

## SACRAL ARCHITECTURE IN FINLAND AND ITS COMMUNITY FORMING ROLE

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The subject of this article is the role of the Finnish Church institution and its influence on shaping the local community. The article presents the possibilities of using and shaping the interiors of temples, depending on the period in which they were created and the function they were to perform.

**Methods.** The authors of the article present the role of Church institution in Finland from the Middle Ages to the present day. The historical educational role of the church and its contemporary community-building function will be outlined. The authors will also present how these assumptions translate into shaping its architecture.

**Results and conclusion.** Despite the considerable secularization of society, the Protestant church in Finland still plays a central role in the local community. The church, with its dominant and educational role in the past, became a companion of the inhabitants, providing them with spaces adapted to their needs, regardless of their age or religion. Once limited, single-space forms of temples, today with an extensive program function as local cultural centers and meeting places adapted to the needs of their users.

**Keywords:** Finland, sacral architecture, church, education, community

### INTRODUCTION

Finland belongs to the group of Nordic countries located on the Fenno-Scandic Peninsula. It is a country with a coherent and homogeneous landscape. It is a coherent and homogeneous country in terms of nature, although



with distinctive areas with their individual qualities. The most characteristic and recognizable feature of the landscape are numerous lakes connected by canals and rivers situated among forests. Yet in terms of climate, Finland is much more diverse. One might experience short and warm summers and long and cool winters. The contrasts between summer and winter are exacerbated by the geographic location affecting the length of the day and night. The summer polar day and the winter polar night are 73 days each, respectively, when the sun does not set or there is no sun at all (Walczak, 1973).

A monotonous landscape rich in lakes, interspersed with coniferous forests and extremely difficult climatic conditions are the hallmarks of Finland. It is precisely these unfavourable conditions: cold, scarce sunlight, location on hard rocks, that the Nordic countries compensate with a rich social life and a deep sense of community (Stock, 2014).

### Figure 1

Berndt Lindholm „Kesäaamu metsänrinteessä” (“Summer mornig on the forest slope”), 1891-92



Source: Turun Taidmuseo. (2022, August 24).

For a long time sacral architecture, which was the only type of public facility universally available, has become and continues to play the role of a cultural centre. In the past, church interiors, which were used primarily for meetings during church masses and ceremonies, and for educational purposes, today are a place where exhibitions and concerts are also held.

The specific spatial conditions, which will be discussed in the following chapters, enable the use of sacred spaces in many ways – ways that serve the members and build a sense of community.

Contemporary Finnish protestant temples are characterized by a distinct form compared to European Christian churches, by experimenting with forms, materials and construction. However, despite these specific features, churches and chapels retain their primary function of multi-dimensional service to the local community.

## THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The national churches of Finland are the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Finnish Church. Both religions have their justification in the history of the country and its geographical location. Finland has a direct border with two powerful countries: Sweden and Russia. Due to its location, for centuries it was a contested area between these two powers. The territory of today's Finland was incorporated into the Kingdom of Sweden during the First Crusade around 1150. All religious and political decisions in Finland were therefore a reflection of the policy pursued in the Kingdom of Sweden. This state lasted until 1808-09, until the Swedish-Russian war. From that moment on, until 1917, when Finland gained independence for the first time, its lands belonged to the Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire.

In the Nordic countries the Church is perceived as a sociocultural institution (Sinnemäki et al., 2019). The Lutheran Church, whose statements, ideas and beliefs are based on education, egalitarianism, work ethics and honesty, influenced the shaping of secular Finland: private and public practices, specific traditions and behaviours.

It is assumed that the Reformation (1517) was the key moment in the spread of learning to read and write, but in fact these skills were fully spread throughout Finland at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. By the end of the 19th century, 98% of Lutheran Finns could read, however only 12.4% could write (Latomaa & Nuolijarvi, 2002).

