

University of Minneapolis
 College of Design
 School of Architecture
 UMN Twin Cities
 89 Church St S E
 Minneapolis, MN 55455 1
 saloojee@umn.edu

Keywords: Eliel Saarinen, Eero Saarinen, Christ Church Lutheran, modern architecture

*The Next Largest Thing:
 The Spatial Dimensions of Liturgy in
 Eliel and Eero Saarinen's Christ
 Church Lutheran, Minneapolis*

Abstract. Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was designed by Eliel Saarinen, then 75, and added to by his son Eero Saarinen 10 years later. Deeply loved by its community, it also serves as a touching example of the relationship between the father and the son. This present examination looks at the building on various scales, underscoring the finesse and material elegance of the building complex, the spatial genius and expertise of Eliel Saarinen, and the deferential addition by Eero.

Written into the National Register of Historic Places, Eliel and Eero Saarinen's Christ Church Lutheran was named as a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior in early 2009. Widely considered to be Eliel Saarinen's masterwork, the church has been hailed as the singular building example that heralded a new direction for ecclesiastic architecture in the United States. Completed in 1949, Eliel's sanctuary sits – in the words of his grand-daughter Susan Saarinen – “quietly there”.¹ It is an unprepossessing building from the exterior, a massing of simple forms – largely rectangular seeming solids, faced with Chicago brick and Mankato Stone, occupying the corner of 34th Avenue South and East 33rd Street in Minneapolis's Longfellow neighborhood. Its exterior belies its interior, which demonstrates Eliel Saarinen's consummate skill as an architect capable of understanding the scale of experience as an essential part of liturgy and as an evocative catalyst for a deep and personal sense of spirit. Approached by the local congregation shortly after World War II, Pastor William Beuge wrote a challenging letter to Saarinen, then head of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Ann Arbor: “I asked him if it were possible in a materialistic age like ours to do something truly spiritual.” The young pastor observed that, “He soon showed me”.²

An important question during this ongoing research into Christ Church Lutheran has regarded how to approach a reading of this building. This research – and this writing – is not the work of an historian, so the question of how to uncover or tease out readings of this building has been a preoccupying concern; it has perhaps resulted in an initial reading that departs from an expected analysis or interpretation. Compounding that is the focus on a building that has been the subject of numerous, if not hundreds, of interpretations over its almost sixty year history. Christ Church Lutheran has been studied and drawn by students and architects from all over the world, recently hosting part of an international symposium paralleled with the exhibit “Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future”, mounted in Minneapolis at the end of 2009. Curiously, however, the building is not as firmly embodied in the architectural radar of those who visit the area; building aficionados are more likely to know Jean Nouvel's (new) Guthrie theatre (and sadly, be less familiar with Ralph Rapson's original – now torn down), or Jacque Herzog's and Pierre de Meuron's Walker Art Center, or the Gehry project – the Weisman Museum – more than the Saarinen project.



Fig. 1. Eliel Saarinen helping lay the cornerstone of Christ Church Lutheran in 1949. Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives. Still from archival footage digitized by author



Fig. 2. Eliel and Loja Saarinen at the building opening. Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives. Still from archival footage digitized by author

That Christ Church Lutheran was designed by Eliel Saarinen at the age of 75, and added to by Eero Saarinen 10 years later, adds to the knotty question of how to approach an interpretation of this particular building. Eero was asked by the congregation in the early 1950s to design the addition to his father's building. Two very distinct and idiosyncratic masters shaped this project over a period of more than a decade. Apart from all of this, perhaps the most important aspect that has been brought to the fore in the study of this building is knowing that it is, and has been, the object of a deeply felt love by its community – well before the cornerstone was laid in 1949 (figs. 1, 2) – and that it serves as a touching example of the relationship between the father and the son.

If architects design for effect and to affect, then a mark of the good architect is to do so without compromising either the technical or the experiential. This dual capacity of the good architect – the ability and nuance to negotiate the scale of experience between the mechanical and experiential – was one of Eliel Saarinen's great skills. In considering that the building was authored both in the name of the father and the son, this notion of "effect" (and in a way, of "cause") has a larger resonance; the hand of two designers with markedly different attitudes about form and space underpin this building.

The evidence of this is embodied at Christ Church Lutheran in two particular ways: in the subtle deftness of Eero's addition to his father's building, and in Eliel's designed experience of the sanctuary. Eliel Saarinen was a master of scale: his work encompasses the broad scope from the local to the global. He designed and proposed city plans all over the world: in Estonia, Finland and Australia, even consulting on projects in South America. He designed buildings – museums, apartment, manors and campuses – and he designed furniture and fixtures – from chairs to tables to teapots and teacups.

If the normative way to look at a building would be from the outside in, this investigation will start instead from the inside out – from object to space to room to building. By looking at these scales, and through these lenses, an attempt is made to underscore the finesse and material elegance of this building and to touch on the spatial genius and expertise of Eliel Saarinen, and a surprisingly soft and deferential project by Eero.

Eliel Saarinen was never satisfied with acceptable, or even good responses; he attempted to conceive of projects in their entirety, at all scales and, perhaps most importantly, to know what the appropriate use of these scales are. The range of scales is embedded here at Christ Church Lutheran, and it is reflected in many ways: from the material and tectonic to the immaterial and the ineffable; to the way that choral music surrounds worshippers and visitors; to how a monumental experience of space is made personal and intimate; to the subtle and deeply poetic way in which light is treated, used and shaped. Eliel understood how light becomes a material principal of this building. In the Lutheran tradition, God's Grace comes by faith alone, through Christ alone – *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus*. Light, of course is one of the mechanisms with which architects and designers try to express a sense of the sacred. At Christ Church Lutheran, for Eliel Saarinen, light revolves around liturgy connotatively and denotatively.

Eliel Saarinen would have been very familiar with this liturgy. His father, Juho Saarinen, was himself a Lutheran minister, tending to congregations in Rantasalmi, Finland and in Lisisila in Ingermanland, Russia. Juho would later leave his congregation in St. Petersburg and move to the outskirts of Helsinki, to join his son and family at their Hvitträsk estate. The Lutheran liturgy is organized by four particular movements:

- Gathering;
- Word;
- Meal;
- Sending.

