

Näkemykseni mukaan  
arkkitehtuuri on  
ensisijaisesti  
käytännöllinen ala.  
Teoriat johtavat  
yleensä harhaan



Ratinan stadion | Ratina stadium, Tampere 1966.

Wienissä opettajana huomasin, kuinka valtava vetovoima teorioilla oli opiskelijoihin. Kaikki halusivat teoretisoida. Näkemykseni mukaan arkkitehtuuri on ensisijaisesti käytännöllinen ala. Teoriat johtavat yleensä harhaan, minkä vuoksi olen kritisoinut teoretisointia sinänsä.

Kun minulla oli aikaa, aloin Wienissä paneutua arkkitehtuuri-teorian kehitykseen Vitruviuksesta alkaen. Le Corbusier on nähty aina rationalistina, mutta kirjoituksia lukemalla ymmärsin hänen olevan varsinainen mystikko. Filosofia on aina lumonnut arkkitehteja. Lopulta teoriat vetivät minutkin mukaansa. Olen nimittäin kirjoittanut kirjan arkkitehtuuriteoriasta ja sen historiasta. Käsikirjoitus on nyt valmis, ja olen lähettänyt sen kustantajalle.

*Millainen nykyarkkitehtuuri sinua kiinnostaa?*

Ennen seurasin hyvin intensiivisesti, mitä arkkitehtuurissa tapahtuu. Kiersin myös tutustumassa uusiin taloihin ja ilmiöihin ympäri maailmaa. Nykyään arkkitehtuuri on minulle taaksejäänyttä elämää.

*Asut Lapissa ja käyt Helsingissä vain kerran, pari vuodessa.*

Minulla oli pitkään talo Italiassa, Toscanassa, ja vietin siellä paljon aikaani. Muutama vuosi sitten luovuin talosta. Lapissa asun niin pitkään kuin pystyn. Lapissa on mahtavan hienoa, vaikka kesällä on hyttysiä ja talvella kylmä. Siellä on hyvä olla.

*Onko luonto hienompi kuin kaupunki?*

On.

Jorma Mukala haastatteli Timo Penttilää Helsingissä heinäkuussa 2010.

## GOOD BUILDING IS NOT AN OCCULT SCIENCE

An interview with Timo Penttilä

Jorma Mukala

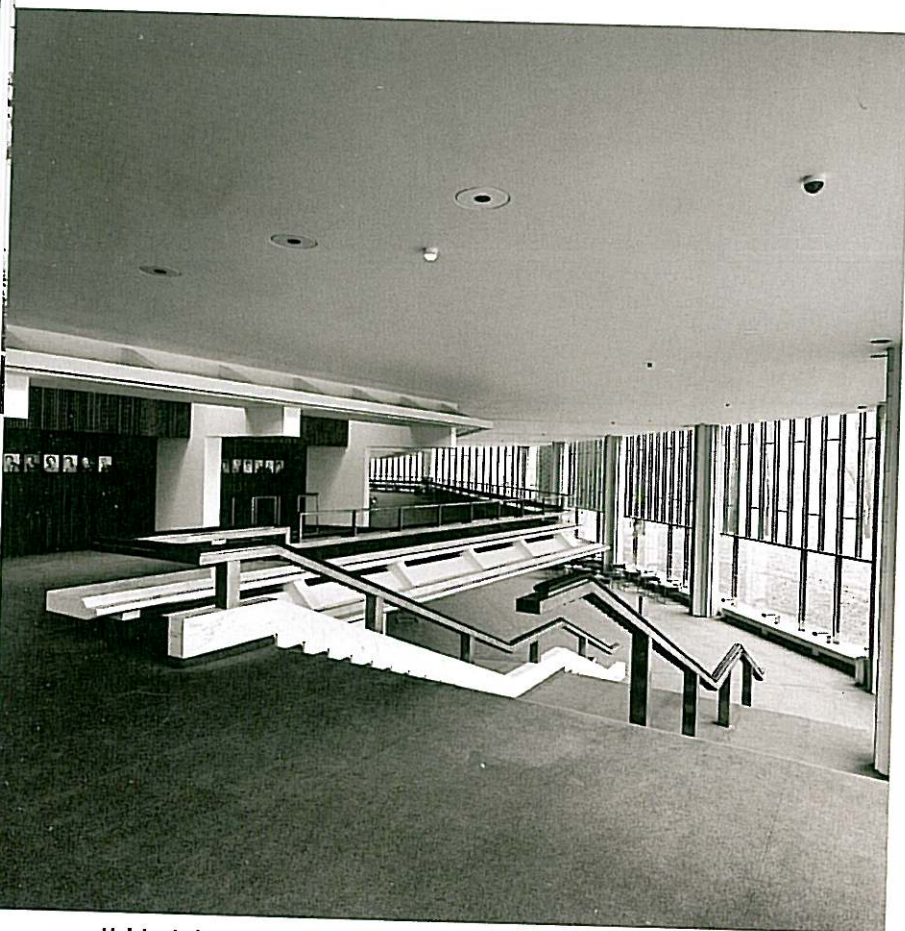
**On a visit to Helsinki last summer Timo Penttilä gave an interview for the *Finnish Architectural Review*. On that occasion it was agreed that the text would be published in one of the 2011 issues. As it happened, the interview turned out to be a farewell to the architect, when in February we received the sad news that Penttilä had passed away. Penttilä's major works are featured in connection with the interview, together with the re-publication of one of his writings.**

