Where They Do It Right
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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Architecture

Where They Do It Right

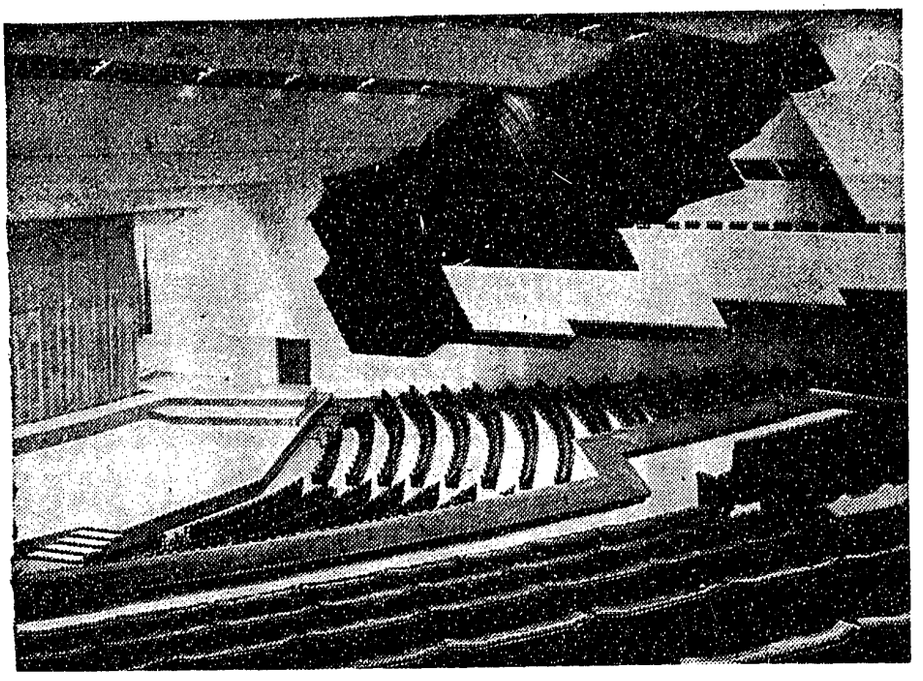
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ON December 2, a major new Concert and Congress Hall, called Finlandia Hall, designed by the Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, opened in Helsinki. At the time, I had the pictures spread out on my desk and a well known dance-and-drama-critic colleague who had been through the trauma of the opening of the Kennedy Center with me happened to see and admire them. "Where's that?" he asked. "In Finland," I replied. "Oh, of course," he said, "we don't build that kind of thing here."

He was right; we don't build big civic and cultural centers in this country much above the architectural schlock level. They are rarely, if ever, great or beautiful buildings. Not because the United States has no good architects or great or beautiful buildings. But neither seems to make it to those symbolic and civic jobs that are meant to represent the country and its culture.

I have not visited Finlandia Hall, but I have seen a great deal of Aalto's superb work in Finland, where it is essential to experience it, and in other countries, including his three works in the United States, the 1947 M.I.T. Dormitory, the 1964 Kaufmann Conference Room at the Institute of International Education in New York, and the jewel-like library for the Benedictine monastery at Mount Angel, Oregon, completed two years ago.

It is necessary to know Aalto's work first-hand, because it translates poorly into pictures. So much of its excellence is its absolute rightness of conception, the three-dimensional relationships of its elements, its use of light and low-key color, the subtle sensuosity of details remarkable for consistency and restraint, and ultimately, its humanity. All this is resistant to the photographer's art.



Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Hall, Helsinki, Finland
How not to build the biggest white marble elephant in the world

Against the experience of Aalto's buildings, it is possible to "read" the pictures of Finlandia Hall, and the message is clear. Like all of his structures, it is a painstakingly beautiful, contemporary design in the highest creative sense. There are no gimmicks. His architecture, as he says himself, is not "coquettish." Function is translated with elegant clarity into a warm and eloquent expression of our time.

