

# The idea of empty space

## Pro Kaapeli movement and the Cable Factory in Helsinki

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**The role played by the Pro Kaapeli movement in the transformation of the Cable Factory during the years 1989–1991 is analysed in the following text. I track the emergence of a new architectural and political idea of transforming obsolete industrial space and a new sensibility of what I will call empty space. The Pro Kaapeli movement defended the idea of leaving the space empty, without any specific function; the emptiness itself was perceived as an important attribute of space. Instead of perceiving this space negatively, it recognized its negativity. At the same time, however, the movement played the role of a vanishing mediator. It unintentionally paved the way for the emergence of the rhetoric of creativity and culture in urban planning and development.**

### Introduction

Several studies have been written on the history of the Cable Factory in Helsinki. Some have focused on the problem of creativity (Lehtovuori 1999), others have provided a sociological study of its users (Mäkelä and Vuorinen 1993), while others have analysed the policy of the building's transformation (Tyrväinen 1992). My intention in the following text is, so to say, simultaneously more ambitious and less ambitious. I do not aspire here to provide any policy advice or a best-practice analysis – something that could be used as a guidebook for building new art factories.

Relying on documents, plans and interviews, I want to show how the idea of defending the space without any immediate use in mind has emerged hand in hand with aesthetic recognition of space that is empty. I will describe the activity of the Pro Kaapeli movement as a fight for the preservation of the Cable Factory and for its largest undivided space, the immense Sea Cable Hall. This fight opposed the plans of the City of Helsinki to split the factory into several smaller units for the use of the local public services.

It is crucial to see that this fight for the preservation differs from the various cases of local activism, where inhabitants and civic movements resist the destruction or reconstruction of an old building by a speculative developer. What is different in the activity of the Pro Kaapeli is that what is intended to be preserved is an ordinary, empty space, rather than some historic, spectacular building.

I will analyse the idea of emptiness in architecture and urban space and connect it with the concept of bigness, which also plays an important role in the present case. In trying to understand the role that the Pro Kaapeli played in the transformation of the Cable Factory, it is important to see both the lack of determination of the future use in defending the space and the fact that this space was perceived as empty. The concept of *empty space* as such is not present in the documents of the Pro Kaapeli movement, but I will use it to analyse the movement's architectural aims and plans.

Finally, I want to analyse the outcome of the process of the factory's transformation. Paradoxically, its 'success' unintendedly paved the way for the current interest to preserve and 'culturalize' old factory buildings. The relation of the Pro Kaapeli to such intentions is ambiguous. Therefore, I will describe its role here as a vanishing mediator. On the one side, within the context of the transformation of obsolete space, Pro Kaapeli brings forward a new historic situation, while on the other, the meaning of the movement's objectives are in this new situation significantly. Characterizing the Cable Factory's transformation into an established cultural centre as a 'success story' (see eg. Pennanen 2002, 124 and Eurocult21... 2004, 19-20) becomes much more questionable if we also look at the changing role of art and culture in the urban planning and development that this transformation simultaneously – partly unintentionally – produced.

## The historical context of the Cable Factory: the emptying of Ruoholahti

The roots of the decision to discontinue industrial production in the Cable Factory may be seen as an instance of the global shift towards neo-liberalism in the 1970s (Harvey 2005). The political spirit of *post-industrialism* emerged soon afterwards. In 1982, the Finnish Chamber of Commerce put forward its ideas concerning the development

of post-industrial Helsinki. It proposed “to develop a metropolis for international communication, business, trade, culture and tourism” and recommended developing the city core and increasing the role of the state in city development (see Haila 1988, 89, 90, note 8). The peninsula of Ruoholahti, where the Cable Factory is located, and which was still in late 1980s mostly occupied by scattered warehouses, represented an industrial *zone of transition* that have offered an immediate opportunity for the expansion of the central district.

