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## Helsinki Modern

T+L looks at how Finland's thoughtful aesthetic tradition is influencing Helsinki's recent wave of innovative thinkers and avant-garde landmarks.

From October 2013 By Heather Smith MacIsaac

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Rock, paper, scissors. Aalto, Iittala, Marimekko. Rock, paper, scissors. Aalto, Iittala, Marimekko. Such was the refrain looping in my head in anticipation of a trip to Finland. It would all be there: rocky shores and handsome granite buildings, forever forests of pine and birch and their blond furniture offspring. Alvar Aalto's iconic Savoy vase, as clear and wavy as lake water; Tapio Wirkkala's glassware for Iittala, as icy as a frozen waterfall; and Marimekko's Kaivo print, rippling like a tidal current. Oh, and of course Fiskars scissors, those orange-handled precision instruments that plant the Finnish flag in households worldwide.

Those iconic pieces date back to the 1930's and 60's. So where had Finnish design been lately? I was hard-pressed to think of a single contemporary name, one that rolled off the tongue like Aalto's. Klaus Haapaniemi was scarcely known outside Finland, other than by design cognoscenti. And much as I found his recent illustrative work for Iittala delightfully folkloric, it was surface decoration applied to a dishware line called Taika—remarkably similar to the famous Teema line, created in 1952.

Plain, monochromatic Teema mugs and plates turned up wherever I went in Helsinki. They were there during breakfast at the buzzy Klaus K Hotel; they popped up at coffee bars and museum cafés. And they showed up in stacks at the Stockmann department store and in piles at the Arabia outlet (sadly, at scarcely a discount). So ubiquitous was the use of this 61-year-old style that it smacked of government issue. Anywhere else this might seem off-

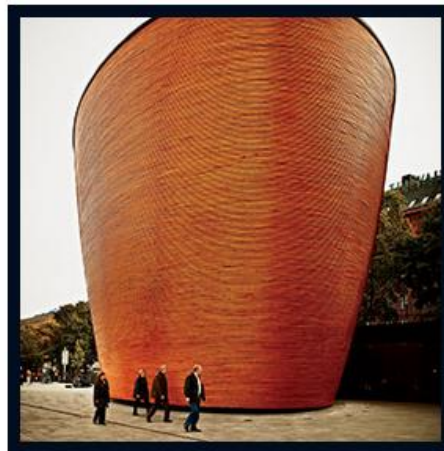


Photo: Adrian Gaut

### T+L GUIDE TO HELSINKI

#### Getting There

Finnair offers nonstop flights to Helsinki from New York City; American Airlines has seasonal service from Chicago. You can also connect via many major European carriers.

#### Getting Around

Biking is a popular mode of transportation here; borrow or rent one from your hotel. The public transit system (hsl.fi) is excellent.

#### Stay

**Hotel Haven** This 77-room gem overlooking the harbor lives up to its name, and is within walking distance of the Presidential Palace and Senate Square. 17 Unioninkatu; hotelhaven.fi. \$\$

**Klaus K Hotel** A late-19th-century landmark decorated around mythical themes from the *Kalevala*, a renowned Finnish epic poem. 2-4 Bulevardi; klaushotel.com. \$

#### Do

Central Railway Station 1 Kaivokatu.

**Helsinki Cathedral** 29 Unioninkatu; helsinginseurakunnat.fi.

**Kamppi Chapel** 7 Simonkatu; helsinginkirkot.fi.

**Kulttuurisauna** 17 Hakaniemenranta; kulttuurisauna.fi.

**Old Customs House** 5 Katajanokanlaituri; no phone.

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putting, but in Finland it simply drove home the idea that if design has no lasting contribution, it is of no value.

Design was everywhere—inclusive, accessible, and without ego. It appeared along the Esplanadi Park, where heavy hitters such as Artek and Marimekko have a major presence, and on Uudenmaankatu and Erottajankatu streets, in the heart of the Design District, both a neighborhood and an association of galleries, shops, and museums. (Design Forum Finland, a store and showroom on Erottajankatu, was an especially worthwhile stop.) Tracking the subtler places—the lone artisans on less-trafficked streets and the small collectives tucked into corners—required more work. Stringing together these scattershot locations as well as the classic sights, while riding a bike borrowed from my hotel, became a thrilling game of catch and release.

