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Author(s): Marc Treib

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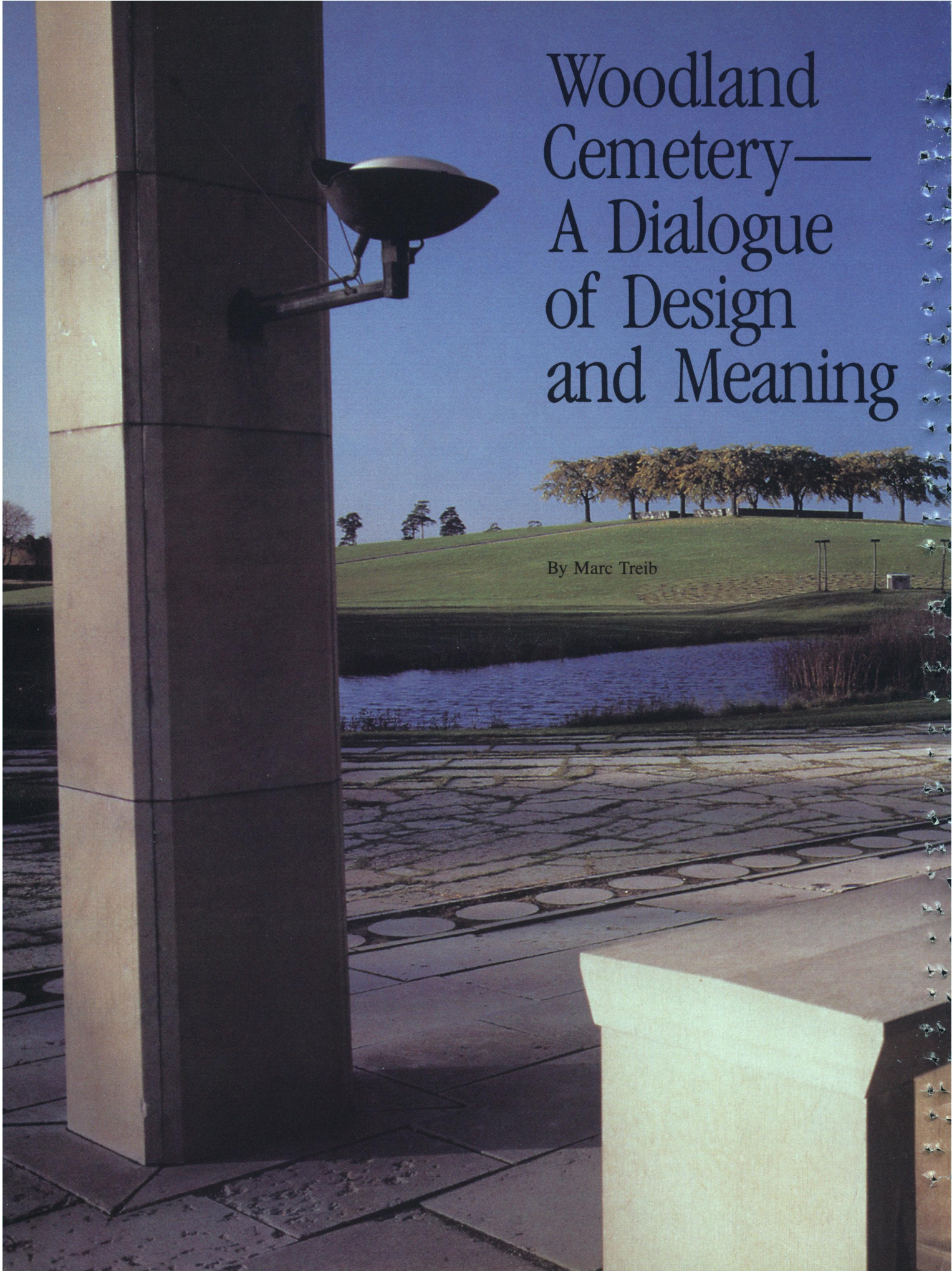
