THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINLAND 1916-1996 – FROM PRESERVATION TO PRESENTATION

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The National Museum of Finland was opened to the public in January 1916. This was more than fifty years after the need of a national museum had first been discussed in public in Finland and almost thirty years after the serious planning of the museum was started. The construction of the present museum building began in 1905 by permission of Czar Nicholas II, after years of debates both about the location of the museum and about its architecture.

The paper outlines how the architectural concept was developed and how – in face of its ongoing renovation – the concern for the museum building as a national monument inevitably comes into conflict with the ideas for the presentation of the collections to a modern public.

The National Museum was used for more than sixty years as a museum, a storage building and an office building of the State Archaeological Commission, nowadays the National Board of Antiquities (Museovirasto/Museiverket). It was as late as 1973 that the offices of the National Board of Antiquities moved to a separate office building near the museum, a former school at Nervanderinkatu 13. The great need for a proper and sufficient storage space was solved for some decades in 1981, when the building of the central storage in Orimattila was inaugurated.

These fundamental changes in the use of the museum building opened the way to restore the building as a museum. However, it was as late as 1996, that the planning of a thorough repair and renovation of the museum building and of all its exhibitions could be started. The rethinking of the actual role of a national museum is also included in this process. Here the National Museum of Finland is sharing its problems with many other old and large museums of history and archaeology round the world.

The National Museum of Finland is a
product of late 19th century thinking and expectations both as an institution and as a building. It was created at an important moment in the history of Finland, which since 1809 had been an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. In the course of the 19th century she had grown more and more independent politically, economically and culturally. Several national institutions were founded during the late part of the century, the national museum being one of them. Conscious work towards a
distinctly Finnish culture had started as early as the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and both a national consciousness and a national feeling were growing. Finland's relations with the Russian administration moved into a new phase during the so-called years of oppression between 1899 and 1905, when Finland's autonomy was endangered. These years - when also the decisions about the national museum building were made - involved the widespread diffusion of nationalism in Finland.

The fact that the National Museum was born during a decisive phase of the nation-building, has in later years made it a national monument in itself. And the fact that, after a complicated planning history, the museum building was designed by the young architects Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Elie! Saarinen, who later won reputation as the prominent architects in the turn-of-the-century Finland, has made the building an architectural monument in which also foreign scholars and architectural tourists take an interest. Hence the renovation of the museum will be the renovation of a national monument with all the difficulties involved. A museum cannot stay as a monument to its own history, as «a museum of a museum». And, as is also very well known, to make a modern museum in an old building is a most demanding task.

**THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM**

The term 'national museum' was occasionally mentioned during the latter part of
the 19th century, denoting the future central and state-owned museum of archaeology, history and ethnography. The museum was established in 1893 by combining various collections then existing in Helsinki. The Alexander University owned and housed the oldest and largest numismatic, archeological, cultural historical and ethnographic collections, even foreign ethnographic material collected by Finnish scientists and travellers from all over the world, especially from Russia. The students' unions had their own, primarily ethnographic collections, as well as the Archaeological Society founded in 1870 and the State Archaeological Commission which had been established in 1884. The museum was officially called the State Museum of History, or sometimes the State Museum of History and Ethnography until 1917 when Finland gained its independence. Since then the museum has been called the National Museum of Finland.

The new museum founded in 1893 was placed in the care of the State Archaeological Commission. This decision was to have great impact on the character of the museum in the coming years: the work at the museum has always been closely connected with the research and preservation of the immovable cultural heritage in Finland. During its first sixty years the museum building was used both as a public museum and as an office building of a growing administration. Today the National Museum, together with 13 minor museums, functions as a separate department of the National Board of Antiquities.

