

The Case of Aalto Library, Vyborg, Russia

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This article has a single building as its starting point. It is a building that gets often referred to as analogous with the city its located in and with the architect it is designed by. The building is the Aalto Library (from now on referred to as the Library) in the city of Vyborg, Russia, designed by undoubtedly the most famous Finnish architect of all times, Alvar Aalto (1898-1976). Still today, the city is a 'hot potato' for many because of its rather complex history.

This article draws upon the authors PhD research. Here, the claim is that by starting from this very specific and concrete object of study, it is possible to reveal a world of things. More explicitly, I assert that this building has the capacity to pull like a magnet, becoming a physical site that allows people to articulate issues of much bigger scale, of greater level of abstractness, and even things one might not think related at all. Hence, the aim of this article is not so much to provide detailed data of the physical building itself, but to shed light on the historical-social context in order to explain why just this Library should be of interest as a work of Alvar Aalto, and as a building in Vyborg.



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Entrance hall. Photo: Laura Berger.

The Building

In 1927 Alvar Aalto won the design competition for the Viipuri Library with a proposal that was strongly marked by Nordic Classicism. At the time, Vyborg was a Finnish city by the name of Viipuri. However, by the time of the final construction in 1933, the site had changed into a park, and Aalto's design had changed completely. (Spens 1994, Adlectreutz, E & al. (eds.) 2009) The building was radically simplified, and the final form "represented International Modernism with the utmost refinement." (<http://www.alvaraalto.fi/viipuri/building.htm>) This was a design for the newly independent Finland (1917), a nation coming into being. For Aalto, the building became a source he quoted in his later works, throughout his oeuvre. Still today, the Library is used in teaching architects around the world as a prototype of functionalist architecture. The Library was inaugurated in October 1935.



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Façade. Photo: Laura Berger.



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Interior. Photo: Laura Berger.

Closed and Open - The city fortress/international centre/military area/‘citta aperta’

Originally, the area of Vyborg was inhabited by the Karelians, and archaeological research has revealed that there was a wooden fort in existence already during the 11th and 12th centuries. At first, the city of Vyborg was a fortress city, officially recognised as Swedish in 1323. The town was ceded to Russia in 1721 and in 1812 Alexander I of Russia incorporated the town and its province into the newly-created Grand Duchy of Finland. (Saarnisto & al. 2010) After Finland became independent in 1917, Vyborg evolved into a lively commercial and cultural centre where most inhabitants spoke four languages: Finnish, Swedish, Russian and German. At that time, Vyborg was evidently a European city, from where a great number of still existing Finnish companies' famous families have their roots. In addition, it should be noted that is not singularly the Aalto Library, but vast number of buildings designed by Finnish architects that survive today. However, after the Second World War in 1944, the city along with its wider area was annexed to the Soviet Union. This turned Vyborg into a closed military area to which was out of bounds for foreigners, and the historical cultural and commercial contacts were cut. (Neuvonen 2008) Hence, this historical turn essentially erased the city off of the map. Thus, Vyborg is a city which has had international importance in its role as a commercial and cultural gateway between Europe and the East, but it also seems that Vyborg as a young Finnish city has produced a truly noteworthy amount of artists and businessmen, raising its importance perhaps even over the capital of Finland during the Finnish period. So far most recent historical turn took place in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Though it had been possible to travel in the Soviet Union, this had been much more restricted, and so, when the borders were opened again foreigners, and especially Finns, went to see the city that had been out of bounds for almost fifty years. The city became open once again, and the restoration of the Aalto Library began immediately.

The Historical Cut

There are several things that make this city exceptional, and a most interesting research case. Admittedly, from the historical perspective, both of the World Wars have created places that could be compared to this, the world is full of lost homes, and areas towards which one group or another has great nostalgia for. Still, I want to introduce three things that are everything but common with Vyborg. Firstly, it is quite exceptional that everyone is evacuated. It seems that in most cases, even in the event of war, at least part of the previous population remains. But when Finns retreated from the city, and made final evacuations in 1944, the city was left empty. In addition, it was not just people, but important documents and objects from city plans to museum artifacts that were quite effectively rescued, to guarantee these were preserved. To enhance to the effect, the Soviets intentionally brought in new inhabitants (which was the common, adapted strategy) from Caucasia and other far away, rural areas. This way, the city suddenly had no history, and the new inhabitants had no relationship to cities in general, not to mention their own new home town. Also, there was no one who could have told about the life before 1944, and even if there were some documents left, it is highly unlikely that the new inhabitants could have deciphered them in Finnish or Swedish.

Second, there is the fact that the area became categorised as a military area, and so throughout the Cold War, the city was cut out of all contacts to the outside world. As evidence of this, Sergei Kravchenko (1990), the architect responsible of the Aalto Vyborg Library during the Soviet times, wanted to ask for advice concerning renovating the Library, but he was denied the permission to take contact to Finland. Therefore, the Soviet inhabitants only had the physical city while at the same time Finns, along with the rest of the world, were left with the past; old documents, photos, memories, and nostalgia. This way, we get what one might call an experiment of history, so radical that it almost resembles a laboratory case. Explicitly, the extremity is represented in that otherwise it would be impossible to cut off a city (along its wider area) for almost fifty years, with total replacement of inhabitants. As a result, there are two completely separate understandings of one and the same city which had time to evolve all the way from 1944 (end of the WWII) until 1991 (end of the Soviet Union). Like noted, Finns immediately started the restoration of the Library, which hints to the fact that many had been waiting for the borders to open, and more recently, the present day Russian inhabitants of Vyborg have become more and more interested in the past of the city before it became Soviet.

