Singler, Sofia, ***The Religious Architecture of Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto***, London, Lund Humphries (2023), 272pp., 150 colour, 55 b&w ills., £49:99. ISBN 978-1-84822-622-7.

Challenging some of the received assumptions about Alvar Aalto’s architecture, this book sets out to demonstrate how Aalto’s church designs are more than just stimulating spatial environments but evidence of a religious dimension that subtends Aalto’s architectural modernism. Drawing on primary archival material the inquiry shows how Aalto’s religious projects responded to the discourses ranging across the religious communities and institutions for whom and by whom they were commissioned. A group of churches from the 1950s to the late 1970s, including projects in Germany and Italy, are carefully examined, but with a primary focus on Aalto’s church building in Finland. Through detailed exploration of the post-war planning and construction of Finnish towns and cities, the study highlights the intricate connections between parishes and municipalities and demonstrates how Aalto’s church designs mirrored societal transformations deemed necessary at the time. It argues, Aalto’s church projects were able to serve as bridging devices between the perceived need for secularisation, because they created parish centres dedicated to everyday social services, while at the same time maintaining the provision of sacred spaces for religious ceremonies and events.

Given the intent of *Religious Architecture* is to challenge the presumed autonomy of Aalto’s architecture from religious belief, the emphasis given to the study and analysis of the Vuoksenniska church in Imatra, designed and constructed between 1956 and 1959, makes sense. Even critics like Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, who had strong reservations about the uncritical adulation Aalto so often received, looked on Vuoksenniska as a masterpiece. According to these historians, what is remarkable about Aalto’s best work is the way the constructed design is able to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable syntactic elements into ‘deliberately ambiguous, polyvalent, allusive forms’. Other critics too have used the Vuoksenniska church to show how Aalto was able to simultaneously distinguish and equate dissimilar things in unified compositions, arguing this sets him apart from other modern architects, whose thinking tended to be elemental and universalising.

In *Religious Architecture* we learn of the many different ways and means by which Aalto communicated with his religious clients about their spatial needs. In so doing the book expands our knowledge of the range of incompatible factors and diverse elements amongst which Aalto was able to work and maintain and expand his extraordinarily successful practice. We learn how he was influenced by ideas and debates within the church, how he was able to work with the sometimes contradictory requirements of local councils and parish building committees and we learn how he sought out and established dialogues with high officials within the various church institutions that commissioned him; and we learn more generally about his interest in post-war liturgical reform movements in Finland and other countries. For those of us who are fascinated by the Aalto phenomenon, this is all very interesting and illuminating, however, one is still left doubting if Aalto himself had any religious feelings or held any substantial beliefs. Based on biographical accounts, it seems Aalto thought of himself primarily as a creative artist, a ‘maestro’ of architectural design. No doubt he considered the various situations of the churches he worked for as real factors in the changing reality in which he practised his art, yet his response was surely aesthetic, not religious. I mean aesthetic in the Romantic sense of the artist who is able to transform reality through art i.e., by changing, not the reality of the world, but the way reality is seen.

If he really believed in himself as an artist then Aalto would have felt no need to actually share the beliefs of his religious clients, he would have trusted in his own ability, as an artist, to discuss and respond sympathetically to their concerns. Furthermore, it seems equally likely he would have welcomed his church clients precisely because their concerns were alien to him, as alien factors church concerns could function as material for his creativity, allowing him to concentrate on the more formal side of how to design church buildings that were as aesthetically attractive and appealing as possible.

We can get some idea of what designing meant for Aalto if we turn to something he once said about his design process. In his famous essay, ‘The Trout and the Mountain Stream’, Aalto wrote:

*…sometimes quite instinctively… I forget the whole maze of problems for a while, as soon as the feel of the assignment and the innumerable demands it involves have sunk into my subconscious. I then move on to a method of working that is very much like abstract art. I simply draw by instinct, not architectural syntheses, but what are sometimes quite childlike compositions, and in this way, on an abstract basis, the main idea gradually takes shape, a kind of universal substance that helps me bring the numerous contradictory components into harmony…*

Aalto’s notion of a mysterious ‘universal substance’, gradually formed through a process of abstraction is quite magical, having something of the alchemical *magnum opus* about it, whereby a primitive, formless and chaotic *prima materia* is transmuted into the pure substance of the philosophers stone. Both architectural designers and alchemists share the need for seclusion in their respective practices. Alchemists lock themselves away in laboratories to perform alchemical acts and architects lock themselves away in their studios to do the work of design. Such places are sealed-off from common use and, temenos-like, assigned with a special designation. It seems quite plausible, thanks to his background in design, Aalto found it easy to understand the significance of sacred space within the church context without necessarily holding religious beliefs himself; because he could see a parallel between the sacred space of church ritual and the communal, yet necessarily secluded spaces that the Aalto studio went to in order to engage creatively in architectural design work.

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