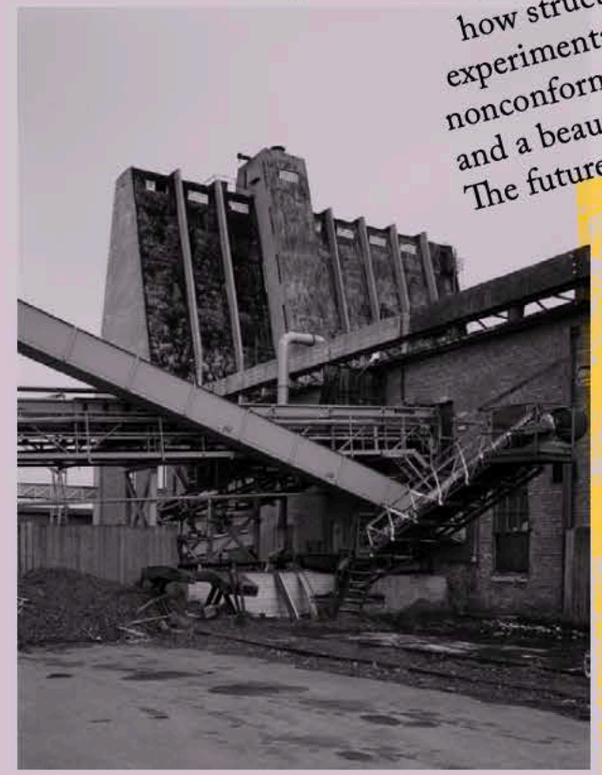
Charlotte Skene Catling

Rebel With A Cause

In conversation with Sukie Smith

Charlotte Skene Catling is a multi-award-winning architect. Her innovative and unconventional approach to all things has rewarded her with an extraordinary life. We speak together at The Academy Club, established in Lexington Street (Soho, London) by our dear friends Andrew Edmunds (1943-2022) and Mandana Ruane, and discuss extracting buildings from the geology of the land, of adventure, coincidence, legacy, and how structure facilitates chaos and experimentation. Charlotte is a rebel, a nonconformist with a wild punk spirit, and a beautiful and brilliant storyteller. The future is safe in her hands.



AALTOSIILO Photograph by Raimo Ahonen
Courtesy Charlotte Skene Catling

Sukie Smith As a child what did you think the future might be like?

Charlotte Skene Catling When I was a child, I lived a funny sort of split life between Ireland, which is like going back in time a hundred years, and New York, which felt like the future, but a dystopian, crumbly, messy one. I was somewhere between the two, the deep past and a kind of fantasy of the future.

I like being in the present. I'm just thinking, I've always been a bit obsessed with geology and rocks, which probably started in Ireland, where my brother and I spent half our lives in rock pools. There's something very compelling about looking into these pools, each like a jewel – a perfect universe where you don't really have to think about anything else, just catching shrimp with your hands. It's very immediate.

But geology brings you into deep time, a deep past, beyond what's even imaginable. And funnily enough, I've just been reading about how the concept of deep time was discovered in Scotland by James Hutton in the 18th century. Through the extraordinary rocks of Scotland. Before that, there was only the Biblical concept of time... Geology was blasphemous.

SS How do you decide what to explore and what draws you to certain places?

CSC With architecture, with a commission, you're dropped into a particular location, which is interesting because you don't know where it's going to be and what it might reveal. Then it becomes like a weird detective game, where you're looking for clues and trying to find things that might trigger some kind of response.

I need to find something exciting that I can then articulate or express in a different form, it becomes a dialogue, and other things emerge from this.

I mean, now we're working on the island of Islay in the Inner Hebrides. According to the man who lives there, it's one of the most remote places in the world - it can only be reached by boat. It triggers a sort of ripple of thoughts and associations. It's a site at the base of a 19th century, still functioning lighthouse designed by a family called the 'Lighthouse Stevensons'. They were extraordinary, completely obsessive, generations of civil engineers who specialised in designing lighthouses in extreme environments. They built them all over Scotland, apparently saving thousands of lives. This lighthouse, Rhuvaal, was built by two brothers who I think were the third generation. One had an only son and wanted him to become a lighthouse designer, but he refused. He wanted to write instead. He changed his middle name from the Scottish 'Lewis' to the more exotic 'Louis' and became Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Treasure Island, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped*. He was very proud of his family of engineers, and wild seascapes and shipwrecks feature pretty largely in his stories.

