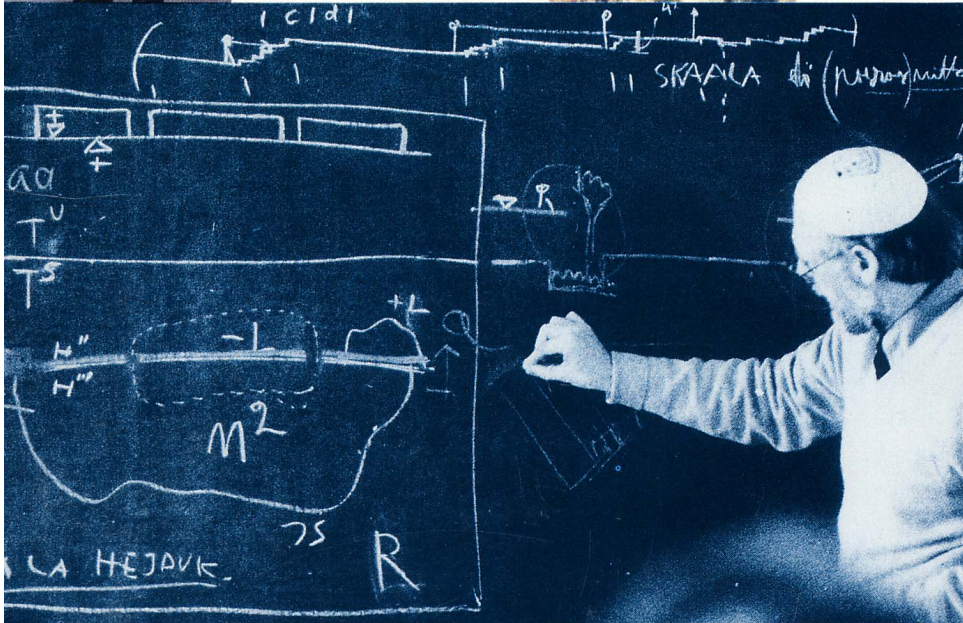


PERSONA OBSCURA



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Soothing Memos against the Pietilä Archive!

"Persona obscura: relejendo a Reima Pietilä"
DPA: Documents de Projectes d'Arquitectura (issue 26/2014).

Quite simply put, some contemporary architects remain so well under the radar that their significance is continuously misunderstood whilst they can occupy a remarkable position in culture and country. In Nordic architecture one name stands out: Reima Pietilä. No question: the figure of Pietila fits into the Nordic scene but in a very special way. Certainly he 'empirically glimpsed' opportunities that went often unattended and were, even, ignored by many of the mainstream architects. This led to a curious almost reluctantly acknowledged significance. His international place in Modern Architecture was assured with the building of Dipoli Students' Union, Suvikumpu Housing in Helsinki, Kaleva Church in Tampere, and the Finnish Embassy in New Delhi (all thought out and designed in the 1960s) but at home he continued to be a vibrant and creative thorn in the flesh to many of the 'normative' Rationalists. In many ways Pietila became the absent Finnish architect. This we should add is no reason to speak of Pietilä as a prime suspect for critical rehab. Pietilä is better than that, needs none of our erring alibis for his sustained contribution to Modern Architecture.

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Often absent, even ignored, the way Pietilä could shift tack, tempt the edge, embrace fiasco and failure in his thinking and works has made him one of the most important and lasting Nordic architects. Moving critical thinking and invention into a project was what Pietilä did best. He could see architecture before it emerged; nothing special in this unless you struggle to read the tree for the forest and the architecture for the city. Nothing special did we say? How can we then celebrate his inventions, his swerves, and remind ourselves at the same time of the inventions that made his work so unpredictable and yet relevant? What does it mean to come in under the radar of the rationally framed Modernism, the normative within Nordic architecture? How do we position this architect? To do this we might seek to understand aspects, alchemical at times, that allowed Pietilä to work his 'magic'.

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For almost his whole career (1953-93) along with his wife Raili Pietilä, Pietilä practiced architecture, wrote texts, produced exhibitions and spoke and lectured in such a way that he not only worked in parallel to the mainstream Rationalism within Finland, but he used this 'alchemical' position to bring architecture in from the edge. This allowed him to confront, with a bewildering consistency, what he saw as the 'other tradition', a static and often unimaginative rationalism. "Since the exploration of the 1960s and early 1960s Finnish architecture has become static and unimaginative," Pietilä explained in a text from 1980. "It repeats the vocabulary of Bauhaus Functionalism in a 'fashionable' manner. If I had to design a house right now, surely it would be those Bauhaus-Finnish stylistics!"

