

Mediating between forest and garden, tradition and modernity, a small wooden gate at Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea is shown to be deeply rooted in Finnish cultural memories.

## A gateway to the 'backwoods': Aalto and the matter of rooting modernity

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In 1939 Alvar Aalto completed a substantial house in a forest clearing for his friends Harri and Maire Gullichsen, wealthy heirs to the Ahlström company. Villa Mairea is loaded with layer upon layer of meaning and multiple references to many architectures, past and present. If a unity, as many critics suggest,<sup>1</sup> it is undoubtedly a difficult one. Indeed, Modernist herald, Sigfried Giedion, wrote of Villa Mairea that, 'even one accustomed to judge immediately the qualities of a building will not easily comprehend the architectural instrumentation of Mairea' [1].<sup>2</sup>

The coherence of Villa Mairea may derive in part from its poetic adherence to the basic configuration of the Finnish vernacular forest enclosure, epitomised by Niemilä farmstead, moved from Konginkangas to the Folk Museum of Seurasaaari, Helsinki [2]. Aalto had used this approach in his own house in Helsinki a few years earlier in his determination to be a thoroughly modern Finn, *and* to relate culture back to nature [2 & 9]. The adoption of such an ordering principle demonstrates something of the uniqueness of his attitude to the construction of place in the milieu of the late 1930s. Giedion, who considered himself to be a close friend of Aalto's by this time, found the approach paradoxical, subsequently labelling his work 'irrational' and 'illogical'.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will examine a small gate/fence at the rear of Villa Mairea, between the lawned garden and the forest [4]. Typically, aspects of the gate came from elsewhere, and as such further demonstrate Aalto's 'collage technique',<sup>4</sup> in which he forges juxtapositions of different forms and histories; a design approach that was rare in the midst of Modernist orthodoxy.

Like the house, the gate is multi-significant, but denotes, I suggest, two particular tropes of his oeuvre. These can be represented by two axes; first, along the line of the boundary representing the narrative of Finland's progress towards 'civilisation'; and second, from garden to forest, which addresses the importance of relating architecture to nature within and without, and the psycho-physical experience of architecture [5]. In his analysis of difficult wholes in Aalto's work, Gareth Griffiths has identified an 'axis of anxiety between perimeter and centre' in some forms,<sup>5</sup> and an 'anxiety of boundary' as these relate with other forms. These axes of 'anxiety' can be applied to the gate/fence episode at Villa Mairea, but I suggest that the 'anxiety' must be understood as a most crucial compositional daring to head into the realm of the fecund, and of precarious harmony, rather than more reassuring compositional unity. After an explanation of its fabric and form, these two areas of his work will be explored.



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1 Plan of Villa Mairea, Noormarkku, Finland. Alvar Aalto, 1937–9

2 Enclosing plan of the vernacular Niemilä farmstead, moved from Konginkangas to the folk museum, Seurasaaari, Helsinki

**The material gate**

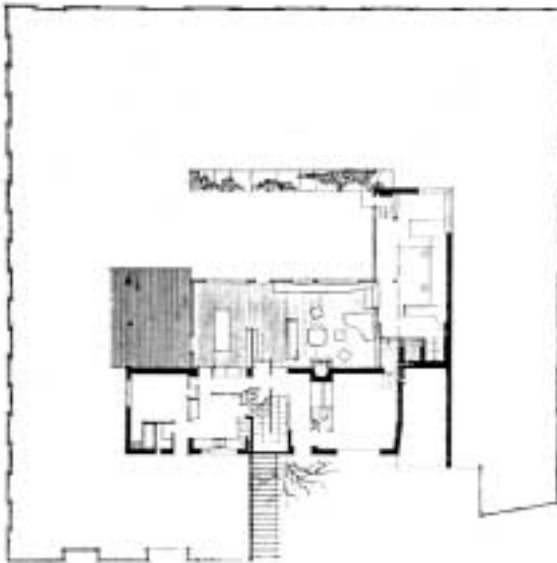
The gate comprises a simple crossing of sawn timbers in a regular formation: 10 x 20mm slats, hinged against the 700mm thick stone wall, and opening inwards. This demands that the user step back onto the stepping-stones, which meander from house to sauna, and on to the gate, before moving forward, out into the forest [4]. The gate closes against a small length of wooden fence, the horizontal members of which are similarly sawn, as battens of 50 x 10mm [6]. There is a tectonic shift from gate to fence since the double uprights which sandwich the sawn members are ‘as found’ bark-covered sticks, reminiscent of vernacular fencing [7]. These poles lean, as if tired, towards the gate. The fencing is then allowed to dematerialise after a run of only a metre and a half,

as a grass mound rises away from the gate, completing the enclosure in metaphorical, rather than physical ways; an ethnological palimpsest leading back from stone wall to timber gate and fence, to simple mound [5].

