A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the *pattern* of centralized spaces

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"God made paper for drawing architecture on. Everything else – at least to me – is a misuse of paper."[1] Alvar Aalto's compromise with practice led, sometimes, to an exaggerated emphasis in the formal aspects of his work. Kirmo Mikkola for example, complained, *"[...] Aalto in his last years produced one silent generation in Finland. [...] Before this Aalto had been an exceptionally active architectural theoretician, social philosopher and cultural figure, but now he decided to withdraw into his studio and concentrate entirely on architecture. [...] The mistakes were made by those who interpreted Aalto's statement as a directive."[2]*

To be accurate, Aalto's statement continues with a warning against the dangers of formalism and an advice to look for the contents, *"[...] architecture – the real kind – only exists where the little man is at the center."[3]* The key periods of Aalto's theory were only rediscovered during the 1970s, namely: 1. how functionalism challenged a classic formation – i.e., Viipuri Library (1927-35); 2. how functionalism was overcome, lyrically, in masterpieces such as Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949-52).[4]

The case of Eric Adlercreutz (Helsinki, 1935–) is part of a broader investigation about the work of Aalto's collaborators. Adlercreutz has a reflective attitude, he needs to know *how?* Challenging Aalto's version of being a poor theoretician, Adlercreutz decides to work with the master after being impressed with… a lecture![5]

Adlercreutz and his office A-Konsultit, have built a comprehensive group of work, including interventions in Aalto's buildings i.e., a complementary hall for the Helsinki University of Technology (2000) and the restoration of the Studio (2002).

In this paper, his work and Aalto's will be related only conceptually – for their thoughtful approach to centralized spaces, between type and use. I'll suggest that Adlercreutz's studies with Christopher Alexander gave him the necessary distance from the collaboration – a critical point-of-view to Aalto's architecture. I'll try to reconstruct Adlercreutz's reflection by discussing these references and conclude by introducing three of his early projects.

In 1968-69, having received a grant to study in the Center for Environmental Structure in Berkeley, Adlercreutz took part in Alexander's *pattern language* course. Like the working time with Aalto, this experience marked him strongly: *"[In] search for wholeness I try to have in mind the important relations at the level of detail, those which affect people's physical and psychological wellbeing in each different circumstance. Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium is a great example of that, how much he was able to empathize with the patients' world and answer harmonically to a variety of problems. Interest in this aspect of Aalto's architecture led me to Christopher Alexander's work, from which I received a lot of influence."[6]*

Adlercreutz proposes an unexpected association; at first sight, Aalto and Alexander's starting points seem rather distanced. It is well known how Aalto was skeptic of methodology, particularly as sought by American universities. Aalto may even have had Alexander's research in mind when he, after a visit to Berkeley, criticized the search for *"[...] some kind of recipe for the problem of how to make good 'building art'. This is increasingly leading to systems, computations, formulas [...]. The architect does not even have to be talented."[7]*

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

2 / 10

Aalto searches for compromise with reality, believes in contributing to harmonize technology with nature. On the contrary, Alexander wants to withdraw from modern discourse. His theories defend rules and instruments to restore a cosmology broken since the arrival of modernity. Adlercreutz is interested in Alexander's collective way of thinking – still, he has Aalto's practical grasp of the profession.

Alexander sharpened his anti-modern position to a point that it is sometimes hard to understand its use in practice. This is why Ingrid F. King, one of his collaborators in the CES, decided to reevaluate the relationship between the pattern language and *modern movement.* King overcomes some distance by reconnecting the studies of the pattern with those of the 1930s functionalists, and comparing it with the *structuralist* and *regionalist* critiques of the modern movement.[8]

King finds incidentally that among modern architecture, Aalto's work has the layered quality sought by the pattern language. His designs seem to develop simultaneously from general to particular and from particular to general, *"Aalto is one of the few architects who took the concept of function seriously as a generator of form. […] if one were to speak of the equivalent of a 'pattern language' building in the 'modern' vernacular, I would say it would be Aalto's famous Villa Mairea".*[9]

King agrees with Adlercreutz that Aalto and Alexander share an understanding of architectural space both as configuration and as life contained. The geometric order is as important as letting an image to turn into a motive from an early design stage. It is of interest at this point, to see how Aalto and Alexander's work relates to that of the first generation of functionalist architects.

