Helsinki’s New Living Room—Oodi Library

Finland’s flagship library, Oodi, has won architectural awards, set borrowing records—and expanded the concept of a library.

By Wif Stenger

Oodi’s sweeping spruce façade stands out from the glass, steel and concrete buildings that surround it.
In good weather, Oodi has outdoor seating on the balcony and at the ground-floor café.
IT FEELS LIKE A collective manifesto of the modern Helsinki spirit, of who we are: open-minded, international, adventurous, playful and confident people who seek respite from the daily grind, who appreciate literature, arts and information.”

Architect Antti Nousjoki is describing the public enthusiasm about Helsinki’s flagship library, Oodi, designed by Nousjoki and his team of ALA architects alongside other principals Juho Grönholm and Samuli Woolston. A wavy, radiant structure that opened in late 2018 as Finland celebrated its 101st Independence Day, creativity is at the heart of Oodi (“Ode”), a spirit that has been taken in kind by its visitors. “The willingness of people to use and share the building in creative and respectful ways has been delightful to experience,” Nousjoki says.

Innovative features of the new building include its glassed-in top floor, dubbed “book heaven,” which most closely resembles a traditional library with its cozy children’s section, a large wooden sculpture by Ai Weiwei and bubble chairs by designer Eero Aarnio. In good weather, additional furniture is made available on a balcony overlooking Citizens’ Square and iconic neighbors such as the Helsinki Music Centre, the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Finlandia Hall and Parliament House. And a spiral staircase decorated by artist Otto Karvonen leads visitors to its second floor, which is devoted to creativity, with a “maker space” offering a wide selection of equipment and facilities, from a recording studio complete with instruments to a kitchen, 3D printers, laser cutters and handicraft tools.

“The maker space is always busy, especially the sewing machines,” says library
director Anna-Maria Soininvaara. “From the beginning, Oodi has been a place where people can work or study alone or together, a place where there’s always something interesting going on, from lectures and study circles to knitting clubs,” she adds. “It’s also become a general meeting place—people just say ‘see you at Oodi’—as well as a tourist attraction.”

The building was designed primarily for its everyday use more than as a sightseeing experience, as Nousjoki stresses. “Just like any other public space in the city, the ground floor is sometimes busy, sometimes empty,” he says. “The second floor, meanwhile, is always full of the kind of casual buzz it was built for,” at least until the pandemic, which closed the library for two months in 2020 and limited it to bare-bones operations in recent months.

**COZY WINTER HAVEN**

In designing Oodi, the ALA’s vision included active, zero-threshold public spaces that would be visible, attractive, understandable and welcoming to all visitors. It describes the top floor as “a calm, contemplative area floating above busy central Helsinki” that “offers unobstructed, majestic views of the surrounding park and cityscape.” And indeed, with its unobtrusive café near the balcony and large magazine section, it is an inviting place for a cup of coffee and a read, a chat or a daydream. As such, it’s been
embraced by people of all ages as a place to study, work away from home, meet friends and pose for social media images.

“The views from the third floor are absolutely great. Its wavy, sloping floor is amazing: it’s clearly loved by children—and child-minded people like me!” says Marketta Kyttä, Professor of Land Use Planning at Aalto University, who studies urban environments that promote well-being and health. “The wooden materials are not only beautiful but also promote an exceptionally pleasant acoustic and olfactory environment,” she says.

According to Kyttä, places like Oodi encourage well-being while fostering public participation, along with self-education and self-improvement. “It’s extremely important that a city has public spaces other than commercial ones that invite people to spend time, relax and socialize,” Kyttä notes. “These are essential building blocks for the development of a sense of community and social sustainability. Public indoor spaces are even more important in a city like Helsinki with long, cold, dark winters.”

“Because Oodi has invested in cozy spaces that invite people not only to read but also chat and organize meetings and events—and has adopted a slightly more relaxed attitude to the traditional silence requirement—it even more strongly fosters social interaction and well-being,” she adds. “The
development of Oodi has been realized in a participatory approach, another building block for social well-being and a sense of ownership.”

That sense stems from the earliest planning for the library, according to Soininvaara. “Before the architectural competition, we asked the people of Helsinki what needs they had, and the whole planning process was done together with the citizens. That’s why we succeeded in getting a building that people seem to love,” she says.

Oodi in turn may also play a role in residents’ overall satisfaction with the city. In March 2021, Helsinki was rated “the world’s happiest city” by a UN report, while The Economist and Monocle have ranked it among the world’s most livable cities.

