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Niskanen, Aino

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# Alvar Aalto and Cultural Memory

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## Keywords

– Alvar Aalto, civic centres, Finland, cultural memory, classicism

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*This article examines the meanings of the past which Aalto wanted to transpose into his architecture – what I term cultural memory. I search for their points of origin in Aalto’s education and travels, in particular his impressions of the Acropolis in Athens.*

*For Aalto, a civic centre was “the face of a city”, which should be the citizens’ meeting place. Of particular importance to him was the ritual entry into a theatre. Of the many civic centres that Aalto designed, few were realised in their entirety. Three of them are examined, as well as the Helsinki University of Technology campus, which is interpreted as a city in miniature. Aalto fought against the idea of placing commercial functions in close proximity with his*

*centres – but recent extensions and traffic arrangements have brought a new vibrancy to some of them. The way in which Aalto handled the idea of memory and his use of classical elements is studied. I argue that classicism seemed continuously attractive to Aalto.*

- 1 Alvar Aalto, “Menneitten aikojen motiivit,” *Arkkitehti* (1922) and Idem., “Porraskiveltä arkihuoneeseen,” *Aitta* (1926). Reproduced as “Motives from Past Ages” and as “From Doorstep to Living Room,” respectively, in Göran Schildt, ed., *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), 32–35 and 49–55.
- 2 Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto* (London: Academy Editions, 1982).
- 3 See Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work. Architecture, Design and Art* (Helsinki: Otava, 1994), 286–293 on commemorative medals, gravestones and memorial sculptures.
- 4 Timo Tuomi, *Olemmeko kaikki kreikkalaisia? Matkoja kulttuurin juurille* [Are we all Greek? Travels to the Roots of Culture] (Helsinki: Aedes, 2020), 53–63.
- 5 Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 79–82.

When asked to write on memory, memorabilia and making in relation to Alvar Aalto's work, I started to wonder if I should write about Aalto's relation *to history*. It of course changed several times during his career; beginning with his early ponderings in the article “Motives from Past Ages”<sup>1</sup> and in his enthusiasm on encountering the spatial sequences in the houses of Pompeii. His standpoint changed to a short but intense denial of history during the late 1920s and early 1930s – but luckily that phase was short. In his mature works Aalto combined many different kinds of references, as has been described, for example, by Demetri Porphyrios.<sup>2</sup> What about actual memorials designed by Aalto? They, of course, represent *objects of memorizing*. And there are many of them, too, from gravestones to memorial sculptures.<sup>3</sup> But here I would instead prefer to concentrate on Aalto's creation of *cultural memory*. In other words, I am not looking so much at the motifs borrowed from history, but rather at the meanings of the past that he wanted to transpose into his architecture – if, that is, the two viewpoints are separable. The perspective of cultural memory is manifested in Aalto's idea of the “face of the city”, in which the cultural centre and within it the theatre in particular become its emblem. This viewpoint is also reflected in Aalto's way of turning a university campus into a town in miniature. It is further manifested through his use of both detailing and marble as a reference to antiquity in a way that ennobles the whole.

The starting points for the emergence of “cultural memory” are not easy to pinpoint directly. As a student, Aalto received history lessons from some memorable teachers. According to Aalto's biographer Göran Schildt, the teachers considered important by Aalto were above all important as pedagogues of attitudes: Usko Nyström, who taught the history of architecture of the antiquities and the Middle Ages, emphasised the values of modesty, humanity, vitality, comfort and practicality. Nyström had made a trip to Greece in 1905, and certainly lectured on the subject.<sup>4</sup> Armas Lindgren, who taught more recent architectural history, awoke a love in Aalto for Italian Renaissance architecture and an understanding of the organic thinking of Jugendstil architecture.<sup>5</sup> Measuring vernacular buildings in Finland under the guidance of Gustaf Nyström taught Aalto about Finnish building traditions – and Nyström's own main works are notably classicist. Journeys also proved important for Aalto. He repeatedly ventured to Italy. He travelled twice to Greece, an early trip to Athens for the CIAM meeting in 1933 and a trip in 1953 to Athens as well as other ancient sites, among them Delphi, Epidauros and the sanctuary of Olympia. How Aalto's vision of city culture developed must have been an emerging process, yet one not easy to trace.

### **The Face of a City, a Civic Centre**

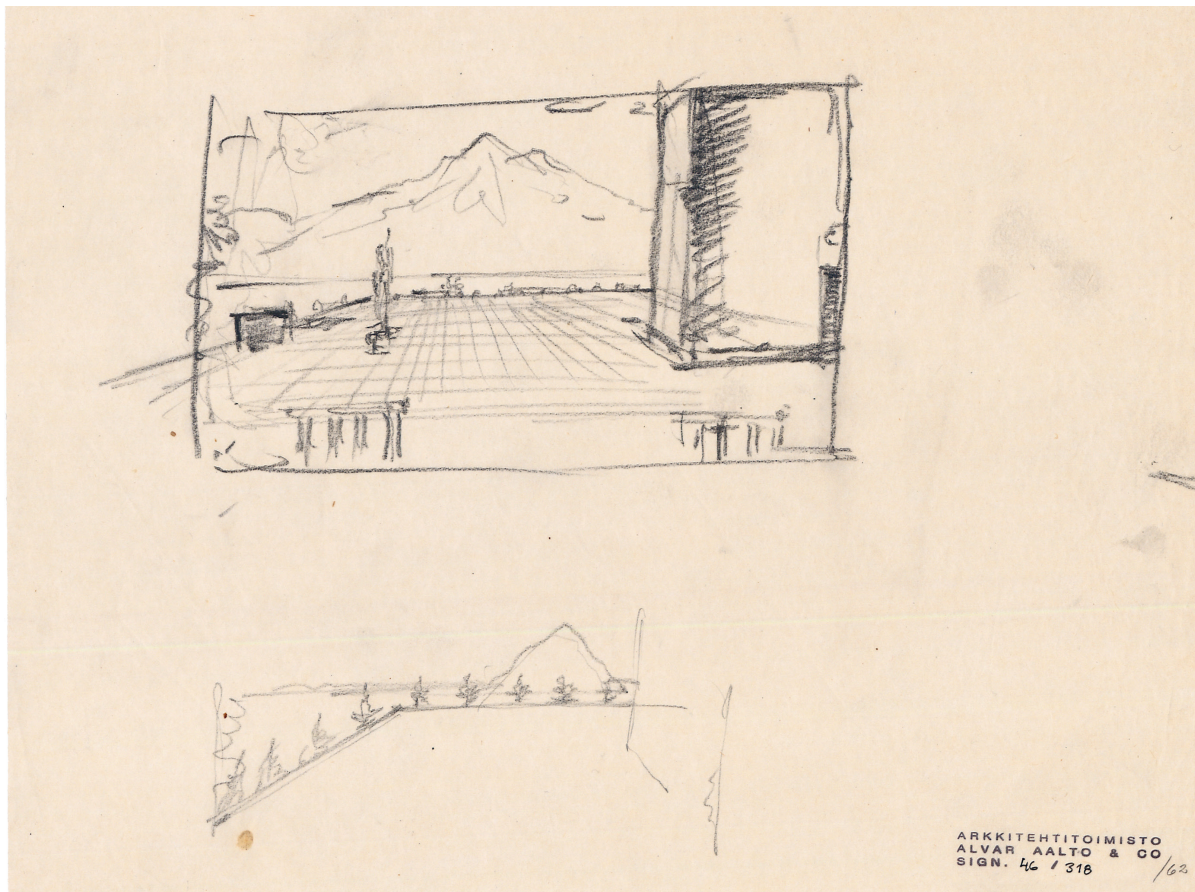
“Memories” enriched with fantasies about ancient classical civilization are evident in Aalto's ideas for city centres and the outline of cultural buildings within them. Aalto spoke early on about public buildings being part of