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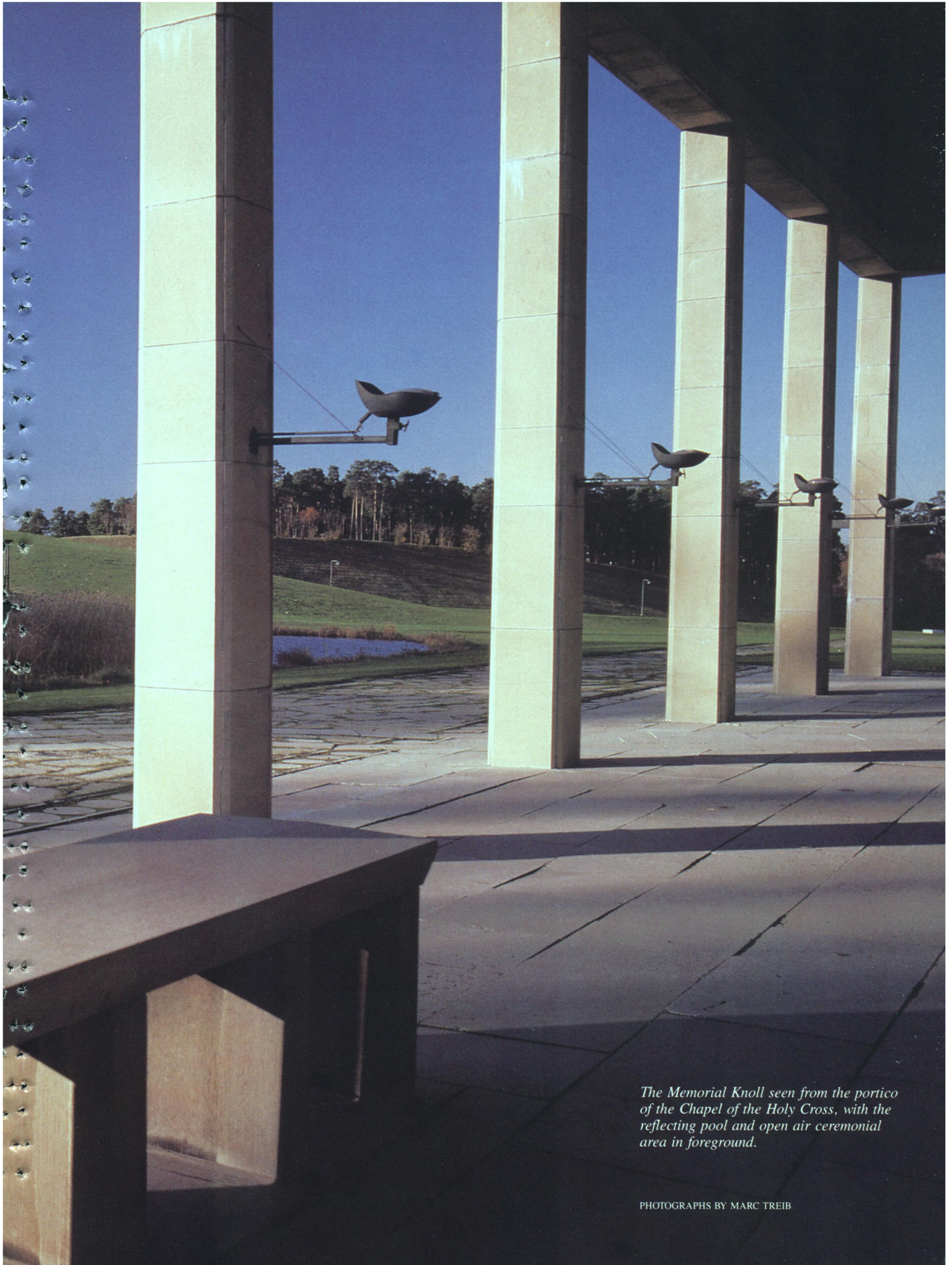
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Woodland Cemetery— A Dialogue of Design and Meaning