These movements are embedded at varying scales in Christ Church Lutheran, and overlap through both the material and immaterial qualities of the building. They serve as a kind of conceptual touchstone for the reading of this building and as a narrative glue. This interpretation will, as noted earlier, start with an inversion of sorts, moving from the micro and shifting out towards the macro, a kind of Eamesian “Powers of 10,” looking at both Christ Church Lutheran and its designers, Eliel and Eero Saarinen.

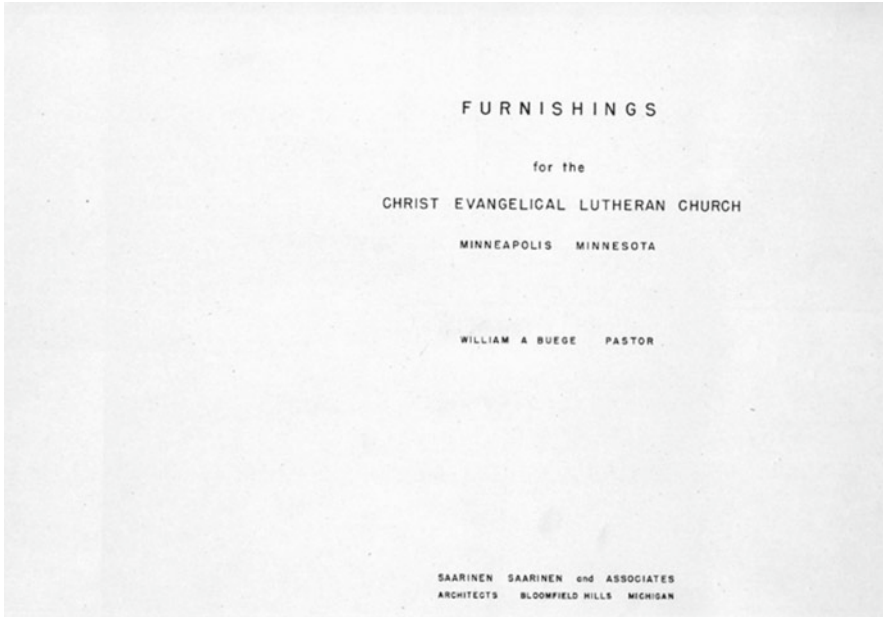


Fig. 3. Title-page, ‘Furnishings Book’ for Christ Church Lutheran.
Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives

Appropriately, for a church, we can begin with a book. Not THE book, but a book (fig. 3), and certainly an important one; The Book of Details, if you will, and a gospel for an architectural understanding of Christ Church Lutheran. Provided for the church as part of the final set of construction drawings for the building, this book contains original drawings from Saarinen’s office showing the furnishings for the church. If we start at the scale of the liturgical objects depicted within, we can extract aspects from them that allow us to posit a manner in which the architect understood his work, not just in the form of the building, but also the way in which he communicated these ideas to us and the community at large. The drawings in this book parallel the way in which the represented objects themselves exist in the physical space of the church, how they occupy it and are highlighted by it. This is a key relationship. British artist David Hockney observed that how we depict space indicates how we behave in space;³ there is a relationship between the image of the object and our experience of it. Here, in the good Book of Details, we see these representations – these object-drawings – as artifacts displayed against a surface, organized against the backdrop of the page. Their drama is played out not only in the

usual convention of the architectural drafting board, through plan, section or elevation, but also in perspective, with cast shadows. These objects have been rendered as experienced things. The images in the book can therefore be understood as an expression of architectural thinking through drawing; before the objects were made, they were imagined as matter, thought of as matter. These liturgical artifacts themselves can then be understood as the manifestation of this thinking through making/drawing. At Christ Church Lutheran, the immaterial was understood through the material realization of ideation.

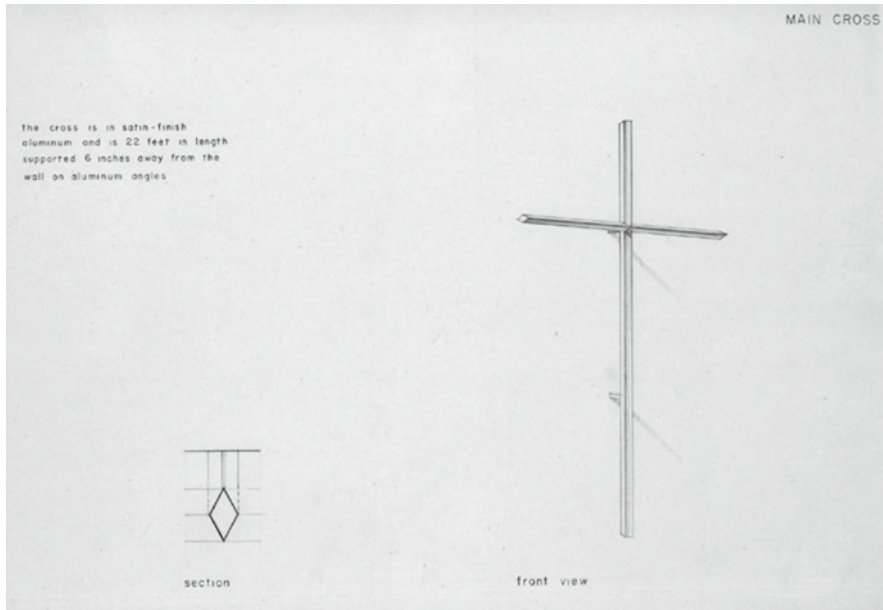


Fig. 4. Main Cross, 'Furnishings Book' for Christ Church Lutheran.
Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives

The cross (fig. 4) is the focal point of the chancel and for the congregants as they gather, in fulfillment of the first movement of the Lutheran liturgy. The volume of the sanctuary itself and the subtle geometry of the nave walls direct one's vision forward. The cross – the ultimate symbol of Christianity, representing at once Christ's saving death and His resurrection – casts an ever-lengthening shadow along the rear of the chancel wall. Through the architecture, the artifact sits against a backdrop of light falling upon the Chancel wall: a material scrim for the divine.

