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Pohjola Insurance Building (1899-1901)
International concepts are conveyed as a synthesis of national motifs and genuine materials

In search of national identity:

Finland was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1809. Russia wished to sever Finland's close ties with former mother country Sweden and thus designated Helsinki as the capital of the Grand Duchy. Under Swedish rule, Turku had been the seat of government and higher education. Helsinki was geographically closer to Russia than the west coast city of Turku, (which almost seemed to gravitate towards Sweden), and thus also more easily supervised from St Petersburg. The Grand Duchy was allowed to retain its laws dating back to the time of Swedish rule. The language of government was Swedish, which was only spoken by 5% of the nation's population. In Helsinki, however, nearly the entire population was Swedish-speaking. Nor was Swedish the language only of the upper echelons of society; it was spoken even by menial labourers. It wasn't until the 1860s and the 1870s that the proportion of Finnish-speakers began to rapidly climb in Helsinki.

The exhortation of "Swedes we are no longer, Russians we can never become, so let us be Finns" was first heard back in the 1820s. Finnish was the language of the people and its status was only highlighted by the Kalevala, the national epic compiled by Elias Lönnrot and published for the first time in 1835. This epic poem told, in Finnish, the tale of the world from its creation, speaking of an ancient, mystical past replete with legendary heroes, tribal wars, witches and magical devices. The Kalevala proved the Finnish language to have a history and established it also as a language of high culture. The idea of Finland being a nation of its own with a language of its own started to take root. (Kalevala got a lot international attention and appreciation. It was translated to German in 1851, to English 1855, to French 1867. Catalan version was translated in 1997)

Folk poetry became a rich source of inspiration for all the arts. Orchestral works on Finnish mythology also received tremendous acclaim. Kalevala was a central theme in art and also acquired political importance.

Language evolved into a political issue in the 1880s. Improvements in the status of the Finnish language sought to strengthen national identity. Educated Swedish-speakers learned Finnish as well and education was the tool for creating a Finnish-speaking educated class. Enactment of the Elementary School Act in 1866 made education available to all strata of society.

Finnish was declared the official language in 1886, around which time the idea of Finland as an independent nation and people also gathered momentum.

A focus on the Finnish language sparked a counter-reaction among Swedish-speakers and gave rise to language parties. The different goals of the two parties were apparent e.g. in their attitude toward World's Fairs. Swedish-speaking liberals wished to present Finland as a modern Western industrial nation and highlighted Finland's political autonomy in particular, while the pro-Finnish faction put more importance on presenting national Finnish culture with its thousand-year-old roots, a nation free of Western tradition yet cultured.

Two opposing views of nationalism prevailed in Europe: "political" and "cultural-organic". By the late 1700s, "nation" in France and England was understood in terms of politics and geography, while the focus in Germany and Eastern Europe was on language and ethnography. The cultural-organic view that underscored the special features of folk culture was prevalent in the Nordic countries while Scandinavism was a manifestation of

“political” nationalism that superseded boundaries. “Political” nationalism had assimilated the Enlightenment-era ideals of individual freedom, liberalism and cosmopolitanism whereas “organic-cultural” nationalism in general opposed economic liberalism and outside influences. In Finland, the two views fell quite cleanly in line with the ideologies of the liberal and the Fennomans and were also reflected in their ideas when it came to matters such as Finland’s participation in World’s Fairs. Analyses Kerstin Smeds in her study on the world exhibitions.

Despite internal conflict, by 1900 internal development and international relations in Finland had developed to a point that may be described as megalomaniacal self-esteem. It was no longer a question of mere national and political self-esteem and a burning desire for sovereignty, but of *cultural* self-esteem and pride in particular, an intense conviction that Finland had something to show to the entire world. The mood and ideas of the time are well reflected in the words of poet Eino Leino. He described the links between Finland and Europe, the dialogue between the national and the international as follows:

[...] It is with freedom, pride and full confidence that we Finns can keep our windows open into the big world. No longer can we be brought down or harmed by importation, so safe and secure have the seedlings of national spirit grown among us. Brisk interaction with Europe is essential to us in all fields so that we may guard ourselves against complacency and that we might continue along the path of healthy development [...].

Roots

Culture and art were a natural element of the pro-Finnish ideology. Finnish spruce forests became an acceptable subject in paintings, whereas earlier landscape artists had travelled as far afield as France and Italy for their subject matter. Likewise, Finnish folk were discovered and accepted as models for renowned artists. The depictions of ordinary people were ideal in their realism; the artists had discovered the honest man who worked with his hands and whose humble life concealed a mysterious beauty and authenticity.