Aalto received a classic formation and accepted functionalism only in the early years of his career. He tried to find new form from the observation of contents i.e., the fan or the undulating line. Aalto was less interested in the moment of reduction than in turning functionalism inclusive and varied. He soon realized that the introduction of more and more factors accentuated the design problem instead of leading to a natural solution: *"Architecture is a synthetic phenomenon covering practically all fields of human activity. An object in the architectural field may be functional from one point of view and disfunctional from another. […] architecture must be functional mainly from the human point of view."*[10]

In Aalto's mature work, experimented solutions are often used as a basis to deal with a complex problem. Aalto revised his method pragmatically. He never took any method for an end, always allowed for interpretation. Thus, he didn't reject the earlier approach, nor entirely subject to archetypes. As Alan Colquhoun explained, his work shows a critical interaction between type and use: *"[In Villa Mairea] neither the living area nor the bedrooms face the concave space of the garden, as a simple binary classification (open/ closed) might have suggested. Instead, this initial implication is contradicted, and the space of the house expands in both directions, permitting a variety of views and lightning and a generosity of life style which would have been denied by a more exclusive interpretation of the parti."*[11]
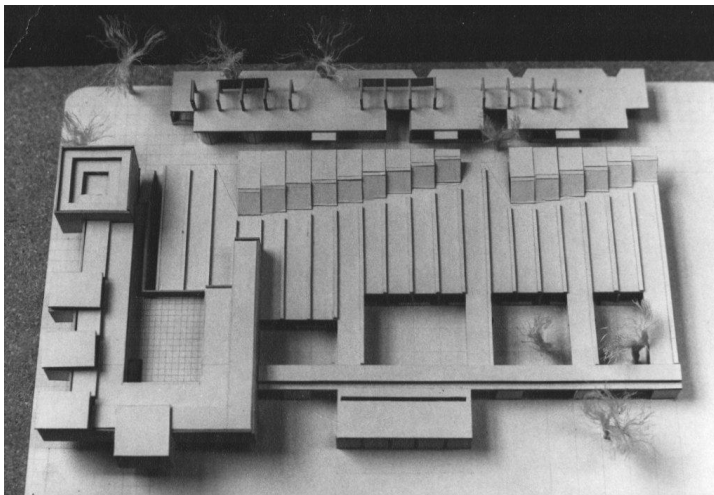
Alexander's interest in functionalism is distanced in time. His first works, immediately received in Finland, resume the investigations of the relation between use and form.[12] *"Notes on the synthesis of form"* (1964) tries to widen and go in-depth analytical functionalism using elaborated mathematical diagrams. *"A city is not a tree"* (1965) wonders about the complexity of the built environment; Alexander proposes to overcome analytical functionalism with a structure, equally rigorous, but more open to conflict and variation.

The pattern language appears as the corollary of this development but already, as a clear critique of modern movement. From the outset, the concept of language challenges the *tabula rasa* of

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

3 / 10

functionalism. The pattern typifies form and reveals the forces which affect it. There is like in Aalto's approach, the rationalist search for standard and the organic search for adapting it to reality. But there is also a direct relation with history and tradition which distances it from the modern sensibility, as Adlercreutz noted when reviewing the pattern studies: *"In reference to the picture material, one can easily accuse the authors of nostalgia […]. However it is probably more just to claim that the book shows […] just how many valuable terms were eliminated from the architectural vocabulary during the Functionalist era. In the reader's mind, the patterns create impressions of an environment characterized by decentralization, a small scale, functional complexity, integration of work and housing, and children and adults, and grass roots democracy."* [13]

The pattern is a format which can accommodate different kinds and scales of contents. It is divided in three parts: 1. Condition, 2. Solution and 3. Justification. The first identifies a recurrent problem in the environment. The second proposes a universal response to be tested and taken into private versions. The last explores the argument using multi-disciplinary sources, from psychology to anthropology.

Each pattern contains pre– and post– references, which encourage associations in strings of multiple patterns, like a hypertext. The use of the language follows a principle of economy and a counterpart principle of difference, somehow comparable with the structuralist pair *typology–morphology* and even with Aalto's more informal concept of *flexible standardization*.[14]

Adlercreutz, Multi-service center (model), 1968. Photo by Eric Adlercreutz.

