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**Afra e le Altre**

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# Afra e le Altre

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# Sommario

7 *Afra e le Altre*  
Claudia Cavallo, Fernanda De Maio, Maria Grazia Eccheli

## **Afra e il suo paesaggio**

17 *a/BA. La casa di Afra e Tobia Scarpa*  
Michela Maguolo

35 *Abitare Casa Scarpa / Fotografare una casa*  
Carlotta Scarpa e Alessandra Chemollo

51 *Luciano Semerani e Gigetta Tamaro, Casa Semerani a Conconello*  
Antonella Gallo

81 *La casa per i matti e la casa per lo psichiatra che li ha liberati*  
Giuseppina Scavuzzo

## **Casa per Noi**

101 *Bottero+Riva, la casa nella casa*  
Annalisa de Curtis

121 *Genere e rivoluzione domestica*  
Alberto Ghezzi y Alvarez

133 *Piccolo mondo moderno*  
Alberto Pireddu

143 *Lo Stökli di Flora Ruchat-Roncati e Leonardo Zanier*  
Carlo Toson e Christian Toson

## **Casa come Noi**

155 *Abitare la messa in scena*  
Maria Grazia Eccheli

177 *Tra Aino ed Elissa, le case manifesto degli Aalto*  
Fernanda De Maio

195 *“L’abitazione del nostro tempo non esiste ancora”*  
Giulia Conti

209 *L'interno della forma aperta*  
Guido Morpurgo

295 *Abitare la montagna incantata*  
Francesca Belloni

311 *Tracce di un percorso architettonico in Suzana e Dimitris Antonakakis*  
Clarettta Mazzonetto

325 *Nature Is at Home Here*  
Laine Nameda Lazda

337 *La casa di Penelope e Harry Seidler*  
Mattia Cocoza

345 *Hopkins House*  
Eliana Saracino

361 *Robert Venturi e Denise Scott Brown: A Domestic Manifesto*  
Rosa Sessa

373 *Abitare il tempo*  
Claudia Cavallo

389 *Modernità arcaica*  
Francesca Mugnai

437 *La casa come spazio dell'anima*  
a cura di Roberta Albiero

**Recensioni**

449 *Alison & Peter Smithson, Upper Lawn, Solar Pavilion*  
Susanna Campeotto

453 *Gli indistinti confini, un libro di Teresa La Rocca*  
Giuseppe Marsala

459 *Ripetizioni, aggiustamenti*  
Marianna Ascolese

465 *Recensione di Gli spazi delle donne. Casa, lavoro, società, a cura di Michela Bassanelli e Imma Forino, DeriveApprodi*  
Alessia Scudella



# Nature Is at Home Here

## The Studio House of Kaija and Heikki Sirén

Laine Nameda Lazda



1 | Kaija e Heikki Siren nel loro ufficio di Lauttasaari, Helsinki

The art of urban civilizations tends toward staticity, solidity, and symmetry. It is governed by the representation of the human body and the mathematical knowledge pertaining to monumental architecture. Nomadic art tends to a greater or lesser extent to be portable, asymmetrical, dissonant, restless, incorporeal, and intuitive.

While it is often stated that the Scandinavian people have a unique connection to all that is selvatic and natural, the root of this phenomenon is rarely questioned. In *Anatomy of Restlessness*, Bruce Chatwin describes Scandinavian and Siberian nomads and their art as something that is contrary to the proportional perfection of the civilizations of Central Europe

(Chatwin 1996, 112). However, each vagabondage comes with a need for refuge—a shelter that responds to environmental conditions and reflects the inhabitants' relationship with the outside world.

While *Homo sapiens* populated southern Europe, the ruddy Finnish lands still awaited discovery under a thick glacier. Before there was the Baltic Sea, the thinning of the Scandinavian ice sheet formed a large freshwater lake that covered much of Finland. This specific formation resulted in a geology composed of both very young and ancient materials, shaped primarily by water and ice.

