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## ABSTRACT

Some aspects on Aalto criticism are debated: Sensitivity to nature, topography, and cultural locality; as well as the critics adherence to Aalto's own questionable positions on other aspects, such as ornamentation and standardization. Descriptions of Säynätsalo are presented, showing not only difference but contradiction among them; pointing that both ways seem to be accepted by publishers and architects. A legitimated criticism based on a tendency to accept as primary sources, information and explanations that are all but empty; showing confusion between the roles of the architect and the critic.

## KEY WORDS

Juan Luis Rodríguez, Criticism, History and criticism, Critical regionalism, Water Struck Brick, Fiction, Architecture Culture.

## TÍTULO

*El ayuntamiento de la montaña*

## RESUMEN

Se debaten algunos aspectos de la crítica sobre Aalto, tales como su sensibilidad a la naturaleza, la topografía y la cultura local; también la aceptación de los críticos sobre algunas posiciones cuestionables del mismo Aalto en torno a la ornamentación y la estandarización. Se presentan descripciones de Säynätsalo que no solo difieren entre sí, sino que se contradicen, anotando que todas parecen ser acogidas por igual entre editores y arquitectos. Una actitud legitimadora basada en la tendencia a aceptar informaciones y explicaciones vacías como fuentes primarias, evidenciando con ello una confusión de roles entre críticos y arquitectos.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Juan Luis Rodríguez, crítica, historia y crítica, regionalismo crítico, ladrillo de Nueva Inglaterra, ficción, Cultura arquitectónica.

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# City Hall on a Hill

Juan Luis Rodríguez

*Arquitecto*

This is the canonic image of the Säjynätsalo Town Hall, an evocative photograph shown in the exhibitions of Finnish architecture all around the world and reproduced in countless books, academic lectures, and architect's personal records. It shows what might be just the final steps on an uphill path, framed by randomly shaped volumes, leading to a space not yet visible. From the distance, the invisible space seems to have been there as an original hill-top which was carefully embraced by the inevitable visit of architecture and civilization. The irregular steps that lead into this place also appear as if they had been delicately carved out of the original site topography. The grass covering the steps suggests that the place has always been there as in the ruins of Rome or Greece. The tall, massive and singular volume at the end of the visual axis is located in such a way that its singularity becomes unforgettable, generating an emblematic image for the community. The lack of people and windows makes the masses appear monumental and without scale, further enhancing the timelessness of the atmosphere.\*

Given these suggestions, the photograph works as an ideal illustration of the qualities that many critics and historians have associated with the Säjynätsalo Town Hall, or Aalto's

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\* Este artículo fue escrito inicialmente como trabajo final para un curso de posgrado en la Escuela de Diseño de la Universidad de Harvard. El texto fue revisado y ampliado para su publicación en la revista *Dis (Courses). Essays on Architecture, History and Theory*, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2007. Para esta segunda publicación en *Ensayos*, se introdujeron algunos cambios para hacer más clara la argumentación original. Para promover un debate cultural en torno al ladrillo, al final se agregó una posdata.

HILL-LIKE ANGLE.

Phaidon, Simo Rista Picture



work as a whole: sensitivity to place, topography, nature, and cultural locality; appreciation for the temporal dimension of architecture and the *longue durée* of human existence; a careful working of natural materials; the creation of a center for the community; and a human and democratic architecture. Such qualities make the Town Hall in Säynätsalo the very opposite of the invasive, insensitive, heedless and universalizing architecture of Heroic Modernism. Indeed, for Colin St. John Wilson, Aalto represents an *Other Modernism* while Kenneth Frampton presents Aalto as one of the idols of *Critical Regionalism*, a movement challenging the reifying aspects of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

A representative example of how Aalto's architecture has been received by mainstream critics is Winfried Nerdinger's reading of the Säynätsalo Town Hall. The author begins by calling it "a masterpiece that succeeded in linking architecture and nature" and then goes on to explain

the Town Hall is situated on a slope, which Aalto exploited to differentiate the various functions to be accommodated here. Set a full story-height above street level is a half-open courtyard, about which the library, reading rooms, and the administration are laid out to for a "campo" for the citizens, a "little acropolis" for cultural events and leisure activities. The courtyard is also reached via a grassed staircase, so that the surrounding nature flows into the heart of the town hall.

Moreover, in addition to being connected to nature, the building in Nerdinger's reading also has a particularly democratic and human character: "The council chamber is set at a higher level: its function is literally elevated—something that is also signaled by the tower-like structure visible from the outside. If it is possible to speak of 'democratic architecture' at all, then it is more likely to be found in Aalto's spaces in Säynätsalo, which are entirely oriented toward people's needs, than in the contorted efforts to achieve transparency in, for example, the German Bundestag building in Bonn."<sup>2</sup> Nerdinger finishes by adding that "the little town hall in Säynätsalo is significant for another specific feature of Aalto's humanist, natural architecture: avoiding a too perfect, mechanical appearance in the brick façade. To this end, he insisted that the brick should not be laid precisely to plane. The result is a lively, natural-looking surface that acquires a sculptural quality in the light."<sup>3</sup>

Nerdinger, St. John Wilson and Frampton portray Aalto as a critic of modernism instead of an insider within a contested cultural project. This familiar version of Aalto as a Northern lone ranger has been recently contested by historians of modernism, including Sarah Goldhagen and Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen. For Goldhagen, Aalto brought new and challenging points into an ongoing international debate in which he felt he was a member;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SARAH GOLDHAGEN. "Something to Talk About. Modernism, Discourse, Style". In: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, June, 1995, pp. 144-167.

<sup>2</sup> WINFRIED NERDINGER. *Toward a Human Modernism*. Prestel, Munich, New York, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> GOLDHAGEN. STTA, *op. cit.* Modernism is a "discourse", that means an ongoing debate.



▲ MAIN ENTRANCE. Phaidon, name of author unpublished.

for Pelkonen, Aalto's career constitutes the example *par excellence* of a person consciously fashioning himself in order to become *absolument moderne*.<sup>5</sup>

Based on critical stances like those of Goldhagen and Pelkonen, on the chronology of Aalto's oeuvre, and more important, on visual observations of plans and buildings, I try to debate some of the canonical aspects on Aalto criticism, namely: naturalism as connectedness to place; humanism as non-mechanistic; tectonic as artfulness of construction and cultural resistance; fulfillment of people's needs to embody democracy; and the exclusiveness of Italian and Greek precedents. Let us begin returning to Nerdinger's account of Säynätsalo.

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<sup>5</sup> EVA LIISA PELKONEN. Unpublished dissertation. Pelkonen claims that Aalto became and remained modern through his trips, friendships, readings, and buildings.

## Place

Nerding claims that the building is situated on a slope which Aalto exploits, presumably to arrive at the two-level solution with the courtyard one story above street level in connection to the “natural” topography. In actual fact, however, the slope is very gentle indeed, the ground behind the building being five steps higher than the street, which is less than a meter. Looking at an aerial photograph of the site, we realize that the impression of an acropolis or an Italian hill-town that one easily gets from the canonical image is mistaken. Actually, the Town Hall is made of two buildings placed on an almost flat site: a U-shaped element around an elevated courtyard and a straight bar along the street. The aerial view reveals a more suburban free-standing building, instead of the random, mountainous character suggested by the intelligently cropped photograph; an architectural idea that criticism has successfully implanted in the consciousness of the architectural community.

There are two different ways to enter the courtyard from where one gets into the main spaces. The main entrance is through the staircase in the east, while the one shown in the famous picture is hardly ever used; because it has higher rises, it is better suited for sitting than walking. One might expect that the elevated courtyard actually covers some functions below, but the sections show that it is all in fact an infill, and also that the grassy stairs looking like they are simply terraced from the natural slope are in fact all built up. Thus, the solution is not derived from natural topography but only made to look as if it was; instead, Aalto creates a completely artificial hill.

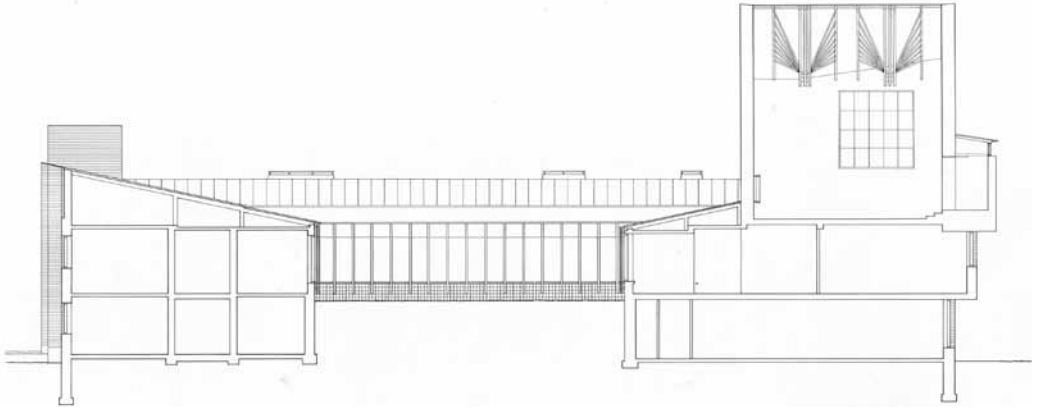
Given the radical restructuring of natural topography to create the simulated hill-town in Säynätsalo, the Town Hall's relation to place is not as natural as Nerding suggests. Let's now review Frampton's claim that Säynätsalo's architecture exemplifies critical regionalism. Defining how a critical regionalist building relates to its site, Frampton explains:

It is self-evident that the *tabula rasa* tendency of modernization favors the optimum use of earth-moving equipment inasmuch as a totally flat datum is regarded as the most economic matrix upon which to predicate the rationalization of construction... The bulldozing of an irregular topography into a flat site is clearly a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute *placelessness*, whereas the terracing of the same site to receive the stepped form of a building is an engagement in the act of “cultivating” the site... in-laying the building into the site... has the capacity to embody, in built form, the prehistory of the place, its archeological past and its subsequent cultivation and transformation across time.<sup>6</sup>