The cross is 22 ft. tall, constructed of stainless steel and mounted to the wall with aluminum brackets. Its section is diamond shaped, with clear, hard edges. Recollections from Nick Hayes, the son of Mark Hayes of Hills, Gilbertson and Hayes, the local office associated with the Saarinen, tells the story of one of Eliel Saarinen's periodic site visits. Laborers had painted the chancel wall with two coats of white, oil-based paint, and Saarinen, upon seeing it, instructed them to grind back the surface of the newly painted Chancel wall, knowing that the softened backdrop would yield a more appropriate experience of the cross and its shadow. Indeed, the drawing of the cross in Saarinen's book of details articulates the dramatic intentionality of the liturgical object against an ephemeral backdrop; the shadows are rendered against an implied surface. In constructing the effect of the cross, Saarinen simultaneously understood its affect (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Time-lapse imagery of light across the Chancel. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

From the cross, our view moves down to the altar and clockwise to the piscina, the bowl used during liturgy. Both the chancel and chapel altars were part of the original design of the church, and are critical components of the experience and nature of the sanctuary. Saarinen highlights both altars against a curved wall which wraps the objects with the diffuse light that enters through translucent windows. The chancel wall curves forward from the sanctuary altar and leads to the piscina, which is located near the altar used for Communion and is mounted on the same wall as the cross. This curve leads to the pulpit, which has its own curved geometries that align with the side-aisle to the north. This suggests a line towards the baptismal font – completing a kind of liturgical loop – one that highlights the space of the Chancel, strongly evident in the plan of the building. The pulpit (fig. 6) is the station of the utterance of the Word – the second movement of the Lutheran liturgical movement – and is in a way a centralizing moment within the space itself.

Through these objects, Saarinen observes and celebrates the integrity of a set of individual moments within the space, but this isn't a hermetic strategy because each of these spaces is impacted by the broader program of the building. These object-moments exist as individual events, but are connected, both conceptually and experientially to the larger scale of space around them.

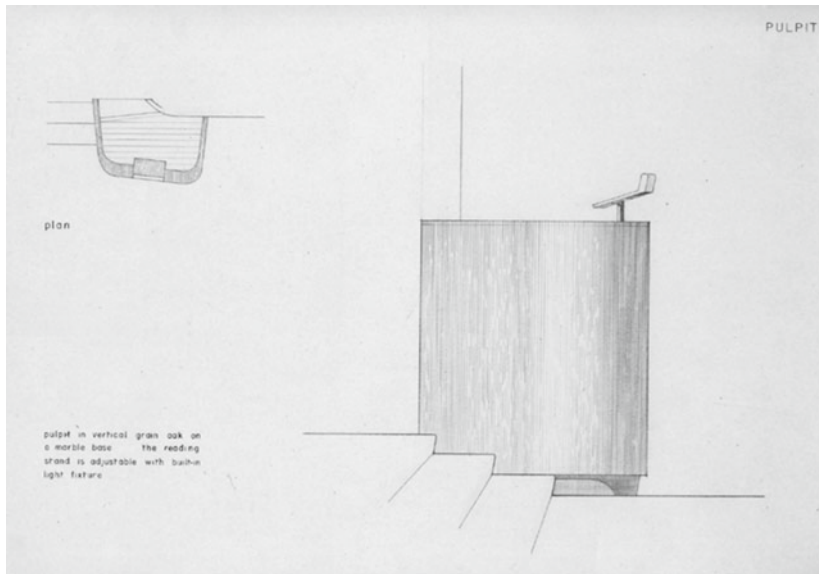


Fig. 6. Pulpit, 'Furnishings Book' for Christ Church Lutheran.
Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives

The altars and their candles are also objects against the page (as drawn in the book) but are also projected against the walls of the church, or in the case of the baptismal font, against a volume defined by its location: situated in a curve in the floor, in a space of its own, with a flooring pattern that differs from the surfaces around it. The Baptistry is bounded by a short, low wall and one steps down into it. The floor is a glossy tile, distinct from the other material surfaces of the sanctuary. Stepped down, it recalls Christ's baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist.

These liturgical artifacts – the cross, the altars, the piscina and the font – have deliberately considered and architecturally nuanced spatial and experiential conditions. As we expand our scale beyond the object as a single moment, we can observe that they are always inserted in a larger, careful material and luminous context. Although the space of the liturgy occupies the entire spatial field of the sanctuary – indeed, the whole building – Saarinen draws out a set of careful architectural conditions that highlight these liturgical and (to coin a term) artifactual moments. The curve of the chancel wall (fig. 7), and the wooden baffle or screen carefully modulate the light that falls onto the surface of the whitewashed brick. All the glass used in the sanctuary (save the entry and bell tower windows) is translucent, which further tempers the eastern and southern light; Eero Saarinen would later use this exact strategy in his design for the Kresge Chapel on the M.I.T campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Specific walls are terminated in such a way that the visible cut edge of the walls themselves define program and space within the building. For example, the two flanking walls from the narthex to the sanctuary are faced with brick headers only, as is the short wall of the baptistry. These edges help articulate particular zones or programs of the church in a less explicit way. The chancel wall edge, perpendicular to the window, has its own pattern of headers and stretchers; further emphasizing this particular volume and its bounding by the symbol of the cross, the station of the Word, the font and altar assist in expressing it as a space of elemental spirituality (fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Sanctuary, view of the chancel and cross. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