AALTOSIILO Courtesy Charlotte Skene Catling

SS Do you think about legacy at all when you are thinking about your work? Making structures for the future.

CSC I don't consciously think about that, but it's interesting. I've always felt so transient. We moved around so much as I was growing up, like gypsies. Architecture is rooted to a particular place: the place is the source of inspiration. With architecture, you can either conceptualise and come up with a universal approach or you respond very specifically to a site. In the latter case, you have to be attached to a place for a period, and you're 'grounded', anchored. The location controls you to some extent. I have searched to do something that has meaning, and I did abandon architecture for a while when I couldn't see how to use it as the right medium. Something that might address the problems we face or make people's lives in some way better, even if only through making something beautiful. There's a sense of legacy in my approach to making, energy and materials. This is clearest and most conscious in the silo project, which is directly focused on the environment, connecting people, and transforming its context.

SS Are you an architect because of this early transience?

CSC I think it's absolutely related. I thought at some point that if I wanted a home, I'd have to learn how to build one myself! Just the study of architecture takes seven years. I started with medicine and changed because architecture took even longer. So, I could sort of have structure in my life. But rarely actually went to school. You know, it was the sort of abstract structure that we wish for — a weird scaffolding in my life. I hardly went in at all. I was with Malcolm [McLaren] at that point, travelling a lot. It was thrilling and mad, and I learnt a lot from him about seeing the world in a different way and working outside the system. On reflection, that period was the complete opposite of stability and structure.

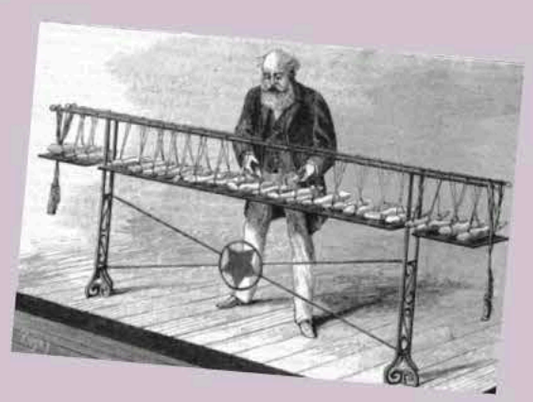
For the Masters' course, we were asked to do a project on Social Housing. I remember in response proposing to design 'Anti-Social Housing', using the Stanislavski Method, but applied to architecture: 'Method Architecture'. This way, I could justify not speaking to anyone in the school for two years, haha.

SS Do you think about the spirits in the buildings?

CSC A building is like a character with a creature's presence. I can't imagine my life without this one being here [45 Lexington Street, home of the Academy Club and where Charlotte now has her offices]. This room is where I met Adam; we married a year later. It was the most wonderful surprise, not what I would have ever imagined from this building... with what's now known as 'the cupid chair' in the corner. It's all alive...

SS How do you feel about the buildings you've created? For example, are you in conflict with them? Or are you in love with them?

CSC I love them for different reasons, but I don't always enjoy returning to them. They become monuments to certain periods of life, with many memories and associations. They are resonant. Like a diary that can be walked through. Theatres of memory. Some memories are happy, others not so much. Like all lives, I suppose. It's an odd process. I often dream of buildings, very often versions of places I've lived. These are recurring dreams, but where I discover rooms and spaces that were never there. These hidden spaces are often much bigger than the original. I suppose it could be some Jungian metaphor for the imagination. I remember a very visceral dream where I flew through Lexington Street. The feeling of my feet sliding over the stairs until there was no contact and I could float, then swim through the air. With a breaststroke. I loved the sensation.



ABOVE: *Flint House* Photograph by James Morris
BELOW: *Baudre-silex-piano* Courtesy Charlotte Skene Catling

SS How do you imagine what you are going to build?

