



# Bank of Finland's architect Ludwig Bohnstedt



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Text

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(ed. Iina Lario)

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Helander's primary source of reference concerning Bohnstedt is the book *Architektur im 19. Jahrhundert. Ludwig Bohnstedt, Leben und Werk*, published by the art historian Dieter Dolgner in 1979.



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## LUDWIG BOHNSTEDT, ARCHITECT OF THE BANK OF FINLAND

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'The first architectural competition held in Finland was an international competition in 1876 for designing the head office of the Bank of Finland . The first prize was awarded to architect Ludwig Bohnstedt, and the Bank's head office was constructed based on his designs.' This nearly legendary statement is part of architectural history both in Helsinki and in Finland as a whole. The claim awakens curiosity. Who was Ludwig Bohnstedt?

Bohnstedt was born in 1822 in St Petersburg where his father, a merchant born in Stralsund, had moved. They lived on a street called Bolshaya Konyushennaya. Bohnstedt attended the St Petrischule, a German Evangelical-Lutheran school (as later did the

Finnish poet Edith Södergran, among others).

Bohnstedt moved to Berlin in 1839 and commenced his university studies initially studying philosophy. In 1840, he transferred to study architecture at the Berlin Bau-schule, whose headmaster was Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The teachers at the Bauschule, eg F A Stüler (famous as a designer of museums) and W Stier (Bohnstedt's closest teacher) were already part of the upcoming generation of architects.

Bohnstedt also studied land-scape painting at the Academy of the Arts. His studies in Berlin were, however, short-lived, and in 1841 he moved to Italy for 12 months, taking a nearly compulsory pilgrimage for

a student of architecture at that time. Bohnstedt adopted the stylistic features of the new Berlin architecture, introducing them later in the small stone palaces of the St Petersburg nobility and bourgeoisie.





*Ludwig Bohnstedt*

## BOHNSTEDT AS PRIVATE ARCHITECT IN ST PETERSBURG

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Bohnstedt started working as a private architect in St Petersburg in 1843. He gained the status of 'free artist' by presenting the required sample of his work at the young age of 21. In 1846, Bohnstedt was awarded the title 'Member of the Academy', a prerequisite of having his works published in the year book of the St Petersburg Academy of Arts. The work required to receive this title was the conceptual plan for a luxury spa. Bohnstedt was also awarded the title 'Imperial Councillor', most probably in recognition of construction assignments carried out for the Imperial family. The highest academic recognition, the title 'Professor', Bohnstedt received in 1858, with the entries for the

design competitions for the Hamburg City Hall and the British Foreign Office in London regarded as among his major achievements.

Bohnstedt did not teach at the St Petersburg Academy of Arts. Instead, he worked from his St Petersburg atelier, where he taught students like V A Schröter, who became an important developer of the St Petersburg brick style and architect of the Mariinsky Theatre, among other works. Schröter also cooperated with the Finnish architect Albert Mellin. It must have been Schröter who later wrote how difficult a person the authorities and developers considered Bohnstedt to be: 'He was defiant, difficult to approach, but how kind and helpful he was with

his students and those closest to him'. Thus, he was a typical artist/architect, in contrast to civil servants. The same trend was also evident in Finland, where independent architects became a counterforce to civil servants in the 1870s. This is reflected in the Bank of Finland construction project.

In the early 1850s, Bohnstedt was Chief Architect of the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna. He designed additional structures for the Oranienbaum palace ensemble, including a gallery and a new kitchen pavilion for the Chinese Palace of Catherine II. These works were evidence of Bohnstedt's ability to adapt to the stylistic ideals of another era. He initially also received official

Bankgebäude in Kopenhagen  
Expositionssaal.

