

ALVAR AALTO AND THE 'FLORENCE IN THE NORTH'. VISIONS, REALIZATIONS AND UTOPIA IN THE EARLY 1920S FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

In my contribute I would like to explore Alvar Aalto's attempt to transform the Finnish town of Jyväskylä into a version of 'Florence of Finland', through his individual interventions, many of which remained uncompleted.

These plans are little known, on account of the lack of attention reserved by the critics who mostly devoted to his mature projects, which -on the contrary- are high-water marks. Moreover, in his senior years, Aalto himself was particularly reluctant to talk about his early works due to a sort of *damnatio memoriae*.

Thus, my research will investigate the documents related to the development of the visionary remodelling of Jyväskylä, which includes realized and incomplete architectures, as well as the consideration of his own words in his articles.

At the beginning of his career in the early 1920s, Aalto seemed to be an enthusiast of the Past. Above all, he esteemed the Italian Renaissance civic monuments which he could have studied on books and during professor Armas Lindgren's lectures at the Polytechnic. It is known that the latter had a certain influence on Alvar's mind. Between 1910 and 1930 in the Baltic region, the Nordic Classicism was accepted by the young generations of architects: tours to the South were fundamental for their profession.

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In fact, Aalto himself estimated Italy the cradle of inspiration which look at to deliberately for his work. In addition, his zealous ambition urged him to mature a sort of utopian plan for the remote state-capital of Central Finland: thanks to his own intervention, it would have been dignified as the prosperous Florence. As a consequence, the newly independent Finland was supposed to reflect the «Mediterranean civilisation and a modern version of the Tuscan Renaissance on the shore of Lake Päijänne».

According to Aalto's scripts, he considered the potential welfare state of the citizens' existences as impacted by urban design. The architect planned squares, boulevards, porticoes, churches, palaces, a covered market, a public sauna, a fair pavilion and even a funeral chapel in order to choreograph a scenery for daily events as in an authentic Tuscan borgo. Finally, the aspect of the town, which had been founded on the neoclassical chess-board-scheme, was meant to be integrated in the pristine landscape of the Region of the Lakes, as it occurred to the Italian top-hill-villages. The yearning to improve life quality within urban design was constant during his career. Man and Nature raise in harmony as in a Nordic-Renaissance dream.

Keywords: forma urbis; strongholds; castles; Campania felix; topographic map

The Renaissance Dream

Between 1923 and 1927, Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) entertained the ambition to turn the centre of Jyväskylä -the new regional capital of Central Finland- into a version of the 'Florence of Finland' (Schildt 1982, 252).

Unquestionably, the young Finnish architect was convinced that the project -once completed- would have brought benefits to its 3000 inhabitants. A sort of a neo-Renaissance dream would have woken them up from their unpretentious reality.

Aalto believed that those who could boast to live in a refined environment could also experience the highest level of Civilization, such as the real happiness, which once belonged to the Renaissance people.

As a university-student, he was inclined to initiate a rising Nordic Rebirth encouraged by Ragnar Östberg and Martin Nyrop's examples, who designed the two most admired City Halls in Scandinavia, examined personally by Aalto in the Early 1920s¹.

In autumn 1916, he left Jyväskylä and moved to Helsinki to undertake his studies in Architecture at the Institute of Technology. Once there, he remained enchanted by the monumental scale of the city, far-off from the countryside where he had grown up.

¹ *Alvar Aalto is portrayed in a photograph taken in front of Copenhagen's City Hall during his first trip abroad in 1920. In addition, in the archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation in Jyväskylä is preserved a pamphlet entitled Stockholm Rathuis published in 1923 and probably bought by Aalto himself in Stockholm in summer on his way to Gothenburg where he visited the exhibition. In 1978 Göran Schildt interviewed architect Väino Tuukkanen, one of Aalto's university mate who confirmed his admiration for the Scandinavian architects*

