

The Workers' Club of 1924 by Alvar Aalto: The Importance of Beginnings

Author(s): Nils C. Finne

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*The philosophy we want is one of fluxions and mobility...
We want a ship in these billows we inhabit. An angular, dogmatic house
would be rent to chips and splinters in this storm of many elements.
No, it must be tight, and fit to the form of man, to live at all;
as a shell is the architecture of a house founded on the sea...
We are golden averages, volitant stabilities, compensated or periodic errors,
houses founded on the sea....* EMERSON, *Montaigne; or The Skeptic*

The Workers' Club of 1924 by Alvar Aalto: The Importance of Beginnings

Nils C. Finne

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The first substantial commission of Alvar Aalto's professional career was a rather peculiar little building called Työväentalo, or Workers' Club, in the city of Jyväskylä, in central Finland. Designed in the spring and constructed during the summer of 1924, while Aalto was 26 years old, the building has recently been partially renovated and deserves a closer examination than has been offered by the Aalto literature currently available.¹

In his *Complete Work*, Aalto himself chose to represent the building with only a single small photograph. Clearly, he was attempting to downplay, if not actually suppress, his early classical buildings. This later attitude belies the intensity with which the young architect approached the Workers' Club. Aalto was obsessed with the building, not only as an object unto itself, but also as a critical element within his youthful vision of transforming Jyväskylä into a northern Florence. As part of a series of unsolicited urban design proposals² intended primarily to create more public squares in the city, the site sketches for the Workers' Club proposed to expand the building to the south with a grand, somewhat naive reflecting pool and flanking loggias (4). The building itself, as a fragment of Aalto's larger fantasy, compressed images that spanned history and geography.

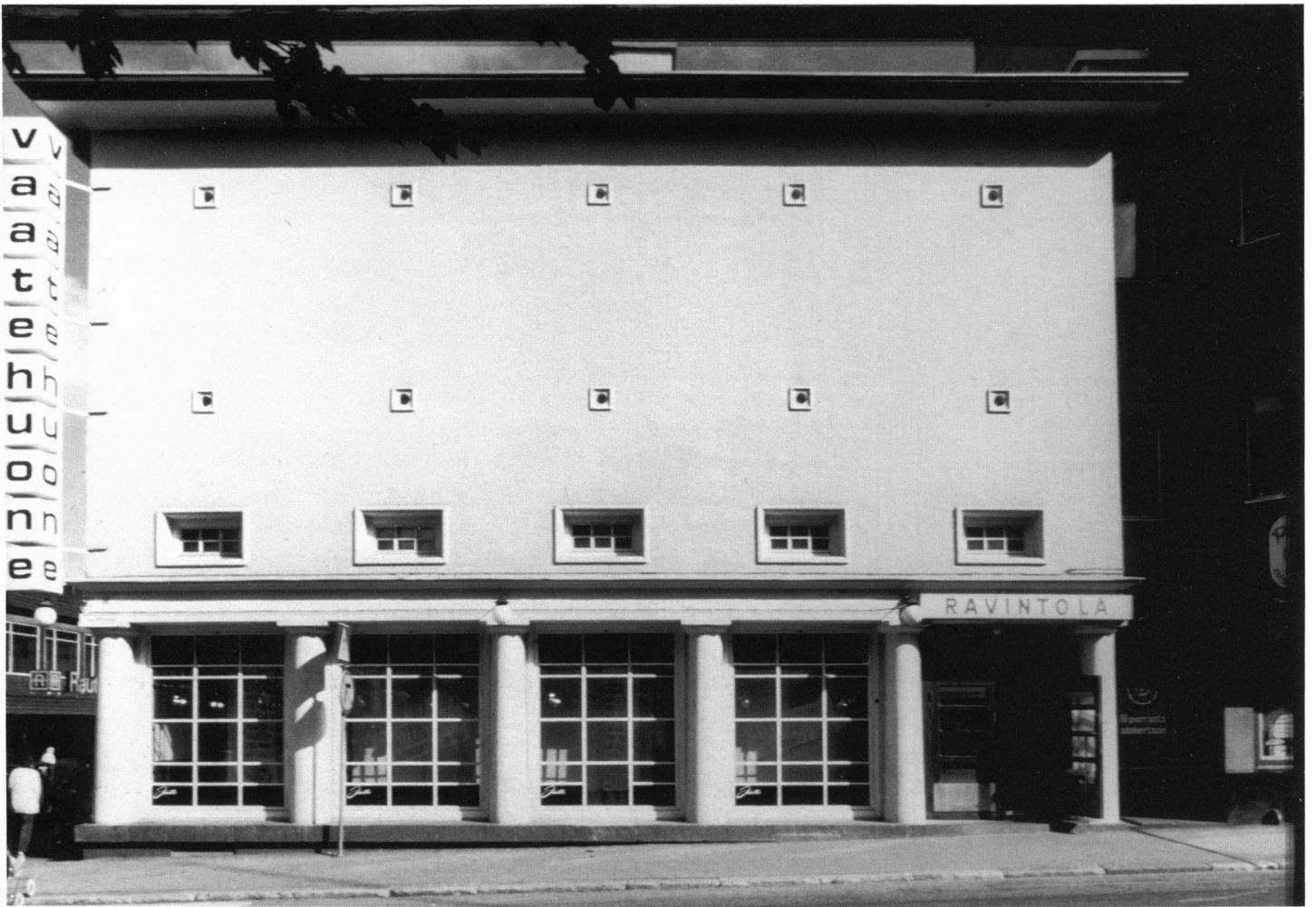
But within the Workers' Club's specific and overt use of historical elements lie some important clues to Aalto's later designs. The Jyväskylä building presents, in embryonic form, many of the thematic oppositions that were to occupy Aalto throughout his career.³ The poles of myth and reality, of the modern and the classical, and of the universal and the vernacular, operate here in an almost anarchic condition of coexistence, a foreshadowing of the narrative genius of Aalto's most important work.⁴ It is this placement of traditional images, endowed with highly specific, localized meanings within an innovative compositional structure, that becomes evident in the Workers' Club and that gives such insight into the character of Aalto's modernity.

1 The building has been discussed, with varying degrees of completeness, by most of the standard Aalto texts. See G. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto, The Early Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984); P.D. Pearson, *Alvar Aalto and the International Style* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1978); M. Quanttrill, *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983). See also a pamphlet entitled *Työväentalo 1923-1925* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 1980).

2 See Schildt, *Early Years*, 252-59.

3 His early paintings, when compared with later complex, abstract compositions, display a similar naive clarity.

4 See D. Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), 10.



1 Jyväskylä Workers' Club, Alvar Aalto, 1924, Kauppakatu elevation.

5 See S. Paavilainen, ed., *Nordic Classicism 1910-1930* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1982). A fairly complete history of the period is included. See also D. Porphyrios, "Reversible Faces," in *Lotus 16* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Electa, 1977), 35-41.

The main characteristics of this architecture can be summarized as follows:

A Building composition based on austere, stereometric form, often employing smooth stucco surfaces, with only a few significant, classically inspired details. Much of the work appears to be atectonic, i.e., indifferent to the nature of materials or construction.

B Buildings can often be seen as assemblages of parts. In massing, the buildings can be broken down into primary stereometric solids. In terms of detail, the smooth wall surfaces of the buildings act as canvases for detail fragments that are in a tensional relationship to each other and to the building mass.

C An equal affinity for high-style and low-style classicism. Examples of the former include work by Schinkel and his followers in Scandinavia such as Grosch, Engel, and Hansen, while examples of the latter can be found in the primitive classicism of vernacular buildings (so-called *architettura minore*).

D A predilection for certain building typologies, especially that of the *corstile*, whether used as an actual exterior space or enclosed in some way as an aula.

E A sensitivity to issues of urbanism and traditional urban structure.

6 For a discussion of the migration of "stripped classicism" from Central Europe to Scandinavia, see K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983).

7 Aalto was aware of Italy through articles such as "Italia la Bella," by Ekelund and Bryggman, in *Arkitehti* 2 (1923).

8 Schildt, in *Early Years*, is not clear regarding the precise date of Aalto's first visit to the Skandia Cinema. It is reasonable to assume that Aalto saw the building when he passed through Stockholm en route from Göteborg to Jyväskylä in 1923.

