

‘Elissa Aalto’s *oeuvre* is both obviously impressive and frustratingly difficult to grasp.’

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Sofia Singler on the elusive yet perfusive presence of Elissa Aalto

Arkkitehti Elissa Aalto / Architect Elissa Aalto

BOOK

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Texts: Mari Forsberg, Mia Hipeli, Mari Murtoniemi, Katariina Pakoma, Timo Riekko
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Reviewed by Sofia Singler

What is everywhere and nowhere, except where something is? ‘Nothing’, the well-known riddle tells us. If we turn to recent research produced by Aalto scholars in the past decade or so, the answer might instead be ‘Elissa Aalto’. Long-standing co-director and, ultimately, solo director of one of the twentieth century’s most acclaimed architectural practices, Elissa Aalto’s (1922–94) *oeuvre* is both obviously impressive and frustratingly difficult to grasp.

Arkkitehti Elissa Aalto / Architect Elissa Aalto summarises succinctly the results of long-standing efforts to peer behind the veil of Elissa’s mystery. (I will refer to the various Aaltos here by their given names, to avoid confusion.) Archival drawings, photographs, correspondence, meeting minutes,



1 Nordic House (1962, 1965–8), Reykjavik, Iceland.

and interviews with Elissa’s peers, friends, and colleagues are collected together in the bilingual essay collection edited by Mia Hipeli and published by the Alvar Aalto Foundation. Long overdue, the book is the first publication globally dedicated specifically to Elissa. The crop is modest, but meaningful. Together with an eponymous traveling exhibition, the collection elucidates the extent to which Elissa shaped Studio Aalto’s culture and portfolio, as well as the difficulties inherent in trying to pinpoint precisely how and where.

Everything produced by and in Alvar Aalto Architects Ltd since Elissa joined in 1949 bears the mark of her hand. The nature and limits of her contributions are often impossible to delineate, however, both due to Elissa’s own temperament, and to the gendered prejudices of architectural scholarship. While the work of co-directed design studios has all too often been attributed to the

perceived spearhead men – misogyny, unconscious bias, and intellectual laziness are all to blame – not all of the women left in the shadows lamented their fate. Elissa, for one, consciously preferred it. Even as partner and director, she ‘remained, or often purposely chose to remain, an anonymous behind-the-scenes orchestrator in the renowned architectural office’.

Paradoxically, her eighteen-year solo directorship of the firm after Alvar’s death in 1976 muddled the definition of her contributions for good. All key drawings produced in the atelier were signed ‘and thus at least formally approved by her’, and ‘she was involved in virtually every project in one way or another.’ Yet she eschewed filling out timesheets or other leaving other administrative traces of her work, rendering it impossible to determine how, and how much, she worked on individual schemes. Neither did she consider it a priority to take credit even in formal project descriptions or



2 Elissa Aalto at the construction site of the Church of St Mary of the Assumption (1966–80) in Riola di Vergato, near Bologna, Italy.

reports. Her imprint is everywhere yet nowhere.

Studio members recall Elissa steadfastly and self-assuredly steering the design of the Nordic House in Reykjavík (1962, 1965–8), for instance, but the final project report omits her name, assigning credit to architect Ilona Lehtinen and interior designer Pirkko Söderman instead [1]. Although Elissa's name began to appear alongside Alvar's in professional publications from the early 1960s onwards, Jonas Malmberg, in his essay on 'Elissa as a Creator', credibly attributes the change to her status as co-director of the firm, rather than a concerted effort to record authorship carefully. Elissa became a partner in 1958, at the age of thirty-six.

Other key projects where Elissa's role was central, according to fragmentary archival evidence and oral history, include gems of the studio's famed 'red-brick period'. The Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949–52) was Elissa's formative debut in the office – and the project during which she and Alvar fell in love. Topping-out first, wedding second. Alvar's fluency in German was advantageously complemented by

Elissa's in French: it was all but natural for her to assume primary responsibility for the building of Maison Louis Carré in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne (1956–63).

