

Artifact vs. Nature: A Study of Aalto's proposal for the Palace of Nations in Geneva

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Introduction

The proposed argument which has been illustrated in the occasion of the first Alvar Aalto research conference is a part of a doctoral thesis which has been undertaken at the IUAV University in Venice.

The particularity of a PhD in Architectural Composition is that the research is based on one hand on a historical approach and on the other hand on a more specific architects' point of view. This point of view is illustrated by the interpretation of drawings and models produced by the researcher. The result is a study where the drawings are used to enlighten the theoretical questions and vice versa.

The researches that we carry on in Venice deal with the work of masters of the twentieth century. We believe that the profound knowledge of their architecture can give us the possibility to understand better our time and to gain a new point of departure for our work as architects, especially today, when no specific theory or direction seems to prevail.

Our time is also the time of rethinking of man's relationship to nature. And in this perspective a study of Aalto's architecture becomes very promising. Although his opus has been widely studied and a lot of interesting arguments have been pointed out during the last decades, some parts of his work still lay in obscurity and some of the questions regarding his work need a constantly renewed point of view.

One of the questions that has never been exhausted and where the analysis of architectural composition can give a valid insight, is how did Alvar Aalto create architectural landscape, how did he "invent" places or how did he make possible to rediscover their beauty? In the broader context of the research, the question about the "invention of the place" in Aalto's architecture becomes a demonstration of the relationship between what is found on the site and what is added to it. It aims to describe the theoretical basis of this approach as well as its practical possibilities in the contemporary practice.

The inventor of Acropolis: Aalto's proposal for the Palace of Nations in Geneva

In order to develop this research question, the study extends over a project, which Aalto develops in his early years and where it seems that for the first time he achieves a synthesis between the “motives from the past” and the wild beauty of the natural environment. This project is the mysteriously interrupted proposal for the **League of Nations' building** on the Lake Geneva in Switzerland. The analysis of the unpublished sketches from the Aalto archives has given a possibility to carry out a hypothetic reconstruction of Aalto's proposal, to relate it to his other early work and to insert it, by comparing it to the other proposals from this famous competition, in a larger perspective within the European architectural debate of the time.

The archive of the *Alvar Aalto Museum in Helsinki* contains approximately sixty pages of sketches of the competition project, elaborated by Aalto in 1926. In some of these sketches the project is already very clearly defined. A complete study about this project has not yet been undertaken, but some of the archive material has already appeared in different publications¹.

The Helsinki Archives do not contain any written material about the project and there is no competition notice or other material which describes the building site like for example photographs. That is why a parallel research has been undertaken at the *Archives of the United Nations Office in Geneva*. There has been found a complete dossier of the competition (Palais des Nations 1926), including all the graphic material and photographs which appeared as an annex of the competition notice.

The plans that illustrate the building site were the basis on which Aalto drew the sketches. They represent the position of the site at the outskirts of Geneva and describe precisely the terrain where the complex should be proposed. The photographs of the famous photographer Boissonnas show the site between the lake and Rue de Lausanne. They are made in the romantic spirit of landscape painting and reveal the site as an artificial arcadian landscape. On the other hand, the presence of the mountains confers to the site a dramatic component.

Those pictures must have impressed Aalto, because he reproduces in one of his sketches the same disposition of Mont Blanc framed between the elements of architecture as Boissonnas framed the mountain between the natural elements.



Illustration 1: Aalto's sketch AFAA 46-317 – the framed view of Mont Blanc, Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum. Illustration 2: interpretation of Aalto's sketch, drawing by the author of the research.

The way in which Aalto approaches the alpine landscape seems to resemble the way the romantic painters represented mountains as a part of natural world, unmastered by a man. The nature in this conception is a "divine creation, to be set against the artifice of human civilization", very far from the contemporary image of the mountains, spoil of their mystical component and seen as a populated contemporary landscape, a hybrid of form and content that is very well depicted in Niedermayr's photographs.

Aalto has been familiar with the Alps since 1924 when he passed them during his honeymoon trip to Italy. His sketches show the impression the mountains made on a traveller from a relatively flat Finnish landscape.

The first sketch among those from the Helsinki Archives that has been studied is the drawing which shows the silhouette of the Lake of Geneva and the line, which starts at the building site and connects it with a point marked with the letters MB. The superposing of this drawing and the aerial photograph confirms that the intention of Aalto was to mark a line between the site and Mont Blanc.