The pattern language course consisted of designing a multi-service center from a selection of 64 patterns.[15] Adlercreutz's proposal, used as example in the course's review in *Architectural Forum*, is a mat of office rooms which is hold together by an elevated open-courtyard. This centralized space appears as a variation of Aalto's civic centers, resulting from the combination of main hall and secondary services.[16]

The comparison between Aalto and Alexander's work can be extended, perhaps, beyond the level of method. The structural quality of the pattern language permits to pass over some differences and focus on the convergences. To begin with, those humanistic themes which distinguish also Aalto's contribution within modern movement. Secondly, the interest in the medieval town and the vernacular. Finally, the continuity of the idea of the house – in variations of centralized spaces –, which is taken even into buildings of civic scale.

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

4 / 10

The last aspect will serve as motive for a more detailed examination of three patterns used by Adlercreutz in his exercise: *4 – Community territory, 16 – Necklace of community projects*, and *50 – Interview booths.*

Pattern 4 deals with the problem of making the center available even for those less likely to use it: the poor or, just someone not seeking for a service. Though justified in terms somewhat tied to the late 60s political context, the pattern's point is that any positive service must have a negative counterpart, an arena free for events, promoting interaction and inclusiveness.
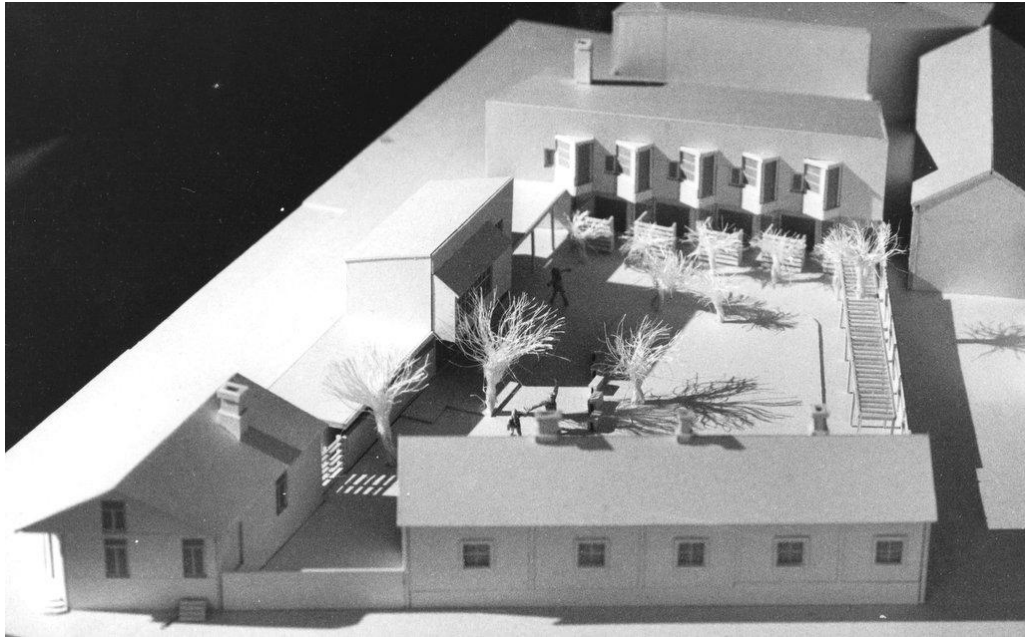
Pattern 4 redirects to 16, describing the ground floor and frontage areas as zones of transition between the city and the services of the community center. These zones should be designed with some degree of functional and formal autonomy, as elements of a minor order within the main structure.

