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Source: *AA Files*, No. 65 (2012), pp. 72-75

Published by: [Architectural Association School of Architecture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41762328>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 21:54

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Reading Aalto through the Baroque

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen

Imagine a piece of architectural writing in which descriptions of visual form, details of an architect's persona, biographical encounters as well as contemporary and historical events all merge into one continuous topology, making both architecture and the act of writing itself feel as if they were organic extensions of life. Such is the case in the chapter devoted to Alvar Aalto in the second, 1949 edition of Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. Indeed, while Aalto is today often treated as a representative of the 'other tradition' of modernism, this chapter reminds us that he once occupied a prominent position not only within the international modern movement but also in its historiography. For not only does Giedion's account place Aalto in the company of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe as one of the so-called modern masters, but he also makes the section devoted to him the longest of them all – 39 pages, compared to 35 for Gropius, 31 for Le Corbusier, 27 for Wright and a meagre 23 for poor old Mies. As much as extent, in the attention given to Aalto's persona, to say nothing of his cultural background, the chapter also departs from the largely formal emphases of the rest of the book – a fact attested to by Giedion himself, who, in a letter to Aalto in January 1949, admits that the section of his book dedicated to the Finnish architect's work 'has become somewhat long in comparison to the other chapters', and that this 'might cause annoyance [*Unwillen*] among some of my friends. Yet, as far as I am concerned, the chapter has made the book much clearer.'

One could well ask why Aalto had not been included in the first edition of the book published eight years earlier, in 1941. Giedion had actually written his first article on Aalto in 1931, and his interest seems to have intensified further after the launch of the bentwood Paimio chair at the Milan Triennale in 1933, for it is at this point that he writes Aalto a postcard exclaiming 'Sie werden ja noch zum "Magus des Nordens"! ('You are becoming the "Magus of the North"!').² Furthermore, by September 1938 and the beginning of Giedion's lecture series at Harvard (a series that would form the basis of *Space, Time and Architecture*), Aalto's international fame had just been cemented with a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with the show and accompanying catalogue highlighting the curvilinear form as Aalto's architectural signature, just as Giedion later characterised it in his book.

However, regardless of the motives behind this seemingly glaring omission and then over-indulged inclusion, there is no doubt that the idea of Aalto as an architect worth taking seriously was greatly reinforced by the Second World War. In fact Giedion published the first version of what became the Aalto chapter during this period. An article titled 'Irrationalität und Standard' (Irrationality and Standard) appeared in the Swiss magazine *Die Weltwoche* in May 1941,

shortly after Aalto himself had come to Zurich to deliver a lecture on Finnish reconstruction (in the brief lull in between two wars with the Soviet Union). It was in this article that Giedion first established the link between Aalto the person and Finland his country of origin, by stating that 'Finland is with Aalto wherever he goes.'

The chapter in *Space, Time and Architecture* then adds the curvilinear form into this equation of man and nation, drawing parallels between Finnish geography and Aalto's defining emblem. The outcome is surely one of the strangest pieces of scholarly architectural writing, with a large part of the strangeness deriving from the fact that Giedion was not only interested in the visual and formal dimensions of Aalto's curvilinearity, but seems also to have employed it as a textual device, making themes weave in and out of focus while inviting the readers to add further associations of their own. In accordance with this open invitation, and again through Aalto, one could speculate on how Giedion may have been influenced by writings on the baroque in the 1930s by the Spanish philosopher Eugenio d'Ors and by the French art historian Henri Focillon, and in particular by the way they offer a new take on the perennial problem of how to make sense of the historicity of architecture.

The basic contents of Giedion's book are quite familiar. It is a retelling of the history of modern architecture since the Renaissance as an alternation between disintegration and integration, between reason and feeling, and tending towards a synthesis. The chapter on Aalto presents the Finnish architect as an ultimate exemplar in this regard: 'By 1930 the new means of expression had been attained. Now it was possible to strive for further development and to dare to leap from the rational – functional to the irrational – organic.'³ In this, Aalto's assigned historical role was nothing less than to 'to re-establish a union between life and architecture'.⁴

The undulating wall – which resonates in the work of other architects elsewhere in the book

Sigfried Giedion,
postcard to Alvar Aalto, 7 July 1933
© Alvar Aalto Museum

– plays a crucial role in this synthesis. Giedion traces the motif back to the baroque period, and in particular to Francesco Borromini's church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontana, where it is credited with an ability to merge different building elements into one synthetic whole – 'baroque manifests itself as a new power to mould space, and to produce an astonishing and unified whole from the most various parts'.⁵ Importantly, Giedion also treats these rippling walls as products of their time – defined by social and economic conditions, and by technical means – as well as something that anticipates future uses and technologies.

