

Strand 1. Breaking the Art Nouveau Glass Ceiling: The Women of Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau and Finnish Architect Women: Wivi Lönn – A Case Study

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Abstract

At the end of the 19th century the statutes of the Helsinki Polytechnic Institute took a liberal attitude regarding supernumerary students, making it possible to admit women. Already between 1887 and 1894, six women enrolled to study architecture – Wivi (Olivia) Lönn (1872–1966) was one of them. She became the first Finnish woman to follow an independent career in architecture, designing a large number of projects between 1898 and 1945. This paper discusses how this was possible, and concentrates especially on her early years in Tampere, where she designed several public Art Nouveau buildings.

Key words: Art Nouveau in Finland, women architects, Wivi Lönn, the city of Tampere

During the 19th century Finland was an autonomous part of Imperial Russia. After being a part of Sweden for 600 years, this new situation from 1809 onwards meant that the country had now its own legislation, gradually also its own money and customs borders. Finland's development towards modern industries began seriously in the middle of the 19th century, and as there were no developed traditions of professional institutes, nor any Academy traditions, there was a shortage of skilled professionals in technology and the building industry. The state played an active role in the development of professions, and professional groups depended in their aims and strategies on the goodwill of the state bureaucracy.¹ The attitudes of the bureaucracy were important for progress in technology, and the education and training of women.

There had been no institutes of art and technology on Finnish soil during Swedish rule. The liberalization of economy in the 1850s and the reorganization of political life in the 1860s led to changes in the training of builders and architects. Industrial progress,

¹ Esa KONTTINEN, Perinteisesti moderniin. Profioiden yhteiskunnallinen synty Suomessa , Tampere, Vastapaino, p. 16-23.

especially from the 1870s onwards led to the founding of new engineering works and the building of railways. All these required a large number of technicians. The increased building activity in Finnish towns introduced a new array of tasks and projects that changed the image of Finnish architecture, as the architects had earlier traditionally worked with churches as their main projects. The new situation demanded new solutions for structures and architectural problems: new town halls, schools, hospitals, railway stations, commercial buildings, and market halls. However, the number of architects in Finland was quite small, and one cannot yet talk about an architectural profession as such, as the term profession usually means a non-craftsmanlike full-time occupation based on systematic specialist training.²

In the 19th century, the technological professions soon began to address the question of who should be trained, a small elite or the “people”.³ In Finland the official status of technical training rose very slowly. Architects and civil engineers had not previously belonged to the leading groups of industry, since the educated elite consisted of academically trained civil servants. And the unspecialized nature of late-19th century architects in relation to master-builders, suggests that the profession was not yet regarded as completely specialized or apart from other groups. However, architects emphasized their artistic talent, seeing themselves as disinterested professionals trying to improve building in general.⁴

The fact remains that in Finland technological training did not reach university level for many years. In 1872 the Technical School of Helsinki was officially reorganized as the Polytechnical School, and this marked the beginning of a new type of architectural training. The curriculum of the School followed the lines of Swedish models for higher and lower-level training. However, Finnish model joined education of engineers and architects in the same institute, as this was regarded as practical. The schooling gained

² Eeva Maija VILJO: “The Architectural Profession in Finland in the Latter Half of the 19th Century”, in Pekka KORVENMAA (Ed.): *The Work of Architects*. The Finnish Association of Architects 1892–1992, Helsinki, The Finnish Association of Architects & The Finnish Building Centre Ltd, 1992, p. 26-51: 35.

³ Rolf TORSTENDAHL: *Teknologins nytta. Motiveringar för det svenska tekniska utbildningsväsendets framväxt framförd av riksdagsmän och utbildningsadministratörer 1810–1870* (Studia Historica Upsalensia 66), Upsala, Almqvist & Wicksell, 1975.

