

From Tampere to Seattle

By **Nina Dahlblom**

Amidst the soft glow of Seattle’s skyline, framed by the ample light flooding through the windows of Salla Eckhardt’s new home, a gentle presence leaps into her lap — Theo, the delightfully fluffy gentleman cat. Theo, it turns out, has a keen interest in dogs.

Sporting a shirt emblazoned with the slogan “Show me your kitties,” Salla proudly wears her allegiance to the cause. It’s the mantra of a local cat café, where funds are raised for the welfare of abandoned felines.

As we admire Salla’s abode, she effortlessly shares her story with the camera. In the background, the smooth jazz of Herbie Hancock’s “Triangle” sets the mood.

Grandfather’s Odyssey sparks the American dream

Let’s rewind to Salla’s childhood. Raised in a family that valued entrepreneurship and community engagement, Salla’s upbringing was one of encouragement and spirited discourse. Her mother ran her own speech therapy practice, aiding those who had lost their ability to speak and making waves in local politics. Salla, the youngest of a brood of siblings, describes her kin as more successful than herself. They tackled schoolwork, sports, and engaged in discussions about politics and business in a nurturing environment.

“My grandfather ventured to America in the past, working in logging and railroad construction,” Salla recalled. Her parents had lived in Florida, planting in their children a longing for international ventures. “Dad used to say, ‘America is the land of opportunity.’”

Reflecting on her choices, Salla candidly admits, “The only thing I regret to this day is giving up my green card. Don’t get married, move to America, and start a business.” Surrendering her green card had once delayed her move to the States. Salla’s mother had obtained the green card in 1998.

“My parents encouraged to seek opportunities abroad. ‘Educate yourself and leave!’ they’d say. Staying here isn’t an option,” Salla said. “But Finland hit a recession; thinking of starting a business was tough. I worked, recovered from illness. Still, I wouldn’t change a thing.

“Now I have citizenship. And a consultancy.”

Salla was referring to her U.S. citizenship and her newly established company, which advises real estate and construction firms on technology and innovation.

Salla laments the resurgence of a cold war mentality and the rise of nationalism. “But I don’t believe we’ll regress to a world where we’re distant from one another. I hope Finnish companies leverage my experience and see the added value in my dual citizenship. Innovation and international business collaboration is still much needed especially now in the current rapidly changing geopolitical and economic landscape.”

From diagnosis to dominance

So, how did Salla find herself immersed in construction innovations?

Like her siblings, Salla excelled in math at school. “I had a knack for visual arts, and history fascinated me. Especially architectural history, ancient ruins, and building traditions. It felt like a natural fit. I could shape, calculate, and draw.”

Upon graduating high school, Salla contemplated, “Business school would’ve been smart, but I guess I was allergic to accounting.”

Opting to study architecture, Salla delved into construction engineering. The entrance exams were a three-part ordeal. “My sister

persuaded me to apply to the Civil Engineering Department. I ended up at Lappeenranta University of Technology studying energy technology.

I was battling cancer when I applied to architecture school. I thought, let me in first, and then it’ll be easier to study what I want.”

Upon starting her studies, Salla visited the doctor. She was diagnosed with advanced-stage cancer of the digestive system. “That’s when the cancer treatments began. During hospital stays, the entrance exams for architecture school kept me going. While working on pre-tasks, I developed a severe infection. I was diagnosed with pneumonia and put on antibiotics in a hospital bed.”

The pre-tasks were due on a Monday. Negotiating with doctors from the isolation ward, Salla promised to take all medications. “Please, just let me take the entrance exams!” She made it to the exams and completed the mathematics and drawing tasks. And she got in!

Finally, Salla’s cancer treatments came to an end. The first-year post-treatment was a breeze. Salla worked and caught up with her classmates. She realized she wasn’t aiming to be a practicing architect. Different challenges beckoned. In 4-1/2 years, she amassed 260 ECTS credits. “I had enough credits for a Master of Science in Engineering, plus the architect’s studies. I guess the fear of ending up with just ‘High School Graduate’, or in Finnish ‘Ylioppilas’ on my tombstone drove me.”

From illness to innovation

However, Salla’s graduation was delayed when she was diagnosed with lung cancer. While battling that, she enrolled in a doctoral program.

At Tampere University of Technology, a virtual construction program was launched under the leadership of Professor Jarmo Laitinen.

“Jarmo was a bold visionary and hired me as a research assistant for the Senate Properties’ BIM research project, for which I wrote my master’s thesis,” she said.

Senate Properties is a Finnish unincorporated state-owned enterprise, which manages a major part of the real estate assets owned by the Republic of Finland. Building Information Modeling (BIM) is a digital representation of physical and functional characteristics of a facility. The current digital twin models of the building industry are developed based on the early BIM development.

Despite the recovery process, the research project was keeping Salla’s mind sharp. The professor encouraged Salla, “Take your time even if it feels difficult — no one has solved this before.” So she thought, ‘Alright, let’s do it.’ She managed to create a process description, and it succeeded.