A concern with the urban image is one of the key aspects of post-industrial city planning (Harvey 1989). In the influential document *The Survey on the Helsinki Waterfronts with Alternative Land Use Potential* published by the Helsinki City Office in 1984,

“landscape targets were given substantial space, and photographs were used in the documents to illustrate the ,gloomy views along the main streets‘ in Ruoholahti at that time... There were detailed suggestions made on the visual aspects of the future construction and landscape design.” (Pennanen 2002, 93)

This document led to a decision in 1985 to prioritise housing (54 200 m<sup>2</sup>) and office (33 400 m<sup>2</sup>) development in the entire area of the Western Harbour. In 1986, Ruoholahti Partial Master Plan was completed by the City Planning Board and it was ratified by the City Council in 1988. Around the same time, the results of a planning competition for the new Ruoholahti were published (Pennanen 2002, 101). The main ‘theme’ of this plan was water. The Ruoholahti canal was considered as the most prominent feature in the identity of the area. On December 22, 1988, the City Planning Department agreed on the outline of plan of Ruoholahti area. In 1991, after the Detailed Plan for the office, commercial and housing sites was approved, new construction began in Ruoholahti (Pennanen 2002, 101).

## The Cable Factory

Among the small warehouses in Ruoholahti, the immense building of the Cable Factory was a remarkable exception. It was built in four stages between 1941-1954 for Suomen Kaapelitehdas Oy (Finnish Cable Factory Ltd.), with cable production starting in 1943 mostly for export to the Soviet Union. In 1966-1967, Suomen Kaapelitehdas Oy merged together with Nokia Ltd., but the building has been known as Kaapelitehdas ever since.

The floor area of the Cable Factory is 49,300 m<sup>2</sup>, making it one of the largest buildings in Finland in its time. The largest undivided space in the building is the Sea Cable Hall (*Merikaapelihalli*) – 110 m long, 14,5 m tall, and reaching over 3 storeys high. The factory was built using a robust reinforced concrete frame, clad on the exterior with brick. It was equipped with machinery for cable production, including tracks embedded in the floor, car elevators and mobile cranes.

According to Pia Ilonen, the head architect of the Pro Kaapeli movement and the architect responsible for most of the reconstruction of the factory, the building, without having received any extensive reparation, was in satisfactory shape still in 1990. There were few cracks in the building and the facade was in need of minor repair (City Planning Department report 1990).

In the original contract between the City and Nokia (March 27, 1987), the Cable Factory was intended mostly for public services for the new residents, stating that the future of the building can be considered only as a part of the new Ruoholahti. Most of the 28,250 m<sup>2</sup> of public services for this new residential use is planned to be located in the Cable Factory. The original agreement between the City and Nokia defined the transitional period until December 31, 1990, later prolonged until June 30, 1991. After this date, the ownership of the building would be transferred from Nokia to the City, in exchange for another property given to Nokia.

On August 5, 1987 the Cable Factory working group was set up by the City Planning Department. Its task was to draw up the detailed plans for the future use, administration and costs of the transformation of the factory. The first plan, the so-called *G-model* from January 10, 1989, proposed to divide the Cable Factory into three separate units and dismember the Sea Cable Hall, its largest space.

At the beginning of 1989, Nokia started to vacate the building. In summer 1989, Nokia started to rent out the space it did not use itself. In June 1990, only 10,000 m<sup>2</sup> was in use by Nokia, while 30,000 m<sup>2</sup> was occupied by a variety of artists and architects who had responded to the Nokia's newspaper advertisement announcing the availability of rentable spaces in the Cable Factory (Cable Factory working group final report 1990).

## The Pro Kaapeli movement

Almost as soon as they moved in, artists and architects of the Cable Factory started to organize themselves and on May 16, 1990 they founded the Pro Kaapeli movement. Employing a series of plans, protests, invitations and presentations, they were at first able to cancel the decision to dismember the building (Cable Factory working group final report 1990) and then later to prevent dividing of the Sea Cable Hall.

Shortly after the foundation of the Pro Kaapeli, the main objective of the movement was conceptualized in an alternative architectural plan, prepared by Pia Ilonen and Jan Verwijnen. It was made public on June 13, 1990. Its main idea was to show that the preservation of the Sea Cable Hall in its entirety was possible and offered a proposal for the spatial rearrangement of the required functions.

According to Pia Ilonen, the starting point for the alternative plan was that all the studios and working spaces in the building could be preserved. At the same time, the alternative plan takes into account almost all functions presented in the official plan (Kaaapelitehtaalle vaihtoehtosuunnitelma 1990). The school and kindergarten, which were placed in the Cable Factory in the official plan, would be located outside of the building. The plan and its proposed 'reshuffling' of functions also shows that the preservation of the Sea Cable Hall in its entirety is possible.