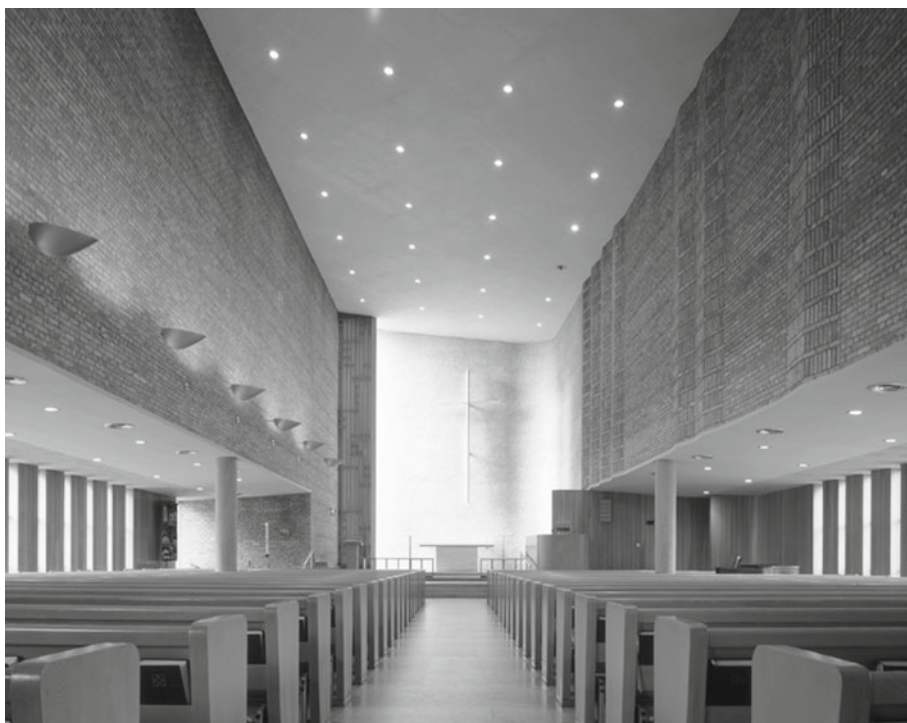


Fig. 8. Sanctuary. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Saarinen is deliberate and methodical about the walls in Christ Church, the way they extend, connect, imply or are cut and exposed. The west wall that bounds the baptistery extends outward, well past where we would expect it to merge with the southern aisle wall. In doing so, it mimics a similar strategy used in the Chapel's East wall. The material and formal expression of these moves point to a considered hierarchy of the spaces of the church; Saarinen's attitude toward the building is clear, in that his architecture underscores spaces of profound spiritual experience within the building, but he does so with quiet poise. The side aisles, too, use this strategy: the west aisle links to the heavy volume of the bell-tower, the east connects to the narthex and lobby. Both connect the glazed end of an aisle wall to an opaque masonry volume.

For those coming for the first time, the reaction to the building is often one of casual indifference. Certainly from the outside, the Saarinen complex maintains a remarkably unassuming and unprepossessing presence. Upon entering the building however, that casual indifference changes quickly. The church is raised up a few steps on a plinth above the level of the sidewalk, and one enters an arcade before turning to the main doors of the building. The arcade was not part of Eliel's early design, but was instead added through Eero's addition. Eliel Saarinen, with the entryway, demonstrates not only his careful attention to detail with a carefully and intricately crafted door, but also in framing the entry with a mullion-less glazing, clearly separating two formal elements within the entry spaces of the church, again suggesting the integrity of these moments within the overall structure and experience of the architecture. He then does this in several places within the building and the result is anything but fragmentary; he achieves a kind of

architectural unity through multiplicity of scale. He also does this at the campanile, an object linked by glass on both sides, and tied into the structure of the building through roof, floor and stair. It reads simultaneously as an artifact in its own right, against the backdrop of the volume of the building of the church, but the stairs that lead to the choir loft are pulled off the side walls by a small gap of a few inches, which allows light to penetrate between wall and stair. This scale of separation – at the scale of both the detail and the volume of the building – would lead Eero Saarinen to employ a similar strategy in the double stair of the addition that leads down into the basement level of the education wing.



Fig. 9. Side-aisles. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The movements of the Lutheran liturgy are ancient, and go back to the very beginnings of the Christian Church. The entry of the congregant into the space is directed forward to the altar and the cross and the chancel wall; this is made more emphatic by the volume of the sanctuary and smaller coves of the side-aisles. The side-aisle windows are angled forward, with a smaller edge profile that reduces the amount of visible lit surface as the congregants gather. The second movement of the liturgy is the Word – *Sola Scriptura* – which takes the pulpit as the seat of the book, and shifts the focus of the congregants to the pulpit from the cross. The Meal directs worshippers forward again to the altar. The manner in which the third movement is performed underscores how Saarinen’s architecture augments the experience of the Lutheran liturgy and how this building can be understood as a facilitator for worship. Once complete, congregants split into two lines and move back to the pews, along the side-aisles. This time, however, they are exposed to the broader face of the side-aisle windows, with their edges more prominently in light (fig. 9). The view back, towards the east, is again, a brick surface, softly lit from either side through translucent glass.

This particular reading of the side aisles is particularly striking as a carefully considered and beautiful effect: following the Meal – the central act of Christian Worship, the Holy Communion – one’s walk back is in a field of light, brighter than when one entered. The worshipper approaches the altar in darkness, and leaves in light.

The geometry of the building is more than a conceptual framework for the liturgical act or a way to facilitate the spiritual drama of this worship: it is also a demonstration of a carefully considered set of technical solutions. Christ Church has been called one of the finest examples of acoustic finesse in American architecture. Eliel collaborated with the acoustic consultants Bolt, Beranek Newman (BBN) in the design of Christ Church Lutheran’s acoustic qualities. BBN was founded by Leo Beranek and Richard Bolt (two professors at MIT), who partnered with a former student, Robert Newman, to form the company. Their first major consulting commission was the acoustic design for the United Nations General Assembly Hall in 1949,⁴ but archival material from Christ Church Lutheran notes their involvement with Eliel Saarinen on Christ Church.

The geometries of the building carefully attenuate any acoustic resonance that might result in echoes or unwanted reverberation. No surfaces are truly parallel (fig. 10). The north wall of the Sanctuary, with its variegated surface, is angled slightly off the orthogonal. The east wall is also turned in, the chancel wall is curved, and the canted ceiling, both in the sanctuary, and over the side-aisles, have been carefully considered. The choir loft of the balcony edge is angled forward too. The perforated ceiling has been designed with a pattern of sound absorption panels as well as void spaces, to allow for a richer, truer auditory experience. No electronic augmentation or microphones are necessary within Christ Church; one can comfortably hear a sermon or presentation without amplification. The sensory experience is remarkable and the choral effect of the music is outstanding. One is, in a way, truly surrounded by music and by the Word. The sanctuary is a receiver both of light and of sound.

