ALVAR AALTO’S VILLA MAIREA

Modernism with a Finnish Approach

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INTRODUCTION

THESIS

Although Alvar Aalto is generally considered a modernist, his design of the Villa Mairea’s exterior, interior, and garden recliner show that he was equally influenced by the Finnish vernacular and the International Style.

BACKGROUND

Alvar Aalto was born in 1898 in Finland, and opened his own architectural firm in Jyväskylä, Finland in 1923. He lived and worked mostly in Finland, in “an atmosphere fraught with questions of national identity,” until he died in 1976 (Curtis, 1996, p. 342).

PHILOSOPHY

Alvar Aalto said “Nature, rather than the machine, should serve as the model for architecture” (quoted in Curtis, 1996, p. 29). This idea probably stems from the importance of nature in Finnish culture. Aalto saw buildings as the connection between people and nature, and wanted to create buildings that would integrate nature into daily life rather than separating the two. He said “Architecture cannot disengage itself from the natural and human factors; on the contrary, it must never do so...Its function rather is to bring nature even closer to us” (quoted in Curtis, 1996, p. 346).

DESIGN LANGUAGE

In his designs, Alvar Aalto often used local materials, particularly wood. He is known for the chairs he created out of bent pieces of wood, eliminating the need to connect the horizontal and vertical pieces (“Design Technology”, n.d.). According to Curtis, Aalto used “anthropomorphic forms and forms inspired by natural phenomena” (Curtis, 1996, p. 455), which can be seen in his chairs, since many of them were formed to fit the curves of the back. According to Curtis, in his building designs, Aalto had “a refined sense of proportion in the placement of voids and solids” (Curtis, 1996, p. 343). Many of his building layouts were based on an L-shaped floor plan and adapted to fit different circumstances.
OVERVIEW

The Villa Mairea was designed in 1937-38 for Aalto’s friends Maire and Harry Gullichsen, and it was built in Noormarkku, Finland. Aalto was told by the clients to treat the Villa Mairea as “an ‘experimental house,’” so he used it to mix together different concepts he had been using (Curtis, 1996, p. 346).

EXTERIOR

The exterior of the Villa Mairea has several elements of both the International Style and the Finnish vernacular. The house is volumetric, has small ribbon windows, and has a flat roof, which are all elements of the International Style. However, these details contrast with the organic shape of the pool, and the curves in some parts of the building, which relate more to the Finnish style than the International Style. The influence of the Finnish vernacular can also be seen in Aalto’s choice of materials. According to Curtis, “a direct and elegant use of local materials, particularly timber” was important in Finland (Curtis, 1996, p. 342), and Aalto uses wood in several different ways on the outside of the house. Curtis also says that the way the house is shaped to partially enclose part of the yard is similar to the partial courtyards of old Finnish farm buildings (Curtis, 1996, p. 346), showing the influence of Finnish history and culture on Aalto’s design.
INTERIOR

The organization and construction of the Villa Mairea’s interior has several modern elements, but the details show the influence of the Finnish vernacular. The house has a very open plan organized in a grid, which is modern. The construction of the house includes some steel columns, which are also modern; however, many of the columns are wrapped in wood, which gives them a warmer feeling. The use of columns allows the house to have large windows that let in natural light and give views of the trees that surround the house. Like on the outside of the house, Aalto incorporated wood into the interior in several ways. Many of the floors and ceilings throughout the house are wood. There are also wooden poles placed throughout the house, like the ones that surround the stairs. Since wood is very important in Finland, this shows the effect of the Finnish style on Aalto’s design. According to Curtis, another example of the Finnish influence in the design is the way that Aalto used curved walls and organic shapes to create a “meandering route” through the house (Curtis, 1996, p. 348).

GARDEN RECLINER

Like the exterior and interior of the Villa Mairea, the garden recliner, which Aalto designed for the house, also shows a mixture of modern and Finnish elements. Aalto designed the back of the chair to fit a person’s back, which could be seen as both functional, since it fits the purpose of the chair, and Finnish, since it is an example of anthropomorphism. The chair is made of wood, which was one of the main materials used in Finland at the time. According to Curtis, objects like the garden recliner “showed how Finnish technology could fabricate forms of great functional elegance out of laminated timber” (Curtis, 1996, p. 346).
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

SUMMARY

Although the Villa Mairea has several International Style elements, the influence of the Finnish vernacular can also be seen in its design. The modernist steel columns are wrapped in wood, and the large windows, which are made possible by the columns, provide views of nature. The following table summarizes the International Style and Finnish elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Villa Mairea</th>
<th>International Style</th>
<th>Finnish Vernacular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exterior</td>
<td>• Small ribbon windows</td>
<td>• Use of wood (local materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Volumetric</td>
<td>• Curvilinear forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flat roof</td>
<td>• Open to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Asymmetry</td>
<td>• Ornamentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>• Open plan</td>
<td>• Use of wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Steel columns (grid organization)</td>
<td>• Ornamentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• References to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden Recliner</td>
<td>• Designed for function-the back is shaped to fit a person’s back</td>
<td>• Anthropomorphism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Symmetry</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Wood</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

By analyzing Alvar Aalto’s Villa Mairea, it can be concluded that he was not strictly a modernist. Although he was definitely influenced by the International Style, as the house’s volumetric forms and open plan show, he was also influenced by the Finnish vernacular, which is shown in the use of wood and the integration of nature into the design. These details show that Aalto did not simply accept the principles of modernism how they were. Instead, he used modernist technology to create unique spaces that showcased the Finnish style.
REFERENCES

TEXT


IMAGES


