

Building Heritage in Finnish Wooden Towns

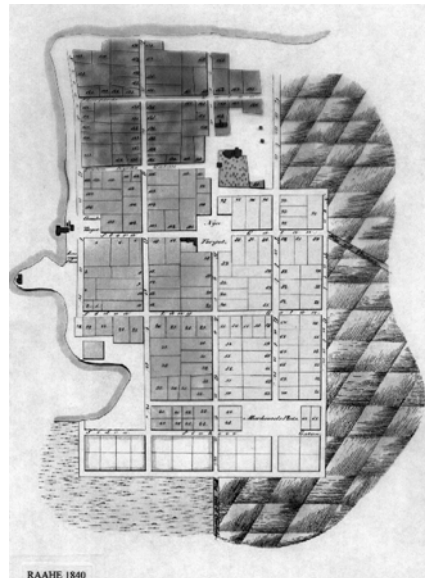
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1. INTRODUCTION

Wooden towns are the most unique sites of historical urban culture in Finland. The oldest Finnish towns still have a structure that dates back to the Middle Ages. Most wooden towns in Sweden and Finland, which was administratively part of Sweden for a long time, however, were built in the 17th century. They typically have a grid plan and a basic architecture of log buildings. When Finland was annexed to Russia in 1809, Finnish architecture began to differentiate from the Swedish building traditions, the most obvious characteristic being the Empire style town plans since the 1820s.

Finnish wooden towns typically have a grid plan and streets lined by one- or two-storey wooden buildings with board facing. From the mid-17th century onwards, buildings were usually placed with their longer side aligned with the street, which is why gables are not part of the typical Finnish streetscape. As a consequence of clearly delineated blocks and large lots, the street space was lined by houses, which, in turn, demarcated yards surrounded by a number of outbuildings.



Picture 1: A typical grid plan of Raahen kaupunki in 1840

The structure of wooden towns has not remained unchanged throughout the centuries, however, as they have been frequently ravaged by fires. Whenever a town was rebuilt after a fire, efforts were taken to make it more resistant to fires and compatible with the contemporary urban ideals. Most of the currently existing wooden towns date back to the 19th century, by which time adequate techniques had been developed to prevent large-scale fires.

Large urban areas of wooden buildings continued to be constructed throughout the 20th century, but urban centres have mostly been rebuilt with multi-storey stone buildings since the 19th century. The drastic rural depopulation and urban migration that began in the 1960s necessitated extensive urban construction, which replaced the wooden towns with a closed

street space by functionalistic concrete buildings and open blocks. The radical renovation of urban centres in Finnish wooden towns had resulted in a fragmentary urban milieu and decomposition of the historical urban structure. The increase in traffic volume has also caused problems.

Very little remains of the Finnish building heritage of the early part of the 19th century. Buildings completed prior to 1921 account for only 5 % of all buildings, and buildings completed before 1950 account for no more than 15 %. Protection of buildings is important precisely because there are so few old buildings left and the current process of urbanisation seems to continue unabated.

2. PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

2.1 Protection of cultural environments by planning regulations

"Cultural environment" refers to an architectural totality consisting of the built environment, including towns and villages, market squares, streets, yards, cultivated landscapes, parks and fixed relics and monuments. A cultural environment always shows signs of human action.

In Finland, land use and town planning at the municipal level constitute the primary and most widely used tool of protection. Town plans include goals, directives, regulations and limitations concerning buildings, structures, relics and cultural environments. Inventories are made to collect information of sites and buildings in need of protection for the purposes of land use and town planning.

Public planning is co-ordinated and supervised by the Ministry of the Environment. All new plans are submitted to this ministry for information. The ministry may intervene in the planning process or the content of a plan in case of errors or deficiencies and order the municipality to make the requisite corrections. Private persons, organisations and enterprises may also file a complaint of possible illegalities in a planning process or a plan to a court.

Protection of buildings in an area with an official plan is mainly done based on the *law on land use and construction* (1999). A town plan may include different legally binding provisions concerning protection, depending on the value and quality of the site or building. Town plans are often supplemented by instructions concerning the methods of construction compatible with cultural values. Conserving planning in wooden towns began in the 1970s. Based on a rough estimate, about 25,000 buildings have been protected by planning regulations.

