

**From Cottages to Concrete: Exchanges with North America in 1960s Finnish architecture
through the work of Heikki & Mirja Castrén**

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Abstract:

The 1960s in Finland were a period of experimentation with concrete, steel, and color, that coincided with a period of rapid economic growth and urbanization. In the building industry, the role of the architect evolved to become a civil servant in a way, entrusted to alleviate shortages in housing and commercial space. Heikki Castrén and his wife Mirja were a pair of such designers, collaborating with the “prophet of Finnish brutalism,” Viljo Revell, before launching their prolific joint career. Regrettably, today they are mostly associated with the “ugliest building in Helsinki,” and offices that may be nondescript by today’s standards. However, their works serve as an underappreciated blend of cultural, technical, and social influences that speak to their time. Shaped by formative years working in Toronto, their career reflects the flow of modernist architectural ideas between North America and Finland during the mid-20th century. With little coverage in English, the projects have been lumped into wider trends of Finnish architecture and have lacked oral histories and personal narratives to better contextualize them; these include the iconic Helsinki City Center, innovative Pohjola Insurance Building, and intimate Skata cottages.

Keywords:

Helsinki, modernism, architecture, oral narratives, Heikki & Mirja Castrén

Introduction:

Presumably, few travelers stepping out from Helsinki's art nouveau central railway station give a second thought to the modernist, concrete block of the City Center before them, and understandably so. It has been immortalized in the public imagination as a symbol for the regrettable demolition of neo-classical architecture in Helsinki's historic core during a period where developers removed the old and ornate, in favor of the new and pragmatic. However, every building has a story, and beginning here would be a disservice to the richness of the City Center, its modernist siblings, and the driven cohort of young Finnish architects behind them. One way to garner empathy for these overlooked buildings as a valuable piece of Finland's architectural timeline is by humanizing them with stories of the men and women behind the drafting tables. This paper will attempt to reinterpret the contentious legacy of 1960s Finnish architecture through the perspective of one such couple that traveled together, designed together, and built together.

The careers of Heikki and Mirja Castrén reveal how architecture can be interpreted through family stories and public narratives, and how architecture has been shaped by the international cross-pollination of ideas. In their story, working in Toronto instilled experiences and lessons on modernism through a North American perspective which they carried back to their projects in Finland.

Three key projects are used to discuss the Castréns' careers concerning the North American influences. They are the Helsinki City Center (1960), the Pohjola Insurance Building (1964), and the Skata Cottages (started in 1953). A brief literature review of each project will be included in their respective sections.

The paper's wider themes of Finnish mid-century architecture and North American influences in the field have been covered in academia, but there are opportunities for advancing the research.

First, the existing literature on Finnish architecture written in English that does exist, often centers its analysis on starchitects like Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto, as reminded by Saija Silén in her master's thesis.¹ Though the attention on these greats is merited, this paper will seek to broaden the academic discourse beyond the functionalist icons to the overshadowed fleet of "ordinary," bureaucrat-like architects in Finland during the 1960s. This period was characterized by a change in the guard as a new cohort of young architects took the mantle from their masters. Fortunately, this cohort's contributions have recently garnered increased attention in Finnish architectural circles through the Finnish Architecture Museum's essay collection, which title translates to *More colorful, happier, more sophisticated - Perspectives on 1960s Architecture*.² These essays provide context of changes in the architect's profession that the Castréns were stepping into which the editors describe as characterized by socialization, pre-fabrication, experimentation, and a fading concept of working under a singular maestro.³

¹Saija Silén. "Finnish-American Architecture and Architects in Northern and Eastern Parts of the United States of America 1850-1950 from Rural Tradition to Urban Ideal," 2008. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/19741>.

²Juhani Lahti et al., *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi - Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Finnish Architecture Museum, 2016).

³Aino Niskanen, "Murros, arkkitehtisukupolvet & uusi estetiikka," in *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi. Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Arkkitehtuurimuseo, 2016), 34–63. 63

Second, Finnish-American connections in design and architecture over the period have been made in academia, but mostly focus on the macro-scale by writing about design exhibitions. For example, it has been established that the U.S. sought to convey soft power during the Cold War era through State Department-sponsored initiatives such as the American Home exhibition by MoMA, which visited Helsinki's Taidehalli (Art Hall) in 1953. Expertly discussed by design historian Gay McDonald, the exhibition focused on American advancements in the design and production methods for kitchen appliances, textiles, and furniture such as those by another designer couple Charles and Ray Eames.⁴ However, the exhibition and corresponding analysis focused on the scale of objects in the home, not the building scale. Researchers approaching the topic from a consumer culture and economics angle have argued these exhibitions were overall well received by the public, even as they highlighted the material wealth disparities between Finnish and American society, especially by showcasing cars and beauty products, but also a general "American Spirit."⁵ The literal import of thoughts and ideologies through exhibitions is interesting but does not explain how such ideas were realized in Finnish buildings. In short, existing literature is lacking on how North American modernism percolated into the works of individual architects.

The driving question of the thesis is then what American architectural ideas were imported to Finland from the Americas in the 1960s, and how were they adapted to fit the Finnish context. The Castréns are a useful vessel to explore the flow of ideas due to their career-long connections to the continent. The pair spent a formative period in Toronto in 1959-60, their mentor Viljo Revell pioneered modernist building practices in Finland, and the couple formed deep friendships with American colleagues as their office internationalized. Grounding the analysis of an otherwise intangible and high-level subject matter in the careers of a specific designer is useful. To achieve this, especially when the subject matter is a non-architect, a new methodology is warranted.

The methodology for this paper is composed of the following techniques: primary sources from the period, contemporary secondary sources, oral history, and the theory of global flow of ideas.

The first two of these are conventional and serve as roots of the paper. The archives of *Arkkitehti*, the Finnish Architectural Review, feature essays, drawings, and period photos of the Castréns's work from the 50s to the 70s. Secondary sources include surveys of their now aging buildings and mentions across Finnish-language books and journals through Finna, an archival search service from the National Library of Finland.

However, as the earlier discussion on hesitantly received exhibitions reveals, the intentions of design are not always received in the expected way by their audiences. Therefore, relying on the voices of curators and historians alone limits our capacity. Fortunately, there is an increasing interest in using personal narratives and oral histories to conduct research in architectural history, a movement embodied by Janina Gosseye and her team at ETH Zürich in their recent book.⁶ It advocates for listening to the stories of users instead of solely architects on a soapbox. However, with Heikki and Mirja's career, we have the opposite problem. The public, and especially newspapers have been the

⁴ Gay McDonald, "The Modern American Home as Soft Power: Finland, MoMA and the 'American Home 1953' Exhibition," *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 4 (2010): 387–408.

⁵ Visa Heinonen and Mika Pantzar, "'Little America': The Modernisation of the Finnish Consumer Society in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Americanisation in 20th Century Europe: Business, Culture, Politics. Volume 2*, ed. Nick Tiratsoo and Mathias Kipping, Histoire et Littérature Du Septentrion (IRHiS) (Lille: Publications de l'Institut de recherches historiques du Septentrion, 2002), 41–59, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.irhis.1940>.

⁶ Janina Gosseye, Naomi Stead, and Deborah Van der Plaats, eds., *Speaking of Buildings: Oral History in Architectural Research*, First edition (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019).

most vocal source covering their portfolio of work. Of course, their buildings are a collective, public asset but it is important to enhance the motivations and backgrounds of the architects to recontextualize their role in Finland's collective architectural legacy. One way to get as close as possible has been to interview living relatives and gather anecdotes of former colleagues and users from audio and written interviews. There are limits to this approach, however, as raised in the *Society of Architecture Historian's* roundtable reminding the memories of living subjects are "partial and fallible."⁷ Therefore, they will be balanced out by more objective secondary accounts.

A key interpretive idea for this work is the notion of global flows of ideas, or "Places and Flows" as introduced by Carola Hein, professor of architectural history at TU Delft.⁸ This implies that in the increasingly globalizing 20th-century world, the realization of architectural forms was shaped both directly and indirectly by foreign forces. This is especially apparent in the building technology and dominant materialization of concrete and steel in the Castrén's work. It can be argued that Helsinki, similarly to Hein's other port regions of focus, served as a hub for the exchange of architecture between Finland and North America. This exchange was conducted with two mediums: physical media and personal travel.

The first of these, photography and literature, were the main catalysts for ideas. Given the expense of time involved with cross-Atlantic travel in the first half of the 20th century, European architects relied on formal engineering literature and even travel books to gather awareness of trends in the Americas, with a special interest in "industrial buildings... pre-fabricated wooden houses, and the steel structures [of] skyscrapers."⁹ Images of factories and skyscrapers were not literal precedents for designs, but they conveyed a sense of 'America' as what cultural historian Silja Laine calls a "product of the popular, mediated imagination rather than a specific geographical or a cultural site."¹⁰ This abstract concept of America would become tangible later in the mid-20th century through traveling exhibitions as discussed above. Architecture-specific exhibitions were also held as America Builds I & II, held in 1945 and 1958 respectively. Despite featuring innovations in Louis Sullivan's skyscrapers and the elegance of Frank Lloyd Wright's work, the exhibitions did not capture the imagination of the public as widely. The hesitation can be heard in a radio report on the 1945 exhibition where the host conceded "One must be jealous of American architecture's entrepreneurial spirit, freedom from prejudice and context that succeeds greatly... but not everything that is in America would work here, especially because of our density."¹¹ Response to the 1958 exhibit was also lukewarm, as *Arkkitehti* editor Pekka Laurila described American architectural impulses as derivative of Europe, and having "sacrificed something of the humanity and elegance of the original functionalism on the altar of capitalism."¹²

⁷ *Oral History and Architectural History: Theory, Politics, Method*, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/555272338>.

