

CONSERVATION AND REDEVELOPMENT ON THE POSTWAR SUBURBS IN HELSINKI

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(Received October 2, 2007)

Abstract

The postwar suburbs built from the 1950's to the 1970's is one type of modern cultural heritages and the time has now come for such places to be examined for large-scale improvement. In this paper, I studied three postwar suburbs in Helsinki: Olympiakyla, Maunula and Pihlajamäki, and outlined the history of each, its characteristics, present situation, and conservation and redevelopment plan. The process of redevelopment, in keeping with the areas' value as cultural property, has been carried out gradually in Helsinki. First of all, a detailed investigation and publication of its results are carried out and specialists exchange information with inhabitants. A redevelopment plan is then drawn up through discussion.

1. Introduction

Finland was founded in 1917, making it a relatively young state. In other words, the identity as a state is in the twentieth century, the age of modernism. Finland was one of the leading protagonists of the modern movement, so that now many of her buildings and industrial properties from that age are considered to be the important cultural heritage. Planned suburbs built in rational way in a modernist style are thought of as part of the cultural heritage of Finland. Development was carried out in the 1940's, especially in Helsinki; it was a key policy of this young state to create a good living environment for its citizens. After the confusion and damage of the Second World War, new suburbs were built from the 1950's. This paper studies the postwar suburbs in Helsinki, their characteristics, value as cultural properties, and how they are being redeveloped today.

2. History of Helsinki and development of housing areas

In 1809, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia. In 1812, the Russian emperor, who ruled Finland at that time, moved the capital from Turku to Helsinki. The old capital Turku was close to Sweden. A townscape suitable for the capital was constructed for the Russian emperor, as Helsinki was the entrance port to Europe from Russia.

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Finland rode the whirlwind of the Russian revolution and became independent in 1917. Housing demand hastened after independence, and to meet this housing areas were extended from the central part to the suburbs. Puu Kapyla Housing Area, which was developed in the first half of the 1920's, is considered the ideal suburban housing area today. In the 1940's, slab block apartment buildings were built even in the suburbs. It was the age of modernism, and housing suitable for a modern life style was sought. Olympiakyla Housing Area is one of the representative examples of this period¹⁾.

Kit houses were built to meet a shortage of houses through the whole country after the Second World War. The construction of large-scale suburbs took on momentum in the 1950's. The Finns worked in consort with the 'new town' construction movement in England and USA at the same time²⁾.

In the 1960's, large-scale suburbs using industrial materials were built. Though they were very innovative, the experimental materials and technology were not really suitable for the severe climate of Finland. The development of the suburbs has been continuing from the 1970's until now. Each town represents the spirit of the age.

Finland joined the EU in 1995. It is trying to cultivate close relations with East Europe and the Baltic States in order to establish a position as the capital of Northern Europe. While Helsinki is still continuing its expansion to the outskirts and new towns are developed³⁾, the postwar suburbs, old 'new towns' are now about fifty years of age. In terms of cultural heritage, they may be quite young. But it is long enough for there to be a need for renovation. Today, the city of Helsinki recognizes their value as cultural properties, and improvement and redevelopment projects are based on that perception.

3. Postwar suburbs in Helsinki and their present condition

In this section, we will look at three interesting suburbs in Helsinki and mention the history of each, the characteristics of the area, and present condition.

3.1 Olympiakyla (Olympic village)

Strictly speaking, this housing area is not a postwar suburb. As the name indicates, it is an area, which was planned for athletes' accommodation during the Olympic Games scheduled for 1940. The Games were canceled because of the War, and actually held in 1952. The planning and construction of Olympiakyla began in 1938, and its first phase was finished in 1940. Development continued after the war and was completed in 1948. The architect Hilding Ekelund is known as a designer of high-quality domestic buildings⁴⁾. He was a chief city architect for Helsinki from 1941 to 1949. Looking at a floor plan of the apartment buildings in Olympiakyla, we notice the delicate consideration of outside space vis-à-vis the architecture. The site plan of this area was made to conform to the natural, gently sloping geographical features, and the outside space was skillfully designed. Though this kind of arrangement of apartment buildings is called 'open type', the open space between the blocks is in fact a protected space like a courtyard of the 'enclosure type' arrangement.⁵⁾

