

ALVARO

ELEVATING
THE
EVERYDAY

The Social
Insurance Institution
Headquarters
designed
by Alvar Aalto
celebrates its 50th
anniversary

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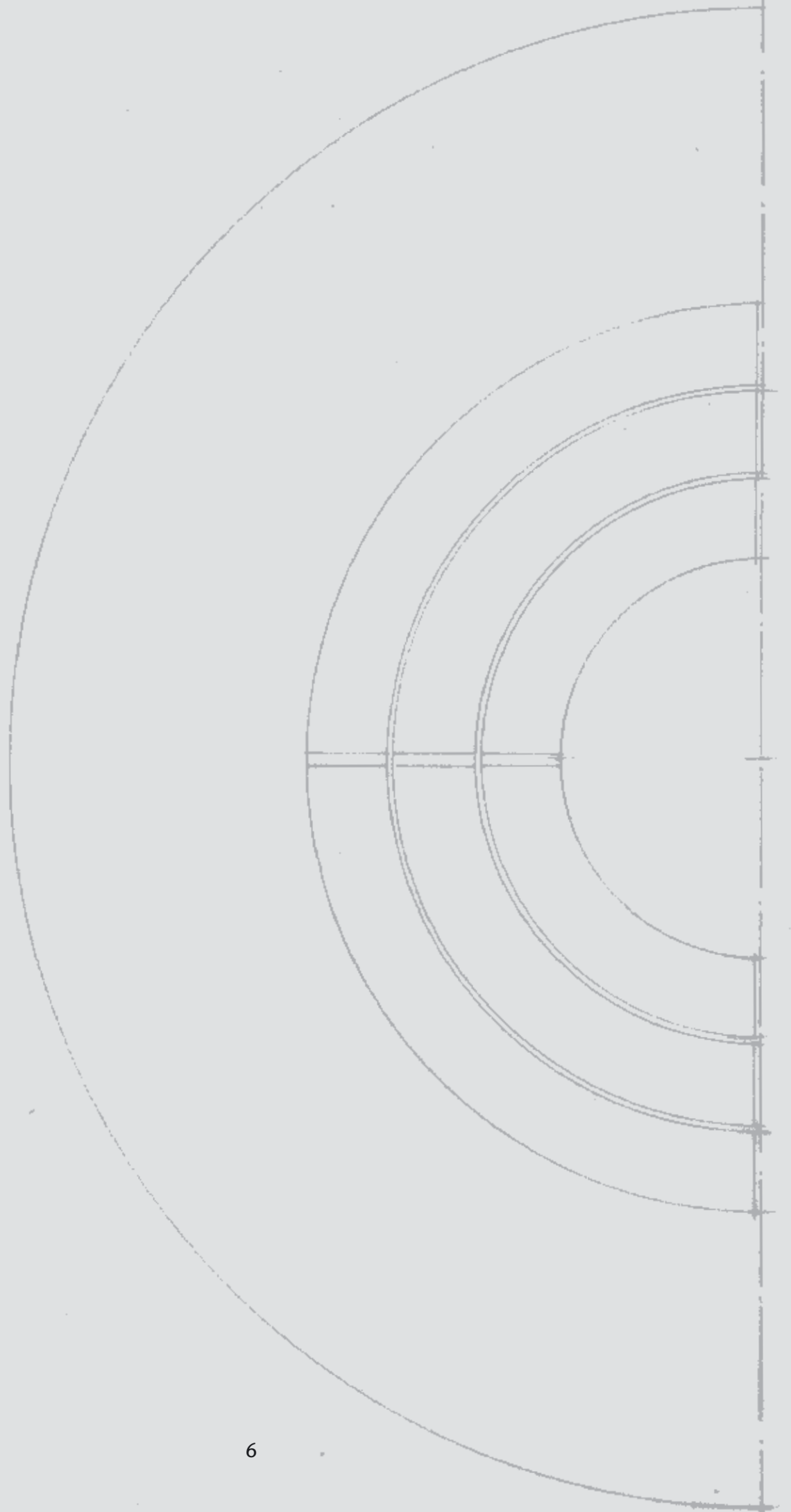
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Foreword

■ The headquarters of the Social Insurance Institution (KELA) in Helsinki, Finland is ranked by experts among the top five buildings designed by Alvar Aalto. Famous both in Finland and abroad, the building itself attracts some thousand visitors every year, most of them from outside Finland.

Of course, we at KELA also value our workplace and our headquarters very highly.

Spring 2006 marked the 50th anniversary of the completion and inauguration of this building. KELA, Finland and the world at large were very different then from what they are now. KELA only administered the national pension on the basis of the 'old' National Pension Act dating from 1939. The war had ended almost ten years earlier. Food rationing had finally been discontinued two years before. The final war reparations had been paid four years earlier, in the same year as the Olympic Games were held in Helsinki, bringing Finland to wider international consciousness.

Construction of the building took just over two years. Initially, KELA did not require the use of the entire building, and some of the premises were rented out. In 1964, as national health insurance was implemented, KELA took over the entire building, and in fact it outgrew its headquarters decades ago.

The purpose of this Festschrift is to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the building with a detailed discussion of the design, construction and completion of the building and to illustrate the building and its details.

Jorma Huuhtanen
Director General, KELA



KANSANELÄKE-
LAITOS
FOLKPENSIOS-
ANSTALTEN

1915-1916

KELA – the Social Insurance Institution

■ The Finnish Social Insurance Institution, known by its Finnish acronym as KELA, manages basic social security for all people resident in Finland in their various life situations. All people resident in Finland and all people living abroad but covered by Finnish social security are KELA customers. The benefits paid out by KELA are statutory.

KELA is a Parliament-supervised institution which was founded on December 16, 1937. It was initially a pensions institution, but its remit has since been expanded, diversified and modernized. In the 1960s, KELA evolved into the institutional core of the Finnish welfare state. In the 1980s and 1990s, KELA became even larger, and its services extended to everyone resident in Finland.

Today, KELA provides its customers with dozens of benefits in various life situations and stages. KELA benefits include minimum pensions, disability benefits, health insurance benefits, rehabilitation benefits, basic unemployment security, benefits for the care of small children, child benefits, maternity allowances, study benefits, general housing allowance, military benefits and special support for immigrants.

A large proportion of all Finns receive some form of KELA benefit every year. In 2006, benefits paid totalled EUR 10.4 billion.

KELA has a comprehensive network of offices, secondary service points and shared service points, ensuring access to KELA services even in sparsely populated areas. In 2006, there were 263 offices open daily, 43 secondary service points and 145 service points shared with other authorities.

KELA has been cooperating with other authorities and with service providers to improve its services. Since as long ago as 1970, pharmacies have been deducting the health insurance compensation from the price of medication at the point of sale.

KELA's more recent services include centralized telephone service and e-transactions.

KELA has some 6,000 employees.





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The KELA gorge



The KELA headquarters building was erected close to the centre of Helsinki in the Töölö district where the surroundings were already completed. To begin with, the rock excavation and construction work annoyed the local residents, who expressed their disgust in the correspondence columns of the newspapers. The excavations for the foundations were nicknamed the KELA gorge.

Public opinion changed later on when the building was finished and people could see how carefully its surroundings were taken into account.

The equipment used by the workmen and the vehicles used for carting the crushed rock would not pass modern safety inspections.



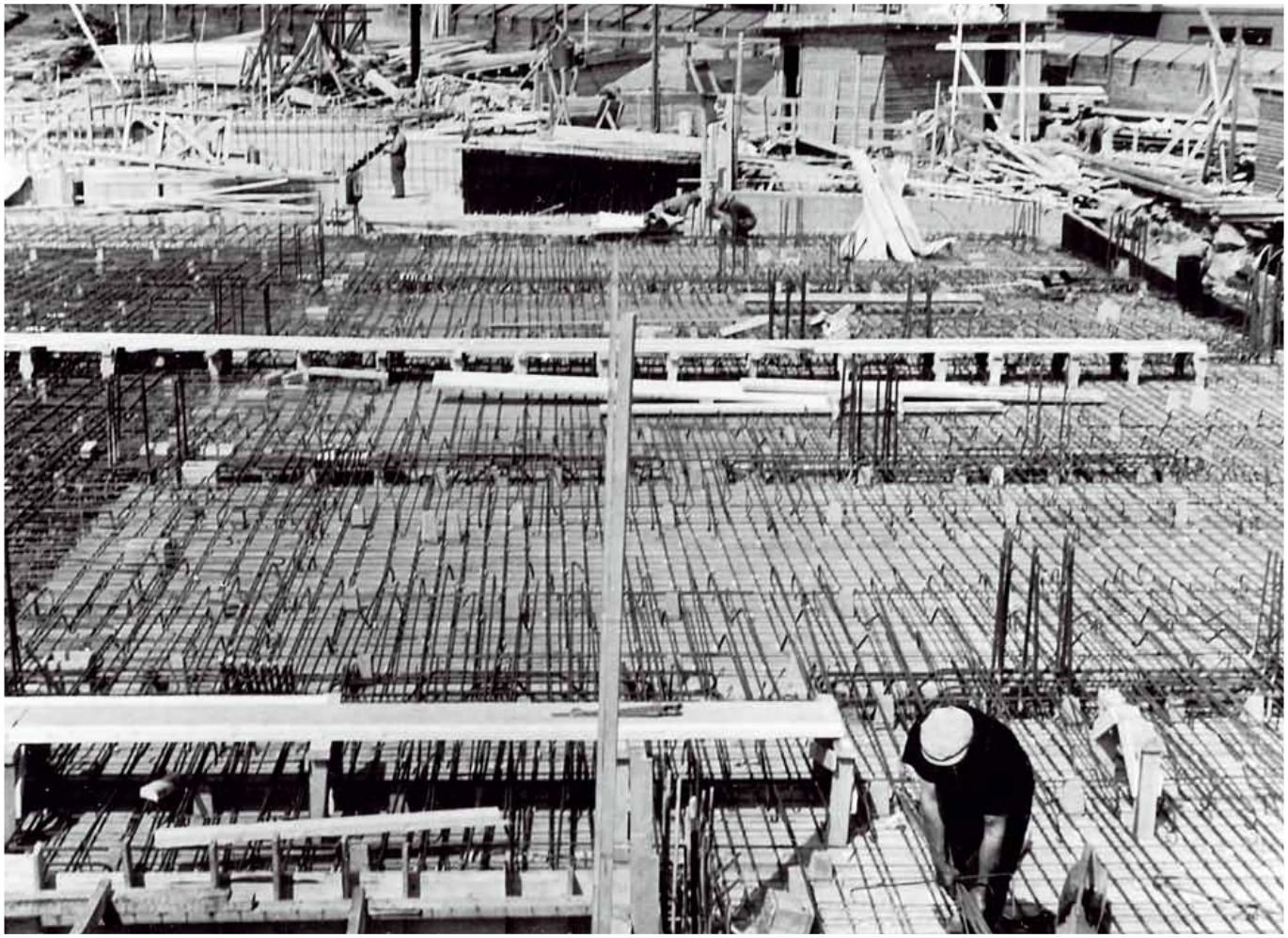




Excavation work started in spring 1952, and the base of the excavation was concreted during the following year. The design of the building had not progressed beyond the sketch stage when the rock was already being broken. When the site was changed, Aalto's office had to completely redesign the building, which had originally been designed for a different site.









President Urho Kekkonen was shown around the new headquarters building in December 1957. Seated, from the left, V.J. Sukselainen (Director General of KELA), Mrs Sylvi Kekkonen, Paavo Kastari (Minister), Eero Rydman (Lord Mayor of Helsinki and former Director General of KELA), Alvar Aalto (Academician) and Aku Sumu (a Director at KELA).

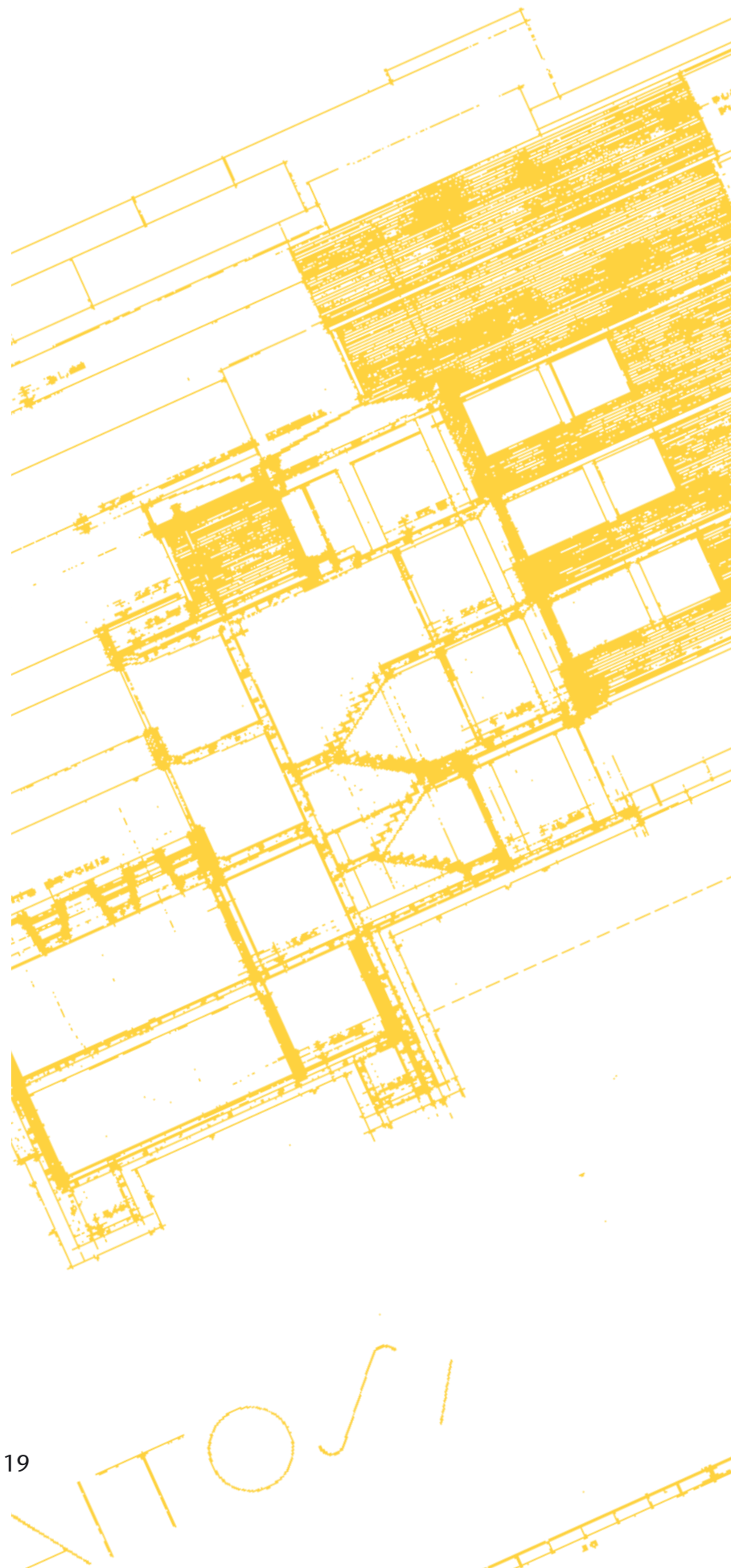
An Aalto masterpiece in war-torn Finland


■ The headquarters of the Finnish Social Insurance Institution (KELA), designed by Alvar Aalto, is located in the district of Töölö on the fringes of the city centre of Helsinki. Previously known as the National Pensions Institute building, it is generally considered one of the masterpieces of Aalto's red-brick period. It was completed half a century ago but still serves its original purpose as the headquarters of the principal social security organization in Finland.

The building has been maintained as close to its original condition as possible. There is a motion pending to declare it a protected building, but it is already being treated as if it were a historical monument. Any and all alterations and repairs that are carried out defer to Aalto's original concept.

When the building was completed, it could house the entire personnel of KELA with room to spare, and some of its premises were rented to the City of Helsinki. KELA is a Government agency under parliamentary supervision; 50 years ago, its domain only covered statutory pension insurance. Its permanent personnel numbered less than 500 in 1950, though by 1956 this number had increased to about 700.

Today, KELA is responsible for nearly all of Finland's social security. This enlargement of its domain has naturally required an increase in personnel, and as a result the headquarters building can now only house part of the central administration of the institution. The total personnel count is almost 6,000, and the total benefits distributed by KELA to Finnish citizens come to some EUR 10 billion per year.





KELA is the acronym used today for the Finnish name of the institution, Kansaneläkelaitos. The acronym is used in this publication for convenience even though it had yet not been coined when the building was completed.

The KELA headquarters building was a public building from the very first in the sense that the Helsinki insurance district office, where Helsinki residents came to discuss pension insurance matters, was located in the building at street level. Today, the building is only used by KELA central administration; it has housed no customer service functions since the early 1970s.

Design work on the new headquarters was begun more than 60 years ago. Finland was a completely different country in those days.

After the war, there was a shortage of everything. Rationing kept a tight leash on the meagre resources that were available. Citizens were allowed to buy food and commodities against rationing coupons, which the public administration issued according to its discretion. Because there was also a shortage of foreign currency, imports were low.

Helsinki suffered from a housing crisis, and there was also a severe shortage of building materials which persisted even at the time when construction on the KELA building was begun; as a result, the application for the construction permit had to be processed not only by the City of Helsinki but also by the Finnish Government.

Food rationing was finally consigned to history in 1954 with the elimination of coffee coupons, but restrictions on foreign currency and imports remained in place for a long time.

As a result of all this, Finns had learned by force of circumstances to live meagrely and to save whatever and whenever they could. Waste and luxury were commonly frowned upon both publicly and privately. Modesty was a virtue even in construction.

Amidst all the shortages, self-esteem was sought from other sources such as sports. The Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952 were a huge national occasion and, as it happened, the 18-year-old Armi Kuusela from Finland won the first ever title of Miss Universe in that same year.

Only a few people could afford to travel abroad in the 1950s. When architect Alvar Aalto felt it necessary to go to Greece and Italy to seek inspiration for designing the KELA headquarters, he had to write an exhaustive report justifying the trip to the Bank of Finland, which governed foreign exchange. Anyone wishing to exchange Finnish markka for foreign money had to apply to the Bank of Finland and also pick up the currency there, in practice. It is highly likely that the drachma and lira notes required by Aalto were personally counted out to him by a director of the Bank of Finland.

Aalto was one of the very few Finns to have extensive international contacts in those days.



No more room on Esplanadi

■ Before moving into its current headquarters, KELA occupied an old bank building in the city centre of Helsinki. KELA had outgrown those premises years before the new headquarters were finally completed.

There was no doubt that KELA needed a new building, but its design and construction dragged out into a ten-year process. The original plan was not only to build a headquarters building but to invest pension funds in an inflation-secure way by building rentable apartments, offices and shops too.

Finding a suitable plot proved to be a problem. A number of options were explored, but with little success. All construction was strictly regulated, and public construction projects were under special scrutiny. Although there was a housing shortage, there was also a shortage of building materials.

In 1948, a preliminary agreement was signed on a plot in the district of Töölö along the main artery of the city centre of Helsinki, Mannerheimintie, a plot which today has two major hotels on it. The management of KELA was not entirely satisfied with the location, as it seemed too small for what was being planned, a "large and modern building which could house a three-storey underground car park and hotel, restaurant, meeting and other premises in the middle part, so as to build up the entire plot as necessary". This quote comes from the minutes of a meeting of the KELA board of directors.

The idea was thus to build densely and to build a lot. At one point, it was envisaged that the district would become the public administration focus of a 'new Helsinki'. Aalto at least was thinking along these lines, as we will see below.



Unprecedented official palace

■ Construction of the new headquarters was considered urgent. KELA sent several letters to the city authorities requesting the clearing of the plot so that excavation could be begun. KELA had already invited tenders for the excavation work, and the Ministry of Communications and Public Works had granted a construction permit in principle, even though detailed plans did not yet exist.

In February 1948, KELA decided to launch an ideas competition for construction on the plot. The new headquarters building was to form only part of the whole, as the plot was intended to contain business and shop premises, restaurants and meeting rooms, and perhaps even a concert hall.

When the ideas competition was published, the press dubbed the scheme an 'unprecedented official palace'.

A total of 43 entries was submitted. Upon opening them, it was found that one entry had been submitted twice, so there were actually 42 entrants. The details of the designers, which had been duly submitted in sealed envelopes, were put into two packages which were sealed in turn and stored in the vaults of the National Board of Construction.

The jury appointed a working group from among its members to undertake the practical task of evaluating the entries submitted. The working group consisted of architects Jussi Paatela, Aulis Blomstedt, Väinö Tuukkanen and Erkki Huttunen and senior engineer Erkki Kalaja.

The working group did a thorough job and wrote up an evaluation on each and every entry. Some only merited five or six lines, while others took up more than an entire page. The task was finished in mid-December, and the competition committee had absolutely no remarks to make; the evaluations were approved unanimously.

It was decided to award first prize to the entry 'Forum Redivivum', second prize to the entry 'Werk' and third prize to the entry 'Kadenssi'.

The entry 'Forum Redivivum' was evaluated thus:

"An entry rich in ideas, based on a clear-cut urban architectural assessment, which points the way towards future developments in this part of the city. The entrant's notion of turning the existing Töölöntori square into a parking place and forming the competition area into a new monumental and business centre for the city district has been executed beautifully and within the context of the modest scale of Helsinki, as a terraced shopping street design which descends from the end of Tykistökatu towards Mannerheimintie. Vehicular traffic passes under this construction at various points, without interfering with the pedestrian route, flexibly catering to a variety of needs. The low office building of the Social Insurance Institution incorporates a festival hall and restaurant, which form the focus of the area. The offices of the Social Insurance Institution are grouped around the dignified and handsome central expedition spaces. (- -) Apart from its architectural merits, the entry and its proposals for

extension demonstrate that the general yet complex and difficult task set in the ideas competition can be executed in an almost ideal manner through skilful organization while improving the general appearance of the district as a whole. The entry and its various options clearly demonstrate that construction on the plot must be conceived as a single entity and that the area can thus be economically exploited without inadvertently creating back yards or poorly lit secondary spaces. The entry contains a generous amount of shop space, though not so much office space because of the low building profile."

When the sealed packages were opened, it was found that the winning entry had been submitted by architects Aino and Alvar Aalto, assisted by architects Keijo Ström, Gustaf Boström and Olav Hammarström.

The Aaltos gave two alternative proposals in their winning entry. Alternative A conformed to the specifications of the competition. Alternative B involved including an extra city block on the south side of the competition area. This would allow "the future creation of a uniform architectural entity, an oblique composition of terraces and buildings to terminate Mannerheimintie".

The winning entry was carefully designed, and a lot of hard work had gone into it. The entry included two scale models and no fewer than 27 drawings.

According to Aalto himself (Arkkitehti-lehti magazine 1-2/1958), "the main theme of the design was in the



terraces rising from Mannerheimintie towards Töölö, where pedestrians and internal traffic were completely separated from vehicular traffic, on different levels if necessary. The building complex would also have an uninterrupted vista over Töölönlahti bay, where more public buildings were expected to be built in addition to the Social Insurance Institution building, forming a new public centre for Helsinki.”

The envisaged building complex would have been five times larger than the Parliament building in volume. According to some estimates, the premises would have been completed in time to be used as housing during the Olympic Games before being converted into offices.

Public criticism was as devastating as the praise of the experts was adulatory. The savage public debate even led to questions in Parliament in 1948. This gigantic construction project, it was feared, would halt all other construction in the Helsinki area for years. What was particularly lambasted was that the project would divert resources from housing construction. Some wondered whether investing the funds of KELA in such a venture made any sense at all.

In the face of all this opposition, the augmented board of directors of KELA nevertheless decided to commission architects Aino and Alvar Aalto to develop their winning entry further on the basis of their Alternative B. The problem of not being able to close the deal on the plot remained, however.

In the event, only one half of the husband-and-wife team was left to implement the design, as Aino Aalto died in January 1949. She had already been ailing in the previous autumn, so it is unclear whether she had actually even been capable of being involved in the design work on the competition entry.

In his biography of Alvar Aalto, Göran Schildt estimates that Aino’s contribution to the joint effort was “to act at all times as the best and closest critic of her husband, with whom he could discuss all the tough problems and whose judgment he trusted implicitly”.

Alvar Aalto took Aino’s death badly. The enjoyment was gone from his work. Both the KELA project and his teaching at MIT suffered as a result.

Göran Schildt wrote:

“Now that the joy was gone, the balance between work and relaxation in his life was also upset. He could no longer unwind in the Swiss Alps or in Finland’s forests. He fell into a confused state of depression and consorted with Dionysus, who is the god not only of earthly wisdom but also of unbridled chaos. Aalto did not usually have problems with drinking, which mostly had a beneficial effect on his personality. But this was not always the case, and in the year following Aino’s death he succumbed to the demon several times, bringing much grief to his children, his friends and his colleagues.”

Much of the work in his office fell upon his assistants.



Aalto did not enjoy living in an empty home. After Aino's death, he spent a lot of time travelling: in 1949 alone, he visited Stockholm, Copenhagen, Zurich, Paris and the Netherlands.

It was not until late summer 1950 that Aalto began to spend more time at the drawing board. This recovery correlated with the presence of an assistant at his office named Elsa Mäkinieniemi, 23 years his junior. They married in October 1952, and Elsa Kaisa took the name Elissa Aalto.

Göran Schildt met Alvar and Elissa soon after their marriage.

"I can safely say that the positive attitude, the joy which Aalto felt in the adventure of life and which was one of the dominant features of his personality, blossomed in a particularly wonderful way in these years. Being with them was a constant delight, spiced by Alvar's pranks and Elissa's bubbling laughter."

Notwithstanding his constant travelling and consorting with Dionysus, Alvar Aalto and his assistants developed the 'Forum redivivum' plan into what they described as a "final sketch" based on Alternative B during autumn 1949.

The end result differed very little from the competition entry. The meeting and banquet hall envisaged to accommodate 400 to 500 people in the entry grew into one for 1,200 to 1,800 people. The hall seemed to be particularly important for Aalto. At his initiative, the

Social Insurance Institution construction committee consulted several musical experts. It was recorded in the minutes that these experts considered that "the construction of a large concert hall would - - - elevate the level of Finnish music as a whole, while no doubt enhancing the value of the building complex of which it would form a part".

Aalto's proposal also included a canal under Mannerheimintie, linking the Social Insurance Institution complex to the public buildings envisaged as being erected on the other side of the road, including a library, City Hall and the opera house. This would have fulfilled Aalto's idea of a new public centre for Helsinki.

As we now know, these plans were never realized. The work was not completely wasted, though, since Aalto was able to use part of the plan for the commission which he later did receive: the KELA headquarters as it now stands is actually based on the 'Forum redivivum' plan.

Though erected on a completely different site, the KELA headquarters displays some of the features of the unexecuted competition entry, such as the terrace concept and the central courtyard with skylights. The red brick and copper elevations were also already in the original plan.

There were many reasons why the new city centre for Helsinki was never built. Severe public criticism was no doubt one factor, but the business case for the project

Key figures behind the building project were Director Aleksi Aaltonen (1945–1954), Director General Eino E. Louhio (1946–1954) Director General V.J. Sukselainen (1954–1971), and Director Kaarlo Hillilä (1946–1954 and 1958–1965).



