Eero Saarinen and the Modern Movement

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The variety and eclecticism of the Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen’s built works set him apart from many of the other architects of the Modern movement. The Gateway Arch, in St. Louis, the David S. Ingalls Hockey Rink, at Yale University in New Haven, the TWA Terminal at the John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, and the Dulles Airport, in Richmond, VA, with their voluptuous curves and striking forms, are perhaps the most memorable of his works, but they present only a small portion of Eero’s ideas and techniques. The Stiles and Morse Colleges at Yale University, in New Haven, CT, elegant compositions of irregularly angled masonry forms, and the CBS Building, a dark, granite composition of striking verticality, among others, give a different and important message about the architect that designed them, his successes and failures, and his impact on the profession. Such works as these showcase Eero’s willingness to explore space in radically different ways and in the process illuminate the core philosophy behind much of his work. In this paper, I argue that this philosophy was groundbreaking in its conspicuous departure from the pervasive modern philosophy of the period. Eero’s place in architectural history has long been a topic of debate among architectural historians; I argue here that it is as one of the most important architects of the twentieth century, not just in the quality of the individual works but in the intellectual rigor of the body of work as a whole. Eero applied form late in the process of his designs, and thus used form above all in response to individual context -- not just in immediate physical surroundings but in the intricacies and meanings of a building’s function in relation to the people interacting with it. Eero pushed the boundaries and limits of modernism by taking its principles and extending them to their logical extremes. Former New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote
that Eero “pushed [Modernism’s] limits too fast, too far”\(^1\); certainly some of Eero’s works seem uncomfortable and borne of intellectual struggle, but it was precisely that act of pushing the envelope of traditional Modernist thought that made him so ahead of his time. His oeuvre, in all its imperfection and idiosyncrasy, is one of the most important of the twentieth century.

Allan Temko, in his 1962 monograph *Eero Saarinen*, summed up Eero’s life quite well:

To have been born crown prince in a small, mildly old-fashioned, but humane and personal realm of architecture, over which his father Eliel ruled with firm benevolence -- and then suddenly to have transformed that inheritance into a sweeping and powerful domain of his own, only to die tragically at the height of his powers -- was Eero Saarinen’s unique fate in the contemporary movement.\(^2\)

Indeed, Eero’s life was anything but typical. He was born on the same day as his father, Eliel Saarinen, on August 20, 1910, in Finland. From the very beginning, Eero was surrounded by the arts: Eliel’s architectural practice dominated the home, and Loja Saarinen, Eero’s mother, was also an accomplished artist. The Saarinen family moved to the United States when Eero was only twelve years old in 1923. While they initially had some trouble settling in, things began to go more smoothly when they became acquainted with George Booth, Michigan’s largest newspaper tycoon, and his family. Soon after, Eliel was asked by the Booths to design a large cultural center in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, at the site of a large estate named Cranbrook.\(^3\)

Cranbrook was originally conceived in 1904 as a place for artists of all kinds to gather, but it was not until 1925, when Eliel was hired to formally institute Cranbrook as a leading


progressive educational center and commune for the arts, that it truly became a legitimate
institution. With massive funding from the Booths, Eliel made Cranbrook a center for the avant-
garde and the cutting edge in the arts scene in America.\(^4\) His own buildings on the Cranbrook
campus embodied a progressive mindset and were always differing explorations of different
facets of architectural form and function as the Modern movement developed.

