

MOVING MONUMENT

AN ANALYSIS OF ALVAR AALTO'S ENSO-GUTZEIT BUILDING

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Preamble

The Enso-Gutzeit Building in Helsinki, by Alvar Aalto, does not fit comfortably into Aalto's oeuvre, nor comfortably into the canons of Modernism, and it works within the urban context of Helsinki in unexpected ways. Yet, it is generally recognized as a significant building in all of these contexts. What is going on here?

Trope

By all accounts Aalto was gregarious, open, and interested in people. He was often described as having a kind of mischievous delight in life. In fact, one of his

favorite phrases was "Take them by surprise."¹ While this may be the battle cry of a competitive architect, it may also be a statement of aesthetic preference.

This orientation can be seen to transfer to his buildings. For example, the Town Hall at Seinajoki appears, from the front, as a kind of classical, almost monumental, building with an ambiguous "crown."² But, as one moves around the structure to the central pedestrian way, this crown decays into a sloping, indeterminate landscape form. The line of the sloping form is then transferred and transformed from the building to an artificial earthen mound. It is a surprising and unexpected change.

This transformation of form, and continuity from form to form is characteristic of most of Aalto's buildings, perhaps a way of consistently "taking them by surprise." The technical term for such a transformation (or literally, "turn") is "trope."³ Aalto's troping is never simple, nor one-dimensional, but always dependent upon the interaction of various concerns - light, context, orientation, circulation, internal disposition, etc. It is the

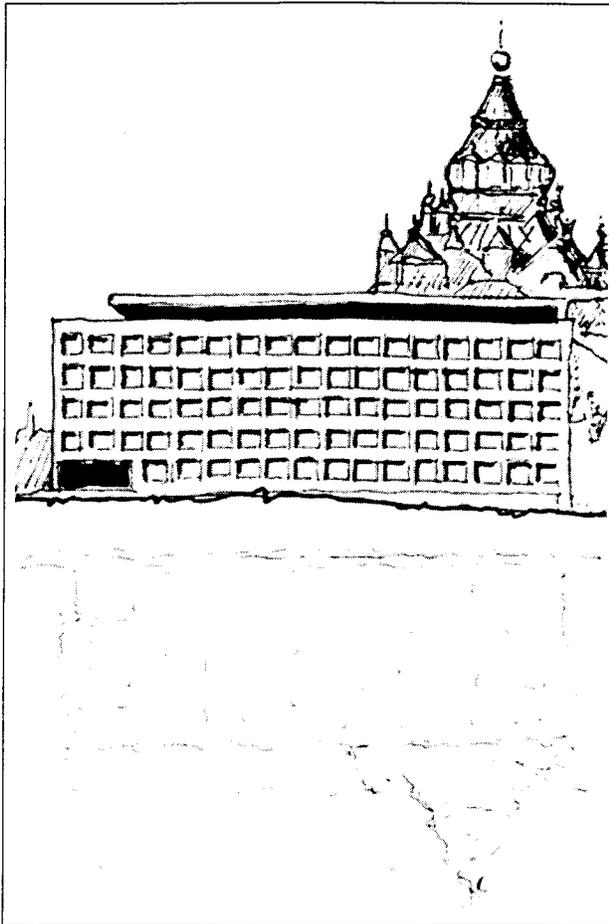


Fig. 1.

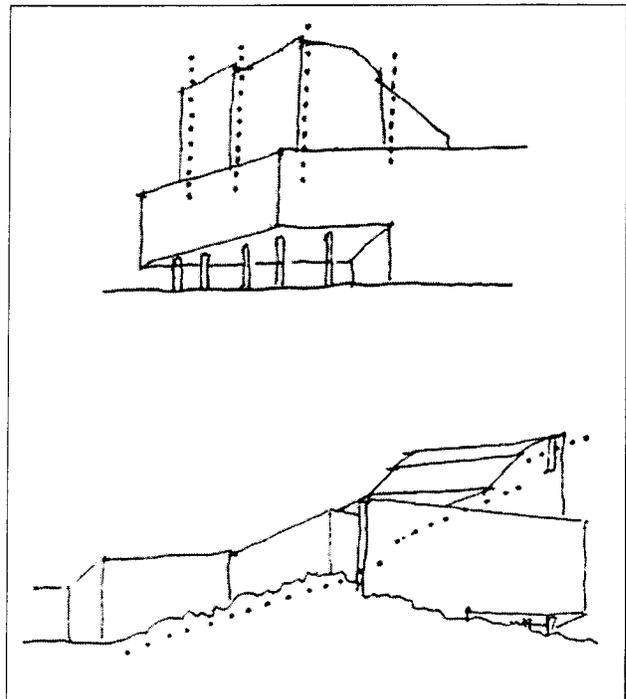


Fig. 2.

