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**Wood and domestic architecture in Aalto’s work. Some influences on Portuguese Architecture.**

**Ana Isabel da Costa e Silva**

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**Abstract**

This article proposes an interpretation of the portuguese experience on wooden architecture taking in account the concept of wrapping (Caters, 2007: 89) and the influence of Alvar Aalto's work in the portuguese architectural scene in the fifties and sixties of the XXth century. In that period, a conjunction of favourable factors drew the attention to the use of wood in Portuguese architecture such as the National Survey on Popular Architecture, the access to international magazines that gave particular attention to the Japanese and the Scandinavian realities, and the impact of a Portuguese architecture magazine, had followed the interest on looking ways outside the epicentre of modern architecture, which gives rise to what Kenneth Frampton called "Critical Regionalism". These factors contributed to a new look at traditional materials according to an approach that moves from the imitation of the vernacular building systems to treat- ing them as materia to a transformation process in order to produce an adequate space to contemporary man.

A "Vacation House" (1957-1959), in Ofir, by Fernando Távora (1923-2005), had a crucial contribution to this debate, as well as the "Boa Nova Tea House" (1958-1963), in Leça da Palmeira, by Álvaro Siza (n. 1933). This tendency generated a unique moment in the Portuguese architecture characterized by the coexistence of the generalized use of concrete and, at the same time, the integration of quality artisanal work such as carpentry.

Alongside with that national cultural ambiance resented in Portugal, Alvar Aalto's work gives, by that time, a particular importance to the use of traditional materials, particularly wood, as an interior and exterior coating element. In his works, particularly in the domestic building, Alvar Aalto used this material breaking the traditional use of wood in Finland (in a structural way) taking advantage of the material's expressive capacities in the space's conformation.

Considering the concept of architecture as wrapping, the starting point of Aalto architecture design is the human being, his emotions and the forms of natural elements (Aalto, 1940: 334), in the alignment of Gunnar Asplund practice. The material's role followed this alignment where the main goal was to find the quality of space to come up with the comfort of human beings. In order to establish a parallel between the portuguese architecture and the Aalto's contributions, we will engage a comparative analysis of Villa Mairea (1938- 39), in Noormarkku, the Aalto House and Studio (1935-1936), in Helsinki, both by Alvar Aalto and the "Vacation House", in Ofir, by Fernado Távora and the "Boa Nova Tea House" in Leça da Palmeira, by Álvaro Siza, taking in account the presence of wood in con- formation of the exterior form and in the characterization of an atmosphere on interior space.

Our study will then serve the purpose of discussing the particular use of wood in Aalto's domestic architecture, according to the con- cept of architecture as "wrapping" and associated to a "methodical accommodation to the circumstances", two key aspects of Alvar Aalto's practice, and its influence into the Portuguese production of erudite architecture in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s.

[*http://www.alvaraaltoresearch.fi/articles/wood-and-domestic-architecture-aaltos-work-some-influences-p/*](http://www.alvaraaltoresearch.fi/articles/wood-and-domestic-architecture-aaltos-work-some-influences-p/)

Alvar Aalto is one of the important figures of modern architecture and is the best-known Finnish architect abroad. His work ranges from area plans to designs for individual buildings and furnishings. In collaboration with his wife Aino Marsio-Aalto, he worked in the fields of interior design and furnishings. Aalto's contribution to the standardised construction and socially oriented architectural planning of the modern movement was important for the development of Finnish architecture and society.

Alvar Aalto is an internationally famous architect and an important exponent of modernism. He created a distinct architectural style, whose aesthetic impact is based on careful consideration for a building's relationship to its natural surroundings, a human scale, the feeling evoked by the materials used, meticulous detailing and the skilful placement of light sources. Aalto is valued for having provided an alternative to the technology-dominated impersonality of the international style, to its structural repetitiveness and visual monotony.

People rarely consider the fact that Aalto's work began as a collaborative venture. From 1924 onwards he was married to the architect Aino Marsio. His wife went on to specialise in interior design, but she also served as his closest professional adviser on the design of the buildings themselves, although looking after the home, the children and not least her husband restricted her participation in the work of the office. The different personalities of wife and husband seem to have complemented each other. It is generally thought that as the more balanced and realistic partner Aino had a moderating effect on Alvar's characteristic tendency to get carried away by an idea. Her outlook had a beneficial influence on many projects; Alvar was totally attached - emotionally and professionally - to his wife. And he recognised this, always, for instance, making public her contributions to their projects and exhibitions. In social situations Aino was retiring, while Alvar, who enjoyed mixing with people, relished publicity and knew how to use it to advantage, maintained the image of their joint enterprise and made important contacts. Aino Marsio-Aalto died at a stage where the first large building projects of the 1950s were in preparation and Alvar Aalto's position as Finland's leading architect was undisputed. The end of the relationship was a difficult experience for Aalto. Three years later he began a new marriage with his assistant, the architect Elissa Mäkiniemi.

