

## Teboil Service Station — Architecture Beyond Philosophical Ideas

Mikko Heikkinen and Markku Komonen

Text by Mikko Heikkinen

*No matter how wild we think our inventions might be, they can never match the unpredictability of what the real world continually spews forth. This lesson seems inescapable to me now. Anything can happen. And one way or another, it always does.*

—Paul Auster *Leviathan*

We knew that there could be trouble at the border. Ten minutes driving east from Hamina, the last town before Russia, we saw the end of the line. Simo has read from the morning papers that the Russian frontier guard has introduced a new form for trucks, messing up all traffic traveling east. Now the line seems to have reached its third mile. Some drivers have already been trapped here for more than 24 hours—there is no chance to turn around with a 60 foot truck and trailer. The only way for us to proceed is to take the left lane and drive safe hoping the oncoming cars do the same. Just before the border zone we make a sharp right turn through the queue to find the vast tank shining deep blue against a white dim sky and high snows.

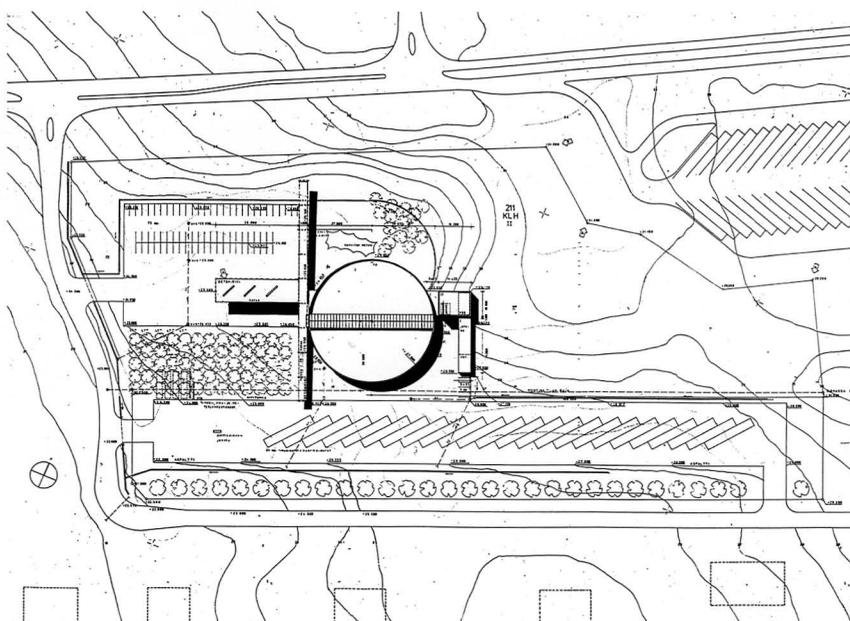
It was a more than a year ago when Mattila and Saarikko agreed with us on all the basic issues. Teboil oil company was very concerned about the arbitrary image of the firm, and fighting for their market share, architecture was to enter the scene. We were given free hands; no design manuals with which to comply were suggested. The timing could not

have been better for us to challenge this main stream of highway architecture: pump stations looking like kindergartens outside and love-boats inside.

We had made an appointment with Mattila at his office before entering the Teboil headquarters next building. He had hardly been able to cover his nervousness on the telephone, “There’s serious problems in the project and the vice-president would like to ask some questions.” At the executive lobby two more deputy chiefs join us. After five minutes silent waiting with dry coughs, a lady with a motherly smile shows us in. Guri Petrunin does not speak Finnish and feels uncomfortable with English so the secretary starts translating in Russian. We honor each other with presents; the two-way interpretation makes the situation look like a formal diplomatic maneuver. The table is hardly big enough to serve two, overloaded by coffee cups, pastries and napkins. We unfold the drawings desperately avoiding to demolish the setting and start to point out some of the main issues of the project. The secretary begins to translate smiling so innocently that I doubt she did not get it all. My eyes start wandering through the room and just when I find a photo of Jeltchin looking grimly to me from the wall of the vice-president, Petrunin wakes me up. “This is very interesting, very interesting...the blue, we have the same word in Russian for the blue as you have!”



