MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF FINNISH ARCHITECT ALVAR AALTO ON VIEW AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Original Drawings and Models on View for the First Time in the United States

Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism

February 19-May 19, 1998

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), a major retrospective of the works of the renowned Finnish architect, designer, and town planner opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 19, 1998. It is the first large-scale retrospective in the United States to present original drawings and models of Aalto's architecture. The Alvar Aalto Foundation granted MoMA unprecedented access to its vast holdings, which have rarely been loaned outside Finland.

Featuring more than 150 original sketches and competition drawings, 20 models, and new and archival photographs--many on loan from museums and private collections in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany--the exhibition presents 45 buildings and projects from all phases of Aalto's 54-year career. Examples of Aalto's innovative furniture and glass, their undulating surfaces reflecting Aalto's naturalistic architectural precepts, are also included.

On view through May 19, Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism is organized by Peter Reed, Associate Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art; with Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture, Columbia University, as curatorial consultant; assisted by Elina Standertskjöld, curator of the archives, Museum of Finnish Architecture; with the cooperation of the Alvar Aalto Foundation and the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki. The exhibition is made possible by a major grant from Celeste Bartos with generous support from Artek. Additional funding has been graciously provided by Elise Jaffe and Jeffrey Brown.

One of the most influential architects of the century, Aalto continues to have a profound influence both within Finland and internationally. He completed a large number of diverse commissions, primarily in Finland and Scandinavia, but also in the United States and elsewhere in Europe. These range from cultural institutions such as auditoriums, museums, and libraries to factories, apartment buildings, churches, and town halls.

While some thirty years younger than Frank Lloyd Wright and approximately a decade younger than Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Aalto actively participated in the evolution of Modernism with the movement's vanguard. Aalto's career had a neoclassical beginning; a lucid "functional style"; and important later work is characterized by expressive and humanist aspirations, which sought to balance regional with international influences, modern with ancient and vernacular...
architecture, and nature with an increasingly standardized technology.

In his essay in the publication accompanying the exhibition, Mr. Reed writes, "His subtle manipulation of materials, respect for their natural and historical associations, utilization of a formal vocabulary that favored free form over regularity, and his profound and acute understanding of the individual site and circumstance created an original architecture that was designed to appeal on many levels, not the least of which were its sensory, visceral, and ultimately human qualities." Aalto himself declared, "Architecture must have charm; it is a factor of beauty in society. But real beauty is not a conception of form which can be taught, it is the result of harmony between several intrinsic factors, not the least the social."

In the exhibition, video "walkthroughs" of several of Aalto's most important and best-known buildings are projected on a large screen. The five brief tapes provide visitors with a rare opportunity to experience the light, spatial qualities, and settings of such works as Villa Mairea, the house for Harry and Maire Gullichsen, Noormarkku, Finland (1938-39); National Pensions Institute, Helsinki (1948-57); and the Church of the Three Crosses, Vuoksenniska (Imatra), Finland (1955-58). The videos were produced by The Finnish Broadcasting Company/TV1 Documentaries.

Several full-scale constructions punctuate the installation and provide a tangible experience of Aalto's architecture, epitomizing his interest in materials and aesthetics. They include a convex curved wall of the unique wedge-shaped bricks based upon the façade of the House of Culture, Helsinki (1952-60) and a wall of glazed ceramic tiles which Aalto used in several buildings in the latter half of his career.

The exhibition includes major institutional, residential, and commercial works as well as lesser-known projects, including Viipuri City Library, Viipuri, Finland (now Vyborg, Russia) (1927-35); Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium, Paimio, Finland (1929-33); Avesta Civic Center, Sweden (1944, project with Albin Stark); Baker House Senior Dormitory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, (1946-49); S'ynätsalo Town Hall, Säynätsalo, Finland (1948-52); Opera House, Essen, Germany (competition 1959, completed 1988 by Harald Deilmann with Elissa Aalto); Helsinki University of Technology (1949-66); and Mount Angel Abbey Library, St. Benedict, Oregon (1964-70).

Aalto's first building in the United States, the Finnish Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair (1938-39, demolished), firmly established him as one of the most important architects of his day. The interior's distinctive design, with its dominating, sinuous, three-tiered wooden walls, synthesized many of the forms and ideas that made his work so singular. Upon seeing it, Frank Lloyd Wright declared, "Aalto is a genius."

The Mount Angel Abbey Library in St. Benedict, Oregon (1964-1970) was Aalto's last building in this country. Testimony to his abiding interest in human-centric architecture, it is organized around a central, open, circular well, ringed by curving reading tables and radiating stacks, creating a space that is simultaneously lively yet contemplative.

Samples of Aalto's birch wood stools, which have been produced continuously since their introduction in the 1930s, are in the galleries for use by Museum visitors. A selection of Aalto-designed glass vases, like the "Savoy" which debuted at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937, are also on view.
Publication
Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism, edited by Peter Reed with essays by Mr. Reed; Kenneth Frampton; Vilhelm Helander, Professor of Architecture, Helsinki University of Technology; Pekka Korvenmaa, Research Director, University of Art and Design, Helsinki; Juhani Pallasmaa, architect and former dean, School of Architecture, Helsinki University of Technology; Marc Treib, Professor of Architecture, University of California at Berkeley. The publication is made possible by the generosity of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, in memory of Lily Auchincloss, and of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. 320 pages with 126 full color and 402 black-and-white illustrations. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Clothbound, $55, distributed in the U.S. and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, and paperbound $29.95; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

Panel Discussions
In collaboration with The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in Decorative Arts, and its complementary exhibition Finnish Modern Design: Utopian Ideals and Everyday Realities, 1930-1997, The Museum of Modern Art presents:

Tuesday, March 10, 1998, 6:30 pm
The Architectural Legacy of Alvar Aalto: A Critical Discussion. Panelists include: Steven Holl, Principal, Steven Holl Architects, New York; Patricia Patkau, Partner, Patkau Architects, Vancouver; Professor Colin St. John Wilson, Colin St. John Wilson and Associates, London; and Mr. Pallasmaa. Moderators are Mr. Reed and Mr. Frampton.

Tuesday, May 5, 1998, 6:30 pm
The Design Legacy of Finnish Modernism: 20th Century Ideals and Realities. Panelists include: Harri Kalha, Research Fellow, Academy of Finland, University of Helsinki; Ben af Schultén, Director of Design, Artek, Helsinki; Kerstin Wickman, Art Editor, Form magazine, Svensk Form (The Swedish Society of Crafts Design); and others. Moderators are Nina Stritzler-Levine, Director of Exhibitions, The Bard Graduate Center, and Mr. Korvenmaa.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets: $8, members $7, students and seniors $5; available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, the public may call the Department of Education at 212/708-9781. These programs are supported in part by The American-Scandinavian Foundation.

Travel
Following its New York showing, the exhibition will travel to the Centro Internazionale D'Arte e di Cultura di Palazzo Te, Mantua, Italy (August 23-November 29, 1998) and the Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan (December 19, 1998-February 15, 1999) under the auspices of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

Special Film Series
In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum presents Baby, It’s Cold Outside: Films from Finland, 1917-1997, a film series on view from April 24 through May 31, 1998. The series features the New York premiere of celebrated filmmaker Aki Kaurismaki's Drifting Clouds (1997). Presented in collaboration with the Finnish Film Foundation and the Finnish Film Archive, the exhibition is co-organized by Jytte Jensen, Associate Curator, and Joshua Siegel, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Video, The Museum of Modern Art.