

Aalto in Detail

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A Catalog of Components

Céline Dietziker
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Birkhäuser
Basel

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Keuruu at the Lake "ohra ahonlahti", June 2019

"My name is Aalto, like the architect," he told us in a friendly way. He had caught us while we were sneaking around his apartment building, taking photos of the garage doors. We were in the middle of the National Pensions Institute apartment complex, which the Aaltos built in the early 1950s not far from their own house. This was one of the special encounters that we experienced during our journey through Finland in the summer of 2019, on a hunt for traces of the Aaltos.

"What are you looking for here?" asked Mr. Aalto—who then insisted on showing us his apartment. In this simple two-bedroom worker's apartment, the Aaltos' talent for solving spatial and tectonic problems could be seen and felt. Within a small space, the transition between the kitchen and the dining room was skillfully resolved by means of a pantry with a built-in cupboard. Of course, there had to be a communal sauna in the lower level of the main structure.

After Mr. Aalto dropped off his son at soccer practice, he immediately took us to two unknown houses in nearby Espoo that were built during World War Two—simple, unpretentious wooden houses. On arrival, we started a conversation with one of the

owners who invited us on a quick tour through her house. In the detailed design of the stair banisters and the curved wooden ceiling under the roof, the Aaltos' hand was clearly recognizable. This approach is present everywhere in the building: construction problems were handled with a passion and joy for design. Wood was bent. Metal was covered in leather. Glazed ceramic tubes direct light into the depths of the room.

Our extensive catalog of details is the result of this journey, when we visited and documented almost fifty of the Aaltos' buildings from Helsinki, to Jyväskylä, to Turku. Our catalog is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, as a photographic collection, it demonstrates our love of details, which we rediscovered through the work of the Aaltos—Aino (1894–1949), Alvar (1898–1976), and Elissa (1922–94). This catalog of building elements serves as inspiration for our own architectural work. In a world of digitalized architecture, we should not forget the roots of architectural culture: handcraft.

Céline Dietziker and Lukas Gruntz

Essay



Alvar, 14 years, 1912

*"(...) Architecture and its details are in some way all part of biology. Perhaps they are, for instance, like some big salmon or trout. They are not born fully grown; they are not even born in the sea or water where they normally live. They are born hundreds of miles away from their home grounds, where the rivers narrow to tiny streams, in clear rivulets between the fells, in the first drops of water from the melting ice, as remote from their normal life as human emotion and instinct are from our everyday work. Just as it takes time for a speck of fish spawn to mature into a fully-grown fish, so we need time for everything that develops and crystallizes in our world of ideas. Architecture demands even more of this time than other creative work."*¹

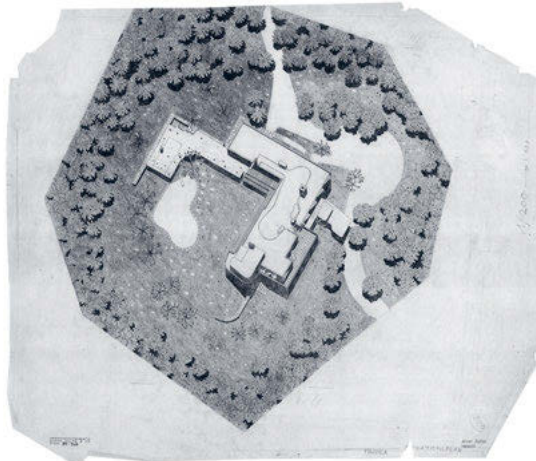
Alvar Aalto's essay, "The Trout and the Stream," first appeared in the fall of 1947 with the Italian title, "Architettura e arte concreta," in the architecture and design journal, DOMUS. For this issue, then editor-in-chief Ernesto Nathan Rogers asked his Finnish friend and colleague Aalto to share his thoughts on the relationship between architecture and art. The result is a very personal text. Using compelling metaphors, Aalto recounts his own experiences with architectural projects as well as experiments with wooden furniture designs and sculptural work, which he carried out with his first wife, Aino. In a conversational tone, he describes the Ionic column capital and his love of Italian architectural culture.



