

LONDON — To promote Britain's first major retrospective of Alvar Aalto's work, the Barbican Art Gallery felt the need to link him to Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe as Modernism's third tenor. And to add topicality it turned over design of the show to a leading Japanese architect, Shigeru Ban, who regards Aalto as his principal influence.

The message is clear: Aalto may be a monument in his Finnish homeland and revered in many architectural circles. But three decades after his death even those conversant with today's high-profile architects may have trouble recalling Aalto's contributions beyond his influential chairs and vases. "Alvar Aalto: Through the Eyes of Shigeru Ban," which runs through May 13, aims to rectify this.

Even in his lifetime Aalto was something of an outsider. Born in 1898, he was 10 to 15 years younger than the Bauhaus leaders who were transforming architecture and design in the 1920s. He also did most of his work in Finland. Most important, his architecture was defined by a humanist philosophy more than by a distinct style.

While inspired by Modernism, he grew wary of that movement, noting in a speech in London in 1957 that, "like all revolutions, it begins in enthusiasm and ends in dictatorship." Even so, in the years before his death in 1976, he could not escape the backlash against Modernism prompted by the banality of much postwar reconstruction.

Aalto's reputation recovered. And it did, the Barbican show suggests, because his hand can more easily be seen in the natural materials he used - wood and brick - and the details of his designs than in the overall look of a building. He was, one might say, a friendly architect, concerned with people more than power, with pleasing more than impressing.

"We should work for simple, good, undecorated things," he explained further in his 1957 London speech, "but things which are in harmony with the human being and organically suited to the little man in the street."

Ban, who organized an Aalto retrospective in Tokyo as early as 1986, has tried to capture this aesthetic through photographs, drawings, models and, perhaps most successfully, with examples of Aalto's furniture and fittings, notably chairs, desks, stools, lamps, vases and plates.

Ban's own identification with Aalto is apparent in a smaller display of his own work, which includes furniture and designs to shelter victims of disasters. (Aalto was similarly concerned in World War II with developing shelters that could "be turned into homes.") Evoking Aalto's use of wood, Ban has given the gallery a graceful undulating ceiling made of cardboard tubes.

Yet the problem intrinsic to all architecture shows remains: to make sense of the narrative, visitors must read wall texts, study photographs (in this case old black-and-white ones and sleek new color prints), grapple with drawings and, even with models, make giant leaps of the imagination.

This show faces still another burden: It must wrestle with the infamously hostile architecture of the Barbican Centre in East London.

Designed in the 1950s, this concrete complex finally opened in 1982 and was quickly tagged London's ugliest building. Its art gallery may even have been an afterthought. It has no natural light.

Ban's show, presented chronologically, focuses on 14 of Aalto's most important projects, starting in the mid-1920s with his first significant design, the Jyvaskyla Workers' Club in his hometown in central Finland. Its facade is neo-Classical, but the young architect was already concerned with interiors, even designing the building's light fixtures.

With the large Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium, completed in 1933, he embraced what was known as Functionalism and adopted a fairly conventional Modernist exterior. Imagining its interior as "an instrument for healing," though, he did his best to make "man at his weakest" comfortable through warm colors, soft light and even a noiseless wash basin.

It was for this hospital that he created the Paimio Chair, made of elegantly bent wood, which sealed his reputation as a furniture designer and is still in production today. Years later, always looking to blend beauty and function, he continued to experiment and created the first mass-produced stools, which could be stacked up high.

By the late 1930s, already Finland's leading architect, Aalto was commissioned to design the Finnish pavilions for the world fairs in Paris in 1937 and New York in 1939. But it was for his friends and patrons, Maire and Harry Gullichsen, that he built Villa Mairea, a two-floor L-shaped house set in woods. Many experts consider this his finest work, as important in his career as Fallingwater

Photographs in this show illustrate how the generous use of wood, both for exterior paneling and for interior floors, ceilings, stairs and window blinds, speaks to the surrounding landscape. The spacious kitchen was designed by Aalto's wife, Aino, while the traditional Finnish farmhouse is evoked in five large fireplaces (despite the home's central heating).

Aalto's work on low-income wooden housing, called system houses, was experimental in a different way. He was developing these as a research professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1940 when he was summoned home to help the wartime reconstruction effort with similarly prefabricated houses designed to withstand the severe Finnish winter.

From the postwar era the show singles out the Baker House Senior Dormitory at MIT; a brick-faced town hall at Saynatsalo in Finland; and the so-called House of Culture in Helsinki, built for the Finnish Communist Party in 1958. There is also the striking white Church of the Three Crosses in Imatra and an art museum in West Jutland.

Not included here is Finlandia Hall, Helsinki's main concert hall and arguably Aalto's most familiar work, if only because it is in the country's capital. It is across Finland that the variety of his work can best be gauged. In Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland, for instance, Aalto designed the entire city center (where this reporter came across his naturally lighted and enormously welcoming city library).

Today it seems strange that Aalto could have felt overlooked by his homeland. Yet in 1954 he named his motorboat Nemo Propheta in Patria (Nobody Is a Prophet in His Own Country). And in the final years of his life, his belief in social architecture was widely challenged.

But by 1986, when his face appeared on a Finnish bank note as a national hero, he was the pride of his country. And in the world of architecture too he was back in favor. It was around this time that Ban discovered him. "Aalto is one of the most innovative architects I know," he said in an interview for the show's catalogue. "I think without encountering Aalto's architecture, I wouldn't have been able to discover my own style."