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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 problem 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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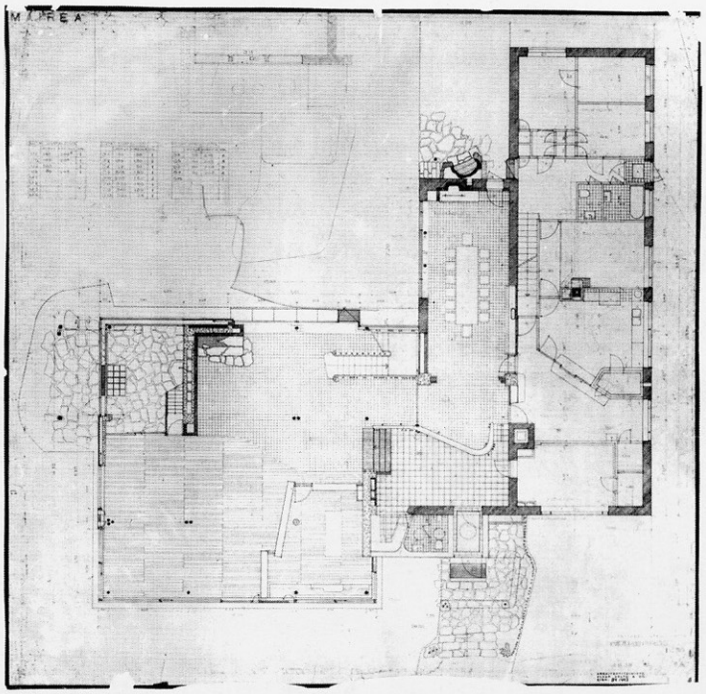
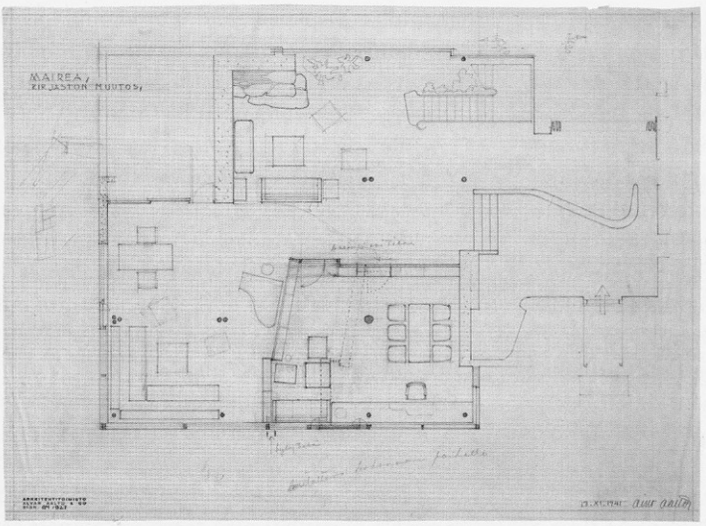




▲ [Figure 1] Ground floor plan of the **Villa Mairea** (AAA 84/443, PRESUMABLY AUGUST 1938 OR EARLIER): The right bottom corner of the square living space is Harry's library enclosed by partition walls.

▲ [Figure 2] Library alteration drawing for enlargement. (AAA 84/927, 13 NOVEMBER 1941).

Ambiguous function and ambiguous flexibility

Up to now, the understanding of the situation, based on GÖRAN SCHILDT's interview with LISBETH SACHS (Schildt, 1986), has generally been as follows. The movable walls were grouped, and they enclosed Harry's library (Figure 1). The outside of the walls was used for hanging paintings and the inside as Harry's bookshelves. But Harry wanted a more confidential space so that business discussions would not be overheard from the outside. Thus, a few years later when the enclosed library area was enlarged (Figure 2), the walls became fixed to the ceiling using a glazed screen.[8] This understanding is by and large correct. Nonetheless, it does not explain some points, most of all, the artwork storage function of the walls. From Aalto's descriptions, we suppose that the inside of the walls should have been hollow and large enough to store pictures, and that they should have had doors through which pictures could be put in and taken out. But Harry's bookshelves do not seem to have fully satisfied this assumption. Even if we take into account the possibility that the walls could have had some compartments for art storage as Sachs said,[9] the inside wall was mainly for books (Figure 3 and 4) rather than for pictures. And the walls were not easily movable. On the other hand, SUOMINEN-KOKKONEN tried a more detailed but slightly different interpretation. She reconstructed the changing situation of the walls and the library in the following order: (1) the movable walls for art display and storage installed; (2) their difficult movability realised; (3) the library set off from the living room; and (4) bookshelves installed in the walls.[10] The major point in this interpretation is that the library was separated not from the beginning but only after the difficulty of the walls' movability was realised. According to Suominen-Kokkonen, it is at this time that the bookshelves were added, deriving this assumption from her analysis of photographs of the early *Mairea* interior. Although her attempt to use the early photos for the study was very critical, and she deserves credit for making the most of them for the first time, she basically overlooked the ground floor plan (Figure 1) for the sake of the photos. As in the plan, the library space had already been set from the beginning. And to give Harry a separate library was one important condition of the 'final design alteration' from the 'Proto-Mairea'.[11]

