

"I demand that people note that surrealist research along with alchemical research presents a remarkable unit of purpose. The philosopher's stone is nothing other than a thing that should be given to man's imagination to take forcible revenge on everything, and after years of taming the spirit and crazy submission, here we are again, attempting to finally free this imagination by the long, huge, reasoned deregulation of the senses." *Andre Breton.*

Quite simply put, some contemporary architects, whatever era they come through, remain so well under the radar that their significance is continuously misunderstood whilst they can occupy a position of quite remarkable value. In Nordic architecture one name stands out from the last century: the Finnish architect Reima Pietilä. No question: the figure of Pietilä fits into the Nordic scene but in a very special way. Certainly he 'empirically glimpsed' opportunities that often went unattended and were, even, ignored by many of the mainstream architects. To remain under the radar of course this had to happen and led to a curious, reluctantly acknowledged significance. Pietilä's place in Modern Architecture was assured with the building of Dipoli Students' Union and Suvikumpu Housing in Helsinki, and with Kaleva Church in Tampere and the Finnish Embassy in New Delhi (all thought out in the 1960s). But opposition proved liberating and the architect continued to be a vibrant and creative thorn in the flesh to many of the 'normative' Finnish Rationalists. Thus, true to evading the radar, Pietilä became the absent Finnish architect. The way Pietilä could shift tack, tempt the edge, embrace fiasco and failure has made him one of the most important and lasting Nordic architects. Moving critical thinking and invention into a project - a translation exercise - 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'. For almost his whole career, along with his wife Raili Pietilä, Pietilä practiced architecture, wrote texts, produced exhibitions and spoke and lectured in such an 'alchemical' 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!"

Unafraid of the polemic, Pietilä would tempt the 'other' by positioning himself in a forgotten mainstream. Instead of what he saw as 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". Interested in sporting with the sacred, Pietilä always attempted to resist returning to those sacred laws or compulsory ideas that he saw -paradoxically- characteristic of the Rationalists. Convincing, at times a muted performance, it has become important, as with many of the great architects, to re-read Pietilä as a way of reading him for the first time.

Let us be clear: Reima Pietilä is no chance architect offering random alibis for the edge condition. Instead his work and person offers 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.

An ability to shape landscape into compatible energy turned an architectural insight around. At the time of framed visions and social dogma, Pietilä responded with nothing less than scripts which he called 'assemblages' towards architecture. Always towards 'architecture!' Wedded to indeterminacy, he shifted space, language and intuition until it offered obvious solutions. It was more than a sleight of hand. The dogma presented by the mainstream necessitated an irresponsibility which Pietilä always used to great effect.

To re-read Reima Pietilä then is to enter his hermeneutic museum. As he cycled his work from poetic text, scribble, exhibition to project, construction and then back to exhibitions, his installations became assemblages and his assemblages re-interpreted other scenarios. An unusual architecture of no fixed pattern resulted. In this way, Pietilä picked up and dwelled within the loophole. He realised, in the general scheme of things, an architect's constructions never quite achieve the inscrutable destiny of finer thinking, not to mention here the supra-rational, the intuitive. Always creatively falling short of cognitive reason, Pietilä celebrated an unknown and invisible architecture. With alchemical cunning, he also knew this would not always be implemented within his built work. He held that architecture could extend and survive beyond any critical apparatus necessary to give it legitimacy. In a contemporary period lasting now almost two decades, when architecture has moved so close to the amorphous, liquid dreams of a free geometry, the alchemical swerves of Pietilä are brought sharply into focus.

Reima Pietilä would agree with Breton; the surrealist research along with alchemical research certainly presented for him a remarkable unity 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. Pietilä's early texts were prescient, and charged, rarely read in any depth. Subject to superficial prejudice and thin attention, Pietilä's alchemy alerted itself. In 1980 Pietilä began to redefine and re-read the very indifference that invited his trip to the edge. The doctrine of the late 1960s had distorted the principle that the anonymous grid plan is the only flexible plan form. 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".