2 *St. Nicolai Church, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Potsdam, 1829-35.*

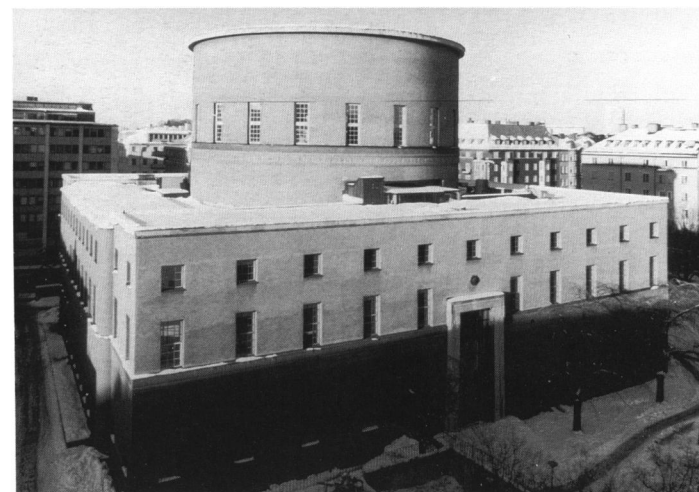
3 *Stockholm Public Library, Eric Gunnar Asplund, 1918-27.*

The Workers' Club in Context

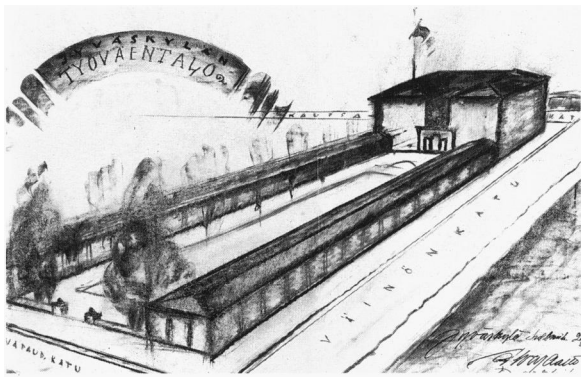
The design of the Workers' Club falls within a period of Scandinavian architecture, roughly from 1910 to 1930, known as Nordic Classicism.⁵ This terminology is not truly adequate for describing the confluence of historical developments that occurred during those years: the legacy of nineteenth-century neoclassicism from Schinkel (2), Engel, and Grosch; the continuing influence of Heinrich Tessenow's canonization of latent classicism within the vocabulary of vernacular building; and the more immediate heritage of "stripped classicism" from central Europe, as evident in the work of Perret, Garnier, Behrens, Hoffmann, and Loos.⁶

The years between 1910 and 1930 were characterized by economic prosperity in Scandinavia and, in Finland and Norway, by newly found political independence. The architects of all four Scandinavian countries exchanged ideas on a regular basis, fostering an intense professional camaraderie and cross-communication. For perhaps the first time, the Nordic countries emerged as an ensemble in which the unity of purpose and ideals was sufficient to outweigh any localized differences. That is not to deny that the quite radical severity of Danish architects such as Thomsen, Kampmann, and Petersen stood in contrast to the more lyrical work of the Swedes Asplund (3), Lewerentz, Tengbom, and Bergsten. It is simply to emphasize those architects' common desire to adapt an international vocabulary of classicism to a specific geographic region. The same unity of purpose is evident toward the end of the 1920s as the rhetoric of classicism is replaced by the rhetoric of functionalism.

As a young architect with limited means, Aalto traveled as much as he could afford: to Sweden, Denmark, Latvia, and Italy. (Significantly, his first trip to Venice was undertaken after the Workers' Club had been designed.⁷) In late 1923, just before beginning the Workers' Club, Aalto visited the Great Exposition in Göteborg and Asplund's Skandia Cinema,⁸ and was quite enthusiastic about the possibilities of what would become known as "Swedish grace."



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4 *Workers' Club, perspective sketch.*

9 As quoted in Schildt, *Early Years*, 177.

10 As quoted in G. Schildt, ed., *Sketches, Alvar Aalto* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 97.

11 Aalto received little or no training in classicism from his teacher Armas Lindgren, who was a partner in the firm of Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen. Lindgren is often credited with the design of the Richardsonian-style National Museum in Helsinki. Aino Aalto, however, studied with one of the stronger classicists of the elder generation, Gustaf Nystrom, whose 1902 addition to Engel's University Library in Helsinki is an especially notable example of classicism.

12 As quoted in N. E. Wickberg, "Finnish Architecture in the Early 1900s and Alvar Aalto," in K. Mikkola, ed., *Aalto vs. the Modern Movement* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Symposium, 1981), 62.

There was a simultaneous interest in political nationalism and primitive folk culture in Finland and Norway during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both countries' struggle for political independence (from Russia and Sweden, respectively) generated the concomitant desire to create an artistic expression with mythic national roots. Karelia, the eastern portion of central Finland, was considered to be the wellspring of ethnicity for literature (i.e., the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national ethnic poem reconstructed from oral traditions), architecture, music, and applied arts. Karelian folklorism resonated in the music of Sibelius, the paintings of Aksel Gallen-Kallela (whose interest in primitivism was shared by other painters such as van Gogh and Gauguin), and the architecture of Lars Sonck and Eliel Saarinen. See Ritva Tuomi, "On the Search for National Style," in *Abacus 1* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1979). See also *Lars Sonck, Architect* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1981) and D. Porphyrios, *Sources*, 70.

Asplund's highly refined sense of esthetics had a crucial influence on Aalto's developing architectural sensibilities. Critical for both men was Scandinavia's distance from the sources of classicism in Italy and Greece, a distance that, ironically, proved an advantage. The resulting oversimplification and distortion in their interpretations of the classical generated the charged abstractions that came to characterize northern classicism. Remoteness and backwardness became a virtue. Aalto aptly described this simplicity and innocence as "stylistic forms from faraway, civilized countries seen through the child's eye of the Northerner."⁹

Just as Asplund's drawings for the Villa Snellman (1917) and for the Woodland Chapel (1918–20) evoke a mood of childlike classicism, Aalto's own fantasy of expanding the Workers' Club to the south resembles a child's crude, though powerful, sketch of an Italian villa (4). Aalto commented several years later that while designing the library at Viipuri he made "children's drawings" from which "sprang a combination of plans and sections."¹⁰

The classicizing impulse, childlike or otherwise, was a means for Aalto to distance himself from the National Romanticism of the older generation of architects such as Lindgren and Saarinen (5), known for their picturesque, Richardsonian form-making. Asplund had similarly distanced himself from the Swedish romantic Östberg following a 1913 trip to Italy. Classicism provided Aalto with a means of expressing a higher, more universal or international level of architectural authority that was inspired by antiquity, yet paradoxically termed "modern."¹¹

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In Finland, Aalto allied himself with critics such as Strenge and Frosterus, who urged an "iron and brain" architecture, opposing the mawkish sentimentality of the romanticists and their obsession with Karelia, the region between the Gulf of Finland and the White Sea and the mythic heart of Finnish artistic ethnicity. "Frosterus was," according to Aalto, "the intellectual injection of poison that Finland had to take at the moment when the development of arts was stuck in national ruts, i.e., 'folklorism' and 'Karelianism.'"¹²



5 *Pohjola Insurance Building, Eliel Saarinen, Helsinki, 1899, detail.*

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13 D. Porphyrios, *Sources*, 59–81.

However, an undercurrent of primitivism or Karelianism did persist in Aalto's work, a phenomenon described by the writer Demetri Porphyrios as *florilegia naturalis*, the creation of a myth from nature.¹³ Although not immediately evident in the Workers' Club, the image of myth was sustained in Aalto's work by several ideas deriving from the vernacular. First, the idea of the primitive hut (recalling Karelian timber cabins as well as the neoclassical theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier's symbolic hut made of tree saplings) is evident in Asplund's Woodland Chapel (7), Aino Aalto's Villa Flora, and Alvar Aalto's celebrated sauna at Villa Mairea (1935) (6). Second, Aalto was influenced by the idea of a complete vernacular environment, as seen in the anonymous farmhouses of the Scandinavian countryside, and recalled by the English Arts and Crafts Movement and Tessenow's use of a vernacular building vocabulary. In this regard, the example of Eliel Saarinen is also important in terms of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* achieved at villas such as Hvittrask (1902) (8). By the late 1920s Aalto had already begun to show a concern for the design of hardware, furniture, and lamps, in the interest of achieving a total ambience in his buildings. Although it is uncertain to what extent Aalto designed furniture for the Workers' Club, he was quite involved in solving such details as door handles and light fixtures.

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6 Villa Mairea, Alvar Aalto, 1935, sauna.

7 Woodland Chapel, Erik Gunnar Asplund, 1918–20, crypt.



8 Villa at Hvittrask, Eliel Saarinen (with Gesellius and Lindgren), Helsinki, 1902, watercolor.

14 See K. Frampton, "Notes on Classical and Modern Themes in the Architecture of Mies van der Rohe and Auguste Perret," in A. Salokorpi, ed., *Classical Tradition and the Modern Movement* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1985).

15 The architectural connection between Finland and Russia is historically strong, beginning perhaps with Engel's comprehensive design for central Helsinki, which was built largely by the Russian tsars Alexander I and Nicholas I. Eliel Saarinen was also profoundly influenced by childhood trips to St. Petersburg.

16 According to Frampton, "Le Corbusier seems to have been suspended in the early 20s between a nostalgia for the classical world and an unqualified enthusiasm for the imminent triumph of the machine." in *Modern Architecture*, 266.



9 *Stockholm Exhibition, Erik Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz, 1930.*

17 K. Varnedoe, *Northern Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 20.

18 As quoted in *Alvar Aalto 1898–1976*, A. Ruusuvaori, ed. (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1978), 147.

Just as Nordic Classicism, particularly as it relates to Aalto, must be seen as overlapping and, to some extent, absorbing, the impulses from National Romanticism, so too should it not be too strictly separated from the European modernist avant-garde of Le Corbusier, Rietveld, or Mies. The Workers' Club was designed roughly contemporaneously with Mies's project for a brick country villa,¹⁴ Rietveld's Schroeder House, Corbusier's Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, and the publication of *Vers une architecture*. Perhaps even more relevant to the Finnish context is the Vesnin brothers' Pravda tower competition entry from 1924.¹⁵ At first glance, the Workers' Club appears to be completely unrelated to such events of the European and Russian avant-garde. In fact, it is the building's evident backwardness that makes it so intriguing. However, the penumbra of classicism was never far removed from the "radical" work of Le Corbusier, Mies, and others.¹⁶ Aalto himself wrote an article in 1926 that included a photograph of the terrace garden at the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau with the caption "latter-day Classicism."

In the Scandinavian context, therefore, the clear separation between "classical" and "modern" becomes problematic. The architects of Nordic Classicism, and Aalto in particular, chose to use a historical vocabulary with a degree of abstraction and, in some cases, ironical commentary that was deliberately modern. The theme may have been classicism, but the mood was modernism. Innovation occurred in the realm of subtlety and nuance, not in the radical new vision of architecture presented by Rietveld or Van Doesburg.

