20th Century Urban Design Utopias for the Centre of Helsinki

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Summary

Lying as it does on a peninsula, Helsinki has always set strict limits to its town-planners; hence a special competitivity even in the urban design utopias of the 20th century. The Russian czar Alexander I, giving an extremely monumental centre to the capital of his newly (1809) acquired grand-duchy, presented a special problem to the following generations. It was not easy to overcome the power of the Russian Empire reflected in that milieu. J.S. Sirén tried to do so in 1917, when Finland became independent, by suggesting that a new parliament house be placed right above the Russian classicism. Eliel Saarinen aimed at breaking the old hierarchy in his Greater Helsinki plan and was supported by Bertel Jung, the first town planning architect of the city. Finally J.S. Sirén was commissioned to build the new parliament house in a new city district to form a new central area. The house was completed in 1931. Several town plans have been drawn for that area since then but, today, it is still occupied by railway tracks and humble sheds, which were progressively disused.

Résumé

Du fait de sa situation sur une péninsule, Helsinki n'a jamais offert que des possibilités strictement limitées à ceux qui planifiaient son urbanisme; mais cette situation présente également un challenge spécifique, exprimé dans les utopies urbanistes du 20e siècle. Le tsar russe, Alexandre I, créa un problème tout particulier pour les générations qui lui succédèrent, puisqu'il choisit de doter d'un centre extrêmement monumental la capitale du grand-duché qu'il venait d'acquérir (1809). Dès lors, il ne fut pas facile de construire en ignorant les témoins de sa puissance que l'empire russe avait laissés en héritage. J.S. Sirén fit une tentative dans ce sens en 1917, date de l'indépendance de la Finlande, en proposant de construire un siège à l'assemblée nationale juste au-dessus des bâtiments témoignant du classicisme russe. Eliel Saarinen formula un plan pour l'agglomération d'Helsinki dans lequel il tentait de renverser les anciennes hiérarchies; il fut supporté dans ce sens par Bertel Jung, le premier architecte urbaniste de la ville. Et enfin, J.S. Sirén fut chargé de construire un nouveau bâtiment pour l'assemblée nationale dans un autre quartier de la ville. L'idée était de constituer un nouveau centre urbain et sa première étape, l'érection d'un siège parlementaire, fut réalisée en 1931. Mais, et bien que, depuis cette époque, de nombreux plans projetant son urbanisme aient été établis, cette zone demeure aujourd'hui encore occupée par des lignes de chemin de fer et des baraques à l'abandon.

1. Saarinen's Proposal for Metropolitan Helsinki

> "Our city lacks the sort of scale which gives capitals of the world the stamp of being cities: there is no wide river, high acropolis, or wide thoroughfare. We should like to see in the Helsinki of our dreams a broad principal street of imposing proportions and beauty, to provide Finland's main metropolis with architectural backbone, and to outwardly express the significance of the city as the nation's capital. It would require more than the Esplanade, or the Senate square. The former, while beautiful, can be regarded only as an attempt. A Royal Avenue, imposing and straight, at once a main traffic artery, delightful to stroll along, and suitable for commercial and civic buildings too: such a thoroughfare would give stature and individuality to the city and permit a monumental urban treatment in the grand style.
>
> All the foregoing defects would be made good, and our ideal aspirations fulfilled, if the Royal Avenue - let us call it that - were to be built along the lines contained in Saarinen's proposal" (Bertel Jung, *Pro Helsingfors* (1918)).

Eliel Saarinen published his Munkkiniemi-Haaga Plan in 1915. Although its primary purpose was the creation of a new town borough, its chief significance was in the way that Saarinen articulated the development of the entire metropolitan area. Munkkiniemi-Haaga was to have been one of many satellite towns set in a ring surrounding the city centre. Even if it never left the drawing board, the prolonged influence it exerted gave the elaborately prepared publication the voice of authority as the first Finnish textbook about urban design. This has been emphasized by Otto-I. Meurman, an assistant of Saarinen at the time, later the first teacher of urban planning at Helsinki Technical University (1936) and the first professor of the discipline (1940) (Genius Loci, 1980).