The law on land use and construction obliges the person preparing the plan to introduce the different versions of the plan to the local residents and to take into account their opinions. This "participatory procedure" provides a democratic way to protect the cultural environment.

2.2 Protection of cultural environments by the law on the protection of buildings and related regulations

Buildings outside planned areas are protected by the *law on the protection of buildings* (1985). Based on the stipulations of this law, about 200 privately owned groups of buildings or single buildings have been protected. In Finland, the decision to protect an endangered building is always made in response to a specific proposal.

Within areas with a town plan, the law on the protection of buildings only applies when protection is not possible based on the law on land use and buildings. In these instances, it is considered necessary to provide more effective protection than can be provided by town planning or desirable also to protect the fixed interior. There are seven buildings protected by this law in Oulu.

The small number of sites and buildings protected by the law on the protection of buildings is mainly due to the limited government funding allocated to the protection of

buildings. The cost of protection to the owner should not be excessive, and the owner is entitled to some degree of compensation by the municipality. In practice, however, no reimbursement has been paid, but protection has been accomplished in ways that benefit the owner, such as by increasing the permitted building volume.

The *law on ancient monuments* stipulates about the protection of fixed relics and monuments. State-owned buildings are protected by a *statute*. The protection of Evangelic-Lutheran ecclesiastic buildings is governed by the *church law*. Based on that law, all Finnish churches built before 1917 are protected. Such church buildings number 500. Even more recent churches may be protected based on a resolution by the National Church Board.



Picture 2: The church of Pietarsaari

The government authority responsible for the protection of culturally valuable buildings is the National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments. The guidance, supervision and financial support provided by this board have played a crucial role in protection based on the law on the protection of buildings.

2.3 Proposal for protection

The proposal for protection should be submitted to the local environmental centre (provincial government authority) within whose jurisdiction the building or other site to be protected is located. Such proposals can be filed by the owner, a government official, a municipality, a regional council or a registered association that operates in the locality where the site/building is located and whose sphere of authority is relevant to such proposal.

The proposal must be submitted in writing, and it must contain information of the proposed object of protection, its location and its owner. An environmental centre may also take the initiative in a matter concerning protection.

2.4 Implementation of protection

The environmental centre may issue an immediate prohibition concerning measures potentially hazardous to the value of the site or building, such as demolition (preservation order). This does not apply to renovation necessary to maintain the building. The preservation order is valid until a legal resolution is issued concerning protection, unless otherwise decreed. The environmental centre must arrive at a conclusion concerning the matter within two years of the issuance of a preservation order.

The National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments issues a statement and, when necessary, a proposal concerning a preservation order to the environment centre. Moreover, the environmental centre requests statements from the municipal authorities and the owner or occupant. If a resolution is made to protect the site or building, the

environmental centre submits its resolution to the Ministry of the Environment for ratification. A negative decision, unless an appeal is filed concerning it, becomes legally binding.

2.5 Problems in the protection of buildings

Compared to the other European countries, Finnish buildings are young. For centuries, Finns used wood as the predominant building material. Log was used exclusively in both rural and urban settings up till the 1940s. The predominance of wooden buildings, however, has turned out a problem in the efforts to preserve the Finnish building heritage. Wood decay, fires and the facility with which log frames could be demolished or re-built have resulted in extensive losses of culturally valuable buildings.

Outdated town plans that overlooked the value of old buildings and allocated excessive building rights to lots have resulted in such high land prices in urban centres that the demolition of old buildings is an economically attractive alternative. The situation is improving, as the new law on land use and buildings requires municipalities to update their plans at regular intervals.

Whenever a planning process is under way, the municipal authorities decide about the possibilities to preserve a valuable site or building. Now that integrative building and complementary building are gaining ground, it may even become increasingly possible to maintain the built cultural environment by integrating new developments to the existing environments.

The contemporary practice of complementary building is problematic from the viewpoint of preserving the cultural heritage. Architects tend to agree that new buildings erected into an old environment should be conspicuously visible. Some architects even aim to underline the contrast between the new and old buildings, leaving the old ones subordinated. Many lay people, on the other hand, appreciate quasi-historical buildings, which mimic indiscriminately the stylistic features and details of old building.

