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# On the edge of reason
## *Gianmaria Socci*

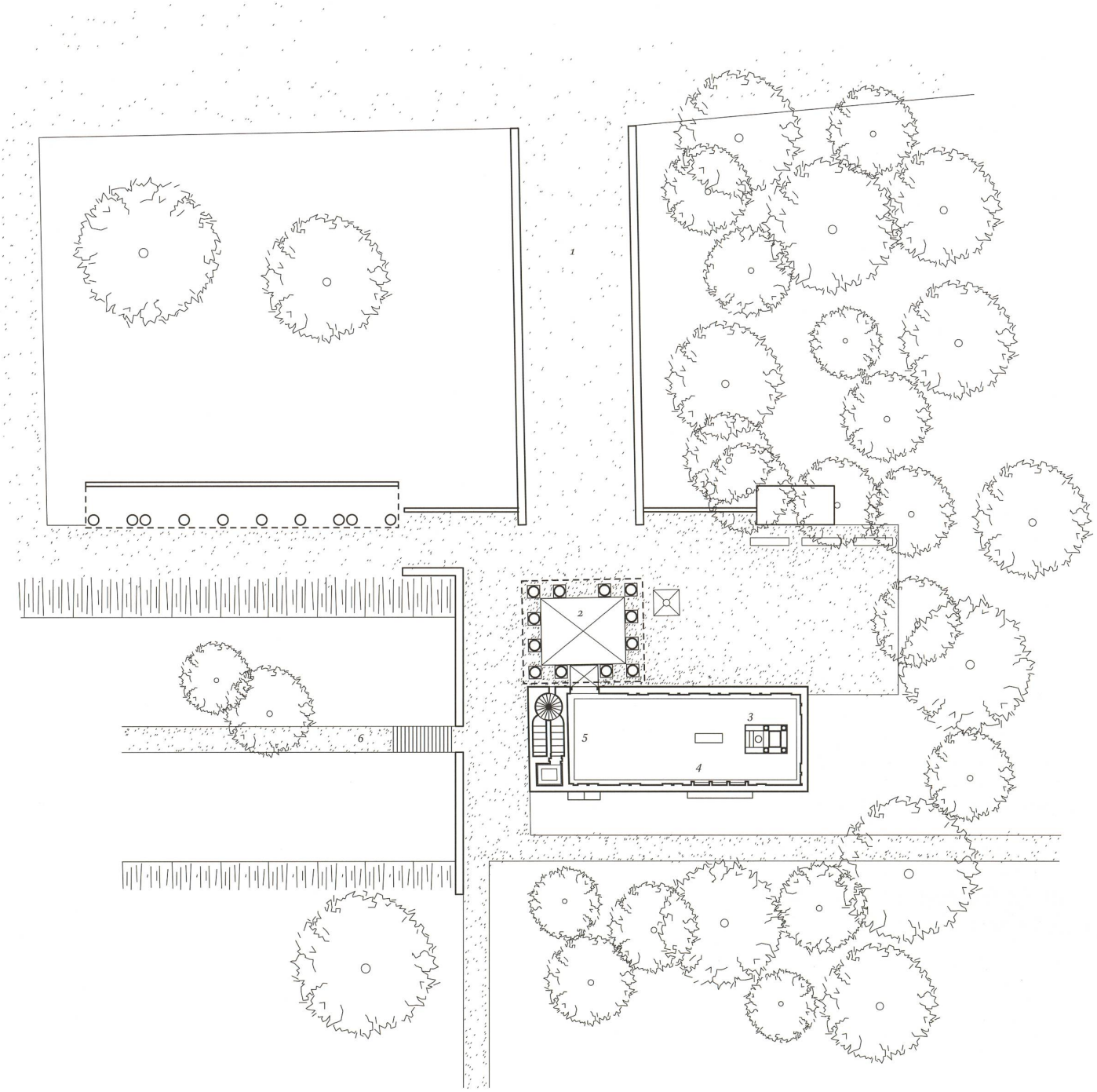


*fig. a Sigurd Lewerentz, Chapel of Resurrection, Woodland Cemetery, 1914, drawn by the author*

A great deal of speculation surrounds the work of Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz, an evasive character who never bothered too much to disclose his design logic. His see-sawing career was punctuated by some remarkable buildings, between extended periods of inactivity. The peaks can arguably be identified in three churches he built between 1925 and 1966. This investigation wants to establish a tie between these projects based on one specific argument, looking at misalignments and odd edges in the composition of their plans. Working at the aesthetic periphery of contemporary movements—Nordic Romanticism, Classicism, Modernism—Lewerentz shook the common understanding of architectural beauty with arbitrary juxtapositions. These never became recognizable stylistic patterns, but stood out instead in their uniqueness as compositional oddities. It is possible yet to trace an evolution of their recurring appearance.

