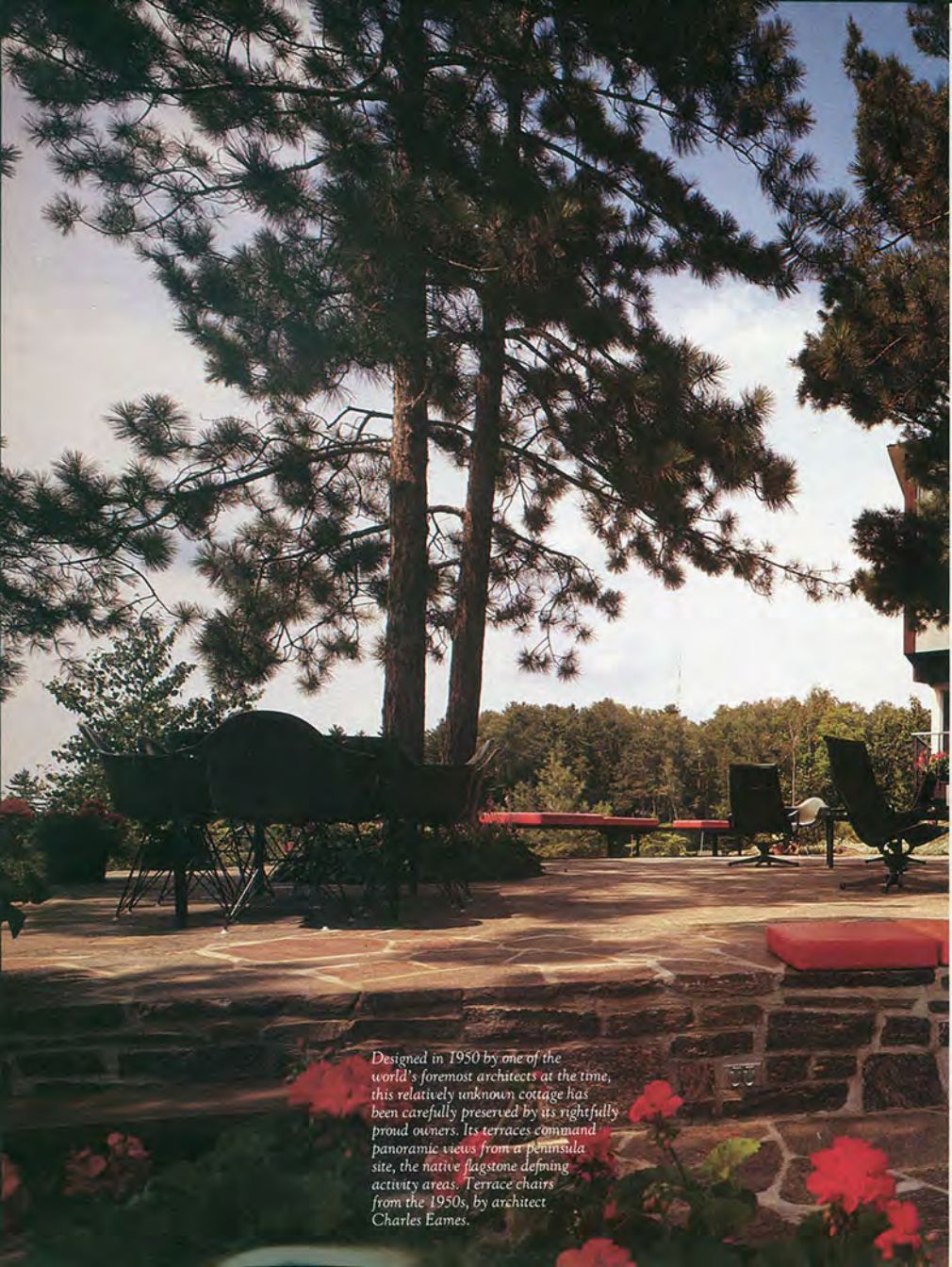


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*Designed in 1950 by one of the world's foremost architects at the time, this relatively unknown cottage has been carefully preserved by its rightfully proud owners. Its terraces command panoramic views from a peninsula site, the native flagstone defining activity areas. Terrace chairs from the 1950s, by architect Charles Eames.*