**Attitudes to the forest**

Of Finns and Finland Aalto wrote, ‘The people have always been able to maintain their contact with nature in this land’.<sup>6</sup> Further to this, if we understand something of the complex symbolism of the forest to Finns, we may examine realms of meanings in the narrative of this gate specifically located on the border of the forest culture of Finland [8].

Attitudes to nature in countries such as Finland and Sweden are quite different to those to the pastoral landscape of England, where it is rare to encounter natural ‘wilderness’. In Finland, for example, children are taught plant identification, and can safely meander in forests, eating fruit and fungi without poisoning themselves, although retaining a deep respect for the dangers of the forest. However, in Finland the forest does not represent human alienation, but often denotes potential encounter or engagement, to use the terminology of



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- 3 Plan of Aalto's own house Helsinki, 1934–6 active in and around the gate/fence episode
- 4 View of the Mairea gate from the garden, showing overgrown stone wall, gate, fence and mound 6 Stick fence at Villa Mairea
- 5 Plan showing the axes of meaning 7 Vernacular stick fencing, Seitsemien National Park, Finland

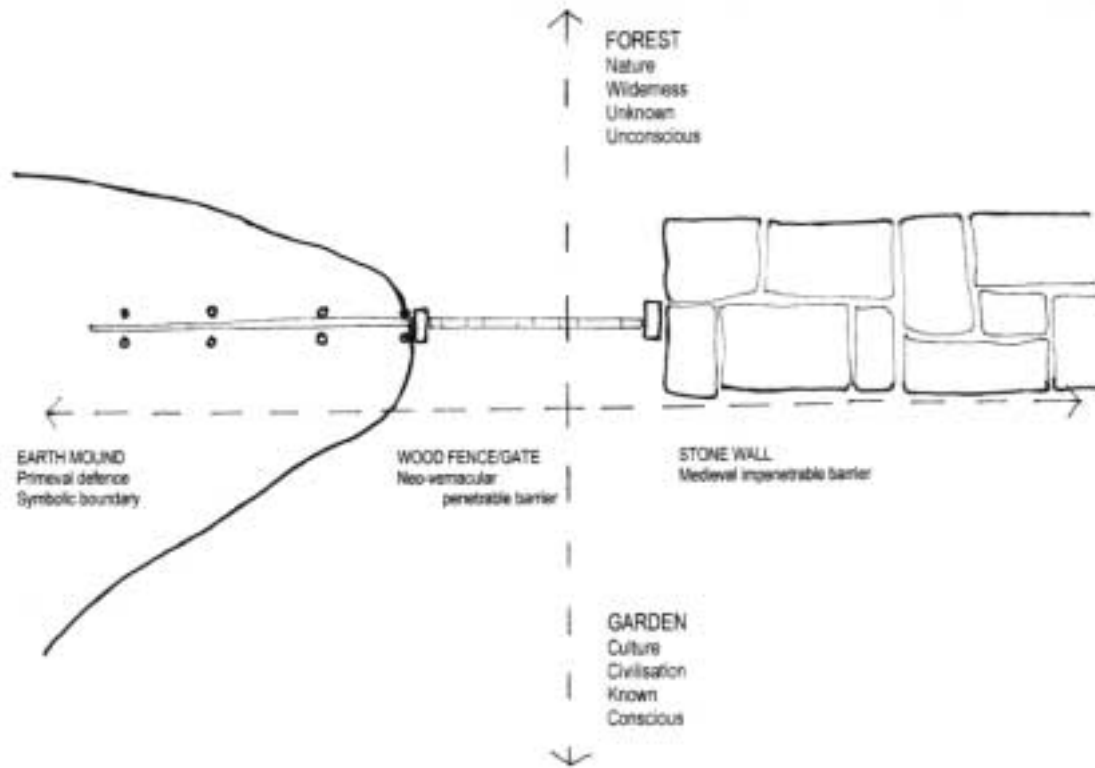


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environmental philosopher, Arnold Berleant.<sup>7</sup> This is repeatedly evinced in the Finnish folk epic the *Kalevala*, which relates how early Finns had full and continuing relationships with nature. Indeed, throughout history, nature, and particularly the forest, has offered an environment in which Finns sought security. They gained practical knowledge which meant that they were safe in its extensive realm. So, in addition to the imaginary riches and

terrors of the forest that live in fairy tales, and its symbolic role as a territory of disorientation, as depicted by Dante, Finnish philosopher Juhani Pietarinen has discerned four attitudes to the forest in Finland: Utilitarian, Humanist, Mystical and Primitive.<sup>8</sup>

The Utilitarian attitude sees the forest merely as an objective resource, and a means of increasing the standard of living, and for the welfare of mankind.