My favorite element of Aalto's landmark Academic Bookstore, on the Pohjoisesplanadi, was not the jagged skylights, but the sinuous door handles, a bronze cascade of three linked loops, with the lowest inviting even the youngest hands to enter. All three were rubbed bright from use. Among the many delicate details of Eliel Saarinen's Helsinki Central Railway Station was one that he was not responsible for but that still seemed absolutely at home: a low play table with a train on a track, all wood, no junk, placed in the ticket hall. The gesture benefited every traveler by entertaining children. Over at Taidehalli, a contemporary art museum as plain and magnificent as Timo Sarpaneva's cast-iron pot from 1960, an installation by Argentine artist Tomás Saraceno similarly served all ages. A facsimile of a black widow spider's web, exploded in scale, filled a room. Clad in striped tees, a young family shed their shoes and crawled under, around, and behind the web of string with joyful, kinetic energy and near silent appreciation.

For a metropolis of a million people, Helsinki is actually a quiet place. I never heard a siren. Not even a car horn. There hardly seemed to be the need for a refuge in the heart of the city—and yet there is an extraordinary new one. The Kamppi Chapel, by K2S Architects, sits in a corner of Narinkkatori Square like a high-sided salad bowl on a granite kitchen counter. Inside, a halo of daylight washed curved walls of alder, creating a womblike environment. "So long as no one's moment of silence is disturbed, anything goes," an attendant said. The city's social services department has partnered with the Helsinki Parish Union (religious services are held three times a week) to man the chapel and provide counsel in an adjoining space.

If the rounded form of Kamppi Chapel was as smooth and soothing as a river rock, the WDC Helsinki 2012 Pavilion, a temporary structure built to celebrate Helsinki's designation as last year's World Design Capital, was an assemblage of plywood puzzle pieces as dynamic as the activities it hosted. The ingenious and inviting open-sided structure hummed like an efficient hive. I was astonished that such an accomplished work was by a 24-year-old. Pyry-Pekka Kantonen produced the winning scheme for a studio class at Aalto University's Wood Program; fellow students joined him in executing its construction. "In creating a public living room, it was crucial to have many people bring their touch and feeling to the space," Kantonen said. "The most important thing for me in design is cooperation." And Helsinki-based Henrik Enbom and Isa Kukkapuro-Enbom, the couple behind TrashDesign and Dodo, companies dedicated to conscious consumption, are seeing to it that every last bit of the pavilion is repurposed; the result was presented at the city's Habitare fair this fall.

Taidehalli 3 Nervanderinkatu; taidehalli.fi.

#### Shop

Academic Bookstore 39 Pohjoisesplanadi; akateeminen.com.

Arelalizza 1 Kruunuvuorenkatu; arelalizza.com.

Artek 2nd Cycle & Vintage 4-6 Pieni Roobertinkatu; artek.fi.

Design Forum Finland 7 Erottajankatu; designforum.fi.

Eat & Joy 9 Aleksanterinkatu; eatandjoy.fi.

Iittala 25 Pohjoisesplanadi; iittala.fi.

Lokal 19 Annankatu; lokalhelsinki.com.

Marimekko 33 Pohjoisesplanadi; marimekko.com.

Marttiini 28 Aleksanterinkatu; marttiini.fi.

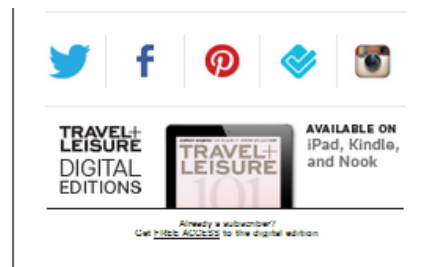
Pelago Bicycles 32 Kalevankatu; pelagobicycles.com.