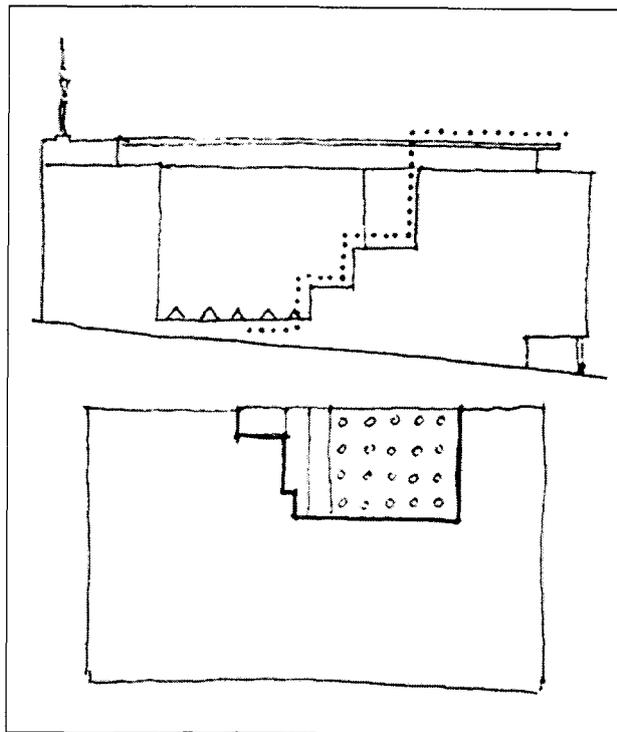


Fig. 3.

very complexity of the troping that makes these moves so difficult to analyze.⁴

From this perspective, the apparent stasis and regularity of the Enso-Gutzeit building comes as a surprise. However, the argument that follows shows it to be developed, as well, out of this transformational aesthetic.

Traditional Exegesis

One explanation for this oddly regular building is that it is, as a whole, a trope from Aalto's typical "organic" formal vocabulary.⁵ Its blocky, prismatic appearance (when viewed from the esplanade, and when seen from the water) is due to the regularity of its urban setting. Its repetitive cellular facade, sheathed in white marble, is a bow to the old Neoclassical section of Helsinki. To anchor the eastern end of the esplanade, it was given a civic monumentality and an apparent stability. But, it is a Modern building, with an almost Miesian order to its southwestern and northwestern (SW and NW) facades. These are clearly contextual moves, developed by Aalto in order to respond to the particularities of this urban site in Helsinki. All of the above characteristics are well known, and are usually deemed sufficient to explain the building. The trouble seems to arise when it is characterized as a "Monumental" building.

Monuments are traditionally simple, static, durable, coherent wholes, and honorific. These are the characteristics that the Enso-Gutzeit building seems to possess. However, this is a general impression. A detailed look at the design decisions reveals that Aalto has *contravened nearly every one of these stated characteristics.*

Violated Volume

The "public persona" of this building is that of a single, pure prismatic block. Seen from the bay, or seen from the esplanade, it carries monumental, and honorific readings. The general expectation is that it is a monolithic office-block with a generalized open-office plan. It is seen on the oblique from the esplanade, emphasizing its reading as a singular prismatic object. However, a glance at the northeastern (NE) side of the building reveals an entirely different order. The volume of the building is violated by the void of a great courtyard.

The building is revealed as a large U-shape, instead of as a great singular block. While this is an entirely reasonable, pragmatic solution to the problem of light, and is a typical plan type in Helsinki, it violates all the expectations of a singular, consistent, "Modern" object (whose clarity and purity supports the advent of the New Age). The extent to which this move is contrary to the tenets of Modernism might be illustrated by Peter Smithson's loss of composure over a presentation of this building at the Architectural Association in 1976.⁶

In addition, the violation of the single block by the courtyard tropes the monumental reading into a bifurcated honorific front and rear court. More peculiar still, Front and Back are at 90 degrees to each other. It should be noted that this juxtaposition of grand honorific front and articulated rear court is not a new theme for Aalto. He previously explored these themes in his Finnish National Pensions Institute, also in Helsinki, in 1948. However, there Front and Back were in the usual one hundred eighty degree relationship. Enso-Gutzeit tropes this previous exploration. There are larger issues.