Eliel Saarinen planned Munkkiniemi-Haaga and with it the whole region of Helsinki as a coherent urban entity (Saarinen, 1915). This utopian design rested first on his clear artistic grasp of what people would regard, in the future, as a dignified way of life, of how they would be employed and of what sort of dwellings they would occupy; secondly, it depended on the success of a breathtaking capitalist commercial venture. M.G. Stenius & Company did not commission the project for the sake of a stylish publication. The company's most important share-holders set out to build a metropolis with the intention of making money. They had bought large tracts of land and their income derived from the sale of building materials. Research on this matter by Helena Hakkarainen revealed that Saarinen was actually a board member of the company and traveled Europe, eagerly noting recent refinements in urban planning techniques. He was driven on, we may assume, not only by artistic ambition. International exposure and success beyond the confines of his native land (with the Tallinn and Budapest plans of 1911 and the Canberra plan of 1912) gave Saarinen enough scope to increase the range and proportion of his planning work.

The first master plan for the metropolitan area was, in a way, a later stage of the Munkkiniemi-Haaga plan. Saarinen's proposal was developed in collaboration with Bertel Jung, the first town planning architect for the city of Helsinki. It was only natural that Saarinen and Jung, supported by a private foundation, should jointly publish a booklet entitled "Pro Helsingfors" (1918), which constituted the first revised "Greater Helsinki Town Planning Proposal". It was written by Jung, whereas the planning proper was by Saarinen et al.

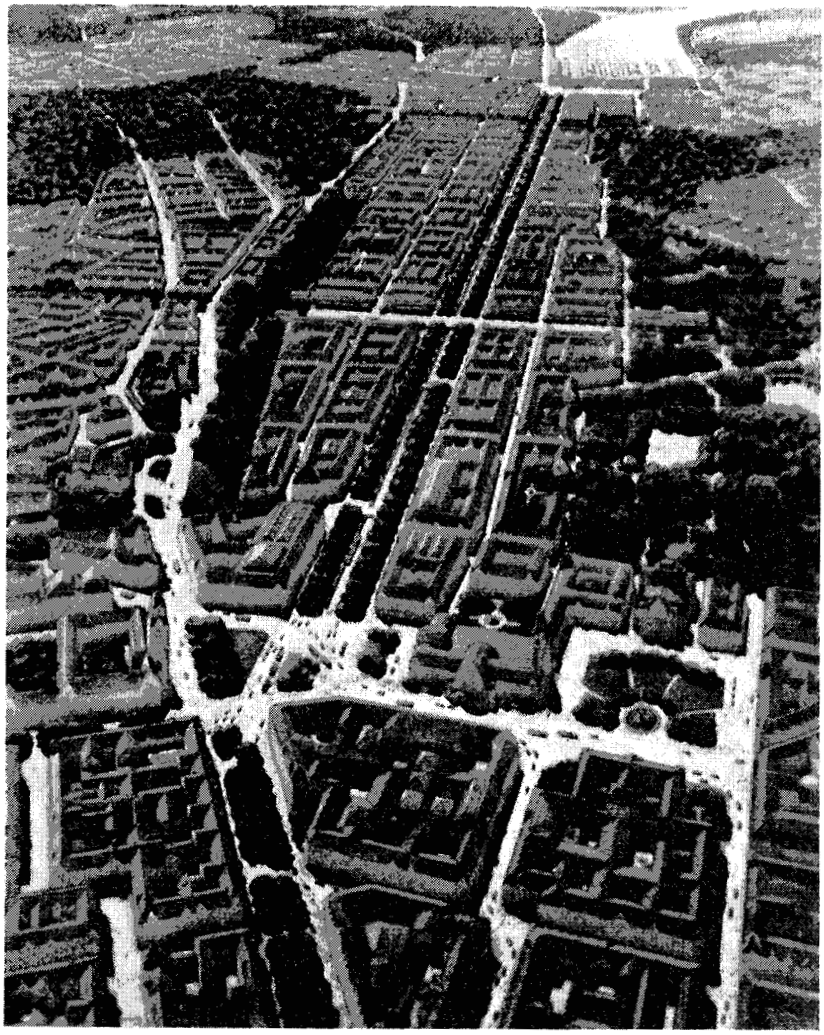

Fig. 1 Eliel Saarinen: Project for Metropolitan Helsinki. The Royal Avenue (1918)
Eliel Saarinen: projet pour la métropole d'Helsinki. L'Avenue Royale (1918)

