

Against Aalto: How the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale had to change into a black box for contemporary video art and how it became a symbol for artists to defeat

Gianni Talamini

architect, PhD
Department of Architecture & Civil Engineering
City University of Hong Kong
Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong
P6424 AC1
Tel: (852) 3442 7618
Email: gianntal@cityu.edu.hk

Title

Against Aalto: how the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale had to change into a black box for contemporary video art and how it became a symbol for artists to defeat.

Abstract

The Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has hosted more than 30 exhibitions since its construction in 1956. Alvar Aalto designed the space as a temporary structure to display conventional Finnish visual art, such as the work of Helene Schjerfbeck. Although being relatively short, the history of the pavilion has been very eventful. The original plan for a temporary building to be dismantled and rebuilt every second year was not followed. Soon after its construction the pavilion instead went through a period of semi-abandonment, being used as a storage space and green house. Only the death of its designer in 1976 brought interest from the general public back to the pavilion for a short time. In the 1990s the dedicated work of Finnish scholars contributed crucially to the conservation both of the building and its history. After the 2000s Finland again started to use the pavilion as a national exhibition space. Since the beginning of the 2010s the wooden construction has often been a contested space between conservators and iconoclasts.

Contemporary art exhibitions and their requirements are very different from those of the 1950s. The exhibitors – in a sort of synecdoche – often see the pavilion as a symbol of what Aalto and his work represents for Finland. In recent years there have been different attempts to fight against the pavilion – more for its symbolism, than for its tangible spatial qualities. Inevitably video art and projections require the exhibition space to become a black chamber, almost completely separated from the outside space and distorting the original spatial balance of the pavilion.

This paper aims to describe how the interior space was conceived in mutual dialogue with the surroundings and how the pavilion is not an architectural object, but rather a sequential system of spatial relationships. It will aim to follow and describe all the various elements and features of the project which were pioneering at the time of the construction, and remain advanced nowadays. Three case studies will be presented in order to discuss the challenges related to the use of this precious example of Venetian and Finnish architectural heritage. This paper seeks to question what remains of Aalto beyond the symbolic content, in other words: what can we still learn from the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale?

1. Introduction

Beginning with his first trips to Italy, Aalto was fascinated not only by the grander architecture he experienced, but also by the so called “architettura minore”. What captured his attention were the relations of the built environment with the embedding landscape, as well as the articulation of open space and the role of the piazza in Italian urban formations. These ideas, captured in sketches, were central in his further approach to design. In fact, in many of Aalto’s works it is possible to recognize some spatial articulation of the Italian or Mediterranean tradition¹. Finally, in 1955 he was able to work in one of the countries that most inspired his design. The occasion was a small pavilion for the Venice Biennale promoted by his beloved friend and business partner Maire Gullichsen. The structure was intended to temporarily host the work of Finnish artists until the erection of a bigger pavilion for all the Nordic countries. Aalto designed the original structure in a short time, during, as Göran Schildt mentioned, one of the busiest periods of Aalto’s life². The pavilion was conceived between the end of 1955 and the beginning of 1956. Minor but significant changes to the building took place during the construction phase in early June 1956. Aalto, present on site with Elissa, modified some small parts of the structure for technical reasons, as well as creating improvements to the original design. The small structure – the only building which Aalto was able to complete in Italy during his life – was originally meant to be temporary. Nevertheless, its spatial configuration is sensitive to its location in the Giardini of Venice.

1.1. The capacity to be dismantled and the lighting system

Most of the words used to describe the pavilion focus on two features: the possibility to be dismantled and the lighting system. Göran Schildt considers both of these features to be failures, despite acknowledging the success of the pavilion in displaying evocative solutions to “real or imagined practical” questions³. When looking at what Göran Schildt regarded as failures it is questionable both Aalto’s responsibilities and whether they should be considered failures nowadays. The fact that the pavilion cannot be dismantled, differing from the original plan, was due to mistakes made during the production of the structure in Finland – with Aalto having no control of this production process. Ironically, this mistake, along with the consequent addition of nails in the structure, is probably one of the main reasons for the structure still existing. Concerning the lighting system, which in 1956 was not providing enough light to the exhibition space – “Only a diffused, green light trickled into the interior, make it looking like a cavern under the sea”⁴ – Aalto can be justified given the photographs of the site that were sent to him via Maire Gullichsen who had obtained these from the Biennale administration. The pictures, captured in winter time, were dated: the surrounding trees did not have vegetation and were much smaller than their actual size at the time. The limited quantity of natural light filtering through the skylight, reflected on the parietal canvas by the complex skylight system designed by Aalto, has been an issue until recent years. In fact in 2011 and 2015 two of the huge trees

¹ Foderaro and Ferrari. 1990.

² Schildt 1991. 8

³ Schildt 1991. 12

⁴ Schildt 1991. 10

collapsed and the canopy which they were providing to the building is no longer there. Although possibly insufficient, the quantity of the light which comes into the building through the skylight was improved.