The League of Nations Palace seem to be the one of the first Aalto's' projects where the landscape assumes great importance in the process of composition. And this is also his peculiarity in comparison to the other proposals. There was no competition winner but nine prices ex aequo were conferred and the jury report criticized the lack of connection to the lake and to the landscape in almost all of them. For the exception of the clamorous project of Le Corbusier, in the competition drawings the surroundings barely appear. In an early sketch of Le Corbusier's proposal, the direction of Mont Blanc is marked and there has been a certain attention towards the landscape². In the other proposals, which oscillate from beaux arts style to neoclassical or in some cases more modern language, the focus seems to be more on the architectural object itself³.

But let us return to the Aalto's proposal and to the way he dealt with the building site. The second series of sketches which has been brought to attention are the small sketches where he tried to insert the two volumes of the complex, the assembly hall and the secretariat, on the lot. As the superposition of the building site and sketches show, there have been several different proposals for the placement of the two volumes. The drawings, which contain more precise proposals of the site plan, derive from those sketches. The measures of the site plan drawings correspond to the measures of the detailed sketches of single levels of the assembly hall building and this has made possible their insertion in the planimetric scheme and their comparison.

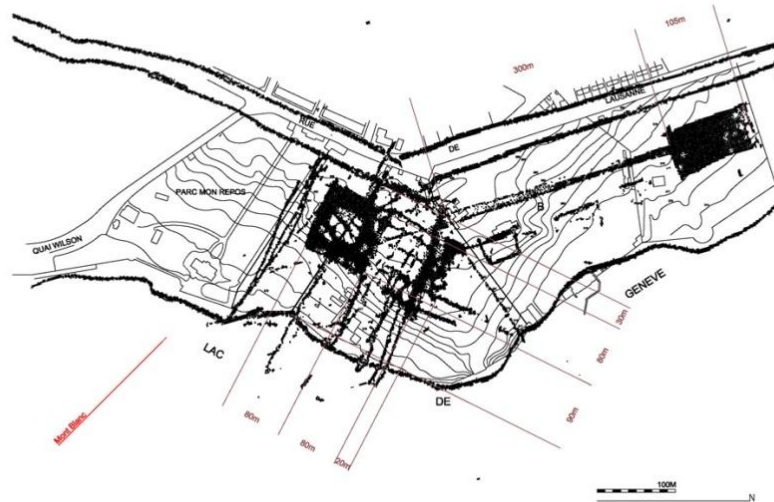


Illustration 3: superposition of the site plan and Aalto's sketch AFAA 46-277, sketch from Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum, drawing by the author of the research.

The information, obtained from the graphic material and from the competition notice, has made possible a **hypothetic reconstruction** of the final version of the project. The most detailed drawings of the plan and the section were the basis for this invention, which has put together the information of various sketches, has given way to a better understanding of the project and has shown how the building, the site and the surrounding landscape are connected.

This operation is based on one hand on a quantity of different material with no chronological order and on the other hand on descriptions from the competition notice. It is a sort of an “archeological proceeding” where the fragments are investigated and put into a hypothetical whole.

What the reconstruction shows, is that the building is not so much ‘Greek’ in its single parts, as it is in the spirit of posing an architectural object in confrontation with the landscape, challenging it and at the same time exalting its characteristics. The two pure volumes have as scenery the organic lines of the Alps and the calm horizon of the lake. The bigger prism of the assembly building is hollowed out with a movement inverse of the stacked mountains. Those are thought to be perceived through the frame of the building openings and through the skylight above the assembly hall.