‹Woodland Cemetery› in southern Stockholm is a refined work of romantic landscape imbued with Nordic atmosphere. Designed by Lewerentz and Asplund after the successful competition entry of 1914, it is the first of a series aiming at redefining burial practices in a population-booming Sweden. The built structures sit across the gently sloping lawns to emphasize existing topographical features according to thoroughly planned rituals. Lewerentz took charge of the design of the ‹Chapel of Resurrection›, which, completed in 1925, is arguably his first acclaimed work. The Chapel emerges through the woods of the graveyards, at the end of an undulating gravel path cutting across the site (1). The little entrance yard on the north of the building is dominated by a classical portico awkwardly positioned on the edge of the chapel, almost tangent to it (2). There is no physical connection between these two parts of the building; they are slightly separated and skewed at a minimal angle. Stepping into the chapel through the portico from the very corner, the worshippers are attracted to the east of the nave where the altar (3) stands by the bright light of a disproportionate aedicule window (4). A small door located west on the opposite wall (5) leads out of the main room and down to a slightly sunken burial ground where the ceremony ends (6). The ritual of the funeral is spatially expressed in its completeness: from the weeping procession through the darkness of the forest, to the intercession of divine light, down towards the end of life where the sun sets. This pedant correspondence of rituals and metaphor generates the main geometrical constrains of the composition. The portico is aligned to the entrance gravel path given by the geometry of the site, whilst the orientation of the chapel follows the burial ground. The minimal misalignment between the two parts of the building arises from the logical consequence of two geometrical systems. For Lewerentz the consistence of the metaphor is stronger than common-sense practicalities. The portico and the chapel do not form a unitary volume but are instead considered as the ends of two distinct paths. They are elements of the landscape that happen to be in extreme proximity without quite touching.

The ‹Church of St. Mark› in Björkhagen adopts an entirely different language and interplay with the landscape. It was built between 1956 and 1960 as the result of a competition that sees the return of the architect after ten years of inactivity. Its two main volumes sit at the centre of a birch forest in a suburb of Stockholm, considerably lower than the surrounding buildings. Their dark red brick facades with wide mortar joints are visible through the complementary colours of the woods. A courtyard with a pool and portico (1) separates the profane function on the west from the sacred buildings on the east and provides a protected space within the landscape that encourages visitors to walk around the buildings. If the ‹Chapel of Resurrection› marks the end of rigorous directions, ‹St. Mark› works instead as a hub, embedded in the woods, whose meandering paths spread out to connect the neighbourhood. Stepping inside the church from the south (2), the continuity of the environment is reinforced by the finned northern walls (3) that admit a diagonal light, and also by the outright use of brick covering all the surfaces. The nave itself is dark and immediately inspires a sense of deep meditation. Few windows open directly into this space while a dense array of pendant lamps provides very dim, diffuse light. Their bronze covers sparkle in rare reflections against the dark, vaulted ceiling. Similarly to Lewerentz' first chapel, the altar is lit by a couple of south-facing windows (4) that generate a deep contrast in very little space. Right after the second window, the wall bends outward behind the altar, its edge disappearing in the dark (5). Despite keeping on changing the overall design until completion, Lewerentz fixed the shape of this wall from his very first version, as archive drawings show, proving it to be a deliberate and important design decision. This little deformation of subtle phenomenological effect brings along some challenging construction details, which are made even more evident by the architect's tenacious decision to not cut any brick or tile. The arrangement of the floor tiles running parallel to the nave, turns abruptly to follow the bend (6). The junction in the floor between these two directories highlights the altar as a separate space, risen on three low steps. It also requires a crooked juxtaposition of tiles to meet the straight lines of the north and east walls, which was plainly solved with extra wide, triangular joints.

