



Yale University, School of Architecture

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Aalto versus Aalto: The Other Finland

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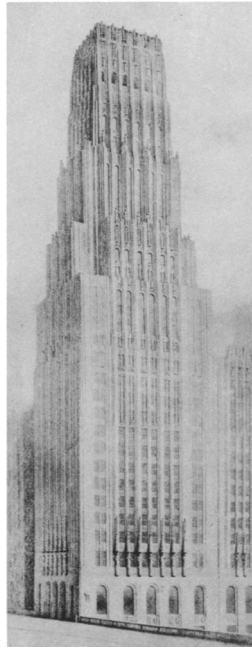


Considering that the population of Finland is roughly half that of greater New York, the extent and the degree to which Finnish architecture has impinged upon the outside world – particularly upon the United States – in the last 40 years is quite extraordinary. Our vision of Finnish architecture has been largely focused on the work of two men: Eliel Saarinen and Alvar Aalto. I do not include Eero Saarinen because, although Eero was born in Finland, he was an American architect; in fact, he was trained in New Haven and is probably the most distinguished product of the Yale School of Architecture.

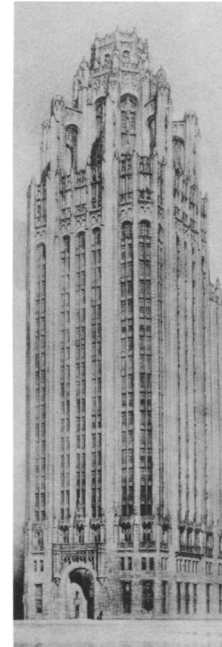
Eliel Saarinen impinged upon us first over forty years ago, when his project in the *Chicago Tribune* competition of 1922 won the second prize and was very distinctly the *succès d'estime* (1a), although of course Howells Hood were the winners of the competition and built the building (1b.) Posterity has generally considered that a dark horse in this competition, the project of Gropius and Meyer, was more significant (1c): for this was the year in which the founders of the International Style produced their first mature projects.

When we think back to some of Sullivan's work – and Sullivan is reputed to have spoken well of the Saarinen project of 1922 – particularly Sullivan's work of the '90s, and above all to his Fraternity Temple project of 1891 (1d), we can't today see very much difference between Saarinen's project and the Gothic project of Howells & Hood that won the Tribune competition. By the end of the decade it was evident, in the Daily News Building (1e) and the McGraw Hill Building (1f) in New York that

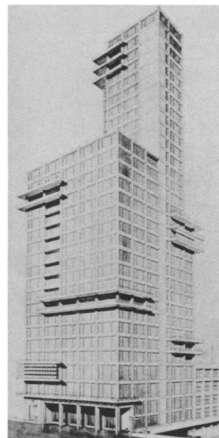
1a



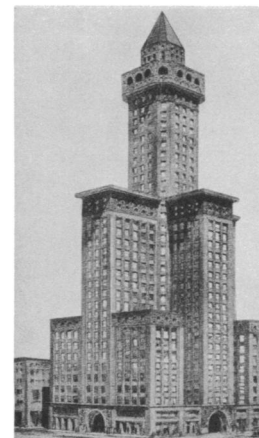
1b



1c



1d



1e



1f

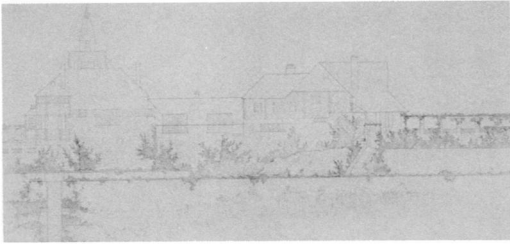


Raymond Hood had learned the lesson, so to speak, of the Gropius project in a way that the elder Saarinen never really did. Yet Saarinen's project made a tremendous impression on American architects. On the strength of it he settled in this country, where he enjoyed, as you may remember, a very successful career indeed.

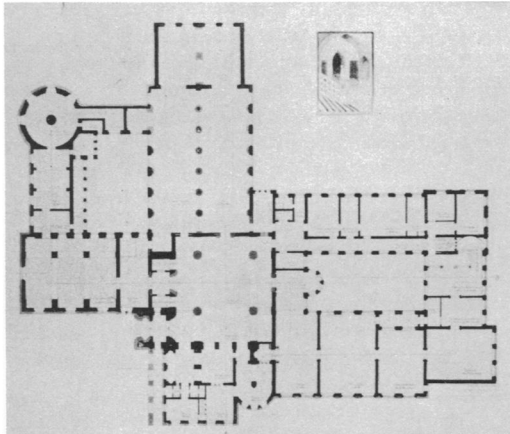
Had we known, at that time, the last building that Eliel Saarinen had built in Finland, we might have been rather less impressed, because it is the sort of building, descending from Richardson and influenced by Sullivan, that was being built all over America, in the east as well as in the Middle West, in the early '90s. I compare it, for one example, with Sullivan's Dooley Block in Salt Lake City of 1890. Sullivan was a much greater architect, and it seems to me his building of thirty years earlier is, if anything, superior to Saarinen's.

Saarinen had already, however, enjoyed a brilliant career in his native Finland. In 1902 he had built his own house at Hvitträsk, outside Helsinki. But when we look at this house – I only show you the elevation (2) – it doesn't seem to be very remote from, or very much in advance of, our own Shingle Style houses of the 1880s. And when we look at his first public building of consequence, the National Museum in Helsinki (3a, b), for which his firm, Gesellius, Lindgren & Saarinen, won the competition in 1904 and built from 1906 to 1912, it is very hard for us to believe that it isn't an American work of the late '80s or the early '90s.

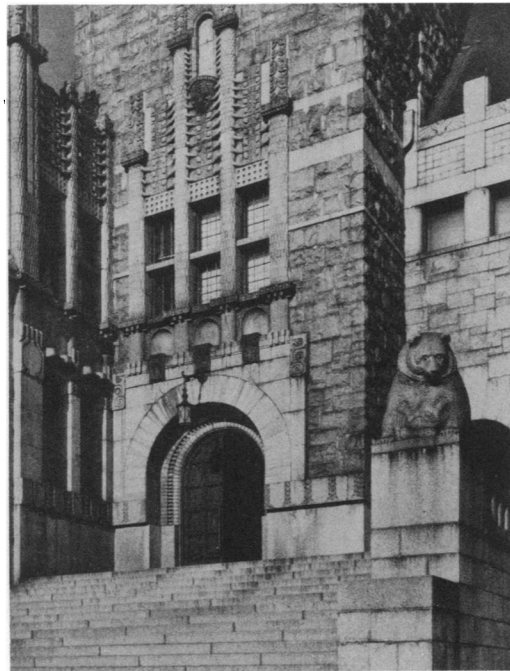
It is possible to compare the entrance to the National Museum by Saarinen and his colleagues



2-3a

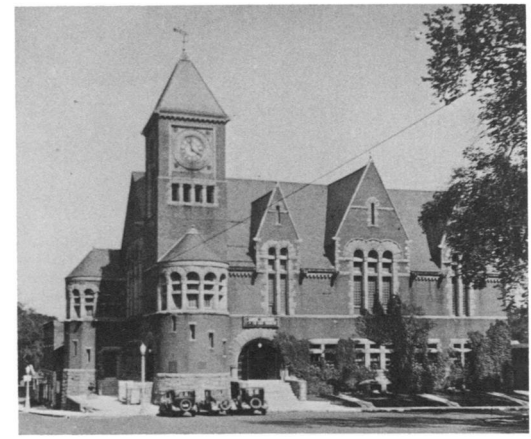


3a,b

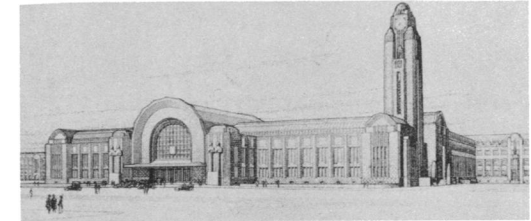


with the Town Hall (4) at Amherst, Massachusetts, of 1890 by H. S. McKay (an architect I had never heard of until I got this illustration out the other day). In its late Richardsonian use of granite trim and of brick walling, it is clearly similar to the materials and treatment of the Saarinen building of some fifteen years later.

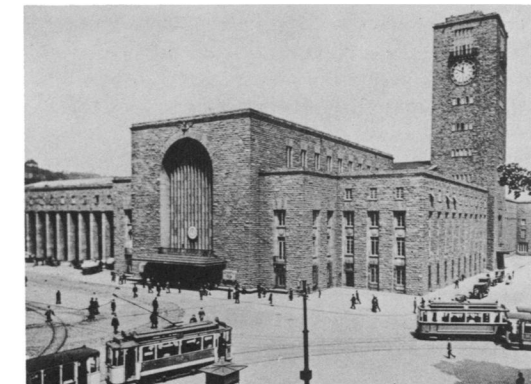
Saarinen's international fame began with a project for which he won the competition in the following year, 1905: the Central Railway Station at Helsinki (5, 6). This is a very large building, under construction over the years 1905 to 1914, but opened only after World War I in 1919. Built of the local red granite, it is an extremely imposing building of generically Central European character. If we compare it with a German railway station of the period, the Main Station in Stuttgart by Bonatz & Scholer (7), begun in 1911 and completed after the interruption of World War I in 1927, I think – in spite of the fact that there are perhaps more traditional touches in the Stuttgart station – the Stuttgart station has lasted better (aesthetically, I mean; both are in good physical condition). Thus the Finnish architecture of Saarinen had in the early '00s pulled out of the equivalent of the American 1880s by accepting the *Jugendstil* of Central Europe. Externally, the Helsinki station is Germanic. Inside, it reflects the Austrian architecture and interior decoration of the period. Illustrated is an early photograph of the interior of the station. I am sorry to say that it does not look as clean and fresh as this today, though it's in pretty good shape. If this is compared with the interior of Otto Wagner's church of St. Leopold (8), outside Vienna, of



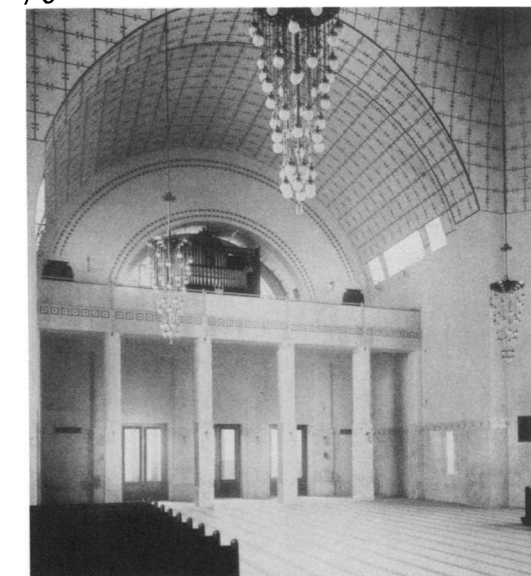
4-5



5-6



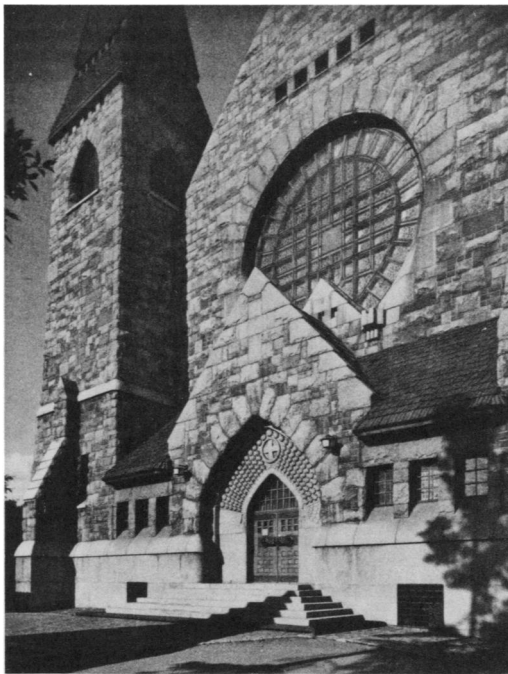
7-8



1907, it is hard to see that Saarinen differs notably from the Viennese at this point.

The first message, if that is the word, that I would like to bring to you from Finland, the first point that I would like to make, is that the elder Saarinen was *not* the best Finnish architect of his generation. A far more interesting architect, who, surprisingly enough, outlived Saarinen (who died in 1950), was Lars Sonck, who died in 1956. Sonck, however, did not come to America and I gather that rather like the Greene Brothers in California, he went into retirement about the time of World War I. At the opening of the century, however, in 1902-07, he built a Lutheran church which is now the cathedral in Tampere (9, 10). This work carries one back to the High Victorian Gothic: it recalls in many ways English architecture of the 1860s and American architecture of the early 1870s. More specifically, perhaps, it recalls some of the idiosyncratic works of Richardson: his early church in Medford, Massachusetts (11), of 1867, or his Ames Gate Lodge of 1880. Although it is generically medieval, the Tampere Church has no recognizably Gothic trim, yet the extremely picturesque organization is quite unrelated to the plan, which is a stubby Greek cross, not unlike the plan of Richardson's Trinity Church (12). But in the handling of the material, the rough rock-faced granite, the Tampere Church rivals, to a degree unequalled by other architects, the physical and material qualities of Richardson's architecture. Sonck also uses red tile roofs, which were characteristic of Richardson's mature work.

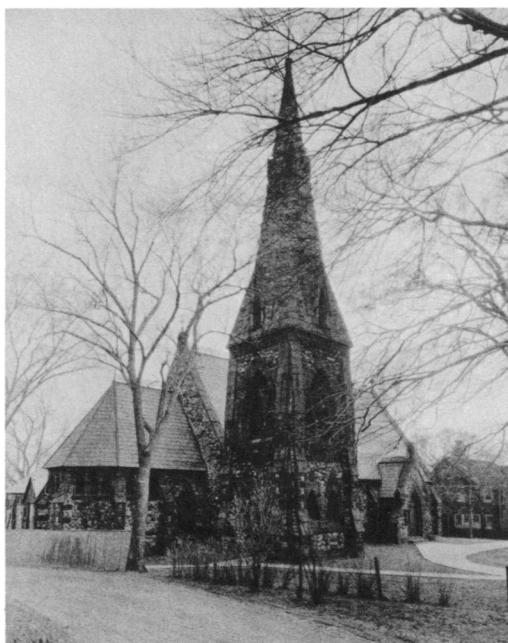
To appreciate this similarity, you must note the detailing of the materials: at Tampere the arches,



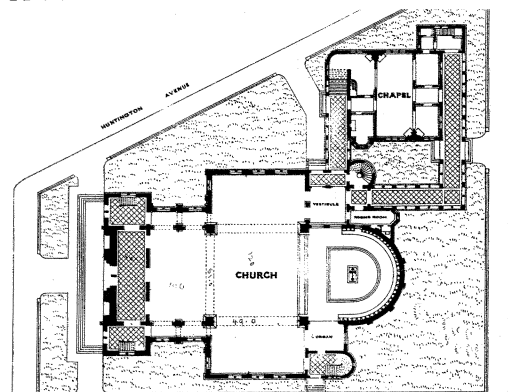
9-10



10-11



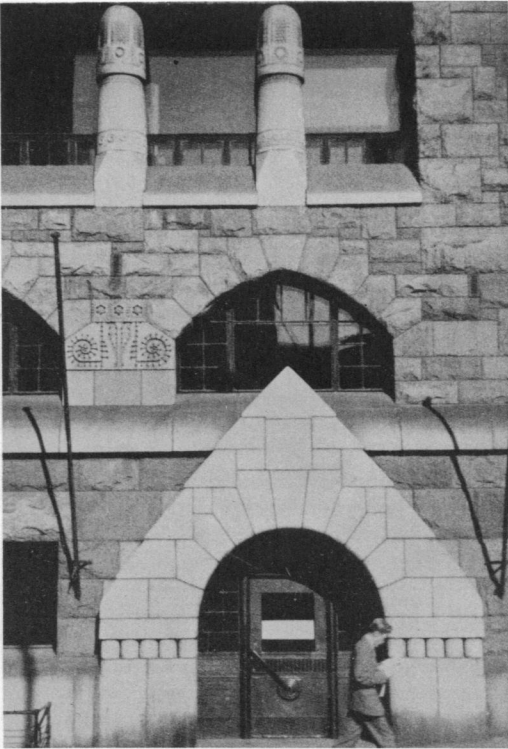
11-12



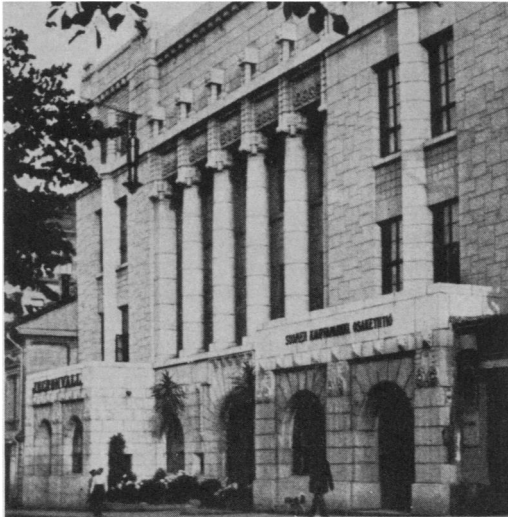
for example, are not Gothic arches; they are irregularly parabolic. The sparse ornament, if it has any earlier inspiration at all, is Early Norse. But look at the abstract detailing of the round window. There is, of course, an arch of rock-faced stone above, but see how, in order to bring in the light, the extrados of that is cut wider than the intrados, and in order to dispose of rain water that might collect below, smooth granite is used for the lower half of the circular frame and provided with a proto-Corbusian spout or abstract gargoyle.

