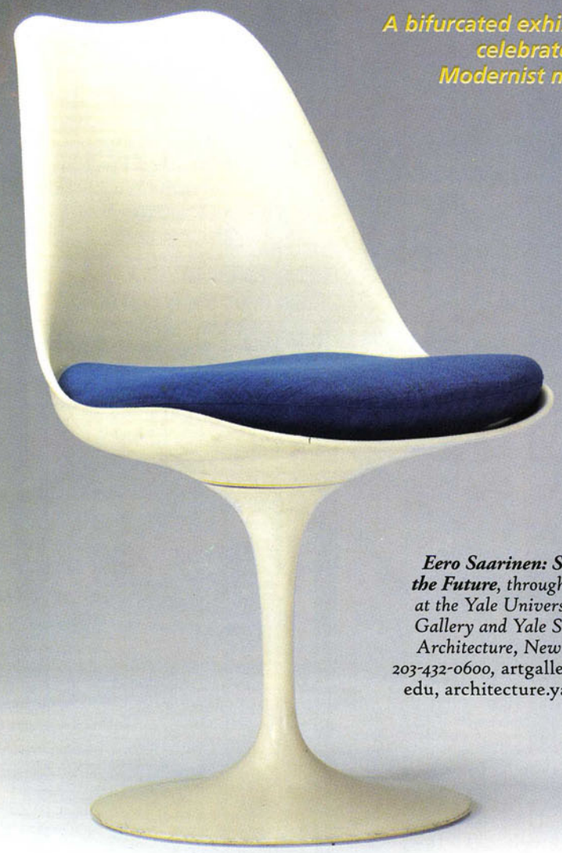
GALLERY

The Two Faces of Eero Saarinen

A bifurcated exhibition celebrates the Modernist master



***Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future**, through May 2 at the Yale University Art Gallery and Yale School of Architecture, New Haven. 203-432-0600, artgallery.yale.edu, architecture.yale.edu.*

Eero Saarinen, Side Chair, 1956. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

Eero Saarinen was a Finnish architect who would have turned 100 years old this year. Although he long ago left this mortal coil (he died in 1961), he lives on before us in his built work.

New Haveners know Saarinen primarily for Ingalls Rink (a/k/a the Yale Whale, Yale's hockey venue), beautiful in its expression of so many different intentions — sculptural, structural, material and institutional. His other New Haven work is far harder to appreciate: the twin Yale residential colleges of Morse and Ezra Stiles.

His client for those commissions, Yale University, has sponsored an extraordinary homage to the man, his work and the movement that he was so deeply a part of — the "cause" of modern architecture. The exhibition *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* is split between two exhibit halls. The "public" portion involving furnishings and a personalized look at the people involved is on view at the Yale University Art Gallery. Across York Street in the Yale School of Architecture gallery, the other half of the exhibit is geared to architects and aficionados of architecture.

Yale was one of mid-century Modernism's great patrons, and the two venues for this exhibit are part of that portfolio. The original Art and Architecture building was designed by Paul Rudolph, and Louis Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery is across the street from his other Yale commission, the Center for British Art. A serendipitous aspect of seeing this visually compelling exhibition is that you can actually see the interior of what are now "old" buildings that have become silent foundations of the New Haven streetscape so many people take for granted.

The YUAG exhibition houses furnishings, personal effects and other materials reflecting the zeitgeist that created the climate for Saarinen's career of thoughtful craftiness and inventive form-giving (he can be seen as a conceptual godfather of Frank Gehry).

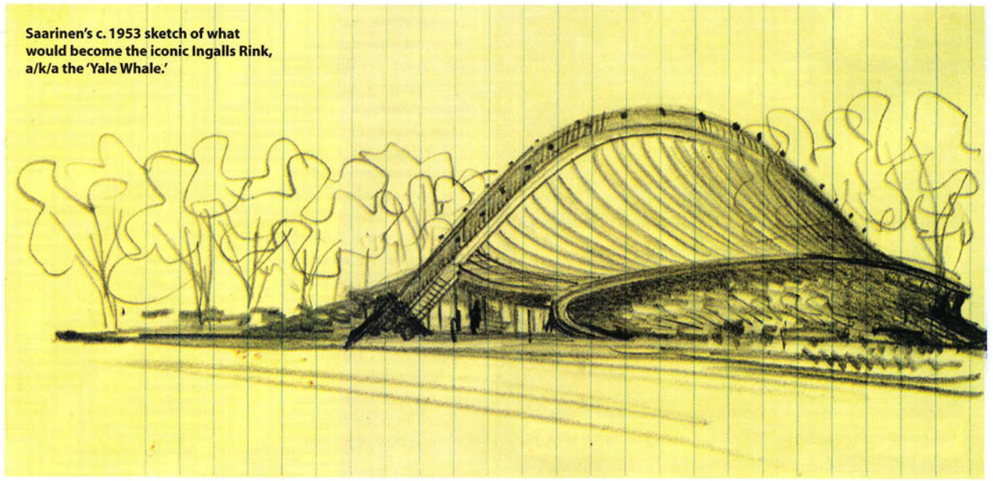
The Art and Architecture Gallery houses a more "inside baseball" exhibit, appropriately displaying huge models, blow-ups of drawings and classic black-and-white photographs that put Saarinen's built product on full display in the belly of Yale's architecture community.