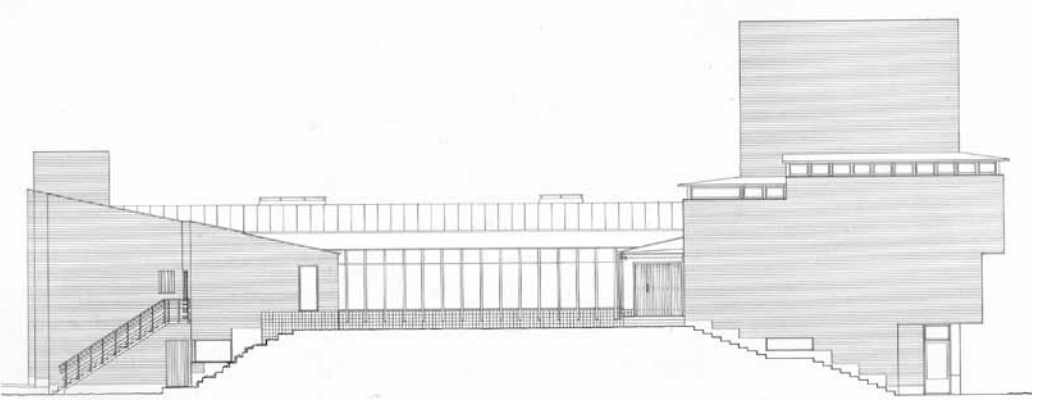
Instead of enhancing the natural contours with terracing, the existing slope on the site was bulldozed away; the earth was collected in the middle of four retaining walls, creating an artificial back-against-the-mountain for all areas on the ground level; thus, any prehistory or identity of the site is gone. Therefore, following Frampton's Heideggerian understanding

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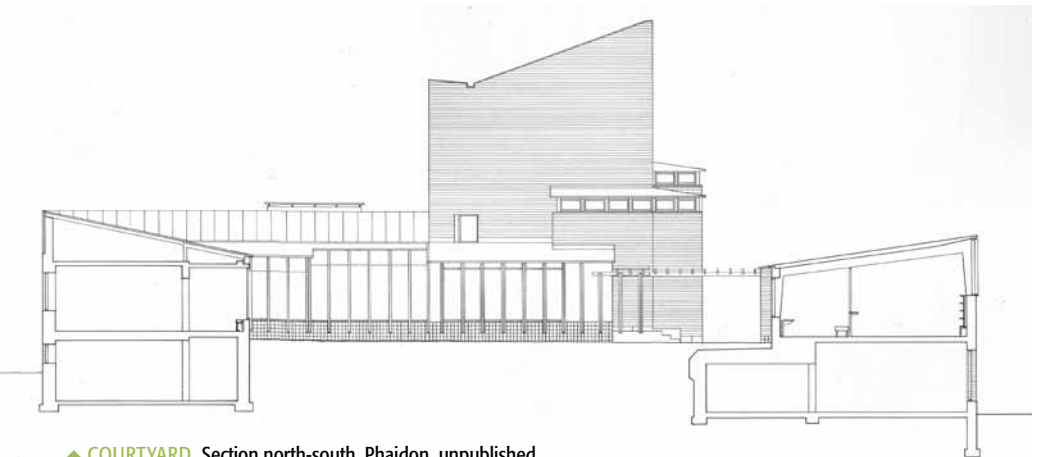
<sup>6</sup> KENNETH FRAMPTON. “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”. In *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Ed. Hal Foster. Bay Press, 1983, p. 26.



▲ COURTYARD. Section east-west. Phaidon, unpublished



▲ STAIRS. Section east-west. Phaidon, unpublished



▲ COURTYARD. Section north-south. Phaidon, unpublished

of how architecture cultivates (*schonen*) the earth, we would have to conclude that the Säynätsalo building, more than a *modernist* creation, would be a *postmodern*, scenographic simulation of a pre-existing ideal, possibly the Italian hill town like the ones that Aalto had admired since his student days.

Another prominent expert on Aalto and the author of a monograph on Säynätsalo, Richard Weston, acknowledges the invention of a site but presenting it as a virtue, as it makes possible the use of another device of classical architecture: the establishment of a *piano nobile* reserved for important functions. In other words, natural landscape was indeed radically –and positively– disregarded following an architectural model, be that of the Southern European hill-town, as the canonical photograph seems to insinuate; a campo or an acropolis, as Nerdinger would have it, or the *piano nobile* of a palazzo, as Weston’s virtuoso reading suggests. We should acknowledge, however, that accepting a degree of unnatural-ness in the conception of place as modified topography, this latter interpretation contradicts those of Nerdinger and Frampton.

## Precedents

Other than the Italian palazzo, the Italian hill-town, or the Greek acropolis, Aalto himself suggested yet another precedent for his design. According to Göran Schildt, when Aalto presented his design to the city council, the necessity of a tall chamber was put in question, to which the architect responded by exclaiming: “Gentlemen! The world’s most beautiful and most famous town hall, that of Siena, has a council chamber 16 meters high. I propose that we build one that is 17 meters.”<sup>7</sup>

However accurate Aalto’s information about Siena is, this comparison may be more illuminating, as the building most obviously shares with its Italian counterpart the use of brick inside and outside.<sup>8</sup> However, brick as an inspirational source for the hill town appearance deserves a closer examination in relation to the technical functions of the material. Thus, let’s question the use of brick through a second critical-regional aspect which Frampton identifies as tectonic, and begin by differentiating *modern* brick from *classical* brick.<sup>9</sup>

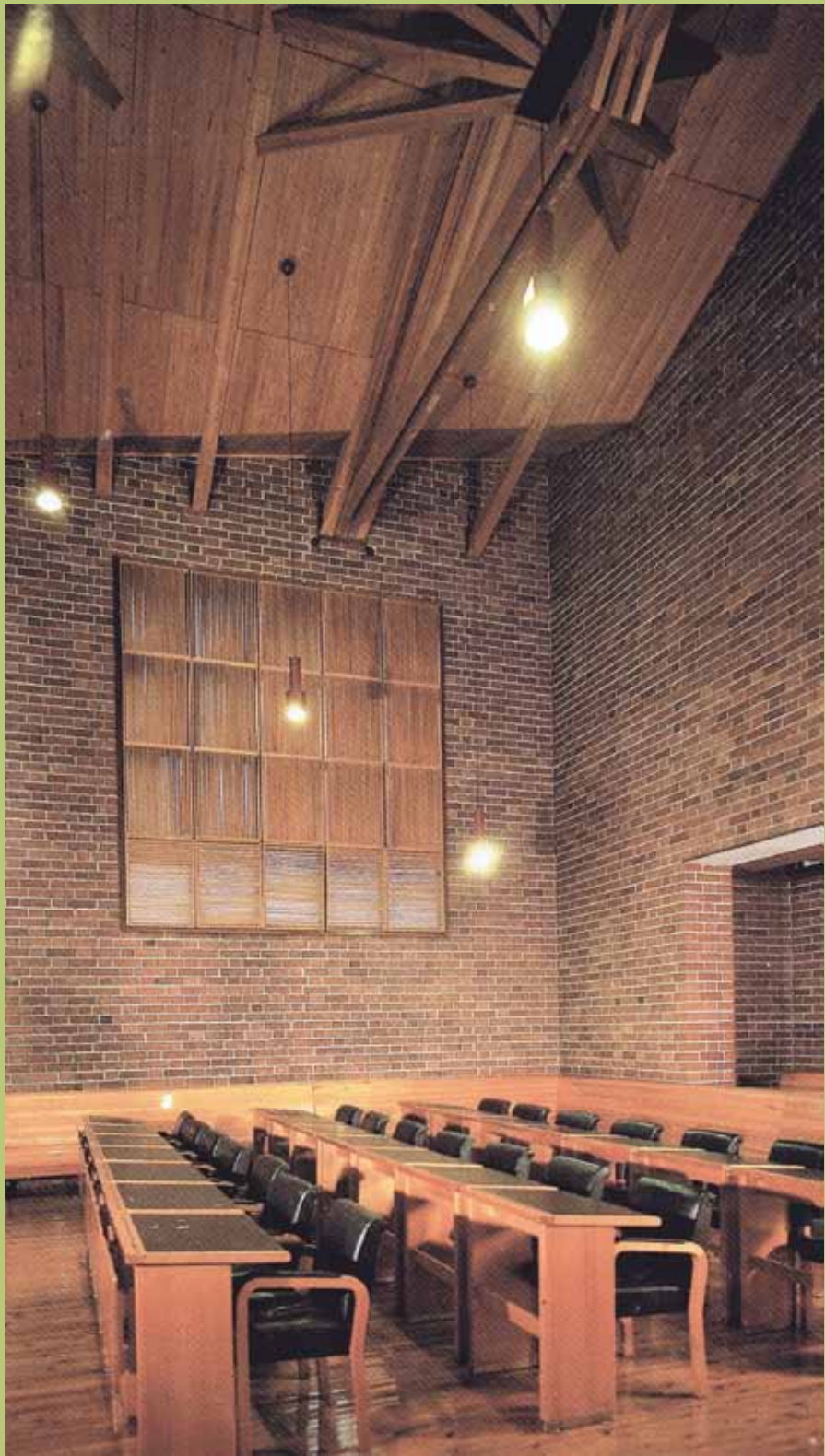
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<sup>7</sup> RICHARD WESTON. “Sense of Place”. In *Alvar Aalto*. Phaidon Press, London, p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Talking about Säynätsalo, Simo Paavilainen makes this point and adds that “the association with Siena is created by the brick, the clear self-assertiveness of the building and the elevated courtyard, which was originally covered with cobblestones ‘like the yard of an Italian farmhouse.’” Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 15th, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> LEONARDO MOSSO. *Alvar Aalto, teokset 1918-1967*. Otava Publishing Comp. Ltd., Helsinki, 1967, p. 86. Quoted In Hanni Sippo (ed.). *Alvar Aalto, The Brick*. AA Foundation Helsinki, 2001, p. 54.





◀ ROMAN LIKE, COUNCIL CHAMBER.

Phaidon, name of author unpublished.

## Tectonic

On the one hand, before the modern use of skeletal structures in steel or reinforced concrete, the walls in brick buildings were necessarily load bearing. According to Weston: “The walls are of brick work and mostly load-bearing.” However, if walls indeed support any weight apart from their own, they would only be occasionally load-bearing, not “mostly”; for as even the massive council chamber is “mostly” supported by concrete columns.

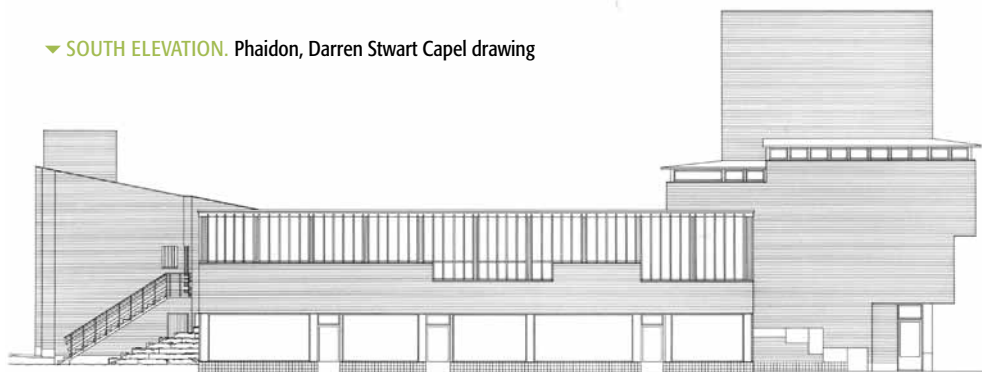
The south and east elevations show the second levels clearly supported by columns; north and west elevations could have load bearing brick walls, although “visually” supported on black marble tiles. Regardless of Weston’s description it seems though that the structural function mostly belongs to the reinforced concrete system, assisted by the wood trusses in some parts of the building. Even if Säynätsalo evokes ancient buildings or epochs, it does not follow that its brick is also structural, as Weston’s ambiguous characterization suggests.