In the field of painting, the Nordic countries also stood apart from mainstream European (primarily French) developments. And, as the art historian Kirk Varnedoe has pointed out, standard overviews of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art with an emphasis on the "chain of progress" of the French avant-garde do not seem to address or explicate Nordic art. That is to say, narrowly linear readings of history do not accommodate the hybrid nature of many Nordic paintings, which often combine realism and symbolism, appearing both descriptive and abstract. Varnedoe observes that "...in the oscillation between Paris and the North that characterized the travels of some Scandinavian artists of the 1880s, we can see the interaction of seeming opposites: metropolis and wilderness, progressive internationalism and resolute parochialism—each alternating with and depending upon the other."¹⁷

As with the paintings of Gallen-Kallela and Munch, the Scandinavian architecture of the 1920s was categorically removed from the avant-garde. Yet by 1930 it was Aalto, Lewerentz, and Asplund who suddenly stood at the vanguard of the new "functionalist" architecture with such buildings as the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium (Aalto, 1929) and the Stockholm Exhibition (Asplund and Lewerentz, 1930) (9). Perhaps the real agenda was more sophisticated than concerns relating to the language of classicism or modernism. Aalto's lifelong distrust of attempts to create unified architectural theory is clear in his succinct comment on the advent of modernism: "It has suffered the same fate as other revolutions: it begins with enthusiasm and ends with some kind of dictatorship."¹⁸



10 Workers' Club, corner view from Vainonkatu.

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11 Workers' Club, corner view from Kauppakatu.

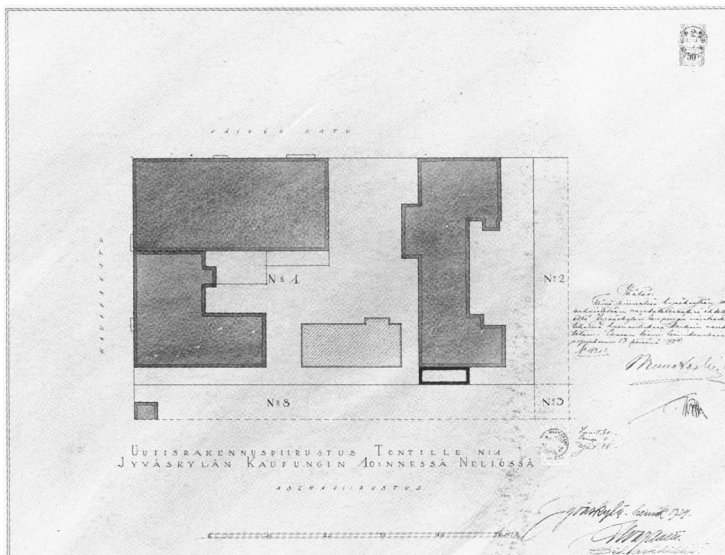
The Importance of Beginnings



12 Workers' Club, view from Kauppakatu.

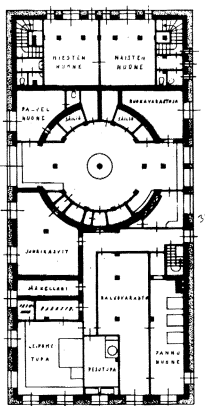
13 Workers' Club, view from Vainonkatu.

14 Workers' Club, site plan.



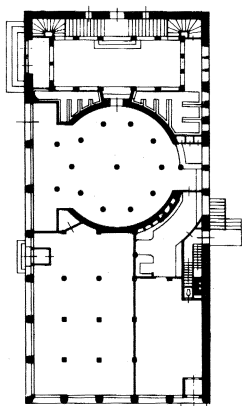
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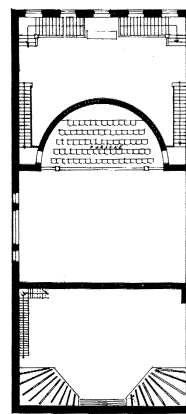
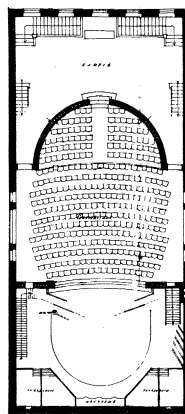
15 Workers' Club, basement and entry floor plans.



16

16 Workers' Club, auditorium floor and balcony floor plans.

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JYVÄSKYLÄN KAUPUNGIN KAUPUNSSA NELLÖSSÄ



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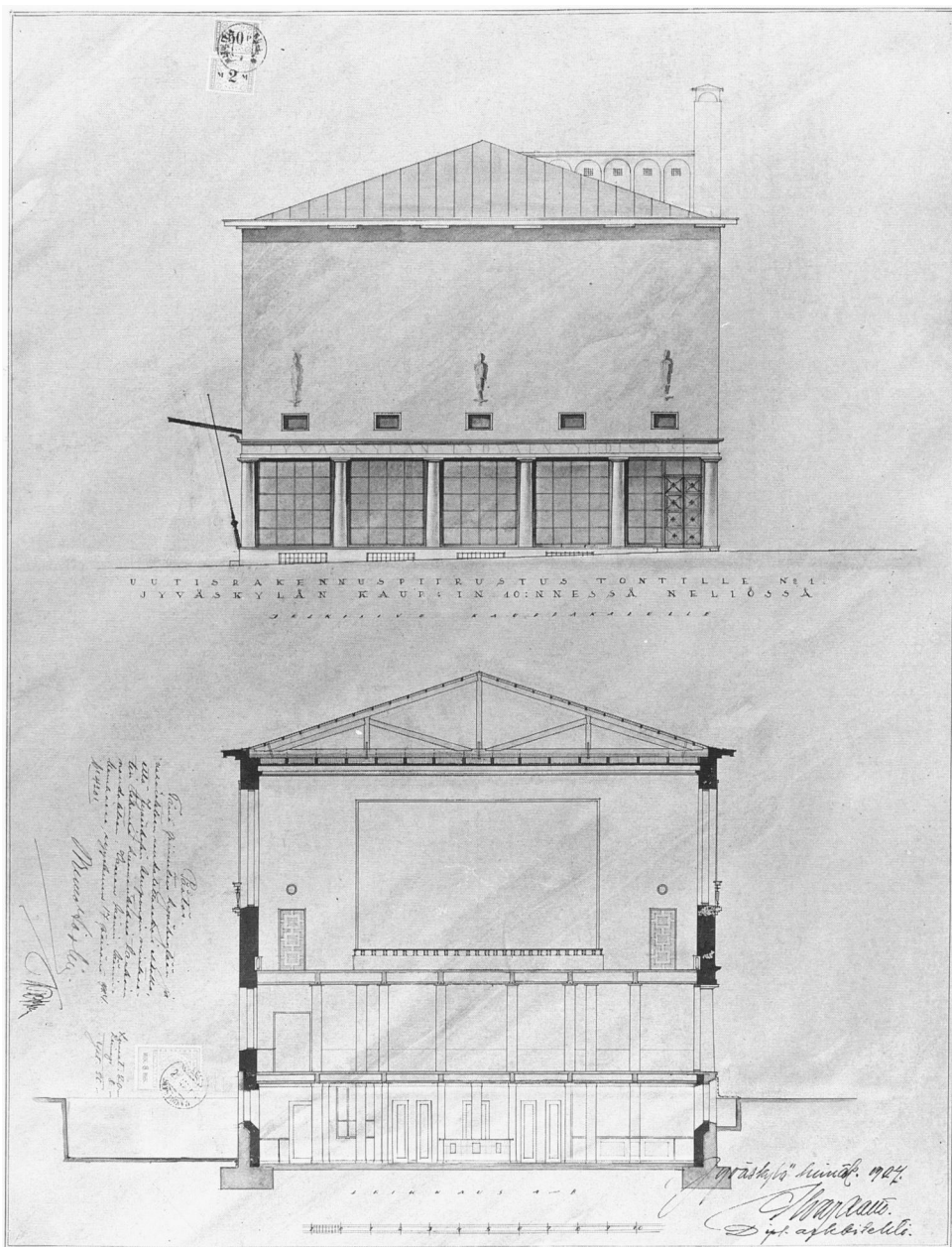
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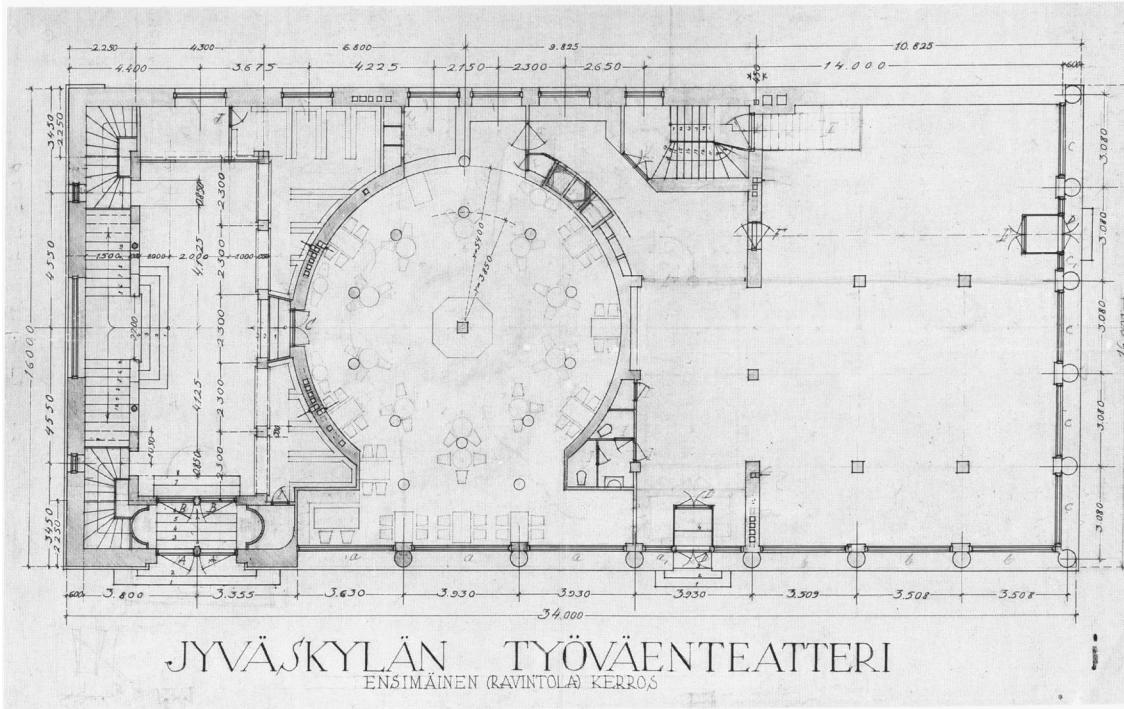
17 Workers' Club, Kauppakatu elevation and section through auditorium.

