



Eero Saarinen **PUBLIC BUILDINGS**

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RAKENNUSTIETO • HELSINKI

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General Motors Technical Center

Warren, Michigan, USA 1948–1956

Eero Saarinen and Associates
Smith, Hinchman and Grylls

The construction of the General Motors Technical Center was closely followed in the architectural press, and as it neared completion it was described in glowing terms: “It is a tense triumphant group, an architectural feat which may be unique in our lifetime.”¹

The Technical Center project was launched in the early 1940s on the initiative of the Chairman of the General Motors Board of Directors, Alfred P. Sloan Jr. The project brought together in Warren,² north of Detroit, General Motors’ research and technical development divisions – Research, Engineering, Process Development, Styling, and a Service Center responsible for maintenance and repair – which had been operating in different parts of Detroit. The Vice President of General Motors Styling, Harley Earl, who had a strong influence on the project, suggested that the centre should be aesthetically distinctive and that its architect should be one of significance. He became responsible for choosing the architect, and at the end of 1944 he chose the firm Saarinen and Swanson from among several alternatives.³

The mark of master urban designer Eliel Saarinen was visible in the first version, in which stream-

lined buildings were placed around an irregularly shaped pool. Construction on site began in late 1945, but the project was suspended for financial reasons and was not restarted until 1948.⁴ It was then that Eero Saarinen, at the renamed firm Saarinen, Swanson, Saarinen, began to lead the design – though still closely consulting his father.⁵ Under his leadership, the architectural appearance of the area changed, acquiring a more simplified rectangular layout, which also served to keep costs under control.⁶ Eero Saarinen summarised the design principles as follows:

Our intention was threefold: to provide the best possible facilities for industrial research; to create a unified, beautiful, and human environment; and to find an appropriate architectural expression.⁷

The atmosphere of the large, multi-building centre is reminiscent of a university campus,⁸ which Saarinen and Swanson had previous experience in designing. The General Motors Technical Center became a groundbreaking corporate campus. Each of the staff organisations had their own purpose-designed building. They, together with a central





OPPOSITE

The unique floating staircase consists of overlapping terrazzo slabs suspended above a pool of water by thin steel rods that hang from the ceiling.

TOP

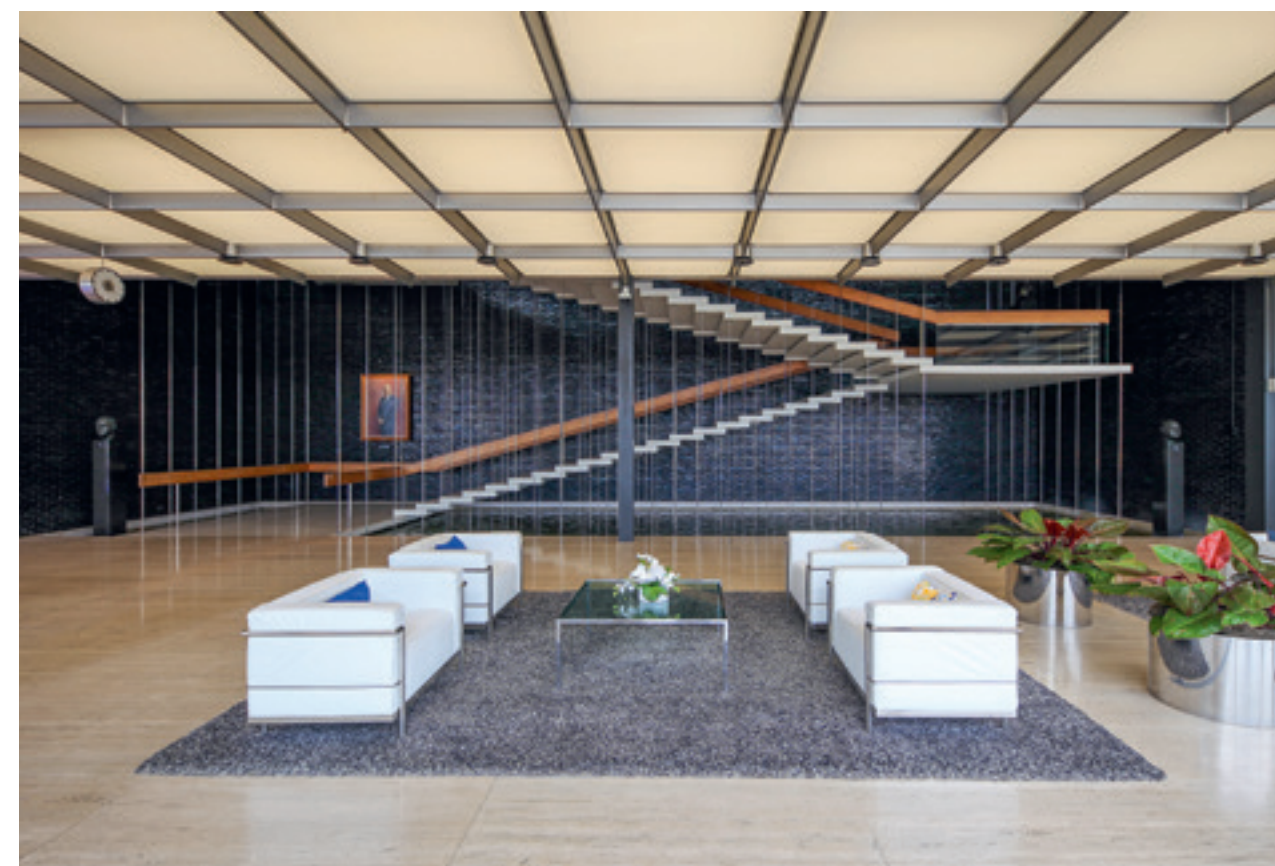
The library in the Styling administration building is a double-height space.