- 6 Marja-Leena Wegelius, "Linnunpesiä vai kultasia häkkejä," in *Teatteri tilassa. Theatre in space. FONDI. teatterimuseon vuosikirja no. 3* (Helsinki: Teatterimuseo, 1989), 49–55, 53. Aalto mentioned the Acropolis already in an article "Painter and Masons," published in the journal *Jousimies* in 1921, reproduced as "Painters and masons" in Schildt, *Aalto in His Own Words*, 30–21. Aalto states: "Nor do I think that an Acropolis can be built in Helsinki."
- 7 Schildt, *Aalto: A Life's Work*, 44–45, 62–64, 127–128.
- 8 Idem., *Aalto in His Own Words*, 201.
- 9 Reyner Banham, "CIAM," in V.M. Lampugnani, ed., *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopaedia of 20th-Century Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 68–70, 69.

the Western cultural tradition. When speaking about city life, he pointed to both medieval and Renaissance Italian cities as well as to classical examples – one of the primary stages of the Western cultural tradition for Aalto being the Acropolis of Athens.<sup>6</sup> The Acropolis had an impact on two of Aalto's early competition proposals: the Commonwealth Palace in Geneva in 1926–1927, and Töölö Church in Helsinki in 1927. For both, Aalto had even drawn Pallas Athena-like sculptures, though in the latter project it was turned into an apostle! The church competition was also influenced by Le Corbusier's famous sketches of the Acropolis in Athens.<sup>7</sup> Aalto was very much looking forward to actually visiting the Acropolis, which he eventually did in 1933 (figure 1).

According to Schildt, "For Aalto, seeing the Acropolis of Athens was so inspiring that in his subsequent practice he devoted a great deal of attention to a feature the CIAM had overlooked entirely, namely the heart of the city, the monumental buildings that together form the city centre, with its citizens' squares, rulers' palaces, and cultural buildings."<sup>8</sup> Actually, CIAM did not quite overlook the theme, as their meeting held in Hoddesdon in England in 1951 had as its theme "The Urban Core", but the congress report was, according to Rayner Banham: "little more than a compendium of fashionable clichés, such as the need to integrate painting and sculpture into architecture."<sup>9</sup>

fig. 1 Aalto's sketch for his competition entry for the Palais des Nations, Geneva, 1926–1927. Alvar Aalto Museum.





- 10 Aalto, “Kaupunkisuunnittelu ja julkiset rakennukset,” a speech by Aalto at a conference of SAFA (Finnish Association of Architects) in Helsinki in 1966. Reproduced as: “Town Planning and Public Buildings,” in Schildt, *Aalto in His Own Words*, 211–214.
- 11 Aalto, “Julkisten rakennusten dekadenssi,” *Arkkitehti*, no. 9–10 (1953). Reproduced as “The decline of public building,” in Schildt, *Aalto in His Own Words*, 210–211.
- 12 Aalto, “Rovaniemi Civic Centre” (undated letter, 1965–68), in Mia Hipeli, ed., *Architecture by Alvar Aalto, no. 18. Rovaniemi* (Jyväskylä & Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum, 2012), 23–24.
- 13 The text on theatres is based on the following website article: Aino Niskanen, “Suomalaiset teatterit 1940–1990” [Finnish theatres 1940–1990], Museovirasto, 2020: <https://www.museovirasto.fi/fi/kulttuuriymparisto/rakennettu-kulttuuriymparisto/rakennettu-hyvinvointi> [National Board of Antiquities website on cultural buildings]

In the 1960s, when criticizing Finnish town planning in a speech, Aalto pointed out that cultural and administrative buildings should be points of departure for city planning and that they would create the identity that the city centres of the 1960s were lacking.<sup>10</sup> In his speech Aalto spoke about the traditional European cities and their division into housing districts and the public areas common to all, sites that included also representational public monuments. In fact, even before then, in the early 1950s, Aalto wrote of what he termed “the decline of public architecture.” The grouping of public activities such as the churches, bathhouses, libraries and so on, he argued, became lost due to the growing dominance of the commercial building: “... which has since grown to such proportions that governmental and other public buildings can no longer compete with it.”<sup>11</sup> Aalto’s speech in 1966, however, was delivered at the time when the master plan for the Helsinki city centre was taking place. Only fragments of Aalto’s contribution to the master plan were realized, most prominently the Finlandia Hall concert hall – but that is another story.

Aalto expressed his views on what civic centres should mean for the citizens when describing the Rovaniemi Library (completed in 1965) and its position in the civic centre:

“The design of these core areas is crucial from the point of view of civic life and the citizens’ attitude to their surroundings. Formerly public events, spectacles, and ceremonial processions played an important role in civic life: the citizens were often personally and directly involved in such activities. For this very reason, the placement of public buildings in the city and their relation to each other was so precisely weighed. They were part of a living organism that was constantly renewed. // Urban architecture still has an important task in reflecting the inner life of cities. It must ensure that the buildings that represent public life and the citizens’ shared spiritual needs – the needs to which a city owes to its very existence – also form the city’s inner silhouette.”<sup>12</sup>

Aalto designed a multitude of civic centres, but many remained only on the drawing board. In the case of Finland, Aalto designed large administrative and cultural centres for the cities of Seinäjoki, Jyväskylä and Rovaniemi. The centres of Seinäjoki and Rovaniemi were actually situated away from other functions of the city. The Jyväskylä civic centre was realized only partly, albeit near the existing city centre.

