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Gunnar Birkerts – Metaphoric Modernist
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Latvian-born architect Gunnar Birkerts belongs to the second wave of modernists who arrived in the United States from abroad, a group that includes Kevin Roche and Cesar Pelli among others. Educated at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, Birkerts worked first with Eero Saarinen in his now-legendary office in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and later was chief designer for Minoru Yamasaki. At that time both Saarinen and Yamasaki were developing their distinctive architectural signatures and building their international renown. Subsequently Birkerts established his own practice, evolving a design process and a philosophy with its own original profile. His approach does not seek a »right style for the job« in the manner of Saarinen. From the first, Birkerts' work was tied to a program as well as a particular context – a place – to the extent that it became expressive of the surrounding landscape and accommodating to the existing vernacular. Birkerts' designs, from the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis to the Corning Museum of Glass to the Houston Arts Museum and recently the Latvian National Library, shows him exploring with ever greater resource and inventiveness the expressive possibilities of symbol and metaphor. Form, he believes, *expresses* function, and does so with its own rich, meaningful vocabulary. Birkerts uses visual metaphors to link program, client, and landscape in a resonant solution. His methodology of using metaphor – meaning – as a first principle, as a generator of design concept, is unusual in the profession, but it is vitally connected to his Latvian heritage and his family background as the son of a folklorist and writer.

This heritage is given a new turn here, for the biographical text of the book has been written by his son, Sven Birkerts, who is a noted literary critic and author of the influential book *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age.* He has also written a memoir, *My Sky Blue Trades* which describes at some length his coming of age struggles with his architect father. Now, years later, Sven brings his cultural perspectives as well as his family insights to bear, offering a unique portrait of a life and career. History and description are enlivened throughout by observations and reflections on the career – the destiny – of this master of the expressive concept. The book is richly illustrated and complemented by descriptive assessments of the projects by Martin Schwartz, who is an architect and writer and who teaches at Lawrence Technical University in Southfield, Michigan.

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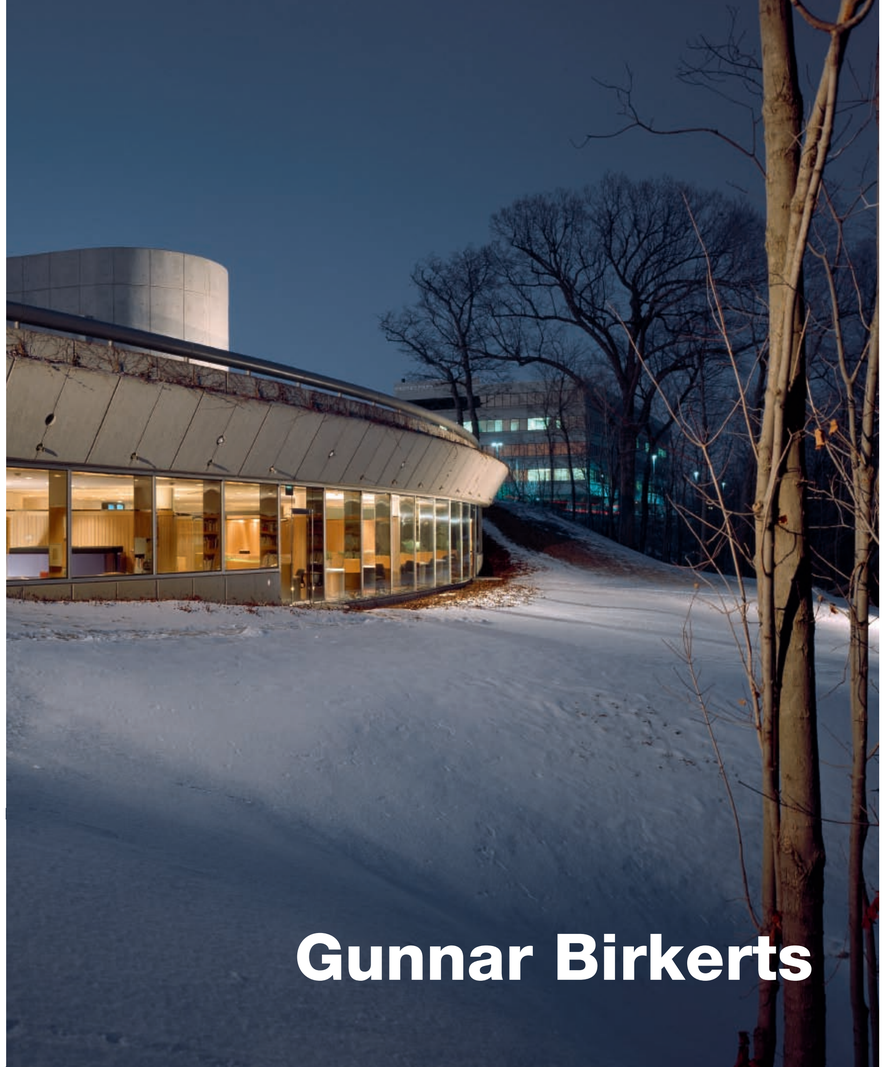

Gunnar Birkerts

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Preface

It's true – the title of this book identifies me as a Modernist. I accept the label. As a child of my times, my history, I cannot think of myself as being anything else. The Modern is in my blood; it was the Zeitgeist that shaped me, not just visually and artistically, but socially, intellectually, maybe even emotionally. I see the world through its lens. Everything meaningful built after I was born I consider Modern.

The first generation of European Modernists, the »masters«, were dogmatic, and what they did and pronounced became the rules. I think of Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier. My influences, however, were the architects of the Second Generation: Aalvar Aalto, and then Hans Scharoun, Carlo Scarpa and Jørn Utzon. Once I came to America and began my apprenticeship, I liked the work of Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph and, of course, the Saarinens.

I believe that it was »destiny« that brought me together with Eero Saarinen. I continue to debate the meaning of this profound encounter – both in my life and my career. The professional attraction was the original impetus, but the learning experience was lasting on many levels. One definite influence was Eero's relentless pursuit of invention. He was tireless. He was always asking: »What has been done? What is the next thing?« This was, of course, also the Modernist credo.

Every structure that I have built has been a »first« for me – I have refused to emulate any existing form or idea.

I was also determined not to look back. I searched for new ways to advance and thought in terms of these »firsts«. One such first for me was in the design of the Lincoln Elementary School. Things that seem common – or at least not unusual – were groundbreaking in 1965. The school was planned with a handicapped ramp and an elevator.

In 1974, I received a research grant to explore subterranean space development and the space above it. My new focus resulted in several earth-covered university-library solutions, starting with the University of Michigan Law Library in 1974, and later including other implementations for Cornell (1980), San Diego (1987) and Utah (1992). I had already realized the »green« component in what I think of as the DNA of my concepts.

Much noticed was the 1968 »first« – the catenary structure-supported Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. The universal recognition by the architectural profession and press was rewarding.

Building enclosures represented other innovations. Daylight control and energy conservation were important considerations at the time. For Massey-Ferguson I conceived the first double exterior skin wall. This was in 1966 – unfortunately the project was not realized. However, in 1974 the IBM regional office building was awarded the first »Corning Glass Energy Award« for its exterior wall concept. The solution addressed daylight control and delivery but also achieved a meaningful graphic expression.

Today in architecture we see a great many computer-generated building forms. These are mostly freestanding icons, with little respect for the surrounding context – possibly the result of a design process immersed in the easy manipulation of screen images. We have never lost the need for architecture that respects landscape, human comforts, and that seeks sustainability – livable solutions.

Globalism – the kind of design that looks past the vernacular in its search for a completely contemporary idiom – tends to remove the regional and national characteristics; it violates the essential – and distinct – context. I believe in an architecture that maintains its regional alliances.

I also believe, the wonders of CAD technology notwithstanding, in the brain-to-hand-to-eye-back-to-brain connection as the basis of my creative process. The moving hand has an intelligence of its own, one that we discount too easily in our move to the computer-mouse. For me the train of the creative process, the trail, is the metamorphosis evidenced in my hand sketches. I save them. My design originates in a synthesis of practical factors and appropriate expressions. Critics have said: »His style is no style.« I accept that as a kind of compliment – every one of my solutions is unique.

Architecture must address not just the practical need for shelter, but also the human need for meaning. I consider metaphor and symbolism to be integral to my concepts, and I draw on my subconscious intuition for both. I see forms as both functional and meaningful. A building is serving its users and at the same time responding to its environment.

A practitioner is not always insightful about his own practice, nor can he see the arc of his career as clearly as someone looking from the outside. I am fortunate in having two different perspectives to complement the visual record of my work. My son, Sven, is a practicing critic and essayist, and he has supplied the so-called »big picture«, the biographical overview that takes into account both the public career and the more intimate private life. He has, with explanatory input, told the story of my life in architecture.

Architectural writer Martin Schwartz, meanwhile, provides an informed descriptive commentary, explaining and assessing the projects one by one. Taken together, the two vantages offer a kind of stereoscope portrait. I am deeply indebted to both for their thoughtful work.

I would also like to thank Axel Menges and Dorothea Duwe for their interest, initiative and hospitality as well as Sally Bund and Nancy Bartlett of the Bentley Historical Archives at the University of Michigan, for all their expertise and generous assistance. It goes without saying – but I say it – that I owe a lifetime's debt to my wife Sylvia.

Gunnar Birkerts

Modernism and timeless form

Sven Birkerts

The world of architecture, like the larger world that contains it, is in a state of accelerated transformation, its practice and procedures at every level now shaped by the powerful pressure of the digital. The ancient art of Palladio and his generations of successors – an art so long rooted in the architect's designing sensibility, the product of hand-eye intelligence – has entered the era of the »program«, the software prosthesis. From conception to realization, every stage of the process is different – it is out of the hands of the individual, if not completely then significantly. It is far too early to evaluate the nature of the change. We can only remark it. And, in remarking it, cast a look backward, to try to better grasp the meaning of what are suddenly the »old ways«. What better way is there to do this than by looking at the life and work of one of the last Modernists, an architect who came to maturity in the last heyday of the mode, and who has continued designing to this day, carrying the spirit of the tradition into our uneasy present.

Gunnar Birkerts – my father – is an architect from the era of the pencil. This does not mean that he fears or rejects technology – not a bit – but that his design process is deeply rooted in the call-and-response process of hand and eye. For him moving a pencil across a page is a way of thinking, a way of getting hold of a visual idea with his whole intuitive being. Growing up, this fascinated me. I would often study his drafting-table when no one was around. I knew it was the site of intense activity. He would be working there at night, when I was supposed to be asleep, but sometimes I would come out for some reason and see him sitting there, wrapped up in his own distraction, pushing his hands through his hair, focused on things I had no idea about. What unseen world could keep a person so preoccupied? I would go back later to search for evidence, moving the T-square up and down on its tightly stretched wire, looking at the pencils and the black marker-pens he liked to use, shuffling through the stacked shirt-cardboards that he collected and covered with his sketches. I remember these sketches especially – always dense, shapes and lines gone over and over until they had a busy kind of mass. His natural hand movement was circular, loose, and to get started on anything he would draw nests of circles, nodes. I suspect he would start making shapes before he had any idea where they would go, the idea being that the shape might jump-start the thinking eye, the emerging conception then giving direction and focus to the hand. I find myself doing the same thing sometimes before I write, less to get ideas than to put myself into an associative mind-state. I wait for the moment when the pencil moves without my direction. But where I produce simple arabesques, the architect always drew dense and vigorous morphing shapes – I don't know if I have ever seen him do a clean-lined sketch.

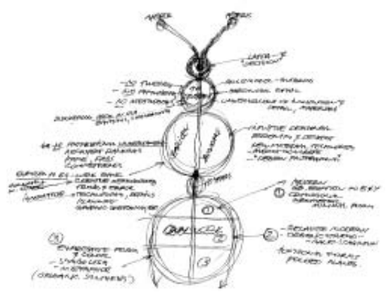
I wasn't at all surprised then that when I asked him to reflect on the major phases and influences of his own career, he presented me with a sketch made up of these same loose curves and circles. It was right in character. He wasn't thinking about a building this time, or one of his »embryos« – what he calls those concept drawings where he tries to find the complete DNA of a project, the part that somehow reflects the idea of the whole – but his own interpretation of his architectural development. I have it here and it's a fascinating document, for several reasons. For one thing, this emblem – or embryo – is drawn in the same style as all those shirt-cardboard sketches I remember. Once again, I marvel at the continuity of hand and eye, the loose movements of the hand, the pressure of the repeating overlays. But the first thing I wondered when I saw it, before I moved in closer to study the details, was whether this was similar in any other way to those conceptual sketches – whether he actually thought that this orderly arrangement of shapes really offered the best possible synthesis of his career. *Synthyesis* – he never tires of saying it – is what he is after in his design conceptions.

The life-sketch in front of me resembles either a snowman, with three successively smaller circles capped by a fourth, a darker circle that has two antenna-like protrusions, or else an insect, a beetle of some kind, with its feelers extended. Only when I study it more closely do I understand that it's meant to be read downward. The feelers are labeled »Merija« and »Peteris«, his mother and father, and they connect directly with the smallest, darkest circle, marked »Latvia«, where my father was born and lived until he was sixteen. The larger circle below is »Stuttgart«, where he studied architecture at the Technische Hochschule in the mid-late 1940s. The next, still larger, has Saarinen inscribed on the left, Yamasaki on the right – representing the two main phases of his American apprenticeship. Underneath that circle, very small, positioned like a belt-buckle, is a mysterious node marked »10 Years«, and underneath that, the base, the largest circle, »Own Work«, subdivided by lateral lines, and numbered 1, 2, and 3, representing the three main phases of his own design.

What I haven't yet mentioned – and to me this is as significant as the circles and the various tag-phrases and arrows that annotate the indicated periods – is the vertical line that neatly bisects the drawing. Looking at it, I found myself remembering the term »bilateral symmetry« from high school biology class. Why this division? This doesn't look to be the map of a divided life. The only actual opposition indicated would be in the middle circle, where he has written »Saarinen« on one side of the vertical and »Yamasaki« on the other.

But I interpret this differently, less literally, as marking a basic impulse to symmetry. And it's true, in many ways the architect is an orderly, balanced person. He keeps organized files; he plans ahead – other cardboard sheets featured neatly printed lists of tasks, things to remember, each marked with its neatly drawn squares. Order, foresight, a daily plan of attack – it fits the man I know, though where architecture itself is concerned, he departed from literal – classic – symmetry early on in his career. But there is more to this symmetry. In another sense I see this vertical line also representing a very basic tension of elements, one that makes immediate intuitive sense to me. I don't know whether he would agree with this or not – I will need to ask him. I'm talking about the split between the organic and the orthogonal, of course, but also a larger, deeper dividedness. Maybe I'm imposing this, making a writerly design, but in fact I've always sensed it there – the tension between the deep traditions of an Old World home culture and a dynamic Modernism.