Aalto's teachers at the Helsinki University of Technology were Armas Lindgren, Usko Nyström and Carolus Lindberg. The national romantic ideals dating from the turn of the century were passed on by Lindgren, for whom an important aspect of architecture was the designer's artistic expression. For Aalto's teachers, architectural history and tradition constituted an integral part of the methodology of design. For Aalto, too, history was an important source of ideas and inspiration but no longer a methodological guideline. He was also always prepared to replace buildings erected by previous generations with structures of his own. Aalto strongly represented the Western ideal of the architect - that of the enlightened autocrat whose task as a designer and the client's trusted partner is to direct the production of a built environment in its broadest sense and in all its aspects, from general plans to the details of interior design. In his case, too, this task involved a firm belief that his own creations were functionally and aesthetically superior to those of his predecessors.

The lively and personable Aalto was a popular student. He was drawn into Carolus Lindberg's circle, which included the artists Henry Ericsson and Toivo Vikstedt and the journalist Arthur Sjöblom. Aalto took his first steps as a writer with columns in Kerberos, a journal which appeared from 1918 to 1921 and was edited by Vikstedt and Sjöblom. His later writing dealt more exclusively with professional matters. But writing was a casual pursuit for Aalto, who never attempted to construct a systematic theory. His activities in the visual arts were in one way or another connected with his architecture, but his architectural sketches and drawings are also interesting works of art in themselves.

Jyväskylä, Aalto's home town during his school days, became his first base of operations. The Alvar Aalto Office of Architecture and Monumental Art made itself known locally through an effective advertising campaign. The office was in a strategic location as far as business was concerned; and it also served as bachelor quarters for Aalto and Toivo Takala, who was to be his associate as draftsman and scale-model builder for thirty years. The first commissions came from or through relatives and acquaintances. The district in which Aalto's father worked as a surveyor - Southern Ostrobothnia and Central Finland - was the most important area for the business. Soon after its establishment, the office had so much work that Aalto took on the architecture student Ragnar Ypyä as a trainee. He married his most important assistant, Aino Marsio, in 1924, and in the same year the office produced drawings for breakthrough work - the Workers' Association building in Jyväskylä and that of the Civil Guards in Seinäjoki. The clients represented opposing political groupings - the socialist labour movement and its victorious White adversaries in the Civil War of 1918. Inspired by the enthusiasm prevailing in student circles, Aalto had participated in the Civil War on the side of the Whites, and there is no reason to doubt that he did so in earnest. As an architect, however, he had his own objectives and principles, which stood outside - or perhaps above - worldly politics.

The first success in a competition came with a win in the second contest for the Jyväskylä Civil Guards building, erected in 1926-29. In 1927 Aalto won competitions both for the building of the Agricultural Cooperative of Southwestern Finland erected in Turku in 1928 and for the City Library in Viipuri (Vyborg), which was completed in 1935 after several planning phases. During the first phase, the design was still classical in nature, but Aalto developed it in a functionalist mode. The Agricultural Cooperative building was the largest yet of Aalto's projects and him to move his office to Turku.

As a student Aalto had assisted Carolus Lindberg in designing the buildings for the first Finnish Trade Fair. As such, Aalto's contribution was a minor one. However, his biographer Göran Schildt regards the experience as important, because it gave Aalto a taste of the fantasy world of exhibition architecture - a world to which his lively imagination was well suited. Aalto was indeed interested in exhibitions, using them as testing grounds. In 1929 he designed Turku's 700th anniversary exhibition in collaboration with Erik Bryggman; this provided an opportunity to apply the principles of functionalism to an overall environment. The architects did not encourage exhibitors to indulge in the fanciful and attention-getting ploys characteristic of the traditional approach to exhibitions. On the contrary, they had designed a strict, uniform framework for the participants. The Turku exhibition gave the general public in Finland its first taste of a functionalist environment.

The undulating picture wall in the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair is one of Aalto's best-known motifs, as is the wavelike wooden ceiling of the reading room in the Viipuri Library. (The Finnish word aalto means 'wave'.) The Finnish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition is one of the buildings in which - from the mid 1930s onwards - Aalto combined the irregular volumes of modernism with a freely undulating line derived from shapes found in Nature (Schildt refers in particular to the shorelines in a lake landscape) with the qualities of an organic building material - wood. Translating shorelines and contour lines into architectural motifs would scarcely have been possible without the aeroplane. And indeed Aalto was interested in flying - and in new technology in general. It was by private plane that the Aaltos went on their honeymoon trip to continental Europe.

