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Aalto, Lewerentz And The Craft Of Light



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Details count. They are those elements, often very small or very complicated (or both), that complete a building—from door handles to devices for capturing rainwater to a myriad of other things. Every architect appreciates their importance to the success of a built work. We in the West even have two contradictory expressions about them: the old adage, “The devil is in the details,” which contrasts strikingly with Mies van der Rohe’s famous dictum, “God is in the details.”

We admire a “well-detailed” building because we know how hard it is to make one. And we lament the poor examples in which detailing was seemingly an afterthought. It is not unusual for the most experienced architect in the office to be entrusted with creating the details, because they demand such a high level of care and skill. An American auto manufacturer used to say, with pride, they “sweat the details.” Yes, details count.

Moreover, details are physical manifestations of the architect’s craft—that special art of putting buildings together. As such, they involve creativity and imagination. They also may highlight what the architect considers important about his or her work. Think, for example, of the careful patterning of reveals in the concrete walls of Kahn’s great Salk Institute. Detail enriches the work.

Alvar Aalto and Sigurd Lewerentz “sweat the details.” Their buildings are powerful and memorable in part because they are so well-detailed. And among the many details, some stand out in particular. These architects crafted detailed, distinctive, and highly individualistic systems for bringing light into their buildings. The lengths to which they went to engage daylight are remarkable.

Natural light and its manipulation are prominent in their work, a preoccupation in practice. When we consider these Nordic architects’ important commissions, we think of places filled with different (and often highly dramatic) qualities of light—from Villa Mairea’s soft, even illumination to the abundant daylight of Aalto’s Viipuri Library and the mysterious glow of the Petri Church sanctuary in one of Lewerentz’s late works. The extreme seasonal differentiations of light at these places, near the Arctic Circle, no doubt enrich our perceptions.

Sometimes, the daylighting systems—details, in terms of architectural design production—are so idiosyncratic, in fact, that they seem almost contrarian—as if the architect deliberately set out to challenge norms and expectations. And perhaps they did. The details demand our attention, just as the spaces they serve do.

In this illustrated presentation, particular examples will be discussed, including Aalto’s characteristic use of a grid of round skylights and Lewerentz’s stunning applications of glazing panels. Potential opportunities for neuroscientific research will be discussed as well. In the special contexts of Sweden and Finland, these details dramatize the daylighting of interiors, calling attention to natural light, helping to mold our perceptions of those important places that are atmospheres rooted in a Nordic world.