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Autor:	Fischer, Sabine von
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The shock of collage

An attempt of immediate analysis of collage in some of Alvar Aaltos buildings

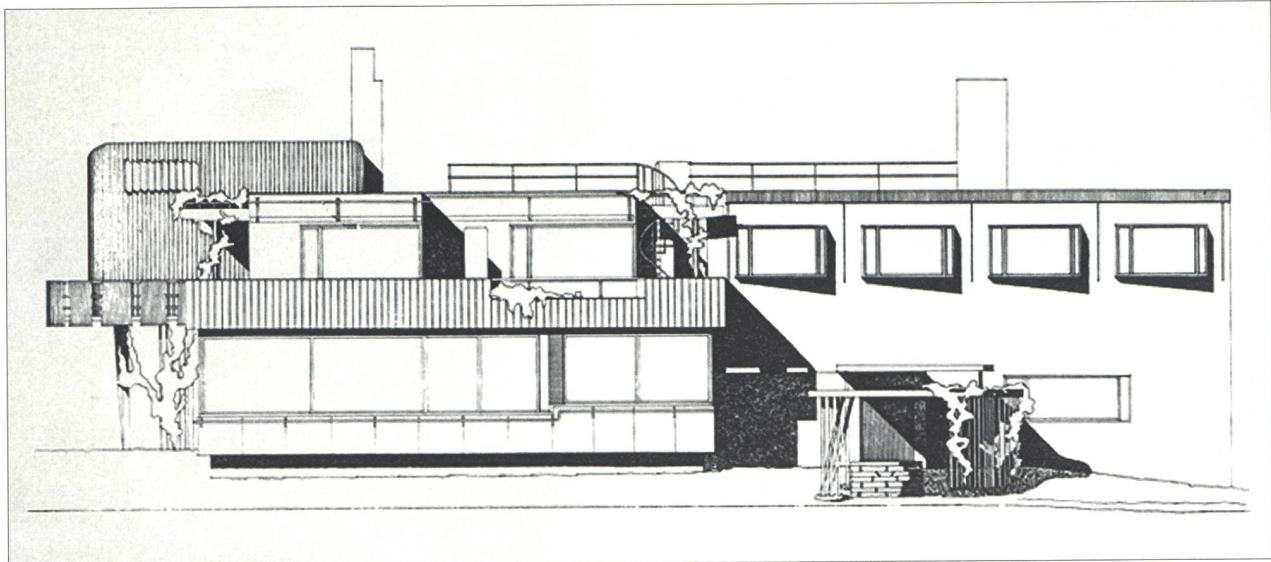
The traveler, arriving from Middle Europe to Noormarkku on the west coast of Finland, is not only filled with expectation and enthusiasm, but also with plenty of preconceptions. The first thing that the Villa Mairea evokes is a moment of shock.

There is no question about the outstanding quality of the villa. However, the traveler will not find the harmony and clarity of proportion that he might have underlined in one of the exams during an architectural education in Mid-Europe. How should this shock be handled? Partly deriving from the selective and categorizing views of historical writings, partly caused by the intensity of the sensual impact of the villa, the shock operates on an architectural as much as on a cultural level. The wide array of materials, forms and views that compose the two-story, L-shaped volume of the villa speaks Babylonian poetry of innumerable languages. The line of the roof dissolves as much as the line of birch stems in the foreground. At the back of the house, the porch and the wooden sauna block with the turf roof finally spoil all ambitions to find a platonic volume, to stand in the line of modernist purism. The villa seems altogether in erratic flux, in friendly controversy or incomplete synthesis, rather than in what is commonly understood as classical harmony.

In order to overcome the shock, it seems that many visitors retreat to historical viewpoints they were taught so thoroughly under the spell of modern classification. Finnish literature handles the confusion by emphasizing that the villa can only be understood after repeated visits.¹ Yet, both these attitudes produce a certain stasis in the understanding of the villa.

William Curtis, one of the ‘connaisseurs’ of Finnish culture and architecture, states in an essay that ‘Aalto needs to be liberated from the over-simplistic schemes imposed upon him: the standard modern movement sagas; the claims of post-modern eclectics; the legends of ‘Finnish identity’ (to mention only some).’² However, as much as the analogy of the Cubist collage has been repeated sufficiently, William Curtis needs it to explain the house: ‘The Villa Mairea resembles an abstraction of a forest clearing in post-Cubist terms. Multiple identities are maintained simultaneously.’³ One might suspect that Curtis implies that Post-Cubism is as much fiction as Post-Modernism is: A utility to explain a phenomenon due to the lack of better means.

The term ‘collage’ appeared between 1915 and 1920 in France to describe a new technique applied in Surrealist and Cubist painting where different materials were glued (franz.: collé) to form a composition of not evidently connected images or surfaces.



col-lage (kuh läzh') n.