Pattern 4 and 16 give a point-of-view about one of Aalto's main themes. Indeed, as Adlercreutz notes: *"In almost all his public buildings there is a kind of public court or larger 'piazza', which forms an integrated part of the composition, a point of gravity that holds the composition together. This space can be an indoor 'galleria' like that in Rautatalo in Helsinki (1955), or a larger public square like his first project for the National Pensions Institute in Helsinki."*[17]

In Säynätsalo, the hall appears associated with a series of secondary services forming an open courtyard. In the final version of the National Pensions Institute, a specific functional need – privacy –, tensions the centralized space. Aalto's individual cabins are remarkably close to Alexander's pattern *Interview booths.*

Running these patterns shows how the language works as a way of relating different kinds and scales of problems in a single moment of the design process. Yet, more than a definite method, the value of the pattern is how it illuminates the phenomenon of architecture – to Adlercreutz eventually, the secret of Aalto's work. The next examples are designs from Adlercreutz and A-Konsultit selected from *Arkkitehti.*

In the Motel Marine extension (1972) in Tammisaari, the courtyard solves in first place the relation with the scale of the town.[18] Although a new kind of program is being introduced, the solution is to continue the existing 18th Century typology of street and courtyards. The option for a central court resolves the conflicting requirements of a seasonal motel where visitors need as much recreation and interaction as repose and privacy. The elements forming the court deal intentionally with the contrasting levels of use at stake. The bar links the courtyard with the street. The terraces serve as filter between the courtyard and rooms. The pergola at the back of the yard creates a protected realm within the courtyard. Even in comparison with the first phase of the project (1965), the solution shows how centralized space is explored beyond formal configuration.
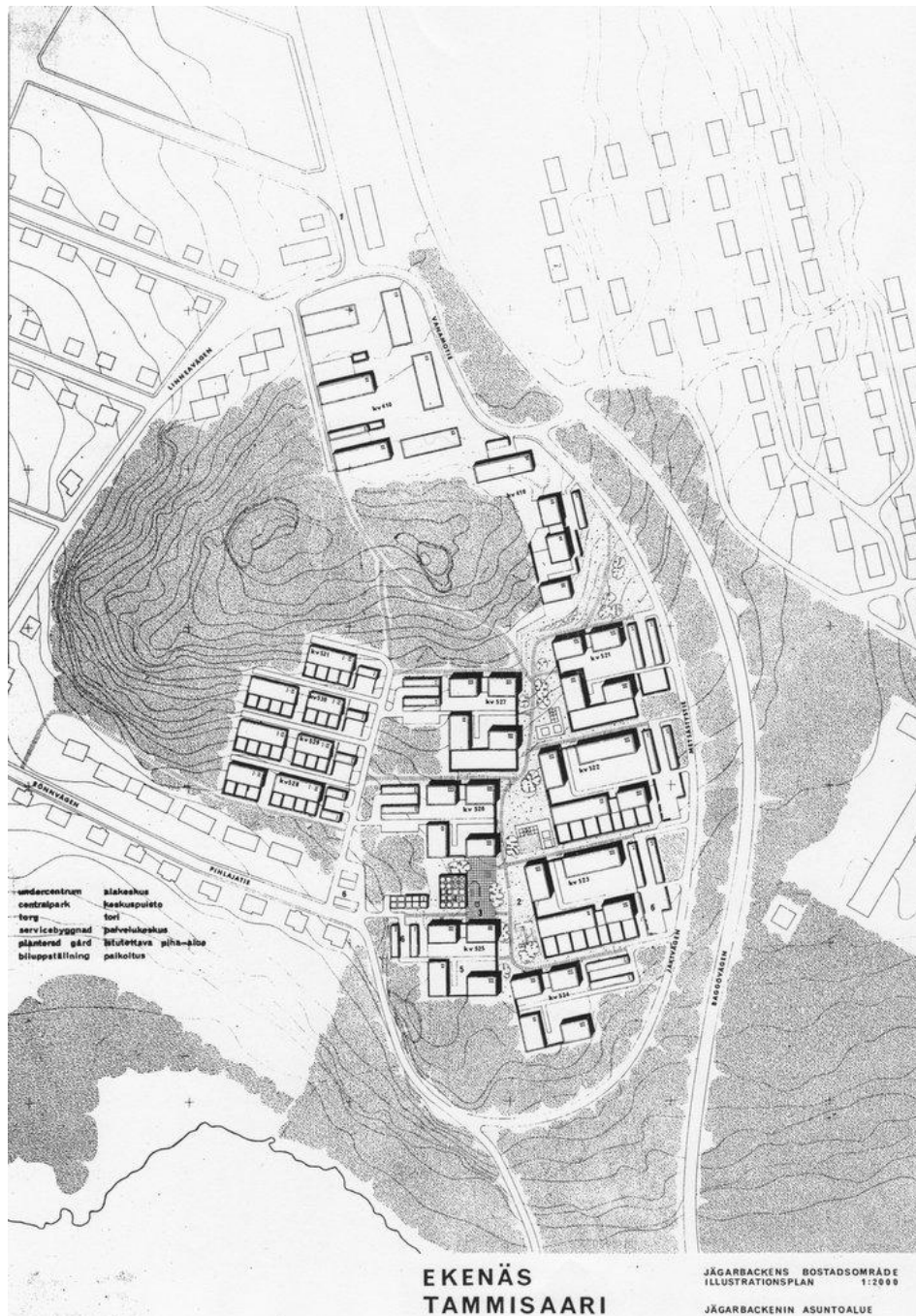
A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

