

Play, Dream, and the Search for the “Real” Form of Dwelling From Aalto to Ando

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In the history of modern architecture, an active and ample criticism of all too conventional and standardized forms effectively voiced itself through the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto. Furthermore, as standardization and internationalization progressed, their ideas about the human value of architecture as well as about place as a *genius loci*, remained forgotten for some decades, but reappeared in the mid-1970s in several countries. Tadao Ando is the architect who, in Japan, consistently formulated non-modernist approaches reminiscent of those of the above “modernists of the second generation,” but which nevertheless bear differences. I want to show in this article, how anti-modern architectural counter movements remained constant to some extent over the last 50 years, though they had to change their strategies at the moment the face of “international reality” was changing. The juxtaposition of Aalto and Ando serves this purpose. The clarifications of Ando’s architectural philosophy that I provide in the second part of the article need to be understood in front of this background.

Aalto’s or Wright’s rejection of modern rationalism led to a reevaluation of an organic method often widely associated with “romantic” ideas. “Warmth” and “feeling” were opposed to “coldness” and “ratio”.¹ In terms of aesthetics, “organic” forms as well as a “naturalness” in architecture bring about a shift from what German idealism has called the “*Kunstschönheit*” (artistic beauty) to the “*Naturschönheit*” (natural beauty). Such a shift implies self-restriction of the architect’s artistic liberty, or, if we want to use a term by the German aesthetician Riegl, it asks for a restriction of the architect’s “will to style” in order to favor more unconscious, instinctive approaches. Accordingly, for Aalto architectural space was considered a successful creation when it was composed in a “natural way”. “Style” would here, necessarily, become secondary because it could only appear as just another abstract concept, as just another intellectual hypothesis bound to contradict the creation of an organic place supposed to be almost as convincing as nature.

It would however, be too simple to identify Aalto’s approach with that of a vague Romanticism. His voca-

bulary has never, in spite of its pronounced regionalist identity, slumped into a quasi kitsch that the preceding Finnish National Romanticism would probably have fallen into, had it continued on the same path it had been exploring for some time. Though rarely noted, in Aalto's thinking there are some ironical or paradoxical lines which make him interesting even today and which were, beyond that, continued by Pietilä.

An important point is that Aalto saw his break with rationalist modern architecture not as a break with rationalism as such, but thought that so far in modern architecture, "rationalization would not have gone deep enough."² That this represents a consistent way of seeing things and not only a play with words becomes clear if one looks at the continuation of modern architecture and at Aalto's position within it. What Aalto alludes to, is the existence of a form of rationality which is not structural or formal but which manages to incorporate in itself all forms of concrete life. In order to understand what Aalto meant by this kind of rationality, it will certainly be in keeping with his own approaches to say that it is closely related to the rationality that human beings use when playing games. As a matter of fact, Aalto himself has put forward the idea of play as a quantity that he wanted to see as being opposed to modern approaches. In 1953 he wrote:

Though we are in the midst of an experimenting, calculating and utilitarian age, we still have to believe that play has a vital role in building a society for man, the eternal child."³

Anti-rationalism of play in Aalto and Ando

First, the link between Aalto and Pietilä can, in my opinion, not be established more efficiently than by insisting on the role of play in both architect's procedures. In his book on Reima Pietilä, Malcolm Quantrill writes that the

sense of play, so essential to Aalto's concept of design method – as it is also indeed to Pietilä's – is offered as a means of escape from the straightjacket of fore-knowledge, just as a child plays to reach beyond the limits of its knowledge and experience.⁴

In Pietilä, Aalto's paradoxical anti-rationalism that is constantly looking for a deeper form of rationality, becomes something like an "unstable language" (Connah), i.e. a language so unstable that it cannot even be grasped by means of intuition. "Intuition", be it "feeling" or a matter of reason, would, in any case, be romanticist,⁵ it would represent a direct approach trying to grasp architecture in the same way in which it grasps nature. What is needed however, is not nature or art but mathematics and empiricism. Only a surplus of mathematics can alter those rigid and scholastic structures that modern architecture clings to (ibid), and only "empiricism" can bring about an "experience with concrete objects" that modernity has lost hold of. (cf. *Le carré bleu* 1958:1)