⁸ Carola Hein, "Module II: Visions and Reality in History, Lecture 4: Places and Flows" (Lecture, AR1A066: Delft Lectures on Architectural History and Theory, Delft, November 30, 2023).

⁹ "The Dream of the New World by Arkkitehtuurimuseo / Museum of Finnish Architecture - Issuu," January 20, 2011, https://issuu.com/suomen-rakennustaiteen-museo/docs/the_dream_of_the_new_world. 13.

¹⁰ Silja Laine, "Imagining America, Building Helsinki," ed. Heli Hyvönen, Tuomas Räsänen, and Janne Tunturi, *Media, Interaction and Integration*, Media, Interaction and Integration: Cross-Cultural Dialogues in the Baltic Sea Area, June 10, 2009, <https://www.utupub.fi/handle/10024/50584>.

¹¹ "Amerikka rakentaa –näyttely Ateneumissa (1945) | Yle Areena" (Helsinki, June 1, 1945), <https://areena.yle.fi/podcastit/1-50416721>.

¹² Pekka Laurila, "6/1958 -," *Ark*, <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1958/06/>, 14.

This also reveals that Finland had developed a strong design identity domestically, so modernist principles would not be arbitrarily imposed. In fact, despite the cultural and economic might of the United States, the flow of design concepts was more of a two-way street.

The second medium for design to flow between the Americas and Finland was individual architects' travel. The limits of print media were apparent in Laurila's article, which bemoaned how the dented photographs and clumsy 3D slides could not provide the true first-hand sense of a building. Therefore, throughout history, architects have used international travel and excursions as inspiration. As early as the 1700s, British architects would embark on grand tours to Italy, and Americans such as Thomas Jefferson to Paris in a quest to establish an American architectural identity.¹³ In the 20th century, intercontinental travel was more feasible. Alvar Aalto famously lectured and designed in New England, returning to Finland with the knowledge of balloon frames, when horizontal timber construction was the norm.¹⁴ Heikki and Mirja too, with Juhani Katainen, traveled throughout Europe during the Pohjola Insurance Building's design phase to see how their ideas had been implemented in other projects, especially the Bürolandschaft open-concept for offices which was prevalent in the team's American precedents of the Burroughs Corporation's office in Detroit.¹⁵ Travel was, and continues to be, a powerful means for architects to absorb and translate the spatial experience of foreign buildings to their home countries. Aalto's and the Castrén's journeys in the mid-20th century reflected a faster pace of academic and professional exchange. In an article about a French and Austrian architect's travels during the same period architecture historian Caroline Maniaque summarizes this point well: "If the grand tour was directed at uncovering the past, two centuries later the journey to the United States was seen as a glimpse into the future."¹⁶

To see what glimpses of the future the Castrén's gathered, the paper will use a chronological order to trace their career, continuously connecting to the broader historical analysis. It will combine elements of biography with architectural theory to trace the American elements and techniques that were imbued in their designs. The paper will be organized into three distinct eras of their career: 1) designing *under* others (1950s-'65), 2) designing *with* others (1965-'70s), and 3) designing *for themselves* (1950s-80). These three respective sections will be anchored by an extended analysis of the Helsinki City Center, Pohjola Insurance Building, and the Villa Skata cottage complex respectively.

The Finns in Toronto

Before proceeding, it is useful to briefly introduce the main characters of the study. Heikki Castrén (1928-1980), known as "Heka" by family and friends, married Mirja (1930-2014) in 1953. From '50-'56 Heikki worked as an office architect for Aili and Niilo Pulkka, contributing to a theater design

¹³ Giovanna Ceserani et al., "British Travelers in Eighteenth-Century Italy: The Grand Tour and the Profession of Architecture," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (2017): 425–50.; Richard Guy Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson's Paris," UVA Engagement <https://engagement.virginia.edu/learn/2016/11/30/thomas-jeffersons-paris>. 1.

¹⁴ Pekka Korvenmaa, "The Finnish Wooden House Transformed: American Prefabrication, War-Time Housing and Alvar Aalto," *Construction History* 6 (1990): 47–61.

¹⁵ Olli Helasvuo, Riikka Koivula, and Tapani Mustonen, "Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi" (Arkkitehdit Mustonen, 2013), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.arkkitehditmustonen.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Pohjola_RHS_pieni.pdf. 10.

¹⁶ Jilly Caroline Maniaque, "The American Travel of European Architects, 1958-1973," in *Travel, Space, Architecture*, ed. Miodrag Mitrašinić and Jilly Traganou (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009).

competition in Turku and an interior for a scout clubhouse in Töölö. Working under a designer pair may have inspired the career aspirations of Heikki to work with his partner. The pair joined the office of Viljo Revell together in 1952. As an established figure of the functionalist school of architecture, Revell was known for the Glass Palace shopping center (1935), the modernist Palace Hotel (1952), and the white stucco Flask Houses of Tapiola (1953).¹⁷ His expertise in large-scale, public-facing buildings partly stemmed from his experience as a co-founder of Finland's Standardization Institute to facilitate post-war construction.¹⁸ Pragmatism coupled with innovation were the spirit of Revell & Co. buildings. At the office, Heikki notably worked on projects for the Finnish Defence Forces like the Parola garrison's recreation center (1957) and an office wing for the Ministry of Defence (started 1957).¹⁹ However, a grand opportunity arose which differed from these relatively conservative commissions. The office's entry for the Toronto City Hall competition had been selected for first prize, requiring a part of the office to relocate to Toronto in 1959. This included Heikki and Mirja.²⁰



Figure 1: Collage of Guard's Barracks office annex for the Finnish Defence Forces by Revell & Castrén. *Finnish Architectural Review*. "12/1961 - Liike- ja konttoritiloja." December 1961, 33.



Figure 2: Exterior of the Palace Hotel by Revell & Keijo Pitäjä. It marked the end 1940s romanticism and new wave to modernism. Heikki Havas. *Hotel Palace*. 1950s. Photograph. Museum of Finnish Architecture.

It must be stated that although Heikki is more commonly discussed in this text, it is because the existing literature references his name mostly. Although Mirja's name has been lumped with her husband's last name in the titles of Castrén & Co. and CJN, she was a very strong architect of her merit. The pair was very close so their successes and struggles were linked as they designed together, skied together, and raised a family together.²¹ Deservedly, Mirja's role was recognized in 2013 as an honorable member of *Architecta*, the society of Finnish female architects.²² She worked side-by-side with Heikki throughout their shared career through all offices. Though projects were generally

¹⁷ Eija Rauske, "Karun betonin aika," in *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi. Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Arkkitehtuurimuseo, 2016), 96–119.

¹⁸ Karl-Erik Michelsen, "The Finnish Building Information File," in *The Work of Architects: The Finnish Association of Architects 1892-1992* (Helsinki: Finnish Building Centre, 1992), 129–37.

¹⁹ "12/1961 - Liike- ja konttoritaloja," *Finnish Architectural Review*, December 1961, <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1961/12/>, 30.

²⁰ Olli Helasvuo, Riikka Koivula, and Tapani Mustonen, "Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi" (Arkkitehdit Mustonen, 2013), 18.

²¹ Marjaana Castrén, Phone interview with Marjaana Castrén, Phone, 12/26.

²² "Kunniajäsenet," *Architecta* (blog), accessed March 18, 2024, <https://www.architecta.fi/yhdistys/kunniajasenet/>. *Architecta*

collaborative, she had a leading design role in the Espoo City Hall, Oulunkylä church, and ski lodges.²³

Working at Revell & Co. was very integral for the longer-term career trajectory of the couple, as Revell was a people-oriented mentor figure. An article by the Toronto City government commemorating the anniversary of the City Hall's construction remembers Revell as a "modest man and self-effacing, notwithstanding his imposing size and appearance."²⁴ He afforded faith and responsibility to the young proteges Bengt Lundsten, Seppo Valjus, and of course, Heikki who followed him to Toronto. In a 2014 remembrance for Mirja in a Finnish Association of Architects bulletin, colleague Juhani Jautianen used the English word "teamwork" as their team's ethos which meant "searching for solutions through the help of differing opinions and perspectives."²⁵ Heikki and Mirja had encouraged another female architect friend and colleague, Marja Nuuttila-Helenius, to join the firm in 1964. She too described Revell as lawyer-like "giving out work assignment in his own cheerful and relaxed style, outlining guidelines... resolving design conflicts with a friendly and broad-scoped manner."²⁶



Figure 3: Revell with Lundsten, Valjus and Castrén (Photographer unknown 1958) City of Toronto Archives, Series 843, File 134, Item 16345.



Figure 4: Opening ceremonies for City Hall (Toronto Fire Department, 1965) City of Toronto Archives, Series 374, File 795, Item 4.