2. The Royal Avenue

Jung's description of the central street-scape feature characterizing their town plan for the heart of the city, i.e. the Royal Avenue, has been quoted above. It was hoped that this avenue would create a symbolic milieu for the town centre. It was planned on the background of the proclamation of Finland as a state that was newly established, western-orientated and dynamic. The renewal of Helsinki's centre culminated in the Royal Avenue:

> "For the most part, the Avenue would run through Töölönlahti bay and the Eläintarha shoreline area, districts which had hitherto seen no building activity whatever. Once the bay was filled and the railway station moved elsewhere, the chance was presented of linking Töölö and Kallio. It would then allow, for example, the wide sweep of Hesperiankatu to be continued in an easterly direction to Itäinen Viertotie, and form an intersection with the Royal Avenue; the outcome would be an urban architectural focus in a very good location within the capital city of the nation.
>
> It was proposed to construct the Avenue on a level that would permit train and tram circulation to run beneath it. A street width of ninety metres was proposed, to accommodate all forms of transportation, whether rail, tram, automobile, mounted horse, carriage or pedestrian. The three kilometre length is no more than between the Brandenburger Tor and the Zoologischer Garten in Berlin, the Gare du Nord and Ile de la Cité (or the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe) in Paris, the Admiralty and the Nikolai railway station in St. Petersburg, or the Gare du Nord and the Gare du Midi in Brussels. Availing of a separate lane for automobile traffic, the distance can be easily traversed in three minutes" (Fig. 1).

When Saarinen drew up his renowned Parliament House for the Observatory Hill site in Helsinki in 1908, it reflected the situation enjoyed by the country during its period as an autonomous Grand duchy. Its plastic monumentality and clear structure were inspired by what Finns described as national romanticism, this century's art nouveau style. The style was Finland's own interpretation of the international art nouveau style. In the context of the capital city, a Parliament House on top of the Observatory Hill would have acted as a counterbalance to the Senate Square of C.L. Engel and created a symbolic milieu for a new age in the history of the country.

3. Bertel Jung

As Helsinki's first town planning architect (from 1908), Bertel Jung was very active in developing the capital according to the prototype of big western cities common in the early years of the century. To him, town planning was a potent weapon. Having paid close attention to the evolution of city planning in German, English and Swedish environments, Jung succeeded in introducing ways to arrest growth of the capital city before Finland had actually experienced any real demographic pressure. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Helsinki was the only Finnish city with over 100'000 inhabitants, this figure being generally considered the measure of a metropolis.

A first utopia was traced on the map of Helsinki by the new wave on the occasion of the Töölö town planning competition (1899). Young architects, led by Lars Sonck (the architect who had promoted the competition) thought that the area, because

of its rocky soil, would be well suited to a German-style borough echoing mediaeval times. Their entry presented fashionably narrow streets snaking through closely-built, picturesque clusters of buildings. The unbuilt areas were left their irregular shape. The buildings were surmounted by towers of various heights, coming into view from unexpected angles.

Jung looked favourably on Camillo Sitte's theories and his ideas concerning urban planning. However, he also identified himself at an early stage with Sitte's classical theories and consequently began to design on an increasingly monumental scale. One of his plans, dating from 1912, concerns a Central Park for Helsinki. The way it handles monumental volumes, grandiose unbuilt spaces and entrance points reflects his conviction, as an architect, that Helsinki was suitable for the large scale urban architectural motifs found in the great cities of the world.

The design of the present-day South Harbour of Helsinki, which in Jung's time was a location used for shipbuilding, may be regarded as the climax of his utopian designs for the city. The area was acquired by the city in 1910, because it was considered to be the focus of the town as seen from the sea. No specific building had been scheduled for the area until Jung, assisted by the town planning architect Birger Brunila, had plans drawn up (1913-14) for the Town Hall and other unspecified large buildings to stand on the rocky shore (Fig. 2).

