

**Ritva Wäre**

Gunillankuja 5 A 1  
00870 Helsinki  
ritva.ware@kolumbus.fi

**CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS OF ART NOUVEAU ARCHITECTURE IN FINLAND  
IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

**Abstract**

Art nouveau was identified as a style in architecture and applied arts in Finland around 1898, when the word *l'Art Nouveau* appeared for the first time in the Finnish press. A Finnish variation of art nouveau was developed in the next few years. It became popular especially in the growing capital of Helsinki and was used for all kinds of building types and was popular among wide variety of clients. Art nouveau was considered at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as modern and West European, and at the same time as very Finnish. Less than ten years later it was generally regarded as totally outdated and unfit for the modern urban landscape and the industrialized society.

**Changing interpretations of Art Nouveau architecture in Finland in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

When, around 1898, art nouveau appeared in Finland as a style in architecture and applied arts it was seen as clearly modern and West European. It was often called also modern or the new style. In the next few years a Finnish variation of art nouveau developed. It was a kind of a fusion of foreign art nouveau and arts and crafts influences and older Finnish national romantic ideas. This was a clever compromise, because the buildings could be seen in the same time very national and modern and international, whatever the clients wanted to emphasize. Early Finnish art nouveau was also called national romanticism because of the abundance of archaic and medieval features in the buildings.

Art nouveau was popular especially in the growing capital of Helsinki during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was used for all kinds of building types and it was popular among a wide variety of clients. Art nouveau was used in churches, banks, cultural and industrial buildings, buildings of worker's unions, in office buildings and in blocks of flats as well as villas. Architects who used art nouveau in their designs belonged to the generation born in late 1860s and during 1870s. Most of them had studied architecture in Finland and they worked as private architects. Art nouveau was truly the new style of the new generation. Even a battle of styles was seen in 1900-1902 when the architecture of the national museum was in discussion and finally settled in an architectural competition.

Contemporary interpretations of the new architecture were written mostly by architects and professional writers and published in the then flourishing professional and cultural press. Art nouveau, in all its personal variations, was seen as modern and international, or specifically Finnish, or later on, as totally outdated and unfit for the modern urban landscape. Finnish writers knew very well the most important European architectural theorists and they followed keenly foreign professional journals: *The Studio*, *Dekorative Kunst*, *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* and *Moderne Bauformen*.

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

The written interpretations the new style were of course intertwined and some ideas were repeated several times by various writers. The terms *art nouveau* and even *modern* were understood in many ways and were changing with time. Especially the term *modern* was used vaguely, often in the meaning of *contemporary*.

### The origins and background of Art Nouveau

In January 1899 architect Ivar Aminoff held a speech about the future architecture in relation to culture and decorative arts. His main points were the following: The time of classical renaissance



was over as well as the dominance of the South European Romanic peoples. Leading peoples in arts and architecture were the Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and other Nordic and Slavic peoples. Finland ought to follow the western cultures. Aminoff also mentioned signs that the western alternative had already been chosen. He referred to the recently (1898) arranged competition for the Finnish pavilion for the Paris World Fair 1900.

Aminoff also mentioned the influences coming from Japan. The dominating style in Northern Europe was , according to Aminoff, “Gothic-like Renaissance”, but he believed that in the

1. Newly built part of the street Laivurinkatu in southern Helsinki (Photo Signe Brander 1909, Helsinki City Museum).

future a totally abstract architecture without representative or symbolic ornaments will appear. Aminoff mentioned also, that in England, decorative arts and architecture were connected both with domestic traditions and contemporary demands. This should be followed by others, too.(Aminoff,1899).

In 1901 architect Bertel Jung presented different understanding of the new movement: According to him it started in USA in the functional furniture design (probably he meant Shakers) and then expanded in England, Belgium and Netherlands, which were the three leading countries of art nouveau. The most important authors and designers according to Jung were William Morris and Henry van de Velde.

Jung also mentioned the Art Nouveau in France and gave much space to the promising developments in Germany and especially in Austria. Otto Wagner was the most important theorist, but Jung even wrote about the realist movement in Richard Streiter's writings. Primacy of purpose and truth in architecture were essential elements of the modern movement according to Jung.(Jung,1901)

Many writers believed that there was a lot of space for the new style in Finland. There were no indigenous building traditions in towns, where classicism and neo-renaissance had dominated (Ahrenberg, 1904; Tavastsjerna, 1907). In the beginning of 1890s the building industry had been at

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

a practical standstill, due to the country's bad economical situation. When the construction activities started again in 1895, they offered fruitful soil to a new kind of architecture, which was in the hands of a new generation of architects, supported by totally new impulses from abroad.

In Helsinki art nouveau buildings were often built on vacant land in the outskirts of the city. New houses rose like flowers in old wooden suburbs as symbols of growth, success and the new century.

