

Strand 2. Art Nouveau and Politics in the Dawn of Globalisation

Architecture, Regionalism, Politics: Finland at the dawn of the 20th century

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Abstract

Finland in 1900 was an autonomous Grand Duchy as a part of the vast Russian empire of the Romanovs. A movement of national awakening had grown steadily since the mid-19th century and a conscious nation-building process began to escalate in the 1890s. All arts took part in this effort in creating a culture which could be seen as distinctively Finnish. Architecture was a key player in this context. At the same time Russia began to curb the autonomous rights of Finland, wanting it to be more closely integrated to the Empire. Waves of oppression followed and any political action of nationalist kind was impossible. Hence the arts, architecture and design included, became a channel to highlight the local, independent character of the Grand Duchy, looking forward to eventual national independence which Finland reached in 1917.

Keywords: architecture, regionalism, center, province, periphery, cultural policies, nationalism, patriotism, localisms, invented heritage

Finnish architecture underwent a tumultuous and fast-paced change in the period from around the mid-1890s to the latter part of the first decade of the 20th century.¹ A succession of events was characterized by a synergy in which several factors vital for the flourishing² of innovative architecture came together in an interaction of cultural, societal and economic factors – the geopolitically perilous situation giving the general mood. Since the late 1890s Russia began to curb the autonomy of Finland in an effort to integrate it more closely with the Empire. Waves of oppression followed: the free press was hurt, the Russian police used letter censorship, the Cossacks were on the streets. It was not possible to act politically without ending to Siberia. But through culture and the arts it was possible to expose patriotism in a symbolical and even crypted way. The czarist police was not capable to decipher cultural codes.

In outlining the routes taken in the developing of western architectural knowledge in Finland, the first source has been Sweden and especially Stockholm, which was also Finland's capital until 1809, when Finland was annexed to Russia. The Swedish capital continued to act as an overwhelmingly important generator and transmitter of ideas. However, especially from the early 19th century, Germany acted as a main source of innovations of a formal, ideological and technological nature. These innovations came to Finland either filtered through Sweden, or directly, from study trips and printed material coming from Germany. The directors of the National Bureau of Building as well as the educational system in architecture also came from Germany. Throughout the 19th century Germany rose steadily in Finnish estimation, not only in architecture, but also in the entire development of Finland's civic institutions and industrial-economic infrastructure.

¹ It is not possible to list all vital research on the topic discussed here. Among them, see Pekka KORVENMAA, *Innovation Versus Tradition. The Architecture of Lars Sonck. Works and Projects 1900-1910*. Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja 96, Helsinki, 1991; Pekka KORVENMAA, *Miedzy centrum a prowincja. Zalety periferii. Ztuka okoto 1900 w Europie Srodkowej*. Cracow, 1997; Silvija GROSA (ed.), *Art Nouveau – Time and Space*, Riga 1999; Ritva WÄRE, *From Historicist Architecture to Early Modernism*, In: Marja-Riitta NORRI, Elina STANDERTSKJÖLD, Wilfried WANG (eds.), *20th Century Architecture Finland*, Helsinki, 2000. On Finnish material in an international context see Barbara MILLER LANE, *National Romanticism in Germany and the Nordic Countries*, Mass. and New York, 2000.

In the east, one of the leading metropolitan European cities was St.Petersburg, the capital of Russia. Eastern Finland had developed intensive trade relations with that urban region, and as Finland was a part (admittedly autonomous, but still politically subordinate) of Russia, it would be natural to expect some dependency on this radiant center of culture. But St.Petersburg did not act as a dominant force in Finnish architecture during the years discussed here. Reasons for this were mainly political: the intense Russification of Finnish society, which started in the late 1890s, resulted in an architecture both intensely oriented towards the West (Scandinavia, the Continent, England and even the USA) and stimulated by a cultural patriotism that served as one ingredient in the architecture of these years. In its attempts to curb the autonomy of the Grand Duchy, Russia actually strengthened the nationbuilding process in Finland, where cultural manifestations, including architecture, were of great importance while political action was impossible.

At the advent of the 20th century a remarkable acceleration became apparent in the mode by which the ideas stemming from both traditional centers of stylistic dominance and new, emerging loci of innovation reached Finland. For centuries the region had been the receiver and slow transformer of ideas that made their way gradually from the Continent, finally reached the major cities, and, even later, the backlands. During the 19th century the time lag between foreign innovation and its implementation in peripheral Finland diminished, and in the last years of the century international currents were still followed without great originality, but with a heightened quality of adaptation. Then, simultaneously with the surfacing of attempts to overthrow the conventionalized idiom of Western architecture with its adherence to historical periodization in greater centers like Vienna, Paris and Berlin, as well as in "new" locations such as Glasgow, Nancy and Brussels, and unforeseen stream of architectural knowledge became available via the rapidly-developing photographic printing industry. Architectural journals, many of them initiated in the 1890s and devoted to the publishing of works of arts regarded as "modern" were now able to reproduce, thus opening the geographic, but no longer intellectual, periphery of Finland to a medium of far more concrete and exact impressions of the international scene of events. Knowledge of recent

architecture became available almost instantaneously with its first appearance, and at a moment when Finnish architects and their patrons, with their building commissions, were ready to utilize it.

