



*At the edge of the forests west of Helsinki, the extraordinary compound called Hvitträsk, the country retreat of Eliel Saarinen and his remarkable family, offers deep insights into a design dynasty and the beginnings of modernism*



Hvitträsk was built in the early twentieth century as the home and studio compound of Finnish architects Eliel Saarinen (1873–1950), Herman Gesellius (1874–1916), and Armas Lindgren (1874–1929).

The architecture studio, in a photo of the early 1910s, was located between the two wings of the main building. From the left are architect Frans Nyberg, Pipsan Saarinen, and Eliel Saarinen.

The Saarinens' apartment has been restored and contains many of the original furnishings. The dining room was also the music room. The vaulted ceiling provided wonderful acoustics, and the lounging corner was well suited to listening to music.

TOP: MEHMET CADIROGLU PHOTOS/NATIONAL BOARD OF ANTIQUITIES

MARKKU HAVERINEN PHOTO, NATIONAL BOARD OF ANTIQUITIES

# Finnish roots: HVITTRÄSK

**By Mason Riddle**

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC ARE MANY, but few are more arrestingly beautiful than Hvitträsk, the early twentieth-century home and studio compound of Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen and his two partners Herman Gesellius and Armas Lindgren. By all accounts Hvitträsk was conceived as a *gesamtkunstwerk*—in which the furniture, lighting, rugs, textiles, glazing, metalwork, ceramic tile, and even kitchen implements were integrated into the overall architectural scheme. Designed in the Finnish Jugend, or what is now called the national romantic style, the Hvitträsk buildings are constructed of stone, log,





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stucco, shingle, and tile to blend with the heavily forested northern landscape. Their rustic exteriors are enlivened by towers, chimneys, dramatic rooflines, fanciful window placements, and deeply recessed entryways.

For the Helsinki office of Gesellius, Lindgren, Saarinen, Hvitträsk was a necessary escape from the onslaught of international recognition that followed the firm's much-lauded Finnish Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. The trio discovered the area—some thirty kilometers west of Helsinki—while designing the nearby Villa Hvittröpp. The sixteen-hectare (forty-acre) site overlooks Lake Vitträsk (White Lake) in the municipality of Kirkkonummi near the village of Luoma. The complex is still nestled in a fluid web of terraced gardens designed in 1907 and 1908 by Eliel's wife Loja, a thoughtful plan that merges Hvitträsk with the numinous forests beyond.

Designed and built between 1901 and 1903, Hvitträsk's manor-like buildings surround a large central courtyard planted with birch trees. Each architect designed his own home. The Saarinens and the Lindgrens lived, respectively, in the south and north wings of the expansive main building, with the shared architectural studio in between. Saarinen's design for the south wing called for multiple

The Saarinens were known for their hospitality, and Hvitträsk evolved into a vibrant center for visiting artists, friends, and family

levels and twelve fireplaces. Lindgren's north wing was dominated by an imposing rectangular, round-log tower. Gesellius lived across the courtyard in the Small Villa (Lilla Villan), the first building completed, in 1902, with its circular tower with a black witch's hat roof.

The three architects, along with artisans from Kirkkonummi and Helsinki, designed and created virtually all the interior decorative elements, which now remain only in the Saarinen apartment. The Boman carpenter shop in Turku built the furniture to Saarinen's designs. Loja designed the chandelier in the main room and a bronze sculpture in the dining room. Of particular note is a replica of the Leikki (Flame) ryijy rug that won first prize at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900; it was given to Eliel as a present by the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who had designed it as a bench cover in 1899.

The ceramic tile cladding on the many fire-

The ceiling decoration and fresco decoration above the fireplace in the dining room were probably painted by Väinö Blomstedt.

View from the north terrace garden.

The *Rival Suitors* stained-glass window was designed by Olga Gummerus-Ehrström.



