

The Woodland Crematorium: a peak into Gunnar Asplund's design process

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The Woodland Crematorium, located in the Woodland Cemetery, in Stockholm, represents the last great work of the architect Gunnar Asplund. This cemetery, designed with Sigurd Lewerentz, was the result of a competition, won in 1915, and proposed by the Cemetery Commission to integrate a new cemetery in the south of Stockholm. This proposal stood out of the 53 that entered in the competition, mainly for the work done in the landscape, to create a place of worship and silence, related to symbolic themes of death and rebirth. The importance of the visual impact of the landscape determined the study of several strategic points of view from the tracing of long existing routes to selecting new axes that would later determine the location of several chapels. Between 1918 and 1926, Asplund and Lewerentz, individually, designed two chapels, - the Woodland Chapel and the Resurrection Chapel, respectively.

However, the main entrance to the cemetery and the visual impact of the landscape at that point was still incomplete. Asplund and Lewerentz propose the location of a crematorium to complete the landscape and as the culmination of the selected route. Between 1930 and 1933, the two architects designed the proposal of a building consisting of a chapel and a crematorium, preceded by a small portico. In 1934, this joined proposal was not only dismissed by the Cemetery Commission, but also a new project was commissioned only to Asplund.

Thus, at the beginning of 1935, Asplund begins to work individually on the proposal of the new crematorium that now requires a larger chapel with the capacity of 300 people, - Holy Cross, - two smaller ones for 100 people, - Hope and Faith, and - the technical areas for the crematorium.

Through the study of the drawings related to the crematorium's design process, found in Asplund's personal archive, it is possible to delineate five main moments that mark the development of the proposal from 1935 to 1937, - an initial proposal in March, a final solution in 1937, and three intermediate studies from March to December of 1935. It is during this year that Asplund tests the greatest number of solutions supported by the diversity of drafted elements. These five moments highlight the main themes which determined the proposal's development, - the portico, and its visual impact on the landscape; the Holy Cross Chapel, and its prominence in the design; and the evolution of the ensemble, which starts from a more compact solution and, at the end, underlines a more linear solution. The work of these themes and the number of solutions synthesize the search for an atmosphere and an intention of a specific promenade.

Initially guided by the solution developed with Lewerentz, Asplund draws in March a very compacted ensemble, where the portico reveals itself as an unifying element of the three chapels, reinforcing the idea of permeability between interior and exterior, and the ending theme of the ascending route. The three chapels presented the same design.

Between March and June, Asplund explores the portico, not as a continuous element, but as an individual structure associated to each chapel, testing the composition's fragmentation and establishing a dialectic occupation of the landscape. This solution is accompanied by some uncertainty regarding of the position of the portico in the ascending route, because Asplund also desires to emphasize the Holy Cross Chapel in the ensemble. The various drawings show this demand to test the expression and shape of the Holy Cross, receding its position in relation to the other two chapels. In addition, Asplund separates the three chapels by introducing green courtyards, providing a continuous frontal reading with a rhythmic change of fillers and voids, in opposition to the continuous portico.

In August, the portico is already rendered as an individual element to each chapel, having greater prominence in the Holy Cross. The search for the emphasize of this chapel is evidenced by the form and expression that it acquires in relation to the others. Asplund evokes an inner atmosphere of ceremony, where all the attention of the public would be centered on the coffin, aligned with the entrance axis, and reinforced through the curved wall. The ensemble begins to gradually occupy the landscape and to give more force to the dimension of the courtyards that divide the chapels, as a way to create more privacy when celebrating several ceremonies at the same time.

Between November and December of 1935 the portico, which was already beginning to lose its strength as a continuous element of the three chapels, only precedes the Holy Cross entrance. Once exploring a more linear and refined solution, Asplund emphasize the portico as the main element visible from the entrance to the cemetery, like the placement of a temple on the monumental landscape. The green courtyards between the chapels gain strength and the portico that once preceded each one is now replaced by paved courtyards. The facade expresses the linear meaning of the whole, rhythmmed by the green courtyards, the entrance to the chapels and also by the wall, that guides us to the portico. The Holy Cross Chapel gains more prominence in the ensemble, not only because it is preceded by the portico, but also by its scale and interior atmosphere. Through several sketches, Asplund tests the possibility of creating a second floor, accessed by stairs that wind through columns, in order to provide the attention of the audience to the coffin.

At the beginning of 1937 Asplund arrives at the final solution. The transition from the previous moment to the final proposal is characterized by the detail of the Holy Cross Chapel, its interior and its formal expression, as well as the reinforcement of the idea of a promenade and the visual impact of the ensemble in the landscape.

The promenade now appears divided in two moments, by a corridor of trees, - one, towards the portico, that crosses the area destined to the urns and allows the direct entrance to the chapels; and the other, aligned with the stairs that lead down to the cemetery, where a large cross marks strategically the union between these two moments. The wall, a determining element in the reading of the route, guides us from the main entrance to the great portico. Arrived at the portico we are confronted with the whole landscape and collected by this great shelter that precedes the entrance to the Holy Cross Chapel. In this chapel we are immediately involved with all the interior atmosphere, reinforced by the accentuation of perspective and the continuity of the slope, already felt at the ground of the portico, which directs us to the coffin. The second floor proposed in previous solutions disappears, now the space is more open and the curved wall emphasizes a warming atmosphere of peace and serenity. In this way, Asplund emphasizes the Holy Cross Chapel, through the portico's permeability with the landscape, and providing the duality between architecture and nature. Its involvement with the landscape and the work with the symbols associated with death and rebirth are evoked in the architectural expression of this chapel and the portico, where the double symbolism of incineration and rebirth are architecturally portrayed. Asplund thus sought to work the atmosphere of the inner space to bring feelings, assist the loss, and comfort the pain, offering some hope.

In conclusion, it is necessary to underline the importance of this study to the understanding of the role of Architecture. This research, supported in the design process of the Woodland Crematorium, aims to emphasize the search to respond, not only to a program, but mainly to the meaning of the set problem through a poetic interpretation, in this case, the construction of a new place. The richness of the Asplund's archive and the number of solutions he explored for the ensemble exemplifies that, as an architect, he was not only concerned with responding to a technical problem or a programmatic layout. Asplund sought to discuss ideas, thoughts and themes, through the design of various proposals, trying to find the best way to express, through architecture, a continuity of the symbolic dimension of the cemetery's landscape and its atmosphere of peace and tranquility. From the portico and its permeability with the landscape, the work of the interior space of the Holy Cross Chapel, and the way that the ensemble evolved in relation to the topography, Asplund conceives a building anchored to the place, and giving meaning to the architectural promenade. In the end, the crematorium's architecture responds to a demanding function but, above all, it responds to feelings of pain and loss, involving and warming people in a continuous atmosphere between building and landscape.