The second 'official' plan was also presented on June 13, 1990<sup>1</sup>. Under the pressure of the Pro Kaapeli movement and arguments presented in the alternative plan, the City changed its opinion on the Cable Factory and reconsidered the original decision to divide it into three smaller units. Consequently, the Sea Cable Hall was not split up. It was agreed that the Cable Factory would be preserved as a whole, and only the north-west corner, where the Boiler Plant was located, would be torn down.

Although many disagreements between the tenants and the City had been cleared up at this point, nonetheless, not all the issues had been settled. Most importantly, the second official proposal kept unchanged the idea of locating the conservatory concert hall into the eastern end of the Sea Cable Hall. The unity of the whole space was only apparently preserved – the concert hall was to be separated from the rest of the space by a glass wall.

The Pro Kaapeli continued with what Pia Ilonen described as an "architecture that consists of lobbying"; promoting their concept of the Cable Factory and Sea Cable Hall. This way of doing architecture consisted of involving the media, inviting the individual decision makers to disclose their ideas for the future of the building, and attempting to secure the support of key decision makers. The architecture they promoted consisted less of an actual design than of trying to put forward a new sensibility of the space.

In winter 1990, the City's own Cultural Board, led by Jörn Donner, recommended to wholly dismiss the *G-model* and instead proposed to keep the building undivided. This had repercussions for further decisions by various local decision-making bodies. The plans to divide the Sea Cable Hall was eventually abandoned by the City Council on February 2nd, 1991. In June 1991, the City Council accepted the alternative plan as a framework for the future development of the Cable Factory. In September that same year, the City Council decided on the limited and temporary financial involvement of the City in the project, for which they set up an independent governing organisation (Kaaapelikiinteistö Oy) which would take effect from the beginning of 1992.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pro Kaapeli and the City administration were in contact before it was publicly released and the media reported on it (Kaaapelitehtaalle vaihtoehtosuunnitelma 1990), as is confirmed in the document from May 30, 1990, in which the City Planning Department commissioned a visualization of the alternative plan.

An important point in the strategy of the Pro Kaapeli movement was that it defended the *empty* Sea Cable Hall without attaching to it any specific function and use. In the rest of the article, I will develop and employ the concept of *empty space* throughout the analysis of the movement's architectural ideas and practice.

## Empty space

By empty space I understand the space:

- that has become *obsolete* as a result of abandonment (or the statement of future abandonment) of the use or function that was defining it previously and
- that is as such perceived as *empty*, as lacking something essential.

The production of obsolescence and the production of useful, 'functional', space are not two distinct processes. Rather, they are two *different* moments of the *same* process that first endows space with a function and then later makes this function obsolete. The production of obsolete space and its redevelopment are determined by the the same process of spatial restructuring (Harvey 1982).

This connection is usually neglected. Even those accounts that try to understand obsolete space in its complexity (Doron 2000; Schusterman 1997; Wilson 2000) fail to analyse the origins of spatial obsolescence. Either it is not theorized at all, or it is implicitly understood to be the result of *external* forces, instead of being characterized as an *intrinsic* part of the capitalist spatial restructuring (but see Smith 1987).

To prevent any confusion, I want to briefly mention another sense of spatial 'emptiness' that is quite different from my own employment of the term. Lefebvre (1991) and Panofsky (1991) talk about the double illusion of space as ideal and transparent on one side and as realistic and opaque on the other. These two attributes have strong connotations with emptiness.

On one side, when we conceptualise space as transparent, we have an idea of space as a natural receptacle, an empty *tabula rasa*, ready to 'be filled' with products of human activity. In the classic critique by Lefebvre (1991), the geometrical and mathematical conception of space is attacked for ignoring the social character of spatial production. Thus, planners and developers operate with a homogeneous and abstract representation of space divided into parcels and plots, instead of taking into account complex spatial heterogeneity. Lefebvre traces back to Kant and Newton the absolute separation between the 'mental' space (a priori existing space) and actually existing social space. Although not explicitly stated, this mental space has a strong connotation of being empty ('fully transparent'), being a pure grid readily available to accommodate passive objects.

On the other side, to understand space as opaque means to make a distinction between solid bodies and intervening space, or, as Panofsky (1991, 31) literally calls it, *empty space*. According to Panofsky, it is the invention of perspective that enables us to posit an absolute gap between the space as a neutral background and the object as the entity that is in this space, but at the same time to see the space and its objects as a homogeneous unity.

