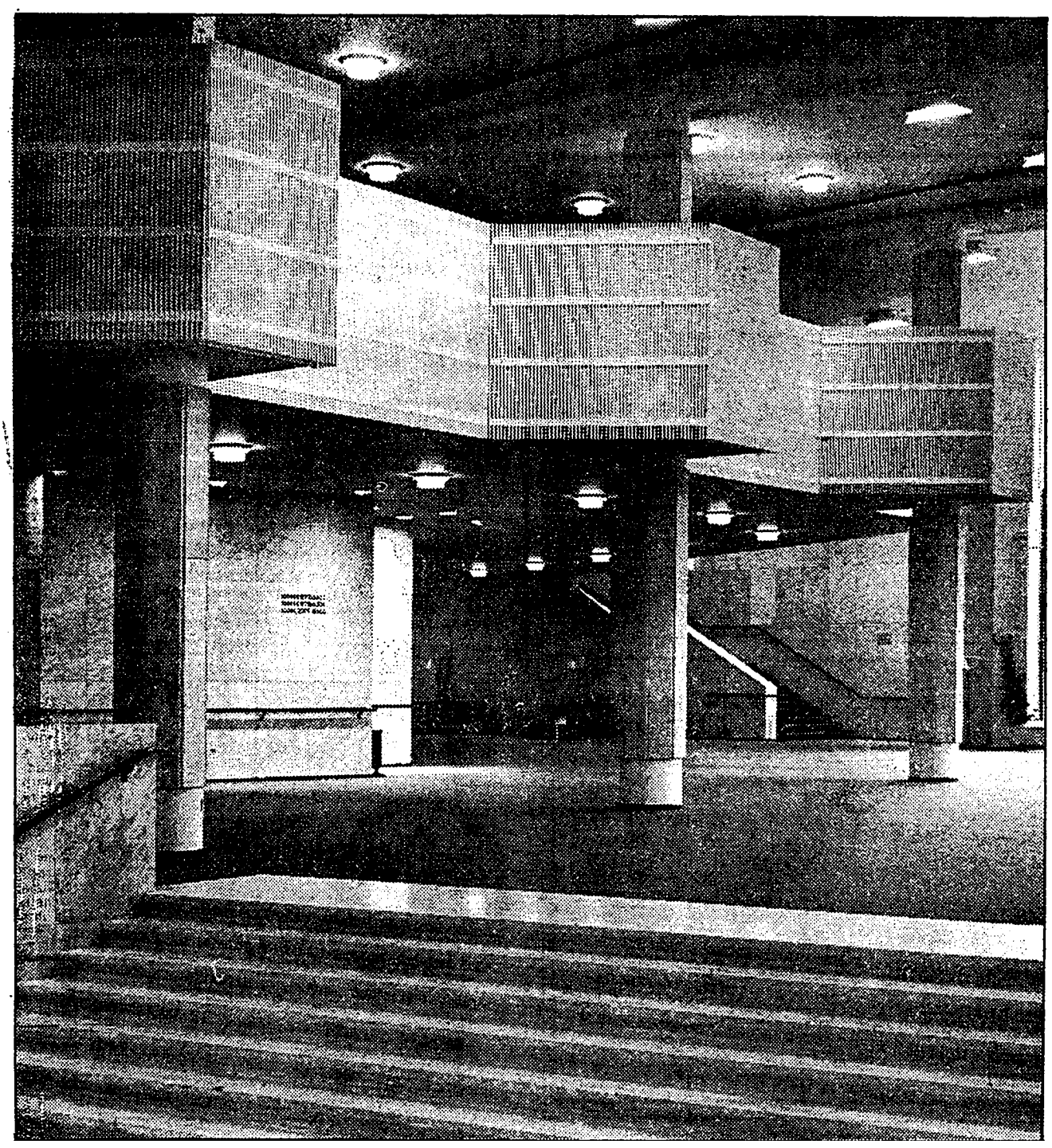
"Aalto's was an architecture dedicated to people, not to machines or technology" (Ada Louise Huxtable)

ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Master Builder Who Left Poetry and Art— Not Monuments



Istvan Racz/Courtesy Consulate General of Finland

Finlandia Hall, Helsinki: "Never any bombast, only a quiet beauty."

There is a particular poignancy in the death of the Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, at the age of 78; the sense of loss is magnified by the fact that he is the last of the great masters of the modern movement. The revolution is over. At some point the realization is going to hit us that this century has been an extraordinary, epochal era in which art changed civilization as it has only a few times in history; the modern world is a phenomenon that parallels classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The men who have been the 20th-century form-givers are only beginning to be seen as giants. They have not yet passed into popular or historical mythology or been given the Olympian public persona that leads to best-selling biographies and cinema canonization. That happens faster today in politics than in art.

