

Innocent Modernism on display in Saarinen show

AN extraordinary exhibit, "Eero Saarinen, Shaping the Future," opened last month, having returned to its sponsoring institution: Yale University. It is about the architect, a cultural movement and, perhaps unintentionally, how architecture can reflect the spirit of its times and give perspective about how the aesthetics of the buildings around us came to be.



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The show, a long-time curatorial effort of Yale and its School of Architecture, is split. The portion at Yale Art Gallery is intended for anybody who is interested in art, craft, culture and building design. It involves furnishings and a personalized look at those involved in Saarinen's work.

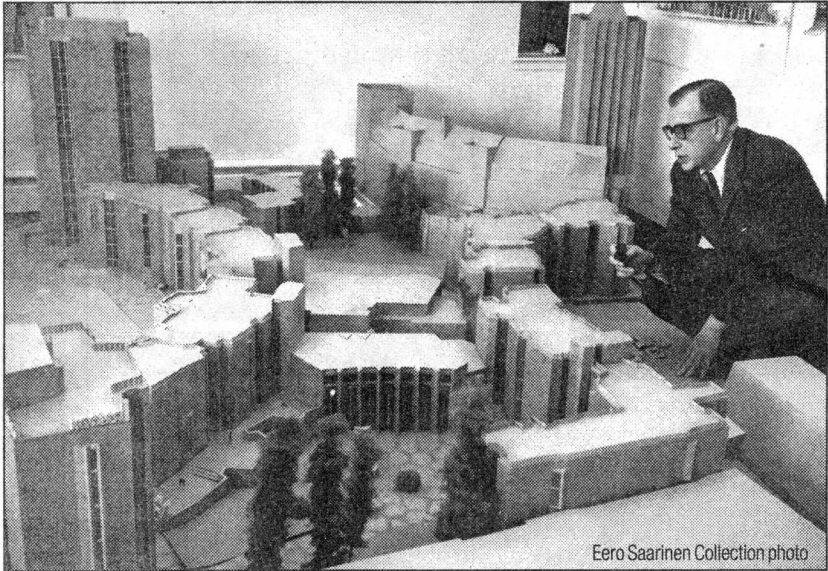
Across York Street, in the Yale School of Architecture Gallery, is the other half of the exhibit. It is geared to architects and aficionados. It has large scale models, blow-ups of drawings and the kind of art photography designed to make buildings look exquisitely architectural in two dimensions.

New Haveners know Saarinen primarily for Ingalls Rink, the hockey venue also known as the "Yale Whale." It is both sculpture and building. His other New Haven work is harder to appreciate: the twin Yale residential colleges, Morse and Ezra Stiles.

The buildings that house this exhibit also are acknowledged modern masterpieces — the art and architecture building designed by Paul Rudolph and Louis Kahn's Yale Art Gallery. Living close to these buildings and Saarinen's Ingalls and Morse/Stiles projects, it is easy to take them for granted.

These byproducts of Yale's presence in New Haven gain new stature when you see this exhibit. For instance, the Stiles/Morse duet was intended by Saarinen to be a Modernist interpretation of medieval village architecture. Many Yale students who have lived in these buildings have reported to me that Saarinen managed to capture the worst aspects of both: the scalelessness of Modernism with the ad hoc brutality of medieval construction.

We may have been blinded to it, but many of Yale's modern masterpieces use the city as the necessary background canvas for their intentionally contrasting expression. As the exhibit clearly displays, the essence of mid-20th century Modernism was the rejection of the historicist buildings that dominated most cities in the world, including New Haven. Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York City is a classic Modernist pearl in the oyster of the Fifth Avenue streetscape — a building that has power by its contrasting shape and materials.



Eero Saarinen and a model of his Ezra Stiles and Morse colleges.

Today, that edgy vision of architects like Saarinen often degenerates into something which is often as superficially style-based as any traditional, historically based building he hated. For good or ill, every new building built in New Haven in the last 20 years is safely modern, conforming to a stylistic expectation that was once revolutionary.

Innocent Modernism is fully captured in Saarinen's work in this exhibit — his fusion of sculpture, craft, and dynamic vitality was imposed on buildings with

an undeniable fervor that starkly contrasts with the banal predictability of the recently completed Smilow Cancer Center or the under-construction Gateway Community College, buildings that dominate their locales by sheer dint of size.

"Shaping the Future," in the exhibit's title, is not just the prime directive of mid-20th century modernist architects. It recognizes the dominant aesthetic we see being built today. A cleaned up, blander modernism is now the politically correct, bankable style of almost all new construction nationwide.

"Making Modern Mainstream" is the title of one of the Saarinen exhibit's rooms. The ironic truth of that statement is that mainstream goes with the flow. It goes along to get along. It may be that Robert A.M. Stern's overtly retro design for Yale's two soon-to-be-built residential colleges will have a shock value amid Modernism's dominant presence in our landscape.

That tug of war between context and creativity in Saarinen's work is at the core of what makes architecture evolve and change with the zeitgeist. That tension, often seen in the relationship between Yale and the city, is what makes New Haven a different — and for me, better — experience than the other local alternatives.

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