

AUTHENTICITY AND ARTIFICE IN ALVAR AALTO'S MOUNT ANGEL LIBRARY

Henry Matthews

In the final paragraph of my book *Kirtland Cutter: Architect in the Land of Promise*, I wrote: "Cutter's most significant contributions to American Architecture are his rustic structures that evoke the wilderness and designs that express the escapism to which his countrymen are prone. The celebration of the primeval forest in Lake McDonald Lodge and the enthusiasm for the exotic in The Hall of the Doges [at the Davenport Hotel], speak eloquently of opposing forces of nature and artifice tugging at the American psyche."¹ Naturally, I was intrigued by the words *authenticity and artifice* in the theme this conference.

The word artifice possesses two, contradictory meanings: first it is defined as skill in art, and workmanship; I associate it with Daedalus the artificer at Knossos of the legendary king Minos. The second, related to artificiality, implies cunning, and deception, an approach employed by eclectic architects of the Gilded Age at the turn of the twentieth century. By designing grandiose mansions in past styles, they beguiled clients into imagining themselves as aristocrats of a bygone era. They proclaimed, in institutional buildings, that the classical and medieval architecture of old Europe expressed the aspirations of contemporary Americans.

If you will forgive me I would like to explain my own background. Since I worked on historic preservation in Washington State and immersed myself in the architecture of Kirtland Cutter, people might assume that my life-focus is on the turn-of-the-century architecture of the Northwest. But this was a phase in my career brought on by opportunity. I was teaching at Washington State University in 1985 when a cache of Cutter's lost drawings turned up in Spokane. I leapt at the chance to study them. Mr. Cutter led me quite a dance; he offered me a fortuitous learning experience, that resulted in a book. But now, let me go back thirty years.

I entered the school of Architecture at Cambridge in 1956 when "the Heroic Period of Modern Architecture", as Peter and Alison Smithson called it², was hardly over. Fellow students and I were deeply moved by the theories and buildings we encountered. We discovered a rich and diverse design scene in which the needs of building users, the relationship of architecture to landscape, the connection between inside and outside, and the use of efficient materials and structural systems were all essential. We despised the eclectic architecture that Modernism aspired to sweep aside. What would I have thought of Kirtland Cutter then?

I don't believe that my mentors uttered the word *authentic*, but I am sure we never doubted the authenticity of the work we admired. We avoided the word *style* and we certainly believed in possibilities much broader than those so narrowly defined by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Alfred Barr and Philip Johnson in the "Modern Architecture: International exhibition" at MoMA in 1932. Their emphasis lay primarily in aesthetic aspects.³

I remember discovering Aalto while reading Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, which the author had expanded from the 1941 first edition to include a serious analysis of his work. Giedion discusses Aalto's respect for human needs and desires as well as his deep attachment to his native landscape. He links him with Le Corbusier in his desire "to create a simultaneity of inner and outer space." And states "...he worked unswervingly to create a flexible wall and to intensify its architectonic properties." He eulogized Aalto's use of the "undulating wall".⁴

I recall the inspiration the architect offered me then and many times since. Clearly he embodied *authenticity* in his design. He absorbed the spirit of modernism, but looked for inspiration in life and nature; he possessed an irrational streak, trusting his intuition. While others devoted themselves to the

quest for universality, he responded to the *genius loci*. He celebrated the promise of new technology; he paid homage to the purity of new forms produced in the 1920s by Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe; but he recognized the complexity of life, the intricate workings of human perception and the possibility of modulating light to animate architecture. As I will demonstrate, Aalto expressed the function of his structures in a joyful manner. In designs that cannot fail to move us he combined authenticity with artifice, in the most positive sense of the word. I will briefly point out some characteristics of Aalto' design in few selected buildings, and end by analyzing the library at Mount Angel Monastery in terms of authenticity and artifice.

Siegfried Giedion singles out the tuberculosis sanatorium at Paimio (1939-33) as one of three modern buildings that “come to the fore”, the other two being Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus (1926) and Le Corbusier’s League of Nations (1927). So, I will begin there. The tall block with the wards for the patients expresses the potential of reinforced concrete. The balconies onto which the patients’ beds could be moved to benefit from fresh air, give the south façade its dynamic form. In response to the contours of the site this soaring structure is set subtly at an angle from the lower building to which it is attached by a light link.



