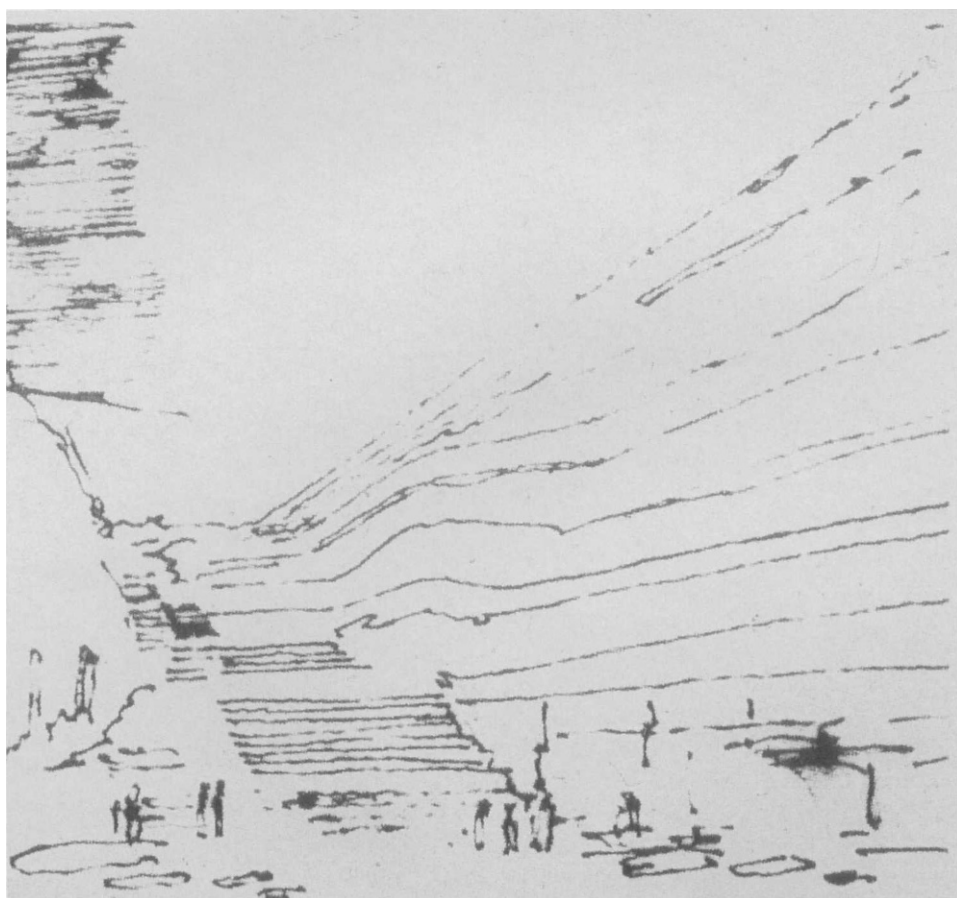


ALVAR AALTO

and the state of Modernism

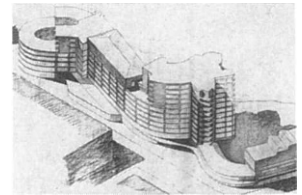


The year in which Aalto launched his career (at the age of 24) with the group of structures at Tampere was a remarkable year: 1922. It was, for instance, the year in which Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's 'The Wasteland' and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* were published, and Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture* was completed; Mies Van der Rohe had just produced his most astonishing vision of the glass tower, and Le Corbusier his project for a contemporary city for 3,000,000 people. It was indeed the year in which Corbu himself set up his practice in Paris, and it was the year adopted by Barr, Hitchcock and Johnson as the birth of the International Style.

By the time that Aalto joined the CIAM Group, at their second meeting in Frankfort in 1929, he was engaged in the design of what appeared to be one of the most sophisticated, and certainly one of the largest, monuments of that International Style, the Sanatorium at Paimio. The sudden flowering of this architecture on a broad international front had been celebrated at the Weissenhofseidlung Exhibition in Stuttgart of 1927, and one year later the CIAM Group had been formed at La Sarraz.

Such apparent conformity was, however, deceptive. Hugo Haering (Figure 6.1) protested at the very meeting against what he saw to be the impatience of the revolutionary who must seek to substitute overnight a new order. His plea for the gentler mode of dialogue and discovery was silenced by the champions of unity, whose fighting manifesto required a new and instantly recognizable canon. The suppression at that time of some inherent contradictions certainly stifled the sort of diversity that the movement needed in order to be sustained beyond the initial attack.

