



NORDISK ARKITEKTURFORSKNING

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research

1-2023

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research

ISSN: 1893–5281

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5.5 Euro (for individuals who get access to the journal through institutions).

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Payment

Sweden pay to plusgiro: 419 03 25-3

Outside Sweden pay in Euro to Nordea IBAN: SE67 9500 0099 6034 4190 3253 BIC/SWIFT: NDEASESS

Published by SINTEF Academic Press

P O Box 124 Blindern, NO-0314 Oslo, Norway.

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INTERACTIONS OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE – THE CASE OF ALVAR ALTO’S TOWN HALL IN SÄYNÄTSALO

JONAS MALMBERG

Abstract

The Town Hall, completed in 1951, is a benchmark in the new phase in Alvar Aalto’s architecture. Aalto actively promoted acquiring high quality artworks throughout the project and provided appropriate spaces for them in the building. The union of other artist’s works with Aalto’s architecture was more obvious here than in any of his earlier or subsequent projects. In his later career, in his major public projects, Aalto did not take advantage of such opportunities, and he started to provide the artworks by himself. In this regard, Säynätsalo Town Hall is a unique building in Aalto’s career. This article reviews the history and background of various works of art intended for the building by Aalto, and it gives more accurate narrative of the artworks. It also deepens the understanding of Aalto’s masterpiece and his ideas of combining artworks and architecture.

Keywords:
Alvar Aalto, Säynätsalo Town Hall,
Modern art in architecture, Built/
Building structures as art

Introduction

The Säynätsalo Town Hall is amongst the most celebrated works in Alvar Aalto's extensive architectural output and has even been acclaimed by Richard Weston as "one of the most admired jewels of post-War architecture" (Weston, 1996, p. 218). The years following World War II were the most creative period of Aalto's long career, as he developed his own original and innovative style of modernism. The Town Hall, completed in 1951, is a benchmark in this new phase, characterized by the use of natural materials, red brick, copper and timber.



Public buildings are of inherent significance to local communities, and particularly in the case of a city hall – as Aalto called this administrative building. Aalto had already carefully considered both the local landscape and the characteristic, gently undulating terrain of Central Finland when preparing town plans for the community, several years prior to undertaking the Town Hall project. Yet at least Dr. Hilmer Brommels (1896–1984), the factory manager who donated the sculpture, shared the same aim as Aalto, to make art available in buildings for public use.

Figure 1
The Town Hall in 1952. The construction works began in May 1950 and the inauguration was held in August 1952 (AAF 100722 / Mäkinen).

The public character of the Säynätsalo Town Hall enabled Aalto to give expression to an idea that he held dear: the integration of art and architecture. Aalto actively promoted it throughout the project and carefully planned appropriate spaces for artworks in the building. He also used his personal contacts to acquire well-known and highly regarded artworks and even donated some of his own. The successful union of other artist's works with Aalto's architecture was more obvious here than in any of his earlier or subsequent projects. This is perhaps all the more remarkable given that the commission for a town hall in a small industrial community of approximately 3.000 inhabitants, which might be regarded as a relatively modest undertaking, should be associated with such extensive aspirations and expressions of visual art, incorporating as it does, several highly significant works of art. The purpose of this article is to review the history and background of these works, based primarily on archival sources, including drawings and correspondence, of which the Alvar Aalto Foundation's Archives and Jyväskylä City Archives are the most important, supplemented by a search of relevant literature and periodicals. This article underlines the unique status of the Town Hall among Aalto's works, since later in his career Aalto himself was responsible for designing and integrating artworks within a holistic architectural concept. One explanation for this might be that Aalto's sensitivity and attention to detail in the Säynätsalo project was not fully understood by the local stakeholders, which deeply disappointed him.

However, some of the art that Aalto had in mind remained only as thoughts, others received little attention, and some have been almost forgotten. In contrast, the story of Fernand Léger's painting is an essential part of the building's cultural history, told in many ways. In this article, I concentrate on those special works of art by Aalto and other artists, which he approved for displaying in the original building. Thus, I deliberately exclude the painting *Rauha* [Peace] by Ahti Lavonen (1928–1979), which the community had received in 1950. Aalto was against the idea of placing the painting in the Town Hall, although later, in the 1970s, it was placed in on display in the community board meeting room.

I also follow the Swedish architecture historian Elias Cornell in considering the sculptural roof trusses (Cornell, 1968, p. 155) of the council chamber as an artwork. Their appearance evolved into a more expressive form through the design process, which led to the total abandonment of simplicity of style, to be replaced by a focus on aesthetic dimensions. This conforms to Adorno's thoughts on artistic work in which he emphasizes innovative expansion of the material used in an artwork into the unconventional and, according to him, artistic production of addressing special importance to something.¹ The trusses have been the subject of speculation as to their intentional, aesthetic and even structural nature. Due to a recent donation, the original structural drawings and calculations are now available for in-depth study in the Aalto Foundation's Archives.

1 E.g. Adorno, 2004, pp.180-213; Adorno's idea of material includes both physical and abstract elements, like the tones in music.



Figure 2
The council chamber around 1952
with both of the paintings and Aalto's
distinctive roof structure (AAF 100901 /
Mäkinen).

The evaluation of the structure and calculations of their specifications were done for this article by structural engineer Hannu Hirsi, M.Sc. (tech.). Several publications have provided overviews of Alvar Aalto as a visual artist, the most complete being *Alvar Aalto kuvataiteilijana* by Erik Kruskopf, published in 2012. Such texts tend to focus on Aalto's drawings, paintings and sculptures throughout his entire lifetime, commencing their narratives from early in his childhood. Many of these publications were prepared for an exhibition. One of the latest writings on Aalto's relationship to art and artists is "Symbolic Imageries: Alvar Aalto's Encounters with Modern Art", by Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen (2014). Pelkonen commendably searches for the origins of Aalto's iconic curvilinear lines and his thinking, although she does not delve deeply into the question of combining the work of other artists in Aalto's architecture. I explore this matter mostly through a literature study.