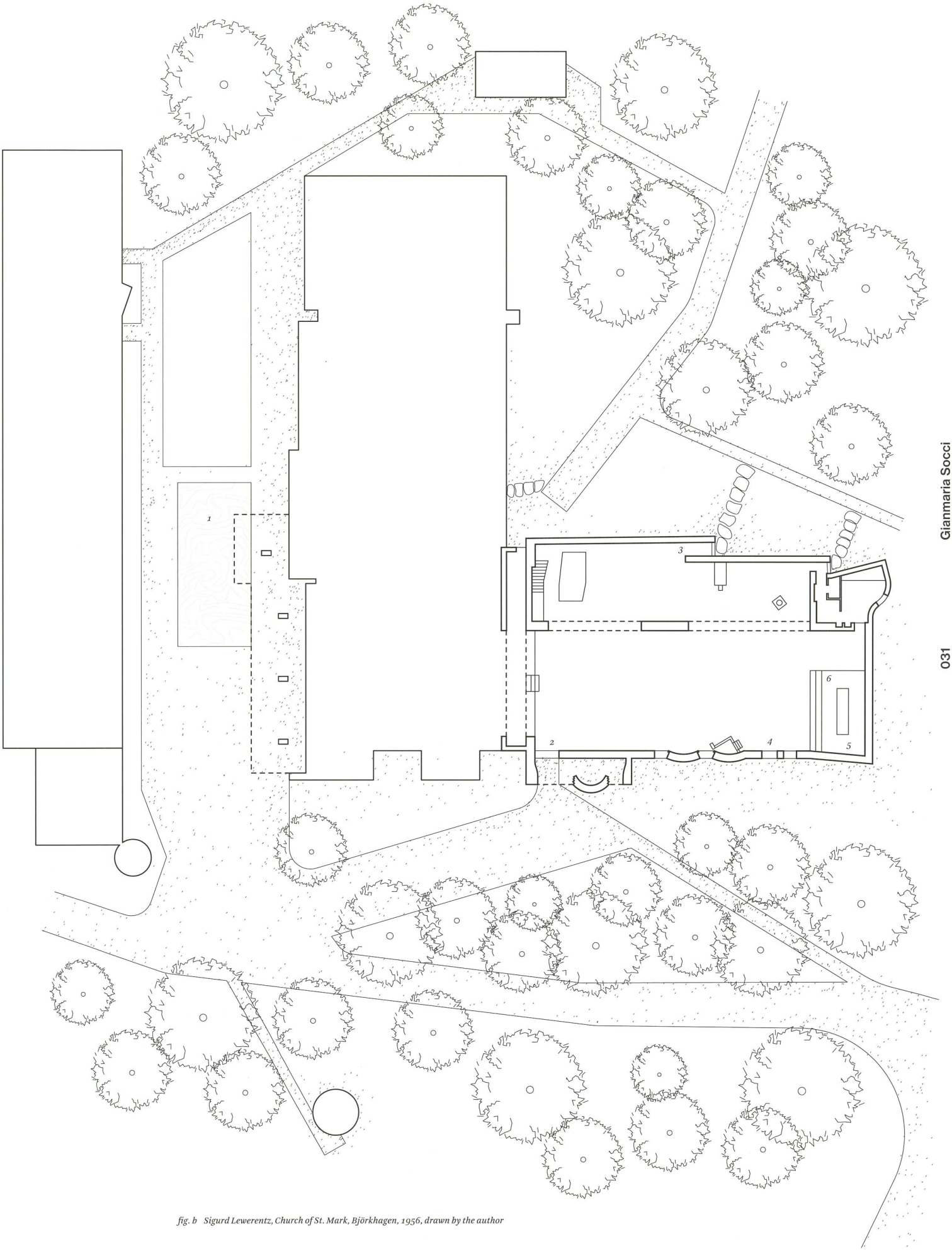


*fig. b  Sigurd Lewerentz, Church of St. Mark, Björkhagen, 1956, drawn by the author*