In referencing Borromini, Giedion is not concerned with the revival of the baroque as a historical style. Instead, he treats the baroque as a state of mind tending towards a synthesis between inside and outside, not just in architecture but also in human terms, as it marked a moment when the external world was shaped by our inner desires, and vice versa. In this sense, the resurfacing of the key formal trope of the baroque was read by Giedion as a sign of the reappearance of this synthetic mindset.

Giedion inherited his interest in the baroque from his teacher Heinrich Wölfflin, whose highly influential book, *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888), established the style that up to then had been considered too pathological to be worthy of serious study. Giedion's own 1922 student dissertation, 'Spätbarocker und Romantischer Klassizismus' (Late-Baroque and Romantic Classicism), contributed to the discussion by suggesting that the baroque had a universalism, an 'unconscious' ability to 'recall' earlier primitive and 'völkisch' forms that resonated through to the present.⁶ The idea that art and architecture could recycle past forms and evoke past eras ran counter to the Hegelian notion of the zeitgeist, by then entrenched in the foundational ideas of the modern movement.

Two decades later, *Space, Time and Architecture* continued to challenge the Hegelian concept of inexorable progress by drawing attention to the way individuals and civilisations have questioned a relationship to their own particular historical moment. To introduce this new paradigm, Giedion refers to Wölfflin's teacher Jacob Burckhardt, who 'had no love for his own time: he saw during the 1840s an artificially constituted Europe which was on the verge of being overwhelmed by a flood of brutal forces'. Giedion goes on to argue that Burckhardt did not just study history for history's sake, but used the Renaissance as a pantheistic model for the 'regeneration' of his own age – 'Burckhardt was a man of great vitality, and a man of vitality cannot entirely desert his own time'. Later in the book, he places Aalto alongside James Joyce and Pablo Picasso (whose *Guernica* is cited as an example of the highest artistic achievement), as artists able to embrace whole histories and human destinies in their art. Giedion calls this ability to think and feel beyond one's temporal and

geographic confines a 'universal outlook upon the world' – a definition that in many ways echoes his characterisation of the baroque.⁷

It is likely that Giedion first became aware of the resurgence of interest in the baroque during the 1930s, when he may well have gained access to the work of Eugenio d'Ors, whose book *Lo Barroco* (1930) treats its subject as an attitude rather than a style, akin to the paradigms celebrated in *Space, Time and Architecture*. The introductory chapter of *Lo Barroco* recalls a visit to Vienna's baroque museum by the late-seventeenth-century Austrian architect Lukas von Hildebrant, which revealed to him 'the virulence of the baroque and its identical rhythm in the most remote regions of the world, and even beyond the world'.⁸ For d'Ors, the baroque was distinguished by an infinite folding of different temporalities and geographies into what he would later define as a baroque sense of time and place. It spans an infinite number of art and philosophical practices, among them the work of Milton, Wagner, Rousseau and El Greco. In this context the baroque is a 'style of dispersion, archetype of the polymorphous... which at the same time manifests the presence of a common denominator, revealing the secret of a certain human constancy'. Assuming Giedion read *Lo Barroco*, he would no doubt have been sympathetic to the chapter titled 'The Lost Paradise', in which d'Ors declares 'the baroque is secretly animated by the nostalgia for paradise'. Here, Giedion's idea of synthesis comes to mind, like d'Ors' paradise, it represents both the beginning and the end of history – we recognise it in the past and yearn for it in the future.⁹

The French art historian Henri Focillon built on the notion of a permanent baroque, spanning various times and places, in his 1934 study *Vie des formes* (The Life of Forms): 'the baroque state reveals identical traits existing as constants within the most diverse environments and periods of time'.¹⁰ Like d'Ors, Focillon used the baroque to put forward a historical model that highlighted continuities and associations through different periods. Other parallels between the two readings are obvious. Consider, for example, this statement at the beginning of Focillon's book: 'A work of art results from an altogether independent activity; it is the translation of a free and exalted dream. But flowing together within it the energies of many civilisations may

be plainly discerned.' Here, like d'Ors, Focillon treats the baroque as something both real – an actual work of art – as well as virtual – the potential of something yet to be realised. Focillon continues: '[Baroque forms] live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own; they proliferate like some vegetable monstrosity. They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities.'¹¹

Although it is difficult to verify Giedion's own bibliographical references, the concepts he articulates in *Space, Time and Architecture*

Focillon calls the 'confusion between form and sign'¹⁴ – that according to him characterises baroque art and architecture – and Giedion's treatment of the undulating wall as a kind of floating signifier able to gain various material and functional applications at different times, proposing a model where forms could have both a past as well as a projective historical role.

