provocation, rigorous analysis, desperate humor, or even a call to arms.

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Related Publication

Raili ja Reima Pietilä: Modernin Arkkitehtuurin Haastajat [Raili and Reima Pietilä: challengers of modern architecture]
Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki
27 February–25 May 2008

The Raili and Reima Pietilä exhibition organized by the Museum of Finnish Architecture in Helsinki is the most ambitious to date on the work of Raili (b. 1926) and Reima (1923–1993) Pietilä (Figure 1). The exhibition is accompanied by a book (in Finnish) of the same title that documents their careers and contains background essays by noted Finnish architectural writers, including Kati Blom, Aino Niskanen, and Juhani Pallasmaa. Most of the materials on display are from the Pietilä office archive donated to the MFA by Raili Pietilä in 2002. Labeling the Pietiläs as “challengers of modern architecture” emphasizes their self-proclaimed rejection of the normative paths of architectural debates and confirmation of the underlying principles of their architectural design. The exhibition gives us the opportunity to review their contribution to architectural debates and confirm their unique status within Finnish architecture.

It is important to recognize that Reima and Raili each played a distinct but no less critical role in their professional partnership. While Reima wrote and lectured extensively about architectural theory, Raili was the confidante and muse on whom Reima depended unconditionally, providing invaluable complementary elements of play and curiosity in their investigations. The professional and personal inevitably overlapped. After Reima’s sudden death, Raili, an accomplished architect in her own right, continued the firm’s practice, including the maintenance and renovation of their existing works. Her dedication to their collaboration culminated in the archival organization of the office materials, a huge task for which she was uniquely qualified.

There are two parts to the exhibition: “Big” and “Small.” The Big Exhibition, organized chronologically, begins with drawings and projects from Reima’s childhood and concludes with the firm’s final design projects. A chest-high band of small images running horizontally around the room frames this rectangular space. Large photographs of built works are displayed above this band with sketches and drawings below. Other drawings in similar frames are placed on lower tables in front, and architectural models are displayed on taller tables in the middle of the room. Despite the evident logic of the layout, framed items in the Big Exhibition are crowded. Given the room’s spatial limitations, the designer of the exhibition, Roy Mänttäri, nonetheless did a commendable job.

The Small Exhibition contains free-standing acrylic display panels on the floor and other panels mounted on the wall. Many of these items were apparently salvaged from a 1971 Pietilä exhibition, Space Garden, at the MFA. There is also an informative film, directed by Anssi Blomstedt (in Finnish, 35 min., Finnish Film Foundation, 1987) Vuodenajat–4 Matkaa Raili ja Reima Pietilän Arkkitehtuurin [The seasons–4 journeys into Raili and Reima Pietilä’s architecture]. In its many sections focused on individual works, Reima Pietilä provides valuable insights by explaining his design approach.

The Pietiläs distinctively departed from the central tenets of Finnish architecture in the twentieth century. They were often misunderstood or slighted even in their native country, given their unconventional interest in the nonrational, intuitive, and emotive as generators of architectural form. Instead of approaching a building program as a problem requiring a pragmatic answer, the Pietiläs saw architecture as a poetic exploration of the world and of dwelling in it, as associated with the late writings of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. To appreciate their work, one must take into account some of the underlying themes and references on which it is based, including geography, geology, morphology, nature, linguistics, metaphor, and the genus loci.

Pietilä’s broad use of neologisms compounds this complexity, making it even more challenging to engage. Unfortunately, neither the exhibition nor the book provide adequate keys to access or evaluate the underlying principles of their work. For those interested in more than descriptions, other references are recommended.

Drawings from his early years show Reima Pietilä working with Euclidean forms to develop modular proportional systems in keeping with the rationalized mass production of building elements, a typical interest of architects in the 1950s and 1960s. Pietilä’s attempt to transcend such geometric bounds, however, is evident as early as 1956, when he won the competition for the Finnish Pavilion for the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels. Drawings and models show Pietilä’s compounded use of right angles, multiplied to a point where the logic of the orthogonal...
becomes fragmented and distorted. The Finnish Pavilion was the first built work to garner international recognition for Pietilä and belongs to a list of only ten built major public works.²

Winning the competition for the Kaleva Church in Tampere in 1959 (built 1964–66) confirmed that Pietilä had indeed rejected what he perceived as orthogonal dogma. The irregular plan is reminiscent of a fish or a leaf, two metaphors that Pietilä himself recognized and accepted. His sketch plan embodies the energy he put into drawing, with layer after layer of graphite strokes and finger smudges (Figure 2). His rejection of standard paradigms in the Kaleva Church reveals a search for alternative principles and priorities for architecture that would continue for the rest of his career.

