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The Trout, the Stream, and the Letting-Be.
Alvar Aalto's Contribution to the Poetic Tradition of Architecture

Pekka Passinmäki

associate professor, architect, Ph.D.
Tampere University of Technology
School of Architecture
P.O. Box 600, FI-33101 Tampere, Finland
pekka.passinmaki@tut.fi

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1. Introduction

When man approaches nature technologically, there is an attempt to force nature to serve only the human needs. In the 'poetic approach' the case is perfectly the opposite: man tries to gain a receptive and listening attitude towards nature.[1] The emphasis between poetic and technological approaches has varied at different stages in the history of architecture. Alvar Aalto's contribution to this long tradition is significant.

In the Ancient World man's relation to nature was centred on nature (cosmocentric). The world (the macrocosmos) was seen as an entity organised in accordance with the laws by which also man (the microcosmos) operated. Buildings were seen as a metaphor for the divine architecture of the cosmos. The architecture of the Antiquity was poetic because it represented the same order as that of the whole of reality. The church adopted the cosmology of the Antiquity: medieval theology conjoined tradition of Plato and Aristotle with Christianity. Thus the tradition of poetic architecture continued also throughout the Middle Ages.

In the Modern Era man's relation to nature changed to become an anthropocentric one. Man was seen as primary and nature as secondary. In the modern thinking, as represented by, for example, Galileo, Newton and Descartes, the inherent order of reality began to lose its meaning and the attitude towards nature was based increasingly on man's rational thinking. Man began to become a subject and the world an object, which meant the defragmentation of the reality that previously had been perceived as integrated. In architecture this kind of thinking was first represented by Claude Perrault and Jacques-Nicolas-Louis Durand. The modern rationalistic and technological approach continued in the theories of functionalism and has continued to do so in large part in current postmodern architectural thinking.

Contemporary architecture has brought many improvements to dwelling conditions, but it also has a reverse side: man often feels homeless in the environment created by modern technology and aesthetics. Therefore a return into the poetic architecture is needed. In phenomenological philosophy there has been a systematic attempt to restore contemporary man to a basis more fundamental than technology. German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is the thinker who has discussed most fundamentally the relationship between poetics and technology. In this paper, I will first study Heidegger's philosophy of technology, and after that Aalto's theoretical thinking. In the end, I show that there are many remarkable parallels between Heidegger's and Aalto's thinking concerning the place of technology in the contemporary world.[2]

2. Heidegger's thinking on technology

Heidegger had a lifelong concern with the nature of working and producing. The main manifests of this concern were essays entitled *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954) and *Memorial Address* (1959). Contrary to popular belief, Heidegger did not stand sharply against modern technology. He did not abandon it, because he saw it as a destiny of Being (*Sein*), as a historical epoch (the Modern Era) that was ultimately aroused by Being itself and not by human actions. Because this was the situation, he stated: 'It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil' (Heidegger 1990b: 53).

According to Heidegger it is inappropriate to oppose modern technology. In the beginning of *The Question Concerning Technology* he defined his task as follows: 'We shall be questioning concerning *technology*, and in so doing we should like to prepare a free relationship to it' (Heidegger 1988: 3). The free relationship to technology is most eloquently outlined in his *Memorial Address*, which can be seen as a culmination of his philosophy of technology. Heidegger's speech, given at the memorial ceremony of a relatively unknown German composer Conradin Kreuzer, grows into a highly suggestive reflection of the possibility of non-technological thinking and acting in our modern Western society.

Heidegger describes the proper relationship to technology as 'letting-be' (*Gelassenheit*). In letting-be one paradoxically says 'yes' and 'no' to the technological world. The importance of Heidegger lies particularly in that in his thinking the poetic and the technological are not set completely against each other, but rather the poetic creates a basis for the technological. He describes letting-be as follows:

> *We can use technical devices, and yet with proper use also keep ourselves so free of them, that we may let go of them any time. We can use technical devices as they ought to be used, and also let them alone as something which does not affect our inner and real core. We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature. (…)*

> *We let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside, that is, let them alone, as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher. I would call this comportment toward technology which express 'yes' and at the same time 'no,' by an old world,* ***releasement*** *[letting-be][3]* ***toward things*** *(****die Gelassenheit zu den Dingen****). Having this comportment we no longer view things only in a technical way* (Heidegger 1990b: 54).