1. Conversation sketch.
2. Merija Saule-Sleine.
3. Peteris Birkerts.



The man can sometimes come across as a psychological enigma, if not to others, then certainly to those who are closest to him. When the family – mainly his children, my sister Andra, my brother Erik and I – discusses him outside his hearing, we often throw up our hands in perplexity – or frustration. There are so many ways that he doesn't seem to »get« himself, refuses to see the causes or effects of his actions and pronouncements. Much as he loves ad hoc psychologizing, he has no developed psychological theory about the sources of his own artistic development. Pressed, he will agree that he is probably too close to the source – himself – to have any degree of objectivity. In the same way, he puts forth few interpretations of his own childhood years, especially in terms of the connection to architecture, though he is interested enough in recalling what he can.

Born in Riga in 1925, raised in a city apartment by his mother, Merija Saule-Sleine, who worked full-time as a teacher and a folklorist, my father works hard to avoid mythologizing a solitary childhood or the impact of an absent father. But the rest of us keep faith with the basics of modern psychology and believe that this had to be the biggest shaping influence. Not just the fact of being raised through early years by a single parent (though it's so common now, it was much more unusual then), but the nature of that experience. His mother was a formidably strong woman, intelligent and willful, with determined theories about child-rearing and discipline. She ran their apartment life with high expectations – that her son would be neat, orderly, and that he would take on a good deal of responsibility. He had chores, schedules, and there were penalties exacted for any shirking of duties. I find that I avoid using his case as an example for my own children – I don't want to turn their grandfather into an oppressive emblem of how hard things used to be. But in fact it *was* in many ways an austere situation.

My father was separated from his mother for many years – from when he left home at 16 until 1968 when they actually saw each other again – and there was a period during and after the war neither knew if the other was alive. They first reconnected through a guarded correspondence in 1946 – the letters used pseudonyms and couched everything in private code. The contact expanded only gradually in the early postwar years. I did not meet my grandmother until my teens and did not see where my parents had grown up until 1972 when we traveled to Latvia as a family for the first time – I was already in my early twenties then. Merija lived in the same apartment that my father had grown up in, except that it had been subdivided after the war to make room for a Russian family. When I watched him moving around in those narrow, high-ceilinged rooms, I could almost feel him trying to come to terms with the new walls, how they jarred against his remembered sense of space. But even in spite of how much was changed, I got a strong feeling of that childhood home. Strong continuities remained. There were books everywhere, hundreds of them – thick, fragrant, Old World-style books, on shelves, piled on surfaces, stacked against walls; paintings – landscapes, mainly – a piano with a coverlet. Flowers. An intimate, intellectual clutter, very much reflecting the life of the mind and the arts.

Merija herself was formal, very much »old school«, still opinionated and capable of strict pronouncements. She had remained in Riga during and after the war, in part out of her devotion to her profession. I used to characterize her to people as a female Latvian »Mr. Chips« – a beloved Gymnasium teacher who had been around long enough to be teaching the children of her former students. And the few times I visited her there in her old age, she was tended to daily by a cadre of her former students, her »girls«, who had kept up visiting rotations for many years. In addition to her teaching, she was a widely respected folklore scholar. She worked for years, with Peter Birkerts, amassing and categorizing folk sayings and anecdotes and publishing the findings in several volumes. To her very last days she retained a scholarly air – always sitting very straight, speaking slowly and with formal diction, defining words if she thought she needed to, passing along advice and instruction and wisdom from the various writers she admired.

My father acknowledges that his mother's influence was enormous, not just as far as character and discipline were concerned, but also insofar as she infused him with an intense sense of his culture, from its etymologies and folklore (which would prove so important many decades later in designing the Latvian National Library), to its music, art, and literature. More than giving him specific instruction, she filled him with a lasting sense of the importance and seriousness of culture and learning, an influence that he and my mother then handed on in their own way. And in later years after the war, when he and Merija reconnected again, she would be his staunchest advocate. In her eyes he was carrying on the creative legacy of his father – or so I would guess.

Any psychologist would be fascinated by the story of my father's father. Peteris Birkerts was already a highly-regarded writer and polemicist when his son was born. Having been educated in America – at Valparaiso and Columbia – he was known for his ambitious syntheses of important trends in European and American intellectual life, and he published some of the first Latvian studies of psychology and sociology. He sacrificed everything to the altar of work, separating from Merija just when fatherhood was about to make its practical demands on him. But though he moved just a short distance away – to a small house at Riga's Jurmala – my father never met him. Instead of a father, he was given a legend. And a set of reasons – why it was that he had gone. Merija offered elaborate accounts of the man's important work and his need for isolation. This, she explained, was the price of creativity.

Did all of this – the loss, the tension of the absence, his mother's accounts and rationalizations – eventually contribute to my father's fierce desire, first for achievement, and architectural excellence, but in later years for recognition as well? He doesn't admit it himself, not directly. But a visitor with a psychological bent might take great interest in inspecting the glass case next to his stu-

dio, where medals and certificates of professional achievement are arranged alongside the many books of Peteris Birkerts he has collected.

Are these family matters relevant to the architecture? A pure design theorist might say no, but I believe that everything pertains at some level, and that a compulsion to please the father had to be part of the formation, the relentless drive for perfection. Or else, on a different level, that nothing could be more integral to this architect's clean, austere Modernism than the crowded space of that original apartment. That contradiction is deeply fascinating. I can call up those rooms in my mind's eye, and beside them conjure up an image of the Houston Museum of Contemporary Art, or the Corning Glass Museum. What makes the path from A to B? There is a connection. But I don't think it was opposition as protest, so much, more opposition as self-definition. The architect would eventually create a counter-world for himself – he had to – turning away from folklore and books to a visual idiom mainly bare of associations. The past had to be left behind. He remarks on this often – that his interest has never been in looking back, but always forward, always to the next thing. This would certainly help to explain his eventual fixation on Eero Saarinen: the Finnish architect followed the same restless impulse.

Restlessness. I think if I were given one of those flash response tests by a psychologist, asked to associate without thinking to the prompt »Gunnar Birkerts«, I might start with »restless«, or »driven«. When Gunnar was running at full-steam, which was often, or wanting to be – which was the rest of the time – it seemed he had a hard time waiting for the rest of us to catch up. His pace and the world's would feel out of synch. He was not a man who tolerated long lines or delays easily. Professionally this translated into a dynamism that others, his colleagues especially, remarked on. His good friend and fellow designer Charles Bassett once said: »Gunnar was born with the engine running.« But this feature of his temperament could also create friction in the home life – he was not often tolerant of late arrivals, unfinished chores. He held the rest of us to his own high standard, and all of us were afraid of disappointing or angering him. The man had a temper, but mercifully it was of the cloudburst variety, over almost as soon as it had begun. I use the past tense here because the years have mellowed his disposition considerably.

Along with this impatience, this drivenness, are several related qualities. Perfectionism. Focus. Gunnar has always had a strong sense of »getting it right«. In his mind, I think, he creates a picture of a specific ideal – a building, say, or how an event should happen – and he will do everything in his power to realize that ideal. Through painstaking preparation, revision, and sheer willful insistence. This was what kept him up at his drafting table long into the night, and had him working on weekends instead of taking up some hobby. It was not, as some might be tempted to argue, that he was a workaholic. Rather, he needed to make whatever he was doing his best, and if that required work and more work, then that was what he did. With single-mindedness and focus. His attention was, and remains, of the lock-on variety, refusing all distraction. If all systems were »go«, then distraction could include almost anything. At these times one look told you that he was turning some problem over and over in his mind.

My father does not linger much on his childhood – the same few stories get recycled over and over – and he is no less reticent with respect to his later boyhood years. Is it that he really doesn't remember, or that he just chooses not to »go there«. I can't make up my mind. He does recall being highly self-sufficient, getting himself to and from school, letting himself into the apartment at the end of the day to do his homework and wait for his mother. She was so organized and punctual herself that he could time her appearance at the corner to the minute. He likes telling that story – there is something confirming about character and reliability to be found there. What did he do by himself? He read, but by his own admission never became a great reader. Instead, he did his schoolwork (he was always a top student) pursued projects, drew, built things. *Built things ...* This seems like a lead to pursue, but he won't tell any but bare-bones stories. In the absence of good narratives, I find myself focusing in on a photograph that shows him in his early teens. He is standing with two other boys, looking as intent as could be. He looks especially lean and serious and hollow-cheeked, I think. All three are studying a large and impressively intricate model airplane they have built from strips of balsa wood – a very sophisticated-looking structure. And this, Gunnar has told me, was just a prelude. He and his friends were far-along in the construction of a full-sized glider – a glider meant for flight – when the war came and put a stop to the project. Both the photo and the story testify to the beginnings of what will be a lifelong fascination with making. But he leaves it to me to draw that connecting thread.

How does a person absorb influence? My father doesn't claim any special interest in buildings or things architectural during these early years, though he also adds that he knew his city intimately. Riga was easily covered on foot, and in those days people walked everywhere. Though he was not yet studying buildings (it seems to me that half of my childhood was spent waiting while the preoccupied architect paced back and forth in front of some constructed thing), he remembers clearly the variety of the city's buildings, the striking juxtapositions of medieval Old Riga with the later Art Deco and Art Nouveau façades and décor.

By the 1930s, though, at least in Europe and America, the idea of Modernism had taken root. Modernism, with its clean lines, its rejection of sentiment, and refusal of historical reference, except the implicit reference to the future – the history to come – first reached my father one afternoon in the corridor of his gymnasium. It quite literally stopped him in his tracks. In those days students who wanted to go on to study architecture were already preparing in their gymnasium classes. Their designs and sketches would be posted for others to see. What reached my father with the force of revelation was an upper-classman's flashy rendering of a »modern« urban building. He stood before it, enthralled by the lines, the bold economy, the *look*. Everything about it felt to him like a signal, advance word of the New. It was one of the first decisive moments in his life as an architect and he speaks of it often.

4. R. Schmaeling, Latvian National Opera, Riga.
5. Michael, Eisenstein Albert Iela 11, Riga.
6. Eizens Laube, Elizabetes Iela 10 b, Riga.

Though it may seem a small event in the larger scheme of things, the personal consequences were immense. The soil must have been ready for the seed. »When I saw that drawing I suddenly knew what I wanted – I wanted to do that.«

That one exposure was just the beginning of what eventually became an incessant search for visual stimulus, the steady fanning of the imagination with shapes, lines and impressions of all kinds. That obsession, that absolute focus has never gone away. For me growing up in our home in Michigan this grazing was an activity so familiar as to go unquestioned. The architectural books and journals everywhere, the sight of the man leafing, pausing, bending in, gathering information. I didn't understand it then. Ready as I was to deplore the fact that he didn't, as my mother did, read books, though he will remind me that he read a great deal in his younger years, and further, that he knows the texts of these hundreds of architecture books backwards and forewards. My point, however, is that I looked past the other kind of »reading« that he did, which was focused, sustained, and encyclopeadic – the reading of images. He continues to this day. Even in his early 80s he is pushed forward by this relentless, impatient inventorying of images.

I recognize it better now, just as I understand how systematically he archived what he looked at in his memory. These photographs and sketches then became available for quick retrieval. Any discussion of design or building we had when I got older was punctuated with references. »Here«, my father would say, »I'll show you.« And he would cross to one shelf or another in his studio – walls of journals methodically arranged – right away putting his hand on what he needed, finding the page, pointing out the feature, the motif, whatever he was after.

That search goes on. The architect is always browsing, looking. For what? The full answer is, of course, complex. In his early years, though, he was in search of inspirations, artistic alignments, directions, evidence of some next new thing. When he thinks back on his years of study at Stuttgart's Technische Hochschule, for example, one thing he remembers most vividly is going to sit in the library of the American Information Center to study the latest magazines from America. There – he likes to draw out the threads of connection – his eye was first arrested by the projects coming out of the Michigan office of Eliel and Eero Saarinen. Given his single-mindedness, the intensity of his self-creation, that place became a kind of fantasy destination. When he ended up working there several years later, he would register one of the many destiny shocks of his life. That location, that intense creative nexus outside Detroit had been felt to be a kindred place long before it became his home.

My father, while in no conventional sense a religious man, has long put his faith in the idea that intensely focused feelings and desires are answered by circumstance. In fact, he likes nothing better than to go over the events of his life with an eye out for decisive turns and developments that later carry a strong sense of being in some way intended, part of a larger pattern of significance. Though he mainly remarks the major, path-determining events – the role Sylvia would play in his first arrival in America, and then a deeply fortuitous late-night meeting in the Saarinen office soon after – he does not forget to also note other critical swerves, including a close brush with death when a low-slung military cable caught him under the jaw and somersaulted him out of the truck bed he was standing in. It was just after the war and he was still in Germany – in fact, he was on his way to see Sylvia – and a slightly different landing or impact could easily have been fatal.

We never know which events will turn out to be the decisive ones or just how they will affect us. From the moment he saw the older student's rendering my father was possessed by his admiration – he loved the modern look of the rendering, the perspective – and moved to imitation. He began to draw buildings of his own, trying to reproduce the feeling of what he had seen. I have looked through the small file of schoolboy sketches that he keeps in a drawer in his studio – painstaking reinventions of perspective, carefully shaded façades, apertures hand-drawn to scale. They are simple and direct, but they take on a whole different meaning in the light of what he ended up doing with his life.

There was little in his schoolboy world to guide him toward architecture. In his home life he was surrounded by books and talk of literature; his mother's friends and visitors were all teachers, writers and intellectuals. There were words and books in abundance, but very little to give him a visual vocabulary to work with. The one exception was the early connection with a man who would become more decisively influential later on. This was Aleksanders Klinklavs, one of Latvia's leading architects and the uncle of his boyhood (and now life-long) friend August Grasis. Once his first interest in architecture had been kindled, my father began to pay more attention to Klinklavs' various buildings, turning his attention as well to the various eclectic structures he had been passing for many years in Riga. This was when the form-seeking imagination can be said to have awakened. As he has often observed, »I did not need to learn the evolution of architectural styles from books – that evolution was all around me, expressed in the changing façades of this eclectic old city.« The old Hanseatic city was an archive of expressive traditions, from the Schindleresque-Neoclassical Opera House and the eclectic Gothic guild houses, to the Medieval Cathedral and the Jugendstil and National Romantic style buildings. He now took them in as something more than just interesting features of the urban environment: he understood them as evolutionary stages of architecture.