By Marc Treib



The Memorial Knoll seen from the portico of the Chapel of the Holy Cross, with the reflecting pool and open air ceremonial area in foreground.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC TREIB



By the turn of the last century, many European cities looked outside their traditional urban boundaries for congregational burial ground. Historically, Swedish funerary needs had been served by the *kyrkogård*, the area immediately surrounding the church. But Stockholm, like other cities, had outgrown its burial ground capacity, and it soon became common practice to develop extensive suburban tracts to accommodate present and future needs.

The resurgence of cremation at this time also represented a concern for urban health and the ritual of interment. The Baltic Exposition, held in Malmö in 1914, reinforced the practice of cremation in modern Swedish consciousness. Among the Exposition's exhibits on the subject of cremation was an unrealized 1914 project by Sigurd Lewerentz for a cemetery and crematorium at Hälsingborg in southwestern Sweden. Gunnar Asplund visited the exhibition and was intrigued by Lewerentz's developed site planning and fecund architecture. Thus the 1915 competition for the design of Woodland Cemetery saw Asplund and Lewerentz collaborate on the winning proposal.

The new Woodland Cemetery lay on the periphery of Stockholm adjacent to a part of the cemetery developed during the previous century. Most of the proposed site was forested, although portions had been cleared during its years of use as a gravel quarry. In response to the site conditions, and in accord with their mythic ideas, Asplund and Lewerentz created a naturalistic landscape structured by suggestions of axial planning, sculptured landscape features, and classical architecture. The program called for a sizable number of grave and urn plots, at least two chapels, the necessary roads, and the most modern cremation and service facilities.

Asplund and Lewerentz called their entry "Tallum," probably coined by combining *tal*, or pine, with a Latin suffix to make the word sound classical. More directly illustrative of the design intention was a sketch entitled "Korsets väg" (The Way of the Cross) which indicates the conscious attempt to integrate religious belief with the design of the complex. This narration of the Resurrection was central to the cemetery's planning and architecture.

