

# Kainula – hiljainen Aalto: A Monograph of One of Alvar Aalto's Lesser-Known Works

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*Alvar Aalto's Kainula, 1954–57. © Astrid Joublanc.*

This is the Kainula adult education institute, designed and built between 1954 and 1957. It is the only Alvar Aalto building in the whole region of Kainuu. Kainula is a nearly forgotten work of Aalto's red brick era; a rarity; "a gem", as architect Tuula Pöyhä from the Alvar Aalto Foundation calls it in her article in the *alvaraalto.fi* journal.

The book I published last summer, *KAINULA – HILJAINEN AALTO*, is my contribution to the Alvar Aalto Researchers' Network. It tells the story of this lesser-known work of Alvar Aalto in Kajaani, northeastern Finland, and its curious origins.

Kainula's own archives were my main source of research on the building: minutes of the meetings of Building and other Committees, receipts of construction materials, a vast newspaper clipping collection and historical photographs. The Alvar Aalto Museum provided me with 236 original plans for investigation. Architects who had worked with Aalto in the 50s were interviewed. Local interviews were also carried out and family archives were consulted.

In December 1957 Aalto received a letter appealing, certainly not for the first time, to his generosity:

"Kunnioitettu Herra Professori....minussa vanhassa kerjäläisessä – heräsi rohkea, ehkä röyhkeä ajatus, kysyä Teiltä, Herra Professori, voisitteko Te vielä lisätä lahjoitustanne [tuolla] 100 000 markalla..."<sup>1</sup>

Who was this person who had the courage to “beg” Aalto: first to donate the plans of Kainula and then to overlook a significant part of the growing expenses to his studio? He was the leader of the Settlement movement in Finland, the doctor of theology Sigfrid Sirenus. Under his leadership, the building’s commissioner, the local association of the Finnish Federation of Settlements, aimed to create a “living home” in Kajaani for people in need of education and culture.<sup>2</sup>

Alvar Aalto appreciated great personalities like himself. This characteristic is significant to the birth of Kainula. Sigfrid Sirenus and Alvar Aalto had met in exceptional circumstances only a few years earlier. They knew and respected each other. My book is about the people and events that resulted in Kainula’s construction and affected the final product of these circumstances; the building as we know it.

## General overview of the building

What makes Kainula so unique is its unusual combination of teaching and living facilities: classrooms for factory workers and temporary lodging for forest workers. The building is in an exceptionally original state: it is special due to its authenticity, as it has never undergone a full restoration.

The shape of the building is different to that of an ordinary school. The classrooms wind themselves on an intimate scale around the heart of the building: a seating area around a fireplace bathed in ample natural light. This is the centre of the building and leads to its most unique and valuable feature, the assembly hall. The cosy spirit of the building is accentuated by warm materials like wood and brick. The interior is suitable in its homelike atmosphere for many kinds of creative studies.

The energetic teaching and cultural activities that have taken place in Kainula during the last 50 years confirm that its planning and construction were a success that met the challenges set by the Settlement movement’s needs.

The story of Kainula is incredible in its “sisu”, courage and patience. The building project faced a great many challenging surprises of its tumultuous time, including a general strike, the devaluation of the Finnish markka, growing interests on loans and changing construction rights laws.

## Notable features

Kainula is situated near the centre of the small city of Kajaani, on a hillside lot surrounded by pine and birch trees and integrated into an old stone wall. Kainula’s northern façade is modest but interesting and original. It has several strips and diagonal lines of windows. The windows of the southern façade took different forms during the course of the planning process, as we can see in the original plans. Last winter the building had severe problems with heating and ventilation, which can be observed in the photo taken in February 2011.

