

*A MOMENT  
IN  
HELSINKI*

*JALOVINA*



Decent into Helsinki. 15 January 2015.

The moment I arrived I knew that Helsinki wasn't anything quite like I had imagined.

I decisively did as little research as possible on Helsinki before I left. Cities, like people, can sometimes promote themselves as things that they want to be, but which they are not. I wanted to experience Helsinki with fresh, open eyes.

No assumptions.  
No prejudgments.  
No false hopes.

Admittedly, I did glance briefly at the Helsinki Wallpaper app (a source that has become more and more the go-to set of electronic cliff notes for any major city in the world). I checked out the street grid, layout of the neighborhoods before we landed so I would at least know key points of interest, how to get around and how to begin the adventure.

My travel companion and I were both a bit anxious as we waited in cue at customs, our flight had been delayed and we landed an hour and a half late. We were supposed to meet our airbnb host in Kamppi over an hour ago.

“The nature of your visit?”  
“Just visiting. Checking out Helsinki,” my travel companion retorted.



View looking down Simonkatu, towards the Helsinki Central Railway Station designed by Eliel Saarinen - the heart of the city.

Side note: said travel companion has a passport like a RockGod having travelled to hundreds of cities all over the World. He is also fairly young. Visiting Helsinki for him was just another notch on his passport...

The customs agent was clearly not convinced and perhaps made suspicious by the brevity of his response and the belly of his passport book. He looked up with eyes of disbelief and a tone of obvious dissatisfaction,

“So you are traveling from New York, you stopped in Istanbul and now I am to believe that you have left those places just to visit Helsinki...for a week...in January?”

This was getting exciting. For a split second I considered myself as some type of international smuggler. Hastily, I stepped in.

“I am an Architect and a Planner. There was recently a design competition for the Guggenheim to drop a museum ‘BOMB’ on the south harbor in Helsinki. We are coming here to try and figure out why – and what is going on in Helsinki... and in Finland.”

He smirked, stamped our passports and asked in a more kindred spirit what I thought about Alvar Aalto. This was the first – but not the last time – we were asked what the hell we were doing in Helsinki.

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A walk through the Nuuksio National Park, 35km north-west of Helsinki at Haltia Nature Centre.

Here is a description of what I desired to find, and sometimes found traces of in my adventure in Helsinki:

I wanted a Winter Wonderland.

What better time to understand Finland but to visit it in the winter time? I prepared for ice age cold and dark days. With 100 days of the year devoted to winter - Finland it is a country whose character is most typically and globally identified by winter, its longest season. I was determined to embrace the beauty of the wintery season, its parks, its forests. I imagined big, wonderful snowflakes falling gently from the sky and a city lit by clever adaptations and use of the reflectivity of snow. I saw snowmen and ice-skating and sledding and all winter activities that bring festivity and joy to the cold.

I wanted well designed everything.

Buildings, furniture, transportation systems, museums – Helsinki is well known to be a World design center. I imagined outdoor public spaces that would beckon me to experience them even in the frigid cold. I fantasized magnificently large ice sculptures emanating with golden light, parks with built-in ever-changing snowscapes designed to ride and slide upon with some type of snowboard or skates. I imagined outdoor spaces that were really indoor – like Aleksanterinkatu and the retail streets of Kluuvi with a retractable glass atrium roof that would draw open in summer months and remain closed in the winter time. I envisioned restaurants with roaring fireplaces and saunas sprinkled around the city like



View looking down Aleksanterinkatu, the retail vertebrae of Helsinki.

hotspot community centers. I wanted to see the use of timber everywhere so I would be constantly reminded of the gentle beauty and warmth of the abundant surrounding Nordic forest lands - a City of Wood.

I wanted outdoor interactive video displays engaging and reflecting the volume of movement and circulation of the inhabitants in the city and updating on local and global news events. Neon signs jutting through the darkness promoting businesses and streetcar tracks electrified in color indicating not only the line the track belonged to, but also would blink to tell you the train was approaching.

I wanted to find a serious underground heavy metal scene. Diehard lovers of Lemmy with encyclopedic knowledge of every single metal band member dead or alive and who was any good at last year's open air metal festival. Steamy, mashing, thrashing live bands rocking out in smelting hot basement clubs with red lights, and the feeling like you've just entered the Satan's lair.

I wanted to be reminded that I was in a port city. I imagined fisherman and ice fishing and nets and fish. I saw big ships and little ships bustling through the great Nordic port of the Gulf of Finland. Seagulls hanging about the water's edge like frozen art while the still, icy waters attempt to congeal after being broken apart by a ship transporting people or a fresh bounty of salmon, baltic herring and other Nordic seafood delights. Serenity. Stillness.



View at the site of the South Harbor and the location of the proposed Guggenheim museum.

I wanted to see latent cultural evidence of power and resiliency of a country strongheld between Stockholm, St. Petersburg and Tallinn. Cross-regional impact and influences, evidenced by retail trade, the arts, the people and by the cuisine. Sweden, Russia, Estonia – as influential, but tangent factors to the way of life of a native Finnish countryman.

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This author is the type of person who doesn't believe you can know a place without having experienced it firsthand. I would not believe much from anyone who claims to be able to look down and speculate from the sky and tell you what Helsinki needs without having first bathed in Finnish water and had a sip of Jaloviina with a good friend or a stranger.

We all understand the importance for a city of be identified as a valuable marketplace on a global scale. Every city wants to attract visitors near and far by being recognized as some form of a cosmopolitan beacon – filled with historic, cultural and societal charms. I would argue that a truly great city is always fully emblematic of itself – its true self.

If we, as cities or as people, cater to portraying what we think we should look like or how we think we should act in order to attract attention (global or otherwise) than we are



Ascent from Helsinki. 22 January 2015. Thick cloud cover hangs over the city on this wintery day, blocking the rays of light from reaching the city below.

at risk of eradicating the basis and the essence of who we truly are. And there is brilliance and depth in each and every facet of our idiosyncrasies.

Look in the mirror Helsinki: You are edgy. You are hot. You have excellent taste in fine food. Water surrounds you. Winter surrounds you most of the year too, and that can be beautiful. Embrace it. There are untapped ways to cherish and emphasize your true self and the inherent nature of your landscape. That has far more appeal than succumbing to the ideals of an institution with little regard for the city it touches down upon.

The port is the gateway to your soul. It should be an epicenter of commercial and recreational activity that draws a local and international community by revealing the brilliance of what it means to be in the landscape of Helsinki – and the capital of Finland. It may contain any of the flights of fancy characterizing Helsinki I've described above and much more. But for certain – it should make for a place once visited no one can soon forget. A singular well designed building or object on your shoreline will not get you there.

And the truth is: Helsinki does not need the Guggenheim to become an international magnet in its own right. The opportunity is all in defining the public realm to create an ever-changing event space emblematic of Helsinki itself.