Just like ancient Greek *poiesis*, letting-be means allowing things to come into the open of their own accord. Man should not been seen here as an agent that by using force pushes the things together, but as a kind of catalyst which enables something to appear. Greeks called this kind of making *techne*.[4] Letting-be can be seen as a new interpretation of Greek *techne*. But what is it that man has to do, if he wants to let things be?

According to Heidegger there are two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: 'calculative thinking' and 'meditative thinking'. Calculative thinking is the same as rational thinking, and it is characterized by the will to dominate things. Meditative thinking is a completely different approach. It seeks to release from willing and to gain a receptive and listening attitude towards nature. To let things be requires meditative thinking.

In his essay entitled *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking* (1944/45) Heidegger considers in more depth the nature of meditative thinking. As a matter of fact, meditative thinking is basically refraining from thinking (Heidegger 1990a: 62). Finnish phenomenologist Timo Klemola has aptly described the essence of meditative thinking by stating that exercising meditative thinking is in fact a returning to the meditative body. When the mind is calm, the ideas do not rise, and the existence reveals itself in a very concrete way in your own body. There is only man's being in the world and world's being in the man, the sheer event of disclosure (*Ereignis*) (Klemola 2004: 38–39).

To gain a poetic approach, an existential reorientation is needed. Man has to reach a new way of being in the world. Heidegger understood that the creative work rises from the human body, from man's earthly roots. In the letting-be the wisdom of the body has a key role to play.

3. Aalto's theoretical thinking

Aalto was very interested in the technological innovations of his own time, but also aware of the associated risks. According to his biographer Göran Schildt, Aalto had inherited positive attitude towards technology from his father and grandfather, but in their way, he did not see technology as an end in itself, but as a means to improve the quality of life (Schildt 1986: 218). Technology was an important source of inspiration for Aalto, his buildings are full of technological innovations. Nevertheless the basis of his architectural thinking rested firmly on biological analogies, not on machine analogies of the functionalism. Another eminent Finnish Aalto-researcher Kirmo Mikkola describes the roots of Aalto's thinking as follows:

> *Perhaps the most important was the link with the tradition of vitalist philosophy: this viewed creativity as an intuitive process, in which playful experimentation superceded calculating deliberation; it studied man as a part of nature, and subject to nature's laws, and recognized that in the final analysis nature is our teacher, and the omnipotent regulator of life, the purpose of which it is impossible and even unnecessary to explain* (Mikkola 1979: 141).

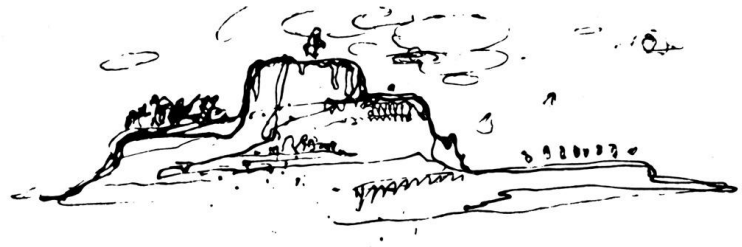
Central terms of Aalto's architectural thinking were *nature*, *man*, and *technology*. Aalto saw reality as a complicated biological system – a system in which all the components affect one another, man being but one component. Man can improve his living conditions, but only in harmony with nature (Schildt 1991: 269–270). In his essay entitled *The Humanizing of Architecture* (1940) Aalto describes the purpose of architecture in this way:

> *But architecture is not a science. It is still the same 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. To make architecture more human means better architecture, and it means a functionalism much larger than the merely technical one. This goal can be accomplished only by architectural methods – by the creation and combination of different technical things in such a way that they will provide for the human being the most harmonious life* (Aalto 1991a: 102–103).

