Alumni interview Lennart Philipson

A legacy and a logo

How did the EMBL logo come to exist?

Before coming to EMBL in 1982, I had had a group in Uppsala whose focus was adenovirus research. At EMBL I felt I had to embark on a new topic in cell biology; therefore, here at the EMBL, my group focused on growth control in mammalian cells. But the adenovirus was still on my mind, and I came back to it when I left for the Skirball Institute in New York in 1993. There we finally cloned and characterized the receptor.

When Konrad Müller asked me for a logo for EMBL, it was natural for me to think of the adenovirus and claim that the 252 hexons represented all the laboratories in Europe, with the red spot being EMBL, now fully integrated in the European map. The location of the red spot was close to its position on the European chart.

I have, as you have previously noted, a flair for bringing the past with me to the future. The name "Operon" was also an attempt to recognize a European contribution and simultaneously allude to all the arias being executed in the EMBL "opera house." The only remaining attribute I left behind was the "Philipson lane" or mall, which still exists. When the building was erected I insisted that there must be a passage to the back of the auditorium for latecomers so that they would not disturb the speakers. This was against the advice of the architects and the builders and it also took away some seats from the Operon. On the other hand I believe both the speakers and the latecomers are happy with the arrangement.

What was the most exciting development during your time at EMBL?

The fact that the Laboratory truly became a collaborative center of excellence in Europe.

Would you share a funny anecdote about your time here?

When Thomas Graf recruited the son of the German President Richard von Weissäcker as a student, in the mid-1980s, the President, along with Minister of Science and Technology Riesenhuber, the Ministerpräsident of Baden-Württemberg, and various other officials felt obliged to visit the EMBL. The laboratory looked like a military camp with police on all the roofs and in the driveways! The visitors were happy with the presentation of selected senior scientists and EMBL became well-known in its host country Germany for the first time.

Have you "exported" any of the EMBL style/atmosphere to other institutions that you moved to later?

Upon leaving EMBL I attempted to create a replica in New York at the NYU Medical Center called the Skirball Institute.

How relevant is EMBL today and for the future of science in Europe and the world?

The EMBL demonstrates that research led by active scientists yields the best product, a lesson still to be learned by many politicians. I believe that Europe must construct additional centres of excellence based on the same principles. The continued success of EMBL may show the way to the creation of several European Institutes of Life Sciences, distributing life science funds within the currently discussed European Research Council, together with EMBO and other Life science organisations. A European NIH may be a proper goal for the future. It requires, however, that EMBL manage a constant rejuvenation of its staff, always focusing on relevant and interesting topics at the forefront of science. This may lead to a common life science base for the expanded EU.