The old wooden towns, which are usually located close to the urban centre, are also threatened by the general rise in the standard of living. The old houses that were originally built by poor people are now being purchased by wealthy people attracted by their central location and idyllic milieu. These people, however, seldom find the old house satisfactory, but wish to modernise, enlarge and renovate it with no regard to cultural values and the environment. In this way, entire living milieus may lose their original character.

3. FEATURES OF WOODEN TOWNS

More than ten wooden towns have been preserved in Finland. There are also some smaller areas of a few blocks of wooden buildings. The small towns on the coasts of the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia are best preserved, probably because their growth has been modest. Wooden areas are most scarce in the towns where post-war growth and in-migration have gradually destroyed the old urban structure.

The Finnish wooden towns are unique and different from their counterparts in the neighbouring countries in view of both town planning and architecture. It is still possible in many towns to detect the influence of the urban milieu ideals of different centuries and the impact of the fire safety regulations imposed in the 19th century.

The most distinctive feature of Finnish wooden towns from the 17th to the 20th centuries is the grid plan and the consequent regular streetscape. All towns established during this period were built with a grid plan, regardless of the terrain. There were also efforts to re-plan existing towns. Both the Swedish King and, since 1809, the Russian Czar aimed to set up uniform and impressive towns. Grid plan was a notably convenient basic principle both in Greater Sweden and the in completely different Empire towns of the 19th century.

Apart from the variable ideals of urban art, social inequality also contributed to the emergence of the urban milieu. The large lots in the urban centre were reserved and priced for administrative buildings and magnificent, often multi-storied merchant mansions. Stone

buildings only became common in smaller urban centres in the late 19th century. Labourers and poor people usually settled in the more peripheral parts of the planned area. Hence, the scale and architecture of buildings were also more modest in the more marginal areas.

The forms of stone architecture imported from Continental Europe over the centuries were applied to wooding buildings. In the 18th century, log buildings were increasingly covered by board facing. At the same time, columns and details of classical architecture began to be modified to suit the scale of log buildings. The builders of small towns in the far north created personal and locally unique interpretations of the classical form language.¹

4. PRESERVED WOODEN TOWNS

One of the best preserved old towns in Finland is **Old Rauma**, which was, in 1991, included in the World Heritage List of UNESCO. It was considered to represent the integral and unified architecture of Nordic wooden towns at its best. Old Rauma is 30 hectares in area, and its oldest parts date back to the early 18th century. There are altogether 600 buildings and 250 lots. Old Rauma is a notably vital residential, office and business area. The old town is characterised by long shopping streets, a market place with a town hall built in the 1770s as well as narrow, winding streets lined by residential buildings. The boundary between the public street space and private yards is marked by high, decorative gates. The idyllic yards are made verdant by luxuriant lilac bushes.

The town plan for Old Rauma was ratified in 1981. It aims to preserve the old town. The plan was prepared with care, based on an inventory that was checked in the mid-1970s. At that time, more than 60 % of the buildings were classified as warranting preservation. The urban authorities also published a guidebook on building methods, which enhanced the impact of the town plan.



Picture 3: Old Rauma

Porvoo, which was chartered as a town in 1347, has retained certain medieval features. The urban view is still dominated by the church. There also used to be a castle in the old times. The main streets, which run parallel to the river, are slightly curved, as in the Middle Ages. Further medieval features include the block division, the fact that the blocks reach down to the river and the frontage of merchants' storerooms by the river bank.

The wooden buildings in Porvoo are younger than the urban structure, as they have been built after the fire of 1760. The boarding of facades was mostly done in the early 19th century. Kirkkokatu street is lined by two-storey wooden houses, which were typical in the

¹ Timo Tuomi, "Piiiteitä puukaupunkien arkkitehtuurista", Suomalaisia puukaupunkeja, Rauma, 1995

18th century, but were prohibited as too vulnerable to fire in the 19th century. In Sweden, wooden two-storey houses only gained popularity in the 19th century.¹

The process of providing a town plan for Porvoo was interesting: a new town plan was ordered to be made, although there had been no devastating fire. The Russian Czar Alexander I travelled through Porvoo on his way to Helsinki, and ordered this irregular and densely populated town to be rebuilt. The new grid plan was completed in 1832, but the old part of Porvoo remained unchanged.

