

# Aalto and Nature



# **Aalto and Nature**

**Edited by Tom Simons  
and Rainer Knapas**

**With Photographs by  
Elina Brotherus**

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# CONTENTS

## 7 INTRODUCTION

TOM SIMONS

## 14 YOUNG ALVAR AALTO: SON OF THE FOREST

RAINER KNAPAS

Finnish romanticism • The educated bourgeoisie: the cultural background of the 1910s • Ideal and progress • Nature and childhood • Absences and voids

## 34 **Finnish Landscapes**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELINA BROTHERUS

## 50 ALVAR AALTO AND GARDEN ART: SOURCES AND WORKS

TOM SIMONS

Armas Lindgren: Alvar Aalto's most important teacher • The English Arts and Crafts Movement 1880–1910 • The Arts and Crafts garden • The Jubilee Exhibition in Gothenburg 1923 • Le Corbusier • Gunnar Asplund • Japonism • The Japanese Wave of the 1930s • Four gardens by Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto • Conclusion

## 102 **Nature in Aalto's Architecture**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELINA BROTHERUS

# 122 THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AS INSPIRATION

VILHELM HELANDER

The legacy of the study years: classical form and Italian inspiration • Study tours to the south as the great European tradition • Et in Arcadia ego - Aino and Alvar encounter Italy • First inspirations from Italy • Alvar Aalto at the roots of Antiquity • Aalto's guiding architectural idea: the building ensemble • Back to the ideals of youth • Aino and Alvar Aalto's later journeys to Italy • Mediterranean journeys with Elissa • Aalto's travel sketches and works as a continuous dialogue • Aalto's sacred landscapes • Epilogue: Aalto builds in the Mediterranean landscape • Architecture as the highest form of human-shaped landscape • A radical reformer who never broke with tradition

# 162 **Inside/Outside**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELINA BROTHERUS

# 182 AALTO AND THE ISLAMIC GARDEN

JOHAN MÄRTELIUS

Spain and Morocco • Marco Polo • Two exhibitions in Sweden • Further encounters • The dream of paradise

# 196 **Classical Landscapes**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELINA BROTHERUS

# 212 THE PRESENCE OF NATURE IN AALTO EXHIBITIONS

TEIJA ISOHAUTA

Furniture as a prelude to architecture • 25 years together • The age of the retrospective • The time of repetition • The anniversary year • Landscape becomes a theme • The cultivated landscape • Aalto and trees

# 227 EPILOGUE

RAINER KNAPAS

# 229

BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCES, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, CONTRIBUTORS,  
INDEXES, ILLUSTRATION CREDITS



“We should remember the great eras of literature, the time of Voltaire, Rousseau, or even later. You have Bernard Shaw, Strindberg, or Anatole France. What was the secret of these men? It was criticism, and at the same time it was the highest class of art, and at the same time it was fight. You could not think about Bernard Shaw without at the same time thinking of him as a fighting man. In their deepest meaning I think that fighting and the highest class of art conform, and in their deepest meaning they belong together ... I think that architectural communion, discussion, and contact, and what we say to the public should be the same as with those literary men.”<sup>1</sup> Alvar Aalto

It is well-known that there is a strong connection to nature and its forms in everything Alvar Aalto has done; in his buildings, his urban plans, his furniture, the vases and other works of art. Architectural writers from around the world have covered Aalto's oeuvre in hundreds of books and articles.<sup>2</sup> So, are there yet unexplored aspects of Aalto's relationship with nature? This book shows that there are still gaps to be filled.

We want to demonstrate that the master builder Alvar Aalto had an architectural ideology that was ingeniously based on nature.  Throughout his life, he returned to the theme of nature in his writings and statements. In each design, he emphasised the natural conditions of the building site and its history and landscape. He took great care to enrich places and landscapes with his architecture and to refine them with his creative, landscape-architectural approach.

The alienation of modern humankind from nature was a central issue for Aalto. He wanted to reconnect humans with the biological features and rhythms of the natural world. A living nature around human beings was, in his view, a prerequisite for a rich life, not a romantic retreat or a mere decorative element. It is that which we want to highlight: the fighting humanist's quest to create in his works a harmonious balance between the world of humans and nature.

We will analyse various works by Aalto, identify sources of inspiration for them and discuss their conceptual background. Nature and culture are the central concepts in Aalto's oeuvre and they provide new insights into the world of this master builder.

## NATURE

Nature's infinite richness of form was a fundamental source of creativity for Aalto. In response to the evolving standardization systems for building elements in the 1930s, he introduced biodiversity as a yardstick, arguing that of all standardization committees, nature was the best.

“Nature, biology, is formally rich and luxuriant. It can with the same structure, the same intermeshing, and the same principle in its cells' inner structure, achieve a billion combinations, each of which represents

1 On receiving the Royal Institute of British Architects' Gold Medal in 1957 in London, Aalto gave a speech entitled “The Architectural Struggle”, recorded by a stenographer. As an aid to the memory, Aalto had written down five words. The text was later published in a number of editions of Aalto texts, including Göran Schildt (ed.), *Sketches – Alvar Aalto*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978, p.145.

2 The literature includes: Demetri Porphyrios, “Florilegia Naturalis – The Aesthetic, Scientific and Ethical Valorization of Nature”, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism. Studies on Alvar Aalto*. London: Academy Editions, 1982, pp.59–81; Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years*. New York: Rizzoli, 1991, pp.269–277; Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto*. London: Phaidon Press, 1995, pp.98–121; William J.R. Curtis, “Modernism, Nature, Tradition: Aalto's Mythical Landscapes”, in Timo Tuomi (ed.), Marja-Riitta Norri (foreword), *Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings: Interpretations of an Architect's Work / Alvar Aalto in sieben Bauwerken: Interpretationen des Lebenswerks eines Architekten*. Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1998, pp.131–141; Marc Treib, “Aalto's Nature”, in Peter Reed (ed.), *Alvar Aalto. Between Humanism and Materialism*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, pp.47–67; Céline Dietziker and Lukas Gruntz, *Aalto in Detail. A Catalogue of Components*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2022.

