

IS THE FUTURE PRIMITIVE?

Jane Withers for HEL YES!

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I've always had a rather romantic view of Helsinki, and with the tunnel vision of a blinkered horse have managed to keep it that way. I first visited in the mid 1990s and was knocked out by the way that sea, city and sky, urbanism and nature bleed amorously together and water appears where you least expect it. I was enchanted by massively rusticated buildings decorated with elfin heads and sprouting lacy tendrils characteristic of Finland's savagely romantic take on Art Nouveau, and Eliel Saarinen's muscular train station guarded by bionic caverns. I remember the simplicity of Alvar Aalto's studio, and eating surreally

named 'cloudberry' and 'bleak roe' in his Savoy restaurant. And the brutal beauty of the Rook Church that is as dramatic as a Mayan temple but in aerial photos disappears back into Helsinki's rocky outcrop.

You might question what this has to do with Helsinki as World Design Capital 2012. Globally design still tends to be regarded as an urban, industrialized and ultimately consumable pursuit. Helsinki has this side, and in spades in the flourishing central design district. But these are icing on the deeper concerns of Finnish design.

If there is something we outsiders might learn from Helsinki in 2012 and beyond, I'd argue that it is Finnish design's profoundly human dimension, the deeply embedded belief that design is for everybody and a part of everyday life, and the holistic connection between man and the environment. In 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', the hugely sympathetic elderly architect Juhani Pallasmaa observes 'Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless.'

Last year when I visited Helsinki Design Week, the things that stuck with me stood out for their sensitive psychological connection to the environment. I am thinking of Wisa Wooden Design Hotel by Pietä-Linda Aurtia temporarily built in the Harbour. In reality more of a cabin than a hotel, the expressive design treats wood with an unexpected lightness. The designer describes how she imagined a rectangular wooden block that washed up on a huge wave and crashed onto the rocks. The end boxes remained intact while the central part has been pulled apart like strands of spaghetti and stretched out to form the swooping sculptural wooden trellis.

As an extreme hydrophile, I enjoyed the sauna design competition in the Habitate Furniture Fair. Sauna Savu by Pute Huima and Oso Virtanen, brought the feel of a traditional chimneyless smoke sauna to modern sauna bathing by using charred

wood so the interior has a dark sooty surface and the scent of smoke. Kyly by Ville Ham and Anu Pausinen of Avanto Architects is a series of massively solid timber boxes as a setting for the stages of sauna ritual - undressing, steaming, washing and cooling off. What struck me was a direct connection to ancient bathing rituals that seems almost primordial.

While these are immensely likeable projects, they still seem to exist in the long shadow of Nordic modernism. But there is also an edgier more mutant approach to cross-pollinating nature and urbanism at play. I have encountered it virtually in the work of Marco Casagrande of C-Laboratory, a Finnish architect now living in Taiwan. Working as a group of architects who call themselves WEAK!, Casagrande designed Big Dome for the Shenzhen & Hong Kong bi-city Biennale. Built on wasteland in between the city hall and an illegal workers camp, the bamboo shelter was inspired by insects and constructed by migrating construction workers using methods from rural Guami. Offering shade, a stage and a fireplace, it served as an event space during the Biennale and as a lounge for illegal workers from the neighboring camp. Casagrande describes the building as 'weak, flexible and improvised... It is growing from a ruin. The architectural control has been given up in order to let nature step in. ... (It) is a retreat for the modern man to escape from ... the exploding urbanism in the heart of Shenzhen. It is a shelter to protect the industrial insects from the elements of un-nature.'

Perhaps there is something in this future primitive? In a similar vein, HEL YES! proposes to explore ways to build bridges from the past to the present and asks 'can something new come out of foraging the old?' Whether through reclaimed cast-off objects or sending out hunter gathers to source food in London. These are all small touches, but still the ethos and sensibility could have larger relevance for our future. Sitting in contaminated and congested central London, I reflect that while we flounder in the recent binge of alternating glass buildings and struggle to rebalance our precarious relationship to nature, in Helsinki a sense of connection still seems to come naturally.