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The Colours of Alvar Aalto

Harald Arnkil

*Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Espoo, Finland
harald.arnkil@aalto.fi*

ABSTRACT

A great number of books and articles have been written about the architecture and furniture designs of Alvar Aalto (1898–1976), but very few of them mention anything about his use of colours. This paper focuses on how Alvar Aalto was influenced in his use of colours by the avant-garde and modern art and design of his time. Colour is an integral element of Aalto's architecture, especially in his lesser-known early works and in the world-famous functionalist buildings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Aalto was not only an architect, but also a designer of innovative furniture, lamps and glassware. Colour played a major role in also these designs.

Keywords: *Alvar Aalto, architecture, design, colours*

INTRODUCTION

'Humanist modernism' or 'humanist rationalism' are the epithets most often associated with Alvar Aalto's architecture and design. The organic, nature-related forms and free-flowing spaces of his building as well as his human-centred design philosophy are the principle reasons behind this interpretation. (See for example Schildt 1986). Thus, Aalto's works have been appraised through his handling of form and function as well as through his effort to harness rationalism and standardisation in the service of better living. His colours have received little or no attention, although they are an inseparable part of these efforts. Recent and ongoing research and conservation reveals that many of Aalto's early buildings were originally much more colourful than has been known hitherto (Riksman 2015). In his better-known mature works Aalto showed a highly developed sense of hapticity and atmosphere. In these works, Aalto avoided strong space-defining colours in favour of nature-inspired textures and muted colours of wood, stone, brick and ceramic tiling. In many of the interiors these subdued tones were offset and enlivened by Aalto's furniture, whose vibrant colours were inspired by modern art.

AALTO FURNITURE AND THE COLOURS OF MODERNISM

From the very beginning of his career in the early 1920s Alvar Aalto travelled frequently abroad. On these trips Aalto formed lifelong friendships with some of the most avant-garde artists his day. These included Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Fernand Léger and Alexander Calder. Their influence on Aalto's colours and forms was as important, if not more so than that of the often referred-to Finnish nature.

In 1937 Aino and Alvar Aalto, Nils Gustav Hahl and Maire Gullichsen founded the furniture and interior design company Ab Artek Oy, primarily to promote and distribute Aalto's furniture internationally. Most of Aalto's furniture and their colours were created in context with his architectural projects. While the surfaces of his mature and later buildings become more and more neutral and material-based, much of the furniture retained its vibrant accent-like colours, which Aalto had favoured already in the 1920s. A hallmark of Aalto's furniture is its modular construction, which allows the creation of a great variety of models from simple elements. The pre-Artek Aalto furniture had been manufactured in small quantities for the home market or as one-offs for specific projects. The wooden chairs and stools came in combinations of all kinds of colours, which disappeared soon after Artek was founded. The early stools and chairs were also sold in plain unvarnished wood; the customer could then paint them any colour they wished! With growing production volumes, came the need to standardise not only the furniture's construction and models, but also their colours. The scale became reduced to a simple combination of natural pale woods (birch or sometimes ash or beech) with tops in black, white and a few primary colours, usually red, yellow, blue or green. Thus, the modular principle was applied to also the colours of the furniture. While the modular structures of Aalto's furniture continued to allow a certain degree of variations of their colour combinations, the new methods of mass production meant the birth of Aalto's standard furniture and standard colours.

The one person who had the greatest influence on the forms and colours of Aalto's early functionalist buildings was undoubtedly Le Corbusier. The similarities are apparent in the Viipuri library, The *Turun Sanomat* building and in Aalto's international breakthrough work, the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Aalto employed, especially in the latter two, a colour scale which strongly resembled Le Corbusier's famous *Claviers de couleurs*.

From the late 1930s onwards, Aalto and Le Corbusier went their separate ways, at least as far colour is concerned. Le Corbusier's architecture became more and more sculptural and polychromatic, whereas Aalto emphasized hapticity, light and atmosphere. Thus, the tone of the interiors of Aalto's mature buildings was relatively neutral, and polychromatic accents were introduced in the form of furniture, interior decoration and artworks. This allowed maximum flexibility and a modular approach to combining colours.

SPACES, COLOURS AND ATMOSPHERES

The colours of Alvar Aalto's architecture can be divided into three stylistic periods: 1) the richly polychromatic Nordic Neoclassicism and Art Deco-influenced buildings of the early and mid-1920s, 2) the mainly white exteriors and richly-coloured painted interiors of the Functionalist buildings of the late '20s and early '30, 3) the material-based colouring of the post-World War II period. This last period included the use of coloured ceramic tiles and in many cases a deep midnight blue surfaces in ceramic tiling or wood, bringing a noble chord to the otherwise neutral palette of white, grey and wood colours.

The Workers' Club in Jyväskylä (1924) and the Defense Corps Building in Seinäjoki (1924) are among the few relatively well-preserved Aalto buildings from his Neoclassical period. Their colouration is entirely different from all subsequent works. During the 1920s Aalto drew ideas and influences from his Swedish contemporaries and friends Gunnar Asplund and Sven Markelius. The colour scheme of the interior of Aalto's Jyväskylä Workers' Club, restored in 2008, is striking: the ground floor entrance hall has pale primrose walls with black skirting boards; black stairs lead past two decorative urns in vivid blue, red and gold. The first-floor foyer is a symphony of Pompeian red, bright blue, off-white and greyish black. Ongoing research and colour restoration on Aalto's buildings of the same period shows that they had equally rich colour schemes.

