

Fr. Barnabas' Helsinki Report

It has been a long cold winter in Finland. Spring is now beginning. The thaw is on.

On February 17 a letter arrived from Aalto's office informing us that DeMars and Wells of Berkeley had been contacted as associates for our library building project. Shortly thereafter I received a call from Vernon DeMars. There seemed to be a few difficulties and uncertainties in this association. (They were prudently and cautiously examining the situation.) We, too, as you know were privately discussing the delay, roadway, building site, our frustration, the development planners, etc., etc... Father Abbot then gave me permission to confer with DeMars and Wells in Berkeley.

It was not clear to DeMars exactly how the building plans would progress through the engineering stage and how the building supervision would be handled from their office on our building budget. Their office would consider a building of this size as requiring a three day a week inspection.

Mr. DeMars and Mr. Wells went over the prospect with me and charted a possible temporary solution to the road problem. We wanted a feasible temporary route around the site until further planning could develop a permanent road situation. It was beginning to look like a difficulty which might further delay the building of the library.

I explained the function of the different areas of the plan in terms of our library needs. I explained the relationship we have, to a limited contract basis, with Beck and Morse on our planning. I discussed our feeling about the prolonged delay in this building project.

DeMars is an old friend and admirer of Alvar Aalto. They shared an office at M.I.T. They have a mutual respect for the ability and completed work each has done. (The profession agrees with this judgement. Both have won many awards.) Mr. DeMars' pedigree and pictures of his buildings have now been in the Fathers' Recreation Room for a week.

Mr. Aalto's suggestion that our classroom building be placed on the South side of the hill opposite the Minor Seminary building seemed to disregard our thinking about a possible future expansion on the Southwest side and the work of future campus development planners. The endless delay and the postponement of our project over the last three years has caused us, shall we say, to lose a little of our good humor and enthusiasm. Since the proposed roadway in back of the monastery violated a long expressed feeling about our East side privacy, this too required discussion.

Mr. DeMars suggested that the squeaky wheel gets the grease with Mr. Aalto. He also indicated that Mr. Aalto reacts to people and personal contact. He is a warm personality with concern for persons rather than things.

Upon my return from Berkeley, Father Abbot agreed that I should take our problems to Helsinki and do what I could do to expedite the project, clarify the situation in regard to campus planning and in general find out more about the plans.

I departed from Portland Airport on March 8 and returned on March 18. The round trip with expenses cost slightly less than \$1,000.

Mr. Aalto was not in Helsinki when I arrived. I knew this before I left. His office suggested that I come at a later time when Mr. Aalto returned and would then notify me. More delay! Mr. Aalto is most gracious. He considered flying back to Helsinki, but his doctor, who has as much difficulty seeing Aalto as we do, insisted that he stay where he was in Switzerland. A meeting was arranged in Zurich. Mr. Aalto came into the city, the Sabena Airlines arranged my return ticket through Zurich without extra cost and I thus had a conference with Mr. Aalto.

Aalto had arranged for my reception in Helsinki and my stay. I was the guest of his office. His office staff was most generous with its time. All the people there were most interested in our project. They gave me the impression that they were very proud of their "Oregon project".

I was met at the Airport by Eric Vartiainen, whom I had once met at the airport in Portland when he

came here. Mr. Aalto sent his private car with his own chauffeur to meet me. I arrived at 11:30 p.m. March 9.

Eric has been in charge of the details of our building from the beginning. Mr. Aalto says that Eric will come with the plans in June and will personally supervise the construction for him. He will work with DeMars on the engineering. He will be with the building all the way.

Mr. Aalto is in his 69th year. He is in good physical health his doctor tells him. His doctor, however, insists that he take large periods of complete rest. He looks terribly tired. His friends say he is. His hands tremble noticeably at times. His doctor, he told me, says that he may have fifteen years yet if he takes care of himself. "First I rest, and then I die" he said for the benefit of Mrs. Aalto. Apparently she is on the side of the doctor.

He has about thirty people working in his atelier or studio. He has about thirty projects under way. There are twelve buildings in the construction stage. These buildings are spread over many countries.

There is no doubt whatever that Mr. Aalto is most interested in his Oregon Project. I was told that libraries are his pets. He expressed his great interest; he speaks with enthusiasm of his coming. He mentioned that libraries and the place of libraries in our civilization remain constant. Other activities and buildings planned for activities have a changing role, the function and place of a library remains constant. Mr. Aalto's most recently completed building is a library at Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle. He has two libraries approaching the construction stage, his Oregon Library and the library for the Finnish Technical Institute. The latter is for his Alma Mater. He has been in charge of the completely new campus plan at Otaniemi, a suburb of Helsinki. (See the article or clipping "University Building by a Master Hand" taken from *Architectural Record* of April '65). He recently completed a library at Seinajoki. (See page 169. *L'Opera di Alvar Aalto*. Milano, Edizioni di Comunita, 1965.)

