

# Aalto, his row houses and their inhabitants

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# 1. Introduction: from widely recognized work to largely unknown production

At a time when French society is seeking a course between collective housing, or social housing estates, which it has been partially demolishing since 2003, and detached houses, whose energy insecurity has been in the spotlight since 2010, row-houses, more commonly found in northern European countries, seem a fecund compromise and Alvar Aalto's row houses offer avenues worth exploring:

- they provide architectural answers that seem promising, such as the particularly well-known one of row houses in a fan-shaped arrangement that he invented and where meet both an aesthetic and a functional need
- they show how an architect who is renowned for exceptional buildings takes on minor, more modest, programs
- they are easier to inquire with the residents who live in and use them in comparison with large public buildings, whereas enquiries protocols are more complex.

These reasons provided the impetus for French government-funded research on Aalto's row houses<sup>1</sup>. This research led to progress on three points:

- identifying all the row houses in Aalto's work, which had been so neglected in the research on Aalto that, to my surprise, a tally had never been made<sup>2</sup>
- establishing the fact that these modest houses were designed to meet the same demands for architectural qualities as Aalto's more prestigious buildings; these small houses, which were built in the years between 1930-32 and 1963-65, incorporate many of the schemes used in Aalto's more ambitious and well-known works
- showing what the residents of these row houses think of them and how they live in them, thus contributing to the understanding of the work in a way that differs from specialists' input.

In this paper I will address only the last point. More specifically, I will endeavour to show how:

- focusing on an unusual object that is different from Aalto's better-known, more prestigious buildings, namely the row-housing unit, and
- initiating an enquiry that invites ordinary residents to voice opinions that Aalto specialists do not generally have access to

involve decentring both the subjects being studied and the production of opinions. This dual shift of focus sheds new light on houses that have been ignored by critics and neglected by research, and also, more broadly, on all of the architect's work. But before I present the results, I shall make a brief detour by way of a few theoretical tools that I found helpful.

## 2. A theoretical detour by way of Aalto's design: the hypothesis of three generators of design

Being familiar with Aalto's published works and having seen his row houses, and then having gone over these visits afterwards and re-examined them in chronological order, I identified the repetition and reinvention of what, in architecture, as in music and literature, are called themes. A reading of more academic research confirmed the existence of these themes that make up Aalto's work (Hoddé, 2002). In the course of my reading I encountered for instance: the outside-inside, the undulating space, the ruin, the organic or "unfinished" modernism, the pursuit of formal details, and the "democratic space". To be more specific, we can think about the Aalto's close attention to sources of artificial light, which are never direct or harsh, or the importance attached to the home's fireplace, which transposes the symbolism of the traditional *tuppa* in a modern living room.



*Workers' Club, Jyväskylä (1924-25), an indoor wall light fitting. Campus in Otaniemi, Espoo (from 1949), outside lamps. Two examples of the architectural theme of Aalto's close attention to sources of artificial light.*

Some themes (such as the relationship of Aalto's buildings to nature) are identified by several specialists, while others (such as balustrades, one of the three themes identified by Baird, 1970) are mentioned only once. A more theoretical definition may allow us to reach consistency in defining architectural themes (Conan, 1988; Hoddé, 2006), but inflating the themes is problematic, since one quickly ends up compiling long lists of seemingly endless numbers of themes. In doing so one loses sight of the specific features of Aalto's design and thereby of his contribution to 20th-century architecture.

To try to solve this problem, I based my work on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical interpretation of Erwin Panofsky's approach to unity versus diversity in Gothic architecture<sup>3</sup>. Bourdieu proposes apprehending certain Gothic themes (such as architectural clarification) in relation to a few principles that organize and generate them in both their diversity and their unity. The section of a building, for instance, can be inferred from its façade because its designers were trained in the scholastic manner, attentive to the way the forms of texts are broken down. Reinterpreting this reading, I combined the extremely diverse themes that characterize Aalto's work into three "design generators" (Hoddé, 2006).