Olympiakyla has already been recognized as a meaningful historical area, because these Olympic facilities, including the housing area, are certainly one of the most important modern architectural sites in Finland⁶⁾. A detailed investigation will show the history and



Fig. 1 Olympiakyla

characteristics of the area, fundamental information about the buildings, and their evaluation. At present, Helsinki City Planning Department is making the guidelines for preserving this area.

3.2 Maunula

Maunula is the first large-scale suburb in postwar Helsinki. Hilding Ekelund also designed Sahanmaki area in Maunula. This area was built in two parts between 1951 and 1956. Twenty-two terraced houses were constructed in the first phase, and four angular point blocks of four to five storey made from slab blocks in the second⁷⁾. They are skillfully arranged, in accordance with the geographical features. The terraced houses are fitted in to the slope and each has a comparatively large individual garden. As the apartments in the point blocks are built spirally around a central staircase, each flat has its own entrance at its own level, like a detached house. Today, Sahanmaki area is a mature town with lots of vegetation. SAFA, the Finnish Association of Architects, has commented, 'the Sahanmaki residential area is indeed one of the best realizations of neighborhood building in Finland'⁸⁾, and this area is registered as a DOCOMOMO registered site⁹⁾.

Another area in Maunula was designed by Virjo Revell in the 1950's. It has also reached its renovation time. The group of buildings in this area consists of apartment buildings, a day-care centre and a sauna building. Though the apartment types and structures varied from one construction phase to another, the red brick outer walls are unifying features, together with



Fig. 2 Sahanmaki area in Maunula

industrial concrete balcony elements.¹⁰⁾

An opening is the part that is damaged most easily. Original wooden frames are often replaced with industrial window sashes made of metal at the time of the improvement. The repairs of apartment buildings began in 2003. When some buildings were repaired, the persons in charge of the city planning department and city museum noticed that the overall impression had changed greatly. Before repairing the rest of them, the architect who had actually designed them, the persons in charge of city of Helsinki, and the representatives of the local community discussed how to improve these apartment buildings in keeping with their value as historical buildings. Sebastian Lönnqvist, who has been the supervising architect since 2004, carefully repaired flats to be suitable for a modern life-style. He worked to keep the original appearance as much as possible. As he leaves former fittings on the outside of openings, the overall impression is the same as ever. The concrete balcony elements are painted to recreate the original feel and tone as closely as possible. On the entrance doors to the common stairways, he reviewed the damaged condition of the fittings, and what could still be used was repaired. Some had to be reproduced after the original design. Residents often want to renovate the fittings in flats, and the floor plan has to be changed accordingly. Present day life is very different from the life of fifty years ago, and the use of floor space has also changed. For example, inhabitants want a larger kitchen with a washing machine and a big refrigerator. It does not make sense that inhabitants should have to bear inconvenience just because they live in a historical building. On the other hand, such flats of the 1950's should be preserved as cultural property. The architect decided to remodel most of the flats to match present requirements, but a few flats, named 'heritage flats', kept to the original design and fittings. This tenacious attitude to design is important in preserving the heritage.



Fig. 3 Repaired buildings designed by V.Revell

There was a public sauna as the common facilities of the area, and the building is a landmark at the crossing in the center of this suburb. Though it is still there even now, it no longer functions as a sauna. The restoration of the signboard was done in accordance with the original period design. Though the signboard says 'sauna', this building is presently used as an office.

3.3 Pihlajamäki

Pihlajamäki was the first large-scale suburb built in the 1960's, and the youngest DOCOMOMO registered area in Finland¹¹⁾. It was a first attempt at using industrial products on a large scale, and is truly experimental in various ways. The photograph taken just after

its completion is very impressive: a landscape with tower blocks on the top of a hill surrounded by very long lamellar blocks, a good embodiment of the period.

