ARCHITECTURE VIEW: ALVAR AALTO'S HUMANE ENVIRONMENTS ARCHITECTURE VIEW ALVAR AALTO

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Alvar Aalto's Humane Environments

The Alvar Aalto Show that has just opened at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street, through Sept. 12) is an import; like the gentle, blond wood furniture that has become a familiar trademark of the internationally famous Finnish architect who died in 1976, it comes from Helsinki, where Aalto lived and worked for almost all of his career.

This is a substantial retrospective exhibition, with more than 80 panels of black-and-white photographs, some color pictures and enough of the architect's original drawings — there are over 40 — to make a fine drawing show in themselves. It includes furniture, glassware, hardware, lighting fixtures and a number of building models and samples of design experiments in wood. A few of the architect's Abstract Expressionist paintings round out the selection; the rich cobalt blue and black that he favored, and frequently used in building tile and leather furniture, are characteristically illuminated with a strong, lustrous streak of white light. Light played the same pivotal role in his architecture.

The exhibition was conceived and designed by the Museum of Finnish Architecture in Helsinki and has been installed in New York by Richard B. Oliver, the Cooper-Hewitt's director of contemporary architecture and design, with the assistance of the Cooper-Hewitt staff. The display has been supplemented by furnishings and fabrics from I.C.F., the firm that distributes Aalto furniture in this country. (The original Aalto bentwood stools of 40 years ago are collectors items now; they were status symbols for young architects and designers then.)

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The show begins with those radical architectural shots heard round the avant-garde world in the 1920's and 30's — the Turun Sanomat Newspaper office in Turtu of 1928-30, the Tuberculosis Sanitarium at Paimio of 1930-33 and the Viipuri Library of 1933-35. The familiar Aalto themes were developed then: the open, skylit, layered space that counts essential experience as high among its functions, the wood details that bring nature to high art, the architecture that is at once coolly esthetic and warmly human.

The highly personal manner that Aalto perfected in the 1950's and 60's, as he moved away from the International Style to something more individual and magical, is traced through such outstanding structures as the Town Halls at Säynäpsalo and Seinöjlki and the Technical University at Otieniemi, as well as the libraries, churches, concert halls and community centers that he built in and outside of Finland during those years.

Aalto's American work, which has never become familiar to the general public, consists of a handful of buildings and interiors. While he had many commissions from large corporations in Europe, his atelier operation attracted institutional rather than business clients here, and the jobs were on a less ambitious scale.

The Baker House dormitories of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were carried out under the pressure of the war years in 1947-48, when the Woodberry Poetry Room was designed for the Lamont Library at Harvard. The Edgar Kaufmann Jr. conference rooms were done for the Institute of International Education in New York in 1963-65, and the Library for Mount Angel Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Portland, Ore., was executed from 1965 to 1970. An early, much-admired work was the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, with an almost expressionistic use of wood meant to evoke Finnish forests at the same time that it declared Aalto's personal design philosophy to the art world.

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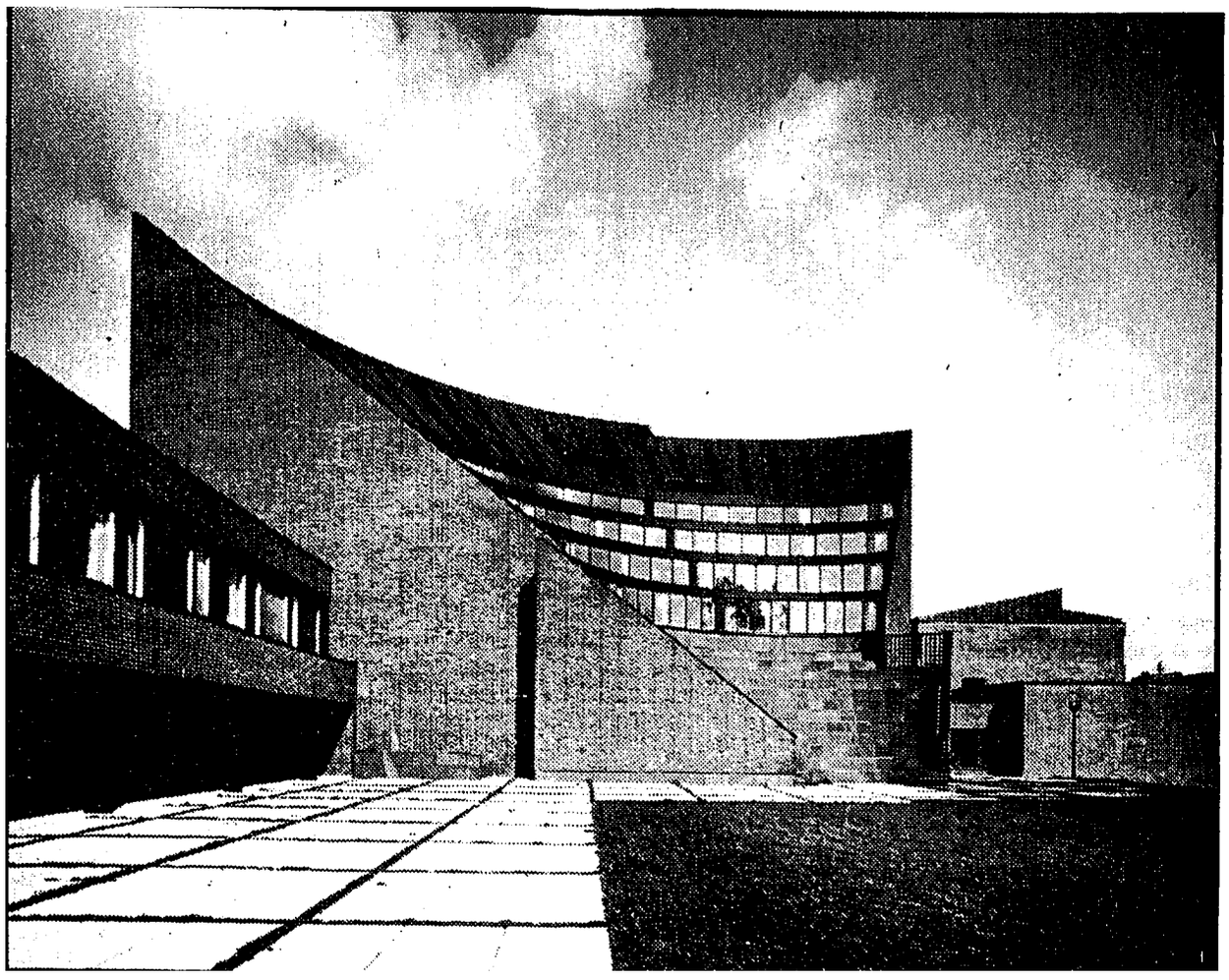
These buildings frequently puzzled their admirers because they were so far out of the modernist mainstream. Critics struggled with their covert disappointment when so few of the expected hallmarks appeared. It has taken the much-bruited "demise" of modern architecture to make it clear what rich and vital design this is when seen without preconceptions, even in the somewhat limited American translations, and when it is understood on its own — and Aalto's — terms.