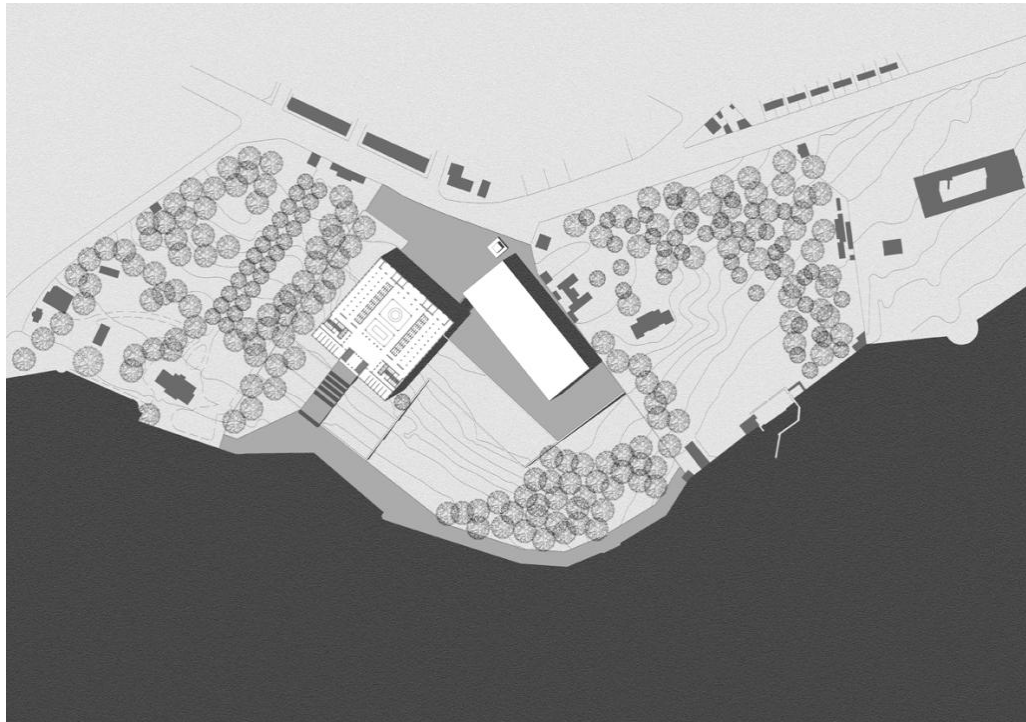


Illustration 4: reconstruction of the site plan, drawing by the author of the research.



Illustration 5: reconstruction of the view from the park, drawing by the author of the research.



Illustration 6: reconstruction of the section, drawing by the author of the research.

Another interesting aspect that arises from Aalto's sketches is the role of the **ancient architectural models**, which has been determining for the composition of the ensemble and its singular parts.

Several studies have questioned about the connection between the early works of Aalto and the architecture of ancient times. One of the aims of this study is to verify, if he used the models just for their typological or formal values, or if also their measures and proportions affect his architecture.

The plans and perspectives of the League of Nations' palace have been compared to the buildings which seem to have inspired them. Although there are some great similarities, which show that Aalto has been profoundly acquainted with ancient architecture, it seems that the will to reproduce measures and exact forms has been overwhelmed with a free interpretation of them and with a will to invent something new.

Though, the comparison of an early sketch of the assembly hall to the plan of Bouleuterion of Miletus shows a correspondence of the radially designed seating rows. The entrance situation has found its inspiration in the classical disposition of public buildings on the square. The relationship between the two volumes seen from the street side resembles the entrance to the Acropolis as it is shown on the famous drawing, published in Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture*. Also the lateral view of the complex resembles a temple on the basement, with a difference that in some versions of League of Nations' Palace, the basement is constituted by the lower part of building itself.

Ancient Greece was not the only source of inspiration. A considerable part of the sketches represent a circular version of the assembly hall building which seems to derive from the image of Pantheon. The superposition of the sketch and the roman temple shows again that Aalto's building is much bigger, but the radius of the assembly hall is the same as the one of the outer walls of Pantheon.

The smaller building of the Secretariat was not developed nor in plan or in section. The façade to the entrance square is designed in the same manner, also when the assembly hall building changes radically. Some former studies have already pointed out the historic sources for this façade (Mikkola 1985:45). The superposition with the façade of Apollo sanctuary at Cyrene, show the matching proportions of the two buildings.

Other general views of the building recall the well-known examples of Greek architecture – Propylaea gateway and a temple on the basement with the mountains scenery like for example the Apollo temple at Delphi.

A conception of another version of the project, which recalls Asplund's Stockholm library, is again very similar to the Bouleuterion of Miletus.

The rectangular version of the building, though, seem to have found the inspiration in a more antique version of bouleuterion, like the one at Priene. This older type of the Greek council chamber had a rectangular plan, with the seats partially excavated in the rocks and disposed at three sides with an altar in the middle. The section in Aaltos early sketches follows this scheme but unlike in the bouleuterion, which was introvert, the assembly hall opens itself towards the view of the mountains.

The astonishing result of this approach is a formal and typological mixture, a building which has something of a theatre, something of a bouleuterion, of an acropolis and of a Greek temple and where all of this is set in the extraordinary panorama of the Swiss Alps.



