

# Rectification to the design history of the Temppeliaukio Church



1. Temppeliaukio Church



2. Temppeliaukio Church, interior

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Design and realisation

Attitudes towards the rock church

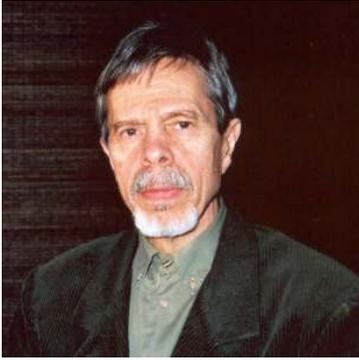
The church breaks out

Blomstedt did not propose the church to be excavated into the rock

The only common feature is the respect for rock



3. Architect brothers  
Timo (1928-) and Tuomo (1931-88) Suomalainen in 1984



Timo Suomalainen, architect  
who was interviewed



The writer of the article:  
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Non-fiction writer

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## Rectification to the design history of the Temppeliaukio Church

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**Temppeliaukio Church ("Rock Church") in Helsinki centre attracts visitors from all over the world. The rock church, designed by *Timo* and *Tuomo Suomalainen* and built in 1969, is the most popular architectural sight in Finland, not only among modern but also historic buildings. Yet, as a result of superficial observation, mistaken assumptions about its design history and architecture have been and still are presented as facts. It is time for rectification.**

Architect brothers ***Timo*** (1928-) and ***Tuomo*** (1931-88) ***Suomalainen*** won the open competition in 1960-61 for the architectural design of Temppeliaukio Church as a result of the unanimous decision of the jury. There had been two competitions arranged about the same church in the 1930s, both unrealised. Architect ***P.E. Blomstedt*** (1900-1935) participated in the first competition arranged in 1932-33, but without success. The similarity between Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen's and P.E. Blomstedt's proposals is a persistently repeated claim or insinuation. In these designs both the main idea and the artistic overall structure are, however, totally different and only the Suomalainen brothers' church is sunk into the rock.

Before I start to analyse in more detail the differences between the above-mentioned designs, I will tell about the planning, realisation and reception of Temppeliaukio Church and the background of Suomalainen brothers (which I have dealt broadly in my book, published in 2003 in Finnish, *Temppeliaukio—kirKKo Suursaaresta länteen* ("Temppeliaukio—Church West from Suursaari Island").

### Design and realisation

It dawned intuitively on the Suomalainen brothers when they visited the building site that, in order to save the character of place, the rock itself had to be understood as a church and everything to be built at the site should be adjusted to accompany the character of the rock. The architect brothers had a firm relationship to rock. They had been born and lived their childhood until the beginning of the World War II on a small island, called Suursaari, in the middle of the Gulf of Finland.

Juxtaposed to the white sandy beaches of the island's bays were hills, precipices and crevices, caves, gorges, boulders, and stony fields. Timo Suomalainen tells how the island of their birth, lost to the Soviet Union, unconsciously participated in their architecture. On the Temppeliaukio Square ("Temple Square") the home island of the brothers, which was its own micro cosmos, is present as the rock church itself. Transferred from the island is the simultaneous feeling of security and freedom that one can experience in nature, which offers not only surprises and adventure, but also a feeling of stability and shelter. Before the brothers started designing the Temppeliaukio Church, they had done planning work for the Ministry of Defence and thus had become familiar with rock building. Moreover, they had come to the point in their career where, after having designed clean-lined and minimalistic architecture, they wished to open to architecturally intuitive, unconscious, solutions giving space even to chance.

According to Timo Suomalainen, in order to realise the total idea or to transform the rock on Temppeliaukio Square into a church, three architectonic basic solutions were needed:

1. Making the entrance into the rock easy and inviting. Because the brothers wanted to locate the floor of the sanctuary at the level of the widest and highest street, Fredrikinkatu Street, which ends at the square, the church hall simply had to be cut into the bedrock. This solution, based mainly on movement into the space, leads the visitor to the sanctuary without the need to climb stairs, simultaneously offering a friendly rather than overbearing experience of the church space.