The war brought enormous disruptions and unexpected dislocations to him as to so many – my father was uprooted from his home, his city, his country, when he was still in his teens. There were hardships, frightening transits from place to place, and a profound ongoing uncertainty about the future. He doesn't like to talk much about those years – a numbed sort of survival mentality took over. He and his friend August scrapped ingeniously for food and necessary goods. But underneath the chaos and the numbness of loss the idea of architecture survived. »It was something

I had to keep me going«, he says. »If I could only get through these times, I thought, I would have a goal, something that made sense.« If anything, the ambition intensified. And then he got his chance.

As the war was ending, he made his way to Bavarian Nördlingen in 1945 to stay with August and the Grasis family (Bavaria was a displaced person zone). Nördlingen, which dated back to Roman times, was a unique among cities in that it was built in the circular embrace of a 15 million year-old crater. The circularity, no less than the long-term organic adaptation to this powerful astronomic event, left a visual imprint the architect would absorb and that would later leave its traces on several important design concepts.

He had heard good things about Stuttgart's Technische Hochschule, one of the main institutions of architecture and engineering in Europe, and wanted very much to study there. The reputation drew him, but only later would he realize what an impressive faculty he would be working with for the next four years, including the Bauhaus' Richard Döcker, Adolf Schneck, the traditional Wilhelm Tiedje, and then the man who would become such an important mentor figure, Rolf Gutbrod. Looking back, he is emphatic about his determination. »Nothing was going to get in my way – I knew what I wanted and I would do what I had to.« And though he had no money, circumstances played in his favor – as they would often during these years. As it happened, with the end of the war, the Allies determined that part of the German reparation would be to fund education for displaced persons – a postwar scholarship, in effect. My father and August both decided to apply to the Hochschule, and both were accepted to the 4-year program, in architecture and engineering respectively.

At this point August's uncle exerted some influence. Klinklavs was then living in exile in the town of Esslingen, and the aspiring student now sought his advice. He remembers that the older architect took an active interest, not only offering practical advice about possible courses of study, but also kindling his enthusiasm. Architecture was not just a pipe-dream, it was real – it could be mastered and practiced.

One of the youngest students enrolled in the architecture and engineering degree program, he was surrounded by older students, many of them back from their war service and bent on catching up. But, as my father recalls, they hadn't yet freed themselves from the tyranny of military discipline – even in lecture halls they tended to sit in formation, the higher-rank officers in front, and soldiers at the back.

Early on he came under the tutelage of the eminent architect Rolf Gutbrod, a Rudolf Steiner-inspired teacher and practitioner who would guide much of his curriculum and would eventually serve as advisor for his 4th year thesis project, the design of a museum of art for Stuttgart. The architect would also eventually provide a letter of introduction to Eero Saarinen.

Gutbrod, then in his 30s, cut a very impressive figure. »He had everything«, my father recalls, »a successful practice, with important commissions – he had already built office buildings – and a strong personal style. He wore tailored tweeds and he drove a Lancia.« On top of this, Gutbrod was married and had a young attractive wife. These were all very exciting possibilities – an architect could do creative work *and* have an exciting life. But the teacher was an influence on other fronts, too. He was the first to offer any professional encouragement. »He was my mentor, he watched and guided my work. Best of all, he liked what he was seeing; he responded.« Years later the mentor would visit the Saarinen office in Michigan and as my father showed him around the office and explained the work he was doing, Gutbrod would see firsthand how far his student had progressed from those first academic projects.

It is tempting to step in to psychologize here. For a young man who had grown up without a father-figure, who was consumed by a desire to learn about architecture, but also to make his mark in the world, the stylish Gutbrod cast a seductive spell. Certainly he impressed on my father the idea that an architect could make a statement, that the vocation had status in the world. An architect was not just a maker of shelters, he was an artist. Emotion and temperament, the power of personality – these things mattered.

At the time, Gutbrod was perhaps more influential as a model, an image, than as a direct design inspiration. The student was more taken with international Modernism, with Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, Aalto and Asplund, even Frank Lloyd Wright, than with his teacher's work. When Gutbrod produced the winning design for the important Stuttgart Liederhalle competition, he remembers feeling somewhat disappointed. »It was not where I was looking.« Gutbrod's approach was not quite what he wanted. He was far more taken with images he found in the journals in the library of the newly-opened American Information Center. »Gutbrod was following Steiner's principles. The shapes were organic, in keeping with the spiritual doctrine of anthroposophy. I was a long way from that.« There are several ironies to note. One was that during the Liederhalle competition my father was working as a student intern for an architect named Heyer, one of Gutbrod's rivals in design. The other, more conceptual and long-term, was the fact that many decades later, following his own evolutionary development, the younger architect would find himself connecting in his own way to organic expressiveness, at times echoing elements of the synthesis he encountered in the work of his first teacher.

After its original buildings were bombed, the Hochschule had moved to nearby Weissenhof, at the site of the existing art school. One street over was the well-known Weissenhof-Siedlung, the site of the 1927 Modernist exhibition where Mies, Gropius and others had designed houses. Students could see it from their windows and were regularly sent there for their drawing instruction – they were urged to learn by copying the best.

Design was, of course, an ongoing part of the Hochschule curriculum, but the core of the instruction was centered on pragmatic basics. Materials, structure, building processes. There were good reasons for this. A decimated Germany was literally digging itself out of the rubble, re-building and re-purposing – nothing was to be wasted. My father got a direct exposure to the *practicum* of the profession, the drill-work of basics. Indeed, so thorough was the hands-on instruction at Stuttgart that when he later took his first job in America, at the Chicago firm of Perkins & Will,

7. Rolf Gutbrod, Liederhalle, Stuttgart.
8. Rudolf Steiner, Goetheanum, Dornach.
9. Sylvia Zvirbulis and Gunnar Birkerts in Noerdlingen, 1948.
10. Weissenhofsiedlung, Stuttgart

his supervisors were impressed enough with his know-how that they loaded on task-responsibilities far ahead of schedule.

But the Technische Hochschule also offered design as part of the ongoing curriculum, a sequence that culminated in the final year with his diploma project. Working under the Gutbrod's tutelage, my father designed a museum of art for Stuttgart. He remembers some of the influences of the time, architects he was studying, like Alvar Aalto, Frank Lloyd Wright and Gunnar Asplund, as well as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Saarinen had not yet exerted his influence, but he would very soon. Poring over the publications arriving at the Information Center he was excited by his first contact. with projects like the General Motors Tech Center, the Brandeis University site plan, the Drake University master plan, and the Smithsonian competition. »To me these were coming in like news flashes«, he says, »and a great deal was coming clear to me very quickly. I was starting to get glimpses of my direction.«

Graduating from the Technische Hochschule in 1949, the architect was ready for the next step. He did not want to stay in Germany. America seemed like the best destination. It was his Modernist Mecca, true, but there was another good reason. During these years of study, his friend August had introduced him to Sylvia Zvirbulis, a young Latvian woman living in nearby Nördlingen. The connection gradually deepened into a courtship. Both of my parents like to reminisce about this period. »This was not dating like you have now«, my father insists. »We weren't driving around in cars. We walked – great long distances to get from place to place. When you walk you talk, and it was the talk that did it. This was the first time I had met a girl who could keep the conversation going.« There was also some pretense of helping her study mathematics, though when we visited Nördlingen on a family trip some years ago, both laughed when they pointed to the window of the upstairs room where they had their lessons.

My mother remembers a very serious, intense young man. »He had such an idea of what he wanted, no doubt in his mind. But he had a reputation for being a bit wild. He sometimes drove a motorcycle. He had a quick sense of humor, a hot temper.« He was deeply affected – shocked – when Sylvia announced that she was sailing for America with her parents. He went to see her off. »It was the first time I had cried like that«, he remembers. »I suddenly knew that this was very serious.« The feeling was mutual. They agreed they would correspond regularly and my father resolved that he would get to America.

And then an opportunity arose for him. An American Lutheran relief organization one day posted the names of potential sponsors, people willing to provide passage and then room and board to prospective immigrants in exchange for a year's work. Distance and geography were just details – this was a way to get to America. With no real sense of what he might be getting himself in for, my father signed up with a North Dakota rancher.

He has vivid memories of his crossing and arrival. For one thing, he was one of the few on shipboard who did not succumb to seasickness. He went to the other extreme. Taking a job with the kitchen crew, he was given unlimited access to food and, best of all, milk – an all but forgotten delicacy which he consumed with zeal. Alas, as more and more passengers got sick, he was also enlisted to work with mop and bucket – a counterbalance to that happy indulgence.

Twenty four, with only a suitcase and a rancher's name on a sheet of paper, he had no idea what he might find when he reached New York. He expected his sponsor to be waiting, of course. But he had also, trying to be mysterious, written to Sylvia, announcing simply: »If you want to see me I will be in New York on December 19« – he gave

her the name of the ship and the scheduled time of docking. She had no other indication of his plans. What happened next has become one of the core myths of my parents' marriage. He talks about it almost like a scene from a film. »The ship pulled into the harbor. Everyone was crowded at the rails to see the great city, ooohing and aaahing. It was different for me. I don't know what I had imagined – but the famous skyscrapers didn't seem that tall ... To me it was almost disappointing. I was more impressed by the expanse, how the city just went on and on.« The scale of his fantasies, he admits, was immense.

As the hundreds of passengers disembarked to the waiting area, the would-be ranch-hand waited to meet his new employer. »But the hours went by and the crowd got smaller and smaller. There was obviously no one looking for me. Everyone else connected with a relative or a sponsor. It was getting later and later, until finally I was alone, standing on one side of the gate, unable to get through because my rancher had not come for me. I didn't know what would happen next.« The main fear was that he would be denied entry, somehow forced to go back to the point of departure. He felt his whole future at stake as he stood there in the deserted docking area. But then suddenly he was not alone any more. Someone had come to meet his ship – it was Sylvia. She had gotten his letter; she had taken the train from Princeton and was there waving to him on the other side of the gate. Gunnar was overjoyed. »The immigration official asked me if I knew this person.« He laughs. »I said I did, yes. Then he checked his papers and saw she was not the listed sponsor. Thank God it was a less regulated time. The man had been waiting there with me. He wanted to go home, but couldn't as long as I was there. He overlooked that the designated contact had not arrived. Instead, he asked Sylvia if she could offer me a place to stay and help me get set up. Sylvia responded that yes, she could. He quickly prepared the necessary forms, and as soon as she had signed her name he opened the gate and waved me in. That was it – I was in America, starting my new life. I can't imagine something like that happening today.« His last memory of the day is of the two of them riding up 5th Avenue in a taxi on their way to the train station, amazed at the Christmas lights and the fantastic store displays.

He stayed with Sylvia and her parents in Princeton, New Jersey, for several days. »It was my first taste of America«, he reminisces. »Every single thing was new. The quiet wide streets, gas stations, and big stores with all of this merchandise piled high on the shelves. These are clichés, but they're no less true: how cheerful everyone seemed, how obliging. And the food! I would go to the drugstore counter and get a hamburger and a milkshake, whatever I wanted.«

He could scarcely take it all in. At the same time, he was getting restless, eager to get started with his new life. He had been dreaming his architectural future ever since Stuttgart, carrying it in his thoughts as the ship made its way across the ocean. Finally, right after New Year's, taking just his suitcase and twenty dollars he had borrowed, he boarded a Greyhound bus. In that suitcase he had a letter for Eero Saarinen from Gutbrod, and his project portfolio. He was on his way to Bloomfield Hills to present himself to Saarinen.

My father relishes the details – and ironies – of this trip, and he laughs at his own naivete. Getting off the bus on Woodward Avenue, he crossed the street and went directly to the Kingsley Inn. He had his own ideas about what fame meant. He thought he needed only to mention Saarinen's name and that everyone would know where to direct him. It was the first of many fantasies he would have to dispel. He walked around the lobby and restaurant asking people. »There was some kind of luncheon in progress«, he remembers. »Everyone was drinking cocktails. Nobody had any idea what I was talking about, who I was asking for.« Only at long last did he find someone who recognized the name and could point him in the right the direction. After asking to leave his suitcase at the desk, he crossed Woodward again and made his way on foot to Saarinen's office.

The man is a great believer in the idea that lives are shaped by significant events – events that come to seem »meant« in the light of their outcomes. In his memories this whole epoch, with its absent rancher, the renewed connection with Sylvia, and the first architectural contacts, is rich with such a heightened sense of destiny. He gets especially animated when he recounts the details of this trip.

To begin with, he didn't know then that Saarinen was a legendary night-owl. When he knocked at the office door, he was greeted by the courtly Willo von Moltke. Moltke, one of several Europeans at then at Saarinen's office, was the unofficial »man of protocol«, a host of sorts. He would have seen a young man with an accent and a portfolio under his arm. Eero, he said, was home sleeping, as he only worked late at night. The young man should come back after midnight – at around three in the morning would be ideal. He was deeply confused, but not by the thought of the late hour. It was that he had assumed that here, as in Europe, architects worked where they lived. Moltke was disabusing him of one of his guiding assumptions about architects.

Nowadays the whole business would seem unorthodox in the extreme, but the visitor wondered only how to pass the time. He walked a great deal, looked around. He had gotten the address of Saarinen's home, which was in walking distance, and he set off down Long Lake Road to find it, then walked by for a slow inspection. What a shock! It seemed that the great designer, his hero, the apostle of the »next thing« lived in a classic Georgian house. »This depressed me«, says my father. »I didn't know what to think. I saw this place and my heart sank.« He had a similar experience later when he went to see Cranbrook, designed by Eliel Saarinen (who was also the first director of the Art Academy). He expected some kind of progressive utopia, some vision of modernity, and found instead a tranquil retreat, with eclectic academic buildings that harked back to English public schools as well as to Eliel's Finnish romanticism. So far nothing was as he had imagined.

He returned to the Saarinen office in the middle of the night – a dramatic enough staging for what he sees as one of the fated moments of his early career. When he arrived he found Saarinen in conversation with a Japanese man. But Saarinen turned to welcome his visitor. He looked over the

11. Eero Saarinen.
12. Minoru Yamasaki.
13. Eliel Saarinen, Cranbrook School for Boys, Bloomfiled Hills, Michigan..
14. Private house of Eero Saarinen, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
15. Eero and Eliel Saarinen, General Motors Technical, Center, Warren, Michigan.

drawings and Gutbrod's letter of recommendation while the other man sat by. My father, fully focused on Saarinen, paid him little mind. He talked for some time with the designer he so admired. Saarinen, for his part, liked what he saw, and took Gutbrod's praises into account. But at that moment, he said, the outlook was not good. Work on the General Motors Tech Center had recently stopped; there were no openings. At this point Saarinen's guest, who had been looking and listening, joined the conversation. He unexpectedly asked if the young architect would consider coming to work at *his* firm, then in St. Louis. But he hadn't been in America for more than a few weeks – geography was still a blur. He heard »St. Louis« and he thought of jazz – he knew Armstrong's »St. Louis Blues«. Was the other architect just being polite? He understood that he was asking him to move to New Orleans. New Orleans! That that was just too far away, he thought. And he declined the offer. Saarinen's visitor was in fact Minoru Yamasaki, then on the verge of a major career breakthrough – and a few years later my father would be his chief designer. But that night his focus was entirely on Saarinen.