“During the final report presentation for the BIM research project, I was asked whether it’s worth making the strategic decision to require BIM,” she said. “I confidently replied, ‘Yes.’ My master’s thesis brought nothing but profit to the client, and the digital construction industry flourished.

“Unfortunately, the architecture department didn’t approve my thesis; it fell under the purview of the building technology professor, despite being an architecture student.” Academic disputes didn’t slow Salla down; her master’s thesis has since been published by the architecture department. Salla’s thesis was awarded the best of the year and it showed the path of her career.

“I don’t have the need to trample others,”

The journey of a building innovator



Salla Eckhardt
photo by Riku Niemi

she said. “I realize that the rug can be pulled from under me anytime. Illness has brought humility. I recognize that I’m a strong personality; after all, I’ve been through a lot and achieved a lot in life. But while I push, I also pull others along.”

Salla’s life nowadays, she says, is peaceful. Besides long workdays, she eschews extreme sports, preferring to spend her free time indulging in gentle exercise and hobbies. The recurrence of cancer was a setback. “During the pandemic, there was talk of brain fog,” she explained. “If I occasionally forgot something, I quickly wondered whether it was due to Covid or cancer.”

Tampere, Silicon Valley of Finland

Salla worked at VTT, the Government Research Institute of Finland, and led the Tampere Smart City project. “Tampere is Finland’s Silicon Valley. Helsinki is the

economic hub, and Tampere is the most attractive city in Finland. It’s managed sensibly.”

In the late ‘70s, Salla lived in Leinola, in the eastern part of Tampere. Leinola was home to many entrepreneurial families, and Salla grew up surrounded by entrepreneurs. Inhabited since the 16th century, Leinola saw Finland’s first electric light at Finlayson. Salla is proud of her home city and the role it plays in Finland’s history. “All streets are named according to Kalevala, and Leinola also houses the statue of Marshal Mannerheim.”

In Tampere, the atmosphere is relaxed; the area developed alongside the iron-fist and paper industries. There, the Hervanta Technical Institute was established, a branch of the former Technical University, now Aalto University’s mechanical engineering unit. “I appreciate different perspectives and diversity. With Tampere’s

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forward-thinking leadership, I’ve made a difference in the digital construction industry” Salla, the Alumni of the Year 2023 of Tampere University promotes her home city.

The Green Card Jackpot secures American Dream

“I participated in the Green Card Lottery in the fall of 2013” One can win a green card, i.e., permanent residency and work permit in the USA in these lotteries. Salla was married at that time, and she submitted the papers as the main applicant in the fall when she had undergone cancer monitoring and received a clean bill of health. “I sensed that my husband wasn’t as enthusiastic as I was. However, I didn’t give up on the idea.

During the spring, we considered where I would move if it worked out.” Manhattan, Washington DC, Boston, and the East Coast were initially on Salla’s mind. Then San Francisco, Seattle, Denver... Even though Salla’s parents had lived in Florida, the southern states were not appealing due to the heat.

Eventually, doors began to close. First, the marriage fell apart, then continuity in terms of work also seemed unlikely. “And then came the lottery win. I didn’t think twice.”

“I had a few months to rearrange my life. On the USA’s Independence Day, I packed up the cats, rented the first apartment with-

out seeing it. I paid the security deposit, and that was it.”

Salla said she didn’t know about Amazon and Microsoft when choosing Seattle. She admitted wondering if the city was too small if it had the right pace. She had savings for a year. Eventually, she found her own home in Pacific Northwest in 2014. “Before the last night in Finland, my girlfriend and I watched “Sleepless in Seattle” to celebrate the departure.”

“If Finns spoke, they would conquer the world!”

In her new hometown, on the verge of a new beginning, Salla began to get to know people and network. “I searched LinkedIn for all the industry professionals in the area, dug up the Finns in Seattle, and found a diverse coffee group. I googled construction companies. Three months later, Salla had her first job in Seattle.”

Already in Tampere, she had started networking at an event of the Finland-America Society, where Bruce Oreck was speaking. Contacts made there helped, for example, in ending up in Seattle.

Salla met there, among others, Greg, an American factory owner in the construction industry, who immediately invited Salla to speak at his event. When Salla, as a nervous speaker, hesitated, Greg said, “If Finns spoke, they would conquer the whole world. Now you’re in the USA, Salla! Not in Finland anymore. Let it rip!”

Now it’s been 9 years since that

moment. Salla is a popular podcast guest and an award-winning speaker and innovator in the construction industry. She has a special ability to combine high technology with the traditional field of the built environment, which is appreciated. But she has literally fought her way up from the bottom.

Her first job was at Hoffman, where Salla got to work on the Texas Microsoft Datacenter Campus project, which included a complex of 15 buildings. Even a luxury residential tower was built in downtown Seattle. Virtual construction was always central to projects.

