

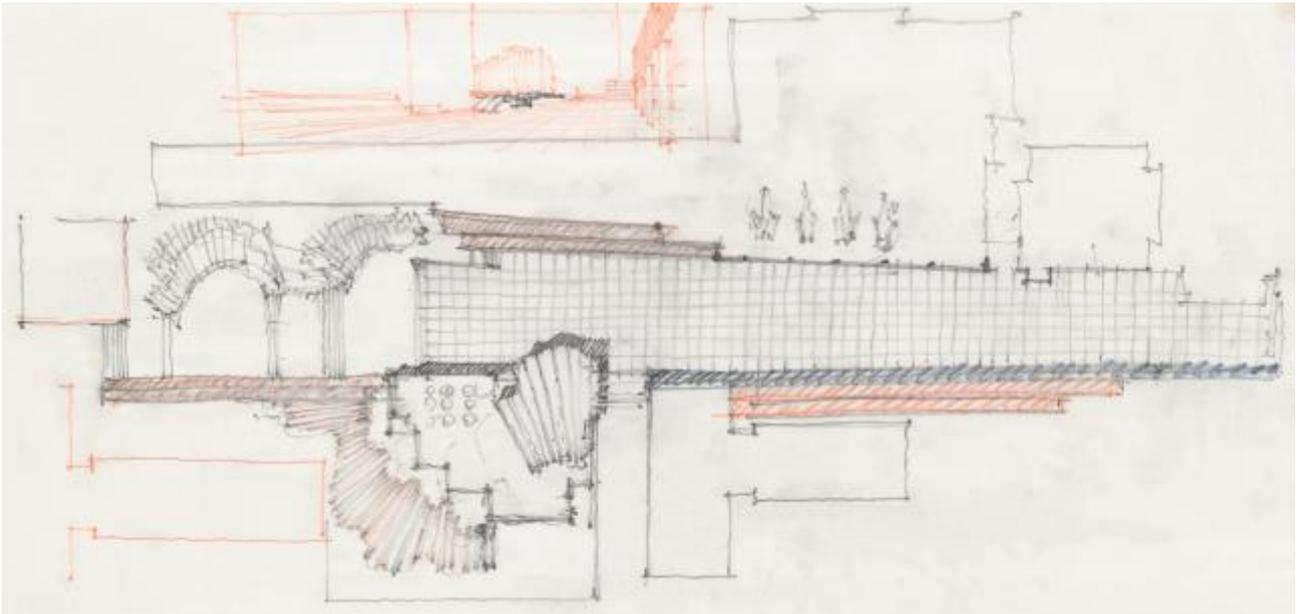
Mediterranean piazza – Public space in Aalto's designs

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Following the *Grand Tour*

From 19th century on, the Mediterranean countries attire massively writers, painters, architects and other artists from central and northern Europe. The *Grand Tour*, the path drawn by Goethe, Stendhal or Hesse¹, was followed also by Alvar Aalto during his honeymoon journey to Italy. He stated in fact that “*when I cross the Brennero Pass, I feel myself like a little Goethe who looks towards South*”². The fascination with Italy, Greece and the Mediterranean as a whole may be seen in his sketches, his memories and his designs.

An important element of this fascination is the Mediterranean *piazza*, the public space that is a *leitmotiv* of almost every city and village in Italy and other countries. The very Italian word – *piazza* – compares in several descriptions of Alvar Aalto’s designs, such as Montréal Civic Centre (1964), Finlandia Hall (1962-1975), the Siena Cultural Centre (1966)³. The attention given to that aspect of Mediterranean cities becomes interesting when once realises that for a Finnish architect it is a rather uncommon circumstance to have an articulated public and civic space surrounded and enclosed by various buildings. As soon as in 1924, Aalto was speaking about the “*urban culture*” describing what he was looking for, but without calling it yet a *piazza*: “*civilisation of forms seems to have governed all life, particularly finding its outlet in the towns, where life flowed in a concentrated and compressed mould*”⁴. The lack of a proper civic open-air space in Finnish towns led Aalto towards looking for a role model – and the Italian *piazza* easily become one.

In the present-day, the public space becomes a place of constant change and mutation: a place where influences exchange and where citizens may affect the shape and the life of the city. The development of participative design policies and the attention towards the human factor in the open-air public spaces make it a pressing issue, and it becomes even more apparent in spaces created fifty years ago when the attention towards those aspects was significantly slighter. Together with studies of people’s behaviour in the street and in the squares, new needs have emerged and new connections were established between architecture

¹ Describes in their books: *Italian Journey* by Goethe or *Rome, Naples and Florence* by Stendhal.

² Interview with Leonardo Mosso and Laura Castagno on November 11, 2013.

³ Montréal: correspondence between Aalto and Mayerovitch, 1963-1964, AAA. Finlandia Hall: plan drawings of the building, 1962-1971, AAA. Siena Cultural Centre: plan drawings of the building, 1966, AAA.

⁴ Article for *Sisä-Suomi* from December 12, 1924: Alvar Aalto, “Urban Culture” in Göran Schildt, *Aalto in his own words*, Otava Publishing Company, Helsinki 1997, p. 20.

and other sciences. Modern architecture may become thus old-fashioned in front of the contemporary designs that praise interaction and personalisation of the public space⁵ – and they are often less concentrated on the purely architectural aspects. In the light of this situation, one ponders on the nature of public space in Aalto – its *inspirations*, its *functioning* and its *issues*. In order to study this subject, it is proposed to focus on these three aspects of public spaces in Aalto’s architecture that are connected to the Mediterranean *piazza*.

