

EERO SAARINEN'S
EMMA HARTMAN NOYES HOUSE
AT VASSAR COLLEGE



The model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, restored 2008

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In 1946 Sarah Gibson Blanding became Vassar's first female president and during her tenure the college underwent many changes that helped to establish its status as one of the foremost liberal arts colleges in the country.¹ One of President Blanding's greatest accomplishments was the development and expansion of the Vassar campus and its architecture. She employed several of the best-known architects of the era to design a handful of buildings that comprise Vassar's own exhibition of modern architecture: the Ferry Cooperative House by Marcel Breuer (1951), Chicago Hall by Paul Schweikher (1959), and the Emma Hartman Noyes House by Eero Saarinen (1958).

The Emma Hartman Noyes House is the only design that Saarinen saw completed at Vassar, but during the period of 1954-1958, when he served as the architect to whom the college turned for all campus planning matters, he proposed a number of designs. Since most of these designs were never fully executed, the drawings were eventually stuffed away in miscellaneous files and storage closets around campus. The architectural model of the design for the Emma Hartman Noyes House, which Saarinen presented to the college in 1956, had also been forgotten, and was left to deteriorate in a dark corner in the basement of Main Building. When rumors of its whereabouts surfaced in the winter of 2007, a search was conducted, resulting in the rescue and restoration of a valuable artifact of Vassar's modern architectural history.

HISTORY AND ORIGINS

Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) is celebrated as one of the most innovative and prolific masters of twentieth-century architecture and design, well-known for works such as the St. Louis Gateway Arch (1948-1964), the General Motors Technical Center in Detroit (1948-1956), and the TWA Terminal at John F. Kennedy Airport, New York (1956-1962). Unlike many of his modernist contemporaries, Saarinen was always considerate of the character, symbolism and tradition associated with his designs, and he defined the idea of context broadly. It is for this reason that he became an especially popular campus architect, and caught the attention of the chair of the Vassar College Art Department, Agnes Rindge Claflin. In 1954, when the college needed an architect to oversee a variety of upcoming projects, Mrs. Claflin wrote a letter to President Blanding, recommending Saarinen as "a very eminent, younger generation" architect.²

As the college expanded in the early 1950s, it struggled to provide its students with adequate residential accommodations. Saarinen's first project at Vassar explored the possibility of constructing a separate building to house all of the college's administrative facilities so that Main Building could be converted entirely into residential space. When this project was abandoned in 1955 (due to a lack of support within the community), Saarinen immediately turned to work on a design for a new dormitory. Donations by Katherine Noyes (VC 1908), Nicholas Noyes, and Jansen Noyes - the children of Emma Hartman Noyes (VC 1880), an alumna who had also served as a member of the music faculty for several years - provided the majority of the funds for the project.³

The site that Saarinen recommended for the new dormitory was a round clearing at the

north end of campus, known as 'The Circle.' The Circle dated back to the founding of the college, and at the Emma Hartman Noyes House dedication ceremony, President Blanding explained that one of her hopes for the building was that it would "reinvigorate" the site.⁴ An early campus map shows that The Circle originally contained three smaller circles, labeled as 'playgrounds', but by the late 1800s, they were joined together to create one larger circle. On 9 November 1895, the first Women's Field Day in America took place on The Circle, and throughout the early 1900s, it continued to function as an athletic field. The Circle was also recognized for its natural beauty, as it was surrounded by dense shrubbery and conifer trees in order to keep outsiders from spying on the young ladies as they exercised.⁵

DESIGN

In May 1956, Saarinen presented the college with an architectural model of his first complete design for the Emma Hartman Noyes House. This model, which has been restored and is on display here, includes two identical four-storey structures and a central single-storey structure faced with a sundial, situated around the northern half of The Circle. It also includes a thick wall of trees around the southern half, so that together, the buildings and the trees create a continuous enclosure around the entire site. As evidenced by the appearance of the Emma Hartman Noyes House today, only one of the four-storey structures displayed in the model was actually constructed. The college never proceeded with the construction of the second structure, mainly



due to the fact that the cost to construct the single wing totaled at \$1.4 million - double the original budget for the entire project.⁶

Although the final design for the Emma Hartman Noyes House differs from the design proposed by the model in terms of its scale, it is quite similar in terms of its basic forms and details. The main facade of the building consists of strips of hard-burned



Above, Noyes House as it stands today, and below, the restored model.

brick alternating between aluminum and glass triangular bay windows, while the convex, rear facade displays an alternating brick and glass pattern with the windows flush to the wall. This contrast between the windows on the front and rear facades demonstrates how Saarinen conceived of the building as a cohesive and functional whole: when an object is bent into a curve, the inner, concave side crinkles as the convex, outer side stretches to become smooth.⁷

In 1952, before Saarinen began his work at Vassar, he explained that "on existing campuses, there is the challenge of building proud buildings of our own time that are in harmony with the existing architecture and the outdoor space."⁸ The design for the Emma Hartman Noyes House meets this challenge by employing modern architectural elements to evoke the qualities of

its surroundings. This relationship between the Emma Hartman Noyes House and its context can be interpreted on several levels. Plan, forms, materials, details, and the design as a unified whole echo abstractly the nearby architecture and the natural setting. The restored architectural model, as supported by a selection of drawings and photographs, helps to illustrate these connections, and thus, provides a greater understanding for one of Vassar's most fascinating and complex buildings.

