



THE NEW STEAM AGE

MEET AVANTO ARCHITECTS

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THE CURIOUS SWEDE

This is the electrification age. We plug in our phones, tablets, books, and pretty soon, we'll all be plugging in our cars. But what about ourselves? How do we recharge? Well, in Finland, they don't only rely on electricity, they turn to a more traditional method – steam. We met up with Avanto Architects from Helsinki to find out more about Finland's sauna culture and discover how their own designs provide a boost for body and mind.

You can never tell what people will come to associate with a particular country or culture. For example, with all Sweden has contributed to the world, who could have guessed it would be best known for flat-pack furniture? So, when the first settlers to Finland dug a ditch and filled it with stones, which they then heated and poured water over to enjoy the resulting vapours, nobody could possibly have predicted that this primitive ritual would become synonymous with the Finnish way of life.

SAUNA AS A SACRED SPACE

Today, most of us view a visit to the sauna as a luxury. It's something we treat ourselves to. But in Finland, it means so much more than that. Saunas are sacred spaces where people can recharge their batteries, escape the pace of modern life and lose themselves in a tradition that has remained relatively unchanged for thousands of years.

"Sauna culture wasn't only found in Finland. It was all over Europe," explains Ville Hara, co-founder of Avanto Architects. "Then, for religious reasons, it became frowned upon. It was deemed immoral. So, in many countries, the saunas closed and sauna culture disappeared. But in Finland



it survived. The interesting thing is, Finnish sauna culture hasn't changed much. It is still the same in many ways and is still a big part of our daily lives."

Before homes in Finland were fitted with indoor bathrooms, public saunas were a convenient way for people to wash and stay clean. But as indoor bathrooms became more commonplace, the need for public saunas diminished and many disappeared as a result. If sauna culture was to survive, it had to evolve. Thankfully, it did. Instead of using saunas mostly

for practical purposes, people began using them as places to relax and socialize. Before long, a more leisurely sauna culture developed and Finland witnessed a boom in the building of new public facilities.

So, where can you experience this new sauna trend for yourself? Well, the perfect place to start is Löyly – a stunning boutique sauna on the Helsinki seafront. With its welcoming atmosphere and sleek, angular architecture, Löyly brings a grand old Finnish tradition effortlessly up to date.

DESIGNING A BETTER WAY OF LIFE

Named after the Finnish word for the steam that rises from the hot stones in a sauna, Löyly is the brainchild of Anu Puustinen and Ville Hara. Anu and Ville founded Avanto Architects in 2004, and right from the start they shared a clear vision of how their designs should look, what they should say and how they should make people feel. "We use architecture as a vehicle to create a better life for people," says Anu. "We want people to really experience our architecture. If someone visits a building or space we have designed and they don't feel anything, or don't remember it afterwards, then we didn't succeed at all." Ville takes up the theme. "It is the same for me. It is all about improving the quality of life. What can we build to make people feel better?"

Avanto means "hole in the ice" and refers to the popular Finnish hobby of winter bathing in freezing water, and a deep connection with nature is central to Anu and Ville's design philosophy. So, when it came to designing Löyly, it wasn't just about creating a space that encouraged younger generations to embrace the traditional and social benefits of sauna culture – it was just as important to create a space that complemented, and was kind to, the surrounding natural environment.



One of Avanto's most successful and well-known projects is the Chapel of St. Lawrence, situated in the city of Vantaa.





Anu Puustinen and Ville Hara, who are better known as Avanto Architects.

THE RISE OF LÖYLY

“Löyly is situated on a strip of land along the coastline called Helsinki Park. We had to make sure our design integrated with the surroundings,” explains Ville. “Instead of a normal box-shaped building, we wanted to create artificial topography. So, we came up with a natural, rock-like shape. As time passes the building turns grey, then it really becomes part of the rocky coastline.”

When it came to choosing the materials for Löyly, Anu and Ville had to consider function as much as form. “As we are working a lot with water, we had to use durable materials that could get wet,” explains Anu. The whole palette is a mixture of concrete for the wet spaces, steel for the load-bearing structures and then a stunning wooden ‘cloak’ that drapes itself around the entire building. It’s this wooden cloak that transforms Löyly from a grand design into a true work of art.

As with all Avanto projects, sustainability was an important consideration. All 4,000 wooden planks used in Löyly’s construction are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. The timber itself was provided by a Finnish start-up called Nextimber, who collect leftover wood, glue it together into massive elements and then saw these into planks. Nothing goes to waste.