This handling of materials is something that the elder Saarinen never approached. Perhaps Sonck's finest work of this early period, however, is the Telephone Building in Helsinki of 1905 (13). Again, the bold rock-faced granite is very Richardsonian. There is polychromy in the walling, several tones of gray and pink granite, instead of the solid gray of Saarinen's National Museum or the solid red of his Railway Station. Again, the detail is indefinable and often highly original, although there is very little of it, for it is limited by the possibilities of cutting granite, a difficult and tough material. Furthermore, although in principle the general quality of design is still High Victorian Gothic, the composition is less exaggeratedly asymmetrical and picturesque than that of the church, more like Berlage's Diamond Workers Building of 1899 in Amsterdam.

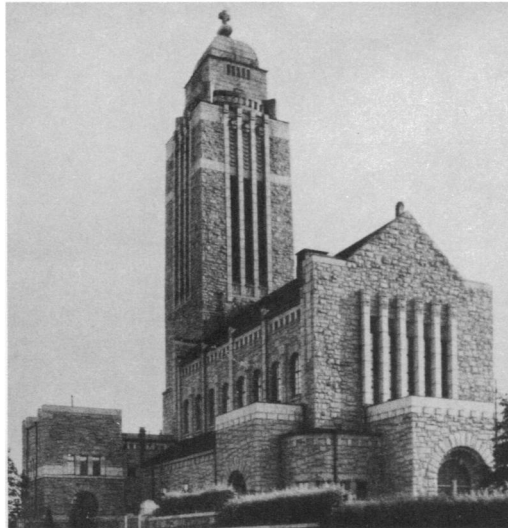
In the next few years Sonck's architecture underwent a change. His material remained the same: he continued to use granite, sometimes smooth-cut as on the Mortgage Bank of 1908 (14), sometimes still rock-faced as on the Kallio Church (15), but less exaggeratedly rough. As with Richardson in his later work, so Sonck also



13-14



14-15



turned to lighter materials and smoother surfaces. But, above all, he reverted to symmetry, to order of a basically Classical sort – though certainly not derived from Ancient or Renaissance precedent. His highly original detailing and handling of the material, as in the arches, remains very much in the tradition of his earlier work. Curiously enough, while we tend to see the qualities of Sonck's early work in terms of a much earlier period in America or Western Europe, namely the 1860s or '70s, the Kallio Church, with its great bell tower capped by a small dome, is, I suspect, what Bertram Goodhue had in his memory when he produced the State Capitol at Lincoln, Nebraska (16) ten years later – a work largely forgotten today but much esteemed in the 1920s for its originality.

Now, we must go back further. There was in Finland a national reason for this return from romanticism, from High Victorian Gothicism, toward order based on a local, national tradition, which was as potent as the Colonial and Georgian tradition came to be at the end of the High Victorian period in this country. With us, unfortunately, the result was only too frequently a mere revival of the dead forms of the past and not, except in the antithetical work of Sullivan, an acceptance of an abstract principle of order, with an innovative and free mode of expression.

The history of Finland is complicated. It was for many centuries under Swedish control. Then, in the Napoleonic period, it became a part of Russia, administered as a separate grand duchy. Turku, known to the Swedes as Åbo, opposite Sweden on the western side of the country, had

16



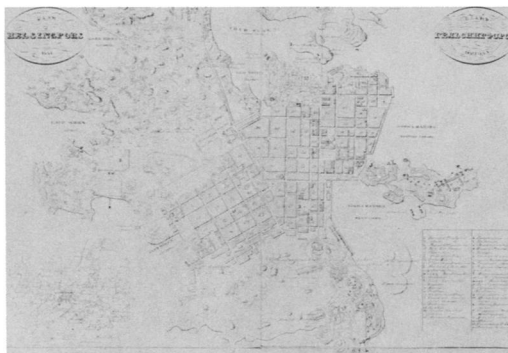
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been the Swedish capital. The new capital city of the nineteenth century was Helsinki. Whatever town there had previously been on the site of Helsinki had burned in 1808 and it was recreated as a new *fiat-city*, from 1812 on, by a Swedish architect named Ehrenström, almost as Chandigarh and Brasilia have been in our time.

Figure 17 is the plan of Helsinki as it had developed up to 1841. The town faces southward to the water; there is the market place with, at right angles, another longer quay. Behind the waterfront range of buildings is the main square, the Senate Square. Over all is a checkerboard arrangement broken only by the park-like continuation of the market place and (for reasons that I don't understand) another checkerboard at an angle.

The Senate Square is surrounded by the principal public buildings, which had come into existence by 1841. Sixteen of them were the work of one architect, a German, C. L. Engel. These buildings are all still in existence today and they give to Helsinki the extraordinary character of a "little Leningrad," a nearly complete Romantic-Classical city. This center, as I said, is set back a bit from the market place on rising land. It is dominated by the Lutheran Cathedral (18, 19), built by Engel from 1830 to 1852.

Engel was not, I think, a very great Romantic-Classical architect, but practically no Romantic-Classical architect ever had such opportunities to build nearly a whole city as did he. Furthermore, the Leningrad-like treatment of these buildings, which are all of stucco – happily, kept freshly painted – is quite different



17-18



18-19



from the dirty brown stucco of Stockholm. The cathedral rises above the square, with a tremendous flight of stairs going up to it, flanked by chapels set forward at the front edge of the higher level. Church and chapels are painted blue with white trim. On the right of the square, the Senate House is painted pale yellow with white trim, and facing it is the similar but less interesting building, also by Engel, of the university, also yellow and white. These buildings still constitute one of the most notable entities to be seen anywhere. Carried out over a relatively extensive period, from the planning in 1812, these and more than a dozen other consonant buildings built by Engel still provide the visual core of the city.

One of the problems that the twentieth-century architects of Helsinki have had to face – the later nineteenth-century architects, as usual, paid no attention to it at all – was the introduction of their buildings into this existing complex without, on the one hand, imitating Engel, and without, on the other hand, being so out of scale, so out of key, that they ruined what existed.

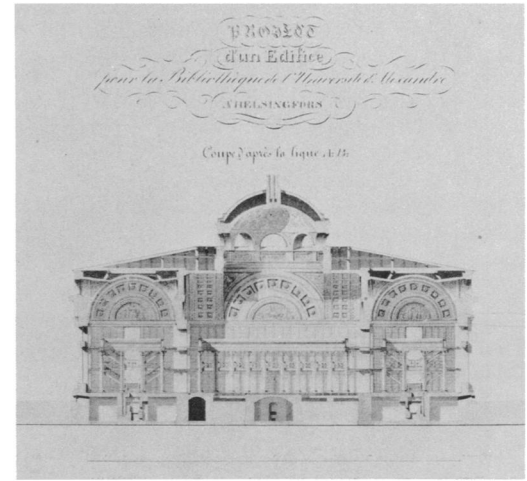
Several of the leading architects have successfully solved this problem. For example, take the Teollisuuskeskus building of 1952 (20). This is better known as the Palace Hotel, but like most of the buildings that have hotel signs on them in Helsinki, only about three or four floors are occupied by the hotel itself, so that there is very little hope of ever being able to stay there. The building – actually a complex building, with shops below, many stores and offices, and two or three stories of hotel rooms and restaurants at the top – is by Viljo Rewell, the architect who is now



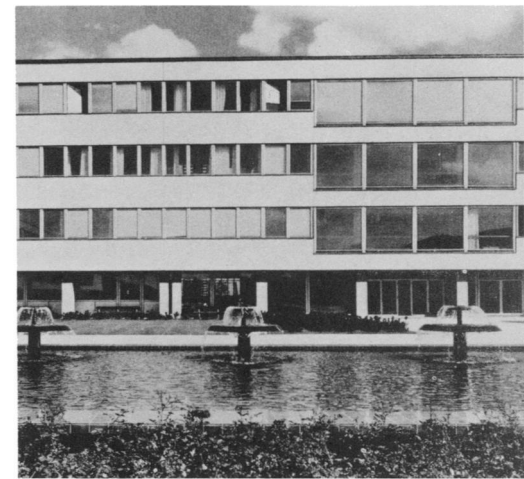
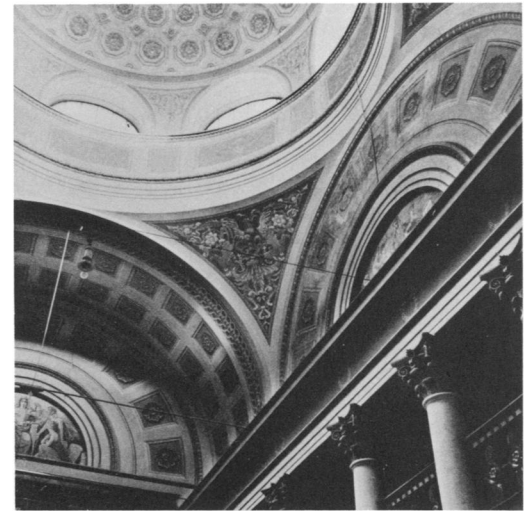
building the City Hall in Toronto. In many ways, particularly as seen in passing, the Palace Hotel is a conventional example of late International Style design. But I think you can readily see how well it fits into the foreground, with the dominating cathedral and the City Hall, at the right on the market place, behind. Nearer to, you should note the rather individual character of the materials. The sheathing is of prefabricated concrete elements of cream color with a polished surface, and various other materials introduced in the lower levels. In spite of its mid-twentieth-century conventionality in scale, color, and proportion, it is not disharmonious with the older buildings, yet not entirely without individual expression in detail.

Another example is a new university building of 1957. This stands behind what is generally considered (after the cathedral) the handsomest and certainly the most imposing of Engel's buildings, the University Library of 1836, again of yellow and white stucco, with a lantern dome above (21). The new university building by Arne Ervi (22) is a still more conventional example of late International Style (in fact, I think it is measured comment, neither praise nor blame, to say that Arne Ervi is the SOM of Finland), but its relatively neutral character, its light color, and its horizontality make a fine backdrop, competing not at all with the prominent but lower early structure that stands across the street from it.

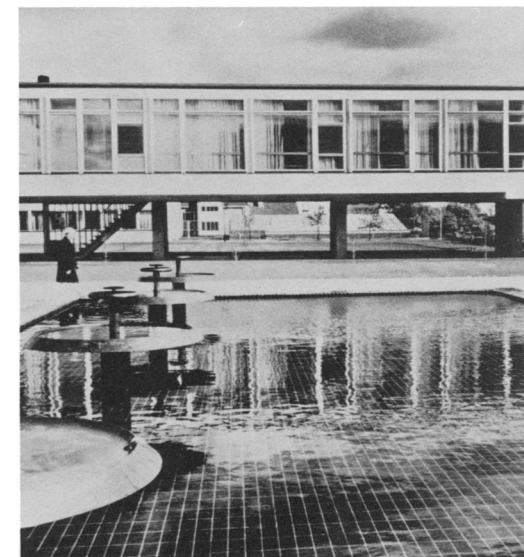
Now we come to Alvar Aalto, for one of Aalto's very latest buildings, perhaps his latest to be completed, is an office building at the end of the waterfront below the main square. On the waterfront is a range of buildings, mostly by Engel,



21a,b



22a,b





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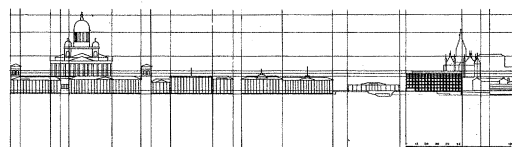
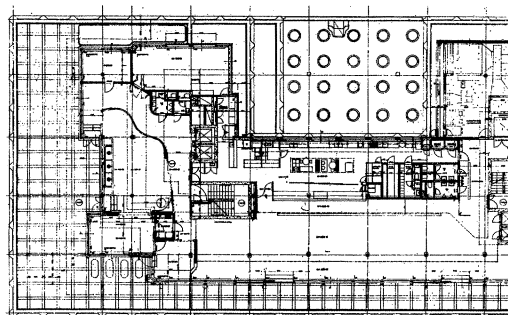
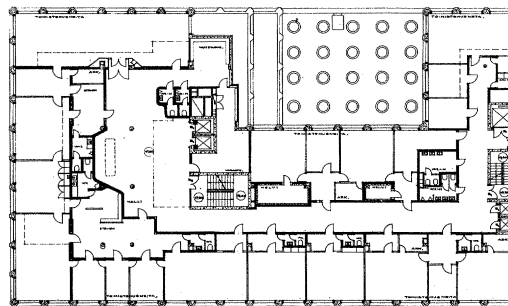
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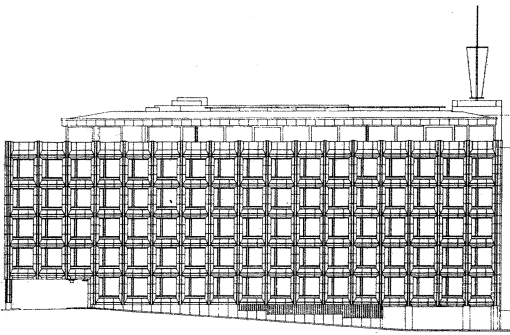
similar to those in the main square. Aalto's office building (23-25) stands at the east end of the square, which is long and narrow, with the water on one side and the range of Engel's buildings on the other – the President's Palace and, further along, the Town Hall. I think you will see that, if anything, Aalto has gone further than his contemporaries Rewell and Ervi in matching in scale, color, and regularity the architecture of Engel, the architecture of the first half of the nineteenth century. His materials are different. Instead of painted stucco he is using white marble here, as also in his new Culture Center at Wolfsburg in Germany.

I asked why in Finland, where such splendid granite of various colors may be found, a building should be built of imported white marble. But so high is the cost of labor in Finland that it's cheaper to have white marble processed – prefabricated, practically speaking – in Italy and to import it all that distance than to have the local granite cut in Finland itself.

The concrete frame of the building is completely clad with marble. Most of the sections, of which we will see details later, are polygonal. The window trim is of teak. It is a building of great elegance, yet at the same time of great simplicity, and above all (and I am stressing this most particularly), a building that gives every consideration to the setting in which it is placed. Nor is this regard for the urban context something new with Aalto, as it must have seemed to many of his most enthusiastic foreign admirers.