In addition to master-planning the complex, Asplund and

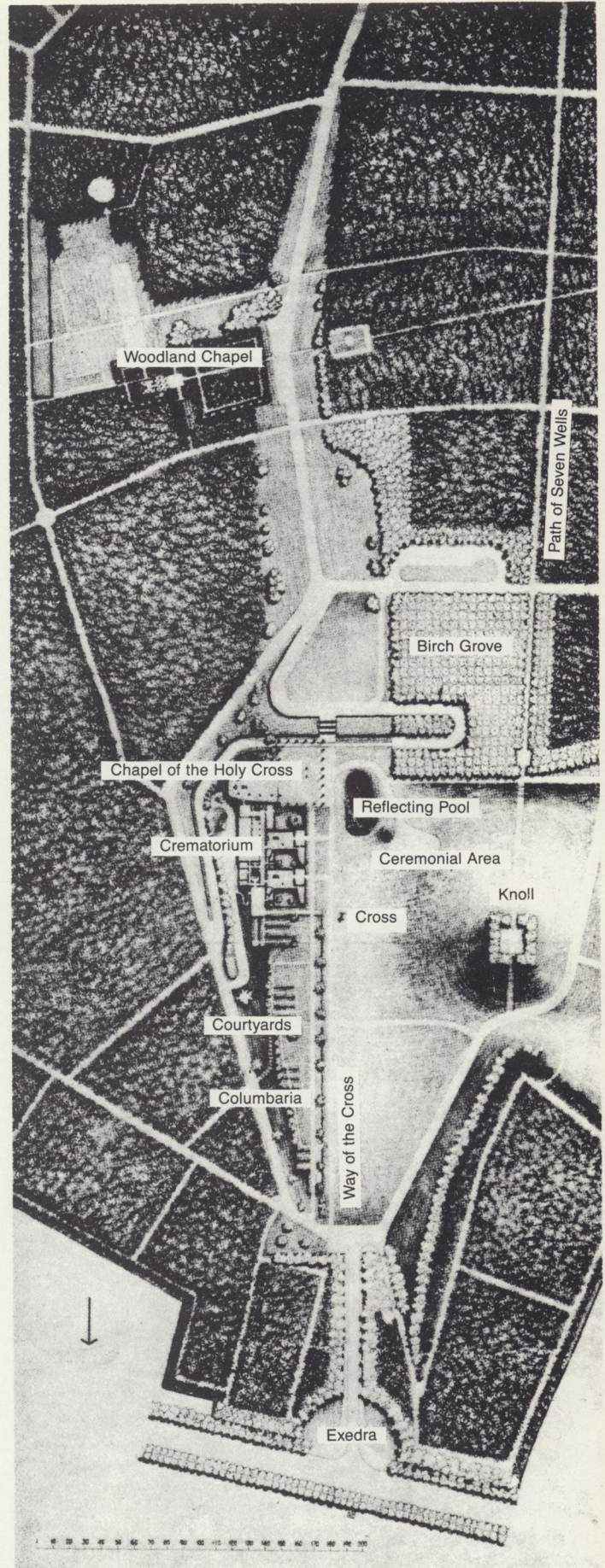


The 1935–40 site plan (right) shows the cemetery's northern area. Moving into the landscape from the semicircular exedra, the stone walls focus movement and vision directly ahead (left). Alongside the columbaria, opposite the Meditation Knoll, is the Way of the Cross (inset).

Lewerentz were commissioned to design two chapels, originally intended as intermediate structures. Asplund's *Skogskappelet*, the Woodland Chapel, is a precise essay in theme and form. The chapel's precinct is distinguished from the surrounding forest by a wall barely high enough to prevent seeing into the courtyard. Its height provokes a sense of mystery and curiosity, but does not isolate the building from nature; the sanctified zone of the chapel actually intensifies the presence of the forest. In early studies for the chapel, Asplund explored the possibility of increasing the density of planting within the courtyard, to strengthen the effect of release within the chapel itself.

We enter through a gateway crowned with an extremely shallow pediment, on axis with the steep slope of the Woodland Chapel's wood-shingled roof. Asplund's use of the traditional roof form of the 17th-century Swedish church lends familiarity to first impression. Crossing the entry space, which retains the forest floor as its surface, the crypt is to the left, dug into the earth and grass-covered, with walls of natural stone.

While the chapel's image is traditional, its form has been honed



Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz

Sigurd Lewerentz and Gunnar Asplund were both born in 1885, had classical architectural educations, studied abroad and, upon returning, rejected the neoclassicism of Sweden's Royal Academy of Arts in favor of a National Romanticism. Although this movement endorsed the use of indigenous Scandinavian materials and forms over imported classical styles, Lewerentz and Asplund successfully fused emotion with classical details, as evidenced in their formal yet romantic plan for the 1914 Woodland Cemetery competition.

Lewerentz and Asplund didn't collaborate again until the controversial 1930 Stockholm exhibition, in which Asplund introduced the Modern to the Swedish public. Lewerentz, besides designing an outstanding villa, developed the sans-serif graphic style for banners, displays and programs, as well as numerous vehicles, pavilions and touring boats. Several years later, Lewerentz was dismissed from their collaboration on another chapel at Woodland Cemetery. Subsequently, Asplund died in 1940. Lewerentz's later designs were extremely "primitive," reverting to a minimalism unapproached by contemporaries until after his death in 1975.

WORKS

Lewerentz: 1916–58, Eastern Cemetery, Malmö; 1920–25, Burial Chapel, Valdemarsvik; 1926, Woodland Cemetery Chapel of the Resurrection, Stockholm; 1930, Stockholm Exhibition; 1936, Villa Edstrand, Falsterbo; 1938–45, Eastern Cemetery Chapel, Malmö; 1956–60, Saint Marks Skarpnäck, Stockholm.

Asplund: 1915, Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm; 1917–21, Lister County Courthouse, Sölvesborg; 1918–20, Woodland Chapel, Stockholm; 1920–28, Public Library, Stockholm; 1922–24, Woodland Cemetery Offices, Stockholm; 1934–37, Law Courts Annex, Göteborg; 1935–40, Woodland Crematorium and Chapels, Stockholm.