### Theatres in Civic Centres

A starting point for Aalto in the design of his civic centres was the citizens’ meeting place, a public square. It is specifically through theatres, however, that Aalto’s community goals are encapsulated; that is, participation as a spectator in the performances becomes a social event in itself.<sup>13</sup>

- 14 Aalto designed his first theatres as part of the Jyväskylä Workers' Club in 1924 and the Southwestern Finland Agricultural Cooperative building in Turku 1927–28. He designed several open-air Greek-style stepped theatres (e.g. Tiilimäki studio, Aalborg Art Museum, University of Jyväskylä).
- 15 Timo Koho, "Teatteriarkkitehtuurin merkitysarvot: teatterirakentamisen suhde yhteiskunnan arvomaailmaan kaupungistuvassa Suomessa," PhD thesis on the development of Finnish theatre buildings, Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1991, 90, 97.
- 16 In Helsinki, for instance, for the Finlandia Hall (1971) and the Enso-Gutzeit building (1962), and in Germany for the Wolfsburg Cultural Centre (1962). On Aalto's use of marble, see Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 228–230.
- 17 Koho, "Teatteriarkkitehtuurin merkitysarvot," 91.
- 18 Ibid., 90.
- 19 Jaakko Penttilä, "Seinäjoen kaupunkikeskus. Seinäjoki Cultural and Administrative Centre. Architecture by Alvar Aalto," no. 16 (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto museo / Alvar Aalto Museum, 2011), 6.
- 20 Ibid., 4.

Aalto had a particularly close affinity with the design of theatres, which he had been involved with since the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

According to Aalto, the theatres located in civic centres should be clearly visible from the centrally placed public square. Their facade towards the square should make their characteristic features visible, which were the stage tower and the auditorium.<sup>15</sup> The stage tower in Aalto's theatres was seen as a part best representing the whole building complex. This aesthetic requirement entailed compromises, as it diminished the necessary production spaces of the theatre at the cost of the townscape. It took two decades to plan the theatres for Jyväskylä, Rovaniemi and Seinäjoki. Aalto's theatre buildings are reminiscent of classical precedents in the form of entrance colonnades and the shapes of the auditoriums. The facades of his theatres were mostly clad with light-coloured ceramic "stave" tiles which the Aalto studio developed from the early 1950s for the cladding of both interior and exterior surfaces. White Carrara marble was an expensive material in Finland, yet Aalto was still able to use it in some of his buildings in Helsinki but also in Germany.<sup>16</sup> Probably light-coloured and gleaming ceramic "stave" tiles can be interpreted as Aalto's innovative substitute for marble.

According to Aalto, the architecture of a theatre should disconnect the theatre-goers from their everyday existence. The interior architecture should raise their expectations step by step leading up to the actual performance.<sup>17</sup> The lobbies in Aalto's theatres are spacious and free-form, whereas the accompanying administrative spaces are regular in form. The main auditorium, which is raised up to the first floor, has an asymmetrical plan; usually based on fan shapes and accommodating an audience of 400–600 people.<sup>18</sup> The building would also mainly include furniture designed by the Aalto studio and the Artek company, as well as the different Aalto-designed lighting fixtures intended for different purposes and incorporating many variations.

### Seinäjoki Civic Centre and Theatre

The city of Seinäjoki is located on the flat plains of Southern Ostrobothnian in western Finland. It originated around an ironworks and gunpowder factories founded in 1798, becoming a municipality in 1868, a market town in 1931 and then a city in 1960. The southern edge of the city centre is marked by the distinct form of the cultural and administrative centre (1951–1987) designed by the Aalto studio. Because of the quality of its various buildings and because it was constructed in its entirety, the Seinäjoki Civic Centre is the most representative of Aalto's city centres.<sup>19</sup>

The Civic Centre was based on two architectural competitions: Aalto won the competitions for the church in 1951 and the town hall in 1958. Thus, he had the opportunity to create an urban centre.<sup>20</sup> Aalto stated at the inauguration of the town hall in 1962: "Seinäjoki is not content with just one or two public buildings, it has planned a group of public buildings that will

21 Ibid., 6.

22 Ibid., 5.

bring people together and for a complete spiritual centre for the city.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it took a long time – until the 1960s – before the church buildings, the administrative centre and cultural buildings were welded together to form a civic centre. The library was completed in 1965 and the government offices in 1968. After Alvar Aalto’s death in 1976, the design of the Seinäjoki Civic Centre was continued by his widow, Elissa Aalto. The final building, the theatre, was completed in 1987, and the paving of the square in 1988.<sup>22</sup> The location for Aalto’s centre was originally a piece of flat ground, but he reconfigured the terrain in front of the town hall to form an artificial hill, while the churchyard in front of the church was banked up to form an auditorium (figure 2).