Aalto and Bryggman, the leading architects of the new architectural movement, worked in Turku, where the atmosphere was favourable to modernism. As well as temporary trainees, the Aaltos employed as assistants two Norwegian architects, Harald Wildhagen and Erland Bjertnaes. In Turku there were clients who specifically wanted functionalist architecture. Aalto was able to employ a skeleton construction, flexible plans and the module principle for a residential building at Läntinen Pitkäkatu 20 which was commissioned by the manufacturer Juho Tapani and built in 1927-29, using standardised prefabricated concrete elements developed by Tapani. The owner of the Turun Sanomat modernised this newspaper and commissioned a design for a functionalist printing-press and office building, which was erected in 1928-30. In collaboration with Emil Henriksson, who acted as the structural engineer, Aalto designed a novel concrete-frame structure for the Turun Sanomat building; in addition to this, it contained - or was meant to contain - the sorts of modernist refinements that Le Corbusier in particular had advocated. Schildt states that Aalto had absorbed the principles of the new architecture and was applying them in practice before he had even had the chance to see a single built example.

The Aaltos' Swedish friend and colleague Sven Markelius had proposed Alvar Aalto as a member of the international organisation of modern architects, Les Congrés Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), and Aalto participated in its activities from 1929 onwards. Through the CIAM, Aalto became familiar with modernism's social platform in the fields of housing and urban planning. Acquaintances made at CIAM meetings led to close and long-term relationships with, amongst others, Walter Gropius and the Swiss architecture critic Siegfried Giedion. Aalto never visited the Bauhaus - Gropius had been forced to leave it before the architects got to know each other, and Aalto did not feel drawn to his successors Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe - though Schildt believes that many of its principles were passed on to Aalto by his CIAM friend Lászlo Moholy-Nagy, who had taught at the Bauhaus. Aalto's friends also included the sculptor Alexander Calder and the painter Fernand Léger. A number of the most influential figures in the modern movement became family friends of the Aaltos, and there were visits to and fro. Their international acquaintances were leftists - many were communist party members - and had contacts with the Soviet Russian avant-garde. Aalto undoubtedly knew of the Russian constructivists, though he does not appear to have known any of them personally.

Aalto seems to have known all the most important modernists in Sweden - the planners and background figures of the 1930 Stockholm exhibition. His circle of acquaintances included the art historian Gregor Paulsson, who gave 'welfare-state functionalism' its slogan with his lecture title 'More beautiful everyday articles'. Aalto's acquaintanceship with Gunnar Asplund deepened into friendship slightly later. As a student, Aalto had tried to get into Asplund's office as a trainee, but he had been turned away. The reason for the slow warming of relations seems not, however, to have been this episode - frustrating though it was at the time - but rather the Asplunds' reservations concerning the Aaltos' and the Markelius' social life, which was marked by an ample consumption of alcohol and by the carefree erotic relations between Markelius' then wife Viola and Alvar, as described to Schildt by Viola herself.

Aalto's relationship with the most famous of architecture's modernists, Le Corbusier, was perhaps at most that of an acquaintance. He had more of a liking for the Frenchman André Lurçat - whom he met during his first trip to France in 1928 and on whose work he lectured at the Finnish Association of Architects (Suomen Arkkitehtiliitto) - than he did for Le Corbusier.

In the fight against tuberculosis, a widespread disease in Finland, a project to build provincial sanatoriums was under way in the 1920s, and Aalto was one of the participants in the competitions held. As a result of his success in one of these, he was commissioned to design a sanatorium for Paimio in the Province of Finland Proper. Built in 1929 - 33, the sanatorium adhered to the Le Corbusier-influenced architecture also to be found in the Turun Sanomat building. At the same time the Paimio sanatorium is a 'social Gesamtkunstwerk', which already received international recognition at the time of its construction. There has scarcely been another building in Finland whose siting and carefully designed interior details are so attuned to the needs of the 'ordinary patient' as in the case of this sanatorium.

Aalto already had experience in furnishings when the Paimio sanatorium was being planned, as he had designed both individual pieces and standardised furniture. During the interior work on the Agricultural Cooperative Building, he had begun collaboration with Otto Korhonen, the technical manager of a Turku furniture and construction factory (Huonekalu- ja Rakennustyötehdas), who had a thorough knowledge of plywood and bent wood techniques. Working with Korhonen, Aalto created chair models for series production. The fittings and furnishings of the Paimio sanatorium and later of the Viipuri library constituted an important advance in the designing of standard models. Some of the furnishings designed then are still being produced. This has been possible thanks to Artek, a firm founded in 1935 on the initiative of the architect Nils-Gustav Hahl to conduct the manufacture, export and domestic sales of furniture. As Artek's first general manager, Hahl aimed to follow the example of the Swedes and develop sensible and reasonably-priced furnishings for a broad spectrum of the public. Schildt reports, however, that as a result of pressure from the Aaltos the firm's range became exclusive in relation to the average Finnish standard and that it concentrated on products designed by the couple; this resulted in quarrels with the idealistic Hahl. Hahl's departure for the war as a volunteer medical orderly and his death in action brought the dispute to a dramatic end. Hahl's conduct underlined the relative indifference of the Aaltos towards social ideals, especially when his quiet heroism was set alongside Aalto's almost hysterical concern for his own safety and his shirking of wartime military assignments.