### “Not only new, but at least in part Finnish new”



2. In the background the new house at Albertinkatu 17. Architect Gustaf Estlander 1905-1906 (Photo Signe Brander 1908, Helsinki City Museum).

complex. The notion of a national style, or national expression of architecture interested both groups, but the methods to achieve it were different. These groups had common goals only when Finland's political, economic and cultural autonomy in Russia was at stake. (Wäre 1991 and 2000). There had been various experiments to create a specific Finnish style, especially in wooden buildings, but all had failed. The task was particularly difficult in case of monumental and stone buildings. The designs for the future National Theatre (originally Finnish Theatre) raised many discussions. Kasimir Leino wrote in 1898, that "hopefully there would appear a genius, who by immersing himself in the ancient Finnish spirit, would create a modern building in a fashion that would still be Finnish in character." He would be a "messiah among architects" (Tuomi 1979, p. 89; Leino, 1898, p.250).

Quite soon, in 1900, the Finnish Pavilion drew much attention in Paris, also from foreign critics. They recognized modern international art nouveau character of the building and in the same time its special Finnish character, given by the ornaments from Finnish flora and fauna as well as reminding medieval churches. This pavilion was an important turning point in the development of Finnish architecture (Wäre, 2002). Architects Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen, and especially Eliel Saarinen succeeded well and put an end to the waiting for an architectural celebrity. People started to talk about *Saarinen style*, and it was copied by other architects. The better name nowadays would be *Finnish Art Nouveau*. Finnish art nouveau was most popular in the very first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This quotation by art historian Eliel Aspelin (Aspelin, 1902, p. 54) defined the aims of the contemporary Finnish architecture in 1901. National style of architecture, its preconditions and necessity had been discussed in Finland throughout the 1890s, later than in many Central European countries. It was partly connected with the political situation of Finland as an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. Finnish nationalism had been developed all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, there were controversies between the two language-groups, Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking, which made the situation even more

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

Finnish Art Nouveau was much influenced by English architecture, especially that of Voysey and Baillie Scott, and also that of Mackintosh and Belgian Paul Hankar. Its special characteristics were light painted rough-cast walls, steep roofs covered with red bricks, windows resembling sash windows and British-looking chimneys. And also animal and floral decorations, which were typical for art nouveau everywhere, were carefully taken from Finnish nature. The use of natural Finnish stone for decorations and facades of the monumental buildings was an essential feature. North American (Richardson's Neo-Romanesque) and Scottish models were used.



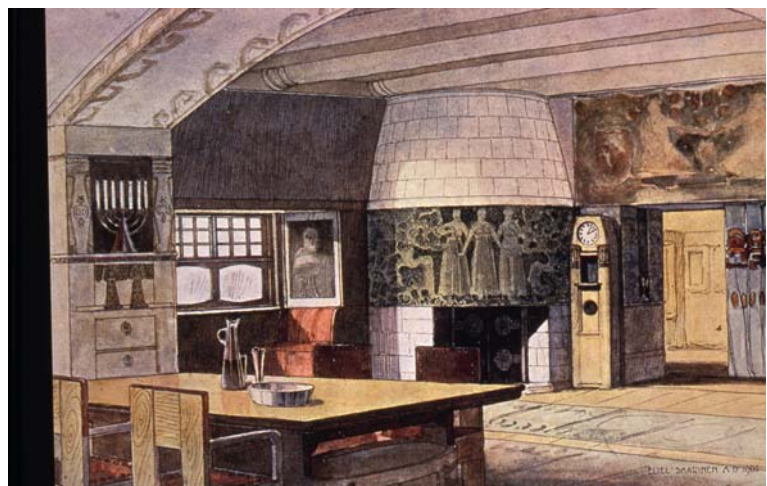
3. Eliel Saarinen, A villa study.  
*Ateneum*

Emphasised simplicity and modesty in form were regarded as Finnish, particularly of Finnish-speaking Finns' characteristics. Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen won the competition for the National Museum in Helsinki in 1902. According to Jac. Ahrenberg, architect and critic, the design did not express any festive mood, but rather "*the murmur of the tall pines and the rush of the deep streams and it was close in spirit to the heavy and melancholy mood of Finnish folk songs*"(Ahrenberg,1902). After the competition the design was developed and altered and these features were no longer prominent.

Even expressive crudity of forms was identified as something especially Finnish. Archaic treatment of forms was generally thought to refer to the distant past and perhaps to the world of the *Kalevala* epic. Ahrenberg saw a kind of *Aleksis Kivi* style in the design of the Technology Students House from 1903. (Wäre,1991, Ahrenberg, 1903): Aleksis Kivi's novel *The Seven Brothers* had presented a forest Finnishness that was regarded as an example of primitive strength.

