

Lingonsö 'Chapel'

Jairo Rodríguez Andrés



Lingonsö 'Chapel'

Heikki and Kaija Siren, Lingonsö - Finland, 1966-69

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Sara Siren in the 'Chapel'

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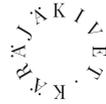
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Editor's Note

This issue is dedicated to the Lingonsö 'Chapel' designed by Heikki and Kaija Siren at the end of the sixties for the southern Finnish island of Lingonsö. Here viewed through an unedited and never published essay purposely written for the Kärjäkivet publication by the architect Jairo Rodríguez Andrés.

What was born first? The island or the house? The answer is clear and leaves no room for doubt. However, we can ask ourselves if the island was not waiting for the house to become more complete and finally have a unique and indivisible understanding. The choice of the place already as a project decision is here revealed in all its splendor as a preponderant element in architecture. At least, for the Siren couple, that specific place on the island, although completely wild, was already a home even before the house existed. About the 'Chapel', we can only say that it reminds us of those cromlechs on top of the hills, where we stop to rest, look at the landscape and think...

We want to thank to the Siren family on behalf of Jukka and Kirsi Siren for their courtesy regarding the publication of their images and also Ana Lubiano Verdugo for the refined models and their photographs. Special thanks to Jairo for his extraordinary effort and commitment during the process.

Finally, we also want to thank to the architecture for allowing us to understand the places with more clarity and attention.

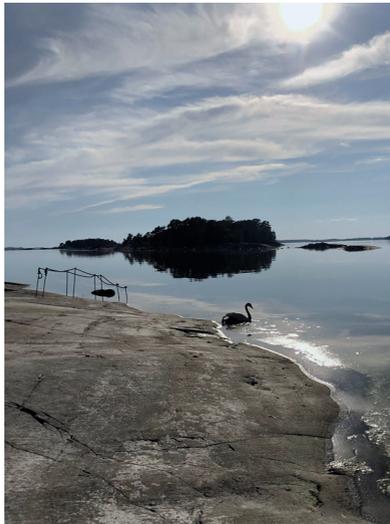
"It is beautiful to be an observer of the ups and downs until the final building. Thank you House!"¹

¹ Excerpt from Alejandro de La Sota texts regarding his Guzman House, Madrid (1972). Alejandro de la Sota Foundation (original archives).

Lingonsö 'Chapel'

- Heikki and Kaija Siren, Lingonsö - Finland, 1966-69

Jairo Rodríguez Andrés,
Architect



Picturing the first time Heikki and Kaija Siren landed on the uninhabited island of Lingonsö seems easy. The boat in which they arrived would be small, and the journey most likely departed from the contiguous Bockholm island. There, Johan Sigfrid Siren, Heikki's father, had his own leisure home: La Maison Bleue or Sininentalo (1938-39). The couple would build their own on Lingonsö, an elongated island barely a kilometer long, and that reconnaissance visit would most likely serve to start figuring out its precise location. The search for the island had not been easy, the location for the residence would not be it either.

Lingonsö, with a lengthened character, was one of the remote islands in the Bårosund archipelago. Its Northwestern face oriented towards the rest of the archipelago. With a smooth topography and protected from the winds of the Baltic Sea, it faced a continuity of peaceful islets, a common feature of this area's reality. On the other hand, its Southeast face, had a specially valuable orientation at this latitude due to its orography, way more complex, as well as a visibly more abstract and moving landscape. The longed-for isolation and intimate, primal contact with nature and its phenomena, under a model of free, sincere and radical interaction with the environment, occurred in this orientation better than in any other area. Here, on a brief rocky headland and next to a small archipelago, facing the opposite shore, the sea showcased all its magnificence. The combination of its erosion and salty water, together with that of the prevailing mighty wind, had characteristically shaped the vegetation and the orography over the years. This seemed like the right place.

Lingonsö island sunset, Northwest face.



1/500 scale model of the island of Lingonsö.