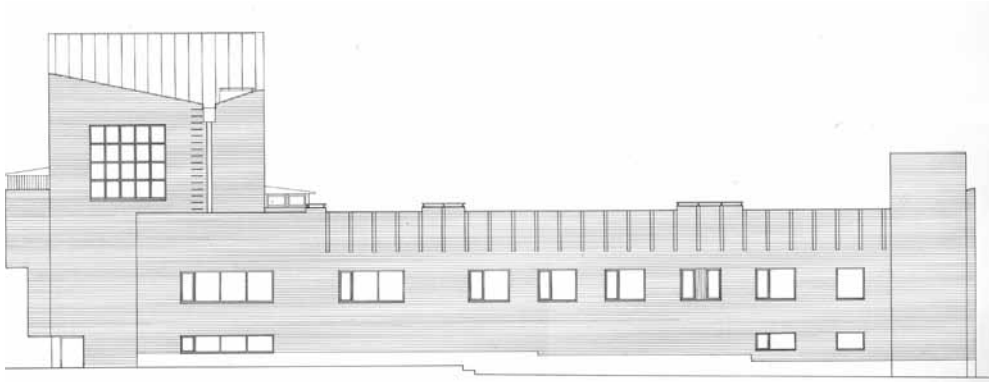
Frampton, on the other hand, mostly uses the Town Hall to exemplify his ideas of tactile sensitivity and phenomenological awareness; he does not discuss its construction. However,



▲ PLANS. LEVELS 1ST, 2ND, 3RD. Phaidon, Darren Stewart Capel drawing

▼ SOUTH ELEVATION. Phaidon, Darren Stewart Capel drawing

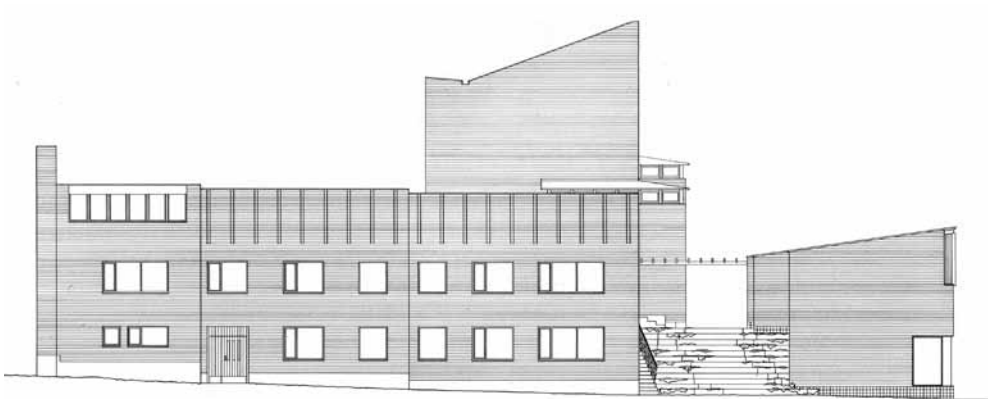




▲ NORTH ELEVATION. Phaidon, Darren Stewart Capel drawing



▲ EAST ELEVATION. Phaidon, Darren Stewart Capel drawing



▲ WEST ELEVATION. Phaidon, Darren Stewart Capel drawing

this aspect should be necessarily implied when the building is recurrently used as an example of critical regionalism; therefore, one could expect that Säjnäsalo complies with his characterization of tectonic, which it does not, at least in full sense. Let's hear Frampton's conception, which he has acutely summarized recurring to Stanford Anderson:

Despite the critical importance of topography and light, the primary principle of architectural autonomy resides in the *tectonic* rather than the *scenographic*: that is to say, this autonomy is embodied in the revealed ligaments of the construction and in the way in which the syntactical form of the structure explicitly resists the action of gravity. It is obvious that this discourse of the load borne (the beam) and the load-bearing (the column) cannot be brought into being where the structure is masked or otherwise concealed. On the other hand the tectonic is not to be confused with the purely technical for it is more than the simple revelation of stereotomy or the expression of skeletal framework... *Tektonik*... not just the activity of making the materially requisite construction...but rather to the activity that raises this construction to an art form...The functionally adequate form must be adapted so as to give expression to its function. The sense of bearing provided by the *entasis* of Greek columns became the touchstone of this concept of *Tektonik*... The tectonic remains to us today as the potential means of distilling play between material, craftwork and gravity, so as to yield a component which is in fact a condensation of the entire structure. We may speak here of the presentation of a structural poetic rather than the re-presentation of a facade.

Three aspects seem to be necessary for tectonic qualification: 1. The ligaments and the skeletal system must be revealed or expressed by the form, not masked or concealed. 2. An additional art of construction must be revealed by the form, similar to the *entasis* of a Greek column; it is not enough to show the joints and the structure. 3. The function also has to be expressed or revealed by the form.

The ligaments of brick are obviously visible as in any brick work; whereas columns and beams, although visible in some parts such as library, shops, and corridors, are mostly concealed. The combination and differentiation of materials seems to be straightforward with the exception, again, of the concealed concrete columns. Finally, although it is unclear whether the use of the word *function* refers to the *use-function* or the *structural-function*, plans and elevations confirm that use-functions are indeed expressed or revealed, whereas structural functions are mostly concealed. Therefore, assuming the most favorable scenario, only the third requirement would be fulfilled; the first and second requirements are absent, rendering the building incomplete for the "art of construction" Frampton assigns to the tectonic.

Interestingly, the latter characteristic of revealing the *use-function* takes us to a very *functionalist* characteristic: the formal recognition of different functions. Weston points out that in 1944, Aalto had already tried –and failed– a similar functional integration for Avesta in Sweden.

The [Avesta] town hall...for example, had boutiques on the arcaded ground floor...just as at Säjnäsalo it contained a bank and the library stood above shops. Aalto argued that such combinations of activities were healthy in promoting day-and night-time use of the civic centre, and

hoped that by grouping them he could create a complex of sufficient scale, variety and presence to withstand the onslaught of commercial buildings which in many cities had already wiped out any possibility of establishing the civic complex as a visual and symbolic crown.<sup>10</sup>

Contradicting the brief, Aalto's plan for Avesta was rejected by the community, partly because it combined different functions in the same building. However, as town planner and competition winner for Säynätsalo, he managed to pull ahead a similar odd program—offices, shops, apartments, library and council hall. In a distant and provincial industrial town with no special projections, it would seem enough to have had a few square meters of office space, probably with a multiple room to be used for sports and social events.

The competition brief implied an advocacy for a complex Civic Center which was meant to supersede the simplicity of a mono-functional Town Hall. Nevertheless, half a century after completion, the apartments have become offices and the shops have been taken over by the library. The Town Hall has become an administration building with a library instead of the intended mixed-use Civic Center. The new two-storey library has a new entrance through the former shop windows, which are now serving a purpose for which they were not designed.

We have observed the inefficacy of Frampton's idea of topography and tectonic when applied to Säynätsalo. Let's now expand our search for another problematic point in Critical Regionalism, by attempting to situate Aalto's brick in a cultural context.

## Finnish brick

Brick in itself never was a particularly Finnish material. Until the early nineteenth century, except for medieval stone churches and castles, almost everything in Finland was built of wood. In the late seventeenth century, however, it became fashionable to paint the houses in towns. Due to the additional cost of paint, one would only paint the street façade which was the minimum required by the crown. The only available pigment was redde (iron ore), mixed with earth. When oil paints became available in the beginning of the nineteenth century, pastel colors were used on the street façade (most often light ochre, sometimes light grey, seldom light blue), and redde on the back, side, or courtyard facades. The riddle paint was supposed to imitate brick construction and the pastel colors stone facades.<sup>11</sup>

In the nineteenth century, Russian authorities started to build both orthodox churches and army barracks out of exposed brick. In addition, brick was the material of choice for many industrial buildings, such as breweries and warehouses. Still, brick was often understood as a

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<sup>10</sup> WESTON. "The Inspiration of Italy". In *Alvar Aalto. Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> This claim comes from the art historian Henrik Lillius. *The Finnish Wooden Town*. Rungsted Kyst: A. Nyborg A/S, 1985. Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 6th, 2006.

symbol for the oppressive Russian regime, and despite for a brief period in the early 1920s, when for example the Etu-Töölö area in Helsinki was built, exposed brick was not popular except for industrial contexts. Therefore, from the point of view of tradition, Aalto's use of brick for large public institutional buildings, such as the National Pensions Institute, the Otaniemi University, and the Säynätsalo Town Hall actually constitutes an aberration of Finnish conventions. As argued above, given that its design not only seems to disregard or disfigure its natural context but also to fail tectonic qualification, if the use of brick does not belong to a local tradition, then it is difficult to see how we could call the Säynätsalo Town Hall an example of Critical Regionalism. Let's take a different look to the material.

## Natural brick

According to Nerdinger and Weston, the brickwork gives the Säynätsalo building its natural quality. Nerdinger argues that Aalto avoided a “too perfect, mechanical appearance”

▼ **VISIBLE MISALIGNED BRICKS.** Phaidon, name of author unpublished.



INVISIBLE MISALIGNED BRICKS.  
Phaidon, name of author unpublished.



in the facade by insisting that the brick “should not be laid precisely to plane”; Weston explains that “Aalto instructed the masons to lay them [bricks] slightly out of line to avoid any mechanical effect”, adding that “when the sun rakes obliquely across the wall surfaces they appear to ripple and come alive.”<sup>12</sup>

Given that Aalto did not repeat this instruction in later works, judging that this technique was successful in creating a lively, natural-looking surface is debatable. Yet, a more interesting subject is brought up by a note Aalto wrote right before completion of the building, praising the bricklayers for having done an exceptional work:

The masonry at Säynätsalo Town Hall, which I consider to be, architecturally speaking, one of the most important pieces of masonry, has been carried out by Toivo Nykänen, Paavo Asplund, Yrjö Marjamäki, Aimo Renlund, Väinö Puolanen and Sakari Sundvall. To me, as an architect, it is of utmost importance to develop the culture of masonry in our country. It is for this reason that the masonry at Säynätsalo is fair-faced brick in the facades and almost everywhere in the interior. I have to say that I am extremely pleased with the results of our cooperation and that an exemplary case of Finnish brick culture has been achieved”. *Alvar Aalto. Helsinki, April 3rd, 1951.*<sup>13</sup>

If Aalto was as impressed by the results as this note suggests, it is surprising that he did not apply the same method of misaligning the brick in order to animate the surfaces in any later building. He might have felt it should or could not be repeated without losing the authenticity of the solution, or he may have found simply too difficult to develop that “culture of masonry in our country”, or he simply lost interest in bare brick, as his latter buildings seem to reveal.