Aalto fits into the story of twentieth century architecture in Finland quite comfortably, in spite





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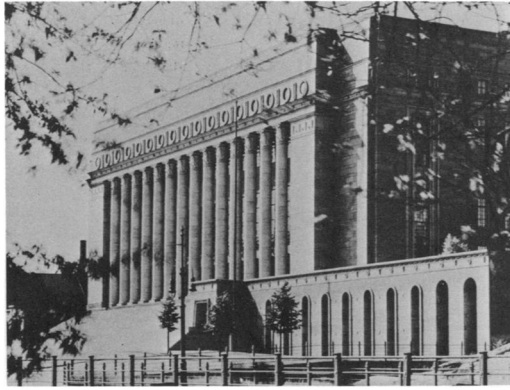


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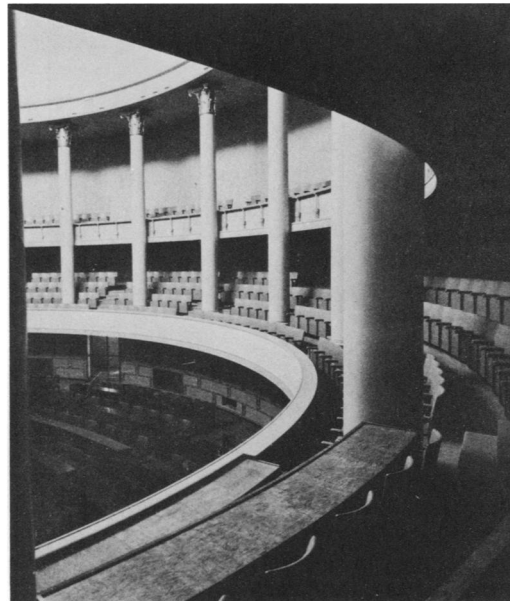
of his extreme and at times, exaggerated individuality. Finland came to its independence after World War I rather gradually, for there were, if I remember correctly, several years of war with Russia. Doubtless as a result, earlier Swedish cultural connections came to the fore again. Aalto, who had been born in central Finland in Jyväskylä, after building very little there, came to Turku, the old Swedish capital. He was undoubtedly, along with most of his contemporaries, much impressed with what was then going on in Sweden.

A slightly older architect, J. S. Siren (the elder Siren), was in the late '20s building the new Parliament House (26, 27). Siren won the competition for this in 1924 and built it in 1927-31. His model is unmistakably Ivar Tengbom's Concert Hall in Stockholm (28), completed the previous year in 1926. It is the same attenuated, stylized "neo-Neoclassicism" that had been endemic in Scandinavia since just before World War I and much admired internationally throughout the early '20s. The Parliament House is so close to its model that it is funny, but there is this characteristic Finnish difference: Tengbom's building, like so many buildings in Stockholm, is of stucco, rather dirty, gray-brown stucco; the Siren building, on the other hand, like the Helsinki buildings of before World War I by Lars Sonck, is entirely of granite, here pink granite. But in terms of its stylistic detail, it is a shameless enlargement of its Swedish model.

The younger architects in Turku in these years of the late '20s were also following Swedish models, as well as some of the early nineteenth-century architecture of that city, such as the Hjelt house of 1831 (29) by P. J. Gylich, an example of



26-27



27-28



28-29



Neoclassic architecture worthy of comparison with Engel's in Helsinki. Illustrated (30) is Aalto's Turku Theatre, which unfortunately burned not long after it was built in 1928. As you can see, Aalto was also working at this point in the overrefined Swedish Neoclassic vein. This is even more apparent today in a surviving monument of the period, also of 1928, the Seurahuone Hotel of Erik Brygmann (31). But the following year, 1929, in buildings designed for the 700th Jubilee of Turku, Brygmann and Aalto, working together, left Swedish Neoclassicism behind and turned instead to what, at that point, must be described as the International Style. This turn was taking place generally throughout Europe and even in America at this date. Not only was it true of the temporary buildings of the Exposition of 1929 but of competitions and large permanent buildings begun by these young architects: for example, Brygmann built in 1929 the Hospits Betel in Turku (32), and Aalto won in that year the competition for the sanatorium in Paimio, begun a bit later.

But Brygmann and Aalto were still following a Swedish lead: Asplund, the foremost architect of Sweden in the late '20s. His city library in Stockholm (33), begun the year after Tengbom's Concert Hall and completed in 1928, was a far more refined, far more abstract, far simpler example of Swedish "neo-Neoclassicism" than the Concert Hall, with its cylinder rising out of a square block rather like projects by Boulé or Ledoux of the late eighteenth century in France. Moreover, by the time Asplund brought the library to completion, he had been so influenced by the new architecture of Le Corbusier, Gropius, and others that the whole substructure is designed in the new manner: its broad flat, stucco fascia



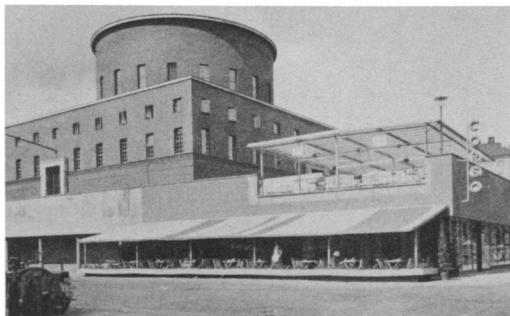
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31-32



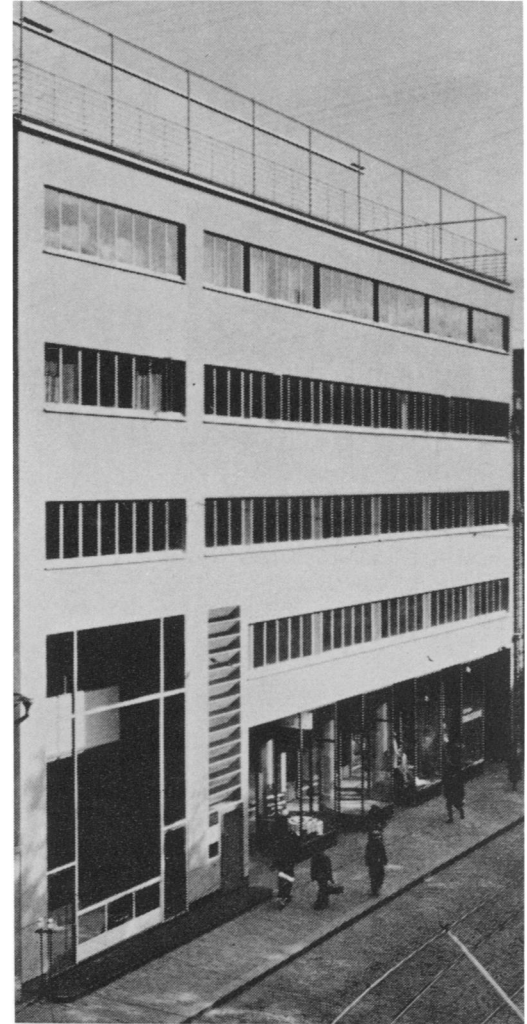
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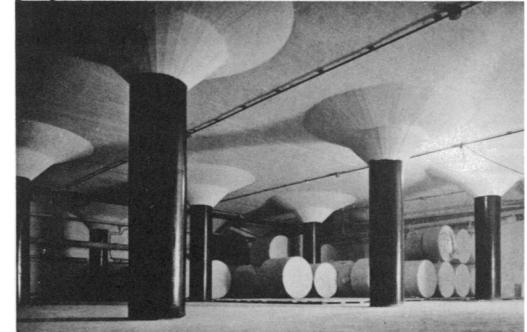
above glass shop-window walls and isolated round *pilots* are all marks of early International Style, so that the boys – and they were almost boys still – Brygmann and Aalto in Turku were, in their drastic change of style in 1929, following again the Swedish lead of Asplund.

The newspaper office of Turun Sanomat in Turku was built by Aalto in 1930 (34-36). It was, and is, a characteristic example of these early days when the International Style was spreading from its countries of origin, from France, Germany, and Holland, throughout the Western world. On the whole, it is not a very inspired example. It resembles the work of Lurçat rather than that of Le Corbusier. But it is characteristic in its ribbon-windows, in its large window-wall, in its flat stucco surfaces; and moreover, thanks to the excellent maintenance that one generally finds in Finland, it is in much better shape than most of the classic monuments of the early International Style in France. It is amusing to see it today in its present setting in juxtaposition with the conventional and rather dull late International Style buildings that go up in profusion in Finland as they do everywhere else. And perhaps this sort of juxtaposition explains to some extent the drastic changes that came in the mid-'30s in Aalto's style. The interior of the Turun Sanomat is in such immaculate condition that I actually wondered whether it had been done over later. But I have no reason to think that the interior, though obviously from time to time repainted and kept up, is not what was originally designed in 1930.

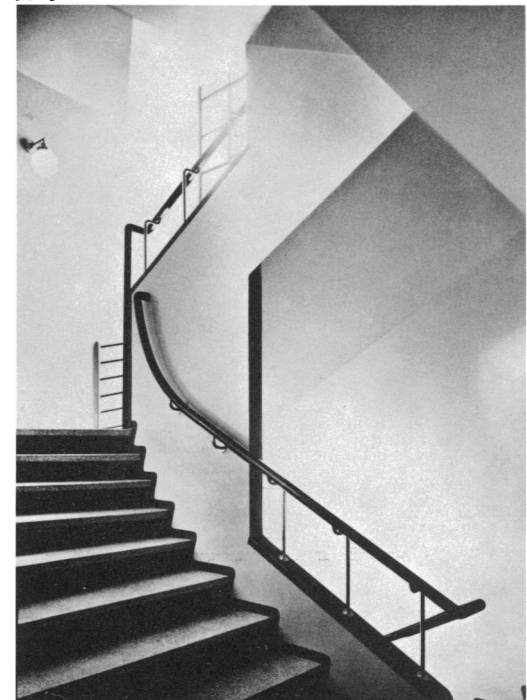
However, the Paimio Sanatorium was by this time begun and was carried to completion in 1933. On the whole, this is a standard work of the early



34-35



35-36





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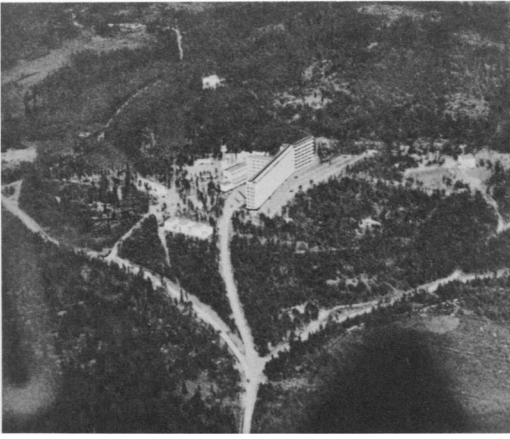
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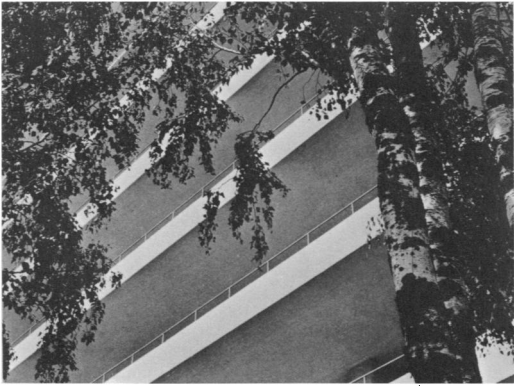


International Style, differentiated – at first sight, at least – from other work chiefly by its large size (37-43). It is in the plan that we see things not found hitherto. Many angles, even occasional curves, are at this point largely peculiar to Aalto, though here quite incidental in the total effect. Furthermore, they seem rather arbitrary. The site is a level one in a pine grove. There seems to be no special reason for shooting the separate wings off at different angles, and so one may consider that there is already here a certain willfulness such as was to grow on Aalto later. Moreover, as it was executed in the usual materials of the '20s, with painted stucco surfaces, and has not been so well maintained as the Turun Sanomat, it is not in very good condition today. This deterioration would help to explain Aalto's turning away shortly thereafter from painted stucco surfaces to other materials requiring less maintenance.

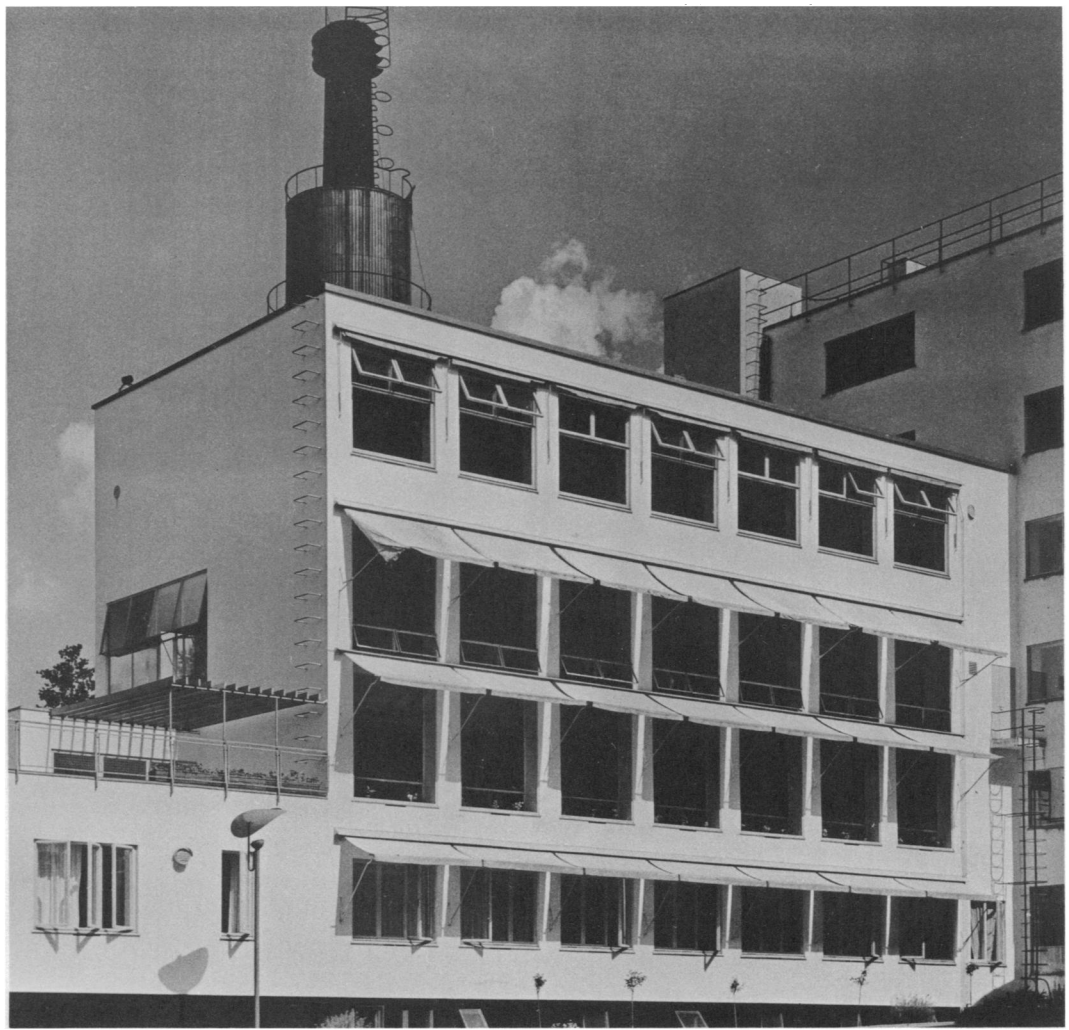
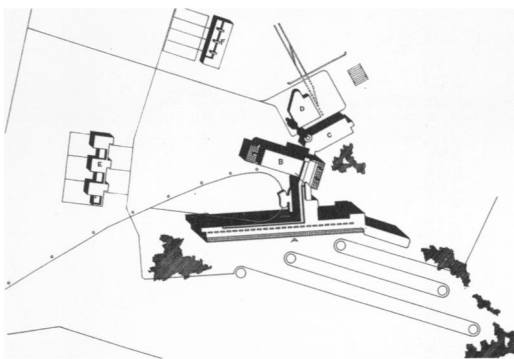
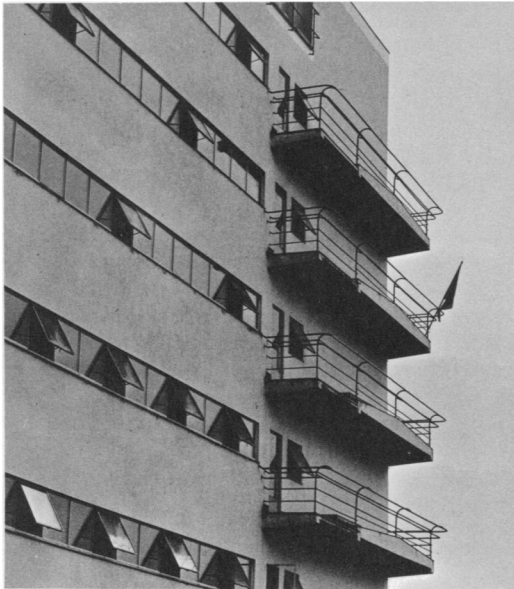
More significant than the quirks in the Paimio plan, I think, was one of the other interiors of the newspaper building, where the printing presses are. There we see, instead of the characteristic circular *pilotis* of the period, sculpturally shaped piers. This was a year or two before such sculpturally shaped piers appeared in Le Corbusier's work beneath the Swiss Hostel at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. In Aalto's next building, the Viipuri Library of 1932-34 (44-52), now alas in Russia, thanks to the Soviets' grabbing of the Karelian Isthmus, we have externally a building conventionally of the International Style. Yet it has this very remarkable acoustic ceiling, produced with small strips of wood, following a curve that is, at the same time,



