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Alvar Aalto is by far the most popular and accessible of the first generation of leading Modern architects, and his architecture is arguably unmatched by that of any other major architect of the twentieth century in its integration with place, in both its natural and cultural attributes, and in its integration with the daily life of the whole human being. Fundamentally grounded in its engagement with the everyday experience of dwelling, Aalto’s architecture involves all the senses and is not dominated by the formal demands of the eye, as with many Modern works. In Aalto’s buildings, as he has said, ‘it is not what a building looks like the day it opens but what it is like thirty years later that matters,’ and this valuing of what his buildings were like to be in and to experience sets Aalto apart from the great majority of his peers. Aalto’s basic understanding of the need to dwell in harmony with nature, to create poetic places from the everyday rituals of existence, to transform rooted culture through contemporary construction and to enrich the lives of the many, not just the few, through the liberating attributes of Modern conceptions of space, establish him as one of the truly great twentieth-century architects – one of the very few who offer both timeless principles and increasingly relevant lessons for the architecture of the new millennium [1].

In its life-enhancing intertwining of the cultural and natural, Aalto’s architecture occupies a unique place in relation to the canonical works of the Modern Movement. More than a decade younger than Le Corbusier and the other members of the first generation of Modern architects, and a near contemporary of the second generation Modernists, Louis I. Kahn and Carlo Scarpa, Aalto has nevertheless always been considered the youngest of the first Modernists due to his astonishing early success – his 1928 design for the Paimio Sanatorium brought him world-wide acclaim at the age of thirty.

Aalto could be said to be doubly blessed: first, by being born in Finland, which, just as he came to maturity, finally gained its freedom after almost a millennium of foreign rule, and which, due to its Nordic glacial isolation, maintained an almost archaic relation to nature and the land in everyday life well into the modern period; and second, by being born at a time when he could inherit the cultural traditions of Finnish national romanticism and Nordic classicism just as they were entering their decline, and concomitantly, when the early Modern movement that was emerging to replace them had settled upon a ‘minimum existence’ definition of architecture against which Aalto would so forcefully react with his unique combination of humanism and naturalism.

This study opens with a definition of Aalto’s context and origins in the Nordic ‘nightlands’, whose severe climate and limited sunlight has led, paradoxically, to an unparalleled integration of human culture and natural place. Aalto’s classical training, typical of so many of the first generation of Modernists, would imprint upon him a love of the Mediterranean, and particularly of the urban spaces of Italy, as well as a sensitivity to the modulation of natural light, that became touchstones for all his work. Aalto’s enthusiastic early engagement of Modern architecture as an extension of the severe functionalism long dictated by Finland’s
Aalto’s first important realized design, for the Workers’ Club in Jyväskylä of 1924 [25], is a small building of great dignity, and even one might say gravity, in its overall massing and its large, solid upper two floors. At the same time the building also has a touch of lightness and buoyancy, due to Aalto’s floating the solid upper floors above a ground floor glazed with a continuous grid of square glass panes, interrupted only by cylindrical columns. He also placed the large three-part window at the centre of the entry façade, out of alignment with the columns below, and pushed it hard up against the cornice line at the top of the building. A surprise awaits us upon entry, where, after ascending the Y-shaped staircase on the end wall [26], its landing illuminated by a half-round window, we arrive at the second level in the outermost corners of a double-height room that spans the width of the building, illuminated by five tall windows, then turn to face a freestanding half-cylinder which seems to fill the room, within which is found the main auditorium [27]. The custom-designed lighting fixtures in the auditorium, hanging star-shaped elements of translucent glass, are no doubt a direct outgrowth of the furniture and lighting designs Aalto had first developed with Henry Ericsson, an artist and fellow student, in the industrial design shop they set up in Helsinki in 1920, and would be the first of a long line of Aalto-designed lights.

