Pure: Life and Design in Finland

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pure

life and design in Finland
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My experiences traveling to and living in Finland have affected my life in powerful, unexpected ways. It had been my first time traveling outside the United States and Canada and I was frightened to take on that challenge alone. However, my worries quickly melted away as I was met with abounding warmth and generosity (a trait unfamiliar to me) from many different Finns along my journey. Finland has shown me a peacefulness and light that I had never found before. This country, and my research completed there, has changed the way I see things in the world today. I treasure my time spent there and the relationships formed, and I eagerly await the opportunity to return. Finland is a beautiful country in so many ways and I anticipate continued success and world-wide acclaim in the future, for this small, mysterious land.
A Mistaken Identity
There are no polar bears in Finland

Finland just might be the world’s most interesting country that Americans know the least about. This rarely noticed little nation has the world’s best education system, some of the most liberated women (the president is female), more cell phones per capita than Japan and America, one of the world’s best high-tech companies (Nokia), remarkable information technology of many kinds, great music from rock and jazz to classical, and a long history of remarkable design. Finland is relatively large, compared to many other European countries, but sparsely populated -- 5.2 million souls, or about 10 percent smaller than metropolitan Washington, D.C. Finland is a beautiful country with a deep-rooted sense of time-honored values and traditions that is full of talented and interesting people. There is much to discover and learn of in this land that still remains largely undiscovered by the rest of the world.
What About Design?

Great care and thought given to the world.

What does design mean to the general public? Making spaces and objects aesthetically pleasing? Decorating a living room? The expensive handbags sold in Saks Fifth Avenue? In reality, the field is far more encompassing, and this book is an attempt to give exposure to many areas of design that are lesser known. There are creative people designing everything we see around us, from the cars we drive, to the lights in our homes, to the patterns on our clothes. Designing is more than making objects look good, it is problem solving- improvements that make every day a little nicer, a little more interesting, and a little more meaningful. In the words of the famous designer Clement Mok, “It’s not rocket science. It’s social science- the science of understanding people’s needs and their unique relationship with art, literature, history, music, work, philosophy, community, technology and psychology. The act of design is structuring and creating that balance.”
Alvar Aalto brought a fresh interpretation of the Modern Movement functionalism to Finland in the early 1930s by rejecting the sharp, angular aesthetic of the Bauhaus. This German design style was internationally influential in the early 20th century. The difficulties of World War II brought about an overwhelming need to boost national self-confidence. In the resulting years of optimism and renewal, designers such as Tapio Wirkkala and Maija Isola molded a distinct and rich language of design that took their work to an entirely new level. Clearly removed from the aesthetic blandness of functionalism, Finnish designs projected an alluring forward-looking vitality that perfectly embodied the spirit of the age. The “Golden Age” of Finnish design is often seen as the 1960s and early 1970s. The sensitive handling of materials and the promotion of evocative organic forms remained defining features of this period. Finnish products received acclaim as much for their technical inventiveness as for their innate artistry.

International Exposure

Forty years of dominance in design

Alvar Aalto, Savoy vase originally designed in 1936
Metsänverotuksen siirtymäkauden päättymiseen.
Pinta-alaverotuksen piiristä myyty puumäärä kasvoi samalla kun.
Myyntiverotukseen siirtyneet metsäomistajat vähensivät myyntejään. Vuonna raakapuun nimelliset kantohinnat laskivat edellisvuodesta keskimäärin prosenttia ja reaaliset (tukkuhintain-deksillä muunnetut) kantohinnat keskimäärin prosenttia. Mäntyjä koivukuitupuun hinnat alenivat hieman jo alkuvuodesta ja muidenkin puutavaralajien hinnat kääntyivät laskuun kesällä.
Kuusitukin koko vuoden keskikantohinta päätyi silti prosentin korkeammalle kuin vuotta aiemmin ja mäntytukki piti pintansa. Koivutukki ja kuitupuutavaralajit sitä vastoin halpennivat prosenttia edellisvuodesta.

