

The textured surfaces of Muuratsalo

Eymen Homsí

PhD student, Architecture
Aalto University
eymen.homsi@gmail.com

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Aalto's architectural and painterly activities converged at his summer house in Muuratsalo. It was there that he both painted and made small-scale constructional experiments. This paper examines the 'experimental' walls of the courtyard in terms of the kinship in Aalto between architecture and painting. It attempts to interpret the walls in terms of the abstract mode of painting that Aalto practiced.

The framed rectangle of white and blue tiles that centers the west-facing wall of the courtyard is a good place to start (fig. 1). It is an architectural element that brings painting to mind in the way it stands out against its background through its color, content, and framing. Moreover, it seems to have served as an easel for Aalto's painting activity, as evidenced by a 1960's photograph. It contains an abstract arrangement of vertical and horizontal tiles in white and blue. Given its prominent placement, and given that formal organization is never random in Aalto, the panel is necessarily significant in some way, but what does it signify?



fig 1

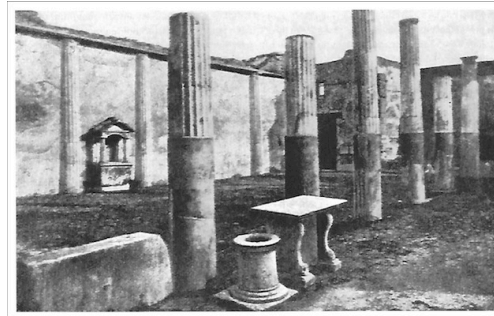


fig 2

A photograph in an early (1926) article by Aalto about modulating interior and exterior space may point us towards a possible meaning.¹ The photograph shows an unroofed Pompeii atrium in which an open colonnade is facing a blind wall. The blind wall is centered by an aedicule, a small shrine dedicated to a Roman deities (fig. 2). A number of similarities between the unroofed atrium and the courtyard of the summer house, built three decades after the article, become evident upon examination. The courtyard is also a kind of unroofed atrium in which a screen of vertical posts (a trellis) is facing a blind wall (the west-facing wall of the bedroom wing). Aalto's blind wall is also centered by a prominent element, the framed rectangle of white and blue tiles mentioned above. The rectangle, like the Pompeii aedicule, serves the formal imperative of centering and decentering the wall. Like the aedicule, it has the visual importance of a symbolic function. But, whereas the aedicule contains a Roman deity, the Aalto rectangle contains only an abstract arrangement of tiles whose significance is not immediately obvious. But if one allows for the possibility that the arrangement is an abstracted views of the surrounding landscape, then the rectangle begins to point to larger meanings. Certainly, the lower half of the rectangle easily suggest a winter view of a frozen lake seen through a screen of trees, and, by the same logic, the upper half appears to be a summer view of the same.² Seen in this light, the rectangle acquires an honorific and even a shrine-like quality (fig. 3).



fig. 3

The referencing of nature by architectural means was an ongoing preoccupation with Aalto, as we know, and it is hardly confined to the contents of this one rectangle. Observers have interpreted Aalto's use of clustered vertical posts (for example, the stairs in *Villa Mairea*) as abstract evocations of 'forest space'. The white trellis facing the rectangle could likewise be said to evoke, or display affinities with, the birch trees just beyond the wall. 'Abstraction', from the Latin *abstractus*, means to draw away material in order to reveal the underlying essence, the essential features of a thing. Here the abstraction draws away the details to reveal the structural attribute of the forest. The white trellis retains the verticals, and the rectangle, in turn, reiterates the abstracted trellis to produce a flat, framed image that is two steps removed from nature. The removal of what is extraneous to reveal what is essential is a central feature of modern abstract art.³ Even Mondrian, the doyen of abstract art, readily admitted how he began with trees and, over the course of a decade, progressively rid them of their representational attributes. "I express myself by *means* of nature. But if you carefully observe the sequence of my work, you will see that it progressively abandoned the naturalistic appearance of things and increasingly emphasized the plastic expression of relationships."⁴

