

**OLLI @Berkeley**  
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**Helsinki: An Extraordinary Design Capital**  
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Syllabus

Finland has a long tradition of political and cultural independence. Helsinki, a relative newcomer in the European scene historically speaking, is the territory of a proud heritage of extraordinary Modern architecture, while occupying a unique geographical position wedged between Russian and Scandinavia. From Eliel Saarinen, to Lars Sonck, to Alvar Aalto and his disciples, Helsinki is a design capital filled with past and current landmarks. This class covers the extraordinary trajectory of a city, which emerges in just a few decades from relative obscurity to becoming a fixture on the world stage in design matters.

**Lesson 1. HELSINKI: THE BIRTH OF A QUIET CENTER**

Within the geopolitics of the Nordic Countries, Finland came fully to its own only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In preceding times, this largely unpopulated country (as of 2023 it comprised approximately 5.5 million people) operated under the control of Sweden first and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the Zars of Russia. The nation's rise to independence in 1917 gave way to a search for a marked national identity without taking radical distance from its Swedish connections, while cutting virtually all ties to Russia, even under the Soviet Union era. Helsinki is today one of the least crowded capitals in Europe parading in its urban fabric deep traces of National Romanticism. This first conversation will provide an overview of the city coming into existence with the European scene.

**Lesson 2. ARCHITECTURE AS A NATIONAL ART**

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Helsinki rose to prominence largely due to the outsized influence of Finnish, later American, architect Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950) through the firm Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen. Their Finnish Pavilion at the Universal Exposition of 1900 in Paris put them on the map, culminating in the design of the Helsinki Railway Station, still standing today and in impeccable conditions. His residential complex known as Hvitträsk became a model of architectural eclecticism exhibiting the heights of Finnish craftsmanship for generations to come. This second talk will delve into the first period of Saarinen's career in shaping the urban and architectural destiny of Helsinki and his followers.

**Lesson 3. HELSINKI: HOME OF MODERNIST ARCHITECTS OF RENOWN**

Helsinki was home to the world-famous architect Alvar Aalto from 1934 till the end of his life in 1976. He arrived in a city already vibrant in architectural distinction, as the city was emerging with its own design language synthesizing indigenous and foreign

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influences to attend to specific Finnish political and environmental conditions. The liberal tradition of Finland was particularly favorable to women entering architectural careers. Aino Marsi (married to Aalto) was in fact one of the most consequential designers in Europe largely responsible for many furniture designs produced through Artek from 1935 onward. The work of Lars Sonck was equally prominent in the city bringing a Richardsonian flavor to the capital experiencing great transformations as Finland was gradually changing from a rural to an industrial nation. This third talk will describe the environment and the personalities (Reima and Raili Pietilä, and Heikki and Kaija Siren (both husband and wife teams) among others) that made Helsinki a permanent fixture in architectural history books.

#### **Lesson 4. HELSINKI TODAY: RECENT TRENDS IN ARCHITECTURE**

The Oodi Helsinki Central Library, completed in 2018, is a built manifesto of the progressive strand that the city proudly nurtures. ALA architects, the designers of this landmark, are a paradigmatic example of how the capital provides plenty of opportunities to local talents to express their creativity, while also welcoming contributions from foreign architects, the KIASMA museum by New York based architect Steven Holl being a case in point. The work of the firms K2S architects, Verstas Architects, and other contemporary practices will be part of the survey covering the most recent trends in Helsinki, completing the class.