Eliel SAARINEN (born, 1873, Finland—died, 1950, U.S.)

Finnish-American architect who influenced on modern architecture in the United States, particularly on skyscrapers and church design. In 1923 before moving to the United State, he became the leading architect of his generation in Finland with his well-known works that are Helsinki railroad station (1904–14), National Museum of Finland (1902-1904) in Helsinki and urban planning projects for Reval (now Tallinn), Estonia, and Canberra, Australia. Therefore, his design attitude could be divided into two phases. Practicing in Finland for 25 years, he first established an international character based on his National Romantic and Jugendstil-inspired architecture. The second phase of Eliel Saarinen’s career began when he emigrated to the United States in 1923, after placing second the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower competition. In this period, his city planning and Art Deco designs resonated through American cities in the first half of the 20th century. His son, Eero Saarinen, was also a famous American architect.

“Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context – a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan.” - Eliel Saarinen
In his childhood, he lived in the Russian territory of Ingermanland near St. Petersburg. Thus, the closeness of St. Petersburg provided the young Eliel Saarinen with a unique urban experience in more rural Finland.

He had essentially wished to be a painter, but in 1893, he entered the Helsinki Polytechnic Institute, graduating from the Department of Architecture in 1897.

In 1893, he was incorporated in the practice of architecture with Herman Gesellius and Armas Lindgren who were Institute classmates beginning practice together even before graduation. The Gesellius, Lindgren and Eliel Saarinen office continued until 1905 when Lindgren left the partnership; Gesellius and Eliel Saarinen stayed to practice together for two further years. The Saarinen-Gesellius-Lindgren partnership got its first commission the same year Saarinen graduated, for the Tallberg Apartments in Helsinki. The Gesellius Lindgren Saarinen partnership achieved early fame for its design of the Finnish pavilion at the Paris International Exposition of 1900.

This followed an important commission in 1899 for the office of a large insurance company in Helsinki. Their design of the Finnish National Museum in 1902 was another important commission.

In 1904, Saarinen married Gesellius’s sister, Louise, with whom he had two children - a daughter, Eva-Lisa, and a son, Eero.

After his partnership with both Lindgren and Gesellius ended, Eliel Saarinen expanded his practice to interest in city planning projects as well as building design. Saarinen gained international prominence two years later as an individual competitor, he won the competition for the design of the Helsinki railway station.
In 1911, he began the important projects of his city planner career. Saarinen met with city planning experts in Budapest to study that city’s plan, and he wrote a detailed criticism that appeared the following year.

Late in 1911 he also served as a consultant to the Town Planning Committee of the City of Tallinn, Estonia advising on conditions for a town planning competition. He entered the competition and was announced the winner for his plan of Tallinn in 1913.

In 1912, Saarinen took part in the international city planning competition for the new Australian capital-to-be, Canberra, he designed new capital only 19 days because he learned competition too late so he did not finish in detail, he won second prize while the winner was an American-born architect Walter Burley Griffin.

He had important contributions for Helsinki in the city planning. In between 1911-1915 he completed a detailed design for the Munkkiniemi-Haaga District that was a region of nearly 2,000 acres to be developed by a private company. Part of the street plan and the design of some of the squares and buildings of this area owe their origins to Saarinen’s proposals.

By the way, Saarinen began work on a master plan for the whole Helsinki metropolitan area. This project could not be supported by the municipality of Helsinki or any other governmental agency but his master plan was exhibited in 1915.
In 1922, Saarinen took second prize in a design competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower that was internationally regarded as a considerable solution to skyscraper architecture and made his name better known in America. He and his family emigrated to the United States where his career would focus on education as well as architectural practice the following year. However, he continued to spend his summers in Finland where he maintained an architectural office.

In 1925, Saarinen was asked by George G. Booth to design buildings for the Cranbrook Educational Center in Michigan, a project Booth planned to be similar to the Bauhaus idea in Germany and the American Academy in Rome.

At his new home, he designed most of the buildings for the Cranbrook Institute of Arts which he worked as the president from 1932 to 1946.

Between 1925 and 1945, at Cranbrook Eliel Saarinen completed the School for Boys, the Kingswood Schools for Girls, the Academy of Art, the Institute of Science, the museum and library, faculty housing, and the resident.

From 1932 until his death, he was director of the Institute’s graduate programs in city planning, urban design, and architecture. He presented his urban planning theories in his book, The City, Its Growth, Its Decay, Its Future, published in 1943.

