



Libraries through the lens

Kallio Library, Helsinki.

THOMAS Guignard looks at an image that feels contradictory to the reality of Helsinki's Kallio Library.

He says: "In many aspects, this image of the Kallio library in Helsinki is not a faithful representation of this institution. The building appears empty, but at the time of my visit in early 2019, it was teeming with life, with patrons browsing the shelves, reading newspapers in perfectly designed chairs; in the rotunda, several packed rows of chairs surrounded a small stage where an author was being interviewed by a moderator while on the mezzanine, all tables were occupied by hard at work students; teenagers slouched towards the young adult section under the gabled

roof and children were running up and down those stairs.

"Being mindful as always not to include children on my photos, I waited for a narrow gap in all this activity to take this image, falsely representing an empty library in the process."

It is not just the image that appears at odds with reality, as Thomas points out. "The nostalgia evoked by the lovely Art Nouveau design of the building, by architect Karl Hård af Segerstad is another false flag: this library has always been ahead of its time.

"When it was completed in 1912, the Kallio library was the very first purpose-built public library building in the country, and it sat at the heart of Helsin-

ki's working-class neighbourhood, open to all. As was the custom then, it initially operated under a closed shelf model. When the library was rebuilt following war damage in 1944, the shelves were opened to the public.

"In 2015, the Kallio library introduced its first Rainbow Shelf, a living collection dedicated to a broader representation of gender and racial minorities in fiction and nonfiction documents, graphic novels and movies for all age groups. By shining a spotlight on these materials, the library hoped to send a message that it was open for all, while making these documents easier to access. The concept was such a success that it has since been replicated across Finland."