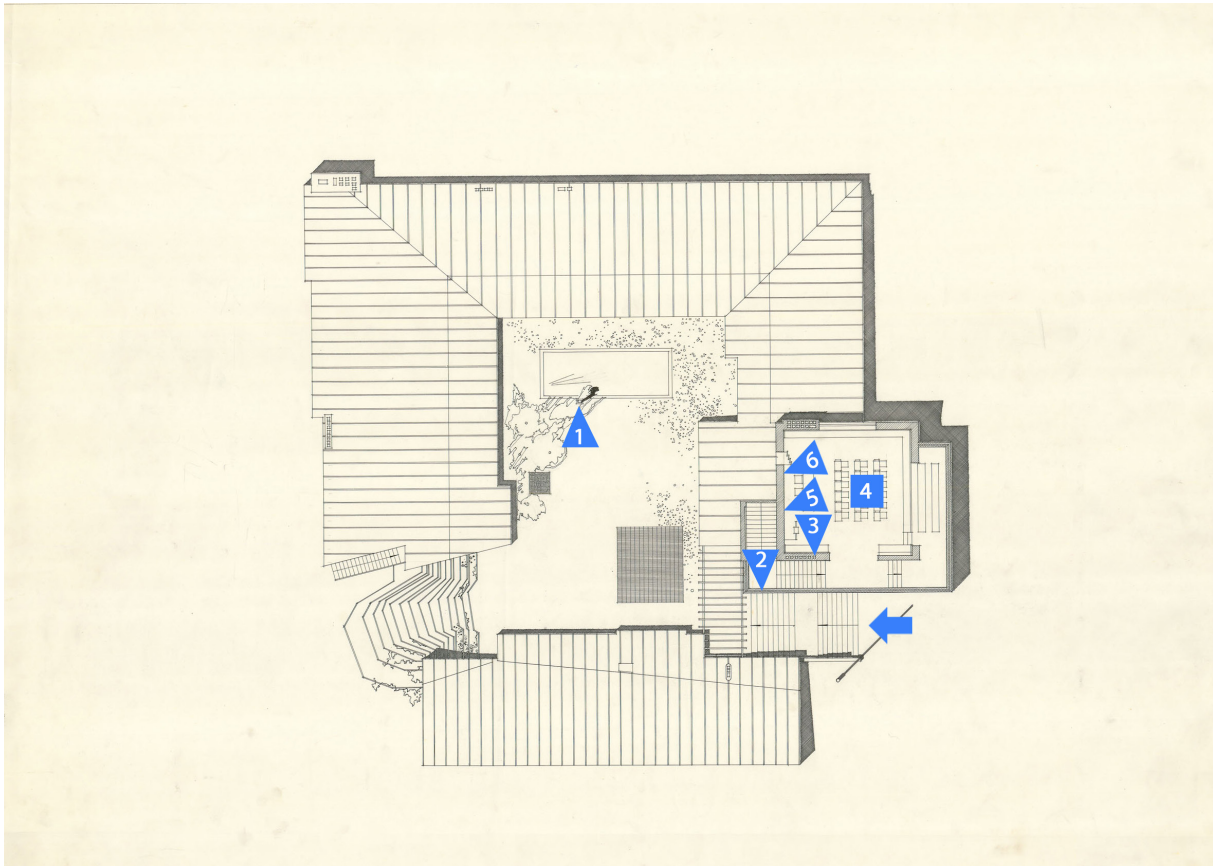
Art and architecture

The combination of different art genres was a widely discussed phenomenon throughout Europe in the early 20th century. The ideology of the early modernists was especially conspicuous in the famous Bauhaus school in Germany. Aalto was very familiar with these ideas and advocated for these modernist themes at an early stage of his career. Also, he had personally become friends with some of the most influential modernist artists and architects. Lifelong friendships were formed with Le Corbusier, Fernand Léger, Sigfried Giedion, Alexander Calder and László Moholy-Nagy. Aalto's participation in the second CIAM Congress (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) in the autumn of 1929 has been considered a significant starting point for many of his international friendships. The modernists' ideas in the mid-1920s were associated with the unification of art and modern architecture, and the first meeting was held in 1928 in the castle at La Sarraz, owned by the art patron Hélène de Mandrot. Aalto personally visited her in 1933 when returning from another CIAM meeting.

The importance of high-quality contemporary architecture, furniture, artefacts and art was still important to Aalto in the 1930s. In 1935, Aino (1894–1949) and Alvar Aalto (1898–1976) co-founded Artek with Maire Gullichsen (1907–1990), an art patron and member of the notable Ahlström's family of industrialists, and Nils-Gustav Hahl (1904–1941), an art critic and historian. The name Artek effectively combined the words art and technology. The aim of the company was “trading in furniture and promoting modern housing culture through exhibitions and other means” (Suhonen, 1985, p. 5). The business was to rely on the sale and marketing of furniture designed by the Aaltos, both in Finland and abroad. It was elegantly aligned with complementary activities, as the company's original aspirations included the promotion of modern art through publications and exhibitions, while simultaneously establishing their own contemporary art collection. In the field of modern art, Artek's role in the Finnish exhibition scene was pioneering. There were clear similarities between Artek's ideology and the goals of the Bauhaus school, led by Walter Gropius.

The art in the Town Hall

In 1949, Aalto had won the architectural competition and accepted the commission. The completed Town Hall was featured prominently as the lead article in the 9–10/1953 issue of *Arkkitehti*. Before long, much of this material was reproduced in numerous international architectural publications. According to the custom at the time, Aalto wrote the presentation, only briefly mentioning some of the artworks: “The building also includes some works of art, a sculpture by Professor Wäinö Aaltonen donated by Enso-Gutzeit Oy, which is connected to the fountain in the patio, and a few paintings” (Aalto, 1953, p. 149).



Aalto carefully placed the art works hierarchically to highlight the most valuable route within the building leading to the council chamber. The path is complicated indeed, and changes direction several times. It starts from the front square via the outdoor stairs to the courtyard and the main door articulated with the pergola and special leatherbound door-handle. From there the route passes through the lobby and turns a full 180 degrees to enter the staircase, finally reaching the chamber after several more 90 degrees turns.

As indicated below by the story surrounding the Fernand Léger painting, citizens or municipal decision-makers at the time were not yet unanimously receptive² to modern art, nor did they comprehend Aalto's sensitivity and commitment to the overall commission.

Figure 3
The locations of the artworks presented in this article marked on Aalto's presentation drawing 1: Statue by Aaltonen, 2: Relief by Aalto, 3: Sculpture by Picasso, 4: Trusses by Aalto, 5: Painting by Hilbert, 6: Painting by Legér (AAF 33-132 with blue marks added by the author).

2 Adorno identifies this unavoidable "rejection" towards "artistically modern" art (Adorno, 2004, p.307).

Sculpture by Wäinö Aaltonen



The first artwork one encounters is the modest sized sculpture elegantly located by the rectangular fountain. The bronze cast of Aaltonen's sculpture *Tanssijatar* [The Dancer] with its adjacent fountain is a focal point of the courtyard, which engenders a highly coherent atmosphere. It is also of symbolic significance since it was donated by the factory, which at the time was the economical and existential heart of the industrial community.

Factory manager Hilmer Brommels told in an interview in 1982 of his close friendship to sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen (1894–1966). No letters or other written sources have been found concerning the matter, but *Tanssijatar* contributes superbly to the overall collection of artworks decorating the Town Hall. Aaltonen also had other contemporary connections to the community, since his bronze statue commemorating soldiers fallen in war was erected in the local cemetery in 1948. Aaltonen was Finland's most notable and prominent sculptor in the decades immediately following the country's independence, and he became a key figure in Finnish art. Reitala has written that Aaltonen attained greater fame and attention than any Finnish contemporary artist.