In the plan for this building [28, 29], Aalto was clearly informed by Asplund’s Lister Courthouse of 1917–23, with its cylindrical courtroom projecting halfway into the entry hall, and this type of contemporary ‘precedent’ would prove to be typical in Aalto’s early work. Yet we should also draw attention to the striking similarities of aspects of Aalto’s design to a much earlier ‘precedent’, that being Leon Battista Alberti’s Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre set within the Cappella Rucellai in San Pancrazio, Florence, 1467; particularly in Aalto’s detailing of the ‘exterior’ of the semi-cylindrical auditorium projection, with its square grid of black-outlined white squares, each with a different circular geometric construction at its centre, and the manner in which the cylindrical volume sits in the small, square, interior piazza-like foyer Aalto has constructed for it.

The Railway Officials’ Apartments in Jyväskylä of 1924 was Aalto’s first large urban housing project, and the plans of the apartments, which have light and air from both sides of the building, indicate his awareness of contemporary efforts to improve the quality of multi-family housing. Aalto’s Seinäjoki Defence Corps Building of 1924, a complex of three structures organized so as to form a rectangular courtyard, again, shows the influence of Asplund’s Lister Courthouse, in both the projecting semi-cylindrical lower floor of masonry main building, and in the semicircular arched entryway of the masonry building that faces it across the court. The wooden stable and garage is composed of a low U-shaped arcaded structure, into which a recess is opened at the centre, framed by two columns, with a larger gabled pavilion rising above – the whole a very correct exercise in Classical planning, similar to many of the Palladian villas Aalto would have studied in school, yet with both flattened arched windows and vertically stretched proportions.

During the summer of 1924, Aalto and Aino Marsio announced to the other employees that they were engaged to be married.
an inveterate storyteller, for whom the humorous impact of the punchline was generally more important than the absolute veracity of the tale, liked to say in later years that he had owed Aino so much in salary that marrying her was the least expensive way to solve the problem. Yet it was a perfect match for Aalto, as Aino complemented him in every possible way, and together they made an exceptional design team. As Schildt has noted, Aino was ‘a strong-minded, independent woman’, and she was also a very talented designer; recent research has shown that from the very start of their shared practice, Aino was a full and equal partner. While her more practical, socially conscious thinking would have an enormous effect upon Alvar, so would her sensible approach to reality. Aino was more grounded than Alvar, and her level-headed support allowed him to be more speculative in his designs, for he relied on Aino to bring the design back to reality. Aino’s grounding of Alvar extended to their home life as well, for Alvar often led a bohemian life of drinking and partying, after which she would make certain he made it home to a proper meal and sleep. Their first child, Johanna Flora Maria Annunziata Aalto, was born on 1 August 1925, her name memorializing the place where they took their honeymoon.

Aalto’s first trip to Italy came in the autumn of 1924 when he and Aino (who had visited Italy three years earlier) went there on a six-week honeymoon. The couple travelled by hydroplane, from Helsinki to Tallinn, Estonia, and on to Vienna, before arriving in Italy. Aalto wrote of his flight over Europe that this was ‘the first Hellenic day of my life’. The couple spent most of their time in the Veneto and Tuscany regions, whose cities would remain Aalto’s urban paradigms. Aalto’s participation in the Finnish architectural profession’s general turn away from recent efforts to make a national style, and toward the wider world outside, was reinforced by this first exposure to the origins of classicism in the Roman ruins, and its reinterpretation in the Renaissance, Baroque and the vernacular buildings throughout Italy. It was in this period that Aalto developed what would be his lifelong fascination with the Mediterranean, and with Italy in particular. It is one of the most curious paradoxes of Aalto’s career as the greatest Finnish architect that throughout his life he would endeavour to emulate Italian architectural and urban models, this despite his own patently inappropriate context and climate of the Nordic arctic.