By the 12th and 13th centuries, all available publications were written in Latin, and possessing reading and writing skills were accessible only for the church people. In the Middle Ages, still few people could afford education. At the end of the epoch, not only the clergy and high society but also wealthy peasants were able to learn. Clergy were taught at the cathedral schools, where young adepts attended trivium and quadrivium lessons, which included humanities as well as mathematics. One of these facilities were located by the cathedral in Turku. After graduating, priests in local parishes were obliged to teach Christian values. During this period, there was no place for parishioners to learn to read or write (Salonen, 2019).

After the Reformation, the institution of the Church became impoverished due to the confiscation of goods and the limitation of influence by

the King of Sweden, Gustav Waza. As a consequence, the possibilities of further widespread dissemination of education were limited. However, as a result of the closure of schools and monastery centres, there was a lack of educated clergymen able to continue transmitting post-reformation values. Due to these shortages, the status of the churches improved in the 17th century, therefore they could continue their educational service.

Following Martin Luther's idea, everyone should be able to read and understand the written word in their own language (Sacred Scripture). This approach had a significant impact on changing the perception of Finnish as a valuable and later national language, which until then was used only by common people, while Swedish remained the administrative language in Finland. Until then there was no standardized Finnish language, abundant in many dialects, which was common to all regions. It was not until the first half of the 19th century that a nationalist movement emerged and found its audience among students and teachers (Sinnemäki et al., 2019). Mikael Agricola, the Bishop of Turku was the first translator of church scriptures into the Finnish language. His first work was *ABC-Kirja* (1543), a textbook that began with the alphabet, then followed by prayers, and ended with numbers. With its help, not only Christian values were passed on in local parishes, but also the practical skills of reading, writing and counting were taught. However, it must be emphasized that learning to write was often perceived as redundant to understanding and implementing post-Reformation values, so it was often neglected. Later, learning to read was to be encouraged by relating the knowledge of the Little Catechism to the permission to get married. Before the construction of local primary schools, the members of the community were taught in the church, before or after mass. The conditions of the church interiors were sufficient to conduct these lessons: spacious interiors and good acoustics adapted to reading aloud during the mass. For centuries the Church was the leading educational institute in Finland until 1868, when the education system was disconnected from it.

During the Russian rule after 1809, when Finland became for the first time in history the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland (Lehtonen, 1999) the needs of the inhabitants changed. Finns were no longer only an agricultural and hunting people. Investments in the development of the cities and the universities contributed to the need to seek for national Finnish identity and develop Finnish culture. This movement included architecture. The creation of the national epic - *Kalevala* - was an incomparable influence on this phenomenon. Transcribed in the first half of the nineteenth century by Elias Lönnrot, spoken mythical stories, mainly from the region of North Karelia, about the ending times of heroes and magic, replaced by the advent of the Christian era, became an inspiration and one of the foundations in establishing Finnish identity (Järvinen, 2010). It was a fruitful time for the development of national art, and the emergence of symbols and heroes. The content and characters derived from the *Kalevala* also began to appear in public spaces, as decorative elements of the buildings. Nature was another key element which

shaped Nordic identity. The admiration of a harsh climate and the appreciation of simplicity and poverty derived from Lutheranism is still an inspiration for designers, although it is also a fundamental value for all Finns, which influences the respect for the use of natural goods. In the second half of the 19th century, Swedish-speaking aristocratic families began changing their surnames to Finnish and using Finnish language at home. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a Finnish-speaking representation of the elite in Finland, and Finnish was no longer a language used only by specific social groups (Sinnemäki et al., 2019).

The church itself also took part in forming the national identity. The foundations of the Evangelical faith fitted with the ideas with which the Finns identified themselves. At the beginning of the 20th century, every inhabitant was obliged to define their religious affiliation. Hence, in statistical data from that period, 100% of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church or the Finnish Orthodox Church (Statistics of Finland, 2021). Leaving the church was possible as early as 1923, when religious freedom was guaranteed. Earlier, from 1889, it was only possible to change religion. Today, there has been a large decline in the number of members of the church. In order to cease being a member of the Church, it is enough to write a letter stating the reasons and deliver it to the parish or the registry office, then the decision becomes final.

