

Gunnar Birkerts

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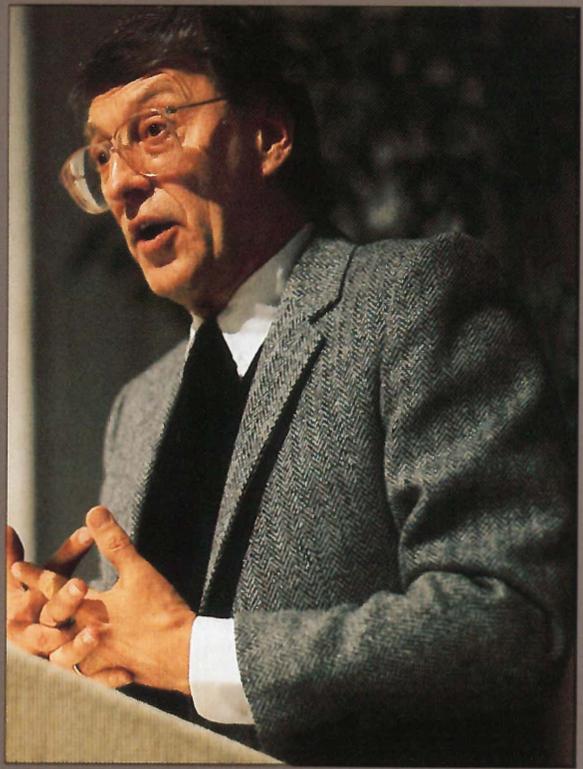
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Architecture

School of Architecture
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign



“If you have a building that has a need, a particular charge to do something; if there is soul somewhere in the program, that the building has to talk, inspire or project; then this is the biggest challenge: To express the soul, the feeling, the meaning, the essence of what it is and what it does.”

Gunnar Birkerts

Bruno Zevi
Editor, *L'architettura*

There is an almost infallible thermometer by which to measure the creative power of an architect. Let him come, even for only a few weeks, to the American Academy in Rome, and see what happens afterwards. If his buildings develop a pseudo-classical, pseudo-eclectic, or post-modern flavour, this means that he is rather weak: he copied the International Style before, and is now ready to copy other fashionable styles, regardless of whether they are old or new. However, if, after the Roman experience, he becomes more courageously modern, then he is a true artist with a personal language that has been enriched by the past yet always continues looking forward.

Well, Gunnar Birkerts was in Rome, and his architecture became more anticlassical. He understood the organic lesson rising behind and below the conventional styles. He emphasized the idea that the modern must be really modern to be able to reflect the past (like in the Law School Library addition); otherwise, it is a parody of it.

Architectural culture today is so confused that it is rather easy to recognize a good architect. First of all, by exclusion. Ask yourself if he is Palladian, neo-vernacular, classical in the sense of producing "boxes," or formalistic in the sense of considering visual effects more important than human spaces. Is he pseudo-baroque, pseudo-Islamic, pseudo- . . . , or post-mortem (sorry: post-modern)? If he is none of this obsolete stuff, he is certainly a good architect. Like Birkerts.

How good? I can suggest another system of evaluation. Examine one of his buildings. If you get the whole meaning of it in five minutes, then he is not very good. If it takes you hours to discover all that is in it, if it is a "difficult" building to grasp in its dynamic spaces, then he is an excellent architect.



Kevin Roche

Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates
1982 Pritzker Architecture Prize

I first met Gunnar Birkerts when he arrived to work in Eero Saarinen's office in the early fifties. At that time the office staff was composed of two groups with different architectural philosophies. There were those who had been attracted there because of Eliel Saarinen and Eero's early work, and those who had come because of Eero's current interest in Mies van der Rohe's expression, particularly as it was manifested in the General Motors Technical Center then under construction — almost a division between romantics and classicists.

These philosophical differences aside, we had a very close social life as we were isolated from the cultural life of Bloomfield Hills, the home of upper-level automobile executives. Gunnar immediately entered into the spirit of things, had a ready sense of humor (essential to survival in the rather highly charged bantering atmosphere), and became a good friend of all. His design skills, his thoroughness, and his ability to draw well and detail convincingly were immediately recognized. It was clear that his education and dedication had prepared him well for a life in architecture.

