammatic and contained redundant elements, the 1926 schemes pared things down to essentials and brought the elements together into a unified whole. The two projects were the limited competition for the park adjacent to the library along Sveavagen, and the plan for a market hall, Odenhallen, along Odengatan.



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35
E. G. Asplund, Stockholm
Public Library, 1922 site plan.

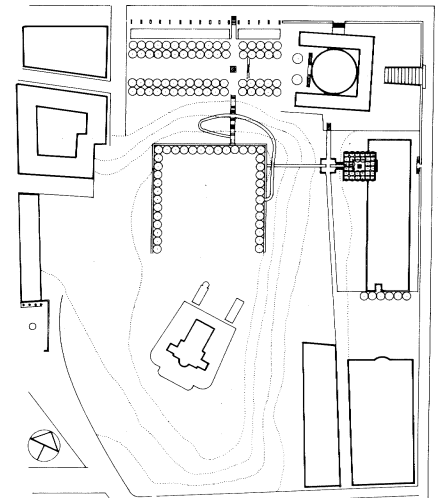


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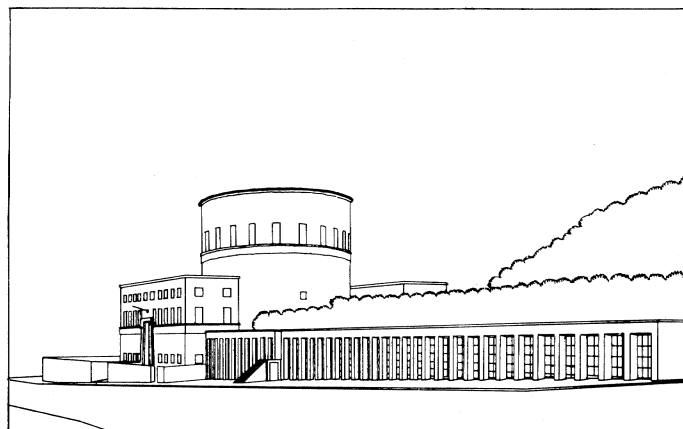
36
Stockholm Public Library, 1923
site plan.

37
Stockholm Public Library, 1926
composite plan showing
competition entry for park and
proposal for Odenhallen.

39
Odenhallen, 1926, perspective
drawing.



37



39

The park along Sveavagen is a study in the richness of simple minimalist landscape design. The main element is a large, shallow rectilinear pond along Sveavagen on axis with the raised forecourt of the library. When viewed diagonally across the pond, the stark forms of the library are mirrored in the pond. Intersecting one side of the pond and jutting out into it there was originally to be a smaller square, defined by walls and evenly planted with a square grove of trees whose overhanging branches gave it a distinctly soft appearance. The contrast of the soft grove of trees with the stark hard forms of the library behind it as seen in a watercolor by Asplund is beautiful and another indication of the basic dualities that constantly underlie Asplund's work. The amorphous shape of the hill contrasted to the sharp abstract geometry of the library and the soft sunken space of the pool contrasted to the hard upward thrusting mass of the library represent other such basic dualities. While they are in a sense well known historical composition devices, Asplund has succeeded in imparting to them a new intensity.

head-tail theme, with the library as the free-standing head, and the market hall as the tail anchoring the complex to its site.

Between the market hall and the steep slope of the hill, Asplund created a park. Two rows of trees on either side made the great cylinder of the library the focus of the composition. While it was essentially a straightforward park layout, the view towards the powerful and dominant library cylinder would have made of the park an extraordinary visual experience.

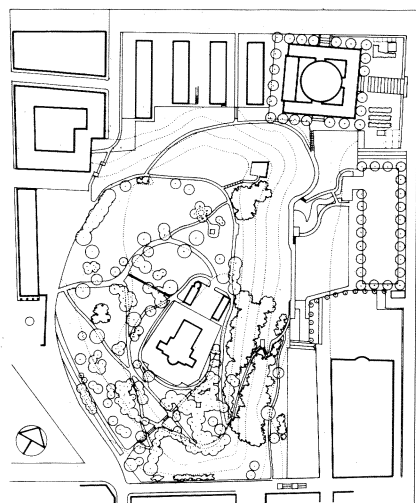
Tying these landscape compositions together, the nexus and dominant element of the scheme was the library itself, at the corner of the two streets. Its base conformed to the rectilinear order of the street grid¹⁰ defining the edge of the sidewalk as well as reinforcing the everyday street activity by providing shops along the Sveavagen side. Only at the point where it confronts the corner of the steep hill does the base set back and make an inflection. This inflection becomes the reference for the inflection of the library itself, which is given a slight twist off the rectilinear to further emphasize its importance. It is thus related to the observatory on the hill by being inflected off the grid and by the placement of the library cylinder on axis with the observatory. One of the side walls of the Capitoline-like ramp cutting through the base to the main entrance of the library is also inflected at the same angle as the building, thus acting as a mediating element between rectilinear order and the inflected library, but also creating a forced perspective as one approaches the building up the ramp.

