



ALVAR AALTO

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# Alvar Aalto Revisited: Towards a Well-Tempered Architecture

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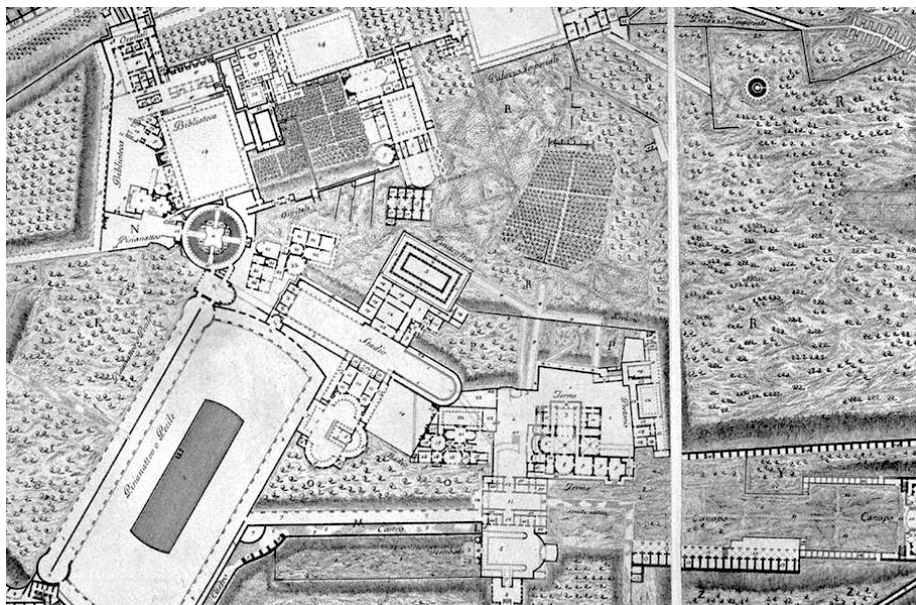
## Alvar Aalto revisited: towards a well-tempered architecture

### *New affinities for architects and the public*

### *In the Age of Technology?*

In trying to reason on the subject and answer many questions, including those implicit in this seminar, I first raised the question whether Technology and Humanism<sup>1</sup> can find a point of equilibrium and reconciliation, at least starting from the practice of university teaching, to which I have devoted myself for more than forty years and in which I still feel I have some competence. I rely on the work done intensively with students in the workshops and degree theses of the Faculty of Architecture Bovisa of the Politecnico di Milano. Starting from 1970, the year I graduated under Professor Aldo Rossi, here I have always taught and researched.

The question posed by this seminar obviously presupposes the awareness that a separation and conflict between Technology and Humanism have long existed and that in practice it is now moving almost irreversibly towards a divorce between *Understanding* (as the learning of knowledge), and *Know-How* (incorporated in production processes). To the point of believing that it was the separation and divorce between the two that has allowed the construction of the new city into forms that are ever more impetuous and rapid, and almost “futuristic”.



### Figura 1

The attempt to reconcile Technology and Humanism would then appear at first sight to be beyond the strength of a single generation, at least until a new civil awareness, a new culture and a new spirit of humanity have been awakened and disseminated.



Figura 2

The Humanism we are speaking about here must not, however, be confused with Humanism as such, meaning the original historical phenomenon invented by philologists and humanists at the Renaissance, in order to reread and reappropriate the writings of rhetorical eloquence of the Classical period, in particular the Latin writings attributed to Cicero. It is rather a secular religion that includes all non-religious and non-spiritual aspects listed in the call for papers for this seminar.

With the waning of the last “post-modern” fashion (now in the process of dying out), we are observing in any case the slow decline of all traditional forms of art, subjected to the dictatorship of increasingly invasive and powerful technology and a market which has appropriated it as a primary, flexible and centralised instrument. Ownership of the means of production and the marketing and distribution of technological products control and will continue to control all the ideational and design phases of “urban products” on a global scale.

“The Unanswered Question “

However, like Leonard Bernstein in his famous six lectures held at Harvard University in 1973, I might decide to look at the “long run” and so title my own paper at this seminar “*The Unanswered Question.*”<sup>2</sup>

If we are asked to reply to the inevitable question: *What will the architecture of the new times be? Will it be possible to humanise the processes that produce and distribute it? We can answer: We’ll see, let’s think about it.*

It is not a matter of again calling in question the idea of Modernity in the shadow of which we grew up and in which we were educated, confident in the democratic use of industrial standardisation.