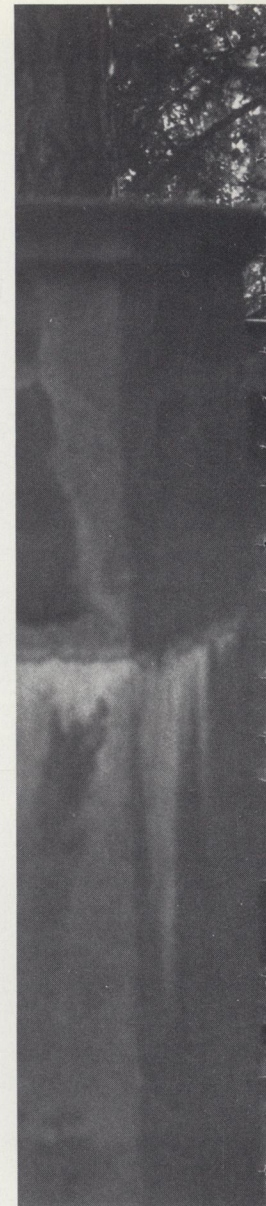
to platonic perfection. The relationship of the columned porch to the interior chapel is that of two almost equal, though overlapping, squares. Set within the square plan of the nave is a circular colonnade supporting a hemispherical dome of wood, painted white. The revelation of the interior space is striking.

Few windows illuminate the traditional Swedish church, making it relatively dark inside. But in the Woodland Chapel there are no visible windows, and the flood of light descends from the skylight as if a gift from above.

The contrast between the natural order of the woods and the geometric purity of the chapel interior is extreme, as if the movement from darkness to light, from earth to heaven, recreates a sense of resurrection. Throughout the cemetery, this narration structures the dialogue between architecture and landscape. The plan of the complex shows that its creators quite consciously employed sequences of closure and release.

We enter the cemetery from the north, having approached the gate along a tunnel of pleached and formally clipped trees. Drawn toward the light at the end of this tunnel, we turn into the semi-

The view from the Woodland Chapel through the forest (right) shows the eloquent alliance of architectonic and natural elements. Gravesites, roads and pathways are treated with dignity and sensitivity to strengthen the natural order. The Woodland Chapel, 1918–20, (bottom right) plays on the associations with 18th-century wooden churches, the purity of the elevation's equilateral triangle and the burial pyramid. Passing within the precinct of the Chapel, one encounters the Crypt (bottom left), covered with sod to symbolize the body's interment in earth.



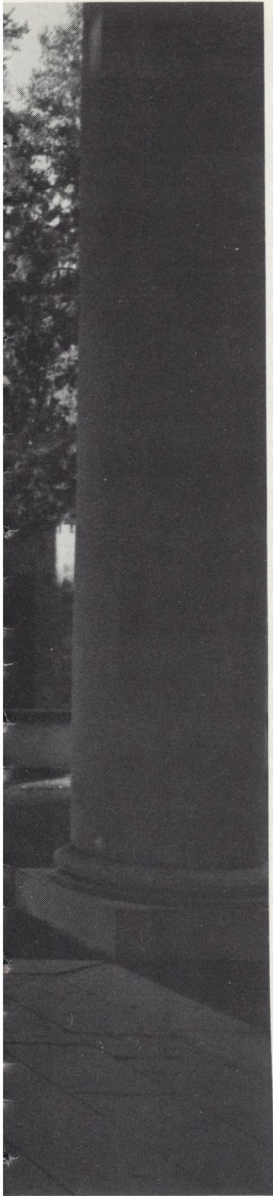
circular exedra that marks the entrance to the grounds. Here attention is focused directly ahead by the high stone walls surrounding the cemetery. Just inside the gateway, built into the wall, is a classical portico covering a fountain—a fountain which neither gushes nor drips, but flows quietly and steadily with the suggestion of eternity.

