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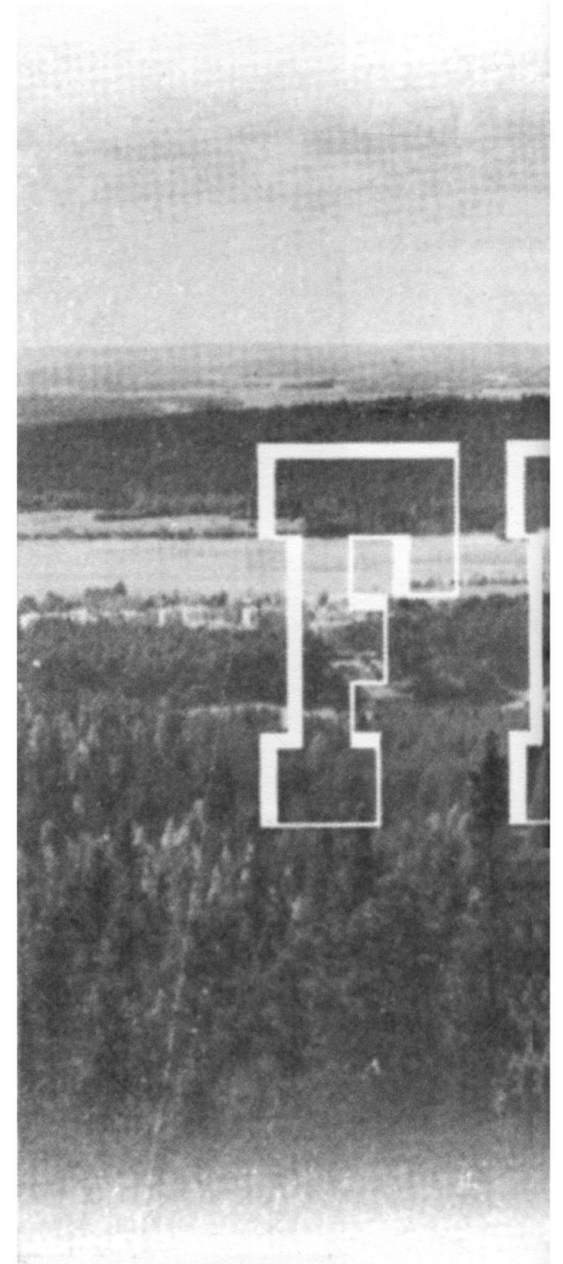
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ALVAR AALTO

AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FAME

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen

“FINLAND IS WITH AALTO WHEREVER HE GOES,” EXCLAIMED THE SWISS ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN SIGFRIED GIEDION IN THE ARTICLE “IRRATIONALITY AND STANDARD” IN 1941.¹ SINCE THEN, AALTO’S NATIONAL ORIGIN HAS BECOME A DOMINANT WAY TO EXPLAIN HIS ARCHITECTURE AND PERSONA. IN THIS ESSAY I WILL SHOW THAT THE READING WE NOW TAKE FOR GRANTED WAS ORIGINALLY POLITICALLY CHARGED, AND THAT THIS POLITICAL DIMENSION PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN AALTO’S ASCENDANCY TO INTERNATIONAL FAME.



In order to highlight the historicity of this reading, I will focus on the period between 1931 and 1949, when Aalto’s international fame was established by Giedion, the British critic Philip Morton Shand, and John McAndrew, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), all of whom emphasized Aalto’s national origins, albeit from different geopolitical and historical vantage points. Aalto first gained international attention during the rise of the extreme right in the early 1930s, when Scandinavia came to represent a neutral alternative to the Continent then divided by national hatred, and his international fame was cemented during and in the aftermath of the Finno-Russian Winter War of 1938–40, when his idiosyncratic formal language came to be read as a sign of resistance against



totalitarianism. The emphasis on Aalto's Finnishness was supported by cultural ideas about the East and the North as havens for creativity and spirituality.

Aalto was certainly aware of and influenced by his international reception. He was political in the most everyday sense of the word: His work and words were often tailored for particular audiences, and he, like all successful architects, was a master of self-promotion. Awareness of the reception of his work became particularly topical when he was chosen as the architect of two Finnish World's Fair pavilions, for Paris in 1937 and New York in 1939. With these projects, he crafted representational techniques that skillfully negotiated the charged political territories. His role in national politics grew pronounced during World War II, when he took part in a propa-

ganda mission with the goal of soliciting international sympathy and financial aid for the Finnish reconstruction effort.

How do we make sense of the links between Aalto's reception, his actions, and ultimately his representational techniques? And further, what do we mean when we refer to the historical "context" of architecture? Following Timothy J. Clark, I would propose that "the so-called context of a work of art is...not a mere surrounding, separable from form."² The context is not merely an external force inseparable from "pure" artistic intentions but is embedded in the expectations and anticipations connected to architecture from both parties involved. Rather than reading Aalto's work through its historical and geopolitical context, I would like to draw attention to what Clark would refer to as its "public

life," that is to say, "what possible uses it anticipated, what viewers and readers it expected, what spaces it was meant to inhabit, and, above all, how such a structure of expectation entered and informed the work itself, determining its idiom."³

The idea that Aalto was a creative genius working alone in the Finnish forests can be disputed from the start. Even as he became classified as a "Finnish" architect, he was a constant presence wherever the international group of architects, critics, and mentors who constituted the modern movement met. While his involvement with the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was somewhat peripheral, several of its leading members, particularly Sigfried Giedion, Walter Gropius, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, became his lifelong friends. A 1930

postcard to Gropius suggests that at the brink of his international fame Aalto felt he had more in common with his international colleagues than with those at home: “The fact is that we are eagerly looking forward to our ‘next time with the Gropiuses,’ while trying to make buildings for people into whose heads the ‘organic line’ will not fit for another 100 years.” He continued:

*We know with astronomical certainty that the only fixed point of our collegial life is in international work. Our private statistics indicate that it isn't possible to find companions among the three million who surround us. Three million is too little.*⁴

A letter thanking Moholy-Nagy for visiting Finland in the summer of 1931 suggests that once Aalto had discovered the Continent, he questioned whether his home country was even worth a visit. “We want to thank you for bringing us so much joy by having the courage to visit our poor Finland which can offer nothing but mud roads and fly-infested forests.”⁵

The Stockholm Exhibition in 1930 drew attention to the nascent Nordic modernism and helped to boost the self-esteem of local architects, especially in the wake of the critical acclaim bestowed upon Gunnar Asplund's fair pavilions. It was around that time that Shand of the *Architectural Review* concocted the term “Swedish grace” to describe Asplund's distinct national sensibility. Aalto refreshed old contacts and acquired new ones when he attended the exhibition's opening. He reconnected with Giedion, whom he had first met at the Frankfurt CIAM meeting

in 1929. He met Shand, who became Aalto's main champion in England, and was brought to the attention of Philip Johnson, who would include Aalto's Turun Sanomat Building (Fig. 1) in the 1932 Museum of Modern Art exhibit, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, and the subsequent book, *International Style: Architecture Since 1922*.⁶

These encounters and the positive response to Scandinavian modernism led to the first critical recognition of Aalto's work in the international architectural press. The first important assessment of it was Giedion's 1931 article, “On Finnish Architecture,” for the German magazine *Bauwelt*, in which the historian and CIAM secretary general proposed a relationship between international and national culture that would become a perennial theme of future Aalto scholarship. For Giedion, the relationship was similar to that proposed in the early histories of modernism, such as Walter's Gropius's *International Architecture* (1925), where the new “international” architecture was considered to be less bound by national origin than “traditional” architecture, even while a strong national identity, as the term *inter-nationalism* indicates, was considered the founding premise of the movement. Internationalism represented a higher level of cultural development.

In his article, Giedion paid special attention to Aalto's country of origin, giving an overview of Finnish history, geography, and industry. Although his decision was certainly influenced by the fact that Finland was a young and still relatively unknown country,⁷ by calling Finland a *Randstaat*, or a border state, Giedion revealed that in his mind the

country occupied a geographically and historically distinct position. Because of its remote location, the country was still in the state of becoming—politically, economically, and culturally.

For Giedion, the Finnish forest industry was representative of the condition that challenges the presumably linear and inevitable progression from agrarian to industrial economy that accompanies modernization. This historical rupture led to a reversal of the traditional center-periphery hierarchy, where, rather than considering Aalto's Turun Sanomat Building as a mere copy of continental precedents, Giedion saw in it signs of “independent development.” His article began as follows:

*It is a sign of the advanced state of today's architecture [Bauen] that the border states of culture don't always merely accept the result of the previous development, which dominates production. Instead, they have demonstrated a capability for independent development, which in turn reinforces and invigorates the origins. Although these border-states lack developed industry, they often possess an immediate ability to create form [Gestaltungskraft], which helps to overcome this limitation.*⁸

In prose that borders on mysticism, Giedion used the word *Gestaltungskraft*, or form-giving power, to explain such a reversal. Instead of being influenced by continental modernism, Aalto “possesses a rare talent to approach the building task organically, to grasp and give form to function in an unmediated manner.”⁹



Fig. 1 View of Turun Sanomat Building *International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, 1932

Giedion had proposed a similar geographic reversal in his introductory essay, “The Contemporary Role of Painting,” for *Produktion Paris 1930*, a catalog for an exhibition in Zurich bearing the same name. In a more politically overt tone, Giedion claimed that the most promising new art came from small countries like Switzerland, which, “due to its location between German and French culture, is able to take a relatively free approach. Here the clear, neutral atmosphere is untouched by local considerations of a different kind...”¹⁰ With extreme nationalism on the rise all over Europe, Giedion considered the ability to transcend national disputes and even national traits as a prerequisite for art’s presumably pure, nonideological essence to come forth. He thus preferred artists who were products of in-between regions with multiple cultural influences. For example, Jean Arp, who was prominently displayed in the exhibition, was as an Alsatian arguably both French and German, and even his two first names, Jean and Hans, indicated an ability to move between different linguistic groups and cultural identities. The idea of an individual artist in an in-between region proposed an alternative to extreme nationalism and homogeneous internationalism alike. Aalto’s case was slightly different because Finland, as a young country, had a national identity that was presumably less finite and more innocent than those of France or Germany.

