

ALA is led by its four founding partners: Juho Grönholm (1975), Antti Nousjoki (1974), Janne Teräsvirta (1975), and Samuli Woolston (1975). Their collaboration started in 2004 through success in open competitions. The first prize in the open competition for the new theater and concert hall in Kristiansand in 2005 granted them their first big commission. In 2012, the four ALA partners received the prestigious Finnish State Prize for Architecture.



### Partners propose Magnolia tree for Tampere.

ALA Architects has proposed to plant a Magnolia tree for Tampere. An intelligent glass dome will provide this tree with a more southern climate, complete with ventilation, shading and lighting. The air exhaust of the parking garage will provide additional heating during the cold, dark months. This dome will have its own microclimate fine-tuned using the technical abilities provided by its glass surface. The Magnolia will be nurtured to burst into a magnificent bright pink blossom by the first of May annually. Its strong perfumed scent will fill the pavilion, on some spring days the scent might even flow down to the parking garage.

Architecturally, the project uses the most obvious and simple solution: transparency. Transparency is used for giving the Magnolia tree a more southern climate. The dome is designed to be a microclimate, complete with ventilation, shading and lighting. The air exhaust of the parking garage will provide additional heating during the cold, dark months. This dome will have its own microclimate fine-tuned using the technical abilities provided by its glass surface. The Magnolia will be nurtured to burst into a magnificent bright pink blossom by the first of May annually. Its strong perfumed scent will fill the pavilion, on some spring days the scent might even flow down to the parking garage.

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Helsinki is currently developing new sustainable methods for building the city. Primarily these projects aim at increasing density at the expense of urban sprawl. Our question is how to make existing built areas denser, another where and how to build high rises. The Cloud City project is one possible answer.

This project aims at increasing diversity in the central design quarters of Pannuvuori. As its site, it uses the large courtyard of the 1930's Nokia campus. The project is a mix of residential, office, and retail. It aims at combining a single family residential building with a two-story office building. The project is a mix of residential, office, and retail. It aims at combining a single family residential building with a two-story office building.

The street is a reflection of its ends. The street is a reflection of its ends. The street is a reflection of its ends. The street is a reflection of its ends.

with angels and ALA architects

The well-known works of young, contemporary Finnish architect Juho Grönholm, like the Helsinki Central Library (A10 #53), and competitions are still an important part of your business strategy. How do you decide which competitions to take on?

The four founding partners of ALA are one of Finland's success stories: winning a major competition at the age of 30, heading an office of more than 40 employees at 40. Besides redoing the Finnish embassy in New Delhi, they are also working on a new, high-profile library in Helsinki. Still, they participate in both open and invited competitions, and are now searching for new opportunities in America and abroad. But did they enter the Guggenheim competition? 'That one did not meet our standards.'

# Competitive spirit

FINLAND — TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER, ILLUSTRATION: KHAUSTOON

The interview takes place via Skype, with ALA sitting at their new office. It is a wonderful transformation of a semi-domed industrial space, its whiteness brightening the cloudy Finnish winter days, and its impeccability and complicated floor plans somehow reflecting the career of these four young architects on a roll. It was the famous Finnish architect, Rainer Mahlamäki, who first personally congratulated them when they won the commission for the Kilden Performing Arts Centre in Norway in 2004 (see A10 #44). He had by that time employed both Juho and Samuli at his office, but things have progressed quickly since then.

**Mahlamäki said that he appreciates the echo of Finnish Modernism in your work, 'with a touch of internationalism, mixing the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas with the Finnish Design-oriented approach.' That sounds like Kilden.**

We certainly like to rigorously analyse every situation we're thrown into, still leaving room for intuitive results.

**You have won several important commissions after Kilden, like the Helsinki Central Library (A10 #53), and competitions are still an important part of your business strategy. How do you decide which competitions to take on?**

We like competitions, both invited and open, that keep our minds and our presentational skills sharp. We set tight criteria as to which competitions to enter and which not; we keep an open mind and take part in open competitions as well, even when there are 500 entries expected.

