

RESEARCH IN LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN



ALVAR AALTO AND THE ART OF LANDSCAPE

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ROUTLEDGE



ALVAR AALTO, THE ART OF LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT OF THE BOOK

WRITINGS OF ALVAR AALTO

Aalto was an eager writer in his early years even though he later hides himself behind his actual drawing work announcing that paper was only to be drawn on.

His way of writing is quite intuitive – in a way poetic, but sometimes it is difficult to catch the real meaning of the sentence. There was also a period in late 1920s and 1930s that he used a bit cryptic and quasi-scientific language. That was an era when he got to know the new thoughts in biology, psychology and sociology. However, his writings open up his attitude towards nature and landscape. Most of all he saw that architecture was a central tool on how a good living to citizens should be organized. The society needs a strong interactive collaboration with surrounding nature.

Aalto saw the Finnish forest as a resort of healthier living environment but also as a guide on how to construct rational and sustainable site plans and buildings to create a functional and harmonious landscape.

THE ORIGIN OF AALTO'S LANDSCAPE CONCEPT

Ten selected project descriptions

Aalto's life era goes together with Finnish independency. Right after matriculation he started his studies in architecture – but he also participated in the civil war in 1918. He was eager to enjoy the student life and he had a hunger for new life experiences. His communicational skills were exceptional and that made him quite fortunate during his architectural career that continued until his death.

In early 1900s, Finland was looking after its identity. From architecture point it followed the path of Western Europe. After the holistic approach of Art Nouveau followed by the New Classical era was the time when Aalto jump in. He made his grand tour in Italy but instead of copying the architectural treasures his eye leaned on the surrounding landscape and the hilltop towns. The way Aalto used building volumes can be traced to Italian landscape. When the modern movement wiped over the Europe, Aalto was in the heart of the new architecture. He interpreted the style not only in architecture but also in the new garden style dividing the courtyards based on their functions and orientations.

Aalto was fast on adapting new ideas and when he got to know Japanese way of combining the interiors and exteriors, he focused on the views out of the building. Aalto's wife Aino was a master of detailing with materials and when they combined their skills the results were impressive and that can be seen in their own house surrounding as well as in Villa Mairea's. The Anglo-American influences are relevant when thinking on town planning. Aalto and other Finnish architects were aware of English garden town ideology but the step forward was the American sociology-based planning scheme that Aalto evaluated in his spatial plans. Aalto took the landscape and its topography as the basic guiding lines and merged them to economical and social structures of the neighbourhood. The result was the green network, that he launched in Imatra.

Aalto made some travels to Islamic based countries in 1950s when there was an economic boom in Middle East. There was a desire to build new cities and landmarks and the international architects were invited. Aalto seem to have adapted some part of the idea enclosed garden as well as the water features that started to appear more often in his plans.

These influences are not so obvious but they are there mixed with other Mediterranean influences like brick walls and architectural antique motives. The combo of using those elements make Aalto unique.

ALVAR AALTO – THE INFLUENCES OF THE VISUAL ARTS

three selected project descriptions

There are architects that are more intellectually oriented and then the architects who are more intuitive and art oriented - Aalto belongs definitely to the latter once. In his childhood he was to become an artist, a painter, and in his student years he wrote art critique. There are catalogues of some art exhibition with Aalto's' remark to Aino, etc. When they met their international colleagues, it was obvious that Aalto felt himself comfortable with artist. He created the deep friendship with Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Fernand Léger and Alexander Calder and had a lot of acquaintances among other artist like Constantin Brâncusi whom he really admired and Otto Carlsson with whom he shared the interest to Art Concret. Friedrich Kiesler and his ideas of biomorphic form language resonated in Aalto's mind and since the end of 1940s, his sketches start to be more fluent and abstract. He also painted some oils which seems to visualize his ideas of shaping the terrain. That is what makes his building projects, that became larger and more remarkable, during the 1950s and 1960s more related to earth. Constructions are in deep dialogue with surrounding landscape; they are rooted to rock bed. The form language is sometimes repeating the landscape and sometimes challenging it with contradictory forms. The forms are abstract but they are based always on either on technical solutions or functional purpose of the building. The forms have correlations with metaphorical objects and sculptures and that is why they are raising strong emotions.

CASE STUDIES

Twelve case studies concentrate at the end of Aalto's career

The case studies includes the topics: green flexibility; two sides of urbanism; two town halls using the best out of landscape; cultural projects in a valley and on top; churches as landmarks and the private houses on the slope. Aalto was very much challenged by the young architects of their time by accusing Aalto for being elitist. These cases do show that Aalto was developing his architectural thinking more towards sustainable and longstanding basis when thinking of materials and surrounding. By using the surrounding landscape and its nature he was creating a strong but delicate visual existence to the site. That is what gives the meaning to the citizens – that is why some sites are more appreciated than others.

Case studies include projects that are realized but also some which are not made. Unrealized projects are still important to raise up as they share information That is important when trying to understand what was the driving force that kept Aalto to evaluate his planning until the end of his career. There is a lot of contradictory substance in those late works. Aalto shows his passionate interest on taking account not only the geographical facts of the landscape but also its culture historical context – what kind of constructions or natural features needs to be preserved. Aalto was very much a protector of the existing landscape; he tried to avoid cutting the trees or to explode too much of the bed rock. That is something quite an opposite of the contemporary way of constructing housing areas or highways. Case studies show also that Aalto was aware of the microclimate problems

caused by constructing rivers, for example, in Lappi regional plan and the ecological feedback of various acts made in forests. In one sentence, Aalto had a surprisingly holistic view on ecology in his time.

CONCLUSIONS

One book Aalto had in his library is 'La Sarre' urbanisme, 1946. In the front page, there is a quotation of Aristotle: 'Une ville doit être bâtie de façon à donner à ses habitants la sécurité et le Bonheur.' Surely Aalto was aware of Aristotle but since Nynäshamn, 1946, he used that as one of his basic messages in town planning. The other messages were that in all planning one must take into consideration the location, the nature, and the topography. Over the years Aalto was using typology and varying as his design methods. When thinking of his landscapes, the ditto themes are the most relevant. The elements of nature, trees, and plants, the bed rock, and the water are the once that has been observed. The water as an element is used much more than it has been thought before. It is used in large scale plan like in Oulu River Rapid or the small scale manifestation like in Jyväskylä cascade pool. Grass terrace is the most known element that Aalto used when combining the building to the landscape. It expanded to terraces and terrace decks used in city plans. A kind of terrace is the amfi theatre form that Aalto was using to create a link to classical landscape. The other way to combine the classical landscape to the natural landscape of the North was to use colonnades and pergolas. Colonnades were having grass roof on top as in Jyväskylä university or to support creepers like in pergola of Villa Kokkonen. The plants are to be used to have 'l'élan vital' that is necessary to have a good life. The plants grow because of sunlight and that's why orientation was important. Aalto made already in late 1930s several studies on orientation and since that he was composing his building blocks to a kind of fragmented groups that had various courtyards and pathways to give a protection of the wind or the warm of the sun. Aalto was combining his knowhow of ecology to his way of re-constructing the landscape but also adding a bit of art with the view of landscape painter.

Teija Isohauta, September 2021