Illustration 7: interpretation of Aalto's sketch AFAA 46-321, sketch from Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum, drawing by the author of the research.

Another interesting fact is that the models are not chosen or tested on a basis of an aprioristic criterion but mostly on the basis of their capability to relate with the landscape and the building site.

All these examples show that in Aalto's project there is a tension between following the old and accepting the new. In this case the old formal schemes prevail, but as we know, it was not so long after that, when this changed almost completely. Particularly the following year 1927 was very important for the young architect. He started to abandon the classical vocabulary and there was quite a positive turn of his career.

In order to comprehend better the League of Nations' project and to produce a reconstruction, which would be as near as possible to the hypothetical Aalto's solution, his production between the years 1923 and 1927 is being studied. Of particular importance is the comparison to the very similar Finnish parliament building competition project, which he made at the age of only 25 years. This project was completed although its complexity and this makes us suppose that the Geneva project has not been interrupted because too complicated. Also the conception of the facades of the later projects as for example of the Agricultural cooperative building in Turku, completed in 1928, is very similar to the design of the facades for the League of Nations' building.

The archaic and the modern: North Jutland Art Museum in Aalborg

The pursuit of creating architecture which deals with the origins, archetypes and ancient models is something that seems to be transversal in Aalto's work and is independent of the stylistic transformation he went through before he found his own personal language. One could argue that this part of his thought is the essence of his particular approach to architecture. The revelation of the time which is passing by, incorporating the present and connecting it to the past is one of the most poetic sides of his architecture.

To illustrate this argument, another neglected work is brought to attention. This is the **North Jutland Art Museum** in Aalborg, Denmark, which Aalto designs in the late fifties with Elissa Aalto and Jean-Jacques Barué. In order to comprehend the design process and the elements of ancient architecture which are reflected in the project, the final version of the building has been redrawn and analyzed. The initial sketches have been compared to the archetypes from ancient Greek architecture and a similar pattern of looking deeply and precisely into remote past to invent a place for today has been studied.

The building formally presents a vague similarity to the League of Nations Palace. It has two levels of which the upper level is also the main level. In this way it exploits the topography of the site, with a height difference between the level of the street and the bottom of the gravel pit. Observing the site plan on which the first project ideas have been drawn, it can be noticed that also the slight particularities of the site, as the line between the wood and the lawn, has been taken into account.



Illustration 8: interpretation of Aalto's sketch, drawing by the author of the research.

The initial sketches of the museum show an astonishing similarity to the disposition of some well-known planimetric schemes from ancient Greek architecture as the sacred area at Delos Island or the Minoan palaces of Crete.

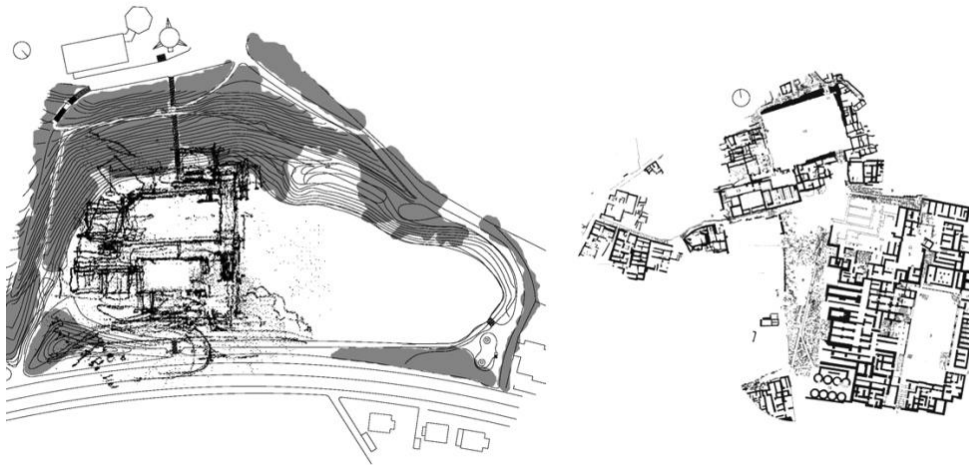


Illustration 9: left - superposition of the sketch AFAA 44-602 and the site plan, right – Crete, palace of Malia, sketch from Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum, drawing by the author of the research.

The complexity of the first sketches is simplified during the design process. The building becomes more and more compact until it is reduced to one main object of the museum, while the other forms that fulfill the first sketches become a theatre and a sculpture garden, disposed on the perimeter of the area and connected with a thin line which encircles the whole and gathers the single fragments.