If the white-blue rectangle, following Mondrian, is indeed an abstraction of the landscape it faces, then it follows that the enigmatic blue rectangle on the adjacent wall is also a possible landscape abstraction, related to the first by materiality, figurality and proximity (fig. 4). The wall that the blue rectangle faces (the gate of the courtyard) frames an expansive and unobstructed view of the lake and of the sky. One could argue that the pure blue of the rectangle mirrors this unlimited blue. Certainly the blue rectangle is reductive to a greater degree than its white-blue neighbor on the adjacent wall. Its abstract logic operates less by 'removal' in the manner of Mondrian, and more by 'nonobjective feeling' in the manner of Malevich, who describes his white and black square paintings thus: "this is no 'empty square' which I had exhibited but rather the *feeling* of non-objectivity.... The square = feelings, the white field = the void beyond this feeling."⁵

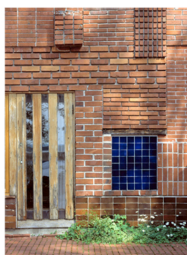


fig 4



fig 5

The Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), who visited Muuratsalo in the mid 1950's, shared with Aalto an aesthetic sensibility that can be described as simultaneously spatial, painterly, and abstract. It is hard to miss the affinity between Hofmann's paintings and Aalto's courtyard walls, in particular the wall with the blue rectangle. Hofmann was searching for a way to embody feelings directly from the materiality and mechanics of painting. He was attempting to go beyond Mondrian's universal (i.e. impersonal) and static forms. "Unlike Mondrian's work in which color helps balance the design, Hofmann's paint loaded brush and exuberant hues threaten to explode the stable right angled grid."⁶ A similar mix of subjective impulse and formal discipline guided Aalto's artistic activity. Both the paintings and the walls share an important quality that allies them with Hofmann and that differentiates them from the earlier De Stijl, namely the open display of their subjective working method, the active presence of the artist. Even though the courtyard walls don't resemble paintings, they have an undisguised painterly quality, a "remarkable richness and variety.... that emphasizes the painterly neo-plastic origins of the design".⁷

For Hofmann nature is the origin of all art, and movement is the 'pulse of nature'. Movement animates life! Without movement there is no expression, but movement means spatial depth, and spatial depth brings its companion, pictorial perspective, which is anathema to abstract art because perspectival space is akin to falling back into a representational mode. "Three dimensional movement can be established upon the picture plane only as two-dimensional, for one cannot produce actual depth on the picture plane but only the sensation of depth."⁸ The painter has to grapple with the contradiction of portraying movement while preserving flatness. The crux of the difference between Hofmann and Aalto, abstract painting and modern architecture, has to do with the problematic of flatness and spatial depth as they relate to movement: how to animate (breath life into) surface?

The answer to the question appears in the work of Hofmann in the form of what he called his 'push-pull technique', as seen, for example, in his *Majestic Blue* of 1965 (fig. 5). He constructs fields in which one or more rectangles, usually blue, appear as volumes that recede and advance solely on the basis of colors and shape. But the Muuratsalo problem is more challenging in that architectural depth is not strictly frontal and movement is not only perceptual. One solution, as I interpret it, is to posit the experience of the house as a mobile sequence of points of view that proceeds, by degrees, from space to no space, from open and closed. This dual character of the house, as open/closed, unfolds for the visitor in the trajectory along the south side of the house, from the boat pier to the forest. The building, which is on a slope, closes down in the ascent and opens it up in the descent. It is transformed from object to void, from container to contained, and vice versa. This oscillation is particularly clear in the plan, the architectural version of the flat canvas, where the head and tail gradually dissolve back into amorphous fragments of forest, the details of which seem random but are, in fact, minutely worked out, no less so than Hofmann's carefully calibrated balance of shape and color.

A similar open-closed experience is repeated at the scale of the courtyard as a whole, and then again at the scale of the details of the walls in what might be called the painterly textures of the walls. The immediate problem was how to introduce texture without the decorative effect of applied layers. The answer would seem to be to modulate the four walls as one sequential unit -- four textured surfaces that are in fact one continuous façade. (Four facades in a sequence might stand in as the architectural equivalent of a *tetrptych*, a painting of four sequential parts). Each surface, and each part of each surface, is one degree more open or closed, one degree deeper or less deep, than the part adjacent to it. The series goes from the full view of the landscape at one end to the fully opaque wall of the last bedroom at the other end. In between these two ends are details that serve to gradually compress space, such as the gnarly volumes of textured brick; the glass-like but opaque blue ceramic panel; the low hallway behind the blind wall; the narrow strip window that is too high and too deep; and the hatch-like door that terminates the series.

