Lachmayer (on Austria’s cultural and political position in the 1950s), Maja Lorbek (on the Austrian branch of the CIAM), Meder (on Boltenstern’s designs for the Kahlenberg), Véronika Pfölz (on two of Boltenstern’s contributors), Georg Rigele (on the politics of the post-war rebuilding campaign), and Adolph Stiller (on Boltenstern’s work for the Wiener Städtische Versicherung), as well as a fine catalogue raisonné. There is also an excellent overview of Boltenstern’s life and work by Eiblmayr. Yet the product, in the end, is disappointing, a fact that has less to do with quality of the scholarship than with uninspiring impact of Boltenstern’s work.

Perhaps the best and most engaging chapter in the book is Kos’s interview with the historian Friedrich Achleitner about the “evaluation of postwar modernism” in the city. Achleitner, who has long been one of the most perceptive observers of the Viennese architectural scene, was a student at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in the years after the war and watched keenly as Boltenstern and others remade the city. He was then, and remains now, troubled by the architecture of the time, charging that Boltenstern “risked little [either architecturally, or] politically,” and that he was responsible in part for Austria’s rapid decline into “intellectual provincialism.” Yet he also points out, with great care, the extent to which the possibilities for Vienna were limited at the time; he characterizes the scene as one of an “imposed modesty” (erzwungene Bescheidenheit), arguing that little more was possible given the unfavorable economic conditions, the large number of buildings that had to be rebuilt, and the fact that so many of the country’s leading architects had emigrated or been killed. The “moderate modernism” of those years is for him merely a reflection of Austria’s pathetic predicament.

Maybe this is true. But if one considers Finland during the same years (which faced many of the same crises) and Alvar Aalto’s brilliant reimagining of orthodox modernism, this argument loses its persuasiveness. In spite of the myriad obstacles and trials that Austrian architects of the mid-century faced, perhaps in the end their failure was their own.

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Notes

1. Oskar Strnad, “Gedanken beim Entwurf eines Grundrisses,” rpt. in Max Eisler, Oskar Strnad (Vienna, 1936), 56–57. The original manuscript of the lecture is preserved at the Sammlung, Universität für angewandte Kunst, Manuskript 4648/Q/3.


Jayne Merkel

Eero Saarinen


Jayne Merkel was for many years the much-admired editor of the important architectural magazine Oculis, and she brings that experience to bear in her monograph on Eero Saarinen (1910–61). He emerges in its opening pages as an architect of great talent and historical significance with an unequalled capacity to create works with popular appeal. He achieved a fame greater than most of his contemporaries in the eleven-year span of his career working independently of his father, Eliel Saarinen. As innovative as he was prolific, Saarinen and his talented collaborators introduced several new building materials and perfected the emerging building program of the corporate office park. Yet his name was close to forgotten in critical circles within a decade of his death at the age of fifty-one and would only reappear three decades later, in the 1990s, when mid-century modernism’s return to fashion brought along an appreciation for innovative forms and technologies, which were his signature achievements. Accordingly, Merkel’s subject is Saarinen’s production and reception in his time, and to a lesser extent, in ours. She sets out to join the critic’s objective of “set[ting] the record straight” with the historian’s ambition of filling the lacunae in the historiographical record of a career and oeuvre (6–7).

Merkel’s narrative of Saarinen’s emancipation from his father’s influence and his traditionalist approach, his matriculation as a modernist, and the almost unimpeded realization of the promise of Saarinen’s talent and genius unifies the book’s fourteen chapters. Three chapters on Saarinen’s early life, his precocious works for his father and their joint endeavors (along with Robert Swanson) as the firm Saarinen, Swanson and Saarinen, and one chapter on his first independent projects and designs for furniture precede eleven chapters on his projects. They are grouped by program—corporate office parks; college campuses and individual buildings for universities; embassies; airports; and memorials—or by place, with one chapter devoted to his four works in Columbus, Indiana, and one to his two buildings in Manhattan.

Approximately sixty works are discussed in what might be called a series of mini-monographs. Merkel takes the majority of them from commission through completion, paying special attention to issues of structure, materials, and engineering as well as to contemporary critical reception. Excellent formal descriptions and explanations of these technical matters are supplemented and enriched by many eyewitness reports from Saarinen’s clients and collaborators, taken from Merkel’s extensive interviews. Each project history is generously illustrated. Merkel’s accounts of Saarinen’s work are instructive, lively, evocative, and generally accurate. With certain reservations, they can be usefully read by scholars as well as by the broad audience for which they are primarily intended.

