

EASTERN CEMETERY, MALMÖ

Modernist architect Sigurd Lewerentz worked on the Swedish city's cemetery for more than 50 years. Now Johan Celsing has meticulously restored the canopies to two of its chapels. By **Hugh Strange**



Project Canopies to the chapels of St Knut and St. Gertrud

Architects Sigurd Lewerentz, 1943; reconstruction by Johan Celsing Architects, 2015

Location Malmö, Sweden

The architectural and landscape works at the Eastern Cemetery on the north-eastern edge of Malmö are remarkable in that they covered virtually the entire career of Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz, spanning from the competition in 1916 until the completion of the flower kiosk in 1969. The competition was entered, and won, by Lewerentz alone, a year after his success at the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery in collaboration with Gunnar Asplund. Titled “Ridge”, the winning scheme accordingly ordered the landscape along an elevated plateau running east to west across the full length of the site. The design developed over

the years, and with it the idea of a series of buildings located along this spine.

As a separate commission, Lewerentz was appointed to design a crematorium for the cemetery in the 1920s. The first designs were within his earlier classical style, comprising a central open portico fronting a chapel, with conical buildings to either side. A very different version of this scheme, together with a small adjacent chapel, was designed for another site, set off from the main axis, and completed in the 1930s in a broadly functionalist style. Soon after, the architect commenced designs for a pair of chapels that also extended this earlier crematorium. These buildings and their substantial entrance canopies, completed in 1943, now form the built focus of the cemetery complex.

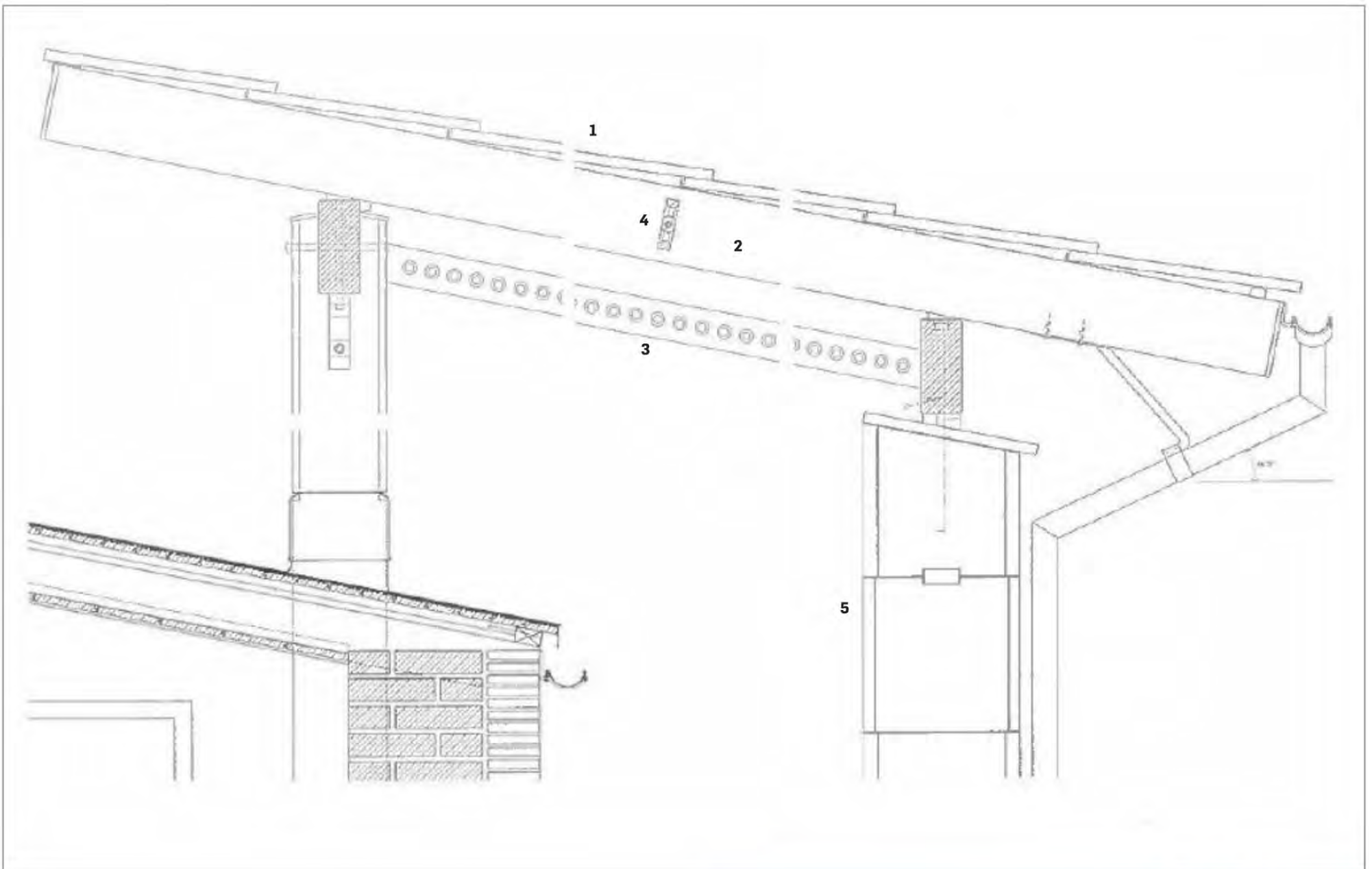
The early design drawings from the late 1930s, for the crematory chapels of St Knut and St Gertrud, display the precise functionalism the architect adhered to at that