2. The creation and use of the unique spatial geometry made possible by the rock. The floor plan of the church hall is oval, clearly divergent from circular and outlined in a special way. The wall line meanders and defines a hierarchy based on the use of the various parts of the hall in the following way: The sanctuary culminates in the cupola—the round shape, familiar already from the Antiquity as representing order, unity, and security. When the surface of the cone-shaped glass roof and the fan-shaped concrete beams supporting the solid dome join the freely undulating outside wall, they form an unfettered line floating in the interior. This line divides the glass ceiling into parts of different sizes depending on the value of each location. In this way, the altar area, for example, becomes more illuminated compared to the other parts of the sanctuary. This combination of a free form into a mathematical form in the space geometry of the church hall the brothers regard as the true idea of their proposal. It gives birth to dynamism, but at the same time a feeling of deep harmony and lightness.

3. Choosing quarried stone to emphasise nature and stability. During the planning process, the brothers linked the church more closely to nature. Even in the competition entry, which the brothers made by themselves without the help of outside experts, the stone surface participated in creating the atmosphere inside in the sanctuary, making the outside stone wall visible through the ceiling window. As the design developed, the wall surfaces of the hall became covered partly by rock, partly by quarried stone, because expert statements by the engineers of various

fields, hired at this point to be members of the design team, deemed these materials to be suitable. This satisfied also the clients. Overall, the brothers became aware of how unsurpassable the rough rock and natural stone walls were technically, aesthetically, as well as acoustically. The colour scheme of the interiors, which the brothers designed, was based on the shades of granite: red, purple, and grey. As metals to match the colours of the stone were chosen steel, made bluish by hammering, and the non-oxidised copper for the front facing of the gallery and cupola.

### **Attitudes towards the rock church**

When the competition results were presented, the Suomalainen brothers' proposal was received mostly positively in the newspapers. However, converting the rock of the Temppeliaukio Square into a church, including the competition phase, took nine years, in the atmosphere of the 1960s, which in Finland was characterised by anti-church attitudes and leftist radicalism. In architecture, the representatives of the rationalist architects wielded power. Propaganda in the papers disparaged the project for years. There were publicity-seeking demonstrators enough. The project, costing the equivalent of an average size school building, was described as a colossal investment. Fellow architects prevented the granting of a routine building permit. Furthermore, dissenting opinions and complaints from various groups representing the builder (the Helsinki congregations) delayed the project—in one of the votes, the continuation of the entire project hung on the single vote of the chairman.

As a result of the negative atmosphere, the two thirds of the building closely skirting the edge of the rock, which contained congregation spaces, had to be cut away, making it difficult today to visualise the total idea of the brothers. During those years of agony, the design nevertheless improved, became refined, and regarding the sanctuary, even kept its original size. The church was consecrated on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, 1969 as the church for Taivallahti congregation (for a couple years it even officially bore the name Taivallahti Church). The negative statements presented publicly then almost completely dried up. Spectators began streaming into the rock hall, and visitors came to the many events staged there. The space inside the rock was frequently used as concert hall due to its superior acoustics. The church was soon presented in many foreign architectural publications. The interest shown transcended nationalities and religions. In 1978, a series of books in eight parts, *I Cento Monumenti*, introducing the sights of the world, was published in Italy. Temppeliaukio Church was presented there as the only example from Finland.

Naturally, the brothers were happy about the recognition received by the church. Soon they began to realize that a small, influential group of people active in architecture and art history in Finland had initiated a campaign behind the scenes. Information about Temppeliaukio Church started to be omitted from Finnish architectural media, guides, and exhibitions aimed outside Finland, as well as from reference and school books and even from historical works. If the church was

mentioned, it was in a dismissive and misleading manner, even hinting at plagiarism. For example, in a publication series by the Museum of Finnish Architecture from 1996, **Elina Standertskjöld** in her book about P.E. Blomstedt (p. 74) states, when covering Blomstedt's competition entry, that "the church drawn by Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen has exactly the same basic idea".

### **The church breaks out**

A new view was finally brought forward by the English architectural critic **Roger Connah**. He studied the Suomalainen brothers' case in his book *Grace and Architecture*, published in 1998, which explored, according to the back cover of the Finnish language edition published the following year, the "professional discouragement, marginalising of architecture not fitting into an ideology, and a tradition of silence and consensus".

