

Eero Snellman

Speech given in Paris in 1947

Your Excellencies Ladies and Gentlemen

The French school of art has, thanks to its centuries-old traditions and by constantly renewing its conception of art and its techniques, succeeded in exerting a profound influence on the visual arts in the worlds both Old and New. Since the 18th century right up to the present day Paris has been the uncontested capital of painting and sculpture.

Artists from all corners of the earth have come here to study. They have returned as often as possible, staying for as long as their means have permitted. Even before the war artists from abroad were having difficulty finding studios. If and when they succeeded, they were obliged to buy all their furniture, model tables and easels, and even their own heaters and light fittings.

I know from experience that a considerable proportion of the money intended for study purposes went on merely setting up home, only to be repeated on subsequent occasions. Equally vexatious was the fact that the said furnishings then had to be sold for a ridiculously low price only a moment later, and this appreciable dent in the funds set aside for study was similarly felt by all thereafter. This essential but pointless outlay could be avoided if the plan which I have the honour of placing before you could be implemented.

Before doing this, I should nevertheless like to say a few words about the furnished workshops and studios that could be rented before the war. Never have I seen furniture in such poor taste, so monstrous in fact as that in these furnished studios, these odious dens fit only as props for, let us say, the play "No Exit" by M. Sartre, but truly not as a setting conducive to the work of an artist. But then the studios were never designed to meet the needs of painters or sculptors – as regards either their ground plan or in most cases their south-facing windows.

The difficulties encountered by foreign artists seeking a studio in Paris were considerable even before the war, but they are now no less than insurmountable and will continue to be so for a long time to come unless some action is taken. An artist obliged to stay at a hotel can spend but a short time here. It is quite impossible for him to settle down and to create anything lasting on which his very contact with French art would have left its mark.

At this critical moment in history, when France feels called to maintain its position in the vanguard of civilisation – when the United Nations has decided to make it the seat of UNESCO – it would be wrong to underestimate the work which artists here have already accomplished and intend to continue doing on France's behalf.

I believe I can say that without these artists acting as cultural envoys, France would enjoy a far lesser reputation in the world.

Before developing and explaining my plan for an Artists' City, let me describe to you a project of this kind already realised in the capital, Helsinki, of my homeland. This is the Lallukka Foundation, on whose Board I have served ever since its establishment 15 years ago.

At the end of last century there lived in Viipuri, the business centre of eastern Finland in the region ceded to the Russians under the terms of the peace treaty just signed, a poor country lad who was destined to become the most famous businessman in his province. At the height of his career Juho Lallukka, donated large sums of money and became a great patron of Finnish artists. In his will he stipulated that funds be used to build a home for painters, sculptors, musicians, composers and opera singers. The house stands on a plot of 1,677 square metres and has a volume of 25,000 cubic metres. This encompasses 46 apartments, 20 of them studios, each with 1-5 rooms. It also has a club where unmarried residents can take their meals and to which outsiders who are members of the club can bring guests to engage in conversation or to read the daily papers or art publications from all over the world. The members can also attend the monthly social evenings with entertainments of a high standard. It must further be added that the house has workshops with full technical equipment; the artists readily make use of these facilities to do woodwork, wrought iron work, casting, canvas priming and other jobs that would otherwise disrupt their private studios.

The house was not built with borrowed money. For precisely this reason the rents are modest and approximately cover the upkeep of the property. The house has provided some elderly actors and musicians with a sunny and even free home for their old age. Some of the studios are let to talented youngsters to facilitate their work. These young artists agree to relinquish their flats to others when they become established or in any case after a certain number of years.

In 1938 I entered into a partnership with the French architect, Alphonse Jouven, of the Finnish pavilion at the international Paris Expo, for a project designed to create a Paris branch of the Lallukka Foundation such as I have just described.

To my profound regret, the war and the financial straits which my country must now surmount prevented the execution of this project; but for them, it would now be ready. Permit me to create for you a picture of what is perhaps merely a utopia: an Artists' City in Paris.

As I imagine it, the City is open to all artists irrespective of race or nationality. They all live under the same roof and – I would make so bold as to hope – establish personal contacts that will most certainly enrich their intellectual lives.

