

Idea Sketches as Traces of Cognitive Styles: The Case of Alvar Aalto

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1. ABSTRACT

While architectural historians have often noted the connection between design sketches and finished buildings, to date there has been little in the literature that relates these drawings to discoveries in neuroscience and visual perception. This paper will present an analysis of the drawings of the great Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, that suggests how researchers might begin to unlock the mental habits of architects and designers to discover historical patterns of thought.

Drawing on previous research that traces what I have called "modes of conception" among prominent architects, I shall demonstrate the connection between drawings, cognitive patterns, and memory in the work of Aalto, one of the most influential "form givers" of the twentieth century. Because many of his sketches survive, along with detailed biographical and eye-witness accounts of his practice, it is possible to study Aalto's cognitive patterns in detail.

I shall conclude the paper with a hypothesis about the relationship between external memory triggers, or "exogons," and drawing types (modes of representation) that draws on the research of Merlin Donald, the Canadian psychologist. This thesis will form the basis for a forthcoming book that examines architectural drawings as keys to conceptual modes from the Renaissance to the present day.

2. REFERENCES

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3. AUTHOR BIO

Mark Alan Hewitt, FAIA, is an architect, historian and teacher who has taught at Rice, Columbia, NJIT and the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently an adjunct professor at Rutgers University. He is the author of six books and more than a hundred articles on architecture and architectural history. His awards include Senior Fellowship at the National Endowment for the Humanities, Graham Foundation Fellowships, the Arthur Ross Awards, and teaching citations from three universities.