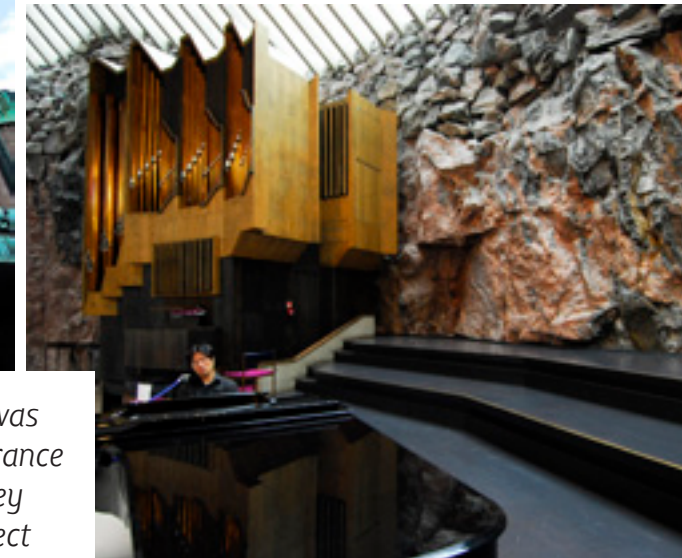


from **SAARINEN**

to **LADY GAGA**

HOW HELSINKI BECAME THE DESIGN CAPITAL OF THE WORLD



Arriving in Helsinki, the first thing my wife Roxie and I saw was the two gigantic lantern-holding statues that guard the entrance of the Central Railroad Station. Granite-jawed and grim, they have stood there for nearly a century, and seemed the perfect introduction to a couple of days dedicated to Finnish design. Soon, the city will become the 2012 World Design Capital. Some iconic structures stand out, such as the Rock Church, and, not least, these statues, managing to look Egyptian, Teutonic, and Finnish, all at the same time.

(Left page) "Custard Pump Back Powder" Shoe designed by Minna Parikka, and bought by Lady Gaga. / (Above left to right) Central Railroad station and the Rock Church.

The station was designed by Eliel Saarinen, an illustrious name in architecture – not least because of his son, Eero, who in the U.S. is famous for any number of things, ranging from the Tulip Chair to the TWA Terminal at JFK, and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. A widely recognized landmark, the Helsinki railway station was originally intended to be more truly representative of the Jugend, or National Romantic style, which dominated Finnish architecture in the early 20th century. But the year was 1916, and change was in the air, pointing to a more rational, utilitarian approach. As a result, Saarinen modified his creation, removing, for instance, the ten stone bears which initially were part of his design. (As for the mythical giants with their spherical lamps, they are the work of sculptor Emil Wikström.)

More history came to life as we proceeded toward our hotel, and passed Senate Square, with its Neo-classical style buildings. Towering above them all, on a high bank

of steps, stood the Helsinki Cathedral, green-domed and dazzling white in the bright sunlight. As on previous visits, the steps were filled with visitors. In the square in front of them sat a pianist playing on a grand piano.

Hotel Fabian, our accommodation – described as a boutique hotel – was near the harbor and the famous open-air market. It was also next to Design District Helsinki, an area brimming with creativity, boasting some 190 spots of interest, all related to design. A quick shower, and we were ready for some reconnoitering.

"The Queen of the Cocktail Dress" – thus was the description of Tiia Vanhatapio, the first designer whose store we visited. Tiia wrote her final thesis at the University of Design and Art in 2005, set up shop that same year, and – to give an example of how hot she is – just received the Best Collection of The Year at ELLE Style Awards. This being vacation time in Finland and she an