I see no reason why each nation should have its own building, as is the case at the City University, because this proved unprofitable even before the war. From time to time they would stand empty for months on end as the students returned to their homelands for the vacation. Due to the acute housing shortage, or rather crisis, they have now opened their doors to all nationalities, which has made them financially profitable and more useful in the international sense.

This, then, is how I envisage the Artists' City in Paris:

A house, four facades, overlooking a park. A courtyard in the centre, flower beds, the open sky above. Sculptors can exhibit their latest works on the lawns in conjunction with the annual residents' exhibition. The big, very big exhibition hall is reserved for painting and gives onto the courtyard, to make it light. In between exhibitions the hall acts as a venue for festivals and concerts, and adjoining it are a restaurant and meeting rooms. In addition to providing artists with a place in which to concentrate in peace and quiet on their artistic creation, the house needs a club that would attract as many Parisian artists as possible. Permit me to assure you, from my long experience, that these two very disparate objectives can be achieved simultaneously.

To return to the house itself: the painters' and sculptors' studios should be located so that their windows face east or north. The plans should be such that a little flat could, if so desired, be combined with or separated from a studio at will. If necessary, for example, an unmarried artist might be content with a studio with kitchenette or balcony while the adjoining small flat could be placed at the disposal of a musician.

Musicians are another group of artists for whom living in a hotel is exceedingly difficult. For hotels are not designed for piano or violin players or residents training their voices all day long.

I leave it for my French colleagues to decide whether flats need to be reserved for the use of French artists visiting Paris.

The artists' home would be furnished comfortably but simply, avoiding all luxury. The studios would have everything the artist needs: curtains, lighting, model tables and desks, easels, stands and shelves, and other such things.

I can already hear my architect friends muttering: "That's all very well, but how many square and cubic metres would this amount to?" It is difficult to give an immediate answer, but the fact remains that there is a crying shortage of studios and this is not going to get any better.

The building site and drawings should permit possible extensions in the future. In my opinion, the project should begin with a building of at least 200,000 cubic metres.

I am indeed very well aware of the difficulties that must be overcome before it is possible to build, to estimate the costs and to raise the funds for this large-scale project at precisely this moment in time when all countries have imposed severe restrictions on monetary transfers. I also know that some will view my plans with a

shrug and class it as just another utopia, precisely because its execution looks impossible under the present circumstances.

Nevertheless I repeat: Paris's future as the capital of art will depend on whether the housing problem encountered by foreign artists can be solved. If nothing is done, the financial advantage afforded by the presence of a large number of foreign artists will also be lost. The global influence of your great nation and the good will which France enjoys are maintained by these same artists whose influence in their own countries is greater and deeper than has, until very recently, tended to be admitted. France's true friends cannot remain indifferent to this state of affairs, and nor is a shrug sufficient.

On the other hand, I can already hear another objection: that this plan for an Artists' City I have just put before you is not sufficient to eliminate the shortage of studios. That is only too obvious, unfortunately. Even if it is carried out, the plan would be no more than the start of a new era. It would, however, be a substantial indication that despite all the difficulties that face us today, we wish to build and to plough a new furrow in the field of culture in which, to my knowledge, nothing of any real note has been achieved apart from the Lallukka Foundation in Finland.

The execution of the plan should begin here, considering that the City of Paris has already procured a site.

Once the plan has been formulated, UNESCO should be used as an intermediary to appeal to all foreign artist associations and groups that might be interested in this project and in assisting it financially. Assistance might also be sought from other countries and governments.

Once the artists' home is ready, there is no doubt about its profitability; there will be streams of takers and residents.

The question of management can be decided in due course. I could imagine a Board of Directors with representatives of the City of Paris, the French arts academies and a representative of all the countries in turn that have contributed funds in, say, alphabetical order.

This Board would be responsible for the administration proper and would select the residents, in a just and fair manner, from the applicants from all countries, true talent being the sole criterion.

Preserving Paris as the capital of the arts is a matter very close to our hearts. In order to do this, let us mobilise all the positive forces both in France and in all the other countries of the world.

Paris, October 1947

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