Memories of a *piazza*

From his very studies under Lindgren, Aalto knew well the Mediterranean architecture. Whereas the education he received at the university was closer to the Ideal City model⁶ – since he studied Alberti, Brunelleschi and Palladio⁷ – his further journeys to the southern Europe gave him the possibility to get to know a more spontaneous and organic examples of public spaces. It was in fact the human scale – the human dimension – that he praised mostly in those spaces. He recalled in fact, “*for me Italy represents a certain primitivism, characterised to an astonishing degree by attractive forms on a human scale*”⁸. In this sentence he connects two elements that are a clue to understanding his devotion to a Mediterranean *piazza*. The first one being the artistic outcome, the aesthetics of a space formed along the years that gained almost a natural look⁹. The second one – the civic dimension of the *piazza* – being a place for meeting people, talking and spending free time.

In fact, that is the reason why Aalto was interested in the Mediterranean model – he intended to re-create that social dimension of the public space, trying to propose the model of Italian *piazza*. The very same word – in Italian – is in fact used by Aalto to describe the courtyard of the Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949-1952): the complex was clearly patterned on a *piazza* – with the civic functions concentrated around an enclosed public space. According to Göran Schildt, Aalto’s intention was to create a similar atmosphere to the one in Siena or San Gimignano in the 14th century – a civic space, designed at a human scale, where everyone can meet and talk¹⁰.

⁵ One may refer to the contemporary designs of Scandinavian architectural practices, such as Bjarke Ingels Group or JKMM.

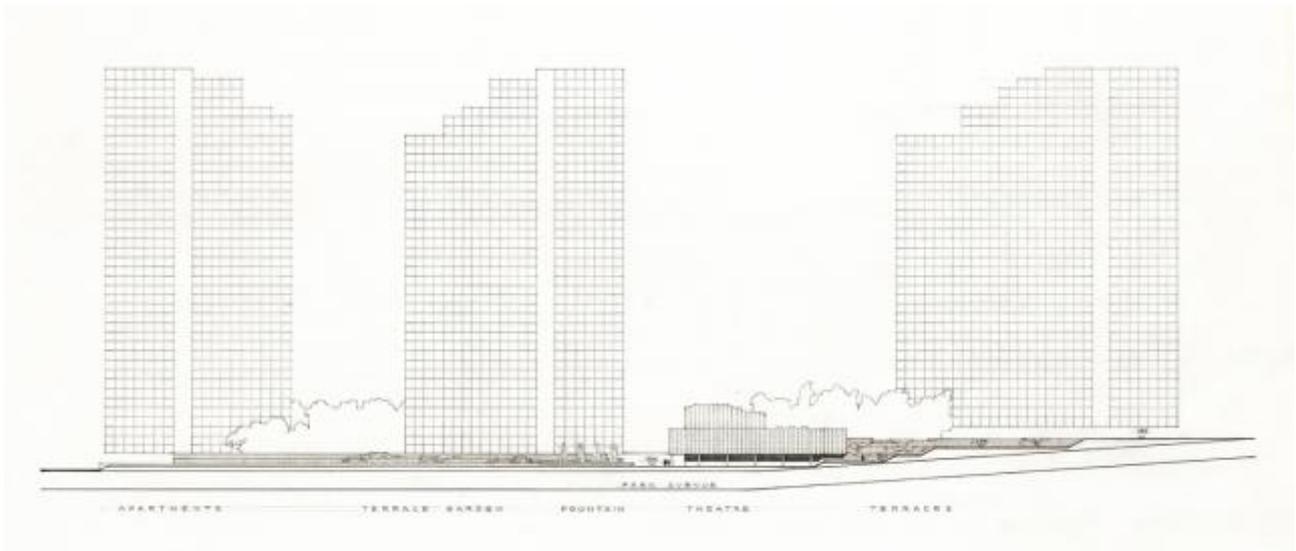
⁶ *The Ideal City*, three Renaissance paintings with a central perspective view of a city of unresolved attribution (amongst various possible authors there are Francesco di Giorgio, Piero della Francesca, Luciano Laurana, Melozzo da Forlì and Fra Carnevale).

⁷ Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto – His Life*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä 2007, p. 123.

⁸ Göran Schildt, *Aalto in his own words*, Otava Publishing Company, Helsinki 1997, p. 39.

⁹ “There are many examples of pure, harmonious, civilised landscapes in the world: one finds real gems in Italy and South of France”, Alvar Aalto, Article for *Sisä-Suomi* from December 12, 1924: Alvar Aalto, “Urban Culture” in Göran Schildt, *Aalto in his own words*, Otava Publishing Company, Helsinki 1997, p. 22.

¹⁰ GÖRAN SCHILDT, *Alvar Aalto – His Life*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä 2007, p. 619.



