

SESSION TWO

Libraries of the Land

Laurence Keith Loftin III

University of Colorado at Denver

ABSTRACT

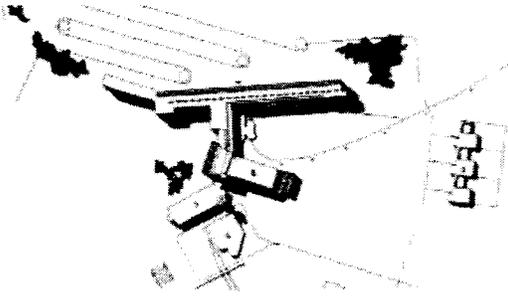


Figure 1 - Paimio Sanatorium, 1928-33

Alvar Aalto has consistently been regarded as a significant architect, but wherein this significance lies has been a subject of debate. This paper proposes that Aalto developed specific compositional strategies for integrating his buildings into a sense of "place" and furthermore made buildings which may be best understood as complex geographical and landscape metaphors. Between 1963 and 1965 Alvar Aalto designed three libraries in Finland: the library at Seinajoki, the library at Rovaniemi, and the Library at Otaniemi, all of which utilized a unique formal invention: the "fan."

This paper proposes that Aalto explored this particular compositional device in order to integrate with, and represent differing landscape types. The paper charts the development of this strategy as it becomes more nuanced, and more complex, weaving the buildings evermore deeply into a local sense of "place" (f l). The paper concludes with some observations on the significance of this work for us, in this time of globalization and the rise of worldwide monoculture.

THE UBIQUITOUS FAN

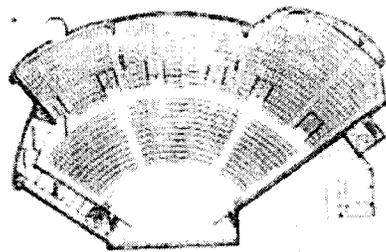


Figure 2 - House of Culture, Helsinki 1955-1958

Early in his career Alvar Aalto invented a unique compositional device which he applied to the solution of differing building programs and even differing building types. This is his signature "fan" shape, deployed as an organizing device in plan, resembling a segmented, hand-held collapsible fan, with its characteristic ribbing and webbing. The sheer variety of building types to which Aalto applied this formal device is staggering. He used it for theaters, city halls, cultural centers, churches, apartment buildings, libraries, and even single-family houses. In the hands of a less accomplished architect the fan might easily have degenerated into a simple repetitive motif, but Aalto managed to reinvent, and reinvigorate this form in each successive project. The fan shape may be consistently recognizable, but the phenomenal experiences engendered, and the thematic implications are different in each project.

The earliest intimation of these ideas is found at the Paimio Sanatorium, designed in 1928 and built between 1929 and 1933. (Fig 1) Here the forms are crisp, hard-edged, utilizing steel, glass, and concrete in the development of a series of definitively Modern buildings. However, the plan of the complex is unexpected. The various buildings appear to be splayed, or "fanned" out from some original orthogonal arrangement. The final plan of the complex does not even appear to be finished. Instead, it gives the impression of something that has developed, and is still developing over time. There is no fan as such, at Paimio, but there is a pivoting or "proto-fanning" movement.

The fan is only implied at Paimio, but much later, in the "House of Culture" (Helsinki, 1955- 58) the fan is the expected, familiar solution to the particular typological problem of an assembly hall. (Fig 2) The detailing of the comers of the auditorium hall as seen by the visitor (note two comers at left of entry) again hints at a pivoting, or fanning movement for the whole volume. Aalto's fan shape, however, is strikingly irregular in its general form, suggesting "organic" growth rather than abstract geometry. Here, the notion of organic growth is added to a rational-geometric sense of successive development.

