

WIVI LÖNN, THE ARCHITECT

INTRODUCTION

Wivi Lönn (1872-1966) was the first Finnish woman to start an architectural agency. She gained the qualifications of architect in the 1890s during an era when women were only allowed entry into construction education programmes by dispensation. Lönn was a productive and innovative architect, but public interest in her career and designs was mostly overshadowed by the contemporary male master designers. During the past few decades, however, Wivi Lönn has been increasingly appreciated as a significant Finnish architect and pioneer, who paved the road for the rise of women in the architectural profession. The Finnish association of female architects, Architecta, was established in honour of her achievements in 1942, and she was granted professorship in 1959.

1. CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN TAMPERE

Olivia (Wivi) Mathilda Lönn was born on 20 May, 1872. Her father, master brewer Wilhelm Lönn, had married Mathilda Sirén from Pirkkala in 1869. Wivi was their second child. The oldest son, Fredrik Wilhelm, or Ville, and Wivi were followed by a son called Emil Arvid and a daughter Aina Maria. The family lived close to the brewer at Onkiniemi in Tampere. When Wilhelm Lönn died on 23 May, 1888, Mathilda Lönn remained as the sole caregiver and breadwinner for her four children. At first, they rented a dwelling at Puutarhakatu 27 in Amuri. In 1893, Mathilda Lönn bought a house at Puutarhakatu 40 and made a living by renting out rooms.

Wivi Lönn's career choice was influenced by her mother, a capable and independent woman who worked for a living. Mathilda Lönn encouraged Wivi to enter an artistic career and to educate herself, which was something for which many of her female contemporaries never had an opportunity. She probably inherited her artistic and mathematical talents from her mother's family (Mathilda Sirén was related to the architect J.S. Sirén, who designed the Finnish House of Parliament). Wivi Lönn reminisced about her mother as follows: "My mother would have made a good architect. She was artistic and knew how to make all things beautiful.

She always encouraged me to strive for new achievements.” (Interview in *Yhteishyvä* magazine 1/1962). The mother is said to have helped her shy and reserved daughter by making speeches on her behalf in topping-out parties. Mathilda Lönn was bedridden for the last 12 years of her life and died in Wivi’s home in Kulosaari, Helsinki, in 1924.

Wivi Lönn started school in the City of Tampere Higher Elementary School in the autumn 1881 and moved to the newly established Finnish Girls’ School in 1893. She was a sickly child and frequently absent from school, which is why she had to repeat the first and second grades of junior secondary school. She had to drop out of school for financial reasons before she matriculated.

While on the higher grades of junior secondary school, she began to call herself Vivi, which she soon began to spell as Wivi. She said she made the difference in spelling because Vivi would have been pronounced ”Fifi” in the German style, and that was something she did not want. She later began to use this colloquial form of her name as an architect, too.

2. CONSTRUCTION STUDIES

Gender-based educational inequality began to crumble when more and more women matriculated from senior secondary school towards the late 19th century. Women gradually also began to enrol in the predominantly male technical colleges, though at first based on special arrangements or with extraordinary student status. It was only in the early 20th century that women began to apply for entry into architectural programmes along with male students. Extraordinary students only attended courses of their own choice, which meant that they studied for a shorter time than regular students (*Arkkitehteja*. Architecta ry:n 40-vuotisjuhlajulkaisu 1982, s.34). As far as it is known, Finnish Signe Hornborg was the first woman to gain the qualifications of an architect in Europe. She graduated from Finnish Polytechnic College (currently University of Technology) in 1890.

In the autumn 1892, Wivi Lönn registered with a special permit as a student in the construction department of Tampere Industrial College. One year previously, an amendment had been made in the operating procedure of industrial colleges, which made it possible for women to attend, though not as regular students. Lönn studied at the Industrial College for one academic year, being the only woman among 13 male students. Her study performance was excellent, and she was ranked as the best student of construction department 1. She told about her studies as follows: ”I wonder

what made me enrol in an industrial college? I have construction in my blood, and that drew me there. People were certainly astonished. The public opinion was quite different at that time. It was not suitable for a girl to be in the same classroom with boys. The teachers therefore wanted to give me private tuition. I wrote all my exams alone in the staff room.” (Interview in *Kaunis Koti* magazine 6 / 1963).

