



Müritzeum science and visitors' centre, Waren, Mecklenburg, Germany, 2007

Two cones, slightly shifted, make this building unique. Adding to the originality, parts of the surface have been charcoaled, but this is sensitively done – ribs of wood grain are easily touched and read. Situated next to a lake in former Eastern Germany, the aim here was to create the impression of a 'floating' building.

Müritzeum is thus partially constructed out of larch that has undergone a charcoaling process, in which a gas burner is used to make it resistant to rot. A film of coal protects the wood. The interior of the wood structure is not, though, charcoaled, but has a clear varnish finish. To accentuate the use of natural materials in the museum, Wingårdh set up a juxtaposition that typifies his propensity for contrasts. The round shapes of the building are dramatically cut off on one side to create an impressive entrance, optimising on the museum's river frontage. For further contrast, the exterior is painted in bright yellow with a clear coating over the yellow wood.

The Flight Control Tower of Arlanda Airport, just outside Stockholm, is an elegant, two-faced sculpture – one part being white and the other black. Its dual personality is due to the tower's two very different functions; the two parts of the tower, 7 metres (23 feet) and 5 metres (16 feet) respectively, together 12 metres (39 feet) in diameter, are needed to contain cables and an elevator – they overlap each other by a metre. One watchtower has a vision of 360 degrees, to see all planes taking off and landing; the other has a more finite view, since it only has to control planes taxiing on the ground. The tower hovers reassuringly over the resting aeroplanes. It is a daring juxtaposition that gives Sweden's busiest airport a distinct, cosmopolitan identity. Taking its inspiration from an old lighthouse, the tower has the same nuances as one finds in Sweden's archipelagos in winter. Wingårdh works with a deceptively simple palette.

He refers to himself as a chameleon. He will tell you that he does not have a typical style. One only has to look more closely at his work, though, to perceive a consistency of approach. It is not identifiable with a particular formal language, but rather with a certain dynamic that is exhilarating, forever revealing new qualities over time. This means that his work is never repetitive. His use of contrast, as we have seen, is a reoccurring tactic. Another trait is his

desire to create poetry through his designs. He tells a story with his buildings, and just like poems they are open to interpretation. Just like good poems they grow on you and reveal a deeper, personal meaning over time. A third characteristic of his work is his sensitive use of natural materials and original approach to natural context.

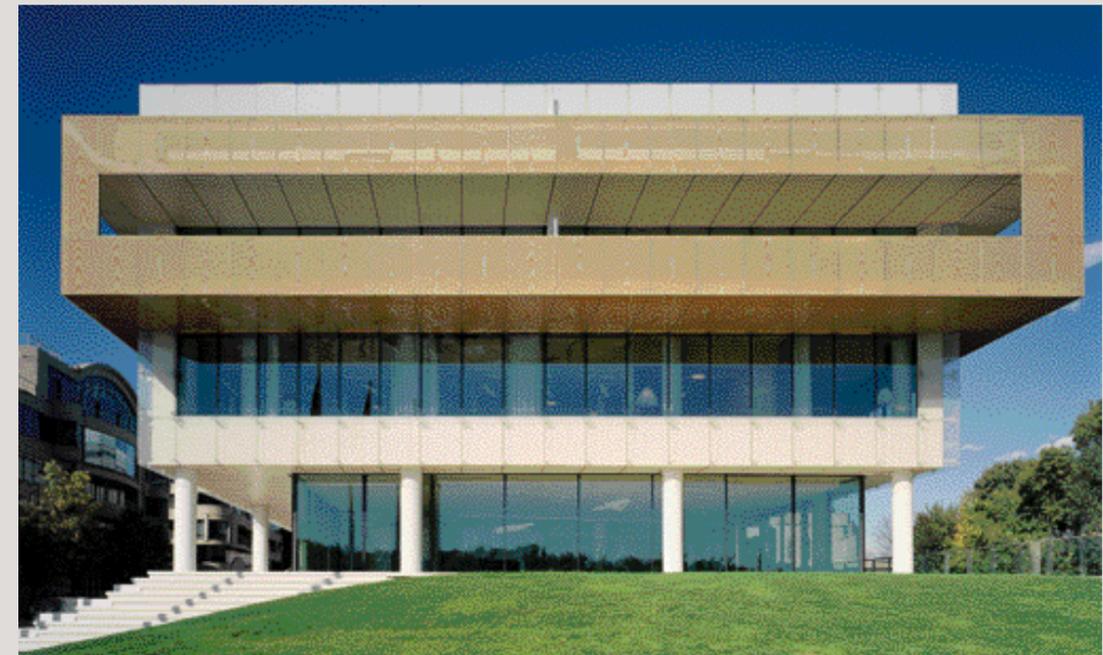
Wingårdh runs a practice with more than a hundred staff –divided between his original office in Gothenburg on the west coast of Sweden and a second office in Stockholm. An office in the capital is a prerequisite for a firm of the size of Wingårdh's for the gaining of major commissions. Being somewhat of 'an outsider' may also account for his appetite – the degree of resolve and determination with which he approaches all of his work. Never clinging to a single solution, he enjoys coming up with alternatives when he encounters obstacles – architecture is for him a work in progress.