Mr. Aalto has recently refused to accept other libraries as projects until these two are finished. The reason he gives is interesting. One of the people in his studio having a difficulty might ask the others how they are solving certain problems. He would then copy a solution designed for another problem and the institution would be cheated in not having a solution organically worked out to suit its own peculiar needs.

Aalto is somewhat pleased that international critics are in wonderment about his distant Oregon project. He mentioned again what a magnificent location we have. He said that there was never any doubt about which side of the hill our library should be placed upon. "It belongs there" and he made a spreading gesture with his hand. At dinner following our discussion he told Mrs. Aalto, Leonardo Mosso, professor of architecture at the University of Bologna, Mr. Ott, professor at the University of Zurich, that a friend of his from Montreal had told him that the only true gentlemen in America were the Benedictines.

Mr. Aalto expressed his pleasure that I had brought greetings from Father Abbot and community and from his personal friend Vernon DeMars. He stated that Mr. DeMars is a very competent designer whom he respects. He went on to say that as soon as his doctor will permit, he and Mrs. Aalto will be coming. (Mrs. Aalto you will remember is also a licensed, working architect. I gather from his staff that she is also mid-wife to many projects, diplomat and representative between doctor and Aalto, staff and Aalto. She is a very warm, genuine person. She assured me that they would come. She was very genuinely sorry about the many delays and difficulties. The many problems and extraordinary events have been very trying. Things seem to be settling down to normal again. Mrs. Aalto or "Madame Aalto", as Mr. Aalto calls her, is very self-effacing. She remains or tries to remain in the background. All decisions are his.)

Helsinki

In Mr. Aalto's studio there is a model of the two seminaries and the library building. I took pictures of this model. In due time I will get them developed and in the Fathers' Recreation Room. I was shown a later set of plans than the one sent to us. There were actually very few changes. The circulation librarian's office was moved to the right hand side of the control area near the browsing room. Certain areas are being re-studied.

We discussed at length the problems of the library building, roadway difficulties, our aversion to a road behind the monastery, our concept of the separation of College, Theology and High School. From this discussion the limitations of our building site and our concept of our school organization became somewhat clearer to Mr. Aalto's staff. I again assured them that the over-all planning would not affect the library site chosen by Mr. Aalto. I expressed Father Abbot's doubts about the placement of the classroom building in the light of our thinking about areas for different units of our school.

Mr. Aalto's office chief is a Kaarlo Leppanen. Eric Vartianinen works directly under him. Eric is assisted in this project by John Ridgewell, an English architect. Since the beginning of the year Eric has been giving his full time to our project. He will continue to do so until the building is finished. Everything is subject to Mr. Aalto's review at every major decision. As the building progresses Mr. Aalto more closely supervises its growth. He has at the beginning given a sketch of its major features and design.

The office staff respect our feeling of privacy on the East side or behind the monastery. They agree that this is as it should be. They all agree in principle that the "academic" side on the North should be quiet side. Mr. Leppanen was very frustrated that having such a potential quiet area for our academic buildings we should cut the landscape in precisely this area. "What is more important, the library or da milk"? after reviewing the different possibilities of access to the elevated kitchen area, the steepness of the grade from the North side, the feeling of privacy on the back or East side, he agreed that perhaps "da milk" was more important.

This placement of the library and the classroom was finally outlined, subject of course to Mr. Aalto's review. The library building will be moved in toward the hill almost to the point of the sidewalk. It will be closer to the sidewalk than the Major and not so far as the Minor. The classroom building will be in line with the press building and behind the Minor seminary.

There will be an overhang on the library building serving as a covered walkway between the two buildings and from the point of design pulling the two buildings together. The Church and the seminaries plus library will then take on a new visual relationship.

There will be a terrace around the building for an ambulatory. This will be followed out in design with careful attention to shrubbery to preserve continuity of the hillside by hiding the dividing thrust of the line of the road. They were much concerned about the feeling or aesthetic sense of the quiet area and involvement with the landscape spread out below.

The site and the magnificent view are elements of primary importance in the placement of the building. They would have preferred to place the building slightly out and on the hillside for the sake of involvement in the landscape. The quiet, natural landscape unbroken by the thrust of a roadway figures in their thinking.

I mentioned that comments had been made that the most beautiful aspect of the building will not be prominent since it is on the North side. They were pleased that we liked the architecture. They then added that the outside was because of the inside. It is the interior beauty of the space they are controlling which gives form to the outside.

