

The curator's angle – An interview with Asko Mäkelä



Text: Mirikka Vidgrén, translation Mike Garner

Who are you and what is your connection with photography and architecture?

I am an art historian and I have been arranging exhibitions of photography since the start of the 1980s. The Seinäjoki-born Alvar Aalto has been a part of my homelife, too – in books, furniture and lighting. Architecture photography was also one of the special fields of photography when I was Director of the Finnish Museum of Photography.

What was the process of mapping out, selecting and scripting the pictures in the exhibition like?

The aim was to create a touring exhibition out of photographs from the Alvar Aalto Museum's photograph archive. An exhibition that would be approachable and easy to transport from place to place. I tried to plan the whole thing to be quite different in spirit from traditional Aalto exhibitions. A significant portion of the works on display are portraits.

I had the idea of basing the exhibition on the photographs in the Alvar Aalto show at the *Palazzo Strozzi* in Florence in 1965, which Aalto chose himself. I thought they had attracted too little attention previously. The idea was reinforced when the architect Kristian Gullichsen told me that Aalto had been very particular about the pictures selected for the show. Overall the role of exhibitions and photographs in Aalto's working process has hardly ever been studied up to now. The Strozzi exhibition turned out to be an important juncture in Aalto's life in other respects, too.

The pictures also reveal the different features of architecture photography. As a type of photo, Alvar Aalto himself favoured the classical photograph, which is of a high standard artistically and in terms of quality, and at the same time shows the essential features of the building.

The work on the exhibition was done to a tight timetable, but the ready-digitized photographs in the archive and the generous assistance from the staff of the Alvar Aalto Museum and Foundation made the job easier.

What is the Alvar Aalto Museum's photograph archive, which forms the basis for the exhibition, like as a whole?

The Alvar Aalto Museum's photograph archive is a national treasure containing more than 50,000 high-quality photographs. The archive is a well-preserved whole, and has surely also been influenced by Aalto's own attitude to photography. He himself only used the top architecture photographers of his day, such as *Eino Mäkinen*, *Kari Hakli*, *Heikki Havas*, *Gustaf Welin*, *Eva and Pertti Ingervo* and *Ädhäm Fethulla*. The pictures Aalto commissioned are characterized by classical principles of composition that are at the same time typical of modernism.

The Museum's own photographers are also absolutely some of the best in the world. The type of picture taken by the Museum's photographers represents the Finnish principle of the good picture, in which the building is viewed as an object. Those who have held the post of Museum Photographer include *Martti Kapanen* and *Maija Holma*. The most recent architecture photographs in the exhibition were taken by Holma this spring. All in all the artistic standard of the photographs stored in the archive at different times has always been superb.

What makes a good architecture photograph and what does it tell us at best?

In a good architecture photograph the building is the most important thing. It can be an empty, newly finished building, one awaiting use, or in use – timeworn and full of life. A human being in an architecture photograph adds a dimension to the picture that is important for the space: scale.



When I was assembling the exhibition, I discovered new information about Aalto's relationship with the photograph – and also about how not everything is necessarily true, even in an architecture photograph – but when brought into the picture makes it a good architecture photograph in Aalto's fashion. When we look at the photographs, we also notice that Alvar Aalto was a storyteller, and that is why this exhibition, too, tells stories about Aalto in photographs.

What image of Alvar Aalto and his production was formed during the planning of the exhibition?

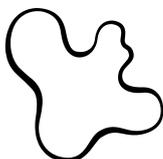
Alvar Aalto was ahead of his time both in marketing and in international networking. So, it's no wonder that he admired the architect *Eliel Saarinen*, who also made an international breakthrough early on and saw what the society of the future could be like.

Having worked in the media, I was interested in Aalto's very advanced way of marketing himself. He was as skilled in working with the media as another great man of his time, President *Urho Kekkonen*, was later on. Alvar Aalto's presence in photographs was natural and he had an innate ability to capitalize on this. Aalto made bold use of this new approach in promoting his production, while at the same time being aware that he was ahead of the field here, too. Alvar was a real charmer, who was able to draw, hold a conversation, party, tell stories, and play. Often all once!

Does the exhibition reveal anything new about Alvar Aalto and his production?

It was astonishing to realize how big a role visual art played in Aalto's production. He was supremely at home in the company of the world's most famous visual artists. He and the surrealist *Max Ernst* designed the Corso Bar in Zürich, Switzerland, as early as 1934. In addition to the most famous architects, Aalto also knew well many of the artists of modernism. He established contacts with many of them even earlier on, such as with the prominent patron of modern art *Maire Gullichsen*, who was a friend of both Aino and Alvar Aalto. The contribution made by surrealism to Aalto's own production became evident in quite a new way. Art plays an important role in architecture photography. It does not spring from nothing, but exists in interaction with the art of the time, with society and its various phenomena.

Taken as a whole the most important observation is probably the significance of the photograph in Aalto's production. He seems to have made particular use of photographs taken while travelling – by Aino, Aalto himself, or Elissa – as inspirational images for his buildings. Their subjects are the history of building or newly built masterpieces of modern architecture. When studying them you can hear Alvar shouting, I can do even better than that: "*Let's blow them away!*"



ALVAR AALTO

**"LET'S BLOW THEM AWAY!"
Alvar Aalto through the camera lens**

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Alvar Aallon katu 7, 40600 Jyväskylä, Finland

open Tue–Sun 11:00–18:00, Jyly–August Tue–Sun 11:00–18:00
www.alvaraalto.fi