



This page: viewed from the road, Life on a Leaf is tidy-looking and self-contained. Unlike most Finnish homes, the building has no garage or sauna, because Jan-Erik wanted to create a house stripped of anything extraneous. Opposite: located on the edge of a park on Hirvensalo, one of Turku's island suburbs, the house has no neighbours. Beyond the boundary of the landscaped garden, wild reed beds emphasise the proximity of water



A NEW LEAF

When it came to building a home for his family, the Finnish artist Jan-Erik Andersson wanted to break with drab functionalism. The result, a quirkily ornamental house called Life on a Leaf, is a playfully referential blend of conceptual art and sinuous organic forms that reflect its sylvan surroundings. Text: Jo Caird. Photography: Eric Morin



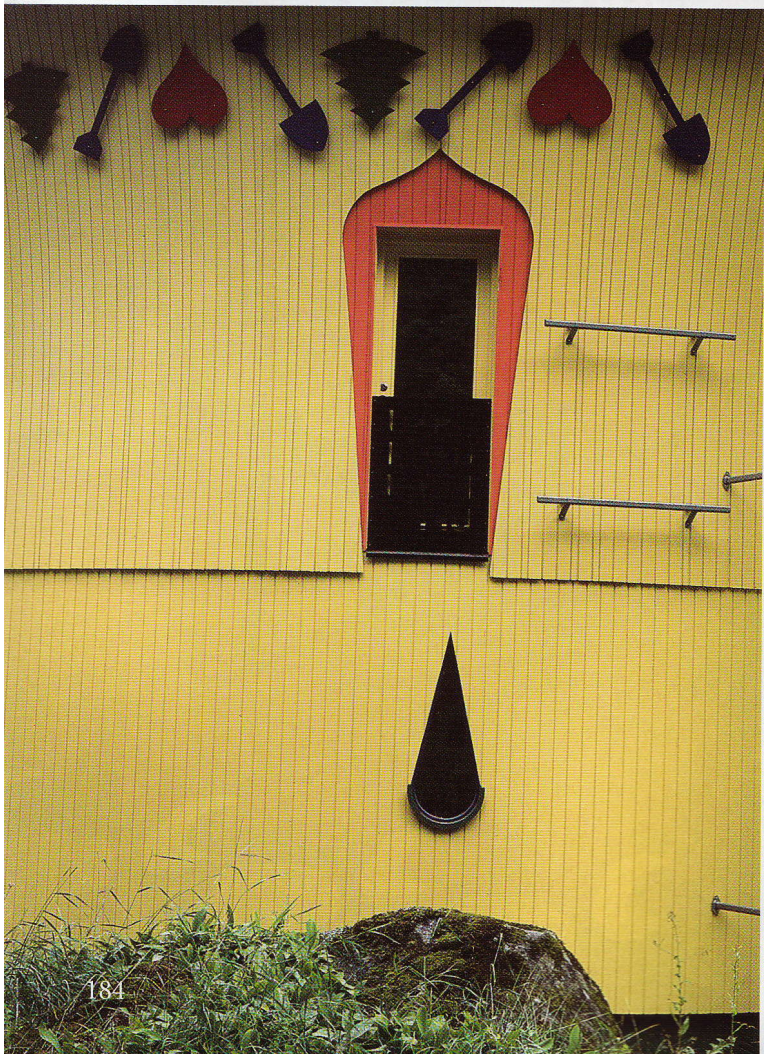
Opposite, clockwise from top: Jan-Erik and Marjo's mezzanine bedroom, reached by a bridge, is filled with light in the short Finnish summer nights, so that Marjo finds a sleeping mask essential; the bridge references the 18th-century botanist Pehr Kalm, and forms part of a sound installation by American artist Shawn Decker; on the underside of the bridge is a relief of dancing footsteps by Susanna Peijari, while a swing bench stands on the apple-themed flooring and a wood-burning stove heats the whole house. This page: retro lamps create a nostalgic atmosphere in the living room





This page: media artist Karin Andersen's playful kitchen worktop – inspired by the unlikely combination of science fiction and Baroque trompe-l'oeil frescoes – lifts the lid on a fantasy world beneath the surface. Opposite: the kitchen, photographed from the high-ceiling living area, is the main family space. Jan-Erik made the two octagonal dining tables himself, while the ceiling lamps are a mixture of shop-bought and artist-commissioned







Opposite, clockwise from top: the heart shapes that appear throughout the house refer to the story on which it is based, Jan-Erik's own fictional account of the life of King Erik XIV of Sweden; the leaf-shaped floor-to-ceiling window of the living room maintains a connection with the natural world outside; located immediately over the kitchen's teardrop window, the harem-style doorway of Marjo's study serves as a fire escape. This page: the hallway is lined with a concrete relief of dandelion clocks, which were shedding their seeds around the house when the wall was being built.