In the early years the exhibitions of the museum were arranged primarily to serve the needs of preservation, scientific research, higher teaching and, in the second place, contribute to the education of the people. Neither the number of visitors nor the quality of the museum visits, not to mention enjoyment or entertainment were seriously considered. The founding of the museum and somewhat later the construction of the monumental museum building were great patriotic efforts at the turn of the century. This would be sufficient for more than half a century. The National Museum was one of the necessities in a young independent state, as it had been in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. It was needed as a treasury of the national «regalia» and symbolical objects. Its mere existence showed that Finland also had a past and a history of her own: a matter which had occasionally been discussed even in Finland during the 19th century.

At the turn of the last century it was especially important to show how Finland differed from Sweden as well as from Russia, and that the majority of the population, the Finnish-speaking people, whose language belonged to the group of Finno-Ugric (Uralic) languages, also had an indigenous cultural heritage. In practice it was not, however, easy to discern the roles of the different language groups in the formation of the history of the nation or her national characteristics.

The more general functions of the museum were connected with the need of popular education and enlightenment. It was necessary to show people the developments of the past, so that their present day, the troubled times of the late 19th century could be better understood. The museum should show people how their ancestors had survived in much more
demanding circumstances. By telling the common history of the nation the national museum should strengthen the national feeling.

THE MUSEUM BUILDING

The State Museum of History was located in various premises until the new museum building was ready to be furnished in the beginning of the 1910s. The main part of the exhibitions were opened to the public in January 1916, the rest in the course of the 1920s. The building was designed in 1902-05 by the architects Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen, who had won the architectural competition in 1901-1902.

The museum is located north of the 19th century city centre, in Töölö, a district planned also at the turn of the century and built in the first decades of this century. The museum is situated in one of the main streets, Mannerheimintie, and now has as its neighbours the House of Parliament from the 1930s and the Finlandia House as well as the new Opera building. The museum is surrounded by its own park with the conservation laboratory placed in a separate building. The museum building is a three-, partly four-storey building with two inner courtyards, steep roofs, gables and towers. The main tower is 50 meters high. The tower and the adjoining «church wing», where ecclesiastical art from the Middle Ages is displayed, gives the building a church-like appearance, which often misleads foreign tourists to consider the building as a church or a church altered into a museum. There are also castellated parts with renaissance motifs. The walls are made of masonry and they are partly plastered, partly covered with granite and soapstone. The roofs are covered with slates and copperplates.

A battle of styles had preceded the decision to announce a design competition for the museum building. It concerned primarily the principles of architecture, but museum professionals were involved as the debate also had reference to the methods of display.

The earliest plans for the museum were made as early as 1889 and 1891, some years before the State Museum of History was officially founded. The programme for the spatial distribution was prepared by the State Commission for Archaeology and the planning was carried out by the National Board of Public Building. The first two plans were signed by the Director of the Board, the architect Sebastian Gripenberg, the third one in 1899 by the architect Hugo Lindberg. All three plans showed a three-storey building with porticoes and wings partly encircling the backyard. The plans with their Roman Doric and free Tuscan orders belonged to late 19th century classicism, a proper and conventional style for academic and public buildings. The 1899 year plan differed from the previous ones proposing that the facade should be covered with Finnish granite. Domestic natural stone materials like granite and soapstone gained great popularity also in Finland in the last years of the 1890s and onwards.

At the early planning stage many central locations were proposed to the museum. The selection of classicism to be applied in the building was partly connected with the location in the city centre near the old Empire-style buildings, partly with the time and architects, probably also with the
Hugo Lindberg 1899. Design for the State Museum of History and Ethnography. All pictures here from the archives of the National Board of Antiquities.

fact that the modest collections of the past of Finland ought to be presented in a classicistic palace in an equally distinguished way as in the central museums of other nations.

The essential idea in the early plans was to place the three departments, the archaeological, historical and ethnographical, in three floors on top of each other. Each department was planned to have its domestic collections placed in successive exhibition halls with the corresponding foreign collections in adjoining corridors. The plan was undoubtedly a schematic one and therefore the building was characterized as a «chest of drawers». At a later stage criticism was also addressed to this plan as the division of three departments into equally sized areas did not allow individual growth of each collection. This arrangement was, however, based on the wish of the museum staff itself. The division of the museum into three departments in accordance with the academic disciplines was inserted also in the finally approved plan, however, having all three departments now on one and the same level. It was obviously of major importance that each department had direct access to the central hall as well as that each department was headed by its own director. This division will be partly abandoned in the current renovation plan.