#### Hotels

\$ Less than \$200  
\$\$ \$200 to \$350  
\$\$\$ \$350 to \$500  
\$\$\$\$ \$500 to \$1,000  
\$\$\$\$\$ More than \$1,000

#### Restaurants

\$ Less than \$25  
\$\$ \$25 to \$75  
\$\$\$ \$75 to \$150  
\$\$\$\$ More than \$150



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Slowly I was discovering a new generation, composed not so much of designers as of thinkers who focus on design's intent and effect. Nature and nurture had always dovetailed in Finnish design; now so too were the past, present, and future linked. In 1925, Aalto wrote about building a "cultural sauna, a national monument, the first of its kind in the budding Finnish civilization." It took nearly 90 years but it finally happened, thanks to the dogged efforts of architect Tuomas Toivonen and artist Nene Tsuboi, partners at architecture firm NOW, whose mission it is to "make the city and world around us more interesting and enjoyable." This past May, Kulttuurisauna, the first public sauna to open in decades, made its debut on the Helsinki waterfront. With a minimized carbon footprint and sturdy tree-trunk columns, the building is nothing short of a spare, primitive temple to communal bathing.

Altruism abounded, and what would pass back home for naive (or faux-naive) statements actually led to results. Eat & Joy, a basement-level market, is the unlikeliest of tenants in the central Kluuvi shopping center, home to fast food and fast fashion. Pink-cheeked and enthusiastic employees helped customers grind grain, buy sausage, and select fish (smoked in-house on Tuesdays and Fridays). The space, with its emphasis on natural materials—wooden display tables, wicker baskets—swung wide of antiseptic supermarket interiors. Reindeer skins draped the shopping carts, and an antique rocker and a classic modern birch high chair flanked the bread oven, which turned out some of the best rye loaves in the city. For a survey of the ingredients feeding the New Nordic cuisine movement—from smoked fish to wild reindeer to Arctic honey—there was no better source.

Reindeer surfaced again, in stacks of full hides at the marketplace by the port, and in skins trimmed to round seat pads at Marttiini, a new shop on Senate Square at the foot of the Helsinki Cathedral. To showcase the 200 different iterations of the traditional *puukko* knife, which Marttiini has been producing in Lapland since 1928, design firm Suunnittelutoimisto Amerikka "carved" a wall of wood tiles, each supporting one or two models via magnets. Pockets made from the same rawhide used for the sheaths displayed even more styles. Elevating this traditional tool to a design object proved to be a solid business move; in the first few months that the store was open, sales dramatically increased.

"Serve the purpose. *Firmitas, utilitas, venustas.*" (Strength, function, beauty.) The motto could have been Marttiini's, but in fact belonged to Pelago Bicycles, a company launched by young brothers Mikko and Timo Hyppönen. Of the 10 models they sell, the upright Brooklyn, a classic bike for city use, was one of their first and is still incredibly popular. I suppose it was inevitable, in an environment where a new appreciation for the old ways was simul-surfacing around town, that I would be reminded of home—Brooklyn, that is, absent the irony.

Along with Teema dinnerware, I saw Aalto's Artek Stool 60 all over the city, mostly in spiffy new condition, its painted disk of a seat as bright and tasty as an M&M. But at Artek 2nd Cycle & Vintage, older models were celebrated. Since 1933, when the stool was introduced, some 8 million have been sold, many to schools, libraries, and restaurants, where they did hard labor. The call to value the beauty of long life and signs of age, rather than put out to pasture an old piece, reflects a fresh view of what it means to be modern.

Aalto once said, "Nothing is ever reborn, but neither does it totally disappear. And that which has once been, will always reappear in a new form." Such was the case for a former drugstore that is now Arelalizza, a shop selling textile designer Maija Arela's line of luxurious knitwear. I swooned over the intimate interior, seemingly untouched since the 1950's. Arela's sweaters, in colors as bold as the tiles of the checkerboard floor, were sensational; the Gio Ponti-esque woodshop fittings even more so.

Repurposing turned up in sizes jumbo to tiny. Helsinki's Old Customs House, a robust brick example of the National Romantic style, came back to life in 2010 after lying dormant for 40 years. Its cavernous interior has been an atmospheric host to Helsinki Design Week events and to a pop-up branch of the Finnish Design Shop. Over at Lokal, a concept store run by photographer Katja Hagelstam, the merchandise also spoke volumes about the waste-not, want-not, look-back-to-see-ahead sensibility coursing through the culture. Driven by pure irritation at the amount of waste a family produces,

textile artist Outi Martikainen collected white plastic bread-bag fasteners and wove them into iconic Finnish forms traditionally made of birch-bark fiber—a basket, a horn, a bast shoe. “I admire Outi’s innovative approach to new materials, and the fact that she sees the value in traditional things,” Hagelstam explained.

