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Aalto's principles of urban space and planning in connection to William Wurster and Lewis Mumford

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The American architect William Wurster (1895–1973) has often been considered the leader of the so-called Bay Region Style. He has left behind a vast inheritance of buildings, the bulk of which are single-family houses, built mainly in the area of San Francisco. Other outstanding architects of that school were the equally renowned Richard Maybeck and John Funk, yet many others could be recalled. They purported an architecture that, quite ostensibly, departed from the rigor and stiffness of the Modern Movement. To be more precise, their real antagonist was not the actual Modern Movement, but its by-product, the so-called International Style. Of course, many distinctions should be made about these terms (Modern Movement and International Style, not to mention Bay Region Style), yet this would bring us far from the limited context of the present essay.

The opposition between Bay Region Style and International Style was a truly American one, for obvious geographical reasons, being a ‘coasts’ opposition: International Style on the East Coast as against Bay Region Style on the West Coast. The latter term has been coined by Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), whose notorious international reputation is that of the great scholar of sociology and urbanism. His fame is actually tied to his masterworks, The Culture of the Cities, above all. Yet Mumford was also deeply concerned about architecture as such, especially American architecture. In his Sticks and Stones and in The Brown Decades, he envisioned an architecture ecologically designed, which avoids the ‘function as ultimate goal’ as well as the uncritical use of technology. He was also quite against the primacy of stylistic choices. His above-mentioned role of founder-theorist, for the architects of the Bay Region, is symptomatic of his broad approach.

Despite the fact that he was mostly involved in planning and urban matters, his attention to building deserves our attention for the purpose of my essay. Indeed Mumford’s theoretical continuousness between architecture and urbanism is retraceable in the work of Alvar Aalto. And this point makes more understandable the linkage between Aalto and Mumford, which I propose here following former studies.

Vastly successful with their clients, Bay Region Style architects designed buildings which, rather than opposing to International Style, simply ignored it altogether. Their terms of references were much broader and totally unprejudiced. Consistently, quite often they included any kind of vernacular elements. This led Henry-Russell Hitchcock to reply to Mumford and put forward the sarcastic term International Cottage Style. Hitchcock was, of course, defending his own ‘creature’, the International Style. As is well-known, it was him—together with Philip Johnson—who pompously organized the MOMA exhibition in 1932, which bore that renowned name.

The opposition between the two schools—one centered in San Francisco, the other in New York—increasingly tended to become a quarrel between their mentors. The apex of this cultural battle took place when Hitchcock and Mumford confronted each other rather
violently in a famous public debate at the MOMA in 1948 called *What is happening to Modern Architecture?* Leaving aside the mere ‘battle of style,’ I want to stress the important matters that *Bay Region Style* architects were—maybe somewhat unconsciously—addressing. By looking at those, the connection of Wurster with Aalto will appear quite clearly, enriching our understanding of Aalto’s work.

Wurster and his circle were, interestingly, working on an almost unavoidable criticism of Modern Movement. In doing so, they can be considered forerunners of what was going to happen in Europe in the late 1950 and 1960s, especially with the Team X and their likes. Lack of contextualization, rigidity of the rational plan, missed link with tradition and history are well-known weak points of the architecture of the Modern Movement, later to be criticized by the young generation within the CIAM. But these very issues happened to be *de facto* faced and often overcome by West Coast architects since the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly it happened with the issue that, more than any other, was totally disregarded by the International Stylists: concern for the relationship between user and building. Maybeck, Wurster and others, instead, were extremely keen in the use of their houses, the respect of the context and the careful choice of building materials.

It is important to note that their achievements did not constitute the isolated trends of a stylistic school, merely flanked by Mumford’s propaganda. There was Frank Lloyd Wright, of course, that was acting in a parallel manner. And, more importantly, their building activities actually fit into a different line of thought, which included sociological and democratic stances, which was increasingly developing in the United States. Indeed the critique of Modern Architecture was coupled by ideas of democratic planning and balanced regional development that Mumford, above others, was sustaining. Mumford’s ideas derived by his masters: Patrick Geddes, firstly, and Ebenezer Howard. The debate was ample: it involved not only a different relation between countryside and the city, but also the pursuit of a correct use of car and rail mobility and the awareness of regional planning. All this led to important achievements such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the strongly influential activities of the Regional Planning Association of America, of which Lewis Mumford was the most prominent member. Mumford dreamed of an ideal, yet imperfect and therefore possible, society for which he resumed the name *Eutopia*. In his view, this could be obtained by replanning by regional lines, with garden cities immersed in the countryside.

The debate about cities and regions was intertwined with the one about architecture as such. And this was true not only for Mumford: it involved, once again, the MOMA, where a few exhibitions were organized according to rather different approaches. The exhibitions ‘Planning the Modern House’, about John Funk and *Bay Region School* organized in 1942 and ‘Look at your Neighborhood’ held in 1944 on regionalist neighborhood planning appear rather striking if one thinks that in that very place, just a few years before, the *International Style* was celebrated. Beside Mumford, a noticeable part in this transmission of ideas—which held together sociology, planning and architecture—was played by Elizabeth Bauer Mock, assistant curator at MoMA. Not by chance, Elizabeth was the sister of Catherine Bauer, a sociologist tied both with Mumford and Wurster, professionally as well as sentimentally, as we shall see.