“I thought I was getting good pay, but in the beginning, immigrants were a bit exploited, but we got into the job.” Salla was always single, unable to afford to let job opportunities slip away. “It was also interesting to see how the job market exploited the singles market,” says Salla, referring to dating, through which she got several job opportunities. “People are happy to recommend their dating partners. It’s win-win networking. For example, I dated the head of a nanotechnology laboratory who knew the head of virtual building.”

Although there were no concrete projects at Sellen immediately, Salla got to work on new technologies and prototypes such as Augmented Reality products like Hollow Lens, after which Salla’s career progressed internally so that she advanced to Director of Emerging Technology and Innovation. “I took the company to the world’s forefront with data models. I couldn’t speak publicly about anything which of course was a bit frustrating. But now the products have been commercialized and in the market. I got to build the company’s digital strategy and talk about innovation with Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft. The work was fantastic!” Salla’s work included developing augmented and mixed reality solutions to support Finnish startups Varjo and Umbra, of which Umbra was later acquired by Amazon.

Finally, the company stuck to a conservative culture; instead of innovations, a traditional representative of the construction industry, a family member, was hired as CEO. The company did not want to expand beyond Seattle. It did not want to innovate anymore. Additional projects and office projects were removed from the agenda, and turnover collapsed. In the real estate and construction industry, Salla had to get used to economic fluctuations.

Spinning off innovation with Tech Giants

But Salla had a friend in Microsoft’s real estate unit who asked if Salla would be interested in her job. Salla soon started as the Director of Transformative Services at Microsoft’s Center of Innovation, focusing on sustainable development and later she got promoted to Director of Digital Building Lifecycle.

“Microsoft was building campuses in China, India, and the USA. They were characterized by a clear lack of data model programs, which I corrected. How to manage cash flows and guide planning. Well, with data model and augmented reality program, process, and strategy, of course.”

Salla had her hands full with her favorite pastime. Her Building Life Cycle process provided clear answers to what is ordered and what it costs, how it is financed, and what the return on investment was. A four-year effort yielded a lot of good results. But due to the pandemic on the horizon loomed massive layoffs and fading financing. At the same time, occupancy rates for office space plummeted, and the future of the real estate industry looked even more uncertain. Shortly after Salla’s departure,

the Center of Innovation was shut down. Where had our Salla turned her attention in the meantime? OAC, a real estate planning and design company, had a Senior Vice President position open when the predecessor retired. The interview lasted a full 6 months, and Salla jumped into a business unit leadership role for the first time, with 65 subordinates.

“I entered a very turbulent place during the mass layoffs and megalomaniac tech layoffs. The sales pressure was of course intense. While construction projects and movements collapsed or were at least put on hold, I had to sell \$20 billion worth of new projects. Salla, believing in empathetic change leadership style, was in a tough spot. In Salla’s company, layoffs were inevitable. “I don’t try to avoid problems. If we fall, we have to endure it, it builds resilience.”

Standing firmly with feet on both continents

“Don’t lie in the fire. In all life crises, I have learned—don’t stop! If a great white shark stops, it doesn’t get oxygen to its gills anymore, and breathing starts to falter. It dies because it can’t pick up speed anymore.”

“The first thing was, keep the tempo” when I asked about her personal survival tactics. Salla sticks to her daily routine. “I send an application every day. I always think that a dead man has no worries or troubles. I can’t afford the goals of a dead man.

Salla’s childhood entrepreneurship resurfaces. She has several potential clients with whom she discusses collaboration. Companies have many needs, but a position should be established, a headcount obtained. It’s challenging when there are no projects.

“Use me, and the fact that I am a dual citizen. I stand firmly with both feet on both continents, I am known.” Salla sends greetings to companies in the USA and Finland.

Salla is indeed well known. It wasn’t long ago that I listened to a Boston based podcast on new real estate technologies. In one of the episodes, then-Autodesk Vice President Amy Marks dropped Salla’s name when she wanted to highlight her own expertise. “Amy is a tough woman,” commented Salla when she spotted herself on the podcast, I had forwarded her. Salla was also awarded the Women of Innovation award in 2023.

“I have 30,000 followers on LinkedIn. I offer consulting services through my own company, even anonymously. Conversations are ongoing. In addition, she is open to job opportunities where she could use her experience for the benefit of companies.

“I am a technology and built environment expert, that’s my niche.” Transformational leader who inspires and empowers people to achieve remarkable outcomes. That’s what Salla really is.

So Salla prioritizes job hunting in her life now in her lovely Seattle skyscraper apartment. She doesn’t want a permanent relationship or to move in together. “Theo the cat is enough for me, along with my dear good friends. Instead, I’m happy to go on business adventures, for a drink, or to the theater,” says Salla, who navigates her networks smoothly, always encouraging those closest to her.”

Editor’s note: *Nina Dahlblom is an accomplished sales and marketing professional, who loves writing and telling true inspiring stories. Nina lives in San Jose, California and is a community activist with a keen interest in immigrant narratives and women’s empowerment.*



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