

# Aalto and history

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In the present seminar the history of Alvar Aalto's work is being dealt with on many different levels. As an introduction, I should like to discuss Aalto's relationship with history. Many of the presentations over the course of the seminar will no doubt take these issues further.

What do we know about Aalto's formative years as an architect? During the period he was studying at the Helsinki Institute of Technology, 1916-1921, the teaching there had a strong emphasis on history: examples from the antiquities beckoned as a foundation for everything new. (Fig 1)



Fig 1. Alvar Aalto in 1916. Photo: Schildt, Göran: *The Early Years*, p. 75.

Nevertheless, those teachers considered important by Aalto were, according to Göran Schildt, above all important as pedagogues of attitudes: Usko Nyström, who taught the history of architecture of the antiquities and Middle Ages, emphasised the values of modesty, humanity, vitality, comfort and practicality. Armas Lindgren, who taught more recent architectural history, awoke a love in Aalto for Italian Renaissance architecture and an understanding of the organic thinking of Jugend architecture.<sup>1</sup> In the paintings he made during his youth Aalto often portrayed historically layered urban milieus. In an early informal article from 1921, "Benvenuto's Christmas Punch", Aalto describes eating a Christmas meal in a palace designed by Bramante, sharing a table with Benvenuto Cellini, Carl Ludvig Engel, André Le Notré and the architect of the pyramids, as well as his contemporaries Eliel Saarinen and Carolus Lindberg. Toasts are made to beauty, building and demolition. The young Aalto in the story cannot reach an understanding with Engel.<sup>2</sup>

It was not only cultured teachers who played an important role in the teaching of architecture but also the measuring of vernacular buildings: all architecture students at that time became acquainted with the Finnish building heritage by measuring and drawing it. In the 1910s besides large monuments such

as castles and stone churches, also wooden churches and belfries of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as neoclassical wooden towns were surveyed; the influence of vernacular architecture has indeed been important for modern architecture in Finland. Aalto applied models from wooden neoclassical architecture in his early designs for private houses. In a 1922 article “Motifs from past ages” he discussed the difference between national and international influences. For him it was important that *that* which had come from foreign influences would change in accordance with local conditions into something new, yet however be Finnish in character. The discussion of national identity was important in many ways for the young nation.

The entire young generation of architects was divided during the 1920s also in their interest in classicism and Italy. Aino and Alvar Aalto left on their honeymoon in 1924 to Florence and Venice, the latter becoming Aalto's favourite city. Aalto projected Italian influences into his early urban visions and church designs. Both Italian hill towns and the composition of the Acropolis in Athens can be seen as sources of inspiration in his proposal for the Töölö Church competition in 1927. One can equally find influences from Gunnar Asplund and the so-called “serliana” motif familiar in Finnish 18<sup>th</sup> century churches in the Jyväskylä Workers' Club (1925). The foyer to the theatre of the Workers' Club radiates in Pompeian colours and the decorations of the curved wall are borrowed from Alberti's Rucellai Chapel in Florence. (Fig 2a, 2b)