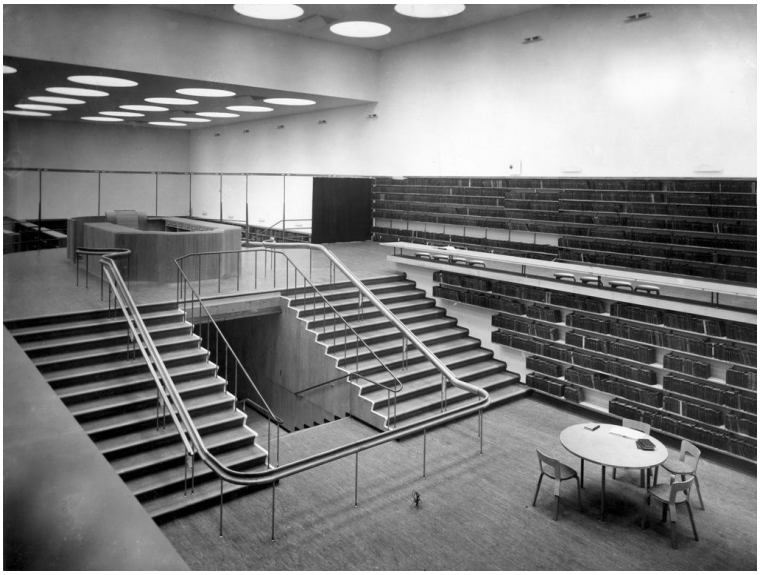
Aalto discusses architecture and creativity in more depth in his article *The Trout and the Stream* (1947). The article is seen as a culmination of Aalto's theoretical thinking. He describes his working method as follows:

> *When I personally have to solve some architectural problem, I am constantly – indeed, almost without exception – faced with an obstacle difficult to surmount, a kind of 'three in the morning feeling'. The reason seems to be the complicated, heavy burden resulting from the way that architectural design operates with countless, often mutually discordant elements. Social, humanitarian, economic, and technological requirements combined with psychological problems affecting both the individual and the group, the movements and internal friction of both crowds of people and individuals – all this builds up into a tangled web that cannot be straightened out rationally or mechanically. The sheer number of various demands and problems forms a barrier that makes it hard for the basic architectural idea to emerge. This is what I do – sometimes quite instinctively – in such cases. I forget the whole maze of problems for a while, as soon as the feel of the assignment and the innumerable demands it involves have sunk into my subconscious. I then move on to a method of working that is very much like abstract art. I simply draw by instinct, not architectural syntheses, but what are sometimes quite childlike compositions, and in this way, on an abstract basis, the main idea gradually takes shape, a kind of universal substance that helps me to bring the numerous contradictory components into harmony.*

> *When I designed the Viipuri City Library (and I had plenty of time, a whole five years), I spent long periods getting my range, as it were, with naive drawings. I drew all kinds of fantastic mountain landscapes, with slopes lit by many suns in different positions, which gradually gave rise to the main idea of the building. The architectural framework of the library comprises several reading and lending areas stepped at different levels, with the administrative and supervisory center at the peak. My childlike drawings were only indirectly linked with architectural thinking, but they eventually led to an interweaving of the section and ground plan, and to a kind of unity of horizontal and vertical construction* (Aalto 1991b: 108).



Alvar Aalto's sketch of a 'fantastic mountain landscape' for Viipuri City Library (about 1929). The ideas of library's layered organization and an inventive lightning solution can be found already in this early drawing. Drawings collection / Alvar Aalto Museum.



Viipuri City Library (Viipuri, Finland 1935). Reading rooms and book collections are connected with staircase. Handrail separates a route for visitors. An ideal diffuse illumination for reading is obtained by placing light sources – the 'many suns' – deep into the circular cylinders. Photo: Alvar Aalto Museum

The core of the story: At a certain moment of the design process Aalto forgets the rational and mechanical thinking and moves into a new relationship with the world. In the same way as so many other artists he trusts in his intention and body consciousness – and when the mind is calm and open the new ideas can rise from this somatic basis. In this stage of the process the conscious mind functions only as a critic of what skillful hands have brought forth.

