

2017 PHYLLIS LAMBERT GRANT

We practice a multidisciplinary approach to spatial planning. The designs are dependent on the degree of precision in the construction details. Creativity in design demands inspiration and references. Time and experience in the profession tend to shape enthusiasm for certain currents and the designers associated with them. We are unabashed admirers of the work of Alvar Aalto and his Finnish compatriots. Aalto's work reveals a fine balance of human sensibility, integration with nature, and careful attention to the making of objects. Aalto's buildings could be defined as Gesamtkunstwerks, "total works," i.e., the modernist idea that works of art, décor, furniture and the structuring spaces have as much value as the building itself. An approach that, in our view, is an ideal to strive for in practice, and one that is very rare, even if much sought after, in contemporary architecture.

We decided it would be worthwhile to use our Phyllis Lambert Grant award to examine the work of Alvar Aalto and gauge the impact of his legacy on Finland, more particularly Helsinki. As both of us are industrial designers by training, we are naturally interested in products and furniture that accessorize the built environment. So it was with our eyes turned toward architectural products that we began our visit to the Finnish capital.

Saynatsalo City Hall,
2017, ©Lambert Rainville



Our intentions for this trip were fairly simple: make a sort of pilgrimage to the heart of a design culture that, up to then, we had appreciated through books, documentaries and products. We wanted to develop our own conclusions as to what captivates us about Finnish design, in the hopes of incorporating certain ideas into our design practice.

The rapid immersion into the world of Aalto was striking. Right after landing in Finland, we headed straight for the Jyväskylä region, three hours north of Helsinki. We were lucky enough to spend time inside the Saynatsalo city hall, completed in 1954 and open to visitors only in the summer 2017. The first of the architect's red-brick buildings, it ushered in his "Red Period."

The Experimental House,
2017, ©Lambert Rainville



Not far away is the Experimental House. This was a very special destination: the Aaltos' summer residence, built as an artistic laboratory, is where the couple experimented with new architectural products and materials, and tested out innovative construction methods. Those studies certainly appear to have borne fruit, as these ideas emerged on a larger scale in the construction of buildings in the urban centres of Helsinki and Jyväskylä.

This condensed tour of the Jyväskylä region provided us with a good understanding of Aalto's architectural interventions in Helsinki, and so it was with an informed mindset that we headed for the capital.

We had planned our research trip so that it would coincide with Helsinki Design Week. Thanks to connections made through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, we attended the Design Commons event and talks, which featured Marcus Engman of IKEA, architect David Adjaye, Paloma Strelitz of Assemble, and many more international-calibre design and architecture stakeholders. It was a very enriching evening.

Besides taking advantage of Design Week, we visited the “musts:” Finlandia Hall, the Aalto House, and the Aalto Studio. The scale of Helsinki’s city centre makes it very walkable. One of the most interesting observations we made is that once we got used to the city, we realized that architectural elements guided our visit: like landmarks, they showed us which doors to head for.

Aalto systematically used the same door handles on most of the buildings he designed in Helsinki, which makes them easily identifiable as his work; they are like a signature. The voluntary difference one can observe between the handles on Aalto buildings has to do with the hierarchy of the number of handles per door. For example, on a public building, he would use two or three handles at different heights, to accommodate the varying heights of that space’s users.

Left : Door Handle,
Entrance to the Academic Library,
2017, ©Lambert Rainville

Right : Tile
Courtyard, Rautatalo Building
2017, ©Lambert Rainville



Once one notices the door handle, one observes a second layer of detail. Moving closer to the façade, one examines the brickwork and the details of the window openings. Inside, one studies the ceramics, the light, the banisters, and concludes with the inner courtyard. In the Helsinki buildings, we noted the polished nature of the detailing along with the same control over lighting and the spatial planning principles focused on human interactions.

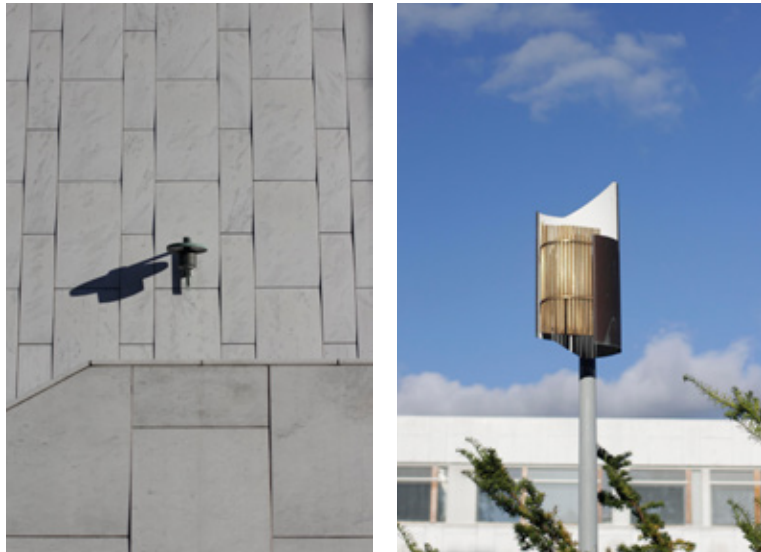
Through these spaces, exterior as well as interior, the meaning of our research became clear. There seem to be two ideas in conflict: standardization of architectural products, and personalization of the built

environment.

