Alvar Aalto’s Muuratsalo house,
understood through Jay Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory

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Statement Of Originality

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John Wright Roberts
Dedication

To the memory of my parents, Jim and Janet Roberts.

For Maria, Julius, and Margot.
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Abstract

This dissertation reviews the literature of architecture and landscape history published in the period from approximately 1975 to 2008, to consider the role of landscape symbolism in explaining the aesthetic appeal of the house architecture of distinguished Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976).

Landscape discourse—the literature, history, theories and terminology of the field of landscape—is relevant in that it may offer insight into Aalto’s well-known affinity for nature, landscape and the architectural site, as recorded in late twentieth-century architectural history, and as set out in Aalto’s own words. Landscape discourse may also enable an enriched reading of Aalto’s house architecture.

The study considers relationships between discourses of architecture and landscape, especially as landscape offers new insight into architectural aesthetics, and focuses on landscape-related themes in Aalto’s domestic architecture. Jay Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory—originally put forward to discuss the aesthetics of landscape and used by Grant Hildebrand to discuss Frank Lloyd Wright’s houses—is adopted as a ‘lens of landscape’ to consider the aesthetic appeal of Aalto’s 1953 Experimental House at Muuratsalo. It is hypothesized that landscape-symbolic elements in the composition of this well-known house may partly account for its aesthetic appeal.

A close reading is made—employing the concepts and terminology of Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory—of compositional elements of Aalto’s Muuratsalo house, both as described in architectural historical literature, and as observed by the writer in person in 2008. Aspects of nature, landscape and site appear to be incorporated and perceived in the house’s composition, along with arguably landscape-symbolic elements, leading to conclusions involving landscape as a factor in the aesthetic appeal of Aalto’s house.
Synopsis

This dissertation examines landscape in the architecture and thinking of the distinguished Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, to consider landscape as a component of the appeal of his house architecture. This Synopsis introduces the central concerns of the study, and outlines research aims and methods. It also introduces key examples of historical and theoretical writing on architectural conceptions of landscape, and on landscape itself. It looks briefly at Aalto and his domestic architecture, and at Jay Appleton and aspects of his theory of landscape aesthetics.

Kenneth Frampton’s 1998 conception of Alvar Aalto’s capacity as a ‘designer of landscapes’ associates Aalto’s name with landscape thinking, and suggests that Aalto’s architecture is a suitable vehicle for architectural research, particularly for looking at architecture through a landscape lens. The work of Grant Hildebrand, who uses Appleton’s theoretical framework of landscape aesthetics to investigate preference for the domestic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, suggests that Appleton’s ideas may shed light on other areas of architectural history, particularly the work of Alvar Aalto.

Writings by Aalto, Appleton, and Hildebrand provide a basis for research aims, objectives, and methodology, as well as a research topic—defined as landscape as a component of architectural aesthetics.

Personal ruminations outline the study’s convergence of two topics: the appeal of Aalto’s house architecture; and landscape as setting and complement for architecture. The two areas of interest together form the research question—Can the appeal of Aalto’s Muuratsalo house be understood in terms of landscape aesthetics, with particular reference to Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory?

Landscape and Alvar Aalto are brought together to form the general hypothesis of the dissertation—that the appeal of Aalto’s Muuratsalo house may be understood
in terms of landscape aesthetics, with particular reference to Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory.

With the study introduced in Chapter 1, the research intentions and activities of the dissertation—the aims, definitions, processes, assumed realities and knowledge, and other methodological components of the research project—are set out in Chapter 2 *Methodology*, with the literature review process seen as a conclusive and appropriate methodological end in itself.\(^3\)

Chapter 3 reviews Aalto centenary literature to observe recent tendencies in architectural history’s understanding of landscape, and of Aalto’s work particularly. In Chapter 4, three topics of landscape-related discourse in architectural history and theory—nature, landscape, and site—are reviewed, to gauge architectural historical understanding of landscape.

In Chapter 5, landscape literature is analyzed to frame a landscape perspective on elements of landscape and architecture: reflection on two landscape concepts also found in architecture—the garden and the terrace—shows how landscape discourse may contribute to an expanded understanding of architecture. The landscape paradigm may enable an extended investigation of Aalto’s architectural aesthetics; the lens of landscape may reveal layers of significance beyond the building-focused discourses of architecture.

The difference between what may be seen as Appleton’s ‘biological’ version of landscape, and Cosgrove’s ‘cultural’ perspective also helps define the present study, which is interested more in Appleton’s ‘experience’ of landscape as a means of explaining preference for Aalto’s architecture, than in Cosgrove’s socially and economically ‘constructed’ idea of landscape (which is also foreign to the general direction of the Aalto literature).

Chapter 6 focuses more closely on literature dealing with Alvar Aalto: his life, houses, landscape, aesthetics, and a theme of atavism pervading his work and
ideas. Chapter 7 considers the theories and writings of Jay Appleton, especially his prospect-refuge theory; it also considers the benefits of the use of Appleton’s ideas and theories by Hildebrand and others in explaining preference for landscape-aware architecture.

Chapter 8 is derived from both the literature and this writer’s personal experience of the Muuratsalo house. Following Hildebrand’s method, the concepts and terminology of Appleton’s theory of landscape aesthetics are used to look closely at prospect-refuge symbolism in the Muuratsalo summer house. The writer’s experience of the house, and a close reading of the literature are used to reflect on the appeal of the Muuratsalo house and how that appeal relates to landscape aesthetics.

In Chapter 9 the insights of the research into landscape and architecture, especially the value of landscape aesthetic theory to look at Aalto’s house architecture, are reviewed to conclude the dissertation.

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