The building industry - and thus the Aalto office as well - had run into financial difficulties when the depression hit in 1929. After the completion of the Paimio sanatorium the Aaltos moved to Helsinki, where the opportunities for work were better than in Turku. The office remained permanently in the capital, where it operated until the 1950s at their own house in Munkkiniemi, built in 1935. In the early 1930s a dispute was still going on in the architectural community over the issue of traditionalism versus functionalism. In the eyes of many, Aalto and the school of thought that he represented were exponents of a questionable 'Bolshevik architecture'; but in the course of the decade, functionalism did in fact become the dominant trend in Finnish architecture. A clear sign of the change was Aalto's election to the board of the Finnish Association of Architects in 1935.

Aalto succeeded in implementing CIAM social policy in his planning and designing work for the Ahlström forestry products concern. In the late 1930s he became acquainted with Ahlström's general manager Harry Gullichsen and his wife Maire, who came from the Ahlström family. The two were building up a progressive, socially responsible ethos in the concern. Maire Gullichsen in particular was familiar with the modern movement in art; she promoted it by participating in the funding of Artek. The Gullichsens felt that modern design was needed at Ahlström, and the Aaltos' office was capable of meeting the concern's needs in many different ways.

Aalto drew up general and site plans for communities - such as Varkaus and Kauttua - which were built around Ahlström plants, and he also designed workers' housing and various other buildings for the company. Harry Gullichsen played a role in Aalto's being commissioned to draw up plans and designs for an enterprise, the Sunila cellulose factory near Kotka, undertaken jointly by a number of forestry companies. Starting with the site plan, Aalto designed all the Sunila buildings, including the production facilities. In planning the residential buildings, he aimed at a 'classless' architecture which differed from the ways in which Finnish factory communities had hitherto been designed in that it was not particularly expressive of the community's social hierarchy. Built between 1936 and 1954, Sunila, whose buildings are sited in a forest-like landscape and adapted to the shapes of the terrain, became a model for subsequent Finnish suburban neighbourhood planning.

For the Gullichsens the Aaltos designed the Villa Mairea at Noormarkku; it consciously presents an alternative to the 'ceremonial' grand residence. Built in 1938 - 40, it had a revolutionary effect on the residential ideals of the Finnish upper middle class. Among the Ahlström residential buildings, the Villa Mairea stands, even in its modern simplicity, at the extreme luxury end of a scale at whose opposite end are the series-produced wooden houses of the company's Varkaus factory. For the latter Aalto had designed his AA system of prefabricated elements and had thus succeeded in adapting the functionalist idea of standardisation to materials and products unknown in modernistic central and western Europe but of a type already employed in the United States. Aalto had approached the task of designing a minimal dwelling from the viewpoint of the user - i.e. from a functional perspective. His architectural thinking was dominated by the ideal of a 'multifunctional space', an ideal that also manifested itself in the designing of the Villa Mairea. The Swiss architect Lisbeth Sachs, who had participated in producing designs for the villa, told Schildt how Aalto removed separating walls from a miniature model, claiming that "those people don't need so many rooms".

Ahlström's interests also included the River Kokemäenjoki economic region, which in Harry Gullichsen's opinion required coordinated planning. On his initiative, cooperative planning began; it involved a number of riverside municipalities and the City of Pori. On Gullichsen's recommendation, the commission for this first Finnish regional plan was awarded to Alvar Aalto in 1940. The model was the famous Tennessee Valley Authority of the New Deal era in the USA. From the 1920s onwards Aalto had produced a considerable number of general and site plans; according to Schildt, he always held fast to his ideas of what constituted a good living environment. These ideas, embodied in his plans, were seldom put into practice, given the lack of political will. A similar fate befell the regional plan for Lapland drawn up in the 1950s.

Collaboration with the Ahlström concern came to an end in 1946, but the plans and designs produced for the company had aroused interest in industrial circles. Work on site layouts and building plans for the Tampella concern's factory community at Inkeroinen started in the 1930s and continued during the war. Plans for Strömberg plants in Vaasa and for Yhteis-Sisu Ltd at Vanaja were drawn up in the 1940s. One of Aalto's most important clients was the state-owned forest-industry company Enso-Gutzeit; he did design work for projects at Säynätsalo in 1942 - 52, at Imatra in 1947 - 61 and at Summa in 1954 - 60, as well as for the head office in Helsinki in 1959 - 62. For a second state-owned enterprise, Typpi Ltd, he designed a chemical production facility at Oulu in the 1950s. The industrial projects gave the office a solid financial basis, enabling it to invest effort in artistic experiments and competitions, where success was more uncertain.