Aalto's complete works have been published in three volumes: Karl Fleig (ed.), *Alvar Aalto*. Zurich: Edition Girsberger, Verlag für Architektur, Artemis, 1963. Reprinted by Birkhäuser, Basel, 1995.

a high level of form.”<sup>3</sup> The only true style in the art of building, according to Aalto, is an alternation and development reminiscent of natural organic life. “From this perspective, architecture can be likened to a growing tree, taking shape through the emergence of new branches and the changing seasons.”<sup>4</sup> In all of his projects, nature was for Aalto a tangible element and an active component. His architecture was very much based on the uniqueness of Finnish nature. He said: “The outstanding beauty of Finnish landscape is not grounded in lushness, colourfulness or grandiose proportions. It is a realistic beauty and should be preserved as such.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Aalto lived and worked in the first half of the 20th century he was already aware of the vulnerability of nature. His relationship with nature was not tainted by romantic traits, even if they were present in his work – Finnish National Romanticism was a movement that had left its mark. However, Aalto’s forays into the Finnish forest landscape with his father – who was a surveyor and took his son on hunting trips – and Aalto’s active involvement in the major construction projects of the Finnish forest industry in the 1930s, had provided a realistic picture of Finnish nature. As explained in Rainer Knapas’ essay, Aalto also understood the importance of sustainable forest management. For many northerners, the untouched nature of forest and wilderness is an ideal. For Aalto as an architect, the refined nature of the cultural landscape was in foreground. “We northerners and especially Finns are very much inclined to forest dreaming, an ongoing preoccupation. However, sometimes we find that we cannot satisfy our longing for pure nature and beauty must be brought to our doorstep. Everything that we add to our immediate surroundings should be done in a way that does not destroy but rather enhances our landscape, which used to be ‘pure nature’”.<sup>6</sup> Vilhelm Helander’s essay explores Aalto’s concept of refined cultural landscape further.

In a television interview with his biographer Göran Schildt, Aalto, in his old days, expressed his relationship with nature in the following way, referring to his land surveyor father’s large drawing table with maps: “The white table taught me that we must be tactful with nature, that we must foster life – but not with technical means.”<sup>7</sup>

It is worth emphasising that Aalto loved flowers. “There is a nice museum at Harvard full of flowers, but all flowers are made of glass. They are mostly enlargements of microscopic elements, like the findings of a surgeon’s knife. They are beautiful and mysterious. They show the rationalism of nature as well as its prolific waste and chaos. It is dramatic; it appeals to both my mental and emotional being. Still, I like the living flowers more.”<sup>8</sup> About a colorful lichen that had found a place to grow on one of Aalto’s brick walls, he wrote: “We have also examined the effect of plants on the brickwork; it gives the architect a shock to suddenly find yellow parasites thriving on his stones and small though these things may be, they are a stimulant.”<sup>9</sup>

A central theme of this book is nature in the garden. We think of a garden today as something revitalising and romantic, a beautiful sanctuary in a polluted world. If we compare a garden designer with the

3 Alvar Aalto, “Rationalismen och människan”, lecture at the Swedish Slöjdföreningens [Society of Crafts and Design] annual meeting on 9 May 1935. Published in *Form*, 7, 1935 and in English as “Rationalism and Man” in Schildt (ed.), *Sketches - Alvar Aalto*, op. cit., pp.47-51, p.51.

4 Alvar Aalto, “Materialens och byggnadssättens inverkan på modern byggnadskonst”, *Arkitekten*, 9, 1938. Translation into English by the editor.

5 Alvar Aalto, *Imatra. Kauppalaan yleiskaava 1952*. Imatra, 1952, p.16. [Kauppala master plan for Imatra]. Translation into English by the editor. Kauppala was a legal term until 1977 for a town that was not quite a city but larger than a rural municipality.

6 Alvar Aalto, “Keski-suomalaisen maiseman rakennustaide”, *Sisä-Suomi*, 28 June 1925. [Architectural art in the landscape of Central Finland].

7 Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*. New York: Rizzoli, 1998, p.274.

8 Ibid., p.247.

9 Bernhard Hoesli (ed.), *Alvar Aalto Synopsis: Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture*. Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1970 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1980), p.21. (From a lecture held at the Central Union of Architects in Vienna, summer 1955; published in *Der Bau*, 7/8, 1955, pp.174-176.)

designer of a building we tend to place architecture on a higher artistic level. There is little recognition that great art can be created with a green palette. However, and as explained in Tom Simons' essay, there are magnificent gardens that have as much artistic value as the masterpieces of architecture, for instance C. Th. Sørensen's gardens in Denmark, Roberto Burle Marx's gardens in Brazil, Luis Barragán's gardens in Mexico and the gardens of Alvar Aalto.

## CULTURE

Although guided by a naturalist outlook on life, Alvar Aalto had a solid background in art, literature and cultural history that he had been building on since his school years. The world of ideas, grounded in the visual arts and architecture as well as drawing on different eras and various countries and environments, constantly interested him – from Antiquity to the present day. While he was not a conceptual, analytical or systematic philosopher, he constantly explored the connection between culture and nature – in his speeches and writings, as well as in his architectural works. As a writer and in his works he relied chiefly on improvisation, and he moved freely between all sectors of culture, from high culture to the most popular.

For Aalto, culture was represented first and foremost by material culture. Over the millennia, humans have refined matter and adapted objects to their needs, and Aalto was an active actor in this historical process. While working in the arts, he focused on the materials that formed their basis. "I think of the word 'materia' in a broader sense in which the purely material activity is closely connected with an intellectual process."<sup>10</sup>

In his description of the Finnish pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939, which was considered the best pavilion in the entire exhibition area, Aalto wrote that exhibitions "should derive their impact from their substance, not from words."<sup>11</sup>

Aalto emphasised that culture affected all classes of society. He also took a stand against high culture. He praised Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm exhibition in 1930 and wrote: "We see an exhibition which in every way is socially oriented and aims at leveling the concept of art. ... I see it as a very positive manifestation that the artist is in a sense denying himself by going outside of his traditional sphere of work, that he is democratizing his production and bringing it out of a narrow circle to a wider public. The artist thus steps in among the people to help create a harmonious existence with the help of his intuitive sensibility, instead of obstinately upholding the conflict between art and nonart which leads to acute tragedies and a hopeless life."<sup>12</sup>

Aalto believed that Finnish culture is dominated by literature. Architecture, urban planning, painting and sculpture, all grounded in matter, do not have the same impact on the Finnish psyche as the printed word. What is striking is that, according to Aalto, nature has an eminent role in Finnish literature. "Finnish literature since the time of Lönnrot"<sup>13</sup>

10  
Ibid., p. 25. (From a discussion with Alvar Aalto in February 1969.)

11  
Alvar Aalto, "Världsutställningen i New York", *Arkitekten*, 8, 1939. Published in English as: "World's Fairs: The New York World's Fair and the Golden Gate Exposition", in Schildt (ed.), *Sketches - Alvar Aalto*, op. cit., pp. 64-65, p. 64.

