



profile



Finnish Line

We could have talked with Emilie Heinonen for hours. Interested and interesting, Emilie is an unusual product of various cultures...and it's apparent in how she lives, thinks and works. Our conversation veered from joint ventures with British architects for projects in Russia through to the concept of silence in the workplace. And, in between, we chatted about the music of PJ Harvey and a blissful remote cottage with water supplied in buckets from the lake.

I'm from Helsinki in Finland. My father was a scientist/diplomat for the UN, so my childhood was spent in different countries like the USA and Austria. We moved countries about every four years – my sister and I called ourselves the suitcase children.

'I've been in the UK for 14 years now, the longest time I've stayed anywhere. Actually, I always wanted to be here – I like the way Britain has a good mix of American and European cultures. I came here when I was 18 and studied interior design at Ravensbourne. After college I briefly worked in Finland for a very technical studio called Arcibella: after a couple of years I went to Austria to join Ibis Design. What those two jobs gave me was good technical training – in joinery and so on.

'In 2004 I returned to London to join HLM Architects, and stayed with them until early this year. I think I joined HLM because I wanted to know more about the building, the envelope. I was always interested in architecture, but I'm glad to be an interior designer – I think it gives you more mobility. I'm fascinated by the social and psychological aspects of interior design – the human reaction within

the space. It's about tuning the building to people's needs. At HLM the work was mainly in the education sector. Perhaps the most interesting project I worked on was Archbishop McGrath School, though in the commercial sector I worked on a number of projects too, such as the hedge fund QCM. Emily Pickering was my boss for a long time, and I also got a lot of technical knowledge from John Kiernan. Good people, and seriously talented.

'What I learned, especially in education, was to try not to follow trends, and I learned how to work with small budgets too – the two often go together. I always want to design a scheme that's homogenous, and not to get stuck in colours. In education design you often find people getting hung up on colours because it follows trends...and it's cheap.

'I was briefly Head of Interiors at HLM – it was a pleasure working as part of a team, and encouraging people to develop their ideas. I left about a year ago though – I wasn't learning any more. I felt I needed to re-engage with Finland: I'd been away from my home country a long time.



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soft areas. No one has a fixed desk – they move around according to their needs. It's heavily based on detailed academic analysis of human behaviour and interaction in the office. It's also about bringing fun and play into the office; lines of white desks look great, but how are the staff feeling? At the newspaper project our consultancy led to the development of 'media dice' – felt wool wrapped acoustic pods for meetings.

'Our study of silence is also related to our study of interaction. GI is currently involved with the University of Helsinki in a project focused on transparency, communication and interaction. Interaction is all about user friendliness, customer orientation and approach. In Finnish this is described as 'user proximity'. It helps our clients think about competitive differentiation, productivity and cost. We apply 'user proximity' to all our projects – hotels and restaurants as well as offices.

▶▶▶▶▶ I knew all about Gullsten Inkinen Architects. They're a really prestigious practice; a bit like a Finnish Gensler is perhaps a good way to describe them! GI has offices in Helsinki and St. Petersburg, and is the largest interior design and architecture company in the Nordic Countries – projects range from Finland to Turkey, from Denmark to Russia. The clients are often international corporations such as Nokia, Unilever, V-kontakt (Russian Facebook), Radisson and Bosch Siemens, as well as well known Nordic companies such as Fazer, Sanoma and Sokos Hotels. I approached GI, they saw me immediately and took me on. My role is to establish GI in the UK. There's a gap in the office design sector that GI fills. It's a very different outlook which ultimately is about efficiency. It's client driven.

'GI has three core values in how we approach design and architecture: sustainability, technology, adaptability. It's all about designing something that lasts, with a long term payback. Clearly it's an interesting challenge as technology advances rapidly. Adaptability is about being exportable, about transforming within the process, and ultimately about working with the client. It's not prescriptive, it's design and architecture that can take various forms. I'm a big believer in sustainable design. And of course in Finland, design is a way of life – it's a design aware community.

'I've lived more years outside Finland than in it – I think I've absorbed an unusual blend of both the British and Finnish cultures. What I'm now doing is to facilitate my contacts in both countries. GI has carried out a lot of work in Nordic and Eastern Europe ▶▶▶▶▶

'With strategic workplace design projects, GI has been actively involved in developing transparency in corporate culture, as well as enhancing internal communication and productivity. We have a concept when designing open plan areas – the 'Silence' concept. The first project was for a major Finnish newspaper called Satakunnan Kansa, and since then there have been other significant projects, such as for an international networks company. The key to the concept is that workplace design and culture differs in different countries, but the one thing they all have in common is the issue of acoustics. It's the fundamental element. Of course, you need the right tools – flexible furniture, flexible technology and so on – but we analyse 'the talk sound'. Our analysis covers fine detail about how clearly you can hear people talking within spaces, whether you can hear anything at all – and anything (like mere mumbles) in between. We work out the loud areas and the



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▶▶▶ countries. As a result we've carried out an impressive amount of feasibility studies, and have great contacts – even to get funding. For many British companies Eastern Europe is uncharted territory – what we're doing is creating joint ventures and alliances. We can organise specialist funding from Finnvera, the financing company owned by the Finnish government. We can source products and services, for example Russian materials for a project in Russia. For British companies wanting to work in the old Eastern Bloc we can offer some fantastic opportunities. It's an exciting time.'

We talked for a while about Emilie's time away from work. Lack of space prevents us from recounting the many varied interests of this cultured and fascinating Anglo-Finn. But room enough for a glimpse into the inner Emilie...and an explanation why this piece is illustrated with an image of a Finnish summer cottage.

'I'm into music a lot. I grew up liking The Cure, Depeche Mode, Fine Young Cannibals – and PJ Harvey too, even back then. These days, all sorts of stuff, from the blues (my boyfriend Will's into it) through to The Dears. Art as well, I love drawing – I've done lots of life drawing. But I think the love of my life is my summer cottage in Finland...miles from anywhere, well, two hours from St. Petersburg! Built from local materials about 50 years ago by my grandfather, it has no heating and no water – we carry water in buckets from the Goat Lake! Simple and perfect!'

