
Notes
1. *Les Confessions de Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* ed. Fran
2. This exhibition of baroque architecture was
reviewed by Andrew Hopkins, “The Triumph of the
Baroque; Architecture in Europe, 1600–1750,”

Marcel Breuer: Design and Architecture
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany
12 September 2003–2 May 2004
Centre International pour la Ville,
L’Architecture et la Paysage (CIVA),
Brussels
12 May–3 October 2004
Spazio Contemporaneo Mestre, Venice
23 October 2004–30 January 2005
Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, La
Coruña, Spain
5 July–16 October 2005
Fundación Istituto de Crédito (ICO),
Madrid
14 December 2005–26 March 2006
Lighthouse Glasgow, Glasgow
16 June–27 August 2006
Ludwig Museum, Budapest
3 May–2 September 2007
National Building Museum,
Washington, D.C.
3 November 2007–18 February 2008

A lively and sympathetic exhibition of
Marcel Breuer’s work was recently seen
in Washington. It had originated as one of the
Vitra Design Museum’s monograph exhibitions dedicated to twentieth-
century masters of architecture and
furniture design (earlier subjects in the
series having been Charles and Ray
Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig
Mies van der Rohe, Verner Panton, and
Luis Barragán), and it was first staged in
Vitra’s Frank Gehry–designed museum
in Weil am Rhein, Germany. Its
extensive travels after that included Budapest,
which is less than a hundred miles from
Breuer’s birthplace of Pecs and where
this reviewer saw the exhibition.3 There
in the Ludwig Museum it covered an
area of about 1,500 square meters (about
16,100 square feet).

The curator of the Breuer exhibi-
tion, as well as of Vitra’s earlier Panton
exhibition and an exhibition of contem-
porary landscape architecture seen at
New York’s Museum of Modern Art in
2003–6, is Mathias Remmele. Remmele
currently teaches design and architecture
history at the Academy of Art and
Design Basel (formerly known as the
Basel School of Design) and teaches
product design at the Kassel Kun-
sthochschule.

Remmele approached Breuer’s
career from several points of view,
including photographs and drawings of
many designs. Three features in particu-
lar were distinguished by welcome sur-
prises. A biographical introduction
focusing on his early years presented sev-
eral rare photographs: a very young
Breuer with his brother Alexander and
sister Hermine; Breuer in his twenties on
the bank of the Elbe with Gropius,
Moholy-Nagy, Schawinsky, and other
Bauhaus colleagues, all in swimming
trunks (but with Gropius also in a tank
top); Breuer with his first wife Martha,
a textile designer; and Breuer with his sec-
ond wife Constanze and their two chil-
dren Francesca (for whom the Cesca
chair was named) and Tamas.

An extensive display of Breuer fur-
niture was elevated above the usual by
the inclusion of a number of prototypes
for designs never put into production.
Welds were clearly visible on some of the
metal tubing. There was an early (1925)
version of the Wassily steel club arm-
chair, but with four straight legs rather
than the familiar runners on either side,
and there was another model with a
stretcher added between the runners.
The exhibition included a whole parade
of four-legged side chairs and many vari-
ations on the 1928 Cesca cantilevered
chair. With a few exceptions, the furni-
ture all came from the admirable collec-
tion of the Vitra Design Museum or the
private collection of the museum’s direc-
tor, Alexander von Vegesack.4

Also exclusive to the exhibition were
a dozen meticulously made building
models, to the scale of 1 to 50 (except for
the model of the De Bijenkorf Depart-
ment Store in Rotterdam, which was in
1-to-100 scale). These models, uniformly
white, ignored Breuer’s virtuoso play
with contrasting materials—both manu-
factured and natural, such as wood sid-
ing and rubble stone—that so
distinguished Breuer’s first work in the
United States from the smooth prisms of
early modernism in Europe. In compen-
sation, however, the monochrome mod-
els emphasized Breuer’s sculptural
manipulations of form, a major focus of
this exhibition. They sat on ingenious
pedestals containing drawers that, when
pulled out, displayed site plans, building
plans, and sections.