In contrast to these two accounts, I do not refer to emptiness as an attribute of abstract and homogeneous space that ignores its concrete social and historical aspects. On the contrary, the meaning of emptiness that I have in mind results precisely from these concrete social and historical processes of the transformation of space. It is the production of obsolete space and the consequent perception of this space as empty, being understood as lacking something essential, that I am trying to grasp with the concept of empty space. Thus, in contrast to emptiness as an attribute of a-social and ahistoric abstract space, I understand empty space as a concrete social and historical space that, paradoxically – and in this I follow Lefebvre (1991) – resulted from our conceptualisation of space as abstract and homogeneous.

When space is described as empty, it is usually done so with negative connotations. Whether from the point of view of developers, urban planners or conservationists, empty space is understood as lacking something essential and thus standing in contrast to the normal non-empty or full, properly defined, space. It is then linked to crime and vandalism, described as ugly and shameful for a city and deplored as useless. Even official administrative documents, as we have seen in the case of Ruoholahti, for example, invoke negative emotions in this context. In tourist brochures, as a rule, obsolete industrial space (and the space of physical labour as such) is excluded from the representation of a city. If mentioned at all, it is described as offering nothing interesting or simply *nothing*.

Negative perceptions stand then as a backdrop for *positive* conceptions, the objective of which is returning the space to use, making it better, beautiful and valuable and turning the disgrace or ignorance into a reputation in the eyes of the world. The 'positive' here means not only good but rather normative, unquestioned or simply 'being *posited*'.

### Architectural negativity

Negative perceptions of space forget the social process of negating the previous uses, that is, of producing obsolescence. Proposals of new positive projects ignore that obsolescence has a systemic character. What is now obsolete space was once itself a positive project. The process of abandoning factories since 1970s is an aspect of the same process of capital accumulation that led to their construction in the

19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. How can we look at empty space in a different light, not simply as negative, but as arising from architectural *negativity*?

Through obsolescence, negativity appears as a failure of a positive spatial projects. It is a concrete and place-specific manifestation of spatial fix (Harvey 1982). A factory literally expresses a contradiction between the production of a new space and the production of its obsolescence. On one hand, a factory is one of the key nodes of the reproduction of the capitalist system. It is here that capital and labour converge in order to maintain the ongoing production of commodities going. On the other hand, when the factory is closed down, the reasons for its closure are not anything external but part of the very same process that in the first place led to the establishment of the factory. While contributing to the constant self-revolutionizing of capitalism, the factory is thus by definition contributing to its own future obsolescence at the same time. The factory thus contains its own negation.

It is from the visibility of this negation that the concept of empty space draws its force. The difference between ancient ruins and industrial obsolete space is crucial here. The former are admired as symbols of greatness of past culture. Ancient ruins represent the fantasy of the otherness read within the traces of great civilizations. We have always known them only as ruins. By contrast, in the case of factories that were made obsolete only recently, the contrast between the living memory of a functioning factory and its present obsolete state is strongly present.

Factory that produces commodities is filled with functioning machinery and repetitive movements of labouring workers. It is *filled* with noise, hyper-activity and tension. When factory becomes obsolete, its material setting still reminds us of this activity of production. But this production is no longer there. For the perceptions of emptiness the context of this historical change is defining.

The scale of the emptiness is equally important here. Perception of spatial emptiness is affected by the contrast between bigness of functional spaces and bigness of empty space. Factory is as an architectural type to a significant extent defined by the architectural idea of bigness. Before returning back to the analysis of the Pro Kaapeli movement, I want to briefly introduce bigness as an architectural concept that mediates between those of empty space and architectural negativity.

## Bigness

*Bigness*, as a specific and defining quality of contemporary architecture and urbanism, was theorized by Rem Koolhaas in his book *SMLXL* (Koolhaas 1995), and can be traced back to his early interest in *congestion* in *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas 1978). Here Manhattan is analysed as a place where the architecture of large, freely divisible spaces was born. The background for the idea of bigness is a homogeneous grid, as opposed to the contextualism driven by preferences for style in architecture.

Charles Jencks talks about something similar when he identifies *extreme isotropic space* (Jencks 1990, 81; see also Jameson 1998, 44) as rooted in the late 19th and early 20th century developments in the reinforced concrete. This new technology enabled interiors to be freed from load-bearing architectural elements and thus a qualitatively new scale of uninterrupted space emerged. This uniform and freely malleable space is then crucial in relation to the industrial and commercial development of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through disjunction of architecture and commerce, their interdependence is achieved. The meaning of extreme isotropic space is contradictory. At the same time that its bigness is a sign of the sublime, it gives a pure architectural form to the real estate speculation (Jencks 1990, 81).