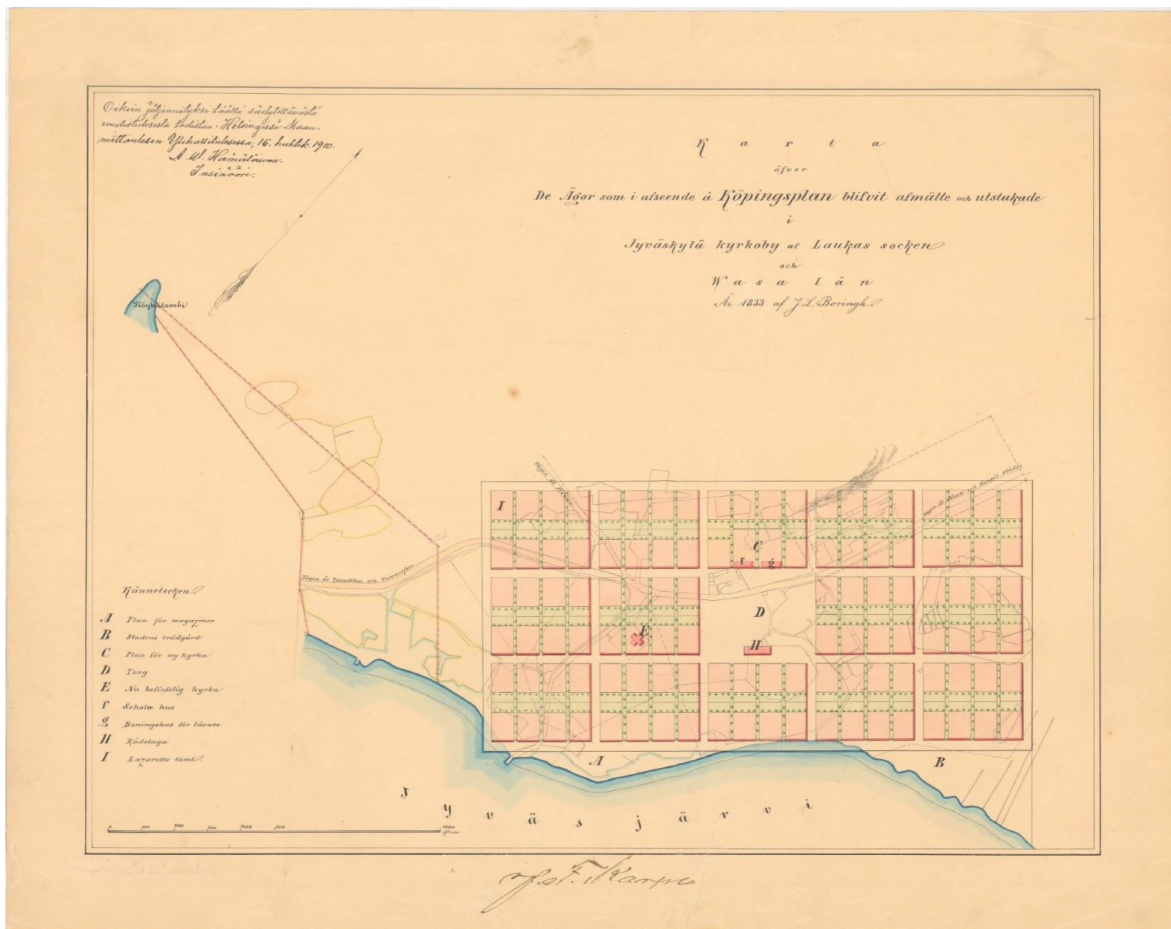
A superb cosmopolitan scenery, with its wide and crowded boulevards, its parks and monumental buildings designed by Carl Ludvig Engel astonished him. The Neoclassicist architect had changed the city landscape about a century before.

As we know from a series of early drafts, roughed out by the student himself during his first flight, Esplanadi appears under an usual prospective and it looks like a praise which reflects the regularity of the urban chessboard. In particular, one of these drawings had been published in the satirical magazine *Kerberos* (1921), as recounted by Aalto's biographer Göran Schildt (Schildt 1984, 135). Aalto's early notions of city planning also express his wish to modify the city from above, just through a quick gesture of the pencil.

Moreover, it is worth noticing that university city-planning classes were introduced only in 1940, when professor Otto Iivari Meurman was nominated as the most qualified expert. It means that Aalto could not have attended any university course on the subject beforehand. At the same time, his professors were the most talented architects in Finland and focused on the study of history and classical antiquities, right when the young nation was in search of its own architectural identity.

Some of their undergraduates will point out that they were «pumped up like balloons and filled with everything that

Fig 1. Engineer J.L. Boringh's foundation plan for Jyväskylä, 1833, Jyväskylä Municipal Archives.



could be drawn from the early history of architecture – and that only»².

However, the young generations considered the Italian excursions as a *conditio sine qua non* for their careers.

Also Aino Marsio (1894-1949) and Alvar Aalto shared the vision of the Nordic Classicism (Stewart 2018). Their Honeymoon in the «Promised Land» (Lahti 2001, 5) of their studies in October 1924 inspired Alvar's mind so much that -since that time- he elected it as his ideal 'homeland'. He estimated Italy his source of inspirations at last.

