Figure 1. Row-houses for workers housing with "practically worthless" balconies, Sunila, 1936

Figure 2. Link houses that stepped up the hill in section, Sunila

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Accessing the Essence of Architecture: "In-between" Nature and Modernity in Aalto's Engineers Housing in Sunila

There is a stream of awareness just below the level of day-to-day self-consciousness that monitors the field of spatial relationships around us....For it is not only for an insight into our mysterious moments of elation that we look to it but also as the catalyst for those responses of alienation and exasperation provoked by the buildings that, as we vaguely say, "do not work."[1]

In his essay "The Natural Imagination," Colin St John Wilson describes the architectural experience as an ineffable yet "inescapable" natural condition of life. In this he grasps at an energy that often goes unrecognized. To speak of architecture at this depth is perhaps to speak of an essence that both feeds and is fed by the human life that inhabits it.

Aldo van Eyck articulated a process of re-establishing a connection between the need for shelter and the full nature of that need. Making this connection was crucial, he argued, "for each man and all men, since they no longer do it for themselves."[2] If a building does not address these instincts it may subtly, even imperceptibly, alienate us from the same deep realms of being. At this threshold much architecture has stumbled, failing to interpret and enact appropriate solutions to the fundamental (but ineffable) problem of facilitating access to this inter and intra-personal psycho-social realm. Our experiential response to such architectural failure is, as Wilson suggests, "alienation and exasperation."[3] It is emotional stress. Wilson continues:

> All our awareness is grounded in forms of spatial experience and that spatial experience is not pure but charged with emotional stress from our "first-born affinities." There is a domain of experience, born before the use of words, yet structured like a language replete with its own expectations, memory and powers of communication: a domain that is indeed the primary source of the one language that is truly universal and to which we have given the name of "body language."[4]

Wilson rightly suggests, "it is intrinsically these sensations [of body language] that are the primary vehicle for architectural experience."[5]

After the Russian Revolution, a newly independent Finland strove to modernize by looking westward—out of reach of the Russian Bear (be it Red or White).[6] When Finns rushed to replace wooden dwellings with modern concrete row houses, the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto feared that the new architecture would create a sense of alienation. Although by no means encouraging a return to the backwoods, Aalto felt that the indigenous buildings could better satisfy the human need for shelter. In their haste to avoid Red dictatorship, the Finns would encounter another, subtler sort of dictatorship, later described by Aalto as "the slavery of human beings to technical futilities that in themselves do not contain one piece of real humanity."[7] Here Aalto was referring to the limited rationalism of Modernity.

In the 1930s, Finnish architecture, like Finnish society, stood poised between the wilderness backwoods and the rationale of industrial European Modernity. Alvar Aalto sought to forge both a physical and a phenomenal relationship between these two in an extended commission from the Ahlström Company to design a series of housing projects for employees of a vast pulp factory in Sunila. These projects, largely designed between 1935-37 with some additional housing blocks in the mid-1940s and early 1950s, ranged from minimal housing for workers to more generous dwellings for engineers and managers.[8] In Karl Fleig's synopsis of Aalto's oeuvre we see the progression through these commissions, highlighting the growth of Aalto's preoccupation with threshold and transition details. [9] The content of such architectural detailing was Aalto's concern, too, for the alienating effects of modern life on the well-being of *uomo piccolo*—little man as he affectionately called his users.[10] Aalto judged that many modern buildings did not enrich the psycho-physical life, but all too often created further schisms between humans and the environment, between people, and more importantly within the person. This was due, Aalto believed, to the buildings' rigidity and inflexibility.[11] If architecture had the task "to aid in the solution of wide-ranging humanistic, socio-economic, and psychological problems," he argued, it "must be allowed as much internal and formal flexibility as possible."[12] Humans, he felt, were forced into architecture that ill-fitted their needs—architecture that was not rational "from the human point of view."[13] I would suggest that this preoccupation spoke, too, of Aalto's own deep schisms within, and the importance of the rejuvenating contact with nature to comfort and heal.[14] Aalto wanted to offer in his architecture that which he knew to be essential within himself, and between himself and the world.

