Craft, Ornament and its Meaning in Finnish Architecture around 1900

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The emotive associations between traditional craft and nationhood are well established in the literature of the craft revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What is apparent, voiced and unvoiced, in collected studies across the international Art and Crafts movement is the degree to which the revival of local crafts was shaped by internationally circulating ideas regarding their value and potential for meaning.

In this article I will consider the manifestation of craft in Finnish architecture around 1900. I will look at the interaction between the international or universal and the local and national in relation to thinking on the craft revival. A consideration of the application of craft revival thinking in architectural practice will allow me to explore the meanings expressed through architectural ornament, as parts of façades or interiors, that sought to embed the idea of craftsmanship in modern building. These meanings can be understood to extend beyond those of national identity, though around 1900 this was often part of what ornament was expected to do. The presence of crafted ornament and the forms it took also addressed wider concerns – triggered by the transformation of modern architecture and the urban environment – through the articulation of humanistic values associated with hand-crafts and hand-making. I aim to nuance emphasis on the reconnection to the local/national heritage by means of a wider discussion of what meanings were served by the insertion of craft into architecture.

The craft revival can be broadly defined as the pan-European movement to research and preserve traditional crafts, as means of reviving and restoring value in contemporary art and design. In the arena of architecture, this took the form of research into vernacular architectural traditions and in the use of other crafts.
techniques, materials, forms or ornament derived from these traditions within contemporary architectural ornament. This later dimension is recognisable in projects that might be labelled as Arts and Crafts or National Romantic, but it also fostered a broader engagement with the meaning and value of materials and techniques that permeated work labelled Art Nouveau and later Modernism. The search for what was sometimes called a new style and sometimes called a new language of ornament overlapped with these efforts because ornament was often the most conspicuous and replicable element of the craft traditions that formed the basis of the new approaches to architecture.

The importance of craft traditions in the development of new architectural approaches around 1900 has been explored by many scholars of Art Nouveau and National Romanticism, both inside and outside Finland. My work is indebted to the work of Finnish scholars, such as Ritva Wäre and Pekka Korvenmaa, whose work in the 1990s charted the importance of such craft revivals, but also pointed out the limits of their impact and their interweaving with other international sources and influences.¹ Their work connects to efforts to explore Finnish architectural history of the late-19th century, as a period during which the Finnish architectural profession emerged and much of its culture was forged.² Outside of Finland, a number of scholars, such as Jeremy Howards and Nicola Gordon Bowe, explored the transnational dimensions of these movements in studies of European Art Nouveau, National Romanticism and Arts and Crafts.³ My work is also in debt to a number of works focused on Central European architecture that addressed the efforts of architects of this period to articulate new identities through architectural ornament.⁴

The current article builds on these earlier works to home in, not just on comparative examples of craft revivals across Europe, but on the means by which these revivals operated transnationally and mechanisms of translation from one region to another and then from one medium to another in design practice. As well as drawing on pan-European material, the article focuses on a set of Finnish case studies. Scholarship on late-19th and early-20th century Finnish architecture has been particularly rich compared to many other European countries, in part because of the importance of the period within Finnish art historiography as a ‘golden age’ and a reflection of the role that Finland’s worldwide

success as a design nation plays in contemporary national consciousness. The result has been a nuanced scholarly field and understanding of the development of educational culture, architectural discourse and professional organisations and the important role of the past and disciplines such as history and archaeology in architectural debates and practice in this period.5

The work presented here has its origins in my PhD project, undertaken in the early 2000s, which started out as a transnational study of Baltic urban architecture and was whittled down over time to an individual architect, Vilho Penttilä (1868–1918), and the architecture of Finnish financial institutions.6 This choice was not an arbitrary one. The forms taken by urban architecture were rapidly evolving, as were the identities they were required to represent. Financial institutions were in a small group of clients with the means to commission large-scale urban buildings, to occupy conspicuous downtown plots and make their choices freely among the architects and styles available. The buildings executed under their auspices were frequently the most lavish and high-status buildings in town, with the exception of churches and town halls. They gave architects a comparably free hand in executing their visions of what urban architecture should look like, unfettered by financial constraints. They were public-facing buildings that sought to address a wide audience of the institutions’ potential customers.

Penttilä was the architect of choice for the Kansallis Osake Pankki (National Share Bank) from the mid-1890s until the hiatus of the First World War and his death in Finland’s Civil War. He was, simultaneously, the Editor of Suomen Teollisuuslehti (The Finnish Industry Gazette) and its various design supplements, and a prominent voice in the first decades of Finnish-language architectural discourse. This allowed me to create a bridge between my interest in architectural practice and architectural discourse. In this manner I am again in debt to Ritva Wäre’s groundbreaking work. The case studies within this chapter, the Helsinki head office of the National Share Bank (1889–91), the Lundqvist Commercial Building, the Pohjola Building and the Viipuri National Share Bank (all 1901), were all buildings I encountered over the course of my doctoral research. An additional advantage of studying prominent urban buildings has been that I have later been able to extend my interest in architectural discourse beyond the specialist architectural Press to consider opinions in the general

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Press. Though the authors were often the same architect-critics who wrote for the architectural Press, their building reviews in the general Press reveal a broader engagement with architectural discourse and argue in favour of a more widely informed audience addressed by these buildings.

