

Does the ephemeral architecture of the Pavilion generate a permanent legacy?

Genesis of the realization: an ephemeral habitat at the Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale, created in 1893, is considered one of the most prestigious artistic events in Europe. It hosts contemporary art, dance, music and architecture. In 1955 Finland obtained the right to install a temporary pavilion. Alvar Aalto was commissioned to build the small, trapezoidal wooden structure. The prefabricated elements in Finland were sent to Venice. The modalities of construction were simple: the system of prefabricated sections had to be both cheap and sufficiently bright and original at the time to promote the notoriety of Finland as a leader in the field of Scandinavian architecture. The architect had only a few weeks to produce the plans and originally the pavilion was only for the 1956 Biennial.

Alvar Aalto received the invitation from the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. In addition, Mrs. Gullichsen, president of the Society of Contemporary Art was the patron of the architect. The convergence of art and patronage allowed the realization of this «tent-pavilion». Alvar Aalto found the idea of a hut as a habitat through the use in the Nordic countries of the Lappish tent, a simple structure, easy to assemble, illustrating the nomadic way of life.

This idea of precarious housing, the architect had also studied in profundity during the war years. He had developed a system of variable assembly of standard sections in wooden houses, manufactured individually and in series. The Ahlström factory supplied him with wood; the same factory that manufactured the sections of the pavilion. He had designed in the 1940s what were called «AA homes» in prefabricated rooms that were temporary refuges in anticipation of bombing. In the same way, a temporary anti-aircraft shelter was installed in the center of Helsinki in 1941: the Erottaja pavilion. Even though the latter only constituted an emergency shelter, the door handles made it possible to recognize their creator.

This idea of a dismantlable pavilion, used in different places, was also inspired by the novel *The Good Soldier Svejk*, by the writer Jaroslav Hašek (1883-1923). The story tells how Svejk's friend, the army chaplain, set up an altar of communion on the battlefield made from components that could be dismantled. When the ceremony ended, the altar disappeared. In Czech and Slovak literature, good soldier Svejk symbolizes resistance, ironically denouncing the absurdity of military life and war. We can assume that the flag reflected the Finnish situation at that time, because of the war and the reparations to Stalinist Russia.

The pavilion was designed to be disassembled quickly. This was made possible by the use of stabilizing and connecting «braces» in the form of large triangles. The effect of the squares was accentuated by the contrast of colors between indigo blue panels and white triangular braces; the Finnish colors, symbol of the huge snowfields and innumerable lakes of this country.

Inside the pavilion, the roof is covered with a butterfly-shaped beam of variable section. The latter supports the trapezoidal geometry of the plane and serves as a support for a canal like that of a Roman compluvium to collect rainwater.

The second strength of the project was the use of skylights in the roof. At the heart of the pavilion, Aalto proposed a revolutionary way of exposing and contemplating art by placing the observer in the dim light and naturally illuminating the paintings on the walls. Thus, the central part of the roof, in the semi-darkness is pierced by the sunlight that penetrates through the elements of the frame. The set forms a sophisticated device for uniform lighting.

A «wooden temple»: durability of the pavilion in Finnish culture

Wood and glass were the materials of choice for Aalto, but also domestic products from his country, Finland. The Nordic countries have always favored natural materials in the sober design of their architecture. With the harsh and cold climate, Nordic life has always been centered around the house. It represents a comfortable refuge. If the primary function of architecture is to shelter, it also reveals a continual search for light and transparency. After the war, Alvar Aalto returned to the beveled forms, the stratification, the irregular cuts drawn by skylights and sloping roofs. He was sensitive to the contours of the terrain, the orientation of the winter light; he felt the need to create user-friendly settings directly related to the surrounding nature. Thus, the pavilion already had these characteristics during its realization. After the Biennial, in the mid-seventies, the pavilion was reduced to something that looked like a ruin. Lack of maintenance, uncertainty about the property, and the Venetian climate, deadly for a wooden structure, all contributed to this deterioration. Strangely, the pavilion, abandoned, seemed to reconnect with the surrounding nature to sow confusion. Like a small temple abandoned in a wood, the pavilion was assailed with plants, mosses and molds reminding almost the privileged link between Finland and nature.

A restoration was undertaken to preserve the pavilion in Italy. The fact of wanting to keep the small temple in Venice is reminiscent of Alvar Aalto's relationship with the country. His furniture was exhibited there in 1933 despite the fascism present at the time. He particularly liked the Italian palaces, and that of the Pazzi served as inspiration for his pavilion. The link between Italy and Finland was thus preserved by the reconstruction of the latter. Thus, the pavilion, despite the ephemeral nature planned from the outset, was transformed into a permanent structure because it carried within it the Finnish culture by its technical and mythical attributes.

All the technical and structural solutions of 1956 were designed for a temporary foldable building, and this was one of the reasons for the rapid deterioration of the pavilion. To improve the weather resistance, the roof was overhanging and, to move the soil away from the walls, a channel was dug around the perimeter and filled with white river stones, as in traditional Japanese houses; the thatch roof lacks gutters. The tradition of local construction and the dimensions of the material have been respected, as has always been done in Alvar Aalto's workshop.

The exit that leads to the terrace is perhaps the part of the whole structure that is the best integration into the environment, with its landscape, its pond borders, and its benches built in local stone, the pietra of istria. The terrace has become a place of contemplation and relaxation with the shade of trees, the murmur of the fountain and the smell of honeysuckle. The acanthus are present because they symbolize the Mediterranean and antiquity, dear to Aalto. This very human refuge, reveals the fugacity of the pavilion. The building is now reborn, thanks to the contributions of Italians and Danes, as a permanent pavilion that bears witness to Finnish culture.

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