To explain Pacon's private commissions, Monnier uses information about building codes, architectural types, site constraints, and client biographies. He attributes the variety in the buildings' composition and detail to both the clients' amateur enthusiasm for customized modernism, and also to Pacon's agenda—especially his interest in experimenting with new materials and his commitment to architectural character and rational planning.

Pacon's work for Raoul Dautry, director of the Réseau des Chemin de Fer, is much better documented. In the fascinating case of the Gare du Havre, Monnier can trace the shifts from the Baroque classical design proposed by architect Lemaesquier in 1912, to Pacon's first project with its parabolic arch façade, to his final design of 1949 with its trabected centerpiece framed by wall sections and monumental sculptures. Monnier's analysis of the rationale for this sequence of designs probes the municipal council's desire for a monumental entrance to their city, Dautry's interest in a rational station to symbolize a centralized, efficient, humanistic state enterprise, and Pacon's own agenda.

The issues that Vigato's architects and critics debate as matters of architectural and social principle are, in Monnier's study, pragmatic exigencies. Regionalism, classicism, monumentality, economy, and rational method are client interests and values that Pacon must accommodate if he is to continue to receive commissions.

We all know that architecture manifests the influence of complex sets of ideals, interests, and circumstances. These two books are worth reading both for their different but complementary insights into the values that shaped French 20th-century architecture, and also as stimuli to further research on the impact of clients and critics, in particular, on the valuation and development of Modernism.

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For much of Alvar Aalto's career his architecture was considered individualistic, idiosyncratic, and beyond systematic analysis or critical evaluation. That Aalto's architecture underwent a series of distinct stylistic changes during his 50-year practice—from the classicism of his early years, to the acceptance of functionalism, to the movement away from functionalism in the late 1930s, to the red brick period, and finally to the complexity found in his later work—contributed to this viewpoint. Aalto's professed lack of interest in writing, lecturing, and polemical discussions, reinforced by such oft-quoted statements as "the truth is in building, not talk," underscores the notion that he cared little for architectural theory or speculation.

In the mid-1960s, dissatisfaction with the prevailing view that Aalto's architecture has primarily a combination of irrational and organic elements and too enigmatic for critical inquiry prompted a number of systematic and interpretive assessments of his work. The view that emerged, and which continues to be supported by recent historical evidence, is that a basic conceptual order and direction, a consistency of thematic concerns, and a profound understanding of architectural history underlie the succession of stylistic periods that mark Aalto's practice. Increased understanding of Aalto's life, writings, and early works indicates more fully the influences in his architecture from Finnish neoclassic, national romantic and vernacular architecture, and international modernism. While we view Aalto as a modern architect, his work reveals a traditionalism that informs us of the cultural heritage within which he worked. For Aalto did not use industrial processes as a compositional technique for his architecture, but incorporated both neoclassic and romantic ordering sensibilities into his designs, displaying his understanding of Scandinavian and particularly of Finnish architectural traditions.


Addressing the theme "The State of Modernism," the intent of the First International Alvar Aalto Symposium was to scrutinize the interaction between the present state of modernism and Aalto's architecture. Held in Jyväskylä, Finland in July 1979, the symposium papers forming the content of Alvar Aalto vs. the Modern Movement do not, unfortunately, investigate the stated theme as fully as would be hoped. While Reima Pietilä, Claude Schneidt, Pekka Helin, and Jan Söderlund attempt to assess the current status of modernism, with the exception of Schneidt's essay "The Inheritance of the 1920s," the authors offer little to clarify the current architectural situation or to evaluate the applicability of modernism today. The essays by Göran Schildt, Nils Erik Wickberg, Andrei Gozak, Pekka Suohon, and Colin St. John Wilson assess differing aspects of Aalto's architecture and the context within which he worked. Of particular significance are Schildt's "Aalto, Bauhaus and the Creative Experiment" and St. John Wilson's "Alvar Aalto and the State of Modernism," for both authors address the primary theme of the symposium by providing insightful interpretations of Aalto's architecture and its interaction with modernism.