*The Russia-Finland Border*



*Site Plan*



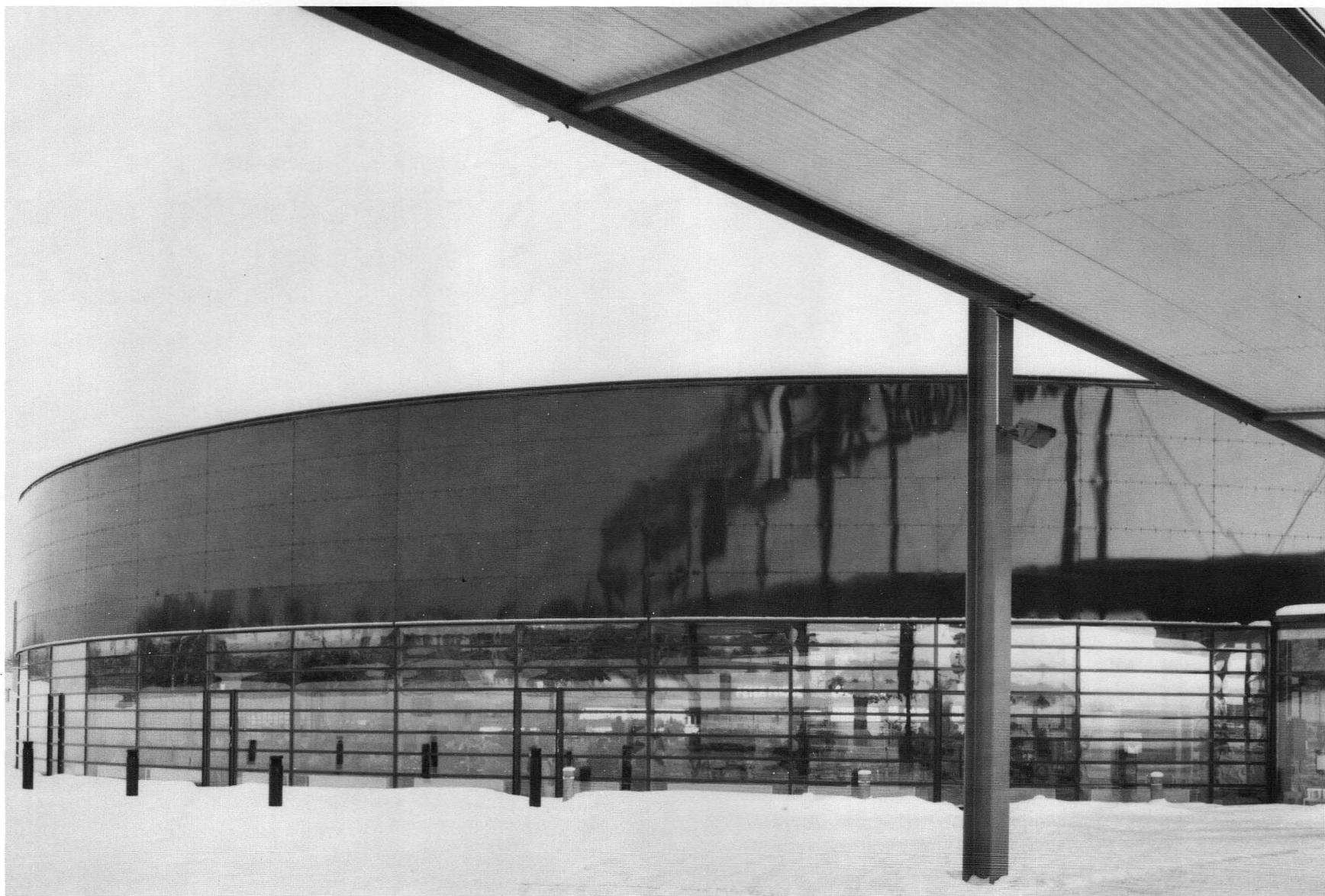
*Perspective Seen from Russia*

A few days later Mattila phones and suggests that the marketing squad will be satisfied with a slightly slimmer band. Could we compromise with that? But the signs and parking spaces painted on the asphalt should absolutely be white or yellow, as they have always been. We insist to keep our approach: it's not only a question about the building itself but total landscape created by the geometry of the traffic areas and greens, by the graphics of the signs and billboards. He reluctantly promises to discuss the case with the vice-president—he alone can't take the responsibility. After a week's investigation we got the final verdict: neither blue nor orange stripes will be allowed on the asphalt.

Mattila, Saarikko and a sales engineer from the advertisement firm enter our

office to show the drawings of a new standard sign tower to be erected in front of the building. We remind them that the project already implies a 300 foot long and 30 foot high steel structure to contain all this information; the whole thing was to integrate the graphics into architecture. Finally we compromise by cutting the mast 10 feet shorter.