18 Workers' Club, entry floor plan (dimensioned drawing).

19 Workers' Club, Vainonkatu elevation.

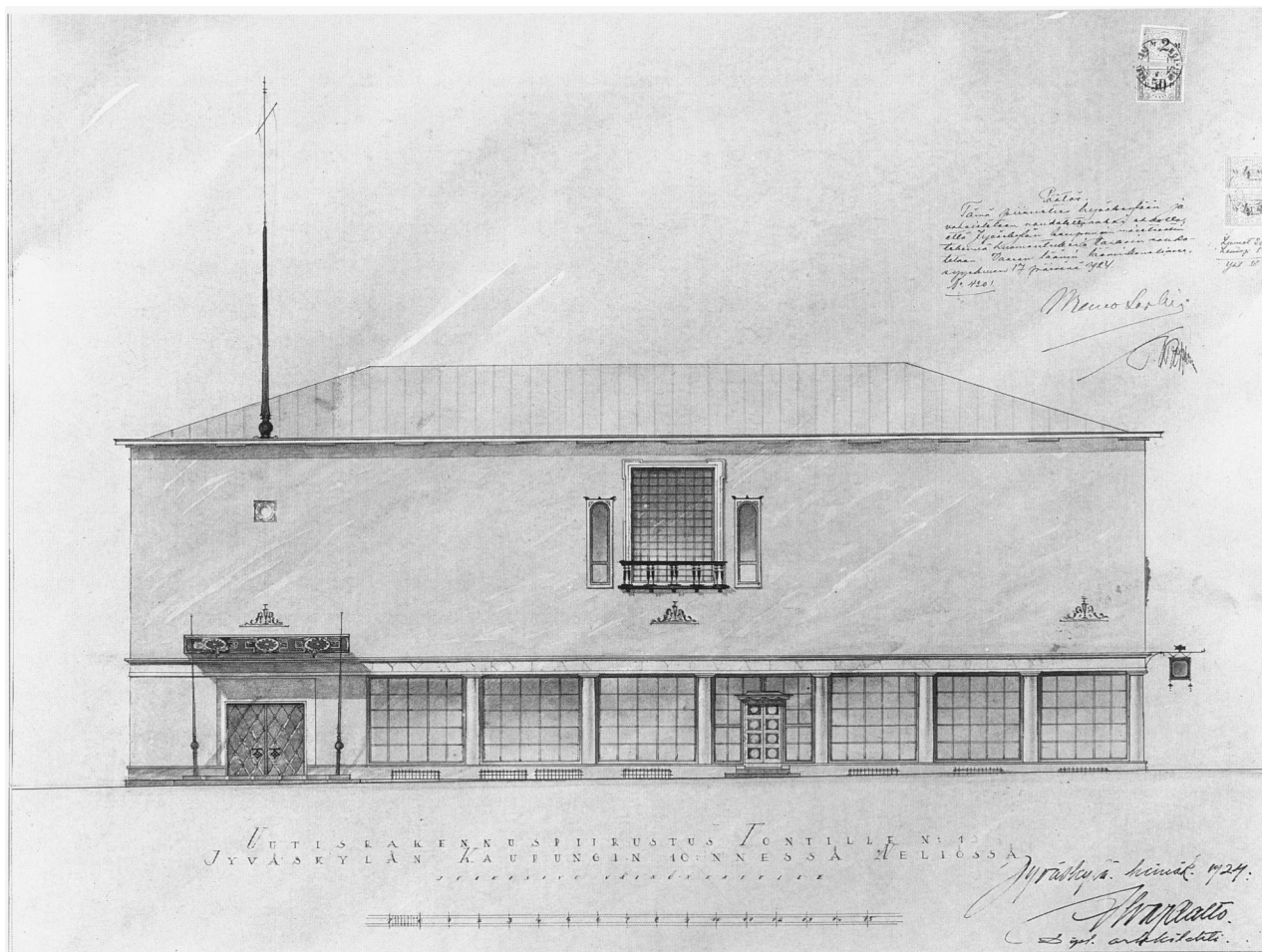


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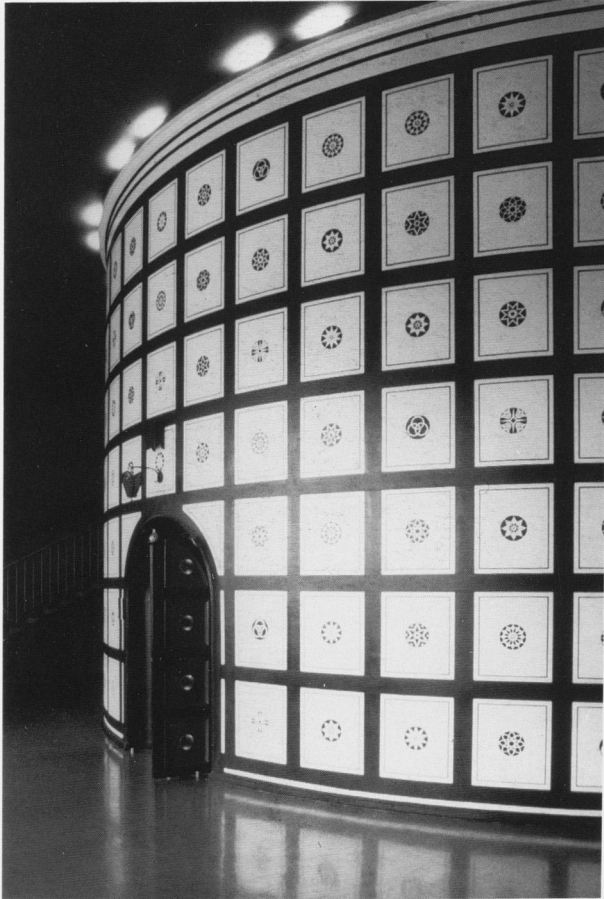
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20 *Worker's Club, entrance to auditorium, upper lobby.*



19 The original objectlike prominence of the Workers' Club has sadly been compromised by the recent addition of a building to the south on Kauppakatu.

20 The comparison with Asplund's 1925 Paris Exhibition competition entry was first suggested by S. Paavilainen in his article "Classicism of the 1920s in Finland," in *Abacus 1* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1979).

21 S. Wrede, "Asplund's Villa Snellman," in *Salokorpi*, 167. As Wrede has aptly noted, the use of strip windows, commonly associated with the free façade, was never a prescription, but rather, one of the many possible expressions of the technics of curtain wall construction.

The Workers' Club

The programmatic conception of the Workers' Club tended to pull the design in disparate directions right from the start. While the auditorium and its attendant spaces were obviously primary, the secondary functions of a café and restaurant were also quite important and suggested a more public, open architectural expression as opposed to the semiprivate, more closed nature of the auditorium (15, 16).

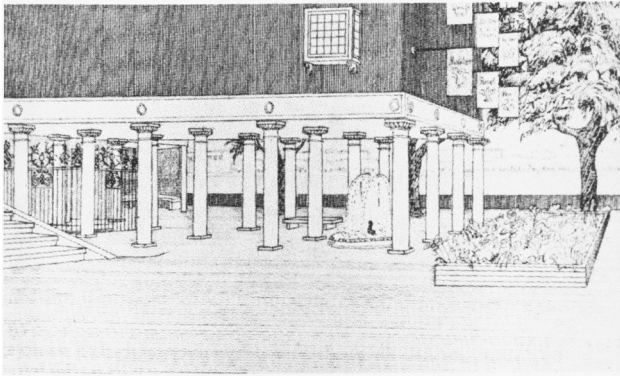
Specifically, the volume of the auditorium is represented externally by smooth, solid wall surfaces punctuated only by a few significant openings, while the ground floor is identified as part of the public domain by the glazed Doric colonnade, continuous on the two street elevations. An early perspective drawing by Aalto shows an open colonnade with no glazing whatsoever (23). Aalto's wish to magnify the public aspect of the building is also seen in his perspective sketch with its reflecting pool and continuous loggias (4).

The Workers' Club bears an obvious relation to the Italian palazzo. The palazzo, although as a type quite diverse in its expression, often employed a ground-floor colonnade and large unbroken surfaces in a manner similar to the Workers' Club. The typical palazzo circulation sequence of entrance, vestibule, and honorific stair leading to piano nobile, is evident not only in the Workers' Club but also in virtually every auditorium building of Aalto's career.

