

## ARTEK – Furnishing a nation

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*'As a child, I was afraid of this chair. The chair lived upstairs my grandparents house. It was unsteady. It was difficult to climb to sit on it, and impossible to stand on. Adults forbade standing on the chair, and after an attempt even a four-year-old realised the stool was not meant for this purpose. Quite a few others have not been afraid of this chair, because Alvar Aalto 'stool number 60' has been sold in millions since it was first designed in 1933.'*<sup>1</sup>

This is a description by a journalist in a Finnish interior magazine '*Deko*', which leads me to the topic of this paper. This paper begins with two notions: First, it is suggested that an essential part of Alvar Aalto's fame is rooted in furniture designs and the distribution of these via the Artek company, established in 1935. Second, the hypothesis is that so many Finns, far beyond architecture and design enthusiasts recognise Aalto's name still today because the Artek furniture remains to be part of many peoples' mundane, 'everyday life'. The motivation for focusing on Artek furnishings in buildings not by Aalto is on one hand to not tease apart Artek's independent role, but on the other hand, because living in Finland, I have found myself only too often awakening to the realisation of being surrounded by Artek furniture in spaces as kindergartens, hospitals, governmental offices, and libraries.

This paper splits to two parts. The first part offers a summary of what might be referred to as the 'official' history of the Artek company. Moreover, it is the writer and art historian Pekka Suhonen who stands out as the main author of the Artek histories, and who has been referenced since. The other part however proposes an alternative reading, which brings forth an intriguing discrepancy between the 'official' history and the ways in which Artek furniture has been used in practice, as part of existing interior spaces not designed by Aalto's architectural office. The main examples presented are library spaces, where the main source appropriated is the Finnish '*Kirjastolehti*', specialist library periodical. This periodical offers an outstanding source, having published not only new library buildings in Finland, but also newly furnished library interiors in Finland from first years of 1900's to the present day.

### Origins of the ARTEK company

October 15th 1935 four persons, Aino and Alvar Aalto, Maire Gullichsen<sup>2</sup> and Nils-Gustav Hahl signed the agreement establishing the Artek Oy. Four days later the two men and two women

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<sup>1</sup> Kauvosaari, R. *Deko* magazine 2/2013, 26

<sup>2</sup> Maire Gullichsen (1907-1990) was a Finnish benefactor of arts and architecture, of born Ahlström, who were among the wealthiest industrial families in Finland.

gathered at restaurant König in Helsinki to discuss the economic aspects.<sup>3</sup> The art historian and critic Hahl became the first managing director. In their original 'founding manifesto of Artek' the goals are divided to three categories: modern art, industry and (interior)decorating, and publications and 'propaganda'.<sup>4</sup>

It appears that from the beginning the motivations for establishing ARTEK were simultaneously international and local: In 1933 the English architectural critic P.Morton Shand had organised an exhibition of Aalto's furniture, including children's furniture, rugs and glassware.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition raised interest in Aalto's furniture, but the factory producing the furniture in Finland was not capable to answer letters from potential buyers.

On the Finnish side establishing of ARTEK stands out as a project motivated by the four establishing members interests. Maire Gullichsen had a dream of a modern art gallery, Alvar Aalto's and N.G. Hahl's vision was to create a medium for a dialogue with international modernism, illustrated by Artek's letterhead 'A centre for modern furniture and house fittings, exhibitions of art and industrial art'.<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, Aino Aalto's personal interests are more difficult to detect. However, Aino was the one to design the interior for the first Artek store upon its opening. It was already before that Aino had paid close attention to fabrics, glassware and rugs on travels with Alvar, and it is credible that with these in mind, ARTEK provided Aino the channel to make available fabrics and small objects in Finland, which she had found inspiring.<sup>7</sup> To add, it has been interpreted that Aino was instrumental for the future and success of Artek, as Aino was the managing director from 1941 until her passing away in 1949.<sup>8</sup>

Internationally the reputation of Aalto furniture became established in the World fairs in Paris (1937) and New York (1939). In Finland of 1930's Artek was visible to the general public as a small modern store in the Union bank of Finland's building on Fabianinkatu street in Helsinki, and it would not have been common knowledge that between 40 to 50% of its sales were international, directing mostly to the UK.<sup>9</sup> In the 30's Artek furnished for example board rooms and hotels, but its