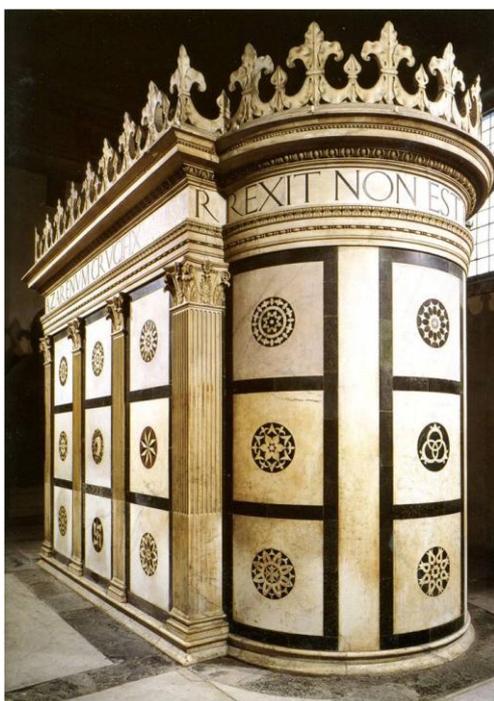


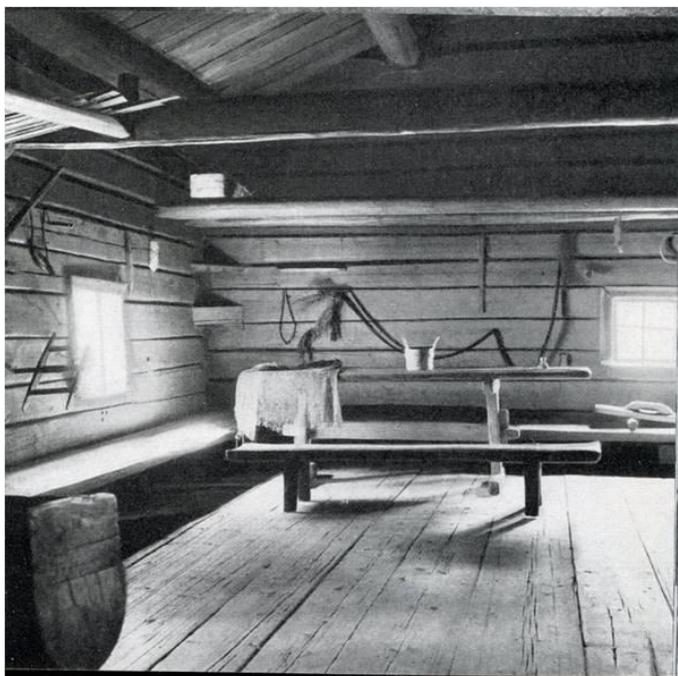
Fig 2a: Alberti's Rucellai Chapel in Florence. Photo: Morolli, Gabriele: Leon Battista Alberti, Florence and Tuscany. *Itineraries through Architecture and Ideas*. Fig 2b: Jyväskylä Workers' Club. Photo: Martti Kapanen / AAM.

In his 1926 article “From doorstep to living room”, which has become a classic, Aalto discusses the relationship between the interior and exterior. He defines the spatial series of a dwelling, beginning with the Pompeian atrium house and the way in which a centrally placed hall can be described as a space under the open sky.<sup>3</sup> This became a theme that Aalto used in numerous variations, from the house he designed for his brother Väinö to the internal courtyard of the Rautatalo commercial building

(1957) in Helsinki. The key words in Aalto's writings are, as I see it, atmosphere and mood - more enduringly meaningful to Aalto as concepts than any stylistic borrowings.

Aalto's turn to functionalism was rapid. The architecture of modernism has been described as an escape into the future, even revenge at the past. Aalto, who had joined the vanguard of modern architecture in around 1928, initially repeated the slogans of functionalism and as a warning example spoke of "worshipping a form world based on temporary emotional forces". Already after a few years, however, Aalto presented statements that were opposite to the mainstream. Central in these was the emphasis on psychological viewpoints in opposition to the mechanical-technical thinking of functionalism as well as replacing a "scientific" approach with intuition. He also raised the individual to the same level as the community as the object and subject of architecture. According to Schildt, Aalto was curtailed from the straightforward approach of functionalism by "the gift of doubt" and the need for empirical proof; Kirmo Mikkola speaks in regard to Aalto about the "worldview of doubt".