1. a technique of composing a work of art by

pasting on a surface various materials

not normally associated with one

another, as newspaper clippings or parts

of photographs.

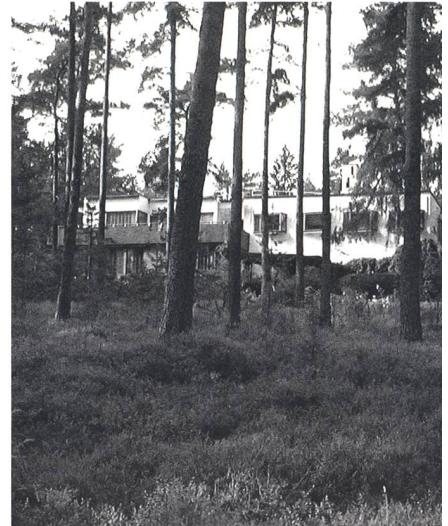
2. a work produced by this technique.

[1915-20; < F, = colle paste, glue (< Gk kólla) + -age - AGE]

At the same time, the related technique of 'montage' produced the effect of what is commonly described as 1+1=3. The juxtaposition of pieces filmed at different location or with different content relies on the viewer who will instantly produce a connection between the two, therefore a third image and meaning. The element of time takes an important role in this process. If one wanted to find a similar effect in architecture, Alvar Aalto's House of Culture in Helsinki (1952-57) could be taken as an example of a composition playing on the relation of 2 different parts, to the south the undulating brick volume of the auditorium, to the north the strictly orthogonal office wing. However, looking more closely, the connecting part of the entrance has to be taken into account, and at this moment the calculation is 1+1+1=3 and therefore not at all extraordinary.

Then, if one had to describe the term 'collage' in mathematical terms, the inverse equation describes the technique fairly well. Any number of, for example, newspaper clips, are joined with an arbitrary number of, possibly, photographs, to form the single piece of the collage. The equation then reads: $n+n=1$, and with a bit of chance it could be an inversed montage: $3+3=1$. Glue binds the multiple elements by a chemical, not reversible process, which is quite indifferent to the single members of the composition. The new entity is an arrangement previously not related in space nor content, now collapsed into one plane (painting), or one body (sculpture and architecture). In the case of the discussed buildings, as well as in many surrealist and cubist collages, the binding of multiple elements results in an entity resembling a wildly moving big particle, rather than a single unit with sharp edges.

The goal of any collage is that each of the members of the composition establish possible relations. Compared to an organic and colorful network, the



Cubist collages as much as Villa Mairea achieve to form the ‘one’ after the equation. Only, the task of describing the exact quality of this new entity is as complex as a mathematical definition.

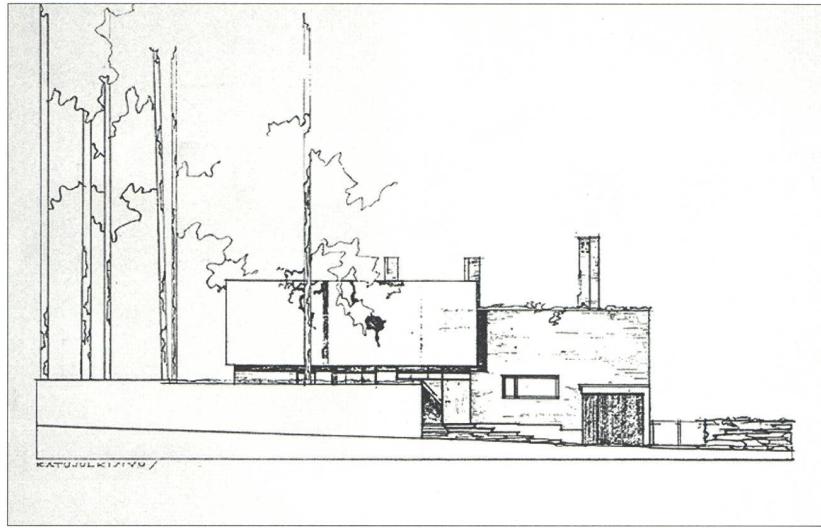
The text will attempt to define the compositional strategy in Aalto’s buildings in terms of ‘collage’ as a form of synthesis; synthesis in process, left incomplete for the purpose of its authenticity. The three buildings selected for this analysis are Villa Maiera (as ‘*experimental collage*’), the Muuratsalo experimental house (as ‘*constructive collage*’) and the Vuoksenniska church near Imatra (as ‘*tectonic collage*’).

the experimental collage

Villa Mairea was designed and built from 1938-41 for Harry and Maire Gullichsen as a residence with grand spaces on the ground floor where the many receptions and legendary parties would be held. Maire Gullichsen, an artist and art collector, is known as the woman who brought Modernism to Finland. It is also fairly common knowledge in Finland that the Aalto and Gullichsen families were not only professionally involved, this being said to underline that great buildings also require an exceptional collaboration of architect and client, at the least. Maire Gullichsen’s involvement with artists makes it easy to draw the comparison between cubist paintings and Villa Mairea as a building exploring the possibility of collage.

