

## HindCite

# Whatever Happened to the Modern House?

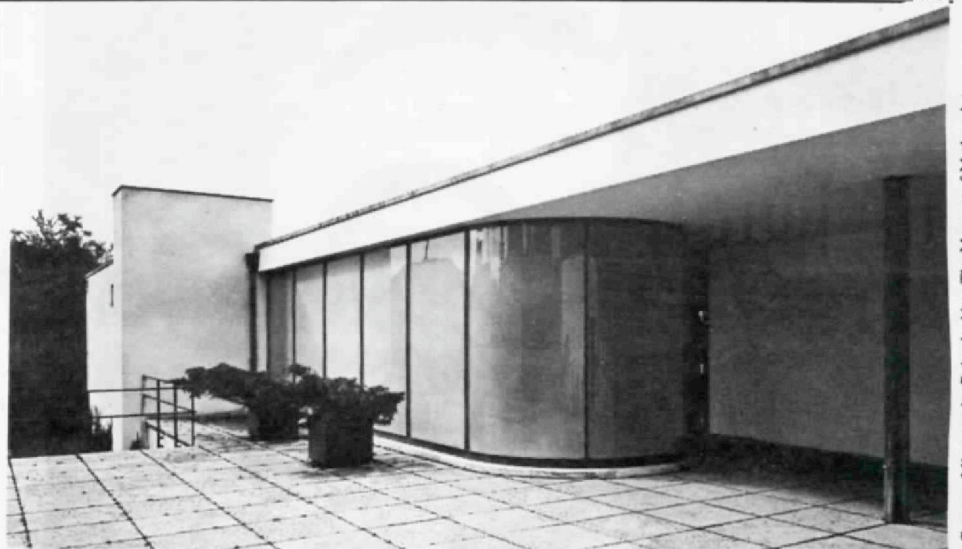
A Personal View

Malcolm Quantrill

In answer to the question "Who invented the postmodern house?", I should have to answer "Eustace Papavas, in the mid-fifties." Papavas was minding his own business at the time, which mainly consisted of designing houses for fellow faculty members at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. But suddenly he discovered that his professional career was in deep trouble. For Papavas was a committed modernist, and the faculty houses he designed were neat and trim, with clean lines and no nonsense. The difficulty was not with his clients, however, for they all enjoyed their Papavas houses without exception, commending the architect to their friends and thus keeping him busy. But they were all relatively young teachers, and American faculty are highly mobile in their early years. When they came to sell their unfussy, trimline houses, they found themselves in trouble, because the market they were competing in was not at all characterized by a sense of modernity. Rather it was solidly American in its hunger for *kitsch*. Why, for heaven's sake, y'all know that house is synonymous with *plantation* home, and it don't take no education to know that even a suburban villa has its li' ole portico!

When Alvar Aalto opened his first office in Jyväskylä in 1923 the romantic

classic style was the prevailing mode of design throughout Scandinavia. Yet Aalto never designed a private house in that style, and by 1927, when his original entry for the Viipuri Library competition showed his admiration for Gunnar Asplund's Stockholm Library, he was already turning his back on romantic classicism to explore International modernism. His private houses, his own studio-house in Munkkiniemi (1935), the Villa Mairea (1937-1939), the Maison Carré (1956-1958), the Villa Kokkonen (1967-1969), and the unbuilt project for the Villa Sambonet near Como (1954) are all determinedly conceived in Aalto's unique transformation of modernism. They recall the particularization of national romantic houses in Finland by such masters as Sonck, Gesellius, Lindgren, and Saarinen. From 1935 onwards, beginning with his own house, Aalto attacked the formal masses of the International style houses built by Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Mendelsohn in the '30s. On the other hand, I should like to suggest that it was Le Corbusier's *ventilation* of the outer skin of the Villa Savoye and the Maison Cook that prompted Aalto to carve into and erode the cubic masses at Munkkiniemi and Noormarkku. Or does the interpenetration of volumes and erosion of the outer membrane derive from Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House, which



Tugendhat House, Brno, Czechoslovakia, 1928-1930, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect

Aalto saw on his visit to Holland in 1928? Knowing Aalto's *lateral-mindedness* in design, it was probably "both-and" rather than "either-or." Certainly, whatever his immediate sources of inspiration and transformation, Aalto's modern houses succeeded in replacing the formula of De Stijl and the International style with what he himself called "life-enhancing charm." For Aalto's modern houses are no mere demonstrations of theoretical precepts: *they are eminently livable and comfortable!* As Reima Pietilä has put it, he practiced *eclectic modernism* rather than modern eclecticism. Unlike our enterprising Athenian in Louisiana, Eustace Papavas, Aalto did not resort to designing houses with cool modern interiors and sultry, mini-plantation exteriors. Aalto, of course, built only five private houses, including his "experimental" cottage at Muuratsalo, while Papavas's real estate "club sandwich" sold, as it were, like hot cakes.

I am reminded of a story told by Donlyn Lyndon. When Euine Fay Jones of Arkansas got the commission to build a smallish house on the East Coast he pointed out that travel to and from the site would make his fees prohibitive. He therefore suggested that Lyndon, being based in Boston, should do the job. Lyndon designed the house and it was built. He heard nothing from his clients for some years, then suddenly came a phone call and an invitation for drinks. After the second martini he dared to ask the couple if anything was wrong. They confessed that, yes, there was a problem, because whenever guests admired their home they invariably asked: "But, tell us, what sort of house is it?" This embarrassed the clients as they did not know what to say. It was clearly neither Colonial nor traditional. As I recall, Lyndon thoughtfully suggested that they simply reply: "It's our style," since to imply that it was *modern* could not possibly satisfy those who had posed the question in the first place. ■

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