Indeed, many of Aalto's designs bear those memories: as it is recalled by Laura Castagno, "*Aalto well knew and recalled Italian piazza. The composition of the volumes in order to create a void space is often Italian-influenced. In fact, he was telling us this directly all the times we were meeting him*". His vivid interest in a piazza is shown also by the attention he was giving to the subject – he was looking for publications on Italian squares for different periods in order to understand better its composition. In a letter to Federico Marconi he asked in fact to look for such a book, comprehensive of photographs and plans¹¹. Indeed, there is a syntony between an Italian *piazza* and Alvar Aalto's public space. A typical Mediterranean *piazza* is characterised by a building that dominates it and gives it its hierarchy – it may be a church, a town hall or a palace. And in fact, in Aalto's architecture a similar rule of thumb emerges too: a *piazza* – or more generally a civic space – remains public and open to everyone in almost every design. The adjacent building – or generally, a restricted space – becomes in Aalto's works a place for offices, classrooms or other functions. Together they form a unique scheme that seems to correspond to Aalto's views on architecture¹².

Another – the third – aspect of the Mediterranean *piazza* that was esteemed by Aalto, it was its independence from the vehicles traffic. As he underlined while talking about Venice, "*it is probably the city with the best traffic system, since the pedestrians have a complete street network to themselves. Similar solutions can be found in history. In Ancient Greece there were two agoras, one for the people and another for traffic, horses, burros etc*"¹³. In fact, Venice, together with Tuscany, was one of favourite Aalto's destinations in Italy¹⁴.

Whereas in many designs one can see the actual application of these elements, it is interesting to follow the evolution of the design for Montréal Civic Centre – a work started by the Canadian practice of Mayerovitch who asked Aalto to participate in the definition of the buildings and public spaces. Thanks to the copious number of correspondence between two of them and to the different amendments made to the design as the work progressed, it is possible to understand better the important issues that led Aalto in his public space designs.

¹¹ Letter Aalto to Marconi from November 1, 1964 (AAA).

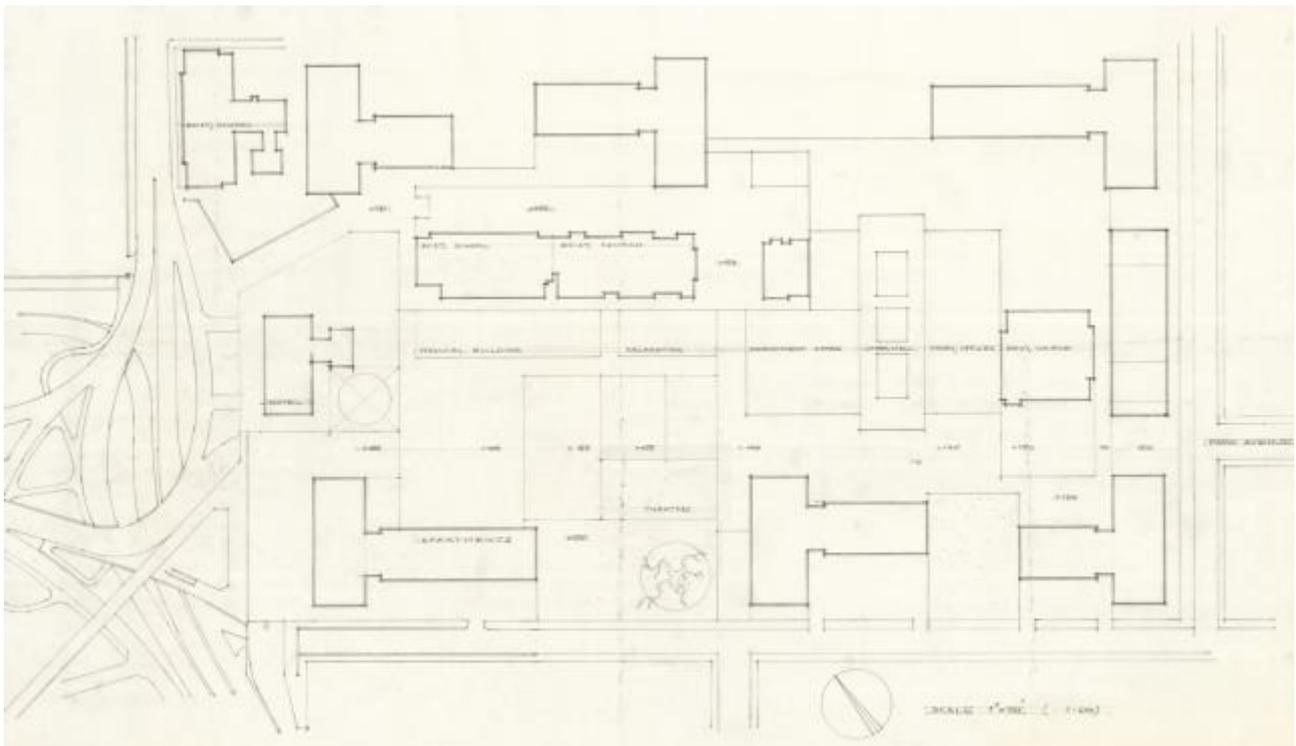
¹² During CIAM, "instead of taking part in the debates, he sat in the shadow of the Parthenon. There his old love revived for the monumental city centres of Italy, those piazzas which are both the architectural symbol of the city and the main setting of its social life", Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto – His Life*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä 2007, p. 344.

¹³ Alvar Aalto's speech in Mexico City, 1963, in Göran Schildt, *Aalto in his own words*, Otava Publishing Company, Helsinki 1997, p. 140.