The first women who registered as students in Finnish Polytechnic College were artistically oriented. Art studies had always been freely available to women in Finland, and the first female students of the college were art students (Lyytikäinen 1996, p.157). Wivi Lönn held extraordinary student status for three academic years. In the late 19th century, architecture as an independent art form was a focus of attention in Finland, which may partly explain the interest of women in architecture. When Wivi Lönn began her studies in 1895, there were three graduated female architects in Finland. Bertha Enwald and Albertina Östman were her female fellow students. Her fellow students also included some of the great names in the Finnish architecture of the early 20th century, such as Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen. Wivi Lönn did her pre-service training in the agencies of Onni Tarjanne and Lars Sonck. She graduated as an architect in 1896.

3. CAREER AS AN ARCHITECT

The gradual emergence of educational equality in Finland in the early 20th century was not enough to break down the male monopoly in state and local government. Most female architects worked either as anonymous designers in public building administration or in architectural agencies owned by men. Wivi Lönn, however, came to be known as an independent and highly esteemed architect, which was an exceptional achievement that went unequalled for a long time. She never married or had children, which made it possible for her to commit herself fully to her work. It is hard to imagine how she could have combined a career as an architect and the obligations of motherhood in an era when such a dual role was considered strange or downright disreputable for a woman. Not even women's associations were advocating the dual-role model for women.

Wivi Lönn's career can be divided into three main phases: the early period in her home town Tampere in 1898-1911, the time she spent in Jyväskylä in 1911-1918 and her time Helsinki up till the 1930s, after which she retired almost completely.

After her graduation from Polytechnic College, Lönn worked for her teacher Gustaf Nyström. It was then that she got her first significant commission from her home town Tampere. She was asked to design the new building for *Tampereen Suomalainen Tyttökoulu* (Tampere Finnish Girls' School, later *Tyttölyseo*). While she was working on this design, she was given a 1000 mark grant by *Konkordialiitto* Association, which enabled her to travel to Scotland, England and Continental Europe. During her travels, Lönn studied the use of bricks and granite in architecture. She was especially interested in granite buildings in Aberdeen. That era was generally considered the golden age of Finnish granite, although Finnish architects were well aware that the stylistic motifs for the use of natural stone had mostly been borrowed from abroad.

In addition to learning about different materials, Wivi Lönn also wanted to learn about the building of schools, and she had been granted a permission by the local school administrators to visit all schools in the Aberdeen region. She especially admired the coziness and tidiness of the schools. The underlying principle of British school architecture was to place the classrooms around spacious halls, which helped to avoid narrow and dark corridors. Pupils often left their coats in a special cloakroom on the ground floor. Lönn found this new model of school building so fascinating that she applied the ground plans she had seen in Aberdeen to her design of *Suomalainen Tyttökoulu* (Suominen-Kokkonen 1992, p. 98). Lönn also skilfully placed the different school functions at the different elevations of the lot. She designed a space for pupils' coats in the basement that was at the level of the playgrounds. The wide staircase opened up into a hall on each floor, allowing the pupils to spend the breaks indoors on rainy days. The outdoor appearance of the building was minimalistic, and Lönn did not yet apply her preference for natural stone in this design.

Suomalainen Tyttökoulu is considered one of the best of Wivi Lönn's designs, and it opened up a new perspective to school design in Finland. While working in Tampere, Lönn also designed schools to be placed elsewhere in Finland, including *Mikkelin yhteiskoulu* (Mikkeli Secondary School) and *Turun ruotsalaisen yhteiskoulu* (Turku Swedish Secondary School). Schools constitute the most important category among her designs, and she is also most widely appreciated for her skilful and economical school designs. Successful school designs and the numerous first prizes in architectural competitions brought her many orders for designs of institutional buildings in the early decades of the 20th century.