Aalto's style, in fact, was a very complex and sophisticated mix. His work moved from neo-classical beginnings through a sleek mastery of the International Style, which he used quickly and astutely to become Finland's acknowledged avant-garde leader, to a return to ethnic and romantic influences. His final reintegration of all those traditions was done with an impeccable 20th-century eye. The result was an esthetic that owed a great deal to a variety of sources, but that was wholly his own. In later years, with the design of Helsinki's Finlandia Hall from 1962 to 1975, he seemed almost to revert to the near-classical quality of the Finnish "national style" of his early years and training. No throwback, however, this is a suavely assured masterwork. Someone has said that only Aalto could use marble without being pompous.

He was not an austere architect, despite his reduction of elements to calculated essentials. His plans and spaces curved and fanned out freely from the basic box. Nor was his sensuousity any less strong for being understated; he attended equally to the selection of clear, silky birch and its lamination and bending into his stylized "tree forms," and the exact section of the dark blue wall-tiles that change subtly as the viewer walks around them. His characteristic palette of white, natural, honey-beige, dark blue and black had a subtle richness that made bright colors seem cheap and gaudy. A stairrail or a door handle became an event.



Aalto's main building at Finland's University of Technology

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A lover of nature, he never allowed it to upstage him; there were surprisingly few views where one expected them in his buildings. The balance between art and nature was most carefully controlled. The way he used light to shape and suffuse the multiple levels of a building is luminous spatial handwriting. The "free forms" he borrowed from Arp in the 1940's became everyone else's clichés. His use of wood, of course, is legendary: the undulating, slatted ceilings, the columns of bound saplings, the bent forms, the details that greet the eye no less than the hand, the near-white natural finishes that make the American products look like pretentious plastic.

All this can be seen, or sensed, in the show at the Cooper-Hewitt. What the exhibition does not do, and probably cannot do, is to offer the kind of total reexamination of this work that would be in order now, long enough after Aalto's death to see it whole and in the light of his increasing importance on the architectural scene. For at least two generations now, this has been markedly influential work, as appreciation has risen for his combined esthetic and environmental skills.

The job of research and reappraisal has been well begun

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in Paul David Pearson's recent book, "Alvar Aalto and the International Style," which does much to clarify the architect's sources and beginnings, and to address the question of creative credit to his wives, who were his collaborating architects. The way in which Aalto adopted, and capitalized on, the International Style and then, for all polemical purposes, became a dropout looking for alternate architectural styles, is more understandable now.

In retrospect, Aalto was clearly a square peg in a round modernist hole, a man who always knew exactly what he was doing. A small, dapper gentleman, he was a charming maverick in everything. Elegant, witty and convivial, in later years he held increasingly bibulous professional bullsessions in his studio that would last into the next morning. He could be courtly; this writer was always "chère madame." He liked to take a visitor to the Savoy Restaurant in Helsinki, which he designed in 1937 and which remained substantially unchanged; there he would order delicately smoked fish with dill and a very fine red wine. It broke all of the rules, of course, and so did his architecture. Some people need rules; he did not.

Aalto buildings pull off a rare paradox: they combine intimacy and monumentality. These structures are full of their own "complexity and contradiction." At the same time, they are strictly ordered; they rely on an almost tyrannical refinement — exactly the right detail to evoke the right sensation and do the right job. Because they deal in a kind of kinetic, sensuous experience, rather than in bold exterior images, few of his buildings are particularly photogenic; it is essential to experience them firsthand.

They wear their excellence with deceptive ease. Above all, they are humane environments in which man is the measure of art. Few architects who walk through Aalto buildings remain unchanged. ■