

A very Scandi paradox

Renovation | An 'experimental' restoration

in Finland channels Bergman cool, secret

history and a supercomputer, finds Helen

Barrett. Photographs by Antti J Leinonen

The scene is pure Nordic folk-noir: a house marooned in fields surrounded by spruce forests, a frozen river and endless sky. Akola is an 18th-century manor built of timber, just outside the rural town of Ii – that's two i's, pronounced "ee" – 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle in north-west Finland. In midwinter, temperatures can drop to about -50C and there is light for just four hours a day; in midsummer the sun never sets. Most extreme of all is the silence, both inside and outside the house.

Teemu Kurkela inherited this eight-bedroom manor house in 2013. At almost 60, he is one of Finland's best-known architects, having co-founded JKMM Architects in 1998, which this month won the competition to design Finland's new €105m museum of Architecture and Design in Helsinki harbour.

Gustavian in style (the Nordic interpretation of French neoclassicism), Akola was, he says, "a ruin full of clutter", dilapidated, somewhat wild and unchanged since he spent holidays here as a child.

Now, after a complex 12-year restoration costing about €1.5m, the interiors are cool and precise. Akola may look like a Nordic minimalist house from the imagination of Ingmar Bergman, but it doesn't feel uptight. It is convivial and almost supernaturally calm.

Kurkela has transformed Akola into what he calls an experimental house. "The experiments are in the restoration and in what happens here, which is just as important." It is part private holiday home, part retreat for hire with spa room, sauna and easy access for river swimming (LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman was an early visitor), and part international public arts venue. "I didn't want to do the Airbnb thing, this is not a place for parties. I wanted something more like a secret."

It all sounds idealistic, perhaps unrealistic. But Kurkela points out that large country houses can be expensive problems, and making them viable is hard. "Houses like this are too small to be sustainable hotel businesses, so you need another concept. I have only one son, my family is small, and I needed to give the house a second life."

He wants to prove that rural places need not be isolated culturally. Next year the city of Oulu, 20 miles to the south of the farmhouse, is one of two European Capitals of Culture. Akola Forum is a series of public events which began in August, part of the Oulu 2026 programme featuring artists and performers including Moy Moy Collective, British curator Shehnaaz Sutervalla, German conductor André de Ridder, Chinese architect Zhang Ke and Finnish choreographer Ella Posti.

Later next year, Kurkela will open House of Sound, a public gallery in Akola's grounds where visitors will "sonically teleport to remote locations around the world" and "focus on uninterrupted, deep listening". The opening exhibition will be curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist of the Serpentine Gallery in London. All this is administered by a not-for-profit company co-founded by Kurkela and led by Mikko Ahtola, former artistic director of the Helsinki Festival.

A farmhouse has stood here since 1550, though Akola manor was built in 1796 and has been in Kurkela's family since 1910, when his great-grandparents bought it with another family as part of a wider farming estate, long since divided up. It was a cattle and timber farm until the late 1960s, after which time, he says, an increase in large-scale farming methods left the family business unviable.

Kurkela's father, a vet who left Ii for central Finland, used Akola as a holiday home and, it seems, to retreat from civil-



The spruce-timber roof is a replica of the 18th-century barrel roof, with 12-metre-long beams cut from single trees



isation into the wild. As a child, Kurkela recalls being tasked with killing mice, sleeping next to the kitchen stove and his parents' house guests running around in wolf skins: "Hippies – it was the 70s." After his father died in 2013, "the rational thing would have been to sell. But I didn't want to do the rational thing. I had an emotional connection to the house. It had supported my life."

Akola's structural renovation was complex and fraught. Kurkela is used to large-scale building projects from the ground up, but Akola was his first renovation project. His architect's ego had no place in Akola, he says. There was no vision; the building told him what to do.

We climb 18th-century stairs with battered treads to the manor's attic –



Clockwise from left: Akola Manor; architect Teemu Kurkela; the kitchen; the modern staircase up to the attic; Kurkela designed the 'supernaturally calm' interiors as well as overseeing the structural restoration



now an immaculate and vast bedroom, with original, slightly wonky cobweb windows in handblown glass restored by a local specialist. Today's spruce-timber roof is a reconstruction of the 18th-century barrel roof, with 12-metre-long beams cut from single trees – hard to find, even in Finland. The original, built by hand with techniques that Kurkela says are all but lost, had been taken down in the 1960s and replaced with tiles. "Too heavy," he says. "It damaged the entire structure." Determined to build a faithful replica, he used a supercomputer at Aalto University near Helsinki to work out how the original would have been created and how to most effectively distribute its weight.

