PARLIAMENT'S BUILDINGS and ART
«The Parliament Building is a song of praise to monumentality»

Hilding Ekelund in Arkkitehti magazine, 1931
The Parliament Building, whose façade overlooking Mannerheimintie is dominated by a row of fourteen columns, is a landmark in the centre of Helsinki. The cube-shaped granite edifice that rose on Arcadia Hill in the 1920s, with its massive steps, still reaches higher than the buildings around it. J.S. Sirén had imagined a different urban landscape, but the monumental square that he envisioned in front of the building remained on the drawing board.

Finland’s parliamentary reform resulted in the need for a new building where Parliament could meet, but this had to wait until Finland achieved independence. The question of where it should be located was decided in an architectural competition that was arranged in 1924. The winner was the architectural firm of Borg-Sirén-Åberg with a proposal that was mainly prepared by Johan Sigfrid Sirén (1889–1961). The young architect, who had a reputation for being meticulous and even a bit stern, supervised every part of the project until it was completed.
The Parliament Building was inaugurated in 1931 and was viewed as the pinnacle of Finnish construction at the time. Finely grained, reddish Kalvola granite was an impressive and original choice for the exterior of the building. The elevations are enlivened by rows of windows as well as variations between smoother and rougher granite surfaces. The entire building has been sculpted to form a carefully considered whole. Finnish expertise in masonry reached its peak in the skilful stonework.

In Sirén’s modern classicism simplicity of form is inventively combined with abundant colours and materials. The rectangular building is laid out symmetrically around the Plenary Hall, which is circular. The marble staircases at the south and north ends of the foyer lead to the main floor and the Hall of State, which is bathed in green hues. This floor also contains the domed Plenary Hall, which has largely retained its original look, as well as a cafeteria in the functionalist style.

Before the Parliament Building

Following the Porvoo Diet in 1809, when the second Diet was held in 1863 all the estates met in the House of Nobility in Helsinki. This building, designed by G. T. P. Chiewitz (1815–1862) for the noble estate, was completed in 1862. The House of the Estates, which was designed by Gustaf Nyström (1856–1917) for the other estates, was completed in 1891.

The shift from the old Diet to a unicameral Parliament in 1907 led to plans for a new Parliament Building. The winning entry that was prepared in 1908 by Eliel Saarinen (1873–1950) called for a monumental building on Observatory Hill, but the Emperor did not give his approval. Projects to expand the House of the Estates also got nowhere. In the early years the new Parliament worked in rented premises, first in the Voluntary Fire Brigade Building designed by Theodor Höjer (1843–1910) and then in the Heinola Building designed by Onni Tarjanne (1864–1946) from 1911 on. Both of these buildings located in the centre of Helsinki were torn down in the 1960s.
Key meeting rooms and offices for senior staff line the Speaker’s Corridor and the Government’s Corridor. Committee rooms are located on the third and fourth floors. The most impressive of these is the old Grand Committee Room. The offices on the fifth and sixth floors were originally reserved for MPs’ offices but are now used by parliamentary groups and the media.

One cross-cutting principle in the internal design of the Parliament Building is a hierarchy that reflects rooms’ purpose in style and materials, all the way down to light fixtures and decorative motifs. Rooms whose décor is governed by classical rules in terms of furniture and details are interspersed with rooms that have been decorated more freely, in which Sirén was influenced by contemporary currents.

Renovation project

The Parliament Building was given protected status in 1980 and any renovations must be supervised by the National Board of Antiquities. Alterations have been made over the years, but the goal has been to preserve key parts of the building in their original form as far as possible. A major renovation was conducted in the early 1980s under the direction of the architectural firm of Laiho-Pulkkinen-Raunio.

Building protection criteria were revised in 2008. Preserving cultural values and modernizing building technology place challenges on the renovation project that was launched in 2006. The project, which includes the buildings and underground facilities that were added in the 1970s as well as the main building, is scheduled for completion in 2017, when Finland will celebrate the centennial of its independence.
The flamy birch furniture in the Diplomats’ Room was designed by Birger Hahl (1901–1975). The luxurious upholstery fabrics were ordered from Oy Pirtti Ab and are apparently original. Hair carpets designed by Greta Skogster (1900–1994), which were woven in Kiikka, have been replaced by a wall-to-wall carpet designed by Irma Kukkasjärvi.

The flamy birch furniture in the Government’s Meeting Room shows Empire influences and was designed by Arttu Brummer (1891–1951). The light fixtures were designed by J. S. Sirén. The ceiling decorated by Gunnar Finne and the blue Wilton carpet designed by Eva Brummer (1901–2007) round out the dignified decor.

The new Parliament Building was regarded as a symbol of the young nation’s freedom and independence. Besides its significance in strengthening national pride the building was also a showcase for Finnish interior design and crafts, which helped form the young nation’s public image. The stern exterior conceals a diverse series of rooms and décors in which light, colours and even playfully modern details are intertwined. Art that is closely connected to the architecture plays a significant role in the Parliament Building. Sculptors Gunnar Finne, Johannes Haapasalo, Carl Wilhelms and Hannes Autere and painter Bruno Tuukkanen were all distinguished artists.