The original plaster cast of the sculpture was made around 1927–28 and named "Salome", and it represents the avantgarde cubism phase of Aaltonen's career. Aaltonen's cubist sculptures were few in number at that time and considered to be exceptionally modern in Finland in the late 1920s. Some bronze versions of "Salome" were later cast, but the earliest cast was made for the Kunsthalle exhibition in Helsinki in 1950. That very piece is currently located in the Town Hall.

Figure 4
Wäinö Aaltonen's sculpture in the patio (AAF / Malmberg) and a postcard by Wäinö Aaltonen to Alvar Aalto (AAF 12940).

In several of his buildings, Aalto combined water elements and sculptures or ornately designed waterspouts in different ways. Aaltonen was also a personal friend of Aalto and was one of the few visual artists who collaborated with Aalto on his buildings. Aaltonen was a member of the Academy of Finland at the same time as Aalto and was appointed an Academician in 1948, seven years prior to Aalto. The origins of Aalto's and Aaltonen's friendship are unknown, but Aaltonen's statue Suomen neito [The Finnish Maiden] was declared the most beautiful sculpture in the exhibition at the 1939 New York World's Fair; the Finnish pavilion was one of Aalto's key works before WWII and established his international reputation, especially in the United States. In front of Aalto's 1958 House of Culture, in Helsinki, there is a stone-built fountain, also designed by Aalto but which again features the sculpture Rakentajan käsi [The Builder's Hand] by Wäinö Aaltonen.

Tanssijatar has been rather modestly received, compared to the esteem in which Aaltonen's other works are held. This relatively small piece dates from an earlier period than the Town Hall and it was perhaps no longer strikingly avantgarde when relocated to Säynätsalo. Although it has been overshadowed by his better-known public works, Aaltonen himself personally appreciated the piece, as its plaster version plays a dominant role in his 70th birthday commemorative greeting card sent to Aalto, a photograph taken in the artist's own library. There is a complex network of various personal relationships, which resulted in finally bringing the sculpture to Säynätsalo. However, Aaltonen was the leading sculptor and Academician in Finland, so in terms of quality it represented the best possible art of the time.

Yet the role of the sculpture is essential to the architectural integrity and realization of the Town Hall, as conceptualized by Aalto. It is the only artwork specifically referred to in Aalto's brief presentation of the Town Hall. Aalto had indeed drafted a fountain and sculpture in his competition entry. At this stage it was only sketched in outline, without a fully conceived solution, but the idea was nevertheless clear. The inner courtyard from which the space for communal activities, as well as the library, were entered was to incorporate a focal point in which a fountain and a sculpture would be combined.

Relief by Alvar Aalto



Picture 5
The landing with the relief in 2014;
originally, there was the option of an
additional window on the right (AAF
digi2266 / Holma).

Alvar Aalto's wooden relief is in the corridor leading to the chamber hall and is visible from the main lobby. However, the staircase conveys such an overall architectural intensity that one may pass by the very centrally placed and relatively large relief without paying too much attention to it.

Aalto's wooden reliefs have been displayed at various exhibitions since the early 1930s, both in Finland and abroad. Aalto's biographer Göran Schildt later argued that the ideological and methodological background to these wooden pieces was found by Aalto in the teachings of László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers at the Bauhaus school (Schildt, 1985, p. 78). But, in writings published during Aalto's lifetime he provided more

abstract sources of inspiration from Professor Yrjö Hirn's lectures on aesthetics (Schildt, 1967, p. 8). Indeed, Aalto started these experiments almost immediately after having visited³ Dessau in 1931.

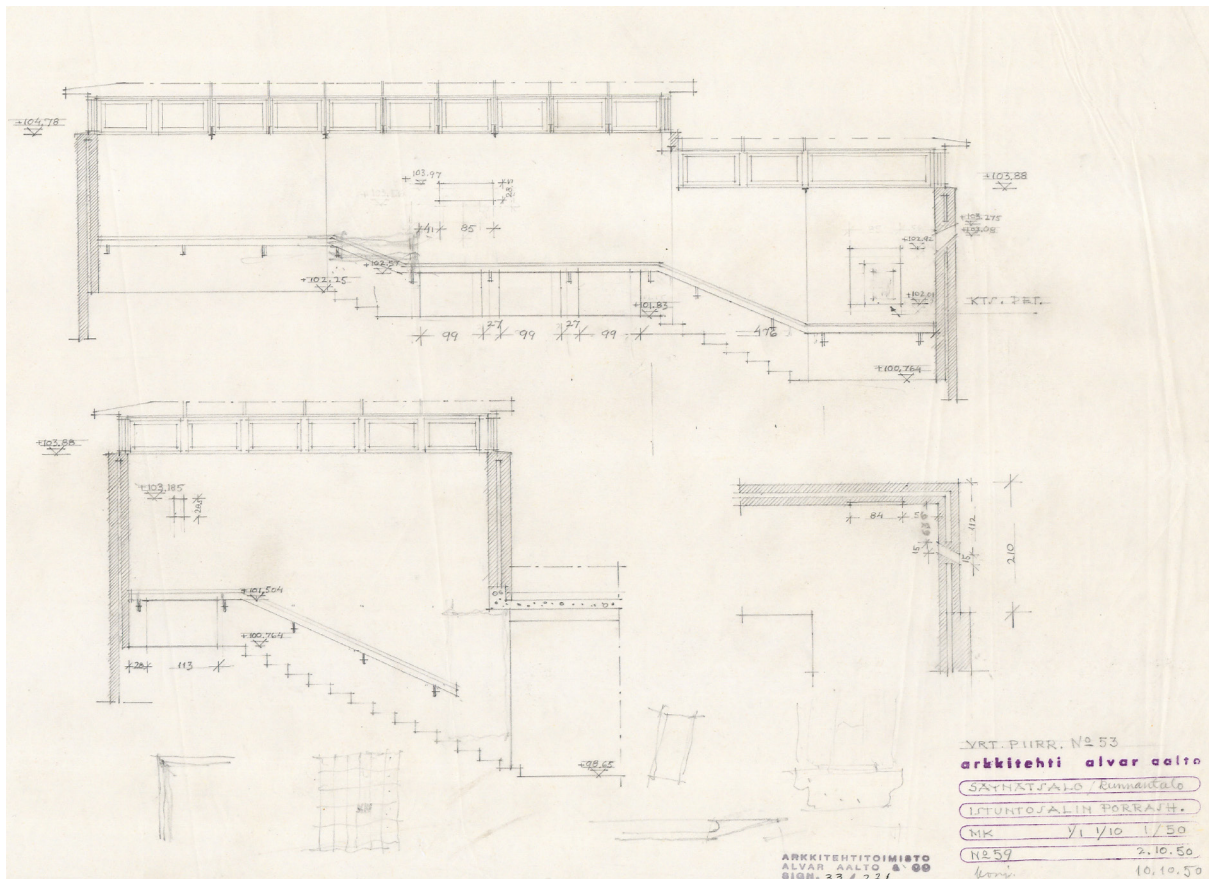
At any rate, it is evident from the review of the pioneering furniture display at Fortnum Mason's in London 1933 that the panels were already compared to artwork. The reliefs, which originally introduced innovative production methods, have since come to be regarded as abstract art. As Aalto placed one relief in the Town Hall, he gave it the character of a finished and complete piece of art. He also enhanced its status by assigning the relief to a similar recess in the masonry wall as for the other works intended for the tower of the council chamber. Aalto evidently acknowledged and accepted the comparison of his reliefs to modernist artworks in 1947 in his famous essay, "The Trout and the Stream" (Schildt, 1997, p. 107).

