



Katajanokka - an Art Nouveau District Questions concerning urban quality and preservation

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The hallmark of Katajanokka has been, and still is, the coexistence of a harbour and residential area in the same district. Viewed within its Helsinki, Finnish and European contexts, the old housing district in Katajanokka is a unique and well preserved example of Art Nouveau architecture. Although its urban quality is highly valued today, that has not always been the case.

I will first treat the early stages of the Katajanokka city district that preceded the large harbour and residential areas. Next I will describe the local town planning and its objectives – the degree to which the urban planning ideals of the 1900s are apparent or not apparent in Katajanokka’s residential areas – as well as critical writings concerning the area. After discussing the residential area and its Art Nouveau architecture in greater detail, I will review the legal protection of the housing areas, as well as the change pressures confronting the Helsinki City Museum’s work in Katajanokka.

First however, I will briefly summarise the general history of Helsinki. In 1809 Finland was annexed to the Russian Empire as an Autonomous Grand Duchy, retaining that status until the country’s independence in 1917. Helsinki became the capital city in 1812. Compared to Turku, the previous capital, it was located closer to the mother country Russia and featured more convenient transport connections. The German-born architect Carl Ludvig Engel designed the Neo-classical squares and buildings of the new administrative centre required by Helsinki’s new capital city status. This new centre is located in the immediate vicinity of Katajanokka.

In the early 1800s, Katajanokka was a typical fringe area for the city’s less affluent segments of the population; construction on the peninsula’s western edge took place spontaneously. The residents were primarily fishermen and seamen, whose houses were modest wood structures. A Russian barracks area was located on Katajanokka’s eastern side. The Merikasarmi barracks designed by C. L. Engel was completed during the 1820s, as well as a prison in the 1830s.

Helsinki’s decision-makers eventually turned their attention towards the Katajanokka direction; the wooden buildings were condemned and demolished; the objective was to create a representative city district featuring masonry and stone construction. Expropriation proceedings lasted until the late 1870s. The Uspenski Cathedral and the Mint of Finland were built in the 1860s, and a few masonry apartment buildings were built near the church in the 1870s. Katajanokka’s eastern section, with its barracks and prison areas, developed separately from the rest of the city.

Beginning in the 1870s Helsinki grew rapidly; the newly acquired right to conduct business spurred industrial and commercial growth. Consequently Helsinki’s population began to increase at a dizzying rate. In 1870 the population was 30,000; by 1900 it had passed the 100,000 mark, enabling the city to be classified as a major city internationally. The city expanded, grew in height, and changed its urban structure. In the city’s administrative functions, the demands of business life became the most important priorities in the city’s development; the objective was to build a major port for the city.

Town planning of the main port and Katajanokka

Beginning in the late 1800s, the town planning of Katajanokka was tied to an extensive programme aiming at the development of the city's harbour conditions. Economic growth, the development of shipping as a consequence of steamship traffic, as well as railway traffic, set completely new challenges for ports. The expansion and modernisation of Helsinki's South Harbour was considered absolutely necessary. Katajanokka provided the best expansion directions, both of which were located on the same bay. The area was also located close to the city centre and could be reached with a railway connection. Previously the aim had been to develop Katajanokka as a representative city district featuring masonry and stone buildings, but now the port's practical needs took precedence and dictated planning content.

In the town plan for the area drawn up in 1882 by Engineer Theodor Tallqvist, Katajanokka's southern and northern shores were reserved for the port. The sea had been filled for a considerable number of quays, and railway tracks had been led to the area. A high-density residential area was inserted between the harbour areas. Aesthetic points of view were ignored completely in a town plan whose configuration was dictated by efficiency, practicality and commercial exigencies. This town plan was however never implemented as such.