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Unafraid of the polemic, Pietilä would tempt the 'other' by positioning himself in a forgotten mainstream. Instead of what he saw as a tired dogma, Pietilä outlined how he might loop back to the innocence of pre-Functionalism. "Those happy days of this century," he would add tongue in cheek. And, as if to throw his colleagues off, he'd suddenly talk of the unexpected: "I earnestly believe it could be to Adolf Loos' Josephine B's House...or still further...I am ready to jump away from all those stylistic roundabouts of today's Postmodernism."

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Interested in sporting with the sacred, Pietilä always attempted to resist returning to those sacred laws or compulsory ideas that he saw characteristic of the Rationalists. It was always a convincing if at times muted performance. Even today, as Pietilä is still debated by many of his colleagues, it is important that, as with many of the great architects, we re-read Pietilä as a way of reading him for the first time. Let us be clear: Pietilä is no chance alibi for the edge condition. Instead his work and person offers us the model of an architect who with such side-winding and ambient skill, was able to work and shape architecture as a complex system; a system both critical and pragmatic capable of responding to culture and society, landscape and geography, technology and materiality. His ability to shape landscape into compatible energy turned an architectural insight around.

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The dogma presented by the mainstream necessitated an irresponsibility which Pietilä always used to great effect. During a time of framed visions and social dogma, Pietilä responded with nothing less than scripts that he called 'architecture'. The question needs to be asked: was Pietilä ultimately an architect of underachieving talent as some felt, or an architect who played with his dissonant talent to reach quite another inner space? Time and again, Pietilä could turn and smile at the suggestion that Kurt Schwitters or Samuel Beckett designed his Dipoli Students' Union building (1966). Blurring fact and fiction was not the issue here this he did consistently; resting momentarily on anything certain was enough to move his creative and at times troubled disquiet onwards. Ironically, this absent Finnish architect was less absent than we think. A cursory glance at the Pietilä Archive(s) would certainly demonstrate this as any critic knows, approaching the difficulty of reading the drawings, letters, sketches and other residua and trying to re-fashion from these shifting notes a more or less stable working process.

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When we consider a critical re-assessment however, it is fair to lift from such documents an interpretation of how the architect's mind functioned when designing. Pietilä spent text after text, for at least three decades, describing his working method, varying it, calling it by different names, shifting from the artist to the architect, and introducing changes possibly just at the inscrutable moment when this method appeared graspable. "I find that our current techno-culture serves mainly to mechanically turn the present into an 'alternative present' without qualifying the value of the actual operation" he would write in 1980. "Mechanical techno-environments emerge so easily from bureaucratic controls and, on the contrary, cultural environments spring out only with superhuman effort. We should be freed from the actual present and build a field for an un-predestined future city."

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The unpredestined future city! Pietila always took his words and language to the edge too. So much so, that to some of his colleagues and other critics, he never escaped his nemesis, Alvar Aalto.¹ To me this commonly held view of his forty-year career skews the real picture. Pietilä might have known he would never escape his programme for a redemptive architecture as art, but by accepting this constraint, he could explore in ways that many of his colleagues and other Nordic architects, including Aalto, would never have done. If his early programme was indeed heavily indebted – fleetingly but seriously - to secret figures like Kurt Schwitters, Theo van Doesburg, Wittgenstein, Beckett, Kandinsky and Klee, these were to Pietilä serious exchanges, serious compatibilities. Secretly, as mentioned elsewhere, Pietilä was more like Hugo Ball, that alchemical priest able to conjure from the profane something sacred and then believe in the faith of this architectural act.

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It is easy to lose sight of critical neglect today. We notice trends, influences and ideas turning back on themselves. Software has helped re-cycle an expressive, morphed architecture. There is talk of a legitimate smooth or warped architecture. Resonance to nature is both natural and artificial in many of these ‘sculptures’. Young rationalists in Finland are able to glide smoothly from the orthogonal rigour of the transparent, structural glass cube to the organic, colourful and sculptural membrane where conceptual forest space is framed in strict tectonics. The word ‘morphology’, once so familiar to architects in the 1950s as they struggled to define form and distance themselves from suspicious playfulness, has now been revised with the verb ‘to morph’. Script or die!

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Now it is possible to morph a form that was once so difficult, so unimaginable in its irregularity (Dipoli?). Now it is also possible to imagine seamless surfaces, discontinuous forms and non-linear abstraction. To transfer the *geometry of the forest* into a cultural issue that might then be expressed in architecture was often difficult to stomach to the 'rationalists'. A lobe battle, if it was not an aberrant strategy, it was certainly considered 'romantic'. If it was a secret phenomenological approach to architecture, it was not analysed or accepted as such at the time. Certainly, to make matters worse, such free 'geometry' sat uneasily with a developing activism that announced clearer, formal, social and political agendas for architecture.