© Model and photos: Ana Lubiano Verdugo

However, this initial desire to settle in this orientation was redirected by the laws of a territory that, regarding its new inhabitants observation, was subtly becoming a landscape.² Reaching the island on a small boat was feasible. However, it was impossible to do it with any other ship of greater breadth, such as the one meant to bring construction materials onto the island, or a sailboat, like the celebrated Kuohuneiti.³ It was necessary to find an optimal area with very specific conditions. It should have deep water as well as tender nearby land, allowing the construction of a pier and a residence with certain proximity. It was necessary to fully understand the topography, including that hidden, invisible below the sea level. The project folder contains three enigmatic and unreferenced negatives with topographic drawings. Their composition reveals the part of the island that, in the Northwest end, not far from the first site, met these requirements. This area did not only meet the conditions for the execution of the indispensable pier, besides, the light and clear topography facilitated the gathering of materials and the execution of siteworks. Something not easy in a context without any infrastructure nor specific machinery. Its immediate surroundings had a friendly character, effective protection from southern wind, and a charming diagonal view of the sunset, as well as a soft and suggestive smooth rock beach. Pivoting on that border gap between water and land, it was undoubtedly presented as the natural location to erect, as a founding act in 1966, the first two constructions: the pier and the sauna.

² Joan Nogué has enunciated on several occasions this concept in which *"Before the gaze, the landscape was only territory"*.

³ The Kuohuneiti was the Siren family sailboat. It was used by the family over the summer on the island, and even from time to time, to go from their usual residence in Lauttasaari, Helsinki, to Lingonsö. Under Heikki's supervision, it was designed by Sparkman & Stephens and built by Eino Antinoja. It was a highly recognised design at the time of its creation.



Southeast face of the island with the 'Chapel'.

Photo: Jairo Rodríguez Andrés [Valladolid University].

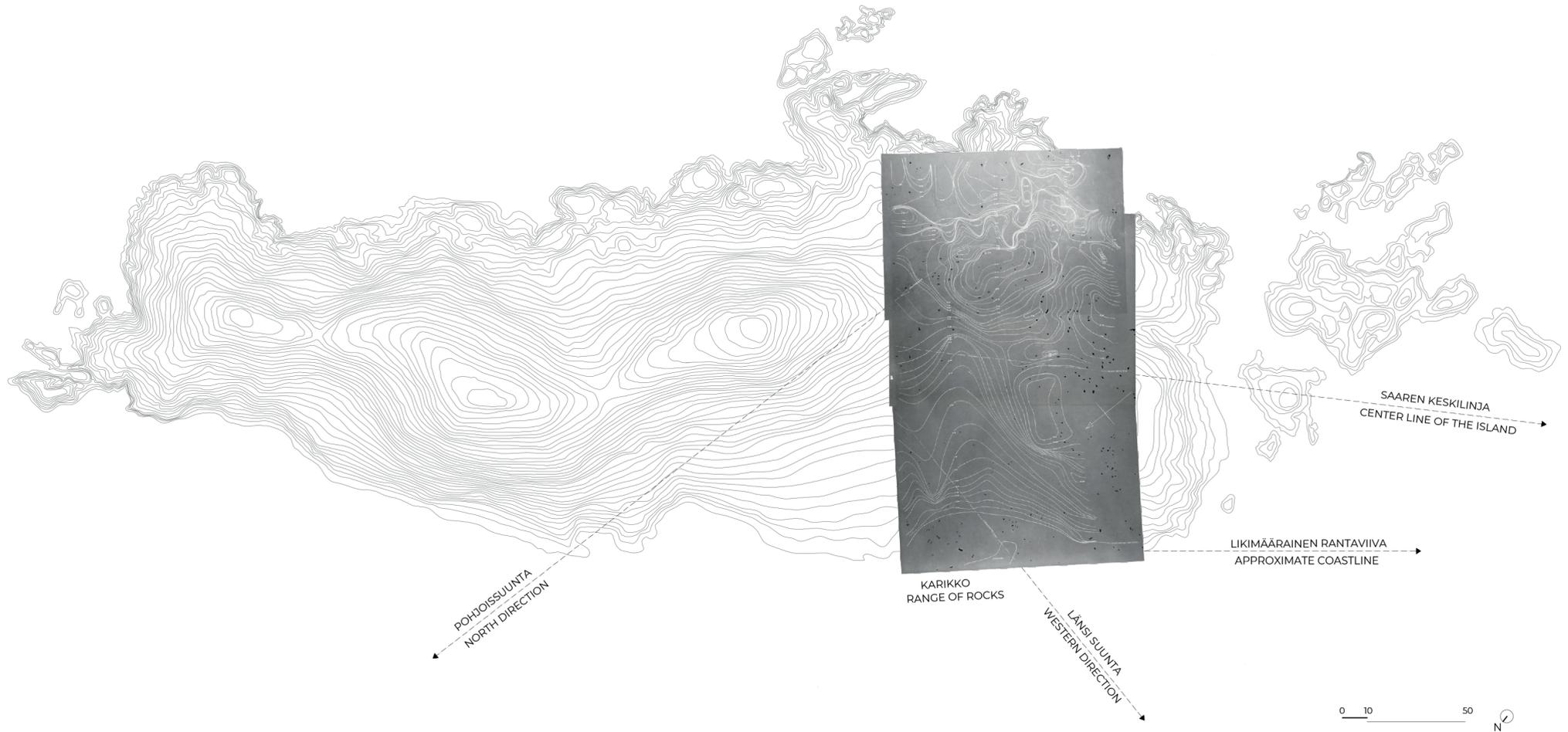
Both archetypes, sauna and pier, paradigms at this latitude of the relationship between human activity and water, would remain the only constructions on the island for a while.⁴ The rest of the project would deliberately be prolonged over four years (1966-69), as the authors would affirm: *"If one decides to settle on an uninhabited island, he'd rather do it slowly, gradually adjusting to area's own rhythm and nature"*.⁵ Attracted by the previous constructions, and after having considered different sites, the rest of the units in the complex found their place around the sauna. A modest but rich home was built up, loaded with an infinity of nuances and evocations. The perfect setting for a summer break.

