THE SEARCH FOR A CONTEMPORARY FINNISH ARCHITECTURE
Adaptations of the vernacular tupa in the oeuvre of Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen, and Alvar Aalto

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Abstract

The impact of vernacular architecture on Finnish architects in the early 20th century has been associated with the search for a national style and the construction of a national identity. However, the adaptation of the vernacular cannot only be seen from this nationalist point of view. Other reasons must be emphasized as well when explaining the exploration of the rural Finnish periphery since the late 19th century and the related interest in the vernacular building heritage. The need to find a contemporary architectural language that reflects modern life in an industrialized country, the attempt to escape the facade architecture of historicism and to achieve an architecture based on the requirements of life, the longing to return to a unity between nature, architecture and humans all explain the increasing interest in anonymous buildings of the periphery. The vernacular is understood as an alternative reservoir of forms and concepts. The discourse in 20th century Finland is reflected in the values attributed to vernacular buildings by the protagonists of the centre and forms the basis for their translation into modern architecture. In the process of adaptation, architectural qualities of the vernacular and international modern tendencies are combined. At the turn of the century, e.g. the vernacular tupa – the main room of the Finnish farmstead – is translated into the spatial concept living hall that originated from 19th century English country house architecture. In the 1930s-1950s, the tupa is used as a point of reference for an open floor plan according to a space continuum. The adaptation of the vernacular must be seen in the context of a reciprocal exchange of ideas, an international discourse about the vernacular throughout Europe and North America that Finnish architects participated in. Vernacularism must be understood as part of an ambiguous architectural modernity.

Keywords: 20th century Finnish architecture – vernacularism – ambiguous modernity – Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen – Alvar Aalto

The discovery of rural Finland

Since the 19th century – starting with the release of the national epic *Kalevala* (a compilation of folk poetry collected by Elias Lönnrot in Karelia and published in

1835) – the interest in rural culture increased in Finland. The exploration of the periphery, supported by the emergence of a corresponding infrastructure connecting urban centres with rural areas lead to an awareness of the vernacular building heritage. Rural Finland became a popular motif in the arts and vernacular architecture – medieval fieldstone-churches, fortresses and farmsteads – were featured as part of an idealized rural life.

Research trips to the periphery initiated a scientific documentation of the vernacular building heritage. In their application for a travelling scholarship, the architects Yrjö Blomstedt and Victor Sucksdorff emphasize the role of architectural research in East-Karelia for further developments in Finnish architecture. The following travelling report, published as a two-volume book with a large picture section is an attempt to explore vernacular architecture systematically[1]. Based on drawings, floor plans and photographs produced during the journey in Karelia, Blomstedt develops a typology of the buildings and their historical genesis from the simplest form of shelter, the koti (cabin) to the two-storey farmstead typical for the region (Blomstedt, & Sucksdorff, 1900-01).

Attempts like Blomstedt's, even though he uses quotations from the *Kalevala* to back up his development history of Karelian architecture, must be seen in the context of a differentiation that took place in the academic practice in the late 19th century. Various disciplines like historic building research and preservation, ethnology, archaeology and museology were established as independent research fields in Finland at the time. The museumization of rural culture, initiated by the founding of the first Finnish open-air museum on Seurasaari island in Helsinki must be seen in this context, too[2]. Following a preservational agenda, vernacular buildings that were threatened by modernization, e.g. the Niemelä farmstead (1786/1844) were translocated from the periphery to Helsinki in order to form a lively architectural ensemble on the island setting.

[1] Yrjö Blomstedt took the leading part in publicizing the results of the research trip. Already in the 1890s, he wrote several articles for journals (e.g. *Teknikern* and *Suomen Teollisuuslehti*) about the journey including architectural drawings and photographs. In 1902, the book was published in German.

[2] The open-air museum on Seurasaari island was opened in 1909 as a section of the newly founded *Kansallismuseo* (National Museum of Finland) in Helsinki.