The protective town plan for Porvoo has been prepared with care, which has made it possible to conserve the building heritage and to develop the town as a cultural tourism attraction.



Picture 4: Shore houses in Porvoo

The decision to establish a town in **Kaskinen** was issued in 1765. High hopes were applied to the new town, which was to grow into a flourishing market town with 548 prospective residential sites. To ensure the growth of the new town, the promotional measures applied to Vaasa and Kristiinankaupunki were temporarily suspended, and their inhabitants were ordered to move to the new staple town.

Despite this promotional effort, however, Kaskinen never truly prospered. Nor was the urban structure outlined in the town plan ever implemented in practice, because there were not enough inhabitants. By the 1840s, 150 lots had been built. Today, Kaskinen is the smallest town in Finland, with 1600 inhabitants, and the squares and streetscapes envisioned in the 18th century town plan have still not been fully accomplished.

The first modern town plan for Kaskinen was ratified in 1981. For a long time, building within the town was supervised based on building codes, of which three different ones were valid during the 20th century. In the 1914 building code, block building density was designed for 80,000 inhabitants. The corresponding figure in 1963 was for 10,000 inhabitants. The identity of Kaskinen is hence characterised by the combination of an ambitious town plan and thwarted hopes for growth.

In 1981, the town of Kaskinen published a guidebook on building methods to supplement the town plan. Town plans with annotations for protection were published in 1987 and 1992. In the new town plans, some lots have an arrow to point out the location of a possible new building.

¹ Henrik Lilius, The Finnish Wooden Town, Anders Nyborg A/S 1985



Picture 5: A street view in Kaskinen

In **Raahe**, the urban centre of 71 lots with two-storey wooden buildings was destroyed by fire in 1810. A new town plan was drawn up, whose most intriguing items is the new Pekkatori square with closed corners. Raahe was the first wooden town with a uniform overall structure since the 17th century: the whole town was built with one-storey wooden houses. In Raahe, the lots at the urban periphery are smaller than those in the centre. As a consequence of this, large merchant mansions were built in the urban centre, while the smaller lots at the periphery of the town were acquired by less wealthy craftsmen and sailors.

The town plans for old Raahen were ratified in 1984 and 1986. In these plans, most of the residential houses lining the streets are shown to be protected, while the outbuilding on the yards have been left without protection. Now that the town of Raahe has begun to sell the real estate it has owned in the urban centre, there is the danger that the new buildings on the old yards may be placed too close to each other. The existing rights for large building volumes would allow this.



Picture 6: Pekkatori square in Raahe

The old buildings in **Oulu** were mostly destroyed by several fires and bombing in the Second World War. Up till the 1960s, however, the town was largely a wooden town. Since that time, due to the rapid growth and economic development, the urban centre has been rebuilt in line with the modern urban principles, which has resulted in further destruction of the typical wooden town milieu. The few protected wooden houses remain in different parts of the town centre.

The most uniform areas of wooden buildings dating back to the 19th century are the Kuusiluoto area and the Pikisaari island, where buildings of cultural value have also been moved. Both areas have remained as residential areas, but their status and price level have risen due to the renovation projects accomplished over the past few years.



Picture 7: Kuusiluoto area in Oulu

The Intiö area was built in the early 1880s to accommodate a sharpshooter battalion. The buildings in the area were vacated in 1999, when the garrison was moved out of Oulu. New uses had to be found for the buildings. The Empire style wooden barracks constitute an architectural entity of notable cultural value even at the national level, and the National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments ordered them to be restored and preserved. The old wooden barracks have since been restored under supervision by the National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments and converted into an educational facility. A further aim is to restore the garden into its original 1880s condition.



Picture 8: The old garrison area in Oulu

A town plan is being drawn up for the old garrison area, to allow complementary building in the old exercise grounds. Special efforts have been made to adjust the draft plan to the valuable environment. Attention has been given to such factors and the overall layout and scale of the area, parking solutions and methods of construction; for example, only three-storey buildings will be allowed in the vicinity of the old wooden barracks.

During the participatory procedure, the gross floor area and scale of the proposed two square building complexes were criticised. It remains to be seen whether the municipality, as the planner, will take into account this criticism in the planning process.