



## **DO! Interview: Esa Laaksonen**

The Alvar Aalto Symposium would be nothing without the people who make it. We interviewed Director of the Alvar Aalto Academy, Esa Laaksonen, who for the last sixteen years has borne the main responsibility for devising and arranging the Symposium. Besides the quiet hum of history and Elissa Aalto's chanterelles, Laaksonen tells us what is on the cards for the future.

### **You have been involved in staging the Alvar Aalto Symposium for many years now and, before that, you could be seen among the ranks of participants. What changes have you seen over the years?**

I was at the first Symposium as a student. On that occasion, there were long excursions and quite few speakers, more time to chat, and a slightly more theoretical emphasis overall. The Symposiums in which I personally have been involved have been different every time. It depends a lot on who is in the chair and on what the current focus is. Nowadays, there is less and less time, finances are tighter, and there are a number of competing events.

### **What does the Symposium mean to you personally? What role does it play on the broader architectural scene?**

The Symposium represents a chance for me to meet colleagues and for airing ideas – and, of course, in recent years, also the responsibility for arranging the event. As a long-standing occasion the Symposium is unique and its future continuation is very important for our profession.

## **What makes the Alvar Aalto Symposium special – worth the experience?**

Jyväskylä, “a city far from the world”, makes no concessions, especially to foreigners; you have to be there and join in. There has been a good atmosphere at the sessions, because the people who come there feel they are at a unique event. That one-off quality is a key factor. It is re-created every time by new speakers and new focuses. The situation is given new life each year by whoever is in the chair for that one occasion. That in itself is a good thing, because otherwise it would begin to repeat itself.

## **What is your most striking memory of a Symposium?**

Colin St John Wilson’s and Göran Schildt’s last appearances; they had the quiet hum of history. Another fantastic memory is the fried chanterelles that Elissa Aalto served on Muuratsalo Island. Elissa went round the grounds with a frying pan, dishing out the freshly fried mushrooms to the participants. I also remember the first symposium excursion to Aalto’s Muurame Church, which had just been “renovated to death”. Aalto’s works of the 20s were just coming to the awareness of the general public at that time.

## **And what topics or lectures particularly spring to mind?**

The shift from more theoretical themes to practical ones occurred when Mikko Heikkinen put an end to modernism-centred subjects with his world of elephants and butterflies. Of the individual lectures from recent times, some that have stayed in mind are Keré at the Symposium led by Sami Rintala, and the two Tezukas and their children three years ago.

## **How do you think the Symposium should develop in the future?**

There has been talk of perhaps taking the Symposium abroad. The idea was first thrown into the ring by the original architect of the event, the long-standing Director of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Markku Lahti. It could be an interesting experiment, for example, in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. It would also be good to be able to run a young architects’ workshop Soundings for Architecture again in conjunction with the Symposium.

I would also like to see more time for discussion. After all, that is what “symposium” means. I have been a participant in quite many well or less-well-arranged seminars. They often forget the importance of spending time together. Exhibitions, events in the city, evening occasions, a spacious timetable – not too many lecturers, but better ones. New generations will come if the topic is interesting enough. I believe I myself was at the youngest end of the spectrum in 1979.