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Selective Participation: Alvar and Elissa Aalto's Sacred Architecture in Riola di Vergato

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Aalto, Modern Architecture, Churches, Liturgical Renewal, Post-War Urbanisation

/Abstract

This paper interrogates the architecture of Santa Maria Assunta in Riola di Vergato (1965-1980) with respect to Bolognese twentieth-century religious discourse on urbanisation and the city. The paper discusses the key issues which framed the inception, development, construction and reception of Santa Maria Assunta, designed by Finnish modernists Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) and Elissa Aalto (1922-1994) and their associates. The practice's only Catholic church, Santa Maria Assunta was a direct product of Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro's (1891-1976) ambitious church-building program, implemented in response to the scarcity of religious space in rapidly urbanising Bologna.

The paper argues that Alvar and Elissa Aalto selectively accepted, adapted and appropriated ideas promoted by the Bolognese church-building program in their design of Santa Maria Assunta. On the one hand, working under the guidance of local figures, especially Cardinal Lercaro, the Aaltos sought to ensure that their design adhered to contemporaneous urban and religious ideals. On the other hand, the Aaltos remained fundamentally sceptical of the ambitions set out by post-war programs of religious renewal, especially those rooted in the ideal of 'participation', which manifest in reformed liturgical guidelines and the integration of church buildings into urban and suburban parochial complexes. The realised design of Santa Maria Assunta embodies the tension inherent in the Aaltos' selective adoption of Bolognese ideals: some elements of the design are products of the broader discourse on the city and the Church institution's role therein, whereas others communicate an opposition to reformist ideals which the Aaltos viewed with disfavour.

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A native of Jyväskylä, Finland, Dr Sofia Singler trained as an architect at the University of Cambridge and the Yale School of Architecture. She practiced architecture in Boston, MA, with a focus on educational and industrial buildings, before returning to Cambridge to undertake a PhD in architectural history. At Yale, she held the Edward P. Bass Scholarship in Architecture, and at Cambridge, a Gates Cambridge PhD Scholarship.

Dr Singler's specialism is Aalto scholarship-the critical analysis of the architecture, urbanism, design and thought of Finnish modernists Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto and their associates. Her other research interests lie in the histories and theories of modern architecture, Indigenous architectures, architectural criticism, and architectural pedagogies for children. She is currently engaged in two main research projects, one on the post-construction 'afterlives' of Aalto buildings, and the other on contested notions of contemporaneity in Sámi public buildings.

Informing and informed by her academic research, Singler is also actively engaged in curating architecture. Major exhibitions include *Città dei Morti-City of the Dead* at the Alvar Aalto Museum (2015) and, most recently, *Alvar Aalto in Deutschland: Gezeichnete Moderne/Alvar Aalto in Germany: Drawing Modernism* at the Tchoban Foundation in Berlin (2023). She also served as academic advisor and presenter for the feature-length documentary film *AALTO* (dir. Virpi Suutari, 2020).

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Introduction

The ostensibly "humane" genre of modernism that the Finnish modernist architect Alvar Aalto became – and remains – renowned for is often attributed to the significance accorded to nature in Finnish culture. Biomorphic readings view Aalto's curved formal language and natural material palette as literal transcriptions of the Finnish landscape of lakes and ridges, or as metaphors of biological forms such as forest flora from his motherland.[1] The "ghostwriter" of the Modern Movement, Sigfried Giedion – to quote Hilde Heynen's apt characterisation – influentially diagnosed Finnishness as a fundamental ingredient in Aalto's architectural project: "Finland is with Aalto wherever he goes."[2] Yet the other broadly acknowledged influence that animated Aalto's creative praxis alongside his native roots, and which Aalto himself lyrically described, was Italy. Ernesto Rogers memorably considered Aalto "not only the best Finnish architect […] but also the best Italian architect (because so far none of us [Italians] have penetrated so deeply into the roots of our ancient art): his aesthetic synthesises the spontaneous Finnish traditions and the rather more complex tradition he assimilated in Italy."[3]

It is this assimilation of "Italianness" that has been evoked as the key determinant to explain why the architecture of Santa Maria Assunta in Riola di Vergato (1965-1980), a commanding concrete church nestled in a valley some fifty kilometres southwest of central Bologna, appears to contrast with the rest of Aalto's sacred portfolio. The last of Aalto's seven churches to be realised, and the only Catholic exception to an otherwise Lutheran group of projects, "the church in Riola is unlike any of Aalto's previous religious buildings."[4] Its exceptional structural lucidity has been associated with the strong lineage of early 20th century Italian design culture – ostensibly more "streamlined" and technical in flavour than Nordic variants of modernism, which are characterised instead as being rooted in site sensitivity and responsiveness to context – more than the six realised churches that preceded it.[5] Its piazza and campanile, furthermore, have been seen as the fulfilment of Alvar Aalto's life-long yearning to build in Italy proper, having "practiced" Italianate design gestures in preceding decades in Finland, where his "vision of transforming Jyväskylä into a northern Florence" led to the application of Ancient Mediterranean architectural types such as the atrium and the amphitheatre into sub-Arctic geocultural environments.[6] **[Fig. 1]**

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1 Teija Isohauta, "The Diversity of Timber in Alvar Aalto's Architecture: Forests, Shelter and Safety," *Architectural Research Quarterly 17*, no. 3-4 (2014): 269-280.

2 Hilde Heynen, "Modernity and Community. A Difficult Combination," in *Making a New World. Architecture & Communities in Interwar Europe*, ed. Rajesh Heynicx and Tom Avermaete (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 70; Sigfried Giedion, "Irrationalität und Standard," *Weltwoche*, May 2, 1941, quoted in Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, "Alvar Aalto and the Geopolitics of Fame," *Perspecta*, no. 37 (2005): 86.

3 Ernesto Rogers, "Le responsabilità verso la tradizione," *Casabella-Continuità*, no. 202 (1954): 1.

4 Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 224.

5 William Charles Miller, *Nordic Modernism: Scandinavian Architecture 1890-2015* (Ramsbury: The Crowood Press, 2016).

6 Nils C. Finne, "The Workers' Club of Jyväskylä by Alvar Aalto: The Importance of Beginnings," *Perspecta 27* (1992): 53.

Making reference to archival research conducted between 2016 and 2021, this article seeks to enrich extant accounts of Santa Maria Assunta's inception and design.[7] It argues that, more than Alvar Aalto's "Italian Fever," the design of Santa Maria Assunta testifies to his and Elissa Aalto's selective, and pragmatic, engagement with Bolognese post-war religious discourse on the city and the role of the church therein.[8] Santa Maria Assunta, commissioned as part of greater Bologna's urban church-building program, is a product of the push-and-pull between local actors on the one hand, who were committed to the (sub)

7 For a comprehensive summary of recent research on Aalto's religious oeuvre, see Sofia Singler, *The Religious Architecture of Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto* (London: Lund Humphries, 2023).

8 Harry Charrington, "The Makings of a Surrounding World: The Public Spaces of the Aalto Atelier" (PhD diss., London School of Economics, 2008), 67.

Fig. 1
Alvar and Aino Aalto, Church of Muurame, 1926–9. Perspective, n.d. Signum 20-117 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

urbanisation of the Catholic church as an institution and to the popularisation of its architecture, and a famed Nordic architectural practice on the other hand, whose co-directors were unconvinced by both the social and architectural fruits of twentieth-century efforts to "update" religious life.

Aalto's only Italian Church: Personal and Professional Fulfilment?

