

AALTO AND THE MODERN(IST) MANNIERA: A CRITICAL READING OF THE MODERNISM AND AALTO AS A BAROQUE MACHINE

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ABSTRACT

Alvar Aalto, being one of the most attributed Finnish architects, both his design ideology and his works have been long discussed in various ways, either from the Modernist point of view through the Regionalist critics (Frampton 1983); or from the formal apprehension of organicism (Zevi, 1950) even up to Baroque conceptualization. This paper aims to re-read the works of the Aalto and his design manner, in a more critical perspective by overseeing them as more matured phase of the Modernism, while discussing the moment of mentioned architectural production through the mannerist context, and finally assigning them with the concept of baroque machine and discuss this hypothesis briefly by interacting with the Deleuzian apprehensions of minor, molecular, event and lines of flight.

Keywords: Alvar Aalto, Critical reading, Modernism, Mannerism, Deleuze

INTRODUCTION

Alvar Aalto, being one of the most attributed Finnish architects, both his design ideology and his works have been long discussed in various ways, either from the Modernist point of view through the Regionalist critics (Frampton 1983); or from the formal apprehension of organicism (Zevi, 1950) even up to Baroque conceptualization. Indisputably, each work of Aalto also exposes the diverse interpretations of Modernist thought in architecture, while transforming the agenda of Modern Architecture, being as a threshold at the same time.

This paper aims to re-read the works of the Aalto and his design manner, in a more critical perspective by overseeing them as more matured phase of the Modernism, while discussing the moment of mentioned architectural production through the mannerist context. I intend to position the argument of my discussion onto a meta-level, and briefly interact with diverse notions of post-structuralist philosophy that are also appraised to be relevant within this context, on behalf of constituting the discussion on the design philosophy.

The discussion commences with brief authorial narrations of on-site spatial experiences of the particular cases, in order to frame the neural-image of the discussion. First of cases is the Church of the Cross in Lahti, where the surface behind the lectern is animated; and the second is the courtyard stairs of the SÄYNÄTSALO Town Hall building, where the steps almost become liquefied and flow into the landscape,

Following that, this paper focuses on revealing the terms of regionalism and the manniera. And finally the design manner of the Finnish architect is unfolded by assigning it to the concept of baroque machine and discuss this hypothesis briefly by interacting with the Deleuzian apprehensions of minor, molecular, event and lines of flight, in opposition to 1920's and 30's psychoanalytical interpretations of Aalto's organicism, and put the final stress on the individuality yet the inarbitrariness of the spatial becomings of the Aalto as a baroque machine.

THE CHURCH OF THE CROSS AND SÄYNÄTSALO TOWN HALL CASES

With its cross-shaped glass-brick pattern, carved on the masonry wall, verifying its name, Church of the Cross rises down on the stairs that are climbing up to the major slope of the Lahti City (Figure 1). The church anchors to the north end of the main avenue that traverses the city, while glimpsing to its companion the Town Hall building, which is located on the other end of the avenue emerging as one of the finest versions of Finnish Jugendstil.

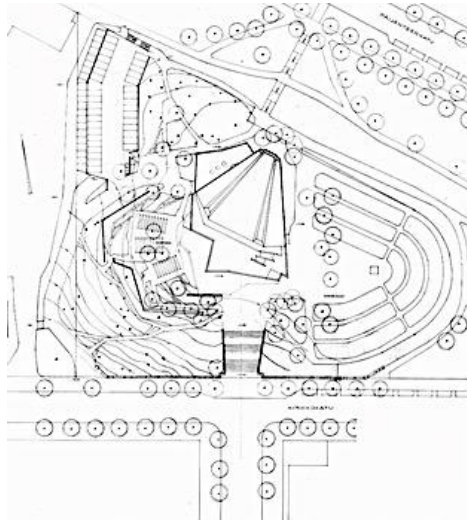


Figure 1. Site-plan, the Church of Cross.

As the main gate opens up into the two story-high, quasi-dark entrance doorway of the church (Figure 2), the opposing door to the entrance leads the guests to the mail hall, an entirely dissimilar interior atmosphere of this transition space.