Aalto’s interest focused primarily on two attributes of Mediterranean and Italian architecture, the first being the Italian piazza as a model for urban spaces. These outdoor ‘rooms’, often ordered by pure geometries, and requiring a surrounding arcade to provide shade from the hot sun, are perfectly suited to their Mediterranean climate – and therefore apparently totally inappropriate as models for Aalto’s night-dominated and light-deprived Nordic context. Yet the contemporary architect Álvaro Siza has noted, ‘Architects do not invent anything; they transform reality’, and Aalto’s transformation of the Mediterranean precedent of the piazza not only into the informal, farmyard-like courtyards that order and provide focus for his urban designs, but also into the interior, roof-lit courts that centre so many of his buildings, must rank as one of his greatest achievements. This, perhaps more than anything else, indicates Aalto’s
While the reserved decorative bands, modest cornice, rusticated base and semi-cylindrical entry niche of his competition design indicated Aalto’s engagement of the Nordic Neoclassical mode, the almost completely smooth surfaces and sharp-edged rectangular form of the building, as realized two years later, shows how rapidly Aalto was appropriating the pure geometries of Functionalism. In the façade as it was built, Aalto reduced the Classical base, middle and top ordering to its absolute minimum [36]. The four upper floors carry a grid of square, steel windows – the same Dutch-manufactured windows Asplund used on his Stockholm Library – which are set deep into the smooth wall surface, rather than placed flush with the outer face, as was typical of Nordic Neoclassicism. These upper floors rest upon a large projecting base course, a cornice-like canopy projecting 2 m (6 ft 6 in) all around the ground floor, which has large glazed openings exactly one and one-half times the width and height of the windows above. The top of the building is marked by a thin dark cornice, the only other decoration on the front façade being a spiralling pattern, derived from the balcony rail decoration of Asplund’s Skandia Cinema, which frames the incised letters that spell out the name of the building. The building’s main entrance is a half-cubic volume carved out of the ground and first floors, into which the projecting cornice turns on either side. On the long façade, Aalto subtly marks the volume of the theatre, and the location of its entrance, by placing flag-poles between the second floor windows and placing a row of shallow, interlocked disks at the top of the building.

The entrance to the theatre leads directly to the ticket booth, on the right, a remarkably abstract design composed of a glazed cylinder resting upon a solid cubic base, which are together lodged in the wall so that exactly half the cylinder stands on either side of it, with a small slot of space left all around. We next enter the lower foyer, where we must move around to the left or right, as directly ahead is blocked by a solid volume containing the stairs, entered from the other end. Turning 180-degrees and moving back towards the street, we ascend to the upper foyer through this freestanding, tubelike staircase space, which is lit by lamps projecting from the top of the wall and shining on the ceiling. Towards the top of these stairs, large circular openings on either side allow views back down into the lower foyer, in a way almost exactly like the openings in the side walls of the entrance staircase at Asplund’s Skandia Cinema. At the upper foyer, we again turn 180-degrees, now facing away from the street (as at the entry), and selecting either the right or left theatre entrance. These take the form of *vomitoria*, a Roman term for the tubelike staircase or passageway that brings spectators up into an auditorium, in this case lined with grey and rose coloured soft felt to dampen the sound. We rise into the pure rectangular volume of the theatre itself, a square in plan, a golden section (1 to 1.6218) in section, facing the stage, the hard reverberant walls painted a deep blue colour, with Poul Henningsen-designed *PH* lamps specially fitted with wall mounts running around the sides and back of the room [37]. Due to this extended and varied entrance sequence,
also was the first indication of his unique way of designing with exquisite feeling for the way the building is set into the landform. Thus, unlike other contemporary designs to which it is often rightly compared, such as Duiker’s Zonnestraal Sanatorium and Gropius’s Bauhaus in Dessau of 1926, the winglike blocks of Aalto’s building are neither configured in a symmetrical overall plan, nor spiralling in a tight rectangular cluster, rather they unfold out into the forest in a remarkably free and irregular fan-shape, starting from the smaller blocks and culminating in the largest and longest wing, housing the patients’ rooms [47–49]. In addition to Duiker’s Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum, which Aalto visited with the architect, Aalto would have been aware of other precedents for this new building type, including early examples such as his fellow Finn Tarjanne’s Takaharju Sanatorium at Punkaharju of 1899–1903 and Josef Hoffmann’s Purkersdorf Sanatorium in Vienna of 1904–8. Of more direct importance for Aalto’s final design for Paimio was his own competition entry for the sanatorium at Kinkomaa of 1927, where the functions are given the same basic overall disposition, except for the more formal nature of the central courtyard, and strikingly similar sun terraces project at the end of the patient room wing; in his renderings of those terraces Aalto showed patients resting on lounge chairs, almost exactly as he would do in the Paimio design.

