THINK CORNER ARCHITECTURAL SELF-GUIDED TOUR

Lobby

The Think Corner building is a masterpiece of renovation. In 2015 the decision was made to provide Think Corner operations with larger facilities and, at the same time, transform the nature of the City Centre Campus.

An administrative building of the University on the corner of Yliopistonkatu and Fabianinkatu was selected as the permanent location for the new Think Corner. It needed to be renovated, making it possible to modify its purpose. The building was a rather dull representative of the modular concrete architecture of the 1970s, reflecting the approach to work and academic hierarchy prevalent in that era. The facilities did not support the mission of an open university, in addition to which the building hindered the modernizing of the city centre campus.

The starting point for planning the new Think Corner was to make the ground floor an open and attractive meeting point that would form a uniform whole with the Main Building of the University and the square in front of Porthania.

The concept of the new Think Corner was formed through the engagement of the University community and a number of stakeholders, such as alumni, decision-makers and residents of Helsinki. More than anything, service design efforts required the willingness to step into the shoes of various user roles and assemble them under one roof to bring out the potential for versatility of the venue as effectively as possible. A bold proposal by JKMM Architects won the architectural design competition. In the end, the only things left from the old administrative building were the 11-storey concrete frame and lift shafts. Almost everything else, including the old courtyard, was harnessed to serve new needs.

The hand of the architects is evident in the new facade of Think Corner. The large entrances and the positioning of the windows, which breaks the traditional rhythm, resembles the OP Financial Group headquarters in Vallila, while the statuesque skylights and the use of a wooden flooring resembling a shop floor bring to mind certain characteristics of the Amos Rex museum. The head designer, who brings a certain family resemblance to these locations is Asmo Jaaksi from JKMM Architects, who together with architect Teemu Toivio led the skilled Think Corner design team. The new facade is distinct and modern, yet in a subdued manner gives way to the dignified Main Building and Porthania, a model of 1950s modernism. The proximity of the historical city centre built in the empire style necessitated the smartening of the overall look of the block without breaking the harmony of the cityscape.
The key new feature in the facade is the open-plan space on the street level. The large, frameless windows opening to the surrounding city connect the indoor areas to urban street life, while the extra-wide entrances invite people to step in. From the perspective of structural engineering, building the windows and broad entrances was challenging, as the concrete element structure of the facade strictly limited the addition of new openings. The impression from the street level of the place almost being airborne was achieved by concealing in the exterior wall a new steel grid beam reaching up to the third floor. The massive steel frame weighs nearly 50 tonnes, and its longest sections are more than 20 metres long. Its diagonal support beams can be seen in the second-floor windows. The sixth, or the top floor, contains a discrete patio and a rooftop sauna.

Stage

Think Corner’s versatility is on prime display in the architecturally impressive ground floor: in the morning the space can serve as a quiet café for getting some work done, while in the daytime it can be a lively lunch restaurant and in the evening an event venue for more than 200 people. Stage, the largest individual space, used to have no roof! During the renovation, the courtyard of the administrative building was covered and moulded into the heart of Think Corner, where the largest events are held. Stage also constitutes a new route from Porthania to the Main Building on Fabianinkatu. Occupying the barely used courtyard can be considered an exemplary piece of reconstruction in the city centre.

The ground floor is built mainly from two materials: raw concrete and Finnish PEFC-certified pine. The three large skylights, each located in a corner of its own above Stage, all point in a different direction. Presentation technology and equipment have been left visible, as the robust technical equipment goes well with the rough concrete look of the venue. Ventilation and other building technology solutions have been expertly hidden in the walls so that no pipes or valves are seen.

Take note of the amalgamation of wooden and concrete surfaces and, for example, the mitre joints of the skylights – implementing such seamless points of contact requires special skill. As a counterpoint to the open ground floor space, Stage is surrounded by small and more private lodges. These open spaces offer safe intimacy and acoustic privacy for work and conversations.

The second floor of Think Corner holds bookable meeting and work spaces, some of which open directly to Stage. These box-like facilities are entirely clad in wood. The window on the extreme left provides a glimpse into the Think Corner studio where media content is produced for science events, podcasts and the Think Corner YouTube channel.

Fönster

Fönster, the other multipurpose venue on the ground floor was named after the window wall opening to Yliopistonkatu. Similarly to the skylights above Stage, Fönster’s windows are glazed with glass elements the size of nearly 3 x 6 metres, the largest in Finland. The concept
of responsibility was applied to the assembly of the pine slat panelling on the walls, with slats used that would have otherwise ended up as sawings or wood chips.

Fascinating details include doors hidden in the panelling, openings to the lower floor and beautiful stairs rising from below. Also remember to lower your gaze: the floor surfaces at Think Corner are either polished concrete or a construction reminiscent of a shop floor, an old way of building extremely durable floors. A floor assembled from wooden blocks the height of roughly 5 centimetres set on their ends is practically everlasting. If a piece is broken, it can be lifted from the floor and replaced with a new one.

The Think Corner bookshop is located in a prominent place next to the large window alongside Fabianinkatu. Unusual for university buildings, Think Corner has been influenced by attractive brick and mortar stores. Think Corner’s accessible entrance is located in the Fönster corner.

**Basement**

Downstairs at Think Corner, the relaxed Basement is an inviting space, especially for group work. At Think Corner, activities are supposed to be seen. All drawing surfaces are free to use, with tools available for loan. Before the renovation, Basement served as a University staff restaurant. With the exception of grinding and polishing, the old floors were left untouched during the renovation. In fact, the outlines of the old restaurant walls can still be seen.

Since Basement is located underground, it has no windows. Natural light is filtered through three light wells, two of which are clad in wood. The light wells, which offer a view to the ground floor, are like secret windows to Basement into which passers-by can take a peek inside.

Think Corner’s furnishings have been chosen to support communal activities and the versatility of the facilities, with the table furniture being fairly large. Even if you visit Think Corner by yourself, others busy with their work are likely to sit down next to you. Certain elements that soften the acoustics of the facilities have been installed under larger pieces of furniture – feel for yourself! All the furniture pieces have been fitted with wheels, which makes them easy to move.

Through Basement, you can access the UniSport sports facilities, which were redesigned, diversified and expanded during the renovation. The sports facilities can be found on Think Corner floors K2, K3 and K4.

**Main staircase**

One of the most photographed and architecturally interesting details of Think Corner is the main staircase. The stair-like pattern on the underside of the wood-clad and steel-framed staircase creates an optical illusion known as the impossible staircase, or the Penrose stairs. The asymmetrically descending staircase plays a significant visual role in all three floors of
Think Corner. According to the main designer, one of the goals of the design process was to build a staircase that persuades people to take the stairs instead of the lift.

**Think Lounge**

Think Lounge, the bright second floor lobby, serves as an active event venue that is particularly well suited to workshops and public events with audiences of less than 60 people. The deep recessed rectangular window openings at Think Lounge frame the beautiful surroundings like paintings, while the rest of the second floor is divided by glass walls into sections with a range of uses. The upper floors have been rented out as office space.

In many ways, Think Corner is a different and new kind of University building open to the public. The inspiring spaces have been designed for both University community members as well as Helsinki residents interested in collaborative learning and working. In fact, openness is one of the most characteristic features of the Think Corner architecture – as you move about the floors and facilities, you will notice that each floor is as open a space as possible. The only facilities that can be completely sealed off at Think Corner are located on the second floor.

All event and work spaces are interconnected lobbies that are not intended for private events. There is always something going on at Think Corner; the adaptability of the facilities also means that chairs, tables and sofas are moved on a daily basis, taking the people on them along.