

Suursaari Island – in the original images of TempPELLIAUKIO Church

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Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen were born on the rugged island of Suursaari, in the middle of the Gulf of Finland. Of the three mountains whose silhouettes dominate the island, two rise to the height of 160 metres. The island is about 11 kilometres long and only 1.5 to 3 kilometres wide. Their childhood island environment – the wild nature and the dialogue between nature and the densely built village – unconsciously influenced the brothers' work, especially the architecture of TempPELLIAUKIO Church. A few photographs with captions give a glimpse of the attraction of this island, which was lost in war.



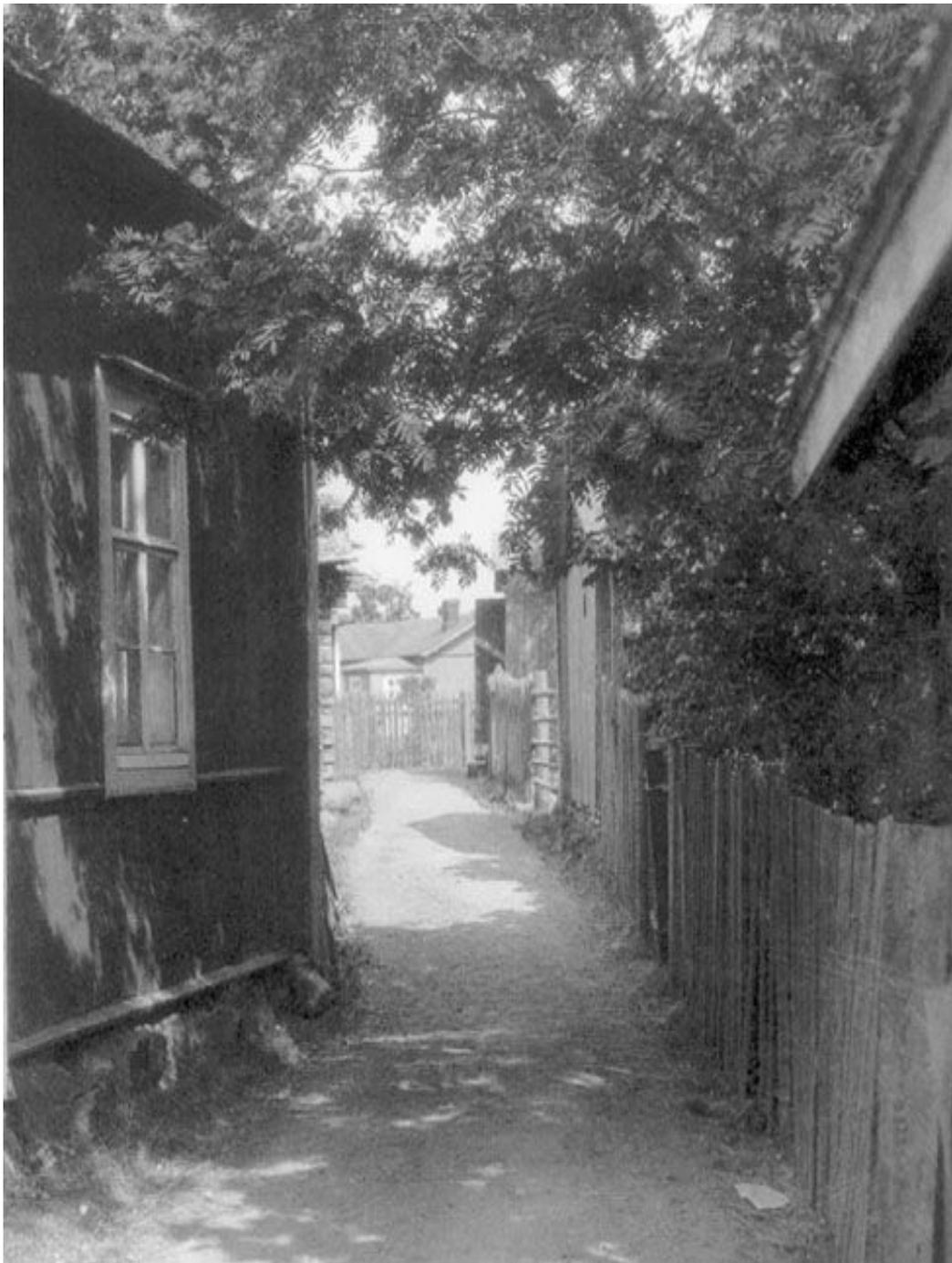
Suurkylä village, on the eastern shore of Suursaari Island.

Timo (1928-) and Tuomo (1931-88) Suomalainen were born in the village of Suurkylä, "Great Village". The village spread over the slowly rising terrain, which rose from Satamalahti, harbor bay, as a dense cluster made up of about a hundred dwellings and many outbuildings. In contrast to the glacial rock and gentle eastern shore, the western shore seen from the sea is dominated by the mountains of Pohjoiskorkia, Haukkavuori, and Lounatkorkia. Between the mountains there are valleys, woods, lakes, marshland, and small meadows, but no areas suitable for farming. The residents, only some 800, had to squeeze their livelihood from the sea washing the rocks. It required throwing oneself into disciplined co-operation with untamed and occasionally dangerous nature. The families of the brothers on both their father's and mother's sides were ship pilots from the island. It is easy to believe that people that settled in this kind of place were persistent, independent, and perhaps sensitive to the impressiveness of the island.



Satamalahti bay seen from the white sandy beach of Liivanranta.