Evident in the final built scheme is the beginning of the exploration that he was to undertake for the rest of his career towards a more personal language

time. However, evident in the final built scheme is the beginning of the exploration that he was to undertake for the rest of his career towards a more personal language, which became inseparable from an intense examination of construction techniques.

The twin chapels each seat 140 people, and are flanked by waiting rooms. Immediately behind them lies the smaller Chapel of Hope that was altered again in 1956-57, and further still the crematorium, with separate access to the rear. Next to the crematorium sits a small staff room. Completed in 1970, a year after the nearby flower kiosk, it is understood to be the last work of Lewerentz. Both of the larger chapel buildings are built in brick, although the material palette loosens and becomes more varied away from the front facades.

While the earlier design scheme showed a pair of simple horizontal canopies set on circular columns, the completed porticos are significantly



more complex. Each comprises two roof planes, tilted towards one another, with these in turn sitting on three rows of four columns. The front two rows of columns are formed in reinforced concrete and clad in Swedish Ekeberg marble. The last lines of columns are formed in timber and align with the front wall of the chapels. As they pass through the chapel roofs these wooden posts are sleeved, continuing through a full floor level, and clearly visibly within the interior spaces. Reminiscent of the surrounding landscaped groves of trees, the columns support a layered roof structure of timber beams. Steel tie-rods brace the roof structure and are protected by perforated oak cover pieces, which are also used as spacers and to form edges at either end. Angled timbers span between the low points of each roof, the gaps between the boards filtering light through to the space beneath.

The timber structure supports a roof cladding formed of 30mm »