This newly-attained ability to assimilate and process information for independent growth relied on the overall sociocultural and economic changes Finland was going through around the turn of the century. First,, Finland's economy was on the upswing from the last years of the 19th century until the middle of WWI. This signified a massive growth in building which coincided with intensive urbanization and re-structuring, especially of such centers as Helsinki, Tampere, Turku and Viipuri – the most important urban sites. In terms of the formal development of architecture, the time between design, execution and completion was diminished. Secondly, Finland had developed a modern infrastructure of social institutions, education and culture. This included the domestic education of architects beginning in 1873, which provided a fresh generation of competitive professionals to the open capitalist market of artistic expertise.³ By the 1890s polytechnically-educated Finnish architects had formed a distinct and collegially-bound profession, defining itself as separate from civil engineers, but closely allied with visual artists. In these years Finnish architects were able to legitimize their broad field of professional expertise, ranging from crafts and the design of buildings to city planning. Free competition, enabled by new rules, established in 1893, for open architectural competitions, forced the older generation of architects to step from anonymity into the realm of engagement in the battle of ideas and the professional testing of innovation capacity. In this way the generation born in the 1870s – among them Lars Sonck, Eliel Saarinen and Armas Lindgren, of the same age group as their international counterparts Joseph Maria Olbrich, Josef Hoffmann and Charles Rennie Macintosh gained a surprisingly rapid and successful entry into the operational field of design and construction. Thus a remarkable generational shift both in culture economics favoured also the "new Finnish" and "modern" architecture: many of their clients came from the newly- emerging middle class of entrepreneurs and financiers. Third, the Grand Duchy was gaining momentum in its process of nation-building,

³ On the profession of Finnish architects see: Pekka KORVENMAA (ed.), *The Work of Architects. The Finnish Association of Architects 1892-1992*, Helsinki, 1992.

with attempts to formulate the country in terms of a nation-state with aspirations for a full independence. In this situation an individual culture, including architecture, was vital to the presentation of Finland as a modern, independently creative society. All this had an embedded political message: patriotically connotated architecture carried a message from a region attempting to carve its own cultural space between the dominance of West and the East.

Cultural dissemination is only one part of the process of reformulating or overcasting the conventions of a special context. If the mechanisms of the receiving partner are strongly resistant to the flow of new ideas – in this case such as the strong dominance of an academic, classicist dogma – change is not solidified. The assimilation process requires a functional field that finds the information productive, wanted and welcome. Without this the existence of this in Finland around 1900 the impulses from Wagner, Behrens, Van de Velde, Olbrich and many others would not have accelerated latent and locally-prepared Finnish tendencies. At this moment in Finland, architects were conscious of a diversity of current trends: one or a few centers no longer dominated the dissemination and channeling of ideas. The new generation also travelled extensively and the sheer volume of available information about architecture, both past and present, had grown. This allowed conscious selectivity where the peripheral position of Finland became an advantage. The tendency to remain a province overwhelmed by one or a few powerful sources of ideas was replaced by a selective and creative transformation of impulses from several centers, mostly European but also American. Adding to this, efforts towards regional differentiation in the carving-out of a visible niche between East and West, and the inventive integration of foreign and local became keys to originality. The interplay between architectural modernity, represented for example by the Art Nouveau and the Viennese Modern, and localisms were linked to ideas of cultural territorialism. This was also the case with the role of tradition.

Localisms vs. Modernity

In its search for originality. local character and, at the same time, modernity, Finnish architecture ca. 1900 turned to anti-classicism, archaisms and a non-imitative use of medieval themes, rather than toward historical periodicity or correctness vis-à-vis exemplary

monuments from the architectural past of the West.⁴ A diffuse "Nordic" character was one of the goals, and when historical material was used it was often Trans-Alpine in origin, referring to regions and periods not associated with the Greco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean, with its later revivals. Instead, adaptations of motifs from Assyria and Egypt, as well as from Continental and Nordic early Romanesque periods were favored. Locally, Finnish medieval churches and castles, with their heavy and, in comparison with their continental models, simplified forms and rudimentary materials, served as ingredients in a synthesis that strove for originality. Instead of the "centers" of historical knowledge, more "peripheral" phenomena were sought in order to find fresh ground in history – which was now to serve modernization. There was no actual antagonism between this delving into the deep strata of history and the effort to give expression to modern functions. The renewed consciousness of history resulted in archaisms, and these served to attain innovation and achieve a-historical and diffuse levels of reference.