For Aalto, architecture must be designed from the inhabitant’s point of view – in this case, literally so, as Aalto later claimed to have himself been ill during the design of Paimio, and he incorporated many of his own experiences into its design. In his Paimio patients’ rooms, Aalto emphasized the healing experience of the patient above all other considerations. As there was no known cure for tuberculosis at this time, sunlight and fresh air were the only ways to combat this deadly disease. Thus, at the east end of each floor in the eight-storey patient room wing, Aalto provided a large ‘sun trap’ terrace, which is angled slightly from the main wing in order to face precisely south, and the top floor of the entire wing is a continuous sun terrace [50].

In the patient rooms themselves [51], which all face slightly east of south, the numerous innovative designs Aalto developed to provide comfort for the patients include: floor and ceiling slabs folded at the edge to temper the glare from the windows; curved corners between the walls and floors to expedite cleaning; innovative indirect lighting, which involved up-lighting a white-painted section of the ceiling, producing indirect, glare-free bounced light; a carefully considered pale grey-blue colour scheme meant to calm; radiant heating panels in the ceiling located so as to heat the lower portion of the patient’s body in the bed below; double-layered, wood-framed window (windows were steel-framed in all other parts of the building) that allow fresh outside air in at one end, which then flows over radiator fins and is additionally heated by the sun while trapped between the layers of glass, before exiting into the room through the other end, thus mitigating any drafts; custom-designed washbasins that minimize sounds of splashing in shared rooms (verified by the author in using those later installed at Aalto’s own house); and metal door handles, wrapped in wood where hands grasp them, designed with a return in the door so as not to catch clothing.
Also important to the sanatorium’s original effect are the numerous examples of custom-designed, bent and curved all-wood furniture, including several tables, the patients’ beds, wall-mounted closets, numerous chairs, including the arm-chair with sprung bent wood leg and arm elements, and the famous ‘Paimio Chair’ [55], with a bent plywood seat and back spanning between two bent wood arm and leg elements, all manufactured by Korhonen, and many of which are still in production today.

While the focus of Aalto’s design for Paimio was certainly on the patient rooms, he nevertheless missed no opportunities to address the entire experience of both working and inhabiting the building. Typical of his holistic vision for the place was his provision of flags that were to be posted on the terraces to celebrate and announce each time a patient recovered. Other parts of the building, from the most important to the most mundane, were equally marked by Aalto’s careful attention to detail. The floors and stairs are covered in linoleum, a new material at that time, in two colours – yellow to mark movement zones and warm grey to mark areas of repose. The main staircase is provided with large windows at each landing [52], and at the western end of the patients’ room wing, facing the entrance to the site, Aalto placed Finland’s first glass-enclosed elevator.

The dining room is a double-height space, with the library suspended above it along the northern edge and a full-height glass wall along the southern side, the lower section of which, being near the room’s occupants, is a double glass wall [54]. Aalto provided for fresh outside air to be brought in at the bottom of the double glass wall, where it was heated both by the trapped sun and by radiator fins, after which it rises and is allowed to enter the room from above, avoiding drafts on the patients seated at the tables. Plants may be placed in between the two layers of glass at the bottom, where they can live through the winter, and the whole window is protected from the summer sun by retractable canvas awnings. In the ceiling under the overhanging library, Aalto provided custom-designed, indirect up-lit fixtures, with a smaller hemispherical source suspended below a larger, hemispherical, copper reflector recessed into the ceiling, between which were mounted large radiant heating panels.

At the eastern end of the dining hall is the recreation room, lecture hall, or chapel, depending on its occupants’ preference [53]. This room has two enormous plate glass windows overlooking the forest – at the time they were installed, glass of this dimension had to be imported – with triangular-in-plan greenhouses at each corner, complete with operable sash to allow venting of excess heat in summer, as well as to allow the warmed humid air, carrying the smell of lush vegetation, to be let into the room in the dead of winter. The dining room and recreation room are entered through two-way, swinging glass doors for which Aalto provided a custom-designed and fabricated silent hinge mechanism, so our entry does not disturb activities in these spaces.