Cooperation among leading designers made the Parliament Building a complete work of art in which every detail is essentially linked to the whole. J. S. Sirén himself took charge of designing the light fixtures and the furniture in key rooms. To furnish the other rooms he chose gifted designers from his own generation: Arttu Brummer, Werner West, Elsa Arokallio, Birger Hahl, Rafael Blomstedt, Arvo Muroma, Hugo Borgström and Elna Kiljander.

With high-quality materials and workmanship, decorating styles vary according to the purpose for which rooms are used. The furniture in more dignified rooms such as the Hall of State is a variation on
the Empire style, which is at the top of the hierarchy. The furniture in the Speaker’s Rooms is Biedermeier, which has a bourgeois feel, and the urban stylishness of the cafeteria is expressed through functionalist steel-tube furniture. In MPs’ offices practical mass-produced furniture was given preference.

Modernists favoured an austere approach to decorating, without frills, and shied away from luxuriousness. The hand-made textiles that were designed for the Parliament Building, in keeping with international fashion, were a key factor in forming a modern whole, however. The Parliament Building is eclectic in its architecture and decoration, with modernist elements of functionalism applied in a classical framework. Features of art deco, which was influenced by cubism and oriental exoticism, stand out clearly in decorations and textiles.

Decorating textiles were designed by Maija Kansanen, Finland’s best-known textile artist in the inter-war period, as well as Greta Skogster, Eva Brummer, Eva Anttila and Marianne Strengell. Textiles such as carpets, curtains and upholstery fabrics were produced in artists’ own ateliers. In addition textiles were ordered from various firms, whose designers’ names have not been preserved.

The Grey Room, which is reserved for women MPs, was designed by architect Elsa Arokallio (1892–1962) and textile artist Maija Kansanen (1889–1957). The original carpet and refined curtain fabrics have not been preserved, but Irma Kukkasjärvi was inspired by them when she created new textiles during the renovation in the 1980s. On the walls are drafts for the competition for a wall painting in the Grand Committee Room that were made by artist Erkki Hervo in 1962.

J. S. Sirén designed the lighting fixtures for the Parliament Building, which were produced by Oy Taito Ab. A silver-plated lighting fixture that resembles a miniature fountain is a decorative detail in the classical decor of a meeting room.

Sculptor Gunnar Finne (1886–1952) created most of the abundant art deco-influenced architectural sculpture in the Parliament Building, which ranges from building decorations to capitals on columns and reliefs. Finne was accustomed to working with architects. A sculpture of the «Lion of Finland Without Its Crown» is located on the wall of the cafeteria.
The Yellow Room was originally one of three lounges reserved for female MPs. Elsa Arokallio (1892–1982) designed the furniture. The upholstery fabrics were designed by Irma Kukkasjärvi to reflect the original textiles by Marja Kansanen (1889–1957). The room is adorned by «Navis Republicae», an art competition entry by Lennart Segerstråle (1892–1975) for the Grand Committee meeting room mural.

The functionalist metal-tube furniture in the cafeteria was designed by Werner West (1890–1959). The cafeteria’s modern decor is emphasized by a mirror-like green ceiling.

Gunnar Finne’s wall reliefs in the dining room portray characteristics of the Finnish people. This one is called «Timid». 
Expansions

In need of more space, Parliament set out on an expansion project in the 1960s. As a result of changes in parliamentary work it had become clear that each MP should have a separate office instead of sharing offices among four MPs as in the past. Personnel was also growing and appropriate facilities were needed for new committees, parliamentary groups, the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the media and the Library of Parliament, for example.

In autumn 1970 a proposal submitted by architects Pekka Pitkänen, Ola Laiho and Ilpo Raunio was unanimously selected as the winner of an architectural competition. Respecting the area’s planning history the proposal took into consideration Sirén’s original vision. The large wings easily fit in the urban landscape in spite of considerable differences in height, since part of facilities are located underground. The expansion, which was completed in 1978, was planned comprehensively, like the Parliament Building, and the architect’s hand is visible down to small details such as signs. MPs received offices in the wings next to the Parliament Building, which also contains an auditorium and a reception room. The Library of Parliament and administrative offices are in a separate semicircular building that is clad in brass sheets. The semicircular space behind the Parliament Building had been included in the plans that J.S. Sirén drew up in the 1920s. Architect Hilding Ekelund (1893–1984) had also envisaged such a space when he planned the Association of Finnish Cities Building, which was completed in 1952 and was acquired by Parliament in the 1980s.

The architectural firm of Pitkänen-Laiho-Raunio was responsible for planning renovation work for Parliament up to the year 2000.

The architectural firm of Pitkänen-Laiho-Raunio selected Irma Kukkasjärvi (1941–2011), a distinguished young textile artist, to design carpets and curtains for the expansion. Each part of the expansion has its own blue, greenish or reddish colour scheme based on textiles. In connection with the renovation of the Parliament Building in 1980, Kukkasjärvi was asked to design textiles based on the original fabrics from the beginning of the 1930s. She considered this demanding job one of the peaks of her career.