Many Swedish architects envy Wingårdh's success, particularly his ability to gain prestigious commissions such as embassies and cultural institutions. The exceptional power that building contractors have in Sweden means that architects often complain of being frustrated by the limitations imposed on them by builders. Architects perceive the building industry as having a negative impact on their creative freedom. It is a constraint that is commonly cited by architects to explain away Sweden's comparative lack of success on the architectural world stage. It is a situation that Wingårdh has managed to eclipse. He has achieved a pretty unique position nationally through his independence from building contractors and by developing a well-organised office with highly motivated staff. The practice organises its work into small project groups where everybody's opinion counts from inception onwards. This is one reason, according to Wingårdh, why the office can meet client challenges in a more creative way. A sense of ownership helps to achieve this culture. There is also, however, always a clear answerable



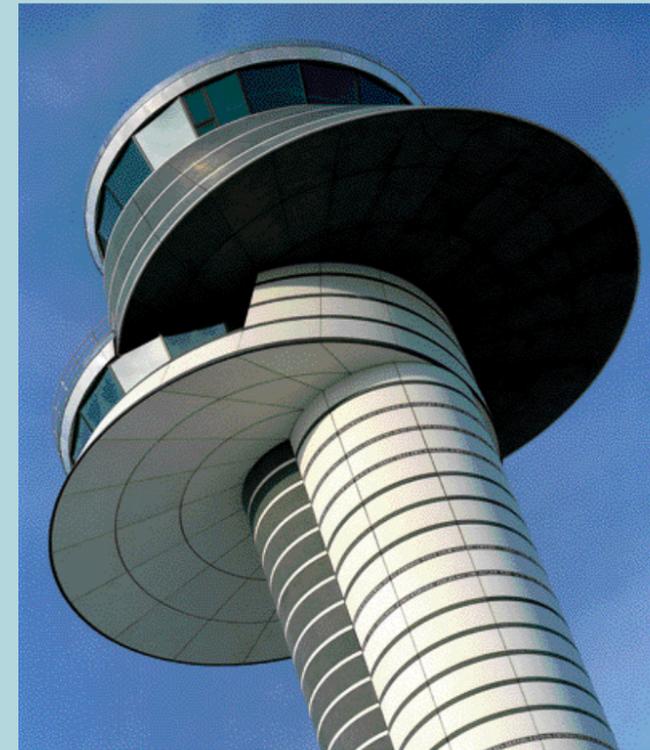
House of Sweden, Washington DC, 2006

The square shape of the 8,000-square-metre (86,111-square-foot) building is a result of the site's form. Wingårdh describes it as a 'typical Scandinavian box'. Inside are three functional sections: one public, another for exhibitions/meetings and a third with a roof terrace. The large public entrance on 30th Street, with two 5-6-metre (18.3-foot) wide sliding doors, welcomes the public to the building. Gatherings of different sorts are held on the entrance floor, and the building also houses office space for 45 employees of the Swedish Embassy and living quarters for employees of a few major Swedish companies. From the garage, the building can be read through a narrow atrium, looking all the way up to the seventh floor. Materials inside and out are wood and glass. The exterior's dual layer of glass means the imitation wood here changes colours, depending on the lighting where it stands on the Potomac River.