While the building as a whole exhibited the most advanced Modernist formal elements, including, among many others, the external expression of the concrete frame (something that would not occur again in Aalto’s work, indicating that, in this case at least, he was influenced by Duiker), Aalto employs them in a way that is markedly different from
many of his peers. Aalto seemed intent upon revealing the interior functions on the exterior form; as he said in a 1928 *Turun Sanomat* article, ‘a functional architecture [is one] in which the exterior faithfully corresponds with the interior’ – a concept that originated, in early Modern architecture, with the Americans Horatio Greenough, Dankmar Adler, Louis Sullivan and Wright. At Paimio, the double-height dining room and the cantilevered corners of the recreation room are clearly legible on the exterior, and the Corbusian *fenêtre en longueur* runs the entire length of the northern side of the patients’ room wing, indicating the continuous corridors within, as the large, square windows on the southern side indicate the individual patient rooms.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Aalto’s Paimio and the various contemporary buildings to which it is most often compared rests largely in the manner in which it nestles in, opens to, grows into and embraces its natural setting of the Finnish pine forest. The forest’s calming serenity, the sound of breezes in its tree tops and the deep quiet of its moss-covered floor remain today an important part of the joy of visiting this place. Combined with his sensitivity to the landscape and the nature of the forest, Aalto’s concern for a far more comprehensive definition of architecture’s human function meant that Aalto – even as he was being hailed as an exemplar of International Style Modernism, as canonized in the 1932 exhibition organized by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – had already begun to move in an entirely different direction.
Entering the house, immediately to our right is the studio office, while on our left the staircase, partly screened by a series of thin vertical wood posts, descends from the second floor. A turn left at the coat closet, and then a right turn, brings us into the living room. Directly ahead a wood door opens to the garden terrace beyond, to the right two large windows allow the midday and afternoon sunlight to pour into the room, while behind us a massive, lime-washed white brick wall houses the low fireplace. Opening off the living room, to our left as we entered, is the dining room, which also looks out onto the southern garden terrace through a single large window. The dining room wall that ends this long combined space is clad in moleskin, secured with vertical batten strips, and has a wood door leading to the covered loggia.

The wood flooring of the large space of the living and dining rooms runs the long direction, parallel to the window wall. At the ceiling, the rooms are crossed in the opposite, shorter direction by three shallow concrete beams, which span from I-shaped steel beams half buried in the southern window wall to the brick fireplace wall to the north, angling down approximately 90 cm (3 ft) before bearing into the brick wall. The fact that there is no such beam at the end wall of the dining room, while there is one at the opposite end of the living room, suggests a spatial continuation beyond this latter edge. Here, standing on a low brick wall, is a smooth plywood partition, which can be slid partway back to create an opening, matching that to the dining room opposite, through which we step up into Aalto’s studio – a vertical counterpoint to the horizontal expansiveness of the living/dining room.

The studio is a double-height volume, with a mezzanine running around two sides, supported by two black-painted, cylindrical steel columns, and is lit by three apertures opening in different directions. Under the mezzanine two large windows meet at the western corner; in the tall central space, a large eight-panelled window opens high on the wall, facing northwest; and at the mezzanine level, a window is opened to the southeast, overlooking the garden terrace. Opposite the western corner window, which was Aalto’s afternoon workplace, an exposed brick fireplace stands on a tiled hearth, with brick steps leading up to the library, with its own large window facing northwest, and a steep wooden ladder leading from the top of the fireplace to the mezzanine – a detail likely derived from traditional Finnish farmhouses. The studio can be accessed directly from the office, while from both the library and the mezzanine, small doors lead to the first floor, housing the bedrooms.