In addition to the unorthodox use of brick at Säynätsalo and the playful variations in the Experimental House close by at Muuratsalo, Aalto did put forth one specific innovation in brick construction, the slightly trapezoidal brick for the House of Culture in Helsinki. The specially designed brick would allow for curved surfaces with a small radius; nevertheless, this first experiment also remained the last. It might have also resulted difficult to repeat, unsatisfactory, or even unnecessary; after all, very similar curves could be obtained with regular brick. Although in retrospect it may be argued that Aalto’s brick buildings are among his greatest masterpieces, the Brick Period was rather brief, lasting only about a decade. For as by the time the Otaniemi University and Jyväskylä University were finally completed, Aalto had stopped designing brick buildings several years ago.<sup>14</sup> In turn, in his Helsinki studio, started in 1954, he had returned to whitewashed brick, as in his first buildings of the 1920s.

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<sup>12</sup> WESTON. *Alvar Aalto. Op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> *The Brick* (ed.), Hanni Sipponen. Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki, 2001. Instead of a letter “sent” to the brick layers, by the way it is written it seems it was a note or a letter to someone else, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Mount Angel Library was built much later, also in brick, but not in Finland. All of Aalto’s buildings in Finland and Europe designed after the 1950s period were not in red brick.



## Precedents

Besides the above mentioned Greek and Italian precedents, historians usually point to Willem Dudok's buildings in Hilversum as possible precursors for the Säynätsalo Town Hall, which indeed bears a certain resemblance to Dudok's 1920 Rembrandt School and the 1921 Dr. Bavinck School.<sup>15</sup> In addition to Nordic Classicists, such as Sigurd Lewerentz or even Eliel Saarinen (whose work in Cranbrook Aalto had seen some years before designing the Baker House), Aalto must have been aware of the brick architecture in Northern Europe in the twenties.

Not only were the Dutch architects of the Amsterdam School performing incredible feats with bricks, but also the German expressionists such as Fritz Höger and Bernard Hoetger. Fritz Höger's Chilehaus in Hamburg and his Anzeiger building in Hannover are the most famous examples of buildings which take the materiality of the brick to extremes, using unconventional brick laying to create three-dimensional ornaments. Bernhard Hoetger's Haus Atlantis in Bremen is a similar attempt to create extremely decorative surfaces by means of bricks of many colors laid in all kinds of patterns. Interestingly, one of Hoetger's buildings in Worpswede, the Weaving shop (1930), shares with the Säynätsalo Town Hall not only the material but some aspects like massing and cornice details. Aalto's 1953 Experimental House in Muuratsalo seems to continue these experiments, although with a more collage-like compositions.

Expressionist brick architecture was suspect in the eyes of orthodox modernists in the 1920s partly because its ornamental exuberance and partly because of its political connotations. Höger and Hoetger were both members of the Nazi party but Hoetger was a particular enthusiastic supporter of lunatic *völkisch* speculations, which he painstakingly illustrated on the facade of the Atlantis building in Bremen.

Aalto's brick architecture is of a different cast altogether, surely more pragmatic, realistic and straightforward, although not completely free of ornament. Looking at the walls of the Säynätsalo Town Hall, we notice not only the vibrant visual effect of irregular brickwork but the fact that three of the facades have thin vertical bands that seem to serve no practical purpose. Many critics describe these lines as "crenellations", and they are said to refer to medieval buildings, including the Civic Palace of Siena. If these lines really allude to the crenellations of the Sienese building, then they really are ornament in a double sense, in that the crenellations in the Civic Palace have also never served any defensive function, as in medieval castles, but only imitated real ones. Aalto would be making a reference of a reference; an ornament in the second power.

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<sup>15</sup> Dudok's best known design, the Hilversum Town Hall and the Vondel School were under construction during the spring of 1928 when Aalto visited Hilversum on his way to Paris. At this time, Aalto also saw Johannes Duiker's Zonnestraal Tuberculosis Sanatorium which was a major inspiration for Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium. Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 12th, 2006.



Given that Aalto's Brick Period only begins after the Second World War, one should not exaggerate the influence of Dutch, German or Italian brick architecture. It is more significant that the Brick Period begins on American soil. It seems likely that Aalto's visit to Boston made him reconsider the value of brick. For instance, one of the striking aspects of the Town Hall is the use of brick on the walls and on the floors in the interior, including the steps leading to the council chamber; in Finland, brick was not used as a paving material, whether indoors or outdoors; in Boston, instead, brick pavements were the rule.<sup>16</sup>

It is instructive to compare the irregular brickwork at Säynätsalo with Aalto's first work of his Brick Period, the Baker House in Cambridge. Most of Baker's facades are of multicolor Flemish bond with shattered bricks, fused double bricks and twisted black clinkers. The most wildly twisted, sculptural bricks are reserved for the facades; there are no 'banana shaped' bricks in the few spaces where the same brick is used inside, such as the fireplace and the communal meeting areas near the entrance. Contradicting Aalto's intentions to use brick for the rooms and corridors, and copper or ceramic tiles cladding for the stair wall, in both cases less expensive materials were finally chosen. Surely against Aalto, corridors and student rooms were finished in terracotta, just as the exterior stair wall was plastered and painted.

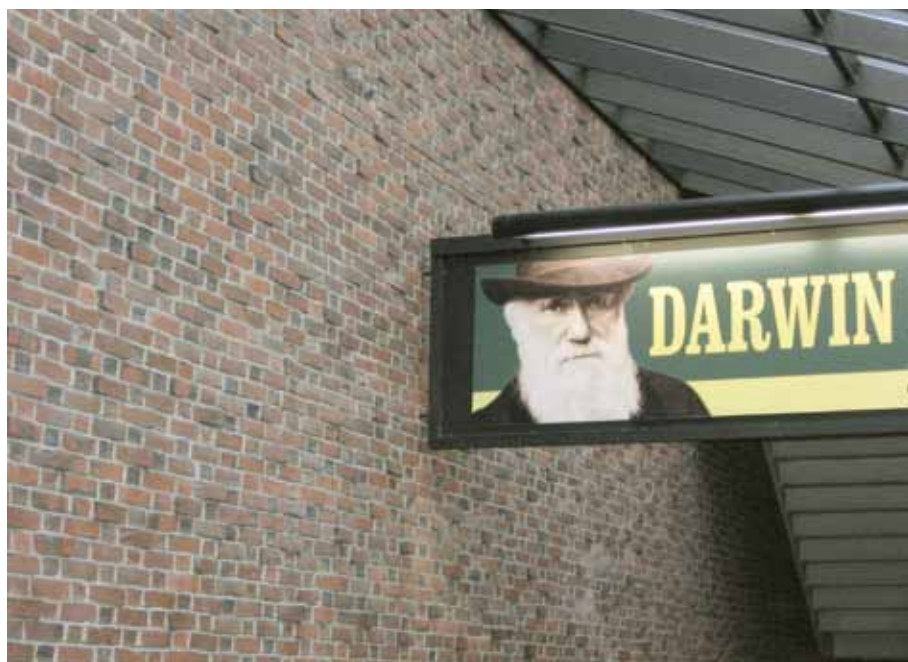
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<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 12th, 2006.



▲ HEMENWAY GYMNASIUM, Harvard University, 1938. JLR  
▼ NEW ENGLAND-HEMENWAY. Waterstruck brick. JLR





▲ SCIENCE MUSEUM. Traditional brick. Boston. JLR

Schildt and Weston report that Aalto had gone out of his way to find a factory on the “brink of bankruptcy” and had insisted the bricks were used without sorting.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the relevance of the factory anecdote, it is important to notice that stories of this sort contribute to disguise the fact that Baker’s shattered brick technique constitutes part of a New England tradition where this material is called *Waterstruck New England brick*.<sup>18</sup> Aalto was not the inventor of the technique, just as he was not alone in showing interest in rough and seemingly unfinished products. The Baker House can be compared with the Harvard Hemenway Gymnasium built by Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch and Abbott in 1938; these architects also built the Harvard Lamont Library in 1947, where Aalto did the interior of the Poetry Room. As the type of brick and the laying technique are the same in Hemenway and Baker, it is reasonable to assume that Aalto asked his colleagues about the brick, and maybe, about the ability of the bricklayers. If not, however, all Aalto had to do was to wander around the campus for a while to run into the Hemenway gym in the North Yard, right

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<sup>17</sup> Aalto noted that the colors ranged “black to canary yellow, though the predominant shade is bright red.”

<sup>18</sup> Guided visit of Baker House with David Fixler on December 1st, 2006. Also see: DAVID N. FIXLER. “The Renovation of Baker House at MIT. Modernism, Materiality, and the Factor of Intent in Preservation”. In *APT Bulletin*, Vol.32, No. 2/3 (2001), pp. 3-11.

behind Richardson's emblematic and also highly textured Austin Hall.<sup>19</sup> Given that Baker and Hemenway bricks and techniques are roughly the same, and that Säynätsalo was the next design after MIT, it is reasonable to claim as legitimate the New England precedent, alongside or even above the classical precedents. The claim, however, would be insufficient to explain Aalto's change of mood at this moment of his career, especially in Finland.

In *The Use and Abuse of Paper*, Kari Jormakka explains Aalto's interest in bricks of inferior quality by referring to Aalto's teacher Usko Nyström, as well as to John Ruskin, both of whom felt that imperfection was a sign of life, as opposed to the spiritless perfection of the machine. It should be added that the topic of *modern* and *natural* building materials had already been explored since the 1930s. Even a former purist such as Le Corbusier had already turned towards "natural materials" and their exaggerated imperfection, with the design of a weekend house near Toulon for Hélène de Mandrot, the Maison Errazuris in Chile and the Maison Weekend in St. Cloud, Paris. In Finland, in 1935, Aalto's compatriot and friend Pauli E. Blomstedt in his Villa Jääskeläinen in Kirjavalta had gone even further than Le Corbusier, harking back to the national Romanticism of the previous generation with a 'functionalist' massing built of rustic logs and natural stone masonry.<sup>20</sup>

To further investigate and reconstruct a discursive context for Aalto's interest in irregular brickwork in Finland, Jormakka suggests two sources of inspiration. First, beginning before the Second World War when the style known as the Romanticism of the 1940s was already established:

It is characterized by a softening of the original "functionalist language"; the introduction of a few organic curves and irregular angles; the use of natural materials, including multicolor brick; as well as attempts at a new ornamentation – which is the reason why this period was often attacked by critics and ignored by historians. However, if we compare for example the Luukkaa day care center in Lappeenranta, Finland, built in 1938 by Maritta and Ragnar Ypyä, we see many aspects that anticipate Aalto's explorations in Cambridge, most notably the application of bricks of a very broad color range.