12 Alvar Aalto, "Det intellektuella Sveriges grepp på herr Medelsvensson. Alvar Aalto karakteriserar utställningen i Stockholm", *Åbo Underrättelser*, 22 May 1930. Published in English as: "The Stockholm Exhibition I", in Schildt (ed.), *Sketches - Alvar Aalto*, op. cit., pp. 15-17, p. 16.

13  
Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884) was a physician, philosopher and poet. As a collector of traditional Finnish oral poetry, he assembled the Finnish national epic, *Kalevala* (1835, enlarged 1849) from ballads and poems gathered during several field expeditions in Finland, Russian Karelia, the Kola Peninsula and Baltic countries.

has been so close to nature that one hardly can find an exact equivalent anywhere else. ... This closeness to nature has been preserved in our literature until now (I am speaking not on a qualitative but on a quantitative basis) and closeness to nature outside of literature is a strong element in just about every average Finn's consciousness."<sup>14</sup>

With this agreement with nature, Aalto took the opportunity to increase the decision-maker's understanding of physical planning. He wanted to see nature in material culture as an equally central component as it is in literary culture. "Nature is, of course, freedom's symbol. Sometimes it is even nature that creates and maintains the concept of freedom. By giving our technical general plans a solid base in nature we can redirect the thrust of development in such a way that our daily work, in all its forms, increases our freedom instead of curtailing it."<sup>15</sup>

14

Alvar Aalto, "Valtakunnansuunnittelu ja kulttuurimme tavoitteet", *Suomalainen Suomi*, 1949. Published in English as: "National Planning and Cultural Goals", in Schildt (ed.), *Sketches - Alvar Aalto*, op. cit., pp.99-102, p.102.

15

*Ibid.*, p.102.

## ALVAR AALTO'S STRATEGIES

Aalto aimed to create a balance between nature and culture. Harmony and beauty in the whole material environment were for Aalto a sign of true culture. His strategy was materiality, closeness to nature and organic movement.

### Materiality

Aalto almost exclusively used traditional materials like wood, stone, vegetation and water. He had an immediate and close understanding of these elements. With artistic imagination, he moulded life into matter. In particular, his contact with Japanese architecture and gardening in the mid-1930s had opened his eyes to a sensual material feel. At the time, he met the first Japanese diplomat in Helsinki, and in a letter to him he wrote: "There is a very special affinity between us modern architects and the well-balanced architecture of your country. I believe that it is a deeper understanding of the language of materials which unites us."<sup>16</sup>

Wood was the natural material that allowed Aalto to create the most revolutionary new forms. "For me wood is not a neutral substance, but more: it is a living material that has arisen out of a growing fibre, roughly in the same way as human muscles. For this reason it is impossible for me to cut figures out of wood as if it were cheese."<sup>17</sup> Aalto's work with wood, together with that of skilful cabinetmakers in the first half of the 1930s, led not only to the production of groundbreaking furniture at an affordable price but also, in part to a new and distinctive architectural design language, which was based on the elasticity of wood fibres and the sensory quality of wood.<sup>18</sup>

As described by Vilhelm Helander in this volume, stone was present in all of Aalto's works: as a support for the foot both inside and outside, as facade and wall material, and in terraces and walls. "Stone is also a natural product, only much older still than the trees growing around us. But one cannot work on these ancient materials without a

16

Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto: The Early Years*. New York: Rizzoli, 1984, p.114.

17

Bernhard Hoesli (ed.), *Alvar Aalto Synopsis: Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture*, op. cit., p.26.

18

Aalto used the expression "the language of wood fibres". Göran Schildt tells an interesting story: Eero Saarinen - together with Charles Eames - met Aalto in Boston in 1946 to get him interested in creating three-dimensionally moulded furniture, but Aalto was cold to the offer. The reason was that he did not want to give up what he called "the language of wood fibres". Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years*, op. cit., p.115.

feeling for the material. The different kinds of porosity require different architectural as well as different sculptural shapes. The ‘biological phenomenon’ in stone is perhaps not as apparent to us as that in wood, but it exists.”<sup>19</sup>

Aalto made a point of introducing water components in his interiors and exteriors such as basins, canals, fountains and waterfalls. He enlisted famous sculptors to design the statues in these water arrangements as described in greater detail by Johan Mårtelius in this book. The environments Aalto created with traditional natural building materials offer a variety of sensory experiences. They engage not only the human eye but also the sense of hearing, smell and touch. The spaces and shapes are adapted to the human body and its movements. Such qualities are extremely important for all high-quality architecture.<sup>20</sup>

## Closeness to nature

Each of Aalto’s building projects involved extensive studies of the character of the site. According to Aalto, a building has “a fixed relationship with nature; it is inseparably attached to a specific plot of land, and it is affected by the specific natural conditions that result from the distinctive character of its site.”<sup>21</sup> Especially in his works after the Second World War, Aalto managed to achieve a genuine form of closeness to nature.

In various contexts, Aalto put forward his thesis that people’s homes should be in direct contact with nature, but this was rarely the case in modern housing construction. “These nine birch trees and some garden chairs, that is the nature that nowadays surrounds our homes and which should be able to compensate for the mistakes we make in the structure of the building itself. I don’t think we can be of any other opinion than that it is not nature, it is not enough.”<sup>22</sup> In a 1932 article on the criteria for a good home, Aalto wrote: “A good dwelling should be built in such a connection with nature that daily life can be suitably divided between indoor and outdoor living, i.e. the dwelling should have a corresponding complement in nature, which is individual for each dwelling or collective for many together.”<sup>23</sup>

In Aalto’s obituary for his mentor and friend Gunnar Asplund, he described Asplund’s great ability to bring architecture closure to nature. His architecture gave man possibilities to experience the richness and captive mood of nature: “I had the impression that this was an architecture where ordinary systems hadn’t served as the parameters. Here the point of departure was man, with all the innumerable nuances of his emotional life and nature.”<sup>24</sup> Aalto understood the importance of nature close to architecture and also nature visible from the interiors of architecture. With the help of garden art and architecture he masterfully sought overall environments.

