Alvar Aalto
Through the Words of Pallasmaa

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1_http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/5174ZSBEFCL.jpg
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**Introduction**

Alvar Aalto’s architecture is seen to be of great experiences, due to his clever ways of exploiting human emotions in terms of memory, hapticity, materials, light and engaging the senses. His work has been noticed by, and relates strongly to the words of Juhani Pallasmaa in his books and essays on the importance of all senses and the need for an experience through a building, not simply pleasing on the eyes.

In this essay I will be using Pallasmaa’s theory’s on what buildings and the architect should give to the world, in terms of buildings. These will then be related to the works of Alvar Aalto to see if his buildings bring this.

All three sections of the essay will relate to how experience is formed in his architecture, as this is the key element, but they will describe how it is done, in different ways.
The Hand and Play

‘A hand is not simply part of the body, but the expression and continuation of a thought which must be captured and conveyed’.² Honoré de Balzac

Computer vs. Hand. As time continues and technology is becoming more apparent in every aspect of our lives, this is becoming a debate in Architecture. The computer is fast and precise, but according to Pallasmaa (and i’m sure others) the hand is irreplaceable in the world of architecture. The hand allows us to create haptic drawings, freely, straight from the mind in a flow of inspiration and 3D models to move, touch, allow our minds inside the building.
Pallasmaa describes in his book the failure of computers in comparison to the craft of the hand:

‘In my view, [...] computer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent multi-sensory and synchronic capacity of imagination by turning the design process into a passive visual manipulation, a retinal survey. The computer creates a distance between the maker and the object [...]’³

The argument for computer aided design is usually that it helps us create spatial situations of complexity that would otherwise be impossible to do, but Pallasmaa uses Alvar Aalto’s Church of Three Crosses at Vuoksenniska as an example of a building without CAD.

² Honoré de Balzac, Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu, quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty ‘Cezanne’s doubt’ Sense and Non-Sense, 1964, p 18

Pallasmaa writes:

'[it] is arguably as complex in it’s fully moulded three-dimensional spatiality as any of today's CAD-designed buildings'.

Above is a sketch of the building by Alvar Aalto, clearly showing the three sections of the building in his earliest ideas. The use of models was also very important in this design to experiment with the lighting, he used light models with adjustable mirrors to trace sun rays through the space, this investigation proved very useful in the success of his building.

4 Sketch for the Church of Three Crosses in Richard Western, Alvar Aalto, Phaidon Press 1995, p 201

In order to create this intense spatiality, an architect even as clever as Aalto can’t work alone, especially without the help of computers. Therefore it is said that he sent his chief assistant to refresh his knowledge of trigonometry. In his book ‘The Thinking Hand’ Pallasmaa does mention the need for intimate communication with your fellow craftsmen around you as the builders have to actually create your vision. Another example of this in Aalto’s work is in Säynätsalo Town Hall, 1949-52. By working closely with his builders and the source of his materials, Aalto was supplied with irregular bricks defying all requirements of normal quality control. This resulted in different shapes and colours which were then to be laid out of line, giving the wall a ripple.

6 http://mariosoustiel.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/36-b_saynatsalo-town-hall_brick.jpg?w=584
'The creative state is a condition of haptic immersion where the hand explores, searches and touches semi-independently'.

Pallasmaa writes a lot about experimenting in the work of any craft, (with the hand and body of course) and it’s importance, but also risk, in creating a great piece of work. Alvar Aalto’s work includes many experiments, through sketches and models of different kinds, as mentioned before on the previous page. Pallasmaa agrees as his uses a few examples in his book ‘The Thinking Hand’.

Aalto simply draws from his instinct creating as he says himself quite ‘childlike compositions’, for example in his scheme for Viipuri City Library, 1927-35, his subconscious sketches take the form of mountain landscapes and ‘many suns’ which eventually did give rise to the main idea for the building. These sketches can be seen in image 8.