In 1961, the Pietiläs won the competition for the Dipoli Student Center on the Otaniemi Campus in Espoo. Built in 1962–66, Dipoli demonstrates through drawings and models Pietilä’s search for architectural form as the genius loci latent in each site. As Pietilä described, Dipoli’s “architecture reflects the forms of the site contours” and that the “building was to become an archetypal or primordial space.”³ The roof form appears as an eruption of the landforms that creates a space below. Parts of the interior, seen in plan and section drawings, are cavelike, with circulation intentionally unclear so as to require exploration and discovery by the first-time visitor. In the preliminary sketches for Dipoli, Pietilä identified “a dreamlike atmosphere. . . . It was like clairvoyance.”³ This conjuring of form, once determined, was modified as required to accommodate functional needs. The plans of Dipoli are fascinating for the juxtaposition of the orthogonally ordered smaller spaces with the amorphous forms of the larger public areas. His goal was to reveal, through architectural form, the primary essence of a site in terms of its spirit of place. The exhibited materials for Dipoli document Pietilä’s ongoing preference for the natural topology of a site as opposed to abstract Euclidian forms. Never repeating themselves, the Pietiläs sought the specific and unique in the genius loci rather than the generic and universal.

The Pietiläs won the competition for the Finnish Embassy in New Delhi in 1963, and it was built in 1983–85. The charge was to symbolize Finland in a building far removed from the context with which the Pietiläs were familiar. Their response was again metaphorical, with a roof of wavelike ridges representing wind-blown snow ridges on Finnish lakes in winter. Numerous drawings in the exhibition reveal the design as it progressed, culminating in one of their most successful buildings. The Sief Palace Area Buildings in Kuwait City of 1978–82 offered additional challenges for building away from Finland: could the concept of genius loci be exercised outside of one’s own cultural context? As displayed in the exhibition, Pietilä metaphorically referenced local sources as diverse as archaeological history, the kinetic rhythms of people, Arab folk music, handicraft, fabrics, Bedouin rugs, and traditional architecture—all influencing the design but never dictating it.

Many of the design sketches in the exhibition are stunning. They vary from thin, sparse lines to dense layers of mixed media. Sketching for Pietilä was a means of uncovering that which was already there. For him, the architect’s task was not to create, but to reveal through architectural form the authentic identity of each site. Sketches for Kaleva Church, Dipoli, and the Finnish Embassy in particular display an intensity of execution and confirm their essential role in the process of revealing inherent architectural form. The heavy layering of graphite, charcoal, felt marker, colored pencil, and other media helped him uncover such pre-existing forms. Some of the sketches even seem to reveal a scraping of the surface in a shamanistic attempt to release some deeply hidden essence. Impossible to preconceive, the essential form had to be patiently sought.

Pietilä was influenced by the architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz’s interest in phenomenology. Pietilä pointed out that Norberg-Schulz once explained that the word understand did not refer to scientific knowledge but “rather an existential concept which denotes the experience of meanings” and thus experience is “a poetic reconstruction of a real world, a phenomenological understanding of nature and things.”⁴ The act of design

Figure 2 Reima Pietilä, Kaleva Church, Tampere, 1959, built 1964–65, sketch plan, undated. Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki

260 JSAH / 68:2, JUNE 2009
was essentially subjective for Pietilä; to
design was to be immersed in a poetic
process and to seek meaning that was
inaccessible through reason alone. Such
an approach required giving oneself over
to the design process instead of relying on
dogmatic external strategies. In Pietilä’s
world, it seems that both design process
and architectural experience were ulti-
mately ineffable.

Pietilä was familiar with some of the
earby essays of Martin Heidegger.
In “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” Heide-
gger wrote that “To the Greeks techne
means neither art nor handicraft but
rather: to make something appear, within
what is present.” For Pietilä, such a
process required remaining open to vari-
ous and diverse stimuli: “The seizing of an
idea is a process which one doesn’t seem
tous and diverse stimuli: “The seizing of an
idea is a process which one doesn’t seem
to be able to influence consciously.

Consciousness is too coarse an instrument.”
The exhibition, despite its distractions,
confirms that such was the path—however elusive and even mystical—that the
Pietilä chose to follow.