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Forest cover literally made life possible in such hostile northern climes. Dependence on the resources of the forest was total, and so life without the forest was inconceivable. The Ahlström paper company is an example of such practical Utilitarianism, through the felling and processing of forest resources.

According to Pietarinen, the Humanist attitude to the forest, like Utilitarianism, is a purely human-centred attitude, yet with different ends.<sup>9</sup> It strives for forests to be used in the service of the Socratic intellectual ideals of beauty and of ethics, and seeks to facilitate mental balance in psychological terms, since nature and the forest become places in which the troubled soul often seeks to be enfolded. This is undoubtedly something that Aalto sought to imbue into his buildings, by extending functionalism 'to the psychological field too',<sup>10</sup> finding it missing in much of the architecture of the 'style-minders of the Orthodoxy' of the time.<sup>11</sup> This begins to define Aalto's divergence from the Modernist fold.<sup>12</sup>

Pietarinen suggests that in the Mystical attitude man searches for unity with nature through sensory or spiritual experience. Therein nature is often experienced as a sacred totality, and as something beyond reason. In the 1950s Aalto declared, 'A mystical element is needed',<sup>13</sup> a rare but important excursion into the realm of the metaphysical for an avowed pragmatist. However, Aalto's reluctance to speak of the mystical does not mean that his material work is not imbued with a metaphysical agenda, through, for example, his explicit sensitivity to the backwoods tectonics. In these ways the memory of the backwoods forest forms were brought forward into the late 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

#### Back to nature: primitivism and modernity

In Pietarinen's opinion primitivism denies all human privileges in nature, and secures the rights of all species, overriding the ideals of civilisation. Herein humankind takes its place beside other species in the eco-system, rejecting technologies that endanger the ecology. Finnish forest philosopher, Aarne Reunala, suggests that 'all our experiences with forests and trees give us some kind of deep, reassuring knowledge of our deep nature that we and the forests are just different parts of the same life'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the mystical attitude fails to address the balancing of civilisation's and nature's needs. Aalto, it must be said, never supported any idea of returning to a primitive union with nature, at the expense of progress, and recognised that ultimately nature will overcome civilisation. Crucially for the 'Modern' Aalto, being close to nature did not mean being primitive. Indeed, the English architect Colin St. John Wilson recalls how, during a visit to Villa Mairea in 1960, Aalto and Harri Gullichsen returned from a forest hunting expedition, and settled down to a family banquet, surrounded by Maire's astonishing collection of Modern art. Aalto noticed Wilson admiring the masterpieces, and gestured to them with the jesting comment, 'You see we are all peasants here'.<sup>16</sup>



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#### Rooting Modernism

Reunala suggests that Finns only found security when industrialisation and urbanisation dawned, after which a more detached appreciation of the forest began.<sup>17</sup> I suggest that, after his early Modern mentors in Finland, Gustaf Strengell and Sigurd Frosterus, Aalto became a prime mover in the shift from the National Romantic conception of nature (what he called 'the absurd birch-bark culture of 1905'),<sup>18</sup> to a progressive, Modern mindset. For example, his own house of 1934 was acclaimed as the 'modern Niemilä farmstead' by his mentor Strengell, a Modernism still rooted in forest forms [9]. Yet, despite the culture of Modernism in which he worked, being both modern and utilising the forest were not mutually exclusive to Aalto, as his designs demonstrate. Indeed, his biographer Göran Schildt has put it strongly when suggesting that the derivation of such interest is due to the fact that, 'insight into the world of the forest – forest wisdom – is at the heart of everything Aalto created, a biological experience which never allows itself to be overpowered by technocratic civilisation or short-sighted rationalism'.<sup>19</sup>

Aalto was an admixture of the foregoing attitudes to the forest and his own, deeply fecund creative engagement with nature. He knew that technology could not be relied upon to mediate or synthesise between elements such as city and country. Rather he sought to highlight the potential for forest and modern life to be fused.



