

Seinäjoki and the Community of the Land

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INTRODUCTION

The later work of Aalto has generally been recognized as being masterful work, but exactly why this is so has been very difficult to critically identify. Much of this has to do with the fact that Aalto's fundamental assumptions and intentions have been radically at odds with the development of Modernism. This becomes particularly evident in his later works, which depart significantly from Modernist dictums. Many of his assumptions and intentions have to do with the character of Finland, and the role of architecture in the Finnish landscape.

FINN AND LAND

"Forest light" is perhaps the primary experience of Finland. However, this is not simple. Summer mornings and evenings are long, always. Then, sharp, slanted light, a horizontal yellow banding against vertical white birch, creates intricate patterns which repeat indefinitely into dim and uncertain distances. At other times, the white trunks waver in a murky under-canopy light. Occasionally, clearings or road cuts allow irregular edges against the sky, and the trees read as a continuous and somewhat airy solid out of which the space has been cut. Saplings soon return, and you sense that the forest is only waiting, patiently, to return (Fig. 1).

Water is the other component here – shallow lakes of calm, steely water that in the long evenings reflect the color of the sky so exactly that water and sky blend, somewhere out there, rendering distances uncertain, and orientation difficult. You are suspended in some nether realm between two oceans of sky, or two oceans of water. Driving is particularly interesting at these times, and you occasionally find yourself blanching as you cross some creek that appears to have the vertiginous depth of the sky.

Early winter is long, dark, and snowy, with a lingering, luminous sky. In the darkest months, the sky is black, contrasting violently with a huge moon. It lights the winter night with a cold and brilliant light. In the distance, low down around the horizon, the northern lights dance their ghostly dance. Life is lead primarily indoors, amidst polished wood, and glossy paint – surfaces to reflect whatever light there is. It is a time of shadows, and of stories of happenings in those shadows. In early winter, the shallow lakes freeze. They become over water routes for vehicles and pedestrians. The isolated islands throughout the lakes, with their cabins and vacation homes, are connected by easy and multitudinous access.

The summers are bright, and these same lakes, exposed to nearly continuous sun, warm to the temperature of bathwater. The shadows are gone. The heavy clothing is gone. The over-water routes are gone, and boats, skiffs, sailboats, and motorbarges are the way of the day. Sleep is difficult, and activity continuous. Lost winter time is quickly made up in all manner of outdoor activity.



Fig. 1.

All of these contradictory aspects leave you with haunting memories of a haunted place. Small wonder that Nordic legends have it that the ancient Finns were a race of wizards, or a people with magical powers, to be treated with great care and deference. They were said to have descended out of the trees, and were known to live in the shadows of the forests.¹ Amidst these forests, and of these forests, the Finns built "smoke-saunas." These were ritual houses of spiritual cleansing: consecrated places for birthing, and for commemoration with an ancient conjunction of fire, water, and smoke. They were also places for dying. They built their homes from the living wood as well, often incorporating and accepting growth irregularities into the construction, acknowledging the land from which they drew life. To this day the sauna is an integral aspect of Finnish life, its ancient and significant rituals remembered into the present.

TRANSFORMATION AND TROPE

It is out of this landscape and these rituals that Alvar Aalto grew, and it is from its indigenous architecture that he drew inspiration. Much of Aalto's early experience was formed by rural landscapes, and much of his early career was concerned with rural settings and sites. He was born in the central province of Kuortane, moving to Alajärvi to work with his father, opening his first office in Jyväskylä. Seinäjoki is located in the province of Kuortane, where Aalto was born. He later returned here to design, and finally to build, his most complete vision of a town center.²

He often spoke of the Karelian Farmhouse. In this vernacular example, rooms were added, as needed, to the central core. The result was an irregular plan which responded to the requirements of time

and circumstance. Aalto referred to the Karelian Farmhouse as “organic.” He further stated, in an astonishingly simple and direct comment – “The very essence of architecture consists of variety and development reminiscent of natural organic life. This is the only true style in architecture.”³

This seems at odds with much of the scholarship surrounding Aalto. For a very long time now, critical commentary has isolated the use of the architectural Type as a significant characteristic of Aalto’s thought.⁴ With a little effort, and some perspicacity, one can begin to identify these types, usually as historical references, which are characteristic of Aalto’s buildings. For example, the dramatic sloped roof and skylight combination of the town hall at Seinäjoki can be understood as a substitution for the typical Jugendstil “crown.”⁵ The crown itself, in Jugendstil architecture, is a substitution for the traditional centralized dome, which, further, is a symbol of the centrality of communal assembly. In other words, there has been a threefold “Troping of the Type”: from the institution of gathering, to the dome, to the crown, to the roof/skylight combination. Here, “Trope” is defined as a “turning,” or a shifting of meaning, so that a word, or (in this case) a form, can have multiple associations.⁶ In Aalto’s work, it is the fleeting and partial character of the type that is significant, not the type itself.

