



FINLANDIA
TALO HUSET HALL

ALVAR AALTO & FINLANDIA HALL

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Alvar Aalto in the 1930's.
Photo: Heinonen,
Alvar Aalto -museum

To be able to understand the architecture of Finlandia Hall, one must be familiar with the larger vision of Helsinki of which Finlandia Hall is only a part, a vision that may never fully materialize.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Helsinki was granted the position of capital of the newly established Grand Duchy of Finland, and the architect Carl Ludvig Engel designed the monumental central square, known today as the Senate Square, which is flanked by the Cathedral, Senate Palace and the University. Alvar Aalto was of the opinion that independent Finland should construct a central square of its own in the new centre of the city, which is in the vicinity of the Parliament House, the building that symbolizes the status won in 1917. It was a lucky coincidence that right in front of the Parliament there lay a large railway freight yard which was to be re-sited elsewhere; Aalto thought that this area would provide a unique opportunity for the realization of an idea, originally suggested by Eliel Saarinen in 1917, for the construction of a new traffic route called Freedom Avenue (Vapaudenkatu) from the northern suburbs right to the heart of the city.

Aalto envisaged a large, fan-shaped square terraced on three levels the topmost point of which would be where the equestrian statue of Mannerheim now stands. The square would open towards Töölönlahti Bay, and on one side it would be flanked by a concert and congress hall and further on by an opera house, an art museum, the city library and, possibly, other public buildings, which would be erected in the midst of the greenery of Hesperia Park. Freedom Avenue was to be built on columns over the northbound railway track, and people approaching the centre by car would see the city opening up before them, a magnificent urban landscape with its facades mirrored in the waters of Töölönlahti Bay, a similar effect to the palaces of Venice. The fan-shaped square would welcome people in a wide embrace while the Parliament House and the Railway Station would provide a supporting flank to the sides.

FINLANDIA HALL

This first plan for the centre was drawn by Aalto in 1961. He modified it in 1964 and 1971 on the basis of criticism from various sources.

Finlandia Hall was designed in 1962 and built between 1967-72. The plan for the congress wing was drawn in 1970 and it was constructed between 1973-75. With the completion of the first stage of this large project, Aalto thought he had triumphed.

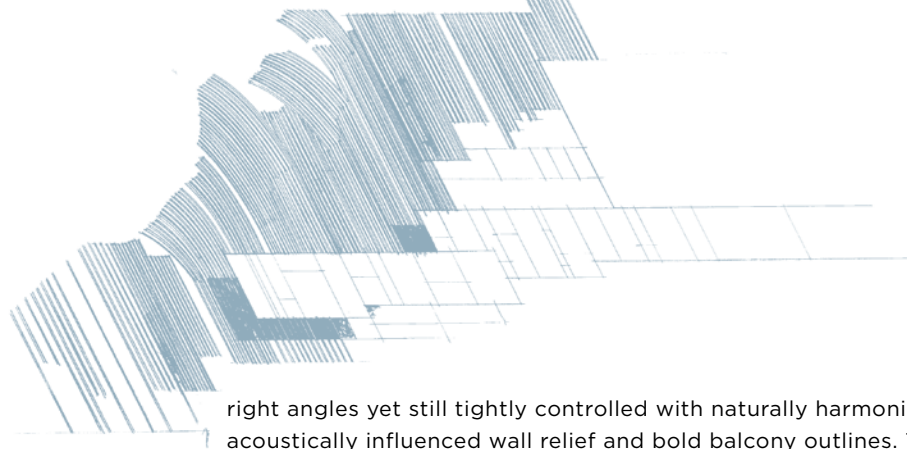
Finlandia Hall itself exhibits many of the ideas that Aalto experimented with during his lifelong preoccupation with monumental building construction. This is not a functional creation, if the term is taken to signify a building whose forms are dictated solely by its practical functions and associated structural solutions. The other way round it is a decoratively conceived composition of cubistic forms, which constitutes a many-faceted whole. None of these elements are, however, purely decorative; Aalto remained faithful to functionalism to the extent that he always sought a practical reason for his forms. The main idea of Finlandia Hall with its tower-shaped part and inclined roof rising over the whole structure was, as Aalto thought, to improve the acoustics of the concert hall by providing a resonance area overhead. The audience would not see it because of the suspended ceiling but it would be capable of creating the kind of acoustic effect that high churches possess. It is unfortunate that this attempt proved in practice to be partially unsuccessful. Yet, the result still provides us with the visual satisfaction of its monumental exterior.

There is a similar twofold reason for the marble which Aalto used both on the exterior, where it is contrasted with black granite, and in the interior. To him marble was an important link with the Mediterranean culture which he wanted to introduce into Finland.

The interior also provides typical examples of many of Aalto's hallmarks and motifs. The large asymmetrical auditorium is nearly void of



Alvar Aalto in the 1970's.
Photo: Eva and Pertti
Ingervo,
Alvar Aalto -museum



right angles yet still tightly controlled with naturally harmonious and acoustically influenced wall relief and bold balcony outlines. Thus it is a simplified version of Aalto's most magnificent auditorium in the Great Opera House, Essen. Between this closed hall for 1700 people and the small auditorium for 340 (its ceiling is borrowed from Aalto's church in Detmerode, Germany) lies the foyer, which is like an open landscape. This is one of these spaces, which lacks any overall form but is surrounded by powerfully designed elements, which Aalto really could master. This foyer layout extends to, or is continued into the congress wing where the most conspicuous architectural feature is the wall which curves inwards in small sections. Even here the motivation was twofold: on the one hand Aalto wanted to save a number of trees growing on the original lot, and on the other, he wished to break the rigid uniformity characteristic of straight walls.

In addition to these general observations, a few words must be said about the preoccupation with detail and the high-quality construction work so typical of Aalto. Here in Finlandia Hall these details are stretched to the limit. Every lighting fixture, every piece of furniture as well as all mouldings, panels and flooring materials were specially designed and are a result of the experience of Aalto's long career as an architect. All materials and colours speak in nature's own subdued way without anything artificial to distract. This is in keeping with Aalto's conviction that architecture serves as a background for human beings. It is not startling forms or interiors with vivid colours that are supposed to attract attention, it is the audience and the performers. Therefore it cannot be denied that something is required of the people, too. The guests at Finlandia Hall need not be attired in the same way as the audiences in traditional opera foyers or gold-laced theatres but they should be as natural and as honest in appearance as the surroundings.

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