

Alvar Aalto: between humanism and materialism: on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to May 19, 1998

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Nina Rappaport, New York

Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism

On exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to May 19, 1998

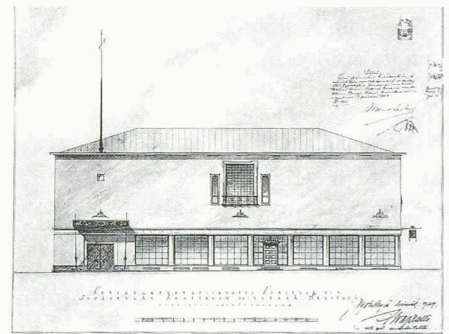
This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), Finnish architect, and with it comes an opportunity for a re-analysis, for exhibitions and tours of his designs around the world. Although most of the activities are occurring in Finland, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City is fortunate to sponsor a major retrospective, «Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism», with many original items on loan from the Alvar Aalto Foundation, that rarely leave Finland.

Peter Reed, curator of the exhibition and Associate Curator of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design,

spent the past three years completing the research, traveling to Finland and hunting for documents throughout Europe. He was assisted by Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture, Columbia University, as curatorial consultant, and also by Elina Standertskjöld, curator of the archives, Museum of Finnish Architecture, with the cooperation of the Alvar Aalto Foundation.

After reviewing volumes of materials from Aalto's 54 year career, Reed observes that «Aalto is a synthetic architect, reconciling contradictory themes, and opposites. When you compare his order with other architects such as Mies - whose order

is a rational and reductive method, or Kahn who deals with function of buildings and an archetypal geometry - Aalto is a centralist about many different things, which makes his order complex. When Aalto talks about the 'super-rational' approach to architecture - by which he meant his psycho-biological approach, taking into account the senses, - there is an architectural order underlying his work, however, he goes way beyond it; he compiles multiple layers for a more sensual approach to architecture.»



Finnish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, Queens, New York, 1939. Aina and Alvar Aalto. (Ezra Stoller© 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, NY) [left] Jyväskylä Workers' Club, Jyväskylä, Finland, 1924-25. Alvar Aalto. (The Jyväskylä Workers' Society, Courtesy Alvar Aalto Museum© 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, NY) [above]

This is made visible in the nearly 50 buildings, projects, and furniture, in 150 original sketches and competition drawings, 20 models, and both recent and archival photographs featured in the exhibition. Some of the lesser known projects exhibited include the Opera House, Essen, Germany (competition 1959, completed 1988 by Harald Deilmann with Elissa Aalto) or the Mount Angel Abbey Library, St. Benedict, Oregon (1964-70).

Aalto's materiality is emphasized with the display of the exquisite original glass blowing tests for his winning design for the 1936 Karhula-littala Glass-design competition for a vase, or in materials such as a sample of Aalto's convex curved wall of unique wedge-shaped bricks on the facade of the House of Culture, Helsinki (1952-60), and a wall of blue glazed ceramic tiles used in the National Pensions Institute in Helsinki (1952-57).

Aalto's functional modernist style and the industrial aesthetic is seen coupled with his love for nature of Finland, a romanticism and a classicism. Some of the unusual projects are his design for the industrial complexes such as the Toppila Pulp Mill (1930-33) and the Sunila Pulp Mill and Housing (1936-38) which combine a humanistic design with industry. Reed comments that «although Aalto is usually considered a regional and vernacular architect, his work was much more profound. He approaches architecture as an artist, and he has a very liberal attitude towards an architectural order; he could switch from one kind of typology to another, depending on the work.»

The layout of the exhibit is a series of episodes which draw you into the work and is well-paced for contemplation of

drawings and models and Aalto's urban planning schemes. In a separate room, short videos walk you through the most well-known buildings such as the Villa Mairea, the house for Harry and Maire Gullichsen, Noormarkku, Finland (1938-39); National Pensions Institute, Helsinki (1948-57); and the Church of the Three Crosses, Vuoksenniska (Imatra), Finland (1955-58). The videos were produced by The Finnish Broadcasting Company/TV1 Documentaries.

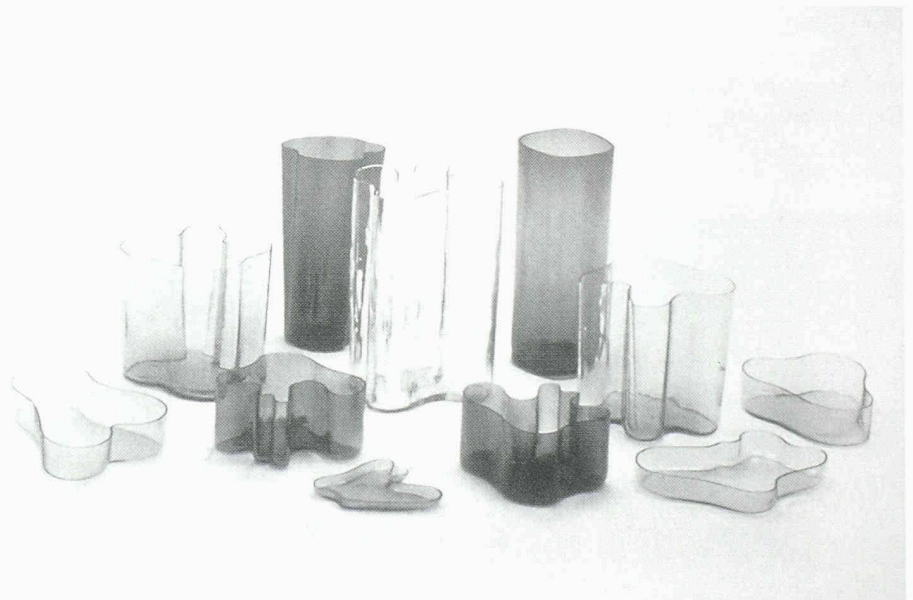
Reed says that «there is a complex and contradictory nature in Aalto's order which Robert Venturi also appreciated. This idea of creating a monumental yet intimate work; it is the both/and, the many paradoxes in his work which is anything but reductive.» MoMA is an appropriate venue for Aalto, since the Museum exhi-

bited his early work in 1938, his furniture in 1984, and ideas were being discussed for an Aalto retrospective in the 1970's. The exhibition includes a catalogue, edited by Peter Reed with essays by Reed; Kenneth Frampton and others.

Following its New York showing, the Aalto exhibition will travel to the Centro Internazionale D'Arte e di Cultura di Palazzo Te, Mantua, Italy (August 23-November 29, 1998) where Achille Castiglioni will design the exhibition, and the Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan (December 19, 1998-February 15, 1999) under the auspices of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

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Vase for the Karhula-littala Glass Design Competition, 1936. Alvar Aalto. (1997 Rauno Träskelin © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, NY) [above] Opera House, Essen, Germany. Competition 1959. Alvar Aalto. Completed by Harald Deilmann with Elissa Aalto 1981-88. (1988 Angela Otto and Friedrich Ostermann/OzOn © 1997 The Museum of Modern Art, NY) [left]

