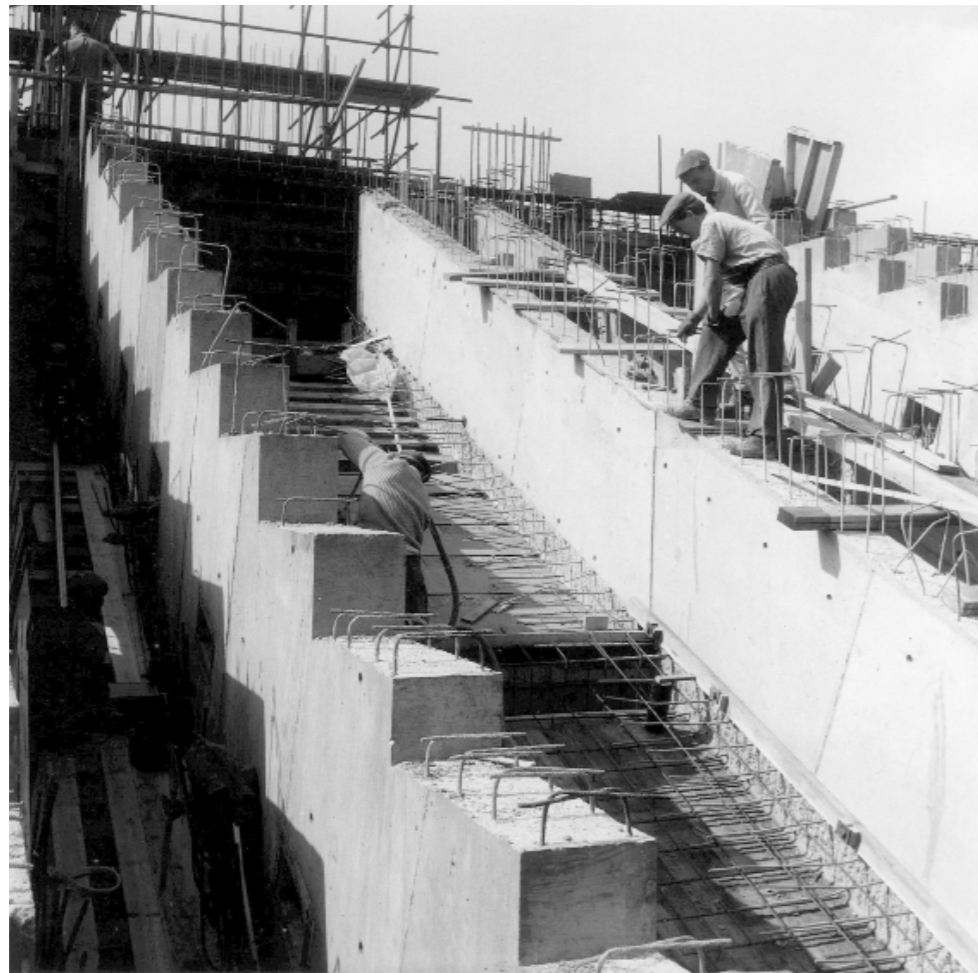


Reviews

In this issue: titles on Brutalism, Finnish design, architectural photography and another new Pevsner guide



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SOUTH BANK
STORIES:
Building the raked
seating for the
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Modern Futures

Edited by Hannah Neate & Ruth Craggs

Uniformbooks, £12

This book collects thirteen essays by academics and artists under the themes of Documentation, Interventions and Transformation of post-war architecture. The editors are lecturers in human geography and historical and cultural geography, interested in the rising popularity of this period of architecture, the increasing threat of demolition and how these are connected.

The range of topics covered is one of its strong points; it also covers a good geographic range, which is refreshing for a book on post-war modernism. There's a great chapter on the building of the South Bank Centre, based on anecdotes from the construction workers; contrast this with a chapter by Ian Waites on an arts project he has been carrying out on a 1960s council estate in Lincolnshire where he grew up, and you get a flavour of the content of this book. There is a focus on

lesser-known suburbs and estates rather than famous brutalist buildings. In his piece on the Suburbs Project, which aims to raise awareness and appreciation of our suburbs, Matthew Whitfield describes the challenges of defining their value and typologies. Around 80 per cent of UK citizens live there, yet they are 'rarely perceived as environments with intrinsic historic or heritage value'. The essays dedicated to key modernist projects – the South Bank Centre, the Golden Lane Estate and Preston Bus Station – provide an alternative to the more usual accounts by focusing on the experiences of construction workers, residents and campaigners. This is not a coffee-table book; it will appeal to the same demographic as its authors and contributors, so it's curious that C20 barely gets a mention. The essays that deal with the theme of Transformation predictably

take a negative view of private developers. I would have liked to see a more balanced discussion here: many post-war buildings under threat of demolition need private investment to give them new life. Many such cases are success stories – including Park Hill in my view – but these are rarely given the same exposure in architectural publications. The book, then, is as much, if not more, about the people who engage with buildings as about the buildings themselves. Oral histories, engagement with local communities through arts projects, and the recording of little-known post-war buildings, suburbs and estates all bring this period of British architecture to a much wider audience. There is a value in these buildings beyond the economic and architectural, which this book makes a case for protecting.