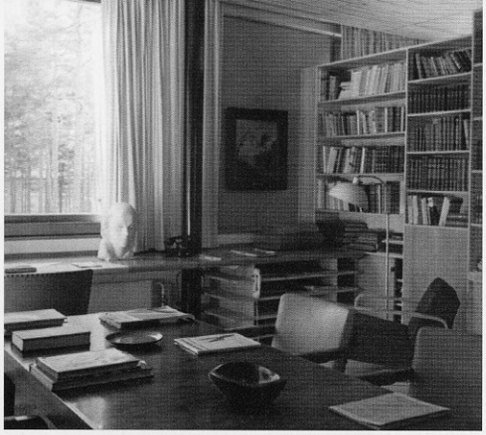
Nonetheless, her trial is valuable owing to the study of the photographs as mentioned. Among them, two illustrations (Figure 5 and 6) are very important. These figures clearly tell us that the position of the wall differed from the formation on the ground floor plan. Considering this alone, we are apt to praise the flexibility of the walls. But what about Harry's library if one wall was turned round? As the space for the head of the fam-

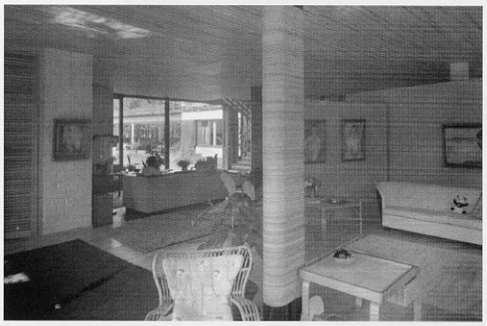
ily, it ought not to have been encroached upon, even if the wall arrangement was changed. Moreover, we should not miss another significant fact that the heights of the two walls differ in the photograph taken from the so-called 'music room' (Figure 5). It arouses our curiosity. What is the reason for the difference in the wall heights?

Existence of 'the other' wall These questions can be answered only through a close investigation of early photographs,[12] which would lead one to conclude that another partition wall had existed. The existence of 'the other' wall apart from the library walls completes this puzzle. Because it was not drawn on the ground floor plan like other furniture and disappeared early from the living room, it has been unknown thus far. As described above, we can see a partition wall that is a little shorter than the library ones in Figure 5. This wall must be the same one shown in the photos taken from the staircase side (Figure 6) and from the courtyard (Figure 7). Differently from the library walls, both of its sides were used for art display and the inside for art storage. This usage conforms exactly to Aalto's statement.[13] Although still ambiguous, the art storage function could also be supported by the Aaltos' own illustration (Figure 8) published with the *Mairea* article. This picture shows a large 'box-like' partition wall. It has two doors at the end: a larger one in the lower part and a smaller in the upper part.[14] They could likely be opened in order to put in and take out pictures. All of these photographs also indicate that this wall was positioned roughly in parallel with the oblique line on the living room floor pattern change (Figure 9). Harry's library walls did not change their position, so to speak, but it is this wall that stood beside them obliquely.[15]

As a result, we can affirm that there were two different types of partition walls in the early *Mairea*. One is the 'nominally' movable wall forming Harry's library and the other the 'practically' movable wall for art display and storage. Because Aalto had to satisfy Harry's spatial demand along with sticking to the concept of "a large, continuous room" that "can be partitioned at will",[16] he needed the 'nominally' movable walls. They were theoretically movable but practically difficult to move. And it is the 'practically' movable wall that better serves Aalto's somewhat obsessive concept. With the help of this partition wall-cum-cabinet, an easier change of pictures became possible, which was Aalto's solution to make life more related to art. It does indeed seem that this wall was truly movable. This flexibility means that the spatial combination of art and life could be changed more interactively, depending on the situation.[17]

For a few years after the completion of the house, the practically movable wall seems to have functioned in accordance with the architect's guidelines. Yet, it lost its proper





▲ [Figure 3] Partition walls for Harry's library bookshelves in the early **Mairea**. (AAA 84/004/356).