Sun terrace, Sanatorium in Paimio (1930s)

He names three “essential” arts—sculpture, painting, and architecture—and discusses how the fields of architecture and abstract art mutually inspire one another. Most significantly, however, he writes about architecture in respect to time, and the importance of having enough of it to be able to develop an architectural idea.

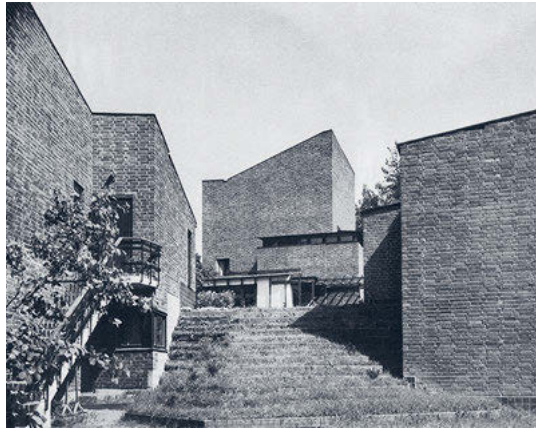
At that point, Alvar Aalto had long been part of the international architectural scene. Within a few years, he had evolved from a young architect influenced by Nordic classicism into a staunch advocate of functionalist modernism. However, the best-known buildings from this early period, the Viipuri Library (1927–35) and the Paimio Sanatorium (1928–33), were already more than a decade old, and in the interim he had become critical of pure functionalism.² During this time, his focus shifted to a humanistic architecture that responded to the needs of people and the natural environment. With great sensitivity, he and his first wife Aino put this approach into practice in the Villa Mairea in Noormarkku (1937–39). The town hall in Säynätsalo (1949–52), and Alvar’s own experimental summer house built with his second wife, Elissa, in Muuratsalo (1952–54), indicate further moves toward the development of a Finnish regionalism employing traditional materials and historical references.³



Site plan, Villa Mairea in Noormarkku (1938–39)

These buildings created over a period of three decades are great examples of Aino, Elissa, and Alvar Aalto's openness to current trends, as well as their constant search for distinctive themes. As different as these buildings are, they all exhibit a love of constructive detail. They are based not only on an interest in natural materials and organic forms but also on a general understanding of architecture as a comprehensive design task, first demonstrated by the Defense Corps Building in Jyväskylä (1926–29). The Aaltos' intense engagement with interior design did not emerge until the late 1920s with the winning of the Paimio competition. Due to a lack of commissions during the Great Depression, Aino and Alvar were forced to lay off almost all their staff.⁴ Since they scarcely had any other commissions, they put all their time and energy into detailing and designing the interiors and furniture. The result was an impressive total work of art that became a model for their later buildings and design objects.

An organic design concept had already been realized by the Aaltos in Viipuri. Through the circular skylights and undulating ceiling, the natural lighting and acoustics were improved upon, and a more human atmosphere created. Bright colors, often applied in



Steps towards the courtyard, Townhall in Säynätsalo (ca. 1952)



Sample wall, Experimental House in Muuratsalo (1960s)

amorphous figures, and a diverse palette of materials for the building elements served the same ends. Aino and Alvar Aalto's furniture and interior design elements were usually created in conjunction with a building project. In their designs for lighting fixtures, hardware, and glass objects, the same themes and solutions run throughout their careers. Their passion for native wood species was as much a part of this as their eagerness to experiment with a wide variety of construction methods. By using



Entrance side, Defence Corps Building in Jyväskylä (1920s)



Auditorium, Library in Viipuri (1935)

novel methods of bending wood, they were able to produce their cantilever chairs.⁵ The transfer of a construction method previously used only for steel tubes to a natural material seems only logical when one considers the Aaltos' careers in retrospect.

Their breakthrough in furniture design came in 1932 with “Number 41,” commonly known as the Paimio chair. When the new sanatorium building was completed, enthusiastic articles appeared in several major professional journals. Aino and Alvar Aalto were celebrated as the ideal architect couple and invited to events at home and abroad. Various architecture and design



Wooden mold and vase from the glass series "Savoy", 1936

exhibitions solidified not only their reputation in professional circles but also their fame beyond. Their modern designs and the corresponding production capabilities made it possible to fabricate good, affordable furniture for everyday use. An essential goal and distribution company, Artek, which they cofounded in 1935, played an important role in the emergence of a modern domestic culture in Helsinki and the rest of Finland. The fact that Artek's advertising slogan for quality furniture, "Buy Now Keep Forever," still holds true today speaks for itself.