At the top of the main staircase we arrive in the central hall, used as a family and breakfast room, with a freestanding exposed brick fireplace. Into this central hall, which acts as a courtyard space for this floor, open the Aalto’s bedroom, with its roof-lit closet; the two children’s bedrooms; the roof-lit bathroom (behind the fireplace), where we find two of the silent (splash-less) sinks Aalto designed for Paimio; and the small guest room, whose built-in bed forms the ceiling of the lower part of the staircase. The three family bedrooms have windows opening to the southeast, for morning light, and Juhani Pallasmaa has noted how the windows of the central hall, which face southwest, are pushed up against the ceiling and given high sills, providing the space ‘a sense of
involvement with modern art, having studied with Léger in Paris, having founded the Free Art School in Helsinki and having purchased a very strong personal collection. Aalto stated that the design was to ‘be used for solving the very important relation between architecture and the fine arts’. After being dissuaded by the Gullichsen’s from siting the house above a nearby stream – this in response to seeing images of Wright’s Fallingwater design, which, as its name indicates, is perched over a waterfall – Aalto located the house in a forest clearing at the top of a hill, between two older houses on the estate [83]. Upon approaching the house, we first see the southern façade, composed of a two-storey white lime-washed brick mass on the right, in front of which a lower, reddish-brown wood and glass volume, resting on a slate stone base (which, in turn, hovers above the ground), pushes out towards us and wraps around the corner on our left. Above the living room, white plaster walls, aligned with the main masonry mass, step around the corner to the left, terminating in a curving volume, which is lifted a full floor off the ground and clad in dark-brown wood vertical slats. On the right, at the first floor, four wood-framed boxlike windows, glazed on three sides, project forward of the white masonry wall at a slight angle, so that the morning sun casts triangular shadows onto the wall [84]. Below these windows, a curving double-layered canopy projects forward from the white masonry wall, supported by four different types of columns, and screened along its eastern edge by a line of thin spruce poles. In the shadow of this hovering canopy we find the door.

After passing through a narrow, low, roof-lit vestibule and a second door, we arrive in the entrance hall, with a tile floor and smooth plaster ceiling. Directly ahead, a freestanding, curving thickly lime-washed brick wall projects towards us, blocking our way forward. Over this wall we catch a glimpse of the gently folding plaster ceiling of the dining room. The curving wall tapers slowly back to the left, where, ascending the wide wood steps at its end, we now arrive into the primary room of the house. Yet we are also at the spatial joint between living room, ahead, and dining room, now behind; between the ground floor and the first floor, which are joined by the staircase on our right; and between the inside, anchored by the fireplace ahead, and the outside, seen through the large glass panels of the window-wall between the hearth and the staircase.

Floating above our heads is the delicately scaled ceiling, made of thin slats of pine set into square panels, with 52,000 hand-drilled lozenge-shaped holes to allow the conditioned air to emerge from the ceiling plenum above, under the concrete slab of the first floor. Directly ahead, a massive masonry fireplace, lime-washed smooth and white, anchors the corner [85]. On its right is a window-wall, the large panels of which can be slid open to access the central courtyard, across which we can see the kidney-shaped pool and the rustic, sod-roofed sauna. The daylight coming in this window wall appears to have carved or eroded an exquisitely curving shape from the side of the fireplace, and we find that this, too, has its function, allowing us to reach in and turn the handle to close the window wall. Behind the fireplace, a masonry
formed this edge of the courtyard. Renovations of this forest entrance in 1991, following criticism of its degraded state, resulted in the terraces’ current sharp-edged and close-trimmed character. Yet examination of Aalto’s original drawings indicate he intended that the two entrances be fundamentally different: where he rendered the ‘urban’ entrance in crisp, rectangular forms, he portrayed the ‘forest’ entrance as being overgrown with trees, whose foliage is shown encroaching on the courtyard.

The courtyard is one of Aalto’s most sublime designs, bordered by the inward-pitching forms of the copper-edged, black galvanized metal-clad roofs around it, and formed on three sides by the largely glass walls of the town hall, the windows of which are framed by black tile bases below and white-plaster panels above, with the vertical copper and wood mullions appearing to hang from the roof, counter-pointing the heavy solid brick wall of the library which defines the courtyard on its fourth side [112, 113]. The grass floor of the courtyard is punctuated by a pool of water and two squares of paving stones, all of which were soon overgrown, giving the space today a haunting, ancient feeling. That this quality was intentional is confirmed by Aalto’s statement: ‘I used the enclosed courtyard as the principal motif because in some mysterious way it emphasizes the social instinct. In government buildings and town halls, the courtyard has preserved its primal significance from the days of ancient Crete, Greece and Rome through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.’