19  
Hoesli (ed.), *Alvar Aalto Synopsis: Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture*. op. cit., p.26.

20  
Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012, pp.75-76.

21  
Alvar Aalto, “Euroopan jälleenrakentaminen tuo pinnalle aikamme rakennustaitteen keskeisimmän probleemin”, *Arkkitehti*, 5, 1941, pp.75-80. Published in English as “The Reconstruction of Europe is the Key Problem for the Architecture of our Time”, in Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in his Own Words*, op. cit., pp.149-157, p.153.

22  
Alvar Aalto, “Elastinen standardisointi”, *Asuntoreformi*, 1, 1964. Translation into English by the editor.

23  
Alvar Aalto, “Hyvä asunto”, *Soihtu*, 4, 1932. [A Good Home]. Translation into English by the editor.

24  
Alvar Aalto, “E. G. Asplund in Memoriam”, *Arkkitehti*, 11-12, 1940, pp.81-84. Published in English in Schildt (ed.), *Sketches - Alvar Aalto*, op. cit., pp.66-67, p.66.

“The organic movement could be incorporated in the shaping of the site in order to create an intimate relationship between Man and Architecture”, wrote Aalto about the flow of visitors in his Paris Pavilion in 1937.<sup>25</sup> In the parks and open spaces planned by Aalto, paths and routes followed “organic” lines reminiscent of the ant paths in the forests. He rarely included resting, playing or gathering places in his parks. The paths led to public buildings and places outside the parks. Aalto wanted to make sure that people move in a park “organically” as in a forest, conscious of the terrain and the vegetation. The nature experiences that the park provided during the walk were regarded as most valuable. In this approach, Aalto followed the traditional English landscape park, which also did not offer special seating. The idea was to experience the park during walks.<sup>26</sup>

Aalto designed a wide variety of chairs, sofas, benches and tables. They were all intended for interiors. Furniture for parks or other public spaces do not appear in his repertoire. The only outdoor furniture he designed was for private homes.

Aalto was early to distinguish between pedestrian and car traffic. In 1955 he wrote: “The automobile cannot be banished from our lives any more, but it can be placed on its own ‘tracks’; that is, it can be given its own proper zone, just as working people and walking people need zones of their own.”<sup>27</sup> In one of Aalto’s finest chapel projects from 1950, the Malmi Chapel with cemetery, you have to leave your car at a distance of at least 250 metres from the chapel and walk along a protected walkway where you have the chapel and a large, beautiful forest hill in view.

In his plan for Otaniemi University of Technology in 1949, Aalto proposed a residential area for professors and other staff from where they could walk directly to the university without crossing a motorway. Aalto was aware that car exhaust fumes are toxic. That was also a reason for him to keep cars away from pedestrians. We know today that traffic brings all kinds of health hazards to humans.

25

“Finnish Pavilion at the Paris World’s Fair 1937”, in Karl Fleig (ed.), *Alvar Aalto. The Complete Work, Vol. I 1922–1962.*, op. cit., p. 81. Reprinted by Birkhäuser, Basel, 1995.

26

See John Dixon Hunt’s detailed analysis on the experience of movement in historic parks: John Dixon Hunt, “‘Lordship of the Feet’: Towards a Poetics of Movement in the Garden”, in Michel Conan (ed.), *Landscape Design and the Experience of Motion*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2003.

27

Alvar Aalto, lecture at the Vienna Architects’ Association, April 1955, published in English as “Between Humanism and Materialism”, in Schildt, *Alvar Aalto in his Own Words*, op. cit., pp. 176–179, p. 179.

## OUR BOOK

Our ambition with this book is to illustrate how Aalto concretely designed his relation to nature and culture and to present new interpretations of his works. We show that Aalto, in addition to his work as a building architect, also was a talented landscape architect. There are only a few architects in the history of modernism who like Aalto were able to succeed in both fields. We interpret Aalto’s work both in the light of the history of architecture and of landscape architecture. Aalto’s creative activity is characterised by timeless qualities that are relevant also in our era – or should be. He is able to inspire us to design a better living environment in harmony with nature and opens our eyes to the rich and puzzling qualities of nature and landscape. Fig. 2



Fig.1 ← Alvar Aalto in the garden of his house on Riihitie, Helsinki, in the late 1940s. Fig.2 ↓ Alvar Aalto, sketch of Hurricane Forest, Cape Cod, 1946.



# YOUNG ALVAR AALTO: SON OF THE FOREST

Fig.1 ↓ Young Alvar Aalto with a shotgun on his back; a hare and a capercaillie as his prey.



RAINER KNAPAS

There are three photographs from Alvar Aalto's school days in which he appears in three different roles: as a 14-year-old artist with palette in hand in front of his own paintings, as a member of the Jyväskylä Lyceum gymnastics team and as a hunter with a shotgun slung over his shoulder, along with the downed prey, a capercaillie and a hare. Figs. 1, 2, 3 The photographs summarise the range of the young man's horizon of experience in the 1910s: his own artistic talent, modern sport and the close relationship with nature. The photographs reveal a period of time and the first biographical chapter of the future architect. The literature on Aalto has always emphasised the importance of his youth and upbringing for Alvar Aalto's understanding of nature, art and architecture. However, in our perspective of over a hundred years later, the question must be asked whether there is a historical basis for this assumption or whether the perception has been repeated so often that the legend gradually became true?

For a study of Alvar Aalto before his actual architectural career, one has to reconstruct the contemporary horizon of the 1910s. Many accounts of the years of Aalto's youth often mingle three different levels: historical reality and its events, Aalto's own accounts of his life and later, selective narratives and interpretations of individual authors. Among Aalto's peers were other prominent Finnish figures such as the composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), the painter and architect Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), known for his illustrations of the *Kalevala*, military commander and statesman Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1867–1951) or President Urho Kekkonen (1900–1982).

The events of Aalto's childhood and family history have been thoroughly researched. Most biographers agree that decisive first influences on Aalto's architecture date back to his school years. It has often been claimed that the relationship of man and architecture to nature and landscape is one of the most distinctive factors in Aalto's career throughout. Without links to culture, however, nature as such remains without content and meaning. The sense of nature and knowledge of nature are always tied to contemporary culture. The relationship between nature and culture and their synthesis is the basis of Aalto's work. This synthesis was founded in the 1910s, before he began to study architecture. In his case, the synthesis of art, literature, knowledge and science took place in central Finland, in the small town of Jyväskylä, both in the family home and the city's renowned lyceum. The experiences of the young schoolboy must of course be understood against the backdrop of contemporary Finnish culture.