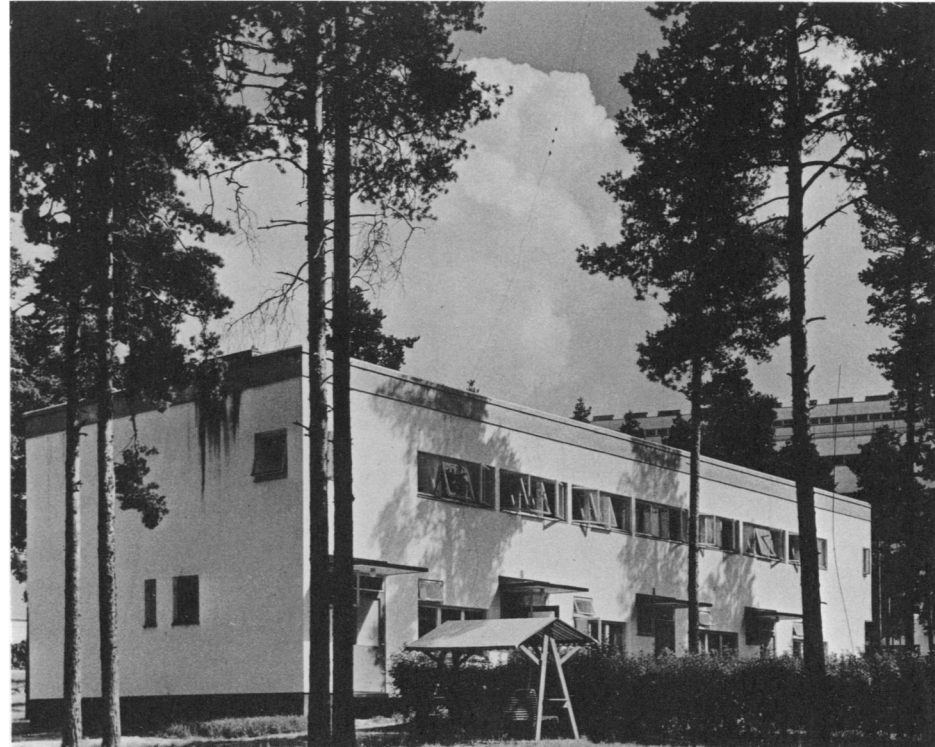
39-40



40-41



42-43



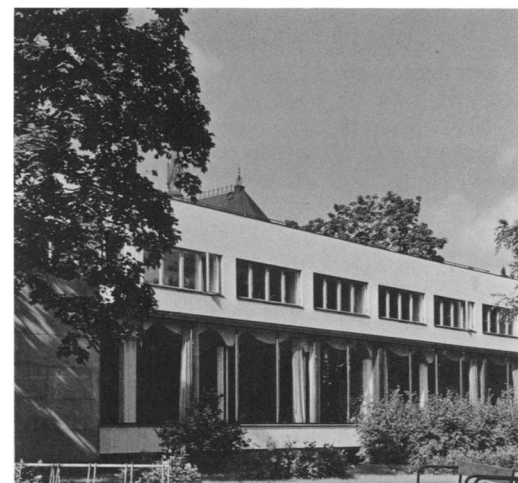
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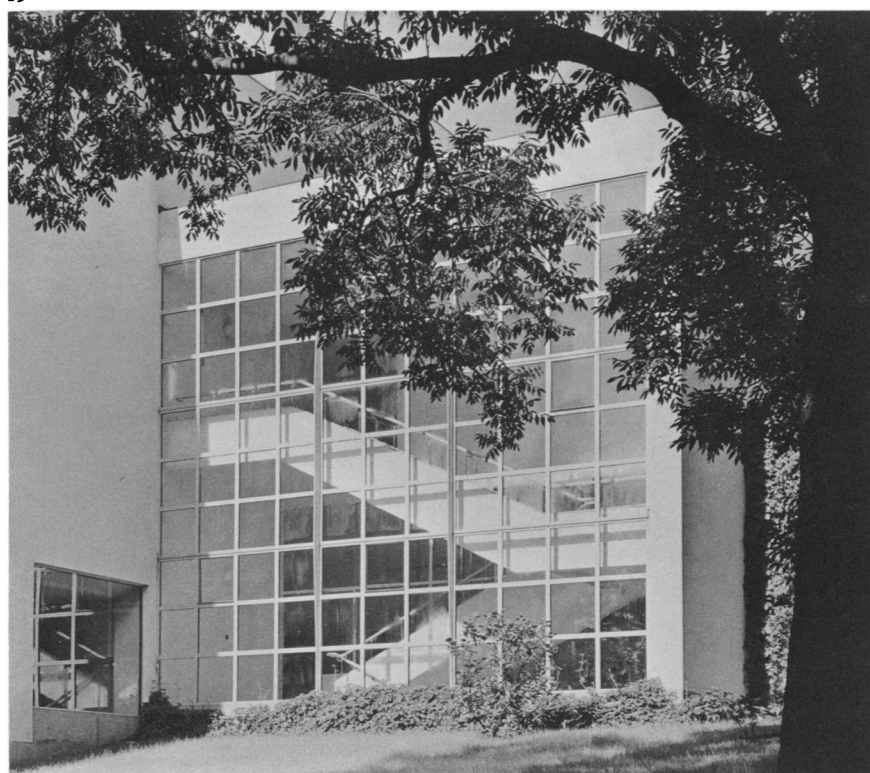
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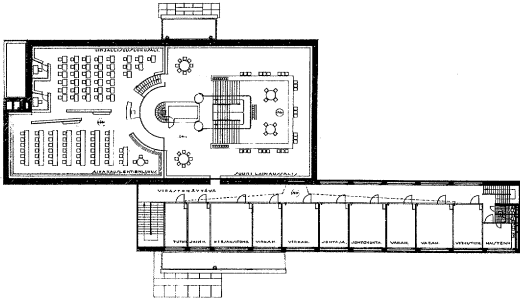
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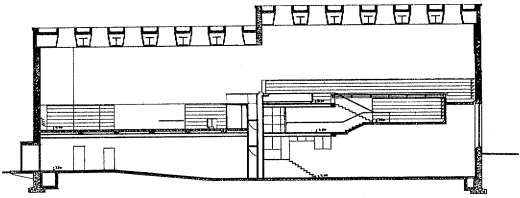


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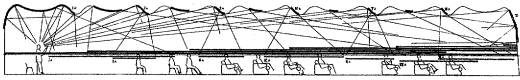




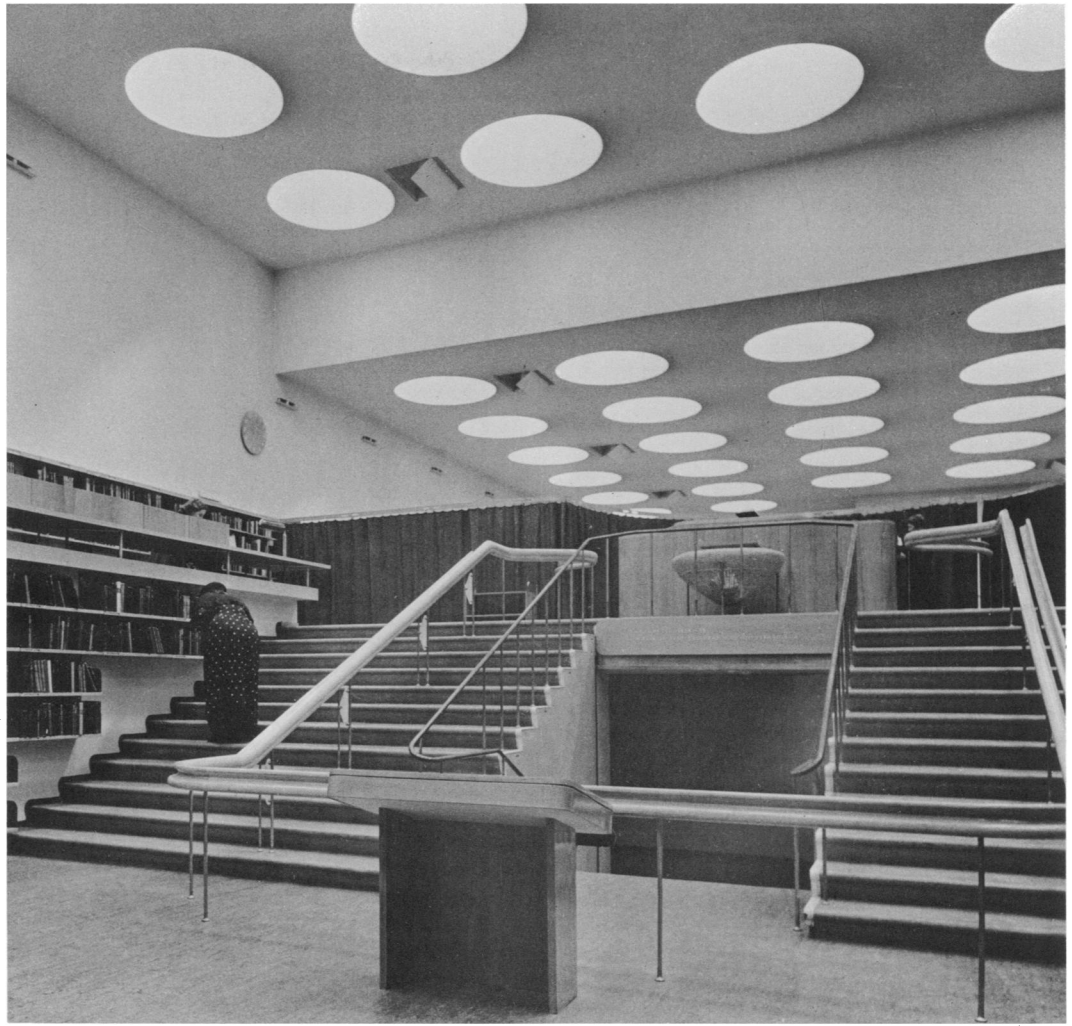
48-49



49-50



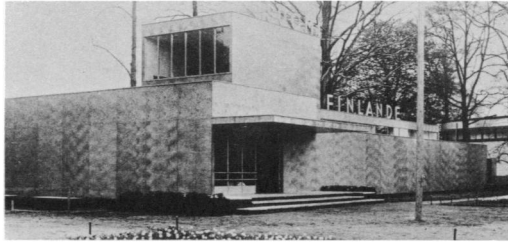
50-51



52



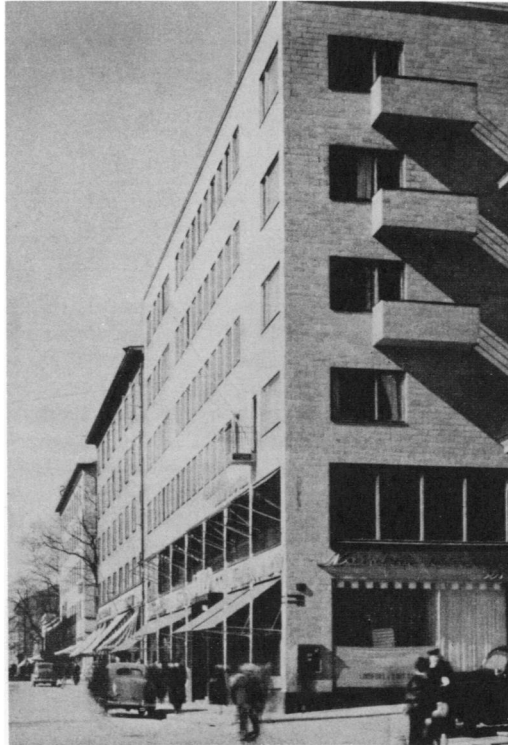
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53-54

mathematically plotted and apparently quite willful – certainly willful as a major expression in contrast to the characteristic rectangularity of the period.

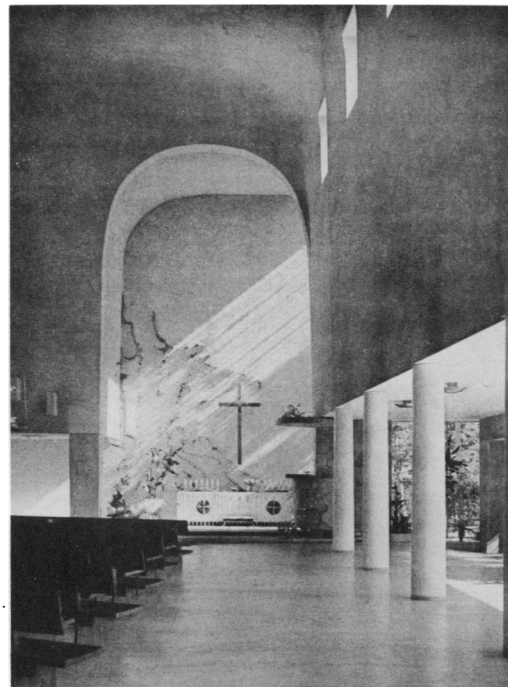
The outside world, rather surprisingly, became quickly familiar with the early work of Aalto, though at this point he built nothing outside of Finland. On the other hand, Brygmann was already represented at the Antwerp Exposition of 1930 by a Finnish pavilion (53). This was an extremely elegant small building of purest early International Style, except that it was entirely built of a Finnish material, a material then not much exploited elsewhere, varnished plywood. So at this point Brygmann was perhaps better known abroad than Aalto.



54-55

Brygmann, furthermore, continued through the '30s as a productive architect. The Sampo Insurance Building of 1938 in Turku (54) shows already a correction of some of the things that didn't wear well about the earlier work. It is surfaced with small elements, tiles of matte-surfaced cream-colored terra cotta, and the windows, instead of being arbitrarily banded, are cut into the continuous wall surface. The next year he began the Crematorium, the cemetery chapel at Turku (55, 56), a building which, to our present taste, has rather too much in the way of decorative art accessories (not generally evident in photographs), but which was already a highly personal, if not a national, expression of the International Style in its free curves, its unevenly rounded arch, its window-wall, and above all its remarkable use of interior planting.

Aalto's high international reputation seems to have begun in 1937 with his Finnish Pavilion at the



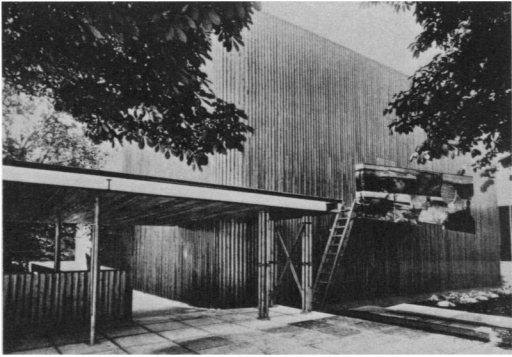
55-56



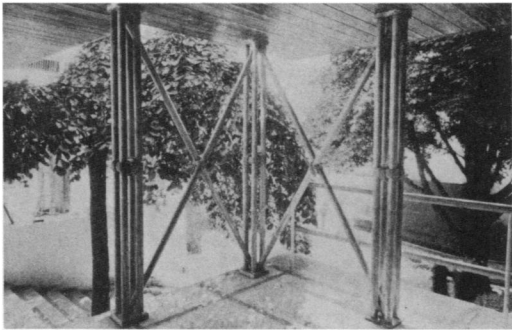
Paris exposition. It was a very remarkable building (57, 58) conceived according to its temporary nature. It made ingenious use of Finnish materials, such as poles of birch wood often bound together by withes. Above all, it expressed the boredom that was already beginning to set in with the standard architecture of the International Style. Its very nationalism, its very expression of local materials and what were somewhat exaggeratedly thought to be local ways of using them, expressed the same sentiments that led us in America in those years to admire early barns and buildings of that kind. And some of the same qualities were found – usually not by visitors at this point, but in photographs – in his own house in the Munkkiniemi suburb of Helsinki (59, 60), where the plain white walls, of painted brick rather than stucco, were balanced with other areas covered with narrow rounded strips of birch wood.