Working from Tallqvist's design, City Engineer Herman Norrmén prepared a new town plan that was ratified in 1895. Katajanokka's town plan was one of the latest examples of the rigid utilitarian thinking – in which practicality and economic values predominated – that often characterised the urban planning of the late 1800s. Streets were laid out in a gridiron pattern that failed to take the area's rocky and undulating terrain into account. The urban structure was based on straight streets and large closed blocks; nowhere in the town plan was there space for any parks or squares. Clearly, it was not a question of urban planning as a work of art. At the same time however, the concept of a more painterly townscape image advanced by Camillo Sitte (1843-1903) began to gain favour in city planning circles. Town planning models were sought from the urban structures of medieval towns, including their tower and roof themes, truss constructions, and varying street views. Parks and squares, as well as a street network that freely followed the contour of the terrain, played key roles in the town plans influenced by Sitte.

Only three years after the ratification of the town plan, a heated discussion concerning the objectives of urban design and the role of the architect in town planning was initiated by Lars Sonck, a young architect who had familiarised himself with the concepts advanced by Camillo Sitte. In an article published in 1898, Sonck strongly criticised the overly schematic urban milieus designed by engineers. He considered Katajanokka a classic example of a city district spoiled by inadequate town planning. From the standpoint of urban design, the architects of that period considered Katajanokka's new housing area a poor formal example that failed to take leisure facilities and the natural surroundings into account. The architecture's profuse form language was also criticised.

Katajanokka residential area

Katajanokka's residential area consists of six large and two smaller blocks at the cape's higher and rockier locations. As early as 1896 the City began to sell off sites to builders. During the period between 1896 and 1905 it sold a total of 44 sites, of which approximately 50% had changed ownership during the years 1901 and 1910. In particular, Katajanokka's housing sites were avidly sought by land speculators.

Construction work began before the turn of the century with the erection of three apartment buildings; for the most part the other apartment buildings were completed by 1913. The

builders were often housing associations, made possible by the enactment of the Housing Companies Act in 1896. The residents belonged to the middle class or bourgeoisie, and often employed servants. Subtenants as well as labourers also inhabited the buildings' basement floors or in other small apartments; their living conditions were decidedly different than those of the apartments' owners.

Katajanokka's transformation in its entirety from a low-income housing area to an enclave for the city's civil service elite and bourgeoisie represented an urban growth pattern that emerged for the first time in the history of Helsinki. A former slum had become a prestigious residential area for the privileged classes. The western section consisted of two completely different milieus: the dense aggregation of the apartment buildings and the port, whose warehouses and quays covered the entire southern zone.

In the housing area, the densely constructed buildings built to the street lines formed enclosed blocks around courtyards that contained yard wings and outbuildings. Fences separated the buildings' courtyards from each other. The limited space in the blocks' internal sections resulted in a highly compact residential entity.

The Finnish Art Nouveau period is considered to have begun with a residence in Katajanokka; it was designed for the merchant Julius Tallberg during the years 1896-1897 by the architectural students Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen. The gifted trio had won both the 1st and 2nd Prizes in the architectural competition organised for the design of the site. The apartment building's facades were accentuated with gable themes and bay windows. The ground floor was clad in granite, elsewhere the surface material was pastel-tinted plastering. The building exuded a fortress-like Gothic quality, as well as a medieval spirituality. In the Tallberg house can be seen many of the architectural motifs that would characterise the buildings constructed later in Katajanokka. These features included accentuated corner sections, eaves lines broken by triangular, Gothic-shaped gables, bay windows, fenestration patterns reflecting the interior spaces' functions, windows of various shapes and sizes, as well as pastel-tinted plastered surfaces. The starting points for the architecture were international, derived from the Vienna Secession movement that in Finland became known as the Wagner school, named for the Austrian architect Otto Wagner.

In the early 1900s, Katajanokka emerged as a visually unified city district. The apartment buildings owned by the housing associations expressed the architectural ideals of those times: a picturesque and variable streetscape in which the plastic shaping of the buildings' masses, roofs and facades was of essential importance. Although the buildings contained references to the architecture of historical castles, the facades' relative simplicity and pastel colours were considered modern. The common features of the buildings included lightly coloured plastered facades, a plastic sense of form, a variable silhouette, and an overall fortress-like appearance.