Beginning in 1936 Saarinen was in partnership with his son, Eero and J. Robert F. Swanson, his former student from Michigan. His best-known works from the latter years of his life include the Tabernacle Church of Christ (1942), and the Christ Lutheran Church (1949).

He was honored with the gold medals of the American Institute of Architects and the Royal Institute of British Architects, decorated by the Finish government, elected a member of several national academies and other societies, and awarded numerous honorary degrees, Saarinen enjoyed his productive career until his death at the age of seventyseven.

In 1950, Eliel Saarinen died in Michigan, and is buried at Hvitträsk, Finland.
The Gesellius Lindgren Saarinen partnership

Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen collaborated professionally for almost ten years and achieved remarkable success in numerous architectural competitions. Their growing name led to a large number of private commissions besides public architectural projects. They designed many of Finland’s best-known buildings of the early 20th century, such as Hvitträsk, their shared studio and residence the Suur-Merijoki manor building, the buildings of the Pohjola insurance company and the Pohjoismaiden Osakepankki bank, as well many villas and apartment buildings at Kasarmitori Square and Katajanokka in Helsinki. In 1905 Lindgren became head of the architecture school at Helsinki University of Technology and withdrew from this collaboration. Gesellius and Saarinen continued as partners until 1907. After 1907 all three worked separately.

The trio’s buildings were the exact example of the national romantic architecture of Finland, also in their early works Jugendstil influence was appeared clearly. The residential building at Sazamakatu 7 in Helsinki, as does their Finnish Pavilion. The Finnish pavilion, however, was an amalgam of Jugendstil elements with clearly recognizable derivatives from the tradition of Finnish medieval stone church architecture, while the overall approach to ornamentation suggested a move towards a distinctly Finnish character. With their imposing Pohjola Insurance Company Headquarters in Helsinki (1900-01) they successfully introduced the national romantic style into Finnish commercial architecture. The design for the Suur-Merijoki Manor house arguably the finest example of national romantic domestic architecture. Another good example of the partnership Hvittrask was built by the partners to serve as their studio and home. Gesellius, Lindgren, and Saarinen began work on major commission that focused public attention on the national romantic architecture with the design of the Finnish National Museum.
Hvittrask located on a steep hillside outside Helsinki the compound is ordered about a courtyard within a series of terraced gardens. Presented as a reinterpretation of Finland's vernacular past, the picturesque massing of the complex is articulated with a rustic stone base and stuccoed or shingled walls, has upper stories of log construction, and is capped by a tiled roof. The interior spaces of the Eliel Saarinen house contain a variety of images and detail qualities: the great hall alludes to vernacular farmhouses and a sitting area incorporates motifs from medieval churches; inglenooks and sleeping rooms are executed in the arts-and-crafts style. These spaces are furnished with appointments designed by either the Saarinens or their artist friends. Suur-Merijoki, a splendid country house located near Viipuri, contains the bestdeveloped Eliel Saarinen interiors of his early career. Moreover, these interiors demonstrate a realized total artistic conception facilitated by the close working relationship between architect, artist, and artisan.

The Central Railroad Station, Helsinki (built 1910-1914) is antitraditional, with spacious interiors and monumental proportions, similar in character to the smaller buildings of Richardson and Sullivan.
Herman Gesellius (1874 – 1916)

Finnish architect
Gesellius’s the most famous work projected under his own name is the Wuorio House in Helsinki. Gesellius designed it from 1908 to 1909, and Lindgren completed it from 1913 to 1914. It highlights architectural sculpture designed by Felix Nylund (1878–1940). Gesellius remove from architectural work in 1912 because of serious illness.

Armas Lingren (1874, 1929)

Finnish Architect
In 1902–12 Lindgren was the Arts Director of the Central School of Applied Arts. He wrote a textbook on styles of building and decoration, published in 1914. In 1919 he was appointed Professor of Architecture at Helsinki University of Technology. As a professor, he taught and influenced the notable Finnish architect Alvar Aalto.

Armas Lindgren’s work with old buildings continued through his whole life. He made numerous aquarelles on churches, mainly the wooden churches of the 17th and 18th century, and was one of the first architects who understood the architectural value of Finnish wooden churches.