**Did you enter the Guggenheim competition?**  
No, it didn't meet our criteria.

**Which were?**  
Well, it's most likely not going to be built.

**Is the development of the Guggenheim Museum still connected to the fate of the New Library, as the municipality is not likely to fund both of them?**

The financing of the project has been difficult in relation with the public and the community, as it involves almost 100 million euros. The city of Helsinki is known for its bureaucracy and slow processes, but after fifteen years there is now a solid political agreement on the project.

Construction will start in September this year, and should be completed in 2018.

**What does (the concept of) a library mean today – or better, tomorrow – in Finland? Your design includes not just regular library functions, but also 'Makers Spaces' and even a sauna.**

The Finnish word for library is *kirjasto*, literally meaning 'bookery', which leaves room for multiple interpretations. Today, books are only a small portion of the reasons to go to a library. We want the building to be for people, not for books or media, to meet, share knowledge, and learn. A pragmatic shift in the consumer landscape and the disappearance of shopping malls calls for a new type of space. In this project, we work on three different levels: public space, books, and multi-use. We are trying to define a new space for public gathering. This is maybe one of the new types of buildings that is needed for people to meet and gather without a commercial reason. It kind of fits in with the tendencies of a sharing economy.

**Your client for the library is very happy with you as architects, but a bit worried about the phase when a decision on the furniture needs to be made. 'They can have strong opinions,' she said. What's that about?**

Furniture in a library building is like the violin in a concert hall – absolutely vital, and the measure of everything. Clients haven't trusted architects with acoustics for a long time, quite understandably actually. At the library, it's the same: it's a delicate business that requires specific knowledge. So we have brought experts into the team, as planned from the very beginning. It's going to be fine; in the end, the furniture will provide special moments within the space.

**Another competition you won in Helsinki, the Harbour Project, is likely to stall. What happened?**

It doesn't look very promising, indeed. It is part of Jätkäsaari, a new residential area near the harbour. At the moment, it's asphalt replaced by a quasi-traditional perimeter block plan, resulting in monotonous and restrictive building volumes. The urban regeneration project aims to have restored the connection between the port and the city by 2030. By then, the annual ferry passenger numbers will have reached ten million, 22,000 new residents will have moved to the area, and 10,000 new jobs have been created. Our proposal consisted of

one long building mass. Moving southward, the harbour boulevard gradually rises up to the first-floor level, taking drop-off traffic and trams to the main entrance. But now the plan is background material for all types of political discussions. There is a big debate going on here about how to allow the future to find its way in this area, to add flexibility, and how to finance it. So we don't expect solutions any time soon.

**What are your strategies outside Finland?**

The idea for the next ten years is to be a little more strategic and selective in accepting commissions. We are going to focus on the democratic and established markets instead of chasing vague Chinese dreams. We did some sketches and proposals there, and we won't say no if an offer arises, but we prefer the West to the Asian 'Wild West'. The USA is difficult to get through, but has lots of opportunities. We might have a chance with clients who are looking for 'the next big thing'. So far, we haven't done a single sketch, so even to do that would be an enormous chance. But we are teaching a studio at Columbia University at the moment, to build up a network.

**Is New Delhi is a different kind of Asia?**

Yes, we're doing another embassy there. After we started the Finnish Embassy in New Delhi, designed by the famous Raili and Reima Pietilä, we got invited to do the transformation of the Dipoli building in Finland, Pietilä's iconic student union building. Dipoli was looking for strong conceptual and programmatic ideas to turn this hardcore piece of '60s design into a contemporary HQ. It's going to be fun.

**What type of projects are you looking for in America?**

In the line of what we have been doing so far, complex public projects would be great, but we are willing to start with anything small and then increase slowly, either in substance or in volume. We'll do a condo or an office building, if it's interesting or big enough to justify us being there. It would be great if we can open an office there.

**When I asked him, Mahlamäki also said, 'I believe their skills and their ambition will carry them far. The Finns are normally shy, but ALA is not – they boldly show their passion and goals.' Do you agree?**  
I think we couldn't possibly hide them if we tried. ▶