

## Harri Koskinen 36: Immersed in Nature, Glass & Sound Systems

**Charlie Morrow:** Standby. Alright, the tape is rolling now. Anytime you're ready. Our guest today is Harri Koskinen, a man of many talents. Born in 1970 in Karstula, Finland, in the central Finland countryside. Howdy came to Helsinki City. To study design in the Institute of Art and Design, he's best known as a leading innovator of Nordic design for, among other things, his award-winning block lamp, the famous light bulb inside a rectangular brick of glass, which is exhibited in New York's Museum of Modern Art.

He's designed furniture, packaging, pots and pans, turntables, hotel rooms, and many other immersive spaces. But most importantly for us here at Immerse, the Genelec 8,000 series of speakers for cutting edge sound systems soon to be released. Genelec headphones. I met Harri in New York City in the first years of this century.

He had designed a traveling show of Finnish design and engineered the installations. Typical of Nordic society, Finnish Designers have worked together for decades to build on their shared values over several generations. Similarly, Finnish architects and orchestra conductors generate a wave of multi-generational forces.

Later, Harri made a home for a MorrowSound 3D showroom system in his Helsinki design company offices. We've collaborated on the show. Sound Glass Space 2012 in the Akusmata Gallery in Helsinki, and on a floating chair for listening to 3D Sound. Harri's design includes sound, light, and physical materials.

How fitting that he named his company, Friends of Industry Limited. Howdy. Welcome to Immerse.

**Harri Koskinen:** Okay, now the battery is running well.

**Charlie Morrow:** Excellent. Nice to see you. I mean, in Finland, I feel I, I feel very good. It's a great, great environment.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah. That's good. How's your daughter?

Hedda is running wild. She's now three and full of energy, like laughing and walking and running and trying to make fun of everything. So, she's a fan of Abba. So Mama Mia is, she can sing that quite well already and.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, that's, that's fantastic.

**Harri Koskinen:** And we were in, in Sweden last week with, and we were actually accommodating in Abba's, Benny's Hotel Rival. And it was so funny that Hedda sang Mama Mia there in the lobby. That's a full immersive experience. Sounds fantastic.

**Charlie Morrow:** Wow. Do you remember your own, first immersive experience?

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah, yeah. Since I, I spent my first, 20 years ago in Karstula community and our farmhouse. It was 160 kilometers from the community center. So really in the middle of the forest. And yeah. Need to say that like on daily basis when opening the front door, the wildlife was there already, I think it was like full-time, very immersive to stay

outdoor and go to the forest and to play the games there and listening, the woodpeckers sing there and the raven flying high from west to east and then the wood grouse having,,, Yeah, it was very, very full all the time. And it was also so natural and so obvious that in that time. It was just like normal living and life. And now when settling down here in Helsinki and Espoo, it's totally different now the lifestyle. So when you are opening the front door, you see traffic Yeah. It's alive in different perspective.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, I know what you mean because our home in Vermont is like your Karstula. You know, we have a bear in the woods behind us. We have 18 acres, which is mostly woods except for some small fields, and it's several kilometers from town. There's a store and a restaurant maybe two kilometers away.

Across the street. There's a community of cows, because that's a big cow farm. So my archivist, who takes care of the place, he always says, "oh, this morning I saw the girls, referring to all the cows out in the field. So the girls are always out in the field. We too have the cycle of the year and, and the countryside. There's different sounds for every season.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah. Like small, nice memories on the summertime. When picking some fresh milk from the neighbor with this tin can and bicycling there, so the sound from the can, like knocking the bicycle. You try to really drive smoothly. But then with the milk, it was like a, it does such an experience in the, in the very bumpy sand road. We had a distance, like one kilometer to the cow farm.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, that's, it's lovely to hear that. I can totally relate to it. So jumping from that beginning, to what you are doing in your life now, which is designing things, how did you go from one to the other? How did the world change for you as you came from Karstula to today?