A second source of inspiration, according to Jormakka, might have been contemporary industrial design. He singles out a few designers working for the Finnish ceramic company Arabia:

The ceramic artist Toini Muona set the precedent for exhibiting technically inferior products. Since the thirties, her work relied on an accidental creative processes based on an impulsive and

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<sup>19</sup> BAINBRIDGE BUNTING. *Harvard. An Architectural History*. Completed and Edited by Margaret Henderson Floyd. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1985. Coolidge, Shepley, Bulfinch and Abbott also designed the Littauer Center (1937), Gordon McKay Laboratory (1953), Aiken Computation Center (1946; expanded 1964), Nuclear Laboratory (1949), and Allston Burr Hall (1951). The Allston Burr Hall features Aalto-like "fan-shaped forms" in the lecture halls.

<sup>20</sup> Aalto had also become a close friend of Swiss artist Hans Arp since Giedion introduced them in 1929.

intuitive empathy with nature...<sup>21</sup> In the forties, Muona's and other designer's experiments with colors and glazing further intensified. Particularly the chance creation of a certain intensive hue of red, *sang du bœuf*, fascinated both the artists and the press. Contemporary critics mystified the baking process and venerated the accidental effects of fire on both colors and forms. Friedl Holzer-Kjellberg, another Finnish ceramic artist, who became famous for developing a method of producing rice porcelain in the forties, held private show in 1953 in which she exhibited "clustered vases," accidentally stuck together, and other porcelain objects that had "taken a new shape" (or, to be blunt, collapsed) during the firing process.<sup>22</sup>

Jormakka concludes that even if Aalto was aware of these mystifying tendencies in pottery, we still need to find why he would have found it relevant to modern architecture. He suggests the post-purist experiments of Le Corbusier's during the war as a possible answer, mainly the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles where Le Corbusier introduced *béton brut*. In his opening address Le Corbusier emphasized that the marks and hazards of the form work and the defects of bad craftsmanship were not smoothed away: "they shout at one from all parts of the structure". Although the use of the natural imprints of wooden boards to vitalize a concrete surface was far from new, Le Corbusier introduced a twist in the discussion as he now claimed ferroconcrete had the properties of a "natural material": "It seems to be really possible to consider concrete as a reconstructed stone worthy of being exposed in its natural state."<sup>23</sup> Thus, by the power of discourse, a former industrial material *par excellence* was elevated by Le Corbusier to the same rank as stone, wood or terra cotta.

Similarly, a discursive operation is also needed for a rough brick wall to be more natural than a smooth brick wall, especially if the material is industrially produced. Materials like brick or wood are indeed modified through industrial processes to the point where their naturalness or artificiality becomes interchangeable upon the frames of reference. Hence, following Jormakka's contextualization, we could assume that Aalto was prepared to understand, and willing also to respond to the cultural challenge launched by Le Corbusier. As MIT and Säynätsalo buildings are roughly contemporaneous with Marseilles, Aalto's first response would have been the Baker House, continuing New England building traditions; his second response would have been the Town Hall, reviving Finnish traditions in pottery. This assumption would also have to accept that Le Corbusier was at the moment not only the leading figure in steering the architectural culture in Europe, but most importantly, the responsible for having declared the war on ornament, barely two decades before. This takes us to a situation where Le Corbusier, one of the harshest critics of ornament, allegedly following Adolf Loos, now seemed to be harking back to ornament himself. Therefore, let's take a detour to better understand the twisting infringed to Loos's argument by Le Corbusier.

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<sup>21</sup> GUNVOR BJÖRKMAN. "Friskt och finskt". In *Boniers* 7-8/1941, 15. Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 12th, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 12th, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Le Corbusier, as quoted by Giedion, in *Space, Time, and Architecture*, p. 546.

## Crime

In 1924, in response to a survey concerning aesthetic education, Loos complained to have been misinterpreted on his attack on ornamentation of 1908. He had predicted in *Ornament and Crime* that the use of ornamentation on objects of practical use would “disappear.” Yet in 1924 Loos made clear he advocated ornamented public architecture and favored the teaching of ornamentation:

Our education is based on classical culture... An architect is a bricklayer who has learned Latin... The starting point of our drawing instruction should be classical ornamentation... We should cultivate not only classical ornament, but also the orders of columns and moldings... Classical ornament plays the same role in drawing instruction as grammar does in teaching of Latin. There would be no point in trying to teach Latin by the Berlitz method... Classical ornament brings order into shaping of our objects of everyday use... And brings order into our lives.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of changing his mind, Loos took advantage of the situation to clarify what he considered a mistake:

By that I did not mean what some purists have carried *at absurdum*, namely that ornament should be systematically and consistently eliminated. What I did mean was that where it had disappeared as a necessary consequence of human development, it could not be restored; just as people will never return to tattoo their faces.<sup>25</sup>

Although Loos only mentioned “some purists”, it seems evident he meant that Le Corbusier and Ozenfant misinterpreted his idea. It is known that Le Corbusier had been in contact with Loos’s essays, at least from 1912, when a selection was printed in the magazine *Der Sturm*.<sup>26</sup> In 1920, Le Corbusier himself had reprinted “Ornament and Crime” in the first issue *L’Esprit Nouveau*. As recalled by James Dunnett, some passages in *Decorative Art* are directly reminiscent of Loos, especially the “absolute rejection of ornament must owe much to the influence of this sensational article”.<sup>27</sup> Yet, this “absolute rejection” was in the service of promoting purism; quite a different intention from that of Loos.

Not exempt of ambiguity, Le Corbusier is at least clear in recognizing Loos’s argument and terminology:

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<sup>24</sup> From Paris, in August of 1924 Survey by Prof. F.V. Morky for the Czeck review for drawing and aesthetic education. “Ornament and Education”. Essay 33, In *Ornament and Crime. Selected Essays*. Ariadne Press, Riverside, California, 1998, pp.184-189.

<sup>25</sup> ADOLF LOOS. “Ornament and Crime” (1929) Essay 29. In *Ornament and Crime. Selected Essays. Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “Ornament and Crime” was published in French in 1913 in *Cahiers d’Aujourd’hui*. Hitchcock. *Modern Architecture*, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> JAMES DUNNET. “Introduction”. Le Corbusier. *The Decorative Arts of Today*, (1925) The Architectural Press, London, 1987 Translated by James I. Dunnet.

Ornament is an excellent thing to keep an element of the savage alive in us—a small one... But in the twentieth century our powers of judgment have developed greatly and we have raised our level of consciousness. Our spiritual needs are different and higher worlds than those of decoration offer us commensurate experience. It seems justified to affirm: the more cultivated a people becomes, the more decoration disappears. (Surely it was Loos who put it so neatly.)<sup>28</sup>

Loos's early writings indicate he was against the Wiener Werkstätte and other groups that tried to create a new, "artistic" ornament for objects of everyday use; yet, except for the exterior or "public" side of "private" buildings, he was not against crafts-ornament in architecture. To better understand his conception it is essential to emphasize the difference he established between *craft-ornament* and *art-ornament*. Craft-ornament was done out of experience by artisan workers like carpenters or masons. Art-ornament was artificially created by artists like Josef Hoffmann or Henri Van de Velde. In 1908 a similar criticism was repeatedly directed to the German Werkbund:

My question is, do we need applied arts? And my answer is no... The activities of the Werkbund are completely ineffective... All crafts that have so far managed to keep the superfluous character out of their workshops are working at the height of their powers. They are the only crafts whose products represent the style of our age. They are so much in the style of our age... that we do not see them as being in a "style... no artist has tried to barge in and take them under his—unqualified—tutelage."<sup>29</sup>

For Loos, the crime took place in the social realm when "added labor or waste of human effort" was unnecessarily applied to objects of everyday life. Yet, he did mention architecture: "Do not weep. Do you not see the greatness of our age resides in our very inability to create new ornament? We have gone beyond ornament; we have achieved plain, undecorated simplicity. Soon the streets of the cities will shine with white walls."<sup>30</sup>

Loos had only claimed that ornament would disappear from objects of every day use, but in order to promote purism, Le Corbusier extended the argument to buildings. However, we should bear in mind Le Corbusier also lamented that "for thirty years no one has been able to find an accurate term", and that the German word *Kunstgewerbe* (industrial art) "is even more equivocal than *applied art*."<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Ernst May, the organizer of the CIAM Congress of 1929, might have also used the crime argument for his own promotion of rationalization within the context of socializing modernism. On the first day of the congress, presumably upon May's suggestion,

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<sup>28</sup> LE CORBUSIER. *Decorative Arts of Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> LOOS. "Surplus to Requirements" (1908). Essay 25. In *Ornament and Crime. Selected Essays*. *Op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> LOOS. "Ornament and Crime". *Op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>31</sup> LE CORBUSIER. *Decorative Arts of Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.



the newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* published Loos's article in 1929 with a dedication: "to the Second International Congress for New Building, meeting today in Frankfurt."<sup>32</sup>

Loos should not be read as progressive avant-gardism; instead, we can understand his contradictions through his own pledge: "The ideal I preach is the aristocrat. I accept decoration in my own person, if it brings pleasure to my fellow men. If it brings pleasure to them it brings pleasure to me too."<sup>33</sup>

If we play the sentence again: *Soon the streets of the cities will shine with white walls*, we can understand why architects like Le Corbusier or May might have found it so close to their purposes: Le Corbusier might have rejected ornament on aesthetic and moral grounds, while May might have attacked it as incompatible with rationalization; in general, for the modernist discourse, the hyperbolic use of the word *crime* might have transformed a cultural misdemeanor in product design into an architectural aberration.

Despite its criminalization, ornament was never really banished from modern architecture. For instance, it is arguable that both Le Corbusier's *béton brut* and Aalto's irregular brickwork are attempts to animate the surfaces of a building in a way that comes close to traditional ornamentation —and yet, since both result not from a deliberate design of a new ornament but rather from a particular way of working the material, they became acceptable for modernist ideology. We can now go back to our discussion around Aalto's ornamental position.