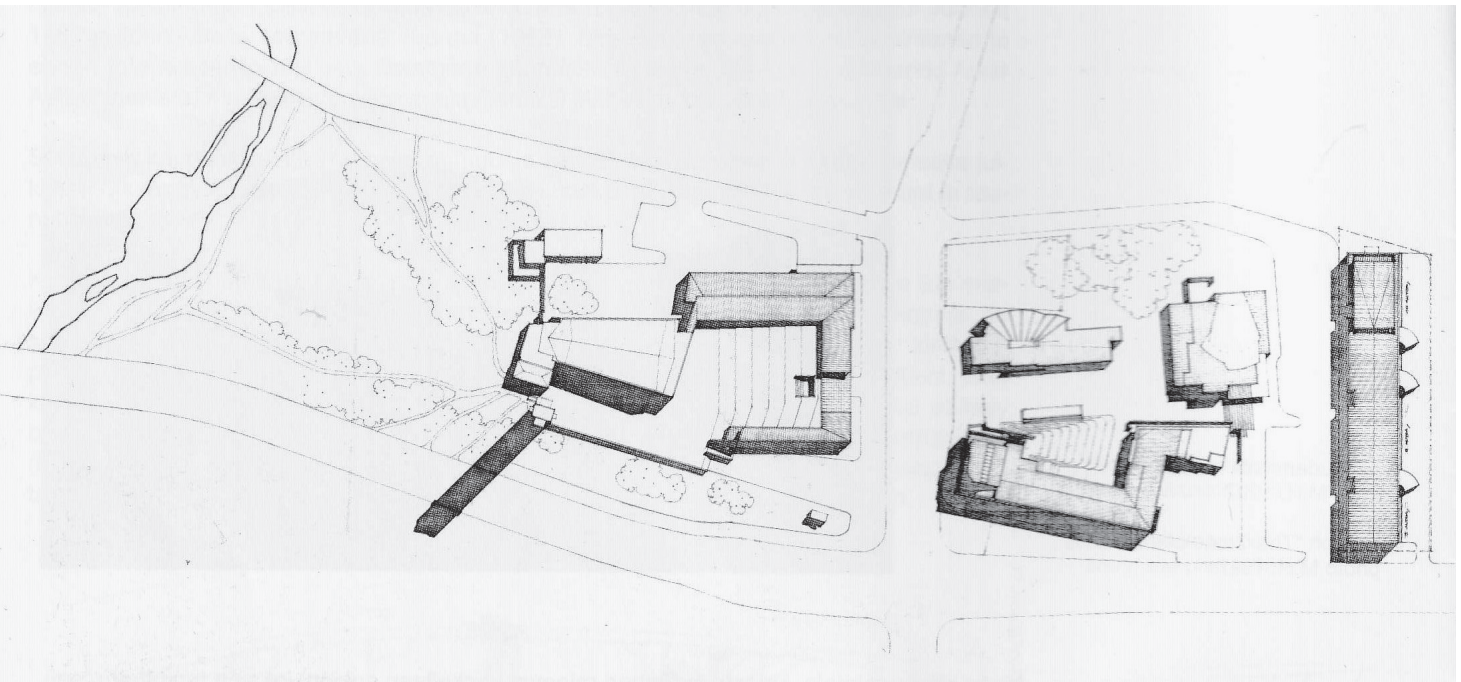


fig. 2 Seinäjoki Civic Centre. Site plan, April 1963. Left, the church and parish centre; middle top, the library and theatre; middle bottom, the town hall; right, the government office building. *Seinäjoen kaupunkikeskus. Seinäjoki Cultural and Administrative Centre. Architecture by Alvar Aalto, no. 16.*



- 23 Penttilä, *Seinäjoki civic center, survey of the building history* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2004), 59.
- 24 Elissa Aalto, "Seinäjoen teatteri, Seinäjoki. Arkkitehtitoimisto Alvar Aalto & Co," *Arkkitehti*, 7 (1987), 45–50.

fig. 3 Seinäjoki Civic Centre. Right, the theatre, left, the town hall, in the middle church tower. Photo Marjo Holma Alvar Aalto Foundation.

Aalto's proposal in the two-phase competition for the Seinäjoki Civic Centre in 1958 entailed fixing the location of the main road and the shape of a theatre. Preliminary sketch designs were then ordered from the Aalto studio.<sup>23</sup> After Aalto passed away, Elissa Aalto's role became crucial for the Seinäjoki theatre, in both renewing the drawings and supervising the construction of the building, which was taken into use in 1987.<sup>24</sup> The theatre building terminates the long square which culminates at the other end in the church. The facades of the theatre are clad with ceramic stave tiles attached to brick walls and the stage tower is clad in copper (figure 3).



- 25 The fine theatre curtain by artist Juhana Blomstedt is seldom used because of changes in the use of the stage. Jussi Aittoniemi, Seinäjoki city architect phone interview 17 March, 2021.
- 26 Päivi Lukkarinen, "Alvar Aalto at the gateway to Lapland," in Hipeli, *Architecture by Alvar Aalto*, 9–12.
- 27 Ibid., 12.
- 28 Aalto, "Rovaniemi Civic Centre," 24.
- 29 Koho, "Teatteriarkkitehtuurin merkitysarvot," 93.
- 30 Niskanen, "Suomalaiset teatterit 1940–1990."

Aalto's idea of raising the theatre-goers' expectations before the actual drama on the stage was established in the Seinäjoki theatre by creating a route which started from the ground floor lobby, where a cloakroom and restaurant were located, and then rising along a broad staircase up towards the upper lobby with a view towards the town hall. The auditorium, with a little over 400 seats, has a muted colour scheme, with the exception of an intensely coloured curtain.<sup>25</sup>

The Seinäjoki Civic Centre, nowadays called the Aalto Centre, has been isolated from the rest of the city by a green belt. As no commercial functions were allowed to be part of it, the centre remained a quiet place for most of the time and the public life that Aalto had spoken of was missing.

### Rovaniemi Civic Centre

Aalto made designs for Rovaniemi, the central city of Lapland and the most northern city of Finland, over a period of thirty years. He started with the design of the master plan after the city had been more or less burned to the ground in the aftermath of the Lapland War of 1944–1945. He also received several commissions from private clients.<sup>26</sup>

Rovaniemi's status changed from a township to a city on January 1, 1960.<sup>27</sup> Aalto was commissioned by the city of Rovaniemi to design Lappia House as part of an administrative and cultural centre, for which he had already drawn up draft proposals. According to Aalto: "In Rovaniemi, the centre will be shaped by a powerful coherent triumvirate: the city hall, the theatre-cum-concert-hall, and the library. These buildings turn their main facades toward the square, which is reserved for pedestrians only and serves as a kind of anteroom of the public buildings in question"<sup>28</sup> (figure 4).

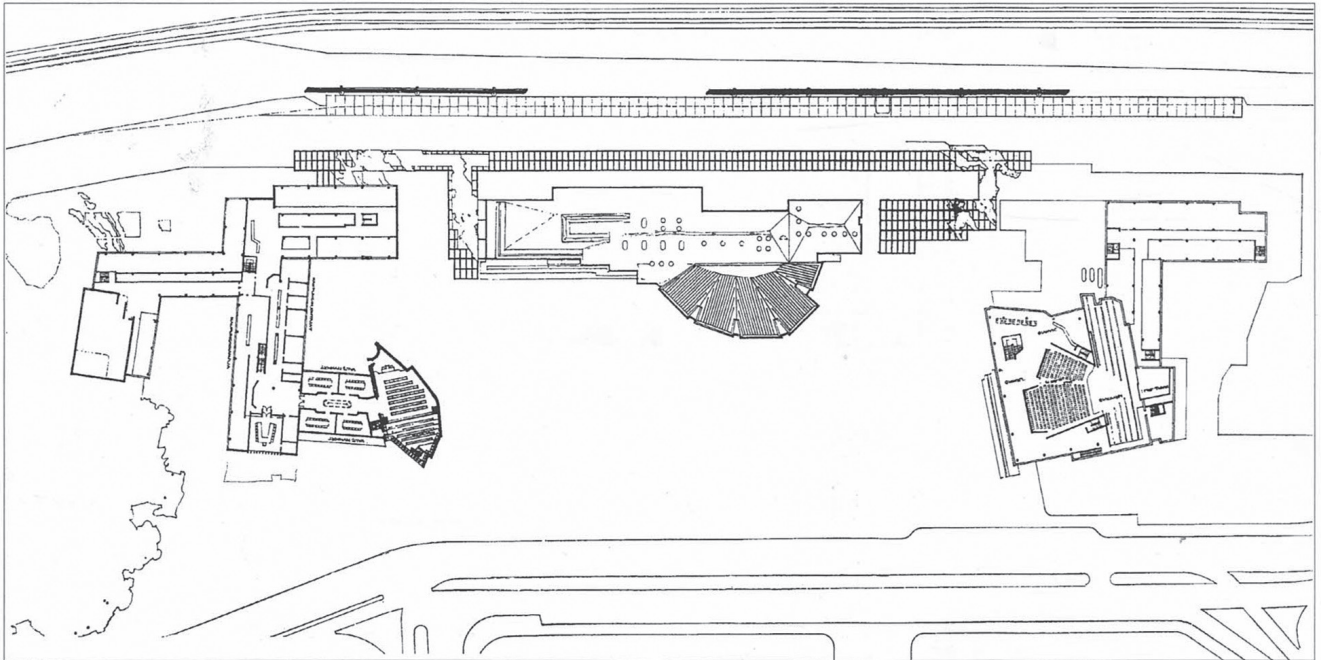
In Lappia House, in addition to the theatre, spaces were also reserved for the provincial museum, a music school and the Finnish state broadcasting company Yleisradio. The building, completed in two phases, was taken into use as the city theatre in 1975. Aalto made the theatre a prominent aspect of the building by raising it up to the first floor and with addition of the rising Lapland fell-like shape of the stage tower. The facades were clad with white ceramic stave-like tiles and the plinths with black granite. The floors of the vestibule and foyers are local brown Lapland marble (figure 5).