In Aalto and Pietilä we see that what was (and perhaps is) in question for any criticism of modernity has never been the call for a "back to nature" or an "against reason" but the overcoming of insufficient forms of rationality as they are used by modernity. This is where I see – within the context of the present philosophical elaboration – a developmental line leading from Aalto to Ando within which Pietilä (though certainly also Louis Kahn) plays a mediating role. Both Pietilä and Ando define their approaches through a strong identification with their native environment. Pietilä defined many of his fundamental ideas in the sixties, but his thoughts on neo-regionalism occupied him especially in the seventies, thus at a time when also Ando formulated thoughts about the relationship between architecture and society. Similar to what Aalto produced forty years earlier in Finland, Ando's architecture appears, at first sight, like a manifestation of a strong anti-intellectualism. Architectural spaces, Ando says, should not be "born of intellectual operations, but of emotions rooted in the desires of many different people." This points to a rejection of thought in general. However, like for Aalto and Pietilä, Ando's alternative is a rationality that is meant to "go deeper" than the overall "rational" structures created by society for so called "free" individuals.

In the 20th century one has generally believed that if intellectualism leads to a separation of architecture from society, the link with society can only be reestablished by modeling everything according to social

needs. However, this is only another form of intellectualism. It has been said of Ando's houses that they are "irrational" and "inconvenient". Is the juxtaposition of the two terms not all too revealing? Is rationality really supposed to be "convenient?" In reality, the deep structure of human dwelling to be rethought in modernity can be discovered neither inside the human mind nor simply "outside", in social life. The true structure of human dwelling is neither a scientific law nor is it an artistic style imposed upon buildings by seeing architecture as art. If there is a way of finding the structure of dwelling that is "convenient" for people, it is most likely to be found through its treatment as a game-like movement that implies a paradoxical negation and simultaneous affirmation of social reality within itself.

One of the ways of finding this game-like structure is by establishing, as does Ando, an "individual zone within society" within which the significance of daily life is allowed to develop new dimensions. Within this "individual zone," which nevertheless communicates, in a paradoxical way, with its environment, within this "primitive image scene" (Ando, *Japan Architect*, 1978:6), a new style of life can arise. This will be a "style" more than the stylization of another, arbitrarily chosen, previous style (since many modern "Japanese-style" buildings are not more than the imitation of a pre-supposed "Japanese style"). It will be an approach that is also as far as possible from the idea of "architecture as art." It will be a style so fundamental that it will be opposed to any ideas of convenience.

Finally, this style can also be called "natural", for real style is a natural as nature. There are few plants in Ando's houses, a fact that could let him seem to stand apart from the "close-to-nature" architecture of Aalto. However, De Stijl had no plants either, and still their houses appear, when compared to the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier (who had no plants either) as almost pantheistically natural. Nature is a matter of spirit and not of plants. Modern architecture all too often reveals a profound misunderstanding of this fact by putting plants into buildings and thus committing a lazy act of stylization. (Would it be wrong to say that Ando's houses are Japanese "dry gardens" and Aalto's European, "organic" ones?).

These are also reasons why I disagree with interpretations like those of Katsuhiko Kobayashi who develops, in regard to Ando, a dialectics of rationality and humanism that would already have been questionable in regard to Aalto. Kobayashi believes that Ando, though a rationalist, would constantly be pursued by the humanist in himself. (JA, 1991:1, p. 138) From the aforesaid it arises that it is rather because of his rationalism that Ando is a humanist and not in spite of it. Finally, rationality is a part of the human being.

The fact of being confronted with an "inconvenient rationality" that seems to be removed from the rationality of everyday life, though at the same time bearing the strict and consistent traits of rationality, is reminiscent of the experience we are making when playing a game. I have made some suggestions concerning the importance of play in Aalto and Pietilä. However, it is also certain that the experience of a convincingly self-sufficient, though at the same time infinitely strange, reality also reminds us of experiences we are making in dreaming. Though not Aalto's, at least Pietilä's architecture provides, as I have shown elsewhere ⁶, some interesting references with regard to "architecture and dream. I will concentrate here though, on Ando's dreamlike input.