1.2. Lightness

The lightness of the structure – which Konstantin Grcic defined as a “maquette at one-to-one scale”⁵ when visiting the construction site during restoration works in August 2012 – contributes significantly to the perception of the building. It projects almost a physical immaterial limit – a sort of a wooden membrane – rather than a massive solid volume elevating from the ground. In fact it is the connection with the ground that is somehow very problematic – to the extent that it could be considered a failure. Aalto designed the pavilion as “a combination of the Good Soldier Švejk’s field altar, a Lapp tent, and Palazzo Pazzi”⁶. The first two of these references are related to one of the two architectural themes which Göran Schildt pinpointed as informing the design of the building: “its capacity to be dismantled”⁷. In light of the importance this capacity the building had to lay on the ground, rather than being firmly rooted into it – as is a tent or a portable field altar. Thus Aalto designed the slab as a temporary structure to be positioned on the ground and to be covered by coconut matting. The combination of the ground matting with the linen canvas covering the interior walls would potentially reproduce the cozy feeling of the ethereal organic membrane of a Lapp tent. The change of the original dismountable slab into a concrete one, firmly anchoring the building to the ground, not only represented a burden to its lightness but also became an issue for the maintenance of the coconut matting due to the rising dampness. Throughout the history of the pavilion there have been different unsuccessful attempts to replace the coconut matting, the last by Panu Kaila in 1993⁸. Nowadays a polished concrete slab – echoing the Venetian terrazzo – is exposed to the visitors as an important document of the history of the pavilion and the way in which it moved away from the lightness of a dismountable structure, in so becoming heavily rooted in the Venetian ground.

2. Mutual correlation between interior and exterior spaces

2.1. Open spaces

Rarely have architectural critics focused on the open spaces of the pavilion as a reason for its popularity. In 1955 Aalto was working on several important projects, including the Iron House and the National Pension Institute in Helsinki, as well as the houses in the Hansaviertel for the 1957 Berlin Interbau. Some of these works present commonalities with the pavilion, using some of the elements which were at that time common in Aalto’s language. For example: the patio, and the fan-plan. Of particular interest is the case of the Vuoksenniska church in Imatra, which encompasses – albeit at a different scale – a very similar plan articulation (fig. 1). Due to the limitation in terms of size, the pavilion

⁵ Konstantin Grcic visited the construction site several times during the restoration works in summer 2012. Quoted words are from a dialogue with the author of this paper during one of Grcic’s visit.

⁶ Gullichsen 1991. 17.

⁷ Schildt 1991. 10.

⁸ Kaila. 1997. As stated by Corrado Pedrocco, master-builder during Kaila’s restoration.

being the smallest public building ever designed by Aalto, the use of the outdoor area as an opportunity to articulate the space can be seen as an ineluctable design strategy. From this perspective the small piazza that was defined in front of the main entrance, along with the 30sqm patio on the side of the Hungarian pavilion, form integral parts of the 83sqm room enclosed by the opaque wooden walls.

2.2. A sequential system of spatial relationships

The two outdoors spaces described above are in symbiotic relationship with the interior room: functioning as filtering areas as well as thresholds. They are compact spaces with a high interior-to-edge ratio, and therefore can be interpreted as hiatuses – kinds of spaces in which to slow down, or to take a break. The Giardini of Venice, which were heavily re-designed during the fascist period with the formation of more rigid, geometric rooms are to a certain extent very modern due to their functional distribution of flows through large monotonous boulevards. The redesign turned the original organic distribution of green spaces into a more symmetric and hard defined one in order to convey an idea of monumentality, typical of that time⁹ (fig. 2). Relevant portions of this scheme are nowadays well preserved, examples being the boulevards linking the entrance to the main Biennale venue on one side to the English Pavilion on the other. Another well preserved area is the expansion into Sant'Elena island designed by Brenno del Giudice in the early 1930s¹⁰. The pavilion is located along the corridors of this geometric scheme, functioning as an orthogonal connection between the main boulevard and the Hungarian Pavilion (fig. 3).

This straight gravel path lays on an east-west line. The pavilion, originally located between the green area and the gravel path, offers a pause in the monotonous walk connecting the main axis to the Hungarian Pavilion. The articulation of the space, although quite simple, is extraordinary powerful. Approaching the site from the west and the main boulevard, the pavilion is just a concave façade with only two elements appearing: the white 'Finlandia' sign, and a relatively large door. It seems anchored to the greenery, being placed on the side of the straight path which functions as a vanishing point. Walking towards the pavilion and getting closer to it the space suddenly opens into a sort of piazza, anticipating the entrance and simultaneously diverting the flow from the gravel path into the realm of the pavilion. This space, large enough to host opening ceremonies, gives to the entrance some semblance of monumentality – reproducing at a very different scale the relationship between the Italian piazza and the façade of the church usually overlooking it. When entering this space the visitor's eyes are captured by the interiors opening up to view while the pavilion walls and the greenery function as visual limits, increasing the sensation of being at the barycenter of a large open space. Getting closer to the entrance is almost like stepping into a different condition, somehow separated from the surroundings. A slight difference in level, a gap of about 15 centimeters between the gravel path and the indoor pavement, contributes to this perception. The 'piazza' is the space where the ground level increases until the height of

⁹ The Giardini were originally designed by Gian Antonio Selva in early XIX century.

¹⁰ Mulazzani, 2004. 73-76.

