

# Paasitorni's History

In 1884 Finland's first Workers' Association was founded in Helsinki with the aim of bringing employers and employees together to improve the working and living conditions of workers. The association also provided educational opportunities and leisure activities. The founder and long-term chairman of the Helsinki Workers' Association (HTY) was industrialist Viktor Julius von Wright, and the association's members included employers as well as workers.

In its first decades HTY operated in rented premises, initially at two different addresses on Kaivokatu and later on Yrjönkatu. These traditional wooden buildings, nicknamed "farmhouses" had dedicated rooms for a library, a meeting room, space for major events and a restaurant. The restaurant in the building on Yrjönkatu was known as "Juttutupa", meaning a place where people came to talk, debate and spend the evening. Alcohol played no part in these evening events as HTY was run under the banner of the temperance movement.

As Helsinki quickly industrialised, the association's membership soon grew and the bourgeoisie splintered off from the labour movement. The "Workers' House" as it was known, became a second home where people met to carry out a wide range of hobbies. As the activities increased, the association became increasingly short of space. A dream was born of a building of their own, capable of holding its head high in comparison with the city's finer stone buildings.

## From humble wooden farmhouse to a prestigious stone building

In 1903 the City of Helsinki granted the association a plot on Kansakoulukatu and the association started a major fundraising appeal to finance the building work. The plot was subsequently found to be too small and a new site was found on the rocky shoreline of the island of Siltasaari in 1905. At that time Siltasaari was separate from what was then the centre of Helsinki but it was close to the working class area of Kallio. It was also assumed that in the future the city would expand northwards to fill the gap.

A competition was announced for the design of this Workers' House, won by architect Karl Lindahl and Max Frelander's proposal for a stylish Art Nouveau building, with a tower reminiscent of a castle. Quarrying of the high rock face on the plot began in 1906. The stone was found to be of such high quality and so visually appealing that the quarrymen suggested using it to clad the building. When the stonecutters were threatened with unemployment the following winter, the Workers' Association reached a decision and the architect redesigned the facade of the building to be entirely clad in granite. The use of Finnish granite as a facade material was also highly fashionable at the turn of the century. There was even enough stone to build a wall encircling the outside space, to pave the neighbouring street running down to the shoreline and later clad an extension.

A decision on the demanding building work was reached in 1908 and the architect added the finishing touches to the building in the spirit of Late Art Nouveau. The facade and the interior of the building were decorated with abstract fantasy designs including subjects from nature and also tool motifs, as a reference to skilled craftsmanship. The decoration took as its starting point geometrical shapes, simplistic style and timeless clarity. The colour scheme of the building radiated warmth and harmony.

Once completed, the Workers' House was modern, with electricity, running water, WCs and central heating. A wide staircase, surrounded by pillars, led visitors to a Congress Hall three storeys high, which was "the largest venue in Helsinki for soirees And undoubtedly the most beautiful." "Its integrity of design and harmonious dimensions come together in the large wall panels rising vertically to a height of 8 metres, before starting to curve in on either side to seamlessly form an impressive ceiling, before meeting in an interlocking arch 14 metres high." The official opening date of the new, substantial Workers' House building was 15 September 1908.

The construction project plunged the association into severe debt. Income mainly came from raffles, the restaurant and renting out the Congress Hall. Juttutupa continued to operate as a restaurant in the basement of the Workers' House, still embracing the spirit of the temperance movement. Large meeting rooms and a gym were located on the lower floors. The library and study were located in the corner room, the best part of the house, which featured beautiful views overlooking Eläintarhanlahti bay. The association also rented out office space from the very start.

## From civil war destruction to extension

The granite facade and the tower made the Workers' House a landmark public building, visible from a distance, and symbolically on a par with the city's most important institutions. In the late 1910s the population was suffering severe hardship. In 1916–1917 the Workers' Association stepped up its operations and its membership soared. Draft plans for additional buildings were commissioned by Karl Lindahl but discussion on extending the building was halted by the outbreak of the Finnish Civil War between the “Reds” and the “Whites”.

As a sign of the dawn of the revolution a red lantern was lit on the tower of the Workers' House on 26 January 1918. The Reds seized Helsinki on 27 January and the Red guard turned the Workers' House into their garrison despite opposition from the Workers' Association itself. The German troops arriving to assist the Whites started to take over Helsinki on 12 April 1918, at which point the main body of the Red troops retreated to Siltasaari. The Workers' House building came under fire from the German forces who demanded surrender.

The ceiling of the Congress Hall collapsed and the tower and the timber parts of the building caught fire as a result of the bombardment. The Reds surrendered on 13 April, after which the Germans, and later the Whites took over the Workers' House. By the summer the building had been emptied of furniture and other removable property.

The Workers' House was released from confiscation measures in December and reconstruction work began, headed by Karl Lindahl. The tower was built to a new design, as were the chandeliers of the Congress Hall. The hall also gained new Viennese-style chairs. The building was reopened on 6 November 1919.