It would be difficult, however, to place his design direction in relation to others. It certainly appeared to be more toward Eliel than Eero, and one sensed that he prized Eliel's lifestyle as a model over Eero's. Eliel represented the individual architect working alone in his studio, a traditional image, while Eero was the driving, brilliant pragmatist, herding a group of ambitious young architects through the intricacies of his own exceedingly complex approach to design.

Gunnar was an individualist then, and over the years he has not changed. He works in the relative isolation of a location which is no longer, as it was in the fifties, a central element in the American consciousness. What Detroit did in the fifties, and the energy with which it was accomplished, was quintessentially American. People went there because it was one of the major centers of industrial and business activity. Unfortunately, the spotlight has long since moved to other cities.

Gunnar utilizes this isolation, however, to buffer him from the influences of the hyperactive architectural community of the east coast (a circumstance which is most felicitous), from the sober intellectual life of Chicago, and from the more bizarre environs of Los Angeles, so he can achieve the objective which should be desired by all architects — that of making a significant contribution to society and to the history of architecture. He does so without the frenetic publicity or the tortured prose which seem to be endemic to the careers of his contemporaries.

I salute him as an architect, as an artist, as a teacher, and, above all, as a person.



Romaldo Giurgola

Mitchell/Giurgola Architects

1982 American Institute of Architects

Gold Medal

Ware Professor of Architecture, Columbia University

If there is ever anything memorable to be found in works of architecture, this quality lies unquestionably in the work of Gunnar Birkerts. The capacity of his architecture to create lingering memories has often been ascribed to its extreme clarity, to the simplicity inherent in its powerful use of architectural elements and their shapes, and to its impressive accomplishment in terms of its structural complexes and their detailing. Among the roster of architects emerging from the office of Eero Saarinen, Birkerts is often considered to be the most uncompromising interpreter of programs, shapes, or forms constituted by precise and interlocked geometrical solutions. Yet what appears to be an eminently abstract approach to architecture is accomplished in many instances with methods which involve highly imaginative approaches to technology and materials.

The evolution of Saarinen's office resolved itself into a variety of personalities from Kevin Roche, who obviously loved it, to Robert Venturi, who did not. Among all, perhaps only Birkerts' work perpetuates the essence of a tradition that did not begin with Saarinen himself, but whose origin should most likely be sought in Scandinavian empiricism in general and its consolidation in the dynamic confluence of principles which characterize American architecture. The basic tenets of such a tradition are, among others, the singularity of the building in relation to a program, the aesthetic valuation of materials, and the expression of autonomous elements.

The legitimacy of the work of an architect should be considered not merely in relation to his stylistic language, its "linkages," its derivation from the work of other architects, or its intellectual position. Rather, the work should be evaluated through attempting to recognize the presence of certain constants, certain tangible documentations of an effort which ultimately leads to a true work of architecture. In Birkerts' work, these constants are closely related to the traditional tenets stated above.

First, each of his buildings represents a particular solution to a problem, distinguishable in its task, assignment, and presence in the environment. In this sense, there is an unmistakable sense of identity with programmatic demands in the Lincoln Elementary School, the Church of St. Bede, or the Duluth Public Library, to choose relatively small-scale examples. The architectural decisions in terms of site plan, distribution, and volumes are all congruent and precise as building typology and character. In this unwavering reliance on the characterization of the building assignment (as in the intimate enclosure of the Lincoln School, the isolated gesture of St. Bede, and the public aspect of Duluth Library), one can trace the attachment to a well-established tradition whose source is recognized in the early development of modern architecture, with particular reference to the Scandinavian work of Eliel Saarinen and others.

No building of Birkerts could be accused of neutrality in the selection of materials. Materials assume an extremely important role, not only in the function of their tasks relative to the design and building type, but also in their intrinsic value as precious elements of the architecture in their rapport with internal and external environments. Few architects have been more successful in producing an aesthetic valuation of materials: in Birkerts' projects, materials appear with great integrity, extended in surfaces to form enclosures, technically accomplished in detailing.