the internal pavement. When stepping on the stone slabs in front of the door the interior space is almost completely visible. On one side a wall, parallel to the gravel path, sharply separates the outdoor public realm from the indoor space. On the opposite side (north side of the building) a wall diverges into the greenery, shaping the fan-plan that Aalto has largely adopted in his architecture. The roofing system incrementally reduces its central height the closer it gets to the east side of the pavilion, while the floor space enlarges – bringing focus to the horizontal level, and consequently to the exhibition walls. At the opposite side of the main entrance the enclosing limits of the building are fragmented and articulated into three parts: a pocket space juxtaposed to the main door, a wall departing orthogonally from the north wall and containing a small rear door, and a central point in which the wooden wall is folding and providing both a junction between the two adjoining parts and a central support (functioning as a column) to the roofing structure. Although being enclosed by nine different walls the room is definitively small and operates as a whole. The small exit to the east opens up to an extraordinary space, masterfully conceived by Aalto. This consists of a small patio, a kind of intimate small garden within the Giardini area. A partition wall frames the light and supports a vine, enclosing a small courtyard in a way that can resemble the articulation of the patio in the Muuratsalo summer house. On the ground, stone slabs are organically stepped into the gravel. The sky is framed by the two white triangles which find their point of junction at 3.5 m above the ground. The view can expand freely into the greenery, and until the main façade of the Hungarian pavilion the accessible space is enclosed by a circular hedge which redirects flow towards the American pavilion (south). This centripetal space is such an integral part of the pavilion that in 1956 Aalto collocated some of his most famous garden furniture in it (fig. 4). The small patio on the east side functions as the central node in the entire articulation of the building. It is not linked to any particular space, or serving as a protrusion or an extension – it is completed in itself. Surrounded by big trees, it opens in a southerly direction allowing the projection of the sunlight – as in a clearance of a forest. Out of the main path, almost hidden by the view of the pedestrians, this space is both a conclusive point of a journey and a place for departures. It is the antithesis to a corridor. When approaching the pavilion from east it is even more clear how the building functions as a transition from the organic and intimate settings of the patio to the more formal public piazza facing the monumental façade of the Biennale main exhibition venue.

There was a time, a few months before the construction of the building, in which the Biennale and representatives of the City of Venice re-discussed the possible location of the pavilion in the Giardini area. A map and written correspondence is still conserved by the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) as tangible documents of this discussion¹¹. Several different locations – sites in which other national pavilions were later erected – were proposed by City Officer Mario Santin to Biennale General Secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini as alternatives for the temporary Finnish structure. Even though the pavilion would still function quite well in many of those locations none of these sites was probably able to provide such ideal conditions as the original one. The pavilion is here

¹¹ Mario Santin to Rodolfo Pallucchini. Post letter, 30.04.1956.

perfectly functioning as a spatial filtering device which seizes a flow and conveys it into a different dimension – expanding the space and suspending time.

3. Pioneering architecture

Although the small pavilion “represents a kind of impromptu or scherzo in the succession of Aalto’s works”¹², it was an occasion for Aalto to develop ideas and solutions which were later used in other projects, and to express his vision of architecture in the most essential way possible. This small wooden construction is in many respects a synthesis of Aalto’s work, as well an important testing ground for him. The following are the main themes of Aalto’s architectural language that informed the design of the pavilion:

1. relationship with the landscape
2. organic functionalism
3. fan-plan.

These are the two experimental aspects:

4. lighting system
5. symbolic value.

3.1. Relationship with the landscape

Aalto’s architecture inflects many Mediterranean urban spaces but it is still in this essence profoundly Finnish. Aalto seldom designed spaces to be located in dense urban environments. His architecture is very often visible and accessible from every direction, never emphasizing a front in opposition to a rear. The entrance to the interior space is often organically inserted into the mass, and is functional to the articulation of the spaces rather than a symbolic threshold. Doing so Aalto was able to integrate indoor with outdoor spaces. His work is often located within a natural context and therefore the outdoor spaces shade into the natural landscape, sometimes almost disappearing, fragmented into it – as in the stairs of Säynätsalo Town Hall, Maison Louis Carré, or Seinäjoki Town Hall. Climatic factors are very important in architecture, and it is probably in the relationship with them that the peculiarity of the work of Aalto should be seen. The average temperatures of Jyväskylä goes over 15°C only three months a year, while being under 1°C on average for five other months. Furthermore, when the good season comes Finns typically spend their time in nature, far from urban areas. In this light, it is evident how the focus of an architect raised in such a context is on the space mostly used by locals: the indoors. Another important element related to climate is light, whose quantity and quality is in Finland very different from that of the Mediterranean. Sunlight here is neither strong nor warm; it has a strong horizontal component, with the path of the sun often low on the horizon, rarely dropping dramatic shadows. While Mediterranean buildings are traditionally intended to protect their inhabitants from the strong and hot sunlight, Nordic architecture – particularly that of Aalto – is designed to capture light and to functionally tame it for specific purposes (fig. 5). Looking at all these aspects the pavilion is a perfect synthesis of Aalto’s approach. It is set into the landscape seeking a

¹² Schildt 1991. 12.

dialogic relationship, and it is accessible from different sides, being completely surrounded by accessible walk paths. It is focused on its indoor spaces and its skylights are design to capture the natural light and to re-direct it to the exhibition walls.

3.2. Organic functionalism

From the above description of the articulation of the space of the pavilion as a sequence of rooms it is possible to draw a consideration that can fit to many of the works of Aalto. In Europe during *ancien régime* space – both indoor, and outdoor – was conceived as a sequential series of room-connection-room, rather than a connecting system which distributes the flow into different rooms. Modernity extensively used this second arrangement, making of the corridor the most important element in spatial design¹³. Borrowing a definition from a different field, the first system can be associated with the series circuit, while the second with a parallel one. Walking through the urban spaces of Venice, as well inside historic Venetian palaces, it is possible to experience the sequence room-connection-room expressed in various form, such as campo-calle-campo. Conversely, our modern peripheries are structured by a distributive system of corridors connected to cul-de-sac rooms. Aalto was able to make full use, within modernism, of the room-connection-room, or even room-room-room, as in the case of the pavilion.

3.3. Fan-plan

“The wedge, or fan plan, which appears as early as 1929 in the competition entry for Vallila Church, returned in more or less pronounced form in almost all of Aalto’s postwar churches”¹⁴. It is not possible to determine whether the choice of a fan-plan for the pavilion was made for functional and economic reasons, or in relation to the ‘religious’ nature of the building – “The story tells how Švejk’s friend the army chaplain sets up a communion altar on the battlefield made out of components that could be dismantled. When the ceremony is over, the altar disappears and the drinking, swearing, and fighting can go on. Aalto thought the same principle could be applied to the Biennale’s artistic position in the everyday life of Venice”¹⁵.

