



eero saarinen shaping community

by Reed Haslach

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The mid-20th century coincided with the zenith of “high modernism” in architecture, marked by pure, abstract, and often monumental forms, especially in public and institutional buildings. While much of Eero Saarinen’s (1910–61) work fits into that mold, modernism alone is not an adequate lens through which to understand his oeuvre. Saarinen designed several major complexes of buildings that ran counter to modernist orthodoxy—subtly in some cases but quite dramatically in others. His unusual approach to designing groups of buildings, though often criticized at this time, derived logically from his early experiences in two creative communities in extraordinary architectural settings.

This article considers three of Eero Saarinen’s campus-based projects—the General Motors Technical Center (1948–56), Concordia Senior College (1953–58), and Stiles and Morse colleges at Yale University (1958–62). These projects stand as evidence of Saarinen’s career-long efforts to achieve a balance between community and individuality, and reveal a keen desire to develop and explore architectural forms and campus plans that not only reflected but enhanced and even actively shaped the identities of their communities.

above: *Where Today Meets Tomorrow* promotional brochure for the General Motors Technical Center, Warren, Michigan, 1956. Courtesy Eero Saarinen Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.



above: **Beauty Arch at Cranbrook School, c. 1928.** A demonstration of Eliel Saarinen's attention to detail in the careful choreography of vistas in order to create a sense of unique identity and place.
 Photo by Peter A. Nyholm, copyright Cranbrook Archives.

right: **Aerial perspective of the Cranbrook School for Boys rendered by Eliel Saarinen, 1925.** Pencil on drawing board. Collection of the Cranbrook Art Museum. Gift of the Cranbrook School (CAM 1954-5). Photograph © 1983 The Detroit Institute of Arts.



Formative Experiences

Saarinen was raised at his family's villa, Hvitträsk, in Finland, and later at Cranbrook Academy, an educational enclave in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, near Detroit. Though remotely located, Hvitträsk was a center for the artistic pursuits of Saarinen's parents, Eliel and Loja—an architect and a textile artist, respectively—and their invited friends and collaborators. The family intentionally mixed their work and domestic lives, based on their belief in cooperative communities as ideal and necessary environments for artistic growth and development.

The Saarinens relocated to the United States in the early 1920s. In 1925, Detroit newspaper magnate George Booth commissioned Eliel to help design and develop a multi-faceted arts educational institution that would have a mission of "self-education under good leadership." Eliel Saarinen's original plan for the Cranbrook campus was notable for its delicate balance between informality and overriding order. While the design included several prominent axes and dramatic sculptural focal points, it also offered unexpected vistas, hidden courtyards, and modestly scaled arcades connecting the buildings. These subtle design details enhanced the tight-knit and intensely creative community of Cranbrook where, in an atmosphere similar to that at Hvitträsk, students explored a variety of artistic media in collaboration with fellow students and resident master craftsmen. Cranbrook's spirit permeated all aspects of its design—from the campus plan to the individual buildings and residences to furniture, which accounted for Eero's first commission.

After studying architecture at Yale University from 1930 to 1934 and working in Finland for a short time, Eero Saarinen returned to Cranbrook in 1936 to teach and go into practice with his father. The Saarinens designed several campus-based projects together and, though sometimes one's hand appears more prominently than the other's, these early works demonstrate a high degree of collaboration. Given his early experiences in the communities of Hvitträsk and Cranbrook, Eero learned to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their communities, and came to believe that the interests of both must be carefully considered in the design process. Furthermore, his campus designs demonstrated his belief that good architectural design should not only reflect, but also actively enhance the interests of both entities.



above: View of General Motors Technical Center showing color glazed brick.
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above right: Interior lobby showing staircase and furniture detail.
© Ezra Stoller / Esto.

below: View of General Motors campus with water tower in the foreground.
© Ezra Stoller / Esto.



An Industrial Versailles

General Motors commissioned the Saarinens to design its corporate research campus in 1944 as “another Cranbrook,” Eero would later recall. When the commission was resurrected in 1948, as the company was gearing up for a post-war production boom, primary project responsibility was transferred to Eero due to Eliel’s poor health. While the earliest plan for the Technical Center featured several major components designed by Eliel—such as a large, asymmetrical pool and a tall water tower—that were retained in subsequent schemes, the design of the GM Technical Center campus clearly reflects a transition from father to son, marking the beginning of the younger Saarinen’s mature career.



Eero worked closely with GM to understand the company’s needs and identity to find what he called “an appropriate architectural expression.” The resulting campus, dedicated in 1956, was a study in steel, brick, and glass on a vast site comprising more than 320 acres. Eero designed, in his words, a “constellation of buildings”—one group of interconnected structures for each of the five GM departments—“clustered” around the central pool. He developed new materials and technologies in cooperation with GM—such as brightly colored glazed brick, prefabricated panel walls, and neoprene gasket weather seals (like those used in automobile windshields) for the glass and metal panels—that would convey their corporate ideals of modernity and efficient mass-production. He strove for a sense of unity, arranging buildings into a “controlled rhythm of high and low,” using color “to help bind the project together.”

