Celebration and Landscape  
The 1998 Alvar Aalto centenary and its legacy for architectural discourses of landscape and site

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Celebration of the birth centenary of Finnish architect Alvar Aalto in 1998 occasioned historical re-evaluation of his legacy and relevance, stirring a particular interest in the value of landscape in his architecture. A centennial celebration may inspire re-evaluation of an architect's legacy; the 1987 Le Corbusier centenary, for example, prompted a surge of scholarship. In 1998 historians added to the understanding of Aalto through notions such as 'Aalto's nature', 'constructed landscapes', 'mythic landscapes', 'fragile architecture', and Aalto 'as a designer of landscapes', demonstrating an increased architectural awareness of landscape. The centenary kindled new interest in Aalto's work, revealed the historical importance of Aalto's approaches to landscape, and provided concepts for a contemporary understanding of landscape in architecture. Leatherbarrow has posited 'topography' as a notion and a theoretical topic to relate architecture and landscape. Selected centennial literature addressing landscape themes in Aalto's architecture is discussed, to demonstrate the value of landscape, particularly its topographic aspects, as an emerging theme of contemporary architectural discourse.

When the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) died in 1976, landscape was not a leading architectural topic, nor was it regarded as an independent discipline or a singular discourse. By Aalto's birth centenary in 1998, landscape had developed into part of architecture's broader discourse of 'nature', and offered a comprehensive critical lens through which to look at architecture. Aalto himself said, "for millennia, art has not been able to disengage itself from the nature-bound human environment, and neither will it ever be able to do so."¹

This paper considers two aspects of the theme of landscape in architecture which emerged from the critical architectural literature of the Alvar Aalto birth centenary celebration. Firstly, during the 1998 centennial, landscape emerged in writing as a key theme for critical revision of Aalto's legacy. Secondly, the Aalto centennial appears to confirm the presence of landscape both as an emerging independent field, and as a theme for critical reflection on architecture generally. These two aspects of celebration and landscape are investigated in selected recent literature, to argue the importance of landscape to contemporary architectural discourse. Supporting Leatherbarrow's proposition that "the task of landscape architecture and architecture, as topographical arts, is to provide the prosaic patterns of our lives with durable dimension and beautiful expression",² this paper is interested in landscape as terrain, platform and site—that which might be termed topography—and how architecture relates to landscape as topography. Its interests stem in part from a sentiment summed up in Leatherbarrow's notion that "architectural character is a consequence of human situations, the typical forms of which are sited in a building's location, plan, and material formation",³ a valuable conception in this context. Leatherbarrow's critical concepts are interpreted as sympathetic to both Aalto's ideas of humankind's relation through architecture to the natural world, and to centennial critical reflections on landscape in Aalto's work.

A 'celebratory' essay such as Caroline Constant's 'From the Virgilian dream to Chandigarh'⁴, written for the 1987 Le Corbusier centennial, demonstrates the insights of landscape. Constant showed Le Corbusier in a new light by exploring landscape themes in his work: the siting of his mother's house on Lake Geneva (1925); the surreal rooftop garden of the de Beistegui apartment in Paris (1931); the fusion of architecture and landscape at Ronchamp (1950-54); and the influence of Mogul garden architecture and the Indian landscape in landscape designs for Chandigarh (1951-65). Constant pointed out that the domains of architecture and landscape, apparently fused in the architecture of Wright and Aalto, were integrated only late in the career of Le Corbusier, when his architecture unified the polarities of a "dual interpretation of nature, as original condition and emblem of rational order."⁵ A celebration presents writers with the opportunity for critical analysis and reflection, using an emerging paradigm such as landscape to re-assess the work of a major artist.

Similarly, landscape becomes a key theme in understanding Aalto's architecture. Schildt wrote about Aalto and nature: "No one who takes an interest in Aalto's architecture can avoid the question of his relationship with nature, his idea of man's place in the
created environment. It is easy to see that his buildings relate to nature in an immediate way.30 Landscape, however, is a more defined architectural paradigm than 'nature', and benefits from insights into topography, through consideration of what Frampton describes as "a sensitively inflected approach toward the placement of the building in its site."31

Architectural writing on landscape, or which adopts landscape or topography as a central critical theme, is uncommon; Spin insisted in 1993 that landscape had been neglected, writing that "[m]ost people, including architects, have little understanding of the scope and complexity of landscape architecture and little knowledge of its history. With the exception of gardens, historians have largely neglected the field."32 Redfield argued more recently that history has 'suppressed' the architectural site and its potentialities, urging an expansion of architectural discourse and analysis to include topography, context and threshold conditions.33 Landscape is an uncommon topic in Modernist architectural criticism,34 yet Scully, in The Earth, the Temple and the Gods (1962), recognized landscape's role in the Classical Greek sacred precinct, where the character of the natural site is complemented by the temple's form and details;11 elsewhere he describes architecture's culturally important role in mediating between humanity, nature and topography:

The way human beings see themselves in relation to nature is fundamental to all cultures; thus the first fact of architecture is the natural world, the second is the relationship of human structures to the topography of the world, and the third is the relationship of all these structures to each other.12

In 1961 Scully related Aalto's Munkkiniemi housing project (1951-55) to the Greek precinct. The apartment buildings are described as objects on the site, encompassed by the eye which connects the viewer to the landscape. "Radial sight lines," Scully argues:

control the placement of the building masses, responding to each other and to the site as they take position in space [...] there is no spatial module—Aalto stresses the fact that the building solids, not the spatial voids, are the positives in the design. Space [...] is simply what is left over between them.13

Scully recognized Aalto's strategy as being consistent with the traditions of Classical Greek architecture more than with those of orthodox Modernism. In Aalto's work, built objects are organized in the landscape, sensitive to both topography and the viewer's eye; the relationship of building and site is more important than Modernist 'space'. Aalto's work is distinguished by its landscape content, identifying it with Classical ideals. Aalto himself wrote of the Finnish landscape and ideals of siting in 1925:

The landscapes we meet outside towns no longer consist of untouched nature anywhere; they are a combination of human efforts and the original environment. [...] The objective is not just that the buildings should meet one or two aesthetic norms, but that they should be placed in the landscape in a natural way, in harmony with its general contours.14

In 1968 Baird noted qualities of "profundity and seriousness in Aalto, to which none of [his contemporaries] attained."15 While not using the term landscape, Baird employed earth metaphors to describe a number of Aalto's balustrade elements, including one which "rises from the floor like a cliff, and ends as a parapet";16 and another, where a stair "rises slowly as the surface of the earth itself might."17 Baird described such metaphorical elements as "only metaphors of the surface of the earth", compared to the terraced earth steps of the Säynätsalo Town Hall: "These steps literally are that surface; as proof they even have grass and flowers growing on them."18 Such landscape strategies as described by Baird, transposing terrain into architecture and architecture into terrain, are poetic and actual, with metaphor intensifying to become metamorphosis, demonstrating cultural capabilities unique to architecture.

Following his death in 1976, Aalto and his work were celebrated by commemorative editions of the leading journals Architecture d'aujourd'hui, Arkkitehti, Architectural Review and Progressive Architecture. A major retrospective exhibition toured, with a catalogue illustrating Aalto themes of nature, culture and landscape, amongst others.19 Between 1984 and 1989 Göran Schildt's three-volume biography of Aalto was released.20 In 1998, a collection of Aalto's essays and speeches, Alvar Aalto: In His Own Words, was also published.21 Notable additions to Aalto scholarship from 1976 to 1998 included books by Demetri Porphyrios (1982), Malcolm Quantrill (1983), and Richard Weston (1996).22 Porphyrios argues that Aalto's compositional tactic was not one of direct reference to nature, but rather of allusion to existing buildings which symbolized nature "by means of already codified architectural signs",23 rather than by direct mimesis of natural forms. Quantrill observes a rarely noted affinity with nature common to Aalto and Borromini,24 claiming that "the architects of both the High Gothic and Baroque embodied the vocabulary of the natural landscape into their structures."25 Weston describes the complexity of Aalto's metaphoric strategies, of a reciprocity between architecture and nature:

Throughout Aalto's work we find a double movement: from nature to architecture; and from architecture to nature. The lakeside elevation of Finlandia Hall suggests [...] a vast geological stratification, above which the main auditorium looms like an abstract 'imaginary mountain' [...] natural materials and motifs are gradually turned into architecture, while architecture is invaded by nature in the form of stone, wood and plants.26

Metaphor once more becomes explicit metamorphosis, as in Baird's description, recalling the mythic effect
and cultural resonances of Ovid's Metamorphoses; a recent version of the poem opens, "Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed / into different bodies." This is a culturally deep-rooted poetic strategy of transformation, even transubstantiation. Poet Ted Hughes notes that "Different aspects of the poem continued to fascinate Western culture, saturating literature and art [...] many of the stories now seem inseparable from our unconscious imaginative life." The notion of myth was always agreeable to Aalto, who wrote in 1925, "We northerners, especially the Finns, are very prone to 'forest dreaming'." However, landscape writing which emerged at the time of the Aalto centenary appears to be concerned with cultural content and context, embracing architecture’s poetic and mythic dimensions, and going on to explore material and spatial concerns of everyday human existence. The pre-centenary writings of Scully, Baird, Quantrill and Weston variously initiate a consideration of the importance of landscape to an understanding of Aalto, and may be viewed as a necessary prelude to the centenary writing of others.

