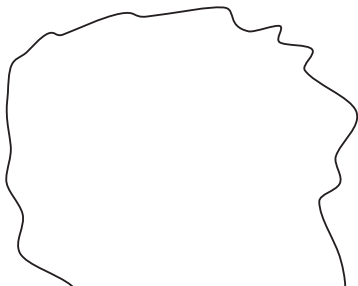




***IN PRAISE OF  
PUBLICNESS: NOTES  
ON THE DESIGN AND  
PEDAGOGY OF PUBLIC  
BUILDINGS***

**Fernando Nieto**

**Case study: Ratina regeneration,  
Tampere**





## In Praise of Publicness: Notes on the Design and Pedagogy of Public Buildings

Fernando Nieto

In 1953, Alvar Aalto published a text in the *Arkkitehti* journal entitled ‘The Decadence of Public Buildings’. In it, he grieved over the lack of attention paid to the public architecture of his time, explaining that the declining importance and position of public buildings in cities had led them to physical and symbolic decay. In his opinion, people’s wellbeing and cultural and civic values had historically depended on how public buildings—‘the common property of all the people’—were correctly ‘dispersed’ in the urban environment. Aalto’s warning was based on the European tradition of cities separating public areas from domestic areas and the fact that the then-emergent building types combining office, commercial and residential uses were challenging the representative function of public buildings, which he said should be ‘restored to its place of honour’.<sup>1</sup>

After being appointed professor at the École Polytechnique in Paris in 1795, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand rejected any symbolic dimension of architecture in his well-known building taxonomies, which were published in two treatises known as the *Recueil* and the *Précis*.<sup>2</sup> Durand’s methodology was based on two-dimensional drawings representing building types at the same scale and in orthogonal projection—through only floor plans, sections and elevations—to classify them according to their pure formal and functional characteristics. He was thus detaching architecture from any analogy to language as a system of signs.<sup>3</sup> Durand’s systematic approach allowed for a typological comparison between abstract models that represented concrete buildings. One noticeable difference in the content of both treatises is that the *Précis* explicitly distinguishes between public and private buildings, while the *Recueil* was presented as a collection ‘of all kinds’ of buildings, which were collected based on how ‘remarkable for their beauty, their grandeur or their singularity’ they were.<sup>4</sup>

The one-and-a-half-century period from Durand’s treatises to Aalto’s text implies the configuration of the modern city based on the separation of public and private, from the outbreak of the industrial cities in the nineteenth century to Le Corbusier’s functionalist *Ville Radieuse* (The Radiant City)—first presented in 1924 and published as a book in 1933—which culminated with the construction of the first *Unité d’habitation*, completed in Marseille in 1952. Aalto was presumably bearing in mind Le Corbusier’s *Unité* when he wrote his text for the *Arkkitehti* journal the year after, in which he stated that ‘this development [referring to the building types combining public and private uses] has not reached its final form in France, but rather on the other side of the sea, in the Anglo-Saxon Imperium and America.’<sup>5</sup>

When attempting to understand the categorisation into public and private realms and its role in the history of cities, Pier Vittorio Aureli’s distinction between the political and the formal in architecture is relevant. Aureli refers to Aristotle’s concepts of *technè politikè* as the art of politics—the *polis* as ‘the space of the many’—which advocates for the common good and thus prioritises the public interest, and *technè oikonomikè*—based on the *oikos* as the private space for the administration of the house—accommodating the particular interests of individuals.<sup>6</sup> In his etymological approach, Aureli points out another distinction between the Roman



notion of *civitas* as the right to citizenship, which is connected to the political form of coexistence between individuals, and the idea of the *urbs*, which represents its material or physical form. The latter alludes to the space that confers cohesion on private space, or *oikos* and, thus, becomes infrastructural.<sup>7</sup>


### THREE CONTINUUMS AND TWO CONDITIONS REGARDING THE DESIGN OF PUBLIC BUILDINGS

According to Aureli's categorisation, the role of public space—belonging to the sphere of the *urbs*—can be considered infrastructural given its double political and physical function. This infrastructural capacity may also be applied to public buildings when they are considered continuations or extensions of public space, as Giovanni Battista Nolli drew them in his map of Rome in 1748. Given their condition as binders of private space in the city at both the physical and social levels, the design of public buildings should emerge as a result of at least three continuums in architectural terms.