As a matter of fact, regardless of any biographical connections, Wurster has often been compared to Alvar Aalto because of similarities in their buildings. As it is well-known, Aalto was very concerned with the ‘humanization of architecture’. In this respect, his buildings stand out as against the more homogeneous production of his colleagues of the Modern Movement. As Kenneth Frampton wrote:

*Aalto’s life-long attempt to satisfy social and psychological criteria effectively set him apart from the more dogmatic Functionalists of the 1920s, whose careers were already established when he designed his first significant works. [...] Aalto always focused his attention on the creation of environments which would be conducive to human well-being.*
The difference between the rational stances of Gropius, Mies and their likes and the plans of the Finnish master do not need to be recalled. Here it is worthwhile to point out that they did not go unnoticed in the American context. Quite significantly, this happened in the very context that I have conjured up so far: the American debate, centered—as it was—at the MOMA. It was in the catalogue of the 1944 exhibition *Built in USA since 1932* that Elizabeth Bauer noted that another modernist in Europe, the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto had set the standard for a comparable ‘humanization’ of modern architecture by ‘creating fresh and sympathetic forms’ that emphasized the centrality of the person in design as shown in his Villa Mairea in Noormakku of 1936–38. Aalto’s ‘humanizing influence’, she maintained ‘could scarcely have found a more receptive public’ than in the United States.14

Wurster married Catherine Bauer in 1939. Years before, she had been the lover of Lewis Mumford. She travelled with Mumford in Europe to visit modern buildings and in 1934, under his encouragement, she published *Modern Housing.*15 They shared the Regional Planning Association of America experience, where Bauer was executive secretary. She was a prominent personality in the social housing debate and later became visiting lecturer at Berkeley. Through her, concern for social housing and democratic planning—together with other Mumford’s themes—was handed over to her husband. At this point, it might sound almost paradoxical that William Wurster and Alvar Aalto met by chance in 1937, as Wurster recalls.16 In that year, the Wursters and another couple travelled to North Europe to study Scandinavian architecture. As the story goes, they happened to stop in Munkkinniemi just in front of Aalto’s house, without knowing whose designer was it: from there, a friendship that lasted until the end of their lives.

Notably Wurster was the man behind Aalto’s commission for the Baker House, when he was the Dean of MIT between 1943 and 1948. It was him who invited twice Aalto to teach at MIT—likely as a counterbalance to Gropius’s New Bauhaus at Harvard. Mumford is also listed among those personalities that have been contacted by the Office A of the State Information Center. This Office, chaired by Aalto, had the aim of obtaining funds for the reconstruction of Finland. Analyzing these biographical notes, and taking into account the closeness of Aalto with the Wursters especially during his teaching periods at MIT, Riitta Nikula has rightly pointed out that Aalto must have been aware of Mumford’s theories.17 Indeed, if one looks at Aalto’s ideas about urban space, one can trace some commonalities between their ideas. Some of Mumford’s concerns for architecture are often recognizable in Aalto: aversion towards bare functionalism, refusal of preconceived style, appraisal of natural materials, respect of topographical conditions, praise for public space and for needs of the dweller. And of course landscape and nature acting in the background for both of them.

On a more general perspective we can also find the same ideas about a classless society, and the same concern for a social housing that could avoid the harshness of standardization.18 And in Aalto there is, also, the same fascination for biology, that comes directly from Mumford’s mentor, Geddes. I merely need to quote one of the many Aalto’s passages where these metaphors crop up:

> The Karelian house is in a way a building that begins with a single modest cell or with an imperfect embryo building, shelter for a man and animals, and which then figuratively speaking grows year by year. ‘The expanded Karelian house’ can in a way be compared with a biological cell formation. The possibility of a larger and more complete building is always open.19

This ideological background can help to better understand the genesis of Aalto’s architecture identifying some possible cultural roots rather than having forcefully to inscribe it in the generous upshot of a genius. The exposition to this American cultural milieu—where a peculiar version of a vernacular modern together with an organic use of material as well as a strong concern for the psychological implication of design—must have been appealing for the Finnish master—on his own already unhappy with the *house as living machine*’s ideology.
Aalto’s lectures and writings betray these backgrounds and his buildings give a further evidence of the treatment of these ideas. And yet, it is in the realm of urban planning that it is possible to find an indirect but ultimate outcome of the cultural environment, as outlined so far. Aalto made about 50 urban plans, between 1931 and 1962, many of which are not very known to scholars. They span from regional plans to contextual projects within the city, including residential projects, civic centers, campus planning and cemeteries. Many have not been built and this probably has caused lack of attention. They express many of the themes enlisted in this paper so far. Furthermore, as we have already pointed out, we find in Aalto’s urban projects several ideas that permeate his own buildings in a fusion between architecture and urbanism that remind us of Mumford’s.