The *cortile* in palazzo design was usually a space with exterior characteristics that had been internalized by the surrounding structure of the building. Aalto used a similar theme with his auditorium, but turned it inside out. The void of the *cortile* became the apparently solid volume of the auditorium, represented by the curving wall facing the second-floor lobby (20). The decorative pattern of that wall's surface resembles early Florentine church exteriors, notably San Miniato, the Baptistry, and the Duomo.

In contrast to the decorative treatment of the curving auditorium wall, the exterior of the Workers' Club is a simple stereometric volume.¹⁹ The upper walls are primarily solid, with windows deployed in a seemingly undisciplined manner. The volumetric weight of the upper floors is underscored by the ground-level colonnade, creating a "hovering volume" that can be compared both to Asplund's contemporaneous design for the 1925 Paris Exhibition²⁰ (21) and to later Aalto work such as the Seinajoki Town Hall (22). In fact, the openness implied by the loggia beneath the simple volume of the building's bulk suggests a less abstract, but nonetheless similar, formal composition to that of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye at Poissy (1929).

The reference to Le Corbusier takes on another dimension with Aalto's window placement. Although Aalto begins with the language of classicism (and what Porphyrios calls its "mimetic," or representational, characteristic), he then uses a dynamic, transformative process that stands in opposition to classical composition, symmetry, and correctness. The squared-off Palladian window (24), for instance, is deliberately crude both in form and proportion. In terms of compositional weight, it is almost equal to the entry door, yet there is no obvious relationship between this window and any other element on the façade (although the window is centered on the auditorium within). The window is adrift on the façade in a manner that not only recalls Asplund's Villa Snellman (1918), but also illustrates one of Le Corbusier's points from *Vers une architecture* (1923): the free façade.²¹



21



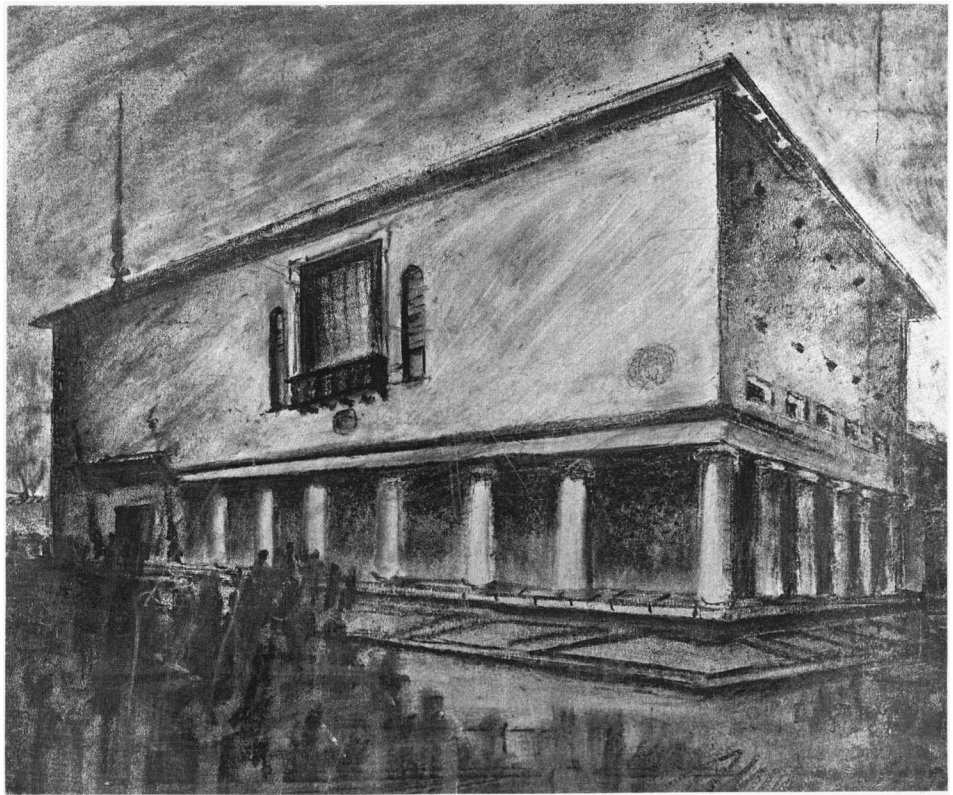
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21 Competition entry for Swedish Pavilion at Paris Exhibition of decorative arts, Erik Gunnar Asplund, 1924, perspective sketch.

22 Seinajoki Town Hall, Alvar Aalto, 1961-65.

23 Workers' Club, perspective sketch.

24 Workers' Club, exterior window detail.



23



24

22 It should also be noted that Le Corbusier's simple "Domino" column grid was transformed within the Turun-Sanomat into five different column types, including the celebrated asymmetrical columns in the printing-press room.

23 For additional information on Carl Petersen, see article on the newly renovated Fåborg Museum in *Arkitektur DK*, 4, 1985. See also H. Stephenson, *Calle, Arkitekt Carl Petersen* (Copenhagen: Arkitektens Forlag, 1980).

24 Only the last three bays of the Vainonkatu elevation are actually square.

25 See Aalto's article on the experimental house at Muuratsalo in Schildt, ed., *Sketches*, 116.

In a very real sense, then, one can speak of the building's diagrammatic modernism coexisting with its diagrammatic classicism. A similar argument can be applied to the *Turun-Sanomat* newspaper building (1928), the first modernist building in Finland, and Aalto's clearest expression of Le Corbusier's five points. The taut, planar façade recalls the Workers' Club, as does the play of differently scaled elements, notably the supersized newspaper display window with its constructivist antecedents. In fact, there is a similar iconographic quality in the newspaper building's window and the Palladian window at the Workers' Club; both elements create a localized intensity on the building elevation. The Le Corbusier-influenced front elevation of the Turun-Sanomat building (26), with overtones of classical proportioning systems, is vigorously contradicted by the polyphony of form found on the rarely seen rear elevation ²²(25).

At the Workers' Club as well, Aalto treated each façade as a distinct composition, with only minimal relationship to the other façades. The strategy of juxtaposing discrete façade elements in a tensional relationship is at work here; Aalto was to expand this painterly device on many later interior and exterior surfaces into a rich collage of textures.

The Workers' Club façade consists of a number of autonomous or semiautonomous elements that tend to assemble and disassemble simultaneously: the floating Palladian window, the entrance canopy, the irregular colonnade, the small, staccato openings on the end elevation, and the various classical fragments, some of which remained on paper only and did not appear on the building as finally realized. The idea of composition and decomposition is related to the strong interest in contrasts during the period of Nordic Classicism, especially as formulated by the Dane Carl Petersen.²³ The disassociation of various elements, such as the entrance canopy from the building wall at Jyväskylä, might be reinforced by the use of strongly saturated color—Pompeian red, cobalt blue, cadmium yellow. Petersen used such colors in the interior of his Fåborg Museum (1915) to reinforce the sense of each room being a separate event, most notably in the cobalt blue of the domed room commemorating the museum's founder. Throughout his career Aalto shared Petersen's interest in oppositions, both among colors and materials. However, there has been some difficulty in determining the precise colors Aalto used at Jyväskylä. The interior colors were strongly saturated, and the exterior appears to have been gray, not the current cadmium yellow.

A remarkable characteristic of the façade is the impression that the window openings are all squares or multiples thereof (18, 19). As far as the ground-floor colonnade is concerned, there are only three bays out of twelve that are in fact square;²⁴ the rest only appear so. This illusion of squareness is due to the fact that Aalto takes three different bay spacings, ties them together with a continuous entablature, and maintains the same five-module glazing division in each unequal bay. Thus, what appears to be a very regular colonnade, fixed by some Albertian rules of proportion and mathematics, turns out to be nothing of the sort. Aalto's perspective drawing of the building actually exaggerates the irregular spacing of the columns and is an intriguing precursor to his later ideas concerning irregular colonnades²⁵ (23). In the case of the Workers' Club, the cause for irregularity appears to have been a combination of the site dimensions (on the Kauppakatu elevation) and internal space allocations (on the Vainonkatu elevation). In any case, Aalto could have regularized the spacing much more than he did, showing instead an early inclination toward the individuality and particularization of architectural elements.



25 *Turun-Sanomat, Alvar Aalto, 1928-30, rear elevation.*

26 *Turun-Sanomat, street elevation.*



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26 Aalto worked as a draftsman on the drawings for the Göteborg Fair during the summer of 1920, at the architectural office of Ares in Göteborg.

This inclination is evident in Aalto's design for the building entrance, where a festive and whimsical canopy stands in deliberate contrast to the solidity of the building's mass and the heavy ground-floor colonnade (30). Notably, the final version of the canopy was less exaggerated than in earlier designs, but still retained the theatricality of the lancelike supports. The immediate inspiration appears to have been the buildings of the Göteborg Fair in Sweden, which Aalto saw in 1923.²⁶ The ephemerality of the ultra-thin colonnettes and the delicacy of the metal canopy are related to Aalto's pavilions at the Tampere Fair in Finland (1923) (31), as well as to his contemporaneous furniture designs (28), inspired by sources as diverse as Pompeii and American Shaker furniture.

The images of the various details—the columns made from lances, the tent suggested by the canopy's initial design, and the unusual door handles that resemble the hilts of fencing swords (29)—evoke the trappings of a medieval jousting tournament. Aalto's references suggest the transposition of a twelfth-century entertainment form onto a twentieth-century theater. The overwhelming sentimentality of these symbols clearly recalls the romanticism of Östberg or Saarinen.