Metsäteollisuuden tuotannon kasvu johtoi vastaavaan suuriseen nousuun hakkuumäärissä ja samalla kaikien aikojen suurimpana metsäteollisuuden puunkäyttöön.
Markkinahakkuut kattovat noin kolme neljännestä metsäteollisuuden raakapu tarpeesta. Puun hintat kääntyivät laskuun aluksi salla, joka jo vuoden keskipäivänä halpennut, ja koko vuoden markkinahakkuut olivat jo edellisvuoden keskilukua.


Alvar Aalto
(b. 1898 - d. 1976)

One of the pioneers of organic Modernism and Finland’s most celebrated architect and designer
"Inspired by the relationship that exists between mankind and nature"
Maija Isola

(b. 1927 - d. 2001)

Isola’s color-saturated and patterned fabrics have had an enormous influence on modern textile design.

Maija Isola in her studio in the late 1970s

Maija Isola, Unikko Poppy, textile for Marimekko, 1962

Alkukesän runsaiden ostojen myötä teollisuuden yksityismiestä tammikuussa ostama puumäärä oli vielä prosenttia sa olevien tilojen osuus yksityisesti metsäteollisuudelle myymästä puusta vuonna oli prosenttia, eli kymmenen prosenttiykköä enemmän kuin edellisenä vuonna.

Metsäomistajat selvästikin valmistautuivat Maukiin vuonna metsäteollisuuden tuotannon kahden prosentin kasvu johdosta sairaavan suuriseen nousuun.

Metsänverotuksen siirtymäkauden päättymi se

Puutuotannolla oli otettua kuivatuksissa ja kuutopuussa

Hintojen kääntynyt nousu on ensinnäkin huuto-,

Metsäverotuksen siirtymäkauden päättymi se

Vuonna alku¬

Puutuotannolla oli otettua kuivatuksissa ja kuutopuussa

Hintojen kääntynyt nousu on ensinnäkin huuto-,
A Unified Voice

Beginning a new era of success

Fresh, young designers from Finland are reinventing modernism in new and unexpected ways, not to be outshone by the work that made Scandinavian Design so popular in the 1950s. Finnish design is something of a paradox. While the nation is home to the internationally respected University of Art and Design in Helsinki and has a long history of great design, there is still one missing piece. Not many Finnish manufacturers are hiring recent graduates in-house. And companies that work with freelancers often recruit big names from abroad. With a small market at home and classic designs of perfection to contend with, young contemporary Finnish designers are facing unique challenges and taking matters into their own hands. Up-and-coming designers in Finland are promoting themselves, starting their own companies, producing their own designs, and thinking globally.
Paola Suhonen, who has lived in Helsinki for her entire life, followed in the entrepreneurial footsteps of her parents when she started her own company, IVANAhelsinki, in 1998. By the time she graduated from the University of Art and Design in Helsinki (with a degree in fashion and textiles) her company was already running quite well. However, Paola traveled abroad to work in Milan for some time.

“I wanted to go abroad just to make sure that I did not want to stay there. I met people from big fashion houses such as Prada and Gucci and I knew I didn’t want to do trendy fashion or luxury brands without any values. I knew I wanted to go home and continue the work I had already started.”

The element that makes IVANAhelsinki particularly unique in Finland is the combination of modern Scandinavian style with a traditional Slavic touch. Finland’s Russian past is rarely celebrated in such a fashion. Quirky patterns inspired by this Eastern Bloc culture, nostalgic traces from the 1970s, and feminine delicate details are Paola’s design trademarks. IVANAhelsinki clothes are full of “positive melancholy” and hope of tomorrow, camping spirit, homemade feeling, and childhood memories.

