of soul and sanctuary
Eminent Finnish architect and father of Nordic Modernism, Alvar Aalto’s “radical compositional technique” is the pictorial collage, and no Aalto design demonstrates this practice more completely than Maire and Harry Gullichsen’s Villa Mairea. Not only does this approach epitomize his career-defining pursuit of an architecture that is at once intrinsically democratic, existing in service to humanity, pleasing, playful, and above all representative of pluralist sensitivities, but through it he translates this abstraction to the visceral realm; to the intimate experience of space created by this philosophy.

This is not a composition of glass, stone, and steel, as a visitor who despises functionalism might imagine; it is a composition of houses, flags, floodlights, flowers, fireworks, happy people, and clean tablecloths. - AA

pictorial collage = multivalency
In his essay “Between Nature and Culture: Reflections on the Villa Mairea,” Richard Weston declares that the task of forging local identities that are neither provincial nor nostalgic will be one of the major cultural challenges of the 21st century.” (Weston, 75) In architecture, he argues, “the twentieth century has left no more pertinent legacy than the work of Alvar Aalto; and in Aalto’s work no building... more pregnant with possibilities than the Villa Mairea." (Weston, 75) The fact that over sixty years spanned the divide between the construction of the villa and the year Weston’s essay was published is evidence of the endurance of Aalto’s democratic and humane philosophy. What was important to Aalto as a renegade Modernist and key architect of Finnish identity post-separation from Russia has continued to occupy the creative conscience of architects around the world and has become increasingly integral to the nature of design produced in a world that is ever-shrinking. Not only is globalization a growing concern, but so is the making of a global mono-culture and its inevitable repercussions: diminishing local identities which result in a decreased connection to the immediacy of the natural environment.

While the villa is celebrated for Aalto’s pluralist incorporation of a multitude of traditional, Modern and international influences, Aalto’s most decisive move is to create immediate local connection through the incorporation and representation of the Finnish forest: spatially, symbolically and decoratively. This results in a design collage that is not only ecologically sensitive to place, and thereby enhancing of “the emotional attachment to particular landscapes” (Orr, 24), but one that also acknowledges that “we are part of the larger order of things and that we have an obligation to act harmoniously within those larger patterns,” (Orr, 23) at once celebrating connection to the infinite and the genius loci.

The resonance between the interior and surrounding forest is surely sensed by most who experience the joy of walking through its ever-shifting spaces. (Weston, 75)
Aalto’s Villa Mairea is as much emblematic of Modernism as it is not. The collage techniques Aalto applies result in the articulation of space that defies uniformity dictated by standard Modernist practice. Indeed, with it, Aalto calls into question the very “principles of modern architecture such as constructional honesty, appropriateness of materials, congruence between inside and outside and the renunciation of ornament” (Nerdinger,17).

In spite of the fact that he embraces the subversion of standard Modernist practice, the cumulative result of his freedom-finding in form and space by “decentering space... [and] articulating new, non-hierarchical compositions” (Weston,75) in the Villa Mairea, is consistent with Martin Heidegger’s discussion of the fundamental project of existence: “being, dwelling and thinking.” (Heidegger,345). The villa’s repeated “L” shape nests in its core the dining room; the life-place of the Finnish home. It is the space of “seasonal, religious, national or familial shared meals” (Heidegger,25), and acts as the locus of activity and main connection to other spaces. Through the connections which spring forth from this centre, the Villa demonstrates a rootedness to place, ritual, and life.

Aalto’s Modernism
undermines cartesian logic

disdain for formal practice

rejected artificial architectural rhythms

incorporates historical references

deliberately deregulated space

employs radical modernist technique: collage

Modernism
ruled by cartesian logic

dictates a formal criteria

clear structural and material rhythms in space

anti-referential regulated space

requires a unity of form and space

*Only when the structural elements –the outcome of logic— are tinged with the art of play...[is] the architect on the right path to enrich life.*
Emerging from Aalto’s subversion of the criteria-referenced strategies of Modern design, are the shades of his politics; Aalto intentionally sought to divorce his practice from the mechanism of control that typical Modernism was. Rather than endeavouring to create structures that reflected the “homogenous and monotonous architecture of the state” (Lefebvre, 179)—as has been the legacy of the Modernist movement—he sought to emancipate individuality and celebrate the many dimensions of human life; to provide design that operated on a functional as well as spiritual—and decidedly humane—level.

Through works such as the Villa Mairea, Aalto employs an “anarchically free treatment of forms and materials” and thus represents “a space for the uninhibited development of human beings and the notion of freedom” (Nerdinger, 20). One prominent feature of the Villa Mairea that reflects the anarchy inherent in his concept, is Aalto’s disruption of the structural column grid. Aalto disrupted coherent order by varying the materiality, but also effectively challenged structural clarity, as a result, the “overall rhythmic development in which distinctions between structural and non-structural elements are blurred, if not actually obscured.” (Weston, 71). While also blurring ones spatial experience, this articulates the connection to the forest surrounding the villa and enhances the human-nature relationship posited by the design.

The paradoxical concept of protecting people from architecture is the true legacy of Alvar Aalto’s humane architecture, his human Modernism (Nerdinger).
It is quite fitting that when translated to English, the Finnish word *aalto* means “wave” (Nerdinger, 20), for, not only does he subvert the prevailing rectilinear language of Modernism and impose a sort of spatial exuberance that challenges its reliance on regimen and regularity, but, he infuses the Villa Mairea with strategies that both disorient and enfold the observer. Richard Weston maintains that “anyone who experiences the interior of the villa can feel themselves at home, the moving centre of a richly articulated space, which seems, like its model forest, to be structured around the human subject.” He further claims that “in Aalto’s hands, the post-Cubist decentring of space was a deeply human project, enabling him to articulate new, non-hierarchical compositions to serve democratic ends” (Weston, 75). It is thus impossible to classify Aalto as a tried and true Modernist or even to declare his kind of Modernism intrinsically Finnish; it is humanist. He is, as Goran Schildt labelled him, Modernism’s “secret opponent” (Nerdinger, 9)—subtly re-humanizing a practice that had focussed too heavily on function and abstraction and denied the essential human experience of memory, of place, and of soul.

If we believe that striated space is the space of order, regimen and control, and smooth space an emergent, chaotic and expressive force that challenges the status quo with the appropriation and morphing of its axioms to fuel a new purpose, then we might view Aalto and his work as having “smooth” characteristics, like a wildflower growing in a sidewalk gap. Inevitably, fissures form in the hegemony and with them emerge new systems. Perhaps what Aalto’s Villa Mairea is most successful in demonstrating is this fissure in the hegemony of the Modernist conception of space: that every straight line has within it the potential to bend. In the rigid exists the fluid.
citations


