

Forbes

Visit Oulu Finland And Explore The Aaltosiilo Cultural Hub

Discover Oulu's Aaltosiilo in Finland, a historic Alvar Aalto silo transformed into a cultural hub with exhibitions, performances, and community events for visitors to explore

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Daniel is a writer exploring culture, identity and human connection.

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The AaltoSiilo in May 2025

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Valentino Tignanelli is the architect- project manager bringing Charlotte Skene Catling's designs to life at one of Europe's most ambitious industrial heritage projects. In [Oulu](#), Finland, along the banks of the Oulujoki river, he oversees the transformation of a towering concrete silo once used to store wood chips for the Toppila cellulose factory.

Known as the [Aaltosiilo](#), the structure is being reborn as a hub for art, performances, workshops, and community engagement.

The story of this rebirth begins with Tignanelli's fascination with Oulu itself.

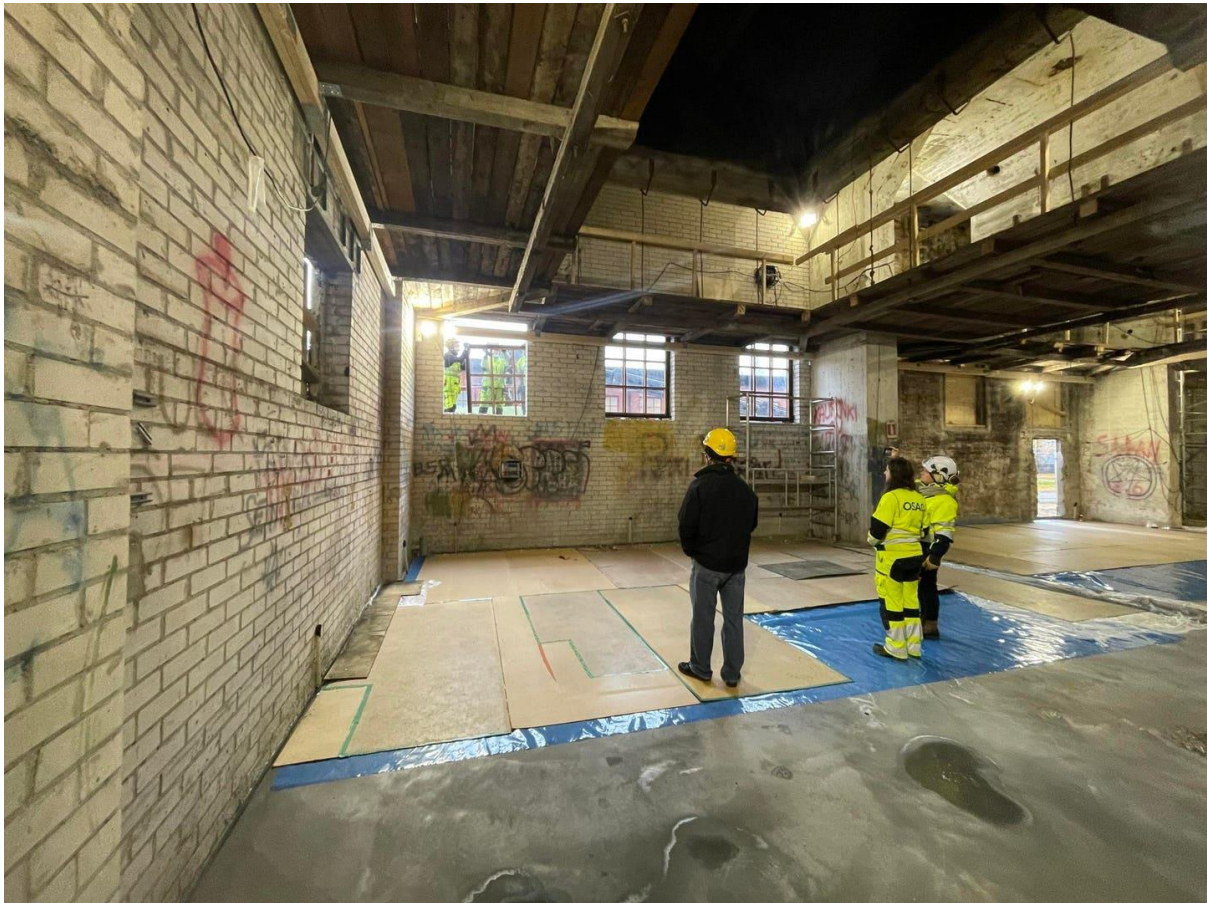


Fall Colors on River Oulujoki at Oulu

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“I knew about Oulu because of the Peter Von Bagh movie *Muisteja*,” he tells me over coffee in downtown Oulu, gesturing toward the river that frames the city. That early curiosity set him on a path that would become deeply entangled with Finnish design, climate, heritage, and community.