To Paola, “one of the greatest benefits of starting your own company is not just the visual and creative freedom, but the ability to put your own values on the things you produce.” Paola is a strong advocate of ethical production and ecological responsibility and awareness. Every single IVANAhelsinki
A Unified Voice

Paola Suhonen, Bauhaus collection, jacket

piece has been produced in Finland. IVANAhelsinki is driven by these principles that support and improve the company’s homeland.

excerpts from an interview with Paola Suhonen in the summer of 2005:

what is this “camping lifestyle” you refer to? It’s a lifestyle which I have just named camping lifestyle- it could be called anything else. When I started to do my work and find my own style and inspiration, everyone was taking their inspirations from other places in the world. I thought, if we are coming from Finland, then we have to express the feelings that have started from our own roots. We can’t go to Japan or India or anywhere else and try to get the feeling from there. It’s not real- and the art work has to be really real.

For me this camping lifestyle is combining this feeling from the 1970s when families here in Scandinavia often went camping in caravans and went sailing. They did different things together with the families- it was really like a community kind of lifestyle. This lifestyle was also somehow quite nature-oriented with different kinds of ethical values and ecological values. These are spontaneous people who are interested in the arts and culture. In my work, it’s not getting back to something from the past, but taking something from the past and making a new lifestyle of today.

how do you balance your freelance work? The inspiration for IVANAhelsinki and my freelance work is the same thing. It’s artwork- created in my own world filled with my childhood memories.
are Finnish designers loners?

That is somewhat of a cliché—everyone is sitting at home doing their own thing. I think it has changed. I personally like the idea of people doing things together. Sometimes when it comes to artwork, you have to do it by yourself to have your own style, etc. However when it comes to operations such as exporting and marketing—everyone has to cooperate because Finland is a small country. Everybody can’t go on their own to try to sell their stuff. So we need to package design, food, music, and many things as new Finnish, contemporary, modern life. Finland is such a weird place of its own—the same spirit is alive everywhere.

Paola Suhonen’s Bird pattern applied to an innovative package design.
Jukka Korpihete at the opening of his exhibit in Helsinki

"My luminaires are designed to interact with their environments."

Spending just 15 minutes in conversation with Jukka Korpihete will forever change the way you think of light. To Jukka, who was just named Young Finnish Designer of the Year 2006, light is a unique medium which can be manipulated to completely transform a space. His Ara luminaire, for instance, was designed to evoke the experience of sitting under a tree on a sunny day through his innovative use of shadows.

Jukka has done extensive research with the University of Art and Design in Helsinki into the theoretical aspects of light and the culture surrounding lighting. In spite of the unique seasonal natural lighting conditions that exist in Finland, Jukka recognized that this was an area of design that had been largely ignored. The majority of lighting in use today serves the purpose of only making a dark space lit. In reality, there is the possibility of having different lighting styles for various parts of a building, depending on the needs and desired atmospheres. This has been Jukka’s focus in recent years: creating unique and appropriate atmospheres with light.

Jukka has been designing and producing his own light fixtures for some time now and also selling them under his own name. At the same time, he engages in lighting designs for interiors (such as libraries) and also facades of restaurants and hotels. By request, this lighting designer will also create a limited, one-of-a-kind art piece. Just in the past year, Jukka partnered with Ilmari Issakainen to start Byrolights, a company dedicated to having a positive impact on the lighting design field.
When it comes to his designs, Jukka always tries to place the emphasis on the light itself, while making the structure of the lighting fixture as simple as possible. As he designs, he’s essentially playing with the light and the control he can hold over the material. Jukka’s luminaire designs are meant to decorate a space by creating light shapes and shadows. As he describes, “I want them to bring forth the experiential properties of light alongside its technical properties.”

One of the most interesting aspects of lighting design is that it’s a constantly evolving field. There will always be new technologies and new buildings that need cutting-edge lighting. For Jukka, this presents him with the opportunity to always do something fresh and interesting.

Jukka Korpihete, Ara luminaire

Jukka Korpihete, Sankari luminaire

Jukka Korpihete, Kenro candleholder

excerpts from interviews with Jukka Korpihete in the summers of 2004 and 2005:

are you currently selling abroad?