The Aalto birth centenary was celebrated in 1998 with events including an exhibition with catalogue and essays at the MOMA, substantial exhibitions in Helsinki and smaller specialist exhibitions. Landscape, rather than nature, begins to outcrop as a significant theme in leading essays from 1998, (re)evaluating Aalto for a new generation of readers. Curtis writes about Aalto’s “mythic landscapes”; Frampton frames Aalto as a culturally resistant “designer of landscapes”; Treib notes landscape and the architectural site as central to “Aalto’s nature”; poet Ted Hughes notes that “different aspects of the poem continued to fascinate Western culture, saturating literature and art [...] many of the stories now seem inseparable from our unconscious imaginative life”; Pallasmaa develops Aalto’s sense of “synthetic landscape” into a notion of “fragile” or “ambient” architecture. These 1998 centennial updates on Aalto testify to broad critical support for the value of landscape in understanding and reflecting on architecture.

In 1982, Curtis had observed “Aalto’s concern for buildings as intermediaries between human life and the natural landscape”, and noted Aalto’s interest in fusions of the intellectual and the sensual in ancient Greek architecture, particularly the platform element, of which other, even spiritual, aspects were memorably commented upon by Utzon in 1965. In the 1998 centenary essay ‘Paysages Mythiques / Mythic Landscapes’, where landscape provides the cardinal metaphor, Curtis argues that Aalto’s awareness of the human figure on the formed platform— which "governed all the levels of his buildings from stairs, railings, benches and shelves, up to the larger moves of platforms, precincts, processional routes and landscape levels"— connects with the Greek topographic element of the platform, with its civic and cultural presence, as well as with a "basic sense of being human in the world." Topography provides a means for architecture to celebrate both the mythic and the mundane.

In a 1991 essay, Frampton reviewed relationships between architectural and landscape practice. He discussed Modern architects—without mentioning Aalto—and evaluated the work of Modern landscape masters. Aesthetic and ecological aspects of landscape are conjoined in Frampton’s concept of ‘resistance’, which he had earlier put forward as a cultural imperative of architecture, but also saw as more fundamentally important: "To write of the modern landscape as though it were nothing more than a cultural discourse would be to trivialize values that are essential to our survival." The values and imperatives associated with landscape are aesthetic, cultural and biological, as Frampton emphasizes in his 1998 centenary essay ‘The Legacy of Aalto’. He describes how the design of buildings and landscapes is not poetic or mythic for Aalto; rather, “Aalto’s buildings were either landscapes in themselves, [or] they extended into the surroundings in such a way as to transform the pre-existing ground. [...] his buildings were constituted as topographic structures rather than as gratuitous sculptural gestures.” Frampton observes that Aalto placed great emphasis on modifying the landscape, of following a strategy, similar to Botta’s, of “building the site”, making the significant claim that “[a]ll of Aalto’s sites were built in this topographical sense, and his achievements as an architect cannot be separated at any stage of his career from his capacity as a designer of landscapes.”

Finnish phenomenology theorist Juhani Pallasmaa looked optimistically to landscape for new possibilities for architecture, identifying Aalto as “preoccupied by the notion of a miniaturized architectonic or synthetic landscape [combining] building volumes and terraced earth to create an image of a complete, fabricated landscape in miniature.” In his Aalto centenary essay ‘Logic of the Image’ Pallasmaa proposes that Aalto’s architecture "is a product of earth; his buildings echo the soil and the terrain." This presentation of Aalto as an architect of landscape, earth, topography and geology is both straightforward and dramatic; Pallasmaa, informed by phenomenology, uses the landscape idea as a platform to hypothesize a ‘weak’ or ‘fragile’ architecture, one which embodies contextual and perceptual ambiguity, ambience and relatedness over clarity and singularity, following Gianni Vattimo’s notions of ‘weak ontology’ and ‘fragile thought’. Pallasmaa proposes an architecture of ‘weak image’, as opposed to the prevailing architecture of ‘strong image’. Whereas the architecture of strong image aspires to impress and control through the authority of singular image and the logically consistent articulation of form, the architecture of weak image is contextual and responsive, and aims at a distinct atmosphere instead of the coherence of form.