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<sup>3</sup> The financial basis was provided by a tripartite agreement between Aalto, the producing factory 'Huonekalu- ja Rakennustyötehdas' and Artek. Suhonen, P. 1985, 14 'Artek 50 years - a short history' Taideteollisuusmuseon Julkaisu No 15 ARTEK 1935-1985. Vientipaino Oy Helsinki 1985

<sup>4</sup> The original manifesto is available on the company's webpages at: <http://www.artek.fi/images/37c5713c489142fe74bfe06edb2d25bd.jpg> Accessed April 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Suominen-Kokkonen, R. 2014 'Aino Marsio-Aallon matkapäiväkirja ja Artek' TAHITI 03/2014 Available at: <http://tahiti.fi/03-2014/tieteelliset-artikkelit/aino-marsio-aallon-matkapavakirja-ja-artek/> Accessed April 2017.

Original source referenced: Morton Shandin's letter to Alvar Aalto 3.9.1933. Letter archives, Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. Shand had been also publishing the Finmar company in Finland.

<sup>6</sup> Suhonen, P. 1985, 14

<sup>7</sup> Suominen-Kokkonen describes: The memory list contains glassware by the Aalto's, other designers glassware, list of plates, cups and jugs to be obtained. Also rugs were part of the shop's interior and products being sold through Artek. Among these perhaps most interesting are the Moroccan rugs ordered from Wohnbedarf, which were first exhibited to the wider audiences in Artek's first exhibition in October 1936. Suominen-Kokkonen, R. 2014

<sup>8</sup> N.G. Hahl perished in the Second World War, in 1941, after which Aino became the managing director. described by Alanen, H. 2004, 10 in Kinnunen, U. (ed.) 2004 *Aino Aalto*. Vammalan kirjapaino, Vammala.

After Aino, Artek's management was taken up by Maija Heikinheimo, who continued the basic line of Aalto furniture, interpreting and drawing new models. She was followed by Maire Gullichsen in 1955, and in 1958 Åke Tjeder who had education in administration and sales, continued. At this stage, to expand its furniture basis Artek signed an agreement with the Billnäs furniture factory for the sale of Knoll furniture. Alvar Aalto did not approve of this, and gradually withdrew from Artek. When Maija Heikinheimo died in 1963, Aalto's own drawing office begun to draw, in collaboration with Artek, the interiors for buildings he was designing. In time Alvar's position on Artek's board was taken by his second wife, Elissa Aalto who became the chairman in 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Suhonen, P. 1985, 7

most complete interior at the time was undoubtedly the restaurant Savoy with its banquet halls and private rooms.<sup>10</sup>

Early on, the other form in which Artek made its appearance to the domestic audiences were exhibitions organised in Artek's own premises or the few and rare showrooms in Helsinki. These can be divided to two types. On one hand Artek imported products as Moroccan rugs and Venini glassware on exhibit. On the other hand, perhaps more striking were the art exhibitions organised by Artek. These remained the undoubtedly the most prominent forum for exhibiting modern art in Finland for several decades, among the most notable early exhibitions being the 1939 review of modern French art organised at the Helsinki Kunsthalle.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, upon searching for information, furniture catalogues and the gallery exhibitions stand out as the two types of printed materials to be found upon searching information on the company.

## ARTEK in Finland

Focusing on the question of where Artek furniture has been on public display, there are at least three types of contexts where the furniture has been displayed in addition to exhibitions organised by Artek itself. First, the largest category of events appears to be exhibitions telling of a wider theme, as for example furnishing of a minimum apartment to illustrate the modern way of life.<sup>12</sup> Second, in commercial events primarily promoting sales and/or disseminating knowledge about Artek as a company. Third more category could be recognised to be the art exhibitions or museum contexts with aim to display the pieces of furniture as examples of the time when these were first designed.<sup>13</sup>

This leads me to the alternative reading, namely, the presence of Artek furniture in very different kinds of interiors which are in everyday use - not curated by anyone for the purpose of displaying the furniture. As the quote in the beginning suggests, many Finns have personal recollections of Artek furniture, which most certainly offers a partial answer to why Aalto's name has remained well recognised across Finland, not solely by those with particular interest in architecture and design.<sup>14</sup> However, as noted my original intrigue for writing about Artek furniture rose from the recognition that this furniture is so common in different types of Finnish institutions that it is even easy to make no note of this mundane fact.