## Ornament

We need to have a working definition to situate MIT, Marseilles, and Säynätsalo as ornamental propositions. A short revision of two key moments in the ornamentation debate has allowed us to differentiate between applied-art, industrial-art, craft-ornamentation, art-ornamentation and decoration, providing enough nuances for a basic definition. Ornamentation, therefore, would be differentiable in at least three classes: 1. Applied or decorative ornament, consisting of new elements superimposed on or glued to the form; as in any architecture with additional elements which are basically attached to different parts of the construction like ceilings, walls, windows or roofs. 2. Integral or organic ornament, consisting of variations obtained from the assemblage of one or more construction materials, built as to avoid the appearance of superimposition of forms; as in the architecture of Arts and Crafts related modernisms. 3. Integral or organic ornament, consisting of variations obtained from in the construction processes, built as to emerge from the form; as in Marseilles' *béton*

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<sup>32</sup> "Ornament and Crime". *Op. cit.*, p. 176. This essay was written in 1908. We dedicate it to the Second International Congress for New Building, meeting today in Frankfurt (1929 *Frankfurter Zeitung*).

<sup>33</sup> LOOS. "Ornament and Crime". *Ibid.*, p. 174.

*brut*. This definition enables to differentiate between the *organic* decorative character of the use of brick at Baker House and the Town Hall: Ornament in Baker would be integral to the variation in quality of the material, whereas in Säynätsalo —and Marseilles, integral to variations in the construction process.

Having stated this we can explore Aalto's own negation of decoration by examining his own words, although quoted by Frampton in support of what the critic randomly terms an architecture of "resistance":

The structures which were means to create a new architecture have been wrested from us and turned into commercialized decorative ends in themselves with no inner value. There was a time when a misconstrued, lifeless traditionalism was the chief enemy of good architecture. Today its worst enemy is the superficial decorative misuse of means acquired during the breakthrough... The contrast between deep social responsibility and decorative "surface effects" is perhaps the oldest and certainly the most topical issue in the debate on architecture. Please do not think that I want to disparage beauty in rejecting decorativeness. 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 least the social.<sup>34</sup>

Aalto is lead by Frampton to flatten ornament and decoration into an equivalence, both negative, where beauty might be associated with charm, harmony and even social purpose but not with decorativeness. Criticism usually assigns this negative stance to Loos; although, as we argued before, it actually belongs to Le Corbusier.

Having confronted criticism and Aalto himself on the grounds of ornamentation in favor of Säynätsalo as a modern statement on ornamental brick, let's now take a final stance against *flexible standardization*; a topic especially keen to Weston for whom Aalto would have taken part in the standardization debate through the Town Hall.

## Standardization

As Aalto strongly opposed Le Corbusier's ideas on standardization, Marseilles, and The Modulor could frame this last debate. However, we could also anchor it in the more distant polemic that took place in Cologne, during the Werkbund reunion of 1914.

In Cologne, the original Werkbund call to unite art and industry turned into the well known and publicized battle on standardization versus art, the two poles personified by Hermann Muthesius and Henri Van de Velde. The confrontation can also be seen as a dialogue of the deaf: Muthesius was not against art but in favor of industry and Van de Velde was not against industry but in favor of art. Muthesius wanted artists working for industry to produce better German products to compete with England and France in taking over the world market; Van de Velde wanted industrial capitalists to hire artists to infuse life with

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<sup>34</sup> KENNETH FRAMPTON. *Between Humanism and Materialism*. The Museum of Modern Art, 1998. "The Legacy of Alvar Aalto: Evolution and Influence", p. 119.

artistic values. Muthesius was in favor of artistic industrial products, much in the vein of industrial design; Van de Velde was openly against standardization because he considered it was unfertile ground for liberty of expression or free decoration.

Van de Velde's main argument resumed the old Arts and Crafts claim that modernism and decoration were not opposed, as long as decoration was not anachronistic: "For twenty years many of us have been seeking forms and decorations entirely in keeping with our epoch". In the end, decoration was supposedly banished and standardization supposedly adopted by modernist ideology, although both topics kept their own uncertain pace.

Aalto would indeed join the standardization debate rather soon in his career, yet for only a brief period. In 1927 he used standard precast, light-weight concrete for the Tapani apartments in Turku, Finland. In 1929, at the CIAM meeting in Frankfurt he exhibited the "ingenious solutions he devised for light fittings, handrails, and door handles" for Paimio Sanatorium and the Turun Sanomat newspaper buildings; he also exhibited "prototypical casement and sliding double-glazed windows, in both timber and steel".<sup>35</sup> By 1930 "he tended to value standardization only at a relative small and incremental scale. As far as the larger whole was concerned, particularly in respect to housing, he moved away from the *Zeilenbau* or row housing pattern...to adopt a more organic dwelling form...by 1935 he had begun to question the techno-scientific and productive criteria that were still being insisted upon by materialist architects and intellectuals."<sup>36</sup> By this time he does not speak about standardization in architectural design but limits it to standard articles –objects of every day use for Loos– and still, with a disavowal: "a standard article should not be a definite product". As late as 1943, he had been invited by Ernest Neufert to "inspect the progress of standardization" throughout Germany, returning an invitation Neufert had received the year before to lecture in Finland.<sup>37</sup> However, almost a decade later, the only aspect Säynät-salo seems to prove was Aalto's rejection of standards, at least in this building. Maybe in some other building but not in this one; even if Edward R. Ford is right in claiming that the church in Riola, Italy, which was built after Aalto's death, is where "posthumously and perhaps unintentionally, Aalto realized his dream of elastic standardization".<sup>38</sup> Paradoxically,

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<sup>35</sup> KENNETH FRAMPTON. *Aalto Centenary*. Frampton also quotes Schildt to explain how "technologically progressive" Aalto was in 1929 on matters of standardization: "The structural principle of transverse bearing walls between non-load bearing facades was borrowed from Mies van der Rohe's house at Stuttgart's Weissenhof exhibition in 1927, and provides flexible variation of secondary wall and windows, allowing for varied apartment size, from studio flats to three-room apartments with kitchen and servant's room.", p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> FRAMPTON. *Aalto Centenary*, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> JORMAKKA. *The Use and Abuse of Paper*, p. 24. "Aalto himself appreciated the standardization program initiated by Ernst Neufert enough to engage him to lecture to the association of Finnish Architects in 1942".

<sup>38</sup> FORD, EDWARD R. *The Details of Modern Architecture*. Volume 2. MIT Press. Cambridge, 1996, p-149

cally, parallel to the *strategic* rhetoric of the standard, runs the claim that one of the many qualities of the building is its singularity.

Aalto complemented this idea by claiming that even if standardized, the article “should on the contrary be made so that the form is completed by man himself according to all the individual laws than involve him. Only in the case of objects that have a neutral quality can standardization coercion of the individual be softened and its positive side culturally exploited”.<sup>39</sup> Like Van de Velde, Aalto felt that standardization was too limiting. In order to be *flexible* it should be kept to a minimum, and it should be limited to “articles” of every day use. As for architectural design, it seemed to be unnecessary for it contradicted the harmony of organic logic.

Schildt tells us that Aalto often remarked, in his old age, that “you can’t save the world, but you can set an example”. This rather vague comment has much importance for Weston as he claims that Aalto twice set an example to the world in Säynätsalo. First by the making of *place* which we have already discussed; the second was the use of brick, which represented,<sup>40</sup> according to Weston, Aalto’s concept of “flexible standardization.”

For Aalto brick represented precisely the kind of “cellular” standardization in which he believed, and in the brickwork...he made strenuous efforts to avoid a mechanical effect...For Baker House...he insisted that the bricks should be used without sorting...For Säynätsalo, Aalto could not find such highly individualized bricks and so to enliven the walls he asked the bricklayers to lay them slightly out of line.<sup>41</sup> Aalto’s fastidious attention to brick...was driven by more than a desire to achieve a visually beautiful result...After his largely unsuccessful efforts to promote...the kind of flexible standardization he believed was vital to overcome the deadening effects of industrialized technology...he came to accept that the best he could do as an architect was to offer the world concrete demonstrations of his beliefs.<sup>42</sup>

In a different text, Weston clarifies that such exemplarity was only a verbal concept:

Aalto returned repeatedly to the idea of nature as the model for ‘flexible standardization,’ and the related concept of “elasticity” yielded fruit in his large-scale planning studies...however, ‘flexible standardization’ remained primarily a verbal concept with which to beat the system builders rather than a viable design strategy.

Weston’s acceptance of this strategic position to “beat the builders”, if not cynical, is at least odd, for it would insist on some *flexible standard* topic, where there is none. As we have suggested at the beginning, this building in the midst of a former forest, with its evocative and hill-crowning appearance would indeed be a first class example of a highly constructed new landscape. It would be fare to recognize an act of blindness and misguidance to use it

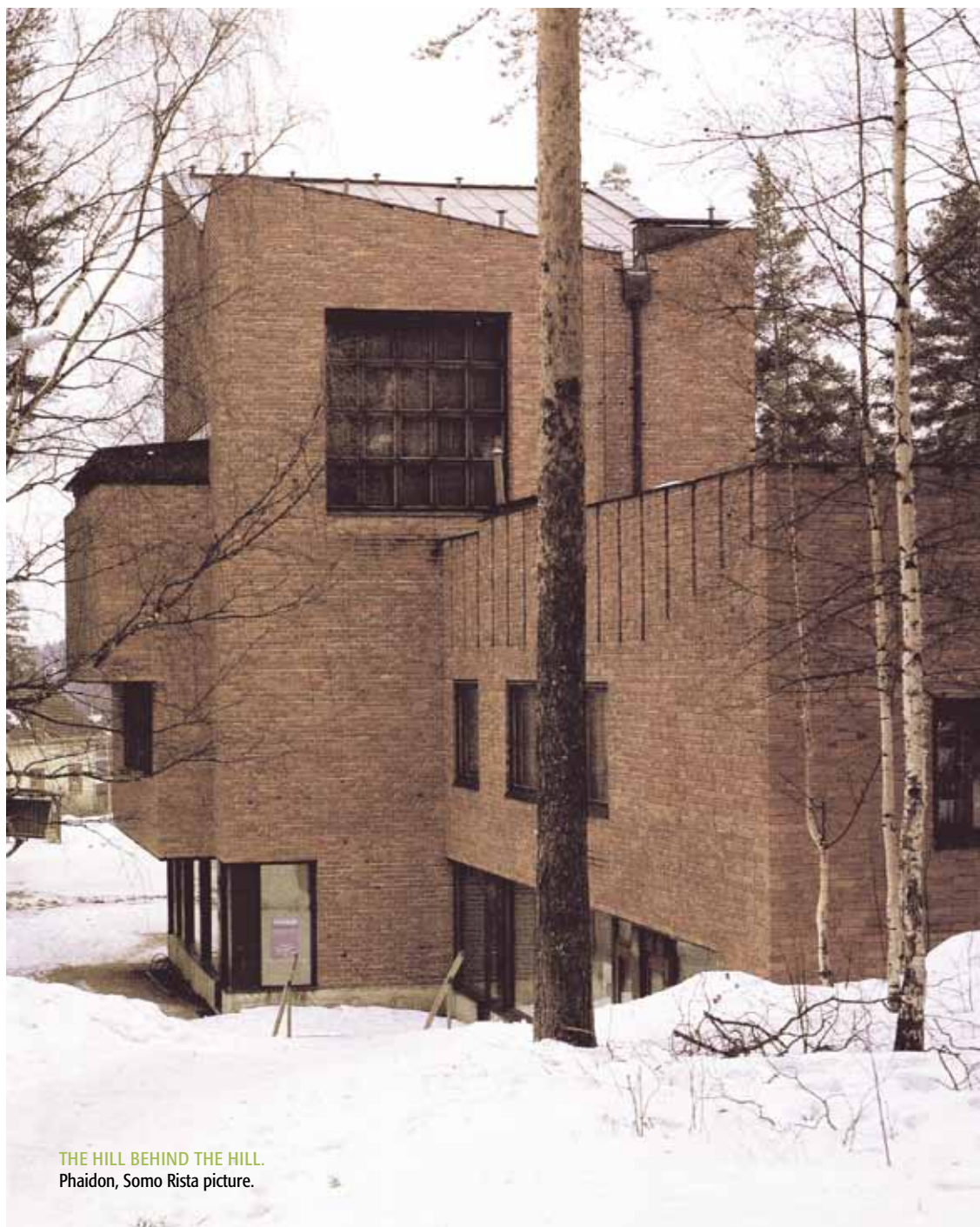
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<sup>39</sup> FRAMPTON *Aalto Centenary*, p. 124. Quoting Aalto from a lecture in Stockholm.

