



Ilmarinen sails on in Yarralumla

The Embassy of Finland in Canberra was praised as an architectural masterpiece even before its official opening on February 1, 2002. According to Michael Garbutt of ABC TV, Vesa Huttunen's building combines national themes with profound lyricism. Comparing the building to the music of Sibelius, Garbutt says "it takes a familiar motif, abstracts certain elements and combines them in a structure that's innovative, complex and ultimately deeply lyrical". These adjectives do not always come to mind when looking at government office buildings, but perhaps Finns are an exception. In fact, the chain of architecturally interesting Finnish Embassies reaches around the world, from Washington to Stockholm, Berlin to New Delhi, and to the Embassy in Canberra.

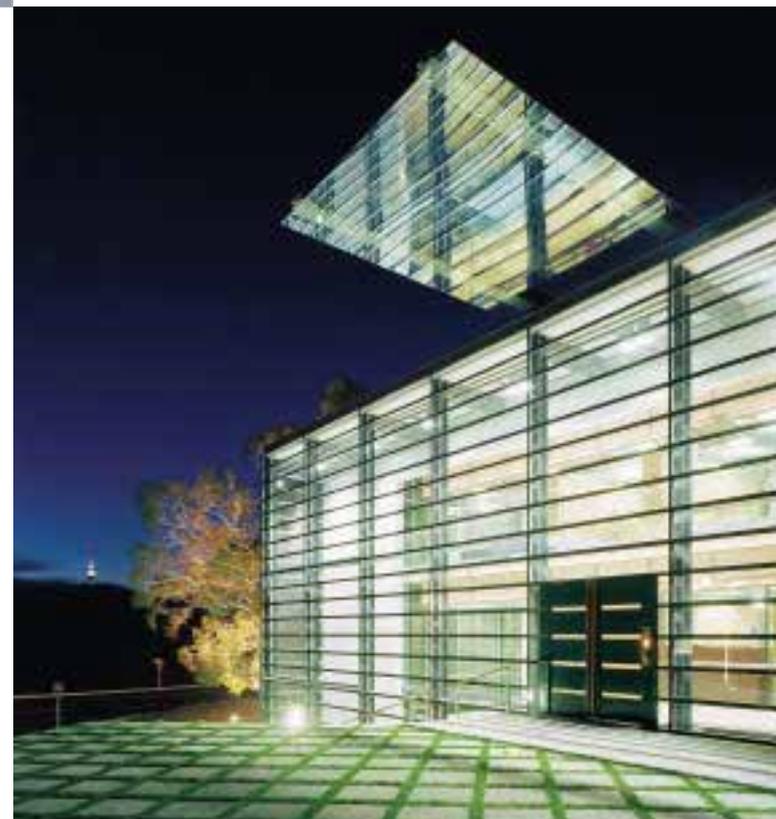


The motif is clearly recognizable from the outside. The building looks like a steel-hulled ship, moored to a timber-clad pier in the midst of the bushlands of South Eastern Australia. This impression is reinforced by the interior; offices are lined up along the side like cabins, connected by walkways overlooking the atrium spaces with the Ambassador's office at the prow.

In an open architectural competition for the Embassy building in 1997, the winning entry bore the name of Ilmarinen, the blacksmith hero of Kalevala, the Finnish national epic. A forerunner of today's Finnish high-tech wizards, he forged the Sampo, a magic mill that produced corn, salt and money, "from a swan's quill tip, a barren cow's milk, from one barley grain, the down of one ewe":

The direct design inspiration, however, came to Vesa Huttunen from the namesake of the great craftsman, the armoured coastal vessel Ilmarinen of the wartime Finnish Navy. The ship was sunk and lost during WWII, but under Huttunen's inspired design, it sails on, transformed into a sleek Embassy building.

The building houses the Chancery, an apartment for a staff member and - of course - the sauna. Complementing the previous Embassy building next door, which is now the Finnish residence, the current Embassy cuts the sloping, triangular site through the middle, creating two distinct exterior spaces; the front entrance from the street, and a wild landscape behind, sheltering the sauna.





Materials and technology

The rear wall is clad internally and externally with stainless steel sheet, punctured only by protruding strip windows to provide light and to afford views to the working spaces. A roof light and glazed floors bring daylight down to the basement level.

Glass is used throughout for lightness and transparency, emphasizing openness and indicating the accessibility of modern diplomacy.

Local timbers, Tasmanian ash and jarrah, have been used extensively for interior cladding and flooring. External decks and stair treads are of reused timber from dismantled Australian sheep stations.

The concrete structure has been exposed here and there. Utilities are visible through the mesh ceilings. Detailing has been kept minimalist and simple.

Rotating timber louvres and a system of automated blinds reduce the heat load and glare from the bright sun in the glazed areas. The building is fully air-conditioned and utilizes a geothermal energy system.

All non-fixed furnishings are of current Finnish design. The works of art commissioned especially for the building are: "Drop" by Jaakko Niemelä, "Sauna & Sisu" by Pauno Pohjalainen and "Tuntemattomia alueita" by Jaakko Rönkkö.



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Project Architects: MGT Architects

Structural Design: ARUP Consulting Engineers

Mechanical & Electrical: Norman Disney & Young

Landscape: Dorrough Britz and Associates Pty Ltd

Main Contractor: John Hindmarsh (ACT) Pty Ltd

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CANBERRA