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Another of Aalto’s forms of experimentation was the very physical and tactile use of wood when designing his furniture, extremely important in the process of getting the furniture right as Pallasmaa also mentions as well as the need for play. For Alvar Aalto experimentation and play wasn’t only kept of a small scale though, it also included his entirely ‘Experimental House’ also known as the summerhouse. It is said that this was partly motivated by his philosopher friend Yrjö Hirn’s theories of creative play and inspiration from being in nature.

This idea of play and keeping the mind open also had him known for making last minute changes and decisions, as in Villa Mairea when after the foundations were laid he completely re-designed it leaving only the servants wing more or less intact.

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Pallasmaa described Aalto’s frightening decisions as a positive thing in Hapticity and Time:

‘He was himself a master of turning last minute design alterations or on-site mistakes into brilliant detail improvisations.’


11 http://26.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lp3fmx9nmG1qztueno1_500.jpg
Integration with Nature

‘After all, nature is a symbol of freedom. Sometimes nature actually gives rise to and maintains the idea of freedom. If we base our technical plans primarily on nature we have a chance to ensure that the course of development is once again in a direction in which our everyday work and all it’s forms will increase freedom rather than decrease it.’¹² Alvar Aalto

Looking through the work of Alvar Aalto, it is instantly apparent that he has a very strong connection with nature and intentions to intwine it within all of his buildings, successfully. Pallasmaa writes of this notion in his chapter about the tools of craft saying that:

‘Also buildings, [...] perfectly adapted to their settings and functional requirements, and precisely expressive of their climatic conditions [...] – turn into architectural tools of sorts [...]’¹³

As well as Pallasmaa, the influential architect that is Peter Zumthor writes in his book ‘Atmospheres’ that it excites him ‘the idea of creating a building, [...] and that it becomes part of its surroundings.’¹⁴

Aalto’s inspiration of nature in most of his work are from his home of Finland but occasionally using


¹⁴ Peter Zumthor, Atmospheres, Birkhäuser, 2006, p 63
the influences of Italy, which he admired very much on a visit there. The Finnish landscape and way of being revolves hugely around the masses of forest, so this is what he brought into his work. A first example is that of his Pulp Mill project built in 1930’s. This project was a collection of five houses, stepping down into the landscape, all different. The idea of individualizing each house was to allow it to be ideally compared with the gift for ‘nuances possessed by nature’.  

Further nuances of nature were added in the form of climbing plants and stripped wood poles, but instead of going into more detail on this project, we will take a look at one of his most famous, demonstrating many of these fantastic features of nature.

Villa Mairea 1938-41, another experimental house made for Harry and Maire Gullichsen on Finland's west coast, surrounded by a beautiful pine wood.

15 Richard Western, Alvar Aalto, Phaidon Press 1995, p 76

16 plan+villa+mairea-1.jpg
Aalto does everything he can to avoid what he calls ‘artificial architectural rhythms in the building’, basically meaning a rigid, linear and repeating plan. By doing this he varies dimensions of the grid and the poles/pillars themselves are all different, in the body of the house and screening the stairs. These poles are sometimes double wrapped, rather than singularly, some bound with rattan (fully or partially) and others clad with timber strips. This is just one of his ways in relating again to the unorganized, organic and unpredictable ways of nature, everything as an individual.

Aalto evokes the experience of the forest in other ways such as, varying the perimeter from solid to part glazed, to full height sliding glass onto the garden, becoming an indoor/outdoor space. Relating to different seasons is his carefully sculpted fireplace, white in colour and recalling the forms of snow, wind sculpted or melted by the

17 plan+villa+maeria-2.jpg
fire, to blend with the fallen snow outside during winter, losing the sense that the glass is even there.