People leave the Church for many reasons and they depend on the current political and social situation. For people aged 18-39, the Church has no personal significance and they also perceive it as an intolerant institution (Niemelä, 2017). One of the reasons is also finances. As an official member of the Church, taxes must be paid to these institutions. Chart no. 1 shows how the participation of the entire society in the membership of national churches developed over the last century. In recent years, a steady decrease in the number of members (Evangelical Lutheran Church) by about 1% annually can be observed.

**Table 1**

*Statistical data on members of national churches in Finland*

| Year | Population | The Evangelical<br>Lutheran<br>Church | %     | The Orthodox<br>Finnish<br>Church | %    | Others    | %     |
|------|------------|---------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|------|-----------|-------|
| 1900 | 2 656 000  | 2 605 536                             | 98,10 | 45 152                            | 1,70 | 0         | 0,00  |
| 1950 | 4 030 000  | 3 828 500                             | 95,00 | 68 510                            | 1,70 | 112 840   | 2,80  |
| 2000 | 5 181 115  | 4 409 576                             | 85,11 | 56 807                            | 1,10 | 659 979   | 12,74 |
| 2005 | 5 255 580  | 4 373 556                             | 83,22 | 59 558                            | 1,13 | 761 522   | 14,49 |
| 2010 | 5 375 276  | 4 207 192                             | 78,27 | 60 851                            | 1,13 | 1 032 429 | 19,21 |
| 2015 | 5 487 308  | 4 004 369                             | 72,98 | 61 690                            | 1,12 | 1 336 106 | 24,35 |
| 2017 | 5 513 130  | 3 908 809                             | 70,9  | 60 644                            | 1,10 | 1 449 453 | 26,30 |
| 2018 | 5 517 919  | 3 851 507                             | 69,8  | 60 697                            | 1,10 | 1 511 909 | 27,40 |
| 2020 | 5 533 793  | 3 751 911                             | 67,8  | 60 871                            | 1,10 | 1 626 935 | 29,40 |

Source: Own elaboration (based on data: Statistics of Finland 1990-2020).

However it should be emphasized, that being a member of the Lutheran Church is not only perceived in terms of religion, but above all it is seen as part of the national identity (Gustafsson, 2000). Being a member of the community does not necessarily mean being a believer: a member - non-believer.

## ARCHITECTURE AND ITS COMMUNITY FORMING ROLE

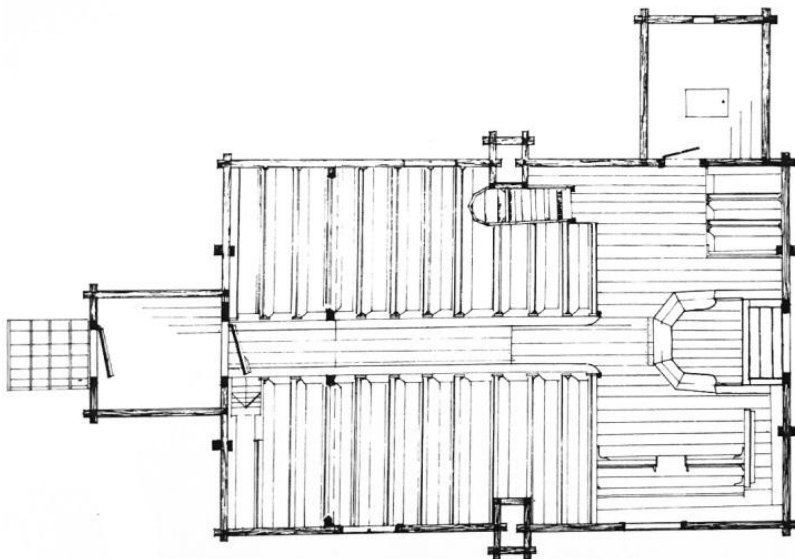
In the post-Reformation definition of the Church, its meaning as “the House of God” is abandoned in favor of a place of prayer and gathering of the community of the faithful (Chojecka, 2020).