I am selling my products mostly in Finland, but I have a lot of contacts abroad and a lot of interest. Unfortunately exporting is not so easy when you are dealing with lighting devices. It’s not wise to send these products to some countries (like the U.S.) because the electrical systems are different. They would have to be manufactured in the States and then sold by a company there. I would have to have a licensing deal. It would be useless for me to send products that can’t be plugged in- I definitely don’t want to start any electrical hazards!
what challenges do new, young designers in Finland face?
One challenge is to get employed! It’s nice to see that many young designers are doing these small-scale businesses and doing it all themselves like artisans. It has been difficult for young designers to work for large companies. They are not using many designers and there are a lot of designers out there. Designers are learning a lot by working in small shops and starting small companies that may become bigger ones. I think it’s good that people aren’t waiting for these already established large companies anymore.

Is it difficult to work globally from Finland? No, no, not anymore—it’s easy. There are a lot of ready-made connections. You just have to learn how to use these connections, so you don’t have to build everything from the first step.

does the government support design?
Very much! I don’t think many people know how to apply for this government money and benefits—it’s kind of a mess. There are so many different offices and you need to make marketing and business plans. They aren’t just giving it away.

I haven’t been using the government’s support much, but now we are making a business plan for the new company we’re setting up for selling my lamps and products. The government will help then and also provide consultants that will also assist to make sure we create a company that finds success. It has been hard to make a business plan since I’m not the one who understands the business words—money money money—very commercial, but it has to be.

do you market yourself?
I’m all the time working to get interviews for myself, but when it comes to sales there needs to be a new division, because I am so bad when it comes to selling my own work.

do Finnish companies support new design?
Hopefully they will learn because it would be the best support for young designers and all designers. In Finland, there aren’t so many big companies that are really concentrating on using designers. I think it would be interesting if more small companies would use designers to help their product development. That would create a lot of new projects for designers.

what role do you think design will play in Finland’s future?
Hopefully there will be more small companies doing their individual work and also many levels of design companies and designers doing more unique pieces. In the future, I hope you can somehow see the difference in Nordic design instead of everything blending together. Now that we are moving that way with people living in very similar ways and culture getting so similar in western countries, it is only natural to get assimilation in the design world also. I try to design lighting that looks like Finnish lighting. I don’t want to lose that.
IMU Design
Saara Renvall, Elina Aalto & Krista Kosonen

Three ambitious, young, female designers with a dream of organizing international exhibitions decided to found a self-appointed National Design Team for Finland. Under these pretenses, IMU was founded by Saara Renvall, Elina Aalto, and Krista Kosonen in 2002. The overall goal of IMU is to help emerging designers easily make the transition from school to professionalism by giving them an opportunity to exhibit their work and talent.

Every year, the three IMU coordinators accept work submissions from designers, many of whom are still students. The works for the individual annual show are then chosen by a jury consisting of well-established Finnish designers. The chosen designers and IMU coordinators then travel abroad to participate in an exhibition. Over the past few years, IMU has held exhibitions in London, Milan, New York, and then Helsinki (in celebration of the Design Year 2005). Each year the process is begun again in order to constantly give new designers the opportunity to participate while the alumni become more established on their own.

Currently IMU is a non-profit organization that relies on sponsors and support from the government to fund their efforts. However, Saara, Elina, and Krista have a future vision of IMU gaining for-profit status as the group is able to get more designs into production. They believe that design is not truly design until it has reached its final user. They will act as intermediaries for the designers to assure the fresh, new designs are given the freedoms they deserve. Often emerging designers

IMU Design founders Elina Aalto, Krista Kosonen, and Saara Renvall
A Unified Voice

are overwhelmed by the limits and demands placed on them and can be easily taken advantage of for their talent due to their inexperience. Even though IMU at times makes it difficult for the original founders to focus on their own personal work, they plan to continue to grow IMU together.

excerpts from interviews with Saara Renvall and Krista Kosonen in the summer of 2005:

how does Finnish design stand out from that of the rest of the Nordic nations?