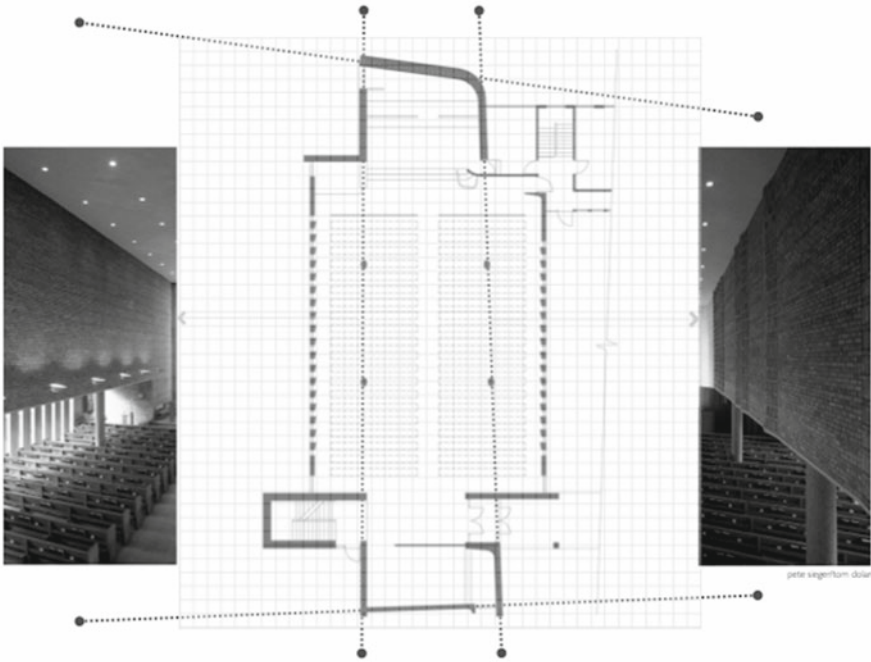


Fig. 10. Building geometry, composite image by author, with photographs from P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan

The building is never lopsided. Given its sometimes subtle and apparent shifts, it manages to achieve, in a special way, a balance and a very human scale through its asymmetries. This appropriateness of scale continues when we return to the exterior; the side aisle on the south side immediately presents a comfortable pedestrian scale to the street edge; as opposed to, for example, the massiveness of the sanctuary wall coming straight down. This creates a kind of cove, a pedestrian-friendly volume pulled from the sanctuary extending out in a gesture to the street, in recognition of the quiet residential quality of the Longfellow neighborhood. Even with a five-story campanile, the church fits very nicely in this part of town. This attention to human scale is again reiterated on the north side of the sanctuary, with the courtyard faced by the east side aisle, giving a more comfortable and humanizing scale to the garden. Eliel Saarinen continues his nuanced manipulation of scale, further breaking up the mass of the sanctuary through a simple line on the north and south walls – a single brick header extrusion – suggesting the volume of the chancel within. Instances of how the scale architecturally “speaks” about space are found on the outside of the church as well (fig. 11).

Eliel Saarinen was unlike the architectural crop working at the time. In 1949 the year the Eames House was built and Phillip Johnson’s Glass House was completed, Wallace Harrison was collaborating, with, among others, Le Corbusier, Ernest Cormier and Oscar Niemeyer on the United Nations Building in New York, and Mies van der Rohe was working on the Lakeshore Drive Apartments in Chicago and the Farnsworth house in Plano. Mies and Gropius came to the US in 1937; by the time they arrived, Eliel Saarinen had been in the US for almost fifteen years.



Fig. 11. Building exterior. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Eliel, on the heels of his second place award in the Chicago Tribune competition in 1923, was working in the United States a few years after the first World War and during the Second. He was fully immersed in a quiet, but conscious pursuit of redefining the post-war architectural landscape. If the modern movement at the time emphasized form, structure, and the “coolly” rational, Saarinen proved with Christ Church that he was quite unlike the modernists of the time. When Frank Lloyd Wright called Eliel Saarinen, “The best of the Eclectics,” Saarinen labeled him “Frank Lloyd Wrong” [Art: The Maturing Modern 1956].

Saarinen was a master of context and place, establishing an appropriateness of architectural expression for a buildings site, distinguishing him from the *Zeitgeist*. Today, none of us would argue about the importance of an architecture of context and Eliel Saarinen was ahead of his time with regard to this as well. This is reflected in the early work he did in Finland. The apartments at 17 Fabianinkatu or the projects in Katajanokka, the Railway Station and the National Museum, for example, are considered subtle and nuanced departures from the prevailing National Romanticism that preoccupied many of the architects working in Helsinki and Finland at the time. Preoccupied with this tricky question of style, his desire for his own architectural expression was expressed in the book he completed in 1948, *The Search for Form in Art and Architecture*. He believed in collaboration – as evidenced by how his office functioned – and not in the role of the architect as a heroic figure working alone. Saarinen said:

Architecture embraces the whole form-world of man's physical accommodations, from the intimacy of his room to the comprehensive labyrinth of the large metropolis. Within this broad field of creative activities, the architect's ambition must be to develop a form language expressing the best aims of his time – and of no other time – and to cement the various features of his expressive forms into a good interrelation, and ultimately into the rhythmic coherence of the multi-formed organism of the city [Christ-Janer 1979: xvii]

This particular observation is the heart of his accomplishment at Christ Church Lutheran because the building privileges an awareness of spirit through a careful relationship between effect and cause, through a clear and deft touch with material and light – the creation ultimately, of sonorous space – both as a crafted architectural strategy and as a rich and lasting experience. The building demonstrates – and this is one of its great effects – the manner in which the masonry is held up with light, almost dissolving through the experience on the inside.

Completed at the same time as the Johnson's Glass house, Saarinen ultimately eschews the overt character of the form itself, as the structure – that physical causal reality of all architecture and in the case of Christ Church Lutheran, steel – is completely hidden through the material and surface elegance of the brick itself (figs. 12, 13). If architecture is achieved by the thoughtful resolution of opposites, then Eliel Saarinen, here at Christ Church Lutheran does it in spades. Light and the surfaces that are carefully designed to receive and hold it, its conceptual experience versus its programmatic reality, its mass versus its form, its effect versus its cause, all serve the desire of the architect to create a space of manifest spirituality. If architecture is a battle plan against gravity, then Eliel Saarinen, with the quiet and restrained poise of an architectural acrobat gives, us a space where light trumps steel and brick.

In 1948, Saarinen's second book, *Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Architecture* was published. 1948 was also the year that Albert Christ-Janer's *Eliel Saarinen: Finnish-American Architect and Educator* was published, "...the book that he (Eliel Saarinen) and his wife Loja both approved" [Christ-Janer 1979: xv]. Coincident with this – the publication of Christ-Janer's biography and *The Search for Form* – Eliel Saarinen would begin to design, with Saarinen, Saarinen and Associates, and the Minneapolis firm of Hills, Gilbertson and Hayes, Christ Church Lutheran.