The theatre auditorium is accessed ceremoniously via a public square, entrance hall and foyer.<sup>29</sup> The 445-seat segment-shaped auditorium was designed for theatre, concert and congress activities and could be combined with a smaller studio stage via a multi-folding door. This, however, became an acoustic problem, as it has not been possible to hold simultaneous performances in the parallel spaces. For stage designers, the asymmetry of the auditorium in relation to the stage has also proved a challenge.<sup>30</sup> Behind the large auditorium and studio there is a chamber music hall (figures 6, 7, 8).

fig. 4 [opposite page]  
Rovaniemi Civic Centre.  
Site plan: right, Lappia House; middle, the library; left, the town hall, completed posthumously. *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work. Architecture, Design and Art.*

fig. 5 [opposite page]  
Lappia House, Rovaniemi. Facade towards the Citizen's Square. Photo Kari Hakli  
Alvar Aalto Foundation.





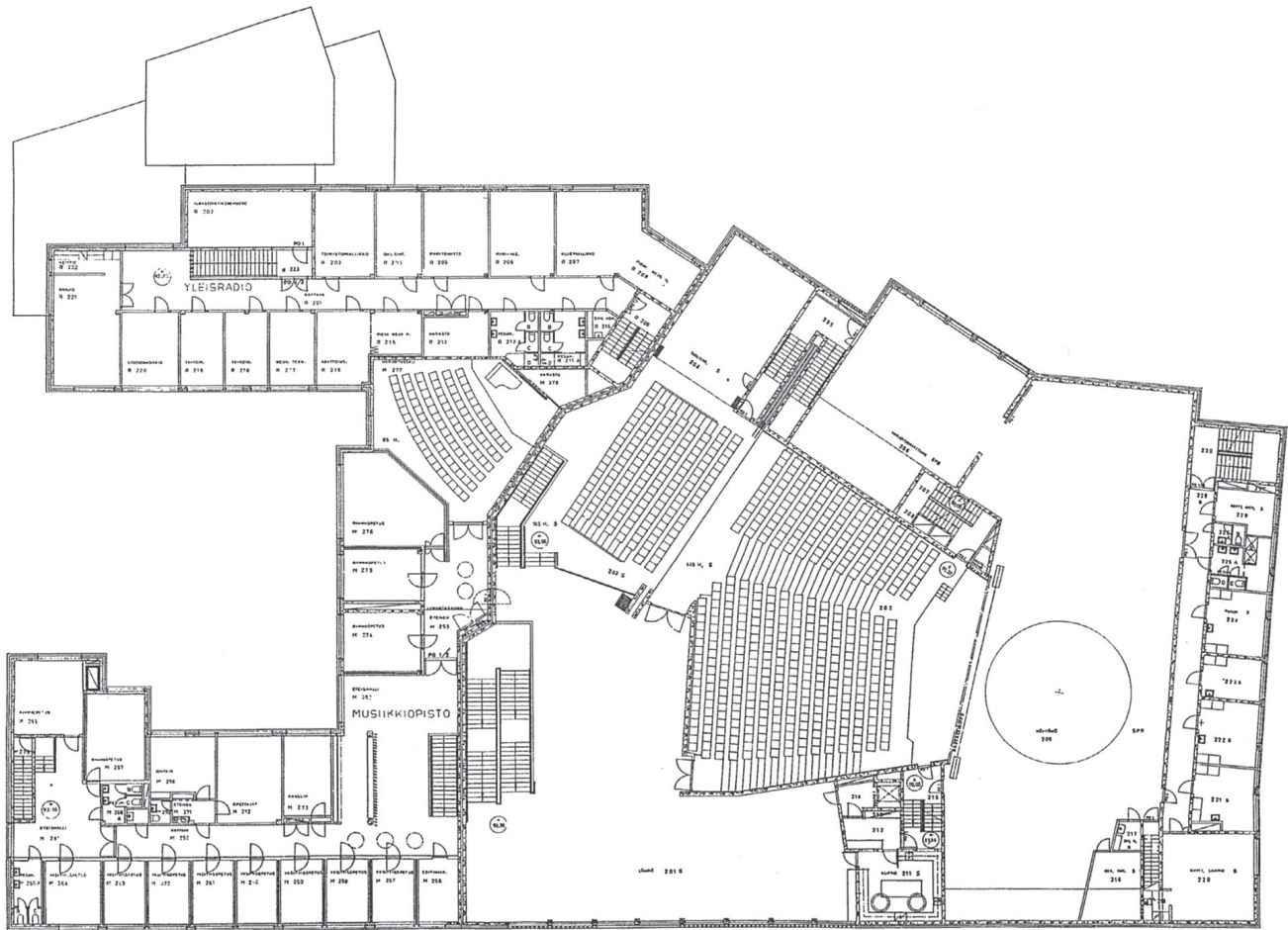


fig. 6 Lappia House Rovaniemi. First floor plan.  
*Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work. Architecture, Design and Art.*

fig. 7 [opposite page]  
 Lappia House, Rovaniemi. Theatre lobby.  
 Kari Hakli Alvar Aalto Foundation.

fig. 8 [opposite page]  
 Lappia House. Theatre auditorium.  
 Kari Hakli Alvar Aalto Foundation.





- 31 The implemented parts of the administrative and cultural centre in Jyväskylä include the Police Headquarters (1976–1980), the City Offices (1967–1978) and the City Theatre (1964–1982).
- 32 Jonas Malmberg, *Jyväskylän teatteri: rakennushistoriaselvitys* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2014), 9.

## Jyväskylä Civic Centre and Theatre

The largest city in the region of Central Finland and the Finnish Lake District is Jyväskylä. The city was founded in 1837 and was built originally as a grid plan in the area between Lake Jyväsjärvi and the Jyväskylä ridge, and consisted of most of the current city centre. The city's nickname, "Athens of Finland," refers to its major role as an educational centre. Jyväskylä was Aalto's school town; he founded his first ever office there, and his works can be seen throughout the city, among them the University of Jyväskylä (1951–76).

