

The Saarinen Connection, by Richard Saxon.

The old US Embassy in Grosvenor Square is being redeveloped by Sir David Chipperfield within the retained façade of Eero Saarinen's 1960 chancery. Saarinen was at the time the most prominent US architect and won the limited competition for it in 1955. What few know is that he asked future BDP partner N Keith Scott to help him. Saarinen was snowed under with work and could not fit in a visit to the site but badly wanted to enter. So, he asked Keith to do an appraisal of the site and the planning constraints and send it to him.

Keith Scott had met Saarinen during his time as a postgrad student in New Haven. Ever the networker, Keith befriended Saarinen by offering to write a review of his controversial MIT Auditorium which appeared in RIBA Journal in February 1955 and in Architectural Record in July.

Eero Saarinen had a very original approach to architecture and a prodigious work rate. Established by 1952 with the huge, Miesian General Motors Technical Center under his belt, he nevertheless hungered for greater fame and opportunity. That came to him suddenly in 1953 when the New York Times sent its associate arts critic to Michigan to write a profile of him. Aline Louchheim took several weeks to interview and understand him. She realised that her skills in writing and in press relations could make him more famous. He realised it too and they fell for each other, marrying in 1954. From that point onwards Eero's reputation blossomed as Aline presented his work in terms which lay people could understand. She described the planned TWA Terminal at Idlewild (JFK now) as a bird in flight, starting major media coverage and transcending the dry technical facts which the office had previously released about its work. New projects poured in and by the time of his sudden and untimely death at 51 in 1961 he had a major office and reputation. Keith Scott's contribution came near the start of this phenomenon.

I first visited the USA in 1964 as a student, to work in Chicago and to travel. I was a Saarinen fan as I liked the way he seemed to create a new architecture for each project, based on the context, the client and his own eclectic inspiration. His rise marked the end of the International Style's dominance. I managed to see the new John Deere HQ in Moline, Illinois, Dulles Airport, Washington, TWA, The Yale and MIT buildings. John Deere was my first encounter with a modern atrium, about which I was to write two books in 1983 and 93. Saarinen had already built one for the huge Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, preceding John Portman's creations by a few years.

Eva Hagberg's new book 'When Eero Met His Match' (Princeton 2022) looks at the transformation of architectural reputation which occurred when Aline Saarinen became 'Head of Information Services'. She seems to have invented the role of architectural publicist, whilst hiding her influence from the media. The lay population found her narrative accessible and evocative and warmed to the architect, never suspecting that good PR was behind it. Eero found his fame but died all too soon of a brain

tumour, unable to complete the portfolio he had won. The office that he built included such prodigious talents as Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Cesar Pelli. They completed his projects and set off on their own paths, providing a continuation of many of his themes for several decades.

BDP came into being just as Saarinen died. We quickly created a communications department, led by the doyen of UK architectural publicists, Greville Griffiths. Keith Scott both helped Saarinen and learned from him. The rest is history.

Richard Saxon CBE, December 2022.