¹⁴ GÖRAN SCHILDT, *Alvar Aalto – His Life*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä 2007, p. 205.

Montréal Civic Centre – the beginning

The cooperation between the Canadian office of Mayerovitch and Bernstein and the Tiilimäki Studio started with the invitation in May of 1963 while Aalto was in Florida. The Montréal office was interested in the collaboration on a design they had a commission for: a plan for a central area of the city, composed of various functions, including some existing buildings. As described by Mayerovitch, the site was “located close to the heart of the city and comprised six city blocks (25 acres). It is proposed to establish a community consisting of residential, shopping, office, recreational and cultural elements”¹⁵. The area in question lies between Pins Avenue, Sainte Famille Street, Milton Street and Hutchison Street, in axis with Park Avenue and at the feet of the Mount Royal Park, the largest park area in the centre of Montréal. It lies also at a distance of scarcely one kilometre from the core of the city centre and the railway station. Indeed, as it was pointed out by Mayerovitch, the site was very interesting¹⁶ and had many possibilities thanks to the proximity to the city centre, to the park itself and to large traffic arteries. The consciousness of the potential of the area led the Canadian studio towards asking Aalto for help. In fact, at that time the Finnish studio had recently finished the work on the plan for Töölönlahti and Kamppi area in Helsinki commissioned by the Helsinki City Board¹⁷, a series of cultural venues along the shore of the bay that formed a spectacular entrance to the city for those who were arriving to the capital. It seemed indeed that the Canadian office was very interested in collaboration with Alvar Aalto – he was contacted several times, via phone, mail and in person¹⁸ until he finally decided that he would take part in the design, as he wrote to Mayerovitch on August 2, 1963.



The first draft from the Canadian studio was sent to Aalto even before, together with one of the invitation letters. Based on those drawings, Aalto decided that he would collaborate and a meeting was set in Montréal

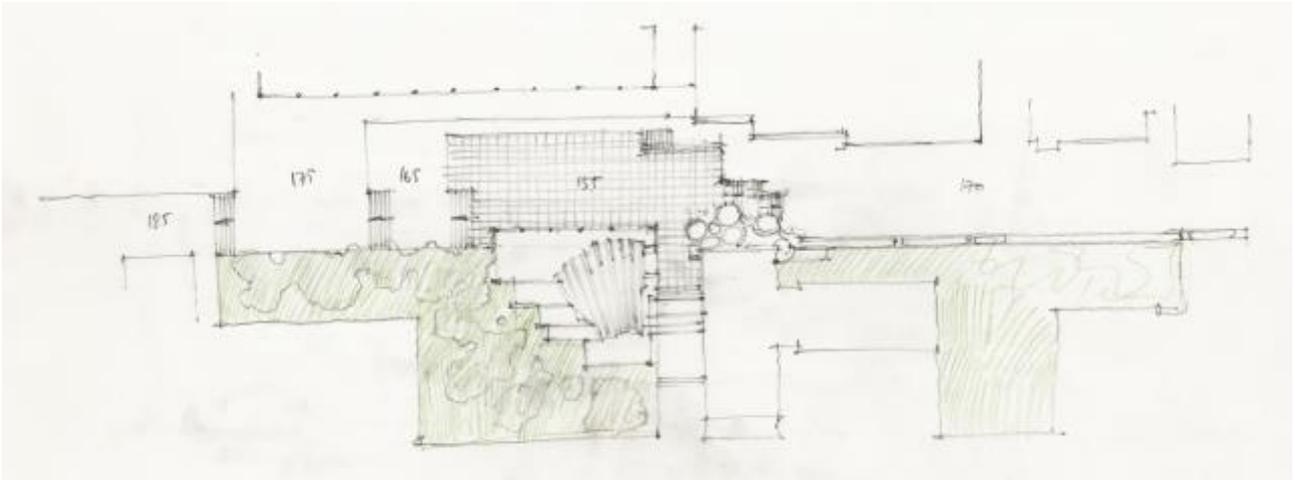
¹⁵ Letter from Mayerovitch to Aalto from May 8, 1963, AAA.

¹⁶ “The site is a dramatic one with considerable potential for an unusual development”, Mayerovitch to Aalto, May 8, 1963, AAA.

¹⁷ Helsinki City Centre Plan (1959).

¹⁸ As it was underlined by Mayerovitch in his first letter to Aalto, “this site is a dramatic one with considerable potential for an unusual development, and while it has not yet been announced to the public, it is regarded by the authorities as a project of outstanding significance”, Mayerovitch to Aalto, May 8, 1963, AAA.

in September of 1963 (he visited Montréal September 16th – 21st) when he had the opportunity to discuss the design in person, but also to meet the clients who commissioned the new civic centre plan¹⁹. Some changes were introduced and in the following months, the Canadian studio sent to Helsinki the revised design and throughout the first half of 1964, Aalto was sending various materials to Canada concerning the updated version²⁰. They were well received by Mayerovitch by June and he was to show them to the customers, although no further trace of communication was found²¹.



Montréal – towards a *piazza*

The very first sketches that were sent to Aalto's studio in the summer of 1963 were a draft of the plan, with the main functions and the surrounding streets – basic information in order to encourage Aalto to participate in the initiative²². Since he agreed to collaborate, more advanced discussions took place in Montréal in September of 1963 when some aspects of the design were altered. As a result of the meeting, Mayerovitch refers to moving the main square from the axis of Prince Arthur Street northwards in order “to obtain a larger and more unified shopping centre, and also to afford better sculptural possibilities”²³.