An Unlikely Architectural Mission In Finland



From August to November 2025, students from Educational Consortium OSAO worked with architects and experts from the architectural and restoration fields on the AaltoSiilo restoration

© JANNE PETTERI KORHONEN

When Tignanelli moved north to complete his master's at the University of Oulu, he already had one foot in the discipline of design and the other in research. His thesis work focused on Meri- Toppila — the same neighborhood where the Aaltosiilo now sits — long before the restoration had begun.

“I was already working on my Meri- Toppila related thesis when Factum Foundation acquired the building and Skene Catling de la Peña made the general design lay out,” he says.

For a silo, this building has a remarkable pedigree. Designed by Alvar and Aino Aalto, it was part of the Toppila cellulose factory and completed in 1931. The silos are Aalto's first concrete industrial structures, a bold pairing of engineering and modernism that was innovative for its time and place.

But the silo's life after industry was long and quiet. The factory closed in 1985 and while other buildings nearby were repurposed for community uses like climbing walls, trampolining centers and kindergartens, this structure stood mostly empty. Its

concrete walls grew fragile. Its function was lost. For decades it seemed destined for demolition.

Culture, Community and Preservation In Finland



Acrobats from Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde and Flow Productions during their on-site performance at the 'Revitalize Meri Toppila' workshop at AaltoSiilo

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Tignanelli believes that preserving the silo is a call to rethink heritage itself.

“For me it’s a call to action regarding ecosystem design — the idea that what we design on the field needs acknowledge different stakeholders on a long- term basis.”

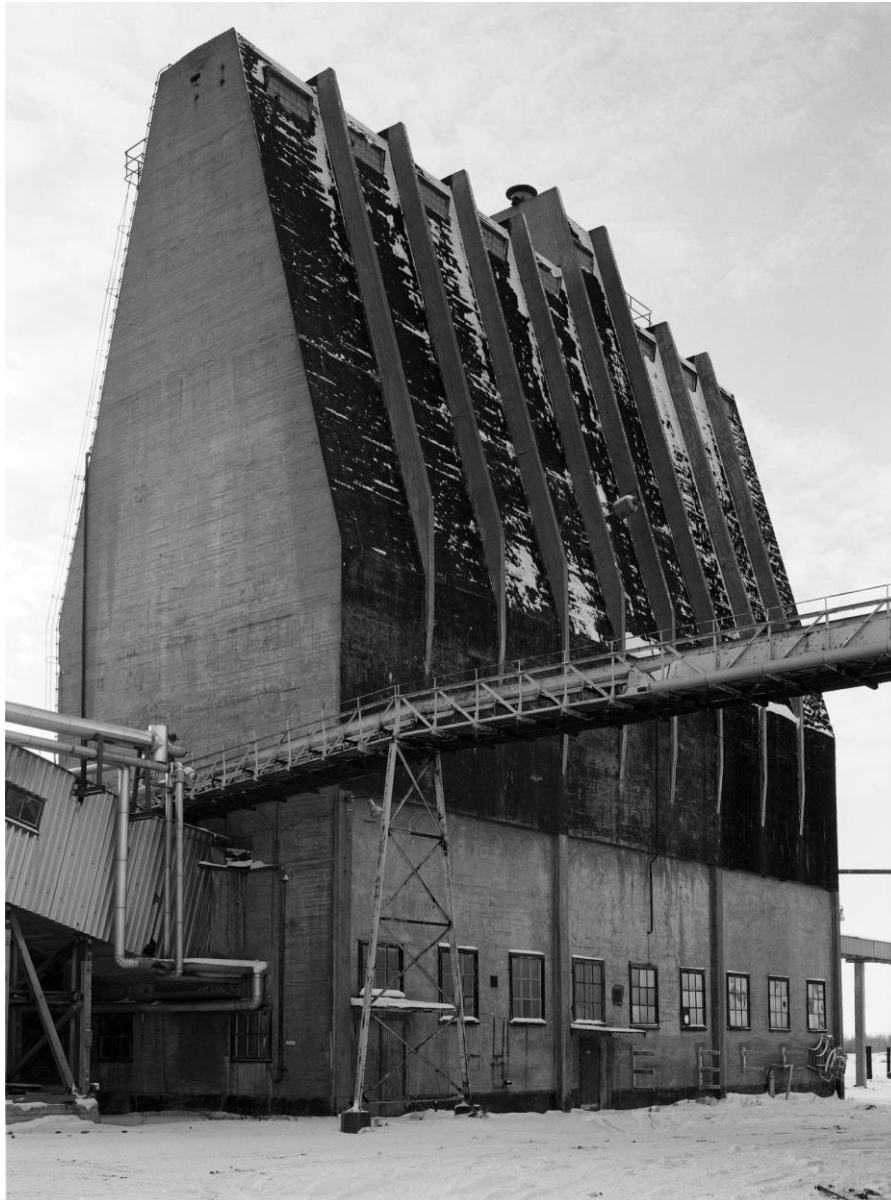
This idea of cultural ecosystem rather than object was the beating heart of the project from the start. When Factum Foundation and Skene Catling de la Peña (SCDLP) acquired the silo in 2020, they did so with a mandate not just to restore but to imagine a new life for a building that was once the working backbone of the local economy.