Walking under the wood trellis at the southeastern corner of the courtyard, we climb the four stairs to the porch landing, grasp the curving,
leather-wrapped door handle, pull open the wood and glass door, and enter. Among Aalto’s ingenious adaptations of this Mediterranean precedent to the Arctic climate of Finland is the loggia-like hallway that edges the courtyard on its northern and eastern sides [114], its partial brick floor appearing to have slipped in from the ‘unfinished’ brick paving patches just outside, and its continuous brick bench lifted above heating radiators, together with its full-height, south- and west-facing glazing, extend the sun-warmed seasons in this first interior layer of the building, which serves as our passage to reach the council chamber entrance.

The ascension to the council chamber is one of the most sensitively choreographed in all of Modern architecture, beginning with the brick stairs that rise out of the large brick paved ‘landing’ set into the floor of the entry foyer just off the courtyard. Surrounded by massive brick walls and floors, and mounting brick stairs, our path upwards is carved out of solid masonry, our way illuminated by the continuous high clerestory windows, their light filtering through the low, layered wooden ceiling which appears to float overhead [115]. Climbing and turning, and climbing again through this labyrinth-like approach, we turn again to finally enter the council chamber. After our passage through the narrow, low, compressed confines of the staircase, the council chamber opens out and up in an exhilarating, expansive release – we have arrived at our goal [116]. The council chamber is enclosed by full-height brick walls on all sides, with a wooden floor that creaks under our footsteps, and a soaring wooden ceiling overhead, supported by a pair of unprecedented and astonishing
independent rooms in the forest, and they are unified by a shared material palette and clustered configuration.

The main building, located not on any central axis but at the eastern corner, closest to the town, houses the auditorium and lecture hall block, and faces onto an L-shaped forecourt, with the large glazed wall of the auditorium block directly ahead [140], and a columned portico running the length of the right-hand side, off of which we may enter the library. Distinct among Aalto’s libraries, this rectangular-in-plan space has three tiers of book stacks on three sides, which step down to the central reading room (similar only to the library Aalto proposed in the 1924 Parliament Building competition), which is lit by a very large, double-layered V-shaped rooflight, similar to those at the National Pensions Institute. Around three sides of the room, at the top level of the tiered book stacks, the ceiling is raised, so that this peripheral space is the same height as the main central space, and light is introduced from a continuous line of clerestory windows around the inner edge, which bounces of the rear wall.

At the edge of the university forecourt, an entrance at the end of the portico leads to an internal street, allowing the primary pedestrian route across campus to pass through the main building. This brick-walled space, four storeys in height, rises to a ceiling opened by a line of lozenge-shaped rooflights, and is given a remarkably urban character by the staircase that forms its right side [142]. This staircase, in its staggered, diagonal ascension, recalls, in general, the topography of Italian hill towns.
Seinäjoki Church, 1952–60; interior view towards the altar

Seinäjoki Church; piers and T-shaped windows on the sanctuary’s south wall

Aalto placed smaller matching vaults beneath each of the main ceiling vaults, separated by a thin shadow reveal, further lightening the cloudlike ceiling. In experience, this is one of Aalto’s most subtle and serene spaces, yet at the same time it is also among his most inspiring and moving designs – an Appropriately spiritual place.

The Town Hall, designed in 1961 and completed in 1965, is set along the northern side of the piazza, the ‘head’ of the large, tall council chamber anchoring the east end, at the street, and the long ‘tail’ of offices wrapping around at its western end, aligning with the western façade of the theatre to frame the piazza. At the street to the east, the council chamber, clad in deep blue, vertical, semi-cylindrical, glazed ceramic tiles, is lifted to the second level and set onto columns which stand on a low plinth, and the main entrance from the street passes through this portico-like space, under the massive elevated volume. The entrance from the courtyard could not be more different, consisting of a stepped series of grass terraces leading directly from the courtyard to the doors of the council chamber itself, as if one were entering the room from the countryside rather than the city. The staircase from the portico street entrance arrives in the council chamber beside the four glass doors from the terraced court entrance, indicating that both entrance sequences are equally important. The council chamber is a rectangular room, and at the northeastern corner, where the council members’ table is placed on a raised dais, the wall behind has been curved, providing both acoustic benefit and indication of honorific status. The ceiling starts low on the entrance side, sloping steeply up to meet the wall which fronts the street, and Aalto opened a large rooflight in the sloped surface, the incoming light from which is baffled by large louvres. Light fixtures of Aalto’s design are hung in a seemingly random pattern in the room, and the council members are called out by Aalto’s provision of different light fixtures above their seats.

