

# Mikkel Aaland



"It's All An Adventure"

I was introduced to Travis Skinner and his Anglerfish Sauna project by Glenn Auerbach, the creator of the popular [Saunatimes](#) web site and podcast. When Travis asked me to write the preface to his new book, *Anglerfish Sauna: Material Based Design & Deep Sea Sculpture*, I jumped. Travis' book is released at the same time we are bombard by the media with Facebook's vision of the future, the metaverse. Travis presents an alternative vision of craftsmanship and authentic human interaction. I think his vision deserves as much attention, or more. You can buy Travis' book [here](#)

## Preface to Anglerfish Sauna by Mikkel Aaland

(All images shown here are courtesy of Travis and are copyrighted.)

With a stroke of genius Travis Skinner managed to create an inspirational work of art that connects two of my favorite subjects: sauna and fish. For 45 years I have advocated a type of bathing known in Finland as the sauna and generically around the world as the sweat bath. Simply put, a sweat bath is a heated enclosed space where one goes to sweat. These baths come in many shapes and forms, from the Russian *banya*, to the Turkish *hamam*, to the Mayan temescal. In 1978 I authored a book titled "Sweat" that connected the dots between them all.



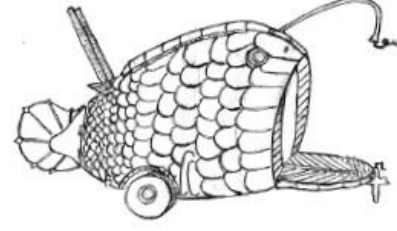
87

My passion for fish began in the early 60s as a young boy summering in Norway with my grandparents when I hooked my first mountain trout. Fishing became a way for me to unwind and connect with nature and it wasn't important whether I caught anything or not. Currently I am working on a photographic project titled "Fish Stories" that takes my interest in fish beyond sport into the world of art and mythology.

Skinner chose to build his sauna in the shape of an Angler fish, because to him, they, are a metaphor for our relationship with nature and our inner selves. I get it. Not only are our bodies a legacy of ancient fish—a human embryo looks remarkably like a fish—but because of their connection with water and the mysteriousness of the unknown, fish hold ancient symbolic meanings.



The first template for the ridge member. I used this template to build a stout ridge beam out of Douglas Fir. From this side perspective you can better see the angle of the front wall.



In my Nordic culture, the fish has symbolic meanings of adaptability, determination, and the flow of life. I also found the fish sacred to the Greco-Roman mythology, where it held symbolic meaning of change and transformation. The fish is often used in Christian symbology to represent Jesus Christ. In Native American folklore, shapeshifting fish spirits marry humans and teach them water magic.

So much for fish. What about the sauna?

I grew up in America with a Norwegian father who clung to the ways of the old country, which included serving cod soaked in lye (*lutefisk*) every Christmas Eve and packing greasy sardine sandwiches in my school lunch box and dressing me in a handknit wool sweater with regional patterns from Telemark. In the 60s he built a *badstue* on the second floor of our suburban home in Livermore, California. The *badstue*, which translates to "bath house", is a Norwegian bath similar to the Finnish sauna. It was a lot more popular with my brothers and me than the gelatinous *lutefisk*.

When I began research for "Sweat" I quickly discovered the sweat bath was as common around the world as the baking of bread and the squeezing of the grape. Why was it so popular? I believe there is much more than the simple fact that it feels good and is good for you. Most sweat baths are communal and bathing together helps create a strong social bond. There is also a spiritual side that comes from connecting with nature and something larger than the self. Can you think of another human activity that combines the physical, social and spiritual under one roof? I think you will be hard pressed to answer.

## carving cedar parts

All of the cedar used on the Anglerfish Sauna was sourced directly from a tree or re-use. I live in the Pacific North West and there are lots of materials in our forests.



Splitting Western Red Cedar from an old growth stump using an old tool called a fro.



Hook knife I made from 1095 high carbon steel



Left to right: Sharp Axe, Gouge, Curved Blade Draw Knife and Mallet

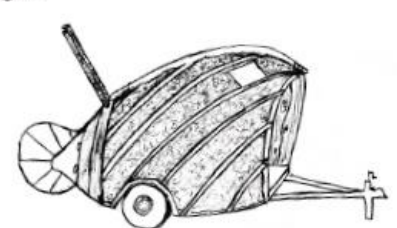
71

Sweat bathing likely began at the dawn of human time, in a cave with a gathering of humans around a roaring fire. Fire, whether shining in heaven or burning in hell, has always commanded reference. The sweat bath, by housing and controlling the awesome power of flame, became a sacred shrine. Early sauna bathers in Finland believed fire was heaven-sent and if fueled with choice firewood and tended to with appropriate ritual, diseases and spiritual evils could be driven off. If treated disrespectfully, fire could engulf and destroy the bather.

Many sweat bath cultures discovered that rocks could absorb the power of fire, and thereby acquired spiritual significance. When water was splashed over the rocks, the vapor produced became another medium for the transfer of heat and another object of worship. The Finns named this vapor *löyly*, spirit of life.



Knife facets create texture that reflect light terrifically. Each blade stroke can be felt and these low relief fingerprints are revealed by high angle light. My work is in celebration of the morning light.



A bather absorbing the heat of a sweat bath could be seen as re-enacting Creation, merging body and fire. The visible product of heat, or "waters born from the heated man," is sweat. Sweat, because of its indirect association with fire, was sometimes connected with the creation of humankind. Sweat from bathing gods is of special importance. In Russian and Native American folklore there are tales of "God" in a sweat bath and creating "Adam and Eve" through drops of falling sweat.

Perhaps another explanation for the sweat bath's spirituality is its association with re-birth. The rejuvenating effects of the sweat bath, combined with its physical characteristics, made it a natural place for purification and rebirth rituals. The warm, dark, moist ambiance inside a sweat bath is easily likened to a womb, even the womb of Mother Earth herself. A tired, dirty bather climbs into the confines of the sweat bath, assumes a fetal position (especially in the smaller, more primitive baths), sweats out physical and spiritual impurities and emerges refreshed and cleansed – re-born.

As with any religion or ritual, sweat baths would not have been given such cultural importance without serving humankind in practical ways. With its mystical powers marshaled, the sweat bath became healer. Nowadays we don't need to point to spirits or magic to explain the healing powers of the sweat. Several recent clinical studies have shown that frequent sauna can help keep your heart healthy and extend your life, lower the risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's, and even help relieve pain and treat the symptoms of chronic tension-type headaches.



## കാടുകൾ ഇടാൻ

59

I have seen my share of innovative saunas. In Finland I saw a sauna built out of a phone booth, and one in a converted fire truck. I even saw a sauna built into a van with a hollowed out V8 engine block used as a stove. Until now, I have never seen a sauna in the shape of a fish.

What you hold in your hand is much more than just a collection of words and images marking the combining of the two. It is a call to action, calling you to open your heart and mind to a universe beyond the mundane, to a universe made accessible through the medium of fire, earth air, and water and your fertile imagination. It's my hope this book will inspire you as much as it did me.

Mikkel Aaland

**Link to Book**



Travis Skinner and Jovanique Novarra in the hot seats