Thus through a complex series of devices, axes, vistas, reflections, inflections, contrasts of opposites, the elements of the site are brought together into a unified whole. Asplund also tied his building complex into the surrounding urban fabric through two historic devices. The height of the main square block of the library aligns approximately with the cornice height of the surrounding apartment buildings, thus giving them all a common reference plane. And while the surrounding block of apartment buildings create a dense urban *poché*, the library exists as its opposite, a free-standing object in a park-like setting carved out of the *poché*, thus both separated from and unified with its surroundings.¹¹

At the top of the hill, a stream emerges out of a vaulted opening and flows down a chute, under the walk leading to the library, breaking into a cascade with steps on either side. It flows into the center of the little grove where it forms a square pool before flowing over a last cascade and into the large pond. This rigorous but rich landscape layout, evoking both the primal spring and the sacred grove, remained the basis for the built project, but both the stream and the square grove were unfortunately modified into a more informal and less intense direction.

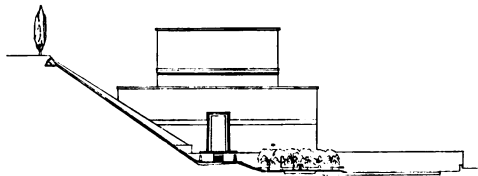
The scheme for Odenhallen dealt with the area behind the library along Odengatan. Asplund designed a low narrow pillared market hall set back from the street to allow temporary open-air stands on the sidewalk, in front of it. The hall was oriented only to the street, being partly built into the earth because of the slope of the land. The building thus acted also as a wall between the street and the park behind, broken only at one point by a stair set at a perpendicular angle to the building that ascends to the park and via a stepped path to the top of the hill beyond. In its relation to the library, the market hall is subordinate, essentially continuing the role of the wall played by the library base. Here, as already mentioned, we again have an inventive variation on the

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In the actual building, the front of the base facing Sveavagen was inflected, making it parallel to the front of the library and providing a natural entrance into the adjacent park.



40
Stockholm Public Library, final site plan.

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In the actual building, some key elements were modified or left out. The modification of the stream has already been mentioned. And, instead of the concentrated grove of trees that provided a soft contrast to the hard geometry of the built forms, the final project surrounded the pond and building with trees, diluting the power of the initial conception.

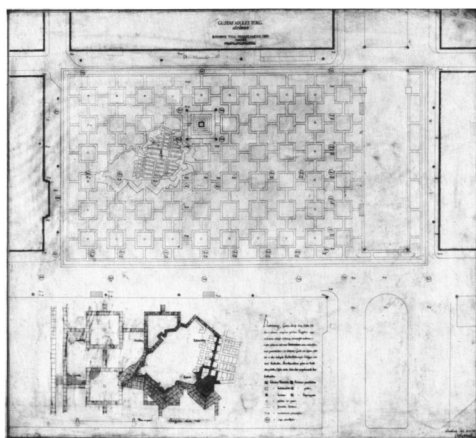


38
Stockholm Public Library, 1926
site section.

41
Stockholm Public Library and
Park, view



41



42
E. G. Asplund, Gustav Adolf
Square, Gothenburg, 1924,
proposal for paving, plan.

Landscape fragments

Finally, I would like briefly to discuss a few of Asplund's landscape details, elements within larger contexts, to illustrate how in a sense he recharged traditional landscape elements with new vitality and meaning. The proposal for paving Gustaf Adolf's square in Gothenburg is a case in point. Borrowing an idea from the Romans who inscribed a map of Rome in the Forum Romanum, Asplund superimposed the irregular outline map of fortified old Gothenburg at an angle on an overall rectilinear paving pattern of squares connected at midpoints, creating a superb piece of abstract graphics. However, not only is the reference to the Forum Romanum made, but the development of the European city in general, and Gothenburg in particular is symbolized where the fortified medieval town outgrew its walls and expanded out into the landscape in a regular grid pattern.