The theme around which the Frankfort Meeting was organized was the nature and standards of the *Existenzminimum*. Almost immediately Aalto was expressing critical reservations about such an approach.¹ We find that the first thing to be said about his relation to the new architecture is that, like Haering and Scharoun, he began almost immediately to set a divergent course from that of the CIAM Group as a whole. The extent to which this represents an 'other' tradition is the main substance of this chapter. For the moment let us simply note the extent to which Aalto's work from this time on took the form not only of a substantial corpus of building but indirectly acted as a critique of what was being done concurrently by the 'established' avant-garde. Perhaps it is for this reason



6.1

that he has always seemed to be closer to our generation than the other principal figures of the so-called Heroic Period. He was the only one for whom the enemy was not the dead hand of the past but false Modernism, a sort of bad faith.

We note also the quite extraordinary compactness with which Aalto's career fitted into a crucial period in the history of his country, at a time when most of the great creative talents that forged the modernist sensibility were expatriates (Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Wittgenstein, Le Corbusier, Mies, Picasso, Brancusi and Stravinsky). This is, however, no coincidence, for the quality of rootedness in the work itself is inherent in the intention and the methodology that Aalto evolved: a form of pact.

'Dictatorship' and the other tradition

In his discourse at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1957, Aalto started by saying, of the revolution of modern architecture, 'like all revolutions it starts with enthusiasm and stops with some sort of Dictatorship', and he went on to talk about architecture as a kind of battleground for the quality of life of the man-in-the-street, a fight for certain freedoms against the twin enemy of technocratic stupidity, on the one hand, and the bad faith of formalism, on the other. Now the probity with which Aalto senses the dangers, and stakes out the positions on which to make a stand and fight, lies at the heart of all that he had to offer. It brought to his gifts as an artist a very special passion and precision.

In his review of Asplund's Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 he declares himself unequivocally in favour of 'the gains architecture has made by setting itself the goal of being a social factor instead of . . . dedicating too much attention to decorative and representational viewpoints'; and he sees it as 'a very positive manifestation that the artist is . . . democratizing his production and bringing it . . . to a wider public'.² Now democracy is arguably the most precious and vulnerable secular value of our time, and the architecture that is proper to it, sustains and reinforces it, is the most elusive of all, since architecture's own relationship to power is necessarily equivocal. Aalto knew the risks, and the way in which certain Scandinavian architecture became thereby emasculated is recalled in his anecdote in later

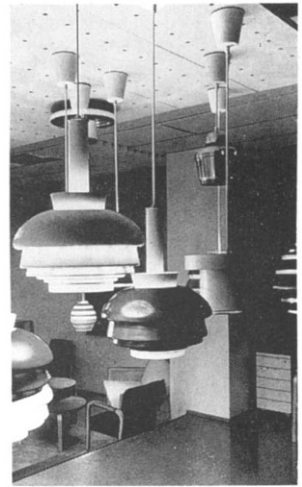
life about the man who awakened from a nightmare crying 'Who can save me from Vallingby?' Nevertheless he set up the interests of 'the little man' as his criteria for judging architecture – though here we add straightaway that he was also writing in 1930 about the emancipation of women: indeed he took 'the modern working woman' transformed from a subordinate position to become an equal working companion (Figure 6.2) as the symbol of the cultural changes of that time. (And we should note in parenthesis that by his insistent acknowledgement of the roles played by Aino and Elissa Aalto in his own working life he was a man who practised what he preached.) We have already noted his reservations about the *Existenzminimum* and to those we can add (also in 1930) arguments in favour of mixed-use planning rather than the single-function zoning of the CIAM theorists.³ When, just after World War II highrise housing was about to be adopted on a large scale, he declared himself to be 'one of those who only against his will accepts highrise dwellings in a location where lowrise is at all possible'.⁴

In contrast to the emphasis at the Bauhaus upon production method as the chief parameter in the design of light fittings he gave priority to the form of the object itself and to the quality and variety of light to be created (Figure 6.3). In general it was under the sign of the biological rather than the mechanical that his formal sensibility was modelled (Figure 6.4). This reflected not only his passion for natural forms and his exploration of nature's resources (such as his experiment in the early fifties with solar heating at Muuratsalo), it also fostered a willing acceptance of the agencies of growth and change in planning in built form and in the selection of materials that welcomed the action of time. In an age when taste dictated a predilection for the bare and the minimal he developed out of functional detail a whole language of rich decoration. Above all a healthy scepticism, controlled indulgence in dogma and the schematic, and he was alert from the start to the emergence of formalism, arguing already in 1935 that Modernism and traditionalism 'have grown closer and together form a large formalist front in opposition to a rational view of life and art'.⁵

