

The Aalto Card in the Conflict between Postmodernism and the Modernist Tradition in Finland

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play the — — card to introduce a specified issue or topic in the hope of gaining (esp. political) advantage, by appealing to the sentiments or prejudices of an audience.¹

1. Introduction

During the excited years of postmodernism, one of the lines of argumentation in Finland was to plead for the existence of an inherently Finnish architectural style: functionalism, or more generally, modernism. Within this debate, Alvar Aalto was eagerly used as a weapon to discriminate between the proper and the improper viewpoints. Interestingly enough, he was used by both camps. For both the Modernists and the Postmodernists, Aalto was an exemplary figure but depending on the agenda, his example directed towards a different direction.

This paper is based on my on-going doctoral research on postmodernism in Finnish architecture. By analysing a small selection of articles, I shall discuss how Aalto's architecture was described and how versatile a role he had in the architectural discourse in Finland in the 1970–90's.

The concept of postmodernism

My interpretation of the concept of postmodernism is three-fold. Firstly, postmodernism is, quoting Umberto Eco, *"the age of the lost innocence"*: an epoch characterised by double-coding, irony and ambiguity and a transition to a post-industrial or late-capitalist social order in Western culture in the late 20th century (Jencks, 2011; Nesbitt, 1996: 21–28; Jameson, 1993: 64). Its temporal borders are debatable: one of its symbols is the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St Louis (1972), but the energy crisis of the 1970's, the nuclear power-plant accidents at Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986), the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York (2001) as well as the credit crunch and the fail of Lehman Brothers in 2008 have also been regarded as emblematic landmarks of the postmodern era (Lencks, 2011: 27; Nesbitt, 1996: 21; Baudrillard, 2001).

Secondly, postmodernism is an orientation of thought and as a concept, acts as a headline for a number of critical perspectives towards 20th century modernism. The most notable theoretical paradigms for the new condition of knowledge were phenomenology, semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Neo-Marxism and Pop Art. These frames-of-thought aimed at challenging the techno-rational ideology, lack of historical perspective, belief in the future, the dominance of one creator-artist, and mono-cultural thinking prevailing in the arts, the sciences and the society (Nesbitt, 1996: 28–40; Lyotard, 1979; Portoghesi, 1982; Portoghesi, 1983).

Only thirdly, postmodernism is (or rather, was) a distinctive architectural style a.k.a Po-Mo. It proclaimed the death of modern architecture, underlined the role of architecture as a form of symbolic communication, and experimented with the neglected elements of architectural expression such as Classicism, kitsch, eclecticism, and vernacularism. Its distinctive features are the figurative use of the column, the use of historical references and other associations, a return to a smaller scale, multifaceted form language, the use of cabled roofs, eaves, chimneys and weathervanes, windows of geometric forms very different from the abstract window strips and curtain walls of modernism, distinctive entrances highlighted with porticos and canopies, as well as the use of symmetry, ornamentation and colour (Venturi, 1966; Venturi et al., 1988; Jencks, 1987; Jencks, 1991).