In any case, the profound difference between “modernity and novelty” was already highlighted in its time, with the Dutch architect J. J. Oud being one of the earliest to do so. What he said, more or less, was that not everything that seems new is really New and therefore Modern.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is it a matter of subscribing *fetishistically* to a preventive part of submission to Technology as the sole possessor of the means necessary to achieve some works of a certain importance (both economic and social), without which, it is said, Humanity as a whole would be set back centuries.

We can, on the contrary, claim our freedom of thought and seek to express independent judgments in the face of the media campaigns that hammer us like so many acts of lobbying, almost as diversions, to distract us from the interests of the community that we have most at heart. As in the famous tale by Hans Christian Andersen, when faced with spectacular examples of mystification we can exclaim aloud: *The emperor isn’t wearing any clothes!*



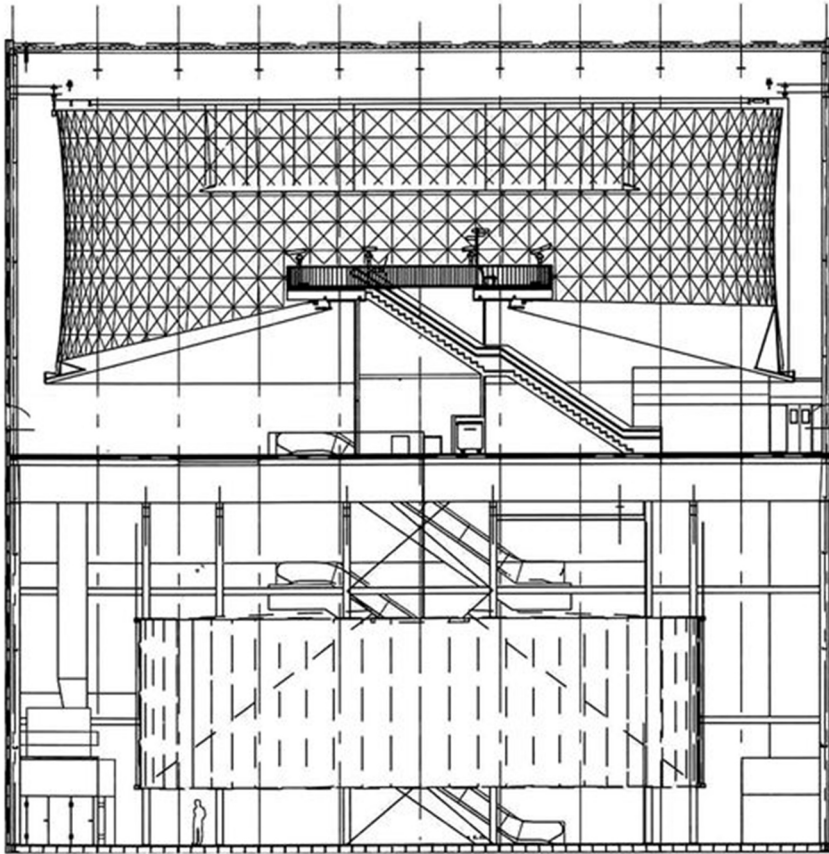


Figura 3

We can also seek to redefine the fundamental contents of each form of art (whether it is music, architecture, dance or painting), adapting them to the nature of artistic creation and its specific sensory and allusive nature as a technique that is not dominant but tamed.

Meanwhile, the contemporary city will be transformed both functionally and in terms of town planning, entrusted to increasingly partial and fragmentary episodes.

Reviewing the fundamentals of artistic work in Architecture is a field in which historical and academic critics universally acknowledge the importance of the contribution of Finland, and Alvar and Aino Aalto in particular. The mastery of Alvar and Aino Aalto, the co-founders of the Artek Group, were also recently analysed in a very interesting research and exhibition devoted to interior design and the definition of modern public space in the places of collective sociality.<sup>4</sup> Together with this, the theme of the city's form, of its plan, has impassioned whole generations of urban planners and cartographers, and recently a publication and an exhibition of the "Pro Helsingfors Foundation"

were also presented. Through cartography and documents from the archives, the publication beautifully illustrated the proposals and exchange of ideas between Helsinki the real city and Helsinki the idealised city between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