In each of his buildings, as in the early University Reformed Church in Ann Arbor with its beautiful relationship between the reinforced concrete walls and the daylight penetrating within the space, or in the festive glass/metal cladding of the Museum of Glass in Corning, this "presence" of materials and confidence in their performance is one of the unmistakable traits of Birkerts' design. In spite of the recognized "classicism" of his plans, it could be said that many of these buildings acquire their particular value from the material/environment relationship rather than in the design of spaces, which often appear as results arising from decisions in plan rather than as autonomous entities. This may be the very reason why his materials appear so splendid, absolute, and indispensable.

For many, the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis is Birkerts' masterpiece, an object combining materials, functions, and structural inventiveness in a timeless relationship. In fact, it is in this building that the constants in Birkerts' work are highly identifiable. Another such constant particularly apparent in that project is the search for the expression of architectural elements in their singular roles. Rather than being seen as instruments of functional precision, his places should be perceived as careful assemblies of self-contained parts, as in the Corning Museum, where the loose but geometrically precise edge of the exhibit areas at the second level corresponds to the circular enclosure of offices.

Such dramatic juxtapositions, often in relation to landscape, tend to reinforce the particular character of the parts, precisely because of their stated incompleteness, as in the U.S. Embassy in Helsinki, or in the relationship between the retaining wall and the interior of the underground University of Michigan Law School Library Addition. Tridimensionally, the same attitude is present in such buildings as the Calvary Baptist Church in Detroit, where the fragmented, all-encompassing roof assumes in itself the entire identity of the building.

In pointing out some of the constants in Birkerts' work, one should perhaps remember that they belong to a search for architecture by someone who defines himself more as a "doer" and less as a philosopher. Yet those constants are the manifestation of more than mere method: they are the evidence of a conceptual gift which is capable, through "leaps of intuition," of identifying and bringing to fruition eternal moments in architecture.

Wolf Von Eckardt

Architecture and Design Critic, *Time Magazine*

The new Corning Museum of Glass has the sensible beauty of a hand-cut crystal tumbler. Although sophisticated in its many thoughtful details, the building is simple and eminently to the point — the ideal vessel for the display of the world's largest collection of all manner of glass. It helps illuminate that history, relate it to our time and give sparkle to the display. And like a crystal tumbler, the building can be viewed as a precious work of art or as a practical utensil.

The museum is a free form that follows its complex functions with brilliant clarity. The shape of the building is boldly undulating with convex and concave curves, which look somewhat like an eccentric flower in plan and in elevation shimmer and seem to move in a play of gray light. The "amorphous" shape of the building, according to Birkerts, symbolizes the amorphous shape of a blob of molten glass. But like hardened glass, the shape also has its cold logic.

Like Saarinen, Birkerts is a doggedly distinct talent, but up to now I found his work more startling than convincing. This building is both. It seems to me precisely the integration of form and function that makes Birkerts' building so refreshing. It is as pragmatic as the best of Eero Saarinen's work, which was never subject to a "style," or even a "statement." Birkerts has no taste for the self-conscious and self-indulgent striving for style. Saarinen set out to solve architectural problems that, of course, included esthetic appeal. He would have agreed with Birkerts that "architecture may indeed be an art of accommodation, but it is also an art of communication."

*Corning Museum of Glass
Corning, New York*



THE CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS



Walter Creese
Coordinator, Architectural
History and Preservation
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