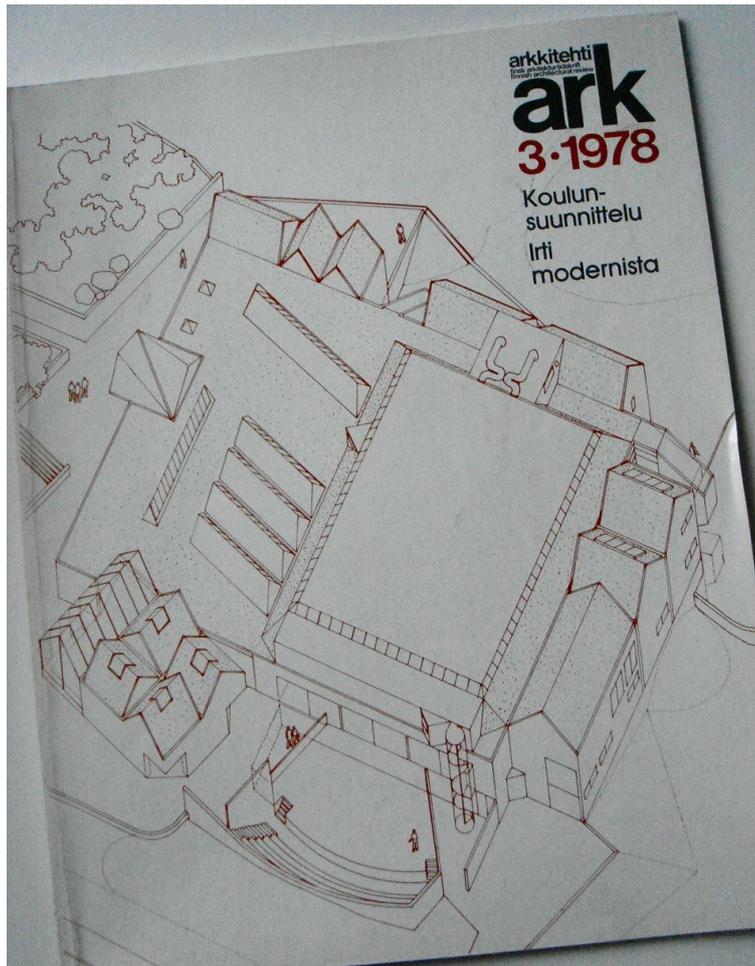


Saloila daycare centre, Oulunsalo @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Ilpo Väisänen and Kyösti Meinilä, 1984–1987.

2. Postmodernist currents arrive in Finland

In Finland, the Finnish Architectural Review *Arkkitehti* reviewed new, postmodern projects and theories already in the 1960's. In the 1970's, the architectural community were introduced to the ideas of Team 10, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Robert Venturi, Christopher Alexander, Rob Krier, Charles Moore and Aldo Rossi. In the 1980's, *Arkkitehti* also published interviews of key international figures of the postmodernist scene: Michael Graves, Kenneth Frampton, Richard Meyer, Maurice Culot, James Stirling and Charles Correa to name a few.

One of the earliest domestic overviews on postmodern thought was architect Pekka Helin's article *Away with the modern: contemporary views in architecture* published in *Arkkitehti* in 1978 (Helin, 1978). Here, Helin criticised dogmatised functionalism and introduced *Arkkitehti's* readers to the recent tendencies such as eclecticism, neo-traditionalism and collage. For him, however, post-modern as a concept did not define a trendy style, but acted as a label for an existing "*reactionary chaos*" that sought new ideological basis from Venturi's 1966 gentle manifesto and Charles Jencks's pluralism.



The cover of the Arkkitehti magazine 3/1978 featuring the purchased competition entry for the Nordens Hus, Faroe Island by Juhani Pallasmaa. The title of Helin's essay makes it to the cover: "Irti modernista" [Away with the modern].

As to the question of where to direct Finnish architecture, he ended his article with a reference to Aalto's article from 1940. According to Helin, the Finns should oppose to architectural trends, stay true to the principles of Aalto's architecture and follow his path to 'true functionalism':

"Instead of following pragmatically and humbly the international trends, Finnish architecture could take off by trusting in Aalto's heritage and seek its strength within 'true functionalism'. Our time demands a discussion on architecture's future programme: how do local and special aspects relate to the international and universal experience; what is the relationship between a historical experience with contemporary development; and what are the means of architecture to respond to the new social demands and to reflect the reality of today" (Ibid.: 37).

3. Aalto in 1976 and the kaleidoscope of attributes

Alvar Aalto's demise in May 1976 coincided with the ideological turbulence of the time. His demise marked a symbolical moment: an era had ended, a new one was to be created and directed in a prosperous future.

Roger Connah quotes Reima Pietilä's description of the prevalent situation after 1976. It was as if a huge tree with a dense and dark shadow had fallen and left a vast, empty, and unnerving clearing in the thicket. *"The shadow was gone, the forest open. A silence followed. Initially there was dancing in the architectural offices. Momentarily few grieved, but only momentarily. The gatherers could re-group. History and individuals realigned themselves, opportunities shifted ground; the legend could be reconstructed"* (Connah, 2005: 244).²

The first flood of reflections on the Aalto heritage were published in the special Aalto issue in *Arkkitehti*. The issue comprised of 24 essays by a variety of esteemed architects, theorists and critics who all underlined Aalto's influence on both Finnish and international architecture. The domestic writers included such versatile names as Kirmo Mikkola, an erudite and angry young leftist and former editor-in-chief of *Arkkitehti*; Hilding Ekelund, the grand-old-man for *architettura minore* and sober functionalism; and Reima Pietilä, an undefinable individualist altogether. Among the international contributors, the most prominent figures were Robert Venturi, Alison and Peter Smithson, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Christian Norberg-Schulz.

The choice of contributors in the Aalto issue reflected amazing open-mindedness and impartiality from the editors' side. Already here we can see how versatilely Aalto could be used to promote various ideologies and how open his architecture was to a multitude of interpretations. Each contributor moulded Aalto to fit his own approach to architecture.