This article, therefore, reflects on the presence of this audience. It explores the ramifications of an architectural culture addressing a wider culture shaped by the increased availability of the printed word and the printed image. The audience addressed by Finnish architects was literate and also visually literate. The language of ornament was a construction of European scholarship, but it was also real and manifest in the expanding realm of visual material available. The role of ornament in architecture went beyond aesthetic efforts to make a building look pleasing. Ornament was understood to reflect underlying cultural meanings and allegiances. Ornament had acquired that meaning and an audience who recognised it had been created over the 19th century by means of the circulating discourse of printed texts and images.

An additional and important dimension of ornament within architecture was one that went beyond the iconography of signs and symbols. It also expressed the investment of care and effort in a building through allusions to the labour and skill manifest in handcrafted elements and this was important in addressing anxieties about meaning and value in modern architecture by reinserting a human dimension. The English critic John Ruskin was prominent in this discourse. His ideas were influential across Europe in the latter decades of the 19th century and were widely translated and discussed. Ruskin's theories were discussed in European arts journals and selections from the works of Ruskin were published in translation in German in 1896, Swedish in 1897 and Russian in 1900.

The period around 1900 was marked by extensive urban building and the rapid uptake of new architectural technologies that radically changed the nature of the architectural fabric. Finnish towns and cities were transformed, over the matter of a few decades, from a built infrastructure of one- and two-storey wooden buildings, to four- and five-storey brick and render buildings. Bertel Jung, writing in Teknikern (The Technician) in 1901 about the recent architectural development of central Helsinki, stated that new buildings had ‘even made Helsinki a “modern

European” city”. These new buildings were a source of pride, as were the central heating systems, fire-safety technologies, iron structural elements, gas lighting and, latterly, the electricity and elevators that began to appear. Finnish architectural reviews of the period, in both the professional and general Press, invariably made note of these technological advances. The circulation of international architectural journalism and the increased prevalence of photographic reproductions of architecture revealed the extent to which Finnish architecture was increasingly similar to architecture elsewhere.

This development was not unique to Finland. The building boom of the late 19th century saw cities expand at an unprecedented rate across the world. In Europe and America, architectural culture was increasingly international, as reviews and images of new buildings could circulate internationally in the design Press within months of completion. Incidentally, the international building boom, with its demand for timber scaffolding, directly contributed to Finnish prosperity as a major exporter of timber. The rapidity of this development and the transformation of the built environment necessarily had a destabilising effect. New architectural technologies could not be ignored. Awareness of international developments was a point of pride across the emerging profession of architect, as it was across many professions. The nation’s architecture should aspire to be as functional, sound, technologically advanced and aesthetically pleasing as that of any other nation. At the same time, this threw up a problem of distinction. If it was all these things, was it still Finnish? Architecture, as both a technology and an art, was meant to meet universal modern needs that, barring climatic conditions, did not vary substantially from country to country. At the same time, it was understood to reflect national culture. Architectural ornament, applied to exterior and interior surfaces, were the means by which architects mediated these competing objectives.

The transnational nature of craft revival discourse

The apparently paradoxical relationship between the universal and the nationally specific in architecture is initially illustrated by a comparison of Abbe Laugier’s frontispiece depicting the primitive hut from his Essai sur l’Architecture, of 1755 (Fig. 1),
Fig. 1. Charles Eisen, Frontispiece for Marc-Antoine Laugier’s book *Essai sur l’Architecture*, Paris, 1755
and a plate from a survey of the buildings of the Finnish peoples (1887, Fig. 2), by the ethnographer Axel Olai Heikel (1851–1924). The primitive hut image serves to suggest the universal origins of all architecture: man’s need for shelter. The form of the hut is presented as a response to the nature of the materials used: wood. The pillars are formed by the upright, still-living trunks of trees. The pitched roof, erected to bridge the two rows of trees, is presented as that first simple step, to augment the natural shelter they provide. In this way, the image reflects the treatise that architecture is, at its roots, a response to needs and to means. At the same time, Laugier’s hut is also presented as the precursor to the column and lintel system of Greek architecture. The female figure, who rests upon a heap of ruined stone capitals and lintels,
directs the *putti* (the reader) to understand the relationship between the hut and the ruins. This secondary allusion suggests the classical as the universally appropriate aesthetic language with which to clothe rational architecture.

Heikel’s study, in contrast, is focused very much on the specific. It was based on an extensive survey expedition, collecting evidence of the buildings and material culture of the peoples of the Finnic language group, dispersed across the Grand Duchy, the Karelian Isthmus and the Volga region. The connection between language, people and architecture can be aligned with the spread of theories of nationhood into the architectural domain through the late 18th and into the 19th century. Such thinking had come to predominate by the end of the 19th century. The notion that the form people gave to the buildings and objects they made was an expression of their national character had become an orthodoxy.

Heikel’s expedition and much of the intellectual culture of the movement pursuing the advancement of Finnish-speaking Finns and Finnic culture, known as Fennomania, was heavily influenced by definitions of Finnish identity bound up in philological research into the Finnish language. Philological researchers earlier in the 19th century had used comparative linguistics to trace relationships between Finnish dialects, as spoken across the Grand Duchy and the languages of various peoples, most notably the Estonians and Karelians, to the East.

Heikel’s study into building types was a conceptual extrapolation from language-kinship to cultural-kinship and mirrored a similar approach in archaeology.

