

## Socio-cultural Notes on the State of Finnish Architects and Architecture

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*I denna artikel diskuterar Arne Nevanlinna vad som kan kallas arkitektu-  
rens centrala kunskapsproblem – den nödvändiga och känsliga balansen  
mellan beprövad yrkeserfarenhet ("praktikerns kunskap") och vetenskaplig  
kunskap ("teoretikerns kunskap"). Han exemplifierar sitt resonemang  
med ett uppmärksammat tjänstetillsättningsärende vid arkitekturskolan i  
Otaniemi.*

*Enligt Nevanlinna är denna strukturella konflikt mellan "praktiker"  
och "teoretiker" mer djupgående än i de andra nordiska länderna, något  
som bland annat visar sig i att man i Finland bibehållit den internationella  
modernismens idéer i en utsträckning som inte förekommer i andra länder.*

*De begrepp Nevanlinna använder för att belysa arkitekturprofessionens  
kunskapsfrågor är: 'auktoritetsorientering', 'etablissemang' och 'myt'.  
Hans poäng är att dessa begrepp visserligen kan användas vid analysen  
av alla existerande professioner – men att resultatet blir speciellt tydligt  
och, kanske, förödande, vid en analys av arkitektprofessionen.*

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This is an attempt to reveal some of the less obvious motives behind the decisions made by Finnish architects and institutions in professional matters. Finn Werne's input (*Tidskrift för Arkitekturforskning*, vol 3, 1-2/1990) has been a general reference as well as a fruitful incentive for the line of thought in this article. The process of selecting the professor in Public Building Design at the Otaniemi school of architecture serves as an illuminating example for how decisive these concealed criteria may be. The conclusion presents some basic alternatives on how the quality of the architects' education in Finland could be improved.

### *The Selection Process*

The post will be vacant after *Osmo Lappo* who has been professor for almost 25 years. The subject area is considered to be the most prominent one among the 11 professorships in the Faculty.

A lack of interest in academic teaching among the Finnish architects was indicated by the fact that there were only three applicants: *Arvi Ilonen*, practitioner with teaching experience from Tampere (Tammerfors), *Juhani Katainen*, professor of architecture in Tampere, and *Osmo Mikkonen*, professor of architecture in Oulu (Uleåborg).

The selected experts were *Matti Mäkinen*, former professor in Oulu and at present director general of the National Board of Building, *Jan Henriksen*, professor of architecture in Stockholm, and *Arne Henriksen*, professor of architecture in Oslo. Their statement was unanimous: None of the applicants was considered to be qualified for the position. In February 1991 the faculty board decided to agree with the experts. This, however, reflects only the professors' view since, according to the university regulations, the rest of the board members (teachers, students) are excluded from decisions concerning the selection of new professors.

The fact that the three applicants, declared incompetent by both the experts and the faculty, included two professors in the same area in other universities caught some public attention. Four comments about the matter have been published in one newspaper (*Uusi Suomi*). The question was raised as to how it was possible to find the same applicants competent a few years back and incompetent now.

### *Concealed Motives*

Understanding the selection process requires an analysis of some fundamental characteristics of the Finnish professional atmosphere.

Relevant conceptions in this case are *authority-orientation*, *establishments* and *myths*, all touching the core of not only the profession but Finnish society in general. These characteristics may have positive or negative consequences depending on the context. My argument is that in this particular process of selecting the professor and in terms of the comprehensive interests of the society, these phenomena have affected the process negatively.

### *Authority-orientation*

Social structures based on authoritarian hierarchies have deep roots in the colonial past of Finland. They still dominate the society in general and the profession of architects in particular. The cultural climate is marked by submittance to conventions represented by those in power in the society as well as in the profession.

In most cases, the opinion leaders do not have to exercise their power by force as their standpoints have been internalized in advance by the subjects themselves. When faced with a problem, people automatically follow the conventions defined and maintained by an accepted authority in the matter. Reaching decisions through discussion and intellectual processes is not the rule.

### *Establishments*

The formation of establishments within the various institutions of the society is a natural consequence of authoritarian structures, administrative as well as spiritual. An establishment is characterized by internal (or fraternal) unanimity and solidarity, high prestige – and the denial of the existence of itself.