When Giedion put forth the idea of the ambiguous *Randstaat*, Shand had already argued that Nordic architecture provided a nationalist alternative to the “internationalist” tendencies within the modern move-

ment. Shand’s response to emerging Scandinavian modernism was even more overtly political than Giedion’s. In an issue of the *Architectural Review* devoted to the Stockholm Exhibition, he trumpeted how a

*fresh artistic Volkswanderung [sic] is being unleashed upon Christendom. Le Corbusier’s blood will soon be quaffed out of his own massy skull, just to show there is no ill-feeling; Gropius’ Communist Bauhaus will be razed to the ground so that a new Valhalla may arise at Dessau.*¹¹

Shand’s undisguised political and ethnic preferences demonstrate that Aalto’s international reception from 1930 onward cannot be separated from the political situation of Europe, marked by constantly shifting geopolitical dynamics and accompanied by varying intensities of national and racial hatred. For an Englishman with apparent nationalist sympathies, Scandinavia represented liberation from the internationalist, leftist tendencies within the modern movement. Shand proclaimed: “May our own Viking blood, the only blood in us that matters, rouse itself to join in the massacre of those traitors of our age.”¹² To those like Shand who blamed the

increasing internationalization and modernization of Western societies for the world’s political and economic troubles, the relatively isolated and racially homogeneous Nordic countries represented an alternative: “If we refuse to follow the lead of Germany or the States... why not cast an eye on the Swede, a quiet, amusing fellow, closely connected by birth, who is not quite such a heavy friend as the German, nor such a loud one as the Yankee. Sweden could teach us quite a lot.”¹³ Therefore it was understandable that Swedish architecture was “destined to be imbued with wholesome Nordic sanity and that very Swedish ‘sweetness and light.’”¹⁴

Shand’s prejudices and affinity for Scandinavian functionalism must be kept in mind when looking at what he wrote about Aalto the next year. According to him, Aalto

*is a “functionalist” in the sense that he moulds form in the semblance of basic construction and purpose, working outwards from plan instead of inwards from elevation. His work, though renouncing ornament per se, evinces an almost tender regard for the design and arrangement of incidental practical details.*¹⁵



Fig. 2 Postcard from Giedion to Aalto August 6, 1933

Following early theories of German functionalism by Paul Mebes and Paul Schulze-Naumburg, who rejected the nineteenth century's imitative style in favor of the simple and practical German architectural tradition, Shand considered Aalto's functionalism anti-internationalist because it was firmly grounded on the needs and aspirations of the people.

Giedion's and Shand's early reviews are indicative of a future pattern: Aalto was commonly accepted and celebrated by people who represented different, even conflicting, political and ideological positions. An analogy could be drawn with Finland, which could be considered part of multiple geographic, cultural, and political alliances within Europe: an extension of Scandinavia, a member of the Baltic states, a part of Western Europe, or a

former province of the Russian empire.

To a great extent, MoMA's *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* ignored the geopolitical subtext that fueled the international modern movement. The goal of its curators, Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, was to portray an image of a coherent modern style. An exterior image of the Turun Sanomat Building, which was included in the show, neatly conformed to the main stylistic principles: volume instead of mass, fine proportions instead of ornament. It comes therefore as a surprise that the subsequent book, *International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, included an interior shot of the printing hall dominated by massive sculptural columns (Fig. 1). Instead of shared aesthetic principles, the caption places emphasis on Aalto's form-giving prowess: "Industrial building raised to

the level of architecture by fine proportions, smooth surfaces and carefully studied forms. The shape of the concrete supports expresses frankly the structural stresses."¹⁶ Aalto came to exemplify what Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the director of MoMA, referred to as "the wide personal variations possible within what may seem at first glance a restricted range of possibilities."¹⁷ In fact, unlike Hitchcock and Johnson, Barr had a historical vision that allowed room for parallel national developments. Tellingly, the International Style exhibition was followed in 1933 by *Early American Architecture: Chicago, 1870-1910*.¹⁸

The presumed coherence of the international modern movement was further shattered when Germany and to a certain extent France became unsympathetic to modern art and architecture. It was hardly a coincidence that Giedion started to pay increasing attention to Aalto's work in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. Giedion's concern for the future of the movement is evident in a postcard he wrote to Aalto from Milan, where he was visiting the Triennale. Referring to Aalto's bentwood furniture, he wrote: "In the Milan Triennale your wooden chairs represent one of the few cheering prospects [*Lichtblicke*] in the international department."¹⁹ Another card, written later that summer after Giedion saw photographs of the newly completed Paimio Sanatorium, underlines Aalto's idiosyncratic formal and material sensibility: "Dear Aalto [sic], Your Sanatorium arrived. ... One can sense your (or Aino's?) hand in every cliché! You will one day become the 'Magus of the North!'" (Fig. 2)²⁰

Citing the moniker given to Johann Georg Hamann, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, Giedion revealed his new value-laden geopolitical agenda: The North represented an abode of fierce, semiprimitive people whose experience of the world was more bound with sensuous experience and myths than that of the southern Europeans. Indeed, the *Königsberger* philosopher is best known for his criticism of the Enlightenment notion of pure reason and is celebrated, somewhat reductively, as an irrational individualist, while more subtle readings credit him for introducing historicity and a certain earthiness to intellectual enterprise. The benevolent regional ethos of the North, now located on both sides of the Baltic, became a sanctuary of common sense in politically convulsed times. Perhaps he knew that the conservative nationalist theorist Julius Langbehn had in his book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* [Rembrandt as an Educator] (1890)—widely



Fig. 3 Furniture on display at MoMA exhibition 1938

read and republished in the 1920s—located the true German spirit similarly along the Baltic shores.²¹

Giedion was not observing Aalto from a distance. The two had been friends since 1930, when Aalto first visited Giedion and his wife, art critic Carola Giedion-Welcker, in Zurich. Aalto's fluent German helped pave his way into Giedion's lively social circle, which included leading members of the European avant-garde, such as James Joyce, Constantin Brancusi, Kurt Schwitters, and Jean Arp. Exposure to their work had an immediate impact on Aalto's work: He designed his first bentwood furniture after seeing the Giedion-curated exposition *Produktion Paris 1930*, which displayed Arp's "biomorphic" wood reliefs.