The first drawings after the September 1963 meeting that were sent to Aalto's office on February of 1964 were still basic in the definition of the spaces. The complex was organised in an orthogonal gridiron with the main passage axis in SW-NE direction, in correspondence to Prince Arthur Street. The alignment with two other streets that pass through the area, Jeanne Mance Street and Park Avenue, was less apparent and the pedestrian movement was segmented by the series of orthogonal masses of buildings and terraced open spaces. The functional organisation of the area was simple, with residential buildings along the perimeter, alternated with small garden areas. The core of the area was to be occupied by other buildings, including two existing churches, existing school, medical building, recreation building, theatre, department store and shopping mall. In addition, a hotel tower was to be designed – at the NW edge of the area. Whereas the

¹⁹ “I should like to tell you that my clients and I were inspired by your counsel and understanding regarding our project”, Mayerovitch to Aalto, November 28, 1963, AAA.

²⁰ “I should be able to send you within two weeks some sketches showing this change, so that the dream may begin to develop”, Mayerovitch to Aalto, November 28, 1963, AAA. The drawings were sent although only as late as on February of 1964 (Mayerovitch to Aalto, February 28, 1964, AAA).

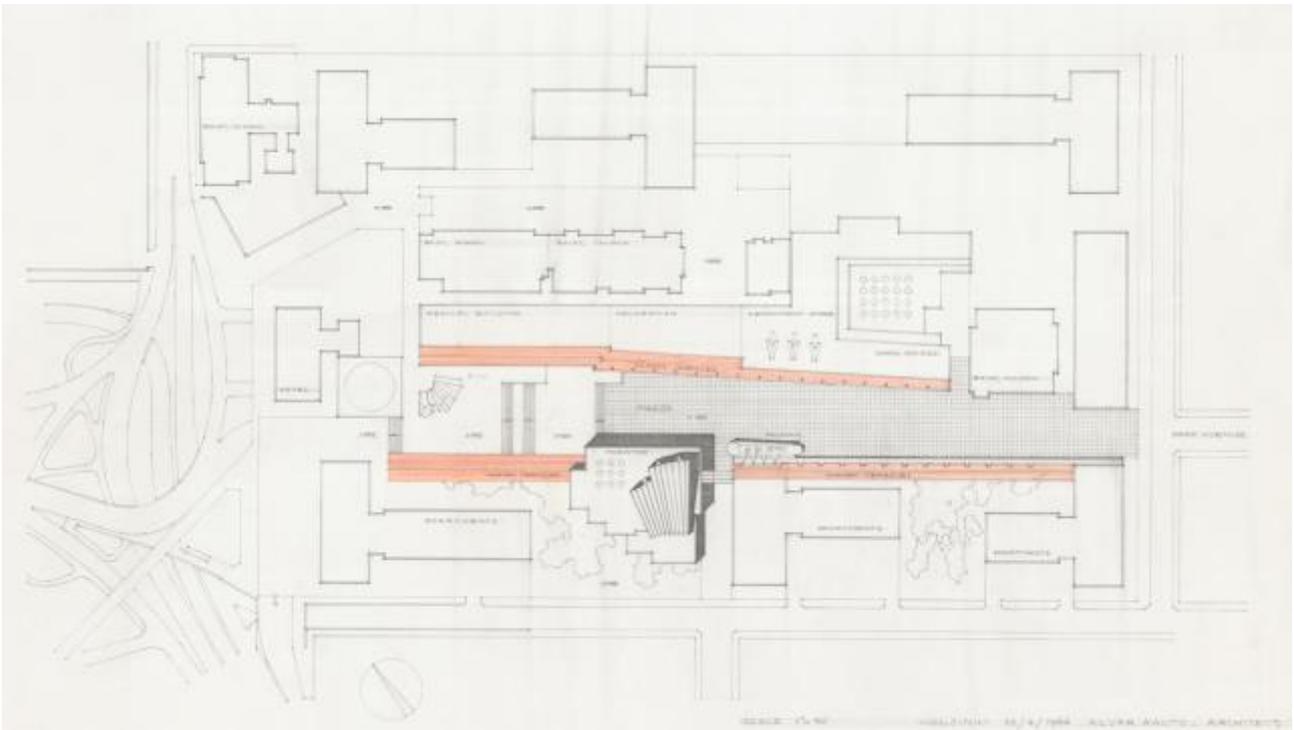
²¹ It is possible that the end of correspondence was “due to a difference of opinion between designer and client over the commercial qualities of scheme”, eds Aila Kolehmainen and Esa Laaksonen, *Drawn in Sand – unrealised visions by Alvar Aalto*, Alvar Aalto Museum, Helsinki 2002, p. 76.

²² “I am sending you some material concerning the Montréal urban renewal project. This represents some of our preliminary thinking only, and is chiefly concerned with establishing desirable conditions on the site itself”, Mayerovitch to Aalto, June 4, 1963, AAA. No traces in the archives of that series of drawings.