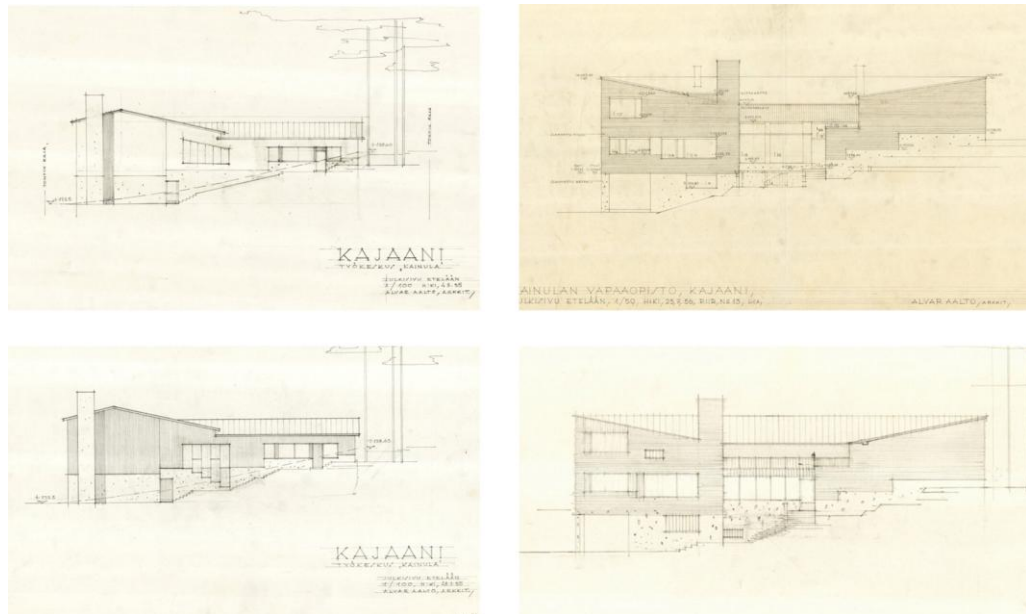


*Kainula's northern façade 2011. © Astrid Joublanc.*



*Kainula's southern façade 2011. © Astrid Joublanc.*



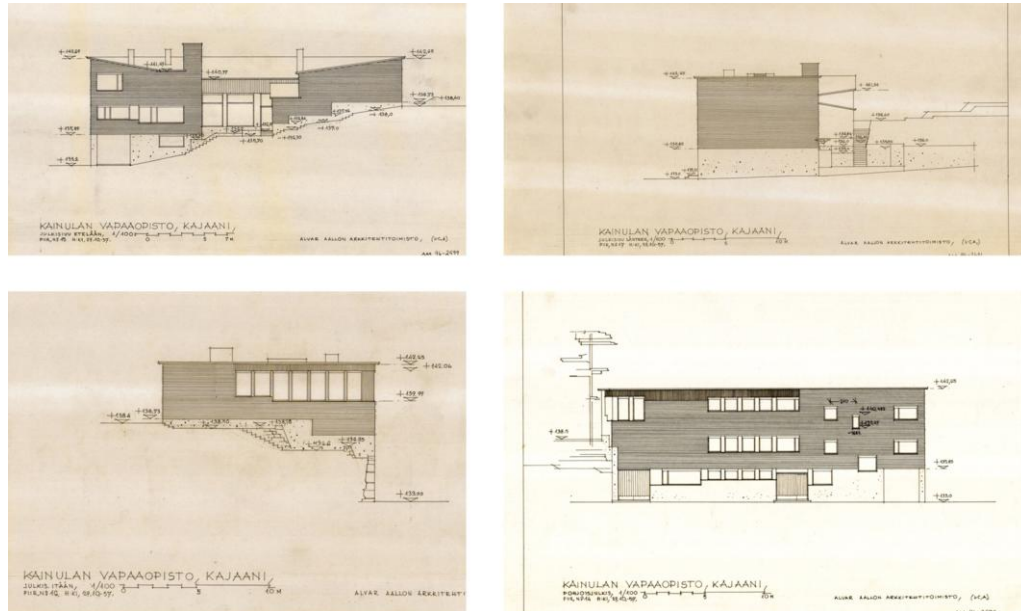


Plans for Kainula's southern façade. © Alvar Aalto Museum / Drawings Collection.



Kainula's assembly hall in the eastern end has high windows on two levels. © Astrid Joubanc.

Kainula has similarities to other Aalto buildings of the 50s: hillside topography, local materials, window and door details, imposing ceiling structures and a fireplace. In the eastern end the assembly hall has high windows on two levels. The last of them is around the corner, like in some other Aalto buildings, such as the University of Jyväskylä and Aalto's atelier in Munkkiniemi.