3.4. Lighting system

The focus on light is a recurrent theme in Aalto’s work. He not only designed several different skylight systems to serve libraries, study rooms and bookshops with indirect light, he also developed several lamps to be able to shape space by the use of its most immaterial component. Nevertheless, Aalto did not design many exhibition spaces illuminated by natural light before 1955. The pavilion was an occasion for him to develop a new skylight system, which he used three years later in his project for the Kunstmuseum in Aalborg (fig. 6-7).

¹³ Koolhaas et al., 2014.

¹⁴ Schildt 1998. 117.

¹⁵ Schildt 1991. 9.

3.5. Symbolic value

Aalto's works stand far away from any – post-modern – attempt to reduce architectural forms to a symbolic function. In his work forms are functional to the design of a comfortable environment, where comfort is perceived as a particular condition of well-being in nature. It is in nature, in its forms and materials, that Aalto has always sought the provision of comfort. Under these premises the pavilion is an extraordinary exception in the work of Aalto. In fact its façades were conceived by Aalto as a rather literal three-dimensional translation of the Finnish flag, whose colors were used with a decorative, symbolic function. Aalto was aware that in the context of the Giardini building façades were often used to inform the visitors about their national identity, as it is evident in the front of the Hungarian pavilion and its decorations. When on site during construction in June 1956 Aalto probably felt that despite the symbolic use of the national colors something was still missing. He personally cut the letters of the 'Finlandia' sign "out of cardboard one by one, having decided on the size, so that they could be made out of metal by Viljo Hirvonen at Paolo Venini's glassworks on Murano. The 'Finlandia' sign was raised to float elegantly from light steel cables in front of the pavilion on the opening day"¹⁶. This gesture radically changed the visual balance of the west elevation: both connecting the façade to the greenery and giving shape to a hierarchical system of visual elements in which the sign became absolutely the dominating one. Doing so the decorative lettering draws the attention of visitors from far away, contributing to the perception of the pavilion as a functional volume rather than an external surface for the exhibition of national emblems. "This anticipated by more than a decade many discourses about the importance of symbolism in architecture"¹⁷. By doing so Aalto did not convert to "the cult of the 'decorated shed' against which he reacted throughout his life"¹⁸. Nonetheless, he dangerously stepped into a minefield – creating the conditions for his work to become an ideological target.

4. Contemporary issues

The contemporary art panorama is very different from that of the 1950s. Furthermore the Finnish exhibition of 1956, a retrospective on the work of Helene Schjerfbeck, was perceived as too conventional at a time in which "the Biennale had a markedly avant-gard bias"¹⁹. There were not many ways possible to exhibit Schjerfbeck's painting, which had to be hanged on vertical surfaces. Moreover, the pavilion was supposed to be used for some years to come, but, due to its temporary nature and the decay time of its materials, it was not expected to have a long life. Despite these premises, more than six decades after its construction the pavilion is still in its original location and serves as a national exhibition space for Finland in the Venice Biennale. Since 1956 art and art exhibitions have changed significantly. Artists are increasingly using new digital media to produce

¹⁶ Gullichsen 1991. 23-24.

¹⁷ Talamini, 2012.

¹⁸ Frampton 1998. 120.

¹⁹ Schildt 1991. 8.

and display their works, as well as fully controlling indoor exhibition spaces with artificial lighting systems – as can be seen in contemporary museums and art galleries. As a result, for many artists the space provided by the pavilion is certainly challenging. Few of these artists – possibly the most experienced – are brave enough to work with natural light, others being too worried to waste the chance of a lifetime. In view of the need for artificial lighting it is evident that the single-room exhibition space has to be partitioned in at least three parts: the central one becoming a black chamber for projections, and the other two functioning as filtering spaces – halting the natural light while allowing visitors to enter the actual exhibition space. To create a fully black chamber the skylights have also to be sealed.

Table 1. Artists at the Finnish Pavilion in the last 10 years.

Year	Artist	Skylights	Indoor partitions	Notes
2007	Maaria Wirkkala	open	none	Skylight ceiling structure painted black
2009	Jussi Kivi	covered	various	The interior space divided into different rooms
2011	Vesa-Pekka Rannikko	covered	on both sides	Main façade being hidden beyond a temporary structure
2013	Antti Laitinen	covered	on both sides	Part of the exhibition outdoor
2015	IC-98	covered	on one side	Portion of the pavilion turned into a storage space, east door not accessible
2017	Nathaniel Mellors & Erkkä Nissinen	covered	on one side	Main (west) door not accessible to the public

The Pavilion was given in use to Iceland for several years. In 2006 it was reclaimed by Finland as a national space for its own exhibitions. Since then, as it emerges from Table 1, most of the artists choose to cover the skylight and to shape some filtering areas at the entrance in order to stop the light. On some occasions the exhibitors selected for the Biennale of Architecture also adopt a similar approach.

4.1. Vesa-Pekka Rannikko

Vesa-Pekka Rannikko was chosen by curator Laura Köönikkä as the artist to represent Finland in the context of the 54th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Under the title ‘And all structures are unstable’, the ambitious exhibition was conceived as the integration of two parts: an indoor space for projections and a three-dimensional structure framing the entrance and reproducing the idea of the construction site in progress (fig. 8). By his own admission the black and white structure that was erected in front of the entrance was both “a comment on Alvar Aalto’s clean-cut Finnish functionalism” and “also a comment on the temporary nature of the pavilion itself”²⁰.

²⁰ Köönikkä 2011.