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The small, dominating 'majority' from the 1960s and 1970s that favoured a stricter rationalism within Finnish Modernism, would, openly and inwardly, condemn Pietilä's 'cultural' forest-space thinking as beyond the conditions of an international, rational architecture. This put Pietilä's work as 'ob-scene', out of the scene in the etymological sense of the word. For a time, it looked as if Pietilä's diagrammatic-conceptual exhibitions (all working around these themes: *Urbanism Morphology* 1960, *Zone* 1967, *Space Garden* 1975) would be short-lived experiments. *Forest morphology* was consigned to the historical dustbin.

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But forget Heidegger's half-poetic intellect for the moment and let's not bring more *forest* into Finnish architecture than it can handle. Was this not what Alvar Aalto's father had instilled into his son? The premise that nature, intuitive language, sensual phenomenology, cultural or landscape factors could be departures for architecture was probably furthest from the intellectual agenda in the 1960s and 1970s.

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The Marxist-Leninists bristled at such sensuality; half poetic indeed, they may have scoffed. Pietilä's underpinning, its awkward, innovative theory and quirky but brilliant inventions always had to go it alone in that country silent in two languages (Brecht). The difficulty of forest morphology and the various diagrams and conceptual language and cultural constructs explored by Pietilä was off limits in these decades. Pietilä amongst other architects like Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen and Timo Penttilä, was 'black-balled', and they too were off-limits.

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Two of Pietilä's projects remain significantly lost: *Malmi Church* (1967) and *Monte Carlo Multipurpose Centre* (1969). To understand this loss as an absence implies a sort of meta-historical game. These projects were not to be. *Malmi Church* would have been the literal cave Pietilä wished to build, without embellishment, without trickery and without sentiment. The *Monte Carlo Multi-Purpose Centre* would have been a significant contribution to an international turn toward the movable and moving building; winged elements would have folded in and out, opening and closing as stadia roofing now does. To re-read Reima Pietilä then is to enter his 'half-poetic' hermeneutic museum, as he cycled his work from poetic text, scribble, exhibition to project, construction and then back to exhibitions, installations and re-interpreted scenarios. In this way, and here he differs from almost all other Nordic architects, Pietilä picked up and dwelled within the loophole. He would agree with Breton; the surrealist research along with alchemical research certainly presented for him a remarkable unit of purpose and might still offer us a key as to why the architect's thinking, architecture and intellectual contribution stand the test of time.

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Let us not cheat history or the passion and courage of Pietilä's ideas nor indeed those that so strongly opposed him. The short version is as follows: Oedipus games took over the solidarity of the architectural profession. After rejecting Alvar Aalto and any Nordic affinities, there was a kind of domino effect, a voiced intention of 'killing off' the type of architecture Pietilä spoke about. Everyone knew about this architecture. It was so easy to mock. It didn't have a right angle. Every window was different. It was always expensive. You get lost inside it. It's a maze. And so on. For some time this succeeded. So much so that - to this day - to some this may still be seen as a triumph.

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So, what happened? This difficulty with Pietilä's architecture cannot merely be explained by using critical alibis or myths about Nordic architecture and the rational urge and pull to the no-nonsense in Finland. If some critical notions rather than others appear to be more acceptable now in re-interpretations of Finnish architecture, we need to consider why. Where is the fresh evidence, and why were such ideas rejected then, only to become legendary now. To understand how this critical narrowness impacted on Pietilä and on Nordic architecture, we must consider the architect today as both 'text' and 'subtext' in post-war Finnish Modernist architecture and what was to become the accepted 'tradition'. Professional divisions and 'battles' are often more critically acceptable when viewed from a present which appears to need to re-read its past so dispassionately.

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Though Reima Pietilä would complete *Dipoli Students' Centre* and *Kaleva Church* (1966) and *Suvikumpu Housing* in the late 1960s, for a period his career in Finland was terminated. Though receiving international acclaim for these 'challenging' buildings Pietilä was the type of architect who was trusted to quietly fade. There seemed no likely intellectual resuscitation of theories that explored landscape as diagram, nature as a cultural paradigm, the Finnish language as morphology, and phenomenology as alchemy. But, as we know now, and as we can trace, that didn't quite happen. Pietilä didn't fade despite his enquiry into a surrealist architecture occasioning the ebullient and charismatic architect and thinker, Kirmo Mikkola announcing roundly in the late 1960s that "it was time to kill off Pietilä's work"? Any re-assessment and re-reading of Pietilä within Nordic and world architecture must begin to open up to the study of architectural history itself.

