

Love & Architecture

Alexandra Lange (*Design Observer*, 22 October 2009)

When Aline met Eero in January 1953, she was the associate art editor and critic for the *New York Times*, recently divorced, and on a trip to Detroit to meet the young architect whose [General Motors Technical Center](#) had proved to be such a smashing success. She was to write a profile of Saarinen for the *New York Times Magazine*, eventually published on April 23 as “[Now Saarinen the Son](#)” with the byline Aline B. Louchheim. A little over a year later she would become Aline B. Saarinen.

Aline was first swept off her feet by the buildings, 25 of them spread out over 320 acres around a huge rectangular pool. The long sides of the three-story buildings housing Engineering and Research, Service, Process Development and Styling were greenish glass curtain walls, still something new; the short walls were bright glazed brick, yellow, orange, two reds, two blues, olive, gray and black. A shining aluminum dome covered the circular space in which Styling tested and displayed GM cars; a shining 50-foot stainless steel water tower marked GM’s place in the sky above the flat suburban landscape.

Aline wrote in a birthday letter to her future husband:

The General Motors job was all and more than anyone had written about it: really a twentieth century monument, yes, “itself like a well-engineered industrial product,” yes, a beautiful expression of our technology, yes, imaginative and big and wonderful in its changing relationships, yes, splendid in the carrying out of the concept down to the careful and pleasing detail, yes, a group of buildings that recognized man’s dignity *vis-à-vis* the machine, yes, very human —

This account and much more correspondence between and by both Saarinens is available online, digitized by the [Archives of American Art](#) at the Smithsonian as the [Aline and Eero Saarinen Papers](#), 1906-1977. Their letters, particularly Aline’s history of their romance quoted above, provide a sometimes shockingly intimate look at an apparent *coup de foudre* of two equals, both stars in their respective firmaments, and both with previous entanglements (him, a wife and two children; her, an engagement and two children, plus her journalism career).

On their first day together, the work eventually receded, and the man came forward.

...it was a nice dinner, but we were both feeling strange and awed and breathless, still caught in the impulse that made me postpone my plane reservation. Then sneaking into Cranbrook and the dark room and the black coat at the threshold and making love for the first time — hurriedly but so that we both knew it was only the first time. Then the drive to the airport and Aline’s autobiography with significantly small mention of any engagement. Then, waiting in the airport on those hidden chairs, you in the black coat and black hat and I looked at you very intently and thought how much I did want to see you again...

(Whew! When I first read this it was on microfilm at the AAA, and I could not believe my eyes. The image of the black coat at the threshold stayed with me for a long time, a short story in itself.)

Love and architecture were mixed from the first moments of Aline and Eero’s attraction, and as the New York installation of the travelling exhibition “Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future” argues, she was

one of his principal collaborators during his too-short career (Eero died of a brain tumor in 1961, age 51). The exhibition, opening November 10 at the [Museum of the City of New York](#), includes Aline's *Times* profile of Eero and additional excerpts from their correspondence, as well as her best-selling 1958 book [The Proud Possessors](#). It also highlights her illustrious career after his death, when she turned from print to the new medium of television, and eventually became host of her own morning talk show, "For Women Only." When she left the show to become NBC's Paris bureau chief ([the first woman](#) to oversee a foreign bureau), Barbara Walters took over.

Alongside Eero and Aline's romantic correspondence, complete with pet names, illustrated envelopes, and cut-out construction paper hearts, is Eero's rather darker correspondence with his shrink, whose name appears to be Dr. Bartemayer (Eero's handwriting is somewhat obscure, though he was famously ambidextrous). In that correspondence he writes and writes and writes about his relationship with his first wife, Lily Swann Saarinen, and his pre-Aline romances with several other women, including [Florence Knoll](#), who had been semi-adopted by the Saarinen family when she attended the Kingswood School, and [Astrid Sampe](#), a Swedish textile designer. He seems to have threatened divorce over a span of years, one foot psychologically and physically (many of the letters are written on one airplane or another) out the door.

In an undated letter to Aline, Eero's woman troubles bleed out of therapy and into their careerist romance. Analyzing the situation of their (future) marriage, he ranks many of the design couples he knows on a chart, the scale based on their percentage of happiness. This was the kind of numerical analysis he performed on airports and corporations, and he saw no reason not to let it carry into his private life. The chart can be seen at [AAA](#) (Page 25), as well as at MCNY. Up at the top, between 100 and 90 percent happy are his parents, architect Eliel Saarinen and textile designer Loja Saarinen, and "Charlie" and Ray Eames (Ray was also a second wife). Between 70 and 80 percent, the [Girards](#); 30 and 40 percent the Knolls, the Louchheims and Eero and Lily Saarinen "before degeneration." Locked apparently in a loveless marriage were the [George Nelsons](#), down at 15 percent. He might have added Henry and Doris Dreyfuss; she ran his office, where she was known as "[Miss Marks](#)" in order to separate public from private roles.

In hindsight, the problem with Eero Saarinen's first marriage seems very obvious. When he met [Lily Swann](#) at Cranbrook in 1937, she was glamorous, a sculptor, a former competitive skier, daughter of a prominent New York family. They married in 1939, and she had a son, Eric, in 1941 and a daughter, Susan, in 1945. Lily contributed sculpture to a number of his early projects, including the winning entry for the Gateway Arch in 1947, just as his mother Loja had contributed to his father's commissions. Eero wanted a partner, in work and life, as Charles Eames had in Ray. As his commissions grew and travel increased, Lily was left at home in Bloomfield Hills with their two young children. As he recounts it, Lily was depressed, possibly unstable, but he was also clearly disappointed that she could not keep up with him.