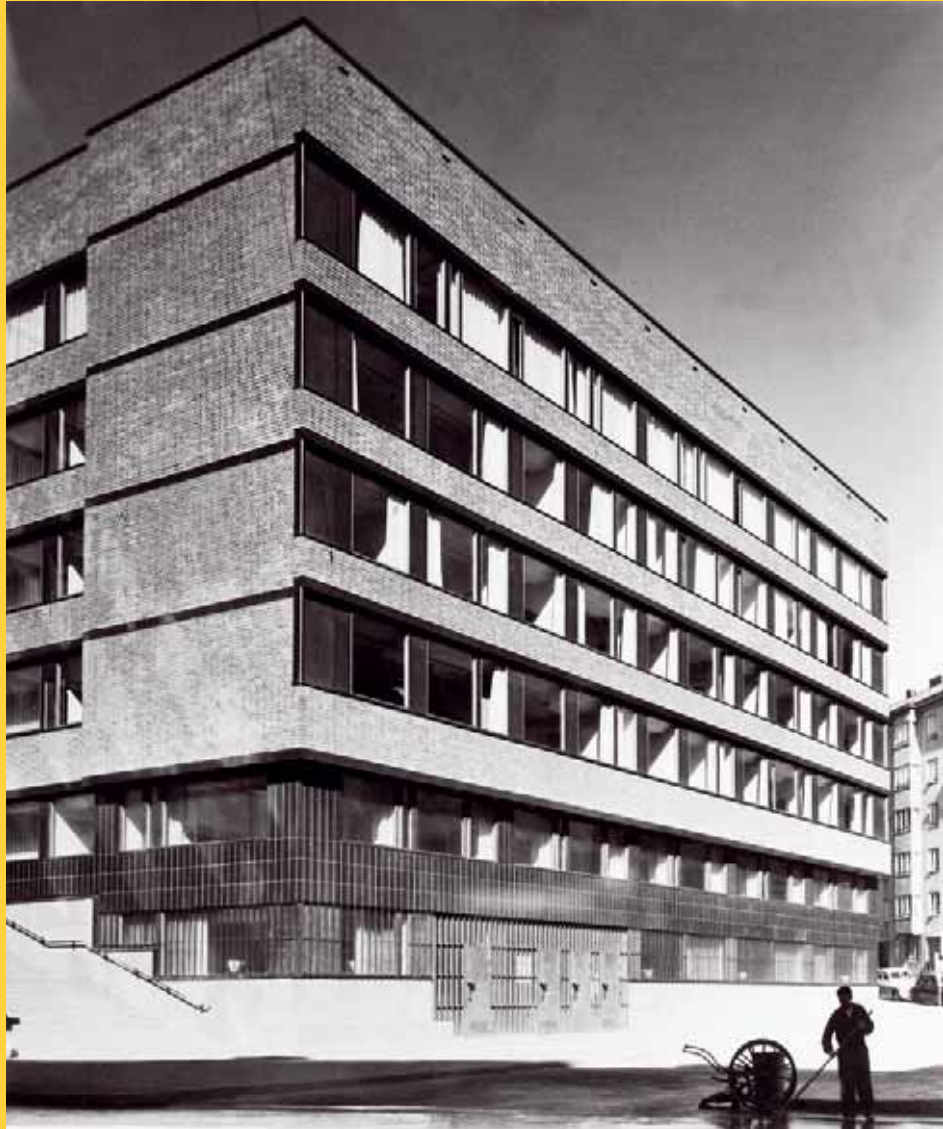
also began to break down. Other plans for business and office buildings had been floated, and the Olympic Games committee had announced that it was no longer interested in this project. It was also questioned whether the construction of a business and office building complex constituted the kind of productive activity that the law required in the investment of pension funds.

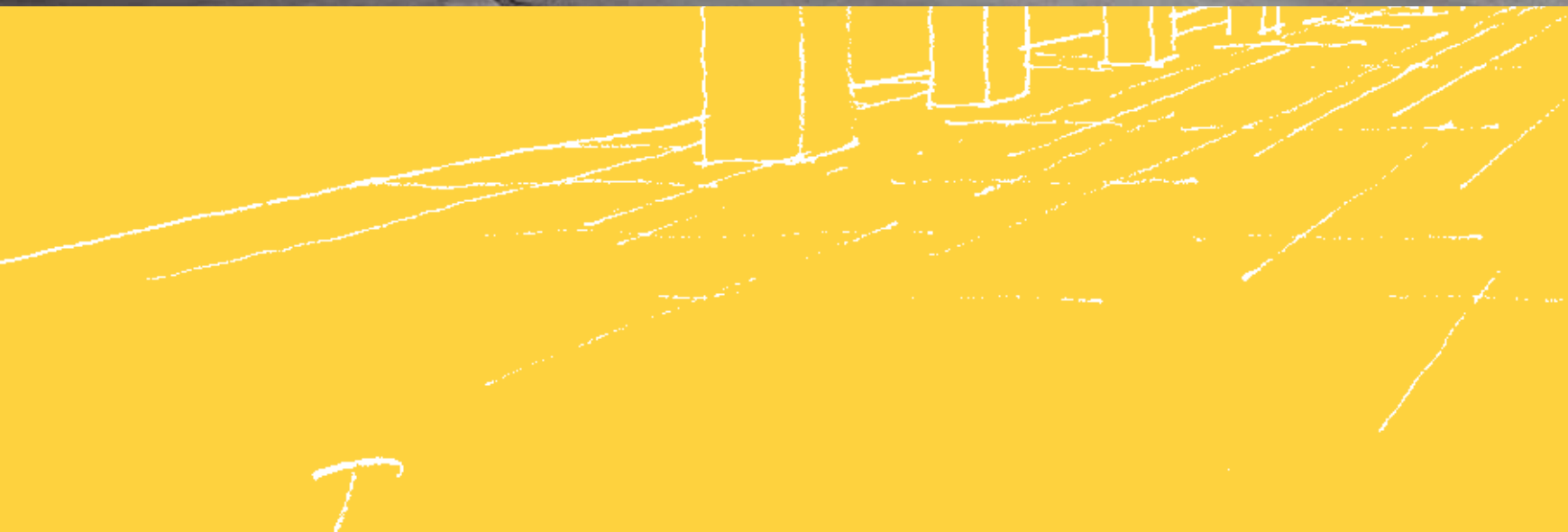


The Social Insurance Institution decided to find another plot for its headquarters, and the grand project was abandoned.



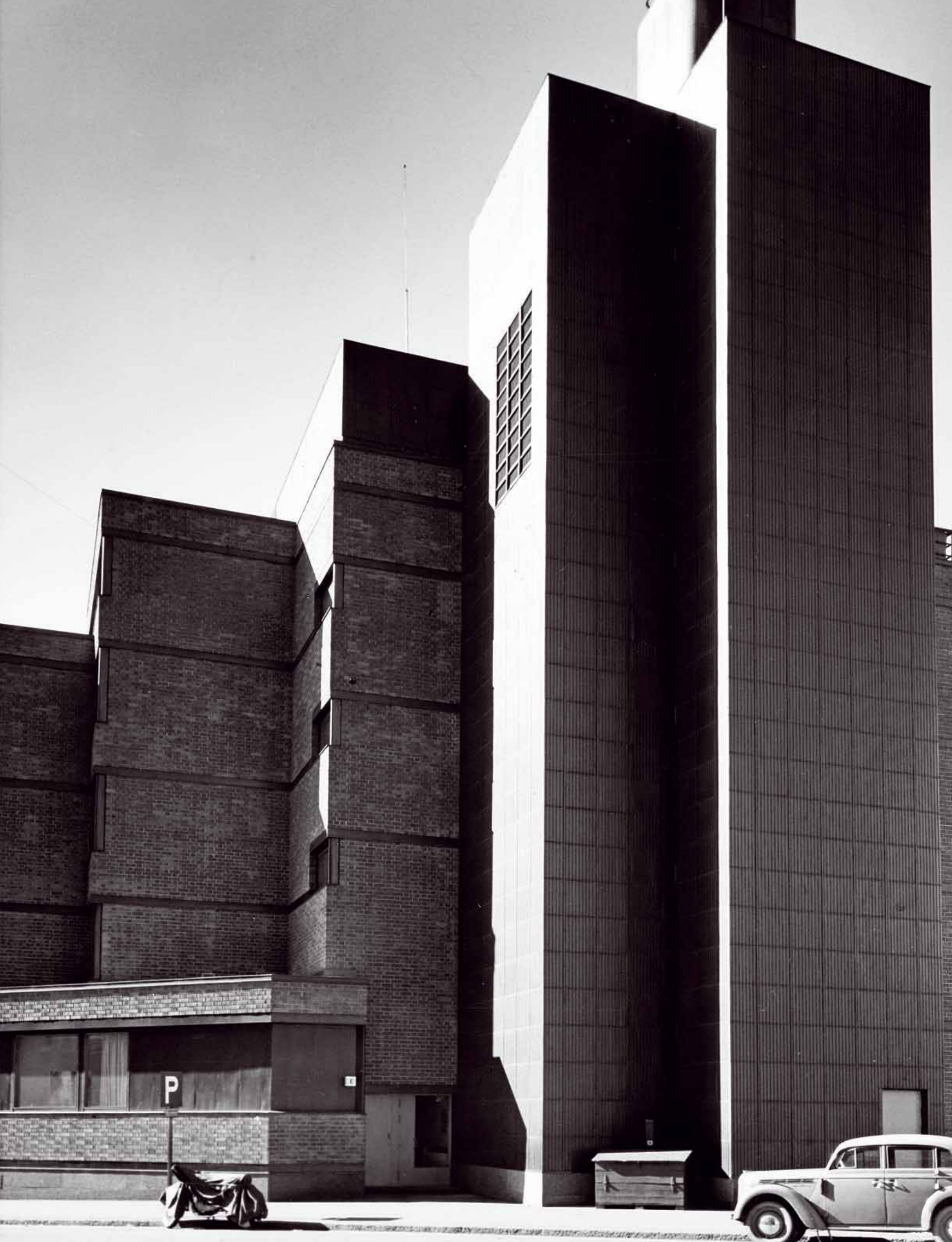
KELA 1956









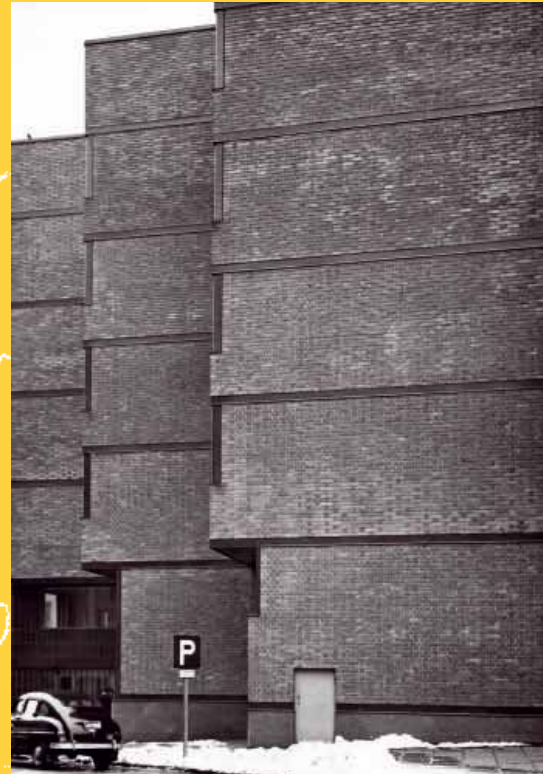
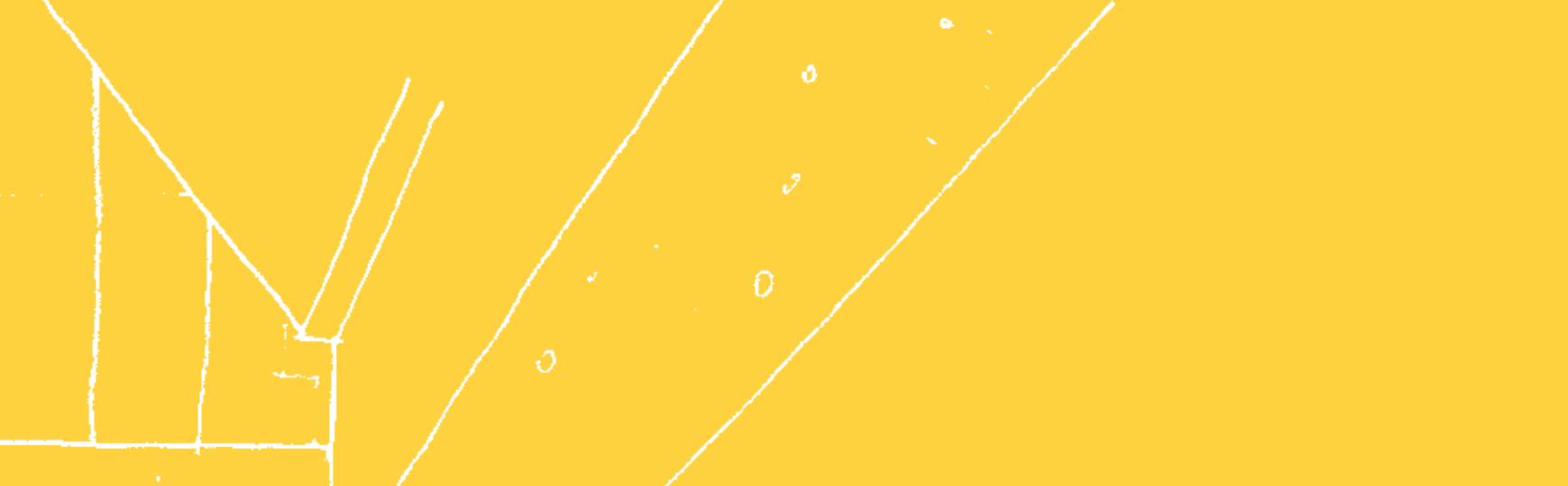


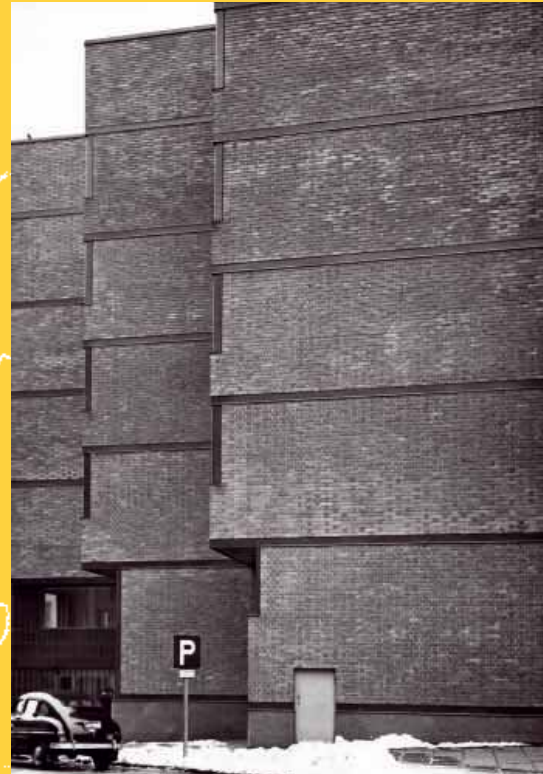
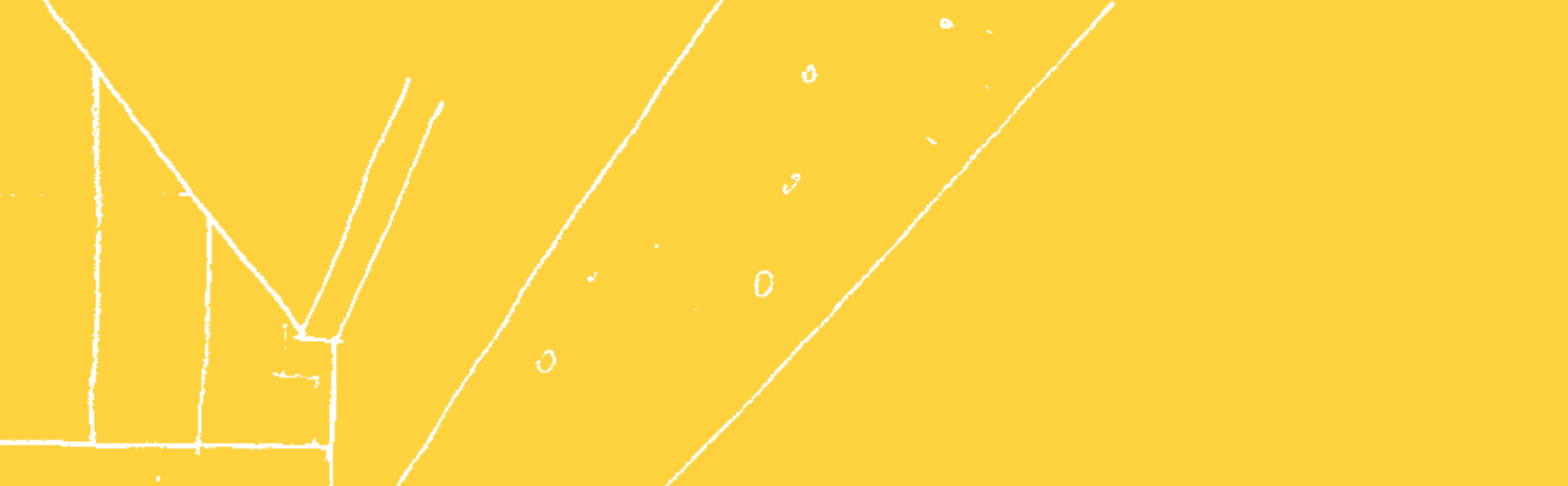












A pleasant and unrestricted place to work

■ The deal for the final plot for KELA headquarters was closed in spring 1952. The plot in question had originally been designated for the opera house. However, the City of Helsinki set certain conditions, including a clause in the contract whereby the City was entitled to rent 1,200 sq.m. of office space in the new building at a reasonable rate for a period of at least five years.

The plot is bound by three streets — Nordenskiöldinkatu, Messeniuksenkatu and Minna Canthin katu — and is triangular. The surrounding plots were already built up. The building rights for the plot were 60,000 cu.m., which was only adequate for KELA's own needs.

It was only natural that the design for the building on the new plot was commissioned from Aalto's office. The design was based on 'Forum redivivum', since Aalto considered that it was possible to keep the basic concept intact even though all the premises intended for renting out were cut.

"The principal motive is to create an office block on a grand scale, avoiding the psychologically and humanly detrimental effect of a tenement-like 'office factory'. The large plot bordering on a park area allows the potential for this. The building is thus broken up so as to form terraces, courtyards and park spaces, offering the sizable staff it houses - - - a pleasant and unrestricted place to work, good lighting and a clean atmosphere."

Construction was begun with excavation work in spring 1952. The plans for the building had not pro-

gressed beyond rough sketches at that point, and changes had to be made on the fly while excavation was still in progress. The excavation for the foundations was completed in mid-January in the following year.

While rock was being blasted in Töölö, the KELA construction committee began to acquire materials, which were still subject to rationing until the end of 1953. Initially, it was difficult to find bricks and steel for reinforced concrete. Experiences at another building site had taught KELA that an entire year might elapse between order and delivery in the case of, say, radiators.

The construction permit application drawings were completed in spring 1953. The application had to be submitted both to the Helsinki City Administrative Court and to the construction committee of the Ministry of Communications and Public Works. The wait was long, and it was not until December — despite earlier promises of a speedy process — that the Ministry gave permission to begin work. On the other hand, this gave Aalto's office more time to complete the actual working drawings.

The base of the excavation had been concreted during 1953 even though there was no construction permit. This was by no means done with stealth, since the 'Social Insurance Institution gorge' had prompted plenty of letters to the newspapers. The residents of Töölö had been disturbed by the noise. Construction on the building frame was begun in spring 1954, and the building was 'topped-out' in November.

The construction did not progress wholly to schedule. The building was not constructed to contract but on a 'cost plus' basis according to Aalto's recommendations. This was felt to be more appropriate for a public construction project. The principal contractors were Arvonon Oy. According to the 'cost plus' agreement signed with them, the building was to have been completed on February 22, 1956.

The work was late because of delays in material deliveries, and the general strike of spring 1956 halted all work for three weeks.

The construction company probably did not appreciate Professor Aalto's way of working, which included refining his plans while work was already in progress.

Drawings were not always available on the construction site as the work required. The KELA construction committee complained to Aalto and reprimanded him seriously because of the changes that had had to be made to prices already agreed for sub-contracts and supplies because the architects had changed the plans.

Aalto defended himself by saying that "to find the right solution, the architect sometimes has to see the entire building".

The appearance of the elevation was discussed for a long time, and the final decision was not taken until the very last minute. Work was still being done on the elevation when the first people were already moving in.

There had been so many changes and alterations made in the working drawings and in the course of construction that the principal drawings signed by Aalto in March 1953 no longer corresponded with the actuality. In January 1956, Aalto's office drew up a new set of principal drawings for the Helsinki City Administrative Court.

The KELA building was presented in an article spanning several double-page spreads in *Arkkitehti-lehti* magazine in 1958. Aalto had prepared a brief description of the building.

"The triangular shape of the plot was naturally something of a disadvantage. However, since the long side of the plot partly faces a park-like area towards the west, it was possible to place an administrative and office building on the plot without designing it as a closed, tenement-like block.

"The main design principle was to create a workplace around a park-like miniature yard terraced above street level so as to eliminate the intrusive effect of motorized traffic, which surrounds the plot on all sides.

"Technically, the construction is a single building with uninterrupted internal traffic flow, even though its external appearance is that of a group of buildings. There is access between the different parts of the building under the terraced yard.

"The main elevation towards Mannerheimintie contains the main entrance to the customer service func-



tions for residents of Helsinki and the vicinity. The foyer connects with the various departments and administration through corridors on the upper floors. There is also a connection through a staircase and a colonnade to the courtyard. There is a separate staff entrance at the basement level on Messeniuksenkatu. The only office premises at street level are those housing the Helsinki district office. All other office space is at or above the level of the terraced courtyard.

“The majority of the building naturally contains normal office space. The lowest level and the courtyard level also house a social welfare and insurance library, a lending library, a modest set of rooms for staff leisure functions and a luncheon room which can also be used both for staff briefings and for both formal and informal meetings.

“The Helsinki district office at street level, adjoining the main entrance, is placed in the main foyer, where the public and private parts of the building meet without disruption.

“The staff entrance leads to a vestibule which is immediately linked to vertical access to the various departments with normal and paternoster lifts. There is also direct, unobtrusive access to other staff facilities such as the luncheon room, the library, and so on.

“The board meeting rooms are on the highest full floor of the middle part of the building. The penthouse floor houses special premises for archival photography, duplication and a clinic.

“The elevations of the building are built in purpose-made brick and copper to cover insulation. Certain separate elements are in black granite, which is also the material used in the walls surrounding the garden areas and the fountains and running water system which form an integral part of the garden.

“The office premises largely conform to normal standards, with the exception of the main entrance and public foyer, which have floors of black and white marble and walls faced with special ceramic tiles. This wall design is an advanced form of the design which I have used earlier in the great marble hall of the Rautatalo building. The idea with this wall design is to create a surface durable enough to withstand the wear and tear caused by people passing through. The ceramic elements form vertical rods interspersed with concave surfaces which can be produced in practically any material to contrast with the hard ceramic finish; for instance, a sound-absorbent material may be used to reduce the hard echo in the space. Exceptional interior design is also used in the library and the luncheon room, where the ceiling conceals a radiator consisting of separate metal radiator elements. Wood and textile are used a lot in the interior design of the floor housing the board rooms.

“The window system is naturally of great importance for working in the building and for the appearance of the building. Although the building has mechanical ventilation and heating, the architect aimed to provide each room with the biological advantage of having natural ventilation through a window that can be opened.”



In the Top 5

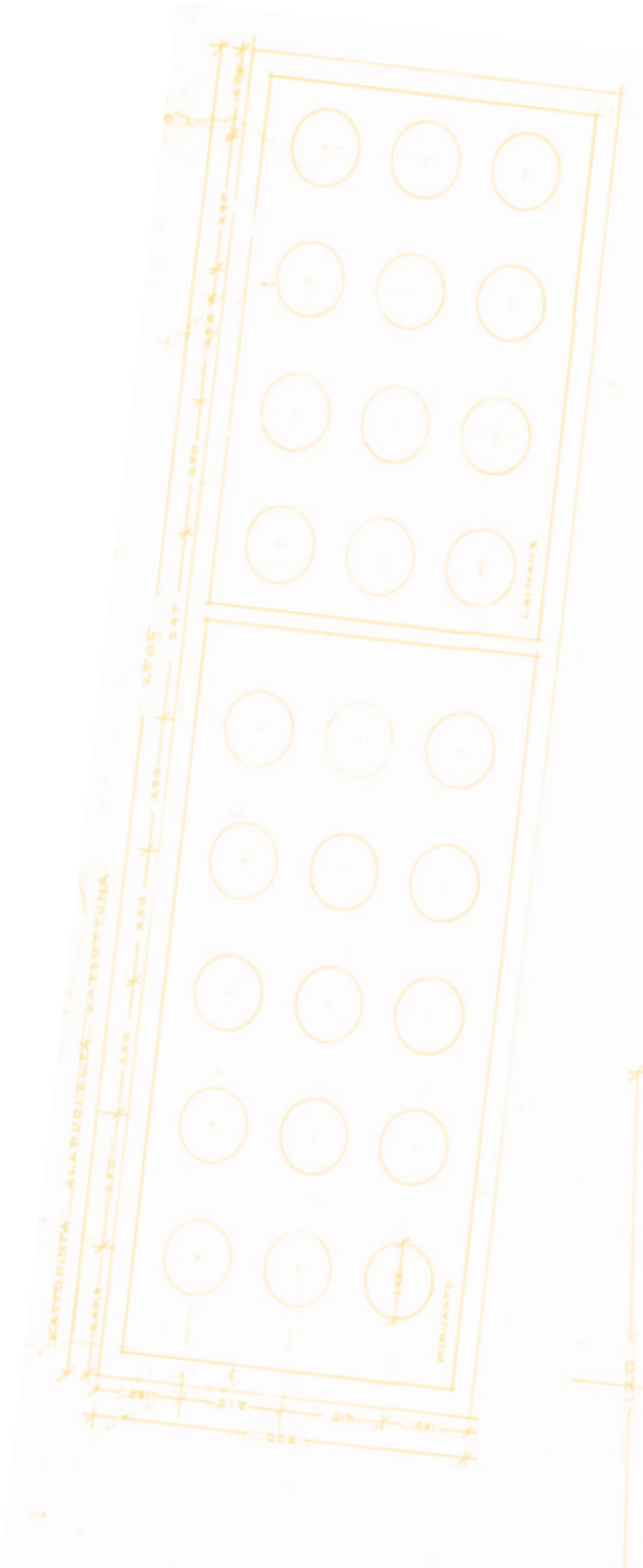
■ Connoisseurs of the architecture of Alvar Aalto are largely unanimous that his best period was that immediately following the Second World War. In 1998, to mark the centenary of Aalto's birth, the Finnish National Board of Antiquities appointed a committee to evaluate Aalto's most important buildings in order to create a 'Top 10 list', which they did.