Alvar Aalto's unending admiration for Italy was sparked by his and Aino Aalto's honeymoon to Tuscany in October 1924. (The trip was Aino's second to Italy, but Aalto's first.) The young couple returned to their home and studio in Jyväskylä, Finland, wholly enamoured and inspired by what they had experienced. Subsequent projects, ranging from modest private villas and competition entries for churches and chapels, embodied lessons learned from the *architettura minore* of the Tuscan countryside as well as Florentine Renaissance jewels. Most famously, Alberti's Rucellai Sepulchre (1455-1460) was transposed by the Aaltos into secular form in their design for the Jyväskylä Workers' Club (1924-1925).[9] Thirty years after the honeymoon, and following countless more journeys to his favoured country, Aalto described the central role played by Italy in his imagination:

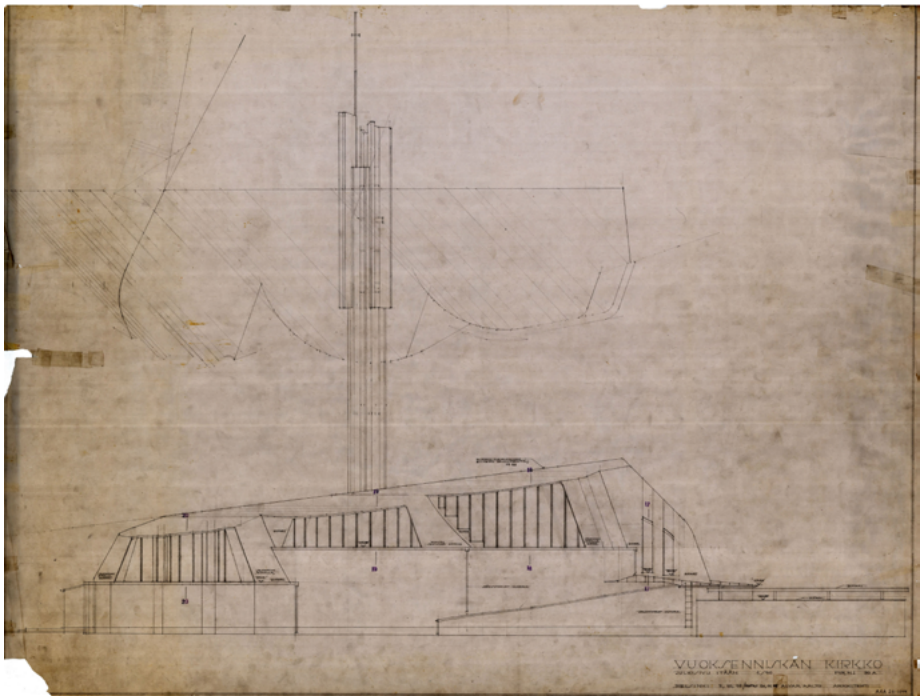
> I don't want to talk about a particular trip, because in my soul there always is a trip to Italy. Perhaps a trip made in the past that keeps coming back to my memory, a trip on which I am, or maybe a trip that I will take. Such a trip is perhaps a conditio sine qua non for my architectural work.[10]

Aalto's love affair with Italy remained one-sided for decades, however. Following its rapid ascent to international fame, sparked by breakthrough projects such as the Finnish Pavilion at the New York World Fair (1939), Alvar Aalto Architects Ltd. went on to complete a suite of projects outside Finland from the 1930s onward. Yet Italy remained conspicuously absent from the portfolio until the 1950s. Aalto's decades-long emotional engagement with his beloved Italy finally promised to assume architectural form in the project for an atelier for painter and designer Roberto Sambonet in Como (1954-1955). Left unrealised, the lakeside villa appears, in retrospect, a sorry omen for bad luck in Italy in the decade to come. Aalto's goal of building something on the "hallowed ground" of Italy turned out "quite difficult to accomplish […] time and again the fata morgana of shimmering palaces and dancing fountains loomed before him, only to vanish into thin air when he approached."[11] Under the co-directorship of Elissa Aalto (1922-1994), who in 1952 married Alvar Aalto and immediately took the wheel of the firm, eight projects were designed by the practice in Italy in the

9 Francesco Dal Co, "Aalto e Alberti," *Casabella*, no. 659 (1998): 66-75.

10 Alvar Aalto, "Viaggio in Italia," *Casabella-Continuità,* no. 200 (1954): 5.

11 Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Mature Years,* 220.



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1950s and 1960s. Only two were ever realised: the Finnish Pavilion in Venice (1955-1956) and the church of Santa Maria Assunta in Riola di Vergato.[12]

Because the Venetian pavilion was intended to be temporary – it has since been both renovated and protected in several cycles – the church in Riola di Vergato is often characterised as the ultimate, and only, fulfilment of Aalto's lifelong dream to build in Italy.[13] After decades of inspiring trips to Italy, close relationships with Italian colleagues, and a flurry of unrealised projects in the Italian peninsula, Santa Maria Assunta has been cast as the gratifying conclusion to a string of frustrations, and the climax of a lifelong cultural passion, if not pathological obsession. For this reason, it has been common to assume that, despite his fame and confidence on the international architectural scheme, Alvar Aalto was unusually deferential to the local client and context, which in turn might explain the project's apparent unrelatedness to the rest of Aalto's sacred oeuvre. Effectively, the assumption has been that *Il Maestro* was willing to relinquish a degree of design control in order not to jeopardise the precious, and final, opportunity to build in what he considered the "Promised Land."[14]

The assumption of partial surrender, in design terms, has been suggested as the reason behind the sobriety, linearity and structural lucidity of Santa Maria Assunta, whose spatial character deviates from the more lyrical language of prior Aalto churches. Consider the way in which undulating walls and vaults meld together, like billowing sheets, in the Church of the Three Crosses in Imatra, Finland (1955-1958), the first of Aalto's post-war churches to be realised, which was hailed both in Finland and abroad as a singular achievement, "far

12 Esa Laaksonen and Silvia Micheli, eds., *Aalto Beyond Finland, Vol. 2: Projects, Buildings and Networks* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Academy and Alvar Aalto Foundation, 2018), 154-159.

13 Timo Keinänen, ed., *Alvar Aalto: The Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale* (Milan: Electa, 1990).

14 Louna Lahti, *Alvar Aalto – Ex Intimo: Alvar Aalto through the Eyes of Family, Friends & Colleagues* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2001), 54.

Fig. 2
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Church of the Three Crosses, Imatra, 1955–8. East elevation, October 3, 1956. Signum 20-1099 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

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from either historical or fashionable form, and completely impartial."[15] Known as Finland's "first free-form church," the nave of the Three Crosses is defined by "its lack of overall formal consistency; each view shows new detail, construction, and forms" and "unity is achieved not through the classical devices of symmetry, balance, repetition, and simple geometric ordering, but through the proliferation of many symbiotically linked individual events **[Fig. 2]**."[16] Or consider the haptic and visual warmth of the timber-panelled vault that bends over the Church of the Holy Ghost in Wolfsburg, Germany (1960-1962), much less alluring in terms of plastic ambiguity than the Three Crosses, yet still indicative of a "signature Aalto touch" in terms of textural richness.[17]

In contrast, the concrete ribs of Santa Maria Assunta are geometrically clean, visually lucid, and spatially dominant elements whose mathematical tenor establishes an unusually pure – if not almost purist or austere – legibility in the design. Scholars and critics have been puzzled by the fact that "at Riola, unusually for Aalto, the structural system dominates the interior. This is a clumsy affair of reinforced concrete frames, like over-sized bent-wood chair legs (Aalto's development of the chair-leg as 'the little sister of the column' was as felicitous as its reverse here is disastrous)".[18] **[Fig. 3]** Was Aalto willing to sacrifice his predilection for a softer, romantic register in favour of locals' insistence on a

15 Walter Moser, "Lutherische Kirche in Imatra, Finnland: 1956–1958, Architekt: Prof. Alvar Aalto, Helsinki," *Das Werk: Architektur und Kunst 46*, no. 8 (1959): 289-293.