Fig. 12. Building construction, view of side aisle and sanctuary from street.
Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives



Fig. 13. Building construction, view of side aisle and sanctuary from campanile.
Image © Christ Church Lutheran Archives

Saarinen begins his book with the observation that the search for form, if “sincere and honest” [Saarinen 1985: v] is a simultaneous process of creation and analysis; that the creative process is the immediacy of design married to a developing system of personal, critical reflection. Saarinen’s ideas of form, their genesis and evolutionary paths, logics and theories to the transitional imagination of man (the dogmatic to the mechanized to the creative mind) are all detailed here. This book is the amalgam of over a half century’s experiences, reflections and musings, all directed at the principal meditation of how and why we make the things we do and essentially, of art as a total experience, rooted in the primacy of nature.

That book is not an historical overview of this thinking, nor it is a scholarly treatise on the subject. It is an attempt by Saarinen to impart a broad sense of what constitutes form-making to the young artist, this after more than quarter of a century of teaching, and more than fifty years of architectural practice, begun in 1894 in Finland. Saarinen’s primer on the search for form which, as both the title and content of his book, is a combination of a reflection of his life as an architect and as an educator.

His early projects in Finland – those done first with Armas Lindgren and Hermann Geselius and later on his own – evidence the sensibility of forward thinking that has characterized much of Eliel Saarinen’s work. While his contemporaries were still deeply connected to ideas rooted in National Romanticism, Art Deco and Jugendstil, Eliel Saarinen was quietly, but very consciously engaged in the search for an appropriate architecture through a deliberate dialogue with material and context. Christ-Janer references Johan Sirén’s (head of the Architecture Department in Helsinki) 1955 opening address to Saarinen’s memorial exhibition in Helsinki:

The early growth of Eliel Saarinen reveals the inner relationship between personality and style. It is also convincing proof, as it always is when an artist is born, that stylistic expression is only a surface phenomenon; the impulses of the soul of the architect go deeper. The quality of expression is the constituent that decides the artistic, the ultimate value. This quality was evident during his early years [Christ-Janer 1979: 7].

Christ-Janer further notes that although the firm of Geselius Lindgren Saarinen were resistant to the embellishment of surface so characteristic to Art Nouveau, the three young architects embraced the “inventive spirit of the trend” [Christ-Janer 1979: 9].

This search for an appropriate context of architectural expression is the theme of Saarinen’s life as an architect. He said:

Most urgently something had to be done to build an art form out of the eternal fundamental principles and to bring architecture and design, in general, out of its humiliating state. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to free design from the its style grip and to let it develop in full freedom according to the nature and character of the time” [Christ-Janer 1979: 25].

Christ Church presents a unique opportunity to evaluate the work of two architects over a period of time, and explore their work critically and creatively in relation to the other. Even though Eero Saarinen was partnered with his father, the sanctuary for Christ Church is predominantly Eliel’s hand. In 1953, in a *New York Times* article titled, “Now, Saarinen the Son” published on April 26th and written by Aline Bernstein Loucheim, then an associate art editor, whom Eero would marry a year later, Eero Saarinen observed of his father that,

I often contributed technical solutions and plans, but only within the concept that he created. A better name for architect is ‘form-giver’ and until his death in 1950, when I started to create my own form, I worked within the form of my father [Loucheim 1953].

The competition for the St. Louis Arch was perhaps the inflection point for this realization. Initially awarded to Eliel Saarinen (the award notification was sent to “E. Saarinen), the correction was noted shortly after and Eliel celebrated his son’s coming into his own with a grand party at Cranbrook. Designed by Eero in 1947, a year before the contract for Christ Church was issued, Eero Saarinen would not live to see the Arch built; construction was only begun in 1963 and finished five year later. The Jefferson Memorial competition coincides with Eero’s burgeoning assumption of increased responsibility in his and his father’s shared architectural practice. Robert Clark and Andrea Belloli write that:

Eero Saarinen returned to Cranbrook during the summer of 1936 and entered into practice with his father. During the next three years, they produced a series of designs that marked the end of the elder Saarinen’s transitional phase, established the manner of expression that characterized his last decade of practice, and served as a point of departure for Eero’s independent work [Clark and Belloli 1984: 65].

Clark and Belloli also observe that Eliel’s genius lay in “craft and synthesis rather than innovation” [Clark and Belloli 1984: 68], compared to Eero’s characteristic ingenuity, inventiveness and his aggressive pursuit of new measures in form and technology in architecture.

When clarifying some issues for Saarinen’s biographer some years after Eliel’s death, Joe Lacy noted that:

As you probably know, the last three or four years before Eliel’s death were more or less transitional. Eero assumed more and more responsibility until eventually Eliel seemed content to let Eero lead the way. However, Eero had great respect for his father’s ability and I doubt if Eero ever ignored Eliel’s ideas.⁵

In a letter two months later, Lacy wrote that:

The very last building that was designed by Eliel and which was built was the Christ Lutheran Church in Minneapolis That was entirely Eliel and Eero had very little to do with it. The pastor of the congregation, Rev. William Buege, is a brilliant man. He made an exhaustive search for the right architect and was finally convinced that Eliel was the right one.⁶

If Eero ever felt shadowed by the form of his father, he quickly demonstrated the power of his own architectural trajectory following his father’s death, distinguished even in the way their practices operated; Eliel embodied the very description of a master in his atelier, sanguine, grand, dapper, while contrasted with Eero, rumped and intense in his office (fig. 14), often working 18-20 hours a day, and relying on the collaborative spirit of his now famous employees: Pelli, Parker, Paulsen, Lacy, Roche, Dinkeloo, among many others. Although Eero had achieved a notable amount of fame with his early furniture projects, the Jefferson Arch competition was an important defining moment in the relationship between father and son. Their studio was “divided with a wall of

blankets, pillows and sheets,” so as not to reveal the developing designs of father and son to each other.⁷ Indeed, Eero would significantly revise the design and detailing of the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan following his father’s death – clearly demonstrating a commitment to his own ideas compared to the original scheme of his father’s. Originally a shared project between father and son, the GM Technical Center became one of Eero’s career-defining projects, eventually leading to many other corporate commissions.



