Like Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto continues to generate interest among different generations of architects, curators, and historians. A comparison of the publication industry supported by these key figures of twentieth-century architecture by way of a search of “title keywords” in the Harvard Hollis Catalog yields 812 hits for Le Corbusier, 486 for Frank Lloyd Wright, 152 for Mies van der Rohe, and 139 for Alvar Aalto. Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen’s study Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics, is among the most recent and worthwhile additions to the Hollis catalog because it fills a number of voids in Aalto scholarship (Figure 1).

With the help of archival correspondence, published essays, and design work, Pelkonen constructs a much more complete and nuanced intellectual biography of Aalto than has been done before. Pelkonen’s study, the result of a multi-year journey of research and writing that started with her doctoral studies at Columbia and continued during her current tenure as Assistant Professor at Yale University’s School of Architecture, portrays an architect with considerably deeper self-awareness of his role in Finnish and international modernism. Pelkonen has the added advantage of reading and writing in Finnish, which is not an insignificant tool to possess when archives and original-language texts are involved. Her partial translation of an essay by Carolus Lindberg (an important architect and one of Aalto’s favorite teachers) entitled “Traditional Finnish Architecture” (13) is a case in point of the ease with which Pelkonen alternates between different languages, with considerable advantages to non-Finnish readers. Although a translation of an article cited by Pelkonen such as “The Geography of the Housing Question” (1932) can also be found in an important English anthology such as Göran Schilddt’s Alvar Aalto in His Own Words (New York: Rizzoli, 1997, 86–89), Pelkonen adds invaluable reproductions of entire pages of the original essay (and not just the text) which allows the reader to better visualize the argument.

Not since Paul Turner’s important publication The Education of Le Corbusier (New York: Garland, 1977) has an architectural historian dedicated as much attention, for example, to the library of an architect. By studying Aalto’s intellectual milieu not only does Pelkonen situate the architect (to use an expression adopted by Sarah Goldhagen in her study on Louis Kahn published in 2001), she also reevaluates the misunderstanding, common to hagiographic monographic studies, that architects originate their work all on their own. The importance of Pelkonen’s contribution lies in her ability to redirect Aalto studies away from the insistence on Aalto as a undervalued genius (in part perpetuated by Aalto’s inscription on his boat of the Latin expression Nemo propheta in patria) and to produce a multifaceted portrait of the intellectual and geopolitical context that inspired his creative process and ultimately generated his work.

Pelkonen reacts to the overemphasis on Aalto’s empirical approach and his practical poetics. This tendency can be traced back to the late 1960s through the early 1980s (Aalto died in 1976), when International Style modernism was being seriously criticized in the wake of dissatisfaction with its universalizing tenets. During this time, Aalto’s body of work became the focus of a number of essays.

Pelkonen’s study is akin to the intellectual musings that generated Demetri Porphyrios’s important study *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (London: Academy Editions, 1982). Like Porphyrios, Pelkonen examines Aalto as architect and intellectual against the complex ideas that generated modernism as well as its many myths. Out of all of the concepts she examines, her thesis that geopolitics is the key to understanding Aalto’s modernity is important because it locates nationalist cultural politics firmly within modernity. To be sure, Pelkonen addresses geographic themes from a number of perspectives: national, international, pan-European, regional, and universal. While it is not an exhaustive monograph, Pelkonen’s carefully selected buildings and projects support her thesis. Her discussion of the geographical influences on Aalto’s bell tower for Kauhajärvi Church (1921) is just one of the many that could be cited. By emphasizing the role of geography in shaping modernism, she offers a more nuanced interpretation of events and positions than would have been possible within the more simplistic (good vs bad; left vs right; progressive vs reactionary) formulas based on the difficult relationship between art and politics that are typical, for example, of older morality-driven studies devoted to architecture under totalitarian regimes in Italy or Germany.

Aalto’s approach and understanding of the role of politics in his career and oeuvre, as outlined by Pelkonen, led to some “ambiguity,” as the author establishes in chapter nine. But rather than read Aalto’s engagement with geopolitics as a liability, Pelkonen stresses the complexity of a Finnish political context that resists simplistic interpretations typical of those criticisms of the 1920s and 1930s, which regarded modern design as either international or reactionary (i.e., nationalist). This insistence on geography can be traced back to the Italo-Swiss Rationalist architect and critic Alberto Sartoris and his *Encyclopédie de l’architecture nouvelle* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1948–57). In that three-volume overview published during the postwar years, Sartoris first used climate and geography to frame the development of the New Architecture and distinguished between the “Mediterranean climate and order” (volume 1), that of the northern countries (volume 2), and that of the Americas (volume 3). Recent overviews of world architecture (for example: Kenneth Frampton, ed., *World Architecture 1900–2000: A Critical Mosaic* [Vienna and New York: Springer, 1999–2000]) have taken up where authors such as Sartoris left off to explore how geography shaped twentieth-century architecture and urbanism.

Pelkonen divides her book into nine chapters organized into three parts: the “Making of a Nation,” “New Geographies,” and “Formal Registers.” Pelkonen’s elegantly designed but modest-size book is a model of how a monograph can be both focused and expansive, scholarly and accessible, and above all not excessively celebratory or hagiographic.

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