Schildt, Aalto's close friend and biographer, explores Aalto's synthesis of ideas and influences from contemporaneous architects and artists from the late 1920s through the 1930s. Of interest are the friendships Aalto developed during this period, friendships which brought him into the sphere of European avant-garde designers and architects. While André Lurçat, Walter Gropius, and Lazio Moholy-Nagy were important friends, it was Sigfried Giedion and his wife Carola Giedion-Welker who linked Aalto to numerous important intellectual contacts. But, as Schildt notes, Aalto seldom discussed the influence that his friends or contemporaries had on his architecture. As a
competitive person and one aware of contemporary architectural developments, Aalto consciously chose what he considered good about another designer’s work and then through his own designs attempted to do it better. Within this context, Schildt examines the relationship between Aalto and the ideas developed at the Bauhaus, examining how Aalto took Bauhaus ideas and modified them within his work.

For St. John Wilson, Aalto broadened modernist design sensibilities. Almost immediately after embracing modernism Aalto set a divergent course, a course against the superficial potentials of modernism’s focus upon industrial production as a formal technique. Aalto’s divergent course reincorporated traditional architectural values, a feeling for permanence and endurance, images and metaphors from nature, the transcendence of spatial and formal character over the abstract and schematic, and a diversity of sources for formal expression. In interpreting Aalto’s broadening of modern design sensibilities, St. John Wilson not only provides a balanced and provocative assessment of Aalto’s architecture but implicitly develops an appropriate and thoughtful criticism of modernism.

In situating Aalto’s work within the traditions of modernism, Demetri Porphyrios, in Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto, presents a two-part critical analysis. The first examines the formal aspects of Aalto’s architecture: the primary organizational techniques he employed in plan form and volumetrics; the specialized architectural elements he used and the manner in which they are combined; his understanding of typology and its use in his architectural conceptions; and the sources for expression found in his work and their requisite meanings. The latter half of the analysis focuses upon the placement of Aalto’s design strategies within the general context of modernism, a context of ideas which Porphyrios traces to the Enlightenment. These ideas include the relationship between industrialization and naturalism in European modernism, the debate between city and country in urban planning and design, and, finally, the semantic context of Aalto’s designs. Throughout the discourse Porphyrios uses the concepts of heterotopia, particularization, typology, and metaphor to examine and assess Aalto’s work.

In contrast to the modernist ordering sensibility of homotopia (favoring unification, continuity, and universality), Porphyrios finds Aalto’s work ordered in a more fragmented, disparate manner which he calls heterotopia, that is, preferring discontinuity and assertion of individual architectural fragments. Aalto demonstrates a unique ability to compose comprehensible works from a seemingly disorderly combination of elements— wedge-shaped rooms, fan forms, jutting or ragged building profiles. To study any number of Aalto’s plans or sections reveals the compositional dominance of autonomous or independent spaces which stand unsuppressed by the conventions of normal modern grid planning. Simultaneously, to design in this mode means to view architectural elements as individual entities, particularized to their specific role or purpose. Aalto’s manipulation of the ceiling plane, acknowledging the specifics of a lecture hall, auditorium, or art gallery, particularizes essential qualities that both differentiate and articulate specific activities.

Porphyrios, going beyond the conventional contemporary use of the term typology, suggests that Aalto’s understanding and use of typology were founded upon the notion of propriety:

Thus Aalto’s buildings always pointed to the realm of the befitting: the socially befitting, the befitting of customs, traditions, aspirations, ideas, beliefs, mythologies or dreams; that immaterial realm of ideologies without which we would be incapable of reflecting upon the material modes that sustain our lives (p. 26).

For Aalto, typology is important because it emphasizes social memory. While the recurring presence of the courtyard or atrium space in Aalto’s buildings can be seen as a reference to an organizational type found in Finnish farm complexes and Scandinavian town halls, it also denotes a space of public action. This articulation of the public realm recalls such remembered social spaces as agora, forum, or piazza.