Assumptions of imbalance have been attached to Elissa's career as well as the studio's output even after Alvar's death, creating the impression that professional asymmetry lingered far after she became solo director of the firm. The book questions the presumed passivity of the studio's Elissan era, arguing that the work produced in its last two decades deserves to be interrogated beyond a simplistic 'post-Alvar' paradigm. Of course the primary concern of the office, when Elissa took the wheel, was to complete a number of major commissions and competition entries left unfinished when Alvar died. Yet they were far from *faits accomplis*: interrupted at various stages of completion, they grew, morphed, and matured significantly under Elissa's guidance. Monstrous in scale and complexity, these projects took years, sometimes decades, to finish. Why do we still attribute more significance to the early stages of design timelines than to the later?

The Churches of the Cross (1969–79) in Lahti, Finland, and of St Mary of the Assumption in Riola outside Bologna (1966–80), whose initial schemes were products of Alvar's relative ecclesiastical conservatism – especially in liturgical respects – had to acquiesce to the reformist agendas set forth by the Second Vatican Council. The theatres of Jyväskylä (1964–82) and Seinäjoki (1981–7), along with the town hall (1963–88) and cultural centre Lappia (1961–75) in Rovaniemi, crowned momentous civic master planning projects that had occupied the studio for decades, finally giving tangible form to the Aaltos' critiques of CIAM urbanism.

As confident at the helm of a boat as in a hard hat directing a crane, Elissa is rendered in the book as fundamentally humble and persistently pragmatic. Her contributions to many seminal projects were condemned to obscurity because of their hands-on nature. Whereas much of the material produced on the drawing board survives in archives, Elissa's work as construction site supervisor left no tangible traces [2]. Also invisible was the wide-ranging palette of administrative duties –

and, to use a contemporary term, emotional labour – that Elissa took on, orchestrating the work of the office as a professional matriarch, of sorts.

The book remains surprisingly mum on the architectural character of the projects produced during Elissa's directorship, leaving much soil for scholars to till. Nonetheless, the buildings themselves stand as primary sources. In parallel to reading the short articles, one cannot help but ponder the realised designs. The inescapable, immediate sense is that Elissa's hand was less classical and less typological than Alvar's. It was more topological instead. Her emphasis on clarity of formal intent jostled with his insistence on reprising historic structural vocabularies (albeit in the abstract), and her predilection for perspicuous spatial choreographies established a productive tension with his proclivity for ambiguity.

Sometimes overlaps created the most intriguing results: the raw solemnity of Elissa's granite staff dining pavilion (1952–3), known today as 'The Lantern', contrasts to the crimson masonry of the rest of the Jyväskylä Pedagogical Institute campus (1951–71, now the University of Jyväskylä). 'Elissa wanted her own temple', studio member Tauno Keiramo recalls: 'a white crown' whose sharp purity would pierce the grainy, crafted fabric of its surroundings.

The romanticism and intricate finesse of the practice's early designs – that is, the joint work of Aino and Alvar Aalto – morphed into something sharper, bolder, and more assertive under Elissa's control. The equilibrium between reason and emotion in the studio's portfolio tilted towards the former, endowing the studio's final works with a more mathematical timbre than before. Even Elissa's textiles, co-designed with Alvar for Artek, are resolutely uncompounded.

Their distilled, flush restraint can be seen as a proto-algorithmic successor to the woven, sensory layeredness of Anni Albers. Elissa's touch was not unconcerned with atmosphere, however. Lucidity was a tool for evoking atmosphere rather than denying it, as her interiors for the Finlandia Hall (1962, 1967–5) and the Essen Opera House (1959, 1983–8) prove [3].

A stress on formal legibility is present early on in Elissa's (Elsa's) student work, published for the first time in this book and exhibition. Whiffs of Frank Lloyd Wright exude from the oversized eaves and the level massing of her diploma thesis project, a theatre school for Helsinki, whose submission in 1949 marked the completion of her professional degree. Another ingredient persistent in her individual work, which enriched the Aalto corpus significantly, is a commonsensical and sensitive approach to landscape. Alvar mastered terrain and landforms, but his happy-go-lucky approach to greenery – often employing generously populated trellises as visual shields to disguise the occasional construction error or compositional blunder – pales in comparison with Elissa's expertise in curating and cultivating the flora for Aalto sites. More than design the landscapes and vegetation plans for seminal buildings such as the Muuratsalo Experimental House (1952–4), she oversaw their design as landscapes. In the case of Muuratsalo, she worked closely with garden designer Paul Olsson. Dutchman's Pipe, Leatherflower, and climbing roses are just as pivotal materials of the Experimental House as the patchwork matrix of different brick types and tiles that its walls are famous for.