Aalto received a commission from the City of Jyväskylä in 1964 to design an administrative centre, which would also include a theatre. He twice completely modified the plan for the administrative centre, in 1964 and then again in 1972.<sup>31</sup> The theatre building was completed in 1982 under the direction of Elissa Aalto.<sup>32</sup>

The facades of the theatre notably differ from each other: the rows of windows in the office wing are oriented towards the adjacent street. The rising forms of the auditorium and stage tower are visible on the civic square as part of an enclosed building. The entrance and the large windows of the foyer face towards the park, and on this side the stage tower is disguised by the roof planes (figure 9).

fig. 9 Jyväskylä City Theatre. Façade showing the rising forms of the auditorium and stage tower. Photo Martti Kapanen Alvar Aalto Foundation.



fig. 10 Jyväskylä City Theatre. Foyer. Photo Janina Kastikainen Alvar Aalto Foundation.

fig. 11 Jyväskylä City Theatre. Auditorium. Photo Martti Kapanen Alvar Aalto Foundation.





- 33 Ibid., 24.  
 34 Niskanen, "Suomalaiset teatterit 1940–1990."  
 35 Idem., "Cultural and leisure facilities in Finland," in Harri Hautajärvi, ed., *The Building of Finland* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2017), 165–195, 174.  
 36 Idem., "Between Alvar Aalto and Karl Marx: Finnish architecture students 1968–1969," *Architecture 68. International Panorama of the Renewal of Education* (2020): <https://metispresses.ch/en/architecture-68>

Parallels in the circulation system and the asymmetrical shape of the auditorium have been drawn between the Jyväskylä theatre and Aalto's Essen Opera House, and indeed they were both designed and built more or less simultaneously.<sup>33</sup> In the former case, the main stair ascends in a ceremonial manner from the dimly lit entrance hall up to the tall and brightly lit foyer. The spatial sequence culminates in a 550-seat sector-shaped auditorium with white walls and dark-coloured chairs. The acoustic wall panelling and the blue and white colour scheme are reminiscent of the auditorium of the Finlandia Hall. The blue atmosphere of the auditorium was completed by a stage curtain. The proscenium arch extends towards the side walls; it can be compared to the impression of a Greek theatre under the open sky (figures 10, 11).

### **Aalto's Theatres in the Face of the Leftist Political Winds of the 1970s**

The solemnity linked with the use of the cultural institutions designed by Aalto began to alienate some people in the late 1960s, as they were perceived as elitist. The influence of left-wing cultural policy increased in Finland after the Social Democrats came to power in 1966. The theatre institution was radically reformed, and the audience numbers increased at an accelerating rate. Both the theatre community and architects discussed the nature of the theatre in society. The debate over the essence of theatre took on political nuances typical of the late 1960s: people asked how art would find its way from *the elitist ivory towers to the common people*.<sup>34</sup> Discussions also began on the idea of flexible studios as an alternative to the traditional proscenium box, as represented by Aalto's theatres. In addition to the main stages, neutral spaces, "black boxes" upholstered in black cloth, were built in the large theatre buildings.<sup>35</sup>

The new large theatre buildings built in several Finnish cities were heavily mechanized in accordance with West German models. In Aalto's theatres, on the other hand, compromises were made in the mechanisation and spatial layout in favour of the theatre's exterior. The Finlandia Hall, completed in 1971, was considered elitist by the young generation at that time, due to both its traditional concert repertoire and its architecture. The solemn ritualistic ascent up to the auditorium did not interest the generation that wanted to come to performances wearing a sweater rather than formal wear. The Finlandia Hall's white marble cladding was especially seen as alienating.<sup>36</sup>

### **A University as a City – Helsinki University of Technology**

Aalto began to receive major commissions in the 1950s in response to the new requirements of Finnish society: the head offices of the National Pensions Institute in Helsinki, as well as various municipal and city halls, theatres, concert halls and two universities. In terms of their

- 37 Idem., "Technology, the Senses and New Types of Projects in the Architecture of Alvar Aalto," in Juhana Lahti, ed., *Modern Life! Finnish Modernism and the International Dimension* (Helsinki: Parvs, 2017), 175–189.
- 38 Penttilä, "Building Alma Mater," in Hipeli, ed., *University of Technology, Otaniemi 1949–74. Alvar Aalto Architect*, Volume 13 (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2008), 6–61, 11, 18.
- 39 Ibid., 14.
- 40 Above all, against J. S. Sirén, at that time professor of public building design at the university. Ibid., 26.

technological infrastructure, the buildings designed by Alvar Aalto in the 1950s were up to date, yet they were more and more hidden under organic materials. Aalto's public buildings began to display references to history, and in this respect he differed from the mainstream of international modernism.<sup>37</sup>

In 1949, Aalto won the architectural competition for the design of the new Helsinki University of Technology campus in Otaniemi in Espoo with his entry *Ave Caesar, Morituri te salutant* [Hail Caesar, those who are about to die salute you]. His partner in the competition project was his wife Aino, who was terminally ill at the time. Some twenty years, however, would pass before the main buildings of the project were completed. The programme of rooms and spaces grew considerably as increasing numbers of engineering students were admitted to the university, as Finland was in a process of rapid industrialisation.<sup>38</sup> Helsinki University of Technology became an American-style campus, with student housing placed in a forest setting and laboratories and most of the departments along the edges of the area. Traffic was separated into vehicular and pedestrian routes. Aalto had brought these solutions from the USA, having been a professor at MIT in the 1940s.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his recognised status, Aalto had to fight for the right to design the university's main building, as some of his colleagues had wanted to have an open competition for it.<sup>40</sup> Rising from a series of lawns, the seemingly simple Main Building (1955–1964) is one of Alvar Aalto's most impressive works. It is situated in the old cultural and historical setting of the former Otnäs manor. The main square of the campus is surrounded by the Main Building and its administrative facilities, as well as the Departments of Architecture and Surveying.

The main building is rooted in the terrain by means of terracing. Its wall-like volumes of red brick ascend within the staggered terrain, spreading out into wings, between which the form of a Greco-Roman theatre rises to form a landmark for the campus. Adjoining the lawn area is an old avenue of linden trees, with the university's Main Library looming behind it. The lawn spreads out like a soft carpet, almost up to the thresholds of the buildings. The Main Building is of reduced form with mostly windowless walls. The bearing structure is a concrete frame clad with bricks and partly with copper. There is dark-grey granite in the foundation plinths and terraced walls, and white marble in the courtyard of the Department of Architecture, which is then echoed by strips of marble amidst the red brick in the façade of the library. The crowning detail is the classical theatre shape of the main auditorium. The use of a classical theme was already evident in the name of the competition entry, though it may also contain a reference to the auditorium of the University of Helsinki designed by C. L. Engel (1832) (figure 12).



fig. 12 Helsinki University of Technology  
(since 2010, Aalto University). Exterior view  
of the main auditorium.  
Photo Martti Kapanen



fig. 13 Helsinki University of Technology.  
Carrara marble clad inner courtyard of  
the Department of Architecture.  
Photo Martti Kapanen, Alvar Aalto Foundation.