Much has been written and even more has been speculated about Alvar Aalto's two marriages and his collaborations with his wives. One of the first publications about Alvar Aalto was the —still today—remarkable three-volume edition by Artemis Verlag, published in Zurich in 1963.⁶ The introduction to the first volume includes a lengthy, heartfelt note of thanks from Aalto to his current and former collaborators. Along with a brief curriculum vitae, the introduction explicitly states that he ran his office as a



Aino with Paimio-Chair, photographic experiment, ca. 1932

partnership with Aino Aalto from 1924 to 1949, and then with Elissa Aalto from 1952 onward. This statement is confirmed by the recollections of numerous employees and further supported by the repeated observation that Alvar and Aino, and later Elissa, complemented each other particularly well in the office setting, both personally and professionally. Despite this, all built projects continue to be attributed to Alvar Aalto alone. It is astonishing that, to this day, the achievements of his partners have not been better researched and appropriately recognized.

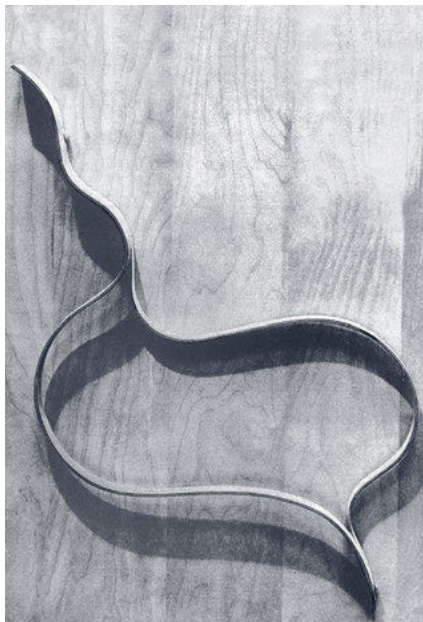
The universal interest in the architecture of the three Aaltos over generations is truly impressive. With their combination of regional and international elements and use of traditional building materials, their buildings have even become more contemporary. Alvar Aalto himself considered the transition from a reinforced concrete aesthetic to wood and natural materials to be the crucial turning point in the development of their architecture.⁷ The engagement with established construction methods and the focus on typically Finnish building materials were probably the decisive factors behind the authentic uniqueness of their buildings. Göran Schildt, who was on friendly terms with Alvar Aalto and wrote several biographies of him, surmised that “the basic essential of his achievement is that his roots are deep



Elissa and Alvar in the office in Helsinki, 1959

down in the Finnish soil.”⁸ In an age that is increasingly marked by generic projects, their authenticity is undoubtedly one reason why the buildings of Alvar, Aino, and Elissa Aalto still have such a strong impact.

Alvar Aalto always preferred that people experience his architecture directly rather than just write about his buildings and the ideas behind them.⁹ Since he and his partners worked on the designs until the end, often making changes at the last moment on the construction site, this is not surprising.¹⁰ Furthermore, the relationship between inside and outside, which is so typical for them, and the subtle mood of the spaces achieved through direct and indirect lighting can only be perceived on location. The same is true for the colors and the often lighthearted, playful components. Only through close examination does it become clear just how much passion went into the development and execution of every single detail. This is even more impressive in comparison with the situation today, when many architects delegate their responsibility to specialists, which results in a corresponding decrease in architectural quality. That the Aaltos would have handed over control of their designs or the execution of their projects is simply unthinkable.

