Alvar Aalto in Retrospect

By Rene Elvin

If it were deemed necessary to justify the existence of small nations, Finland might well do so by the excellence of its contemporary architecture alone. A country of hardly 4,500,000 inhabitants, with meagre natural resources except timber, and these further strained by wars and post-war reparations, dangerously situated next to an immensely powerful and not always friendly neighbour, covered with snow and ice throughout its long winters, it has yet produced, as the fine flower of a remarkably advanced civilisation, a school of architects of whom any nation might be proud, including Eliel and Eero Saarinen, Erik Brydgman, Viljo Revell, Aarne Ervi, Kaija and Heiki Siren, Jonas Cedercreutz, Helge Railo, but first and foremost Alva Aalto.

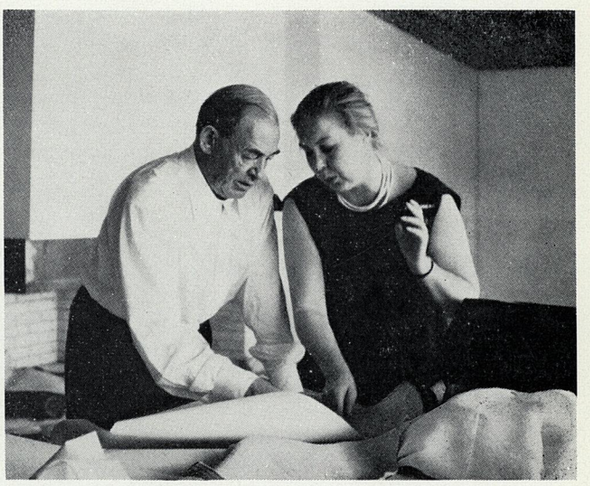
At 65, Hugo Henrik Alvar Aalto has recently received the double accolade of the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects and of a magnificent monograph of his collected works, selected by himself and bearing his name.* Whoever studies it will enthusiastically approve that award.

Born in 1898 in Kuortane, he studied at the Helsinki Technical University and obtained his diploma in architecture in 1921. After travelling extensively throughout Scandinavia and Central Europe and working for a time in the Planning Office of the 1923 Göteborg Fair, he was from 1923 to 1927 in private practice in Jyväskylä, from 1927 to 1933 in Turku and since 1933 in Helsinki. In 1925, he married his colleague Aino Marsio, who until her premature death in 1949 was his closest collaborator, especially in the design and production of bentwood furniture.

Turku Exhibition

His first large-scale project was the exhibition organised in 1929 to mark the 700th anniversary of the foundation of the city of Turku, a modest-size town with a population of 80,000. The show was therefore designed within a severely restricted budget and, not for the last time, Aalto demonstrated here the truth of Goethe's axiom, *In der Beschrankung zeigt sich erst der Meister* (restrictions show up the true master). All structures were built of light wood framing clad in fibreboard, inexpensively but colourfully covered with advertising posters. Vertical features gave a strong accent to the entrance area, in contrast with the predominantly horizontal aspect of the pavilions. The festivities also comprised a music festival, for which Aalto erected a striking open-air podium, and theatrical performances, for which he designed the (permanent) Finnish Theatre. An habitual winner of architectural competitions, he had won first prize for that project, a somewhat stark structure in which the auditory is a simple cube finished in dark blue stucco.

Another characteristic work of that period was the "Turun Sanomat" newspaper building in Turku that accommodates behind an elegantly fenestrated elevation printing works, editorial offices and flats for senior executives. Designed in 1927 and erected in 1927-29, it is remarkable for its large circular skylights on conical concrete bases, an ingenious Aalto invention thanks to which natural and artificial lighting come from the same source, ensuring at all times a shadow-free, non-dazzling diffuse light. He was to use the same device later in the National Pensions Institute and in the Rautatalo office block in Helsinki.



Elissa and Alvar Aalto

He employed that lighting system also in what was to become the most seminal of his early works, the famous Viipuri Library, which was unfortunately destroyed in the Russo-Finnish War but has now been rebuilt by the Russians according to Aalto's design. Designed in 1927 as the result of a competition in which Aalto, as so often, obtained first prize, it was erected from 1930 to 1935; it certainly belongs to Aalto's masterpieces and must have been one of the most extensively photographed and widely praised buildings of its time. Among its most notable features were the undulating ceiling of the lecture room, made of laminated red plywood strips, and the sunken reading room, that was evidence of his masterly handling of different levels to add spatial interest and variety to interiors.