Vanessa Beloyianis, Vassar Class of 2008

¹ This exhibition would not have been possible without the assistance and support of Nicholas Adams, Bryan Corrigan, Ronald Patkus, Dean Rogers, Peter Papademetriou, Gordon Millsaps (VC '08) and Marguerite O'Haire (VC '08).

² Agnes Claflin, letter to Sarah Gibson Blanding, 15 February 1954, Sarah Gibson Blanding Papers, Box: 6, Folder: Eero Saarinen Associates, Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library.

³ "Donors Dedicate Noyes in Circle on October 11," *Vassar Chronicle*, 20 September 1958, Noyes Hall, file no. 6.73, Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library; A government loan supplied the remainder of the funds.

⁴ "Miss Blanding's Remarks at Dedication of Emma Hartman Noyes House," 11 October 1958, Sarah Gibson Blanding Papers, Box: 6, Folder: Emma Hartman Noyes House (Dedication), Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College Library.

⁵ For the history of Noyes Circle, see: Karen Van Lengen and Lisa Reilly, *Vassar College: An Architectural Tour* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 88 - 89.

⁶ Bruno and Daniels, 86.

⁷ Paul Byard, "Modernism at Vassar" (lecture, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, 26 February 2008).

⁸ Aline B. Saarinen, ed., *Eero Saarinen on His Work* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 13.

THE RESTORATION OF THE MODEL

When the architectural model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House was discovered in the basement of Main Building, it was in very poor condition. Both the structural platform and the buildings had suffered extensive damages, with many parts either broken or missing. A few leafy clumps served as the only evidence of the ring of thick trees that originally surrounded the southern half of The Circle, and empty holes near the outer edges of the platform indicated where other trees or bushes had once stood. The single-storey structure between the two curved wings of the building was also entirely missing, while a large section of the front facade of the eastern wing had been broken off and half of the back facade was peeling away. In addition, dust and brick debris from the Main Building basement had stained the platform and coated the rear facades of both wings.

The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center engaged Margo Delidow and Eric Meier to undertake the restoration. Between May 2008 and October 2008, they worked off-site to recreate all of the missing parts and also spent six days cleaning the model and piecing it back together at Vassar. Delidow reported that recreating the missing parts - particularly the angular windows on the front facades of each wing - was the

most challenging aspect of the restoration because of the model's refined details. In order for the restored model to achieve the rich layering of textures and colors of the original, each missing part was recreated by a careful, multi-step process. Delidow believes that this layered quality is one of the reasons why the model is "so appealing to the eye."

The architectural model of The Emma Hartman Noyes House is the only surviving three-dimensional record of Saarinen's design for the building, and in its restored condition, displays his concept to its fullest potential.

Vanessa Beloyianis, Vassar Class of 2008



Conservator's photo before restoration.



The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center is located on the Vassar College campus 124 Raymond Avenue Poughkeepsie, New York 12604-0703
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CHECKLIST

1. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Architectural model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, 1956
Mixed media
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
2. John Lane Studio
The Emma Hartman Noyes House dedication ceremony, 1958
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
3. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Site Plan Study for an Administration Building, 1954
Blueprint with colored pencil and adhesive paper additions
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
4. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Site Plan, 1957
Blueprint
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
5. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Ground Floor Plan, 1956
Blueprint copy
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
6. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Typical Floor Plan, 1956
Blueprint copy
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
7. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Developed Elevations, 1957
Blueprint
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
8. Ben Schnall
Front façade of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, date unknown
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
9. Ben Schnall
Angled view of the front façade of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, date unknown
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
10. Photographer unknown
Rear façade of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, date unknown
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
11. John Lane Studio
The Emma Hartman Noyes House lounge, 1958
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library.
12. Eero Saarinen & Associates
Lounge Circular Sofa, 1958
Blueline diazo print
Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College
13. John Lane Studio
Architectural model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, 1956
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
14. John Lane Studio
Architectural model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, 1956
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
15. John Lane Studio
Architectural model of the Emma Hartman Noyes House, 1956
Photograph
Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library
16. - 19. Photographs of the restoration of the Noyes model by Margo Delidow and Eric Meier