4. Parallels between Aalto's approach and Heidegger's letting-be

There can be seen many remarkable parallels between Aalto's approach and Heidegger's letting-be. Both thinkers constantly strived for a balance between technology and nature. This they did by trying to understand that mysterious moment when something that has not previously been comes into the world. The mechanisms of this coming can be followed, however, only up to a certain point. The birth in itself is a mystery, which can be described only by means of a metaphor. Aalto described the birth of the architectonic idea by using the metaphor of the trout and the stream:

> *(…) Architecture and its details are in some way all part of biology. Perhaps they are, for instance, like some big salmon or trout. They are not born fully grown; they are not even born in the sea or water where they normally live. They are born hundreds of miles away from their home grounds, where the rivers narrow to tiny streams, in clear rivulets between the fells, in the first drops of water from the melting ice, as remote from their normal life as human emotion and instinct are from our everyday work.*
>
> *Just as it takes time for a speck of fish spawn to mature into a fully-grown fish, so we need time for everything that develops and crystallizes in our world of ideas. Architecture demands even more of this time than other creative work* (Aalto 1991b: 108–109).

Heidegger, too, described the birth of the genuine craft with the biological metaphor and just like Aalto he pointed out that creative work requires training and time:

> *At times it [the meditative thinking] requires a greater effort. It demands more practice. It is in need of even more delicate care than any other genuine craft. But it must also be able to bide its time, to await as does the farmer, whether the seed will come up and ripen* (Heidegger 1990b: 47).

Both thinkers saw that the balance between technology and nature can only be achieved by overcoming technology and rational thinking. They also showed us that it is possible to work in balance with nature and at the same time take into account the technological and practical requirements.

5. Conclusion

Aalto's method that was described previously is generally considered to be highly personal. For example Schildt points out: 'This was a beautiful and logical solution to the problem of Rationalist form, but it was not a formula likely to help other architects to achieve good results' (Schildt 1986: 223). My conclusion is that Aalto's theoretical thinking is not so private; on the contrary it contains general significance, especially when we think of existential and environmental problems caused by contemporary technology.

I am not saying that everybody should start to make 'naive drawings', but if an architect in a successful way can take possession of his body and its pre-theoretical meanings, it might be the key to an architecture, in which the poetic dimension can be achieved. However, this much is clear: Aalto is an example of an architect who could let things be.

[1] Commonly we connect the term 'poetic' with poetry. We understand poetic first of all as a literary concept. Of course the term has this meaning, too, but the original meaning of the word is much wider. J.O. Urmson describes the different meanings of the term *poiesis* as follows: (1) In the widest use the term is used of any doing or making: 'Whether things done (*poiematon*) or things suffered (*pathematon*)' (Plato *Republic*: 437b). (2) In a narrower use the term is used of making as distinguished from acting: 'In the variable are included both things made and things done; making (*poiesis*) and acting (*praxis*) are different' (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1140a 1–2). (3) In its narrowest use it is used specifically of poetry and its composition: 'I propose to treat of poetry (*poietikes*) in itself and of its various kinds' (Aristotle *Poetics*: 1447a 8–9). (Urmson1990: 136–137) In this paper I use the term in the second above-mentioned meaning: *poiesis* means 'making'. (See also note 4 below.)

[2] This article bases on my Ph.D. dissertation *Arkkitehtuurin uusi poetiikka. Fenomenologinen tutkimus teknologian ylittämisen mahdollisuudesta nykyarkkitehtuurissa* [A New Poetics of Architecture:a phenomenological study of the possibility of overcoming technology in contemporary architecture] (2011) where I have studied Heidegger's poetic approach to architecture and Alvar Aalto and Peter Zumthor as representatives of this new poetics.

[3] In this edition German *Gelassenheit* is translated as an old English word 'releasement', but nowadays an established translation of the word is 'letting-be'.

[4] Aristotle defined the connection between *poiesis* and *techne* as follows: 'Making (*poiesis*) and acting (*praxis*) being different, art (*techne*) must be a matter of making, not of acting' (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1140a 16–17). In Greek *techne* meant both 'art' and 'craft' and there was no separation between technology and art. *Techne* meant all making.

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