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IN SEARCH OF THE FORGOTTEN WALL
IN THE EARLY MAIREA

“On this great floor space I will install movable walls. [...] These walls are at the same time cabinets for storing the collection. The outside of the walls is for exhibiting the selected pictures. [...] It is like a library of pictures, where some of them are exhibited on the outside and some are stored within.” (Alvar Aalto, a lecture delivered at Yale University, May 1939)¹

The *Villa Mairea* (1937–39) is one of the most representative works in ALVAR AALTO’S (1898–1976) career. For this reason there have been numerous studies and publications on the house.² However, most researchers have not devoted their attention to one major issue raised by Aalto in his public descriptions of the design: first in his Yale University lecture delivered during the construction of the house, and second in the *Mairea* article published in *arkitekten* just after its completion.³ The issue is to create a space that combines art with life for the art collector client, MAIRE and HARRY GULLICHSEN. To fulfil the purpose, Aalto devised, at a practical level, movable walls that could function both as art exhibition walls and art storage cabinets at the same time. Seemingly, it is only recently that this subject has been dealt with by a few researchers (Kim, 2003 and 2006; Suominen-Kokkonen, 2004).⁴ Nevertheless, neither of these studies could afford to explore the situation of the movable wall deeply enough. But studying it in more detail reveals a new story completely untold thus far. In this short article, I will argue that there had been two different types of movable walls in the early *Mairea*,⁵ which will unveil one forgotten face of the *Mairea* interior in its early years.

Aalto’s own description of movable walls In the Yale University lecture, entitled *The Home of a Rich Collector*, Aalto raised one prob-

lem in the architecture of the day. It was the lack of “any real connection between art and daily life” in houses with a separate art gallery. His solution was to design one large single room that could serve both as a living room and as an art exhibition space at the same time, and to install movable walls that could be used both as art display partitions and as art storage cabinets. Because we cannot appreciate many artworks simultaneously, Aalto argued, only selected pictures should be displayed, and they should be easily changed according to the circumstances. About the wall itself, Aalto described it as follows: “The walls must be thick and hollow, about two or three feet, just like boxes. You can place them wherever you wish. They are in no way attached to anything, but are like separate movable boxes. They slide on bases of soft felt. The walls themselves can be opened in several places by thin, light doors. Within the walls are special shelves.”⁶ In a similar manner, Aino and Alvar Aalto mentioned the movable walls in the *Mairea* article: “This room can be partitioned at will with thick, felt-coated, movable walls. [...] Partitions [...] can be grouped freely. [...] The movable partitions also serve as cabinets for the artworks, making it easy to change the paintings on the walls and to display only a few of them at a time if so desired.”⁷

From these descriptions by Aalto, we can extract two important features of the walls concerning function and flexibility respectively. First, they have both functions of ‘art display’ and ‘art storage’. Especially for the storage function, the wall should be thick and hollow like a box and must have doors to be opened. Second, they are mobile and can be grouped flexibly. And the formation of a partitioned or enclosed space by the walls should be easily re-arrangeable. If so, what were the actual executed walls and the completed *Mairea* interior like?

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