

So What Do You Say to a Pine Tree...

"...in a certain sense, architecture can be said to have created its materials and methods itself."

A. Aalto, 1938

The intention of this paper is to examine the work of Alvar Aalto, but not by conventional methods of inquiry. The search here is not for a system that will assure the practicing architect of success. Instead, the desire of this paper is to reveal some of Aalto's concern for mythical order, which enabled him to 're-make' meaning in the physical world. This is by no means to say that every work by Aalto can be called a 'work of Art', or that the incorporation of myth is to be found in every project.

The "work of Art" creates itself via the artist, not necessarily anyone with a brush or chisel, but rather through one who is willing to 'listen' to art speak and can then re-present that order. This re-presentation is an interpretive act which involves more than simple depiction. It involves a perception of an ordered mythical truth which is revealed through experience, and is simultaneously understood through the experience of re-making the myth. It is this interaction between Art and artist, Art and man, that provide us with a model in which we may look at architecture and its relationship to Aalto. Through this relationship, architecture becomes a built explanation of an order, and not buildings as aesthetic objects.

The role of myth in Finnish culture has been crucial to its development. The *Kalevala*, first published in 1835, and again in 1849, had been a verbal tradition of creating in poem-song the mythical tales of creation, heroes, magic, unseen spirits, love, and the inevitable 'other world'. It was compiled in the 19th century by a generation of Finns that were interested in establishing a national and distinctive cultural identity rooted in the language and story telling traditions of the people. The re-creation of the *Kalevala* by the orator was an interpretive art-form that could not be undertaken by just anyone, but only through those who possessed this special talent was the *Kalevala* passed on.

This epic poem opens with the birth of Vainamoinen (the immortal god who is the companion, hero, and soul of the Finns), whose conception takes place when the Virgin of the Air lowers herself into the sea and becomes impregnated by the Wind and the Waves, transforming her into the Water-Mother. Almost immediately, a teal flies past searching for a suitable place to dwell. Building her nest upon the knee of the Water-Mother, the teal lays her eggs. The eggs then fall from the nest and break, the broken pieces are transformed into the elements that become the ordered universe. The lower fragments become the earth, upper fragments the sky, the yoke becomes the sun, the white becomes the moon, and that of the egg which is blackish is transformed into clouds. After the creation of the basic elements from the cosmic egg, the Water-Mother sculpts the land and the depths of the seas, all the while still bearing the immortal Vainamoinen, who is to remain unborn for another thirty years. Vainamoinen is then released from his tiresome nest into the sea, and tossed about for a great length of time. Finally reaching the shore, he sets his feet upon the surface of a treeless land and the world begins.

The importance of the *Kalevala* in the Finnish culture is still prevalent and taught in Finnish schools today, even though the emphasis has been redirected. When the 1849 translation was published, it consisted of 22,795 lines of poetry. By 1948 when the Finnish Literature Society produced their edition, the epic had grown to approximately 1,270,000

lines and was published in 33 volumes, yet this was only about half of the verses which had been collected at the time. The numbers are not important, but to see the value placed on the myth and the tradition of 're-making' the myth, does provide us with some insight. This concern for 'making' as the explanation of an order seems to be present in the work of Aalto where mythical and poetic thought are incorporated into conventional building. The continuous discovering and re-discovering of this order in the 'world' is to be found in such tactile curiosities as columns wrapped with leather straps, saunas with sod roofs, fireplaces with curvilinear walls, or displaced Japanese details.

Aalto's perception of architecture both past and present, is that of a being, a dynamic entity. In the opening quote, Aalto bestows upon architecture some characteristics of a living phenomena, seen to have the capacity to govern its own development, in particular the realm of materials and methods. Further implications of such an autonomy would also suggest that man is not the instigator of such development but is in fact a participant, a necessary fragment of a greater whole whose development takes place within a time-frame independent of man's impetus. It was not only the technological aspects of building that held Aalto's interest, but the perception of some 'other order' or quality that when maintained as the primary goal of architecture, kept the secondary (but none the less necessary tectonics of building) concerns in proper perspective. These guideposts of the 'other' provided by the Aalto lead us from space to place, a place where the (modern?) artist is destined to reside: the place between the temporal material present, and the poetics of dwelling. But before speculation takes over completely we should take a closer look at the words of Aalto himself.

"Architecture is not only a quality of finished constructed results but to a higher degree a stratified process of the development in which, together with internal reciprocal action, new solutions, new shapes, new building materials, and steady changes in the ideas of construction are continually being created. ...

"I believe, in fact, am convinced that in their beginnings architecture and other genres have the same starting-point - a starting point which is, admittedly, abstract but at the same time influenced by all the knowledge and feelings that we have accumulated inside us."

A. Aalto, 1938

There can be no doubt that Aalto was a 'building' architect, but he was also deeply concerned with theoretical issues. His search for architecture was more than just a final product of assembled details and materials. Aalto clearly states that the reality of architecture is found in (between) the layers of the design process. At the most basic level, this process would involve the analysis of the building program along with the functional issues, common to the practice of architecture. But it is the acknowledgment of the 'other', in this case the "internal reciprocal action", that professionalism should be concerned with. It is this personal level of understanding which appears to separate Aalto from the norm of general practice.