If *bigness* for Koolhaas (1995) was the name for a revolutionary-utopian program in architecture, the speculative nature of bigness reveals it rather a dystopian *junkspace* (Koolhaas 2004). There is an important shift in the later books of Koolhaas (see Foster 2001), where he realized that “[b]igness is a representation of urbanity that lays claim to reality in the name of consumer culture. By appealing to the old rhetoric of the new, [he] liquidates its very possibility” (Otero-Pailos 2000, 388). The utopic assertion of the irrelevance of context in Koolhaas’ first meaning of the term has nowadays been reduced to the ruthless exploitation of real estate. Bigness has today become a dominant mode of speculative redevelopment.

In contrast to both of these two meanings of bigness, in my analysis of the Cable Factory I focus on bigness as an attribute of obsolete space. It is the scale of bigness that significantly strengthens our perception of contrast between functioning spaces of production and commerce and inactivity and silence of the same spaces made obsolete.

## Pro Kaapeli movement and The Sea Cable Hall

With the concept of bigness of obsolete space, the perceptions of emptiness by the Pro Kaapeli movement can be understood. Emptiness, as a perceived aspect of obsolete space is related to the idea of bigness. In the context of the movement’s defence of the Sea Cable Hall, the perception of emptiness emerged out of the traces of something that was no longer present.

The Pro Kaapeli perceives the obsolete space as empty, but it does not perceive this emptiness as *negative*. Consequently, it does not see empty space as a problem calling for a *positive* action. Rather, perception of the *negativity* of obsolete industrial architecture and of empty space can be interpreted as being an intrinsic part of the architectural idea proposed by the movement.

In the approach that the Pro Kaapeli movement attempted to formulate, this failure is not ignored, but it is acknowledged as an attribute of space with which architects and users can further work and interpret it. Throughout this process, a

wholly new concept of space emerges, something that neither *replaces obsolete by functional*, nor *isolates obsolete* in its obsolescence by conserving it as a *positive* sign of past. In the case of the Sea Cable Hall, emptiness is appreciated without specifying any use or function.

The Sea Cable Hall has been described by the Pro Kaapeli as the *lungs* of the building (Antakaa Kaapelitehtaan... 1990). The load-bearing function is performed by outer walls, the hall is thus undisturbed by columns. This was originally a crucial functional requirement, as the space was designed for rolling cables and then loading them onto ships.

The Pro Kaapeli movement argued twice that the Sea Cable Hall should not be divided. In the first official plan, the Sea Cable Hall is to be divided as a result of the proposed dismemberment of the whole building into three units. In the second plan proposed by the Cable Factory working group, after it was agreed that the Cable Factory as a whole will be preserved, it was suggested to divide the Sea Cable Hall by glass walls – thus separating a conservatory music hall in the west part of the Hall ( $35 \times 15 \text{ m}^2$ ) from the rest ( $70 \times 15 \text{ m}^2$ ).

In its aim to defend the preservation of the Sea Cable Hall as an undivided space, the Pro Kaapeli movement did not refer to any immediate use or function. The only change that architects did was replacing the floors and hanging curtains. The main idea was that the space would stay unfurnished and unequipped. For each event in the Sea Cable Hall, the interior had to be adjusted from scratch and then emptied again.

The idea of architecture that is pushed forward by the Pro Kaapeli is concerned with the complex relationship between the present and the industrial past. As the key report states apropos this idea, it

*“is not a case of historic renovation that can be carried out in perfection, but of ‘atmospheric preservation’ [tunnelman säilyttäminen] – something totally different.”*

(Merikaapelihalli väliraportti 1992)

The appeal to atmosphere is interesting in the context of today’s developments in architecture. While recently, architecture and art have been much concerned with the *production* of atmospheres (two main examples are Diller & Scofidio’s *Blur Building* and Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project*; see also Somol & Whiting 2002, 74), in the case of the Sea Cable Hall atmosphere rather emerges out of the material traces of the now *absent* production. Hence, in the extended document on the Sea Cable Hall from the fall of 1992 (Merikaapelihalli väliraportti 1992), it is proposed that the high ceiling with beams should not be changed, while at the same time

removal of the metal rails and turntables during the summer of 1992 is described as an unrepairable damage.