The story is amusing on several levels, but it takes on a great retrospective significance – almost an ironic significance – once we look at the larger trajectory of the career. The fact is that at that moment he was in the middle of the night, negotiating with the two central figures of his architectural apprenticeship, two men who would teach him a great deal, but who would also help him define through opposition his own vision and style.

Saarinen was in close contact with the principals at the firm of Perkins & Will in Chicago – they had collaborated on the design for the Crow Island School. He thought there might be a job there for the newcomer, but he also promised to make contact as soon as there was an opening in his firm. This was one of those headline moments that determine so many things about a person's career. Saarinen would prove true to his word, inviting my father back the following year, after his apprenticeship at Perkins & Will. And four years after that he would go to work for Yamasaki, who by that time would have established his office in nearby Birmingham.

My father took Saarinen up on his offer to make the necessary contact in Chicago. He got on the Greyhound bus the very next day and headed for Chicago to present himself to Perkins & Will. Everything was a first-time experience – the open farmland of Michigan, the big refineries of Gary, Indiana and the industrial sprawl of Chicago. It was here, decades before, that his father had for a time practiced law. I have a Xerox of his business card: Peter J. Birkert (sic), identifying himself as »Attorney and Counselor at Law«. My grandfather had come to America to study at Valparaiso and Columbia, and for a time had a law practice on Chicago's LaSalle Street. His son would have passed right by on his way to his first job.

To say that my father was living his life on a shoestring at this point would be a drastic understatement. He had used the last of his money to buy his bus ticket, and when he got to Chicago he had to ask to store his few things at the YMCA while he went to see about employment. His margin of safety was nonexistent. But he had good luck – and good word of mouth. After being interviewed by Larry Perkins and Phillip Will, the two principals of the firm, he was offered a job. »They told me I was hired and could start next week. They had no idea what things were like for me. I didn't want to tell them, so I just asked if I could start sooner. ›How soon?‹ they asked. I thought about my suitcase in that locker. ›Tomorrow?‹ I remember the look they exchanged. ›Fine‹, they said. But even that was a problem. I was embarrassed. Finally I swallowed my pride and told them that I didn't have enough for a room for the night. ›You have no money at all?‹ By this point they were roaring with laughter. They couldn't believe it. One of them reached into his pocket for his wallet – he ended up advancing me my first week's wages so I would have a place to stay.«

My father started at Perkins & Will in January of 1950, renting a boiler-room bed-space with a Latvian family in Chicago. He worked at the firm for 17 months, first as a draftsman, but very quickly picking up bigger design responsibilities. He had never imagined an office on such a scale – but it was the perfect place to learn the ropes. There he mingled for the first time with other young architects – Bob Jones, a young architect back from a European Fulbright took him under his wing – and started learning the American architectural lingo.

He remembers his first apprenticeship vividly, how quickly he had to scramble to translate what he had learned in Stuttgart into a non-metric framework, figuring out terms and specifications. He would borrow working drawings and the Sweets catalogue to study at night. Already he was living the double-life of the profession, switching from office work to other projects on his own.

Impressed by his work ethic and his thorough grounding in materials – the emphasis of the Technische Hochschule curriculum – his supervisors expanded his responsibilities, giving him the design of the United States Post Office Substation on LaSalle Street. It was basically a re-modeling job, offered in what he recalls was a »show us what you can do« spirit. They were obviously impressed by the results, for soon after that he was sent to nearby Rockford to work on the design for the Rockford Memorial Hospital project.

A great many things happened during what was chronologically a very brief interval. For one thing, my father and mother were married in the Princeton University Chapel on Christmas Day of 1950, with his old friend August serving as Best Man. There was a whirlwind quality to the whole event, which included the then almost-obligatory honeymoon in Niagara Falls. Reality only set in after, when they went to Chicago, Sylvia for the first time. After a few days in the city they moved and set up house in Rockford. After six months intensive work on the hospital – they had scarcely arranged their few belongings – the long awaited call came. »It was Eero – he said ›come now‹.« Gunnar understood that this summons marked the real beginning of his architectural career. »There was no question in my mind«, he says. »This was what I had been waiting for.«

The young couple had to move again, this time to an apartment in Pontiac, Michigan. Saarinen's office was just down the road in an old schoolhouse on Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills. My father's professional beginning coincided with the

beginning of a family as well. Sylvia was pregnant, and I was born in September, not long after their arrival.

Of course I don't remember much from these earliest years, though certain later images survive from the Pontiac years. How much is preserved memory, and how much is a composite from later? I can't be sure. I do hold onto a certain atmospheric impression. I recall my parents sitting together at the end of the day, enjoying their ritual of cocktails and conversation, each debriefing the other on events and encounters. For years, so it seems now, I heard the mysterious »Eero« sound woven through the evening report. »Eero ... Eero ... « I must have been two or three. I associate the strange word with the feeling of those times – conversations involving Eero were always very serious. Beyond that, I never paid much attention. But I was aware a few years later when it changed, becoming »Yama ... Yama ...«

There were other memories – real or imagined or suggested by stories I heard. I have an image of my father's drafting table in our apartment always called »Terraces«, how when I was very small he would set me down on that great expanse (though I can't believe he was changing my diaper). And I have impressions of him sitting at that table for many hours at night – the intensity of the light from the architect's lamp – though logic says I would have been sleeping.

Things were now very different for the young architect. On every front. If Perkins & Will had been a large firm made up almost exclusively of young American architects – at least that was his memory – Saarinen's office had a much more international profile – German, Polish, Australian, Japanese ... But for all that, my father's main impression was of a bastion of crew-cut conformity. »Everyone looked the same back then«, he says. »Grey flannel suit, button-down shirt, striped tie ... Remember, these were all Ivy League grads, and this was the uniform. I went the other way. I bought myself a blue flannel suit.« The tendency, to look different, to *be* different, never changed. I rejected it in my younger years. Desperate to be seen as an average American, one of the group, I resented my father's tendency to go against the current. Think of it – other fathers had flat-tops, my father had (for then) longish hair. Other families drove American cars – we had to have imports. My childhood world saw the psychology of the blue suit played out in every part of daily life.

The Saarinen firm was now Eero's alone. Eliel had died a short while back, though he remained a presence – very literally, in fact. My father remembers his first day in the Saarinen office. There was a meeting and working drawings were being spread out on the conference table. The newcomer was, of course, nervous; he didn't see the winks going around the room. When his new colleague, John Dinkeloo, signaled to him, he hurried to oblige. »You, young guy«, said Dinkeloo, »hand me that.« He was pointing to the mantle. My father reached for what looked like a vase. There was a silence around the table. Dinkeloo looked at him without cracking an expression. »We'll let Pappi hold the drawing«, he said at last. Another silence. Only then did it dawn on him: he was holding the urn filled with Eliel's ashes. Then he was mortified, but now he can laugh. »It was«, he says, »the closest I ever got to the master.«

The Saarinen office in those years was a hothouse environment for young architects who were looking for the next new thing. In the four years he was a designer at Saarinen's, my father worked alongside Dinkeloo, Robert Venturi, Spero Daltas, Charles Bassett, Charles Eames, Kevin Roche, Olav Hammerstrom, Anthony Lumsden, Glen Paulsen, Cesar Pelli, and Mark Jaroszewicz, and on and on – a strikingly international mix of talents. Out of that group Bassett and Paulsen would become long-term friends. Of course, in those years they were all still young men getting their first start, hardly well-known figures. But the atmosphere was energized. There was much talk of politics, many parties – some boisterous – to celebrate commissions and awards. This was the period of the MIT Dome, the Columbus Bank, Concordia College, and the General Motors Tech Center – he had different assignments on all of these projects.

It's hard to imagine a more stimulating course of instruction for a young architect – the jobs and his colleagues had him stretching in all directions. My father remembers that there was a steady stream of visitors through the office. Not only was it almost a mandatory stop for all the Fulbright scholars from Europe, but on any given day Buckminster Fuller, Kenzo Tange, Charles Eames, or Paul Rudolph might stop in for a look around. There is no question that the Saarinen office was the epicenter of modern architecture during these years.

But as the shock of the new gradually wore off, as the excitement was absorbed by the steady repetitions of office life, my father also found that Saarinen's way of approaching design problems, his way of thinking about design, was not his. Saarinen – working in the office – followed a highly refined process of idea selection and elimination. This played out in several ways. There is the well-known story of the Saarinen chair concept, where the architect more or less proclaimed: »There have been four-legged chairs, and three-legged chairs, and two-legged chairs. But the one-legged chair has not been done. We'll design a one-legged chair.« He ended up creating a line of one-legged chairs and tables for Knoll Furniture. The point was that he needed to create the conditions – the challenges – that would stimulate his best creative thinking. Nothing excited him more than the idea of the untried.

Where building-design was concerned, Saarinen asked his staff to generate what felt like endless (and sometimes unnecessarily obvious) solutions. For every part of every project, he would survey all of the available possibilities and then pick what he thought was the best. Over and over, refining, narrowing down, generating new variations from the best concept and then selecting from those. It was a kind of applied natural selection, a formalized survival of the fittest, the kind of rapid-fire filtering that is nowadays accomplished through computer imaging.

Saarinen was in many ways a deliberator. A favorite anecdote in our house – a true account – told of Saarinen being questioned on TV by a high-strung interviewer. Increasingly exasperated

16. Gunnar Birkerts, collapsible cart for Cantu international furniture design competition.
17. Sven Birkert's adjustable chair.
18. Pope chair. Ergonomic design overtones.
19. Eero Saarinen, War Memorial Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
20. Minoru Yamasaki Reynolds Metals Building, Southfield, Michigan.

by the architect's slow and thoughtful responses, the man finally burst out: »Mr. Saarinen, I wonder if you could speak a little faster?« Whereupon, so the story goes, Saarinen pulled out his pipe, slowly filled it, tapped the tobacco, fussed with his matches, and only then, when he had exhaled the first smoke, replied – slowly – »No, but I could say less.« Years later I sent the anecdote to the *Reader's Digest* – it was my first published writing.

My father spent his years at Saarinen's doing his part, taking great inspiration and instruction from his persistence and his insistence on innovative excellence, but also, as time went on, chafing against a process that was diametrically opposed to what would become his own mode of concept-generation – intuitive, unconscious, seeing the emerging solution as a kind of embryo concept ready for growth and elaboration.

Of course, the larger flowering of that methodology was still some years in the future. But the young architect was already starting to find channels for the creative impulses that office projects couldn't quite accommodate. One of these was furniture design, which for a time became a major after-hours preoccupation.

Even in his Stuttgart years my father had occasionally tried his hand at entering furniture competitions, submitting designs for the Museum of Modern Art's furniture design competition in the late 1940s.. His work was noticed. And in 1955, when he was at Saarinen's, he entered the First International Furniture Competition at Cantu, where he was awarded a 1st prize for his design of a collapsible serving cart, as well as folding chairs and tables. What made the honor especially gratifying was the fact that it had been judged by Gio Ponti, Sven Markelius and Alvar Aalto. Though models of the pieces were built in Italy, they were never produced. During this period, he also came up with prize-winning concepts for a chair, a desk, and an adjustable child's chair. The prototype of this last was a key prop of my younger years, and I have vivid memories of moving the platform from level to level as I grew. He was later asked by Baker Furniture of Grand Rapids to create designs for a line of desks and tables for office use (at the time the company was having great success marketing the contemporary residential furniture of Finn Juhl). That project never came to market. My father stopped designing furniture after he left Saarinen's office, but then, in the 1980s, his inventiveness would be challenged by a commission from the Detroit Archdiocese to create altar furniture for Pope Paul II's visit.

It's hard for me as my father's son and direct witness to square the more objective chronologies and descriptions with what I remember, and, more important, what has come down through the years as the family mythology, the larger thematic narrative. I want to trust this latter version, of course, not absolutely, but as a way of getting at the psychological importance that my father has granted to different phases and events. The story of arrival and the early Saarinen years, for instance, have always loomed large in this mythology, probably because they correspond to the first expression of ambition and desire; they represent the laying down of the career foundation. The Yamasaki years, while obviously still important, figure less in his reminiscences. Yamasaki is there as a counterpoint, offering a very different energy and approach to design, and he is, no question, the vital next step after Saarinen. But these years – 1956 to 1960 – are seen less as a baptism than as a stage preceding independence.

What is interesting, but hardly ever mentioned, is the fact that after leaving the Saarinen office in 1955, we moved to Milwaukee, where my father set himself up in partnership with architect Don Grieb. It was in some ways a logical next step, for he had worked extensively on the War Memorial Building while at Saarinen's office and already had many contacts in the city. Taking up Grieb's partnership offer was an early attempt at breakaway independence, but the relationship was dissolved after just one year. Maybe in keeping with his policy of not dwelling on mis-steps and mistakes, he does not make much place for this trial in his account of things, except to say that Yamasaki got wind of the fact that the Midwest scene did not seem to be suited to Gunnar's talents and ambitions, and that he wooed him to join his Birmingham office as Senior Designer. Yamasaki was at this point breaking with the Miesian orthodoxy and was very interested in developing metal technology along the lines of what Saarinen had been doing at the General Motors Tech Center. He had a chance to showcase his new interest in the design for the headquarters for the Reynolds Metals company in Detroit. He wanted my father on his team because he recognized that along with talent came the know-how acquired at the Saarinen office.

Though Gunnar had first met Yamasaki in the middle of the night in Eero's office, the two increasingly eminent architects had since grown apart, to the point where they no longer talked. In fact, now that they were both in the area and often in competition for the same jobs, the offices were more or less sealed from each other. This development came in the wake of the contentious London Embassy competition – which was ultimately awarded to Saarinen. »Competition« is an accurate designation.

We moved back to the Detroit area, to Birmingham, in 1956, where for the next four years the architect would absorb the more overtly creative approach of the Yamasaki office. These were dynamic years for the Japanese designer. He had become a kind of »folk hero«, written up with cover stories in *Time* and *Life*, which in those days amounted to a popular canonization. The office was then working on major design projects for Wayne State University, the Dahran Airport in Saudi Arabia, and the World Trade Center.

In the new firm, my father's professional profile began to change. During his tenure at Saarinen's office, he had kept a deliberately quiet profile, watching and absorbing, not looking to push for attention in what has been described as »a stable of thoroughbreds«. But now, older, with more experience behind him, and a more responsible position, he became a more assertive and visible presence. For one thing, Yamasaki often delegated him to meet with editors and members of the architectural press, in this way initiating relationships that would stand him in good stead over the years. Some of these same editors would soon enough be there to herald his emergence, helping to create the »buzz« that is so essential to further commissions.

