

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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Institute of Fine Arts, New York University
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Alvar Aalto: Planning Finland, c. 1940

My paper will deal with Alvar Aalto's planning ideas during the two Finno-Russian Wars between 1939-40 and 1941-44, during which he spent prolonged periods in the U.S. and became exposed to American regionalism. I will focus on a seminal year 1940 when Aalto was most actively pursuing different planning ideas during and in the aftermath of the Winter War.

I will discuss a series of articles and projects which demonstrate the various ways he started to apply regionalist planning principles to the Finnish war-time context. His article "Finland" written for the *Architectural Forum* in 1940 maps out the foundation of Finnish modernism on the lines of American regionalism and puts forth his plan for reconstruction. The proposal "American Town in Finland" executed while Aalto held a research professorship at MIT was a first attempt to put regionalist principles to use. A little brochure entitled *Post-War Reconstruction: Rehousing Research in Finland*, published through the Finnish Consulate in New York for American distribution in 1940, puts forward the idea of "flexible standardization," which allowed architecture to absorb various contingencies from site conditions to programmatic needs. Aalto's first large scale planning project, the Kokemäki River Valley Regional Plan (1940), both commissioned by Finnish industry, both encompassed new settlements, infrastructure, production, and recreational facilities and used planning as a means to regulate the spatial relationships between these functions.

I will point out how the Second World War offers a backdrop, even an answer, to Aalto's activities at that time. The "Finland" article was aimed at convincing his American audience--a potential source of humanitarian aid--that the Finns had nothing to do with the (putatively) Communist-infested international modern movement nor nationalism that fuelled the Second World War.

My paper will thus expose the audience to little-known aspects of Aalto's activities and persona, namely that he was very well versed in statecraft and saw his writings and architecture as a means to promote and even act out various geographical scripts. His geographic narratives produced terminology, representations, and spatial products whose goal was to understand and reinforce national culture, on the one hand, and conceptualize relationships to other countries, on the other. The spatial idea behind *regionalism* was a nested network, in which the country's internal infrastructural, settlement, and production networks are supported by and connected to the larger global networks of international commerce. On the whole exposure to regionalism helped him to overcome the nationalist and internationalist ideologies that had fuelled much of the architecture culture of the early part of the 20th century and take a pragmatist approach to geographic questions emphasizing management of economic, human, and natural resources

during the period of post-war Finnish reconstruction, which eventually laid the foundation for the future economic prosperity of the country.

Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen is an Assistant Professor at Yale School of Architecture, where she also directs the Masters of Environmental Design program and the modern architectural archives lab. She received her M.Arch from Tampere Technical University, a Masters of Environmental Design from Yale, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. She is an author of *Achtung Architektur! Image and Phantasm in Contemporary Austrian Architecture* (MIT Press 1996). Her second book *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*, which is co-edited by Donald Albrecht (Yale University Press, 2006), won the Sir Banister Fletcher Award in 2007, and the Philip Johnson Book Award in 2008. Her next book *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity and Geopolitics* will be published in March 2009, also by Yale University Press. She is currently working on a book and exhibition on Kevin Roche with her students. Her scholarly work has been supported by the Getty, the Graham Foundation, Finnish Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research.

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