BOTTOM

The wall behind the floating staircase consists of black glazed brick.

OVERLEAF

The cafeteria in the Styling administration building overlooks the lake. The wood panelled side walls, luminous ceiling, and orange and cream coloured linoleum floor characterise the room. A transparent screen made of three tones of plexiglass held in an aluminum frame diffuses light.







OPPOSITE TOP
A side corridor in the classroom wing of Wyneken Hall, with alternating perforated brick walls and windows.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Sihler Auditorium interior.

TOP
Staircase in the Walther Library.

BOTTOM
The mezzanine level of the library offers peaceful places for reading.



United States Chancellery Building in London

London, United Kingdom 1955–1960

Eero Saarinen and Associates
Yorke, Rosenberg, and Mardall

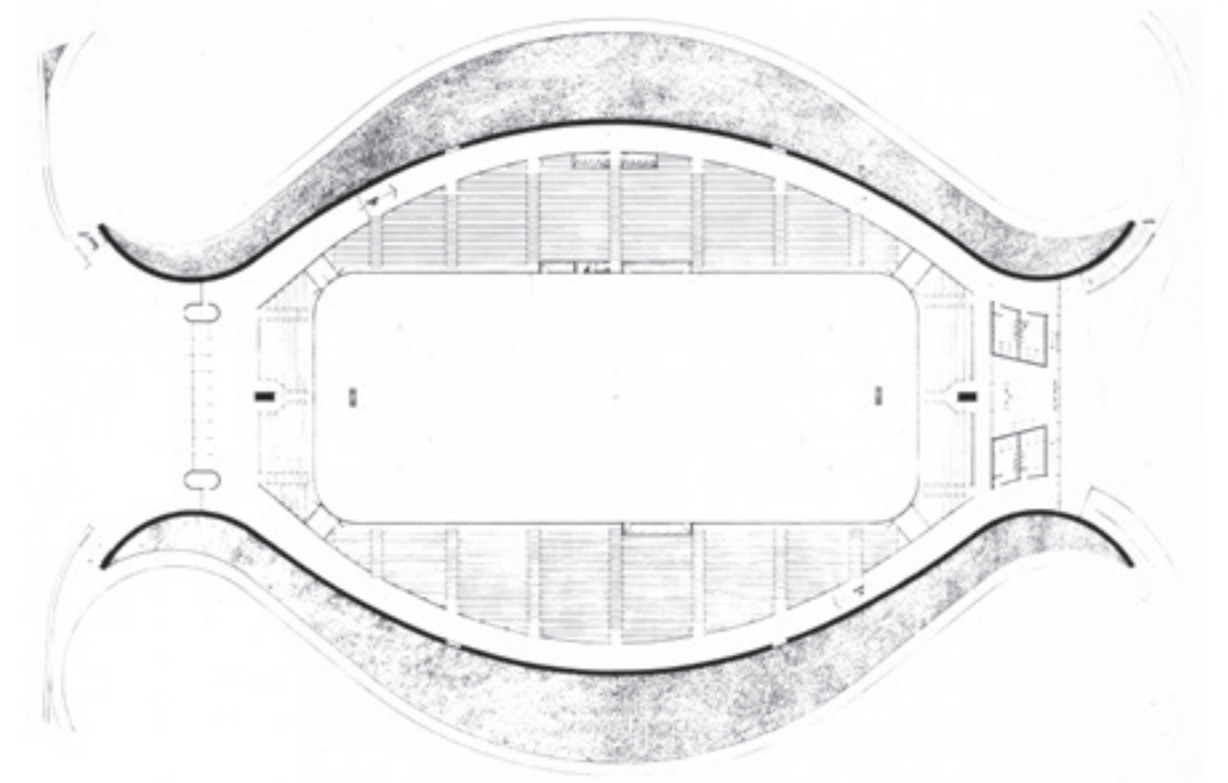
The United States' Chancellery in London was the most important project in the US post-World War Two programme for the construction of embassies and chancelleries. It was also the only one for which the State Department's Foreign Buildings Operations arranged an invitational competition, held in 1955 among eight architectural firms.¹ The competition was arranged because the modern administrative building had to be integrated into the historical urban environment of Grosvenor Square. The United States had a long history on the square, including, among other things, the residence of the first US ambassador to the United Kingdom and during World War Two it was the headquarters of the American Armed Forces.²

The United States' Chancellery took shape in a competition brief that emphasised the "creation of goodwill by design of distinguished architectural quality ... by intelligent appreciation, recognition and use of architecture appropriate to the site and country."³ The building had to be appropriate to its surroundings in terms of scale and materials, while at the same time "represent the US at this time".⁴ Eero Saarinen's winning proposal fulfilled these objectives.

The chancellery complex housed three separate operations: the US Embassy, US Consulate, and US Information Service. Each had its own entrance and lobby: the Embassy was accessed from the square, while the other two were accessed from side streets. The spaces serving visitors were located on the first floor. The main lobby, with its skylight and fountain, formed the heart of the building. Two high-ceilinged spaces, one housing the visa section and the other a library, offered views of the landscaped square. The offices on the upper floors placed along a central corridor formed a symmetrical U shape, with a lower office section in the middle. The basement had a café and auditorium.

One of the building's distinctive features is the concrete diagrid ceiling extending throughout the ground floor. The structure also projects outward to form part of the exterior facade, where the intersecting ends of the beams serve as a decorative motif. The structure is supported by cross-shaped pillars clad in gold-coloured – or, in Saarinen's words,⁵ straw-coloured – anodised aluminium trim. The structure and decorative motifs come together in an unexpected way but





TOP
Main entrance
vestibule.

BOTTOM
The staggered concrete
seating provides good
visibility of the arena.