This applies to architects as well. The dominant conception of architecture as well as rules of how to interpret it are given by a relatively small-numbered inner circle operating like a club. The members, practically all of them design practitioners, do not have to impose their stand-point on the common architect; in an authority-oriented society the rulers and the ruled need each other. This is why both parties tend to be a bit offended when faced with an analysis based on power structures.

Important positions cannot be filled without the consent of this establishment: the chairman of SAFA, the chief editor of the magazine *Arkkitehti*, the director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, etc. In fact, the selections are often made in advance by the inner circle, and the actual election process remains a formality only.

In the schools, the professors are the establishment. Students, teachers and the personnel are represented in the faculty board but have little influence, not only because they are in minority but also because they have submitted themselves to thinking that professors know better. The occasional dissident does not want to jeopardize his/her career by contradicting the professors. All important committees, task forces etc. are dominated by professors, leaving the resources of the rest of the teaching personnel largely unused.

### *Myths*

The achievements and the reputation of Finnish architecture have fertilized the ground for a rich set of professional myths. Earlier, the myths certainly

have been fruitful sources of self-confidence and inspiration for Finnish architects. They are still needed, but the problem now is that the profession seems to be unable to renew the myths in accordance with the changes in the society.

Gradually, the myths have lost their original function and become, like the professional institutions, instruments for the establishment in distinguishing itself and maintaining its position within the profession. In the process of selecting the professor some myths seem to hold direct relevance:

*1. Ultimately, architecture is art, or rather, the mother of all arts*

The conception as promoted by the Finnish establishment of architects is adapted from the art theories where architecture is understood as art based on individual experiences guided by a collection of archetypes, represented by ideal (geometric) forms and stored in the collective, subconscious memory of man in all times and cultures.

The most prominent spokesman for this approach is *Juhani Pallasmaa*. Criticism toward this conception is effectively rejected by mystifying the origins of architecture: It is hard to argue against myths which are declared inexplicable by definition.

Consequently, western-originated international vocabularies like classicism and modernism are preferred to culturally oriented architectures richer in variation and expression. Urban design and planning, both part of the education of Finnish architects, do not very well fit into this artistically oriented, psychological conception of architecture. As urban problems inevitably have a social content, they are not in the focus of the establishment's interests. This is visible also in the content of the magazine *Arkkitehti*.

*2. The future of Finnish architecture is in International Modernism*

The myth contains not only the visual outlook but also the method of design. Fully adapted by the Finnish architects is the modernistic process starting with functions expressed in the program and proceeding in a "logical" sequence to the final solution. Only few of the best architects have shown ability to use more creative approaches. The shortcomings in the overall quality of the built environment in Finland may be seen as a direct consequence of the dominance of international modernism.

*3. Heroism: The development of architecture is lead by individual gifted designer-architects*

They are regarded as absolute authorities, not only in architectural design but also in all other professional matters, including the criteria for select-

ing professors. Merits like teaching and research never overcome design qualifications. Schools of architecture are not seen as places where architecture can be developed.

*4. Corporative consensus: Internal solidarity is necessary to protect the profession against outside attacks*

The content of the consensus is dictated by the establishment. This prevents criticism and development of other approaches to professional matters. As Finn Werne pointed out, the profession may be considered strong when it is well integrated into the society, and vice versa, a weak profession turns inwards isolating itself from the society. In these terms, the profession of Finnish architects is weak.

Overemphasizing the artistic content of architecture is bound to keep a distance to the rest of the society. As a result, the gap between professional and public conceptions of architecture in Finland remains quite wide.

*Improving the Quality: Professorial Strategy*

Recently, the educational quality of the Otaniemi faculty has been criticized for serving too directly the needs of practising architects, thus giving up its potential avant-garde position within the profession to the leading designers. This is understandable as most of the professors have their own offices. In order to protect their prestige the professors keep silent in public. Among themselves however, the need of changes has obviously been recognized.