*20th-Century Architecture: Finland*, published in 2000, ended the boycott. The second publisher of the book is the Museum of Finnish Architecture; the book is edited by **Marja-Riitta Norri**, the director of the museum of that time, as well as by *Elina Standertskjöld* and **Wilfried Wang**. The book included the work of the Suomalainen brothers, but did so by distorting the text of the competition jury in presenting the brothers' work as a development of *Blomstedt's* competition entry from 1933 (p. 105). The conclusion is wrong, because the designs in question are totally different and the brothers were not even aware of Blomstedt's proposal before submitting their competition entry.

Timo Suomalainen was invited to become a Fellow of American Institute of Architects in 2000 and to receive the cultural prize of his home town Espoo in 2002. In 2003, Temppeliaukio Church was finally included in an exhibition organized by the Museum of Finnish Architecture; the exhibition was *Sacral Space*, which presented the 12 most important Finnish post-war churches on a tour around the world. In 2004, Temppeliaukio Church was declared a protected building. The protection proposal stated: "Temppeliaukio Church is an original building, strongly associated as a product of the Finnish spirit".

The work, hidden in plain site for more than thirty years, has finally broken out. Now, however, the same sources who did not have any regard for the Suomalainen brothers' work still stubbornly strive to transfer part of the design, recognised as successful, to an architect of a different generation. For example the internet pages of the Museum of Finnish Architecture tell that P.E. Blomstedt's proposal resembles surprisingly closely the Suomalainen brothers' proposal, realised almost forty years later, where the church is quarried into the rock. The texts under the interior picture of the brothers' church in the exhibition *The 130 Years of Finnish Architectural Competitions* of 2006, organized by Finnish Association of Architects in the Museum of Finnish Architecture, P.E. Blomstedt's unsuccessful entry was introduced as "a hemisphere church to be excavated into the rock".

## **Blomstedt did not propose the church to be excavated into the rock**

On the 6th of July, 2007 I was together with architect Timo Suomalainen in the archives of the Museum of Finnish Architecture searching material for my study in cultural history. At that point the original documents of P.E. Blomstedt's entry were found. They included also the façade drawing of the area where Sammonkatu and Oksasenkatu Streets end, as well as a drawing called "the special drawing of the rock area". I was given a permission to use the copies of the drawings that I received from the Museum in my study. I was not aware earlier about the existence of these drawings—nor has Timo Suomalainen known about them.

The following characterisations, based on this amazing find in the Museum of Finnish Architecture, are founded on observations by Timo Suomalainen: This material immediately reveals the previously hidden character of P.E. Blomstedt's entry: the church as a contrast, rather than integral, to the rock. Critically, the hall was not embedded into the rock but skirted it. *Blomstedt* quarries a piece out from the edge of the rocky outcrop, forming a cove into which the church building with the sanctuary in front is pushed. His church is not sunk into the rock, but rather abuts it. The sanctuary, whose floor plan is the shape of regular circle, is situated next to the rock. The other spaces are connected directly to the sanctuary and extend to the street almost all the way to the pavement. The main passage into the sanctuary from the entrance leads to both sides of the altar area. From the end of Fredrikinkatu Street a narrow corridor, covered with a turf roof, leads through the rock to the gallery; the walls inside appear to be of stucco or concrete. The sanctuary itself is covered with a glass brick cupola, which dominates the external appearance and forms a strong contrast with the nearby natural rock. Inside the sanctuary is severely symmetrical, even Classical in its spirit. The sanctuary shares nothing in common with rock, stone or any part of nature. Nothing inside in the sanctuary expresses even the location of the building in the cove of the rock. The hall is closed, without windows, its only light coming through the cupola, emphasising its own isolation. Its Classical-Functionalistic façade and cupola strengthen the contrast to the rock. The façade is symmetrical with its two wide entrance recesses and steps leading up to the sanctuary and other spaces. The vegetation and the pergola supporting give a decorative, light touch typical of Functionalism.

Blomstedt aimed, with his unconventional proposal, a rationalistic design of contrasts, foremost to preserve the rock in the densely built part of town.