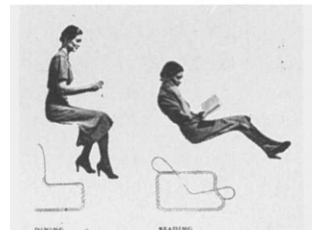
Clearly one of the things that he had meant by 'Dictatorship' was that periodically a form of architectural language tends to be imposed upon the requirements of a building brief. Indeed the history of style is the succession of tyrannies imposed by the great



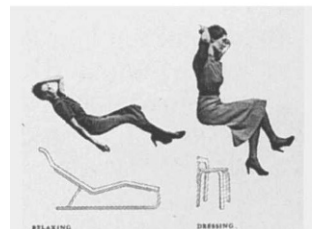
6.2



6.3



6.4(a)



6.4(b)

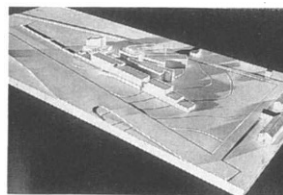
innovators, whose poetry blinds their followers to all but itself, and it may even be argued that the authority of that poetry is directly proportional to its hypnotic power to paralyse rational judgement.

In the same year that he gave his discourse we can see this form of dictatorship clearly exemplified in the entries for the competition scheme for the City Hall of Marl. We get one proposition after another in terms of the grid-frame structure in the manner of Mies, which was then universal.

Then suddenly the box is burst open. First we have the project by Aalto that opens like a hand in a beautiful controlled gesture (Figure 6.5) and then the project by Hans Scharoun whom I have already mentioned as sharing Aalto's opposition to the CIAM canon. Here we see in varying degrees, in these two projects, an extraordinary independence of parts brought together in a collage of powerful juxtapositions that defy not only the Miesian discretion about selectivity but almost all conventional rules of formal continuity. And here I am reminded of a passage from an author to whom I shall make a number of references, namely Adrian Stokes:

In regard to human constructions, ugliness, 'badness' as such, is not most feared, but emptiness, that is to say, lack of identity, lack of focus, promoting a feeling of unreality as may be transmitted, for instance, by an ill-proportioned flashy apartment yet designed it seems to banish space and time and so the sense of any function to be performed there . . . The squalid, the ugly, do not necessarily lend themselves to this numbing sense of unreality, deeply feared as proclaiming lack of relation, disintegration, the undoing of the ego-figure. Shape, pattern, growth, rhythm, interlocking parts of whatever kind, restore ourselves to ourselves.

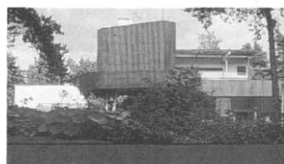
We should note that the first characteristic of this responsive architecture is the vitality that flows from permitting the individual elements to have their own space and representation, and therefore identity. Now it is part of a thesis about which I argue further in Chapter 7, that for Aalto (as for Haering, Scharoun, Duiker and the early Melnikov) expressionism was the bridge to an extraordinary enlargement of the language of architecture (Figure 6.6), at a time when most of the early protagonists had rejected it in favour of the new reductive canon of purism. Avoiding that overemphatic



6.5



6.6(a)



6.6(b)



6.6(c)

rhythm (in which all impulses run parallel), but accepting the means (stepping, polyrhythms, juxtaposition, changes in scale and material), he elaborated a syntax whose capacity to accommodate the circumstantial and the contradictory precisely matched, as we will see, his insatiable desire to embrace and depict the variety of human occasions. Louis Kahn once said that 'some functions suggest forms and some forms suggest functions', and in this sense Aalto transvalued the lexicon of expressionist forms. That the apologists of the time, and the historians since, have failed to appreciate this transformation has done much to obscure the lines of continuity in what I would call 'the other tradition' of responsive architecture.⁷ And, in doing so, it has compounded some journalistic confusions of our time about 'the death of modern architecture'.

The lion and the programme

Two months after Aalto's Discourse at the RIBA, John Summerson read an important paper there entitled 'The Case for a Theory of Modern Architecture'.⁸ That paper came to a halt with a dilemma, as both Summerson and his critics saw it. He started by making a bold claim and one that I have examined at some length in Chapter 2. He said that the social sphere or 'the programme as the source of unity is . . . the one new principle involved in modern architecture'. He then went on to 'the crux of the whole matter' by realizing that 'the conceptions which arise from a preoccupation with the programme have got, at some point, to crystallize into a final form . . . but there is no common theoretical agreement as to what happens at that point . . . One may even be speaking of a missing architectural language'.

Now Summerson is alluding not just to the vast increase in the range of building types which require research into their operational parameters, but also to the sense in which architecture became engaged in a form of social contract of the type to which Aalto referred. Now the programme, as the vehicle through which information and intentions of this order are to be transmitted, is indeed far removed in terms of complexity from the *utilitas* of Vitruvius.