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ANU PUUSTINEN, AVANTO ARCHITECTS

RECHARGING BATTERIES, REFRESHING ATTITUDES

Löyly took six years to complete. And when it was finally finished, even Anu and Ville were pleasantly surprised at the positive effect their design had on people. “It was quite a shock for us when we visited the sauna for the first time after completing the project. It was a Saturday evening and the place was full of young people. Everyone

was drinking beer and having a good time – almost dancing,” explains Ville. “But, of course, there’s not only one way to enjoy a sauna. You don’t have to sit in silence. You can enjoy it together, talk and have fun. Now, on Saturdays, it gets really loud here. This is the new social way to enjoy a sauna.”

Löyly has changed people’s attitudes to sauna in Helsinki in more ways than one. “In Helsinki, all saunas had separate spaces for men and women. But when we thought about our families and friends, we are both sexes – and sometimes something in between. So, of course, we would like to enjoy a sauna together,” says Anu. “With Löyly, we had the chance to create a space where families, friends and everyone else could go together.”





“Architecture is a multi-sensory experience. It’s not only a visual experience.”

ANU PUUSTINEN, AVANTO ARCHITECTS

Löyly became the first mixed public sauna in Helsinki, but not everyone was happy about this break with tradition. “Of course, some people – mainly older, middle-aged men – were quite offended by this. They thought this was totally wrong. But you have to ask these kinds of questions. It’s like opera. Do we still have to perform opera in the same way we always have, or can we make some changes and develop it further?”

But Löyly didn’t just provide people with a fun new way of recharging their batteries after a hard day. It also provided a previously neglected area of Helsinki with a new lease of life.

“Löyly has shown how one public building – even a small one – can change the entire image of an area. We’re very proud of that,” says Anu. “This area used to be empty. And even though it is a fantastic location that opens out to the sea, there was really no reason to come here.”

Löyly has helped change all that. In the summer, the entire coastline is now packed with people enjoying picnics, jogging and, of course, meeting up to take a sauna with their friends and families.

SPIRITUAL REGENERATION

Like Finland, though, there is more to Avanto than saunas. One of their most successful and well-known projects is the Chapel of St. Lawrence, which is situated in the nearby city of Vantaa. This was the first project Anu and Ville worked on together, and the one that led to the creation of Avanto.

“The St. Lawrence project was part of an open architectural competition,” explains Ville. “Anu and I were working at the same architecture firm at the time and we both wanted to enter the competition. In the beginning, we planned on submitting separate entries. But in the end we ran out of time, so we put our proposals together.”

The proposals must have complemented one another perfectly, because their joint entry took first prize and Avanto Architects was born.

You may think there is a world of difference between designing a sauna and a chapel, but Anu and Ville approached the creation of St. Lawrence with the same human-centric focus they apply to all their projects.

“It’s all about empathy,” explains Anu, “Putting yourself in the place of the people using the building. So, when we started designing the chapel, we thought about what kind of activities would take place here – services, funerals etc. We also considered who would come here and what comfort or help the space could give them.”

The new chapel was to be built on the site of a previous, older one, which was situated next to a medieval church in the oldest part of Vantaa. To help their new design integrate respectfully with the landscape, all the materials in the building were picked from the surrounding area. This not only reassured the locals who would be visiting the chapel, the use of tried and tested materials also reassured the building authorities that the structure was capable of lasting 200 years.

“In the beginning, before anything was built, the locals were naturally suspicious,” explains Ville. “But when they saw the end result they were really happy and now they are very proud of it. It gives them something.”

“We have received very positive feedback from people who have used the spaces,” continues Anu. “They tell us how the spaces comfort them when they are in sorrow and make them feel better. That makes us really happy because that is exactly why we do what we do.”

IN A SAUNA, EVERYONE IS EQUAL

Anu and Ville see similarities between designing a sauna and designing a chapel. “There are similar elements. It is a process, so how do you change as a person because of this process?” explains Anu. “In chapel, you may meet sorrow. And it’s hard. But it’s better to go through the process and make peace with your emotions. Then you can get on with your life. A sauna is a little bit similar. It is heat and extreme cold, but after this process you are like a newborn person. It’s very nice to see when our work can bring people joy, happiness or a moment of wellbeing.”

So, what do Anu and Ville look to experience when they take a sauna? And can they relax without thinking about new design ideas for their next project?

“I think, in Löyly, we can finally relax. In the beginning, however, all we could think about was what we could have done better,” says Anu. “What I hope to get out of a sauna depends on that particular day. Some days I might

want to contemplate by myself, other days I might read a magazine and relax by the fire. But when we go to Löyly with friends, it is totally different. Then we are very social and we enjoy life fully.”

“For me,” begins Ville, “sauna is very social. It’s a good way to spend time together. Perhaps you are bit more intimate and uninhibited with people when you are in a sauna. You have more time, you are more relaxed and you open up more.”

And what special part of Finnish sauna culture would Avanto Architecture like to bring to the world?

They both think carefully for a moment before Anu finally concludes, “In a sauna, everyone is equal.” You can’t really ask for more than that. ■