One of the architectural objectives was to create a "Gesamtkunstwerk", a total work of art that integrated a building's external appearance, interior spaces and even its furnishings. Besides the international Art Nouveau style, certain architectural motifs – such as decorative geometric patterns or decorative bear, swan and owl themes inspired by Finnish nature – were also derived from traditional Finnish architecture.

About twenty designers, – architects as well as building engineers – planned the apartment buildings in the western section of Katajanokka. The most prolific office, responsible for the design of 8 apartment buildings in the area, was the joint office set up by the architects Werner von Essen and Kauno S. Kallio and the building engineer Emmanuel Ikäläinen. (Other renowned designers included the architect trio of Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen (Olofsborg residential building 1903 and Eol 1902) and the architects' office of Usko Nyström, Petrelius and Penttilä (Housing Association Kataja).)

An excellent example of an Art Nouveau building and one of the most impressive examples of this style applied to an apartment building on a corner site is Olofsborg, designed by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen in 1901. Its walls are light yellow and smoothly plastered, while the plinth and entrance archways' vaults are clad with natural stone. Irregularity is a prevailing characteristic of the facades. One eye-catching detail is a thick, rounded protrusion recalling a castle tower. The exterior doors on the street side are decorated with the bird and plant motifs characteristic of that period.

At Katajanokka the buildings' often quirky stylistic variants are however absorbed into an overall architectural entity whose characteristic features are plastic forms, a multifaceted fortress-like silhouette, a richly diversified roof landscape and pastel-coloured plastered facades.

The residential area has for the most part retained its original appearance and local character; only a few individual buildings have been constructed in the area after the initial building phase of the early 1900s.

Until the 1970s the area was developed primarily to serve the needs of goods traffic; this led to traffic problems as well as the conversion of apartments to office use. The change from goods traffic to passenger traffic also restored residential functions in Katajanokka's housing areas.

The Katajanokka residential area has been classified as a culturally and historically significant national landmark. Additionally, almost all of the residential area's streetside buildings were protected by the town plan in 1984. The town plan also contains regulations governing the protection of stairwells. Outbuildings and yard wings were not designated as protected because at the time the town plan was formulated, the intent was to facilitate the possible creation of more spacious courtyard entities. From today's perspective however, the densely built blocks are historically valuable entities worth protecting. The internal sections of the blocks tell us much about the history of the building of Katajanokka and Helsinki. Taken together with the streetside buildings, these secondary elements help convey a more accurate impression of the city's development.

The Helsinki City Museum and its Cultural Environment Unit functions as a building protection authority in Helsinki, rendering advisory opinions concerning questions related to town planning, as well as the preservation and repair of culturally and historically important buildings. In Finland the overall preservation of the cultural tradition is entrusted to Finnish Museums. The Helsinki City Museum is responsible for both the material cultural heritage as well as the built cultural environment and cultural landscape.

Today's building protection problems at Katajanokka primarily concern the renovations of existing apartment buildings. Frequently the intent is place new lifts into buildings originally built without any vertical transportation devices. In Helsinki, the prevailing practice has been to cut new space for the lifts between the stair flights. The City of Helsinki and the Ministry of the Environment also provide financial assistance to housing associations constructing new lifts in formerly lift-free buildings. For a stairwell designed as an integrated work of art, the insertion of a new lift undeniably and irrevocably damages a stairwell's overall spatial quality, its lighting conditions and original structural components. Even though the stairwells are protected interior spaces in the town plan, new lifts are continuously sought. One example is the housing association Norma, where a building protection dispute concerning the installation of a new lift led to judicial proceedings; the case is still pending and the final decision will be rendered by the Supreme Administrative Court of Finland.

Besides lifts, Katajanokka also has locations where the intent was to replace original wood windows with new wood/aluminium frames; in recent years building permits have not been granted for these types of windows.

Katajanokka is a respected residential area and its cultural and historical values are widely recognised. Even today however, Art Nouveau architecture is often perceived as an enhancement of the townscape image instead of an overall entity – a total work of art – in which all the parts play key roles: interior spaces, structures, details and materials. One of the Helsinki City Museum's objectives is to preserve this Art Nouveau-style residential area as authentically as possible for future generations.