• Nicola Rutt

Artek and the Aaltos: Creating a Modern World

ed Nina Stritzler-Levine & Timo Riekko

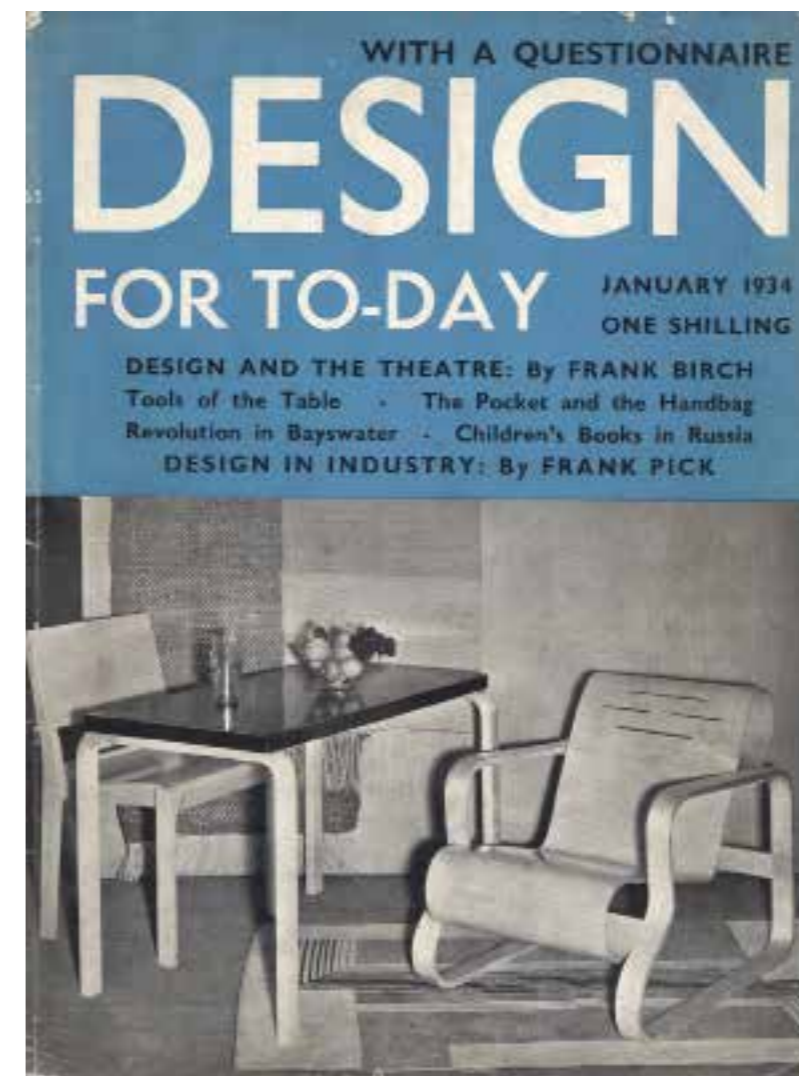
Bard Center, 698pp, £50

This lengthy multi-author account of the furniture and interiors of Alvar Aalto and his first wife Aino Marsio Aalto was written to accompany a recent exhibition. Among other fascinating information, we learn that 'the Swedish Alvar Aalto Society made a major contribution to the restoration of the City Library at Viipuri by instituting a voluntary "tax" on their members. On an annual basis they would request donations based on the quantity of Aalto furniture and glassware each member owned.' This fundraising technique would be an interesting one to apply to C20 members. The Artek pieces that were designed from the early 1930s onwards (with short wartime interruptions) have been

among the more accessible 'modern classics', both in price and in the ease with which they could be integrated with other kinds of furniture. Pre-war Britain, so often seen as resistant to modernism, became one of the chief importers, contributing significantly to the viability of the business. This nugget of information comes in the context of several articles discussing the distribution and sale of Aalto furniture in different parts of the world: an interesting index of the take-up not just of modernism, but of a particular strand within it. Compared with the metal-framed modern furniture of the 1920s, the Aalto pieces ushered in a softer look and feel, their wooden construction partly the direct consequence

of manufacturing conditions and expertise in Finland, and partly due to a shift within the Modern movement as a whole towards the more natural-seeming forms and finishes long associated with Scandinavian designers. A significant theme of the book is to restore the contribution made by Aino Marsio Aalto, who died relatively young in 1949. Convincing claims are made that her contribution to the furniture and interiors of the practice was at least as important as that of her husband. These are supported by detailed documentation from the Artek archives transferred to the Alvar Aalto Museum in Jyväskylä within the last decade. In the process, much other detail emerges that makes the book a rich and diverse source of information and images. Of particular interest to British readers will be the chapter by Harry Charrington on 'Retailing Aalto in London before Artek', which gives new details of the seemingly bizarre choice of Fortnum and Mason for the first exhibition of Aalto furniture in November 1933, and the role played by two of the most mysterious promoters of modernism, P Morton Shand and H de C Hastings. Apart from its use value, furniture acted as a tradeable currency for ideas and affiliations in a way difficult to achieve with buildings. Shand, pursued by creditors and in need of income, found co-directors for a new company, Finmar Ltd, devoted wholly to the sale of the furniture then being produced by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy Ab, prior to the foundation of Artek in 1935. Demand actually exceeded supply, since there seem to have been production difficulties in Finland, and there were rival producers of modern furniture in timber in the British market, including Isokon, Gerald Summers' Makers of Simple Furniture, and Plan Ltd, in which Serge Chermayeff was involved. Even so, Aalto chairs, stools and tables can be seen in many photographs of British modernist interiors of the period, and were also stocked by Gordon Russell during Nikolaus Pevsner's time there as a buyer. It helped that due to low costs of materials and labour in Finland, the smaller pieces, such as three-legged stools, were cheap; Charrington doesn't quote prices, but I recall my father saying that they cost half-a-crown (12 ½p), in contrast to current retail prices of £150 and upwards. The book under review appears already to be out of print, although copies are available online. A reprint would be a good move – it makes entertaining reading and, even if Aalto seems to be a well-documented figure, the record still needs enriching and straightening out.

• Alan Powers



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INFLUENTIAL ARTEK:
Finnish furniture in 1930s Britain