At Seinäjoki, the historical tropes of the roof are just the beginning of the transformations. As you walk around the town hall from the southern to the western side, the crown, which at first appears static and stable, a kind of broad rectangular cap to the building, devolves into a steep inclined wedge of skylights (Fig.2). This shift from the static to the dynamic is both startling and unexpected: even more so is the formal continuation of the line of the constructed wedge into the slope of a long, grassy mound. At this point, the troping is radical. This is no mere historical allusion, no mere formal slight of hand, but a transformation between worlds.

PLACE AND PROCESS

In the context of Modern architecture (with its clear geometries of form and organization) the development of the town plan at Seinäjoki appears perplexing, seeming to be a collection of unrelated gestural moves which make little sense. This is a new town center designed from zero. One would expect there to be a clear, designed order. The order is there, but it is a troped order.

The area around Seinäjoki is rigorously flat, with distant ripples of land to the northeast, and a single anomalous mound to the north. This mound rises steeply on the northwest, and descends gently in a long slope to the northeast. It is some distance away, and not really visible from the site given for the new town center. For this site, two architectural competitions were held, separated by seven years – one for a religious center, and later, one for an administrative and cultural center.⁷ The sites chosen face each other across a major two-lane

road. In other words, this division was the only significant characteristic of a site that was simply a fully wooded flat plane.

Diagrammatically, there is a civic precinct to the west and a religious precinct to the east (Fig.3). It seems reasonable to assume that at some point in his design thinking there would have been a clear organizational line which connected these two (see Fig.4). By “connecting the dots” one can still find such a line. But this line is no longer really present. It has been troped – the church and the town hall have been pivoted to opposite sides of that original line (see Fig.4). The tell-tale clue is that the facade of the church is angled to frontalize on the distant abstract front of the town hall. Furthermore, misaligned dual axes resulted from this pivot. The first axis is framed by the edge of the theater and the town hall at the north. Here, the

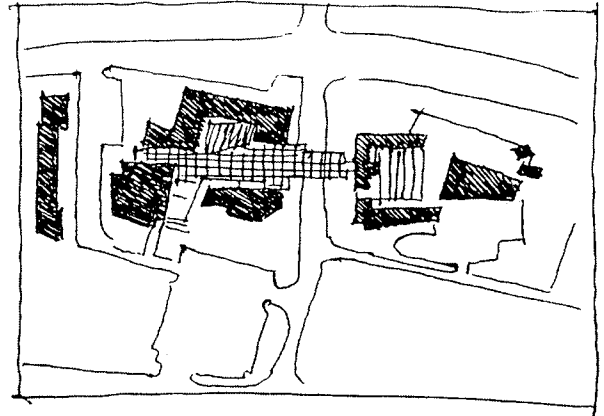


Fig. 3.

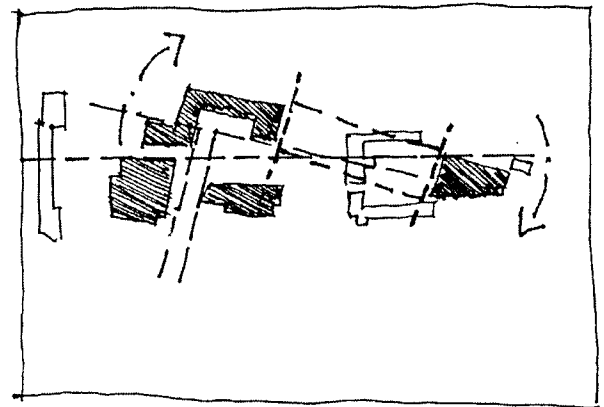


Fig. 4.