The nationalistic tone of the politics that swept through Europe in the 1930s was also reflected in Finnish architecture: vernacular elements such as the round-log architecture and decorative motifs of Karelianism were often applied in rather artificial ways. Aalto had a different approach. In his architecture, too, it is possible to see a kind of "homecoming": he freely drew on themes from vernacular architecture, mixing these with the form language of international functionalism. The workers' housing in Sunila and Kauttua, Aalto's own house in Munkkiniemi and the luxurious private house of Villa Mairea received vernacular additions: dark-tarred wood cladding, traditional pole fencing, and the warmth of wood generally as a material. The living room of Villa Mairea became a variation of the traditional Finnish "tupa", the main room of the farmhouse, and perhaps a reflection of the iconic Niemelä croft at the Seurasaari open-air museum or the Hvitträsk Jugend castle. (Fig 3a, 3b, 3c) Thus Aalto returned to the ideas that he presented in the 1920s about how that which had come from foreign influences would change in accordance with local conditions into something new, yet however be Finnish in character.



*Fig 3a. Niemelä croft at the Seurasaari open-air museum. Photo: Wickberg, Nils Erik: Finnish Architecture. 1959, p.55.*



Fig 3b. Living room, Villa Mairea. Photo: Maija Holma / AAM.

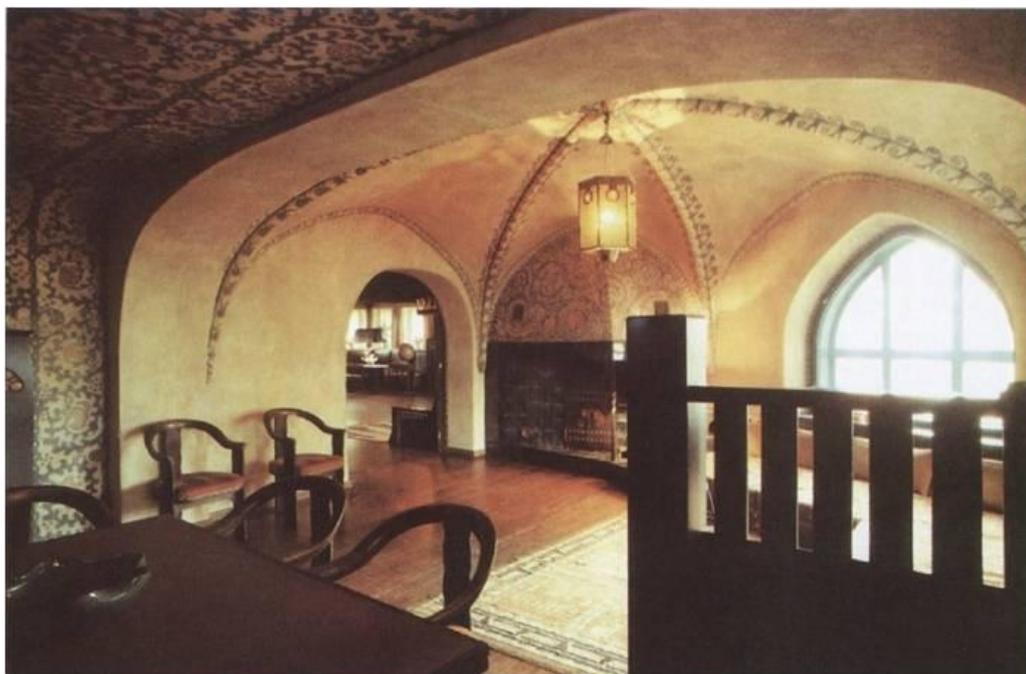


Fig 3c. Hvitträsk Jugend castle. Photo: Moorhouse, Jonathan; Carapetian, Michael; Ahtola-Moorhouse, Leena. Helsingin jugendarkkitehtuuri 1895–1915.