Wivi Lönn's designs included schools of home economics and folk high schools. In 1906, she designed the Ebeneser college for kindergarten

teachers in Kallio, Helsinki. This design later caused her to get commissions from the Young Women's Christian College (YWCA) Lönn designed the large main office building for YWCA in Helsinki in the 1920s and smaller buildings for a number of local associations. The construction of the aforesaid main office building (currently Hotel Helka) was significantly sponsored by Commercial Councillor Hanna Parviainen. She donated a notable sum of money on the condition that she herself and architect Lönn could have an apartment in the building. After Parviainen's untimely death in 1938, Lönn lived in the building on her own for 28 years until her own death.

Lönn's best-known ecclesiastic design is the Pispala chapel, built in Tampere in 1908. The building was later converted into a church. The most significant of her banks and business buildings was the design for *Oulun Säästöpankki* in 1911.

Wivi Lönn was also a skilful structural designer, who herself calculated the structures of roof trusses, beams and cupolas. In the concrete structures of the Tampere fire station, for example, she utilised the curving shape of the lot and left the large equipment room without internal structural supports. This solution served excellently the functions of the fire station. It was significant that, in her later co-operation with Armas Lindgren, for example, Wivi Lönn designed the structures, not the ornaments.

Lönn spent the years 1911-18 in Jyväskylä, sharing with her mother the house she had designed on the Seminaarinmäki hill next to the house she had designed for her brother Ville. One of the main reasons for her decision to move to Jyväskylä was her excessive work burden in Tampere. According to her own words, Lönn escaped "the telephone and such things". Her work load had grown to be so huge that she was only able to work on her designs during the weekends and nights. In Jyväskylä, she started an agency in a building designed by herself at Hämeenkatu 4. Over time, Wivi Lönn designed nearly a full suburb on Seminaarinmäki, including several villas. Due to the First World War and the political instability prevailing in Finland in the 1910s, construction activity slowed down notably. During this period of lesser activity, Lönn mainly employed herself by designing family homes and some fairly large villas. Her designs are especially numerous in an area called *Älylä*, which became popular among the cultural elite of Jyväskylä.

In Jyväskylä, Lönn got to know Commercial Councillor Johan Parviainen' family and especially their daughter Hanna, who became her good friend and important companion on their trips to Europe. Sulkula

Mansion, the home of the Parviainen family, became a second home for Wivi Lönn for several years. *Johan Parviaisen Tehtaat Oy* (Parviainen Factories), the industrial establishment owned by Johan Parviainen, became a significant employer for Lönn, who was able to design almost all new premises built the company on Säynätsalo island, most of them in the 1920s. Her Säynätsalo designs include an office building, a kindergarten, an old people's home, a hospital, residential buildings for workers and engineers as well as the layout plan for a residential area. With the help of Hanna Parviainen, Lönn also established connections with other industrial families, and she made designs for the paper mills of Serlachius and Schaumann in the 1910s. Her biggest industrial commission was the design for a large storage building for *Tampereen verkatehdas* (Tampere baize factory) as well as renovation designs for their old office building and some other buildings on the grounds.

The most significant foreign commission was Estonia Theatre in Tallinn, which was based on the prize-winning design produced for a contest in cooperation with Armas Lindgren. The other commissions outside Finland included the Tartu student hall in 1909, a girls' school designed for Estonia in the same year, but never actually constructed, and the design for a villa in Biarritz one year later.

Wivi Lönn was most productive during the early decades of the 20th century, when *Jugend* was the predominant style. In Finnish architecture, this style is associated with the National Romantic movement. It can be said that *Jugend* (or *art nouveau*) architecture first abandoned the rational and norm-constrained design practices based on the classical scale and aspired towards an intuitive, subjective approach. The style of Lönn's buildings is compatible with the contemporary spirit of Finnish architecture, and during the early part of her career, she co-operated with several significant Finnish architects (Pohjanpalo 1977, p. 99). In her co-operative projects with Armas Lindgren, Lönn abandoned decorative and romantic motifs and adopted a more streamlined form language, including, for instance, brickwork left visible in façades.