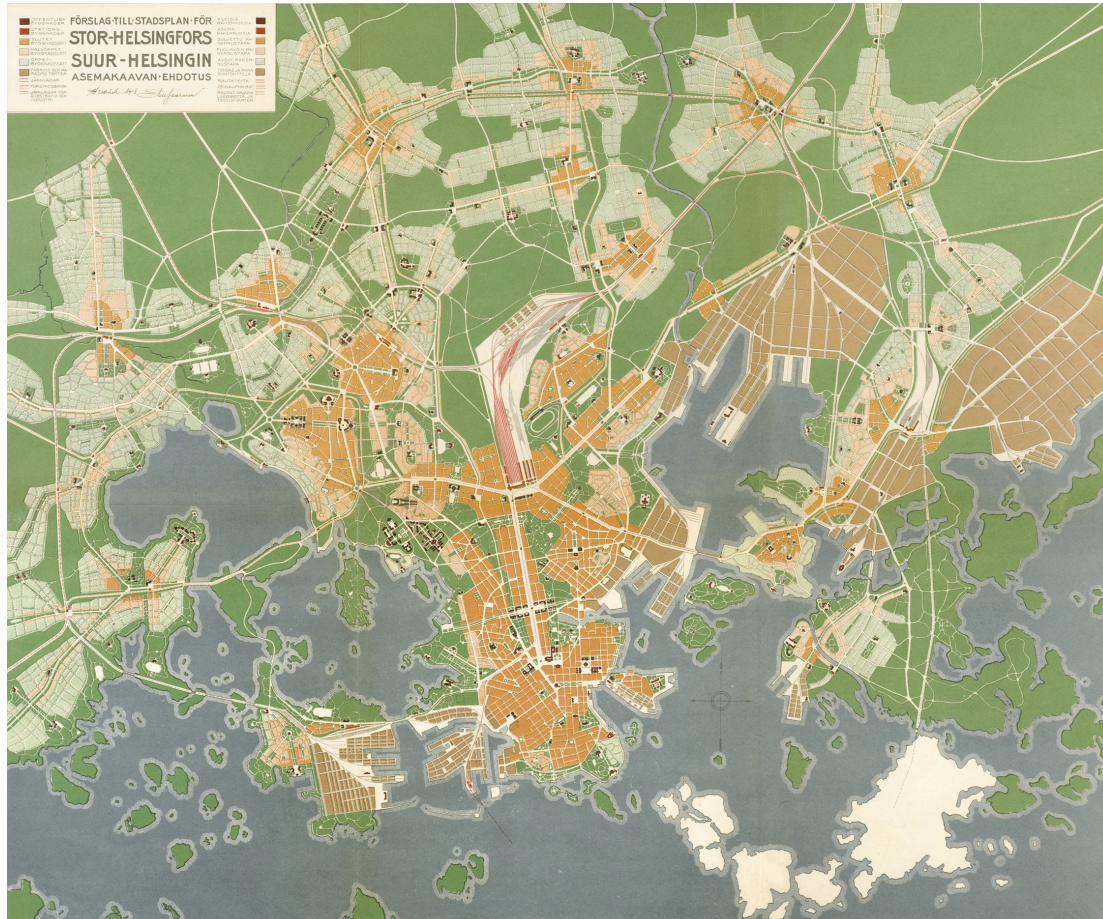


Figura 4

### The young Helsinki and the young Aalto

*“Aalto is the strongest exponent of the combination of standardisation with irrationality, so that standardisation is no longer master but servant.”<sup>6</sup>*

This statement by Sigfried Giedion contains, I believe, in a nutshell the progressive and optimistic contradiction of the Myth of the Modern Movement in Finland, its relation to the rightly celebrated work of Alvar Aalto and its cultural foundations. Hence also its natural evolution from a prophetic phase of announcement towards an age such as ours, which is mirrored in the debate over Technology and Humanism today.

It is the biography of the “young city” of Helsinki, the capital city of a nation that is also “young,” at least in its institutional form, which makes us return to

the very personal and equally significant “forever young” work of the early Alvar Aalto, who with his own personal story and the international echo rightly raised by the formal research in his projects, seemed in the interwar years to present himself as the heir to an arcane myth and the prophet of a new vision of Architecture as lived space. It afforded a fertile ground for comparison between the more general events in his country, then being formed as a united and independent state, and the international debate, which from that experimentation drew pointers and encouragement for an organic and functional architecture.

The projects and the “form” of the city imagined by Alvar Aalto in materialising and at the same time superseding the “political development” of his homeland in contemporary architecture also mirrored a discussion and debate in many ways still unresolved and dynamic about the future of the contemporary city and architecture as artistic practice and as social and economic organisation. From this point of view, Helsinki becomes an example and a paradigm.