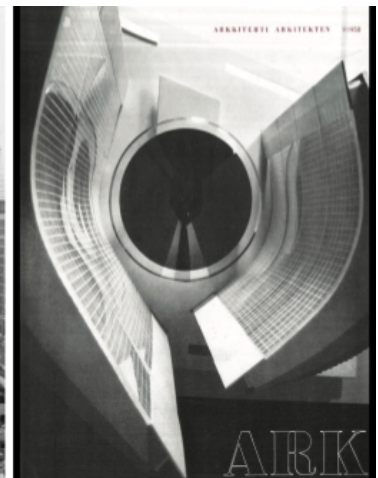


Figure 5: View of competition entry model for the City Hall on the cover of *Arkkitehti*. ark. "9/1958." Cover.

Living in Toronto highlighted the economic and cultural differences between Finland and North America for Heikki and Mirja. While the project was underway they resided in the newly planned Don Mills neighborhood, referred to as "Canada's first corporate suburb," which coincidentally reflected Finnish urban planning with the Garden City principle of separating functions.²⁷ Though their stay was ultimately brief, they traveled extensively. With a five-year-old daughter, a two-year-old son, and a third one underway, they embraced their new surroundings in company barbecues and road trips to Niagara Falls. The ability to step into a car and cruise down a freeway was relatively novel.

²³ Juhani Jauhianen, "Mirja Castrénin muistokirjoitus," *AU (arkkitehti-uutiset)*, November 2014.

²⁴ Toronto, City of. "A Step Forward in Time: Viljo Revell's Winning Design." City of Toronto. City of Toronto, November 23, 2017. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

<https://www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/history-art-culture/online-exhibits/web-exhibits/web-exhibits-local-government/a-step-forward-in-time-torontos-new-city-hall/a-step-forward-in-time-viljo-revells-winning-design/>.

²⁵ Jauhianen, *Mirja Castrén muistokirjoitus*, (translated by self), 4.

²⁶ Jauhianen, *Mirja Castrénin muistokirjoitus*, (translated by self), 5.

²⁷ Sewell, John. "Don Mills: E.P Taylor and Canada's First Corporate Suburb." In *The Second City Book: Studies of Urban and Suburban Canada*. James Lorimer & Company, 1977, 18.

Diary entries reveal how Mirja was delighted by the concept of picnic tables perched on the roadside for families like hers to pause for lunch.²⁸ Even the small-scale, everyday infrastructure was conducive to personal car ownership which Finland lagged in. For them, like many other Finns, personal car ownership and Americanist consumer culture were exciting and aspirational.

In addition to the family adventure, the stay in Toronto created a two-way street for architecture and design ideas to flow. Useful exchanges included meeting colleagues who later moved to Finland to work with them, and even connecting with the Finnish-American icon Eero Saarinen. In the 9-1965 edition of *Arkkitehti*, Heikki wrote a remembrance of Saarinen in which he recollects visiting his office in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan:

In the spring of 1959, Viljo Revelli, Bengt Lundsten, Seppo Valjus, and I were Eero's guests in his office at Bloomfield Hills. At that time, he had shown a still half-finished film about his future work at the airport in Washington and took us to a model room, where the entire floor of the room was filled with a site model of the airport area with buildings and runways. A wheeled chair had been built for examining the model, which had a periscope attached. It was placed in such a way that one of the mirrors was almost attached to the floor. Eero kicked off his shoes and began to push us each in turn in the chair. The spectator's approach experience when driving towards the main building was startling. Polka-like excited, he told us about the different phases and details of the work and we followed with admiration how Eero, or, as I see is already today a piece of architectural history... how a great problem solver practiced his philosophy.²⁹

Saarinen was also one of the five judges for Toronto City Hall's competition and had reportedly convinced two other judges to select Revell & Co.'s design. It was not purely a one-way transactional experience of taking Americanism with them, but they actively imported Finnishness by adorning their home with quintessential Finnish designs like Marimekko textiles and Iittala glassware. They felt responsible to serve as informal design ambassadors.³⁰

I. 1950s-'60s: City Center

While working in Toronto, the office received an assignment for the City Center project in which Revell & Castrén would realize their newfound North American sensibilities in downtown Helsinki with a contentious legacy. Property owners Tallberg, Helsinki Share Bank (HOP), and the national railway (VR) commissioned an extensive revitalization of the valuable city block across the central railway station to modernize existing buildings and improve connectedness. Though initial plans were drafted by the team in Toronto, this was particularly a breakthrough project for Heikki who was tasked by Revell to return with his family to Helsinki and oversee the project.

²⁸ Marjaana Castrén, interview, 12/26.

²⁹ "9/1965 - Kandinsky, Lindqvist," *Arkkitehti*, <https://www.ark.fi/en/1965/09/>, (translated by self), 171.

³⁰ Marjaana Castrén, Phone interview, Phone, 12/26.



Figure 6: “Projects for rebuilding Helsinki’s center” *Finnish Architectural Review*. “1/1967 - Helsingin liikekeskusta.” 1967, 41.



Figure 7: Exterior of City Center. Kari Hakli. *Kluuvi, Kaivokatu 6,8, Ns.* 1975. Photograph. Helsinki City Museum.

The Helsinki City Center is perhaps the most covered of the Castrén projects, certainly in architectural circles, but also in pop-culture imaginations. This is likely due to its idiosyncratic style and how it represented the growing pains of Helsinki’s rapid urbanization. It is possibly the most literal translation of North American commercial design principles to any project in the Castréns’s portfolio, both in an architectural and construction sense. Historian Olli-Paavo Koponen has framed the City Center in his article “Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City” for *Arkkithehti* magazine as emblematic of Finnish commercial architecture inspired by coverage of U.S. modernism in architecture review journals and museum exhibitions like “America Builds II.”³¹ His text is sympathetic to the City Center, framing it in the context of optimism and idealism. Others extend their empathy to near pity, framing it as an unfortunate testament to Helsinki’s overzealous urbanization. These are preservationists like Anja Nevanlinna in “Cityscape research from the perspective of history and memory,” and Aura Kivilaakso in a book for the Helsinki History Museum, *When Helsinki was Built as a City*.³² Both authors discuss the facade’s iconic car ramps but do not explicitly link it to the unrealized, joint Finnish-American transportation masterplan of Smith-Polvinen. This North American vision for the downtown’s development has recently regained attention in journalist Kalle Silfverberg and animator Uolevi Holmberg’s article “Big Plans.”³³ These works are useful in communicating the “image” of America that the City Center conveyed through its exterior, but they do not analyze how the lived experience of the architects in Toronto shaped the design, and how the project mirrored the euphemistic practice of urban renewal which took place across American cities in the 60s. The City Center is a complex project produced by market forces, social forces, and the lived experiences of Heikki and Viljo Revell; not just a failed attempt at modernism as the conventional literature might suggest.

³¹ Koponen, Olli-Paavo. “Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City.” *Arkkithehti*, February 28, 2023. <https://www.ark.fi/en/2023/03/forgotten-vision-of-helsinki-city/>.

³² Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna. “Kaupunkikuvan tutkimus historian ja muistin näkökulmasta.” *Kvartti*, January 2006, (title translated by self), 18; Aura Helmi Ilmatar Kivilaakso, “Keskustan Vuosina 1945-1990 Valmistuneet Liikerakennukset,” in *Kun Helsinkiin Rakennettiin City - Keskustan Vuosina 1945-1990 Valmistuneet Liikerakennukset* (Helsingin kaupunginmuseo, 2014), (title translated by self).

³³ Kalle Silfverberg and Uolevi Holmberg, “Suuret Suunnitelmat,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, December 24, 2019, sec. Kaupunki, <https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000006345856.html>. (title translated by self).

The City Center can be viewed as an evolution of the team's previous projects. Kivilaakso argues in her book that in the City Center, "the characteristic features of Revell's architecture were visible, such as the horizontality of the design language, the even distribution of the facades, the sparse forms and structurality of the details."³⁴ Similarly to the Toronto City Hall, the solution was a sculptural, stripped-down, yet eye-catching modern building that would divide opinions. The most eye-catching element, a rounded concrete entablature, would attract notoriety, gaining the colloquial name "Sausage Building" after a satirical comic in the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper.³⁵

The public's hesitation is understandable since the building introduced qualities of North American architecture that were alien to the historic core of Helsinki, such as car-centric design and urban renewal approach of demolition. For example, two concrete car ramps dominated its eastern facade meant to facilitate the growing segment of private car owners. Kivilaakso states the purpose of the car ramps was to centralize parking and utilities for the building "enabling the more expensive street level to be occupied by storefronts of businesses."³⁶ The concrete ramps are a powerful gesture, nearly identical to the access ramp of the Toronto City Hall. While the ramp in Toronto was designed to drop off dignitaries at the main entrance, the City Center's ramp would be for the everyman to exercise their newfound purchasing power. Although the contemporary property owner claims "the City-Center was well received in its day" in an article celebrating its 50th birthday, Kivilaakso reminds readers of the controversies.³⁷ The first phase of construction in 1964 created a "city-wide cultural scandal" as it required historically significant buildings such as the neo-renaissance Skoha House, historic restaurant *Central*, and an Eliel Saarinen-designed department store to be demolished.³⁸

Just as the City Center mirrored '60s North American building practices in the physical facade, so did its symbolism. In "Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City," Koponen discusses the city's goal to compete with other growing metropolises in the Baltic region, arguing that new office buildings like the UN Headquarters, Lever House, and Seagram Building served as "model examples." These icons, as well as office buildings featured in *America Builds II*, featured "unique and sophisticated concrete structures and early curtain-wall facades... [where] the architecture of the facades was designed to work with neon signs as in London and New York... [since] companies wanted to amplify the images of success and modernity with the buildings they built for themselves."³⁹ Photos of the City Center from the period express how its orthogonal, ribbon-like facade made the signs of tenants eye-catching and legible like a book- something its neo-renaissance and jugendstil neighbors couldn't offer.