Viipuri Library, 1927-34 Reading room and book storage

In his Viipuri library (1927-34), two adjacent rectangular wings rise to unequal heights, expressing different functions. One of the architect’s aims is clear: to fill the interior with daylight. Fifty-seven skylights penetrate the roof of the larger block that contains the reading room. Whether selecting books from



Viipuri Library, Lecture room with undulating acoustic ceiling

shelves, sitting at tables in the reading room, or strolling up the generous stairs, patrons can enjoy ample, soft daylight. When the long winter nights draw in, the same skylights conceal the source of the electric light. While illumination is essential for vision, clear sound is necessary for hearing. In the long lecture room with windows all along one side, Aalto has developed a sophisticated acoustic ceiling that reinforces the voices of speakers. Covered with slats of pine, its undulating surface reflects the speaker's voice by multiple paths to the ears of the audience. This unique element appears delightfully playful, but, as the diagram shows, it works. The chairs and stools designed by Aalto for Viipuri, reappear today at Mount Angel library looking as appropriate as they did in the nineteen twenties.

The Villa Mairea ((1938-9) also features smooth, white surfaces but, introducing irregularity, juxtaposes them with widely projecting balconies of wood. "defining two sides of a courtyard open to the adjoining forest, this summer retreat interacts intimately with the surrounding landscape. While Le Corbusier's Villa Savoie forcefully demonstrates his *five principles of architecture*, the villa Mairea seems to be more concerned with informal living in the country. The simple mass of the fireplace, promising warmth in winter, contrasts with the openness of the window walls. A delightful element of the living room is the screen of irregularly placed wooden poles enclosing the staircase.

Aalto's design for the Finnish building at the 1939 World's Fair in New York stood out among the modernistic buildings with overtones of stripped down classicism that dominated the fairgrounds in



Finnish Building, New York World's Fair (1939) Interior (photo Ezra Stoller)

Flushing Meadows. Clearly he had no interest in fitting in: he brought to life, in an abstract yet tangible way, the essence of Finland. In contrast to the ubiquitous smooth dazzling-white plaster, concealing wooden framing, Aalto dared to expose wood as his principal material. The interior is a work of brilliant artifice.. Since the narrow ground space constricted the potential for display, Aalto decided to create a soaring interior with undulating walls leaning inwards. Their inclination towards the upturned faces of the public allowed the images to be seen at a favorable angle. The serpentine wall allowed serial vision of bays and promontories on its surface enlivened with two dimensional exhibits. He succeeded in showing a copious array of pictures and data while evoking a glorious Finnish forest. Who could fail to be captivated?

At MIT's Baker House which stretched along the Charles River in Cambridge Massachusetts, (1948) Aalto exploits the undulating red brick wall for the benefit of the residents. Unlike monotonous straight corridors in conventional dormitories and apartments, the hallways in Baker house, not only curve; they open into small social areas, and, as traffic diminishes towards the ends, they become narrower. But the main benefit of the serpentine plan is that the rooms offer different views, permutations of up-river, down-river, and straight across. Separate from the main six story building, the social spaces and cafeteria stand apart in a low block with round skylights penetrating the roof.

It is clear that Aalto, embracing the principles and freedoms of modern architecture, designed each building according to its purpose, its users' needs, the opportunities of the site, and by giving free reign to his imagination. So it is at Mount Angel. The Benedictine Abbey founded in 1882 by Swiss Monks who had been suppressed in their own country, succumbed to a fire ten years later, The fine book collection, serving the monastic community as well as a seminary and a small college, was scattered through

several buildings. In 1963, Father Barnabas, charged with exploring options for a new library, suggested immodestly that they should seek 'the best architect in the world,' an ambition that surprised his colleagues but broke no monastic vows. He boldly wrote to I. M. Pei, Louis Khan and Alvar Aalto.

At this time, Aalto, in poor health, did not feel that he could make the journey to Oregon, but since he loved designing libraries, he accepted the commission, appointing his former associate Eric Vartiainen and Californian architect Vernon DeMars to take responsibility for the engineering, working drawings and site supervision. Vartiainen met frequently with the monks and with Aalto in Helsinki. From the beginning, he made it clear that this would truly be an Aalto building.⁵ Time does not allow me to discuss the evolution of the design through five stages. I will jump to the library I first saw it twenty-five years ago and in August this year.



On a flat-topped ridge overlooking the peaceful Willamette Valley, the buildings of Mount Angel Abbey and seminary surround a rectangular lawn dominated by a Lombard Romanesque church; irregularly planted trees break the formality of the campus. Aalto made no attempt to create a monumental form; rather he offered a plain, single story façade with a projecting canopy and windows screened by redwood grills. The steel columns of the canopy are softened by wooden cladding. This eastern entry at the very edge of the bluff leads through a simple foyer into a luminous space that steps down on three levels. Visitors immediately reach the open librarians' area surrounded by a curving counter from which the fan shaped interior radiates out. From this one vantage point the librarian can oversee the entire library and patrons can comprehend it as an architectural whole.