In 1920 a change in the regulations was introduced, according to which instead of individual members, the Helsinki Workers' Association was only open to organisations (the majority of them being unions). At the same time the Workers' Association split from the Social Democratic party to form a financially independent organisation. One consequence of the Civil War of 1918 was the politicisation of the Finnish Workers' Association, where the bourgeoisie were no longer welcome. The culture of the country was divided, with two strongly distinct White and Red camps prevailing on through the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1925 the Worker's House gained a new extension designed by architect Karl Lindahl and the current main entrance. In terms of style, the extension with its solid black pillars epitomises 1920s Nordic Classicism. The extension was clad in the granite quarried from the site at the start of the century. A beautiful restaurant was completed on the 2nd floor. The entrance floor was home to a cinema showing silent films, Punalyyhty (the Red Lantern), which due to tough competition survived for only a year. The room was subsequently used as a billiard room until 1976. The end of prohibition in 1934 saw the restaurant gain the right to serve alcohol.

## Labour movement culture and a restaurant business

The start of the Winter War against the Soviet Union in 1939 brought the country together and levelled out social disparities. The Helsinki Workers' House building survived the Second World War largely unscathed. The class-spirited labour movement culture continued to flourish in the post-war period. In the 1940s and 1950s the Congress Hall of the Workers' House hosted the most popular dances in Helsinki several times a week. Music hall also flourished and the Radio Symphony Orchestra used the Congress Hall for rehearsals and concerts.

As the 1960s dawned dances started to also be held in the Workers' House's upper restaurant, named Paasiravintola. "Paasi's" daytime dances were popular in the 1970s. The lower temperance restaurant ceased operation in 1947 and a restaurant did not open in the same premises until 1979. In the 1970s and 1980s discos in the Congress Hall attracted young people while weekend dances drew an older crowd. For a long time HTY's restaurant business was run at a loss and in 1996 it was decided to transfer the restaurant business to an external entrepreneur.

## Paasitorni – a meeting and congress centre

In the mid-1980s the building was characterised as a building that operated on strongly ideological lines and many thought labour movement organisations should remain its prime users. However, the building was gradually developing as a congress centre. In 1987 the congress centre was named Paasitorni and the conference premises were updated, gaining modern meeting technology. Work began to market the building as a modern place to meet for groups outside the labour movement itself.

Over the decades attempts had been made to bring the appearance and interior decor of the Workers' House into line with the spirit of the times. In actual fact the building had fallen into disrepair and modernisation efforts had been carried out at the expense of the building's history. In 1996 it was decided to commence restoring Paasitorni's premises in keeping with the architect's original plans. The premises were skilfully and sympathetically restored between 1996 and 2007.

In 2010 Paasitorni was presented as a candidate Unesco World Heritage Site together with eight other important buildings in the labour movement. Head of the Danish Workers' Museum Peter Ludvigsen surveyed 58 of the most important sites in 23 countries and found that Paasitorni perfectly met Unesco's criteria for a World Heritage Site in terms of authenticity and historical integrity.

"The building is an important symbol of the history of the labour movement and its degree of originality is high. The building has been well maintained and the museum authorities in Finland have praised the skilfully completed restoration," Peter Ludvigsen says. "Paasitorni is an excellent example of an actor who has understood its historic importance and takes it into account in their work."

From 1996 until this day Paasitorni has undergone years of strong growth and development which have taken it from a virtually unknown player to become one of the leading meeting and congress centres in the Greater Helsinki Region. Paasitorni also provides an ideal setting for both private and business-related celebrations. In its current form Paasitorni is able to retain the original character of the building as a venue for major conferences and events. Clients appreciate Paasitorni's rich history and unique architecture.

Thanks to the renovation, architect Karl Lindahl's decorative features of the building on the subjects of continuing growth and evolution are equally applicable to the modern Paasitorni. Maintenance, new building work and the development of the business respect the building's heritage. The Paasitorni block features architecture from several different decades. In 2012 early twentieth century Art Nouveau, 1920s Classicism and 1950s Modernism were seamlessly joined by 21st century architecture when the major development project reached completion with the opening of a new building in the inner courtyard. The extension of Paasitorni, new Scandic Paasi hotel and the unique floating Restaurant Meripaviljonki,

opened in 2015, create a unique complex providing conference, restaurant and hotel services in the historic heart of Helsinki. The main aim of the renovation work and the new building has been to retain the spirit of each of its historic periods.

*Source:* Sirpa Haila: Paasitornin tarina (The Story of Paasitorni). Helsingin Työväenyhdistys ry, Helsinki 2001.

*Quotes:* Eedvard Walpas: Torpista kivialoon. Helsingin työväenyhdistyksen asunnot vuosina 1883 – 1908. (From farmhouse to stone building, the homes of the Helsinki Workers' Association 1883 – 1908). Helsinki 1908.