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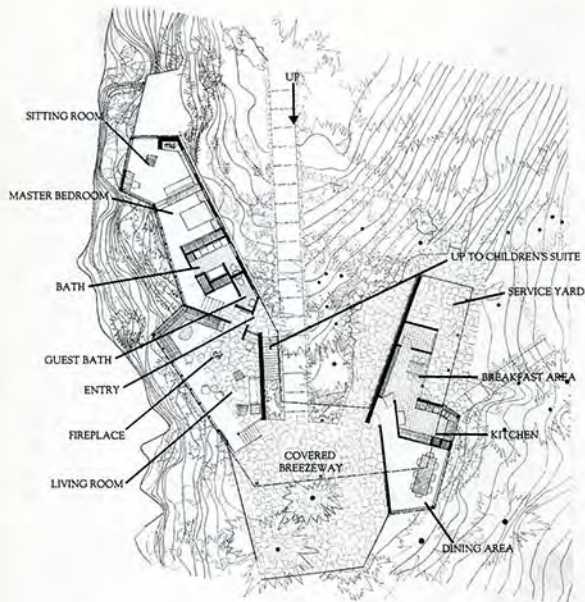
# Ontario's Saarinen

by Peter C. Papademetriou

*Never before published, this summer home by architect Eero Saarinen is a provocative experiment in style, a marriage of modernist principles and rugged regional expression*

PHOTOGRAPHY BALTHAZAR KORAB LTD.

## Saarinen



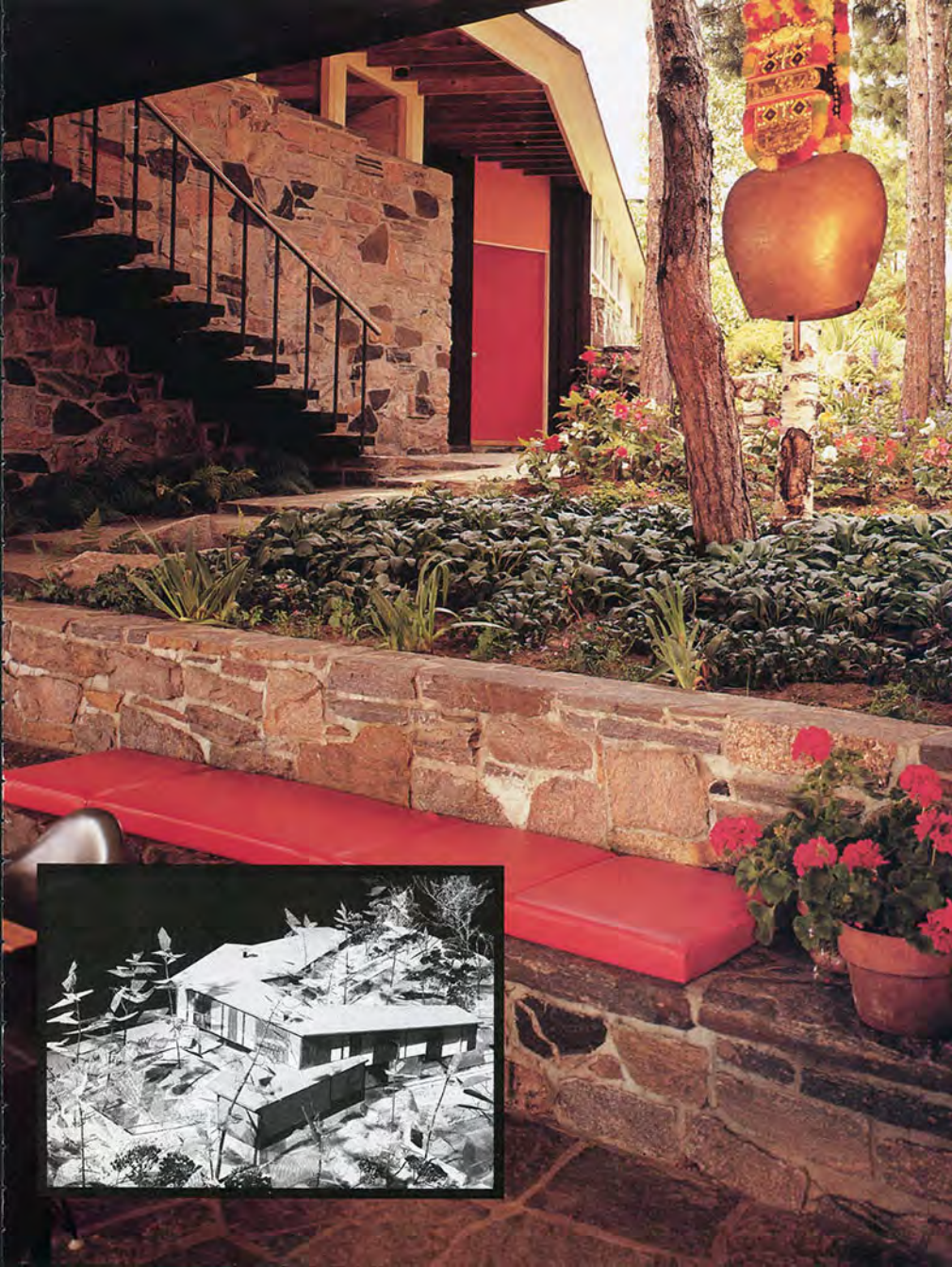
Eero Saarinen, one of the most famous modern American architects, was also one of the most enigmatic. His career resists simple characterization because his buildings present no identifiable "look" of easily discernible unity. Well known and respected by both his profession and the lay public during his lifetime (he made the cover of *Time* in July 1956), Saarinen's true complexity has been in part obscured by such familiar monuments as Washington's Dulles Airport, his TWA terminal building at New York's JFK, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Detroit's General Motors Technical Center, Yale's Stiles and Morse colleges and its Ingalls Hockey Rink and—his only skyscraper—the black granite CBS headquarters building on New York's 52nd Street.