By breaking up the reading of a large, singular, monumental building, into a variety of smaller, fragmented parts, Aalto has reduced the scale, subverting any general reading of Enso-Gutzeit as a grand architectural presence from this side. The purpose of this can only be called "architectural deference." The reduction of the figural and objectual presence of Enso-Gutzeit to the northeast *defers* to the Uspenski Cathedral, supporting a recognition of its historical and figural presence. Here the existing context is supported over the new signature building, and urban texture over free-standing object. This move is a prescient one. Later in 1966, Aalto inflected the entire council chamber of his Town Hall for Alajärvi towards the 19th century Church by Engle.

Decayed Court

The large-scale contextual implications of the U-shaped plan are clear, yet there are many small-scale formal moves that seem to have other, more subtle agendas. These agendas are also in dialectical contradistinction to the monumental reading of the SW and NW facades.

On the SW and NW facades the grid is regular, an indicator of a universal and thorough order. One wonders if the grid extends inward as an ordering principle. On the northeastern side, details begin to matter enormously. There are blank volumes (in some cases housing support for mechanical spaces) which extrude out and beyond

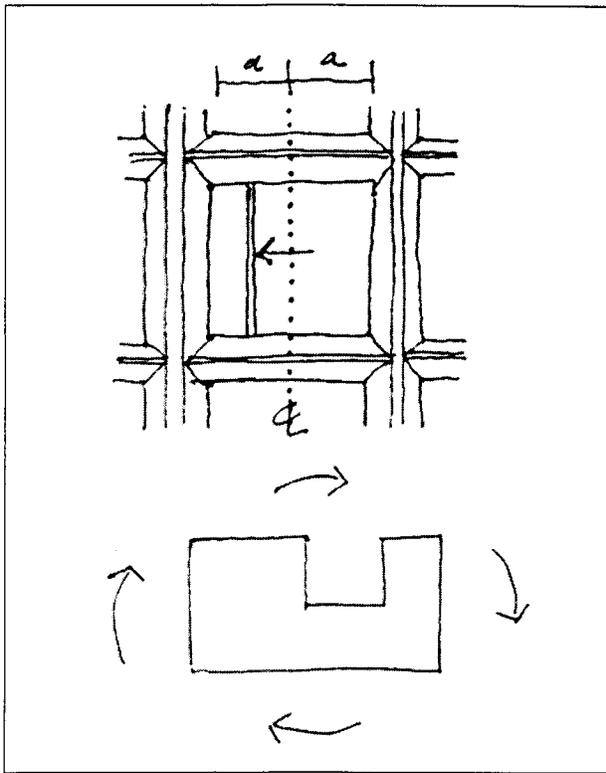


Fig. 4.

the regular grid. Here, the grid is no longer read as a universal ordering principle, but merely as a surfacing, a thick 'skin,' that is incomplete, perhaps violated. Aalto has introduced a discussion of surface/depth, noting the potential implications and meanings of that fundamental architectural element: the wall. The discussion itself has troped from urban concerns to theoretical concerns. The SW&NW facades have a regular and formal life. The breakup of surfaces on the NE side tropes the reading into one that is non-monumental, irregular, and informal; the diametrical opposite of the SW&NW facades. More than this, the appearance of this irregularity and informality on the NE side is, not just incompleteness, but destruction and decay.⁷ This reading of a decaying building is so powerful on this side that one cannot help but wonder if Aalto might be providing an image of "the monument assailed by time," or implying that monuments are merely urban theatre, with their obverse of exposed and unadorned structure.

The SW&NW facades are more than regular and formal, they are grand. They seem to float, rendering them independent of context - facade as heraldic monument - static and unmoving. Meanwhile, the irregular, decayed NE elevation formally "acts." It is in motion connecting the building to the ground. This is particularly clear in the NE section of the building where staircase volumes descend to the earth. In this way the static monumental readings of the SW&NW facades of the building are denied. The implied tropes are: transformation from front to back, from static to dynamic, from formal to informal, but also faintly, from urban to rural.