**Harri Koskinen:** It's been of course, like a long process and like day by day. Adventure and the adventure you will see when you are like monitoring your life from today to the past. So when you are living, living like a full life, you don't monitor yourself on that sense in a way. So you understand and get things afterwards.

But I was very lucky to live in this farmhouse and also my uncle lived in the same building. So I was joining him to the summer work. So we were. We built log houses, the cottages on the summertimes. I spent like three summers with him. So we started from the pile of logs, and then we built the house or the cottage in like a three month...

Hard work. Full summer to eight or nine, nine hours in a building site, and then the freedom started. I had to run to the tennis court, what was a distance of the three kilometer round and to meet friends and then to swim. And, I think that also having the wood workshop in our yard, house building and doing things all the time, repairing bicycles and mopeds and, and sat and doing everything by yourself in a way, and learning from the older brother and learning from the uncle and learning from the father. That was a very normal life and I think it really gave like a nice keys for today as well. So I've been always very curious of things, how things are working – and why is that?

After high school, I decided to go and study something that was not familiar for me in a way. So I went to the art design school and there we started to learn how to skits and design things. And after that you built them, not like... like you were just doing everything

at once in a way that you need to somehow program yourself. That was a nice education in Lahti school.

And then after Lahti I did the studies at the University of Art and Design of Helsinki. That was even more conceptual and more abstract, but I still kept going to the workshops. We had great facilities there with wooden, with metal and such, and open access to the materials. So that was a very integral path for me.

At the same time, doing things by hand, but also thinking more conceptually and learning. Learning by doing that was the method, like active life from very micro living then to the macro living innovation.

I had my first travel abroad when I was 19 years old and we went with my sister to see how it's life in Turkey. Oh, what a change. That was also like eye-opening thing in a way to have this treatment, but then started this work, oh, this like student life with all. All kind of excuses and like trips to see things. And then in this work life, a lot of travels to see colleagues and clients and factories and such. So it's been like that.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, I hear you. Thank you for tell telling the story. It's... one can imagine it as you told it. You also have had fun with music in your life. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your, your music.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah, the music has been always very fascinating and has been creating like a new world, a new imagination in my mind all the time. So I'm really like a transferred somewhere When I enjoy listening. Something great is somehow abstract for me in a cool way. I really got into music. Exploring my older sisters and, and brothers' vinyl records. They luckily were also very keen on music. So they, they imported music from abroad and we, we got like a first pressing of the great songs, vinyls and nearly young.

And then I got my first bass when I was age of 12. So I got it from the Santa Claus and it was like a big package. And that's my sister's gift for me.

**Charlie Morrow:** Lovely.

**Harri Koskinen:** And that bass was huge on my hand and. Then luckily also my sister put it to the one guy who started to teach me a bit how to play the bass. And that opened again a new world so that I could imitate some tracks and learn music. And then we also had a band in elementary school. Yeah. And then we played some evergreens, More like, on the heavy. Music side. So mainly I think we played ACDC. It was great and it's still great.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, great.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yes, we have reunion. Once a year, we get together and we still play the same, same songs. And we enjoy this simplicity in a way and we continue where we left Karstula on those days.

But then it's been like always [about being] very into music, but never studied any better. So the design and visual somehow took me more ahead [while] collecting music all the

time and trying to expand my tastes, very keen on everything new. And then my work life when establishing my design studio.

And actually before that I was very happy to meet Ilpo Martikainen who was the founder of Genelec Company based in Iisalmi and we had a very nice day in the Iisalmi factory. It was, I think, 1998 already. And somehow he was also very keen on my ideas and visions as a very young, young designer. And I started to learn how to do things from the material in real for the industry. So we had a very open discussion and ideation that what is the sound production and how to really create this, like a standard of the sound and what kind of limitations we are having when building sound source and cabinets and speakers.

And that also opened me to a new world. I was very keen on collecting audio devices at that time. And this Genelec really opened my archive in a way as well. And I was very happy to start to work with them since 1998. And we are still working on a weekly basis with the company. And it's been a great, great journey with them.

