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Alvar Aalto's Silo to be Transformed into Research Centre Promoting Architectural Preservation in Oulu, Finland



November 2020. Image © Factum Foundation and Skene Catling de la Peña

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[Skene Catling de la Peña](#) and [Factum Foundation](#) are transforming [Alvar Aalto's](#) iconic wood chip Silo into a research Centre promoting architectural preservation and re-use. The AALTOSILO, a cathedral-like concrete structure “*will become a point of focus for digitizing and communicating the importance of the industrial architecture of the north and – in turn - the impact industry has had on the environment*”.

Form must have a content, and that content must be linked with nature.

-- Alvar Aalto



Located in Oulu, [Finland](#), on the edge of the Arctic Circle, the Toppila Silo was designed by Alvar and Aino Aalto in 1931, part of the cellulose production plant. Asking “*Can Aalto’s Silo have a new life as a creative research Centre promoting recording technologies and re-thinking materiality in one of the fastest-changing parts of the world?*” Skene Catling de la Peña and Factum Foundation decided to purchase the project in order to renovate it and create a center that promotes curiosity and research. In fact, the AALTOSILO will generate a center for technology, encompassing initiatives focused on digitizing and recording both man-made and natural environments. The project will consist of restoring Aalto’s 1931 concrete Silo, to become a reference for the preservation of other concrete, industrial heritage, and build a new research center as a radically ecological structure.

God created paper for the purpose of drawing architecture on it. Everything else is, at least for me, an abuse of paper. -- Alvar Aalto

The 258 m² space, with its 28-meter-high single space with three suspended hoppers, will become a multi-purpose public space that can function as a ‘Cabinet of Curiosity’. In addition, Charlotte Skene Catling will design a new structure on this site to act as the Research Centre, a building that creates a dialogue with the Silo and the Aalto’s ‘Experimental House’. Working with a team of structural engineers, services engineers, quantity surveyors, and conservation architects specialized in historic structures, Skene Catling de la Peña and Factum Foundation seek to restore and reveal the Aalto’s building as a multi-purpose public building.

A key project in Aalto’s career, the Toppila cellulose factory hasn’t been unused for decades. It became internationally known in 1931 after being photographed by the Bauhaus teacher Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Listed under ‘Nationally Important Architectural Areas’ and the Silo itself is further protected under the ‘SR-1 Nationally Important Protected Building’ classification, the project used for storing wood chips will become a space for knowledge, “*focused on sharing human skills, transferring technologies, and*

gathering diverse types of information for condition monitoring and to assist in-depth study”.

The Toppila cellulose factory [...] Completed in 1931, is an example of early functionalist architecture in [Finland](#). Especially the Silo, with its particular character, is a local landmark. [...] Being unused for decades, the Silo provides possibilities, unique challenges, and great potentials in reuse as well as in architectural and structural innovations. [Rehabilitation](#) of the landmark building will hail a new period, not only in the neighboring Toppila area but also in the City of Oulu. -- The [Alvar Aalto](#) Foundation, Helsinki, March 2nd 2021, Jonas Malmberg M.Sc. (arch.), M.A. (art history)



Toppila Pulp Mill with Aalto's Silo photographed in 1938. Image © Finnish Heritage Agency

Including Multi-sensory recording, training, and sharing, the center will highlight how technology is helping us to see the world afresh. *“Visualizing the electromagnetic energy*

of the aurora borealis, rethinking the role and use of cellulose and lignum and monitoring marine pollution [...] recording of climate change and its impact on the natural environment”, are some of the initiatives the project will be responsible for.

Collaborating with different actors across [Finland](#), Sweden, and Norway, the project is partnering with the Oulu University, the Aalto Foundation, the Aalto University, and the Oslo Centre for Critical Architectural Studies.

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