CSC I think I start with stories and connections. And places do resonate in some strange way. I find so much architecture is clinical and unimpressive, abstract in the most boring way. Much is like this because of the way architecture is produced and organised. As a process, it's become very litigious. And it's expensive. Some architects are really negotiating a legal process through building. The result can end up feeling like inhabiting a spreadsheet and the contract. You know, it feels that you're in this rather miserable dry, soulless space... Architecture as a profession doesn't interest me, architecture as a process does. I like architecture because nothing is irrelevant. It can encompass anything and everything.

SS Do you research the area for a long time before you start even thinking about the structure?

CSC You can fall down rabbit holes, for example, lighthouses: you suddenly discover this strange world, imagining how people lived at that time, a life of extreme isolation and dazzling Fresnel lenses, rotating machines, wild oceans. The all-seeing eye, what lighthouses represent symbolically. Why do they appear on Tarot cards? You can go off in a million different directions. And then there's the geology of this particular place on Islay, which is so dramatic.

SS Actually, there are geological links with a huge number of your projects, aren't there?

CSC Yeah, I mean the Flint House is like a geological extrusion.

SS What is Flint exactly?

CSC Flint is a crypto-crystalline quartz made of organic matter. Created by the sea rising and falling over billions of years. It only appears in chalk. There's a chalk faultline that runs all the way from Norfolk, through Oxfordshire, down to the South coast and South Downs. This is the only place in the country where flint appears. It's an amazing Neolithic material that connects Grimes Graves, the stone age flint mines with a landscape like the surface of the moon, all the way through to The Needles, vertical shards of chalk in the sea off the South coast... so evocative of time.

SS And so sonic, the stones can resonate so beautifully if you strike them.

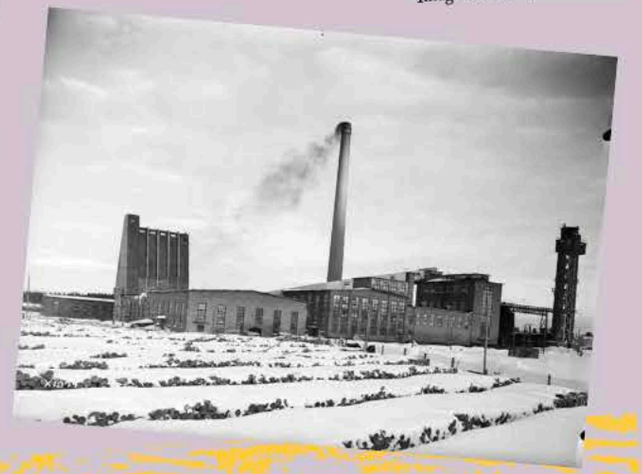
CSC Did you know there was a man in France called Honoré Baudre who created a Flint Piano in the 19th century? It was called the 'Silex Piano' – silex is flint in French. Apparently, he nearly went mad searching for over 30 years for the stone that would produce the perfect A sharp!

SS I am so glad to know that!

CSC Finding the people to turn thoughts into reality is the real challenge. You know, it's one thing to come up with these completely insane ideas and to convince people they should spend lots of money realising them, but then it's, 'oh fuck, who's actually going to make it?!'

Large flint buildings hadn't been made for hundreds of years, so I had to find someone who knew enough about the material to build on that scale. Eventually I found David Smith, aka 'The Flint Man'. He normally restores historic buildings. He got very excited about using flint in a way it hadn't been before. He put together an incredible team, including the flint master, John Lord. John is now in his 80s, and he's been working with flint since he was twelve. Everything is done with sound, listening to the rock, which tells him exactly where to break it. He says he still gets as excited now as when he was a boy each time he opens a flintstone and finds fossils millions of years old. You can find beautiful sea urchins, and strange underwater stuff, in chalk made from billions of tiny skeletons.

ABOVE: Toppila Pulp Mill in Oulu
BELOW: Alvar Aalto, Oulu
Images Courtesy Charlotte Skene Catling



SS Has anyone ever read your fortune? Looked into your future?

CSC In Ireland, OF COURSE!
There we believe in everything, fairies, and spirits. It's funny being in Finland now because there, and in Iceland, there are some aspects to their characters that are very like the Irish. In Iceland, roads are rerouted around rocks because they're thought to belong to the fairies. Architecture and urbanism have a 4th dimension in the spiritual realm...