⁴ E. KONTTINEN: Perinteisesti..., 252; see also Mervi SALOKANNEL: *Arkkitehdin ammatin synty ja alkuvaiheet Suomessa* (Unpublished Graduate Thesis in Sociology), University of Jyväskylä, 1990, p. 64-70.

higher-level status when in 1879 the School became the Polytechnic Institute. Teaching of architecture was organized efficiently in the 1880s with teaching of statics and construction theory along with general architectural theory, the theory of composition, and the theory of form. After a longer planning stage, the Polytechnic Institute was reorganized again in 1908 as the Helsinki University of Technology. This did not affect, however, teaching at the Department of Architecture.⁵

Training for Women

I have previously compared the situation of the United States of America and Finland with regard to the development of the architectural profession, as neither country had long or developed traditions of professional training institutes. They both also shared a shortage of skilled labour and professionals. And one of the similarities included the early acceptance of women in systems of formal education, also in architecture. In 1880 the first woman architect graduated from Cornell University, and in 1890 Sophia Hayden became the first woman to complete the full four-year course in architecture at MIT. Although half of the existing schools of architecture refused to admit women, by 1910, 50 American women had graduated in this field.⁶ In Europe and in other Nordic countries than Finland, architectural training had traditionally been arranged in art academies, and later in universities of technology. Women were not accepted in these institutions until quite late: in Copenhagen, the first woman was admitted in 1908 to study architecture at the Royal Danish Academy, in Norway the first woman in Norway graduated from the Trondheim University of Technology in 1912, and in 1919 a woman graduated from the Stockholm University of Technology.⁷

The status of Finnish women changed in the late 19th century. In 1878 they were permitted to own land, and official freedom of trade and occupations made it possible for unmarried women to enter trades. In the 1860s, certain civil-service positions became available, and a teacher-training seminar in Jyväskylä opened higher level

⁵ Renja SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe of a Profession. Women as Architects in Finland from the 1890s to the 1950s* (Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 98), Helsinki, Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1992, p. 24-26.

⁶ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe...*, p. 28.

⁷ Ibid.

education for women.⁸ It is also relevant that education became one of the main items on the agenda of the Finnish women's movement. It had been given a clearly utilitarian role and it was expected to open important sectors of society to women, even though academic education became available for them at a slow pace. One of the reasons for this was that the Russian authorities were highly suspicious of this issue for political reasons.⁹

In the 1870s two women were granted special dispensation to study at the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki, and after 1885 their number was growing. The risen prestige of academic learning and the lack of other educational alternatives were among the factors that steered Finnish women into academic fields. In 1900 over a hundred women enrolled at the University in Helsinki.¹⁰ However, in the 1870s technical training had not reached the academic level in Finland. For prospective students, the Polytechnic Institute required a minimum age of 16 and the completion of a four-year secondary school course. The statutes made no specific mention of education being restricted to men, even though it was actually meant as such. The entrance requirements were, however, changed in 1886, and after that the matriculation examination certificate now granted automatic admission. And since the statutes retained a liberal attitude regarding supernumerary students this made it possible to admit women, who had not completed the matriculation examination.¹¹

The first five women students between 1879 and 1882 were, however, mainly interested in arts subjects, when they enrolled in the sculpture classes taught by Carl Eneas Sjöstrand at the Polytechnic Institute. Four of them were later active as artists, for instance Helene Schjerfbeck and the teacher's daughter Helmi Sjöstrand. But between 1887 and 1894 the first six women students enrolled to study architecture. They were not entitled to become regular students as they had not completed the matriculation examination, however, Wivi (Olivia) Lönn and Albertina Östman had studied at an

⁸ Riitta JALLINOJA. "Miehet ja naiset", in Tapani VALKONEN et al. (Eds.): *Suomalaiset. Yhteiskunnan rakenne teollistumisen aikana*. Porvoo, WSOY, 1983, p. 223-226.

⁹ Christine JOHANSSON: *Women's Struggle for Higher Education in Russia, 1855-1900*. Kingston & Montreal, McGill Queen's University Press, 1987, p. 19-20, 51-67; many Russian female medicine students studied in Zurich, and were in contact with the anarchist movement there.

¹⁰ R. JALLINOJA, "Miehet..", p. 226.