▲ [Figure 4] Present situation of Harry's library bookshelves. (PALLASMAA, 1998, P. 128).

▲ [Figure 5] Partition wall situation seen from the so-called 'music room' (AAA 84/004/336): The heights of the two partition walls differ.

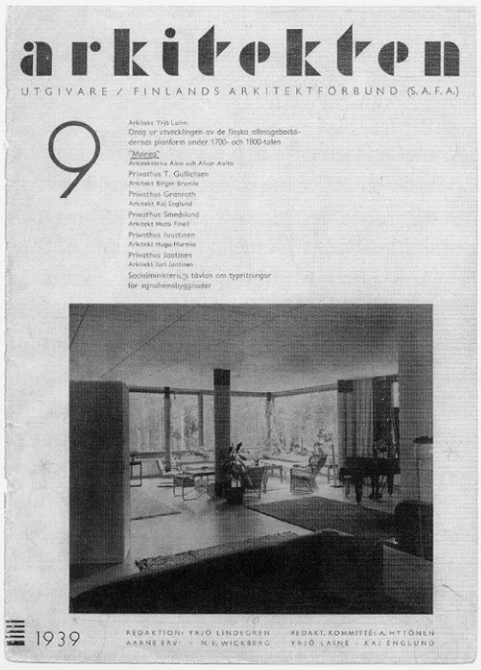
▼ [Figure 6] Partition wall situation seen from the staircase side. (AAA 84/004/331)

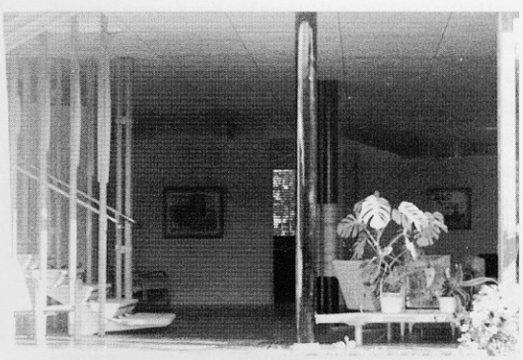
▼ [Figure 7] Partition wall situation seen from the courtyard when the large glass doors are removed: The brightness and contrast of this photo was digitally adjusted to show the walls more clearly. (PART OF AAA 84/004/132)

► [Figure 8] Cover page of **arkitekten** no. 9, 1939 with **Villa Mairea** living room photo: There are two door handles at the end of the partition wall.

place when Harry's library was broadened to occupy almost one fourth of the whole living room area (Figure 2), and after the alteration it disappeared from the *Villa Mairea* living room forever. Perhaps the extended library wall area complemented the lost art display wall. The large mansion also had enough space to store artworks, especially in Maire's ample studio on the upper floor.[18] Since then, the practically movable wall has become forgotten in people's memory little by little.[19]

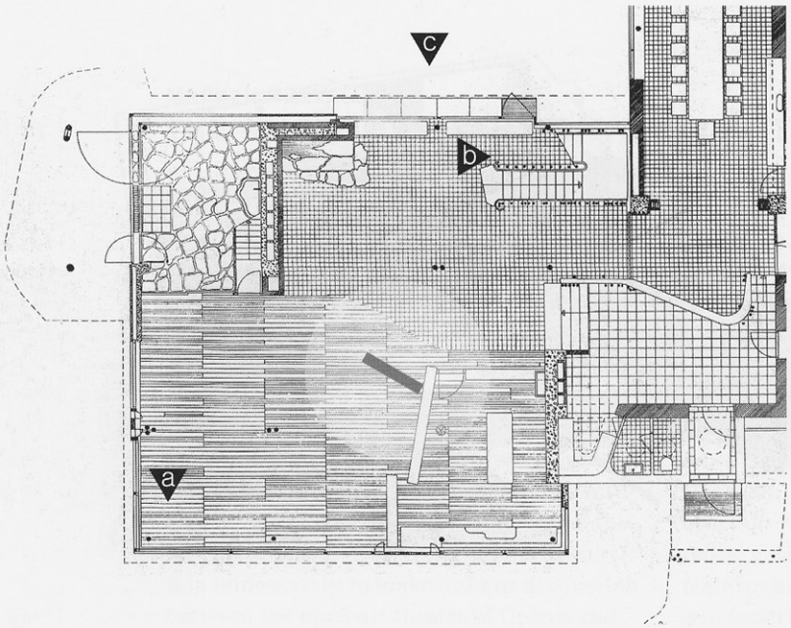
Conclusion In this article, I raised a question about the movable walls in the *Villa Mairea* living room, devised for art display and storage, pointing out a gap between Aalto's