The arc of the canopy over this nerve center of the library is echoed by the dramatic curve of a skylight through which daylight, reflected softly off splayed surfaces of white plaster, illuminates the space below. Beneath it the floor drops to a mezzanine and beyond that to the lower level where book stacks radiate



Mount Angel Abbey Library. Interior

out, as they do above. Further arcs define the edges of the mezzanine, the eastern guardrail of the main floor, the wooden ends of the book stacks and a line of lamps over a long, curving table. Above the far wall to the west, clerestory windows spread light onto the ceiling over the book stacks. Rejecting the option of opening up this wall to the beautiful view, Aalto concentrated on creating an interior space for books and quiet study, protected from a distracting outlook and the glare of afternoon sun.

Three slender cylindrical columns support beams that cross the skylight to disappear above the ceiling, and further columns stand in the book storage area. But the structure supporting the roof is not expressed aggressively; on the contrary the roof and the floors below it seem to float peacefully. My photographs may suggest a vigorous and even restless intersection of bold curves. When holding a camera it is hard to avoid any excitement that is offered, but I believe that my real experience was of serenity.

I know of only one other library in which the bookshelves fan out from a single point: the History Faculty building at Cambridge by James Stirling. In the previous library, shortly before the architect received the commission in about 1960, a thief, unseen by anyone cut many valuable engravings out of books and secreted them inside his coat. The architect responded with a design that allowed one person to survey all the spaces between radiating shelf units.⁶ When I mentioned this to the librarian at Mount Angel, she told me that she had not considered this aspect of the design, but loved the way that she could easily point out where subject areas or individual books could be found. Indeed the system gives an astonishing coherence to the interior.

Because of the sense of order that one perceives on entering, it is not immediately clear that the four segments of the fan do not stretch out the same distance. In fact, Aalto, adapting to the contours of the site, conceived an eccentric plan in which the southern segment was much shorter than the northern one. I suspect, however, that the irregularity appealed to him. The four straight facets of the west wall, articulated by gaps between them, form a curve, with sharp angles at both ends.

The details of the library are exquisite: the short staircases between the mezzanine and the two floors are simple and direct; an easy-to-grasp metal handrail stands on a wooden board; plain wood and synthetic materials connect with elegant reticence on working surfaces; dark gray work-tops eliminate glare from overhead; on the floors, lighter blue-gray carpets create continuity. The carrels exemplify Aalto's subtle detailing: their wooden doors with frosted glass panels provide privacy, but present a luminous wall to the public space. Their furnishings provide all that a researcher needs; wooden slats moderate the light from the windows. Throughout the library Aalto's furniture, from simple stools that stack easily to luxuriant armchairs, some of them originating in the nineteen-twenties, satisfy all needs and complete the sense of visual consistency

During fifty years as an architectural historian, I have reveled in my good fortune to earn a living with the architecture of many eras from the classical age to Modernism and beyond. I have reconciled myself with the eclecticism I once despised. However, I must say that I am on the side of that great Oregonian architect Pietro Belluschi in his disapproval of Michael Graves's Portland Building, an inauthentic product of artificiality, cunning, and deception from the Reagan years. As I try to banish that aberrant phase of American architecture from my mind, I find the perfect antidote at Mount Angel. Praise be to Father Barnabas! Each time I walked into this library, I felt the kind of thrill that I experienced when I first visited the Bauhaus, the Villa Savoie, Crown Hall at IIT, Ronchamp, Taliesin West and the Kimball Art Museum. But here, in Aalto's late work, I find is something more: a testament to the career of a modern Daedalus who placed the perceptions of human beings at the center of his creations.

¹ Kirtland Cutter: *Architect in the Land of Promise*. University of Washington Press. 1998 p.384

² Alison and Peter Smithson, *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*, London/Milan 1981 [reprint of *Architectural Design* December 1965]

³ Henry Matthews "The Promotion of Modern Architecture by the Museum of Modern Art in the Thirties." *Journal of Design History*, Volume 7, No. 1, March 1994. pp. 43-59 (reproduced on my website: www.henrymatthews.com)

⁴ Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* third edition, Harvard 1954 pp 565-605

⁵ Donald Canty, *Lasting Aalto Masterwork: The Library at Mount Angel Abbey*, Mount Angel, St. Benedict, Oregon 1992

⁶ James Stirling told me this story in 1964.

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Books:

Kirtland Cutter: Architect in the Land of Promise 1998

Mosques of Istanbul 2010

Greco-Roman Cities of Aegean Turkey 2014