The excitement – for it was real excitement – about Aalto's work of this period was, I think, understandable in terms of reactions that were taking place throughout the world against the coldness and the pseudo-mechanism of the International Style. Especially stressed at the time was his exploitation – perhaps even more striking in his plywood furniture – of local Finnish materials.

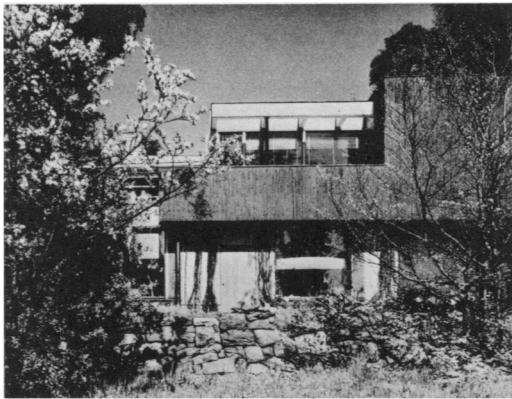
Contemporary, roughly speaking, with his house, which was begun in 1936, was the Sunila Factory and housing development (61-69) just across the bay from Kotka, of 1936-39. In the vast pulp factory on the edge of the bay, he developed, perhaps more consciously than had generally been done up to this time, some of the more spectacular qualities of large-scale industrial architecture. The housing was more or less standard for the period,



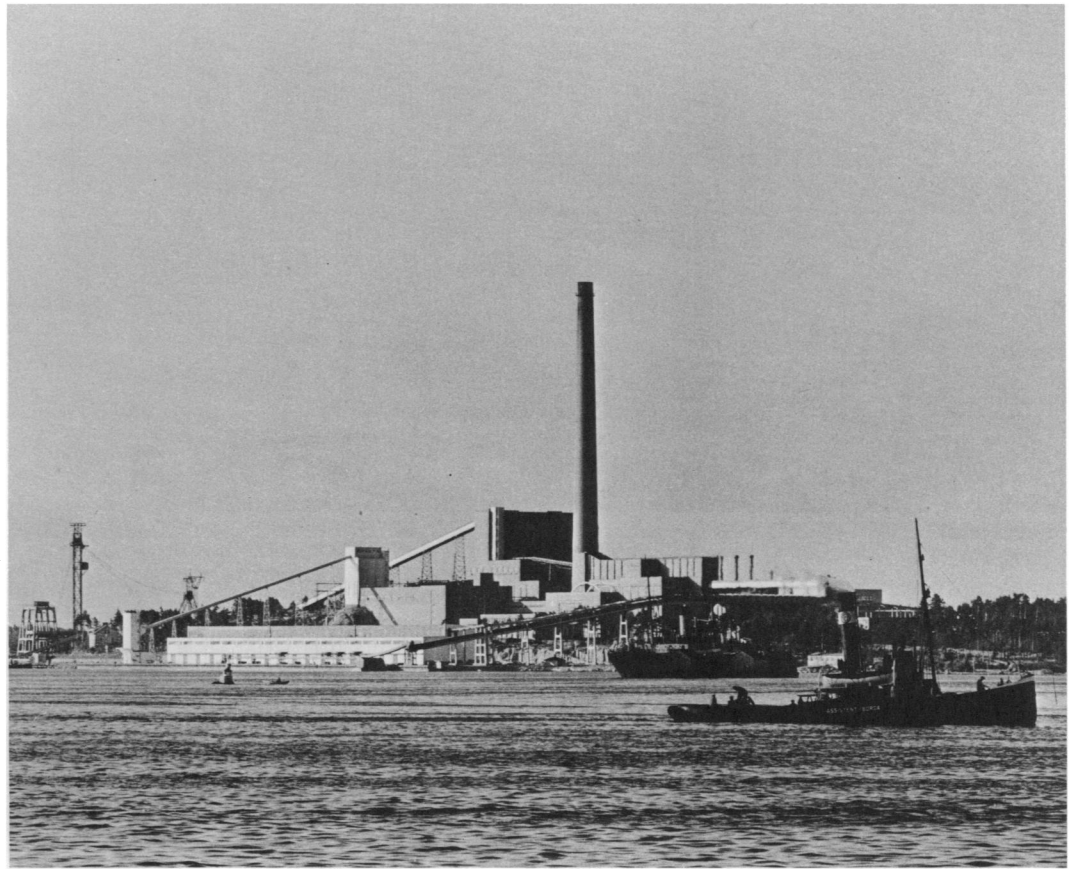
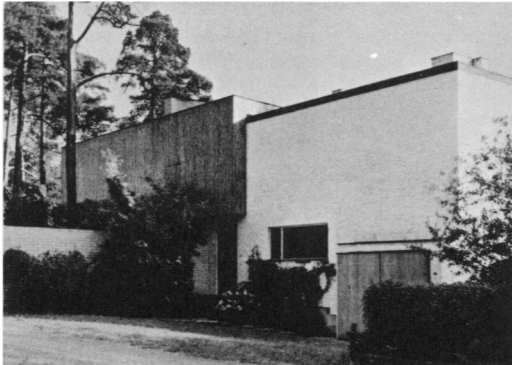
57-58



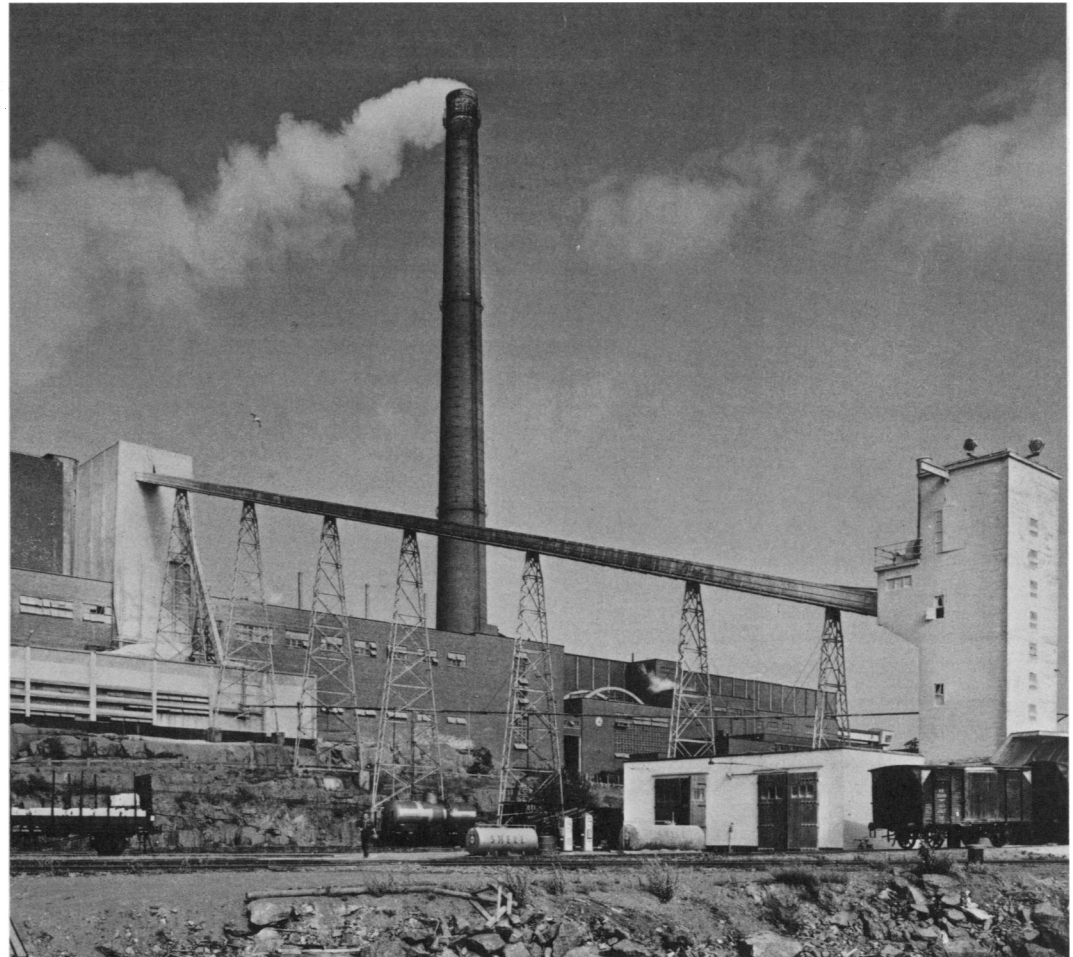
58-59



59-60



61-62

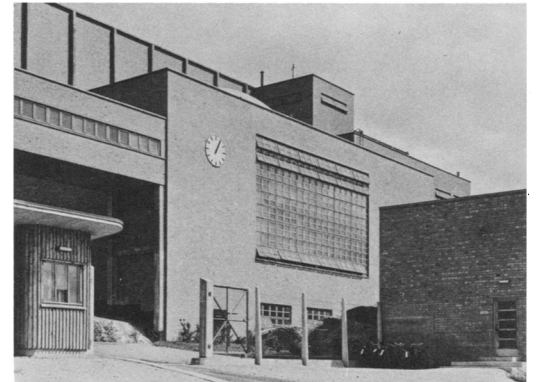


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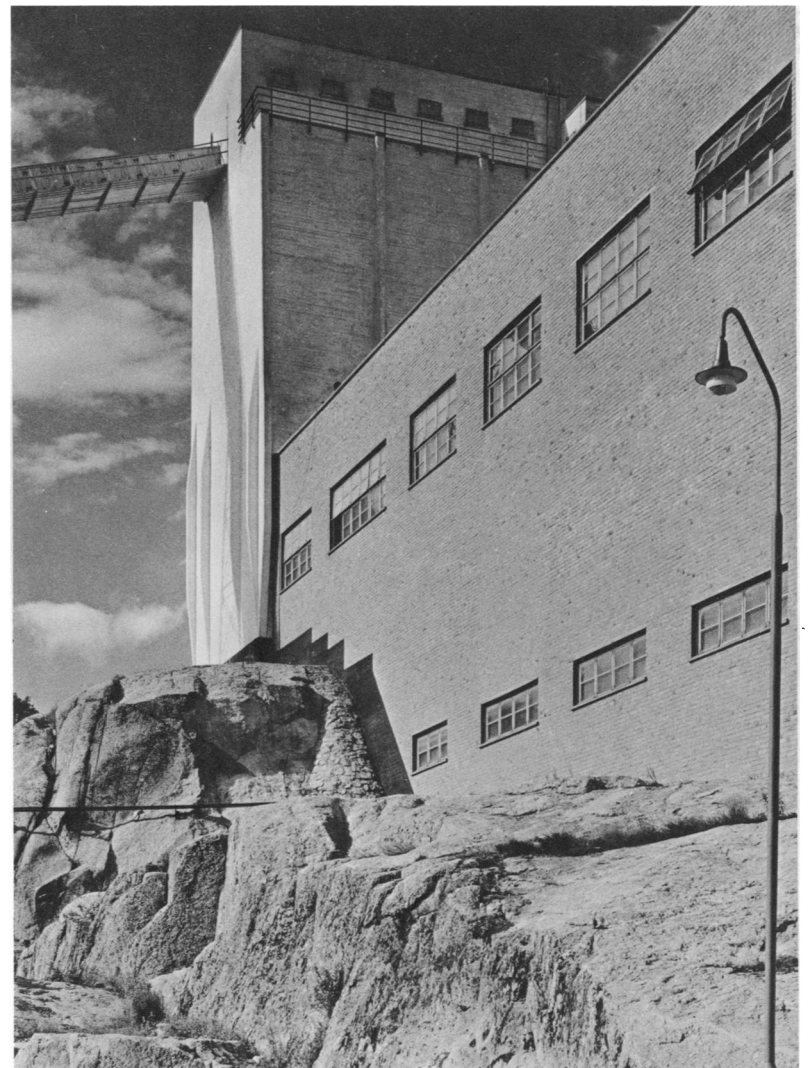
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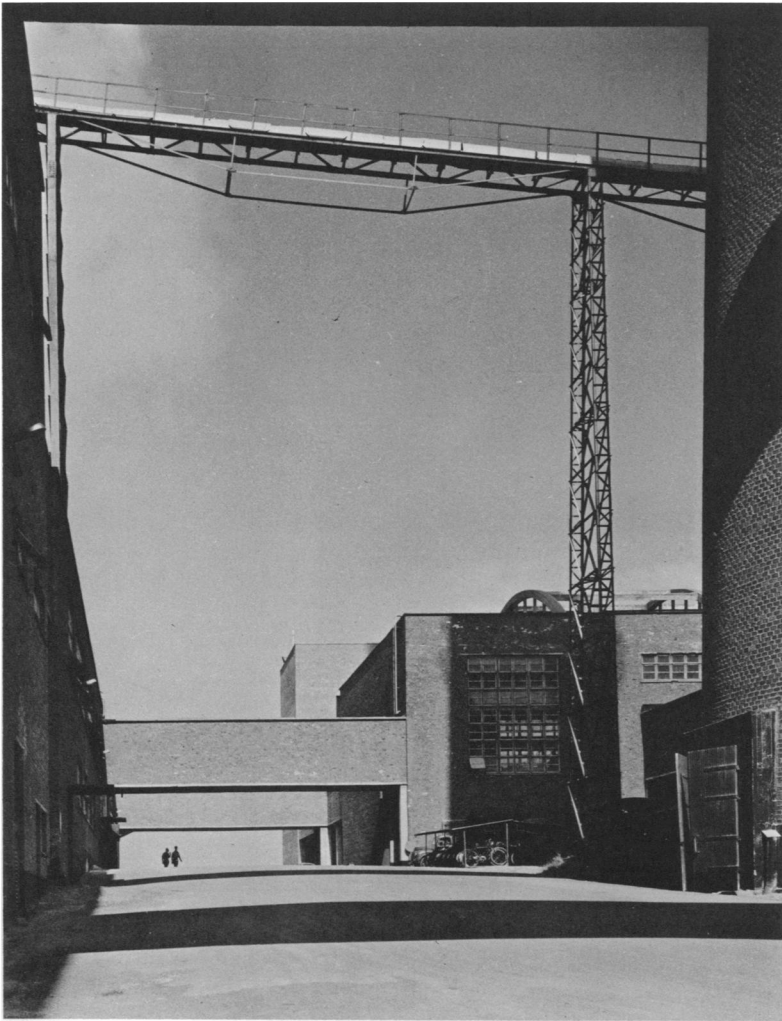
63-64



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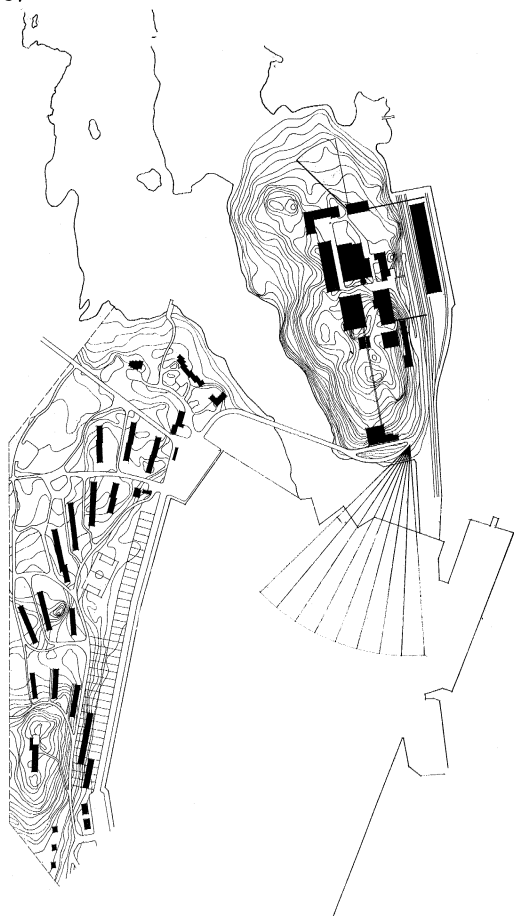
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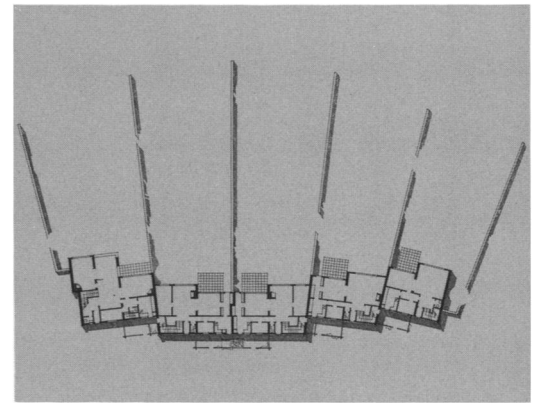