Aalto established professional contacts with the Anglo-American world in the 1930s. The New York Museum of Modern Art had held an exhibition of the Aaltos' work in 1938, and in the same year they made their first trip to America. There they became involved with wealthy circles associated with the museum and established contact with the Rockefeller Foundation. During the same trip Aalto, who had been one of Eliel Saarinen's critics in his youth, visited Cranbrook to establish more harmonious relations with the other internationally famous figure in Finnish architecture.

The couple's second visit to America in 1940 was an outright escape during the final stages of Finland’s Winter War against the Soviet Union. Aalto gave guest lectures at various educational institutions and evidently attempted to justify his presence in the United States with ideas that he himself had concocted concerning aid for Finland from the Rockefeller Foundation. The idea of an experimental town for evacuees - which would involve a research institute responsible for developing the production of housing - aroused interest and seemed advantageous both for Finland and for Aalto himself. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) invited Aalto to take a research post there, since the proposed institute and possible funding from the Foundation were linked to Aalto in person. By this stage Finland had again become involved in the war, and only one sea link - to Petsamo - remained, so that it was a question of either staying in the United States or returning, and the Aaltos went back to face the dangers of the new war situation alongside other Finns. Finland's alliance with Germany put an end to plans for an experimental Finnish 'American Town'. After the war, however, Aalto was appointed a professor at MIT, fulfilling his duties there very irregularly until 1948. He was also kept busy by projects at the Helsinki office, and he never really attempted to develop a practice in the United States. While there, he got to know Frank Lloyd Wright, who had had an influence on his work. By this time, however, Aalto was an independent master, who relied on his own critical thinking when absorbing and applying new ideas. Lewis Mumford, the critic of urbanism and author of The Culture of Cities, was another of Aalto's American friends.

Aalto was now assigned to architectural tasks on the home front. Reconstruction was the new national undertaking, and Aalto continued in his own country the discussion on this topic that he had begun in the United States. On the recommendation of the Association of Architects, an office for reconstruction was established in 1942, and Aalto participated mainly by supervising the development of building standards, which were produced by two of his former assistants, Aarne Ervi and Viljo Rewell.

During and after the war, the production of type drawings and the designing of standardised building-element series and town plans was important as far as employment and social influence for architects was concerned. To the experienced modernist Aalto, such work was a self-evident professional task. In this situation it was only natural to elect him chairman of the Association of Architects - as was done in 1943. A further reason for the choice was undoubtedly an inkling as to the final outcome of the war: Aalto had professional connections with the United States, which would become the leader of the Western Bloc after the war. The Association also pushed for Aalto's appointment as director-in-chief of the national board of public construction; the post went, however, to the architect Jussi Lappi-Seppälä. Aalto then became the leader of opposition to the State's architectural and building policy. In protest against the rejection of Aalto, the Association proclaimed a boycott of government commissions by its members, a ban which lasted until 1957. The following year Aalto relinquished the chairmanship. This meant that he was now freed from commitments which might have caused embarrassment when he took on State commissions.

Aalto's professional career reached its zenith in the 1950s. At the end of the previous decade, there had been several important competitions for public building projects, and Aalto had won a number of them. These buildings represent a peak achievement of the Finnish building industry; they are matched only by the finest products of the national romantic period in their uniqueness and the quality of the workmanship. A celebration of the end of postwar material scarcity, they are carefully thought out down to the last detail and made of the best possible materials. The furnishings of these buildings are from Artek, and of the renowned textile artists of the time Aalto seems to have favoured Kirsti Ilvessalo (b. 1920).

Aalto was appointed architect of the municipal hall built in 1949 - 52 for the small industrial community of Säynätsalo on the recommendation of Enso Gutzeit's local manager Hilmer Brommels. As the architect of the Jyväskylä College of Education, Aalto was enthusiastically greeted back to his former home town, even though contracts for the project (1951 - 56) were ultimately the subject of court action. He nevertheless joined the local summer population, building himself a villa, the 'experimental house', at Muuratsalo in 1952 - 53. The Helsinki University of Technology (1949 - 66) and the Social Insurance Institution building (1953 - 57) confirmed Aalto's position as the country's leading architect, but this did not prevent him from accepting such jobs as designing the House of Culture (1952 - 58) for the Finnish Communist Party, now freed from its underground existence.

Not counting Finnish exhibition buildings, Aalto's first project built (and also designed) abroad was a dormitory (1946 - 49) for MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Despite the initial enthusiasm of foreigner's wanting to become Aalto's clients, many projects commissioned from abroad remained unbuilt; perhaps his designs were not easy to apply within all traditions of building. Outside Finland, most of Aalto's works are in Germany, a country from which he was already receiving commissions in the 1950s. There are also buildings designed by his office in Estonia, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Bangladesh, Italy and Sweden. In the 1940s it looked as if Aalto, with his Swedish fellow architect Albin Stark as a partner, was going to gain a foothold in Sweden through construction projects initiated by the industrialist and shipowner Axel Johnson, but not one of the designs produced by Aalto at the time was translated into reality. As monuments of civil society, municipal administrative and cultural centres provided welcome planning work; Aalto received both domestic and foreign commissions, but such centres were actually built only in Seinäjoki (1951 - 87), Alajärvi (1965 - 70) and Rovaniemi (1961 - 87).