The intention of the founders was to assemble building types from all parts of Finland.

The search for the other

The exploration of rural Finland and the related appropriation of the vernacular architecture through journeys, artworks, research and material translocations can be described as an inner exoticism that is not directed at another foreign, i.e. non-European culture, but at the other within one's own territory; both unknown and familiar, exoticized and source of authentic cultural heritage (Krasny, 2010, p. 41). The otherness of one's own periphery represents an alternative pool of forms and concepts that were adaptable in order to achieve a new, i.e. contemporary architectural language for Finland.

(1) A building tradition of one's own

Vernacularism – the appropriation and adaptation of the vernacular – has been associated with the search for a national style and the construction of a national identity. As an expression of emerging nationalism in the late 19th century and the related need to define oneself architecturally as a nation, the adaptation of the vernacular is often understood as a catalyser for Finnish national ambitions. The historic and political situation in turn-of-the-century Finland – the struggle for political and cultural independence from the Russian Empire and the founding of the first Finnish nation state in 1917 – leads to an equation of vernacularism and search for Finnishness (Korvenmaa, 1999. Wäre, 1993).

The term vernacular summarizes the essence of what was projected onto the anonymous architecture of the periphery (Rudofsky, 1964. Preston Blier, 2006)[3]. Vernacular means nativeness, a home-grown architecture that can be located. At the same time, it is a-historical, because it is not based on an academic superstructure like an international canon of styles. Following the concept of

[3] The term vernacular was not used in Finland at that time. Rural architecture was either named after its region of origin, e.g. Karelian architecture (Aalto, 1941), or the Finnish word *kansanomainen* (folkloristic) was used.

invented tradition (Hobsbawm, & Ranger, 1983), the vernacular is understood as one's own building tradition due to its peripheral location. Urban architecture, on the other hand, is seen as spoiled by foreign influences, in the case of Finland by Swedish, Russian and German building traditions, due to its centrality[4]. The periphery fulfils the role of an imaginary region (Moravánszky, 2002) where the desired nation as an imagined 'protonation' was preserved in form of vernacular architecture.

The Finnish pavilion by Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen at the Paris World's Fair (1900) is one case exemplifying how vernacular references can be interpreted as one's own building tradition. The environment of the World's Fair as an arena of friendly competition between nations already promotes a nationalist reading of the pavilion's vernacular elements, a church-like building structure with granite portals referring to medieval fieldstone-churches and ornamental decorations deriving from the Finnish flora and fauna. The pavilion as a political architecture aims at external self-portrayal and therefore can be read in relation to Finnish national aspirations at the turn of the century.

Although the historical background of the Finnish national movement cannot be disregarded as a driving force of vernacularism, it is necessary to take other factors into account. The adaptation of vernacular architecture can no longer be seen only in connection with nationalism. Neither can it be limited to the period of the national movement (1890-1917) especially in housing where vernacular references can be found throughout the 20th century. As for villas and summerhouses, the reasons behind the adaptation must be re-examined. Most of these buildings hardly gained any broader public recognition apart from a narrow circle of professionals. Hence, they cannot be interpreted as an expression of a national style. Due to their private character, however, they function as an experimental field for new architectural tendencies in which vernacular references had a place. In addition, the adaptation is not limited to

[4] Until 1809, Finland was under Swedish control and only after that became a part of the Russian Empire as a relatively autonomous grand duchy. The senate square in Helsinki with the cathedral, senate building, national library, university and town hall was planned in the 19th century by German architect Carl Ludwig Engel in form of an internationally widespread classicism.

vernacular architecture from Finland, but includes anonymous building traditions from abroad. Alvar Aalto's work, for example, shows a huge impact of vernacular architecture from Italy (Micheli, 2014).