The first settlers in Finland, that were likely hunter-gatherers from areas now in modern-day Russia or the Baltic region, were called with the term *Finn*. It is derived from the word *Fenni*, used by the Roman historian Tacitus. It likely stems from the Latin *finis*, suggesting the area was seen as a borderland, and edge of civilization.

In wonderful savageness live the nation of the Fenni, and in beastly poverty, destitute of arms, of horses, and of homes; their food, the common herbs; their apparel, skins; their bed, the earth [...] Nor other shelter have they even for their babes, against the violence of tempests and raving beasts, than to cover them with the branches of trees twisted together [...]. Such a condition they judge happier than the painful occupation of cultivating the ground, than the labour of rearing houses than the agitations of hope and fear attending the defense of their own property or the seizing that of others. Secure against the designs of men, secure against the malignity of the Gods, they have accomplished a thing of infinite difficulty; that to them nothing remains even to be wished (Tac. Ger. 46, Eng. transl. by J. B. Rives, Oxford 1942).

The description of Fenni by Tacitus is significative to show the schism between the two societies, the one inhabiting and living during the Roman Empire's golden age, when Domus Aurea and Colosseum were built, and the proto-Finnish society, that moved and inhabited their lands in a semi-nomadic way, rather than creating urban structures and fortifications, they created light shelters from the wood, stone and animal skins.

In the last two centuries, in difference to most of the Western countries, Finland experienced extremely slow transition from rural to urban culture.

After Finland gained its independence in 1917, it rapidly industrialized, transforming from a predominantly agrarian economy to a mature industrial one with a nucleus of paper and wood production. This industrial development expanded the demands for architecture, and a great number of facilities emerged alongside the rise of modern architecture.

Modern European architecture emerged from a foundational relationship between man and industry, exploring a range of architectural responses within this framework. But when this vision of architecture arrived at the unique environment of Finland, the rich nature of Finland brought an added and new position to bear. In Finland, the relationship between man and nature became a parallel and equally essential condition to that of man and industry. Finnish modern architecture, therefore, had to address and reconcile both these dimensions.



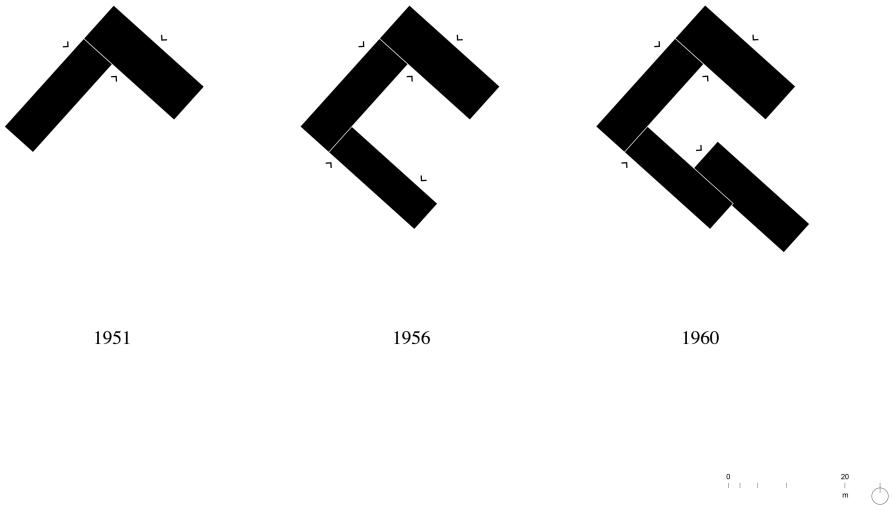
2 | Lauttasaari island and location plan of the siren house in respect to the Helsinki city centre. Digital redrawing by author, 2025.

As Finnish modernism evolved, the universal principles of modern architecture became infused with the unique qualities of the Finnish environment and sensibility. In contrast to Le Corbusier's machine aesthetic, Finnish architects gradually introduced a softer approach. By the 1950s, this synthesis gave rise to a distinctly Finnish architectural language. Within the Miesian ethos of clarity and simplicity, Finnish architecture projected a fresh and compelling northern identity onto the international stage (Asada 1975, 7).