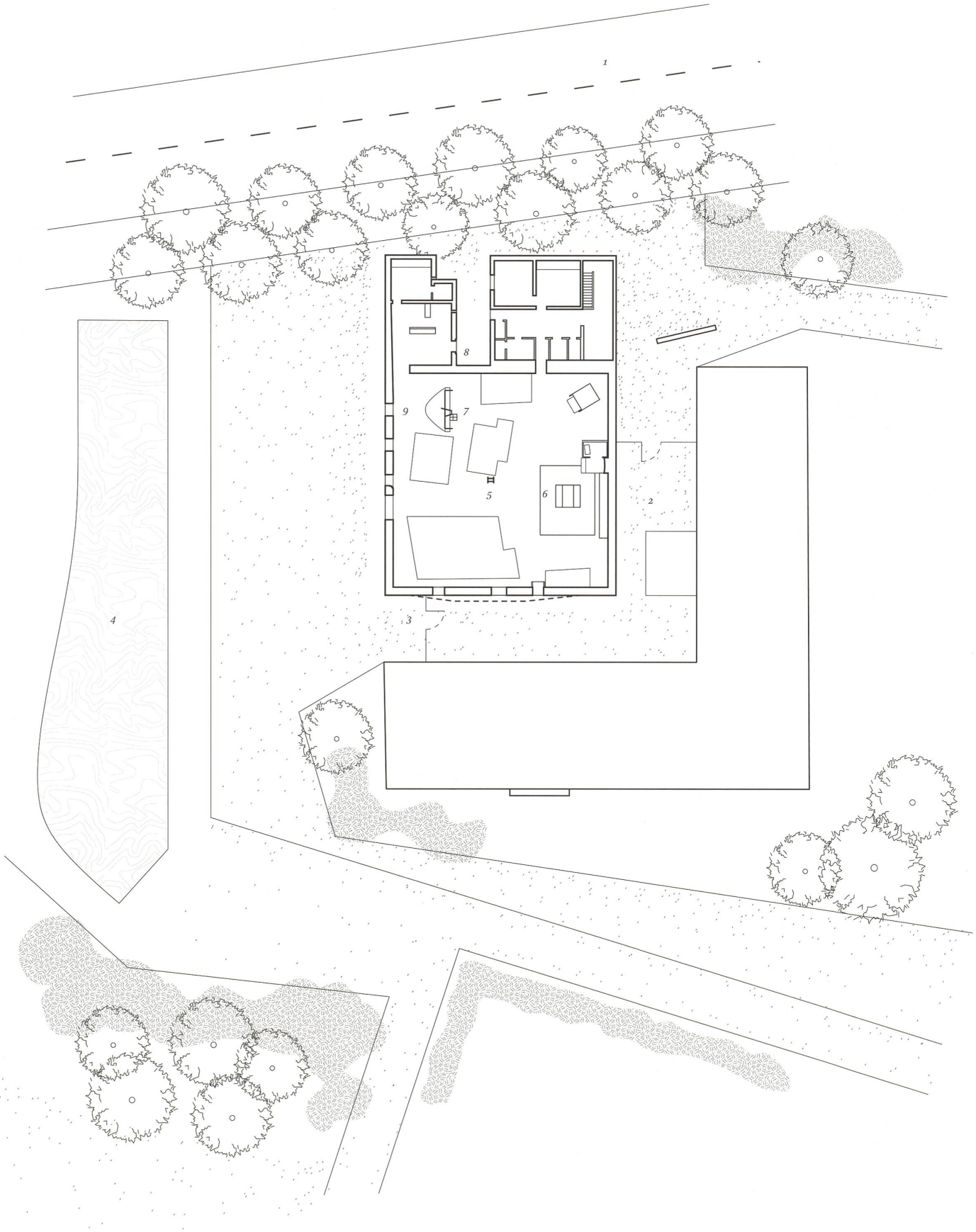


*fig. c Sigurd Lewerentz, Church of St. Peter, Klippan, 1963, drawn by the author*

