

A House That Belongs To History: A House That Belongs to History Cont. It Belongs to History C...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE Architecture Critic of The New York Times

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THE great houses of history offer the visitor the double pleasure of their experience as works of art, and intimate glimpses into the lives of great men. But only a few privileged tourists and a handful of serious students have seen one of the finest houses of this century, by one of its most respected architects: Eliel Saarinen's little known, richly romantic monument to Art Nouveau and Finnish nationalism called Hvittrask, 10 miles west of Helsinki. If present plans come to fruition, a foundation will open Hvittrask to the public as an international cultural center.

Since Art Nouveau and related turn-of-the-century styles are reaching a peak of popular interest, the house is a discovery that will be prized by the period's devotees. But Hvittrask is not camp. It has none of the dated, awkward, transient taste that so charms the sophisticated esthete. Its style is timeless, although

specifically of its own time. Its sensitive, almost theatrical relationship to nature in a country of extraordinary natural beauty, its modern spatial vision, and its superbly coordinated interiors and furnishings that combine straight-lined geometry, the flamelike forms of Art Nouveau and peasant crafts, make the house a masterpiece of the early modern movement. In addition, the drama of Hvittrask over its 66 years of existence—loved, left, abandoned and restored—rivals the poetry of its design.

Hvittrask was built by three young Finnish architects, Herman Gesellius, Armas Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen, in 1900-01. Eliel Saarinen was the famous father of the equally famous American architect, Eero Saarinen, who designed some of the world's most noted structures before his death in 1961. The elder Saarinen lived and worked at Hvittrask until 1923 when, after one partner had left

and the other had died, he emigrated with his family to the United States. His body rests on a wooded slope at Hvittrask, the home that he loved with a singular dedication.

The name Hvittrask means "white lake," and the lake is there, 180 feet below the natural ledge on which the complex of stone and timber buildings sits like some medieval Finnish hill town, in a magnificent setting of pines, birches and mossy rocks descending steeply to the water's edge. The house is as sympathetically allied to its natural setting as the more famous home of Eliel Saarinen's contemporary, Frank Lloyd Wright—the legendary Taliesin, at Spring Green, Wisconsin, designed a decade later.

The two great houses share some basic characteristics of the tradition-shattering architecture of the time. The breakdown of interior walls, the remarkable sense of open space flowing from one huge room to another,

was an international turn-of-the-century rejection of conventional planning. The love of natural materials, here granite and wood; a new, simple kind of furnishing for the new space, with rug-draped wall sofas, tables and chairs, hangings and fabrics designed by Saarinen and his wife Loja—all were part of the early 20th-century esthetic revolution.

But Hvittrask is more than textbook proto-modern or fashionably Art Nouveau. The early years of the century are known as the period of Finnish "national romanticism"; the same movement that created Hvittrask produced the music of Jean Sibelius and the poetry of Eino Leino. Both men were visitors to the Saarinen home, where the intellectual and artistic ferment centered. Hvittrask reflects the emerging national Finnish taste in its great wooden ceilings and plastered and decorated vaults that consciously *(Continued on Page 67)*



HVITTRASK—Terraced walls tie Eliel Saarinen's turn-of-the-century home near Helsinki to a ridge above a lake.



SPLENDOR—The entrance hall has a baronial air. The timber roofs, plaster walls and glazed tile stove-fireplace are traditional elements framing a modern, open space furnished with original Saarinen pieces and antiques. The fireplace "conversation pole"—for holding while talking—is one of many Art Nouveau details.



SYNTHESIS—A room between the entrance hall and studio wing recalls Finnish folk art and architecture in its stenciled wall patterns and vaulted ceilings. A rug woven by Saarinen's wife, Loja, covers a corner sofa and continues onto the floor. Colors are red, blue and natural against dark wood.

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recall the Finnish architectural heritage of Carelian timber construction and medieval stone churches. The synthesis of experiment and tradition, of architecture and folk art, gives the house its evocative richness and national quality.

After the Saarinens left for America, his sister lived in Hvitträsk for a while. The furnishings were gradually dispersed and the house was sold. The rest of the story belongs to a woman named Anelma Vuorio, who bought the house after World War II and whose love for it equalled Elie Saarinen's.