In placing Aalto within the context of Scandinavian and European modernism, Porphyrios is one of the few authors who concurrently endeavor to establish a critical framework for discussing modern architectural ideas. To define the boundaries of contemporary criticism he uses Aalto as a means to explore another agenda—to formulate a definition of modern eclecticism. Aalto was an eclectic in the best sense of the term and becomes an appropriate model for Porphyrios’s use. But the desire to establish a framework for critical discourse often prevents the author from venturing into the realm of personal interpretation. This is unfortunate, for some of Porphyrios’s excellent critical analysis of Aalto’s architecture becomes mired in a slush of current polemical rhetoric.

Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study, by Malcolm Quantrill, is intended as a critical companion to the three volumes comprising Aalto’s complete works published by Verlag für Architektur Artemis. To achieve this objective, the major architectural themes found in Aalto’s buildings and projects, themes that emerged early in his practice and formed a continuity in his work for the next four decades, are examined. Quantrill, using a chronological format corresponding to the important periods marking Aalto’s career, traces and analyzes the following themes: the courtyard as an important ordering device in Aalto’s buildings, the evolution of the undulating surface into the fan form, Aalto’s concern for natural light, the use of vernacular images and motifs as sources of expression, the recurring presence of romantic sensibilities and qualities in Aalto’s work, and his exploration and development of an expressive and tactile material vocabulary.

In placing Aalto within the larger context of Finnish architectural history, Quantrill concentrates on the relationship between Aalto’s work and the architecture of the national romantic period. This is especially appropriate in evaluating Aalto’s output from the late 1930s until the beginning of his last decade of practice (c. 1966). The correspondence seen between national romantic architecture and Aalto’s work from 1937–1966 is made manifest through the development and mature expression of the architectural themes Quantrill evaluates, for a number of these themes are romantic in inspiration. But Finnish architecture is more than recurring romanticism, since it contains a strong national component—the “Nordic classicism” of the early 19th century and the “Nordic classicism” of the 1920s. Quantrill is less successful in integrating and interpreting the latent classicism found in Aalto’s work.

In assessing the major works of Aalto’s 50-year career, Quantrill only achieves part of his intention to create a critical companion to the three Aalto volumes, for he sacrifices comprehensiveness. The three volumes are as important for what they omit as for what they include, and this affects the completeness of Quantrill’s presentation and analysis. Missing from Aalto’s oeuvre compléte, and incompletely presented in most recent assessments of his work, are two important periods in his development: the early years from 1920–1930 and the war years (1939–1945). Quantrill, as Pearson before him, fails to adequately and comprehensively address the work from both these periods, having selected only Aalto’s major buildings to examine. The important work done by Aalto during the time his office was located in Jyväskylä (1923–1927) has not been fully documented or critically assessed as yet. Schildt’s Alvar Aalto: De vita bordet is one of the few books that contain a representative selection of projects, competition entries, and built works done during this period. The similar relative neglect of the period between 1939–1945 is also regrettable, since during that period Aalto was engaged in designing a variety of building types ranging from saunas and housing complexes to entire factories for Finland’s major industrial firms. To fully understand Aalto’s evolution, especially his use of vernacular sources of expression and incorporation of vernacular-inspired details, this period requires more substantive analysis. With Quantrill’s focus on romantic and vernacular influences in Aalto’s work, to omit critical discussion of this period is unfortunate.

These three books encapsulate the range of approaches currently being used to interpret and assess Aalto’s architecture. Each covers significant territory and contains important insights and appraisals. Quantrill’s and Porphy-

"This volume," writes Amiram Harlap, "does not purport...to be a compendium or catalogue of all the noteworthy architectural works done in Israel in recent years; rather, it is an attempt to single out some creative works that are representative, in one way or another, of the search, the experiments, and the solutions that underlie Israeli architecture." This search, he contends, is so intensive that Israel might almost be regarded as a laboratory of experimental probing, a seeking for authenticity and appropriateness in an environment of challenge and change.

