Learning from Finland

St. Louis, Missouri, is home to the Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen’s greatest design, the soaring Gateway Arch. In concert with this inspirational achievement, Washington University in St. Louis, one of the premier North American universities, and its nationally ranked Graduate School of Architecture & Urban Design, has a long tradition of architectural educational exchange with the city of Helsinki and with Finland, through visiting faculty, semester programs in Finland, and a twenty-year history of Fulbright Scholars to Finland from the School. In 1999, when I arrived in St. Louis after ten years of living, working, and teaching in Finland, the School was an ideal place to further the architectural and cultural relationships between the two nations.

Since the 1950s, notable Finnish architects and designers have regularly served as visiting guest professors in the Graduate School, among them Aulis Blomstedt, Kirmo Mikkola, Reima Pietilä, Esa Laaksonen, Juha Jääskeläinen, Jouni Kaipia, Juha Ilonen, and Mikko Heikkinen. Many more Finnish architects and designers have visited the Graduate School as lecturers and critics. Internationally renowned architect and educator Juhani Pallasmaa has served most recently as the Graduate School’s Ruth and Norman Moore Visiting Professor. Not surprisingly, the University’s Kemper Art Museum was a principal American venue in 2009 for the exhibition, Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future, organized in part by the Museum of Finnish Architecture.

At the same time, the Graduate School of Architecture & Urban Design has a rich program of international seminars for its students, with locations in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Seoul, South Korea; Tijuana, Mexico; Shanghai, China; and Barcelona, Spain — and naturally in Helsinki and Finland. These semester programs are four month sessions, with students in full-time residence in these vital centers of world design activity. In Helsinki, a semester-long spring program was first organized in the spring of 2001; the leadership of architects Juhani Pallasmaa and Jouni Kaipia was instrumental in shaping the program from the outset, and currently architects Matti Rautiola, Pentti Kareoja, Sirkka-Liisa Jetsonen and Kimmo Friman guide the semester. This spring is now the 11th year the Graduate School has resided in Helsinki, working closely with Finnish architects, historians, designers and engineers in a full curriculum of design, history, and technology, along with office visits, excursions (north, east and west) and guest lectures. Since 2001, over 150 students have come to Helsinki from St. Louis and been transformed as architects.

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The distance between St. Louis and Helsinki is more than a few thousand miles I suppose, but anyone passing through the School of Architecture at Washington University in the past ten years might be forgiven for assuming otherwise. With students, professors and even office furniture arriving or returning each semester from Finland, it’s hard to imagine that anyone inhabiting Givens Hall during these years could leave without some curiosity about this small country in the North. But of course that curiosity takes hold more strongly in some students than it does in others, and for me it quickly morphed from a simple fascination to a subject of academic inquiry for which it seemed only natural to find my way to Otaniemi.

When I arrived as a Fulbrighter some two years later to study wood architecture and design I felt almost unfairly at ease in my new home, reuniting with friends who were happy to introduce me to the city and to make me part of their lives within it. After such a welcome introduction it’s not surprising that I still find myself with so many opportunities...
and so much desire to return to Helsinki.”

David Sobol studied with me in St. Louis in 2008, and following a seminar visit to Helsinki, he made his Fulbright application to study natural light in architecture at HUT in 2009. David describes the experience:

“While a graduate student of architecture at Washington University, I enrolled in a seminar titled, “Alvar Aalto: Critical Studies.” (As part of the seminar)...we traveled throughout southern Finland for one week in mid-March to study and survey Aalto’s architecture. Our travels brought us into contact with a variety of places, landscapes, and people that left a lasting impression. What struck me most about the architecture was the poetic and strategic use of daylight. However, it wasn’t just the architecture that resonated with me. It was refreshing to be in a culture that encouraged reflection and placed a high value on active listening. There seemed to be a relationship between the genuine way in which people communicated and the thoughtful architecture we encountered.

My experience in Finland as a Fulbright Fellow taught me how to prepare intellectually and respond instinctively. Because my research project focused on daylight and architecture, I learned, quite literally, to take what the weather gave me. This is a lesson I’ve learned to incorporate into other areas of my life that extend beyond architectural research.”

Other applicants are in the wings, inspired by their predecessors and the strengths of architecture and culture to be found here. The excellence of Finnish architecture, the relationship of design to nature, climate and light, and the deep cultural values of Finnish society have all had a lasting effect. Washington University in St. Louis’ Graduate School of Architecture & Urban Design is grateful for the opportunities Finland, the city of Helsinki, the Fulbright Center and the Helsinki University of Technology (now Aalto University) have provided our students and we look forward to a continuing productive relationship between the two nations, cities and universities in the years ahead.

Peter MacKeith

Peter MacKeith is Associate Dean of the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts and Associate Professor of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis. He was educated at the University of Virginia and Yale University and received a Fulbright Fellowship to Finland in 1990. From 1995 to 1999, he was the director of the international Masters Program in Architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology; he joined the faculty at Washington University in St. Louis in 2000. He has subsequently worked between Finland and the United States, in architectural education, practice and journalism. Currently, he is on the advisory board of the Finnish Cultural Institute-New York and the Washington University Fulbright Committee.

In Memoriam Phillips Brooks (1929-2011)

Former Fulbright Scholar, Dr. Phillips Vaughn Brooks, 81, of Elkins, West Virginia, and Helsinki, Finland, passed away in Helsinki on April 15, 2011. Phil Brooks was a staunch supporter of the Fulbright program, and will be sorely missed.

Brooks had a long and varied teaching career. A specialist in American literature and culture, he taught at Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia from 1969-99, also serving as chair of the English department and director of the general studies program and creative thinking program. Phil’s Fulbright activities took him to Ankara, Turkey, Lattakia, Syria and Almaty, Kazakhstan, from which he moved to Helsinki, Finland in 1999. At the University of Helsinki, Brooks taught courses in the Department of English and the Renvall Institute.

Phil Brooks was a gifted teacher and a genial colleague, who always had a smile and an uplifting word. Despite health problems, he remained sharp and energetic, an inspiration to his many friends.

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