Tignanelli frames this choice simply:

“Buildings like the silo — complex, old, with a problematic past — are not the standard industrial heritage structures that are financially viable for the market to restore and use — so usually are demolished and a lot of our shared history is lost.”

If this silo can be saved, many others across Europe can follow.

Restoration As Revelation In Finland



Arkkitehti Alvar Aallon suunnittelema entinen Toppilan sulfiittiselluloosatehdas (1931–1974) Oulussa, jossa Kajaani Oy (1974–1985) lopetti toimintansa vuonna 1985.

VALOKUVA © 1985 RAIMO AHONEN

Restoration has not been easy. [The silo](#) was never meant for people. It was a machine, a vessel for industry. Its stark engineering posed technical and ethical questions from the outset.

“The building wasn’t originally designed for people, but for industrial processes. It’s Alvar and Aino Aalto’s first concrete building and part of their very first industrial

complex. Because of this, preserving it comes with a lot of heritage challenges as we try to keep it alive and usable for the wider community.”

From conserving original materials that needed removal and stabilization to heating, electricity, air, and humidity control in the harsh climate, each architectural decision has been both practical and symbolic. Tignanelli emphasizes the importance of creating spaces that feel welcoming, not museum- like or frozen in amber.

“We need to reach a minimum level of operability by 2026 so the ground floor can be safe and functional for events and exhibitions and, most importantly, open and welcoming to the whole community.”

To honor Aalto’s legacy while pushing the silo’s use forward, the project implements Charlotte Skene Catling’s designs. The project is not implementing designs only, [but an approach and methodology that wishes to become a standard for the reuse and revitalization of concrete buildings, as opposed to their demolition \(the Spolia Protocol\)](#).

Tignanelli works as project manager, bringing these designs to life on site. Windows are recreated using traditional Aalto studio techniques with OSAO students. Brick floors are rebuilt from reclaimed materials inspired by Alvar’s experimental work at Muuratsalo. Innovative touches, like glass rods threaded through original wooden peg holes, preserve the “patina of time” while making the space usable for contemporary events.

“Our direct Aalto- heritage actions include renovating the windows using traditional Aalto studio techniques and creating an experimental brick floor inspired by Aalto’s work in Muuratsalo with students,” Tignanelli says.

More Than A Building: Programming And Place-making In Finland



AaltoSiilo Festival 2022: Farewell to the Hoppers'

OTTO LOWE PHOTOGRAPHY

When the ground floor opens during Oulu European Capital of Culture 2026, the silo will already have hosted a vibrant calendar of exhibitions, workshops, and performances. Tignanelli describes a full programme from intellectually rigorous symposiums to open workshops and cross- institutional collaborations.

“We have a full programme for 2026 — from exhibitions, symposiums and live performances to open workshops and collaborations with institutions from all around Europe.”

One standout moment was [Farewell to the Hoppers](#), the first major event held inside the silo since Factum acquired it. The performance reunited Transistori, a band rooted in Oulu’s culture of making music in former industrial sites, transforming metal remains into instruments.

“Bringing them together for one last performance in an industrial site on the verge of renovation became a powerful statement about the silo’s future and the importance of seeing it as a complete, living heritage.”

