Länsi-Pasila 1972-1989: a digital glance at an urban transformation

Timo Laine, Kari Laine, Antti Härkönen, Susanna Ånäs, Kaisa Sarén.
Rauli Laitinen, Jussi Kulonpalo

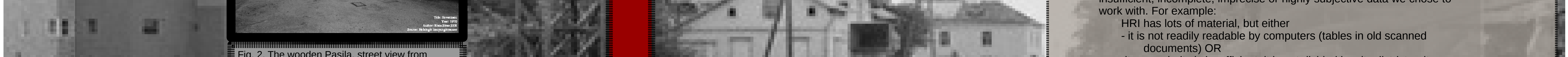## Wooden Pasila, the last wild-born workers residental area in Helsinki, was replaced by concrete Länsi-Pasila during the 80's.

Wooden Pasila, located within today's Länsi-Pasila, was a diverse residential area. It was constructed and inhabited by working class families - mainly railroad workers, since the 1890s. The early development of Wooden Pasila was driven by industrialization and rapid population growth. The houses were built on rented plots with no city plans nor building regulations and the neighborhood grew organically. Houses were built in close proximity to each other and no two houses were alike.

The City of Helsinki threatened not to renew the plot leases already in the 1940s and uncertainty about the future led to dereliction of the buildings as nobody was willing to invest in renovations.

The housing and sanitary conditions were poor in most cases and eventually Pasila became an area of cheap rental housing described as 'an emergency landing' place for the poor.

In the early 1970s Helsinki started buying the buildings and terminating land leases. The number of people living in area, which had been over 3000 at the best, started decreasing to being only 113 in 1979. Statistics show how the young people and families were the first to move out, typically to suburban housing estates while the old people remained on the area by late 1970s.

A new town plan for Länsi-Pasila was approved in 1979, and the old buildings were quickly demolished. A new and modern city district of Länsi-Pasila was quickly built in the area with new and mostly younger residents moving in. By 1989 when the main phase of the construction of the modern Länsi-Pasila area was ready, there were about 2000 residents. Today approximately 2700 people living in the area. Nowadays Länsi-Pasila has a relatively large share of municipal social housing (21.5% of the all the housing stock) as well as a considerable amount dedicated student housing.

Fig. 1. Neighbourhood of new Länsi-Pasila from 1984. Source: Helsingin Kaupunginmuseo

Fig. 2. The wooden Pasila, street view from Eevankatu. Source: Helsingin Kaupunginmuseo

The population of Länsi-Pasila by age

Fig. 4. While tearing down old Pasila during the 70's, young people and families moved away first while older population left. During the 80's the area was built ready.

Researchers get huge aid of digital techniques, but working with scattered data is not easy.

We were trying to find conflicts between reality and impressions of life in both Wooden and concrete Länsi-Pasila. During the hackathon we got many interesting findings, but also faced multiple challenges of insufficient, incomplete, imprecise or highly subjective data we chose to work with. For example:

HRI has lots of material, but either
- it is not readily readable by computers (tables in old scanned documents) OR
- its granularity is insufficient: it is not divided by city district or it does not go back to our selected time period

Finna has lots of photographs of the area of Länsi-Pasila...
- with no location data; a problem we have partially solved by making automatic searches to api.finna.fi using street names from our chosen area as search terms to create a collection of images
- representing the aim of the commissioned museum and the subjective vision of the photographer
- with metadata written from a personal, subjective perspective and for the purpose of categorization not necessarily telling of images themselves nor about the area they depict.

Other problems or uncertainty we considered during the week:

Map data and tools lack of standardisation
No standard file format
Different projections
Problems with Python libraries
Privacy concerns and copyrights limit access to data, specially about health, wellbeing and mental life of residents

One week hackathon included mapping, mining the open statistics and archieves and writing scripts to get maximum value of avaiable datasets.

We wanted to make sense of the freely usable museum collections related to our area (Länsi-Pasila) and period of study, mainly consisting of records of photographs with a digitized image. The photos included some descriptive metadata; a year and keywords f.ex., but no real location information. The contents of the index were not available as a single dump but through queries via api.finna.fi.
To create a collection of relevant records we queried a list of historical and current street names against database of pictures in the Finna API.
The photographs themselves were a starting point for research, as they visually illustrate the change in the area. The same process can be applied to other districts as-is, and as more material becomes available through Finna, the process can be used and adapted to expand the Pasila collection.
The photographs could also be plotted in a relatively accurate way to a map 1) if the street names still exist and their location can be automatically determined or 2) if a table mapping a street name to coordinates can be generated.