APPROACHING THIS building on the outskirts of Turku, Finland, you'd be forgiven for mistaking it for a children's daycare centre. Leaf-shaped, bright yellow, it is also decorated with a nursery frieze of red hearts, blue shovels and green Christmas trees. But first impressions can be misleading. This eccentric-looking place is in fact a private residence, home to Jan-Erik Andersson and his family, and it boasts perhaps the most dynamic domestic interior in Finland.

Jan-Erik, an installation artist celebrated in his country, has been interested in buildings for some time, having collaborated with the architect Erkki Pitkäranta since 1995. The two founded a practice together, its name – Rosegarden – referencing a shared passion for architecture inspired by the forms and beauty of nature. Andersson and Pitkäranta couldn't understand the prevailing obsession with abstraction and fear of ornamentation: they wanted to design places and interiors that told stories; that made people laugh; that in themselves were art objects.

The duo worked together on a number of successful projects in the 1990s: a cowshed shaped like a cumin seed; a horticultural college in the form of a flower; a quirky and colourful interior for a visual-arts organisation. But the ultimate challenge came when, in 1999, Jan-Erik decided to design and build a home for his family based on Rosegarden's founding principles. *Life on a Leaf*, the evocatively named house the artist now shares with his graphic-designer partner Marjo and their seven-year-old son Adrian, took six years to plan and four to build. But it was worth the wait.

The interior is almost entirely open-plan; the bathrooms, Marjo's study and Adrian's bedroom are the only rooms with

doors. The ground floor of the three-storey building curls around a central wall that separates the kitchen from the entrance hall and shelters the wood-burning stove that helps to heat the house. The layout is one of many nods to traditional Finnish house-building, such as the concave exterior walls topped by deep eaves to minimise the impact of rainfall.

One of the artist's favourite places in the house is the kitchen-diner, with its psychedelic worktop, two-tone colour scheme and motley collection of dining chairs. The teardrop-shaped window was inspired by a six-month spell in Kilburn, northwest London, in the 1980s, where Jan-Erik first encountered windows in the kitchen and bathrooms of houses – features practically unheard of in Finland. The worktop was designed by media artist Karin Andersen, who, with almost two dozen others, was invited to contribute a piece that would become part of the fabric of the house. Jan-Erik gave these artists, all of them friends, free rein, but insisted that the works should be conceived independently of the house. 'They had strict orders not to try to fit things in, because I don't like art that fits too neatly; it should create some tension,' he explains. Andersen's worktop is 'extraordinary', continues Jan-Erik. 'When you are working there, she is there, too, in a way. You are communicating with her. The space makes you want to dance. Adrian does a lot of dance performances there.'

Elsewhere, the commissioned pieces – sound installations, textile designs, relief work in concrete – guide the interior design, with Andersson drawing on his own colourful, sculptural practice to fill in the gaps. The collaborative aspect of *Life on a Leaf* has been crucial to its success, he says. 'I don't want to live in my own head and neither do my family, so in that way it's very good to have a sense of the other artists being there, too.'

The resulting house is an extraordinary jumble of styles, colours and textures. Noticeable, however, is the paucity of objects. Aside from the collection of leaf-shape bowls decorating the coffee table – many of them gifts from British environmental artist Trudi Entwistle – and a few books and records, *Life on a Leaf* is remarkably bare. 'It's just down to what we really need,' he explains. 'We've stripped away everything else to be able to create this new mental space.' If Marjo had her way, he adds, the house would be almost entirely empty. 'She really doesn't want anything, except for clothes of course. She wants to burn all my books; she says that everything you need is on the internet or in the library.' Marjo's own study is resolutely white and unadorned, a haven from the visual busyness of the rest of the house. Adrian's room, on the other hand, is your typical child's bedroom, where Lego and other playthings litter the floor.

The artworks that animate the house may be impossible to ignore, but they do not interfere with the business of sleeping, eating, playing and working. This is a house designed for living. That's partly the point Andersson was making by building it in the first place. There's no reason why art cannot be part of daily life, he believes; no reason why it shouldn't play a role in architecture, too.

When Andersson first put together the plans for the house 13 years ago, a professor of architecture told him he would never be happy there. This is a picture, not a house, the academic said, and you can't live in a picture. But almost three years after Jan-Erik, Marjo and Adrian moved in, all three are still discovering new and positive perspectives on their extraordinary home. *Life there*, says Andersson, is 'better than we would have believed' ■

For more information about Jan-Erik Andersson, ring 00 358 40 501 3960, or visit anderssonart.com

Opposite: at the top of the spiral staircase is Jan-Erik's open-plan study. He has a studio elsewhere, so this serves as more of a 'philosophical space'. This page: the study leads directly to 'the Bluebell', a conservatory-style area perched on the top floor. This is Andersson's favourite room in the house, from which, glass of wine in hand, he can gaze out over the strait that separates Hirvensalo from the mainland. Turku Castle, which features in the artist's Erik XIV story, can be seen in the distance