Taking note of other traditions and history, he most definitely brings a hint of Japanese culture in subtly with the use of bamboo fences either side of the front porch, which juts out the front of the house in a sculpted way. The bamboo gives the effect of the forest continuing right the way into the house, screening the eyes from the white walls of the house as you enter up the path. Another tradition, out of the norm from the rest of the house, is the dining room. This room is the only that one could see underlying order, Aalto’s reasons for this was that this is appropriate to

the activity of dining and entertaining and is, as Klaus Herdeg argued, ‘as an architectural embodiment of the social traditions’.\textsuperscript{19} This building embodies a lot of traditions and knowledge of history, the whole plan itself could be seen as the reworking of the traditional tupa, a living room in a traditional Finnish farmhouse designed for many different functions but with private spaces; Aalto does this by the use of different level flooring and screens.

The use of traditions, history and even other precedents is hugely important in designs, that knowledge is already there in the subconscious mind so is only natural that it will come out.

Palasmaa uses a quote in ‘The Thinking Hand’ which describes this need:

‘Meaningful buildings arise from tradition and they constitute and continue tradition. [...] No architect worthy of his craft works alone; he works with the entire history of architecture ‘in his bones’.’\textsuperscript{20}

Many more of Alvar Aalto’s buildings display this idea of landscape integration and follow of tradition or history. Looking briefly at another of his important buildings, Säynätsalo Town Hall, mentioned in the first section for its brickwork and will be again in the next. This building creates a great sense of place, situated on a lightly forested island, but seems to be taking inspirations from other parts of the world this

\textsuperscript{19} Richard Western, \textit{Alvar Aalto}, Phaidon Press 1995, p 84

time. The first notion is of Japanese is the rectangular light opening, filtered and reflected by a grid of wooden screens, providing most of the natural light.

The main layout of the building, using the courtyard is Aalto’s main motif relating back to the time of ancient Crete, Greece and Rome as the courtyard had large importance in the buildings of parliament and courthouses. That is a brief insight into the ideas of some forms in Säynätsalo Town Hall, but it’s main features are the way the building evokes the senses and will be discussed further in the section to come.

21 http://media.dwell.com/images/480*556/goolrick_3bldgs_finland2.jpg
Awakening the Senses

‘Alongside the prevailing architecture of the eye, there is a haptic architecture of the muscle and skin. There is architecture that also recognises the realms of hearing, smell and taste.’

Juhani Pallasmaa

Juhani Pallasmaa is a very strong believer in the ignition of all senses in a piece of Architecture, mostly apparent in his book ‘The Eyes of the Skin’. This book talks about contemporary architecture simply built for the visual needs and how important the other senses are, especially touch in creating an existential experience for the people.

Looking first at one of Aalto’s pieces which is as direct in contact you could get with the human form; his furniture. Pallasmaa states himself that ‘Alvar Aalto was consciously concerned with all the senses in his architecture.’ He then continues with a quote from Alvar Aalto confirming this in the making of his furniture:

‘A piece of furniture that form part of a person’s daily habitat should not cause excessive glare from light reflection: ditto it should not be disadvantageous in terms of sound, sound absorption, etc. A piece that comes into the most intimate contact with man, as a chair does,

22 Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin Architecture and the Senses, John Wiley & Sons, 1996 p 70

23 Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin Architecture and the Senses, John Wiley & Sons, 1996 p 70
shouldn't be constructed of materials that are excessively good conductors of heat."\textsuperscript{24}

Focusing now onto his buildings, and back to Säynätsalo Town Hall, but this time on materiality and how the space feels. Structural plans such as the angles introduced, give the feeling of an organic form and a creation of an outdoor space feeling inside, this is made by slight changes in material over the roofs of the courtyard, reinforcing the idea that the corridor is connected to an arcade running around the court.

The bricks on the outside of the building, talked about in the first section, follow on into the interior through it’s walls and stairs leading to the council chamber with just small slices of sunlight. The chamber itself then, also brick and dimly lit, emphasizing the sheer grandness from which you can just see the roof trusses.

