



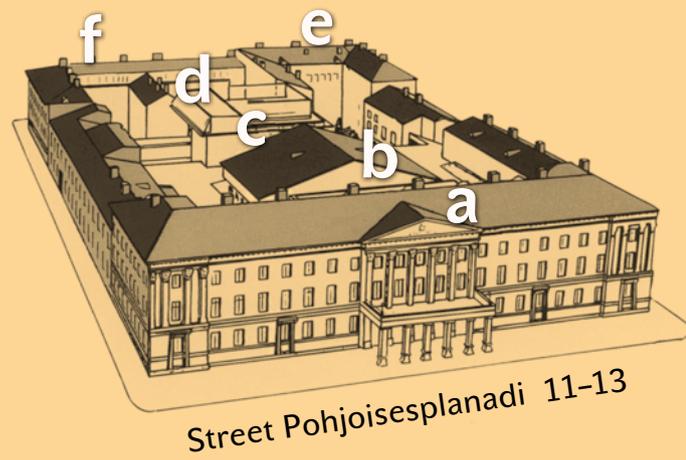
The City Hall Quarter

The Lion Block



The Lion Block

- a Helsinki City Hall – former Hotel Seurahuone (Societetshuset)
- b Banquet Hall
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- d Empire Room
- e Bock House – the Old Town Hall
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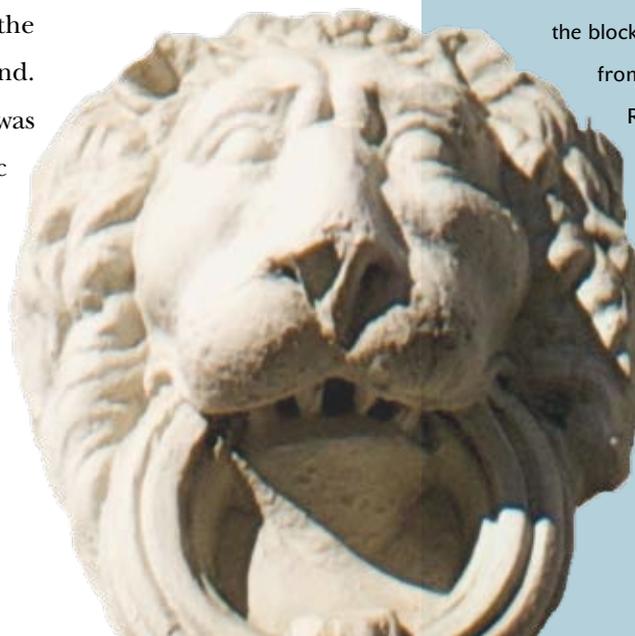
The Lion Block

Helsinki City Hall is located in the “Lion Block” of the Empire-style city centre. The southern side of the block is dominated by the City Hall’s Neoclassical façade. City offices, meeting rooms and reception halls are situated in former merchant houses on the Senate Square side. Offices and restaurants can be found on the streets encircling the block. Helsinki City Council meets in a new building in the centre of the block.

The oldest buildings of the Lion Block date from the 18th century. The block was given its current layout during the Russian era (1809–1917), following Johan Albrecht Ehrenström’s city plan from 1812. In the same year, Helsinki became the capital of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. Berlin-born Carl Ludvig Engel (1778–1840) was commissioned to design many of the public buildings of the new capital. These buildings included the Seurahuone Hotel (Hotel Societetshuset), which today houses the City Hall. Until the early 20th century, the Lion Block, together with its neighbouring areas, was the centre of the city’s business and social life.

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Throughout the first decades of the 19th century, the capital of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland was little else but a massive construction site. A number of public buildings went up for use by the country’s government and academia. As the city grew, it became necessary to give names to the new blocks and streets. Blocks were often named after flora and fauna. As a result, the Lion Block’s neighbouring blocks became the Elephant, the Rhinoceros and the Dromedary. The streets Aleksanterinkatu, Sofiakatu and Katariinankatu, which encircle the block, received their names from members of the Russian Royal family. Pohjoisesplanadi, to which the City Hall opens, forms an attractive esplanade complex together with Eteläesplanadi and the adjoining Esplanade Park.





City Hall

- former Hotel Seurahuone

The Seurahuone Hotel, designed by C. L. Engel, was completed in 1833. Hotel operations continued in this building until 1913, when they moved into the current Seurahuone hotel facilities next to Helsinki Railway Station. The City of Helsinki had acquired the building in 1901 in order to build a new city hall on the site. However, a decision to demolish the building was never reached and, instead, the old building was renovated, turned into a city hall, and reopened in January 1932. The City Council met in the Banquet Hall in 1932–1965. Major renovations to the building based on a plan by architect Aarno Ruusuvuori were made in 1965–1970. Excluding the Banquet Hall, all indoor spaces were torn down and rebuilt into modern office spaces.