The conception of the Aalborg museum is in some way very near to the idea of the Geneva project. In both cases the nature shelters architecture and the architectural object manifests itself through a clear iconic image. The building alludes at a temple on the basement and the museum becomes a temple of art that rises from the soil. To the organic void of the lawn clearing, a rectangular figure is opposed which is formed by two types of enclosure: inner and outer. The building and the site form a sequence of places which we encounter, and where each of them is a link to the classical formation of space. The artificially reproduced classical landscape is like a scenography through which the observer moves, becoming himself a performer of the single scenes.

The observation of photographs that Aalto took during his journeys to Greece and the sketches he drew at Delphi reveals the scenes which have clearly inspired the outer spaces of Aalborg museum and the analogies through which the symbolic dimension is achieved. The exact reproduction of the measures was also in this case not one of Aalto's priorities. This again does not mean a superficial acknowledgement with Greek architecture. As in the case of Geneva, the profound knowledge of the architectural history plays an important role and is in some way a point of departure for the whole composition, the basis and the material for the new inventions.

An emblematic case is the figure of the theatre, which was officially not a part of the competition program. While it fits in the scenery in the manner of a Greek theatre, it is at the same time a distortion of this classical figure. It is isolated and treated like a singular form, a fragment with a symbolic function in the composition. The classical theatre exploits the natural formation of the site and the location on the steep terrain with a view towards a valley. At the same time it is a dispositive for the contemplation of landscape. It is a building that is generated by the existing landscape but at

the same time it is made of preconcert form which precedes the specific site and act finally as an artifact opposed to nature. This ambiguity actually represents the basic property of the classical Greek architecture – its “organic” dimension, lost in most of its later revivals. And the same ambiguity can be found in Aaltos buildings, where the “object” is adapting to the landscape but at the same time the composition assumes preconcert forms which establish a dialectics between the architecture and nature. Like in other Aalto’s projects, the theatre in Aalborg’s Museum garden might be a reminiscence of the **terraced landscape** that fascinated him so much. One can think of the obvious connection between culture and cultivation, but also of the fact that Aalto maybe saw the nature through the prism of architecture and not just vice versa.

This kind of vision can be captured in the way the Aaltos photographed landscape and architecture during their journeys in the Mediterranean area. The photographs of the sites with the ruins like for example those taken in Egypt in 1954-55, show the large portions of desert in contraposition to the pure forms of architectural fragments but also the scenes where the ambiguity between what is architecture and what is nature is depicted.



Illustration 10: Thebe. December 1954. Alvar and Elissa Aalto's trip to Egypt, Alvar or Elissa Aalto, Alvar Aalto Museum.

Conclusion

In this way the research analyses the elements of Aalto's architecture and their interacting with the landscape. Respecting the dialectic relationship between architecture as artifact and nature, already pointed out in earlier studies, Aalto's opus will be investigated in order to get a better understanding of its inner rules and of the **symbolic function** of its archetypes as seen through the eyes of a contemporary observer. The different way Aalto's architecture reinterprets architectural models and the special position that the ancient architecture occupies among various other sources, will be studied. The analysis of the selected buildings should lead to a better understanding of the discovered concepts and their interaction within the urban context.

Aalto's approach to the architectural project can hardly constitute a 'method' that can be repeated. Nevertheless, the continuous pursuit of the **construction of a 'paradise'** and of the creation of a **harmonic environment** for a men's living are the characteristics, which the present study underlines. And these are also the issues where contemporary architecture frequently risks failing.

Finding the place where being on earth can manifest itself in an authentic way would be too easy if one could simply recreate the places of the past as it would be too easy if we could reach it through the unconditioned use of technology. Aalto's architecture places itself in between and it is the equilibrium of these factors which is worth to be studied and comprehended.

Today we are aware of the rupture of the "synthetic place", of the place which should contain the words and the things, the memories and the present. Aalto's lesson can be seen also in this way: what is sublime does not necessarily depend on the real place but on its heterotopic dimension, on its property to evoke the different, the archaic and the original.

1 An extended article about the Aalto's proposal has been published in the catalogue of the exposition *Il Baltico e il Mediterraneo* (Gresleri 1990).

2 For description of the Le Corbusier's proposal see (Various authors 1987 *Le Corbusier à Genève*).

3 For description of the other awarded projects see the comments of the jury (*Palais des Nations* 1927).

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