16 Michael Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 166.

17 The client parish even advised Aalto against too much timber in the interior, fearing it may result in an ambiance too 'rustic' for a city as industrial in character as Wolfsburg. Sofia Singler and Maximilian Sternberg, "The Civic and the Sacred: Alvar Aalto's Churches and Parish Centres in Wolfsburg, 1960-68," *Architectural History 62* (2019): 226.

18 Richard Weston, *Alvar Aalto* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 213.

Fig. 3
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Nave. Photographer unknown, n.d. (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

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more streamlined architectural language, perhaps indebted to the strong Italian tradition of industrial design and engineering?

Another factor pointed to as supplementary explanation for Santa Maria Assunta's unusual spatio-structural purity is professional opportunism. Aalto's personal lack of faith and conscious absence from religious discourse, as documented by his biographer Göran Schildt and others, has fuelled the assumption that he accepted sacral commissions mainly as opportunities to explore novel design solutions, which could then inform the rest of the practice's portfolio. His continued interest in ecclesiastical projects has been explained largely by the creative freedom, scale and programmatic complexity offered by such commissions, which allowed him to "manipulate both space and light to magical effect."[19] Schildt went as far as to characterise Aalto's personal relationship to religion as "an almost Voltairean antipathy," highlighting how both Aalto's upbringing and education, at the Jyväskylä Lyceum in central Finland, had emphasised the tradition of French scientific rationalism.[20] If the rest of Aalto's oeuvre is often analysed in relation to the philosophical and ethical principles he expounded in his speeches and writings – from his empathy for the "little man" to his theories of "flexible standardisation" – his denunciation of religion, at least in public, has limited analyses of Santa Maria Assunta and other churches to opportunistic and somewhat frivolous experimentation.

In short, it has been considered "somewhat of a paradox" that an unbelieving architect would design so many churches with such commitment and gusto.[21]

19 Weston, *Alvar Aalto*, 206.

20 Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Complete Catalogue of Architecture, Design and Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 39.

21 Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Complete Catalogue of Architecture, Design and Art*, 81.

Fig. 4
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Church of the Three Crosses, Imatra, 1955–8. East window and wall. Photograph by Heikki Havas, n.d. (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

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Efforts to read Aalto's religious oeuvre in terms other than artistic ambition have been limited to Schildt's argument that rather than religious dogma, Aalto's sacred projects express his conception of harmony, rooted in the Ancient Greek idea of the *kosmos* as well as a Goethean understanding of natural order.[22] In Schildt's reading, Aalto's conception of harmony was not unique to the religious context, although it found clearer expression there than in secular projects:

[T]here was, after all, a tenable ideological reason for Aalto's involvement in sacred buildings. Not that he was moved by the mystique of suffering preached by Christian doctrine any more than by its transcendental ideas of the hereafter; instead, he had a deeply-held belief in the inherent harmony of existence […] in which everything must be in correct proportion to the totality of things.[23]

As is often the case in the history and historiography of modern architecture, black and white photography has contributed to seminal interpretations made of the Aaltos' sacred spaces, reinforcing the assumption that the practice's churches were predominantly opportunistic endeavours. Images of Aalto churches are typically cropped and angled so as to emphasise the most lyrical aspects of their interiors. The photographic representation of Church of the Three Crosses, for instance, has served to highlight its perceived position as "the most convincing evidence of [Alvar Aalto's] ability to convert the plastic plan into a three-dimensional plasticity".[24] **[Fig. 4]**

22 Göran Schildt, *Näin puhui Alvar Aalto* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), 28.

23 Schildt, *The Complete Catalogue*, 39.

24 Malcolm Quantrill, *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), 30.

Fig. 5
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Sectional model, n.d. (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

The photographic record of Santa Maria Assunta, in contrast, has served to highlight its structural bravado – and its relative sobriety compared to the practice's prior ecclesiastical projects. Widely circulated images of a sectional model of the nave draw focus on the accordion-like folds of skylights and the ribs that carry them as the protagonists of the design. [Fig. 5] The most famous photographs taken *in situ* reinforce the impressions made by the model: the spatial clarity of the nave is magnified by the generous light in which it bathes, the prefabricated concrete arches spotlighted literally and metaphorically by the skylights above. The near-mysticism communicated by photographs of Aalto's prior sacred projects in Finland and Germany – as epitomised by views from behind columns in the Church of the Three Crosses in Imatra, or the undulating, fabric-like altar wall of the Church of St Stephen in Wolfsburg (1963-1968) – seems to have been replaced by an exceptional degree of spatial perspicuity and structural legibility in Santa Maria Assunta. The fulfilment of personal and professional desires in Riola di Vergato appears to have resulted in a preternatural tranquillity whose essence is embodied in the clarity of the church itself – or so it has been assumed.

Modulating Liturgical Modernity

New research on Santa Maria Assunta, as well as on Studio Aalto's religious oeuvre at large, suggests that prior narratives of the design are misleadingly uncomplicated, however. Santa Maria Assunta was not merely an outcome of Alvar Aalto uncritically appeasing the client in order to complete a long-desired commission on Italian soil. Neither was it the sole result of opportunistic structural and artistic experimentation, an anomalous late-career reinterpretation of the smoothness of Italian engineering and product design culture, produced as an unexpected conclusion to an oeuvre previously focused on organic romanticism. Instead, the architecture of Santa Maria Assunta embodies the way in which Alvar and Elissa Aalto selectively accepted, adapted and appropriated ideas drawn from Bolognese post-war religious discourse into their own ecclesiastical architecture. Although Alvar Aalto's personal appreciation for Italian culture and architecture was palpable, this love did not mean that he undiscerningly accepted everything demanded by his client or promoted in Italian religious or architectural discourses. Instead, his and Elissa Aalto's engagement with the sacred architecture of the twentieth century and *particularly* its relationship to the city was selective and, at times, even confrontational.

Key to the Aaltos' relationship with Bolognese discourse on the city and the sacred was their engagement with local figures who were directly involved, at the highest level, in programmes of liturgical renewal and parochial urbanisation. Of course, the 1950s and 1960s defined a pivotal era in the ecclesiastical architectural history of Bologna. Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro (1891-1976), Archbishop of Bologna, who had been actively engaged with the liturgical movement since the 1930s, established a church-building programme for the Red City. The programme was a response to the scarcity of religious space in rapidly urban-

ising Bologna: some sixty new churches were needed to ensure worship access to all parishioners, especially in the suburbs.[25] Lercaro strategically sought the services and collaboration of the most famed architects of the mid-century. He invited Alvar Aalto to the inaugural Congress on sacred architecture and art in 1955, along with the likes of Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier. Although Aalto did not accept the invitation, Lercaro's interest in him remained – and likely only augmented – during the following years, when Alvar Aalto Architects Ltd. completed a quartet of churches to virtually unanimous acclaim in Finland and Germany: the aforementioned churches of the Three Crosses in Imatra and the Holy Ghost and St Stephen in Wolfsburg, as well as the Cross of the Plains (1958-1960) in Seinäjoki, Western Finland.

In the mid-1960s, a decade after the Congress, Lercaro presented Aalto with the invitation to design one of the new churches of Bologna. An initial, informal letter was delivered to Aalto by a Finnish diploma student in architecture, who served as an international correspondent for *Chiesa e Quartiere*. Lercaro submitted a formal request a few months later, in Florence in 1965, at the occasion of a major exhibition on Aalto's work at the Palazzo Strozzi, the first time the duo met in person. Aalto accepted immediately. The suggested site was just outside Bologna, in Riola di Vergato. The brief, translated into Finnish by an employee of the Aalto studio, made clear Lercaro's demand that the architecture be modern, the liturgy be modern, and the urban disposition be modern.[26] Given Lercaro's directorship of the commission responsible for the implementation of the Council's liturgical recommendations (*Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia*), the brief naturally aimed for the new building to epitomise the courageous changes brought about by Vatican II, especially its participatory ethos.