Lönn's active career only lasted for slightly more than 15 years. In the 1920s, she worked on some large orders, but mostly travelled around Europe every year with her friend Hanna Parviainen, being therefore obliged to decline several offers of work. Lönn gave up most of her architectural duties in the early 1930s, when the first signs of functionalism began to emerge in Finnish architecture. One of her last designs was the Tähtelä observatory in Sodankylä in 1945. Lönn said that she could not keep up with the new styles and especially the new building materials, and

she therefore considered it best to retire (Laine 1992, s.46). Still, even after her active career, she continued to follow actively construction and the development of architecture.

4. ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS

In the late 19th century, professional Finnish architects began to develop an operating strategy to maintain their position along with other educated art professionals. One of the most significant new activities was the organisation of architectural competitions. Architectural competitions allowed designers to display their professional skills in a versatile way and enabled junior architects to gain public recognition and expert evaluation based on their success in competitions.

After her highly appreciated design for *Tampereen Suomalainen Tyttökoulu*, Wivi Lönn participated in a competition to design *Aleksanterin kansakoulu* (Aleksanteri elementary school) in Tampere. She won the competition under the pseudonym "Koe" (Test). When the identity of the designer was revealed, the other participants in the contest claimed that the jury had not been sufficiently qualified, and there was a public debate on the issue in newspapers. Ultimately, however, Lönn's design was implemented. The school was completed in 1906, and experts still consider it the most successful school building in Finland. The building has since been repaired and renovated with respect to its original style.

Wivi Lönn's design fulfilled the most important criterion for publicity in architecture, namely the first prize in an architectural competition. Thanks to her victory, Lönn became appreciated as a fully fledged member of the profession, which can be considered a key moment for both her personal professional career and female architects in general. Lönn received altogether six first prizes in architectural competitions. In addition to that, she won competitions with designs produced in co-operation with Armas Lindgrenin.

Wivi Lönn won the first prize in the architectural competition arranged in 1904 for the design of *Tampereen talouskoulu* (Tampere school for home economics). This did not give rise to similar controversy as her design for *Aleksanterin kansakoulu* because this was only a "soup school" (Pohjanpalo 1977, p.102). Lönn's design was implemented. The style of the building is mostly classifiable as *Jugend*, and the ornamental interior motifs, such as fish and vegetables, remind the users and visitors of the original use of the building.

The first prize in the invitation-based competition for *Tampereen kauppaoppilaitos* (Tampere commercial college) in 1991 and the building that was constructed during the following year belong to the series of school buildings designed by Lönn. While designing the interior, she once again applied the model she had seen on her trips to Europe, mainly England and Scotland, where the classrooms are placed around large halls. Lönn assigned different uses to the different halls, such as "recreation room" and "morning assembly room". The gables of the commercial college, which have some classical features, are decorated by vault motifs. New floors have since been added to the building, and renovations have caused it to lose part of its architectural value.

In addition to the above-mentioned competitions arranged in Tampere, Lönn also won the competition for the design of *Mikkelin yhteiskoulu* (Mikkeli secondary school) in 1910. Thanks to her numerous prize-winning school designs and buildings, Wivi Lönn became acknowledged as an expert designer of schools. She was offered the tenured position of a school expert in the Superior Board for Schools, but she declined, preferring her career as a private practitioner.

The competition for the building of Tampere volunteer fire brigade in 1907, which was won by Lönn, caused a scandal. It was obviously considered unsuitable for a woman to design a "men's house" of this kind, and Lönn's victorious design was never implemented. Instead, a new design was ordered from a well-known building engineer in Tampere.