However, Heikki and Kaija's initial dream of inhabiting the Southeast face of the island never left their minds. Faced with the instinctive need to live and enjoy that impetuous shore, they imagined and erected in this place, not far from the residence, a dreamlike piece in the form of a pavilion: 'Paviljonki Lingonsö'.⁶ Although that was the name originally given by its authors, the structure was and continues to be something way more complex up to nowadays. Despite its scarce entity, this satellite construction embodied the representation of the whole residence that could never be built there. Even though it had been conceived with a contemplative function, from its ambiguity, that minimal building and its immediate context were able to host a multiplicity of uses. Thus, it was used as a meeting room, hosted celebrations and concerts, it also became an assembly, a bedroom and even a celestial observatory. Its strategic location and subtle transparency fostered an intensification of the occupation of the place. The users' designed position, recessed and comfortable, together with the pleasant interior silence, condensed the surrounding reality, amplifying the experience of enjoyment of natural events. For this reason, other types of uses of a meditative and spiritual nature did also find a place in this pavilion. A symbolic link was held here, among other events.

⁴ Only a small 50x50x30cm semi-buried telephone booth, prior to any construction, functional thanks to an underwater cable and installed to be able to follow the works from a distance or solve an emergency, initially accompanied the sauna and pier.

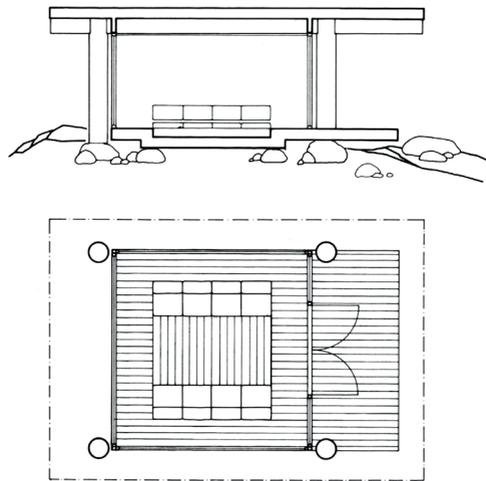
⁵ BRUUN, Erik and POPOVITS, Sara: *Siren. Finnish Architecture*. The Otava Publishing Co., Helsinki, 1978, p. 47.

⁶ In the plans in which the construction is defined, it appears named as 'Paviljonki Lingonsö', Lingonsö Pavilion. Documentation consulted by the author in the architects' archives on 28 March 2011.



Assembly of the island with the topographic study of the project area.