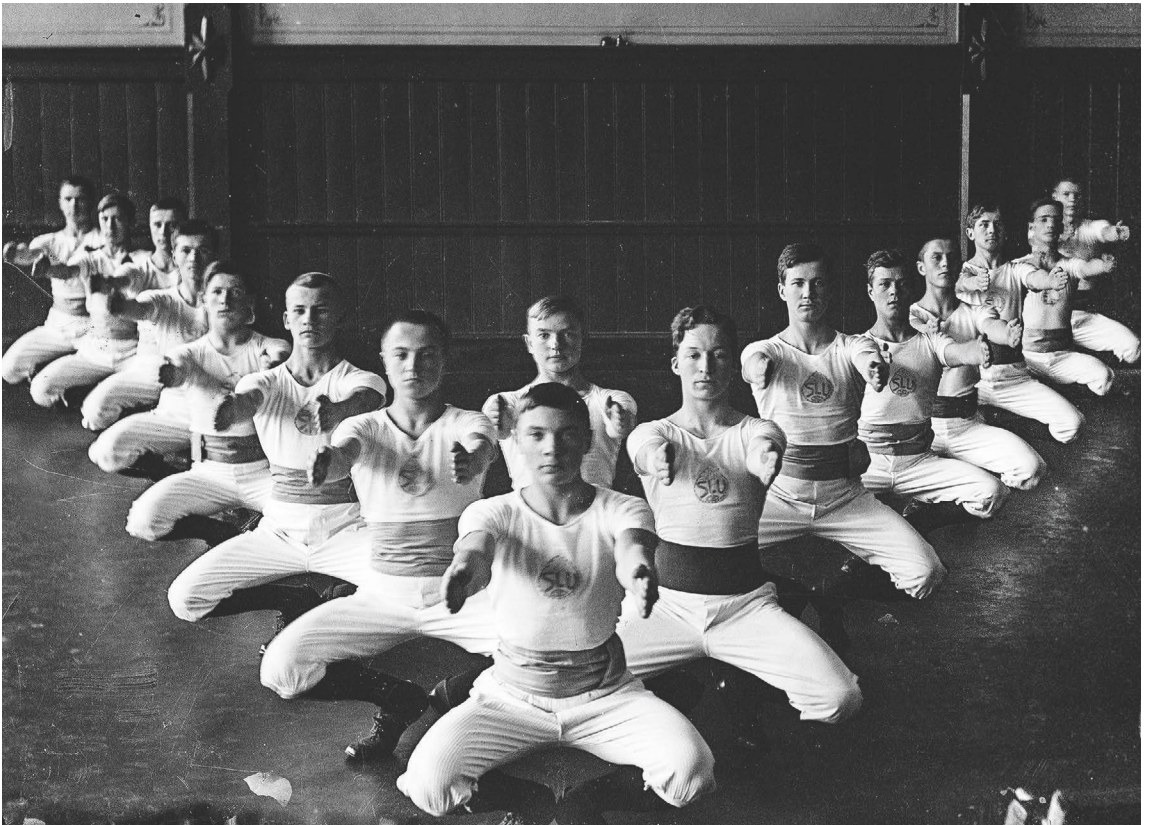
## FINNISH ROMANTICISM

The relationship with nature, landscape and the forest in particular has been a central theme of Finnish art history, concerning the "golden age" of national romanticism in the early 20th century. The generation before Aalto, which included Jean Sibelius as a composer and Akseli Gallen-Kallela as a painter, had created their own national Finnish images, using nature as a source of inspiration.

Fig.2 ↓ Fourteen-year-old Alvar Aalto in the role of a young artist in front of his paintings of landscapes.



Fig.3 ↓ The Jyväskylä Lyceum gymnastics team. Alvar Aalto is fifth in the left row.



The Finnish national landscape had been evoked through images and writings from the mid-19th century onwards, fostering a civic society committed to nature. Finland's national existence, its language and history were part of the school education that took shape in the second half of the 19th century. The themes of 19th-century nationalism promoted "Finnishness" and the connection of the Finnish nation and its people with nature. The national epic *Kalevala*, collected from older sources and published in 1835, J.L. Runeberg, who published *The Tales of Ensign Stål* in 1848 and 1860, Zacharias Topelius (1818–1898), in particular with *Boken om vårt land* (1875, Book about our country, Finnish translation *Maamme kirja*), and Aleksis Kivi, author of *Seitsemän veljestä* (1870, The seven brothers), formed the foundation for Finnish literature, instrumental in shaping the nation's identity. This idealistic folk poetry and the leading poets evoked an image of the ultimate sanctity of the forest and nature, which also included all citizens. This spirit, which penetrated the school system and the teaching at the lyceum in Jyväskylä, was taken over by Alvar Aalto.

It has often been argued that all the great Finnish names have included nature and landscape as a decisive source of inspiration. This heroic relationship with nature was summed up by Aleksis Kivi's "Metsämiehen laulu" (Song of the young hunter), the lyrics for a composition by Sibelius:

Hail, forest, hail, mountain,  
Hail, prince of the forest!  
Here is a boy, brave and young;  
He comes forth, full of strength,  
Like a wind from the fells.  
I will be a son of the forest,  
the hero of the mighty spruces,  
In the fields of Tapiola,  
when I wrestle with the bear  
the whole world will be forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

The "Son of the Forest" theme is emphasised in any analysis of Aalto's work, but it is only one aspect of his youth which influenced the future architect. His roots in Finnish nature are often presented in a romanticised, almost mythical way. His relationship with nature was part of his family background, since his grandfather was a forester and his father a surveyor, but it was also influenced by a number of other factors that were typical of Finland in the first decades of the 20th century. These included social mobility, bourgeois urban culture with its pluralistic world of ideas, modern urbanisation exemplified by the city of Jyväskylä, the First World War and the years of new technologies and industrialisation. In this overall scheme, nature and the forest were only part of the picture – important, perhaps, as the very antithesis of modernisation.