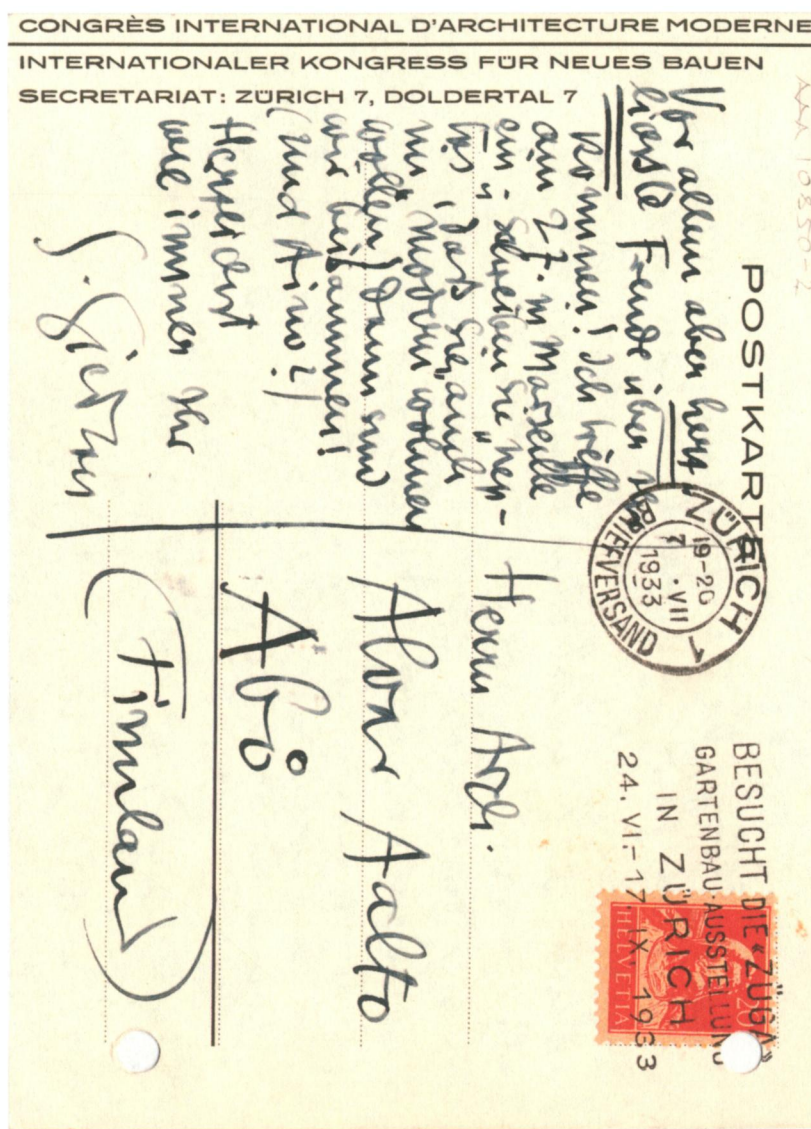
In Focillon's words, with the baroque 'the confusion between form and sign never becomes more complete... form is tortured to fit a "meaning"'.¹⁵ Similarly, in Giedion's treatment, Aalto's curvilinear motif seems to linger within an in-

between state of complete vagueness – it can be anything and mean anything – while ultimately settling upon very concrete meanings and functions. For example, a view of a characteristically Finnish lake landscape is juxtaposed with images of the Savoy glass vase, a plan of the Finnish pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair and a bird's-eye view of the Baker House, evoking a multitude of references and associations and suggesting that this form has the power to metamorphose into anything at any scale: migrating not only from landscape to architecture to product design, but also further into different functions and materials.