To come to grips with it, we must start by acknowledging quite frankly the fundamental ambiguity in

its nature, which gave rise to Summerson's dilemma. I have likened this below to Freud's classic distinction between the manifest and the latent content of a dream, in order to evoke the uneasy sense that we all too often have that the so-called architectural 'problem' stands in a false relation to the real world of people's desire.

But a more appropriate analogy to the nature of Summerson's 'programme' would be the formula for dealing with the structure of genetic coding known as DNA, in which a helix of double and single strands of code link in a simple way to form the most complex message of all – life itself. If we then liken the first of the two coding strands in our DNA formula to those conventional aspects of the programme that deal with the operational and environmental parameters, we find in Aalto's work from the late 1920s onwards an 'attack' whose freshness, professional rigour, and technical imagination, amounted to a form of significant innovation in themselves. If we take, for instance, his analysis and solutions to the needs of the tuberculosis patients at Paimio, we find a case-study of a different order from the idealized and abstract models of functionalism proposed by his contemporaries. A whole range of novel 'detail' is invented to respond to the nervous condition and particular needs of a patient in terms of heat, light, ventilation and quietness. All these considerations conferred upon the 'programme' an unprecedented density of relevant detail, the draught-free filtering of natural air through double windows; the varied use of colour to relax or stimulate; special wash basins; specially designed doorfurniture cupboards and beds – even the notion of putting out a flag on the sun-terrace to celebrate each recovery of a patient (Figure 6.7).

Aalto was, however, very aware of the dangers inherent in the design methods that grew from seeking a total solution by solving the secondary or subordinate operational factors in isolation, one by one. He illustrated this with the following anecdote:



6.7

As a teacher I once heard a student present his thesis project. It concerned a children's hospital. He had attempted to find the overall solution not only through one secondary method but through many. The analysis of movement patterns took half an hour of the speaker's time. There were the space needs for children of different ages, different light angles in the window systems, easy maintenance of surfaces, etc.

All of them good things in themselves if one understands them as subordinate elements, but they were in this case not sufficient to create a humane environment or a functioning whole. When the student had finished counting up all these methods and presented his technical solutions for all the cases, I could not help but say: 'You have apparently still left out at least one possibility. How would the building and the sick children in it function if a wild lion jumped in through one of the windows? Would the dimensions be suitable in such a case?' The answer was a deep silence in the whole auditorium. Only the laugh of the paediatrics professor from Harvard could be heard.⁹

To the student the manifest programme was a checklist of predictable behavioural parameters and nothing else: to Aalto the programme had to embrace another story as well, and his surrealist image of the lion has the dream quality that encourages me to re-invoke for a moment Freud's concept of latent content in dream-work. Aalto's lion, like an apocalyptic beast, sloped towards our student in search of a quarry that did not exist in that student's imagination.

To return therefore to our DNA model, we find a second set of questions operating enigmatically at another level, and answered by a second strand of code, one just as important as that dealing with operational requirements, but here dealing not only with Summerson's 'missing language' but also with ambiguous psychological and cultural demands and those symbols for what Aalto called 'life's ungraspable difficult unity'.¹⁰ In 1940 he said 'rationalization has not gone deep enough . . . the newest phase of architecture tries to project rational methods from the technical field out to human and psychological fields'.¹¹ And it is this second strand in the genetic code of our model that I wish to examine by exploring that new range of 'psychological fields', wherever it may lead.

In the same way that certain forms (in Kahn's phrase) suggest the accommodation of certain functions, so do certain clusters of form congregate under the sign of one or the other of two major spatial experiences of overriding psychological potency that we have examined at length in Chapter 1 – envelopment and isolation. And there we found that what seems to be at work here is the instantaneous fusion of nervous sensation and half-buried memories, a Proustian chemistry of the nervous system which takes the

form of a body-language operating just below the level of self-conscious awareness yet colouring all our spatial experience (see Figure 6.8(a)–(b)).

So we must add to the specification of our code a component of body language; but note that it is not just the innocent version (so beloved by aesthetes) of ‘empathy’ (of translating, in imagination, the statical thrust of the columns into a load upon your own shoulders – what Corbu called ‘the witness of energy’). It is a language in which the human body, your body, once had to be the sole metaphor you had for dealing with every emotion, frustration or fantasy, fear or joy and which owes its emotional charge to its reconciliation of contradictory material. And it is one of the most marked characteristics of Aalto’s work that it so dangerously engages with contradictory elements which it yet manages to control.¹²

But there is also yet a third reading to be built into our code. This is the realm of traditional associations, the ancestral hall of conventional symbols and collective beliefs, the local colour of every cultural reign.