For many centuries Finland had been a peripheral province contended between great state powers. Now, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Finland became a protagonist. In the dialectic between the city's political form and its physical form it is possible to read the paradigmatic nature of what an interesting book presents as “Helsinki Daughter of the Baltic: A Short Biography.”<sup>7</sup> The text concretely describes the search for an accomplished form of the capital city in the face of growth that is, so to speak, in many ways spontaneous and contradictory. Becoming a city without the defects and the “ills of the city.”

We, too, are perhaps seeking to deal in the clearest way possible with the theme of artistic creation and a revisitation of the compositional and philosophical themes of architecture, in the light of the key words that have



also affected the transformations of contemporary architectural culture, which have deeply penetrated into Alvar Aalto's work as architect and theorist.<sup>8</sup> It should not escape attention that the concept of artistic creation lies at the centre of his work. For Aalto, architectural creation does not evidently manifest itself as a pure technical process, but occurs in a twofold transformation from natural matter into constructional matter and as *"a stratified process of development at the highest level in which, together with a reciprocal internal action, new relationships are continuously created, a constant exchange of the constructive idea."*<sup>9</sup>

Strengthened by his experience as a man from the landscape of Finnish woods and lakes, Aalto even speaks of the struggle "against Nature," in the sense of imposing a form on the material to be worked for humanity and at the same time entrusted to the architect with the task of *"reaching the formal uniformity of many and varied architectural problems."*



Figura 5

Rereading his writings (of which I have a valuable little collection in Spanish) and reviewing his projects enables me to appreciate all of his subtle critical and self-critical ability. Reading these writings means in the end confirming the timeliness and the prophetic character of his statements, always presented in the context of the work carried out with Aino, aimed at

developing a uniform design between the knowledge of nature and technical competence in the design of functional systems and in the organisation of the city. In this, I believe the “organic” and “functional” character of his architecture consists,<sup>10</sup> in seeking to compose in a single organism, that is, according to a scale of both formal and spatial values, the syntactic principles of the functional purpose given by the program and the “irrationality of [industrial] standardisation.” The poetic figure determined by the compositional structure of the completed project and by the materials chosen and worked for the purpose implemented a process in many respects similar to that of Jean Sibelius in the construction of his Lieder and his symphonies, starting from notes and sound modules traced from life, observing landscapes and the animals that inhabit them.



Figura 6

*Fake and False modernity: Building the city: a long-term process*

It is again a question of discerning between appearance and reality in the contradictions of the new functional themes, often motivated by reasons of commercial policy, to claim the architect as “artificer” and not as a pure link and executor in the chain of production. A role and autonomy of critical judgment both in terms of urban development processes and of works completed and presented as novelties by the glossy reviews.



If, in musical composition, the ambiguity of the relationship between tonality and chromaticism mirrored for the modernists the contrast between the technique of the “well-tempered” sound medium and the seriality of composition, likewise in the compositional process in architecture, the ambiguity of the relationship between matter and measure, between function and structure, has increasingly highlighted the uncertain and unpredictable balance between form and meanings in relation to real space.

With the progressive development of technology, the Vitruvian categories of *Utilitas*, *Firmitas*, *Venustas* have gradually dissolved, and the foundations of composition, stone, brick and metal, have lost their recognisability, their specific weight, their value, their nature as materials, replaced by cheaper and more serial surrogates and counterfeits.

It is a contradiction in many ways that has always been inherent in artistic work and in the transformation of matter into the work of art. But whereas in the past it often played a positive role by pushing for progressive simplification – less is more – with the intervention of the artistic avant-gardes new ideological, aesthetic, and social contents centred around the theme of standardisation and the technical reproducibility of the work of art. Consider, for example, the *module* and the importance of graph paper as an instrument for sizing the elevation and section in the technical execution of the design of details.<sup>11</sup>

In drawing on the pure formal exteriority of the figurative and plastic arts of the twentieth century, through often inappropriate hybrids and contaminations, in the practical construction of the city today, we have explored processes in many ways unpredictable and contrasting: on the one hand charged with figurative suggestions retraced from the works of the past, and on the other void of content or replicating in indifference to places, history and their culture.

Discussion about the architectural and urban project is now penetrating the terrain of ideology and social psychology, of economic cycles and the mass behaviours induced by globalisation, namely in support of a shared and planetary global market, pervasive and ubiquitous, which does not leave

much room for the architect as artificer, often conditioned by the standardised critical judgment and by the support of a generically assenting public.