The design that is considered Wivi Lönn's most significant contribution is the City of Tampere main fire station, which is based the first prize in the architectural competition arranged in 1905. At that time, the architects at Tampere were fiercely competing for design commissions, and Lönn's fellow student Birger Federley, for example, had submitted three alternative designs. The victorious design, especially its façades, as well as the jury of the competition, including the architect Bertel Jung, were criticised by the other competitors. The City of Tampere required granite to be used in the façades of the building, and Lönn had the advantage of being familiar with the use of natural stone in architecture. In addition to the models in Scotland, Lönn also derived ideas from *Johanneksen kirkko* (Johannes Church, currently Tampere Cathedral) designed by Lars Sonck, which was then under construction. The brick exterior of the fire station was partly covered by thin slabs of granite, used by Lönn to create an impression of a full stone structure. The halls of the station were originally designed for horses, but they have since proved their flexibility even in the era of fire engines. The design of the building is dominated by a tower, where fire

hoses are dried. The one floor later added to the building has been successfully integrated with the original design.

Architect Armas Lindgren sought to co-operate with Wivi Lönn on some extensive competition designs after the closure of the agency owned by himself, Herman Gesellius and Eliel Saarinen. Lönn and Lindgren jointly designed the victorious designs of two major buildings. The first of these was the University of Helsinki student union building in 1907, while the second was the competition design for Estonia Theatre in Tallinn in 1908.

The victory in the Estonia Theatre competition was Lönn's most significant achievement in co-operation with Armas Lindgren. The contemporary director of the theatre, Hilma Rantanen-Pylkkänen, was happy to have the building designed by Finnish architects. The building was accomplished in 1917, and it has played an important role in the development of the Estonian independence movement.

5. INTERNATIONAL TRAVELS

Finnish architects' efforts to study and to develop their professional skills were significantly promoted by trips abroad, mainly to Central Europe, at the turn of the 20th century. Artists had, for a long time, done part of their studies abroad, first in Germany, but during the last few decades of the 19th century increasingly also in France, especially Paris. Architects adopted the same practice, exploring the experimental use of materials in Europe, the new structural solutions and the new types of buildings. Recent innovations were also displayed in exhibitions, especially the world expos, which crucially facilitated the spreading of inventions and technical and economic know-how all around the increasingly technical world (Tuomi 1999, p. 101). Finnish architectural and construction expertise was also on display in world expos. For example, the Finnish pavilion in the Paris Expo in 1900 brought international fame to the three architects who had designed it: Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen.

During her career, Wivi Lönn made at least 34 trips abroad, visiting different parts of Europe during the years 1897 – 1938. She never went outside Europe, but travelled widely within Europe from Moscow in the east to Edinburgh in the west. Lönn kept a diary of her travels to describe buildings, but also events and the people she met. She travelled almost yearly, combining work and holiday. By the time of the First World War, she had already made 14 trips to Central and Southern Europe, but the war prevented travel for several years. She visited exhibitions and familiarised

herself with many building, which stimulated her ongoing design projects. She was typically gone for two to three months at a time, and she occasionally made even two long trips during the same year. Lönn also frequently visited Stina Östman, a friend from her student days, who lived in Switzerland. Since 1910, and possibly even earlier, the trips were also motivated by health concerns. Lönn used to work standing, and that began to cause a strain on her legs. She often visited the spas in Central Europe, especially Wiesbaden in Germany, for treatment of her painful knees (Suominen-Kokkonen 1992, p. 99).

Wivi Lönn made her first trip to Stockholm, where she visited a Scandinavian exhibition of art and industries in August 1897. The exhibition in Djurgården was dominated by an industrial hall considered the largest wooden building ever constructed, which had been designed by Ferdinand Boberg and Fredrik Lilljekvist. The Stockholm exhibition was one of the large exhibitions at the turn of the century, where people went to develop their professional skill and to find innovations and stimuli.