With a grounded and forward-thinking ethos in place, Helsinki is poised to stay a leader in mindful urban living. The values the city espouses—collaboration, openness, continuity—seem not political but simply correct. And though the approach may be shifting, as old-school becomes new again, design itself remains as highly valued and democratic as when renowned industrial designer Hannu Kähkönen was a student in the 1970’s. “One of our mottoes was, ‘Everyone needs a more beautiful everyday.’” As for being on the cutting edge, Finland seems happy to leave that to Fiskars.

### Easy Day Trips from Helsinki

A journey west out of the city offers a quick dip into the countryside and an in-depth view of the roots of industrial design and architecture in Finland.

**Hvitträsk:** The Finns’ love of craft and affinity for communal life come together at this turn-of-the-20th-century studio and villa, now a museum, a half-hour’s drive or train ride from Helsinki. Once home to architects Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, and, most notably, Eliel Saarinen, Hvitträsk is an unparalleled sampler of design in wood, metal, textiles, stained glass, and wall paintings—the best expression of the Arts and Crafts Movement’s devotion to a total work of art in Finland.

**Fiskars Village:** Once a center for ironwork, this 17th-century town is now the setting of a vibrant artist community. From a Neoclassical manor house to Empire-style worker’s housing, the variety of architecture is as much worth the trip as the exhibitions, which showcase the talents of the residents and international designers alike.

Both places can be visited in one day, but consider staying overnight at **Fiskars Wårdshus** (\$\$), a simple but charming inn with an excellent restaurant. The original house, built in 1836, has four rooms, while 11 others lie in the modern annex.

### Helsinki’s Restaurant Scene: Where to Eat Now

In the sphere of New Nordic cuisine, Finland hasn’t received the amount of attention that Denmark and Sweden have, but its chefs and foragers are every bit as active and adventurous.

**Boulevard Social** serves Mediterranean family-style tapas in an interior that may be steampunk’s first landing in Helsinki. The cocktails are some of the most accomplished in town; the lemon pie, not to be missed. \$\$\$

Chefs Antto Melasniemi and Heikki Purhonen change the menu every week at their laid-back, 26-seat restaurant **Kuurna**, but always deliver hearty cooking (fried chicken hearts; spinach crêpes with mushroom sauce). \$\$\$

If you can’t get into Noma, in Copenhagen, go to **Olo** in Helsinki. You won’t be settling. Splurge on the multicourse “journey” with wine pairings and prepare for fresh, seasonal dishes such as cauliflower with Finnish caviar, lamb with beetroot, and organic licorice with white chocolate and black currants. \$\$\$\$

Spurred on by the global “food for all” movement and as a rebellion against excessive regulation, Helsinki gave birth to **Restaurant Day** two years ago; it has now spread to 35 countries around the globe. On four weekends a year, anyone can set up a “restaurant”—meaning anything from a basket lowered out of a window to a car trunk or a park bench.

Among the treats of a “simple” dinner at **Spis**: an amuse-bouche of cucumber and dill; a main course of cod with broccoli, fennel, and tomato; and, for dessert, gooseberry and sour milk. \$\$\$\$

Once a slaughterhouse, the **Teurastamo** complex is now home to pop-up restaurants, a cooking school, a bakery, and a butcher. There’s even a communal grill in the open-air courtyard.

### Icons of Finnish Design

**Savoy Vase:** After winning a design competition in 1936, Alvar Aalto's asymmetrical piece showed at the Paris International Exhibition the following year, and was displayed on tables at Helsinki's Savoy restaurant.


**Teema Dishware:** This Iittala line by Kaj Franck was so minimalist for 1952 that it was considered a revolution at the dinner table.

**Sarpaneva Cast-Iron Pot:** A hit since it launched in 1960, Timo Sarpaneva's piece for Iittala was even celebrated on a postage stamp.

**Marimekko Kaivo Print:** The brand's pattern from 1964 took inspiration from rings that form on water's surface.

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