

ARCHITECTURE: VILLA MAIREA

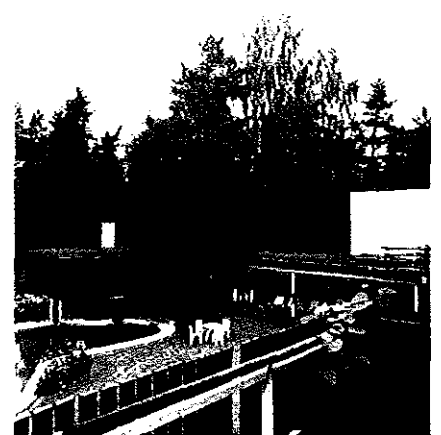
Alvar Aalto's Living Masterpiece in Finland

By Nicholas Fox Weber



IMAGINE VISITING 27 rue de Fleurus when Gertrude Stein was at home. You wouldn't just see a Paris apartment whose walls were blanketed with Matisse and Picassos; you would meet the person whose friendships and outlook were encapsulated in the canvases that surrounded her. Consider what it might have been like to drop in at Fallingwater when Mr. and Mrs. Edgar J. Kaufmann were sitting down for dinner. The sweeping terraces and snug interior nooks of Frank Lloyd Wright's cantilevered house over a waterfall would not have struck you so much as line and form as the setting of a family's everyday existence. These places, after all, weren't only aesthetic compendiums and milestones in the development of twentieth-century taste. Above all they were people's

In the late 1930s, the combination of Alvar Aalto's talents and Maire and Harry Gullichsen's patronage resulted in the creation of Villa Mairea in Noormarkku, Finland. Free from foreign architectural influence and considered a modern masterpiece when it was built, the house has an open plan and an indoor-outdoor arrangement that fully merges the building and landscape. ABOVE: Behind the large windows of the entrance façade—built of black slate, teak and whitewashed brick—are the living room and library. BELOW LEFT: According to Maire Gullichsen—who along with Aalto was one of the founders of the gallery Artek—the main entrance has an abstract "tree-shaped canopy carried by wooden pillars." BELOW RIGHT: The courtyard's grass-covered traditional log sauna.



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homes. They reflect needs and passions; they offer biography.

To be received at Villa Mairea by Maire Gullichsen is comparable to having visited those other gems of modernism when their original residents were alive. Mrs. Gullichsen isn't just the inhabitant of the house, she is its patron. Her vision and values were in ways as seminal to the development of Mairea as were the views of its architect, Alvar Aalto.

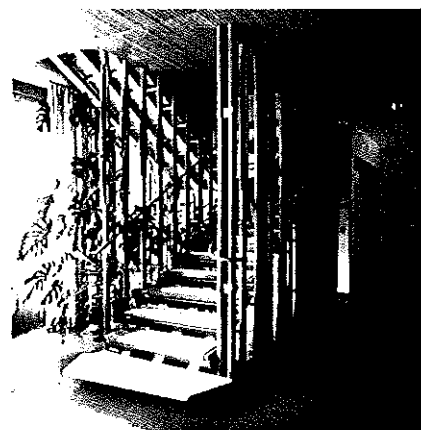
And it was in large part her and her husband's energetic, unwavering support in this and other projects that enabled Aalto to realize his ideas and spread them to the rest of the world.

As a young woman from a prosperous Finnish family, Maire Gullichsen studied art in Paris with Fernand Léger. When she returned to Helsinki to attend the Art Academy of Finland, she found the education there to be "uninspiring and conventional," so in 1934 she and two of her friends established the Free Art School as a breeding ground for progressive ideas and modern methods.

The school became a mecca for artistic pioneers. From Nils-Gustav Hahl, Maire Gullichsen heard of the young Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. Other architects admired the bold simplicity of the buildings he had done in Jyväskylä and the rhythmic planes of the Tuberculosis Sanatorium he had completed in Paimio in 1933. The town library he had designed in Viipuri in 1935 had gained attention for its crisp modern exterior and grandly sweeping, sculptural interior spaces. Because of his pioneering furniture designs—such as

molded plywood chairs, and the stackable bentwood stools that are today used around the world—Aalto had already garnered considerable recognition outside of his native land. But if specialists and foreigners knew his work, Aalto was not yet a name on everybody's lips in Finland. When Hahl, a good friend of Aalto's, received inquiries from abroad about where to buy the architect's furniture, he had no solution. Aalto himself rarely answered the mail.

Shortly after she had first learned of Aalto, Maire Gullichsen went with her husband, Harry, to buy furniture for their Helsinki home. When asking about a chair she admired, she again heard the architect's name. Soon thereafter, Mrs. Gullichsen was talking with Hahl about her desire to open an art gallery. He proposed that they sell furniture by Alvar Aalto and his wife, Aino, also an architect, and



ABOVE: In the open-plan space, the entrance leads directly to the living room. Next to the fireplace is a large still life by Juan Gris. Within the spacious interior is an array of objects—Finnish furniture, French and Italian artworks and Moroccan handwoven carpets—collected by the Gullichsens. At rear, an oil by Massimo Campigli. On the wall, at right, is a wooden relief by Alvar Aalto (top, circa 1960). ABOVE RIGHT: The linear use of wood—on the staircase and throughout the house—unifies the design, while the repetition of tree forms links outdoors and indoors. RIGHT: Maire Gullichsen at Villa Mairea.