Aalto conducted various (well-documented) material experiments in which one might find formal similarities to pieces of art of the time. However, Aalto never considered these experiments as works of art. Even though the compositions and their materials were carefully chosen, they were mere preparations for the work of the architect. What is of much greater interest is the number of sketches that were produced during the design process of Villa Mairea. The drawings tell a story of their own, of intense conversations between the architect and the client, and only after many alternatives the final design was determined.

Villa Mairea can be looked at as an overwhelming assemblage of impulses. If it were not so spacious, tactile and generally excessive, it would be a variation of Aalto’s own house that was built a few years before in Riihitie, Helsinki and that had convinced the client to commission Aalto with their new house. The overall layout of Villa Mairea resembles Aalto’s own house, of which only few design sketches remain, as if the idea had been conceived secretly, in the modest but firm hands of two architects, Aino and Alvar Aalto. One of the



elements established in the architect's house in Riihitie is the L-shaped plan which can also be found, for example, in the Snellman villa in Stockholm by Asplund and which is typical of bourgeois residences in northern Europe at the beginning of the century. As in Villa Mairea, the facade is a sculptural composition of surfaces and volumes of white stucco and wooden boards. Yet, the Riihitie house is a perfectly pragmatic and at the same time perfectly poetic house, with dimensions measured of the architects who would live and work there. The two levels of intersecting living and working quarters in the Riihitie house are a molecular collage of big and small, modern and vernacular elements.

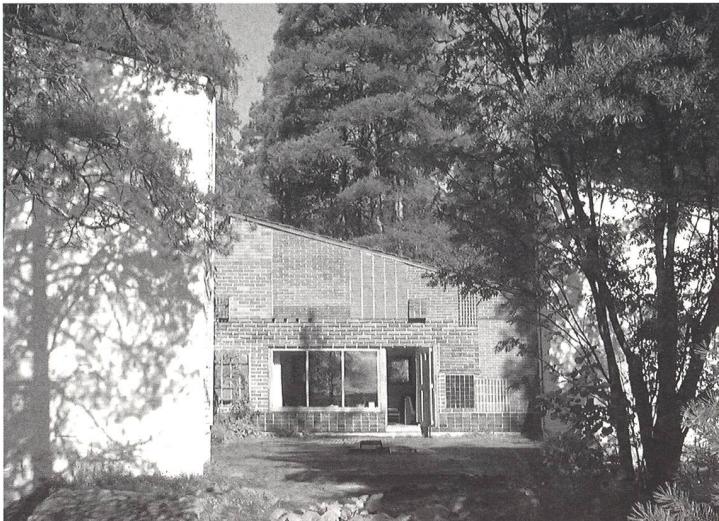
The small wing of the Riihitie house accommodates Aalto's studio. The wing in Villa Mairea is far more extensive and contains the dining hall and a second layer of kitchen and guest rooms. It is not only the scale that has changed, but also more importantly, the density and intensity of architectural elements. The grand entry hall of Villa Mairea that took over the whole ground floor of the front volume (before the construction of the library room) transcends residential scale: It is a reception area, a lounge, an art gallery, an extension to the garden and a maze of bamboo columns.

the constructive collage

In the Muuratsalo house, built between 1952 and 1954 as a summer house for Alvar Aalto and his second wife, Elissa Aalto, the collage is the most obvious, as it is fully intentional and part of the actual process. The design was finished as the bricks and tiles were laid down, to compose a layer of wall at the same time indefinite and still explanatory if not didactic. The 1:1 experiment for the curved wall of the House of Culture, positioned in the Southeast corner of the courtyard, has become part of the interior landscape. Demetri Porphyrios takes a slightly defensive viewpoint when he describes the scene of the rich inner life of the experimental house as 'par excellence the consciousness of the dossier where things are tiled to be saved from extinction.'⁴ The animated interior elevation of the courtyard is contrasted by the outer appearance. From a bit further, the white paint on the exterior walls of the house and the courtyard is like a veil, gleaming through the forest, hardly visibly from the water.

the tectonic collage

The Vuoksenniska-church in Imatra (1956-58) could be described as an instance of 'anthropomorphic eclecticism'. Elements from romanesque, gothic,



baroque and even eastern sacral architecture enrich the facades of the church, while the inside embraces the visitor with a silent orchestra of curves and vaults. The back side clearly shows the three bays of the interior space, while the entrance elevation contains elements found in other Aalto buildings: the vertical white wooden slats of the corner window screen, volumetric setbacks and the floating roof to the service entrance. The over one hundred windows (especially the double-layered skylights), the bowing walls and the arch-like beams are in free flow, yet a thoroughly sculpted three-dimensional composition.

