

The art of finnish architecture



I AM AWFUL at drawing, I mean really awful. Perhaps that's why I admire architects. Albeit some more than others.

Architecture says a lot about a country. Finland's architectural track record is mixed - everything between brilliance and outright rubbish. I guess it is pretty much the same everywhere around the globe.

Our architecture has a glorious but short history. Over 90 per cent of all buildings in Finland have been constructed since 1900. Nevertheless we boast more than our fair share of famous architects and designers.

The most venerated Finnish architect and designer remains Alvar

Aalto, who died in 1976. You will see his signature all over the country, from the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki to the city centre of Seinäjoki. If a Finn has ever visited your home, he or she will most probably have brought you an Aalto vase.

Aalto was a disciple of the famous trio of Eliel Saarinen, Armas Lindgren and Herman Gesellius. They belonged to the National Romantic era around the turn of the last century. You might want to visit Hvitträsk, where the three architects lived with their families.

Eliel Saarinen's son, Eero, designed the Arch in St. Louis (the Jefferson monument), one of the most famous buildings in the United States. I remember visiting it at the tender age of 13. It left a lasting impression on me, a bit like the Atomium in Brussels, or the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

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After the Functionalism of the 1950s, Reima and Raili Pietilä designed a number of interesting public buildings including Dipoli in Otaniemi (in Espoo, near Helsinki) and the Tampere library.

Much of Finnish public architecture is characterized as Functionalist, with large spaces and lots of light. It is what I would call no-nonsense and no-clutter architecture. Plain and simple.

If you want a snapshot of Finnish architecture in Helsinki start your walk from the Olympic Stadium, go past the Opera House (preferably quickly), the Finlandia Hall, the National Museum, the Parliament, Kiasma (the

Museum of Contemporary), Lasipalatsi ('glass palace'), the Railway Station, and down to the Esplanade, and finish off with the Senate Square.

This walk will give you a flavour of all the key eras of Finnish architecture, from the Modernist to the Empire styles.

Finnish architecture has a glorious recent past, and I can't wait to see what showpieces of Finnish design by the current generation are waiting in the wings.

Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen and Reima Pietilä had a common trait: they were bold. They represent the kind of boldness that made Finnish architecture well known - and my kind of amateur art-admirer happy. #

Alexander Stubb is Finland's minister of foreign affairs.