Genius loci, complexity and contradiction

For example, Christian Norberg-Schulz, whose phenomenological approach towards architecture played an enormous role in translating the postmodern philosophy into new, postmodern architectural thinking, focused on the genius loci of Aalto's architecture.

Following the argumentation in his two books, *Intentions in Architecture* (1965) and *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971), Norberg-Schulz saw Aalto's architecture as a form of poetry that exemplified perfectly what he meant by the Heideggerian *Dasein* and by his reading of the purpose of architecture to concretise the existential space of the human being. *"The role of the architect is to make people see the special nature of the location"*, Norberg-Schulz wrote. *"Aalto was a singer; he expressed a dream and gave us roots"* (Arkkitehti 1976: 50).

The harbinger of the postmodern turn, Robert Venturi, read Aalto through the two lenses of complexity and contradiction and underlined the tensions and the openness of interpretation in Aalto's architecture. Its human qualities showed in his free plan and the use of natural wood and red brick.

For Venturi, Aalto was Palladio of our time. His architecture used conventional elements but they were organised in an unconventional way; it was based on tension rather than serenity or drama of consistency; and it derived from exceptions or distortions to the order. *"Aalto himself has become an Andrea Palladio of the Modern movement, a mannerist master but in a low key (...). The quality of Aalto's elements comes not from their originality or purity, but from their deviations – sometimes very light, sometimes gross – in their form and context"*, Venturi wrote (Ibid.: 66).

Individualism and expressionism

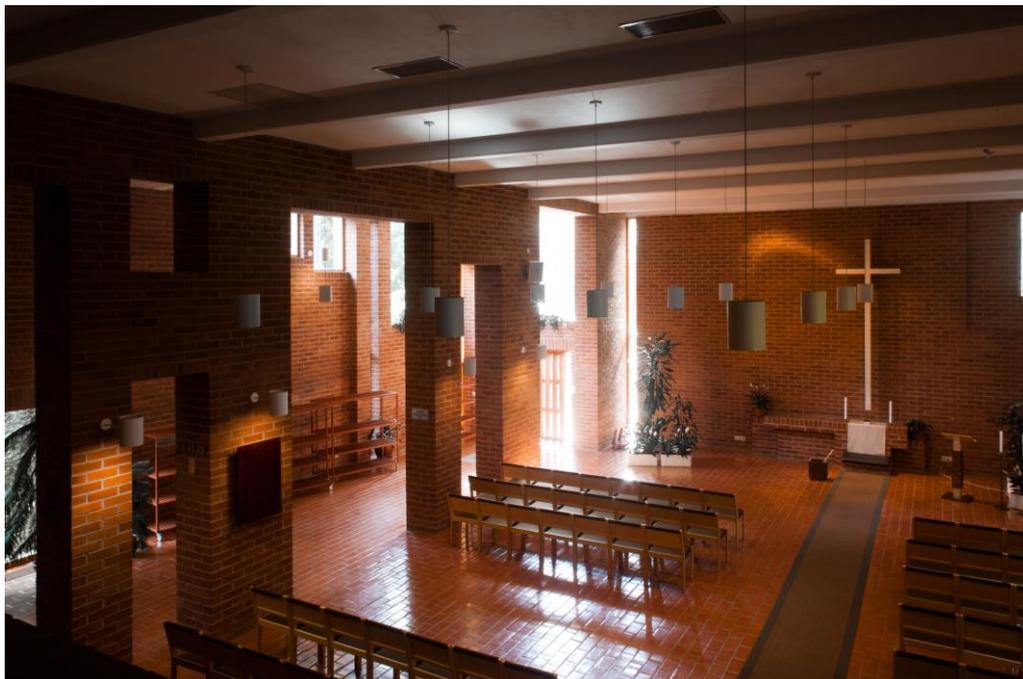
Norberg-Schulz and Venturi attested to the openness of interpretation in Aalto's architecture, but amongst the domestic writers, Aalto was given more and more the role of the guiding light of Finnish architecture. This shows well in Kirmo Mikkola's contribution.