SS The past becomes the future in a very real way, I guess.

CSC Yes, but construction is ironically one of the most destructive things in the world.

SS Tell me about this Finnish project.

CSC This project in Finland, just below the Arctic Circle, came about during lockdown. Adam and I were in a Seville where the temperature had reached 50 degrees. I can't bear the heat. I was in the hotel with the air conditioning pouring over me and was wandering around the internet. There's an Instagram post I look at called the 'Brutalism Appreciation Society'. On it, there was a notice announcing that Alvar Aaltos' first industrial building was up for auction.

Alvar Aalto is amazing. He was one of the great 20th-century architects; the humanist modernist. Very interesting. He worked with his wife, Aino, who was also an architect. And they were Finns. It was so odd that this building was for auction. I Googled 'Alvar Aalto auction' and was directed to sites selling some of the great furniture that he and Aino had designed; New York auction houses selling a door handle for £ 80,000, or a chair or light fitting for 100,000. And then, finally, I found this weird little auction site that sells all the things you need if you live in the north of Finland, like snow chains for your car tires, or outboard motors, or fishhooks or rubber boots. And among all this, there was Alto's first industrial building, right on the edge of the Arctic Circle. The price listed was 6,000 euros.

SS You got it??

CSC Adam came back, and I said, 'It's fucking hot out there, isn't it?' I was now dreaming of snow and ice. 'How about the Arctic Circle...?' Bids had to be in increments of 250 euros. We thought it would be funny to make a bid, almost as a way to cool down. We didn't really think about it after that. But a couple of months later, for 6,251 euros, we became the proud owners of this completely insane building. So then we had to think what to do with it.

SS The Arctic Circle is almost without time, isn't it?

CSC In fact, it's changing really fast. If you think about the future of the planet, this is the frontline. The land is rising nearly a centimetre a year through 'post-glacial rebound': as the glaciers melt, their weight lifts, and the land rises. Oulu is rising at pretty much the same rate as Venice is sinking.

The 20th century was all about consumption, industry, and toxic processes. Resources seemed infinite. The land was raped. Finland at the beginning of the 20th century was as poor as Namibia, but with no natural resources except trees. The Silo was part of a factory commissioned by an English company to make cellulose pulp. Thousands of trees

were delivered by water, stripped of their bark, chipped, then the woodchips were dissolved in sulphuric acid to break them down into cellulose. This was 1931. We're taking this information and trying to turn the whole narrative around.

SS The building only processed the trees didn't it, no paper making. What was left in there?

CSC It was a silo used for storing woodchips. At the turn of the 19th century, modernist architects became obsessed with the huge grain silos built in Buffalo, New York. Architects like Bruno Taut, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius all published pictures and wrote about them. Erich Mendelsohn was the only one to actually visit them. The silos were such radically different forms; no one had seen anything like them. They were vast and completely inhuman. No windows. Pure function, no decoration, impossible to categorise, no style. It was this complete break from the past that became the beginning of modernism. Silos were also the beginning of the futures market: for the first time, it was possible to store grain and release it when you chose, which meant you could control the markets. Capitalism encapsulated in a building form. The AaltoSiilo is a Nordic version, more like a mad expressionist cathedral, 28 meters high and 30 meters long, made of 10 cm thick concrete.

The world-famous *Screaming Men choir of Oulu*
© Factum Foundation

SS How long has it been abandoned?

CSC Since the 1980s. Last September, we did our first performance in the Silo. A Finnish group called 'Transistori' played the entire building like a musical instrument. We're about to do another with an incredible group of people called 'The Screaming Men', an aggressive acapella choir run by conceptual artist Petri Servio, a punk really, who worked in the Silo when he was 17. As did his father and grandfather. Called *SCREAMING DUENDE*, the event will be the meeting between The Screaming Men and a radical Sevillian flamenco master, Israel Galván. So, Seville ends up in the Arctic Circle.

SS The connection of it all is really extraordinary.