Harlap sets two goals for his book: to "provide an acquaintance with Israeli architecture," and to "offer an understanding of the factors that go into the making of that architecture." To facilitate that understanding, we are presented with a preliminary section, "Background and Development." Here are the essential, geographical facts about Israel: its location, physical characteristics, and climate; the demographic basis of its complex, heterogeneous population; and the nature of the building industry and its growing industrialization, as well as a look at who owns the land and who initiates the major projects. This is dry, factual material, more informative than enlightening. The data presented, moreover, are, at the time of publication, well over a decade out of date. Given the dynamics of Israeli development, this can lead to critical distortions of vision and interpretation.

A brief history of architectural development since the 19th century follows. It is a thoughtful, well-researched article of expanded length. As there is so little written on Israeli architectural history, it is to be welcomed; but it is not the authoritative, scholarly history, thoroughly researched and adequately documented, that is so badly needed. When such a history comes to be written, it should be enriched by the serious research currently in hand, or recently completed, on a range of topics that includes: the origins and development of the design of the kibbutz; major urban design projects and important architectural projects during the Mandate period; the emergence and characteristics of the public housing movement prior to and after the development of the state; and the role of such significant architects as Eric Mendelsohn and Richard Kauffmann.

Kauffmann, incidentally, has his name consistently misspelled in Harlap's book, as does Baerwald (not Berwald). Clifford Baillie (not Clifford) and others. This is not a case of transliteration from the Hebrew, for these are European names, but even if transliteration is the problem, we can at least expect consistency: is it Chavkin or Havkin, Krakower or Krakauer? The book, from a technical point of view, gives every indication of having been hastily cobbled together. There are numerous printing errors; there are four systems of dealing with figure numbers; there is a hodgepodge of an addendum, followed by an afterthought, "Some Recent Buildings," which commences with an illustration of a Tel Aviv building of the 1930s—all indicating some improvisation in putting the book together.

The most satisfactory part of the book is the section entitled "Representative Projects," to which some three-quarters of the volume is dedicated. Despite the author's disclaimer, it is really a compendium, but of course not an all-inclusive one. It consists of illustrations and descriptions of a very large number of architectural projects, dating in the main from the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 to the early 1970s. (The appended chapter, "Some Recent Buildings," cursorily attempts to bridge the ten-year gap between the principal contents of the book and the date of publication.) The projects are classified according to building types, and are presented chronologically in each category. Each project is well illustrated with photographs, plans, and sections; the accompanying descriptive text is brief and factual. The names of participating architects are listed—in Israel, with constantly changing partnerships and many ad hoc teams of designers, this is by no means an easy task of identification—and all buildings are dated, sometimes specifically, usually by a more general term such as "mid 60s." This may not be the level of specificity to which we in the Technion's "Documentation Centre for Architecture" would aspire, but it is so much better than what has hitherto passed for documentation in the publication of Israeli work, that it is to be welcomed.

In this section of the book there is no analysis or critical comment. The facts are presented and left to speak for themselves. The resultant picture which emerges of the Israeli achievement is, I believe, impressive. We are, after all, talking of a mere 25 years or so in the output of a small country struggling at times with daunting objective tasks of immigrant absorption, economic stringency, and defense, and with a total population probably no larger than a medium-to-large city, by world standards. There may not be great masterpieces of modern architecture here, but there is a cumulative body of work of consistently high standard—fresh, vital, often innovative. There is, moreover, despite local differences and individual nuances of approach, a kind of national consensus which gives to the architecture, particularly that of the 1950s and 1960s, a unity tending to, if not quite reaching, a national style. It is a hard architecture of stern materials—concrete and stone—and of uncompromising forms, geometric, massive, sharp-edged. It is an architecture where the wall surface is dominant, and the sun the main creator of pattern.

Harlap, particularly through his association with the Ministry of Housing—he edited the 1973 and 1977 editions of their publication Israel Buildings—has a first-hand, extensive knowledge of architects and architecture in Israel. While one can always argue about any anthology, on the whole this one is what it claims to be—representative. It is in its way an extension of the limited range of literature on Israeli architecture.

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