

SUOMEN KUVALEHTI

Big dream

A silo designed by Aaltos is being renovated for cultural use in Oulu. The utopian project is dividing opinions.

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The Toppila factory was the first industrial design project by Alvar Aalto's architectural firm. Four buildings remain from the factory, one of which is an old silo.

It All Started on a Whim.

In August 2020, **Charlotte Skene Catling** was in a hotel room in Seville, scrolling through Instagram.

She and her husband, **Adam Lowe**, work in architecture and art, and they had come to Seville for business. Her husband had gone into the city to run errands, but due to the unbearable heat, Skene Catling had stayed behind in the air-conditioned hotel room.

On Instagram, she came across a photo posted by the *Brutalism Appreciation Society* of an old silo. It was designed by **Alvar Aalto**, whom she admired, and it was located in Finland. The post mentioned that the silo was for sale.

The building was peculiar, cathedral-like. It had been completed in 1931, but Skene Catling thought it was more elegant than other silos of that era.

She started Googling for more information and ended up on the auction site Huutokauppa.com. There, amidst motor vehicles and everything else, was indeed a silo designed by Aalto's architectural firm, put up for sale by the City of Oulu. The current bid was 6,000 euros.

The price was hard to believe. In American auctions, even door handle designed by Aalto sold for more!

When her husband returned from the city, Skene Catling suggested they offer the minimum bid increment: 250 euros. Perhaps it was the heat, perhaps the COVID lockdown made everything seem a bit crazy—either way, they decided to bid. They wouldn't win, anyway. Some American Aalto fan would surely buy the building for millions of euros.

But no one raised the price. The couple now owned a dilapidated silo located somewhere near the Arctic Circle. *Oh God*, Charlotte Skene Catling thought. *What do we do now?*



A ticket kiosk will be built in the spring from the concrete blocks against the wall.

The silo had long been a problem child for the City of Oulu. The Toppila pulp mill was closed in 1985, after which the silo and three other factory buildings designed by Aalto were protected by a zoning decision.

Over the years, all sorts of ideas were considered for the brutalist concrete building. Could it be an apartment building, a chapel, or a training space for a fencing club? The Lutheran Evangelical Association of Finland reserved it for a year. The association dreamed that Alvar Aalto's name would attract tourists and bring global attention in its wake.

All projects and ideas ran aground due to a lack of funding or will.

Kulttuurivoimala ry (Cultural Power Station Association) organized events in the building until 2019, when the silo was closed due to indoor air problems.

Many locals might have been pleased if the eyesore had simply been demolished. In a 2009 public vote by the *Kaleva* newspaper, it was voted the ugliest building in the city.

The City of Oulu had enough and put the silo up for sale. Interest was tepid.

What if we just let it turn into a ruin in place and applied "cultural heritage palliative care" to it? This is what **Vesa-Pekka Herva**, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oulu, managed to suggest in a *Kaleva* column in August 2020, just moments before the silo changed owners.

The silo had finally gotten lucky. Adam Lowe and Skene Catling specialize in the conservation and digital recording of cultural heritage sites and artworks. The work is done within the framework of both the *Skene Catling de la Peña* architecture firm and Lowe's *Factum Foundation*.

Additionally, Lowe has a sister company, *Factum Arte*, located in Madrid: a 10,000-square-meter workshop that produces works for world-famous contemporary artists, among other things. Clients have included **Anish Kapoor, Marina Abramović, Carsten Höller**, and many others.

Skene Catling is not only an architect but also a teacher and researcher who advocates for sustainable architecture: the demolition of buildings should be avoided. And if it is necessary, parts should be reused elsewhere.

In Skene Catling's view, architects have lost too much power to real estate speculators in recent decades. It should be taken back. She trusts the young generation of architects, who she feels think almost like activists.

"People have really had enough of the state the world is in, and they want to start taking active action. It is so satisfying when you can bring about change," she says in a video call from Madrid.

Gradually, the plan began to take shape: The silo would be turned into a cultural center. The ground floor would have an event space, the top floor a "Tar Bar" with a view, and the stairwell a visual arts gallery.

Next to it, an annex would be built from recycled concrete elements, housing a sauna, a café, and a research center focused on building conservation and especially the cherishing of northern industrial heritage. One exterior side of the building would be steps serving as an amphitheater-like auditorium.

The locals had to be involved. The area has many immigrants living in city rental housing, and the Aalto Silo should offer something to them as well—jobs and recreational activities.

First of all, the pigeons had to be dealt with. There were thousands of them inside the tall building. The floor was covered in thick layers of bird droppings, making the air so toxic that respirators had to be worn inside, and even then, one couldn't stay long.

By law, the birds could not be poisoned; they had to be evicted by other means. That proved difficult. The pigeons attacked. They ate anything, even each other. When they were evicted, they came back. They bred and grew quickly. It felt like more and more kept coming. It was a nightmare.