Liturgy was a key instrument which the Church institution employed to address its self-diagnosed need to encourage participation among the *fedeli*. The seeds for post-war liturgical reform had been sown between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, when the Catholic Church underwent significant liturgical transformations animated by "Christ-centred" theology.[27] Architecturally, Christ-centredness was typically interpreted spatially as altar-centredness. The dominance of directional plans was questioned as a result of the will to highlight the altar as the central focus of ecclesiastical space: officiating clergy and laity were invited to worship together in the same space around the altar, thereby purportedly promoting of a sense of community among them.[28] The designs of architects such as Dominikus Böhm and Martin Weber materialised the altar's recasting from a cultic locus of the clergy to a site of congregational

25 Angelina Alberigo, ed., *Giacomo Lercaro. Vescovo della chiesa di Dio 1891-1978* (Genoa: Marietti, 1991); Claudia Manenti, ed., *Il Cardinale Lercaro e La Città Contemporanea* (Bologna: Editrici Compositori, 2010).

26 Marjatta Hietaniemi, "Alvar Aallon suunnitelma Riolan kirkoksi: sijoittuminen ja suhde maisemaan" (Master Thesis, University of Jyväskylä, 2003), 15-17.

27 Albert Gerhards, "Spaces for Active Participation. Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Catholic Church Architecture," in *Europäischer Kirchenbau, 1950-2000 = European Church Architecture, 1950-2000,* ed. Wolfgang Jean Stock (Munich, London: Prestel, 2002), 19.

28 Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [1918], trans. Ada Lane (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930).

activity, informed by the principle of *circumstantes*, gathering around the altar.

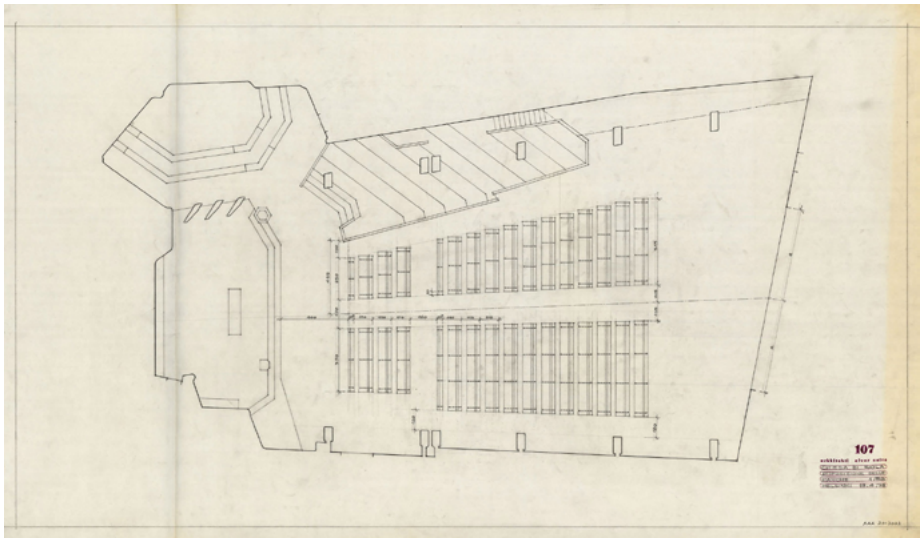
Post-war, the Catholic campaign for *aggiornamento* – updating – climaxed in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), whose promotion of free-standing altars solidified worship *versus populum* as the new norm. Officiating clergy would celebrate the Eucharist facing the congregation rather than the apse (*versus apsidem* or *versus orientem*).[29] Other recommend reforms, rooted in earlier renewal movements, included a new model of communion procession and placing the baptismal font closer to the altar. Architecturally, these reforms were manifest in the apse no longer being separated from the nave, the altar area being set only marginally higher or at the same level as the congregation space, and the pulpit – indeed even accusation – among liturgists, exemplified by seminal texts such as Peter Hammond's *Liturgy and Architecture* (1960) – was that the basilical plan had distanced the congregation from the altar and clergy, and hindered participation in worship. *Versus populum,* in contrast, would engage believers "in a corporate liturgical act in which everyone celebrates."[30]

The evolution of the plans of Santa Maria Assunta illustrates not just how post-war liturgical ideals shaped the Aaltos' design, but also how they were moderated and manipulated iteratively by the architects during its development. In each successive version, the project became wider, shorter, and boxier. Alvar Aalto personally preferred a traditional basilical plan, but Cardinal Lercaro pushed for a wider space in light with his Vatican II -fuelled ambition to bring the faithful to Mass in a participatory way. Rather dramatically, an entire bay of the church was ultimately removed, to make it even shorter and thus more "participatory".[31] [Fig. 6] Although the *parti* of Santa Maria Assunta nonetheless remained predominantly long in the – whose basic template for a church is a wedged plan that is clearly longer than wider, – the concrete ribs established a transverse pull across the space, visually foreshortening the main longitudinal axis and thereby satisfying the liturgical reformist impulse to encourage "active participation" by decreasing the distance between the congregation and the altar. The perspective drawings of the church similarly illustrate how mechanisms of renewal, as promoted by Cardinal Lercaro, took architectural shape, and were adapted by the Aaltos piecemeal as the project developed. Santa Maria Assunta ended up the only church in which the Aaltos agreed to omit an altar rail entirely, no doubt a consequence of Cardinal Lercaro's liturgical insistence. [Fig. 7] It would not have been a frictionless compromise, as the altar accorded special meaning in Alvar Aalto's understanding of sacred architecture. He steadfastly held that, despite the pressures to allow for maximum flexibility, which shaped the design of his Finnish – and which prefigured the conclusions eventually

29 Gerhards, "Spaces for Active Participation," 25.

30 Stephen Hackett, "Postconciliar Church Design," in *Vatican Council II: Reforming Liturgy*, ed. Carmel Pilcher, David Orr and Elizabeth Harrington (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2013), 239; Peter Hammond, *Liturgy and Architecture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Peter Hammond, *Towards a Church Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1962).

31 Alvar Aalto Museum Archives, Santa Maria Assunta, "Riolan kirkko," 492 drawings.



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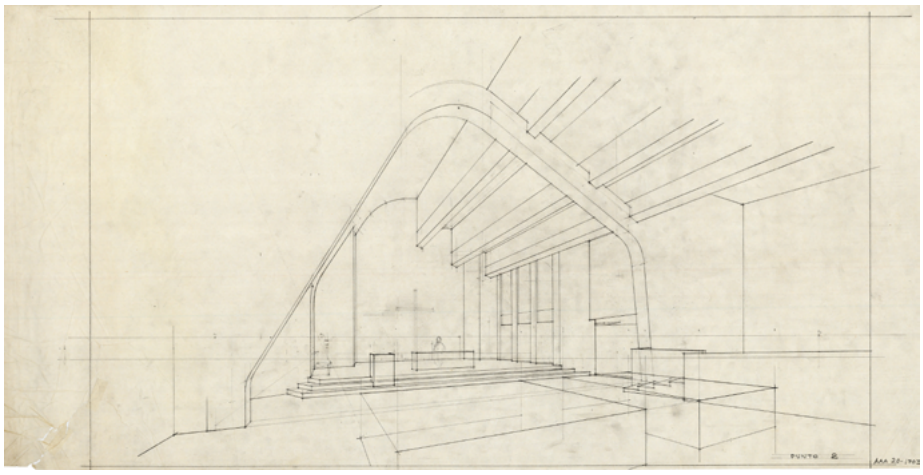

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reached at Vatican II – the altar remain unmoveable, commanding, and heavy.[32] Even in parishes that explicitly asked Alvar and Elissa Aalto to design for liturgy *versus populum*, altars were never set on the same level as the congregation, and altar areas' dignity never curtailed in material quality or detailing. In terms of its express allowance for worship *versus populum*, Santa Maria Assunta thus stands as the most liturgically modern of Aalto's religious works.