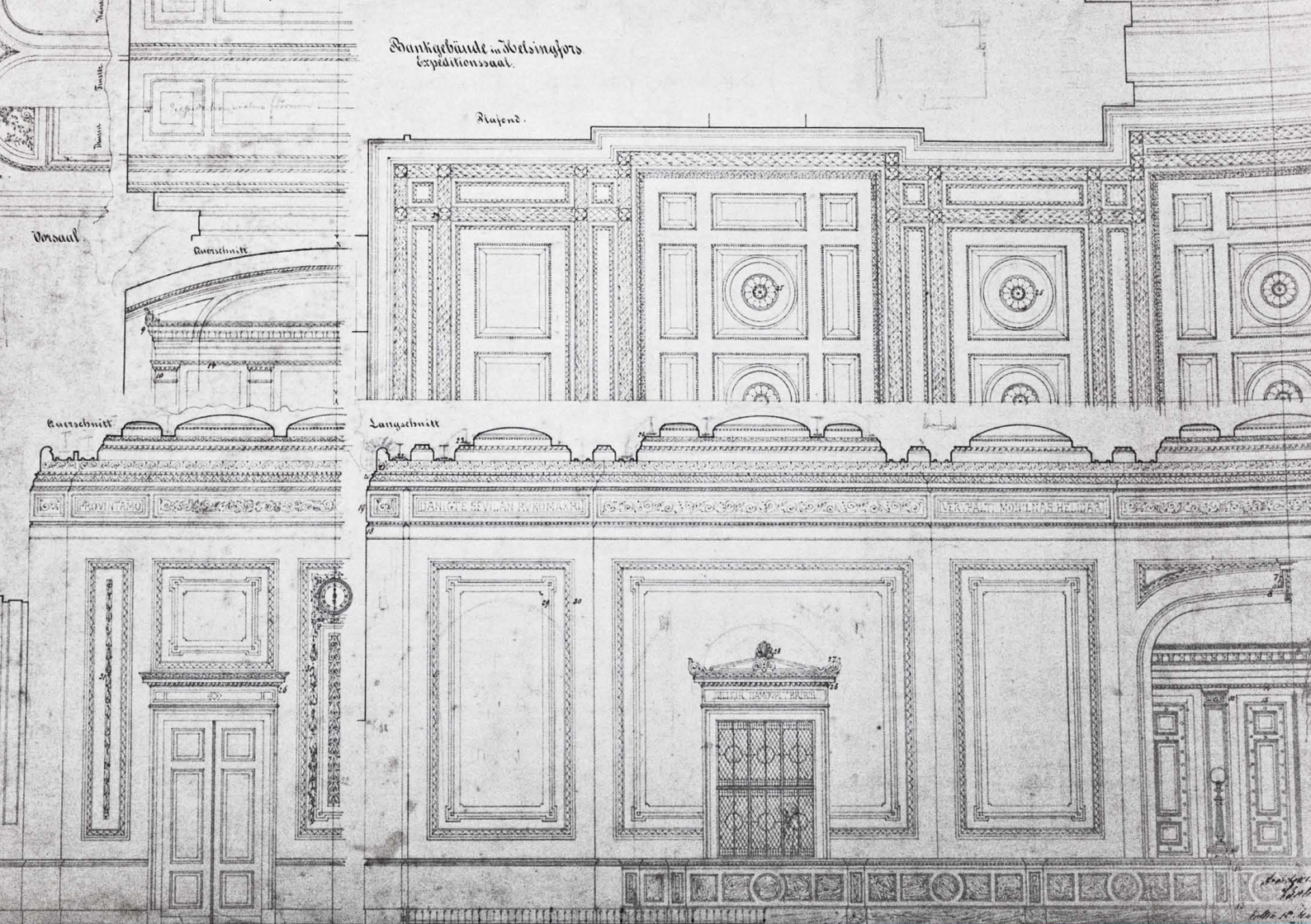
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commissions from the state, but he gave these up due to conflicts caused by his impractical nature.

From the early 1850s onwards Bohnstedt was mainly a private architect. Typical commissions were small town mansions commissioned by members of the nobility and bourgeoisie, the majority of which have since been demolished. Probably the finest example of Bohnstedt's flexible stylistic mastery and his virtuosity in presenting designs is the Yusupov Mansion, constructed in 1852–1858 on the Liteiny Avenue. This is one of the finest examples of Russian Baroque, an architectural style that emerged in St Petersburg in the 1830s and which was favoured by the court and nobility. The style was based on the architectural

ideals of the era of Empress Elizabeth and her senior court architect Rastrelli.