### *In quest of public space*

The first and most obvious sign of this decay of artistic activity is the little or no attention paid to public space. Both in the traditional meaning of locus/place, so well described and developed by Aldo Rossi in his book *Architecture of the City*, and borrowed from the study of the ancient city.<sup>12</sup> And in the equally truthful and concrete version of “Nordic Mannerism”, the expression of technical planning made up of layouts, squares and monuments that can be traced back to Camillo Sitte and his studies of the medieval city, which greatly influenced innumerable enlargement plans of many European cities in the twentieth century.



Figura 7

*Instinct, art and the collective nature of the city: new goals, new affinities*

*“During the past decades, architecture has often been compared with science, and there have been efforts to make its methods more scientific, even efforts to make it a pure science. But architecture is not a science. It is still the same great synthetic process of combining thousands of definite human functions, and remains architecture. Its purpose is to still bring the material world into harmony with human life. To make architecture more human means better architecture and it means a functionalism much larger than the merely technical one. This goal can be accomplished by only architectural methods – by the creation and combination of different technical things in such a way that they will provide for the human being in the most harmonious life. Architectural methods, on occasions, resemble scientific methods; in architecture you can adopt a research process similar to those used by science. Architectural research can be more and more methodical but substance of it can never be solely analytical. Always there will be more of instinct and art in architectural research.”<sup>13</sup>*

In this important essay written in 1940, Alvar Aalto unambiguously expounded the conditions for a progressive development of an architectural discipline not subject to technology. He speaks of an architecture capable of co-ordinating the many technical disciplines that help determine the degree of satisfaction of a more harmonious life.

On the scientific character of architectural research, he also states that its essence should never be “solely analytical”, meaning by analytical the ability to break down the relevant problems and variables into ever smaller and more elementary issues, but that in the last instance, instinct and art must always prevail over scientific analysis in matters of design.

In the light of the developments that in recent decades have taken place in techniques of representation, statistics and finally calculation, in addition to what has already been said about the possession of the means of production, we still have to establish what is really meant today by “instinct and art”, and how to recover “lost time”.

I believe that the main task of whoever has responsibility for the conduct of public affairs, and thus the city and the territory in the broadest sense, is to impose unity of purpose on the many systemic complexities stemming from both the development of technologies and their extension beyond the boundaries of the city and the territories in the ways that they have historically been formed and consolidated. In other words, the geography of the problems that create the demand for architecture no longer coincides with the geography of places and cities – or rather not just with it – however important they may be.

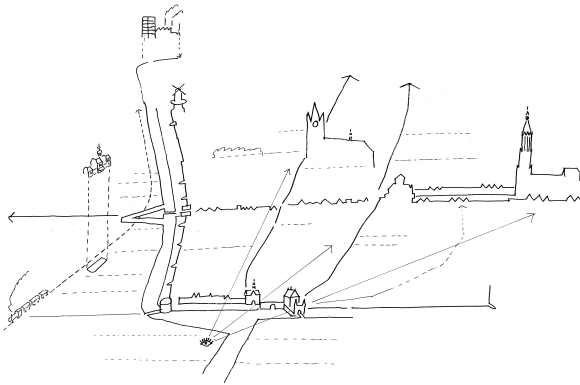


Figura 8



Figura 9

School and the method of inquiry and research have as many responsibilities in the formation of a civil consciousness and a citizenship of the world based on analysis, but which also avoids cultural standardisation, and above all is

linked to the different and specific contexts of study scattered around the world.

Can technology be humanised just by making use of devices and substitutes, and whatever can be transferred to new generations, so as to dissuade them from the tempting shortcuts of technology based on speed of analysis and calculation?

First of all: *school, education and the practice of design must be assumed as a collective work which should be introduced by the survey. To do this, the term context will increasingly regain its original meaning of an “actual territory wherein education is given”.*



Figura 10

At the same time the word design should refer to a *process of critical knowledge supported by the survey in a specific context, both concerning the function and the programme from a historical point of view.*

Furthermore, greater importance needs to be paid to experiencing *existing and built architecture*, to be understood and materialised through visits to sites. This should include buildings and works by leading architects of the present and past, as well as vernacular and minor ones.



