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**007 and Contemporary Sacral
Architecture**

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007 and Contemporary Sacral Architecture

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Abstract

The status of the church changed in Finland after the WW2. The Finns began to be secularized. The church tried to take new tasks to fasten itself more intensively on the care of social problems besides the mere spiritual work. Democracy was the slogan of the 1960's. Finland went through a quick urbanization.

This all was reflected in the church and sacral architecture. The special features of the churches, solemnity and hierarchy began to vanish. It could be seen in the architecture competitions of the time. They aroused often polemics that clarifies the state of great changes. Some architects wanted to question the whole institution and its traditions and to create something new.

My paper handles this phenomenon with one example. The Salpausselkä church architecture competition in 1967 in Lahti tried exceptionally to find an idea to a whole suburb and a service center of the area. The competition was won by architect Kristian Gullichsen. His proposal was a variable and flexible center that could be carried out economically and efficiently. Gullichsen's pseudonym was 007. In his perspective drawing of the church he showed Superman pointing a low moderate building.

The debate following this solution however led to a different result. The planning task was finally given to architects who won the third prize. It was said that churches have always been the noblest achievements of architecture and there is no reason to make the traditions banal and to strive for cheap curiosities.

What kind of forces were fighting on the fields of architecture. What kind of arguments kept the traditions alive? What kinds of elements were used to build the church of a modern suburb in the beginning of the 1970's? My paper tries to give answers to these questions.

Keywords: church architecture, modernism, urbanization

Finland met a very strong and quick urbanization after the Second World War. Farmhouses with their small fields which had been parceled out by the state after the war proved not to be viable. The traditional agricultural livelihoods began to decrease and farmers moved to factories. In the year 1950 one third of Finns lived in towns and boroughs but 25 years later already two thirds lived there. After the Second World War a typical Finn had a farm house or a small cottage with two rooms in the country, a quarter century later he had a flat with three or four rooms in an apartment house in the town.¹

The status of the church changed also in Finland after the Second World War. The religion had tightened its grip on the Finns temporarily during the time of crisis but afterwards they began to be secularized. The church tried to take new tasks to fasten itself more intensively on the care of social problems besides the mere spiritual work. The Finnish church adopted Norwegian models which emphasized the so called working church model. Also some priests having seen the pains and anguish of the war front proposed that brotherhood, involvement and everyday life should be taken into consideration in the parishes. The work among young and old people and the poor was one of the new methods to get a foothold in the society. It is very interesting that the 1950's and 1960's were the most active decades in building churches during the Finnish independence.²

Democracy and equality were the slogans in the 1960's and this effected on the church as well. The Finnish church was traditionally quite rightist and this did not suit to the leftist trends of the 1960's and 1970's.³

The urbanization and the field of social obligations of the church were directly reflected on the sacral architecture. The churches could move to a kind of parish centers with club rooms, vicarages, even sports grounds. The special features of the church, solemnity and hierarchy began slowly to vanish. This could be best seen in the numerous architecture competitions from the 1950's to the 1970's. They often aroused polemics that clarifies the state of great changes. Some architects wanted to question the whole institution and its traditions. They wanted to create something new to meet the new democratic consumer society and anonymous architecture. One of the most emphatic voices belonged to Nils Eric Wickberg, the central figure of the Finnish art history and theory. He strongly defended modernism in sacral architecture.⁴

The Finnish sacral tradition is based on the medieval stone churches with steep roof slopes, narrow vaulted windows and support constructions applied from the gothic system. This is the image of the real and authentic Finnish church. According to the general belief, the higher the building, the stronger is the faith.⁵

¹Pihkala 1992, 291–292.

²Lauha 2004, 200–202; Heikkilä 2008, 79–80.

³Lauha 2004, 200.

⁴Salokorpi 1990, 64–65; Pallasmaa 2008, 312.

⁵Salokorpi 1990, 64.

Figure 1. *The Oldest Church in Lahti, the Wooden Temple from the Year 1890 by Architect Albert Mellin. Now Demolished. Photo Lahti City Museum Photograph Archives*



After the Second World War there was a strong revival of this building type. Many modern “medieval” churches were seen, the most famous and also influential example is the Salla church by Eero Eerikäinen and Osmo Sipari from the year 1950. It was a revival but also a strong symbol of hope and better future because the former Salla church had been burnt by the Russians during the war and the new church literally rose from the ashes of the war.¹

At the same time there aroused a new wave of monumental churches, sacral houses that had been intended to strongly dominate their surroundings by their placing and size on the other hand or by their architecture on the other hand. Planners tried to find personal, individual, even amazing architectural solutions. Architect Aarno Ruusuvuori’s Hyvinkää church from 1961 is maybe the most expressive and effective example of this phenomenon.²

¹Lahti 2000, 18; Lauha 2004, 201; Pallasmaa 2008, 309.