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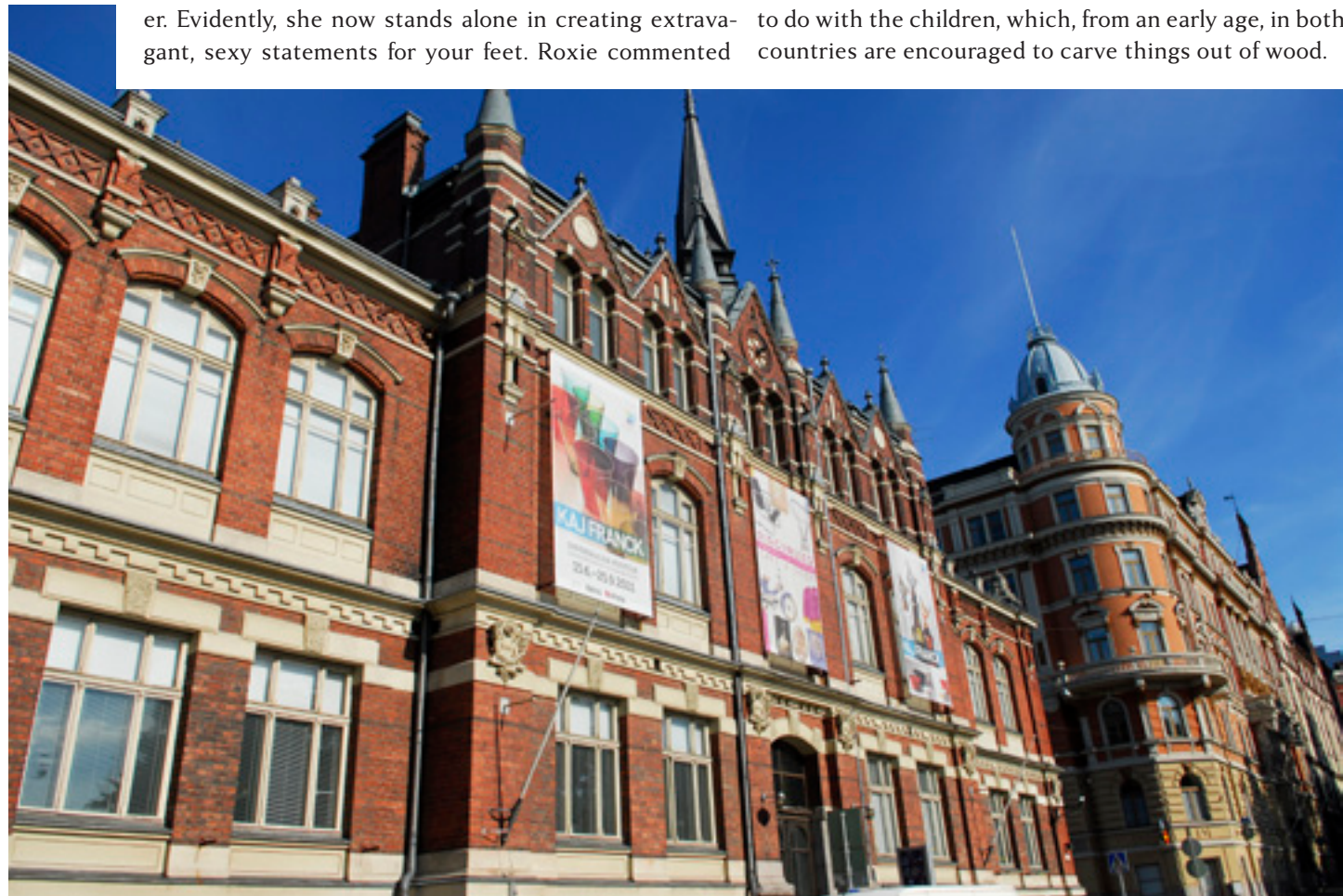
extremely busy young woman, it was small wonder she wasn't there. But the dresses were, held up for us to admire. Apparently, one of her more notable clients is Dita Von Teese, the American actress and burlesque dancer. Displayed was one of Dita's purchases, a black sensuous-looking creation named "Mamie."

Not far from Tiia Vanhatapio's place we found the boutique of Hanna Sarén, yet another up-to-the-minute designer, and one of the best-known names in Finnish fashion. Unlike Tiia, she happened to be around, gracing us with her presence. Apparently, her career took a flying start a decade ago, when her first collection of clogs and bags was presented in Japan. Currently the Sarén brand encompasses women's and men's collections, shoes, bags and accessories, even a children's collection. The interior of the store had an unpretentious, rather casual look about it. The focus was all on the clothing.

Minna Parikka, the third store we visited, was a scream. Never before have I seen such an assemblage of colorful and, as far as I could tell, uncomfortable footwear. I read somewhere that Minna Parikka at the age of 15 already knew her calling: to become a top shoe designer. Evidently, she now stands alone in creating extravagant, sexy statements for your feet. Roxie commented

on the fine handicraft; I marveled at the playfulness and, in some instances, the outrageousness of it all. No surprise that Lady Gaga has beaten a path to her door. On display, in addition to shoes, I noticed some buttery soft gloves and a red handbag shaped like a heart, suitably called "Arm Candy."

When you think of Finnish design, you think of minimalism and clean lines. You think of Alvar Aalto, one of the country's all-time greats, whose work includes architecture, furniture, textiles and glassware. In 1935, he and his wife Aino, along with two friends, founded Artek, a furniture company with several stores, one of which is now part of Design District Helsinki. Here the legacy lives on. I was amazed at the utter simplicity, the functionality and beauty that characterized so many of the items – chairs, sofas, lamps, tables, etc. Seeing the ingenious way wood, especially birch, was used, I was reminded of what a visiting Finnish designer once told me in New York. Asked about the affinity in design sensibilities between Finland and faraway Japan, he thought for a moment, then suggested that it may have something to do with the children, which, from an early age, in both countries are encouraged to carve things out of wood.



