

ArtMonitor

WORKING PAPER

“The Weight of Architecture”

Author Sara Torsson Szyber

ArtMonitor Working Paper No. 06a (Eng)
January 2025

HDK-Valand, Campus Steneby,
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

This paper can be downloaded without charge from:
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Contact: sara.szyber@gu.se

Abstract

In early Autumn 2024, during 22-23 of August I attended the 16th Alvar Aalto Symposium “The Weight of Architecture” in Finland. As a senior lecturer in furniture design, I had the opportunity to visit the symposium and was encouraged to produce a working paper to share some of my experiences.

The Alvar Aalto Symposium is an international discussion forum held every three years in Jyväskylä, for contemporary architecture and environmental issues. The aim is to stimulate critical, problem-solving and future-looking discussion on topical environmental, social, artistic and technical challenges facing society. Both at the beginning and end of the trip, I had the pleasure of visiting several of Alvar Aalto’s buildings across central and southern Finland.

The symposium wanted to address questions around three dominant areas, which were environment, resources and architecture. The chosen theme emerged from current global problems, such as climate change and extreme weather conditions, the loss of biodiversity and the political, financial, and societal changes in our society.

Renowned speakers such as Yvonne Farrell (Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning architect and the founding member of Grafton Architects) and Helena Mattsson (Professor of history and theory of architecture at KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm) as well as John Schellnhuber (Director General, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis from Vienna) and David Benjamin (Director of AEC Research at Autodesk and Associate Professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture) were among the prominent guests in Jyväskylä for the symposium.

Keywords

Environment, resources, architecture, sustainability, responsibility, technology

Sara Torsson Szyber

The Weight of Architecture

During the travel to Finland, both before and after the symposium in Jyväskylä, I had the opportunity to visit several of buildings and sites of Alvar Aalto. As a start we went to Muuratsalo Experimental House (built 1952-54), situated near the rocky shore of Lake Päijänne. The Muuratsalo Experimental House was Elissa and Alvar Aalto's self-designed atelier and summer residence. The house was perfectly integrated into the surrounding forest and lake landscape, creating a seamless interaction with nature. As the name of the house suggests, the site was also used to try out new ideas, evidently illustrated through the brick walls of the patio. The interior was designed for clear everyday needs in mind, with open social areas and a corridor with sleeping cabins.



The next morning, we visited Säynätsalo Town Hall (built 1949-52), where the council chamber is the dominant architectural element, soaring tower-like above the complex. The main material used for the exterior as well as for the representative areas of the interior is bare red brick. Interestingly, the building today lacks tenants and the municipal functions it was originally designed for, as city halls become redundant due to municipal mergers. However, the library, furnished with Aalto's designs for both children and adults, remains in use.



“- What is the role of architecture and design amidst environmental crises, catastrophes and political upheaval? How much does architecture weigh when the future of the entire planet is at stake?”

The 16th Alvar Aalto Symposium, “The Weight of Architecture”

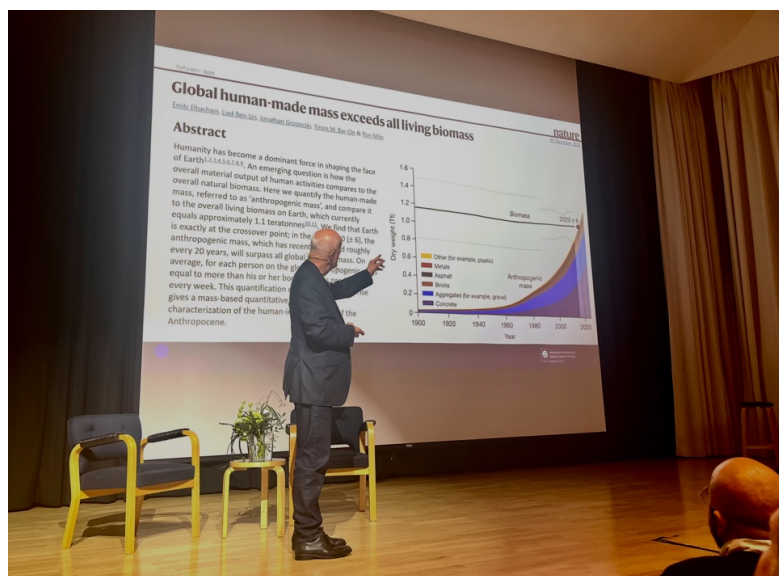
Coming back to the symposium itself, the onsite venue was held in the main brick building of the University of Jyväskylä, by Alvar Aalto (built 1955). This whole site feels as a welcoming composition of buildings and preserved forest areas, interwoven with pathways and gardens as part of the university campus.

As previously mentioned, the overarching theme of the symposium was explored under three specific subthemes – Environments, Resources and Architecture. The audience was invited to ponder on topical global problems, changes and extreme phenomena that are impacting the building sector and the work of architects and other designers.