³⁴ Kivilaakso, *Kun Helsinkiin Rakennettiin City*, 120.

³⁵ Marja Salmela. "Makkaratalo sai nimensä Karin piirroksesta." Helsingin Sanomat, January 15, 2004. <https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-2000004195356.html>.

³⁶ Kivilaakso, *Kun Helsinkiin Rakennettiin City*, 121

³⁷ Anita Riikonen, "Finland's Largest Sausage to Be Decorated with Flowers for the Jubilee Year." *Sponda* (blog), February 15, 2017. <https://sponda.fi/en/finlands-largest-sausage-to-be-decorated-with-flowers-for-the-jubilee-year/>.

³⁸ Kivilaakso, *Kun Helsinkiin Rakennettiin City*, 121

³⁹ Koponen, "Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City."



Figure 8: “Before” photo of City Center’s site. Iiro Nurminen. *Keskuskatu 8*. n.d. Photograph. Helsinki City Museum.



Figure 9: “After” photo of City Center’s site. Eeva Rista. *Keskuskatu 6, 8*. 1970. Photograph. Helsinki City Museum.

While some were excited by the modernity of the project, the court of public opinion ultimately ruled against City Center. Nevanlinna presents two camps in her article on spaces and memory. She argues that on one hand, the City Center’s “two-story atrium with bustling shops, elevators, and escalators charmed [some] locals,” while others felt “strongly leaning into a car-centric concept was inappropriate in the center of a European city,” and its “massive scale dwarfed the nearby Auteuneum museum’s and Railway Station’s monumentality.”⁴⁰ There were complaints to various bodies about the building’s design until 1971, but without success, according to journalist Marja Salmela. It was also dramatically featured in the 1980 film *Right On, Man!* where a group of troubled high-school students loiter around the City Center’s shops and restaurants. The climax of the movie features the Sausage darkly. The protagonist is sprinting through the parking garage escaping from a police officer and his German Shepherd, vaulting over the barrier onto the sausage. Defeated, he commits suicide by rolling onto the traffic below. Though a pure work of fiction, the street level’s hallways were indeed restless with young people, requiring their closure at night with gates and glass walls starting in 1991 according to Salmela. The building would unfortunately come to represent grittiness and incongruity, somewhat blemishing Heikki’s extensive career.

⁴⁰ Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna, “Kaupunkikuvan tutkimus historian ja muistin näkökulmasta,” (quote translated by self), 24.



Figure 10: Cartoons criticising underground tunnels in lieu of safe pedestrian paths in Helsinki's reconstruction plans. *Arkkitiehti*. "1/1967 - Helsingin liikekeskusta." 1967. Originally in *Ilta-Sanomat*, 56.



Figure 11: Film poster for *Right on Man*. The protagonist climbs onto the concrete "sausage" in the film's climax. *Täältä tullaan elämä!* Sateenkaarifilmi Oy, 1980.



Figure 12 : City Center viewed from Keskuskatu. Two young people leaning against a concrete railing. Eeva Rista. *Keskuskatu* 6, 8. 1970. Photograph. Helsinki City Museum.

While overseeing construction on the City Center in November of 1964, Heikki and Mirja were compelled to enter the next stage in their career. Unfortunately, the stressors of intercontinental travel and political disputes over the Toronto City Hall project took a toll on their mentor Revell's health who passed away suddenly. Nuuttila-Helenius, who had joined the firm the same year, describes this period in her interview as "... brutal. We all had to step into boots that were at least two sizes too big."⁴¹ The following year, they rallied together under a new banner of "Heikki Castrén & Co," with Mirja, Nuuttila-Helenius, Juhani Jauhiainen, and Kimmo Söderholm, as partners. The firm would go through multiple phases of expansion and contraction over its lifespan, working on municipal government offices, shopping centers, and public transportation depots. While less relevant to the general public, one building would come to be their crowning achievement in its successful realization of modernism in the Finnish context: the headquarters of the Pohjola Insurance Group.

II. 1965-'70s: Pohjola Insurance Building

Unlike the City Center which has been the subject of public scrutiny for its incongruous modernism, the Pohjola building has been recognized as a landmark project in Finnish architecture of the 60s for its advanced construction and programming. Serving over 1000 employees across 22,500 square meters in a northwestern suburb of Helsinki, its scale and novelty were clear as it was described as a "streamlined colossus... sized like a Hilton-hotel" in Kauppalehti at the time of construction.⁴² The largest office building in Finland upon its completion, it serves as an example of North American modernism adapted successfully and was key in Heikki and Mirja's success with Castrén & Co. This is apparent in the collective memory of the family and public recollections.

⁴¹ Pirkko-Liisa Schulman, "Marja Nuuttila-Helenius – Arkkitehti, Arkkitehtitoimiston Osakas Ja Alan Uranuurtaja :: Naisten Ääni," *Naisten Ääni*, 2016.

⁴² Jaakko Lyytinen, "Unelmien toimistotalo," *Helsingin Sanomat*, May 13, 2018, <https://www.hs.fi/sunnuntai/art-2000005676098.html>.

Perhaps due to its relative remoteness and ordinary function, existing literature on the Pohjola Insurance Building comes mostly from architect and engineering voices, unlike the very public City Center. At the time of construction, multiple articles were featured in *Arkkitehti* written by Heikki as well as architecture critics, but most recently in an extensive 2013 survey by architects at the engineering firm Mustonen OY.⁴³ It analyzes the construction process of the building but also contextualizes it in the Castrén's entire career. It begins to make connections to North American influences in its modular building elements, and cites an interview with co-designer Juhani Katainen, who modeled the building's light-filled atrium after Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration Building. Though it was demolished well before the team's stay in Canada, it suggests how the Finns were inspired by the prevalence of iconic, corporate-campus offices in the Northeast. In addition to architectural inspirations, Mustonen OY analyzes the construction process and technologies in detail. Novel elements to the Finnish building industry included aluminum window frames and plasterboard, which the Castrén & Co. design team likely absorbed from networking and visiting offices around Toronto. This section builds on Mustonen OY's technical analysis and use of Katainen as a primary source, by providing Heikki and Mirja's narratives while also speculating on Toronto's influences.

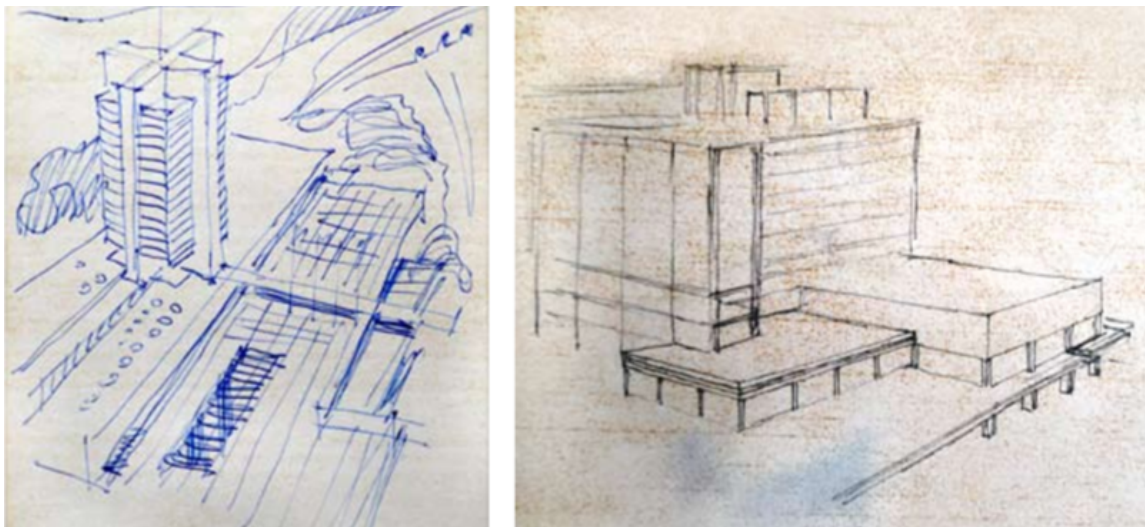


Figure 13: Early sketches by Heikki Castrén (left) and Juhani Katainen (right) of the Pohjola Insurance Building. Helasvuo, Olli, Riikka Koivula, and Tapani Mustonen. "Pohjolan Toimitilo Lapinmäen tie 1." *Arkkitehdit Mustonen*, 2013, 23.

It was the right project, for the right audience, at the right time. Like the Toronto City Hall and City Center before it, the Pohjola building was a truly collaborative effort that carried the marks of many young architects. Given the track record of Revell & Co. with office and civic buildings like those for the Finnish Defence Forces in the 50s and, of course, the Toronto City Hall, competition organizers invited them to submit entries along with heavyweights like Alvar Aalto and Heikki Sirén. The jury makeup was fortunate as it included Aarne Ruusuvuori, remembered as a "strict modernist, known for his reduced concrete buildings" and experimental prefabricated wood building; all qualities aligned with Revell & Co's skillset.⁴⁴ During the competition phase in 1964, the first entries were made with Revell in Toronto before his passing, but the competition proceeded by the Helsinki branch under Heikki. Around this time the firm coalesced under a new banner of Heikki Castrén & Co. Though he

⁴³ Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen, "Pohjolan Toimitilo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi."

