



## PRESERVATION AS PROVOCATION: RE-THINKING SAARINEN'S ACADEMY OF ART

[ 2006 – 2007 STUDENT COMPETITION - ABSTRACT ] In 1942, Eliel Saarinen, the renowned Finnish-American Modern Architect, designed the Library and Museum of the Cranbrook Academy of Art to be the centerpiece of the campus, which is now a National Historic Landmark. Considered to be one of the most technologically advanced and aesthetically daring Modernist building complexes at the time of its completion, its expanding collections and growing numbers of visitors now require a major transformation of the original. This competition, the first to address the emerging field of preservation design, invites architecture students to imagine this transformation. The challenge is not to adapt the buildings to fit current trends in library and museum design. Rather more ambitiously, it is to discover how the preservation of these extraordinary buildings can provoke a profound rethinking of our current conventions about design. The aim is to envision a new type of library and museum that would be unimaginable without the existing structures.

- Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

## [ DESIGN ESSAY ]

Architecture begins by looking into the past. By studying buildings and spaces which have been successful, but to also see what has failed, we can build our knowledge and foundation of good design and begin to understand how the development of building typologies is the result of repeating past ideas reinvented and elaborated to meet the needs of an evolving world. However, to rethink Saarinen's Cranbrook Academy of Art is also to look deeper into the past; not only should we aim to design an extension taking into consideration the successfully practiced concepts of past libraries and museums, but we must first aspire and learn to preserve Saarinen's design of the well-established Cranbrook landmark. The library and museum represents more than simply an institution that defines a successful building, through its architecture it captures a moment in time and the essence of Cranbrook's conception.

The initial steps of the project arose with our need to create an understanding of the preexisting museum and library at the Cranbrook Academy. As the challenge calls for a solution in preservation design, we decided to first research the history and initial concepts of the academy during its conception to create an awareness of the essential parts of Cranbrook which would need to be preserved. Initially, the founder, George Booth, began to develop his farm estate in response to the changing needs of his family and community. Booth pushed his strong belief that to be able to understand and appreciate beauty in nature and art, one needs to start with the youth.<sup>1</sup> This belief became the core of the Cranbrook idea and the academy of art was to be the goal and physical centre of Cranbrook. Eliel Saarinen, commissioned as the architect for both the master plan and the library museum building, looked to the past as well as the present emerging design solutions to create this new academy. Saarinen followed the South Kensington Principle; Gropius had unified an art academy in London by connecting the South Kensington Museum and school of design in attempt to eradicate the differences between the fine and applied arts.<sup>1</sup> Saarinen adopted this idea and the Cranbrook ideal became an ambition to create an institution where there was no curriculum but rather a place to invite artists and scholars to meet together for informal creative activity. Saarinen aspired to create architecture for art; in its space, would itself inspire and invoke creative thinking and learning with the emphasis on place, people, and experience.



South elevation of Cranbrook Library and Museum. Middle: view of open propylaea.<sup>2</sup>

The original library and museum consists of three parts in his design; an enclosed library, an enclosed museum, and an open propylaea interrelating the programs. The building in context has two main axes: the primary axes stretches from the Orpheus Fountain entrance through to the library – museum propylaea and down towards the Triton Pools, the secondary axes runs from the library through the colonnade to the museum.<sup>2</sup> The primary axes through the propylaea suggests a focus on the idea of the experience of the visitor as one passes through the architectural artifacts and through the formal gardens. The experience of the visitor is not solely defined by the building or the matter contained within it, but the landscape plays a vital role in creating a grandeur entrance as well as to define the complex as an architectural whole. The enclosed spaces of the library and museum house literary and historical artifacts while being an artifact itself contained and exhibited by the landscape. Through the creation of the axes, Saarinen gives the opportunity to experience objects in a meaningful way.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, Robert Judson. "Design in America: the Cranbrook vision, 1925 – 1950"

<sup>2</sup> "Historical Preservation Student Design Competition." ACSA: Competitions. ACSA.

