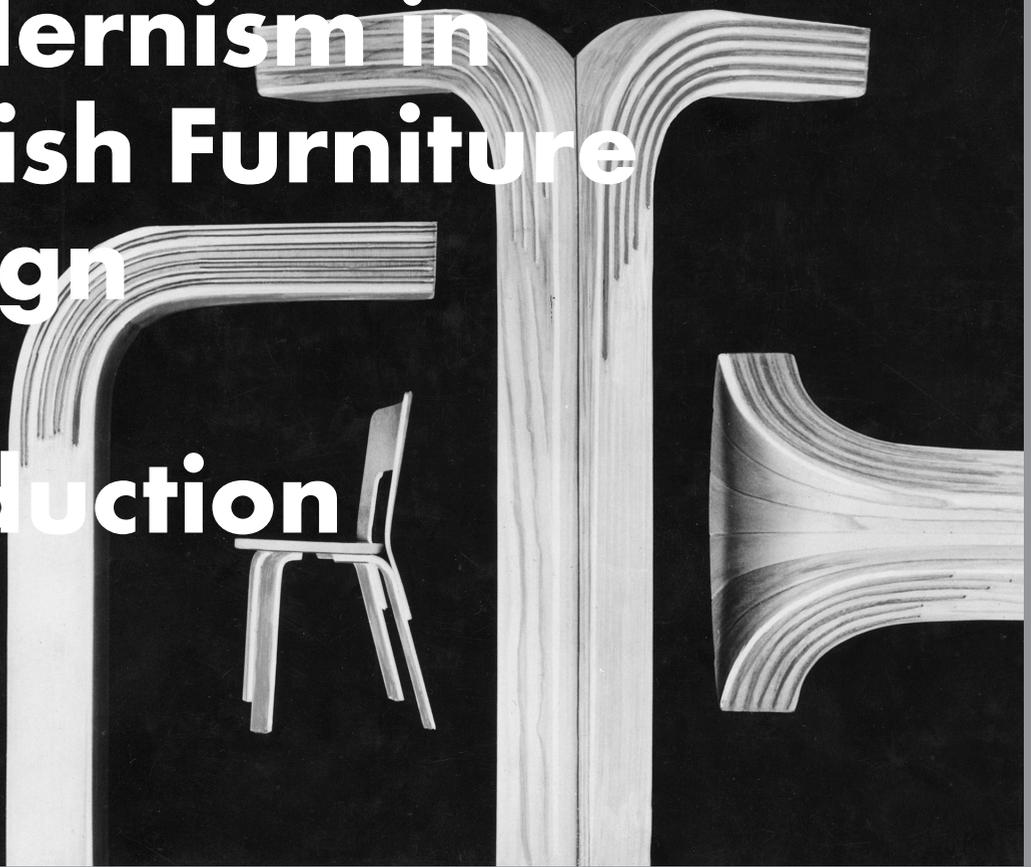


Modernism in Finnish Furniture Design and Production



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When looking at the development of Modernism in Finnish furniture design from abroad the conventional image is Alvar Aalto's Paimio chair descending in 1931 into a desert of traditionalism and starting a new, bright era of Modernity. This cliché is partly, but only partly true. In the following I will outline some major trends in design, use of materials and techniques of production in Finnish furniture before World War II.

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As has been made clear in numerous studies, Modernism entered Finnish architecture quite precisely around 1930, vanguarded by Aalto but also by other protagonists of Modernity as it was already demonstrated by the continental avant-garde and by examples in neighboring Nordic countries. But the production of buildings and furniture have quite different parameters and speeds. Serial product design demands not only a designer and client–user, consumer–but also a context of industry, marketing and distribution. Serial factory production does not in itself lead to Modern products although it is a prerequisite for it.

Furniture industries were among the first ones in Finland to enhance their product lines through professional designers. Among design professions architects used historically to dominate even furniture design which is well exemplified in the oeuvre of Eliel Saarinen. But in the 1920s new designer professionals emerged, coming from the Central School of Applied Arts. Thus, designers like Werner West were now employed by the rapidly emerging furniture industries from the late 20s onwards. The products themselves displayed variations and modifications of historical period styles or of the vernacular sphere. Material was solid wood, although plywood was already used as seats in lightweight chairs of anonymous design. But plywood together with other sorts of laminations came to be the medium for Modernism to enter. This was natural in a country with the abundance of birch forest and a high-level industry to process it. Finnish industries lived from forest and state-owned laboratories and they were developing and testing new ways to exploit these vast resources, not only via chemical processing into pulp and paper but also in the realm of mechanical wood utilization.

< The basic supportive element for most of **Aalto** furniture since 1935 in various scales. This invention made it possible to create a 90-degree angle by using solid birch wood (refer to text for further information).

< An example of **Aalto**'s experiments on how to reach from nature to industry. Below a "natural" object, on top a man-made experiment of gluing together wood particles. Photo: Kolmio. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

So, when the tidal wave of Modernism reached Finland with architecture as flagship it naturally brought with it the need for furniture suiting the new idiom. Architects such as Aalto and Pauli Blomstedt also designed furniture, here following the example of Saarinen, to match their interiors. Often, especially in the case of Aalto, they were commissioned for a public building but became later more widely available as spin-off products. But before going into Aalto's groundbreaking role and wood let us ask: when the continental paragons in Modern furniture by Breuer, Mies and Le Corbusier were realized via tubular metal, how were these formal and technical solutions adapted to Finnish conditions? In building design and production this question was not so pertinent but in serial furniture production questions of price of material, its availability and production conditions were highly relevant regarding the product and its final price. It is a very different case to design and execute a luxurious villa like Villa Mairea than to keep a product line profitable and the company surviving.

