

ET IN ARCADIA EGO: THE RUIN METAPHOR IN ALVAR AALTO'S WORK AS A DRIVER FOR CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Rosana Rubio Hernández, Fernando Nieto Fernández and Carmen Toribio Marín

From the mid-1930s onwards, as Alvar Aalto's work acquired a more personal character, it started to represent a recurrent thought with increasing intensity: the constant negotiation between the equally prevalent natural environment and human civilisation, as well as the transitory condition of man's habitation. A still frame from Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia* (Fig. 1) helps to illustrate the idea explored by the present paper. The image shows a world in a continuous state of becoming, expressed by natural elements colonising the space of a robust Gothic ruin, in which an ephemeral hut enables human life to flourish again: the man's temporary habitation takes place in between the two spatio-temporal orders established by *arcadia* and *civitas*.

Aalto's work represents these two necessary mythical human habitats, while building the actual space for man's contingent living. The present investigation interprets this two-fold strategy as an enduring *Aaltian* characteristic, enacting the ruin metaphor as its driver. This kind of nostalgic approach stimulates a creative view over the past that inspires the future [1, p. 42]. The mechanism triggers an ethical-aesthetical proposition that recalls the well-studied humanism of Aalto. However, the present study portrays Aalto as an early precursor of the values of cultural sustainability – a less explored perspective.

Et in Arcadia ego

Aalto became familiar with classical *civitas* while studying architecture and so-called Nordic Classicism was the predominant style in Finland. By the end of his studies, during the ritual of the *Grand Tour*, he had the opportunity to set the idealised academic *civitas* at odds with reality. Like Droctulft, the barbarian warrior in Borges's tale [2], Aalto was impressed by the civilisation of southern Europe but, unlike the Germanic migrant, he was not captivated by prosperous cities, but instead thrilled by the ruins of a vanished civilisation. The classical architecture Aalto encountered on his travels was far from the pure Classicism he had studied at home, as his field trip drawings confirm. He realised that the actual Italian *civitas* was an amalgam of fragments and detritus of a cult architecture re-appropriated by an *architettura minore*, which configured a picturesque landscape in an arid enclave, flowing with channelled waters and punctuated by the *durisilva* vegetation. Unlike Droctulft, Aalto

did not stay in the south; he returned to his home country, which was then undergoing modernisation. He returned to build for a Finnish man, who was in the process of enculturation, relying on Classicism as a driver [3, p. 35]. By then, Aalto's Italian experience started to permeate his interiorised Finnish landscape, from the abrupted Karelia to the fertile Ostrobothnia, where archaic architecture emerged in boreal forest clearings, and where the abundant water of the lakes appeared as an unstructured yet continuous element.

In an integrative and idiosyncratic approach to architecture, Aalto developed over time a recurrent scenography: the mixture of a bygone *civitas* and a fading *arcadia*, which frames modern daily life and where the metaphor of the ruin rules the *mise-en-scène*. Like in Poussin's painting *Et in Arcadia ego*, the introduction of a *memento mori* in *Arcadia* speaks of a denial of the world's continuity and harmony. A ruin in a landscape is a reminder of the cyclical process of decay and renewal. Moreover, it recalls an irresolvable conflict between nature and humankind as well as the constant negotiation between the asynchronous lifecycles of nature, civilisation and man, which entangles ecological connotations. Aalto's drawings of broken capitals, almost like natural rocks formations [4, p. 257], show his interest in how architecture returns to nature.¹ While the ruin metaphor synthesises the conceptual spheres of nature, civilisation, and human being, the defining physical characteristics of ruination perform at an architectural level. Its fragmentation and incompleteness blur topological relations. This ambiguity of the architectural limit eases, at different scales, the physical and visual engagement of the inhabitant with the environment, and the integration of architecture with the surrounding landscape [6, pp. 51-77]. Natural elements, such as the terrain and the vegetation, contribute to the blurring effect so as to organically merge human-made structures and the natural context. The profiles of Aalto's buildings seem to have been shaped by the forces of nature^{2,3} hence sometimes looking like the culminating ruinous mounds he once drew. Altogether, this leads to the construction of a holistic image of the place and, with it, of its collective identity.⁴ Furthermore, the ruin's fragmentation, irregularity, discontinuity, and incompleteness seem instrumental in Aalto's form-making process and plastic evolu-

