

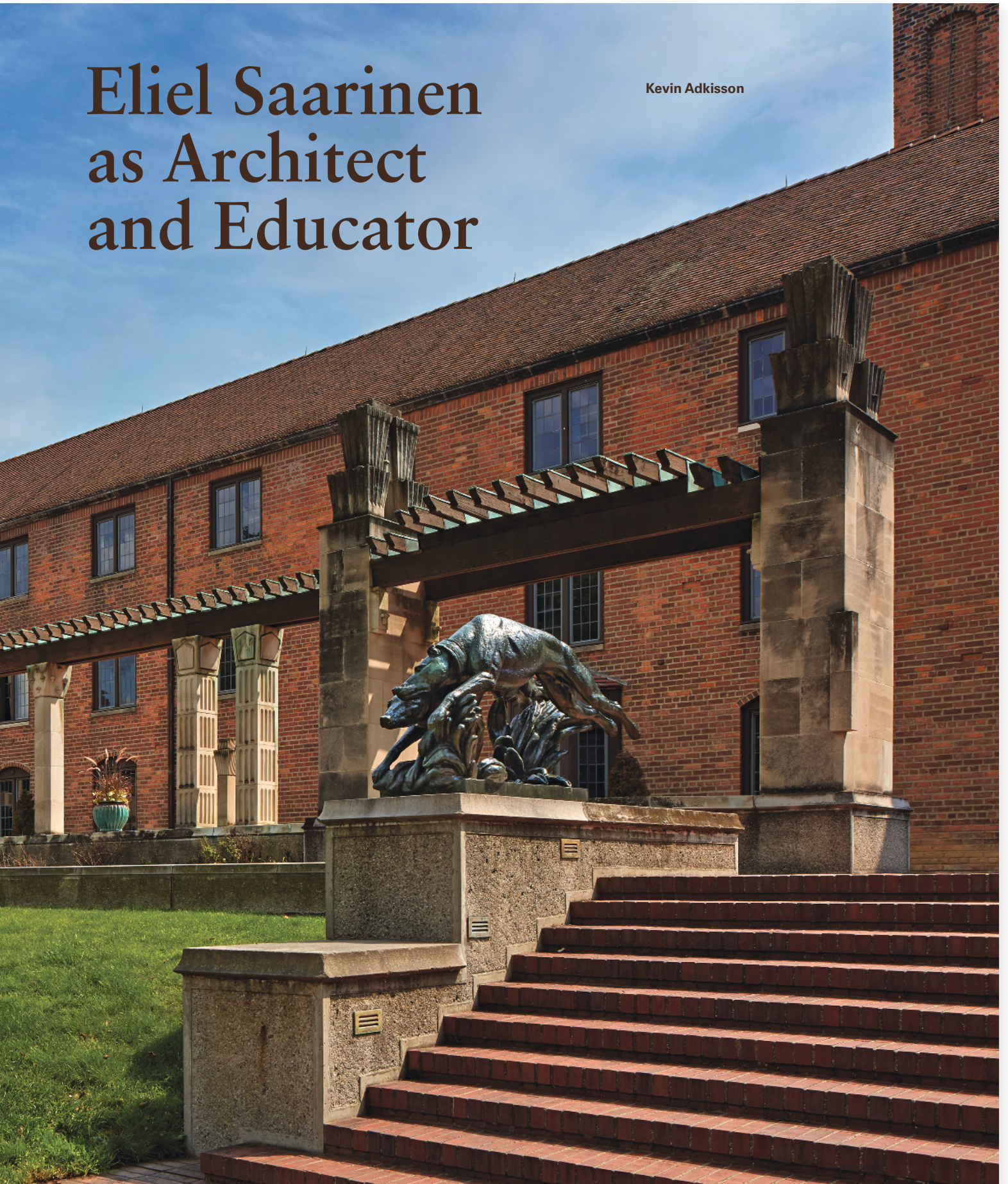
Evolution Over Revolution

Eliel Saarinen,
Cranbrook School for Boys,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,
1927-30

Dormitory rooms are housed in simple brick buildings, while the study hall (left) features decorative limestone windows and patterned brick gable ends. Sculptor Carl Milles's *The Running Dogs* (1929) sits in front of a pergola where each column features a unique design.

Eliel Saarinen as Architect and Educator

Kevin Adkisson



The Cranbrook campus is designed with a concerted effort to integrate art, craft and architecture. Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research curator **Kevin Adkisson** shares some of its stories and explores a variety of its external and internal spaces and the conceptual rigour that went into them. Collectively, the campus provides an inspiring backdrop to individual students' creative journeys.

