

SAARINEN'S VILLAGE

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY IN ARCHITECTURAL FORM

By Christopher Seifferlein

Last year I returned to the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary and found one of my seminary classmates in the very same place where I might have seen him years before: in the gathering room of one of the dormitories. Common areas like these around campus are well known among graduates and guests. Meanwhile, the bell tower tolls daily, inviting the seminary community to the literal pinnacle of campus to receive gifts of sermon, sacrament, and song. Students enjoy coffee and conversation in "the Commons" after chapel, where they ask their professors further questions from the morning lectures. Classmates gather in the dining hall to discuss theology at lunch, where even off-campus students aim to be present. While many of these spaces appear happenstance, they are due to the influence of notable architect Eero Saarinen, who designed the campus from 1953–1957.

Lutheran Theology in Brick

It has been said that if you hired Frank Lloyd Wright to be your architect, you worked for Frank. Saarinen, however, was known for a different principle—one for which he was often criticized. His dogged desire was to work for his clients and understand their needs even better than they did.

Even though his grandfather was a Finnish Lutheran pastor, you wouldn't expect a famous, distinguished architect like Saarinen—who designed General Motors Technical Center in Detroit, the TWA Flight Center at John F. Kennedy Airport, Dulles International Airport, Morse and Ezra Stiles Colleges at Yale, Deere and Company Headquarters in Moline, the Bell Labs Holmdel Complex in New Jersey, and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis—to get the finer details of Lutheran theology.

But in his design for the Concordia Theological Seminary campus, he intentionally made the rooflines of all the buildings swell upward to the "most significant" (in his own words) building on campus. He used the side windows of the chapel (now being renewed) to "dramatize the altar as focal point." The low lighting in the interior of the chapel creates a restful space while daylight from the skylight and side window spotlights the altar, made of one six-ton piece of Vermont marble. The architecture points to the altar of campus as the central place from which all other things flow. Saarinen visually captured Lutheran theology—and now, all these years later, both the aesthetics and the purpose of the architecture still stand.

Saarinen had a way of doing architecture that focused first not on how a building looked, but what the building was supposed to do. Ultimately, he built the campus—









designed to resemble a northern European village—as a community with purpose.

Not surprisingly, the campus chapel is where the brilliance of Saarinen's design really shines. His understanding of Lutheran principles, especially as an outsider, was astounding, and one can't help but assume that this chapel easily would have Martin Luther's stamp of approval.

Consider this: Luther once was asked what he thought of some of the famed cathedrals of his day.

> Cologne has a cathedral that is so large that it has four rows of columns, each row consisting of twenty columns. These are extraordinary buildings, but they aren't suitable for listening to sermons. Good, modest churches with low arches are the best for preachers and for listeners, for the ultimate object of these buildings is not the bellowing and bawling of choristers but the Word of God and its proclamation. The cathedral of St. Peter in Rome and the cathedrals in Cologne and Ulm are very large but inappropriate.

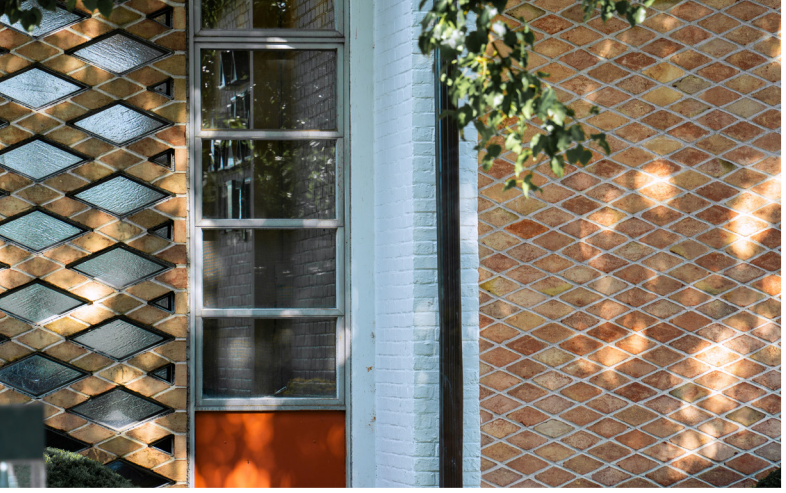
In other words, if a building didn't fulfill its main purpose of providing a fitting space for hearing the Word of God, it didn't matter how grand it was. Saarinen's chapel, however, was designed specifically as a place where its form followed the function of what it intended to do. Saarinen wrote,

> We wanted to work with the simple Chapel shape appropriate to the Lutheran Church and to create an interior in which the relationship of human beings to enclosed space would be appropriate and inspiring. The problem was also to find a shape and materials which would allow the spoken word to be heard clearly and one in which the organ should swell to its fullest. We believe the high Chapel interior answered these requirements.