Lindgren’s solo work includes the Kaleva insurance company building in Helsinki and several dwelling houses. His dwellings include the Ribbinghof row houses in Kulosaaari and the Kone ja Silta construction company’s housing (together with Bertel Liljequist) in Vallila, Helsinki. The designs made by the office Lindgren–Liljequist in 1914–26 include Hanko Town Hall and Säynätsalo Church.
National Romantic Architecture and Finland

In this period, Finland was undergoing a period of national self-awareness, a nationalism founded on the desire to search out and understand traditional Finnish cultural origins. Finnish national architecture expresses a strong historical bent rooted in medieval imagery with some references also to Art Nouveau or Jungstein. While National Romanticism paralleled the Arts and Crafts movement in England, and Art Nouveau, Secessionism and Jugendstil on the Continent, it was together effective in the Finns defining their national character and aspirations. Formally, National Romantic architecture is characterized by several features. It is profoundly composed, with irregular asymmetrical plans and masses. Mass and volume, rather than surface, are emphasized. It also employs tactile materials: granite or soapstone (left uncut or often crudely dressed), hand-molded or specially made bricks, rough-hewn logs, and wooden siding, shingles, and roofing tiles. Thus ragged and irregular building masses and profiles are complemented by the use of heavily rusticated masonry surfaces, protruding log ends, and numerous textural variation in materials. While the forms and images comprising National Romantic architecture contained both national and international precedents, the ornamentation featured motifs of a specifically national character derived from Finnish nature and folklore. It was common that the architect would design not only the house but also decorations such as doors and statues. There are dozens of beautiful and funny details in the national romantic buildings of Helsinki such as frogs, squirrels, and owls.

The Central Railroad Station
America and Chicago Turbine Factory

The determinative factor that affects developing American modernism and design was the huge migration of foreign talent. More than a third of the designers in American Modern were immigrants drawn by economic opportunity or escape from political oppression. Even these artists radical new design styles were not yet widely understood in the US, the US was a country that accepted initiatives. Eliel Saarinen brought new elegance, delicacy and sophistication to American modernist design. While he working in the US through the 1940s, his style shaped and evolved Art Deco into the stripped back, West Coast style that would define mid-century Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco.

He is one of the precursor designer that reflected the Europe art deco to American modernist architecture. The sophisticated design relies on geometric forms, with fine proportions offsetting simple decoration. From his broad city plans and architecture to his detailed furniture and silverware designs, Eliel Saarinen sought balance between geometry and nature.

With the reasons that interrupted by the First World War changing tastes and economic problems in Finland because of Finland becoming an independent nation (declared from Russia), after his design for the Tribune Tower in Chicago was placed second, Saarinen moved along the United States and settled in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Especially, most of the competition-winning buildings were never built but competition considered the beginning of the Modernist movement in America. In Saarinen’s proposal was not based on any recognizable historical style, its fluent vertical lines its rhythmic setbacks evocative of medieval tower. It was Europe style supplied answers to aesthetic problem of the American skyscrapers. His application of verticality to an aerodynamic modern design won praise from across the US and influenced many other architects in their designs for the early generation of skyscrapers; even Louis Sullivan.

Tea Urn and Tray Design of Eliel Saarinen

His Proposal of the Tribune Tower in Chicago
Cranbrook Academy of Art, known as the cradle of American modernism, was founded by George Booth. He and his wife’s plans were made for an academy of art based on the American Academy in Rome. George Booth approached Eliel Saarinen with this idea when he was a professor at the University of Michigan. Both were inspired by the vision of English the Arts and Crafts movement, soon spread to the United States so they began to work together quickly. Informal art education began at the Academy in the late 1920s, in studios built for the artists and crafts people working with Saarinen. The Academy of Art was officially sanctioned in 1932 with Saarinen placed as president. He continued to design new buildings for the campus with Academy student assistants. The original Cranbrook Institute of Science building was completed in 1937 and the Academy art museum and library in 1942. The campus which has been described as an “architectural and horticultural treasure” was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark in 1989, considered a complete example of Saarinen’s genius. He also headed the department of architecture and city planning there. His son Eero was helping his father design furniture and fixtures for the Cranbrook campus by the time he was in his teens. Eero also studied and taught at Cranbrook, worked on furniture designs, and practiced architecture with his father.
The American Academy in Rome

The American Academy in Rome is a leading American overseas center for independent studies and advanced research in the fine arts and humanities.

