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# The Waves of Time Revisited: Glimpses of life

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## Abstract

This study could perhaps be characterized as the art of walking in time, verbally, pictorially and abstractly, i.e. using words, images and thoughts. Of course, the ideal of essayism also includes a scientific dimension. Equally the aim is to make multi-level use of the idea of dialogue. At the same time, the writer is also carrying on a monologue (with himself), an aspect that is called dialogic monologue. After all, the respondent, too, is himself the questioner. Architecture and the essay are reminiscent of each other. The created building and the created word are close relatives. An essayistic study signifies a hermetic state of language. A text's inner verbal room is constructed from a circle of ideas. Roundness means enclosure: then there is an end at the beginning and a beginning at the end. Yet space is not circumscribed and confined. The actual beginning and end are always located outside the respective verbal room. The spiral of deduction forms a linguistic wisp and whirl that begins and ends as a chronological sequence. The past points forward to the future, and the future looks back to the bygone. The deepening of ideas means passing through several verbal rooms and, during that journey, conclusions will be refined. The Waves of Time, just as the Aaltos of their time, are surges of masterfulness. Glimpses of life mean flashes of Finnishness. They are collective snapshots: excerpts from a shared national story.

**Keywords:** essayism; Aino and Alvar Aalto; spirit of the place; functionalism

## Prologue

The wave breaks. The swell weakens. The force of the breaker subsides. Footprints left in the sand fade and dissolve. Water washes away the years. A human ceases to exist. Words remain. Each of us reads them in our own way: concretely or figuratively. Language cannot be commanded. It is the home of expressions, the dwelling of meanings.

Sometimes the waves of time crashed onto the shore with their white horse crests riding high. Development took off with the automobile and hitched a lift into the future. Time touched language: The first part of the word, *auto*, migrated into Finnish. The ending, *bil*, became attached to Swedish. The aesthetics of roads was born. The

village lane turned into a motorway. Networks acted as the mainstream of everyday life. Lakes and rivers were crossed. The poetry of bridges was written.

These reflections are an introduction to a forthcoming Aalto study. The tenor of the review is now essentially essayistic and literary. My own experiences, deliberations and earlier writings serve as important source material. They have arisen both in Finland and abroad. My interest was particularly stimulated and affected by Virpi Suutari's eloquent and moving documentary Aalto (2020). Of course, even here, my great inspiration has been Dr. Göran Schildt. His importance will be further emphasized in my later study of Aalto's artistic thinking, at which point I shall examine the significance of the collaboration between Aino and Alvar Aalto. This step paves the way for the key element of working together. Instead of an individual, a twosome, a duo, emerges - or perhaps even an 'indivi-duo'.

The perspective on the topic, then, is personal. I assume, however, that some of the conclusions and interpretations could be universally valid. Perhaps the term "cultural images from memory" could also be used to define my way of writing, where dialogue between word and picture is necessary. The present moments here are the early 1940s, the autumn of 1941, and the year 2020. The time perspective is almost 80 years. The period pictures are also similar: an era of war and pandemic. So an ongoing crisis is associated with both present moments. There also exists a desire for both to be passing moments, to be transitory. At issue is a powerful and momentous turning point or crossroads. (On the spirit of time and place, see e.g. Bolgár, 1969; Itkonen, 2002; 2012; 2018; 2020; Jääskeläinen, 1957; Pulla, 1959; Vuorio, 1953.)

Together the Aalto architect couple sketch out both everyday life and festive moments. Two working together create more than one working alone. Even in wartime, there is a need for architectural design language and the art of being human.



Photograph 1. Aino and Alvar Aalto.

Photograph 1 was on display at the Alvar Aalto Museum. It is also included in Suutari's *Aalto* documentary (on the *Aalto* film, see also Design Stories 2021; Virpi Suutari 2020). In both film and museum, the photograph is an essential element of narration. It embodies the importance of working together. Each and every action would seem to be guided by the absolute idea of equality between the participants. The Aaltos complement each other. Only cooperation can make the best imaginable outcome possible. War is only the existential framework, the prevailing structure of life, located in the background of artistic activity. Of course, it maps out its own and, in some places, even precise existential boundaries on the world.

In Photograph 1 war and everyday life are presented side-by-side. Designing and creative work are carried on even while out there the world is ablaze. A home is a refuge in the midst of all uncertainty. The military uniform and everyday clothes embody the dichotomy of reality. They tell about the home front and the frontline of battle. Above the entire existential arrangement, there seems to hover a spirit of modernity. Homeland and humanity are the measures of everything. The photograph is extremely expressive and poignant.

