# Mikkel Aaland



"It's All an Adventure"

# The Aaland Ulefoss Sauna: *Reinventing the Modern Nordic Sweat*

Last summer, while filming the Scandinavian episode of Perfect Sweat, I had the fortune to meet the Swedish architect <u>Anders Berenssson</u>. He had designed a "secret" sauna for his uncle on an island in the Swedish archipelago that posed on the outside as a simple fishing hut but opened up revealing a wood burning sauna with a full glass wall with a stunning view of the water and passing ships.



Anders Berenssson and the secret sauna.

I took an immediate liking to Anders and after we had finished filming, I asked if he would help redesign our personal sauna in Ulefoss, Norway. Our sauna, or *badstue*, as we say in Norway, was built by my father in the rear of my grandfather's vacant furniture warehouse and opened up to a river in our backyard. I have many fond memories of sweating in my father's *badstue* but I wanted something different.



Inside the original Aaland badstue.



The rear of the old furniture warehouse.

I have always appreciated the womb-like feeling of the Native American sweat lodge which is often built in a circular shape using easily malleable materials such as willow, hide or soil. I also love the serenity of the Turkish hamam with its domed ceiling and rounded wash vestibules. Could Anders turn a traditional box shaped *badstue* with its sharp right angles into something more organic and non-rectilinear that evoked the same feeling I got in the sweat lodge and *hamam*? Could he do this using wood, the preferred building material of the north?



Inipi, a Native American inspired sweat lodge in Copenhagen.

Anders was intrigued and accepted my challenge. Months later he and his German intern Eva Sachs, showed me a 3D model of their unique and innovative solution. Working within the confines of four existing walls, they developed a system of stacked studs shaped in three dimensions like a wood womb or timber cave. I loved what I saw! It offered the organic shape I was looking for and as a bonus the stacks of wood also provided a battery of thermal mass that radiated a gentle and comforting heat from all sides of the room, not only from the stove and stones. (This evenly distributed heat from thick log walls is one the things that makes the traditional Finnish smoke sauna (*savusauna*) so special.)



Most saunas are box-shaped for practical reasons. The simplest way to construct a building with logs or straight planks of wood is to stack them one on top of the other at right angles. Clearly Anders' design would require a lot of wood, skillful carpentry, and labor. Enter master carpenter/handyman, and my friend, Ben Zweerts. Ben is originally from Holland but moved his family to Norway years ago. Not only is he a talented craftsman but when he saw Anders' model, he was excited by the idea of working "out of the box", so to speak. Last spring, while he was laid off from his day job because of the corona virus, Ben turned Anders' design into a reality and not only created something beautiful to behold-a work of art-but it also met my expectations for a perfect sweat.





Following are a few of Anders' design notes, which I have edited:

### Design concept

The concept for this design has been to reinvent the modern Nordic sauna in both shape and structure. The reinvention takes its starting point in a shift of mind set in how modern Nordic wood buildings are built. For the last Century Nordic wood buildings have become less and less wood and more and more insulation, moist and wind barriers and composite materials. This development is now experiencing a shift back to more solid wood buildings due to new knowledge about wood and climate change. Old more solid wood buildings last longer, have little moist problems and store more carbon dioxide. With the development of new techniques they can also be built fast and affordable. We believe the same trend is absolutely relevant for the sauna typology. A sauna hardly needs extra insulation since it's heated for short periods of time and the experienced heat is manly a direct heat from the stove. A sauna hardly needs plastic sheets and other products that emits chemicals when heated. A Nordic sauna is typically built in wood and why not develop that technique in a new way in both building techniques and atmosphere.



#### Structure

Wood works as a heat battery slowly charged when heated, slowly emitting when the space is cooling down. By stacking wood we created a big thermal mass of wood with a lot of exposed surfaces that can be charged with heat. The structure also have another positive effect. It stores carbon dioxide when kept in a building. Although this sauna is little it takes its small part in cooling down the planet but hopefully also inspiring others to start thinking of wood as a carbon dioxide storage.

#### Architecture

A sauna is also a spiritual space. A place of recharging the soul. We wanted to make this space a soft and warm organically shaped womb like cave. Wood is a soft warm material that is pleasant to be close to. Wood however most of the time comes in straight boards. To get an organic shape we worked with subtracting a timber structure to create a more cave liked shape. In most parts the cave is stacked with straight cuts but where body meets wood the studs are jigged sawed smoother and sanded.

The cave has three levels. The lowest level is reached directly where you enter the sauna. The second layer is an introvert cave space where you can crepe into the wood structure. The third layers you sit next to the window looking out towards the river.





#### How to build

The 2 by 3 foot fir tree stud (45 X 75mm stud) is a Nordic off the shelf product normally used in non-load bearing walls . This is our only building part for this project except the surrounding walls. The stud is stacked with a distance 4 feet (95 mm). When creating a seating area the gap is filled with a stud making the gaps between the studs 10 mm. The studs are screwed together and the wholes are plugged when visible. Since the structure is made in a 3D program all studs can be measured and cut in advance. Since the structure is in wood alterations such as smoothening surfaces can be made after the structure has been erected



### Ben's Impressions

"When I first saw Anders' model, I thought to myself, Oh My God! So much wood. So complicated. But I knew it would end up special. When the wood was delivered the neighbor asked me if I was building a house. He couldn't believe it would fit in one tiny room! It was tricky putting the studs in place and keeping everything straight and level. It was much like putting together a 4-dimensional puzzle. My son, Thomas, helped. In the end it all worked out, and it's beautiful!"





### Link to Anders Berenssson's Website

# Perfect Sweat Update

Shooting for Perfect Sweat has been put on hold because of the world wide pandemic. Planned shoots in the Baltic and Mexico have been postponed. In the meanwhile we have shot seven episodes which are in post-production. At this time we don't have a formal agreement with a distributor but we are working on it! These are strange times, but one thing is for sure: our love for sweat has not diminished.

Follow the project on Instagram <u>https://www.instagram.com/perfect.sweat/</u> and like us on <u>Facebook</u>. Watch the <u>Perfect Sweat trailer</u>.

Thanks! Mikkel