The maturation of the project from a relatively traditionalist basilical plan to an increasingly wide nave which would support *versus populum* liturgy was unsteady. Rather than immediately acceding to Lercaro's wishes and thus to the recommendations set out by Vatican II, Alvar and Elissa Aalto pushed for a more traditional liturgy than what the Catholic Church envisioned. Liturgically, the final construction is an illustration of the tensions that arose between designer and client, rather than a straightforward translation of Lercaro's – or the Second Vatican Council's – ideals into built form.[33]

Fig. 6
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Schematic ground floor plan showing the arrangement of the pews, scale 1:50, April 19, 1978. Signum 20-2022 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

Fig. 7
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Perspective, altar area, n.d. Signum 20-1703 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

32 Letter from Ernst Korritter to Alvar Aalto, August 12, 1968, Alvar Aalto Museum Archives, "Wolfsburg. Detmerode."

33 Arto Kuorikoski and Sofia Singler, "Building for Change: Liturgy and Architecture in Alvar and Elissa Aalto's Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato," in peer review (expected publication 2025).

Urban Participation Versus Sacred Seclusion

In addition to conforming to the new liturgy, Cardinal Lercaro asked that the new church in Riola di Vergato be modern – that is, participatory – in its urban disposition. After all, the commission was for one of many new churches to be built in urban and suburban Bologna, and liturgy was not the only facet of churchly modernisation. "In order to become a pastoral and social project, [Lercaro's program of participation] must also become an architectural and urban project."[34] The bureau *Ufficio nuove chiese di periferia* specifically addressed how architecture could be employed to support pastoral life and welfare provisions in the ever-expanding outskirts of metropolitan Bologna.[35] Other than via modern liturgy, how could new-build sacral architecture speak meaningfully to modern urban contexts?

The Cardinal explicitly acknowledged the need for sacred space to have and retain a "spirit of its own" – a sentiment with which Alvar Aalto would have readily agreed – yet envisioned this spirit being nestled in the rest of the city, "set in the world of the secular buildings that surround it, with which it divides the space and creates the city."[36] Aalto, in contrast, believed that in order to establish its own identity in an increasingly commercial age, sacred space necessitated a degree of seclusion rather than urban integration. Therefore, Aalto was not convinced about the Catholic Church's self-diagnosed need to build more worship space in urban and suburban – a strategy that Protestant Churches took up in parallel, including in Aalto's native Finland, just as straightforwardly as they had adopted the Catholic Church's liturgical reforms to their own agendas.[37]

As much as Alvar Aalto admired how churches had traditionally marked the centre of town in Italian villages as in Finnish ones, his conviction was that in a modern age, a degree of separation was needed instead. Urban contexts were developing so densely, so commercially and so homogenously that setting the church building into urban or suburban loci without enough mediation risked downplaying its hierarchical importance over secular buildings. Aalto considered "all cultic sites and sacred areas, churches, and so on" worthy of special emphasis in the cityscape, their treatment distinct from secular counterparts.[38] Yet the dominance of commercial building had, in Aalto's words, "grown to such proportions that governmental and other public buildings can no longer compete with it," ruining the traditional hierarchy in which the sacred trumped the civic, and the civic the commercial.[39] In effect, the assertive position accorded

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34 Gaetano Adolfo Comiati, "Giacomo Lercaro in Bologna. An Influential and Paradigmatic Event between 'Experiences, Hopes, Defeats,'" *Actas de Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea*, no. 7 (2020): 55.

35 Claudia Manenti, *La Campagna Nuove Chiese del Cardinale Lercaro* (Bologna: Minerva Soluzioni Editoriali, 2023).

36 Giacomo Lercaro, *La chiesa nella città: discorsi e interventi sull'architettura sacra* (San Paolo: Cinisello Balsamo, 1996), 17.

37 Sven Sterken and Eva Weyns, eds., *Territories of Faith: Religion, Urban Planning and Demographic Change in Post-War Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022).

38 Alvar Aalto, "Julkisten rakennusten dekadenssi," *Arkkitehti*, no. 9–10 (1953): 144-148.

39 Aalto, "Julkisten rakennusten dekadenssi", 144-148.

to religious buildings in the past was no longer a *fait accompli*, due to which hierarchy had to be attained through alternate means – typically, separation. Aalto's preference for dissociating a church from the city-centre was not due to an aversion to religious elements in the cityscape, but a mechanism to guard a sense of the sacred.

Hence, in instances where the firm was able to choose a site for a church building, the preferred option was the least urban possible. For instance, in Imatra, a new town on Finland's border with the USSR, for which Alvar Aalto Architects Ltd. had drawn up the master plan some years earlier, Aalto and his associates chose a plot removed from the urban spine of the municipality. Their chosen site was closer to industrial lands and forests than residential or civic neighbourhoods. Its relative isolation was underscored further by the architects' decision not to set the church even in the new "centre of town" designed as a detailed addendum to the master plan, which, if realised, would have comprised a theatre, gallery, town hall, library, and various other civic functions. The chosen plot, instead, sat in a peripheral area zoned as "forest" – a marker of his decision to build a forest church for a forest town. Initial sketches for the church explore the possibility of a piazza mediating between the church and street; the idea was discarded almost immediately in favour of setting the church deep into the forest, with only winding paths leading up to the building concealed among the trees.[40]

When a choice of site was not granted and a plot in a decidedly urban environ came predetermined – usually cases in which the client parish or competition brief mandated a plot in the city-centre – members of the Aalto studio submitted to the task, albeit somewhat reluctantly. The focus then became on ensuring a due degree of separation between the city and the sacred through architectural means. The plot of the Church of the Cross in Lahti (1969-1979), the penultimate church completed by the studio, is not only urban, but monumentally so: it sits at the northern end of a grand street that cuts through the city, facing Eliel Saarinen's Town Hall (1910-1912) at the southern end. Together, the two monuments form an *axis mundi* for the town, with sacred and secular poles at either end.[41] Because of the monumentality of the site, urbanity was not as distasteful for the Aaltos as elsewhere. The hierarchical significance of the plot was undeniable, thanks to which the resultant church did not risk being conflated with other functions. Still, as if to pre-empt future developments that might decrease the due degree of valorisation accorded to the church, its exterior is somewhat defensive in tone. A mute brick crust guards the light interior from the world beyond with the impervious solemnity of a fortress wall: the façades do not invite the city in as much as guard the nave from the world beyond.

In Wolfsburg, Germany, the plot presented to the studio for their design of St. Stephen's Church was suburban, and, to the Aaltos' chagrin, set into the heart of a shopping centre. The inescapability of the commercial context led the architects

40 Singler, *The Religious Architecture of Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto*, 37-38.

41 Mauri Malkavaara, *Ristinkirkko* (Lahti: Lahden seurakuntayhtymä, 1998).

to opt for a strong gesture of denial, where "the marble-clad façade of the nave presents a closed front to the adjacent shopping mall."[42] Although they reluctantly agreed to "integrate" the church into the shopping precinct in line with the parish's wishes, throughout different design iterations the Aaltos held on to the ambition "to valorise the church" by establishing an architectural sense of separation between the sacred interior and profane exterior.[43]

In contrast, the little valley in Riola di Vergato, at a distance from the urban core and suburban peripheries of Bologna, must have been a relief. Notwithstanding the fact that the commission for the church arose from an urban church-building scheme, the site, at least compared to many others selected for the same initiative, was relatively isolated in the manner he would have desired. Reportedly, Alvar Aalto specifically "requested a rural rather than urban setting" when he accepted Lercaro's commission.[44]

Lercaro's understanding of an urban disposition was not just about the location of the site, of course. Another aspect was reaching out to the city by means of quasi-secular programming, a pastoral strategy epitomised by the construction of parish centres and parochial complexes (the former a standalone building that combined, under one roof, secular functions with sacred space – a genre of "multifunction church" – and the latter a collection of sacred and secular buildings bunched together, including a church alongside spaces such as sports halls or daycare centres). Meek and unassuming, parish complexes embodied the Church's attempt to react to decreased membership and to dismantle the public perception of its ostentatiousness during post-war austerity. Its "voluntary relinquishment of self-representation" led to the promotion of multipurpose architectures, whose massing, elevations and interiors were hardly distinguished from those of other public buildings.[45] Parochial complexes were deemed material expressions of the theological ambition to extend outreach particularly in urban settings, and of the decreasing dominance of Mass as the most critical ecclesiastic ritual.[46] Since the wars had "demanded heavy sacrifices from parishes,"Finnish architect Rafael Blomstedt acknowledged, a due sense of architectural humility was now necessary to reflect the "cultural, practical and aesthetic values" appropriate to the post-war context.[47] The rationing of building materials had already subjected monumentality to intense questioning in European ecclesiastical architectural debate. Furthermore, the construction of complexes devoted to spaces of socialisation and learning triggered less opposition than the erection of new-build churches proper.[48]

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42 Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto Guide*, 205.