Mikkola had earlier accused Aalto of favouring the individual instead of the democratic collective and for his preference of artisan techniques over industrial methods. In a special Finland issue of *Le Carré Bleu* in 1971, Mikkola had criticised the housing project of the Sunila pulp mill as an attempt to cherish *"a garden city idyll in the forest"* rather than an attempt to seek a universally applicable solution to large-scale housing problems (Mikkola, 1971).³ In an unpublished lecture from 1969, Mikkola saw Aalto even to have succumbed to a *"baroque manner of expression"* (Mikkola, 1971: 4) during his late years and thus become *"such an institution that he has little influence on the direction of development... a respectable figure but not a role model"*.⁴

In the Aalto issue of *Arkkitehti* as well as in his later works,⁵ however, Mikkola portrayed Aalto as an intuitive artist and a prominent intellectual. He admired Aalto's individualism, his love for the 'little man in the street', his ambivalent attitude to politics and how his architecture was uniquely Finnish in feeling but still lacked any nationalistic endeavours (Arkkitehti 1976: 20–21).

The turn in Mikkola's thinking is striking, but can be explained with the situation in the mid 1970's. Modern architecture was in a state of utter confusion, the postmodern thought put pressure to reinvigorate both architectural thinking and expression, but the ideology of the New Left of the 1960's could not digest postmodernist ideas associated with consumerism, capitalism and the emerging Neo-Conservatism.

For the leftist Mikkola, who already had favoured constructivism and called for architecture with a social mission, Aalto's architecture, despite classified as individualist, elitist and expressive, was also a token of architecture that had been unyielding to fashion, functionalist and humane. Like Helin quoted above, Mikkola saw Aalto's value in the fact that Aalto had taken his own path very early on and how the real gem was in *"his architectural philosophy, his wise and humane views of the relations between architecture, nature and man."*⁶



Early postmodern thinking for modest and humane architecture. Törnävä chapel and crematory, Seinäjoki @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architect Heikki Taskinen / Arkkitehtitoimisto Arktos 1979, competition 1972.

4. The Oulu School and Aalto's regionalism

In the late 1970's, the emergence of a spirited Oulu School of architecture established around the then professor Reima Pietilä at the Oulu University Department of Architecture brought a new angle to the debate.

The young Oulu graduates described the Finnish scene as an academic, theoretical and "*bigoted strive to express the Spirit of the Age*" (Niskasaari et al., 1981: 40). Their interests resided in regionalism, postmodernism and Karelianism, and one of their missions was to develop a new relationship between architecture and the public: to listen to their needs and heed their values. Besides Aalto, their idols were Reima Pietilä and Frank Lloyd Wright (Ylimaula et al., 1993: 11).

Pietilä himself had for long opposed the Miesian box-and-the-grid paradigm prevalent from the late 1950's onwards. He called for a more liberal and variegated architecture. For Pietilä, "*architecture should promote local ties; architecture is various degrees of continuation of nature and it should correspond to the symbolic function of dependence*" (Pietilä, 1967b: 24).⁷ He saw Aalto as an example of how to promote innovative, idiosyncratic and ever-up-to-date good and real architecture. In order to survive as an architect in an ever-changing world, one should not hide behind dogmatic stylistic norms (Pietilä, 1967a; Pietilä and Connah, 1981).



The icon of the Oulu School: Oulunsalo town hall @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Kari Niskasaari, Reijo Niskasaari, Kaarlo Viljanen, Ilpo Väisänen and Jorma Öhman, 1982.

Whilst for the Helsinki based modernists Aalto served as role model for true functionalism, for the Oulu School, Aalto provided a model for a less severe, regionalistic and humanistic architecture in a situation where contemporary modernism was *"not even a style but an intolerant attitude"* (Niskasaari et al., 1981: 41; Ylimaula et al., 1993: 88–94). The Oulu School was inspired by Aalto's use of brick, sense of tradition and landscape, and organic form language. Aalto's architecture, such as the Finlandia Hall (1971), also seemed to enjoy public appreciation whereas the establishment often took a more scornful attitude especially towards Aalto's late projects.⁸



Kiuruvesi town hall @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architect Kari Niskasaari, competition 1979, finished 1984.

5. Our future lies in modernism

The Oulu School's line of argumentation for postmodern architectural thinking was soon attacked as un-Finnish and inauthentic. Despite the Oulu School's interest in Pietilä and Aalto and the regionalistic and vernacular overtones of Finnish postmodernism in general, postmodernist architecture was regarded as – quoting Markku Komonen, the editor-in-chief of *Arkkitehti* in the early 1980's – "*a purely American phenomenon, which cannot reasonably be exported elsewhere as a style*" (Komonen et al., 1980: 24). The reading of postmodernism as an imported style tuned the question of contemporary architecture into a question of deviation from or allegiance to the modernist canon of Finnish architecture.



