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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 30, 1964; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 38

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Rooms He Designed to Be Unveiled Today

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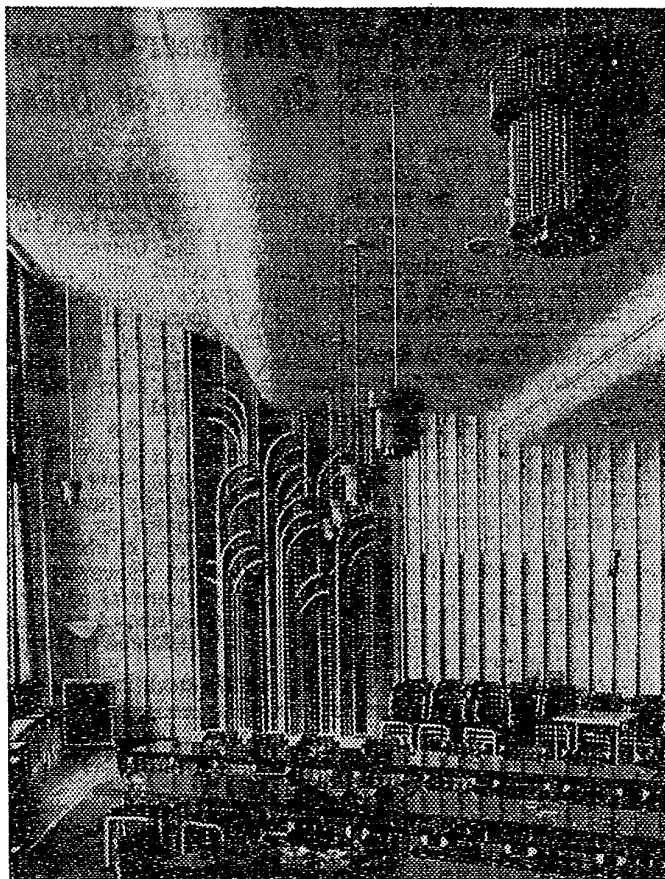
A NEW YORK example of the work of Alvar Aalto, a founder and leading practitioner of modern architecture, will be unveiled officially this afternoon with the dedication of the Institute of International Education building at 809 United Nations Plaza.

The building is by Harrison, Abramovitz & Harris, but the 12th-floor conference rooms, where the ceremonies will take place, were designed by the internationally honored Finnish architect as the gift of the Edgar J. Kaufmann Foundation.

The completion of these interiors marks a felicitous ending to what otherwise would have been a fairly routine exercise in New York's architectural economics.

In 1950, the institute bought one of the handsomest of the city's baronial houses, the Gould-Vanderbilt mansion at 1 East 67th Street, for \$400,000. In 1960, needing more space, it sold the building to an apartment-house developer, to whom it was worth almost three times as much—\$1.1 million—to tear down. A landmark was lost.

This year the institute completed its chaste and sleek new office building, which substitutes a conscientiously businesslike taste and competence for chateau-style grandeur, at a cost of \$4.5 million. That would be the end of an unexceptional story except for that top floor, which has been transformed for an undisclosed and probably formidable price into the most beautiful and distinguished interior



The New York Times (by Neal Boenzi)

One of rooms designed by Alvar Aalto for the Institute of International Education, 809 United Nations Plaza.

that New York has seen in many years. A landmark is gained.

Here are the well-known Aalto trademarks that have been admired by two generations of architects. Pale, laminated woods are used with the plasticity of sculpture; stepped, curved walls and ceilings turn ordinary rectangular spaces into a series of softened enclosures of seductive virtuosity, and de-

ceptive simplicity belies a most sophisticated style.

But even if these contributions have already taken their place in architectural histories, there is nothing dated about them. The Kaufmann conference rooms are so far superior to corporate and institutional interior design here that they make the standardized, expensive ploys of teak-by-the-yard and conference-table-by-the-ton seem

flashy and cheap by comparison.

This superiority rests on a large talent and small details. First, and most important, there is Aalto's treatment of architectural space. It might be called a sensitive and loving kind of manipulation that molds, instead of denying, the existing architectural shell. It is creative camouflage, rather than destructive decoration. And it is frankly sensuous, rather than severe.

Approximately 4,350 square feet of conventionally boxlike, low-ceilinged space has been divided into a lobby, reception room, conference rooms and a corridor. Much of the area can be opened or closed in a variety of ways by sliding doors.

The large conference-room ceiling sweeps upward in undulating stages to a window-wall, an effect made possible by moving the heavy service machinery above. Side walls curve gently and unexpectedly, giving a diagonal focus. Even the cobalt-blue Finnish tile of the elevator entrance is rounded and smooth to the hand. Inside, the colors are white and ivory, accented by black, with the cool, elegant clarity of natural tones and materials.

Scarcely second to the resolution of space is the superb use of wood. It is quite possible, in this country, to forget that wood is so beautiful and that its appeal is due to its qualities as a natural material. American processes of manufacture frequently result in a mechanized and overfinished product that looks as if it had never known a tree.

The rooms glow with the pale warmth of white birch. White plaster walls are partly sheathed with white-birch

They Are in Institute at United Nations Plaza

panels, and slender, vertical battens of clustered, laminated birch rods tie both surfaces together.

This wall treatment breaks into a brief abstract fantasy at one point on the longest side of the main conference room, where a composition of straight and bent wood forms is meant to suggest a stylized forest. It was reduced to a small stand of "trees" by New York's fire laws.

All of these more sensitive elements, including the Aalto-designed furniture upholstered in soft black leather, an integral part of the interiors, were prefabricated or produced in Finland. The "forest" was studied at full-size in the architect's Helsinki atelier and re-erected here. Large, plain sections, like the ash panels and sliding doors of the same white tone as the Finnish birch, were made in the United States.

There is no sign of the aggressive angularity or dynamic sharpness that is commonly labeled modern. Aalto might be called, to use the language of painting, a soft-edge architect. He continues to work, in increasingly subtle ways, with the free-form, a concept he virtually invented in the nineteen-twenties. And he has seen it turned into the most abused of all clichés.

He himself is incapable of a cliché or a stereotype of any kind. A small, spry, sophisticated, impeccably tailored Finnish troll of 66 years, with a gleam in his eye and a soft barb to his wit, Alvar Aalto still leads the field of design.