Other reasons must be emphasized when explaining the exploration of rural Finnish periphery since the late 19th century and the related interest in the vernacular building heritage. The need to find a contemporary architectural language that reflects modern life in an industrialized country, the attempt to escape the facade architecture of historicism and to achieve an architecture based on the requirements of life, the longing to return to a unity between nature, architecture and humans all explain the increasing interest in anonymous architecture of the periphery. Eliel Saarinen (1931: 118), for instance, talks about the need to find '*the fundamental form of the time*'. Images of the vernacular besides the attribution as one's own building tradition were created in relation to the discourse about a contemporary architecture in 20th century Finland.

(2) The unity of nature, architecture and humans

In the dichotomy of centre and periphery, the first is characterized as urban and industrialized, a place where the contact to nature is lost. Rural areas, on the other hand, are seen as a reservoir of pre-industrialized times, a place where a life close to nature has survived. The painting *Loft-barns at Korpilahti* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela depicts the close relationship between nature and vernacular architecture imagined by the protagonists of the centre. The two buildings are embedded in the landscape, their foundation melds into the rocky underground and the wooden log-construction is corresponding with the forest in the background. Through the choice of local building materials the architecture is connected to the surrounding landscape (Figure 1).

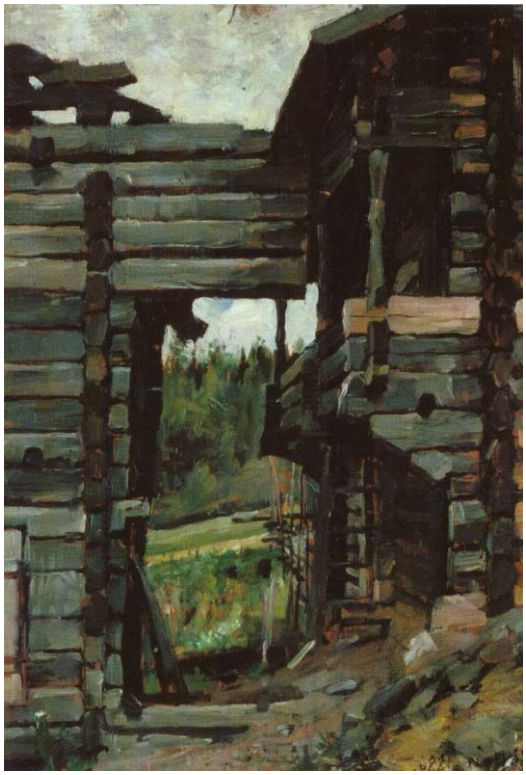

Figure 1. *Loft-barns at Korpilahti*, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, 1886, oil / canvas, 36 x 27 cm, private collection. (Becker, 2002, p. 43)

One of the images projected onto the vernacular, as shown in Gallen-Kallela's painting, is the unity of nature, architecture and humans. In his article, *Karelian architecture* Alvar Aalto states that the value of the region's architecture lies in a desirable, harmonious relationship between humans and their natural and built environment[5].

> The role played by external influences here [Karelia] has been exceptionally small. By this I mean that the region has largely been left to fend for itself and its construction has therefore been dictated directly by natural conditions. Qualities, forms, and methods arising from the native people themselves and the distinctive natural features of the region can therefore be found there in an exceptionally unadulterated form. Karelian architecture thus has special value as a tool for analyzing ways in which

[5] The article was published in the daily newspaper *Uusi Suomi* (02 November 1941).

> human life can be harmoniously reconciled with nature at our latitudes. (Aalto, 1941, p. 117)

Important aspects representing a widespread perception of the vernacular building heritage are mentioned in the passage above. The qualities of the vernacular derive from its peripheral localisation. The significance of architecture as a mediator between humans and their natural surroundings is emphasized. And finally, the periphery, unaffected by industrialization and urbanization, is seen as a reservoir of architectural concepts that are adaptable for a contemporary architecture. The attributed image of unity reflects the demand for a nature-orientated way of building that was voiced e.g. within the discourse about the suburban villa in Finland.