***Jorma Mukala: During your career you have designed numerous public buildings as well as commercial and office buildings. Which of your works have been closest to you?***

Timo Penttilä: My first important work was a school, Sampola, built in Tampere. Tampere is my home town but I settled in Helsinki during my student days and also at that time my father's job was transferred to Tikkurila near the capital. I did not particularly miss my home town, but then a competition win took me back there. I had an office in Tampere for some time. I designed schools there and my final work in Tampere was the Ratina Stadium.

The Helsinki City Theatre is probably my most important work. Perhaps the closest one, too, because it required so much energy. I had the opportunity to design this important cultural building at a very young age – I was 30 when I won the competition. The task probably went slightly beyond my capability and knowledge at that time. There were, of course, several experts on the design team and adequate information was available. In retrospect I have often thought how, with very little experience, I nevertheless completed the theatre. Well, it was done the way it was. The Finnish architectural competition system is, by the way, really excellent. Young architects and even students can participate in them and when they win they can also realise their ideas.





Helsingin kaupunginteatteri | Helsinki City Theatre, 1967.

*In Sampola and in the City Theatre it is possible to see a similar sculptural quality as in the works of Alvar Aalto.*

I am not able to name detailed exemplars. The direction in my architecture has also been compared to the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, and it is indeed possible that Wright's architecture may have influenced me, but not in a radical way. I have never had just one mentor. On the other hand, I have also never had completely independent ideas. I believe that all buildings come about from a tradition, from what has been done previously. The architect looks at the world, becomes fascinated by certain features and applies them in his own work. He does not create anything from nothing. Talk of the architect's creativity is pointless bragging.

#### **The true and the false architects**

*At the beginning of your career you worked in Aarne Ervi's office. Did he guide you in how to be a professional architect?*

Ervi was for me the most important of my older colleagues. I got to know his work and persona very closely. He paid attention to me and I got to do quite interesting work. Ervi was very social, he always let others design, too, and was not a dictator who wanted to control everything. I participated in competitions quite often and did a fair amount of work on the Tapiola Centre. There was a very good atmosphere in Ervi's office. He called me Timosenko.

*What was the attitude towards Alvar Aalto in the 1950s and 1960s?*

Aalto was regarded more highly than anyone else. I met him personally only a couple of times. As the Vice Chairman of the Finnish Association of Architects, I once had a very embarrassing task. Aalto had spoken badly of a colleague and as a representative of the board I had to go and ask him: "What on earth did you mean when you said those things?" I could not even get started because Aalto did not take the issue seriously at all and his response was: "Well, for goodness sake, don't be ridiculous on the board." He took out a bottle of Vermouth and we began to discuss architecture. The task I had been entrusted with was never accomplished.



Salmisaaren voimalaitos | Salmisaari power station, Helsinki 1985.