70-71

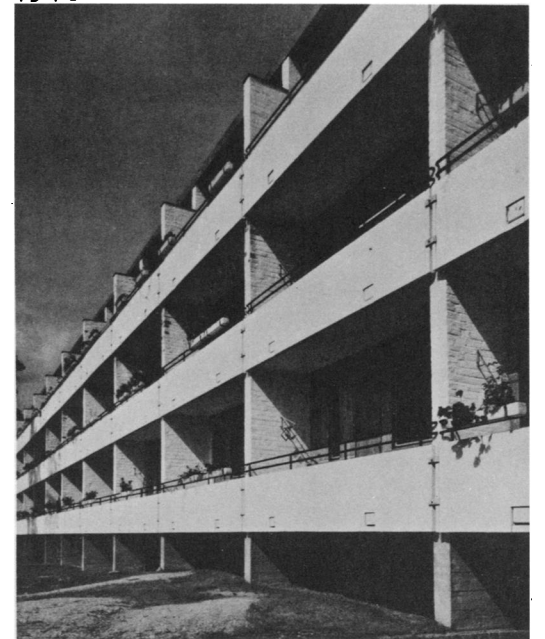


72-73

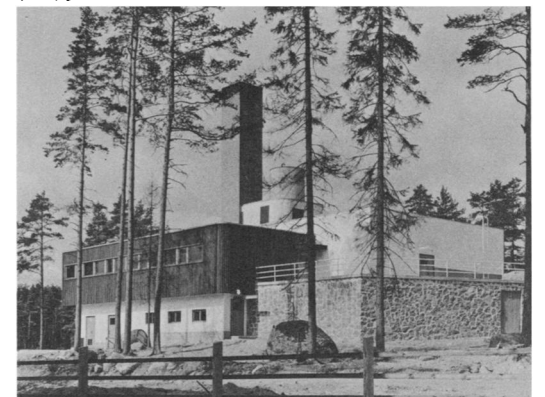


73-74

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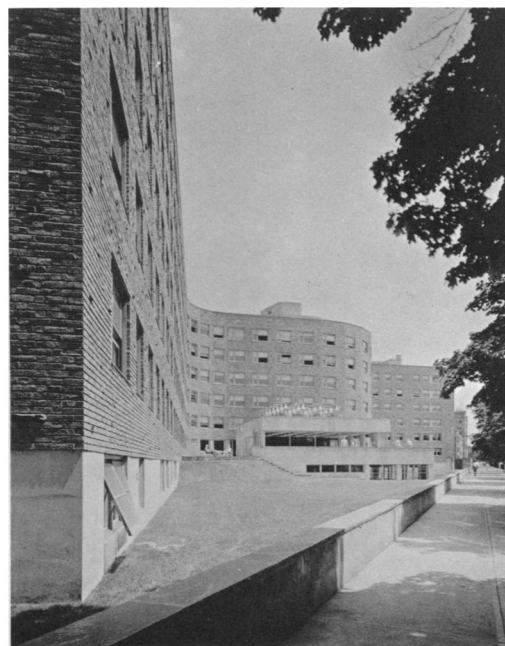
74-75



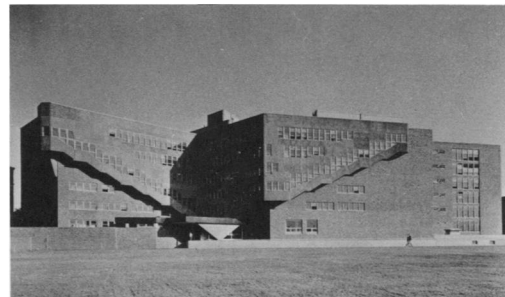
(70-75) however, without any very strong personal or local characteristics. To a considerable extent the interest of Sunila has since worn off. Other architects are now quite able to produce, twenty-five years later, equally striking examples of pulp mills, the only major industry of Finland practically speaking; and the housing at Sunila – as is, alas, often the way with such early twentieth-century projects – has gone a bit grubby with time.

Now our story, which started perhaps a little arbitrarily in Chicago, returns again to this side of the water. After World War II Dean Wurster, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was able to obtain for Aalto a commission to build a senior dormitory, Baker House (76-79). This went up from 1947 to 1949 – during the years, as a matter of fact, when I was myself teaching at M.I.T., so that I used to see Aalto and could watch the building going up. There were many difficulties. One of the chief was that Aalto's first wife, Aino, who had been his partner, was dying in Finland, so that he was not able to be continuously on the job. But leaving the difficulties aside, we see that new elements of antithesis to the International Style appear very strongly here.

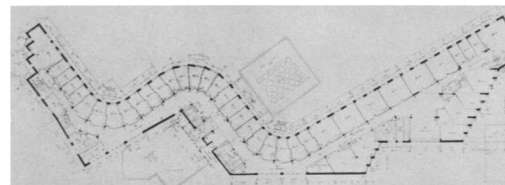
The curves, which had made their first appearance, very incidentally, way back at Paimio, now become the dominating theme of a plan that is a sweeping double curve. The angles, which had also appeared at Paimio, are now present to an extent that photographs hardly indicate. The façade is zigzagged backward, with angular staircases rising above the entrance outside the walls. Furthermore, the materials are not Finnish. There is no birchwood, no Finnish granite here. The structure,



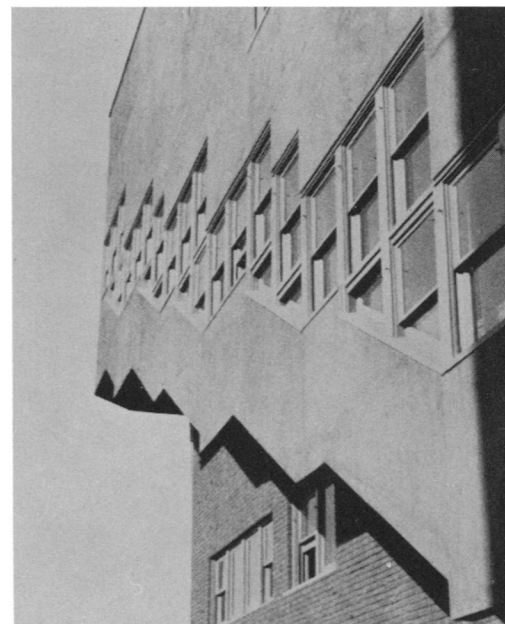
76-77



77-78



78-79



although it was intended to be steel, is ferro-concrete and the cladding is of very, very rough brick, utilizing a maximum of clinkers. Apparently the American reaction was: "Isn't this Finnish!" Well, it isn't. I myself have never seen – maybe those who know Finland better have, but I never have – any brickwork there not to be on the whole of a smooth and straightforward character. The bricks themselves are not of an especially smooth texture, but this use of rough clinkers is more familiar in some of the apartment houses built in New York on Second Avenue in the 1920s. This sort of brickwork was, amusingly enough, picked up by Eero Saarinen and used in his chapel at M.I.T. It is more special to M.I.T., in other words, than to Finland.

The same is more or less true of the pink stucco of the staircases. The original design for the cladding of these hanging staircases required metal, presumably Finnish copper; but as prices rose – and they rose very rapidly in the late 1940s – cheaper and cheaper versions were designed, ending up with the pink stucco. Although stucco was a part of the Finnish tradition of the early nineteenth century, it certainly was not a part of the more developed style of Aalto in the later 1930s.

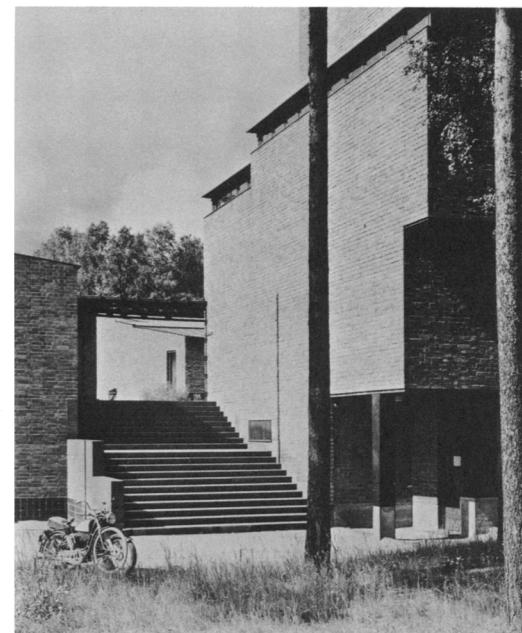
But, of course, this building has very great historical importance: it was a premonition – a preview even – of many of the changes that were going to come over architecture in the next 15 years. I mean the changes in plan, the preference for rough textures, the general "brutalism" – the word was invented later, but it already applies here – were, at least for America, innovations; and I think we perhaps have seen enough of Aalto's work



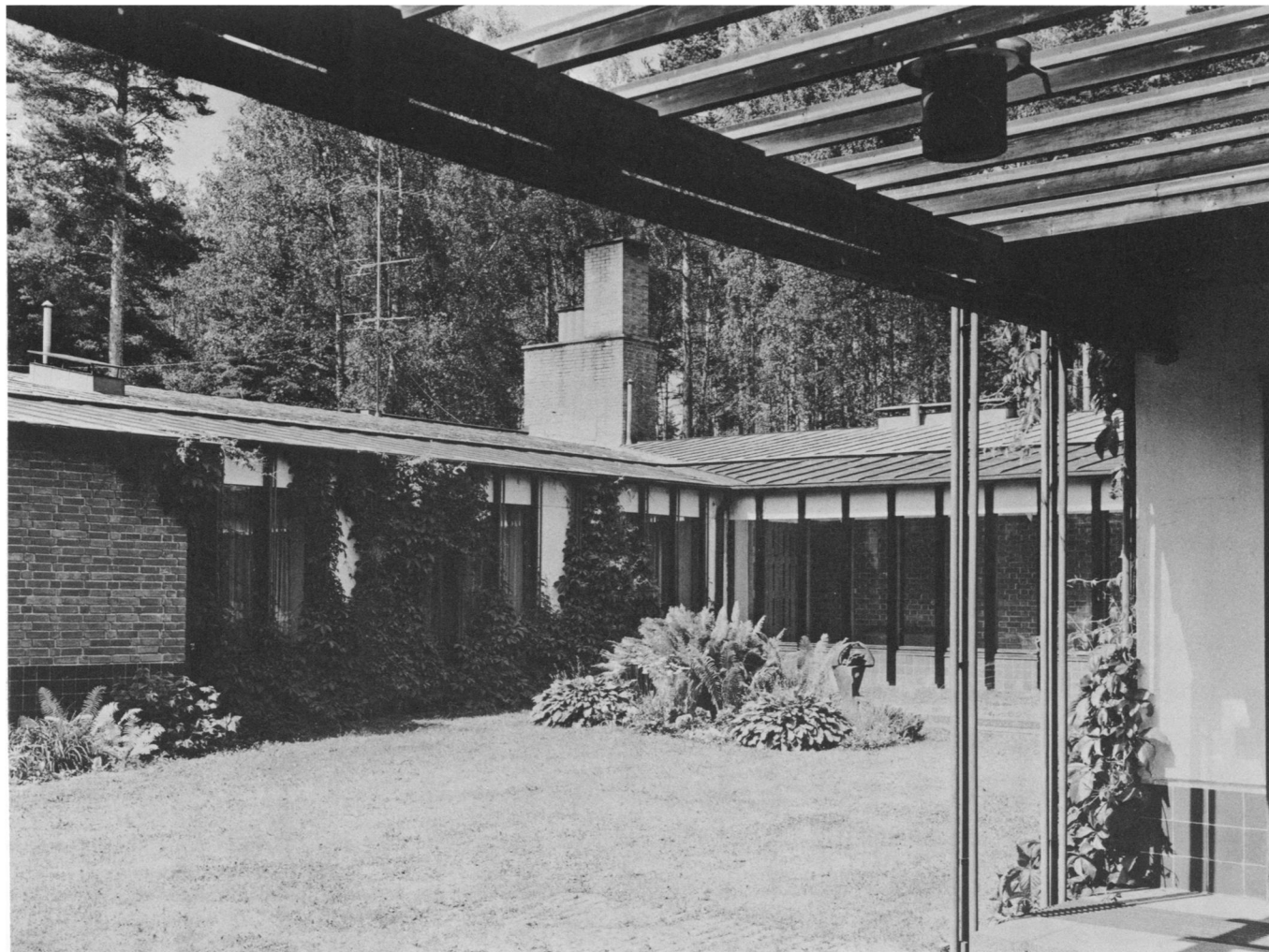
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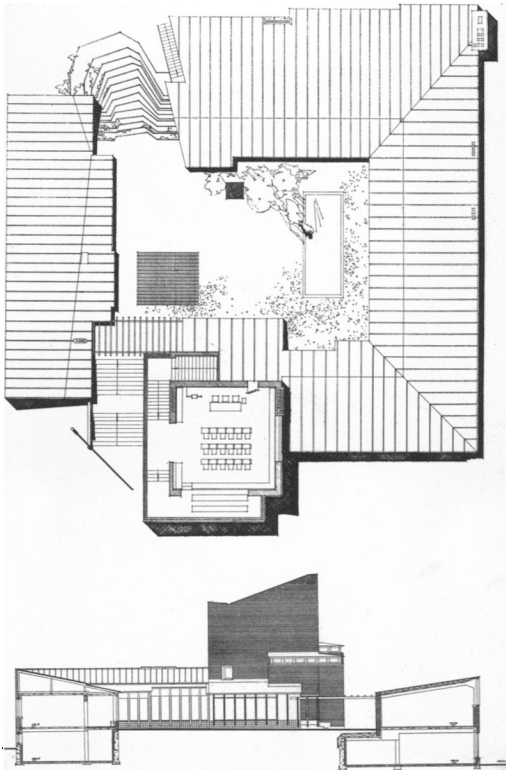
80

81



82





83



84-85



153

to realize that, as regards the brutalism, this was an innovation here in his work.

Following upon this came a building so well known, if I may judge from the multiplicity of slides of it available in the Yale collection, that I almost thought I wouldn't show it at all: the Communal House at Säynätsälo of 1951 (80-85). The brick reverts to normal Finnish brickwork, no clinkers. The plan is devoid of curves, but there are many, many whimsies in detail, most of which have become clichés in the hands of British brutalist architects, though even they have not yet used this peculiar device for supporting the roof. Well, as you can gather, I don't think much of Säynätsälo. I didn't in advance, and my opinion was not changed in seeing it, though I can appreciate many of the reasons, comparable to the reasons for which Aalto's work appealed so much in the mid-'30s, why Säynätsälo appealed in the '50s.

The year after Säynätsälo was started, Aalto built the building of which we now see the interior court (86). This is the marble court of the Rotatalo, or Iron Building, in Helsinki of 1952-54, which I do want to stress. It is, except for the change of materials, so characteristic an example of the spread of the International Style that you might easily think it was the court of the Avery Memorial in Hartford (87), if only there were a Francavilla statue in the center. The chief difference is that it is of marble, or at least of imported travertine, and that it has a rather tricky lighting system overhead, for the night lighting is by external fixtures, as over the dining hall at Baker House. If this interior expresses the theme Aalto vs. Aalto perhaps more sharply than any



86-87



other confrontation than I have made thus far, what is even more peculiar and unexpected is the building's exterior. Figure 88 is the exterior of the Rotatalo next door to that 1921 building of Saarinen, and Figure 89 is a building of 1935 – it has a peculiarly unpronounceable name – by no less than the elder Siren. The principle of design was taken over almost without change except for a general fining down of the elements in the Aalto building. I think there is some truth in the assumption that Aalto has a “country style,” as represented by Säynätsälo, and a “city style,” as represented by Rotatalo. Perhaps he thought Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the country!