The implied metaphors of growth and movement find their first truly explicit expression at the Cultural Center in Wolfsburg, Germany. Here, the five lecture rooms of the adult education center individually have an irregular, polygonal shape, and their ensemble arrangement is clearly a fanning pattern, which departs from the rectilinear box of the rest of the building. (Fig 3) This ensemble fan surges into the public plaza as a kind of indeterminate object. The main entry into the building is underneath this fan, so that this organic and indeterminate form acts as the emblematic entry facade for the building. It is significant that from the plaza, the fan, in elevation, seems intentionally difficult to read. It is divided horizontally and vertically by differing materials. Strong verticals of narrow, black marble contrast with lighter, broader horizontals of alternating white and gray marble. The result is a kind of visual razzle-dazzle which both delights and confounds the eye. It is difficult to determine the depth and position of the wall plane. It seems to fluctuate in depth depending on whether you focus on the verticals or the horizontals.

In this way Aalto has emphasized the indeterminacy of individual perception as opposed to the "objectivity" of orthodox Modernism. He has fully moved away from a concern for the abstract, Static, and "pure" forms characterized by the compositions of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rhoë, and Walter Gropius, to an emphasis on dynamic, indeterminate, "organic" forms. Furthermore, the large scale of the irregular building forms suggests that this building can be read (from the plaza, at least) as a carefully orchestrated array of landscape references: cliff edges, tree lines, cavern entries, and clearings in the forest (see the roof plaza). The observer and the user of the building thus becomes an explorer of this artificial landscape, discovering, traversing and utilizing the spaces from the point of view of individual need.

This is a significant shift: a distinct change of emphasis from object to person, and from abstract thing to particulars of position, observation, moment, and finally "place."

Place is a particularly difficult term to define and to use, but is essential to this discussion. In regard to defining place Ian Howard says:

"We can also think of belonging to a place in terms of the perspective of an 'insider's view' and an 'outsider's view' of a place... From an outsider's view the description of place concerns artifacts From an insider's view, the description of place concerns an ongoing process of living within the reach of a particular horizon that is personal and part of lived experience." (f2)

If "lived experience" lived "within the reach of a particular horizon" is taken as a definition of place, then the work of Alvar Aalto can be seen as the making of Significant Places.

LIBRARY, SEINAJOKI 1963-65: THE FOREST

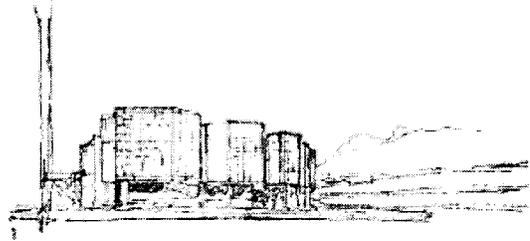


Figure 3 - Cultural Center, Wolfsburg 1958

Aalto's library for the town complex at Seinajoki (Fig 4) is crisp and white, from the outside, but the clear geometric abstraction of Modernism is gone. Instead, the elevational indeterminacy that Aalto developed at Wolfsburg is continued in this project. The north facing entry wall, as seen from the central, public "piazza" is simply a series of three slightly displaced parallel walls, with glazing obscured by a continuous pattern of vertical grills. The south facing wall is an irregularly faceted wall with a series of horizontal louvers obscuring clerestory glass.

The building is fundamentally secretive: there is neither obvious civic iconography, nor any recognizable form as such. It is only as you penetrate into the interior that the building reveals itself and its purposes. Meanwhile the plan is one of Aalto's most striking organizations. It is basically a long horizontal block of a building interrupted by a great irregular fan. It is here that the fan shape takes on a new function, and a new significance.

It must be remembered that the winters are long in Finland, and dark. Diversion, during these months, until recently, was primarily through reading. Finland has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. For this reason a community library is of particular significance, becoming the center of culture in the winter. At this northern latitude, as winter comes on, the sun rises in the east, and moves horizontally across the tree tops to the south, to set in the west. The light is precious and "lemon" colored. The shadows are long, and in the forest, the alternation of shadow and light mediated by trees and branches is one of the most familiar of Finnish winter images.