1 Georg Simmel: "...when decay destroys the unity of form, nature and spirit separate again and reveal their world-pervading original enmity." [5, pp. 371-385]

2 Georg Simmel: "... it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature. The same forces which give a mountain its shape through weathering, erosion, faulting, growth of vegetation, here do their work on old walls." [5, p. 381]

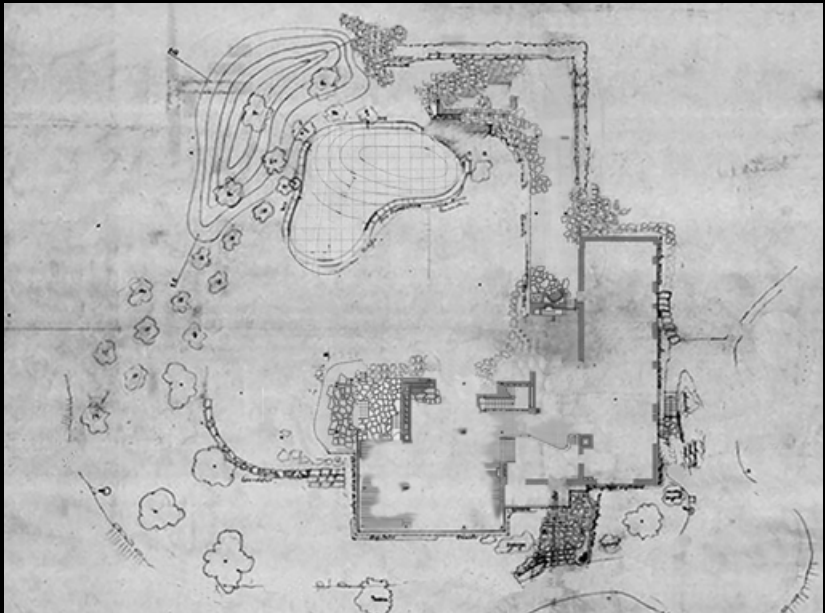
3 William C. Miller: "What Aalto's work seems to imply, and the fragmentation and the use of planting seems to reinforce, is the image of a building dealing with the issues of time, nature and aging by actually participating in the process." [7]

4 Aalto once claimed that he used ruination-like compositions to simultaneously glorify both Greek and Nordic democracy. [8, p. 261]

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2



1 Andrei Tarkovsky. Still frame from *Nostalghia*, 1983.

2 Villa Mairea's floor plan in a highly hypothetical future.
Drawing by the authors.

tion [8, p. 257]. Hence, the ruin's morphology is in part responsible for Aalto's own building identity, distancing him from tradition and from the work of his contemporaries; despite sharing with them the same inspirational sources. Comprehensively, the aesthetic triggered by the ruin metaphor resonates with ethical concepts that contemporary cultural sustainability discourses foresee.

The realm of the 'real' *civitas* underpins Aalto's architectural scenery. Cult architecture elements (e.g. atrium-like courtyards, peristyles, amphitheatres, citadels, vine arbours, pools) are arranged according to the logic of the *architettura minore* (e.g. off-sets, asymmetries, articulations). One of its elements, a modest solid and textured wall, often made of brick (whether fair-faced, plastered or tiled), makes a fragmented, incomplete and discontinuous boundary with an ambiguous interpretation: as if either decaying or still under construction. It is in this way that Mediterranean architecture settles into the Nordic landscape; and vice versa, the forest, lake and rocky terrain slip physically and visually into the architectural scenery in a deliberate arrangement of different depth planes, as Aalto's drawings indeed show. Occasionally, meridional vegetation sneaks into the scenery, which eloquently speaks of Aalto's stubborn aim for hybridisation. Together with the ruin metaphor, also metaphors of natural elements are at play (e.g. lake-shaped ponds, forests of wooden-poles). Like William Kent and the picturesque, Aalto seems to have understood that the dissolution of the boundary implied not only a physical and visual continuity but also a formal one [8, p. 70].