Was Elissa's sensibility somehow more directly Arctic? A native of Lapland, born in Kemi and educated in Rovaniemi, her practicality is tempting to attribute, partially, to an upbringing in harsh climatic conditions, at a distance from the cultural-educational urban clusters of southern and coastal Finland (the University of Lapland was founded in 1979). Alvar often referenced his familial roots as the flatlands of Ostrobothnia, and his formative years and education in 'the Athens of Finland', Jyväskylä, crediting both of them for shaping his understanding of geomorphology as well as Nordic vernacular and



3 The so-called clover tables in the foyer of the Finlandia Hall, Helsinki, Finland (1962, 1967–75), designed by Elissa Aalto.

Classical cultural heritage. What, then, did Elissa take from the tundra into her work? How about her wartime life, which encompassed both volunteer service in the auxiliary paramilitary organisation Lotta Svärd and architectural studies at the Helsinki University of Technology, bombed several times during the Winter War?

The texts in the book are consistently, and at times almost comically, upfront about the paucity of biographical fact. 'There exist different accounts' of Elissa's reasons for seeking employment at Studio Aalto, among other events of her life, 'all of which are probably more or less true.' Nonetheless, Mia Hipeli has succeeded in weaving together a cohesive outline of her life in the essay 'Elsa, Eki, Elissa'. Additionally, interviews with Elissa's peers offer insight into her character. Introverts will recognise themselves in descriptions of Elissa's temperament. Whereas Alvar was sociable to his core, dependent on the bubbly joys of camaraderie, laughter, and booze, and perhaps therefore allergic to the stuffiness of formal events, Elissa receded into her own quarters to balance the burdens of continual social interactions.

Despite her slight reclusiveness, she nevertheless took on the public-facing duties of the firm, assuming the role of a diplomat or spokesperson, and humbly handling ceremonial engagements such as 'embassy receptions, which Alvar didn't'.

What the book refrains from doing – consciously and productively – is interpreting the work of Elissa in relation to that of Aino Aalto (1894–1949), prior co-director of the studio and Alvar's first wife. 'There is no reason to compare the two', the introduction declares frankly. The justification is twofold: first, Aino's biography and life have already been dissected in much more detail, and second, simply, the two women's careers deserve to be studied beyond the insipid constraints of a trite predecessor-successor dynamic.¹ Aino and Elissa's age gap of nearly three decades, a generation, makes comparative interpretation all the more methodologically challenging, if not entirely fruitless.

Nonetheless, many of the essays make note of Elissa's respectful appreciation of Aino's contributions, primarily as an architect, yet also as a wife to Alvar. Elissa delighted in the Association of Women Architects of Finland,

Architecta, founded by Aino and others, and had no qualms about promoting the work completed by Aino and Alvar during their quarter century together. Rather than self-erasure, Elissa's respect for Aino was rooted in a sense of responsibility to honour the past, both familial and architectural, as well as a sincere, unfussy contentment with adapting to existing environments. As the longest-standing resident of Aino and Alvar Aalto's marital home, which the couple had co-designed and built in the 1930s, Elissa 'treated the house with piety and respect' and ultimately ensured the building's protection for future generations.

Immune to the allure of status, Elissa was captivated by conclusion and cohesion more than creation *ex nihilo*. 'For Aalto, it was more important what form the building would take, and [that decision] was more or less Aalto's', Elissa noted of major projects, recognising that her own interests lay in structure, construction, and interiors more than massing or iconography. 'I had no great need to change my husband's designs.' She maintained a degree of personal distance from the work of the practice in public. Years after her husband's death, she continued to speak of Alvar's architecture rather than theirs, hers, or the studio's.