Next we have another contrast. Figures 90-96 are the Pension Bureau of 1954-56, Figures 97-101 the House of Culture of 1955-58, both in Helsinki. Here the two sides of Aalto come closer together to an extent that these views don't make entirely evident. The Pension building is set down on a triangular site in such a way as to require as many zigzag breaks as possible. But this view is of the long side, with the open court, and shows the juxtaposition of low elements executed in two tones of the dark gray local granite, with taller elements of fine brickwork – almost as remote as you can get from the clinkers of Baker House – and the cladding of all the intermediate elements with the one metal that is produced in Finland, copper. The building represents, it seems to me, a very standard late translation of many of the elements of the International Style into the richer, more colorful, more natural materials that have come to the fore again since the 1920s. At the House of Culture the auditorium, at least, is a quite disciplined expression of curved forms, which are certainly more suited to the purposes of an



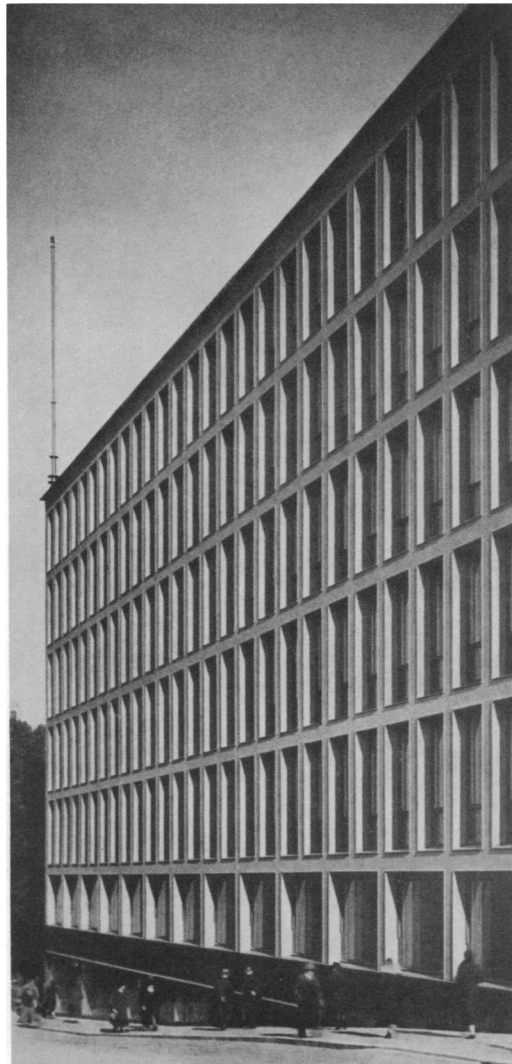
88-89



90-91



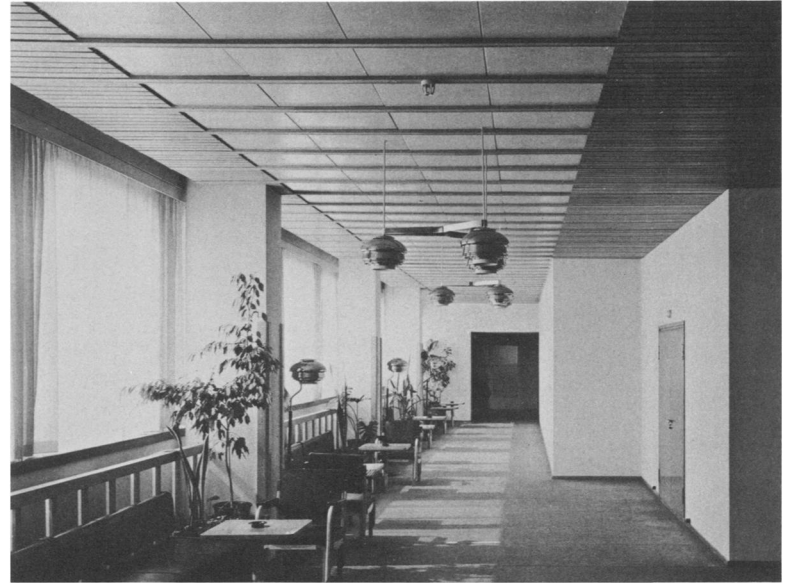
92-93



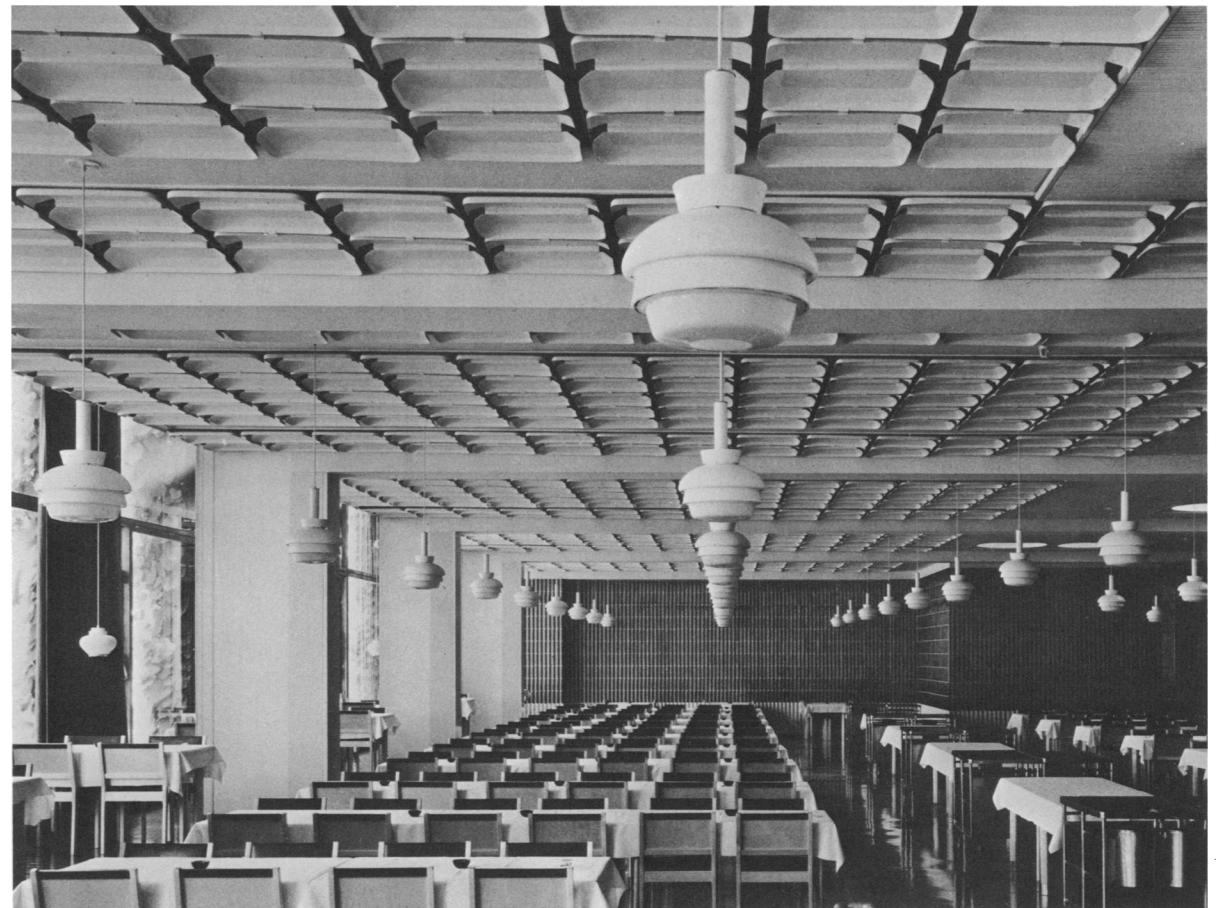


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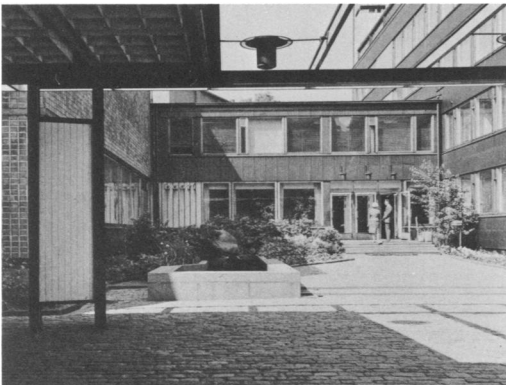
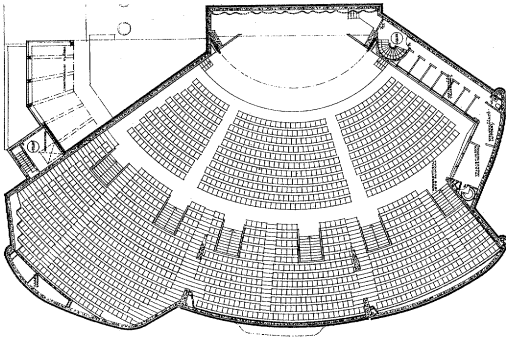
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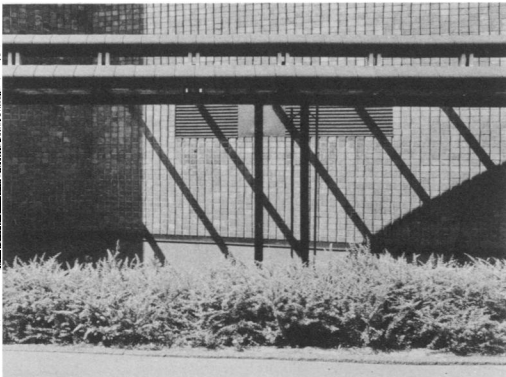
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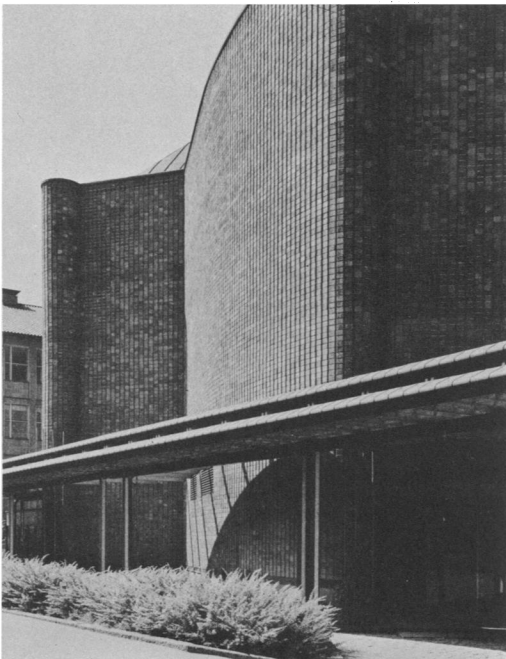
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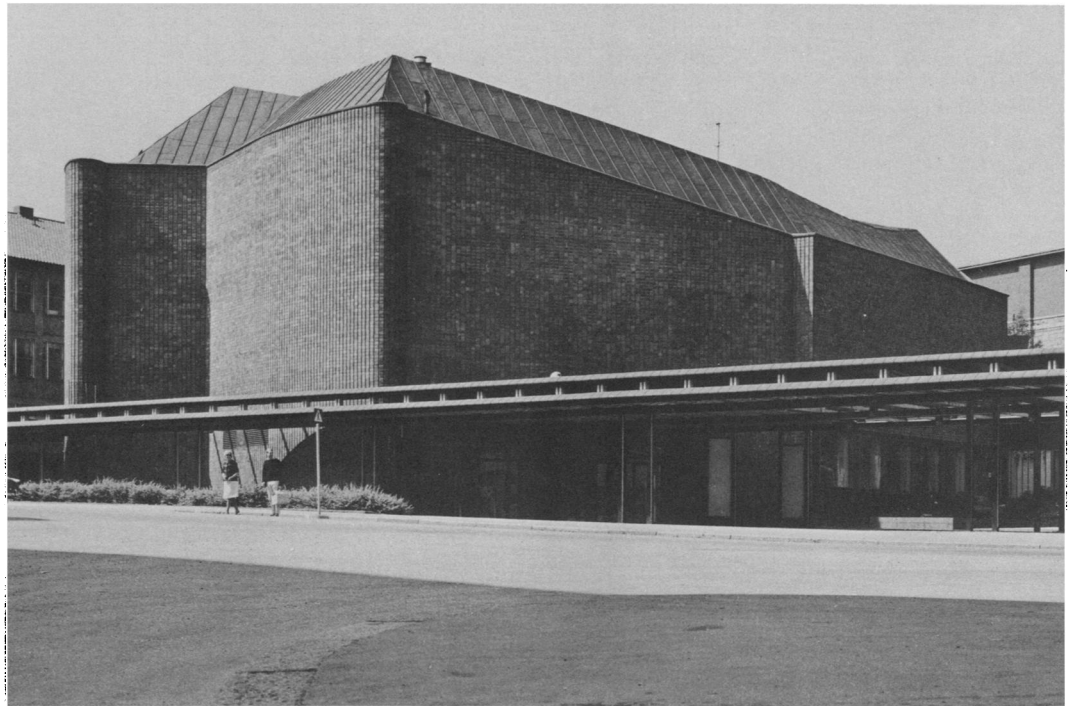
97-98



98-99

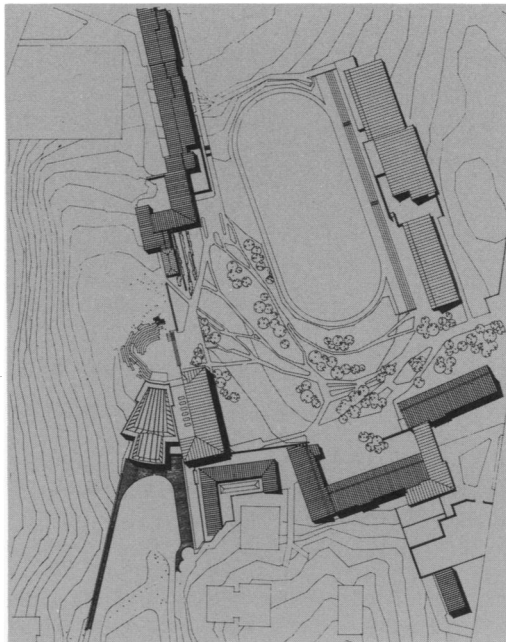


100-101

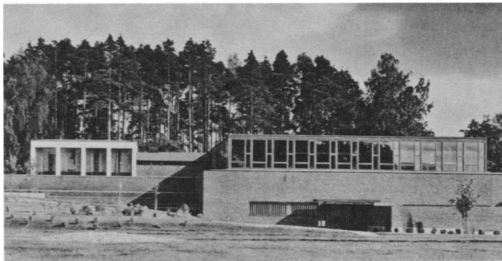


auditorium than to those of a dormitory. Furthermore, the brick is specially made with rounded ends, giving a sort of corduroy surface that goes very happily with the curves, which in their richness recall Dutch architecture of the Amsterdam School of the early 20s. What is surprising, however, is the total lack of visual connection with the small block of offices and so forth standing independently to one side, which is part of the same complex and was built at the same time. These Helsinki buildings of the mid-50s represent something closer to the middle range of Aalto's achievement.

So also does the very large complex of buildings at the University of Jyväskylä (102-105). Returning to his early home, Aalto built this university and teacher's college beginning in 1957 and through much of the period since. It occupies a shallow valley, one group of buildings extending across the top and others extending down the two sides. The materials are consistently the fine, well-laid red brick of the Pension Bureau, a considerable amount of copper, and some of that varnished wood which is one of the Aalto clichés that the English brutalists have taken special delight in: it weathers very badly in England. We may note, also, not only a general severity of design but practically no curves or sharp angles. Aalto clearly has given an important position to the faculty dining hall, which, with its almost Miesian purity stands practically free in the middle of the right side. It is executed in the palest, nearly white, local granite, and is of – as I say – a Miesian sort of elegance that nevertheless does not contrast too sharply with the more earthy handling of the classroom buildings opposite. This is also to some extent true of the auditorium here. These portions of the Jyväskylä complex certainly lead towards the office building on the waterfront at Helsinki, with its happy relationship to the old buildings of Engel.