It was during this period of the 1950s—when Finnish modernism reached maturity—that Kaija and Heikki Siren began their career. Their youthful openness and refined sensibility quickly led to the creation of works that came to exemplify the spirit of modern Finnish architecture.

### **The Studio House and the Conditions of Experimentation**

The Siren Lauttasaari studio house (1951–1960) is located on an island on the left side of the historical centre of Helsinki. It is positioned on the eastern part of the island, built on the land plot fitting into outlines drafted in the general masterplan 1913 by Birger Brunilan for the Lauttasaari island. When the Lauttasaari bridge was completed in 1935, Brunila's plan was finally implemented and the first buildings were built on the fields of the historic manor. In the



3 | Sirén studio house transformation. Schematic redrawing by author, 2025.

1950s the area became attracted many architects besides the Siren couple, notably, architects Marja and Keijo Petäjä. [Fig. 2]

Extended and rebuilt in three different stages, the studio house in Lauttasaari by finnish architects Kaija (born Tuominen, Kotka, Finland, 1920-2001) and Heikki Siren (Helsinki, 1918-2013), married in 1944, might be seen as the embodiment of Finnish architectural tradition—and as a quiet refutation of Alberti's dictum: “Un'opera è tanto più significativa quando non puoi togliere o aggiungere alcunché”[1] (Alberti [1452] 2010, 123). [Fig. 3]

While both architects were raised in the spirit of Scandinavian neoclassicism and national romanticism [2] where composition was understood as a semantic technique, where the arrangement and relationship of parts within a whole—is not just formal or aesthetic, but communicate meanings. They matured in together with a birth of modern Finnish architecture.

Rather than a building that has a closed and complete form, where a defined boundary between inside and outside exists, Siréns transformed their studio-house from a rigid place of enclosure of protection into a living, evolving space that is open to interpretation, a series of rooms placed in a precise relation one to another, while leaving the possibility for future transformation. [Fig. 4]



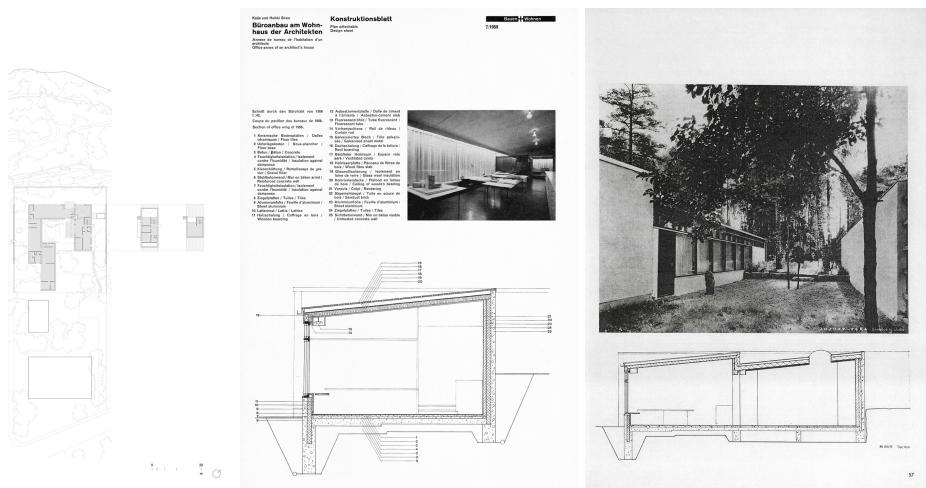
4 | Sirén studio house transformation. Digital model by author, 2025.

5 | Site plan. Redrawing by author, 2025.