Bohnstedt's extensive career in architectural competitions began during his time in St Petersburg. He submitted a proposed design for the summer residence of the Grand Duke and for a roof to convert a courtyard of the Winter Palace into an interior hall. In that era, Bohnstedt's most significant prize awarded him the contract to design the German Theatre in Riga, nowadays the Latvian National Opera. The theatre was constructed in 1860–1863. Riga had in 1856 received a new town plan, which was based on the park area surrounding the old town.

Of Bohnstedt's work, the theatre building is the most important one

that was realized. However, it was to suffer a harsh fate, as a large proportion of it was burned down in 1882 due to the failing of the gas lightning, considered at the time to be state-of-the-art. Bohnstedt and his son prepared a restoration plan. Soon thereafter the theatre was extended at the stage end under the direction of Riga's chief architect. Nowadays the original building is nearly lost behind even newer, large extensions, perhaps dictated by practical needs.

*The German Theatre in Riga,  
designed by Bohnstedt,  
is now the Latvian National Opera.*

© Latvian National Opera.  
Photo: Andris Tone.





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## THE GOTH A YEARS

The other key phase in Bohnstedt's life and career began in 1863 when he left St Petersburg and moved to Germany, the country of his ancestors. He did not move to Berlin, the city where he had studied, but to Gotha, in the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, located in Thuringia, in the heart of Germany. He participated in the construction of Gotha as the town council's Senator Expert of public construction.

In Gotha, Bohnstedt designed important new buildings that attracted attention, including bank premises that gave a glimpse of the future Bank of Finland building. These buildings are, however, not mentioned in the concise travel guides of today. Working in Gotha, Bohnstedt also designed many

buildings in other parts of Germany. The villa he designed for the poet Ernst Reuter in Eisenach is a typical example of the ideals of the Berlin school of architecture that he adopted during his years of study. Bohnstedt is, however, best remembered for his entries in numerous international design competitions.

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Photo: Peter Mickelsson.









## BOHNSTEDT'S ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

Bohnstedt is a typical architect of the mid- and late-1800s: historically enlightened and a skilled draughtsman. He moved easily between various styles. Motifs were borrowed and amalgamated, which was typical of the period.

The key eras of architectural history – Classicism, Romanticism, Gothic and Renaissance – were quickly revived. This style is often referred to as 19th century historicism, or eclecticism. It should actually be referred to as stylistic pluralism, ie the application of various styles in a building to achieve the desired form and character. In this respect Bohnstedt was a true professional. Like many other architects of the time, particularly in Germany, Bohnstedt was a follower of the