²Pallasmaa 2008, 309.

This trend was much criticized. It was said to be of American origin from the 1950's. In the United States the influential business world stirred up the public opinion to revolt against the international style by Mies van der Rohe which was seen to be guilty of the decline of the traditional American architecture. This gave birth to a new wave of design architecture and the result could be seen especially in the World Fair in Brussels 1958. A collection of odd pseudo constructivist pavilions was said to have an international effect. The healthy base of Finnish architecture was infected, too, and it could be noticed the most in the church competitions and their results.¹

A famous Finnish architect, Reima Pietilä called contemporary – he meant from the 1950's to the 1970's – architecture a broken rocket that had been launched to a distant track and which nobody could stop anymore.²

To break down these trends was the new goal of some radical architects of the 1960's. My study handles this phenomenon with one example, the Salpausselkä church architecture competition in 1967 in Lahti town.

Lahti is a small town in Southern Finland. It is a very young town – Lahti got its municipal status in the year 1905. Lahti grew very quickly after the Second World War. In the year 1945 there were about 32 000 inhabitants in Lahti, 15 years later this figure had almost doubled. Until the 1970's Lahti was a town of passers through, a town of rootless people. The town scape of Lahti is very new, mostly from the 1960's and 1970's.³

Figure 2. *Old and New Lahti from the 1950's. Photo Lahti City Museum Photograph Archives*



¹Mikkonen 1968, 25; Pallasmaa 2008, 310.

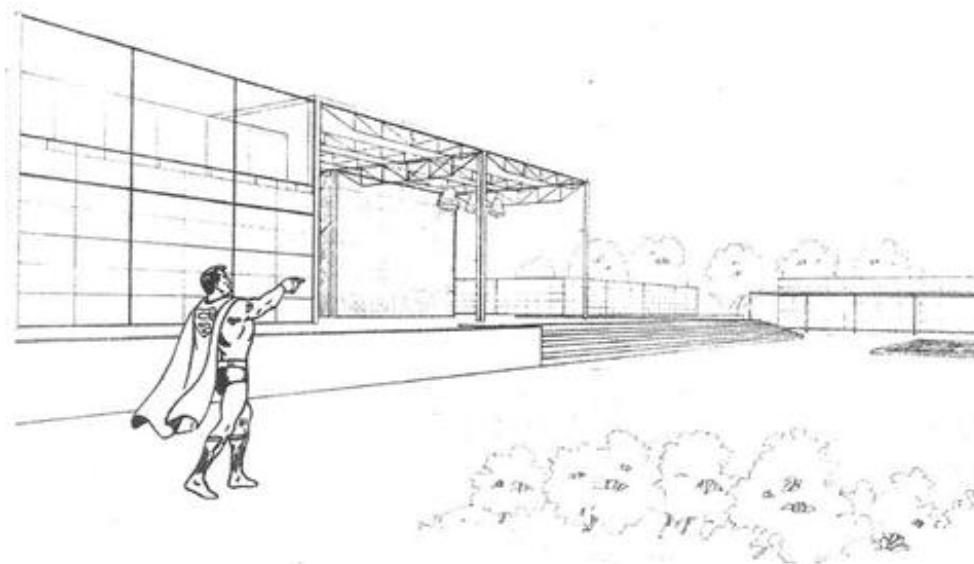
²Pietilä – Pietilä 1979, 54.

³Niskanen 2012, 8.

The Salpausselkä church architecture competition was exceptionally trying to find an idea of a whole suburb of about three thousand inhabitants and a service center of the area. The church should be generally applicable. It should not be isolated and torn apart from the surrounding area. The competition program defined the status of a sacral building in the modern society as the central question of the process.¹

The competition was won by architect Kristian Gullichsen with his team. Their proposal was a variable and flexible center that could be carried out economically and efficiently. Gullichsen's pseudonym was 007. In his perspective drawing of the church he showed Superman pointing at a low moderate building. The church was a low straight rectangle with glass walls and a flat roof.²

Figure 3. *The Perspective Drawing of the Salpausselkä Church Competition Entry by Architect Kristian Gullichsen and his Team. Photo Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6-7/1968*



The team told that they had avoided a solution that would emphasize the special character of the church. The church should be taken to pieces and built again in different ways. It was to be built with glass and metal elements and no traditional materials as brick, wood and even concrete were to be used. There was also an outdoor space inside the building which could be used as an extra market square beside the one of the residential area.³