In 2024, progress was finally made: The *Post-Industrial Dance* festival gathered over a thousand people in the silo's yard. The Mayor of Oulu, **Ari Alatossava**, visited Factum's work during his trip to Madrid. The EU Commission's *Living Cities* delegation came to see the silo instead of Helsinki's Oodi library. The silo had beaten a 98-million-euro construction project.

Last winter, the interior demolition of the building began. Metal hoppers used for storing wood chips were removed, and the place was cleaned up.

The decrepit concrete ruin had been brought back to life.



OSAO student Elena Stefanovska removes student project pictures from the wall of the construction site booth.

Breath steams in the air. It is November in Oulu and slightly below freezing, but the underfloor heating installed in the silo is not yet on due to technical problems. Project manager **Valentino Tignanelli**, a fresh architect graduated from the University of Oulu, is giving a thank-you speech to the vocational college students who participated in the renovation.

New windows and a floor have been installed in the building. The floor is patchwork-like because it is assembled from colorful recycled bricks. The aesthetic inspiration was the brick wall collages of Alvar Aalto's *Muuratsalo Experimental House*.

Tignanelli talks about the upcoming cultural program. Oulu is the European Capital of Culture in 2026, and the Aalto Silo is one of its venues.

Marina Abramović, **Elina Brotherus**, **Mieskuoro Huutajat** (The Screaming Men's Choir)—he lists artists whose works or performances will be seen in the silo.

Raimo Tikka, restoration architect for the Oulu Museum and Science Centre, listens to the speech from the sidelines. His responsibility has been to supervise the students' work.

There has been an unprecedented buzz around the silo. Tikka doesn't recall seeing anything like it in Oulu during his 30-year career. Aalto enthusiasts and delegations visit the building daily. Often, they are from abroad.

"Alvar Aalto is such a name that it draws crowds globally," Tikka says.

The project involves educational institutions from Finland and abroad, government agencies, architects, engineers, entrepreneurs, artists, and volunteers.

"Likely no one has a completely full picture of everything that intersects in this project. In that sense, this is truly once in a lifetime."

Raimo Tikka tilts his head back and looks up. He points his flashlight at the Aalto Silo's concrete pillars, upon which the 28-meter-high building rests. The walls are thin, only 8–10 centimeters, yet the structure holds together and bears the load.

The building is a reinforced concrete masterpiece of its time, but whether it was a good silo is uncertain.

"Some engineer stated quite recently that functionally it was a complete catastrophe. What he bases this view on, I don't know. That's a place for investigation for the author of the building history survey."

Peering up, it looks like there are small holes in the walls. In the past, they held wooden pegs, remnants of the mold into which the concrete was poured. The pegs subsequently rotted away. A basic renovator would have cast the holes shut with

concrete, but Charlotte Skene Catling came up with the idea of putting glass prisms in them.

She wanted the building's history to be visible, and when it was light outside and dark inside, the impression would be like being surrounded by stars.

The thought is wonderfully poetic.

Raimo Tikka takes one unused prism in his hand. When the prisms arrived in Oulu from Madrid, it was noticed that they were not weatherproof.

"The Spanish contraptions still needed some tweaking to make them suitable for our freezing weather here."

Then another problem was noticed: the prisms also contained mirror-bright stainless steel, so they reflected sunlight very powerfully. They had to be dimmed.

"Well, we couldn't sprinkle diamonds like that on the walls. They would have been fine, but the neighbors wouldn't necessarily have liked it."



OSAO students have gathered for the project's closing ceremony.

Perhaps the most ambitious part of the Aalto Silo project relates to concrete.

Concrete production is one of the world's largest causes of carbon dioxide emissions, which is why the construction industry is looking for ways to reduce emissions. The industry believes in carbon-neutral concrete. It is already on the market but is also still being developed in several universities. Some research is also being done on how concrete elements could be detached from buildings slated for demolition for reuse.

In Skene Catling's vision, concrete elements would be "surgically" removed from buildings being demolished in Oulu to build the annex next to the silo.

At the same time, buildings in Oulu under threat of demolition whose concrete elements would be usable would be mapped out, and the implementation of building control would be recorded.

The concrete lessons would be recorded in the "Oulu Protocol" and could be utilized later around the world.

It would be about a much bigger thing than just one building. With the help of the Aalto Silo, they would try to change the world.

Currently, the construction cluster of Northern Finland is mapping out with Oulu's building control how a circular economy concrete site could be realized. The safety and healthiness of recycled concrete must be considered.

The reuse of concrete elements has been studied elsewhere besides Oulu, but the results are not yet particularly promising. Diamond cutting concrete is expensive and slow. Additionally, there are many regulatory clauses related to the reuse of elements. Some may be unnecessary, but the topic needs further research.

In the future, concrete elements may possibly be designed so that they are attached to each other with mechanical connectors without grouting. This would make detachment easier. Overall, the reuse of building components will become more common, believes **Elina Yli-Luukko**, director of the construction cluster.

For now, the Aalto Silo annex will have to wait. Next to the silo is a pile of old plinths and other pieces of concrete, as well as pillars. A small ticket kiosk will be built from them as a student project next spring. It is a start.

