

1948 // NATIONAL PROFILE FINLAND

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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE IN 1948

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the first Garden Architects began to make an impact in Finland. *Suomen Puutarha-arkkitehdit r.y. - Finlands Trädgårdsarkitekter r.f.* was founded in 1946. The purpose of the organisation was to develop the professional skills of its members and further establish garden architecture in general. In 1947, one year before the inaugural meeting of the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA), the Association organised its first design competition, which was for a public square called Kolmikulmapuisto in Helsinki.¹

According to the Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects, Garden Architect Paul Olsson (1890-1973) represented the Association at the inaugural meeting of IFLA in London. In professional journals, his European colleagues do not mention his participation, but close colleague, Swedish Architect Holger Blom, refers to him in his personal pictures from the congress.²

NOTABLE INDIVIDUALS

Paul Olsson (1890-1973) was born in Helsinki to a Swedish family. His father, Svante Olsson, had moved to the country a year earlier when he was appointed to the first permanent post of Helsinki City Gardener in 1889. He grew up in a family where parks, gardens and their design were a constant focus of attention. His career choice was influenced by this early experience.

At that time, horticultural architecture was not yet a well-known field in Finland and there were no university courses in the subject. Temporary City Gardeners had been working since 1878 in Helsinki, and when the first permanent post was advertised, they had to look abroad to fill the position. Olsson's father was appointed to the post.

Paul Olsson saw the importance of education and went abroad to study horticulture. He completed a master's degree in horticulture at the Köstritz General Horticultural College in Germany, graduating as a horticultural architect

in 1911. At the same time, he worked in Central Europe for many renowned horticultural architects. This gave him a broad international perspective.

After graduating, Olsson moved back to Finland. He worked with his father to draw up plans for public parks owned by the City of Helsinki and for private gardens. Between 1913 and 1920 he also worked under his father as Assistant City Gardener. During this period, he influenced Finnish park and garden design by introducing a new continental style of formal gardens alongside the existing landscape garden style in Finland at that time.

The first urban parks in Helsinki were landscape parks for the gentry, with plants as a kind of exhibit. Exotic species were also used, which were admired by the upper classes on their walks in the parks. The areas were reserved for use by the gentry, and the workers spent their time in popular parks, such as Seurasaari and Mustikkamaa in Helsinki. Under Paul Olsson's influence, the landscape parks of the gentry were transformed into Anglo-German formal gardens, favouring geometric and symmetrical forms. The first examples of this were the Eiranpuistikko (1915), designed in collaboration with his father, the Engelinaukio (early 1920s) and the front of the Talvipuutarha (Winter Garden, early 1920s).

Olsson's garden architecture was stylised, with uniform colour fields and rhythmic forms blending with the shapes of the landscape to create clear lines of sight and aesthetically pleasing ensembles. His design also incorporated various structural objects such as pergolas and decorative elements borrowed from antiquity, including statues and sundials. Decorative ponds and networks of walkways covered with different stone

materials contributed to the spatial division of parks and gardens. His design reflected a strong architectural vision and a thoroughness that is matched by the quality of both the flora and the building materials. In his private garden designs, he often sought to bring nature and buildings together in a total work of art. This meant taking into account the architecture of



the buildings when designing the garden architecture.

Paul Olsson set up his own garden architecture practice in 1920, around the same time he established a nursery in Koivuhovi in Kauniainen, which later became the largest nursery in the country. Olsson's nursery was also known internationally. It continued to operate for many years; Leif Olsson, the youngest of Paul Olsson's four children, joined his father and grandfather as a horticultural architect and continued to run the family business until the end of the 1980s. The other children also carried on the family tradition, pursuing careers in horticulture.



1. <https://www.m-ark.fi/mark/historia/>
2. MERL SR LI AD9-14-1
3. Museum of Finnish Architecture. <https://www.mfa.fi/kokoelmat/arkkitehdit/paul-olsson/>
4. Holger Blom's photograph from the Congress 1948 © MERL SR LI AD9-14-1

5. Paul Olsson © Puutarha 1960-44
6. Drawing from the Paul Olsson's collection © Museum of Finnish Architecture

Paul Olsson focused particularly on private gardens, but also designed cemeteries, industrial gardens and gardens for apartment blocks. One of his most famous works was the private garden plan for Kultaranta in Naantali (1916), which he drew up together with his father. It included a formal garden, a kitchen garden and a forest garden, as well as a roof garden plan. The Gold Coast is one of the most famous of his productions, not least because it has remained in its original form to this day. Indeed, many of Olsson's other gardens have either been destroyed during the wars, divided up and reduced in size or given other uses.

Paul Olsson reformed Finnish horticultural architecture and laid the foundations for the professionalisation of the sector in Finland. He continued to travel throughout his career, bringing European trends to the Swedish gardening community in Finland. Olsson was an active contributor to magazines and was involved in the organisation of many garden exhibitions and events. He was also active in various organisations in the field and offered internships or jobs to many younger generations of horticultural architects. Among those who have worked for him are Leena Iisakkila, Onni Savonlahti and Maj-Lis Rosenbröijer. The Museum of Architecture (formerly the Finnish Museum of Architecture) received the drawings and photographs of Olsson's garden architecture office as a donation from a relative in 2001. The very large collection includes garden and park designs from three generations, from 1913 to 1990. The collection is available to researchers by request.³