Nature and landscape provide the context for this proposed theoretical conception of architecture. This ‘fragile’ notion of an architecture of ‘weak image’ and sensory ambience is exemplified in the Japanese garden, described by Pallasmaa as “exquisite architecture without a singular
gestalt or structure”; he notes that Aalto “transformed this architecture of landscape and nature into the constructed world of architecture.” Pallasmaa comprehends the ambiguities of Aalto through the “architecture of landscape and nature”, sensing the metamorphic possibilities of architecture in Aalto’s landscape strategies, and using landscape to identify and articulate otherwise inexplicable poetic qualities in Aalto’s work.

Landscape critic Marc Treib had written extensively on gardens and Modern landscape architecture before contributing the essay ‘Aalto’s Nature’ to the 1998 MOMA exhibition catalogue. The essay, written from a landscape perspective, presents a focused critique of Aalto’s landscape concerns. Making the assumption that ‘the idea of nature is itself a cultural construct’, Treib contributes a number of valuable insights into landscape in Aalto’s architecture, of which three are of interest here. First, he taxonomizes Aalto’s non-urban buildings into three different types of “constructed landscape”; “concave schemes reiterated the contours of fissures or valleys. The convex schemes completed or reinforced rising landforms. And for those sites that lacked potent natural features Aalto constructed his own architectural landscapes.” At one level this observation connects Aalto’s site strategies to the ancient Greek sacred precinct. At another level, Treib’s landscape discourse facilitates the vital theoretical task of organizing and naming; he notes convexity and concavity in buildings, and relates the observation in geologically accurate landform terms, adding landscape knowledge to architectural discourse, rather than resorting to poetic interpretation.

A second insight from Treib is the observation that conditions of ‘surprise’ were strategically central to Aalto’s methods:

But, just when expectation was highest, a surprise would jolt anticipation: a disjunction between the exterior form of the building and the actual contour of its interior spaces; [...] the frequent shift between orthogonal and curvilinear, or angular, planning. Found in projects large and small, [...] these unexpected conditions became the fundamentals of Aalto’s architecture and method.

This idea of surprise appears to have characterized much of Aalto’s professional approach, as well as being a successful principle of architectural conception and composition; “Let’s take them by surprise!” was reputedly a motto of the Aalto office. This thrill of surprise in the experience of architecture may be likened to the enjoyment of elements symbolic of what Appleton describes as ‘hazard’ in landscape, whereby overcoming spatial elements of fear and the unexpected in our habitat provokes an emotional reaction of delight.

Treib’s third important insight is the claim that Aalto’s architecture “operates as nature does”, simultaneously addressing “the entity and the fragment [and] the relation of the building itself to its site.” Thus, claims Treib, Aalto denied “any grand formal scheme in deference to accommodating human activity, and the nature of the site”, similar to Pallasmaa’s notion of a ‘fragile’ architecture, which paradoxically strengthens its ambient effect through yielding to built and topographic contexts.

Leatherbarrow’s interest is in architecture as part of a broader cultural context, in architecture’s topographic locality, and with how “topography gives material and structure to the patterns and purposes of our lives”; he attends to “very specific situations [...] primarily in theoretical thought [...] to local details of buildings, life situations, and cultural conditions.” In his 1993 book The Roots of Architectural Invention Leatherbarrow investigated architectural topics of site, enclosure and materials, aiming to “restore, or at least recognize, the uncertainties at the basis of current practice by a kind of overturning, upsetting, or shaking.” He maintained a thesis that “architecture imitates human life”, and held that “architectural character is a consequence of human situations, the typical forms of which are sited in a building’s location, plan, and material formation.” In the absence of specific reference to Aalto, Leatherbarrow’s work nonetheless appears to have affinities with notions of landscape and topography in Aalto, as enunciated by Curtis, Frampton, Pallasmaa and Treib in their 1998 reflections on Aalto.

In 2004 Leatherbarrow writes on the cultural significance of landscape and architecture; relating the two not through their difference or their sameness, but through their ‘similarity’, which helps form “a singular cultural framework, topography.” Leatherbarrow acknowledges laconically that “buildings are always built somewhere”, and outlines a theoretical framework for topography based on its material, spatial and temporal aspects, embracing functional and even performative aspects of landscape, recognizing potential for surprise in the “expected and unexpected events” of topography. This, it may be contended, implies Aalto’s unique sense of drama and surprise, and the experience of architectural ‘surprise’ analogous to the unpredictable spatiality of natural landscapes.

Leatherbarrow enfolds within the idea of ‘context’ the contemporary philosophical argument that existence is relational, an idea deriving, he outlines, from Heidegger, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, who provide philosophical underpinning for Frampton’s and Pallasmaa’s commentaries on Aalto. Leatherbarrow points out that “the argument for context [...] has meant rethinking the building’s engagement with its material and spatial surroundings, whether built or unbuilt [i.e., natural].” He also indirectly supports Pallasmaa’s ideas of fragility and weakness, noting that “landscape provides a framework for architectural thought because it is inescapably ambient, or, as I have come to call it, topographical.”