But for the time being he was still a young architect learning his ropes, trying to accommodate himself to Yamasaki's more volatile approach. He found himself somewhat disillusioned. He had listened carefully – and approvingly – when Yamasaki had said he wanted to break out of the Miesian »box«, but more and more it was clear he did not so much want to break out as cover it with a decorative ornament. Yamasaki had discovered precast high-density concrete – »shock beton« – which allowed the creation of small parts. Yama got carried away, started in a new direction. The project of breaking the Miesian box was not working out. His young Senior Designer had a harder and harder time making peace with the architect's design ethos.

If he was not achieving complete fulfillment of his own growing creative urges on the jobs themselves, he began to find other outlets outside the office. This was the period when he bought an MGA and to race in local rallies and gymkhanas. But there was another, more important outlet for his energies (and frustrations) . He not only continued work on his furniture design, but with his colleagues Astra Zarina and Doug Haner, he worked on the international competition for the Cultural Center in the Belgian Congo. The three collaborated very smoothly and the team was awarded a Third Prize in this highly competitive run-off.

The association with Latvian-born Zarina (he had not known her before coming to Yamasaki's office) had a large long-term importance in my father's life. A few years later, after winning the prestigious Rome Prize, Zarina decided to establish herself in Italy. There she »discovered« the hilltop village Civita di Bagnoregio, in north of Rome, and persuaded a small group of friends, my father among them, to buy and restore houses there. After the mid-1970s, »Civita« would figure very importantly for him as a place of rescue and replenishment, but also as a site of artistic inspiration.

At that time, though, Michigan was still the practical center of things. The architect, at Yamasaki's office, was moving into what might be called a transitional phase. The customary moonlighting work of competitions continued (with Zarina and Haner he also entered the international competition for Ankara Technical University in 1959), but as he emerged into greater visibility he also began to be approached independently by clients. There was Ed Haley, our one-time neighbor, who wanted my father to design his new funeral home. And Detroit-area financier Alan Schwartz was interested in having him design a summer residence. Contacts proliferated. There was a major overture from local developer Morton Skolnick – he was looking to build Lafayette Tower, a large-scale urban apartment building, his first high-rise.

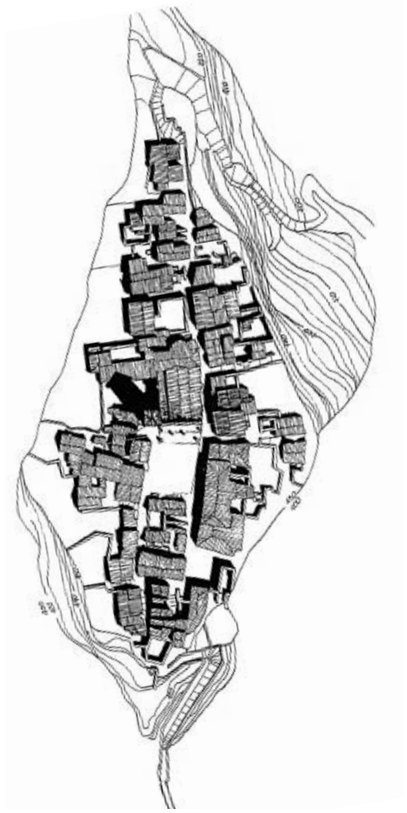
The times seemed auspicious for another try at independence. With Haley, Schwartz, and Skolnick as clients, or potential clients, my father and Frank Straub, another principal from the Yamasaki office, left to establish the firm of Birkerts & Straub, Architects. It was not in all respects a smooth departure. The architect recalls announcing his decision to leave over lunch with his boss. Yamasaki claimed to understand, but he wanted to keep some architectural contact. He offered to help by sending along possible clients, but his head designer was dead set on making his own way. He refused point-blank, thus offending Yamasaki, who then would not speak to him for a long time.

Hearing the story, I was not surprised. Either by the assertion of independence, or principle, or by the brashness of this action. It has, along with impatience and a quick temper, always been a part of the man's character, but it was especially pronounced when he was younger. If the tendencies eased over the years, they did not die out. Certainly they surface in what I think of as the »Philip Johnson story«, which dates from a much more recent time. As my father tells it, he and Johnson, who were aesthetically deeply at odds over the issue of Postmodernism, met once – and only once – for lunch. The talk at some point turned to the question of metaphor, and Johnson, exasperated over something, said: »What do you mean *meta-phor*? What *is* metaphor?« To which the younger man replied, once again burning his bridges: »If I say ›you look like hell‹ that's metaphor!« In fact it's simile, not metaphor, but I think Johnson got the point.

Looking over a biographical chronology of the career, I am surprised to see that the Birkerts & Straub partnership, established in 1960, was terminated just two years later, making way for Gunnar Birkerts & Associates. Birkerts & Straub figures much more significantly in my recall. This, I'm sure, has to do with my own moving into awareness, becoming alert to events in the larger life of the family. Certainly it was a matter of daily discussion at the dinner table. There was a general air of excitement, a sense of risks being taken, of adventure. Here was our father starting his own business, having his own office. The small upstairs space in a Birmingham building (within a mile or so of Yamasaki) is still vivid to me more than forty years later, the stairs, the smells, the drafting tables and the area where models were built. My sister Andra (who is three years younger than me) and I would go along with him on weekends, and Dad would let us pick a few things from the small supply room while he attended to his business. There were hard 4-H pencils in tin boxes and tablets of yellow legal paper. We both felt proud and proprietary. And then there were the ceremonial occasions when the office got a new client. On those nights he would come in from the garage with a bag from Howard Johnson's. Ice cream. This ritual went on for some years. We commemorated the Schwartz commission, and the Lafayette East apartments, and later the Marathon Oil office building and the Lillibridge School addition, and the Savings and Loan Bank in Royal Oak.

These were all area commissions, and while we loved the treats, and the sense that good things were happening, that the new business was doing well, we were less excited by another ritual – the Sunday drive. These expeditions were undertaken casually, usually with assurances that we would just take a short spin, but they always ended up with my sister and me bored in the backseat of the car, trying to amuse ourselves while my mother read in the front seat and the architect paced out or inspected the site – of Lillibridge, of the orchard in Northville ...

This period also introduced Ann Arbor into our geographical picture. In 1959, on the strength of



21, 22. Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy.
23. Gunnar Birkerts with his MG racer.
24. Gunnar Birkerts with a student at the University of Oklahoma.
25. Gunnar Birkerts in conversation with Bruno Zevi in the American Academy in Rome.

his work for Saarinen and Yamasaki, as well as his success in important competitions, my father was named a Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan School of Architecture – just the beginning of a decades' long affiliation, which would see him promoted through the various levels to full professorship and, much later, the first Thomas S. Monaghan Distinguished Professor, and finally, in 1990, Professor Emeritus. There was a stint at the American Academy in Rome – which he still views as a great period of personal renaissance. He was also invited on two separate occasions to teach in residence, in one case as the first Plym Distinguished Professor at the University of Illinois, and later as the first Goff Professor at the University of Oklahoma – in both cases he inaugurated these professorships. He looks back on both residencies as periods of creative rejuvenation.

In the early years, he drove to Ann Arbor two days a week to teach his class, always leaving time for his ritual of swimming laps in the university pool. Family visits became more frequent in 1963 when he was given the commission to design the University Reformed Church. Then we made regular Sunday pilgrimages, my sister and I still waiting for long periods in the back seat, but now looking forward to a lunch at Dominick's, a Greek restaurant over by the architecture school.

For whatever reason, he did not discuss his teaching life often – and I was sometimes surprised to remember that he kept up this parallel vocation. My sense is that while he enjoyed the actual in-class work (remember that his mother was a revered teacher in Riga for fifty years), he felt removed from academic culture. He did not go to faculty meetings, and took no role in departmental affairs. He made it clear that he was there as a practitioner. At various points, I remember, his detached style gave rise to grumbling among his teaching colleagues – as well it might have – and he would report this with a certain satisfaction. He took it as evidence of the special status of those teachers who also »do«. Nevertheless, he was often invited to lecture at colleges and universities around the country, and was regarded as a popular teacher at Michigan. In 1971 the National Student Organization honored him with its Tau Sigma Delta gold medal.

But there was a deeper, more important tension, which grew more pronounced in later years, especially during the heyday of Postmodernism in the 1980s and early 1990s. This architect has never been a theoretician or intellectualizer. Though he devours architectural journals with single-minded zeal and knows both the history and the current scene with a practitioner's grasp of detail, he does not have an interest – or belief in – theory. At one level, he sees it as the revenge of the frustrated, those who can only build in their heads; he deems it pretentious, impractical, and a dead-end. In his decades of teaching, he was resolutely hands-on, teaching skills – the practicum – and then later, as his own approach to design changed, after he discovered the power of the intuitive subconscious, *process*. His mission was to teach his students how to think like architects, how to build up a reservoir of content, and then how to begin tapping it to discover the best appropriate solutions to the problems imposed by the commission.

The intuitive/synthetic breakthrough was still some years in the future. At this point, through the 1960s and into the 1970s, he was still working with versions of what he calls (and taught) as the 1-2-3 approach, using drawing and reactive response to generate ideas and refinements. The hand draws, the eye sees and evaluates, and then coaches the hand to make corrections and adjustments – a process that can be repeated until a solution emerges. The embryonic sketches that became so important after the mid-1970s did nor exist yet. Design was still significantly a matter of making a drawing, responding to it, and then modifying as needed. Over and over. The process was generative, but not as intuitive as what would come later.

Even with this approach, which he now sees as necessary for that stage of his evolution, but limited in its ultimate reach, my father was getting a good deal of attention in the architectural press for his bold design solutions. The Schwartz residence, for instance, received multiple awards (from *Architectural Record*, and the AIA, among many others) and the Royal Oak Bank and the University Reformed Church were also honored.

But the most important recognition – at least from the vantage of retrospect – was conferred in 1964 by *Progressive Architecture* magazine and its editor John Dixon. I have a Xerox of the announcement, which reads, in part: »Next month, for the first time within recent memory, *Progressive Architecture* will devote a substantial part of an issue to the personal and professional biography of one man.« An extraordinary singling-out of an architect not yet forty: to have a leading journal of the profession, one read by all architects, put the spotlight on his emerging career. The characterizing adjectives were strong, and in many ways defining. The designer was called »an experimenter«, a »maverick, even something of a heretic«, a man »whose ideas definitely do not run in the main channels of architectural thinking«. These were, no question, heady times. I was especially pleased to connect the word »maverick« with the popular TV show of the same name. *That* felt like real praise.

Though obviously no life breaks neatly into chapters – there are always overlaps and continuities – the architect's career does seem to follow a certain large scale pattern. His time of apprenticeship and growing independence was clearly bounded by the years with Saarinen and Yamasaki; he broke into his own with the founding of Birkerts & Straub. And though that partnership lasted for only two years, the momentum was carried on, with Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, through a series of increasingly visible buildings in the Detroit area and the Midwest. The phase of emergence culminated when the firm received the commission for the design of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis in 1967. That project then announced a higher profile and a new range of important commissions followed. An invitation to be Architect in Residence at the American Academy in Rome in the Spring of 1976 accelerated an emerging shift in his design process and led to a deep reconsideration of form.

But before the Federal Reserve Bank and the Academy – before this reconsideration could take place – were years of growth and consolidation.

Projects during this period include, after the Lafayette East apartments, the Lillibridge School addition, the Marathon Oil Building, the University Reformed Church in Ann Arbor, the South Wing of the Detroit Arts Institute, and the Fisher Administrative Center at the University of Detroit.

The pattern of local focus was broken with the commission for the Lincoln Elementary School in Columbus, Indiana, sometimes called »the town that architecture made famous« or »the Athens of the prairie«. This project arrived by the special invitation of Irvin Miller, well-known CEO of the Cummins Engine Corporation. Miller had the idealistic ambition of turning his company town into a design Mecca, for the sake of beauty, but also as a way of fostering an educated community culture that would in time become a resource for the enlightened corporation he sought. To this end he invited a number of the country's leading architects – including Cesar Pelli, Kevin Roche, Richard Meier, and I. M. Pei – to design buildings in the city. Miller knew my father from the Saarinen years, when he had done a major part of the interior design development for the Union Bank & Trust Company. Still, for Miller to have bet on Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, by any standard still a young firm, shows how their reputation was growing.

Columbus would prove good to my father over the years – he calls it, along with Corning, New York, his »favorite city«, at least in terms of hospitality to his design. The Lincoln School project required him to synthesize a complex set of constraints relating to placement, energy conservation, and handicapped services. He worked closely with people in the community. »There were no heroics«, he recalls, »no acting like the master.« The relationships were respectful and engaged, and paved the way for other jobs. The Lincoln project was followed later by an invitation, not from Miller but from another group, to design St. Peter's Lutheran Church. And when the time came to expand the Lincoln School with its finite geometry, no architect search was attempted. In Corning, the design for the Museum of Glass had captured the imagination of the community, and working relations with the city had been so smooth, that the relationship was renewed with the separate commission to design the Municipal Fire Station.

Irwin Miller was impressed with the final design for the Lincoln Elementary School, its careful use of space, its subtle landscaping, and overall innovative matching of design to practical uses. A man with many connections and much influence, he became instrumental in getting Gunnar Birkerts & Associates its next large-scale commission. This was for the Tougaloo College master plan in Tougaloo, Mississippi. The college was founded out of a strong Civil-Rights-era initiative to create forward-looking education for black students in the South. As a committed social activist, Miller had a strong interest in the project. »Those were very intense times«, my father recalls. »School integration created a lot of unrest in the South. We architects were seen as part of the reform, and we were often challenged. Though we were not Freedom Marchers, our presence in the company of black faculty brought out a certain public aggression.«

Full implementation of the Tougaloo design would have offered a large-scale modular solution that followed a distinctively urban scheme. A library and two dormitories were ultimately built, but the overall plan became a casualty of changing social conditions, mainly the large-scale movement of black students into integrated state schools in the mid-1960s.

The Irwin Miller connection underscores the vital importance of the progressive-minded client in this architect's career. »Irwin Miller had a passion for architecture«, he recalls, »he believed in aesthetic value and saw the architect as an artist. That was exciting. And where there is a dynamic like that, where relations are good, it helps the design process. Ideas come better when there is a sense of welcome.«

The next, very important architect-client collaboration began a short time later when he was contacted by Hugh Galusha, the ambitious and progressive-minded President of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. Here my father found not just what proved to be a meeting of the minds, but, as time went on, a genuine friendship. But first, of course, they had to take each other's measure and go through the stages of establishing trust.

