

Alvar Aalto meets Álvaro Siza

Next year, Finland will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976). Aalto is undoubtedly one of the grand masters of 20th-century architecture and design. His impressive oeuvre transcended New Objectivity with an organic and humanistic vision of architecture. A large Aalto exhibition can be seen until January 4, 2026 in 15 rooms of new Siza Wing of the Serralves Museum in Porto. With no fewer than 131 original drawings, it is a fitting tribute. An intense collaboration with the Alvar Aalto Museum. "Portugal meets Finland."

Architectural exhibitions are usually quite problematic compared to presenting paintings, sculptures, textiles, or design objects. To provide visitors with insight, aids are needed, as an alternative to the physical experience and emotion of an on-site visit. An Aalto building is not movable like a Picasso painting!

Curator António Choupina, recently appointed director of the architecture department at Serralves, opted for a classical concept. He previously presented the major Siza exhibition in conjunction with the museum's expansion, now named the "Siza Wing." The Aalto exhibition also featured as much original material as possible, magnificent documents that convey the intensity of the creative design process. The delicate pencil drawings and perspective drawings frequently found in publications hang on the walls in full size. Sometimes they offer a glimpse into what one already knows, but without the reduction. The photographs are original black-and-white photographs of the buildings in various formats. Choupina chose themes within a chronological development of his oeuvre. The transition from classical formal language to that of the European avant-garde came with the library in Viipuri. With the Paimio sanatorium (1928-1933) and the numerous publications about it, Aalto immediately established himself as one of the central figures of the new architecture from a small and young nation. This key work is highlighted with numerous drawings and a large model. Also featured in the 1930s are Villa Mairea and Finland's presentation at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

After 1945, an overview is provided of his projects in Finland, America, Germany, and Italy. A wide variety of commissions, including museums, churches, libraries, and university buildings. In France, south of Paris,

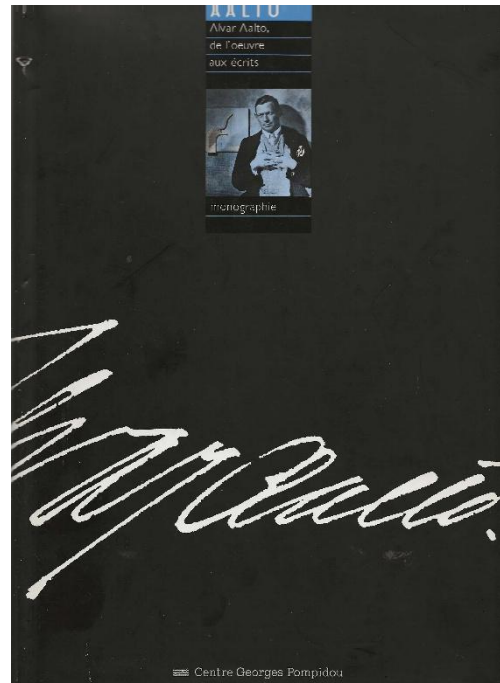
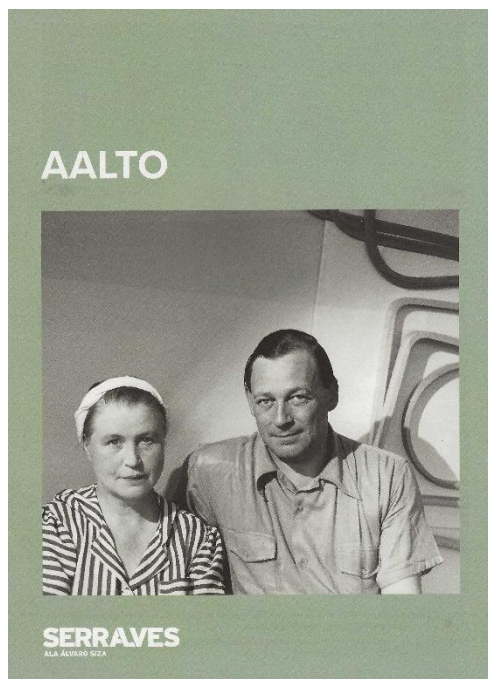
stands the Louis Carré residence, which can be visited. Well worth the trip!