As the photograph taken during construction shows, unified panel walls with insulation were used. The use of industrial products is one of the features of postwar architecture. But, they were not adequate for the severe climate of Helsinki, and various problems arose. During past repair

works, another cladding was added to the original panel walls, so that their overall appearance has changed. Although natural materials, such as timber and stone, weather naturally and take on a tasteful patina, industrial materials tend to become dirty and ugly.

Lifts were not installed in the four-storey lamellar apartment buildings at the time of their completion. The addition of lifts is indispensable, even for the historical buildings, because inhabitants get older and the criteria for a barrier-free society get more demanding. In 2002, residents reached an agreement on the addition of lifts to the apartment buildings. Changes in appearance have resulted. The emphatic horizontal lines, composed of continuous horizontal windows, and the panel walls are the most important characteristics of the elevation of such buildings. Addition of vertical elements cut the horizontal lines, and changes the overall impression of the building for the worse. The city planning department which noticed this change intended to preserve the value of Pihlajamäki as a DOCOMOMO registered site, so began investigating there immediately¹²⁾. The master plan of this area was revised after this investigation in 2007. How to treat existing buildings was specified minutely in the master plan. As for the buildings built in the 1960's at Pihlajamäki, most of them are classified as

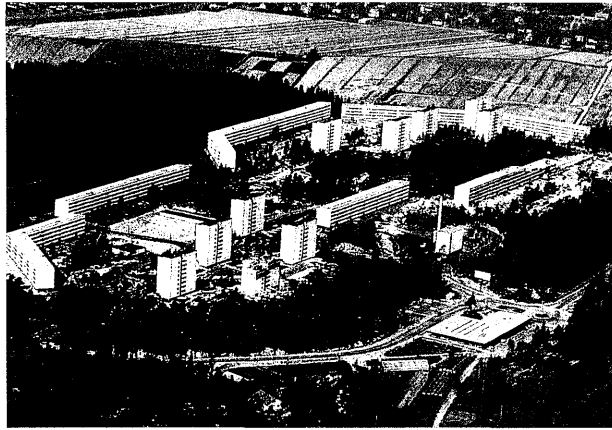


Fig. 4 Aerial view of Pihlajamäki in the 1960's

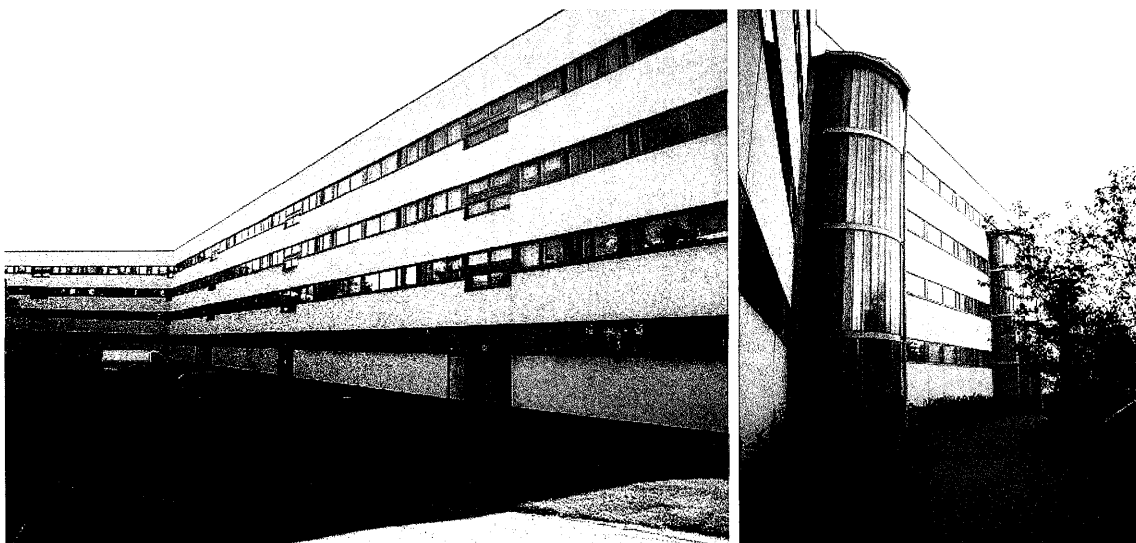


Fig. 5 Preserved original elevation additional parts



Fig. 6 Shopping Centre in Pihlajamäki

important buildings, and extension or remodeling which results in big changes to their elevations can no longer be authorized.

Helsinki city is trying to energize this area by adding new facilities while taking care not to reduce the value as a DOCOMOMO registered site. One project puts new terraced houses into the vacant lots foreused as parking. Also, the deserted shopping centre will be remodeled. The original part, which was designed by a famous Finnish architect, Heikki Siren, will be preserved, an extension will be removed, and a daring new housing complex will be constructed.

4. How to preserve postwar suburbs as cultural properties in Helsinki

As mentioned above, Finland is a state that was born in the twentieth century, and its national identity is in the modern movement begun in the 1920's. Alvar Aalto is a world-famous Finnish architect: a Building Protection Act protects all his works as cultural properties, even those constructed in the 1970's. Architects in those days, including Aalto, worked to realize projects for Helsinki's suburbs¹³⁾. Today, some areas are recognized as national heritage sites. Suburbs built about forty years ago have many problems both in Helsinki as well as in Japan. For example, residents are getting older, shopping centres are sleepy and not attractive to young people, and so on. The present situation of Pihlajamäki in Helsinki may be contrasted with that of Senri New Town in Osaka. Senri New Town is now considered to be 'decrepit', although not mature, and has been redeveloped without an investigation.