The dozen model subjects were, in
chronological order: the 1946–47 Robin-
son house (Williamstown, Massachusetts);
Breuer’s 1947 and 1951 houses for him-
self in New Canaan (Connecticut); the
1953 De Bijenkorf Department Store
(Rotterdam, The Netherlands); the
1953–61 St. John’s Abbey Church (Col-
legeville, Minnesota); the 1956 Begrish
Hall, New York University (University
Heights, New York); the 1957–58 Staeh-
lin house (Feldmeilen, Switzerland); the
1958–63 Annunciation Priory of the Sis-
ters of St. Benedict (Bismarck, North
Dakota); the 1961 St. Francis de Sales
Church (Muskegon, Michigan); the
1963–66 Whitney Museum of American
Art (New York); the 1968 Baldegg Con-
vent (near Lucerne, Switzerland); and the
1977–80 Atlanta Central Public Library.5
None of the models depicted a building
designed before 1946. Unrepresented
were the Bauhaus interiors of 1926 to
1932, the 1929 Harnischmacher house
(Wiesbaden), and the 1934 Dolderthal
apartments (Zurich). Missing as well were
his two small early American delights, the
1940 Chamberlain cottage (Weyland, Massachusetts, with Walter Gropius), and the 1952 Caesar cottage (Lakeville, Connecticut), both of which are almost always included in Breuer surveys.

A thirteenth model (unfortunately omitted in Washington, D.C., reportedly because of a space shortage) was the most striking of all. It was not of a single building or complex but a 10-meter-long wall-hung composite of numerous multi-faceted geometries Breuer devised for the precast concrete façades of many of his larger buildings, acting simultaneously as sunscreens for the windows they enclosed, as housing for mechanical ducts and wiring, and as structure. Seeing a whole row of these forms—each unique—gave viewers an uncommon awareness of their inventiveness and beauty. As I. M. Pei remarks in an interview included in the catalog, “because of his use of concrete, one can call Breuer a sculptor-architect.”

As Remmele writes in his introduction to the catalog, “the crystalline forms Breuer began to develop in the 1950s for his concrete buildings are characteristic of his late period. . . . In the St. John's Abbey church they are for the first time fully developed. [These forms give] the façades a tremendous physicality and depth. The end result is that our impression of the building constantly changes depending on the weather, the day, the season, and on our particular viewpoint.”

The composite model of “sculpture-architecture” was the most important component of the exhibition's most salutary aspect: its positive attitude toward Breuer's later work.

This is a view of Breuer's accomplishments that would have coincided with his own. When I went to work as a draftsman in Breuer's New York office in 1962, full of reverence for his furniture and early houses, I was surprised to find no images of any of them. Only his latest work was displayed, and Breuer himself was notoriously reluctant to reminisce—or even answer questions—about his European past.

The early phase of Breuer's design, full of wit and energy with an occasional dash of quirkiness, deserves to be greatly admired. The later phase of work may be said to have begun not only with St. John's, but also, on a residential scale, with the second Hooper house of 1957–59 in Baltimore, a building unprecedented in Breuer's work for its orthogonality and severity, its entrance façade a 140-foot-long plane of stone broken only by a pair of glass doors. Certainly the later work began in earnest with the Whitney Museum. The new work was larger, heavier, tougher, more muscular, and less immediately ingratiating.

Among those not ingratiated, unfortunately, has been the author of our most thorough book about Breuer's work, Isabelle Hyman. Her 2001 monograph, though admirably comprehensive and informative, was soured by her lack of appreciation for much of Breuer's later design. She mutes this disapproval in her chapter in the exhibition catalog, but even there she writes of “brooding and assertive” design and “limited appreciation for the effects of beton brut” in Breuer's work of the mid-to-late 1960s. In the Vitra exhibition, happily, the appreciation for the serious works of Breuer's mature years was not limited but was radiantly evident. It is the most important Breuer exhibition since the retrospective curated by Arthur Rosenblatt at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1972–73, and the most intelligent.