A postmodern offshoot of the modernist tradition interpreting the traditional Finnish way of building; organic constellation of small scale blocks around a courtyard, slanted roofs, red ocher clapboard with white corner boards. Onnimanni daycare centre, Säköylä @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Kari Järvinen and Timo Airas, 1980.

Juhani Pallasmaa, the then director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, pronounced plainly that "*our future lies in modernism*": "*In the Nordic countries(...) modernism has become a tradition – one might even say an attitude to life – which it would be senseless to question(...)* In response to the question of how to invigorate architecture in its evident state of stagnation, Pallasmaa turned down the postmodernist option but, instead, called for a softer and less alienated modernism: "*We do not need an architectural revolution; on the other hand, an enriching and deepening of stereotyped modernism is necessary also in Europe*" (Pallasmaa, 1980: 48).⁹

In 1981, following a seminar on the future of modernism, a group of esteemed Finnish architects published a solemn public statement rephrasing Pallasmaa's view. It appealed to the Finnish national sentiment and emphasised the deep-rooted position of modernism typical for the Finnish lifestyle and culture.

The correct path, in short, was not postmodernism but the refurbishment of modernism. *"The Modern Movement is a firm tradition in its own right and is capable of further reformation, transformation and refinement. The means of modern architecture are being liberated to meet the challenges of our time"* (Gullichsen et al., 1981).



A lobby becomes a picturesque street with postmodern articulation. Toholampi town hall, 2nd floor @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Kari Niskasaari, Reijo Niskasaari, Kaarlo Viljanen, Ilpo Väisänen and Jorma Öhman (NIVÖ), 1987.

Re-establishing Aalto with polyphony and critical regionalism

How then could one build on the modernist tradition and yet meet the challenges of our time?

Although Venturi had, as quoted above, described Aalto as Palladio of our time, the Finnish modernists did not see the connection but wanted to develop something that would be more "*neo-Aalto rather than neo-Palladio*". The 'less is more' -ism of modernism contained a danger of reducing architecture down to nothingness. The 'more is more' -ism included a risk of overloading the environment with too much stimuli (Gullichsen, 1980).

Aalto himself had stepped aside from the dogmatic canon of functionalism already in 1930's. Now, this uncontaminated Aalto tradition together with his organic form language, empathic humanism and modest rationalism would provide a perfect formula. Pekka Helin's wording for this interpretation was 'polyphony': "*Part of another kind of modernism, the architecture of Alvar Aalto has a substance of a polyphony very much alive, a polyphony which could show architecture the way out from the dead end it hovers in today*" (Helin, 1981: 146).

Kenneth Frampton's essay *Towards a critical regionalism: six points for an architecture of resistance* provided further methods to weave the way through the demands for more regionalistic and meaningful architecture. For Frampton, critical regionalism involved a more direct dialectical relation with nature than the more abstract, formal traditions of modern avant-garde architecture allowed.

However, critical regionalism would diverge from the "*simple minded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular*" that was taking place within postmodernism. Frampton emphasised a reading of the architectural experience as a bodily and tactile and not just a visual one. Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall was presented as a brilliant example of such tactile sensitivity (Frampton, 1983: 21, 26, 28–21, 26, 29).¹⁰ More accurately, if we infused the functionalistic package with postmodern thought such as phenomenology, then we would have the perfect formula for new Finnish architecture.

6. The cool Helsinki school

The use of Aalto's architecture as a safeguard and a reference point had already at the beginning of the 1980's created a trend to use direct references or allusions to Aalto in new building-¹¹ This was not merely welcomed: architecture should not succumb to too direct an imitation; this was exactly what postmodernism had been censured for. Kenneth Frampton recognised the problem in the 2nd edition of his *Modern Architecture a Critical History* in 1985 as he identified "*a painstaking elaboration and inflection of Aaltoesque organicism*" (Frampton, 1992: 331).



University of Joensuu, lobby @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Jan Söderlund and Erkki Valovirta, 1979.

A more successful route to 'neo-Aalto' resided in neo-functionalism: the revival of the aesthetics of early modernism. *The Architectural Review* celebrated the emergence of the "cool Helsinki school" in a theme issue in March 1990. The issue presented recent works by contemporary offices and the "project of revivifying Modernism. It looks as if Aalto's mighty presence has at last been re-assessed: contemporary architects are no longer in rebellion against a father figure but can draw from his work without being overwhelmed."



Poleeni Civic Centre, Pieksämäki, view from the lobby @ Anni Vartola 2010. Architects Gullichsen – Kairamo – Vormala, 1989.