Cranbrook provided Eero from the very beginning with various avenues through which
he could express his creativity. Surrounded by leading practitioners working within a multitude
of different mediums, Eero gained hands-on experience with assorted different arts. Eliel
frequently gave Eero minor architectural projects to go along with his own larger projects on the
campus. Beginning in 1929, Eero designed gates, details, and sculptures for his father’s buildings
on the campus.\(^5\)

Eero began at Yale in 1931, and thrived there despite the Beaux-Arts curriculum in place
(this approach, common at Universities during the period, prescribed classical forms and little to
no inquiry or intellectual theory). He was awarded several prizes, and graduated in three years.
Soon after graduating, he was awarded a traveling fellowship to Europe with Carl Milles, a
Swedish sculptor, and other friends. In Europe, Eero gained firsthand experience with the classic
monuments of the past, and continued his design work, producing designs for an unbuilt
commercial center and a concert hall renovation.\(^6\)

Eliel Saarinen was a highly active and prolific architect. He built works from the 1890s
until his death in 1950, published several books, and taught at Cranbrook from the 1925

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid., 32.
onwards. Throughout his career, Eliel was not afraid to try new things or continue exploring architecture in untried ways. From a relatively young age, he adopted a highly progressive view of architecture, which he expounded in his 1948 book *Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Art*:

For those years -- 1894-1897... coincided with those very years when it finally became evident that the Classical form after all is not the form to be used for contemporary purpose, but that our time must develop an architectural form of its own.⁷

Many of Eliel’s best-known and most acclaimed works were constructed in the turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau style that sought to explore ornament in more relevant ways by bringing it back to nature. Eliel’s work was key in Finland’s transition between the classical and the modern; the notable Finnish Modernist Alvar Aalto put it this way:

The pioneering of Eliel Saarinen in his country has eliminated the conflicts which are likely to hamper a balanced artistic production. Thanks to his honest, logical approach, the usual strife between old and new architecture does not exist in Finland.⁸

Eliel’s work -- in Finland from the late 1890’s until 1922 and in the United States until his death in 1950 -- was particularly marked for its exquisite material properties. Even the famously derisive Frank Lloyd Wright was impressed: “You always have the luck to work with good materials, while I seem always to have to work with lesser ones,”⁹ Wright told him on a tour of Eliel’s Kingswood School at Cranbrook. But Eliel’s modern aesthetic only really developed

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⁸ Albert Christ-Janer, *Eliel Saarinen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1948), ix-x.

⁹ Ibid., 73.
when he worked in partnership with Eero starting in 1936. Together they combined Eliel’s
mastery of masonry with Eero’s distinct taste for the modern. 10

As Eero settled back into life in Michigan, he began to become more involved at
Cranbrook. He soon befriended the noted architect Charles Eames (those close to Eero were
amazed at how Eames’s presence could seemingly transform Eero from his intensely focused,
introverted self into someone amazingly talkative, outgoing, and excitable), and in 1939 was
appointed to Cranbrook’s architecture faculty. That same year, he married Lily Swann, a sculptor
with whom he worked on several projects.11 Swann described Eero this way:

He was listening to the news constantly. I'd never listened to the news in my life
only music, you know just didn't interest me. And I liked... he was so serious
listening to it that I liked that, because I always liked seriousness. And I was sort
of in awe of him.12

Throughout the late 1930s, Eero and his father submitted designs to various architectural
competitions, most notably for a new art center at Wheaton College, an overall campus design
for Goucher College, a theater at the College of William and Mary, and a new Smithsonian Art
Museum. The Art Museum proposal consisted of a progressive, confident arrangement of marble
forms next to a large reflecting pool; unfortunately, the design was scorned by both critics and
the public, and, despite support from some Modernists, never built due to widespread
opposition.13

10 Ibid., 81.


13 Pelkonen, 34-55.
Between 1937 and 1942, Eliel and Eero did complete many important works. The Kleinhans Music Hall, in Buffalo, New York, was a symmetrical composition of two curved forms -- a larger concert hall and a smaller one -- that played off a large pool of water. The Crow Island School, in Winnetka, Illinois, made significant use of landscaped outdoor space to for students to utilize. And the Tabernacle Church of Christ, in Columbus, Indiana, abstracted the traditional forms of a church with its sanctuary and tower in a modern way. The aesthetic adopted in these projects was distinctly modern but still, in some ways, tied to the past. The consistent use of masonry, a hallmark of Eliel’s work, was the most distinctive example of this. Other projects of the period include the master plan and Opera Shed for Tanglewood, in Lenox, MA, the Wermuth House, in Fort Wayne, IN, and a community center in Fenton, MI.14