In Sunila, Aalto's concern for the process of entering, and for the richness of being "in-between" inside and outside, gradually came to the fore.[15] His first workers housing in Sunila had no balconies, and appeared at first glance to be scantily garbed in the stripped Modernism of Gropius' Siemensstadt Housing, but he argued that "every family had no difficulty in gaining direct access to the landscape." [16] Aalto's second scheme contained, by his own admission, "practically worthless" token balconies (Fig.1), like the ones his friend Gropius had offered students at the Bauhaus.[17] This important failure pushed Aalto to make access to nature not just a desire, but an essential aspect of his housing design. He began to explore the intrinsic relation between architecture and landscape, advancing ideas of "the trinity of the human being, the room, and the garden" and its out-working in "outside rooms" that he had put forward ten years before.[18] He became determined to offer "access to the landscape" from all dwellings, believing that sudden alienation from nature, which had occurred because of Finland's "ever-increasing mechanization," was responsible for many social ills. Yet Aalto knew, too, that "also our own actions estrange us from nature." [19] In his third housing scheme in Sunila, Aalto created link houses that stepped up the hill in section (Fig.2), providing more extensive balconies, a typology he used again in Kauttua.[20]

After these "workers" housing schemes, Aalto had the opportunity to further explore the relationship between architecture and landscape in the more generous specification allowed in the housing for engineers. Here, on a flatter piece of woodland ground, he flexed the plan instead of the section, allowing it to open up to the south and the sun like a flower. Unlike the very rational rectilinearity of the earlier housing schemes, the plan flexes (Fig.3) in what he later called "elastic" or "flexible standardisation," accommodating views of the natural environment and the need of the users for more privacy and individuality. By the 1930s such a conscious accommodation of both natural and human circumstances had become a central tenet of Aalto's design process, and was not unlike Haring's *Leistungsform* or content-derived form.

The access to these "engineer's" row houses is of particular interest. Trees grow against the whitewashed façade, while an "in-between" space or architectural "moment" creates a transition between two places and two states of mind (Fig.4). Here the "moment" both divides and unites the tree and whitewashed façade, easing one to and fro: forward into the white Modernity and backward, into the folkloric realm of *Tapio*, the forest god (Fig.5).

Figure 3. Both images show southerly aspect of engineer's Housing, Sunila, Aalto, 1938

With the vernacular accent of his mother tongue, Aalto enunciates this gesture of welcome into Modernity, this easing between nature and culture. He uses wood, whose Latin root (*materia*) is closely related to the word mater, meaning mother and maternal love.[21] This is a playful reminder of the essence of the argument, the preverbal, physical reality of primal embrace from which our body-space language grows. Aalto believed that wood was "psychologically very valuable,"[22] perhaps due to its rich "kinship with man and living nature," and the "pleasant sensation" of its tactile quality. Thereafter, Aalto accessed the potential of Modernism with wood.

The smooth round-wood does not alienate the body, Aalto argued. It does not conduct heat away from the hand, as metal does.[23] The wood thus provides a tectonic transition. From forest the visitor passes through a trellised gateway that marks the territorial entrance to the cold white façade of the north wall (Fig.3). Yet against the hard façade the gateway appears vulnerable, a palimpsest of the Finnish tradition and mysticism of forest lore thrust up against whitewashed rationalism.[24] It is also a gesture of subliminal encouragement to dwell, more fully, in the new architecture, reassuring us that the old relationship with nature can be maintained, or made anew. It marks an acknowledgement of something archetypal. Aalto thus manifests a transition because the Finns "no longer did it for themselves," as Van Eyck put it. They no longer dwelt, eye to hand to mouth, in the forest,[25] no longer marked the subtle boundaries of their shelter or settlements, and thus were losing conscious sight of the psycho-social reality that is inherent in the physical realm.

The round-wood trellis is a psycho-spatial episode, functioning, in Aalto's terms, "to tie the threads of a living present with those of a living past."[26] Yet crucially, Aalto wrote that such manoeuvres were a "point of departure,"[27] existing in order to "meet today's needs."[28] The clear tectonic connections between these trellises and the vernacular Finnish enclosures do not suggest that Aalto sought to re-create ethnological specimens. Rather, they form a caveat to Functionalism, reminding us that limited Functionalism and the "intoxication with Modernism"[29] failed to address some realities of human life. Rationalism, he felt, "often suffers from a lack of humanity," and needed to be "expanded." Such "in-between" episodes at Sunila were Aalto's way of addressing the "human question." I suggest that, in both the form of wooden entrance detail and the particular tectonic manifestation, Aalto sought to draw the users deeper into themselves, a "moderating pause" in which to acclimatize,[30] at the same time rooting Modernism in both the cultural past and the environmental present. In this architectural pause he was reaching for what was missing in much of Finland's new, urban architecture as it raced, full-tilt, into that "rootless, airborne internationalism."[31]