Third unprecedented aspect is that the restoration of the Library was initiated, supervised and so far most funding has come through the Finnish Aalto Foundation, specifically The Finnish Committee for the Restoration of Viipuri Library. What is exceptional is that a private foundation acts across borders, with no intermediary such as UNESCO, or originally without an official invitation to aid in restoration. The internationally accepted rule, as it is of the Finnish Board of Heritage and Antiquities, is that each state is responsible of heritage solely within its own borders, and if anything, consultation can be provided if an inquiry is made through official routes between two states. This has caused some Finns to think that the Finnish architects' interest to restore resembles a colonial project, and that the attitude toward Russians is even a bit dismissive. Regardless, the Russian inhabitants of the city, using and working in this popular municipal Library, have throughout been most grateful for the restoration project. And to add, I would assert that the Finnish Restoration Committee would never perceive their work in the terms suggested by the critique, but instead, are truly interested in the building and its role as a laboratory for restoring modern. (Kairamo, (ed.) 2001)



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Lecture hall. Photo: Laura Berger.



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Lecture hall. Photo: Laura Berger.

Time and Place Blurred

However, more detailed research points beyond discussing the city and the Library via categories like functionalist architecture, the Finnish ministries official stand, or nostalgia. Instead, what becomes clear is that people express ideas related to time and place. Here, time is everything but linear and locations get happily mixed or are referred across in an analogous way. There are innumerable reflections related to location that are linked to the Library. To name some, during the Soviet time, the Library was thought of as an 'American style Library' for the reason that all the books were in open shelves, there for the public to page them through, unlike in the Soviet style libraries. Some Soviet locals have also thought of the city and the Library as essentially Baltic because they had had no access and comparison to the Nordic countries and the architecture of these. (Berger 2009) Then, for example, from time to time there has been discussions that the Library and even the whole city should be proposed for the UNESCO heritage list, which points to both the locals' as well as Finns' concern for the future of the city. At the same time, it has been predicted that the gas line Russia is building to provide gas for the European market, could be a factor that might bring more industry and investments to the city, and liven up the surrounding areas as well. Recently Hermitage has opened a branch in the old Vyborg Art School from 1930, designed by the Finnish Architect Uno Ullberg (1879-1944).

Finally the Library itself brings together very different types of people from the everyday users to the international architecture buffs who come to visit, while for Finns, the city has been advertised as 'the best preserved Finnish city', for there has been no building boom in Vyborg which would have caused the demolition of so many older buildings, as the case has been in Finland. Also the still existing nostalgia many Finns still hold on to, makes the area a popular place to visit. More lately, a Finnish American artist Lisa Roberts has organised events as part of an art project where she has brought together people like young Russian inhabitants of the city, elderly nostalgic Finns, and Finnish architects. The idea behind this series of art projects was to introduce the different groups to each other, and create art specific to time and place, which is not possible to renew or replicate. In these, nostalgics and inhabitants of today meet, and past and present get blurred in the present moment. Most fittingly, the series her art projects began with the title, 'What's the time in Vyborg?' (Kopenkina 2004).

In conclusion, I propose that when people talk about the origins of an architectural, stylistic prototype, it can be revealed that they are actually talking about the origins of Finland as an independent nation. Or, ideas concerning how to, or who has the right to decide about the restoration can culminate to claims over a place and relations between Finland, Russia, and then also with other countries. It has also been pointed to me that when some (Finnish) people talk about the Library, they talk about Vyborg, Karelia, and the 'lost land'. Thus, reality is much more interesting and complex than what might be assumed. What happens, is that it is often difficult to delineate the difference between the Library and the city, for, often these are used to express perceptions of things that are more abstract and of much greater scale. One explanation for why just the Library and the process of its restoration could have become a kind of culmination point for multiplicity of issues, is that while the city and people connected to it have experienced such radical historical cuts, at the same time, the Library ties in local and international interest, while it has kept its function as a public space and as such, offers a solid, material reference point for many abstract things.

Hence, this case illustrates use how complex understandings can be attached to a single building. Moreover, I propose that this is what keeps the 'case alive': it is only because there are different and even conflicting ideas related to the building and the city that 'keep the ball rolling'. It is exactly because of the questions like whose history the Library and the city reflect? Is the building most important because it is a popular municipal library, or as an ideal typical case of an architectural style? Or, how different in the end are the Soviet and Finnish/foreign perceptions of this place, which for so long were based on Soviets experiencing the physical city versus the outside world having only images and stories about it?

The last news about the Library are that after almost 20 years of restoration, the Russian Government has expressed its interest in the building. This statement was made by Russia's prime minister Vladimir Putin to Tarja Halonen, the previous president of Finland near the end of her term, pointing again to the Library's role in relations between the two countries. "During 2010 the Government of the Russian Federation will finance the completion of the restoration with 6,7 million euros."
(<http://www.alvaraalto.fi/viipuri/restorat.htm>)



Aalto Library, Vyborg. Roof. Photo: Laura Berger.

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