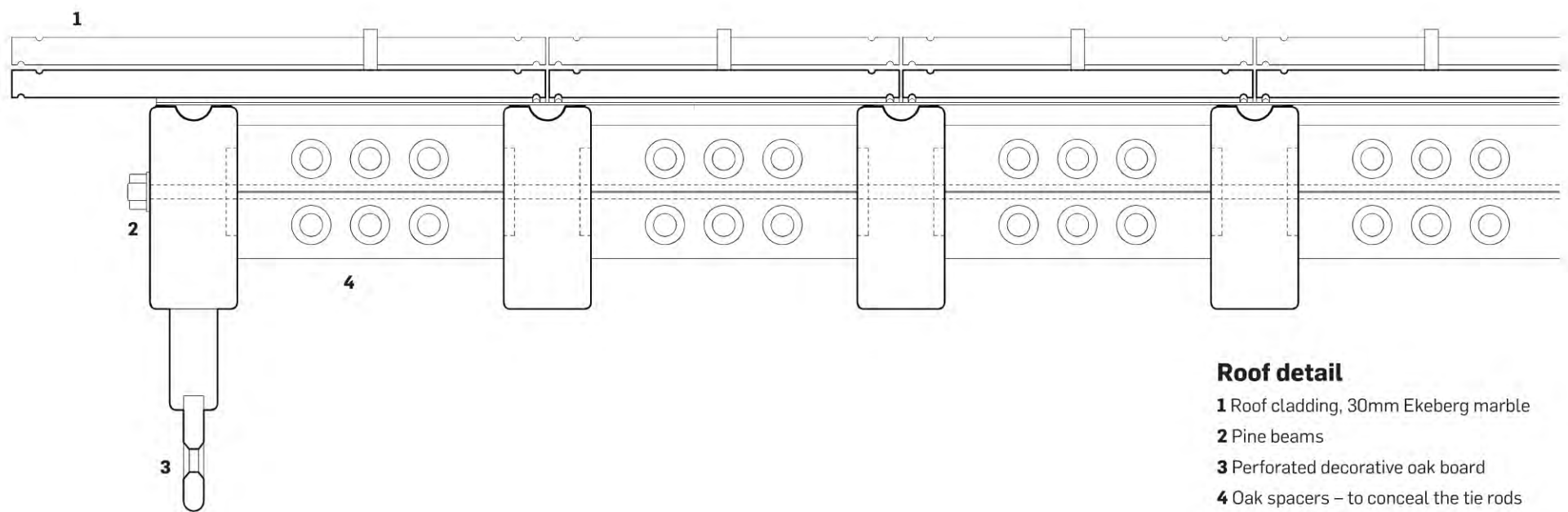
Canopy detail

- 1 Roof, 30mm Swedish marble from Ekeberg
- 2 Beams, fir with metal sheet – gutters in aluminium
- 3 Perforated wood, oak
- 4 Perforated wooden distances, oak cover and steel-rod protection
- 5 Column, reinforced concrete cladding with Ekeberg marble

Opposite: The two canopies are closely integrated with the surrounding landscaping