### **The art of interior space**

Travelling is an important viewpoint when looking at the Aaltos of that time and at the waves of time. The most interesting of conversation partners is the previously mentioned art historian Schildt. His excellent volume *Aurinkolaiva* (The Sun Ship) (1957) is an appropriate travel guide. The book gives an inspiring description of Daphne's journey on the Nile. For some time Alvar Aalto was also on board the sailing boat. Docent Henrik Knif has also taken a thought-provoking look at the subject in his book *Göran Schildt – Kaksi Elämää* (Göran Schildt - Two Lives (2020)). However, the viewpoint of my own research differs fundamentally from Knif's description. I will return to the analysis of the Nile journey in more detail in my already mentioned forthcoming Aalto study where the essayistic significance of Schildt will also be analysed in greater depth. The present section is thus the initial spur for a comprehensive philosophy of travel.

A home is not just a roof over your head. A home is an abode of peace for the whole of existence, a safe haven. It is a human being's most personal and private circle of being. Perhaps the home could be considered a kind of practical utility for daily use. For the Aaltos, the home had also become an *objet d'art*. It served as a window looking into visionary architecture and modernity. Their home was designed to herald the future. Words of tomorrow were written into its formal language. The Aaltos' home was a reflection of a new era.

The Aaltos' home in Helsinki, on Riihitie Road in Munkkiniemi, was completed in 1936, which was also the year of the Berlin Summer Olympics. Europe was already on its journey towards war and a chaotic and critical turning point in the notion of being human. At this point, however, there are no grounds for focusing on the philosophy of

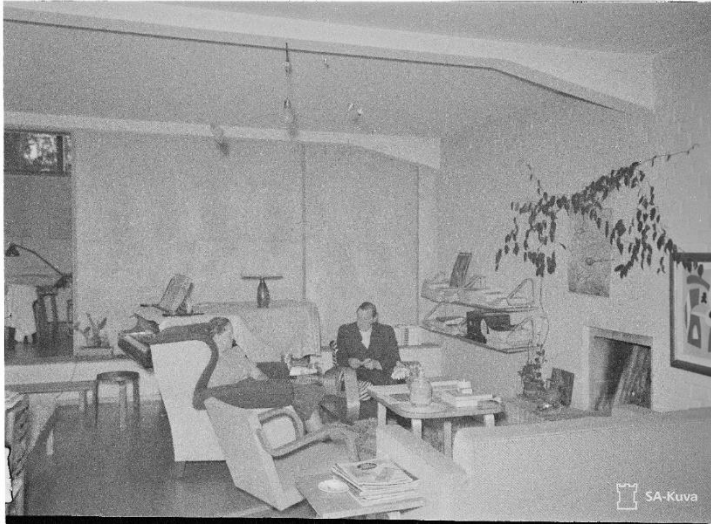
architecture or the history of war. Their analysis needs research entirely of its own, which is why the subject is now only lightly touched upon. The leading role, after all, is taken by an essayistic analysis of the idea of travel. (See also, for example, In Aalto's atelier, 2020; Aalto's home, 2020.)

As Daphne glided along the surface of the Nile, Schildt and Aalto were engrossed in deep discussions about art, for example. The book *The Sunship* interestingly describes these reflections which focused on being human as the measure of everything. It was that ideal notion of functionalism that had an essential place in Aalto's architecture. The way Schildt describes the framing of the question stimulated further deliberation in the reader: "For him [Alvar Aalto], the living person is the centre of everything, but it is not an heroic superhuman pursuing the absolute, nor a neutralized Nordic welfare state citizen, but an independent, fearless type consisting uniquely of strength and weakness. I suspect Alvar got to know this human in his childhood among the street lads of Jyväskylä, although he later built a truly spiritual brotherhood with Anatole France, Brunelleschi and Catullus. In any case, it is this particular type of person who determines Alvar's entire worldview and his art, and he carries it with him as a measure by which everything is measured: can this thought, this thing, town plan, book, piece of furniture, building or other person withstand the gaze of an idealized Aukusti Nyyperi\*\*?" (Schildt 1957, p. 244; see also Schildt, 1964, on Aalto's architecture.)

Without photographs, this analysis would lack impact. The use of a sample pair of photos sheds light on the matter in many ways. We begin the inspection of the Aaltos' home with an "inner gaze": an examination of the essence of the interior.



