EERO SAARINEN 1910-1961
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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THE loss of a creative artist at the height of his productive powers is always a tragedy. In the case of the death of Eero Saarinen, the loss must be measured in terms of the art that touches all of our lives: architecture.

It is a curious and inescapable fact that the art of building is the most vital, positive, influential and pervasive of the arts. Today's architecture has the validity of necessity. The needs of modern life and the advances of modern technology have combined to produce the monuments and the style that are the truest measure of our age.

The untimely demise of an unusually talented practitioner of such a singularly important art has a special poignancy. In spite of population and building explosions talent remains a rare commodity. Architectural activity in the United States has never been greater and its achievements are of serious international influence. That is why Eero Saarinen's loss stands out in sharp relief.

Monuments

American architectural leadership began with the age of the skyscraper; it continues with the age of the ice-palace—the glass tower, born in Europe and brought to fruition here, has become the symbol of our contemporary culture. Thoroughly domesticated, it has been turned to the uses of big business with typical Yankee efficiency, its cool and arbitrary elegance copied in all the major cities of the world. Saarinen himself built one of the best of these mid-century glass monuments: the extremely handsome and beautifully detailed General Motors Research Center in Detroit.

But American talent, notoriously restless, has moved on to richer and more varied forms. Prosperity, the continuing need for new building, and the growth of technological frontiers have promoted a new phase of exploration and experiment, watched closely by the rest of the world. Eero Saarinen was one of the prime experimenters. His buildings are a distinguished catalogue of the technical and esthetic potentialities of the new architectural trends.

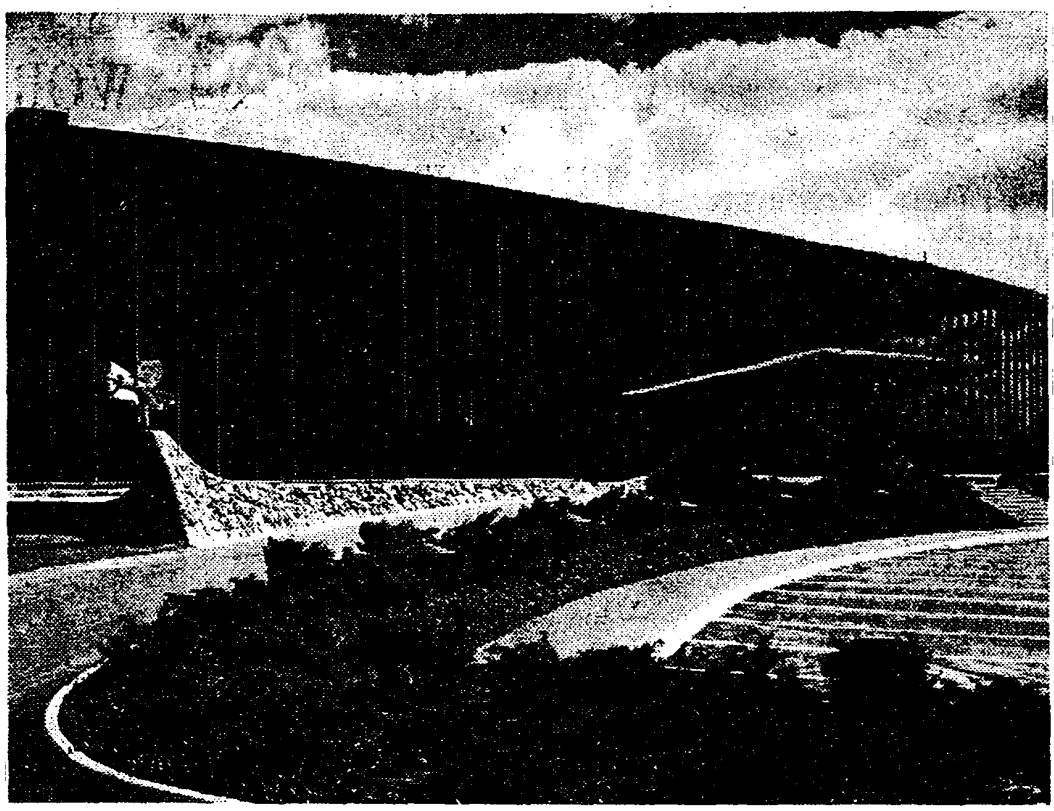
His daring new plastic form for the auditorium at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955 was one of the first structures to break with the rectangular prism; the Yale hockey rink of 1958 carried this unconventional concept even farther with its curved, tensioned roof; he sought its ultimate expression in the free-form, poured concrete TWA Terminal nearing completion at New York's Idlewild Airport—a definitive and awesome statement of the almost anarchic release of architecture from familiar forms and techniques.

