

The Future's Past

A review of the exhibition: *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future at the Yale Art Gallery*
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By Geoffrey Detrani

One of the most satisfying things about watching dated science fiction films is seeing how people in the past pictured the future. Envisioning the future is an exercise in gazing askew at the here and now and futurism a warren of rumination and wish lust piggybacking on self-fulfilling prophecy.

Futurism-as-relic is one of the strongest senses I get when I look at images of Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen's well-known TWA terminal (1956-1962) at JFK airport. With its sweeping concrete curves, paucity of right angles and jutting, cantilevered forms defying the visual logic of its own thrusting weight, it is a futuristic mothership of a building. Read as metaphor for the interface of people and their flying machines it can seem poetic.

But it's also a time capsule, a bit of calcified futurism, and a memento of the pasts' future lingering in the present retrofitted to serve the needs of the now. That is to say, it's an inspired building – a building of utility that doesn't look like a utility closet. Architecture as poetics.

Yale is the latest host to "Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future," a traveling retrospective of this heralded architect and designer's work. The show, dispersed into two separate exhibition spaces, encompasses a wide range of Saarinen's expressions, from childhood charcoal drawings to the chairs and tables he designed to the buildings and structures that he is best known for.

Saarinen was the child of an accomplished architect and seemed destined to follow in his father's footsteps. As a young man during WWII he worked on designs for the White House situation room. Later he would author the kind of 1950's chairs and sofas that have become icons of the McCarthy era corporate lobby. But he is best known for his vision and reach as an architect.

One of his first commissions was the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, better known as the "Gateway Arch" in St. Louis Missouri. You may recall from history class the national-mythopoetic notion that this soaring triumphalist parabola of concrete clad steel commemorates, with modernist succinctness, the opening of the lands west of Missouri. Vision and technology made this reaching arch stand and the materials speak plainly, if abstractly to this message.

But Saarinen wasn't all about curves and undulating lines. His Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey was solidly, monolithically, rationalistically box like – a steel

and glass rectilinear prism – as if the black plinth from *2001 A Space Odyssey* were set down on its side and provided with ample parking.

Some have accused Saarinen of being a kind of cheerleader for the powers that be. His clients included some of the most powerful and entrenched corporations in American society as well as wealthy universities and the federal government. His design for the American Chancellery in London, with its façade topped with a huge eagle, raised the ire of the British for its bombast and severity.

Some accused Saarinen of inventing or adopting a new style for every job. Some charged him with abandoning sacrosanct Modernist design principles. But there is nothing inherently wrong with stylistic variation, and anyway, the doctrinaire modernism of the International Style was overdue for a makeover.

Closer to home, Saarinen's legacy is anchored in his Yale buildings, chiefly the Ingalls Hockey Rink - a capsized Viking ship hull of a building with a jutting, load bearing prow of curving concrete. Here form and function seem in highly expressive and satisfying friction and the problems of crafting useable space resolved with heuristic simplicity.

Perhaps Saarinen's protean adaptability was his central strength. Perhaps he was the visionary that many believe him to have been. He died young, leaving others to bring some of his seminal works to completion leaving one to imagine how his fertile imagination might have filled the future. This exhibition provides ample resources for that speculation.