The phrase "internal reciprocal action" holds much insight into Aalto's thought and inspiration. It contains the outcome of much personal searching and pondering of the issues which encompass the question of meaning in architecture. The 'internal' suggest that which is inside or contained within, consequently that which is normally accepted as concealed, overshadowed and protected by an exterior. To bring to our attention the 'internal' is to acknowledge the existence of a related exterior, which is connected through an order that allows the two parts to function as a unit or body. Each part's existence is dependant upon the other, yet each is the other's opposite, to a point. At this 'point' the distinctions that keep these two parts separated are no longer Aalto's concern. What becomes important at this 'point' is the consideration of what holds these opposites together, what is the common element to be found in these opposites that allows for their union to create a 'real wall'. For these two elements to work as unit, there must be a common goal by which each side of the wall both 'influences' and is 'influenced by'. It functions as a body, a whole where the combined experiences of the exterior and interior create a working knowledge.

So much for the mechanics. The validity of experience, as it pertains to knowledge is that it provides a lived connectedness to an event or occurrence from which an order is found. This perception of order begins to take shape after an event has been internalized and reflected upon at a personal level. The associations that are made from this reflection (including the connection to unrelated and/or opposite events) creates a personal ground of meaning: Knowledge [this simplification is about 'speaking the unspeakable' not psychology]. When the meaning is discovered in experience, the knowledge that is brought forth is true myth. This form of myth can exist at a cultural level as well as a personal level. At both levels however, it was the re-connecting of the 'internal' that was necessary to provide a meaningful base for Aalto's architecture, ...A real wall.

With 'reciprocal-action', on the other hand, Aalto is speaking of an active displacement that results in an inversion. This is a specific and determined motif in which the intention is to go beyond conventional experience so as to be left free to uncover and investigate its counterpart, the embodied experience of myth, i.e. the 'other' side of materials, details, and the design process. To consider this approach in reference to the act of design, it is the rational and learned responses that plagues the 'planners' mentality. To purposely avoid this by allowing the mythical and scientifically irrational portion of the mind and body to participate with a project, the discoveries that would usually be withheld become unveiled. The integration of this internal knowledge proved to be an essential part of Aalto's work as it provided a proper balance to the pragmatics of architecture, but more importantly, it gave a solid ground of meaning for the 'making' of form. It is this personal comprehension of the 'space of modern man' and its relationship to the 'place of mythical man' that allows his work to stand as a built order, the reconciliation of the internal and external can be experienced. As before, the question is one of finding a common element that would allow for the marriage of two seemingly opposed elements such the modern and the mythical.

So to follow the true form of 'reciprocal action' in Aalto's thought, the place to seek such an ambiguous element is most likely 'standardization'. In discussing the continually changing, but constant face of architecture Aalto states:

"One further aspect of architecture must be called to mind in this context: the oldest, and at the same time most recent technique, standardization. One of its most important results was the systematic arrange-

ment in architecture. By standardization one often understands a method which creates uniformity and formalism. This definition is obviously false. True standardization must be used and developed in such a way that the parts and raw materials have qualities from which the greatest possible number of different combinations will ensue.

I once stated that the best standardization committee in the world was nature herself: but in nature standardization appears, above all and most exclusively only in the smallest units, the cell. This results in millions of elastic connections in which there is no trace of formalism. Furthermore, this gives rise to the enormous wealth of organic growing shapes and their eternal change. Architectonic standardization must follow the same path."

To consider Aalto's words more closely reveals something very interesting: 'greatest possible number of connections', 'the ability to provide millions of elastic connections', 'enormous diversity in shapes' and 'eternal change' are contradictory to the 19th and 20th C. concepts of standardization. This is not about mass-production or a technically simplified utopic life.

This statement has nothing to do with the visual or physical properties of architecture, but with the invisible, mythical order of nature herself. It is these qualities that must exist as both the basis and the goal of a work. Once this duality of myth is grasped "the work of art" has given itself to the artist, whose task is then to interpret and re-present the order in the making of the work. The outcome of this use of materials, allows for and almost provokes a new interpretation with each encounter. This is the same tradition of 'making' which has been the life-blood of the *Kalevala* for the past 2500 years.

The notion of standardization in Aalto's work and lectures then is more closely related to the commonality found in opposites, a thread which links the seemingly unrelated in such a way that they become inseparable; a body is made. This thread provides a flexible bonding that has the ability to transcend time, change its form from perceptual (primordial experience), to physical (architecture as making order), finally returning back to perception through re-interpretation, in short the Myth is (re)made. It is this *element* that bonds the internal to the external; *provides a connection* that allows each side of the wall to influence and be that which is influenced; it functions as a *body* in that meaning is discovered in and through experience, last but not least it is the only way real meaning can be embodied into a physical place in order to define *Place in the world*.

True Myth: the element that provides a connection from the body to a Place in the world.

It is with this understanding of myth that the *Kalevala* can be seen as an appropriate means of grounding in the Finnish culture. But in the larger issues concerning myth, be they cultural or personal, it is the (re)making of myth into an order that brings us to the 'point' where we may participate with the invisible workings of the world...

... our Place.

M. is formerly from another land of pine trees. Not an academic, he just calls'em like he sees 'em.