With this migration, and as if to counter the dogma of form follows function, Giedion seems to suggest that the curvilinear form has the ability to generate multiple meanings. Furthermore, he reads it as not only the outcome but the trigger of a creative process. For example, the acoustic ceiling at the Viipuri Library represents the 'freedom of opportunity to excite the plastic imagination of an artist'.¹⁶ In other words, curvilinear form has the particular capacity to unlock creativity and allow unpredictable new solutions to emerge in

response to perennial architectural problems.

By calling the curvilinear form a 'constituent fact', one of the things that are 'constant but only occasionally reappear', Giedion also emphasises that it is not simply a personal idiosyncratic gesture, but part of a longer historical trajectory. This definition suggests a kind of latency – a term Giedion actually uses to imply how certain architectural ideas, like the interpenetration of space and volume, were latent before the right technology (glass and steel) made them possible. At other times latency manifests itself in his writing through a sense of nostalgia and longing:



certainly bear strong resemblance to those of d'Ors and Focillon. It is hard to avoid the similarity between d'Ors' idea of 'constancy' and Giedion's idea of the undulating wall as a 'constituent fact' – that is, one of 'those tendencies which, when they are suppressed, inevitably reappear'.¹² Likewise, Giedion paraphrases Focillon's idea of a 'life of forms' almost verbatim, arguing that architecture is not bound by time or in response to historical conditions, but 'has a life of its own, it grows or dwindles, finds new potentialities and forgets them again'.¹³ Parallels can also be drawn between what

'out of forgotten strata of consciousness the elements of primitive man which are dormant in us are again brought to light, and at the same time unity is sought with the present day'.¹⁷

A key concept underpinning Giedion's phenomenological epistemology, latency is based on the notion that our daily experiences are shaped by things that we cannot quite see or think, that is, by things that are unconscious. In psychoanalysis it refers to a pre-conscious state, and interestingly Giedion uses a number of psychoanalytic terms, such as 'subconscious' and 'unconscious', throughout his book. Also relevant in this context is Freud's notion of the latency phase, when the child builds up defence mechanisms against certain natural drives. Yet, as we have learned from Freud, rather than remaining buried, hidden latencies become virulent, guiding our deepest thoughts and impulses.¹⁸ Giedion's reference to the 'irrational' in the Aalto chapter can be linked to these psychoanalytical ideas, signifying that at best, most synthetic architecture is not just a product of the conscious, rational mind, but also an outcome of deeper, irrational levels of the human psyche. Giedion's idea of history is organised in the same manner: he calls the time frame he is writing in a 'period of transition', implying that something latent was about to burst onto the surface.¹⁹

In Giedion's view, the historian's task was to detect such latencies. Reading Aalto through the baroque therefore allowed him to see hidden meanings, impulses and associations behind a single architectural element, be it a vase or an acoustic ceiling. In the process he suggests that writing history is a hermeneutic project. 'History is not simply the repository of unchanging facts, but a process, a pattern of living and changing attitudes and interpretations'. A 'contemporary historian', even when looking backwards 'transforms its object: every spectator at every period – at every moment, indeed – inevitably transforms the past according to his own nature'.²⁰ For Giedion, as for many of his contemporaries, to discuss the baroque meant going beyond standard historical writing and transcending the merely descriptive, empirical analysis in order to take a stand on the world they were living in.

In Giedion, as in d'Ors and Focillon, the emphasis throughout is on the human being, whether an artist, historian or a perceiving sub-

ject. Interweaving the viewpoints of the artist and of the beholder, they all make the case that the subject is inseparable from the world they live in, the objects they encounter and the buildings they occupy. Art is an integral part of life, or as Focillon puts it succinctly 'a work of art is situated in space'.²¹

In his opening chapter titled 'Forms in the Realm of Space', Focillon talks about how the 'space of life' and the 'space of art' converge through art's ability to mould space – a 'plastic and changing material'²² – according to its own needs. In this equation art expresses the vitality