A search also began for architectural heritage rooted in Finnish history. From 1871 to 1902, the Finnish Antiquarian Society organised archaeological expeditions with young architects. In search of their Finnish roots, artists and architects made expeditions to look for the Finnish national style, to study historic heritage, modest medieval churches and simple rural dwellings, which inspired and influenced them profoundly.

The new generation of architects had a conscious desire to discard the tradition of classicism and create distinctive architecture in line with international trends yet drawing its influences from Finnish nature and popular building. At the same time, new modern building technology was being utilised and new inventions introduced.

The Truth of Material and the Truth of Style (by Sixten Ringbom)

Criticism of conventional façade materials had already arisen by the mid-1800s. Plaster mouldings and other ornaments came to be perceived as disingenuous and false appendages that had no place in genuine architecture. Easily damaged and difficult to fasten, they also came to be considered a hazard to the safety of passers-by.

Some examples of European writings on the materials:

“In fact (quote from Sixten Ringbom), one of the earliest and most important debates on true material was focused on this tangible issues, dangerous cornices.”

In 1884 the Norwegian journal *Teknisk Ugeblad* noted that the winter that year looked especially bad. “We can hardly recall ever having seen as many plaster ornaments coming down wholly or in part.” Also German journals reported recent cases of crashing cornices and crumbling facades in Berlin.

Architect Hörlin, who was active in the “arts and crafts” movement, demanded in 1887 that “the architects ought to form a conspiracy against the tyranny of plaster”. Plaster is a sin that will always find you out, it has become its own punishment “ruining the appearance of the building as well as constituting a danger.”

Already Gottfried Semper in 1853 designated in his London lecture the “material system” one of the three factors determining style. He advised the practicing architect to regard his material, not as passive matter, but

as a source of inspiration. At the same time he warned against overrating the materials in architecture. He was still anxious to preserve the priority of another favourite idea of his, the concept of coating (Bekleidung).

International debate on façade materials heated up in the mid-1800s, the premises being practical and building technology requirements, and not just new ideologies in architecture. Genuine building materials were desired for the creation of genuine, organic architecture.

In Finland the choice of natural building stone is restricted almost entirely to hard rocks. Among softer varieties only soapstone occurs in quantity. Of the major buildings dating from the Middle Ages, all but three are built of field stone. Monumental architecture was erected in brick and plaster. Until the late 19th century, hard rock was considered a luxury to be used only for details, such as copings, portals etc.

Finland and Norway shared the same situation: the scarcity of easily worked stone and the abundance of hard rock. Both Finns and Norwegians tended to see themselves as the grey stone peoples of the north. In Finland author and journalist Topelius had compared the grey stone itself with the staid and serious inhabitants of the country.

New methods and tools to utilise stone were developed as a result of increasing demand for natural stone. The contributions of geologists were also sought in the construction industry. Commercial enterprises and industry gradually took an interest in the excavation and working of different types of stone for use in construction, but progress came slowly.

The New Style:

The concept of the New Style was more complex. The demand of 19th century style was repeated in countless articles, pamphlets and books. There were demands of putting a stop to the historical masquerade. "Instead of imitating the forms of the past, we should give the creations of our time the stamp of original beauty and truth." "Every epoch has left behind its own style of architecture. Why should we not try whether a style of our own might also be found?"

The Pohjola building

Fire insurance company Pohjola was established in 1891 and named after the Kalevala. At the time, the name standing for Northland as in the home of the northern people in all likelihood gave the impression of security. The other connotations of the name in the Kalevala – those of "underworld" and "dark world" – may not have been fully appreciated.

In the spring 1899 the Pohjola company arranged a competition; the street façades would have to be granite or other Finnish stone.

Architects Törnvalds were commissioned to design the floor plan of the building on the basis of their prize-winning proposal. The façades designed by architects Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen were considered especially attractive, and the trio were awarded an honourable mention and commissioned to design the façade. The building comprised business, office and residential premises. It was built to modern standards with much iron and equipped with its own switchboard and lift. The building also housed an electrical plant to generate power for e.g. the Swedish-made lift, and it had steam heating.

A façade of natural stone decorated with ornamentation in a national motif was unprecedented. The material of choice for the façades was Finnish soapstone. The rough wall was engraved with vertical grooves and the ample ornamentation focused around the windows and doors. The walls were worked by Norwegian stonemasons.

The result was an eclectic creation, embodying elements of elegant "Spanish" commercial architecture (top floor tracery, even the composition of the main door), American Romanesque (the tower with its corner turrets, the heavy rustication) and Continental Jugendstil (the lintels, the heavy corner column; the final version of the helmet). In order to fuse these disparate elements into a unified whole, Gesellius-Saarinen-Lindgren employed the same ornamental vocabulary as they had used in their Paris pavilion: plants and animals from the Finnish flora and fauna. These ornaments are integrated into the framework of traditional architectural members and motifs. The architects had still some way to go before they were prepared to let the stone to speak for it self. As Ringbom so clearly puts it in his thesis.