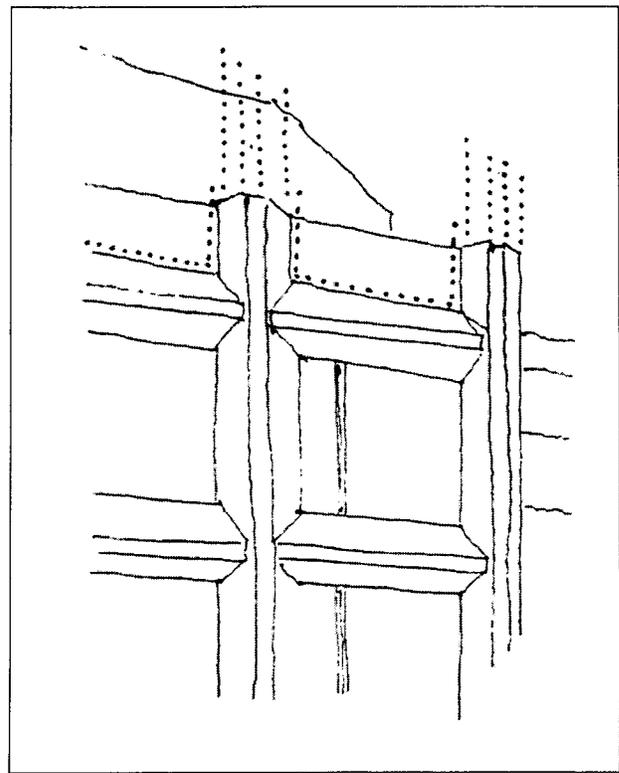


Fig. 5.

In one of his more famous statements, Aalto asserted that he wrote entire books of philosophy with each building. In the case of Enzo-Gutzeit, this seems to be the case. Perhaps he is arguing that the monumental decays, or more optimistically, that the regular grows out of the irregular. Perhaps this is an ironic commentary on our aspirations for permanence, or our willing suspension of disbelief in the (false) facade. The building hints at many such nuanced readings.

Insouciant Mullion

Perhaps one of the more telling details is the offset vertical mullion which appears within the square of each window. It is as if the static bass rhythm of the grid is syncopated by the grace note of the mullion. While this might sound farfetched, musical analogies abound in Aalto's work, from the percussive notches in the brick at the Town Hall in Säynätsalo, to the rhythmic patterns in wood at the entrance of the Kokkonen House in Järvenpää. At a larger scale, it is hard not to read the stasis of the grid as shifted and inflected towards the left, imparting a rotational spin to the building as a whole. This spin is obviously in contradistinction to the image of a grand, noble, static building.⁸

Incomplete Grid

I have spoken of the NW&SW facades of the building as being emblematic of order, universal and regular. A closer inspection reveals that this order is incomplete at the top and at the lower edge. Partial cells of the grid read as incomplete, as if the grid has frayed, like a fabric, at its edges. This curious incompleteness, implied by the handling of

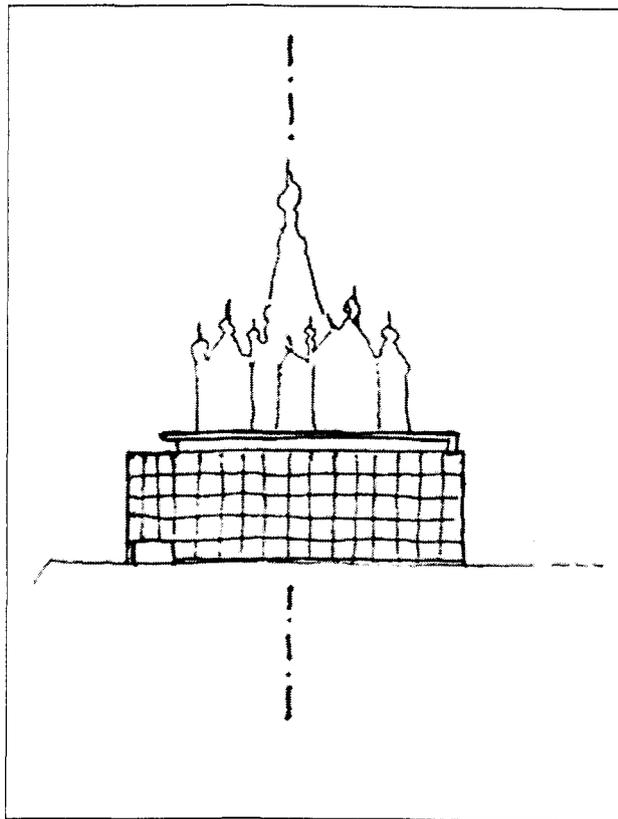


Fig. 6.

the detail, suggests that even these monumental facades are in a state of incompleteness or ruin. The incompleteness seems more distinct at the top than the bottom. While there is no way to prove conclusively the following assertion, both the existing detail, and the surrounding context suggest an extraordinary possibility.

