

ALVAR AALTO

**Alvar Aalto Foundation
July 18th 2024
For Immediate Release**



Alvar Aalto's Kaufmann Conference Center - Photography Janne Tuunanen

Alvar Aalto's Kaufmann Conference Center in New York

The Kaufmann Conference Center – one of five realized works in the United States by famed Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and the only remaining in New York – away from public view for two decades will have a new public future.

[Link to Photography and Project Archive](#)

New York, New York – The Kaufmann Conference Center – one of five realized works in the United States by famed Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and the only remaining in New York - will have a new future. The cultural impact of this space is undeniable; it demonstrated a “more human” approach to modernist interiors at a time in the 1960s when modernism in the United States was becoming colder and more sterile. An important and an extensive mission for saving the interior; its architectural elements and furniture, has been underway with the collaboration of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Consulate General of Finland in New York, Finnish Cultural Institute in New York and managing firm Office of Tangible Space. The pieces from the Kaufmann Rooms will soon begin their next chapter, being reconstructed as part of public exhibition nationwide and remain part of Aalto’s important legacy in the United States.

Alvar Aalto’s Kaufmann Conference Center, located at 809 United Nations Plaza in New York was commissioned by Edgar Kaufmann Jr. in 1962 and opened in 1964. Located across from the United Nations building, the Kaufmann Conference Center was built as part of the Institute of International Education (IIE)’s headquarters and used to host visitors and conferences until the building was sold in 1998. Being a private space, the interior failed to receive New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designation as an interior landmark in 1998 and in 2016. The space has been closed to the public for over two decades.

The Kaufmann Conference Center includes an elevator lobby clad in curved blue tile, a large reception hall and two smaller rooms that are sub-dividable with partitions. Although entering into a smaller compressive lobby, stepping into the reception hall reveals an expansive, light-filled space with window louvers, an undulating plaster ceiling peppered with gold pendant lights, and a bent wood wall relief sculpture. The space is marked by classic Alvar Aalto architectural details including tile, wood wall ribs, and bronze door hardware. The custom furniture, lighting and draperies were designed by both Elissa and Alvar Aalto. Although the walls were framed on-site, all other elements including lighting, wood details, furniture, tile, and draperies were manufactured in Finland, shipped over, and installed. The large, forest-like wall relief sculpture was constructed by Alvar Aalto himself in his Helsinki studio prior to its dismantling and shipment to New York.

“The Kaufmann Conference Center has the unique signature of Alvar Aalto and it was a spatial masterpiece,” states Tommi Lindh, Director of Alvar Aalto Foundation. *“On the behalf of Finland and Aalto’s legacy we could not be more grateful for the endeavors for securing the future for the interior.”*

Securing the Future of the Interior

The conference center, situated within a large private tower building, is considered one of the most important modernist interior spaces in the United States. Despite the support of Aalto enthusiasts and several attempts made for protecting the space, it never received the NPC landmark status. As the future of this important space was in limbo, through negotiations led by the Consulate General of Finland in New York, it was determined that the Alvar Aalto Foundation would become the steward of the contents of the interiors and find a new home for them in public view into the future.

The project to dismantle the 4500 square foot interior has been a major endeavor. Alvar Aalto Foundation, in collaboration with the Consulate General of Finland in New York and Finnish Cultural Institute in New York tapped interdisciplinary architecture studio Office of Tangible Space to manage the project. The firm's attention to detail at many scales (architecture, interiors, and furniture fabrication) and close ties to Finnish design made them a clear choice.

"It was such a unique, powerful opportunity to be able to approach this work so intimately. The work of Aalto has been a constant reference for our studio for how to make work on many scales and to aim to impact people on a deeper human level through design. To then be given the responsibility to handle the work itself and be its custodian and steward was not lost on us. It has been an incredible journey to dive deeply into this work not only in the physical space, but in research, in creation of new drawings, in 3D scans/modeling, and in photography with the aid of Finnish photographer Janne Tuunanen. To create and expand the archive documenting this work was the first step, the next step was to manage the dismantling." - Michael Yarinsky, cofounder of Office of Tangible Space with Kelley Perumbeti

In almost the reverse of its construction, the elements that were manufactured and shipped over from Finland and landed in New York Harbor and were brought to site for installation were now carefully dismantled, logged, packed, and stored for public display in the future. This included the large wood wall relief sculpture, wood wall rails that Aalto called "spaghetti" rails due to them being constructed from many tiny wood dowels, curved cobalt-blue tiles, bronze door handles, custom furniture, window louvers, curtains, and the many beautiful gold-plated copper pendant lights.