Paging through the Artek company's archived materials one comes across range of spaces in Finland: the Finnish travel association office, The School of Economics in Helsinki, the Kauhajoki elementary school, the corset store Sjöblom in Helsinki, several milk bars, Vaasa, Turku and Helsinki airports and so on. These leave no doubt about the myriad of types of interiors furnished with Artek furniture in buildings not by Aalto's office.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Suhonen, P. 1985,14. It is this restaurant which gave its name to Aalto's most famous vase, the 'savoy vase'.

<sup>11</sup> This is an interpretation of Suhonen, P 1985,7

<sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, Galerie Artek was in many ways separate, essentially funded and run by Maire Gullichsen. A short history of the Galerie Artek has been published in Reuter, C & Alanen, L. (eds.) 'Maire Gullichsen Sateenkaaren värejä, Tummia Sävyjä. Muistoja vuosilta 1907-1928 Tammi, Helsinki 2010, 344-349

<sup>13</sup> For example, in the Helsinki Design Museum's permanent exhibition there are several examples of Artek furniture.

<sup>14</sup> In the Artek archives catalogue is note that there is a portfolio of drawings of Maire and other homes and apartments of Maire Gullichsen. Maire Gullichsen's 'homes and apartments' beyond the Villa Maire would offer an interesting topic on its own. Except for this, other private spaces furnished with Artek furniture most likely consist of individual objects rather than entire interiors.

<sup>15</sup> In this paper I am not addressing the issue whether Artek has furnished the entire interior and/or whether an interior designed from Artek has designed these. This would be possible to ascertain from the receipts from different commissions. However, for the purposes of this paper it suffices that the general rule with public and semi-public

However, looking more closely at the photographs of the Artek company along with the articles published in the *Kirjastolehti* periodical from 1950's until the present day, it is possible to get closer to the notion of how Artek appears as mundane interiors in Finland.

This brings forth a totally alternative reading to that which enhances the original ideals when Artek was first established. The following part of this article introduces selected notes on newly refurbished library interiors in Finland of 1950's and 1960's.<sup>16</sup>

### Standardisation and alteration

In the *Kirjastolehti* specialist library periodical of 1951 the architect Tarja Salmio-Toiviainen's description is among the first notes where standardised Artek furniture is described as part of a refurbishing project. She describes the renewed Helsinki City Library on Rikhardinkatu street, which she has been designing. The issues her account reveals is the co-operation between the architect and the local librarian, which appears to be the rule rather than exception in descriptions of both new as well as refurbished library interiors. In other words, this stands in contrast with the Artek advertisements which promote the idea that Artek provides total service, from the design service to all the furnishings.

Salmio-Toiviainen points out that the premiss is that the architect and the library professional both start from a completely different view point in respect to what the project is about, and usually both need to give up something they would have liked to add. She sees it is this mid-way solution which will lead to the best realisation of the interior. The article most of all focuses on describing the furniture, and it is noted that the tables are covered with linoleum, Artek standardised products.<sup>17</sup> It appears that since this point, in numerable articles of this library periodical it suffices to note that a library has been furnished with desks covered with linoleum surface. As the other alternative still at the time was commissioning the tables from a carpenter, it is most likely that remarking the use of linoleum surface refers to Artek tables across the references. The other point this early commentary on use of Artek furniture makes evident is that the interiors were construed with mixing and matching furniture from different sources: it would appear that none of the Finnish library spaces, even when dominantly furnished with Artek furniture would be only and purely Artek.

IMAGE to be added: *ARTEK advertisement*

*(Text in the advertisement: 'Kirjastoseura on hyväksynyt kirjastohuonekalumme yleisesti kaupunkien ja kuntien käyttöön. Suunnittelumme maksuton. Kuvassa Käsikirjasto. A216 kaappi, 112 seinäkirjahylly, 14 tuoli. (Kirjastolehti 1953, 149))*

IMAGE to be added: *ARTEK -advertisement*

*(Text in the advertisement: 'Käsikirjasto - Sisustamme kuntien, koulujen, sairaaloitten, yksityisten ym. kirjastoja (Kirjastolehti 1953, 239))*

A good example of 'hybrid' appearance of a library space is the Imatra town library.

In the professional library periodical it is described how this library is one of the most beautiful realised in our country during the recent years. A system of balconies give the interiors a special

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interiors seems to be that some furnishings are by Artek, and these are combined with other furnishings, light fixtures and objects case by case.