The histories of craft and craft revival discourse written in the 19th century were invariably discussed in terms of national specificity, yet the scholarly discourse on the craft was international. Heikel’s work was frequently published in German and occasionally in French in order to reach non-Finnish audiences. The transnational character of this discourse can be illustrated by way of the following case study, which traces resonances between different writers over time and across language barriers. Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857) was a Norwegian landscape painter of the early 19th century. He was also an antiquarian and passionate about the preservation of Norway’s art and archaeological heritage. In 1837, he published an illustrated book on Norway’s early wooden architecture: *Monuments of Highly*...
Developed Wooden Architecture from the Earliest Centuries in Norwegian Rural Areas. The book was published in German by a publisher in Dresden, the city where Dahl spent most of his life. Dahl’s lithographs illustrating Norwegian churches were also captioned in German and French (Fig. 3). This again revealed the assumption of addressing an international scholarly community, beyond Norway, with this study of Norwegian craft.

The same image of Borgund Church was reproduced 45 years later in a textbook on architectural history by the German architect and professor at the Munich Technical University, Rudolf Gottgetreu (1821–90). It appeared in the section on wooden architecture, ‘The Work of the Carpenter’, in which Gottgetreu outlined the origins of wooden architecture in the meanest and most ancient form of shelter. The chapter took readers through a narrative of the development of wooden architecture derived from...
from biblical and classical sources, such as the Temple of Solomon and Caesar’s bridge over the Rhine – legendary architecture with pan-European relevance. His study concluded with a representation on notable contemporary wooden, vernacular architecture focused on national crafts, catalogued by their most distinct features and attributes.

In ‘The Work of the Carpenter’, Gottgetreu cited what he considered the most significant texts in this field: Johan Christian Dahl’s aforementioned 1837 book; E.G. von Gladbach, Die Holz-Architektur der Schweiz, Zurich 1867; Viollet-le-Duc, L’art Russe: Ses origines, ses éléments constitutifs, son apogée son avenir, Paris, 1877 and Georg von Moller, Denkmäler der deutschen Baukunst, Darmstadt, 1845. This offers just a small taste of the wider field of scholarly publishing on wooden architecture, as a subsection of the emerging disciplines of art history and craft studies.

Gottgetreu’s book was, in turn, the primary source for a long article in the Suomen Teollisuuslehti (Finnish Industry Gazette) on the ‘History of Building in Wood’ by the Editor and most consistent proponent of the need for a Finnish style, the architect Vilho Penttilä.21 Though it was not accompanied by illustrations, the content of the article substantially reproduced the structure and gist of Gottgetreu’s section on wooden construction. This exemplifies the process by which thinking on craft architecture and its subsequent relationship to craft revival design was spread across Europe. In this case, Gottgetreu reading Dahl and Penttilä reading Gottgetreu.

Penttilä echoes Gottgetreu’s taxonomical emphasis on nationally distinct forms and features. The traditional vernacular architecture of each nation was praised for the sophistication of its construction methods and richness of its ornament. What was particularly highlighted were the things that made each regional tradition particular. In the case of Norway, Penttilä echoes Gottgetreu in emphasising the covered veranda around the outer walls of the stave church, as a locally developed form evolved to provide the congregation with shelter before and after services: a local solution to a local problem and the essence of the creativity of a nation. The multi-part article concludes with a plea that such a distinctive national tradition of wooden architecture be found in Finland.

The translation of Finnish craft discourse into contemporary design

It was in hope of this that Finnish craft material became the focus of interest for architects in the 1890s. Ritva Wäre’s research has shown that a craft revival, in the sense of a search for a Finnish Style, was relatively limited in its scope and coherence. At the same time, amongst a small set of dedicated Fennomane designers, such as Penttilä, it flowered in a few projects, as well as in the pages of the *Finnish Industry Gazette*. Its clearest manifestation is in the series of competitions for furniture in a Finnish Style held during the 1890s. The first competition, organised in 1894...
by the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts, illustrates this (Fig. 4). It is interesting to note that two of the seven jury members were ethnologists – Theodor Schvindt (1851–1917) and Heikel – both of whom were members of the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts. Both of them also prefaced their ethnographic publications with expressions of hope that the material they presented would be of use to contemporary makers.

The geometric patterns in Sucksdorff’s (1866–1952) first-prize-winning entry can be read as an interpretation of the patterns of Finnish textiles collected by the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts and those studied and published by Schvindt. They can simultaneously be seen to make reference to the forms and ornament of Finnic material culture, as studied by Heikel, and as directly studied by Sucksdorff during his own expedition to Karelia. The competition jury clearly thought so, commenting that ‘both the main points of the design and the decoration feel authentic and in accordance with a Finnish style’.

What is indicated in this example is that a clear relationship had already been established between ethnographic material and ornament in contemporary design. At some point prior to the 1890s certain forms, techniques and materials came to be regarded as a repository of ideas of national identity and sufficiently familiar to the public to be able to communicate these ideas. For the idea of a Finnish Style to work at all, i.e. for certain patterns, forms, materials, colours and so on to be associated with the idea of Finnishness in the minds of the public, there had to have been an ongoing, publicly available discourse to build up such associations. Experiments with the revival of vernacular crafts in the 1890s rested on such established connotations, so that it was possible for designers, jurors and the public to identify or recognise certain design features as ‘Finnish’ in some way. This discourse was based around a particular body of source material: Finnish craft and archaeological artefacts, which had been collected and made available in public or semi-public collections and disseminated through a range of print media. These forms were echoed and reproduced in various forms through the 1880s and 1890s, resulting in a process of accumulated meaning, so that the craft-derived geometric patterns came to stand metonymically for Finnish culture.
One source for this material were the illustrated publications of the various societies that concerned themselves with Finnish material culture. The Finnish Literature Society, The Finno-Ugrian Society, the Friends of Finnish Handicrafts and the Society for Finnish Antiquities all produced illustrated books on Finnish archaeology, ethnography and vernacular crafts, architecture and textiles. Additionally, this material was disseminated by means of shorter articles in newspapers, journals and magazines, aimed at the wider, literate Finnish-speaking population.