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8 Forest at Villa Mairia

9 Side view of Aalto's own house, Helsinki, 1934–6

10 Threshold of Aalto's Sunila Engineers Housing; B-type, 1935–7

11 Stepped terrace of Aalto's Kauttua Workers Housing, 1937–40

### Nature and modern living: a new balance

After the loss of his mother, when he was eight, Aalto experienced the forest as an important, holding environment – nature as a continuum which was also in constant flux. He wrote: ‘As for the Finnish landscape, it was all around me, all the time. That experience of a working balance also gave me an idea of how man should treat his surroundings ... we can seek a balance with our environment and concentrate on healing the scars’.<sup>20</sup>

His father, a forest surveyor, took the young boy on surveying trips deep into unmapped depths of the Taiga, where they hunted and fished, and where the young Aalto helped to map the terrain scientifically. Consequently, Schildt believes, Aalto’s use of wood and his reflection of a forest context into the heart of modern Finnish life was, ‘not a matter of romanticism or mysticism, but of their opposite, an extreme sense of reality, a sharing in Nature’s own wisdom and rationality’.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, Schildt is too close to his subject here when he says there was no element of ‘mysticism’, since not only have we heard Aalto declare the opposite,<sup>22</sup> but his references to the modern human condition are frequently contiguous with references to nature’s crucial, but ineffable metaphysical role in modern life. Through culture generally, and architecture specifically, Aalto believed, society should seek to bring into balance ‘the whole of the milieu that surrounds [it]’,<sup>23</sup> as he put it – including nature, settlements and all other elements that make up the framework of life.

Aalto desired to reinstate opportunities for what he described as a ‘closeness to nature [which] is a strong element in just about every Finn’s consciousness’.<sup>24</sup> Seeking, thus, to offer a ‘gentler structure of life’,<sup>25</sup> he recognised that, ‘Not only ever-increasing mechanization but also our own actions estrange us from nature’.<sup>26</sup> For example, he sought to spread his ideas from villas to the housing designed for those working for the Ahlström company at Sunila and Kauttua [10 & 11], by determinedly making direct contact between each dwelling and the natural environment. By providing balconies and stepping the section of the building with the terrain he offered direct access to nature from each apartment, while rough wooden trellises created a threshold to the simple Modern whitewashed volumes that was sympathetic to the surrounding forest.

### Irregular modernity and a thoroughly Modern Finn

The form and eclecticism of Villa Mairea seemed to flabbergast Aalto’s Modern friends. Indeed, on staying at Villa Mairea in 1948, Giedion wrote that ‘this is not a house, it is a love poem’,<sup>27</sup> thus judging his work to be ‘illogical’ in the chapter dedicated to Aalto that he added to the second edition of *Space Time and Architecture*.<sup>28</sup> However, with the gentler perspective of time, his wife, Carola Giedion, relayed to Schildt that Aalto had spoken much about the epic *Kalevala*, going on to say, ‘what [he] gave us was a new relationship with Nature, something sorely needed in our technological era [...] It was Aalto who gave

wood back to us’.<sup>29</sup> This is important, an admission from the heart of formulaic Modernism that Aalto practised a rhetoric of his own that challenged theirs and for which they came to have a great respect.<sup>30</sup> Aalto determinedly made liberal references to nature and liberal usage of wood in the Modernist milieu at a time when it was thought *de rigueur*. I suggest that he thus brought aspects of the accommodation he had experienced as a child in the forest into his architectural work; something I believe was a personal necessity to Aalto.

Aalto may have promoted himself as a modern pragmatist, but we can clearly see that he also requisitioned a vernacular logic of relations, as the comparison of the plan of the vernacular Niemilä farmstead, his own house and Villa Mairea demonstrate. In a conversation with Schildt, Aalto mused that, ‘I don’t think I have a feeling for folklore. The traditions that bind us lie [...] in the climate, in the material conditions, in the nature of the tragedies and comedies that have touched us’.<sup>31</sup>

This is important, since he suggests his stimulation was human experience that could be mirrored in the natural environment, and then translated into built form. Regardless of his declaration against poetic folklore, he clearly referred to it in conversation in the 1930s, and had a keen interest in vernacular tectonics [6 & 7]. His poetic references to various vernacular traditions are legion in Villa Mairea – though are rarely mimetic. Take for example the Japanese tones of the sauna door, the gate/fence episode, or its wooden lock, borrowed from a traditional Swiss gate mechanism that Aalto had seen on a drawing, on the desk of an assistant, Paul Bernoulli. He requisitioned it, announcing, ‘Let’s put it here’ [4].<sup>32</sup>