During the reign of the Swedish Kingdom until the Swedish-Russian war (1808-1809), vernacular and simply functional architectural forms dominated in Finland, although they were characterized by an excellent technique of joining and using local wood.

Simple in form, single-spaced with a sacristy they were often preceded by a bell tower. It is here, in the first public building, where the members met for study and mass. After the Reformation, Catholic buildings retained their functional layout, but the interiors were stripped of redundant decorations. Lutheranism perceives art only as a didactic instrument or a medium of remembrance (Białostocki, 1982). The layout of the interior itself depends on Luther’s view of the written word. As the most important element of the liturgy is the proclamation of the Word of God (*Sola Scriptura*), the pulpit becomes one of the key elements of the interior. The remaining elements of the liturgical triad, obligatory in Lutheran churches, are the altar and the baptismal font. The perception of read or sung words will be reflected in the layouts of post-reformation temples. Since then, centrality and symmetry of new built temples are valued. It has a positive effect on the acoustics of the interior and provides all participants with similar conditions during the mass, emphasizing the community. Examples are the Sodankylän Kirkko (1700) or Vimpelin Kirkko (1807) temples.

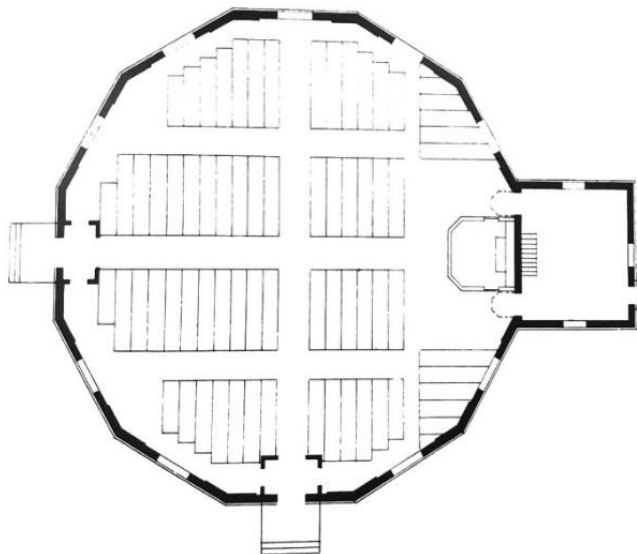
The same attitude towards the temple plans prevailed until the end of the first half of the 20th century. The new century brought experimenting with materials (steel, concrete) and modern technologies led to designing new church plans and creating different atmosphere of the interior. It became brighter and more illuminated, such as Hyvinkää Church (1961) by Aarno Ruusuvori. It is a small church adapted with its scale to already existing local architecture. Another example of the use of new technologies is the Kaleva Church in Tampere (1966) by Raili and Reima Pietilä. The tall body of the church fits perfectly with the massive residential district in which it was built. In this complex form of the church, there is space for supplemental functions, such as club rooms or classrooms.

**Figure 2**  
*Sodankylän Kirkko plan (1700)*



Source: Petterson (1992).

**Figure 3**  
*Vimpelin Kirkko plan (1807)*



Source: Petterson (1992).

**Figure 4**  
*Hyvinkää Church (1961), Aarno Ruusuvori*



Source: Discovering Finland (2022, August 25).

**Figure 5**  
*Kaleva Church in Tampere (1966), Raili and Reima Pietilä*



Source: Reddit (2022, June 16).



The 20th century set a new direction in architecture. The designers of that generation, using modern and available technologies, searched for their own answer to the form of sacred temples. A contemporary answer both for oneself as a designer, but also for the contemporary needs of architecture users. Hence, new functions appear, developing the classical church layout.