An early example of the transposition of meaning from vernacular sources to contemporary design can be seen in the design of bonds for the National Share Bank in 1889 (Fig. 5). The bond, designed by Sigfrid August Keinänen (1841–1914), was issued for the launch of the new bank, which had been founded to provide financial services in Finnish to combat Swedish-language economic hegemony. The bond was framed with an ornamental border of geometric forms suggestive of carved posts and reminiscent of Karelian carved grave posts or barge boards. The roots of the imagery in ethnographic and archaeological
scholarship reflect the role that visions of the past had in constituting both present and future identity in this period.

The directors of the National Share Bank sought to communicate their vision for the future of the institution and the nation and this vision incorporated both tradition and modernity. The bond itself, as a document, was a manifestation of a thoroughly modern nation-building, economic enterprise. This point is significant in reminding us that the use of newly-emerging national imagery based on ethnographic sources was not intrinsically anti-modern. A sense of the past was a vital component in the construction and articulation of hopes and plans for the future, making the past a central element in the construction of modernity. To conceive of cultural artefacts and practices as traditional, as rooted in some timeless, pre-modern space, implicitly acknowledges an awareness of being part of another time/space, a modern present that reflects back on the past. As Pertti Anttonen has said: ‘While modernity, according to the classic tenet, destroys tradition, it – epistemologically speaking – creates tradition and makes tradition a modern project.’

A further instance of the National Share Bank’s use of patterns recognised as Finnish can be found in the 1889–91 headquarters building in Helsinki by the architect Onni Tarjanne. The four-storey commercial building was executed in a Neo-Renaissance style, largely without clear national signifiers. However, the review in Päivälehti, the only Press review of the new building, tantalizingly notes: ‘The cornice mouldings of the ceiling are of original Finnish patterns, so that it is indicated to the visitor that he has arrived at a national institution...’ Sadly, no visual records of this interior exist that show this design feature with sufficient clarity to be analysed, but the review points to the existence again of patterns widely recognised as being Finnish in character.

We can ask what function these elements of ornament served. They made allusions to vernacular craft traditions, hand-carved wood or woven or embroidered ornament, translated into modern media: print or plaster moulding. This translation process did not disrupt the role they performed in articulating a visual link back from the space of the contemporary to the space of the largely timeless, national past, as constituted in nation-building, ethnographic discourse.
Despite the hopes of Heikel and Schvindt and the various competitions promoting a ‘Finnish Style’, the direct translation of vernacular forms and ornament into contemporary architecture was swiftly overtaken by alternative forms of expression. This was certainly not a reflection of a decline in Finnish national feeling. The unification policy of the Russian Tsar through the 1890s, which sought to dismantle the semi-autonomous status of the Grand Duchy of Finland, triggered widespread patriotic resistance among Finns. It is possible that Karelian forms, with their eastern associations, no longer aligned so well with the image of the Finnish nation that patriots wished to preserve and promote.

Certainly, the competition for the Finnish Pavilion, announced in 1898, for the Paris World’s Fair in 1900, stated that the pavilion should be given the appearance of stone. The announcement of the competition in Hufvudstadsbladet, the leading national, Swedish-language daily, commenting on the choice of stone over wood, observed that the Finnish style was the product of the imagination of certain architects and that, more importantly, it would be taken as Russian by the uninitiated, i.e. the rest of the world, due to similarities between the two.\(^3\) This would, of course, run directly counter to the aims behind the pavilion project, which sought to use it as a vehicle for making the plight of the Finnish national known to the world.

The extensive work of ethnographers and architects interested in exploring vernacular material did not evaporate entirely. Rather, the impetus behind the engagement with Finnish craft was absorbed into a broader trend concerned with the role of craft, ornament and materials in modern architecture.

**Craft revivals and new meanings in architecture**

Across Europe, the scope of the craft revival phenomenon suggests that it offered more than just the opportunity to imbue designs with a national stamp. Alongside its role as part of a national language of design, it functioned as a universal language, expressive of other values. The *fin-de-siècle* was a period searching for a way to reconcile the material and spiritual. There was a widespread desire to transcend the divide between the materialistic, progress-oriented, rationalism on the one hand and more ephemeral, spiritual values on the other. Through the 19th century there had been growing disquiet at the marginalisation

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\(^3\) ‘Den finska paviljongen vid världsutställningen’, *Hufvudstadsbladet* 168 (26 June 1898), 3.
of the latter portion of the human experience. Craft revivals offered a model for the reconciliation of function and the creative spirit. It also served as a means of reinserting the human and the authentic into a world of increasingly mechanised and mass production through its associations with individual, hand-making.

Already in the 19th century, research into crafts had placed significant emphasis on its intrinsic engagement with the functional, as well as the pursuit of beauty in everyday life. Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, in his *Art of Russia* (1877), noted the similarities in appearance between the architecture of different regions. He explained it on the basis of the supposed rational use of individual, hand-making.