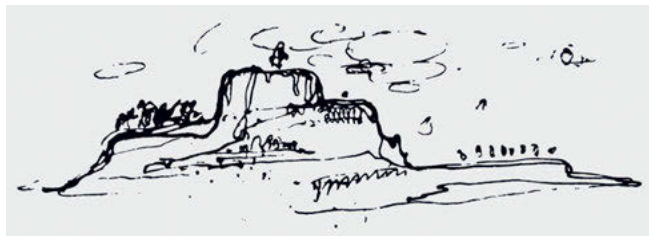


Experiment with plywood, 1934

In his essay mentioned above, Alvar Aalto also describes his preferred way of working. He presents his method of developing an idea into a project as a meandering, unconscious process that begins after he has ascertained the essential facts:

“I then move on to a method of working that is very much like abstract art. I simply draw by instinct, not architectural syntheses, but what are sometimes quite childlike compositions, and in this way, on an abstract basis, the main idea gradually takes shape, a kind of universal substance that helps me to bring the numerous contradictory components into harmony.”¹¹

This almost poetic description corresponds with his comments about the time factor in creative work. No one would deny that it takes a lot of time as well as creative space to develop convincing architectural ideas. Talking about the intelligence of the fingers may sound strange at a time when pencils and sketch



Sketch for Library in Viipuri (1920s)

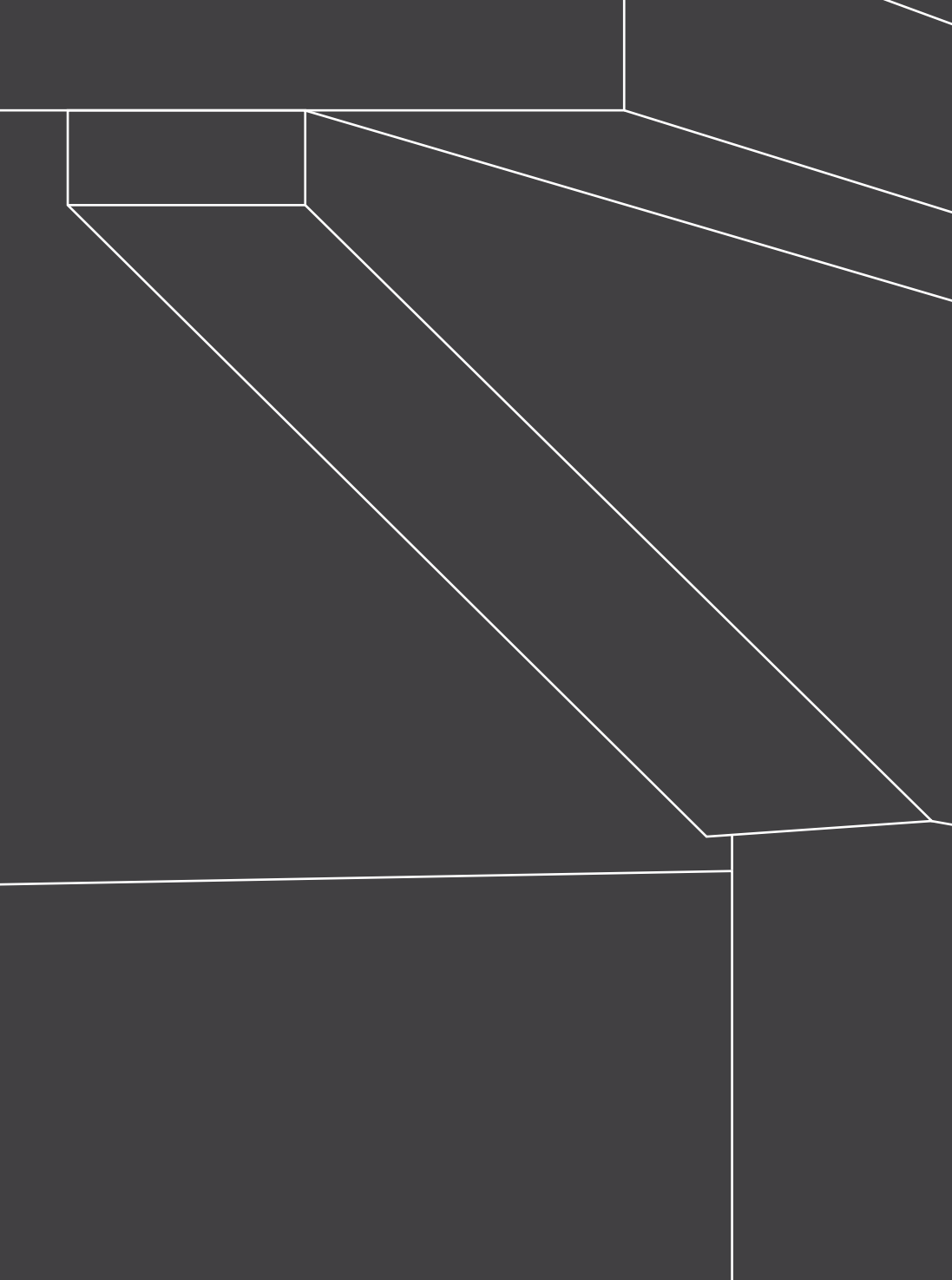
paper are hardly used anymore and work is increasingly done digitally. By contrast, the topics and projects described here clearly show the opportunities and also the qualities of the analog manner of working.