Little by little we were listed out from the site-meetings. Afraid of losing control of the building process, something had to be done. To appeal to the sergeants for sympathy would not help, so we decided to report to the presidential level. A delicate letter with precision and politeness was written, translated into Russian by a pianist who had been studying in Leningrad for many years,



and finally typed in Cyrillic alphabets—a font surprisingly hard to find in Helsinki. The reply was correctly praising, noting our ‘interest’ in the project, but that interest was not supposed to create any expenses to them.

20 The service station was to be opened within a few weeks. On the supermarket

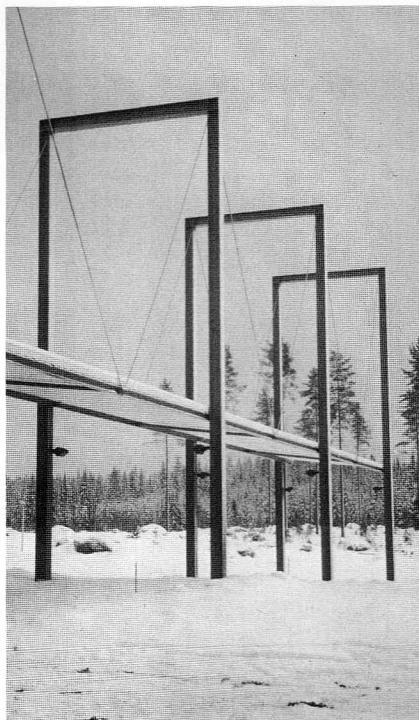
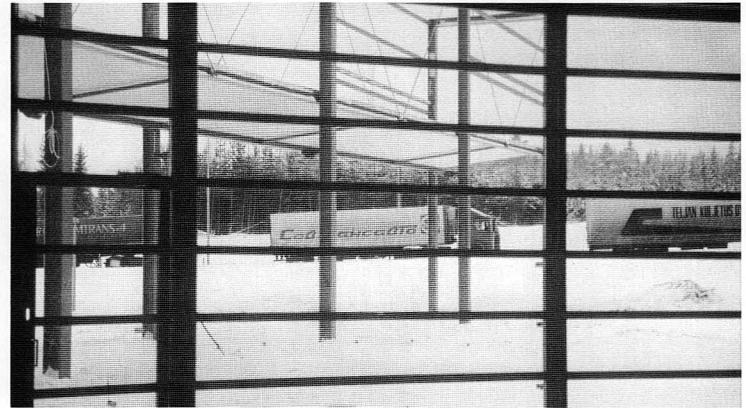
side of the glass-roofed gallery, the first freezers were ready to be installed. The site manager could not feed our curiosity to tell about furnishings and colors. Outside there was a movable lift with three guys mounting lights for the Teboil-band above the filling area. It looked just like the last option we told them to do. Reijo Vuorela, who will run the super-

market invites us to have lunch at his present depot—doomed to be taken down because of new zoning arrangements.

Business is sky-rocketing here; the traffic seems to have no limits. Five years ago the border was practically closed from the east, and the cargo was formally controlled by bilateral long-term contracts.

Now the day-to-day supplies for the 5-million citizens of St. Petersburg roam this road. To get a visa is only a matter of time and money. Hard currency is expensive for the eastern tourists, but you can always sell liquor—and price differences make it very profitable. The black market is well organized; stocks are hidden in plastic bags in the nearby forests on the





Finnish side of the border. Many seem to make their living by this in both countries. At the same time, the sales at the Finnish owned liquor stores have collapsed everywhere in the eastern provinces.

Reijo has papered the entrance wall with photos taken of 'celebrities' who have visited the station. Now he insists to

have us in his collection. First put on a stylish cap promoting 'Aimo-annos,' then say 'cheese' and you are a part of the history. And then on the road back to Helsinki, the oncoming endless line of trucks leave again only one lane for traffic. The Russian Ladas do not seem to care about us, and soon we learn to give way by driving on the shoulders. The

queue has hardly moved during the day. There are freighters from all parts of Europe, many firms grouping several trucks together making the travel safer. The drivers kill time reading porn mags, eating burgers and playing cards. They can't leave their engine for a long time. You never know if the new form which has been causing all this is suddenly can-

celed and the traffic will be free to go. But you can see that they do not care. Anything could happen here, and one way or another, it always does.

Architects: Heikkinen and Komonen  
 Project Architect: Simo Freese  
 Photos: Simo Freese, Mikko Heikkinen, Voitto Niemelä, Reijo Vuorela