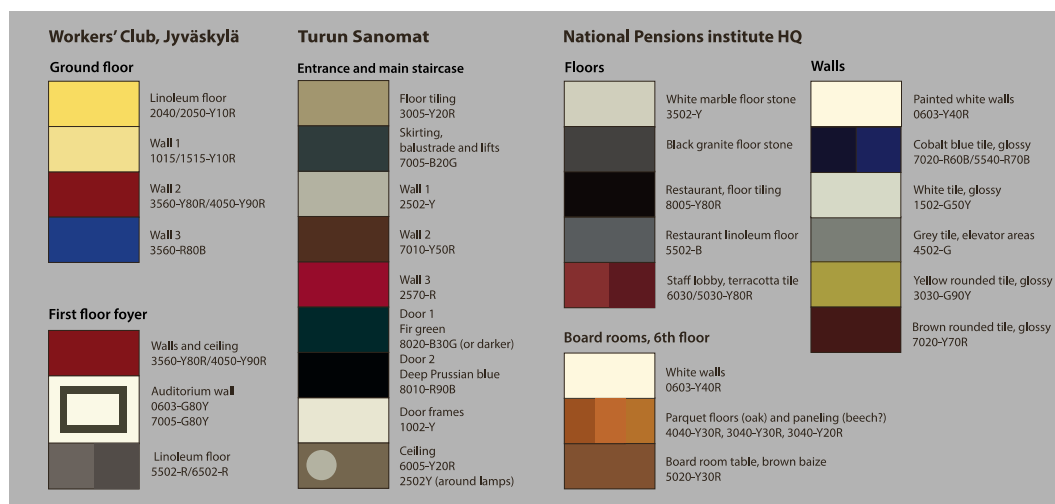


Figure 1. Interior colours in three buildings by Alvar Aalto (all in Finland). The NCS codes refer to the nearest available NCS standard colour and are given without the NCS S prefix. All measurements by the author, August 2015.

THE LOST COLOURS OF MODERNISM

The *Turun Sanomat* Newspaper head office and printing works in Turku, Finland (1928–30) is a fully-fledged example of Le Corbusier-inspired functionalism. The extant interior colours offer a rare glimpse of the kind of colours that were used in functionalist buildings of the era, and which are now lost in most similar buildings. Many of the *Turun Sanomat* office and printing works spaces have been altered, but the hallways and staircases are relatively well preserved and the colours have been recently restored to what is presumably very close to the original. Nearly all surfaces are painted with full-gloss lacquer paint and the colours are in elegant tones of crimson, dark fir green, chocolate, and warm grey (Figure 1, above).

In 1928 Alvar Aalto travelled to Paris where he was shown Le Corbusier's studio and other buildings. However, Aalto did not meet Le Corbusier who happened to be in Moscow at the time (Schildt 1986, p.56). Aalto finally met Le Corbusier at the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) conference of 1929. The records do not say whether Aalto discussed (despite the fact that he knew no French) architectural colour with Le Corbusier at this meeting. At the next CIAM meeting in 1933 in Athens Aalto kept company mainly with Le Corbusier. Nils-Gustav Hahl, who was also present, reported later how the two commented Fernand Léger's lecture on architectural colour: "...both of them typically considered only the physiological effect colours have on people, and almost wholly disregarded their aesthetic qualities". (Schildt 1986, p.95). In any case, although the *Turun Sanomat* was completed in 1930, the colours in the halls and staircases seem as if taken straight from the 1931 colour keyboard.

Le Corbusier had written extensively on the subject already in 1928 in an article with the title *Polychromie architecturale*. It remained, however, unpublished until 1997. Two years after writing the article Le Corbusier published his first collection of *Claviers de couleurs* for the Salubra wallpaper company. The trade literature of the 1931 *Clavier de couleur* describes it as "...a system which makes it possible to establish a strictly architectural polychromy in the modern dwelling, one in accordance with nature and with the deep needs of each person." (Menin & Samuel 2004, p.57) This idea would surely have resonated well with Aalto.

Immediately after completing Turun Sanomat, Aalto began work on his major international breakthrough, the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium (1929-33). There are Corbusier-influences in Paimio, too. In all his architecture Aalto used space, materials, colours and light to create ambiances for physical and psychological needs, to comfort and uplift the user. Nowhere is this more evident than in Paimio. Every surface and colour is carefully designed with the health and wellbeing of the patients in mind. Although many of the original colours are still visible in the Paimio Sanatorium, according to the recently published research by Elina Riksmán, Paimio was originally much more richly coloured than its present-day appearance indicates. (Riksmán 2015).

