

The Front Row

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Words by Natalia Torija

PUUTALO OY AND FINLAND'S LITTLE BOXES



Born out of a necessity engendered by war in 1940, the Puutalo Oy housing consortium was established in Finland to help relieve a stark national housing shortage. Ultimately, the company would send 9 million square meters of housing components to every inhabited continent on earth. Documented in an exhibition and publication at this year's Biennale Architettura, *New Standards* showcases a tale of 20th-century Tiny Houses and the inhabitants who love them.



Architect Jens Erik Hansen and his wife, Denmark, photo © Juuso Westerlund



Finn Kolling and Vibeke Stoustrup's house, Denmark, photo © Juuso Westerlund

Forty-seven-year-old Mina Alanko has lived in Marttila, a planned neighborhood in northwestern Helsinki, since 2016. But she's known the neighborhood for much longer: her maternal relatives moved there in 1943, just after the community was established. Originally constructed to house Finnish veterans of the Winter War (1939-40), Marttila was designed by Helsinki architect Birger Brunila, with landscaping by Elisabeth Koch. Alanko's grandfather, a war veteran himself, raised his family there. "Today," said Alanko, "my brother's family lives in the area as well as our father in his own house, which was our childhood home."

An industry of prefabricated houses was born in 1940 when Finland faced a housing emergency after the Moscow Peace Treaty, requiring the country to relinquish 10 percent of its land to the Soviet Union. Finding itself suddenly autonomous and dependent on domestic materials, Finnish forest industry companies formed the consortium Puutalo Oy (Timber Houses Ltd)—a streamlined design, manufacture, sales, promotion, and distribution entity for single-family wooden houses. "The contribution of Puutalo radically changed the domestic landscape—and even the conception of domesticity—with the image of the single-family house. [There were] also profound implications on the country's industrial building sector, [in] the way that wood production in Finland was managed and oper-

ated," said architect Philip Tidwell who, together with Finnish architecture historians Kristo Vesikansa and Laura Berger, curated the exhibition and publication *New Standards* for the Finland Pavilion in this year's Biennale Architettura in Venice. Their exhibition is the first investigation into the history of Finland's prefabricated house movement, "These houses were designed by big names in architecture from the time, but they don't get picked up in architecture history."

While the structures were originally conceived to fill a domestic need, Puutalo houses (and barracks, schools, dormitories, hospitals) were ultimately sent to over thirty countries, providing shelter for German troops, Polish coal miners, Dutch schoolchildren and Yemeni construction workers.

Finnish photographer Juuso Westerlund captured the visual stories of current Puutalo residents with case studies in Finland, Denmark, and Colombia for the *New Standards* exhibition. His focus was "on inhabitation and people more than architectural form or even materiality," he and Tidwell explain. "These houses have the patina of decades and that's also just, for us, one of the most interesting things, the kind of way that they've been changed and adapted."

In Marttila, Mina Alanko and her two children were confronted by

deferred maintenance issues when they bought their house in 2015 but, fortunately, they were able to live with Alanko's parents down the street during the renovations. The construction work included removing panels from the walls of the vestibule, revealing a sub-structural rot. "As we began to examine," said Alanko, "there were rat corridors [under the floors] and the water pipes were the wrong kind and in bad condition." The family moved into the house in 2016 and are now concentrating on landscaping: "The garden was completely wild [and] we have been clearing it little by little. The old garden pond has been dug out and I have planted a lot of new flowers and a vegetable garden in the front yard. The children have a self-service flower shop at the gate, which sells perennial ornamental plants."