(3) Functionality, Simplicity and Truthfulness

Vernacular architecture, its construction and placement is understood as a sole consequence of climatic-topographic conditions and the use of local materials. Rather than academic styles, the natural needs and the requirements of the inhabitants are the starting point for architectural planing (Aalto, 1930, p. 77). The inner organization of the buildings and their exterior result from functional considerations. Based on the assumption of functionalism, Aalto also refers to the vernacular in regard to his call for flexibility and organic growth. The vernacular (Karelian) house is described by Aalto as a cluster of cells that is growing over time with the changing requirements. A building structure should be as flexible as possible. Only then, it is suitable for the fast-changing modern world, according to Aalto (Aalto, 1941, p. 118).

Connected both to the close relationship to nature and the proclaimed functionality are the attributes simplicity and truthfulness which are projected onto the vernacular. Anything unnecessary is omitted from the architecture, because it is planed only in respect to functional considerations. Local building materials, wood and granite are used to their material properties.

> It [Karelian architecture] is forest architecture pure and simple, with wood dominating almost one hundred percent both as a building material and in

> jointing. From the roof, with its strong log structures, to the moving parts of the building, we find timber, which is generally left naked, without the effect of immateriality given by coloring. Timber is used as close as possible in its natural size, according to its own scale. (Aalto, 1941, pp. 117-118)

Vernacular architecture was used as an argument within the discourse about justice of materials. Blomstedt calls the East-Karelian architecture an example of true wooden style (Blomstedt, & Sucksdorff, 1902, p. 114). On another level, the qualities of the vernacular were connected with the demand to escape historicism. The vernacular was seen as an alternative to an architecture with no connection between facade and internal space (Saarinen, 1931, p. 122). It was promoted as a model of true unity of exterior and interior due to its functional planing.

The adaptation of the vernacular

In a process of adaptation, the attributed architectural qualities mentioned above are translated into a contemporary-modern architectural language. Hence, the modern buildings show a conceptual connection to their vernacular references and similarities can be found more on a general level of architectural understanding, e.g. in the handling of materials or the placement in the environment. The adaptation is not an act of copying or citation, it is a transformation that includes international tendencies of the time. International developments in which the vernacular plays an integral part as well, Arts and Crafts Movement, the continental reform movements around 1900, the ideas of an organic architecture all show that vernacularism must be discussed as part of an international ambiguous modernity (Aigner, 2010).

The inclusion of international tendencies, either related to vernacularism or in general is based on a transfer of ideas – not in form of a one-way street from continental Europe to peripheral Finland, but as a reciprocal exchange, an international discourse Finnish architects participated in. The interconnection of

Finnish and international discourses in modernity was based on journeys and personal networks. Finnish critic and architect Sigurd Frosterus, for example, worked in the Weimar office of Henry van de Velde and Alvar Aalto was a member of *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne.*

The internationalized character of exhibitions and the circulation of publications function as an additional place for the Finnish participation. Journals like *Studio, Academy Architecture / Architectural Review, Moderne Bauformen* or *Art et Décoration* were available in Finland, too. Buildings from North America, England, Sweden and Germany were discussed in Finnish magazines, as was Finnish architecture in international publications. In the picture section of Hermann Muthesius' *Das moderne Landhaus und seine innere Ausstattung* (The modern country house and its inner furnishing) Pekka Halonen's studio house and villas by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen are presented next to projects from Great Britain, Germany and Austria (Muthesius, 1905)[6]. Here, Finnish projects are included in the latest developments in housing on an international basis.

Besides the exchange of ideas Muthesius' publication is also an example for the international dimension of vernacularism at the turn of the century. In *Das moderne Landhaus* he names the simple, vernacular town and farmhouse as a model for developing an architecture originated from the requirements of modern time. Muthesius promotes a planing from the interior to the exterior and combines it with criticism of historicist facade architecture (Muthesius, 1905, pp. 3, 7)[7]. Similar demands were voiced by Finnish architects such as Gustaf Strengell, Bertel Jung and Eliel Saarinen (Strengell, 1903. Jung, 1901. Saarinen, 1931).