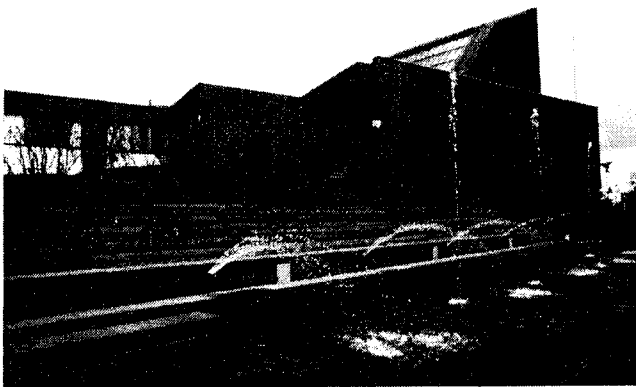


Fig. 2.

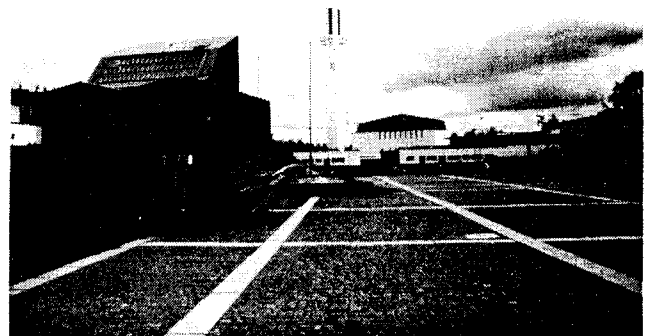


Fig. 5.

carefully framed entry into the civic court from the administration building does not align with the distant passage to the grassed amphitheater in front of the church. The strange mound and fountains of the town hall interrupt this initial alignment and conspire to move you to the new alignment established by the passageway to the church. There appear to be two partial axes which slip past each other. You must re-center as you walk along from west to east or vice versa (Fig.5). The significance is – you wander, and you discover yourself wandering, much as you would in a much older town center that grew by accretion over time.

A smaller, cross axis, or approach between the theater and library was then developed as a response ninety degrees to the shifted position of the town hall (Fig.4). The angle of the peculiar grass mound at the town hall can be seen as a dialectical countershift to the original pivot, as well as a counterpoint to the new cross axis.

The great dilemma of all new towns, or new centers is that a rigorous and rational layout often results in a sterile and uninteresting environment. Here, the simple initial pivot, and its resultants create a variety of intriguing dialectical relationships between the parts, subtly but surely asking the user and visitor to discover the order of the parts in terms of their individual spatial relationships. This discovery must be sequential, phenomenal, and ultimately personal. One comes to understand Seinäjoki viscerally over time, rather than diagrammatically as an intellectual abstraction. The odd result is that the town center feels like a much older place with a “virtual history” of building and counter-building over time.

CULTIVATION AND CULTURE

Perhaps another way to make sense of Seinäjoki is to examine our normal expectations of a “town center,” and to compare these with Seinäjoki. Aalto was fascinated by Italian hill towns. The traditional image of a medieval Italian town is a haphazard collection of irregular blocks surrounding, at some point, a central figural space, or piazza, which served as the town gathering place. In more wealthy towns, there would be a campanile. Later, multiple piazzas might be connected axially to produce larger civic organizations. At Seinäjoki there is an amalgam of both of these. There is a giant campanile, in this case the bell tower for the church, wildly overscaled, marking the church and the town center in general, from a distance. There is the sloped and grassy “clearing” in front of the church and a paved widening, between the library and the town hall. In both cases, there is the unexpected presence of “natural” features.

Across the street, the “court” in front of the church reads as a familiar piazza, at least in plan. However, it is a grassed and stepped slope which descends some six feet to the entry of the church. It is a kind of amphitheater for larger gatherings than can be accommodated by the church structure alone. The sense that it conveys, though, is of an older landscape condition, modulated (by a previous culture?) for gathering. The church then is an interloper, a later development. The pseudorelations on the entry facade imply that this could be read as a kind of citadel, or castle which has been adapted for religious purposes. The amphitheatre then is a remnant of breastworks.

The civic court between the hard, linear edge of the library and the U-shape of the town hall has a very large, and peculiar grassed mound which rises to a second storey entry into the town hall, and foyer for the assembly room. As indicated before, this slope is continued by the slope of the assembly hall roof. It is as if the town hall were either, built around an older mound structure, or that a kind of artificial landscape was inserted into the otherwise flat topography of the town center. In the first interpretation, the virtual history of the place takes on an archaic depth. In the second interpretation the continuation of the slope between the assembly roof and the grassed slope boldly announces Aalto’s theme of the continuity between the man-made and the natural.