As well as the overall composition of many of his buildings being rooted in a poetic interpretation of nature’s growth process, Aalto used wood as the mechanism to mediate the experience of the forest back to the Modern physical and psycho-spiritual home. Indeed, Aalto came up with the idea of a ‘trichotomy (of); traditionalism, modernism and realism’.<sup>33</sup> Pallasmaa takes this point, suggesting that Villa Mairea seems ‘to question the basic stylistic attitudes of Modernism ... by creating items of separate intellectual categories [such as modernity and folk tradition]’.<sup>34</sup> Aalto might suggest that there is no need to conceive these as separate intellectual categories, but rather mutually contingent entities, which lead to a new design logic.

At the start of his career, Aalto had demonstrated a strong determination to improve nature through the implantation of carefully formed and sited building, articulating his mission as the making and improving of human connections with nature in what was a society rudely wrenched from nature’s realm by industrialisation and the movement of populations to cities.<sup>35</sup> He sought to reinvigorate what he saw as an age-old process of human activity impacting upon the natural environment. As a young architect in 1925 he wrote, ‘The landscapes we meet outside towns no longer consist of untouched nature anywhere: they are a combination of human

work and the natural environment'.<sup>36</sup> Never did he allow his subsequent, Modernist agenda, to eradicate this deeper sense about the vital and intricate relationships between human life and the natural environment, recognising the danger that 'the predominant mentality today goes to lengths to try to avoid [this relationship]'.<sup>37</sup>

In turning to Aalto for their own home and those of their workers, the Gullichsens requisitioned his determination to create modern environments that were imbued with mechanisms through which to relate humankind to nature and the past, those 'organic connections between a building and nature (including man and human life as an element of greater importance than others) is provided for'.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Aalto articulated his desire to bring 'the world of material into harmony with human life'.<sup>39</sup>

### The gate as a place 'in-between'

It is helpful to refer to the root of the word 'harmony' in the Greek etymon, *harmos*, meaning 'joint', because the idea of the moment of joining the dissimilar is crucial to understanding Aalto's work. The Maireia gate mediates between the different axes of meaning [5]; from the *prehistoric* mound to the *cultured* stone wall; the *known* garden and the *unknown* forest.

Although acknowledging that Villa Maireia is certainly a difficult unity, I suggest that the 'anxiety of boundary' is ameliorated at the moment of the gate. It evinces Aalto's capacity to design around this position of anxiety in meeting what is 'other', beyond the bounds, and what is experienced as an extant psycho-physical moment. So the gate can be said to represent one of the deepest motivations for Aalto, what he called, 'the simultaneous solution of conflicting problems'.<sup>40</sup> In this case, if not actually conflicting, then it certainly mediates between the often-alienated agencies of natural life and culture. Although it is of a very simple form, the gate triggers an architectural experience that is a far from a simple tool for the conjugation of mind and nature,<sup>41</sup> being as rich and complex as the mind of the user.

Yet, it was not always Aalto's plan to offer such an open-ended garden. The early plans, known as Proto-Maireia, showed a more rectilinear definition of the garden, with a strong L-shaped trellis feature closing the western side of the garden, and meeting the L-shaped stone-wall [12]. This is much less interesting than the more precarious conceptual enclosure he finally chose.

### The function of relating: the symbolic gate

The gate offers vestigial protection from, as well as access to, the forest [13 & 14]. There is both a physical and a symbolic passage. The physical passage is between a garden and a forest. The metaphoric passage is, in part, between the meanings associated with these two places. It relates the two tropes of the 'civilised' garden and the 'wild' forest in which collective memories of the power of the forest, its shadow over Finnish history, and the immanence of its encroachment, are all active. This garden-forest migration thus gathers to itself both collective and



12 Plan of Aalto's Proto-Maireia design showing a more enclosed garden boundary

personal narratives of the present and the past. For example, it relates Finland's precarious present of the mid 1930s, moments before the Russian 'bear' invaded Finland's eastern border in 1939 in the Winter War – a time at which Aalto suffered a mental breakdown. It also relates Finland's precarious past, the centuries of eking a subsistence existence from the floor of the forest – the realm in which Aalto had found security as a child.