One remarkable example of this unity is the open court scheme, so much recurrent in his buildings—as for instance in Villa Mairea (1938-39), Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949-52) and the Experimental house on Muuratsalo island (1952-53). This scheme finds a further development in many urban projects, including the ones for the cities of Jyväskylä, Oulu and Otaniemi, where L-shaped or C-shaped buildings—in a variety of solutions—are set as the matrix of the lay-out. This device allows Aalto to either include topographical or landscape-oriented directions, but it also generates urban public space in-between or in front of the buildings, an issue he was particularly concerned about. He, indeed conceived of space between the buildings as a set for ‘organic movement’—in a rather Mumfordque manner. This was an issue that he faced both at the small scale of the building and at the large scale of urban plans. In Aalto’s words:

One of the most difficult architectural problems is the shaping of the building’s surroundings to the human scale. In modern architecture where the rationality of the structural frame and the building masses threaten to dominate, there is often an architectural vacuum in the left-over portions of the site. It would be good if, instead of
filling up this vacuum with decorative gardens, the organic movement of people could be incorporated in the shaping of the site in order to create an intimate relationship between Man and Architecture.23

This does not imply that the building was merely set as an isolated object seeking relations to external marks. Indeed Aalto was perfectly aware of the values of urban texture. As is well-known Aalto was fascinated by urban complexity, which he mostly admired in Italian cities, very often quoted in writings and speeches. To this respect the 'Rautataajo' commercial building (1951-57) and the Academic Bookstore (1961-69) are good examples of this awareness. In those cases, the continuity of the street facade was secured and public space allowed in the interior. Yet, when conditions permitted, Aalto implemented very challenging proposals: urban buildings that stand halfway between 19th century urban blocks and the free-standing objects of certain modern architecture. The project for the Munkinniemi Pensions Institute Dwellings (1952) and the National Pensions Institute, The social insurance institution of Finland, Kela (1953-56) in Helsinki are successful examples of new urban lay-outs, bearing a different attitude towards the urban block. They are both successful attempts of inserting public space and urbanity within the block. Another outstanding example is the Enso-Gutzeit Co. head offices (1959-62), in which the rear facade is subtly fragmented in order to create a different perception and use.

This rather elaborated manipulation of the public space in-between buildings is quite clearly due primarily to the fulfillment, which Aalto highly sought, of the need of public space for the dwellers. An evidence of this primary concern is the fact that, consistently, this did not happened in industrial plans like Sunila. There, as Porphyrios has pointed out,24 the rationalistic grid is adopted with no prejudice. Quite clearly, for Aalto, the city was a ‘diffused house’, a place where a ‘community life’ had to take place, like in Mumford’s Eutopia. Another similarity between Aalto and Mumford is evident in the Kokemäen-
joki regional plan (1940), which echoes the approach the Tennessee Valley Authority plan. In the Regional plan for the Kokemäenjoki river valley, the separation of countryside and cities is totally blistered while the idea of flexibility—intended in terms of organic development—is clearly embraced. The Kokemäenjoki regional plan was based on faith of fast transportation by car. This was another point of contact between Aalto and Mumford. Mumford and Benton MacKay, notoriously, supported car transportation often proposing parkways. Exactly on the ground of this idea, Aalto was going to conceive the extraordinary Plan for Helsinki city centre (1961-66).

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Above: Alvar Aalto, Kokemäenjoki Regional Plan, Helsinki, Alvar Aalto Foundation.


'What is happening to Modern Architecture? A symposium at the Museum

Above: Alvar Aalto, Sunila industrial and residential plan, Helsinki, Alvar Aalto Foundation.


17 As far as I know we lack evidences that Aalto and Mumford actually met either in America, most likely at MIT, or in Europe. Scholars so far are discordant. Riitta Nikula poses it as unavoidable. Riitta Nikula, ‘La città negli scritti di Alvar Aalto’: 25. Eeva Maija Viljo goes beyond their acquaintance and takes for sure their friendship: ‘Lewis Mumford, the critic of urbanism and author of The Culture of Cities, was another of Aalto’s American friends.’ Eeva Maija Viljo, s.v. ‘Alvar Aalto’, *Biografialeskus* (http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/).


22 This is very much in the manner of Mumford, whose former activities as playwright have been influential in this respect. This point is made by Wojtowicz, *Lewis Mumford & American Modernism*: 113-114.


The rich body of papers produced for the 2nd Alvar Aalto Researchers Network Seminar ‘Aalto beyond Finland - Architecture and Design’ by scholars from different countries is an extraordinary attempt to illustrate the international environment in which Aalto worked from the beginning of his career and how his genius for making contacts made him a citizen of the world. At the same time, the research presented here is revealing of the internationalisation of Aalto and his work, shedding light on the cultural exchange occurring between Finland and the world in 20th and 21st centuries.