And we had a very practical dilemma on that time, or actually Ilmo had, since he established Genetec already 1968 or nine and doing like many, many speakers and very complex entities and solutions. What sort of idea of the speaker and how to really make the difference from the competitors since they were having the excellence of the sound production and the engineering. But then how is the visual performance and the outlook of the speaker. So he was never sat satisfied of that.

We started to explore the possibilities in diecast aluminum, how we can create a new world of speakers in a way. And then we managed to do it. And here we are still today following the same path and ideas. But still everything is based on that specific day when we met with Ilpo and we started to have this conversation.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's a fantastic story. I met Ilpo before you did?

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah. Right.

**Charlie Morrow:** Remember? I was in Helsinki visiting the radio, years ago. At that time I was doing experimental radio programs and, I was sharing my sound archive and sounds that I made with folkloric instruments in the radio lab. And they gave me radio sounds of ice that the radio had collected, which I still use in my work.

I met Ilpo and he was there. He had just sold his square, passive speakers right to the radio lab. And there I was. I think it was, um, trying to remember the person who was. Pekka Siren. And was there, and he asked if I would like you to "meet Ilpo from out east. He's a speaker maker. He's been making these speakers himself and they sound great."

And, I just said hello to him. That was the first time we met, was my first trip to Finland. Later on, I met him when I was in Rome. I was doing another co-production with, with the Italian state radio, doing public event broadcast. And I met him, he was working at that time with the Vatican Radio. I think that was one of his first clients as well, to the Vatican Radio. So we met early on in our careers and then later on he took an interest in the 3D sound that I developed and supported that. Big show in the early two thousands in New York called New Music, New York, and we had a Morrow sound cube on two scales.

We stayed in touch. I was very sorry when he died young. He was a wonderful man. But it's been also a pleasure to follow your collaboration with Genelec through the years and always been great to see and understand that how they are supporting everything new. They're very curious of what is happening around and always seeking like, like new opportunities.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yes, absolutely. And some memories from the early days with Genelec. Yeah. It was 1998 when I first met and we, right away started to ideate this like a different creation of the speaker or the monitor, how to have it. And also at the same time, since they were so deep into this professional monitoring, and it's like home audio, it was sort of teasing them ... There's some since many individuals already do have Genelec at home. But they never meant to have anything specific for the residential market. And that was also like one ball given to me at the same time. And then I got a call from the Issey Miyake studio from Japan, 1999. And they sent me an invitation to come to have a show in Tokyo in year 2000. I told Ilpo – hey, now we have an opportunity maybe to create something spectacular, [never-before-seen]. And then he really got excited that, hey, now we need to run for that and let's do a creation. And then we started to work on the show.

We made this diecast, monolith speaker 6040a model, which is still in production. We had one year to develop it, but still not enough to build a real model. But we had two prototypes there in the show and everything was great in Iisalmi when we tested it, and then we were so excited that he also traveled to Japan for the opening.

In Tokyo, when we had this opening day, the speakers didn't cooperate.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh.

**Harri Koskinen:** Something happened on the way from Iisalmi to Tokyo. But luckily the exhibition one big space and the back wall, that was like a solid curtain in a way. So we luckily we had to build like a setting in a way that the speakers were active behind of the curtain, and we had a sort of a prototype standing in the front of the curtain. And that was like mimicking the sound of Genelec then through the curtains. But luckily I had also like many other pieces there shown I created a modern living room there with a sofa bed and shelf systems. And we had the soundscape there available, although the speakers didn't work.

**Charlie Morrow:** Wow. Was it the difference of electric power? Maybe that was killing them. This is what you could call, audio fiction.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah. Nice stories.

