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# SAARINEN'S SUBVERSIVE THRONES: MODERN RESISTANCE OF CRAFTED REGIONALISM

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## ABSTRACT

Eliel Saarinen, promoted modern design organically derived from the experience of place and subverted modernist universal principals. By using local craft and forms, he resisted modern formal abstraction, uniformity and standardization. Demonstrating the organic principle of cities, as consistent with that of chairs, Saarinen wrote, “Take for instance the story of that humble chair. During thousands of years there have been made millions and more millions of chairs, yet you may select one of these quite at random—except for those that stupid and pernicious imitation has brought forth --- and you can trace its origin to time and people. The truer this chair expresses the best of its time and people, the more it possesses those qualities that could further the growth of that cultural tree of its epoch. And the more there were of those forms which possessed similar expressive qualities, the stronger the expressive formation of that cultural tree was able to grow.” Asserting the inseparability of ‘form-order’ and ‘social-order,’ This paper compares his 1908 Koti Chair and his 1929 Cranbrook Side Chair, both grounded in experienced place yet situated in differing contexts of Finland and the U.S.A, as examples of regional subversion to claims of modern universality.

chairs tell us about their users. From a design history perspective we can analyze the significance of the rush seating, ladder-back splat in contrast to the cabriole legs and upholstery as evocative of distinct social classes. We search for clues from the formal and historical context. Through the two paintings Van Gogh expresses the personality of things and their users. However more importantly, the paintings are conversations on canvas that frame a complex friendship. As material expressions of connections to people, place, history and shapes, the chairs offer a prelude to the story of two other modern chairs, by Finnish designer Eliel Saarinen: one crafted in Finland 1896 (about 8 years after Van Gogh’s paintings) and the other in Cranbrook, Michigan, 1929.

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Figure 1: Vincent Van Gogh, *Gauguin’s armchair*, Arles, December 1888, London, National Gallery

Figure 2: Vincent Van Gogh, *Vincent’s Chair with his Pipe*, December 1888, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.

In art history, the comparison of Vincent Van Gogh’s 1888 Chairs: Chair with His Pipe and Gauguin’s Arm Chair, is often referenced. What makes the comparison so compelling is the force of personality that the chairs project. The empty seats become markers embodying figures of Van Gogh and Gauguin. It does so through the use of color, the style of chairs, the style of interiors, the materials and the left behind objects.....a cigar on one, a lit lamp and modern novel on the other. The



Figure 3: Eliel Saarinen, Koti Chair, 1896

Figure 4: Eliel Saarinen, Cranbrook Side Chair, 1929

Unlike Van Gogh’s chairs, these two images offer us no contextual clues. The compulsion of personality we feel towards Van Gogh’s paintings is neutralized in the images of Saarinen’s chairs. Instead, we have two spot-lit chairs with imbedded significance independent identifiable users. The objective modernity that begins to show itself in Van Gogh’s representation of absence matures into

Saarinen's furniture design. However, I want to claim that the evolution does not diminish the compulsion of contextual personal identity present in Van Gogh's chair paintings rather the stories become about collective belonging instead of specific individuals. Place, not person, exhibiting specific characteristics give Saarinen's designs character. These encounters of local narrative and universal abstraction continue to resonate in contemporary post-industrial crafted conversation pieces and in design aspirations across the globe. What gives a modern chair character, if not the user, the maker or the historical context? I suspect, that the character of modern things develop in collective conversation, rather than by individual decree. Eliel Saarinen's chairs are subversive, in that they are seats at the table of global conversations and not isolated thrones of individual expression or imitations of an universal pattern.

This talk analyzes and compares two chairs as examples of collective regional resistance to modern universal authority. The comparison points to the ever-present critique of the modernist appeal towards universal, objective, formal abstraction, arising out of two different conversations and continents. I claim that Saarinen's work shows the social agency of design in the context of globalization through engaging and hybridizing conflicting design approaches. Alongside the formal and historical context, the conceptual conversation each Saarinen chair articulates makes this comparison different than Van Gogh's character chairs. The method of this paper, consistent with the thesis, compares and presents the two chairs, in 'conceptual' context extracted from his writings, as examples of constructive conversations in an era of globalization.

'The City: Its Growth, Its Decay, Its future' published in 1943, presents Saarinen's architectural principles of, expression, correlation and 'organic' order that defends the cultural agency of urban design. Likening, city development with chairs in history, he equalizes the arts, as well as scale of design. Design is viewed as a system organization the ties together different constructed components into a functional whole much like a biological system. For example, Saarinen correlates street patterns with biological circulation patterns. A healthy city, much like a healthy body grows, is strong in circulation and muscle, without cancerous nodes of congestion or decomposition. The body-city analogy extends to his understanding of chair design. His 1948, "The