4.2. IC-98

IC-98 was the pair of Finnish artists chosen by curator Taru Elfving to represent Finland in the 56th International Art Exhibition. 'Hours, Years, Aeons' was an attempt, as with Vesa-Pekka Rannikko's exhibition, to halt time: "IC-98 transform[ed] the pavilion into a chamber that guides viewers into the Giardini on another plane of temporality"²¹. The transformation of the pavilion into a dark chamber was literal (fig. 9) – with the exhibition pursuing a political attempt to look into the Finnish modern industrial development with the aim of retracing a history of domination and colonization²². With these eyes the pavilion was interpreted as "a prime example of nation building, [which] makes tangible the many dependency of independence"²³, where the independence is to be understood as that of the Finnish nation-state and the dependencies here questioned mainly referring to the modern development of Finland. "In its humble scale the pavilion carries an enormous weight of Finnish history – constructed out of timber, its financial and material, technological and ideological roots lie deep in the forest"²⁴. Skylights were covered and a thick black curtain immediately after the entrance halted the light. The only accessible ingress was at the front, the exhibition space being reduced by one third in order to create a stage for a large screen in the middle of the indoor space. The door facing the Hungarian pavilion was closed to the public, giving access to the back stage used as storage. The final exhibition presented by the artists was the third of three different proposals, which (in order) planned to:

- turn the pavilion into an apparent ruin, with the removal of one of the triangles to be used as a bench,
- extend the interior space by several meters to the western side, in order to provide a larger space for projection,
- break the 'Finlandia' sign into two pieces to be hanged as if following down.

The artists refused to hoist the national flag, in sign of a protest against its symbolic value.

4.3. Nathaniel Mellors & Erkkka Nissinen

In 2017, at the 57th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, Nathaniel Mellors and Erkkka Nissinen are representing Finland. The 'Aalto Natives' exhibition once more turns the pavilion into a black chamber in order to make it suitable for projections. The skylights once more sealed, with the pavilion accessible only from the east side. Using the exhibition curator Xander Karskens's words: "The Aalto Natives explores themes such as the invention of national identity and the origins of culture by way of absurdist satire. Dressing its intellectual ambitions in purposefully silly gear, it both addresses the complex challenges our globalized world faces today, and pokes a cheeky kind of fun at the political correctness of its discourse"²⁵.

²¹ Elfving 2015. 6.

²² Elfving 2015. 6.

²³ Elfving 2015. 6.

²⁴ Elfving 2015. 6.

²⁵ Frame 2017.

5. A symbol for artists to defeat

5.1. Nation-state ideology

Due to its nature contemporary art is one of the fields in which social changes are first perceived and interpreted. With the recent rise of nationalism and the growth of social tensions, artistic expressions are increasingly focusing on the role of the nation-state in the contemporary panorama. It is a general tendency that can be seen in many international exhibition venues. The Venice Biennale is not an exception and, among several possible examples, the title of the International Art Exhibition of the 54th Venice Biennale directed by Bice Curiger is probably the most outstanding: 'ILLUMInations'. While the work of Vesa-Pekka Rannikko was a commentary on the architectural components of Aalto's work, IC-98 and Mellors&Nissinen have related their pieces to the symbolic components of the pavilion, which has been interpreted as a national emblem. By exhibitors' own admission, in IC-98's case, "The Giardini of the Biennale, [are] representing modernity as well as the nation-state ideology"²⁶. In the case of Mellors&Nissinen, "The installation [was] conceived for the architectural and ideological context of the Finnish Pavilion, [in an attempt to] re-imagine Finnish society"²⁷. In the work of Mellors&Nissinen, as well as in the curatorial statement, Aalto – starting from the exhibition title 'Aalto Natives' – is deeply linked with an ideological perception of the Finnish nation-state. "We wanted to take a cosmic perspective on nationalism — a comic-cosmic perspective on national identity, creation mythology, transnational movement, bureaucracy and class & racial stereotyping" state the artists²⁸.

5.2. What remains of Aalto beyond the symbolic content?

Very little indeed. The pavilion is becoming increasingly used as a black box, preventing millions of visitors from a complete and organic understanding of the space designed by Aalto. The features of the pavilion described above have in recent years been strongly challenged by the work of the artists. The relationship with the landscape is often altered with the creation of partition walls, which impede the direct visual relationship between interior and exterior spaces. The sequence of room-room-room is replaced by a very different order, or even completely interrupted. The fan-plan still survives, but becomes much harder to read. The natural lighting system also remains sealed. What does remain is the symbolic value, which is enhanced and elevated as the most important feature of the pavilion and mistaken for its essence.

6. Conclusions

Over the last decade in 80 per cent of art exhibitions the pavilion was turned into a black box. Reviewing art criticism this scheme appears not to be successful, with Maaria Wirkkala's exhibition having recorded possibly the most enthusiastic reaction from the public. However many factors positively contributed to the extraordinary success of Maaria Wirkkala's exhibition, most likely not only the decision of the artist to leave untouched the original settings and to let the natural light flow into the exhibition space

²⁶ Elfving 2015. 8

²⁷ Frame 2017

²⁸ Frame 2017.

and interact with her art piece. This paper is not questioning whether enhancing the characteristics of the space designed by Aalto can contribute to the quality of an art work. It is simply reporting that over the last decade roughly two million visitors were not able to fully experience that space (fig. 10).

The transformation of the exhibition space as well as the alteration of the external appearance is not only found in the last decade. In 2005 the last artist to represent Iceland in the Pavilion, Gabriela Friðriksdóttir, both turned the Pavilion to a black box and masked the west façade with a quite large wooden structure. However she did not do it against the pavilion and what it might represent. In contrast, in recent years – in an attempt to “critique power structures and the status quo”²⁹ – the pavilion is becoming the target of an ideological battle.

