of Soul and sanctuary
alvar aalto’s villa mairea
jessica cullen fall 2009
space
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.

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 is ultimately “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” (Herdeg, 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, but at the same time, Aalto de-centers space via the disruption of the structural column grid. Aalto disrupted coherent order by varying materiality but also effectively challenged structural clarity, and 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 one’s spatial experience, this articulates the connection to the forest surrounding the villa and enhances the human-nature relationship posited by the design.
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 romanizing 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.
space

barcelona pavillion

figure 6

rigidity

fluidity

villa mairea
The emergent effect of Aalto’s subversion of the Modernist Cartesian grid in the development of the Villa Mairea is echoed in the form that arises from it. It is neither resolved, nor complete, nor does it subscribe to “any kind of absolute reference” (de Solas-Morales, 616); instead, reference and meaning thus produced lie in relating—through form-dichotomous forces. It would therefore seem that meaning is continuously produced via fragmented accumulation and association; it is in the continuous reading of the complex and contradictory massing of bodies—the collage that is the Villa Mairea—that one can exhume it. Kenneth Frampton describes the main buildings of the Villa Mairea as a “geologically striated mass” set in juxtaposition to “the irregularly contoured perimeter of the sauna plunge pool” (Frampton, 199). The “metaphorical opposition”, in this case “between artificial and natural form” (Frampton, 199), is part of Aalto’s all-encompassing architectural trope. In this case there exists an opposition between natural and artificial; in another reading, the rustic vernacular of the sauna is set against the “sophisticated tectonic” (Frampton, 200) of the public facade. The “head of the studio” opposes “the tail of the sauna”, while the “wooden siding of public rooms stands in contrast to the white rendering of private areas” (Frampton, 200).

Binary opposition abounds in the Villa Mairea, code and form relate the historical and contemporary; global and local; male and female; natural and artificial; open and closed. Form therefore becomes the dialogic relationship between binaries. One might go so far as to call it “rhizomatic”, in the Deleuzian sense, but perhaps the conditions and connections that are produced are static, representing fixed meaning and operating only in a purely symbolic, coded, and temporal sense.

The “irregularly contoured perimeter of the sauna plunge pool” (Frampton, 199), for instance, references an organic form, and in the dichotomous relationship between it and the “striated mass” (Frampton, 199) of the main Villa buildings, it certainly operates as such, but it is not a organic. It is symbolic of the organic, but not in itself a natural feature of the site. It remains only a reference. Or does it? Considering the greater scope of the site and situation of the Villa Mairea, it would seem that the sauna plunge pool is actually a figurative step in the generation of the resultant form.
The ‘story’ of the Villa Mairea is thus: cyclical topography morphs into the embryonic form of the sauna plunge pool, which then morphs into the rusticity of the sauna and connecting exterior corridor (a becoming-L shape) which finally morphs into the “sophisticated tectonic” (Frampton, 200) of the main building and public facade. It still operates as representative, but plays a generative, transitional role. In The Trout and the Mountain Stream, Aalto writes that “architecture and its details are connected in a way with biology. They are perhaps like large salmon or trout. They are not born mature... and as the fish eggs’ development to a mature organism requires time, so it also requires time for all that develops and crystallizes in our world of thoughts. Architecture needs this time to an even greater degree than any other creative work” (Frampton, 200).
This same irregular form is referenced in the main entrance canopy, and in the shape of the studio which defines the entrance space below it—signification that is no doubt important. In their irregular shape, they represent and define the transitional space that the entrance zone is; quite literally, the “in-between” (Grosz, 93), the becoming space: becoming-form, or becoming-natural environs. Aalto extends this transition through what Frampton calls the “metonymy of the entrance canopy” (Frampton, 200). Irregular organization of columns under the canopy are trees, the collection, a forest—“a device repeated in the interior stair” (Frampton, 200) and in the irregular placement of columns throughout the interior of the Villa. It is indeed infected by multivalent forest references as columns not only signify the surrounding Finnish forest, but in the various permutations and combinations tectonically reference both Japanese and African assemblages. This ‘infection’ is permitted through the blurring of transitional space and form of the entrance, and suggests the tension inherent in form’s existence: not fixed, ever in transition, ever-shifting, ever-morphing, ever impregnated with new meaning.
The massed L-shape forms of the Villa articulate this idea of openness and transition with respect to the idea that the L-shape itself is unresolved, permissive of new opportunity. The form which defines the dining hall and exterior hearth below--nested between the entrance corridor and the crux of the main building L-shape--is particularly interesting in this regard. If viewed in classicist terms—form as representative of body—we might view this rectangular space, the lower section of which is marked by an external loggia, as remarkably feminine. Renja Suominen-Kokkonen argues that the Aaltos were particularly influenced by their honeymoon trip to Italy where they were exposed to Fra Angelico’s Cortona Annunciation. In his depiction of the Immaculate Conception, Angelico places the Virgin in a space defined by an exterior logia, surrounded by a garden ground space (Suominen-Kokkonen, 83). Suominen-Kokkonen argues that the Aalto’s borrow the power of this formal arrangement, this feminization of the transition space, in their creation of form that fuses with a natural environment—in particular in the cloaked entrance and logia that connects the vernacular of the past with the limitless possibilities of the future, and the smooth of nature with the striation of form. Entrances are thus significantly feminine, they are, like the Virgin body, the “receptacle of incarnation... open and closed, enigmatic and familiar” (Suominen-Kokkonen, 86). They receive as well as produce limitless possibility.