¹¹ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN, *The Fringe..*, p. 30.

industrial or a trade school. This exempted them from the first-year course in architecture, and they both graduated in three years. Signe Hornborg, who graduated in 1890, was probably the first architect woman in Europe to have a complete formal education in this field.¹² [Fig. 1]

The number of female students continued to grow gradually at the Polytechnic Institute, between 1896 and 1900 the seven women who began their studies were all granted the rights of regular students, and the first woman to graduate in architecture as a regular student was Blenda Nyberg in 1901. The trend of women entering to architecture studies grew between 1901 and 1908 when sixteen women enrolled, and it is important to notice that in the academic year 1903–1904 seven women began their studies at the same time. From the beginning until 1908 total of 29 women had studied at the Department of Architecture, and eighteen graduated. These students were mostly from upper- or middle-class backgrounds. Until the early years of the 20th century, most of the students in architecture were Swedish-speakers; a Finnish speaking majority came about in 1906. The teaching at the Institute operated in the Swedish language, but from 1888 onwards both languages were used according to the needs of students.¹³

The professions are regarded as aiming at permanent goals, and the formal and informal socialization of new members acquires an important role. The educational system in architecture in Europe, in guarding the power of knowledge, has adopted the role of controlling this knowledge and producing the elements of status.¹⁴ In Finland, architecture developed from a pre-modern profession into a modern one in the late 19th century. These changes coincided with the advent of women in architectural training. In spite of their studies, women appear to have disrupted the gender-based division of labour. However, to understand why this field had an appeal to women, there are few reasons. One is the fact that fewer men were applying to this field, so the competition was not that hard. Another reason may be that around this time architecture in Finland was taking on a strong role as an art. Studies in arts had always been open to women in Finland.

¹² R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN, *The Fringe..*, p. 30-31.

¹³ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, p. 31.

¹⁴ M. BURRAGE & R. TORSTENDAHL (eds.): *Professions in Theory and History. Rethinking the Study of the Professions*, London, Sage, 1990, p. 207-217.

Wivi Lönn as an architect woman

The disintegration of a gender-based monopoly on education in the late-19th-century Finland did not dissolve the male monopoly of positions in public service. The formal equality of women did not extend beyond the institutions of learning.¹⁵ However, architect women of different generations shared confidence in the prevailing meritocracy and the opportunities for advancement in one's career. But the conflict of the professional role and the separate identity of women emerged when they entered working life.

As Olivia Mathilda (Wivi) Lönn (1872–1966) was one of the early female students in architecture, there are some problems with the information of these yearly courses concerning the relations between female and male students. [Fig. 2] Wivi Lönn seemed, in any case, to get along with all her fellow students. She studied in the same course with two male students, Birger Federley and Torsten Montell, but there were other women students in the Department, one older than her (Bertha Enwald) and from 1894 one younger (Albertina Östman), who became her life-long friend. The class that was one year younger had also Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen as architectural students. Wivi Lönn, who was the older colleague for these two men, assisted their architectural firm Gesellius – Lindgren – Saarinen in several occasions. She became a family friend with Armas Lindgren's family and had also a firm together with him. So, even though there were not many female students when she studied architecture, she was able to form her own kind of professional circle from the early years on.¹⁶ We should remember, however, that the pioneering women must have had difficulties, also Wivi Lönn, even though the teachers seemed to act friendly, though confused. She has recalled how the principal of the Polytechnic Institute remarked to her: “Miss, how can you have the courage to come here, with all these men around?”¹⁷

Wivi Lönn graduated in architecture at the time when professional discourse focused strongly on the forms of a national architecture and the opportunities opened up by new materials. She was actually one of the young architects who introduced both

¹⁵ Raija HUHTANEN: "Naisten virkakelpoisuuden historiallista tarkastelua", *Oikeus*, 2, 1983, 94-95.