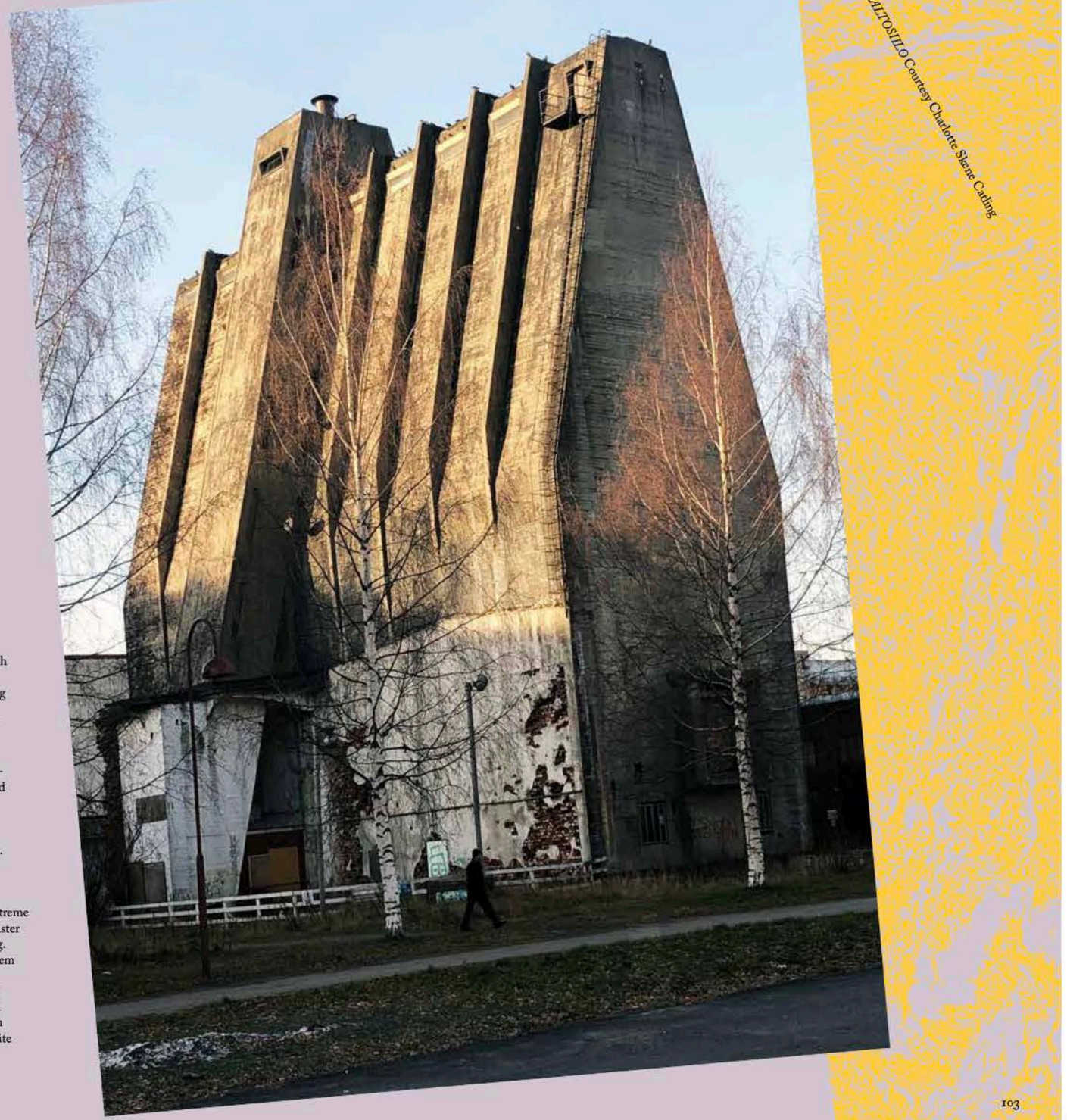
CSC The Silo is in a place called Oulu, which was founded in the 16th century. It was famous for making the pine tar that was used to waterproof the British boats that sailed off to conquer the colonies. It made some people there very rich... the 'Tar Bourgeois', as they were known. But then Oulu became a huge 'tech-y' place because Nokia is based there, and it's dark all winter. It's the biggest 'living lab' in the world. Lots of gamers and gaming innovation. Now cellulose is being used again, as nanocellulose, in 5- and 6-G technologies. It's come full circle.