The first of these generators refers us to a special place that Aalto occupies, along with Hugo Häring, Hans Scharoun and a few others, in Colin St John Wilson's 1995 book *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture. The Uncompleted Project*. The project appears in the book as an open process whose aim is neither a predefined purpose nor adherence to any particular style or doctrine, let alone submission to some aesthetic "dictatorship", to quote a 1957 speech by Aalto. According to the French architect Bernard Hamburger (1986: 50), "A line of Aalto's is an adventure. We don't know what will happen to it when it begins. It starts out straight, bends left, stops short, makes a wide curve, and a corbiestep ends quite by chance. Aalto showed that there is coherence in the accidental phenomenon, which prior to him was but an arbitrary event." Aalto developed a free modernity and was acknowledged for this by peers and critics alike. Robert Venturi, for example, draws a host of examples from Aalto to illustrate his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* -- his antidote to dogmatic modernism. I will call this generator "a different modernity, between freedom and conventions".

Two other generators can be added to Aalto's modernity, which is so different from architectural modernity. First, Aalto multiplies the connections between his buildings and the existing context and makes them denser. This context is usually a natural setting but can also be urban. Let us take as an example the terraced grassy slopes that serve as a transition between the masonry shape of the 1956 Maison Carré and the surrounding natural terrain; I will call this second generator "an architecture of relationships".



*Maison Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne (1956), the "turf stairs" create a transition between the house and the landscape.*

Secondly, Aalto builds for men and women as they are, without aiming to disrupt the uses and conventions that structure their everyday lives. As Juhani Pallasmaa wrote in his foreword of *Alvar Aalto designer* (2002: 10), “Aalto designs emanate a sense of empathy and comfort [...]. His style of design is based on sensory realism and it aims at true experimental qualities instead of conceptual and stylistic aspirations or retinal aesthetics. Aalto’s buildings and objects project a sense of familiarity and intimacy. His furniture evokes tactile and warmth, ergonomic comfort and acoustic softness, his light fittings turn light into a playful haptic substance, and his glass objects invite the caress of the eye and the hand.” And his buildings are in turn inviting, self-evident, kind and convenient. Mention has been made of Aalto’s humanism (MOMA, 1998) but I have preferred to call this third generator “architecture for the little man”, to use Aalto’s own words. We note that the second and third generators run counter to two breaks advocated by modernists. First, modernists declared it essential to wipe the slate clean. In a 1925 proposal called the Plan Voisin, for example, Le Corbusier considered razing the centre of Paris in order to be free to erect his towers. Aalto, on the other hand, accepted what already existed and preferred to show that he was inventive by “drawing” the dialogue between his architecture and the place where it stands. Secondly, modern architects were fascinated by the Bolshevik myth of the “new man”, while Aalto chose to put his architecture at the service of the “little man”.

### 3. Residents of row houses and “architecture for the little man”

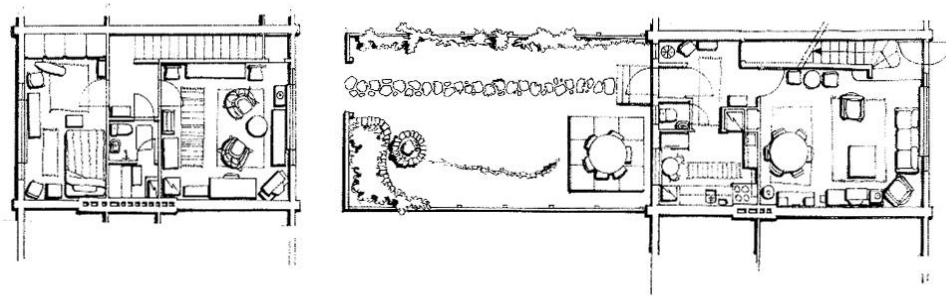
I will focus only on the third design generator, “architecture for the little man”, illustrating it with a few related architectural themes. I will depart from the sphere of design to examine the reception of Aalto’s row houses by the thirteen of these houses that we conducted our enquiry, using a combination of measured drawings complete with furnishings, photos, and interviews in Finnish and Swedish about the qualities they enjoy in the everyday life of the inhabitants and the problems they encounter<sup>4</sup>. As was fairly logical, we identified three types of reactions to Aalto’s row houses in the opinions voiced by the people living in them. I shall illustrate them with one or two examples from each type:

- the qualities of their homes
- the “inconveniences” of the houses, in the words of one of the residents of Kotka, which are related to problems of everyday use in architecture
- real ambivalence when they cannot reach a clear opinion