Fig. 14. Eero Saarinen’s office. Image © Leonard Parker, AIA

From his remarkable entry into the St. Louis Memorial Arch competition,⁸ Eero Saarinen was one of the pioneering spirits in redefining the American Architectural landscape (fig. 15). Out of the approximately forty “25 Year Awards” given by the American Institute of Architects, Eero won five during his career. Growing up under the gaze and desk of his father, his career – although tragically cut short at the age of 51 – and contributions to the modern architectural canon cannot be overstated.

Saarinen, Saarinen and Associates continued until Eliel Saarinen’s death in July 1950, shortly after the dedication of Christ Church Lutheran. That ultimately saw the full flowering of Eero Saarinen’s great capacity as an architect, as well as his discipline and superhuman commitment to work, on one project committing approximately \$12,000.00 towards a competition whose first prize award was \$4000.00. It was noted that:

In a single evening he will run through 170 ft. of tracing paper” and he made more than 2,000 drawings in revising his plan for the London embassy. A woman in his office, whose desk Saarinen sometimes uses late at night, inevitably knows when he has been there. Says she: “It’s like slicing down through the excavations at Troy—tracing paper, tobacco,

paper, paper, matches, more paper, a cigar stub, paper, paper, paper [Art: The Maturing Modern 1956].

This work ethic would yield some of the most celebrated architectural works during the period between his father's passing and his own in 1961.



Fig. 15. The St. Louis Arch. Image © Leonard Parker, AIA



Fig. 16. The TWA International Flight Center, model. Image © Leonard Parker, AIA

Perhaps best known for his iconic designs for the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the TWA International Flight Center at JFK Airport (fig. 16), Eero's oeuvre is impressive. He designed the John Deere Headquarters in Moline, Illinois, but died a week before construction commenced on the almost 700-acre campus. He designed the GM Technical Center in Warren Michigan, the CBS Building – the Black Rock – in New York, the IBM Plant in Rochester, the Bell Labs Complex in New Jersey, the Miller House in Columbus, Ezra Stiles College and Ingalls Rink at Yale, and Washington Dulles Airport. The echo of his father's influence can be best seen in the Kresge chapel on the MIT campus. Quiet, restrained and singularly nuanced, much of the careful quality of Christ Church is evidenced in this gem – in particular, the nuanced use of transparent and translucent views in the entry – akin to Christ Church's windows – and in the careful attention to brick as a surface. From the TWA International Flight Center to the Tulip Chair, like his father, Eero was adept at many scales.

Through all of this emerging body of work, and seemingly embodying the paradox and complications of being at once a mainstream architect, a multi-vocal designer and an innovative stylist, Eero Saarinen would return to the site of his father's last built work, and would build on his father's capacity for understanding effect and cause and the appropriateness of scale. He would design and supervise – at least the early stages of this project, because he died before this building was completed – this addition to Christ Church Lutheran (fig. 17). One can imagine that, at what was really the height of his career, when Eero Saarinen received a request to add to his father's building, the architect of the Jefferson Arch and the TWA Terminal, perhaps, straightened his tie, smoothed down his hair and honored the building and the man that ultimately transformed the direction of ecclesiastical architecture in the United States.



Fig. 17. Eero and Paulsen's addition, with the sanctuary beyond.
Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The relationship between Eliel and Eero Saarinen is a timeless evocation of the enduring bond between father and son. In their own ways, they represented broadly different temperaments in period, style, attitude and time. Eliel was the genteel, cultured aristocrat, educator and writer, whose deft drawing hand and ideas of architecture as a synthetic craft quietly suggested a new direction for American modernism, while Eero was the intense, focused and inward-looking innovator who came to symbolize the trailblazing enthusiasm of post-war architecture in the United States. Eliel's oeuvre was identifiably consistent; it is easy to trace the formal and architectural lineage from one projects to another; Eero's body of work is vastly different in form, resulting in early scathing criticisms from the likes of Vincent Scully (cf. [Romàn 2003: 2]) who accused him of having no consistent language and said that his adaptability (now acknowledged) signified a lack of discipline!

Eero's addition to his father's work, with the significant contributions of Joseph Lacy, Glen Paulsen, Leonard Parker and Cesar Pelli,⁹ is – to use a current of the theme of this writing – perhaps the most appropriate scale of effect to Christ Church Lutheran. It is modest and utilitarian, in the best senses of those words, and playful too, with a veritable Knoll and Eames showroom fronting 34th Avenue (fig. 18), but it is understated and deferential to the form of his father. Glen Paulsen, interviewed for the developing monograph on this building, noted that Saarinen's driving concern was the appropriateness of the Education Wing as a quiet response to the sanctuary. Paulsen's office worked with Eero Saarinen on this project, and Glen Paulsen¹⁰ served as the primary designer, with Eero as the deciding voice on the project.



Fig. 18. The Education Wing's "Knoll Showroom."
Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The addition, although programmatically different from the sanctuary, is connected to it through materiality and detailing. The great success of Eero's and Paulsen's addition lies in the apparent unity of the Education Wing with Eliel's sanctuary, but also shows an almost, I believe, tongue-in-cheek response to the work of "The Great Man," as Eliel was known, or as he was more affectionately called by his students and employees, "Papi."



Fig. 19. The sanctuary seen through an atrium window in the Education Wing. Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota



Fig. 20. Christ Church Lutheran, exterior view of the sanctuary.
Image © P. Sieger, AIA and Tom Dolan, Minneapolis, Minnesota

While Eliel Saarinen's sanctuary is a profoundly inward-looking building, the Education Wing, particularly on the main floor, opens up to its context.

The floor-to-ceiling windows of the Luther Lounge (fig. 19), running the full length of the east facade of the Education Wing, open to the residential life of the street. Eero Saarinen and Paulsen turns the interior hallway that separates the classrooms into a windowed and sky-lit atrium; the main hallway that links the new entry around the small courtyard, past the church offices and into the sanctuary, is a glazed cloister. The basement is admittedly more utilitarian, but the spaces are still very social, with two

lounge areas, connected to an industrial (and elegant) kitchen, linked to huge gymnasium, whose bulk and mass surpass that of the sanctuary, but is ultimately not part of the experience of the building's exterior.