Hvitträsk's symbol, a tower within a wreath of roses, embellishes many objects, including textiles and furniture



places was manufactured by the Wilhelm Andstén tile factory in Helsinki, and the fireplaces' decorative metal doors were created either by Hj. H. Kastens Metallfabrik or by the artist Eric "Bucklan" O. W. Ehrström, who lived in the Small Villa after Gesellius moved to the north wing. His wife, Olga Gummerus-Ehrström, designed the jewel-toned stained-glass window punctuating the end wall of the dining room in 1904–1905. Titled *The Rival Suitors*, the win-

dow relates to one of the most celebrated stories surrounding the compound. At the time it was being built Eliel was married to Mathilda Gyldeén, a socialite who was not happy about moving to the country. Gesellius's sister, Louise (Loja), had come to live with him after completing her studies in sculpture and drawing in Helsinki and Paris. Eliel became infatuated with Loja and Herman fell in love with Mathilda. Eliel and Mathilda divorced in 1903, and, on the same March day in 1904, both couples were married and lived on happily at Hvitträsk.

Within a dozen years of occupancy, the Saarinens took sole ownership of Hvitträsk. The Lindgrens unexpectedly moved back to Helsinki in 1905 when Armas began a full-time professorship at the Polytechnic School (now Alvar Aalto University) and left the architectural firm. Gesellius moved from the Small Villa into the north wing and renovated Lindgren's log interior into one featuring white plaster walls and refined German style furniture. Often employing many assistants, Saarinen and Gesellius continued their architectural collaboration until 1907, but the following year they had a falling out and the studio was divided by a partition, formally signaling the end of their design collaboration. In 1912 Gesellius was diagnosed with a lung tumor and, on his death in 1916, Mathilda sold the north wing to the Saarinens and moved to France. Eliel and Loja's two children, Eva Lisa (Pipsan; 1905–1979) and Eero (1910–1961), who became the celebrated American architect, were born at Hvitträsk.

The Saarinens were known for their hospitality, and Hvitträsk evolved into a vibrant center for visiting artists, friends, and family. Music was an important aspect of life and visitors included the Finnish musicians Jean Sibelius and Robert Kajanus as well as the Austrian composer and conductor Gustav Mahler. Hungarian sculptor and architect



JÄRVINEN PHOTOS/NATIONAL BOARD OF ANTIQUITIES.

Géza Maróti and his family came too, as did Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who brought his friend the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. Food was plentiful, often harvested from Loja's gardens and the surrounding forests; there was a still in the basement. The wrought-iron rings near the fireplace in the main room, made by Anton Alexander "Santtu" Hartman in nearby Masala, were for holding on to. When guests let go and fell to the floor Saarinen requested they retire.

Architectural work slowed to a snail's pace in Finland after World War I. In late 1922 Saarinen won second place in the competition to design the Chicago Tribune building and the following year he traveled to Chicago in search of opportunities. He landed a teaching position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and his family soon joined him. In 1925 the wealthy newspaper publisher George Gough Booth invited him to design the campus of the Cranbrook Educational Community, an American interpretation of the Bauhaus in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The rest is history. Saarinen went on to design many campus buildings, including his own residence, and, in addition to teaching, he became president of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1932.

In spite of being ensconced at Cranbrook and running an architectural office, Eliel and Loja—who founded Studio Loja Saarinen and oversaw the textile department at Cranbrook from 1929 to 1942—returned to Hvitträsk every summer except during the war.

In 1949 the property was sold to Anelma and Rainier Vuorio. Less than sympathetic reno-

The Liekki (Flame) ryijy rug, made by the Friends of Finnish Handicraft in 1986, is a replica of one given to Saarinen by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who designed it in 1899 and showed it at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle.

The main room is furnished with pieces designed by Saarinen, mostly from 1905–1906, including the bench for the ryijy rug. Loja Saarinen designed the wooden chandelier in 1903.

The stove and fireplace tiles in the main room were made by the Wilhelm Andstén tile factory of Helsinki.





Saarinens designed the bedroom furniture. A tower within a wreath of roses, Hvitträsk's symbol, is carved into the footboard.



variations of the buildings followed, and many interior items were lost or sold. The property changed hands again in 1968 and more interior objects were sold.