*When the young constructivists wanted to renew Finnish architecture in the 1960s you and Reima Pietilä were visibly on a different trajectory, and you also polemicised against the constructivists.*

Reima's architecture has never appealed to me. I find it too confusing, but we were regarded as similar in the 1960s. For example, Kirmo Mikkola considered Reima's and my works as an unfortunate intermediary stage in Finnish architecture. I replied to Mikkola just as strongly and I guess I even upset his feelings a bit. If we divide architects, paraphrasing Vitruvius, into the true ones and the false ones – the wrong ones do not know what architecture is or present architecture in the wrong way – then in the 1960s I belonged quite clearly to the wrong architects. At least Kirmo Mikkola and Juhani Pallasmaa belonged to the right ones. I remember a debate held in Dipoli where the theme was theatre design. The Helsinki City Theatre had been completed, and I was about to leave for a year to lecture at the University of California at Berkeley, but I had time to participate in the theatre debate before my trip. However, the whole event was simply about criticising the city theatre... Finally I said: "Sorry, I'm leaving for the USA now. Bye!"

*Of your works from the 1970s the best known and most visible is undoubtedly the Hanasaari Power Station in Helsinki. The Salmisaari Power Station also has a very important role in the cityscape of central Helsinki.*

In power stations the architecture is merely a protective envelope for machines and engineering structures and an architect cannot start off in the same way as in the design of, for instance, a theatre. The proportions and basic materials are decisive. In the design there is not much leeway. In both power stations the limitations were also rather strict with regard to costs, so it was not possible to play around. The starting points had to be utilised to the best advantage to achieve an impressive building and a good cityscape.

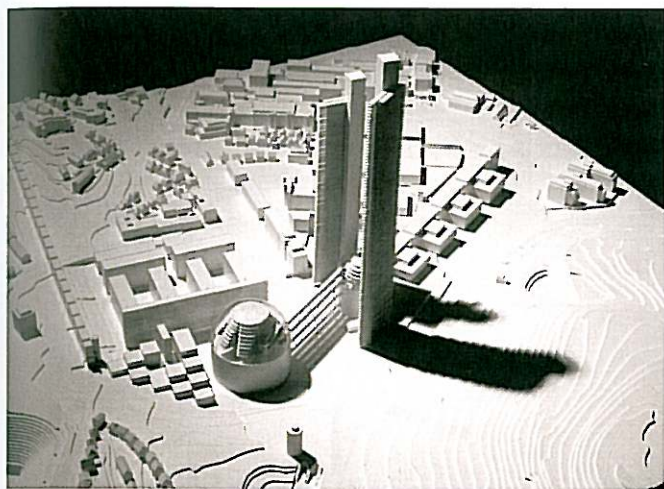
#### **A professor in Vienna**

*In 1980 you began to teach architecture.*

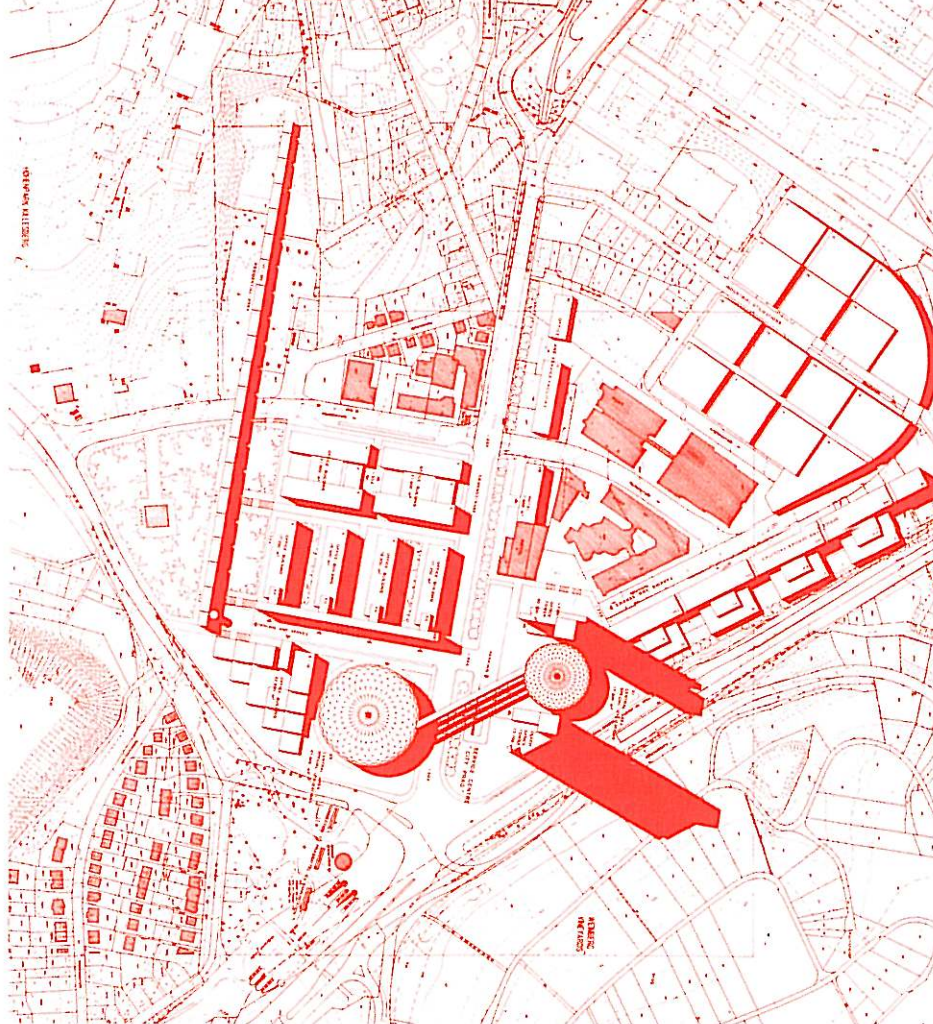
When I was on the jury, together with Keijo Petäjä, for the Tampere City Library competition, I received a phone call from Vienna. The caller was architect Gustav Peichl. He inquired