**Charlie Morrow:** Yeah. I have a few as well, about things not working. I just jumped to a story of mine. I used a very early model of a solid state amplifier for a bass player when I was giving a lecture at the university many years ago. And for whatever reason. That particular bass had so much energy that this amplifier in a black box with grill on the top, caught fire and there were flames coming out of it and everybody said, what a fantastic show. And I was thinking my \$2,000 toy has been fried? Because the early ones were quite unstable.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah, it's great to have the Genelec speakers. You can play bass very well through them. And you don't need to have like a stack of marshals on the corner anymore. So you can play through [directly] your audio system.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, they are really robust. I think Ilpo's standards are really famous. I mean, you being part of the design team, say sort of a Mercedes-Benz or BMW of speakers, a standard that really didn't exist before, you know, for the full line of speakers. I mean, it's scaled from small to large and all of them are quite robust.

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah. I dunno, have you seen, we just published new headphones for Genelec?

**Charlie Morrow:** No.

**Harri Koskinen:** I just had a first pair. They are just getting available this spring. So they are meant for the sound reproduction in the studios. So they are not portable Bluetooth at all, as you can guess. In Genelec the world is like that. No gimmicks.

**Charlie Morrow:** So they're hardwired, they're not a wireless?

**Harri Koskinen:** Not wireless. No.

**Charlie Morrow:** I should love to hear on them. Because it would be very interesting ...

**Harri Koskinen:** We've already gotten very, very nice results from there, from the crowd and we are also developing them all the time. ...

**Charlie Morrow:** Do they also plan a version for noise reduction, a traveler's version, so to speak?

**Harri Koskinen:** That might come in couple of years? They are not yet. In agenda, but maybe in coming years. All Genelec speakers are handmade in Finland.

**Charlie Morrow:** I think the headphone itself is a great idea because it will be a standard. People really don't have a standard. They have a favorite but not a standard for doing a studio work with headphones. And a lot of people these days need headphones because their entire studio is a laptop.

I met a group from Florida who put together millions of dollars to develop a high-end headphone, which is coming to market around the same time as the Genelec. I'll find out more about it for you ...

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah.

**Charlie Morrow:** Somebody who had been in another part of the audio business, but dreamed his whole life of making a perfect headphone with price not being an issue. And I was talking to them because they needed some high-end demo material that showed off the way the speaker sounded. They could take things from records and so forth. But then they wanted something that was more like soundscapes and that was where, that's how I met them. Demo soundscape as they bring the headphone to market.

I'd like to change the subject to glass because I think that glass is as you have handled it. Is what everyone would always imagined that glass would be a kind of a medium like painting or a novel. It's a part of so many people's lives in so many forms. Glass tells so many stories and I think you are a storyteller in all of your designs and particularly your work in glass. Would you speak a little about that? I should point out that to our audience, that Harri works as an artist, as well as a designer, so that these different ideas find their way into unique artworks that are in galleries as well as in design objects that are in development and taken to market. But please talk a little bit about your view of glass?

**Harri Koskinen:** Yes. Thanks for asking. Glass has been somehow very close to me, many, many years when getting more into this design world. This Finnish design history is quite wide, but some of the masterpieces are made from glass and it's fascinated me for many years, even before getting into this field – in Karstula, the world was so different all the time.

We had this like hardware store, the only one in the community, but then in the middle of the hardware store there was like some cells full of this litala glass, also unique glasses, but also this like mass produced ones. I spent some time in the front of the cell and they were like diamonds there in the middle of the hardware store.

But then, yeah, when getting into school and having a chance to study materials, I also chose glass as one of my materials and I started to right away do the class by myself in a hot workshop using my skills, what I had at the time and I learned a bit. Then we had some joint venture course with an Italian brand when studying in university and I was the one who was picked to go to the factory for the scholarship.

And then I had the opportunity to study glass and the possibilities more deeply. That was 1996 and the location was in Nuutajärvi Glassworks at that time, and I was very interested about the many possibilities of glass – how it is like a tool in your hand for everyday use.