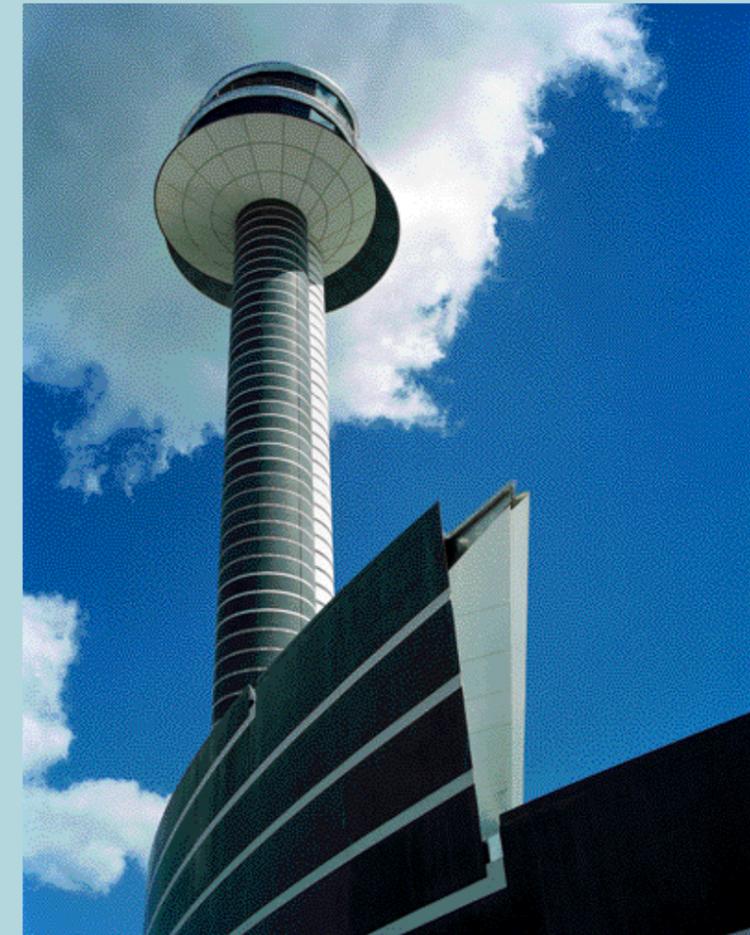
Universeum science discovery centre, Gothenburg, 2001

Constructed of wood, the centre is a twisted box that gives Gothenburg more of an urban identity as it seems to protect the city through its large windows. It was built to stimulate young interest in natural sciences. Different climate zones show how water, earth and animals interact; for instance, one can enter a rain forest at the top of the trees (25 metres/82 feet up) and pass tropical birds, wild monkeys and butterflies on the walk down, culminating in piranhas in the water. A double-glass layer is needed to maintain the temperature at 30°C (86°F) and the humidity level at 95 per cent. There is also a room that recreates Northern Scandinavia, with mountains, melting snow and streams.



Arlanda Traffic Control Tower, Stockholm, 2001

Like two birds – one white, the other black – pushing close together for comfort, the tower's dual purpose is manifested in the architecture. The tower handles landings and take-offs on the one hand, and directs traffic on the ground on the other. Visibility in the latter is not as essential, which is why this part of the tower has a more limited all-round view.

