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VISUAL

LEGAL SIGHTSEEING

A peopled Peace Palace

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Helsinki Central Station, 15 August 2025: copyright author

In and around Helsinki's Central Railway Station – known familiarly as Steissi – one may find oneself at once among protester, preacher, and fortune-seeker. Beneath its lone tower, the stony building spreads out, low. Along both sides of the blocky structure, public squares open up; the surrounding urban environment invites in the city's bustle.

The Central Station is architect and urban planner Eliel Saarinen's adaptation of his earlier modernist entry to the design competition for the Peace Palace in The Hague. Features of that praised entry,[1] titled *L'Homme*, are recognizable in the station building. Both have a symmetrical design, with unassuming walls lined with windows. The clock tower to the right of the Central

[1]For a more detailed description, see H. Charlesworth, 'The Art of International Law', (2023) 38(3) *American University International Law Review* 609, 616–25.

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Station, angular but for its domed roof, shares a likeness with the one Saarinen had drawn at the centre of *L'Homme*. Other aspects of the building differ from Saarinen's Peace Palace. Where *L'Homme*'s entrance hid behind a row of pillars at the top of a staircase, the Central Station's front doors are at street-level, visibly accessible beneath a subtly ornamental arched window. Four muscular columns stand beside these doors, two to each side: they are Emil Wikström's granite lantern bearers, holding up globes of light. The Central Station also resembles the more national romantic Vyborg Station, designed by Saarinen and Herman Gesellius, where sculptor Eva Gyldén's bears and stone-faced women once welcomed passengers.[2] Soviet forces destroyed the station in Vyborg during the Continuation War, leaving the Helsinki Central Station a rare architectural reminder of a Peace Palace that might have been.

Steissi may not house the International Court of Justice, but it is home to another kind of justice-making. Every day, the lively station connects hundreds of thousands of people to one another and to the places from which they come. One of few heated public buildings open to all and for a large part of each day, the Central Station serves as a meeting point for locals, a shelter for the city's rising number of unhoused persons, and a resting spot for passengers. The station's space, nestled between other culturally significant buildings, extends into adjacent airy squares. These squares offer protesters unique opportunities to occupy and refigure the place's symbolic and affective attachments.[3] Here, the question 'where are you, and we, going?' can at once concern the direction of public transport and of life together. In taking up the space and inviting passers-by to join them, activists create possibilities for transformative encounters and dialogical struggles over meaning and politics. Such use of the space aligns with the ideas underpinning Saarinen's plan; the spatiality of the Central Station's setting reflected a sensitivity toward the importance of communal places for vibrant social and public life.[4] *L'Homme's* design may have been, as one critic put it 'throbbing with life',[5] but more so, now, throbs the Central Station. Its vitality does not come only from the aesthetic ideals it embodies. More importantly, the Central Station gathers people into shared time and motion. They bring its design alive.

[2]For images, see J. Mehtonen, 'Helsingin Rautatieaseman Kivimiesten Pikkusiskot Tuhottiin Sodassa', *Yle*, 12 December 2015, available yle.fi/a/3-8481811.

[3]L. Näre and M. Jokela, 'The Affective Infrastructure of a Protest Camp: Asylum Seekers' "Right to Live" Movement', (2023) 71(1) *The Sociological Review* 165.

[4]M. Lindqvist, 'Eliel Saarinen's Railway Station as Setting for New Eliel Competition', *Helsinki City Museum*, 9 December 2020, available www.helsinginkaupunginmuseo.fi/en/2020/12/09/eliel-saarinens-railway-station-as-setting-for-elielinaukio-competition/. Recent plans to erect office buildings on one of the squares have prompted public conversation about who the space is for, and why that should matter. See further, K. Karlsson, M. Schalin, and T. Tuomi, 'Kaupunkilaisten etupihat: Elielinaukio ja asema-aukio kauppatavarana', in H. Hautajärvi et al. (eds.), *Kenen kaupunki? Helsingin kaupunkisuunnittelu ja kulttuuriympäristö törmäyskurssilla* (2021), 126.

[5]As cited in Charlesworth, *supra* note 1, at 623.

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