The chapel's interior rises to 97 feet under its high-pitched roof, creating a space noted for its acoustics. Saarinen also designed the chapel's organ and bell tower. Word, prayer, and liturgy—the communicated, sung, read, and spoken Word and its primacy— was not only written in the bricks of this campus but is the focus and mission of all that the Seminary does.

Life Is Community

But back to that idea that the campus was designed to be a community.






While monastic buildings are centered inward—cloistered and walled off, standing as stark towers and bulwarks against the assaults of the world and its ideas—a *community* is built to be intentionally inward *and* intentionally outward. Even down to the dormitories, the inward thrust of each building was designed for each person to be strengthened, healed, and given rest, so that they might be propelled outward to the rest of the buildings and their centers. We see this even in the designs of the showers, beds, prayer areas, and commons (complete with a fireplace!) in each dorm.

The design proclaims that the purpose of living in community is not that we might stay in that community forever. We may call it "the Fort Wayne Seminary," but it is no fortress—there are no walls around this campus.

In these buildings, Saarinen wished to express a community fostered by Word and Sacrament and a life cultivated and enjoyed from dining hall to classroom—not for the purpose of isolation, but for strengthening and equipping for service. The mission statement of the Seminary expresses just this, that the work done here is meant to "form servants in Jesus Christ who teach the faithful, reach the lost, and care for all." The statement speaks of a communal focus, both inward in study, prayer, and commitment to the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the liturgical life of the church, and outward in that the gifts received here are the very source of the life that we bring to the world. The Seminary exists as a community to serve the church and world, to send formed servants into her ranks.

Preparation for Life

Gregory the Great wrote his rule for pastoral care during a time when he had to convince men to join the ranks of clergy (mid-sixth century). Men had left the world to form spiritual communities in remote places. Many of these well-qualified men were not interested in reentering the world, as the intimate quietness of study and reflection would be interrupted by the demands of everyday life. Gregory's advice to these men was that living in the world and serving the church would not be easy but that the contemplative life was a true preparation for pastoral service and not a permanent escape from it.

Each pastor, layperson, and Christian family can also take to heart this idea that we all need intentionally inward times. Life in the world renders a person wounded, beaten, and weary. Time for family devotion in God's Word and to eat with one another around the dinner table heals us from the onslaught of the world. These things strengthen us for reentry to serve our neighbor in need with the gifts



we have been given. Our neighbor needs us!

Luther didn't eliminate the monastery but brought monastic living to each family. Each family became a little cloister ruled by the Small Catechism, its book and guide. But that cloister was never meant to be only inward. Prayer at the table and the bedside and life with each other in community were all meant to propel each Christian outward for life in service to our neighbor. We can be of no use to the world without the inner life, yet we can be of no benefit to the world with only the inner life. Work without deep prayer makes you useless to others, and a life centered only on the inward self is missing its God-given goal and purpose.

Even the Bricks Will Shout

Pointing to this reality, Saarinen placed visual cues even in the distinctive diamond-shaped bricks, designed specifically for the Concordia project. In the chapel, the "Concordia bricks" (as they came to be known) are tipped upward, pointing vertically. In all of the other buildings on campus they are tipped sideways, horizontally, in the places where we deal with our neighbor. We commune with God, we commune with others, not for seminarians to stay at the seminary forever, but to be given to the church and world.

Saarinen designed the plan of this seminary around a village—a village with a church at the center and height. He believed that "a village of the North European type" would provide "a quiet, unified environment into which the students could withdraw to find a complete, balanced life and yet one which is related to the outside world." Even down to the dormitories, Saarinen said, "We hoped that the intimate house would encourage real student responsibility for the group within each house."

What is CTSFW but a thriving and living community? Today this little village continues to be an inspiration, a little model of life in this world as it should be, even as it continues to form servants of Jesus for the church and world.

References:

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