



ALVAR AALTO CHURCHES

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CROSS OF THE PLAINS CHURCH

Seinäjoki, Finland, 1951–1960

Seinäjoki is a city in Southern Ostrobothnia that has grown around a railway hub surrounded by arable land. In the 1940s there was a hope in Seinäjoki that a new diocese then under consideration for the region would be located there. When an architectural competition for Seinäjoki Church was organised in 1951, the objective of the brief was to create a large church, with the hope that it would gain the status of a cathedral.¹ In the competition jury's assessment, it was noted that some of the proposals had enhanced this feature with design layouts that would allow for open-air events: "The strong features of the designs and the contrasting material choices were seen to be justified and necessary for this location."²

The prize money was divided between three proposals.³ In addition, three further proposals were purchased, one of which was by Alvar Aalto and his assistants. When it came to the implementation, however, the jury recommended Aalto's proposal, "Lakeuksien risti" [The Cross of the Plains], as best fulfilling the competition objectives, compared to the other proposals. This was the case even though his proposal had been excluded from the competition due to formal reasons, that is, for going outside the competition area. The proposal nevertheless fulfilled the competition programme's wish for a "major church character, in a strong and magnificent way". The jury was satisfied with the proposal's open square. As regards the

interior, the jury stated: "The interior has the appealing resonance of a medieval cathedral, achieved through contemporary means."⁴

The church as built featured to a great extent the same components of Aalto's competition proposal: a heavily tapered, a cathedral-like church interior, terraced "green piazza" in front of it, and a tall landmark bell tower. A little earlier, Aalto had won the architectural competition for the design of the Central Lahti Church with a similar design.⁵

Due to financial reasons, the building construction was delayed. The plan allowed for phased construction, with the church built first and parish facilities later, which was what the parish decided to do.⁶ Funds were also raised, and a voluntary church fee was collected for the construction of the tower.⁷ Likewise, a separate fund was collected for the pews.⁸ Costs were cut in the facades. In the original design, the church was clad in black granite. The parish was concerned about costs, and so in 1955 Aalto changed the facade material to rendered brick, with the exception of the side chapel, which remained in black granite. He wrote: "It would be similar in spirit to a [traditional] granite church, and even if somewhat modest, it

> A confirmation celebration on a summer Sunday at the Cross of the Plains Church.







^ The ceremonial doors are closed during normal everyday activities.

A mass celebrating Virgo Fidelis, the patron saint of the Carabinieri. (See p. 260–261)

> The design premise for the nave was a series of load-bearing concrete frames. The clerestory windows face northwards. The asymmetrical concrete arches supporting the vault are thematically related to Aalto's wooden furniture.