For the Siréns, a log village in Finland, the whitewashed houses of the Mediterranean, and Japanese folk wooden architecture retained an astounding quality through their unpretentious originality. These buildings not only fulfilled their function but often achieved high architectural quality. As Heikki Sirén observed, “Instinct, intuition and imagination are united in creative work, which retains its value which can be based on a visionary, technological, aesthetic-philosophical or purely morphological point of view.” (Bruun & Popovits 1976, 10). Yet for Siréns, every good solution began with a clear floor plan—serving as a synthesis of all aspects of a given problem. [Fig. 5]

It is almost impossible to speak of a plan, without considering its implications on the three-dimensional environment. The studio-house can be schematically divided into two parts: the private domestic space, in the form of a traditional house with a gable roof, and the public studio, expanded into three single-story volumes with sloping roofs to resist Finland’s harsh climate. The studio volumes are placed tangentially one to the other following an L shape. In the plan the interior space of each volume appears to be conceived as one large autonomous room contained by the load-bearing walls, that is further subdivided by the composition of separating elements, with a slight connotation of the work of Mies van der Rohe. [3] [Fig. 6] All the studio volumes, however, take a similar characteristic to that of a cave or a refuge, in each block the wall facing the garden in the middle is blind, while the opposite wall is punctured



6 | Ground, first and second floor plan. Redrawing by author, 2025.

7 | Technical section of the office space extension of 1956. Retrieved from: F. Füeg (Ed.), *Kaija und Heikki Siren, Office annex to an architect's house*, "bauen + wohnen" 7 (1959), 253.

8 | Technical section of both the office space extension of 1956 and extension of 1960. Retrieved from: S. Yoneyama, *Special issue on Kaija and Heikki Siren*, "Kindai Kenchiku" 8 (1965), 57.

by a ribbon window. The space captures the inhabitant and protects them, allowing them to observe the changing natural landscape through the dark frame of the opening. From a functional point of view, the north-west exposure of the architects' studio volumes provided optimal lighting for drafting plans. The office meeting area, located at the junction between the volumes built in 1956 and 1960, has no horizontal windows, but is illuminated by three skylights above, offering an even distribution of light over the long timber meeting table. [Figg. 7-8]

The domestic layout, under the dramatic gable, struggles to maintain the same graphic purity. Rather, this volume attains its strength in the section. Upon entering, the enclosed garden is revealed to the visitor, and the height of the space is dimensioned to pronounce this horizontal relation. However, the living room, placed at the angle between the house and the studio, could be named one of the most dramatic spaces in the building. The room follows the course of the sloping roof and arrives at the height of a double volume, thus, not only becoming an autonomous, complete space but also resolving the issue of a threshold space between the familiar, private spaces of the house and the architects studio.

The autonomy of the space is caused not only through its signature volume, but also the openings in it. The window opening up to the sea views in the north, is the compression point of the triangular edge of the roof pressing onto the wall. All the light that enters, accentuates the sloping form of the ceiling, and, inversely, the slant of the roof weights down and puts the focal point to the outside view of the sea. It could be argued that Sirens conceived the plan that conducts the light into sentimental patterns.



■ Takana Eeriki Pajunen, Heikki Siren ja Pentti Turunen, edessä Oyvino Lepo ja Aarne Ruusuvuori. Seinävaikuttajat on

taas tuli Heikin aisanpari Teekkarikylän suunnittelussa. Usein mentiin työmaakokousiin, kassilin pilurustuksesta mukana. Kopiolatos ei kerännyt lähtenyttä metsästetekkiä Otaanimeen, vaan toi pilurustukset melle arkkitehtitoimistoon.

Teekkarikylän aksessuareihin pisteetkoisissa käytytien Heungin pommitukseen tuhosutunut Neuvostoliiton lähetystötaloon tiliä. Niiden kerääminen ja puristaminen oli teekkarien verraton talkkoustopaus, joka herätti maanlaajista huomiota - kuten on tarkoituksista.

Osia vanhusta tiliistä oli muutopuolia ja vajaakanttiin - eivätki muurit olivat välttämätöntä ihonmuureita. Tiliistä tehtiin ulosnean yhden kiven vahvuuteen ja vahvasti - sen eteen tulikokkilevy ja julkisivu Pihlheimen punalittelestä. Toisessa rakennusryhmässä erillä sitten kantavara rakenteesta betoniseinät.