Aalto's early work is 'Nordic classical' in the style of the 1920s; he was particularly attracted to the picturesque adaptation of historical or classical motifs characteristic of that era's architecture. The work of Swedish and Danish architects - especially Gunnar Asplund, but also Ragnar Östberg and Martin Nyrop - showed Aalto the opportunities for romantic expression hidden within classicism.

Aalto's shift to functionalism in the late 1920s took place in conjunction with fairly large design projects; and his adoption of the new concept of architecture happened within a short space of time and constituted a radical turning point. What was involved was also a more profound view of architecture: it seems to have been important for Aalto to understand the principles of functionalism, as opposed to seeing it only as a formal style. But his work nevertheless retained a romantic tone which acted as a counterweight to the rationalism of the modern movement. Nature provided him with new features to exploit in his architecture, and achieving a unity between landscape, terrain, vegetation and a building seems to have become his central objective. The spatial and visual complexity of Aalto's buildings is aimed primarily at the senses, but they can also contain references to sites of great historical value, such as the ruins of the Graeco-Roman world, or allusions to exotic 'primitivism'. For Aalto, architecture was essentially a social phenomenon. A building embodies the designer's empathetic relationship with the user; or the starting point of the design can be a utopian ideal of human cooperation, with the building as the representation of good democratic administration or the welfare state's concern for its citizens. A building also had to offer aesthetic stimuli for free and spontaneous cultural activity. The Italian architect Leonardo Mosso, who worked as an assistant of Aalto's, was probably thinking of the sensuousness of his architecture and its mythic aspects when he called Aalto "a poet amongst architects". On the other hand, the antirationalistic features of Aalto's architecture have raised doubts amongst such defenders of modernist rationalism and the antihistorical ethic as Nikolaus Pevsner. In a 1961 lecture held at the Royal Institute of British Architects in which he spoke with concern about the awakening of the spirit of historicism and the dangers inherent in the legacy of expressionism, the German-born British art historian presented Aalto's House of Culture as a warning example of this trend.

The phase of Aalto's architecture that has attracted the most international attention begins in the 1930s and continues after the Second World War. Especially after the war, he designed for foreign clients, but his career was predominantly based on his home country. He worked almost entirely in Finland, where most of his works are also to be found.

Alvar Aalto's position in Finland differs somewhat from that which he holds abroad. From a Finnish perspective, there is especial significance in the fact that he was the first among Finnish architects to adopt modernism's view of architecture so thoroughly that within a short space of time he became the leading architect of the new movement in the Nordic countries. Important from the viewpoint of Finnish architecture and society was Aalto's contribution to the standardised construction and socially oriented architectural planning of the modernist movement.

From the 1950s onwards, Alvar Aalto was renowned both at home and abroad. According to Schildt, he was offered numerous professorships at universities and colleges all over the world, but he consistently refused them because of his work commitments. His Finnish admirers elevated him to the status of a national hero to complete the series of figures who had achieved international fame - Jean Sibelius and Paavo Nurmi. And Aalto, who had always understood the importance of theatre and myth in human life, himself participated in developing this personality cult.

Eeva Maija Viljo

Translated by Roderick Fletcher

[*http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/english/?id=1408*](http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/english/?id=1408)

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An eloquent humanist, as well as one of the great architects and designers of the 20th century, Alvar Aalto breathed life and warmth into modernism, placing emphasis on "organic" geometry; supple, natural materials; and respect for human feeling.

"Architecture," he said, "must have charm; it is a factor of beauty in society. But real beauty is not a conception of form...it is the result of harmony between several intrinsic factors, not the least, the social." Aalto's intention was to create integrated environments to be experienced through all the senses, and to design furniture that would be at once modern, human and specifically Finnish.

Using native birch wood and plywood and his own new bentwood techniques, Aalto created his classic Lounge Chair, the curvilinear Wood Screen designed for the Finnish Pavilion and his iconic stacking stool. These pieces represent his virtuosity with form and structure and firmly established Aalto's genius and fluency with wood - which he described as the "form inspiring, deeply human material." Their natural beauty also made waves among the European avant garde, better known for a high-minded austerity than warmth.

Aalto's work was enthusiastically received in the U.S. and the Museum of Modern Art organized a major exhibition of his work in 1938. A year later, Aalto completed the Finnish Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Frank Lloyd Wright, upon viewing the Pavilion, said simply, "Aalto is a genius."

As one of the founding fathers of modern design, Alvar Aalto had a profound influence on Charles and Ray Eames and George Nelson, designers who also combined formal concerns with humanistic ideals. We can thank Aalto not only for bentwood solutions like the L-leg and the Y-leg, but for the preserving the trace of the human hand and spirit in beautiful materials and the simple forms of modernism.

