

SHADOWLANDS

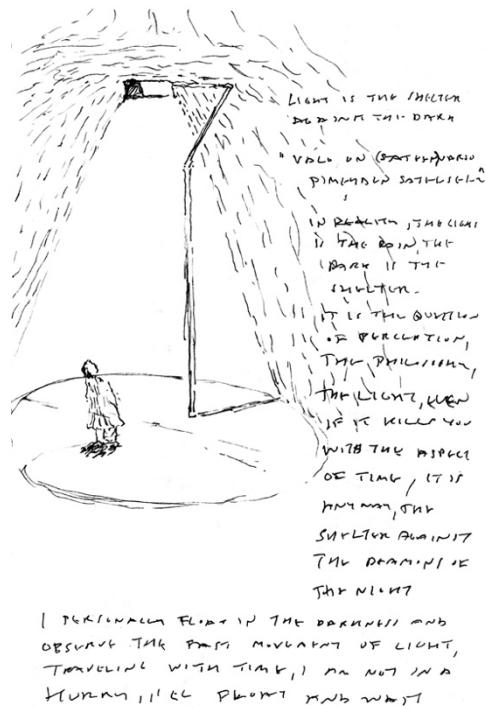
or

The Collected Works of Vesa Honkonen So Far



Foreword

Vesa Honkanen - Architecture of Light, Cities and Landscape
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Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The Chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'.
For the loser now
Will later to win
For the times they are a-changin'.

Bob Dylan ¹

Nothing could be further away from architecture than Bob Dylan. Think again! Vesa Honkonen and I share a liking for the Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki. There is one film in particular that draws me to the *unknown*, in the thinking of this young architect. *Calamari Union* (1985) is a simple film, a simple idea, full of simple one-liners. But like good architecture, even a disposable throw away idea, it makes more of this simplicity. Nine, twelve, fourteen or is it seventeen young hipster-thugs in leather and poplin all named Frank begin a black and white journey from the working class side of Helsinki (*Kallio*) to the Betterlands of Southern Helsinki (*Eira*).²

There, only 2 miles away over the rainbow, the sun shines and the sea slowly laps the shore. There, the air is fresher and the future is bright. There, when the surviving two Franks reach it after fighting off women and other worries is the faroff land, Estonia. The last shot is a rowing boat, a mock fight, the future secure. Eastland! The end of this mock-noir journey is a *happyend* world. It is – and Honkonen understands this too - one of the best sequences to describe the development of Finnish architecture over the last 30 years.

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Finland to all intents and purposes is still one of the margins of the world. Most of what is known of the country is second hand. Most of its authority is passed through foreign scholars or researchers interested enough in its identity, but more usually influenced by the sentiment of its image. Few have the luxury or privilege of depth. Few ever feel that they inhabit the country. Even less inhabit its language, that zone linguists often call a ‘falling zone’ without quite using those words.

When Honkonen worked with Steven Holl as his assistant on the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki during the 1990s decade he prepared a series of notes on 'darkness' as a letter to the American architect. It was an attempt to explain without explaining away the ungraspable subtleties and difficulties within the Finnish culture, within the Finnish way of doing things. Everything appears to fall you see and still go on. Even the tango, an inscrutable form of creative sadness, falls away without ever quite falling off. It is not the sadness you quite think it is, which makes the creativity something inscrutable also.

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Historically belonging to the Finno-Ugrian peoples rather than the Indo-European language speaking world, Finnish is a difficult language to improvise within. It is a language that does not open without some knowledge of its syntactical structure. That means you need to understand its additive, agglutinising characteristics.³ Like a sculptor who adds not subtracts, you throw more and more clay at the language, the words get longer, the meaning sticks. Yet, and this can be surprising, languages in the margin, especially non Indo-European languages, continue to hold a fascination for students and scholars beyond comparative linguistics. The societies themselves become attractive too because of their margins. And their margins are beginning to reach into their architecture.

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It is often said that there are few advantages being in the margins. What is defined elsewhere in the centre (wherever that is) too often finds its way eventually in modified, even reduced form, in the periphery. This is a *shadowland*. Cultures meet and co-opt, for their own use ideas from elsewhere. The *shadowland* is often tormented until originality is established. Then there is the Nightlands,⁴ the darkness, the sadness, the silence, the suicide figures, the tango and the lakes. Considering its intensity during the five or six winter months from October through March, we can understand Christian Norberg Schulz's notion of this part of the world as the Nightlands. Helsinki particularly is as windy as Edinburgh but darker, with a different less compact rugged majesty. It is as attractive as St Petersburg in miniature form. It is not however Stockholm, Oslo or Copenhagen. For much of this century Helsinki has been a terminal city. With the Cold War, things stopped at Helsinki.