A commentary on chairs.

We had just visited Design Forum Finland, and were now in the nearby Aero Design store. As one of the eminent innovators of modern furniture design, Aero Aarnio is, perhaps, most famous for his spherical chairs from the 1960s. And there they were: the Ball and the Bubble Ball, one standing, the other transparent and suspended. As Roxie sank into the former, a young girl posed in the latter. Back in the 1950s, there had been yet another trailblazer – Limary Tapoivaara's Tulip chair, which, if I've understood this correctly, got a tremendous boost after making its appearance on the original *Star Trek* series.

As our explorations continued, stretching into the following day, we visited such classic stores as Arabia and Iittala. Not to mention Marimekko, which, with a profusion of sheets, towels, hammocks, mugs, trays and shower curtains, dazzled with its bright colors and put me in a sunny disposition.

In the general excitement over becoming World Design Capital, it appears that conventional boundaries of design have been stretched a little, expanded to include food and food presentation. Thus, at Grotesk, the recommended lunch restaurant, attention was drawn not only to some spectacular light fixtures, but also to the presentation of the roasted arctic char, prettily covered in lemon foam. No less inspired was the "glow-fried" whitefish with artichoke and Beluga lentils, served to us for dinner at Salutorget, a charming old restaurant, overlooking Esplanadi Park and next to the Market Square. Speaking of food, I also recall from our dinner at Lasipalatsi (the Glass Palace) an outstanding salmon soup with rye bread, and, for a finisher, some delectable local cheeses.

(Opposite) The Design Museum. / (Above top to bottom) Sales girl with shoes designed by Minna Parikka. Hanna Sarén showing a couple of her dresses.



Showroom at Marimekko

Now for our meeting with Stefan Lindfors, a high-profile industrial designer, sculptor and film director, and, generally, a creative force to be reckoned with – internationally as well as in his native Finland. In his mid-twenties, Lindfors first achieved public and critical attention with his lamp Scaragoo, unveiled at the Milan Furniture Fair in 1988. He has designed work for all the major Finnish design manufacturers, made short films, TV shows and pop videos, and been a teacher and guest professor in a number of schools, including the University of Art and Design Helsinki. His work includes Winged Victory, a sculpture for Watch's pavilion during the Olympics in Atlanta, as well as a sculpture exhibit at the Finnish Embassy in Washington D.C.

The personification of hip, he swept into the bar where we were scheduled to meet and immediately presented us with a signed copy of *Driven by Love and Fury*, a tome about himself and his work. He then proceeded to talk about his most recent ventures, which included pending contributions to 2012 World Design Capital and the creation of a new website.

What if I could get a photo that justly conveyed his dynamic, slightly over-the-top personality? Asked if there were some nearby place where we could go for a more interesting background, he told us about the metal sculpture he'd designed in front of Restaurant Kosmos, just down the street. "I could climb up on it," he suggested. Wonderful. So out we went. Kosmos was closed, but the café across the street was filled with people. Seeing all the cell-phone cameras, Lindfors hesitated. "We better not," he said, "someone will recognize me, snap a picture, and tomorrow it will be on Finnish television."



(Right page) Iittala jewelry display. / (Above) Stefan Lindfors / (Below) Display room at Iittala.





(Left) Assorted platter at Grotesk restaurant. / (Top to bottom) Salmon soup with new potatoes and fresh dill in cream sauce at the Glass Palace restaurant. A display of traditional Finnish cheese. White fish with Beluga lentils, globe artichoke, and lemon sauce at Salutorget restaurant.





(Above) Painted glass windows in Salutorget restaurant. (Right) Grotesk restaurant, with state-of-the-art light fixtures.



Of the 190 spots of interest, the Museum of Art & Design took top ranking. Here, in a large building from the 1890s, you can see who made Finland a major player in world-class design. The museum includes a permanent exhibition devoted to the country's design history from 1870 to the present day. It also features separate, changing exhibitions. Right now there was a perspective on Kaj Franck, a renowned designer whose 100th birth anniversary is celebrated this year.

Design, in various and unexpected forms, seems to permeate this city. Why not a hotel inspired by Finland's national epic, the *Kalavala*?

This is exactly what Klaus K is all about. Here the symbolic egg from which the world was created is prominently highlighted, and each room reaches an emotional pitch with names like *Envy*, *Desire*, *Passion*, and *Mystical*.

And now, back in New York, I read that Lady Gaga has been awarded a double platinum for her album *The Fame Monster*. Her trophy, presented to her in Helsinki, was a pair of high-heeled platinum pumps with platinum bars as platform soles, designed by – who else – fashion designer Minna Parikka. ■■

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(Top to bottom) coffeepour on the rooftops of Helsinki. Bed with reading lamps at Hotel Fabian.