This is the essence of the form in the Villa Mairea—if we return to Aalto’s discussion of the egg and the fish—it is a dynamic form, which we see evolve in plan on the page, and which posits new possibilities in the “typology” (Vidler) of the two formal entrances. Aalto’s domestic masterpiece is thus perhaps not to be classed with the functionalism that Eisenmen presents as being “no more than a late phase of humanism” (Eisenmen, 237). It is thus that we recognize that the multivalent qualities of the Villa Mairea, in its collage-like presentation, are not mere representations of signs and symbols, but rather, exist as a “text” (Eisenmen, 11), abounding in layered meaning produced by formal relationships, and in this form, suggestive of new possibilities, while never pretending conclusion. Like Shakespeare, Aalto is a “supreme ambiguist” (Venturi, 20).
Difficult to categorize, and the intricacies of his works often difficult to articulate, it is no coincidence that Aalto’s productive life coincided with “the most consistently agitated period of Finland’s existence” (Pelkonen, 201). This is not unlike Shakespeare—another “ambiguist” (Venturi, 20)—whose most complex work was produced at a time of significant social unrest in England (works such as The Tempest reflect this).

John F. Kennedy’s Special Consultant on the Arts August Heckscher approaches a plausible explanation for this phenomenon as for him, “rationalism proves inadequate in any period of upheaval... A feeling of paradox allows seemingly dissimilar things to exist side by side, their very incongruity suggesting a kind of truth” (Venturi, 20). The architecture that Aalto produces, and this includes his pre-war works such as the Villa Mairea, therefore operates as a “floating signifier” which Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen identifies as being a tactic embodying “Aalto’s ultimate geopolitical endgame” (Pelkonen, 181). No work represents this duality more than the Villa Mairea—it is, perhaps, Aalto’s endgame in its infancy.
Though seemingly purporting a kind of bucolic bourgeois Finnish identity, it is essential that we consider, in light of this discussion of embodiment in architecture, the forces that produced the Villa Mairea, as well as the larger “geopolitical” (Pelkonen) or “biopolitical” (Thacker) organism of which it is a part. Having been constructed in the late 1930s—in a Europe on the cusp of another world war, in a Finland newly emerged from its own political strife and civil war, which Aalto himself was involved in (Ray, 8)—it is representative of a Finland very much in transition. A Finland ensconced in what Eugene Thacker might call a “juridical no-man’s-land of the state of exception” (Thacker, 16) where modernism was no longer sufficient to house the experience of the unresolveable duality of human life. Since architecture embodies the spirit of its time, the temporal zeitgeist of human existence, we must view the Villa Mairea as embodying this oscillating, emerging identity, this construct in flux which operates like “a baggy pair of pants, holding together all right but constantly rearranging itself every time it tries to sit down” (Hayles, 89); positing at once an international and national quality, historic and modern, natural and artificial. It is more than a frivolous commission solicited by the elite Gullichsen family. It is an embodiment of Aalto’s political and social advancement and by extension, Finland’s development as a nation on the Western world stage. According to Pelkonen, “architecture is here made to transcend actual conditions and contingencies, and it is exactly the ambiguity of meaning so created that reflects Finland’s political goals: to transcend Russia’s political influence and become, at least in people’s imaginations, a politically ambiguous neutral zone with no ideological attributes” (Pelkonen, 196). The Villa’s ambiguity of meaning (due to its multiplicity of references) produces this neutrality—it is everything at once; neutral and saturated.