Does preservation of industrial atmosphere and construction of a meaningful relationship between past and present means keeping the building untouched, conserving every single detail simply because it is old? That is not the case. As Pia Ilonen says:

“Level of reconstruction varies - for some it has been enough to build just dividing wall; but there has been also spaces that have been intensively and heavily reconstructed.” (Ilonen 1990)

This then suggests an idea of architecture operating on the slippery terrain between the two positions – on one side, destroying historical traces by new uses and on the other, destroying *historicity* inscribed in the building, perceiving every single detail as a sign of a distant past and effectively making the building untouchable.

### Aesthetic critique?

The artists and architects organized within the Pro Kaapeli movement, presenting the alternative plan without specifying any uses or functions for the Sea Cable Hall, ‘recognized’ the value of empty space as such. This *aesthetic* assertion has certain *political* consequences.

Within the debate on art and urban space, two positions have been dominant. On the one side, it has been claimed that artists and the so-called ‘creative class’ in general have positive effects on the city and urban economy (eg. Florida 2002, 2005). Here art and culture are seen as instruments for the urban development. The authors who present themselves as value-neutral and who simply provide sociological analyses of the creative class (eg. Hoyman and Faricy 2009; Kotkin 2005) also belong into this group. Without questioning the concept of ‘creativity’ itself, ultimately these authors accept all the normative and strategic consequences of its use.

On the other, ‘critical’, side, writers such as Ley (2003), Deutsche and Ryan (1984), Zukin (1995) or Stallabrass (1999) reduce the role of art and artists to that of gentrification pioneers. They show how the presence of artists in devaluated neighbourhoods increases the symbolic value of the place, which is then exploited by real-estate developers. As part of this process, the low-income residents are displaced by the high-income population.

While I do not question these latter arguments as such, the problem is that they are only *partially* correct. The authors representing this position reduce the effects and power of art to its *sociological* consequences observable in the increase in the average income and the level of rents. These changes are then perceived as effects of a more general process of the *aestheticisation* of urban space (Ley 2003), without specifying what aestheticisation means.

Sharon Zukin, the classic author in the gentrification debate, surprisingly argues that we should move beyond the characterization of 'the global urbanization' by gentrification and instead talk about the conflict between aesthetics and authenticity (Zukin 2009). Her appeal to the academic community is that authenticity is still a valid concept that precisely has to be saved from the throes of its aestheticisation:

"As researchers, we face a challenge in helping city dwellers to understand the dynamics of global urbanism and to resist the pacifying effects of its aesthetic appeal, which reflects that of consumer culture." (Zukin 2009, 55)

I think it is here where the problem lies, because what gets lost in both the 'gentrification' and 'aestheticisation' critiques are precisely the aesthetic operations of art. These operations do not simply refer to the qualities of beauty or to the domain of art criticism (in the sense that beauty would justify the social injustice). Following Rancière (2006), aesthetic operation can be defined as an operation that reproduces or intervenes within the prevailing *distribution of the sensible*. Aesthetic operations reinforces or questions the border lines between what is visible and what is not or between what is intelligible and what is unintelligible. At the same time, it reinforces or questions the distribution of social roles and functions in relation to these lines.

Its political power appears only in the concrete instances of artistic creation, its reception and its interpretation. In the case of the intervention of the Pro Kaapeli in the Cable Factory, I believe we are dealing with such a moment of artistic, and more specifically architectural and spatial, interpretation. The movement has opened up a new idea of empty space that challenges negative perceptions of obsolete space by perceptions of its negativity.

### Vanishing mediator

While identifying the emancipating view of empty space in the activities of the Pro Kaapeli movement, we should also pay attention to its unintended consequences. One of the paradoxical outcome of the Pro Kaapeli's activity was that the same Cable Factory that was planned to be divided and redeveloped is now enlisted as a 'heritage monument'. Thus when in 2008 the facades of the Cable Factory were planned to be renovated, permission to use new and more weather-resistant bricks (which had in any case the same appearance as the existing ones) was at first refused and then granted only after a long process of deliberation. Some time between 1989 and 2008, the factory that initially had been doomed to dissection became an untouchable monument.