description of them and Harry's library wall system. In short, the function and flexibility of the actual executed walls shows a subtle difference from the architect's original intention. Early photographs of the Mairea interior both amplify the curiosity of this difference and hint at the answer. I argued that another wall, a 'practically movable wall', must have existed, one that must have been both flexible and functional as in Aalto's intentions. This wall has been completely forgotten, but it serves to bridge the gap. While remaining rather ambiguous, it offers a better understanding of the architect's statement and a much clearer picture of the early Mairea interior.

However, this discovery of the lost wall is like picking up one fragmental fact. What is more important is that this wall supports Aalto's creative adoption of the art display principle – that is, some pictures are exhibited and others are stored, and they are frequently changed. Thus far, it has been generally thought that Aalto obtained this idea from LE CORBUSIER's *Vers une architecture*.[20] But in a recent publication (Kim, 2006), I suggested a new possibility that it had originated from the Japanese 'tokonoma' tradition.[21] Considering this idea, does this wall not signify more fundamental things beyond the retrieval of one house's lost memory?



▲ [Figure 9] Location of 'the other' partition wall used both as an art display and storage unit: The views from 'a', 'b' and 'c' correspond to Figure 5, 6 and 7 respectively.

Acknowledgements

I give my sincere thanks to Prof. Renja Suominen-Kokkonen of the University of Helsinki and to the Alvar Aalto Academy, who generously provided me with a working place in each institution and supported my research between October 2005 and January 2006.

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1 *Alvar Aalto, "A Home of a Rich Collector," Lecture delivered at Yale University on 9 May 1939, partly published in Alvar Aalto: In His Own Words, ed. Göran Schildt (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), pp. 225–229.*

2 *Not only are there many articles and books purely devoted to the Villa Mairea, but most books on Aalto and most general history texts on modern architecture also contain a chapter on this house. For example, Villa Mairea: Architecture in Detail (Weston, 1995) and Alvar Aalto: Villa Mairea 1938–39 (Pallasmaa, ed. 1998) may be the most representative monographs on it.*

3 *Aino and Alvar Aalto, "Mairea: Maire och Harry Gullichsens Privathus, Norrmark," arkitekten 9 (1939): pp. 134–137, republished in English in Schildt, 1997, pp. 229–230.*

4 *Hyon-Sob Kim, "Fusion of Architecture, Art and Life: Red House and Villa Mairea" (paper presented at the 20th EAAE Conference, Four Faces – The Dynamics of Architectural Knowledge, Stockholm-Helsinki, May 8–11, 2003), pp. 83–86 and "A Study on the Influence of Japanese Tokonoma on Aalto's Art Display Concept in Villa Mairea, 1937–39 (text in Korean with English abstract)," Geonchuk-yeoksa-yeongu (Journal of Architectural History), vol. 15, no. 3 (2006): pp. 43–57; and Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, A Library of Art? – The Villa Mairea and Notes on the Gender of the Art Collector (Pori: Pori Art Museum, 2004).*

5 *Here, the early Mairea means the house before the alteration of Harry's library in 1941. The year 1941 is merely the time when the alteration drawing (13 November 1941; see Figure 2) was made, so it is quite possible that the actual work may have been completed later.*

6 *Schildt, 1997, p. 229.*

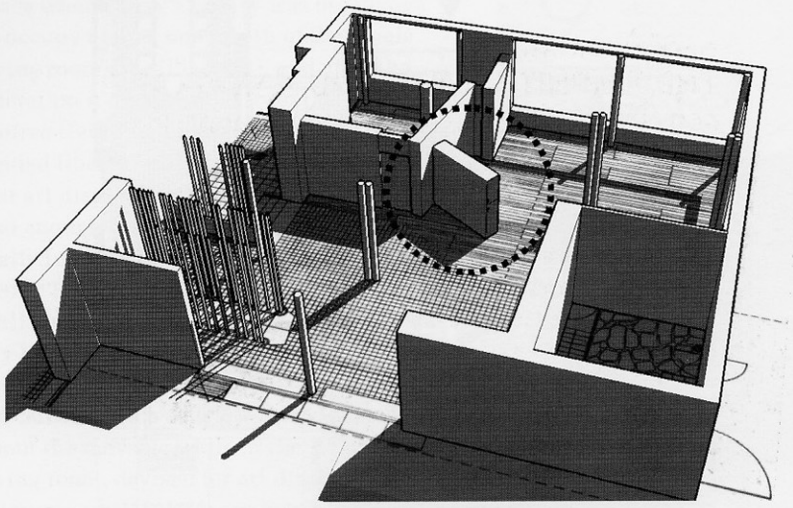
7 *Ibid.*

8 *Göran Schildt, Alvar Aalto: The Decisive Years (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 159.*