5 / 10

Adlercreutz and Aschan, Motel Marine extension (model), Tammisaari, 1972. Photo by Eric Adlercreutz.

Adlercreutz and Aschan, Motel Marine extension, Tammisaari, 1972. Photo by Miguel Araújo, 2012.

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

6 / 10

The concept of the project of Jägarbacken housing area (1969) is a cell of four apartment blocks forming a central community courtyard.[19] The scheme is more open than the traditional grid of Tammisaari but also more structured than the modern freeform suburb. Each cell opens outwardly to the interstices of untouched forest and closes inwardly as a community realm. The cell-type adapts to the topography and specific apartment kinds, repeating with morphological differentiation. The common facilities and the informal treatment of the detail give the courtyards an everyday character which contrasts with the prefab construction. It is in this way introduced the theme of appropriation and participation continued in later housing projects, for example Kartanonkaari, Helsinki (1978).
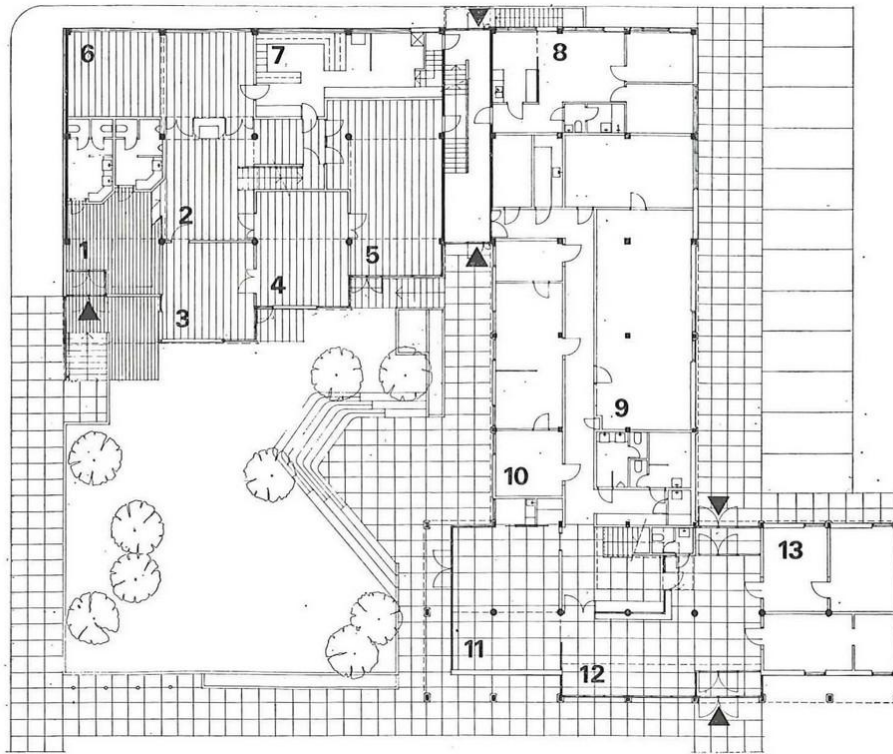

Adlercreutz and Aschan, Jägarbacken housing area (plan), Tammisaari, 1969. Drawing by Adlercreutz and Aschan (taken from the brochure Ekenäs stad: Jägarbackens bostadsområde, 1968).

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

7 / 10

Adlercreutz and Aschan, Jägarbacken housing area, Tammisaari, 1969. Photo by Miguel Araújo, 2012.