The strategy of the professors is definitely not based on self-criticism. Faithful to the established conception of architecture, the professors seem to favour a resurrection of heroism. Getting hold of famous designers would in their opinion improve the educational standard and enhance the presently low motivation of the students.

The first move of the professors into this direction was to select experts known for sharing their conception of architecture. The experts followed suit: As intended, achievements in architectural design were given absolute preference to other merits. As criteria the experts used not only the architectural (=artistic) quality of implemented buildings but also success in architectural competitions or professional exhibitions (i.e. "Finland Builds" at five years intervals).

Thus, all criteria involved in the process are based on subjective evaluations by architects having the same view of architecture: professors, experts, juries of competitions and exhibitions. The process was secured in advance to be protected against outside influences.

Of course, the professors cannot blame the lack of competent applicants on anyone else but themselves. Most of the professors have been around long enough to educate architects for wider interests than the most pragmatic ones, had they only been able or willing to do so. As things are now, the Otaniemi school wavers somewhere between a vocational training school and an academic faculty of a university.

This is said with full awareness of the benefits of the long tradition of handicraft-oriented methods in the training of architects. The question is whether this is enough for meeting the problems of the modern society.

Rather than encouraging the discussion between alternative conceptions of architecture and teaching, the establishment sticks to its position by issuing absolute statements about architecture. One example: The international Alvar Aalto symposium, arranged every third year in Jyväskylä, is used by the Finnish establishment as a forum for strengthening their professional prejudices (most notably the somewhat naive faith in international modernism), instead of exposing their standpoints to international discussion and criticism.

### *Improving the Quality: Alternative Strategies*

What are the professors going to do now? The faculty board has already decided for a wait-and-see attitude. Temporary professors will be invited for shorter periods of time, and the probability that they will include foreigners is high.

Wherever they come from, their contributions will obviously not consist of participation in the long-term development of the faculty. This is a risk: The substance of the education has been stagnant for some twenty years now, and the role of the leading professor in the faculty would be crucial in terms of acting as a primus motor when trying to cope with new challenges to the education.

One way to break this deadlock would be to widen up the criteria for competencies to include teaching and research as well. If these merits were taken into account on equal basis with design achievements, culturally oriented architects would become eligible for professorships adding to the number of potentially qualified applicants.

In this context, cultural orientation includes enlarging the range of professional careers to teaching, research, writing about architecture, etc. These new activity areas call for more intellectual capacities than is needed in the conventional design process based on intuition, or in the pragmatically oriented teaching in the schools of architecture.

As things stand now, this is utopia in Finland. The international practice that a doctorate should be a basic requirement for a professor in architecture will not become true in a foreseeable future. For architects, the way toward a more tolerant and democratic atmosphere seems to be even harder than for the rest of the Finnish society.

### *The Students Hold a Key Position*

So far, the blame for the stagnant situation in the school has been put on the professors only. In fact, the problem is not as simple as that.

The professors are able to exercise their power position freely because other categories of the academic community remain passive.

This concerns especially the students. Their interest is focused on something else than the development of their own education; also this may be seen as an indicator for their low motivation and the fact that a more inspiring and challenging learning environment is found outside the school. The incoming recession along with fewer job opportunities for the students may soon change all this.

Changes toward a more progressive educational system will not happen without active participation of the students. The events twenty years back may serve as a reference. The students managed to achieve some of their objectives in an amazingly short time, just on the basis of their concentrated effort, conviction and enthusiasm.

This is needed once again. The last time, the ideals were social and political. This time they could be less world-embracing, concentrating on problems of the professional and academic quality in architects' education.

Even more than the Finnish society as a whole, the architects are challenged by the demand of integration. The profession has to find and establish a new position both internationally and within its own society. The time when architects could rely on the reputation and past achievements of famous Finnish architects is definitely gone.



*"TILL FOLKET I ERIKSBO AV ELY MAOZ TILLSAMMANS MED ERIKSBOBORNA 28 JUNI 1979"  
Målningen är ett kollektivt minne från dem som var med till dem som nu bor i Eriksbo.  
Tillbyggnaden på gaveln inrymmer ett fritidshem. Skolan skymtar i bakgrunden. (Foto  
Lars Nyman.)*