## **The only common feature is the respect for rock**

In both the Suomalainen brothers' and P.E. Blomstedt's plans the rock has been given the main role, although in the totally different ways. For Blomstedt, the artistic main feature arises from the contrast of the rock and building, while for the Suomalainen brothers it is born from the harmony between the rock and the forms of the spaces. The outline or the part of the circle of the cupola—a fairly common

sacral structure—in the drawings of both proposals is insufficient to label the designs similar. Respect for the rock—not building upon it—remains the only commonality in the proposals.

The competition jury, in its statement from 1961 paid attention to the above-mentioned shared respect: “The proposal in its main part follows the line, which has presented already earlier in the competition about the church on this site, but as a design it is however completely original.” Timo Suomalainen believes that with this exact statement the jury wanted to emphasise that the Suomalainen brothers’ proposal, called “Kivikirkko” (“Stone Church”), is its own independent creation. The competition program in fact instructed to applicant to apply this approach by stating the city council’s view that “...the architectural competition should include the organisation plan for the whole Temppeliaukio Square with its park area and parking spaces, taking into attention that as great part as possible of the rock area of the square could be saved.”

Instead of small Finland having been able to be glad—the opinion makers in the architectural media among others—about the unique work which had won international fame, Temppeliaukio Church became a target of the institutional abuse of power. The case can be described by French sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu’s** expressions, “symbolic violence” and “manipulation of goals”, which he uses when referring to the power of institutions to preserve, forward and forge cultural value judgements and canons. This kind of violence and manipulation has dictated how Temppeliaukio Church is handled to this day, what has been allowed to be said, taught, and written about it.

I have written this article in order to further understanding of the basic idea and architectural solutions of Temppeliaukio Church—Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen’s work of art—and to show how a distorted and inaccurate design history, which was developed and distributed with the tools of personal and institutional power, has reached the dimensions of a scandal. The article and picture gallery are freely available providing that the source is quoted.

**Translated from the Finnish original by Pirkko-Liisa Louhenjoki-Schulman.**

The photos and pictures about the project refer to the realised design.