In Finland archaisms and the creation of mytho-historical layers of building stock mainly involved the reduction of forms and ornamentation, the use of robust masonry, and post-and-beam themes that referred back to the early history of tectonics. Straightforward reference to history was rejected in favor of a multi-level synthesis. The past was not doctrinaire, but a starting point for free elaboration. The result included new, urban structures such as banks and apartment blocks, built in form associated vaguely with archaic material, folklore or medieval village churches. Allusions to a diffusely paraphrased past, together with elements from contemporary international material, served to express the functional modernity required by a rapidly developing urban infrastructure.

These features and combinations of elements from a partly fabricated history were realized in overscaled stone masonry – not loadbearing, but a surfacing applied to brick construction – and an extremely reductive architecture that served mainly as an expression of private and

⁴ Barbara MILLER LANE, *Modern German Architecture*, In: Richard ETLIN (ed.), *Nationalism in the Visual Arts*, Washington, 1991.

public functions. Another kind of "history" was adapted for private houses and villas in small towns and suburban and rural locations: the vernacular that expressed the past and even present of the "Volk" and suited patriotic and regional aspirations. Even around 1900 Finnish vernacular building practice was dominated by wood, with timber construction laid horizontally and joined at the corners. This technique was in the 1890s revitalized by artists and architects, and elevated from the "low" medium of everyday peasant reality to the "high" sphere of culture, where it was assimilated along with the modernizing tendencies of the emerging national-regional culture. The tradition was unbroken and real, but in the process of elevation and modification it passed through a phase of re-invention and cultural processing before being accepted into the prevailing cultural context. Models for this assimilation were sought in the fringes of the cultural territory regarded as Finnish, from areas in which it was believed that an unspoiled past was preserved, unaffected by industrialism, societal or intellectual modernity, or even by the printed word. All this was found in the borderland of Finland and Russia, in Eastern Karelia with its well-preserved timber villages. They fulfilled the quest for the original, the primitive and hence the archaic. Used dominantly in rural context timber paneling with heavy wooden elements were also used in an urban context, in interiors, as a reference to regionalism and to the native and now romanticized building tradition. This material also brought to urbanism connotations of purity and simplicity, and of roots anchored in a rural past.

The mixture of archaizing and medievalist references with continental modernity dominated buildings by architects such as Lars Sonck; the office of Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen; Valter Thomé, Usko Nyström and several others between 1900-1905. (*figs 1,2*) At that time Finnish architecture had reached a stage in which it functioned as part of a contemporary, international network. Its mode of operation was that of interaction, and no longer consisted merely of the modification of impulses stemming from other centers. Finland, or rather the capital Helsinki, had become a minor architectural center with an international impact especially in the Baltic region. Its architectural solutions were published not only in the Nordic countries, the Baltic provinces and Hungary, but also in Germany, in such leading journals as *Moderne Bauformen* and *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*.

But already by 1905 the tidal wave of formal individualism, extreme picturesqueness and yearning for "Finnish" mytho-archaic allusions expressed in rough stone and timber came to an end. That year saw the completion of the Helsinki Telephone Company building by Sonck, the ultimate *tour de force* of a sculpted facade in multi-colored granite. (fig. 3) This only one year before the shift toward even treatment of the facade surface, axiality, and even classicism appeared. By 1906 all leading architects in Finland had abandoned the approach which was later labeled "National Romanticism".(fig. 4) The new, less idiosyncratic approach, that now even accepted columnar facades, was more suitable for the development of coherent urban entities and streetscapes. The battle against the international, late 19th century historicism was over and the basic principles of classicism were again accepted but now stripped of straightforward stylistic references.

Postscript

With this severely compressed outline of events I have attempted to demonstrate – using architecture as a case – how it was possible around year 1900 for a geographically and culturally peripheral European region, the Autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland as a part of the mighty Empire of Russia, to rise into a self-consciousness of its limited assets and how to use them in a tactically optimal manner. These events were not formulated into a deliberate action program. But certainly the precarious and politically threatened position spurred in culture a concerted effort to generate expressions that would mark the territory "Finland" as a self-supporting cultural entity, capable of creating works of not only local value but noticed also internationally and even exerting influence abroad. The "leap" from the conditions of the mid-1890s to the situation in 1910 was considerable by any measures. – In hindsight we can trace a couple of concepts which were operative although not consciously formulated at the time discussed. A crucial one is the division of center, province and periphery.⁵ Center, yes, we know dominates like Viennese architecture dominated the Austro-Hungarian realm. A province, on the other hand, is depending on one dominating center, as so many cities and regions were of Vienna, Berlin, Paris. But then we have the periphery. Under favourable

⁵ The author is indebted for this division to the renown late Polish art historian Jan Bialostocki. Discussions with Bialostocki, Washington, 1986 at CIHA World Conference.

conditions and concerted efforts peripheries can absorb elements from several centers and mix them with local elements and skill. The result is a creative periphery. I am arguing that this was valid regarding Finnish culture, including architecture, In this way the term periphery is not diminutive but entails a possibility for originality. In Finland the culture and arts supported the broader and more complex set of events of nation-building. Which, then, became politics leading to national sovereignty.

Curriculum Vitae

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