The idea of a "view" for a visiting motorist, or a crow's nest type of vantage point from the top of the building met with looks of incomprehension. The architecture invites and directs one to explore

the beauties of the site. The ambulatory will direct one to the relationship of architecture and site. The viewer will then experience personal involvement in the quiet natural landscape and panorama.

This is how Aalto approaches the problem, and his thinking about the space in the building. A person entering the library will (on a clear day) see the most majestic elements of our view framed in the picture window of the browsing room. This will include the valley below and the Cascade Range crowned with Mt. Hood. Proceeding from this point, a person will enter a pleasant controlled space with an emphasis on quiet and disengagement.

As Mr. Aalto says, he is always in the agony of doubt and uncertainty until he sees the final product, until he sees, "if it works."

There will be windows in the closed carrels. The closed carrels will be worked organically into the periphery or outside wall area. They did not understand that these closed carrels would have ceilings closed as well as closed wall.

Observations and Impressions (Personal)

I do not propose to set myself up as an architectural critic. I do propose to give my impressions of a few Aalto buildings I visited. If they sound like the same thing you will have to judge their merits according to my precaution here given.

Finland in the long cold winter is overcast and much like Oregon in its dark, dour days. Mr. Aalto has long been concerned with keeping his buildings light and cheerful. The circular designs on the plans are skylights. The tipped roof line on the North side is a light scoop around the perimeter of the top floor. It is a cheerful experience to enter an Aalto building on a gloomy day. The light on the perimeter gives an atmosphere of light, a feeling of coming-into-the-light not a going out of it. The central part of the building has this same effect through the round overhead porthole. It adds a dimension of interest to usually dead space. There is an element of wonderment in the charm of an Aalto interior.

A person wonders how he accomplishes so much with so little. Part of the secret seems to lie in the wedding of function and design achieved by making the function be the design.

There is a sense of friendly, playful atmosphere, but an atmosphere which is somehow classical at the same time.

In addition to a number of Helsinki buildings of Mr. Aalto, I visited one of his most recently completed buildings. It is a library at Rovaniemi. The library is larger than our proposed building. I have some pictures of this which I will place in the recreation room when I finish them. I have some colored transparencies which will allow you to judge for yourself.

The building is magnificent in its interiors. From the standpoint of library administration I do not understand its staff areas. Its "people" area is visually apparent and visually superb. Our fast growing population would dictate that a public library such as this have more mobility. We think in terms of larger and larger. Europeans think in terms of now...and then, perhaps. (I was in Europe for the greater part of eight whole days, you know.)

The librarian at Rovaniemi told an interesting anecdote. The Russian delegation came to inspect the newest library in Lapland. The Finnish state building code requires bomb shelters to house the people who might at any time be in the building. The Russian delegation wanted to know "whatever are you doing with a bomb shelter? There will never be any need for such a thing."(!)

The newest of the buildings of Aalto in Helsinki are the Concert hall, Student Residence, Thermo-technical Laboratory, and the Student Center. The three latter are in connection with the Finnish Technical Institute project. Mr. Aalto won the competition in his design for the whole campus layout. He is personally doing some of the key buildings.

A review in retrospect of Mr. Aalto's work will appear shortly in the Architectural Forum, Eric Vartianinen is the author of the article.

Cardinal Lercaro has asked Mr. Aalto to design a new church in Bologna. It will be the first church in Bologna according to the principles and spirit of the new liturgical constitution. The Cardinal made a big thing of this. Mr. Aalto was much impressed with the "Aalto Day" in Bologna. Civic officials, prelates, etc. He was so impressed that he apparently considered all lesser officials of the Church as monsignors. I was duly invested with the title when introduced to his friends.

To Sum Up

Eric will be here in June with the plans. Following presentation of these plans, Eric will proceed to Berkeley where he will guide them through the engineering at the firm of DeMars and Well. Before the engineering is too far advanced but advanced far enough for accurate estimate of building costs, these will be presented to us. Bids will be let locally. Eric will supervise the building construction.

The Aaltos will be here as soon as his doctor will authorize travel. His office thinks in terms of a time following Eric's visit. Mr. Aalto will be here several times according to the way his office envisions it. It is his usual procedure. I think the provision "if his health permits" might be in order.

In his present projects, Mr. Aalto's work is spread from the Arctic Circle to Bagdad, through Finland, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Lebanon and America. Building at a distance is difficult. For Aalto it is not unusual. Mr. DeMars comments that part of Aalto's great reputation is that he gets buildings completed.

The latest book on Mr. Aalto will be found in the Recreation Room.