"A WONDERFUL NEW CAMPUS FOR A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY"

Excerpts from an interview with architect Glen Paulsen

Around 1995–1996, the Rev. Paul Jackson, then assistant professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions and head librarian at Concordia Theological Seminary, interviewed Glen Paulsen, principal designer of the Seminary's campus, which was originally created for Concordia Senior College.

Paulsen joined Eero Saarinen and Associates in 1949, then left after a couple of years for a job as a chief designer in New York. He returned to the Saarinen firm in 1953. "One of the things that Eero tried to entice me with to come back was the opportunity to work on [the Concordia] project," said Paulsen.

Following are lightly edited excerpts from Jackson's interview. We thank Professor Robert Roethemeyer, the Wakefield-Kroemer Director of Library and Information Services, for unearthing this gem from his collection. Jackson's questions appear in italics; Paulsen's responses follow.

Why Saarinen?

Why do you think the Saarinen firm was chosen? Did you ever talk to people about why they decided on such an international or well-known firm?

Eero said that they were looking at prominent firms, very well established with good reputations. But he said, "You know, I think the reason they chose me was they expected me to do a campus similar to General Motors Technical Center." He had just completed the Tech Center at that point, and as you probably know, it is a highly industrialized-looking, very modern group of buildings.

So he thought they were looking for a very contemporary building or complex of buildings. But as usual, Eero analyzed things in their own context completely. He wasn't thinking about what he did last or what would be the most popular thing to do today but about the nature of a senior college being planned for pre-seminary students—what kind of environment that should be.

The Process

What was the process whereby the central ideas that were to take shape on the campus were conceived?

It probably wasn't a straight-line progression, but one of the most remarkable things to me looking back on the development of Concordia was the intelligence of the [Synod] Board of Education.

When they presented the program to Eero, it was fairly brief. It didn't spell things out in any detail. As a matter of fact, I remember it as a one-page typewritten memorandum that listed basically the number of students, what the purpose of the school was, and what their educational emphasis was going to be. They did indicate what kind of classrooms they wanted, and a chapel and dormitories.

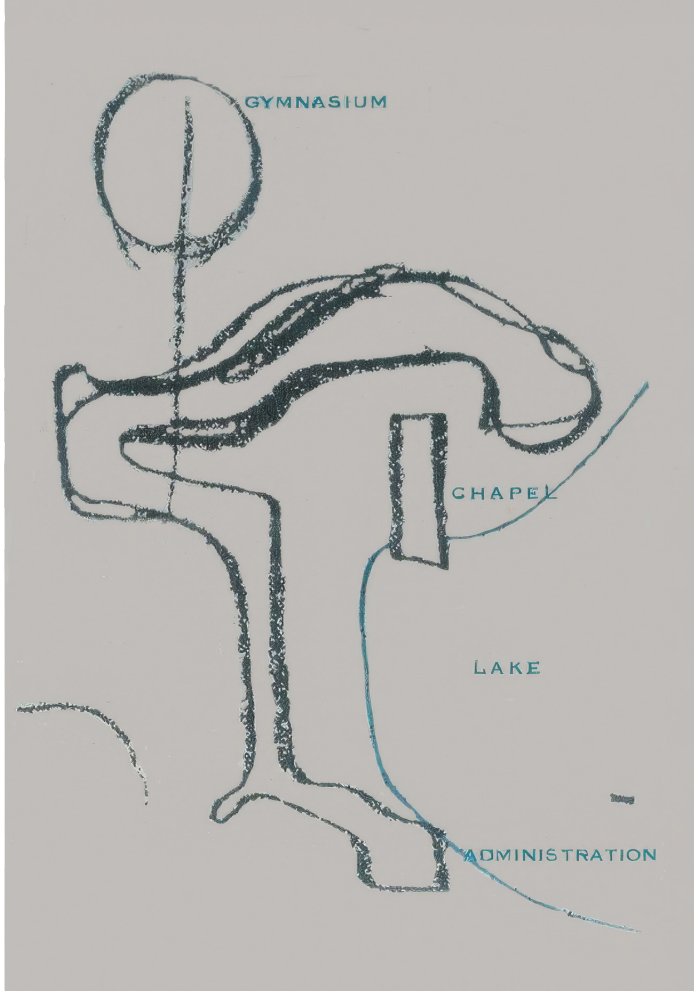
[Eero] wrote me a memo when I arrived back in Bloomfield Hills. He was going to be gone that particular week, so he said "Now Glen, I want you to start on this project. It is a wonderful new campus for a religious community. We are starting from scratch."

The Location: Kramer Farm in Fort Wayne

[Eero] was working with a city planning consultant who was helping to evaluate sites. I think there might have been







Clockwise from top left: A "state-of-the-art" classroom with tiered levels; Eero Saarinen's "doodle" of the campus design; an example of a diamond-brick "grillage" on a south-facing wall in Wynken Hall.

as many as twenty-two sites considered in the beginning. The list had been narrowed down a lot, and they finally decided on the Fort Wayne area.