43 Singler and Sternberg, "The Civic and the Sacred," 228.

44 Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto Guide*, 206.

45 Horst Schwebel, "An Aversion to Grand Gestures: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Protestant Church Architecture," in *Europäischer Kirchenbau, 1950-2000 = European Church Architecture, 1950-2000,* ed. Wolfgang Jean Stock (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 219.

46 Schwebel, "An Aversion to Grand Gestures: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Protestant Church Architecture", 219.

47 Rafael Blomstedt, "Seurakunta ja rakennuskulttuuri," *Arkkitehti*, no.1 (1944): 20-21.

48 Schwebel, "An Aversion to Grand Gestures," 219.

In line with contemporaneous ideals of multipurpose sacred spaces, in Riola di Vergato, Cardinal Lercaro envisioned an entire parochial complex rather than a singular church. In Lercaro's vision, the complex was to include, in addition to the church proper, a church clergy house, parochial club spaces, a nursing home, a kindergarten and, in a manner typical of Catholic youth work, a football field and other subsidiary functions.[49] The trouble was that, mirroring his scepticism toward liturgical renewal, Alvar Aalto was hesitant to "modernise" the urban disposition of churches via the inclusion of participatory functions within or around them. For him, parochial complexes were unsatisfactory hybrids, neither sacred nor secular enough. Rather than "update" or enrich religious life in a meaningful way, in Aalto's mind, parochial complexes had robbed "from church buildings their character as public buildings."[50]

Alvar Aalto was not a lone critic. In fact, throughout Europe, architects appeared more "conservative" than clergy with regard to the new building types. In Finland, the national Lutheran Church's cultural affairs committee organised a joint conference with the Finnish Association of Architects to address the problem of the "form and content" of parish centres in 1957.[51] Architects expressed dismay at the clergy's unbridled enthusiasm for parish centres, arguing that the dignity of churches was still needed in modern times – a position attributed in part to a modernist insistence on the functional separation of spaces.[52] Clergy, in turn, countered that the only architectural way for the Church to communicate its ambition to meet people in their everyday lives, was to build more humbly, to create an "ordinary" version of an architecture that had for centuries sought to be "extraordinary." Nonetheless, even in Bologna, the prime "laboratory" for the Catholic Church's architectural (sub)urbanisation project, ideals of simplicity and "evangelical poverty" were not always straightforward qualities to translate into built form. Giuseppe Vaccaro, for instance, chose to incorporate rather than downplay the "orienting quality" of older churches into his design of San Giovanni Bosco (1963-1968), consciously seeking to counterpoise the contemporary language of the church with clear, and ostensibly more traditionalist, urban legibility.[53]

Alvar Aalto's distaste for parochial centres was apparent from the earliest sketches for the *complesso parrocchiale* in Riola di Vergato, which make the clear the hierarchical terms in which studio members treated the various components of the complex. The buildings were laid out along "a gradient of sacredness," where the parish centre, encompassing at least some religious functions, was allowed nearest the church, whereas the school and retirement home were

49 Alvar Aalto Museum Archives, *Riolan kirkko- ja tilaohjelma* [The brief for the church and parochial complex in Riola], signum 20A-196, n.d., "Riolan kirkko."

50 Alvar Aalto, "Vuoksenniskan kirkko," *Arkkitehti*, no. 12 (1959): 194-207.

51 Keijo Petäjä, "Seurakuntatyön ja arkkitehtuurin vaatimukset seurakuntataloja suunniteltaessa," *Arkkitehti*, no. 9-10 (1957): 159–60.

52 Oscar Ortiz-Nieminen, "Kaikenlaiselle toiminnalle tilaa riittää, kaikenlaisille seurakuntalaisille paikkoja on: monitoimikirkkoarkkitehtuuri Helsingin seudulla 1900–1960-luvuilla" (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2021).

53 Claudia Manenti, *Luoghi di Identità e Spazi del Sacro nella Città Europea Contemporanea* (Franco Angeli, 2012), 117.

set decidedly further away. It would be tempting to interpret the radiating lines drawn from the heart of the nave in one standout sketch as indications of such a gradient: hierarchical importance emanates from the sacredmost interior. [Fig. 8] Tellingly, napkin sketches of the required football field and swimming pool were produced, but never seriously incorporated into the site plan; the fact that nothing came of them would have presumably been a relief to the design team.[54]

As the project progressed, studio members had to accede to a tighter site plan, with the different buildings bundled up closer to one another. In response to the uncomfortable proximity of subsidiary functions to the church, a sinuous wall was laid out to separate the *edifici sociali* from the ecclesiastical spaces. [Fig. 9] It was as though the architects agreed to include in the project buildings which they viewed with disfavour, but then childishly or even petulantly underlined their dissatisfaction with the requirement. The push-and-pull between architect and client continued: in response to Lercaro's feedback, in a revised scheme, the parish centre was moved next to the church, to frame the long edge of the church piazza in front. The final version of the complex was "conceived not with the character of a perched citadel, but as a service open to the whole Riolese community," Lercaro noted with gratitude.[55] It embodied the "concept of the church as a place of community convocation of the people of God around the altar; a church that opens onto the city and extends into it, that participates in the flow of life of the city, not that isolates itself, but that is tied to the knot of the neighbourhood with works of fraternal mediation."[56]

In the site plan, the sole component which was granted direct connection to the church proper was the vicarage, the *casa canonica*. The parish building committee had specifically asked for the vicarage to be melded together with a parish centre, and for the combined spaces to be accessible by car.[57] Defying the request, Aalto studio members separated the parish spaces from the vicarage, and set the garage apart from both. Most significantly, the vicarage was attached to the church proper, exploiting the sacristy as a bridging element between the altar area and the *casa canonica*. [Fig. 10] The vicarage of Santa Maria Assunta is the only of Aalto's directly connected to a church. The solution may well have been a respectful nod to the Catholic context, and the role of Fathers therein – both a touching tribute by an Italophile to the culture he loved, and a gesture to underscore the unsatisfactoriness of parish centres. Whereas parochial complexes, in Aalto's mind, were driven by the misguided and somewhat populist ethos of "updating" the Church's outreach to twentieth-century paradigms of urbanised life, vicarages held in themselves a positively nostalgic vestige of the past, where village communities were steered not by bureaucratic entities but by local individuals and families, perhaps explaining Aalto's favourable attitude towards them.

