

# JOANNA LAAJISTO

Interior Architect | Helsinki, Finland

## LAYERING OLD AND NEW IN FUNCTIONAL AESTHETICISM

For Joanna Laajisto, good design lasts a lifetime, both conceptually and physically. With a design philosophy driven by functionality and aesthetics, she seeks “not to clutter this world with unnecessary things but to find the hidden beauty of each space and to enhance it through creative solutions.” Her spaces are often characterized by a blend of old and new, revealing layers of textures and colors in a harmonious unity.

The Helsinki-based interior architect studied and started her career on the West Coast of the United States. She received a B.A. from the prestigious Interior Design School of Southern California (IDI) in 2005, going on to work in Los Angeles at an international architectural firm designing large-scale commercial projects. During that time, she also received supplemental LEED\* accreditation in green design. Since returning to her native Finland in 2008 to work as an independent interior architect, Laajisto has gained increasing attention for her growing portfolio that reflects her aesthetics of quiet emotionality.



You have designed a number of (semi) public spaces (offices, restaurants, retail spaces, etc.) and they all have a very personal, welcoming, relaxed feel. What are the key ingredients in creating such an atmosphere in a space?

I like to create public spaces that have an intimate, homey kind of feel. I use layers of old and new, mix design styles and

*“I use layers of old and new, mix design styles and like to use traditional elements in a new way. People feel relaxed when they are surrounded by familiar objects and when things are a bit worn down.”*

like to use traditional elements in a new way. People feel relaxed when they are surrounded by familiar objects and when things are a bit worn down.

To what extent do you create a Scandinavian or Nordic atmosphere? A Finnish atmosphere?

I think my designs speak about a certain kind of way of living (lifestyle) that can actually be found globally, not just in the Nordic countries. I respect the heritage of a space or an item and use that as a source of inspiration. What makes my design Nordic is that I like to use local materials, such as pine and oak wood. I also use lots of vintage items mixed with new design, and the pieces that are readily available here are mostly Scandinavian design classics.

I am drawn to a neutral color palette, sometimes warm, sometimes cold depending on the space. Neutrals create a timeless and calming background to a space. But I am not afraid to use pops of color as an accent. If color is used on large surfaces, such as walls or floors, I like to mute it down to soft pastels.

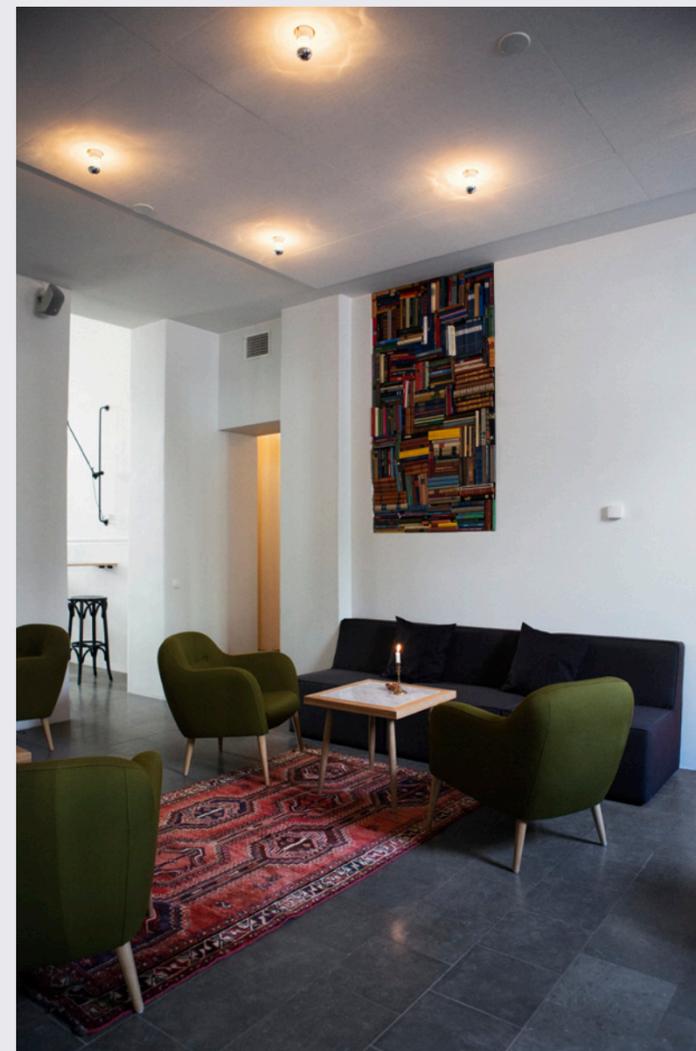
I guess I like a certain calmness or even melancholy in a space. Maybe that is a Scandinavian or more specifically Finnish quality. We are a quite melancholic people.

