

Dance House Helsinki

Finland's first landmark designed for dance

The Dance House project is a long-awaited milestone in the history of Finnish performing arts. The impressive new building and renovated premises in the old parts of the Cable Factory cultural centre are designed by JKMM Architects in collaboration with fellow Finnish practice, ILO architects. The project, combining new and old, comprises over 7,000 square metres dedicated to dance – a world-class setting for the performance and experience of dance, circus, and culture. Finland's first landmark designed for dance opened at the Cable Factory Cultural Centre in Helsinki downtown area in spring 2022.

DANCE BEGINS

In recent years, dance has become an important part of life in Finland as a popular form of recreation that contributes to people's well-being. In this sense, a house dedicated for dance is part of the infrastructure for "happiness", a common good.

"It has been a privilege for us architects to be involved in creating a new home for dance. The project is unique and there are only a handful of similar buildings in the world. The Dance House is like a huge modern 'dance machine' that will be turned on when dance begins, when the dancers and the public take over the building," sums up the project's lead architect and co-founder of JKMM Teemu Kurkela.

The building is a significant remodelling and extension of Helsinki's former cable factory. Dating from the early 1940s, this is where, for example, marine cables were manufactured. In the early 1990s, the building was acquired by the City of Helsinki and, today, the Cable Factory is Finland's largest cultural centre containing museums, galleries, studios, art schools and many other spaces and functions for hundreds of creative tenants and professionals.

The Dance House adds a striking contemporary layer to the history of the former factory and its surroundings. The new and the old are placed in contrast, but also in dialogue with each other. The Cable Factory's cultural and artistic tenants and visitors were actively engaged in the design process from the beginning. Their feedback has led to a major overhaul of the 30-year-old cultural centre during the construction project.

Together, the Dance House and the Cable Factory create a meaningful destination and a revived neighbourhood. Niki Matheson, Director of the Dance House Helsinki, makes no secret of her enthusiasm: "A long-time dream of the dance community is finally coming true, and we will be able to open our doors to the public and dancers. The opening of the Dance House is historic in many ways. We will offer a diverse programme of domestic premieres, classics and international guests during the opening year."

DANCE AS AN INSPIRATION

The architecture of the Dance House was inspired by dance. The aim was to examine the underlying principles of dance rather than its forms and aesthetic.

Dance deals with gravity, lightness, and the weight of the human body. The main façades consist of two gigantic steel walls, lifted from the ground hovering in the air, seemingly defying gravity. The two walls are in dialogue: one wall is made of rough rusted steel, another of shiny stainless steel. The "floating" metal facades were custom designed by using laser welding technology, to create bespoke sandwich panels with the biggest possible surfaces of metal.

Dance performances also create illusions. The steel wall of the entrance square forms a gigantic surface for reflections and light in the darkening evening. The light satin-like steel surface can be transformed with light, it can become a part of the scenery of the dance events.

Facing the park, the North facades are covered by hundreds of circular aluminium discs. The discs create abstract rhythmic surfaces against the sky. Rhythm is also one of the key principles of dance.

MACHINE FOR DANCE

The Dance House is like a huge modern "dance machine", designed to connect to an old factory. The spaces are industrial in scale and the details can be identified as parts of a machine. The Dance House provides a state-of-the-art technology for experiencing and performing dance.

"The machine-like quality can be sensed everywhere. You can feel and even touch the technology. The Dance House uses solid hard-wearing and robust materials that will stand the test of time," says the project architect at JKMM Harri Lindberg.

The 7,000 sqm project contains two black-box dance theatre spaces. 'Erkko Hall' is the largest dance performance space in the Nordic countries: 26 metres wide, 37 metres deep and 24 metres high, including a mobile 700-seat telescope seating system. The flexible space can accommodate up to 1,000 people. The Erkko Hall's auditorium, stage and side stage can also be separated to form three event spaces. The Cable Factory's old 'Pannu Hall' was redesigned into a smaller black-box theatre space for 235-400 people. The modular and movable seating system has a total of 1,100 seats. The performance spaces of the Dance House are equally suitable for dance, circus, and other demanding performing arts.

The Dance House project houses a new heart for Cable Factory, a glazed roof to cover the outside courtyard space between the factory wings transforming it into multifunctional entrance and event space. Inside, in addition to the Dance House theatres, the visitor will find: the lobby; a restaurant; a cellar serving as an underground club and cloakroom. Back-of-house facilities include: the performers' greenroom; a training studio; changing rooms; offices. Dance can spread everywhere: out of the halls to the lobby, glass courtyard and further out to Cable Square, all kitted out with performance facilities.

"All the public spaces in the Dance House have been designed with performance in mind. It is possible for dance to take over, for example, the entire Cable Factory for the duration of a performance," says Lindberg.

THE MOMENT OF DANCE PERFORMANCE

"The architecture of Dance House is designed to leave room for dance performances, it is only complete when dancers and audience arrive. As the visitors enter the spaces, they feel like walking onto the stage, becoming part of the performance. The whole building can be experienced as a stage. The moment of performance has arrived. "

Leading interior director at JKMM Noora Liesimaa says,

"The Dance House is built on experiences and illusions. It invites you to enter the world of dance and art without any preconceived ideas."

In the interiors, robust surfaces of raw steel and concrete meet theatre lighting systems, technical installations, and striking colours. Lights and shadows play with reflective surfaces. Together, these aim to create a "burlesque" quality reminiscent of the films by Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki.

In the lobby, the interactive lightwork "The Other" is created by artist Eetu Huhtala. The light system reacts softly to movement of the visitors entering the space, which creates a delicate and experiential light installation. The interactive lightwork transforms into art according to the movements of the people in the space – just like a dance.

NOTES FOR THE EDITOR

ABOUT JKMM

JKMM Architects is an integrated design practice of architecture, interiors, urban life, furniture, graphics, and art. Based in Helsinki, JKMM is creating next-generation modern Finnish design.

Since 1998, JKMM's numerous architecture competition wins have informed how the studio has evolved into one of Finland's leading architectural practices. Competitions continue to be an important way for JKMM to test new ideas both on paper and in practice. JKMM has a wide range of experience in the design of public, cultural, university and school buildings and housing. JKMM has also worked on several architectural conservation and remodelling projects including the extension and refurbishment of two Alvar Aalto designed libraries in Seinäjoki and Otaniemi as well as the widely celebrated design for the new Amos Rex art museum in Helsinki. In 2019, JKMM won the competition to design the new extension to the National Museum of Finland.

ABOUT DANCE HOUSE HELSINKI

Dance House Helsinki is the first performance and event space in Finland dedicated to dance. It provides a spectacular setting for performing and experiencing dance and circus all year round. The Dance House offers both domestic and international dance and performing arts performances. Dance house Helsinki's programme consists of programme content produced by different cultural operators and Dance House Helsinki's own programme project activities. The operations of Dance House Helsinki are supported by the City of Helsinki and Arts Promotion Centre Finland. Dance House Helsinki's sparks programme, which is to be implemented in 2020–2023, is supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, and the International Visiting Programme, which is to be implemented in the opening years 2022–2023, is supported by the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation.

MEDIA REQUESTS

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