Regarding the environment, topics included global crises, coexistence between humans and other species, and the need for adaptation. In the resources segment, discussions covered AI, material data, and sustainable material choices. As a closing subject area, the topic of architecture focused on tools and solutions, new horizons and - corresponding to the title of the whole symposium - the weight of architecture. In practice, most speakers touched on all three themes in their presentations.

Sharing some reflections from the first day, I think that John Schellnhuber¹, a world-renowned climate scientist held an interesting and engaging speech. He emphasized the need to transition from a "dumb, divisive linear petro-economy" to a "smart, inclusive circular bioeconomy." Schellnhuber continued about "the elephant in the sustainability room" and that the built environment stands for 40 % of global GHG emissions, 55 % of developed-countries waste and consumes 90% of all mineral resources in Germany. He argued to change the climate regime because negative emissions are the only way to stop the exhaustion of the planet. Solutions proposed was to retimber the city, by usage of renewable materials as bamboo, hemp and glulam - and of reforesting the planet. Thoughts that came during the talk was that we - at our university campus in Dals Långed - are trying to be in the process of kneading and trying to comprehend these issues, as part of being a relevant education.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Joachim_Schellnhuber



John Schellnhuber in Jyväskylä

Another compelling talk was by Hilda Rantanen, who shared experiences from her company Materialisting². She talked about building with insight, choosing the right materials and the importance of environmental data. So, what does “environmental data” mean? Hilda referred to the notion of EPDs³ (Environmental Product Declarations). This has a close correlation to Life Cycle Data⁴, where You use the whole footprint involved from actions and products and get a “circularity score” according to a product’s composition, origin, energy, longevity etc. Continuously she spoke about choices and how they impact our ecosystem. She suggested simple tools as having a questionnaire to help understanding the process, like “- How to keep the outcome of my design in the loop as long as possible?” or “How to make this product possible to dismantle?” Also, the importance of finding constructive ways of enhancing a pro-active engagement towards your sphere of “industry”.

² <https://www.materialisting.com>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_Product_Declaration

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life-cycle_assessment



Hilda Rantanen in Jyväskylä

From my bench in the audience this was inspiring, because I felt that we are talking about this approach in our education. As furniture designers, we are not on the highest level in the “food chain” - but still, we are able to discuss choices and processes with the industry when developing our future concepts.

David Benjamin⁵, Associate Professor at Columbia GSAPP, opened the next lecture of Resources with a proposal to radically reimagine a carbon free society. At his university, he told, they have developed a method where they combine teaching and hands-on research with the surrounding society. He posed the question “How can we dramatically decrease our co2-emissions when the amount of people and buildings will increase in the world?” His answer was to build with materials that can embody carbon - like wood as well as corn and mycellium. At Columbia university they had made research around new resources, aiming to integrate new ideas of materials with classic fabrication. Brick masons and students worked and invented mycellium bricks together. The method was to test the limits – “What if we did not try”, he said, “it is a way of growing together. We need to drop in solutions, we can not wait for the right solution - we need to invent”. Benjamin showed the build-up of their structure from mycellium bricks at MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) and referred to his title of the lecture - “Scaling up!”. His approach was to test new ideas out in society rather than hiding them, to be able to make and debate around possible sustainable solutions and impacts.

⁵ <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/faculty/186-david-benjamin>



David Benjamin in Jyväskylä

In the section of Architecture, Helena Mattsson⁶, professor in History and Theory, KTH School of Architecture addressed the question “How is Architecture Political? Notes on Spatial Solidarity.” Helena Mattsson's research area is 20th century architectural theory and history with a focus on the architecture of the welfare state in the post-war period. Her research is often situated at the interface between architecture and other fields, such as economics, consumption and welfare research.

She argued that architecture is part of the political system and citizens are threatened by social inequalities interwoven in this context. As an historian she spoke of a period in Sweden between 1945-1993, when housing and public architecture was protected from the market and housing was seen as a human right and a democratic project. After this period, many organizations have disappeared and a “financialization” have taken over the built environment. She gave examples that The Ministry of Housing, The Swedish Housing Board and The National Board of Urban Planning had all disappeared in the 1990ies. “Precisely now,” she continued, “macroscale counteraction - to what students learn about to reuse and think green - demolishes the built environment”. What the built environment in societies need is rather empowerment; that citizens matter, and that participatory engagement makes cities more democratic. It is a question of our cultural heritage as well, and taking a more critical position as an architect, to create “spatial solidarity”.

To mirror this now in 2025, The Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning's new rules have been passed, despite strong protests from both the Swedish

⁶ <https://www.kth.se/om/upptack/akademiska-hogtider/professorsinstallation/2018/helena-mattsson-1.862463>

Architects Association and the Public Health Agency of Sweden. This seems to be consistent with what Helena Mattsson addressed in her lecture, i.e. other examples of actual conditions of top-down control of our built environment. Her lecture came out both as a historical lecture about our architectural heritage and a rather daunting eye-opener connected to contemporary conditions in the Swedish society.