Aalto, thus, manages to deploy an entire range of opening and closing elements to achieve a set of architectural surfaces that expand and contract space. The space of the courtyard can be seen to be crossed by invisible vectors that connect the forest to the abstracted views of itself (not unlike Renaissance perspective). The space oscillates between the fully three-dimensional forest and the highly compacted planarity of the walls. The two rectangles become devices to signal the contraction and expansion of space from flat to full, from abstract to 'real'. The walls reconcile the painter with the architect (fig. 6).

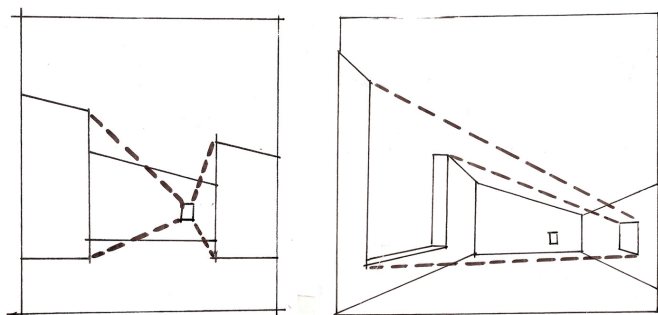


fig 6

Looking just at the blue rectangle facing the gate opening, we see the range of possible meanings it has and, by extension, the possible meanings of other elements. It may join other elements on the wall to clarify, distort, or amend associations. It can easily ally itself with the adjacent window through its position, symmetrical about the center axis of the courtyard, through its glass-like smoothness and mirror-like reflectivity, through the metaphor of openness and spatial depth. It may also, equally well, recall a lake, a sky, a window, a mirror, an eye. It can also affiliate itself through its materiality and modularity with the dense elements: the brick volumes and surfaces that denote opacity, earth, and compression. It may also join the elements connoting both open and closed: the carved out fireplace, the striated glazing of the main door, the white-blue rectangle, the hatch door of the last bedroom, the trellised opening, the horizontal window (fig. 7).



fig 7

The credentials of the building are mixed and ambiguous. Is it organic (natural) because of its incompleteness, with parts still emerging from the forest? Is it vernacular because of its primitive construction, its ad-hoc elements, its central fire? Is it modern? Or is it in fact a conflation of these and other designations? Porphyrios has likened the brick walls to a quilt.⁹ The siting amalgamates all these possibilities, situating the house between the modern boat, the vernacular sauna, and the forest. The overall form is incomplete, giving credence to all these readings. It has been noted that it brings to mind the image of an abandoned ruin.¹⁰ It's a compelling image: the courtyard appears to be missing its roof, the tail fragments have been given over back to nature, the textures reveal the passage of time. There is something melancholy in this proposition, and it is in keeping with the seasonal nature of the house, abandoned for most of the year. The alternation of winter darkness with summer gaiety corresponds with the closing down and the opening up of the house. This opposition of inhabitation vs. abandonment, expansion vs. contraction, openness vs. closed-ness becomes the architectural metaphor that generates the placement and form of the house. It also generates an emotional content for the house, the 'painterly' expression. Aalto notes that "the Finnish home should have two faces. One is the aesthetically direct contact with the world outside; the other its winter face, turns inward and is seen in the interior design which emphasizes the warmth of our inner rooms."¹¹

The house stands at the end of the high moment of Modernism, parallel with other contemporary works. It could stand as a ruin of modernity with its opaque layers of brick instead of white surfaces, its cave like enclosure instead of transparency. Transparency survives in the north-south axis that visually connects the lake to the forest behind the house via the living room and back windows. But the other axis, the east-west axis, is abruptly interrupted at the white-blue rectangle on the blind wall, while the bedrooms, just behind the rectangle, turn their backs entirely to the axis.