[*http://www.dwr.com/category/designers/a-c/alvar-aalto.do*](http://www.dwr.com/category/designers/a-c/alvar-aalto.do)

### Architecture

Alvar Aaltos architecture is part of the history of international modern architecture. As early as 1949, the Swiss architectural historian Siegfried Giedion placed Aaltos extensive body of work in an important position in his book on the history of architecture in the twentieth century, Space, Time and Architecture.

Alvar Aaltos ability to synthesise rationalist architecture with an organic language of form, and his way of combining materials and making the landscape part of the building are unique. Aaltos architecture is still discussed by students and lovers of architecture all over the world.

### Design

Alvar Aalto designed his first items of furniture even before he had become a qualified architect. After qualification, as a young architect, the design of artefacts took on a fairly important role in his office and he designed pieces of furniture for various clients, tinged with the revivalist styles that followed the spirit of the age. Already at the end of the 1920s, he started to investigate the latest trends in the architectural field and modern international furniture design. Paimio Sanatorium (1929-1933) was the first building Aalto designed that was furnished entirely with his own factory-made furniture.

Aalto's modern furniture is essentially linked with inventions about the bending of wood. He was granted patents on several of these inventions in a number of different countries in the 1930s 40s and 50s. According to Alvar Aalto's design principles, the interior design and furnishings had to be in harmony with the architectural style of the building.

[*http://www.alvaraalto.fi/architecture\_design.html*](http://www.alvaraalto.fi/architecture_design.html)

## Early work

Aalto’s architectural studies at the Technical Institute of Helsinki were interrupted by the Finnish War of Independence, in which he participated. Following his graduation in 1921, Aalto toured Europe and upon his return began practice in [Jyväskylä](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309047/Jyvaskyla), in central [Finland](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/207424/Finland). In 1927 he moved his office to [Turku](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/610208/Turku), where he worked in association with [Erik Bryggman](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/82543/Erik-Bryggman) until 1933, the year in which he moved to Helsinki. In 1925 he married Aino Marsio, a fellow student, who served as his professional collaborator until her death in 1949. The couple had two children.

The years 1927 and 1928 were significant in Aalto’s career. He received commissions for three important buildings that established him as the most advanced architect in Finland and brought him worldwide recognition as well. These were the Turun Sanomat Building (newspaper office) in [Turku](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/610208/Turku), the tuberculosis sanatorium at Paimio, and the Municipal Library at [Viipuri](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/633556/Vyborg) (now Vyborg, Russia). His plans for the last two were chosen in a competition, a common practice with public buildings in Finland. Both the office building and the sanatorium emphasize functional, straightforward [design](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/159146/design) and are without historical stylistic references. They go beyond the simplified classicism common in Finnish [architecture](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/32876/architecture) of the 1920s, resembling somewhat the building designed by [Walter Gropius](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/246573/Walter-Gropius) for the [Bauhaus](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/56418/Bauhaus) school of design in Dessau, Ger. (1925–26). Like Gropius, Aalto used smooth white surfaces, ribbon windows, flat roofs, and terraces and balconies.

The third commission, the Viipuri Municipal Library, although exhibiting a similar dependence on European prototypes by Gropius and others, is a significant departure marking Aalto’s personal style. Its spatially complex interior is arranged on various levels. For the auditorium portion of the library Aalto devised an undulating acoustic ceiling of wooden strips, a fascinating detail that, together with his use of curved laminated wood furniture of his own design, appealed both to the public and to those professionals who had held reservations about the clinical severity of modern architecture. The warm textures of wood provided a welcome contrast to the general whiteness of the building. It was Aalto’s particular success here that identified him with the so-called [organic](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/431930/organic-architecture) approach, or regional interpretation, of modern design. He continued in this vein, with manipulation of floor levels and use of natural materials, skylights, and irregular forms. By the mid-1930s Aalto was recognized as one of the world’s outstanding modern architects; unlike many of his peers, he had an identifiable personal style.

Finnish pavilions for two [world’s fairs](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/649088/worlds-fair) (Paris, 1937; New York City, 1939–40) further enhanced Aalto’s reputation as an inventive designer of free architectural forms. In these designs, both chosen in competition, he continued to use wood for structure and for surface effects. Also during this period, in 1938, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City held an exhibition of his work, showing furniture that he had designed and photographs of his buildings.

Aalto’s experiments in [furniture](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/222627/furniture) date from the early 1930s, when he furnished the sanatorium at Paimio. His furniture is noted for its use of laminated wood in ribbonlike forms that serve both structural and aesthetic ends. In 1935 the Artek Company was established by Aalto and Maire Gullichsen, the wife of the industrialist and [art](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/630806/art) collector Harry Gullichsen, to manufacture and market his furniture. The informal warmth of Aalto’s interiors is best seen in the much-admired country home Villa Mairea, which he built for the Gullichsens near Noormarkku, Fin.