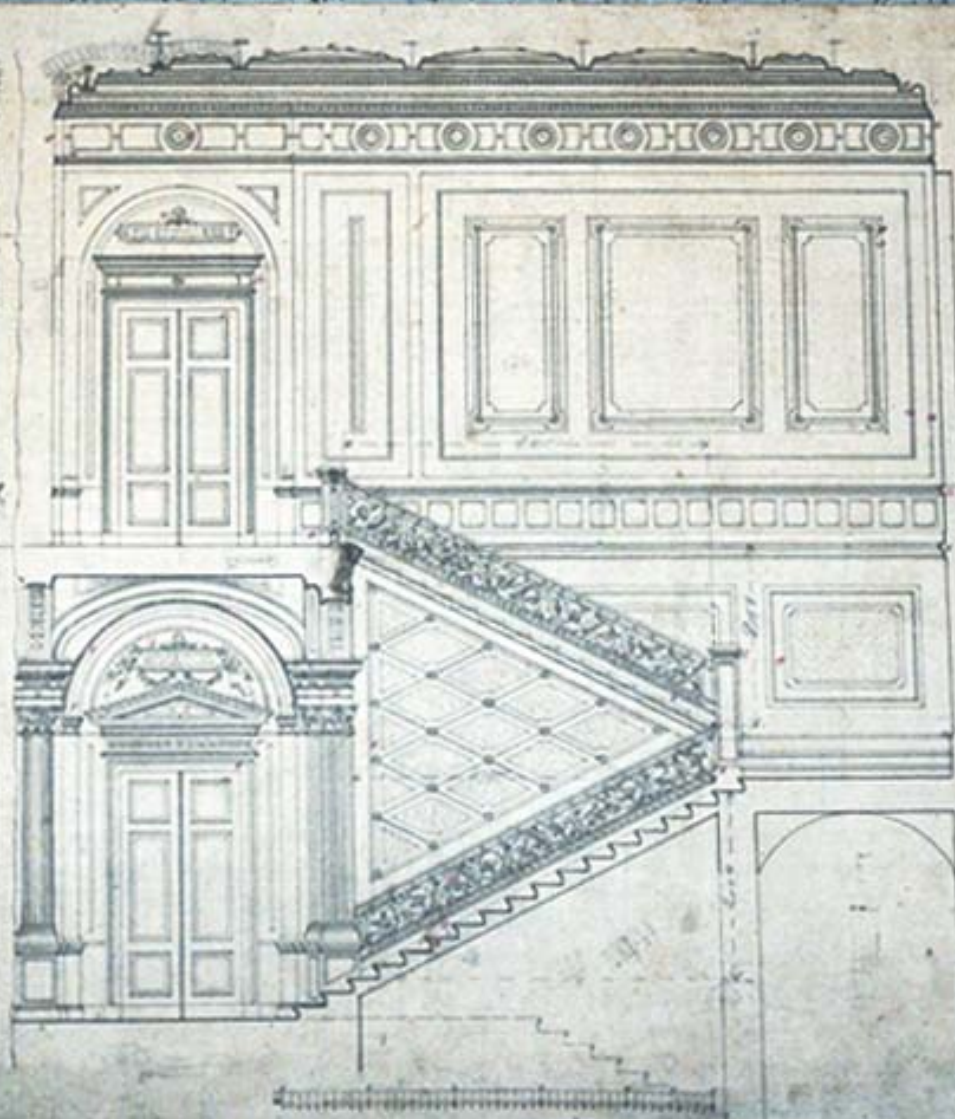
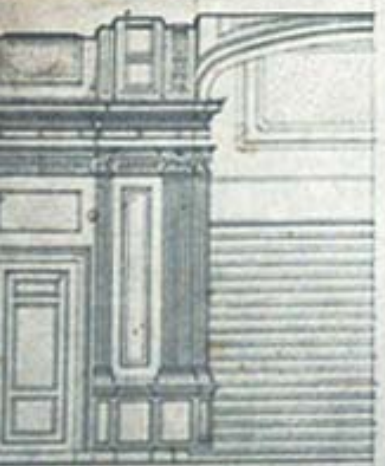
Rundbogenstil (round-arch style) developed in Germany in the early 19th century, and later of a more ornate style, Neo-Renaissance, a rather simplified example of which is the head office of the Bank of Finland.

Typical features of the Neo-Renaissance style of Bohnstedt's era were strong, enclosed buildings standing alone in their environment. Bohnstedt's designs did, however, often include freer features. He did not adhere to the principle of stylistic purity often required of building designs, but combined forms fairly freely. He designed Neo-Byzantine Orthodox churches, and in Russia he quickly adopted the elements of Neo-Baroque and Neo-Rococo that were popular at the time. Bohnstedt was also

familiar with the Neo-Gothic style and its variations.

Historical architectural forms were not copied as such, but elements of them were amalgamated to produce new entities. In the 19th century, architects were particularly dedicated to developing new solutions for new construction assignments. Bohnstedt, too, made a contribution in this respect, particularly as a designer of theatres and banks. In architectural competitions, the design assignments were usually ceremonial public buildings. They represented a specific art of construction (Kunstbau), the opposite of which were functional buildings (Nutzbau). Bohnstedt also designed industrial buildings. The only commission realised in large scale to which

*Sectional drawing of the Bank of Finland head office. © Bank of Finland. Photo: Peter Mickelsson.*



Bohnstedt did not contribute was the rental apartment block of the "Grynderzeit", the property development era.

Industrialisation brought new construction materials and methods: iron and glass, mechanically pressed bricks and eventually concrete, which was initially used for eg artificial stones cast into decorative forms. Buildings designed by Bohnstedt are usually examples of solid stone construction based on brick masonry and plastering or natural stone. He did not, however, shun innovations: some of his designs and writings reflect his interest in iron and glass architecture.