JAPANESE INFLUENCES

As Juhani Pallasmaa has pointed out, Aalto's handling of space and materials shows clear influences of Japanese culture and architecture (Pallasmaa 1998, p.98). His shift from paint and pigment colours to material colours may also have been prompted by Japanese influences. Aalto, who never visited Japan, acknowledged his admiration for the ethos of traditional Japanese interior design in an address to the Swedish Craft Society in 1935 (Schildt 1997, p.271). The interiors of Villa Mairea in Noormarkku (1938-39), the Experimental House in Muuratsalo (1952-53), Maison Louis Carré in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne (1959) and the Aaltos' own home on Riihitie in Helsinki (1935-38) have an atmosphere that resembles that of traditional Japanese houses. The interior walls are off-white or covered with plain fabric or wood. Strong chromatic colours are reserved mainly for details, such as upholstery and curtains or decorative objects.

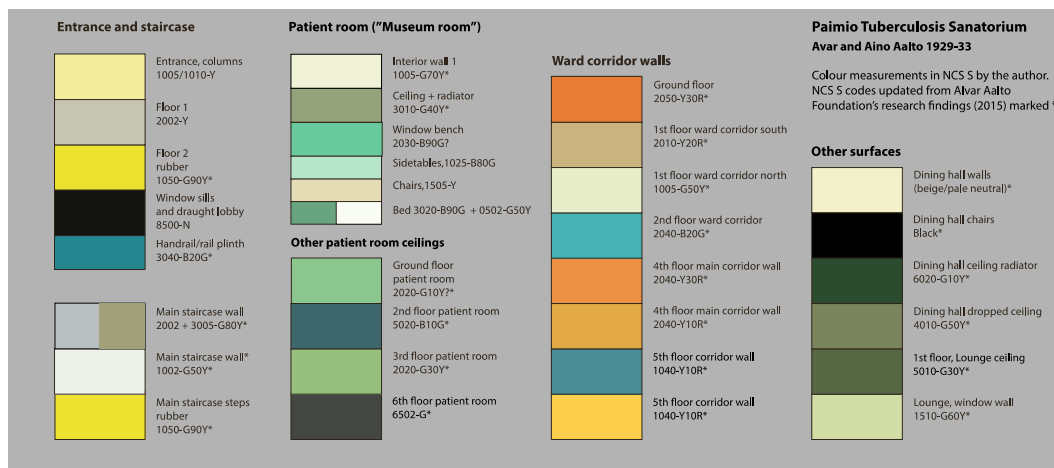


Figure 2. Interior colours of the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium. Aalto engaged the master decorator Eino Kauria to assist him with the colour design. Bright canary yellow linoleum and rubber was used in the flooring and skirtings of the main entrance hall and staircase. The patient rooms were painted with soft green tones to give visual relief for the recumbent patients. Full gloss lacquer paint was used on many of the hospital surfaces. The NCS-codes marked with * have been updated from the 2015 research by Elina Riksmán of the Alvar Aalto Foundation.

Aalto's exteriors of this period are often either white plaster, brick, oxidized copper or bronze cladding. The materials were chosen as much for their durability as for their visual qualities. In Villa Mairea there are wooden and natural stone elements that chromatically further integrate the house with the surrounding forest landscape. This interconnection of natural and man-made environments continues indoors in the wood and stone details, the houseplants and the free rhythms of the clusters of wooden pillars. With the nature-inspired, restrained colour palette and especially through his masterly handling of natural and artificial light, Aalto created interiors that allow flexibility and harmonious combination of brightly colour details and accents with furnishing and textiles.

CERAMIC TILES AND THE SIGNATURE BLUE

One exception in the later Aalto's restrained architectural palette is the use of deep midnight blue in various materials – most memorably in the rod-shaped cobalt blue ceramic tiles that he used in many of his civic buildings. This blue first appeared on the background wall to the outdoor fireplace in Villa Mairea, then again on the exterior wall of the patio in the Aalto's summer residence or Experimental House in Muuratsalo. From there on this 'signature blue' appeared in one form or another in almost every civic building designed by Aalto.

Alvar Aalto created an exceptional variety and richness of colours, materials and textures in the National Pensions Institute Headquarters in Helsinki (1952–57). Aalto achieved this chiefly with specially manufactured, rod-shaped, flat and round ceramic tiles. Their colours were cobalt blue, brown, mustard yellow, off-white and grey. The off-white and grey tiles have a satin glaze, while the all the rest have a full-gloss glaze to them. The variation of colours, profiles and finishes creates a rich optical and haptic experience, reminiscent of kinetic sculpture and painting.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Aalto's colours were influenced by his early and lifelong contacts with some of the most radical and famous artists of the modernist period. Aalto's radically modern furniture colours were probably inspired by the vibrant "pure palette" of the early abstract painters and sculptors, such as Fernand Léger and Alexander Calder. Le Corbusier probably influenced not only the structure and forms of Aalto's early Functionalist buildings, but also their interior colours, which are now being rediscovered in their full richness. How direct the influence of Le Corbusier's *Polychromie architecturale* was on Aalto is a matter of further investigation. Colours were an inseparable part of Aalto's quest to create comfort and welcoming atmospheres and to serve the "biological needs" of the ordinary man and woman in the street.

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