Cranbrook Academy of Art

Cranbrook Academy of Art is devoted solely to graduate study in the arts, offering master’s degree programs in fine arts and architecture. Areas of study include architecture, ceramics, design, fibre arts, metalsmithing, painting, photography, printmaking, and sculpture. The faculty consists of an artist-in-residence in each department; visiting artists also lecture, conduct workshops, and evaluate student work.
Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum and Library

The buff yellow brick and Mankato limestone-clad building consist of two rectangular wings separated by a large open propylaeum (defined as the structure forming the entrance to a temple) that shelters the entrances to the museum and library wings. The museum block to the west is almost window-less by necessity, while the library wing possesses a bank of windows along the north elevation that provides natural light to the two-story reading room.
Eero Saarinen (1910 – 1961)

Son of pioneering Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen, he gained fame as one of the leaders of the International Style, especially, he carried his father’s later rational Art Deco into a new futurist internationalism, regularly using sweeping curves and abundant glass. Eero followed in the family tradition, studying design under his father at Cranbrook Academy of Art before moving to study in Paris. In 1929, Eero left for Paris where he studied sculpture then he began the Yale architecture program the following year.

He worked for, and in collaboration with, his father from 1936 to 1950. The two Saarinens designed the group of 25 buildings that make up the General Motors Technical Center (1945-1956). It is important for Eero because creating a rational steel and glass design different from anything designed by Eliel Saarinen, Eero Saarinen found himself sought after by other major US companies. The leadership of Eliel seems to have been dominant. “As his partner,” said Eero, “I often contributed technical solutions and plans, but only within the concept he created.”

His first significant move out of his father’s shadow came in 1947 when, still working at Eliel’s practice, Eero entered his own design into the competition to design St Louis’ Gateway Arch and ultimately won the commission. The memorial is a stainless-steel arch in the shape of an inverted weighted catenary curve.
The City: Its Growth, Its Decay, Its Future

The book is based on his city planning town-building ideas especially about organic decentralization that is his theoretical system. Also, the book follows the organic growth of the cities from the beginning of civilization until twentieth-century, cities were suffered by urban disease, before ‘toward the future’ the cure of this disease: cleaning, rebuilding and modern principles of traffic organization and hygiene. It was prepared for discussions at Cranbrook.

In the text, there were some keywords ‘organic order, concentration&decentralization and organic decentralization. he explained their two analyses of town-building. First analysis about reasons town-buildings success and failure, according to him, whether or not it is successful depends on organic order, this is essential and imperative one. I understood that the behind reason of town buildings success related to quite connection with organic order. In the second part of analysis town-building contemporary and future problems should be solved with architectural principles of organic order.

The most important harvest from this first part of our analysis will be the essential fact that the fundamental reason for success or failure in all town-building depends on whether or not town formation is based on the architectural principle of organic order. This, we will find, is not only an essential fact, but also an imperative one. Consequently, when we – in the second part of our analysis – come to investigate contemporary and future town-building problems exclusively, we are going to do it with the presupposition that, behold: any problem must be solved so as to bring the physical formation of the town into accord with this architectural principle of organic order.
Organic order could be learned from past experiences in town building. Faced some problems in almost all phases of town building, these problems are quite new to previous experiences, things that were not in the previous periods. I think he mentioned technical problems or new transportation problems etc. about town buildings.

Concentration and decentralization was opposite terms. When the cities grow quickly, concentration increases. With this growth decentralization causes existence suburbs, satellite towns, neighbor communities, and all sorts of miscellaneous settlements about the core of the original centralization. Concentralization in the overgrown cities has caused compactness and disorder and though these, deterioration and spread of slums. So this problems can be solved with organic decentralization.

While studying contemporary and future town-building problems, we will soon discover that the imperativeness of this architectural principle of organic order is almost the only lesson that past experiences in town building can teach us. In almost all the other phases of town-building we are confronted with problems so entirely new, so completely reversed, and so utterly absent from the experience of any previous era as to make a thoroughly new orientation most urgent. Indeed, as radical a change in the means of transportation

“Organic decentralization” must be the key-word, and it must be the leading theme throughout our whole analysis of modern problems. So it must be, for only through an organic solution of the problems of decentralization can organic order be brought into the city and made lastingly effective.
Organic Order

According to his book The Search for Form in Art and Architecture (same analysis with the City) he mentioned organic order with these sentences:

The principles of an organic order have often been referred to. It has been referred to particularly because of its close relation to the structural consistency of the universe. And in view of this fact, we preferred the principles as the fundamental principles of architecture. Expression and correlation are daughter principle of the universal principle of the organic order.