Saarinen's tragic and sudden death in 1961 at age 51 removed him from the architectural scene in a period of tremendous reevaluation, and his work fell into some disrepute during the critique of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, however, a new generation is reexamining his buildings to rediscover how he used the exploration of relevant vernaculars for problems vastly more varied than a single-minded approach could sustain. In fact, Saarinen's ad hoc approach precluded the possibility of a personal style, and contributed to his elusive identity. Additionally, what is now seen as the substance of his



The social core of the house, an outdoor space between the two wings of the ground level, is sheltered by the children's suite above. A gathering place set into the native rock, this covered breezeway, the hub of all activities, is continually passed through by family members going elsewhere. INSET: An aerial view of the Saarinen model, looking northwest, illustrates how the house clings organically to its natural setting. LEFT: Ground-floor plan.

Model photo and plan courtesy  
Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo  
& Associates.





career lasted little more than a decade, from the death of his famous father and partner, Eliel Saarinen, in 1950, to his own death eleven years later.

This little-known lakeside summer home in Ontario was not Saarinen's only connection to Canada. He was a principal juror in the first design competition for the National Gallery in Ottawa (1952-54), a juror for the Windsor, Ontario, civic auditorium competition of 1953, for the Vancouver civic auditorium competition of 1955 and for the Toronto civic square and city hall competition of 1958. The Ontario cottage, however, is of special interest, and not just for Canadians.

Saarinen created seven known single-family residential designs. Two were renovations (one a modest addition, designed at age 18, to a burned-out section of the family home, *Hvitträsk*, in Finland; the other involving interior alterations to a Victorian Michigan farmhouse where he lived), and only four houses were built.

The original commission for the Ontario cottage came at the beginning of Saarinen's independent career. Its uniqueness lies in part in the architect's response to the client's needs and the specific character of the site itself, but also in his very evident unconcern for stylistic identity or aesthetic consistency with other work. At the time, in late 1950, the principal project in the office was the General Motors Technical Center, whose construction (the then-largest post-World War II private corporate project in the U.S.) would establish Eero Saarinen's position among the modernist avant-garde. The high-tech precision of GM—including the then-innovative technique of a minimalist industrialized metal curtain wall with windows held in place by neoprene gaskets, in emulation of the windshield glass of GM cars—stands in vivid contrast to the rustic aesthetic and informal technique of this Canadian vacation home.