What amazed the couple most is tracked down through the examination of their travel sketches and photo-album, enriched with the impressions captured abroad. It seems that the portraits of the Italians whom they met up could be equally valued significant as the façades of the buildings they impressed on the sheets of their *cahiers de voyage* to give

2 In 1970, during an interview architect Selma Setälä reported this memory (Kinnunen 2004, 50).



Fig 2. Alvar Aalto's article about the project of the church of Muurame on the pages of 'Uusi-Suomi', October 31st 1926.

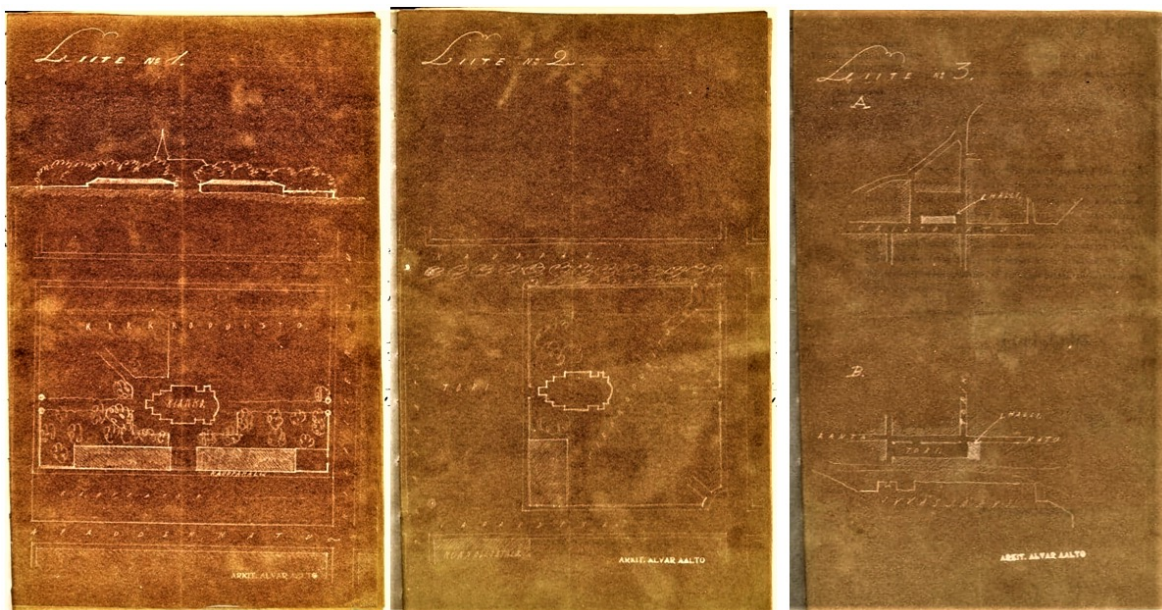
³ Aalto, *Sisä-Suomi*, January 9th 1924.

the true perception of the Southern lively atmosphere. This remained a focus in Aalto, who always took into account Man in the contest of Architecture.

During that excursion abroad, the architect took synthetic notes about the Early Renaissance monuments, which he had previously studied on books and that he tried to reflect in his projects (Mangone 2002). Albeit in Italy, he did not make reliefs as his colleagues were used doing: he was mainly captivated by the fleeting impressions and by the scrutiny of the anonymous vernacular buildings. In addition, the topography and the top-hill-villages seen in Tuscany became his «first 'religion'», as defined by Schildt (Schildt 1984, 251). His love for the Mediterranean culture was in full swing on the pages of *Arkkitehti*, the official Finnish architectural review, neither to reinforce any dogmatic vision, nor to fix a proper model (Ekelund 1923). On the contrary, Italy was described as the perfect balance between Man and Nature, an iconic stop for any Nordic 'pilgrim', who could take the opportunity to toast with a glass of Chianti to the obstacles of their home Countries. Once back home, the young architect conveyed the necessity to give a 'human touch' to what he described as the «austere Finland dominated by cold and police»³.

As well as Aalto, the Finnish architect Erik Bryggman, once back from the same formative tour, acclaimed the South as something more than Piazza San Pietro or cities rich in museums, which confirms the architects from the North's fondness for the Mediterranean Country (Micheli 2009, 31). Two years after his graduation, Alvar Aalto moved back to Jyväskylä where he had been brought up. There, in 1923 he established his atelier of «Architecture and Monumental Art», a pretentious title impressed on the office sign, located in Jyväskylä's city hotel, right on the main street (Schildt 1984, 126).

Fig 3. Alvar Aalto's proposals for the development of Jyväskylän church square, 1923, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.



