

The essence of the line

Seldom has an architect received as much tacit support from friends and colleagues as **Mauri Korkka** who, with two posters and a fine idea, had made it through to the final six vying for the honour to design the new premises of the Stockholm City Library. In the end Korkka shared third prize, but given that the international competition had attracted a massive 1170 entries, the inevitable disappointment was tinged with pride.

FINLAND — TEXT: TARJA NURMI, PHOTOGRAPHY: KIRSTI RANTANEN

Interview

Mauri Korkka works with his life partner Kirsti Rantanen. In their tiny office they are often accompanied by their 3-year old son Marius, who has already experienced Egypt and Paris during his parents' working trips – and of course Stockholm for the competition announcement. Mauri and I met in Kruunuhaka, one of the oldest parts in Helsinki. The day before he had just submitted another competition entry and was planning to start work on another one within a few days.

Tarja Nurmi: How do you console yourself after losing yet another competition?

Mauri Korkka: You win some, you lose some. One of our success stories, a large park that is a combination of environmental architecture and very special, small-scale pavilions is currently taking shape in the suburb of Myllypuro in the eastern part of Helsinki. We expect it to be finished within a few years.

TN: What made you decide to become an architect?

MK: I had that idea already in school, as a teenager. I thought that architecture is also about communicating with people. Of course I also thought about the arts or mathematics as a career. But architecture had a very positive aura in those times.

TN: What do you mean by a 'positive aura'?

MK: Architects enjoyed a solid status in Finnish society. They were highly respected and relatively affluent professionals. Architecture was written about in the media. Some architects were heroes, people to admire. Like Alvar Aalto, who conveyed something very energetic and positive. My older brother became a civil engineer, but I decided I wanted to do something that was closer to culture. I wanted to become part of a profession that creates culture.

TN: There are three schools of architecture in Finland. Where did you study?

MK: I chose Tampere [in southern Finland – ed.] This was during the 1980s and at that time it was quite new and our department was located right in the heart of the city. I was very pleased about that. We had our own, very close and active community of students and teachers. The school was a natural base and meeting place for all of us – the school, teachers, students, there was lots of energy! We had diploma seminars which most of the students took part in, and in the evenings we had great parties.

The seminars were not only for a small group but open for all. That was inspiring, also for the younger students.

TN: Can you describe some highlights from this period of your life?

MK: All my professors and senior teachers had an impact on me, each in his or her own way. I enjoyed working by myself and I started taking part in competitions already in my second year. Our small library was very important for me. I got to know some architects and fellow-students who discovered how to win competitions at the end of the post-modernist boom in Finland in the late 1980s. They won many Finnish competitions and I saw how it was done. I worked for architectural firms in the late '80s and early '90s, and learned about professional practice first hand – and then we had the awful recession around 1990. It put an abrupt end to this positive and rewarding process. In Finland it was and still is common to work in an architectural office before finishing one's studies. At this time I also won a big international student competition for La Défense in Paris, and after that I became a sort of role model for other students in our school. There had been over 500 entries, and in my project I had used my knowledge of fractal theory and the Menger sponge as a source of inspiration for the spatial structure which was a very thin and tall skyscraper.

TN: This must have been very important for the rather new Tampere school of architecture?

MK: Oh yes. But the professors, teachers, even students, were very keen to bring the new department into the limelight. We wanted to shout WE CAN! to the Otaniemi school in Helsinki. Our students won international student competitions. As a logical continuation of this, some Tampere-educated architects like 8 Studio began to win a series of competitions. That was really amazing! I also worked with those people, and Pentti Kareoja, Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma are still my friends. Today they are all professors of architecture in Helsinki, Tampere and Oulu.

TN: Can you talk a bit about your work as a teacher at the Tampere school?

MK: After graduating in 1990, I was encouraged to apply for a job as senior design tutor at Tampere in 1991. My subject was 'public buildings and architecture'. We did a lot of international student work like competitions and exhibitions. We were very ambitious; we wanted to open new doors for the students and we organized exhibitions

in Paris, London, Berlin and, of course, at the Museum of Finnish Architecture here in Helsinki.

TN: Tampere has not been at the forefront of contemporary architecture in recent times and you are now in Helsinki. What happened to make you decide to leave?

MK: Against the will of both teachers and students the architecture faculty was moved out of the city centre onto the technical university campus in suburban Hervanta. I was really disappointed because we had the city all around as a living, inspiring 'laboratory'. I couldn't accept the move so I quit. Later, from around 1998, I did some teaching at Otaniemi on the Alvar Aalto Campus of the University of Technology where I had my own course, 'Future Cities', in a loose collaboration with Professor Trevor Harris. Our remit was to imagine and figure out what Helsinki might look like in 100 years' time – population, technology, the whole works. Unfortunately, because we didn't get enough resources this ambitious course ended up being marginalized. But we had very interesting discussions. And I sometimes really do miss teaching. A teacher of architecture must be very alert, must demand a lot of himself. He or she also receives a lot of inspiration from the students. It's a two-way-street, demanding and giving plenty of energy!