This continuity, this interpenetration between the man-made and the natural, is something that the casual visitor to the town center



Fig. 6.

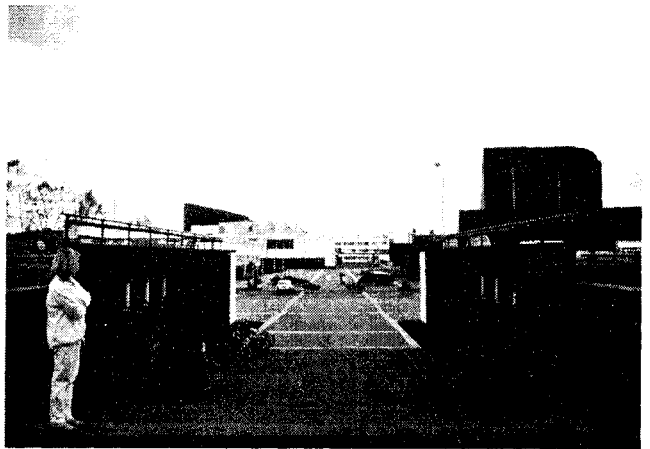


Fig. 7.

experiences phenomenally. There is an astonishing sectional sequence that you experience as a linear progression, or which can be appreciated equally in its constituent parts. The following is that sequence as a single walk: You begin your walk from the administration building at the west, through the narrow passage between the theater and the town hall into the paved center. Then you walk up the slope into the town hall, glance into the assembly room with its dim west lighting, then descend by broad stair into the lower foyer, whereupon you exit through the town hall loggia. At this point you must cross the street, and ascend steps between narrow blue tiled walls (a second passage, a propylaea no less) to arrive at a brief paved landing which allows a view of the grassed amphitheater before the church. Finally, you descend the gentle grass steps to the citadel-like facade of the church. The sequence is roundabout, circuitous, and fascinating. The unmistakable characteristic is the sectional movement. You feel as if you have been walking through, not just a town center, but a veritable landscape, with its mountains and plains, defiles and vistas.

For Aalto, architecture bridges the gap between the dynamic life of the landscape with all of its growth and decay, and the “ideal world” of static and fixed objects with all of its stabilities of construction. However, this is not quite accurate, because the image of the bridge itself is an image of a static and fixed object. Aalto is, instead, designing tropes.

The lore surrounding Aalto is that he was the “Master.” He had the reputation of capturing the essence of a design idea in a few swift strokes of a pen, or quickly working out the design idea in marvelous smudgy pencil sketches.⁸ In the rapid and intuitive action of the sketch, lines flow into forms, which mutate into possibilities for

place, light and occasion. The final form is fixed in construction, but troping in image and experience. The statement that “organic growth is the only real style for architecture” is not a reference to style as identifiable forms, or characteristic traces, but to style as a characteristic process of thinking, in which all is interrelated into one continuous flow.

Aalto is still often categorized as a modernist. His early work draws from this tradition but he consistently moved away from this in his later, more personal expressions. His designs became increasingly less prismatic, less static, more complex formally and thematically. His work gradually shifted away from the vaguely Platonic (static and “timeless”), to the explicitly Heraclitean (dynamic and “timeful”). These buildings were, and are, about the phenomenal, the experiential, and the associational. The inspiration and final goal of this interrelation is to produce a weave between those deeply severed domains – the natural and the man-made.

TIME AND AGAIN

Here, in this very flat and undistinguished territory, Aalto has created a complex phenomenal experience of landscape and architecture. As you return towards the paved center, walking up the amphitheater, the roof forms of the town hall and theater come into view, seeming to suggest the abstract sweep of rocky crags, expanding, shifting, changing form and aspect as you move around and between them. The phenomenal experience is supported and strengthened by visual cues (Fig. 7).

However, in Finland, time is of the essence. In early winter and early spring, the sun rises, moves horizontally across the treetops, and sets. The south-facing library “fan” is designed to capture and baffle that continuous horizontal light. In this case, the personal, phenomenal experience of the architecture is keyed to the phenomenal procession of the sun.