In 1972 Reima Pietilä turned up at Cornell as a member of that loose architectural group that had in many ways taken over from CIAM, Team X. He had with him what he called a kind of checklist, an index of issues. It was yet one more of his continuing moves to resist the Surrealism that he had been close to in the late 1950s, but no one, not even this Third Generation of emerging Re-constructed Modernists really saw it as that. Playing the outsider even in Team X, according to Giancarlo de Carlo who recounted this in 1986, Pietilä was and remained unpredictable. His presentation might have been obtuse, obscure or meandering but his presence was always spiritual in the distant, self-ambiguous, alchemical sort of manner. The inside-outsider role in Team X (one amongst many insider-outsider roles he performed) allowed Pietilä to corrupt any interpretation of him. The persona obscura knew well enough - tempt wilful mystical expressionism, tempt the irrational, and the alchemist answers with hermetic clarity. 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. Sometimes, just sometimes, he would assert, that might be architecture! As a tireless experimenter Pietilä lived in the optimism of unknown meaning. He took on the possibility that this could -given luck (he never underestimated luck!)- be transferred into a critical thinking and architectural intelligence that might produce something called 'assemblage' (after Kurt Schwitters). Later when Pietilä returned to Finland from the Cornell meeting he submitted the Cornell paper to the Finnish literary journal Parnasso. He would tell this story with a sly grin, his open mouth slightly but gently hissing. He received a note back indicating that this was not considered poetry at all but merely a 'laundry list'. He used to laugh at this in the telling, and it seemed to confirm the hidden Surrealist gest within him. As if he could flirt with, momentarily venture into, and then go beyond the Dada fringe.

Though Pietilä was never to go as far as

Kurt Schwitters, he did play the hermetic fringe like a master: "Dada was a materialisation of my disgust. Before Dada all modern writers held fast to a discipline, a rule, unity. After Dada, active indifference, spontaneity and relativity entered my life..." Schwitters wrote and continued in his Merz manifesto (1920) to expound his own field: "and I believe it is a mistake to say that Dada, Cubism, and Futurism have a common base. The latter two tendencies were based primarily on a principle of intellectual and technical perfectibility while Dada never rested on any theory and has never been anything but a protest. Poetry is a means of communicating a certain amount of humanity, of vital elements that the poet has within himself".¹ There was no doubt Pietilä had such poetic elements within himself too. But this was not mere protest. Architecture was never mere protest. Pietilä's challenge was clear: how much of the poetics of landscape and language (that 'half-poetic intellect', if you like to recall Heidegger) could be made manifest and translated or transferred to architecture?² He would imitate the editor's disgust and speak as he often did in the third person: "what is Pietilä doing?" In fact, Pietilä so consistently lived through this third person world that you would be forgiven for thinking he really was not speaking about someone else, some other errant architect.³ In smiling at the note given back by the then-editor of Parnasso, Pietilä seemed jubilant, oddly seeing the 'laundry list' as a triumph. But this was not odd at all. The 'player-architect' seeks a continuing game to resist interpretation, and yet provide continuous options to read the work and move onwards. Though he never said it, and never quite confessed to it, Pietilä would probably have agreed with Kurt Schwitters: that Pietilä could write and talk about Pietilä. Only is, Pietilä, the third person!

Note-taking, indexing, (laundry) listing, monitoring the words behind the words left Reima Pietilä monitoring the architecture behind the predictability of his own architecture. Cautious not to imagine any poetic nature in the traditional sense, yet seduced to fall back on it time and time again, Pietilä scavenged collectible ideas which would be incorporated back and forth into his work over a period of almost 40 years. It appears now that Pietilä lived this edge so completely that he was always critically doomed to create architecture that could spiritually and ambiguously breathe.

Using the Finnish language, an anecdote, or a coincidence, Pietilä dabbled in knowledge so close to the hysteria and misunderstanding about alchemy that even Sufist thinking would only invite respite for such a contemporary liking and mind. A recent book produced by Elizabeth Burns Gamard, Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau (otherwise called by Schwitters before he developed his Merz philosophy: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery) offers us ample evidence, if more were needed, on the connections between Pietilä and Schwitters. For Pietilä was and remained, unfashionably, a Surrealist throughout his life even if this is barely mentioned.⁴ Going slightly further we might even consider him a closet Dadaist, a self-corrupter of those critical routes which always attempted to bring him back to earth and nature. The philosopher-architect emerging from the 1950s had decided rather early on: a highly controlled subjectivism might have irritated colleagues and critics but it held deeper acts for the architecture that could emerge.⁵ It was inevitable: Reima Pietilä would ultimately have to be against the archive he actually created.