In his essay 'The natural imagination', Colin St. John Wilson has defined such 'in-betweenness' as 'the inescapable condition of our life: we had better know how deep are the roots of that condition'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is born before the use of words (and many would argue before birth itself), and has a complete language 'replete with its own expectations, memory and powers of communication', as Wilson put it.<sup>43</sup> This may arguably be said to be at the heart of architecture

So the Maireia gate is a complex threshold, engendered by the generic tension of metaphysical 'in-betweenness' [5 & 13].<sup>44</sup> Its role is elucidated by the ideas of the Italian sculptor Moretti, which describe this aspect of the gate's function: Moretti speaks of the 'degrees of compression and release' in such physical works, noting that 'it is our job to be dealing with "inside" and "outside" and "threshold between" as vivid experiences working on people, shaping and celebrating their intentions'.<sup>45</sup> Such 'in-betweenness' is also close to Donald W. Winnicott's theory of

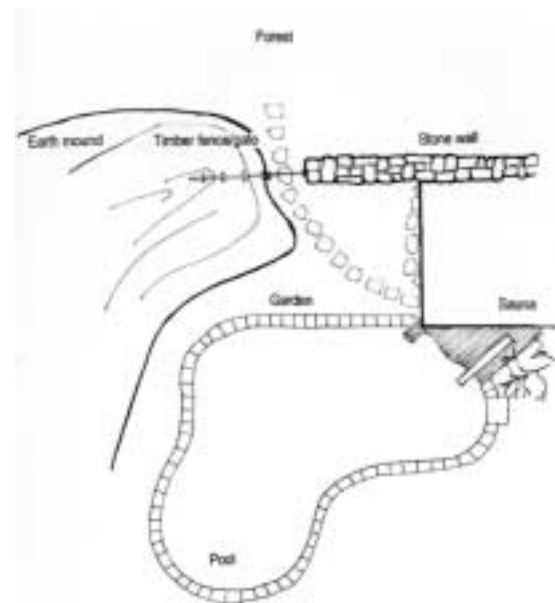
transitional phenomena, a tool for bridging between inner, subjective experience and shared reality of life;<sup>46</sup> between a sense of 'I am', and 'we are'. The gate is a microcosm of this movement both at a physical level, and in the psychological realm; it creates a 'potential space', as Winnicott put it, that comprises fragments of undifferentiated experiences, the bank of perceptions, sensations and feelings – which may be brought to consciousness. As 'potential space', the area around the gate may be understood to become a primary process of identifying self and non-self, and as such may become a microcosmic context for creative, psychological change as one moves towards and through it. In other words the gate episode may be a tool for the exploration of the interplay between inner and outer reality.

In this way the gate offers a process of differentiating from (or put another way 'a passage between') dependence and merger within one environment (such as the safety of the conscious, the known, or the cultured garden) to relative independence in another (such as the unconscious, the unknown, or the potentially hostile forest) [7]. This may then be symbolic of the Kleinian journey from dependence in relation to the familiar environment (i.e. initially fusion with 'mother' in psychoanalytical terms) to one of independence and detachment in another environment beyond (a journey towards 'experiencing' something as 'other-than-me'). Such use of transitional objects is not pathological but, as Winnicott put it, is 'primary and continual', and something that is too little understood in the making of place defining life as a process of inner growth and change. Aalto, too, articulated his desire to design *milieu* able 'to meet psychologies demands for continuous renewal and growth'.<sup>47</sup> In terms of the natural environment of the forest such depth experience is understood by Reunala to rest on a projection of 'mother' onto the forest, evinced in expressions such as 'mother forest' and 'in the lap of the forest', and even the forest experienced as a womb.

The etymology of wood and forest is interesting in this light. Rooted in the Greek *hyle*, which originally meant 'forest', the term grew to mean 'form'.<sup>48</sup> The Romans translated Aristotle's *hyle* (form), into *materia*, which in Latin means wood. Crucially *materia* has the same root as *mater* or mother. So, forest, wood and matter closely relate mother, matter (existence and life) and the forest.<sup>49</sup> Aalto seems to have had an intuitive awareness of this etymology, when he explained that by material, 'I primarily mean matter as substance, and yet the word material means more to me, for it translates purely material activity into the related mental process'. For Aalto the use of wood in particular was a very symbolic act: 'Matter is a link. It has the effect of making unity ... the links in material leave open every opportunity for harmonious synthesis'.<sup>50</sup>