At Seinajoki the library fan shape with its clerestory glass and protective louvers facing south is designed to follow the horizontal sun, to gather as much sunlight into the building as possible during the early winter and late spring months. The great, interior, concrete curve, which faces the clerestory, reflects indirect light down into the stack area, thus protecting the books from direct exposure to sunlight. The fan, here, is not just a representative of the development of the program, not just an image of growth, but is a very carefully calibrated device to bring the particular Finnish light into the building. This lighting device, clever as it may be, is nevertheless only part of a much larger scheme of reference.

This concrete curve appears to be supported by a curving row of white concrete pipe columns. Against these white columns the horizontal winter light, interrupted by the vertical glazing stiles and horizontal louvers, paints a brilliant banding. It is as if these columns were birch trunks in the forest, and the light mediated by a thousand bare winter branches. The pattern of light against the columns is so similar to the pattern of light in the surrounding forest that the sense of being in a Finnish forest is unmistakable. It should be noted, as well, that in the main reading room there are unexpected alternations in floor level, and roof plane. The same kind of surprise is engendered by the lack of rectilinear geometry in the main reading room. This lack of clear geometry, combined with the variations in floor and roof plane, create an ambiguous and somewhat mysterious interior: one that must be sequentially, and personally explored.

To sum up, in the first of these three library explorations, Aalto making architecture that visually represents aspects of the surrounding landscape (the forest, in particular). Significantly, this building also integrates its functioning into one of the basic rhythms of this landscape, responding to, and engaging the unique pattern of the sun.. Finally, the indeterminacy of the space renders it discoverable only in experimental terms. In other words, the building interior re-creates aspects of the "lived experience" of the landscape outside.

Buildings are normally thought of as shelter from the surrounding landscape, as an alternative to the landscape's "lack of consideration" for human needs for warmth, protection, shelter and for functional accommodation. A building is thus an alternate h~ world. That Aalto would design a building to be a landscape image with its generalized sense of variety and spatial indeterminacy is not only striking, but unique within the history of architecture.

If Aalto is indeed re-creating the particular landscape in this part of Finland (f3), what is the motivation, and more importantly, what is the significance? Jeff Malpas, in his article "Finding Place: Spatiality, Locality, and Subjectivity," suggests a significance for Aalto's places:

"If we take ...place seriously, then what emerges is the possibility of thinking of subjectivity -and of thought and experience -as essentially a function of place, or locale." (f4)

He goes on to say:

"Indeed, there is reason to think that only if we can understand creatures as embedded in a world can we understand them as in any way capable of thought -whether believing, desiring, hoping, calculating, fearing, meaning, or whatever -or indeed of purposive action Only a creature that is oriented and located can relate to objects and to the world." (f5)

Thus, in the broadest terms, the significance of Aalto's buildings lies in their ability to awaken us to a sense of the particular place, and to those aspects of the place that are fundamental to our thought and our being.

LIBRARY, ROVANIEMI 1963-68: THE SKY

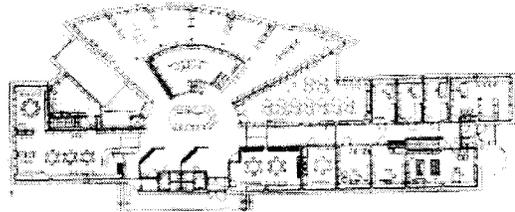


Figure 4 - Library, Seinajoki 1963-65

At first glance, the plan of the library at Rovaniemi seems to be simple replay of the plan at Seinajoki. (Fig 5) There is the same long horizontal bar of support spaces, and the distinctive fan of the reading room itself. Yet, closer inspection reveals that the fan grows into the central piazza as a distinctive form, instead of hiding away from the piazza, as at Seinajoki. The fan, with its blank, but vertically patterned walls is a formal event in the piazza, similar to the formal presence of the fanning lecture halls at Wolfsburg. This seems a curious development until it is realized that Rovaniemi is in central, northern Finland in an area that is predominantly flat, undistinguished, and largely unforested. The town hall, with its distinctive vertical form, and the sloping volume of the theatre, both provide landscape-like elements which are compositionally in tension with the fan of the library. All three of these elements combine to delimit and invigorate a "surrogate landscape," an alternative to the otherwise flat and unrelieved surroundings. Here, Aalto has instituted the human place as a bounded and recognizable territory. (f6)

The organization of the fan is significantly different from the one at Seinajoki as well. The wall of the fan is not continuous, but is segmented, producing four distinctly different areas within the fan.