Almost automatically our pace quickens. As we approach the end of the stone walls, we are offered a most powerful view: the green meadow ahead, blue skies above, the string of chapels to the left, and the meditation knoll to the right. Environmental cues move us to the left, along a broad path leading to the chapels built by Asplund, 1935–40.

Here, three instances of the subtle adjustment of architecture and landscape present themselves. First, the broad walk, though a definite stripe across the land, is a stripe comprised of numerous pieces of stone left more or less in their natural form. Spaced some four inches apart, the interval allows grass to grow between the stones, resulting in a path that is both in the lawn and yet distinct from it. (This treatment is used with equal effect in the







The Path of the Seven Wells (left) stretches from the portico of Lewerentz's Resurrection Chapel, 1925, southward towards the Meditation Knoll. The symmetrically planted grove of birch trees (bottom left), so familiar in the Swedish landscape, screens a service parking lot. The band of elms along the columbaria is carefully clipped into a growing wall (bottom right); limits of space and relationships between plantings and physical structures change with the seasons. The columbaria courts are visible on the other side of the wall.

paving of the ceremonial place.) Instead of the path running along the wall, the design separates path from wall with an earthen bank, softening the transition.

Second, the path is not a strictly classical axis: it is not terminated by the structures at its end but passes them by. We move, in fact, in a spatial channel between the chapels and the great stone cross; as in the entry sequence, our attention is not earth-bound by structures but is directed skyward.

Third, the meditation knoll facing the chapels is planned in the purity of the square, but its walls are constructed of field stone to soften the impact of the geometry. Actually planters, these low walls are further muted in summer by flowers that tumble over their edges. Surrounding the walls is a square of trees, cut into a more architectural form. Thus the continual play between architectural and natural orders is a true dialogue, in which each respects, defines, and at times comments upon the other.

A multitude of specific details enriches the reading and experience of this funerary landscape. Most paths are unpaved and left as pure sand, defined by sloping banks of grass which bolster

Asplund and Lewerentz's design is a narrative of the Resurrection—meaningful sequences of enclosures and openings allied with a consistent use of devices and oppositions that direct vision skyward.

them rather than by stone or concrete edges. The portico of Lewerentz's Resurrection Chapel (1923–26) terminates the "Path of the Seven Springs," although the axis is established more in plan than in space. Looking out from the chapel portico, the meditation knoll is barely visible through the forest, for each segment of the path is revealed only in time. At one end, resurrection lies within the chapel; at the other, it is found in the skies.

From the knoll the chapel structures read as a gradual stiffening of the forest edge, with a band of elms carefully clipped into the form of a growing wall. The limits of the space and the various relationships between tree and structure, or between tree and tree, change with the seasons. In autumn, the elms turn bright yellow and create a strong line between the pine forest and the stone-clad chapels. The pattern of courtyards fronting each of the later chapels offers more intimate spaces within the architectural zone—linked to, yet distinct from, the great sweep of the meadow.

The use of dialogue and adjustment is well represented by a grove that screens the parking area southwest of the Chapel of the Holy Cross. Asplund and Lewerentz planted a new grove of the birches so familiar to the Swedish landscape, but here incised with the mathematical regularity of the first orchard. The effect, especially when viewed through the pine forests, is that of a living colonnade, the natural prototype of the chapel portico beyond.

The narrative culminates once again in this portico which both shelters and shades. The loggia's compluvium (a square opening in the roof) casts light on the sculptural pylon of the resurrection below and effects a conceptual bond between earth and sky. Even the lamps are turned toward the ceiling—light falls only from above. The script is played out in its entirety.

During the years following the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition, Gunnar Asplund's work sought an equilibrium between the language of classicism and the new impulses of modernism. In contrast to the more hermetic forms of the '20s, this is an architecture which directly engaged its context and its time. Asplund's later work at the Woodland Cemetery represents this further design sophistication, in which meaning and formal pleasure derive from the dialogues between site and structure, between architecture and its narrative program. The architecture and landscape architecture of the Woodland Cemetery thus embrace a greater conceptual and experiential realm, and ultimately play theater to a far greater audience. ■