Aalto turned out to be a loyal disciple. The curvilinear form soon migrated from furniture into different scales and functional appropriations, most notably into the acoustic ceiling at the Viipuri Library. It comes as somewhat of a surprise that despite the fact that these forms were very similar to those produced by Arp, Giedion saw curvilinearity as Aalto's trademark gesture. "On the whole, the building is again, with all its original details, true Aalto [*ein Richtiger Aalto*]," he exclaimed after seeing pictures of Viipuri.²²

The theoretical debates around biomorphism offer clues about why curvilinearity was associated with individual and national artistic production. Writing in the early 1930s, Giedion-Welcker, a leading theoretician of biomorphism, interpreted Arp's curvilinear forms as a sign of energy and emotion that sprung from the unconscious: "Arp's art is everything but a product of reason...it captures the irrational present in unmediated [bodily] sensations."²³ The methodological premise dealt with a desire to link artistic production back to reality by viewing it as a kind of seismographic notation of an artist's existential relationship to the surrounding world. Like Wilhelm Worringer in his hugely influential *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), Giedion-Welcker could not resist reducing the relationship between art and reality to a formal taxonomy: Curvilinear forms were associated with an empathetic disposition toward the world, while geometric forms revealed a certain fear and desire to deliver oneself from the chaotic world into the realm of the absolute. This formal-psychological interpretative method can be criticized for its ideological mysticism and for contributing to the simplistic classification of people and cultures. The formal taxonomies were

influenced by Worringer's categorization of southern and northern sensibilities, Jung's personality types, Nietzsche's idea that people in different regions have differing attitudes toward the world, and the idea of "organic" (primitive) versus "unorganic" (modern) societies. In the hands of Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmeyer, it led to a bias toward nationalism, racism, and cultural nostalgia.

The convergence of formal and cultural readings might in fact be the main reason why Giedion did not include Aalto in the first edition of *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, the text of which was originally delivered as the Norton lectures at Harvard during the 1938–39 academic year. He must have been aware that American scholars in general, like those at MoMA, favored less ideological modes of formal analysis. Another, more trivial reason for the exclusion might have been that Aalto was not yet well known in America. The Aalto retrospective held at MoMA in 1938 changed all that.

Aalto's engagement with the Museum of Modern Art began at the Paris World Exposition of 1937, where the Finnish Pavilion attracted the attention of the museum's affiliates. Among them was Henry-Russell Hitch-