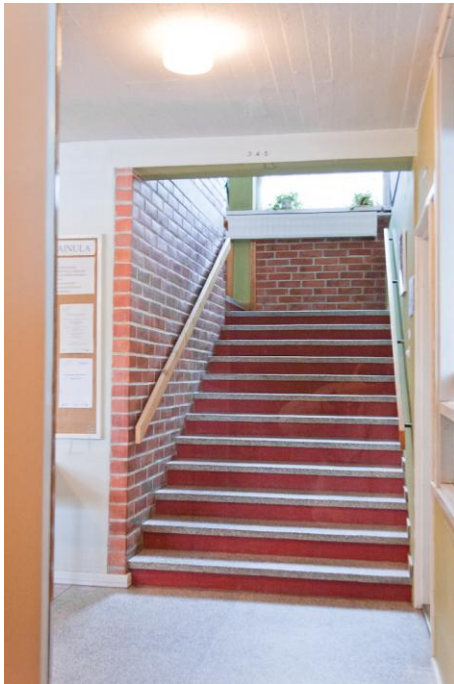


*Kainula's final series of plans; four elevations. © Alvar Aalto Museum / Drawings Collection.*

The final four elevations are signed by the project architect of Kainula, Lina-Christina Aaltonen; dated October 1957. Landscaping plans of the slope behind the house were also designed but the work was never finalized. Aaltonen was fully supported by the Doctor Viljo Rasila, then director of the Kainula Institute, who was determined to complete the building process in changing, difficult circumstances.



*Dr. Rasila and architect Aaltonen on Kainula's inauguration day in September 1957. © Kainula Archive.*



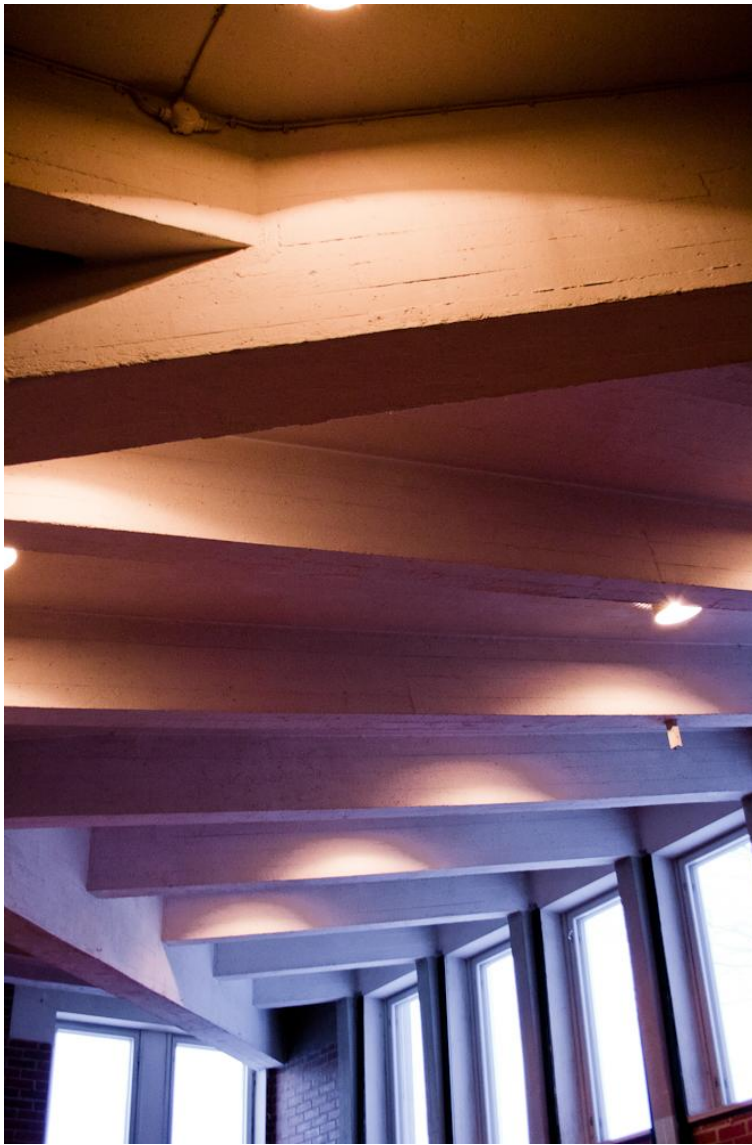
*Kainula's main staircase. © Astrid Joublanc.*

A modest and welcoming entrance leads through a low hall to the main staircase, which has brick and wooden details. The upstairs fireplace hall is used for informal meetings. The hall leads through to some classrooms, but also the building's most valuable feature, the assembly hall. It is dominated by the asymmetrical beams of a ceiling cast in reinforced concrete. The lighting changes the movement of the ceiling. Over the years the assembly hall has been adapted and transformed for a range of different activities; everything from a ballet studio to an art exhibit.