²³ Mayerovitch to Aalto, November 28, 1963, AAA.

buildings were drawn only as perimeters, the open spaces were more detailed, including division between park and paved areas, and the difference of various levels of the terraces. A slight hierarchy of those spaces was set up – with the main one seemingly being the area between the medical building and the theatre, with various bistros along its perimeter. It seems that the enclosed character of the main *piazza* (and the particular attention to this area) was the result of the consultations with Aalto. Thanks to him, in Mayerovitch's vision, the *piazza* became then a "focus of most public activities, which (...) can be divided into more intimate areas for out-door eating, dancing, band concerts, skating etc"²⁴.

Aalto's study on Mayerovitch's updated proposal started with slight alterations to the perimeter of the buildings – in one of the first drawings from Tiihimäki, the layout of the area is almost the same, with the only changes concerning extending the apartments towers in W and E corners of the area and moving the hotel perimeter. The corresponding sections across the area show the central zone occupied by public lower buildings, with height below 20 meters, whereas the hotel and the office building were much higher, respectively with 30 and 20 storeys. The surrounding residential towers were even higher, reaching around 115-120 meters. Aalto's drawings show also the different levels of the open spaces between the building masses – going from 56 to 50 meters of altitude (185 to 165 feet). The section through the office building and the hotel illustrates well the idea of creating a public space that is a centre of the new area, surrounded by the residential buildings. Even if the main elements are significantly lower, their importance is given by the articulated open space that lies in front of them and that may function as a civic square. A look on the final perspective views prepared in Helsinki shows that the residential buildings act indeed as a background to what happens to the *piazza* and the lower public buildings.



According to the agreements between Aalto and Mayerovitch, the Finnish architect was to design "something small of his own" in the area, a public building²⁵ – the almost obvious choice was the theatre in front of the

²⁴ Mayerovitch to Aalto, February 28, 1964, AAA.

²⁵ In the letter from August 2, 1963, Aalto writes to Mayerovitch about the suggestion the latter offered him on the phone to "do something like a concert hall". He stated that "it would be the key for a complete composition of the surrounding buildings" (Aalto to Mayerovitch, August 2, 1963, AAA). It was also a key point in Aalto's deciding to take

main square area. The first sketch of the theatre building shows a familiar fan-shaped form of the roof of the main theatre hall atop of an orthogonal mass of the building. The theatre seems although almost recessed in the cavity of the square – 3 meters below the level of surrounding pedestrian areas. Immediately, the importance of the open space is underlined by how the square is highlighted by the paving pattern. Likewise, an irregular and organic form of the future fountain lies SE to the theatre building. Whereas the form of the theatre could have easily been inspired by Aalto's previous designs (and clearly shows Aalto's fan-shaped *leitmotiv*), it was the layout and the form of the public space that was majorly studied during the work on the design. The interior organisation was only vaguely sketched in a free-hand drawing, whereas the external form was more studied, since it was directly related to the open-air public space²⁶.

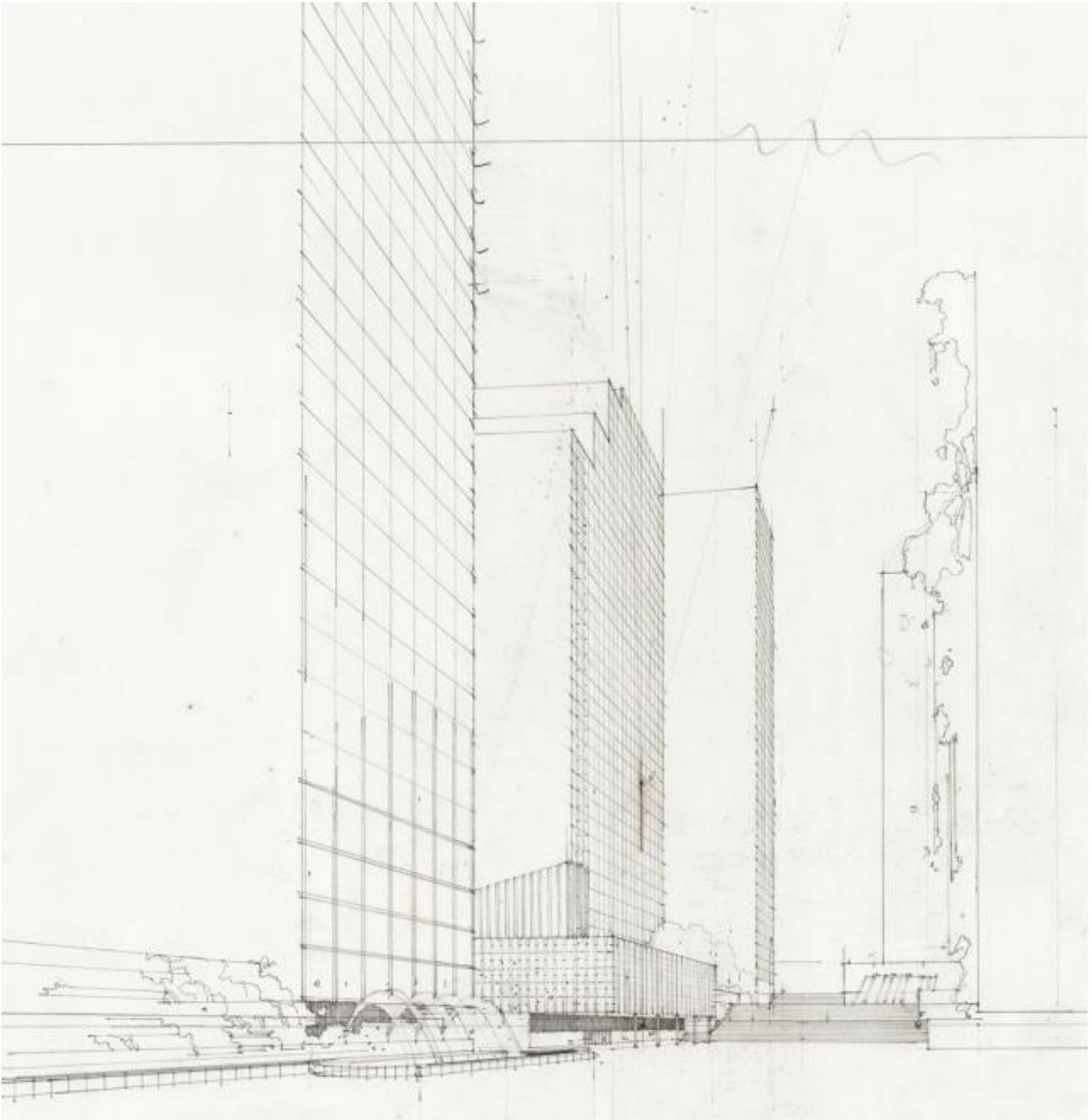
The various versions of the design show thus the evolution of how the final *piazza* was created. Starting with a fragmented and divided space on various levels, with the main area recessed between several buildings and pedestrian passages, the *piazza* slowly took its shape by giving it more importance and more *élan*. One of the first changes of Mayerovitch's layout was to shorten the recreational building and to keep the theatre out of the Park Avenue axis²⁷. In this manner, the relationship to the rest of the urban tissue was much more evident – an issue that was lacking in the initial proposal according to Aalto²⁸. The paved area became then clearly the most important public space in the entire complex, strengthening the initially sketched hierarchy. The recessed *piazza* became thus a core to the design, surrounded by the theatre building, sculptural fountain and terraced gardens on the western side, and by the medical and recreational buildings with colonnade on the opposite side. More advanced drawings introduce new elements to the *piazza* – terraced gardens appearing on the eastern side and other sculptural elements in the upper part of the square. The most important change is although the decision to leave the *piazza* at the theatre level continue towards the southern edge of the area. The *piazza* is no more than a small and recessed limited area, but a true *esplanade*, a civic space that dynamically (thanks to the oblique eastern edge too) points towards the city centre. It changed from a fragmented and limited form in Mayerovitch's design into a fluid space that flows through the area and gains a truly civic dimension.