The St Petersburg era Bohnstedt can, as a master of Neo-Baroque, be compared to Andrei

Stakenschneider, the transcendent stylistic virtuoso of the era, or the architect of the German Church in Helsinki, Harald Bosse, who was influenced by the Berlin school of architecture. In terms of their importance, Bohnstedt's designs fall among the wide group of buildings that, even if slightly overshadowed by major works, complete the picture of 19th century architecture.

*Entrance hall of the Bank of Finland head office, 1934.*  
© Bank of Finland





## ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS OF KEY IMPORTANCE IN BOHNSTEDT'S CAREER

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In his career as an architect, Bohnstedt specialised in international architectural competitions. Already during his years in St Petersburg he entered over 20 international competitions. Of his design proposals, at least four were awarded or purchased. Bohnstedt also submitted six proposed designs in St Petersburg and a number of design proposals elsewhere in Russia. During his Gotha years, he received at least eight prizes in the 17 international competitions he entered. He entered almost all the major competitions of the era, including those for designing some of the most famous buildings in 19th-century Europe, eg the Hamburg City Hall and the monument for Victor Emmanuel II

in Rome. Of Bohnstedt's design proposals during his time in Gotha, the designs for a pilgrimage church in Portugal and for the Bank of Finland's head office in Helsinki were completed.

The competitions also opened up a connection to Finland. To the design competition for the Bank of Finland, Bohnstedt submitted two proposals, one of which was awarded first prize. In addition, the rights to Bohnstedt's proposal were reserved in the competition to design the Helsinki Surgical Hospital in 1877–1878. The final designs were drawn up by Frans Anatolius Sjöström, adapting the solutions in the proposals that had been awarded and purchased. The layout of the hospital's main pavilion was based partly on

Bohnstedt's proposal, meaning he contributed to the architecture of this historically significant hospital. Bohnstedt also participated – unsuccessfully – in the competition to design the Ateneum Art Museum (the national gallery of Finland) in 1882.

Bohnstedt's success in competitions cannot be explained only by his active participation. The key to his success was the fine presentation of his drawings combined with very rational room plans.

Bohnstedt's biggest triumph was 1st prize in the competition to design the German Reichstag in 1872. Over 100 proposals were submitted. Bohnstedt's entry was a major project, consisting of 15 large drawings. When Bohnstedt





was announced the winner, the people in Gotha honoured him with a torchlight procession and the press celebrated him as the number one master builder in the country, and even the greatest living architect.

The style of Bohnstedt's proposal was described as 'Römische Renaissance im Freier Auffassung', ie Roman Renaissance freely interpreted. The dominant motif of the Reichstag building was the huge arched portal in the centre piece of the main facade. It was interpreted as open, inviting, a metaphor of democracy and the antipode of a closed, giant administrative building. The interior consisted of a well-functioning network of corridors, instead of rows of halls. The proposal earned Bohnstedt an unprecedented reputation, and

other architects imitated the main features of his design in subsequent competitions.

The triumph turned, however, into tragedy. The project for the Reichstag building was postponed, and finally, in 1882, a new competition was held, in which Bohnstedt was not successful. A new, heavier style prevailed. A second blow to Bohnstedt was the fire at the German Theatre in Riga. Around the same time, a large project for the construction of a castle in the Ukraine was cancelled, as the developer went bankrupt. In 1883, Bohnstedt suffered a stroke, but he kept on designing until the end of his life. He finally died in 1885, in a state of mental derangement ('im Geistiger Umnachtung').

In peer reviews, Bohnstedt was described as the last and major

representative of 19th-century architecture considered important for Germany as a whole. The reviews also included a hint of criticism towards the apparent ease of working evident in Bohnstedt's designs. It has been argued that quick success led Bohnstedt to ingenious superficiality. Presenting architecture in the form of impressive drawings, ie plans, was for Bohnstedt apparently more important than the construction of the buildings. For example, in order to stand out, Bohnstedt presented as many as 68 drawings at the 1862 London Exhibition. On the other hand, Finns remember that, despite numerous requests, Bohnstedt did not bother to come to Finland to supervise construction of the Bank of Finland's head office.