⁴⁴ "Aarno Ruusuvuori," *Arkkitehtuurimuseo*, <https://www.mfa.fi/en/architects/aarno-ruusuvuori-2/>. Museum of Finnish Architecture

is formally credited as the designer, Heikki passed much of the responsibility in the Pohjola competition to the young Juhani Katainen. He recalls: “When the proposal was drafted in our office, I criticized the authors. I said ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’” and after listening “[they said] do it better yourself then!”⁴⁵ Much like Revell with Toronto City Hall, as the senior of the office, Heikki passed on responsibility to the passionate, even younger members of the office. Their entry *Byromaani II* sold judges on the standardization and organization in contrast to Aalto’s more organic, “lively and varied” design.⁴⁶ Romanticism in Finnish architecture had made for rationality.



Figure 14: Pohjola’s building committee and design team. Helasvuo, Olli, Riikka Koivula, and Tapani Mustonen. “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1” *Arkitehdit* Mustonen, 2013, 26.

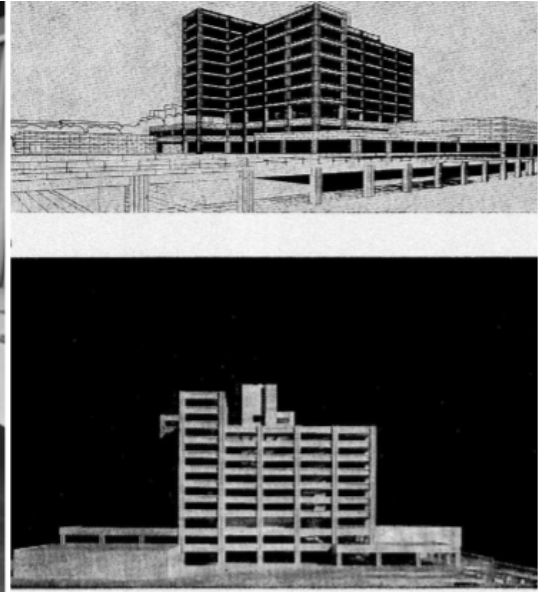


Figure 15: Perspectival view & model. *Finnish Architectural Review*. “1/1967 - Helsingin liikekeskusta.” 1967, 30.

The Pohjola building mirrored multiple trends in the corporate architecture of the 50s and 60s North America. These inspirations were in its typology, programming, and structure that critically adapted to the local needs.

The Pohjola building followed trends in office architecture from the general region of Toronto where the Castréns lived in 1959-60. In a 2016 paper, business and management professor Ron Kerr traces the forces that reimagined the corporate building typology during the 50’s and 60’s. He uses SOM’s, Saarinen’s, and Kevin Roche’s buildings as case studies to show how vertical urban tower block offices, “although symbolically powerful... [were failing] to promote interaction and community within the corporation,” thus making way for “horizontal skyscrapers” in the form of corporate campuses set in “natural or landscaped” environments.⁴⁷ According to Kerr, Saarinen’s sprawling campuses for General Motors, IBM, and Bell Labs sought to project corporate identity and identification, and in Saarinen’s own words “foster [a] community of loyal employees... [making] the attitude of our people who work in them lifted and more rapid and more efficient.”⁴⁸ Although the

⁴⁵ Jaakko Lyytinen, “Purettavan Pohjola-talon suunnittelija oli parikymppinen opiskelija, mutta hän ei koskaan saanut kunniaa,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, May 13, 2018, <https://www.hs.fi/sunnuntai/art-2000005675759.html>.

⁴⁶ Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen, “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi,” 26.

⁴⁷ Ron Kerr, Sarah K. Robinson, and Carole Elliott, “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Corporate Power: Historicizing the Architectural Typology of the Corporate Campus,” *Management & Organizational History* 11, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 123–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449359.2016.1141690>, 130.

⁴⁸ Kerr, *Modernism, Postmodernism, and Corporate Power*, 132.

Pohjola building dwarfs in comparison, it was the largest office building in Finland at the time and also prioritized employee welfare along with its corporate image.

The Pohjola building sought to create a sense of attachment and community for employees with its programming of generous amenities. For the first time, all branches of the firm were under one roof, anchored by a 9-story atrium that a member of the car insurance department remembers as a “festive large and tall hall,” in Helsingin Sanoma’s retrospective, “The Dream Office.”⁴⁹ The project was a point of pride for Pohjola’s investment manager and head of the building committee, Veikko Laaksonen, who even secretly added a full-length swimming pool in one of the three basement levels, unbeknownst to the CEO. He also requested recreation spaces like a shooting range, a gymnasium, ball courts, a music studio, and an employee club space. The positive attachment and memories of staff are described in Lyytinen’s article by former employees like Mirja Tanhunpää in Pohjola’s communications department. She organized shooting competitions for excited international visitors and recollected how “some employees would arrive early in the morning to swim, and hang around until the evening.”⁵⁰ Mustonen OY’s survey cites German art historian Reinhold Hohl who identified the purpose of recreation spaces like this to incentivize and retain top talent and avoid “dissatisfaction, which strictly organized offices had a risk of doing.”⁵¹ Employee welfare and the image of the organization were linked. Mustonen continues: “Companies enhanced their images with powerful figures which used technical innovations, and invested in high quality... upholstery and custom made furniture.”⁵² Pohjola was no exception as it included over 1,500 artworks and even building-specific lounge chairs by Pekka Perjo.⁵³ This was mutually beneficial where the firm’s investments in the interior also improved the quality of life for the staff.



Figure 16: “Pohjola chairs” designed by Pekka Purjo in the atrium of Tower A. *Finnish Architectural Review*. “2/1970 - Suunnittelun järjestelmällisyys.” 1970, 65.



Figure 17: The 25m long shooting range in the basement was used by guests and staff. Lari Malmberg. “Työhyvinvoinnin ylläpitoa muutama vuosikymmen sitten – Helsingin konttoreissa räiskittiin aseilla.” Helsingin Sanomat.

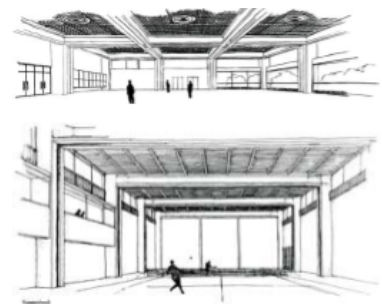


Figure 18: Sketches of the dining hall (top) and ball court (bottom). Helasvuo, Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1” Arkkitehdit Mustonen, 2013, 106.

In addition to the amenities and high-scale interior to create a powerful American-esque corporate image, so did the location and form of the building. Like in upstate New York where many of these corporate campuses were built, the increased car infrastructure and congestion of downtown Helsinki encouraged locating the in the suburbs of Munkkiniemi. The Pohjola building is located just barely outside the center in a residential area with park-like surroundings, but the design included planting

⁴⁹ Jaakko Lyytinen, “Unelmien toimistotalo,” (quote translated by self) 6.

⁵⁰ Jaakko Lyytinen, “Unelmien toimistotalo,” (quote translated by self) 20.

⁵¹ Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen, “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi.” 1” 9

⁵² Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen. 9

⁵³ Jaakko Lyytinen, “Unelmien toimistotalo,” (quote translated by self), 5.

trees that block views of the plinth, making just the tower visible in among the apartments.⁵⁴ This matches the spirit of the “country, rural, and pastoral as symbolically positive in the location of [American] campuses.”⁵⁵ Again, the car ramp was a prevalent element that carried over from the Toronto City Hall, to the City Center, and into the Pohjola Building. While these two projects dramatically swooped their entrances to the parking deck along the facade, in the Pohjola building the ramps descend into an underground parking garage of 400 vehicles.

Heikki and Mirja’s practice of architecture is reflected in the Pohjola building. Similar to Saarinen with the massive model for Dulles Airport which they rolled through, the pair valued working with their hands and testing structural solutions at a 1:1 scale. Writing in *Arkkitehti*, “The test house as a design method,” Heikki describes how the team built a mockup to test how the granite cladding work could be mounted on the building’s facade, as well as the different services like air conditioning systems, false ceiling, and movable wall partitions.⁵⁶ The survey of Mustonen OY expands on the report, describing how the test house was a two-story structure of two modules (8.5m x 17m), used to test the furniture choices for the interior, lighting, as well as sun shading.⁵⁷ Additionally, this was also a way for different manufacturers to install and argue for the value of their most advanced products. Being associated with the Pohjola building was a very effective selling point, as it represented the newest of the new. The 05-1966 edition of *Arkkitehti* is dominated by the project, with seven pages of advertisements from building component manufacturers showcasing how their products were installed in the Pohjola building.



Figure 19: Various suppliers advertising their products and how they were applied in the Pohjola building. *Finnish Architectural Review*. “2/1970 - Suunnittelun järjestelmällisyys.” 1970.

Although procured or completed by domestic manufacturers, advertisers imbued messages of Americanism and its association with advancement into the ads. For example, the Lahti Glass Company advertises its Polarpane line of special glass, manufactured with the “Pittsburgh method.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen, “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi.”, 51

⁵⁵ Kerr, *Modernism, Postmodernism, and Corporate Power*, 132

⁵⁶ “1/1967 - Helsingin liikekeskusta,” *Finnish Architectural Review*, 1967, <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1967/01/>, 30.