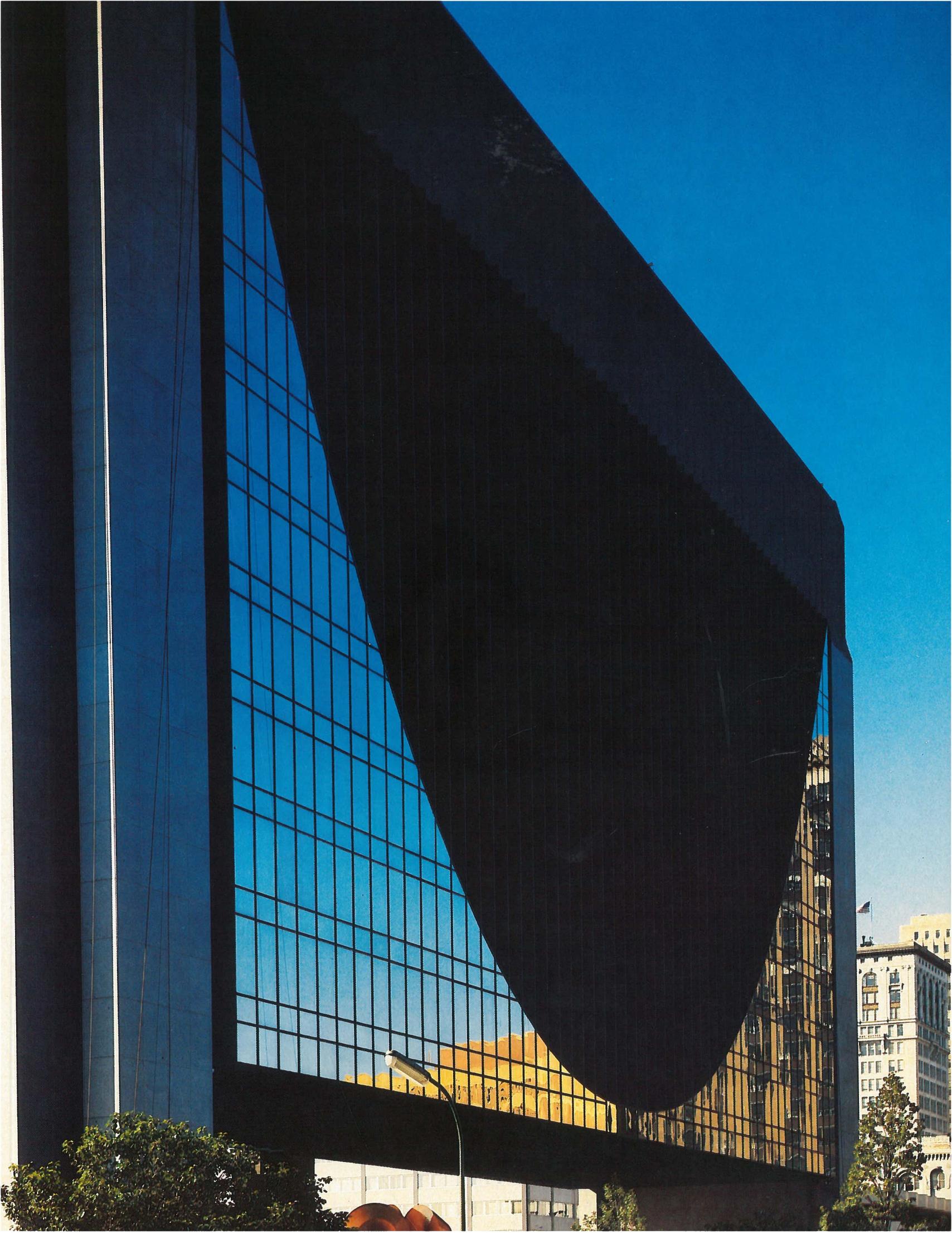
On seeing Gunnar Birkerts' buildings we first exclaim, "Why of course: how right!" But the exclamation comes out of their longer-termed fitness, rather than their immediate obviousness. Once the lucidity and simplicity of thought have been relished, however, it dawns that to be so singular on such a vast scale must have taken a great deal of determination and courage. Birkerts has stayed in the Midwest, rather than migrating out, as Roche & Dinkeloo, Cesar Pelli, and many of the others of the original Saarinen circle did, including even Eero Saarinen to Connecticut at the very end of his life. This move, or lack of it, on Birkerts' part, undoubtedly took another kind of courage.