A similar phenomenon can be observed today. However, the original assumptions remain unchanged: the excellent use of the material from which the object is made and an attempt to combine traditional and modern technological possibilities. The contemporary way of understanding the concept of humanistic architecture, responding to human needs, is also present. The function and scale of the church is tailored to the needs of the parish and the local community. The churches built in the 20th century abound in a number of supporting functions, adapted to the needs of both the parish and the users for whom they are built. In Finnish churches, not only the mass takes place, but the building also serves as a meeting place for users of all ages, and often of different religions. An example is the church in Espoo, in the newly developing Suvela district, where 30% of residents are foreigners. The sacred function is related to the local cultural center. The building also contains office spaces, as well as those intended for children and adolescents. There are sports fields and a playground for children next to the church.

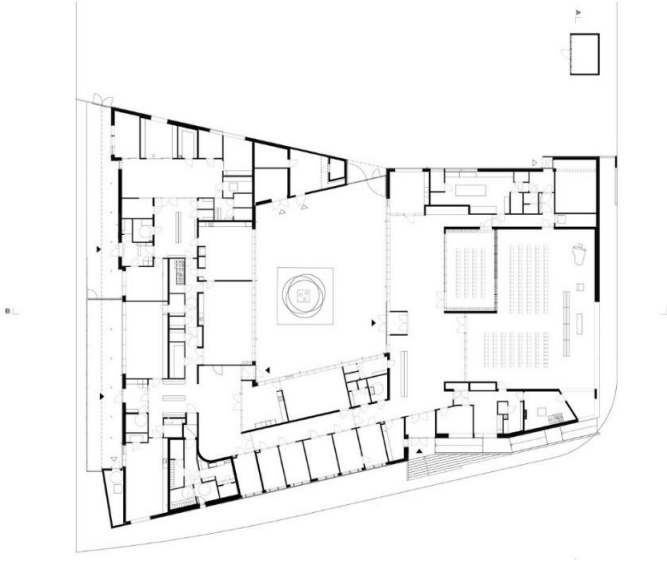
### Figure 6

*Suvela Church (2010), OoPEAA*



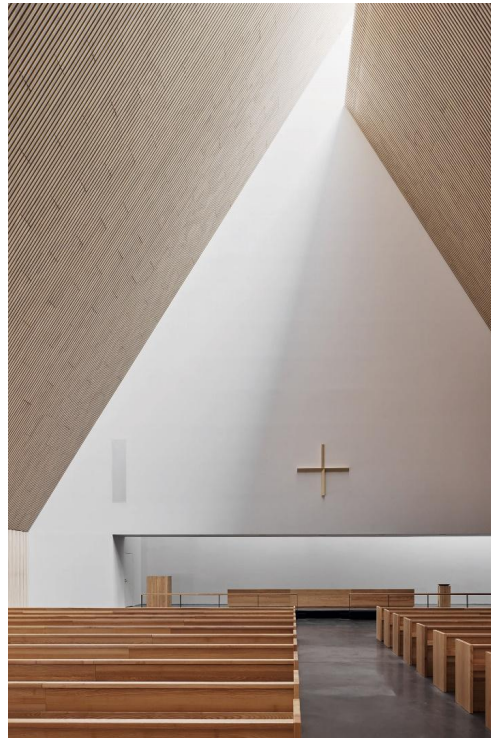
Source: OoPEAA (2022, June 12).