²⁹ Frame 2017.

Elfving, Taru. 2015. *Introduction: Telling Times*. In *IC-98. Hours, Years, Aeons: Moving Images and Other Projects 1998–2015*, ed. Elfving, Taru and Söderlund, Patrik, 2015. Frame Visual Art Finland. Helsinki.

Foderaro, Vittorio and Ferrari, Enrico Maria ed. 1990. *Alvar Aalto: Il Baltico e il Mediterraneo*. Marsilio. Venezia.

Frame. 2017. Erkkä Nissinen and Nathaniel Mellors explore nationalism and creation myths in their absurdist video installation to feature in the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Frame Contemporary Art Finland. Helsinki. <https://frame-finland.fi/en/2017/03/10/erkka-nissinen-and-nathaniel-mellors-explore-nationalism-and-creation-myths-in-their-absurdist-video-installation-to-feature-in-the-finnish-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale/> (Accessed, April 30, 2017).

Frampton, Kenneth. 1998. *The Legacy of Alvar Aalto: Evolution and Influence*. In *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, ed. Peter Reed, 119 -139. Museum of Modern Art (Harry N. Abrams). New York.

Gullichsen, Maire. 1991. *The Building of the Alvar Aalto Pavilion for the Biennale*. In *Alvar Aalto: the Finnish pavilion at the Venice Biennale*, ed. Keinänen Timo, 16-25. Electa. Milano.

Kaila, Panu. 1997. *Il restauro del Padiglione di Alvar Aalto a Venezia: problemi di conservazione dell'architettura moderna*, Quaderni ARCo 1997, 59-66. Gangemi. Roma.

Koolhaas, Rem, ed. Westcott, James, contrib. Boom, Irma, Graduate School of Design, and AMO. 2014. *Corridor, Book 9*, in *Elements of Architecture*, Koolhaas, Rem. Marsilio. Venezia.

Köönikkä, Laura. 2011. *And all structures are unstable, Venice Biennale 2011*. Vesa-Pekka Rannikko. <http://www.vesapekkarannikko.net/exhibitions.php?id=19> (Accessed, April 30, 2017).

Mulazzani, Marco. 2004. *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*. Electa. Verona.

Schildt, Göran, 1991. *An Architectural Impromptu*. In *Alvar Aalto: the Finnish pavilion at the Venice Biennale*, ed. Keinänen Timo, 8-15. Electa. Milano.

Schildt, Göran. 1994. *Alvar Aalto. A Life's Work – Architecture, Design and Art*. Otava. Helsinki.

Schildt, Göran. 1998. *Alvar Aalto: Masterworks*. Thames and Hudson. London.

Talamini, Gianni. 2012. *Restoration of the Finnish pavilion at the Venice Biennale*. Alvar Aalto Foundation. Helsinki. <https://aaltopress.wordpress.com/2012/09/20/gianni-talamini-restoration-of-the-finnish-pavilion-at-the-venice-biennale/> (Accessed, April 30, 2017).

Fig. 1

Mirrored plan of the pavilion superimposed over Vuoksenniska Church's plan

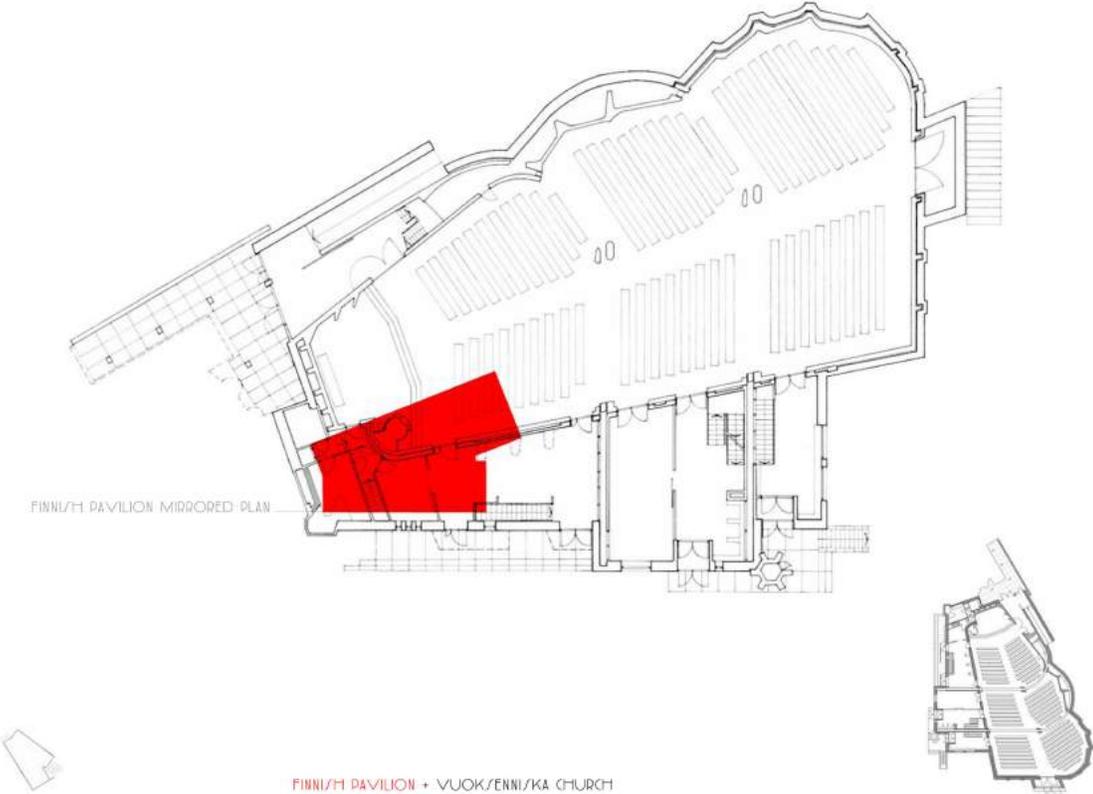


Fig. 2

The Giardini in 1926 and 1934 (Adapted from Mulazzani, Marco. 2004. *I Padiglioni della Biennale di Venezia*. Electa. Verona)