The relief in the Town Hall was designed in 1947. Schildt explains the method in which it was made: "Aalto had an irregularly shaped mould made into which [were] thrust softened spaghetti-like wooden laminas soaked in glue. These filled the mould and solidified into the desired shape without injury of the fibres" (Schildt, 1967, p. 9).

The relief is located on the intermediate landing of the stairway, where the direction of ascent to the chamber hall turns once again. A small, upward-sloping window was also designed at this point for the purpose of bringing natural light to the landing in general and specifically to illuminate the relief. The window appears in the same façade drawing in which the window illuminating the Léger painting was shown for the first time. In the drawings dating to very late 1950, the idea of the window had been abandoned, but apparently the opening had already been built in the masonry. Thus, even today, the inner wall has an area, one brick wide and three in height, simply plastered with grey mortar. It is also visible on the exterior as a deviation in the brickwork.

Yet as a wooden piece of art, Aalto's relief perfectly complements the interior's character, detailing and furnishings. It resides naturally in the landing leading the visitor to the chamber, the hearth of the building. Wood as a material can also be considered appropriate for the town hall of a municipality, depending on and even owing its origin to the timber processing industry – as is also affirmed by the sculptural roof truss.

3 Aalto's visit in Dessau at Albers's is confirmed on a letter by Albers (AAF 13246). Yet, for some reason Aalto later denied having visited the Bauhaus School.



Work by Picasso

Several places were designed for various artworks in the Town Hall, of which many have remained as empty recesses in the brick wall in the corridor as well as in the chamber itself. They are similar in construction to the ones housing the other paintings. Their purposes cannot be precisely identified, but a hint is given by Elissa Aalto (1922–94) who supervised the construction site as a novice architect at Aalto’s office. In an interview with Satu Mattila, she explained the purpose of the recess next to the sliding door of the chamber as follows: “One of the walls of the chamber has a recess which Aalto intended for a sculpture by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). The matter was not widely discussed and was probably not known by many” (Mattila, 1994, p. 302).

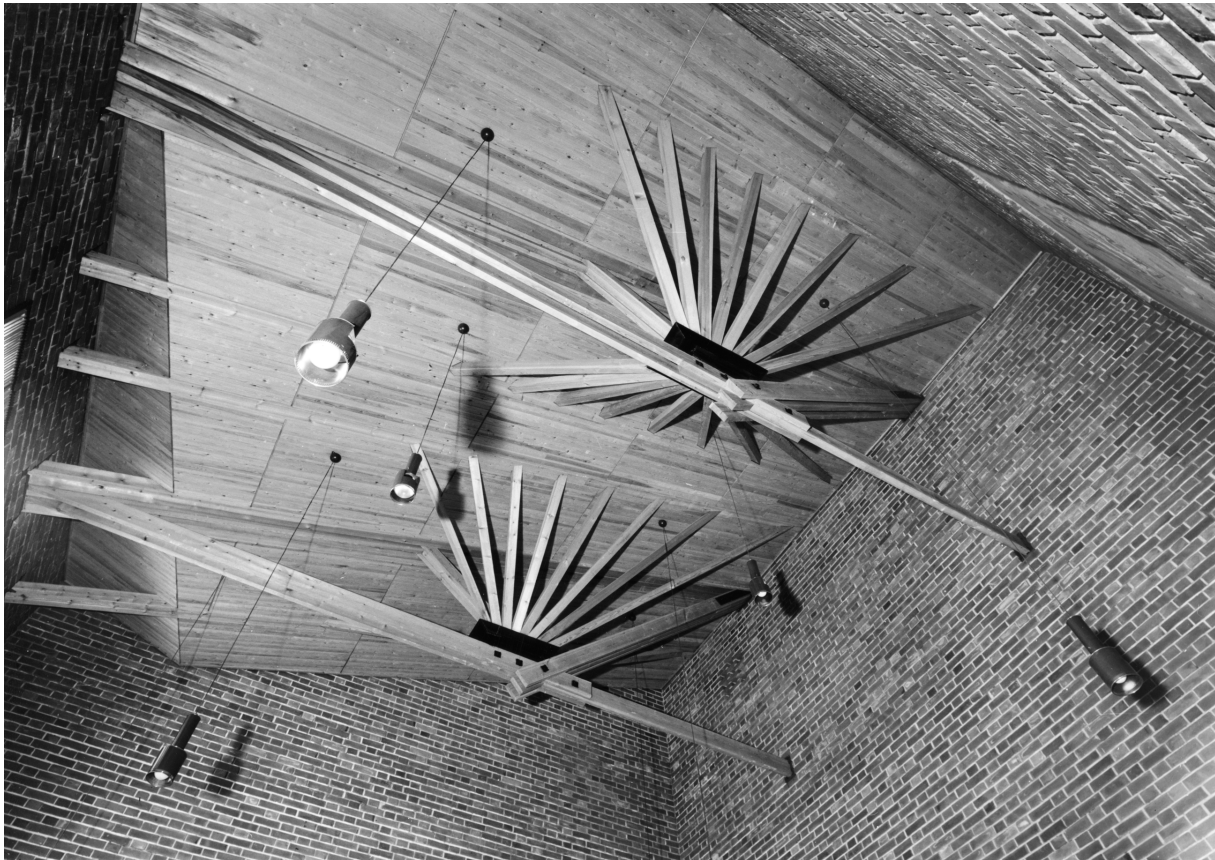
Unfortunately, no contemporary written evidence to verify this claim is found. Still, on July 17th, 1953, in the newspaper Svenska Dagbladet, Schildt presented Aalto’s architecture and Säynätsalo’s Town Hall. He wrote: “Two of the world’s foremost painters, Picasso and Léger, who live in Paris, have promised to paint for us. Why couldn’t the workers of Säynätsalo get Léger and Picasso?” (Schildt, 1953). With this, he expresses the very idea found in Artek’s visions of art enriching buildings and indeed the entire community, while simultaneously also being of educational and inspirational value.

Figure 6

The detail of the landing, showing the location for the relief and the diagonal window on the right. One of the currently empty recesses is also seen in the middle of the long wall (AAF 33-221, excerpt).

Apparently, works by some of the most prominent protagonists in international modernism were to have found a place in the Town Hall – at least in Aalto’s visions. Most likely, it was envisaged that there would have been more than the single painting by Léger, the story of which, presented later, has become an almost mythical narrative of the Town Hall.