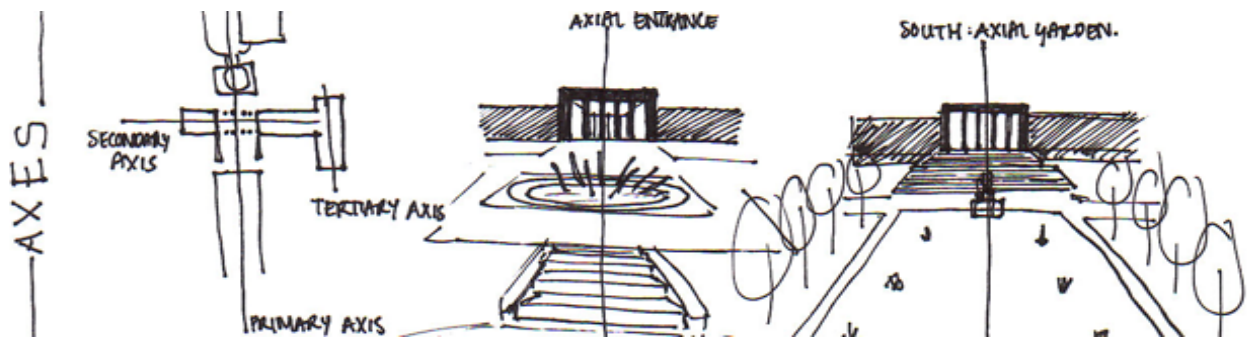
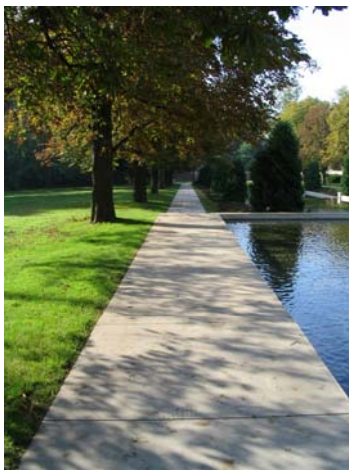


Diagram of Saarinen's Axes.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding the existing Cranbrook is an imperative first step while understanding historic preservation is an important second. Preservation design is an emerging field where solutions are still undefined and attitudes are varied. John Lawrence describes preservation as, “the basic purpose... is not to arrest time, but to mediate sensitively with the forces of change. It is to understand the present as a product of the past and a modifier of the future.”<sup>4</sup> Other perspectives are less optimistic as described by John Ruskin, “it is impossible as impossible as to reuse the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.”<sup>4</sup> Rem Koolhaas describes that to preserve architecture is to preserve history and the spirit of the people – yet we can only preserve architecture with dense masses as sustainable and lightweight materials will tend to deteriorate causing that spirit to be lost.<sup>5</sup> Attitudes vary inasmuch as do the products of preservation design; a silk mill is transformed into the UW School of Architecture, historic Frank Lloyd Wright houses are restored to its original design, while Phillip Johnson’s towers are retrofitted to meet today’s human comfort standards. Preservation begins with understanding what should or can be preserved but it is also to understand what may be left behind. Elkus Manfredi Architects is currently reusing an old candy factory to build One First Condos in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In this project, the exterior of the building is being preserved while the interior is gutted to create space for its new intent. Although the candy factory may have been prominent during its time, it had long been out of business and provided little to no cultural significance within its community. It was decided that the shell of the building was still in good state but the neighborhood needed another application to meet the needs of the evolving community – another type of program to define its future. Other preservation projects however, require more sensitivity to the original program such as the preservation of historic homes. Many historical political figures such as John Quincy Adams, have had their homes restored to its original states as to mark a place in time. The architecture captures a part of their life and is able to tell visitors a story about the way the historic figure lived during that era. Preservation of these homes is not only simply preserving the architecture, but understanding that the architecture is representative of a significant time in history.



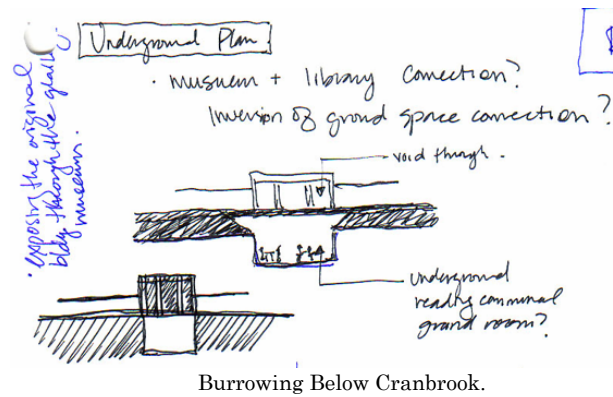
View of Cranbrook landscaping.