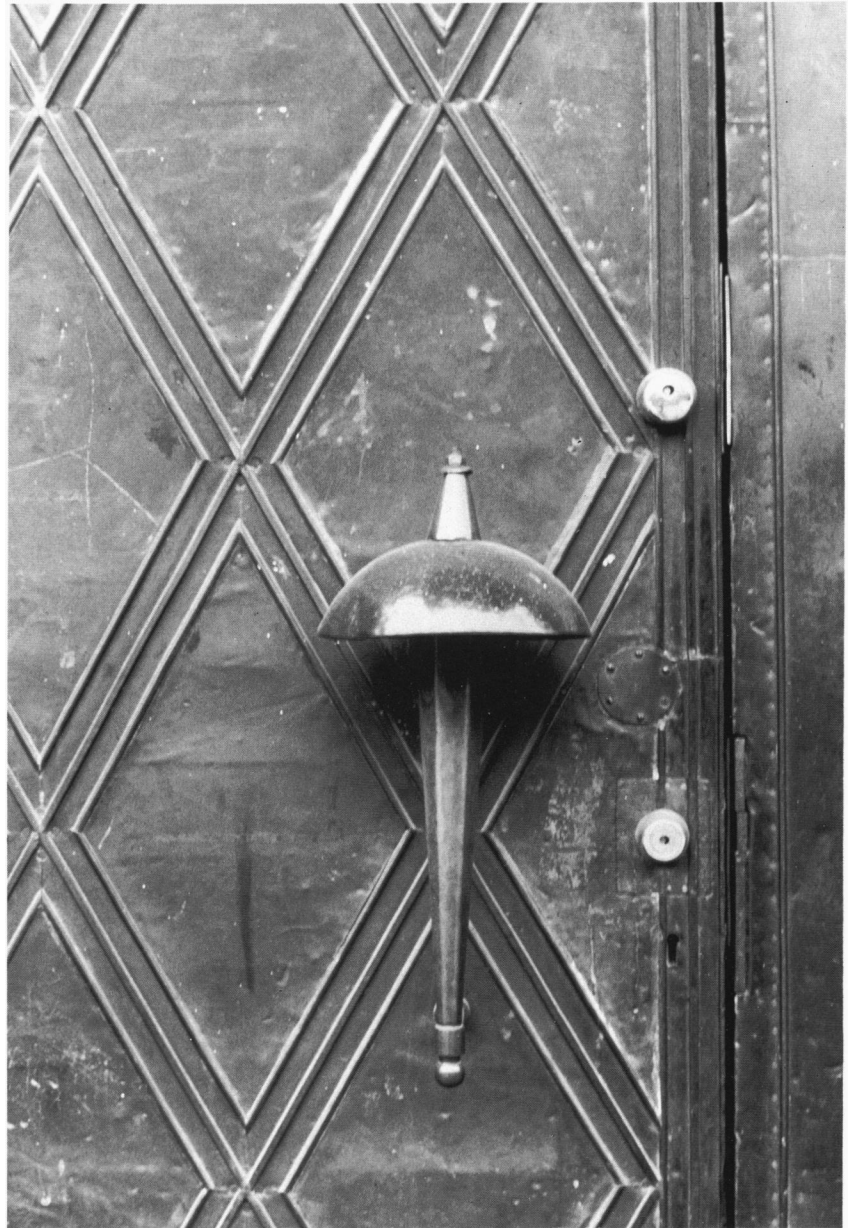
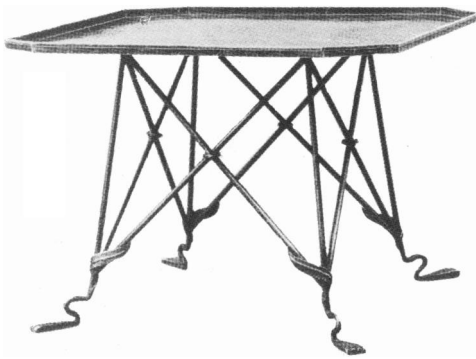
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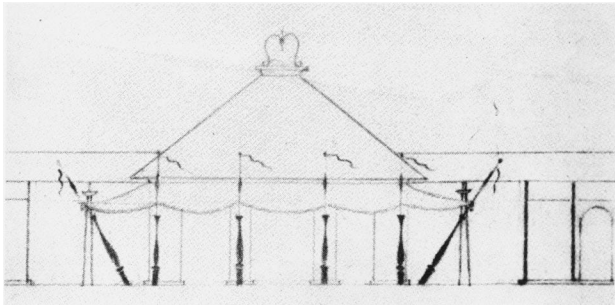
27 *National Pensions Institute, Alvar Aalto, Helsinki, 1956, door handle.*

28 *Table design, Alvar Aalto, 1924.*

29 *Workers' Club, door handle.*

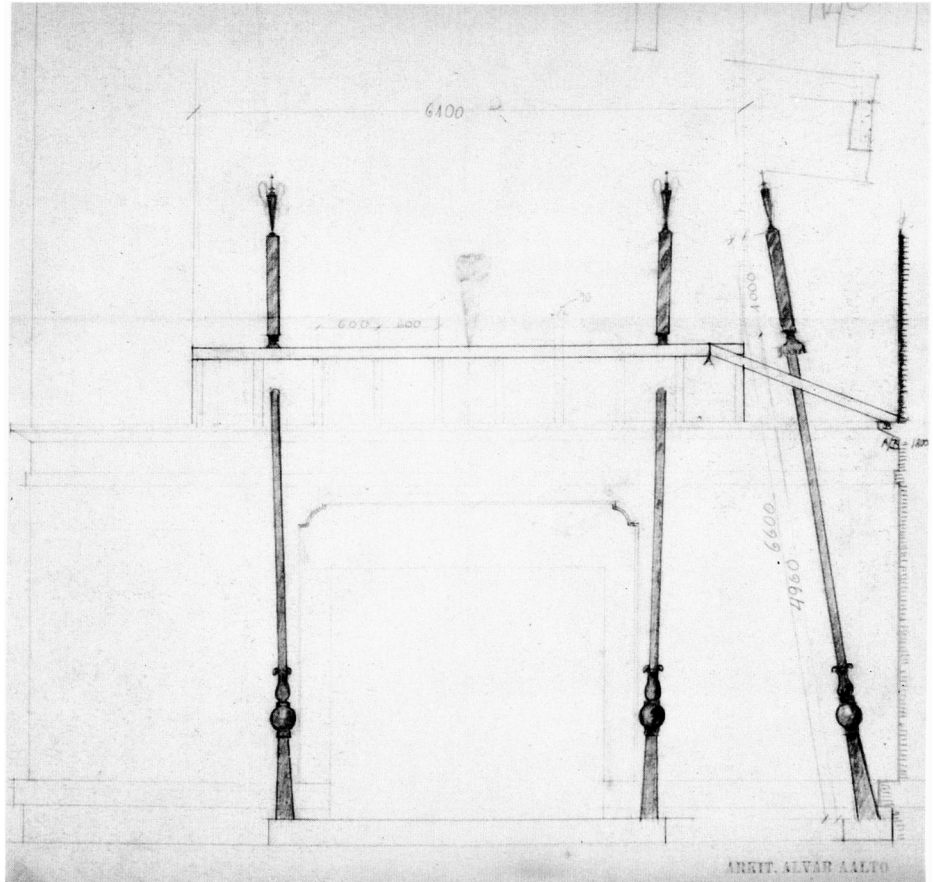


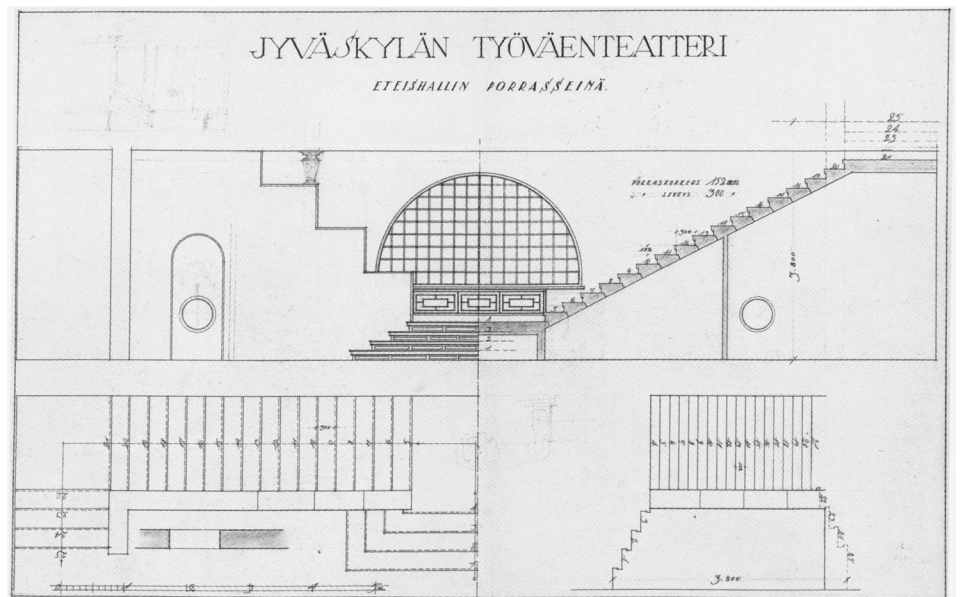
30 *Workers' Club, entrance canopy.*



31 *Design for Tampere Fair, Alvar Aalto, 1922, detail.*

32 *Workers' Club, study for entrance canopy.*





33 *Workers' Club, lower lobby.*

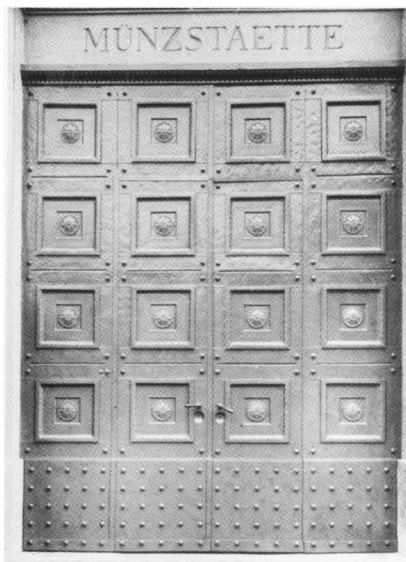
34 *Lister County Courthouse, Erik Gunnar Asplund, 1921, lobby.*

35 *Worker's Club, drawing of main ceremonial stair.*

This fantastic assemblage of elements initiates a path to the theater that begins at the building's lower lobby and coatroom (33, 35). The lobby is dominated by a grand ceremonial stair washed with light from a semicircular window, similar to the entrance window of Asplund's Lister Courthouse of 1918 (34). On axis with the stair and window is the entry to the café, a distinct circular space with a closely spaced ring of columns that carry the load of the auditorium above. This space, unfortunately now closed off to the lobby and not currently used as a café, originally gave the first inkling of the round "drum" set into a rectangular container that is the theme of the second-floor lobby. In fact, the curving back wall of the auditorium above is allowed to penetrate directly down to the café space (15, 16), creating a vertical continuity within the plan.