*Kainula's assembly hall. © Astrid Joublanc.*





*Kainula's assembly hall ceiling. © Astrid Joublanc.*

In the western wing are the living areas for the director and the concierge of the institute. The apartments have their own stairwell. In the 60s the building also had lodging for forest workers who visited the town while looking for new employment. The building was used day and night, had a kitchen and a sauna as well as classrooms and meeting areas. The whole building has hardly been refurbished. Materials such as acoustic panels, lamps and furniture are original. Kainula's interior was not designed by Aalto's office because of lack of resources, but the atmosphere, the style and the colours are original from the 1960s.

What interests me in Kainula as a social scientist is its role as a centre of important cultural and educational activities in Kajaani and how much this fact is due to the successful design of the building. The aim of my book is to raise interest in Kainula's architecture to support its restoration by finding public funding. I wanted to record the state of the building. Now I invite architects to investigate it more closely.



The history of Kainula's construction triggers questions worthy of further investigation:

**1. Does the history of a building's construction tell us something about the characteristics of the society that surrounded it?** Kainula's construction site in the 1950s was typical of its time, a local endeavour that reflected the values and aims of the society that surrounded it. Those involved in the construction work were all aware of the main problems faced by the project: lack of funding, difficulties in sourcing materials and all manner of unexpected social and political events that disrupted the day-to-day work schedule. The criteria for a good construction labourer were the same as for a good citizen: you had to be industrious, frugal, patient and have a creative approach to solving the scarcity of resources.

It appears that some of the menacing external events facing the project ultimately strengthened the committee's resolve to bring the project to completion, rewarded it with concessions from Aalto's office and forced some flexibility into the city's bureaucratic system. Kainula was built in spite of obstacles. Did the spirit which prevailed in the successful project simply reflect the social life of a small northern town after the war, ready like many others to struggle hard to achieve progress for its inhabitants?

**2. In the 1950s the customs and unwritten conventions of a building site** were rich and locally varied: e.g. the topping-out celebration with its traditional pea soup and beer, some unconventional forms of compensation for workers and the hierarchy of the building site. Like all construction sites Kainula had its own local rules and laws. Those who didn't meet the chimney-builder's unwritten expectation of a Koskenkorva contribution for his troubles, for example, could find themselves with a chimney that operated with a suspiciously poor draught.

The hierarchy of those involved in the construction was a complex one. Toivo Hytönen, a contemporary surveyor, spoke of the project with great respect. He knew he was contributing to a work by Aalto, but the person who had most impressed him at the construction site was the director of the institute, Viljo Rasila, "the Doctor himself", as Hytönen called him. Adding to the confusion was the fact that the project architect, Lina-Christina Aaltonen, was a woman, which was unusual. The only women at building sites at the time were generally bricklayers' helpers or cleaners.

Doctor Viljo Rasila, Professor Emeritus and director of Kainula throughout the building process, provided me with valuable information not only on local customs but also about his visits to Aalto's office. Being a historian, his remarks were rarely about architecture, though he literally lived on the building site. His reconciliation skills and his decisive struggle to build a new settlement house and to develop its activities were essential for the success of Kainula.

While these first two points were rather general, the following are more specifically concerned with Alvar Aalto's office.

**3. What was the working culture of Aalto's studio?** In what way did Aalto's office help to prepare architects for their role at the building site? To foreign employees, his methods were amazing, affording them attractively high levels of independence, challenge and responsibility.

Alvar Aalto would send architects on-site to familiarize themselves with the construction lot, the commissioner's representatives, the construction firm and maybe even the town's general atmosphere. Aalto's way of dealing with project preparations is of interest to social scientists due to its particularity.

Aalto placed great importance on the cooperation between master builder and architect. As the project architect of Kainula, Lina-Christina Aaltonen also had to be flexible when it came to her role: the customer and the construction firm both had fixed ideas about the architect as a mere specialist and not the project's manager. Was she better prepared for the patience and adaptability required of this job because of the working culture in Aalto's office?