Perhaps it means that he understands the inherent proportions of the Midwest better than anyone else. Like Eero Saarinen, he thinks unself-consciously and boldly on the specific site and at a grand scale. So the General Motors Center, which was Birkerts' first project with Saarinen, is really an Illinois Institute of Technology, enlarged and accentuated, a midwestern flat campus expanded to the automotive scale. So too, the Federal Reserve Building in Minneapolis is an upside-down St. Louis Arch by Saarinen, with the structural daring and influential presence of an old-fashioned, midwestern grain elevator. Symbolism in the Midwest derives more from industrial and technological prototypes than in other regions of the United States. Thus the Duluth Library is also a beached Great Lakes ore boat, only the cargo is one of books — recorded thoughts.

Both he and Eero Saarinen understood, maybe better than the locally born, that the Midwest has two positive potentials on top of its many disadvantages in scenery and morality — it has space enough in which to develop the big idea, which can then represent the “better,” or improving, image. We have batted on to Sigfried Giedion’s interpretation of the first modern building as the London Crystal Palace for so long that we are apt to forget that the real first model for the other architects of the mid-nineteenth century was John Ruskin’s New Museum at Oxford. It indicated how a new science and technology was supposed to eventuate into a new aesthetic of morality, and Birkerts’ buildings remind us of that dependency too. Fine architecture in the Midwest becomes more of a moral imperative than it does elsewhere. When an architect insists, as Gunnar Birkerts does at the exposition of his philosophy, that he is a builder first, a theoretician secondly, you know that this person is a midwesterner and that this is a moralistic statement for him, at least.

Birkerts’ work in this context stands not only for a “better” architecture, but also for a better and broader culture. One senses this intention in his churches and educational buildings particularly. He follows in the longer tradition of Sullivan and Wright in the Midwest in this regard. The Federal Reserve Building in Minneapolis would be, in some ways, a reincarnation of Sullivan’s Wainwright Building in St. Louis (the “first beautiful skyscraper”), with both being descended in the family of forms from the Eads Bridge in St. Louis. Both architects wanted the skyscraper to become a part of a larger civic panorama, not just an entity in itself. With Sullivan the motivation came from the shame and destruction of the Civil War, while with Birkerts it came from the shame and destructiveness of urban renewal, joined with the fact that it had taken the Old Northwest Territory so long to create its own iconography. The latter regrets the delay. America might falter any number of times on a sociological or economic basis, but these two architects would keep offering “superior” proofs that there was something worthwhile to be discerned in the fabric of the culture nonetheless. Chicago is full of such conscious reassertions, deemed eminently necessary at the time, such as Marina City; the Hancock Building, meaning “OK” much more than wrong with its big “X” frames; or the Sears Roebuck Building, where one skyscraper grows self-consciously out of another, large out of small.

Birkerts also follows in the general groove of Sullivan and Wright in his tendency to experiment with windows and skylights (the Johnson Wax Tower is not too unlike Birkerts’ IBM Tower in Southfield, Michigan, in its interest in doing something different with the traditional strip window) and in his inclination to take on as much of the wonderful midwestern aerial illumination as he can. He did this as indirectly as possible in the University Reformed Church in Ann Arbor, just as Wright did it indirectly with his Pyrex tubes in the Johnson Wax office at Racine or his Unity Temple at Oak Park, to begin with. Last, but far from least, Birkerts is like Wright not only in being able to tell “up” from “down,” as stimulated by the prevailing flatness, but also in being able to enhance that difference. Thus we discover the surprising underground implantation of the Lincoln Elementary School in Columbus, Indiana, and the similar underground additions to the libraries at the University of Michigan or Cornell, forever concerned with capturing light and looking up. The philosophy is very close, on a greater scale, to Wright’s preoccupation in the second Jacobs house in Wisconsin, or Falling Water in Pennsylvania, with clutching the earth, digging into the ground, at the same time that he wanted to set the occupants free to enjoy the light in the zenith of the sky.



Cesar Pelli

Cesar Pelli and Associates

Dean, School of Architecture, Yale University

Gunnar Birkerts is an old and dear friend. When I went to work for Eero Saarinen, my first job in an architect's office, I was assigned to work on the Milwaukee War Memorial, a project headed by Gunnar Birkerts. Working together, we had long discussions that started at the office and continued well into the night. We talked not only about the issues of design present in the war memorial, but also about architecture in general and our own professional futures.