## BOHNSTEDT, ARCHITECT OF THE BANK OF FINLAND'S HEAD OFFICE

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The Bank of Finland was established in Turku in 1811 and moved to Helsinki in the autumn of 1819. Its first temporary location was the house of merchant Johan Sederholm, at the south-east corner of Senate Square. The Bank operated for nearly six decades in the southern wing of the House of the Senate (now the Government Palace). This was a natural location, as it was a monetary institution operating under the Senate. The Bank of Finland's administrative status was changed in 1868 when it was placed under the Diet, and the plan for a special building to house it became topical.

The first designs for the new Bank of Finland head office were drawn up in 1872 by Hampus

Dalström, chief architect at the Board of Public Buildings. As stated by Hugo E Pipping in the historical review of the Bank of Finland, Dalström was sent abroad, eg to Copenhagen to study the building of the Danish central bank (Nationalbanken) that had been completed earlier. This building, designed by architect J D Herholdt, and at the time representing state-of-the art bank architecture, has since been demolished. In his design, Dalström had clearly adapted some of Herholdt's solutions, although within the scope of a smaller construction programme. Based on these solutions, Dalström drew up the first outlines of the room layout of the future building.

Dalström's designs did not, however, please the Parliamentary Governors of the Bank. This was the period when the first private architects were emerging alongside civil servant architects. Dalström's design was discarded when the decision was taken to arrange an international architectural competition to design the Bank's head office, the first such competition in Finland. The competition prospectus was also sent abroad with the help of the Bank's network of contacts.

The competition prospectus laid down several requirements for the building. The main facade should face Nikolainkatu (now Snellmaninkatu). The building material was defined with fire safety in mind, and thus only stone and iron were allowed as building





materials, except for the floors and doors. The vaults also had to be fireproof. Also for the sake of fire safety, heating had to be conveyed to the bank building from a separate annex. The room layout was also strictly specified.

By the closing date of 1 September 1876, nine proposals had been submitted to the Bank of Finland's secretariat. The members of the jury included two Finnish architects: Frans Anatolius Sjöström, a private architect and a leading teacher of architecture, and Ludvig Lindqvist from the Board of Public Buildings. The international member of the jury was F G Dahl, an architect from Stockholm whose designs included the National Library of Sweden.

Two prizes were awarded. The first prize, of FIM 5,000, was awarded to Ludwig Bohnstedt. The second prize, of FIM 2,500 was awarded to F O Lindström, an architect from Stockholm. There is no official information on the other entrants, because the names of the participants were kept in sealed envelopes and only those of the winners were opened. The second-placed Lindström later became the head architect of the Swedish city of Umeå and designed the most important public buildings in the city. The Bank of Finland's archive of drawings includes a series of drawings intriguingly signed 'Philibert'. These are Lindström's competition proposal for which he was awarded second prize, and

'Philibert' was his pseudonym in the competition.

Bohnstedt had acquired experience in Gotha in designing bank buildings and in developing the building type. His proposal for the Bank of Finland head office includes similar features to those in other bank buildings designed by him and only recently completed. For example, the two-storey buildings had a clear, almost cubic form, slightly protruding wings, rustic facades and Roman arches. All these solutions are typical of the era.

Bohnstedt was at the height of his career when he won the competition. Having an internationally known architect to design a building in Helsinki was greeted with enthusiasm.



Bohnstedt's implementation drawings are an example of his elegant way of presenting drawings. The facades have grandeur, although lacking in individuality. In the interior, one is struck by the magnificent spatial progression leading from the ground floor entrance hall to the monumental staircase that dominates the entire spatial composition – as in so many 19th-century public buildings – and onwards to the halls on the main floor.

In the elevations, attention is caught by the wealth of ornamentation and arrangement of walls and ceilings, adhering to the controlled elements of Classicism. The building is a typical example of a stone building designed by

Bohnstedt, ie solid and quite traditional. It is based mainly on brick masonry and arching covered with stucco. The innovation of the era, ie iron construction, was, however, adapted extensively in the supporting structures. In detail drawings, attention is drawn to the abundant use of iron bars and bricked arching in the supporting structures of the interior roofs. The aim was to achieve reliable fire protection, which was particularly important for a bank building. This increased the costs, but, in the view of the Bank's senior management's, the building's fire safety was so good that it was unnecessary to take out fire insurance.

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Photo: Peter Mickelsson.