In his critique of the Poleeni Civic Centre at Pieksämäki, Colin St. John Wilson praised Kristian Gullichsen's reading of the tradition of 65 years of Modernism as an intellectual and artistic goldmine. According to Wilson, "in so far as the work of Aalto and [Erik] Bryggman contributed its own inflection to that rapidly evolving language, so the claim by the current generation of architects in Finland to draw upon the ensuing tradition at source has the simple authority of a birthright."¹²



Government Office Building, Rauma @ Anni Vartola 2011. Architects Olli-Pekka Jokela and Pentti Kareoja, 1992.

Undoubtedly, neo-functionalism inspired a few fine new buildings, but would a return to early Aalto and the early 20th century architectural style really be the solution for Finnish architecture? Architect Markku Komonen, one of the doyens of Finnish architecture of the 1990's, found it necessary to remind the Finnish audience about the unyielding progressiveness of Aalto's spiritual heritage.

His short commentary entitled *Our problem: Alvar Aalto* was published in 1991. Komonen found it tiresome to see his colleagues to dwell on Aalto and functionalism "as if they would be some sort of a complex or a personal problem". In his view, the essence of functionalism was fundamentally optimism and willingness to tackle contemporary problems. As a style, neo-functionalism would be banally eclectic as any other neo-style.

R.I.P Alvar Aalto

At the beginning of the 1990's, it was finally time to leave the past and move forward. The one last time Aalto was dug from the grave was in 1993. This time, the Aalto card appeared in the debate around Steven Holl's winning proposal 'Chiasma' for the architectural competition for the Helsinki Museum of Contemporary Art. "Holl's Helsinki banana" was regarded to be too "object-like, introverted and theatrical" and as such, it did not fulfil the functional requirements of an art museum.¹³

Most appallingly, Chiasma was seen to violate the historical principles of openness in the Helsinki urban structure which were fixed by Aalto's Helsinki Centre Plan for the Töölö Bay area in 1961. The master was consulted once more. This time, however, the magic no longer worked. The spell was broken.

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- 1 "play, v.". OED Online. December 2011. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145475?rskey=mxl0Da&result=202> (accessed 1802.2012).
 - 2 Timo Koho addresses the old tree metaphor to Juhani Pallasmaa and his essay in the *Byggekunst* magazine 7/1986. According to Koho, Pallasmaa referred to Aalto as a protective father figure but also as an 'old oak' that had cast its shade over the younger generation. See Koho, 1995: 7.
 - 3 See also Pietilä, 1971; Mikkola, 1974.
 - 4 Unpublished section of a lecture "Suomalaisen arkkitehtuurin ajankohtaisia pyrkimyksiä" [Contemporary goals of Finnish architecture] (1969) in Mikkola, 2009: 19, 22.
 - 5 See e.g. Mikkola, 1978a; Mikkola, 1985.
 - 6 Mikkola's preface in Schildt et al., 1981. See also Pietilä, 1971; Mikkola, 1978b; Mikkola and Kairamo, 1980.
 - 7 See also e.g. Pietilä, 1983; Pietilä, 1967; Pietilä, 1971.
 - 8 "To my understanding, the Finnish public regards Hvitträsk [Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen 1903], Dipoli [Pietilä 1966] and Finlandia Hall [Aalto 1971] as quality architecture, while I have personally heard a professor of architecture claim that Finlandia Hall is an unfinished work of undeveloped scope." Reijo Niskasaari in Ylimaula et al., 1993: 97. See also Koho, 1995.
 - 9 Pallasmaa's essay related to two connected events to outline Finland's position amid the Euro-Atlantic battle: the America Draws exhibition displaying drawings by 26 American architects, and the so-called Schooner Symposium entitled The Future of Modern Movement on the Gulf of Finland.
 - 10 Frampton's essay was published in Finnish in 1989: Frampton, 1989.
 - 11 For examples, see e.g. Koho, 1995: 83–87.
 - 12 Colin St. John Wilson, the Modern Tradition: Three recent urban buildings by Gullichsen & Kairamo & Vormala in Davey et al., 1990: 39. A slightly different version of the text was also published as an introduction to the office monograph Güell, 1990.
 - 13 The Chiasma debate took place on various platforms; see e.g. Helsingin Sanomat newspaper between 19 June 1993 and 5 July 1994. Part of the debate also took place in the Architectural Review. See issues between September 1993 and January 1994. The quotes are from Norri, 1993.

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