The roof trusses of the council chamber



In the hierarchy of the Town Hall, the council chamber is the most significant interior. As discussed above, the majority of the artworks were also intended to be displayed there. The hall is dim and relatively high, its atmosphere characterized by the use of red brick and wooden materials in the floor, ceiling, furniture, window frames and grilles – and particularly in the roof trusses. Their structure forms a strong sculptural theme at the highest and hierarchically dominant point of the building, although the wooden structure does not appear in the façade.

The sculptural and original appearance of the roof structure evolved progressively from the more typical gable truss presented in the competition and the early design drawings. Architect Annikki Hirvelä-Hyöty-

Figure 7
The unnecessary beams are the thin ones pointing to the lower right (AAF 100909 / Ingervo).

niemi, who participated in the design in Aalto's bureau, recalls that the truss was "drawn with devotion"⁴. The solution was based on parallel primary beams and the supporters took shape during the process; Aalto later named the supporters as "butterflies" (Aalto, 1957, p. 261). One could propose that giving a particular nick name for the structure he gave it a status of an individual artwork. The change in the design was nevertheless considered so significant that the municipal council entered into a debate over it on September 26th, 1950, and they were presented a special scale model built in Aalto's office. The 50th anniversary publication of the engineering firm Magnus Malmberg refers to the Town Hall and quotes Malmberg. According to him the Aaltos had designed two primary trusses; Alvar Aalto did the original sketch, which the engineers then converted into the structural design. "The idea was totally unconventional, since the primary and secondary beams were parallel to each other. Still, it became a brilliant and harmonious structure" (Seppälä, 1985, p. 20-21). Engineer Olavi Törmänen's role in the design was crucial, since he did the calculations and prepared the drawings, and he wrote an extensive explanation of the structures in 1954, as follows:

The rafters, of which there are 2, are actually quite simple triangular trusses connected with bolts and Bulldogg [sic.] connectors. At the lowest point, 16 supporters are assembled in a fan form, which then support the rafters, parallel to the upper supporters. [...] It may be obvious that the peculiar form of the supporters is an expression of the architect's creative work (Törmänen, 1954, p. 137).

Both Malmberg (Seppälä, 1985, p. 20-21) and Törmänen (Törmänen, 1954, p. 137) emphasize the role of architects in the design. The striking structure of the trusses – and simultaneously the functionality of the construction – have been the subject of constant discussion to the present day.⁵ It may be impossible to verify the origins of the myths circulating around the lack of structural significance, although Professor Juhani Pallasmaa recalls that speculation spread as early as the late 1950s.⁶

There is very little written evidence on this issue. The clearest reference is in *Arkkitehti* 7–8/1976, by Professor Aulis Blomstedt (1906–79), who was a member of the jury for the architectural competition. He refers to a conversation with Aalto at the construction site of the Town Hall, where Aalto had asked his opinion on the single structurally unnecessary, but aesthetically significant, horizontal beam in the truss (Blomstedt, 1976, p. 48). This recollection has most likely reinforced the doubts about the structure, and within the context of the ideals of pure functionality and modernism that prevailed in Finland, a lack of structural function has been perceived in a negative light, with at times even a suggestion of dishonesty or deception.

4 A lecture by Hirvelä-Hyötyniemi at the Town Hall on 18.6.2016, recorded video by the City of Jyväskylä.

5 The long-time director of Aalto Museum, Markku Lahti, recalls the discussions at least from the 1970's (to the author on 29.10.2020). Visitor coordinator Harri Taskinen, tells that the question as to whether the trusses were "only decorative" is common (to the author at the Town Hall on 14.9.2020).

6 Professor Juhani Pallasmaa's (b. 1936) mail to the author 29.10.2020. Pallasmaa had already participated as a student in the work of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, so the relatively early dating of his memories. According to Schildt Pallasmaa was one most active opportunist towards Aalto of the younger generation Finnish architects in the 1960s and 70s (Schildt, 1991, p. 306-307).

The archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation include notes and the final structural drawings by Olavi Törmänen. Hannu Hirsi, M.Sc. (Eng.), studied the notes and design of the roof at my request. According to him, the solution is elegant and technically functional. The secondary rafters, parallel to the primary beams are supported by tilted struts. The diagonal struts are connected to the secondary beams at their upper ends by the notch joints, and at the lower end they are supported by specially shaped cups made of steel. According to the calculations, the structure is capable of supporting a load of 3.6 tons. Bulldog toothed-connectors have been used to transfer the shear forces, whereas some of the joints are simple notched contact joints. Hirsi summarizes: “If you are looking for anything superfluous or redundant in the design of the roof structure, then the strut that extends from the lowest corner towards the wall could be seen as structurally unnecessary. Otherwise, the entire structure is beautiful, well designed and technically fully functional”⁷

7 Hirsi, email to the author 10.9.2020.

The functionality of the roof trusses is combined with the exceptionally innovative and original structure, as Schildt summarizes: “This was a typical Aalto ‘invention’ with a practical function, which naturally did not prevent it from also having an aesthetic purpose” (Schildt, 1991, p. 161).

The choice between pure, structural necessity and visual aesthetics was very significant for Aalto. He was fully aware of the difficulty of the choice, the undated sketches include drawings, in which the structurally unnecessary horizontal part is missing. He finally made up his mind, perhaps inspired by Blomstedt, to prioritize the visual appearance. The decision to follow aesthetics, rather than simplicity of the structure, had already been made earlier in the design process. The conventional and simple orthogonal arrangement of primary and secondary beams, as presented in the earlier stages, would have been optimal for material economy, but these were replaced by more sculptural forms. Probably, there was no need to save timber in the construction. Also, it can be considered appropriate that the municipality, which was highly dependent on its timber factory, would pay homage to this by endorsing a wooden structure as the architectural culmination of the council chamber ceiling. This again conforms precisely to Adorno’s concept of artwork, where the object or building becomes something else, beyond the ordinary (e.g., Adorno, 2004, p. 107).

Map of Säynätsalo



Figure 8
The map painting (perspective corrected photo AAF / Malmberg).

The largest recess for artwork in the council chamber houses an alsecco painting depicting the islands of the community, painted by Fritz Hilbert. Despite its central location, the painting has received very little attention, nor is its painter mentioned, even in the most extensive writings of the building.⁸

Hilbert (1898–1981) worked in S. Wuorio’s painting company for more than six decades, from 1913 onwards. He progressed to become the head of the decorative painting studio, artistic director and eventually chairman of the company’s board. Hilbert completed his studies at the senior course at the Ateneum School of Art, Helsinki. In addition to carrying out the designs of other artists, he also drew up various colouring schemes himself. Hilbert was also an important artisan in preparing the stained-glass windows supplied by Wuorio’s studio. He also took an active interest in the renovation of peasant style furniture and taught specialist courses. Since WWII, the working opportunities for decorative painters had been greatly reduced, but S. Wuorio’s painters, under the direction of Hilbert, carried out several conservation and restoration tasks.