There is a warmth to the Cranbrook campus. Rambling groups of brick buildings house a series of schools, studios and museums carefully arranged among rolling hills and bodies of water. Sculptures and fountains dot the campus, working with the landscape and architectural ornament to lead the eye, then the body, between buildings. Set in Bloomfield Hills, around 20 miles (30 kilometres) from downtown Detroit, the campus is utopian in its apparent remove from the concerns of city life, a pedestrian landscape at the edge of the Motor City.

Cranbrook's architecture, a vibrant and intriguing strain of interwar modernism, celebrates the search for a better future through art. Using the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen used the Cranbrook project as a laboratory for his own architectural expression, synthesising many historic and contemporary sources with his considerable creativity. Every Cranbrook building rewards a close look. The lives of those who live, study and visit the campus are enriched by what he achieved.

But what is Cranbrook's achievement? How did Saarinen's search for an appropriate form for each project result in buildings that flit between tradition and modernity? What were his techniques, as architect and educator, and how did his expansive and flexible pedagogical approach create such a lasting impact on this experimental community?

Eliel Saarinen,
Campuses of Cranbrook Academy of Art
and Cranbrook School for Boys,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,
1925-42

Saarinen grouped the red-tile-roofed buildings of Cranbrook School for Boys (left) around a series of quadrangles. Academy Way forms the spine of the art school, which grew over time from the Arts and Crafts Studios (centre bottom, 1928) to the Library and Museum (right, 1942). Load-bearing brick construction is used throughout.



Creating the Cranbrook Institutions

Between 1918 and 1942, newspaper publisher George Gough Booth and Ellen Scripps Booth established on their family estate the original six Cranbrook institutions – an elementary school, preparatory schools for girls and boys, an Episcopal church, an art academy and museum, and a science institute – which are linked by shared patrons and a shared campus. While programmatically separate, each institution is engaged in one mission: enrichment through investigation and experimentation in art, science and education.

When Saarinen moved with his family onto the Cranbrook estate in 1925, he began a quarter-century-long commission as principal architect of the growing campus. His mandate from George Booth: Cranbrook must be an ‘eye-opener’. Saarinen took this to heart, writing that ‘the opening of the eyes [would be] the key program of the whole Cranbrook development’.¹

Booth gave Saarinen an opportunity, and Saarinen ran with it. The commission was expansive: buildings and landscapes, furniture and textiles, andirons and silverware, and more. Saarinen put into practice his belief that architects should always design in relation to the next largest thing; architecture, to him, must harmonise from the teacup to the city plan. In his designs, individuality is key. His style quivers between the past and the future in an idyllic present. The projects are hard to categorise, as he put his own cast on everything. An exquisite sense of wonder and discovery permeates his work.

Taken as a whole, the Cranbrook project represents one of the last and largest expressions of the Arts and Crafts movement in North America. It was the English Arts and Crafts that motivated George Booth to action. The movement also grounded Saarinen’s practice in Finland, but at Cranbrook he took it as a flexible starting point, adapting and repurposing its forms and ideologies until his death in 1950. Unlike so many other utopian projects that sprung from the Arts and Crafts, Cranbrook – both its architecture and its mission – continue today.

First Cranbrook Buildings

Saarinen crafted an architecture that is both familiar and associative, and highly original. To a visitor arriving today at his earliest campus buildings, opened in 1927, his style may appear quite traditional. Standing in the main quadrangle of the historic Cranbrook School for Boys (now the co-educational Cranbrook Schools), one is surrounded by two- and three-storey buildings of red Detroit-made common brick and red tile roofs. Like many American preparatory schools and colleges built in the 1920s, the formal arrangement traces its roots to Oxford and Cambridge.

But linger a moment over the details – the structure and ornament – and what Saarinen designed reveals itself to be unique, new and inventive. Pause at the northeast entrance to the dining hall where the initial appearance of cool Classical symmetry of Saarinen’s quilt-like composition of limestone, wire-cut Roman brick and leaded glass is quickly complicated by its irregular and whimsical detailing. The dining hall entrance, once considered, leaves a lasting impression of both originality, quality and correctness.