(continued next page)



Entry Lobby - Cobalt Blue Tiles - Photography Janne Tuunanen Wall Relief and Spaghetti Rail - Photography Janne Tuunanen

The Consulate of General of Finland New York, with the lead of Anssi Vallius, Special Adviser for Cultural Affairs, has played an integral role in the process and took an active position in negotiating the donation of the space from and in close collaboration with the State of Qatar. *“We felt it was important to preserve a significant cultural heritage in New York, and with the successfully concluded negotiations, the Kaufmann Conference Rooms were donated to the Finnish state in the first step. Future use and value will be created through the Alvar Aalto Foundation. The foundation has expertise and an important interest in not only preserving the Kaufmann Conference Rooms but also sharing Aalto's legacy with the public.”* - Jarmo Sareva, Consul of General of Finland in New York

The Alvar Aalto Foundation maintains the material and intellectual legacy of Alvar Aalto, and acts to make his work and thinking more widely known – for the benefit of a better everyday environment and design culture. For the Alvar Aalto Foundation it has been clear from the beginning of the process, that Alvar Aalto’s Edgar Kaufmann Conference Center, designed for an American audience, should remain in America. The pieces from the Kaufmann Rooms will begin their next chapter, being reconstructed as part of public exhibition nationwide and remain part of Aalto’s important legacy in the United States.

Collaborating Organizations:

About Alvar Aalto Foundation

The Alvar Aalto Foundation maintains the material and intellectual legacy of the world-famous architect and designer Alvar Aalto, and acts to make his work and thinking more widely known.

The Alvar Aalto Foundation also oversees the work of the Alvar Aalto Academy and the Foundation's Architectural Heritage Team. The Architectural Heritage Team provides expert assistance on repairs of buildings designed by Aalto. The Alvar Aalto Academy fosters training and research in modern architecture, and mounts architecture events in Finland and abroad.

The Alvar Aalto Foundation is the Museum with the national responsibility for Alvar Aalto's architecture and design heritage and the international centre for information about Alvar Aalto, with extensive collections that form the basis of the Museum's and the Foundation's exhibitions and publications.

About Office of Tangible Space

Office of Tangible Space is an interdisciplinary design studio based in New York and San Francisco – founded by Michael Yarinsky and Kelley Perumbeti. They specialize in architecture, interiors, furniture and curation, with projects ranging from the object-scale to the architectural. The work is grounded in a human-centric approach that is achieved through warmth and materiality – the creation of space that feels lived in and strengthens a feeling of comfort and contentment. Regardless of project scale, the intentionality in each detail of the work allows for moments of thoughtful engagement and opportunities for social gathering. It evokes a desire to stay and to notice - to have a dialogue with the immediate environment.

About Consulate General of Finland in New York

The Consulate General of Finland in New York promotes Finland's commercial and cultural interests and strengthens the country's national brand in the US through public diplomacy. The activity scope of the Consulate General of Finland in New York covers 35 states situated on the East Coast and in the Midwest, as well as two special administrative regions (Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands).

About Finnish Cultural Institute in New York

The Finnish Cultural Institute in New York is a non-profit organization working across the fields of contemporary art, design, and architecture, creating dialogue between Finnish and American professionals and audiences. Founded in 1990, the Institute has grown from a residency program to commissioning large-scale projects and events that foster critical dialogue and work to build support for professionals in architecture, design, and contemporary art.

Key Background Information:

Alvar Aalto in his own words in a letter to the client during the design process.

“The project depends entirely on the skeleton of the structure. Due to this fact I have not made any changes in the part of the building where the elevators, technical tubes, toilets etc are placed by the architect of the building. My project regards only the reception hall and additional conference rooms... I have projected the reception floor as one total aesthetic form, the reception hall and the small conference rooms with sliding doors give one total picture... The walls of the reception hall are made as a wooden sculpture, sometimes very deep (like a forest), sometimes with thinner profiles and forms.