The first continuum is related to their capacity to convey the values and ideals of a society's culture, acting as its mirror and a measure of the quality of its citizenship (*civitas*).<sup>8</sup> This function of public buildings as representatives of the culture they belong to connects them to the notion of urbanity, a term derived from the Latin word *urbanitas*, which means courteousness, restraint, attention or good manners. Therefore, urbanity entails a characteristic of exemplarity that can be applied to public buildings and spaces. Moreover, public building design is or should be exemplary because it connects the singular and the universal, linking the uniqueness of particular cases—in the form of specific contexts, programmes, needs or interests—with the general concepts associated with the common interest, be they environmental, societal or cultural in nature.<sup>9</sup>

The other two continuums regarding public building design are interrelated and refer to the position of public buildings in their time and place. As manifestations or expressions of their own time, the design of new public buildings should meet the past by offering a continuation of the timeline that brings the past to the present. In addition, this historical continuity implies the formal and typological adaptation of public buildings to the urban fabric in which they are inserted. Aureli's notion of the urban 'archipelago', in which 'the grid is a sea and the plots are islands', is pertinent in explaining the relationship between urban form and public buildings, which is removed from the consideration of the latter as icons or iconic buildings.<sup>10</sup>

These three continuums—cultural, historical, and urban—can be the basis for the reconciliation between societal demands and the disciplinary aspects of architecture and design, which are embodied in the design project. The architectural project translates abstract notions related to the culture, time and urban reality of public buildings into concrete responses. These responses are articulated through design strategies that channel the associated aesthetic, functional and technical requirements and are responsible for concrete aspects, such as formal and typological choices, the possibility of generating public space for the city—with the best public buildings being those that are capable of providing high-quality public space for the city—or the use of a particular architectural language.



In addition to the three continuums, there are two intrinsic conditions of the project of public buildings that connect it with any architectural project: its abstract nature and the holistic vision required to address it. The architectural project entails the abstraction of reality, which only becomes tangible when it is built. Aureli has recently explained abstraction in architecture by looking beyond the fact that such architecture is devoid of ornament. Rather, he views it as the result of the project being ‘the main locus of abstraction because its working presupposes the reduction of reality to the exactitude of measure, geometry, and later the relentless quantifying logic of money’.<sup>11</sup> He points out the moment at which the physical act of constructing a building and the intellectual dimension of designing it are disengaged, which transforms architectural projects into strategies for managing not only building forms and measurements but also resources, labour and, ultimately, power relationships.<sup>12</sup>

The second condition of the project of public buildings is its requirement of a holistic understanding and approach, which connects it with the ideas of system and systematisation. According to Christopher Alexander, systems imply special ways of looking at things when they work as a whole, thereby leading to holistic behaviour resulting from the interactions between the various parts. A system is also an abstraction, and the notion of wholeness refers to a breadth of vision, rather than attention to detail.<sup>13</sup> This is applicable to the architectural project, which can be seen as a result of the combination of parts that have been previously separated—functional, spatial, structural, constructive and material needs—to make them work holistically by means of a main architectural idea or concept. This holistic view is especially important in the design of public buildings, in which the demand for various degrees of publicness is remarkable.

#### INTERTWINING PRACTICE AND THEORY REGARDING THE PEDAGOGY OF PUBLIC BUILDING DESIGN

The above-mentioned factors imply the need for a multi-level perspective that links practice and theory in the pedagogy of public building design. This connection between theory and practice can be fostered through the simultaneous implementation of hands-on methodologies and theoretical knowledge at design studios, in which learning-by-doing or experiential learning remains the main pedagogical approach. The promotion of an enriching environment for learning and teaching at design studios should involve the utilisation of knowledge produced not only within the academic environment but also outside it so that the disciplinary aspects of the profession are connected with the most urgent requirements at the societal, cultural and environmental levels.

The use of research-informed knowledge for the architectural project represents a potential area to be explored, as does the further development of design-based methodologies in research, in which knowledge derived from the practice of the discipline is utilised in the form of empirical data and hands-on ways of doing that generate new insights, which will later be applicable to teaching.<sup>14</sup> In addition, theoretical knowledge produced through basic research provides abstract notions that can be used as conceptual frameworks to theoretically formulate and encompass the most urgent societal needs. The obtention of both practical and theoretical data and know-how derived from various disciplines is a plus for the pedagogy of

the architectural project if that know-how is capable of offering new visions that condense the multiple factors involved.