Anti-rationalism of dream in Ando

Yonel Schein has spoken of the "profound reverie of Wright" (*Le carre bleu*, 1964:2), and if one wants to see a continuation from Wright to Ando one could say that Ando continues Wright's

lightness reachable with the serenity of the one who had gone beyond the anguish of the present with a long march toward higher stages of alienation.

(Tafari and Dal Co on Wright)⁷

"Wind, light, earth, and water. This is a reverie and rest for humanity," says Ando. (JA 198:3, p. 58) Ando's "architecture of dream" can be explained through the connection it has with the idea of "play" as it has been developed by a preceding generation of anti-rationalist architects of whom Aalto has so far served as an example. Ando calls for the "dreaming and lunacy that

conceivably occupy an important position in the work of architecture," (JA 1986:3) and admits that many of his commissions "have emerged from a dream."⁸ Elements of a dream-like vocabulary came to Ando from Isozaki who often uses dream motives in a mannerist fashion. In Isozaki one notes attempts to undermine reality in order to create illusionary effects. Also Ando's architecture creates, at times, a dream-like atmosphere but the means and aims he pursues are different from that of Isozaki. Ando's "aesthetics of dream", if he really has one, is more a matter of participation than of contemplation.

First, there are the labyrinthine structures of his houses. The labyrinth bears a clear metaphorical link with dreaming (as much as it does with play). Then there are the concrete walls, which enclose space by, on the one hand, being absolute and physically concrete, and abstract and ungraspable, on the other. Ando says that he uses concrete because in this way walls

become abstract, are negated, and approach the ultimate limit of space. Their actuality is lost, and only the space they enclose gives a sense of reality existing. (JA 1982:5, p. 12)

One could hardly better describe the experience of space as it is made in dreaming. The absolute enclosure of dream-space exists, but at the same time this space appears to be unlimited because the dream itself exists "as such" and is not contained in any other space.

Also on a more abstract level, Ando's aesthetic comes close to an aesthetic of dreaming. The fact of obtaining a level of purity that exceeds function completely overlaps with the principles underlying any ontology of dream. If dream would only follow functions, it could not even exist. Only because – for whatever reason – the (normal representative) form of the dream is severed from function (through, according to Freud, condensation, distortion, etc.), a strange phenomenon like dreaming is allowed to arise.

Another point which makes me believe in a link between Ando's work and an aesthetic of dream is the fact that one is often unsure if there is irony involved or not.

Finally, there is the silence. Silence is the form of purity that is essential to game. "Silent spaces cannot be seen with the eyes; they are felt with the heart," says Bontond Bogнар.⁹ Takefumi Aida has almost canonized the parameters essential to the "architecture of silence". Silence is dark, it is contained in materials, it is nature, it is pessimistic. (JA 1977:10/11) We can add that silence is also essential to dream (if not dream is also essential to silence). To this, the scrupulous examinations of Freud and Kraepelin of the function of speech in dream testify. In dream, every spoken word weighs very heavily and "purity of expression" becomes a stylistic imperative. It is clear how much, in this context, style becomes a "logic" as opposed to "aesthetic form". It is a logic whose function is fundamental and more important than all the rest. Ando says:

What is important is the clarity of one's logic. Not the transparency one associates with superficial beauty, or a simple geometrical quality, but the transparency of a consistent logic.

(JA 1991:1)

What he says would apply to game as much as to dream.