I will now look at some ways of preserving and redeveloping the recent cultural heritage of Helsinki.

4.1 Historical investigation and publishing

Before redevelopment, there is first of all a historical investigation. Specialists on both architectural history and architectural preservation work for the city planning department and are part of a team, together with experts from the City Museum or the National Board of

Antiquities. The required background information has already been researched, because Helsinki City has a comprehensive record of its land and buildings. They collect related materials at the time of planning and construction, and examine the main concept of the design and its value. Through field investigations, they study the physical characteristics of the area and its buildings. Though investigations of traditional pre-modern towns have become very popular in Japan, there is little historical investigation on the modern period, especially of postwar suburbs. Results from such investigations and assessments by specialists are published as reports as soon as possible¹⁴⁾ and put in the public library as well so that all the people who are interested can access them easily. All decisions made concerning city planning, such as changing a master plan, will then be made based on this.

4.2 Neighborhood project

City of Helsinki is trying to invigorate the Pihlajamäki area with 'neighborhood projects'¹⁵⁾. These were started in 1996 by the Helsinki City Board to promote renovation work. Such projects are effected through cooperation between the city's administrative sectors. The purpose of such projects is to launch and coordinate neighborhood development and to find cooperation partners. For redevelopment of an area, not only the construction of new buildings, but also the establishment of new activities for residents is important. There would be a local area center, base for many activities, convened there by both specialists and by the residents themselves.

This project started ten years ago, and, during this period, the participants made an architectural guide map and some postcards so that many people could understand the charm of the area and its buildings. Specialists on architecture and urban planning sometimes visit the elementary school in the area and teach children and their parents about the buildings as cultural heritage. Such activities make them have an interest in the area and recognize its value. When residents understand the value of their area, it is very easy to preserve it. City of Helsinki also proposes a 'living museum' of the 1960's, with the revision of the town plan of this area. If we take a walk along the 'cultural path of the 1960's', we can see and recognize all typical types of apartment buildings designed in this period.

