

DESIGN & DECORATING

MY FAVORITE ROOM

Does This Look Like 1939?

The design moves—from an Alvar Aalto house built nearly 80 years ago—that inspire superstar architect David Adjaye today



TRUNK SHOW Alvar Aalto brought a Finnish forest setting into this 1939 house with earthy materials and elements that recall tree trunks.

BY SARAH MEDFORD

GHANAIAN-British architect David Adjaye crafts buildings that are the Marlon Brando of the designed world: brooding and weighty, resistant to easy interpretation and a bit mysterious. They tear you away from whatever else you're looking at, or thinking about, to

say, "Follow me, you won't be sorry." Best known in this country for his 2016 National Museum of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C.—a stack of geometric forms clad in perforated bronze—he has also turned out private homes here and abroad. His latest book, "David Adjaye: Living Spaces" (Thames & Hudson), reveals his predilection for tucking everyday life behind massive, dark-hued walls.

Which makes his reverence for this airy 1939 getaway on the west coast of Finland a surprise. Villa Mairea, designed by Finnish modernist Alvar Aalto for art collectors Maire and Harry Gullichsen, is a sybaritic retreat with generous windows, walls collaged from stucco, wood, stone and tile, and balconies facing dense pine forest. When Mr. Adjaye visited the house, open to the public, about 25 years ago, he most admired

Aalto's mastery of spatial storytelling—especially in the open living area. "It's clearly a room, but also not," he said. "Somehow, you're in an architectural forest."

Structural columns wrapped in wood or rattan evoke trees, as do the extended balusters of the showstopping staircase. Aalto's wife and lifelong professional partner, Aino Aalto, marshaled just a few simple furnishings, letting the interior and exterior merge into

one permeable, shifting landscape flanked by slatted-pine ceilings and tile floors. "Aalto doesn't just frame the view, he brings the view in to you," said Mr. Adjaye. "That's a complete invention that I continue to learn from. It's very powerful and difficult to do because it can become very kitschy."

Start by resisting the call of twig furniture and taxidermy, and find deeper inspiration in nature. As great architects do.