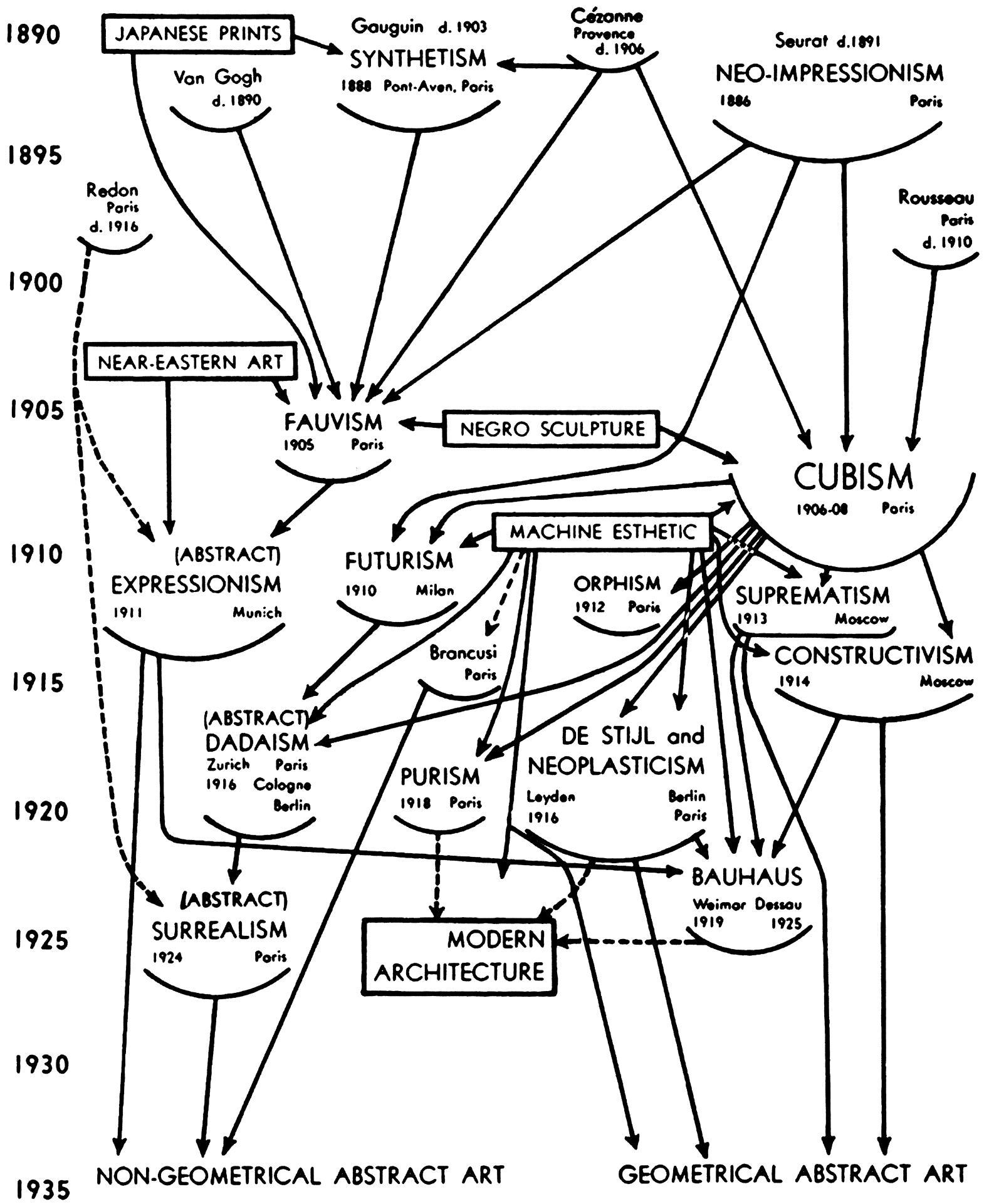


Fig. 4 Diagram of art movements *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936



Fig. 5 Finnish Pavilion New York World's Fair, 1939

cock, who in *Architectural Forum* singled out Aalto as “the greatest individual architect represented in the Exhibition.”²⁴ The rise of nationalist sentiment in Europe turned out to be Aalto’s luck: The exposition was marked by the absence of most of the pioneers of the modern movement, with the exception of Le Corbusier, who, after having worked on several comprehensive urban plans since 1932, was left with a minor commission, Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux. When countries central to the development of the international modern movement—France, Germany, Russia, and Italy—turned to neoclassical monumentalism, the exposition became a showcase of modernism from smaller countries like Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden, all of which garnered Hitchcock’s praise. John McAndrew, the curator of the

department of architecture at MoMA, offered Aalto a retrospective on the spot.

The question of why Aalto, a relatively unknown architect in America, was singled out for such an honor is worth asking. After all, Aalto was only the second architect—Le Corbusier was the first—to gain such recognition from MoMA. In the exhibition catalog, *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, the first architectural monograph published by MoMA and the first ever published on Aalto, McAndrew revealed the motivation, defining Aalto as an emblem of a wider stylistic change: “Like the design of other men first active in the ’30s, Aalto’s work, without ceasing in any way to be modern, does not look like the modern work of the ’20s.”²⁵ McAndrew then continued to define the shifts and re-engagements of the new generation:

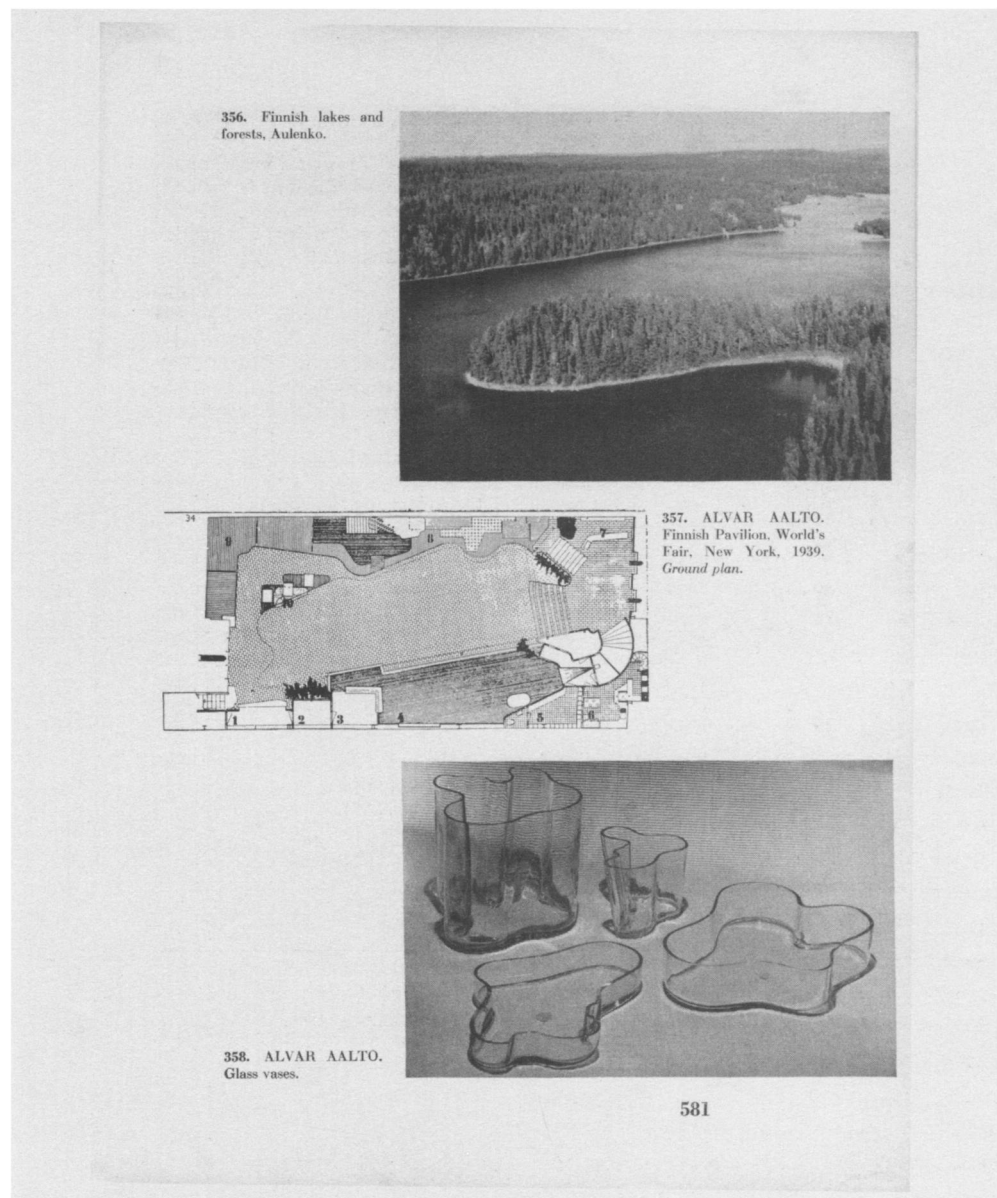


Fig. 6 *Space, Time and Architecture*, second edition 1949

*Certain materials and forms once renounced because of their association with non-modern work are now used again, in new ways or even in the old ones. To the heritage of pure geometric shapes, the younger men have added free organic curves; to the stylistic analogies with the painters, Mondrian and Léger, they have added Arp.*²⁶

However, the architecture part of the exhibition sent somewhat mixed signals about his position vis-à-vis the International Style. With their white stucco walls and flat roofs, the Turun Sanomat Building (1928–30), Paimio Sanatorium (1929–33), and Viipuri Library (1928–35) could easily be placed within the legacy of 1920s modernism. In order to highlight a paradigm shift, the catalog gave out only their completion dates. The extensive

use of wood in Aalto's own house (1936–37) and the Paris Pavilion (1936–37) made a clearer case for a distance between 1920s and 1930s modernism. The furniture in the exhibition made this distance even more explicit: The work was based on a single formal trope, curvilinearity, and a single material, wood. Individual pieces were mounted on the wall like art objects in order to celebrate their formal and material qualities (Fig. 3).

McAndrew borrowed the idea from Barr that the modern movement was experiencing a shift from the “geometric” to the “organic”; in his 1936 catalog, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Barr had identified these as the “two main traditions of abstract art.” He called the first tradition “intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear, and classical in its austerity and dependence upon logic

and calculation,” and positioned the second one as its polar opposite: “intuitional and emotional rather than intellectual; organic or biomorphic rather than geometrical in its forms; curvilinear rather than rectilinear, decorative rather than structural, and romantic rather than classical in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous, and the irrational.”²⁷ In fact, the Aalto retrospective might not have taken place if it had not been for Barr’s artistic and intellectual agenda.²⁸ This relatively unknown Finnish architect helped support the claims of a nonlinear and pluralistic evolution of art which were depicted in the chart at the beginning of *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Fig. 4), while at the same time confirming Barr’s prediction that “the geometric tradition in abstract art... is in decline.”²⁹ McAndrew used Barr’s formal taxonomies, associating the shift from the geometric to the organic with that from internationalism to the emphasis on national character. Reflecting Barr’s sympathy for individual expression, McAndrew labeled Aalto’s formal language as “personal.”

As is usually the case, words and concepts change their meaning when transported into a new period and place. By the late 1930s, American intellectuals started to associate internationalism with Marxism and other socialist ideologies. Hence, Aalto’s supposedly “national” style spoke for the need and ability to resist these forces. The shift from uniformity to “personal” expression rides the same political moment. Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” essay, written in 1939, countered kitsch—a product of totalitarianism—with avant-garde—presumably an outcome of an individual artist’s fight against authority.³⁰ By using the conceptual pair *national* and *personal* to describe Aalto’s architecture, McAndrew avoided any association with the “debased” totalitarian nationalism of Nazi Germany. The seamless link between the formal, psychological, and cultural taxonomies neutralized any ideological meanings. Worringer’s notion of empathy comes to mind: Aalto’s organic lines were presented as an outcome of a spontaneous, unin-

hibited union with the world that characterized primitive people.

In light of MoMA’s agenda, it is therefore no surprise that the furniture caught the fancy of a large audience. In a letter to Aalto, McAndrew said:

*The exhibition of your architecture and furniture is a great success. Over 1,000 people a week have come to the Museum to see it; we consider this an exceptionally good attendance. The visitors have been perhaps more interested in the furniture than the architecture, but that is to be expected, for there is no furniture as handsome or comfortable as yours to be had in this country for anything like so low a price.*³¹

A review in *Art News* confirmed McAndrew’s assessment. Aalto was presented as one of “the most original designers of furniture of the past decade,”³² while the buildings on display were listed without comment.

The success of the exhibition cemented MoMA’s role as a kingmaker and arbiter of new trends and styles. McAndrew’s letter to Aalto gives clues about who else was considered among the new leaders in the field: “We [have been] pleased to see the great number of architects who visited the show. Wright, Gropius, Breuer, Neutra, Asplund, Lescaze and others have been here.”³³ Placing Wright at the top of the list attests to MoMA’s changing attitude toward him. While underrepresented in the 1932 exhibition, his status rose after the 1936 completion of Fallingwater, which paved the way for the reemergence of America as a leader in modern architecture. In fact, MoMA dedicated a show to Fallingwater in late 1937. The Aalto retrospective endorsed the idea of the emergence of national expression in modernism in the 1930s. In fact, after Johnson resigned as the head of the architecture department in December 1934, MoMA had started to pay increasing attention to American developments. The 1932 International Style exhibition was followed by *America Can’t Have Housing* (1934), *Modern Architecture in Cali-*

fornia (1935), *Architecture of H.H. Richardson* (1936), and *A New House by Frank Lloyd Wright* (1938).³⁴ Indeed, in her introduction to the 1944 exhibition catalog, *Built in USA, 1932–1944*, Elizabeth Mock credits Aalto with affirming the already lurking dissatisfaction with International Style modernism among his American colleagues.³⁵

So when Aalto set to work on the competition for the Finnish Pavilion for the New York World’s Fair in the months following the opening of his MoMA exhibition, he was surely cognizant of what Americans might want to see. As if to reaffirm MoMA’s prediction that architecture culture was facing a shift from the geometric to the “organic,” a slightly tilted curvilinear multimedia wall (Fig. 5) dominated the design.³⁶ What the exhibition catalog called a “vigorous expression of the work and culture of the Finnish people”³⁷ was celebrated with photo-enlargements of Finns and displays of industrial products.