*From a place of
entertainment for
high society to city
hall*



Helsinki, founded by King Gustavus Vasa of Sweden in 1550, began to grow into a city only after it became the capital of the new Grand Duchy of Finland in 1812. According to the wish of Russia's Tsar Alexander I, the capital was built on a grand scale. The city expanded, and its population grew. New facilities were needed for social life and cultural events. The Seurahuone Hotel was the main stage for entertainment until the early 20th century.







City Hall opens to the public

The lobby of the City Hall encompasses a general information point, “Virka Info”, and an exhibition space, “Virka Gallery”. The information point’s staff assists residents with questions related to city services. The staff also accepts applications, forms and initiatives. The area has wireless Internet access and a Helsinki City Library computer terminal available for use by city residents and visitors. Virka Gallery’s changing exhibitions showcase Helsinki and other cities, offering viewpoints to interesting cultural, architectural and social phenomena. The lobby, as well as the Banquet Hall, is also used for concerts.

The Lion Block and its neighbouring areas were the centre of lively entertainment in the 19th century. There are now plans to rejuvenate the Lion Block by opening the doors of these historic buildings to the public and to restore the block’s character as an attractive visitor’s site with restaurants, shops and clubs at street level.

The Lion Block is an attraction to both residents and visitors



The façade, the entrance colonnade and the Banquet Hall are the only parts of the former Seurahuone Hotel which remain as they were during hotel operations. The entrance hall and the City Hall’s other indoor spaces, re-designed by Professor Aarno Ruusuvuori (1925–1992), represent 1970s’ architecture.

After its major renovation was completed, the City Hall received a representative collection of contemporary Finnish art. Valoseinä (Light Wall”, 1971) by Eino Ruutsalo is part of the permanent collection in the gallery, as are Rut Bryk’s ceramic relief Kaupunki auringossa (“City in the Sun”, 1975), and sculptor Kimmo Kaivanto’s Ketju (“Chain”, 1971). The last of the three seems to extend into infinity thanks to mirrors placed above and below the work.



Banquet Hall

The Banquet Hall of Seurahuone was used for balls, banquets, concerts and tea parties. The kitchen was of high quality and brought European novelties within the reach of Helsinki's gourmets. Other important cultural trends of the time were also introduced at Seurahuone. A representative of French Lumière Cinématographe showed the first motion picture in Finland in the hotel's Banquet Hall in summer 1896, only six months after the world premiere in Paris.

The Banquet Hall is the only space in the City Hall which has retained its 19th century form. Seurahuone's original main hall, which was situated in the western part of the building's second and third floors, was changed into hotel rooms in the 1860s, and a new hall was built in the building's courtyard in 1863. The Banquet Hall was expanded into its current form in 1887, according to a plan by architect Bruno Granholm.

*The Banquet
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Popular concerts by conductor Robert Kajanus and the Helsinki Orchestra Society, the current Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, were held many times per week, and the hall was the venue for these concerts for three decades, from 1882 onward. Foreign conductors and soloists brought international colour to Helsinki's music life. Many of Jean Sibelius' works were premiered at Seurahuone







City Council meets in the newest building of the block

The Council Chamber of Helsinki City Council is situated in the centre of the Lion Block in a new building completed in summer 1988. The 85-member Council meets in this chamber, designed by Professor Ruusuvuori, every other Wednesday. The public can follow the meetings from the gallery, accessible from an entrance at Sofiankatu 3 A.

*Helsinki's highest
decision-making
body, the City
Council, convenes
in the heart of the
Lion Block*



Helsinki City Council convened for the first time in 1875 in the main hall of the Bock House, chaired by Senator Leo Mechelin. The Council was chosen by general election, and it became the City's highest decision-making body. The highest administrative body was the Magistrate, whose task was to monitor the City's finances. During 1912–1931, the City Council met in Pörssitalo and, from 1932, in the City Hall's Banquet Hall (former Seurahuone's main hall). From 1965 to 1988, the meetings were held at the White Hall in the neighbouring block. Since 1988, the Council has had a permanent meeting space in the Council Chamber, built in the centre of the City Hall block.





Bock House – the Old Town Hall

The construction of Sveaborg, or Fortress of Finland (Suomenlinna), was begun in 1748. It enriched the Helsinki bourgeoisie. As an indication, they built new stone buildings for housing and offices. The Senate Square side of the Lion Block is made up of a row of merchant houses built in the late 18th century. The oldest of them dates to 1763 and belonged to merchant and magistrate Gustav Johan Bock. As Helsinki's new centre was under construction, the Bock House was expanded and raised into a three-storey building in 1816–1819, according to C. L. Engel's design. During the block's most recent renovation in 1985–1988, this house, which had been in administrative and office uses and had undergone many changes, was restored in the spirit of Engel's plans as regards room division and colours.