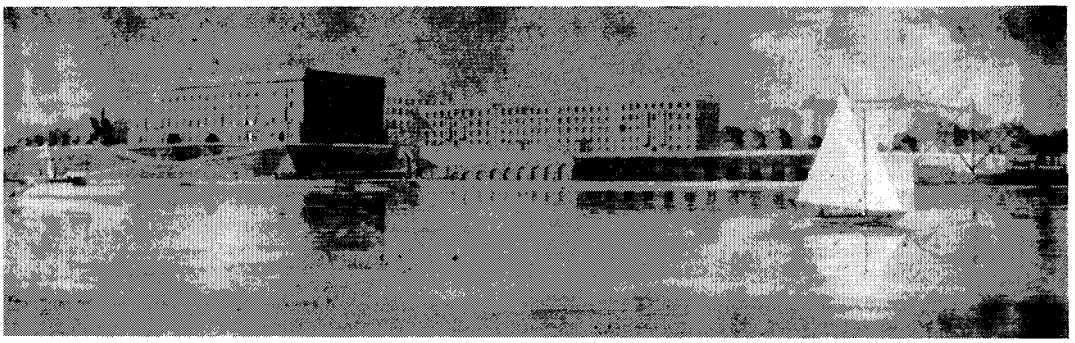

Fig. 2 Bertel Jung and Birger Brunila: Design for monumental building at South Harbour, 1913
Bertel Jung et Birger Brunila: Projet de bâtiments monumentaux près du Port Sud, 1913

The striking cubic shapes of the flat-roofed buildings and the terraces on massive plinths visible in the perspective drawing remind one of the Royal Palace in Stockholm. In another picture, a huge tower reminiscent of German architecture is reflected in the harbour.

Jung saw to it in his design for the South Harbour area that a location with great landscaping potential would not be used only to serve secondary, short-term needs concerning the economic sector.

Southern Helsinki was not to have a large town hall. Instead, Seurahuone, designed by C.L. Engel for the Market Square, was to go through its own relevant history. Jung successfully defended his utopian view with respect to the Observatory Hill.

After it became clear that the Parliament House planned on this site would not be built and that Engel's Observatory would be left undisturbed in its green surroundings, Jung clearly took position. In 1923, he voiced his opposition to those who still envisaged the hill as the location for the elected representatives of the people and put forward his views in a manner which is rarely found in official documents:

> "The city should on no account, whatever offers are made, forgo this place which, in its current role of park and vantage point, is among the more beautiful, perhaps is the most beautiful, place in the entire city".

Jung's implacability regarding the future evolution of the capital made an outstanding public servant of him. But he also had to accept disappointment with respect to his bigger projects and to his utopian designs. In the text of the Pro Helsingfors project, he regrets the fate reserved to the Royal Avenue:

> "Will the ambitious idea remain just a theory and the town plan for the city blunder around a hitherto, up hill and down dale, careful to avoid the least obstacle and party to prevarications and compromises of the day, ignoring the possible achievements tossed our way like fruit for the picking, were we only bold enough to make a decision? No more can be expected. Given deliberate indifference, 'valid' reasons will be found to destroy any argument. 'Sweet dreams and fantasy!'. It is so easy to see people off with empty recognition of this kind. Without any more ado, so much that is good in the world can be done to death".

4. Centre of the Capital City

The undeniable, unique greatness of the centre designed during the Russian period has always represented a hinderance to the plans attempting to attribute a genuine city centre to independent Finland's capital. However, even during the first decade of the nineteenth century, when Empire-style architecture rated very poorly in general, Engel's architectural achievement aroused positive comments as a rare implementation of an urban utopia. Architect J. Ahrenberg wrote, in 1912, that J.A. Ehrenström and C.L. Engel's works were the final instance of neo-classical ideals in the Age of Enlightenment; they were also well adapted to the true nature of Finland's soil. A plan was developed on this account, and not so ambitious that it could not be implemented. Gustaf Strengell had his influential book ("Staden som konstverk" / "The City as a Work of Art") published in 1922; it included, as representative Finnish urban milieu, only the oldest ones, i.e. those dating from before the nineteenth century. The Senate Square by Engel was practically the only exception; and the writer expressed the wish that urban planning would in future adopt the clarity of Engel's conception.

When Finland became completely independent from Russia in 1917, an effort was made to express the new national situation tangibly in the fabric of the centre of its capital city. In a search for something which would express what the new state represented, it was planned to modify the Senate Square, the symbolic milieu of the autonomous period. The intention was to divest the place of its old symbolism by recourse to a new expression of freedom.