The built work of Aino, Alvar, and Elissa Aalto is truly multifaceted, joyfully exuberant in design, and at the same time authentic. The Aaltos felt as much responsibility for the context as for the exterior and interior of their buildings. But the strong relationship between the various elements of their architecture is most clearly revealed in their love for the smallest building components—the details.

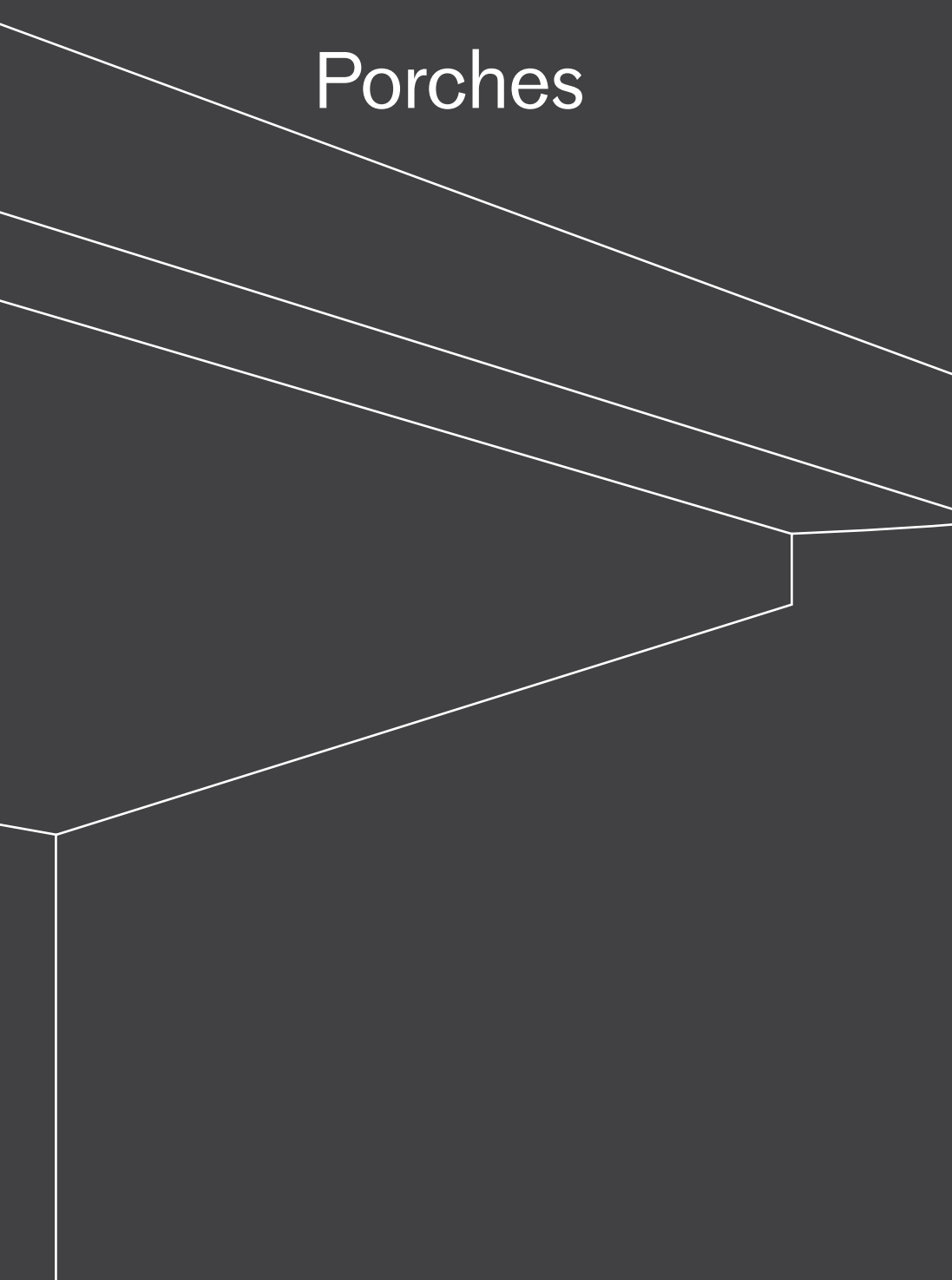
This catalog demonstrates that these are the very soul of their total works of art. Through intense commitment, careful selection of materials, and use of their own photographs, Céline Dietziker and Lukas Gruntz have thoroughly explored this aspect of the work of the three Aaltos. They deserve full recognition and heartfelt thanks for this valuable, groundbreaking study.