... *it manifested in traditional timber constructions, the principles of which we also find on the slopes of the Himalayas, in Scandinavia, the Tyrol and Switzerland. The correspondence of these constructions, which for centuries have stood in parts of the globe separated from each other by vast spaces without direct communication between them, is certainly one of the most interesting to study in the history of art. The inhabitant of the Canton of Bern is hardly more familiar with the methods adopted by the Great Russians, than they have knowledge of high buildings in the mountain of the Himalayas and yet, if a fairy were to transport a Swiss chalet to the highlands of the Indus and a wooden house of the Kashmiri to Great Russia, the people there, so remote from each other, would scarcely notice the exchange.*

It is not my intention to confirm Le-Duc’s assertion of equivalence. What this quote illustrates is the widely held notion that craft forms from different times and places could be read as based on common principles of the rational use of available materials and responsiveness to local climatic and topographical conditions. This connects us back to Laugier’s primitive hut and the principle that the origins of architectural beauty lie in the synthesis of desired function and available materials.

Laugier’s primitive hut illustration performed another important function with resonances for our period of study: it seeks to make architecture legible. It is an image with a didactic function: to illustrate the relationship between the need for
shelter and the structure that provides it. It also communicates the theory of the (fantasy) origins of the columns and pediments of Greek architecture in the trunks of trees and branches thrown across to provide shelter, and this serves to explain the relationship between the more developed forms of classical architecture and its primary structural and functional principles. By looking back to these origins, Laugier evoked the ongoing presence of these principles that might have become obscured by later centuries of augmentation and elaboration but were, he argued, still there at the heart of classical architecture.36

The legibility of modern architecture had become a source of anxiety through the course of the 19th century, as it would continue to be up to the modern day. The development of modern architectural construction, the split between engineered core and the architectural façade, disrupted the relationship between visual expression and underlying structure. The suitability of one historical style over another was endlessly debated across Europe. The effective relationship of architectural construction, materials and ornament were increasingly considered essential to successful architecture.37 Though the principle was widely shared it was, in practice, hard to achieve. The new building technologies listed above did not come with a pre-established visual culture. As buildings became increasingly complex and innovative, expressing construction, function, ethos and identity became more challenging.

In wrestling with this modern problem, architectural theorists sought to reassert the fundamental principles at the root of modern architecture. Laugier’s visual analogue between nature and architecture can be seen to persist through the 19th century. In the writings of François-René de Chateaubriand in the 1800s, architecture is compared to the structural forms of trees:

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\text{The forests were the first temples of divinity and thus men acquired the first ideas of architecture. This art must, therefore, have varied according the climates. The Greeks turned the elegant Corinthian column, with its capital of foliage, after the model of a palm tree. (...) The forests of Gaul were, in their turn, introduced into the temples of our ancestors (...) everything in a Gothic church reminds you of the labyrinths of a wood.}^{38}\]
The relationship between structure (trunks and boughs) and ornament (leaves and flowers) is one that is echoed in the writings of Violette-le-Duc and his student and successor, Victor-Marie-Charles Ruprich-Robert. It also familiar from the writings of John Ruskin and other British Arts and Crafts writers.

Craft, ornament and Finnish architecture around 1900

Efforts along these lines can also be traced in Finnish-language architectural discourse. Penttilä attempted to distil received wisdom on the principles of architecture for Finnish-speaking readers in a long, two-part article, ‘On Beauty in Building’ in 1893. In this article, architecture is presented as an art, but at the same time an art bound to the logic of rational construction. He too uses the analogue of the plant:

Just as a plant germinates from the seed, grows, spreads its branches and flowers, so must an artistic building do also. The seed of an idea is sown in the imagination; it germinates and soaks up the elixir of life. It is planted as a seedling, to grow and flower at the end in the façade of the building. The building plan is the fixed core, the contents of which are to be made comprehensible to the senses by the clear forms of the external shape.

The quote reveals the way Penttilä’s writing enthusiastically segues between different ideas: the flowering plant as an analogue for creative thought and for the relationship of ornament to structure in architecture. The visual expression of load-bearing construction was one of the cardinal laws of architectural beauty, he stressed:

The upper part of the building, which also comprises the roof as a supported-element, exists in relationship to the form of the walls, which support it. The eye should not see them as carrying more weight than can be supported or vice versa. In the Greek column system such relationships attain their highest flowering.
In these two passages, we can see the long persistence of the twin ideals traced in Laugier’s primitive hut. The rapid development of architectural education and the architectural profession in Finland from the 1870s to the 1890s, lent itself to the simultaneous manifestation of old and new architectural thinking. Late 19th-century Finnish architectural culture was characterised by the persistence of anachronistic ideas, as shown in the work of Ville Lukkarinen. Alongside this, architects engaged with and adopted new ideas encountered on study trips abroad and through architectural print-discourse in Swedish, German, Russian and English. Different architects navigated their way through this new abundance of competing authorities in different ways. The absence of a firmly entrenched tradition facilitated a period of rapid innovation as different solutions were swiftly adopted and just as swiftly discarded.