<sup>16</sup> Between 1951 to 1965 which are the years during which the *Kirjastolehti* periodical has most often made note of Artek furnishing in library spaces across Finland, there are close to 40 library spaces of different scales where Artek is explicitly referenced. It is however likely that the number is larger than this.

<sup>17</sup> *Kirjastolehti* 1951 44 vuosikerta, n:o1 'Näkökohtia kirjaston suunnittelussa ja sisustamisessa.' (1951 50-53) Tarja Salmio-Toiviainen

character, because in order to create more floorspace the balcony follows across three of the library's four walls. The furnishings designed at Artek specifically for this interior, the successful shades of colours on the walls and in the rubber floorings and the numerous art works on the walls provide a homey feeling to the library. Under the windows are affixed full height row of bookshelves, the Skanno Libri shelves with adjusted measures, comfortable but presentable group of desks accompanied by a cushioned bench. The lending desks in the adult and children's sections are from Artek, the type which can be constructed of parts, as are the table for displaying books and fixtures for advertisements on the walls. In the children's section there is space for some 2.000 books on the light frame Artek shelves, which can also be added to should more space be needed. In the reference section there are separate reading tables 60x80cm covered with different colour linoleum surfaces. Also in the reference section are Artek shelves, attached from floor to ceiling to wooden shafts. At the end of the description it is concluded that the interior has been designed by the town architect A. Lindqvist with help of the revised sketches by the National Library Board.<sup>18</sup> What this illustrates is that when Artek is referenced, only too often the aspects associated with it are that it has been specifically produced for the interior in question, that Artek furniture is constructed of parts, the different colours and that the Artek furnishings can be later added to, for example in the form of acquiring additional shelves. Thus, there is an intriguing balancing between the idea of standardised furniture and how it is being adjusted and altered case by case. To add, across the descriptions even when there is a mention of Artek company's involvement with designing the specific interior, the person referenced without exception is the contribution of a local architect. Also at least in more important libraries as the Helsinki City Library also the Finnish National Library board has offered its expert knowledge on best arrangement of library spaces, this way enhancing solutions which in the library experts view should have been the best standards to be replicated. In sum, while the Artek furniture was promoted as standardised, it was quite literally 'fitted for purpose' in the specific interiors.

IMAGE to be added: ARTEK -advertisement

(Text in advertisement: *'Haukiputaan, Imatran ja Simpeleen kirjastot ovat viimeisimpiä sisustuksiamme'* *'Standardihuonekaluja - erikoissisustuksia'* (Kirjastolehti 1954, 87))

Descriptions of the library spaces also challenge today's perspective of Artek furniture as typically made of birch wood, tables covered most typically with white or black linoleum surface. In 1957 the specialist library periodical published the seventh branch library of the city of Turku, the Teräslautela library. There, it is pointed out that the furnishings are almost completely from Artek, only the more rare colours. In the adult's section there are two round tables of ash, around them black chairs covered with light colour telon-textile. The librarian describes how they had done their best with architect Sarainmaa to fit a round table in the children's section with no success, until the librarian came up with the idea that the table can just as well be rectangular. The architect had then drawn a nice three meters times 60cm table and positioned around it small chairs with bright red, white, black, and blue seats. For the lending desk the architect had come up with a solution with a special shape till to make it fit, covered in dark green linoleum with grooves on its surface.<sup>19</sup> Thus, admittedly in many descriptions it is not possible to ascertain which parts of the furnishings are by Artek, which are not, but what does remain evident are the combinations and often most unusual sounding colours of the Artek furnishings. Explicitly, thinking of the images of library interiors preceding the appearance of Artek furniture, the interiors are strikingly traditional with heavy wooden furniture lacquered in dark colour which can be deduced even from the black and white photographs. This combined with the ideals of the Artek manifesto had made it credible that still in the 1950's acquitting of Artek furniture needs to have created an entirely different 'modern' atmosphere in the spaces. However, the often referenced darker kinds wood as for example ash,

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<sup>18</sup> Kirjastolehti 1955, 32-33 'Imatran kauppalankirjasto (keskuskoulurakennuksessa)'

<sup>19</sup> Kirjastolehti 1957, 107-109 'Uusia kirjastohuoneistoja'

together with for example chairs in several colours point to the fact that Artek has products have been made available in different epochs in very different shades and colours. Consequently, the rupture from dark lacquered, heavy furniture to use of birch has not been as abrupt as one might presume from today's perspective.