⁵⁷ Helasvuo, Koivula, and Mustonen, “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1: Rakennushistoriaselvitys & arkkitehtuuri analyysi.”, 28

⁵⁸ Vilhelm Helander and Mikael Sundman, *Kenen Helsinki- Raportti Kantakaupungista 1970* (HKI: WSOY, 1970), 91.

Also, the Du Pont company advertises its neoprene gaskets being applied globally, with the caption “Architects agree- not just in Finland, but also in America... that Du Pont neoprene is the most durable, reliable, and efficient sealant.”⁵⁹ These advertisements hint at the disparity between Finland and the USA in that the architectural ideas and philosophies were equally advanced, but despite its growing manufacturing sector domestic Finnish manufacturers were outclassed by the Americans. Perhaps Heikki and his team had a small role in spurring building innovation as they ordered aluminum window profiles, gypsum boards, and Corning glass for Pohjola that were novel to Finland but were commonly used in North America.

The project and newly founded Heikki Castrén & Co. office was more than just a workplace, but rather a lifestyle and a vessel to make lifelong connections. The timing of the competition win was huge for the success of the office, given the shake-up that was Revell’s sudden passing. The Pohjola building was Heikki and Mirja’s landmark project, so they were deeply connected to the project, quite literally in fact. As was typical for the architects at the time, the pair moved the family into an apartment across from the construction site while the project was underway.⁶⁰ Though only 12 years old, their eldest daughter contributed by working summers as a secretary and retrieving pastries from the nearby bakery for her parents and their colleagues. During their teenage and young adult years, their other children worked as model makers, as well as phone and printer operators.⁶¹ Despite the large scale and scope of projects, the office still functioned as an intimate family business in a certain capacity.



Figure 20: Oblique aerial view from a small plane from the direction of Munkkivuori to the west. Simo Rista. *Lapinmäentie 1*. Photograph. Picture Browsable at Helsinki City Museum, 1970.



Figure 21: The parking garage is tucked underground with a more subtle car ramp in comparison to City Center & the Toronto City Hall. Helasvuo, Olli, Riikka Koivula, and Tapani Mustonen. “Pohjolan Toimitalo Lapinmäen tie 1.” *Arkkitehdit Mustonen*, 2013, 30.

The firm balanced commercial success with being a teamwork-oriented, positive workplace. The firm which started as Heikki Castrén & Co. restructured again in 1972 as CJN, short for “Castrén-Jauhiainen-Nuuttila,” the four partners. Over its lifespan, the firm would grow to be the largest architecture office in Finland at one point, but its staff count would ebb and flow depending on market demands. During the Pohjola project, for example, the staff count grew to 100 employees, which can be credited to the office operating “like a business,” not a “bohemian art atelier.”⁶² Throughout the company’s lifespan, foreign architects, including other designer couples from Sonoma, California, and Boston, Massachusetts relocated to Finland and worked at CJN, interested in

⁵⁹ “Pohjolan toimitalo, Helsinki.” <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1967/01/>, (quote translated by self), 17.

⁶⁰ Castrén, Phone interview with Marjaana Castrén.

⁶¹ Hannele Castrén, Phone interview with Hannele Castrén, n.d.

⁶² Hannele Castrén.

learning more about Finnish architecture. These people would graduate from being just employees to be close and personal lifelong friends. Peculiarly, it was easier to navigate the employee-employer relationship dynamics with the foreign staff. Over sauna nights and company ski trips, these colleagues evolved into lifelong friends.⁶³ Such interpersonal relationships showcasing Finnishness to curious foreigners reflects the two-way exchange with North America.

However, scaling up from being an office with friends and classmates to a business meant making difficult decisions, and taking on the burden of its success. In the 1970s when the Finnish recession hit, Heikki was in the unenviable position of needing to fire dozens of staff members to keep the business afloat. This took a toll on Heikki and Mirja's spirit. Fortunately, they had a continuous vessel to retreat to and reconnect with the more expressive and sensitive side of their architecture. This was the Skata cottage in Sipoo.

III. 1950s-'80s: Skata cottages

For both architects, the intensity of working on large-scale institutional buildings was balanced with an ongoing passion project of their Villa Skata cottage complex in the archipelago of Sipoo. Like for other Finnish architects across generations, working with one's hands in nature offered respite and a sense of freedom and experimentation. Due to the non-existence of formal literature on the site beyond Jari and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen's feature in *Finnish Summer Houses*, this section will be rooted in the personal narratives of family members.⁶⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the source for the Skata-related information will be interviews conducted with two of their daughters.

Given its private programming, secondary sources on Skata are limited apart from the work of photographer Jetsonen in their aforementioned 2008 book on cottages of Finnish architects. In addition to capturing the sauna and main living quarters, the brief chapter also includes two family photos of Heikki and friends assembling the log structures by hand. In his description, Jetsonen states the summer residences were "a counterpart to the demands and scale of his commercial and office buildings," bringing out his "sensitive side" which tracks the narrative of descendants who upkeep and enjoy the property to this day. This literature is brief, yet poignantly captures the passion and sensibility to experiment and work with one's hands. While the two other case studies are an opportunity to start with the broader narrative and zoom into the architect and their motives, the Skata case study offers the opposite. The hand-drawn sketches, film photos, and family stories will be the foundation to make a wider statement on the value of nature and refuge in Finnish culture to globalizing, modernist, forces.

⁶³ Hannele Castrén.

⁶⁴ Jetsonen, Jari, and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen. *Finnish Summer Houses*. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008. <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0727/2007037738.html>, 102.

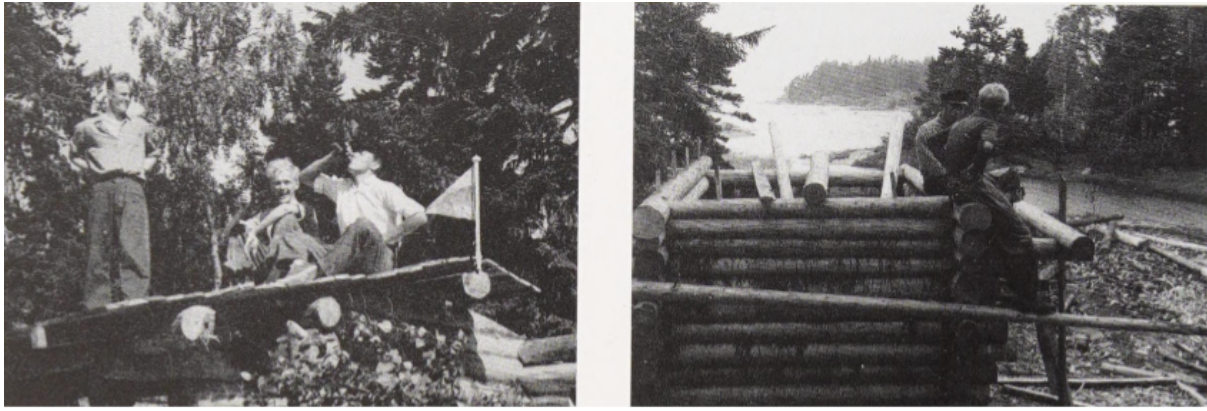


Figure 22: Photos of Heikki (middle in left photo) and friends working on the Skata cottage. Jari and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen. *Finnish Summer Houses*. 2008, 104.

While the City Center and Pohjola Insurance buildings reflect different degrees of North American modernist influences, the Skata cottage project was a largely unadulterated touchstone to their Finnishness. Located on a small peninsula in the archipelago, 35km east of Helsinki, the land for the cottages was sourced from Mirja's side of the family. The first structures were erected in 1953, and the latest additions in the 1990s. Upkeep and maintenance were sporadic until the current owners, Hannele and her architect husband Matti, took on the role of repairing any deteriorating building parts and fences around the property. Modern conveniences have been intentionally avoided as it was Heikki and Mirja's vision for the cottage to be a "pure" country cottage, without running water or electricity. To this day, wood collected from fallen trees across the property is used to heat the cabins, and rooftop solar panels power LED lights. The project's defining building is the "big cottage," housing a bedroom, common area, and kitchen. Other buildings include an outdoor kitchen, a shed, and a small guest cottage which were constructed with the help of friends and family. Journalist Katja Martelius from Helsingin Sanomat described it as "a cozy and rather traditional nest made of round logs, which blended into the pine landscape of the beach, and whose large windows opened up a view of the sea bay."⁶⁵ Physically constructing the buildings by hand, an opportunity not possible with the concrete and steel commercial buildings, instilled such a profound connection to the place that Heikki drew from memory in the hospital in 1980 before passing.

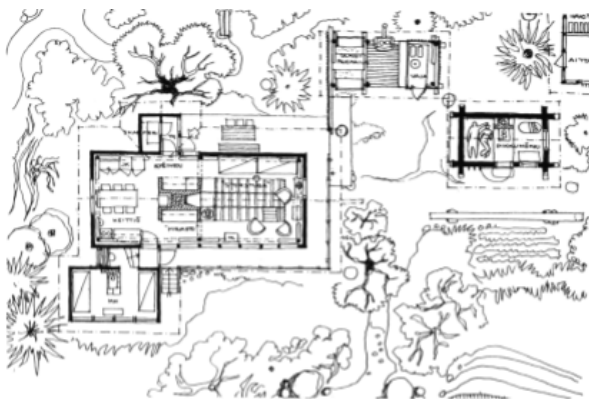


Figure 23: Hand drawn sketch of Skata's site plan which Heikki drew from memory in the hospital. Jari and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen. *Finnish Summer Houses*. 2008, 102.