Phaidon’s monographs on architects are conceived in keeping with the press’s
eighty-five-year-long tradition of popular art books that meet the highest standards of excellence in scholarship as well as in production and design. It is therefore regrettable that the attention lavished on the book design was not matched by that given to the substance of the text itself. A sharp-eyed, architecturally knowledgeable copy editor might have caught the occasional lapse of architectural knowledge (the “Greek temple” of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, 95); toned down Merkel’s exasperation with criticism she finds excessive (“Sigfried Giedion’s response was more obtuse,” 118); and called for documentation of large claims of Saarinen exceptionalism (“few, if any, [modern] architects . . . explored technical possibilities with Saarinen’s zeal,” 232). Modifications such as these would have increased the book’s utility for scholars without diminishing its accessibility.

That said, there is no gainsaying Merkel’s conclusion. Most Saarinen researchers would concur with her view of Saarinen as an important innovator in the areas of materials, structures, and programs, whose emphasis on research was his major contribution, and whose “styles for the job approach” allowed him to derive building form from function, symbolize his clients’ enterprises, and render the aspirations of his age in material form in “unusual, ambitious, and challenging buildings” (231–32). Some will, however, contest Merkel’s position that all the works were uniformly good, that every structural solution or technological innovation was elegant, necessary, or effective, and that postwar optimism was the only aspect of the period crystallized in his work (6). Reinhold Martin, for example, has argued that Saarinen’s corporate campuses show his greater “willingness to broker a merger between architectural experimentation and the imperatives of the military industrial complex” and the “corporate ethos” than that of his contemporaries, such as the more corporate Skidmore Owings and Merrill, who did so only “half-consciously.”

Merkel writes in the mode of the heroic biography. She assumes that Saarinen was predestined for greatness and for modernism—by virtue of the necessity of breaking with his famous more traditionalist father—and that Saarinen lived up to both promises. This “great man” approach has critics in our discipline. Here is not, however, the place to pursue this much-discussed issue, and in any case, in fairness to the author, this would be to criticize her for not writing the book that she chose not to write. We can fairly ask, however, if the objectives of filling the historiographical lacunae and “set[ting] the record straight” have been reached.

The four decades between Saarinen’s death and his return to popularity were indeed relatively lean years for research. The monographic literature on Saarinen was thin on the ground and thin in historiographical substance. With the sole exception of Aline Saarinen’s compilation of excerpts from Saarinen’s writings with an illustrated list of works that was long the authoritative one, it was constituted of entirely pictorial surveys. Merkel’s references, however, show that the lean years were not years of famine. She cites Peter Papademetriou’s brief but important articles, in which he drew on research in the then uninventoryed office records; Martin’s book on the intricate nexus of modern architecture and the “corporate ethos”; Janet Loeffler’s volume on the commissioning of American embassies from modernists in furtherance of cold war foreign policy; and this reviewer’s unpublished SAH Annual Meeting paper on the competition for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (1947–65) that catapulted Saarinen to national fame. But for a long time, historical accounts such as these were the exceptions to the rule. The need was thus real, and Merkel’s methodical review of the projects goes a considerable way toward satisfying it.

The record she aims at straightening was the one established by the most important critic-historians of the day—Reyner Banham, Peter Blake, Sigfried Giedion, John Jacobus, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, J. M. Richards, Vincent Scully, and Bruno Zevi—as well as by two emerging researchers; Martin’s book on the intricate nexus of modern architecture and the “corporate ethos”; Janet Loeffler’s volume on the commissioning of American embassies from modernists in furtherance of cold war foreign policy; and this reviewer’s unpublished SAH Annual Meeting paper on the competition for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (1947–65) that catapulted Saarinen to national fame. But for a long time, historical accounts such as these were the exceptions to the rule. The need was thus real, and Merkel’s methodical review of the projects goes a considerable way toward satisfying it.

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As Merkel explains in her penultimate footnote, Saarinen research has entered its fat years. Thanks to Kevin Roche’s donation of the records of Eero Saarinen and Associates to the Yale University Library in 2002, the joint efforts of four institutions in Finland and the United States, and the intense collaborative research of a binational team of scholars, the first scholarly symposium has been held, the first retrospective exhibition (with an important accompanying catalog) organized, and the first portfolio of his works completed. A number of dissertations on Saarinen are underway, and one has been published. Merkel’s book was well advanced when the Eero Saarinen Papers were opened to scholars and was on the verge of publication when the symposium at Yale revealed how its riches enables a nuanced understanding of Saarinen’s achievements that takes his many shortcomings in account. The coincidence of her research with the beginnings of the Saarinen revival makes her crusading spirit and strong identification with her subject understandable. Her joining of a narrative of his genius with solid documentation about his production and new insights into his reception brings the “pre-Yale” period of Saarinen research to an honorable end.