The deep understanding between architect and client is a key determinant of the eventual success or failure of any project, but as this architect has learned over his long career, the more artistic or venturesome the design, the more vital it is that there be a shared vision. The convergence does not usually happen on its own. It requires the architect, especially in the first contacts, to use all of his intuitive faculties, working as psychologist and salesman, coaching the client (who is often initially conservative – fiscally and artistically) to see the project in fresh ways, overcoming resistances while creating assurances.

For years I listened as my father debriefed my mother at the end of the day, going over the blow-by-blow account of important meetings, often talking in terms of his feelings and intuitions, detailing how he picked up degrees of receptivity or obstruction during the course of a presentation, how a certain important member of the board had to be brought around. The trick, he always said, was not to try to strong-arm the individual, but to seduce him, bring him around by degrees, educating him in stages until he actually saw that his own thinking was present in the concept proposal.

Presentations have always been emotionally-charged ordeals for him. He has stopped short of claiming that he could actually read the auras of the people in the room. But he often tells about tuning into the body language – how a person holds himself or shakes hands – as well as to the nuances of eye-contact; not surprisingly, he usually claims he was confirmed in his intuitions after the fact.

One surprise that did come his way, though through a different kind of mis-reading, was at the hands of Hugh Galusha, who would become not just an important client but also a trusted friend. Galusha had a strong mandate. The Federal Reserve was looking to change its public face, to de-emphasize the »fortress« character of its big institutional buildings. Galusha had asked Ellis Kaplan, an architect friend of his, to draw up a list of the five best contemporary architects. Four of the

names on that list were widely known: I. M. Pei, Aldo Giurgola, Harry Weese, and Ben Thompson. The other firm was Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, which at that point was a very small, six-person office.

When Galusha and his group came to Birmingham for an on-site interview, my father was worried. »We didn't have the office presence«, he says. »I thought the best thing would be to drive out to Ann Arbor where the University Reformed Church was under construction. But unfortunately it was winter and when we got there things looked pretty uninspiring. The poured concrete forms were discolored by the application of pre-heated additives. This was not the image of the building I was hoping to present. I saw this at a glance. There was no point in pretending otherwise. So I was open with Hugh – I explained the situation. At the same time I was sure that we wouldn't be getting the job.«

He was wrong. Not long after, Galusha called to tell him that Gunnar Birkerts & Associates would be doing the bank design. He was overjoyed, but also mystified. It was not until years later, when they had become friends, that Galusha talked about that afternoon. He confided then how impressed he had been by the straightforwardness, by the would-be architect's frank admission of concern about the presentability of the Reformed Church; he said that he found in their conversations an honesty and willingness of admit a mistake, qualities that he admired greatly. It was enough to make the difference.

For my father to have given up hope at that moment is unusual. It goes against his basic profile, which follows certain precepts. As he has often said, he believes »what's done is done; forget the bad, the unpleasant; always look ahead.« He is a self-styled proponent of the power of optimism. I remember once when we were talking about flying – I was confessing my anxieties about hurtling through space – he said that he never gives it a second thought. Whenever a flight gets bumpy, he explained, when he feels people around him getting jittery, he makes it a point to put everything out of his mind, to concentrate on sending positive thoughts to the pilot's cabin. By the same token, he has said more than once that the best way to go (were it not for the fates of the others involved) would be mid-flight, at 600 miles an hour, 30,000 feet – instantly.

As a result of this meeting of minds – his and Galusha's – he found himself arrived at a whole new architectural echelon. The Federal Reserve Bank was by far the biggest commission of his career; it was a highly visible building that would, not surprisingly, make him a highly visible architect not only in America, but in Europe and Japan as well. The notoriety – the »buzz« – escalated beyond all expectation when the design was submitted and accepted. The mammoth structure would be built according to the principles of the suspension bridge, with the offices in effect suspended from huge catenary cables. Aside from its revolutionary structure and its visual elegance – the great sweep of the cables was exhilarating – the concept also satisfied the original mandate. The storage vaults were relegated to the underground, while the people were raised up off the ground, into the light. It was a full-scale separation of the Fed's human and material wealth. The architectural press was by and large captivated by the innovations, and the building was widely publicized. But it also had its critics, *New York Times* writer Paul Goldberger among them. This was, remember, the era of the counter-culture, when big was bad and all government initiatives were regarded with suspicion. All monumentality, whatever its purpose, was for the Establishment and against the people.

The years that Gunnar Birkerts & Associates worked on the bank were years of great growth – the office expanded to 35, the largest it had ever been. The architect had become a very busy man, designing, teaching, giving lectures, and presiding over the new projects that started coming in. In that period the office worked on the IBM Corporate Center and the Houston Contemporary Arts Museum – both very sleek, »minimalist« buildings– the Dance Instructional Facility in Purchase, New York, and then, soon after, the University of Michigan Law School addition, the IBM office building in Southfield, Michigan, and the Duluth Public Library. Gunnar Birkerts & Asssociates was in the limelight, with very gratifying attention from the press: many of the buildings not only received important awards, but were given cover exposure in the major architectural journals.

Interestingly, the leap to intuitive design – and the corresponding move to a more organic conception of appropriate solution – had not yet announced itself. As my father put it recently, »I later went back through my papers to see if there was any kind of conceptual sketch of the Fed. I was shocked. There was nothing. The same with Lincoln – nothing!« And this is from a man who saves all of the evidence, who archived (and eventually donated to the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan as well as the Latvian National Library) the thousands and thousands of sketches that would come. But they hadn't come just yet. As daring and innovative as the designs of this period were, they were still significantly the products of the conventional process, with ideas generated through the 1-2-3 – brain, hand, eye – method. The architect was still building momentum for the leap which, when it came, was surprising and transforming.

The mid-1970s brought a major new phase in my father's life and architecture, a phase marked by a surge of creative inspiration. The geometric/orthogonal approach now gave way to a very different search for solution, and as this happened the design process itself seemed to change. Mainly, he found that he was trusting his intuition much more than he had before, allowing the subconscious mind to absorb the constraints of the project and help shape the design. He began to speak in terms of an »embryonic synthesis«, a visual intuition which even in its first sketchy versions could be seen to contain the DNA of the final design. This suggests that the visual intelligence was more confident of the correspondences between form and function, and more willing to think expressively right from the threshold. What he discovered and confirmed was that concepts which emerged from this subconscious process were very often also logistically informed – that he could »check the math« and find that they worked. Hand in hand with this shift came the architect's expanded notion of metaphor, the arresting thematic signature that put a new spin

on his long-held ideas about architecture as appropriate solution. His intuitive synthesizing seemed to work readily with symbol and analogy, as if these were part of the collective inheritance.

It is hard to account for a change so major and decisive. I think of the documented transformations in the work of artists and composers, shifts so striking as to become tag-identifications, like Picasso's »blue period«. Often these take place in later life and represent a full commitment to the premises that underlay earlier explorations of form and content. Change is not surprising, but dramatic change is. In my father's case, where the arc of development was so compressed, it's tempting to search for factors and influences. Though I'm well aware that this is mainly guesswork, I would offer the following. First, there is the time of life – his age – combining with the momentum of his own architectural development. I mean, the man had worked intensely since the early 1960s on innovative, boundary-testing conceptions while still working with the basic orthogonal rule-book. After so many years he found himself looking to new challenges; he felt his method changing, his reach extending. Certainly the structural adventurousness of the Federal Reserve Bank suggests a determined push against the norms. As does the 1969 design, the second, for the Corning Public Library, which shows clearly – metaphorically – the impulse to go against the symmetry of the perfect circle, to crack the shell and hatch something new. The original proposal had the structure serving as a literal bridge over the Chemung River. It was the first time Birkerts had segmented the line, going against the linear orthodoxy.

Second, perhaps, is the architect's growing trust in the power of the subconscious mind. The impulse in that direction was present early on, as far back as his early years with Saarinen, where, much as he admired the results, he couldn't quite make peace with the process of elimination procedure that Saarinen required. It seemed like an enormous expenditure of energy, making concrete what the visualizing mind could often see for itself. The creative restlessness that resulted pulled him toward Yamasaki, and then, when that firm's approach seemed too confining, drove him to found his own office.

Even so, this trust – belief – in the subconscious was slow in developing. The architect needed the confidence that comes from the successful completion of a number of challenging design problems. Maybe he also needed some of the explosive psychological and emotional energies of midlife. My father was just turning fifty, the classic age of male unrest, more or less the age when his one-time friend and almost-client John DeLorean resigned his high position at General Motors and went off like Don Quixote to try to design the dream-car that would bear his name.

The architect staged his own dramatic mid-life statement, but in a whimsical spirit. When his 50th birthday arrived, he disappeared from the office, leaving only a few cryptic, slightly ominous-sounding notes. Everything was arranged for maximum dramatic effect. He and my mother flew off to a Caribbean Island, telling no one. Here he laughs. »The joke was on me. We came back after a week and I was braced for a big reaction. I had no idea what I'd find. I half-expected that there would be police at the house, looking for clues. But no, we got home and there was nothing. I went to the office, expecting to find everyone biting their nails. They barely looked up from their drafting boards. ›Hello, Gunnar‹ ...«

His real mid-life transition, his bid for a fresh departure, happened on paper. It was first signaled in his design for the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, Finland (the building was never finally built). Here he expressed most fully his long-standing admiration for Alvar Aalto. This was the one master he had accepted unconditionally, and who even now he calls his guiding light. »When I am in search of inspiration«, he says, »I often say to myself, I wonder what Aalto would have done?« One of the first trips out of the country that my father and mother took together, back in the early 1960s, was to Finland – it was an architectural pilgrimage. He needed the connection. »Everyone in America accepted the other great masters – Mies, Wright, Gropius and Corbu – but they hadn't found their way to Aalto.« The devotion has not really diminished over time. Indeed, his library shelves have more books about this man's work than any other.

The U.S. Embassy project was a return to a familiar landscape and atmosphere. With this project we see the first of the conceptual sketches, the densely drawn emblems that contain all of the ingredients of the final plan. What is remarkable is that these visual embryos, while synthesizing all of the requirements of the building-to-be, arrive not through rational superimposition, but from within, via intuitive expression – inspiration. They testify that the unconscious mind has been processing the necessary elements, combining and recombining possibilities, filtering and modifying, until at some trigger point a visual insight arrives.

Paradoxically, the project that triggered this more »inspired« version of creativity itself had the most pragmatic mandate. As one of the closest Western edifices to the Soviet Union, the Helsinki Embassy would be, among other things, a surveillance site. But as technology gives, it also takes away. Advances in satellite systems made this key intended function redundant, and funds were allocated elsewhere. The legacy for the architect was his trust in a new design procedure.

My father has since learned to trust the process absolutely, finding every time that the intuition is confirmed by retrospective analysis. And this, he quickly points out, is something that CAD design can never accomplish, no matter how sophisticated the programming. For him, intuitive synthesis trumps procedural solution every time. It is the only approach, too, that can make a place for the non-rational metaphor – the visual or structural theme that confers a deeper identity on the project. This element is not in any objective sense part of the »given«, though in fact it is discovered there, often deeply embedded in the intended function or use of the building.

Speaking about intuitive design, as the architect often does, he is careful to emphasize certain constraints – lest anyone think that the process is simple, uninformed, or somehow just »magical«. He insists that the appropriate response can never come before the complex requirements have been exhaustively researched and then internalized – everything from site specifications to functional needs. The subconscious works with the totality of the information and if there is new input from the client it can change everything, forcing a fresh synthesis. When I ask him to explain the role of the architect in the process, he offers a concrete illustration to make his point. »Think of a design competition«, he says. »You have ten invited architects synthesizing the same variables of a given project, and without fail they arrive at ten different answers.« The reason? Each architect assigns a different relative value to the input, one stressing locale, another focusing on lighting requirements. The training and philosophy of the designer is a major factor – but over and above everything else is the influence of strong personal expression. »Architecture at the highest level is an expressive art – there's no getting around it.«

His design process for the Helsinki Embassy (1975) was a strong outward sign of the new approach. But the direction and acceleration of the transformation were determined by another set of influences. The first was a new client, Tom Buechner, who would be another of the instigating figures in his creative life. From Buechner came the commission for the Corning Museum of Glass. This was the rarest client, the most compelling project. Buechner, himself a painter and a connoisseur of the arts, gave the gift of license: he wanted an original, a showpiece building. The pitch could not have come at a better point in my father's career. For at this same time the American Academy offered him a 6-month Architect in Residence position. It would prove to be one of the most creative and spiritually-enriching periods in his life, a personal renaissance he would forever after associate with all things Italian. Rome allowed him the breakthrough design of the Corning Museum, the first full expression of the new methodology. The successes of this period were honored, as he sees it, by his winning the Brunner Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1981, the citation of which read: »One of the most talented architects in this country today. His works display a rare combination of craftsmanship and poetic spirit.«

Italy has been both a literal and a symbolic presence for my father. Literally, there is the whole story of Civita di Bagnoregio, the hilltown in Lazio where in 1967 he bought a small house that was really more ruin than house, and which he had slowly restored over a period of years. The connection there – for both purchase and restoration – was his old friend from the Yamasaki office, Astra Zarina, who after her Rome Prize year had decided to make Italy her home, and who had been the first to buy a place in this village she had come upon.

»Civita« (as it was called from the first) was much discussed in our family, though for a long time the reality was hard to fathom. The town is accessible only by footbridge, with donkeys used for larger transport – it was (and still mainly is) an image straight out of the Middle Ages. I remember that when we stopped off there once during a family trip to Europe, we mainly stared at crumbled walls and gaping patches of sky. What a shock it was to return years later to find a finished house with tile roof and solidly mortared walls perching there on the edge of a cliff.

Civita became his symbolic anchor-point. It represented retreat and renewal, »la dolce vita«, and a link back to his Academy stay and the inspiration of the Corning Museum, which had emerged with all ten-digits intact from the embryo sketch and inventively merged the practical program needs with the metaphoric possibilities inherent in the properties of glass. Built to display glass artworks, it aspired to be its own kind of glass artwork, making inventive use of faceting, reflectivity, and a tension between the non-linear (though not quite molten) shape and the fundamental linearity of facet lines.

The Academy interlude was retrospectively important for another reason – this was my father's first meeting with the Italian architecture critic Bruno Zevi, who came to hear his lecture presentation and initiated a contact that would last until Zevi died in January of 2000. Zevi was a powerful force in European – and international – architecture, combining a fierce polemical style with a zealous conviction about the mission of Modernism, which was increasingly toward Organicism. Their meeting was a vital, and creatively timely, convergence of sensibilities, for it was also just in this period that Postmodernism was gaining ascendancy in the architecture world (and in the culture in general), and decisive splits and alliances were taking place on all sides. Zevi saw an ally, an American architect who rejected the postmodern pastiche of modes, the imposition of stylistic tags from the outside, and who kept faith with his Modernist origins, even as he changed his process and moved in his design toward an Organicism of the sort Zevi admired – not of flowing lines, necessarily, but involving a rejection of right angles and symmetry.