The GM complex is often compared to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago. But sleek and modern though it may appear, the GM Technical Center—dubbed “a Versailles of Industry” by *Life* magazine—seems to owe a substantial debt to the picturesque precedent of Eliel’s Cranbrook campus plan. The project demonstrates Saarinen’s interest in maintaining a sense of individual identity within the unified whole of the campus through focal elements such as the structurally exuberant central staircases in four of the five buildings, and the dramatic sculptural counterpoint provided by the Styling Dome. As at Cranbrook, Saarinen even extended his attention to the campus’s furniture, which he designed in collaboration with Knoll, and a sculptural screen in the campus restaurant by Cranbrook alumnus Harry Bertioia. These elements underscore the importance of individual details in the creation of, in Saarinen’s words, a “unified, beautiful, and human environment.”



above: **Aerial View of Concordia Theological Seminary campus after January of 1966.**
 Courtesy Concordia Theological Seminary.

below: **A view of Kramer Chapel.**
 © Balthazar Korab Ltd.

below right: **Students study near the fireplace in the Concordia Senior College Student Commons.**
 Photo by Alexandre Georges, courtesy Concordia Theological Seminary.

Architectural Concord

In 1953, a few years into the GM project, Saarinen was commissioned to design an entire campus for a new Lutheran college in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Concordia Senior College was originally a two-year school intended to prepare students for seminary graduate study. The 191-acre site was flat and visually unremarkable, so the primary burden of establishing both an identity and sense of community would have to be borne by the architecture and planning.

In 1958, Saarinen noted, “The solution seemed to lie in the village-concept: a group of buildings that would have a quiet, unified environment into which the students could withdraw to find a complete, balanced life and yet one which was related to the outside world.” The final design was inspired by a Scandinavian village and was visually unified by the use of pitched roofs throughout, consistent orientation of building axes, and a common materials palette, including diamond-pattern brick walls and black roof tiles. As at GM, Saarinen included a man-made lake, in which the central chapel would be reflected, as a focal point in the plan.

Project records show that Saarinen was intimately involved in the Concordia project, signifying his particular interest to create a community that was a place of both learning and living, similar to what he had enjoyed at Cranbrook. In a memo to his staff, he envisioned the college “as a very closely knit group of buildings” and gave extensive thought to how spaces would be utilized, from the way professors conducted their classes to the routes by which students would move about the campus. For example, while the school administrators originally wanted the students to be housed in three large dormitories of 150 students each, Saarinen proposed smaller houses for 36 students each, arranged in clusters, remembering later, “We hoped that this intimate housing would encourage real student responsibility for the group within each house.”

Concordia reflects not only the influence of Saarinen’s years at Cranbrook, but also that of his father. Eliel Saarinen taught his son to design for the “next largest context—a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, environment in a city plan.” In the case of Concordia, with its featureless site, Eero looked to the community’s identity for inspiration. While the project’s individual buildings are considered by many to be among his least inspiring, through thoughtful groupings of buildings, sensitive landscape design, and careful arrangement of private and communal spaces, Saarinen successfully imbued the campus with a sense of place that reflected and enhanced its communal character.



Medieval Modernism?

One of Saarinen's last projects was the design of two residential colleges, Ezra Stiles and Morse, at Yale University. More than mere dormitories, the Yale residential colleges provide sub-communities within the vast university setting. Students study, eat, and socialize together in their colleges, each of which is headed by a faculty "master." Yale's college system, with its intimacy reminiscent of Cranbrook, resonated with Saarinen and he desired to create buildings that expressed and reinforced its goals. As at Concordia, the Stiles and Morse colleges reflect Saarinen's thoughts about particular uses, the individuality of student residents, and appropriate shared spaces.

With the Yale administration's directive that the majority of rooms in these new colleges be singles, Saarinen resolved that the colleges' rooms should be as distinct from one another as possible—"as random as those in an old inn rather than as standardized as those in a modern motel." He created an array of room shapes, sizes, and locations, considering even the views from room windows, with an intention to create diverse experiences for students within the college community. At the same time, Saarinen did not forget the greater context of the campus community, in keeping with the examples of his father and Cranbrook. He carefully considered Yale's existing courtyards and predominant stone construction. In response, he created a new construction technique for exterior walls—a hybrid of traditional stone bearing walls and modern, poured-in-place concrete—intended to yield buildings that closely complemented their masonry neighbors.



Most interesting of all, it appears that Saarinen's process of designing the buildings was itself a reflection of his interest in the relationship between the individual and its community, and the ability of architecture to both reflect that relationship and actively enhance it. Saarinen shaped the overall building footprints of Stiles and Morse by clustering individual rooms and community gathering spaces into almost cellular structures, the whole buildings assuming forms that were literally the sum of their parts. The finished complex was a curious one—not fully modern but obviously non-traditional. For Saarinen, the project was a logical extension of his ongoing and evolving interest in the relationships between the parts and the whole in campus plans, and a fascinating expression of architectural convictions heavily influenced by the environments of his youth.

Although Eero Saarinen may be best remembered for his spectacular Gateway Arch in St. Louis and for the TWA Terminal at Idlewild (now John F. Kennedy International) Airport, his campus-based work may constitute a more important legacy, and may be the most revealing lens by which to judge his design philosophy. During his brief career, cut short by a brain tumor when he was only 51, Saarinen explored an astonishingly wide range of ideas regarding architectural form and materials. Yet despite his seemingly constant experimentation, Saarinen never wavered from his fundamental belief in the potential of architecture to give communities concrete form and to inspire the creative and intellectual lives of their members. •

above: The poured concrete and stone aggregate walls of the Ezra Stiles and Morse Colleges at Yale University.
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below left: Floor plans of Ezra Stiles and Morse Colleges at Yale University.
Eero Saarinen Collection. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.