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Alvar Aalto and the "Florence of the North"

Finland is one of the European countries that marks the geographical and cultural border between the West and the East, where Russian history met the local culture in the past.

After the declaration of independence in 1917, Finland needed its own cultural identity free from the previous Eastern influences.

At that time, the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) forwarded a new model for the state capital of Central Finland, Jyväskylä. Since the 1850's, it earned the nickname "Athens of the North" thanks to its role as an educational centre where exceptionally Finnish (not Russian) was the official language in use, despite it was still part of the tzars' empire.

In my doctoral dissertation I intent to ponder about Aalto's early projects, especially I yearn to bring to the light the interest on his proposal for Jyväskylä as the «Florence of the North»¹. The first question I wondered in my investigations was the reason of this comparison.

This title –which somehow sounds romantic- had been used for the first time by Aalto's biographer Göran Schildt to include his early production referred to his activity in the 1920's. His «Office for architecture and monumental art»² in Jyväskylä's main street, few steps away from the house where he grew up, had been recently opened.

Different typologies of buildings and urban plans had been designed at that time: villas', squares', public buildings' and a covered market's drawings witnessed the influence of the Southern models.

In Alvar Aalto's article we read: «one finds gems in Italy [...]. Central Finland frequently reminds one of Tuscany, the homeland of towns built on hills, which should provide an indication of how beautiful our province could be if built up properly»³.

In this way, Aalto himself expressed his wish to turn the page of History: Finland was finally an independent nation and deserved an authentic architectonic-identity. Due to accomplish this aim, Aalto invited his colleagues to give a sight to the Southern culture. He especially admired the Italian 'Architettura Minore' and the Reinassance masters, such as Beato Angelico or Andrea Mantegna whose representations of the top-hill-towns stroke his mind. In his attempts to renovate, Aalto felt the necessity of translating the Classical idiom into the Finnish reality to create a sort of a neo-Reinassance city.

¹ Schildt G., 1984, p.

² Signboard, reported in Schildt G., 1984, p. 130

³ Aalto A. 1925, in Schildt G., 1984, p. 210

Thus, he began designing buildings and squares, in order to take the distances from the National Romanticism which characterised the previous century when the «culture of birch bark flourished and everything that was coarse was considered so Finnish»⁴.

On the other hand, we must say that Alvar Aalto followed the steps of Gunnar Asplund, who was the leader of the Nordic Classicism in Scandinavia. The latter's researches convinced the younger colleague that once he had changed the urban composition and the aspect of the town, he would have revitalized citizens' lives by creating a pivotal-model which could have been followed by other cities in North-East Europe.

Through the reconstruction of the image of the mythical Renaissance, it could have brought benefits to the citizens as had happened in Florence in the past, according to Alvar Aalto's *naïf* belief.

Moreover, I frequently visit the Finnish archives where I continue finding important documents referred to Aalto's production. There I brought to light important documents, such as invoices which confirm his six-weeks-trip in Italy already in 1924, a few months after his graduation.

Thereby, my researches in Finland let me keeping in touch with experts thanks to whom I develop a critical study about this architect through the analysis of the proposals for the perypherical 1920's Jyväskylä.

⁴ Aalto A., in '*Keskisuomalainen*', 22nd January 1925 (author's translation).