

ALVAR AALTO: ARCHITECTURE, MODERNITY, AND GEOPOLITICS

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Alvar Aalto, (1898-1976) Finland's leading architect of the Modern era, is known for his design rather than for statements or writings. His work of the 1930s, represented by his Viipuri library, clearly embodies the characteristics of the International Style, and throughout his career he never abandoned modernist principles. Nevertheless his design is inextricably linked with the spirit of his native land and often discussed in a regionalist context. He always remained an individual, setting his own course. However his theoretical underpinnings have not been fully explored. Eeva-Lisa Pelkonen's lucid new book makes a significant contribution towards the filling of that gap. It is devoted specifically to the architect's literary sources, his own writings, his political involvement and his lively international engagement. She carefully documents the transition from his role in Finnish nationalism and architecture rooted in Nordic tradition to his embracing of the modern world and the development of a rich symbolic language.

Pelkonen attributes Aalto's openness to new ideas to his bilingual, liberal family who despised nationalist extremism. She traces his constant search for new places and new people and observes his negotiation with changing political situations. She explains the context in which he built his career: Finland's independence from Russia, in 1917 while he was a student; its division into Finnish and Swedish speaking regions; his move in 1927 from the small, traditional Finnish speaking town of Jyväskylä, where he opened his first office, to the more modern city of Turku with its predominantly Swedish, culture; his development of an international perspective.

While Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier both lacked a formal education in architecture, Aalto attended a conventional school of architecture and came under the sway of several outstanding teachers and professional architects. He read widely and, responded in essays and articles. Compared with Wright's and Le Corbusier's angry and bombastic condemnation of the conventional architecture of his time, we find Aalto reacting critically, in a balanced way, to the ideas and buildings of the more progressive architects of his own country and neighboring Germany. He was inspired by Nietzsche's concept of European unity in *Beyond Good and Evil*, and by Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's condemnation of national separatism in *Pan Europa* (1924) as well as the ideas of the cosmopolitan *Clarté* organization founded by Henri Barbusse. As Europe rose again from the ashes of World War I Aalto cast his net wide. As well as following the birth of the Modern Movement in France and Germany he experienced exciting work in Riga, Latvia, marveled at the greater transparency achieved with large expanses of glass in Sweden and was intrigued by constructivism in Russia.

To Aalto internationalism was not so much an issue of style as of cooperation in a broad arena for the solution of societal problems and the enrichment of life. He traveled widely

and forged friendships with artists, architects and thinkers including Siegfried Giedion, J. J. P. Oud, Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, André Lurçat and many others, but he tended to reject the utopian determinism associated with Le Corbusier. While Pelkonen describes him as “malleable,” she shows how he made strategic decisions that opened up opportunities. She states: “Aalto embodied three key ideas of modernity: change, progress and dynamism”

In a chapter entitled Geopolitics of Fame, she deals with his inclusion in the groundbreaking *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She follows with an intriguing section on the political background to Aalto’s retrospective at MoMA in 1938. After Le Corbusier in 1936, he was only the second architect with a solo show there. The author traces his selection for this honour to the success in 1937 of his exhibit in Paris at the *Exposition des Arts et Techniques Appliqués à la Vie Moderne*. By this time, France, Italy and Germany had officially turned away from modernism and contributed neoclassical or downright Fascist designs. The result was that international critics recognized countries like Finland, Czechoslovakia and Sweden which had previously been on the fringes. The museum under the perceptive direction of Alfred Barr and the curator John Andrews, “was endorsing the idea of localized, nationally distinctive trends in modernism.” “Aalto was celebrated as an arbiter of post-International Style architecture” After the retrospective Aalto won the competition for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. In that exhibition, “as if to fulfill MoMA’s prediction that architecture was shifting from the geometric to the organic” Aalto “designed the pavilion with a dominant, tilted curvilinear multi-media wall.” Pelkonen, suggesting a shift in Aalto’s approach explains that “whereas the acoustic ceiling of the Vipurii library built on a tension between form and function, the New York wall played on the multilayered symbolic meanings embedded in form”