The last example is the project of the Finnish Embassy in Warsaw (1972).[20] The program presented again, contrary outward and inward energies. The semi-closed courtyard combines the Embassy's public character – related with the street and the garden opposite side – with its protected dimension – the Ambassador's house. The solution is worked in section so that the higher levels are more sheltered. This means that within the house, bedrooms are upstairs whereas living areas are at the garden level. In relation to the complex, the house is half-floor above the Embassy's offices which in turn, are connected with the street. The two levels interlock in the central space, an outdoor amphitheater which immediately recalls Aalto's work. The entrance hall of the house is a miniature of this structure, functioning as an element of simultaneous spatial concentration and dispersion. This rich solution is achieved within an austere style, which can be taken to comparison with the contemporaneous movement of *Finnish constructivism.*

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

8 / 10

Adlercreutz, Finnish Embassy in Warsaw (plan), Poland, 1972. Drawing by Adlercreutz and Aschan (taken from Arkkitehti 7-8, 1972, p.15).

Adlercreutz, Finnish Embassy in Warsaw, Poland, 1972. Photo by Adlercreutz.

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

9 / 10

[1] A. Aalto, "In lieu of an article," in *Alvar Aalto In His Own Words*, ed. G. Schildt, Helsinki: Otava, 1997, p.264. (*Arkkitehti*, 1-2, 1958).

[2] K. Mikkola, "From the technological to the humane: Alvar Aalto versus Functionalism," in *Abacus Yearbook,* Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1979, p.137.

[3] Aalto, op. cit., p.264.

[4] The reception of Aalto's work was initially filtered through S. Giedion's interpretation in *Space, Time and Architecture.* The criticism later opened up with i.e., the Aalto Symposiums organized after 1979 and the research of Aalto's archives carried on by G. Schildt, etc.

[5] Doctoral thesis in progress, *The work of Alvar Aalto's collaborators: Jaakko Kontio, Kaarlo Leppänen and Eric Adlercreutz.* Adlercreutz worked with Aalto between 1959-65. See, E. Adlercreutz, interview by M. Borges de Araújo and T. Tallqvist, tape recording, 10 December 2010, Studio Aalto in Tiilimäki 20, Helsinki.

[6] E. Honkasalo et al., "Questions and answers. Eric Adlercreutz," *Kätketyt Portaat* no. 3, 1990, pp.7-13.

[7] Aalto, "Speech at the Helsinki University of Technology Centennial Celebration, December 5, 1972," op. cit., p.283.

[8] I. F. King, *Christopher Alexander and Contemporary Architecture,* Tokyo: a+u Publishing, 1993.

[9] King, op. cit., pp.112-4.

[10] Aalto, "The humanizing of architecture," op. cit., p.102. (*The Technology Review*, Nov, 1940).

[11] A. Colquhuoun, "Alvar Aalto: Type versus Function," in Colquhuoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, p.75. (1976)

[12] The Finnish translation of "A city is not a tree" for example, was published in *Arkkitehti* see, "Kaupunki ei ole puu," *Arkkitehti* 7-8, 1966.

[13] Adlercreutz, "Alexander's pattern language," *Arkkitehti* 5-6, 1979, pp.68-9, 75.

[14] Aalto, "The Reconstruction of Europe is the Key Problem for the Architecture of Our Time," op. cit., pp.149-57. (*Arkkitehti*, 5, 1941).

[15] See, C. Alexander et al., *A pattern language which generates multi-service centers*, Berkeley: CES, 1968.

[16] R. Montgomery, "Pattern Language," *Architectural Forum* Jan-Feb, 1970, pp.52-9.

[17] Adlercreutz, "The fall and rise of the public space," in *Changing trends and timelessness,* Helsinki: SAFA, 1984, pp.29-36.

[18] E.Adlercreutz and N.-E.Aschan, "Motel Marine Extension," *Arkkitehti* 4, 1972, pp.40-1.

[19] Adlercreutz and Aschan, "Jägarbacken housing area," *Arkkitehti* 3, 1974, pp.51-3, 58.

[20] Adlercreutz, "The Finnish Embassy in Warsaw," *Arkkitehti* 3, 1977, pp.40-3, 49.

A continuing theme in the work of Alvar Aalto's collaborator Eric Adlercreutz – the pattern of centralized spaces
Miguel Borges de Araújo
1.2.2013

10 / 10