Irma Kukkasjärvi designed the three-part «Rug Relief» (1982) for the reception room in the expansion.

After winning the architectural competition for the expansion of Parliament in 1970, Pekka Pitkänen, Ola Laiho and Ilpo Raunio established a partnership. Laiho and Raunio were mainly in charge of planning, assisted by architect Anja Karlsson and interior architect Martti Tiilikka. The architectural firm of Pitkänen-Laiho-Raunio was responsible for planning renovation work for Parliament up to the year 2000.

The library that was established by the Estates in 1872 serves as the nation’s central legal and political science library and is located in an annex that was completed in 1978. The entrance is dominated by Kain Tapper’s wood sculpture «Wind» (1986).
The City of Helsinki built a small park with a fountain in front of the new annex. In connection with Parliament’s centennial a sculpture by Eila Hiltunen (1922–2003) entitled «Past Knights» was unveiled in the park as a monument for equal and universal suffrage.

Little Parliament

The Little Parliament annex was inaugurated in September 2004. It was designed by the internationally recognized architect Pekka Helin and his team, who won an international architectural competition that was arranged in 1998-2000.

The Little Parliament has been designed to fit in with the surrounding urban landscape in terms of shape, dimensions and materials. The end of the curved section is clad in the same reddish Kalvola granite as the Parliament Building. Different types of Finnish stone and wood have been used on the walls and floors inside the building. As in Parliament’s older buildings the aim has been to showcase Finnish expertise and quality in planning and building the annex.

Located on the first floor of the Little Parliament is the Visitor’s Centre, which provides information on Parliament. The upper floors contain offices for MPs and their assistants, meeting rooms, the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the International Department. The building’s central space is an atrium that serves as a cafeteria and banqueting hall. Next to the atrium are meeting rooms for the Grand Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and other purposes.

Architecture gives visible form to the objectives and ideals of the times. The Parliament Building with its granite walls defended the young republic and made Finland part of the tradition of European democracies. The Little Parliament was meant by its designers to express the ideals of Nordic democracy: closeness to people, openness and understanding of the surrounding reality.
Parliament has a sizable collection of Finnish art from the late 19th century to the present day. The largest number of works are in offices. These are mostly graphic and photographic works on paper. Larger paintings and sculptures are located in lobbies, meeting rooms and corridors. The art collection includes portraits of 34 Speakers of the Diet and the unicameral Parliament. Portraits owned by the non-noble Estates were passed on to the unicameral Parliament, while portraits of Lord Marshals have remained in the House of Nobility. Portraits have been painted by distinguished artists from Albert Edelfelt and Eero Järnefelt to Kimmo Kaivanto and Jaakko Sievänen. Portraits have been placed in rooms used by the Speaker’s Council and the Speaker as well as offices along the Speaker’s Corridor.

The most significant works of art have traditionally been selected through competitions. Parliament’s best-known series of sculptures is visible in news photos almost daily. These were not procured directly from Wäinö Aaltonen (1894–1966), a leading artist of the times, as J.S. Sirén had wished. Nevertheless Aaltonen’s Work and the Future was selected as the winner in an open art competition that was announced in January 1930, as expected. The series of gilded plaster sculptures that Aaltonen completed in 1932 were cast in bronze after his death. Settler, Intellectual Work, Faith and Harvester represent men’s work in society. The female figure standing with her back to the hall carries the future in her lap, a small boy. Although Finnish women had received full political rights over 25 years earlier, the affirmation of the basic values of a patriarchal agrarian society was not questioned. The nude female figure raised eyebrows, however. A competition for a wall painting in the Grand Committee Room that was held in 1929–1930 attracted a number of prize-winning entries that were purchased. These were by the distinguished artists
Lennart Segerstråle, Yrjö Ollila, Uno Alanco and Henry Ericsson. A new competition that was arranged in 1961–1962 did not have a clear winner either. Drafts by Erkki Hervo, Anitra Lucander, Unto Pusa, Anna Räsänen and Heimo Riihimäki were praised and are on view in the Parliament Building. The issue was decided in 1980 when Parliament accepted a painting by Pekka Halonen entitled Log Floating. In 1926 the Finnish Government had donated the work to the International Labour Organization in Geneva. The gift was returned to Finland in the mid-1970s when the ILO constructed a new office building, to which Halonen's work was not moved.

Scultures for the four courtyards outside the wings containing MPs' offices were procured in a competition that was arranged in 1978–1979. All four prize-winning entries, Veikko Hirvimäki's In Time, Markku Kitula's Coexistence, Taru Mäntynen's The Approaching and Arvo Siikamäki's Discussion about the Future, were carried out. After their completion in 1981 each courtyard had its own symbol.

Noteworthy works have also been ordered directly from the artist, such as Maija Lavonen's Textile on Three Levels (1982) in the Speaker's Reception Room and Irma Kukkasjärvi's Rug Relief (1982) in the reception hall in the expansion. Kain Tapper's large wood
sculpture Wind was placed in the foyer of the Library of Parliament in 1986.

Located along the Speaker’s Corridor are rooms for the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, the Secretary General and the Speaker’s Council, which directs legislative work.