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Further east was too far east. In films like *Reds* Helsinki became a stand-in city for Leningrad. Now the Helsinki - St Petersburg axis runs a flourishing trade line just as it did at the turn of the century. The black market stretches the whole length. It is obvious that such specific geo-cultural and geo-political conditions have undoubtedly influenced its architecture. The darkness of Finland's northern latitude certainly suggests a *shadowland* but with a difference. It is this difference that feeds the images that become too predictable. These are the images visitors wish to re-script as if they experience anxiety like no other. Well, the news is out; the Nightlands are changing. This is the beginning of a beautiful relationship. In this century, not the last.

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Honkonen does not use the phrase a 'falling zone' but the way light fades in autumn, the way darkness re-defines lightness in the country he might have done. And the best image to describe just how and why Honkonen will work within the falling zone, is this. In Aki Kaurismaki's film Ariel (1988) it opens with a young man leaving the mine in Northern Finland for the last time. He loses his job, the mine is closing. His father sits in a café. He hands the son his car keys and after announcing the sadness of it all, proceeds to the toilet cubicle. The shot is heard off screen. The young man goes to find the car left to him by his father. It is a huge whale of a white Cadillac. He reverses it out gently. The timber barn creaks. He slowly pulls off. The barn continues to creak, eventually collapsing just as the car is set free.

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The Collected Works of an architect not yet fifty years of age? Is this not something to smile about and celebrate? It's not everyday you get the chance to write the foreword to an architect not yet 50. But for this I would suggest there is good reason. In a country like Finland, perhaps generally all over the world, many architects don't achieve their so-called serious work until they are well past 50 years of age. Look at Frank Gehry or Daniel Libeskind. It is often a deceptive contract with maturity when it is usually more about suffering. Life is scripted out by the profession. An architect not yet leaving behind what must be left behind, and a Finnish architect not wanting to reach what colleagues say it is inevitable to reach, maturity. Forget it, because the country will. The profession mauls the 'calling', and the 'calling' resists the profession. Feel-good architecture is seen as a result instead of the transition it always is. To resist the clichés of its own profession is becoming part of the 'calling' in architecture. That is why we don't really need to talk about architecture to talk about the young Finnish architect Vesa Honkonen.

When you note the departures, Honkonen uses and then insinuates within his works, you realise this is a person operating within and outside the shadowlands. Here, in the *Collected Works of Vesa Honkonen So Far*, we see the poetic, even enigmatic departures – darkness, sadness, cinema, Bob Dylan or Shakespeare - offer unusual and challenging tectonic, cognitive and aesthetic response.

These departures are a kind of lift-off. They might edge us toward the transformations necessary for a more conventional urbanism, for architecture as event or more other recognisable architectural encounters. But these are conventions, aspects of an accepted architecture only other architects feel comfortable with. These departures make one obvious point: young architects are unlikely to remain within architecture alone. Today this is the biggest club in architecture that has no membership fee, no club headquarters and no common manifesto – it is what we might call **Pulp Architecture**.

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So what is pulp architecture? Let's rap a little. Pulp is not quite (yet) a new architectural programme. Pulp is a strategy, an attitude, a parti, a google, an alibi, a motor, an engine, a scroll, a resistance, an optimism, a seduction, a fatigue and possibly an ethic....(*the list is not closed*) If movement itself is essential to our contemporary existence, then Pulp Architecture can only ever be a movement-in-progress. Pulp Architecture responds to changing social, cultural and economic conditions. Pulp Architecture learns mortgage and developmental terminology to appropriate planning inertia. Pulp architecture must even respond to political uncertainty, terror, surveillance politics and deceit. Pulp architecture cannot avoid the new media, but it can programme its potential uses within architecture.

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Pulp Architecture explores how these conditions and others could re-program architecture. In a contemporary condition ‘between’ rather than ‘within’, Pulp is theory and anti-theory. Pulp is a transportable architecture that seems to wish to stay on the edge. Pulp is trans-urbanism, trans-architecture. Pulp is awkwardness before it is smoothed out. Pulp architecture respects but rejects the star architecture system of individualised spectacles. Pulp challenges existing architecture as much as it challenges architecture already on the edge. Pulp is an architectural strategy informed and fashioned from film, street culture, art, play, terror, surveillance, the hacker ethic, shopping, surveillance, war and new media..... *(the list cannot be closed)* but – and this is important – pulp is not FICTION.⁵

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Is there a danger here?

Yes, hopefully. For who wishes to tame such thinking, to bring it back into the country’s national idiom, into the so-called mellow stage of an architect’s thinking, into the myth of Finnish architecture? Who wishes to see the promising signs in a designer’s repertoire conform to the conventional forms up ahead? Gone is the time for such nostalgia. By re-framing issues - light, space, interiors, installations, buildings, yes buildings! cities, yes cities! - the edge in such thinking will go inwards and become more dangerous.

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The Collected Works of Vesa Honkonen So Far has one other serious message: to avoid being re-framed by a society that has seen many young architects begin brave, become established, and remain housebound. Today, in the *nightlands*, in the *shadowlands*, in the *betterlands*, this is not an option any longer for a young architect. The script remains to be written.