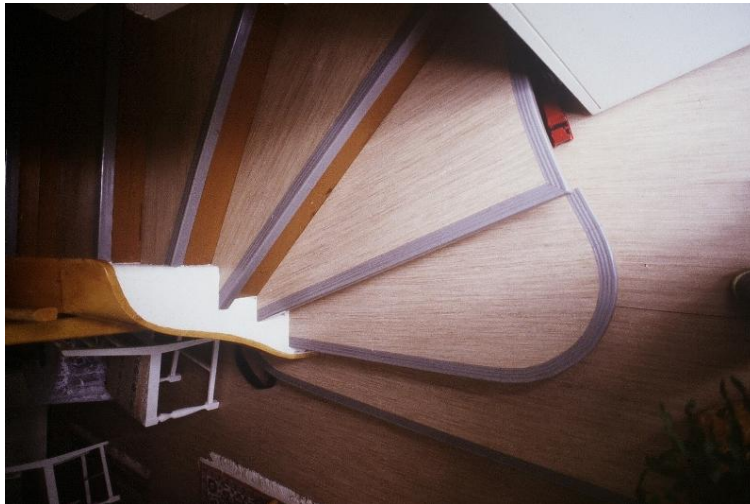
#### 3.1 qualities: the staircase and the upper landing

The enquiries show that the staircases of the homes we saw are more than just vertical connections: they contain, condensed in them, exceptional aesthetic and functional qualities. And the inhabitants never see them as a problem. In Pietarsaari for example, where some of the occupants are elderly, they found it incredulous that staircases were an issue and surprised that we kept asking how they felt about the stairs. The architecture reflects their feelings, both in the width and brightness of the

staircase and in the steps, which are as comfortable as those of the Maison Carré. But most of all, residents repeatedly expressed emotion about the stairs: the staircase is the element that represents the home as a whole (in the Rantala building in Kotka), or it is the object of symbolic appropriations (people rewrite the history of their design). And when you see that the staircase doubles as a raised platform or a makeshift chair and forms an elegant curve in an orthogonal world, you understand the woman from the Mäkelä building in Kotka who claims to have chosen her house because of its staircase. Here the residents' everyday life is woven not only by the details of use but also by those of emotion.



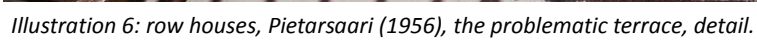
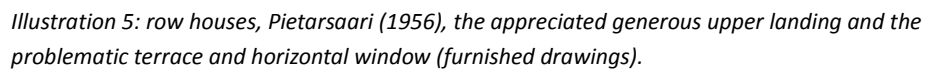
*Mäkelä building, Kotka (1937), the appreciated staircase (furnished drawings).*



*Mäkelä building, Kotka (1937), detail of the first steps of the staircase.*

Upstairs, the landing is generous enough to make it more than just a passageway. Instead, as the visits and interviews revealed, the landing provides an upper nook that you find in other, larger houses built by Aalto, such as the Villa Mairea and Villa Aalto. The row house residents are unanimous in liking the landing and they use it in various ways, reserving it for activities that are neither too individual (for which they use the closed rooms) nor really social (those take place in the downstairs living room). And these landings are inviting areas that beckon inhabitants to live in and appropriate the upper floor in a different way.







