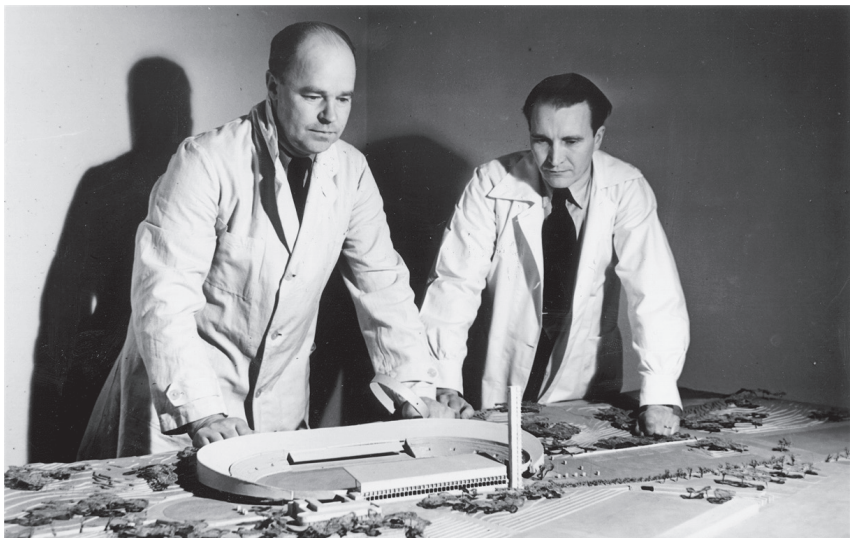
The Helsinki Olympic Stadium in Transition

By Wessel de Jonge[1]

Many 20th century sports facilities are in need of upgrading according to present standards and the 1938 (1952) Olympic Stadium of Helsinki is no exception to the rule. The international sports federations increase their requirements and security issues become more prominent by the year. Finland's largest stadium is mainly used in summer for soccer matches, athletics, rock concerts and other events, and additional usage throughout the year would be welcome in order to strengthen the venue's financial position and to pay for the extensive maintenance and renovations. At the same time the stadium is a popular historic site that plays an important role in the collective memory of the Finns and needs to retain its character as cultural heritage. Many delegates have visited this outstanding example of Modern Movement Heritage during the last docomomo International Conference that took place in Helsinki last August. Now, the building needs to be improved.



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The Finns–as a small and young nation–took immense pride in offering their help after Tokyo withdrew to organise the 1940 Olympics in the dawn of the Second World War. The first large scale stadium of the country was designed by the Finnish architects Yrjö Lindegren and Toivo Jäntti and was first completed in 1938. Among the other structures that were built for the Games were the 1934-35 Exhibition Hall (architects Aarne Hytönen and Risto-Veikko Luukkonen), the 1938 outdoor Swimming Stadium (architect Jorma Järvi), the 1938-40 Velodrome and Rowing Stadium (architect Hilding Ekelund) and the Olympic Village designed in two stages from 1938-40 and 1940-48 by Hilding Ekelund and Martti Välikangas.

One may imagine the great disappointment when the 1940 Games were cancelled altogether due to the outbreak of the war. It was not until 1952 that the next Olympics could be held in the Finnish capital and the new stadium could finally serve its intended purpose. By then, the requirements for the event had increased and the building had to be considerably adapted and complemented with a second ring in reinforced concrete and temporarily extended with a third ring of stands constructed in timber. Also most of the other structures were extended or altered.

After the Games, new offices and a youth hostel were built under the stands. The annexe houses a popular sports museum including trophies of the national hockey team and trivia that once belonged to Finland's sports legend, the distance runner Paavo Nurmi whose outstanding performances in earlier Olympics inspired the Finns to make the bid in the first place. Together with the stadium's landmark tower that offers a breath taking view of down town Helsinki, its harbours and the bay, the museum is a must-see for every tourist visiting the capital.

The arena involves a 400 metre athletic track and an athletics field that is used as well for soccer matches, accommodating 70.000 spectators on the surrounding stands at the time of the 1952 Olympics. Today the venue seats 40.600 spectators for sports events while its capacity for concerts can be extended to 50.000 with additional stands on the centre field. A second canopy opposite the original one has been added in 2003-05 after design of K2S architects, who also developed a master plan for future developments of the site.

The job for the architectural design of the stadium's conversion was put to tender in the summer of 2012 and was won by an international team consisting of K2S and NRT, both noted architectural firms from Helsinki, stadium expert White architects from Stockholm and Wessel de Jonge architects from Rotterdam, that specialises in the adaptive re-use of 20th century architectural heritage.

The stadium needs to be adapted to come up–as far as possible–to the guidelines of FIFA, UEFA and the IAAF which may be regarded a real challenge given its status as a national heritage site. One of the key issues is the consideration to cover the rest of the seats with additional canopies. Another is the request for a single-curved track whereas the present track could only be squeezed in between the stands by designing a double-curved track. Other challenges to be met include the wooden benches which are similar to the original ones but do not comply with UEFA requirements regarding individual seating, the lack of vomitories for emergency evacuations, the general lack of logistic facilities such as parking, loading docks and elevators, and the cramped catering and sanitary areas. New facilities will be added for contemporary sports and cultural events as well as fairs and conferences that will allow multiple usages. The site plan needs to be revised in order to accommodate large crowds in a more inviting way and to improve service access of the venue while avoiding large scale surface parking facilities and connecting the site much more to the surrounding city. The renewal is scheduled to be ready by 2018.