The KELA building was in the Top 5 on this list, together with the Paimio Sanatorium, Säynätsalo Town Hall, Vuoksenniska Church and the Villa Mairea.

A book was also published for the centenary year, entitled *Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings*, and an exhibition on the same theme was held at Helsinki Art Hall. The seven sites chosen for this exhibition were Paimio Sanatorium, Viipuri Library, the Villa Mairea, Säynätsalo Town Hall, the KELA headquarters, the Rautatalo office building in the city centre of Helsinki, and Vuoksenniska Church.

The article on the KELA headquarters in that book was written by Timo Tuomi, head of research at the Museum of Finnish Architecture.

"The KELA building is an important example of how Aalto aimed to reduce large institutional and commercial buildings to a human scale" Tuomi summarized. The main humanizing measure was to split the large building mass up into smaller components, with courtyards and sheltered park-like areas in between.



The division of the building into smaller parts is easy to see when one walks around the building. It looks different from each side. The main entrance and principal elevation are towards Mannerheimintie, which is the main artery in Helsinki. On the opposite side, the KELA building seems to draw in the park which extends towards it from the Lastenlinna children's hospital. At the third corner of the plot there is a tower built around a chimney.

"The building is a collection of interpretations of classical indoor and outdoor spaces. The great public hall with rooflights is like a village square transposed to an indoor setting. The small library, reflecting the design of Viipuri (Vyborg) Library, has indirect natural light from the ceiling, creating an almost sacred atmosphere. The staff luncheon room, the staff gymnasium, which is perhaps the most neglected room in the building though it resembles an atrium, and the delineated outdoor spaces of the courtyards are all variations on a classical theme."

"The components of the building descend in terraces towards the park, recalling Italian or Greek temples or villages built on a hillside with the most prominent public building at the top."

The seeking of inspiration from Greece was cited by Professor Aalto himself, for instance in the application he submitted to the board of directors of the Bank of Finland for obtaining foreign currency in April 1953.

"Architect Elsa Mäkiniemi-Aalto and the applicant are to travel to Switzerland, northern Italy, Greece and Denmark on a research assignment for Alvar Aalto Architects. The trip, which will involve both architectural studies (at Delphi, Mycenae and Epidauros in Greece) specifically for the design details of the headquarters of the Social Insurance Institution and studies of practical and economical solutions in industrial and office buildings in Switzerland and northern Italy, is to begin on the 17th of this month.

"The applicant therefore respectfully submits that the board of directors of the Bank of Finland approve the enclosed application for foreign currency."

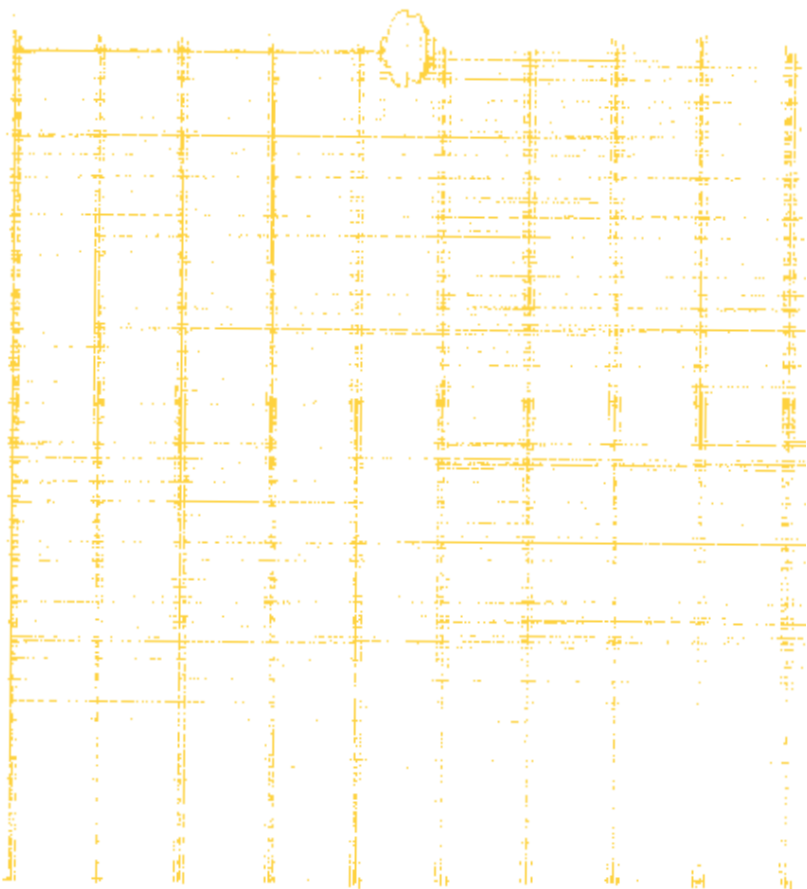
The application was signed by Alvar Aalto.

It is not certain whether it was that trip or some other which resulted in the oblique placement of the building with regard to its surroundings, to enhance its exceptional nature as a public building. The main elevation is in alignment with the surrounding buildings when viewed from Mannerheimintie.

The same oblique placement features in the plan drawn up by Aalto with Swedish architect Albin Stark for the town centre of Avesta in central Sweden in 1944. The description of this plan states:

"One often finds that ancient castles, churches and other dominant buildings in a city are situated obliquely, not aligned with the square city blocks surrounding them. This creates an enchanting contrast

which strongly emphasizes the venerable dominant structures. Similarly, a modern town centre can be enhanced and provided with a dominant central structure which cannot be created with haphazardly strewn small-scale public buildings.”



The burning question of brick

■ The KELA headquarters differs from its surroundings in its colour too. The fairface red brick is in stark contrast to the light-coloured rendered and painted elevations of the adjacent buildings. Acquiring the bricks needed for the elevation was no simple matter in the days of building material rationing. Aalto took a personal interest in the matter and wrote to R. Granqvist, the engineer in charge at the Santamäki brick works in Riihimäki.

“Dear Sir,

“I recall mentioning some time ago that I have a burning question of brick for next year’s construction season which should be resolved in the next few weeks. The project is the new Social Insurance Institution building in Helsinki, for which as many as 3,000,000 bricks will be required: a great number of elevation bricks but also interior decoration bricks and smaller numbers of special bricks, both flame-kiln produced. This is my most important building to date, at least as important as the University of Jyväskylä, and I also have wide-ranging authority to experiment with high-grade brick and other ceramic elements, such as covering the waterproof surfaces of the elevation with special-profile ceramic tiles instead of copper sheeting.”

The products of the Santamäki brick works have withstood the test of time well to the present day. They are of normal dimensions and hand-thrown. Their durability is due to their composition, which ensures that even when they freeze they do not chip and peel like extended factory-made bricks.

Many have wondered why an Aalto brick wall is always vivid and interesting, whereas a similar wall in another building may seem simply dead.

Göran Schildt, Aalto's biographer, wrote that Aalto had come up against this problem when building the elevations of the MIT dormitory (completed in 1949) in fairface brick. The American bricks were too even and flawless, all equal in shape and colour.

Finally, he found outside Boston an ailing brick works that produced "the most woeful bricks in the world". Aalto was overjoyed. He described the end result enthusiastically:

"The bricks are made from topsoil clay, which is parched by the sun. They are fired in hand-laid pyramids, using only oak to fuel the fire. When the walls were built, no bricks were discarded, and all colours from black to canary yellow were accepted, though the overall colour remains bright red."

The same situation emerged in the work on Säynätsalo Town Hall. Aalto considered this so important that he assigned his newly hired assistant and future wife Elsa Mäkineniemi to supervise the work. After the work was completed, Aalto sent a personal thank-you note to each bricklayer involved in the project.

"For me as an architect, it is highly important to develop the art of bricklaying in our country. This is why Säynätsalo Town Hall is faced with fairface brick both inside and out. I must say that I am extremely pleased

with the fruits of our cooperation, which have led to a fine example of Finnish brick construction."

The rod-like ceramic tiles used for the interior walls on the first floor of the KELA building were developed by Aalto together with the Arabia factory specifically for this project. The same tiles were used almost concurrently in the Rautatalo office building project. The aim was to find a design that was acoustically advantageous and would withstand heavy use. Today, the tiles still look as good as new.

Durable materials were of course needed for spaces to which customers had access or where there was frequent traffic, such as the staff luncheon room. More textiles were used in the interior design of the floor housing the board of directors. Aalto is said to have divided the building into three categories for the purposes of interior design and materials: the public spaces downstairs constituted one category, the ordinary offices the second and the board of directors floor the third.

Aalto designed at least nine different light fittings for the KELA building, many of which were later adopted elsewhere too. Furniture, lighting, door handles and many other interior design elements were specifically designed for the uses and needs of the building instead of being brought in.

Nordiska Kompaniet (NK), a department store in Stockholm, asked Aalto to organize an exhibition of his furniture, lighting fixtures and textiles in 1954, when

he was working on several of the items of furniture destined for the KELA building. For the exhibition catalogue, Aalto provided a humorous comment on his work, entitled 'A word from Alvar Aalto'.

"As we all know, soup must have a spoon. In furniture design, there must be a basic element, a constructive standard part which can then be modulated and replicated in all the various pieces. The sine qua non is that this element must have both constructive properties and an appropriate shape in keeping with the style.

"My furniture is seldom if ever produced through professional design work. Almost always I have created furniture alongside architectural design, whether in public buildings, aristocratic residences or workers' cottages, to go together with the architecture. It is great fun to be able to design furniture in this way.

"In conceiving furniture, the tie between vertical and horizontal elements is historically — and practically — the most difficult fundamental problem. I believe that stylistically this is the crucial problem. The chair leg is, after all, the little sister of the architectural column when it adjoins a horizontal element.

"Thus, this little exhibition focuses almost exclusively on the chair leg. - - - That is the spoon in the soup. Everything else is vegetables, which are very good in a soup but not, strictly speaking, necessary."

A modern property developer would require greater efficiency

■ According to the classical definition, architecture must fulfil three basic requirements: a building must be usable, durable and beautiful.

The 'usable' aspect includes functional, practical and economical elements. Durability is not just physical durability but today also includes ecological sustainability. Beauty, then, is a property of both the building and its environment.

The KELA building fulfilled all the classical architectural criteria when it was completed, even if its economy was called into question. Erkki Mansikkamäki, property manager at KELA, points out this aspect in particular.

"No modern property developer could cope with the KELA headquarters building," Mansikkamäki says. The efficiency of the building does not measure up to today's productivity expectations, which have been sanitized of all aesthetic criteria.

At the end of 2005, the building housed 410 employees, down from more than 650 two decades earlier.

The greatest changes in the appearance and nature of the building have been caused by the discontinuing of customer service and the dismantling of the customer service units.

The reception for the Helsinki district office was located at street level, in the large roof-lit foyer today known as Kelahalli. It had 28 cubicles to ensure customer privacy. Aalto had designed the cubicles, which were carefully

executed in mahogany and ash. The desks, chairs and lamps were also designed by Aalto. One specimen has been preserved for posterity.

The foyer, which is three stories high and is lit by rooflights, is described as Finland's first open-plan office. It is also known among KELA personnel as 'Alvar's church' because of its temple-like appearance.

When the district office was closed down, many years were spent in wondering what to do with the foyer. Director Göran Engström finally suggested that it be converted into a lecture hall and exhibition room.

The renovated space, named Kelahalli, was completed for the 50th anniversary of KELA in 1987.

Alvar Aalto classified the KELA headquarters as a public building, which Aalto felt should set an example to all other kinds of building — not through imitation of its forms, but at a deeper, more indirect level.

In 1953, Aalto wrote an article for *Arkkitehti-lehti* magazine titled 'The decadence of public buildings':

"Nevertheless, public buildings must be as important in society as the principal organs are in the human body, unless we want our society to become clogged, psychologically unpleasant and physically taxing. We must consider that the present trend in urban construction is a transition period which will hopefully soon be a thing of the past and which will likely be viewed with scorn by future generations.

"Our society must re-establish a correct sense of proportion.

"It is incorrect to say 're-establish', though, since the appropriate phrasing would be that we must re-create the proportions which are essential for an organized society.

"The society now emerging, which for want of a better term we might describe as the classless society, is even more delicate than the bourgeois society created in the French Revolution, since it involves larger masses of people whose physical well-being, growth into citizenship and increased cultural powers depend largely on the correct proportioning of public institutions and areas."

The air must be crystal-clear

■ There are plenty of examples in the literature on Aalto of the Professor's extravagant lifestyle. These easily lead the reader to conclude that Aalto was a complete financial ignoramus. However, although he knew how to burn money, he also knew the value of his work and billed his clients accordingly.

The Social Insurance Institution was an important major client for Aalto's office. Design fees were based on a percentage of construction costs as recommended by the Finnish Association of Architects (SAFA). This recommendation was applied very flexibly, though. Correspondence reveals fees ranging from 2% to 8%, depending on the quality of the work. Aalto levied extra fees sometimes on the basis of the project being a public building, sometimes on the basis of a plot having a difficult shape, there being a SAFA recommendation for extra fees in both such cases.

In practice, design fees were negotiated as a gentlemen's agreement. They were not even always written down. Advances running to several millions of markka were sometimes paid in cash against a receipt and collected by an errand boy.

How much Aalto's office actually billed in all for the design work on the KELA headquarters is not really relevant. The main thing is that the work was done and the end result was satisfactory. Experts on Aalto unanimously refer to the KELA building as a 'comprehensive work of art', because Aalto's work is evident even in its tiniest details. The same accolade has been given to other Aalto buildings too.

Of course, KELA sometimes tried to contest the design fees, but Aalto was adamant:

"It is an exceptionally difficult task, due to the highly challenging shape of the plot and the added responsibility of creating a public building commensurate with the surrounding urban fabric."

Aalto pointed out that every single floor in the building was a different shape.

Director Hillilä seems to have been Aalto's confidant, to whom he expressed his concerns in a brotherly tone.

"Dear friend,

"To complement our negotiations, the content and spirit of which I accept *con amore*, I would like to submit to you the schedule of fees for interior design. You proposed that these matters be taken up in a few weeks' time. However, I believe that in such an important project **THE AIR MUST BE CRYSTAL-CLEAR FROM THE START**. Therefore, I desire that you and through you the Board should be aware of the overall magnitude of the project so that there can be no confusion between us in such an important undertaking.

"One important factor is that I cannot keep negotiations open and create a building for the Social Insurance Institution at the same time. As Wallenius puts it: 'You cannot go fishing for whale and herring at the same time.'

“Perhaps I am being too much like Ståhlberg [a reference to Finland’s first President], but absolute clarity is the only possible working hypothesis for me. At the moment, I am mentally (though not in terms of work load) stressed to the bloody extreme with finishing up your building, and I intend to go into the forest for a few days to meditate and sketch. I am satisfied with the exterior, but the monumental interior work is still on my desk. Unfortunately, this interior design will have a crucial impact on both the construction and the ventilation system. Therefore I must do this work now, with no distractions on my mental horizon. Perhaps you might call this an artist’s complex, but this is the only way in which the building will turn out well.

“Therefore I am enclosing a schedule of fees for designing the fixtures and furniture for the building.

“This schedule is not negotiable, as I cannot engage in haggling while I am involved in designing the very core of the project.

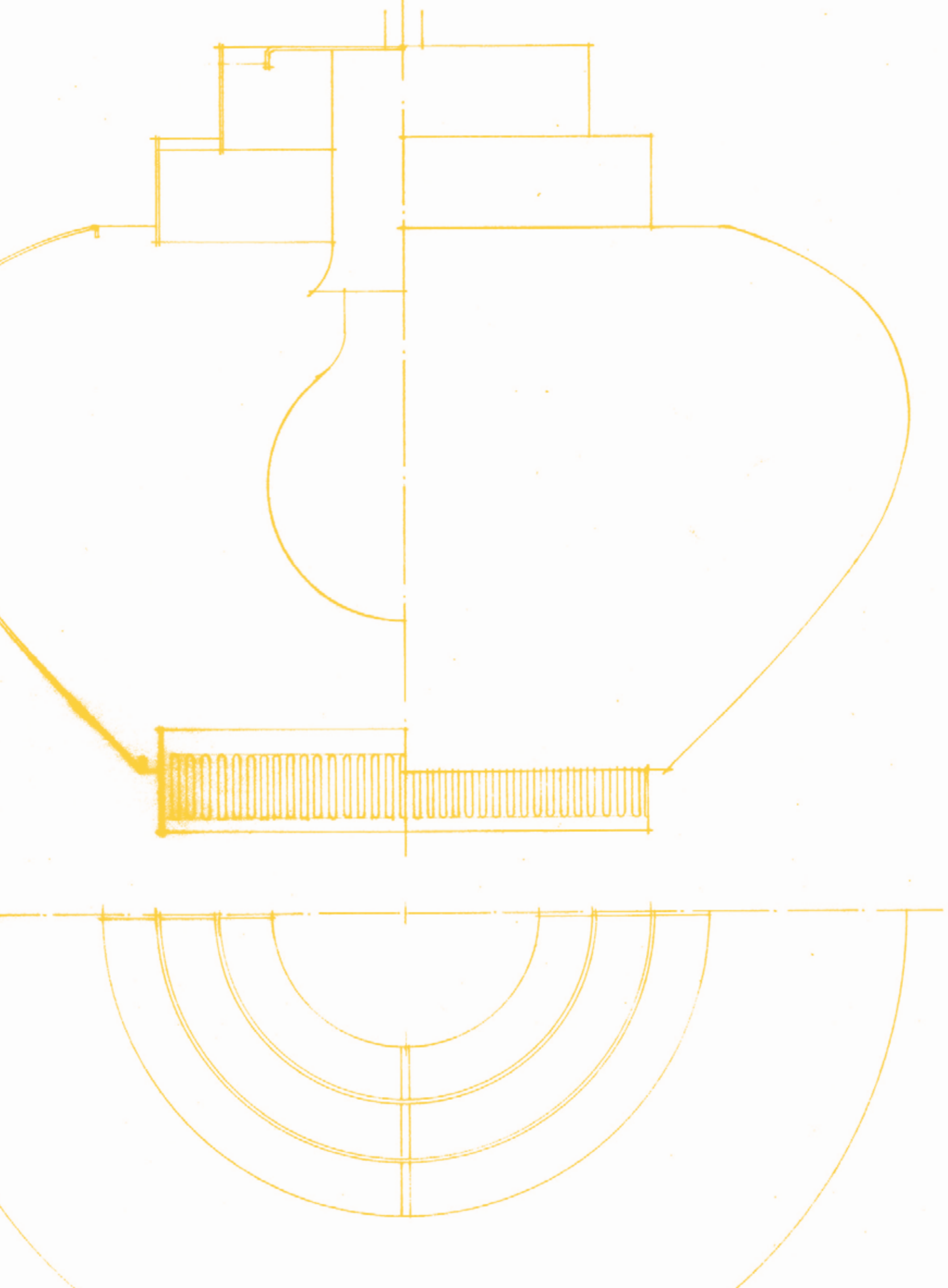
“You are a perceptive enough judge of character to know that this is for the best.

“Please give my regards to Louhio, if he has already returned from holiday.”

At Aalto’s office, the KELA building project involved above all the architect Keijo Ström, who contributed to the ‘Forum redivivum’ competition entry, and the architect Olavi Tuomisto. As they moved on to other assignments, they were replaced by the architect Olli

Penttilä. The assistants on the project were architect Mäkinieki (Elissa Aalto) and architect Toivo Korhonen. The office timesheets also record the names of a dozen other people who contributed to the project in some capacity.

A contribution was made to the interior design by Maija Heikinheimo, artistic director of Artek, and many of the textiles were designed by the artist Kirsti Ilvessalo.





LIGHTING



It is unlikely that any other architect has ever been as interested in the lighting of the spaces he designed as was Alvar Aalto. His desire to influence the lighting has been explained by a number of things, including the Finnish climate. For the greater part of the year when there is no daylight, the spaces have to be lit by electric light. Aalto often wanted his artificial lighting to seem to extend the daylight, and thus the light fittings were installed so that they shone in the same direction as the natural light. This was done, for example, in 'KELA Hall', where the fittings are placed between the glazed structures of the high roof lanterns.





Many of the light fittings Aalto designed individually for specific spaces were later put into mass production. The light fittings sold by Artek were used in both private homes and public spaces. Aalto's designs were usually implemented by Viljo Hirvonen, whose company Valaistustyö acted as a subcontractor both to Aalto and to Artek. Hirvonen is said to have been able to produce prototype light fittings on the basis of nothing more than rough sketches and verbal instructions.

These fittings were included in the Artek range in 1952.





Aalto demonstrated that he was a master of variation in the design of both furniture and light fittings. By varying a basic theme, he was able to produce a whole spectrum of variations. At the time the KELA building was under construction, the industry was not tied to large production runs as is the case today. Aalto might quite happily design several different light fittings for a single room.







The materials used for Aalto's light fittings varied from steel to painted iron and aluminium, polished brass and leather covering. Many of the light fittings have remained so popular that they are still in production today.



The three-part wooden light fitting made of painted metal and polished brass, used in the financial department, was produced by Artek and was included in the Artek range in 1957. The same fitting was also used at Säynätsalo Town Hall. Aalto liked the fitting so much that he acquired one for the dining room in his own home.

The large fitting on the right, made of polished and painted brass, is used in the large conference room on the executive floor. A variation on this lamp was later used in Finlandia Hall and other places.







For the painted metal light fittings used in the executive offices, Aalto studied the way the light filtered through holes punched in the metal.



Aalto was a master at using indirect light. Indirect light gives pleasant, even lighting where the source cannot always be identified. Varying the type of light fitting gives distinctive lighting and atmosphere in different spaces. The photo on the left shows the corridor lighting, while the photo on the right shows the library lighting. Nowhere does the light dazzle the user directly.



The photo on the next page shows the pendant fitting in the cafeteria; this never entered into mass production.



Aalto did not seek publicity

■ The new building was taken into use one section at a time during 1956. The pensions and technical insurance departments moved in May, and the other departments followed in June.

The City of Helsinki building inspection authority approved the new building as a whole on August 30, and the handover inspection was held on September 11.

KELA continued with its reticent publicity policy. There is no record of any formal 'house-warming' or other celebration of the completion of the building. Indeed, some newspaper articles claim that the architect had forbidden photographs of the building.

Alvar Aalto was a brilliant lecturer and socialite, but he was apprehensive about publicity and criticism of his work. He is said to have created an entire generation of mute architects in Finland with his well-known quip:

"I do not write, I build. God made paper for drawing. Any other use is, at least for me, abuse."

In 1961, Aalto wrote in a letter to Alfred Roth, a Swiss friend of his:

"I myself do not enjoy publicity. This is not because I am modest, but because publicity invariably fails to convey the correct image of my architecture and always has a journalistic undertone which I find disagreeable. - - - One cannot require someone working on two dozen public buildings at once to find time for something as frivolous as publicity. Seriously, publicity distracts me from my work and upsets my mental balance."

Throughout the construction, the press had described the building as a 'palace'. Rumour had it that there was to be a swimming pool, which would have been unheard of. This rumour most likely stemmed from the design for a subterranean library, which to a construction worker could have resembled a swimming pool.

Another notable feature was the copper facing on part of the elevation. Though weathered to green today, it shone like gold when new. One explanation for the use of copper may be found in the close relationship between KELA and Outokumpu, a major producer of copper. KELA was a major investor in and owner of Outokumpu at the time.

The press were given a tour of the building in late November 1956. There appears to have been great interest, with illustrated features appearing in all the major media. The event was hosted by Director General V.J. Sukselainen, who discounted criticism of the project's expense:

"Who then could build handsome buildings if not the government?"

Public criticism levelled at the new building seems to have bothered the management of KELA. Press secretary Armas Leppänen addressed the question of personnel doubting whether the new building was needed in issue 4/56 of the in-house magazine, *Kela pyörii*. Leppänen promised a further training session for personnel, involving an introduction to the building and its functions. He ventured that the vast majority of the personnel knew nothing about the building

Wise decisions are made here

beyond the route from the staff entrance to their own office and to the luncheon room downstairs.

Having described the building in detail, Leppänen concluded:

“Finally, it must be said that a new thing is always a new thing, and as such always seems unduly fancy and luxurious to some. Developments are rapid in construction. Yesterday’s building can seem old-fashioned and impractical tomorrow, figuratively speaking. When our Parliament building was completed, it was also condemned as a ‘palace’ in public debate. The ideological debate that raged then can be in some measure compared to the uproar which certain people are seeking to provoke with regard to ‘our house’. No one would dream of criticizing the Parliament building today; indeed, it is viewed with pride and paternal love by all Finns. Of course, the Social Insurance Institution headquarters cannot compare with Parliament in terms of authority and dignity, but perhaps our house will serve as a fine example of today’s construction for future builders. And perhaps the controversy which it has sparked will also die down in due course. Perhaps some of those who now denounce it will come to view it more favourably in the future.”

The building attracted great interest upon its completion. When the building was opened to the public, there were as many as 6,000 visitors per year. This was such a large number that the tours were considered to disrupt the normal work of the institution, and the number of visitors admitted was restricted. Even today, the building attracts some 1,000 visitors every year, mostly from abroad.

■ Peter MacKeith, Associate Professor of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis, investigated what messages Finnish companies wish to communicate with their headquarters. The study, commissioned by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA), was completed in August 2005. It discusses whether great glass cubes like the Nokia headquarters actually contribute to corporate competitiveness, creativity and transparency, as the companies themselves maintain.

MacKeith is well acquainted with Finland, having lived here for some ten years. He was investigator for and leader of the international Master of Architecture degree programme at Helsinki University of Technology (TKK). He was also employed at an architects’ office in Helsinki for a few years.

MacKeith notes that every building sends a message, whether the owners want it to or not. It is interesting to consider what kind of a message the KELA headquarters sent 50 years ago, what kind of a message it sends now and how those messages fit in with KELA values.

According to MacKeith, the buildings of today’s information society or ‘new economy’ reflect the rules of the global economy: borderless, transparent and flexible.

The idea is that employees in glass boxes or open-plan offices are easy to approach, and people at different levels of the organization can meet freely. Thereby information can flow, and creativity can flourish.

In 1998, the architect Pekka Helin wrote about how the design principles for the Nokia headquarters match the aims of the company:



“The main aim in the design was to create a workplace for the new millennium, interactive and conducive to creative thinking. The result was a flexible, adaptable and repeatable spatial unit which suits both individual work and team work.”

The designer explained that visual contact between spaces and groups of spaces promoted communication. The traffic flow within the building was intended to generate “positive encounters”.

Peter MacKeith disagrees completely.

“The correlation between creativity, productivity, transparency, flexibility of spaces and openness is an illusion. Productivity increases have perhaps been attested in company studies, but not in any academic studies.”

According to MacKeith, the real reason for constructing modular glass cubes is the need to keep design and construction costs as low as possible.