The distinctive style that resulted from the Saarinen partnership was more than just the sum of two different people’s ideas -- both Saarinens influenced each other in important ways. As Virginia Christ-Janer, wife of Eliel’s biographer Albert Christ-Janer, put it:

14 Ibid., 36-37.
15 Temko, 52.
I think today’s architectural critics tend to dwell too emphatically on Eero’s influence on his father. They were both strong individuals, of two different generations, influenced by customs and mores of two eras and two quite different countries.\(^{16}\)

In fact, while Eero undoubtedly did influence his father significantly, the more apparent manifestation of influence was Eliel’s in Eero’s later works of the 1950s. Eliel’s love of masonry and willingness to frequently draw directly from classical precedents would later manifest themselves in some of Eero’s most significant works, as well as in the overall stylistic approach he would take -- one far less dogmatic than those of most of his contemporaries.

Throughout the late 1940s, after he returned from a brief stint creating designs for the Office of Strategic Services between 1942 and 44,\(^ {17}\) Eero began to assume greater control of the firm, while Eliel focused on only a few commissions and kept teaching. During this period, Eero also became well-known for his obsessively methodical approach and consistent inability to meet project deadlines.\(^ {18}\) He saw hard work as key to his success:

> My life has been a fanatical concentration on architecture at the expenses [sic] of all the other phases of life -- this has probably been due to the fact that I largely pattern my life upon my fathers [sic] and since competition is very keen today and my talents are not as free flowing as my fathers, such a concentration has been necessary to succeed.\(^ {19}\)

The 1940s also brought new tensions. In 1946, George Booth replaced Eliel as Cranbrook’s director, and when he died in 1949, he was replaced by his son Harry. Eero was not very closely connected to Cranbrook by that point, and when Eliel died after a long and successful career in 1950, Eero did not donate his archives to Cranbrook. This led to even more severe tensions, and

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 329.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 39

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
soon after Eero cut himself off entirely from Cranbrook. As his marriage to Lily began to fall apart, however, he continued to rely on his friends from Cranbrook.\textsuperscript{20}

In the period after Eliel’s death, Eero finally began to come into his own as an architect. As he put it,

As his [Eliel’s] partner, I often contributed technical solutions and plans, but only within the concept he created. A better name for architect is form-giver and until his death in 1950, when I started to create my own form, I worked within the form of my father.\textsuperscript{21}

Eero’s “own form” emerged very quickly. By 1956, his office had 18 projects under development, all of which embodied not Eliel’s ideas, but Eero’s. Soon noted young architects, including Kevin Roche, Cesar Pelli, and Robert Venturi came to work for the office. In 1953, Eero was interviewed by Aline Louccheim, an art editor of the New York Times; they got along incredibly well, and were married in her New York Apartment on February 8, 1954.\textsuperscript{22}

From his father’s death until his own in 1961, Eero experienced his most important phase of building. In those 11 years, Eero was constantly busy with new designs for buildings of various types across the world. And right off the bat, there was no dearth of work to be done. The General Motors Technical Center, a huge commission first awarded in 1945 to Eliel and Robert Swanson, another firm architect, was left to Eero and his associates to complete. In 1948, when the project was really getting going, Eero began to take it over from his father and guide it in his own direction. When his father died, Eero’s new associates stepped in and also made large