One of the key factors affecting the attractiveness of neighborhoods is the condition of the building stock. Buildings require constant maintenance and regular renovation in order to retain their value. The neighborhood project supports the preparation of repair guidelines to prevent repair measures from conflicting. Pihlajamäki is one of the pilot neighborhoods and the project team drew up it in line with an investigation. This guideline describes original condition, present condition, a recommended repair plan and an alternative repair plan for every constituent part. When there is a technical defect in the first, people may not be able to return the property to its original condition; and sometimes an economical reason will not allow them to realize it. If residents have several options, adaptation for present day life becomes easier and the conservation of the historical buildings goes ahead at the same time with minimum difficulty.

A color sample at the time of construction was recently discovered in a collection of documents¹⁶⁾. The original colors are easy to lose, due to repeated painting at renovation. The project team also made a set of guidelines about color, and if a resident has an interest in it, he/she can easily restore their home to the original color.

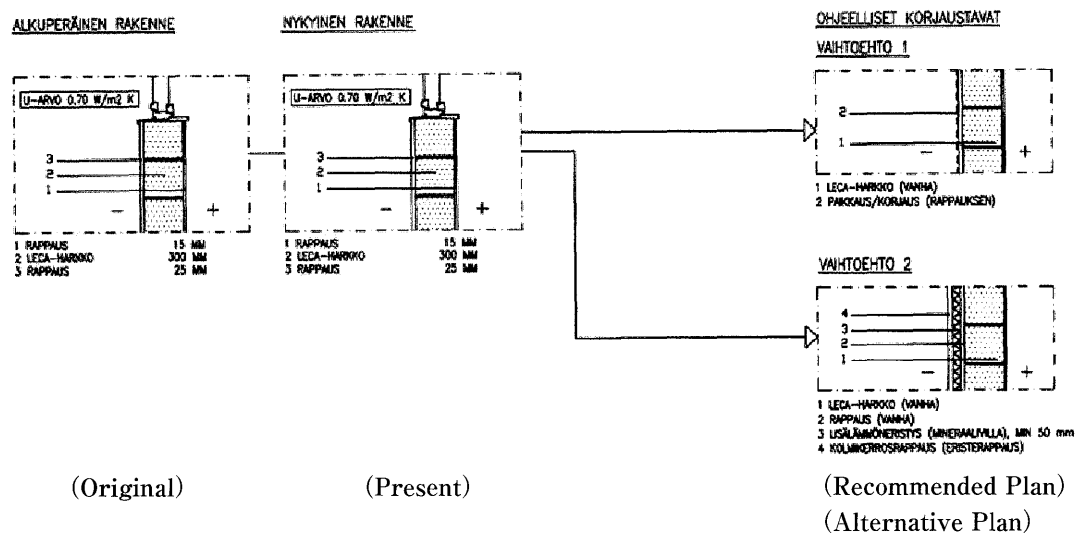


Fig. 7 Repair guidelines for outer wall

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed three postwar suburbs in Helsinki and described its history, characteristics and present situation. The building stock of the suburbs in Helsinki reflects the typical housing architecture of its time, and the layering of different decades forms part of the richness and charm of the urban environment. Finnish people have a clear idea of the value of modern heritage, but they also seek newness and comfort in their houses. As the suburbs mentioned here are comparatively young and are still living heritage, their value should be maintained while residents continue to live there.

Before redevelopment, detailed investigations are always carried out, and results and assessment are published. If needed, a project team is organized to ensure a smooth redevelopment. Such teams might make a set of guidelines for repair and suggest some alternative repair plans with respect to the original plan.

Frankly speaking, at first sight it is difficult to find merit in the appearance of the modern box-like buildings in Pihlajamäki. But when one knows their historical background and position in history, one's impression of it will change completely and one will realize its value. To make a guide map and to host many events with residents are important activities in order to promote the area in terms of modern heritage.

Few buildings from the 1960's are recognized as cultural properties in Japan, although they may become so in the future. Many are demolished without discussion or investigation. The process for preserving and redeveloping modern heritage in Helsinki is a useful reference for condition of Japan's modern heritage.

This research was supported by Kansai University's Overseas Research Program for the year of 2004.

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