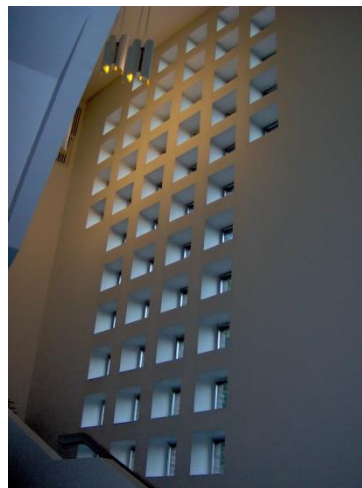


Figure 2. Entrance hall, the Church of Cross.

Inside the main hall, the immense luminosity penetrating through the glazed ends of the walls from the elevated and dis-attached ceiling (Figure 3), is further magnified via white and reflecting surfaces (Figure 4) that are all bounded up with a huge, but an elegantly designed thin cross (Figure 5), which stands as the genuine welcomer of the holly room, straight ahead on the opposite wall of the doorway. From the glittered touch of the light, through the sublime tranquility of the altar with its modest cross, there emerges an enliven folded plane,

with all its unevenness (Figure 6). Doubtlessly this animated surface, scratching out from the continuously flowing planes not only states its uniqueness and minor existence within the spatial unity that it begets, but also whispers both the transfiguring perception of the design thought, and the architect's manner of its time.



Figure 3-4. Main hall, the Church of Cross.

Similar to the animated folding surface behind the lectern in the Church of the Cross; surprisingly emerging and enliven, as well as liquefied spatial qualities further appear almost in every design of Alvar Aalto. Although in very modestly and silently attitudes, Aalto places his works to the limits of the exceptional to the ultimate point where his works blossom as the rare examples of a minor population of the mainstream "Modernism".



Figure 5. The apsis and the cross, the Church of Cross.



Figure 6. The lectern and the animated wall behind it, the Church of Cross.

Yet, neither totally curvilinear, nor commonly folded, but mostly the combination of these differentiated non-linear surfaces generate this atypical delightful diversity, where as the abstract rational forms of the modernist language liquefy into a more fluid domain of spatial interactions; just in the similar way where he conceptualizes, the courtyard stairs of the SÄYNÄTSALO Town Hall building (Figure 7-8).

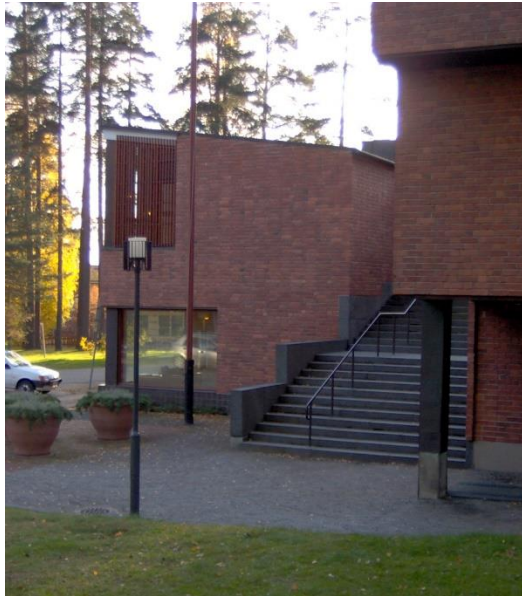


Figure 7. Säynätsalo Town Hall.

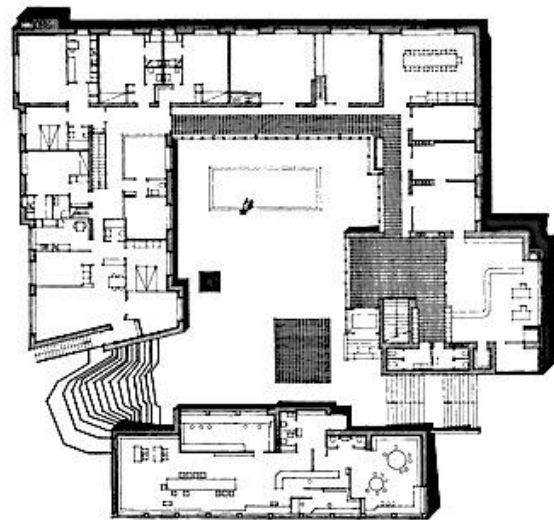


Figure 8. Site-plan, Säynätsalo Town Hall.