The KELA headquarters falls midway in time between the great granite edifices of the early 20th century and the glass cubes of the end of that century. An appropriate person to evaluate the message of the KELA building might be Professor Juhani Pallasmaa, an architect who is perhaps one of the most important and influential prompters of public debate in Finnish architecture today.

Pallasmaa appears to be touchy on the subject of considering price alone in the field of construction. Aalto’s

design was criticized in public debate for being expensive and extravagant.

“Cheapness is an obsession of modern times. Costs are only relevant for the brief period during which the building is being constructed. A few years later, no one is interested in the price tag any more.

“Helsinki railway station designed by Eiel Saarinen is worth its weight in gold. It is such a fine building and such an essential component of the Finnish identity that no one today would dream of asking what it cost to build in its day.”

Pallasmaa feels that construction is today seen as purely a financial investment, and not — as it should — as a spiritual and cultural investment too.

Aalto was of the opinion that society must, in public construction, show a good example and construct buildings of high quality, expenses be damned. Today, Pallasmaa feels that central and local government are setting the worst possible example in their construction projects. All prices are negotiated down as low as possible, starting with competitive tenders for the design process. The results speak for themselves.

Pallasmaa addressed the current trend of construction in glass at a conference on the topic in 2004.

“The development of the window from a metaphysical focus for the eye and a conveyer of observations into a glass wall, a virtual absence of wall with the resulting disappearance of the window too, is undoubtedly



a worrying trend. Today, we see buildings that are all window: we are called upon to live our lives in a window. Such inversions are perhaps exciting and thrilling, but they can also seriously impoverish architecture by destroying its very essence..."

Pallasmaa is not completely pessimistic about the profuse use of glass, however; he also sees new potential in it.

In the 1950s, it was simply not technically possible to use large glass surfaces as it is today. However, the notion of a transparent house had already been invented, as witness the post-war work of architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Eero Saarinen.

When Alvar Aalto was designing the KELA headquarters, he was well aware of contemporary international trends. In fact, Aalto executed more buildings abroad than any other Finnish architect. He constantly met foreign colleagues both on his trips abroad and on their visits to Finland. Aalto's office in Helsinki was perhaps the most international meeting place of its day in all of Finland.

Instead of glass, the principal material of Aalto's work in the 1950s was red brick. 'Pure geometry' and 'comprehensive grid systems' did not inspire Aalto. He preferred hand-made free forms, natural and human-friendly materials, and tailored design.

Pallasmaa describes the KELA building as a homage to people, both those working there and those coming there as customers.

"Elevating the everyday through architecture.

"Taking people into account starts with the entrance to the building. The main entrance surely intimidates no one. The front door is more modest than in many private homes, yet it has a number of details that show consideration for the visitor. For example, there is a tiny lip protecting the door handle from the rain. It may be useless in practice, but it is nevertheless a gesture towards the visitor. There is also a narrow shelter against the rain above the door itself.

In front of the entrance there is a stone bench, which can be seen as an invitation for the elderly to rest for a while. Not many sit down in winter, but it is the thought that counts.

There was no way that Aalto could have known KELA's values today when he was designing the building, but it is still interesting to consider how well those match the values reflected by the building.

The mission defined by KELA for itself is to secure the income of the population, to promote health and to support independent living. The values guiding the institution are: valuing people, competent, cooperative and renewing.

As it happens, the literature on Aalto almost as if by common agreement mentions valuing people when discussing the KELA building. The entrance is one example, but consideration for people is apparent throughout the building in the choice of materials. Everything that the hand is meant to have contact with

has been made pleasant to touch. Aalto himself spoke of good working conditions as opposed to those of 'office factories'.

The staff luncheon room affords a view of the courtyard, the 'upper terrace' or forum, as it has been called in reference to the entry that won the original design competition. Aalto argued the case for forums as meeting places for citizens, though in the event those in this design never functioned as they were intended. The 'upper terrace' of the KELA building provided access through the block until the late 1950s, but passers-by tended to trample on the planting, and finally access was prevented with the installation of metal gates in the portals.

The idea of a forum is perhaps at its purest in the raised courtyard of Säynätsalo Town Hall. Aalto described it as a place where citizens could gather as on the Campo in Siena. Not that the citizens of Säynätsalo have ever done so, but the forum is there should they ever feel the urge, as Göran Schildt wittily points out.

Juhani Pallasmaa considers that Aalto's forums are "symbols that feed the imagination and are not meant for actual use". After all, Senate Square in Helsinki is not in the use for which it was originally conceived, he points out by way of comparison.

"In any case, the KELA building courtyard is a very rare urban oasis. It really does recall the central square of a small Mediterranean town."

Another oasis in the building is the library, recalling the themes of Viipuri (Vyborg) Library. Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that no institution has such a centrally placed library as that in the KELA building.

A library creates the impression of a civilized and humane institution. It inescapably prompts the impression:

"Wise decisions are made here."

KELA2006



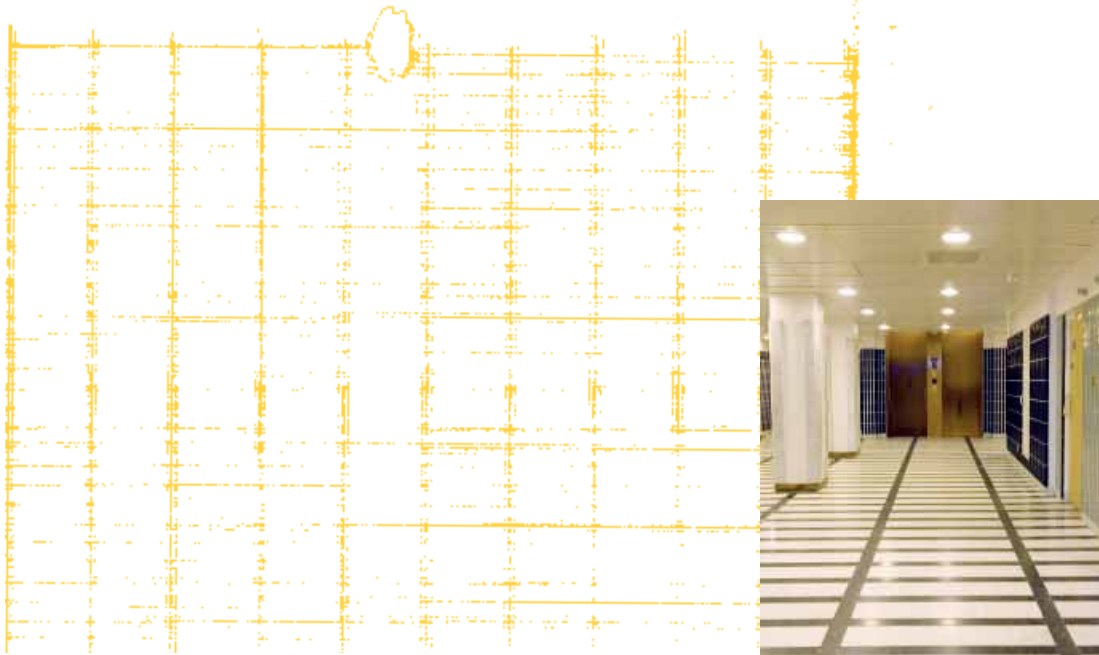
The following pages show illustrations of the entrance hall or foyer space originally conceived as a public space and of the Helsinki District Office connected with it. Aalto felt that the public spaces, which would be subject to heavy use, had to be made of durable materials. This was accomplished so successfully that even today, fifty years after the building was constructed, the floor and walls of the foyer look as though they had just been completed.





Combining Finnishness with Antiquity and the international Modernist style is considered one of Aalto's special characteristics. He drew on those aspects of international Modernism which fitted in with his own Finnish architecture. It cannot have been easy to combine these aspects, but the final result seems natural and effortless. The use of marble in the entrance hall is a direct reference to Antiquity.





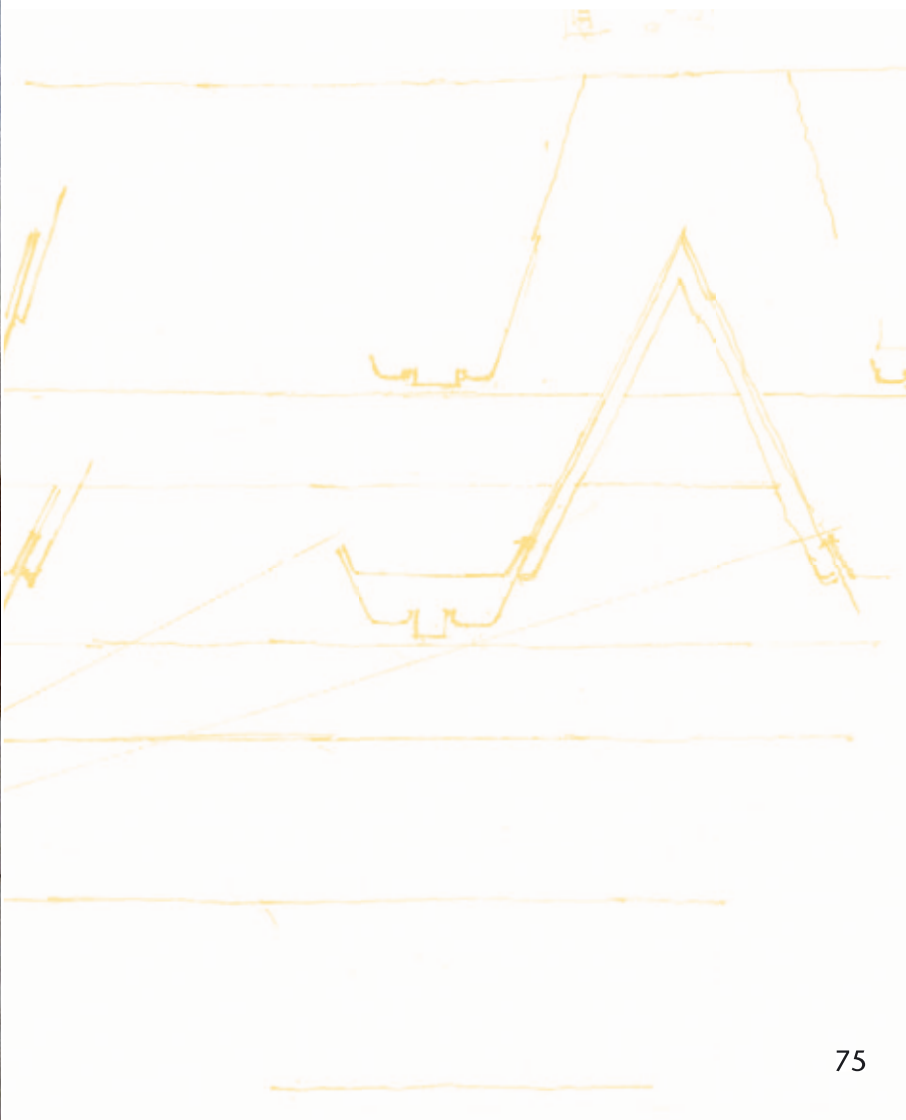
The Helsinki District Office customer services area on the first floor of the KELA building has been described as Finland's first open-plan office. One of the customer service points has been preserved for posterity. The finishing of the joinery is universally admired.

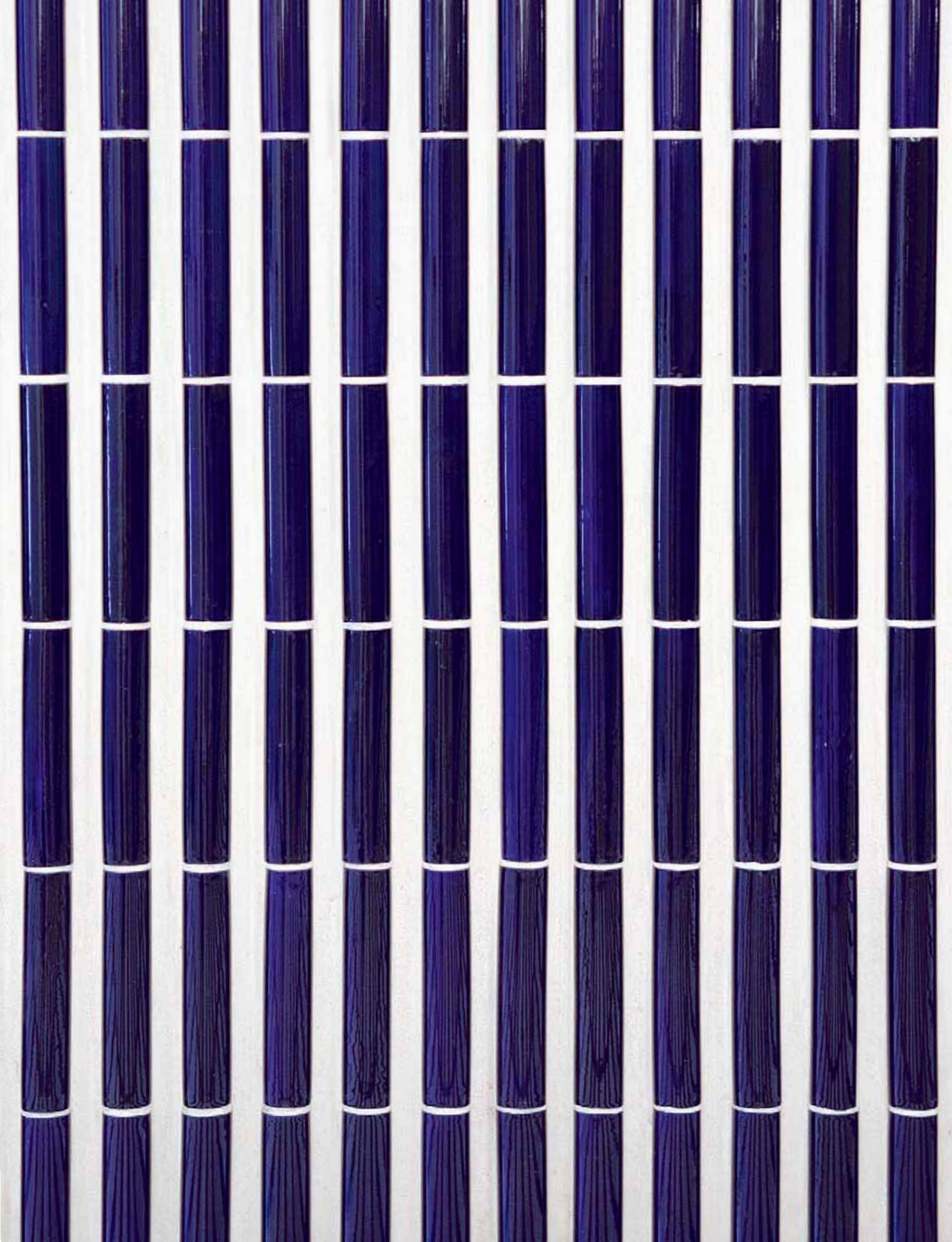


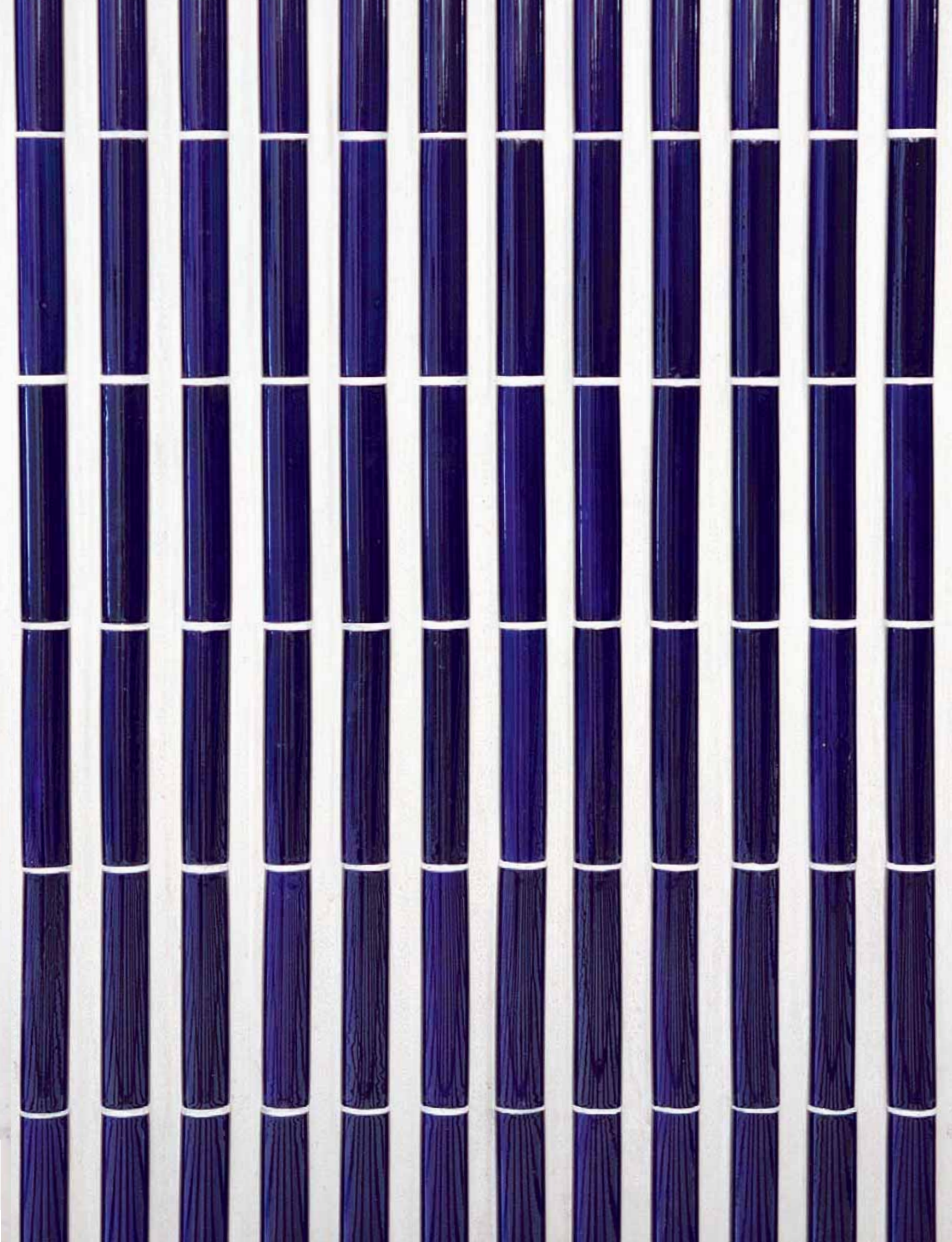




The space known as 'KELA Hall', originally designed for customer service, is lit by huge roof lights. During the darker times of the year, artificial light comes from the same direction. The high roof lanterns give the space the feel of a temple, and KELA staff began referring to the hall as 'Alvar's church'.









Alvar Aalto developed these rod-shaped ceramic wall tiles for the KELA building and for the Rautatalo building which was under construction at the same time. The tiles were manufactured in various colours and were subsequently used elsewhere, for example in Aalto's Sähköotalo (Power company office building), completed in the early 1970s.





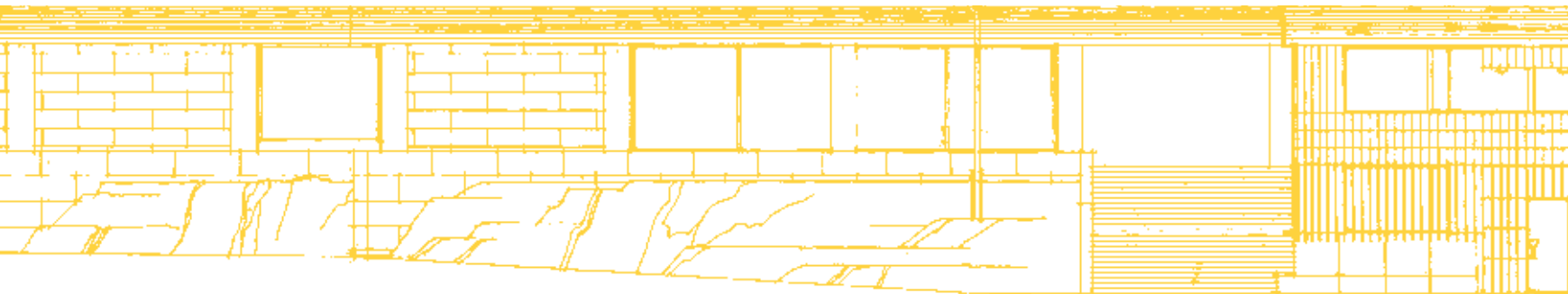
TILING





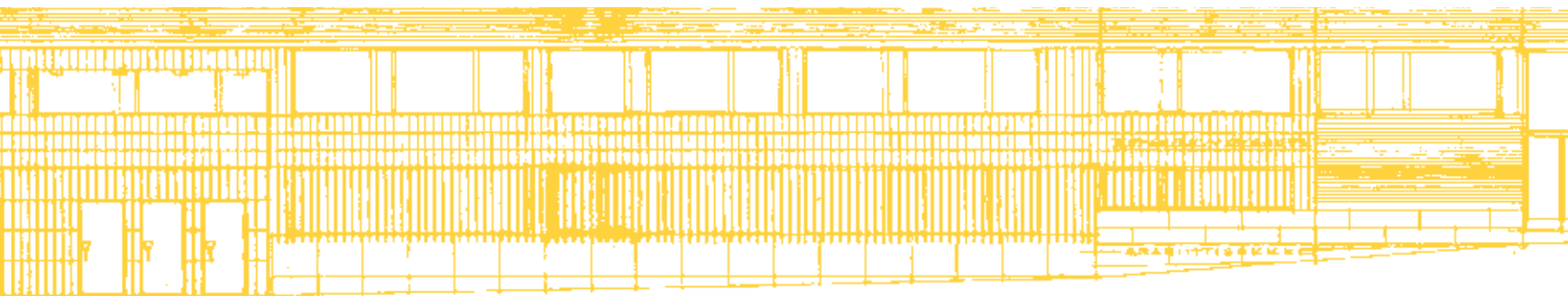
It is easy to see the influence of Classical architecture and direct references to Florence in the scale of the facade of the KELA building. Aalto deliberately borrowed some of the features of a Renaissance palazzo, for example the stone benches flanking the main entrance.

Visitors to the building cannot but be amazed by its actual size. It is much larger than one might think on the basis of the elevations. The KELA building is considered to be a good example of Aalto's ability to make a large-sized institution and office building human in scale. Many people think it a miracle that a 22,500 m² building could have been rendered so intimate.





Aalto differed from many other Modernists in that he took careful note of the building's surroundings and was not satisfied with designing one-off buildings. From one direction, the building looks as though it swallows up the adjoining park. Another viewpoint is dominated by the massive tower (pp. 84–85), which conceals the chimney.









The different parts of the building step down towards the park zone in a way that brings to mind Greek and Italian hilltop villages and temple areas where the public space is at the top of a hill. The

park looks as though it continues into the inner courtyard of the KELA building, right through to the staff luncheon room via the large windows.



As Alvar Aalto himself put it: "The prime motive is the creation of a large-scale office block with the elimination of the 'factory-like' features which are reminiscent of tenement dwellings and which are so psychologically and humanly damaging."





PIIRUSTUKSESSÄ ESITETTY KORKEILEVYTTÄ ZON
PÄÄDINÄ OTTAEN SITTEN JO HUOKIHOON KORK-
KILLEVUJEN AIHEUTTAMA KULMAISUUS.
VESIKATTO: LOPKO 1: BETONIKALUSTAK
LOPKO 3: TUKIRAKENNE KQ
SÖEX HÖVLÄTTÄ ALUSLA
LOPKO 4: BETONIKALUSTAK
VESIERISTYS
ALUSBETONI
KORKIN SUOJAUS ULLAKON
ERISTYKSEN VÄTEYDESSÄ.



The liveliness of the brickwork in Alvar Aalto's buildings has often been admired (see adjoining page). The architect himself frequently supervised the work of the professionals. He wanted a specific sort of brick in his buildings, showing the marks of genuine handwork.

In a close inspection of the building, the characteristics of the international Modernist style of the 1950s can easily be

seen. The attention is drawn to the use of columns and the dual theme of light and deep shadow. The columns at the upper level are much more slender than those at the lower level, as they carry much less weight. The openings break up the solid massing, which would otherwise be very heavy.





It is easy to find points of contact with Italy, which Aalto visited frequently, in the water feature in the internal courtyard. Unlike in Rome or at Tivoli, running water can be enjoyed in Helsinki for only part of the year.





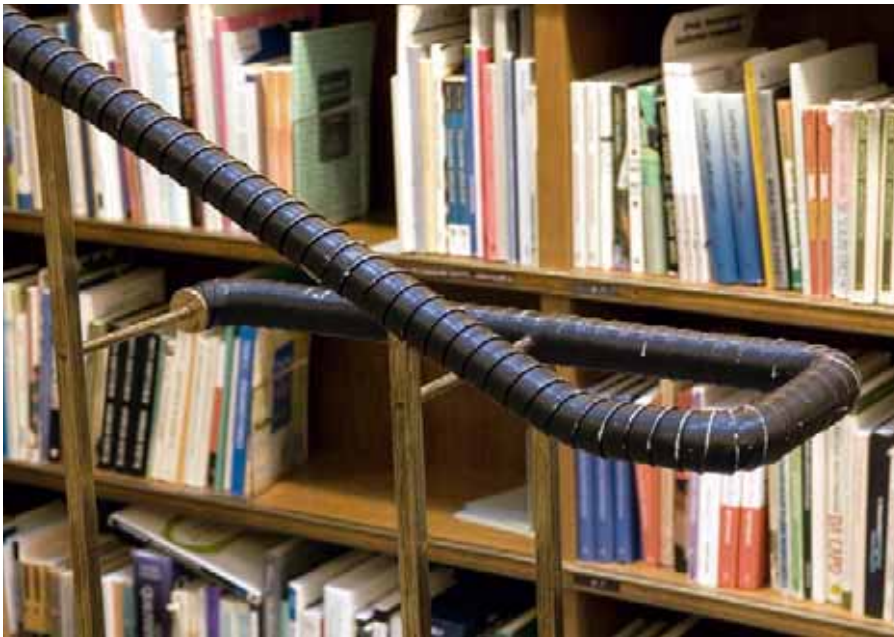








LIBRARY



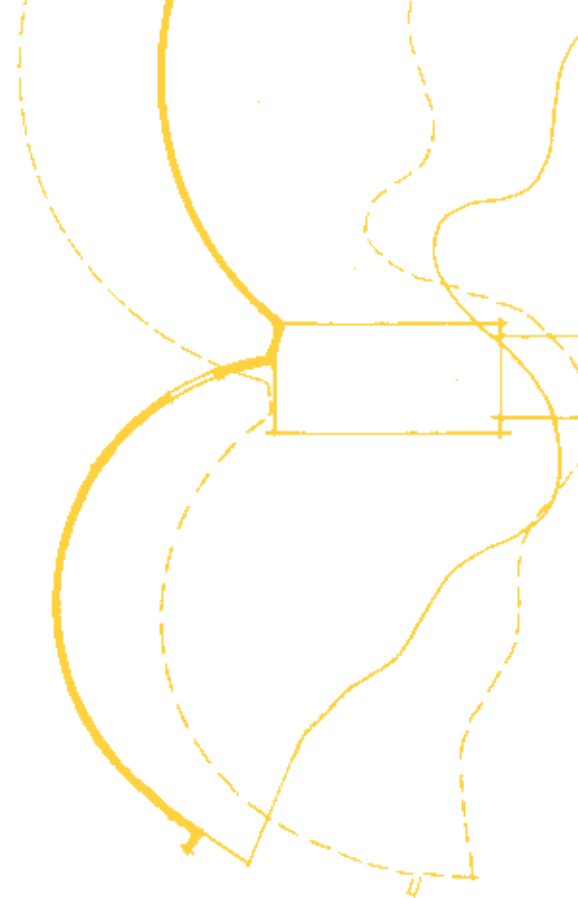
The library in the KELA building is considered to be a repeat of Aalto's Viipuri (Vyborg) Library at a smaller and more intimate scale. The circular roof lights and the sunken library area are very similar.