Right: Columns are clad in Swedish Ekeberg marble



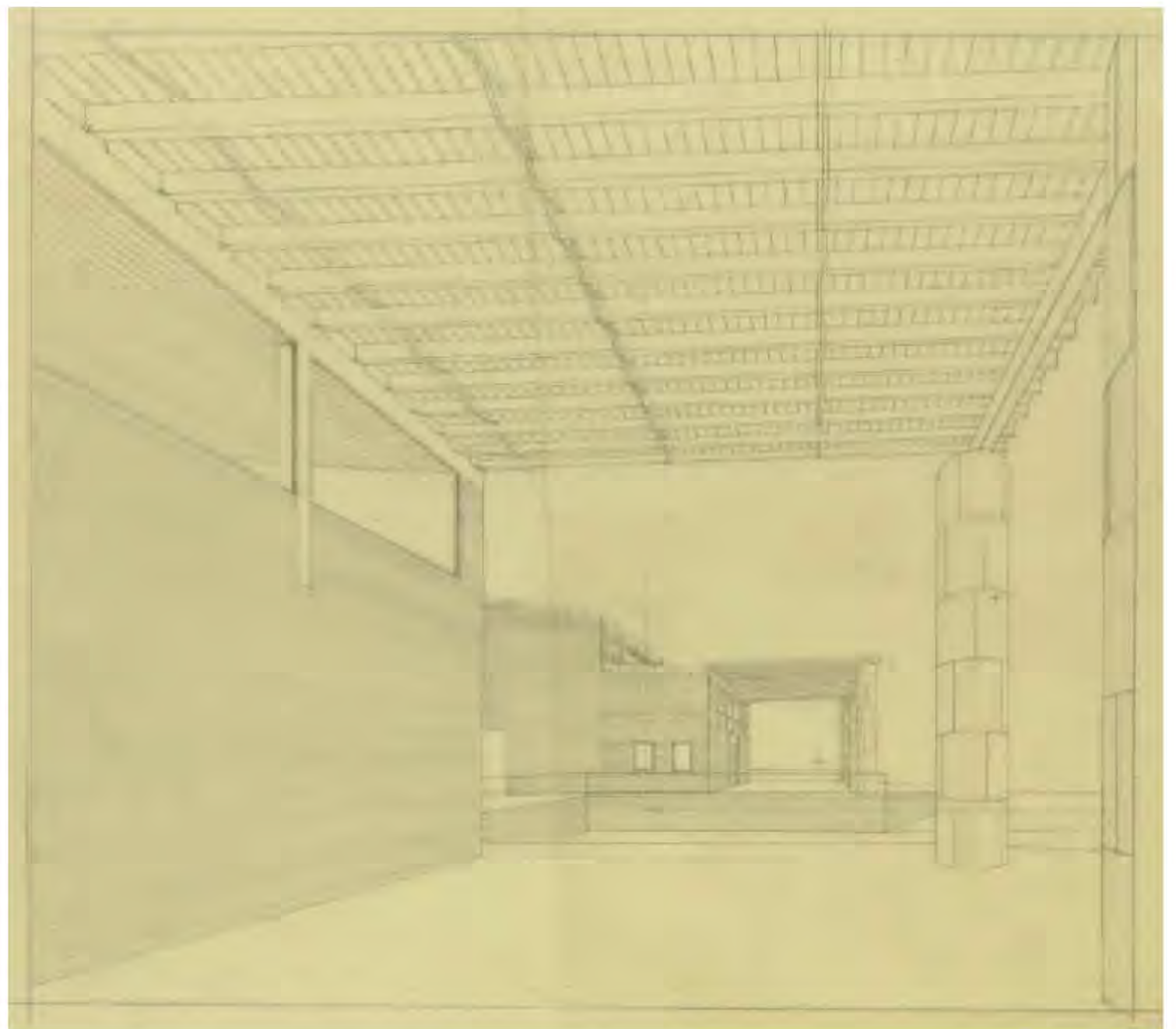


Roof detail

- 1 Roof cladding, 30mm Ekeberg marble
- 2 Pine beams
- 3 Perforated decorative oak board
- 4 Oak spacers – to conceal the tie rods

pieces of Ekeberg marble. These are lapped, with the top edges held on small steel angles. Lateral joints between the roof slabs are detailed so that any rainwater passing between falls to a recess within the topside of the timber beneath. The grooves are lined in metal, originally lead and now aluminium, with the water connecting through to the main metal gutters below, which are arranged one above the other at the split valley. The manner in which the gutters and downpipes, originally in painted steel, but now constructed in aluminium, discharge the rainwater is clearly articulated throughout.

A number of repairs and alterations had taken place since the original construction of the canopies, first in 1955-57 and again in 1982. As much deterioration was related to the wooden roof structure, in 2002 a report was carried out that suggested the timbers should be replaced with steels. Fortunately good sense prevailed, and in 2015 the Swedish practice of Johan Celsing Architects completed a meticulous reconstruction of the canopies. The majority of the marble to the roofs and columns has been reused, and where this has not been possible, great care has been taken to precisely match the material and finish. The timber structure and rainwater goods have been replaced, and the few alterations that have had to be made relate closely to those overseen by Lewerentz himself during the 1950s works. Throughout these works the practice was able to refer to the original drawings, archived at the Swedish Museum of Architecture.



Above: A perspective drawing by Sigurd Lewerentz showing the original design of horizontal canopies

Opposite: The inner edges of the roofs are supported on paired steels, set into the columns and clad in timber

PROJECT TEAM

Client: Malte Sahlgren, Church of Sweden

Architect: Johan Celsing arkitektkontor
Structural engineer: Tomas Gustavsson konstruktioner

Project manager: Church of Sweden

Main contractor: Serneke Group AB



Hugh Strange talks to Johan Celsing, the architect behind the restoration of the Malmö chapels, about following in the footsteps of Sigurd Lewerentz and the importance of 'robust' architecture

'IF YOU DO ARCHITECTURE BY THE BOOK, OBVIOUSLY SOMETHING IS LACKING'

Could you say a little about your early experiences in architecture?

Well, my father [Peter Celsing] was an architect, so the profession was very present as a context when I grew up. As a boy I apprenticed making models in my father's office during a few summers. But as a teenager I certainly didn't plan to be an architect, which probably is not unusual as an attitude in adolescence to one's family circumstances. Instead, I studied painting and sculpture for some years. During that time, my father collaborated with many architects and artists, some of whom I got to know, then or later. Sigurd Lewerentz was one of these.

And what were the first projects for your own practice?

Early on after establishing my practice I was suggested by an older colleague for a job at the Institute of Medicine [in Stockholm]. It started as a small project, but developed in scale, and finally turned into a significant new building called the Nobel Forum (1993); an auditorium building for the Nobel Foundation.

Who were your influences by at that time?

During those early years, and still today, the Austrian architect Herman Czech was an important inspiration. Despite the different built character of our work, I was impressed by the reticence, the quietness of his approach. I was drawn to the way he advocated an understated quality where things arise as you start using them, such that beneath an initial impression of simplicity within a building there might be an incredible depth to the work. So, at first glance, the Nobel Forum looks like the rest of the university buildings and labs. But after a while, or while stopping with the car at the red lights outside, you will sooner or later get a sense that this must be something other than a laboratory, something public.

For similar reasons I have an interest in Alvaro Siza. It's very clear



that he has a great talent for form, but in addition, I think he also has a humbleness that leads to a depth to the work. You feel his presence in the work, that, through drawing, he's really been inside the spaces before they are formed as buildings. And he has a wealth of experience of the different aspects of an architect's work. To me, the really important aspect of our work is the multitude of aspects that you need to deal with, and the resulting layering of meaning.