Gustaf Nyström gave Wivi Lönn a testimonial where he concluded that she had good qualifications to work as an architect and recommended that she be granted a travel allowance, for which she applied when she had been given the commission for the design of *Tampereen Suomalainen Tyttökoulu*. *Konkordialiitto* Association also gave her a grant for an excursion in 1898, and that helped Lönn to learn about the ways of using natural stone and brick in different parts of Europe. During this same trip, she got to see the space solutions used in schools in England and Scotland, especially in the Aberdeen region. The only Finnish architects to have visited Aberdeen before Lönn had been Hugo Lindberg and Gustaf Nyström's brother Alexander Nyström, who had probably influenced the decision of Lönn, who was employed at his brother's office, to go to Scotland (Suominen-Kokkonen 1999, p. 102).

From Scotland Wivi Lönn went to London for two weeks and then continued her journey to Paris. There she met Armas Lindgren, who accompanied her for excursions of the city. They travelled together to Cologne in Germany, from where Lindgren returned to Finland. Lönn stayed in Europe until the beginning of October. She worked on her designs of *Tampereen tyttökoulu* in such a way that the first set of designs was already completed at the beginning of November.

In the summer 1900 Lönn went to Central Europe again. The Finnish pavilion at the Paris Expo, designed by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen, had gained a lot of international attention and fame. Wivi Lönn's notes, however, say nothing about the Finnish pavilion, although she often helped

her colleagues at busy times and was probably quite familiar with the pavilion design process.

Wivi Lönn first crossed the Alps to Italy in May 1906. She was busy touring Italian towns, and she even wrote a note about the volcano Vesuvius, which seems to have been active at that time. She also visited several German towns. Lönn was mostly interested in kindergartens applying Fröbel's pedagogic guidelines, because she had been given the commission to design the new building for *Ebeneserkoti* in Helsinki in February 1906. Lönn produced the first drafts for it in the summer of the same year.

During the years that followed, Lönn mostly travelled in Germany and France. In 1909 she went to Stockholm, continued via Germany to Vienna and returned via Denmark to Finland. Lönn stayed in Vienna for a relatively long time and, together with her friend Aina Lindell, frequently visited *Brugtheater*, which had been designed by Gottfried Semper and Karl von Hasenauer. The theatre building included the innovations introduced by Richard Wagner concerning the design of the stage and the auditorium (Suominen-Kokkonen 1999, p. 104). Lönn was interested in the design of theatres, and she participated in the design competition for Estonia Theatre together with Armas Lindgren in that same year.

During this trip, Lönn also visited exhibitions in different parts of Europe. The light-coloured buildings designed by Ferdinand Boberg caused the Stockholm Industrial Exhibition to be called "Den vita staden" (The White City). On her way home from Vienna, Lönn visited an exhibition in Århus, whose overall layout had been designed by the architect Anton Rosen.

The first prize for her design of Estonia Theatre encouraged Lönn to undertake a trip with Armas Lindgren via St. Petersburg to Vienna and Munich in February 1910. They visited theatres to find out about innovative stage equipment. The design for Estonia Theatre included a Wagnerian orchestra pit and an undivided auditorium with a concrete balcony.

The First World War prevented travelling in Central Europe, and Lönn made her first post-war trip abroad with Armas Lindgren in 1920, when they participated in a building congress arranged in London. After that, most of Lönn's trips were private rather than professional. Since 1921, Lönn mostly travelled with Commercial Councillor Hanna Parviainen. The activities of these two friends were compatible with the new principles of independent femininity of the early 20th century. They were well educated and held leading positions in professional fields with few women, Lönn as an architect and Parviainen as the director of the industrial community she

had inherited from her father. They were single and free to go to Europe even for long periods. Wivi Lönn said she was offered major design assignments in the 1920s, but she preferred to stay and support her friend. Long trips interfered with design work, and in the early 1930s Lönn gave up most of her activities as an architect.

Wivi Lönn died in 1966, and by that time, she had begun to gain at least some recognition for her life's work. Researchers, however, only became interested in her in the 1980s. At that time, people began to acknowledge her significant role as a pioneering female in the field of architecture, which helped women to gain a status in architecture much earlier in Finland than in the other European countries.

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