

Finnish Master Fashions Library for Abbey in Oregon

Aalto Blends Wood, Lighting and Hills in Ageless Style

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Special to The New York Times

MOUNT ANGEL, Ore., May 29—Importing the work of a famous Finnish architect known for his beautiful use of wood to the Pacific Northwest may seem like bringing coals to Newcastle. The woods here are as full of architects as they are of Douglas fir.

But imported architecture, unlike some imported wines, can travel well. The new library of the Mount Angel Abbey, a Benedictine monastery 40 miles south of Portland, being dedicated this weekend, brings a small and perfect work of the 73-year-old master of the modern movement, Alvar Aalto, to the United States.

As surprising as its presence here on an Oregon hilltop is the fact that this is only the second building, and third work, of this internationally celebrated architect in this country. The Baker House dormitory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was built in 1947, and the Kaufmann Conference Room was designed for the Institute of International Education in New York in 1964.

Mr. Aalto takes only those commissions that please him. When a letter came to Helsinki in 1963, quite out of the blue, from Father Barnabas Reasoner, postmarked St. Benedict, Ore., asking him "to give us a building that will fill our needs in a beautiful and intelligent way." Mr. Aalto agreed to do the job. It was an act of faith on both sides.

Anonymous Donor

The result is a three-story, fan-shaped structure that cost \$1,272,000 and was paid for by an anonymous industrialist. It fits snugly into the side of a hill that overlooks a vast, quilted panorama of rolling farm country.

Right now, there are fields of red clover and bursts of orange poppies. But it could just as easily be a monastic hilltop in Bavaria or the south of France, with the cultivated land spread below, except for a backdrop of Mounts Hood, Adams, St. Helens and Rainier. This is green north country, as hospitable to Alvar Aalto's architecture as his native Finland.

The whole building is from the master's hand, down to the smallest fitting. Furnishings, lamps and movable objects were brought from Finland. All structural and trim details are on-site work. The classic Aalto-designed chairs



David Falconer for The New York Times

The interior of the new library of the Mount Angel Abbey, a Benedictine monastery 40 miles south of Portland, Ore.

and stools in vanilla-pale birch have a "B" brand mark on the bottom to identify them for export from Finland. The Benedictine brothers at Mount Angel raise their own beef and send their cattle brand to the factory.

Only the library's top level shows above the hill at the entrance side. It is flanked by other abbey structures built in a bland mid-1920's medieval manner that might be called Lapsed Lombard. With no compromise of its own style beyond a blending buff brick, the new addition displays a kind of good environmental manners rare among name-architect "star" structures on institutional or educational campuses.

Dedication Ceremonies

The architect could not come for the dedication but the weekend ceremonies will be highlighted by a Duke Ellington concert in the new library, introducing the work of a resident composer, Ann Henry. There will also be performances by the Portland Junior Symphony and the Lewis and Clark College Choir and Abbey Schola.

Richard W. Southern, a medieval historian who is president of St. John's College, Oxford, and the Abbot Primate, Rembert Weakland of Rome, head of the Benedictine Order, will speak at the dedication. The Finnish Ambassador to the United States, Olavi Munkki, will attend the ceremonies.



Hermann Hoffman

Alvar Aalto

The design was begun in Mr. Aalto's Helsinki studio from photographs and plans of the site. In 1967, before construction, he visited the abbey. He moved the location of the building 10 feet to save two handsome Douglas firs and to insure an opening between buildings for the view.

The library itself does not maximize the view; it does not focus attention on the outdoors. It is a place to work, flooded with controlled

daylight, with equally controlled glimpses of the countryside.

The fan-shaped plan, with a two-story central, curving skylight, reveals the entire interior to the eye from the entrance. There is no rigid, straight-line, geometrical progression of shelves or stacks; they enclose the space and the user in a gentle arc. The two floors of light-bathed stack and working areas can be seen at once, in a functionally and esthetically inviting relationship. The whole operation can be controlled by a single librarian.

Beautiful Blend of Colors

The Aalto palette of white walls, black seating and pale, warm woods, a beauty intensified by natural light from high windows and skylights and warmed by a carefully supplementary incandescent glow, proves again that no color can be the richest color. The characteristic, lovingly used Aalto woods are birch, oak and fir crafted here, with insistently natural finishes that make American wood products look like cheap wood imitations.

A slatted, sunburst ceiling of fir strips is repeated in slats finishing the ends of the book stacks. The free form, an Aalto innovation that suffered near-total degradation by the 1940's, is here in curving walls that define a small lecture hall, also fan-shaped, that seats 100 in Aalto black-

and-birch chairs facing an oak "shell." The building is superbly finished and detailed.

The structure contains about 43,000 square feet of space, with room for 250,000 volumes on theology, philosophy and related educational subjects, to serve the abbey and its seminary and wider ecumenical scholarship. There are microfilm, periodical and map rooms, a bindery and staff offices. The associated local architects were DeMars & Wells of Berkeley, Calif., and Eric Vartiainen represented the Aalto office on the site.

Beyond the facts, there is a kind of architecture that is elegant, humane and full of sophisticated skills. These skills never date. Vintage Aalto and 1970 Aalto are the same—subtle, sensuous, full of wisdom about the environment and man.

Aalto architecture continues to teach basic truths about space, light and function. Two generations brought up on pictures of his landmark library at Viipuri, destroyed during the war when the Russians took over the Finnish province of Karelia, can find the essential lessons here. They are lessons of humanitarian sensibility and a quality of design practice that must be applied to whatever new sociological role the architect defines for himself in a troubled world.