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We have seen and noted elsewhere, in the face of poetical self-censorship and mounting silence Pietilä always took his critical responsibility seriously. Whether agreeing or not with the critical methods chosen, Pietilä's role during the period 1955-1985 as a constant questioner and provocateur within Finnish architecture should hardly be in question. Yet gaps in history begin to exist. At what moment did he begin distancing himself from other Finnish architects? Though this was perhaps unclear at the time, anyone wishing to trace this can look, for example, at the different agendas for 'nature', 'harmony' and 'structure' between Aulis Blomstedt, Aarno Ruusuvuori and Pietilä.

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Blomstedt mentored both Pietilä and Ruusuvuori, near classmates at the Helsinki University of Technology School of Architecture. All three architects in fact appealed to the 'real' in architecture's relation to nature. Their nuances and differences emerged merely in relation to the discipline, manipulation and refinement of form. All three architects also sensed the trends and fashion within Modern Architecture would always fade; country boys like Blomstedt and Ruusuvuori believed in architecture's talent for taming the forest. Aulis Blomstedt would hint through Egyptian traces at the return to classical harmony echoing Corbusier's lament for the architecture of past times. Aarno Ruusuvuori, more pragmatic, would look to Japan and a refined Brutalism for his impeccable reductive purism.

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The 'absolute' that both these architects imagined presented to Pietilä a divine but random belief, necessarily scaffolded by theory, taste and emphasis. Instead, Pietilä saw within the forest a morphological map and diagram of his own culture and language. Emotion in architecture to Pietilä was inseparable from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger's clearing. Therein, around 1954, Pietilä's difficulty began.

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Of course, history is further complicated if we think of those events that do not make even the selection of history as already hinted at.² And in this way the 'anachronismus' passes the test of time. Architecture of all types will be re-read, re-appraised and then ignored once more. This paradox holds a triumph for all architects. The works remain to be exploited and even neglected thereafter. No cynicism is implied in identifying such critical acceptance. Let us remember, in a forgetting process, in what we often call the forgetting years, oblivion is not an option.

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In sum, even if others felt confused, this *persona obscura* knew exactly what he was doing. For Pietilä, the obtuse had its chance, created its own space, made for the life of untold stories and overlapped dreams. Pietilä's earlier texts were prescient and charged but they were hardly ever read. Really read that is. Subject to superficial prejudice and thin attention, Pietilä's alchemy alerted itself.

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In 1980 Pietilä began to redefine the very indifference that invited his trip to the edge: The doctrine of the late 1960s for Pietilä had distorted the principle that the anonymous grid plan was the only flexible plan form. Instead, he considered this subordinated Finnish architecture to little more than an elitist series of box-productions! "We have too many 'wrong' images of the future predicting continuous and compulsory change as the only possible route for evolution," Pietilä wrote, "Architecture should not be so pliable and servile that it remains a mechanical tool. It shouldn't help to further the alienation and subordination of man.

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Pietilä possessed that surrealistic mischief where he would hijack or swerve away from any coherent attempt at explaining his process whilst, of course, realising as all good Surrealists did, how one must go some way towards an explanation. If there is a very real *absence* within Reima Pietilä that exists within the society and architecture, is it so earnestly redeemed by his life's project? And if so how might we legitimate this idea of an absence? Rudi Fuchs in *Conflicts with Modernism or the Absence of Kurt Schwitters* considers, unlike Mondrian, Kurt Schwitters was never fanatic about purity. He was a very 'impure' artist. And Fuchs continues "when I speak of Schwitters' absence, I also mean to say that the very idea of impurity (or the idea of compromise and aesthetic contamination as a source of inspiration) is largely absent from Modernist artistic consciousness."³

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This is not so far from the position that Pietilä took up, and in many deviating ways he continued to foster an absence within which he could work, either more favourably or then more personally. If we have learnt anything about Nordic architecture over the last 30 or 40 years it is not improbable at all to consider that alchemy is more fittingly a part of the apparent rational procedures that passed for a normative architecture in the last few decades. This architecture of rigidly controlled repressed framing, some would say, is the true black magic and Pietilä, like Muhammad ibn al-Hasan an-Niffari, too cunning, too impermanent, and too much the poet to be satisfied with the applause of these earthly gods.

Roger Connah © "Persona obscura: releyendo a Reima Pietilä" *DPA: Documents de Projectes d'Arquitectura* (n. 26 2014).

¹ Aalto as Pietilä's nemesis, see the earlier essay in this volume.

² See the note on Gass in the earlier essay....

³ Rudi Fuchs, *Conflicts in Modernism or the Absence of Kurt Schwitters*. Bernh, 1991, Cited in Garmard, Schwitters, op cit. p.5-6.