You mention that you like to combine new and old. Can you elaborate on this? What kinds of Scandinavian design items have you used and in what combination?

For example, I prefer to use vintage Alvar Aalto pieces to new ones. Old pieces of furniture from Artek have a wonderful patina and are much more interesting than the

newer models. The more scrapes, paint marks, and other flaws, the better. For the meeting room at Sherpa advertising agency I used vintage Aalto 69 chairs in

(\*note from the editor: LEED [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] is a certification system established by the U.S. Green Building Council and has become a standard in North America and internationally for measuring sustainability in the design, construction, and operation of high-performance green buildings.)



natural and black paired with a modern white table from Hay.

The TV armoire and table lamp were found in vintage shops. For the same project, modern Danish arm chairs were reupholstered in black wool fabric and paired with a comfortable modern sofa. Using vintage and new together gives the space interesting layers.

How did studying and working in the United States — and the West Coast in particular — influence your (Scandinavian) sense of aesthetics?

In Los Angeles I learned to respect design classics. There the architecture is very much

influenced by mid-century modern design. But at the same time they don't have the burden of long history and traditions, so new architecture and design can be quite bold, contemporary, and inventive there.

I think that using both, the old and new, is what inspires me the most. I respect traditions but don't like to copy something that has already been done.

How would you describe classic Scandinavian design vs. the very contemporary? What are differences, what are similarities?

We Scandinavians are very proud of our heritage. Many designers, myself included,

draw inspiration from the rich Scandinavian mythology and old traditional ways of doing things.

We are also very practical and think functionality even before aesthetics. Because of that, Nordic design can be very honest and that is why it appeals to many people.

In the United States you became a LEED-accredited interior architect. What aspects of your work reflect an environmentally sustainable approach?

In addition to using sustainable materials with low VOC (volatile organic compound) content, I like to design things that will last more than a passing trend. I hope that my



LEFT AND RIGHT PAGE:

For Bar & Co, Joanna Laajisto created four rooms with distinct atmospheres while maintaining coherency in design. The design combines classic bistro style elements with a contemporary twist. Custom wrought-iron fixtures, textile birds, and vintage copper accents add a sense of warmth and intimacy.





THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE):

- 1 Laajisto created a familiar, small apartment atmosphere for the Gulled furniture showroom, featuring a table and chairs from Hay, Tom Dixon's iconic copper shade lamp, and a rolling file cabinet and stepladder by Magis.
- 2 An interior Joanna designed for the Sherpa Agency, an advertising agency in Helsinki.
- 3 Detail from an interior Joanna designed for Pinata, an animation and illustration studio in Helsinki.



designs will last over 10, 20, or 50 years both conceptually and physically. I think that is what makes design good.

**What would you like to design but have not yet had a chance to do?**

I am hoping that I will get a chance to design an intimate boutique hotel with a restaurant-bar where the local crowd can mix with visiting tourists.

I am also crazy about lighting and have already designed some one-off pieces for my projects. But in the future I would love to work with a lighting manufacturer and design a range of light fixtures.



THIS PAGE:  
A look into the home of Joanna Laajisto and Mikko Ryhänen. The apartment from 1928 was initially very dark, but after extensive renovation, they transformed it into a light and comfortable oasis to weather the dark winter. Mikko and Joanna used wooden vintage pieces, color accents from textiles and art, and warm metal accents to add a bit of sparkle. Modern classics such as Bertoia dining chairs and a Platner coffee table are items that Joanna and Mikko wish to pass on to their children.