**Figure 7**  
*Suvela Church plan (2010), OoPEAA*



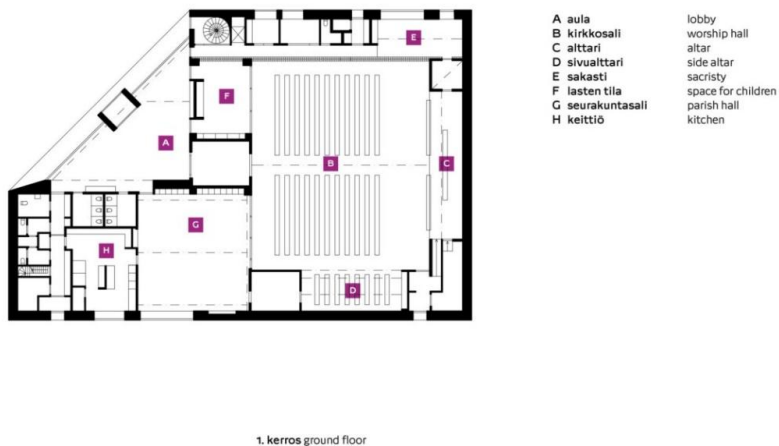
Source: OoPEAA (2022, June 12).

Another contemporary example from 2021 is the church in Ylivieska, which is a response to the lack of a temple after the local wooden church burned down in 2016. In its massive brick block, the building hides not only parish rooms, but also rooms for children and a widely available kitchen.



**Figure 8**  
*Ylivieska Church (2021), K2S*

Source: K2S (2022, July 14).

**Figure 9***Ylivieska Church plan (2021), K2S*

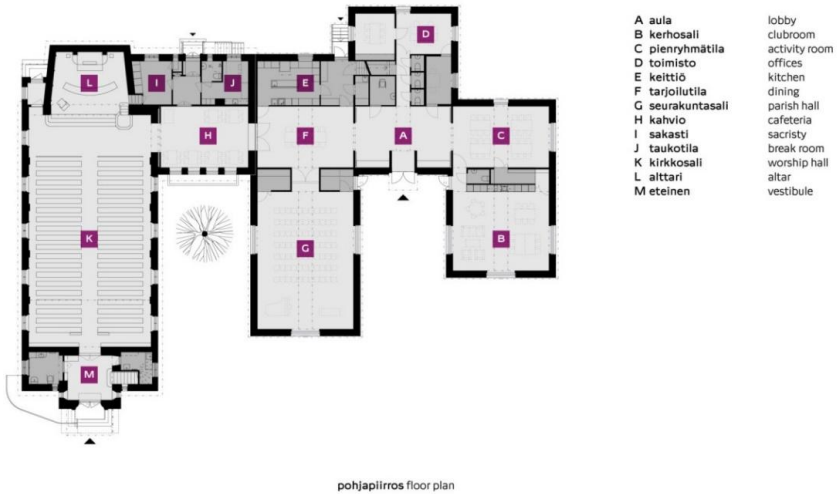
Source: Arkkitehti. Finnish Architectural Review (2022, June 17).

The historic church in Myllykoski, which until recently had only limited sacred spaces, was expanded with additional functions in 2020. As part of the revitalization program, new buildings, attached to the historic body of the church, are a meeting place for the local community. There are parish rooms, an available kitchen with a dining room and club rooms.

**Figure 10***Myllykoski Church (2020), OPUS architects*

Source: Arkkitehti. Finnish Architectural Review (2022, June 17).

Figure 11  
 Myllykoski Church (2020), OPUS architects



Source: Arkkitehti. Finnish Architectural Review (2022, June 17).

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the constant secularization of society (every year the number of believers decreases by about 1%, similar to Sweden or Norway: [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi), [www.svenskakyrkan.se](http://www.svenskakyrkan.se), [www.ssb.no](http://www.ssb.no)), Protestant churches are still being built as a response to the needs of the local community. In addition to the purely sacred function, the facility abounds in complementary functions, such as meeting rooms, cafes, offices and themed rooms for children and teenagers. Therefore, as part of the urban layout, green areas and playgrounds are created around the churches. With these measures, churches constantly function as meeting places or community centres, regardless of the religion of their users. These architecturally diverse and heterogeneous in terms of spatial solutions, sculptural compositions fulfill their community-forming role and convey ideologically coherent content.

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