Throughout Helsinki, Jugendstil architecture populates the city with a fantastic array of inventive roofs, turrets, tops, crowns, finials, lanterns, spires, and domes.⁹ Further, the spire of the Klippan Restaurant Pavilion by Lindqvist, descends through the section as the major architectural move.¹⁰ Aalto would have been familiar with all of this.

Significantly, just behind the Enso-Gutzeit building, the Upenski Cathedral is a gigantic vertical presence. From the water, it is a grand spire in the background, with the Enso-Gutzeit building foregrounding in blazing white. As one observes the skyline from the water, moving across the bay, there is a moment when the spire of the Upenski Cathedral appears to rest completely and solidly on the Enso-Gutzeit building as a base. The incomplete vertical woof of the grid of Enso-Gutzeit is completed by the Upenski Cathedral. The modern Meisian building of Alvar Aalto is given, if briefly, a gigantic spire, bridging the conceptual gulf between the Modern and the Traditional.

But the completion, focus and centering of such a spire surely belies the incompleteness, the implied spin, the suggested decay, and the formal activity of the northeastern elevation?

A clue is provided by the inconsistent design of the

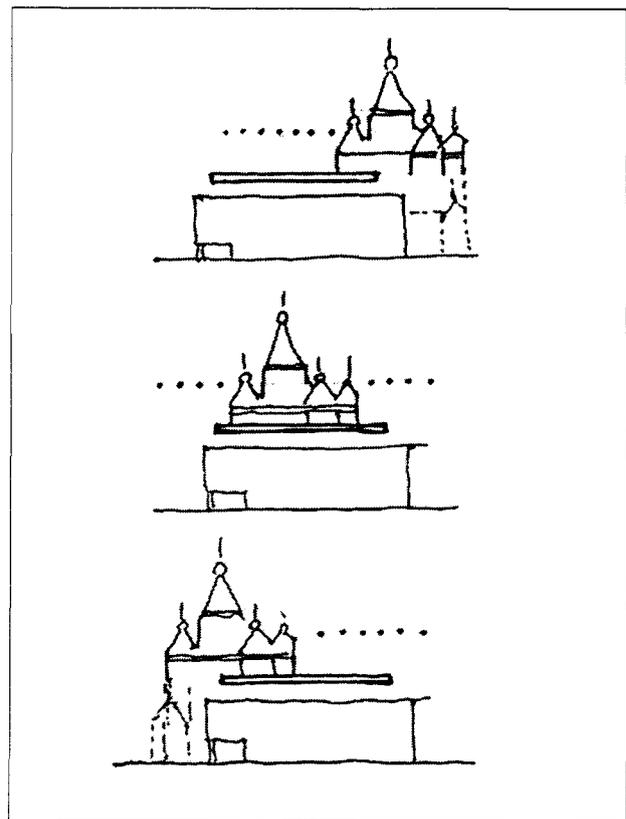


Fig. 7

cafeteria roof. The cafeteria is set back from the elevations, providing a terrace for eating outside. But the roof of the cafeteria is a long, flat, horizontal strip of white. It may be that the reason for this long flat line is to allow, and support the "slide" of the spire behind and across the top of the building.

This cinematic slide is a three-dimensional dance of shifting parallax. The incompleteness of the woof of the grid and its desire for finality is countered by the recognition that such completion is fleeting,

This interpretation seems a stretch. However, in subsequent works at Seinäjoki, Säynätsalo, and Finlandia (to name only the more famous) Aalto has developed roofs and crowns, and has troped those crowns in regard to the base so consistently, that this reading at Enso-Gutzeit can be understood as a faint, and partial prefiguring of later, more literal compositional gambits.

Design Method

These speculations regarding the primacy of movement, change, and the trope, are supported by an exegesis of Aalto's design methodology. In general, his buildings begin, in plan, with a simple, generic diagram which is troped, transformed, adjusted, tweaked, and modified for functional, poetic and associational reasons.