While there are many similarities, one thing that really makes Finland stand out as different is our country’s history. Finnish society is young and the culture isn’t that old either. So many other European countries, like Sweden, have had those old royalties and a cultural life with money and fancy things for so much longer than Finland has had good things. I think that makes a huge difference. Finland has never had too much money or time— they just solve the problem and don’t add anything that doesn’t have a purpose there. Things are changing now. As our society progresses, we have more things, but culture-wise, we are still a bit from the forest—not too European.

would it be better for young designers if the old designs weren’t so successful?

Just because the old designs are still in production, doesn’t mean that there aren’t good things happening now or that they won’t be picked out. It is good that we have classic designs. They stay and they...

Saara Renvall, Sununtai rocking chair

Mari Relander & Anne Katrine Till, Anemone hanging light fixture

Saara Renvall, Sununtai rocking chair
And when we go abroad, it’s nice because we group together. It’s a tight community of designers in Finland. You can offer more if you are a diverse group of designers working together.

do Finnish businesses support new designers?
It is small companies that should be encouraged to use design and designers–they could make a bigger difference now. But they are afraid of the investment. There are people who believe in good design, but they don’t have the money to invest in it, even though in the long run, design could make so much money for the company.

how are young designers of today different than the classic Finnish designers as people?
The profession is different. Now you have to be interesting, you have to network and work in groups; today you need to have more skills as an individual. Back then you would have very long-term relationships with a few companies. Nowadays, you have to find your own work and work with several different groups of designers.

Today, Finnish designers are working in a large, connected community.

do you think design will play an even larger role in Finland’s future?
I hope so, but there needs to be education of the whole society and the companies. They need to understand the entire process of making an investment and the various results you might experience. Design has the potential to bring companies significant profits.

still interest people. If it’s good design, I don’t care who designed it, whether they’re old or dead or young: it doesn’t matter.

is it more challenging to work from Finland?
It is difficult to get the work. You have to be creative because we don’t have the market here. You have to work abroad and we are hard to work with since we’re so far north (which is also a good thing. It’s interesting to live here).

do you ever consider leaving Finland?
No, not really. It’s nice here for many reasons. I like to travel, but I would never consider moving somewhere else because of the work. I find it really easy and fun to work here. Communication is much easier because everybody really knows everyone else. And when we go abroad, it’s nice because we group together. It’s a tight community of designers in Finland. You can offer more if you are a diverse group of designers working together.

Today, Finnish designers are working in a large, connected community. You can offer more if you are a diverse group of designers working together.

Jeremiah Teschin & Alex Estadieu, Capital Tableware
It was in Finland where Brian Keaney (originally from Ireland) and Tony Alfström met while studying ceramics and glass at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. They were drawn together by their common interest in exploring and developing new ideas. Together Brian and Tony founded Tonfisk Design at the end of 1999 out of the frustration of seeing so much sameness in design and the belief that there was a gap in the market for innovative, idea-driven tableware.

Tonfisk Design had been welcomed to the design scene by extensive interest and press coverage from the beginning, both internationally and in Finland. The WARM range, combining ceramics and wood, was already featured in Wallpaper magazine by the end of 1999 and quickly became one of the year’s trendiest items. Tonfisk Design hit the ground running, and hasn’t stopped since. They continue to find success with each product they introduce to the market. Today, Tonfisk products can be found in nearly thirty different countries.