41 Aalto, "Kaupunkisuunnittelu ja julkiset rakennukset," 55.

42 Penttilä, "Building Alma Mater," 36.

The ensemble of buildings comprising the main facilities of Helsinki University of Technology can be interpreted as a city of the antiquities: the spreading of the Main Building in a fan shape over the rising terrain can be compared to the Hellenistic upper city of Pergamon; the university administration is located at the highest point of the area, with the theatre-like main auditorium slightly lower. The combination of brick and marble strips on the front of the Main Library on the main square side is reminiscent of the ruins of Palatinus Hill in Rome. There is also marble in the lobby of the Department of Architecture as well as the walls of its courtyard, where Aalto would have liked to have placed columns as examples of the classic orders (figure 13).

For economic reasons, Aalto aimed for a non-decorative form in the exterior architecture, which would provide the *academic dignity* due to a major university.<sup>41</sup> The interior spaces, however, are varied and nuanced. The main auditoriums, with their rows of seats placed in the manner of a Greek theatre, are the culmination of the series of spaces in the Main Building. The Main Building was complemented by a small shopping centre (1961) on the side of the campus green, intended to serve students and the still few other residents in Otaniemi, as well as by the Main Library (1969). Aalto expressed his thoughts on the "festival square" adjacent to the theatre, that it "automatically becomes a meeting place for the students." However, Jaakko Penttilä points out that the square is located next to the administrative wing with the plenary hall of the Administrative Council, that is, "the spaces intended for the university's festivities, formal occasions and highest authority – and it becomes clear, however, that Aalto did not think of informal student gatherings. On the stage of academic prestige, students were spectators and listeners." They should be listening to the rector's speech.<sup>42</sup>

The brick volumes of the university are sculptural and generally windowless towards the outside. The Main Building is separated from the rest by a central square and a wide street.

### **The Zoning Ideology and Changes in Seinäjoki and Otaniemi in the 2010s**

Aalto's intention to raise the status of culture to form a contrast to all commercial functions led to the isolation of his administrative and cultural centres and Helsinki University of Technology from their surroundings, and especially from commercial functions.

As I see it, here Aalto worked in the spirit of the Modernist zonal planning launched by CIAM in 1933. The urban life that Aalto longed for in his city centres was thus not realized, at least from the present-day point of view. On the other hand, the hopes of our own time for the openness of public buildings and their connection to urban life have changed since Aalto's time. A lack of urban vibrancy has not been felt in Jyväskylä, where the buildings of Aalto's Civic Centre are an integral part of the



- 43 Harri Hautajärvi, architect, Doctor of Science, phone interview 20 March, 2021.
- 44 JKMM, "Seinäjoen kaupunginkirjasto / Seinäjoki Main Library," *Arkkitehti*, 8 (2012): 43–51.
- 45 Niskanen, "Cultural and leisure facilities in Finland," 171.
- 46 Asmo Jaaksi, architect of Seinäjoki library JKMM Architects, phone interview 17 March, 2021.
- 47 *Campus 2015*. Espoo: Aalto University.
- 48 Versta Arkkitehdit, "Väre," *Arkkitehti*, 6 (2018): 46–55.
- 49 Arkkitehdit NRT, "Aalto University Harald Herlin Learning Centre," *Arkkitehti*, 1 (2017): 24–32.

city centre. In Rovaniemi, the large library brings life to the civic square.<sup>43</sup> In Seinäjoki and Otaniemi, it is only since the 2010s that supplementary infill building has brought new urban life to these centres.

The 2008 architectural competition for the design of an annex to the Seinäjoki Administrative and Cultural Centre challenged participants to complement Alvar Aalto's library with a large space that could be used flexibly. "Apila" [Clover], the pseudonym of the winning proposal by JKMM Architects, refers to an arrangement in which the various functions protrude from the centrally placed-customer service area.<sup>44</sup> The role of libraries as book and music depositories, as well as places of silence, has changed following digitalisation. Nowadays, Finnish libraries offer various services, from free workspaces to 3D-printing services, as well as the lending of musical instruments and fitness equipment. The most recent libraries strive for a relaxed atmosphere.<sup>45</sup>

The entrance to the large extension of the Seinäjoki Library, completed in 2012, was turned towards the civic square of the Aalto Centre. Expansive views and comfortable furnishings invite visitors to linger inside the library. Cast concrete surfaces encounter glass, wood and soft, colourful textiles. The library's new modes of operation and attractive interiors have encouraged schoolchildren and young people to spend time there. As a result, the Aalto Centre has become livelier than previously (figure 14).<sup>46</sup>

Aalto University became a reality at the beginning of 2010 when three major Finnish universities merged: the Helsinki School of Economics, the University of Art and Design Helsinki and Helsinki University of Technology. The need to locate all three "schools" in Otaniemi and the vastly increased number of students meant significant additional building needs. The Campus 2015 two-stage international planning competition was held in 2012–2013.<sup>47</sup> The winning proposal by Versta Arkkitehdit was implemented and the Aalto University School of Art and Design was completed in 2018. In addition to the academic facilities, a wing of the new building also comprises shops, cafés, restaurants, as well as access to a new metro station. The square between the new building and the former Main Building is a place where people like to gather and is usually full of life (figure 15).<sup>48</sup>

The restoration of the university's Main Library and its remodelling as the Learning Centre in 2016 entailed the transformation of the basement floor book storage into facilities for a café and a variety of spaces to hold meetings and group work, as well as personal study and relaxation. The original spaces of Aalto's Main Library on the upper floors were carefully restored.<sup>49</sup>

fig. 14 [opposite page]  
Aerial view of Seinäjoki Civic Centre, with the extension to the library by JKMM Architects in the foreground. Photo Tuula Pöyhä 2012.

fig. 15 [opposite page]  
Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture by Versta Architects. Photo. Andres Meischner.





- 50 Martin Steffens, *Schinkel* (Köln: Taschen, 2016), 59.
- 51 The Königsplatz museum area in Munich, comprising the Glyptothek archeological museum, and Propyläen gate, built in 1816–1846. Also among the complex was the two Honour temples (Ehrentempel) built in 1935 and demolished in 1945. The Berlin Museum Island (Museumsinsel) comprises five museums built in 1830–1936.