Aaltonen also had to listen to the wishes and demands of the commissioner. Kainula's plans were changed several times. Based on the literature about Aalto I have the impression that Aalto was more prepared to negotiate on plans than is generally known or expected. Was the project architect aware of this and did she follow his example? This would be interesting to know.

**4.** I would like to add at this point that even though some women architects have been the object of research in Finland, further study on the life and work of Kainula's project architect Lina-Christina Aaltonen (1922–1990) could be interesting. She was a person totally devoted to her career; a member of the Union of Finnish women architects then called **Architecta**. Many people know the bronze fountain in the inner courtyard of Rautatalo, but only a few are aware that it was designed by Aaltonen, in whose creativity Aalto trusted.

**5. To what extent does Aalto's body of work really correspond to his social mindset and values, his humanism and his objective to improve the quality of life of the average person?**

Aalto wanted to understand his commissioner's needs and fulfill them. If he respected the commissioner and considered the project important, he didn't always charge for his work. This was the case of Kainula and some other cultural projects where the budget was tight. Yet it was not only a result of his peculiar way of dealing with his income and expenses: it was mainly a direct consequence of his desire to serve the people.

I would like to know what a building can tell us about Aalto's work and life, his humanistic views and his aim to make people's life better and raise their living and working conditions.

6. Kainula's location, far from the capital, also makes it an interesting object of investigation for a social scientist. Alvar Aalto's name probably helped in acquiring loans for the building process, but as it turned out it was not wise to appeal to his name and fame far and wide. For the people of Kajaani the respected professor Aalto was a "Helsingin Herra", "a Gentleman from Helsinki", too expensive, too elegant to understand factory and forest workers' needs. Ordinary people didn't know of his post war reconstruction work, of his factory and workers' living area plans, though his hospital designs were perhaps more known by the public. However, the local press in Kajaani promoted the project and reported on Aalto's plans in a respectful tone.

**Did the media shape public perception of Aalto?** Is there a conflict or tragedy in the contrast of his humanism and his "Helsingin Herra" image? Are there consequences of this conflict in the case of Kainula or maybe in another building project? Was the image of the respected professor and academician the reason for the lack of public debate on the building plans in Kajaani? Or did the silence just show lack of interest and knowledge of the significance of architecture?

Local newspapers may feature valuable commentary on Aalto's person, on his lesser-known works, and also on the impression that people in the periphery have about Aalto's impressive architecture in bigger cities. The case of the Finlandia Hall roused ordinary readers to comment, even in the Kainuu press. Was the feedback of the public and provincial newspapers important to Aalto?

7. Silent works like Kainula need national support. **Aalto's lesser-known, often privately own works are frequently in need of restoration funds.** Directing attention and research activities at even the most modest of these buildings enriches our understanding of the way Aalto's work has influenced social development.

Can the Alvar Aalto Foundation, for example, affect the allocation of public funds by its actions or public statements? How should it offer restoration advice, if that is often perceived as an application of pressure and a reason for growing expenses, not as support? Is it possible to convince those who allocate public funds – that is, politicians and civil servants – that the architectural, social and human values of Aalto's heritage are as precious as those values that bring economic advantages? I believe that we should not convert educational institutions into hotels and restaurants.

An interdisciplinary approach is as important in architecture as it is in social sciences. We should contribute to public understanding of, and interest in, this field. This should not be a difficult task, as architecture concerns every individual in one way or another. By doing this we can help architects set and reach their aims to build a better society through their work.

## Issues for further research

1. **How does a building's construction history reflect the surrounding society?**
2. **What can local customs and the unwritten conventions of a building site tell us about the surrounding society?**
3. **What was the working culture of Aalto's studio like?**
4. **Lina-Christina Aaltonen (1922–1990), an architect devoted to her career.**
5. **To what extent does Aalto's body of work really correspond to his social mindset and values, his humanism and his objective to improve the quality of life of the average person?**
6. **How did the local media shape the public's perception of Aalto?**
7. **How can Aalto's lesser-known, often privately-owned works be better supported?**

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<sup>1</sup> "Esteemed Professor;...there arose in me, old beggar that I am, the daring, and perhaps presumptuous idea to ask of you, Sir Professor, if you would consider increasing your donation by [these] 100,000 marks..."

<sup>2</sup> www.setlementti.fi

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