Pallasmaa describes this room and the feeling:

\begin{quote}
‘The dark womb of the council chamber [...] recreates a mystical and mythological sense of community; darkness creates a sense of solidarity and strengthens the power of the spoken word.’\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Speaking of the ‘spoken word’ in the chamber, Alvar’s lectern is said to be placed uncomfortably close to the wall, could this be a subtle hint in order to make the speakers keep their talks to a minimum? A great use of the human emotions. The seating in the chamber is also designed for the


\textsuperscript{25} Juhani Pallasmaa The Eyes of the Skin Architecture and the Senses, John Wiley & Sons, 1996 p 49
citizens, as his own furniture, smooth and inviting to the human touch, as such intimate objects should be. This building was designed to be memorable but also an easily habitable space for the everyday users.

The next Alvar Aalto building, is one of great human experience and careful thought, as it doesn’t deal with just the average person; but also the patient.

Paimio Sanatorium 1929-33 shows great care in the design and every feature in order to help comfort and heal the sick with tuberculosis. The accepted treatment for tuberculosis, put forward in 1901, was isolation from urban pollution in natural surroundings and optimum exposure to sun and fresh air. Paimio Sanatorium is placed in forest, what

26 http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3486/4004181453_95f5a91b7e.jpg
better natural surroundings. The functional plan of the building was that each wing is positioned in the landscape to the demands of the rooms (such as amount of sun, air or views).

Another example of the use of the environment was in the sun terraces and patients wing, he faced them due south, however he claims this was more symbolic of the healing powers for the patients. It evokes the feeling that the building is an organism that can respond to the environment.

Alvar Aalto shows that this building truly focuses on the healing and needs of the patients. While he fell ill himself, he used that time to experiment was it is really like to be sick and this led him to the realization that:

‘the ordinary room is for a vertical person [whereas] a patient’s room is a room for a horizontal human being, and colour, lighting, heating and so on must be designed with that in mind.’

In order to respond to the patients, their senses and needs: ceilings were painted darker than walls to be more restful to the gaze, mounted lights were to face upwards and be out of sight thus to reflect off the wall. The wash basins which each patient had, were designed to reduce the sound of splashing to not disturb other patients and draught free air was omitted from where it was pre-heated between the window glass. Acoustics also took into consideration as not to disturb or unsettle patients as one wall was lined with absorbent insulation and even the materials of the window

pains were that of timber rather than steel to be warmer to the touch. As well as material, finally colour was also taken into account in communal areas in order to soothe and stimulate as appropriate, also with painted grey bands along the floor to kindly and simply suggest the routes.

Bringing this building and it’s fantastic thoughtful elements back to the works of Pallasmaa. Pallasmaa, with his great dislike of architecture simply for the eye and his needs for all senses and human nature to be evoked and cared for, quotes positively of Alvar Aalto’s design of the Paimio Sanatorium in ‘Hapticity and Time’:

‘Using this method of analyzing experiential situations, Aalto conceived the sanatorium as a carefully and empathetically studied instrument of healing for the benefit of human beings at their

28 Sketches showing effect of overhead heating and design for patients bed in Richard Western, Alvar Aalto, Phaidon Press 1995, p 56
weakest, 'the horizontal human being', as Aalto calls his hospitalized client. Aalto's sanatorium could well be the one building in the history of modernity that contains the highest concentration of technical innovations, yet it is firmly rooted in human experiential reality."29
Conclusion

Alvar Aalto’s buildings and other works are great examples for the writings and theories of Juhani Pallasmaa as demonstrated in some examples above.

Aalto has many other projects which show this in different ways, some better in aspects and some worse. However the buildings chosen above are overly successful in showing many aspects of Pallasmaa’s thoughts, so much so that they were mentioned personally in a number of his books.

30 http://farm6.staticflickr.com/5094/5589294679_ce56cec891_z.jpg
As Aalto has shown, and Pallasmaa has spoken about, the need for haptic, multi-sensory experiences is key in architecture but unfortunately it has subsequently been partially lost over time, partly to do with computers and rising technology perhaps. Maybe with the words of Pallasmaa and the works of Aalto and other histories and traditions, architecture and the use of it as a craft can continue.

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