There has been discussion about possible sources for the circular roof lights which give such atmospheric, chapel-like lighting. The idea may have come from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, which appears in Piranesi's prints and which Aalto was very familiar with. Round openings were used at the Villa to light semi-basement rooms.









Scarcely any other government agency or institution has a library placed as prominently as that in the KELA building. The library, which focuses on socio-political works, is in great demand and is used by KELA staff and outside experts in the field of social work.

SEATING



Alvar Aalto was a pioneer in the use of wood, especially bent wood, as a furniture material. His work prompted numerous imitations, and copies of his furniture designs began to appear in the United States as early as in the late 1930s.

In Finland, the wood-processing industry is an old-established field, and bending wood and plywood was nothing new. Aalto used this expertise in designing furniture and developed bending methods in conjunction with professionals.

Much of the furniture used in the KELA building was designed specifically for the purpose. Some

of the items were taken into mass production, and some of them are still in production today.

This double-page spread shows the X or fan-shaped leg introduced to the public for the first time in 1954. These items form a series of chairs specially designed by Aalto for public spaces.

Aalto explained that he designed the furniture 'as an accompaniment to the architecture', that is to say as a part of the whole.







The Y-leg chair on the left-hand page is in the same style as the furniture Aalto designed for the KELA building, but dates from a much later period. These chairs were acquired for the luncheon room in 1990. The renovation of the furniture was supervised by Alvar Aalto & Co, Architects.

The original luncheon room chair can be seen above left. The legs are in birch, and the seat and backrest are upholstered in black leather.

The chair shown above right is a 'spare chair' and was part of the original furniture used in the conference rooms, corridors and executives' rooms on the sixth floor.



The armchair shown below was co-designed by Alvar Aalto and Maija Heikinheimo together. The model is based on a 1970s frame.

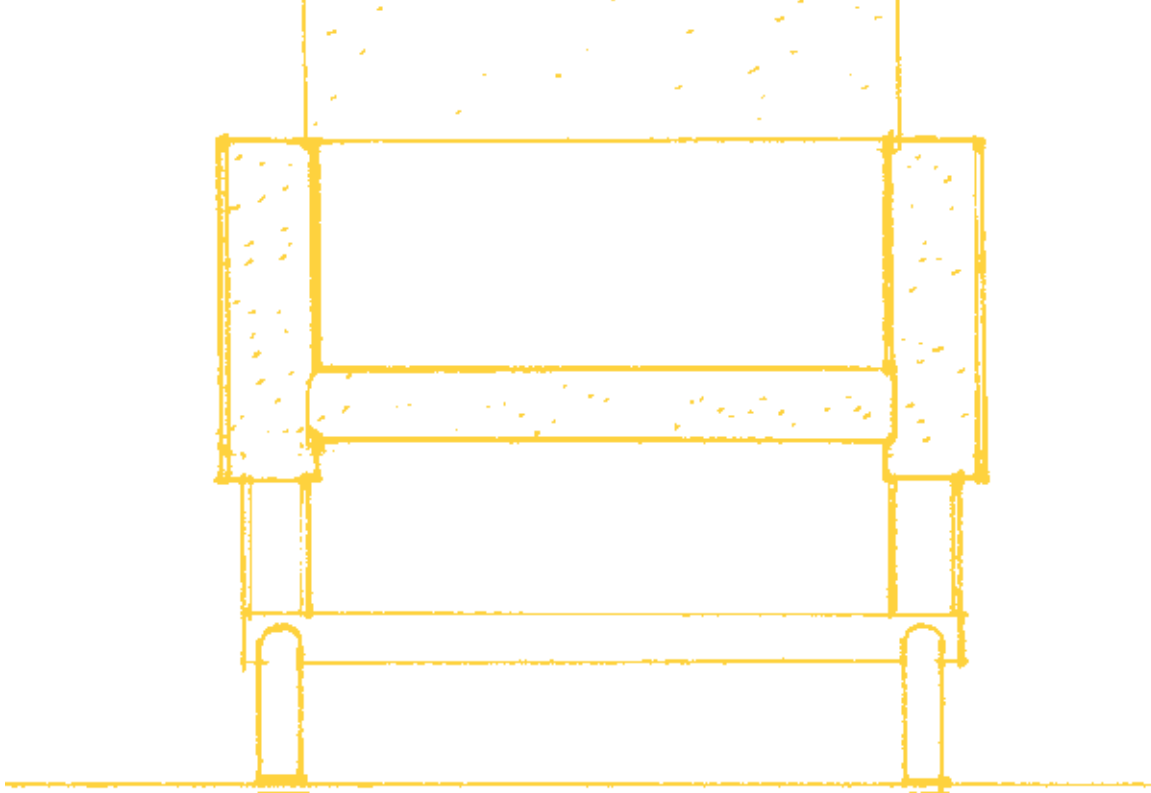




The backrests of the armchairs which form part of the original conference room furniture are a fraction higher than standard. In the model shown above, the black leather upholstered armrests have been specially styled as 'wings'.

The seat and back of the original luncheon room armchair on the right are upholstered in blue fabric.





The arms of the arm-chair which formed part of the original furniture in the sixth-floor corridor aroused a certain amount of interest due to their amusing 'spaghetti' effect in the wood.



The chair used on the executive floor is upholstered in black leather. Quite subtle means are used to denote the hierarchy between the different spaces.

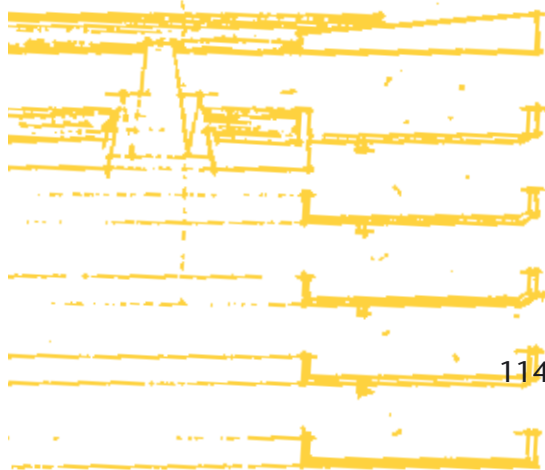




NATURE



Finland's natural surroundings impart a distinct flavour to the forum idea, adapted from Antiquity. In winter, nature can be admired from behind the big glass windows of the staff luncheon room. Few public office buildings can boast a courtyard with such an experience of nature right in the centre of the city.















HANDRAILS



Careful design extends right through to the staircases. Aalto wanted the handrails to the staircases to be in wood, which would be pleasant to the touch. For the same reason, the handrail in the library is finished in leather.











MANAGEMENT



The atmosphere on the executive floor is far away from the typical public office building, so much so that the corridor space resembles more an extended living room of a private house. The warmth is generated in various ways, including the use of wood and the lighting. Dispelling the feeling of officialdom is one of the characteristics of Aalto's architecture.







Comprehensive design extends right down to the textiles. The design of the wall-hanging in the trustees' conference room, by Kirsti Ilvessalo, is repeated in the familiar chequer-board pattern of the entrance-hall floor, and its warm shades bring an intimate atmosphere to the room, further emphasised by the lighting.







DOOR HANDLES



A significant proportion of the door handles and door pulls used for the KELA headquarters were designed specifically for this building. Some of them came to be used regularly in Aalto buildings thereafter. Some of the door handles were originally designed for the Rautatalo building.





The light-metal handle used for office doors and designed specifically for the KELA building acquired the name 'the Aalto model'. Subsequently, the handle became commonly used in work by Aalto's office. It is also often used in a black-anodised finish.



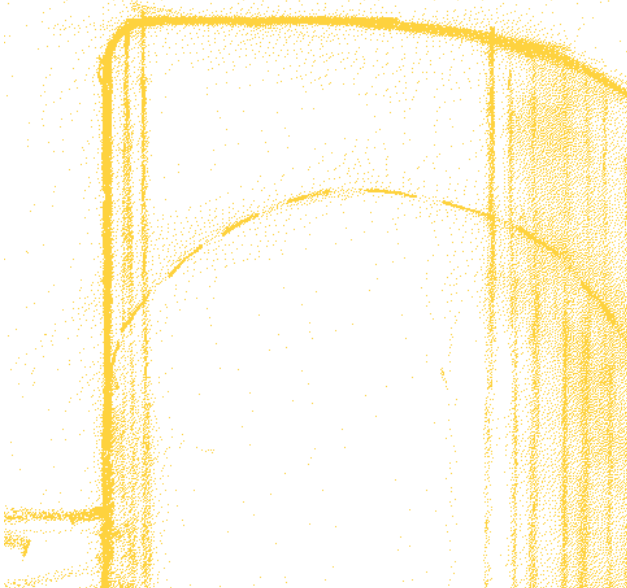




The handle used on the lift doors (see adjoining page) was originally developed for another building in the centre of Helsinki, the Rautatalo building, where it is used on the external doors, as in many other Aalto designs later on.



A rain shield was designed for the bronze handles on the main entrance doors so that there is no need for customers' gloves to get wet when they arrive at KELA.









One of Alvar Aalto's design trademarks is a leather finish on door handles. He considered it important that the handle feels pleasant to the touch.



Alvar Aalto

Alvar Aalto

February 3, 1898, Kuortane – May 11, 1976, Helsinki
(Source: Museum of Finnish Architecture)

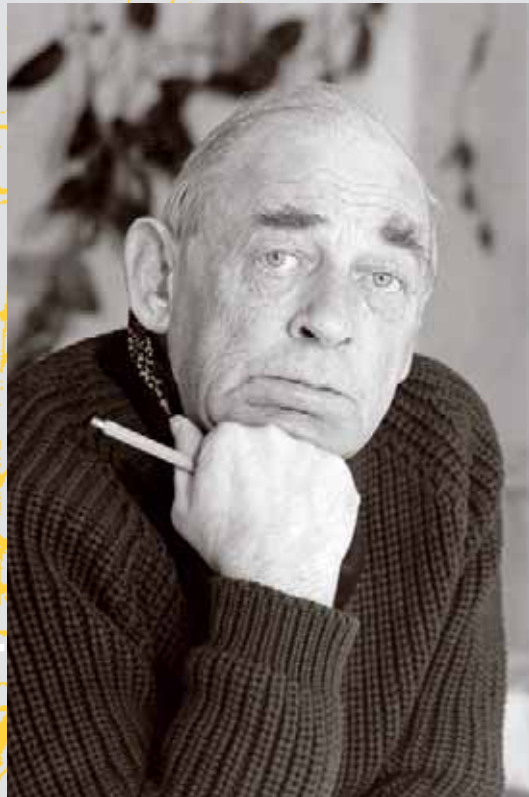
Hugo Alvar Henrik Aalto passed his matriculation examination in 1916 and graduated as an architect from the University of Technology (today Helsinki University of Technology) in 1921. He set up an architect's office in Jyväskylä in 1923, and the following year he married architect Aino Marsio (1894–1949), who was his colleague until her death. Aalto's office moved to Turku in 1927 and to Helsinki in 1933.

Alvar Aalto was chairman of the Association of Finnish Architects from 1943 to 1958, a member of the Academy of Finland from 1955 and its President from 1963 to 1968. He was a visiting professor at MIT in the USA from 1946 to 1948. He received a considerable number of honours and awards all around the world. Aalto travelled frequently in Europe and outside, though his favourite destination was Italy.

In the course of his extensive career, Aalto created a huge body of work containing different types of buildings from summer cottages to elegant private residences, from entire housing estates to industrial sites, from cultural buildings to city centres, not forgetting community planning. There are important Aalto buildings not only in Finland but elsewhere in Europe and in the USA too. He made a major contribution to modern furniture and lighting design through the Artek company, founded in 1935.

Aalto's entire career reflects his aim of solving each new task in an unprejudiced and innovative way. He found interesting

Alvar



Aalto

challenges in design competitions, in which he and his office participated — with great success — throughout his career.

The dominant stylistic ideal in the Nordic countries at the time when Alvar Aalto was beginning his career was Classicism. His major works from this period include plans for churches and church renovations, and the Workers' Club in Jyväskylä (1924).

Aalto was in the forefront of Finnish designers exploring European Modernism. He moved to Turku, where international ideas were more readily available. Aalto collaborated with the architect Erik Bryggman in designing the layout and buildings for the Turku Trade Fair in 1929. This fair firmly established the principles and aesthetics of Functionalism in Finland. The offices of the Turun Sanomat newspaper (1930) and Paimio Sanatorium (1933) together with Viipuri (Vyborg) Library, completed in 1935, were important milestones on the pathway to Modernism.

Aalto began to gain an international reputation with his Functionalist buildings, and in 1933 he and his family moved to Helsinki. His range of projects expanded and diversified; an example of this is the Sunila pulp mill and adjoining housing estate in Kotka, which he designed in the late 1930s. In that period he also designed a number of prominent private residences, such as his own home in Helsinki (1936) and the Villa Mairea in Noormarkku (1939). These buildings showed his aim of breaking free from the strict rules of Modernist architecture and realizing his own vision of harmony between man, nature and architecture. Temporary buildings such as the pavilions for the World Exhibitions in Paris (1937) and New York (1939) enabled Aalto to experiment more freely with fundamental architectural concepts such as massing, space, light and materials.

Like all other architects in Finland, Aalto was involved in the reconstruction effort following the Second World

War. Standardization was a means for ensuring high quality in construction undertaken with meagre resources, but here too Aalto was not content simply to follow the rules: he considered that standardization must be flexible and based on the actual needs of people. He also referred to nature's capability for variation and diversity.

In the late 1940s, Aalto suffered a personal loss with the death of Aino Aalto from a serious illness. Some years later, in 1952, he married his colleague, the architect Elissa (Elsa Kaisa) Mäkinen (1922–1994). After Aalto's death, Elissa Aalto ran Alvar Aalto & Co Architects until her death in 1994.

At 50, Aalto may be said to have attained maturity as a designer as well as an architect. The experience he had accumulated led him to formulate his synthesis of vision at the very time when most Finnish architects were returning to the strict ideals of Modernism following the turmoil of war. His new high period, in which he produced his most original works, came in the 1950s. Red brick, often in conjunction with pine and copper, was the dominant material. His innovation and creativity are manifest in buildings such as Säynätsalo Town Hall, the Muuratsalo Experimental House, the University of Jyväskylä buildings, the Church of the Cross of the Plains in Seinäjoki, Vuoksenniska Church in Imatra, the Rautatalo office building, the House of Culture and the KELA building in Helsinki.

The buildings on the campus of Helsinki University of Technology in Otaniemi were built in the 1960s, also in red brick but simpler in form than their predecessors. In the 1960s and 1970s, Aalto began to turn towards lighter colours with white rendered surfaces, white sand-lime brick and the rod-shaped ceramic tiles which he himself developed in the 1950s and used in both exterior and interior surfaces. This trend is evident in the administrative and cultural centres he designed for Seinäjoki and Rovaniemi.

Buildings

The Helsinki city centre plan went through a number of design stages but was never put into practice apart from one of its key elements, Finlandia Hall, which was built in two stages, completed in 1971 and 1975. It is the culmination of Aalto's work, though its external facing of Carrara marble has proved to be a mixed blessing, attracting admiration but being ill-suited to a cold and polluted urban climate. The marble facing was a conscious reference to ancient Greece and Rome, symbolically linking Finland with the origins of western culture.

Alvar Aalto's architecture has been described as both Finnish and international. His extensive output can be seen to reflect Finnish nature and tradition on the one hand and the long history of architecture on the other. His creative talent enabled him to forge these into a synthesis all his own.

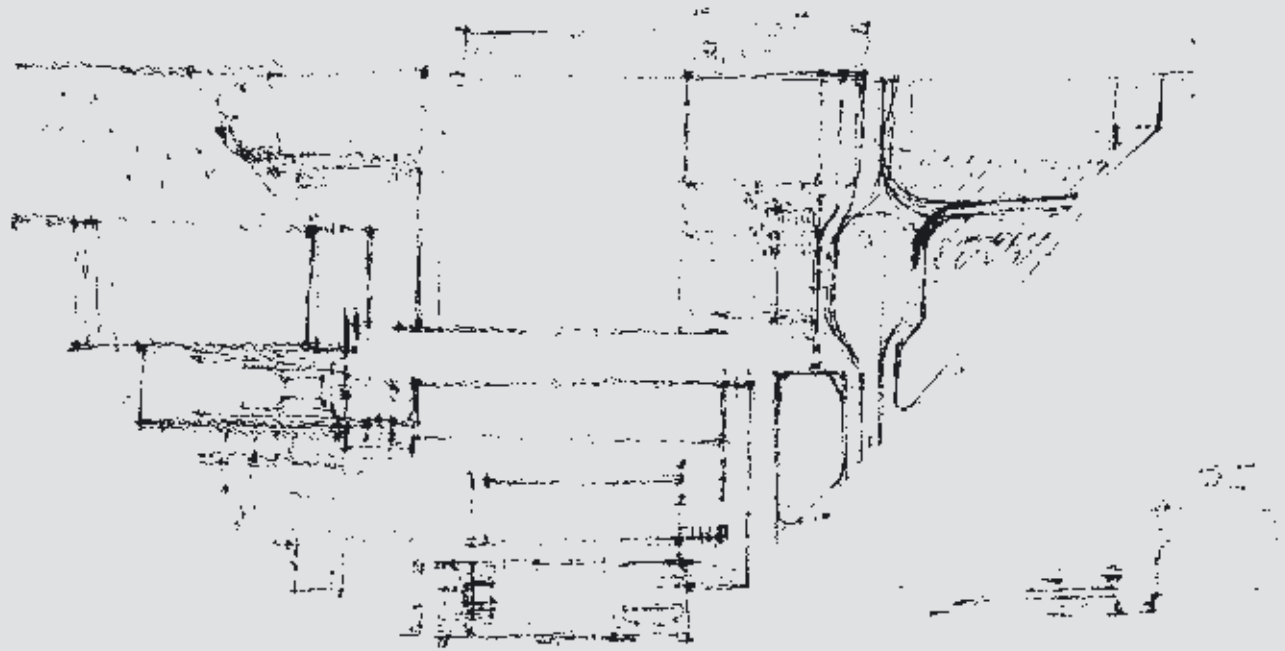
- 1924–1925 Jyväskylä Workers' Club
- 1926–1929 Muurame Church
- 1928–1930 Turun Sanomat newspaper offices
- 1929–1933 Paimio Sanatorium
- 1933–1935 Viipuri (Vyborg) Library
- 1934–1936 Riihitie 20, Aalto's home in Munkkiniemi in Helsinki
- 1936–1954 Sunila pulp mill housing estate near Kotka
- 1937 Finnish pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris
- 1938–1939 Villa Mairea, Noormarkku
- 1939 Finnish pavilion at the World Exhibition in New York
- 1950–1952 Säynätsalo Town Hall
- 1952–1957 University of Jyväskylä
- 1952–1956 Social Insurance Institution headquarters, Helsinki
- 1955–1958 House of Culture, Helsinki
- 1956–1958 La Maison Carré, France
- 1956–1959 Vuoksenniska Church, Imatra
- 1956–1960 Seinäjoki Church, the Church of the Cross of the Plains
- 1955–1964 Helsinki University of Technology, Otaniemi, Finland
- 1961–1964 Essen Opera House, Germany (built 1981–1988)
- 1962–1971 Finlandia Hall, Helsinki
- 1965–1968 Nordic House, Reykjavik, Iceland
- 1966–1969 Academic Bookstore, Helsinki
- 1969–1975 Lappia Hall, Rovaniemi

Furniture and interior designs

- 1930s Paimio chair, Aalto stool
- 1933 Exhibition of Aalto furniture in London
- 1935 Founding of Artek
- 1939 Savoy Vase, also known as the Aalto Vase (New York World Exhibition)

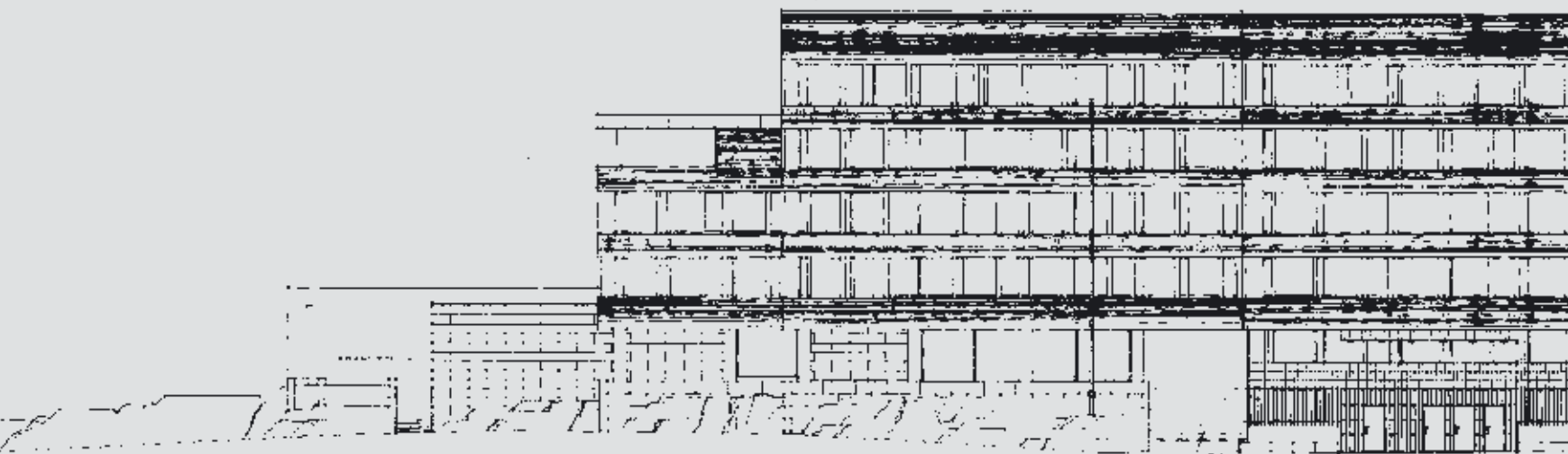
Regional plans

- 1941 Kokemäenjoki valley, regional plan
- 1943 Oulu Koskikeskus town plan
- 1944–1945 Rovaniemi master plan
- 1947–1953 Imatra area master plan
- 1964 Espoo Kivenlahti-Soukka master plan
- 1964 Jyväskylä central area plan
- 1951– Seinäjoki central area plan
- 1959–1964 Helsinki central area plan