In pedagogical terms, the project of public buildings should be based on learning and teaching methods that incorporate combined analysis and synthesis during the design process. Moreover, the one-way sequence traditionally developed in design studios from the analysis stage—the separation of a whole into parts to understand the relationships between them—to the synthesis phase—the recomposing of those parts to create something that did not exist before—could also be redefined so that a propositional, forward-looking attitude is fostered from the onset of the design process. This is especially important in public building design, in which a multi-scale, holistic approach—as this text has attempted to describe—is imperative in integrating a building’s formal, structural, spatial, material and technical systems into a coherent whole.

<sup>1</sup> Alvar Aalto, ‘*Julkisten rakennusten dekadenssi* (The Decadence of Public Buildings)’, in *Arkkitehti-Arkitekten 9–10/1953*, (Suomen Arkkitehtiiliitto – Finlands Arkitektförbund, Finnish Association of Architects), 1953, 144–148. Illustrated with artist Helvi Hokkanen’s watercolour of the Acropolis Propylaea and architect N. E. Wickberg’s photograph of Pisa Cathedral, the article precedes the publication of Aalto’s then-just-finished Saynäsalo Town Hall and Muuratsalo Experimental House. These two works supported Aalto’s preference of ‘reply[ing] in buildings’ instead of doing so with words in response to the article request by the editor-in-chief. The journal issue is almost entirely dedicated to the Finnish master, including the transcription of a speech on the occasion of the Medal of Honour being granted to him by the Danish Architects’ Association.

<sup>2</sup> The *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tous genres, anciens et modernes* (Collection and Parallel of Edifices of All Kinds, Ancient and Modern) was published in 1801, and the *Précis des leçons d’architecture données à l’École Polytechnique* (Précis of the Lectures on Architecture Given at the École Polytechnique) was published in 1805.

<sup>3</sup> Antoine Picon, ‘From “Poetry of Art” to Method: The Theory of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand’, in J.N.D. Durand, *Précis of the Lectures on Architecture with Graphic Portion of the Lectures on Architecture* (Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2000), 36.

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough analysis of Durand’s methodology, see Christopher C. M. Lee, ‘The Deep Structure of Type: The Construction of a Common Knowledge in Durand’s Method’, in Pier Vittorio Aureli (ed.), *The City as a Project* (Routledge, 2013), 166–208.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem* Aalto 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (The MIT Press, 2011), 2–3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem* Aureli 2011, 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> When he explains the key elements of cultural and educational architecture in the Nordic countries, Peter MacKeith states that ‘societies that are so devoted to these fundamentals of citizenship engender an equivalent quality of libraries and schools design’. Peter MacKeith, ‘The Building Art, the Social Art: Reflections on a Nordic Public Architecture’, in *Proceedings Series 2022-1 ‘Northernness’* (The Nordic Association of Architectural Research, 2022), 15–27.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Exemplarity provides a mediation between singularities and universalities—or between singular instances and universal concepts or norms.’ Jakub Mächa, *The Philosophy of Exemplarity: Singularity, Particularity and Self-Reference* (Routledge, 2023), 12.

<sup>10</sup> ‘The iconic building cannot be considered an exemplary part of the city because its economic principle is to be unique and unrepeatable. Since it is no longer the state but the corporation that builds these *grands projets*, the iconic building responds to a demand for uniqueness as an emblem of market competitiveness’ [original highlights by the author]. In his elaboration of the concept of archipelago, Aureli refers to Rem Koolhaas’s project ‘City of the Captive Glove’ and his influential book *Delirious New York*. The concept was, in turn, adopted by Koolhaas from the project entitled ‘Berlin as a Green Archipelago’, which was led by Oswald Mathias Ungers, in which he took part in 1977 and the ideas of ‘cities within the city’ and a ‘city made by islands’ were developed. *Ibidem* Aureli 2011, 24, 44 and 177–227.

<sup>11</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Architecture and Abstraction* (The MIT Press, 2023), xxi.

<sup>12</sup> See the chapter entitled ‘Architecture, Abstraction, and the Prehistory of the Project’. *Ibidem* Aureli 2023, 1–41.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Alexander, ‘Systems Generating Systems’, in *Architectural Design 38*, December 1968: 605–610. Reprint in Achim Menges & Sean Ahlquist (eds.), *Computational Design Thinking* (Wiley, Chichester, UK, 2011), 58–67.

<sup>14</sup> See Giovanni Corbellini, ‘Design by Research’, in *Villardjournal 01.018 Investigate* (Quodlibet, 2018), 13–22; and Jan Silberberger (ed.), *Against and for Method: Revisiting Architectural Design as Research* (gta Verlag, 2021).