

Laboratory for Learning

Rooted in community values,
Opinmäki glimpses into the future of school

As the City of Espoo set out to build Suurpelto – a new city district – in the beginning of the millennium, there was already talk of creating a vibrant heart for the community-to-be. Over the years, a vision started to take shape: the centre piece for the new community should be a multipurpose school that would be available for all citizens, not just school children.

The City put together an open architectural competition in 2011 to find a totally new concept that would work for Suurpelto. Young architect Esa Ruskeepää won the contest with his work ‘Mäkin opin’ (‘I’m learning too’). The building, the very first implemented project by Ruskeepää, was designed in close co-operation with its users over a period of three years.

Finally, the grand opening was celebrated on Espoo Day on 29 August, 2015, as almost 1,000 pupils started school at Opinmäki Learning Centre. Opinmäki (Learning Hill) encompasses, for instance, two schools, a day-care centre and a library. The wild card in the mix, however, is that the premises are also rented out to various actors ranging from choirs to local companies.

Share What You Have

Only the day-care centre is off limits; all other space is available for further use each day, after the school kids grab their backpacks and head home. To facilitate this, there are no home rooms in Opinmäki, or regular school desks for that matter. The pupils look after their belongings knowing that somebody else may be using the same space in the afternoon.

At its core, Opinmäki is a learning centre with the idea of offering a new way to

learn and work together in shared facilities. The services, architecture and operational culture of the learning centre are aimed at supporting lifelong learning.

This new kind of learning environment is designed to promote the diverse development and wellbeing of its users as well as the realisation of diversity, sustainable development and multi-culturalism. For example, the Opinmäki gym is the largest of its kind in the city, and it’s used – in addition to pupils – also by several sports clubs.

Long Time Coming

Pekka Vikkula, City Project Director for Suurpelto, could not be happier now that the community finally has its calling card and true heart. After all, the guiding vision of Suurpelto calls for “all the important things in life” to be near and readily accessible. Adding multi-space edge to Opinmäki is perfectly in line with the original idea of Suurpelto, Vikkula says.

“What has been created here is nothing short of a multipurpose centre for lifelong learning – a dynamic centre that brings together education, culture and all kinds of other activities,” Vikkula says, adding that the idea is to really push the utilisation rate here – when one group exits, another one can enter.

“The space is so flexible that you can do practically anything here. I don’t think we’ve seen anything quite like it in Finland – or anywhere else, for that matter,” he says.

Looking at the bigger picture, Vikkula observes that Espoo wants to be in the forefront of developing communities of the future, and Suurpelto – which combines Garden City appeal with hi-tech service solutions – is a perfect example of this mindset. Located along Ring Road II, the new community is steadily gaining momentum – and the new learning centre will go a long way to help take the new community to a totally new level.

Just a School? – No way!

With a price tag of EUR 54 million, Opinmäki is the biggest and the most ambitious school project in the history of Espoo. The school has already received rave reviews for both its appearance and functionality. Architect Esa Ruskeepää is quite pleased with the final outcome. He says that the challenge in designing schools today is that schools “can’t be just schools anymore”: increasingly, we are seeing a development where schools are turning into citizens’ meeting places.

Nevertheless, making the premises truly multi-space is no easy feat, Ruskeepää admits:

“When you had different spaces and various timeframes to use them, one really needed detailed planning to make the concept work in the optimal manner,” he says.

“In the end, I feel that we were able to fit all the parts of the puzzle together pretty well.”

The operations in Opinmäki are based on collaboration and interaction, both between the operators and with residents of the community. Flexible premises, smart technological choices and using facilities in

novel ways enable residents of all ages to meet and interact every day of the week.

Roll the Dice

Opinmäki is extremely accessible from any direction, comprising nine separate buildings – already called “dice” – that are connected by squares. According to Ruskeepää, dividing the huge entity (16,880 square metres) into smaller buildings makes sense, when you approach the decision utilising ‘child-scale’.

The apparent danger in multipurpose space is cramming dozens of activities in one mega-building – but how does this all look to, say, a seven-year-old?

“What we have now is more like a little village,” he says.

The building materials are brick, concrete and wood. Ruskeepää says that in his design, he was going for a mood that is more peaceful and dignified: this way, the centre is seen not so much as a school, but as a “building for the community”. Opinmäki is also energy-efficient and optimised for life-cycle expenses – meaning, among other things, that the premises are convenient to service and maintain.

Opinmäki – Fast Facts

Services: Espoo International School, Päiväkehrä School, Opinmäki Day-care Centre, Active Learning Centre AKKU, Youth Centre, Espoo Adult Education Centre, Sports and Exercise Services, Espoo Catering, Cleaning Services, basic education in arts, Suurpelto associations

Architect Esa Ruskeepää (b. 1980)

Primary Designer Vesa Erikkilä (b. 1963)

Project Architect Sasu Marila (b. 1972)

Competition entry creators Thomas Miyauchi, Esa Ruskeepää

Architectural competition 2011

Structural design: Jyrki Ketonen

HPAC and I&C design: Vesa Jermilä

Electrical design: Mika Lamminen

Project management contractor: SRV

Total costs: €54 million

Gross floor area: 16,880 m²

Year of completion: 2015

Push the Envelope

Kaisu Toivonen, Director of Education at the City, comments that in the coming years, Opinmäki will become one of the pioneers of education in Espoo.

“Placing international and Finnish-language basic education in shared premises will create linguistic and cultural understanding,” she says, adding that a lifelong learning tunnel reaches from pre-school to adult education.

“Shared premises with the Cultural, Youth and Sports Departments is an opportunity to develop new ways learning which support children’s growth and learning as well as harmonise school days,” says Toivonen. ●