The clients were an American couple with five children, whose family had spent summers in Canada for several generations. While they had come to know Saarinen through an earlier association, the vacation home was their first personal project. The house was not winterized and was conceived as a "shorts and bare feet" environment, to make the most of outdoor living. Its organization was generated by an initial "cluster" concept, which proposed a house for the children, a house for the parents and a separate common space. The site itself became the

major factor in Saarinen's scheme.

This lakeside site, a rocky point, undoubtedly inspired Saarinen; nothing could more suggest the appearance of his native Finland than its landscape of rocks, trees and water. A survey plotted all trees 10 cm or larger in trunk diameter, and the approximately 280 square metres of space needs for the house were essentially inserted into land that remained.

The visual character of the house is a studied informality, an irregular geometry that accommodates the vagaries of terrain. Its basic U-shape wraps around the high point of the peninsula, near the crest but not on top of it. This design brings an arriving visitor into gradual contact with the house: the sense of arrival is first to the crest of the rise, after which comes a descent to a lower level, where a modest entry opens onto a breezeway framing a panoramic view beyond.

The first indication of the house itself is its copper roof, which nearly touches the ground, separated only by a narrow band of windows. This hovering roof is a unifying element, its continuous slope contrasting with a variety of levels contained within the interior.

The actual core of the house is that breezeway, formed by Saarinen's clever retention of the spirit of the original cluster idea while bringing the parts together through a separation of functions on the lower level and roofing over the breezeway with a "bridge" of children's rooms and related spaces on the second floor. This breezeway space, nestled against the rock, is the true social core of the home. Beyond the breezeway a series of flagstone terraces (several added since Saarinen's time) looks out over the lake, cooled by winds from the water.

The interiors are angled to capture a variety of views. A short wing containing a service yard, kitchen and interior eating area benefits from morning light, while a longer wing, with the main living room and master suite, enjoys western light and sunsets. Because the prow of the U faces south, the children's rooms and all communal spaces receive continuous sunlight.

As the house levels rise or fall with site contours, a sense of separation exists between areas, although all are under the continuous ceiling plane; this provides a simultaneous sense of two scales of occupation. One unique architectural detail: to achieve a constant ceiling depth despite structural spans that varied widely because of the

*OPPOSITE: View from the entry into the living room, whose modest size indicates a secondary space designed for inclement weather. Slight differences in level accommodate the house to its site and suggest a separation of spaces that are actually continuous. Natural wood and stone reinforce a rustic feeling, the informality underscored by the irregular geometry of room shapes. The freestanding metal fireplace was designed by Kevin Roche, an assistant to Saarinen, who himself has since become a major figure in U.S. architecture. The "womb" armchair half hidden behind the fireplace was designed by Saarinen in 1948 for Knoll International, N.Y. It and Saarinen's built-in seating elements around the fire evoke a cave-like interior secure against the elements.*