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"City Prag", Stuttgart, kilpailuehdotus | competition entry, 1990.



about my willingness to become a Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The academy had two architectural professorships. One was held by Peichl himself and the other by Roland Rainer, who was about to retire, and whose post I was asked to take over.

#### *How was the teaching?*

I had similar views on architecture as Rainer. He considered practical matters close to life as being important and had a negative view of theory. My principle was to accept any style as long as the practical, technical and other factors had been taken into consideration in the design and solutions had been found for them. I also, naturally, told the students my views on the student project as a whole, including the appearance, but I did not exclude in advance any particular stylistic approach. When I presented my viewpoint, Peichl became enraged. It was completely against the tradition of the *Meisterschule*, according to which the students, from the time of Otto Wagner onwards, had produced similar architecture to the professor's, and this principle was considered important. I found this practice odd in modern times.

#### *In Finland there is no corresponding tradition.*

During my own student years, Professor Jukka Sirén was a rather strict personality. In his design work he kept to classicism but on his courses students could design projects over a very wide range. I myself designed an art museum for my diploma thesis under Sirén's supervision and he did not limit my approach in any way.

#### *Could a Finn adapt to Vienna?*

Yes, the Finn did adapt, but I must say that the Austrians are rather curious people. I did not make many friends there, but we got along. Vienna is a great city and pleasant to live in.

#### **Theoretical analysis**

##### *In your texts you have criticised architectural theories.*

When I taught in Vienna I noticed what an enormous pull theories had on students.

Everyone wanted to theorise. As I see it, architecture is primarily a practical art. Theories usually lead one astray, which is the reason I have criticised theorising in itself.

When I had time, I began in Vienna to delve into the development of architectural theory from Vitruvius onwards. Le Corbusier had always been seen as a rationalist but by reading his texts I understood he was a veritable mystic. Philosophy has always enchanted architects. In the end theories pulled me in as well. I have in fact written a book about architectural theory and its history. The manuscript is now complete and I have sent it to the publishers.

#### *What kind of contemporary architecture interests you?*

I used to follow developments in architecture closely. I also travelled worldwide acquainting myself with buildings and phenomena. Nowadays architecture is for me a past life.

#### *You live in Lapland and visit Helsinki only once or twice a year.*

For a long time I had a house in Italy, in Tuscany, and I spent a lot of time there. A couple of years ago I gave up the house. I will live in Lapland as long as I can. Lapland is really a wonderful place to live, even though there are mosquitoes in the summer and it's very cold in the winter. It's a good place to be.

#### *Is nature better than the city?*

Yes.

Jorma Mukala interviewed Timo Penttilä in Helsinki in July 2010.