



Image Credit:
Brad Angelini

The Earl V. Moore Building—The School of Music, Theater, & Dance

1100 BAITS DRIVE

ARCHITECTS:

Eero Saarinen, 1964

Ennead Architects & IDS, 2015

Tamara Burns

As a young teenager I used to make the short trek from my house, along Baits Drive into University of Michigan’s North Campus, down what was known in my family as Gershwin’s Gully, and into the School of Music to play on a harp in the small practice rooms on the lower level. At that time, I had no idea of the cultural significance of the building and I can’t report that it inspired me to become an architect or a musician for that matter! However, I remember being struck by the tall exterior windows, the interior brick finishes and the beautiful setting.

The School of Music building was designed by Eero Saarinen and opened in 1964. It was renamed the Earl V. Moore building in 1975, and in 1985 the Towsley family provided the funds for the addition of an auditorium which had been dropped from the original plans because of cost cutting. In 2015, the building was expanded with the addition of the William K. and Delores S. Brehm Pavilion designed by Ennead Architects and IDS.

Eero’s connection with North Campus did not begin with the Music School. Eero and his father Eliel were commissioned in 1951 to create a master plan for the newly envisioned North Campus. Their plan was never fully implemented and they later resigned, unhappy with “randomly selected architects, administrators, lack of coordination in planning and design, and insufficient funding that prevented the proper development.”¹

Eero Saarinen began designing the School of Music in 1952. A love letter from Eero to his future wife, Aline, in 1953, noted “the big push now is Michigan because we do want to come up with a good scheme on that.”² The letter included a

little sketch of the music building with a domed performance hall, which was eliminated as the design evolved. The design was approved in 1954 but funds did not become available until 1961. Unfortunately, Saarinen died in 1961 at 51 years of age, so he never saw the building completed, much less any of the additions.

The building is classic midcentury modern design composed of pre-formed concrete, beautiful brickwork, and paired, narrow windows reminiscent of the black keys on a piano. It is a clear geometric composition with a strong axis, integrated wonderfully into the natural surroundings.

It is notable that, according to an architect working at Saarinen’s office at that time, there was not a lot of excitement about the project in the office.³ It was seen as a fairly ordinary building. This is reflected in its lack of inclusion in Saarinen’s important works and that little is written or published about this project. It is clear there was cost-cutting in the version that was built—for example, the initial removal of one of the three major blocks at the south end—and perhaps that influenced opinions.

However, having an Eero Saarinen building in one’s community isn’t ordinary at all and, to many of us, it is a building we are proud to call our own. In my case, it’s just a short walk away, down Gershwin’s Gully. ■

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1. Kathryn Bishop Eckert, Society of Architectural Historians, <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/MI-01-WA11>

2. Eero Saarinen letter to Aline B. Saarinen, 1953, *Aline and Eero Saarinen papers, 1906-1977*. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

3. I heard this from a close family friend who will remain anonymous.