Helena Mattsson in Jyväskylä

“The Weight of Architecture”-symposium came to an end with a beautiful film by the artists/ filmmakers Bêka & Lemoine; “The Sense of Tuning”, a portrait of the architect Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai. Bijoy Jain is an architect and artist, who received the Alvar Aalto medal in 2020. Conceived as a cinematic experience, the film captured a day-long encounter between Bijoy Jain and Bêka & Lemoine – twelve hours of intense wandering, plunging us into the vital energy of the streets of Mumbai, between Jain’s work and home.

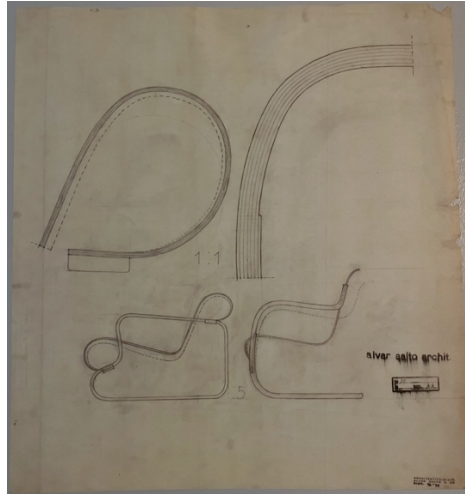
On our way back to Helsinki we visited Villa Mairea, located within the Noormarkku Works area. The building was designed by Alvar Aalto and completed in 1939. Originally, the villa was a residence for businesswoman Maire Gullichsen (née Ahlström) and her husband Harry Gullichsen. Today Mairea Foundation arranges guided tours and oversees the collections and archives in the house. It was an impressive villa, but their rules did not allow us to take pictures indoors. Some impressions if comparing Villa Mairea to Muuratsalo, was the sense of inviting the passage between outside and inside to be somewhat fluid. The living spaces unfolded themselves through large windows, out to the garden and the surrounding forest. More

secluded dwellings, like a small winter garden or bedrooms were often faced with direct access to a patio.



Villa Mairea

The last stop was Paimio Sanatorium (built 1933) by both Alvar and Aino Aalto. The building, constructed based on their win in an architectural competition resolved in 1929, was groundbreaking. A tuberculosis sanatorium was particularly suitable for a building which followed the tenets of the new Functionalism, where bold concrete structures and state-of-the-art building services were inseparable elements of architecture and practicality. The entire building complex, grouped together in several parts according to use, was constructed in accordance with Aalto's philosophy, right down to the smallest details of the furniture. Aalto designed the interior colour scheme, including the yellow floors in the main staircase, the colourful walls in the corridors, the dark ceilings in the patients' rooms and the orange balcony rails, in conjunction with the decorative artist Eino Kauria. Several world-famous furniture was designed directly for the sanatorium, as for example the Paimio chair. The chair was designed for tuberculosis patients to help healing by resting their arms behind their backs, open their chests and breathe.

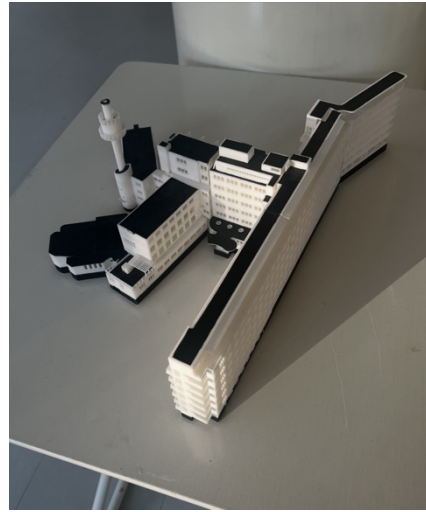


Paimio armchair (left), by Alvar Aalto

Today, Paimio Sanatorium is run by Paimio Sanatorium Foundation⁷. Paimio Sanatorium Foundation sees the future of the site as a unique and powerful instrument for the development of strategies and solutions on a societal scale. Its past may be associated with healing in a strictly medical sense, but today it presents equally valuable possibilities as a scale that transcends individual treatment and looks towards the relationship between individuals, communities and societies. The way they are making this is under development - as an example they were trying out artist's residencies. There were a lot of visitors in the building, admiring the yellow staircase, studying small exhibitions in the former hospital rooms and eating in the generous cantina. I hope that this unique place will be able to offer space for reflection and work for a long time to come.

Overall, the time in Finland provided invaluable insights. Do not hesitate to contact me with further thoughts or questions.

⁷ <https://paimiosanatorium.com/sanatorium/history/>



The Paimio Sanatorium

Links:

<https://www.alvaraalto.fi/en/megaevent/alvar-aalto-symposium-2024/>

<https://ahra-architecture.org/events/weight-of-architecture>

<https://www.scandinaviandesign.com/16th-alvar-aalto-symposium-2024-focuses-on-the-era-of-extremes/>

<https://www.alvaraalto.fi/en/architecture>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Joachim_Schellnhuber

<https://www.materialisting.com/about-us>

<https://www.arch.columbia.edu/faculty/186-david-benjamin>

<https://www.kth.se/om/upptack/akademiska-hogtider/professorsinstallation/2018/helena-mattsson-1.862463>