Otaanimeessä työmaakokousia velti vaslaväistä lumenpäivien mukaan - ja Kauko Rastas lepposaisi mulla osoittaa tyylin. Kukkapa olio arvannut, että tuleva vuorineuvos ja Urho Heikkosen hyvä kavalaan nujaa hellittää. Karan sun olimme tulossa työmaakokouksesta. Heikki paatti aja-

87

9 | (above left) View of the enclosed garden; (above right) fire place between double-height living room and dining room; (below right) double-height living room; (below left) meeting room in the extension of 1960. Retrieved from: E. Laaksosen, *Arkitehtien Lauttasaari: Sonckista Sireniin*, Helsinki 2022, 190.

10 | Collaborators of Siréns wearing hats in the form of the domestic wing of the studio house in Lauttasaari. Retrieved from: J.Lahti, F. Autio (eds.), *Everything and nothing – architects Kaija + Heikki Siren [Kaikki ja ei mitään – arkitehdit Kaija + Heikki Siren]*, Helsinki 2020, 87.

An element that accentuates the difference between the spaces connected to the double-height living room is the fireplace. While traditionally one of the most significant features in Nordic houses, in the Sirens' studio-house it functions as a unifying device that both articulates and intensifies the tension between the diverse environments the architects have created. The fireplace is located in the corner between the living and dining rooms, near the door leading to the architects' studio. One part is compressed beneath the low ceiling of the upper floor, while the other projects into the open volume of the double-height living room. Due to the difference in floor levels between the living and dining areas, the fireplace is embedded within the sequence of stairs, reinforcing its role as a transitional element. Although the building's concrete structure is not overtly expressed, the architects' structural thinking is revealed in the composition of volumes—volumes that evoke the tectonic nature of architecture as a joining of elements. [Fig. 9]

The large roof of the house of Siréns distinguishes itself among surrounding buildings on the Lauttasaari island, mostly built from the 1940s onwards. While the neighboring houses had accepted the touch of modernity, opting for flat roofs, Siréns made a deliberate choice of re-

presenting domesticity with its signature form: the gable roof. It could be argued that it was a conscious choice to use a conventional form, an architectural type, rooted in the habit and social convention, that acts as a classificatory tool and that makes the visible world legible for the members of society. The use of type establishes the tactile and visual analog of social morals and standards, and forms relationships with the physical world surrounding the society. Curious image shows collaborators of the Siren office wearing paper hats in the form of the domestic, gabled volume of the building.

Type, and even form, become elements that generate new associations and mental connections, enhancing human creativity. On the contrary, this proves that the type is not necessarily traditional, and demonstrates that it can coexist with, rather than contradict, artistic freedom and progress. [Fig. 10]

The mastery of Kaija and Heikki Siren lies in their ability to balance the use of archetypal form with repetitive structural elements. While the recognizable form provides a literal and poetic reading of the architecture, it is through the skillful deployment of a single constant element that they achieve countless spatial variations and experiences—always within the same underlying structural logic.

Walls and fences in the Siréns' project carry significance beyond mere boundaries. They define direction, protection, and transition. The wall is what defends, but also what opens, and mediates, between inside and outside, between private and public, between what is shown and what guarantees modesty. The correct positioning of the wall, as well as the moments of its absence bring to fusion between interior and exterior spaces, allowing to experience the rich natural environment around the house.

Siréns skillfully used the differences in elevation in the terrain in designing the walled fence.

The progression of the sloping terrain can best be seen in the high wall encircling the plot of land, which by dropping off the level of the land, expressively slides down as if the wall would be an abstract representation of a topographical model.

While the height of the wall does not allow a wandering eye to visit, the northeast part of the plot facing the sea, instead of being marked by a masonry wall, is made of a darkened timber structure. It follows not only the course of the terrain but also the disposition of the windows to free the views of the seaside to whomever is staying in the house and the studio. Rather than a mere boundary, the wall in Siren design becomes a framing element that directs and enhances whatever is found in its proximity. Furthermore, with the addition of the other two volumes of the architect's studio, the house saw an emergence of the third element: the walled garden, a necessary *hortus conclusus*—a protected, open-air enclave shielded from wind and glances. Though respectful of the site's natural condition, the Siréns deliberately crafted a secluded, artificial space crowned with a small pool—antithetical to the vast, open sea.