102-103



103-104

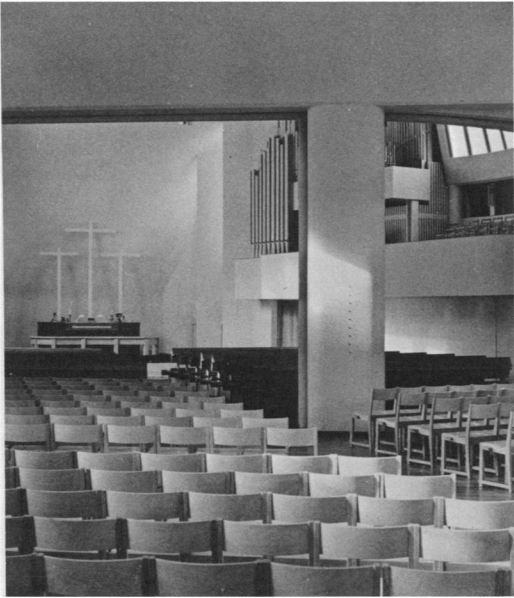


104-105

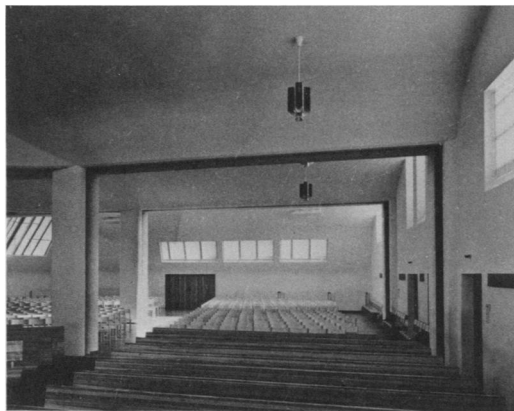


I think you can now see a little more clearly the detailing of the rather small pieces of marble that clad the structural frame of the office building. You can also see, not the local varnished birch, but the imported teak and the extraordinary consistency of the detailing that leads to the stopping off of the vertical elements at the top and in the middle of the bays at the bottom. On what might be called the back of the building, where the hill rises, the basic vocabulary is handled somewhat more freely – the breaks are more casual, but the vocabulary continues to be equally consistent. This, it seems to me, is a very different Aalto from the Aalto of Säynätsälo – and I won't even mention such horrors as the Vuoksenniska Church (106-110) outside Imatra or the Culture Center at Wolfsburg! (111-119) – but quite in keeping with the total story of his career as I have shown it so far.

Moreover, it seems to me that, just as we in America certainly made an error (an understandable error, since he settled in this country with great acclaim) in believing that Saarinen was the one great architect of the early twentieth century in Finland, we have tended to make a parallel mistake in assuming not only that Aalto was peculiarly Finnish but that he was practically all that was Finnish. In the early years he had – locally, at least, if not internationally – a serious rival in Erik Brygmann; and today there are several other architects whose work at best is perhaps of equal quality – though, I am free to admit, it is rarely so consistently exciting in the way that Eero Saarinen's was. I don't know whether it was his Finnish birth or not, but Eero Saarinen had also something of Aalto's capacity to move in all directions, not quite at once but still from building to building, so that even now we still have no really clear picture of his over-all direction. The other Finnish architects are less



106-107



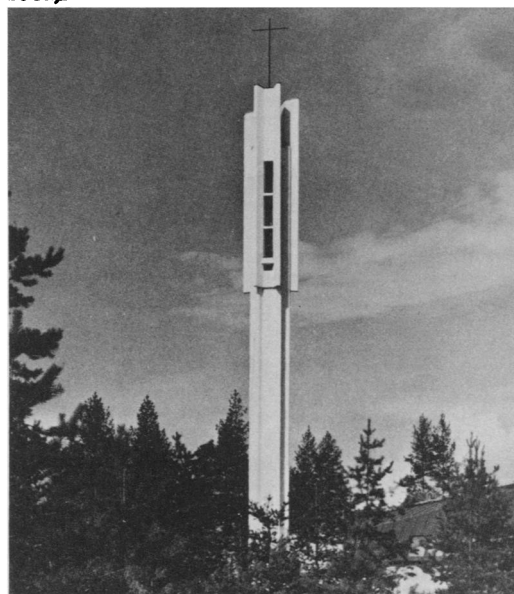
107-108



109-110



108a,b





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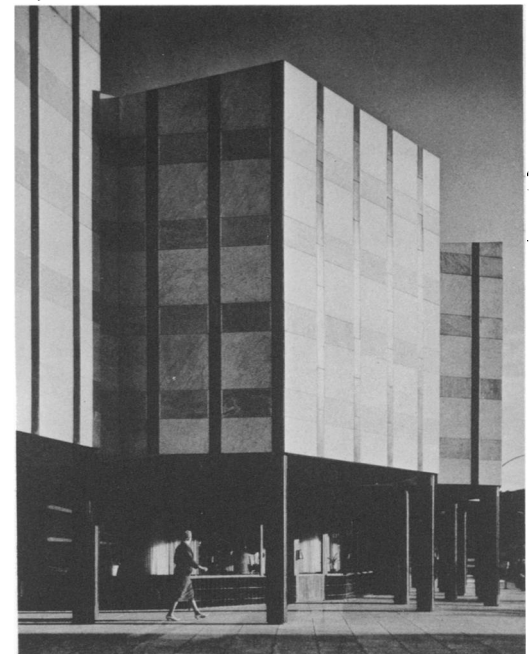
113-114

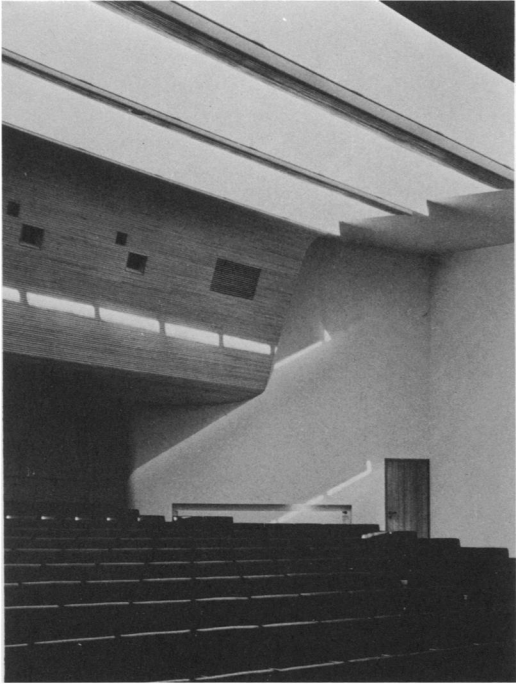


114-115



115-116





117-118



119

161



various, and for that reason their individual works have perhaps less intensity, less poignance.

For example, the Finnish University at Turku by Arne Ervi (120), especially in photographs, looks very much like what I said of his university building in Helsinki: it is Finnish S.O.M. Actually, there are certain local touches that are somewhat special. The *pilots* are faced with the beautiful local pink granite. The wall surfaces are not, as you might think, of stucco but of small, matte white tiles laid in broad patterns. Without being very exciting, it is certainly high in the international roster of standard university buildings of the 1950s. Individually, the buildings are perhaps as good as Aalto's, though certainly lacking the over-all interest of his at Jyväskylä. Aalto's other university outside Helsinki is not far enough along yet to be judged as a whole.

Viljo Rewell, of course, now has an international reputation thanks to his work in Toronto. Figure 121 shows a crematorium. It is a very peculiar thing about the Scandinavian countries that the best architects seem to be chiefly employed building crematoriums! This goes way back, to Brygmann and, of course, to Asplund in Stockholm. The Rewell crematorium has more punch certainly than Ervi's work, with its vast paraboloid roof sheathed in copper, its low walls largely unbroken by windows, and its characteristic (for present-day Finland) contrast of light and dark – often, though not here, white and black.

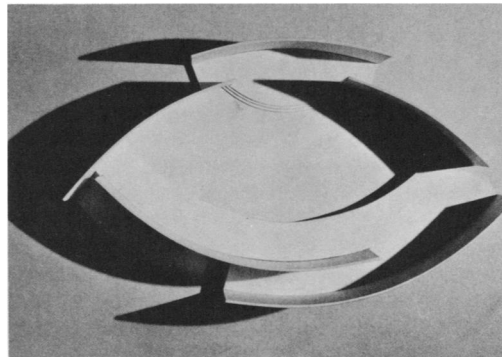
Few individual works of Aalto have been more successful than the church at Orivesi (122, 123)



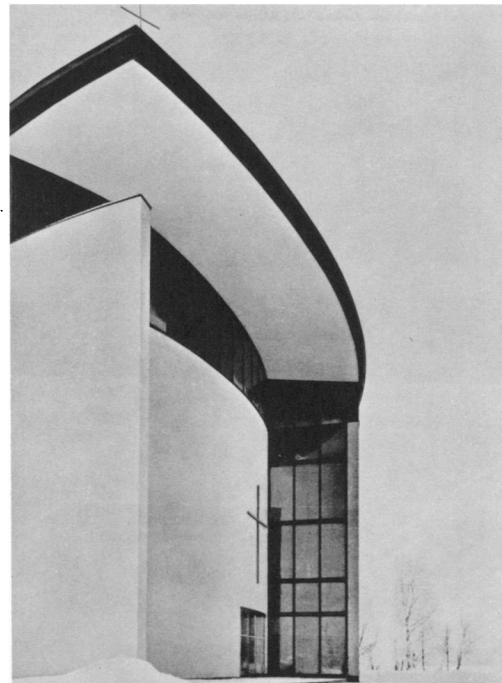
120-121



121-122



122-123



of last year by the Sirens, the son and daughter-in-law of the elder Siren. The church has a curious shape, rounded sides coming to sharp points, with light introduced where concentric walls overlap, and also at the top under the slab of the roof. The same shape appears inside, lighted chiefly by a kind of clerestory. The interior is of the utmost clarity and purity. Rather surprisingly, one finds that the Communion table is in the middle of the long side, with a piece of abstract wooden sculpture above. The white walls are given their quality largely by the remarkable control of the lighting.

The church is of brick covered with a thin coating of whitish-gray stucco. One doesn't quite know why, except perhaps to parallel the smooth plaster of the interior. But certainly this is a work of great emotional intensity and with a purity of form that compares well with what I consider the more Finnish side of Aalto, as distinguished from the more personally willful side.

Sometimes Aalto is neither as accomplished as we know him to be capable of being, nor as excitingly willful; sometimes it is actually hard to believe that a particular work is not some sort of provincial International Style job of twenty-five years ago, as in the Museum of Central Finland at Jyväskylä (124, 125). This is partly of brick, partly of stucco, all painted white, with windows stuck in any-old-how, a building of some quality inside, but almost characterless outside in terms of the architecture of the 1960s. Yet when asked to collaborate with his contemporaries, as at Tapiola, probably the finest suburban housing development



124-125

in the world, we find that Aalto's tall, white towers rise above the row houses designed by the Sirens for the vine-covered slopes in a happily anonymous way. For all his personal vagaries, Aalto is a Finnish architect and, like his contemporaries, capable of continuing a tradition which in Finland goes back in one form or another to the early nineteenth century. Small as this country is, it has a living tradition that is broader than what is represented by the two names Saarinen and Aalto.



Addenda; Some Recent Buildings by Alvar Aalto  
Photographs by G. E. Kidder Smith

APARTMENT HOUSE *Bremen*, 126-128

CHURCH *Wolfsburg*, 129-132

CHURCH *Seinäjoki*, 133-135

TOWN HALL *Seinäjoki*, 136-138

Note: The buildings illustrated on the following pages were not visited by Prof. Hitchcock



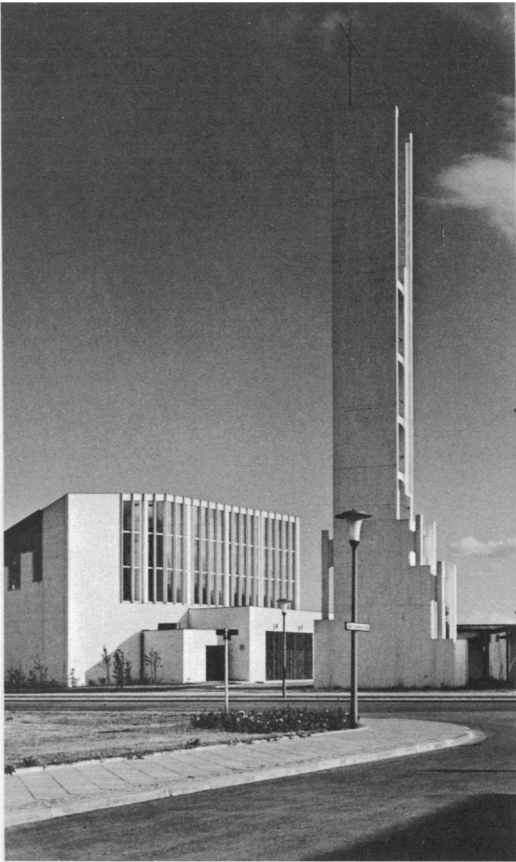
164

126

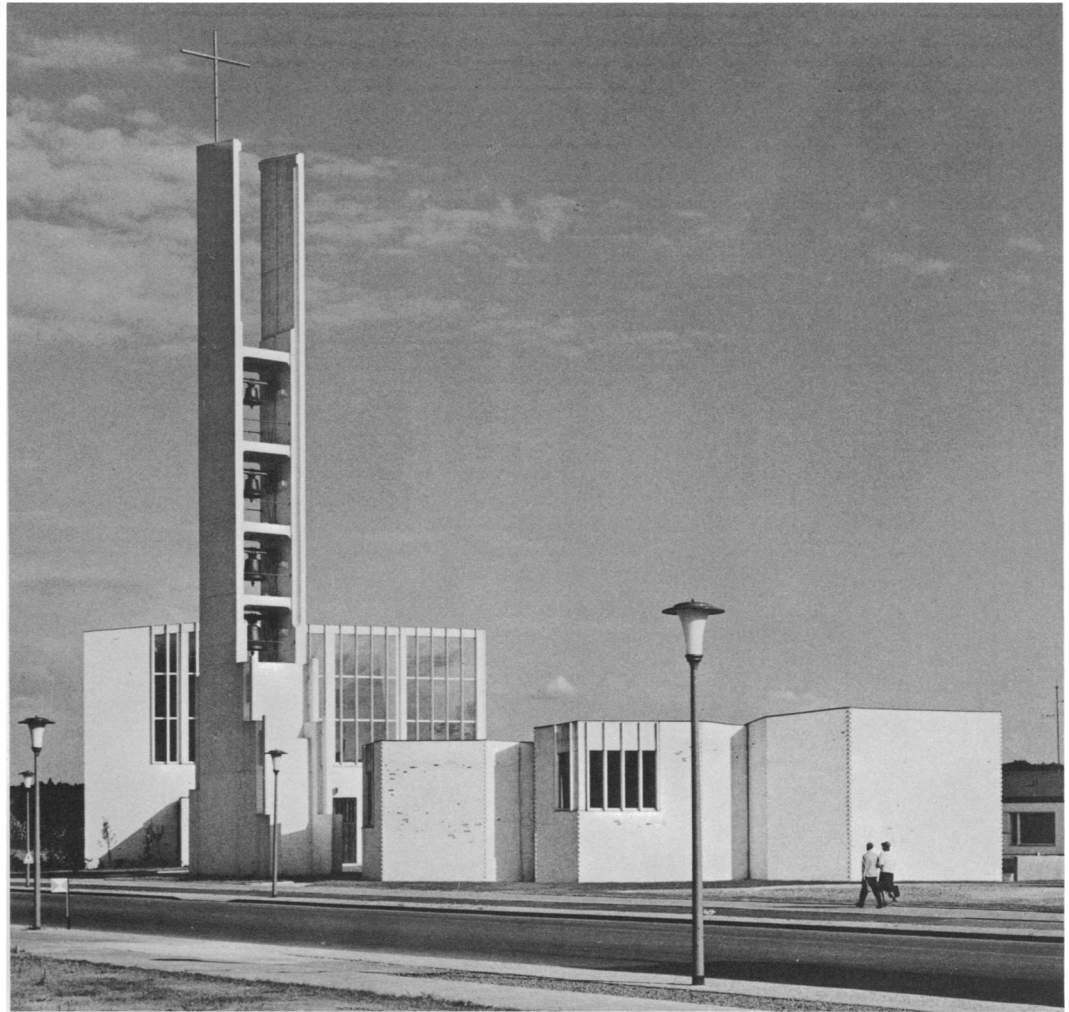
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128





129-130



131-132





166 133-136



134,135-137,138