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 40-41.
\textsuperscript{22} Pelkonen, 334.
The center, which was completed in 1955, consisted of a campus of 25 buildings on 320 acres surrounding a central pool. It had an austere, modern aura to it -- all of the buildings evoked a machine aesthetic, with their carefully detailed, Miesian facades and careful planning. Ultra-thin glass curtain walls and squared corners played off of sculptural, rounded staircases, a central water tower, and a dome building. Colorful, glazed brick on exterior end walls was used to lend a lighter, playful feel to the center. But despite its campus-like properties, the GM Technical Center was not friendly to pedestrians -- the entire complex (with one minor exception) was designed on the scale of an automobile. Accordingly, the result was a work of monumentality and power that expressed a distinctly postwar confidence in the future of capitalism and technology in America. Eero did not feel the need to disguise the sheer size, scale or nature of the project; instead, he exposed it and drew upon it to produce a dynamic, forward-thinking complex. As he himself put it,

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23 Ibid., 357.
24 Temko, 60.
25 Saarinen, 30.
Like the automobile itself, the buildings are essentially put together, as on an assembly line, out of mass-produced units. And, down to the smallest detail, we tried to give the architecture the precise, well-made look which is a proud characteristic of industrial America. The architecture attempts to find its eloquence out of a consistent and logical development of its industrial character. It has been said that in these buildings I was very much influenced by Mies [van der Rohe]. But this architecture really carries forward the tradition of American factory buildings which had its roots in the Middle West in the early automobile factories of Albert Kahn.26

The GM Technical Center’s popularity and success earned Eero a spot on the cover of Time Magazine on July 2, 1956,27 and set in stone the foundations of his reputation as a master public relations man for large companies seeking to make their presences more palatable to the public.

The GM Technical Center established Eero as one of America’s leading practitioners of architecture, but it did not allow him to explore some of the most interesting and vital facets of design -- namely the interactions of people in human-scaled spaces. The Kresge Auditorium and Chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, MA, afforded Eero an interesting opportunity to explore those facets in great depth. Designed and constructed between 1950 and 1955, the design was conceived as a balance and contrast of differing forms, as at the GM Technical Center. The Auditorium, a copper dome that touched the ground in only three places, was essentially a modern take on the imposing domes Welles Bosworth’s MIT Central Building, while the nondenominational Chapel, a moat-enclosed brick cylinder topped with the elegant, lifting form of a Theodore Roszak sculpture serving the function of a bell tower, evoked the heaviness of the campus’s predominant masonry and provided a quiet space to pray or even just think in peace. (Originally, there was also to be another rectangular building as well.) The Auditorium, the first large-scale concrete shell building in the United States, sat on a brick

26 Ibid.
27 Time Magazine, 2 July 1956, 1.
podium and featured a main hall with 1,200 seats as well as a smaller, lower theater. These functions were a tight and somewhat awkward fit for the dome structure, but on the whole, they were cleverly and effectively integrated into it. Eero, always willing to analyze his building’s successes and failures objectively and honestly, later wrote of the building,

I think some of the criticisms [ leveled against it] have a certain amount of justification. I feel now that the building is not enough of a lifting form and that perhaps it does lack sufficient definition of scale. Our belief in the effectiveness of the interior shape and space and in the good acoustics has been justified.  

The Chapel, a very different building, was focused entirely around the central sanctuary. This 128-seat, circular room featured undulating interior brick walls, movable furniture, and ethereal light. Most of the room’s light came from an oculus at the far end of this room (to the visitor entering from the narthex), which then reflected down on a shimmering golden screen designed by Harry Bertoia. The rest of the light came was reflected into the room upwards from the moat around the building. The result was an incredibly spiritual, restful space.

The interior wall was curved... to give the space a lack of sharp definition and an increased sense of turning inward. The arches on the outside occur where the exterior wall and the undulating interior wall meet. In retrospect, especially after

Figure 3: The Kresge Chapel. Photograph by the author.