Gunnar has expressed some of his ideas of the time in a kind of manifesto that he called »The Next Architecture«. He wrote: »When we follow the process of organic synthesis we create expressive architecture. As we respond to space needs we do it without subjecting the solution to inflexible geometry. It is still geometry, but not orthogonal or circular; it is polygonal. Based on polygonal geometry, it is free-form, not organic. Polygonal architecture allows us to express space in form without compromising functional or aesthetic considerations. Polygonal form does not ›follow function‹, but it is expressive of function. The difference is that the form that follows function is a wrapping skin around function; the form that is arrived at through organic synthesis responds to both interior and exterior considerations and is thus expressive of both.«

Zevi sent an enthusiastic note from his journal, the internationally influential *L'architettura*, in 1984: »Long live *your* ›Next Architecture‹! Viva la *tua* ›Architettura Futura‹!«

Zevi would soon enough be influential in getting the architect involved in a series of ambitious urban initiatives in Florence, Turin and Venice – projects which inaugurated what was for him a very important »Italian phase«, but which did not, for various reasons bound up with upheavals in the Italian economy, come to fruition. The house in Civita remains to this day a much-loved place, and a symbol of the first promise of that period; but it is also, alas, a reminder of possibilities that were never realized.

My father keeps a small album of photographs from his time at the Academy, many of which were taken on the night of his talk. These are mostly

group shots, people caught in conversation in garden settings and in front of banquet tables. In these photos he is almost always in the middle of some polemic, leaning forward, gesturing with his hands (he is by nature a gesturer). In some he is talking to Astra, in others with Zevi. Though he is just fifty, he looks younger – thin, with longish hair, his intensity and focus making he wonder if he suspected then that the Academy was one of the high point periods of his life, and this evening possibly the peak moment of his stay.

What happened to the architect in his 50s can be explained at some level as a creative transformation, deep-seated and long in the making, the kind of artistic emergence that cannot happen where there is no foundation prepared. Productive intuition can only happen when there is great confidence and a good deal of absorbed craft and knowledge. The synthetic power that finds solutions does not ignore the analytic or the rational – they are always seen to be present – but it does not always follow their prescribed path. Rather, the architect searches for an expressive and uniquely right artistic solution, trusting that decades of training will support choices that may arrive through a kind of visualization.

This might be the place to remark on the extraordinary importance music has had in the architect's creative process. Though his musical passions have changed over the years – from deep immersion in Bach and the masters of counterpoint to the Romantics, to Sibelius – the intensity of listening has been a constant. I have never had the sense that he uses the sound as some background pattern, to soothe or distract. Rather, it is for him an immersion in dynamic form – and in that way like architecture. He is very susceptible to the composer's emotion as well as the structure, the inner design. More particularly, he was fascinated – and stirred – by the way certain composers used sound on behalf of images. He cites Respighi's *Pines of Rome* and *Church Windows*, as well as Moussorgski's *Pictures at an Exhibition* as examples.

My father and I have discussed the role of the unconscious in design for many years now. He has described in various ways the moment of the breakthrough, how intuition can find an answer to a problem only after all of the variables have been absorbed. I can't help but see certain important links to the writing process as I experience it. For me, too, there is only a certain distance that systematic thinking can take me with any project. The basic line of sense – the argument, the exposition – is of course determined by logical sequence. But the other organization, what I think of as the necessary shape, needs to come through some thematic recognition, and this requires more than intellect. Meaningful form is felt rather than thought. I'm confident that my father would second me here. He might agree, too, that it is precisely for this reason that architecture is an art. The building primarily serves practical ends, no question, but it also reaches for meaning, for a thematic resonance that enriches the experience of its users, and this is where the more elusive side of creativity enters in. How does the architect find the best answer to the practical program and then fashion that solution into a deeper aesthetic statement? It would seem that the fashioning cannot come later, cannot be added on, but must be part of the process from the very beginning, suggesting that a deep imaginative connection is essential.

The obvious question to be asked here is how the arrival of digital technology – of computer-assisted design – might affect this, the artistic, part of the process. Does the high-speed implementation of variations – design proceeding along the »what if we do this?« lines – short-circuit the visionary originating process that generates the best design? The revolution is too recent for the results to be in and the assessments to be made. But it may be that at some point in the future pencil and paper will be seen as a radical innovation.

Thinking as a writer about the creative process of the architect helps me to understand the next phase of the career, in particular his deep-rooted disagreement with the reigning *ism* of this cultural period – Postmodernism. For a long time I believed that the main reason for his opposition was simply his rejection of the herd mentality that fuels most fads. He has always derided group-think. If something is suddenly popular, the odds are that he'll find a way to dismiss it. Growing up, I had the feeling that the neighbors and the kids in school were somehow all on one team together, while we were a team of our own – we lived in the auto capital of the world and he insisted on driving foreign-made cars.

The other obvious reason, I believed, was that he found the visual aesthetic irritating. From the first, his own style, whether he was designing a piece of furniture or an office building, has favored economy and formal elegance, a repudiation of ornament or decoration for its own sake. And certainly Postmodernism, as practiced by Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, and their mainly East Coast cohort of followers, was a riot of add-on decorative effects – of details applied because they were referentially interesting rather than structurally essential.

But the more I contemplate this breakthrough phase, announced most strikingly in the design of the Corning Glass Museum, and later carried on in projects like the University of Iowa Law Building, the Ferguson residence, or the Kemper Art Museum, the more I see that the difference is also philosophical. What underlay these solutions was a search for an inevitable expressive form, one that is an absolute fusion of form and meaning. For the architect this meant the discovery, or creation – or *invention* – of an utterly singular building, a building perfectly responsive to its program: one-of-a-kind architecture arrived at through the experienced visualizing and synthesizing capacities of the architect. This, as the architect explains, is why he has always been happiest working with a few select commissions rather than at a faster-paced (and more lucrative) rotation. He favors the term »appropriate architecture« for what he envisions, but to me that has always seemed too modest a description, not suggestive enough of the leap of insight required to fuse all of the elements together into a harmonic whole.

Whatever is the best characterizing label, the point is that this is design from within, pledged to uniqueness, whereas the postmodern ethos has always been the reverse, treating the history of the art as a kind of archive and applying effects as needed from the outside. Postmodernism adapts architectural quotation as an intellectual exercise – interesting, witty, but also at a fundamental remove from necessity.

26. Design presentation in Novoli, Italy.
27. Gunnar Birkerts with client Thomas Monaghan.
28. Gunnar and Sylvia Birkerts, 1990.
29. Pastoral Latvian landscape.

This was, I think, the substance of his diatribe against Postmodernism – this along with a suspicion of what was clearly a powerful in-group influence-peddling, most clearly exemplified in the competition for the Portland Building in Portland, Oregon, when of the six invited finalists, all prominent architects, Gunnar Birkerts was deleted by juror Philip Johnson (»Not enough Postmodernism«, he supposedly remarked), who then added to the list his protégé Michael Graves, a relative unknown more gifted at fanciful sketches than the kind of structural understanding essential for creating a major building in real space. Graves was then declared the winner.

For my father, then, there was the bitter irony that his creative breakthrough should have come when it did, at a point when the winds of fashion were blowing strongly in the other direction. This meant several things. For one, commissions big enough to sustain an office were harder to come by – more and more prospective clients were lured by the publicized stars of the day. For another, time had passed and a new generation of editors and tastemakers had come to power at the journals, many of them eager to broadcast what they saw was the new next thing. Gunnar Birkerts & Associates, which had for many years seen cover after cover devoted to its latest buildings, was no longer making the splash it once had.

It was at this point that Italy became so important. My father's residency at the American Academy in Rome had led to the friendship and endorsement of Zevi, and this now bore fruit in a series of challenging commissions – in Florence, Turin, and Venice. First, he was invited to join a small group of international architects (including Richard Rogers, Ralph Erskine, Aldo Loris Rossi, and the much-admired Giovanni Michelucci, who was ultimately not able to participate) in a major urban initiative in Florence's Novoli district. It was an exciting international amalgamation. Members of the group, hosted very graciously by Fiat, were to work individually on their projects but also in tandem; the mandate was to re-establish a viable urban context after the departure of the Fiat corporation. The conversational give-and-take around the table was stimulating in the extreme. Gunnar likes to remember this cosmopolitan idea exchange, which also became the beginning of a series of international contacts.

Gunnar Birkerts & Associates was to design what was tagged a »multi-use« building, with different functions on different levels – a new sort of challenge for the firm. The project tapped the architect's growing fascination with Italy and its highly-evolved vocabulary of specific forms tailored to need and constraint. In this respect, as in others, Civita – indeed, the whole Italian vernacular – stimulated his thinking immensely. He studied the highly evolved juxtapositions, the care for detail both large-scale and domestic. The Novoli design explores the possibilities offered by urban layering, where different needs are addressed on different structural levels. These kinds of problems had from the first engaged his imagination, leading to the modular gestalt of the master plan for Tougaloo College back in the 1960s, and showing up in interesting elaboration in his studies in the mid-1970s of underground architecture, and his ingenious solution to the Law Library addition at the University of Michigan (1974–81).

Italy in those years was hospitable to his idea of design in a way that America was not. For one thing, the country was not enamored of Postmodernism. As the architect put it: »The Italians didn't need to go for all the historical reference and quotation in their design – they were surrounded with it. Walk two blocks in Rome and you have walked back and forth through time.« He was stimulated by the high-profile design sessions convened by the client, where a room full of highly creative – and differently creative – architects would brainstorm together. What in many contexts could be a recipe for disaster – ego and aesthetics being a highly combustible mix – here created several memorable occasions, with refined design sensibilities listening, conversing, sometimes disputing, but feeding rather than frustrating each other as they tried to create a highly variable urban environment that would at the same time express some essential harmony.

During this period, the firm also had other projects developing in Italy. One was in Turin, where the Italgas corporation was removing its gas storage and making a large site available. Repurposing industrial land was the mandate of the times. Gunnar Birkerts & Associates was commissioned to prepare a plan for converting the site to for commercial use. When the city did not approve the first plan, a second project was developed for the University of Turin – a facility for the Humanities faculty. The design concept sought to maximize green zones through vertical use of space, and also alluded to the former site-function with cylindrical elements representing oil-storage tanks.

At about this time another challenging design project was in the works, a soccer stadium for the city of Venice. The firm proposed a unique, but also very practical solution to the perennial problem of directing and controlling large crowds. The design called for a structure that would be surrounded by Venetian lagoons and accessed by a number of bridges, thus separating the stadiumgoers into manageable groups.

Alas, liberating and stimulating as was his involvement in these very different kinds of projects, the architect was to experience a profound disappointment. For it was just at this time that the Italian economy suffered its much-documented collapse – the abrupt removal of credit and available funding brought initiatives all over the country to a standstill. There was nothing to be done – the projects remained on their drawing boards. I remember that there was a pervasive sense of letdown. Coming home to visit, walking around in his home studio, I saw the drawings pinned all around on the walls, the photographs and mock-ups. An enormous investment of will and creative energy had been aborted by circumstance. At the same time, he concedes that whether a project is finally built or not, the creative investment, the intensity of the problem-solving is the same, and in some ways it has an almost equal reality status.

In 1984 another powerful and demanding client appeared – Thomas Monaghan, the self-made multi-millionaire, founder and CEO of Domino's Pizza, and an enthusiastic admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright (and collector of Wright memorabilia). He

approached Gunnar Birkerts to design of the world headquarters for Domino in Ann Arbor, a sizable project.

Monaghan was not exactly a hands-off client – he wanted, if not an outright imitation, then at very least a building in the style of his Master. Here was a great and vexing irony. Just when the architect was most vigorously formulating his notions of the organic, the appropriate – of design evolving from the constraint of its needs and uses – he was being asked to create a building that would in the largest sense of the word be a kind of quotation, or homage – »in the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright«. Still, the commission interested my father in other ways. Certainly it would be a fiscal lifesaver for the firm. The challenge, he knew, would be to bring his client around, to de-emphasize the Frank Lloyd Wright component, using it as part of the »given« of the conception, but not as its guiding principle. »I told Tom that I would do it«, he says, »only if at every point it's at least 51% Gunnar Birkerts. He said OK.«

His response, after various trial designs, was to isolate elements of the Wright »grammar« and adapt them to his own uses. He took key features – the brick, the overhang of the copper roof, the berms, the horizontality – and tailored them to the needs of the building. Monaghan was enamored of superlatives. »He wanted the biggest this, the best that«, recalls my father, whose design response was to elongate, to design what would ultimately be one of the longest buildings of its kind in the world. With Domino, every strategy was debated, contested, as client and architect went back and forth. This was, I know, a period of great inner struggle for my father, between his practical needs for his office and his architectural idealism. His method kept coming up against the insistence of Monaghan's conception, and his disdain for referential architecture was tested at every point by the »homage« nature of the undertaking. The final result, though hard won, reflects the architect's persistence – it is an elegant structure that acknowledges Wright in various ways but also retains its independence of expression.

If I can pursue a metaphor – assuming again that there are certain creative similarities between literary and architectural conception – I would say that writing about my father's life and career I have tried to follow a line of growth and change, rejecting neat symmetries and conventional (orthogonal) patterns. Doing so, I have sometimes felt that I was offering my own version of an »appropriate« or organic presentation, descriptions which both appeal to me. But when I come to the most recent phase of development, I have to change my approach, find some way to present a circumstance that is almost too neatly symbolic, that makes too nice of a shape. If it were an event in a novel, a critic might rightly object that it was not plausible. I'm talking about that fact that in 1989, the Latvian-born architect, son of two leading literary people, a writer and polemicist and a folklorist, long exiled from his homeland, should be invited in late career to design the Latvian National Library in Riga, a project that returns him not just literally – professionally – to the place of his origins (just a few kilometers from where he grew up), but that has also allowed him to indulge to the full his design methodology, in the process tapping some of Latvia's deepest cultural and mythical layers, most notably by using the Glass Mountain legend of ancient folklore as a conceptual premise.

The Latvian National Library project was an important psychological culmination. The architect, now mature and tested and confident in his synthesizing philosophy, was able to reach deep into the accumulated materials of his heritage. He could draw freely on his knowledge of Latvia's culture and folklore, its climate and natural features, to create a concept that was in no sense an adding up of factors and site constraints, but that achieved instead a creative emotional expression that embodied the spirit of his place of origin. Though the project has had to go through innumerable modifications as a result of political and budgetary demands, he has never doubted the rightness or integrity of the core conception. And though it is a deeply meditated public design, through it he feels a profound connection to his personal roots.

