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REVIEW

## In Search of Aalto. A Review of *Alvar Aalto: The Mark of the Hand*

*Alvar Aalto: The Mark of the Hand*, Harry Charrington and Vezio Nava (eds.),  
Rakennustieto Publishing, 427 pages, Helsinki 2011, ISBN: 9789516829954

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Books on Alvar Aalto's architecture have been published and continue to be published around the world. One could ask: What viewpoints remain undocumented and why should they be presented at this time? Surprisingly, however, there is still room for Aalto research; he is still one of the least researched of the "masters" of modern architecture. A quick search of the webpages of Columbia University's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library gives the following result: Frank Lloyd Wright, 1139 hits; Le Corbusier, 1013; Mies van der Rohe 331; and Alvar Aalto, 283.

Language barriers and the diversity of Aalto's architecture may contribute to the hesitancy of researchers to pick up the subject. Readings of Aalto as a representative of an 'other modernism' (Colin St. John Wilson) or 'critical regionalism' (Kenneth Frampton) have further contributed to him being considered an exceptional case, one that cannot be a paragon, particularly in the present era of globalization and massive urbanization. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co have gone far as to claim in their survey that Aalto's 'historical significance has perhaps been rather exaggerated; with Aalto we are outside of the great themes that have made the course of contemporary architecture so dramatic. The qualities of his works have meaning only as masterful distractions, not subject to reproductions outside the remote reality in which they have their roots' (Tafuri and Dal Co 1986: 338). Interpreting Aalto's works through a lens of phenomenological authenticity has further limited the interest of those who believe that architecture – as well as the architectural experience itself – always has a political and social context. Furthermore, Aalto's virtuoso-like eclecticism and the diversity of his work make him a difficult subject both for students to study and emulate and for teachers to teach. As a side comment, I should note that when I studied architecture in Finland during the 1980s, I did not hear Aalto's name mentioned even once.

To be sure, the interest in Aalto comes and goes with the times. After he had been granted a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art as early as 1938, Aalto's position in the canon was cemented in the second edition of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1949). While Aalto is today often treated as a representative of the 'other tradition' of modernism, Giedion's Aalto chapter reminds us that he once occupied a prominent position not only within the international modern movement but also in its historiography. For not only does Giedion's account place Aalto in the company of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe as one of the so-called modern masters, but he also makes the section devoted to him the longest of them all – 39 pages, compared to 35 for Gropius, 31 for Le Corbusier, 27 for Wright and a meager 23 for Mies. Aalto was also particularly loved in war-torn Italy, where he was endorsed by the eminent architectural historians Bruno Zevi and Gillo Dorfles, who saw Aalto respectively as a representative of the 'organic' and what the latter called the 'timeless essence of baroque architecture.' Numerous pages, even issues, of *Zodiac* magazine were devoted to the master's oeuvre throughout the 1950s.

A more rationalist and technologically orientated movement in architecture won ground in the 1960s, and the popularity of Aalto's work lost ground that has never been fully recovered. Göran Schildt's three-part biography (1984, 1986, 1991), while illuminating important aspects of Aalto's life and oeuvre, did little more than cement the personality cult surrounding Aalto. It is at this time that Aalto became considered an exception to the normative. Through rigorous formal analysis of many Aalto buildings in his *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Aalto* Demetri Porphyrios (1982) convinces with the notion of the presence of multiple ('heterotypic') organizational principles, as well as conveying multiple meanings inherent in Aalto's buildings.

While the Museum of Modern Art's 1998 centennial exhibition and the accompanying catalog edited by Peter Reed, *Alvar Aalto: Between Material and Humanism* (1998), focused mostly on Aalto's best-known buildings, the cen-