Another of the exhibition's case studies is the Finneby neighborhood, located about three kilometers west of the Danish city, Aarhus. These 122 houses were built between 1946 and 1948 as part of a trade deal with Finland for food and were all the same model—OK-240 "Ditte 2." Karen Kjærgaard and her husband Erik moved into their Finneby house in 1950. Their granddaughter Line, 43, remembers visiting their home on Arnagervej street as a child. "The house has always been an oasis—a place of freedom—Karen and Erik were always hospitable, no matter



when you came by,” Kjærgaard said. “They also participated in the annual street party on Arnagervej, where Karen always had her famous apple porridge with cream with her.” Kjærgaard’s children got an early taste of it too. “They also liked visiting their great-grandparents and eating all my grandmother’s homemade buns, cake, and other delicious things. Her grandparents are now both gone, but their memories remain. The best ones “came from spontaneous short visits, talking while drinking a cup of coffee—what we in Denmark call hygge.” These days, the community stays connected through a Finnebyen Facebook group of active community members who get together for summer festivals and Christmas.

Jens Erik Hansen, 70, is an architect who has lived in Finnebyen since 1979. “When the [Putalo Oy] houses in Denmark were built, it was for people who were living in small flats in the center of Aarhus, where it was not very good for their health to stay there,” he said. “Now it’s not poor people from the center of the town coming in. It is more academics and, through the last thirty to forty years, it’s been mostly architects, artists, musicians, people who are creative in some way.”

Hansen has worked in seven houses in the neighborhood including his son’s blue house and garden, about forty-five meters away from his, as well as their friend Finn Kolling’s who, in exchange for electrical work, had an almost identical “Finnehouse” built next to his. “Many people who visit us say it’s so fantastic and cozy that we can live in a summer house all year because it’s a wooden house,” Jens says.

Post-WWII reconstruction meant big business for Puutalo Oy in terms of international contracts, but the company also sought ways to benefit from trade. In Colombia, General



Brother and sister, Adolberto Manga and Ilse Manga grew together in the house their parents bought in 1961. Adolberto has lived there ever since and in 1976 Ilse and her three children returned to live with her brother.
Barrio Simón Bolívar, Barranquilla, Colombia 2020
Photo © Juuso Westerlund



Rolando Cantillo Benavides, Colombia
Photo © Juuso Westerlund



Nelson Robles and his mother Olga Llanos de Robles, Colombia,
Photo © Juuso Westerlund

Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who came to power in 1953 through a military coup, saw to it that small land ownership, social housing, and employment rights were high on his incoming government's agenda. This included building Puutalo houses in two Colombian cities, Cartagena and Barranquilla. In 1956, as part of a "socioeconomic rehabilitation" project, the residents of an area of Barranquilla pejoratively referred to as Zona Negra—whose informal housing was subject to crime and flood hazards—were relocated to the former LANSÁ airport where 1,600 Puutalo houses were built in exchange for their worth in Colombian coffee. The new neighborhood was named Simón Bolívar, after their *Libertador*.

Rolando, 31, lives in Simón Bolívar with his son and partner, who has been living in the house her whole life. "The house used to belong to her uncle for sixty years," Rolando says. He built an extension five years ago where he now runs his business selling sports performance supplements. "When we were on quarantine [last year], we put together a gym at home and we trained very hard to stay in shape." His yellow house is one of the few houses left mostly intact, "most of it has died down a bit, and now I'd say there are ten or eleven [original] houses left in Simón Bolívar."

Nelson Robles, 57, lives with his mother, Olga, and four of his ten siblings. "I was born here [in the house] in 1964 with the help of a midwife, which was common back in the day," he said. Olga, who passed away in May 2021, was born in 1928 and moved to this house with her husband in 1957. "This house is a legacy and a patrimony that our parents have left us and that we still preserve," Nelson says. Two additions were built since the original construction—one in 1965 for his father's butchery, and the second in 1988 for one of his sis-

ters. When residents became sole proprietors, they were given toolboxes to care for and maintain their houses. "We are very grateful for everything the government of Finland has done for us," says Nelson, "and for all the users who benefited a lot here in Barranquilla. We are always at your service." <

New Standards is Finland's exhibition for the 17th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, on view until 21 November.
newstandards.info



Karen Kjaergaard, Finland, photo © Juuso Westerlund