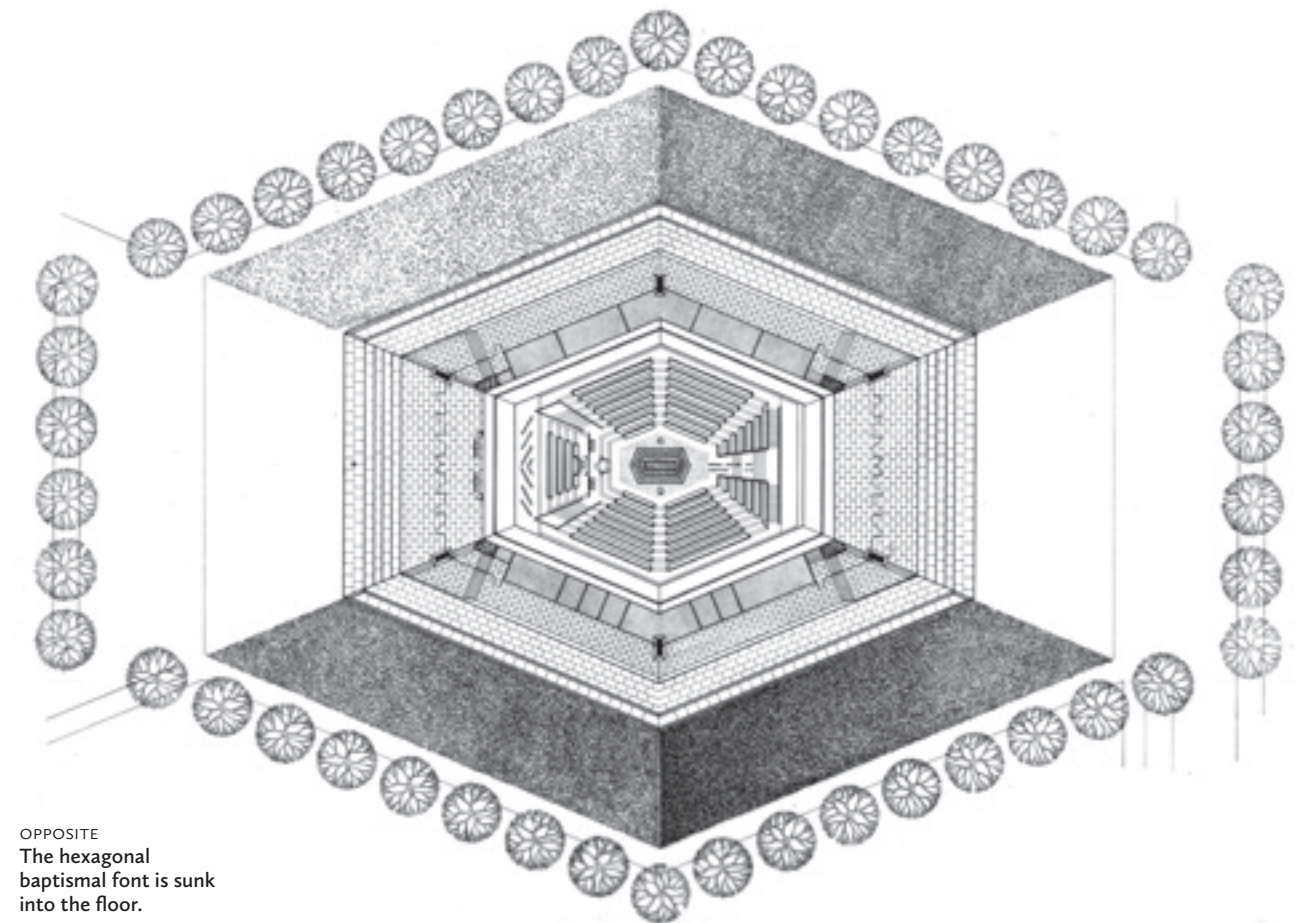
OPPOSITE TOP
Floor plan.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
The concrete is
complemented by the
exposed steel cables
and wooden panelling
of the ceiling. Plastered
aprons were added for
fire safety reasons.

NEXT OVERLEAF
Evening view of the
main entrance.







OPPOSITE
The hexagonal
baptismal font is sunk
into the floor.

TOP LEFT
In the ceiling above the
font is a dove sculpture
by Alexander Girard.

TOP RIGHT
Oculus in the
sanctuary.

BOTTOM
Floor plan.

OVERLEAF
The sanctuary. In the
centre, beneath the
oculus, is a wooden
communion table. The
organ forms a sculp-
tural element in the
space. Alexander Girard
designed the nature-
themed and brightly
coloured *Living Cross*
church textiles.



TOP
View of downtown St. Louis from the top of the arch. The park over the highway and the connection between the arch and the Old Courthouse was completed in 2014–2015.

BOTTOM
The bank of the Mississippi River and the grand staircase crossing the railroad.

OPPOSITE
Dan Kiley's landscape features free-form geometry, ponds, plantings, and curving pathways in the rolling terrain, and offers breathtaking views of the arch.