HÉLÈNE LIPSTADT

DOCOMOMO US
Vincent Ligtelijn and Francis Strauven, editors
Aldo van Eyck: Writings
Amsterdam: SUN Publishers, 2008, 2 vol., 980 pp., 60 color and 580 b/w illus., €100 (cloth), ISBN 9789085062622

“Van Eyck to me is a significant architect. He’s more than significant, he’s a great architectural mind who has had little opportunity,” said Louis I. Kahn in a 1972 interview. Kahn first met van Eyck at the 1959 Congres Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) meeting at Otterlo, the Netherlands, and recalled that van Eyck “made a speech about the meaning of a threshold just before you enter a room. It was magnificent, because through this, you could build a whole architecture.”1 In Kahn’s two statements, we may discern the outline of van Eyck’s importance to twentieth-century architecture and the dual paths of his influence. At the time of Kahn’s interview, van Eyck had, in fact, realized only a small number of buildings, including the Municipal Orphanage in Amsterdam of 1955–60, the Roman Catholic Church in The Hague of 1964–69, and over seven hundred children’s playgrounds in the city of Amsterdam, built starting in 1947. On the other hand, van Eyck’s writings and lectures, published here in collected form for the first time, have had a profound impact far beyond that of his modest number of major built works.

Today, Aldo van Eyck (1918–99) is increasingly recognized as one of the most important and influential of the second generation of modern architects. His work and writings criticize what he felt to be the fundamental social, cultural, and experiential failures of mid-twentieth-century mainstream modernism. He proposed an architecture and urbanism far more engaged in the everyday lives of the people that inhabit it, which he achieved by regrounding modern architecture in the accomplishments of early modernism in all the arts; reconnecting modern architecture to the spatial history of non-Western and archeaic cultures; and radically redefining the progress-dominated and technologically determined intentions of modern architecture—which he summarized as “space and time”—in the humanist, localized, and experiential terms of “place and occasion” (1.50).

Van Eyck was one of the principal founders of Team 10, a group of architects that broke away from CIAM in the 1950s and articulated a more humane, holistic, historically informed, and contextually sensitive vision of modern architecture and urbanism. In this, van Eyck was arguably the leading figure in the constructive criticism and fundamental redirection of mid-twentieth-century modernism, which he believed had become an international style, universally applied without respect to history, human nature, context, climate, culture, or building traditions. During the last three decades of his life, van Eyck applied similar criticisms to postmodern historicism and deconstructivism, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to replace modernism as the dominant international styles. Van Eyck felt these were characterized, perhaps to an even greater degree than modernism, by the same unconscionable irresponsibility toward the people who inhabited architecture.

Each chapter of Aldo van Eyck: Writings is insightfully introduced by Vincent Ligtelijn, editor of Aldo van Eyck: Works, the authorized catalog of van Eyck’s architectural designs, and by Francis Strauven, author of Aldo van Eyck: The Shape of Relativity, an “architectural biography” that, in this writer’s view, is one of the best books on architecture, period.2 Aldo van Eyck: Writings is composed of two volumes; the first, entitled The Child, The City and The Artist, was written in 1961–62 but remained unpublished until now. This unparalleled contribution to modern architectural and urban theory is both a summary of van Eyck’s thinking on architecture to this date, including writings from his time as editor of the Dutch architectural journal Forum, starting in 1959, as well as responses to the ideas and designs of those he taught with in the United States during this period—most notably Louis Kahn, whom he taught with at the University of Pennsylvania in the spring of 1960, and Fumihiko Maki, whom he taught with at Washington University in St. Louis in the fall and winter of 1961–62. The editors have organized the second and larger volume, Collected Articles and Other Writings, 1947–1998, into thematic chapters rather than by strict chronology. Both volumes are extensively illustrated, so that the reader easily follows van Eyck’s descriptions and arguments.

In his earliest writings, which were prepared for and presented at the CIAM 6 meeting at in 1947, van Eyck argued for the critical importance to modern architecture of what he called our inheritance from the avant-garde in all the modern arts, and for a rededication to the liberative avant-garde agenda rather than the narrowly defined, reductive postwar functionalism that he felt was moving toward making architecture around the world essentially the same. During the period 1938–46, when he lived in Zurich, van Eyck had been intro-