

Health: The Design, Planning and Politics of How and Where We Live

- **Paper / Proposal Title:**

Alvar Aalto's "experimental patient room" and the problem of architectural research

- **Format:**

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- **Author(s) Name:**

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- **University or Company Affiliation:**

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- **Abstract (300 words):**

Although "evidence-based design"¹, which has become particularly popular in healthcare to improve the well-being and recovery of patients, might seem a relatively new field of study, we can trace the approach to relate statistical data to the quality of (hospital) spaces at least back to Florence Nightingale.

More recently also Alvar Aalto has been acknowledged as a forerunner for a research-driven approach to architecture, his 1930s icon, the tuberculosis sanatorium in Paimio, established as an example for the current field of evidence-based hospital design. Diana Anderson praises in this context Paimio's "comprehensive design strategies",

¹ Evidence based-design can be loosely defined as „the process of basing decisions about the built environment on credible research to achieve the best possible outcomes.“ (compare Anderson: "Humanizing the hospital", CMAJ, August 2010, p. 535)

where “the individual's privacy and comfort were of central importance”, thus leading to the empowerment of the patient.

This paper will discuss Aalto's design strategies for the sanatorium, in particular the “experimental room”, which – as Aalto claimed – played a central role to determine the layout of Paimio's 150 two-bed patient rooms.

While medicine can rely on a defined research framework, -and although the term “evidence based design” may suggest otherwise- what exactly constitutes substantial research in architecture was and is far less clear. Although especially in recent years there were important attempts to “demystify” the topic², architectural research still operates in a distinct grey-zone.

The “experimental room” will serve as a lens to recognize the traps and possible shortfalls within the field of “evidence based design” as well as its potential for the qualitative improvement of the medical institution.

While the claim of a purely scientific design approach for Paimio is a myth, Aalto's method where designers, patients and physicians should come together to test and evaluate different spatial solutions in a realistic environment deserves our attention.

Together with Aalto's reflections on science presented in early articles the episode of the “experimental room” may help us rethink the relationship between architecture and research and support the development of a future research framework which acknowledges the value of user participation while taking advantage of the intuitive and creative element in the architectural design process.

• **Author(s) Biography:**

Eva Eylers is an architect and academic specializing in the relationship between architecture and health. She currently teaches at the TU Berlin. Educated at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg (Diploma), and at the Architectural Association, London (M.A. and Ph.D.), Eva completed her doctoral thesis, which explored the role of the tuberculosis sanatorium for modern urban planning in 2011.

In 2009 Eva received the joint Study Centre Research Grant from the AA and the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal. Eva has taught at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, at the Architectural Association, at the School of Art and Design History, Kingston University and at the University of Applied Sciences in Trier.

² Compare for example: *Architectural Research Methods* (Linda Groat, David Wang, 2013), *Design Research in Architecture* (Murray Fraser (Ed.), 2013), *Demystifying Architectural Research: Adding value to your practice* (Anne Dye, Flora Samuels (Eds.), 2015) and *Research Methods for Architecture* (Ray Lucas, 2016)