[6] The picture section includes exterior views of the studio home of Finnish painter Pekka Halonen and of three villas – Villa Sievers, Suur-Merijoki and Villa Miniato – by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen. Interior views only from the three villas by the architects trio with an clear emphasis on the hall

[7] The interconnection of Finland and Germany was strong at the turn of the century. Besides Hermann Muthesius' *Das moderne Landhaus,* his influential book *Das englische Haus Vol. 1-3* (1904/05) was available in Finland. Paul Mebes' *Um 1800* (1918) was widespread, too. In *Um 1800* Mebes calls for a return to pre-industrialized architecture. Projects by Finnish architects were published in German magazines such as *Moderne Bauformen* and *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration.*

The tupa as a spatial concept

The tupa – the main room of the Finnish farmstead – is a combination of living room, kitchen, common- and workplace. Permanent furnishing, e.g. benches around the walls, a fireplace and movable furniture define areas for various activities: working, gathering, storing, sleeping, cooking and eating. Within the discourse of modern housing, both regarding suburban villas and minimum dwelling, the tupa was referred to as a conceptual model for a multifunctional space.

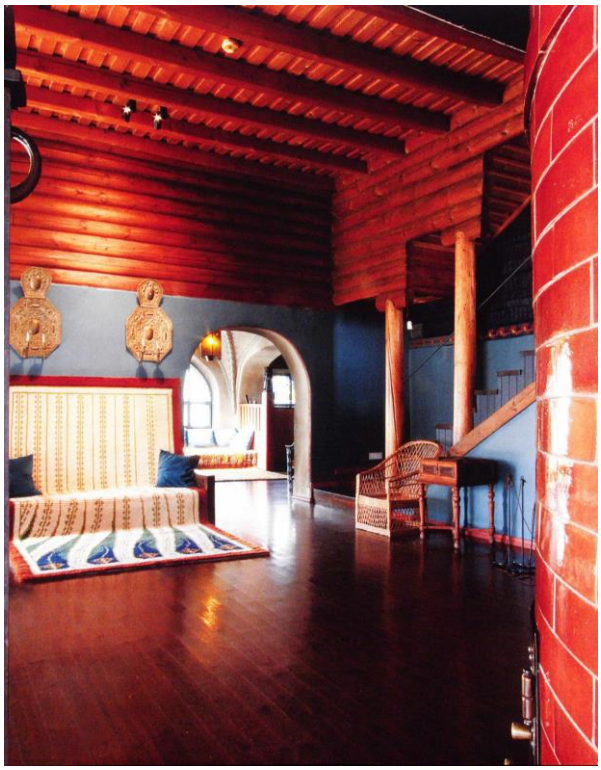

Figure 2. Villa Hvitträsk, living hall at Saarinen's wing with Akseli Gallen-Kallela's tapestry *The Flame*, Hermann Gesellius, Armas Lindgren, Eliel Saarinen, 1901-03. (Jetsonen, & Jetsonen, 2014, p. 76)

In the villas by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen the idea of the tupa as a multifunctional room, as a central place of public gathering and private living, is translated into the concept of the hall, e.g. at Hvitträsk (1901-03), the studio

home of the three architects. Although the floor plan of Hvitträsk is still marked by single room units, the living hall in Saarinen's wing shows an attempt to create a more open space. Towards the adjoining dining room, for example, the hall is separated only by a wide archway. The different ceilings – in the almost two-storey high hall an open beam construction and in the broader dining room a vault – support the spatial differentiation between living and dining area. The hall gives access to the garden and the open staircase links it with the upper floor (Figure 2). Even though the hall functions as a connecting element in the organisational structure of the floor plan, the room is no mere entrance hall. In the living hall, the multifunctionality adapted from the vernacular tupa is translated into a subdivision of spatial units, nooks for sitting and more intimate gathering, a fireplace area, a central space for more public meetings and a staircase as an inner transport way. A comparable spatial concept can be found at the architects' Villa Miniato (1901-02) and at Villa Hvittorp (1901-02) where the hall is subdivided by nooks and varying floor levels to mark the different functional areas for gathering, reading, sitting and playing music (Figure 3.).