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Instead: Honkonen suggests more edge, and subsequently more falling off that edge. Make what significance you wish, but here is an architect beginning to draw on the legacy of a Finnish architecture that now needs no further support. It is time to move. Old critical forms and frames will no longer suffice for Finnish architecture. The practice wheels on the early learning bicycle have been thrust away. Other young architects will no longer accept that the 21st century will be a more accomplished version of the 21st century.

More recently and this is where Vesa Honkonen comes in, a stage has been reached where younger architects have taken different choices than their teachers, their professors. The choice for them is not between Heidegger and Stockhausen, or Satie and Sibelius, it is between rock music, rap, tango, art, film making, electronic art and design. When young architects make these choices, they don't suddenly leave such interests and impulses behind, they don't choose one over the other, they don't edit out everything that doesn't concern architecture. Instead, they re-evaluate and re-script architecture through them.

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“It was a light week in Lograire. The wine was free. Connie had a bowl. All the boys’ names were frank. He went all the way to the drugstore to be sick on account of military school. Phones rang. Cops’ cars came and went looking at the party.

Anna had a relative in a field and the field had a speakeasy. Connie had an inn called Connie’s Inn. Music under the hot tunnels of summer. The cops were in the cellar wanting to do the Charleston with the German maid. Connie had on a wet bathrobe and frank got sick in the maid’s bathroom on account of military school. We went to sleep in a boat that night in the harbor singing in front of fat Tony’s. The boats were all beyond the reach of Edison and played their own lights upon the harbor. Several called Frank went all the way. I knew they took him in a copscar from the middle of the Park. I knew Finneran would fall in the middle of Harlem. Some stayed in the boats and others went to Cambridge.”⁶

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The Contemporary Moment? We are always about to come up to the present as if we can avoid falling once more. The confusion about confusion instead of thrilling us, wards us off. We want less of everything if it is going to be as insecure as the American President says it is. We opt for safer solutions, safer hotels and journeys, safer restaurants, neater critical theories, and a return to the safer past when bombs didn’t fall, when random acts of terror did not put our life in jeopardy. Architects now grow up, and becoming so wise they begin to tell younger architects this is the way it is. Coherence is invited as if we all need now to join the war against the infidel. It still goes on.

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I keep getting asked whatever happened to Finnish Architecture? Can it ascend once more? Is it doing so, is it really so predictably Modern and inevitable? I try desperately to avoid such questions. Most of those asking have an image of a Golden Age in their minds. Based on so little knowledge of the past it hurts trying to answer them. There is in this anxiety and romance a lamentable hope that somehow things haven't changed. At least not in Finland, the questioner suggests. At least not out there in the shadowlands, in the betterlands - surely things haven't changed. Well, I think architects like Honkonen have news for them. Things have changed. Things will go on changing. And just as I keep getting asked this question I keep being just as stubborn and repeat those lines from the British playwright Edward Bond. "Remember: The firing squad shoots in the back of the neck. Whole nations have been caught looking the wrong way." Finland?

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To conclude however reluctantly; as if to invite us into the falling zone, as if to take us over the edge it is only decent to balance this vertigo by the words of the Finnish poet Bo Carpelan from his novel Axel (16.11.1914). Not safe words, not easy words, but, to some, wise words: "The insignificant is so insignificant that whoever sees it smiles. The insignificant has a tough life-energy, is always there, always signifies something and is a significant warning. It warns the significant against always believing that it is significant. The insignificant displays itself in the cracks between the stones, or is it perhaps the mortar? Why am I interested in the insignificant?"

Because the insignificant does not simply draw nourishment from the significant; the significant is also dependent on the insignificant, as the landscape is dependent on its sometimes almost invisible shadows." ⁷ I have the feeling Honkonen knows exactly what the poet means: the insignificant is so insignificant that whoever sees it smiles. And it is in the architecture of idea not the idea of architecture that the new work begins to smile. The barn collapses yes, but the smile draws itself across the mouth, across the veiled, silent, dark culture. Now, from this part of the world, with its own tough life-energy, isn't that some sort of triumph?

Nothing to add

But the big voice of a detective

Using the wrong first names

In national archives. ⁸

Roger Connah The Hotel Architecture, Ruthin, North Wales. (18.10.04)

¹ Bob Dylan, *Writings & Drawings*, Cape, London 1972, p.85

² for more on this & other films by Kaurismäki see Connah, *K/K, A Couple of Films and some Donald Ducks Vap*, Helsinki 1991

³ see Peter Hajdu, *Finno-Ugrian Languages & Peoples*, Deutsch, London, 1975

⁴ see Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Nightlands*, MIT, 1995

⁵ for more on Pulp Architecture see Connah, *Pulp Architecture Goes Yale*, Perspecta

036, MIT Press 2004.

⁶ Thomas Merton – *The Geography of Lograire*. New Directions, New York, 1969, p.46-47.

⁷ Bo Carpelan, Axel, Paladin, London, 1991

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Lograire*, op.cit.,p.130