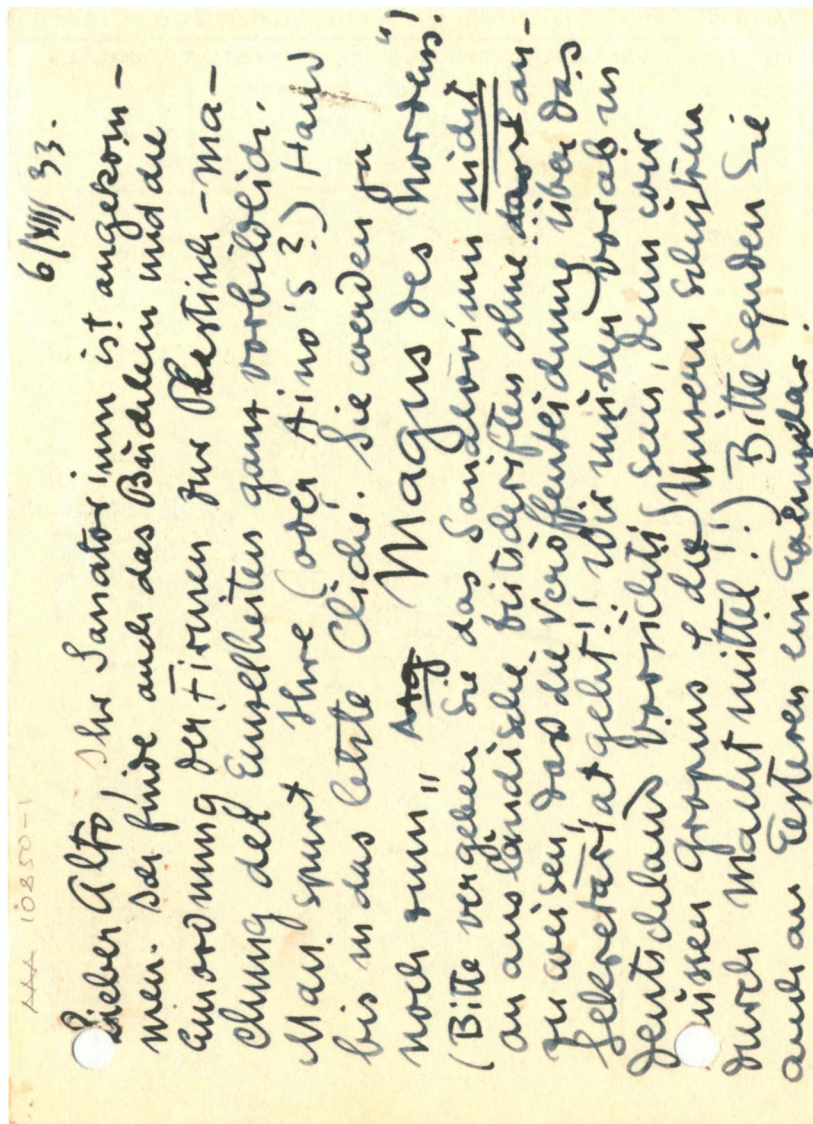
The baroque also provided a new epistemological paradigm, marking the shift from an emphasis on abstract knowledge and ways of seeing to a multi-sensory response to the surrounding world, or the moment when Descartes' notion of *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am') gave way to the idea of 'homo cogitat' (man thinks), in the phrase of the great baroque philosopher Spinoza. Here all thinking and being is directed to the world; there is no foundational prior self.²⁴ Tellingly, Focillon's book culminates in a chapter named 'In Praise of Hands', which treats hands not simply as the vehicle for executing an idea but as multi-sensory living things – as 'receptive organs' which have a life of their own beyond the mind.²⁵

It is no surprise, then, that this kind of attention to the external world features heavily in the chapter in *Space, Time and Architecture* devoted to Aalto: 'One cannot speak about Aalto the architect without speaking about Aalto the man.'²⁶ Giedion refers to Aalto's ability to connect with people – he even 'talks to old ladies on trains' – and to absorb ideas and formal motives from his contemporaries, integrating them into his own work in a fluid and organic manner. Aalto is seen as a sponge, a sum of the events, encounters and influences. And the curvilinear form acts here as a notation of his actions and experiences unfolding in real space and time.