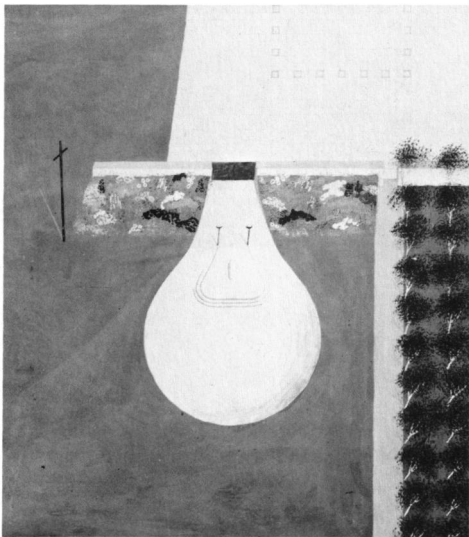
In his 1932 design for an outdoor ceremonial plaza adjacent to the Woodland crematorium, later to be built in a different form, Asplund has taken the traditional curving garden steps that well out through a terrace wall and turned it into a large drop shaped stone paved area that appears to have run, liquid like, out over the grassy landscape. A smaller tongue, framed by two torches, continues on a level course and becomes the platform upon which the casket is set.

The outdoor clock at the crematorium is a most traditional, and in this case utilitarian, outdoor element. But by its placement and by the inflection he has given it, Asplund has charged it with meaning. Not only does the clock evoke the passing of time and thus in this context, mortality, but the way it is bent over evokes metaphors of both old age and the withering of a flower.

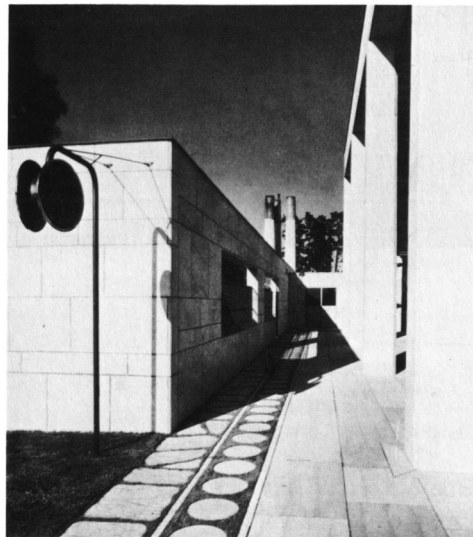
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 Alvar Aalto, "E. G. Asplund in Memoriam (1940)," *Sketches* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1978), p. 66.

In his design for an outdoor drinking fountain for the Carl Johann school in Gothenburg done in the early 1920s, Asplund uses the traditional landscape element, the urn. But rather than the ornate urns set on pedestals so beloved by the nineteenth century, Asplund uses a simple but very sensual "vernacular" amphora shape and sets it directly on the ground surrounded by four stone slabs forming a circle around it. The bulging sensual form with its jet of water appears almost to have grown out of the ground. While the metaphor of drinking in classical culture is obvious, more importantly the sensuality of the act of drinking is made manifest. And the curving form of the amphora provides a contrast to the rigorous rectilinearity of the adjacent building.

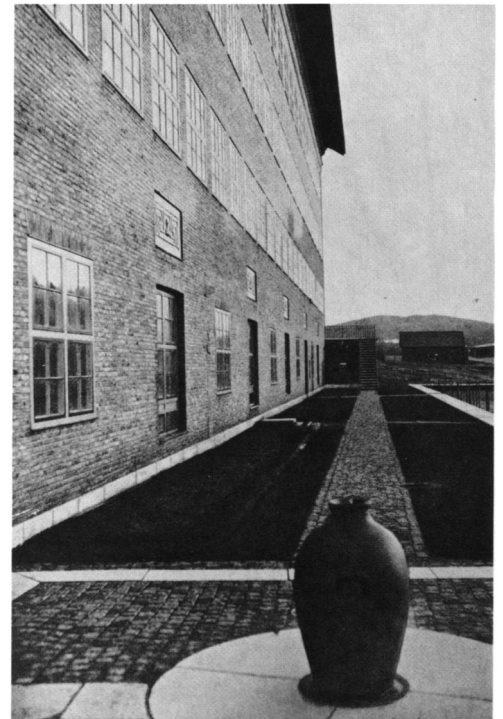
In 1940, Aalto wrote of Asplund in reference to his Skandia Cinema, "I had the impression that this was an architecture where ordinary systems hadn't served as the parameters. Here the point of departure was man, with all the innumerable nuances of his emotional life and nature. This contact with nature, man included, was clearly discernible in all of Asplund's projects. Much can be written about Asplund's art and its different phases, but if one studies them one will always find this underlying direct contact with nature."¹²



43
 Woodland Cemetery, proposed outdoor ceremonial plaza, 1932 gouache.



44
 Woodland Crematorium, Clock.



45
 E. G. Asplund, Drinking Fountain, Carl Johann School, Gothenburg.