While the sanctuary is a quiet volume whose experience is wholly interior and is an expression of a poetic understanding of light and liturgy, the education wing is more extroverted – in an introverted sort of way. As a tribute to his father (and in a way, as Paulsen's tribute to his friendship with Eero Saarinen), with the Education Wing, Eero has managed to reflect his own attitude about architecture in a way that honors Eliel, but also echoes his own vision for architecture. There is a unity at Christ Church Lutheran that is not only the unity of Eliel Saarinen's Cranbrook, of views and changes of scale and, as Paul Goldberger noted, of "creating a constant sense of surprise" [Goldberger 1981: 311]. Certainly the sanctuary embodies these notions, from its exterior simplicity, to its interior views and its experiential complexity. The unity at Christ Church Lutheran is of the balance of opaque and transparent, of interiority and exteriority, of the restrained craft of Eliel, and in a wonderful surprise – an innovation of sorts – of the subtle and quiet hand of Eero.

When asked what his favorite building was, Eliel Saarinen replied, "The next one",¹¹ anticipating that the work of the architect is never truly complete, that the search for form is unending. Christ Church Lutheran sits, in Susan Saarinen's words "quietly there," serving as a sensitive tribute to the broad and unique genius of both father and son (fig. 20). Eliel Saarinen sought specificity and appropriateness through scale, but with Christ Church Lutheran he achieved a kind of spiritual universality, and the addition by Eero Saarinen and Glen Paulsen continues that essential quality. The education wing is not flamboyant by any stretch of the imagination, but extends in a generous arc from the work of Eliel's Sanctuary, bounding the courtyard and deftly borrowing and interpreting the father's work – a curved wall, a slight reveal between stair and edge, a carefully scaled facade – while maintaining, very discreetly and informally, the authorship of the son.

Born on the same day thirty-seven years apart, August 20th, and collaborators on the same projects for some time, both Eliel and Eero Saarinen died of similar causes. They were both awarded the AIA Gold medal – Eliel Saarinen in 1947, Eero posthumously in 1962. Eero would accept the RIBA Gold Medal for his father's contribution to architecture in September of 1950 just two months after the death of Eliel on July 1st of that year. Eero died in 1961. But for this text and these reflections and importantly, for the experience of the building itself, the church complex constitutes, in the buildings that embrace a courtyard, the lasting continuity of the relationship between father and son.

Notes

1. Susan Saarinen made this comment in September of 2008 at a lecture she delivered at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Named as one of the Finlandia Foundations co-lecturers of the year (with Marc Coir), Ms. Saarinen observed – it was her first visit to the complex designed by her father and grandfather – that it was one of her favorite buildings in their oeuvre.
2. Pastor William Buege, in a letter dated November 2005 to Rolf Anderson. Mr. Anderson, a local Minnesota historian, generously shared this correspondence with me.
3. Paraphrased from Hockney's comments in the excellent documentary film, "A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China or: Surface is Illusion but so is Depth" [Haas and Hockney 1989].
4. See the BBN Technologies website at <http://www.bbn.com/about/timeline/> (accessed 28 March 2010).

5. Letter from Joseph Lacy to Albert Christ-Janer, dated January 2nd, 1971, Box 2, Folder 2.1 Saarinen Family Archives.
6. Letter from Joseph Lacy to Albert Christ-Janer, dated March 18th, 1971, Box 2, Folder 2.1 Saarinen Family Archives.
7. Susan Saarinen, conversation with the author, Minneapolis 2008.
8. According to Marc Coir, Eero never gave credit to Carl Milles for suggesting that the section of the arch be triangular when Eero had requested his advice concerning his entry into the competition. Coir noted this in his lecture at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in September 2008.
9. The author has conducted several interviews with Leonard Parker, who, as the site supervisor on the addition, noted Pelli's contributions to the developing design in Glen Paulsen's office.
10. It's interesting, albeit incidental, to note here that Eero recruited Paulsen personally to join the Saarinen office. Paulsen's first projects included working with Eliel Saarinen, but later transitioned to joining Eero on his work. Paulsen, notably, became the third president of Cranbrook, after Eliel Saarinen and Zoltan Sepeshy. He was interviewed in November 2008 for a developing book on Saarinen (of which this paper will form a part) in November 2009.
11. Marc Coir made this observation in his presentation with Susan Saarinen at the Minneapolis Institute of Art in September 2008.

References

- Art: The Maturing Modern. 1956. *Time Magazine*, July 2, 1956.
- CHRIST-JANER, Albert. 1979. *Eliel Saarinen: Finnish-American Architect and Educator*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- CLARK, Robert Judson, and Andrea P.A. BELLOLI. 1984. *Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision, 1925-1950*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers.
- HAAS, Philip and David HOCKNEY. 1989. *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China or: Surface is Illusion but so is Depth*. Directed by Phillip Haas and written by David Hockney. Documentary film.
- GOLDBERGER, Paul. 1981. Eliel and Eero Saarinen. In *Three Centuries of Notable American Architects*, Joseph J. Thorndike, Jr., ed. New York: American Heritage Publishing Company.
- LOUCHEIM, Aline. 1953. Now Saarinen The Son. *New York Times*, April 26, 1953.
- ROMÁN, Antonio. 2003. *Eero Saarinen: An Architecture of Multiplicity*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003.
- SAARINEN, Eliel. 1948a. *The Search for Form in Art and Architecture*. Rpt. 1985, New York: Dover Publications.
- . 1948b. *The Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Architecture*. New York: Reinhold Publishing.

About the author

Ozayr Saloojee is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Minnesota's College of Design. He joined the faculty in 2005, after teaching and practicing architecture in Ottawa, Canada, where he completed his B.Arch and M.Arch degrees at Carleton University's School of Architecture. Born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa and in Canada, Professor Saloojee's current academic areas include questions of tradition and modernity in Islamic Architecture, and research interests in contested landscapes, and the political agency of the architect in these conflict terrains. He participated with the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) and Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis) with the hosting of the Eero Saarinen retrospective "Shaping the Future" in 2008 (as a co-organizer and invited presenter of a related symposium). He also collaborated on the exhibit "Christ Church Lutheran: Three Photographic Visions" with VJAA (Minneapolis) Site Assembly (St. Paul). The exhibit design was awarded an American Institute of Architects Honor Award in 2009. Professor Saloojee is currently completing a monograph on Eliel and Eero Saarinen's Christ Church Lutheran.