By reading between the lines, the choice of rooting back to the remote inland was strategically profitable: he could compete with few other business candidates and count on his father's contacts as he was an esteemed member of the local council⁴.

The town was modelled on the neoclassical plan, which had been elaborated by C.L. Engel and by the local engineer J.L. Boringh in the 19th century (Fig. 1): at the moment of the foundation of the centre on the shore of Jyväsjärvi, the water vein which definitely was the most efficient connection in the Lakeland.

Although its unlucky location, the village soon became a pole of attraction for carpenters and entrepreneurs with their families, including the Aaltos who settled down in 1903, when Alvar was only five. The atmosphere of those old times is reported by a journalist who stopped there in 1859: «Signs of artisans line the walls, the market square is larger than those found elsewhere, except in Porvoo. I had just arrived when a barrel organ started playing under my window – you don't get more Parisian than that» (Papperslytanpaper 1859). In addition, the first Educational Institute for Teachers was opened at that time and Finnish was the only official language in use, while Swedish or Russian were commonly spoken at school. This gave the chance to all citizens to have access to higher education when the Grand Duchy of Finland was still part of the czar's empire.

After that, Jyväskylä was known as the «Athens of Finland»⁵, a facetious title that marked its metamorphosis from an ordinary reality to a solid democratic and commercial hub,

⁴ Before moving back to his own town, Alvar Aalto had worked in Helsinki but he did not succeed in realizing his projects

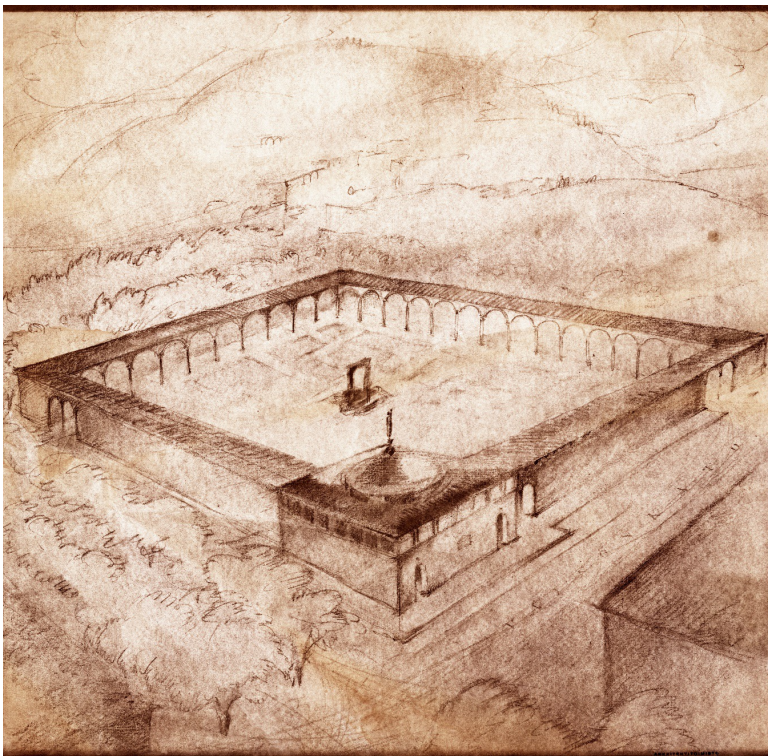


Fig 4. Alvar Aalto's draft for Jyväskylä's unrealized Market square, 1925, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.