Saarinen, 42.
having looked again at the archivolts of Romanesque churches, I wish that we had given these arches a richer, stronger, three-dimensional quality. And I am aware that the connection between the narthex and chapel is clumsy. However, I am happy with the chapel. I think we managed to make it a place where an individual can contemplate things larger than himself.29

But while the MIT project allowed Eero to focus on creating more human-scale spaces, it was not entirely a success in that regard, a fact that Eero was acutely aware of later in his life:

Looking back at this early work, I think the dome and chapel can be criticized as being too egocentric. The shapes of the buildings are closed. They do not contribute anything toward creating unity within an area which so badly needs unity. From the beginning, we conceived of these buildings on a great square, but neglected to define and crystallize exactly how it would be achieved. This we should have done.30

Eero did, however, see potential for future improvement. Referring to plans for a more unified quadrangle, he said:

And my hopes are that we will be able to create a large court where we can pull all of the surrounding buildings together into one humongous whole -- in a sense continue the spirit of the Welles Bosworth buildings at MIT -- not in the actual architecture, but in the largeness of spirit.31

In the Chapel and Auditorium at MIT, and in the GM Technical Center, some of Eero’s first solo projects, his distinct approach was already quite visible. Instead of adopting a trademark style in the vein of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, or Frank Lloyd Wright, three of Eero’s greatest influences, he chose to apply different styles to each project depending on its function and location. At the GM Technical Center, he intentionally chose to borrow the curtain wall from Mies van der Rohe, in order to best express machine efficiency. At the Kresge Auditorium, he chose to create a striking, dramatic building that capitalized on a bold structural

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
technique to express the spirit of innovation at a university. One time Eero employee and leading postmodernist Robert Venturi put it this way, in a panel discussion about Eero’s work:

In the end I might put it that Eero’s work acknowledged and expressed, via its kind of baroque drama, complexity -- complexity not within the projects but among the projects -- and thereby did not and does not fully connect to our era, which is mannerist -- where pure unity cannot happen -- where exceptions have to be accommodated within conventions. So Saarinen distinctly was not -- is not -- a mannerist.32

Venturi points out that Eero’s eclecticism among his projects leaves him disconnected from a distinctly mannerist era, but does not note that this eclecticism was only skin deep. Kevin Roche, the architect that took over Eero’s firm after his death and went on to design significant works in his own right, pointed this out to Venturi during the discussion:

By the time he got to thinking of the form, he already knew more about the subject than probably the people who had asked him to do the building in the first place. More about what was needed, more about the functional aspects, and he had thoroughly investigated all of the other relationships, the urban design, the cultural environment, all of these things which one normally takes into account.33

The approach that Roche describes was what truly set Eero apart. His methodical search for all of the necessary information from which to design a building and his careful studies of sites, and their physical surroundings and cultural identities, led him to his selection of form.34 By contrast, many pioneering Modernists, like Mies van der Rohe, sought to solve functional problems within a pre-determined building skin (in Mies’s case, this would be the glass curtain wall). That idea is still, in a sense classicism. It is classicism stripped of its traditional ornament, certainly. But it is still classicism in that it takes an applied skin and attempts to fit function into that, rather than

32 Pelkonen, 356.
33 Ibid., 360.
taking form and having it follow function entirely, as Modernist doctrine dictated. So essentially what Eero was doing was bringing that Modernist doctrine to its logical limit -- form being entirely dictated by function. Eero saw himself as taking the three guiding principles of the time -- functional integrity, honest structural expression, and awareness of time, and adding his own to them: expression of purpose and meaning, relation to environment, and carrying a concept to its conclusion. These added principles were based upon a simple and logical extension to Modernism -- that the definition of ‘function’ could be expanded to also mean the nature of expression in a building. This resulted in the idea that Modern buildings did not need to be limited with the use of the simplest possible structures or skins; instead, they could be functionally successful and structurally honest, and yet still be expressive of their purposes and meanings. What Venturi was reacting too, then, was perhaps not so much this approach as the abuse of this approach. As Eero’s career went on, some of his designs became more questionable and, in Venturi’s eyes, betraying of the process through which Eero created them.