Tonfisk products are marked by simple, beautiful, and functional designs with a smart twist to them. The objects are reminiscent of traditional Finnish design in their use of cork, wood, and other natural materials. Brian and Tony pride themselves in producing their products with a high, handmade quality. As of now, all of the products are produced out of the Tonfisk studio in the suburbs of Helsinki. They enjoy the hands-on approach they take to producing Tonfisk designs. It’s through this process that many new ideas are born.
excerpts from an interview with Brian Keaney in the summer of 2005:
where did you get the name Tonfisk from? Tonfisk means ‘tuna fish’ in Swedish. The name was chosen late one Finnish winter night because no other name seemed to fit the values of the company- innovative, personal, Finnish. ‘Tonfisk’ didn’t seem to either at the time but we liked it. Funnily, nowadays it seems to fit just right!

what’s the benefit of your diversity in backgrounds? Because I’m coming from abroad, I’m not just thinking within Finland. Why couldn’t it sell in Ireland and if it can sell there- then why can’t it sell other places? It’s the same thing- you just go talk to shops and see if they like it and if they like it, they buy it, etc. Now, more people are doing what we’re doing and people have learned from what we’ve done, but things were different when we started. At that time, most companies were focussed just on Finland. Since Finland joined the European Union in 1995 or ’96, exporting and selling to other EU countries has been much easier and cheaper. The EU makes a larger home market for everyone.

can you explain your motto? Form follows function doesn’t mean all objects have to look the same. In general, people usually think everything needs to look the same if the function is the same, but it doesn’t if you just use your imagination. There are a 1000 ways to do something if you are not so lazy and are willing to
think beyond the obvious answer. At Tonfisk, we believe that if you work at it harder you get newer kinds of things. But when you want to make something interesting, it doesn’t mean you have to make something that doesn’t work. A design can be different or interesting and still have a function that makes sense.

would it be better for young designers if the old designs weren’t so successful?
I don’t think so. The way we see it, it’s a benefit. The work that has been done before, and the recognition and reputation that it’s gotten, helps us when we go places and say we’re from Finland. We’re already up to another level. It’s because of our classic designers that people hold Finnish design in high regard. The old stuff also provides a lot of basis for magazines to do stories on Finland. Because of that, they also find the new, exciting things that are happening here in design. I don’t necessarily see it as a problem for young designers, it just means that their work has to be something that is going to be better to replace it.

do Finnish retail companies support emerging, young designers?
No. As an outsider, I would say definitely not. Artek, Iittala, and even Marimekko do very, very little—maybe one or two small things and projects with different Universities. They don’t actually make it a priority to hire young designers.

This may be partially due to marketing pressure. In a lot of ways, the biggest Finnish companies are still living off the classic products from designers of the Golden Age. They have been very slow to react and bring out new designs. It has been easier for their marketing people to work with designs that have already been successful in the past, rather than putting effort into building up something new.

The famous glassware company, Iittala, has been trying to get big, already established, foreign designers to work for them. They think the names will make it easier to interest the press and get into new markets. The company assumes that no one would be interested in a young, unknown Finnish designer— even if the product is very interesting. But I think, in general, consumers don’t care or even know the name of the designer. In the end, they buy the products they like and the things that interest them.

I don’t think companies should use only Finnish designers and I understand that, as a company, you have to make decisions that are in the best interest for the business. However, I do think they have been very lame in not using more Finnish designers. There is talent in Finland— you can find good designers here. At times, companies aren’t even using a majority of Finnish designers.

In general, I think there is a lack of courage and these large companies aren’t willing to take any sort of risk. For young designers, in our own small companies, we don’t have any other choice but to take many risks.
Moving Forward

Progression through connections

In the upcoming years, Finland is going to continue making design a distinct priority in their culture. The government is supporting design with legislation at a national level. Their expansive policy is to promote innovation, educate the local public and business world about the value of design, increase exports, and strategically market Finnish designs internationally. Young designers are being encouraged to look for inspiration abroad and to also take some time to work and collaborate in other countries around the world. Future products are going to combine incredible design with technological innovation in an effort to create more economic stability and a higher quality of living. Finland will continue to become well known internationally for its high class design, original products, and technological know-how. The challenge for the rest of the world is to try their best not to fall behind.