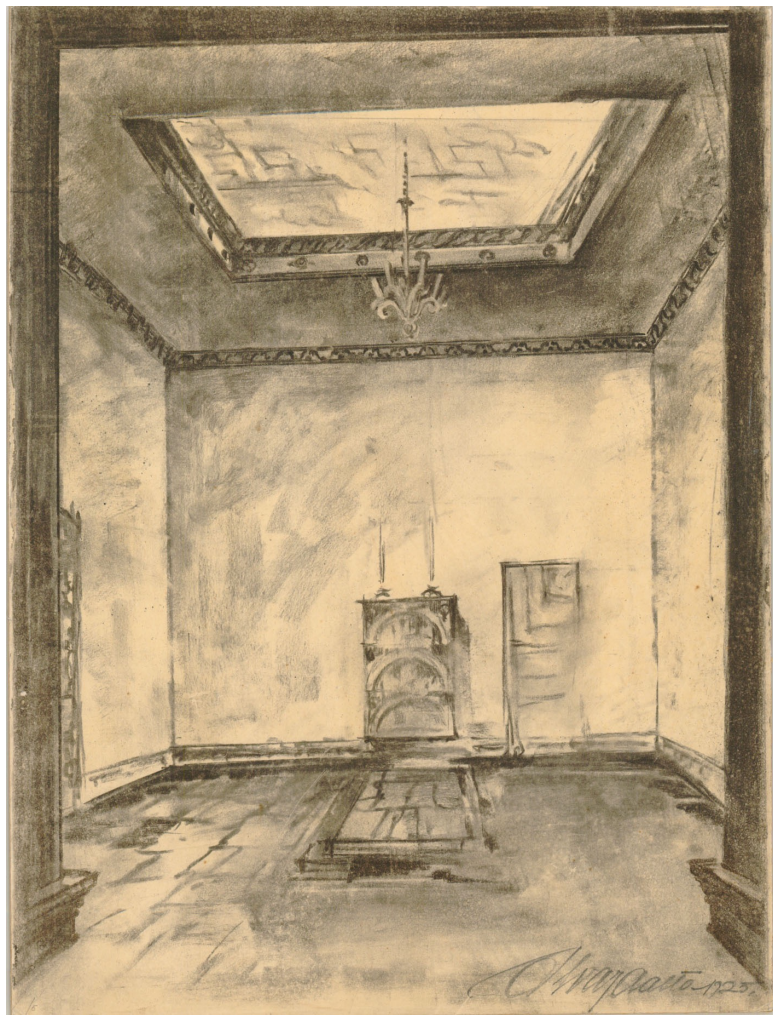
⁵ We can read for the first time this title in a letter written by the Finnish philologist Elias Lönnrot in 1850.

right where Aalto will be designing the university campus in the 1950s.

Nonetheless, in the early 1920s he found a favorable pretext for his aspirations to give his homeland a new architectural image wishing that the citizens promoted their own town to the rank of the province. It is commonly accepted that Aalto struggled a lot to import the Mediterranean aura through individual interventions, which could have determined a new aspect of the city centre, right when he was still influenced by his professors' views.

As an outcome of his ambition, he would have encouraged the sociality through his projects. Despite his propaganda on the local newspapers, the proposals for the design of the civic spaces had been judged excessively eccentric, revolutionary and expensive for such a small community. Little else remains regarding these drawings on account of the absence of interest reserved by the critics. We must consider the fact that Aalto himself hid his early proposals as he did not feel confident with what he could have judged as a youthful indiscretion (Niskanen 2018). Except this *damnatio memoriae*, they are pivotal to clarify his initial vision about Architecture and City Planning, especially in this *milieu*. An extract of the time elucidates his juvenile intentions: «one

Fig 5. Jyväskylä Funeral Chapel designed by Aalto in 1925. The chapel is protected by a hipped roof with a rectangular skylight, similar to the atrium of a Pompeian domus. Unrealized. Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.



finds real gems in Italy and Southern Europe. Not an inch of ground remains intact, yet no one can complain of absent of scenic beauty. Central Finland frequently reminds one of Tuscany, the homeland of towns built on hills, which should provide an indication of how beautiful our province could be if built up properly»⁶.

The text was clearly born in the grasp of a designer and leaves no room for doubts about his future goals of re-modelling the landscape. He struggled to find any resemblance between two realities by showing some of his projects. For instance, the reminiscent of the *borghi* became apparent in the statements for the churches of Muurame and Taulumäki presented in a rather idealistic ‘Tuscan’ perspective in the morphology of the gentle Finnish hills, by locating them on the top of a sort of a dreamy mountain, alike the profiles of the Alps he sketched by the train on his way to the South. In reality, the readers of *Uusi-Suomi* (The New Finland) might have appeared to them hilarious, as they were familiar with the real site (Fig. 2). In the same way, Aalto compared Harju (the glacier hillock that determines the Northern limit of