Mrs. Vuorio, a small, chic blonde, has ranged in her activities from writer and war correspondent to documentary film maker. For the past 17 years, with funds and encouragement from her husband, a prosperous lawyer, she has pursued the restoration of the house. She searched Helsinki's auction records with the instincts of an archeologist and the tenacity of a police detective for listings of the Saarinen furnishings that had been sold. They were re-purchased when possible. Copies were made from old photographs or originals to fill in missing links. She added Finnish antiques and appropriate new textiles where necessary.

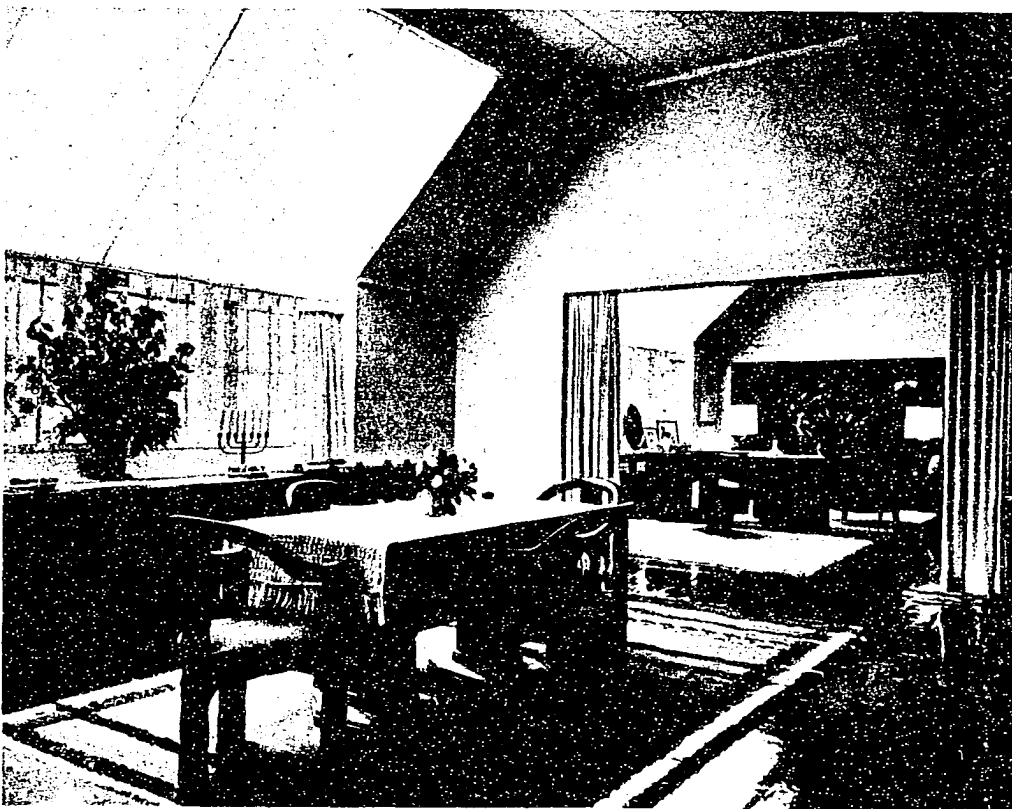
The result is not a "pure" restoration; part of the style of the house is her own. This is a sensitive and respectful preservation of the character

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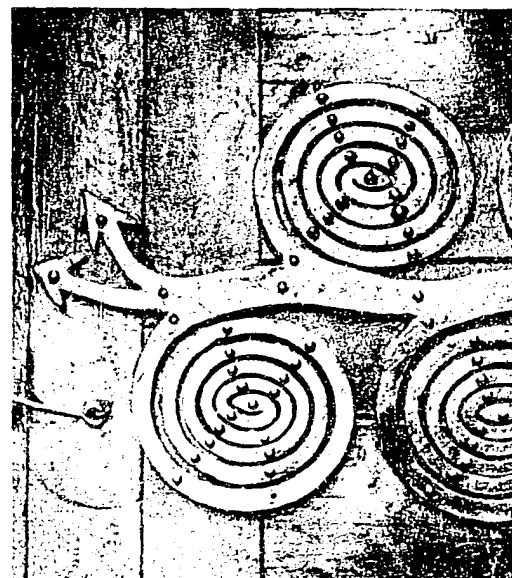


FURNITURE—In the studio, are Elie Saarinen's desk and chair, designed in the early years of the century and still handsomely contemporary. Saarinen drawings line the walls behind.