Photograph 2. At work.



Photograph 3. Everyday life.

In their work the Aaltos created a daily life that was both valuable and valued. Home was a haven of rest and work. What might Aukusti Nyyperi, mentioned by Schildt, have thought of the Aaltos' house? What exactly would he be like as an ideal type, as anybody? On what basis would he qualify as a person who could act as the measure of everything? By no means a small and trivial task. Does the person at the centre of everything understand the magnitude of his role? Or is it enough that he is just his own true self?

The interior of Aaltos' home is like a showcase for their art and skill. I would even talk about it as holistic home art and the poetry of everyday existence. From work there comes art, and art becomes work. An object for daily use develops into an *objet d'art*. How and why does such a transformation take place? An inspiring co-worker, an inspiring environment and the idea of something the world still needs: in this way, ingenious practical creations are produced. The beauty of the object gradually transforms practicality into artistry. By way of the thought, paper draft, and implementation, the visionary object proceeds into the category of art. However, without the appreciation of users, the transformation will not succeed. Here, too, the magic word could be functionality - or functionalism. Indeed, then, the human being is the measure of all things.

The workspace in photograph two is high and bright. There is boundless space and open space as well as light from the large windows. In such an environment, it is easy for ideas to arise and grow to heights. An important element would seem to be cooperation, something which only becomes a reality when the ideal of equality prevails. Both parties are equally important. Without the other, one half of the strength of creativity is missing. Virpi Suutari's documentary *Aalto* skilfully highlights



this fact, which is one of the most insightful aspects of the film. Suutari has made a documentary of high quality.

The Aaltos were able to combine the ordinary workaday man and the spiritual giant. Or at least, Dr. Schildt interprets the situation this way. As role models for the workaday everyman he mentions the Jyväskylä street lads from Alvar Aalto's childhood. In this way, Schildt sees the birth of a living man, a "type" built of strength and weakness. Even though it refers to a partially ideal character, it is still not about a hero, a Greek *heeros*. In photograph two, then, the Aaltos would have been creating buildings, homes for such a person. Then all people are considered equal. It would be good for everyone to live in such a society. Maybe everyone would like to call it their home. Presumably this is what the Aukusti Nyyperi mentioned by Schildt would think.

In photograph three, the Aaltos are spending their daily lives in a dwelling which is a condensation of their already realized masterly ideas. In the interior, the arts and daily life are in harmony with each other. They are in a thoughtful dialogue, each with the other. Many of the Aaltos' own masterpieces are on display. Their timeless design language speaks to us and for itself. Works of art, a map, a grand piano and plants complete the harmonious and rounded-off overall impression. In the ambience of the living room, both the artists and Aukusti Nyyperi would feel at home. Modernism represents an era of days yet to come. As an interpreter of the 2020s, I am also pleased by the view. Nationality and internationality, as well as the workaday and festive, exist side by side in harmony. Without doubt the overall composition can also withstand the gaze of a living person. And really there's nothing to wonder about. When the human being is set as the ideal of being, the home becomes a refuge. Its emotional appeal goes beyond the individual.

### **The warmth of the homely gaze**

War does not diminish the importance of the home and one's own existential sphere. It is like a protective wall against the cold winds of the world. An equal life companion and a family are essential elements of a good life. And they make many other things achievable. Without them numerous plans would remain unfulfilled. When there is warmth in the homely gaze, a human smile is sincere, too.

My reflective paths still lack depth. The discussions between Schildt and Aalto on the Nile journey are once again essential. *The Sunship* is still one of the gems of Finnish travel literature. Schildt aptly characterizes Aalto's role as a thinker and artist: "The evening ended in the best of moods, in precisely that kind of freely meandering, gentle mocking and meaty philosophizing at which Alvar [Aalto] is a master. In this context, I have to say something that the reader may indeed have already understood: I have no doubt whatsoever that Alvar Aalto is one of the truly great artists of our time. Only the great works of architecture of past centuries have touched me as deeply as the Säynätsalo Town Hall and a few of the wall surfaces at the Jyväskylä College of Education. Being with Alvar therefore means much more to me than just the joy of

intelligent and inspiring company: it allows me to see the problems in both his own creative work and in art generally.” (Schildt 1957, pp. 243–244.)

A pair of photographs rich in content is needed to analyze the Aaltos’ artistry. It should also shed light on Alvar Aalto’s philosophizing, which is deemed masterful. What is of particular interest now is to examine architectural insightfulness.