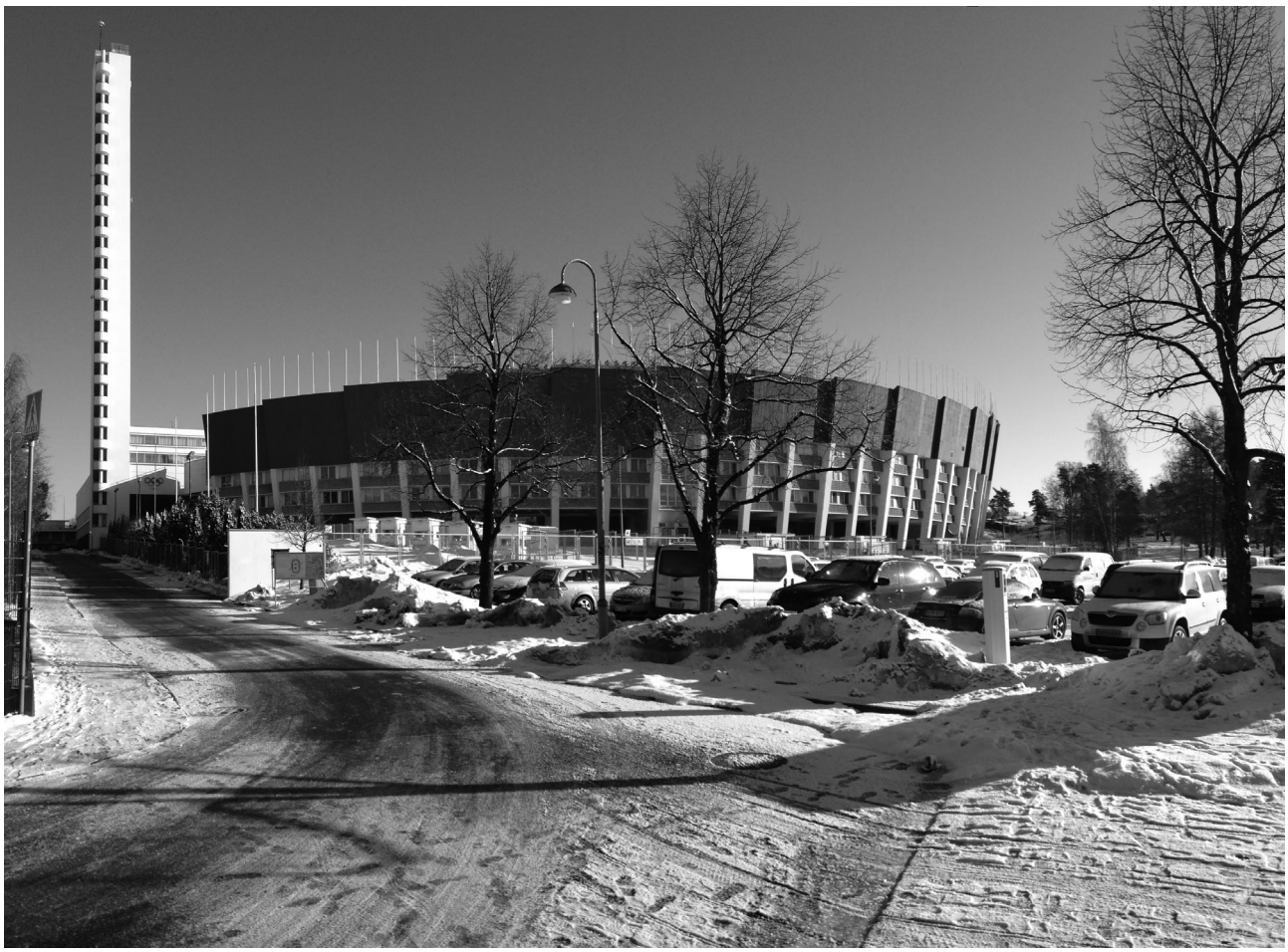

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Figure 1. Architects **Yrjö Lindegren** and **Toivo Jäntti** with the original model for the stadium. Photo from Stadion-säätiö (The Stadium Foundation).

Figure 2, 3. The Helsinki Olympic Stadium in its present condition, showing the 1952 extension rings with their fan-shaped timber façade. The tower offers an outstanding view of the city and is a tourist attraction. Photo by the author.

Figure 4. Due to the harsh climate in the Finnish capital, the stands and sports field inside are left unused for much of the year. Photo by the author.

Notes

1. Wessel de Jonge graduated in architecture at Delft University of Technology and co-founded **docomomo** International. Beside his 1999-2004 rehabilitation project for the Van Nelle Design Factory in Rotterdam, his other Master Planning projects include the extensions of Amsterdam's 19th century Artis Zoo and the 1958 *Cité Modèle* in Brussels. He founded Wessel de Jonge architecten bna which has specialised in the field of rehabilitation of existing buildings that in many cases involve additional or new interpretations in particular environments. Among other projects he has been in charge of the restoration and adaptation of Gerrit Rietveld's 1953 Biannual Pavilion in Venice, Italy (1995); the supervision of the restoration of the Wiebenga and Van der Vlugt's 1922-23 former Technical Schools in Groningen (1999); and the rehabilitation of the 1947 former Control Tower at Schiphol International Airport (2001). Recent commissions include the Forum Rotterdam, in cooperation with OMA; the extension to the 1920s Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam, involving the rehabilitation of the museum's entrance and the addition of a hotel and a new theatre.

References

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