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Vaulted rooms and window- and door openings, characteristic for the Finnish pavilion of paris exhibition were common elements of Finnish architecture in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elements of medieval architecture were references to Finnish medieval churches but they belonged also to a large European phenomenon and especially to the arts and crafts movement. Most severe Finnish-minded writers did not consider medieval castles and churches particularly Finnish, as they represented the Swedish reign and foreign cultural influence in general. They were often used in buildings designed by Swedish-minded architects. Others preferred to use stylized elements of medieval architecture, like towers, or they took their models from Scottish or other European castles.



4. Eliel Saarinen, An interior study. *Ateneum 1901*, pp. 428-429.

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

## An international style?



5. At the corner of Fredrikinkatu and Bulevardi streets two new apartment buildings designed by architects Grahn, Hedman, Wasastjerna 1902-1903 (left) and Gustaf Estlander 1903-1904 (Photo Signe Brander 1907, Helsinki City Museum)

Foreign influences were always present in the writings and in architecture in Finland in all architectural fields. Finnish architects travelled extensively and read foreign architectural journals. And also Finnish journals reflected interest for foreign developments in architecture.

The will to attain the level of the *greatest cultural countries* of Europe (was very distinct in Finland at the turn of the century 1900. These great cultural countries were primarily Germany, France and Great-Britain. Relations to Sweden as the former mother country till the year 1809, as well as to other

Scandinavian countries were close, and Swedish architecture had much influence in Finland, partly due to the fact that many Swedish architects worked in Finland. Also contacts with Russia, the then mother country were close and many Finnish architects even worked in St. Petersburg. Traditional Russian wood architecture was admired, but not copied. (Wäre, 2005).

At the turn of the century the internationalism was often mentioned in the writings and European architecture was seen as a collection of separate national and regional trends. Only few years later claims for more visible and uniform internationalism were often put forward and one can notice a growing criticism of national romantic trends.

### The notion of modern

The notion of *modern* was used by many authors already in 1890s, as a synonym for new and contemporary. Some years later modern was more specifically connected with truthfulness to materials and sensible use of ornaments as well as primacy of the interior to facades. It was also used in connection with *realism* and *rationalism*.

Bertel Jung had referred to Otto Wagner's and Richard Streiter's *realism* in 1901, emphasizing that new building types and new materials, especially iron, demanded new architectural forms.(Jung,1901) Two years later architect Gustaf Strengell distinguished in contemporary Finnish architecture two different tendencies, *rationalism* and *national romanticism*. Rationalism resembled to the former realism: floor plan and interior layout were to be expressed in the external architecture and truthfulness to materials and construction was demanded. According to Strengell, the main precursors of rationalism were Richard Norman Shaw and C. F. A. Voysey (and before them Ruskin and Morris), as well as Paul Hankar, Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde. (Strengell, 1903).

Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

The notion of modern was clarified again in 1904, when Eliel Saarinen won the competition of the new main railway station in Helsinki and the commission for the building was given to him. In his design the building would be finished in natural stone and decorated with stylized castle motifs. While Saarinen's design were generally highly praised, it was also criticized by some younger architects, as for ex. Sigurd Frosterus and Gustaf Strengell. Because of this attack Saarinen continued his work and altered his designs many times. The modified designs show influences of architects Peter Behrens, Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich.

Sigurd Frosterus had worked as an assistant of Henry van de Velde in Weimar from October 1903 to March 1904, just before the competition, in which he also participated with an entry showing clear elements of the most recent Weimar architecture of Van de Velde. In his texts Frosterus developed the basic idea of Art Nouveau rationalism. He believed that new materials (iron and concrete) call for new forms: "The guiding motives for the future architecture ought to be the most rational use of materials, economy of materials and ruthless concentration of power. A building was no longer a picturesque silhouette, a lifeless, immobile, imposing mass, but a living organism, corresponding to a given purpose, adapted to the circumstances." (Frosterus, 1904). He also believed that we can learn more about the form from the construction of machinery, bicycles, cars, from battleships and railway bridges, than from historical styles. Frosterus attacked strongly the national romanticism, the *Finnish style* as he also called it, and wrote that "we did not live on hunting and fishing any more, as in the old days, and decorative plants and bears – to say nothing of other animals – are hardly representative symbols of the age of steam and electricity" (Frosterus 1904).

The reinforced concrete was not introduced in construction works in Finland until 1904. Before that it could not even be discussed. After that it was used increasingly also in the ceiling vaults of Helsinki railway station.

After the debate of the Helsinki railway station in 1904 the mainstream of Finnish architecture, also that of Eliel Saarinen, changed gradually. The paths of Otto Wagner, Henry van de Velde and Josef Hoffmann were followed closely. Reinforced concrete was used, stone claddings were made smoother and archaisms were left behind. Symmetry and even classicism with columns were accepted as elements of new monumentality.

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Bruxelles – 5. 10. 2010

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