My father had left Riga while still in his teens, at that point completely unsettled by the chaos of the war years, and had later moved to America to build a life for himself. Though he insists he is not a backward-looking person, the loss of all that was most familiar had to have been devastating at some level. For three decades he did not set eyes on his mother, and there were many years when he and Merija lost contact completely, neither knowing whether the other was alive. It was an enormous consolation for him finally to establish connection in 1946, though for a long time they could do no more than write to each other. Mother and son did not set eyes on each other until 1969, when the Soviets at last gave Merija a visa that allowed her to travel to Michigan for a visit. By that point she was elderly, but still mentally vigorous, very keen to learn everything about his accomplishments – she became his greatest booster. I have vivid memories of the two of them together during her visits – sitting together on our upstairs couch talking in almost conspiratorial fashion, or walking together, my father holding her arm protectively as he leaned in to hear what she was saying.

My parents found ways to keep the culture alive without meshing themselves too deeply into the local Latvian community. We spoke Latvian at home; there were books and paintings everywhere; and holidays kept a strong trace of the old traditions. Both my parents accepted – or sought – a certain degree of outsiderness, never looking to join the American mainstream, keeping the feeling of difference alive. Though I resented this as a child, wanting the conformity above all else, as I've gotten older and have recognized how easily traditions get erased, I understand – and appreciate – their way of doing things. For them, I'm sure, it was an interesting tension, or ambivalence. Though I never heard either of my parents express a strong desire to go back to Latvia to live, there was always the sense that it was still the home place. When I ask him to talk about its meaning for him, my father pauses for a long time. »Finally«, he says, »my sense of Latvia is something deeper than all of the interchanges of the present. It goes back, not just to *then*, to my own years of growing up, but to something even deeper – a sense of the land, the nature, the culture and history that

30. Gunnar Birkerts exhibition in St. Peter's Cathedral,Riga, 1989.
31. Commemorative stamp, Latvian National Library.
32. Commemorative silver Lats coin, Latvian National Library.
33. Gunnar Birkert's studio in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

go way back. It's almost tribal, this sense that there are unchanging essences, all those things that live in the folklore, in the collective memory.«

These days, with the regular to-and-fro travel required by the National Library, along with the understandable fact that as people get older they look more closely to their origins, all parts of the connection have grown very strong. The old essences and the sense of the contemporary. Interestingly – and paradoxically (given this almost tribal awareness) – the internet has become a vital source of contact. My father begins the day by logging on and checking his Latvian sites, and through the day keeps up with project developments. At the same time he is urging my mother to master the laptop so that she can work on translating a family genealogy ...

Latvia, then, has become the dominant theme of his life, in a sense. He returns at least four times a year now, usually together with my mother, but not always. And he is very busy when he goes, not just with business pertaining to the National Library, but also with serving on juries and judging panels, and developing several other projects, including, significantly, the design for the Museum of Occupation – a transformation of a Soviet-era war museum that uses metaphorical elements with a bold simplicity, playing off the primary associations of the colors black and white. The two colors have taken on a strong metaphorical charge, expressing, alternately and in combination, darkness and light, good and bad, freedom and oppression, transparency and opaqueness – all of which can be seen as features of the Latvia's history in recent decades. The Latvian people have responded with recognition and enthusiasm to this visual sign-language – indeed, the metaphor has proved stronger than any practical obstacles that have come up with the project.

Busy with these various homeland initiatives, the architect finds himself much rejuvenated by the work, the meetings, and by renewing his connection with a city as energetic and cosmopolitan as Riga. And Riga has, in turn, embraced its native son. In 1989 it presented a major exhibition of his architecture in the medieval St. Peter's Cathedral – arguably Riga's major landmark. Then, in 1995, recognizing his contribution both to architecture and his country, he was awarded the prestigious »Order of the Three Stars«. And in 2005 the city honored the National Library with the issue of a silver 1 Lat coin; two years later a commemorative postage stamp was released. The distinctive image of the »Castle of Lght« is familiar to all.

I have a sense of coming full circle here, but there are a few twists. The continuity is, of course, gratifying, but the nature and degree of change are also there to be remarked. I started out writing about the architect and the pencil, the old-style creative visualization, and then I looked back at his coming of age in what now seems in many ways a very different world. This one career has spanned an amazingly dynamic (and troubled) historical period and the contradictions are extreme. I visited him in his new studio yesterday, and at one point while we were talking he sat me down to show me a commercial for the National Library on his laptop. It had been sent from Latvia (I have noticed that most of his e-mail in one way or another relates to Latvia), and featured him reflecting on the nature of the library project. The spot was filmed in Riga, for Latvian television. There he was, speaking Latvian, gesturing with his hands in the way that is so familiar to me. I couldn't stop marveling – the boy who fled with just a suitcase sixty five years ago is back – digital, virtual, but very much himself.

I mentioned the new studio, which is a well-lit space in my parents' new condominium in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The scale of the enterprise has shrunk down. The studio in our Michigan home was vast and high-ceilinged, with room for drawings and sketches on the walls and models on the various tables. Here my father has to content himself with what is within arm's reach. But the space still vibrates with an energy of purpose. »It was a tough move in that sense«, he admits. »I had to give so many things to the Bentley Archive. You build and gather for all those years, and then you start to reduce.« But for all that he seems at peace with the new scale of operations.

It helps, I suppose, that as an architect he has been deeply self-reliant all along, carrying all that is most important in his head. I marvel at this simple fact: that for all the shifts of history, all of the technological advances and complications of our world, he remains, at his core, the man with the pencil, relying on the power of inner visualization, on the glimpse of rightness that can guide him to a solution. He does depend on others to deal with the intermediary technology—he himself retains his faith in the power of the mind, conscious and unconscious, to digest the information and transform it into articulate visual form. And sitting there, talking to him in his studio, seeing all his materials laid out neatly on the long table, the files full of documents ready to hand (at least once per session he goes burrowing after some item I have to see), the shelves lined with labeled photo albums, and above those what amounts to a collection of models from unbuilt projects (»representing so much compressed thinking«, he says, shaking his head), and on the wall, flanked by a small Latvian flag, a large photograph of Riga, I have to grant, admiringly, that this is a man who has lived his passion, and who has been given the great good fortune to be living it still. He knows this, but he doesn't make too much of the fact. There are things to do. Laid out on the bed behind us I see the rolls and rolls of drawings he will start to work with as soon as I leave.

Holtzman & Silverman office building, Southfield, Michigan (1983–89)

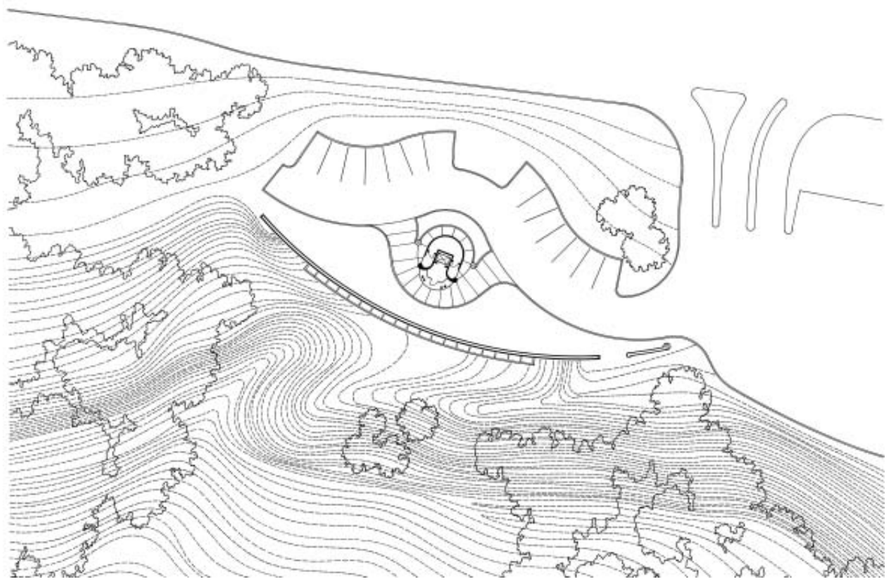
The Holtzman & Silverman office building site is so narrow that in order to accommodate both the office and automobile parking within required setbacks, grade level was reserved for automobile parking and landscaping. The office structure is tucked underneath and the hillside retained with reinforced concrete walls. At grade, a grove of trees screens a park-like setting, with both parking and works of art, from a noisy and unsightly thoroughfare. Set back from the street, at the edge of the building, an oversize handrail defines an overlook and corresponds to the line of office windows just below. The railing and an elevator lobby, an outcropping of carefully detailed concrete with exposed aggregate, are the only architectural elements visible from the street.

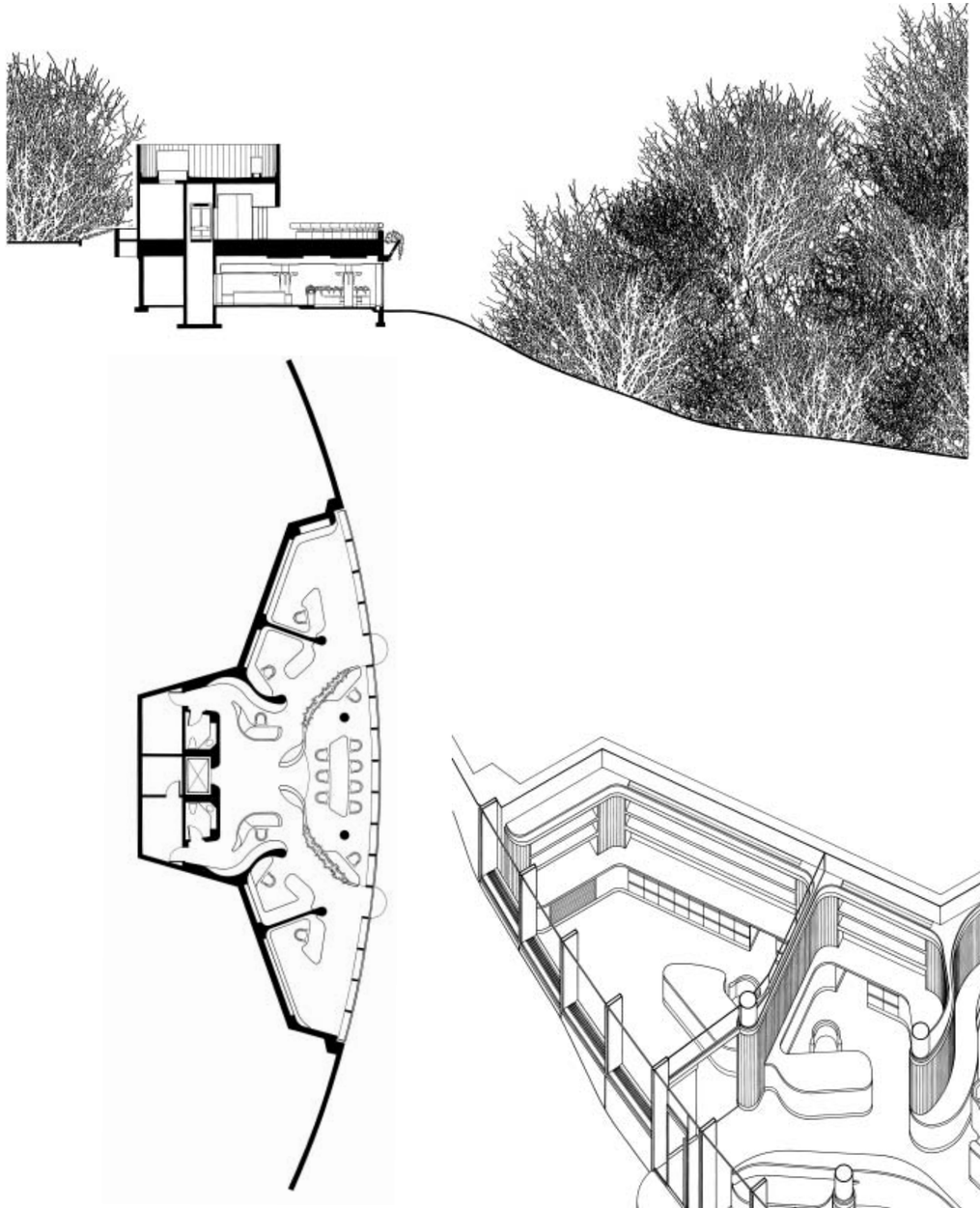
Birkerts regards Holtzman & Silverman as the best interior work his office produced,[26] a level of quality corresponding to the tastes of the clients, two collectors of art and books that are on display in the office and around the site. The elevator is the first hint as to the extent to which attention was paid to every aspect of the office interiors. The elevator doors are polished stainless steel frames with glass silk-screened in thin, vertical, white stripes. Inside the cab, electric lighting is concealed above a dropped ceiling; the cab walls and ceilings are black laminate. The office is only 2,600 square feet, about the size of a house, and symmetrical with work space for a small staff centrally located in an open area. The two principals' offices are at opposite ends. The space is compact and efficient, but the large views and use of daylight make the interior appear spacious.

The interior partition finishes and office furnishings are primarily maple, in three formats: bird's eye, a veneered plywood, and solid trim. Except where there are shelves, the walls are articulated with closely spaced, vertical, maple strips, each beveled at a shallow angle to create a point. The strips stop short of the solid maple base and upper trim leaving a fraction of an inch of air between vertical and horizontal elements. The white painted walls can be seen between each strip and above the eight-foot level where the wall is fully revealed. This kind of detailing, in which materials are separated by thin »reveals«, is typical of the interior, which is itself a narrow band of softly illuminated space. The ceilings are white to reflect daylight as well as electric light from custom chrome fixtures. Supplementary lighting is supplied by recessed ceiling fixtures. The office emerges from the hillside with glass facing east to admit diffused skylight throughout the day. The glass is secured in polished, stainless steel frames. The mirror finish reflects the landscape, diminishes the boundary between it and the interior, and enhances the continuity of the wall of glass. The floors are covered with a dark carpet except at a small conference area whose flooring is leather tiles.

The building is a metaphor for a »cave filled with light«,[27] but in its sophistication, the finished product, even years after its completion, goes well beyond that allusion. This is underscored by the treatment of the site, which, now screened from the highway, has become a sculpture garden. The trees are carefully trimmed. The rough concrete elevator enclosure is studied, proportioned, and carefully modeled. The overlook to the east is defined by an oversized pipe rail; its circumference is not scaled to the hand but to the site. This potential for designing the land became more a part of Birkerts' underground strategy as he developed his later projects at the University of Utah, the University of California at San Diego, and others.

1. Site plan at entrance level.
2. Section.
3. Floor plan (main level).
4. Isometric drawing of a section of the building.





5. Surface entrance.
6. Night view from ravine.
7. Interior view.