The honorific stair, a powerful element in the lower lobby, directly opposite the café, would become a central theme in Aalto's later work. At the Turun-Sanomat building, for example, the internal organization is dominated by a grand ceremonial stair beginning at street level. Aalto later spoke of stairs as the slopes of mountains within his interior landscape, and it is the atmospheric transposition of both landscape and urban space to the interior realm that is so overwhelming in the second-floor lobby. This tall, formal space is dominated by the curving wall of the auditorium (20). The top of this drum, or apse, as Schildt has called it (apropos of its likeness to the black and white decorative treatment of a Florentine church), is marked by a simple "cornice" that is pulled away from the ceiling and emphasized by lighting. It is clearly intended to be a building within a building. A specific source may have been *Um 1800* by Paul Mebes, a common reference book for the Nordic Classicists. Mebes included an exterior door from Karlsruhe with a decorative design virtually identical to that found on the interior wall at Jyväskylä²⁷ (36, 37).

27 P. Mebes, *Um 1800* (Munich: Verlag F. Bruckman A.G., 1918), 244. This page shows two photographs of ornamental doors. One door's decoration closely resembles the decoration of the curving auditorium wall. The second door is similar to the main entry door at the Workers' Club.



36 Door detail from Karlsruhe, from the reference book *Um 1800* by Paul Mebes.

37 Workers' Club, auditorium entrance doors.



28 Schildt, *Early Years*, 214-30.

29 A. Aalto, "From Doorstep to Living Room," as cited by Schildt, *Early Years*, 215.

30 See Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complète 1929-1934* (Zurich: Les Editions D'Architecture, 1964), 54.



38 The Annunciation, *Fra Angelico*.

39 *Illustration from Aalto's 1926 article in Aitta. Aalto's caption:*

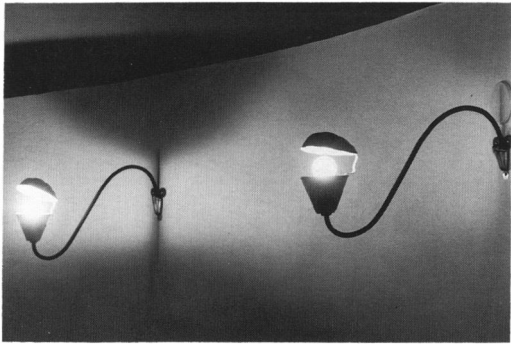
"View from Pompeii, the peristyle of a patrician's house with an unroofed colonnade forming a link between the inner rooms of the house."

40 *Workers' Club, sketch of auditorium lobby.*

Aalto discussed the idea of treating internal surfaces as external in a 1926 article that, as Schildt has observed,²⁸ was pivotal for Aalto in that it marks the beginning of his lifelong investigation of the "unity of the room, the external wall and the garden."²⁹ Two illustrations from the article are worth mentioning: the painting *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico (38) and a photograph from Pompeii (39). Both images reveal Aalto's intention to create an "inner landscape," a reversal of interior and exterior. Conversely, an illustration by Le Corbusier dating from 1930 shows a roof terrace inhabited by living room furniture and a mysterious fireplace (with the Arc de Triomphe placed wittily just behind).³⁰ Aalto internalized nature in his buildings, whereas Le Corbusier created an exterior roof garden populated by interior objects. Clearly, climatic differences between the Mediterranean (extroverted) and the Nordic (introverted) environments were critical in the development of these sensibilities. Aalto's inner landscape, characterized at the Workers' Club by the opposition of a specific curvilinear element set within a neutral frame, can be seen throughout later work such as the Finlandia Concert Hall. At both Finlandia and the Workers' Club, the auditorium is pushed into the lobby, and can be read as a somewhat enigmatic, autonomous object within the space. The contained space of the auditorium itself thus fluctuates between positive and negative readings.

Inside the auditorium at Jyväskylä a balcony over the rear one-third of the space creates a low-ceilinged area that leads to the tall volume of the auditorium itself. On the walls of this vestibule are reflector lamps that are subtle precursors of Aalto's later work; he would use reflectors again on his exterior light fixtures at Otanieni and many other buildings. More specifically, at the Worker's Club the reflectors are in the form of shells (41), which can be traced to his early ornamentation sketches that explore this marine motif (43). These first shells, though apparently ordinary in their similarity to contemporaneous design imagery, foreshadowed the fanning shape of the nautilus, which was to obsess Aalto in his later buildings and furniture, from the smallest detail to the contour of building plan and section.