¹Salpausselän kirkkokilpailu'. *Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6-7/1968.*

²Salpausselän kirkkokilpailu'. *Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6-7/1968.*

³Salpausselän kirkkokilpailu'. *Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6-7/1968.*

This logical method and not so sophisticated finishing were told to lead to a price which could be compared with an industrial building.¹

Figure 4. *The Salpausselkä Church Competition Entry by Architect Kristian Gullichsen and his Team. Photo Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6–7/1968*



The debate following this solution however led to a different result. The planning was finally given to architects who won the third prize in this competition. The reason was told to be the sacral nature of their church plan.²

So the aims of the original task, of the whole competition were turned upside down. The universality of the sacral building was abandoned. The special status of the church complex was emphasized.

What kind of forces were fighting on the fields of architecture?

Salpausselkä church was the fourth church building for Lahti inhabitants. All its predecessors were of the old traditional church type, the medieval form. Even the small funeral chapel that served as the church of Salpausselkä parish before it got its own church was of the same type. As Lahti is a very young town it is obvious that people value traditions in the new surroundings. Especially the first own church in Lahti, the wooden temple from the year 1890 was very beloved and there was a great and angry debate when it was torn down in 1977.³

One of the judges of the architecture competition wrote at the time of the discussion of the Salpausselkä church that churches have always been the noblest achievements of architecture and there is no reason to make the traditions banal and to strive for cheap curiosities.⁴

The architecture of the 007 was simple. It had no decorations and it was totally undressed of hierarchy and traditional features of sacral building. The competition entry was a kind of a joke – the pseudonym 007 had been quoted from quite a different world, the entertainment, and the comparison of Superman to Jesus was coarse. What if the appearance of the competition entry was different?

¹'Salpausselän kirkkokilpailu'. *Arkkitehtuurikilpailuja 6–7/1968*.

²'Salpausselän kirkkoa ei tehtäne voittaneen ehdotuksen mukaan'. *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* May 3, 1968.

³Niskanen – Rekola 2014, passim.

⁴Mikkonen 1968, 25.

The final church was simple, too, but it had the old distinctive marks, for instance a clock tower, a stone wall, and an abbey like shut courtyard. The materials were familiar, yellow brick and wood, not metal and glass.

Figure 5. *The Salpausselkä Church by Architects Woldemar Baeckman and Helmer Löfström. Photo Tiina Rekola / Lahti City Museum Photograph Archives*



The concept of a suburb was quite strange in Lahti, too. The first suburbs had been built in the beginning of the 1960's.¹ The citizens were used to live in

¹Niskanen 2012, 30.

the city center or residential areas, not in suburbs. The church connected with supermarkets and ordinary apartment houses was a totally new way to see the holy building. The result was that the church had to be isolated from the everyday surroundings and it had to be a kind of dominant, not a part of everyday life. The whole complex was surrounded by a small pine forest which separated it from the other suburb.

The church's aim after the war was to be a part of people's everyday life, both functionally and by its surroundings. People did not want this. The special features of the church had to be maintained. Even nowadays this trend is very strong: when the biggest Finnish newspaper arranged a competition of the ugliest church in Finland this summer the winner was the Konala church from the year 1973. It got about one quarter of the votes, which there were totally over 12 000.¹ Its architect is Heikki Castrén, one of the pioneers of modern postwar architecture in Finland. The five ugliest churches of this competition are from the years 1965–1977, one of them is the Tapiola church by architect Aarno Ruusuvuori.²

Even Kristian Gullichsen himself returned to the way of historical forms. He adopted the postmodernism of the 1980's and applied its language very innovatively and ingenious. Gullichsen has often loaned the themes of for instance Alvar Aalto and Le Corbusier in his sacral architecture.³ He was one of those numerous architects who began to plan churches that "look like churches" as was the demand of congregations.

The traditional hierarchy of the sacral building had to be preserved although the functional environment changed – or maybe just therefore. As Juhani Pallasmaa, a famous Finnish art theorist put it: "...a respectful attitude to traditions does not imply regressive traditionalism, but its acknowledgement as a source of meaning, inspiration, and emotional rooting".⁴

¹'Betonikirkkoa on vaikea rakastaa'. *Helsingin Sanomat* August 10, 2014; 'Konalan kirkko on Suomen rumin'. *Helsingin Sanomat* August 17, 2014.

²'Konalan kirkko on Suomen rumin'. *Helsingin Sanomat* August 17, 2014.

³Salokorpi 1990, 65.

⁴Pallasmaa 2013, 5.

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