In the work of the poet Robert

Frost, there is also this sense of depth, of profound things being worked out beneath the surface. He said something along the lines of "a poem without a metre is like playing tennis without a net". I think in a similar way architecture makes good use of order. A certain structure and rhythm are necessary in a building, necessary in order to make a building accessible for everyone. Then, some people who get closer can dig out further things - that's what it's all about for me.

Recently you've been working in the context of certain key works by Sigurd Lewerentz. How has this developed?

First we won the international competition for the new crematorium in the setting of Asplund and Lewerentz's Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm. There were other architects involved in this competition, including Caruso St John and Tadao Ando. Our scheme placed a brick building within a clearing in the woods. This building was inaugurated in 2014. More recently we've completed the renovation of the two canopies to the chapels at Malmö Eastern Cemetery.

The care over materials and detailing is very evident in your completed buildings - perhaps in common with Lewerentz. Could you say a little about this?

Well, you come into a room and you are impressed by the layout and the light, but then, if you start looking at things, they need to have an integrity at closer inspection, they need to have a dignity in detail in themselves. Similarly, I think it's also important that internal surfaces should have a tactile quality; we've used glazed bricks in some of our recent buildings - you can lean against a glazed brick wall without scuffing your shirt. That is a part of the consideration of the tactile aspect. Furthermore, the sensuous quality of these bricks contrasts with what otherwise may be an austere masonry atmosphere, with a minimalist, brutalist leaning that I am not very interested in. I have sometimes described our approach as an intense, but realistic craftsmanship. This realistic element is important - buildings should not be over-expensive, such that architecture becomes a plaything of the rich.

In your text, "The Robust, The Sincere" (2007), you wrote that "the robust is an alternative to the architecture that is mainly based on visual features". Could

Opposite: A 19-floor housing project in Malmö, completed in 2016

Below left: The interior of the Chapel of Hope, designed over a series of decades by Sigurd Lewerentz

Below: The new, brick-clad crematorium at Stockholm's Woodland cemetery, now a Unesco World Heritage Site



you describe briefly what you think this alternative architecture might be?

I think it's not so much an opposition; there is sufficient space for what I try to do. Although the visual is paramount, I think that it's not sufficient alone, and an overemphasis on the visual limits the real possibilities of our work. But it's important to state that my idea of the robust isn't necessarily about a physical solidity. It's more the idea that a work of architecture might have a certain intellectual integrity, a conceptual resilience.

Is that something you see in Lewerentz's work?

Lewerentz's two late churches, St Mark's in Stockholm and St Petri in Klippan, are certainly very interesting and cherished by many. But in the context of our reconstructions at the Eastern Cemetery, there is a work that, to me, carries extraordinary qualities hardly surpassed even in

Lewerentz adjusts parts of the previous works, and then, in the final drawings, he doesn't try to adjust the old to fit the new, he doesn't mind the contrasts

Lewerentz's own work. This work is now the Chapel of Hope, but it was part of the first crematorium, built in 1931. The space was somewhat enlarged and adjusted in 1943, then further enlarged in 1956.

As much as we hate it if someone changes our work, there is something about works that have an accretion of different times, that display a multitude of voices at play, that are more than the individual can muster. Although this process normally takes place over centuries by various architects, here it happens by the same hand, but at different periods of his career. This little chapel com-

bines in its richness a much wider sensibility. In each of its stages the architect has done his utmost to make the best work possible, but he also adjusts parts of the previous work, and then, in the final drawings, he doesn't try to adjust the old to fit the new, he doesn't mind the contrasts. That is why I think this is richer and even more interesting than the late churches. I sometimes quote the old wedding rhyme to my students, "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue", because this collected approach brings a real richness.

I was struck in the Malmö chapels by the variety of the architecture; the sense of the architect exploring various ideas in parallel, the parts co-existing with the whole. As a result, there's a looseness to the building.

The looseness that you say is very important, and in fact the Swedish

translation of "The Robust, The Sincere" could almost be understood as meaning "looseness and precision". When things are too ordered, too structured, they can become dry. If you do architecture by the book, then obviously something is lacking.

In my view, architects gain from developing their ingenuity by solving whatever practical or functional issues are at hand. What may seem a trivial issue can make you aware of things that inform the work in ways more significant than you first thought. You never know beforehand which are the keys, and therefore you need to be attentive to such a multitude of issues. A certain discipline is needed in architecture, buildings need to be rationally arranged, they need to fulfill economic efficiency. However, all great works are infused by something else - by the temperament of the architect.