Judging by his pronouncements, Aalto was well aware that the “vulgar” classical architecture seen at the Paris World Exposition went hand in hand with a debased form of nationalism. The title of an interview Aalto gave to *Helsingin Sanomat* in June 1939 demonstrates his characteristic sensitivity to his audience: “Large exhibitions suffer from so-called exhibition nausea. Finland’s good reputation in America relies on sensitive use of advertising.”³⁸ As a consequence, Aalto aimed to steer away from any explicit meaning, talking rather about wanting to create “an impression on the visitor psychologically and instinctively.” He continued: “A true image of a country cannot be conveyed with individual objects alone; it can be done convincingly only by the atmosphere such objects create together, that is, only by the overall effect perceived by the senses.”³⁹

The creation of a politically innocent and materially elusive “atmosphere” was based on carefully considered representational strategies: displaying objects in the state of becoming; endless repetition of the undulating line at all scales, blurring the hierarchy between objects and their background; and

the integration of different media—objects, photographs, and films. These representational strategies shared with the vernacular what Roland Barthes called the “reality effect,” which is marked by an “overabundance of details” and images which, rather than forming to a coherent narrative, simply claim, “We are real.”⁴⁰ The frantic overlapping of lines and textures added to their mystique.

The emergence of quasi-vernacular motifs in Aalto’s work in the late 1930s supported similar readings: “The vernacular represented a benign, non-aggressive, pacifist architecture in a politically convulsed time.”⁴¹ Tellingly, the sources of this “politically correct” version of national expression are ambiguous, and the vaguely Japanese details of the Paris Pavilion prove the case. The rustic sauna and fence added to the Villa Mairea around the time of the MoMA exhibition alluded more specifically to the Finnish vernacular building tradition. Yet even here the vernacular pointed to an innocent state of the local culture prior to the birth of the nation-states.

The start of the Finno-Russian Winter War in November 1939 gave these benevolent ideas a new twist. Aalto, now crowned with MoMA fame and well connected to America’s cultural and financial elite, was sent to the United States, where he spent six months visiting friends, lecturing, and writing articles. The American media was on Aalto’s side: The idea of small Finland heroically fighting against the large Russian army drew the world’s attention. Yet, at the same time, Americans were unsure about Finland’s political orientation. In the article “Finland” for the July 1940 issue of *Architectural Forum*, Aalto convinced his American audience that Finns had nothing to do with the Soviet Union and the presumably Communist-infested international modern movement. Aalto’s Finland was an innocent, politically and culturally ambiguous region rather than a well-defined nation-state. The best of Finnish modern architecture (Aalto was probably referring to his own work) bore witness to this distance and had shown independent development

somewhat along the lines of American regionalism. Aalto noted:

*As in other countries with a more or less provincial culture, modern architecture did not appear in Finland as a superficial style trend in imitation of the great European centers. Even though there is today in Finland, as in all countries, a good deal of superficial modernism, the country itself—its climate, resources, topography, and ways of living—afford a mass of material which forms a good base for the solution of problems of contemporary architecture.*⁴²

Giedion, informed of Finland’s hardship as well as of Aalto’s American fame, willingly joined his propaganda mission and wrote “Irrationality and Standard” shortly after his friend’s lecture tour in Switzerland, which was another potential source for financial and humanitarian aid. No longer hesitant to make historically and culturally specific commentaries, Giedion leapt into statements like “Aalto carries Finland with him wherever he goes. ...It provides him with that inner source of energy which always flows through his work.” Yet, rather than celebrating a mystical nationalist essence flowing from Finland through Aalto into his work, he considers Aalto’s relationship to Finland as ambiguous, even tormented. “Aalto is restless. He does not always remain in the pine and birch forests in Finland.”⁴³ Comparison with émigré artists like James Joyce and Pablo Picasso reinforced the political dimension of their shared existential condition: Aalto “belongs to a world where national borders no longer exist.”⁴⁴

Giedion elaborated upon this aspect of the essay when he expanded it for the second edition of *Space, Time and Architecture* (1949). The fact that the resulting chapter, “Alvar Aalto: Elemental and Contemporary,” is longer than those on Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Walter Gropius pays witness not only to Giedion’s high esteem for Aalto’s genius but to the political and territorial dimension of his work and persona. The book

reveals that Giedion’s encounter with Picasso’s *Guernica* at the 1937 Paris World Exposition constituted a seminal moment. He celebrated the painting as the greatest modern painting for its ability to depict the suffering of the Spanish people and called it Picasso’s “first real historical painting.”⁴⁵