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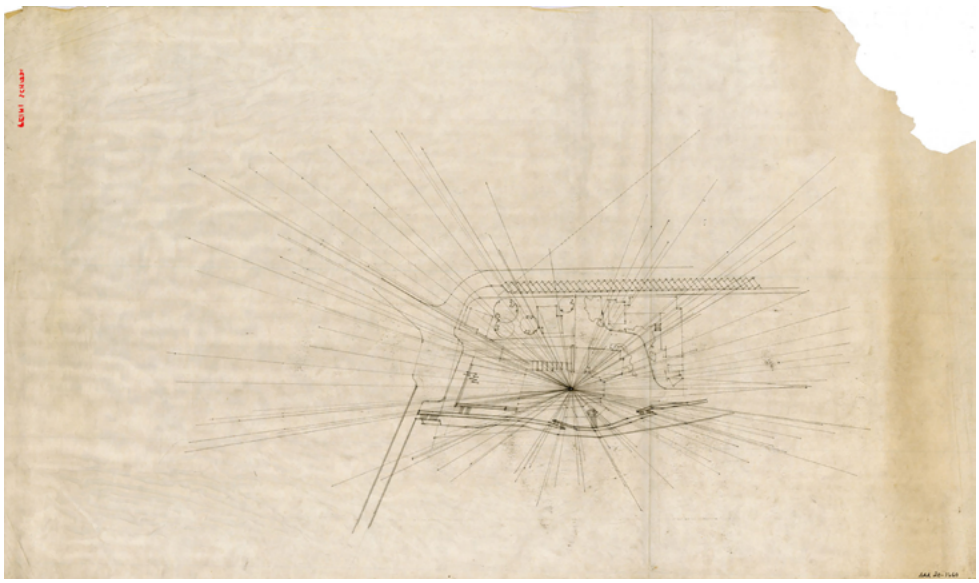
54 Hietaniemi, "Alvar Aallon suunnitelma Riolan kirkoksi," 142.

55 Giacomo Lercaro, "… Voi Tutti, Uomini di Buona Volontà," *Chiesa e Quartiere,* no. 40 (1966): 8-9.

56 Lercaro, "… Voi Tutti, Uomini di Buona Volontà", 8-9.

57 Hietaniemi, "Alvar Aallon suunnitelma Riolan kirkoksi," 131-134.



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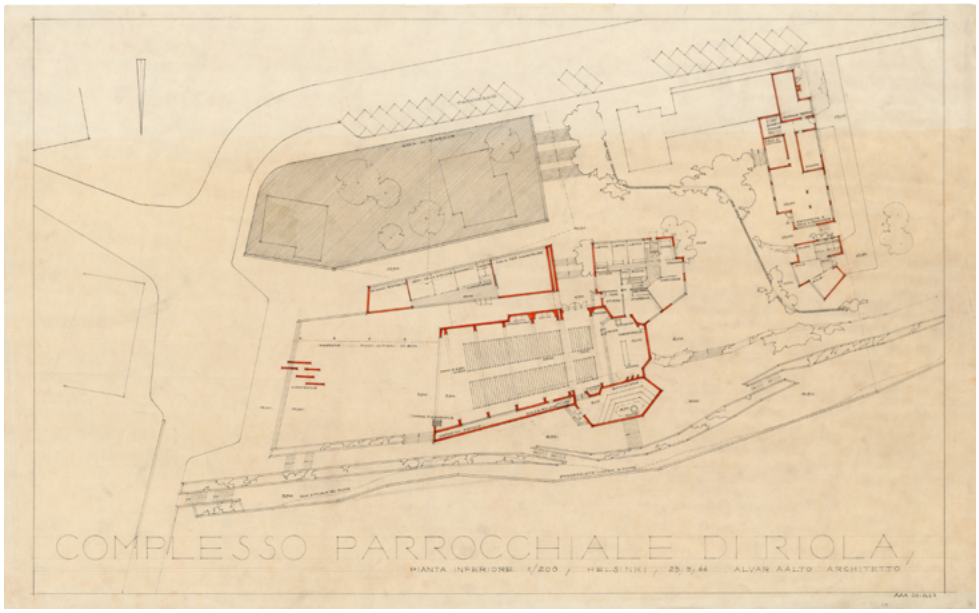

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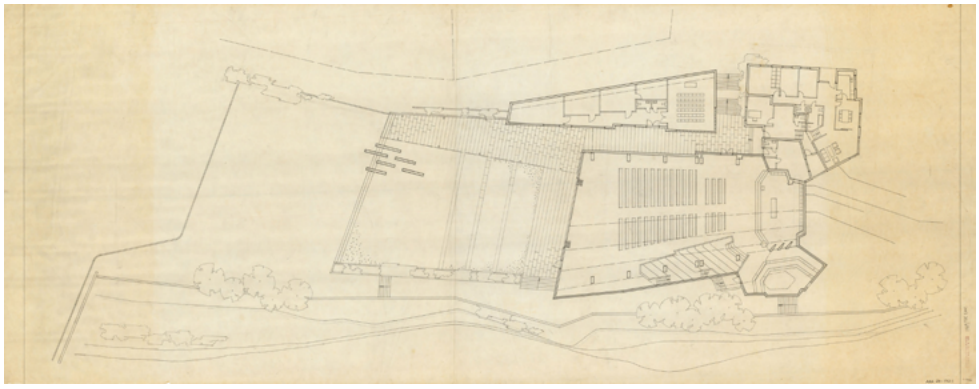

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Fig. 8
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Sketch, site plan. Signum 20-1660 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

Fig. 9
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Ground floor plan, scale 1:200, May 25, 1966. Signum 20-1667 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

Fig. 10
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Ground floor plan, scale 1:100, n.d. Signum 20-1723 (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

The exterior form and massing of Santa Maria Assunta pose interesting conclusions when interrogated in light of its hoped-for urbanity. Its stepped profile, which nestles into the mountain, might be considered a reformist gesture insofar as it departs from ecclesiastical tradition. On the one hand, its departure from the singular, monumental symmetries of traditionalist churches might be seen to conform with Cardinal Lercaro's vision of a *chiesa dei poveri*, where monumentality was downplayed and softened. (Similarly, in Eastern Finland some years earlier, Aalto's client priests had asked for the design of the Church of the Three Crosses to be, in architectural expression, "as obliging as God's grace."[58]) On the other hand, the stepped exterior may also be read as a snub to the urbanity underscored by Cardinal Lercaro and other "urban-minded" shepherds of churchly renewal programs. The massing of Santa Maria Assunta echoes the form of the surrounding topography, seeking to meld itself more with terrain than town: "Like the heavily-eroded profiles of the surrounding mountain ranges, the church appears as if part of the earth, fitting completely into the natural terrain, its interior a great primal cavern."[59] **[Fig. 11]** The design thus appears to communicate Aalto's view that, in a modern age, church buildings demanded a degree of separation from, rather than seamless integration with, urban life. A return to quasi-primitive cave typologies was more preferable than an open-doors sacral architecture woven into the commercial and civic quarters of the modern city.

Fig. 11
Alvar and Elissa Aalto, Santa Maria Assunta, Riola di Vergato, 1965–80. Exterior view looking northeast. Photograph by Maija Holma, n.d. (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

58 Singler, *The Religious Architecture of Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto*, 71.

59 Trencher, *The Alvar Aalto Guide*, 206.

Conclusion: Tensions between Timeliness and Timelessness

Scholarship interested primarily or solely in Alvar Aalto's biography, portfolio or personality have typically accorded insufficient significance to the extra-personal factors that shaped the making of the eponymous firm's religious architecture. Hence the historiographical stalemate in which evocations of Aalto's personal lack of faith have impeded enquiry into the churches designed by the atelier, and limited their analysis predominantly to questions of form, material, and lighting. In contrast, scholarship that approaches liturgical renewal as the *primus motor* of twentieth-century sacral architecture has, at times, overemphasised liturgical matters as generators of architectural form, and paid insufficient attention to designers' personal convictions – not just religious views but architectural opinions concerning sacredness, ambiance, hierarchy, and appropriateness.