TN: How would you describe your approach to work?

MK: If something doesn't seem to work, we usually try another approach. We have many different collaborators and connections and professional relations and we are always open to new insights, new connections, new commissions, to completely new approaches. I would like to work in alternative ways, to do things a bit off mainstream. That is not always a guarantee of professionally rewarding or lucrative results, compared with traditional and 'safe' routes to success. But after many disappointments, too much bad luck and too many economic difficulties – you end up wondering whether it is worthwhile. And now we are facing this possible recession. On the other hand, different ways of doing things may just get us through the worst economic crisis. We are small, we can adjust.

TN: But you still have a great variety of interesting projects?

MK: Yes, we have had many interesting and challenging commissions like the Hämeenlinna Kantolanniemi →





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Mauri Korkka was born in Lahti, in southern Finland, in 1958. Before and after completing his architectural studies he worked for various Finnish architectural practices. In 1991 he married fellow-architect Kirsti Rantanen and in 1998 they opened their own practice. The focus of Korkka's work to date has been urban design and public buildings. He has also taught public building design at the Technical University of Tampere. Korkka developed a taste for architecture competitions when he won first prize in an international student design competition in 1990. Although he has yet to win a big design prize, he has been a runner-up on several occasions. His published works have introduced new ideas to the Finnish architectural scene.

(The essence of the line)

'Vau Vanaja' innovative city development project which we designed for a small but ambitious town in Southern Finland which wants to improve the quality of life of its citizens and has openly stated that it values high-quality architecture. I am also used to working on competitions. It is now in my blood, and although we haven't yet landed a really big fish we have had some successes, like Myllypuro Park.

TN: How would you manage a big project if you were to get it, given that it would require more personnel?

MK: We have close connections with colleagues who have worked with the likes of Koolhaas. If we were to win a big competition, of course, the office would have to be completely reshaped. We have received financial support for our projects, like state or foundation grants. And we get inspiration from being elsewhere, by spending time abroad. For me the studio scholarship in New York and numerous stays at the Cité des Arts in Paris have been vitally important.

TN: But how does a small office run by a young couple with one young child and another on the way manage to combine the creative work, day-to-day business activities and travel with domestic life?

'Architecture that is the result of careerist calculation is generally lacking in brilliance.'

MK: As far as little Marius is concerned, he is also a source of energy and inspiration. Sometimes when I work on an idea for a project, he plays on the office floor under the tables and then falls asleep in his carriage, quite happily. We have our home and the office very close to each other, which makes it easier to organize our life. We call ourselves a Boutique Office, after the exclusive Boutique Hotels. We want to give our various clients and working partners quality in the sense that we take each task separately. And seriously, of course!

TN: You seized the opportunity to take part in the Stockholm Library competition, in the middle of other work at the office?

MK: I have taken part in over ten large international competitions. When they announced this particular competition, I was working on the Kantolanniemi city planning project for Hämeenlinna, and Marius had just been born. I studied the competition documents and wondered whether I would have time for it. But then the concept started to live a life of its own and it looked good, and besides the documentation for the first phase was not too time-consuming. So I went ahead, but I didn't sleep much during that very intense first phase. The second phase, in which the initial 1170 entries were reduced to six, was exceptionally demanding and loaded with technical nonsense. It was difficult for all six of us and all these technical and documentation requirements were sort of 'eating into' the architecture. We were even required to send the digital 3D-model together with all the other-time consuming documentation, - usually the model is sent two weeks later. New demands kept arriving up to a couple of weeks before the deadline.

TN: Tell us about the Myllypuro Alakiventie Park, which is slowly taking shape in Helsinki. Has it been under construction for a long time?

MK: Yes, for a few years, but it is very big. It occupies the site of a former rubbish dump. It is a gigantic artificial hill in the shape of a flattened cone, over 120 metres in diameter and about 20 metres high. The idea for a park on a site where blocks of flats built over the former rubbish dump had to be demolished takes its inspiration from my trips to Manhattan and Paris. We do the annual walk in Paris on their National Holiday in July. The route takes us from the geographical midpoint of each arrondissement, to the very centre of the city. The route or trail in this walk is tens of kilometres long and it makes a counterclockwise spiral on the map. This same theme is also present in the Myllypuro project, which will contain state-of-the-art RGB-led lighting technology, small steel-frame pavilions covered with foliage and decorated with small trees. It is also a very challenging process because we are using the latest technologies. It will be like a big piece of environmental art. It has to have an artificial shape and appearance, because there is also a piece of real, original nature very close to this park - one of those exciting, undulating granite hills typical of the natural landscape of coastal Finland. There will also be new housing areas next to the landscaped area.

TN: Where is the connection with Paris in this concept?

