

The Alvar Aalto Theatre Opens in Essen

BY OWEN LEVY

■ **The Alvar Aalto Theatre in Essen (exterior 1, interior detail 2, and audience chamber 3), officially opened in 1988, was originally designed in 1959 by Aalto. Construction costs and environmental concerns led to its postponement over the intervening decades.**

● *Le théâtre Alvar Aalto d'Essen (extérieur 1, intérieur détail 2, et salle d'audience 3), ouvert officiellement en 1988, fut à l'origine conçu en 1959 par Aalto. Les coûts de la construction et les intérêts des écologistes ont reporté ce projet depuis plusieurs décennies.*

▼ **Das Alvar Aalto Theater in Essen (Aussenansicht 1, Detail innen, 2 und Zuschauerraum 3) eröffnete offiziell 1988, wurde ursprünglich aber 1959 von Aalto entworfen. Probleme mit den Baukosten und -materialien führten dazu, dass die Eröffnung über die Jahrzehnte hinweg verschoben wurde.**

An architect's impression of an ancient Greek amphitheater was the inspiration for the newly opened Alvar Aalto Theatre and Philharmonic in Essen, West Germany. As its silhouette, that now seems postmodern, scopes out the future, the sleek interior showcases state-of-the-art technology.

Twin sloping roofs suggest a double-tiered spacecraft poised for takeoff. Or perhaps, a great yawning clamshell. Others see crags from the rocky Greek coasts as its inspiration. But no matter what the first impression, the Aalto is the longest-awaited opera house to open in Europe in quite sometime.

The Aalto opened officially on September 25, 1988 with a production of Wagner's *The Meistersinger of Nuremberg*. This was nearly sixty years after the Essen city fathers had first proposed such a facility for the benefit of their prospering citizenry, and thirty years after a competition was announced.

Named for the late Finnish architect Alvar Aalto—perhaps a first for a theatre—the structure was based on plans he submitted nearly 30 years ago for the 1959 competition sponsored by this indus-

trial center in Germany's Ruhr Valley. Some say Aalto, who died in 1976, was the last survivor of that elite fraternity of 20th century giants that includes Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier. Certainly the Aalto will most likely be the last theatre of such size and architectural interest to open in Europe for the balance of this century. Aalto's winning plans lay unrealized until 1984, primarily because postwar Essen, then a heavy coal mining area, had other priorities, including a new city hall and dealing with economic depression. When the money was eventually appropriated, the estimated cost was 145 million Deutsch marks.

That figure dropped 10 million DM when fears of air pollution from nearby heavy industry prompted a switch from a white marble facade, as Aalto had envisioned, to a light Sardinian granite that might better cope with the environment. Ironically, recent changes in the area's economy to more high-tech industries has cleaned up the air.

Though Aalto suggested what the mainstage and backstage areas would be like, his original plans did not foresee the major advances in stage technology which the theatre bearing his name now contains.

THE AALTO THEATRE FINALLY OPENS ITS DOORS 30 YEARS AFTER ITS DESIGN