In contrast to the vast surfaces that characterize many of Aalto's later works, like the nearly scale-less composition of brick and glass at the auditorium of the University of Jyväskylä (1950-58), the Vuoksenniska church condenses the various references of the composition into details. A granite slab, laid into the base of the church tower, remains as a solitary reminder of classical construction within the modernist white vertical surfaces.

The inverse pitch of the assembly room in Säynätsalo Town hall (1949-52) has become such an icon of Nordic Modernism that it hits the eye of the approaching architect already when deeply hidden by the forest. In Imatra, it is only the white color, or a moment later, the tall tower of white planes, signalling the traveler to get off the bus after a long drive through the forest. One could say that the 'tectonic collage' which comprises architectural expression not only in plan and section, but also in the combination of the two as well as in every detail, sacrifices the clarity of the iconic image in favor of a shell to embrace the visitor with a multiplicity of subtle gestures, all built in stone.

Aalto's search for a synthesis of opposites has created rich grounds for interpretation. The escapades of his open and conquering attitude laid out paths deviating from the dogma of modernist understatement. The diversity of elements seems to provoke differing explanations, not all of which are rendering justice to the architect.

Hal Foster had stated that the term 'Post-Modernism'⁵ simply translates to 'after Modernism' and therefore is open for further interpretation. Finally, and for the better, architectural discourse, where Modernism versus Post-Modernism is reduced to formal polemics, seems to have exhausted itself. Current publications indicate that a new view of 'post-modern' culture and architecture could be based around sensual experience, with an ambition to integrate not only appearances.



Kenneth Frampton called long ago for the necessity of an 'Arrièregarde'⁶ dedicated to Re-Interpretation rather than Repetition of familiar or even superficial and decorative images. For further distance to conservative or populistic tendencies, Frampton in this essay established the term 'Critical Regionalism' as proposed by Tzonis and Lefavre in 1981, the most prominent term in the battle to rescue modern values past the dilemma of the so far strenuous Post-Modern debate. Juhani Pallasmaa in his essay 'An Architecture of the Seven Senses'⁷ criticizes today's leadership of retinal and perspectival images. He suggests 'bodily identification' and a return to a more sensual and erotic relation of man to the built world.

It might be the privilege of the 'Arrièregarde' to detect the condition of shock as a propelling momentum. Modernism has lost credibility; still Post-Modernism has not come to any true conclusions. Those are still to be made. What if the eye, liberated of preconceptions, awakened by the effect of shock, could find clues for new architectural definitions in most familiar sites? If it is so that the previous generations of architects have not been able to process the shock, it is now the task of contemporary theory to discuss Aalto's use of 'collage'. Whether it is based on an overflow of ideas and ambition (Villa Mairea), in the moment of the hand laying the brick (Muuratsalo house), on richness of memories (Vuoksenniska church), or on one of the many instances not investigated here, the process of successful 'collage' accomplishes to be inclusive without giving up the idea of a 'whole'. Exclusions have never granted long lifes to political regimes, nor have they enriched architectural styles. An investigation into the techniques of 'collage' in the architecture of Alvar Aalto might be one of the means to develop terms for expanded and more complex harmonies, suitable to reflect today's questions in design and building.

Sabine von Fischer graduated from ETH Zürich and lives in New York. She would like to express her thanks for the grant from the Schindler Foundation in Zürich, which enabled her to travel in Finland during August and September 2000.

1 Björn Soogenstatj: *De Droom ant de Suepp, Ystad*, 1976, p.23ff.

2 William J.R. Curtis: 'Modernism, Nature, Tradition: Aalto's Mythical Landscapes', in *Alvar Aalto in seven buildings*, published by the Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1998, p. 131

3 William J.R. Curtis, *ibid*, p. 135

4 Demetri Porphyrios: 'Heterotopia: A Study in the Ordering Sensibility of the Work of Alvar Aalto', in *Alvar Aalto, Architectural Monographs 4*, 1978, London

5 Hal Foster: *The Anti-Aesthetics – Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1987, preface

6 Kenneth Frampton: 'Kritischer Regionalismus – Thesen zu einer Architektur des Widerstands', p. 158-9, in *Postmoderne-Zeichen eines kulturellen Wandels*, hrsg. von Andreas Huyssen und Klaus R. Scherpe, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1986. (The essay also appeared in Hal Foster 'The Anti-Aesthetics')

7 Juhani Pallasmaa: *The architecture of the Seven Senses*, p. 29, a+u, July 1994 special edition 'questions of perception'.