**TECH MEETS NATURE**

Oodi is archetypically Finnish in its entwining of technology, sustainability and natural values. The latter can be seen in the sweeping spruce façade, real trees growing toward the skylights on the top floor, and Alvar Aalto-esque curves inspired by natural forms.

The sustainable aspects may not be as obvious—such as its extreme...
The “maker space” features 3D printers, sewing machines, soldering stations and laser cutters.

energy efficiency and boosting of the sharing economy. One visible, amusing example of its tech features is a fleet of small robots that discreetly roam the aisles and ride the elevators, retrieving and distributing items from the multilingual 100,000-volume collection. While that alone is considered a modest collection for a major library, an app also allows users to order materials from any of 64 regional libraries, which can be picked up at any branch or bookmobile, usually within a couple of days.

SERVICES LIKE THIS MAY CONTRIBUTE TO FINLAND’S SECOND-highest library usage rates (just behind Iceland) in Europe, with the average person making 15 loans and 10 physical library visits a year. And having only a limited number of books on hand—with quick access to millions stored elsewhere—gives Oodi an airy, uncluttered feel, while allowing room for its many other functions.

“By defining the built drama of Oodi not as a book archive, but rather as a complex social club for everyone, the dramatic building does in many ways inspire and redefine a public library as an institution,” says Nousjoki. “Oodi is an extreme example of how a physical building can influence the use and the content of a public building.”
Meanwhile, Oodi is influencing other libraries around the city and country. During its first year, overall borrowing throughout the city library system rose by about five percent, with printed books up nearly seven percent and new library card applications up by four percent compared to the previous year, Anna-Maria Soininvaara
Having a modest number of books on hand—with quick access to millions more—gives Oodi an uncluttered feel.

notes. She adds that since then many other municipalities around the country have contacted them for help in designing their own, smaller versions of Oodi.

“Oodi has enlarged the role of public libraries in Finland,” says Kyttä, adding that beginning in the 1990s, public libraries have been actively adopting new activities such as lending equipment along with books and other media. This is in line with the Public Libraries Act, revised in 2017, which mandates them with promoting active citizenship, democracy and lifelong learning.

So the idea of a library as a non-commercial center of civic and literary activity, arts and crafts—and an oasis of urban calm—is likely to spread in post-pandemic Finland.

In the meantime, Oodi has undergone a few minor tweaks, including a new safety railing for the balcony and a larger main entrance, due to the higher-than-expected popularity of the library. “It turned out that the revolving door could not cope with the peak people flow, so it made sense to modify it. Minor fixes and upgrades are normal in a building with such intensive use,” says Nousjoki.

The architect does not foresee the need for more adaptations of the building itself, but hopes for improvements to its surroundings.

“The outdoor plazas and parks, and gaps between buildings, are results of somewhat unsuccessful urban planning done before the competition,” he explains. “The way forward would be to build a proper park with high-quality green spaces and an interesting mix of functionalities,” like Oodi itself.
Oodi’s busy children’s section features storytelling and handicraft events.
Artist Otto Karvonen’s Dedication in the stairwell celebrates library users, accessible online in 10 languages.

Since opening, Oodi has been a popular hangout space for students.
### OODI IN A NUTSHELL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opened</th>
<th>December 5, 2018</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
<td>ALA Architects partners Antti Nousjoki, Juho Grönholm &amp; Samuli Woolston, winners of an anonymous 2013 international design competition (544 entries)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awards</td>
<td>2019 IFLA Public Library of the Year, 2020 DETAIL Magazine Prize</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lending materials</td>
<td>100,000 books, audiobooks and e-books in Helsinki’s 20 most common languages, periodicals, films, music, games, musical instruments, tools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>National Audiovisual Institute movie theatre, multipurpose hall, two cafés, art exhibitions, city and EU information centers, meeting rooms, computers, vintage video game stations, kitchen, recording studio, 3D printers, sewing machines, soldering stations, laser cutters, handicraft tools, gaming stations, vinyl printers, large-format printers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction cost</td>
<td>100 million euros ($120 million)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floor space</td>
<td>185,000 square feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>3,200 people</td>
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<td>Staff</td>
<td>64 (plus three robots)</td>
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**Wif Stenger** is a U.S. journalist and translator who has lived in Finland on and off since childhood. He is a news producer for the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) and writes for various publications.