Figure 3. Villa Hvittorp, living hall, Eliel Saarinen, watercolour, 1902. (Jetsonen, & Jetsonen, 2014, p. 60)

At Hvitträsk, the furnishing designed by Saarinen has an important role in defining functional space units. The fireplace, which is an integral part of the vernacular tupa, functions as a joint between the spatial parts and gives the room a sense of warmth and comfort. Due to the wooden wall treatment and the open beam construction of the ceiling, the room appears to be a log house within the villa. The adaptation of the spatial concept tupa is enhanced by an aesthetic reference to the traditional construction of vernacular farmsteads in Finland. The tapestry *The Flame* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela supports this, too. It is an adaptation of the Finnish ryijy-rug. The vernacular weaving technique and the traditional placement on the wall are combined with the formal language of Art Nouveau (Figure 2)[8].

The concept of the living hall as a combination of living, common and reception space derives from the 19th century country house architecture in England and North America. Via international journals and especially German publications such as *Neubauten in Nordamerika* (Graef, 1897-1904) the idea of the hall was introduced into the Finnish housing discourse at the turn of the century[9]. Anglo-American examples offered points of reference for the housing question in Finland. The planing from interior to exterior, the resulting asymmetry of the buildings and a comparable adaptation of the vernacular in English and American architecture at the time, supported the inclusion of Anglo-American tendencies into housing projects in Finland. As shown in the villas mentioned above, the international concept living hall was adapted in the work of Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen as an outer structure and was combined with the adaptation of the multifunctional tupa as a concept of inner spatial organization.

In the article *From doorstep to living room,* the idea of the hall was voiced by Alvar Aalto as well.

[8] There are different versions of the ryijy-rug *The Flame* by Akseli Gallen-Kallela. One is also shown in the living hall at Villa Miniato. One version was presented as part of the Iris-room in the Finnish Pavilion at Paris' World's Fair (1900).

[9] American architecture, especially the work of Henry H. Richardson, was discussed in Finnish magazines (e.g. *Suomen Teollisuuslehti / Suomen Teollisuuslehden Rakentaja)*, but often without pictures. German publications on American architecture function as an additional source.

> One of the possible ways to arrange and furnish the entrance section is offered in the English hall. [...] The British psyche is foreign to us and does not readily take root in our soil, but one feature decidedly deserves to be noted. One of those large, spacious rooms with an open fireplace, a rustic floor and a form which differs from that of the other rooms has a psychological function apparent to the sensitive eye. (Aalto, 1926, p. 52)

Aalto defines the hall as a contact zone, a place of transition between interior and exterior: '*It* [the hall] *symbolizes the open air under the home roof*', according to Aalto (1926: 52). He also relates the concept of the hall to the vernacular Roman atrium house. Both the hall and the atrium are the central spaces of the house, function as an entrance situation, but are no mere circulation areas. They are semi-public living spaces that give insights into the inner structure of the building. The article reflects Aalto's interest in Italian vernacular architecture and gives an outlook to later projects that show an adaptation of the atrium house.