*Illustration 7: row houses, Pietarsaari (1956), the problematic terrace.*

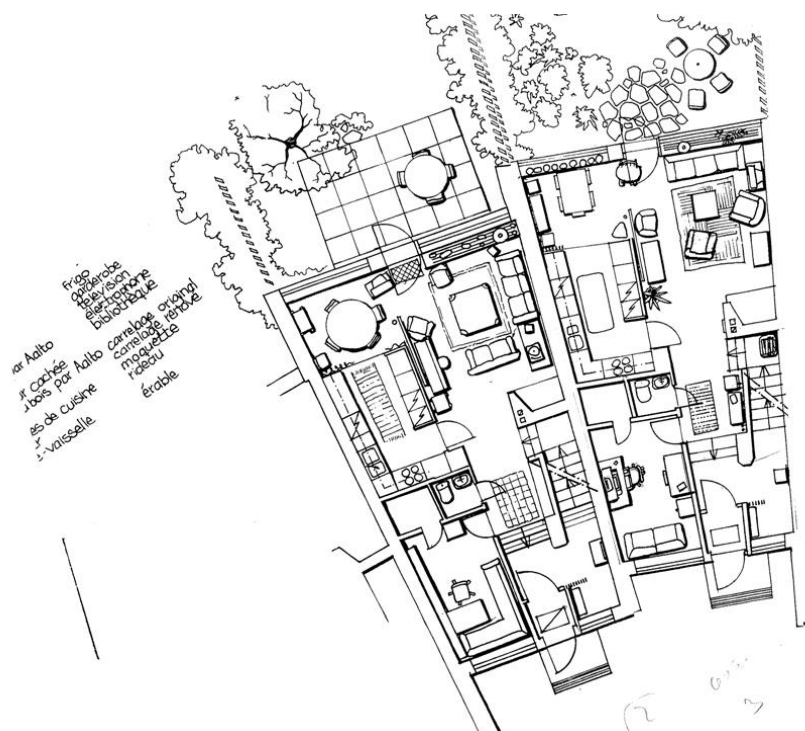


*Illustration 8: terrace houses, Kauttua (1938), the covered terraces.*



### 3.2 inconveniences: the fireplace and the terrace

We know how important fireplaces are to Aalto (Hoddé 1998: 64), and that they are an architectural theme related to the monumental fireplace of the traditional *tuppa* (Molley, 1984). Yet in three out of the four families questioned in Pietarsaari, the fireplace is relegated to the background, behind the furniture, and the living room is arranged without it. Clearly the fireplace is “out of order”, not technically speaking but in a domestic sense: it is set into a narrow wall in the far corner of the living room and gets in the way of anyone crossing through the room. The fireplace just doesn't fit in if it is brought into interaction with the living room furniture, the room's morphology, and the flow of people moving in and out. Occupants have no choice but to ignore it. The fireplaces of Pietarsaari are not the only features that Aalto sometimes overlooks, although his oversights are rare. Terraces are another problematic feature. When they are not sheltered from the snow, the snow piles up, making it impossible to open the French windows, and has to be shovelled off. The snow creates a cold wall and can seep through the ceilings of habitable rooms. In Rantala (Sunila), residents found this regrettable and were surprised that Aalto failed at the roof convention. Sometimes, like in Pietarsaari (completed in 1965), they decided to cover the terraces themselves, based on the way Aalto solved this problem in his own buildings in Kauttua (completed in 1938). Behind this ignorance of everyday use -- something highly unusual for Aalto -- emerges an architectural theme that no specialist had really noticed before, but that was mentioned by the occupants. That theme is the domestic terrace. With hindsight, we recognize the elegant touch of terraces in a number of Aalto's designs.



*Row houses, Pietarsaari (1956), the “out of order” fireplace (furnished drawings).*



*Row houses, Pietarsaari (1956), the “out of order” fireplace.*

### 3.3 ambivalences: the fan shape and the horizontal windows

Occupants may like the design of a staircase or upper landing or be upset that a fireplace is positioned awkwardly or that a balcony is unprotected, but they are also sometimes ambivalent about the architecture. The morphology of fan-shaped houses, for instance -- a theme that is so characteristic of Aalto, which, we point out, was invented along with the row housing unit in 1936 in Rantala (Sunila)<sup>5</sup> and subsequently spread to all his work – appears as a determining factor in protecting the privacy of attached houses, especially from outdoors, as can be seen in Rantala (Sunila). But the fan shape does make the interior of the houses somewhat difficult to fit out and furnish (Pietarsaari is an example), as would be true of any space at odds with conventional orthogonality.

Windows are another example, as in Pietarsaari. The upstairs bedrooms, which give out onto the garden, have large double-glazed windows that open by pivoting horizontally up towards the ceiling. This makes them very heavy to handle and occupants complain that it is exceedingly difficult to leave them ajar (to air out the rooms), and even more difficult to open them (in order to clean them). Matters become even more complicated when the house is fan-shaped: this makes it outright impossible to open the window, which rests on the walls, forming a re-entrant angle. It really is the question of use, whether daily (airing out a room) or occasional (washing the windows) that is the problem here, and not an overly assertive, inadmissible modernism: the enjoyment occupants get from the view from the bedrooms, and the way the attractively wood-trimmed horizontal windows fit into the façade do mitigate anything about the windows that might have seemed overly modern. If the practical and aesthetic aspects are weighed up, the window is certainly too heavy, but people like it.