One of the biggest projects that revealed the flaws in Eero’s process, and in his execution of it, was the United States Embassy Chancellery in London, designed and built between 1955 and 1960. In designing it, Eero looked at a large set of potential designs that, in the words of New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, “ranged from classically modern to neo-fascist, sensual concave facades to rigid boxes.” Ouroussoff blamed the seeming difficulty that Eero encountered in designing the building on his uncertainty about what image America should project to the world, though that does not get at the entire issue. Given Eero’s process of assigning expressive form after analyzing function, he certainly must have struggled with how to

present America in Britain. At the same time, however, his philosophy of expressive form did not limit itself to expressing the nature of what went on within a building: it also encompassed the relationship between a building and its surroundings. And so Eero also had to work with Grosvenor Square, the predominantly Georgian square upon which the building was to be built.

In the finished result, it is immediately apparent that Eero’s process did not go entirely well. The building seems awkwardly torn in its respect for the forms and statures of its neighbors, its desire to be traditionally modern, and its expression of a more idiosyncratic sensibility. Which is not to say that the building does not have merits -- it does. Its patterned facade of alternating window depths was intended to garner soot stains in certain places and not others, and thus give the building more texture over time.

And the structure, in its boxiness, does have some strength and power to it. But in other ways, the building was far less successful. Its gold trim, intended to play off of nearby classical buildings, instead just detracts from the design’s modernity and makes the building overly showy. And in its awkward attempts to abstract the forms of other buildings on a larger scale --

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as in the fenestration, and the overall height and massing -- it further gains the look of a slight misfit. Even Eero admitted to its problems: “In my own mind, the building is much better than the English think -- but not quite as good as I wished it to be,” he said not long after it was completed in 1960.

The question of whether it was Eero’s process or his execution of that process that caused the building not to work as well as it could have is an interesting one. Certainly Eero seems to have encountered some confusion as to how exactly America should be portrayed to the rest of the world in the postwar era, as Ouroussoff pointed out, but it also seems that he struggles with where the limits stand between an expressive design and applied ornament. This theme of expressiveness vs. ornament appeared repeatedly in Eero’s work -- even at early projects like the Chapel at MIT, where structural arches, a reflecting pool, a large tower-like sculpture are all applied to the building. One of the key failings of Modernism as a movement is in its dogmatic pursuit of an unattainable goal: a pure building. Even Mies van der Rohe, its greatest advocate, used fake structural supports in the Seagram Building to make his work look ‘purer’ than it actually was.38 Eero was then coming up against the classical nature of a style, an applied skin or aesthetic, and in abandoning that for an architecture of multiplicity, came up against the fact that no building is truly free of ornament. So, in a larger sense, the Chancellery Building, in its embrace of its context and of traditional ornament, embodies that tension between an era calling for buildings of a skin-deep style and a man who sought to bring the tenets of the Modern movement to their logical endpoint, albeit an endpoint he was not entirely comfortable working with -- the point where ornament again openly becomes a part of architecture. And thus Venturi

was right -- Eero was disconnected from his time in his inability to be a mannerist, but in such buildings as the Chancellery, he was unable to harness this new horizon in architecture to create something truly great and original; instead, he fell back on traditional forms of ornament and a societally acceptable modern skin.

But in other cases, where Eero was free to experiment with his buildings in very different ways, he came upon more success. The Ezra Stiles and Morse Colleges at Yale University, in New Haven, designed and built between 1958 and 1962, again required Eero to deal with an area of strong identity while at the same time allow his own buildings to express themselves in full. Eero came to the conclusion that in order to express the idea of a college rather than a dormitory, it would be necessary for the architecture of the colleges to focus on the individual. He responded to a general student dislike of the other colleges’ common rooms by creating a new sort of a common room, what he called a “buttery,” the

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39 Temko, 106.
40 Saarinen, 88.
basement of the colleges.\textsuperscript{41} He also expressed individuality and Yale’s gothic spirit through minimal use of right angles in order to create unique rooms with the slight edge of irregularity that all good gothic architecture possesses. But whereas his attempts to fit in at Grosvenor Square failed, they were in fact strikingly successful at Yale. The colleges, rendered in a concrete-stone mixture, have an intimate feel to them, and their austere, gothically Modern esthetic helps mediate between various surrounding campus buildings. Their spatially complex exterior terraces prove, as do all of Eero’s best works, that Modernism can have a sculptural, dramatic aspect to it.