Ensconced in "modern masterpieces" and celebrating the Modern movement's heyday it's rewarding to understand how Saarinen fit the time. He was part of a group comprising mainly white European males who saw a decaying, outdated and perhaps even venal world of historicist building and boldly spoke truth about the disingenuity of the dominant presence of historicist architecture in an age of exploding social and technological change.

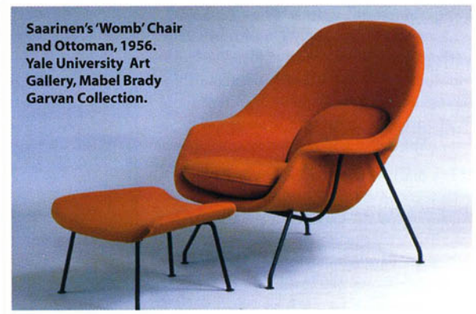
It is a mark of the "settled law" of architectural aesthetic judgment that Saarinen and the creators of the buildings that house this exhibition comprise a veritable "Pantheon of Heroes" for the profession (some call it the "starchitect" phenomenon) — so much so that the rarest of things has happened: an architect's design was renamed for him post-mortem: What was the "A&A Building" is now Paul Rudolph Hall. If there was ever a philosophical self-celebration this is it.

The dynamic between idea and reality is at the core of all design, and architecture is no different. Modernism was a revolutionary effort, so the prosaic realities of durability and use could get short shrift in the building of these architects' ideas. Both of Saarinen's New Haven masterpieces have had to be extensively renovated — most aggressively the Morse/Stiles complex where an "intervention" by Yale was needed to detox their inherently depressing qualities. Intentionally rendered as Modernist interpretation of medieval village architecture, the Morse/Stiles complex captured the worst aspects of both: the scalelessness of Modernism with the ad hoc brutality of medieval construction.

Saarinen's 1963 Dulles Airport Termindal is one of the monuments of Modernist architecture.



Saarinen's c. 1953 sketch of what would become the iconic Ingalls Rink, a/k/a the 'Yale Whale.'



Saarinen's 'Womb' Chair and Ottoman, 1956. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

The seductive qualities of modern expressive design are fully and effectively offered up in this exhibit. The huge models of Dulles Airport and the TWA Terminal at what is now John F. Kennedy (*née* Idlewild) Airport are astonishingly real, and yet are abstractly rendered in pure white.

Like present-day computer-generated renderings that can be as seductively believable as the movie *Avatar*, Saarinen sought to make the compelling reality of his work fully evident before construction, both to sell the buildings to patrons, but also to wrest control of the designs he wrought.

These startling models exude allusive qualities that are uncontrollable in even the most venerating context. You are either under age 30 or pop culture-illiterate if you cannot see the parallel contemporary universes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the Jetsons TV series in these otherwise starkly rendered models. The photographs in this exhibition convey the very essence of the architecture as "art mindset" — most often composed with no humans within or without the structures they depict.

Such insights are why we have exhibitions. But the depth of subtext, the internally referencing commentary of a great university producing an exhibit about the recipient of its great patronage and its presence in a little New England city is also inescapable.

Every public building is designed by an architecture firm, and any building of any size has a significant construction budget, but so many buildings are inherently "background" affairs and serve as the backdrop when the fashion-model buildings by "starchitects" strut down any given streetscape.

Given its undeniably dynamic and enriching presence, Yale itself effectively renders the surrounding context of New Haven its background, virtually the definition of the town/gown dynamic.

Pearls are not the beloved offspring of oysters — quite the contrary. Pearls are the exquisitely beautiful product of an irritating speck of sand that causes just enough discomfort that it cannot be ignored.

This exhibit offers rich insight into how modern architecture "irritated" the first 50 years of the 20th century before it conquered the consensus of what now constitutes aesthetic legitimacy. Yale may be New Haven's pearl, but its irritations seem fairly insignificant when its presence in our midst creates exhibits like this one. ❖