The period after the Second World War, in the form of the International Style, meant a lack of history; according to American architect Philip Johnson, history was a “crutch” that is no longer valid. Aalto was the exception, in whose works references to history began to emerge already in the 1950s. It was no longer, however, a question of grafting individual motifs but of a richer spectrum of ambiguous associations. In the same way, Aalto’s architecture was in a dialogue-type relationship with its contemporaries – from the façade of the Rautatalo commercial building to Mies van der Rohe’s office building designs or from the Vuoksenniska Church to Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp Chapel, many of his works are discussions with references to history (Fig 4a, 4b). We can also ask whether Aalto’s designs for town halls refer to medieval town halls with their towers. (Fig 5a, 5b) Can we interpret his university campuses as images of classical cities? At least in Otaniemi we find a theatre and acropolis where the administration sits, as well as a Roman ruin in the form of the marble fragments of the library walls. (Fig 6a, 6b) Do the Uspenski Cathedral and Enso-Gutzeit building in Helsinki form a pair similar to St. Mark’s Basilica and the Doge’s Palace in Venice? Is the Finlandia Hall in Helsinki a classical temple, with marble both inside and outside? (Fig 7a, 7b) Did Aalto wish that his city centre designs would develop a similar urban life as he encountered in Italian cities? – I feel certain he did.



Fig 4a. Vuoksenniska Church. Photo: Martti Kapanen / AAM.



Fig 4b. Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel. Photo: ©CSU Sacramento, CSU WorldImages.



Fig 5a. Vincenzo Rustici: Festival in the Piazza del Campo, Siena. Image: Girouard, Marc: Cities & people, a social and architectural history.



Fig 5b. Säynätsalo Town Hall. Photo: Maija Vatanen / AAM.

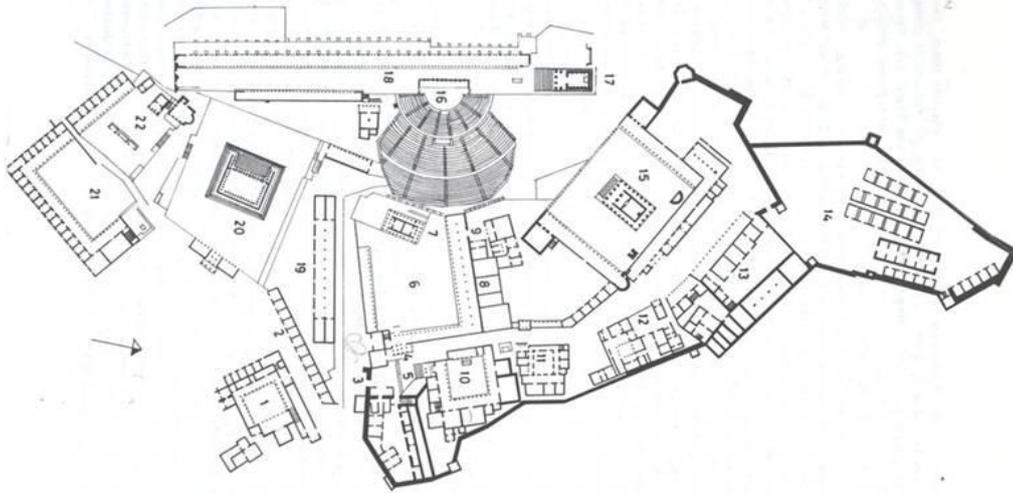


Fig 6a. Pergamon. Martin, Roland: *Greek architecture*, p.185.