These four areas contain within them three lowered reading areas. The central reading area, while actually one space, has two 'legs' that make separate areas within it. Given the openness of the surrounding landscape, Aalto has designed a large room with a remarkable variety of intimate spaces. Just as the exterior landscape forms are counters for the actual landscape, so the intimate spaces of the interior are a counter for the surrounding openness.

The main entry into the Library is from the central piazza under a portico adjacent to the blank, vertically patterned walls of the fan. Above these walls are large clerestory monitors with predominately north facing glazing. This is a surprise. The fan, with its monitors facing north is accomplishing something entirely different from the fan at Seinajoki. The monitors gather northern light instead of southern light into the building. This makes perfect sense because Rovaniemi is farther north in Finland, and the majority of the winter light will come, not from the South, but from the indirect glow of the winter sky produced by reflected light from the snow-covered ground. The fan gathers this predominant light. However, this is again, only a bit of engineering at the service of a larger landscape metaphor.

Inside the reading room, the light from the monitors is baffled by the plane of a lowered soffit. The monitors themselves are above and hidden. There is a flood of cool, indirect light -the light of the northern sun, high and hidden by the edges of a cloud. There are few columns, and these are widely placed. This is clearly not the close, intimate, individual world of the forest. Rather, the interior is broad, open, and lit from high above. Inside the library at Rovaniemi you find yourself under the northern sky of Finland, experiencing its grandeur and expanse, yet able to retreat from it into the individual areas made by the fan segments.

If the significance of Aalto's work lies in awakening us to those aspects of place that are fundamental to our thought and being, then the library at Rovaniemi raises the ante in that discussion. It counters the openness of the generic landscape outside -its placelessness, and reinstates the light of this landscape inside. In other words, it both ameliorates the territory and raises our awareness of it at the same time. The library at Rovaniemi cannot be understood separate from the interaction with its setting. In this way Aalto's later work explicitly returns to attitudes and considerations that are not modern. Herbert Read has said:

"One cannot emphasize too strongly that the 'object d'art,' as transportable and movable in space, is foreign to the Greek and Gothic Civilizations; it is a peculiarly modern conception, the expression of a new change of human attitude." (f7)

"The Egyptian Sculptor had no desire to isolate the human figure in space, to dissociate it from its niche or socket, for to do so would have served no rational purpose." (f7)

'Place,' or location with all of its particularity and specificity was dominant in pre-modern cultures. It was dominant over any sense of abstract or mathematical 'Space.' (f 8) Aalto's later work returns to this pre-modern conception of a work of art, and to a conception of our own being as particular within a place.

LIBRARY, OTANIEMI 1964-69: FOREST-CLEARING-LANDSCAPE-FINLAND

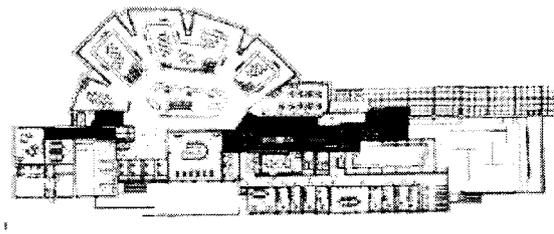


Figure 5 - Library, Rovaniemi 1963-1968

Otaniemi is located near Helsinki. It is a well developed area, with lavish houses, commercial areas, extensive (for Finland) road systems and public transit, yet remains intertwined with forests, lakes, and fingers of water. It is a complex landscape where humans and nature exist in a kind of precarious balance.