That fecund period also saw the construction of the Paimio Sanatorium—again after a competition in which Aalto was placed first. Designed in 1928 and built from 1929 to 1933 with the participation of four cities and 48 communities, that altogether admirable establishment is located in the midst of dense forest and bears witness, in detail after thoughtful detail, of the meticulous attention Aalto pays to human needs. Here, the patient is at the very centre of the design conception : for the sake of quietness, two-bed rooms were selected; mechanical ventilation was avoided, as fresh air is of vital importance in the healing process; staff accommodation is completely separate from the wards wing; all patients' rooms and rest halls are located away from traffic and orientated towards the woods and gardens.

Finland lies far away from the tracks usually beaten by tourists, and so relatively few people can have seen the works so far mentioned. Two of Aalto's works, on the other hand, have been seen and visited by millions, though they were only temporary : they were the Finnish Pavilions at the Paris and New York World's Fairs in 1937 and 1939 respectively. As is by now hardly necessary to add, the design of both was awarded to Aalto following competitions he won. In the latter case, friction between officials and the architect prompted him to commit a small breach of ethics : he submitted not just one

* *Alvar Aalto*, the commemorative volume mentioned at the beginning of this article, is published (with letterpress in German, French and English) by Dr. Hans Girsberger, Zurich 1, Switzerland.

but two projects, while, for her part, Aino Aalto submitted a third without her husband's knowledge—and the Aalto studio received the first three prizes !

I remember the Paris pavilion well : it was one of the most charming units in a most unequal show dominated by the megalomaniac monstrosities of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Its main visual theme was the extensive use of Finnish timber both as structural element and wall cladding. Here again, Aalto had designed skylights embodying lighting fixtures so arranged that day- and night-time lighting were approximately similar, and, once more, his masterly handling of interior space was shown in the way the visitor was unobtrusively led past and then above the objects on view.

The New York pavilion, for which only a small area was available, consisted of four levels which, by clever use of architectural shapes and sloping surfaces, were visible simultaneously. The roof, too, was used as an exhibition space : propellers of Finnish press wood churned the air both as objects on display and as a source of ventilation.

The year 1939, during which the New York Fair took place, also witnessed the completion of the first part of Aalto's Cellulose Factory at Sunila in southern Finland, which G. E. Kidder Smith describes as "the finest and probably the most famous industrial complex in the world". Situated on an island with steeply sloping shores, it is so planned that production can start on the highest level, to which a giant hopper carries the raw materials, and proceed down through various stages to the harbour. The centre of the plant is built up into a terrace (comprising the offices and laboratories) from which all phases of the manufacturing process can be observed, also embodying a garden that provides a quiet atmosphere and pleasant vistas. Much care has gone into the preservation of natural features, and the pine forest surrounding the factory has been left intact. On the mainland, behind the industrial island, attractively sited in a forest, are the staff housing and community facilities; only the south-exposed hills are used for dwellings, while the pine forest has been left undisturbed on the north slopes. District heating is not centralised in one plant, but divided into three groups, thus achieving flexibility in the layout that carefully follows the contours of the land and avoids schematic over-concentration.

Interpenetration of nature and architecture is also a feature of one of Aalto's master-works, the Villa Mairea, built in the midst of a pine forest, on the top of a hill, for his friends Maire and Harry Gullichsen, art lovers and collectors. The house, in which timber and grey granite are the chief materials, is beautifully bedded in the landscape, of which the swimming pool and the inevitable sauna are integral parts.

Aalto, designer *par excellence* of public buildings and of town plans, has built relatively few private houses, but they are outstanding in their restrained elegance, none more so than the delightful holiday house he designed for the French art dealer and collector Louis Carré on a pleasant site of the Ile-de-France. Here again, the dramatic handling of spatial volumes, such as the entrance hall, framed by an undulating ceiling of pine strips, and the furniture, entirely designed by the architect, produce an atmosphere of opulent yet tasteful livableness.

