



Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

20th edition, 2009

Otaniemi Chapel

Espoo, Helsinki, Finland

Carlo Scarpa Prize
2009
Jury report

A small masterpiece by the architects Kaija (1920-2001) and Heikki (1918-) Siren, the *Otaniemi Chapel* has stood since the mid-1900s in a forest glade on the highest point of the peninsula to which the distinguished Helsinki University of Technology was moved at around the same time. The masterly simplicity and transparency of the building draws revelation of the sacred from nature and confers sense and measure on a space that provides an educational experience, spiritual and social, cultural and musical, for the entire community of families and students. Nature, architecture and society thus come together in this remarkable crucible of form and life, the site to which the Jury has unanimously decided to award the seal of the xx International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens.

The site embodies the fundamental features of an anthropology for which nature, and in particular the forest, which covers three quarters of Finland, is the principal source of life, the most abiding and profound link with its history and a comforting, contemplative sanctuary. In the minute scale of a work commissioned by a student association, in the subdued, oblique light of its spaces, what strikes one most of all is the primacy of nature, the pantheism almost, which informs the stones and the mosses, the sea glimpsed beyond the trees and the houses, the bricks and the wood of which the chapel is built and the geometry of parallel vertical lines through which the firs and the birches set scale and rhythm for human spaces.

The hierophantic task of nature is clear here; indeed the site proclaims as much through its language of signs and symbols conveying ancient, universal meanings. The usual iconography of the devotional setting is replaced by a glass window that takes up the entire wall of the apse. Astonishingly, the forest is thus brought into the rectangular hall of the church and given the leading role, a role which is underlined by the analogy of trunks and branches with the wooden rafters and slender tie beams. Nature and architecture make use of the same materials yet remain radically different. Their very otherness draws them into dialogue and together they set the defining criteria of the place, the space, time, light, sound and silence that lead to a uniquely intense and profound perceptive experience.

By focusing on a site centred on a church, the Jury also wishes to draw attention to the richness and quality of recent religious architecture and parish buildings in Finland. The Otaniemi Chapel is not an isolated case in a geocultural area in which contemporary art devotes determined effort to conveying a sense of the sacred. The Jury was able to visit a number of sites evincing the extremely high quality achieved by this effort, starting with Erik Bryggman's Chapel of the Resurrection in the cemetery at Turku (1938-1941), including several works by Alvar Aalto and going right up to recent works by Aarno Ruusuvuori in Tapiola and Juha Leiviskä in Myyrmäki; visits that provided ample grounds for reflection on the different ways in which Finnish architecture strives for the "ineffable".

Nature, architecture, space, time, light, constituent materials and site fully become "place" only when they are joined by the active presence of a community that identifies with it and takes responsibility for it. Present here are both a parish community in the tradition of the Protestant Church and a community historically linked to the University, which in turn is an institution whose history intertwines with that of Finland and, from the middle of the 19th century, constituted one of the main sources of nurture for the idea of nationhood and of the energy needed for its creation.

The University of Technology was founded in 1849 and operated for over a century in the centre of Helsinki, moving to Otaniemi after the Second World War; the plan was devised by Alvar Aalto, who won the 1949 competition and designed some of his best-known buildings for



it, and other buildings were conceived and built by various architects including Kaija and Heikki Siren and Raili and Reima Pietilä. The demand for a centre of religious and community life was not initially envisaged by the plans but originated with the first groups of students assigned to the houses that had been built for the athletes of the 1952 Olympic Games. It was the students, organized into the Ristin Kilta (Guild of the Cross) association in 1947, who resourcefully collected the funds needed and commissioned the architects. The Chapel was inaugurated in 1957. From 1960 until 1965 it was used as the parish church of Tapiola, the neighbouring part of Espoo, which was one of the two great areas of expansion of Helsinki in those years. In 1972 the students' association ceded it to the Parish on condition that its original role and name were maintained; the parish priest is therefore also the university chaplain. On 22nd July 1976 the church was seriously damaged in an arson attack and over the following two years it was restored by the original architects.

So this small complex now performs an active role as a meeting place for different social groups and for different educational purposes in a country which boasts a cooperative relationship between a modern State and an Evangelical Church. While ownership and management of the Chapel are in the hands of the Parish, the surrounding area belongs to the State and is part of the University, which as Alma Mater is responsible for the campus as a whole and is morally committed to safeguarding the site. The Jury makes a respectful but earnest appeal to the Parish authorities to investigate whether the functional requirements of the proposed new building might be satisfactorily fulfilled if it is sited in a position that is not so close to the forecourt of the bell tower; and it extends the appeal to the Office of the University Principal and to the Students' Association asking that they not only ensure the upkeep of the roads and paths and the surroundings but that if possible the area concerned should be extended. It is the duty of all those responsible, to various extents and in various ways, to safeguard the discreet, sober, silent character of the place for those who live, study and work on the peninsula and to ensure that it remains place of growth, composure and meditation for all.

The Jury entrusts the Scarpa Seal dedicated to the Otaniemi Chapel to the Federation of Espoo Parishes, and expresses its warmest greetings to all those who work there in the fields of theology, education and music, along with the hope that they may long continue the quiet, daily practice of lofty thought and simple action, of gentle gesture and friendly concern, of doors kept open for encounter with a sense of nature in dialogue with the sphere of the sacred, with wise insight embracing both innovation and tradition, with a human condition exposed between science and faith; open, in short, to the things, ideas and experiences that help one find one's bearings in the world.