¹⁶ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Interview with Wivi Lönn by Kyllikki Halme 23.10.1958. In the archive of Museum of Finnish Architecture.

international innovations and their “national” versions. She did not, however, adopt the most romantic concepts of the time, as from the very beginning of her career; her works stressed rationality, structures, functionality of space, and economy. Her collaboration with Armas Lindgren and their joint works were viewed, however, in the contemporary criticism mostly as the works by the male partner.

Wivi Lönn’s career is special because she was the first Finnish woman to have an independent architectural office of her own. She was responsible for a large number of projects between 1898 and 1945, including several significant public buildings, and some of them were commissioned as the results of architectural competitions.¹⁸ Her ability in technical and structural design can have its roots in the fact that she began her education at the Tampere industrial school for master-builders. She transferred her studies from there to the Department of Architecture, prior to graduating as a master-builder.

Her career as an architect for private schools began already two years after her graduating as an architect, when she was in 1898 commissioned to design the building of a girls’ school in Tampere, the same school where she had been a pupil. The total number of schools she designed all over the country was over thirty. And at the beginning of the 20th century she had more commissions than she could effectively handle, making it necessary to enlarge her office and employ her first assistants.

Wivi Lönn won most of the architectural competitions between invited entrants which were held in the city of Tampere in the early years of the 20th century.

Lönn and her architecture in Tampere

The industrial city of Tampere in the Pirkanmaa region of southern Finland was founded in 1779 by a waterfall. It grew to be one of the most important industrial centres in Finland during the 19th century, when for instance Scottish industrialists started their businesses there. By 1900 Tampere was the third largest city in Finland, and the city planning had to take into account the growing number of city population.¹⁹

¹⁸ For information on her career, see R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe...*, p. 43-63, 97-100.

¹⁹ Paula KIVINEN: *Tampereen jugend, arkkitehtuuri – taideteollisuus*, Helsinki, Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1992, 13-14.

The redevelopment of the city centre started in the end of the 1890s; especially the new banking business and large commercial buildings were constructed in the place of the earlier wooden buildings. Also new infrastructure with drainage and water system was developed. An interesting fact is that quite many of the new bigger official buildings were constructed after an architectural competition. One of the most important buildings of this kind was the new Lutheran church, designed by architect Lars Sonck.²⁰

Wivi Lönn was originally from Tampere, she grew and attended her first schools there. Her father died quite young when she was only 16 years old. This might be one of the reasons for her to try to find an occupation as soon as possible. Her relation to her mother was very warm, and mother was very supporting for her choices of further education. This was also needed when she started her studies in 1892 at the Tampere Industrial School to become a master-builder, among 13 young men. Her earlier education was, however, higher than these men had, and her teacher, architect Georg Schreck must have been aware that she was very talented in mathematics and drawing. This made it easy for her to enter the Helsinki Polytechnical Institute in 1893.²¹

After graduating from the Polytechnical Institute in 1896, her teacher, architect Gustaf Nyström, who had had her as a trainee in his architectural office, recommended her for a travel grant in 1898 to go and study granite and brick architecture in England, Scotland and Continental Europe. At the same time she received her first commission to design a large institution building. The client was her former school, the Finnish Girl's School in Tampere, and this commission gave her a reason to study also the design of English school buildings. She sought solutions undressed stone architecture in Aberdeen, in Scotland, where only few earlier Finnish architects had been. She also received permission from local authorities to visit all the schools in Aberdeen area, from where she adopted a number of ideas for school design. Of these, hygiene, cleanliness, and plans focusing on halls were also applied in her later school projects.²²

Almost immediately after the completion of the Girl's School project in December 1902, she had another opportunity to test her skills in this area of architecture. As the city of Tampere was growing fast, there was a need to have new primary schools. In

²⁰ Pekka KORVENMAA, *Innovation versus Tradition: the Architect Lars Sonck* (Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 96), Helsinki, Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1991.

²¹ P. KIVINEN, *Tampereen jugend..*, 1992, 34-35.

²² R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, 1992, 97-98.