9 *Schildt, 1986, p. 159. Indeed, one version of the library plan (84/600; drawn in September 1938 but altered in December) shows dot-lined boxes in the walls, which presumably indicate the compartments. But they occupy very small parts of the whole library walls.*

10 *"The Gullichsens stored artworks in the moveable, box-like partitions that were also used for displaying them. It was, however, technically more difficult to move the partitions than Aalto may have imagined in 1939. They set off the library from the rest of the ground-floor area, and shelving for books was installed on the opposite side of the partitions. This naturally restricted their moveability." Suominen-Kokkonen, 2004, p. 36.*

11 *Schildt, 1986, p. 159. The name 'Proto-Mairea' was coined by Schildt (1986, p. 154) for the first completed design of the house. Concerning the whole process of the Villa Mairea's design development including the 'final design*



▲ [Figure 10] Computer 3D reconstruction model of the early **Mairea** interior with 'the other' wall.

alteration', see Hyon-Sob Kim and Peter Blundell Jones, "Villa Mairea, The Lost Memories," ptah 2004:1 (2004), pp. 17–28.

12 *The Alvar Aalto Archive keeps over 500 photographs of the Villa Mairea but at the very most, only a dozen show a certain part of the movable walls in the early Mairea. Author's research at the Alvar Aalto Archive in Helsinki between October 2005 and January 2006.*

13 *One difference in this situation from Aalto's argument is that the practically movable wall seemed to be only one, not many. But we know that the plural expression of "walls" or "partitions" includes the library walls.*

14 *I am indebted to Suominen-Kokkonen for drawing my attention to this fact (Author's discussion with Renja Suominen-Kokkonen on 23 November 2005). But it was the author that later noticed the photograph's publication in arkitekten 9 in 1939.*

15 *However, it is also not clear whether or not this wall had ever actually changed its position.*

16 *Schildt, 1997, p. 229.*

17 *His intention to make the different types of walls could also be supported by early drawings of each (see AAA 84/601 and 912), though the executed systems were unlike the drawings. Unexpectedly, Harry's library wall drawings made in 1938 (see AAA 84/601, 602, 675, 676 and 679) already had the soundproof screen, though the screen style was different from the one executed in 1941 (see AAA 84/929). The screen was not installed in the early Mairea, undoubtedly because Aalto wanted the living room to seem like one "continuous room" and the walls to have 'flexibility,' at least in theory.*

18 *Likely, Harry's library walls are still able to store artworks in their lower parts, but they were mainly for his book storage purpose.*

19 *In an interview with the author in Helsinki on 2 January 2006, the clients' son Kristian Gullichsen – a seven-year-old boy at the time and now an elderly man in his mid-seventies – did not deny the possible existence of this wall but could hardly remember it.*

20 *Schildt, 1986, p. 159 and Suominen-Kokkonen, 2004, p. 54.*

21 *I raised this opinion on the basis of two facts. One is what Aalto said in the Yale lecture: "We know that the Japanese home never displays many pictures at one time, but they change the pictures from week to week and from month to month." The other is the fact that Aalto referred to Tetsuro Yoshida's Das japanische Wohnhaus (1935) regarding this house design (Pallasmaa, 1998, p. 98). When explaining 'tokonoma' in the Japanese home, Yoshida describes: "Tokonoma or Toko (picture recess): [...] The picture, called Kakemono, is frequently changed just like the vase and the other ornaments; the selection of the pictures follows the season, to whose mood they are adapted. When the Kakemono is not displayed, it is rolled up and stored in a chest." (p. 59; This translation generally follows the English edition "The Japanese House and Garden" of 1955 but I altered it on the basis of the original version.) I maintain that Aalto's description of the Japanese home in the Yale lecture was his reiteration of what he had read about tokonoma in Yoshida. For more arguments on this, see Hyon-Sob Kim, "A Study on the Influence of Japanese Tokonoma on Aalto's Art Display Concept in Villa Mairea, 1937–39" (text in Korean with English abstract), Geonchuk-yeoksa-yeongu (Journal of Architectural History), vol. 15, no. 3 (2006): pp. 43–57. I am currently preparing an English version of this article for publication.*