And so we have come a long way in our attempt to spell out what Summerson’s ‘programme’ has to cover if it is to match adequately, not only the criteria of function and environment, but also the other interlocking codes that together spell out both the private and the subliminal reactions, and the public realm of conventional narrative; and then, above all, so to weave the strands together that one can begin to conceive their counter-form in the architectural language that was ‘missing’ in Summerson’s view of the programme as he conceived it. A language whose words are dense and multi-evocative; portico and hall, aedicule and roof, hanging garden and atrium, column and wall, mixing memory with need, sensation with reflection, doubling meanings with profusion.

The missing language

At least we now know that in looking for Summerson’s missing language we are not looking for something simple. We are looking for an architecture that can encompass in its narrative all the strands of codes that we have explored – and which are indeed the essential structure of any of the cultures that are the glory of our history books. Now a culture cannot be conceived in the brain of one man alone, nor does it, like a



6.8(a)



6.8(b)

mushroom, grow overnight. A theory or a school of thought can, but not a culture which is collective, cumulative and necessarily imbued with much reflection and resonance: composed, furthermore, of many individual strands that, as in the fibres of a cord, may be discontinuous yet bond together under tension into one thing. Aalto said 'it requires time for all that develops and crystallizes in our world of thoughts. Architecture needs this time to an even greater extent than any other creative work.'¹³ He used to say that what matters is how a building looks thirty years after it was built – a test that his own work survives exceptionally well (Figure 6.9).

That is precisely the question that was posed back in 1922 when *Vers Une Architecture* was completed by Le Corbusier. Have we had enough time yet? Looking back now our judgement would be that timing is as crucial as time itself. Reflecting upon the achievement of Le Corbusier, for instance, it is the impatience of the man that seems most touching – even tragic. He did try to do it overnight, and he did try to do it almost alone. In view of this, it is extraordinary that his architecture did at least address itself to all the levels of our programme except perhaps one – the level of conventional symbols. And for that reason his work, which was a paragon to the rest of the world, lacked the necessary rootedness in the French prejudices of the time to avoid disfigurement (Figure 6.10).

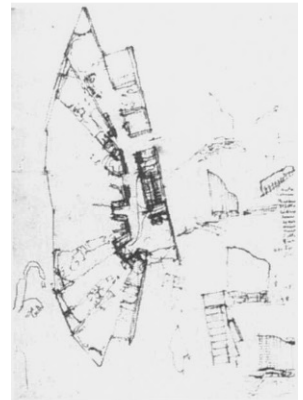
On the other hand, for Alvar Aalto time and country meshed perfectly with his talents, largely because he made them do so. The language of his architecture followed very closely the contours of the building programme that he was studying at any one time, and it did this because of one very striking characteristic in the 'structure' (abstractly speaking) of his creative attack. This can be epitomized by drawing two forms – an ideograph of two lines, one straight, the other serpentine. We can transform the lines into planes, and whether we view it as plan or section, it will recall to us the archetypal Aalto space, in which the juxtaposition of a strictly flat plane with a rhythmically wavelike surface seems to charge the air of the space like the beating of a giant wing (Figure 6.11). But these two forms can also be imagined as the lines of an encephalogram – an imprint of the brain's processes – in the sense that there seems always to be in the 'argument' of an Aalto building a complementarity between the rigorous plane of analysis and the turbulent wavelike surge of fantasy.



6.9



6.10



6.11(a)



6.11(b)

In the introspective essay entitled 'The Trout and the Mountain Stream' (1947) Aalto describes something very like this dialectical tension in his own design process:

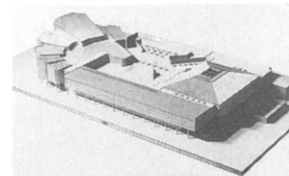
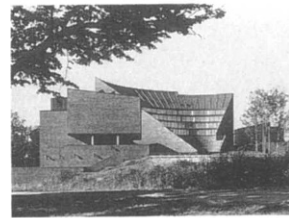
Architectural design operates with innumerable elements that internally stand in opposition to each other. They are social, human, economic, and technical demands that unite to become psychological problems with an effect on both each individual and each group, their rhythm and the effect they have on each other . . . The large number of different demands and sub-problems form an obstacle that is difficult for the architectural concept to break through. In such cases I work – sometimes totally on instinct.

And here we recall the account and illustration (Figures 2.13–2.14(a)–(e)) of his working method as set out in Chapter 2.

