

Japan Foundation Supported Project
Alvar Aalto: Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban

Date: 22 February – 13 May 2007
Venue: Barbican Art Gallery

Architecture for the 'little man' – one of Aalto's underlying ideologies is succinctly portrayed in this two level art gallery space at the Barbican centre. This is an exhibition of seminal works by the eminent Finnish architect Alvar Aalto interlaced with Japanese architect Shigeru Ban's personal take on architecture. This parallel exhibition features the twin thinking and workings behind two culturally different yet highly influential architects of differing eras.

Navigation within the gallery is relatively easy with clear signposting and helpful staff. The exhibition is split into two parts with the main bulk of the exhibition located on the first floor in chronological order and the second part on the ground floor. The displays consisted of a combination of photographs, drawings and architectural study models.

The subtlety of Aalto's works revealed his deep desire for a humanitarian approach to architecture. His interest in humanized spaces made a strong impact on his design of Palmio Tuberculosis Sanatorium 1933, where his design concept was for the 'horizontal human' – taking into account the amount of time a patient in the sanatorium spends lying on his/her bed. The human touch was important as he considered it an imperative part of architecture as architecture is in essence made for the use and enjoyment of the humans living in and with it. In this respect, the need for experimentation and exploration of how spaces and materials function and the effect of spaces created for the users were important.

As Aalto's architecture matured, some references to Japanese architecture were also made, as shown in Villa Mairea 1938. The design and linearity of the building plan plus the garden in relation to the house appear to evoke similarities with Japanese architecture. The emotive use of materials and their controlled use in this building appealed to the senses at a deeper level compared to his previous works.

On the ground floor, examples of Aalto's furniture designs were on display providing a good idea of how varied and extensive Aalto's interests were and how his ideas were translated into other forms of works. There were also examples of Aalto's interest in materials and his idea of 'flexible standardisation' whereby building materials were prefabricated into modular components for their efficient and economical use.

Within the ground floor exhibition space, examples of Ban's own works were also showcased in the middle of the floor, surrounded by cardboard tubes which acted as both vertical screens as well as suspended ceiling transforming the area into a surreal otherworldly space.

Japanese architect Shigeru Ban curated and designed the exhibition. Ban reflected that Aalto's design philosophy was instrumental in influencing his own direction in architecture. He, like Aalto, feels strongly that experimentation and humanism are interdependent and an integral aspect of

producing good architecture which is successful and provides affordable spaces to live in. In this, he designs in disaster areas through an understanding of simple materials like paper which are sustainable and affordable.

The success of the exhibition is the simplicity and clarity of its theme, colour and displays. There is no excessive use of colour that detracts from the underlying focus of the exhibition – which is to extol Aalto as a humanistic architect. The subtle, muted tones deployed throughout the exhibition provided a good backdrop reflecting the spirit behind Aalto's works. However, while the success of the exhibition relied strongly on its overall subtlety in presenting Aalto, it could have been even better if the distinction and connection between Ban's and Aalto's ideologies were made clearer with perhaps a stronger and more distinctive commentary of Aalto by Ban.

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