In 1981 Hvitträsk became the property of the Finnish state and in 2000 it became part of the National Board of Antiquities and a property of the National Museum of Finland. Restoration began, working from photographs and original plans. Many lost items were recovered or returned to the property and others were replicated. Since Eliel and Loja altered the inte-

rior design numerous times while living there, it is difficult to discern what constitutes "original." However, Hvitträsk still evokes an inspired genius loci, reflecting

its original deeply Finnish national romantic aura in a commanding yet poetic way.

According to Hvitträsk manager, Pepita Ehrnrooth-Jokinen, the Saarinen wing is 95 percent restored. "The house is now in the shape it was in 1923, when the family moved to the USA," she says. Walls were scraped to identify original colors and materials, and wallpaper

was uncovered or matched when possible. Saarinen designed the white-painted furniture in the linoleum-floored master bedroom, now returned to its original green, and the adjacent conservatory. The upstairs was electrified in the 1920s and Eliel and Loja had running water installed in the adjoining bath, though the cabinet and basins date from when they lived there year-round. Eliel also designed the furniture for the third floor draftsmen's room and, on a smaller scale, for the children's second-floor bedrooms and

playroom. Hvitträsk's symbol, a tower within a wreath of roses, embellishes many objects, including textiles and furniture.

Today, the Saarinens' south wing is open to the public as a museum. The architectural studio is used for special exhibitions. In 1971 the north wing (which had burned in 1922 and been rebuilt between 1929 and 1936 on a much smaller, less dramatic scale to Eero Saarinen's designs) was converted into a conference center. The Small Villa was significantly renovated into a restaurant and



Decorative relief of Pipsan Saarinen by the Hungarian artist Géza Maróti.

Originally for draftsmen, this room was connected by a stair to the architecture studio on the first floor. After Pipsan was born in 1905, it was transformed into the children's playroom in 1908. Eliel designed the furniture and the ryjijy rug with a tree motif, which was woven in 1908 by the Friends of Finnish Handicraft. Above hangs a sketch by Olga Gummerus-Ehrström for the stained-glass window in the dining room.



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café, though it is still a beguiling place with its original tiled fireplaces and an open veranda constructed in 1910. What had once been tennis courts is now the visitors' parking lot. A sauna perches on the shore of Lake Vitträsk.

The seeds of Eliel Saarinen's modernist aesthetic and his comprehensive design thinking run deep at Hvitträsk and were later expressed in his extensive city-planning projects in the second decade of the century. While living and working at Hvitträsk his Munkkiniemi-Haaga project for the expansion of Helsinki was made public in 1915, followed by comprehensive city plans for Budapest and Tallinn in Estonia, among other cities. Soon after his arrival in the United States, Saarinen developed a plan for Chicago's waterfront. His modernist aesthetic was most fully expressed at Cranbrook during the 1930s and 1940s. A National Historic Landmark the campus is considered the most com-



MASON RIDDLE PHOTO

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plete example of Saarinen's modernist genius. Among his student collaborators were Charles and Ray (then Kaiser) Eames.

So deeply attached to Hvitträsk were Eliel and Loja, that their remains, along with those of Armas Lindgren, are interred on a sylvan site overlooking Lake Vitträsk. A fifteen-minute walk from the main building through forest blanketed with moss-covered boulders, mushrooms, and berries, leads to the site. A simple stone plaque engraved with their three names is attached to a huge granite outcropping; a granite plaque in the ground is inscribed with a self-reflective quote by Eliel, "Work is the key to creative growth of the mind."

Visiting Hvitträsk more than a century after its genesis, the word utopian springs to mind, but it inadequately describes the real world compound that thrived on big ideas, hard work, and committed play. Some have said that Hvitträsk was a romantic dream in the midst of a beautiful Finnish forest, where the work of architects, life, and art came together. It was this and then some. **M**

*Mason Riddle visited Hvitträsk in September 2013 while attending the annual Helsinki Design Week. In addition to her tour with Hvitträsk manager Pepita Ehrnrooth-Jokinen, a resource for this article is the recently published Hvitträsk Guidebook by Jouni Marjamäki et al.*

This room off the architecture studio was originally a billiards room where the architects could relax. Eliel later converted it into a library, moving in his desk and chair, designed in 1907 and made by the Boman shop, and building bookshelves on three walls.