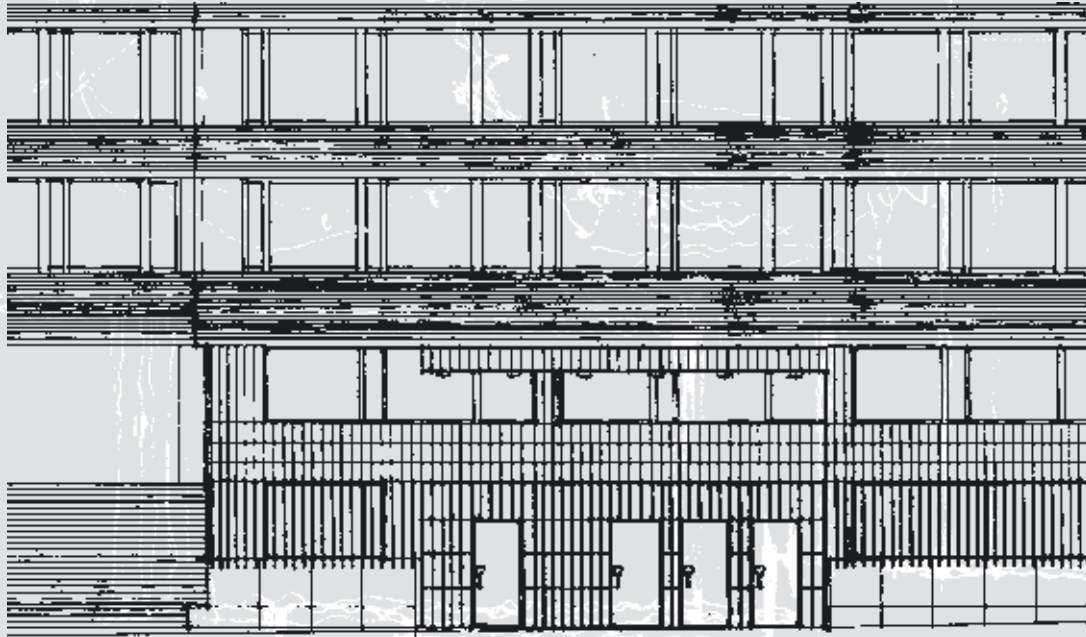
Sketch of block

Elevation to Mannerheimintie

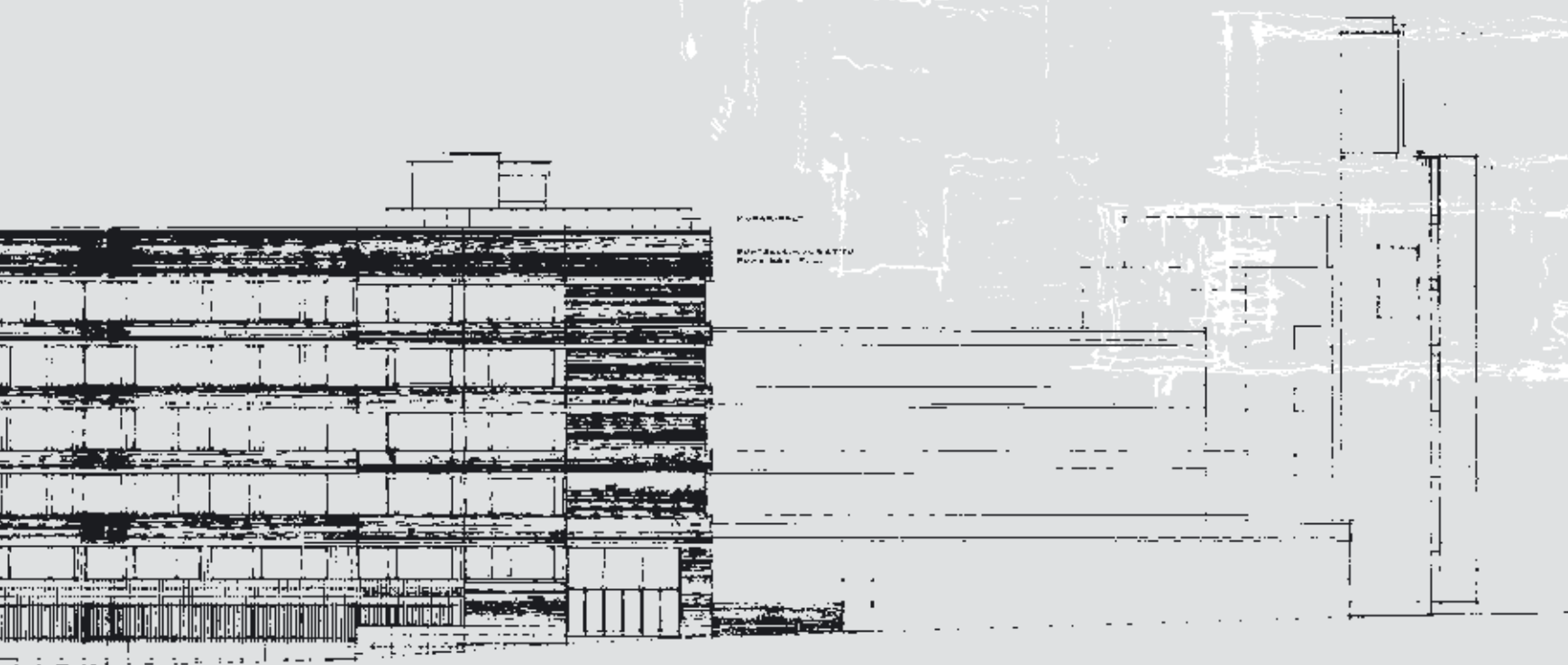


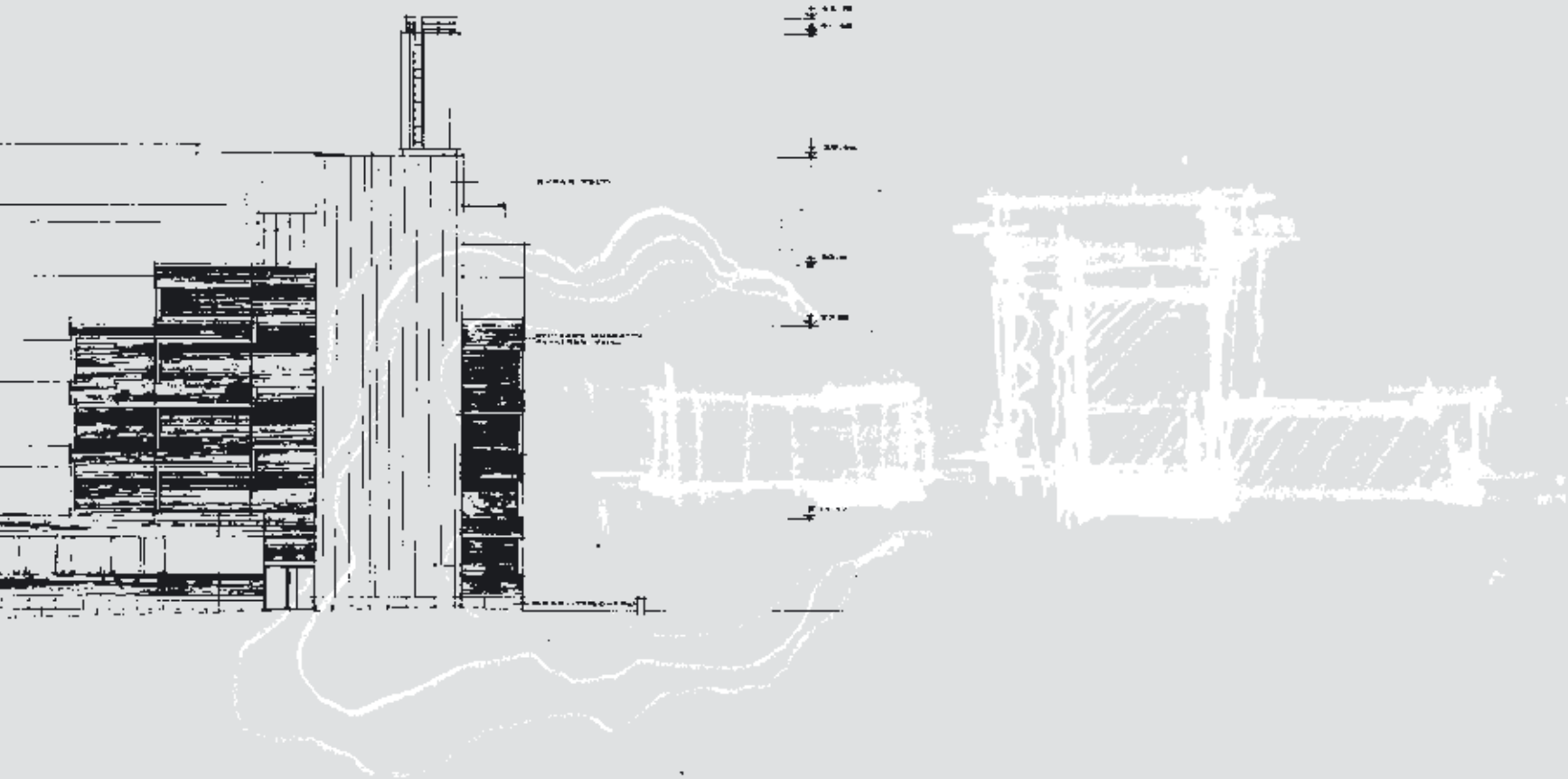
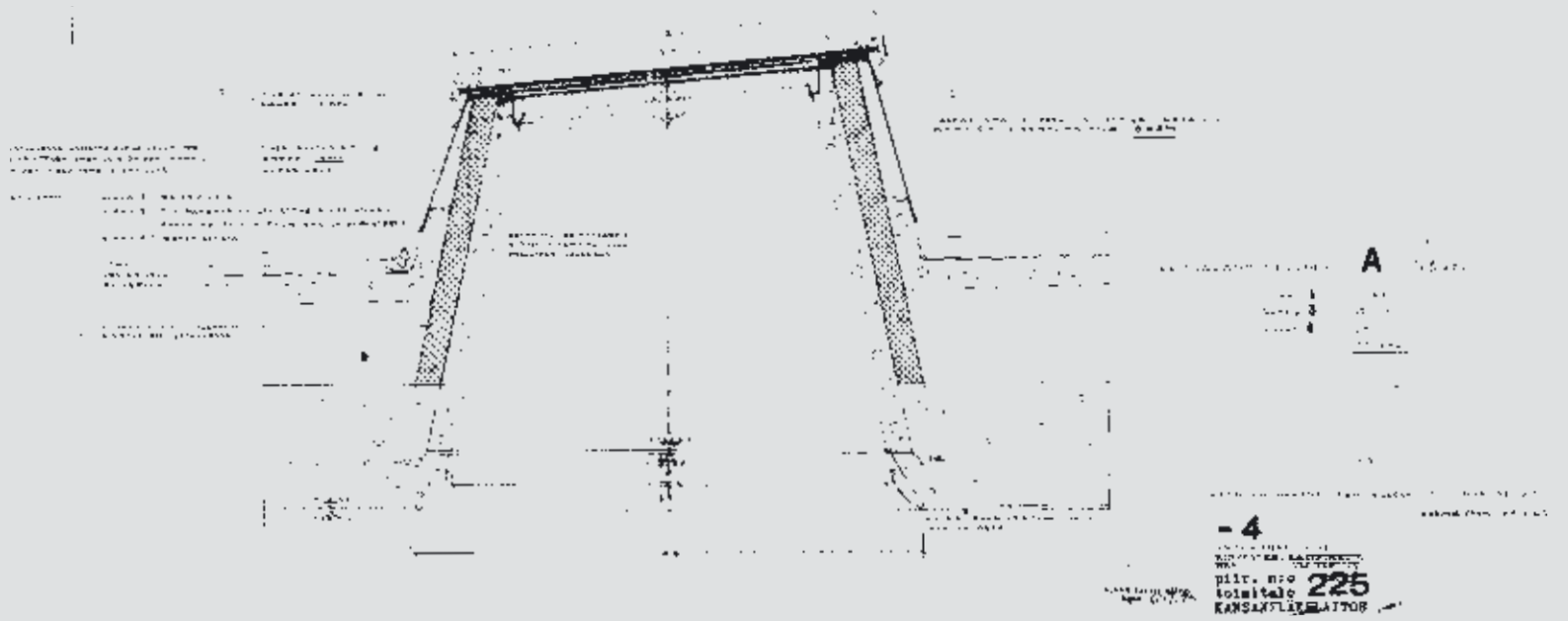
KANONINEN, AALTO

KORTTELI, NO. 17
JOKIKIVU MANNERHEIMINTIE, FINLAND, 1967



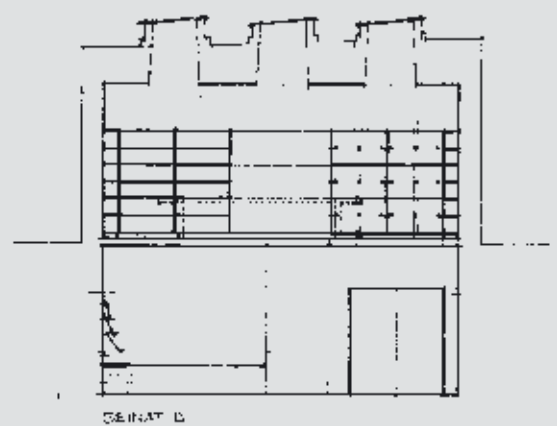
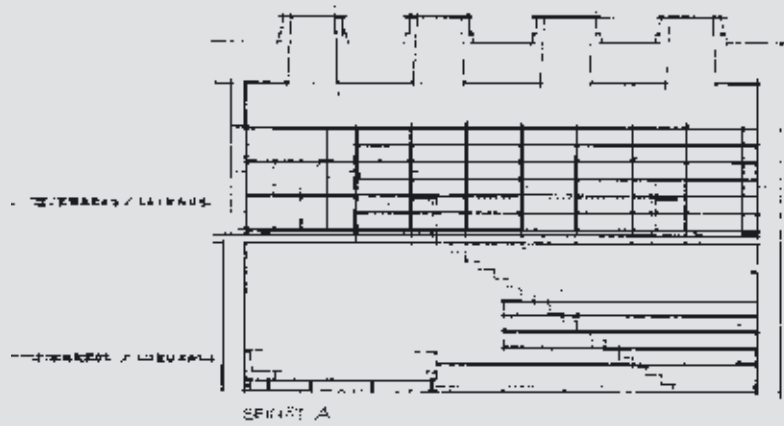
Main entrance on Mannerheimintie





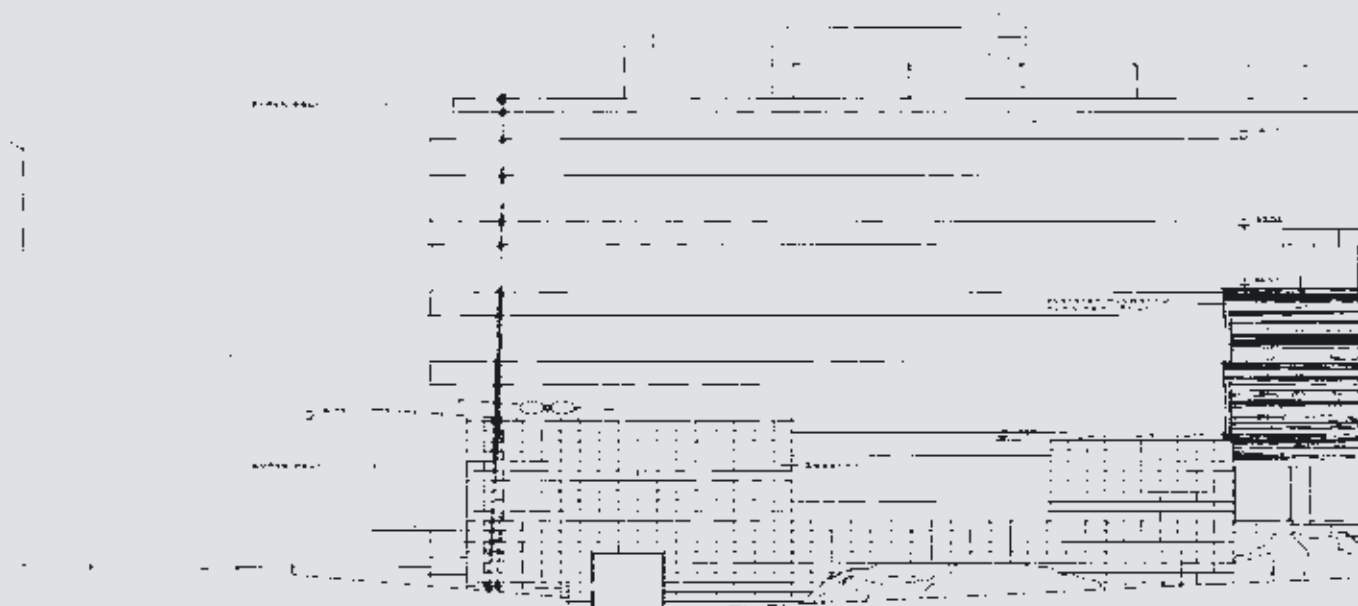
РЕЗАНТИ 15, 1, 2

Handwritten signature
 КОЛЛЕКТИВ АРХИТЕКТОВ



Detailed drawings of library

Elevation to Nordenskiöldinkatu



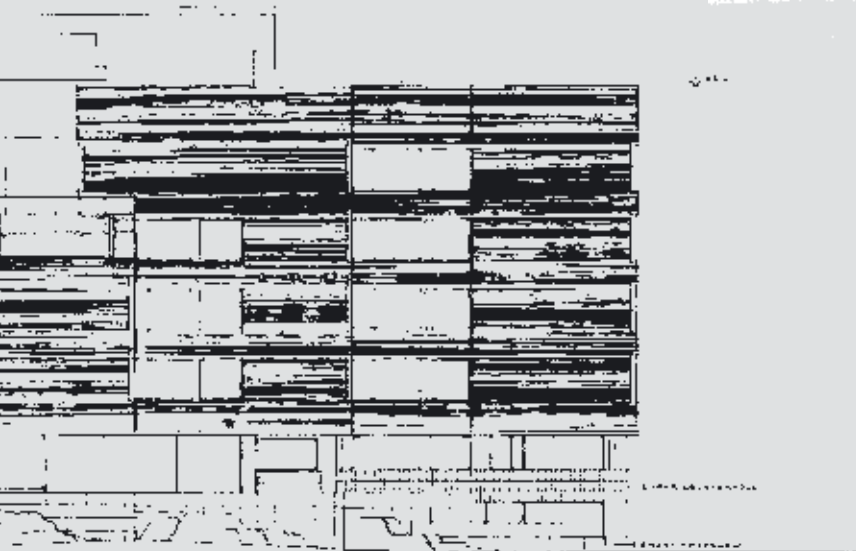
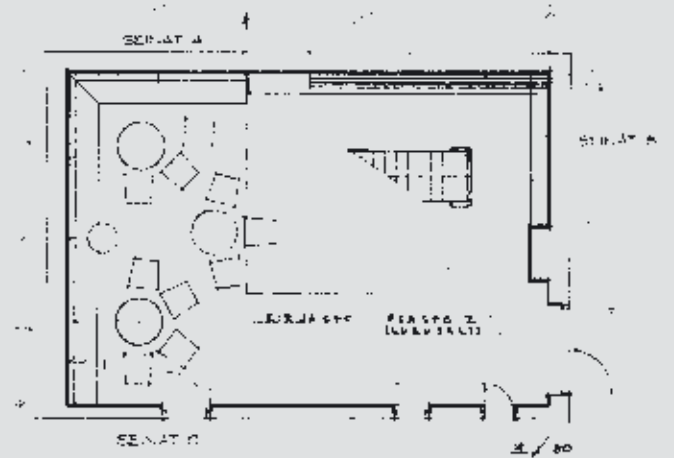
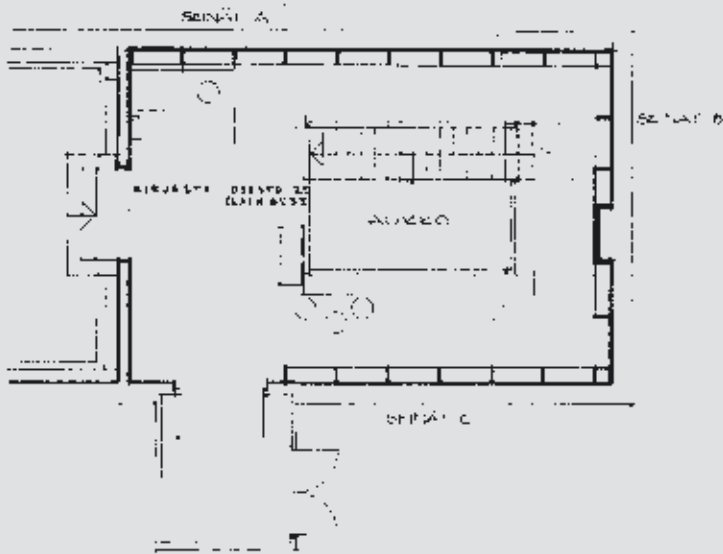
KANUNELÄKCHITTOI

10 NITÄS, KORTTEN 5022
 00010 VUOKKOVA (NORDENSKIÖLDINKATU), PIIRI NO 2 // 1/00/

PIIRITÄHTÄTÄLLÖNÄ KÄYTTÖÖN

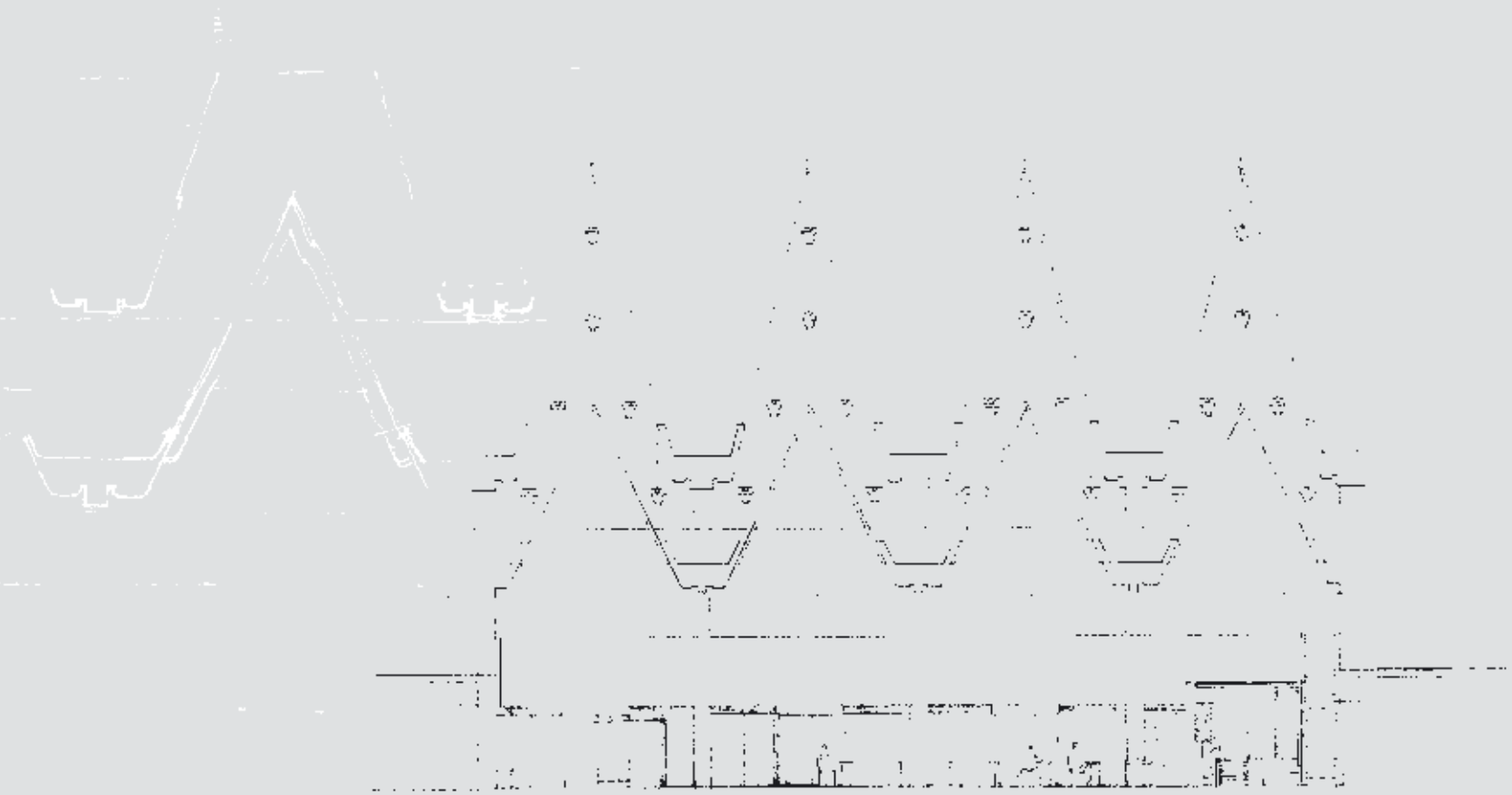
SECTION A

SECTION B



PELLANKE, S. J. M.