Community At The Core In Finland



The AaltoSiilo in the background with the AINO AALTO Pop-Up Park built during the ‘Revitalize Meri Toppila’ workshop

© VERA LAKOVAARA

The silo’s narrative does not stop with architecture or performance. It is, at its heart, about people. The surrounding Meri- Toppila neighbourhood is transient, with a large mix of students, recent arrivals to Finland, and others who might otherwise feel unrooted. The silo project has worked to shift that.

“Meri- Toppila has a large transient population. This means people that live in the neighborhood don’t stay long in place. The area has lots of rental units. People that just moved to Oulu — international students and refugees — composed the majority

of the population. With our events we try to create a sense of belonging through its more iconic structure: The Aaltosiilo.”

Workshops like “Revitalize Meri- Toppila” have invited locals to co-design urban interventions with materials from the renovation, effectively weaving the process of restoration into the fabric of daily life.

“We created, through co- design with the local population and students, a pop-up park for them to use during the whole summer — bridging heritage conservation with improving the quality of common urban spaces.”

Sustainable By Design In Finland



AaltoSiilo Festival 2022: Farewell to the Hoppers’

OTTO LOWE PHOTOGRAPHY

The silo’s transformation is deeply sustainable. Reclaimed elements from demolition are being repurposed into art installations and workshop resources. Seasonal weather conditions are used strategically to reduce strain on environmental systems during restoration.

“Not only is material reuse being incorporated into the renovation of the silo itself, but several activities planned for the 2026 European Capital of Culture programme will also focus on reusing elements and materials from the renovation site.”

The project also implements the Oulu Protocol, a pioneering method for industrial material reuse spearheaded by SCDLP.

“By creating a protocol of reuse of materials especially concrete entire reclaimed pieces in a way that is financially and legally possible to use them regularly in construction sites, we hope to influence future adaptive reuse projects in Finland and beyond.”

Personal Reflections And The Road Ahead In Finland



Render of the AaltoSiilo

© SKENE CATLING DE LA PEÑA

For Tignanelli, the work has been transformative.

“I fell in love with architecture again.”

One of his most moving moments came when a local artist brought former factory workers into the silo’s narrative through audiovisual performance, using their recollections of the building as source material.

“Their experiences and them seeing the building saved and in process of reuse was very touching...”

As the ground floor prepares to open for events tied to 2026, Tignanelli imagines an ongoing life for the silo as a local and international hub for culture, innovation, and material reuse.

“After 2026, the building will be used by several cultural organizations. Plans for the new building and expansion will come shortly.”

When asked whom he would invite to a dinner at the completed Aaltosiilo, he smiles.

“The building will be open in phases so this will take shape in different formats over time. But after the ground floor is open for the 2026 celebrations we’d like big community dinners — hopefully with Factum Foundation president Adam Lowe and lead architect Charlotte Skene Catling presiding the schnapps toasts. If I could invite characters who are no longer with us I’d choose Peter von Bagh and Aino and Elissa Aalto.”