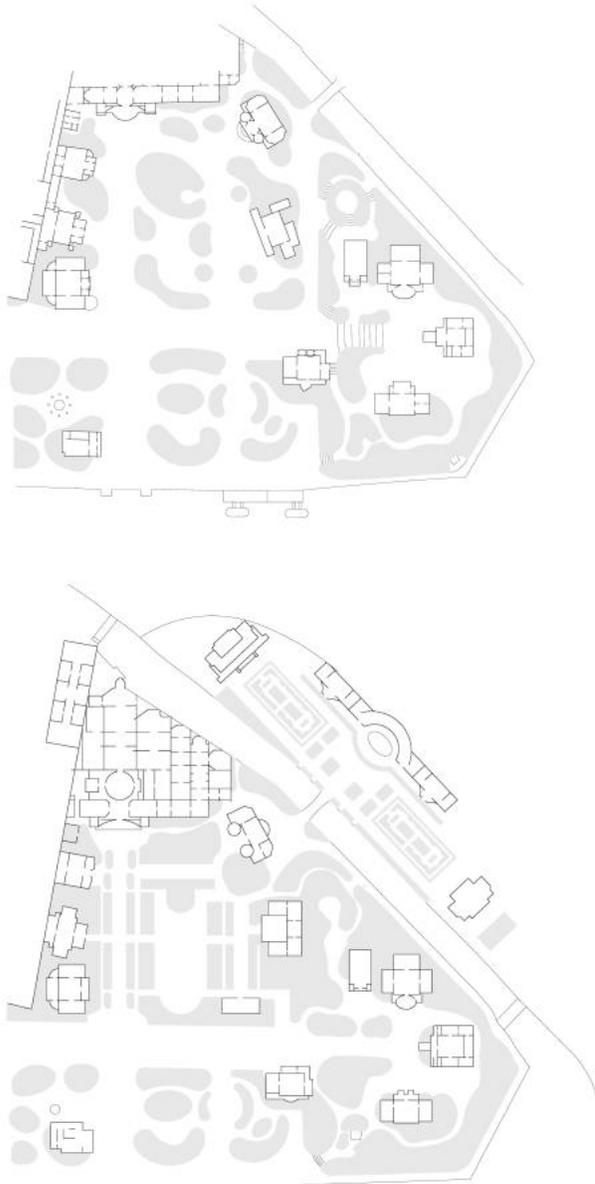


Fig. 3

The location of the Pavilion in the Giardini

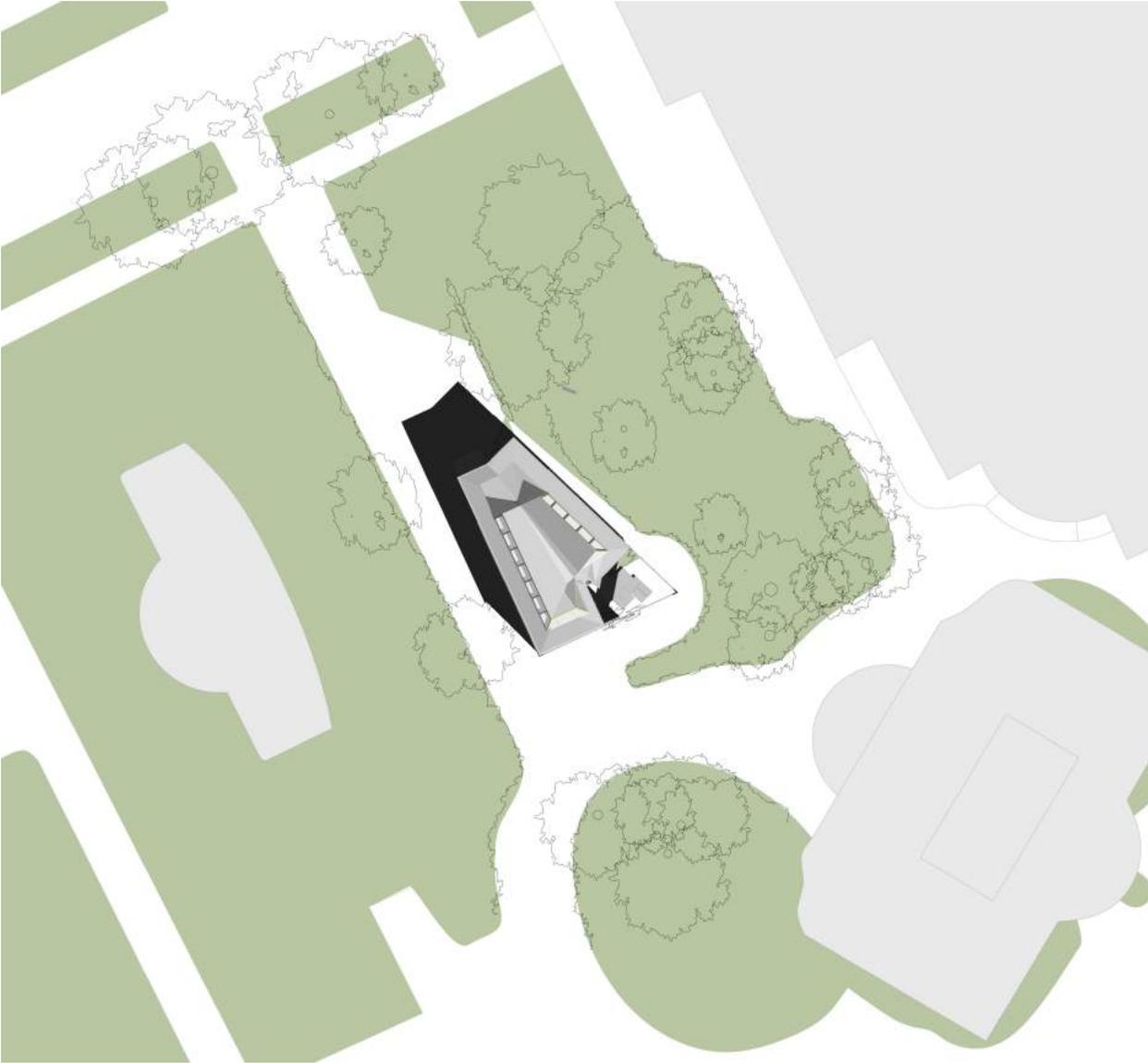


Fig. 4

Finnish Pavilion in Venice Biennale (Alvar Aalto 1956). (c) Drawings collection / Alvar Aalto Museum



Fig. 5

Finnish Pavilion in Venice Biennale. Interiors after restoration, 2013



Fig. 6