Annette Helle
Zurich, Spring 2022

- 1 Alvar Aalto, "The Trout and the Stream," [1948] in:
G. Schildt, ed., *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words* (Helsinki:
Otava, 1991), 108–9.
- 2 "Aalto's lifelong attempt to satisfy social and psychological
criteria effectively set him apart from the more dogmatic
Functionalists of the 1920s, whose careers were already
established when he designed his first significant works."
Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*
(London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 202.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Göran Schildt, *Moderna tider. Alvar Aaltos möte med
funktionalismen* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand,
1985), 85.
- 5 This new method for manufacturing bentwood was
developed with the help of the Korhonen furniture factory,
and patented in 1933. See exhibition catalog: Enrico Baleri,
Marco Meneguzzo, and Comitato organizzatore salone del
mobile italiano, eds., *Alvar Aalto* (Milan: Cosmit, 1998), 30.
- 6 Karl Fleig, ed., *Alvar Aalto Band I 1922–62* (Zürich:
Artemis-Verlag für Architektur, 1963), 6–7.
- 7 Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 202.
- 8 Göran Schildt, "Alvar Aalto," in: Fleig, *Alvar Aalto*, 15.
- 9 Michael Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto Guide* (New York:
Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 23.
- 10 Pallasmaa, "From Tectonics," 39.
- 11 Aalto, "The Trout and the Stream."



