

## **A moment in the life of a building**

Pia Ilonen

Today, Cable Factory is one of the major cultural centres of Helsinki. Focusing on the years 1989-91 when the industrial monument was in peril, architect Pia Ilonen reflects on the dialectic of use and vacancy, emptiness and appropriation, exploring the transformational cultural potential of free, underdefined space.

*Things are changing at such a pace that, although we are probably not fully aware of it, there actually is a revolution going on before our eyes that is already drastically reshaping people's lifestyle – technically, economically, politically and socially we are witnessing changes more radical than at the beginning of this century. But because things are happening piecemeal and in different places we usually do not get the full picture.*

Jan Verwijnen "Cultural change", 1991 (unpublished manuscript)



A moment in the life of the building. Photo Kalle Kultala 1961, Lehtikuva.

1961

An old cable factory in Helsinki, there since the Second World War. Back then, a unique place on a big scale, ahead of its time. A standard port of call in Helsinki for state visits. In September 1961, Leonid Brezhnev, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and President Urho Kekkonen walking through the huge Sea Cable Hall, laughing, satisfied with the fact that Finland had taken care of the reparations to the Soviet Union in the post-war period. A golden moment in the life of the building.

Hundreds of workers braid copper wire and encase it in rubber for electrical wiring. Others develop the wireless voice communications systems. The Nokia cell phone success starts in this building, a monument to Finnish inventiveness and prosperity. The future is not yet there to be seen: the day when life in the building vanishes. The building cannot serve

anymore. It has to disappear. It is too big. Too useless to exist any longer. Unless a cultural change occurs.



Another moment in the life of the building. Occupying a free space. Photo Stefan Bremer 1989.

1989

Another moment in the life of the building. A single day in December 1989, one of those defining days where the forgotten building is re-visited and brought to life. Traces of industrial past on the floors, in the walls, in the air. A cultural change is happening inside the frames of the building, but nobody is talking about it or seeing it yet. Too busy occupying a free space, working in a place of their own, built by themselves. In an open building: a space for opportunity, a democratic space, unprogrammed, free for uses not yet conceived.

And yet, soon there will be a time when they have to take the story of this place forward from that point. Initiating a campaign and demonstrating the potential of the place, employing a series of plans, inviting politicians, circulating ideas, exchanging thoughts. Radical free strategic thinking paving the way for the emergence of the rhetoric of creativity and culture, not too often heard of before.

The old cable factory does not disappear. It exists. The past and the present, tactile materiality and ephemeral memory intertwine. The identity of the place is strong, the atmosphere unique. The continued relevance of buildings from the past to contemporary architectural practice is being discussed. Norms and standards questioned, new organizational thinking developed, allowing interaction and participation.

On the road to the next moments in the life of the building, new life flows inside: an open framework with concrete pillars and beams, a building free to change over time as a result

of interventions, unforeseen developments. A continuously changing transformation process, a building project forever on the move goes on.



Occupying a free space. The Housing Company Tila in Helsinki, 2008. Architect Pia Ilonen.  
Photo Stefan Bremer 2008.

2008

Learning from history. The old cable factory as a mirror for the conventional, regulated architecture. An open building: a space for opportunity, a democratic space, not too programmed. Loft living in the cable factory: loft living in new urban housing? Occupying a free space, living in a place of your own, built by yourself. Why not? Again, a conventional architectural practice and urban design must be questioned. Norms and standards re-examined, strategic thinking developed, allowing interaction and participation. An architect demonstrating the potential of a free space, initiating a campaign, employing a series of plans, circulating ideas, exchanging thoughts. Paving the way, taking the story forward.



### Pia Ilonen

founded the architectural office Alli, later Talli, for the reconstruction/restoration design of Lasipalatsi – a building in the center of Helsinki – in 1995. In 2005 she wrote her thesis Kaleidoscope/Planning and Implementing the Restoration of Lasipalatsi/The whole Picture for the degree of Licentiate of Science at Helsinki University of Technology (Aalto), where she had been teaching for several years. With her new office ILO Architects, she is working with public buildings and housing projects and is responsible for ongoing Cable Factory transformation process, including the extension design for the House of Dance. Her experiences at the Cable Factory since 1989 have defined her entire professional foundation. For the last 15 years, she has been questioning how high-rise blocks are produced and designed in Finland with several case-study houses, one of them based on an open building raw-concept. She was invited to the Venice biennale 2018 “Freespace” international exhibition to present her ideas.