Satamalahti, "Harbour Bay", with its shore barns, docks, fishing boats, yawls, and visiting barks, was the centre of life for the Suurkylä people. The regularly operating passenger ships also docked at the breakwater. During the years before the Second World War up to 9000 visitors arrived on the island during the summer season. Most of the summer guests stayed at island homes. The Suomalainen family, too, housed visitors, necessitating the family itself to live in barns and in the sauna building during the summer season. The shores of Satamalahti served as a place to maintain the vessels, clean fish, wash laundry, exchange news, and generally set the matters of the world in order. Satamalahti bay, with its rambling shore structures and clear water, was an enchanting playground for village children. The harbour was like a playground and waterpark built on a scale suitable for children, always offering something new according to the season. The lagoon-like bay, somewhat oval in shape, protected from the restless sea by a breakwater built from large blocks of granite, was one of the most powerful spatial experiences for the architect brothers during their childhood days.



The old mail path – the most central and perhaps oldest village feature.

'Mail path' in Suurkylä Village was like a series of dusky tunnels made from the old houses and barns and foliage of trees, with the small clearings at road crossings giving light at each end of the tunnels. The picturesque villages of Suursaari Island with their lanes, views over the shores and inland lakes, mountains and rocky outcrops had inspired artists since the 19th century. The people in the home village knew as well how to appreciate the nature and beauty of their living environment. The respect for environment and place is visible in the brothers' architecture. According to Timo Suomalainen they, however, never tried to imitate nature in their work, but instead intuitively chose the structures, shapes, materials, and colours so that they would generate a sense of nature at its best. In the fall of 1939, during the first days of the Winter War, both villages of the island, Suurkylä and Kiiskinkylä, were destroyed in the bombings by the Soviet Union. The residents of the island managed to be evacuated to the town of Loviisa on the mainland. Timo was then 11 years old and Tuomo almost eight. According to conditions of the Moscow Peace Treaty Suursaari Island had to be ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944.



The Stone ledge and a summer guest at the foot of Haukkavuori Mountain.

In many locations on the western side of Suursaari Island, the stone walls of the mountains rise dramatically towards the sky. Mountains, rock clefts, stone ledges, caves, boulders, "giant's cauldrons", and seashore rocks were enticing with their magnificence, mysticism, silence, and sense of holiness. The island was an intact unity, a space defined by contrasts, where freedom and security worked simultaneously – an experience that the brothers in their architectural solutions such as for Temppeleaukio Church tried to reach. Timo Suomalainen tells how the acquaintances of childhood, the boulders and rocks, gained a special place in their work. When their journey as refugees ended, Timo at 19 and Tuomo at 15 got a chance with their own hands to drill and even explode stone when building a new home on a plot in the town of Hamina (then Vehkalahti) given to the refuge family. In the beginning of their career as architects, the brothers became familiar with rock construction when designing projects for the Finnish Defence Forces. Stone and rock became the expression of power and stability not only in Temppeleaukio Church (1960–69) but also in Espoonlahti Church (1976–80), and in the Hotel Mesikämmen, built in Ähtäri (1973–76).



The weather clears - sails are being dried.

In the course of human history, rather than restricting freedom or creativity, the sea has instead offered the possibility to escape narrow-mindedness. The mobility of the people of Suursaari Island was manifested in family relationships encompassing the outer islands and the coast of the Gulf of Finland. Visiting artists and numerous tourist groups ensured cultural exchange, which extended abroad. Sailors went to the sea and brought influences even from remote lands. The geology and unusual plant life interested researchers of culture. Suursaari Island is immortalised in pictures and printed media. It has been engrained deep in the minds of those who visited there or were born there. The childhood environment offered Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen a basis to create architecture as a union of functionality and practicality and emotion. As a result were born functional buildings expressing free forms, a strong sense of materials, and active interplay of structures. One way of describing their work is "critical pragmatism", the words used when Timo Suomalainen was invited to become a honorary member of SAFA, the Finnish Association of Architects in December 2009.

Of original images and universal feelings.

Even occupied by a foreign power, Suursaari Island has managed to stay in the limelight of interest surprisingly actively. Temppeliaukio Church, which inherited a lot from the impressive island, continuously attracts visitors from all around the world. The more than a half a million visitors annually make it the most popular architectural sight in Finland¹. Art historian Timo Koho says in his book *Menneisyyden muistikuvat* (Atena, 2003 – "Images of the Past") that, in spite of its modernity, Temppeliaukio Church carries interesting images of the past. According to Koho, the great international interest in the church stems from the sense, in its sacral space one can feel both nature mysticism and the universal feeling of the early stages of Christianity. Timo Suomalainen admits it. He says that their courage and right to break into the rock was consciously rooted both the early Christians' need to seek shelter as well as the protective qualities of Finland's medieval churches. Nevertheless, part of the creative process was rooted also in the unconscious stream, which functioned as an invisible tool quite apart from practical considerations. Those entering the church space can let themselves be taken by the same stream, experiencing the emotions of their culture and feelings, opening up to personal meanings, and restoring themselves in a sheltered environment.

In Temppeliaukio, one can easily find Suursaari Island as one of the many original images, and one of the most impressive. According to Timo Suomalainen, this unity of worlds of form and experience the brothers themselves, however, realised only after the construction work of the church was finished.

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

Sources

Interview with Timo Suomalainen (Espoo, March 2010).

Mehtälä Maila: Temppeliaukio – kirkko Suursaaresta länteen. WSOY 2003.

Note¹

Finnish Tourist Board: number of visitors in 2007 (the most recent statistics for the whole country)

Santasalo Ky: number of visitors for each sight in 2009 (statistics for Helsinki)