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ennial year also produced some information about lesser known aspects of Aalto's life and oeuvre. Bruno Maurer's and Teppo Jokinen's *Der Magus des Nordens: Alvar Aalto und die Schweiz* (1998) shed light on Aalto's vast international network of friends and reminded us that Aalto had an international career. Päivi Lukkarinen's *Alvar Aalto in Lapland* (1998) and Elina Standertskjöld's *Alvar Aalto: Urban Visions* (1998) illuminated lesser known aspects of Aalto's oeuvre. The publication boom during the Aalto centenary was followed by a quieter period, but the interest in Aalto is again reawakening. The result has been a continuous stream of new publications that even manage to reveal new angles.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Charrington and Vezio Nava's recent book *The Mark of the Hand* (2011) focuses on interviews with those of Aalto's employees still alive and continues the 'oral history' series probed in the book *Alvar Aalto: Ex Intimo* edited by Louna Lahti (2001). The authors are the Italian-born Vezio Nava, who had been an Aalto employee of long-standing and who has lived in Finland for several decades, and British architect, teacher and critic Harry Charrington, who has published several books and articles about Aalto. The book emphasises an issue that already has been highlighted several times previously: nobody does it alone. The secret with Aalto, as also with many other 'great architects', was the ability to attract talented and loyal employees. In the case of Aalto, the study demonstrates that also his wives, Aino and Elissa, also exerted an influence behind the scenes; their roles included reading the thoughts and moods of the 'Maestro', as well as interpreting and guaranteeing the 'mark of the hand', that is, the unique sensibility distinguishing his work from that of others. We learn about Kaarlo 'Kale' Leppänen's observation towards the end of the book, however, which makes it clear that in Aalto's office there was only ever one boss: 'Although Aalto said the office is like a big family and he's the father figure, or it's like an orchestra where everyone plays his part beautifully, Aalto was certainly not for teamwork. Teamwork diffuses ideas' (Charrington and Nava 2011: 343).

The interviews in the book focus on describing through anecdotes the atmosphere in the office during the 1970s. The descriptions of office culture and working methods are interesting. Leppänen's stories about the different stages of the Finlandia Hall are particularly memorable. Unfortunately, memory is hard to control and therefore the reader is left wanting more historical detail, such as people's names and dates. Because many projects continued after Aalto's death, it would also have been interesting also to read about the employees' feelings during the period of transition as well as about the new division of labour.

The numerous stories shed light on Aalto's character are equally interesting. We learn about Aalto's often unpredictable temperament, his generosity, notorious drinking habits, not-so-politically-correct treatment of women, and extraordinary language skills – he was famous for

frequently resorting to Latin or French. The book thus provokes the prevailing question regarding most of Aalto scholarship: do we really need to know the author in order to understand the work? Until now, our understanding of Aalto's persona has been shaped mainly by the books by Schildt and Giedion, who both believed that, at least where Aalto is concerned, we do. Schildt, as a writer, concentrated on discussing the man behind the works more than the works themselves, while Giedion, trained as an art historian, approached the problem of life and work from a more methodological perspective – how indeed aspects of individual life are reflected in the work both consciously and subconsciously. Giedion saw in Aalto, a charismatic and likable fellow whose life seemed to have been entangled with the destiny of his native Finland, as a prime candidate by which to mine this question, and, as a result, the chapter on Aalto in Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* emphasises the persona of the architect more than those of the other masters.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Aalto's larger than life persona and enormous charisma surely contributed to his professional and critical success as much as his artistic talent did. One would indeed have expected the authors of the present study to engage how their contribution builds upon these existing Aalto narratives beyond adding to our knowledge about 'how Aalto went about his work' (Charrington and Nava 2011: 53).

We now live in a continuous barrage of images and information, and in the case of Aalto, of particular interest is the ambiguity and diversity of his works. In his book *AaltoMANIA: Readings against Aalto?* Roger Connah (1999) provoked historians to admit that the truth can perhaps never be found – and that's fine. The task of the critic is to create a relationship to the material and, like a detective, to speculate through context and comparisons. Throughout the text he or she conjures the works to life again. A good text discussing Aalto would in that case be like Aalto's curved line, a living 'object' forever elusive and continuously inspiring new interpretations and stories, like those included in the book at hand.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My own book *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity and Geopolitics* (Pelkonen 2009) discusses Aalto's international networking and geopolitical narratives in his works and writings. Several books have been published on Aalto's international activities. *Aalto and America* (Fenske, Anderson and Frixler 2012) continues the investigation of Aalto's contacts and works in different countries.

<sup>2</sup> See my article "Reading Aalto through Baroque" (Pelkonen 2012) for more discussion about how Giedion handles the work-life issue in the Aalto chapter in *Space, Time and Architecture*.

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