MK: As far as Paris is concerned, we wanted to create a 'new version' of La Villette. Myllypuro Park covers 11 hectares and it will be closely linked to a sports and recreational park. And there will be housing, as I already mentioned. We see this former dump as a place for 'dumping city culture', in a way in which the spirit of the cities of the modern world would be floating in the air over this artificial hill, as an abstract foliage. There will be pavilions, benches, artificial interactive led lighting. We aim at complexity and a kind of 'conversation', in which the lighting responds to impulses generated by human movement. Then there is the challenge of choosing vegetation that completes the whole and also changes with the year. We wanted to give the park an appearance that in some way refers to how an industrialized city deals with its own problems.

TN: Your student friend, now Professor Eeva Pelkonen of Yale, said in an interview that no remarkable contemporary architecture can be found in today's Finland. Do you agree?

MK: We must remember that there are fewer than 3000 qualified architects in Finland. Numerically, it is a small profession. The recession of the early 1990s created a situation in which everything mattered more than the actual creation of architecture. Clients are more interested in details like the size of the offices, than in creating something new and maybe innovative. Finnish architects do have potential, for sure, both the established and younger ones. But clients, politicians and bureaucrats are running the show now and the thickness of the drawn line means a lot more than the essence of the line! Those who studied in the 1980s and '90s are theoretically and practically competent. The reality is that even in competitions people are more or less prepared to provide the kind of ideas they think are expected of them. Architecture that is the result of careerist calculation is generally lacking in brilliance.

TN: How about the teachers? Don't we have very competent individuals teaching in our schools?

MK: I don't want to question anybody's competence, far from it! But in Finland there is a lack of public discussion. There is virtually no recognition of architecture or architectural criticism in our key media. It is a small country. Finnish architecture professors are too cautious, they do not say things out loud in public. They have a state salary, which represents security, and a private practice on the side. So they play it safe. Nobody wants to rock the boat and jeopardize future commissions. Criticism of the status quo is expressed almost only at private parties, late at night. All very hush-hush.

TN: Even though the profession is competitive, you keep in close touch with some colleagues and have long talks with them, for instance after badminton or a sauna and a few cigars?

MK: Yes, of course. I greatly appreciate being together and talking with people like Juha Ilonen, Pekka Harni or Toni Pelto and Anu Leinonen, and then we have good friends in Paris like Kirsi and Olivier Mas and Axel Sowa, and so on. I like people who continue to believe in quality architecture and environment. And, most of all, in the essence of the line. ←

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← **ASPLUND STOCKHOLM LIBRARY (2007, EQUAL THIRD PRIZE)**
 The design for the Asplund Stockholm City Library in Sweden shared third prize in an open international competition in 2007 and was the first choice of Sweden's leading architecture magazine ARKITEKTUR. The building has a multi-colored facade evoking books on a bookshelf. The central hall/reading room is top-lit by a giant perforated concrete dome.



↑ **INFILL PLAN FOR A 1970S HOUSING ESTATE, ESPOO (2006)**
 Commissioned by housing developer VVO, the plan showed that it would be possible to realize new buildings and to improve parking within the existing structure.

→ **ALAKIVI ENVIRONMENTAL ART PARK, HELSINKI (2000)**
 This design, which won an invited competition, is currently under construction. It consists of an earthwork 20 metres high and some 120 metres in diameter. Spiralling around the hill to the top is a pathway lined with steel-framed pavilions containing photographic images of Paris and New York printed on glass shields and illuminated by RGD led lights. There will also be state-of-the-art interactive light installations and music.

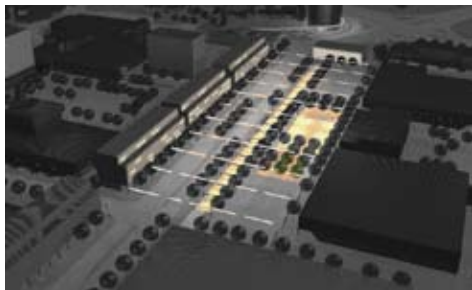


↑ **FUTURE VISION FOR VANAJA-KANTOLA (2006-)**
 Commissioned by the city of Hämeenlinna, the purpose of this future vision was to suggest new and different ideas for living, working, recreation and transport in a new district close to the old city centre. More detailed city planning is in progress.



← **INFILL PLAN FOR A HOUSING ESTATE IN KOSKELA, HELSINKI (2002)**
 The plan commissioned by the City of Helsinki in 2002 proposes using land now occupied by street-level parking for a serpentine wall of housing that would give a fresh, contemporary character to an area of post-war apartment buildings. More detailed planning of the southern and northern parts of the area are still in progress.

→ **RAISIO CITY CENTRE (2000)**
 City plan and idea for light square. The Raisio Centre with its light installations was later realized according to the guidelines and ideas developed in this complex city planning process.



**Work by
 Mauri Korkka**