<sup>1</sup> Translation into English by the editor. The poem "Metsämiehen laulu" is part of Aleksis Kivi's poem collection *Kanervala*, first published in 1866, and it also appears in his novel *Seitsemän veljestä* (Seven Brothers), 1870. It was later used in compositions by Yrjö Kilpinen and Jean Sibelius, but those musical versions were published much later (e.g. Sibelius's choral setting around 1899). Several English translations of "Seven Brothers" exist; the first English edition was translated by Alexander Matson and published in 1929 by Coward-McCann in New York.

# THE EDUCATED BOURGEOISIE: THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE 1910s

Socially, the family of the surveyor J. H. Aalto represented the Finnish ideal of upward mobility. Through education and training, citizens of Finnish society could advance from the peasantry to civil service and finally, in the third generation, they could become part of society's elite – in Aalto's case, however, while deliberately maintaining their connections to the countryside.

The family, which had lived in Jyväskylä since 1903, represented the small town's educated bourgeoisie, the Finnish *Bildungsbürgertum*. This comprised a house of one's own, summer homes, servants and a close network of relatives and acquaintances that were a natural part of the children's upbringing. Typical for children of the bourgeoisie, piano lessons and a lyceum upbringing were also provided for Alvar Aalto. <sup>Fig. 4</sup>

Aalto's Finnishness needs to be understood in the context of the era and within a setting often found in other civil servant families of the period: The languages spoken at home were both the father's Finnish and the mother's, stepmother's and her relatives' Swedish. After elementary education in Swedish, the school language became Finnish as there was no other option in Jyväskylä.<sup>2</sup>

Alvar Aalto's early artistic talent as a draughtsman was strongly supported from home, and he received private art lessons in addition to drawing lessons at school from the Jyväskylä-based artist Jonas Heiska.<sup>3</sup> His nature paintings have been interpreted as an anticipation of Aalto's later development of organic forms. <sup>Fig. 5</sup> These paintings often followed or even imitated Heiska's models. During the 1910s, Aalto developed as an artist and thus became more independent. In his landscape and architectural motifs, he was inspired by the expressionistic world of form and colour of Tyko Sallinen (1879–1955). During his secondary school years, Aalto did not excel in any subjects other than drawing and gymnastics, but he did take an active part in the school's extra-curricular activities. He was a member of the gymnastics club, chairman of the school's student council and editor of its newspaper, and a member of the temperance club.<sup>4</sup>

The curriculum and the contents and ideology of the academic subjects in secondary schools had evolved by the turn of the 20th century into a common matrix for students throughout the country, which was to the nation's future educated elite. In Jyväskylä, as elsewhere, the lyceum was divided into a science and a classical course of study. Those who had chosen the classics studied Latin and Greek. Aalto went to the science course, but what both branches had in common was a strong Finnish national foundation. Aalto suffered from reading and writing difficulties when he entered the lyceum, but the modern languages course – where Swedish, German, French and Russian were studied, in addition to the compulsory Finnish – opened up a literary and multilingual world for him. Through language and history lessons, one could take a step towards Europe already in Jyväskylä.<sup>5</sup> The lyceum liked to

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On the history of the city of Jyväskylä, see Päiviö Tommila, *Jyväskylän kaupungin historia 1837–1965*, 1–2. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän kaupunki, 1970, 1972. Specifically on the changes in the cityscape, see Jussi Jäppinen, "*Oletko koskaan nähnyt kauniin kaupungin?*" *Jyväskylän ruutu-asemakaavan vaiheet 1800-luvulta 2000-luvulle*. Jyväskylä: Minerva, 2005. ["Have you ever seen a beautiful city?" The stages of Jyväskylä's checkerboard town plan from the 19th century to the 21st century], and Jussi Jäppinen, *Kadonnutta kaupunkia etsimässä. Tarinoita Jyväskylän puretuista rakennuksista*. Jyväskylä: Atena, 2017. [In search of a lost city. Stories of demolished buildings in Jyväskylä].

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On the young pupil Aalto's interest in art, see Erik Kruskopf, "Alvar Aalto kuvataiteilijana", *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran toimituksia* 1325. Helsinki, 2012. ["Alvar Aalto as an Artist", Publications of the Finnish Literary Society].

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About Aalto's school progress and hobbies, see Kari Silvennoinen, "Lyseolainen Alvar Aalto", *Ptah*, 2, 1996. Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Museum.

5

On the history of Jyväskylä Lyceum, see Päiviö Oksala (ed.), *Jyväskylän lyseon satavuotishistoria 1858–1958 ja juhlaJulkaistu*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän lyseo, 1958.



Fig.4 ← Alvar Aalto as a schoolboy. The background of the studio image is a grand piano – children's piano lessons were a common and important symbol of the city's educated bourgeoisie. Fig.5 ↓ A 1914 gouache and watercolour painting by Alvar Aalto of a winter landscape, highlighting nature's changing forms and colours.



profile itself on the one hand as a provider of a general humanistic traditional education and on the other hand as a stronghold of emerging Finnishness. Figs. 6, 7

Outside the walls of the lyceum, a different kind of world opened up – the city of Jyväskylä, but in particular the countryside, nature and the forest. The forest was of course independent of social class differences and constituted a realm with which his surveyor father was well acquainted. In the forest, both rural and urban dwellers could hunt and move around on equal terms by virtue of the right of public access. For the sons of the upper classes, wilderness hikes and fishing trips represented healthy and sporting activities, but they were also a way to get closer to nature and the people. Aalto's interest in hunting has often been linked to his architecture and general character. The hunter's alertness, observation skills and quick reactions were typical traits that lasted throughout his life. Hunting can be perceived as a kind of return to living nature and the landscape. The world-famous Danish architect Jørn Utzon, for instance, was also a hunter, and the famous 1930s philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) emphasised the mythical significance of hunting as a way to reconnect again and again with nature.<sup>6</sup>

In the Finnish art and literature of the 1910s, the national romanticism with its forests, lakes and the golden age of the *Kalevala* symbolic landscapes was already *passé*, a thing of the past.<sup>7</sup> In the country of the emerging forest industry, people increasingly began to relate to the forest as a natural resource. The use of forests was on the verge of transitioning from the local agriculture and forestry of the peasantry to large-scale industrial production.<sup>8</sup> This left its mark on the landscape, especially in the interior of Finland.