### Primal conjunctions of form

I suggest that a better understanding of the Maireia gate may help explicate what Wilson calls 'primal conjunctions of forms'.<sup>51</sup> This concerns the way in



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13 Plan of area of mound, fence, gate, wall and sauna

14 View of fence, gate, wall and sauna from mound

15 View of gate with brooding forest beyond





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which architectural episodes and experiences interact in such a way that may 'induce' or stimulate certain human emotions, 'stirring intimations' or sensations; those 'unknown modes of being' as Wordsworth put it.<sup>52</sup> This is the process whereby there are stirrings of a-logical or instinctive memories that are virtually physical.

If the gate can be read as 'a play between an inside-outside and the real outside',<sup>53</sup> as Wilson put it, we can ask which is the inside-outside, and which the real outside? The movement of life 'betwixt and between' is the activity of our 'natural imagination' – what Wilson defines as 'the infrastructure of architectural experience ... initial provocation and sustaining scaffold upon which the intellectual constructs and cultural symbols of artificial imagination are erected'.<sup>54</sup>

We have heard the Finnish accent of the cultural depths of the forest above, but the specifics lie at the heart of an individual experience in the garden at Mairea, and back in the psychical memories that are carried there [15]. If the Mairea gate offers a 'passage between' the conscious self and the unconscious, then in approaching and choosing how to use the gate one experiences a vivid juxtaposition of the ambiguous territories of what is inside and what outside [5]. At this moment 'unresolved ambiguity reigns', as Wilson has put it.<sup>55</sup> The experience of safety and enclosure in the garden, of being within, and part of the enclosure, is challenged as one moves towards the gate/fence episode which dematerialises the edge condition of the wall/mound boundary; that 'anxiety between periphery and centre'. It should be recalled that the forest is not generally perceived as threatening in Finland, yet it is also a realm in which the inner self is activated. So movement to the edge of the garden is perhaps more a movement to an interior place, rather than a threatening exteriority.

Indeed, taking a psychoanalytical view, Reunala suggests there is a neurotic symbolism in which, 'the

forest has been seen as benevolent and protective' and yet has also 'aroused fear'.<sup>56</sup> He adds, 'to mother-forest we can project feelings that we were not able to express to our real mother as children'.<sup>57</sup> At another level he suggests an archetypal symbolism, in which familiar forests are held as valuable, reflecting memories of past experiences. These are envisioned as an extension of the self, representing the deepest symbolic level of forest experience, wherein the forest is experienced as the entire unpeopled universe, and we experience something of the 'basic structure' of life, and of ourselves. Thus the design of the gate could be said to have a degree of moral, rather than just aesthetic content. It draws one from social isolation [the forest] to interaction [the garden]; from intra-personal [solitary nature], to the interpersonal reality [communal dwelling], and as such is a moment that embodies an essential drama of architecture. Through the Mairea gate Aalto offers an invitation to the forest, and 'the hinterland of man's mind', to borrow from Jung.<sup>58</sup>

#### Attachment to the archetypal wall

As is typical in Aalto's oeuvre, the precarious joint between these metaphysical realms is strongly rooted. In this case the gate/fence episode relies on Finland's strong heritage of medieval stone walls, often over a metre thick, that signify both physical and spiritual enclosure around the churches. Indeed, Aalto sent his assistant, Bernoulli, to study dry stone walls in western Finland before the Villa was built.<sup>59</sup> These walls utilise Euclid's strong geometric arm defending against the vagaries of the forest geometry, and are a symbolic defence against the forest beasts and pagan deities, with their 'indifference to Man'.<sup>60</sup> Yet, such geometric boundaries were necessary but not sufficient in Aalto's conception of the relationship between the new, Modern realm of Villa Mairea and the forest beyond; he undermined the sureness of the solid moss-covered wall by joining it to the delicate, but

unrefined gate; not so much 'anxiety' as a precarious joint or 'harmos'.