Finnish Pavilion in Venice Biennale (Alvar Aalto 1956). (c) Drawings collection / Alvar Aalto Museum

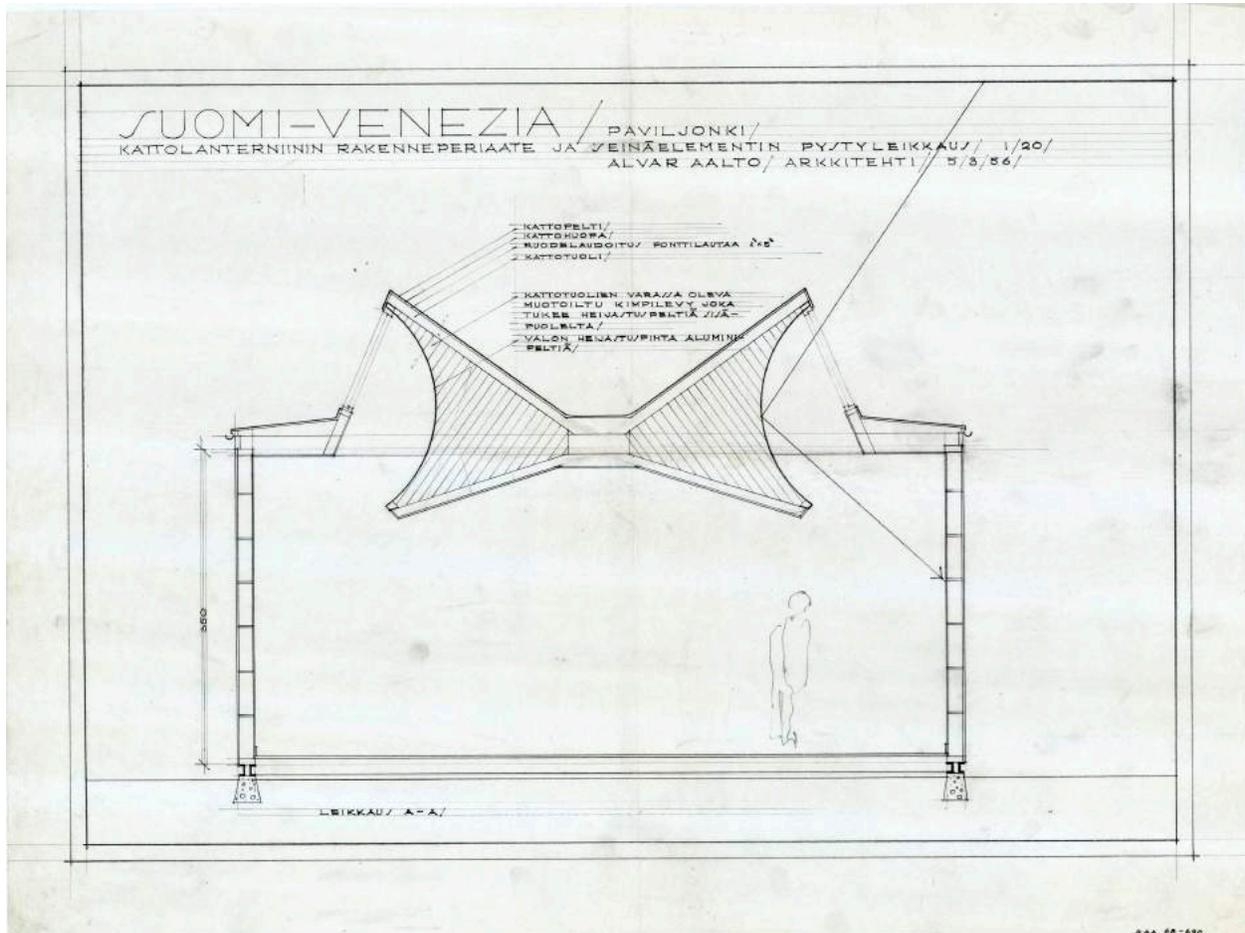


Fig. 7

Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg, Denmark. Elekhh, 2007



Fig. 8

Vesa-Pekka Rannikko's exhibition, 2011



Fig. 9

Interiors of IC-98's exhibition, 2015



Fig. 10

Finnish Pavilion in Venice Biennale fully accessible during Architecture Biennale 2016