In Jung's opinion, as the town planning architect, this purpose would be served best if the University was to allow its central building to be used otherwise and acquire a large area in the Meilahti villa district on which to be rebuilt. This is also evidence

to Jung's growing enthusiasm for American planning principles: he believed a separate campus to be best suited for the university's requirements.

Shortly after Finland became independent, the Council of State appointed a committee whose task was to report on the feasibility of transferring the University to Meilahti; they also had to examine the possibility of choosing the old city centre as a site for the administrative and cultural buildings required by Finland's new status. The building with the greatest symbolic weight for which a location had to be found was, obviously, the Parliament House. Architect J.S. Sirén was chosen to be secretary to this committee.

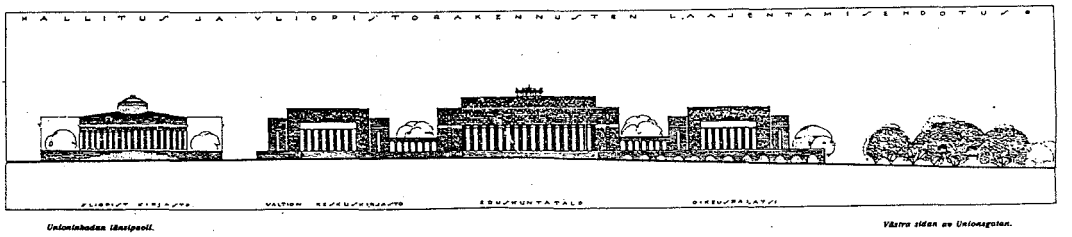

Fig. 3 J.S. Sirén: Design for terraceof monumental buildings on the west side of Unioninkatu, 1919
J.S. Sirén: Projet pour la terrasse des bâtiments monumentaux à l'ouest de Unioninkatu, 1919

Sirén's plan for renewing the Empire-style centre and dismantling the old hierarchy in favour of a new iconographic order represents a particularly interesting phase of utopian classicism in Finland's architectural past. Sirén's townscape alterations were centred on Unioninkatu, traditionally the principal approach route to the vast square. He proposed to demolish the civil training school for the sons of Russian soldiers (known as the 'kantonist school') and designed a trio of fine buildings for the site as a continuation of the University Library. Adjacent to the latter as the National Library, next to it the Parliament House, and the Palace of Justice, serving to balance the Library, since it had an identical facade. The theme inspiring all three facades was evolved from the Library, by Engel. The Parliament House attained dominance in virtue of its extra height and of the sculpture surmounting it. The three buildings were linked together by a storey-high colonnade. The whole was larger than anything built in the classical idiom in the Senate Square vicinity. In contrast to the strong verticality of the Nikolai (or Cathedral) Church, there would have been a novel and strongly resonating plinth, whose monumental proportions and architectonic impact (at such a raised level) would have subordinated the two older buildings (the Senate and the University already bordering on the Square).

J.S. Sirén won first prize in an architectural competition for the Parliament House which, as was decided in 1923, should be built as the focus of the west side of the growing city centre. The granite-clad classical palace which was finished in 1931 is widely regarded as based on one of the most favoured and varied architectonic themes

of European-American classicism. Discussing it further would be beyond the scope of this paper, but it may be of interest that this focal point of the unfinished city centre in the borough of Töölö was given its present location via Unioninkatu, and that, despite its wrong location, it belongs to the most significant urban utopia which took place in the early years of the country's independence.

When it was decided in 1924 to build the Parliament House in its present location and the basic plan became known, a town planning competition was organized. It was hoped that the successful winner would make of its vicinity the throbbing centre of Finland's growing modern metropolis (Helsingin Kaupunginvaltuuston painetut asiakirjat, 1923-1927). Architect Oiva Kallio's entry, "Urbi" came best of the eighteen projects submitted; it was a distinctly classical urban utopia reminiscent of those to be found in central Europe, and of a contemporary plan for the Kungsgatan in neighbouring Stockholm.