## CONSTRUCTION OF THE HEAD OFFICE

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Construction of the Bank of Finland head office began in 1878, on a site on Tallinmäki in Kruununka. The site, located on Nikolainkatu, had been purchased by the Bank in 1875, for approximately FIM 16,500.

The cornerstone of the building was laid on 13 May 1879. The chairman of the Parliamentary Governors, Robert Montgomery, gave a speech, and in the corner stone, a tin box was hidden, containing 10 and 20 markkaa gold coins, 1 and 2 markkaa silver coins and a roll of parchment describing the founding of the Bank of Finland.

In the execution phase of the project, conflicts arose. The Board of Public Buildings even refused to approve the original drawings. In

a letter to the Emperor, the Board doubted the strength and fire resistance of the building and its ability to protect against burglary. It is noteworthy that the head of the Board was Hampus Dalström, the same architect whose designs for the building had been rejected. Bohnstedt stayed in Gotha and mailed all the drawings required in the execution phase, refusing to travel to Helsinki. Architect F A Sjöström was hired to supervise execution. He criticised Bohnstedt's designs bitterly, as witnessed by the letters found in the Bank's archives. He points out, for example, that the height of a room could vary in different drawings.

The building structures and the technical outfitting of the building were executed mainly by Finnish

experts. Construction was supervised by chief engineer Ossian Bergbom, and the technical equipment was designed and supplied by engineer Gustaf Emil Berggren. Both men apparently also contributed to the roof structures and other constructional details.

The building was completed in 1883, final construction costs amounting to approximately FIM 1.1 million.



© Bank of Finland.  
Photo: Peter Mickelsson.

## LATER PHASES IN THE LIFE OF THE HEAD OFFICE

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In the 1890s, Gustaf Nyström became the regular architect for the Bank of Finland. Over the years, he designed a number of branches in various towns around the country, and he had a considerable impact on the architecture of the head office. First, he modernised the courtyard building, mainly for the purpose of banknote printing. The building has since been demolished. In accordance with a plan drawn up in 1898 and 1900, the small courtyards of the building were closed off and the downstairs was provided with a new American-style safe vault. When the roof slabs were reinforced with concrete structures, an even more spacious arrangement was created on the upper floor. Over the main area

for serving members of the public, a glass roof was constructed. In several of his other designs, Bohnstedt, too, had shown an interest in experimenting with a glass roof. Diagram drawings and cost data on the building elements reveal, however, that the glass roof, at the time so important and characteristic of the interior of the building, was a redesign by Nyström.

Upon Nyström's death, architect W G Palmqvist inherited several assignments and designed the next major renovation and extension project on the head office; the drawings are dated 1922. The facades of Palmqvist's extensions (wings) complemented Bohnstedt's building quite harmoniously. The wings were, however, discarded in

the next major renovation. Armas Lindgren also participated in designing the furnishings in the 1920s.

The head office was damaged by bombing in 1944. Marks of the splinters are still evident on the pedestal of the statue of J W Snellman, located in front of the building. The distinguishing glass roof was also destroyed in the bombings and was replaced with a solid roof.

In the early 1960s, the building was completely renovated and a considerably larger extension constructed on the west side by architect Harry W Schreck. The head office was turned into a large, functional public office building. The facade on Snellmaninkatu was restored, but the interiors





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*Ravages of the 1944 bombings.*  
© Bank of Finland.  
*Photo: Fred Runeberg.*

experienced major changes in this complete overhaul, including the surface materials, an example of which are the new, demanding marble tiles.

A detailed restoration of Bohnstedt's building would be impossible after all the changes. During the latest restoration, completed in 2006, part of the transparency and spaciousness in Bohnstedt's and Nyström's designs was re-established in the main layout of the old part of the building. The restoration design was prepared under Matti Nurmela.

Even after all the changes to the head office, one can still experience the architectural designs of Ludwig Bohnstedt. The overall volume of the building and

the facades along the front square on Snellmaninkatu still dominate. In the interior, the grand entrance hall and its wall placement, typical of Bohnstedt – particularly the monumental main staircase and some of the spaces on the upper, ie main floor, showing the imprint of both Bohnstedt and Nyström – can still be experienced. The ornaments include the letters L B, effectively the architect's signature.

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