

Opening Ceremony of Aalto University
Friday 8 Dec 2010



Festive Dialogue:
Initiator of Aalto University, Professor Yrjö Sotamaa and
Professor of Corporate Responsibility Minna Halme

Halme: Yrjö, what did you have in mind when you launched the idea that UA&D, TKK & HSE would join to become one university?

Sotamaa: I was thinking of wild flowers in my garden. The future will be different and therefore we need different type of universities. And very different thinking to tackle the global challenges and turn them to opportunities for Finland. We just cannot anymore ride with the same old horses. And of course I was thinking of raising the role art and design in building the 21st century Finland. They are both tools for transformation and examples of necessary human centric thinking.

What opportunities do you expect Aalto to offer to you?

Halme: Opportunities for cross-disciplinary research is what I'm looking for. My research group studies environmental questions and social sustainability issues like global poverty, and what could be new ways of organizing business and economic life so that we would not violate the nature and that more people globally would equally benefit from the economic activity. They are multidisciplinary problems, and I hope that Aalto will make it easier to work across disciplines and aim at holistic understanding.

Secondly, Aalto legitimizes interaction with different stakeholders in society: business, NGOs etc.

Challenge: Top-research goal, good at an abstract level, but easily leads to only measuring publications in top journals... this requires specializing on small, narrow fields, get better in that, results in fragmentation rather than addressing problems holistically.

Sotamaa: Many of these issues are not new. They were present in the 60's, but it didn't work – what is different now?

Halme: Now there is more knowledge about innovative solutions. Social and environmental problems can be starting points for new sustainable more sustainable technologies and business models.

Let's take global poverty as an example from aid and charity to companies innovating affordable products and services in areas like water, energy, housing to the poor. Alleviate poverty, but in economically feasible ways.

Sotamaa: Usually we think about development only as a material concept. How to create change that produces wellbeing without material growth? Do you think that is possible?

Halme: New ways of doing business and new ways of understanding our lives. Needs can be fulfilled in different ways than only selling and buying more goods. There are a number of technological innovations as well as more service-based business models that offer the same level of wellbeing, but with lesser material and energy use.

Besides, there is a lot of scientific knowledge already about the connection of economy and happiness. Layard: After 20.000€ happiness no longer increases. Stable society and small income differences are the most important societal features for promoting conditions of happiness.

Sotamaa: You mentioned before that Aalto legitimizes interaction with different stakeholders. Should we look for new approaches to collaboration with our traditional partners like other scientist, universities and companies. More open collaboration maybe? Should we also take into account radical networks like Greenpeace and others as collaborators?

Halme: Hearing the future, the weak signals. Aalto-course "How to change the world" students will work in real-life projects of a number of NGOs.

What do you think Yrjö, can Aalto challenge the fragmentation paradigm of the present day scientific world? Can Aalto create incentive systems that encourage us to see 50 years ahead?

Sotamaa: The whole Aalto concept is based on holistic thinking and as such it is challenging the present silo paradigm.

But this is of course not enough.

Aalto has to have the courage to take risks and garden "wild flowers". I like your idea of thinking far ahead. We have to be prepared for unexpected changes in the society. Playing safe is not the best model. And I would love to see Aalto to be driven by passion to creativity and innovation, to search for something unique and by passion to change the world. That would be the bigger meaning we have been looking for. Would you agree with this Minna?

Halme: I'll be happy to be part of that kind of Aalto. Love wild flowers & hardly ever play safe.

Sotamaa: Great! Lets go and do it!