part in the initiative, since "it should give our [Aalto's and Mayerovitch's – AN] collegial work something of a realistic background to a closer co-operation" (Aalto to Mayerovitch, August 10, 1963, AAA).

²⁶ As it was underlined by Aalto, his aid would have been concentrated on the *piazza* design: "the inside story of your project – mainly the *esplanade* type *piazza*, its relation to parking and circulation of pedestrians etc. – are all things where I could probably be of some use" (Aalto to Mayerovitch, August 10, 1963, AAA).

²⁷ "In my opinion the place ought to be free of any interruption in length-direction, without any crossing buildings", Memorandum attached to Aalto's letter to Mayerovitch, April 30, 1964, AAA.

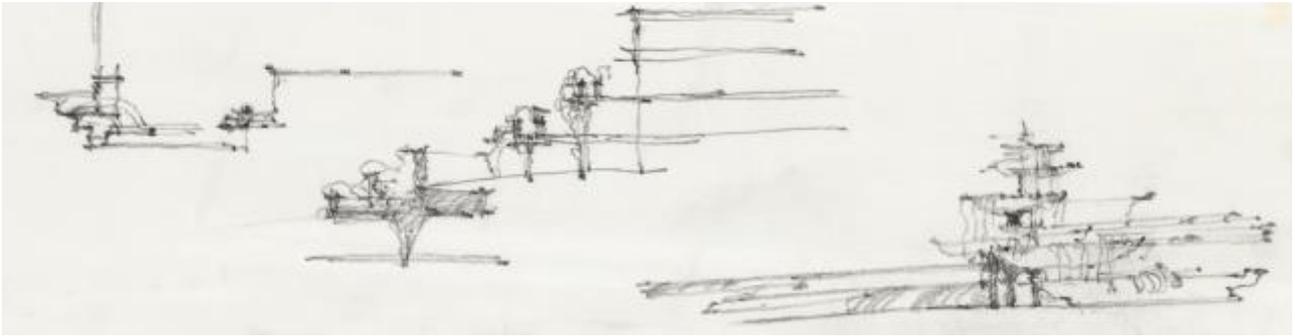
²⁸ Aalto wrote to Mayerovitch: "the things which are difficult are the forms and problems outside the project; relations to neighbourhood and entrance of the main routes from outside. These things were just the problems which made me hesitate for any co-operation" (Aalto to Mayerovitch, August 10, 1963, AAA).