## 4. Conclusion: hybridizing for greater comprehension

The forthcoming book will, of course, examine the subject in greater depth<sup>6</sup>, adding an array of examples to the foregoing and qualifying it. We may conclude, however, that this work provides three kinds of insight:

- better knowledge of row houses. Architectural evaluation of Aalto's row houses provides feedback that enriches the design of these units as an architectural type that is acknowledged in the history of architecture. This evaluation could contribute to a well-argued critique of French row houses, which often sacrifice use to image, but we could also establish a "programme of use" designed to improve houses of this type
- better knowledge of Aalto's work. The architectural evaluation based on the uses and emotions mentioned in the thirteen homes aroused residents' enthusiasm but also brought to light real criticism and problems. We discover that certain aspects of the design were skipped. But the criticism is kept in perspective by the occupants' gratitude for what the architect gives them in other ways, and is put into context by what they know about an architect who cares about *commoditas* (in Alberti's words [1452]) -- in other words the practical, sensible aspect of everyday life
- better knowledge of architecture. In a more theoretical way, laymen sit down with scholars and remind us that architecture has two inextricable aspects: it is both a cultural production and an object of everyday use. Therefore it must meet everyday needs as well as be able to move us. Architecture has regained its anthropological unity, which spans everything from design to reception (Hoddé, 2010), and this is arguably the most decisive theoretical knowledge acquired in this research.

With respect to these three points it should be stressed that it is the occupants who produce this knowledge that specialists could not always anticipate and suspect. So the insight residents can give on Aalto's inventions and creativity and laymen (or non-specialists) make us see things that had been invisible to us and level criticism that we had not been expressing. In this way they shed their light on Aalto's work -- by identifying, for instance, all the potential for privacy that the fan shape creates. This shows that the separation between scholarly criticism and reception by users is not so relevant. And because the residents enrich the way we look at a work that gives us never-ending lessons in design, we find it worthwhile to ask them to testify (Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe, 2009) and it give me an opportunity to pursuing my long-time theoretical interest in the relationship between design and reception in architecture (Hoddé, 2010).

- <sup>1</sup> See the call for tender launched by the Ministry of Infrastructure, Transport and Housing in the framework of their “Plan urbanisme, construction, architecture” (Urbanism, Construction and Architecture Department) in March 1999; see also the final research report, R. Hoddé and J.-M. Léger (2003), *La Leçon de l'étranger. Aalto, Siza et la maison de masse*, Paris, Plan construction architecture, “Maison individuelle, architecture, urbanité” (Private houses, Architecture, Urban planning) programme.
- <sup>2</sup> Pekka Korvenmaa did this type of work by surrounding Aalto's industrialized houses. See P. Korvenmaa (1990), “The Finnish Wooden House Transformed: American prefabrication, war-time housing and Alvar Aalto”, *Construction History*, vol. 6, p. 47-61.
- <sup>3</sup> Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, (1951) which Pierre Bourdieu translated into French in 1967 and to which he responded in a thirty-two-page postscript/essay on Panofsky's contribution to a theory of professional practice and knowledge.
- <sup>4</sup> I enquired in eight houses in Kotka (four in the Mäkelä building, and four in the Rantala building), in four houses in Pietarsaari and in one house in Paimio. The measured drawings were made by Tommi Kuikka and the interviews conducted by Viirpi Mamia (at the time Finnish architecture students); the interviews were translated with the help of the cultural services of the Finnish Embassy in Paris, represented by Pia Setälä.
- <sup>5</sup> The shape was outlined at a competition for week-end homes in 1932, the *Tuli* Project; *tuli* is the Finnish word for fire, the hearth occupying the tip of the triangle. See. “Alvar Aalto's Summer Cottages and Sauna”, in Erkki Helamaa and Jari Jetsonen (2005), *Alvar Aalto Summer Homes*, Helsinki, Rakennustieto Oy, p. 18.
- <sup>6</sup> In négociation with Parenthèses, Marseille, to be published in late 2012.

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