We experimented with keywords extracted from the records of Finna. As we were interested in impressions, we had to produce a way for the computer to understand the impressions in the photographs. We divided the keywords in two categories representing the "old", "soft", "spontaneous" and "free" wooden Länsi-Pasila and the "new", "hard", "rational" district that replaced it. We have used the categorization to calculate a value for each image. This trial were highly experimental and not scientific at all, while with more meaningful distinctions the method could be useful. The added location data gives one potentially interesting dimension to the data and simplifies the re-use of pictures in further research.

To get impressions of Länsi-Pasila, we formed a list of key-words from YLE archive related to Länsi-Pasila. (Fig. 5.)

One research line in our group was to look at the spatial positioning of the historical images. For the purpose, a historical map of the area was created from georeferenced aerial images and cadastre maps. A test set of photographs depicting a selected location were positioned on the map by hand, with latitude, longitude and compass values. The presentation of the images in different environments was tested. We used Mapillary as a platform, it is a crowd-sourced street view environment using photogrammetry. Alternatively, the images could be shown against modern landscape in Google Earth.

We also collected statistical data of old City yearbooks, old decisions and other digitized data available in Helsinki Region Infoshare (hri.fi) and avoindata.fi.

Fig. 5. Wordcloud of the YLE archieve keywords in 1969-1989 related to word Pasila (names excl.). Bigger font relates to more hits in dataset.

Conclusion and some further thoughts

As a conclusion, further research should be done to develop the methods to examine how succesfully the historical transformations of urban areas have managed to done. However, the subject is important since the results would help straightly in developing new areas.

As described, the scattered data makes challenges but does not prevent the research, and the digital methods can give great value of effort and new sights otherwise not seen.
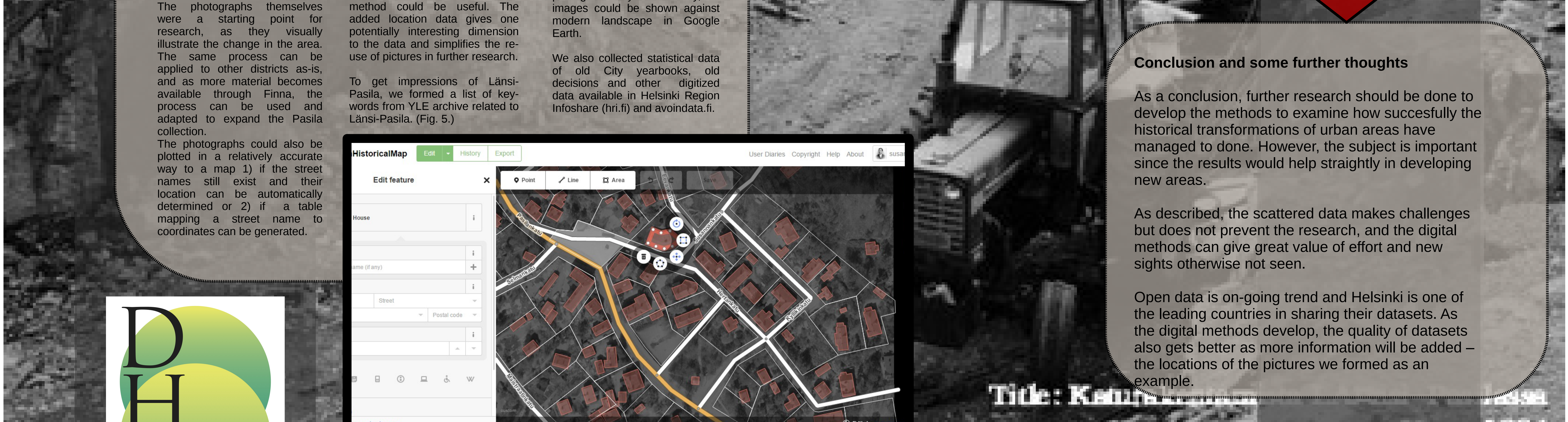
Open data is on-going trend and Helsinki is one of the leading countries in sharing their datasets. As the digital methods develop, the quality of datasets also gets better as more information will be added – the locations of the pictures we formed as an example.

Fig. 3. The coordinates of buildings and the locations of the streets in wooden Pasila were calculated and placed on the historical ortoimage in Open Streetmap. Picture: Susanna Ånäs

DHH16
DIGITAL HUMANITIES HACKATHON
MAY 2016 HELSINKI