

FINLAND

Helsinki-Malmi Airport Under Threat

Helsinki-Malmi International Airport (architects Martti Välikangas, Dag Englund, Onni Ermala and Vera Rosendal) was built in 1935–38, though operations at the airport began as early as 1936. Experimental reinforced concrete wall construction enabled the use of, for instance, strip windows around the entire cylindrical main terminal building. At the centre of the three-storey building with a circular floor plan is a terminal hall extending the height of the entire building and lit by a skylight. Two low wing buildings at right angles to each other protrude from the main building. In



Fig. 1: Aerial view of Malmi Airport in 1948. In the centre is the circular terminal building with symmetrical wing buildings on the sides. In the foreground is the aeroplane hangar with its mono-pitched roof. (photo Veljekset Karhumäki 25.9.1948, Helsinki City Museum)

addition to the terminal building, the airport complex comprises an aeroplane hangar and four runways. The reinforced concrete pillars and steel lattice trusses of the hangars represented in their time the latest in building technology.

Malmi Airport also possesses considerable symbolic significance in both aviation history and Finnish cultural history, in addition to its architectural and structural engineering values.

Malmi Airport was established near the Tattarisuo marshes on a watery ground, which at that time had no other use. Beneath the runways is a 39-kilometre-long drainage system that still keeps the runways dry. The area of the airport is approximately one hundred hectares. The airport, with its runways and buildings, is regarded as a cultural landscape, where over the years unique flora and fauna have become established.

Malmi Airport is a versatile general aviation centre

Malmi Airport is one of the world's best preserved, still functioning airports built before the Second World War. It provides a venue for a broad range of aviation activities, special events, and leisure and recreational activities. Not only is the airport used by private commercial pilots; there are also five commercial aviation schools and several aviation clubs. Parachuting and the training operations linked to it, as well as hot-air ballooning have provided interesting spectacles for residents of the neighbouring areas.



Fig. 2: Malmi Airport terminal building, with the aeroplane hangar in the background, small planes in their own parking stands, 1972 (photo Sky-PHOTO Möller, Helsinki City Museum)

Various aviation service companies and aircraft repair and maintenance companies operate at the airport. Approximately 300 people are in employment at the airport. In addition to the small planes nowadays stationed in Malmi, there is a heliport offering chartered flights. The airport is used by thousands of active pilots, about 700 of them amateur pilots. With approximately 40,000 annual landings, Malmi is the second busiest airport in Finland.

Besides flying operations, Malmi Airport also offers training opportunities for a variety of sports, public gatherings and testing activities that require a lot of space. It is possible to organise large-scale events on the airfield, such as rock concerts, which, due to noise problems, cannot be held in the city centre. Air shows and various events aimed at the general public enliven the area and entertain aviation enthusiasts.

The airport area provides an invaluable open landscape for local residents. The area is a regular destination for birdwatchers.



Fig. 3: Frame plan for Malmi Airport area, 1.12.2015. The terminal building and aeroplane hangar to be preserved are shown in black at the bottom centre of the image. They are overshadowed by new buildings and the open field landscape is destroyed.



Fig. 4. Central hall of Malmi Airport terminal building in 1972 (photo Juho Nurmi, Helsinki City Museum)

Circumscribing Malmi Airport is a popular jogging track and outdoor trail that offers interesting experiences and views of the local nature.

Airport conservation values have been identified and protection is actively pursued

Malmi Airport's international cultural-historical value is undeniable. It has been included in the selection of works of Finnish modernism approved by the international organisation DOCOMOMO (catalogues 1991 and 2017). In 2016 the airport was listed among the world's endangered cultural environments by the World Monuments Fund. In addition, in 2015 it was designated by Europa Nostra Finland as the country's most endangered cultural heritage site.

Malmi Airport, including its runways, terminal buildings and aircraft hangars, has been included in the Finnish Heritage Agency's inventory of Nationally Important Cultural Environments (RKY 1993 and 2009). The government decision requires that the listed sites must be preserved. In addition to the Finnish Heritage Agency and a number of other expert organisations, the unprecedented active civic engagement demands that Malmi Airport be preserved for aviation use.

Friends of Malmi Airport was established in 2002 with the objective of preserving Malmi Airport for aviation use. The association has documented the airport's operations and published an in-depth history of its construction and operations. Furthermore, the association has made a proposal to protect Malmi Airport under the Act on the Protection of Buildings, and has often appealed against development projects that would lead to the airport's destruction. In doing so, it has invoked international agreements and commitments ratified by Finland, such as the Faro Convention. The association has also launched a municipal initiative to hold a consultative referendum to preserve Malmi Airport, as well as a citizens' initiative to establish a nature reserve there. Tens of thousands of signatures have so far been collected. Friends of Malmi Airport has proposed that a special law, *Lex Malmi*, be created to protect the airport, but in 2018 the Finnish Parliament dismissed the proposal. At the same time, however, the Parliament insisted that a substitute airfield would have to be found so that aviation could continue. No replacement airfield has yet been found.

The petition launched by Friends of Malmi Airport for preserving the airport has so far attracted almost 74,000 signatures. The active association has not given up on its objectives, although some of its initiatives and appeals have been rejected. It has maintained its optimism that the ongoing protection initiatives and appeals will be successful.