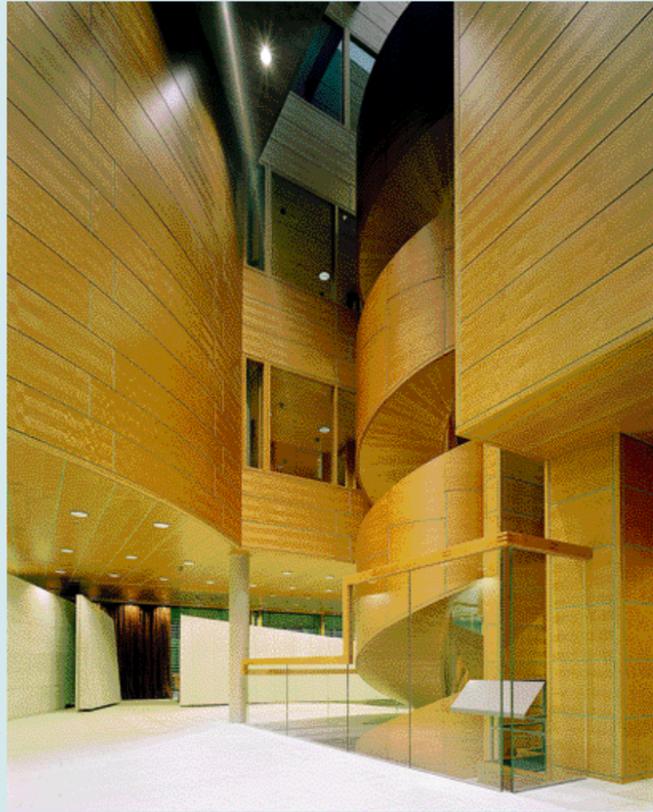


leader in place within the group to respond to client needs. The size of the office also gives it a competitive advantage. As one of Sweden's largest architectural firms, it is able to handle major projects that smaller practices simply cannot take on. Creative freedom, however, also depends on the clients themselves. An established client base of municipalities and cultural institutions tend – unlike construction companies – to have quality uppermost in minds as the end users.

Wingårdh's position nationally in architecture was secured in 2003 when he won an invited competition, against Johan Celsing, Christer Malmström, Greger Dahlström and Lasse Vretblad, to design the House of Sweden in Washington DC. The multipurpose building, which was completed in 2006, houses not only the Swedish Embassy, but also apartments for embassy staff and some major Swedish companies, as well as function rooms for hospitality and meetings. Through its overall appearance and choice of materials, it engenders Swedish societal values such as openness, transparency and democracy. His office used the entire site for the structure, and the city got a unique building.

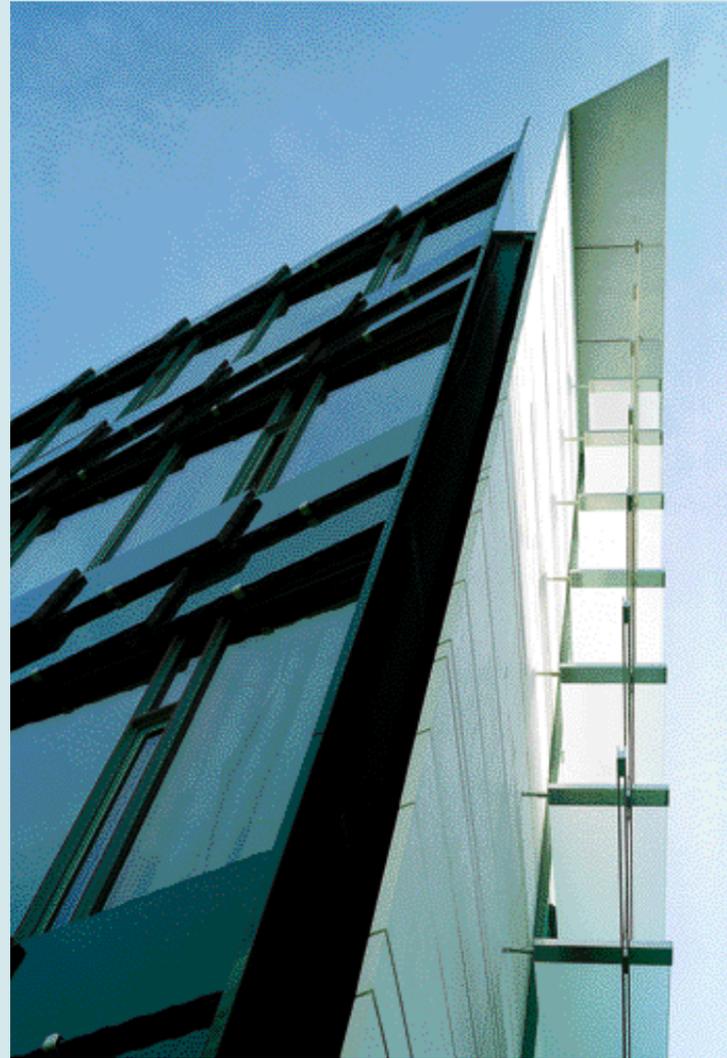
Wingårdh's success in a national context is often due to his abilities as a front man, because his persuasive talents are also rare among Swedish architects. His charm, however, is