It must be pointed out that there are obvious differences between Washington's Kennedy Center and Helsinki's Finlandia Hall beyond their quality as architecture. The Kennedy Center is huge; it contains three performing arts halls for opera, concerts and drama, joined by a foyer and corridors big enough to float several battleships, plus restaurant and executive space. The houses within the house—all, thank heavens, a resounding acoustical success or this would really be the biggest white marble elephant in the world—are larger than Helsinki's. There are differences in program, subsidy, costs, ownership and operation.

The Helsinki building is meant for the joint purpose of concerts and congresses. A wing of large meeting rooms will extend the structure farther along the lakefront that marks the town center sometime this year. There is presently a 1,750-seat concert hall, a 350-seat chamber music hall, radio studios and executive offices, restaurant and cafeteria, some meeting rooms and facilities for simultaneous translation in all public areas. Concert acoustics have been judged successful by a majority of critics, and some matters of debate, such as the level of the orchestra stage, are capable of adjustment.

Beyond these differences, however, there are very important, striking similarities between the two buildings. Both are avowed architectural and cultural landmarks in their respective capital cities, both entail a form of status and symbolism of national significance, and both purportedly serve their countries' highest cultural aspirations and achievements. What is of concern here is the quality level at which these comparable objectives are translated into architecture. One succeeds, the other fails.

Take, for example, the use of marble. Both buildings are marble-clad. The Kennedy Center is a gargantuanly inflated, nondescript box with marble wrapped around it like so much yardage.

The marble of Finlandia Hall both embellishes and defines the building's shapes and functions. "The finishing process does not constitute an adventitious beautification by means of coverups," says Aalto of his work generally. "It is rather an attempt to refine the already existing parts by leaving them clearly visible." Tower, stairs and other details and the plan and scale of interior spaces are revealed through crisp exterior planes precisely proportioned and put together.

This is the artistry that distinguishes architectonic form from a large lump. The subtle, proportionate cutting of the marble, the masses broken or accented by gray granite, indicate an esthetic sensibility, not a packaging job.

Inside, there is no red or gilt. The interior of an Aalto building is a revelation about color. There isn't any, in the conventional sense. There is pale wood, birch or beech, of silky natural tone and texture, there are natural leathers and fabrics and black leather upholstery, and sometimes a light or dark Arabia tile.

It is as if suddenly the full range of color experience, all of the warmth and subtlety possible, is released by the nuances of those blond, black-accented hues—infinite, rich, gently sensuous variations that would be killed by anything stronger. It is like rediscovering what color really is by going back to basics. Nothing could be a more definitive contrast than the visual assault and ultimate boredom of the Kennedy Center decorative scheme—any color as long as it's red.

In Finlandia Hall, every detail is from Aalto's hand. The furnishings, from chairs to lights and linens in the restaurant, have the consistency of genuine style and taste. In the Kennedy Center, the luxury restaurant has ersatz, red-upholstered, traditional French chairs made in Austria, and there is throwaway vulgarity from what are billed as the biggest crystal chandeliers in the world to the gross Miami beauty salon decor of the ladies' rooms. Finland's gift of handsomely designed Kaj Frank cups and saucers are in the cafeteria.

The Kennedy Center is also suffering from an identity crisis. It does not know whether it is a cultural center, a national monument, or a tourist feature, and it is disastrously trying to be all three. If it is a cultural center, it should be more than a booking house, because as a booking house it is a pretentious architectural overreacher. As a national monument, it is stylelessly ponderous. Something less extravagant and ambiguous in upkeep and function would make more sense as a tourist attraction. It has been neither funded nor toileted for the purpose.

Finlandia Hall knows clearly what it is. It is part of a coordinated, long-planned civic and cultural center design by Aalto for the heart of Helsinki. It is a monumental project, in the classic sense of providing formal civic space and civic buildings, and in the nature of our times it is currently being attacked by short-sighted reformers of the social condition.

They miss the point. Social conditions must, and do, change. But this is among the last major works of the last major master of the modern movement, and art outlasts change. Alvar Aalto, approaching 74, is both a great artist and a great humanist. Somewhere inside this dapper little man of wry and serious wit is the key to the combination of esthetic and environmental sensibility and appropriate social response that we seek so noisily and fruitlessly today.