In linking Aalto's persona to his signature formal device, Giedion's approach comes close to the way his wife, the noted art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker, treats Jean Arp and his biomorphic art. (It is worth noting that Aalto probably saw Arp's work for the first time during a 1931 visit to the Giedions in Zurich.²⁷) Importantly, Giedion-Welcker did not see biomorphic abstraction as simply a formal counter-pole to geometric abstraction – a reading promoted

by Alfred Barr in the 1936 MOMA exhibition 'Cubism and Abstract Art' – but, rather, as an outcome of the 'universalist' mindset able to merge different temporal events into a whole (akin to how d'Ors, Focillon and Giedion interpreted the baroque). As Giedion-Welcker put it, Arp's work was 'pure poetry, which allows everything anecdotal and specific, as well as psychological and individual, to flow into one large reservoir'.²⁸

'Aalto is restless', Giedion says. He 'does not always remain in the pine and birch forests of Finland... His nature leads him to come into contact with whatever the place and period have



of the world and the subsequent fulfilment of the subject when it allows the world to pour in. Giedion attempts something similar when he refers to Leibniz's notion of the monad, with its 'internal relationships to the entire universe'²³ where everybody and everything is conceived as both a distinct entity and as part of a greater whole. The historical baroque provided a model because it did not confine itself to a clear frame, but burst out at the seams, as it were, moulding space and investing it with a dynamism that could only be experienced by the moving body.

to offer for the forces of artistic development.²⁹ It is important to note that nowhere in this chapter does Giedion claim that Aalto's architecture is the outcome of some kind of mystical *genius loci*. Also, when he puts forward geographic narratives, the emphasis is on a more open-ended process. Echoing his reading of Arp's native Alsace, he defines Finland as a *Randstaat*, a border state in a constant state of becoming, both culturally and geographically. An aerial view of a lake-filled landscape – an image Aalto himself started to use in both his buildings and his articles around 1937 – captures the argument, depicting Finland as half-water and half-land – the ultimate liminal zone – evolving without a clear ideological script. Giedion's presentation, of course, is not without an ideological and political subtext: Finland is shaped into a pure geographic narrative, without political currents, during the most difficult time of its existence, when it found itself at war with Russia.

The search for a baroque sensibility in Aalto's architecture culminates in the work of the Italian critic Gillo Dorfles, a professor of aesthetics at Trieste and Milan and an active member of both the Italian Movimento per l'arte concreta (MAC) and the France Groupe Espace, both founded in the late 1940s, the latter by the architect André Bloc. In Dorfles' modestly illustrated book, *Barocco nell'Architettura Moderna* (1951), Aalto is represented by the Savoy vase and an interior perspective of the Finnish Pavilion at the New York World's Fair – examples which, again following Giedion, identify the curvilinear form as the overriding leitmotif in Aalto's work.

Dorfles had reviewed the d'Ors book for *Domus* in 1946 in an article titled 'Attualità del barocco' (The Timeliness of the Baroque). His own book builds to some extent on the argument of d'Ors, referring to the constant presence in art of the baroque as the new *Kunstwollen*, in which the dynamic overcomes the static, the tactile the optical, the organic or plastic the geometric – whether in architecture, painting or music. However, he then introduces a new concept, the 'neo-baroque', to describe what he sees as a contemporary reformulation of this impulse. Aalto is placed in the company of figures such as Carlo Mollino and Oscar Niemeyer, as inheritors of the tradition laid down by cubism and expressionism in the early part of the twentieth century. Also different in Dorfles is the willingness to assign an explicit ethical and moral dimension to forms characteristic of the neo-baroque: free forms that appeared to suggest softer, more humane values.

Therefore while d'Ors and Focillon, and subsequently Giedion, propagated the idea of a universalising baroque mindset, Dorfles instrumentalised the baroque towards his vision of a postwar architecture that enters the social realm. With its concrete and palpable presence, Aalto's architecture represents for Dorfles a kind of saturated reality effect. His goal is best

put in words in the manifesto of the Groupe Espace he helped to craft in 1951, which calls for 'art that is inscribed in real space, responding to all functional requirements and all human needs – both simple and most elevated'.³⁰

Aalto's architecture was particularly popular in postwar Italy, not least because of the revival of interest in the historical baroque during the 1950s. In this context it represented, like the baroque, the ultimate 'open work', to borrow Umberto Eco's term for a work that is to be completed by the viewer. Understandably, architecture liberated from explicit meaning represented freedom in a country that had succumbed to totalitarianism during the war. A special 1958 issue of the journal *Zodiac* devoted to Aalto bears witness to the intensity of the response, among architects, artists and critics to Aalto's sculpted, baroque-like spaces. Describing the interior of Vuoksenniska Church, the painter and critic Pier Carlo Santini writes, as if in a trance (or as if quaintly translated): 'With what does it rhyme this strange architecture that escapes any classification in its ultimate greatness? With what indeed, if not with beauty nowadays so oft wronged, so oft denied in man's life?'³¹