IMAGE to be added: *ARTEK -advertisement*

(Text in the advertisement: *'Sisustussuunnitteluja / piirustustoimisto / erillisiä kirjastohuonekaluja / kirjastoseuran hyväksymiä / täydellinen valaisin- ja verhopalvelu/ suunnittelu ja valmistus / Neuvottelemme tarjouksista/ Keskuskatu 3 Helsinki (Kirjastolehti 1955, 46)*)

To offer one more example, it appears that in many cases the existing buildings have set to large extent the parameters in respect to what has been understood to be the appropriate appearance for the new furnishings. The Turku City Library, originally completed in 1903 designed by K.A. Wrede, representing Northern Renaissance was refurnished in 1963. In this case, it is described how the new bookshelves have beautiful oak veneer and regardless of their light frame are most appropriate for their surroundings with the columns and the ceiling cupola. The round oak tables from Artek and oak chairs covered with blue galon, blend well with the rest of the furnishings and the multi-coloured backs of the books. It is concluded that it has been a most difficult responsibility for the architect and the librarians to renew an old and precious library which had remained in the same condition for approximately 50 years, and as such had become beloved by the citizens. The city department of general works had planned the work, and the renovation had been designed by architect Anja-Inkeri Sutinen to whom the city had funded a study trip to visit Scandinavian libraries.<sup>20</sup> In sum, what many of the descriptions where Artek furniture has been acquired reveal, is that there tend to be other motivations, as the age and atmosphere of the building, or will to update the spaces with informed solutions concerning what had been done in the neighbouring countries. In this sense, I suggest the library spaces offer a more general example, and it is more than probable that other institutional buildings, as city halls, hospitals, schools and kindergartens also accord with the logic of the commissioners wishes and the Artek furniture being adapted to the particular pre-existing interiors.

IMAGE to be added: *ARTEK - advertisement*

(Text in the advertisement: *'Ajanmukaisuus, asiallisuus ja viihtyisyys sekä oikeiden kalusteiden valitseminen oikeaan ympäristöön ovat Artekin sisustuspalvelun tunnuksia. Artekin monipuolinen valikoima käsittää myös asiallisia ja edustavia huonekaluja kirjastoja ja lukusaleja varten Neuvoa tarvitessanne Artekin sisustuspalvelu auttaa Teitä!'* (Kirjastolehti 1956, 227))

## Conclusion

Professor Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, a well known scholar having researched Aino Aalto, has suggested that certain pieces of Artek furniture, in particular items designed for the Paimio Sanatorium and the Viipuri Library which have risen to the position of classics,<sup>21</sup> have consequently blurred our perception of the practical functioning of the Artek company. She asserts that developing new models was important from the very beginning. This however has not been appreciated enough, and much emphasis has been put to the context of Aalto's designs and later Artek items as variations of his works.<sup>22</sup> In particular the descriptions of use of Artek furniture in Finnish libraries support this analysis.

To recapitulate, the main interest of this paper originated from the notion that Aalto's legacy is rooted not only in the buildings but in particular in Finland the Artek furniture and interiors are so

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<sup>20</sup> Kirjastolehti 1963, 8-9 *'Uusittu kaupunginkirjasto Turussa'*

<sup>21</sup> As for instance the three legged stool which the quote in the beginning refers to.

<sup>22</sup> Suominen-Kokkonen, R. 2014

widely spread across the country that Artek could be understood to represent part of the Finnish 'mental landscape'. In conclusion, I want to bring forth two key points which the discussion offered in this paper has revealed. First, that a closer look at particular interiors with Artek furnishings reveals how this standardised furniture has been taken to use not only in interiors designed for range of functions from milk bars to governmental offices, but how Artek furniture has been able to transform from its establishment through the epochs, changing colour and even shape. In other words, in most cases where Artek furnishings have been commissioned for an existing building, the Artek interior has not been a 'total work of art'. Instead, Artek furnishings have changed in appearance in time and for the purposes of specific interiors. The other point this paper wishes to raise is the outstanding difference between the so-called 'formal history' written about Artek company, and the presence of Artek furnishings in variety of types of interiors in Finland in mundane use. The aim of referencing the examples from the specialise library periodical is exactly this practical side to the story. While the colour and exact appearance of the furniture has slightly varied, Artek furniture has been familiar to only so many Finns since the original establishing of the company in 1935, in the form of a three legged stool at their grandmothers house, but perhaps even more importantly, from kindergartens to governmental offices to hospitals - in other words, from the beginning to the end of one's everyday life.

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