The long duration of the city should also be experienced as a form of knowledge based on memory. All this should become curricular in the education of the young generations: mapping, analysing by layers and training in the practice of drawing by hand, or using raw material modelling, should again be cultivated. In other words it is time that the relationship between the *eye* and the *hand*, lost in many cases, or not even experienced, should be restored and brought back.

Finally, understanding what town-planning standards mean *in relation to practice* could foster knowledge and expertise as well as familiarity with design tools and *landscape representations*, which would be useful both for expounding financial programmes and proposing *new artistic and technical-operational approaches*, based on reality.

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(text: words 3056)

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism>,:

"The word "Humanism" is ultimately derived from the Latin concept [humanitas](#), and, like most other words ending in -ism, entered English in the nineteenth century. However, historians agree that the concept predates the label invented to describe it, encompassing the various meanings ascribed to *humanitas*, which included both benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by *bonae litterae* or humane learning (literally "good letters"). In the second century AD, a Latin grammarian, [Aulus Gellius](#) (c. 125 – c. 180), complained: Those who have spoken Latin and have used the language correctly do not give to the word *humanitas* the meaning which it is commonly thought to have, namely, what the Greeks call *φιλανθρωπία* ([philanthropy](#)), signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction; but they gave to *humanitas* the force of the Greek *παιδεία* ([paideia](#)); that is, what we call *eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*, or "education and training in the [liberal arts](#)". Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the desire to pursue of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, has been granted to humanity alone of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas*, or "humanity".

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Unanswered\\_Question\\_\(lecture\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Unanswered_Question_(lecture_series))

The Unanswered Question is the title of a lecture series given by [Leonard Bernstein](#) in the fall of 1973. This series of six lectures was a component of Bernstein's duties as the [Charles Eliot Norton Professor](#) of Poetry for the 1972-73 academic year at [Harvard University](#), and is therefore often referred to as the Norton Lectures. The lectures were both recorded on video and printed as a book, titled *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard*.

<sup>3</sup> La distinzione tra Nuovo e Moderno in Architettura in origine formulata dall'architetto Olandese J.J.P.Oud (Cfr. J.J.P.Oud, *Lo sviluppo dell'architettura moderna in Olanda*, 1926, in S.Polano (edited by), J.J.P.Oud, *Architettura Olandese*, Milan 1981, pp. 95-96), è stata ripresa ed ha dato il titolo al libro: [E.Bonfanti](#), a cura di M.Biraghi e Michelangelo Sabatino, Milano 2001. pp. 127-140

<sup>4</sup> in: AA.VV, *Artek and the Aaltos – creating a modern world*, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Cfr.: AA.VV., *KAUPUNGIN PIIRTEET – STADENS PRAGEL – OUTLINING A CITY*, Pro Helsingfors – Pro Helsinki, Helsinki 2017

<sup>6</sup> Cfr.: Sigfried Giedeon, *Alvar Aalto: primordiale ed attuale* in: S. Giedeon, *Spazio, Tempo e Architettura*, Harvard University Press, 1941 – Terza Edizione Milano 1954, pp.559-597

<sup>7</sup> Matti Klinge, Laura Kolbe, *Helsinki Daughter of the Baltic – a short Biography*, Helsinki 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr.: Alvar Aalto, *La humanización de la Arquitectura*, Edition a cargo de Xavier Sust, Basel 1970

<sup>9</sup> *ibidem*: pp.25-35

<sup>10</sup> <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sistema>

“Un sistema può essere definito come l'unità fisica e funzionale, costituita da più parti o sottosistemi ([tessuti](#), [organi](#) o elementi ecc.) interagenti (od in relazione funzionale) tra loro (e con altri sistemi), formando un tutt'uno in cui, ogni parte, dà un contributo per una finalità comune o un obiettivo identificativo di quel sistema. Spesso, in [anatomia](#), proprio per lo scopo comune degli organi/elementi componenti, viene confuso con il termine "apparato", ma la struttura e la funzionalità dei sistemi ne rendono la semantica ben più ampia, articolata o complessa rispetto quella degli apparati.”

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*, Torino 1966

<sup>12</sup> [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architettura\\_della\\_città](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Architettura_della_città)

“L'architettura della città è un saggio di [Aldo Rossi](#), col quale affronta lo studio dello spazio urbano partendo da aspetti di carattere architettonico.

La città è difatti descritta come un organismo di fatti architettonici (o singole unità architettoniche) dal fondamentale ruolo di essere la "scena fissa nel teatro della vita umana".”

<sup>13</sup> Pubblicato in: “The Technology Review, November 1940, pag. 14/15.