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Related publication
Eriika Johansson, Kristiina Paatero, and
Timo Tuomi, eds., Raili ja Reima Pietilä: Modernin Arkitektuurin Haastajat [Raili
and Reima Pietilä: challengers of modern
architecture], Helsinki: Museum of
Finnish Architecture, 2008, 156 pp. €25
(paper), ISBN 9789525195293.

Notes
1. To help locate such keys, the following are recom-
demed: Marja-Riitta Norri, Roger Conah, Kari
2. The ten major built public works are: Finnish Pavilion, World’s Fair, Brussels, 1958, 1958; Kaleva
Church, Tampere, 1959, 1968–64; Dipoli, Ontaniemi,
1961, 1962–66; Sunikumppa Housing, Täpola, 1962,
1962–66; Finnish Embassy, New Delhi, 1963,
1963–85; Sief Palace Area Buildings, Kuwait City,
1969–70, 1978–82; Hervanta Community Center,
Tampere, 1975, 1978–79; Metso Library, Tampere,
1978, 1981–86; Church, Lieksa, 1979–82, and Man-
nytemi, The President of Finland’s Official Resi-
4. Ibid., 27.
5. Quantrill, ed., One Man’s Odyssey, 27.
6. Martin Heidegger “Building, Dwelling, Think-
ing,” Poetry, Language, Thought, translated by Alberi
7. Norri et al., Pietilä, 27. Italics added by author.

Palladio
Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura “Andrea Palladio,” Vicenza
20 September 2008–6 January 2009
Royal Academy, London
31 January–13 April 2009
Fondacio La Caixa, Barcelona
19 May–6 September 2009
Caixaforum, Madrid
6 October 2009–17 January 2010

Since he is about the most celebrated architect in the Western world, every
generation must have its own Palladio display: For mine it was organized in 1973 by Renato Cevese, then director of the Cen-
tro Palladio (properly, CIS or Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura
“Andrea Palladio”) in Vicenza in the great hall of the basilica, breathtakingly—and
still memorably—set out by the great
Franco Albini. It had its more modest, if
elegant (and equally scholarly) London
avatar in the Hayward Gallery (patronized
by the Arts Council—with a catalog
signed by Howard Burns and Bruce
Boucher).

For another generation, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Centro—and with
the major provocation of Palladio’s half-mil-

lennium—Howard Burns, who succeeded
Cevese as the director of the Centro Pal-
ladio and now chairs its directing commit-
tee, has organized the current show in the
home of the Centro, Palladio’s own
Palazzo Barbaran da Porto, with the brilli-
ant assistance of its director, Guido Bel-
tramini. It is a less dramatic, somewhat
drier, and more didactic show, but has the
great advantage over its predecessor in
being able to call on the scholarship of the
intervening thirty years, which has seen a
great flurry of Palladian studies.

It can also draw on the Centro’s trea-
sures such as the fine models made of
beechwood and biscuit porcelain, mostly
of existing buildings, and also of unexec-
uted projects like the majestic one for the
Trissino villa at Meledo, of which there are
only some rather poor fragments on site,
and which provides the show with a fine
climax. These models have now been
augmented by new resin and some painted
wooden ones, such as the startling interior
of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice show-
ing its recovered “original” (before it was
whitewashed by Baldassare Longhena)
and rather harsh coloring, as well as an
analytic one of the Vicenza Basilica. There
is also a moving (in both senses of the
word) computer model of the project for
the Rialto bridge. And it is wonderful to
have Canaletto’s capriccio of the projected
bridge set between two of his Vicentine
masterpieces, the Palazzo Chiericati and
the Basilica (as Palladio showed in the
Quattro Libri), in the original version com-
missioned by the polymath Francesco
Algarotti (who claimed to have invented
this kind of painting), and which was to
prove so popular that Canaletto did four
versions of it.

Like its predecessor, the Vicenza show
has moved to London, to the spacious
quarters of the Royal Academy in
Burlington House, where many of the
drawings must have spent some time after
their arrival in Britain, even if Sydney
Smirke and others have left little of the
town palace that Colin Campbell and
James Gibbs had put together for the
architect-earl, who had bought (and had
graved) the surveys of antiques. Oth-
ers he acquired through another archi-
tect, John Talman, and the heirs of Inigo
Jones, who in turn seem to have gotten
some from Andrea’s son Silla, and a few
from his awkward disciple, Vicenzo
Scamozzi, a century earlier. A later Duke
of Devonshire, Burlington’s collateral