⁶ Aalto, *Sisä-Suomi*, 28th June 1925

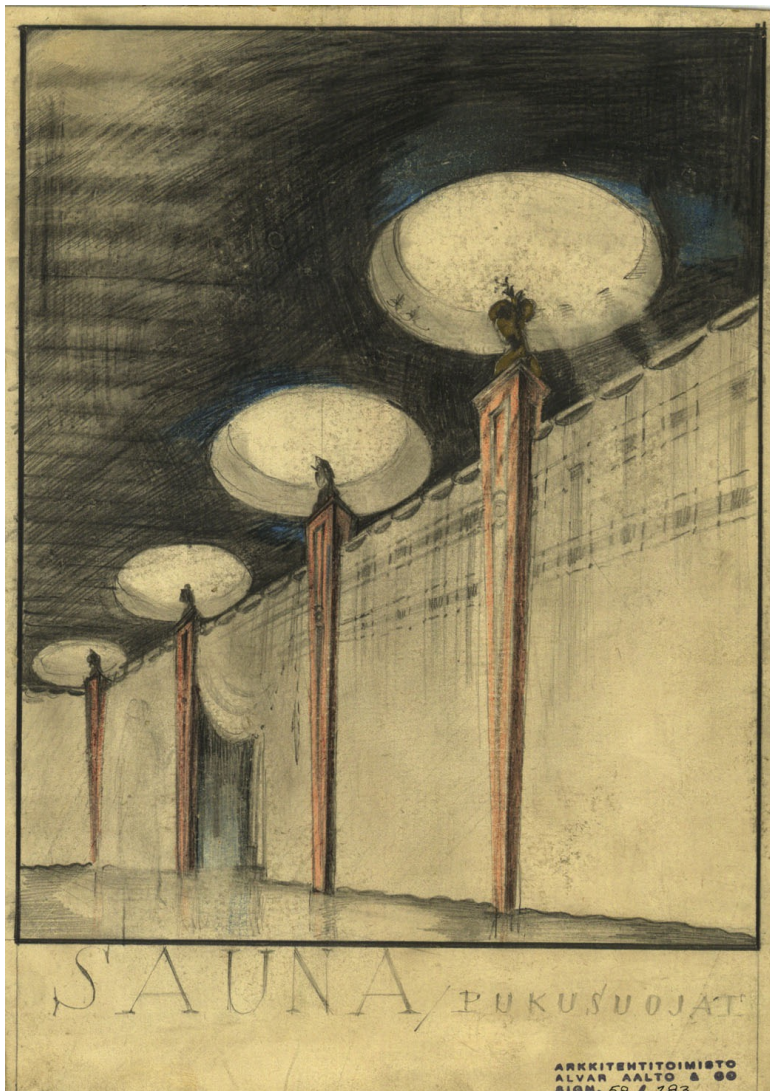


Fig 6. Alvar Aalto's draft for Jyväskylä's public sauna in an archaeological style, 1924-25, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.

⁷ Aalto, *Sisä-Suomi*, 5th
June 1925

⁸ Aalto *Sisä-Suomi*, 12th
December 1924

Jyväskylä) to the «mountain vineyard of Fiesole»⁷, involved in his Italianate fantasies. On account of this spirit, the town was seen as an idyllic testing ground.

Aalto initiated the architectonic research about a much more sociable urban prospect as he was persuaded that the possible welfare state of his citizens would have been impacted by the choreography and the new urban design.

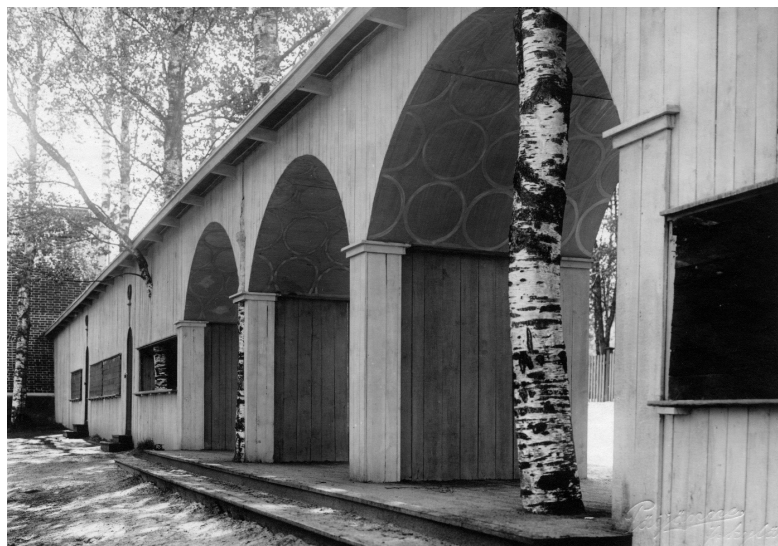
In place of this, we agree with the Finnish historian Riitta Nikula, who observed that Aalto's stay in Italy «gave [him] background to Jyväskylä's contemporary problems» (Nikula 1998, 98). However, it is also true that the architect began reasoning about altering the town a year before his trip to Italy, as demonstrated by some documents collected at the Municipal archives, dated back to October 1923 (Fig. 3).

As requested by the city council, the architect Alvar Aalto speculated three scenarios for the main square, which stood in the middle of Engel's urban grid. The hypothesis can be judged as proof of his beliefs: «One of the surest criteria which enable us to evaluate the cultural level of a modern town is its market square»⁸.

The first draft of this series of proposals focuses the concept of setting up two twins-buildings that would have been anchored to the Southern side of the forum, in accordance with the Hanseatic tradition, with the market standing next to the church and the City Hall⁹.