But also the immateriality of it in a way when living inside and taking a look outside, you have the window glass there in between and it's like protecting you from the outdoors. And it's fragile. It's sturdy, but it's also fragile and it's like a miracle among materials that we can treat and use and manufacture.

But through the years, I've been lucky to be inside the Glassworks to learn the production methods, creating some concepts for use and also concepts for exhibitions, and it has limitations, of course. A lot. I think that is also one of the keys why it is interesting, at least from the perspective of an industrial designer like me. The limitations are really evoking the questions in your head in a way, and that is like problem solving.

That's about all you can create from the glass and the transparentness and also the solidity of the glass and its opaqueness and many, many aspects of the material and the layers inside the glass and its inner life and everything.

I have already had four private unique art exhibitions and they have been mainly glass pieces. There are also some mixed material. And I'm again, end of this year, heading to have my fifth show in Gallerie Forsblom this autumn. I think my main material

is, again, glass. Since glass, I think, really gives you the possibility to express your concepts and your thoughts.

**Charlie Morrow:** I'm curious, when you are working with your vision of an artwork and working with the glass, how does that process work? When one sees the pieces, their micro-worlds, the glass itself has a shape and inside there's this world of color and shape. because so much can be done with glass. How do you as a maker start and wind up where you go?

**Harri Koskinen:** Yeah, I've been always like a jealous of the glassblowers themselves. I never learned the excellence of doing and producing the glass by myself, like from the start to the end.

So that's always a collaboration with the glassblowers and the professionals in the glass industry when creating things in reality. It's also unpredictable. In a way that I cannot figure out things to advance in a way that there always has to be a space for some failures.

And the failures are not compromises. They are part of the process. And the failures doesn't mean that there's only a negative aspect to it. They're part of the process, and that's great in a way, and that's part of the limitations of the material and the production. But, yes, I think since it's not only the concept you are transmitting, it's the whole thing in a way, the existence of the object in a way when it's shining, reflecting, the light has a lens effect, how it transforms the surroundings and how it mirrors the environment. And I think it's all layered. Also in the visual context, but also it's very thoughtful in a way ... like how does it look in a way?

But when I do have a chance to create something out of glass, for example, the concept is much more, much more important than the look of the object.

**Charlie Morrow:** Well, I've had the unique experience of having shared your studio for a number of years, and I think being with your objects, starting with the glass objects and the Genelec, both of them have a kind of living creation [feeling].

For me, my particular form of music and events and stuff is very shamanistic. And so, for me, your object-making is making objects that have some life, and I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about that. The aesthetics in this work is a bit like a hidden value in a way.

**Harri Koskinen:** Of course, when I started to study this field, it was when I knew nothing in this field. I thought that it was about the shapes, about the look or the outline of the things, but when I go more deeply into this world, it's like the shape-giving is only a very minimal aspect of the process of creating new things. I've always been searching. It's like the functional aspects of everything. What I do, I love when things do have many functions or many interpretations in their existence and it's a bit difficult to explain. Of course, when working with clients, the clients also set their values and their guidelines on the end result.

But my role when working with industrial clients is to keep the great concept there and, many interpretation levels have to be there and the hidden aesthetics have to follow [through] in everything we do. Hopefully, the end result also evokes positive thoughts and



many explanations in a way that each person touching or feeling or using the objects, what I've been creating, that they have their own understanding of the object.

**Charlie Morrow:** Oh, that's quite beautiful. I think that this has been a perfectly shaped conversation and I think we'll take our leave at this point for this show. I'd like to come back and talk to you another time about the work that you do for furniture design, design of spaces, and all the million things you're working on, watches and so forth.

But I think for this particular discussion, I want to thank you so much for sharing your time – I know you're a busy person – and sharing your thoughts. I appreciate you very much, so thank you, Harri.

**Harri Koskinen:** Thank you, Charlie, and let's have a nice cup of tea when you are around. So see you soon.

**Charlie Morrow:** Thank you so much. Thank you. Bye-bye.