As you see from the above mentioned I have the intention to make the whole thing as a wooden covering system made in pieces and put together on the spot. It can be made here in Finland with the combination of two firms. (One a medium-sized precision wood factory, the same that made the special ceilings for Mason Carré in France, the other one is a high-class precision shop, which has been working with me for more than 30 years and has made all my specially designed objects.) to have a thing like this made, let us say of the quality of a violin or some other musical instrument, is not very easy. I shall personally make the sculptural parts and supervise the work with my partners. The whole thing can be shipped in parts directly from the factory to New York Harbor and some of the specialists can be sent to New York to do the assembling.

In the reception room one of the undulating walls forms the wood sculpture, in some places very deep in profile (as I said, like a forest). It is, of course, impossible to show any details such as lighting, furniture, textiles etc, but I will include a new lighting system which is a sort of metallic filter of light. This lighting system we shall create in variable forms for this reception hall and conference rooms. I shall send you all the details in spring.”

Kaufmann Conference Center Project Overview by Matthew A. Postal

Visitors to the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms enter an early 1960s office building and take the elevator to the top floor. Passing through the low-ceilinged vestibule, they come to a spacious reception hall, hung with brass lighting fixtures and furnished with chairs of birch and black leather. This luminous interior has a soft golden hue, in part due to the sunlight that filters through a grid of louvers, but also due to the generous use of lightly finished woods—ash and birch—silhouetted against angled walls of white plaster. On the far side of the room is a wood sculpture. Constructed from long, flat pieces of laminated birch, this striking assemblage resembles a snapshot of a thickly forested landscape. Equally dramatic is the ceiling, gently rising in stages to a height of

twenty-two feet. 1

1 Postal, Matthew A.: Alvar Aalto and the Edgar J. Kaufmann Conference Rooms in Aalto in America. 2012. P. 263

Ada Louise Huxtable's review upon the unveiling of the space in the NYTimes in 1964

Here are the well-known Aalto trademarks that have been admired by two generations of architects. Pale, laminated Woods are used with the plasticity of sculpture; stepped, curved walls and ceilings turn ordinary rectangular spaces into a series of softened enclosures of seductive virtuosity, and deceptive simplicity belies a most sophisticated style.

But even if these contributions have already taken their place in the architectural histories, there is nothing dated about them. The Kaufmann Conference Rooms are so far superior to corporate and institutional interior design here that they make the standardized, expensive ploys of teak-by-the-yard, carpet-by-the-vertical-inch, and conference-table-by-the-ton seem flashy and cheap by comparison.

This superiority rests on a large talent and small details. First, and most important, there is Aalto's treatment of architectural space. It might be called a sensitive and loving kind of manipulation that molds, instead of denying, the existing architectural shell. It is creative camouflage, rather than destructive decoration. And it is frankly sensuous, rather than severe... Even the cobalt-blue Finnish tile of the elevator entrance is rounded and smooth to the hand. Inside, the colors are white and ivory.

Scarcely second to the resolution of spaces the superb use of wood. It is quite possible, in this country, to forget that wood is so beautiful and that its appeal is due to its qualities as a natural material. American processes of manufacture frequently result in a mechanized and overfinished product that looks as if it had never known a tree.

The rooms glow with the pale warmth of white birch. ... This wall treatment breaks into a brief abstract fantasy at one point on the longest side of the conference room, where a composition of straight and bent forms is meant to suggest a stylized Forest. It was reduced to a small stand of "trees" by New York's fire laws.

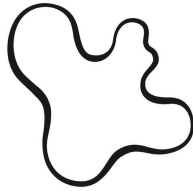
All of these more sensitive elements... were prefabricated or produced in Finland. The "forest" was studied at full size in the architect's Helsinki atelier and re-erected here... There is no sign of the aggressive angularity or dynamic sharpness that is commonly labeled modern. Aalto might be called, to use the language of painting, a soft-edge architect... He himself is incapable of a cliché or a stereotype of any kind. A small, spry, sophisticated, impeccably tailored Finnish troll of 66 years, with a gleam in his eye and a soft barb to his wit, Alvar Aalto still leads the field of design.

Ada Louise Huxtable, NYTimes 11/30/1964 "Architecture: Alvar Aalto Finnish Master, Represented Here"

For more information:

[Link to Photography and Project Archive](#)

TOMMI LINDH
CEO / Alvar Aalto Foundation
+358 44 562 1625
tommi.lindh@alvaraalto.fi



ALVAR AALTO