Nevertheless, in the second plan a bigger market-hall would have been located on the corner between the main road (Vapaudenkatu) and the square itself (Kirkkotori), similar to the ones in Helsinki, Kuopio and Turku. While in the latter one Aalto suggested to move the market to the harbour by the lake, either to highlight the importance of the trade in the region or to facilitate the communications with the other towns, linked to the lake. At that time he was still working in Helsinki. In the attached dissertations we can read how hard the young architect tried to convince the members of the city-

Fig 7. View of the Renaissance style transient portal of the Song Festival. It was implemented in the respect of the flora of Jyväskylä's city-park in summer 1924, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.



board of the advantages which would have derived from each of these proposals. His firmness of presenting three options sets a pattern for the rest of his career: he was never hindered from creating multiple proposals for competitions.

Finally, it was decreed that *Kauppatori*, the Market Square, would have been set in the previous school plaza, which looked like a vast, spare space at the feet of Harju hill while the church square remained untouched, as we can still see nowadays. By the way, Alvar Aalto also redesigned the new Market Square. A wide regular patio surrounded by a Poplar wood on the North-West side¹⁰, due to highlight the constant dream of the Mediterranean boulevards or- as Aalto himself suggested for the previous plan- «a mini Hyde park» (Pearson 1989, 46).

The spotlight on this plan is Aalto's intention to rectify the irregular shape of the site with a classical porch (Fig. 4). Meanwhile, the portico works as a filter between the city and the inner paved area, but it would also protect the market stalls under its structure, presumably made of wood due to practical reasons. Even though the monumental scale of the plan is idiosyncratic compared to the wooden buildings of the neighborhood, it pretends to evoke a classical *stoà*. It can also be the result of personal reminiscences, such as the sketches of the cloister of San Marco, which is located a few steps away from Piazza della Santissima Annunziata in Florence or Piazza delle Erbe in Padua could also be identified as another source of inspiration for him¹¹. Overall an aspiration of re-brand the town into an established city with prominence.

About the archaeological and aesthetic research, in the perspective view of *Kauppatori* Aalto envisaged to install

⁹ In 1903 the architect Yrjö Blomstedt remodelled the public park located between the church and the Town Hall so that since that moment it was known as the 'church garden' and not the 'church square'

¹⁰ In some other drawings of the time Aalto was inclined to insert exotic plants such as Cypresses or Poplar trees, emblems of the Southern landscapes. During his trips abroad he also sketched the local flora

¹¹ In the archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation in Jyväskylä are collected some postcards, photographs and sketches produced in the mentioned Italian cities

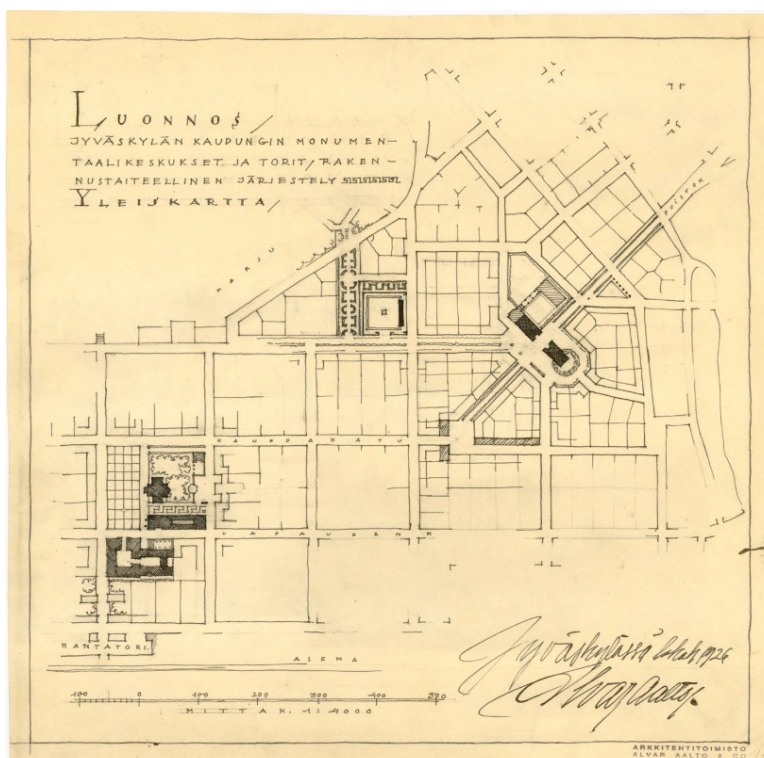


Fig 8. Overall plan for the monumental centre of Jyväskylä, 1926. Note the three main squares, which imagined to be locate in the original grid, Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä.