Skeptical about the promises of the Modern epoch, Aalto's work constantly questioned the status quo of the Modern dictatorship, as he saw it, believing it could be transformed "into its apparent opposite, to love with critical sensibility."[32] Here Aalto nails his colors to the

Figure 5. Vernacular enclosure, Lieksa Folk Museum, Finland

mast, and his wooden poles to the whitewashed façade of Modernist architecture. In doing so, he offered "little man" a way in to the alienating modern epoch. He established a crucial rubric for accessing and simultaneously subverting Modernity. This is important to the current argument, since by even suggesting the need for a transition between inside and outside Aalto was searching deep in the very nature of architecture as shelter, and was intuitively speaking at the psychological as well as the physical level. Here we return to the mother tongue—the physical language of space and embrace.

In this way, I suggest, Aalto's entrance to his Sunila engineer's housing offered the users the early opportunity to dwell more fully in his housing, to access the benefits of Modern living by carrying with them the rooting relationship of nature without and nature within. This is not as far-fetched an idea as it might seem. If architecture invites and does not repel or alienate, those who use it may do so in a more relaxed way. In "The Natural Imagination" Wilson suggests that architecture can accommodate, and even embody something of the emotional drama of human life. He relates the deepest root of this idea to the work of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein.[33] Like his friend, art theorist Adrian Stokes,[34] Wilson utilizes Klein's theories of the development of the infant psyche, and most importantly her identification of the two polar "positions" or modes of experience, Envelopment and Exposure, and the delicate and fecund place between these. This psycho-spatial grammar, rooted in the first holding environment, is extrapolated in various forms (both positive and negative) into our human futures. Aalto suggested, "One way to produce a more humane built environment is to expand our definition of rationalism." In "Rationalism and Man" (1935) he went on to speculate that the most important area of demand that an architect must address is "invisible to the eye: this area perhaps conceals the demands that are closest to the human individual and thus elude definition." Therein, he concluded lie, "the purely human questions."[35] It was this architectural essence or "energy" that Wilson explores in the opening quotation, above.

Aalto thought that the age-old feel for materials was severed in early Modernism. Therefore it is no accident that the "in-between" episode in Sunila is made from wood. To Aalto it mattered deeply that metal conducted heat away from the hand and wood did not.[36] For this reason Aalto used wood on occasions when he wanted to extend an invitation to the deepest realms of architecture. But he chose wood, too, for its association with nature and therefore the capacity to rehearse, in the heart of the building, the relationship with the forest. Within his buildings, and in-between them and their immediate environment, he invited the user to keep relating to the natural environment. Aalto's writing reinforces his architectural argument that we deny our inner-life at a great cost,[37] and indeed, for Aalto personally nature played a crucial regenerative role in his own life-long struggle with deep psychological disturbance.[38] Aalto's work offers the users a way in to their "hidden" experience—what Suzanne K. Langer called the realm of

Figure 4. Wooden "inbetween" episode, Engineer's housing, Sunila, Aalto 1939

"threads of unrecorded reality"[39]: threads connecting the living present with the living past, both personally and culturally. As I suggest elsewhere, Aalto was able to shore up his own vulnerable self by weaving such disparate and often broken threads into his creative work.[40] At its best, architecture subtly invites us to be more fully human, and aspires to remind us of our relation to the "other," be it another person, or some natural phenomenon. The architectural moments Aalto creates, such as the threshold in Sunila's Engineer's Housing, seek to encompass the whole human condition—"his comedy and tragedy both."[41]