In the face of poetic self-censorship Pietilä took his critical responsibility seriously. It has always seemed possible and highly plausible to put Reima Pietilä in the same company as John Cage, Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, Paavo Haavikko, Eugene Ionesco or Kurt Schwitters but few seemed able to do this or take this further critically. Few critics or historians have shown interest in such a community of ideas. Yet today it is probably amongst such figures that graduates, students and young architects begin tracing and rereading the source and thrill in much contemporary art, architecture and culture. And it is probably amongst such figures who are associated with current ideas in 'nomadism', algorithmic architecture and network architectures that Pietilä's work, his ideas and difficulty are best understood and located.

By the end of the 'heroic' 1950s, Pietilä was already distancing himself from other Finnish architects. Though this was perhaps unclear at the time, anyone wishing to re-trace this can look, for example, at the different agendas for 'nature' between Aulis Blomstedt, Aarno Ruusuvaori and Pietilä. Blomstedt mentored both Pietilä and Ruusuvaori, near classmates at the Helsinki University of Technology School of Architecture. All three architects in fact ap-

pealed 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 Ruusuuvuori believed in architecture's talent for taming the forest. Aulis Blomstedt would hint through Egyptian traces at the return to classical harmony echoing Le Corbusier's lament for the architecture of past times. Aarno Ruusuuvuori, more pragmatic, would look to Japan and a refined Brutalism for his impeccable reductive purism. 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. Belonging to a lost, unsettled Modernism, emotion in architecture to Pietilä was inseparable from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger's clearing. Therein Pietilä's difficulty began.

But forget Heidegger's half-poetic intellect for the moment and let's not bring more forest into 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. Pietilä's underpinning, its awkward, innovative theory and quirky but brilliant inventions had to go it alone. The difficulty of forest morphology (and its various other conceptual language and cultural constructs) was exaggerated during the 1960s. Pietilä was 'black-balled', the type of architecture he explored off-limits. Two projects remain significantly lost: Malmi Church (1967) and Monte Carlo Multipurpose Centre (1969). To understand this implies a sort of meta-historical game. These projects were not to be. And by the 1980s when Pietilä returned to similar solutions to such architecture, the Finnish society had lost faith in the natural 'forest space' and required the polished, 'literal' version, of the type Pietilä then produced for the residence of the Finnish President in Mantyniemi, outside Helsinki (1993). 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.

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 notions about 'forest space', privileged nature and cultural issue appear to be more acceptable now in re-interpretations of Finnish architecture, we need to consider why. We need also to consider fresh evidence, and why such ideas were rejected then, only to become legendary now. And, to understand how this 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 and re-read its past so desperately. 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, nature, the Finnish language and phenomenological connections to architecture. But, as we know now, and as we can trace, that didn't quite happen. Pietilä didn't fade. The Pietiläs returned to carry out a second sequence of 'challenging' free-form works during the 1980s (Tampere Library 1984, New Delhi Finnish Embassy 1985, The Official Residence of the President at Mantyniemi, 1993).

The architect as reflector of the spatial structure of the landscape -was this not Pietilä's constant, intermediate and consistent message thrust in between the Rationalists? Was this not the enquiry into a surrealist architecture that occasioned the ebullient and charismatic Kirmo Mikkola to announce roundly in the late 1960s that 'it was time to kill off Pietilä's work'? And how do we know this? By putting our ears close to the tracks, and listening! And in this way the 'anachronismus' passes the test

of time, which is why 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. 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. What happens finally, the respected American writer William Gass asks in his essay 'The Test of Time', to works which have withstood the Test of Time?' Easy! 'They become timeless!' Gass writes. And not only that, they become tamed, generalised, idealised and romanticised. And works which do not pass this test? Are they ignored, misunderstood, or neglected? 'No, Gass replies, 'works which fail find oblivion. Those which pass stay around to be ignored, misunderstood, exploited, and neglected'.⁹ Ironically, almost two decades on since the architect's death, this may paradoxically be Pietilä's triumph. What do we mean? Well, Pietilä and the architecture may be re-read, re-appraised and then ignored once more but his wit, talent and works are still around to be ignored further. The paradox holds a triumph: 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.