February 1903 the municipal authorities declared a design competition for the school, and the entries were limited to local architects. The invited entrants were architects August Krook, Wivi Lönn, Lambert Pettersson, Georg Schreck, and Albertina Östman.²³ Wivi Lönn's project received first prize, which finally marked her entry into the profession, as this event has often been given major importance in art-historical and architectural studies.²⁴

Lönn made her professional debut with two school projects, one of which fulfilled also the main criterion of public exposure, i.e. first prize in a competition. In later years, her "name" became specifically associated with the design of schools. However, this primary school competition was not an easy process for her. As Finnish architecture was an almost completely male domain in the early years of the 20th century, the attitudes of her male colleagues, and sometimes also clients, contained elements of discrimination. The winning entry of Lönn for the Alexander Primary School in Tampere in 1903 was publicly reviewed and criticized. Her local colleagues, the architects Lambert Pettersson and August Krook, officially complained to the city council that her winning entry did not follow the instructions of the competition. The Helsinki architects Valter Thomé and Bertel Jung had been asked to review the entries, and when they came to conclusion that almost all the entries differed from the instructions, the complaint was put down by the city council. Krook and Pettersson, finally, proposed that the winning entry might be lead to good, especially if they can give suggestions to the winner. So, in this first major success of Wivi Lönn's career, her elder colleagues publicly questioned her professional competence. And, even though the result was positive for her, as the jury supported her entry, this clearly shows the circumstances that prevailed in this profession.

Wivi Lönn's architecture in Tampere culminated in 1905 in a restricted competition for the building of Tampere's main fire station. Again, the invited entrants were the local architects Birger Federley, August Krook, Wivi Lönn, Toivo Paatela, Lambert Pettersson and Georg Schreck. And again the winning entry was designed by Lönn, of which the jury said it to be overwhelming. The male participants did again find several

²³ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, 1992, 98.

²⁴ See e.g. Vappu LEPISTÖ: *Kuvataiteilija taidemaailmassa. Tapaustutkimus kuvataiteellisen toiminnan sosiaalipsykologisista merkityksistä* (Tutkijaliiton julkaisusarja 70), Helsinki, Tutkijaliitto, 1991, 29.

faults in the winning project, and when we consider that one of the male participants had left three separate entries, his disappointment must have been severe. But the city council ordered the project from Wivi Lönn in February 1906, and she started to work with the final drawings.²⁵

The chief fire officer in Tampere, who also was an architect, had been on a study trip to Berlin and Sweden to see new solutions in fire station building. He was especially interested in the new Malmö fire station, and Lönn had probably discussed this issue with him, as the Tampere fire station in fact has a similar arrangement of spaces. However, Lönn was able to use her knowledge of undressed stone architecture from Aberdeen, when she designed the façade of this building. Her ability to take account the building site is very clear in this case. The building is placed on an irregular lot, and she made the building to curve, so that the most important element, the shelters for fire-extinguishing equipment had more space. She was at this time also very competent to use reinforced concrete structures for her buildings. The project was completed in the autumn of 1908.²⁶

Women's Place in Architecture in Finland

The leading institutions of Finnish architecture, whose systems of rules and norms guided the processes of becoming an architect and operating as one, concerned firstly education and training. Secondly the role of the professional associations grew to be quite important in the beginning of the 20th century. These organizations not only controlled their members, but as architectural competitions came under increasing control, this sector began to supervise the profession as a whole.²⁷

Graduates in architecture usually found their first employment in the architect's offices of their teachers. Some of them also got minor positions at the state Board of Public Works and Buildings. Also women graduates in architecture began their careers along these routes. However, for them, a professional role entailed different individual choices and aims. As a group, they experienced, anyhow, similar problems in trying to combine careers with family life with professional competence, acceptance, and recognition. As

²⁵ P. KIVINEN, *Tampereen jugend.*, 1991, 55-57.

²⁶ P. KIVINEN, *Tampereen jugend.*, 1991, 58-60.

²⁷ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe.*, 1992, 96.

the individual choices differed, it is difficult to outline any general image of their professional aims. Their entry into working life reflects the importance of education and training for all of them.

