

*Alvar Aalto and Japan: Mutual Discovery of  
Environmental Integration Architecture Idioms*

Evgeny Pyshkin, University of Aizu

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**Introduction**

Though the famous Finnish architect *Alvar Aalto* (1898-1976) never visited Japan, his works include a number of important links to Japanese culture. Nowadays we observe constant public interest in architecture and design exhibitions organized in Japan, which are influenced by Aalto works and introduce the connotations to Aalto's rational modernism and environmental design. Particularly, we can recall the 2019 *Artek* project with a flagship exhibit of the classical Ystävä stool designed by Aalto, the 1986 glass and furniture exhibition organized in *Tokyo Axis Gallery*, which presented art deco works into the context of exposition space using ceiling panels constructed from recycled paper tubes and referring to the interiors of Aalto's *Viipuri Library*, and the project "*Alvar Aalto Second Nature*" in Tokyo Station Gallery, to cite a few. The curators of these projects introduced Aalto's iconic designs ranging from furniture and household items to his architectural masterpiece constructions including such conceptual projects as *Villa Mairea*, *Finlandia Hall*, *Jyväskylä University*, and many others. Thus, there is an inherent interest of Japanese public to the emblematic works of Finnish modernism and rationalism through the careful investigation of the existing links and mutual dependency between contemporary Western and Japanese cultural traditions in architecture, design, and applied arts.

## Japanese Traditions among the Inspirational Sources of Aalto's Style

Aalto's projects (particularly, *Villa Mairea* in *Noormarkku, Pori* and its own house in *Riihitie, Helsinki*) attract particular attention of architecture critiques investigating how these projects draw upon inspirational sources from Japanese traditional architecture. In his lecture "*Japonism and Alvar Aalto*" (Hansen, 2010), Leif Høgfeldt Hansen described how the book "*Das Japanische Wohnhaus*" by Tetsuro Yoshida (Yoshida, 1935) was used as a design manual for Aalto's *Villa Mairea* finished in 1939. Hansen pointed out that Aalto's reflection on Japanese architecture became one of core components of the transformation of his style to what can be called "*soft modernism*". Thus, according to (Kim, 2008), Japanese architect Tetsuro Yoshida (1894–1956) was a key figure and mediator of architectural interchange between East and West during the early 1930's. He strived to introduce Japanese architecture (and Japanese culture in a broader sense) to Europe, while bringing many ideas of Western modernism back to Japan.

Japanese patterns were not the only source of Aalto's approach; the adoption of Japanese patterns to Western architecture was one of important elements of the synthesis of Aalto's personal idioms and architectural forms (Chiu, Niskanen & Song, 2017). Beyond the scope of Yoshida's monograph, Aalto had access to a wide variety of literature sources presented to him by the family of the Hakotara Ishikawa, the first Japanese ambassador to Finland between 1933 to 1937. Aalto expressed his appreciation of Japanese culture in the 1935 lecture at the Swedish Craft Society (Aalto, 1935): "*There is a civilization that, even [at the handicraft stage, showed] enormous sensitivity and tact toward the individual in this regard. I mean parts of the Japanese culture, which, with its limited range of raw materials and forms, inculcated a virtuoso skill in creating variations and almost daily recombinations*" (Hansen, 2010).

With respect to how the *Riihitie* and *Villa Mairea* designs respond to the surrounding natural landscapes in both functional and aesthetic ways, we need to analyze a wider range of inspirational sources including huge complexes such as *Katsura Imperial Villa*, nicely described in this context in (Chiu, Niskanen & Song, 2017) and *Tamozawa Goyōteivilla* in Nikko, as well as smaller residences such as *Seisonkaku Villa* in Kanazawa built by Lord Maeda for his mother in the last years of the Edo Period, the latter is particularly interesting because garden viewing deck roof built without traditional supports so as not to interrupt the beautiful view to the garden.