The Enso-Gutzeit building seems to have begun as a simple rectangle, axially organized in both directions. On the ground floor it is partitioned into two major parts, the entry lobbies, and the office 'quadrangle.' These two parts are located on either side of a longitudinal axis that is troped off the original geometric axis of the rectangle.

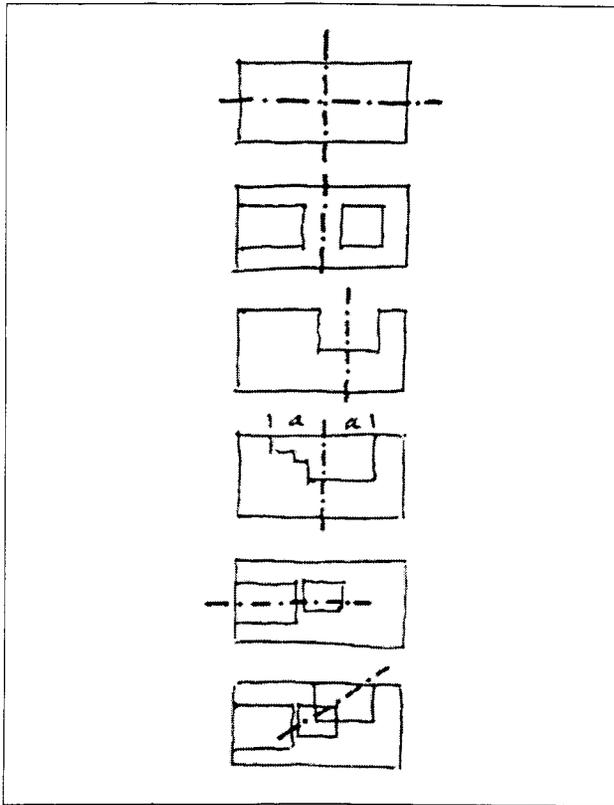


Fig. 8.

The lateral axis line is announced by the symmetrical entry and re-stated by a central corridor through the quadrangle. The lateral axis is reinforced by the lateral banks of offices and storage with their associated corridors. The largest and most significant trope begins with the appearance of the court on the second level. It appears asymmetrically in the plan, ignoring the (already shifted) first floor longitudinal axis and introducing the implication of a secondary longitudinal ordering system. The conflict between the readings of the elevations is repeated in plan: formal order versus informal order, etc. However, by the time the court has stepped back to the roof, its general position in the plan has returned to a symmetrical one in regard to the shifted longitudinal axis. In other words, the decay, and decomposition that appears in the northeastern elevation serves to reconcile parts of the plan.

The ground floor provides clues to a further and perhaps more far reaching interpretation. The three doors of the large internal entry lobby are symmetrically disposed about the lateral entry axis. The double doors of the second, internal lobby are on axis, but upon passing through these, one realizes that one has entered the second lobby off center, along the edge. The position of the internal columns and the startling skylight (from the court) in the far corner suggest an unexpected diagonal movement across this space. In effect, the plan has shifted the orientation from the lateral to the longitudinal. Perhaps this implies, as it did in elevation, a trope from the formal to the informal, from the long axis of the esplanade to the local particulars of the site.

Having entered the second lobby, one might expect to re-center along a new axis. Instead one is directed to the far corner of the space with a skylight "spotlighting" a position in front of a relatively small door. This is a door scaled for the individual.

There is a clear diminuendo: from the grand vehicular port-cochère to the public vestibule with its parallel set of three doors, to the entry, of two doors, into the second lobby, and finally the single door onto the hall. Aalto often said he was designing for the "little man." Here he has established a progression that goes from the grand to the quotidian, ending with the single worker at a back door. In the end, the placement of the court with all of its implications hinges on the individual, and his most particular concerns.

Heraclitus and Aalto

Modernism, or at least the major strain which runs through Le Corbusier and the International Style, has a latent Classical aesthetic. The emphasis on pure form, clear geometries, and zero-detailing derives from a geometrical aesthetic of ideal forms, with a heritage running all the way back to Plato and his transcendent ideas.

Aalto's work has never fit comfortably into this aesthetic. His early modern buildings such as the Paimo Sanatorium, or the Turun Sanomat office building, outwardly appear to be canonical. But even these have forms which trope unexpectedly. His later, mature work, which carries his unmistakable stamp, is unclassifiable in these terms.