In Porto, a total of 31 projects, including a model of a self-designed boat. In addition to the many scale models, there are also film clips. In Room 12, an original piece of furniture from the Academic Bookstore in Helsinki, a project from 1961-1969. In the final room, his largest building in Helsinki, the Finlandia Hall, which was recently renovated, is on display. His final project, the church in Riola di Vergato near Bologna, was completed after his death. In the 1950s, Aalto also designed the Finnish Pavilion in the Giardini di Venezia, a wooden structure that was recently renovated and is the subject of the Finnish contribution to the 2025 Biennale. A visitor's guide was also chosen instead of extensive room texts.



Photos Marc Dubois

The cover of the visitor's guide doesn't feature a building, but a photo of him with his first wife, Aimo, a 1940 image published in the Artek magazine. The visitor's guide doesn't show Aalto's first name. On page two, there's a photo with his second wife, Elissa.



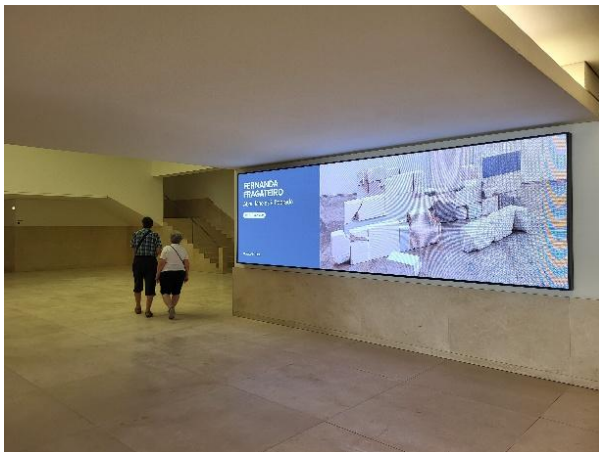
The cover of the 1988 Aalto monograph features his photo and signature; there's no mention of Aimo or Elissa. The book accompanying the major 1998 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York features only a small photo of both women in the concise "Chronology." All the major exhibitions were organized through the Aalto Museum in Finland. Presumably, the Alvar Aalto Museum did everything it could to place its "master" at the center. Meanwhile, the world was changing, and architectural historians increasingly emphasized the contribution of architects' wives and the oeuvres of women. Choupina's choice reflects current trends without seeming reproachful.

The "Aaltos" immortalized their fame with their mobile designs: wooden furniture for Artek and glassware for Iittala, creations that would remain in production for years to come. They became classics of 20th-century design. And let's not forget the numerous lamps the couple created for various projects. Their oeuvre is much more than the grand gesture. Every component of a building, from parapets and fireplaces to door and window handles, was designed with the utmost care. This attitude

undoubtedly had a profound influence on Siza's delight in designing small-scale elements.

Like many young architects after 1945, Álvaro Siza drew inspiration from the Scandinavian architecture scene, and particularly from the work of Aalto. The exhibition features one of the first publications Siza purchased in 1950, an issue of the French magazine *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*. Siza's early projects owe a great deal to Aalto. In 1988, Siza received the Alvar Aalto Medal for his oeuvre.

At the entrance to the Siza Wing is an installation by Portuguese artist Fernanda Fragateiro. Her work consistently connects to architecture in the broadest sense. Using fragments of a demolished building, she created a floating wall with an opening that references the work of Linda bo Bardi. This opening connects to Siza's adjacent window, which overlooks the garden.



Expo Fernnada Fragateiro

Photos Marc Dubis

The Aalto exhibition runs until January 4, 2026, and the major retrospective "Sussurro" by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan runs until January 14. His work is presented in the Art Deco villa in the park.

Highly recommended for an autumn trip to Porto and Serralves.

Marc Dubois, architect HON FRIBA