The ‹Church of St. Peter› in Klippan adopts the same vocabulary of rough material. This church is the last major project of the architect who, 78 years old when construction started, had achieved that sort of confidence and perseverance allowing his long developed language to flourish unburdened of compromises. The site in a small Swedish village is located at the crossroads of two streets, in the quadrant occupied by a public park. The parish is aligned along the northern road (1), acting as a gate. A narrow L-shaped courtyard serves the entrances to the offices and meeting rooms, separating again the profane and the sacred (2). This time though, the courtyard emphasizes the independency of the complex from its surroundings. There is no direct view towards the park and the two accesses, marked by heavy iron gates (3), are both facing paved spaces. The large pool on the western square (4) serves as an abstract reflection of the facade rather than as an element of the landscape, highlighting a radical shift from the previous works. The envelope of the church itself appears to be composed of right angles and simple proportions with the various rooms juxtaposed linearly. Its walls enclose the spaces entirely with the most no-nonsense attitude. The simple architectural mass unfolds eventually in the magnificent interior of the nave. This is formed as an exact square plan with a complex double vaulted roof, supported by a T-shaped column resembling a cross at the very centre (5). The liturgical items are arranged quite freely around the column, and so are the worshippers, sitting in a quasi-circular array towards the altar. The floor tiles mark the placement of the furniture, they turn independently in multiple directions regardless of the edges of the room forming a gentle slope to the altar (6). In correspondence to the baptismal font (7), they rise decisively and form a gap where drops of water fall at a constant interval. The misalignment of the floors, mere consequence in ‹St. Mark›, becomes here an unrestrained compositional tool to design a dreamy, solemn landscape of bricks. The visitor enters through an informal wedding chapel, accessed unspectacularly from the north facade (8). Once again Lewerentz seeks a complex visual relation between the entrance and the altar neglecting the traditional procession symmetry. A complete turnaround allows a slow transition to the darkness of the church: the accompanying wall rises slightly obliquely to emphasize the movement. This irregularity does not affect the floor patterns, that evade alignments altogether with their multiple arrangements. Remarkably, the bend does not show on the outside either, as it is resolved within the thickness of the wall itself, tapering almost imperceptibly from an apparently random point after the northernmost window (9). ‹St. Peter› neglects a direct dialogue with its surroundings; its introverted boundaries enclose the field for the game of correspondences and counterpoints. The church becomes a landscape in itself.

Lewerentz' use of raw material, unusual construction techniques and unconstrained geometric rules, is so complex and unorthodox that only extensive analysis can produce thoughtful interpretations, which are conveniently provided by some excellent books and essays on the subject.[1] The contingent observations of this text highlight instead a certain *modus operandi* that stays consistent in the architect's work through a great deal of changes in context, technology and language. From the misalignment of the ‹Chapel of Resurrection›, demanded by landscape axes, to a conscious but somehow crude move in ‹St. Mark›, to the carefully designed yet enigmatic directories of ‹St. Peter›, Lewerentz seems to progress towards the spontaneity of the empirical gesture in a stubborn struggle to let the poetic arise from material contingencies. In what could be described as a process of internalization, the contingencies of the context evolve in time into self-referential indoor correspondences. From the scale of the landscape to the construction detail, the hierarchy of compositional constraints is accordingly exploded into multiple competing decisions that balanced somewhere between metaphor, phenomenology, and craft. The tense yet unitary effect of the composition is achieved through an unstable equilibrium of conflictual instances rather than a coherent overreaching logic. There is no analytical rigour, no explanation needed: the buildings stand self-evident in their uniqueness.

Once, when a mason asked Lewerentz for instructions, he was quoted replying: «I don't know how you will do it, all I know is that you will not do it in the way you are used to».[2] Working with such courage against ordinariness, Lewerentz had to master every single detail to achieve the fragile balance of his compositions, on the edge of what was considered reasonable.

1 To mention only a few: J. Ahlin, Sigurd Lewerentz, Byggeforlaget, Stockholm, 1985 (English trans. 1987), the main source for accounts on the life of the architect and his few written statements; Flora, Giardiello, Postiglione, Sigurd Lewerentz 1885–975, Electa, Milano, 2001, with an insightful essay by C. St John Wilson and extensive drawing documentation.

2 J. Ahlin, Sigurd Lewerentz, Byggeforlaget, Stockholm 1985.

*Gianmaria Socci, born 1985,* received a master degree in Architecture from FAF Ferrara and a MAS degree in Urban Design from ETH Zurich. He has worked across Europe and received awards in numerous design competitions. Between 2013 and 2016 he has been research assistant for Urban Think Tank at ETH Zurich. He's currently designing and researching independently in southern Europe.