STANLEY ABERCROMBIE
Sonoma, CA

Related Publication

Notes
1. Negotiations are underway for further venues in the United States, Mexico, and Brazil, but these plans are not yet firm.
2. Vitra also owns a valuable source of information about the development of tubular steel furniture, the archives of Anton Lorenz. Lorenz was the managing director, from about 1928, of Standard Möbel, the furniture company founded in 1926 by Breuer and Kálmán Lengyel.
3. The model makers deserve credit. The builder for
seven of them (Breuer I, Breuer II, Robinson, Stae
ehlin, Annunciation Priory, Baldegg, and the façade composite) was Marc Gehde from the Vitra Design Museum’s own workshop. Another four (De Bijenkort, Begrish Hall, the Whitney, and the Atlanta Library) were made by Remmele’s students at Basel’s Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst: Daniel Christen, Valerie Hess, Raphael Hoghammer, and Markus Kammer. The model of St. Fran
cis de Sales was made by Ursula Burla and Oswald Dillier, professional model makers in Basel. And the model of St. John’s was made by Dirk von Kollin and Horst Steinem of Universität Dortmund.

4. I. M. Pei, “A Sophisticated Way of Looking Nat


8. Other important Breuer exhibitions have included one at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1981, curated by Christopher Wilk, and one at the Bauhaus Archive, Berlin, in 1992.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
31 January–26 April 2009

Museum of the City of New York, New York
10 October 2009–3 January 2010

Yale University Art Gallery and Yale University School of Architecture, New Haven, Connecticut
13 February–2 May 2010

Eero Saarinen was not only the most suc
cessful architect of his day, with more major commissions and victories in com
petitions than any of his contemporaries, he was also (occasionally) the most
ingnald and, after his untimely death at 51, the most quickly forgotten. In the
1950s and early 1960s, when his last buildings were being completed, a dozen or more articles were published on his work every year, but by 1968, they had trickled to one, and in 1973, 1974, 1982, and 1986, not a single reference to him appears in the Aver Index.

This informative and entertaining exhibition is part of an attempt to reassert his career, and it comes not a moment too soon, as several of his most important buildings—Bell Laboratories, the American Embassy Office buildings in London and Oslo, the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport—are threatened. Fortunately, the show provides a superb introduction to a body of work that ranges from chairs to master plans and from thin glass-walled rectangles—like those at the General Motors (GM) Technical Center, the IBM factory, and Bell Labs—to sculpturesque concrete tours de force—like the Yale Hockey Rink, the TWA Terminal, and Dulles Airport.

The show begins by introducing Saarinen the man (1910–61). In a short, beautifully edited film, the architect himself appears in vintage footage, and colleagues who survived him—Florence “Shu” Knoll Bassett, Ralph Rapson, Vincent Scully, Glen Paulsen, Leonard Parker, Gunnar Birkerts, Balthazar Korab, Cesar Pelli, and Kevin Roche—describe his ambitions and approach. Then he is characterized in artifacts and personal effects—family photographs, a passport, “To Do” lists, student work, travel sketches, and a handsome wrought-iron gate he designed for Cranbrook School before he left for college.

At Cranbrook Saarinen’s first works can be found in context—decorative reliefs at Cranbrook School, chairs and windows at Kingswood School, the master bedroom at his parents house (which is now a museum). Cranbrook was where Saarinen’s father, the well-known Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen, came when the boy was fifteen to design an art academy, schools, and museums. It is where Eero Saarinen returned after graduating from Yale to practice with his father and to teach, and he remained in Bloomfield Hills after his father’s death in 1950 to lead his own firm.

Also at Cranbrook the very different talents of father and son are apparent. Eliel, who studied painting as well as architecture, had a scenic sensibility. Eero was a sculptor at heart. He studied sculpture in Paris before he went to architecture school. These differences, as well as generational ones, show up in a large wood, stone, aluminum, bronze, and plastic model of a scheme for the Smithsonian Art Gallery on the Wash
ington Mall of 1939 for which Eero was the lead architect, though he entered the federal competition for it with his father, brother-in-law Robert Swanson, Charles Eames, and Rapson. It contrasts tellingly with Eliel’s flat-roofed, symmetrical Cranbrook School before he left for college.

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Because of his sculptural propensity, Saarinen used models to design more extensively than perhaps any other archi
tect. Working for GM, he learned to use

Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future
Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki
6 October–12 December 2006

National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, Oslo
20 January–18 March 2007

International Centre for Urbanism, Architecture, and Landscape, Brussels
19 April–7 October 2007

Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
17 November–30 March 2008

National Building Museum, Washington, D.C.
3 May–23 August 2008

Minneapolis Institute of Art and Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota
14 September 2008–4 January 2009