Seasonal time is also critical. Again, Aalto has captured this experience. The visual understanding of this place in summer is different from the visual understanding of this place in winter. In summer, broad plains of paving, and the long broad slopes of the amphitheater and the mound stand out visually in front of the clear white of the library and church, giving the impression of a gently rolling landscape, characteristic of much of southern Finland. In the winter, the white of the buildings blends into the snowy landscape. The roofs of the town hall and the church both become white, and only the tiled silhouette of the town hall (with its tiled base), and the dark roof of the theater stand out as dramatic, dour mountain crags in a bleak landscape (Fig. 7). This is the rocky landscape characteristic of eastern Finland, particularly around Koli (Fig. 6). None of this is overt. All is suggested, almost subliminal in its subtle provocations. The sense you have after walking through this place is that there is a cluster of buildings intricately interwoven with landscape, to such an extent that it is unclear what is landscape and what is building.

NATURE AND NATION

Much of Finland is forest. Around Koli, there are abrupt low mountains (Fig. 6). To the west and north the land is flat and cultivated. To the south it is gently rolling. It is a country that is predominately experienced through and by its landscape. Towns, settlements, and homesteads are widely separated by vast tracks of uninhabited, or sparsely habited wilderness. The major national roads are two-lane. Secondary roads are dirt or mud. Only around Helsinki, with its larger population, do roads and construction dominate.

Seinäjoki, is isolated, a dot on the map in an area that is flat and

undistinguished. Here Aalto has brought together various landscape types and landscape memories of Finland. Seinäjoki can be understood as a condensed version of *all of Finland*, with its various landscape types – plain, mountain, and forest, as well as with its seasonal incarnations. For the Finns, much of their national identity is associated with the character of their country’s landscape. Aalto recognized this, and interwove into this civic place, landscape imagery and experience. *This is a civic landscape*. Seinäjoki’s place imagery not only grounds it within the context of Finland, but significantly, binds it to a sense of national identity.

Since the Renaissance, the design of architecture has been understood to be the ordering and “correcting” of the disorderly and irrational character of nature. It has been assumed that man and nature have been contestants in a battle for supremacy. Aalto has overturned this four hundred year old tradition in his work. He has established instead, a formal and phenomenal continuity between these two that has not been so clearly stated since Heraclitus. Aalto intuitively and insouciantly proposed that architecture is a participant in the experience and in the processes of place. This is a profound contribution to the possibilities and potentials of architecture.

COMMENCEMENT

There are many authors, and many books concerning the character of “place” these days. Yet, the issue of how to build into a place, and to participate in a place seldom overtly deals with the problem of our fundamental assumptions. Medieval farming villages, which can be found throughout Europe, have an intimate and easy relationship to the land due to the quotidian and seasonal cycle of planting and harvesting. In the contemporary world we seem to be thoroughly isolated from these cycles and these seasons, with only a glancing recognition of the coming of fall, or the difficulties of winter. We live in an electronic, economic, digital, and gas-driven culture whose independence from the cycles of the natural is seen as a virtue. Yet, we are slowly realizing that the further we go from the natural world, the more sterile and unlivable our cities, and our homes become. We can no longer view ourselves as separate, above, and superior to the natural. We must see ourselves as part of, and participants in, the natural. Aalto proposed an approach to this viewpoint at Seinäjoki forty years ago. The project has been thirty years in completion. Hopefully, it will not take us as long to learn from his example. Looking at these works of Aalto, we are at the beginning of new possibilities.

NOTES

- 1 Private conversations with Tuomo Junkari, Judge Advocate, Helsinki.
- 2 Kuvaus, *Alvar Aalto - Seinäjoki* (Seinäjoki: Vassa, 1996). Dates were derived from this little booklet.
- 3 Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991). There are many provocative quotes sprinkled throughout this volume.
- 4 Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Editions, 1982) See particularly chapter III: “The Retrieval of Memory” for an elaboration of the idea of Type.
- 5 Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Editions, 1982). See particularly page 28 for a detailed discussion of the idea of the iconographic type of the “city crown.”
- 6 George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988). See particularly p.4 for a discussion of the historic roots of this term.
- 7 Karl Fleig, *Alvar Aalto* (New York: Praeger, 1974). See graphic and photographic descriptions.
- 8 Bernhard Hoesli, *Alvar Aalto Synopsis* (Boston: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1980). See excellent examples of Aalto’s sketches.