The paradoxical point in this transition is that the Pro Kaapeli movement has itself played the role of what Jameson (in his reading of Weber) has termed a *van-*

*ishing mediator* (Jameson 1973, see also Weber 2001). It is as an agency playing a mediatory role between the two historical configurations, which disappears once the new regime is established. The paradox of the vanishing mediator is that it brings forward its own disappearance by actually succeeding. The actor is a carrier of a historical shift, but the result of this shift is always already something different than what was originally envisaged. A vanishing mediator

“creates the conditions for its own suppression and withering away. But without this ‘vanishing’ mediation, no transition from the old to the new society would have been possible.” (Balibar 2003, 334)

The Pro Kaapeli movement struggled for the preservation of the Cable Factory and against, as they put it, the “sanity of the welfare-state” (Merikaapelihalli väliraportti 1992). It also, often implicitly, struggled against the separation (albeit bourgeois or Adornian) of *high* and *low* culture. This struggle then led to the outcome where the high and low culture are really not separated anymore in so far as they are both reduced to their role as *creative industries* and *culture*, as we can read in urban policies and documents on urban strategies aiming at strengthening inter-local competition and the production of urban representations.

For example, according to the General Master Plan of Helsinki from 1992, “the city will harbour a more active policy towards commercial activities inherent in urban culture, street life, and events... In order to reinforce the public image of Helsinki and create a highlight of culture and leisure services providing diversity in city life a project should be initiated to attract international interest.” (Helsinki Master Plan from 1992, cited in Lehtovuori 2005, 178). This attitude then culminates in two key projects: the opening of the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in 1998 and being selected joint European Capitals of Culture in 2000.

Interestingly enough, the contradiction between the two conceptualisations of the relation between art and empty space – on the one hand, as a relation to empty space as such and on the other hand, as an instrument in inter-urban competition – is already implicit in the discourse of the Pro Kaapeli movement.

In the archives of the Pro Kaapeli movement we can trace two discursive tactics.<sup>2</sup> On the one side, there is a concern for the empty space as such, independently of its qualification or usefulness. The identity of the place is established only by its lack (“unused industrial halls”, “undefined space” /interviews with Ilonen, Kuronen, Stromberg/). Here the identity cannot be established positively and once and for all because there is a consciousness of the negativity of architecture. Hence, the idea of empty space is not concerned with an identity of place, but precisely with its non-identity, which it does not see as a bad thing.

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2 The different strategies are here meant not to be personalized or identified with particular groups of people. My interest is rather to show certain inherent and still latent tensions existing within the discourse of empty space itself.

On the other side, there are tactics that is concerned with differences, comparisons and potentials of the empty space. It can be described as searching for identity through difference ("one of the best", "unique in Scandinavia", "non-commercial" / Ilonen 1990; Kaapelitehtaalle vaihtoehtosuunnitelma 1990/). These tactics defines themselves in a relation of difference or identity with ,the Other'. Within these tactics, culture is opposed to consumerism (shopping paradise vs. cultural paradise /*ostosparatiisi* vs. *kulttuuripalatsi*/), but also to the sanity of the welfare state, as already mentioned (Merikaapelihalli väliraportti 1992). In a similar vein, the informal culture of the Cable Factory is opposed to the formal attire of ,high culture': "the Cable Factory is more important for Helsinki than the Opera" (Jörn Donner, in Kaapelitehdas on Helsinkiin... 1990).

The latter discursive tactics refers to *activating the differences* in form of increasing competitiveness and stimulating local economic growth. A pamphlet from January 07, 1991 criticizes the official Cable Factory plan of June 1990 by appealing to the necessity of developing the identity of Ruoholahti, as well as Helsinki as a whole. Questions such as what Helsinki as a capital has to offer to OSCE and what Finland has to offer to the "new Europe" are ones that the authors consider important. Further, they argue that the Cable Factory, as they see it, does not contradict the other cultural plans for the city, such as the project for a museum of contemporary art (today's Kiasma). The justification of culture by referring to competitiveness is explicitly presented already in early 1990, when it was argued that the Cable Factory can become Helsinki's Centre Pompidou (Jörn Dönnner Culture Planning committee, see Koko kaapelitehdas... 1990; Kaapelitehtaan tilojen... 1990).

Although these arguments may have been used in a *tactical* way in order to fight against the official plan, similar statements are employed today in a *strategic* way by urban planners and policy makers. Such abstract statements that culture and creativity are important for the city thus simultaneously become concrete *projects*. Today in urban planning it is the concept of *creativity* that represents, in the language of Rancière (1999), the passage from the *politics* of empty space to the cultural *policy* of urban development.

