

# In Praise of Wood

**John Gayer** on new buildings using Finland's oldest architectural material

Architecture is the most important artistic discipline in Finland, and "From Wood to Architecture," at the Museum of Finnish Architecture through September, shows that those working in the shadows of Eliel and Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto are continuing to produce innovative, but very sensible and sensitive buildings. And while architectural practice in this land of forests and lakes has long been inspired by nature, recent developments have also witnessed a renewed emphasis on wood.

Built between 1996 and 2005, the 17 buildings showcased here persuade you that the color and textures of wood give a pleasure and warmth that cannot be matched by other materials. One of the best examples of wood's versatility stands in Joensuu—a town famous for the disappearance of 200 public yellow bicycles (and their subsequent reappearance around the world), and also famous for its outlying



forests. Completed in 2004, Antti-Matti Siikala's Finnish Forest Research Institute is Finland's largest office building having a load bearing structure of timber. Recycled wood from hundred-year-old logs cover the walls of the entrance to the building, and the glulam beams and columns inside evidence current technology. Clusters of diagonal columns and an elliptical space clad in tarred wood shingles give life to the otherwise rectilinear structure.

St. Henry's Ecumenical Art Chapel, completed earlier this year, rests atop a small hill and follows its topography. Clad in vertical strips of copper, the exterior shell will gradually oxidize and blend with the color of the trees that surround it. Inside, the slow reddening of horizontal planks of pine comprising the lining will remind visitors of the exterior's original color. The religiosity in Matti Sanaksenaho's design, articulated through the building's east-west orientation, controlled use of light, and the rib cage of high pointed arches forming the support structure, suggests Gothic sources.

Ville Hara's lookout tower at the Helsinki Zoo advances the tricky process of bending wood. I've visited this structure, and it's delightful. Floating within the lattice framework of bent and twisted strips of wood bolted together, the viewing platform offers unhindered views in all directions, including up through a circular opening, toward the sky. At its perimeter, the ends of all the strips converge, and it's easy to imagine that a break in this collar would bring the whole tower crashing to the ground—but this feeling is just a function of the impressive, open support structure.

Another standout piece is Silja Rantanen's studio. This austere structure by Hannele Grönlund, which harmonizes with the surrounding farm buildings, disguises a large open space filled with light. Resting on a platform that allows an outcropping box structure to hover over the landscape, this minimalist shape conveys solidity and weight.

Though the exhibition focuses on technological achievements and architectural qualities, these buildings also make a profound impact as artistic creations. Natural and applied colors, proportion and scale, and positive and negative spaces enliven facades; tactile surfaces and overt sculptural forms create enchanting but unpretentious spaces. Something about wood, too: you just want to touch all of these buildings. □