The connection between the municipality and Hilbert may have already been established through the stained-glass windows of Säynätsalo Church. These windows, completed in 1927, were designed by Antti Salmenlinna (1897–1968). Several of his works – including the stained-glass windows of Säynätsalo Church – were manufactured in S. Wuorio’s work-

8 Only exception found is Mattila, though first name misspelled as Fritch (Mattila, 1994, p. 302).

shop, probably with Hilbert's participation. Salmenlinna, on the other hand, had participated in the New York World's Fair in 1939 with a vase produced by the Riihimäki glass factory. As mentioned, the pavilion was one of Aalto's most renowned works dating from before WWII. There is, however, no evidence of any possible connections between the authors at that time.

In a letter to the Municipal council on 26 January 1953 including the invoices for the project, Aalto's office states that: "The invoice for S. Wuorio's colours (32,800:-), which the council had approved, was yet to be paid" (Aalto, 1953b). The role of Aalto and his office in the map painting may indeed have been larger than has been thought. Written contemporary evidence of Aalto's role is not met, but Uuno Jokinen explains in his memoir 1984 how Aalto had promised to provide a fresco there. That could also explain the lack of sketches or other material in the archives of the Wuorio painting company.⁹ On closer inspection, one may notice that the map depicts some unrealized designs by Aalto, the most significant being the sport and cultural complex designed around 1950, which was to have dominated the region on the highest point on the island. Architect Heikki Tarkka, who worked in Aalto's office, explained in an interview how he participated in the map project. As a young architect he received training at the construction site. In the summer of 1951, the office had had a workspace for a few architects in the "basement of the factory office", and in 2001 Tarkka recalls how they had the surface plastered for the map and how the office staff were drafting curves on it before the final painting work was done. Previously, various options for the placement of the wall painting in the council chamber were sketched in Aalto's office. It was, for example, at one stage considered that the artwork would be displayed on the same wall as the entrance. Eventually, however, the recess was made in the wall, which is in the major view for the audience and council members, at the top of the wall behind the chairman.

Within the entity of the council chamber, the painting depicting the local map is of considerable significance. Yet it is almost forgotten. Perhaps the fact that it is a relatively neutral-looking and clearly identifiable map within a truly modernist building is one reason why it may have been somewhat overlooked and received less attention than warranted.

It is, after all, a conventional work of art, painted on plaster with very traditional means and, on the other hand, it is a strongly informative image and one which cannot be easily removed. It effectively represents the local identity with its factory and log rafts, but as such it is merely a decorative painting rather than an original work of modern art. On the other hand, the historical technique, which draws upon the legacy of European traditional and ecclesiastical art as well, blends well with the architecture of the building, which, despite, or in addition to its modernist style, evinces Mediterranean and even monastic references.

9 The construction board minutes are missing in the City of Jyväskylä archives for 2018. According to the assistant M. Aaltonen, Wuorio's archives at the National Heritage Agency archives includes no material pertaining to the painting (Aaltonen's email to the author 1.10.2020).

Painting by Fernand Léger



Aalto had first met the painter Fernand Léger (1881–1955) in 1933 during his travel to participate in the CIAM meeting. They met again in the spring of 1937 in Paris, when Aalto supervised the construction of the World's Fair Pavilion, and Aalto invited Léger to present his modern artworks in Finland.

During his career, Léger painted a large number of works of various sizes for certain buildings and interiors. Baudin has pointed out that Léger was keen to work on paintings assigned to certain buildings, and he also had an architectural draftsman's training. In the 1910s and into 1920s he was influenced by the Bauhaus school, and throughout his career Léger worked with several architects, creating friendships with many of them. Le Corbusier and Léger, for example, had met in December 1920 and became close friends by the end of the decade. Writing in 1929, Le Corbusier praised the special power and dazzling colours of Léger's art.

When Aalto met Léger again in Paris in 1950, and according to Schildt, Aalto had referred to his project "for the tiny industrial village of Säynätsalo, where the Communist workers held a majority in the municipal council. This pleased Léger, himself a Communist, so much that [he] offered to make a painting for Aalto's town hall" (Schildt, 1991, p. 143). The idea was

Figure 9
The copy of the Léger with the indirect light in the chamber hall. Léger's signature in the upper right corner has been painted over (AAF / Malmberg).

not new, however, as Léger had indeed sent a postcard to Aalto as early as in 1934 proposing co-operation: “Isn’t there a little bistro in your project that I could decorate? Or a movie theatre. I would love to. If not, I will come and decorate your hat. Fernand L.” (Schildt, 1984, p. 159; Kruskopf, 2012, p. 92). Léger’s international career had begun much earlier and extended to various Nordic countries. For Léger, the Nordic countries represented something unique and admirable. Léger had enjoyed both Finland and Maire Gullichsen’s hospitality during the previously mentioned exhibition in Artek in 1937, and also gave a public lecture in Helsinki. Aalto designed a special recess in the council chamber for the piece, and Léger made a relatively small painting to fit the dimensions. Immediately next to the artwork, the design was supplemented by another window with an inner louvre, providing indirect, natural lighting to the painting. The dates of the detailed drawings match the meeting with Léger, also supporting the history recorded by Schildt. The plain, natural timber appearance of the louvre, dominantly located in the chamber, again articulates the material qualities of the chamber.

Aalto’s efforts to install the painting to its assigned location did not proceed as smoothly as intended. When the municipal council was informed that the price requested was FIM 200 000, they considered it unreasonable (Schildt, 1991, 144). The amount represented about 3 % of the total building costs and was far from being nominal. For example, on April 29th, 1949, exactly the same amount was allocated by the council to organize the invited architectural competition. It can also be compared to the monthly salary of FIM 35 000 paid to the master builder appointed as “the supervisor of the site” by the council on April 5th, 1950. According to Schildt (1991, p. 143–144), Aalto did not want to offend his friend with such a setback but instead acquired the work for himself. However, the project had evolved by this stage to be somewhat more complicated. It transpires that the narrative provided by Schildt in the biography is only part of the truth. Initially, the municipality had the impression that the work was to be a gift. The Council decided on the matter in the meeting on 28 April 1952, the minutes of which elaborate the rather vivid ensuing discussion. It is obvious that the vast majority of the representatives did not appreciate contemporary art. The minutes summarizes: “During an in-depth discussion, it was stated that this work of art, representing the latest trend, is such that it is not understood by the layman, at least at the moment. But its value may, after the passing of several generations, become impossible to estimate” (Minutes at Jyväskylä City archives, 69 §). Before the meeting, Aalto had personally put the painting in the recess; in the meeting, the community accepted the gift, and decided to provide hospitality for Léger as he was expected to visit the Town Hall during the becoming summer.

It seems that the nature of the work as a gift was not clear to all stakeholders; some words in the previously mentioned minutes can be inter-

preted as questioning the donation. In September 1952, the somewhat surprising request for payment was delivered to the municipality on behalf of Léger via Aalto, and on April 21st of the following year, Aalto was offered reimbursement for the instalment.