I remember going out there [to Kramer Farm, the selected site] with Eero one day and visiting and meeting Mr. Kramer and walking through the woods and looking at the apple orchard up on the little hill where the chapel or academic complex is now, just surveying the whole scene. It was very hard to imagine the finished product at that point. But Eero decided that this was the site that held the greatest promise.

The minute we had the site selected, we started trying to relate the program to the modest space we had and the nature of the land—the rolling and the amount of open space and the woods and the buildable area as opposed to flood plains, etc.

The Village Concept

Whose idea was that?

Eero's. Absolutely no question about that. He verbalized these things, and I then tried to interpret what he was envisioning so that I could put it down on paper and then see whether it would work and then present it to him for review. That's the way we worked all the time. We had developed quite a number of different solutions to the arrangement of buildings when one day we went out to lunch—and Eero was a great one for drawing. He would doodle on a napkin or on paper placemats, on the back side of it—and he started talking. He was just thinking out loud about how he saw it. He started doing some little doodles which were to me extremely significant.

That is about the time he started thinking about all the roofs, oriented in the same direction, some of them higher than others rising up to the chapel then down to the library. So that was the germ of the final solution.

After that lunch we brought back these sketches; he was thinking more and more in terms of this village idea. So he sent me to the library in Cranbrook to look up European, especially northern European, villages and to see how these villages and these roofs were posed. I had a whole trackboard full of photostats or xeroxes of them. Some of them were wood engravings, they were so old. That had a strong bearing on how we developed.

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ARCHITECT GLEN PAULSEN

So it was an ordered kind of plan.

Very ordered, yes. And that is one of the things that probably very few people would realize about Concordia, the degree of order and integration that evolved in that. That was the big design problem.

You know, it's very simple to say that we are going to have twenty-five buildings, which there were, all organized east and west in their axis, and all having the same kind of pitches on them. It's another thing to develop the architecture that goes with that. Because we were building twenty-five buildings at one time, it took several years to do it. But we were conceiving it at one point and building it as fast as possible.

We had to develop a vocabulary for the architecture. The concept then was of this sort of village-like community, and then the organization of it in terms of planning was very much Eero's vision of how you would approach the school from a visitor's point of view as well as the people that lived there—how they would go every day from one building to another, from their dorms to the library, to the chapel or to the academic building. Then the buildings were positioned to achieve what he felt were the right relationships.

Influence of Religion on Saarinen's Design

Did you feel that Saarinen's own personal spiritual background played any role in the design of the campus?

When he was a youngster his parents always took him back to Finland every summer. That was before World War II, and I'm sure that the architecture that he saw in their travels had a bearing. He had a very retentive memory, and I'm sure that these things come out. You don't maybe consciously know it.

I really think that Eero had a great deal of religious sensitivity, but he was so totally wrapped up in architecture that he saw everything in relation to architecture. He really had a sensitivity for the spirituality of architecture and especially in religious architecture. He knew what generated those feelings, and I think the Concordia chapel is a very stunning example of his beliefs on that score.

The Lake

Concordia was quite unique among all of Eero's work. He never again did a small, traditionally inspired architecture work. On the other hand, it had all of the earmarks of everything else he did. A lot of people might not recognize that. One example: the use of water.

I think that corn was being raised where the lake is now. When we looked at the surveys and the contour grade elevations, it was quite apparent that there was sort of a basin where the lake is, and the runoff from that basin was going down onto the flood plain. So Eero decided that water—a small lake there—would be sort of the unifying element that the whole complex related to.

The 5'4" Module

Every building is a multiple of 5'4". The structural framing system was developed on that basis. And the brick module was designed to that so it gives a certain order. Even the window dimensions are based on that. They aren't always 5'4"; they may be two times 5'4" or some multiple.

I did a drawing to show Eero the problem of superimposing a single module on all the buildings. We had planned the buildings before the module came up. But it was so close that we had no difficulty in adapting them to the module. It was pretty much a dimensional change. It created a kind of unifying device.

The Diamond Brick Idea

Whose idea was the Concordia brick?

That was Eero's idea. Now, once again, that sounds simple. The decision to use the triangular brick was based on the fact that all of these gable ends you see had a rake to them. If we had used ordinary brick, which we did for economical reasons on the gym, they would have to be cut when they meet the slope. In this case Eero wanted to use a brick that would really conform to the geometry of the facade.

The other really brilliant thing was that he saw the potential of developing these grillages which controlled the sunlight on the south and on the west. That was strictly his doing. Then, it was up to me to determine: Well, if we were going to use this diamond-shaped brick, how many different shapes do we have to produce in order to meet all the conditions that the buildings defined? The bricks are all the same size, but some of them are different shapes. There are about nine different ones.

The Project Budget

There was one suggested. As I recall it was maybe thirty-two million dollars, but it was unrealistic, and everybody knew it. It had been established maybe three years before so all of these things had to be reckoned with. In my recollection, although don't hold me to this, the final cost was in the six- to seven-million-dollar range. But when you think that all that site development had to be done, all the landscaping, the building of the dam for the lake, plottings and all those buildings, it is pretty amazing.