The most stirring section in the book is a description of Villa Hauta-aho in Seinäjoki (1982) in Aila Svenskberg's essay on Elissa 'as a designer of surfaces'. The single-family home is one of just six projects listed in Timo Riekko's catalogue as 'purely Elissa', that is, completed in the atelier with no input from Alvar. The first of the firm's projects to be realised after his death, Villa Hauta-aho is hardly an emblem of change. In fact, it is a celebratory collage of all that came before: fragments of its exterior and interior are quoted directly from the practice's prior domestic schemes. Put Villa Mairea (1937–9), Maison Louis Carré (1956–9, 1961–3), Villa Kokkonen (1967–9), Villa Skeppet (1969–70) as well as the Aalto House (1935–6) and Studio (1954–5, 1962–3) in a blender, and what you get is Villa Hauta-aho [4]. The building testifies to the thesis of Jussi Rautsi, former studio member – interviewed for the book by director of the Aalto Foundation, Tommi Lindh – that continuity was Elissa's prime concern.

Continuity manifested not only



4 Villa Hauta-aho (1982), Seinäjoki, Finland.

in the reprise of earlier motifs in new commissions but in caring for the post-completion 'afterlife' of the studio's prior output. Renovation and restoration were tremendously far-sighted contributions of Elissa's, whose value will only increase the more honestly we confess the culpability of new-build construction in the face of the global climate disaster. The first major renovation the office completed was the House of Culture (1952–8), in the 1980s, some three decades after its inauguration. (The book offers us a noteworthy reminder: although architects and policymakers would love to take credit for 'inventing' adaptive reuse as a solution to sustainability concerns, prolonging buildings' lifecycles is not a new phenomenon.) The most Herculean restoration task that Elissa carried on her shoulders was the resurrection of the Vyborg Library (1927–35) in Russia – a project she boldly initiated in collaboration with Soviet officials, and whose completion in 2013, nineteen years after Elissa's death, was met with widespread international acclaim. The heroic effort of such a lengthy, vast, and complicated collaboration between two former enemy countries is difficult not to romanticise nostalgically given the perilous state of Russia today.

Scholars of modern architecture owe a debt of gratitude to Elissa for her 'systematic endeavour to secure the studio's legacy.' She co-founded the Alvar Aalto Foundation in 1968, and served as the vice-chair of its board. Alvar was its chair, and his biographer Göran Schildt was one of a handful of art historical experts elected. Established as Alvar's health began to decline, the Foundation sought to 'ensure the preservation of the physical and immaterial heritage produced by the studio', an effort that continues to this day through annual design seminars and symposia, and through the research undertaken at the Foundation's expansive archives in Jyväskylä. Without the Foundation, the quarter million originals that survive from Studio Aalto's drawing cabinets would 'no longer be in Finland and certainly not housed in a single archive'.

Elissa's pragmatism bred prescience, and vice versa. Intuitively aware of the urgency to act before precious archival materials ended up scattered in



5 Employees at Studio Aalto in the 1950s, with Elissa Aalto and Alvar Aalto in the foreground.

miscellaneous collections worldwide, she coordinated the transfer of the Studio building and its contents to the Foundation in the years leading up to her death. The Studio was sold to the Foundation in 1987, the drawing collections in 1990, and the photographic and textual archives as well as all furniture in 1991. She also bequeathed the Muuratsalo Experimental House to the Alvar Aalto Museum, thereby subtly indicating her wish for it to be joined with the Foundation (the merger ultimately happened in 1998, as part of Alvar's centenary celebrations). The legacy of Elissa lives on through the Foundation and the work of its employees, not least because it took on many of the responsibilities Elissa had assigned for herself. In addition to the more orthodox functions of a museum, the Foundation operates in the spheres of architectural policy, heritage management, and education.