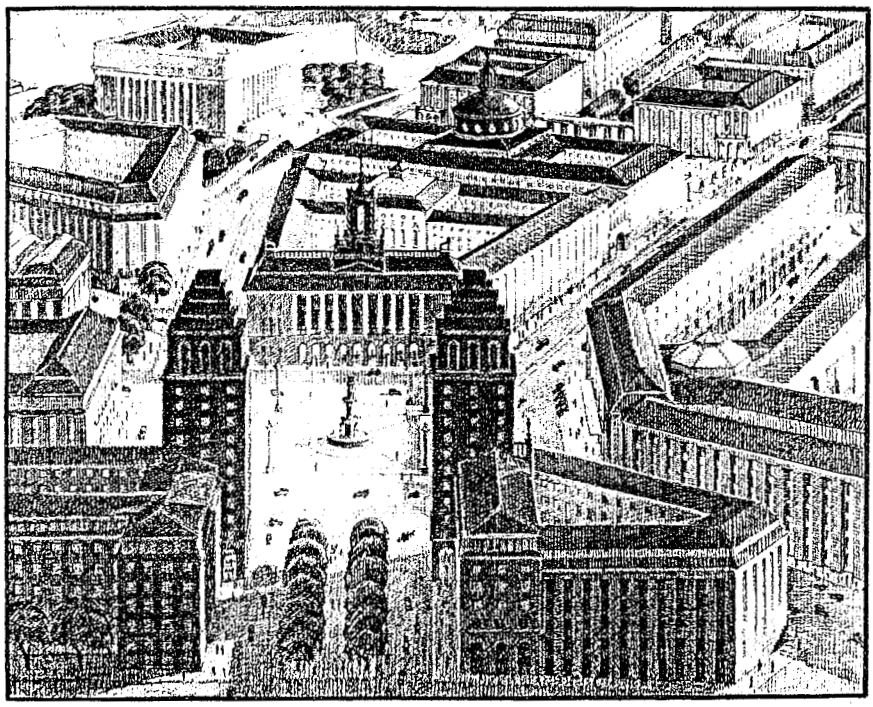

Fig. 4 Oiva Kallio: Perspective drawing of the 1925 Töölö town planning proposal
Oiva Kallio: Esquisse en perspective du plan pour la planification de la ville de Töölö (1925)

Kallio's view of Finland's new urban centre was exaggeratedly European in inspiration. Traffic circulation routes formed an impressive system of esplanades. The perspective drawings showed unbuilt spaces set out with care and furnished with statues. The facades of the buildings were drawn in a heavily classical manner and the streetscape was adorned with carefully sited towers.

Oiva Kallio worked further on the design, which reached it final shape in 1927. The architect's views on urban planning changed rapidly during this period. Historically it was characterized by buoyant conditions and by tremendous building activity. Finland was thought to be developing along the same lines as the United States. The perspective drawings of the 1925 version were rather German in conception. Horses and carriages still competed with Model-T Fords and trams, as they passed the Parliament House. The pace remained leisurely. Architect Elsi Borg collaborated to the later stages of this design. Her perspective drawing of the final appearance of the boulevards indicate an altogether different lifestyle. The classicist palaces along the esplanade have been supplanted by flat-roofed skyscrapers. There are four traffic lanes with large, fast-moving cars. In the sky, over the streetscape, biplanes can be seen, as symbols of modern times and international contacts.