Developed by Jairo Rodríguez Andrés and Ana Lubiano Verdugo



Some of the few who attended that ceremony remember it as a truly exciting event. With the delicate music of a Bach toccata in the background, performed by local musicians and folk instruments, Sara Siren, daughter of Heikki and Kaija, got married at Lingönso. The atavistic union was held between the sea and the forest, on the virgin rock of the remote island and under the ceremonial canopy. If in the celebrated Chapel of Otaniemi (1954-56), the Siren couple previous work, the symbolic dimension of the altar-reredos was projected regarding nature and its elements, in this case, the entire environment assumed the condition of an immeasurable sanctuary. Nature acted as a temple, being the sky its natural vault and the trees, primitive and ancestral guardians of The Word, witnesses of the link.

A minimal configuration shaped this spontaneous altar: four pillars standing on the rock, holding two horizontal platforms, one of which would serve as a floor and the other as a ceiling, and a meagre glass closing with two doors. Over time this construction would be known as the 'Chapel', name by which it is still known nowadays. It is undeniable, specially after having visited it, that a deep spiritual halo emanates from it. The arrival to the island from the nearest pier, about ten kilometers away, or from the family residence in Lauttasaari aboard the Kuohuneiti, acts as a preparatory tour, along with the subsequent path through the insular nature. In addition to a comforting heat, derived from the subtle indoor greenhouse effect, and contrasting with the exterior noise of the sea, the wind and the moving trees, the interior brings a special stillness. This place was conceived for rest, introversion and observation of events in a primal way, in line with Heikki's particular inclination towards a spirituality projected on nature, close to a pantheistic feeling.⁷

Plans of the 'Chapel'.

Heikki and Kaija Siren © Siren Family Archives. Courtesy of the family.

⁷ Information obtained from the interview held on 28 February 2011 with the architect Jukka Siren, son of Heikki and Kaija Siren.



1/30 scale model of the 'Chapel'.

© Model and Photos: Ana Lubiano Verdugo

He always had a special predilection for resting there, in solitude, in his own words in search of a literal *"heavenly peace"*⁸ The implicit mysticism in this place would be accurately summarized by Helmut Borchardt in the following excerpt:

"The intrinsic significance of the chapel on Lingonsö is that here the spirit has managed to affect the material. Only in this way can the power transferred to the visitor be explained. Devoid of sacred symbols, the building is transformed into a chapel, into a place for the transcendental. The design alone gives it this elevated character. It is passed on to the visitor who experiences a feeling of liberation and elevation".⁹

The few components of this construction condensed many of the values and interests of the discreet couple of architects. Their predilection for precision, rigor and order, as well as for naturalness and simplicity at the same time, were summoned here. Lessons from Miesian architecture, artistic minimalism, Nordic primitivism, Japonism, the local constructive tradition, Doricism or classicist revernacularization were also cited over its four pillars and two platforms.¹⁰ A singular ability to approach a fusion of geographically and culturally distant constructive values and traditions stands out in this construction.

⁸ Information obtained from the interview held on 06 February 2021 with Kirsi Siren, daughter of Heikki and Kaija Siren.

⁹ *Op. cit.* 5, p. 16

¹⁰ Concept used by Demetri Porphyrios in PORPHYRIOS, Demetri: "Reversible faces. Danish and Swedish architecture 1905-1930" in *Lotus* 16, Milan, 1977, and later collected by Alan Colquhoun and Kenneth Frampton.



The 'Chapel'.

Photo: Jairo Rodríguez Andrés [Valladolid University].

Scandinavian rawness, Japanese syncretism and classic tectonics and naturalness beat within this structure. At the same time, the strength of Finnish woodcutters, the thousand-year-old skill of Japanese carpenters and the Mediterranean echo of the mythical origin of the lintel construction seem to resonate in the small temple.

