

The Color of Aalto's White Walls

Virginia Cartwright
Associate Professor of Architecture
University of Oregon

Finnish architect Alvar Aalto is renowned for the luminous quality of his architectural designs. Perhaps less discussed is the role of color in his work.

The material palette of his architecture is restrained. The interiors characteristically have white walls and ceilings. The floors are tile or carpet of low reflectance. At first glance, Aalto's interiors are almost austere. It is through the details of wooden handrails and window trim, and the people and objects in the rooms that color is brought into the buildings.

The white that Aalto applied to the ceilings and walls of the interiors of Mount Angel Abbey Library has a reflectance of 90.4 %¹. The floors are covered in a gray carpet with a reflectance of 11.5%. The primary colors present in the building are found on the bindings of the books, and, the more colorfully clad students. The books, the people and the touches of wood are small and intimate in the snowy luminescence.

Subtly, there is a glow of red at the top of the north-facing light monitor. The red rocks on the roof reflect their light on the white surface. Thus, the cool blue light of the north sky is balanced by the warm red of the roof.

In the town hall for Seinäjoki, Aalto employed a blue-glazed tile as exterior cladding of the upper floor. The lower level, consisting primarily of white columns, allows the piano nobile to float above the entry lobby. The blue of the tile is noteworthy as it changes dramatically from black to royal blue as the weather changes the light.

The choices that Aalto made for his buildings anticipated the dynamic quality of light, in the quantity, color and direction. Surfaces become dynamic in their acceptance of this changing condition. From his early works, which sought a constant diffuse light, to his later works, where the changing light emphasized the programmatic hierarchy, Alvar Aalto developed design strategies to give his buildings a timeless and ever-engaging character.

¹ Carbonnier, Eric Garrison, Daniel, Liu, Yingying Cartwright, Virginia, "Alvar Aalto's Daylight Devices: A Retrospective Daylight Analysis on Mount Angel Abbey Library", PLEA 2013 Munich: Sustainable Architecture for a Renewable Future