Clear-cut forests were a result of the needs of the wood processing and paper industries. On the other hand, the declining folk culture and traditional timber architecture began to be valued as research and museum objects. In 1916, the summer after he became a student, Aalto participated as a draughtsman in an ethnographic field expedition to South Ostrobothnia under the leadership of seminar lecturer Toivo Salervo (1888–1977).<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, artists and researchers discovered folk architecture and wooden churches as expressions of a special Finnish *Kunstwollen*, “will to art”, a specific artistic drive. The best-preserved examples were documented, in part also as a reserve of form and ornament for the emerging national romantic architecture. Niemelä farm in Konginkangas in central Finland, with its numerous buildings, constituted an artistic ensemble in the eyes of architects and researchers. The farm, with its objects and artefacts, was moved to the open-air museum on Seurasaari island in Helsinki in 1909 (part of the National Museum of Finland). The buildings were considered an excellent example of Finnish rural vernacular architecture. The initiator of this preservation was a lecturer at the seminary in Jyväskylä, architect Yrjö Blomstedt (1871–1912).

The downside was that the idealistic idyll of a national landscape was shattered and partially destroyed. Several sensitive observers wrote

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John Roberts, “Aalto and Utzon, Atmospheres Beyond Finland”, in Sirpa Mikkeli and Esa Laaksonen (eds.), *Aalto Beyond Finland*. Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy, 2015, pp. 214–215.

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Aimo Reitala, “Metsä suomalaisessa kuvataiteessa”, *Silva Fennica*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1987, pp. 436–444. [“Forest in Finnish Art”, Finnish Forestry Society, Helsinki].

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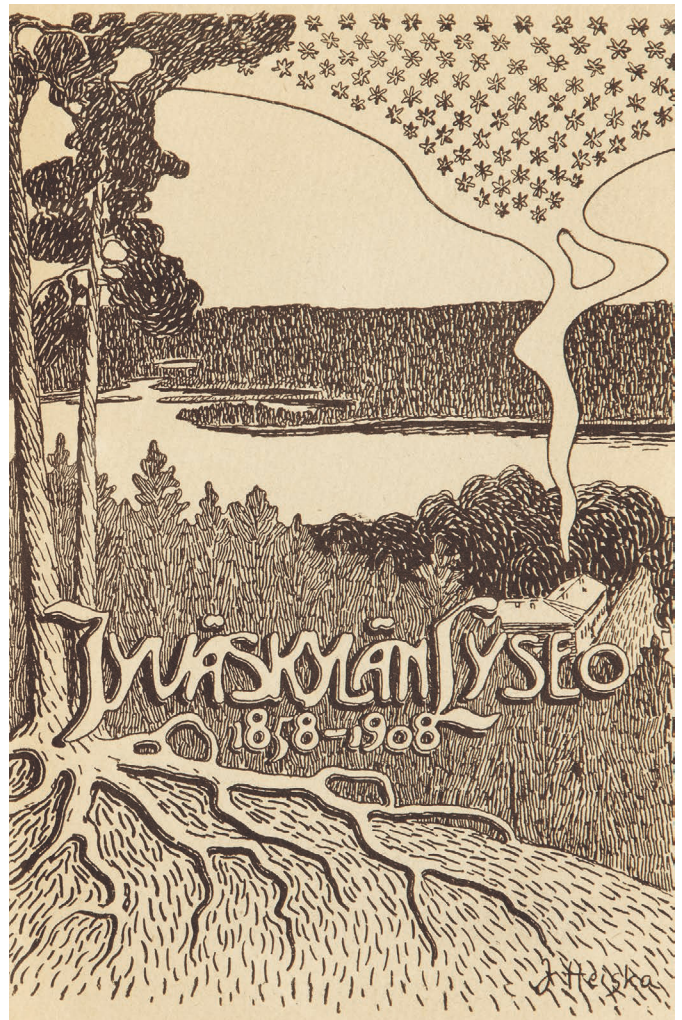
Matti Leikola, “Metsien hoidon aatehistoriaa”, *Silva Fennica*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1987, pp. 333–341. Especially on the impact of slash-and-burn agriculture and grazing, see Martti Linkola, “Metsä kulttuurimaaisemana”, *Silva Fennica*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1987, pp. 362–373. [“The history of forest management” and “Forest as a Cultural Landscape”, Finnish Forestry Society, Helsinki].

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Marjo-Riitta Simpanen, *Käsityö - Aalto. Inhimillinen tekijä*. Suomen käsityön museon julkaisuja 15. Jyväskylä, 1998, pp. 7–9. [“Crafts - Aalto. The human factor”, Publications of the Finnish Museum of Crafts].



Fig.6 ↑ The castle-like, romanticised architecture of Jyväskylä Lyceum with its medieval elements was a stronghold of Finnish national and classical education. Fig.7 → This publication by Jyväskylä Lyceum from 1908 features a Finnish national landscape. Cover design by Jonas Heiska, Alvar Aalto's teacher in drawing and painting.



about the subject, for example the photographer I. K. Inha (1865–1930), who documented landscapes and country life. Although the aesthetic values of forestry had already been paid attention to in the 19th century, an overall picture of the importance of forests and forest management only emerged in the 20th century.<sup>10</sup> Alvar Aalto never refers to the aesthetic or social conflicts of early industrialisation. In 1910, for example, the first large industrial plant in Jyväskylä, Wilh. Schauman’s plywood factory, had been founded close to the city centre. Nevertheless, connecting industrial plants and their associated residential areas with nature became an important part of Aalto’s work.

Alvar Aalto programmatically renounced all forms of wilderness romanticism. The earliest and best-known article that highlights his relationship with nature and landscape is from 1925, “Architecture in the Landscape of Central Finland”. Here he discusses the curvilinear landscape features, their “impurities” and the possibility to correct them: “Take, for example, Ronninmäki Hill, which dominates the countryside around Jyväskylä. It would only need a white campanile near (not at) the top for the whole area to acquire an aura of refinement.”<sup>11</sup>

The short article that Aalto wrote briefly after his first trip to Italy brings out the Finns’ tendency for “forest dreaming”, from which a synthesis between nature and art offers a way out: “Everything we add to our home soil must be done in such a way as not to degrade, but to refine our ‘pure nature’.”<sup>12</sup>

Through his interest in painting, Alvar Aalto had already early on devoted himself to close studies of nature and its phenomena – alongside the obligatory collecting of plants during the summer holidays.