Search for Form in Art and Architecture' tells us, "Form must follow this human body, no matter whether the chair be found in the pompous palace of Roman antiquity, or in the humble dwelling of the remote hamlet of today. It then would seem that the problem of the chair is pretty much limited to the practical requirements arising from the conveniences of the human body. And, as the human body, relatively speaking, always is the same as to shape and size, then, so one would think—even the chair is bound to be always more or less the same as to shape and size. And, yet, throughout its history the chair has had much significative meaning infused into its forms. Take at random one of these out of millions, and you can trace its origin—when genuine—as to time, race and country. It can tell its story just as plainly and clearly as it should be, for even minor objects should do it—and must—when form is genuine and true. Form must be born in closest contact with the intimacy of life." If according to Saarinen, things tell a story that depicts an intimacy with life, his chairs should show us interpretations of life conceived and constructed. With this assumption, we look to the stories embedded in the Koti chair and the Cranbrook side chair. These designs show us Saarinen's Hegelian perspective and the development of his subversion of modern universal ambitions in favor of collectively derived self-conscious formal logic.

The Koti chair (1896) embodies the turn of the century attention to progressive Nationalism. In the use of local materials and symbolism, we find evidence of lived tradition asserted. In the 'Search for Form' Eliel Saarinen aligns himself with the pioneering efforts "trying to bring freedom to style chained form" such as the Art and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil movements. In extolling the new direction of design, he begins with a confession related to his own involvement. He writes, "Considering, to begin with, the circumstances surrounding architecture, the writer was midst the pioneering for a new architectural form from its very start. For this reason it is natural to expect and pardonable, we hope—that thee following may have a subjective flavor to some extent, at least (Saarinen, 1948)." Along with his own efforts, he cites the works of Van de Velde, Josef Hoffman, Renie Mackintosh, Frank Lloyd Wright, Baillie Scott and Edgar Wood in contrast to what he viewed as Latin conservative stagnation. The culmination of the European efforts, occur in Paris 1925. As he writes, "Nobody is a prophet in his homeland; and so Louis Sullivan

and Frank Lloyd Wright were not appraised at their full value in their country. The efforts of Austria, Germany and Holland, even after they had gone on for decades, were considered strange movements. But when Paris finally started, then.....!" Countering 'style dictatorship' and 'the lack of fundamental principles,' Saarinen sought to exceed style derived of a single principle whether material, organic function, functionalistic, movement or streamline. The trend of an excellent idea used and then abused as style needed to be broken. The principle of 'organic order' held the promise of freedom for Saarinen and the 'Koti' chair is an example of such contextual expression and correlation.

The turn of the century European efforts evolved beyond a tradition of imitation and projected into a modern future of creative cultural expression. Demonstrating an active struggle to give modern living form, these styles practiced his theory of 'organic design' as total design, as 'embracing space.' Recognizing his own context, Saarinen encourages us to relate to our own time. "The author's mission is to bring the reader's mind into accord with the world of thought in his own era. The author's own world of thought, therefore cannot be independent with the pulse beat of his time." Correlation is Saarinen's source of an organic principle of design. Miming an ideology about materiality, movement or history is not progressive, giving voice to the modern experience, however is. The dependence on lived experience makes Saarinen's philosophy incompatible with modern ambitions of unified and universal formalized design principle, for example, principles of Miesian international style or CIAM principles of Le Corbusier. Organic design defined by experience gives visual order and harmony and is not an abstract imposition. By positing, a correlation of all elements that cultivates anew to changing contexts instead of merely imitating past prescriptions, the Koti chair celebrates Finnish turn of the century lived identity.

Although Saarinen's response to industrialization and mechanization was inspired by biological formal logic, he did not advocate an imitation of nature. Correlation and expression does not entail reproduction. While the machine holds the threat of disconnection by conceptual abstraction, nature holds the same danger as a pattern to be copied. In other words, he hoped to follow the logic of natural whole-part connections that 'naturalize,' not of particular natural form, like botanicals and animals. His indictment of repeated natural forms

extend to any dictatorship of style that once abstracted from life, dies. Just as there can be no eternal style, there can be no international style. The Koti chair expresses a moment in Finnish living, invoking symbols, forms, materials, proportions, colors, textures as, 'individuality of form must become modulated to fit local conditions of life and climate.'" (Saarinen, 1948) The task of design is the task of contextual modulation, much like lawyers who modulate the legal principles to fit individual circumstances.

An industrialized artificial world required cultural adaptation. Responding to changing circumstances was a new design negotiation that exercised self-conscious spirit that no longer merely mimed a past tradition or an abstract ideology. According to Saarinen, art evolved through the periods of unconsciousness, consciousness and self-consciousness. Hegelian cultural development in *Phenomenology of Spirit* was Saarinen's way to understand design development at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Koti chair represents an emergent glow of cultural self-awareness in the context of 1896 Finland that joined a European conversation about design progress. The language of progress and development though muted in the West, continues to animate design discussions in India, China, Africa and Latin America.

