

# THE RADAR DESIGN

BY TIFFANY JOW



**CURVES AHEAD** *Clockwise from left: Eero Saarinen's Tulip chair has reached iconic status, much like his designs for the Dulles International Airport, Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri, and his 1937 model for Architectural Forum.*

## THE CHAIRMAN

*The first major retrospective of Eero Saarinen's work comes to DC this month and places the mod maestro on a pedestal*

Walk into any modernist manse and you're bound to meet Eero Saarinen. Tulip, Womb or otherwise, his mid-century furnishings hold mad cachet today and have given the designer enough chic cred to last a lifetime and beyond. Opening this month, the first comprehensive retrospective of the Finnish architect, who designed the sculptural Dulles International Airport, lands at the National Building Museum—47 years after the architect's death.

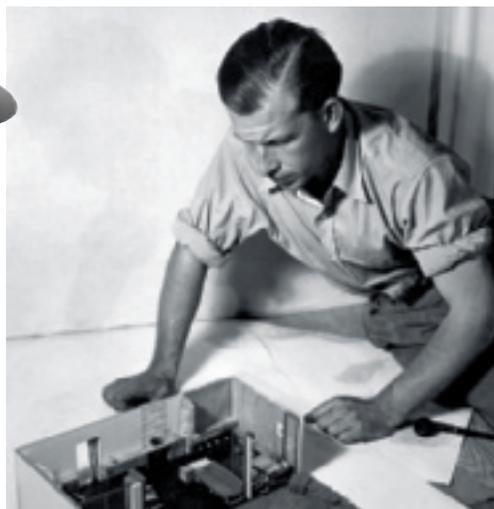
"While Saarinen was clearly one of the most inventive architects of his era, these drawings and hand sketches reveal the process behind his masterpieces," says Martin Moeller, senior vice president and curator at the National Building Museum.

On view are a number of intriguing personal items that are equally telling. A love letter to his would-be second wife, an associate art critic for *The New York Times*, shows a chart he made listing qualities of an ideal partner and compares her—along with women A, B and C—to his criteria. She came out on top, but only by a small margin.

There's also his elaborate to-do lists and a manuscript he handwrote backwards. "He could write with both hands, one mirroring the other, simultaneously," Moeller says, "or sketch with his left hand while drawing something completely different with his right. That his brain could process two wildly different things at the same time makes one wonder how much it influenced the design process and how unusual his projects were."

When a brain tumor ended Saarinen's life in 1961, many of the 51-year-old architect's most famous projects were still under construction. His firm saw each structure through and then continued to operate under a different name. Saarinen's archives remained at the workspace until partner Kevin Roche offered to donate them to the Yale University Library.

The school's scholars embraced the material, which hadn't been touched in more than 40 years, but Saarinen fans and aficionados clamored for more



access. The Finnish Cultural Institute, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, the National Building Museum and Yale University's School of Architecture came together to launch the landmark traveling

exhibition *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*. This display of never-before-seen journals, models, project notes and client communications makes its third stop here in anticipation of Saarinen's centennial birthday in 2010.

Widely celebrated now for creating a new breed of emotionally driven design, Saarinen was initially derided by critics for challenging the then-standard view of how a modern building should look. His work eschewed Mies van der Rohe-esque dark steel and glass and favored curves and flow. Saarinen's work resonated with the public and came to embody the 1950s, a time when people felt secure and economically powerful.

"All of his buildings expressed the spirit of the era, showcasing great optimism and the limitless possibilities of what America could do," Moeller says. Saarinen created Black Rock, the iconic CBS headquarters in New York, and the sweeping Gateway Arch in St. Louis. In 1956, *Time's* cover celebrated him as one of the most influential individuals of the day, and *Life* called his General Motors campus a "Versailles of Industry."

"Fifty years ago, corporations like CBS were the world standard," says Moeller. "Saarinen was at the center of it all in many ways. The idea that his buildings and campuses could suggest a renaissance was exciting, and they seemed to capture the public's imagination." Indeed, they still do. ■

*"Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future" will be on view May 3–August 23 at the National Building Museum, 401 F St., NW, [www.nbm.org](http://www.nbm.org).*