## Saarinen

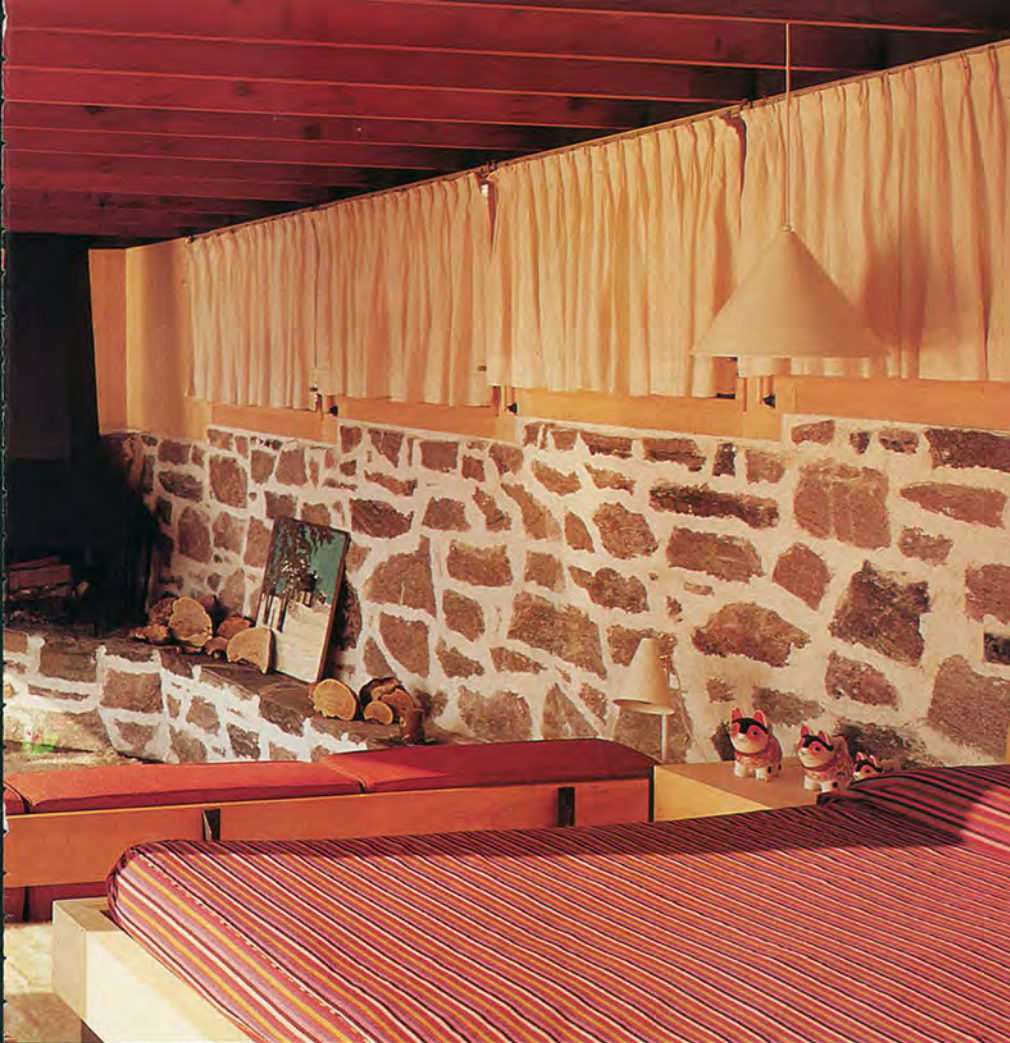


ABOVE: The owners' suite occupies the end of the cottage's west wing, allowing privacy. A change in level once again fits house to contours, as well as defining a comfortable sitting area adjacent to the sleeping level. A built-in sofa acts as a balustrade between the levels. The bentwood armchair is a Saarinen design. One side of this room opens out to lake views and a private balcony, while the other is tucked into the rock. The stepped configuration of the curtained windows on that side responds to the slope of the land just outside.

irregular plan, Saarinen chose an optimum depth for the ceiling beams and simply varied the spacing between them. This also created a rhythmic pattern in the ceiling. Such a move goes against the grain of true modern orthodoxy, however, which would have opted for a more modular structure, and suggests that the Canadian house embodies a different aesthetic. For Saarinen was indulging here in an evocative, allusive vocabulary at the same time as he sought to advance the symbolic and environmental content of the modernist tradition.

The "organic" forms of the house do not contradict the





uses of technology in its widest sense. Overhangs and cantilevers, lightweight structure, repetitive modules, large areas of glass and continuous strips of windows mark this unmistakably as a modern building. The "natural" materials do not stand in opposition to the logic of contemporary construction, and the "rustic" appearance is achieved with abstract precision. The ornamental program derives from indigenous materials used in a straightforward manner and with a limited and restrained palette.

Here is a cabin whose surfaces are both a vernacular of board-and-batten vertical wood siding, as well as a kind of

Mondrian-like composition of planes and lines, an assemblage of pieces and a singular unity. The hand-hewn and the industrial coexist simultaneously. Saarinen was here able to humanize the message of modernism, whose universal expression he transformed into a contextual regionalism that grows from the site and celebrates the summer life of its occupants. □

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