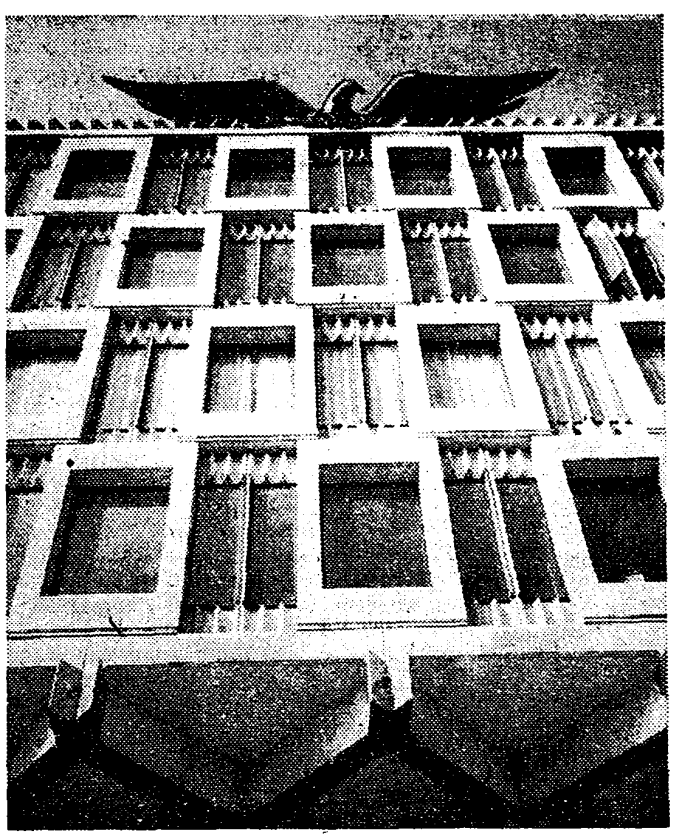
Sensuous surface complexity was emphasized in his American Embassies in Oslo and London, the latter the cause of considerable controversy over its gilded eagle and overtly decorative façade, although the refinement of its interior details has been much admired. Seldom an innovator, Saarinen had a sure instinct for important new ideas, which he investigated thoughtfully and imaginatively.

Some important questions raised by his work have to do with current American architectural practice as well. Does such varied experimentation stress logic or sheer virtuosity? Are its solutions artificially forced for effect, or do they follow a pattern of reasonable architectural evolution? That the results are stimulating, dramatic, and often beautiful, cannot be denied. Nor can we censure an age that gives the talented designer the freedom to be a conscientious architectural adventurer. The dividing line—seldom clearly visible—is the familiar, dangerous transition from freedom to license.

Freedom

Perhaps the best answer to these questions was given by Saarinen himself at the time of the exhibition of the TWA model at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. When this reviewer expressed concern about the pitfalls of free experimentation, he agreed that it presented great dangers, but that "there would be greater danger if we didn't try to explore at all." Where his further explorations would have led, of course, is the question that can never be answered because of the incalculable loss of a tragically terminated career.





BY SAARINEN—The IBM headquarters building in Westchester County and, below, the U. S. Embassy in London.