Elsewhere, Kurkela built stories about his ancestors into the fabric of the house. His great-grandmother was a fearsome employer who spied on her labourers through Akola's kitchen window to make sure they did not leave the fields early. They dodged her gaze by hiding behind the trees. He positioned the new kitchen sink next to the window with a sightline to the forest in her honour. He commissioned a friend to paint a portrait of his grandfather Martti, whom he never met but who had one glass eye and now gazes across the kitchen with mismatched pupils. More ancestral portraits line shelves in the living room.

Kurkela also kept and partly restored stencilled fragments of block-printed wallpaper in bedrooms, living rooms and corridors, mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries. He commissioned a replica of one design and hung it near the 200-year-old remnants. In the living room he found sheets of 19th-century newspapers used for wallpaper lining stuck to the timbers (one includes a 1860s dispatch from Queen Victoria being presented with a shawl).

Kurkela left the newsprint where he found it as material evidence of former residents' lives. He also kept the ornate ceramic warming stoves, though today Akola is heated by geothermal systems and electricity.

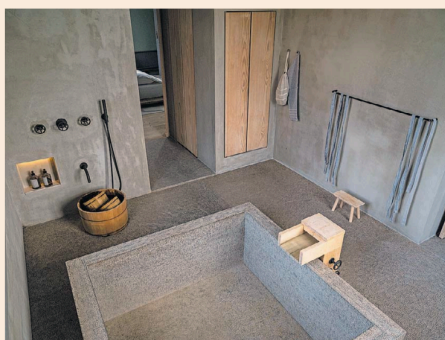
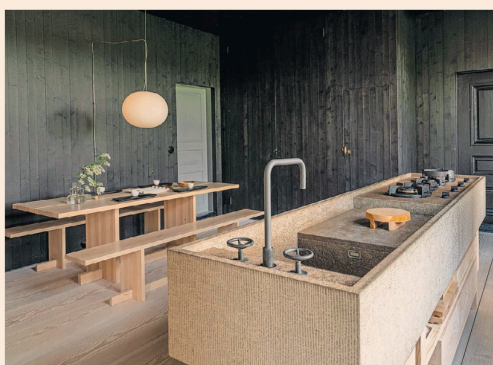
But despite these details, this is a thoroughly modern home. A period restoration "would not be authentic, it would be an invented story", he says. "People think a kitchen, for instance, should be imitating some other decade. But that's fake. And it's problematic if you go for the modern approach, because it looks industrial and Italian. So there's difficulty in making something modern that's not fake, not Italian and especially that would fit the countryside."

So Kurkela designed Akola's interiors himself, down to the furniture. His forefathers seemed to have been hoarders, but Kurkela is a minimalist. "Part of the atmosphere comes from emptying everything," he says. "Usually identity is built around objects. But if there is more emptiness, the focus shifts to other things and you have space to fill it with your own thoughts." His ancestors' stuff, he tells me, is stashed in an outbuilding.

It may be remote, but it is far from dead. A road to Lapland runs through town. It is popular with artists and the population is young – unusual for a rural community. Kurkela says Ii is also "a Riviera for old IT engineers – Nokia veterans buy a holiday home and they go fishing all day".

When Kurkela started the renovation he panicked. Perhaps Akola was too far for visitors to bother with, which is one reason why he built the spa. Yet he was wrong. "When I don't plan anything, friends still come and stay. Even when I don't invite them, they still show up." With its international cultural programme, more people will arrive. Kurkela's ancestors are gone. But he says the revitalised house has given him more social life than ever before.

Oulu 2026 opens in January (oulu2026.eu); House of Sound opens in August 2026 (houseofsound.fi)



Clockwise from above: the bathroom; stencilled fragments of 18th and 19th-century wallpaper were partly restored; the house is near a river for bathing; the attic has become a vast bedroom, with original cobweb windows in handblown glass restored by a local specialist