Ornament, in the sense of the surface articulation of façades and interiors, played an integral part in architecture at the turn of the century, as the frequent allusions to the integral relationship of the flower to function of the plant as a whole attest. The very partial departure from the dominant classical idiom of the National Share Bank headquarters in Helsinki, represented by the small inclusion of elements of Finnish ornament, was swiftly overtaken around 1900 by a profusion of new forms. If we compare three further commercial buildings, all completed in 1901, we can consider what this diversification might mean. The Lundqvist Commercial Building, by the architect Selim Lindqvist, stood on the principal commercial street of Aleksanterinkatu, Helsinki. Opposite it, the Pohjola Building, for the Pohjola Fire Insurance company, was designed by the firm Gesellius–Lindgren–Saarinen. Another branch of the National Share Bank opened the same year in the important commercial city of Viipuri, designed by the firm Usko Nyström–Peforelius–Penttilä.

The three buildings shared common characteristics related to their urban locations and commercial functions. They were, internally, based on supporting structures of iron, with the Lundqvist House going the furthest in departing from the need for internal supporting walls to allow for complete flexibility in the arrangement of the interior. The buildings combined large windows for shop premises on the ground floor, with more conventional fenestration above. In order to meet the demands, voiced above, of
making visible the structural integrity of the building, the different architects all elected a similar solution by placing broad granite piers between the large windows to offset visually the transparency and weightlessness of glass. This was noted in a number of the reviews, indicating that Penttilä’s concern was widely shared. In a review headed with the Latin quote, *Architecturae sola domina est necessitas* (Architecture’s sole mistress is necessity), the architect Jac Ahrenberg commented on the Pohjola Building:

> These vaults and rocky volumes seem symbolically to indicate the raw, unprocessed mass from which grows the more even surfaces of the floors, finer shapes and rich plant and animal ornamentation.\(^{44}\)

Though the idiom is far removed from the classical, the main portal to the building was ornamented with soapstone colonettes that, in place of capitals, metamorphose into the trunks of pine trees with twisted branches and pine needles.

Materials played a key role across all three buildings, as an articulation of the principles of beauty. All three of them used local stone, in a departure from plaster façades, which was greatly welcomed by the architectural profession and the culmination of a long discourse.\(^ {45}\) Lindqvist used granite only to a limited extent, to clad the piers between the ground-floor windows, before shifting register to vibrant, red brick. G–L–S used soapstone and Usko Nyström and Penttilä, the co-authors of the Viipuri project,\(^ {46}\) used a combination of granite on the ground floor and soapstone on upper floors. The use of stone cladding, though it had no actual load-bearing function, was felt to express greater architectural integrity than plaster shaped to mimic stone.\(^ {47}\) Local stone was also another way of signalling a building’s national specificity, offsetting its similarity to modern buildings elsewhere. Alongside the façade materials, all three buildings made extensive and varied use of ornament. This ornament was important not merely for the iconography, but for the meanings invested in the materials and techniques used to craft it.

### The Lundqvist Commercial Building

The Lundqvist Building was enriched by a combination of materials and techniques that were utilised across the façade (Fig. 6).

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\(^{46}\) The architectural drawings are signed by both architects, implying they both contributed to the project. The minutes of the Viipuri Branch of KOP, however, refer only to dealings with the architect Penttilä, so it is likely that he was substantially responsible for the design and building work. It is possible that for such a prestigious commission Usko Nyström, as the most senior architect of the trio, signed the drawings to indicate his approval. Ringbom, *Stone, Style and Truth*.
Granite piers were carved in a combination of smooth and rough dressing. The red brick upper façade was, in itself, rich in colour and additionally ornamented with various decorative mouldings and filleted demi-columns. The red brick was contrasted with areas of pale render. The fenestration varied on each floor, down to different patterns in the glazing bars. The upper portion of the street façades was further enriched by means of full-colour majolica mosaic panels across the façade and gable ends. The roofline featured an array of small spires and decorative metalwork finials and ridge crests. Grey slate roofs and a green copper cupola over the tower added further contrasts of colour and materials.
The main entrance on Aleksanterinkatu was ornamented by two bronze allegorical figures of *Hunting* and *Spinning*, by the artist Robert Stigell (1852–1907). Between these, a carved portal led into a magnificent vestibule clad in contrasting colours of Belgian marble and majolica panels depicting daisies. This itemisation of the ornamental details of the building is far from exhaustive. It serves to indicate the extent of the investment, both financial and conceptual, in visually enriching this commercial building. The sheer variety of materials and techniques draws attention to the craftsmanship that went into the building – with each transition from stone to brick to tile, and from brick to wood and metalwork, different skills are performed. It is no coincidence that this investment in art and craftsmanship in architectural ornament coincided with the importation of modern industrial construction techniques into high-status architecture.

**The Pohjola Building**

The ornament of the Pohjola Building was not so materially various, but was no less dramatic in its scope (Fig. 7). The soapstone façade was enlivened with vividly carved forest animals and sprites, pine branches and contrasting smooth- and rough-dressed surfaces, by the sculptor Hilda Flodin (1877–1958) and a team of Norwegian stonemasons. The interior continued the ornamental idiom of the mythic northern forest, but in wood. This culminated in a wood-panelled transactions hall, which contemporaries compared to an old cabin, farmhouse kitchen or the home of Louhi, the Mistress of Pohjola in the *Kalevala* legends. The hall was dominated by red pine cladding over walls, ceiling and furnishings, creating a rustic impression (Fig. 8). The centrepiece of the composition was a massive, wood-clad pillar that ostentatiously supported the roof beams. The real structural support was provided by a relatively slender iron column concealed within its core. The column does not echo any real feature from Finnish vernacular culture. Rather, it suggests the imagined past of great, wooden feasting halls and an ancient, pagan culture. In this way it is comparable to Victor Vasnetsov’s stage designs for the performance of *The Snow Maiden* at Abramtsevo in 1881: the Romantic revival of an imagined pagan past, which leaps from surviving vernacular crafts towards far richer fantasy.