Viewed independent of this history, independent of Aalto’s architecture’s role as geopolitical agent, the Villa is at the very least a multivalent body, a schizophrenic body, and while the world was the stage for Aalto’s architecture to act out Finnish nation-making (or an antithetical form of nation-making, whatever the case may be), the Villa itself is a stage which may be considered not only a narrative of the development of Finnish architecture, from primeval, to historic, to modern (read international) as previously discussed, but also a narrative of the bourgeois values it contains. Operating as it does within a specific vernacular for a specific client (the Gullichsens), the Villa also has much to say about the bodies it contains—specifically the male and female bodies it both embodies, reaffirms and constructs in its being.
The position of the dining room in relation to the whole has been discussed previously, serving as it does to be “a source of stability in the life of the household” (Herdeg, 29). Amidst the turmoil of change enacted by the development of the building form (primeval, to historic, to modern) the dining room sits impassive, stolid, and enclosed in a significantly rectangular shape, which Klaus Herdeg describes as being “a quasi-independent object inserted into the larger of the two arms of the L shape of the main mass” (Herdeg, 29). The rectangle of the dining room is resolved and sits in opposition to all other formative L shapes which are, essentially, becoming-forms. Herdeg further asserts that the “notion of object—connoting singularity or special purpose—is suggested by an elaborate orchestration of mutually reinforcing architectural events—formal, functional and symbolic” (Herdeg, 29). The most significant symbolic assertion made by Aalto’s placement of the dining room and organization of the life within it, is the privileging of specific positions within the room.

Herdeg describes these two positions—in keeping with traditional familial arrangement—“the supreme position, the farthest from the [interior] entry, corresponds to the head of the table, while the nearest to the entry, opposite the head of the table, corresponds to the next most important position” (Herdeg, 30). Obviously, the father occupies the supreme position furthest from the interior entry, while the mother occupies that nearest it; in close proximity to the service wing so that she might oversee the meal functions and preparation. This arrangement is not unusual, but the particular qualities of the view enjoyed by each position is worthy of discussion as they reaffirm the gender roles of the bodies that occupy them. Whereas the mother can, “looking straight ahead along the entry-dining axis... contemplate her husband silhouetted against the dining room’s asymmetrical fireplace... [and] through the window... see the sauna, the pool, the garden court, and the pine forest—things natural or traditional” (Herdeg, 32), the father “is the only one to see straight along the axis of the table... and the room through a series of receding planes” (Herdeg, 30). He can see who enters the house, the pine woods in front of the house—by means of a clerestory window—“and perhaps even the other side of the little valley” (Herdeg, 30). Furthermore, depending on the time of day, “the glass of the living room might even reflect the pool and the forest beyond” (Herdeg, 32). Clearly, this highly specific value structure—that of man as head of household and woman as fixed, contained presence, is embodied in the design and allocation of viewing privilege in the dining room of the Villa Mairea. Symbolically, this suggests that although the forces of time and history and nation-making change the nature of Finnish life, one thing remains unchanged: the family structure.

This can be further explored in a return to a discussion of the Aalto’s adoption of Alberti’s intimations regarding the patriarchal control of space, and entry as female. Renja Suominen-Kokkonen maintains that “the control of women and the practice of maintaining their purity.
can be understood in terms of woman being literally regarded as an entrance, and therefore this social route of entry and exit must be symbolically guarded (S-K, 86).

The Aalto’s adoption of Fra Angelica’s female-referenced loggia (previously discussed) that serves to connect the exterior garden with the interior, as well as the placement of the man at the head of the table nearest the exterior entrance introduced by this loggia, is significant. Entry is thus controlled by the male head of household both from the garden space to his rear, and from the main entry way, which he also oversees from his omnipotent dining position. Via this privileging operation, and architecture responding to and reproducing cultural norms, this space both produces and reinforces gender roles and further posits the containment and control of the female typical of this period in history.