What was Saarinen’s inspiration for this most unusual entrance? The quadrangle’s architecture surely met the client’s



Eliel Saarinen,
Dining Hall, Cranbrook School for Boys,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1928

Each limestone square offers its own individual expression. The grid of brick is established and then violated. At the corner, geometric blocks serve no structural purpose but add interest and disrupt the symmetry of the composition.

brief for Arts and Crafts-style buildings, but it also incorporates trends in Art Deco styling, and German and Dutch Expressionist designs. Saarinen’s detailing also points towards more eclectic sources, such as American architect Claude Bragdon’s system of ‘Projective Ornament’² in which repeated geometries, not historic forms, create new designs. The many influences are woven together with precision and creativity. The Hungarian architect and artist Géza Maróti, who partnered with Saarinen on ornament and sculpture at Cranbrook from 1927 to 1929, said that the buildings would be ‘like a good book, opened at the right page’.³

While the architecture of Cranbrook is meant to be discovered and read over several years of boarding-school life, the first buildings Saarinen designed for the Academy of Art, in 1928, are more straightforward. Craft workshops that made furniture, metalwork, book bindings, textiles and the like to outfit the Cranbrook campus were organised around an irregularly shaped courtyard in buildings of load-bearing brick walls and slate roofs. Forgoing the rich ornament of the School for Boys, the simple, gabled studio buildings and residence hall have a strictness of line and clarity of form.



Eliel Saarinen,
Kingswood School for Girls,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,
1931

above: The simplification of massing and creative use of repeated motifs, particularly the telescoping form, unify the Kingswood design.



right: The harmonious and serene Green Lobby features a rug designed by Maja Andersson Wirde for Studio Loja Saarinen (reproduction seen here), tiles made at Detroit's Pewabic Pottery, furniture designed by Eero Saarinen, and painted decoration by Pipsan Saarinen Swanson.

But a closer inspection of any individual wall again reveals Saarinen's love of detail. Bricks of different dimensions are used to enhance or call out certain features, while elsewhere bricks form patterns of interlocking geometric shapes and running mortar lines. An arched passageway that decreases in dimension at one end is constructed of bricks laid in a basketweave pattern, a pleasing and structural answer to a visual desire for forced perspective towards the landscape. Without slavishly copying any one style, Saarinen took from the past certain materials, techniques and moods to shape a modernism that engages with history without repeating it.

Adapting Modern Sources

Coming quickly on the heels of the first buildings, Saarinen's 1931 Kingswood School for Girls (now also part of the co-educational Cranbrook Schools) demonstrates that his manner of working – creating new modes of expression through creative adaptation of historic forms – is expandable.

At Kingswood, the building massing is simpler, and the colours fresher: golden Mankato limestone, buff sand-cast brick, and verdigris copper roofing. In both structure and ornament, Saarinen narrowed his range of motifs, fixing on telescoping forms. Swinging into the building's auto court through gates of telescoping ironwork under piers of telescoping stone, one sees chimneys, columns, light posts, leaded glass windows, brickwork and sidewalks all rendered in variations on this motif.

Inside, handmade tiles and custom textiles, handwoven at Cranbrook under Loja Saarinen's direction, continue the patterns and rhythm of the architecture. With assistance from his wife on

textiles, and from their children Pipsan and Eero on interior and furniture designs, the Saarinens built Kingswood as one of the most fully realised *Gesamtkunstwerke* in America.

Kingswood opened just a few months before the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York staged its seminal exhibition 'Modern Architecture', which decreed that the International Style, with its flat-roofed, white-walled and ribbon-windowed buildings by Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier was *the* way to be modern. Compared to Le Corbusier's architecture – machines for living – Saarinen's Kingswood feels both luxurious and distinctly historic.

Yet Kingswood demonstrates how Saarinen could deftly blend International Style approaches to programming and massing, Art Deco detailing and Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style within a single project. Saarinen absorbed and adapted these contemporary influences as confidently as he did historic styles. *Architectural Forum* claimed Kingswood showed 'that brick may still be used with imagination and taste to produce an effect that is unusual yet entirely straightforward and unforced'.⁴

In 1930, Eliel and Loja Saarinen moved into their new home on Academy Way. Built to serve the Academy of Art's President (a role Saarinen held until 1946), its brick exterior gives no indication of the jewel-box-like Art Deco interior. Again, the Saarinens designed everything, with much of the furniture, textiles and objects in the house executed next door in the Cranbrook studios. Saarinen House did more than simply act as a residence: it was a public-relations tool. Heavily publicised, it served (then, and now as a house museum) as a showcase for the family's talents, as well as an advertisement for the graduate Academy.



Eliel Saarinen,
Saarinen House,
Cranbrook Academy of Art,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,
1930

The family designed every aspect of their home, much of which was then made next door. Geometric textiles from Studio Loja Saarinen unify the interiors just as the use of patterned brick exteriors creates cohesion across the campus.

Saarinen as Educator

Cranbrook Academy of Art provided Saarinen the opportunity to be both architect and educator, serving as President and Head of the Department of Architecture and Urban Design. Just as his buildings strike a balance between the familiar and the inventive, so too did his leadership.