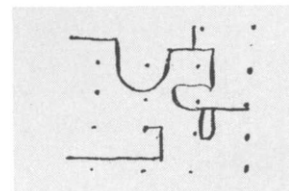
The references to the subconscious and to methods akin to the 'écriture automatique' of the surrealists are very pregnant and lend some support I think to my introduction of explicitly psychoanalytical factors. We notice here also the introduction of the notion of 'play' (a central theme in the cultural theories of his friend Yrjö Hirn) for what Corbu called 'the deadly serious game'. In addition, there is of course the conscious play of allusions, the element of acknowledged artifice that permits things to be said and things to be read into them that could not otherwise be permitted or acknowledged. (Here the parallel would be with Freud's analysis of the tendentious joke.) We have allusions to other buildings, Siena, Romana Minora and Pompeian courtyards, Greek theatre and mountain sites (Figure 6.12), encrusted Byzantine walls and spolium architecture.

It is a further characteristic of the ideograph that I have proposed that it has an open linear form of binary nature, and Aalto will occasionally use this fact as in the façades at Wolfsburg Cultural Centre (Figure 6.13) to allow two forms or two adjoining façades to enjoy a quite disparate character or even a deliberate discontinuity. In this it differs from the language of Le Corbusier, for which I offer this other ideograph in which a fixed rectangular framework withstands erosion by violent subforms (Figure 6.14).

For Corbu there is always this tension between the pragmatic components of brief and site, on the one



6.13



6.14

hand, and some glittering diagram or haunting memory of the Acropolis, on the other. This is the unique drama of his architecture and its formal dialectic. Aalto is wary of the diagram, of any proposition that is schematic. It is significant, for instance, that, except in the case of the Paimio Sanatorium (in which he may well have been influenced by Duiker), he never indulges in any exhibition of the structural frame. His dialectic is more subtle and for its working out demands a suppleness and an ability to change pace; it needs also the freedom of a less demonstrative tone in order to pursue his close reading of the working requirements of a brief.

Nevertheless, the language of Aalto and Corbu has more in common than with, on one side, the abounding fluidity of Scharoun's a-formal inventions, which scarcely admit to the existence of an autonomous architectural language, and, on the other side, the strict framework and pure externality of the Miesian temple form.

In one sense we are here rehearsing the range of what Stokes meant when he said that the generic difference in styles lies in the varying combinations by which the two poles of aesthetic experience are conveyed to us. We might even conceive of a form of architectural horoscope by which to define the predominance of one or the other sign at different times in history. Were we to do so we would notice the uncanny way in which Aalto seemed time and again to be offering the counterbalance to a dominating trend. It is with difficulty that one recalls what a shock it was, in the early 1950s when the first photographs of the town hall at Säynätsalo appeared (Figure 6.15); it hit the bland imagery of the Lever House like a bulldozer. In much the same way the massive containment of the courtyard there challenged the fashionable fluidities and elisions derived from the ITT Campus. Baker House at MIT had of course appeared even sooner, while, by comparison, a few years were to pass before the images of Ronchamps, Villa Shodan and La Tourette were to be published. At this time therefore Aalto's work was at the forefront in shattering the elegant mould of the International Style 'White' architecture. As in his earliest industrial buildings, architecture regained lost robustness.

The other, gentler, characteristic of Aalto's language which separates it from all of his peers is his use of images and metaphors from nature rather than machinery, and of materials that weather to maturity;

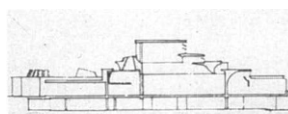


6.15

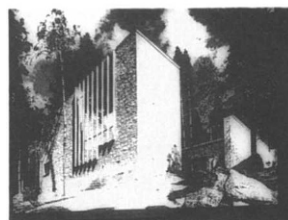
and this relates also to his sense of time and endurance. Impatience is not consonant with a feel for nature. Both the farmer and the sailor know better than to try to call the tune, and we sense the same wariness in Aalto's anticipation of growth and change, both in the form and the fabric of his buildings. He is said to hold that it will take 50 years before his buildings can be judged properly.

He shared with the Japanese a reverence for the variations and recombinations that flow from nature's continual change. And by these means he gives us the sense of a building perceived as a shimmering structure of transformations, responding to the light and weather and colour and smell of each season always changing and, in itself, weathering and changing colour: not as Platonic form in immutable Mediterranean light but as man-made fabric enduring time. He knows what it is like when sunlight refracted from rippling water dances on the bulkhead of a yacht (and he seeks to build this into the clerestories at Aalborg (Figure 6.16), of which he said 'light is to the Art Gallery what acoustics is to the concert hall') and how in the courtyard of Muuratsalo (Figure 6.17) the glow from a winter campfire creates with its reflections from the surrounding snowbanks an almost mystical feeling of warmth. All in all, it was a language of unprecedentedly wide range and stylistic diversity at a time when a narrow strictness was all the cry; and in its sense of presence, it has more in common with those painters of our time who call for a renaissance of the figure after an age of drained abstraction. This quality tempts one to revive the concept of 'character' in assessing his buildings – that quality of figure or image through which Ruskin and Stokes can suddenly deepen the game. Certainly, one is provoked to treat seriously again the question of ornament, for many of his buildings evoke an almost Byzantine glitter, through surfaces and details that answer to myriad demands of use, yet still remind us that Helsinki lies on the same line of longitude east as Tirgu Jiu and the birthplace of Constantin Brancusi.