Photograph 4. Sheltered privacy.





Picture 5. Risen from the landscape.

What makes a particular building an architectural masterpiece? The front yard, the facade, is a stripped down and delimited area of the world. A public space has been transformed into an accentuatedly private space. The basic bare outer shell conceals its abundant contents. It's like a secret whose solution requires effort and application. It is not something revealed to everyone.

It would be interesting to talk about a multi-faced house. The look of the building would differ when viewed from varying directions. Accordingly, the spirit of the place would also change as one moved through its space. Or it would be a matter of different variations or nuances in the spirit of the same place.

In photo four, the Aaltos are hidden from the gaze of outsiders. Maybe the family is also out of reach of the war. The still life set-up emphasizes intimacy. Privacy is important. Each one must understand that it is to be cherished. Likewise, other people must know how to appreciate the importance of privacy. This is something that has changed a fair amount with the passing decades and the technicalization of existence. Some modern people specifically want to be on view and as visible as possible. The topic will be examined in more detail in my forthcoming essays. (On essayistics particularly, see Itkonen, 2006; 2010; 2010; 2015; 2017.)

The pair of photographs four and five perfectly captures the idea of a theme and its variations. Just as in Schildt's description, I as a researcher also have the opportunity to look at the essence of Aalto's architecture. I can then be indirectly conversing with him. I am also happy to agree with Schildt that Aalto was one of the really great artists of his time. However, the claim needs to be made more specific to the extent that we can justifiably talk about Aino and Alvar Aalto together as the Aaltos. The situation also becomes clear in photograph four. The family unit also plays an important role: children mean the continuity of existence even in time of war. The world will not disappear but will continue to exist even after the exceptional events of war. The same truth is also told by the green plants. Hope should never be abandoned.

The corner, with its wooden fencing, reveals the presence of certain existential ideals. Rest and exercise as well as activity and reflection alternate in daily life. Alvar Aalto's military uniform is a sign of the actual present moment. Does the status of officer have any special meaning? I would presume so. Even in the days of the war, the role of the artist differed from that of the rank and file.

A lounge for sunbathing, a hanging trapeze bar for gymnastics, vines to enliven the environment and a sheltered canopy for quiet moments, they all still carry echoes of everyday life at the time. Perhaps it was in that environment that the initial ideas for the architectural masterpieces mentioned by Schildt were born: the SÄYNÄTSALO Town Hall and the wall surfaces of the JYVÄSKYLÄ College of Education, now the University of Jyväskylä. Artistry and practicality are equal elements present in the garden view shown in photograph four. Functionalism was on a human scale, and the human was

the ultimate creative stimulus of functionalism. They needed the inspiring power of each other, a fact that the Aaltos were very clear about.

Photograph five typifies the intertwined importance of intellect and emotion, the way that total works of art are created. The architectural creation seems to have risen directly from the landscape. Or we might also talk about a miracle that has sprung from the bosom of the earth. The space is not closed but opens out into time and space. The existential framework is heard in the sighing of the tall and ancient pines. The green plants are like shielding hands protecting the home. Any evil does not even come close to this idyllic harmony. The stone slabs are reminiscent of centuries-old footprints that link antiquity to the present. Yes, we should believe Schildt's words: the Aaltos were among the most significant artists, both in wartime and during all the following decades. They were seers whose gaze extended to timelessness.

### Epilogue

Fate appeared as a travelling companion. Sorrow arrived. The twosome became a onesome. Yet Aino Aalto's spiritual presence is also felt in this modern age of the 2020s. The narrative power of photography is undeniable.



Photograph 6. Spirit and life.



Life flows in green plants. They breathe life into both an interior and an exterior. They make a building a home. Aino Aalto was also able to carry this view over into her works of art. Even at the moment of their birth they were indeed both objects for use and *objets d'art*. The masterly creations were home art. There was a warmth in them.

Just as the waves of time are also waves of timelessness, so the Aaltos of that time are timeless Aaltos. I am proud to have had them as my guides on my cultural journey. Our shared journey is only just beginning. It will continue in the very near future.

English translation by Glyn Hughes

## Notes

\*Translator's note 1. The title plays on the word 'aalto'. In Finnish the word literally means 'a wave', but it is also a common surname.

\*\*Translator's note 2. Aukusti Nyyperi (August Nyberg) was a neighbour of the young Aalto. His bohemian lifestyle appealed to and influenced Aalto.

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