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ELIZABETH MOCK'S RENEWAL OF MODERNISM AND THE ECHOES OF ALVAR AND AINO AALTO'S OEUVRE

João Miguel Couto Duarte and Maria João Moreira Soares

Built in USA: 1932-1944 – affirmation of a humanized architecture

Built in USA: 1932-1944, the exhibition that ran at the MoMA in New York in 1944 and curated by Elizabeth Mock (1911-1998), then acting curator of the Department of Architecture at the museum, confirmed the renewal of Modernism that was beginning to impact the American architectural landscape at that time. In the exhibition catalogue,¹ Elizabeth Mock notes the emergence of a humanized architecture, underlining the renewed attention to local values and traditions, the climate, and the topography. *Built in USA: 1932-1944* departed from the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* of 1932, which also ran at the MoMA, curated by Philip Johnson (1906-2005) and Henry-Russell Hitchcock (1903-1987). However, it affirmed a new reading of architecture that was more sensitive to regional forms of expression.

Mock's remarks in the exhibition catalogue reveal a reflection on the work of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) and Aino Aalto (1894-1949): "Aalto had been notably successful in creating fresh and sympathetic forms, based as much on intuitive understanding of the way free people might like to live as on a lively sense of the potentialities of materials and the demands of industrial production."² Elizabeth Mock, who was then still called Elizabeth Bauer, knew Alvar Aalto through the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*. The exhibition featured images of the Turun Sanomat building in Turku, which was completed in 1930, confirming the international interest that Aalto generated at the time. Mock's network of family and professional connections was decisive for deepening her knowledge of the Aaltos' work in the following years.

Early contacts with Aalto's work

Her visit to the *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* and her knowledge of the work of Catherine Bauer (1905-1964), her older sister and a defender of public housing, brought Elizabeth Bauer closer to architecture. Catherine had assisted Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) in preparing the housing section of the exhibition.³ After majoring in English at Vassar College in New York, Elizabeth became one of

the original group of Taliesin Fellowship apprentices, set up in 1932 by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and Olgivanna Lloyd Wright (1898-1985) in Spring Green, Wisconsin. During this time, she got to know Rudolf Mock (1904-1977), a Swiss-born architect who was a fellow apprentice. They married in 1933. After a short stay in Mexico, they moved to Switzerland.

In Switzerland, Rudolf Mock worked with Otto Senn (1902-1993), a former colleague at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH) in Zurich. Elizabeth Mock enrolled at the Gewerbeschule Basel to complete her training in architecture. The figure and work of Alvar Aalto were well-known at the time in the Swiss architectural milieu, as his work was disseminated in the magazine *Das Werk*. Elizabeth Mock was certainly aware of the presence of Alvar Aalto.

Collaboration with the MoMA and contact with William Wurster

The Mocks returned to the USA in 1937, settling in Princeton, New Jersey. Elizabeth began working for the MoMA as an assistant to John McAndrew (1904-1978), who became curator of the museum's Department of Architecture and Industrial Art that same year and of whom Elizabeth had been a student at Vassar College. Collaborating with the MoMA and her sister's relationship with the architect William Wurster (1895-1973), who she married in 1940, made it possible for Elizabeth to follow the work of the Aaltos closely. North American architectural magazines, in particular *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Forum*, had been publishing Aalto's work since the early 1930s.

In 1937, Elizabeth Mock published an article in the *Magazine of Art* on the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*,⁴ which opened in Paris in May that year. Mock makes no reference to Aalto's Finland Pavilion. However, the pavilion was well-known to the MoMA circle.⁵ Henry-Russell Hitchcock praised the work in an article on the exhibition for *Architectural Forum* magazine.⁶ In the spring of 1938, the MoMA opened its *Alvar Aalto: Architecture and Furniture* exhibition, which was curated by John McAndrew. This was the first major showcase for the work of the Aaltos in the USA, and the second exhibition the museum had organized on the work of an architect, the first, from 1935, being dedicated to Le Corbusier (1887-1965). Mock didn't work on the organization of the exhibition, but she certainly did follow it. *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*,⁷ the exhibition's catalogue, was also the first North American monographic work on the Aaltos (Fig.1). In addition to the Turun Sanomat building, which had been included in the 1932 exhibition, this one also featured the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium, completed in