<sup>40</sup> WESTON. *Alvar Aalto. Op. cit.*, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> In the note quoted above the brick layers are being mentioned, not addressed.

<sup>42</sup> WESTON. “Nature”. In *Alvar Aalto. Op. cit.*, p. 104.



THE HILL BEHIND THE HILL.  
Phaidon, Somo Rista picture.



as an “example to the world” in preserving the existing topography; it should be equally deceiving to bring it as an example of any kind of standard. Just as Le Corbusier’s claimed a loud shouting from the “naturalized” concrete of Marseilles, one can only hear non-standard screams from the “naturalized” hill of Säynätsalo.

## Fiction

The writer Gabriel García Márquez once confessed “he thought he had a problem” when he discovered that a massacre he described in one of his novels had not been as spectacular in reality as the narrative required. For the purpose of the novel, he argued, a train full of corpses was needed as the outcome of really wonderful and bloody slaughtering; therefore he simply made up the massacre, complete with the train. The historian Marco Palacios tells this story because he wants to criticize other writers who use Márquez’ novel as a source of facts. If there is any historical problem, Palacios argues, it “is not in the novel but in the historians who quote it as if it was a primary source”.<sup>43</sup>

One problem in much of Aalto criticism is the tendency to accept the aphoristic statements by the architect as apodictic revelations and primary sources. Such an attitude can lead to explanations

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<sup>43</sup> FRANK SAFFORD, MARCO PALACIOS. *Colombia. País fragmentado, sociedad dividida. (Fragmented Land, Divided Society)*. Norma, Bogotá, 2002, p. 522. Marco Palacios, referring to an interview with Gabriel García Márquez on British TV, 1991: “eso fue un problema para mí... cuando descubrí que no se trató de una matanza espectacular...[pero] en un libro en el que las cosas se magnifican, tal como en *Cien años de soledad*, necesitaba llenar todo un tren con cadáveres.” La conversación deja en claro que el problema no es del novelista, sino de los historiadores que citan la obra como si se tratara de una fuente primaria.

that are all but empty. For example, Schildt and Weston use Aalto's promise to "set the world an example" as a device to rationalize the work: although the architect's attempts at flexible standardization manifestly failed, Weston nonetheless claims that these failures are successful as examples for the world to follow. Such legitimative criticism is based on a confusion of the roles of the architect and the critic.

We may assume that Aalto enjoyed misleading gullible critics, such as Schildt, but also that such misinformation is often for the sake of self-promotion.<sup>44</sup> There might not be any thing wrong with Auschwitz-like architectural trains but only from the architect's point of view. Historians and critics, however, may need other justification for perpetuating or creating myths, especially when they make us blind through irrelevancies, to many possible relevant qualities in the architecture discussed.

Of course, depending on their frames of reference, critics can legitimately give different meanings to the same aspects of a building. A structure that serves the needs of the people can be described as "functional" but it can also be interpreted as "democratic"; an irregular brick-laying technique could be understood as "human" or it could be seen as "decorative". But assigning meaning to a building or to its aspects can not be infinitely flexible: "exploiting a site" by *restructuring its topography* (Weston) really is opposed to *laying out the building into the site* (Frampton). These two descriptions of Säynätsalo are not just two different ways of describing or valuing the same aspect of the building: in truth, these interpretations contradict each other and cannot be valid at the same time. Nevertheless, both ways of seeing seem equally popular among book publishers and architectural reading audiences. Perhaps, if we accept Thomas De Quincey's characterization of rhetoric as dealing with truths such as "the affirmative and the negative are both true",<sup>45</sup> architectural criticism should strive more for neutral and veridical than rhetorical and fictional.

Another possibility is the existence of a genre of architectural historiography engaged in active myth-building, where the value of individual buildings is irrelevant unless it constructs its own concentration camp trains even if no massacre should be forthcoming. However, even if we simply understand history as the construction of contingent and grounded narratives, the canonical image of Aalto seems unnecessarily constricted. In fact, reading many of these texts one cannot but think these authors are describing another building. For instance, Sigurd Lewerentz St. Peter's Klippan church.

Many of the published texts on Aalto show a complacent tendency to fit him into the straightjacket of coherence and heroism. In doing so, this rhetoric fuels a consumer image of

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<sup>44</sup> To give just three examples of deliberate misleading from Schildt's biography: Aalto imputes to Nietzsche a statement, "only the men of the dark look back"; Aalto quotes Dante as saying that the worst thing in hell is that the stairs have the wrong proportions; Aalto misrepresents the height of the Sala pubblico in Siena. Conversation with Kari Jormakka, Cambridge, June 15th, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> THOMAS DE QUINCEY. *Rhetoric and Style*, pp. 4-5.

an architecture that is human, natural, Finnish, and critical of modernism, failing to address reasonable questions, such as the role that the city of Boston or the work of conservative German architects might have played in Aalto's attempt to develop a regional or national architecture; or issues that might give Aalto a new relevance today, such as the debate on ornament and decoration. Or else, how might Aalto have failed in developing a culture of brick in Finland, unknowingly contributing to develop such a culture in other places. For instance, in Colombia.

*Dedicated to Rogelio Salmons, for his scientific mind*

### Posdata

Como lo aclaro al inicio, el texto escrito en inglés se desarrolló a partir del trabajo final de un curso sobre Aalto. Para la segunda publicación, el texto fue revisado y modificado, procurando mantener el carácter de la argumentación. Ahora considero pertinentes algunas anotaciones complementarias sobre el curso y sobre el vínculo enunciado entre Aalto y Colombia.

Dentro del marco general de la revisión de los estudios críticos sobre Aalto, el trabajo debía partir de conocer un edificio particular y cuestionar las construcciones discursivas que lo presentan. La metodología para abordar el ejercicio tuvo tres pasos: primero, reproducir lo más literalmente posible la argumentación de un especialista en el edificio; segundo, encontrar problemas en su argumentación y contrastarla con otras para determinar un posible canon, y por último, proponer un modo alternativo, y propio, de ver el edificio. En últimas, el trabajo debía ofrecer una lectura propia y novedosa del edificio, haciendo caso omiso de las primeras dos partes. No obstante, al encontrar inapropiadas un gran número de críticas, me pareció pertinente discutir las y centrar sobre este aspecto el tema del artículo.

La hipótesis inicial del curso propuso que el valor cultural de un edificio como obra de arte depende de las narrativas que lo valoran y posicionan como punto relevante dentro de la historia de la arquitectura. Se asumió que una obra arquitectónica no adquiere el valor de obra de arte sino cuando un escritor argumenta que esta posee un singular valor artístico. En arquitectura, es indispensable que quien haga la valoración y genere los argumentos sea un escritor, llámese teórico, historiador o crítico, o un arquitecto convertido en escritor. Se requiere, además, que el escritor consiga un público que lo respalde y continúe o desarrolle la argumentación, un público que idealmente mejore o, en su defecto, reproduzca los criterios de valor asignados por la crítica.

En el caso de Aalto, el primero en elevarlo a exponente de primer orden de la arquitectura moderna fue Sigfried Giedion. Si bien Giedion entra en contacto con Aalto desde 1929, en el segundo CIAM, solo escribe sobre él en la primera edición de *Espacio, tiempo y arquitectura*, en 1941; y solo para mencionarlo ocasionalmente en relación con otros arquitectos. Aunque desde entonces alude a Aalto de manera elogiosa como el mago del norte,



apenas hasta la tercera edición, en 1953, incluye el capítulo dedicado a él con el ambiguo título de “Irracionalidad y estandarización”<sup>46</sup>. Con el tiempo, este capítulo crecería hasta que en la sexta y última edición, en 1967, tiene cerca de cincuenta páginas.

El hecho de que Aalto perteneciera a un país periférico como Finlandia parecía darle un encanto adicional que reforzaba la nueva corriente regionalista promovida por Giedion, para quien el regionalismo, como casi todo lo nuevo, era patrimonio de Le Corbusier. Las virtudes principales de Aalto estaban más por el lado del organicismo y del humanismo, y su mayor originalidad consistía en ser un exponente de la “forma libre” –y orgánica–, haciendo referencia a las formas ondulantes del Pabellón Finlandés de la Exposición de Nueva York en 1939. Giedion, no obstante, siempre en defensa de Le Corbusier, mantiene una reserva que cuestiona el organicismo y las formas libres, argumentando que la arquitectura no puede tener “libertad absoluta”.

Säynätsalo se torna en protagonista de primer orden desde su aparición en la escena internacional en 1952 y varios escritores después de Giedion continuaron valorando el Ayuntamiento o Centro Cívico de Säynätsalo como obra maestra; Frampton y Weston, entre otros, reeditan algunos temas que continúan la línea crítica trazada por Giedion. Frampton reclama para el edificio un singular valor cultural denominándolo, primero, “regionalista” a secas, y posteriormente, “regionalista-crítico”; Weston reclama haber tenido una “experiencia mágica” la primera vez que visitó el edificio, a partir de la cual se propuso develar lo que se ocultaba tras esta magia.