## Aalto and Japan: Towards an Architecture of Meaningful Environmental Integration

The route of ideas and idioms is not a one-way journey, but (*ōfuku*, Japanese) – round trip. In contemporary Japanese architecture, we can find a number of interesting examples of re-consideration of Aalto models in Japan. In Fukushima prefecture, on the slope of Bandai mountain, there is the hotel *Hotelliaalto* designed as a collaboration project of Yoshihiro Masuko, Toshikazu Kawai, and Shintaro Otake. The responsive character of this project definitely fits the frame of what people mean by *Nordic architecture* often characterized by such traits as simplicity and functionality packed with the integration of building space with communicating landscapes: in our case, the hotel sections differently “communicate” with forest and mountain sides of the complex. However, the hotel design could not be understood as a simple translation of Aalto idioms, but an implementation of the meaningful environmental design incorporating the models and patterns from both Nordic rational modernism and traditional Japanese villa and searching for a mutual response between the architectural project, environment and human beings (where the links to both the particular individuals and the society at large are of equal importance). The latter thesis may be nicely illustrated by Aalto’s project for *Jyväskylä University*, where the authors were searching for a way of implementing the meaningful interaction of the university buildings with Jyväskylä city by “*integrating the university into the urban fabric not only as an academic facility, but as a public and intellectual center*” (Fiederer, 2016). New university buildings (such as Agora Center designed by Arto Sipinen and built in 2000) follow the Aalto’s approach of finding a harmony between its function and dialogue with the environment.

In addition to the above-mentioned *Hotelliaalto* project, in contemporary Japanese architecture we can find other clear references to Aalto’s works. A perfect example is the *Iwaki museum and library of picture books* (2005) (Emily, 2012), a meaningful but less known project by *Tadao Ando* (born 1941) compared to the famous Tokyo Skytree tower construction, where he was one of the chief supervisors. The picture book library used by a private kindergarten in Fukushima prefecture is a fascinating demonstration of Ando’s critical regionalism seeking to provide an architecture rooted in the modern traditions, but tied to its geographical and cultural context. Here, the term “critical” is used to refer to an ability to adopt local circumstances to common solutions (Botz-Bornstein, 2016). The ways the building of the picture book museum interacts with the nature conform to the models introduced by Aalto in his *Villa Mairea*, the latter being often arguably mentioned as one of best examples illustrating the association and mutual dependency of architecture and nature: “[*the entrance is*] a sensitive intermediary between the real forest of the outer world and the microcosmic

*forest inside the house [...]. The main staircase is a miniature forest*” (Kim, 2009). Ando reinterpreted Aalto’s approach to the case of functional building situated between the scenic Pacific Ocean coast and the hill landscape of Hamadori region in Fukushima prefecture. It is no exaggeration to say that Ando’s project may be considered as an illustration of one of the major idioms of Aalto’s approach: “*humanizing modern architecture for both physical and psychological needs of human beings*” (Chiu, Niskanen & Song, 2017) by the means of composing the clear relationships with the environment. The effect of architecture humanization can be achieved by completely different means, not obligatorily within the functional or rethought modernism paradigm: for example, in the famous Liège-Guillemins station project (2009), Santiago Calatrava suggested to use a structure without facades “*relying on the roof for shelter and the building’s identity [and implementing a] transparency and dialogue between two neighbourhoods – the one residential, the other resolutely urban*” (Etherington, 2009).

## Conclusion

This brief study of the mutual dependencies between distant but actively interacting cultures through the perspective of connections between traditional Japanese architecture and modernist and post-modernist projects of 20th and 21st centuries contributes to the discourse on reciprocal influence between Aalto and Japanese modern and contemporary architecture, which is far from being at the end of resources and needs further research efforts, discussions, and discoveries. I have to accept possible criticism of this contribution, which lacks justified observations and more detailed examples of how the presented ideas are actualized in existing designs and buildings. This short and perhaps even profane writing hopefully invites more in-depth studies especially from those having better professional expertise in the domain, in contrast to the author, for whom this exploratory input is rather a reflection of personal interests beyond the scope of the professional majors.

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## Attachments

The following photos taken by the author are attached to this article:

1. Finlandia Hall, Helsinki, Finland.
2. Interiors of Aalto's House in Riihitie, Helsinki, Finland.
3. View to the internal garden of Seisonkaku Villa, Kanazawa, Japan.
4. Tamozawa Imperial Villa, Nikko, Japan.
5. Hotelliaalto hotel in Fukushima prefecture, Japan.
6. Agora Center, Jyväskylä University, Finland.
7. Museum of Picture Books, Iwaki, Japan.
8. Skytree Tower, Tokyo, Japan.

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