In Yli-Luukko's opinion, Skene Catling's idea of turning the silo into an event center is good. As a local, she is rather ashamed that none of them were able to save the silo.

It required foreign visionaries.



The silo rises to a height of 28 meters, and the grate structures absorb the horizontal loads of the walls.
The small points on the walls are prisms.

The Aalto Silo has developed into such a peculiar project that even Charlotte Skene Catling sometimes feels that the "funny little building near the Arctic Circle" is magical. It brings people together; things happen around it. It pulls her strings too, like a puppet in a theater.

But one important puppet is missing: a big financial backer. The renovation of the silo is estimated to cost slightly over one and a half million euros, and the annex roughly the same amount. Over 250,000 euros have gone into the renovation, obtained from the Factum Foundation and private funders.

Finding funders has been difficult. It came as a surprise to the British that patronage is so scarce in Finland. Even international contacts have not helped so far.

Is one and a half million a lot of money or not? At least it is only a fraction of what was paid for the Norwegian *Kunstsilo*. Transforming a massive silo building into an art museum cost about 60 million euros.

Even if the sum were gathered and the Aalto Silo completed, money would also have to be found to run the operations.

The Oulu Culture Foundation funds events for the year 2026, but what about after that?

Mayor Ari Alatossava says on the phone that the Aalto Silo can apply for support from the city for cultural events. The city distributes, for example, about 800,000 euros to cultural partners for three years at a time.

In 2024, 14 associations were sharing that pie.

Alatossava rejoices at how ambitiously the development of the silo has begun. It has come as a surprise to him how much it interests foreigners—in Oulu, it perhaps wasn't fully understood before how big a name Aalto is globally.

What about support for building development? No, that isn't possible.

"The city has specifically sold the silo off," Alatossava emphasizes.



Valentino Tignanelli imprints his fingerprints in soft concrete as a memento.

Even Barcelona's *Sagrada Família* wasn't built in a day! The Aalto Silo won't be finished for years, but the intention is to use it even while incomplete. But does it have architectural value, and was it worth protecting? It only fits 150 people inside, so does it make sense to turn it into a cultural center at all?

Architect **Juho Grönholm**, a partner at *ALA Architects* which designed the Oodi library, doubts the concept. In his opinion, the aesthetic and cultural-historical value of the

wood chip warehouse is not significant. The most valuable thing is likely the story of its designer.

"We can certainly question hero architect myths, but also whether the hero architect or hero architect couple in question actually created an artistic creation from a mundane warehouse building with their heart's blood," Grönholm writes via email and continues:

"Regarding the silo, it is quite justified to question what use would actually fit this carcass and at what cost (including emissions) it is worth reviving this carcass."

In Grönholm's opinion, changing the purpose of a building is not always even justified from an environmental perspective. For example, he believes converting the *Kunstsilo* into an art museum required more concrete and caused more construction emissions than if a new building had simply been built. Such architecture, in Grönholm's view, is just nostalgia.

Pia Krogius, zoning architect for the City of Oulu, disagrees.

Alvar Aalto was a genius. The Toppila factory area, including the silo, is early production of Aalto's office and thus part of the entirety of his output. Preserving the buildings helps to understand how Aalto's thinking developed. There will be no more new Aalto buildings.

Additionally, Aalto's most significant sites are nominated to become UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which also raises the value of his other sites.

Besides, demolition should be avoided, and building elements should be taken for reuse more than currently. Krogius wonders why development isn't already further along.

It is not so much about money, but about values and the fact that we must learn to think in a new way.



As a young man, Petri Sirviö worked summer jobs at the Toppila pulp mill.

Long ago, the banging of the Toppila pulp mill could be heard in nearby houses. A smell of sharp sulfur and crushed spruce hovered over the area.

On Sundays, **Petri Sirviö** walked around the factory with his father if his father was on duty. The father checked that the machines were working.

In the boy's mind, he was a bit like a workshop elf. Soon after his father retired, the factory was closed.

When his father died, Sirviö carved a memorial for him out of spruce. He remembered the scent, which was the same as at the factory, and wondered if his late father would take the memorial as mockery or a tribute.

Father didn't hate the factory. But it wasn't a calling for him either. At that time, people settled for what they got from life.

Now the son sits in the Aalto Silo site hut. 63-year-old Petri Sirviö is known as the founder and choir director of *Mieskuoro Huutajat*. He is also an Account Manager at the municipal business company *Business Oulu*. His territory is the creative economy, and he advocates for the Aalto Silo.

"Finns are such realists, nihilists, modest. The British have the ability to dream, even if it's sometimes a bit high-flown."

Sirviö hopes that the people of Oulu understand what kind of luck the city has had with the Aalto Silo. It shouldn't be let go of.

"That we have acquired an international partner of this level by chance."

Next summer, he will take his choir to the Aalto Silo.

Then they will start screaming.

Correction Jan 2, 2026, at 11:01 AM: In Juho Grönholm's opinion, the value of the wood chip warehouse is not significant. Not the grain warehouse, as the text previously incorrectly stated.