11 | The South façade of the house, in proximity of the domestic entrance. The wall as a boundary of *hortus conclusus*. Photography by author, March 2025.

The large trees and rocks have been left in place following the Siréns' principles and attitude towards the natural context. The colours of the building, the white plastered walls, and the dark brown stained wooden fixtures blend well with the darkened barks of the winter humidity of the tree trunks. Similarly to the exterior color palette, one finds the same language in the treatment of the interior space. The interior walls are thinly plastered and painted white, so the textured surface and the play of light touching the brickwork have been preserved. The interior ceilings are dark brown board and batten and they follow the slope of the roof, while the earth-colored tiles on the floor liven the space through the changing reflections of the light, which are sometimes tamed by the use of a carpet, Finnish textile industry that was thriving in the second half of the 20th century. The sober use of colors and materials works as the backdrop to display various objects gathered by the architects over time, especially, the tools and pieces related to the sailingboats, which was a passion of the Siréns. The house, Sirén cabinet of curiosities, presents itself veiled in constantly oscillating metaphors: the stuccoed white surfaces (Modernism or vernacular?); the wooden surfaces (industrial production or rusticity?). Perhaps an echo of Aalto's preoccupation with the metaphoric use of materials? Or the nostalgia for the rustic life of Finnish folk, the Art Nouveau indulgence in the sensuousness of materials? (Porphyrios 1982, 50) [Fig. 11]



12 | The South façade of the house, in proximity of the domestic entrance. The wall as a boundary of *hortus conclusus*. Photography by author, March 2025.

### No Building Is an Island

Some three or four hundred meters away from the Pyramid I bent over, took up a handful of sand, let it fall silently a little further on, and said in a low voice: 'I am modifying the Sahara.' (Borges 1984, 82)

The fundamental theme underlying the design of the studio house by Siréns is the problem that has not ceased to animate Western thought: the debate between nature and civilization; between rusticity and the man-made; between the country and the city; between primitive shed and civil habitat, between private and public (Porphyrios 1982, 26).

The interior treatment of the low volumes of the architecture studio recalls a domestic environment that is further embellished with the objects, sculptures, and paintings cherished by both Kaija and Heikki Sirén, thus further enhancing the home-like atmosphere. However, the private family spaces are kept separate. These spaces, while curated with a precise relation to what stands beyond the foundations of the building, however, are internalized detached entities, a domestic stage, that have maintained their hybrid character of being a refuge, a lookout point, and a home. While the composition of the studio-house is deeply related to the context, the work of the architects transcends it merely from being an observation point of the landscape, rather the Sirén studio house is an articulated device to understand and exhibit the landscape and to intrigue the observing public.

Kaija and Heikki Sirén's work can only be fully understood on the basis of the distinctive Finnish culture. Just as *no man is an island*, neither is the house-studio of Siréns.

It is a building that does not seek to isolate itself, but rather join with the surrounding landscape in a structured dialogue.

By “modifying the Sahara”, Borges suggested that even a simple gesture can carry a much larger impact. The studio-house of the Sirens, though not publicly accessible, contributes to the architectural and street panorama of Finnish society. Although a house is a private entity, this one—with its monumental, archetypal roof—belongs, in a way, to everyone. Borges’s citation serves as a reminder that the architect’s responsibility is a public one, even in spaces that appear private. [Fig. 12]

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## Notes

[1] A work is all the more significant when you cannot take away or add anything.

[2] Kaija and Heikki graduated from the Helsinki Polytechnic, and in 1949 they opened their studio in Helsinki. It could be stated that the architecture by Kaija (born Tuominen, Kotka, Finland, 1920-2001) and Heikki Sirén (Helsinki, 1918-2013), finds its initial imprint of Johan Sigfrid Sirén, the father of Heikki who designed the Helsinki Parliament Building and was a professor at the Helsinki Polytechnic, thus having a direct influence during the formative years of both young architects.