The opening images in *Zodiac*, which depict Aalto sketching in his studio, capture perhaps better than any words what postwar critics found so compelling in Aalto: embodied engagement and feeling. They bring to mind Focillon's chapter 'In Praise of Hands', in which he calls hands (somewhat baroquely) the windows onto the human soul and celebrates their creative actions as an unmediated registering of the movements of the mind: 'Through his hands man establishes contact with the austerity of thought. They quarry its rough mass. Upon it they impose form, outline and, in the very act of writing, style.'³²

Indeed, the reception of Aalto's work during the immediate postwar years was never dictated solely by formal questions. The baroque offered a model for an architecture that was guided by a deeper motivation, that embodied the presence of the soul and a distinct way of looking at the world, and stirred the emotions of those who used it. D'Ors, Focillon and Giedion were all interested in the question of how a style conveys a way of thinking or a particular sensibility. The latter found an ideal link between the curvilinear form and Aalto's endlessly curious mind and restless feet. If the now sadly forgotten early-twentieth-century German architectural historian Karl Scheffler once defined Hans Poelzig with the words 'there is gothic in him',³³ then Giedion and Dorfles could equally well have pronounced, 'there is baroque in Aalto'. Their contemporaries would have known immediately what they meant.

Alvar Aalto, from *Zodiac* 3, 1957
Photos Göran Schildt

1. Letter from Sigfried Giedion to Alvar Aalto, 10 January 1949, Alvar Aalto Museum, Helsinki.
2. Postcard from Sigfried Giedion to Alvar Aalto, 7 July 1933, Alvar Aalto Museum, Helsinki.
3. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Birth of a New Tradition*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), p 566.
4. *Ibid*, p 565.
5. *Ibid*, p 109.
6. *Ibid*, p 14.
7. *Ibid*, pp 3, 4, 7.
8. Eugenio d'Ors, *Du Baroque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), p 15.
9. *Ibid*, pp 96, 37.
10. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. Charles Beecher Hogan and George Kubler (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942), p 15.
11. *Ibid*, pp 31, 58.
12. *Ibid*, p 18.
13. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 23.
14. Henri Focillon, *op cit*, p 18.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 579.
17. *Ibid*, pp 529, 621.
18. See Stefanie Diekmanna and Thomas Khurana (eds), *Latenz: 40 Annäherungen an einen Begriff* (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007) for further discussion on this topic.
19. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 11.
20. *Ibid*, p 5.
21. Henri Focillon, *op cit*, p 63.
22. *Ibid*, p 65.
23. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 22.
24. See Charles T Wolfe, 'From Spinoza to the Socialist Cortex: Steps Toward the Social Brain', in Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Niedich (eds), *Cognitive Architecture: From Bio-politics to Neo-politics – Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication and Information* (Rotterdam: o10, 2010), p 190.
25. Henri Focillon, *op cit*, p 158.
26. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 603.
27. For more information on Aalto's relationship with the Giedions see Teppo Jokinen and Bruno Maurer, 'Magus des Nordens': *Alvar Aalto und der Schweiz* (Zurich: gta-Verlag, 1998) and Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity and Geo-politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
28. Carola Giedion-Welcker, 'Hans Arp: Dichter und Maler', in *Das Kunstblatt* (Berlin, 1930), reprinted in Reinhold Hohl (ed), *Carola Giedion-Welcker Schriften, 1926–1971* (Cologne: M Dumont Schenbert, 1973), p 246.
29. Sigfried Giedion, *op cit*, p 621.
30. *Groupe Espace Manifesto*, October 1951, reprinted in Luciano Berni Canani and Giorgio Di Genova (eds), *MAC/ESPAC: Arte concreta in Italia e in Francia, 1948–1958* (Bologna: Edizioni Bora, 1999), p 27. Author's own translation.
31. Pier Carlo Santini, 'Alvar Aalto from Sunila to Imatra: Ideas, Projects and Buildings', *Zodiac* 3 (1957), pp 27–28.
32. Henri Focillon, *op cit*, p 157.
33. Karl Scheffler, 'as große Schauspielhaus', in *Kunst und Künstler: Monatschrift für bildende Kunst und Kunstgewerbe* 5, 1919, p 232, quoted in Sokratis Georgiadis, *Sigfried Giedion: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), p11.