The Institute of Technology in Otaniemi is a large complex of buildings designed by Aalto in a flat and rather undistinguished area. The library at the Institute of Technology in Otaniemi (Fig 6) is situated along the northwestern edge of the college campus, and like the other libraries, is part of a larger ensemble of buildings sheltering a public area. In this case the public area ("quad") is neither rectangular, nor entirely open, having trees, paths, and some irregular undergrowth. All of the buildings, including the library, are built of an industrial red brick. The resulting, rather prosaic, imagery seems to mitigate any expectation of place reference or landscape metaphor.

Closer inspection reveals the auditorium building to the east, to have a small scale 'Greek amphitheater' built into it. The theatre appears incomplete at the top, the last bit of structure only continuing around the curve about a third of the way. (f9) The main entry into the library from the public area (near the theatre), is a rectangular

opening in the wall, surrounded by an irregular pattern of white marble, as if this marble were the mere remnant of a much larger sheathing. Many other details in this area indicate incompleteness or decay, suggesting, faintly, that the campus could be very old, surviving into the present in a ruined state. The irregular public area, with its casual undergrowth suggests, again, a space once well defined and now partially overgrown.

In the library the fan is different from the fans at Seinajoki and Rovaniemi. In plan it is hardly recognizable as a fan at all, seeming to expand and contract in several directions at once. It is less organic, and more faceted. Here it appears as if the fan had cleared out or rearranged the interior as a result of its growth. It also indicates a kind of ruination, and perhaps reclamation by the forest.

These contradictory planimetric aspects allow the development of complex interior spaces. The elaborate interior boundary of the main reading room renders this room ambiguous as to size and depth, much more so than at Seinajoki. As one enters into the great reading area, the repetitive skylight pattern provides the mediated, complex light typical of a forest canopy. The experience at Seinajoki is one of intimacy, of being among a stand of trees, while at Otaniemi, the experience is one of great depth, not of a stand of trees, but of the forest proper.

The new invention in this library is the large northeast facing monitor which provides a grand downwash of light in the middle of the reading room. The boundary of this central area of the reading room is sprinkled with large columns whose vertical wood detailing clearly refers to tree trunks. To enter into this area is to emerge from the forest and enter into the light of a clearing. The floor is also highly reflective, and the further reference is emergence from the forest onto a body of water reflecting the pale evening sky of late autumn or early spring.

This is not to say that the interior is 'symbolic' of the forest, a clearing, a lake, nor that a forest, a clearing, a lake are 'represented' in some way. Rather, Aalto has identified certain experiential similarities, certain patterns of light, shade, and reflectivity that are reminiscent of experiences in the land. To experience this interior is to re-experience in memory the surrounding landscape.

This experience of forest and lake, shadow and light is one of the most common experiences in Finland. In fact, this couplet could be understood as the defining experience not only of this area, but of all Finland.

The ambiguous extension of the forested landscape, clearing, water, and sky provides a more complex topographic experience than ever before, one that recalls both the local, and the regional landscape. Furthermore, Aalto insures that the topographic references do not remain static. The north- northeast facing monitors insure that

the lighting conditions inside the library will change subtly as the day progresses. The metaphoric clearing will be lit more brightly in morning than in the afternoon. These changing lighting effects will mimic the gradual change of light and mood within a forest and clearing.

Perhaps it is the experience of time that is the dramatic addition to Aalto's universe of implication. Time is not just quotidian, nor just seasonal, but refers to the rise and fall of civilizations across centuries. This is a large claim, but Aalto's use of the ruined theatre in many projects is a fairly well known reference to his idea that Finland was a kind of Greece of the north. The exterior references of the library at Otaniemi are to ruin and loss, the interior references are to a forest that has come to reside in the interior of the building. The combination of these two suggests that Aalto has designed an institute for education that contrasts the optimism of the built with an expectation of the final demise of culture. In the end the "natural" returns in the form of the shadowed forest.