In a relatively late interview in 1984, Uuno Jokinen, the chairman of the municipal board at the time, recalls the matter in a slightly different and more expansive manner than Schildt in his biography (Schildt, 1991, p. 143-144). Jokinen had created a confidential relationship with Aalto – which lasted despite the disagreements with the municipality. Documentary evidence supports Jokinen’s narrative as to how the painting had been discussed during the construction phase but had failed to eventuate, even though the building had already been completed (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 227-230). Then, unexpectedly, Aalto had invited Jokinen to the Town Hall to place the artwork in the assigned location. After having looked at the painting for a good while, Jokinen had confessed to Aalto that he did not understand at all what the work depicted. Aalto had replied: “It doesn’t present anything! It’s just a merry colourful spot on the red brick surface!” (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 228) The work remained there; at the next meeting, Jokinen recalls that he had presented it, and the donation was accepted. In 1955, the representative of Léger’s estate had priced the unsold works and the invoice was delivered. The council decided not to pay, even though the teacher Eero Lehtiö tried to convince the other council members: “It is unlikely that the municipality will be provided with a similar opportunity in the foreseeable future. We must take advantage of this situation, after all it is rather a modest amount of money. I propose that we accept the invoice.” (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 229) Only shortly after, Aalto had asked to deliver the painting to the Léger Memorial Exhibition at Artek (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 229). Aalto’s letter dated 4 November 1955 to Jokinen has also been preserved in which Aalto gives his own view of the story:

As you may well remember, Säynätsalo’s municipal council at one stage decided against purchasing the painting by F. LEGER (a small painting behind the secretary’s chair) but allowed it to remain there. The fault is partly mine, as I had originally agreed with Léger that he would provide the painting with only a small formal remuneration. However, his art dealer did not agree to this, demanding instead a fee according to their general mutual terms. However, given that the painting was by Léger, the price was nevertheless rather modest. I then left the matter aside, thinking that when I next met Léger, I could intervene in a positive way. Meanwhile, however, I received a license for the painting and the right to purchase it personally, so I now have formal ownership of the painting. Due to the death of Léger, we no longer have any recourse of action but to pay for it as required. My personal opportunities for intervening and mediating are now gone, so the painting must be either paid for or handed over to me. You may kindly deliver this message to the

municipal council. I am no longer prepared to donate the painting to the community after the way in which Säynätsalo has behaved towards me, as you well know (AAM, letter 35443).

Aalto's letter to Léger on March 16, 1954, a year and a half earlier, is revealing. Aalto wrote, rather deviously, a slight white lie to the effect that, following the recent municipal elections, the incoming council no longer wished to proceed with the purchase of such a modernist piece of art. Simultaneously, Aalto announced that he would gladly acquire the painting himself to place it later in the Town Hall. In his postscript, Aalto even confesses that he had on purpose refrained from telling the exact price of the painting during the construction work, in order to ensure that the artwork would be installed. He concluded his letter: "J'avais un peu abusé le conseil de commune de Säynätsalo en taisant le prix lors des travaux, afin de pouvoir placer votre oeuvre à cet endroit" (AAM, letter 25699).

Thus, Léger's painting appears in the recess in the early photographs. After the commemorative exhibition in Artek in late 1955, the artwork was relocated to Aalto's recently built office, where it remained hanging in Aalto's own working studio for some decades.

Relatively soon after Aalto's letter to Jokinen, some of the municipal representatives began to regret the loss. At the council meeting on December 17, 1955, purchasing the painting was rediscussed at the request of Lehtiö. The reason for reviving the matter was that it was no longer possible to extend hospitality to the artist, as had previously been agreed upon, "and that it would be a pity if the painting were not reclaimed. Also, its value may increase substantially following the artist's death. It was unanimously decided to authorize the municipal board to explore options for returning the painting. If the conditions were reasonable, the financial sacrifice could be accepted" (Council minutes 17.12.1955, 146 §, Jyväskylä city archive).

However, this was all to no effect, as Aalto did not change his mind. The painting, "La Peinture Murale", was eventually bequeathed through Alvar and Elissa Aalto to their descendants who offered it to auction at Christie's in London on February 4, 2002, where it was sold for £ 201,750. The author has no information concerning the whereabouts of the painting since that time. A copy of the painting was placed in the recess with the agreement of Elissa Aalto in the 1980s. Kerttu Niilonen summed up the feeling of regret over the missing painting in the newspaper Uusi Suomi as early as 11 June 1959:

Those art enthusiasts who are aware that there once used to be a painting by the celebrated artist Léger in the Town Hall chamber, [-] painted specifically for this very place, in expectations of personally visiting Säynätsalo, can only regret the decisions and chain of events that led to the now vacant recess in the council chamber. By losing the painting, Säynätsalo lost so much (Niilonen, 1959).

The relatively small painting is one of the artist's later works. When viewed within the context of Léger's entire output, it is considered a relatively minor work and is not representative of the artist's finest achievements. It may be somewhat of an exaggeration to call it the culmination of Léger's long interest in the Nordic countries, but it nevertheless is imbued with a sense of finality because of the artist's death in 1955. However, the painting – and on the other hand its absence and replacement by the current copy – has a very special and unique significance within the narrative of the Town Hall and in the history of Finnish architecture.

Aalto's frustration over Säynätsalo

Hilmer Brommels resigned as factory manager in 1951, but before this the Town Hall was almost completed. After he left, numerous new controversies between Aalto and the community emerged and previous difficulties only worsened. Aalto's ambitious visions for the Town Hall, and the subsequent phase of disillusionment, can most likely be attributed to, at least in part, to his frustration with the municipality. The chairman of the municipal board, Uuno Jokinen, recalls that the construction work had started well but gradually led to an impasse where progress had slowed, and discord was inevitable. A key figure in this was Harry Arikka, a member of the construction committee, who also expressed his dissatisfaction directly to Aalto. Aalto also felt that the municipality had completely ignored his advice concerning recommendations for some of the alterations of the Town Hall. Perhaps the most notorious of these was when neon lights were installed by the bank operating in the building. In Aalto's opinion they were totally unsuitable, and he actually went as far as to break them, after which the community approved them to be reinstalled. In addition, the project for a Cultural Centre, designed in around 1950, was abandoned. Aalto refers to his frustration in 1956, as he directly accused the community of a lack of civilized manners.

Jokinen recalls his last meeting with Aalto at Hotel Helsinki in 1958, when they discussed the construction of the garage needed by the Town Hall (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 229-230). Jokinen had indeed been involved in the initial negotiations for acquiring and installing Léger's work at Säynätsalo. Aalto said, quite frankly: "The municipality made it quite difficult in that matter. It has treated me with disrespect in many ways. The way in which they seemed so dismissive of the Town Hall design was very distressing.

Under such circumstances it was simply not possible to relinquish the painting” (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 229).