Säynätsalo, is one of the locations, where Aalto built quite a lot of examples. In fact Säynätsalo is one of the suburbs of Jyväskylä city, like Muuratsalo, again one of another very important location, where Aalto's experiment house is located. Säynätsalo Town Hall which enfolds a multi-programme building, is located just outside of the Säynätsalo main district. Being formed as an introvert building emerging around an elevated courtyard space, the exterior characteristics of the building appears are more massive brick structure, without much apertures on the outer skin. However, the inner façade, surrounding the courtyard, emerges as more transparent and the lighter surfaces of the protected courtyard creates a more delicate atmosphere in the courtyard (Figure 9 and 10).

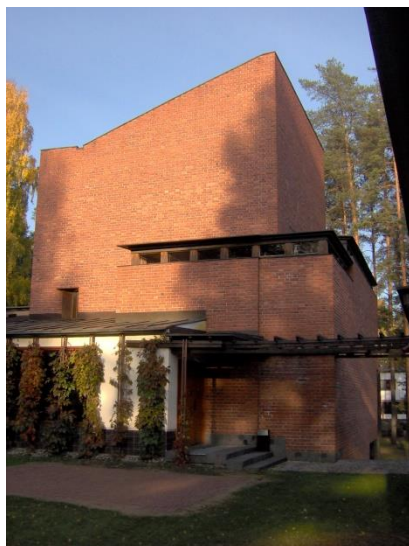


Figure 9. Säynätsalo Town Hall.



Figure 10. The elevated courtyard,

The courtyard of the town hall has been risen up to the first floor level of the existing ground level of the river bank. Yet, although the u-shaped courtyard has been surrounded with the

building blocks, but not tightly closed with them, whereas at a final point, it decreases down to the water shore and dissolves into the landscape through these organic stairs (Figure 11).

With his explicitly unique design approach and architectural outputs, Alvar Alto's works address to a very particular point that are mostly not easy to be defined or categorized. Without a doubt, via his works, Aalto introduces the experimental characteristics of the architectural space and its increasing tactile qualities through innovative deployments of both materiality and design.



Figure 11. Courtyard stairs dissolving to the landscape

REGIONALISM OR MANNIERA

The term regionalist architecture has been first conceptualized by Alexander Tzonis and Lian Lefaivre through their essay dating back to 1979-80 (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1990). The architectural examples that have been tagged as critical regionalism, have been essentially came out as the critique to the crisis of the Modernism during the second half of the 20th Century, while referring to the problem of sameness, over-homogenized formation of the architecture the lack of detail, and above all the over-determinist and very closed characteristics of the Modernist interventions, during those days (Frampton 1983).

The critical regionalism has introduced a novel interpretation to the Modern Movement's closed system, which was once dispersed from the external interactions and influences of the design system, and has criticized its pre-defined, absolute and independent position to its surrounding conditions (Görgül, 2008). As it has been observed, critical regionalism has organized its legacy around meaning, identity and sameness problems of the Modern Movement.

Thus, in other words, instead of the rational dimension of architecture; its transformation into a tactile existence that might interact with the existing milieu or a condition to become that unique spatial existence of that setting, briefly that moment and space, rather than a pre-

defined design output were the crucial point of the critique and the commentary architectural works (Görgül, 2008).

Tzonis and Lefaivre further advocate the uniqueness of the regionalism due to its differentiation and discontinuity from the mainstream Modernism on behalf of the context that they dwell into (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1990)... Thus, within the dogmatic rationalist structure of the late-Modernism, the critical regionalist examples have been appeared as merely the experimental practices that have been criticizing not only the milieu and the condition that they were going to position, but also itself in terms of how they were going to be position and to be exist.

Referring to all these key points, the critical positioning, the experimental processes, tacitly enriched spatial qualities and material experiments; the works of Aalto were once asserted as the examples of critical regionalism through that perspectives. However, what I argue in this paper, although the innovation that Aalto introduced through his works could also be asserted in the similar way that the mannerist attitudes were demonstrated, besides closely related to the conditions that they were emerged within the crisis of the Renaissance period.



Figure 12. Fall of the Giants by Giulio Romano, Palazzo del Te, Giulio Romano, 1526-35