Alvar Aalto's contribution was never in question, but his work always made doctrinaire modernists uneasy. It was hard to classify. His style did not mesh conveniently with what was being produced and propagandized; he simply did not take his place in the proper critical historians' hierarchies and pieties. While his pioneering importance got him included in all anthologies of the new work (usually at the back), he was out of the mainstream.

He was a loner, in spite of the conviviality of his Helsinki studio and long nights with friends and associates and too much wine—a small (for a giant), charming, willful maverick of a man who quietly and firmly evaded the dictates and proprieties of the International Style. At the same time, he built with beautiful fidelity to the principles of structure and material that were the avowed basis of modernism. But his was an architecture dedicated to people, not to the machine or technology. A younger generation is now discovering this in a climate of changing tastes and ideologies, and he is gaining rather than losing in stature and influence.

And so his loss seems greater, and we cannot escape a definitive end-of-an-era feeling. The buildings of the men who shaped and defined the modern movement are points of pilgrimage now. Le Corbusier's Ronchamps is like a Bernini chapel; Mies's Chicago is a course of student instruction; Wright's buildings are preserved by the National Trust; Gropius's house has been taken over by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. It is going to be very hard to make monuments of Aalto's low-key, lovely buildings, devoted equally to esthetics and the environment. For one thing, they are not photogenic. They must be experienced in person. Their effects are intimate and subtle and there is never any bombast, only a quiet beauty.

His structures may be half buried in a hillside, as in one of his few American works, the Library at Mount Angel Abbey built near Portland, Ore., in 1969-70. There is a simple, cool rationalism to his materials and forms rather than the histrionics of brute concrete or structural exhibitionism. He was the rare architect who could use marble without pomposity. But he never popularized; he was as stringent as he was sensitive. Brick is used severely (but still subtly) at the Institute of Technology at Otaniemi; midnight blue tiles make a rich, vitreous abstraction reached by a geometry of stepped terraces gentled by grass for the Town Hall at Seinajoki.

Inside, his buildings embrace the visitor with "soft" but superbly controlled shapes and surfaces. The key is a combination of rigor and sensuosity. There are the curving free forms that he virtually invented and that his imitators turned into a 1940's cliché, the pale, satiny birch of his native Finland, white walls touched occasionally with colored tile and luminous with daylight at many levels, its sources used to shape, accent and simply uplift the spirit with brilliant virtuosity.

The Aalto classics, well established in architectural histories, are the Viipuri Library with its round skylights, bentwood furniture and already complete Aalto vocabulary, designed in a competition in 1927, built from 1930 to 1935 and destroyed in the Russo-Finnish War of 1940-41, and the Paimio Sanitorium of 1932. Other classics are the characteristic laminated birch furniture of the 1930's and 1940's, still in production, with more recent additions of constantly increasing refinement.

In all, he built for more than six decades in Scandinavia, France, Switzerland, West Germany and the United States, but the body of his work is in Finland. There are schools, universities, churches, museums, civic buildings, private homes and apartment houses, offices and factories. Finlandia Hall, designed in 1962 and built from 1967 to 1971, is a handsome concert and congress hall that is part of a comprehensive civic center plan for Helsinki. In the United States, in addition to the Mount Angel Library, there are the Baker House dormitory at M.I.T. of 1946-47, and the 1963-65 Kaufmann Conference Room of the Institute of International Education in New York.

Everything bears his highly personal stamp. Buildings came from his hand complete with furnishings and a dazzling array of lighting fixtures. For all of its understated simplicity, the Aalto style is distinct, assured and unmistakable. And it is intensely personal. He never saw architecture as a philosophical or intellectual exercise. He never joined the polemical group pronouncements of the architectural tastemakers. He was never the kind of modernist who practiced architecture as theory and produced buildings that have to be explained to be liked, or even tolerated.

Aalto buildings don't have to be explained. They need only to be walked into. His vocabulary of "naturals"—woods, finishes, fabrics, leathers—testifies to a deep love of a very basic kind of beauty, both restrained and joyous, and it is a love that is meant to be shared. It includes nature and its relationship to man's world. Take delight in this with me, is the architect's message. But that message can also be read as a definition of architecture as the making of a place that functions to the highest degree of use and pleasure.

There is a generation now (how the decades pass) that is "rediscovering" Aalto. Appreciation is extending beyond the codified, influential aspects of historical modernism to the spirit of his work. The danger, however, is that these lessons will be misused. The tendency in architecture today is to perceive the elements of a style and to employ them as a set of decorative symbols for a sophisticated kind of mannerism.

That is not nearly good enough. The whole point of Aalto's architecture—which must not be lost again—is that all of its forms, techniques and details add up to an essential, rational and elegant humanism. He set for himself the most absolute standards of perception and performance, in the service of a very human place. But when asked about his theory or practice, he simply replied, "I build." What he built was enough; it was poetry and art.