We were at a beginning — very early in our lives as architects — in a country that we both had decided to make our own. He was a good person to have met then, deeply committed to architecture, selfless in his concerns, and possessing an excellent, clear mind. If I had then the awareness that I have today, I would have known that Gunnar was going to have a brilliant career. It was fortunate that I did not have such an awareness because, as it has happened, each professional unfolding has been a surprise and a delight for me.

Gunnar is a thorough and complete architect, but I would like to dwell on some of his more individual characteristics. Uppermost would be his concern for craftsmanship. He used to spend much of his time in those days in Bloomfield Hills designing furniture and developing exquisite details when two materials or just two pieces of wood came together. I see this same concern in many of his buildings. The strongest image I have is that of the Lincoln Elementary School in Columbus, Indiana. There, a handsomely detailed, square brick building sits in a circle of trees and guards inside a wooden structure, detailed like a large treasure chest, which is the gymnasium. This cabinet-like element appears to have been fitted tightly inside a courtyard, and the tightness of the packing works. The school's interior becomes delightfully beautiful because of the sensitive design and detailing of this large wooden room. Gunnar also has an excellent and sophisticated understanding of new materials and the possibilities of the industrial process. He has designed several buildings where the use of industrial materials has been carried to the level of architectural poetry.

When I think of Gunnar's architecture, I always remember his appreciation for and sophisticated use of natural light. The forms of his buildings have been carefully shaped to be caressed and enhanced by light. In his interiors, natural light — always present — makes his spaces luminous, soft, and comfortable.

He is indeed a complete architect, very aware of his responsibilities and of the social role that his buildings play. He maintains an unflagging concern for the comfort and pleasure of the users, and for the key relationship among the whole, the parts, and the human scale. To my good fortune, he remains a steadfast and good friend.



Afterword

We are here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a school of architecture steeped in the history of architecture and architectural education. One cannot operate in any capacity within the school without developing an almost personal familiarity with individuals of the past like Nathan Ricker, the first graduate in architecture from a U.S. university, or Francis J. Plym, an 1897 graduate and later a school patron whose fellowship program has funded student travel in Europe since 1911. Similarly, names like Robert Allerton, Frank and Jennie Long, Rex Newcomb, Edward C. Earl, James M. White, and Edward L. Ryerson hold special meaning in a tradition in architectural education now over a century old.

Recognizing that such traditions grow slowly and that truly significant historical events are rare, I must nevertheless report a belief that, with the performance of architect Gunnar Birkerts as first Plym Distinguished Professor, we are at the beginning of a great new tradition and perhaps even in the midst of history-in-the-making.

Selected for this endowed chair from nominations which included the most prominent of American architects, Gunnar Birkerts has this spring enthusiastically shared his thoughts and experience with the students, faculty, and design professionals of this educational community with unquestionable skill and remarkable candor. By discussing in open forum his education and coming to America, his years with the Saarinens and Yamasaki, his admiration for Alvar Aalto, his ties to the Modern Movement, the evolution of his own work, and even his lifestyle and thought process, Birkerts has established himself as both a visionary and a man of his time.

I would like to extend thanks to architects Kevin Roche, Cesar Pelli, and Romaldo Giurgola for their insightful remarks as colleagues of Gunnar Birkerts, to architectural critic Wolf Von Eckardt for his comments recorded at the opening of the Corning Museum of Glass, and to architectural historian Walter Creese for his essay on Birkerts and the Midwest. I especially wish to thank Bruno Zevi for his thoughtful introduction, and of course Lawrence J. Plym for his continued support of our program. Hopefully, the printing of this booklet commemorates more than the recognition of an individual, celebrates more than a single event. It reflects a strong and living tradition in architectural education that had its beginnings here some 110 years ago and continues with a vitality, a quality, and a sense of purpose into the future.

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Gunnar Birkerts:
First Recipient of the Plym Distinguished
Professorship

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