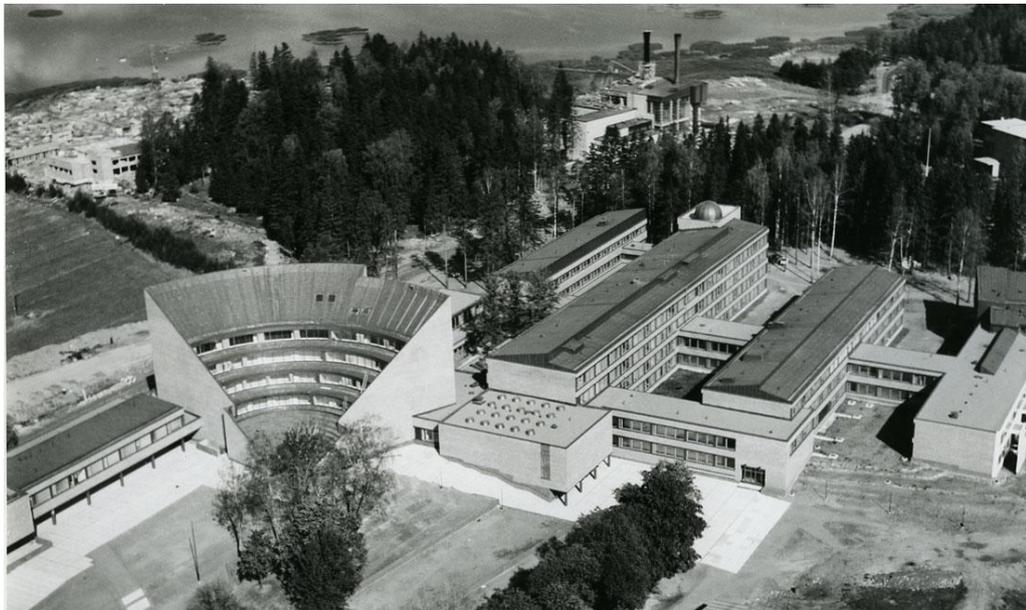


Fig 6b. Otaniemi campus. Photo: AAM.



Fig 7a. A Temple? Photo: Collections of the chair of history of architecture, Aalto University.



Fig 7b. A Temple? Marble inside and outside. Finlandia Hall. Photo: Maija Holma / AAM.



Fig 8a, 8b. A dream of southern citylife. Photo: Collections of the chair of history of architecture, Aalto University.

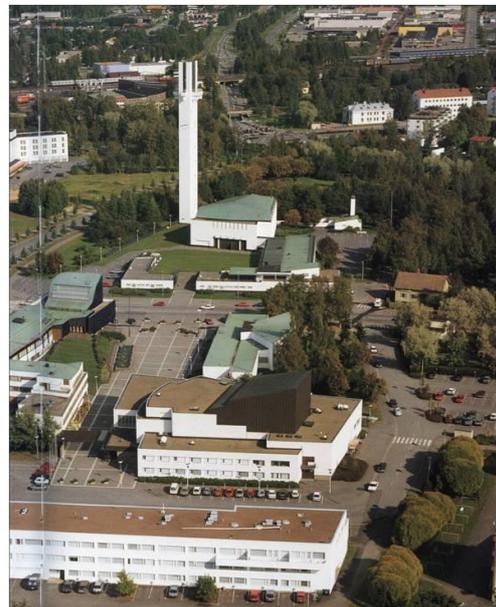


Fig 9a, 9b. The heart of a city. Photos: Collections of the chair of history of architecture, Aalto University (9a). Alvar Aalto: Between humanism and materialism, Simo Rista (9b).

In his later writings Aalto did not return to history or the motifs of the past that he had discussed in his early writings. In a 1940 article "The humanizing of architecture" he expresses his departure from the ideology of the "non-synthetic" and "narrowly analytical" architecture towards a new kind of thinking. It should interpret art and culture in a modern and comprehensive way but at the same time give room to creativity and the subconscious resources of the human psyche: "... architecture is not a science. It is still the great synthetic process of combining thousands of definite human functions and remains *architecture*. Its purpose is still to bring the material world into harmony with human life. ... Architectural research can be more methodical than previously, but the substance of it can never be solely analytical. Always there will be more of art and instinct in architectural research."<sup>4</sup>

Aalto adopted motifs from the existing form repository of architecture and art, and gave them new meanings. Utilising and further developing existing themes corresponded to the central concept of evolution in Aalto's philosophy. Schildt even mentions Aalto's ability to create a comprehensive picture for himself from discordant viewpoints.

And finally: How did Aalto on a more personal level relate to the concept of time? According to those who knew him well, he lived strongly in the present; reminiscing did not seem to interest him, not even about his own creative work. The analysis of it remains our task.

*Translation Gareth Griffiths*

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<sup>1</sup> Schildt 1984, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Schildt 1997, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Schildt 1997, 49-55.

<sup>4</sup> Schildt 1998, 29-30.

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