The expression is that natural form richness is established through a certain significative order different each case and expressive of the meaning behind the form.

Correlation is our subject of study was the landscape, we learned that in the landscape there must exist a trend to correlation so as to keep things together and to make the whole an integrality of correlated order.
Organic Decentralization Theory concerns urban development and spatial layout structure of Eliel Saarinen, developed to dealing with the various problems of over-expansion of the big cities. According to Saarinen, cities take a piece step by step: new towns do not suddenly separate from the central city but move away organically. A city is also made up of many cells with certain gaps in between. This gaps aim was to control cells growth so the growth of the ceilings more flexible and less dangerous. This approach of theory comes from living organism.

Saarinen maintains that to control the decay of modern cities and promote urban development, three goals should be achieved. First, transfer all kinds of activities of the run-down area to suitable places according to a proposed plan. Second, restore the above-mentioned emptied area and convert it for other most suitable purposes. Third, protect the value in use of both the old and the new (contrast idea of Le Corbusier Radiant city). Therefore, organic decentralization is to divide the crowded areas of the big city into a couple of centralized units and then organize them into “correlated and functional concentrated points in activities”.

Organic Decentralization Theory holds that some public and urban administrative department must be distributed at the center of the city. Both heavy and light industries should be removed out of the urban center. Thus, a lot of empty land of large acreage in the city center should be used to increase green land and supply housing for those who have to work at the central area of the city.

After World War II, many big cities in the West guided by Saarinen’s Organic Decentralization Theory adjusted their urban development strategies and formed a healthy and orderly development mode. Greater London Plan and Grand Paris Plan are considered to be the most famous examples.
In 1915, Saarinen and Bethel Jung made an expansion plan of 170,000 people for a Finnish Helsinki New Town Munkkiniemi-Haaga, also known as the “Greater Helsinki” plan. Conforming to the Organic Decentralization Theory, it states that quasi-independent towns should be set up near to Helsinki, and the city should be given directed guidance to control its further expansion. Also, concerned that there was not enough space in the core of the city for the expanding commercial center, with a suggestion that the Helsinki railway station be moved three kilometres northwards to create space for a new ‘City’. Following his idea, Saarinen and Jung planned an entirely new city center northwest of the old neo-classical center.

Eliel Saarinen’s Munkkiniemi–Haaga town plan

Eliel Saarinen’s plans for the decentralization of Greater Helsinki, Finland (left), and Greater Tallin, Estonia (right)
Camillo Sitte/ City Planning according to Artistic Principles

City Planning according to Artistic Principles is not purely an attack on the modern planning systems of the time, but an attempt to define a unity between modern and artistic methods through the creation of suitable public space. He maintains that the key element of successful city planning is the plaza or public square. There exists a context and history of use in these public spaces which make them vital to cities. These public spaces concentrated all the prominent buildings of their type in one pure space within the city where all distraction and unnecessary elements could be excluded. Sittes’s city planning ideas (sittesque vision) influenced Eliel Saarinen. Based on Sitte’s work, Eliel Saarinen was able to combine medieval and baroque organizational notions into fully developed spatial ensembles that had uniquely urban qualities.

Le Corbusier/ Radiant City

The Radiant City (well-known name Ville Radieuse) is an unrealized urban masterplan by Le Corbusier. Designed to contain effective means of transportation, as well as an abundance of green space and sunlight, Le Corbusier’s city of the future would not only provide residents with a better lifestyle, but would contribute to creating a better society. Though radical, strict and nearly totalitarian in its order, symmetry and standardization, Le Corbusier’s proposed principles had an extensive influence on modern urban planning and led to the development of new high-density housing typologies. However, for application of this plan required massive destruction but based Eliel Saarinen organic order and decentralization theory, the city’s old properties protected or repaired.
There was a track with the name Elie Saarinen from Elements of an Incomplete Map Pt. II by NORTH of AMERICA, his and son had huge contributions on modern American Architecture.

Link: https://northofamerica.bandcamp.com/track/elie-saarinen

Note: I am aware of the presentation longness but Elie Saarinen was so productive architect so it was out of my control, I want to mention his important works and ideas in detail. Thanks.