1932, the Viipuri Library, completed in 1934, the Aaltos' house in Munkkiniemi, from 1936, and the Finland Pavilion for the Paris exhibition, as well as dozens of other design pieces, including furniture, glassware, and lighting fixtures. The Aaltos visited New York in the fall of that year on their first journey to the USA. They returned in spring 1939, to finalize the Finland Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939, and were to return again in the spring of 1940, and stay until fall. In June 1940 *Architectural Forum* published the article "Finland",⁸ in which Alvar Aalto, under the shadow of war in Europe, underlined the importance of the regional values of Finnish modernism. The Villa Mairea in Noormarkku, completed in 1939, is highlighted amongst other works by the Aaltos and other Finnish architects. During these stays in the USA, Alvar Aalto gave several lectures, thus confirming the interest generated by their work, and they socialized with the North American architectural elite. John McAndrew and Elizabeth Mock co-authored the 1942 book *What is Modern Architecture?*,⁹ which was associated with a MoMA circulating exhibition of the same name. The book features images of the Turun Sanomat building and the Finland Pavilion in Paris. Aalto's work was once again chosen by Elizabeth Mock for the exhibition *Building with Wood*, which opened in late 1944. The exhibition included the Paimio Chair of 1931-32 (Fig. 2). Elizabeth Mock left the MoMA in 1946, removed by Philip Johnson.

The year 1937 was also when William Wurster got to know Alvar and Aino Aalto at their recently finished house in Munkkiniemi.¹⁰ On his return journey to the USA, Wurster stopped in Paris to visit the *Exposition Internationale*, where he probably went to the Finland Pavilion. Wurster and Aalto's meeting was the start of a lasting friendship. The Aaltos even went to the West Coast to visit Wurster when they were in the USA in 1939. In *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, Elizabeth Mock recognizes the value of Wurster's work, highlighting how, even before 1932, the modernity of his houses resulted from his exploration of the Californian tradition of using wood.¹¹ There was frequent contact and visits between Elizabeth Mock and her sister and brother-in-law, both when the latter couple lived in Berkeley, California and after they moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Echoes of Alvar and Aino Aalto's Oeuvre

Elizabeth Mock's relationship with architecture was accompanied from early on by her knowledge of the work of Alvar and Aino Aalto. Her interest in their work is part of a wider interest in architecture that was marked by a desire to humanize it and root it in vernacular values. In *Built in USA: 1932-1944*, Mock recognizes the uniqueness of the Aalto designs in the modern architecture scenario and stresses

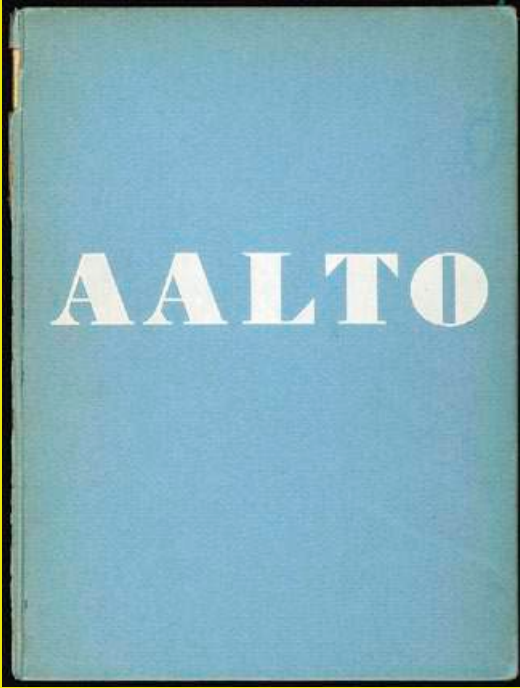
the huge receptiveness for their work amongst the North American public.¹² This continued knowledge goes some way to explaining how echoes of Alvar and Aino Aalto's oeuvre reverberated through Elizabeth Mock's renewal of Modernism, which found its greatest expression in the exhibition of 1944.

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- 11 Mock, *Built in USA*, 14.
- 12 Mock, *Built in USA*, 20.

Acknowledgments

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1. *Architecture and furniture: Aalto*. MoMA, New York, 1938 (The Museum of Modern Art Library, catalogue no.: 300061926). © 2023 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.



2. Installation view of the exhibition 'Building with Wood'. MoMA, NY, November 15, 1944-February 18, 1945, IN267.1. © 2023 Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.