Aline, on the other hand, was a working woman. She had a nanny and an ex-husband. And she made every effort to see Eero in the months before and after the article was published, meeting at the Langdon Hotel on Fifth Avenue and 56th Street, traveling to New Hope, PA with him to check on the progress of Harry Bertoin's screen for the GM cafeteria, hooking up in Boston in a hotel room filled with models of MIT's Kresge Chapel, watching him present furniture ideas to Hans Knoll. Even on the day they met, there was dinner with the Girards, Alexander and Susan, neighbors and kindred design spirits in suburban Detroit. Eric and "Susie" Saarinen, even Loja, make appearances in Aline's history of love; Lily is strangely absent from the Vaughn Road house where the family then lived (Loja in a modest modern cottage of Eero's design out back).

After their marriage, Aline had to recuse herself from covering the world of architecture in which her husband played such a leading role (today she would have had to recuse herself after that first Cranbrook encounter). Instead, she became “Head of Information Service” at Eero Saarinen & Associates, pitching his projects to the magazine editors for which she previously worked, charming his clients personally and professionally. She threw herself into his work while simultaneously managing to further her own. Part of her artful packaging of Saarinen’s career included a feature on the new Saarinen family, Eero, Aline and son Eames (born 1955) living in that Vaughn Road house in minimal style.

Her aid continued after Saarinen’s death, when she helped to secure his place in the American architectural pantheon. She and Saarinen’s longtime partners [Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo](#) traveled around the country, making sure the firm’s nine commissions under construction or in design (including the TWA Terminal, Dulles Airport, two residential colleges for Yale, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the CBS Building) were all completed as Saarinen buildings. In 1962, she published a book of his writings, including gorgeous black-and-white photographs, [Eero Saarinen on His Work](#). She also outlined a book on the CBS Building after its completion in 1965, as she always considered it Saarinen’s most media-centric project.

I always feel a little sad for Lily Saarinen (and Catherine Woermann Eames, and the other architects’ first wives who are not present in Wikipedia). I would like to think the relationship of Eero and Lily might have gone differently today. She might have been in architecture school alongside him, rather than in the sculpture program. She might have entered the Gateway Arch competition on her own. She would probably have waited longer to get married, and longer to have children. She could have turned into Aline, rather than be replaced by her. Eero’s older sister Pipsan worked alongside her husband, architect J. Robert F. Swanson, a onetime partner of Eliel and Eero Saarinen, designing furniture, textiles, fashion and interiors.

And, at least according to my anecdotal data, architecture schools today sometimes seem like dating services. Many in my husband’s class at Yale architecture school are married to each other and living within five blocks of us in Brooklyn; others are married to architects they met on their first job at a big firm. In 2007 Robin Pogrebin chronicled this trend (also without hard numbers) in the [New York Times](#), pointing out a raft of up-and-coming practices led by married couples including SHoP, nArchitects, WORKac. Already there is Diller Scofidio (+ Renfro, not quite sure where he fits in), Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, Sauerbruch Hutton from Germany. It is quite likely that, after Zaha Hadid, the next woman to win the Pritzker Prize will be in partnership. Japanese architect [Kazuyo Sejima](#) of SANAA would be the obvious candidate; she practices with Ryue Nishizawa. Luckily the Pritzker jury has rewritten the rules in the last decade. When Robert Venturi won in 1991, Denise Scott-Brown, his longtime partner and wife, was left out, but Herzog & de Meuron won jointly in 2001.

I’ve been asked why so many architects marry each other, and my theory is that good partnerships, in work or life, are based on the same foundation. One partner has qualities or talents the other lacks. In many of the architecture partnerships I’ve observed, one person is the front (wo)man, the other the quiet design force, one the critic and the other the workhorse. There has to be a level of trust between architecture partners commensurate with marriage; why not search for that in a single individual? The grueling schedule of architecture school and first jobs puts those talents on public display. Rarely do you see so much of a person, under such duress, as in architecture school. If you still love them after 10 cups of coffee and three nights with no sleep, you should put a ring on it.

I don’t think practicing in partnership rather than alone is a bad thing, or a comedown, for women, who are still severely under-represented in the profession. [The National Architectural Accrediting Board's 2008](#) report says 41 percent of architecture graduates were women, while according to the [2009 AIA](#)

[Firm Survey](#) report, the share of architecture staff at AIA member-owned firms that is women is 27 percent, and the share of firm principals that are women is 17%. The AIA is a voluntary professional organization, so these are not the total numbers of women practicing architecture, but that's still a big gap, and one that increases at the higher levels of the profession (principals and partners). When [Architectural Record](#) surveyed female practitioners in 2006, many with their own firms said solo practice brought them freedom (and a few said they backed into when seeking greater flexibility while raising children). I would like to think that women graduating from architecture school in the 1990s or 2000s don't see partnership with a man as a limit on their freedom, and maybe partnering with a husband makes work-life balance, and not getting mommy-tracked, possible. (I could not find data on architecture couples. If any readers know of better sources, please note that in the comments and I will update these numbers. If no one has done this survey, it seems like a worthy topic.)

Like Eero and Aline, architects married to architects are seeking a partnership of complementary equals, someone who understands their language and their sacrifices, and who can prioritize the same aesthetic quest. Aline's birthday letter to Eero puts his architecture first — that's why she is in Detroit, and that's what initially wows her. When he turns out to be as imaginative and big and wonderful and human as that architecture, she gets more than a little weak in the knees. When architecture works it should make us all swoon, just like our partner.