Aalto famously said, “Even architecture contains a hidden thought . . . the aspiration to create Paradise.
It is the sole purpose of our buildings. Every building, every product of the art of building... tends to express our desire to build an earthly Paradise for human beings.” Aalto's ideal of 'Paradise' appears, from the critical evidence, to have been strongly connected, through landscape and metaphor, with the natural world. Leatherbarrow's proposition, that "the subject matter of architecture is not architecture itself but human existence in its full breadth and richness" implies and requires the topography of the natural world as the essential place for that human existence.

The theme of landscape in architecture emerged at the 1998 Alvar Aalto birth centenary as a vital and central theme for critical reflection on Aalto's legacy. The Aalto centennial also appears to have confirmed landscape as a viable theme for general critical reflection on architecture, and raised the idea of topography as an emerging topic within architecture's discourse of nature. These two aspects of celebration indicate the importance of landscape to contemporary architectural discourse. The cultural armatures of landscape and architecture, as 'topographical arts', allow a better comprehension of Aalto's ideal of a 'Paradise' for people, and are arguably able to provide "durable dimension and beautiful expression" to our daily lives, through specific theoretical and practical attention to landscape as earth, terrain, ground, platform, site—in short, as topography.

NOTES
5 Constant, 'From the Virgilian dream', p. 66.
16 Baird, Alvar Aalto, p. 15; reference is to main staircase at Teachers' Institute of Jyväskylä.
17 Baird, Alvar Aalto, p. 16; reference is to Otaniemi Institute of Technology.
18 Baird, Alvar Aalto, p. 16. Similar grassed earth stairs, in a vestigial form, are to be found at the northern 'back door' of Aalto's Muuratsalo summer house.
23 Porphyrios, Sources, p. 55.
24 In an endnote Quantrill connects Aalto and the Baroque: 'Elissa Aalto's remark that her husband was particularly interested in the work of Francesco Borromini, made during a conversation with the author in Helsinki in February 1978—Quantrill, Alvar Aalto, pp. 273-4.
25 Quantrill, Alvar Aalto, p. 6.
26 Weston, Alvar Aalto, p. 104.
27 Ted Hughes, 'Creation; Four Ages; Flood; Lycaon', in Tales from Ovid: Twenty-four passages from the Metamorphoses, London: Faber and Faber, 1997, p. 3.
28 Aalto, 'Architecture in the Landscape of Central Finland', p. 207.
30 William J. R. Curtis, 'Alvar Aalto, Paysages Mythiques' / 'Mythic Landscapes', Architecture d' aujourd'hui (February 1998), pp. 4-19.
33 Hughes, Tales from Ovid, 'Introduction', p. viii.
36 Curtis, Modern Architecture, p. 304. Utzon, in his essay 'Platforms and Plateaus', (Zodiac 10, 1965), noted the transcendent experience of the Monte Alban site in Mexico, where, he says, 'The human regulation or adaptation of the site has resulted in something even stronger than nature and has given it spiritual content.'
37 Curtis, 'Paysages Mythiques', p. 12.
38 Curtis, 'Paysages Mythiques', p. 12.
39 Kenneth Frampton, In Search of the Modern Landscape, in Stuart


41 Frampton, 'In Search of the Modern Landscape', p. 61.


44 Frampton, 'Legacy of Alvar Aalto', p. 238.


46 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Logic of the Image', p. 290. See pp. 291-92 for examples of Aalto's tactics of landscape: fusion of terrain and building in terraces and vegetation (Maison Louis Carré, 1955-59); building profile echoing site topography (roofline of Rola Church, 1966-60); image of a mountain or gigantic rock formation (House of Culture, Helsinki).


51 Marc Treib, 'Aalto's Nature'.


53 'Constructed Landscape' is a subheading of Treib's essay, along with 'Tuscany in Central Finland', 'The Landscape Within', and 'The Sublime Forest'; all are potent Aalto topics. See Treib, 'Aalto's Nature'.


56 Schildt, Alvar Aalto: The decisive years.


59 Treib, 'Aalto's Nature', p. 64.


62 Leatherbarrow, Roots of Architectural Invention, p. 6.

63 Leatherbarrow, Roots of Architectural Invention, p. 216.

64 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 1.

65 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 9.

66 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 9.

67 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, pp. 11-12.

68 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 12.

69 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 12.


71 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 16.

72 Leatherbarrow, Topographical Stories, p. 1.