also set to stand him in good stead with clients and the public abroad. When he wanted to use imitation wood for the exterior of the House of Sweden, he chose an exaggerated, imitation wood-vein pattern veneer, set in glass panels, to give the impression of wood from afar; wood being the building material most closely associated with his densely forested home country. Washington's planners did not, however, approve of this over-exaggerated and fake material. This judgement was made when an official saw a piece of the imitation panelling from a distance of a mere 0.7 metres (2.3 feet) rather than the intended 7 metres (23 feet). Wingårdh recounts: 'He went ballistic.' Wingårdh got on a plane and met up with the whole Committee of Fine Arts, which has absolute power over new buildings in Washington's central area, that was about to decide on his choice of skin. He explained that trompe l'oeil paint effects have a long and strong architectural tradition in Sweden, and showed them slides of the exteriors of castles and churches painted to look like imitation stone and marble. 'We had to fake it, since genuine materials often were scarce, we were not as rich as the Italians,' he told them. 'And if you are going to fake it, why not do so a bit extra.' The committee's seven members only needed a few minutes to decide, as retold in Swedish



Swedish Embassy, Berlin, 1999

All of the Nordic embassies are closely grouped together in Berlin. Wingårdh's choice for Sweden was a building where the different facades use different materials. On the exterior, two walls contrast – one made up of rough, black basalt, the other of light, white limestone. The interior is all wood and the spiralling staircase gives the main hall an organic feel. One can also watch passers-by through the copper inside wall.



design magazine Forum: 'Mr Wingårdh. We would like to thank you for your efforts to address our concerns regarding this clearly prominent project. Our point of view is clear: your building is a gift to the city of Washington.' In this kind of situation, having a father who worked as an executive at a concrete factory probably helps.

The House of Sweden, which has that very modern purpose of branding a country, stands majestically on the waterfront in central Washington DC, not far from Georgetown University and the Watergate compound. The Universeum science discovery centre in Gothenburg, completed in 2001 and entirely made out of glass, wood and recycled paper, is likewise a good illustration of his work. Both the House of Sweden and the Universeum demonstrate how he uses design to transcend a building's mere function. He stresses the functions, but through his architecture he also endeavours to give his buildings an identity and life of their own, endowing them with iconic powers that tell us interesting and humorous stories if we only care to listen.

Wingårdh wants to take our breath away with his creations, while also keeping it simple. It is all part of the

Scandinavian, Lutheran heritage, where ornaments are considered extraneous – a form of showing off. He creates grand gestures with almost masochistic constraint; one can sense that he would always like to let his ideas roam free. What keeps him from doing so is the understanding that his talent thrives on self-control, adding just the right amount of unpredictability and tension. Functionality also means making the movement within the building humane, as he calls it. When residents and visitors can read the interior from the outside, as at the Universeum where there are large windows in the entrance, then he has succeeded. Inside, it is possible to look all the way to the bottom of the building while standing at the absolute top. The museum's 3-kilometre (1.9-mile) walk through some of the world's climate zones is all part of this humane experience, which is underlined and enriched by the wooden ecological design. Wooden elements of the building can easily be exchanged. Another good, but very different example of this is the Swedish Embassy in Berlin, where the interior is a wooden whirlwind of hard and

soft shapes. Standing in the main hall looking at the spiral staircase feels a bit like being comfortably trapped in the undercurrent of a big wave.