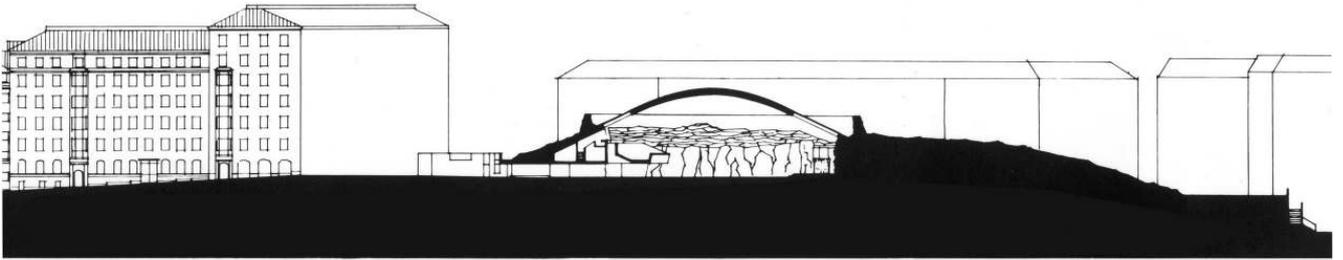


6.  
Part of the gallery and the organ  
Photo: Arttu Suomalainen

7.  
The church seen from the east  
Photo: Timo Suomalainen

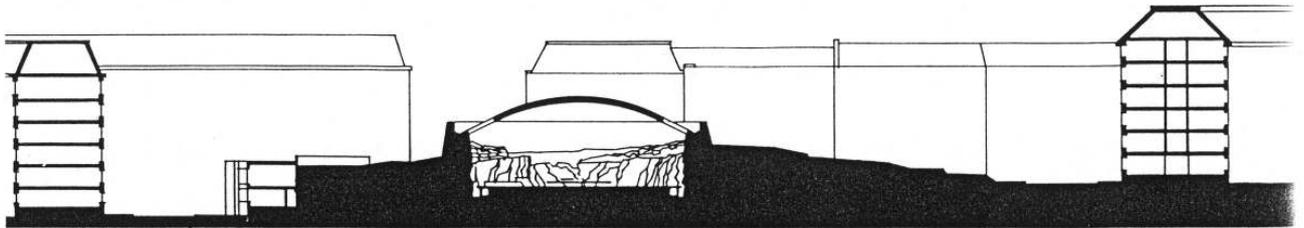


8. Tempeliahaukio Square and its surroundings



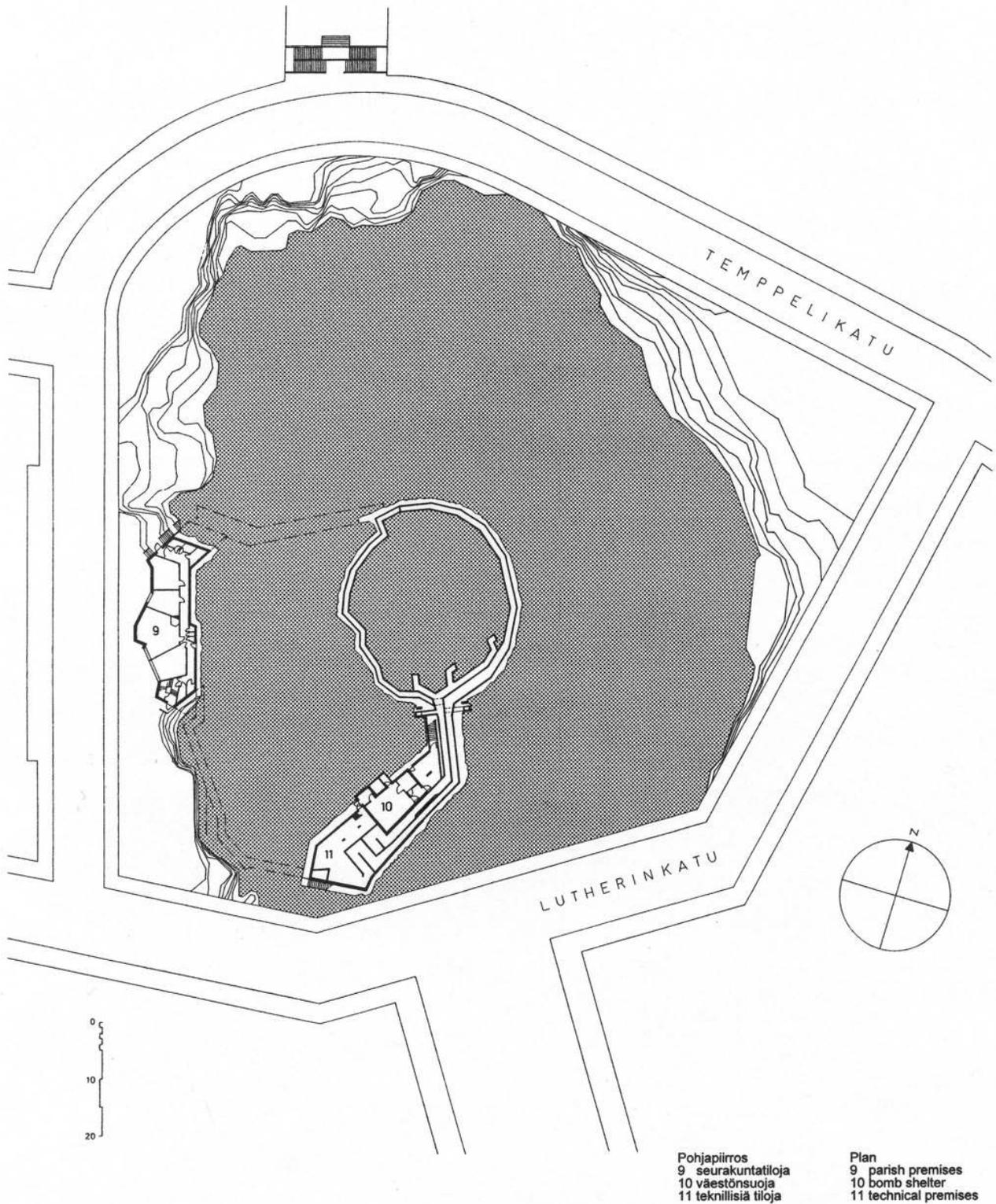
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9. Longitudinal section