The hopes to get the building soon into its construction stage were good when the Senate approved the 1899 year plan. The project was considered as an urgent one in the atmosphere of the years of oppression and the museum was expected to be completed by the year 1903. It was in this situation that the whole project was endangered when the relevance of the
architectural style of the plan was questioned. In spite of the proposed facades of granite, the planned building was considered totally outdated both as a public building in general and as a museum in particular. Neither would it have suited the future townscape of Töölö, the planning of which had started at the same time, along the then current lines with narrow curved streets and buildings decorated with gables, turrets and other details of historical architecture as well as of art nouveau. The fashion in architecture had changed during the ten years spent on the planning of the museum and the selection of a proper location.

The criticism was formulated by younger architects and museum people, or more precisely by architects who had worked closely with museum people. The central figures were Armas Lindgren and Gustaf Nyström, who was professor in architecture and at that time working with the town plan for Töölö. Most of the discussions were published in daily newspapers or other forums. Even a pamphlet called Värt Museum was published by a group of young architects Herman Gesellius, Bertel
Jung, Armas Lindgren, Harald Neovius and Lars Sonck. The primary goal of the architects, being very much concerned with this matter, was to initiate an architectural competition for the museum. The antagonism between «old» and young architects as well as between architects in public service and private architects was also involved in this case.

The old plan was rejected in 1900 and a competition was arranged in 1901-1902. The first prize was, not surprisingly, awarded to the architects Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen who had got deeply acquainted with the museum project. The rough and modest forms in their competition entry were then seen as very modern. It was even possible to see certain specifically Finnish characteristics in the proposed building, although the allusions to Finnish medieval and renaissance architecture primarily belonged to the function of the building: they were to create a proper and stimulating frame for the collections presented inside.

A few foreign museums were named as models in the discussions about the National Museum. They were the museums in Magdeburg, München, Reichenberg and above all the Swiss Landesmuseum in Zürich, planned by Gustaf Gull and completed in 1898. The seemingly free ground plan was seen especially favourable in regard to future extensions of the building, something which was in fact planned several times but never realized, either for architectural or financial reasons. The last effort was made in 1986, when a design competition was arranged. The competition was won by the architect Aarno Ruusuvuori with a proposal for a three-storey underground extension, but it was not realized due to the lack of financial resources.

Another important feature in Zürich and later also in Helsinki was the variety in space and shape as well as in the architectural decoration of the exhibition rooms. The rooms were each designed for a specific type of collection or for a certain period. The intention was to create fascinating and pedagogically effective rooms.

The shift to a public-oriented museum planning was evident and it happened early in the history of museums. Unfortunately it was never fully realized in the National Museum of Finland. Most of the
planned decorations for walls and ceilings were not painted because of limited financial resources. Only a few of the exhibition rooms were used in the way the architects had imagined. Even the first displays were built according to the ideas of the museum staff. Later on the different departments and rooms have, of course, been newly arranged from time to time.

The varied and architecturally interesting ground plans and exhibition rooms offer both an advantage and a challenge when exhibitions are planned, especially in a situation when all the exhibitions are to be renewed to serve the visitors of today and the future. The same also applies to the difficulties with modern museum technics: they, too, can be adopted only on the terms of the old building. Neither of these problems can have common solutions, nor models to follow. The museums are particular buildings and museum visits do consist of experiences in space, of walking and standing in very specific rooms.

Preliminary work for the planning of repair and renewal started in 1993 and the draft plans are expected to be completed in the autumn of 1996. The planning work for the new exhibitions is going on parallely. Assuming that the financial plan can be followed too, the work should be completed in the year 2000.


**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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