Signature
ARCHITECT



Proposed alterations 1980s

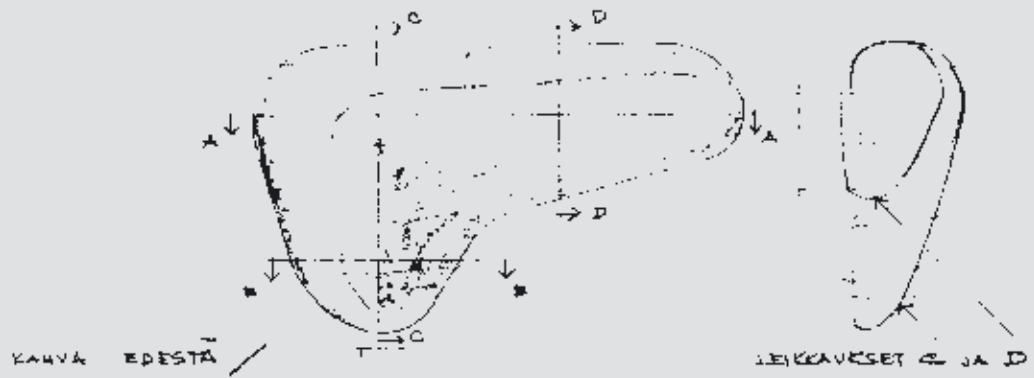
Elevation to Minna Canthin katu



KANVANELÄKELAITOS

YÖNNÄLÖ, RORTTELI 507 /

JUKKAMU, MINNA CANTHINKADULLE, PIIRI NO 20 / 1913 /



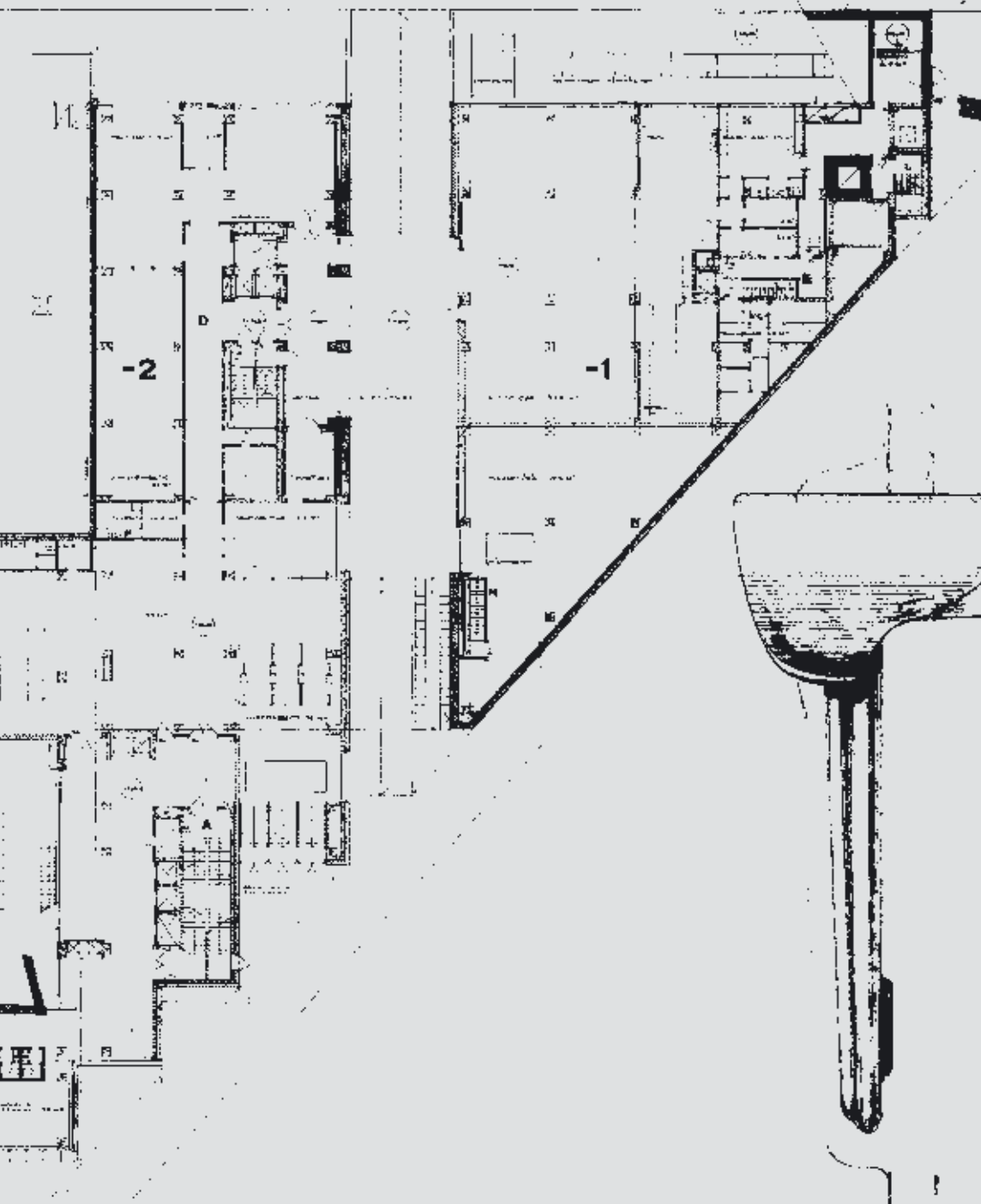
First floor



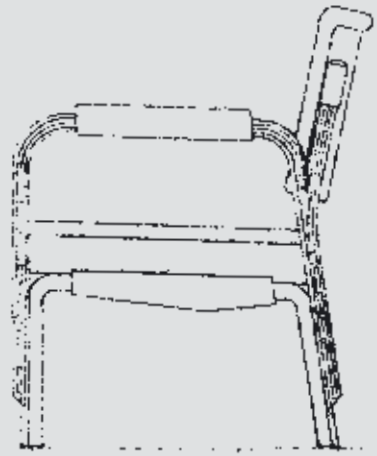


TAHOKKIA / KÄSITTELY KUTEN KOPPESSA /
KESKINEN INTAKOSKI /
KIINNITYSPILKIT EIVÄT SAA VÄRVÄ /

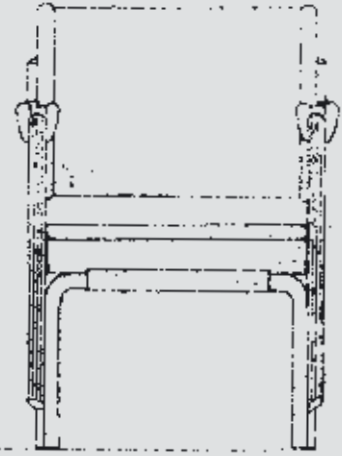
KÄYVÄ TAKAA /



Door handles to main entrance



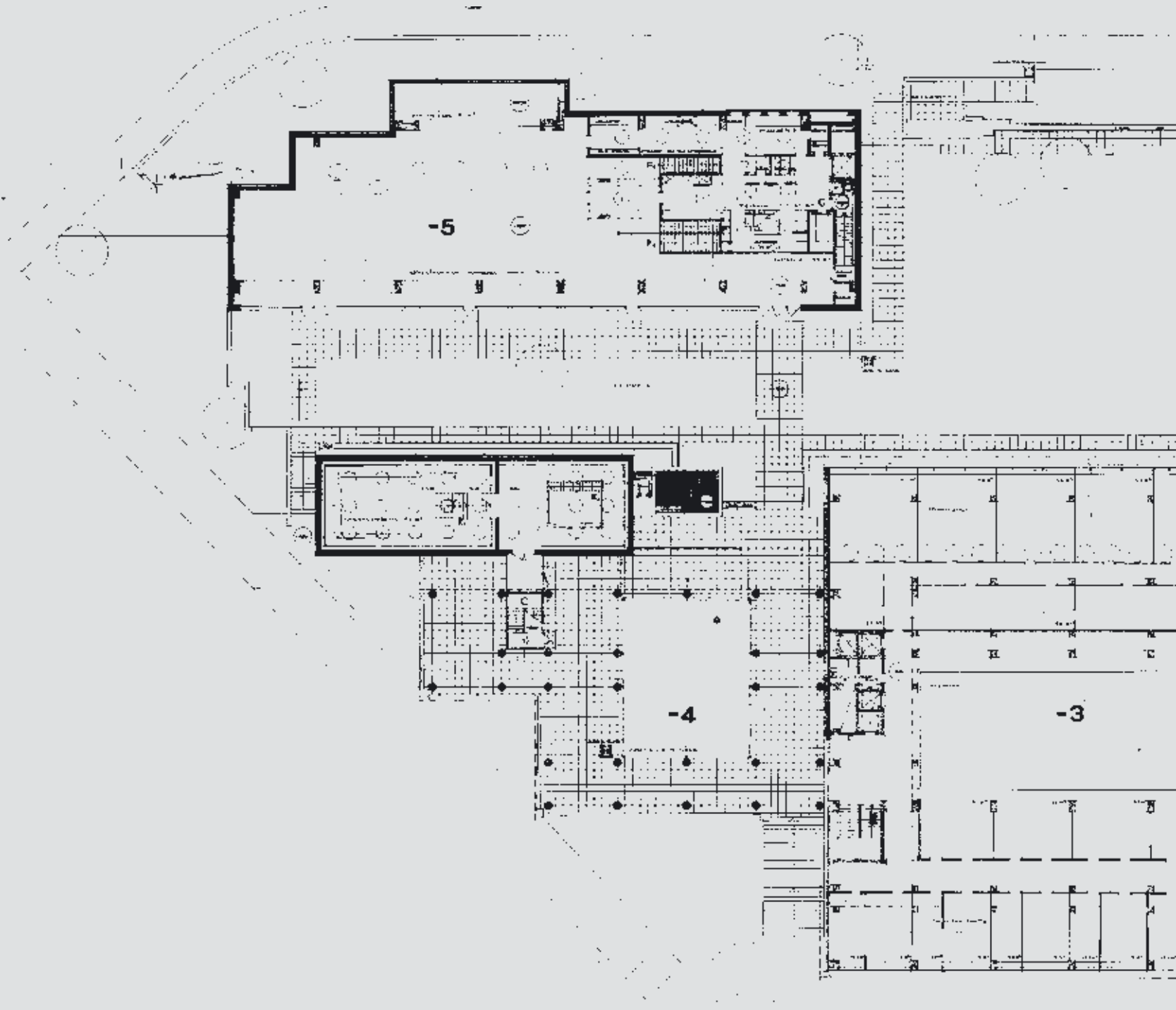
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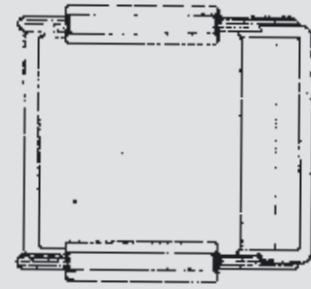
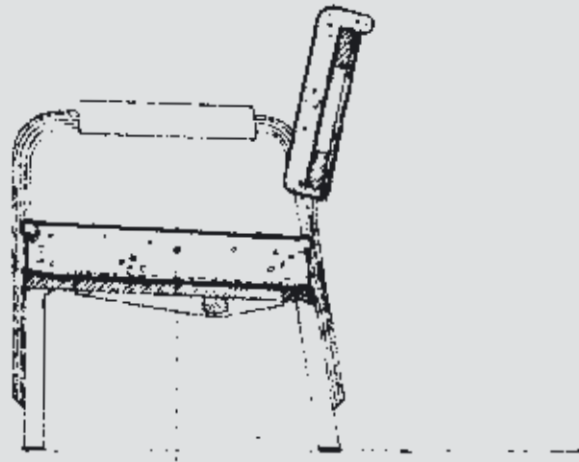


24

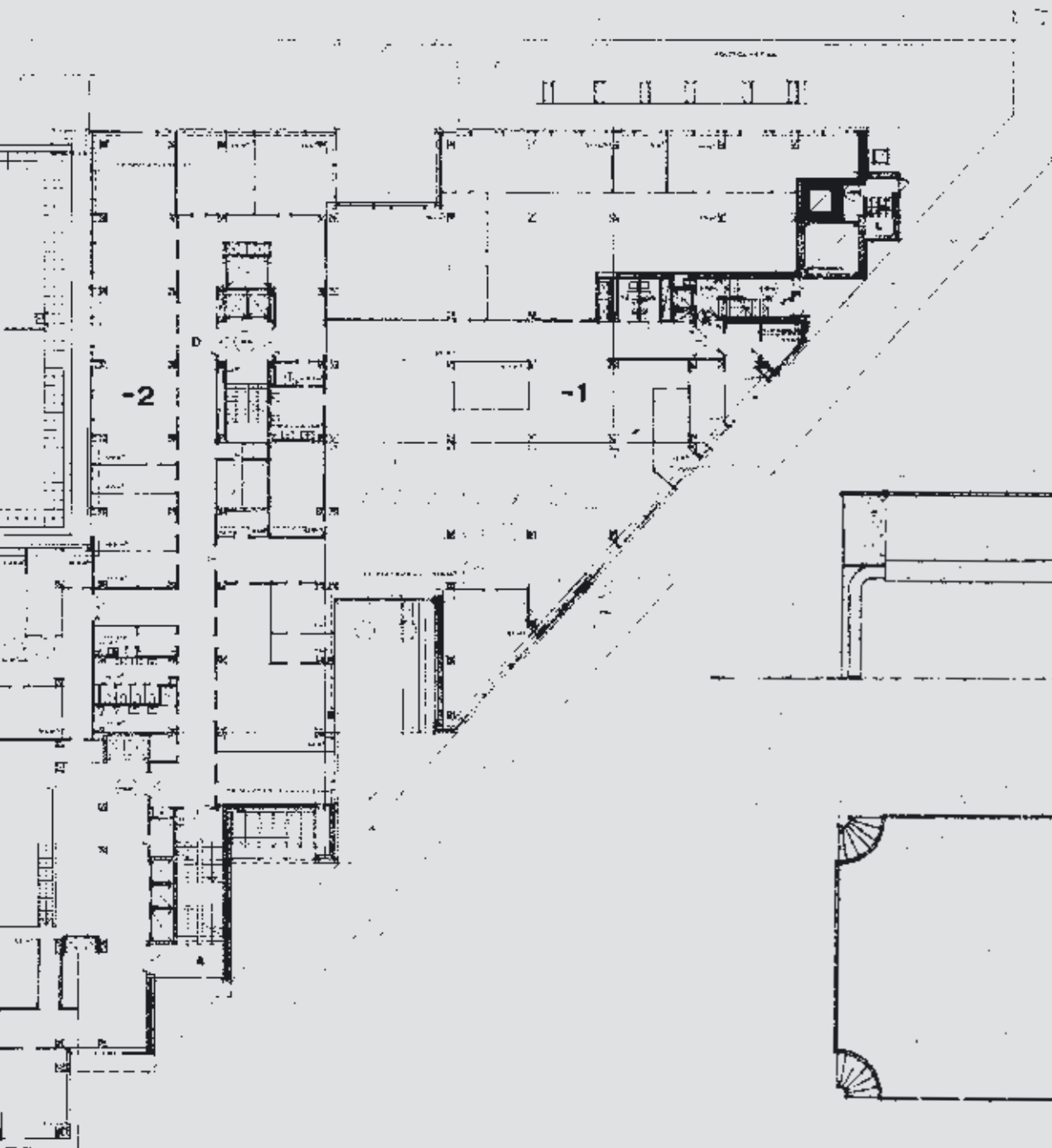
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Second floor

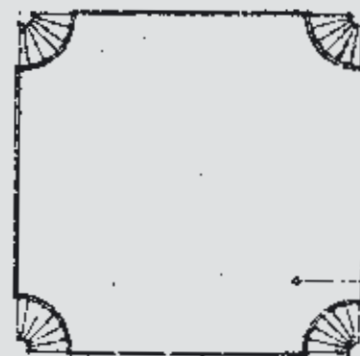




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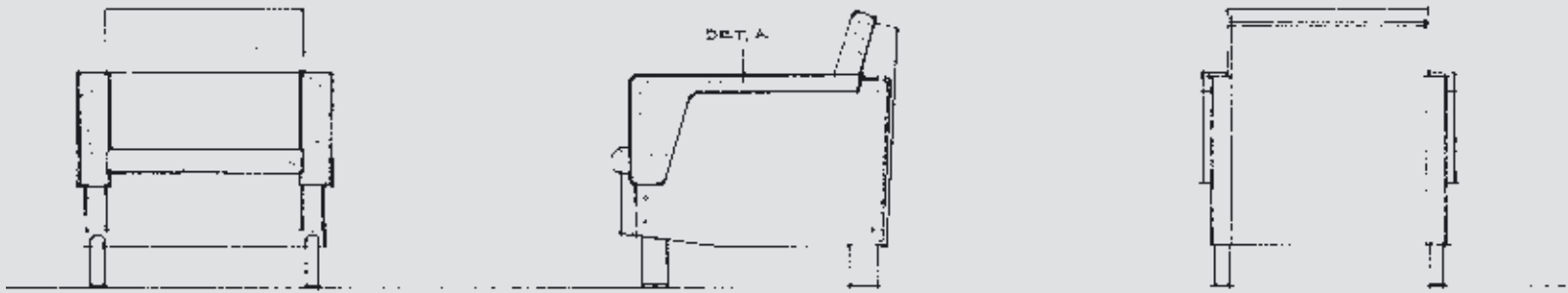


26
24
40

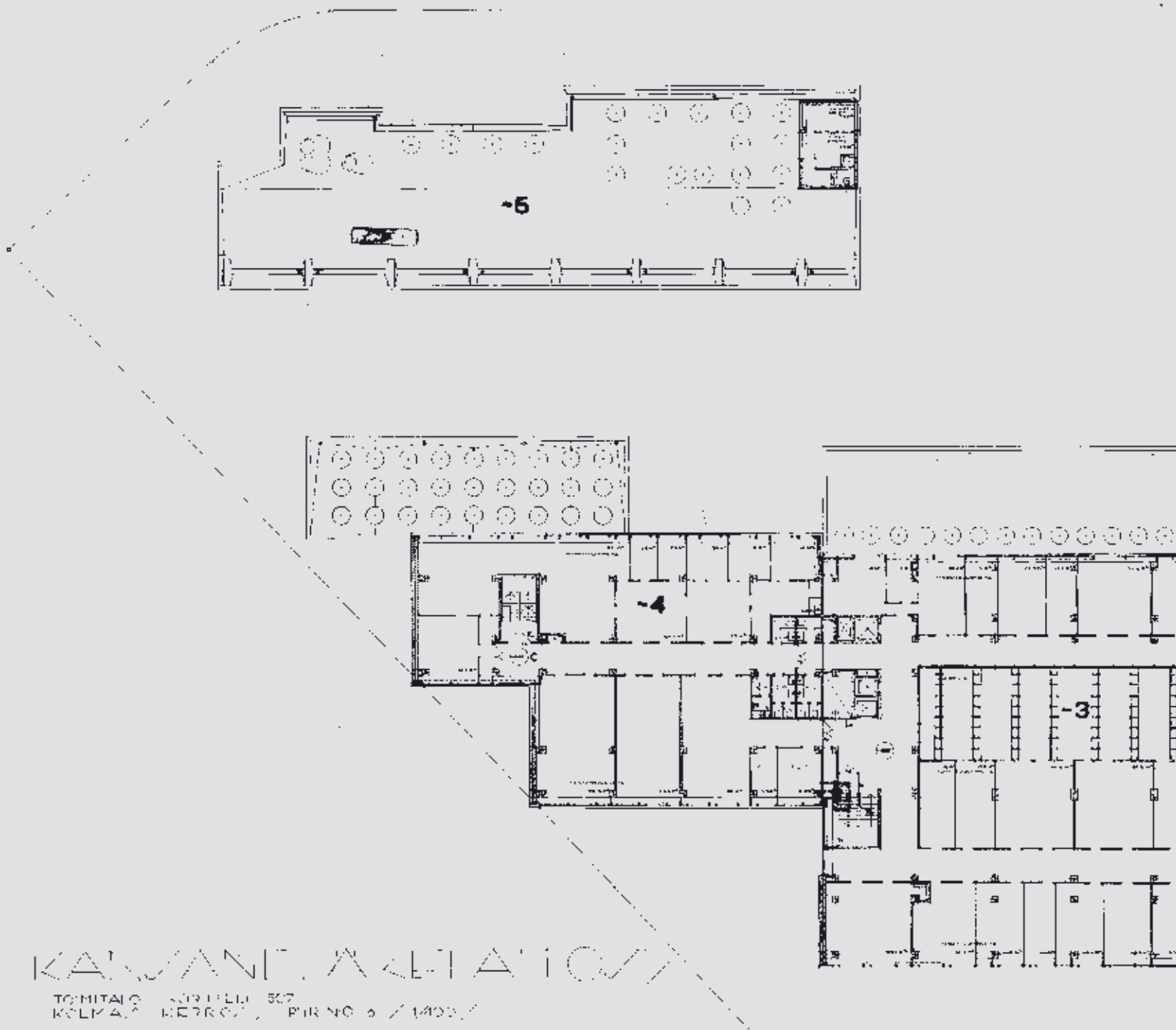


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60



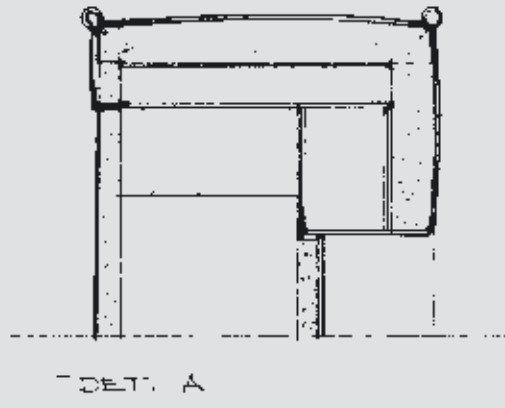
Third floor



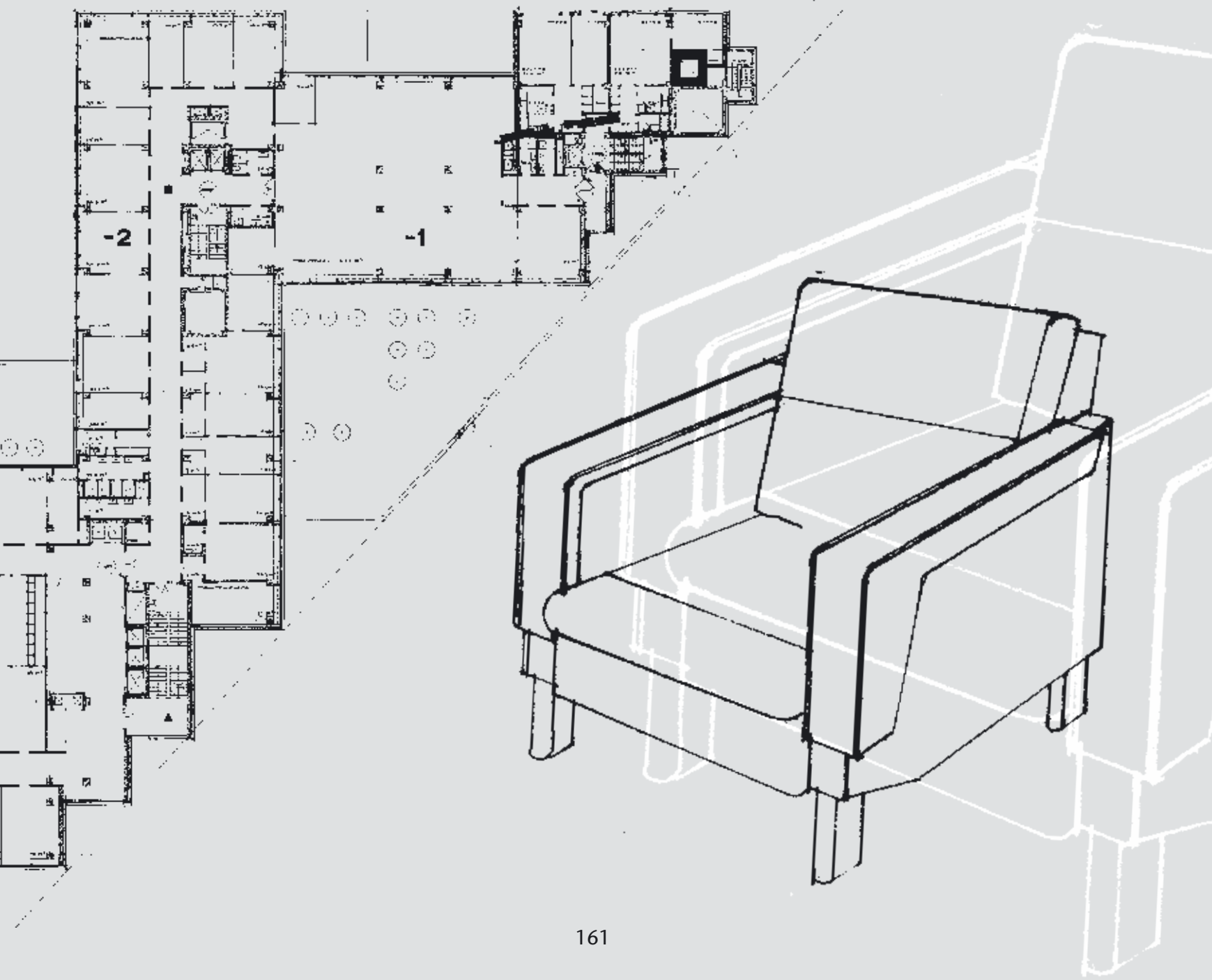
KAWANE, KATAOKA

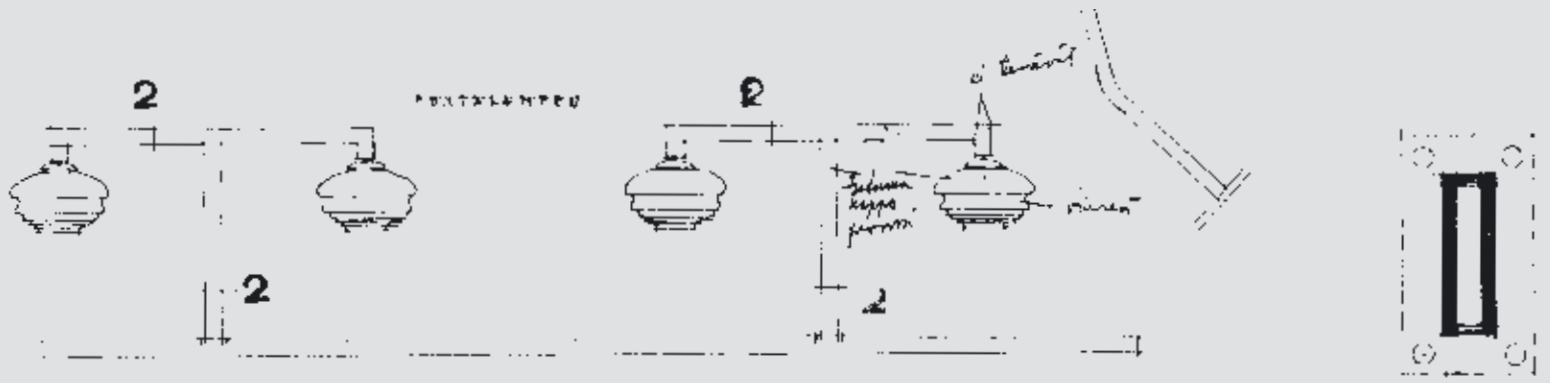
TOHITAIQ KORYUJIDU 507
KOLMAA HERRON, PIIRNO 6 / 1400