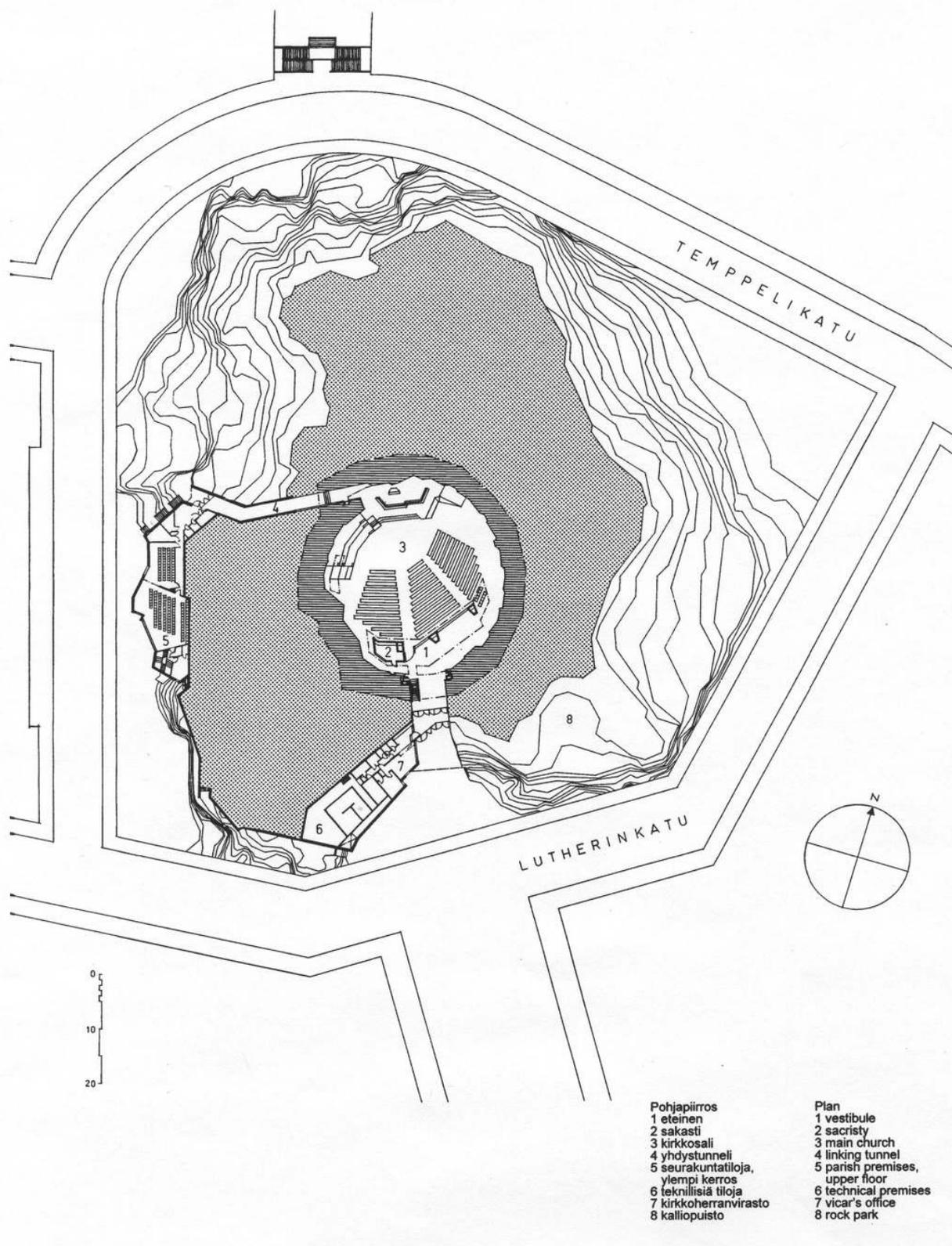


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10. Cross section



11. Basement



10. 1st floor