One of the first personal choices faced by young architect women concerned combining one's career with family life. Of the 18 women, who began their studies at the Polytechnic Institute, 13 eventually married. Eight of these marriages were with fellow architect or engineer, and only three women completely gave up work after marriage. Marriage thus had a definite influence on careers. Those who had married colleagues usually continued in tasks more or less corresponding to their training. They could have a joint office or partnership with their husband. Of the early architect women, only Wivi Lönn, who never married, had her own office from the beginning of her career.²⁸

Unlike the visual arts, architecture did not have a medium of public exposure such as exhibitions. This meant that commissions became an important means of creating name for oneself in architecture. One's first major commission was a debut marking one's entry onto the scene, and into one's own generation of fellow-artists.

Wivi Lönn had almost fifty years of active professional life, and she designed a total of thirty schools in different parts of Finland. Her reputation as a skilled designer of large school buildings and a winner of many competitions ensured a stream of commissions also for other institution buildings. In her own professional ambitions, she clearly preferred commissions of this kind, at least in the first decade of the 20th century. She received a large number of private commissions for villa, too, but in later years mentioned that her time was taken up by too many of these "minor jobs".²⁹

Even in institutional architecture, a network of personal contacts was essential to Lönn's relations with her clients. She had many acquaintances, and as a recognized and economical architect, she appealed to organizations and bodies that wished to use services of architect women. In other countries, organizations such as the YWCA preferred architect women in their projects.³⁰ One of the earliest projects in this sector for Lönn was a home economics school in Tampere, which was commissioned from her

²⁸ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, 1992, 97.

²⁹ Interview with Wivi Lönn by Kyllikki Halme 23.10.1958. In the archive of Museum of Finnish Architecture.

³⁰ In the United States Julia Morgan designed a large number of buildings for the YWCA, see Sara H., BOUTELLE: *Julia Morgan, Architect*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1988, 87-106.

in 1902, soon after the girl's school project. And over the years she received many commissions of this kind: in 1906 a kindergarten teachers' institute in Helsinki, in 1907 a home economic school in Karjaa, in 1911 a crafts and home economics school in Naantali, and even as late as the 1920s, her contacts brought her one of her largest commissions, the YWCA building in Helsinki.³¹

Her attitude regarding work was so all-encompassing that it excluded any consideration of having a family. In her old age she once observed: "I have been so interested in my work that I haven't had time for anything else".³² However, she travelled abroad every year, and these trips combined holiday and working, as she visited exhibitions and projects related to her work, often spending time in Switzerland, or the spas of Central Europe, especially Wiesbaden. She had also close contacts with younger architect women, some of them also worked in her office. She was warmly disposed towards Architecta, an association of younger architect women founded in 1942. The launching of this association happened on the 70th birthday of Wivi Lönn in May 1942, when 46 architect women met at architect Elsi Borg's and her husband's Anton Lindfors's studio-apartment in Helsinki. They wanted to honour the "Grand Old Lady of Finnish Architecture". This first meeting led to this new association.³³

It is difficult, however, to establish a connection between Wivi Lönn as an individual and her role as an artist-architect. She did not reveal much of her private life, and was even mostly reticent in professional matters, preferring to remain outside the organizations responsible for decision making in the field. Her name as an architect of institutions was for many decades absent from the written history of Finnish architecture, even though she specialized in an important area of architecture and introduced a number of significant innovations.

Illustrations:

Fig. 1 The first women students at the Department of Architecture of the Polytechnic Institute in Helsinki 1879–1908. Renja Suominen-Kokkonen.

³¹ R. SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN: *The Fringe..*, 1992, 99.

³² Interview with Wivi Lönn by Kyllikki Halme 23.10.1958. In the archive of Museum of Finnish Architecture.

³³ Ilmi HAAPIO: *Architecta 1942–1952*. Helsinki, Architecta, Suomen naisarkkitehtien yhdistys, 1982, 1-3. (Stencil)

Fig. 2 Wivi Lönn's passport photo ca. 1910. Wivi Lönn Collection, the Oulu University Library, Finland.