Figure 24: Exterior of Skata photographed by Jari Jetsonen in 2008. Katja Martelius. "Karujen rakennusten arkkitehdit toteuttivat unelmansa idyllisissä kesämökeissä." Helsingin Sanomat, 2016.

⁶⁵ Katja Martelius, "Karujen rakennusten arkkitehdit toteuttivat unelmansa idyllisissä kesämökeissä," Helsingin Sanomat, March 18, 2016, <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000002891688.html>, 90.

The cottage, or *mökki*, is a centuries-long cultural practice in Finland but it experienced a surge in the 50s which Mirja and Heikki were part of. As mentioned, this period was a time of growing wealth in society, enabling city dwellers to make true of a common dream of owning a summer cottage. Architectural historians at the Tampere School of Architecture credit the instilled cottage culture to Finland's "highly anticipated but short-lived summer season... [where] many Finns consider the cottage to balance out city life."⁶⁶ The concept of a secondary summer home earlier in "in the 19th century represented a model of luxury living that belonged only to the elite in the early years of Finland's independence," but became increasingly commonplace with ordinary members of society over the 50s due to rising wealth.⁶⁷ This practice was in contrast to settlement patterns in North America, where urban centers sprawled and suburbanized. Suburbs were a middle-ground between the city and the countryside with detached private homes, but people could take advantage of urban conveniences. The cottage culture of Finland in contrast provided a more clear-cut separation between rural and urban life. Expectedly, cottage design has been a point of pride for Finnish architects across generations.



Figure 25: Interior photo of the main cottage. Jari and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen. *Finnish Summer Houses*. 2008, 106.



Figure 26: Headquarters of the Fortum Corporation in Keilalahti, Espoo, completed in 1976 by C.J.N. Simo Rista. *Nesteen Pääkonttori*. Unknown. KAMU Espoon kaupunginmuseo.

Although vernacular Finnish architecture was the dominant inspiration for the Skata's wooden cabins, aspects of the couple's more industrial portfolio seeped into the design. The main 1958 sauna, for example, had a unique architectonic principle. Rather than creating a typical free-standing log building, this sauna was still wooden but with a tent-like form. All walls apart from the one dividing

⁶⁶ Lotta Häkkänen, Hüseyin Emre Ilgin, and Markku Karjalainen, "Cottage Culture in Finland: Development and Perspectives," *Encyclopedia* 2, no. 2 (June 2022): 705–16, <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia2020049>, 3.

⁶⁷ Häkkänen, Ilgin, and Karjalainen, 6.

changing rooms and sauna space are pitched, with the roof leaning from the ground in charge of load bearing. Another key point of departure from the vernacular, and the subtle incorporation of modern architectural language is the use of steel plates to anchor the walls into a large boulder nearby. At first thought these steel plates seem like an inconsequential design decision, but they actually hint at an issue of introducing incongruous, construction strategies, similar to the City Center in Helsinki. Given the harsh winds, freezes, and snow on the archipelago of the Gulf of Finland, these plates have experienced rusting issues. This may have been avoided with different mounting, treatment, or maintenance strategies for the steel, but reveals how innovating with atypical material choices came with the risk of sacrificing performance when applied in an incompatible context.



Figure 27: Photographs of the sauna building. Marjaana Castrén. *Skata Cottage Sauna*. 2023. Digital photographs.

The intimate, domestic, Skata cottages are in stark contrast to the main portfolio of their career, which has been noted by multiple observers. In a Helsingin Sanomat article on the release of *Finnish Summer Houses*, the Jetsonen couple cites this very contrast as what drew them to document Skata in the first place. Attending a wedding of one of the Castréns's children, he was taken by the serenity of the place in contrast to buildings like the City Center and Fortum corporate office (Fig.26) which he thought was “worthy of photographing.”⁶⁸ The contradiction has been noted by non-trained architects too, such as Heikki and Mirja’s discerning grandchild who asked “Why did Heca design something like *that* [the Neste HQ] when he built such a cozy sauna for us?”⁶⁹ For Marjaana, the “small-sized, down-to-earth, wilderness cabin type was close[er] to his soul.”

In addition to the historic and vernacular, smaller-scale buildings were a chance for Heikki and Mirja to experiment with sustainable design, a label seldom used to describe their modernist professional portfolio. In early as the 60s, Heikki experimented with rooftop solar panels for the cottages, enabled by advancements of the 50s by Bell Labs in New Jersey.⁷⁰ Heikki and Mirja even won an award for a net-zero house, “The Warm Heart” which they built for the 1977 building exposition with Kalevi Sassi, and other principals of CJN.⁷¹ Despite their love for the traditional, close-to-nature cottages in

⁶⁸ Martelius, “Karujen rakennusten arkkitehdit toteuttivat unelmansa idyllisissä kesämökeissä,” 7.

⁶⁹ Hannele Castrén, Phone interview with Hannele Castrén.

⁷⁰ Smithsonian Magazine and D. Lawrence Tarazona Office U. S. Patent and Trademark Office, Elizabeth Chu, U. S. Patent and Trademark, “A Brief History of Solar Panels,” Smithsonian Magazine, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sponsored/brief-history-solar-panels-180972006/>.

⁷¹ Hyttinen, “Muistatko vielä nämä asuntomessutalot? Kritiikkiä on sadellut varsinkin liian isoista ja erikoisista rakennuksista,” mtvuutiset.fi, July 7, 2016, <https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/muistatko-viela-nama-asuntomessutalot-kritiikkia-on-sadellut-varsinkin-liian-isoista-ja-erikoisista-rakennuksista/5978266>.

Skata, Heikki and Mirja were not afraid to experiment and infuse modern architectural aspects. For example, a summer cottage in Teisko which was featured in the April 1963 edition of *Arkkitehti* exhibits just this phenomenon.⁷² The house is almost a scaled-up version of the tent-like sauna building at Skata. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows at the long sides of the main living room create a connection to the outside, and the building's roof is leaning from the ground in a similar way to the sauna. Reading these buildings in contrast to the higher-profile commissions raises the question of why the architecturally more "modest" buildings were such a source of pride for Heikki and Mirja. Jetsonen compared cottage design to a "diary," where the designer is free from the constraints of production and is beholden only to themselves and nature.⁷³ Skata and similar dwellings are an opportunity to trace the subtle lessons jotted in the diary of their career, originating from the modernist lessons of Revell to the inspirations and innovations from North America, and finally the collage of these influences in the civic buildings of 1960s Helsinki.



Figure 28: "The Warm Heart" net-zero house at the 1977 construction exposition. Hyttinen. "Muistatko vielä nämä asuntomessutalot?" mtvuutiset.fi, 2016.

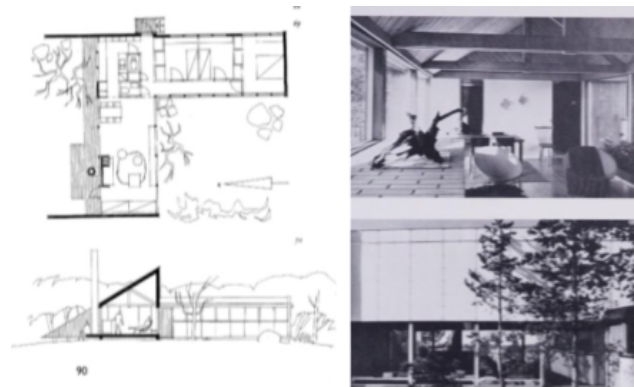


Figure 29: "Summer house in Teisko," by Mirja and Heikki, incorporating modern forms to a vernacular building type. ark. "4/1963 - kesämökkejä," 90.

This thesis has sought to showcase and reinterpret the prolific careers of Heikki and Mirja Castrén throughout the mid-20th century, a pivotal period where innovation and tradition encountered each other. Together with an extensive network of collaborators, their projects reflect rapid cultural, economic, and professional changes through the lens of architecture. By focusing on their joint career, it has been possible to illustrate the influences of North American design concepts to Finland, and how their realization has been received by the public. By blending primary sources, oral narratives, and theories on the global flow of ideas, this paper has highlighted the work of lesser-known designers in contributing to Finland's architectural evolution.

⁷² "4/1963 - kesämökkejä," *Arkkitehti*, <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1963/04/>, 90.

⁷³ Martelius, "Karujen rakennusten arkkitehdit toteuttivat unelmansa idyllisissä kesämökeissä," 4.

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Appendix:

Following is an outline of the economic and social context in Finnish history where Heikki and Mirja Castrén initiated their career. This is by no means a comprehensive recount but is intended to contextualize and “set the scene” for the status quo in architecture, education, and Finnish-American connections.