Referring to constructions of such distinctive, deep-rooted and well-known traditions as those cited, in what could be considered a veiled description of the 'Chapel', Heikki and Kaija would note:

"It is obvious that the lasting significance of these buildings stems from the strength of creation behind them. They do not only meet the given need, but also often rise beyond it to the non-rational quality of architecture. Instinct, intuition and imagination are integral to creative work of permanent value".¹¹

In the same way it happened with other creators, the settlement of modernity had guided the couple of architects towards a search, close and away, for these permanent values. Carried away by a similar sensibility of distilling the shared essence, Dimitris Pikionis would also describe this desire accurately:

"I feel within me an urge: that to find the one, indivisible tradition of the world. I have perceived its universal unity. [...] I know there are differences, but above them, I can feel a unique and fundamental tradition".¹²

¹¹ LEE MORGAN, Ann and NAYLOR, Colin: *Contemporary architects*. Chicago, St James Press, 1987, p. 843.

¹² PUENTE, Carlos: "Camino secundarios", in AA.VV.: *Otras vías 1: Homenaje a Pikionis*. Ávila, COACYLE -Demarcación de Ávila, 2005, p. 23.



Movable architecture.

© Dr. Pales, Collection Musée de l'Homme [Architecture Without Architects].

But the 'Chapel' was not the only example in the work of the Finns of the materialization of this synthesizing will. Along with other projects, the 'Utsjoki' Restaurant in Karuizawa (1974) and the Sports Club in Onuma (1976), both in Japan, also portrayed this topic. Produced in Lapland, transported by land and sea to their destination, and jointly assembled by Finnish and Japanese carpenters there, where they still stand perfectly integrated today, representing, as well, an eloquent culmination of this attitude.

It was common to hear Heikki and Kaija talk about the need to find an architectural solution in each project through the *"natural way of thinking"*, yearning for a simple *"natural response"*.¹³ Together with the real and the rational, the non-rational was also considered in the creative process: *"The irrational is a component of architectural design; naturally it is something difficult to define in a unique and unmistakable way"*.¹⁴ From this position, it is possible to think that intuition, both complex and abstract as it is in architecture, emerged as the main way of approaching this essence of the design and construction event. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that it was common to find on his work table, as his son Jukka still remembers today, a copy of *Architecture Without Architects*, by Bernard Rudofsky,¹⁵ published on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition at MoMA just two years before Lingonsö siteworks got started. This catalog was an extensive and rich graphic compilation of the above, gathered from the five continents. Its repeated consultation was a powerful visual reaffirmation regarding intuition as a common, recurrent matter. Instinct and imagination, guided by a powerful intuition, shaped irrefutable implantations alongside with ingenious and effective technical solutions. It was an ideal epitome for the launching of work on any unknown territory. It was, at the same time, a scattered portrait of the essential, of that *"worldwide tradition"*. That which was going to be distilled both in the 'Chapel' and in other projects, from a balanced conjunction of reason and intuition.

¹³ Information obtained in the interview with Jukka Siren on 01 December 2020.

¹⁴ JOEDICKE, Jürgen: "The development of the architectural achievement. Interview with Kaija and Heikki Siren" in *Bauen + Wohnen* vol. 31, no. 2/3, 1977 Feb., p. 76.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* 07.

Jairo Rodríguez Andrés

Jairo Rodríguez Andrés, Burgos, (1981) Architect (2006) and PhD Architect (2013) by the School of Architecture of Valladolid. Assistant Professor of Architectural Projects since 2014 at the same school.

He has published articles on finnish architecture in renowned media such as VLC, ZARCH or PPA, and been invited to take part in International Conferences like the 1st International Congress "Mizuiro" (2011) or the International Congress: Aalto beyond Finland (2014).

He has also enjoyed two UVa Research Scholarships, a F.P.U. Scholarship of the Ministry of Culture, one Scholarship by Caja de Arquitectos Foundation and one more of the Research Program Jóvenes Excelentes by Caja de Burgos Foundation. He is a member of the Recognized Research Group GIRDAC at the University of Valladolid.

His academic and research works are combined with his professional activity as a Founding Partner of Oaestudio, an architecture and interior design office. Architectural design of residential, educational, retail and hostelry environments, together with a wide production of ephemeral and experimental spaces, are the main focus of his studio's activity.



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Finnish word meaning “court stones” or “circle of stones”: places of judgment (originally iron age graves), where judgments were held and justice carried out, accordingly to the Finnish National Board of Antiquities.

In the ancient times, they were important places where the primitive leaders of the North got together in order to discuss and decide about common matters.

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