The gate/fence mediates between the contrasting material enclosures of the confident defensive medieval stone wall and the appeasing, symbolic defence of the primeval earth mound, and as its physical form diminishes, the notion of boundary bleeds away into the landscape of the earth – that heap displaced when the most modern of plunge pools was dug, now mounded as a symbolic gesture of enclosure and defence against natural forces. Here the tight physical enclosure of house and wall recedes, and with it both the physical and metaphorical defence of 'civilisation'. The metaphorical palimpsest of pagan defences is pushed up, beyond the gate/fence episode, against the spirits of the forest. Yet over this primeval mound modern life can flow, as if the confidence of its very modernity may seek to cock a snook at superstitions of the nymphs and spirits of the backwoods and of the primitive. Although such mythical beasts may be discharged, Aalto was keenly aware that their psychological correlates may not be so easily dismissed. In the episode of the Mairea gate this transformation is re-enacted symbolically, not with any tangible physical defence, but rather by placing an age-old metaphorical one, the mound, protecting human life from within the realm of the Finnish forest god, Tapio.

#### Conclusion: the rhetorical gate 'in-between'

In published plans of the villa the gate is rarely present, with the exception of Pallasmaa's book, *Alvar*

*Aalto: Villa Mairea 1938-9*.<sup>61</sup> The boundary is thus almost invariably shown to finish with the end of the stone wall defining the end of the enclosure, allowing Euclid's arm to enwrap the wooden sauna building, and come to an abrupt stop. So records and analysis of Villa Mairea miss the intriguing references to both permanency and sacredness of the low, broad granite wall as it precariously ties to the subsequent, more delicate palimpsests of gate, fence and mound, which allow the forest to seep into the place-setting for modern life.

The Mairea gate/fence episode is a joining mechanism. It demonstrates a logic of relations that became instinctual to Aalto, one encouraged in his observation of vernacular compositions and tectonics, but not rooted there alone. That human life and nature (within and round that life) are isomorphic, not only in theory but in practice, was a constant stimulant to Aalto. To work simultaneously with a sensitivity to human nature within, and the wider nature without, encouraged him to write that, 'pure, original nature, with all its magic power, cannot surpass the sight of a landscape to which a human touch has been added as a harmonious, enhancing factor.'<sup>62</sup> I suggest that the gate at Villa Mairea is such an 'enhancing factor', a testimony to this desire to direct the creative hand to enhance the natural environment in the most sensitive and meaningful way. It bears witness to Aalto's capacity to design around the belief that 'great ideas arise out of the small details of life; they spiral out of the earth. Our senses mediate the raw material which becomes thoughts'.<sup>63</sup>

#### Notes

1. J. Pallasmaa, *Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea, 1938-9* (Helsinki: Alvar Aalto Foundation and Mairea Foundation, 1998).
2. Sigfried Giedion, *Space Time and Architecture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 480-2.
3. Giedion called the work, 'illogical – Organic' in an article about Aalto in 1950. Sigfried Giedion, 'Alvar Aalto', in *The Architectural Review* 107 (1950 Feb), 77-84 (p. 77) and 'irrational' in his chapter on Aalto, added to the earlier editions of *Space Time and Architecture*, p. 480.
4. Pallasmaa, *Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea*, p. 93.
5. Gareth Griffiths, 'Drawing in Finnish': *Rethinking Relativism and the Search for Cultural Identity* (TTKK, Department of Architecture: Tampere, Finland, 1995), p. 124.
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  61. It is interesting that neither in the extensive plan drawings nor in the photographs does the gate appear in Richard Weston's *Architecture in Detail* on Villa Mairea, nor the book *Alvar Aalto Houses – Timeless Expressions*, nor in the beautiful *Alvar Aalto: A Gentler Structure for Life*, each of which document Villa Mairea extensively. Richard Weston, *Villa Mairea*, Architecture in Detail Series (New York: Phaidon, 1992).
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arq gratefully acknowledges:  
The author, 2, 4–11, 13–15  
Alvar Aalto Archive, 1, 3, 12

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Anna Hall, curator of Villa Mairea, to Marja Holma of the Alvar Aalto Archive, Jyväskylä, and to Juhani Pallasmaa.

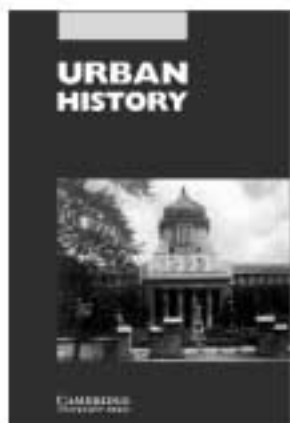
#### Biography

Dr. Sarah Menin's research examines the creativity of architectural place and the mind. Her books include *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier* (co-written with Flora Samuel); *Constructing Place: Mind and Matter*; and *An Architecture of Invitation: Colin St. John Wilson* (co-written with Stephen Kite).


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