Man's activities are arranged subsequently against this background scenery. For this purpose, Aalto seals the 'ruined' wall's discontinuities and openings with panels made of soft, fragile, and transient materials: wood and glass. Aalto masterly bridges the metaphorical and the physical realms by contrasting the mechanical and organoleptic properties of matter. Within this logic, two different kinds of order rule the wall's openings: the 'breakages', which still belong to the ruin metaphor and its associated atemporality, and the 'windows', related to the human scale and man's contingent life. The 'breakages' located at the upper parts of the boundary are filled with glass and vertical battens, framing the sky and the treetops. These gaps provide a light that illuminates and enlightens, blurring the line where the wall encounters the ceiling, which reinforces the idea of incompleteness, also insinuated by the irregular contours of this kind of opening. Likewise, plants that grow at the foot of the wall, apparently wild, reinforce the image of a ruin. Similarly, climbing vines form living yet changing compositional planes on the wall's inner and outer faces: everything in ruin is outdoors. The 'windows' occupy the lower parts of the boundary, where life unfolds. They gather a warming light, and are designed to accommodate human activities around them: e.g. to sit by them, whether on a low bench or at table

height, or to look through, encompassing the experience of the landscape. Similarly, an amalgamation of varied elements gravitates around this inhabitable boundary: human artefacts (objects of daily life, artworks), indoor and outdoor greenery (plant pots and flower beds) and water containers (vases and pools). All things considered, Aalto's architecture provides comfort while conveying an aesthetics and an ethics of everyday life.

As a whole, this scenario represents the realms of nature and human civilisation employing the ruin metaphor, while providing man with a shelter in a world in the state-of-becoming. Making an exercise of the imagination, in a highly hypothetical future, the windows overlooking the scene could join the cycle of matter, while the 'broken' walls remain standing. The onetime indoor spaces would then reunite with the natural environment through the atrium-like gardens, as Aalto might have imagined from the beginning^{5,6}. Later, perhaps, a new man would again inhabit this territory, and the cycle would start over (Fig. 2).

Discussion

The ruin metaphor pierces Alvar Aalto's work. From the 1930s onwards, Aalto's projects of any scale and typology show nuances, variations, combinations, and evolutions of this scenography, mobilising semantic and architectural mechanisms. The ruin has the potential to subvert boundaries by creating new relationships with the environment, its fascination relying on procuring the symbolic reunion of *civitas* and *arcadia*.⁷ Ruination creates a scenery that carries enduring values of collective and individual identity triggered by a sentiment of nostalgia, which undermines linear notions of progress [11, p. 6]. All in all, the ruin metaphor embodies the will to connect, to bridge the ecological, civic, and individual realms, creating a harmonised whole from opposing poles: human and natural, past and present, destruction and creation. Therefore, from a contemporary perspective, Aalto's goals would be framed within the discourse of cultural sustainability, which recognises culture as an agent that characterises the natural, built, and social environments, understanding that new developments are set within the cultural framework that houses them. Aalto's deployment of the ruin metaphor creates a novel architectural identity in Finland grounded in its deep cultural routes.

5 Georg Simmel: "...growing together with it like tree and stone." [5, p. 382]

6 George Baird: "...it is as though the final victory of nature over the vulnerable creations of mankind had already been conceded in Aalto's works at their inception." [10, p. 13]

7 Georg Simmel: "... the destruction of the spiritual form by the effect of natural forces [...] is felt as a return to the 'good mother' [...] Between the not-yet and the no-longer lies an affirmation of the spirit." [5, p. 382]

Further, this Aaltian resource entails an aesthetical proposition that contains an ethical background. In German, *das Schöne*, ‘beauty’, is etymologically related to *schonen*, ‘to take care of’.⁸ In Aalto’s work, aesthetic values awake essential and timeless values which drive, implicitly, caring attitudes towards the natural and cultural context.

In this paper, we have maintained that the way Aalto handles the ruin metaphor in his work drives ideas related to present-day sustainability discourses, situating him among the pioneers in this field.