After the successful defence of the Cable Factory by the Pro Kaapeli movement in 1991, the tactics of appealing to differences and opposition against the 'sanity of the welfare state' is itself appropriated by the new urban policy regime of culture and creativity. For example, the cultural transformation of obsolete industrial premises in Suvilahti in Helsinki is promoted by the city of Helsinki using the Cable Factory as a model. It is justified by arguments that stress the connection between culture, creativity, identity and economic value-production.

But there is still another outcome that followed from emancipating empty space from its negative perceptions. For Kant for whom the ultimate meaning of the French revolution lied not in the 'actual events' but in the *enlarged* audience, which may

have been absent from a direct participation but which created this meaning by being involved with one another (see Arendt 1992, 65; Kant 1992). This is not simply a *reasoning public* (along the lines of argument of Habermas 1991), but it involves a certain reconfiguration of common *sense*. Similarly, the ‘discovery’ of empty space constitutes, in the words of Rancière (2006), such *redistribution of the sensible*. This effect cannot be measured, since it is not a sociological fact but rather a practical hypothesis (Rancière 1991). It is a question in the form of “What if?“. I interpret the activity of the Pro Kaapeli movement as if they had asked the question: “What if we defended this space, because it is empty? What would be the real consequences?”

On one side, as a vanishing mediator, the Pro Kaapeli movement has unintentionally brought about a regime of cultural development and creativity. On the other side, however, it has played an exemplary role in showing that it is possible to ask a question that challenges the way we perceive and transform obsolete industrial space.

## Conclusion

I have analysed the role of the Pro Kaapeli movement in the transformation of the Cable Factory during the years 1989–1991. Although the concept of empty space was not explicitly used in the movement’s discourse, I have introduced it in order to understand the specificity of the architectural approach towards the obsolete space developed by the Pro Kaapeli. The idea of empty space captures the new sensibility that recognises emptiness itself as an important and defining aspect of obsolete space.

The idea of the negativity of industrial architecture is based on the contrast between a functioning factory and its current state of obsolescence. As I argued, in contrast to perceptions that see empty space as *negative*, the Pro Kaapeli movement related to the *negativity* of architecture. A large amount of energy in the Pro Kaapeli defence was dedicated to the preservation of the empty Sea Cable Hall without attributing it a specific function. By defending empty space without specifying its use, the Pro Kaapeli did not forget the failure of a past positive project, nor did it propose a new one.

I have further analysed the new sensitivity towards the emptiness in the context of the concept of bigness. In contrast to the two prevalent meanings of bigness (utopian and speculative), the perception of emptiness by the Pro Kaapeli movement was developed largely in relation to obsolete bigness. Here, again, the contrast between the memory of the functioning space and its present silence and absent function is crucial.

I have pinpointed two consequences of the Pro Kaapeli movement’s efforts. In spite of the common description of the transformation of the Cable Factory as a ‘success story’, Pro Kaapeli played a mediatory role in the transition to the regime

of cultural creativity in urban planning and development. By invoking the concept of vanishing mediator, I wanted to stress that the movement is not an immediate agency (such as the proponents of neo-liberalism, the “creative city” consultants, etc. would be in this case). A vanishing mediator produces the new historic configuration as an unintended consequence and not as a project. Nonetheless, the analysis of the Pro Kaapeli’s tactical arguments has shown that the germs of the new regime and policy have been already present in the discourse of the movement itself.

Finally, although Pro Kaapeli played the role of a vanishing mediator of the new cultural capitalism and the idea of empty space was appropriated for the speculative spatial production, this does not diminish the importance of the emancipatory role of the movement. The value of the idea of empty space lies in the fact that it has shown how a practical hypothesis that challenges the existing definition of a problem can be put forward.

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#### INTERVIEWS

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- Marjanna Kajantie**, head of the Cultural Department of the City of Helsinki (Jul 23, 2007)
- Ulla Kuronen**, artist, founding member of the Pro Kaapeli movement (Nov 25, 2008)
- Stuba Nikula**, managing director of the Kaapelikiinteistö Oy (July 18, 2007; Nov 17, 2008)
- Henrik Stromberg**, artist, founding member of the Pro Kaapeli movement (Dec 5, 2008)