As a collection of various authors' essays on the same individual, the book does not escape unscathed the typical ailment of its genre: repetition. The accompanying exhibition, more narrative and less analytical than the book in tone, is peppered with informative and inspiring quotes that it would have been valuable to include in the publication too. Visitors committed to reading the image captions carefully are

rewarded, for many of the most memorable comments are hidden within them. Tommi Lindh's exhibition architecture, built by Antti Heino, recognisably channels Elissa. The sinuous curve along which the presentation boards are placed is an obvious reference the undulating motif cemented as the studio's signature gesture in the 1930s – conveniently, *aalto* is the Finnish word for wave or curve – yet the planar purity of the plywood panels, and the muted, unfussy joints that connect them, are a clear celebration of Elissa's sober register.

The historiographical contribution of the book is more nuanced than one might assume, if one presumes to cast it as an effort to write 'female architectural history'. While the publication serves to foreground what will hopefully become a fertile field of research into Elissa's life and the final two decades of Studio Aalto, and thereby begins to fill a sorely vacant *lacuna* in Aalto scholarship, it self-reflexively, perhaps even self-contradictorily, questions the purposefulness of its own enterprise. The essays provide an unadorned account of what is currently known of Elissa's life and work, directly acknowledging the value of adding to the disappointingly limited corpus of research on twentieth-century female architects. Yet they also suggest that measuring the

collective contribution of such research primarily through the lens of gender is, at best, simplistic, and at worst, insulting to Elissa's legacy.

Scholarly desire to correct the male biases of modern architectural history must not result in the abandonment of critical nuance. It would be all too easy to read in undue submission into Elissa's role in the firm, the poor CEO of a company that, until its closure upon her death, bore her husband's name. But as Jonas Malmberg highlights in his essay, it should be, by now, evident that any project 'designed by "Alvar Aalto"' in fact refers to a project produced by his office as a kind of collective'. Elissa was *primus inter pares*, but credit must be carefully and correctly assigned to the rest of the team, too [5].

An enduring myth, repeated in Finnish newspapers as recently as last year, is that *Il Maestro* forced a new name on Elissa upon their marriage. The tale of a young Elsa Mäkineniemi acquiescing to the chauvinistic control of her superstar husband has long been evoked as a sorry example of the marital submission that often lurks behind the veneer of apparent professional equality. Typecast as a twentieth-century Galatea, Elsa was purportedly sculpted into Elissa Aalto at the hand of the Finnish Pygmalion Alvar, her new name imposed upon her along with a new wardrobe and even hairstyle. Archival research

into long-forgotten passports and other identification documents suggests, however, that factual history is less dramatic. 'Elissa', a nickname favoured by Aalto thanks to its Carthaginian pedigree, replaced 'Elsa' in speech and in drawing signatures in the 1950s, but not legally. Furthermore, the newly-wed name 'Elsa Kaisa Aalto' evolved, in 1961, into 'Elsa Kaisa Mäkineniemi-Aalto', perhaps mirroring the growing confidence of its bearer. Rather than evidence of meek capitulation to an identity crafted by her husband, 'Elissa Aalto' is more accurately considered the *nom de plume* of a quietly poised designer, rather content to separate her personal and professional identities.

When Alvar died, Aino's coffin was moved over from the Marsio family grave into Alvar's. Elissa took on the responsibility of designing their tombstone. She placed Alvar and Aino's names on the marble, but hardly left a margin for her own. 'Had she taken the role of a bystander here too?' the book asks. We will never know, but the tombstone in its current state, with Elissa's name added in 1994, serves as an appropriate emblem of her life. She may not have felt the need to place herself in the limelight, but subsequent generations ought to. Elissa devoted herself not to Alvar or Aino, but to *Aalto*: the studio, the portfolio, the brand, the *oeuvre*, the archives, the

scholarship – and in so doing, to the legacy of 'humane' modern architecture at large.

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Notes

1. Recent examples include the feature film *AALTO* (dir. Virpi Suutari, 2020), which focused specifically on Aino and Alvar's shared life and work, and *Rakastan sinussa ihmistä: Aino ja Alvar Aallon tarina* (Otava, 2021), a collection of Aino and Alvar Aalto's letters edited by their grandson Heikki Aalto-Alanen, to be published in English by Phaidon in 2023.

Competing interests

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