Travel Guide: Experiencing Oulu And The Aaltosiilo In Finland



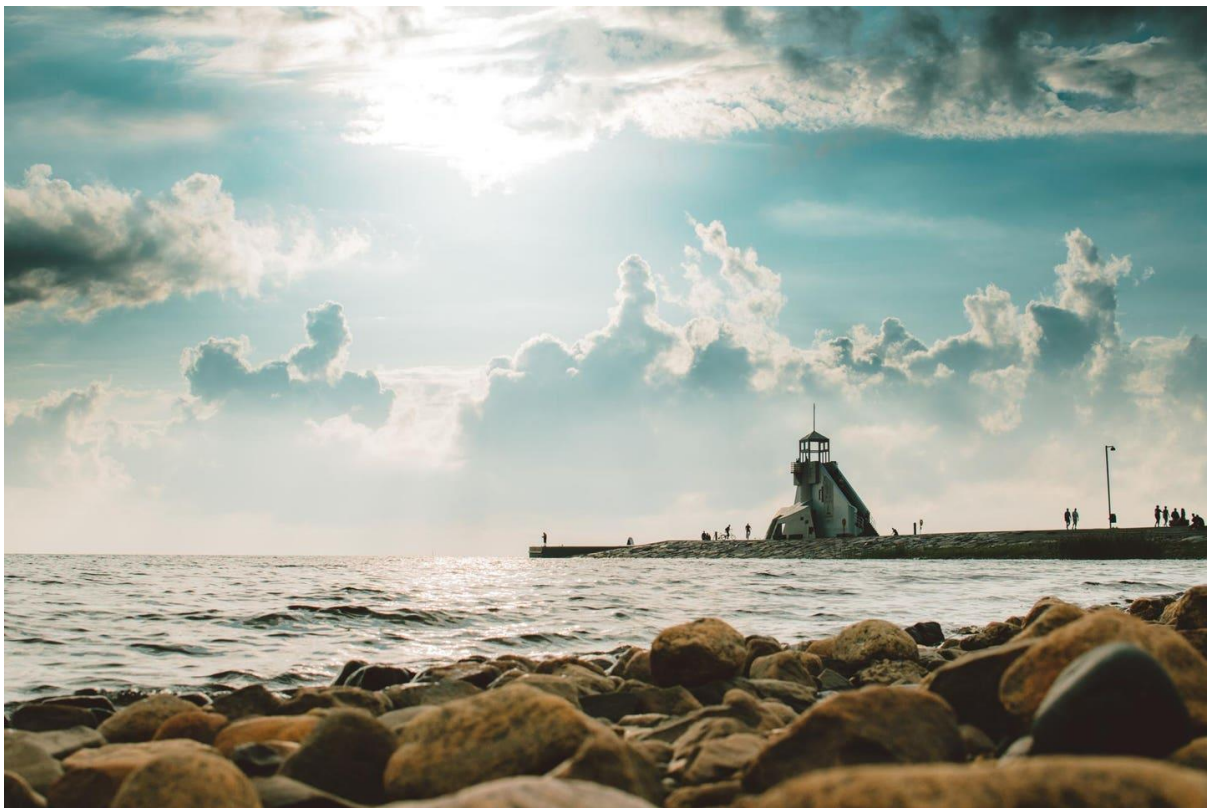
Oulu, 1922. Creator: Eero Järnefelt. (Photo by Heritage Art/Heritage Images via Getty Images)

GETTY IMAGES

Travel Tips For Oulu

- Flying: Oulu Airport (OUL) has direct connections from Helsinki and select European cities.
- Train: A scenic 6- hour ride from Helsinki winds through northern Finland's forests and lakes.
- Best season: Summer for midnight sun cycling, winter for snow adventures and Northern Lights.

What To Do Near The Silo



Lighthouse in Nallikari beach in Oulu, Finland

GETTY

- Cycle or walk along the Oulujoki river path toward Meri- Toppila.
- Explore Oulu's design studios, galleries and market hall.

Top Nordic Cuisine & Seafood Picks in Oulu

Fine Dining & Classic Nordic Cuisine

Uleåborg 1881 – Elegant restaurant blending traditional Finnish ingredients with classic techniques; known for smoked salmon and fish specialties.

Ravintola Hugo – Stylish restaurant with modern Nordic flavor profiles and seasonal menus using local ingredients.

Ravintola Hella – Contemporary Finnish restaurant with refined interpretations of local dishes.

Toripolliisi – Popular local bistro near Market Square with Nordic- leaning seasonal menus.

Seafood & More Casual Experiences

Ravintola Nallikari – Waterfront restaurant with a relaxed vibe; great for fresh Baltic catch and local seafood dishes with a view.

Vihiluodon Kala Oy – Highly rated fish restaurant just outside central Oulu, ideal for fresh Baltic seafood like locally caught fish fillets.

Alfred Kitchen & Bar – Nordic menu with fresh seasonal ingredients, including fish and seafood options.

Sokeri-Jussin Kievari – Historic tavern in Pikisaari known for traditional Finnish dishes including local fish.

Oskarin Kellari – Cozy cellar spot great for lunch with local flavors and casual dishes.

Local Market & Specialty Spot

Kalaliike Minna Pekuri – Specialty fish shop in the market area where you can pick up fresh Baltic fish and local seafood treats and snacks.

What to Try In Oulu, Finland



summer morning scenery in Oulu, Finland

GETTY

In Oulu you'll find classic Nordic seafood like pan-fried whitefish, smoked salmon, herring specialties, and local fresh fish pies or soups — yes they are featured in market stalls at Oulu Market Square and Oulu Market Hall. So off you go.

In the quiet steel shadows of a building once used for wood chips, Oulu, Finland is redefining its story. The Aaltosiilo is not a museum or a relic. It is a reminder that even the most unpromising structures can become places of wonder, connection, and renewal — if we are willing to see them with fresh eyes.