## Mature style

The decade of the 1940s was not productive; it was disrupted by war and saddened by his wife’s death. In 1952 he married Elissa Mäkiniemi, a trained architect, who became his new collaborator.

Aalto’s commissions after 1950, in addition to being greater in number, were more varied and widely dispersed: a high-rise apartment building in Bremen, W.Ger. (1958), a church in Bologna, [Italy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/297474/Italy) (1966), an art museum in Iran (1970). His continuing work in Finland, however, remained the measure of his genius. Many of his projects involved site [planning](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/463159/planning) of building groups. Two such projects were the master plans of colleges at Otaniemi (1949–55) and at Jyväskylä (1952–57). Aalto’s experience in planning originated early with such industrial commissions as the Sunila cellulose factory (1936–39, extended 1951–54), which included workers’ housing and was a triumph of comprehensive planning.

The single work that epitomizes Aalto’s mature style is perhaps the Säynätsalo town hall group. Modest in scale in its forest setting, it nonetheless asserts a quiet force. Its simple forms are in red brick, wood, and copper, all traditional materials of Finland. Viewing it, a person feels the achievement of a perfect building, in that the essence of the time, the place, the people, and their purpose is brought into focus by the awareness of the architect.

Aalto received many honours. He was a member of the Academy of Finland (Suomen Aketemia) and was its president from 1963 to 1968; he was a member of the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne from 1928 to 1956. His awards included the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture from the Royal Institute of British Architects (1957) and the Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects (1963).

## Assessment

Aalto, whose work exemplifies the best of 20th-century Scandinavian architecture, was one of the first to depart from the stiffly geometric designs common to the early period of the modern movement and to stress informality and personal expression. His style is regarded as both romantic and regional. He used complex forms and varied materials, acknowledged the character of the site, and gave attention to every detail of building. Aalto achieved an international reputation through his more than 200 buildings and projects, ranging from factories to churches, a number of them built outside Finland.

* [Images](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/241/Alvar-Aalto/74/Assessment#md-media-strip-tab-image-content)
* [Videos](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/241/Alvar-Aalto/74/Assessment#md-media-strip-tab-video-content)
* [quizzes](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/241/Alvar-Aalto/74/Assessment#md-media-strip-tab-quizzes-content)
* [Lists](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/241/Alvar-Aalto/74/Assessment#md-media-strip-tab-lists-content)

Aalto’s preliminary plans were freely sketched, without the use of T-square and triangle, so that the unfettered creative urge for inventive shapes and irregular forms was allowed full play before functional relationships and details were resolved. The absence of theoretical rigidity revealed itself in his final designs, which happily retained the spontaneity and individuality of his early sketches. As a Swiss art historian expressed it, he dared “the leap from the rational-functional to the irrational-organic.” Since Aalto’s staff was small (some six to eight architects), all of the work bore the imprint of his personality.

Aalto wrote little to explain his work, but his architecture conveyed a variable, lively temperament, free from dogma and without monotony. His work was said to express the spirit of Finland and its people, primitive yet lyrical. His friendships with such artists as Fernand Léger, Jean Arp, and Constantin Brancusi may have nourished his fondness for curvilinear shapes. While his work was never compulsively innovative, neither was it static. His late designs showed an increased complexity and dynamism that some regarded as incautious. In particular, his work of the late 1960s and early 1970s was marked by splayed, diagonal shapes and clustered, overlapping volumes. Energy and imagination were ever present.

[H.F. Koeper](http://www.britannica.com/bps/user-profile/1622)

Major Works

Turun Sanomat Building, Turku, Fin. (1930); Municipal Library at Viipuri, now Vyborg, [Russia](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/513251/Russia) (1930–35); Sulfate Paper Mill at Toppila, Fin. (1931); Sanatorium at Paimio, Fin. (1933); cellulose factory at Sunila, [Kotka](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/322857/Kotka), Fin. (1936–39; extended 1951–54); Villa Mairea (Gullichsen House) near Noormarkku, Fin. (1938–39); sawmill at Varkaus, Fin. (1945); Baker House (student dormitory), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, [Cambridge](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/90646/Cambridge), Mass., U.S. (1947–48); town hall group, Säynätsalo, Fin. (1950–52); House of Culture, Helsinki, Fin. (1955–58); house for Louis Carré, Bazoches, France (1956–58); church at Vuoksenniska, Imatra, Fin. (1956–58); Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Ålborg, Den. (1958–72); post and telegraph office, Baghdad, Iraq (1958); Community Centre, Wolfsburg, Ger. (1959–62); Community Centre, Seinäjoki, Fin. (1962; theatre added, 1967); Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms, Institute of International Education, New York City (1964–65); Mount Angel Abbey Library, near Salem, Ore., U.S. (1967–70); Finlandia Hall, Helsinki (1971, enlarged 1974); Taidemuseo, Jyväskylä, Fin. (1973, later called the Alvar Aalto Museum).

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