Controversial plans for the future

All stakeholders agree that Malmi Airport is a nationally important cultural environment, but their interpretation of the scope of the protection differs significantly. The City of Helsinki is consistently working on transforming Malmi Airport into a residential area, despite the fact that the Finnish Heritage Agency and Friends of Malmi Airport are working to retain also aviation operations there. The City of Helsinki has terminated the ground lease contracts for Malmi Airport, coming into effect by the end of 2019.

The city has a monopoly on land-use planning and intends to draw up a development plan that would convert the airport site into a dense area of apartment blocks (25,000 inhabitants and 2,000 jobs). The development planning defines the land-use of the area. The city aims to fill the airfield with residential buildings during the period 2020–2045. The development plans would preserve the individual airport buildings, although their functions would change and they would lose their dominance in the landscape. Part of the runways would remain as roadways or vistas as a sort of memory trace of the lost runways. Otherwise, the open airfield would become enclosed. At the same time, the physical conditions for flying would disappear from Malmi Airport. The aviation operators' lease contracts are being terminated, and thus aviation operations are in danger of coming to an end in the near future.

Although the Finnish Land Use and Building Act requires that the Inventory of Nationally Important Cultural Environments (RKY) must guide land-use planning so as to protect sites, and the Finnish Heritage Agency in its statements and appeals has emphasised the importance of aviation activities in Malmi, the city authorities have not taken into consideration the overall conservation objectives of Malmi Airport.

Appeals have been made against the land-use planning decisions and the termination of contracts, and some of the appeals are still pending.

As Malmi Airport has not been protected through land-use planning, efforts have been made to protect the airport under special legislation. The state has a broader decision-making power in the application of the Act on the Protection of Buildings, but here too, disagreements have arisen. The conservation proposition by the Friends of Malmi Airport was rejected in the summer of 2018. When appealed, the Ministry of the Environment overturned the negative decision and returned it for renewed preparation in the summer of 2019. The ministry focused in particular on safeguarding the area's original aviation operations. At the same time, the ministry took a stand for maintaining the operations of the airport by stating: "The regulations, however, may indirectly prevent or restrict some particular use. Protection may, in practice, also contribute to the preservation of the site such that it remains suited for its original purpose." The ministry required that the decision be justified from the point of view of the Act on the Protection of Buildings and not refer to the Land Use and Building Act (land-use planning).

In the summer of 2019, a new supplementary decision dismissing the protection proposal was adopted, again shifting the issue to land-use planning: "It is possible, sufficient and appropriate to protect Malmi Airport by means of land-use planning." This new dismissal is still subject to appeal. The Finnish Heritage Agency, together with the citizens' association, have been active in advocating for the preservation of Malmi Airport as a whole. The appeals are pending.

Differing views on conservation objectives

The Finnish Heritage Agency, conservation experts as well as the general public want to preserve Malmi Airport as a living and functional entity, which includes the buildings with their interiors and the surrounding areas, as well as the runway area with its structures, equipment and underground drainage systems. This would provide a framework for continued aviation operations. The development planning proposal currently under preparation is based, however, on the preservation of only parts of the airport complex.

Behind the City of Helsinki's objectives lies the need for building affordable housing with good traffic connections. What has sparked debate, however, is the fact that building on the Malmi Airport area would be expensive and difficult. The airport's soggy clay soil extends to a depth of 10–25 metres and massive piling would lead to expensive construction. It has been calculated¹ that a total of around 14,000 kilometres of reinforced concrete piles

would be needed, thus generating more than 350,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. More than two million cubic metres of earthworks would increase the project's enormous carbon footprint. The construction on Malmi Airport is thus at odds with Helsinki's aspiration for carbon neutrality. There is also a dangerous layer of sulphide clay in the subsoil and the unexploded wartime aircraft bombs left around the airfield would also pose a major risk to the builders. Instead of replacing the soil and heavy piling, aviation would be the optimum use for the watery and springy land. The airfield could be developed into an intelligent aviation hub, with diverse cultural and aviation services.

Citizen activists emphasise the nature and recreational values of Malmi Airport and its importance as an airfield for both training and transportation. The opportunities offered by an operational airfield for a variety of recreational activities and large-scale events have been highlighted. Many rare species of plants, birds and insects are also an asset to the airport. All of these would be lost if the airfield were redeveloped as a dense area of housing.

The conservation activists are worried that the residential building on the airport grounds would permanently eliminate Helsinki's only airport and its immeasurably valuable, living cultural treasure. According to the Finnish Heritage Agency, the use of Malmi Airport for aviation purposes would be the most natural solution for safeguarding both international and national values, and at the same time the correct premise for any decision about its preservation.

Malmi Airport has indeed a future potential that, according to conservation activists, the city has not sufficiently recognised. If properly developed, the airport could also be a major cultural tourist destination. For example, it could be the site for the Finnish Aviation Museum, which is currently looking for a new location in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. Various large-scale cultural and nature-related events would also add to the attraction of Malmi. The city has also not understood the importance of Malmi Airport as a provider of non-scheduled air traffic services and as a stand-by airport in times of crisis. The pace of development in motor technology is staggering. In the near future, electric aviation will eliminate the noise pollution of flying and reduce adverse climatic effects. Might this enable finding a compromise? In any case, drone cargo deliveries are becoming increasingly common, and the unmanned piloting of clients (UTM, Unmanned Traffic Management) will fundamentally change aviation operations. In such a case, an airport for small planes situated in an urban area would provide an unparalleled competitive factor for the city.

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Footnotes

- ¹ *Suomen Kuvalehti*, 30.11.2018.

Translation

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