Adoptando como punto de partida los puntos con los cuales estoy en desacuerdo, el artículo sintetiza mis objeciones a estos y otros autores. Dado que sin estas “ficciones” habría tenido poco que decir, la mirada de cada uno ha sido de gran valor dialéctico. Paradójicamente, debo a Frampton un especial agradecimiento por haber propiciado la abstrusa labor de descifrar el papel de Säynätsalo dentro de la teoría del regionalismo crítico, como un edificio que ofrecía una “resistencia cultural”<sup>47</sup>. Fueron las que considero sus vaguedades y la necesidad de refutarlas lo que me condujo a la nota en la cual Aalto reconoce el excelente trabajo de los mamposteros y enfatiza la importancia que en ese momento tuvo para él desarrollar una “cultura de la mampostería”. Cito una vez más parte de esta nota:

The masonry at Säynätsalo Town Hall, which I consider to be, architecturally speaking, one of the most important pieces of masonry [...]. To me, as an architect, it is of utmost importance to

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<sup>46</sup> Desde la primera reunión CIAM en 1928, la preocupación de Giedion como historiador y activista de la nueva arquitectura se orientó hacia el papel de los arquitectos más importantes en la conformación y consolidación del llamado Movimiento Moderno.

<sup>47</sup> La siguiente comparación y la consecuente acusación me parecen necesarias: así como el Town Hall aplanó, y en tal sentido “violó” el terreno, Salmons modifica de tal manera las topografías montañosas que si uno pretende pasar por *resistente*, siguiendo a Frampton, y manteniendo el hiperbólico lenguaje del delito, habría que procesar a Salmons, y a Aalto, por delinquentes. Si se reconoce, en cambio, que ambos alteran la topografía para inventar paisajes, en lugar de

*develop the culture of masonry in our country.* It is for this reason that the masonry at Säynätsalo is fair-faced brick in the facades and almost everywhere in the interior. I have to say that I am extremely pleased with the results of our cooperation and that an *exemplary case of Finnish brick culture* has been achieved.

ALVAR AALTO. HELSINKI, APRIL 3RD, 1951.

Aunque la primera frase que he subrayado, “desarrollar una cultura de la mampostería en nuestro país”, podría prestarse a confusión, es evidente por la segunda frase, “un caso ejemplar de cultura finlandesa del ladrillo”; resulta evidente que aun si el ladrillo no era una tradición finlandesa, hay una voluntad explícita de proponer un proyecto cultural.

A raíz de la expresión de esta voluntad por parte de Aalto, construí una cronología visual de la obra, a partir de la cual es posible concluir que Aalto abandonó el proyecto. En favor de esta proposición está el hecho de que a partir de los años sesenta Aalto no volvió a diseñar en ladrillo a la vista (no obstante, en ladrillo pintado de blanco, sí). Para contradecir la proposición, estarían las universidades de Otaniemi y Jyväskylä y la biblioteca benedictina de Mount Angel en Estados Unidos; pero si bien la construcción de las universidades se prolongó por muchos años, los diseños corresponden a un breve período durante los años cincuenta. Entre tanto, la biblioteca benedictina fue hecha fuera de Finlandia.

Tenía entonces tres posibles temas por desarrollar: la identificación de este proyecto cultural, aparentemente fallido; la verificación de que muchas de las descripciones sobre Säynätsalo se ajustan más a las iglesias de Lewerentz, y los puntos problemáticos encontrados en la crítica. Impulsado por una idea de Roger Connah, opté finalmente por desarrollar el tercer punto, dejando los otros dos para ocasiones más propicias. Para Connah, aunque este tipo de crítica pretende con frecuencia vincularse a la poesía, debería mejor entenderse como una “prosa enloquecida”<sup>48</sup>.

El objetivo entonces se dirigió a cuestionar las opiniones con mayor carencia de fundamento. Adquirieron especial relevancia ideas aparentemente laterales al problema del edificio como obra de arte y gestor cultural, ideas como las de Jormakka sobre la importancia cultural de las ceramistas finlandesas; o el debate sobre la “mala lectura” de Le Corbusier hacia Loos, que tanto ha marcado la interpretación sobre el ornamento. También la evidente necesidad en la que incurren autores como Schildt y Weston al aceptar de manera acrítica que Aalto, en Säynätsalo, pudiera referirse seriamente a un tema como la “estandarización flexible”, para luego banalizarlo como un simple “concepto verbal”.

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acomodarse a los mismos, y que esto es una virtud artística, a quien habría que procesar es a Frampton.

<sup>48</sup> Connah cita un poema de Pope: “And he, who now to sense, now nonsense leaning, Means not, but blunders round about a meaning; And he, whose fustian’s so sublimely bad, It is not poetry, but prose run mad”. ROGER CONNAH. *Aaltomania. Readings against Aalto? Building Information Ltd., Tampere, 2000.*

Me pareció que debía partir del mayor “error crítico”. Este error radica, a mi modo de ver, en que autores como Nerdinger y Frampton condicionan negativamente la recepción del edificio, al exacerbar la conservación de una topografía que ha sido notoriamente modificada, obstruyendo de paso la posibilidad de apreciar el valor artístico de inventar un nuevo paisaje. El resto, está escrito en inglés.

De los dos problemas pendientes retomo uno en este momento: si Aalto quería establecer una cultura del ladrillo en Finlandia era porque no la había, o porque él consideraba que no la había. Entonces, ¿por qué insistir, desde la crítica, en “recuperar” tradiciones donde se estaban tratando de instaurar? Del mismo modo, ¿por qué insistir en que el ladrillo es una tradición ancestral colombiana, en lugar de reconocer que hay una forma moderna de utilizarlo? Evidentemente, el ladrillo es una *tradición constructiva* en muchos lugares del mundo, incluidos Finlandia y Colombia, pero una *tradición cultural*, en el sentido que lo es en países como Holanda e Inglaterra, o en ciudades como Boston o Nueva York en Estados Unidos, es algo diferente.

Una primera genealogía establecería que en Colombia la tradición del ladrillo está representada por arquitecturas claramente “no modernas”, como la catedral de Villanueva y el Palacio de Gobierno en Medellín, o los barrios de La Merced, Teusaquillo y Quinta Camacho en Bogotá. Otra genealogía menos reconocida establecería que Dicken Castro fue el primero en introducir el ladrillo asociado a la arquitectura moderna, tradición que continúan, al menos en Bogotá, Fernando Martínez, Guillermo Bermúdez y Rogelio Salmona. Una tercera tendencia crítica establecería que cada uno de estos arquitectos siguió su propia línea y que eslabonar unos con otros es una operación superflua.

De uno u otro modo, ahora que el paisaje urbano de algunos sectores de ciudades como Bogotá y Medellín está dominado por el ladrillo, recae una vez más sobre este material la sospecha de elemento inadecuado para expresar lo que se ha dado en llamar “lo contemporáneo”, tal como hace cincuenta años se consideró inadecuado para expresar lo que se daba entonces en llamar “lo moderno”. A partir de la afirmación de Aalto, quisiera insistir en que el ladrillo se instituyó como una tradición cultural colombiana a través de Salmona. Asumo que la revisión de esta cultura y sus relaciones específicas con edificios como Baker House y Säynätsalo podría contribuir no solo en el confuso debate entre lo moderno y lo contemporáneo, sino que, además, debería ayudar a desenredar las madejas de lo regional-nacional-internacional y de la historia-teoría-crítica.

Bogotá, octubre 3 de 2007

En defensa de la primacía de Dicken Castro en la utilización moderna del ladrillo, se debería reconocer que durante un tiempo Fernando Martínez llamó a Castro “el Sumerio”, porque había construido unas casas en un material tan antiguo como el ladrillo. Le pedí a Castro una verificación de la historia sobre su apodo y me confirmó que, en efecto, “así sucedió”, aunque no por mucho tiempo, ya que Martínez pronto se unió al grupo del ladrillo

y la postura perdió vigencia<sup>49</sup>. Además, Castro aceptó como probable la hipótesis de que tras la ironía erudita sobre este origen ancestral hubiera un rechazo a la adecuación del ladrillo para representar lo “moderno”. Esto sería consecuente, añadió, con el espíritu corbusieriano que dominaba la Universidad Nacional de Colombia durante los años cincuenta. Ahora se reconoce que lo que se entendía por “corbusianismo” en ese momento eran sus ideas de los años treinta. Tal vez por eso, explica, “se tenía tanta devoción por la pintura blanca”, aunque eso, claro está, “no lo sabíamos”.

Para Castro, que había crecido yendo a misa en la catedral de Villanueva en Medellín y en una casa en Santa Helena, hecha por su mamá en ladrillo a la vista por dentro y por fuera, y que había conocido recientemente el edificio de Aalto en MIT, el ladrillo era, pues, algo “normal”.

Además de aceptar como posible el rechazo al ladrillo justificándolo en un corbusianismo anacrónico, Castro sugirió aclarar tres puntos: primero, que de haber alguna primacía en el uso moderno del ladrillo, esta le correspondería conjuntamente a Hans Drews y Arturo Robledo, con quienes hizo aquella “primera” casa moderna, terminada en 1956<sup>50</sup>; segundo, que si se buscan antecedentes históricos en el uso del ladrillo, deberían incluirse necesariamente los edificios hechos por Nel Rodríguez en el centro de Bogotá, y tercero, que al margen del ladrillo, si se pretende reconocer la importancia de algún otro arquitecto “abandonado” por la crítica, este debería ser Álvaro Ortega. Con respecto a la primacía cultural de Salmons y a la posible realización del proyecto formulado por Aalto, la opinión de Castro fue: “sí, eso parece claro”.

De modo que si bien es posible reclamar un punto cero para el aspecto cultural, no es posible hacerlo para el inicio en el uso del ladrillo. Durante los años cuarenta, cuando Gabriel Serrano aún no tenía título de arquitecto, la firma Cuéllar Serrano Gómez había utilizado ampliamente el ladrillo en edificios como el hospital San Carlos, la clínica David Restrepo, la Litografía Colombiana y el Teatro Palermo, pero ya en la década anterior, y sin reconocimiento hasta el momento por parte de la crítica, una arquitecta de ocasión había construido una finca de recreo, en ladrillo por dentro y por fuera, presumiblemente moderna.

*Bogotá, octubre 17 de 2007*

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<sup>49</sup> Conversación con Dicken Castro y Mauricio Pinilla en el apartamento de Castro en Bogotá, octubre 17 de 2007. Cuenta Castro que al llegar de Estados Unidos a mediados de los años cincuenta y comentarle a Fernando Martínez que Wright estaba haciendo “maravillas” en ladrillo, y que Aalto acababa de terminar un edificio “sorprendente” en MIT, también en ladrillo, la respuesta de Martínez fue que Wright era un arquitecto del siglo XIX y que ese material era de invención sumeria; lo cual lo convertía, aparentemente, en inadecuado para la modernidad arquitectónica. La cronología de las obras de Martínez indica que mientras se refería de tal modo a Castro, su obra conservaba las líneas del concreto a la vista y la pintura blanca.

<sup>50</sup> Salmons utilizó esta casa para “convencer a unos clientes” sobre de la posibilidad de utilizar el ladrillo interiormente. Finalmente los convenció y la casa se construyó, pero acabaron “pañetándola por dentro”.