Consistent with the primacy of organic design that correlates and expresses lived experience, the Cranbrook Side Chair, 1929, is a piece from a collection designed for Saarinen's Cranbrook, Michigan, home. It was part of a dining room projecting, promoting and teaching an American modern interior. If the Koti chair reflects the dawn of a self-conscious design era, the Cranbrook chair reflects its fulfilment. Here abstracted lines unify the piece much like construction lines on a drafted drawing. The slight flare of the back splat, the warm muted tones of yellow and red, the gentle curves bespeak a self-referential language of repeated lines, curves and color. The Cranbrook dining room delivers a unified vision of American mid-west modernism asserted and promoted. Here the principle is the same as the Koti chair, to modulate principles of correlation, unity and expression to regional life.

The Koti chair was a voice in a conversation, alongside, Hoffman, Van de Velde, Mackintosh, Frank Lloyd Wright, about design that culminated in the 1925 Paris exposition. Correspondingly, the Cranbrook side chair is a response to the dual principles of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale*

*des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels* that ranged from the luxurious works of Ruhlman and Andre Gault to Le Corbusier's machine of modern living. The Cranbrook chair not only attempts to synthesize these efforts in Hegelian fashion but also transplants the dialogue into an American context. The chair, contextualized in a global debate becomes much less a statement of universal abstraction and instead becomes a site of cultural hybridization. In fact, not only was Saarinen a participant in trans-atlantic visual discourse, he was the principle designer for the "Architect and the Industrial Arts—An Exhibition of Contemporary American Design" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1929 becoming the official narrator of American design. In engaging with the American context, Saarinen, also directly confronts the role of the machine. Unlike the Koti chair laden with Finnish symbolism, the Cranbrook Side chair, speaks of precision, abstraction, simplicity and more importantly celebrates America's fascination with the machine, as well as with movement. The abstracted lines pay homage to the climate of streamline deco inspiration uniting the Moderne principles of crafted luxury and the machine-made.

If we look at the *formal* development of the chairs from Koti to Cranbrook, we see an increased level of abstraction and simplicity. However, if we look to the *conceptual* development of the chairs we find a complex cultural exchange fuelling the drive towards simplicity. The value of conceptual context analysis is in uncovering conversations that make design a critical/questioning process and not merely problem solving. By following Saarinen's voice, we follow his conversations that resonated in Europe and then in the U.S. True to his principles, he designed above dictates of imitated style (even his own) and sought to give shape and voice to lived experiences of a particular time and place. He offers us direction towards entering discussions about design in the era of globalization, sustainability, biomorphism, technophilia, post-industrial craft etc. The Koti to Cranbrook chairs display cultural evolution in the mode of self-conscious and organic understanding of design that resists a meta-narrative in favor of an ecology of debate and deliberation. For Saarinen, active creative life struggles to communicate multiple lived systems and does not succumb to lifeless imitation of a universal logic. The comparison of the chairs show Saarinen's struggle to speak a local visual language and to be understood globally.

The limitation of Saarinen's approach is that it rests on a primacy of the architect's vision. In both conversations, European and Trans-Atlantic, architects preside over the logic of design and establish a priority of the whole. Therefore, even though we see isolated images of the Koti chair and the Cranbrook chair, they do nevertheless present a part of a constructed visual system. The Cranbrook Chair is a component of the Cranbrook logic, just as the Koti Chair is a component of the logic of Finnish National Romanticism. Whether an object can achieve self-consciousness and become an autonomous logical visual system was not addressed. For Saarinen, objects are located, but themselves not locations. Consequently, Saarinen's subversion of universality, remains constrained by locality.

Now, what does the 20<sup>th</sup> century turn to self-conscious organic design tell us about our 21<sup>st</sup> century struggles with design and globalization? The resistance to universal principles fostering a stagnant culture of imitation and repression offers an example of creative empowerment. For us, the challenge becomes whether creative empowerment can be asserted by a visual logic specific to each *object*, as a site of cultural exchange. To follow Saarinen's prescription to self-conscious, cultural production we would need to first, be conscious of local traditions and visual logic, second, update the visual logic for contemporary relevance, and third, translate the local visual logic in order to communicate with others. The Saarinen chairs were multilingual and able to communicate the cultural European exchange of the Art Nouveau period between designers in Belgium, Scotland, Germany and the trans-Atlantic exchange of the American Deco, Bauhaus and Modern. The difference between globally communicable design and universal design resides in our ability to become visual polyglots. The challenge therefore, for emerging design markets in the developing world is not only to understand the visual language of the West but also to educate the global market about respective local visual languages. Meaning of things are no longer given by history, location, race, religion but mediated by design promotion, education, commercialization and reception. The mediation is the cultural modulation that Saarinen's subversion of universal design principles, in conversation. His chairs are seats at the table of a global design discourse and invite us to join in the conversation too. I would like to conclude with Saarinen's words... that "Duality of logic always establishes the parentage of

individuality” and suggest that agency of design in the context of globalization and social development depends on conscious local design development towards abstracted self-conscious global deliberation, where identity is achieved in collective engagement.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

A College of Liberal Arts International Travel Grant at Purdue University helped support the presentation of this paper at the conference.