But above all, this virtuosity and diversity served a working theory of open form that demanded on behalf of the range of its subjects an equally wide and generous implementation; for when architecture serves life rather than just itself, its means must be prodigious.



6.16



6.17

Aalto and the present State of 'Modernism'

To acknowledge the significance of this Other Tradition is of great importance today. We have seen that that tradition has, from the first disagreement at La Sarraz in 1928, been critical of the 'established' values and strategies of the International Style. In recent years much of that same criticism has come home to roost in a spate of journalism announcing the 'death' of Modern architecture.

But evolution is of the essence in authentic Modernism, and we have seen how Aalto himself in 1940 referred to 'the first (and now past) period of modern architecture'. But one thing is quite certain, and that is that the tradition of which I speak requires neither funeral rites nor expiation in the much abused ashes of Pruitt-Igoe. And what are the alternatives?

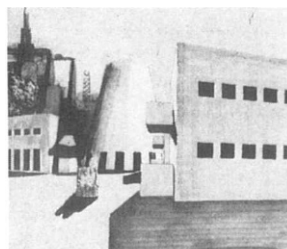
Only two of any substance, and both hinge on the issue of the 'missing language'. On the one hand, we have the claims of technology 'transcending', in the famous phrase of Mies Van der Rohe, 'into architecture'. To Aalto himself this is an overreaching – the raising of both the products and the intellectual values of technology to the level of idolization. One senses in Aalto a sort of physical repugnance towards objects and surfaces that exhibit a polish too cold and glossy and dandified to be touchable. At a deeper symbolic level, it is relevant to record Adrian Stokes' quotation from 'The Delay of the Machine Age' by Hanns Sachs: 'The Ancient world overlooked the invention of machines not through stupidity nor through superficiality. It turned them into playthings in order to avoid repugnance'.

It is clear that, to Aalto, technology raised to the level of importance at which it drains attention from the objects it was created to serve, in order to focus attention upon itself, indulges in a sort of blasphemy. We could exemplify this concern by taking three recent art galleries, each a miracle of technology, but each using that fact to frustrate our attempts to look at the works of art by thrusting to the forefront of our attention, in each particular case, some aspect of itself, either the structural system, or the bits and pieces of the constructional 'kit', or the servicing entrails. This kind of technical obsession is not just a question of an innocent desire to please through the excellence of the 'well-made thing', it is the deliberate and aggressive narcissism that motivates the whole Modernist aesthe-

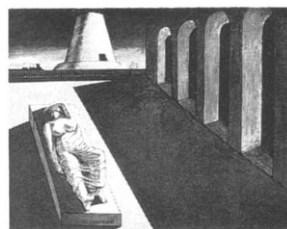
tic in its drive towards the purification of means, to the exclusion of all content, all subject matter but itself, in a frenzy of self-exposure. In terms of what Aalto stands for, this subversion of aim has rather the same effect (though far from the same cause) as the grounds of inauthenticity of which we spoke earlier – things seeming to be what in truth they are not, a show of freedom that proves in the event to be a bondage: bad faith.

The second alternative is of a different order, since it represents a point of view which, paradoxically, is both more novel and very much older. I refer to those claims on behalf of architecture as an autonomous discipline proclaimed most poignantly by Aldo Rossi. If this were no more than a criticism of the International Style, on the grounds that architectural language has been trivialized by reducing it to forms that are born solely out of service to use or structure, then we would simply be back with Aalto's story of the student and the lion. But it is much more than that. In the first place, from an impatience with what is claimed to be the banality of the everyday, it has moved towards a kind of estrangement from reality that is surreal in nature. It is not just a flight from reason (though in my view it is that), it is also a poetic complaint of some force, telling of a torn and unassuageable need for a long-lost world in which massive forms might assert order once more, imperious geometry take the place of panic, astonishing presences repeople the void in order to humour positivism's dread of the Sphinx (Figure 6.18(a)). This is the world of Giorgio de Chirico (Figure 6.18(b)). The cry is to get straight back to something like Summer-son's language of antiquity, whose unarguable authority established the necessary plane of phantasy upon which much of our subliminal and conventional coding can be played out.