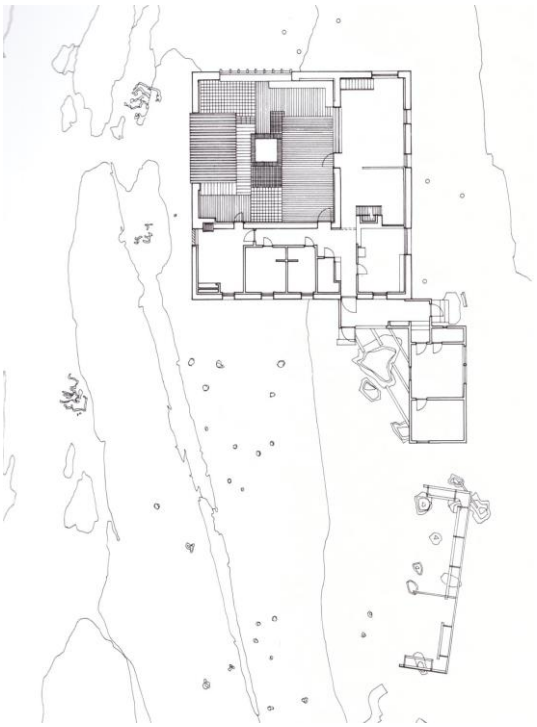

Figure 4. Muuratsalo Experimental House, site plan, Alvar Aalto, 1953. (Weston, 1995, p. 117)

In the Muuratsalo Experimental House, Aalto combines the idea of the atrium as an interspace between interior and exterior with the adaptation of the tupa. For Aalto, the tupa as well as the atrium provides an alternative concept of room that is not defined as an enclosed cell, but as an open space (Aalto, 1930, p. 77). In Aalto's housing projects, the tupa is translated into an open floor plan according to a space continuum. At the Muuratsalo Experimental House, that open living room, following the multifunctional qualities of the tupa, extends into the atrium-like courtyard which becomes an interior room in the exterior space (Figure 4). A similar relation between inside and outside can be found in Aalto's Villa Mairea. Here, the open living room is structured by varying floor levels and can be subdivided by moveable wall-units in order to create functional areas like a library, study and exhibition space (Figure 5). The spatial organization is based on the requirements of the inhabitants, a family of art collectors and can be changed in regard to the requested use of the living room. Here, the multifunctionality of the tupa as a concept of inner spatial organization meets Aalto's call for organic flexibility.

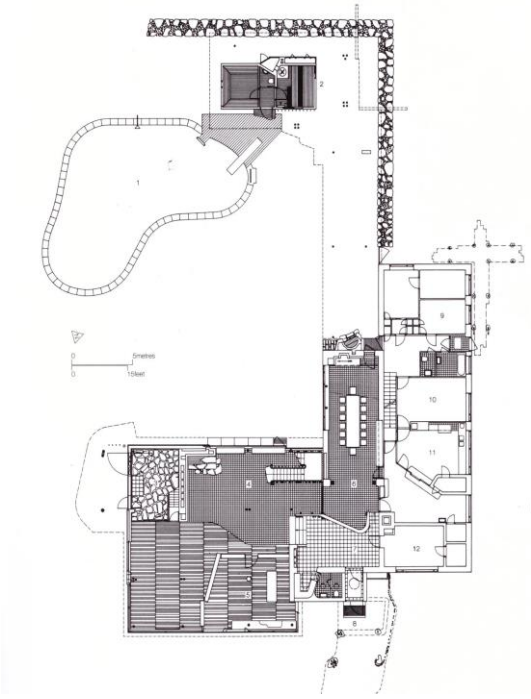

Figure 5. Villa Mairea, ground floor plan, Alvar Aalto, 1937-1939. (Weston, 1995, p. 86)

Conclusion

The adaptation of the tupa in the works of Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen, and Aalto is based on the attributed value as a multifunctional room, including international modern tendencies at each time. At the turn of the century, the vernacular tupa is translated into the spatial concept living hall that originated from the 19th century English country house architecture. In the 1930s-1950s, it is used as a point of reference for an open floor plan connecting it with the idea of a space continuum that was internationally discussed in the context of Functionalism, Neues Bauen and International Style.

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