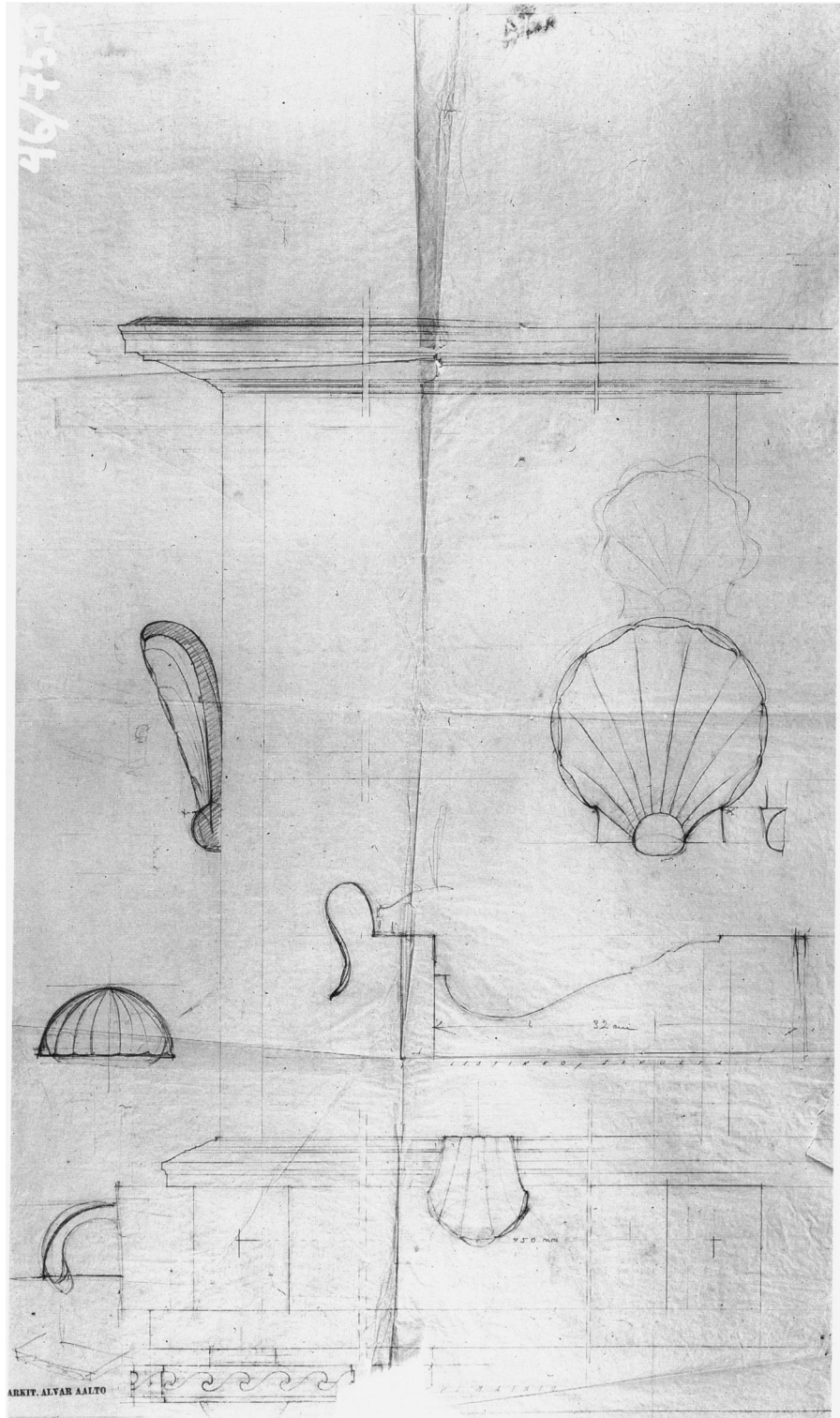




41 *Workers' Club, light fixture in auditorium vestibule.*

42 *Alvar Aalto Museum, Alvar Aalto, 1973, exterior light fixture.*

43 *Workers' Club, ornamentation sketches.*



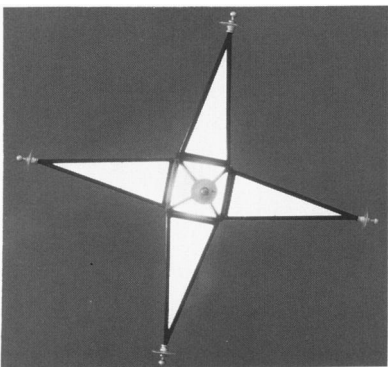
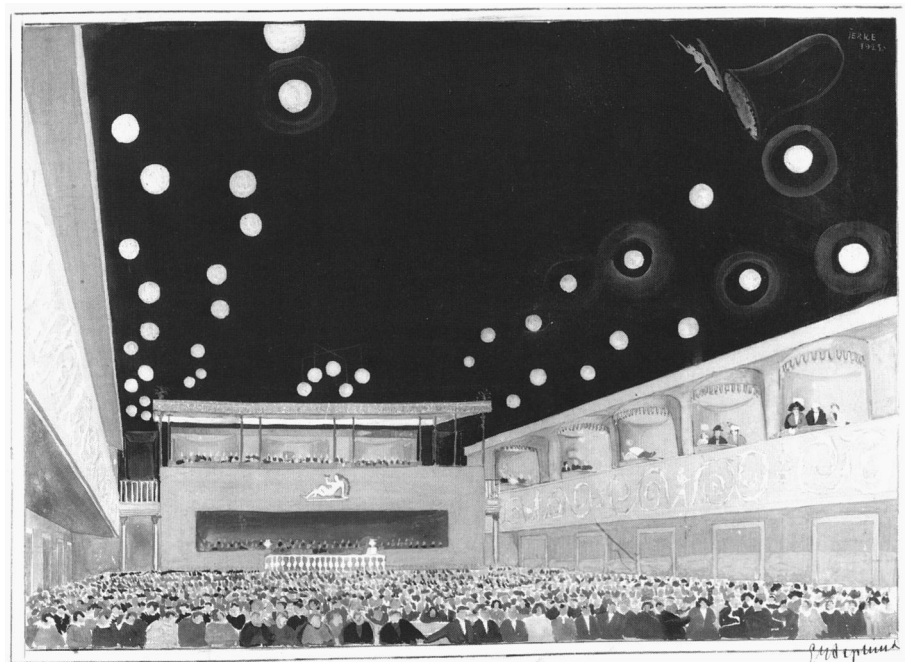
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44 *Workers' Club, auditorium interior.*

45 *Skandia Cinema, Erik Gunnar Asplund, 1924, perspective.*

46 *Workers' Club, light fixture in auditorium.*



The Importance of Beginnings

Within the main auditorium space, it becomes evident that the placement of the Palladian window, seemingly arbitrary on the exterior elevation, is in fact determined by the interior (a “functionalist” operation). The window is perfectly centered on the auditorium wall. Scattered above are the distinctive star-shaped light fixtures (46), suggesting a quite literal interpretation of the ceiling as a sky. Aalto praised Asplund’s refined sense of atmospherics when he wrote of his first visit with Asplund to the Skandia Cinema (45): “We sat in Skandia’s indigo-colored theater a few days before it was completed. ‘While I was building this I thought of autumn evenings and yellow leaves,’ said Asplund as he showed me the contourless auditorium with its yellow light fixtures. I had the impression that this was an architecture where ordinary systems hadn’t served as parameters.”³¹

31 A. Aalto, “E. G. Asplund in Memoriam,” *Arkkitehti* (1940).

It is this same type of atmospheric interest, of extracting a more elusive meaning from an image of reality (beyond the parameters of ordinary systems), that forms a bridge to the work of de Chirico, whose idea of the metaphysical can be construed as analogous to the “frozen,” or condensed, language of classicism developed by Asplund, Lewerentz, and Aalto. De Chirico spoke of representing a familiar object “as though there had been a slight and mysterious transformation of features.” The evocation of a frozen moment, of quite powerful, enigmatic events, is clearly indicated by de Chirico’s description of Paris from 1921:

As you leave the station and enter the heart of the city, the scenery becomes increasingly magical; you have the feeling of being inside a huge jack-in-the-box.... [It is] the open stage of a wonderful theatre: the backdrop is the soft gray mist that joins the sky to the earth and to the constructions of men, constructions that are also gray, curious, and hospitable sources... from which spring forth, like figures of a magic lantern, hurrying throngs of men and vehicles.... In a shop window showing a group of ladies and gentlemen with their children on a Riviera beach, I thought of the *Odyssey* and of wandering Ulysses.... Modernity, that great mystery, dwells everywhere in Paris, you find it again at every street corner, coupled with what once was, pregnant with what will be.³²

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32 See M. F. dell’Arco, “De Chirico in Paris 1911-1915,” in the exhibition catalogue *De Chirico* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 12-13.

Just as de Chirico could look at the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence and yet see a Greek temple (in his first Metaphysical painting, *Enigma of an Autumn Evening*, 1910), so Asplund could see an autumn evening and yellow leaves in his Skandia theater. Aalto could see his theater lobby as a small Italian urban space, or Jyväskylä as a northern Florence. In each case, the source of inspiration has a magical overtone that prevents a strictly literal transfer of images.

Myths, present and past, of Florence and Jyväskylä are superimposed upon each other. Other images, such as the entrance canopy as a tent structure at a medieval festival, the honorific stair as the slope of a mountain, and the auditorium as a star-filled winter evening, all provide an emotive content that stands in opposition to the austerity of form and rigorous methodology encouraged by both Nordic Classicists and the early modernists.



47 *Alvar Aalto Museum, Alvar Aalto, Jyväskylä, 1973.*

Once a “mythical” image, whether pictorial or architectural, has been invested with a meaning that goes beyond its real associations and contexts—a metaphysical meaning, to use de Chirico’s term—then it quite literally acquires a life of its own and can speak to other similarly invested objects. At the Workers’ Club, building elements such as the auditorium (with its inlaid curved apse and starlit interior), the floating Palladian window, and the staircase acquire an autonomy that allows an internalized conversation to occur. It is possible to analyze virtually every later Aalto building in terms of this interaction among autonomous objects. In the Villa Mairea, for example, there is a strong sense of a populated interior space, even when no people are actually present. “This may seem to be a field,” Aalto remarked, “in which the architect’s authority ceases, but no architectural creation is complete without such a trait.”³³

33 Schildt, *Early Years*, 218.

Abstract Classicism

The threshold between classicism and modernity... had been definitely crossed when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things.

MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Order of Things*

The Workers’ Club stands as a palimpsest of Aalto’s early career: multiple writings, each with a particular significance for Aalto’s later work, have been impressed on this “tablet” and then partially removed. The compression of both time and geography inherent in negotiating themes of myth and reality, the modern and the classical, or the universal and the parochial, is critical to the narrative of Aalto’s work. Does the Workers’ Club represent the language of classicism, or, conversely, does the Turun-Sanomat building, as an example, represent the language of modernism? In both

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cases, the buildings exist more as commentary on the respective vocabularies than as cohesive representations. The urge to categorize, to classify, to establish hierarchical systems, is invariably undercut by the polysemy presented by Aalto's work.

Two ideas figure prominently in Aalto's transformation of classicism. One is atmospheric illusion, "a world impregnated with poetry and hallucinations."³⁴ The second idea is abstraction, which Aalto observed is ideally "the result of a kind of crystallization process."³⁵ Cursorily, it is possible to say that abstraction, and the corollary ideas of transformation and dynamism, are the basis for what we know as modernism. Classicism, on the other hand, is concerned with ideas of composition and stability, with hierarchies established by axes and symmetries. Aalto remained on the threshold between classicism and modernity, thus allowing both representation and abstraction, composition and transformation, to continue.

The Workers' Club, then, represents the first statement in Aalto's work of such themes as the anarchic ordering of autonomous objects, the reversal of external and internal, the concern for symbolic imagery and representation. The polarities and oppositions evident in the building show Aalto's commitment to multiplicity as a basic architectural methodology. But the sine qua non of Aalto's early architectural vision is unquestionably Erik Gunnar Asplund, with his sure sense of history and geometric abstraction, his light aristocratic, artistic touch, his interest in atmospherics and symbolism as well as formal sequences and oppositions. The dicta of neoclassicism and functionalism had only a limited resonance in the work of Asplund and Aalto; each had a more complex and sophisticated esthetic agenda. The Italian designer and art critic Persico wrote in 1935:

The neoclassicism of the Swedish architects is not cold and formulaic, but is a spirited reinterpretation of a world both poetic and fantastic... a terrestrial paradise. In this sense, the Swedish neoclassicism is not an academy, but an art; it is a strict discipline and not a simple way of creating....

For Swedes, Venice is not an example to be exploited, but a world of dreams.... In this Olympic milieu the rationalism, or *funkis*, as is said in Sweden, is not an indirect polemic or new dogma, but the constant aspiration of all people toward the most beautiful ideal.³⁶

A critical misreading of academic classicism and modernism is central to the work of both Aalto and Asplund. "To live," the literary critic Harold Bloom has noted, "the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father."³⁷ It is this misreading of historical models, Aalto's reinterpretation and reinvention of those various sources, not necessarily in a synthetic manner, that gives the Workers' Club such potency. This building presents a frame and reference for Aalto's later work, a benchmark subject to the inchoate ambiguities and confusion embodied in the notion of beginnings.

34 E. Persico, "Cooperativa Forbundet," *Casabella* (August 1935).

35 A. Aalto, "The Trout and the Mountain Stream," in Schildt, ed., *Sketches*, 98.

36 E. Persico, "Cooperativa Forbundet."

37 H. Bloom, *Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 19.