It is to the echo of these ancestral voices that Rossi is listening. It is, however, one thing to be the inheritor of a vast and undispersed iconography (that is indeed the virtue of working within a tradition – you are not on your own), but it is another matter to re-invent that lost world overnight. For although we are not asked to return to the classical forms literally, something is wrong with the argument from the start. Where the prototype evolved as the transformation of use and structure into poetry, we are now invited to short-cut straight to the poetry and to cut out the banalities of use and structure. This is Art for Art's sake again, and it is one of the oft-noted characteristics of aestheticism that



6.18(a)

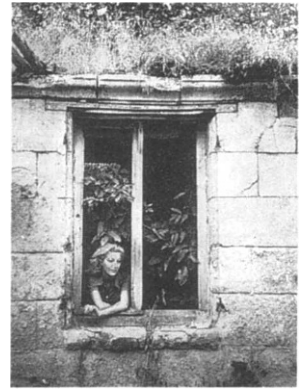


6.18(b)

its most favoured phantasies revolve around the idea of death (take the writings of Walter Pater as a supreme example). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Rossi's most poetic project is for the cemetery at Modena. Borrowing de Chirican images of ambivalence and impotence, it achieves a haunting evocation of death. These are images of power, but it is a power that oppresses; and those unframed and windowless apertures that no one will ever look through remind me of the advice that Aalto once gave to a student, 'When you are designing a window imagine your girl-friend looking out of it.'

That thought in turn recalls to mind another surrealist image, only this time the surrealism of life: it is a photograph by Picasso's friend Dora Maar (Figure 6.19). It comes as a timely charm or benediction to guard us from the hypnotism of that death wish; for the only thing that can save us from the bewitchment of poetry is another poetry. Here we are offered a composite emblem of architecture, nature and woman – a florilegium to Eros. And, after all, what I have tried to convey from the start is that the probity of Aalto's life work lies precisely in the way that, in an age of terrible violence and bad faith, he preserved a vision of architecture as a celebration of life, of a power that does not oppress, but sustains.

Thus we can admire the way in which he invented a world of forms, and we can be deeply moved on occasions by the way those forms are assembled to create a presence and a place that, like a human face, have the memorability we do not normally enjoy in our daily commerce with the man-made world. Now, unarguably, much of that grace is a pure gift (from the Gods), personal, rare and inexplicable, which pours through one person and becomes a sort of blessing on us all. What is not so personal, and is, indeed, available to any of us who wish to learn from it, is the probity that launched and informed that world of forms – I mean that very down-to-earth humanity that addressed itself with what Leonardo da Vinci called *ostinato rigore*, obstinate rigour, and a great professional pride, to the tangled web of needs and annoyances, desires and frustrations by which each day we follow our course; and to find an answer to those needs is to give to the individual a kind of self-respect which constitutes a form of freedom that the politicians know nothing of, because it has nothing to do with dogma, but all to do with how each person (Aalto's 'little man') is helped to be at home in a world that can be marvellous in unison,



6.19

but terrifying in alienation. Aalto was one of the rare architects in our time who could make monuments; but much rarer was this other gift, which could make poetry out of the everyday, which could, in the words of the painter Vincent Van Gogh, 'give back to ordinary men that something of the eternal that the halo used to represent'.

References

All reference to Aalto's writings are to page numbers in 'Sketches' published by MIT Press, 1978, a substantial but by no means complete selection of Aalto's writings and lectures edited by Göran Schildt. (A.A.'s writings have been variously translated and versions differ significantly; eventually an 'authorized' version must be produced.)

- 1 'Sketches', p. 31: 'The Dwelling as a Problem', 1930. 'We have certainly had enough examples of such a minimal line.'
- 2 'Sketches', p. 116.
- 3 'Housing Construction in Existing Cities', 1930 ('Sketches', p. 5).
- 4 'Building Heights as a Social Problem', 1946 ('Sketches', p. 92).
- 5 'Rationalism and Man', 1935 ('Sketches', p. 47).
- 6 Adrian Stokes, *The Invitation in Art*, p. 52.
- 7 Hitchcock in 1952 stigmatized Aalto's Baker Dormitory as 'expressionist'; and Giedion when he, at last, in the eighth printing of *Space Time and Architecture* introduced a chapter on Aalto, set it under the rubric of 'the irrational'.
- 8 *RIBA Journal*, June 1957.
- 9 'Art in Technology', 1955 ('Sketches', p. 128).
- 10 Speech at the Centenary Jubilee of the Jyväskylä Lycée, 1958 ('Sketches', p. 164).
- 11 'The Humanizing of Architecture' 1940 ('Sketches', p. 77).
- 12 The handling of contradiction here is something very different from the use of the term by Venturi for whom its connotation seems to be purely stylistic – a sort of mannerism employed to attack the 'boredom' that is presumed to be the price of conformity.
- 13 1947 ('Sketches', pp. 96–8).