

Buildings of power and resonance

Architectural education in schools and colleges

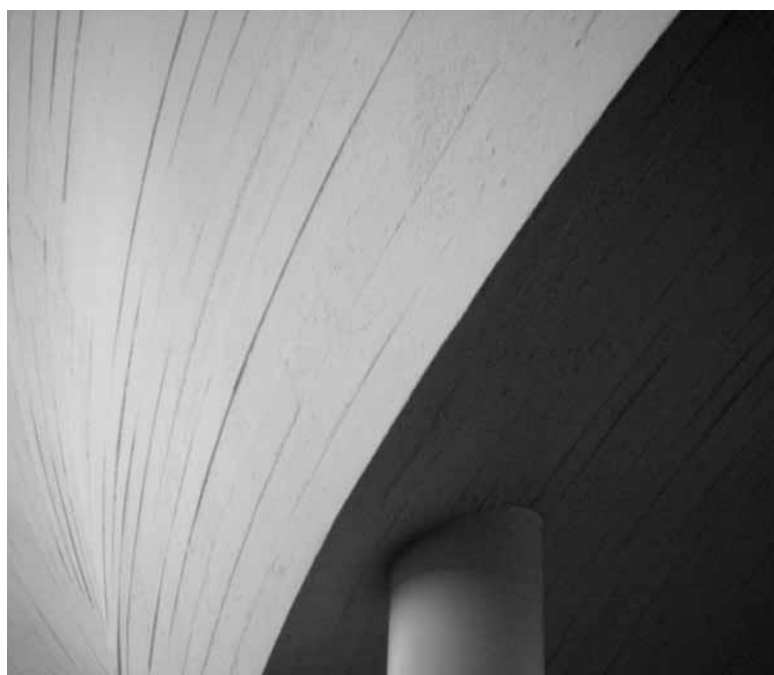
The Aalto atelier

Harry Charrington's article (*arq*, 14.3, pp. 255–66) is a fascinating addition to the ever-increasing literature on Aalto. His concentration on Aalto's method of working with his colleagues is especially welcome. As well as adding to the anecdotes collected together in *Ex Intimo*, to give us a fuller picture of the studio at Tiilimäki, Charrington prompts thoughts of a more general nature about the types of practice different architects run. No doubt many *arq* readers will have illustrations drawn from their own experience, and it is possible to identify a number of models, which each have their benefits and disadvantages. The way that Aalto ran his office seems to me to be absolutely of a piece with his design philosophy, and is not a model that architects without his particular approach could adopt with ease.

Surely it is the case that 'designed' practices (to use an ugly but useful term) depend on a very few charismatic individuals with strongly developed attitudes to the formal characteristics of the work that emerges. The architects concerned do not necessarily have to lead the design process by drawing the initial concepts in the seductive way that Aalto did – they can proceed by assembling an atelier of talented assistants who draw and model, but they ensure that the work to emerge from the office is their own by choosing consistently some sets of forms rather than others: something of Aalto's 'divide and rule'. Lasdun's office would appear to have worked in this way. Richard Rogers seems to be an architect whose consistency of production is dependent on his ability to inspire by words as much as by drawings and sketches, which



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1–2 A 'methodological adaptation to circumstance' characterised Aalto's studio practices

are usually executed by others. Gropius was another architect who did not draw, but in his case the resulting buildings are more variable in character and quality, depending on those with whom he was collaborating. Aalto's scepticism of 'teamwork' would seem justified.

But in most instances, we can point to sketches or doodles by the 'named' architects, and follow the way in which an initial idea is developed and emerges in the built project. Frequently, a powerful design idea is maintained only by a process of eliminating those contradictions that threaten to dilute it. Structural disciplines, servicing requirements and, of course, budgetary constraints all conspire to muddy the elegant conceptual notion. In the case of Aalto's architecture, not only did his initial sketches apparently carry sufficient slack to allow for most of these constraints to be absorbed, but his design philosophy allowed pragmatic variation to affect, and in some instances actually enhance, the form of the buildings. I found an anecdote in *Ex Intimo* told by Jaakko Kontio, who worked in Aalto's office from 1954 to 1960, particularly telling:

Whatever blunder you made at work, he never put your back up against the wall like Allu Blomstedt or others did. He always found a solution! And they were brilliant. In the House of Culture when a big sanitary pipe came through in the corner of the concert hall, he solved it so that the spot became the most photographed detail of the whole building!