The final version of the design has a long *piazza* that is entirely levelled at **47 meters of altitude (155 feet)** and continues fluidly southwards towards Park Avenue: it became “*a real monumental central place dropping down from the Hotel to the other end of the whole composition*”²⁹. Its northern edge is dominated by the hotel tower, placed next to a series of steps that go up to reach the nearby park level. On the upper levels of the open space, there are a few sculptural elements that – together with the fountain on the lower level – may constitute an artistic addition to the civic dimension of the *piazza*. The initially reduced garden terraces now accompany the *piazza* all along the area on both sides: together with the water flowing from the fountain and with the colonnade on the opposite edge, they create a perspective movement that underlines its importance. The buildings surrounding the open space are changed: the recreation building is obliquely cut with a colonnade on the ground floor and it is connected directly to the department store building that was drawn from a scratch. The latter’s initial elongated, orthogonal and perpendicular to the *piazza* axis form, became a central composition, more seemingly a courtyard building with its wings that embrace a middle

²⁹ Memorandum attached to Aalto’s letter to Mayerovitch, April 30, 1964, AAA.

area illuminated with the Rautatalo-style round skylights. The colonnade continues along its walls, giving thus unity to the central *piazza* area: according to Aalto, it would guarantee to “get a good promenade as well as a good architectural frontage, on one side of the Piazza”³⁰.



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The interior's exterior – a way back to Italy

A very interesting aspect of the design of the Montréal *piazza* is the fountain that was to be placed next to the theatre with water flowing along the *esplanade*. The main basin on many sketches is strikingly similar to the fountain that is present until today in the courtyard of Rautatalo building (1951-1955) in Helsinki. The chalice form of the elements at various heights and water falling from one onto another element of the fountain is a recurring theme in both cases: the very same logic and composition of the fountain may be a sign of something more than an example of coming back to known forms. It strengthens a parallel between Aalto's outdoor civic and public spaces and some interiors.

The Rautatalo building interior courtyard in fact functions like a *piazza*, with a fountain, a café (the first Café Aalto was there) and surrounding constructions. The skylights provide some natural light so that the interior may indeed seem a true outdoor space. It is interesting how those buildings that have an “*interior piazza*”,

³⁰ Memorandum attached to Aalto's letter to Mayerovitch, April 30, 1964, AAA.

such as Rautatalo, Finlandia Hall or Academic Bookstore are always full of life and people, whereas many outdoor spaces designed by Aalto – as Seinäjoki City Centre or Rovaniemi Centre are often empty. In fact, the interior spaces have often most of elements that can be found in the Italian and Mediterranean squares in general: first, a place to sit, to relax, to talk with others, to meet, to have a drink or to eat something. A common element to a Mediterranean *piazza* is a small local bar, a cafeteria where one can take a sit a have a drink, may it be inside or – even better – just in front of it with the view of the entire square. Second: some elements that make that square unique, may it be a monumental building, or a small fountain. In a typical Mediterranean *piazza*, it may a small church or a *palazzo* in the most important public spaces, but it may be also a sculpture, a fountain or even a lonely tree giving some “natural relief” amongst the buildings of the city centre. It gives a specific character to the civic space: aesthetic quality and possibility to identify more easily with the space. Third: shade from the strong southern sunlight. In fact, due to the southern climate, some squares remain crowded even during the hottest part of the day thanks to the refreshing shadow of the trees or surrounding buildings. With all these three elements combined, the indoor spaces become what a true Mediterranean *piazza* is – a core to the social life of a city.

These characteristics of course does not imply that implementing a bar in every Aalto’s public space is enough. Worse, it may disturb the artistic composition and value of these spaces. The example of Italy is although a very instructive one – since the historical heritage of the surroundings does not let to freely alter those spaces. A peculiar rule of thumb may be defined although – all those elements seem to converge in one idea, already expressed by the Danish urbanism Jan Gehl in the words “*something happens because something happens because something happens*”³¹. The meaning of this sentence lies simply in the fact that people are attracted to places that are not empty, that are already crowded and used by others: may it be them drinking in a bar, having a conversation under the shadow of a tree or simply wandering.

There is no definite answer to how to obtain this effect. If one looks at the present-day Italian (and not only) *piazas*, it is sure that various events and manifestations attract people. May it be an open-air art exhibition, a traditional manifestation or a cultural happening; they all bring together more citizens. There are infinite examples of such events – an interesting one may be for instance the organisation of Via Crucis in Seinäjoki centre together by the theatre and the church³². The art in general may be a magnet that attracts people, as well as slight modifications to small architecture in public spaces that may give new possibilities, bring curiosity and give a fresh air breath to a modern architecture setting. Since the importance of Aalto’s public spaces as architectural and cultural heritage, such alterations should be although decided very carefully – and perhaps a good solution may be an architectural competition. What surely should be done is to discuss the possible ways to obtain such an effect, bearing in mind one thought – that people’s needs and habits may change, whereas the built environment lasts much longer.

In fact, many other possibilities may be surely proposed for the revitalising of the public space in Alvar Aalto’s architecture. The purpose of this article is not although to extinguish all the possibilities, but to give a start for a discussion and reflexion on what may be done. A guideline for such a discussion may be the words pronounced by Aalto in 1956 at the University of Oulu: “*we must find new forms (...), corresponding to life today – and to life in the year 2000, to the extent we can foresee it*”³³.

³¹ Jan Gehl, *Life between Buildings*, Island Press, Washington 2009, p. 75.

³² Interview with Vesa Tapio Valo on February 13, 2014.

³³ Alvar Aalto, “Forms as a symbol of artistic creativity”, in Göran Schildt, *Aalto in his own words*, Otava Publishing Company, Helsinki 1997, p. 183.