[3] In this regard, the work of Kaija and Heikki Siren in Japan is particularly noteworthy. The plan for the Golf Club (1976) is based on a flexible grid with cross-shaped columns that directly reference Mies van der Rohe. However, rather than being made of steel or concrete, the columns are constructed from wood using *blockbau* techniques—prefabricated in Finland and shipped across Siberia for assembly in Japan. The architecture of the Sirens, as presented in Japanese publications such as *SD* (10/1975) and *Kindai Kenchiku* (8/1965), represented a form of modernism that resonated more closely with Japanese cultural sensibilities in the post-WWII period. Their use of materials and construction methods offered a mediating language between the spatial clarity of Miesian architecture and the cultural context of post-war Japan.

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## Abstract

The Lauttasaari studio-house (1951–1960) by Finnish architects Kaija and Heikki Sirén exemplifies a uniquely Finnish interpretation of modernism, merging archetypal form, structural clarity, and a deep engagement with nature. Built gradually across a sloped site, it combines a gabled domestic volume with three studio blocks, forming an adaptable composition open to change. A double-height living room, embedded fireplace, and walled garden articulate transitions between private and public, home and studio. Material restraint—white plaster over concrete wall, dark timber, earth-toned tile—anchors the house in its landscape, while topography-sensitive walls mediate between enclosure and openness. Though private, the house becomes a civic gesture, visible in the urban fabric and architectural culture. Contextual and personal, the studio-house serves not as an isolated object, but as a device to interpret, engage, and live with the landscape—quietly resisting urban monumentality while affirming the tactile, poetic, and symbolic richness of Finnish architecture.

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*keywords* | Architects' Studio; Kaija and Heikki Sirén; Finnish Landscape.

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Maria Grazia Eccheli

**Afra e il suo paesaggio**

**a/BA. La casa di Afra e Tobia Scarpa**

Michela Maguolo

**Abitare Casa Scarpa / Fotografare una casa**

Carlotta Scarpa, Alessandra Chemollo

**Luciano Semerani e Gigetta Tamaro, Casa Semerani a Conconello** Antonella Gallo

**La casa per i matti e la casa per lo psichiatra che li ha liberati** Giuseppina Scavuzzo

**Casa per Noi**

**Bottero+Riva, la casa nella casa** Annalisa de Curtis

**Genere e rivoluzione domestica** Alberto Ghezzi

y Alvarez

**Piccolo mondo moderno** Alberto Pireddu

**Lo Stökli di Flora Ruchat-Roncati e Leonardo Zanier**

Carlo Toson e Christian Toson

**Casa come Noi**

**Abitare la messa in scena** Maria Grazia Eccheli

**Tra Aino ed Elissa, le case manifesto degli Aalto**

Fernanda De Maio

**“L’abitazione del nostro tempo non esiste ancora”**

Giulia Conti

**L’interno della forma aperta** Guido Morpurgo

**Abitare la montagna incantata** Francesca Belloni

**Tracce di un percorso architettonico in Suzana e Dimitris Antonakakis** Claretta Mazzonetto

**Nature Is at Home Here** Laine Nameda Lazda

**La casa di Penelope e Harry Seidler** Mattia Cocozza

**Hopkins House** Eliana Saracino

**Robert Venturi e Denise Scott Brown: A Domestic Manifesto** Rosa Sessa

**Abitare il tempo** Claudia Cavallo

**Modernità arcaica** Francesca Mugnai

**La casa come spazio dell’anima** a cura di Roberta

Albiero

**Recensioni**

**Alison & Peter Smithson, Upper Lawn, Solar Pavilion (London 2023)** Susanna Campeotto

**Gli indistinti confini, un libro di Teresa La Rocca**

Giuseppe Marsala

**Ripetizioni, aggiustamenti** Marianna Ascolese

**Recensione di Gli spazi delle donne. Casa, lavoro, società, Bologna 2024** Alessia Scudella