8 Byung-Chul Han, “Beauty obliges us; moreover, it orders us to treat it with care.” [12, p. 13]

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This study is based on the field analysis of the selected case studies and relies on the content and materials shown at the exhibition *The Cultivated Landscape of Alvar Aalto*, held at the Museum of Finnish Architecture, 25.9.2019-12.4.2020.



Rosana Rubio Hernández PhD, architect and Master's Degree in Architecture (ETSAM, UPM); M. Sc. in Advanced Architectural Design & Research (GSAPP Columbia University, Funded by a La Caixa Foundation Fellowship). She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tampere University School of Architecture, Finland, where she also teaches design studios and theory seminars. Previously, she has taught in various Schools in Madrid, including ETSAM and UCJC, Liverpool, Antwerp, and the University of Virginia School of Architecture, in the US. Rubio Hernández's research focuses on the encounter of technology and architectural design, including the technological and cultural history of building materials, glass and light interacting technologies, and smart-age friendly spaces. Her academic work has been published in various scientific journals and books, and her dissertation, "The Dream of Glass Architecture", was awarded with the UPM PhD Extraordinary Prize 2015-16, and in the 12nd Biennial Competition for Doctoral Dissertations in Architecture *arquía/tesis*. Between 2007 and 2013, she was the curator of the exhibition series "Columbia University Conferences on Architecture, Engineering and Materials" held at the GSAPP. She has also extensive experience in architectural practice: in 2002 she founded her own office in Madrid working on architectural and jewellery design, for which she has received awards, such as the Thyssenkrupp Architectural Prize 2002, as well as being exhibited at the Venice Biennale.



Fernando Nieto Fernández PhD, architect (Advanced Architectural Design, ETSAM, Technical University of Madrid UPM, 2014); Master of Advanced Studies in Collective Housing (ETSAM, UPM, 2006, La Caixa Foundation Fellowship); Master's Degree in Architecture (ETSAVA, University of Valladolid, 2004). Nieto Fernández has combined his professional practice as an architect with his research and publishing activity. His research interests rely on architectural design methodologies, with a focus on housing design and regulatory systems, emergent design methodologies and combined strategies for linking practice and theory in the discipline of architecture. He undertook predoctoral research at ETH Zurich with a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship for Foreign Scholars and Artists (2013-2014). He has worked as postdoctoral researcher and teacher of design studio courses at Aalto University Department of Architecture (Group X, 2014-2018). Nieto Fernández has been awarded various research grants, and his research and professional work have been published in specialised journals and awarded at several forums, such as the 14th Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism or the 11th Biennial Competition for Doctoral Dissertations in Architecture. At present he is an Associate Professor (tenure track) of Architectural Design at the Tampere University School of Architecture, co-leader of SPREAD research group, and co-founder, and co-editor-in-chief of the HipoTesis research platform.



Carmen Toribio Marín PhD architect, with an extraordinary award and Master's Degree in Architecture (ETSAM, UPM); specialized in landscape architecture and restoration of historic gardens at Castillo de Batres School of Landscape and Gardening. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at the Department of Architectural Composition (ETSAM) and a member of the Cultural Landscape research Group (GIPC), whose purpose is to study the cultural meaning of the built environment. Toribio Marín has applied her expertise teaching theoretical-practical disciplines in bachelor and master's degrees at ETSAM and was involved in the creation of the first degree in Landscape Architecture taught in Spain (Camilo José Cela University). Her research area focuses mainly on garden and landscape heritage. The results have been published in conference proceedings, national and international seminars and magazines. Among her latest publications is the book she co-edited and authored two chapters, *The History of Water Management in the Iberian Peninsula* (2020) and the book she co-edited *Cultivares. Un recorrido de 200 años por los Viveros Municipales de Madrid* (2019), an investigation of the historic municipal nurseries commissioned by the Madrid City Council. Toribio Marín's professional career is consistent with her teaching and research work, with projects in heritage spaces such as the Park of the Citadel (Barcelona), *Vivero de Estufas del Retiro* (Madrid) and *Parc Font del Racó* (Barcelona).