These final comments are a stretch, but, this interpretation seems particularly apt when it is recognized that, by this time, Aalto had lost faith in large scale projects, in industrialization, and to some extent in the Modern Project as a whole. (f 10) Goran Schildt recounts that Aalto had said, by this time,

"You can't change the world, you can only set it an example." (f 11)

CONCLUSION

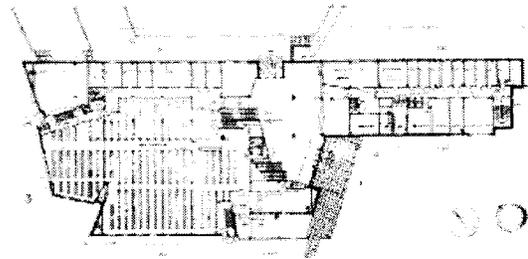


Figure 6 - Library, Otaniemi 1964-1969

At the beginning of the 21st century, our sensitivity to geographical place has been steadily eviscerated by our technologies. Philip Brey says explicitly,

"... over the past two centuries, the role of geographical features in the constitution of the identity of places has decreased; this devaluation has resulted from the employment of various space-shaping technologies, used by human beings to transcend the limitations of their local environments." (f 12)

Brey calls this devaluation of places "geographical disembedding."

If our Places are undergoing fundamental changes with the advent of communication and virtual technologies, then our way of thinking is also fundamentally changing. Aalto seems to have known this too, and regretted it, if the interpretation of the Library at Otaneirni is correct.

However, if geographical places form our thinking, and if this formation is largely unavoidable, then remaining aware of our "geographical origins" and of their influence upon us is of some significance, particularly with the rise of globalization and the resulting monoculture. The argument here is that Aalto's buildings not only represents the significant characteristics of specific geographical places, but significantly (and perhaps more importantly), sensitizes us to the experience of those places. In this regard, Aalto's buildings can be understood as acts of "geographical re-embedding."

Perhaps the real lesson, and the real significance of Aalto's work is that we can not hope to know ourselves until we attend to our biological and geographical roots. In his various buildings Aalto re-sensitizes us to the nuances of natural places, pointing the way to an architecture that could allow us to fall in love with our world, once again.

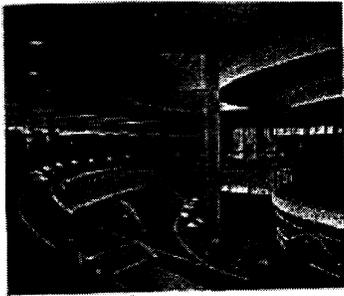


Figure 7 - Library, Mt. Angel 1965-1970

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- ¹"Place" is an extremely difficult term to define and to use. In the interests of brevity, this paper uses a few choice quotes to set the argument. For a detailed philosophical history of the concept, see Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)
- ²Ian Howard, "From Inside Out: The Farm as Place," in *Philosophies of Place*, ed. by Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 153.
- ³The town center as a whole at Seinajoki is a complex landscape metaphor. For a more detailed discussion of the center as a whole see Laurence Keith Loftin III, "Seinajoki and the Community of the Land," in *Modulus 18* (San Francisco: William Stout Publishers for the University of Virginia, 2000)
- ⁴Jeff Malpas, "Finding Place: Spatiality, Locality, and Subjectivity," in *Philosophies of Place*, ed. by Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 36.
- ⁵*ibid.*, 36
- ⁶*ibid.*, 24
- ⁷Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 58
- ⁸James Dickinson, "In Its Place: Site and Meaning in Richard Serra's Public Sculpture," in *Philosophies of Place*, ed. by Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., Inc., 1998), 52.
- ⁹For a brief, but focused discussion of the theatre at Otaniemi see Michael Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1996) and for a more detailed discussion of various theatres in Aalto's work see R Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (London: Phaidon, 1995)
- ¹⁰For a more developed discussion of the effect of Aalto's change in attitude on his work, particularly regarding his own Summer House, see Laurence Keith Loftin III, "Last House, Last Land," (Charlotte: ACSA Southeastern Conference Proceedings, Fall 2000)
- ¹¹Goran Schildt, *The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991)
- ¹²Philip Brey, "Space-Shaping Technologies and the Geographical Disembedding of Place," in *Philosophies of Place*, ed. by Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 239.

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