Conceived and opened during the same years that the famed Bauhaus was consolidated and closed, Cranbrook Academy avoided polemics and never operated under a bold manifesto like its oft-compared German predecessor. Cranbrook lacked the dogma of many modernist experiments, but it also eschewed the trappings of tradition found in the French Beaux-Arts teaching methods that then dominated American schools of art and architecture.

Saarinen, who trained at Helsinki Polytechnic under such a system, abhorred what he called the ‘non-creative-school-book-learned-art-teacher’,⁵ believing that ‘creative art cannot be taught by others’.⁶ Academy students, therefore, have no required courses and follow no curriculum; instead, they create their own problems and design their own solutions. Saarinen respected the past, and encouraged his students to travel and study historic forms, but in the studio he demanded they avoid mimicry in favour of searching for contemporary forms. To see examples of such a practice, all an Academy student must do is walk through Saarinen’s architecture.

A Monumental Final Building

Saarinen’s theories are reflected in the layout of his last Cranbrook project, the Academy Library and Museum, opened in 1942. Students enter the library on one side to *read* the history of art, cross the open peristyle to *see* the history of art in the museum, and then, eyes opened to a world of possibilities, descend the steps towards their studios to *make* the future of art. While the stripped Classical styling is certainly grand, the scale is almost domestic – the columns are not even 40 feet tall. It is not a domineering building, but an ennobling one. Standing between the columns, surrounded by art, and looking out at an unfolding landscape of gardens and terraced fountains, one is uplifted.

His beguiling ornament continues here, too, even though by this time many architects had abandoned such detail. Meandering linework emerges from the stone and brings the monumental scale of the building to the intimate scale of the hand. The curious and original ornament system – compared variously to ancient runes or Mayan carvings – was never explained by Saarinen. But where the ornament flowers, it inspires the curious visitor to pause, touch and examine the architecture, to wonder what they are witnessing.

In rebuffing the International Style for Cranbrook (at a moment where, in private practice with his son, he was designing such buildings), the Library and Museum show Eliel Saarinen’s refusal to reject history and instead embrace its mysteries.



Saarinen's Legacy

Cranbrook's long period of development gave Saarinen the opportunity to continually evolve his architecture with the times. As one visiting architect wrote: 'Each building is but the latest step forward and never the last. Consequently, Cranbrook presents a permanent record – conveniently assembled in one spot – of his ever-changing interpretation of the spirit of contemporary life.'⁷

In the diverse array of buildings and objects eventually produced by his son, Eero Saarinen, his faculty, such as Charles Eames and Harry Bertoia, or his students, including Harry Weese, Ralph Rapson, Florence Knoll, Gyo Obata and Edward Bacon, one witnesses Eliel Saarinen's theories of total design, insistence on quality and, most importantly, his demand for forms appropriate to the problem and the age. Saarinen's legacy did not turn out to be his creative blending of historic and contemporary sources, but his insistence to be always searching.

That Eliel Saarinen's philosophies and not his style proliferated keeps the Cranbrook campus a singular gem. As author and former Cranbrook elementary school teacher Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote of her first visit: 'Cranbrook is beautifully done – too beautifully. As though it were wished there.'⁸ ▢

Eliel Saarinen,
Cranbrook Academy of Art Library and Museum,
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan,
1942

opposite: A ceremonial procession through the landscape, appropriate to the building's role as a temple of culture, culminates not at a central door but an open peristyle. The building offers visitors the same opportunities for choice that Saarinen gave his students.

Notes

1. Eliel Saarinen, 'The Story of Cranbrook', unpublished manuscript, 1950, p 8. Saarinen Family Papers, box 8, folder 6, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
2. Claude Bragdon, *Projective Ornament*, The Manas Press (Rochester, NY), 1915.
3. 'Cranbrook School – Founded on Ideals', *The Magazine of the Women's City Club*, Detroit, May 1927, p 28.
4. 'The Kingswood School for Girls', *Architectural Forum*, January 1932, p 38.
5. Saarinen, *op cit*.
6. Eliel Saarinen, 'On the Cranbrook Development,' published transcript of an address given at the American Institute of Architects Convention in San Antonio, Texas, April 1931, p 4. Cranbrook Foundation Record Group I: Office Records, box 26, folder 13, Cranbrook Archives.
7. Kent Barker, 'Eliel Saarinen: An Appreciation', *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 21 (12), December 1944, p 270.
8. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *War Within and Without: Diaries and Letters 1939–1944*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (New York), 1980, p 299.

below: Enigmatic meandering linework ornament appears across the Museum and Library building. Saarinen's shaped pedestal holds sculptor Carl Milles's *Torso of Folke Filbyter* (1927).



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