We're trying to use the reinvention of the Silo to completely transform the area. The Silo is in a part of Oulu called Meri Toppila, full of students and refugees. Amazingly, for such a tiny place, there are over a hundred different nationalities living there. It's an interesting and uniquely weird community.

Over a thousand people came to the first performance we staged. Now we've begun the transformation of the Silo into a performance, exhibition and event space, with a 'Tar Bar' on the roof, and we're building a Research Centre focused on the environment next to it using large pieces of recycled concrete. The first phase of that building will be a public sauna and amphitheatre. We're working with an amazing Italian-Argentinian guy called Valentino Tignanelli. He moved to Oulo to study architecture, inspired by a film-maker who lived there. When he read that we'd bought the Silo, he got in touch and 'informed' us that he was working with us on our project, completely mad, but yes!

SS Who is the film-maker that compelled Valentino to move there?

CSC Peter von Bagh. He also set up the Midnight Sun Film Festival in Lapland, a project almost more extreme than ours. He was a master of films and filmmaking. He wrote a lot about them too, but in Finnish. He made a film about Oulu called, *Remembrance* – A Small Movie about Oulu in the 1950s. And it's quite compelling.



AALTOSIILO Courtesy Charlotte Skene Catling

Section of AALTOSIILO by Skene Catling de la Peña

My grandmother was Swedish. It's funny. After buying the building, so many weird coincidences followed, one after another. For instance, we were contacted by a film-maker called Tapio Snellman. I had worked with Tapio in England, he made a film about The Flint House for the Architectural Review Magazine. We also showed some of his work at a film festival I set up in 2017 with a Chilean friend: The Arch Film Festival, London. It turned out that Tapio was Finnish (I hadn't known), he was obsessed with industrial ruins (I didn't know that) and it turned out that he was going to Oulu the following week (I couldn't have known that). This became the beginning of a documentary he's now making about the AaltoSiilo.

Architecture and film have an interesting relationship. Setting up the Arch Film Fest seemed important as it addresses how architects seem to have lost the ability to tell a story through architecture. Great buildings have a narrative to the way they're used, in the way you move through them, which includes the events that take place within them. There are so many similarities between the disciplines. They almost all involve 'place' used to create mood and atmosphere. Then there's scale, their collaborative nature, cost, the length of time they take to make, the software used to describe and generate imaginary spaces... But film-makers – good ones at least - know how to tell a story. Architects seem to have forgotten.

There were so many other coincidences. The most absurd was when I let my Swedish relatives know about the Silo. They told me that for several generations, part of the family lived in Turku. I thought, my God, this is ridiculous, am I now Finnish?

SS What do you think that is about? Do you think that the fact that you were moving all the time when you were younger has something to do with it? Or do you think it's kind of punk? You have this amazing sense of adventure, as well as not just exploring, but kind of like making your mark somewhere.

CSC Nothing, nothing in my life has ever really been planned. It's sort of crashing from one mad adventure to another.

SS You're brave and have spirit.

CSC Well, if you're open to it...

SS As you had such a chaotic start to life you are unafraid of it ...you survived it.

CSC It's reassuring. Yeah. Just fear of what the opposite of that might be. So unfamiliar. You know, anything conventional is so unfamiliar that it feels rather scary.

SS It's structure that you make, it facilitates freedom and chaos, it's very generous.

CSC Contradiction and tension.
I think if that were to die, it would feel like the end.
But I'm optimistic, there's so much out there, so much that's strange and wild. And exciting.

We then speak more about the interior of the Silo, how the flow of humans through it will follow the path of the pine trees, how it will take us up to the 'Tar Bar' serving whiskey and a drink flavoured with pine tar, and a viewing platform to look over the Bothnian Sea, about how the exterior of the new Research Lab will have a Frankenstein structure made from relics of buildings and contain a Cabinet of Curiosities of Factum projects (how very Laboratory) and, we speak more about the love of rocks, of meeting the man who weaves the tartans used by Vivienne Westwood who uses an ancient noisy loom housed in a tiny croft in the Hebrides... of more coincidences, and I leave dear Andrew Edmunds club, who also facilitated abandonment and wildness by creating the space, giddy from seeing the future via the past through this extraordinary human's eyes.