What is especially typical of Wingårdh's architecture is his choice of materials – limestone and granite are reoccurring favourites. He explains that they are characteristic of his native town of Skövde in western Sweden, inland from Gothenburg. He also finds these stones immensely sensual: 'Limestone ages rapidly and leaves traces of the past. At my office in Gothenburg, you can see signs from where people prefer to walk, and in the bathroom, there are prints from where people rest their hands.' One senses an overall yearning for the sea in his work, which may also date back to his childhood. One can imagine him dreaming about the sea as a boy, being so close to it, but not close enough to easily get there and experience it, and this is why it has such a presence in many of his designs. The same goes for the city, explaining the urban dimension of his work.

Using materials that do not need too much care is another trait, which must also influence his choices. Making buildings that last have a peculiar allure for him. Müritzeum, according to him, will not need maintenance for the next hundred years. The interior will need repainting of course, but the charcoaling process is so effective that the exterior will not require

refurbishment, no matter how much it rains. The fundament is concrete and resilient in its own way. The same goes for the Universeum, where a roof protects the wood. It is as close to being a totally ecological building as it is probably possible to get today. Naturally ventilated, its energy requirements are planned to be next to none, and water is recycled within the building. When solar cells are economically feasible, they will provide the building with electricity.

As further horror scenarios emerge of what might happen to us all if not enough is done to avoid impending environmental disasters, one can only hope that more notice will be taken internationally of Gert Wingårdh and his well-tuned sensibility. In the interim, he can find comfort in the fact that Sverre Fehn was 72 years old when he received the Pritzker Prize.

Timothy Tore Hebb writes about architecture and urban planning for Swedish newspapers and magazines. He recently interviewed Zaha Hadid's Patrik Schumacher for Arkitektur about the office's work and theory. He also writes about Stockholm's future urban challenges, such as how the city can grow rapidly while at the same time providing good living conditions and minimising segregation.

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Resumé

Gert Wingårdh

1977
Wingårdh Arkitektkontor founded in Gothenburg

1986
Öijared Country Club, Lerum (Kasper Salin Award)

1989
AstraZeneca R&D site, Mölndal (Kasper Salin Award)

1993
Ale Secondary High School, Nödinge

1996
Swedish Embassy, Berlin
Arlanda Traffic Control Tower, Arlanda Airport, Sigtuna

1997
Auditorium and student union at Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg (Kasper Salin Award)

1998
Universeum science discovery centre, Gothenburg

1999
Kajplats 01 housing, Malmö
Aranäs school and theatre, Kungsbacka

2001
Konstfack School of Applied Arts, Stockholm
Hammarby Gård housing, Stockholm
'New Trends of Architecture in Europe and Japan' event, Tokyo, represented with Universeum science discovery centre

2002
Norra Bantorget Hotel, Stockholm, due for completion 2007

2003
Villa Ann, Gothenburg,
House of Sweden, Washington DC
Breath of Life opera, Östersund
Vällingby fashion retail, Vällingby, due for completion 2009

2004
Kallis bath and spa, Helsingborg
Müritzeum science and visitors' centre, Waren, Mecklenburg, Germany

2005
Citadell bath and pool, Landskrona
Glaskasten sculpture museum, Marl, Germany, competition (first prize)

Arabiastranden housing, Helsinki, due for completion 2009
Volvo Next Face retail design, global

2006
Hyllie commercial centre, Malmö, due for completion 2010
Exhibited at 'The Eighth Belgrade Triennial of World Architecture'
Exhibited at 'A World in One City: A Sketch for London', London Architecture Biennial

2007
Spira concert hall and theatre, Jönköping, due for completion 2009