¹² The document is part of Erik Bryggman's archive collected in the Åbo Akademi in Turku. In Finland sending Christmas cards with the latest projects became a tradition among the architects in the 1920s

¹³ Still the executive plans are not even collected in the archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation but in the regional ones

¹⁴ At the Polytechnic professor Nyström taught Architecture History and was fond of Egyptian Archaeology and Ancient Greece: so it is worth supposing that he gave his imprinting on his students

a monumental horse through, somehow similar to the Renaissance well in Pienza, which as a student might have admired on some manuals.

A Christmas-card sent by Aino and Alvar Aalto to Erik Bryggman in 1924 emphasizes their hope in the realization of the project within the incoming autumn¹². Unfortunately, we know it was rejected.

On the other hand, a year later Bryggman sketched a similar plan in China ink for Turku's Market square, by demonstrating a common vision.

Nothing was lost in Jyväskylä: in fact in 1927 the open-market was moved to the new location. Only Aalto's small classical temple-like-building was implemented for the meat-inspections and remained in use until the early 1960s when it was pulled down, by ignoring the designer's identity¹³.

Classicism as source of inspiration

As seen until now, the antiquities played a crucial role in Alvar Aalto's 'Classical Season', but in the Market Square's plan he touched the limit of blasphemy by using the classical temple as a model for a practical use.

He perceived Classicism not as a dogmatic model -quite the reverse- it was for him an extended catalogue of forms and spatial solutions and adapted its elements to his personal aesthetic and performing demands.

With the intention of carrying out a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he realized a gas station and a newspaper kiosk like mini-temples decorated with unusual Pompeian and neo-Egyptian ornaments in bright colours¹⁴, meanwhile Gunnar Asplund was doing the same in Sweden.

Aalto's infatuation for the use of porticoes and arches -for him as a peculiarity of the Western tradition- is a constant in civic buildings, villas, but also in the parish churches, funeral chapels (Fig.5) and even in a public sauna that he imagined to be modelled in a clear archaeological-style based on the ancient Roman bath (Fig. 6).

In fact, the pavilion for the annual song festival which had been assembled in Jyväskylä's park in Summer 1924 reflects this relish (Fig. 7): without damaging the native flora, Aalto realized this transient gate by using cardboard and battens, as testified both by the plans for the structure and by the photographs taken during the event.

A couple of years later, observing his personal mission for this sort of *Renovatio Urbis*, the architect felt ready to draw up a monumental centre plan which would have been integrated in the original neoclassical urban chessboard. Indeed, Jyväskylä would have assumed a new, elegant aspect through the system of squares and tree-lined-avenues (Fig. 8).

In emphasizing the *grandeur* and to foster the impression of an urbanization extended in the course of the decades and not planned at once, he praised the architect Gustaf Strengell.

This theorist asserted that the urban formalism was a product of the historical events and not derived by the taste of the citizens. Aalto envisaged to decorate the churchyard with a mosaic paving and with a formal garden, which would have enhanced this religious 'Acropolis' of his 'ideal city'¹⁵.

Another assignment, which Alvar Aalto proposed in the plan, was a third square flanked by twin buildings, forming a monumental 'gate' accessible for those who came from North-East. It is probably a sort of reflection of the images of the two churches in Piazza del Popolo in Rome, which he had been familiar with since his schooldays. Furthermore, we also notice that it displays a penchant for monumentality, a reminiscent of Bertel Jung and Eliel Saarinen's proposals for the Helsinki Plan (1918).

¹⁵ In late 1926 Aalto won the competition for the headquarters of the Civil Guards that would have been built on the right side of the square: right after his conversion to the Rationalism

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can assert that through these projects the young architect developed the traditional Nordic vision by deliberately looking toward the South, as he asserted: «we can with open-eyes absorb impressions from old Italy, Spain and the new America» (Aalto 1922).

His intention to push the new civilised Finland into the Western orbit takes a political meaning, while converging different traditions tracked down in his early works.

According to the lingering Renaissance dream, the Past was a promise for the Future, so that the notion of 'usable past' is the result of pragmatic motifs, which conducted him to dream the utopian Nordic *Buongoverno*.

He was clearly certain that those interventions would have turned the centre into an urban heaven for 'Finnish-Renaissance' people.

In Jyväskylä Aalto took his first professional steps as an architect and as a cultural mentor. His mission was creating a better choreography in order to establish the realm of human happiness. His job was apt to enhance the development of a modern Country.

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