ARCHITECTURE

Helsinki Jugendstil Architecture: 1895-1915

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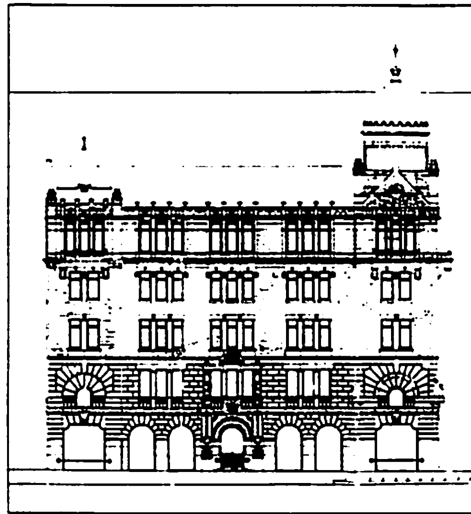
AT A TIME WHEN NATIONALISTIC FEELings are running high among the various peoples of the Soviet Union, it is fascinating to examine a moment in history that exemplifies self-conscious national expression in neighboring Finland, whose capital Helsinki is located just a few miles from Tallinn, Estonia, across the Gulf of Finland. It was at the turn of the century that the Finns, then living under Russian rule with a long history of prior Swedish domination, sought to assert their own identity through the Finnish language, decorative arts, and most clearly through architecture.

The Jugendstil movement, born and nurtured in Brussels, Paris, Vienna, and Munich just before 1900, formed the basis for cultural expression that came to be called National Romanticism in Finland. Renewed interest in the Kalevala, the Finnish national epic, sparked a search for the roots of Finnish folk culture in vernacular log buildings and farm houses of Karelia, a passion for the romance of rural forms, and a keen appreciation for furniture and crafts—all part of an effort to distinguish that which was intrinsically Finnish from Russian, German, or Swedish influences. It is no accident that this surge in artistic expression, which turned the little wooden town of Helsinki almost overnight into an exuberant and animated city of stone and brick, set the scene for national independence, won at last in World War I.

Helsinki Jugendstil gives tantalizing pictorial evidence that the city still is dominated by its Jugendstil buildings. It is a maze of villas and apartment flats plastered in yellow, pink, rust, and white, topped with colorful roofs of iron, copper, and tile, and detailed with brick, wood, and wrought iron. Its banks, publishing houses, and office buildings are constructed of heavily rusticated granite, decorated with intricate geometric patterns and images of bears, fish,



The 1901 Pohjola Fire Insurance Building by Gesellius, Lindren, Saarinen.

owls, and reindeer carved into capitals, pediments, friezes, and balustrades. The city's short blocks produced an abundance of corner sites, often highlighted by projecting turrets, towers, and large bay windows. Doorways are deep and doors are massive; entrances are often whimsically cavelike. Windows are round, square, arched, and tapered in a variety of ways, and often feature stained glass, which casts amber, blue, and celadon-colored light into what must have been rather dim interiors, lit by gas lamps and heated only by small, tiled stoves.

Eliel Saarinen is the best known architect of those who practiced in Helsinki at the turn of the century—known in the U.S. because of his eventual emigration to America, and also among non-architects because he inevitably is confused with his son, Eero. Other architects who worked and thrived in the tiny Baltic capital are Lars Sonck, Selim Lindquist, and Wivi Lonn, one of the first woman architects with her own office. Saarinen's railroad station, with its tall, rounded tower, designed in 1914, is still the major landmark in Helsinki's cityscape of buildings no higher than six or seven stories. Likewise, the massive stone tower of Sonck's Kallio Church still rises high above the Kallio neighborhood, an area that grew to accommodate workers' housing and industry in the last years of the 19th century. The other key urban landmark from the period is the brick and stone spire of the National Museum, designed just a few years earlier by the prolific firm of Gesellius Lingren Saarinen, headed by three partners who collaborated for nearly a decade.

The book is an unequalled resource for visitors interested in exploring the visual uniqueness of Helsinki—by armchair or on foot. As a walking tour guide, though, the book is limited by its large format and size (more than 300 pages). A paperback version would be welcome, but only if such an edition maintained the large scale of the maps. One additional limitation of the book, though a curious one, is the fact that through its beautiful photographs it manages to convey the idea that Helsinki is always bright, clear, and sunny. In fact, it rains often in Finland, it can be gloomy and cloudy for long periods of time. The splendid light of long summer days is counterbalanced by the dismal darkness of long winter days. And the darkness plays a key role in the culture itself. The authors correspondingly have included an assessment of climate as a design factor. How well do buildings respond to the northern climate? In what ways do they enhance the cityscape in the gray months of the year?

Possibly the single most provocative aspect of Helsinki Jugendstil is its careful documentation of the cross-currents of design thought at the turn of the century, when revolutionary fervor mingled freely with artistic effort. In charts and diagrams, the book itemizes the places to which young Finnish architects traveled and where they studied, and cites important international exhibitions and publications that they saw, including the influential exhibit of Frank Lloyd Wright's work in Berlin in 1909. Only with such tangible evidence of exchange can we trace the circuit of ideas and begin to evaluate a nation's own style, if such an entity truly exists. ■

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