His work escapes this classification because our critical categories are not suited to the subject. The most successful critical lens developed to examine Aalto's work is the Type. But there is the uneasy sense that the typological dissection, while enlightening and useful, ultimately misses the heart of the work.

The type is static. It must be, since it refers to an Idea which is beyond the mutability of the world. It is this very mutability that Aalto seems to be interested in, seems always to champion, seems to encourage with his odd non-geometric forms, with his incomplete compositions, and with his trellises, lattice, materials, which allow the building to change with time and the seasons. The given type, whether it be in plan, section, or elevation is merely the starting point for the architectural discussion. The type is always troped to a different form, or to a different type. *The trope of the type* is the key to understanding the work of Aalto. The type is fixed and static, but the trope is moving and active, changing always. When the trope, and its series is isolated, the sheer delight, and perhaps the "surprise" that Aalto spoke of comes into clear focus. Aalto's work does not grow out of a transcendent and other-worldly Platonism with its fixed, eternal Ideas and types, but out of a this-worldly romantic fascination with mutable particulars and unique confluences. This is surely an inevitable result of living and working in an environment with explosive growth during a short summer of continuous light, and an equally rapid demise with the onset of a winter of unrelenting dark. This is a world of insistent fluctuation, and ceasing change. But such a "romantic" orientation has roots that run much

deeper than the nineteenth century, going far back before Plato, ending in Heraclitus and his conviction that all was change.

You can never step into the same stream twice, Heraclitus said. Take them by surprise, said Aalto — because things are not as simple as they seem — and never, ever, the same.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Michael Techner. *The Alvar Aalto Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1966), p. 18: This phrase is originally attributed to a young resident of Jyväskylä.

² Demetri Porphyrios. *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Editions/St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 28: Porphyrios has brief, but detailed discussion of the idea of the iconographic type of the "city-crown." It should be noted, as well, that the "crown," instead of the dome, was a characteristic aspect of Jugendstil Architecture, and one with which Aalto would have been familiar.

³ George Hersey. *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 4: Hersey's discussion of the trope is both historical and poetical. The point here is that the "trope," as used in my essay, is not a new technical term, nor an arcane concept, but one that has around for a very long time. Aalto's primary use of the trope as a compositional and iconographic act sets him apart from most Modernists. However, this is a recessive process in the best modern work, seldom mentioned because it works against the standard critical positions.

⁴ Stephen Groak. *Notes on Responding to Aalto's Buildings in Architectural Monographs 4 - Alvar Aalto*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), p. 106-108: Groak, more than most critics, recognizes the inherent complexity of Aalto's work, a complexity that leaps across normally isolated and separate categories, from prag-

matic to iconographic, circulation to light, etc. I have referred to these kind of leaps as tropes.

⁵ Techner. See p. 34: This explanation of Techner's, while compelling, is too generalized to be of much help. The particularized tropes of small-scale aspects of the building suggest a wry, or perhaps ironic stance on Aalto's part, recognizing the context in general, but troping that context in particular.

⁶ Porphyrios. See p. 129, footnote #33.

⁷ Karl Fleig. *Alvar Aalto*. (New York: Praeger, 1974), see p. 182: Plan of Aalto Summerhouse (1953): This little house of Aalto's, begun six years before the Enso-Gutzeit Building, is usually spoken of as being an "experimental" house where Aalto played with brick variations, and structural possibilities. There are deeper implications. Here Aalto is dealing directly with this issue of "decay." One originally approached from the water, encountering outbuildings which grow in order and regularity as one moves up the slope. The courtyard of the house is final regularized element. However, once in the courtyard, the variety and irregularity of the brick types suggest a descent into disorder at the level of the detail. As one leaves the house and moves back down the slope, the order of the settlement seems to fall away, to decay, until only woods and water are left.

⁸ Colin Rowe. *Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), see p. 185-204: *La Tourette*: Note that La Tourette, by Le Corbusier, develops a similar dialectical tension between solidity and rotation. There are a number of devices that imply rotation, including the implied spiral movement of the light canons. The displaced window mullions at Enso-Gutzeit serve a similar function.

⁹ Jonathan Moorhouse. *Helsinki Jugendstil Architecture 1895-1915* (Helsinki: Otava Publishing Co., 1987), see entire book.

¹⁰ Arvi Ilonen. *Helsinki - An Architectural Guide* (Keuruu: Otava Publishing Co., 1990), p. 70: for a reproduction of the section of this building.