One can hardly imagine such a tale coming out of the office of Mies van der Rohe, for example. Aalto himself mentioned the 'methodical accommodation to circumstance' of the varied Karelian buildings that he admired so much, and the ability to accommodate the unexpected is one of the benefits of a fluid and inclusive formal vocabulary. Charitableness to the errors of the staff is also easier when 'blunders' can turn out to be beneficial.

If these are advantages of Aalto's style of atelier, what are the disadvantages? Some would presumably find the seamless transition between office and house (in Tiilimäki), and even summer house at Munkkiniemi, to be suffocating. They would rather work in one kind of place and be at home in another. When the staff are also the family, relationships that go wrong can be exceptionally painful.

But to be reminded, in our

current less than ideal world, of a form of practice where small groups were responsible under a charismatic architect of unique formal mastery, for buildings of such power and resonance, is a definite privilege.

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A place beyond where we are

As one who writes and practises in the north of Scotland, I very much enjoyed Laura Hourston Hanks' *Island Identities: The Pier Arts Centre, Orkney* (arq, 14.3, pp. 222–36). The author writes eloquently about Reiach and Hall Architects' elegant and well-crafted Pier Arts Centre. I would like to take up two themes from the paper: the first about how we imagine and use a sense of north as inspiration; and then to reflect on whether Stromness's singularity limits what we can learn and apply in developing architectural narratives in remote locations.

How we describe an architecture bound up in a sense of the north is well described by Hourston Hanks as a critical preoccupation of the Arts Centre's architect and is rightly unfurled as both a sensory phenomenon and as a means of defining a condition of distinctiveness and separation. Peter Davidson's book *The Idea of North* resonates with the architect Neil Gillespie's praise for the sculptural qualities of a low northern light as critical in situating architecture in high latitudes. There is, however, a restlessness that lies with this, as if always looking to the horizon for an ever more pristine rendering of a cool utopia. Materialising the north is a fragile pursuit, and is quite elusive in lower latitudes. However, the Orkneys with their pared landscapes and pristine light are a delightful reality in which the architect can seek inspiration.

In Scotland, many look to Scandinavian experiences, where the experiential north seems so much more woven into a culture that encompasses the art of Eilif Peterssen and Harald Sohlberg to luxuriating in long nights of Summer with Monika. In our devolutionary culture, there is tacit encouragement to look across the North Sea rather than over the border to define our architecture.

Politically it showed itself as an aspiration to ascend to an 'arc of prosperity' across the northern periphery until our age of insolvency revealed it to be illusory. For Scotland, an idea of north therefore might describe searching for a place beyond where we are. It differs from the Scandinavian experience where it is a concept embedded in its culture. Orkney in its own way wishes clear blue water from the mainland. An affinity towards Scandinavia is perhaps rooted more in forging a distinctive identity from Scotland's Central Belt than a seamless celebration of a common history.

The distinctive sense of light and space is an integral part of defining an architecture founded in the high latitudes of the Orkneys and indeed has that abstract quality that fits well within a well-versed canon of Critical Regionalism. I would argue, however, that there are limits to this beyond which we simply appropriate cultural narratives without enough critical discernment.

I would pose a question of how much can we take from the paper to help us intervene meaningfully in the Scots landscape? There is a sense that the Arts Centre lies in a gentle but persuasive straitjacket, in a context with little latitude to strike out on its own. The distinctive massing of the waterside makes the 'second shed' almost the missing part of an intricate spatial jigsaw. The design follows through with a reinterpretation of the existing harbourside buildings. So much of it is therefore about Stromness. The collection that lies within the building is staged within a more internationalist 'white cube'. It could be considered that rather than the building occupying a 'position as mediator between past and present', it is one that accommodates two quite distinctive worlds. A globalised consensus as to how art should be staged contrasts with the imperatives laid down by cultural and physical context. The Arts Centre is an interesting reversal of Bagsvaerd church as it is described by Kenneth Frampton in *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*. The church's generic exterior and specific interior are inverted in Stromness. The interior of the second shed is internationalised contrasting strongly with the contextual certainties that mould the building's exterior form.

Many architects in Scotland grapple with what it means to build within rural landscapes. There is a