



SOUL ASYLUM
The home's former ballroom is awash in modern Finnish design, including Eero Saarinen's famous Womb chairs and a 2013 painting by Milla Kuisma.

FINNISH LINE

THE NEWLY RENOVATED RESIDENCE FOR THE AMBASSADOR OF FINLAND TAKES ON A GORGEOUS CONTEMPORARY VIBE.

By Jennifer Sergent
Photography by Greg Powers

With its pale brick, colonnaded portico and barrel-tiled roof, the residence of Finnish ambassador Ritva Koukku-Ronde fits comfortably with its stately neighbors off Massachusetts Avenue. The ambassador says she loves that local architects designed the home nearly a century ago. But once she stepped through its doors upon assuming her post in 2011, it was a different story.

"I was astonished. I didn't get the feeling that you get when you approach the Finnish embassy," she says, referring to the modern, award-winning and LEED-certified design less than a mile away. "When you open the embassy's doors, you come to Finland. Here, when you opened the door, [that wasn't the case]."

The last update there was sometime in 2010, and the endeavor resulted in a nondescript traditional decor that one might see in any government office. "I was homesick," Koukku-Ronde recalls. Thus, she set about transforming the residence into a showcase of Finnish design for the thousands of guests who are invited to diplomatic dinners, receptions and events throughout the year.

She also wanted the furnishings and art to reflect the strong ties between her native country and the United States. Protest Design Oy, the Helsinki firm that won a competition to redesign the interiors, worked with Finland's Ministry of Foreign

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HOME COMING Alvar Aalto's lighting and furniture greet visitors, while a custom console represents the joining of our two countries.

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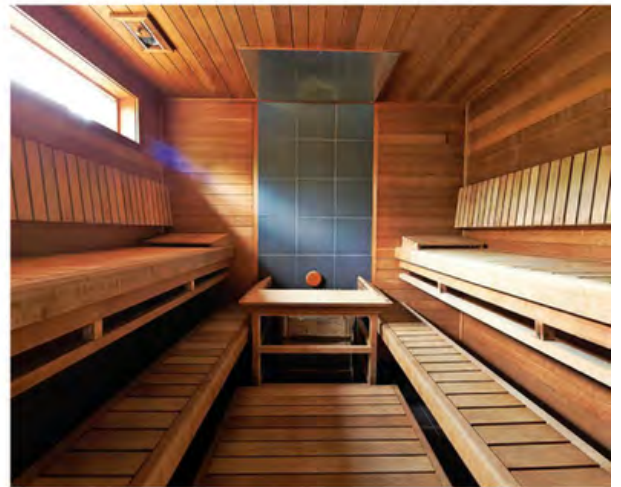
—RITVA KOUKKE-RONDE

...CONTINUED Affairs to create a “bridge between local architecture and Finnish lifestyle.”

That bridge is best represented through furnishings by the famed Finnish-American architects Eero Saarinen (who designed Dulles International Airport) and his father, Eliel. The younger Saarinen’s Womb and Organic chairs fill the main living room, while Koukku-Ronde spotted a dramatic dining table and chairs by Eliel at the ambassador’s residence in Berlin. The Berlin residence was also going through a redesign, and her counterparts let her have the sleek Saarinen pieces, which now anchor the sunroom.

Alvar Aalto, Finland’s other famous export, is also well represented through lights and furnishings in several of the rooms, including a dramatic grouping of nine chrome A330s pendant lights that hang above the coffee table in the lounge.

But not everything is new. In keeping with the Finns’ green philosophy, Koukku-Ronde wanted to recycle as much as she could. The dining room kept its existing mahogany table and sideboard, but gained life with dramatic, cone-shaped lights overhead by Finnish designer Marko Nenonen, and a hand-knitted rug by Pirjo Pajusalo. A large grouping of tree trunklike



FRESH EYE Clockwise from top left: Ambassador Ritva Koukku-Ronde sits in a Saarinen Organic chair; Kristina Riska's tree trunklike ceramics were transferred from the Finnish Embassy; the ambassador's modern sauna served as inspiration for the main residence's redesign.

ceramics by Kristina Riska was transferred from the Finnish Embassy, and an iconic Aalto lamp was obtained from the ambassador's residence in Paris. The geometric black-and-gray rugs in the living room, furthermore, are cut and dyed from old Turkish rugs.

One of the ambassador's best finds was there all along: early 20th century glassworks by Finnish designer Arttu Brummer-Korvenkontio. "We were digging through the cupboards when we found them!" says Koukku-Ronde, who placed them in the living room.

When it came to the art, Koukku-Ronde worked with the Finnish National Gallery and the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki to choose works by Finns either living in the United States or who've shown a strong American influence. Another priority was showcasing female artists and paintings of girls and women. "They are representing our golden age," says the ambassador—who may

have just started a new golden age as her country's first female ambassador to the United States.

Just over a year since the project's completion, the design is fulfilling its intended purpose: "We can use this as a window to Finnish design—the Finnish way of thinking," Koukku-Ronde says. "And it's an example of the inspiration between our two countries. In terms of diplomacy, this is helping us enormously." ■