The preservation of Cranbrook began by realizing its significant aspects and the quintessential elements that describe and tell the story of Cranbrook. Our ideal was to create using its past as precedence to build a new but essential addition. As the experience of the visitor was a primary focus during its original design conception, we not only aimed to preserve that experience, but also sought to enhance it. The library and museum had become true historical artifacts culturally significant and essential to the Cranbrook Academy. By building onto the landscape an addition to meet the growing needs of the institution, would be to alter the human experience as other objects within the landscape would cause an imbalance between garden and building, as well as pulling focus away from the existing buildings and breaking the original axes. Instead, we concluded that by burrowing underground to create a new world would offer a new way to experience Cranbrook, provide the space needed for its growing collections, whilst preserving the initial experience of Cranbrook through the visitor as envisioned by Saarinen.

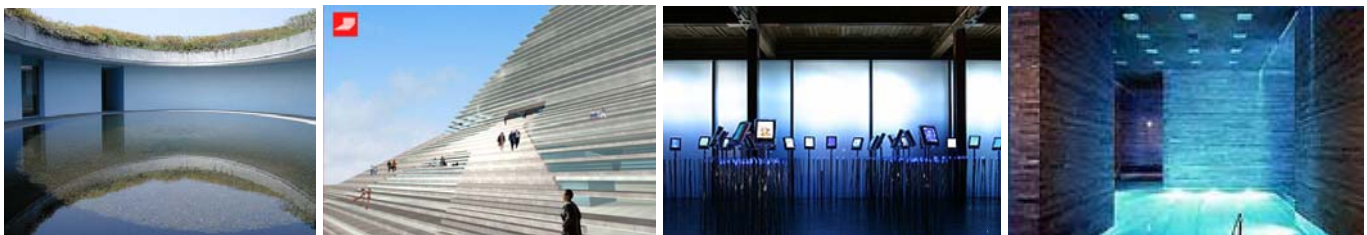
<sup>3</sup> Diagram of Axes drawn by Reena Mistry.

<sup>4</sup> Tyler, Norman. “Historic Preservation: an introduction to its history, principles, and practice”

<sup>5</sup> Koolhaas, Rem. “Preservation of History.”



The addition is accessed through the original; the idea of the new being unimaginable without the existing structures. However, by digging into Cranbrook’s underground, we had to also take into considerations the functional needs of a library and museum. The very evident and immediate problems with building beneath ground were involved with the lack of lighting and its accessibility. We looked to existing projects such as Tadao Ando’s Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum for inspiration. Ando’s museum is partially buried below grade with interesting cuts into the landscape to create courtyards and to bring in light. Not only does his Ando use subtractive methods to pull light to the underground, he also used additive methods such as triangular skylights that emerge from the earth adding to the landscape manmade forms. Other projects such as Bjarke Ingel Group’s Stockholm Contemporary Dance Theatre uses glass between horizontal bands in the façade to create a transparency and to connect the exterior space to interior. To bring light into the Cranbrook underground, we decided that creating subtractive skylights strategically placed over spaces such as student carrels would bring in the natural light needed. In addition to the skylights, we’ve redesigned the stairs from the propylaea to the Triton Pools to have glass instead of concrete risers in the stair between the concrete treads to bring in light but also to allow visitors a glimpse of the new world below. A courtyard containing a sculpture court and outdoor café seating adjacent to the new staircase brings more curiosity to the new underground. Spaces such as the student carrels between the bookshelves were inspired from UW School of Architecture’s Musagetes Library while the interactive media info area was inspired by the media garden in David Adjaye’s Nobel Peace Centre. Materials used to create the new underground world of Cranbrook were inspired from Peter Zumthor’s Thermal Baths. Zumthor’s underground structure brings to life a new world through its materials; slate bricks and dramatic lighting create a new exciting experience of being sunken underground. Circulation between the varying galleries were derived from personal experience through art galleries including the MOMA and the ICA.



Left to Right: Ando’s Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, BIG’s Stockholm Contemporary Art Museum<sup>6</sup>, Adjaye’s Meda Garden<sup>7</sup>, Zumthor’s Thermal Baths.

Although many elements of the new addition were derived from knowledge of other underground projects, libraries and museums, the most influential project remains as the existing Cranbrook Academy of Art library and museum. To create an addition to Cranbrook is look further than simply designing a structure to meet its growing needs; it is to create a structure that compliments and respects the existing. The new must be sensitive to the old, as without the preexisting, the new could not exist.

<sup>6</sup> "...BIG..." Bjarke Ingels Group

<sup>7</sup> Adjaye, David. "Recent Work."

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