

“Behind Our Bricks - Eero and Eliel Saarinen”

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From the scaffolds of Cranbrook Mansion to the walls of Adam’s Castle, the city of Bloomfield Hills has long trumpeted glorious architecture worthy of the national eye. But behind the bricks of each beautiful building lay the minds of some of history’s greatest architects. Among the greats are Bloomfield Hills locals, Eero and Eliel Saarinen. It is thanks to the father-son duo’s creativity and ingenuity that Bloomfield Hills has earned a reputation as a town with the ability to produce not only impressive architecture, but impressive architects too.

Before migrating to Michigan with his family, Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950) was already a respected architect in Finland. He was known for his “Art Nouveau buildings in the early years of the 20th century” (Detroit Historical Society). Still popular today, Art Nouveau is a style of art and architecture involving simple, asymmetrical designs. Eliel was also known for his use of the Romantic Style, a combination of European medieval and Roman styles, often described as nostalgic and charming. “Art,” Eliel explained, “was born as a desire, not as a demand.”

Cranbrook Educational Community

Once in Michigan, the Saarinens quickly became involved in the Bloomfield Hills creative community. Eliel was hired to spearhead the design for the Cranbrook Educational Community in Bloomfield Hills. He designed the Cranbrook School for Boys, “the Art Academy... the Art Museum and Library” (Detroit Historical Society). Eventually, Eliel began teaching at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, of which he was the first president. While there, he taught Henry (Harry) Booth, son of newspaper mogul George Booth. A friendship then blossomed between their families, leading George to enlist Eliel’s help in further decorating the Cranbrook Estate (Pelkonen Eeva-liisa, et al. 30-31).

Later, Eliel and his son-in-law, Robert Swanson, a University of Michigan graduate, created their own practice in Bloomfield Hills. The practice had previously been Swanson's, located in Detroit, Michigan.

In his Blood

After graduating from Birmingham High School where he “excelled in the arts,” Eliel's son, Eero (1910-1961), spent the larger portion of his life encased in the walls of the Cranbrook campus which played a crucial role in developing his style, by offering “a wealth of opportunity—an extraordinary environment in which to ply his creative gifts... and the freedom to develop his talents...” (Pelkonen Eeva-liisa, et al. 29).

When he entered adulthood, Eero followed in his father's footsteps.

The Dynamic Duo

After studying architecture at Yale University, Eero returned to Bloomfield Hills to teach at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, just as Eliel did. Then the two joined minds when Eero entered the family practice, subsequently redubbed Saarinen-Swanson-Saarinen. Swanson would later leave the practice when the offices were split in 1947. The duo then masterminded many projects including the Illinois Crow Island School which featured an “asymmetrical exterior, ...flat roof,” and exterior walls made up of decorative yellow bricks (Rethinking the Future).

Despite their kinship, the pair's styles didn't always align. Eero's style rejected many of the traditionalistic elements found in his father's works. In true Bloomfield Hills fashion, Eero was an innovator. He was known for his daring techniques that made great strides in the community. This was exemplified in his additions to the Crow Island School which boasted a modern design that “flagged a clear departure from the multistoried, high ceilings, type building

prevalent in the 1920s” (Rethinking the Future). Critics hailed the building as an architectural breakthrough capable of redefining the art form.

Eero Takes the Reins

After the passing of his father in 1950, Eero created his own practice, Eero Saarinen and Associates, in Birmingham, Michigan. Combining what he learned at Cranbrook with knowledge gained working with his father, Eero created his own style, one that would shake the scaffolds of architectural design. It attracted those tired of the mundanity of traditional architecture. Eero introduced buildings “rich in architectural character and visual drama unknown in earlier years” (Britannica). He sparked a trend in the 1950s towards “exploration...in American architectural design...” that changed the future of architecture (Britannica). “Experimentation,” he said, “can present great dangers, but there would be greater danger if we didn't try to explore at all.”

In addition to architecture, Eero dabbled in furniture design. He entered several works in competitions, but “...always came just short of winning, earning him the nickname Second-Medal Saarinen” (Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research). However, Eero refused to give up and overcame the nickname in 1940 when he and architect Charles Emes won first prize in a competition where they entered their ‘Seating and Other Living Room Furniture’ collection which included a series of *Side Chairs*. “While most of the chairs had visible imperfections,” their one-of-a-kind chairs were successful in retaining their design integrity and shape, laying the “foundation for further innovations in modern seating design” (Cranbrook Art Museum). Some of Eero’s pieces now reside in the Cranbrook Art Museum, within the walls of the institution that raised him.

Eero also designed furniture for Cranbrook's Kingswood School for Girls. The angled, bright orange and green pieces he created greatly resemble today's modern furniture that they inspired.

General Motors Technical Center

One of Eero's earliest endeavors was designing the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan. The project, originally his father's, was given to Eero after his passing. Saarinen built five buildings for the center, each focused on a different type of study. Within the design, "Saarinen's technical solution of the curtain wall (metal panels and glass set in aluminum frames) was widely..." renowned and later emanated by many other well-known architects (Britannica). It allowed separation from rough weather without blocking natural light from entering the building.

The center, opened in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, is now highlighted on the National Register of Historic Places. It demonstrates the expertise and innovative techniques that Eero acquired at Cranbrook. The pioneering design paved the way for more advances in his work and the entire community, an early step into a career that would define the Bloomfield Hills man as a father of modern architecture (Pelkonen Eeva-liisa, et al. 231).

Back to Their Roots

Over the course of his life, Eero designed many wonders from the London U.S. Embassy to the famous St. Louis Gateway Arch. Yet no matter how far away his endeavors reached, Bloomfield Hills was "never far" from his thoughts as it was the "creative energy..." in Cranbrook and the city itself that "catapulted Eero Saarinen to greatness" (New York Times; Pelkonen Eeva-liisa, et al. 29). Hence, he returned home to Michigan for his last architectural triumph, overseeing the design of the new University of Michigan School of Music.

Today, tours of the Bloomfield Hills home of Eliel and his wife, Loja (1879-1968), are enjoyed by many. The “art deco masterpiece” is a relished visual of the Saarinen’s techniques, which remain catalysts for today’s architects and designers (Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research).

Despite half a decade having passed since their deaths, behind our bricks the spirits of Eero and Eliel remain, encapsulated within each art piece and building they conceived, as well as within Bloomfield Hills itself, the city that propelled them into infamy.

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