The design of Santa Maria Assunta testifies to the manners in which modern sacred architecture was shaped by the dialogue and debate between the Church and the designers hired to give form to its twentieth-century mission. Neither Alvar Aalto's personal ethos nor liturgical renewal alone explain the tensions inherent in its design. The story of Santa Maria Assunta is not one of a modern Cardinal commissioning a modern architect to produce a liturgically, urbanistically and socially progressive project together. It is a story of a reformist Cardinal engaging in a tug of war with an architect whose views on sacred architecture were arguably more conservative than the Cardinal's. [Fig. 12] Alvar Aalto's relative ecclesiastical traditionalism was rooted in an appreciation of religion as a set of unchanging customs and heritage, and an appreciation of religious rites and rituals as constituent ingredients of "cultural memory."[60] He therefore defied programmes of renewal, whose aims to modernise, popularise and "update" religious life he considered superficial or even antithetical to the very purpose of faith.[61] In effect, Aalto's commitment to seeking the timeless in sacral architecture conflicted with the Church's self-mandated program of timeliness.

Alvar Aalto was not alone in his scepticism. For example, his insistence on longitudinal, basilical plans – which framed the design even of Santa Maria Assunta, commissioned explicitly for the new liturgy – was not unrelated to a similar position held by modernists Gillespie, Kidd & Coia in Scotland, who also insisted on longer "traditional plans" in their churches, and an emphasis on the ceremonial gravitas of the journey from entrance to altar.[62] Further research into the views of the other architects involved in Bologna's post-war church-building boom, and how those views shaped and were shaped by the requirements and desires of the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Lercaro, *Officio Nuove Chiese*, and local parish officials, would enrich our understanding of the complex

60 Aino Niskanen, "Alvar Aalto and Cultural Memory," *JOELHO Journal of Architectural Culture*, no. 13 (2022): 45-66.

61 Singler, *The Religious Architecture of Alvar, Aino and Elissa Aalto*, 95.

62 Robert Proctor, "Churches for a Changing Liturgy: Gillespie, Kidd & Coia and the Second Vatican Council," *Architectural History 48* (2005): 302-306.

dynamics of collaboration and compromise which affected the resultant buildings. Were local (Catholic) architects more supportive of the recommendations set out by Vatican II? Were the tensions inherent in the design of Santa Maria Assunta exceptional or illustrative of the *status quo*?

The debate between Cardinal Lercaro and the Aaltos was not always easy. In the end, however, Lercaro explicitly thanked the Aaltos for interpreting the brief "in the spirit of plenary participation of the people in the liturgical celebration," suggesting the final result was pleasing at least to him.[63] Cases such as Santa Maria Assunta suggest that the conclusions reached at Vatican II were not directly or straightforwardly applied to architecture, as much as mediated through the relationships that grew between the Church and modern architects. Historiographically speaking, the Second Vatican Council is typically narrated as a watershed moment that profoundly and permanently altered Christian art and architecture. Recently, attention has been called to the need to consider more critically what happened in the run-up to Vatican II, particularly in the preparatory period between the Second World War and the Council, a period during which many of the nascent changes were moulded and re-shaped iteratively before being codified into their final form.[64] Similarly, what happened immediately *after* the Council, in the design of churches such as Santa Maria Assunta, warrants continued critical interrogation.

Furthermore, the complex to-and-fro which shaped the evolution of the liturgical, urban and architectural orientation of Santa Maria Assunta was not limited solely to Lercaro and the Aaltos as the sole actors. In addition to Alvar and

63 Letter from Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro to Alvar Aalto, December 3, 1966, Alvar Aalto Museum Archives, "Riolan kirkko."

64 See, for instance, Michela Pirro, "The Post-War Reconstruction of the Ecclesiastical Building in Italy. The Role of the Pontifical Central Commission for Sacred Art," *Actas de Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea*, no. 6 (2019): 50-67.

Fig. 12
Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro and Alvar Aalto discussing the design of Santa Maria Assunta in 1966. Photographer unknown (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

Elissa Aalto's direct correspondence with Lercaro, other members of the Aalto studio received assistance via letters from Bolognese architects tasked to assist with the project locally. A particularly pivotal figure was Luciano Gherardi, who became the liturgical consultant for the project, patiently guiding the Nordic architects on how best to materialise Lercaro's ideals in the design. After each major design iteration, studio members sent drawings for review to Bologna, and revised them back in Helsinki according to the suggestions of Monsignor Gherardi. Further research, especially on the other urban and suburban churches built under the auspices of Lercaro's program, would help elucidate the cast of actors and their respective roles and responsibilities in the shaping of Bolognese modern sacred space. Architect Glauco Gresleri, one of the architects most intimately involved in Lercaro's program, tellingly described the context in which Bologna's new churches were designed as "an integrated system of progress. The exchange between liturgists and architects is an everyday operational practice."[65] Further research would shed light on the motivations, mechanisms and outcomes of such "everyday operational practice" and thus contribute a more balanced view of how liturgical ideals were translated into architectural form.

Another noteworthy topic for further research is the contribution of Elissa Aalto to the design of Santa Maria Assunta. It is an inescapable and tremendously relevant fact that the construction of Santa Maria Assunta drew to a close under the sole direction of Elissa Aalto; the church was consecrated two years and fully completed four years after her husband's death. Although most of the project development was led by Alvar Aalto in his final years, and although Elissa Aalto "remained, or often purposely chose to remain, an anonymous behind-the-scenes orchestrator" in the designs she co-directed, her contribu-

Fig. 13
Elissa Aalto directing works at the construction site of Santa Maria Assunta in Riola di Vergato. Photographer unknown, n.d. (source: © Alvar Aalto Foundation).

65 Glauco Gresleri, "Per un rinnovamento dell'architettura sacra (1955–1965)," in *Giacomo Lercaro. Vescovo della chiesa di Dio (1891-1978)*, ed. Angelina Alberigo (Genova: Marietti, 1991), 109.

tions were monumental in nuance, complexity, and scale.[66] [Fig. 13] Recent and ongoing research suggests that "Elissa's hand was less classical and less typological than Alvar's. It was more topological instead. Her emphasis on clarity of formal intent jostled with his insistence on reprising historic structural vocabularies (albeit in the abstract), and her predilection for perspicuous spatial choreographies established a productive tension with his proclivity for ambiguity."[67] Did Elissa's more mathematical register meld with Lercaro's conceptions of architectural poverty, amplifying the effects of liturgical renewal on Santa Maria Assunta, and thus explaining its unusual lucidity, unique among Aalto churches?

The extent to which Alvar Aalto's ecclesiastical conservatism melded with Elissa Aalto's predilection for clarity, and how they mixed with "Lercarian liturgical thought" is impossible to determine before further research is carried out.[68] What is clear, however, is that the Aaltos remained fundamentally sceptical of the ambitions set out by various post-war religious and urban renewal programs. The realised design of Santa Maria Assunta embodies the tension inherent in the Aaltos' selective adoption of 20th century ideals concerning the sacred and its role in the modern city: some elements of the design are direct products of the broader discourse on the city and the church institution's role therein, whereas others communicate an opposition to ideals the Aaltos viewed with disfavour.

On the one hand, the Aaltos relied heavily on local figures, ranging from Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro to liturgical consultant Luciano Gherardi, to ensure their design adhered to contemporaneous urban-religious ideals. In this respect, they did participate in the participatory paradigm set out at Vatican II. On the other hand, they remained fundamentally sceptical of the ambitions set out by various post-war religious and urban renewal programs, and insisted on a degree of tradition in liturgical, urban, and social terms. In this regard, their participation was partial and selective, if not somewhat defiant.

66 Sofia Singler, "Review: Arkkitehti Elissa Aalto / Architect Elissa Aalto," *Architecture Research Quarterly 27*, no. 1 (2023): 73-78.

67 Singler, "Review: Arkkitehti Elissa Aalto / Architect Elissa Aalto", 73-78.

68 Comiati, "Giacomo Lercaro in Bologna," 54.

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