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49 This imaginative dramatisation of the national past was an international phenomenon. See for example Rosalind P. Blakesley, “‘The Venerable Artist’s Fiery Speeches Ringing in my Soul’: The Artistic Impact of William Morris and his Circle in Nineteenth Century Russia”, in Grace Brockington (ed.), *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 79–105 and Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
Fig. 7. Gesellius–Lindgren–Saarinen, Pohjola Building, Helsinki, 1899–01. In Rakentaja 11 (1901), 87

Fig. 8. Gesellius–Lindgren–Saarinen, Pohjola Building, interior. In Rakentaja 11 (1901), supplement XIV
The column is carved with bears, echoing these features on the façade. Heavily riveted, ornamental metal strapwork also enhances the sense of rustic heritage and conspicuous craftsmanship. The addition of prominent metalwork, strap hinges etc., was a feature common to English Arts and Crafts furniture, much admired across Europe. Entwined forms in the metal work also suggest the influence of the Norwegian Viking Revival, which was one of the most internationally recognisable and admired national revival styles of the 1890s. The elaborate central pendant lamp similarly departs from the elegant chandelier-inspired forms common to high-status interiors. The lamp takes the form of four mottled-glass lanterns with metal hoods, bracketed together by means of a geometric metal frame.

The message inscribed in the ornament of the Pohjola Building is clearly that of an institution proclaiming its Finnish identity. The direct use of references to the vernacular material so carefully gathered during the 1880s and 1890s are, however, absent. What has been retained is the principle of craftsmanship and the hand-wrought. The choice of a varied palette of materials, particularly the use of red pine rather than marble or mahogany, upheld the Arts and Crafts principle that valued skilled and artistic workmanship, over the raw value of the materials used. The rough-hewn carving and hand-beaten and riveted metal details made visible the invisible hands of the craftsmen who had executed the interior and sought to impress visitors with this labour and skill rather than with sheer opulence and expensive materials.

**The Viipuri National Share Bank**

Nyström and Penttilä’s Viipuri National Share Bank building continues this trend, albeit without the extreme theatricality of the Pohjola Building (Fig. 9). The treatment of the façade demonstrated a similar *horror vacui* to the previously discussed buildings. Stonework was dressed in varied courses of ashlar, rubble- and diamond-pointed and interspersed with carved ornaments of thistles, clover leaves and flowers. The mezzanine floor was particularly picked out with a motif of caducei of Mercury (the God of Commerce) topped by cogs, indicating industry and technology. Over the main entrance, there were a pair of decorative panels carved with integrated symbols signalling arable farming and forestry (sources of wealth) and

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a steam train and ship (trade). In addition, the corner tower carried the carved coats of arms of Finland, Karelia and Viipuri. The combination of ornament derived from nature, the coat of arms and the modernity signalled by the steam train recalls the share certificate designed by Keinänen. All that is missing is the Karelian-inspired notch-work.

The banking hall is more coherent in its iconography and focuses on an ornamental scheme of thistles and floral ornament taken from the façade (Fig. 10). The iron columns and fire-proof concrete flooring were concealed behind oak and pine panelling and massive granite columns. Though less conspicuously rustic than the Pohjola Building’s interior, the National Share Bank interior can nevertheless be contrasted with the banking halls of nearby competitors in Viipuri, such as Waldemar Aspelin’s Pohjoismaiden Osakepankki (1900) and Gustav Nyström’s Suomen Yhdyspankki (1899). These banks were furnished with banking halls in a far more classical vein, with tall marble
columns topped with ornate capitals of gilded plaster and plaster friezes. The natural wood of the National Share Bank struck a deliberately more domestic note. This is suggestive in the context of the overtly Fennomane character of the National Share Bank, compared with its Swedish-speaking competitors. Alongside this preference for native wood and conspicuous craftsmanship over marble and gilt, the long counter and furniture designed for the interior also signalled an awareness of international design trends, Arts and Crafts and Jugendstil. Solid wooden forms were offset with smooth, tapering legs, delicate struts and jewel-like inserts of carved oak leaves.

Fig. 10. Vilho Penttilä and Usko Nyström, Viipuri National Share Bank, Viipuri, 1900–1901. Courtesy of Nordea
Conclusion

The international craft revival, in all of its elements, from the pan-European scholarly tradition of ethnographic and architectural research to the mutual admiration of craft revival design from country to country, was an integral part of the value of national crafts. Contemporary rhetoric, with its repeated condemnation of the foreign, can be misleading if taken at face value. It is important to remember that for every statement decrying the adoption of ‘bad’ foreign fashions at the expense of national traditions, another statement can be found expressing admiration for ‘good’ architectural solutions imported from abroad.

Reviews of the Lundqvist and Pohjola buildings both commented on international influences. The brick façade of the Lundqvist Building is described as follows:

*Its style is the modern brick gothic, which, in Germany in particular, has gained a significant spread.*

The review in *Dagligt Allehanda* also described the extensive use of modern building technologies in the Lundqvist Building, such as elevators and efficient doors and windows, as offering:

*...everything America, and fantasies in that vein, have found to be achievable, solid and refined.*

In the same review, the Pohjola Building was described as ornamented with Finnish animals and plant motifs ‘reminiscent of the role models of the sculptural decorations found in the newest English, American and Austrian journals’. Ahrenberg’s review in *Teknikern*, already cited, similarly identified the conceptual origins of the building in England and America.