The brick patterns are obviously inspired by De Stijl composition and/or Cubist collage techniques. Quantrill observes that: "Aalto, whose paintings are strictly notional and expressionist in character, sought here to systematize the architectural expression in a painterly form. If this is so then his model is clearly that of the De Stijl movement."¹² But the textured walls in fact present us with a critique of De Stijl and Cubist surfaces. The white planes of De Stijl here become painted brick walls, impure, imperfect, and contaminated. Likewise, the carefully delineated brick planes of Dudok are replaced by the highly weathered surfaces of the courtyard. The spacious modern box of the

Schroeder House, composed of freely floating planes, is here compressed and flattened, and no longer penetrated by light. The surfaces are rendered thick, picturesque, tactile, and deeply shadowed in the moving "mystic light" of the fire. They tangibly evoke a 'painterly' effect.

Aalto on abstract art: "Perhaps the important thing is precisely that abstract art represents a simplification which enables us just to experience feelings, purely human feelings."¹³ Aalto's paintings have no titles and so provide no cues as to their emotive meanings, but he considered them important for his design process, and so the buildings are the final expression of the feelings in the painting. Many of the paintings are strangely architectural in that they *almost* look like plans, sites, building elevations. There is no doubt that the feelings called forth by the activity of painting were not trivial to Aalto. "When painting in Muuratsalo Alvar would sometimes sigh: 'Oh, how all this nature disturbs me!'.¹⁴ One can speculate on private meanings (are the blue tiles a torso?), but Aalto, in his famous reticence, puts an end to that kind of talk: "form is a mystery which defies definition, but it gives man a good feeling."¹⁵ One wonders about the need for reticence. The justifications he offers for his unusual walls in Muuratsalo are carefully pragmatic and rational, though he prefaces them with Yrjo Hirn's notion of instinctive feelings and serious play. Similarly practical explanation are presented in his descriptions of the role of abstract art as a stimulant to architecture. Romy Golan observes: "The fear of abstract painting, which may unlace the understanding to a world less simple than apparent, is the fear that primacy may pass to the private, rather than the collective, vision. And there can be no return."¹⁶ And yet, so much time has passed since Muuratsalo was built. Aalto's tiles and Hofmann's floating rectangles look quite harmless now.

¹ Alvar Aalto, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, Ed. Göran Schildt (Otava, Helsinki, 1977), p.51

² The upper left rectangle is more ambiguous, perhaps it depicts gentle waves in plan, or a
² The upper left rectangle is more ambiguous, perhaps it depicts gentle waves in plan, or a tongue-in-cheek heraldic coat of arms for Wave, Aalto.

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (University of California Press, Berkley, 1969), p. 173-75.

⁴ Piet Mondrian "Dialogue on the New Plastic," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992), p. 282.

⁵ Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism," *Theories of Modern Art, A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Ed. Herschel Chipp, (University of California Press, Berkley, 1968) p.342-43.

⁶ Irving Sandler, "Hans Hofmann: the Dialectical Master", Ed. Cynthia Goodman, in *Hans Hofmann* (Whitney Museum, New York, 1990), p. 86

⁷ Malcolm Quantril, *Alvar Aalto: a Critical Study* (New Amsterdam Books, New York, 1983), p. 142

⁸ Hans Hofmann, "On Movement," in *Theories of Modern Art, A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Ed. Herschel Chipp (University of California Press, Berkley, 1968), p. 543

⁹ Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (Academy Editions, London, 1982) p.10

¹⁰ Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (Phaidon Press, London, 1995), p.121

¹¹ Aalto, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, p. 52

¹² Quantril, *Alvar Aalto*, p. 141

¹³ Alvar Aalto, *Alvar Aalto Synopsis: Painting, Architecture, Sculpture*, Ed. Bernard Hoesli (ETH, Basel, 1980) p. 18, originally appeared as answer to an inquiry of the 'Domus' Magazine, 1947, 223-225, p. 3-20

¹⁴ Elissa Aalto interview 1991, in Louna Lahti ed. *Alvar Aalto: Ex Intimo* (Building Information Ltd. Helsinki, 2001), p. 25

¹⁵ Aalto, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, p. 179

¹⁶ Colin Thubron, *Where the Nights are Longest: Travels by car through Western Russia* (New York, 1984), p. 90