Though the Villa Mairea celebrates the mutable Finnish identity emerging in pre-World War II Finland, one part if its identity remains fixed in its form, and in the effect this form has in reproducing experiences for its occupants. All other identity, it seems, in this world of geo-political shifting, is to be toyed with, but the family structure remains untouchable, complete, and intractable.
technique
In “Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science” Alberto Perez-Gomez declares that humanity has “forgotten his fragility and his capacity for wonder, generally assuming that all the phenomena of this world, from water or fire to perception or human behaviour, have been ‘explained’.” (Perez-Gomez, 468). This, a result of the unquenchable human desire to rationalize existence through science, to explain, and to understand it in its totality; an act that is nevertheless futile given the continual upheaval of life in its perpetual state of “almost-fell” (Kelly, 79). In this search for rationality, the poetic—that which in human consciousness provides space for the unknowable—experiences a vastly diminished role, standing in stark contrast to Sappho’s “tekton”, the carpenter-poet (Frampton, 521). In order to reassert the poetic dimension of human life lived, embodied and performed in the tectonic, in the metaphor of life that imbues the act of building, the architect must therefore revitalize this, the “reconciliatory mission” (Perez-Gomez, 468). The architect must stand, as Walt Whitman’s “full-grown poet” stands, between “the Soul of man, proud, jealous, and unreconciled” and “Nature (the round impassive globe, with all its / shows of day and night).”

If any twentieth century architect sought to position himself thus, none did so as effectively as Aalto. Via the agency of architecture, Aalto sought to reinsert the human into the complex system of life—to free the Finnish soul, and with it, the human soul from the trappings of nationality. Performing at once as a geopolitical agent, and an “architect of social and cultural communication” (Pelkonen, 182), Aalto understood that “to articulate, to make or break connections between objects, between ideas, between objects and ideas, takes power” (MacGregor Wise, 83). The political position he created for himself on the Western world stage, by recognising that “art was power and it was linked to power” the “Finn without borders” (Pelkonen, 197) thus furthered this philosophical purpose to reinsert human life into the complexity of biological life and to free human life therewith. He maintained that “by basing
To be dehumanized, according to Aalto, is to not fit into the system of life--the system which narrates a freedom of form and experience via a multitude of permutations and combinations inherent in it. Freedom, is the essential quality of nature; the “almost-falling into chaos” (Kelly, 80), the imbalanced balance of the natural world. Aalto harnesses the power of nature in his architecture to provide a space for the free development and movement of human beings. This is reflected in the greater strokes of his work and in the Villa Mairea in particular, which slips in and out of modernist form, and perches precarious on the edge of chaos. Understanding that nature is complex, and that nature is an assemblage of disparate parts in precarious relationship and balance, the Villa is, in its totality, an assemblage, “a collection of several buildings assembled over time” (Weston, 66). Not only is this assembly addressed in its form, but in the cacophonous materiality of the Villa itself—from the materiality of its assembled buildings, to the multivalent language of the columns which fill its space with “a permanent state of dialogue or contrast” (Nerdinger, 18-19). This continuous dialogue exemplifies the Villa’s inherent formal, spatial and symbolic freedom, which Klaus Herdeg believes provides one with the “means by which to construct one’s own world” (Herdeg, 35) and thus precisely fulfills Aalto’s freeing imperative, his “life enriched with play” (Nerdinger, 17), his loosening of tectonic control in order to produce “vibrancy and tension... [in] its contradictions and inconsistencies” (Nerdinger, 19) life in its contradictions and intricacies.

We must recognize this freedom in the form of the Villa, in the looseness of space punctuated by column materiality that is both symbolic and cacophonous, a tectonic connection to the forest, and the natural world, as Aalto’s biological positioning of life within and amongst life-complex.


Figure 1: Aalto, Alvar. (Sauna and Plunge Pool). “Villa Mairea.” Finland: Noormarkku.

Figure 2: Early sketch of “Integral House.” Toronto: Shim-Sutcliffe Architects, 2008.