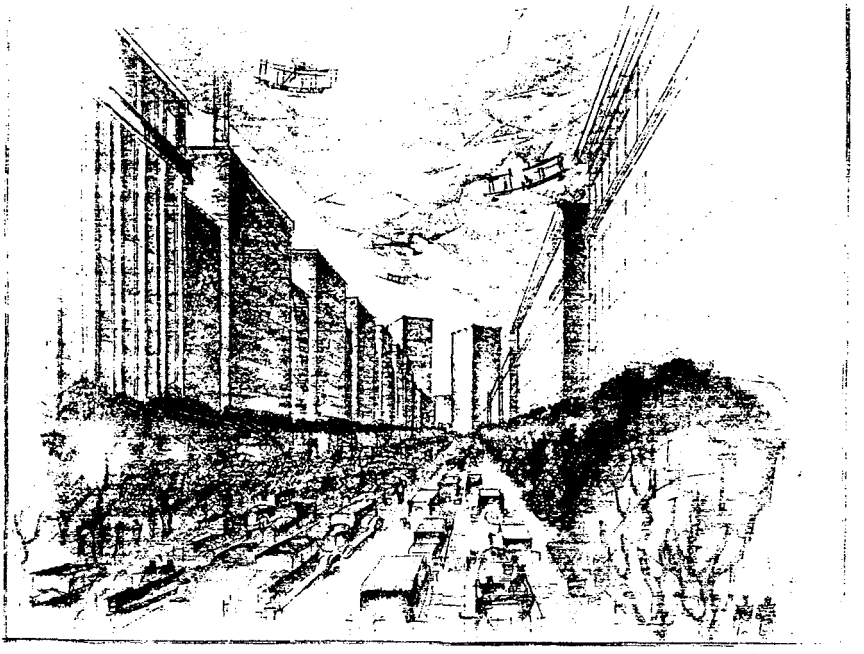

Fig. 5 Elsi Borg: Perspective drawing of the final proposal of the Helsinki Centre Plan of 1927 by Oiva Kallio
Elsi Borg: *Projet final pour le plan du centre d'Helsinki élaboré par Oiva Kallio en 1927*

5. Finnish Urban Utopias

In 1930, the aspirations of the Finns towards a metropolis were squashed by the worldwide recession. The Kallio design had long been in the hands of the city authorities, and been considered the natural way for the project to develop. The dimensional details of squares and traffic arteries and the gross floor areas required by administrative, commercial and residential needs had been computed. As late as 1930,

it was believed that the Finns also wanted to live in monumental apartment buildings on exclusive streets and enjoy their leisure on gravel paths bordered with beautiful plants, in the public park. The subsequent developments were to eliminate the features of this urban utopia.

In their well-known survey, "The Intellectual versus the City" (1977), Morton and Lucia White state that Americans regarded urban environments, with a few exceptions, as mainly a question of problems and defects. The utopias of their dreams were not urban utopias. For Finns, the matter rested largely the same. In a country which was urbanized rather late, the agrarian culture remains seen as a source of goodness; in contrast, the city is considered a root cause of evil. Consequently, people believing in the urban cosmopolitan dream have generally remained a small minority.

A famous text by Helen Rosenau (1974) divides urban utopias into social and formal ones. The few Finnish urban utopias did not evolve from social premisses. Social and socialist ideals drove the Finns to establish model communities in different parts of the world, many of them as far from Finland as was possible. Eighteen of these communities have recently been described by Peltoniemi (1985); they range from the eighteenth century to the end of the 1970s. In his summary, Peltoniemi states that all utopias created by the Finns bore the marks of a strong attraction to the land. Almost all model communities were based on farming, even when practical consideration would have suggested that they were doomed to failure. In some cases indeed, the poverty of the soil, the foreign climate and a lack of skill combined against their developers.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the enormous rebuilding programme which was started relied heavily on agriculture and rural settlement. By international standards, the neighbourhood evolution model developed for the expansion of cities was as anti-urban as was conceivable. City centres were allowed to develop without restraint, paving the way for widespread indifference.

In Helsinki's case, each urban utopia proposed emphasized different aspects, as the occasion arose. National considerations were accorded primary importance in the capital city. Within the Finnish utopia, dwellings have always been attributed a somewhat secondary role and the question of culture established itself only at the time it was granted a place in the city centre designs by Alvar Aalto at the end of the 1950s.

Aalto's over-restrained string of cultural buildings stretching along the shore of Töölö bay stands diametrically opposed to the superficial diversity and the noisy, polluted air of today's commercial centres. The inconceivable void that stands in place of a terraced deck gives the impression that Aalto refused on principle to use the net floor area available. In his architecture, the plan for the centre of Helsinki presents a profound and striking synthesis; it is one among the most substantial and most original achievements of European modernism. The spirit of the project is marked by the Royal Avenue of Saarinen, having become Liberty Avenue.

We may ask the question of whether Aalto's Centre City Plan and its implications is an utopia. It is hard to imagine a rowdy gang of young people on the terraced deck. The unbuilt space would not offer much shelter for the elderly either. The whole design is arresting because it relies on people behaving according to an ideal, and it ignores the concrete factors which make up daily life. One has trouble imagining a community based on a city centre that focuses on culture and around an enormous void.

And I don't even know that such a place should exist:

"The present city - without reason, without dream - leads to dystopia and disaster. Utopias - without reason, with dream - cannot get us out of the impasse. There is only one road left - with reason and dream - which should take us out of the bad place into a good place, which is not out of place - anentopia" (Constantinos A. Doxiadis, 1968).

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