### A Dream of Antiquity

Let us return to the dream of antiquity as fuelled by Aalto's imagination. Undoubtedly, the Acropolis in Athens was a source of inspiration for him throughout his student days, via international influences and then ultimately in the actual encounter. It was not the only starting point of his interest in antiquity, but certainly one of the most important ones, if Göran Schildt is to be believed. Like his contemporaries, Aalto seems to have inherited a belief in the "noble whiteness and quiet greatness" of ancient Greece, following in the footsteps of the German neoclassicist Johan Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768). The Acropolis in Athens, as encountered by Aalto and by new generations after him, is an artificial creation. During the 19th century it was cleared of all previous cultural layers. The remains of "secondary" buildings were also cleared from the site, leaving only those monuments on the bare rock that were perceived as belonging to the "Golden Age." And although the remnants of the colours of ancient architecture were known and had been even reconstructed during Aalto's time, the Acropolis he encountered was monochromatic. Perhaps it would be something of a piquant question of whether the temple-like nature of the Finlandia Hall – white marble both inside and out – is derived from the temples of the Acropolis.

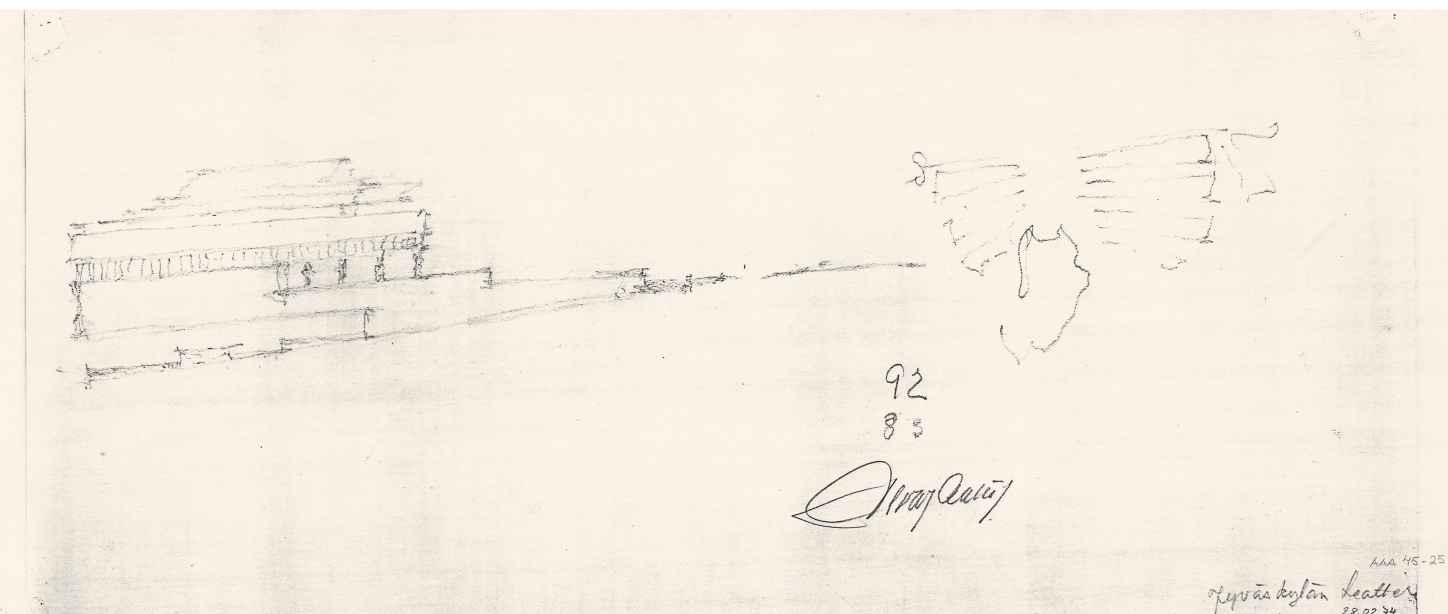
Was perhaps Aalto's lofty view of the face of the city a legacy from German Romanticism or, more generally, from Neoclassicism? Karl Friedrich Schinkel had envisioned Berlin at the beginning of the 19th century as the "Athens on the Spree," "wanting to create the impression of an ancient ideal which was also socially relevant in his own time."<sup>50</sup> And of course, cultural centres with classical architecture had been built at least one hundred years before Aalto's time, such as Munich's Königsplatz or Berlin's Museumsinsel.<sup>51</sup> What was significant to Aalto in the examples from antiquity were not the classical forms, to which he could refer in fragments. Central to him rather was the perspective I have mentioned at the outset, cultural memory, which involved the prominent position of public buildings, a city centre open to the townspeople, and urban life. Aalto was offered the opportunity to design and implement civic centres and universities which met the needs of his own time. The needs of our current urban life have been met by infill building both in Seinäjoki Civic Centre and Otaniemi University.. Antiquity – among many other factors – provided Aalto with ingredients that he incorporated into his own designs (figure 16).

Aalto seemed to consider the use of classical motifs possible even during the era of the strictest Modernism. In the courtyard of the Department of Architecture at Helsinki University of Technology he had hoped that columns of the classical orders would be placed in front of the white marble panels – though the idea never materialized. Aalto had no problem with using caryatids during even the strictest period of Modernism. For instance, he designed caryatids as supports for





fig. 16 Wilhelm Ahlborn, "View of Greece's Golden Age," copied from the 1825 original by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1836.  
Photo. Open source.



52 Teija Isohauta e-mail 1 April, 2021; Schildt, *Aalto: A Life's Work*, 60–61.

53 The design of the Jyväskylä theatre began in 1964, but in 1972 the entire design was renewed. Of the facades, two alternatives were presented, one with caryatids. Schildt, *Aalto: A Life's Work*, 108–109. Sketch designs from 1970 and 1974 show caryatids in the facade facing towards Vapaudenkatu street. Isohauta e-mail, 1 April, 2021.

54 Eric Adlercreutz, project architect for Suomen Yhdyspankki bank building, Helsinki. Phone interview 29 March, 2021.

the roof terrace of the unrealized chapel for Malmi Cemetery in 1950.<sup>52</sup> And he also sketched designs in 1972 and 1974 for caryatids to be placed between the windows opening out onto the patio of the Jyväskylä City Theatre, but they too were not realised.<sup>53</sup> When designing the Union Bank of Finland offices in central Helsinki in the early 1960s, Aalto had discussed the possibility of placing caryatids to support the roof of the terrace at the end of the building that overlooks the Esplanade and Market Square. When his assistants were surprised, Aalto stated: “We mustn’t be so dogmatic.”<sup>54</sup> The caryatids, however, were never added to the building (figure 17).

fig. 17 Aalto’s sketch for the façade of Jyväskylä City Theatre, 28 February, 1974.