The Small Villa (Lilla Villan) was the first building completed, in 1902. It now serves as a restaurant, but in addition to its living spaces, it originally incorporated cellars, a stable, carriage shed, a sauna, a laundry room, and a bakery.

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## By Mason Riddle

WHO DOESN'T COVET AN ALVAR AALTO bentwood Paimio chair? And what's not to like about Iittala glassware designed by Aino Aalto, or Kaj Franck's iconic mid-century Teema ceramic cup for Arabia, or a striking stretch of Marimekko fabric? And those orange-handled scissors by Fiskars are everywhere. Of course we embrace these things: they are all twentieth-century examples of Finnish design burned into our aesthetic consciousness.



LOOKING FORWARD:

Finland in the 21st Century



A new exhibition in Minneapolis explores contemporary Finnish design

Birch Octo 4240 lamp designed by Seppo Koho, 2005, manufactured by Secto Design, Espoo, Finland.

Sauna designed by Olavi Koponen of R2K Architects, Kelujärvi, Sodankylä, Finland, 2005.

Mikko Kärkkäinen's LED1 lamp, 2009, manufactured by Tunto Design, Järvenpää, Finland.



Bagley Nature Center, University of Minnesota-Duluth, designed by Finnish-American architect David Salmela, 2010.

Sukupuu (Family Tree) maternity package designed by Johanna Öst Häggblom, 2012, manufactured by Kela, Helsinki.

Jopo bicycle designed by Markku Autero, 2000, originally designed by Eero Risilakki and Erkki Rahikainen, 1965, manufactured by Helkama Velox, Hanko, Finland.



panied by a well-illustrated catalogue, with essays by Olivarez, Jukka Savolainen, director of the Design Museum, Helsinki, and Juulia Kauste, director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, the show is divided into five thematic areas: “The City Redefined”; “Relax, Recharge, and Reflect”; “Artful Living”; “Design and the Body”; and “New Design Realities.” Topics addressed include the ways in which urban design is reshaping the quality of Finnish life; the significance of summer homes, saunas, and recreation to Finnish notions of well-being; how well-designed domestic objects are integral to daily life; contemporary ideas of fashion; and innovations in areas of sensory design, graphic design, food, and systems design.

Helsinki was designated the World Design Capital 2012 by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, an award that highlights accomplishments of cities that use design to improve social, cultural, and economic life. *Designed Environments* will feature several projects from this event, including photographs of

the 2012 pavilion, designed by Pyry-Pekka Kantonen and the Aalto University Wood Program as a temporary “living room.”



Innovative, elegant, and to-the-point design has long been Finland’s international calling card, and the new exhibition *Finland: Designed Environments* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts provocatively reinforces this idea. Organized by Jennifer Komar Olivarez, MIA’s associate curator of decorative arts, it is the first in-depth museum exhibition in the United States since the 1990s to explore Finnish design. It takes us well beyond the twentieth-century object and thrusts us into the more comprehensive notions of twenty-first-century Finnish design.

“The legacy of Finnish design runs deep,” Olivarez says. “It is a step above what we normally consider good design. The Finns continually find ways to improve upon design ideas of the past and always ask how design can meet the needs of the people. How can design address the problems of today?”

*Designed Environments* handily demonstrates the ways in which, over the last fifteen years, the Finns have incorporated thoughtful design into virtually every aspect of their daily lives. Accom-

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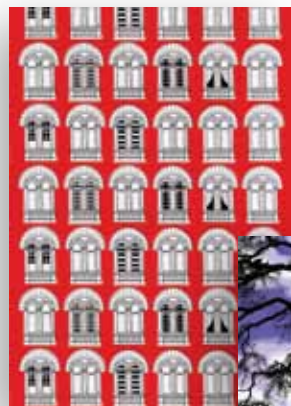


Details of three fabrics manufactured by Vallila Interior, Helsinki. Left to right: Viiskulma designed by Elizabeth Salonen, 2011; Kelohonka designed by Tanja Orsjoki, 2008; and Helsinki designed by Riina Kuikka, 2011.