Modern furniture of domestic design and production adapting chrome-plated steel tubing certainly made their entry also to Finland in the early 30s. A main figure in their design was Pauli Blomstedt but also several companies produced anonymous furniture such as bed-sofas, cafeteria furniture and items for barber shops. But after a brief enthusiasm, furniture of this kind remained mostly in the public sphere. They were also ridiculed by the press as "anti-furniture" and shunned by the great majority from doing home purchases—that is, for urban homes in a country which up to the 50s was predominantly agrarian. One did not buy avant-garde to serve the functional and cultural needs of a farmstead. So, how did the alternative, Modernism in wood and mainly spearheaded by Aalto, evolve?

The plethora of studies and writings on Aalto—also by the author—has covered exhaustively his furniture design. But here some key points to track the path from daring experiments to everyday public and household items all Finns know and cannot avoid using, so topical they are especially in various public circumstances. And, beyond this, there is the international consumption of which an illumi-



Figure 1. Interior of the Café Fazer in Helsinki from 1930. Architect and interior designer: **Jarl Eklund**. Photo: Roos. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.



Figure 2. *Hotelli Helsinki* (Hotel Helsinki) room, 1930. Architect and furniture designer: **Pauli E. Blomstedt**. Photo: Apollo. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

native case of co-branding is the use of Aalto high-stools painted white in Apple stores. As said above, serial product design always needs an industrial facilitator. In this case the collaboration of Aalto and the innovation-eager furniture producer Otto Korhonen was seminal. The industrialist was out looking for novel products, Aalto searching a mechanism to realize his design concepts. This synergy led to a collaboration upon which the family-based Furniture Manufacturer Company Korhonen is still, in the third generation, able to thrive by relying on designs by Aalto dating to a great deal from eighty years ago.

The innovative aspect of the early Aalto furniture was twofold, technical and formal. Technically the main point was to develop-together with Korhonen's expertise-ways to use different kinds of birch wood lamination and bending frames, and also laminated frames. The results were manifested in the so-called Paimio chairs, originally designed for the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium by Aalto in 1931. Both their laminated and to the users weight reacting seat-back unit and their one-piece frames were truly revolutionary in their own time in Finland and to great extent also internationally. But the most significant innovation was what was to become the basic element for most of Aalto's furniture: the leg unit which bends in a 90-degree angle. For this Aalto was able to secure an international patent and—*nota bene*—not a copyright of shape but a technical patent. The solution was based on sawing narrow cavities in solid birch, inserting in them glue and thin pieces of veneer, heating the item and bending it. The result acted as a piece of monolithic birch wood. This unit, in various scales, opened the way for a vast collection of different kinds of furniture.

But how were these technical solutions in wood to be put into service of a Modern design approach? I would say that Aalto performed a double trick where the technical and formal are intertwined, the technical providing a solution for the design and vice versa. The main issue was to re-interpret the continental examples into domestic technical know-how and materials which were more available and cheaper than steel tubing. The solution, as exemplified by the Paimio chairs, is both aesthetically and technically convincing and, at the same time, the use of wood entailed a certain domesticity at least in Finland, the land dominated by an environment traditionally realized in wood. We cannot forget the fact that these were not merely formal Modern experiments: we may compare the usability and comfort between these and, for example, Rietveld's famous reclining chair.

From today's situation, saturated by Aalto furniture from eight decades—they are not retro or re-launches but have been in continuous production—it is hard to perceive their novelty at the time they were introduced. The move

from commissioned furniture into the realm of spin-offs serving private consumption was not self-evident. They, especially chairs, were strikingly different and demanded a certain effort from the consumer to prioritize them over other items on the market. Their private market coverage in Finland in the 30s was not remarkable. Internationally they won high acclaim for example in Great Britain, Switzerland and lastly in the US. The manufacturer, who depended on labor-intensive practices, was not able to meet the international demand. But, knowing the apparent success of this furniture especially after World War II, raises a question: if Aalto had the designs and the producer believing in him, what about the necessity of marketing and distribution? As we know, many great designs have stumbled on this factor in the chain from design to consumer and the inherent market revenue.



Figure 3. "Paimio" chair designed for the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium by Alvar Aalto, 1931. Photo: Pietinen. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Here we come to the remarkable and rather exceptional palette of a supporting context Aalto had at his disposal. In 1935 the company Artek—still highly operative today—was founded, supported and realized mainly by Maire Gullichsen, the heir of the industrial empire of Ahlstrom Ltd. Artek was to propagate a Modern culture of furniture, interior design and related objects. The main sales objects were Aalto furniture and in addition to that Artek provided commissioned interiors, also equipped with Aalto items. So, from 1935, Aalto had a "full hand": his designs, the supportive producer and a marketing and distribution unit. This symbiosis and its continuing existence is quite unique in the history of Modern furniture. It also explains the wide and historically deep presence of Aalto furniture, especially in Finland.



Figure 4. "Paimio" chair version B. Both "Paimio" chairs demonstrate the use of laminated birch wood, in the seat and in the frame. Photo: Pietinen. © Museum of Finnish Architecture.

I have outlined the conditions for the emergence and continuous production of the so-called Aalto range of furniture. Its "Modernity" is displayed on many levels. It covers Aalto's design intentions, the role of the daring industrialist, the quest for Modernity by the wealthy patroness and the conceptualization of the design-driven enterprise Artek. But, this story is not typical but on the contrary atypical not just in Finland but also internationally. And we have to bear in mind that when approaching the late 30s a multitude of producers in Finland were hiring designers—not architects any longer—to modernize their product portfolio. The fruits of this were to be collected after World War II when the mature profession of furniture and interior designers emerged. We can justly assert that what Aalto and his providing context had achieved before the war set a certain standard.

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