



Aalto in the 1970s, Image courtesy of the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä
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Aalto, *Villa Mairea*, Noormarkku, Finland 1938 - 1939, Living room area with specially designed tea trolley, Courtesy of the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä



'ALVAR AALTO THROUGH THE EYES OF SHIGERU BAN'

On the Exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery, open between 22 February – 7 May 2007, London, The Barbican Centre.

Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) was undoubtedly one of the most important architects of the twentieth century. While the Finnish architect is often ranked alongside the leading figures of European modernism (such as Mies, Gropius, and Le Corbusier), however, he cut a distinctive figure against the background of the so-called 'modern movement.' His design philosophy was firmly rooted in functionalist principles yet steered away from the strictures of rationalist orthodoxy. Aalto's singular position was further bolstered by the critical stance he took, particularly after the Second World War, towards the fading of Modernism's *ethos* into an increasingly shallow and dehumanised International Style. Aalto's idiosyncratic work always resisted stylistic labels. Whether he designed a chair or a church, he always put at the heart of his design the functional and psychological needs of what he called 'the little man.' The fact that his method could not be

pinned down to any established canon is further testified by the fact that the adjective 'Aaltian' - unlike 'Corbusian', for instance, or 'Miesian' - never gained currency in architectural parlance.

The significance of Aalto's architecture was widely acknowledged during his own lifetime. To this contributed, in no small measure, the (belated) appraisal of Sigfried Giedion, secretary general of the CIAM and 'official' historian of the modern movement. After initially shunning Aalto's approach as 'irrational', Giedion reassessed his work and gave it a prominent place in the second edition of *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1949). By the 1950s, Aalto's worldwide reputation was fully established. His work was widely exhibited and he was awarded prestigious accolades such as 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). Despite the international acclaim, in 1954 Aalto inscribed the Latin maxim *nemo propheta in patria* [Nobody is a Prophet in his Homeland] on his newly-built motorboat, hinting that he had not yet received equal recognition in his native Finland. The year after, however, he was elected to the Academy of Finland, of which he became President a few years later. By the end of his life, Aalto had become a household name in Finland and across the Nordic countries. His status as a national hero was sealed by the reproduction of his portrait on the 50 Mark bill, in the last series of the Finnish currency before the changeover to the Euro.

Today, Aalto's humanistic approach to design appears to be as relevant as ever. This view was embraced by London's Barbican Art Gallery, which put up the first retrospective of Aalto's work in the United Kingdom (1). The event marked the 25th birthday of the Barbican Centre, the cultural hub in the City of London that, after a major refurbishment, has proudly reclaimed its primacy as Europe's largest arts centre. It would have been hard to rival the comprehensive exhibition



Aalto, Civic Centre, Seinäjoki, Finland 1958 - 1987, Conference room in Town Hall, Image courtesy of the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, © Kalevi A. Mäkinen

1. 'Alvar Aalto Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban' was at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, between 22 February and 13 May 2007. The exhibition was organised by Barbican Art Gallery in conjunction with the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä. It was curated by Shigeru Ban in collaboration with Juhani Pallasmaa and Tomoko Sato.

2. An eminent Finnish architect and author, Pallasmaa worked in Aalto's office and today is chairman of the Alvar Aalto Academy, Finland.

staged by New York's MoMA in 1998, on the centenary of Aalto's birth. The London exhibition was an altogether more selective and, indeed, more singular endeavour, fully consistent with the Barbican's provocative motto: *Do something different*. The projects on display were selected by Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, who curated the exhibition together with Tomoko Sato and Juhani Pallasmaa (2). Ban's encounter with Aalto offered a fresh look at the work of the Finnish master, upon which so much academic literature has been piled over the years. As the co-curators pointed out, Ban 'is acknowledged as one of the post-war generation of architects who carry on Alvar Aalto's legacy today' (Pallasmaa and Sato, 2007, 62). This legacy is noticeable in more than one aspect: 'Like Aalto, Ban takes an

organic approach to design and an innovative approach to materials, but perhaps the most important aspect of Ban's work linking back to Aalto is his compassionate approach to architecture, exemplified in his emergency housing made of paper tubes for displaced disaster victims and refugees' (Pallasmaa and Sato, 2007, 62).

The exhibition was divided in two parts. The upper floor presented a selection of Aalto's most significant projects in chronological sequence, following a series of well-worn historiographic categories that designate the main shifts in his oeuvre, from the early 'Neoclassical phase' to the 'White period and Aalto's late phase.' Here the visitor had a chance to examine Aalto's most famous pre-war designs, such as Paimio Sanatorium (1929-33) and Viipuri Library (1927-35); but also his later projects, marked by a shift towards a humane civic monumentality, such as the Säynätsalo Town Hall (1948-52) and Helsinki National Pensions Institute (1952-57). An interesting glimpse into Aalto's practice was afforded by the experimental summer house and studio which he built on the Muuratsalo Island with his second wife Elissa (1952-53). This small vacation home and the annexed sauna, situated in the surrounding forest, demonstrate better than other 'major' projects the architect's keenness for play and experimentation as well as his intimate relationship with nature.