As the colleges neared completion in 1961, Eero appraised his works:

\begin{quote}
The colleges are looking strong, as I hoped they would, and they really work with the other buildings. We must plant ivy as soon as possible and decide on a sculptor for the dining-hall chandeliers.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

His wife Aline described Eero’s thought process, “He thought of college architecture in its relation to students, as stage scenery.”\textsuperscript{43}

The Morse and Stiles Colleges have, however, had one consistent problem: the butteries. Dank, lightless spaces, they did not have a successful internal relationship to the dining halls and simply did not serve students well (they have since been modified). For many Yale students, that concern came to play into a larger sense of discontent with the colleges’ designs. Since the colleges’ completion, student opinion has shifted considerably on the issue of whether individual rooms or centralized social spaces are more important. During Eero’s time, the former was seen as desirable; now, the latter is seen as having paramount importance. Regardless, all architecture

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{41} In Retrospect -- Eero Saarinen’s Morse and Stiles Colleges, perf. Kevin Roche, Cesar Pelli, Vincent Scully Jr., Youtube, KDN Films, 2010.

\textsuperscript{42} Saarinen, 92.

\textsuperscript{43} Pelkonen, 99.
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must age and adapt to fit changing uses, and on the whole, Eero’s colleges at Yale have been spectacular successes.\textsuperscript{44}

What it is, exactly, that made these works successes is an interesting and important question. Eero did apply the same process he applied to the London Chancellery at Yale, but it seems he was more self-confident in the design of residential buildings in a Gothic environment. Himself a graduate of Yale, Eero also benefited from a close relationship with Yale president A. Whitney Griswold and an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of student life at the institution.\textsuperscript{45} The sophisticated Modern take on Gothic architecture that resulted to this day lends a sense of peace, dignity, and place to a hectic campus and countless hectic lives.

As the 1950s went on, much of Eero’s work became successively more wild and daring. The David S. Ingalls Hockey Rink, also at Yale, was designed and built between 1956 and 1958. The 3,000 seat arena has a massive, dramatically curving concrete spine from which a great wood roof is suspended. The rink drew upon Eero’s love of bold structural techniques and skill with sculpture to produce a wildly memorable, striking work. “I believe the David S. Ingalls Hockey Rink is one of the best buildings we have done and I am very proud of it,”\textsuperscript{46} Eero opined not long after the building opened. He saw the rink not only as an interesting building, but as an important moment in his career. Talking to a friend shortly before his death in 1961, he stated:

Yes, I would agree the Hockey Rink marks an important moment in my work. You could say it strengthened my convictions about making everything part of the same ‘form-world’ and gave us confidence about handling vaults and suspended roofs -- which have interested me since some projects of the ‘Fifties and the

\textsuperscript{44} In Retrospect -- Eero Saarinen’s Morse and Stiles Colleges

\textsuperscript{45} Pelkonen, 243.

\textsuperscript{46} Saarinen, 60.
Aspen tent. It influenced both TWA and the Washington airport. I think that the critics have tended to underestimate the hockey rink.47

The rink was, however, criticized by Venturi for its seemingly unnecessarily complex and dramatic structure, given its site at the university and its relatively mundane function (Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, replied, “Clearly, you have yet to understand hockey at Yale.”)48 Venturi, does, however make an interesting point -- was Eero, in his love of complex drama, perhaps betraying the principles upon which his work is laid? Given Eero’s desire to express the less qualitative nature of what went on within the building, it seems that the answer is no. The great curving spine and wooden roof seem to express the excitement and movement of hockey -- this is not meaningless drama. And as Eero himself stated, the rink was an important exploration of the more dynamic structures and forms that would come to dominate some of his last works. His two airports, the TWA terminal at the John F. Kennedy Airport in New York and the Dulles Airport in Richmond, VA, both utilized similarly dramatic curves and bold structures in order to best express the nature of a mobile society. Those buildings, two of his most famous to this day, show off Eero’s skills as a sculptor and his ideas about expressing movement, but they just scratch the surface of the process that Eero utilized. The GM Technical Center, MIT Auditorium and Chapel, and Yale residential colleges took that process in three entirely different directions. And, in one his very last buildings, but first and only skyscraper, the Columbia Broadcasting Systems Headquarters took it in yet another.