Finnish economy and society post WW2:

The Finnish capital of Helsinki was largely spared from the direct impact of the Winter and Continuation Wars. It wasn't Soviet bombs that triggered a wave of construction in the capital region, but rather the combined impact of domestic refugees from the annexed Karelian region and the ongoing shift to a manufacturing-based economy. Throughout the 50s and 60s, Finnish society began to urbanize at an increasing rate which led to type of rural decay throughout Finland while the urban areas began to prosper. This is a notable point of comparison to the United States which in the post-war years saw the opposite issue of urban decay as the wealthier, typically white, tax base rushed to the suburbs for single-family-home-based developments like Levittown.⁷⁴ Although over 100,000 buildings were demolished in the Helsinki area to make room for more dense housing solutions, Finland also suburbanized.⁷⁵ While the suburbanization patterns of the US in this period are characterized by the Levittowns across the mid-Atlantic, Finland's are by the likes of Tapiola, modeled by the principles of Ebenezer Howard's “Garden City” model. Revell also contributed designs for the Tapiola project, such as the iconic “Flask Houses.”

These new planning and architecture solutions reflected what architecture historian Juhana Lahti describes the 60s as a period of “socialization,” where the welfare state was born and new infrastructures were constructed to support it.⁷⁶ Lahti emphasizes the rapid development in the '60s, citing how private car ownership quadrupled from 160,000 to 643,000, 14 new cities and 12 *köping*s were designated, and 200,000 housing units were built through the decade. Expectedly, this required new architects and design approaches to meet the demand of rapid growth. Between '64 and '69, the Helsinki planning office grew from 30 people to 170, six new universities were established, and more design competitions were held than ever before.⁷⁷ Pre-fabrication became a “dominant practice,” and new standardization processes were established by offices such as the Finnish Concrete Industry Organization (SBK) and the office of precast concrete standards (BES), for which architect-engineer partnerships like Viljo Revell and Paavo Simula had laid the foundations for in the late 50s.⁷⁸ Stretching the most out of the limited building supply also pushed mixed-use buildings which can be seen throughout the Castréns's career.

The next generation & American cultural influences:

The cohort of young Finnish architects hoped to make their distinction from the old guard of functionalist architects. A sense of activism and rebelliousness toward the older cohort lingered in architecture education. Working for the likes of Aalto was considered unfashionable and undesirable. Working under a maestro with a singular vision became less appealing. An example of friction can be

⁷⁴ Steven Conn, *Americans against the City : Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2014)

⁷⁵ Julia Donner, “YLE Teema | Sininen laulu | Osa 9 - Elämän näyttämöitä 1958-1966 | Purkuskandaalit,” YLE (Finnish Broadcasting Company), 2004

⁷⁶ Juhani Lahti, “Kamalan ihanaa vai ihan kamalaa,” in *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi - Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Finnish Architecture Museum, 2016), 10–33.

⁷⁷ Lahti, Lahti, *Kamalan ihanaa vai ihan kamalaa*, 19

⁷⁸ Lahti, Lahti, *Kamalan ihanaa vai ihan kamalaa*, 25

seen in the 1-2/1958 edition of *Arkkitheti* where Aalto calls out the expressive concrete shell buildings of Eero Saarinen by describing the design as “grown boys playing with curves and tensions which they do not master.”⁷⁹ Retrospectively in 1985 Reima Pietilä, a key member of the 60’s cohort, reflected “in the naive fifties, new directions were sought in architectural competition entries to the extent that the old guard pioneers finally got worried... new architecture was censored, its spirit froze.”⁸⁰

Following is an overview of the American influences that affected the new cohort:

1. American student ideologies:

Trends that occurred across American college campuses trickled into the conversation in Finland as well. For example, the 6-1968 edition of *Arkkitehti*, featured the hippie communes of Colorado.⁸¹ Anti-Vietnam War sentiments, jazz, avant-garde films, and a general interest in activism through design lingered, along with an “innocent belief in endless [economic] growth,” as Aino Niskanen argues in *Breakthrough, architect generations, and a new aesthetic*.⁸² The moment was a curious one as economic growth raised an overall optimistic atmosphere in Finland, as it was increasingly realistic for families to buy a car, boat, or cottage in the countryside. Regardless, students were skeptical of the status quo and how this new wealth should be managed. This can be seen in the leftist, communist student movements that resemble groups on American college campuses. Even the spirit of an American campus was present, as Alvar Aalto’s 1949 competition entry for the design for the Helsinki Institute of Technology was “heavily influenced by American university culture... located in park-like surroundings; its center made up of a grouping of buildings around a central square,” like the quads of U.S. college campuses.⁸³

2. American theorist, ideologies imported (in suburbs):

As Finnish architecture students focused on social issues, they were also exposed to international authors which particularly influenced the planning of Finnish suburbs. The writings of Americans like Jane Jacobs, Buckminster Fuller, and the British-American Christopher Alexander were featured in *Arkkitehti* throughout the 60s. There was an interesting clash in the development of the Finnish suburb as different forces were squeezing the suburbs to be tighter, and others to be more expansive. On one hand, the separation of functions in the model of “the functional city” was pushed by CIAM conferences by the Finnish Aulis Blomstedt, co-founder of the CIAM Helsinki group. Also, Otto I. Murman favored separating buildings to avoid the collateral damage from bombings should the Cold War escalate.⁸⁴ The optimistic, expansionary approach coincided with the Smith-Polvinen plan, an unrealized highway master plan for the capital region developed by an American-Finnish engineering office to speed up private car travel.

Sprawling to the suburbs invited criticism, however. A strong countering voice was featured in a 1966 edition of *Arkkitheti* as Alexander’s “A city is not a tree.” This seminal text advocated for mixed-use buildings and developments instead of separating functions in the manner of Le Corbusier. Finnish

⁷⁹ Reima Pietilä, “12/1958 -,” *Arkkitehti*, 1958, <https://www.ark.fi/en/1958/12/>.

⁸⁰ Aino Niskanen, “Murros, arkkitehtisukupolvet & uusi estetiikka,” in *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi. Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Arkkitehtuurimuseo, 2016), 34–63.

⁸¹ “6/1968 - maailmansuunnittelu,” *Arkkitehti*, 1968, <https://www.ark.fi/fi/1968/06/>.

⁸² Niskanen, *Breakthrough, architect generations, and a new aesthetic*, 35

⁸³ Louna Lahti, *Alvar Aalto, 1898-1976: Paradise for the Man in the Street*, Basic Art Series 2.0 (Koln: Taschen, 2015).

⁸⁴ Timo Tuomi, *Tapiola: puutarhakaupungin vaiheita ; arkkitehtuuriopas* (Espoo: Espoon kaupunginmuseo, 1992).

writer Standerstskjöld highlights how in Alexander's writing "Community and the interaction of residents with the environment had to be taken as the starting point of the design."⁸⁵ This was more congruous to the Finnish context, as the text tapped into a "1960s strengthening sense for the collective and a resistance to all things elitist."⁸⁶ Though the Castrén's commissions were generally in urban centers, the mixing of programs to meet communal needs can be seen in the Pohjola Office and City Center projects. In short, some theorists favored U.S.-style urban growth, and others actively resisted it.

3. Direct American cultural imports:

Some official initiatives from the U.S. were also imported to Finland. "Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City" published in *Arkkitheiti* discusses the post-war orientation of Finland. Although Finland maintained diplomatic and economic ties to the Soviet Union after the armistice in WW2, it was culturally much more oriented to the Western powers. According to the author Olli-Paavo Koponen, "the planning and construction of our capital reflected the admiration for everything American and the goal of transforming the center of Helsinki into a real western 'city'."⁸⁷ Koponen cites the *America Builds* exhibition hosted by SAFA (Finnish Association of Architects) and the Finnish-American society as the catalyst for this city-like architecture, and Viljo Revell's 1952 Palace Hotel is emblematic of this trend. U.S. design was legitimized again in 1953, as analyzed by design historian Gay McDonald in "The Modern American Home as Soft Power: Finland, MoMA and the 'American Home 1953' Exhibition." This however was an "organic" and genuine independent exhibition, not an imposition by a particular institution with an agenda.

4. American building practices:

The assemblies and building technologies of large-scale projects were inspired by American case studies. As mentioned above, commercial buildings were the first ways to Americanize Helsinki. Koponen describes how international modernism was realized in Finland through these commercial spaces whose "facade was separated from the structural frame... architecture of [which] was designed to work together with neon signs, as seen in London and New York. Companies wanted to amplify the images of success and modernity with the buildings they built for themselves."⁸⁸ Constructivism in general gained traction, inspired by Mies van der Rohe's West Coast houses and Charles and Ray Eames's case studies with "geometric forms, and light and minimal detailing," as well as "steel framed facades with colorful panels."⁸⁹ Glass and steel facades, concrete structural, and internal parking garage represented progress and growth. These qualities cultivated an image of a North American city in Helsinki, but also the functions of one which the Heikki's and Revell's City Center exemplify.

⁸⁵ Elina Standertskjöld, "Järjestelmä arkkitehtuuria," in *Värikkäämpi, iloisempi, hienostuneempi - Näkökulmia 1960-luvun arkkitehtuuriin* (Helsinki: Finnish Architecture Museum, 2016), 123–43.

⁸⁶ Tuomi, *Tapiola: puutarhakaupungin vaiheita*, 17

⁸⁷ Olli-Paavo Koponen, "Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City," *Arkkitheiti*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.ark.fi/en/2023/03/forgotten-vision-of-helsinki-city/>.

⁸⁸ Koponen, *Forgotten Vision of Helsinki City*, 10

⁸⁹ Niskanen, *Murros, arkkitehtisukupolvet & uusi estetiikka*, 46