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Notes

1. Colin St John Wilson, "The Natural Imagination," *Architectural Reflections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18.
2. The quote is derived from a 1962 untitled paper by Aldo Van Eyck, reprinted in *Team 10 Primer*, ed. Alison Smithson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 43.
3. Wilson, 16-17.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.,12.
6. Having always been downtrodden beneath the kingdoms of Russia and Sweden, and being in no mind to allow Russians to over run her again, the rapid expansion of her fledgling economy was a bulwark against further, Soviet, dictatorship.
7. Alvar Aalto, "The Architectural Struggle," 1957, reprinted in *Alvar Aalto: Sketches*, ed. Göran Schildt, trans. Stuart Wrede (Cambridge: MIT Press, c1978), 145.
8. The plan for the whole area was conceived at the start, although the housing projects proceeded in series. Aalto wrote, "Only the south slopes of the hills are for dwellings, the valleys are traffic ways and gardens. On the north slopes the pine forest shall remain undisturbed." *Alvar Aalto*, ed. Karl Fleig (Zurich: Verlag für Architektur Artemis, 1990), 96.
9. Aalto, "Art and Technology," 1955, reprinted in Schildt, 128.
10. Ibid., 129.
11. Aalto, "Rationalism and Man," Ibid., 50.
12. Aalto, "The Influence of Construction and Materials on Modern Architecture," 1938, Ibid., 61.
13. "Rationalism and Man," Ibid., 50.
14. Sarah Menin and Flora Samuel, *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier* (London: Routledge, 2003).
15. This interest in inside/outside had been a concern for Aalto during his early neo-classical style of design as is demonstrated in his famous Pompeian sketch of the aedicular atrium moment in the Villa for his brother.
16. Aalto cited in Fleig, 96. Fleig's synopsis of Aalto's work was compiled in collaboration with Aalto, who had a hand in writing up the project descriptions.
17. Sarah Menin, "The Meandering Wave from Sunila to Marseille," *PTAH 1* (Helsinki: The Alvar Aalto Academy, 2003): 42-51.
18. Aalto had illustrated his argument with both Pompeian villas and Le Corbusier's Esprit Nouveau Pavilion. Alvar Aalto, "From Doorstep to Living Room" reprinted in *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*, ed. Göran Schildt (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), 49-55. Herein Aalto wrote of "the trinity of human being, room and garden," 50.
19. Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," Schildt (1978), 131. This idea grew into a new housing typology; three floors of accommodation stepped into a hill, with direct access at the rear to nature. After achieving this in Sunila he repeated it, most successfully in the Kauttua Workers Housing scheme.
20. Ibid.
21. Macfarlane, J. *Dictionary of Latin and English Languages* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, n.d.).
22. Aalto, "Wood as a Building Material," 1956, reprinted in Schildt (1978), 142.
23. Aalto, "Rationalism and Man,"1935, reprinted in Schildt (1997), 91.
24. Aalto, "Experimental House," Schildt (1978), 116.
25. J. Pallasmaa, "Eye, Hand, Head and Heart: Conceptual Knowledge and Tacit Embodied Wisdom in Architecture," in *The Four Faces of Architecture*, eds. L.Villner and A. Abarkan (Stockholm: RIT, 2005), 61-72.
26. Aalto used these words to describe Gunnar Asplund's architectural legacy in "E.G.Asplund in Memorium," Schildt (1978), 66.
27. Aalto, "The Dwelling as a Problem," Schildt (1978), 31.
28. Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," Schildt (1978), 131.
29. Aalto, "Rationalism and Man," Schildt (1978), 47.
30. Wilson, "The Natural Imagination," 16.
31. Aalto, "Art and Technology," 1955, reprinted in Schildt (1978), 129.
32. Aalto, "Centenary Speech," Schildt (1978), 163.
33. 'Wilson, "The Natural Imagination". See also Sarah Menin and Stephen Kite, An Architecture of Invitation: Colin St John Wilson, Ashgate, 2005.
34. Adrian Stokes, *Three Essays: The Luxury and Necessity of Paintings* (London: Tavistock, 1961).
35. Aalto, "Rationalism and Man,"1935, Schildt (1997), 91.
36. Ibid., 90-1.
37. Menin, "Aalto and the Tutelary Goddesses," in Andrew Ballantyne, ed., *Architectures: Modernism and After* (New York: Blackwell, 2003), 57-87.
38. Menin and Samuel, *Nature and Space*.
39. Susanne Katherina Knauth Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, c1993), 281.
40. Menin, "Aalto and the Tutelary Goddesses"; idem, "The Profound Logos: Creative Parallels in the Lives and Work of Aalto and Sibelius," *Journal of Architecture*, Spring 2003: 131-148.
41. Aalto, "Instead of an Article,"1958, reprinted in Schildt (1978), 161.