Another commentator identified the ultimate sources of the Pohjola building as “American and English“. It is artistically based on three cornerstones: simplicity, respect for the material and stylisation of the realistic motifs employed. He was impressed by the vigorous rustication: “These arches and these masses of stone symbolise, as it were, the raw, untouched substance from which the smoother surfaces, the finer forms and the rich plant and animal ornamentation are growing up.”

Today it is difficult to imagine the impact made by the Pohjola building. Crowds of people watching and discussing the details of the building were a common sight in the spring of 1901. Some commentators were more critical. They said that ornaments should have some connection with the significance of the building. When viewing the Pohjola House one should think more of the zoological museum than an insurance company.

The statuary enlivening the street view was executed in soapstone by artist Hilda Flodin (1877–1958). The building’s main entrance is guarded by four mischievous figures. These grimacing, demonic creatures tie in with the tradition of Romance church architecture which used gargoyles to caution church-goers of the perils of the world and to protect the building against evil spirits. The creatures in this new style were brimming with youthful spirit and humour.

Two pine trees marking a pair of columns are supported on the heads of the figures. The trunks rise straight and solid, holding a capital of pine twigs and bears hiding therein. Above them lie two larger bears holding torches. As a bear holding a torch was also the emblem of fire insurance company Pohjola, the portal did double duty as a subtle “billboard”. Behind the bears are two more delicate pine trees supporting a garland of pine twigs. The classic decoration has been replaced with motifs alluding to Finnish nature.

Flodin’s ornamentation has been interpreted as a Kalevala motif. The grimacing gatekeepers may refer to the dark and mysterious aspects of Northland and the figures may represent the two sons of Louhi (a female witch-like figure in Kalevala). However, it seems more likely that Flodin’s sculptures had no greater agenda than corporate image. Architect Gustaf Strengell defined the architecture of the Pohjola building as “a poem in stone”. The pinecones and squirrels were enough to forge a link between the decoration and the pro-Finnish movement, and since European Jugend architecture also employed organic nature motifs in ornamentation, the decorations of the Pohjola building were nationalistic and modern at the same time.

The wild North inside

The interior of the building teems with strange creatures, hags of the Northland and other hideous beings. Wood is the dominant material throughout and the wood carvings are intricate, designed by the architects. Researcher Marika Hausen believes Lindgren in particular was eager to bring the seething scenes of the Kalevala to life.

The main entrance to the Pohjola building is a richly ornamented soapstone portal. The main door, decorated in a bird motif, is reached through a small outside hallway. A vaulted hall lit with lanterns leads to the staircase. The doors, decorative pillars and lampposts on the banisters and the curved benches are all made of pine and the over-sized wrought-iron mountings with a plant motif are painted black.

The ornamentation of the Pohjola building invoked much heated comment among contemporaries. The peculiar dwarfish creatures sculpted at the heads of columns in the stair hall were particularly perplexing. Apparently they represented the diseases called up by Louhi, hostess of Pohjola – Colic, Pleurisy, Fever, Ulcer, Plague, Consumption, Gout and Cancer. The figures depicting these ailments have been thought to represent the myriad hazards and calamities that were the rationale for taking out insurance in the first place.

The insurance company’s customer floor was given the shape of a cottage main room with a large wooden column in the middle. Contemporaries found the decor of the customer floor ancient Finnish in style. It created a sense of home and security that could be had by customers if only they bought insurance. The dangers depicted in the stairway could be averted by stepping in and taking out a policy.

The meaning of the building

Chairman of the Board of Pohjola, architect Sebastian Gripenberg, was staunchly pro-Finnish. In his inauguration speech he praised the ensemble of material and ornamentation:

“And now you will certainly ask me in what style the building is built. All the innumerable people who have stopped in front of the exterior to watch, to appreciate, to admire and to criticize, all these people have agreed

in saying: "We have never seen anything like this before". And they have been right, since there is indeed nothing like this in our country or elsewhere. The style has been called Finnish naturalism: this term is as good as any other, because the salient feature in this building is that every material speaks its own, natural language, and that the ornamentation is based solely on themes derived from the Finnish flora and fauna – and all this in a manner that bespeaks of the extraordinary and original gifts of the architects... To Finnish art this is nonetheless a source of great satisfaction; this originality is also acknowledged abroad, as evidenced by the attention shown the pavilion of our artists in the Paris exhibition."