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he took the Gullichsens to meet them. They admired the Aaltos' house, and they all had lots to talk about. Aalto was also a painter, and he shared Mrs. Gullichsen's taste for Picasso, Braque, Léger and other artists then working in Paris. They agreed to collaborate, and in December 1935 Aino and Alvar Aalto, Maire Gullichsen and Nils-Gustav Hahl founded Artek. The name combined *art* and *technic*. Artek was to be "a center for modern furniture and house fittings, exhibitions of art and industrial art." Since its inception, the firm has been responsible for exporting Aalto's designs for furniture, vases and lighting fixtures—as well as other exemplars of modern Finnish craftsmanship—all over the world. It has also imported fine contemporary art and furnishings into Finland.

The Aaltos and the Gullichsens became close friends. Shortly after the founding of Artek, Harry Gullichsen, head of the forestry firm A. Ahlström, commissioned Aalto to design a pulp mill and workers' housing for his company. The project helped make the architect's reputation as a designer for industry. Then Mr. Gullichsen arranged for Aino and Alvar Aalto to do the interior of the Savoy Restaurant, completed in Helsinki in 1937. That undertaking redefined the modern urban dining experience. The Savoy, as gracious as it is sleek, demonstrated that what could be streamlined could also embellish life. Every design nuance of the interior is a paean to contemporary elegance: the hanging lamps, the wooden latticework shutters and grills, the free-form service table and rolling carts, the businesslike yet luxurious chairs and the free-form "Savoy" glass vases that have since been multiplied worldwide. The work of both Aino and Alvar Aalto increasingly achieved warmth and opulence in a new vocabulary free of reference to historical form or any other location. No wonder that Alvar Aalto, and Artek, began to receive more

and more commissions for factories, schools, libraries and other buildings—and that in 1937 the Gullichsens asked Aalto to design their house.

Aalto was not yet forty years old, and the Gullichsens were ten years younger, with three children under the age of ten. They wanted a house large enough for bringing up a family and for entertaining. The dining room should comfortably seat at least twenty people. The children should have somewhere to play undisturbed when their parents were giving a big party. The family required a large library, and Maire Gullichsen wanted a studio. Above all, they wanted a close connection with nature.

The Gullichsens needed to live near the Ahlström headquarters in Noormarkku, not far from the Finnish city of Pori. The spot on which they set Mairea was on a slope a short walk from where Maire's grandfather, founder of the firm, and her uncle had already built large, imposing residences. Politics as well as aesthetics figured deeply in the Gullichsens'

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thinking. Despite their wish to have a big house to accommodate their growing family and art collection, they were deeply concerned with social equality. The conclusion was that Aalto's design for them should be experimental in nature, an opportunity to work toward standardization of certain ideas that would pertain to the construction of houses of all sizes for people of different economic backgrounds. So in combining various materials and attempting pioneering innovations in design, Aalto could work out ideas that would

nourish a range of his architectural forays from that point forward, and not merely provide luxury for a prosperous couple.

Aalto constructed Mairea of brick and concrete. He covered the elevations with wood—teak and Finnish pine—or with stone slabs or straw. He developed an unusual ventilation system, for which pine strips act as filters distributing purified air evenly throughout the entire space. He worked out new ideas of insulation, using, in some places, thick slabs of cellular concrete. He invented movable exterior walls that in summer can be opened to the outside.

Aalto also gave domestic architecture a freedom of form it had rarely enjoyed before. The ideas would work for the Gullichsens, but they could in time also serve the larger population. That meant not just details of construction and design but, most important of all, the espousal of variety rather than uniformity. The result of Aalto and the Gullichsens' open, life-embracing approach has a look of change and vitality more than of permanence and stasis. At Villa Mairea, there is a sense of ongoing motion, of the synchronism of human needs and the interplay of cultures.

When you arrive at the villa you know that you are about to enter one of the best-known architect-designed houses of our century, but you feel in no way as if you are entering a Statement or a Masterpiece.

The entrance is hard to distinguish from its surroundings. The supporting columns are untreated, slender tree trunks banded together. The atmosphere isn't one of humanity conquering nature—announcing itself triumphantly against the landscape with pediment or portico—but rather of working in tandem with it. You walk through a friendly, human-scale door and face a balustrade that repeats the treelike forms. Inside and outside, man and nature, shelter and openness: All are linked.

The experience of Villa Mairea is

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an encounter with a multitude of levels and materials, with generous walls of glass and snug enclosures, with space that flows from open areas to private chambers. It is like a sojourn through the natural landscape. Unlike so much domestic architecture of our century, it doesn't reduce or confine life into rigid sequence, but allows for it in full diversity. There is Finnish furniture, Moroccan carpets, French paintings and drawings, and a panoply of books and flowers. Like the large Juan Gris that Maire Gullichsen selected as the focus of the main living area, the house exalts the richness of daily life and its objects and movements.

What really dominates, however, is the sense of array. Next to the living room is a conservatory, and with plants on either side of the glass wall, you hardly know whether you are inside or out. Near the fireplace, the upholstered white armchairs designed by Aino Aalto specifically for the house provide ease and comfort as you look in toward the fire or out at the welcoming vista of gardens and walkways surrounding the free-form pool and grass-covered log sauna.

For flexibility in changing spaces and hanging paintings, Aalto designed some of the interior walls to be movable. Because Maire Gullichsen's collection of books has grown, an interior wall was shifted a few years ago so that the library today is bigger than it was originally. On the handsome blond wood desks are piles of paper and family photographs signifying the realities of full and happy lives, not posed or contrived order.

Villa Mairea was a turning point in Aalto's career. Like so many projects resulting from the Gullichsens' patronage, it has contributed immeasurably to the elevation of its architect's reputation from relative obscurity to the forefront of modern design. But it is a tribute to something even larger than the history of design. Rather than imposing control over life and its accumulations, Villa Mairea accommodates and celebrates it. □