Jokinen replied that the ‘Merry Colourful Spot’ on Aalto’s wall was in an unsuitable location, since it was intended to match with the red brick background. He recounts how he suggested that the painting could remain in Aalto’s possession, even if it were placed, as intended, in the Town Hall. Also “whenever the building and the chamber were presented to the public, the story of the painting would be explained and Alvar Aalto would be acknowledged as the owner” (Rautjoki, 1991, p. 230). According to Jokinen, Aalto was evidently enthusiastic about the proposal and promised to return to it. However, this did not happen. Jokinen and Aalto never met again. Aalto seems to have used the Léger painting in his possession as a means of retribution.

The Town Hall art as an exception in Aalto’s career

When considering the scale of the Town Hall complex and the scarcity of resources in Finland immediately after WWII, as well as the limited economic opportunities offered by a small industrial community, Aalto’s vision was revolutionary. The importance of bringing visual art into public buildings is particularly evident in the Town Hall. An intriguing aspect relating to the variety of artworks is that they embody a considerable period of development and change in artistic trends, with respect to both form and technique: the map painted on plaster is very traditional, the sculpture is an example of 1920s’ cubism, the relief refers to avantgarde material experiments of the 1930s’ and other pieces represent contemporary art. The displayed artworks were designed as an integral part of the building, while the building itself was intended as an environment in which each work could be fully appreciated within the overall architectural, structural and lighting context. One could even assume that the relatively small sizes of the niches for the art works in the council chamber and corridor were purposefully done to limit the sizes of any future artworks. Thus, they were conceived as an integral part of the building as a whole, even though the individual pieces are relatively modest and serve to supplement the architecture. Aalto designed an architectural masterpiece, considered carefully down to the smallest detail, and he actively strived to achieve and complement this with world-class modern artworks provided with suitable locations.

Still, even in its partly realized form, the art scheme is significant in terms of representing the essential features and aspirations of Aalto’s architecture. He had already completed various projects closely linked to art, such as private house galleries and art museums, dedicated to the display of art. However, in neither of these was the placement of artworks defined so clearly nor adapted to the architecture as in the SÄYNÄTSALO Town Hall.

It is also worth noticing that, in his later projects, Aalto was no longer motivated to incorporate comprehensive and systematic artistic endeavours within his architectural projects or commissions, nor did he make efforts to include international art. This is despite the numerous opportunities for combining the efforts of artists and architects in ambitious and innovative ways, especially in significant later public buildings. However, for one reason or another, Aalto did not even try to take advantage of such opportunities. This seems difficult to comprehend, given that he and, for example, his close associate Maire Gullichsen had vast international connections, which could have initiated collaborative enterprise for which only the imagination would have been the limit. There were numerous contemporary modernist buildings where architecture was complemented with large scale artworks and murals. Aalto didn't take steps towards that at any scale. In a letter to Aino Aalto in 1948, he instead strongly criticized the large, wall-covering mural by Joan Miró (1893–1983) in Terrace Plaza Hotel Cinninati being “full failure” and “out of scale” (Aalto-Alanen, 2021, p. 442).

Kirimo Mikkola, a next-generation architect and a strong opponent of Aalto during his lifetime, later wrote admiringly about him. According to Mikkola, Aalto, in his early career, maintained the idea of combining art and architecture. In the spirit of the CIAM modernists, buildings should include individual works of abstract art. Mikkola argued that after WWII, Aalto distanced himself from these ideals as his architecture became “more subjective and richer”, and he refrained from employing visual artists in his architectural projects. Mikkola concludes that Aalto later wanted to “oppress the visual arts into a servant of architecture, a built-in component of architecture” (Mikkola, 1985, p. 45). The art works by artists – or preferably by the architect himself – can beautifully complement the architecture, and many features of buildings, or even fixed furniture may resemble abstract art – such as the truss in the council chamber in Säynätsalo.

Already when Aalto had commenced his projects with Säynätsalo, he wrote in his article, “The Trout and the Stream”, about combining visual art with architecture. He confesses to being against large scale monumental art in architecture as a specifically ordained policy of art, and explains as follows:

The question of the connection between architecture and the free arts has always been on the agenda. Usually, it takes the form of a desire for more sculpture and painting in works of architecture. [...] I'm not opposed to these demands—far from it. [...] I think this may be the way to reach far deeper, to the core of the relationship. On the other hand, abstract art forms have served as stimulus to contemporary architecture – indirectly, to be sure, but the fact cannot be denied. On the other hand, architecture has also provided material for abstract art. The two

fields have influenced each other in turn. There we are, then—even in our time the arts have a common root, and that’s already saying quite a lot (Schildt, 1997, p. 107-108).

Some two decades later, in a relatively late interview published in 1967, Schildt asked whether Aalto had been planning to initiate co-operation with visual artists. Aalto denies this yet gives a relatively complicated answer: “Co-operation is born simultaneously with the [architectural] work itself. Sometimes there is a need for it. Sometimes, on the other hand, it doesn’t fit into the working plan at all, in fact it could spoil the result” (Schildt, 1967, p. 5).

Schildt interprets this answer to mean that Aalto wished to avoid competition between artists, so that since the 1950s, he created more and more of the artworks by himself.¹⁰

One could also propose that community resistance and the stakeholders’ failure to comprehend or appreciate Aalto’s sensitivity and architecture during the construction and subsequent years resulted in the change of attitude. This gave the Town Hall an exceptional place amongst the works of his entire career, and it eventually became a singular example

¹⁰ This competitive feeling was experienced by the highly appreciated artist Kain Tapper (1930–2004), who was the only one tried to co-operate with the senior generation architect. His bronze relief *Horisontti* [Horizon] was placed in 1967 in the Jyväskylä University’s main building (1954). Almost a decade later, Tapper did seven sketches for a monument in the garden of the Finlandia Hall. He recalled the two projects in an interview in 1985: “My starting point [in *Horizon*] was that one should not even notice it. If I had done something on the beautiful wall, I would have committed a major mistake. [...] After all, Aalto is such a strong architect that my ideas [next to the Finlandia Hall] went all too Aalto-like, it didn’t work out. [...] Fortunately, it was never realized” (Arnkil, 1985, p. 14). In Elissa Aalto’s time, co-operation with Tapper continued and there was common project in Rovaniemi in 1988; Tapper’s solo exhibition took place in Alvar Aalto Museum in 1981.



Figure 10
The earliest colour photo found to date of Léger’s painting in Studio Aalto from the late 1950s (AAF av 9927 / Haefelfinger).

of the combination of art and architecture – despite all the fascinating possibilities it presented and the breadth of his personal connections. The painting by Léger hung for decades next to his desk and daily reminded of this unsuccessful endeavour.

Acknowledgements

The article is prepared as spare-time research without funding. Language proofreading was complementarily provided by PhD Peter Ward. Valuable comments to the article were given by my tutor PhD Juhana Lahti. Also, I wish warmly to thank structural engineer Hannu Hirsi, M.Sc. (tech.) for his assistance.

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