
Notes

**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.\(^2\) 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 exhibition, as well as of Vitra’s earlier Panton exhibition and an exhibition of contemporary landscape architecture seen at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2005–6, 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 Kunsthochschule.

Remmele approached Breuer’s career from several points of view, including photographs and drawings of many designs. Three features in particular were distinguished by welcome surprises. A biographical introduction focusing on his early years presented several rare photographs: a very young Breuer with his brother Alexander and sister Hermia; 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 second wife Constance and their two children Francesca (for whom the Cesca chair was named) and Tamas.

An extensive display of Breuer furniture 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 (1923) version of the Wassily steel club armchair, 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 variations on the 1928 Cesca cantilevered chair. With a few exceptions, the furniture all came from the admirable collection of the Vitra Design Museum or the private collection of the museum’s director, Alexander von Vegesack.\(^3\)

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 Department Store in Rotterdam, which was in 1-to-100 scale). These models, uniformly white, ignored Breuer’s virtuoso play with contrasting materials—both manufactured and natural, such as wood siding and rubble stone—that so distinguished Breuer’s first work in the United States from the smooth prisms of early modernism in Europe. In compensation, however, the monochrome models emphasized Breuer’s sculptural manipulations of form, a major focus of this exhibition. They sat on ingeniously pulled out, displayed site plans, building plans, and sections.

The dozen model subjects were, in chronological order: the 1946–47 Robinson house (Williamstown, Massachusetts); Breuer’s 1947 and 1951 houses for himself in New Canaan (Connecticut); the 1953 De Bijenkorf Department Store (Rotterdam, The Netherlands); the 1953–61 St. John’s Abbey Church (Collegeville, Minnesota); the 1956 Begrish Hall, New York University (University Heights, New York); the 1957–58 Staeelin house (Feldmeilen, Switzerland); the 1958–63 Annunciation Priory of the Sisters 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 Baldeg Concert (near Lucerne, Switzerland); and the 1977–80 Atlanta Central Public Library.\(^3\)

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 multifaceted 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, stronger, 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
Breuer opened his New York office in 1946. Other important Breuer exhibitions have included Isabelle Hyman, (New York, 2001). Exibition is part of an attempt to reassess his career, and it comes not a moment too soon, as several of his most important commissions and victories in competitions than any of his contemporaries, he was also (occasionally) the most maltreated 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 Avery 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 scenographic 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 Washington 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 Cranbook Art Museum of around the same time where it is displayed. Eliel’s beautifully proportioned and detailed museum has more traditional grandeur and delicate, spare ornament. The Smithsonian design, while refined, shows influence of the International Style. It is asymmetrical, unadorned, and more visibly thin-skinned. Perhaps for that reason, it was never built in a conservative place like our nation’s capital.

Eero Saarinen was not only the most successful architect of his day, with more major commissions and victories in competitions than any of his contemporaries, he was also (occasionally) the most maltreated 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 Avery Index.

**Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future**

*Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki*

6 October–12 December 2006

*Museum of Modern 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

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

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