The Library, designed in 1963 and completed in 1965, is the first fully articulated example of Aalto’s classic design. The support services and secondary spaces, such as the children’s library, are housed in a straight-walled volume that frames the southern edge of the courtyard, through which the building is entered, and, directly opposite the entrance, the main reading room and radial walls of book stacks open out towards the south in a fan-shape which is enclosed by an undulating wall. Facing the piazza, the library’s northern façade is a low, white-plastered masonry wall, the long horizontal windows of which are screened by vertical white-painted steel bars, while the southern façade, facing a small park, is dominated by the taller undulating wall of the primary space, with its horizontal angled wooden louvres running continuously across the large windows that are opened in the upper half of the wall. The entire building rests on a short, dark granite base, which the white plaster overhangs by an inch (2.5 cm).

We enter by climbing a set of stairs to reach a shallow terrace, passing through the double set of glass doors into the low foyer, with the children’s library to the left, the offices and other services to the right, and the circulation desk and main library directly ahead. When we reach the circulation desk, the ceiling above our heads is lifted and light pours
in from behind us, through clerestory windows facing north. But the greater light is ahead of us, where a few steps farther in, we come to the open rail at the edge of another of Aalto’s typical sunken reading rooms, in this case an arc-shaped space accessed by a staircase set between bypassing curved walls. Its walls lined with bookcases, this sunken reading room has an ingenious series of interlocking triangular wooden reading tables, providing each reader the wider end of the table and presenting those sitting opposite with the narrower end, which fits to one side or the other of their own wider table end, maximizing the useable space for each reader while creating an elegant composition [170].

The main level of the library is occupied by radially disposed bookcases, and bookcases also line the two long side walls and the undulating southern wall. This main space is covered by a complex all-white ceiling, similar to the section of a seashell, which is comprised of the sloping ceiling under which we entered, a low curving plaster vault over the sunken reading room and a curving, white-painted cast-concrete vault lifting and opening to the south. The wood-board formwork markings giving this outer ceiling a subtle horizontal pattern [171]. Where the inner and outer curving vaults meet, 61 cm (2 ft) beyond the back edge of the sunken reading room, Aalto positioned a curving line of five cylindrical columns – these, together with the piers embedded in the southern wall, support the roof and ceiling. The large, horizontally louvred windows, which run continuously across the upper half of the south-facing undulating wall, begin at the same level as the lowest point
yet at the same time secluded, standing in light, a place apart from the everyday world. In his engagement of natural light in our experience of inhabiting this sanctuary, Aalto matched his Baroque precursors Borromini, Neumann and the Dientzenhofer, and, in having only the more meagre northern sunlight to work with, one could argue he surpassed them.

The three-lobed section and plan of Imatra also has acoustical benefits when the church is open its entire length, allowing sounds from the pulpit, organ and choir to carry all the way to the back section. Worked out using a famous mirrored model and smoke to reveal the light bounces (which duplicated the predicted reverberation pattern of sound), this is Aalto’s most beautiful design exemplifying what has perhaps best been described, by Donna Cohen, as an ‘acoustic contour’, a kind of echo of the landscape coming from the shaping of interior space so as to resonate with the surrounding landform and natural setting. In Aalto’s architecture, the various senses and experiences were never isolated, but rather integrated, so that, here in the Imatra church, the double-skinned windows along the east side of the sanctuary have functions relating to day-lighting (the space appearing to be brighter inside than outside), acoustical (bouncing sound back down into space), environmental (tempering the winter cold), psychological (construction of softly curving, protective inner shell) and phenomenological (view of the forest, one’s place in the world).

In explaining the angling inwards of the interior glazing along the eastern wall of the church, Aalto maintained it was for acoustical reasons, saying it was necessary to provide good distribution of the sound