The façades of Helsinki illustrate that contradiction. Each façade is composed of similar construction materials (brick, tile, ceramic, sheet metal), but upon closer inspection the architectural products (handles, light fixtures, letterboxes) seemed specific to each building. It's unclear where that desire for personalization originated. With the architect? The occupant? The manufacturer? The artisan? We believe it's that grey area between the architect's calculated intervention and the citizen's impulsive gesture that generates the tactile richness of the city's buildings. A dialogue between public and spaces is encapsulated within the urban built environment.

Left :Light fixture,
Finlandia Hall,
2017, ©Lambert Rainville

Right : Light fixture,
Finlandia Hall,
2017, ©Lambert Rainville



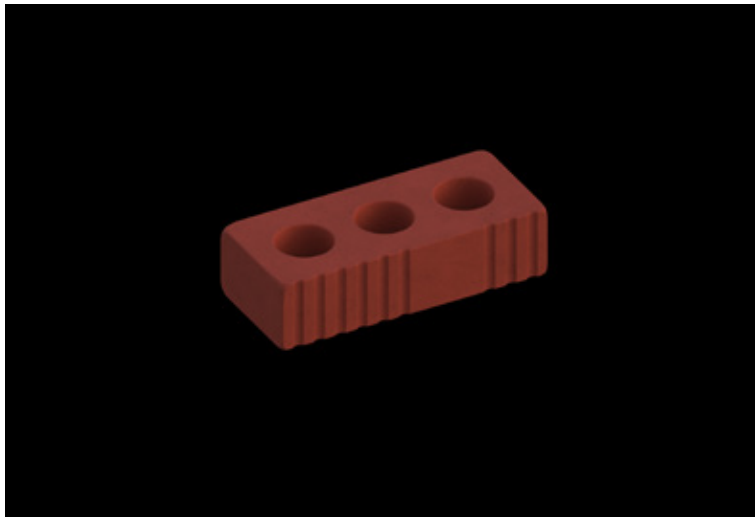
One aspect that piqued our curiosity was the close relationships between Aalto and Finnish manufacturers. For example, the architect's buildings used bricks with non-standard dimensions. He developed a brick design to be able to execute the curves of outside walls to match his requirements. Another fascinating discovery, which might seem trivial, is a type of tile used in Aalto's constructions that was available in multiple finishes. It was manufactured by the company Arabia. The collaboration was a logical one for the century-old manufacturer, known for its patterned dishware. The colours of the building tiles and those of the porcelain products' ornamentation are the same! Proof that a close relationship between architects and industry can be conducive to emergence of the technical heritage found in architectural complements.

Helsinki appears to deploy a great deal of energy and resources where it counts. Take, for example, the new public library, a major project with a design that is slightly more "risqué"—somewhat in the image of Finlandia

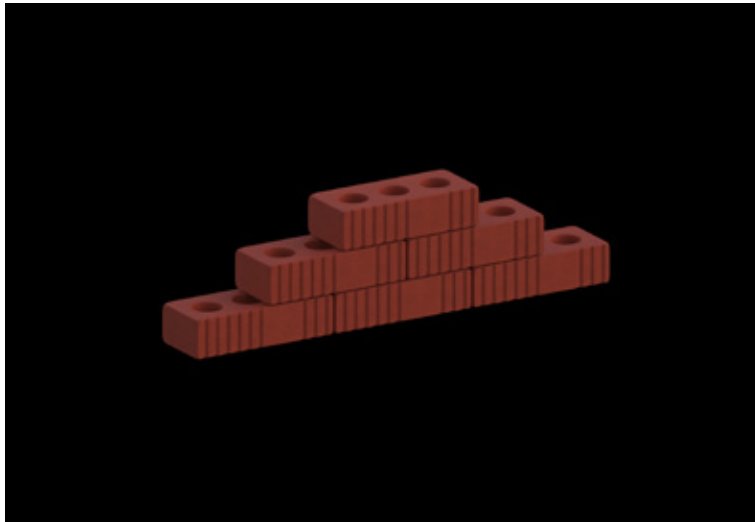
Hall, which opened in 1971. Residential and commercial buildings, however, exhibit more sober architecture, with the aim of blending into the urban fabric. That restraint in the architectural gesture and a preference for materials and products originating with local industry contribute, in our opinion, to the sense of Helsinki's human scale. We believe Finnish architecture and design are still living in the shadow of the country's Scandinavian neighbours (Norway, Sweden and Denmark). Yet we are witnessing the emergence of collaborations between the smaller Finnish manufacturers and international-calibre designers: one need only think of Konstantin Grcic, Hella Jongerius, and Daniel Rybakken, who have designed products for Artek in recent years.

Since returning from our trip, we've applied this new knowledge to a project to revitalize a façade on Saint-Hubert Street. Mirroring the experimental process of Alvar Aalto's constructions, we are using this opportunity as an ideas laboratory that could contribute to our city's built heritage. To that end, we are developing architectural products specifically for the project with the aim of having them manufactured locally. For example, illustrated below are two products: a texture brick, and a reinterpretation of a door handle design typical of Montréal retail spaces.

Brick,
work in progress,
2018, ©Rainville Sangaré



Bricks,
work in progress,
2018, ©Rainville Sangaré



Door Handle,
work in progress,
2018, ©Rainville Sangaré