Fig. 8 But there were also other fields that he explored. Literature was clearly important to Aalto and he read a lot in different languages. We can assume that the new foundations of Finnish general education of the 1910s, such as the multi-volume world history *Maailmanhistoria*, the so-called “Black Encyclopedia” and the *Oma maa* book series, were part of the family’s library. All of them were the first of their kind in the Finnish language. However, no personal memories of his exposure to music and musical experiences have been preserved for posterity. Aalto mentions a visit to the “cinematograph” – a representation of the modern world – as early as 1907, but hardly at all after that. Photography came into the picture later, in the 1920s, and it became an important means of observation for him alongside drawings, especially on his travels. Aalto apparently did not take notice of the new wonders of technology, such as cars and airplanes, during his school years in Jyväskylä.

Fig. 9 However, trains and steamboats were already part of daily life. Outside school and home, different degrees of freedom began to emerge, transcending the norms of early 20th-century bourgeois culture.

School and home defined their own models for morals, manners and daily life. Their opposites and refuges were the freedom of the forest, the city’s carnivalistic fairgrounds or painting. The annual horse fairs near the lyceum represented a liberty that ran counter to the city’s bourgeois culture and contrasted with the orderliness of the school. Fig. 10 The desire to act in a kind of countercultural spirit seem to have been part

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For more details, see Jari Miettinen, *Luonnon kauneuden huomioon ottaminen metsänhoidossa*. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston Metsäekologian laitoksen julkaisuja, 7, 1993, pp. 29–50. [Publications of the Department of Forest Ecology, University of Helsinki]. Among the first foresters who saw beauty values in the forest were A.G. Blomqvist in 1881, P.W. Hannikainen in 1893 and Theodor Homén in 1914. See, for instance, P.W. Hannikainen, “Kauneuden-aisti metsänhoidossa”, *Suomen metsänhoitolehti*, 2, 1893. [“The sense of beauty in forest management”], and Theodor Homén, “Metsänhoito ja kauneus”, *Valvoja*, 3, 1914. [“Forestry and beauty”].

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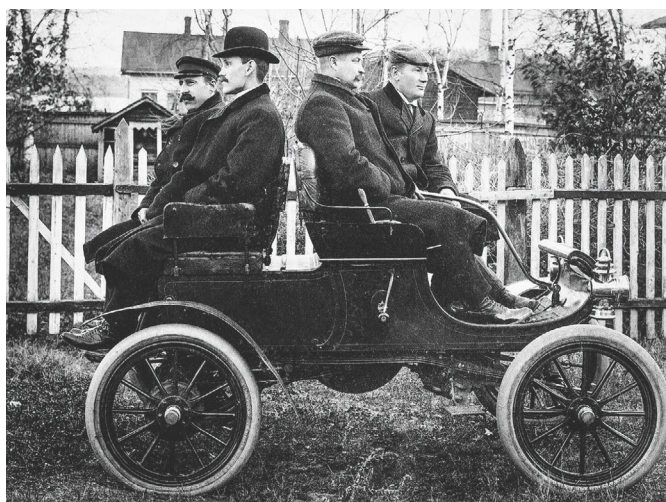
“Keskisuomalaisen maiseman rakennustaide”, *Sisä-Suomi*, 26 June 2025. Later republished in Göran Schildt (ed.), *Alvar Aalto in His Own Words*. Helsinki: Otava, 1997, p. 22.

12

Ibid.



Fig.8← This bird's foot trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) was part of Alvar Aalto's herbarium, collected in the summer of 1911 in Loviisa, near the Svartholm fortress. Fig.9↓ The first car in Jyväskylä in 1906. Alvar Aalto's interests at a young age were progress and technical inventions. Fig.10↓↓ Market scene in Jyväskylä in the 1910s. The visits to the fair were an attractive antithesis to the educational ideals of the Lyceum.



of Aalto's nature already during his school days, as did an apparent ease, *sprezzatura*, in all his performances. His external nature also included dressing with style. Aalto's always carefully chosen hats were a legacy from his lyceum years – in a preserved group photo with schoolboys, he appears as grown-up as possible, in a felt hat.

## IDEAL AND PROGRESS

Alvar Aalto's father, an active municipal politician, represented the progressive, non-socialist party called Young Finns that stood for a modern urban liberalism. At the time, Young Finns were keen to emphasise social, industrial and technological progress under the leadership of an elite of "men of practical life".

Engineers, architects, foresters, agronomists and surveyors were key figures in the future industrialised country Finland, as well as businessmen, industrialists or newspaper editors. Among the ideals that these men of action embraced were both geographical and social mobility, travelling, broad language skills and quick decision-making. The perceived opposite were the academic, book-learned pedantic scholars, painters, philosophers and aesthetes, those useless people from the point of view of social development, supposedly detached from reality. It is easy to see which group Alvar Aalto wanted to identify with, at least from his student years onwards.

Practical exercises were an essential part of the studies of engineers and architects. In the background there was a philosophy which reached Finland just around 1910, that being American pragmatism. The most important figures of this philosophical tradition, William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952) and Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), were known in Finland. According to pragmatism, it could be said that practice, real-world applications and effectivity determined what was true and not true.

Alvar Aalto's Young Finnish family tradition was based on the idea of progress, which had already been the guiding principle of English liberalism in the 19th century. Economic and social progress required that social conditions changed for the better. <sup>Fig. 11</sup> The idea of continuous improvement of the quality life, also affected the surrounding nature and the landscape. The landscape provided natural resources and raw materials for industry, but through technical interventions also hydroelectric power, waterways as well as road and rail connections.

Landscapes could be enhanced by additions of art, especially architecture – as was so often the case in Aalto's production. From faith in liberal, progressive values and politics, it is only a short step to a more radical form, activism, which in Finland has been most closely linked to the resistance against the Russian government and the russification policy during the time of Governor-General Bobrikov, from the end of the 1890s. Activism was a far-reaching movement that encompassed both intellectual and physical activities – sports and gymnastics were an important part of the movement. The Jäger Movement,<sup>13</sup> the so-

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From 1914 onwards, the Jäger Movement (*Jääkärliike*) was an effort to recruit volunteers from the then Grand Duchy of Finland to be trained in Germany. The clandestine movement was dominated by German-influenced circles, such as university students and the Finnish upper middle class. Over 1100 volunteers are estimated to have travelled to Germany. By the movement, Germany intended to support the creation of a Finnish sovereign state and to cause Russia's defeat in the First World War.