Alterations
1970s

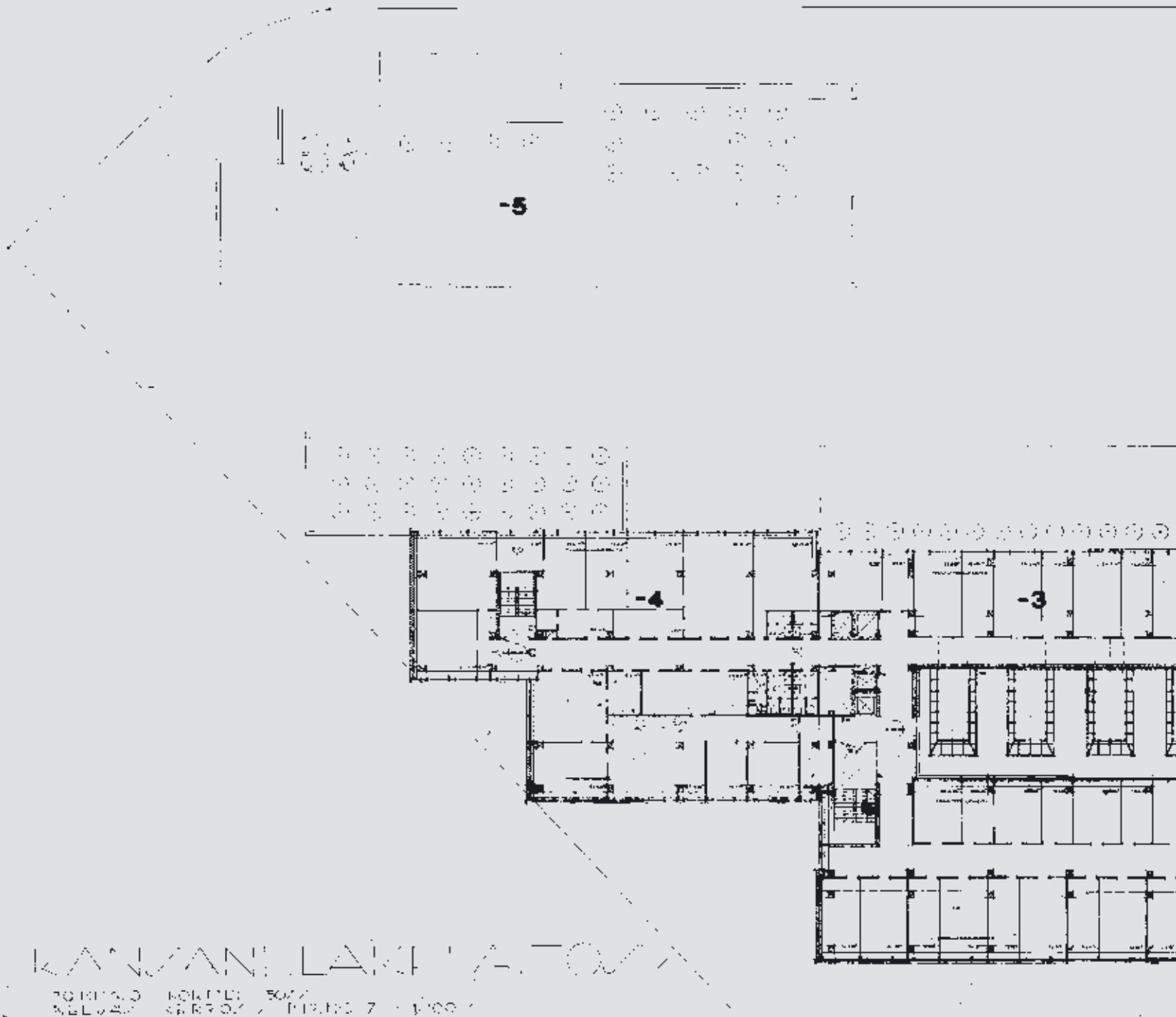


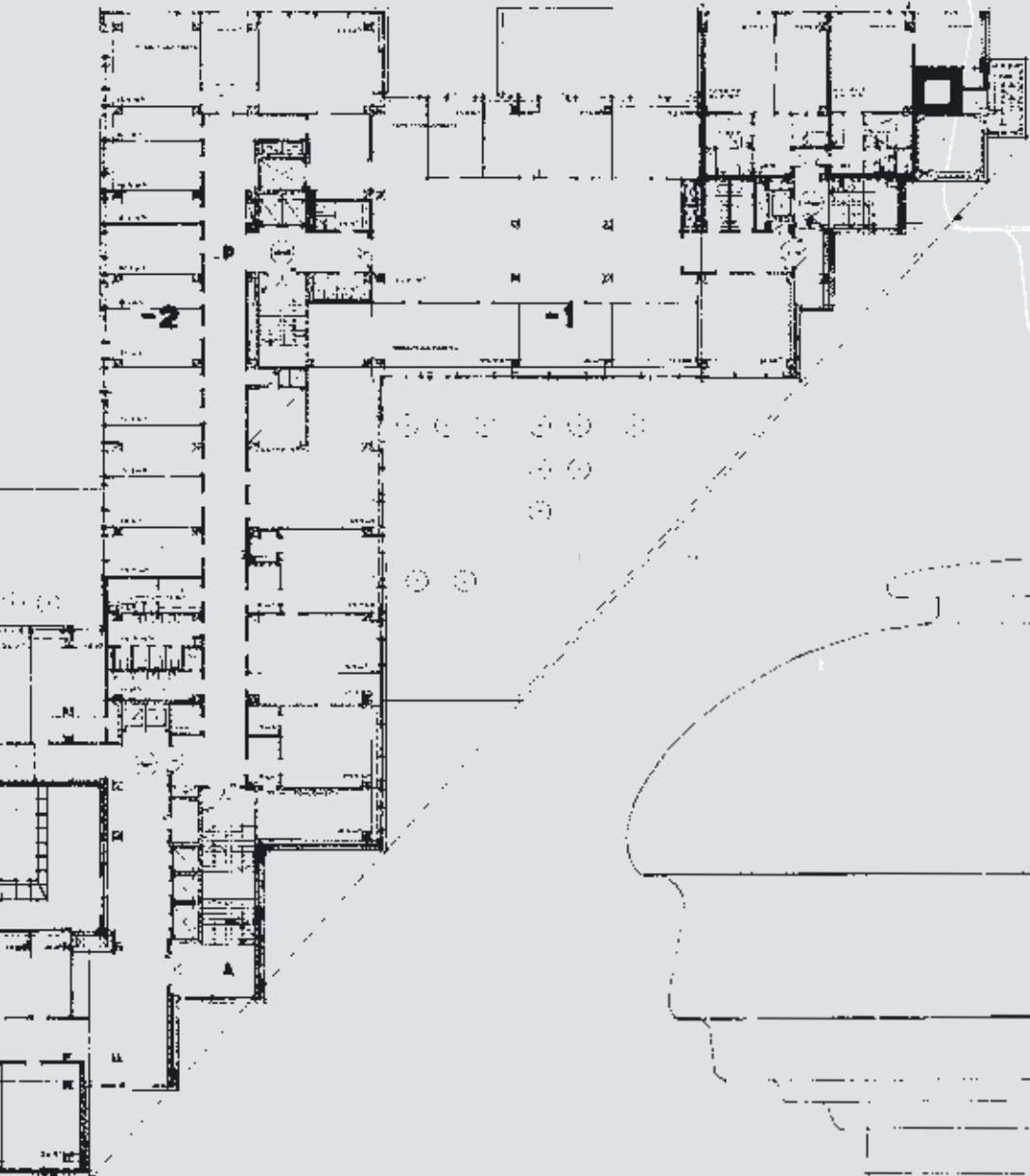
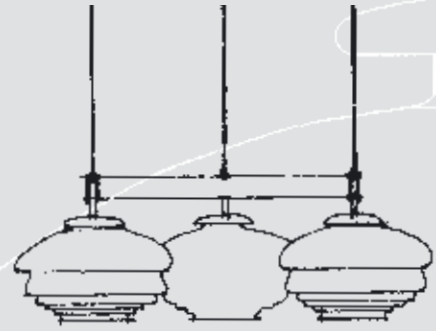
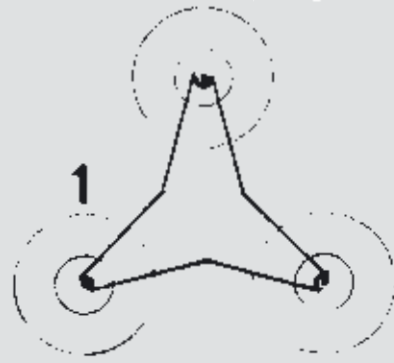
- ORVAKALUSTOT:
- ERIKKANEN 2 x 1 SOHVA
 - 14 NOJATUOLIA
 - 1 KIRJOITUSTUOLI
 - KANGAS: METROVAATTA "PAMELA"
 - NI 23 VÄRTEÄ,
 - ILMAN NAHKAÄ
- TUOMINEN 1 x 1 SOHVA
- 3 NOJATUOLIA
 - 1 KIRJOITUSTUOLI
 - KANGAS: "T.HOKALUOTE"
 - "PILAK" NI 215 SININEN
 - MUSTAT NAHKAÄREUNUSTEET
- ENGSTRÖM 2 x 1 SOHVA
- 14 NOJATUOLIA
 - 1 KIRJOITUSTUOLI
 - KANGAS: SEPE DENGO, SININEN
 - MUSTAT NAHKAÄREUNUSTEET



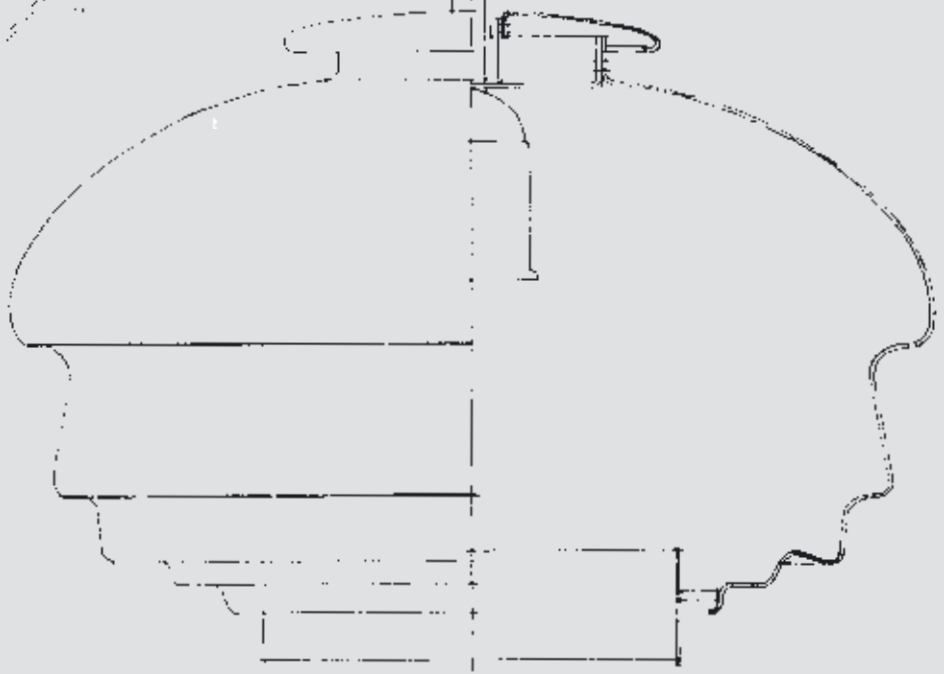


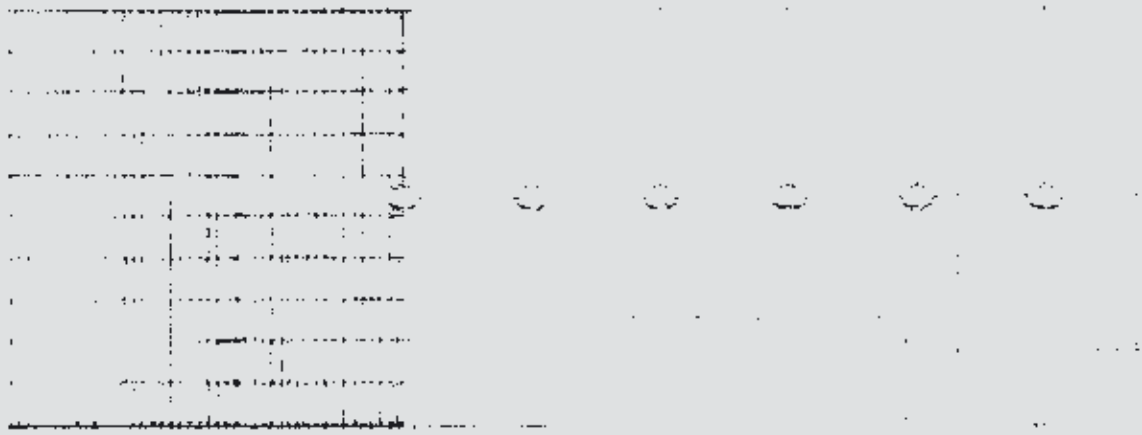
Fourth floor





1
20.2.54



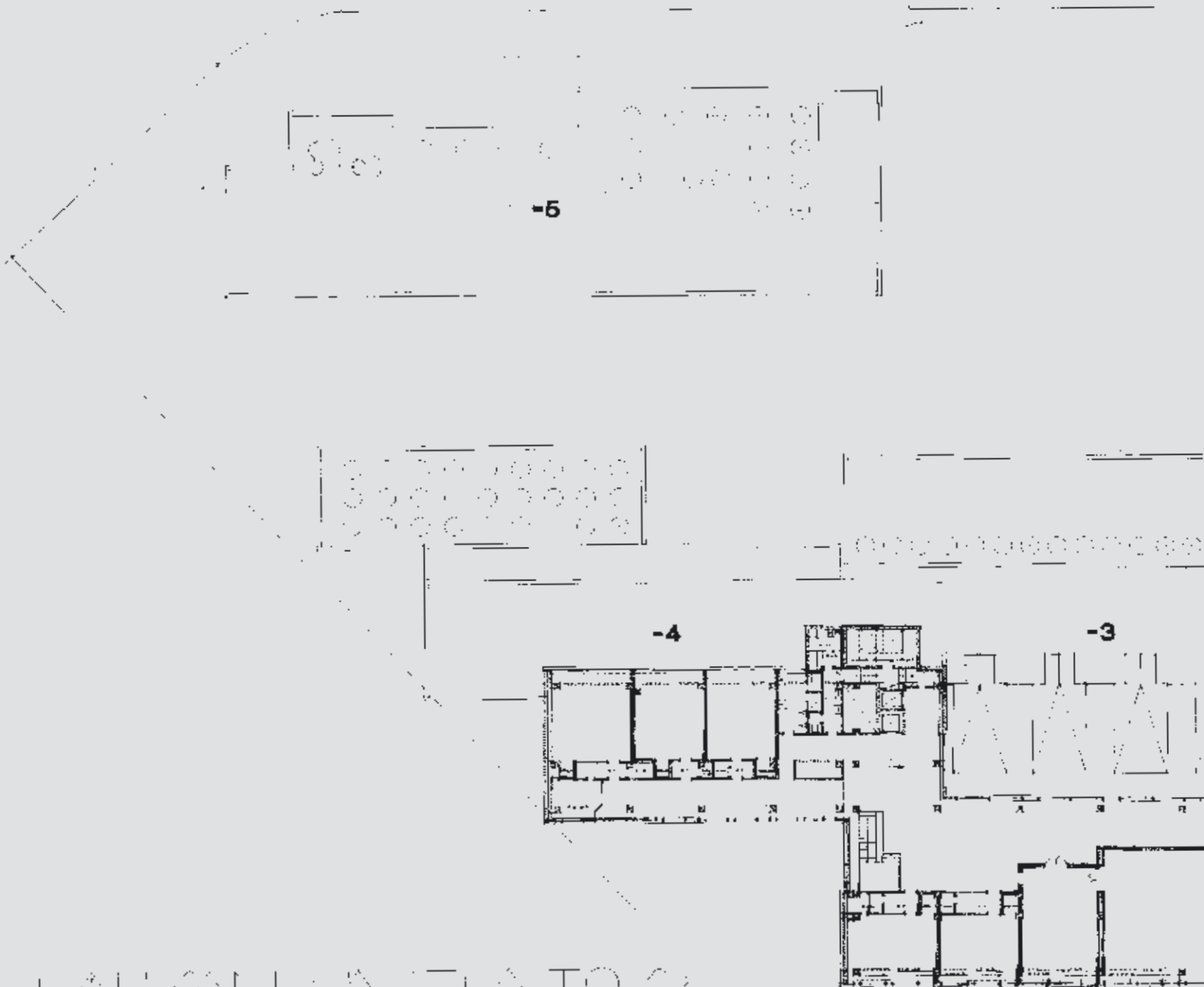


Fifth floor





Sixth floor

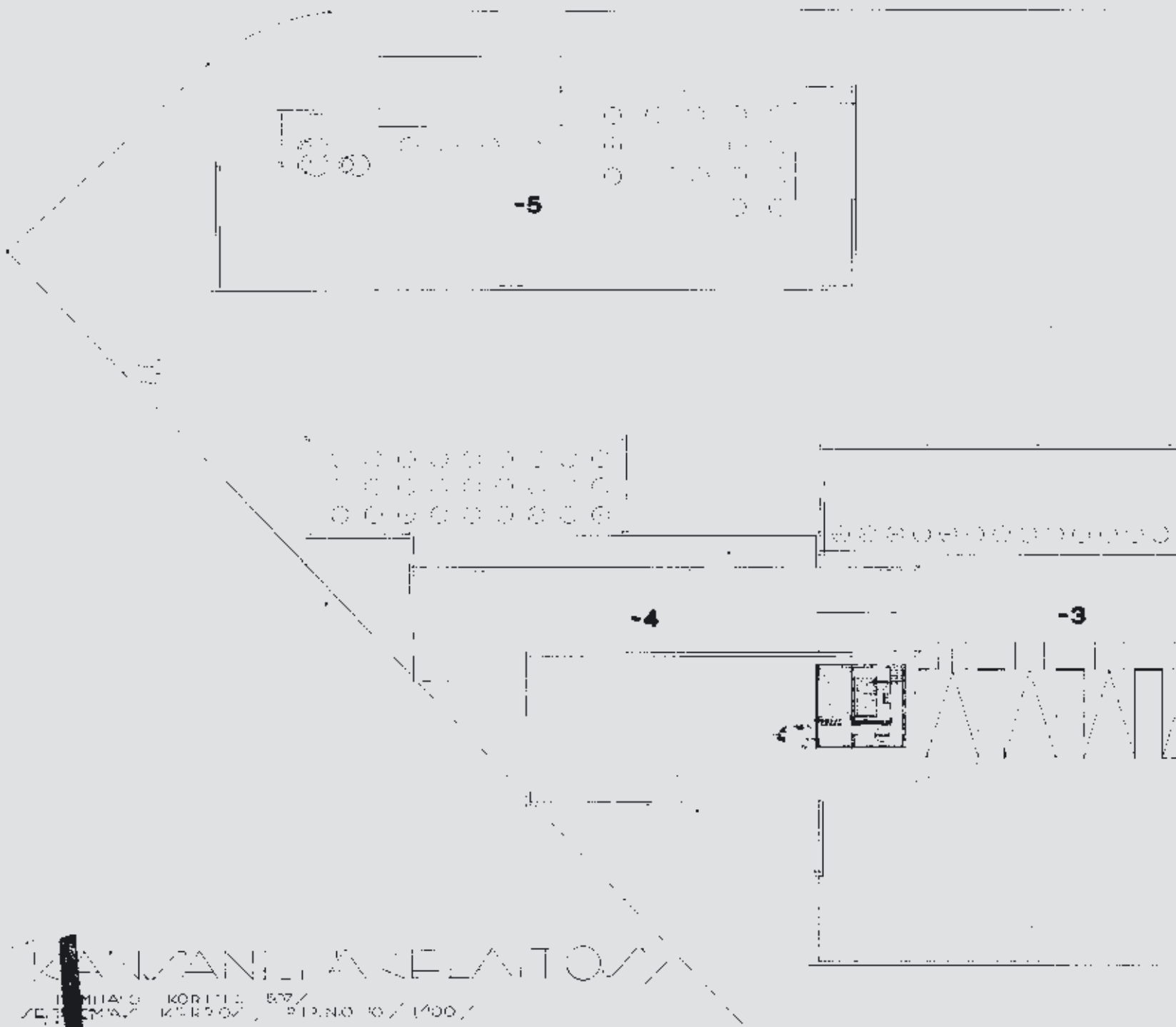


PLAN OF FLAVELA TOWER

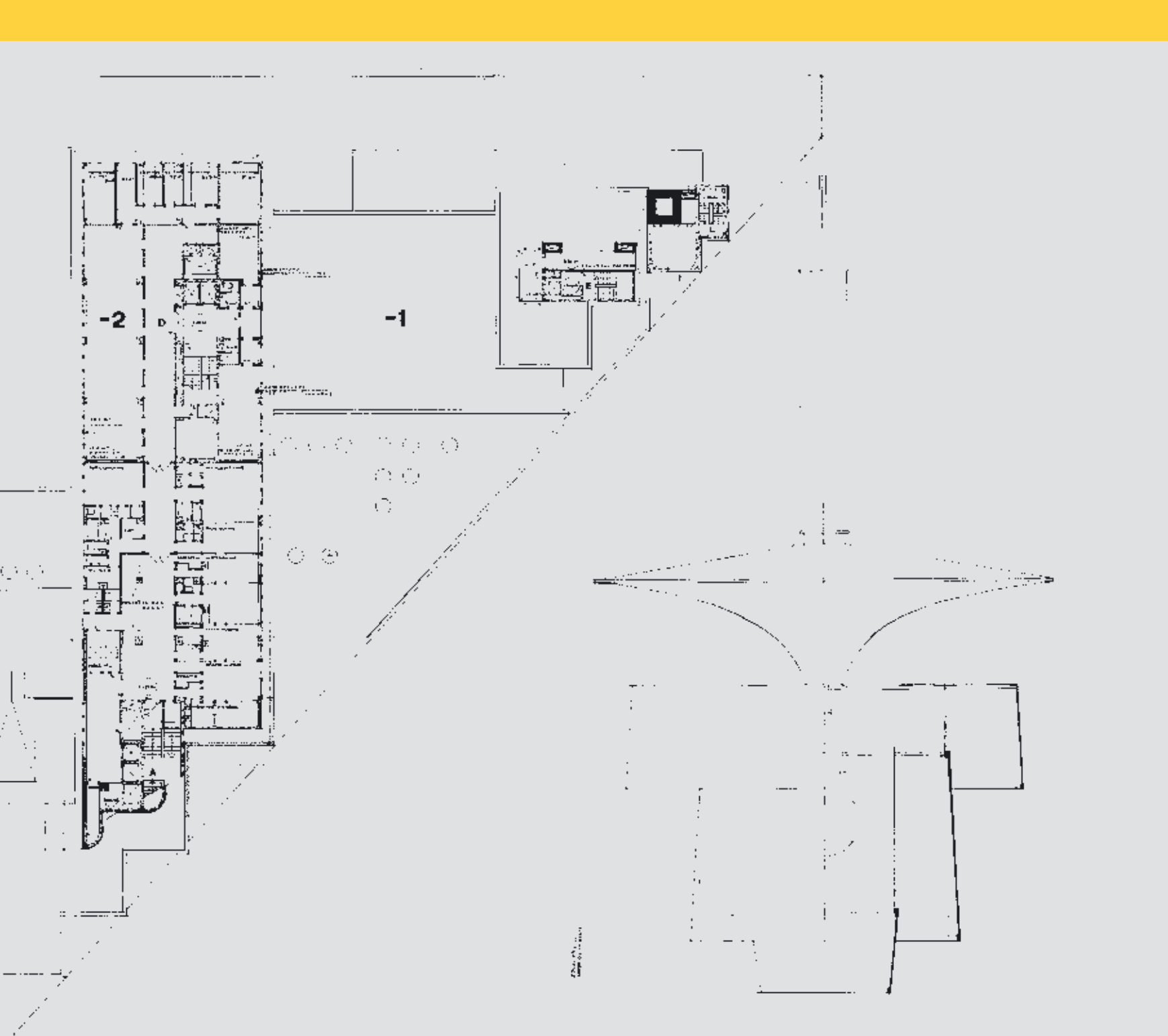
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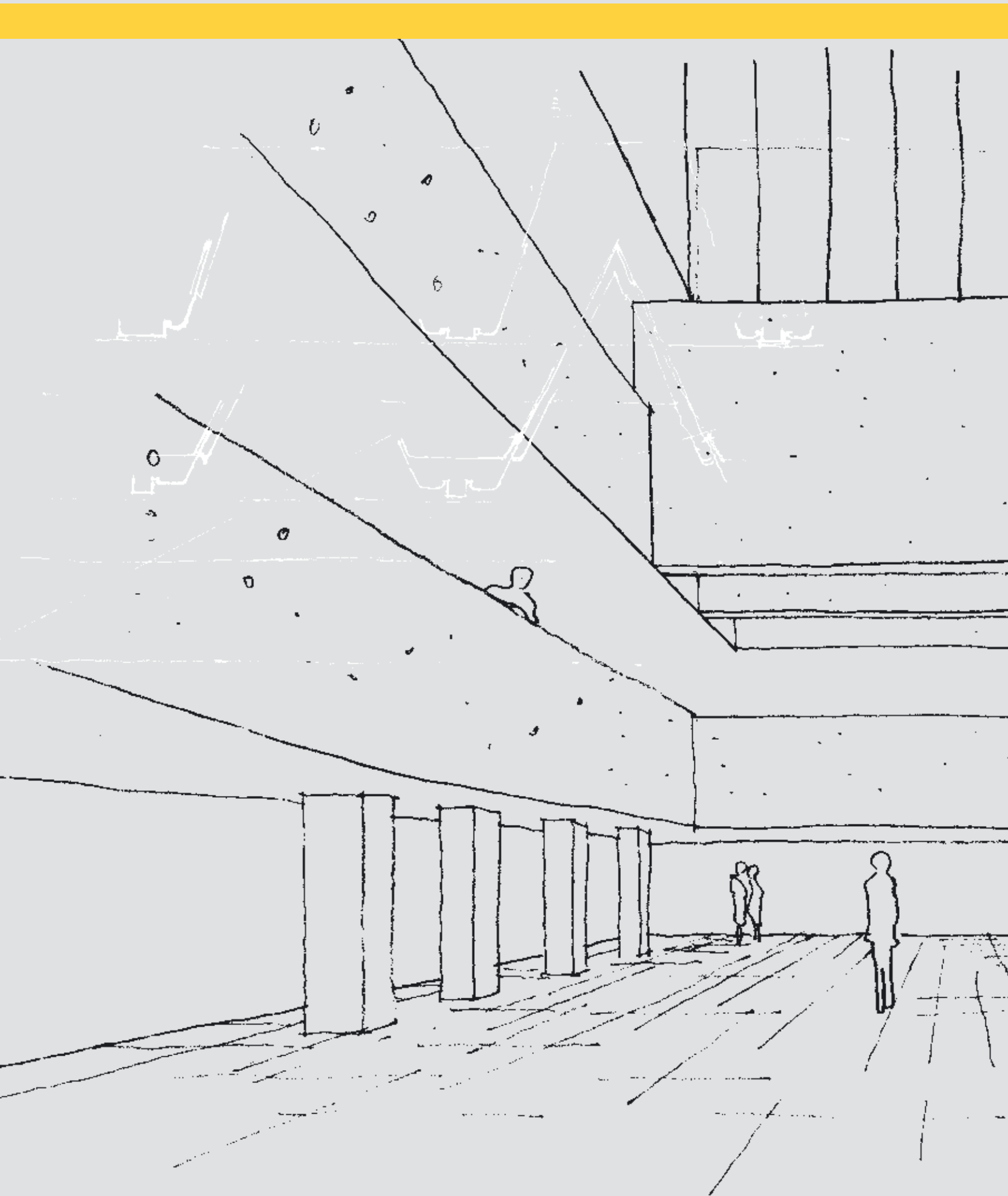


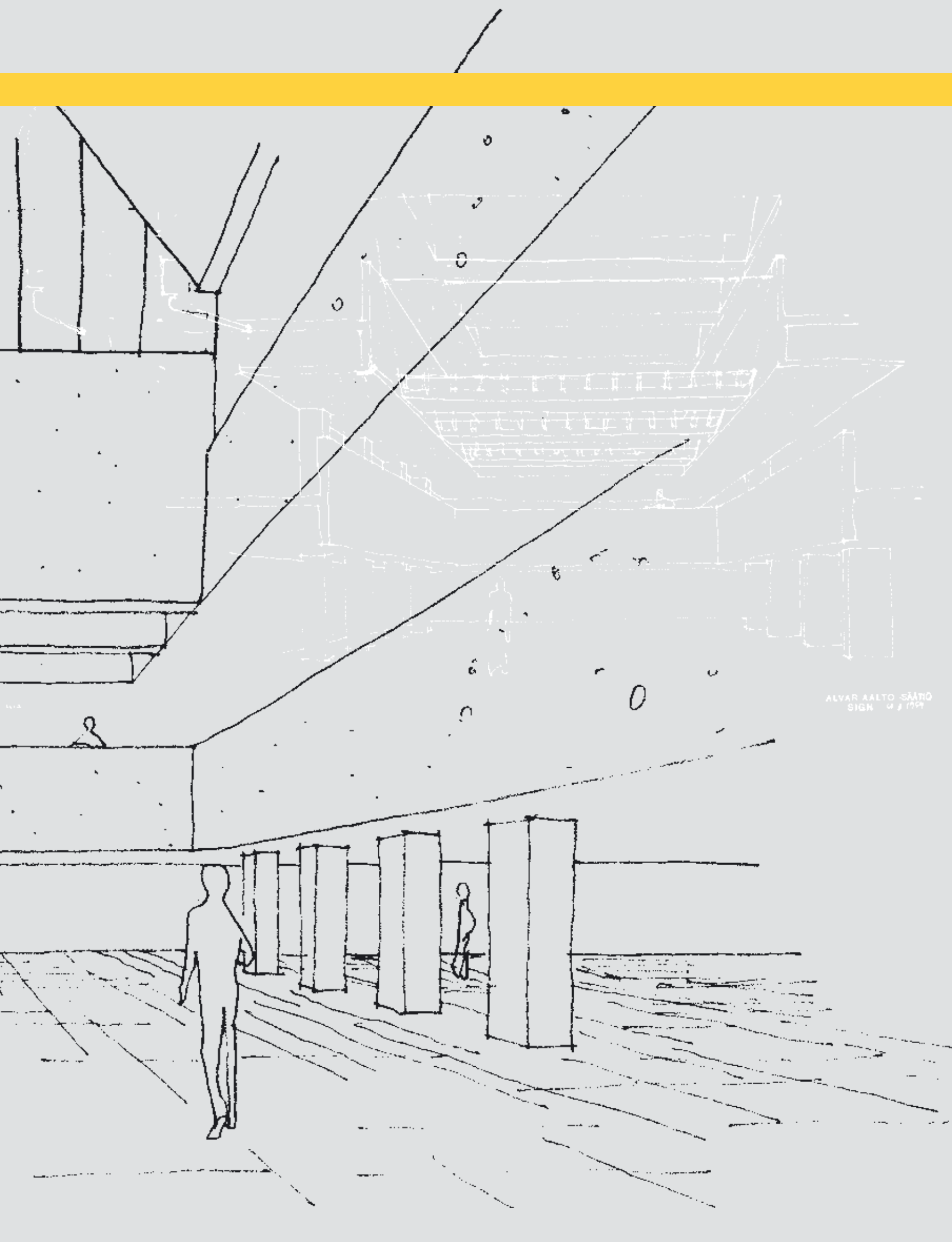
Seventh floor



КАМАННИ АСЕЛАНТОУ
ИЛИЈАД КОРТИС 57/
ЗЕЛЕНАЛ КЕРПОВ, БР.НО 10/100,







ALVAR AALTO SAARO
SIGN. 4/1954

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*“The National Pensions Institute
is an important example
of how Aalto aimed to humanise
large-scale institutional and
commercial buildings.”*

Timo Tuomi, in Alvar Aalto in Seven Buildings
– Interpretations of an Architect’s Work (1998)