Similar to the mid-20th Century crisis, Mannerism in the 16th Century emerged as an invention to a difficulty -the crisis of progress- by exposing the ability to resolve the problems through mapping out new ones in a lively imagination that could be created” (Kurbanovsky, 2002) (Figure 12). Like Rudolf Wittkower (1978) mentions in 1930’s, Mannerism was developed as the criticism of Renaissance crisis (Wittkower, 1978). Doubtlessly, the political condition of the crisis was strongly connected with the collapse of the Eurocentricism in terms of geographical dominancy, the transfiguring religious

legitimacy of Protestantism against Western Europe Church, as well as the increasing trade facilities and abstract power of money (Kurbanovsky, 2002). Besides as Colin Rowe defines, “Mannerism was the visual index of an acute spiritual and political crisis.”, while equating it further into a complexity (Rowe, 1976, De Meyer, 2012, p.256). In addition to these, in his work Friedländer (1990) further introduces something quite crucial in terms of revealing the spirit of the maniera (Friedländer, 1990). He defines the Mannerism as a “reaction against the standardization of the High Renaissance, and its objectivisation of the beauty”. In this regard he emphasizes that, “art becomes the rejection of the normative” (De Meyer, 2012, p. 246) Moreover, like De Meyer states, it is exactly this moment when the ingenium of Renaissance “...had shifted towards something more modern in manner. As such, maniera suddenly become desirable as an expression of spiritual particularity, self-confident, independent and transgressing the dicta of mere rationality.” (De Meyer, 2012, p.246)

Mannerism has emerged as an autonomous act within the milieu it has been blossomed. It came out as an individual expression that was beyond the doctrines, presumptions, model-books institutionalized attitudes, approaches and behaviors. It was emerged in the vacuum or the missing space of Renaissance’s precision against the personal deformations (De Meyer, 2012, p. 247), furthermore as a medium to express the possible or potential singularities of the moment of creation.

In short, similar to “Mannerist escape, restlessness and irrationality opposes itself to academic rules of the Beaux-Arts realism”, the emerging works of Aalto, also oppose to the orthodox dominancy of the Modernist rationalism (De Meyer, 2012, p.246)

AALTO AND THE MODERN MANNIERA



Figure 13-14. Lecture rooms, Helsinki University.

The works of Aalto have appeared as the individual and unique cases against cliché and standardized approach of the Modernism. They are non-categorical and introducing unpredictable singularities in each time (Figure 13-18).



Figure 15. Säynätsalo Theatre building interiors.

When speaking in Deleuzian terminology, each case emerges as not molar, but molecular structures, neither hierarchically formed systems of pre-defined mass configurations, nor the out-puts of strictly defined patterns, but rather as more dynamic formations of relatively flexible design approaches that are merely atomized apprehension of spatial relations and mobilized spatialities; not only existentially, but also poetically as well.



Figure 16-17. Info desk, Jyväskylä University.

Apart from the universally, pre-defined conditions of Modernist apprehension, each case in Aalto's design emerges as a unique implication, a singular case, associating with the design story, program and the surrounding conditions. They further interacts with the idea of Deleuzian philosophy of event, further nurturing from the possibility of singular realization

process of multifarious potentials of the parallel existentialities, where as each case becomes the unique actualization process of that moment and milieu.



Figure 18. The stairs inside Aalto's home-office, Helsinki

Moreover, the works of Aalto also asserted as unique cases of lines-of flight in Deleuzian terminology, while imposing a break-through from the conventional perceptions of the Modernism, becoming as “liberating force and opposition to [the existing]” in the similar way that Ernst Michalski attributes to the mannerist attitudes. (De Meyer, 2012, p. 246)

It is also worth to say that, this inspiring atypical unique character that makes the works of Aalto being differentiated from the general character of its time, also emerges as the minor stance, both poetically within the architectural paradigm in general, rather than posing an endeavor to dominate or impose a sovereignty to become the mainstream action; as well as literally being a minor touch in each architectural proposal, remaining in the limited and modest realizations of the apprehension.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When it is examined comparatively, Aalto and his works emerges as individual and unique cases against cliché and standardized approach of the Modernism. They are unique cases, introducing unpredictable singularities in each time of their becoming processes, independent from the presumptions or pre-assumed formal language of the Modern architecture. Therefore, his works are not easily definable, nor categorize within the rigid boards of the Modernism. But, again this uniqueness, and condition dependent implementations of the Aalto, made him and his works innovative and inspiring.

Resonating with the principles of the Mannerism; being as a “reaction against the standardization of the High Renaissance, and its objectivisation of the beauty” (Friedländer, 1990), but to strict Rationalism of the Modern Era; as well as “rejection of the normative” (De Meyer, 2012, p. 246) Aalto's works emerges as a shift, a breakthrough “transgressing the dicta of mere rationality”(De Meyer, 2012, p.246), yet being as an self-confident line of flight, emerging as an antagonist but multitude baroque machine, creates and re-creates its self.

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