The reviews of the National Share Bank were less extensive, as was common for buildings outside Helsinki. They emphasise the innovation of the soapstone façade. Additionally, the technical innovations of the extra-secure banking vaults and the English-made cash registers and safe were admired. What might we make of this seeming inconsistency between the expression of national identity or local traditions and importation of new ideas and technologies?

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51 ‘Dess stil är den moderna tegelgotik, som särskilt i Tyskland vunnit en betydande utbredning’, *-n., Huvudstadsbladet* 177 (5 July 1901), 4.
52 ‘...alt hvad Amerika och fantasien i den vägen funnit uppnåeligt, solidt och raffinerad ändamålsenligt’; B. [Bertel Jung], ‘Moderna byggnader i Helsingfors’, *Dagligt Allehanda* 69 (12 June 1901), 2.
53 B. [Bertel Jung], ‘Moderna byggnader i Helsingfors’, *Dagligt Allehanda* 69 (12 June 1901), 2.
Penttilä ended his 1894 article on the history of wooden architecture with a long quote taken directly from Gottgetreu on the Swiss craft:

*These are works in wood that manifest complete design accuracy, as well as artistic forms of the highest calibre. Nowhere else can be found such original and at the same time functional joints as the ones used by the Swiss joiner and carpenter for supporting his beams and uprights, which are arranged so thoughtfully and employed so practically. One can trace the joy of creativity and the striving towards beauty in these works. In numerous towns the opinion is widely held that all constructive parts should be suitable and sure and decorative forms should respond to materials, so that mere handicraft has risen through its own strengths to great heights and created works of art, which merit enduring comparison to that of other nations.*

Unique forms in Swiss wooden architecture, the small as well as the large, appear beautiful through their sublime, harmonious relationships and fine taste. To this is added striking colour effects, decoration by living flowers and plants around the windows and porches – all of these reveal the striking idea that they are all born of nature, national life grown to health as an expression of true, fresh nationality. It is work expressive of intelligence and joy and the independent spirit of a free national people.  

The architectural values expressed here are universal, transcending any specific Swiss-ness. What is described is an architecture in which sound construction and functionality are in harmony with the requirements of beauty. Furthermore, the balance achieved allows for the expression of personal creativity on the part of the builder and community through the expression of harmony with nature, local conditions and national spirit. This underlying ethos behind the craft revival was celebrated internationally. It was also understood across Europe as a reformist model for contemporary design whose core principles transcended national boundaries, even as it offered a path towards an internationally respected need for local specificity. The
revaluation of craft in Finland cannot be considered separate from the widespread revaluation of craft in European design discourse. This trend did not have a single point of origin, but arose out of a range of concerns regarding commodity culture and the erosion of local traditions in the face of global capitalism.

In architecture, the reliance on historical forms (classical and gothic) raised questions as to the suitability of such forms for meeting modern needs, both in terms of symbolism and practicalities. Established architectural theory lent credence to the principle that ornament should be a ‘natural’ outgrowth of structure and function. By 1900, the structural character of urban architecture was unrecognisable from the architectures of the past, increasingly dependent on iron and steel supporting structures and concrete. Hand in hand with this, functions had also evolved and diversified. While no definitive language of ornament emerged to express these shifts, investment in ornament in the form of crafted interventions in façades and interiors served to provide a counter-weight of recognisable value to offset the invisible, new technologies within. The ‘honesty’ of stone and brick, in place of plaster-dressed façades was one dimension of this. The profusion of hand-wrought elements, carved stone and wood, mosaic, metalwork details reconnected architecture with narratives of craftsmanship just at the moment when it began to shift conclusively from artisanal labour to industrial construction technologies.

The Finnish case studies above reveal that, even within the confines of a single architectural milieu, this period was one of significant experiment and divergent strategies for resolving the challenge of a new style for a new world. The well-known story of the Helsinki Railway Station competition and the pamphlet published by Gustaf Strengell and Sigurd Frosterus presents a compelling narrative of the rejection of National Romanticism and the craft revival in favour of rationalism in the early 20th century. However, the foundational thinking regarding the meaning and value of craft and craftsmanship persisted. One need only look at the attention to materials and their handling in the work of Alvar Aalto, a pupil of Armas Lindgren, whose genius for ornament contributed to the early success of the G–L–S firm. Through the Nordic Classicism of the 1910s sculpted ornament in stone and the highly-crafted finish of wood, metalwork, tile and

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marble in the interior continued to mediate the technological domain of new constructions by means of the human domain of craft.57 Through the first decades of Modernism illustrative ornament receded, but the careful handling of materials and their conjunctions continued to fulfil that function as Finnish architecture achieved international esteem.

The craft revival was propelled by a sense of imminent loss and the fear that the tides of modernisation would sweep away the identity and memory embodied in traditional ways of life. Craft as a concept evokes first and foremost the presence of the skilled hands that hewed, moulded, wove and spun, a measurable human scale and recognisable investment of time. New technologies disrupted this, but the carefully jointed brickwork and majolica of the Lundqvist Building, the gnomes of Pohjola and the carved oak leaves of the Viipuri bank were a way of reasserting a connection to values that were worth maintaining, just as the new elevators and fire safety were worth celebrating.

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