In dream, such a kind of logic establishes itself, and it always develops from the inside to the outside. Is it necessary to say that also Ando always works "from the inside to the outside"? And like Ando, also dream does not really create an "imaginary space" but rather something like a space rhythm that can be called *ma* and which is objective and subjective at the same time. In dream, as in Ando's buildings, there is no overall structure (except the one attributed by the analyst) and nothing can be seen from the outside. But like dream (and like the Japanese tea pavilion *sukiya*) Ando's houses contain a totality coordinating the details and contributing to the creation of a more profound stylistic expression. "I prefer for the space to speak and for the walls to produce no sense of their own entities," says Ando. Is this not something like "the space of dream" in which space is not geometrically defined but exists "for itself" only through (game-like) experience?

The ideas about space and silence in regard to dream, are also essential to traditional Japanese culture.

In Noh-plays the quality of *yūgen* (translated as 'mystical depth') is able to create a spatial experience that comes close to the experience of dream. Typical motifs of Noh-plays are scenes in which dream and reality interpenetrate and cannot be distinguished from each other. Then, the stylized and silent way of walking of the Noh-actors creates a kind of unreal space or *ma* in which temporal continuity is abolished. The Noh-play creates a space of silence, and in it, the experience of dream can be essential.

It is impossible to talk in this context about Ando's search of a fundamental style without mentioning the role played by the body. Space is experienced with the body, and when this happens, we are once again close to the experience of space in dream:

And even before my mind had identified the habitation, he, my body, remembered everybody's bed, the place of the doors, the position of the windows, the existence of the corridor...¹⁰

This is how Proust describes the sleepwalking experience of orienting oneself, half asleep, in a dark room. It is the body which knows the space so well, much better than the mind. When Ando says that he would be interested in seeing what "life-patterns can be extracted and developed from living under severe conditions" (JA 1980:4) it becomes clear that Ando wants to enter the phenomenon of "life-style" into the most profound layers of human existence. Through "severe experience" the "right" way of living leaves the sphere of theory and becomes a matter of the body. Once again, all this is very Japanese. Nishida Kitaro, the main Japanese philosopher of the 20th century, believes that the body is the center of our thought, that the body thinks and that only the body permits us to be linked to the environment.

Conclusion

The link between the exposition of Ando's "phenomenology of dream" and the preceding reflections on Aalto architecture of play might have appeared as being covered, on these last pages, under philosophical descriptions of Ando's architecture of dream. Still, the purpose of the present article was to describe a line



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leading from Aalto to Ando, represented by a common protest against standardization and internationalization. If this line is difficult to recognize, then only because "internationalization" itself has changed its face. Aalto made a case against modern impersonalism as well as against an idyllic consumer society propagating a life-style incompatible with any search for profounder styles of living. What he offered was his "organic" alternative. Today, however, it turns out that at a further stage of internationalization involving reality's quasi "virtualization" through the media as well as through the computer, "organism" is no longer sufficient. My point is that here, at the stage of virtualized and globalized modernity, Ando's spaces appear, through the affinities they bear with dreamlike expression, as the most convincing anti-rationalist alternative. At the same time they are, just because of their dreamlike input, linked to earlier "playful" attempts of Aalto and Pielitā. Like Aalto's architecture, Ando's spaces make a case against cold and technocratic modernism but at the same time they do more: they also make a case against the idyllic global village offered by visions of a world represented by virtual reality which blurs, in its own "impersonal" way, the distinction between dream and reality.

References

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3. Aalto: "Experimental House at Muurasalo" in *Arkkitehti* 1953.
4. Malcolm Quantrill: Reima Pietilä: Architecture, Context and Modernism (Helsinki: Otava, 1984), p. 168.
5. Cf. Pietilä's article "La théorie de la composition et les mathématiques contemporaines. Dans quel sens constituent-elles des notions équivalents?" in *carre bleu* 1957/58.
6. "Empathy, Alienation, Style, Non-Style: The Architecture of Reima Pietilä" in *Le carré bleu* 1998:2.
7. M. Tafuri & F. Dal Co: Modern Architecture (Milano: Electa, 1976), p. 330.
8. Cf. Yale Studio: Tadao Ando. Current Works (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 11.
9. B. Bognar in F. Chaslin (ed.): Tadao Ando: Minimalismes (Paris: Electa Monitor, 1982), p. 26.
10. Swann I, p. 15.