Only a small proportion of the many buildings designed by Aalto can be described here, but mention should be made of an exemplary official edifice, the Town Hall in Säynätsalo, a rugged

Villa Mairea, a country house near the village of Noormarkku, Finland (1939)

Detail of the roof construction in the council chamber in the Town Hall at Saynatsalo (1952)

island in the inland sea of Päijänne, which was commissioned, as usual, on the basis of an architectural competition in 1949. It is relatively small, containing, in hardly more than 280,000 cu. ft., the offices of the local government, the council chamber, a community library, flats and store rooms so planned as to accommodate future expansion. Entirely built of red local brick with copper roofing and special framing for the longer spans, it encloses interior courtyards on various levels, joined by garden-like steps and terraces. The ceiling of the council chamber interestingly reveals the supporting structure of the roof, whose main struts also support the secondary roof framing.

One of the most striking among recent Aalto creations is another Helsinki building, the *Kultuuritalo,* or "House of Culture", built in 1955-58 and embodying a large multi-purpose conference hall for trade union meetings and concerts; to ensure perfect acoustics, Aalto chose for it the shape of a clam shell of concrete with timber and tile cladding; the various types of wall surfaces can be interchanged according to the acoustics required. The asymmetrical amphitheatre is faithfully reflected in the external shape, for which specially made brick masonry made possible the construction of walls of any radius.

Again as a result of a competition won by Aalto in 1950, he was commissioned to design the Pedagogical University at Jyväskylä, which has been under construction since 1953. This is, in the first place, a first-class layout scheme. The various buildings around the U-shaped, tree-planted court have two entrances, one to the streets and parking areas, the other to the inner precinct exclusively reserved for pedestrians. The main entrance hall and foyer, with one wall completely made of glass offering a view on tall trees and greenery, its ceiling clad with richly textured wood, contrasting with the grey and white marble floor, are eminently characteristic of the Aalto style.

Yet another competition he won in 1949 led to a most appropriate commission : the main new building of the Helsinki Technical University, where he once studied architecture, and which is now to be transferred to Otaniemi, outside the capital. It was completed in 1964, and is by all accounts, as well as judging by the plans and models, most impressive.

A much later competition, won in 1958, resulted in the design of a vast Cultural Centre at Wolfsburg, the "Volkswagen" town, which is to provide intellectual stimulation and relaxation for the thousands of workers of the car plant. It comprises a library, a school for adult education, club rooms, a community hall and a roof garden. The main building, with its façades of white and blue Carrara marble combined with a dark stone, was completed in 1962.

Equally great as architect and town-planner, Aalto was employed in both capacities for the reconstruction plan of the city of Imatra—a wonderful scheme in which he has been careful to preserve farm lands and wooded areas even in the very centre of the city. As part of that scheme, he was also called upon to design the church of the Vuoksenniska district, completed in 1958/59. This is a particularly fascinating building, fulfilling both sacral and social functions, which are reflected in its tripartite shape. One part is the Lutheran chapel, with altar, pulpit and organ, seating up to 300 people. The two other sections, separated from each other by massive 16-in. thick, soundproof, concrete sliding partitions, can be used simultaneously without interfering with each other, so that, say, a funeral, a church guild and a youth meeting take place at once. On Sunday, all sections are thrown together, to accommodate nearly 1,000 persons.

Aalto's powerful abilities as a planner are at present being tested again in his redevelopment plan for the centre of Helsinki, which proposes a new express highway on the line of the existing rail approach, large new parking areas covering the present unsightly marshalling yards, and themselves overlaid by a new shopping district, as well as a cultural centre including a concert hall, congress hall, opera house, art gallery, municipal library, academy, additional sites reserved for future buildings. The plan also embodies the existing Olympic stadium, built in 1934-52 by Lindegren and Jäntti. The whole ambitious scheme, with its three-level use of the ground, is at present still under consideration, but has been already widely acclaimed.

Aalto and his second wife Elissa, also an architect, whom he married in 1952, today head a 30-man office which handles an almost incredible volume of creative work, including at present a new concert hall for Helsinki; a church in Detmold Germany, which promises to be one of Aalto's finest; a library for the Lapland city of Rovaniemi; a large opera house for Essen; buildings for the Technological University at Otaniemi; and a museum in Aalborg, Denmark.

Always ready to accept the technical resources of the modern age, yet deeply rooted in the organic traditions of his own small country, Aalto distrusts both romantic flights and the mechanical parallelipipeds of steel and glass that proliferate in the name of progress. He is unique, and it is much to be hoped that he may be invited to contribute an important project to this country while he is at the height of his powers. What about Piccadilly or one of the new universities ?

Private residence and studio for Aalto himself at Helsinki (1936)