The original sketches, drawings and models on display (mostly provided by the Alvar Aalto Museum in Jyväskylä) were supplemented by analytical models elaborated by Shigeru Ban's laboratory at Keio University. Further visual material included a digital animation of the Finnish pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair and an insightful documentary on the Villa Mairea, the summer house designed for Harry and Maire Gullichsen in Noormarkku, Finland (1938-39). This house, which Giedion described as 'a love poem', stands out as Aalto's finest and freest experiment in domestic architecture, and an unsurpassed synthesis of built and natural environments. In Aalto's own words, 'The house has a soul that interacts with the inhabitant's state of mind and emotions.'

After this wide-ranging overview, the second part of the exhibition (on the gallery's lower level) explored a series of key themes running through Aalto's prolific career, such as forms, materials, lighting, etc. Aalto's formal vocabulary was reinterpreted in light of recent research, carried out by Ban's laboratory, which has revealed a set of rigorous geometrical rules underlying many of his compositions. The section on materials drew attention to Aalto's far-sighted concept of 'flexible standardisation', an efficient system which was meant to deliver well-designed quality products at an affordable price. A further exhibit dealt with the relationship between the architect and society. This section showed a hitherto little known aspect of Aalto's work to which Ban felt a special affinity: the standardised systems designed to house the war homeless in the 1940s. The social concern animating these projects has found an echo in Ban's own search for innovative and effective ways to respond to humanitarian needs in areas ravaged by disaster. The exhibition ended up with a selection of design objects, including several 'classic' pieces of plywood furniture produced by Artek, the Finnish company that Aalto set up in 1935 with Maire Gullichsen and the design critic Nils-Gustav Hahl.

Throughout the exhibition, details of Aalto's buildings were illustrated by colour photographs taken by the renowned architectural photographer

Judith Turner. While these images convey the rich texture of surfaces and materials, however, they mostly fail to capture the sensual and spatial qualities of Aalto's architecture. If anything, this limit reinforces the view - shared by the curators themselves - that Aalto's work does not lend itself easily to any form of representation.

The design of the exhibition exposed a similar conundrum. Ban's trademark paper tubes were used to envelop the gallery space inside a flow of undulating walls and ceilings, in an attempt to evoke a typical feature of Aalto's design. In reality, this ostensible homage came across as a rather self-referential gesture; and not a particularly original one either, since Ban had already used the same device twenty years ago, in his earlier design for an Aalto exhibition in Tokio. If Ban's curatorship can be appreciated for the selection and interpretation of specific aspects of Aalto's architecture, his constant attempt to seek parallels between his own work and that of 'his self-confessed hero and spiritual mentor' (Pallasmaa and Sato, 2007, 63) was arguably less convincing. The choice of inserting a small space dedicated to Ban's own projects did not particularly enrich the visitor's experience. In fact, one gathered the impression that the curators, by forcing a half-baked comparison between Aalto and Ban, ultimately did not do justice to either of them. If the idea of revisiting the work of the former 'through the eyes of' the latter was doubtless a bold and

Aalto, House of Culture, Helsinki, Finland, 1952 - 1958, Exterior, red-brick wall - detail
© Judith Turner, 2006

Shigeru Ban, Paper tubes, detail,
Courtesy of Shigeru Ban Architects,
© Takashi Sekiguchi





Aalto, Jyväskylä Workers' Club, Jyväskylä, Finland, 1924 - 25, Upper lobby and entrance to theatre, Image courtesy of the Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä
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intriguing one, its realization stumbled into some evident pitfalls.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the exhibition made up with its breadth of scope for what it possibly lacked in critical depth. Besides collecting under the same roof a remarkable body of material, some of which original, the Barbican Art Gallery organized a wide range of parallel events, talks, and workshops throughout the period of the exhibition. Among them were an 'Alvar Aalto education programme' and a study day focusing on the significance of Aalto in the UK. The lavishly illustrated catalogue includes an introduction by Colin St. John Wilson, an interview with Shigeru Ban, and a critical essay

by Juhani Pallasmaa, which centers on the 'human factor' as the driving force behind Aalto's design and philosophy. It concludes with three short texts by Alvar Aalto himself: a useful reminder of another aspect of his legacy, which comprises a wealth of speeches and writings in addition to his ever inspiring design work.

Davide DERIU
London, 7 April 2007

REFERENCES

PALLASMAA, E., SATO, T. eds. (2007), *Alvar Aalto Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban*, Exhibition catalogue, Black Dog Publishing in association with Barbican Art Gallery, London.