Porches





Cultural Centre
Helsinki, Finland
1952–1958



Public Pensions Institute
Helsinki, Finland
1953–1956



Housing Area Sunila Paper Mill
Kotka, Finland
1936–1938, 1947, 1951–1954



Housing Area Sunila Paper Mill
Kotka, Finland
1936–1938, 1947, 1951–1954



Student Union Building
Jyväskylä, Finland
1961–1964



Student Union Building
Jyväskylä, Finland
1961–1964



Architect's House
Helsinki, Finland
1935–1936



Architect's House
Helsinki, Finland
1935–1936



Theatre
Seinäjoki, Finland
1961–1987



Villa Mairea
Noormarkku, Finland
1937–1939



Villa Mairea
Noormarkku, Finland
1937–1939



Lohiluoma Residential Building
Kauttua, Finland
1942



Pedagogical University
Jyväskylä, Finland
1952–1954



Tuberculosis Sanatorium
Paimio, Finland
1929–1933



Tuberculosis Sanatorium
Paimio, Finland
1929–1933



Tuberculosis Sanatorium
Paimio, Finland
1929–1933



Villa Kokkonen
Järvenpää, Finland
1967–1969



Housing Area Sunila Paper Mill
Kotka, Finland
1936–1938, 1947, 1951–1954



Villa Mairea
Noormarkku, Finland
1937–1939



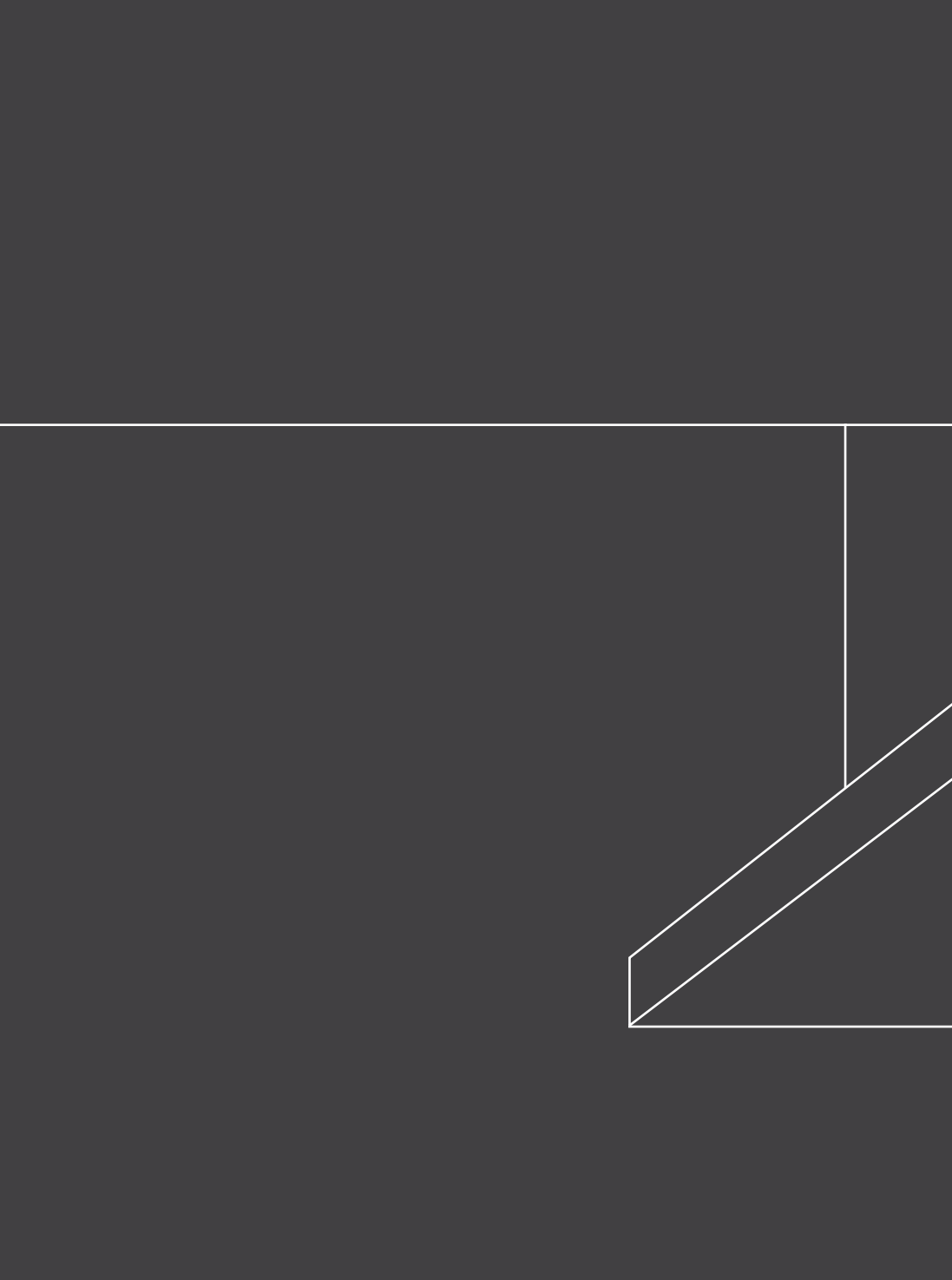
Tuberculosis Sanatorium
Paimio, Finland
1929–1933



Library of the Institute of Technology
Espoo, Finland
1964–1970



Church
Seinäjoki, Finland
1951–1960



Ceilings