FITTINGS—This outside door hinge of wrought iron is typical of the splendidly handmade iron and copper details throughout the house, all showing the sinuous, curving lines of Art Nouveau.



STUDIO—Used as a dining room now, this double room was the architectural workshop of the house. Light that floods and models the space comes from windows and skylights.





▲ **TEXTILES**—One of Loja Saarinen's finest weavings is this sofa-rug with blue and orange flame motifs sweeping across the floor.

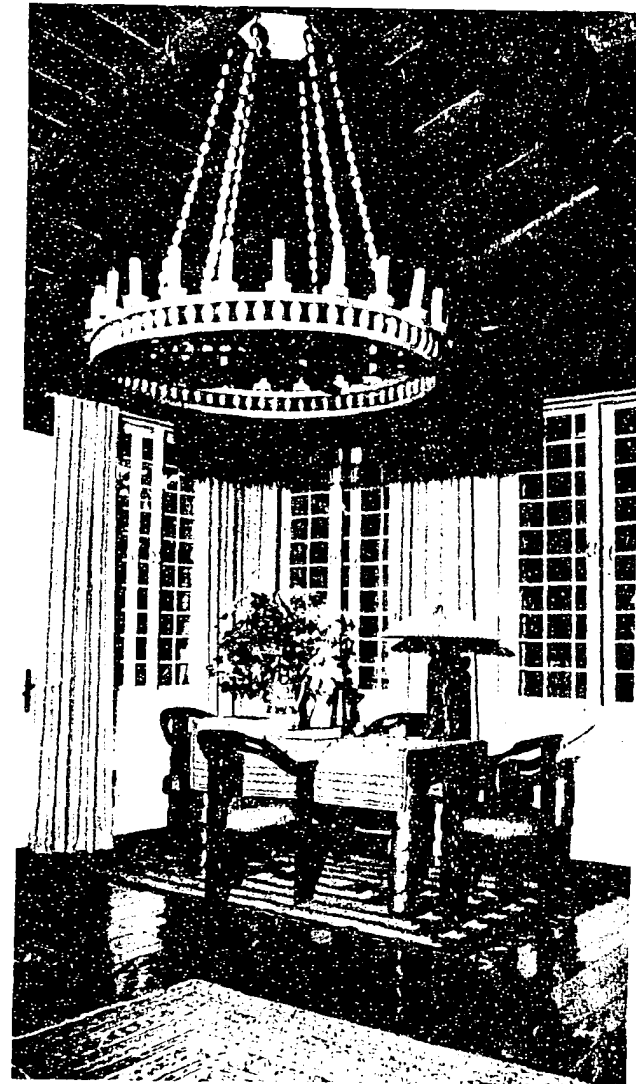
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of the building, with its magnificent, indestructible spaces and many of the original, museum-calibre furnishings, plus a full complement of Saarinen drawings documenting much of his work of the period. The interiors have not been restored to their 1901 state, although there was enough of a record to attempt to do so. Yet the spirit of Hvitträsk is intact.

The restored Hvitträsk has served as an unofficial guest house for the Finnish Government for more than a decade, with Mrs. Vuorio acting as hostess to visiting American generals, British royalty and Russian diplomats. "We have served as a bridge between East and West," she says of herself and the house. Although they seem one and inseparable, she plans to give up Hvitträsk soon, to insure its future.

Because she is convinced, with scholars of the period, that Hvitträsk is a national treasure, Mrs. Vuorio offered to sell it to the government last fall. The Finnish parliament debated purchasing it to make its guest house status official. This would have kept it closed to the public, but negotiations failed. The foundation now being formed under joint private and government auspices will carry out Mrs. Vuorio's plan to make Hvitträsk a center for international cultural conferences, guaranteeing its preservation and opening its doors to the world for the first time. The house now belongs to history.



▲ **FOCUS**—A large wheel chandelier in the timbered main hall highlights an elegantly carved table and chairs of Saarinen design.

▲ **CRAFT**—The copper fireplace hood, with its decorative swirls and border, is a striking example of Art Nouveau invention. It shields a monumental hearth with the logs arranged upright in the Finnish manner.