Excluding its ground floor offices, the Bock House today serves City's receptions. Some of the rooms serve City Council meetings and receptions.

Merchant Bock's house served as the residence of the Governor-General and as a town hall



The core of Helsinki's Neoclassical centre is Senate Square. The Square is encircled by the Main Building of the University of Helsinki, the Helsinki Cathedral, the Government Palace, and the Lion Block's merchant houses, where the capital's main political and administrative bodies were placed in the late 19th century.



Empire Room

The halls and rooms of the assembly wing built into the Bock House in the 19th century were painted in strong colours and decorated with wall paintings and plaster ornaments. In the renovation begun in 1985, the Empire Room, which is situated in the wing, was restored to its original form as designed by C. L. Engel. Today, it is considered the most beautiful reception hall in the city.

In the early years of the Russian era, the Bock House served as the residence of governor-generals. It was also used for receptions, as during merchant Bock's time. Two Russian tsars, Finland's Grand Dukes Alexander I and Nikolai I, stayed at the Bock House when visiting Helsinki.

Helsinki's first town hall was torn down to make way for the construction of Senate Square and St. Nicholas' Church, and the Bock House was turned into a town hall in 1838. The Magistrates' Court, an auction hall and a prison moved into the house. A police station and a private investigator's office operated on the Katariinankatu side. Town prison facilities were also found there.

*The turquoise
coloured Empire
Room is Helsinki's
most beautiful
reception space*



Merchant Bock's house was one of the most handsome buildings in town and, according to lore, when the house was still in Bock's possession and the town was under Swedish rule, the house's hospitality was enjoyed by the Swedish Kings Gustavus III and Gustavus IV Adolf.

Helsinki City Council met in the Bock House's main hall, the current Empire Room, from its first session, held in 1875, until 1912. The Hall features Albert Edelfelt's portrait of the City Council's first chairman, Leo Mechelin, who later also served as a senator.



Burtz and Hellenius Houses

Alongside the Bock House rose Municipal Mayor and Merchant Nils Burtz' House in 1762–1775 and Province Treasurer Carl Hellenius' House in 1770. The Burtz House was probably the first building in Helsinki to have three storeys. The houses' façades acquired a new look when the whole block's Senate Square side was rebuilt in the Empire style in the 1830s.

The Burtz and Hellenius Houses were used by the Helsinki Police Department from the late 19th century until 1986. The merchant houses alongside Senate Square today belong to the City of Helsinki. The ground floors serve businesses, but otherwise the buildings are used by the City as office space.

The Bock, Burtz and Hellenius Houses are the oldest stone buildings on mainland Helsinki



The interior of the Burtz Merchant House preserves decorative details from both the 18th and 19th centuries, such as ornamented wooden ceilings, wooden floors, doors and windows. The house was renovated in 1985–1987.



Illustrations



Photos on the brochure's inside covers:
Esplanade Park.
Harri Heikkilä, 2008



Front cover: Market Square, Pohjoisesplanadi
and the Havis Amanda sculpture. Erkki Mikko-
la, 1935–1937. Helsinki City Museum



Back cover:
Sofiakatu. R. Roos, approx. 1930.
Helsinki City Museum



Market Square.
Gustav Welin, 1927.
Helsinki City Museum



Lion Relief (Katariinankatu 4).
Harri Heikkilä, 2008



Selling potatoes in the Cholera basin, City Hall
in the background. Volker von Bonin, 1960.
Helsinki City Museum



Banquet Hall,
crystal chandelier.
Lauri Mannermaa, 2008



Kimmo Kaivanto: Chain, 1971.
Jan Alanco, 1997.
Helsinki City Art Museum



Helsinki City Hall
Lauri Mannermaa, 2008



Helsinki City Hall, the Helsinki Day Reception
in Banquet Hall on 12th June.
Lauri Mannermaa, 2008



Detail of the Banquet Hall's
wall decoration.
Lauri Mannermaa, 2008



Helsinki City Council.
Pertti Nisonen, 2008.
City of Helsinki, Communications



Lion Block courtyard.
Harri Heikkilä, 2008



Bock House,
Old Town Hall. Matti Tirri.
City of Helsinki, Communications



Street mirror on
Katariinankatu.
Harri Heikkilä, 2008



Empire Room.
Ilari Järvinen/Museokuva.
Helsinki City Museum



Albert Edelfelt:
Senator Leo Mechelin, 1901. Hanna Rikkanen, 2001.
Helsinki City Art Museum



Panorama from the St. Nicholas' Church tower to the
south. In front the Burtz and Hellenius houses and So-
fiankatu. Eugen Hoffers, 1866. Helsinki City Museum



Senate Square and St. Nicholas' Church,
lithography. Publisher Fredrik Tengström, 1838.
Helsinki City Museum



Tourists in Helsinki.
Lauri Mannermaa, 2008