Orange Box chair designed by Hannu Kähönen, 2009, manufactured by Creadesign, Helsinki.

Several other architectural designs are also represented, including Olavi Koponen's Sauna and the Kamppi Chapel of Silence by Kimmo Lintula, Niko Sirola, and Mikko Summanen. Bridging Finnish and American design thinking is the Bagley Nature Center at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, designed by Finnish-American architect David Salmela.

In terms of objects, Olivarez says, "Alvar Aalto's legacy of strong, clean lines with an organic feel in form and material is still apparent in Finnish design. However, ideas of creative sustainability and non-material design are increasingly explored." The Orange Box chair by Hannu Kähönen, for example, is made from wooden fruit crates to draw consumers' attention to waste and recycling. Japanese architect and designer Shigeru Ban, recipient of the 2014 Pritzker Architecture Prize and glob-



ally renowned for his sustainable design thinking, has created a modular 10-Unit System chair that is manufactured of recycled material by the legendary Helsinki design company Artek, founded by the Aaltos in the 1930s.

The array of innovative functional objects includes Esa Vesmanen's sleek Balance chair, a chaise longue that integrates a personalized audio system into its "sound pillow." Savoy, a limited edition ceramic dinner service by Karin Widnäs, honors the seventy-fifth anniversary of the still celebrated Aalto-designed Savoy Restaurant. The long tradition of Finnish textiles is continued by Vallila Interior's colorful fabrics, screened with images that bring elements of the outdoors inside. Two bicycle designs, so important to the twenty-first-century city, make an engaging appearance, including the 2000 update of the classic 1965 Jopo.

"One of my favorite pieces in the show is the Sukupuu (Family Tree) Maternity Package," Olivarez says. "The World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 wanted a fresh new design for a maternity package, and a student, Johanna Öst Häggblom, won



the competition. It's not necessarily the first thing people think of when they think of contemporary design, but it has everything needed for a newborn and shows how design is a part of the lives of even the youngest Finnish citizens." Affectionately called the "baby box," it is distributed to new parents by Kela, the Social Insurance Institution.

Olivarez is also inspired by contemporary Finnish lighting design. She notes that the Octo 4240 by Seppo Koho "shows how wood is used in ways that we don't think of for lighting—as the integral fixture and shade." Likewise, she thinks the Kubo light therapy lamp by Eero Aarnio "will be revelatory, since most of the lamps treating SAD [seasonal affective disorder] available in the U.S. look like makeup mirrors. Innojok, the manufacturer has really evolved the SAD lamp from medical equipment to sculptural lighting." Mikko Kärkkäinen's birch LED1 lamp is futuristic in feel but made from wood, perhaps Finland's most revered design material.

Information technology plays a role in *Designed Environments* too. Who knew that what may be Finland's biggest worldwide export, the video game *Angry Birds*, was designed by Jaakko Iisalo in 2009?

But what might be the quintessential twenty-

Kamppi Chapel of Silence, Helsinki, by K2S Architects (Kimmo Lintula, Niko Sirola, and Mikko Summanen), Helsinki, 2008-2012.

Sense Light swing designed by Alexander Lervik, 2005, manufactured by Saas Instruments, Helsinki.

first-century object in this cornucopia of Finnish design is the Sense Light swing by Swedish designer Alexander Lervik, made from acrylic and LED lights by Helsinki's Saas Instruments. In a country that spends much of the year in darkness, what better way to generate a little breeze and the sensation of a shooting star on a warm summer night? **M**

Finland: *Designed Environments* is on view to August 17 at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts ([artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org)) and from March 13 to August 16, 2015, at the Nordic Heritage Museum, Seattle, Washington.

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