The CBS Building drew upon the corporate public relations skill he had previously developed working for Bell Labs, IBM, and General Motors, but for the first time brought those

47 Ibid.
48 Pelkonen, 361.
skills into the city. The building, designed by Eero from 1960-61, and completed after his death by his associates in 1964, capitalized both on Eero’s penchant for the bold and sculptural, as well as on his skill at effectively weaving modernity into a classical context (perhaps something he picked up from Eliel). The building, a simple 38-floor box dominated by a series of dark granite triangular piers that emphasize the building’s verticality, stands out as an elegant, subtle, and yet deeply expressive work that distinguishes itself even in such an aggressively developed area as New York. The travertine-clad lobby drew upon Mies van der Rohe’s Seagram Building only a few blocks away, yet the building is no imitation. Instead, it’s one of Eero’s most successful executions of his process -- a work of ingenuity in which form and structure are combined on the exterior, creating a unique, three-dimensional facade and column-free office floors. Former New York Times architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable put it this way: “It is a building in the true, classical sense, a complete design in which technology, function, and aesthetics are conceived and executed integrally for its purpose.”

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49 Ibid., 47.
50 Roman, 173-180.
Eero Saarinen died on September 1, 1961, due to complications from a brain-tumor surgery. His associates, led by Kevin Roche, went on to complete nine of his in-progress projects, some of which were not even yet under construction (like the CBS Building). Eero’s funeral, held at the MIT Chapel, was attended by some of the most important architects of the period: Charles Eames, Louis Kahn, J. Irwin Miller, and Pietro Belluschi, among others. He left behind a widow, Aline, and three children -- Eric and Susan from his first marriage and Eames (named for Charles Eames) from his second. Eero died at a tragically young age, just as he was reaching the height of his powers, but he left well-loved and well-respected. In retrospect, his buildings have aged well and his reputation, once clouded with allegations of failing his modern principles, has grown more sterling over time. In recent years, several important monographs of his work have been published, and his true contribution to architecture is beginning to be seen clearly, in its full effect.

Eero Saarinen was not afraid of failure. He particularly liked when he was referred to as a “methodical but not cautious architect,” and that phrase described him well. He developed a unique, forward thinking approach that brought the principles of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe to their logical endpoint -- the point at which ornament, embodied in expressive form, returned to architecture. And if Eero, still in some ways grounded and restrained by the modernist, anti-ornament dogma, was not always able to bring his architecture successfully to that point, that does not diminish the accomplishments he did have. He pursued the theory behind his architecture with intellectual rigor, and imbued modernism with a higher form of expression -- both in his famous, dramatic airports and in his subtler CBS Building, MIT Chapel,

52 Saarinen, 14.
and Yale residential colleges (among many others). Eero was not just a corporate public relations man -- he was actively seeking a higher form of expression -- in effect a movement to follow modernism. Robin Boyd effectively summed up Eero’s career in 1959 with the phrase, “Reasoned rectangles to felt space.” Methodically, but not cautiously, Eero developed one of the twentieth century’s most important design philosophies:

I believe that the spirit of a building should be expressed, not hidden behind a neutral curtain of glass. Buildings should have ‘guts’ and direction and make statements. Neutral buildings do not stimulate man’s imagination or give man confidence or make him feel proud and I believe architecture should do these things.  

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53 Pelkonen, 100.
54 Ibid., 16.
Works Cited