One could argue that Giedion saw Aalto’s work as the first real historical architecture. Giedion summarized his cultural-historical ambition thusly: “Alvar Aalto’s active life coincides with the most consistently agitated period of Finland’s existence.”⁴⁶ Reflecting on the events of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, Giedion emphasized Finland’s problematic geopolitical location between East and West and argued that this in-betweenness “gives a creative tension to his work.”⁴⁷ Nothing illustrates the link between form and these historical and geopolitical tensions better than an aerial view of a Finnish lake that Giedion juxtaposed with the plan of the New York World’s Fair Pavilion and a photo of the Savoy vase (Fig. 6). The undulating line is read here as a seismographic notation of both Finland’s and Aalto’s experience of historical turbulence. It bears witness to the character of its people, which is a mixture of “smoothness and friendliness” combined with “firmness.”⁴⁸

Aalto had used the image of lakes in several projects, articles, and lectures from the late 1930s onward: in the exterior of the Paris Pavilion, as part of the multimedia installation in New York, and accompanying his *Architectural Forum* article on Finland. The image gained an ominous subtext after Finland lost most of Carelia, the heartland of the country, to Russia twice, following the Winter War in 1940 and the Continuation War in 1944. We can only lament the fact that this tormented aspect of Finnish history has not survived in current Aalto scholarship. If it had, perhaps we would no longer use the curvilinear form as a designation for something represented that is Finnish in nature, but rather as a reminder of the world that unites man to representation.

1 Sigfried Giedion, "Irrationalität und Standard," *Weltwoche*, May 2, 1941. The article formed the basis for the Aalto chapter in the second edition of Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949). The quotation appears on page 567. 2 Timothy J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 177. 3 *Ibid.*, 176. 4 Alvar Aalto, postcard to Walter Gropius, October 23, 1930, Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. 5 Aalto, undated letter to "Ellen and Moholy," ca. 1931, Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. 6 Although Johnson and Aalto did not meet personally, Swedish architect Uno Åhrén served as a mediator, which led to Aalto's inclusion in *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*. The Alvar Aalto Foundation has a letter from Johnson to Aalto requesting material, dated July 15, 1930. 7 Prior to gaining independence in 1917, Finland had been ruled by Sweden (twelfth century–1809) and Russia (1809–1917). 8 Giedion, "Über finnische Architektur" [On Finnish Architecture], *Bauwelt* 25 (1931): 34. 9 *Ibid.* 10 Giedion, "Produktion Paris 1930: Malerei und Plastik," in *Produktion Paris 1930* (Zurich: Kunstsalon Wolfsberg, 1930). 11 Philip Morton Shand, "Stockholm, 1930," *Architectural Review*, August 1930, 69. 12 *Ibid.* 13 *Ibid.*, 46. 14 *Ibid.*, 71. 15 Shand, "The Work of Alvar Aalto," *Architectural Review*, September 1931, folio. 16 Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932), see first photo insert. The exhibition catalog, which bore a slightly different title, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), preceded the book. 17 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Foreword," in *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, 16. 18 For a history of MoMA's exhibition programs, see A. Conger Goodyear, *The Museum of Modern Art: The First Ten Years* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943). 19 Giedion made the same point in two postcards to Aalto, the first one written during and the second one after the Milan Triennale, on June 27 and July 3, 1933. The quotation is from the latter postcard. Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. 20 Giedion, postcard to Aalto, August 6, 1933, Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. 21 I owe this remark to Werner Oechslin. See "Der Magus des Nordens": Alvar Aalto und die Schweiz, eds. Teppo Jokinen and Bruno Maurer (Zurich: gta, 1998), 9. 22 Giedion, postcard to Aalto, December 2, 1935, Alvar Aalto Archive, Helsinki. 23 Carola Giedion-Welcker, "Hans Arp: Dichter und Maler," reprinted in *Carola Giedion-Welcker: Schriften 1926–71* (Cologne: Verlag M. Dumont Schenbert, 1973). 24 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "Paris Exhibition," *Architectural Forum*, September 1937, 160. 25 John McAndrew, *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 1. 26 *Ibid.* 27 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 19. 28 Indeed, Hitchcock's favorite, J.J.P. Oud, and Johnson's favorite, Mies van der Rohe, might have been more likely candidates for the retrospective. 29 Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 200. 30 Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939), 34–49. 31 John McAndrew, letter to Aalto, April 16, 1938, Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. 32 From a review of Aalto's MoMA exhibition in *Art News*, April 2, 1938, 23. 33 McAndrew, letter to Aalto. 34 Goodyear, see "Department of Architecture" chapter and appendix. 35 Elizabeth Mock, ed., *Built in USA, 1932–1944* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 20. 36 McAndrew, *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, 3. 37 Simon Breines, "Architecture," in *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, 9. 38 Aalto, "Suurnäyttelyiden Varpoluena n.s. Näyttelyväsymys. Suomen Hyvä Maine Amerikassa Edellyttää Harkintaa Mainostuksessa," *Helsingin Sanomat*, June 23, 1939. 39 Aalto, "Maailmannäyttelyt: New York World's Fair. The Golden Gate Exhibition" [World Exhibitions: New York's World's Fair. The Golden Gate Exhibition], *Arkitehti* 8 (1939), 113. English trans. from Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 121. 40 I owe this reference to Romy Golan. See her article "A 'Discours aux Architectes'?" *Rivista de Architettura* 5 (June 2003), 153. Originally from Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 131–5. 41 *Ibid.* 42 Aalto, "Finland," *Architectural Forum*, June 1940, 399. 43 Giedion, "Irrationalität und Standard." 44 *Ibid.* 45 Detlef Mertins, "Transparencies Yet to Come: Sigfried Giedion and the Prehistory of Architectural Modernity," (unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 1996), 49. 46 Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 566. 47 *Ibid.*, 568. 48 *Ibid.*, 569.