

in the short documentary commissioned for the exhibit, “we have to broaden the alphabet of modern architecture” in order to move “beyond the measly ABCs.” Or should we say “Mies-ly” ABCs? For Saarinen’s experimentation with varied and sometimes showy styles – often utilizing bright colors, rounded forms, and newly developed industrial materials – departed from the meticulous efforts of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the preeminent dogmatist of postwar High Modernism, to refine a universal, minimalist, rectilinear vocabulary for architecture. Just as Saarinen kept his attention on the needs of his clients, his soft and curvaceous Womb Chair prioritized the demands of human comfort over the sparing elegance of the cold, tubular-steel furniture produced by Mies. If Saarinen’s pragmatic outlook, contextual approach, and collaborative process put him somewhat at odds with the dominant ideologues of his day, his practices accord well with contemporary attitudes, suggesting that his influence might be stronger in this century than in his own.

### Catalog

Pelkonen, Eeva-Liisa and Albrecht, Donald (eds). 2006. *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

## Design in the Age of Darwin: From William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois, May 9–August 24, 2008.

### Reviewed by Jesse Adams Stein

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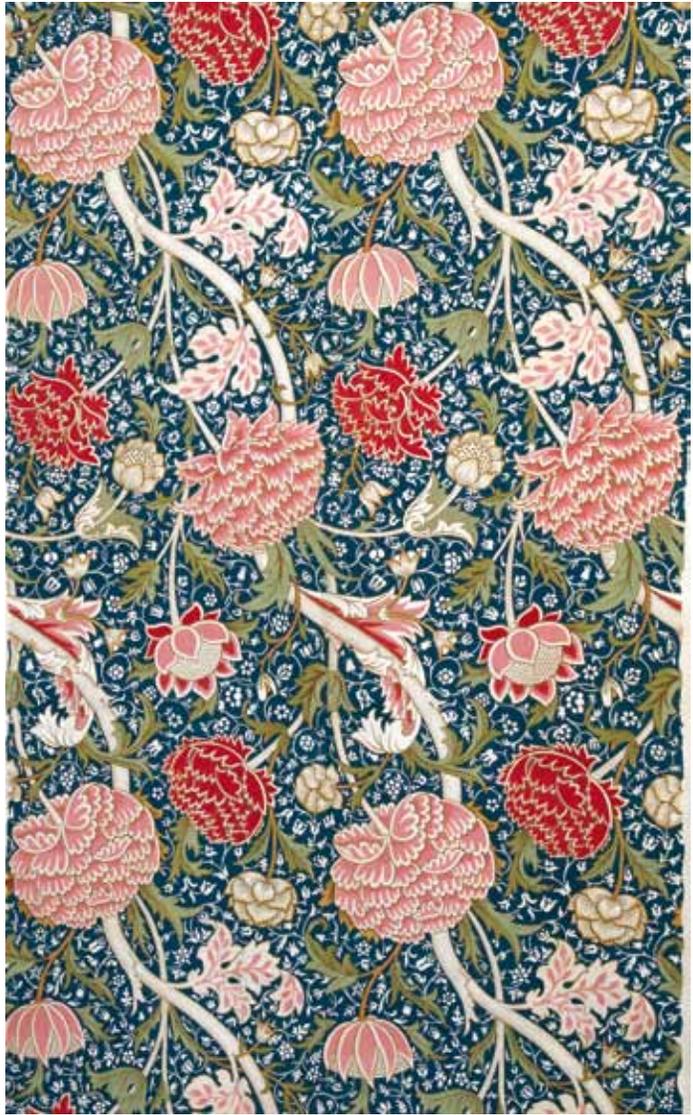
Is it possible to ascertain the influence of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) on European and American architects and designers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? In posing this question, Stephen F. Eisenman, a professor of art history at Northwestern University, explored uncharted terrain in the history of modern design. In Eisenman’s exhibition “Design in the Age of Darwin,” these questions were reconfigured into a hypothesis – fittingly for the scientific theme – about the existence of a connection between evolutionary thought and the development of architecture and design in the decades following the theory’s dissemination. According to Eisenman’s introductory wall placard, the discourse surrounding Darwin’s theories helped to produce a “new modernist language of form and design,” regardless of whether designers were pro- or anti-Darwinian. The primary form of evidence Eisenman cites for this influence is the shared terminology of scientific and design disciplines: “adaptation,” “functionalism,” and “fitness” were debated

in both fields. The linguistic similarities are certainly compelling, but the works on display – by luminaries such as Christopher Dresser, William Morris, C.F.A. Voysey, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and C.R. Ashbee – do not suggest in their “form and design” any obvious references to Darwinian thought.

Chiefly organized by artist (rather than conceptually), the exhibition included decorative and household objects, architectural fragments, plans, and botanical illustrations. Eisenman used a large number of wall texts to elaborate on the formalist-functionalist divide that he believes characterized nineteenth-century design. He defines formalists as those who believed natural form derived from fixed, God-given types, and functionalists as those who, following Darwin, understood natural form to be generated by adaptations to the environment, making form secondary to function. In one illustration of this division, *Cray Textile*, a Morris block print of 1884, was juxtaposed with a leaded-glass window from Wright’s 1903 Jacob Wasler house (see Figures 1 and 2). The placard stated that the unpredictability of patterning in Morris’s designs indicated openness to the idea of nature adapting to its environment, in contrast to Wright’s more static, elegant reductions of nature into geometric form. The unstated implication in this pairing, which Eisenman did not play up, was that Wright’s design choices can be connected to a conviction in unchanging essentials and fundamental types. Surprisingly, Eisenman refrained from speculating on Wright’s or Sullivan’s position on Darwin’s theories, preferring instead to comment cryptically on their “depictions of nature.” More information about these designers’ beliefs about Darwinism, and some mention of the critic John Ruskin’s outspoken criticisms of Darwin, would have been welcome in this section.

Eisenman’s language was more definite when discussing other practitioners. One beguiling contradiction revealed by the show was that Dresser was a formalist, but also a botanist. He was one of the few practitioners whose views on evolution we know with certainty: Dresser didn’t support the theory. While Eisenman’s wall texts informed us that we can observe a repeated reliance on a leaf-stem system, demonstrating Dresser’s belief in a fundamental, God-given plant structure, it is difficult to identify this difference visually – Dresser’s botanical illustrations and teapots seem to emulate nature in ways that do not seem particularly formulaic.

Ultimately, although Eisenman did not provide sufficiently compelling visual and historical evidence to link Darwin’s theories to design practice, he did successfully highlight other important themes of turn-of-the-century design, such as increasing mechanization, the loss of skilled craftsmanship, formal abstraction, and decadence in consumer objects. Perhaps a more forthright discussion of these issues would have given the exhibition a more convincing premise. Nonetheless, Eisenman’s chosen topic is deserving of further analysis, especially given the ferocity of our own culture’s



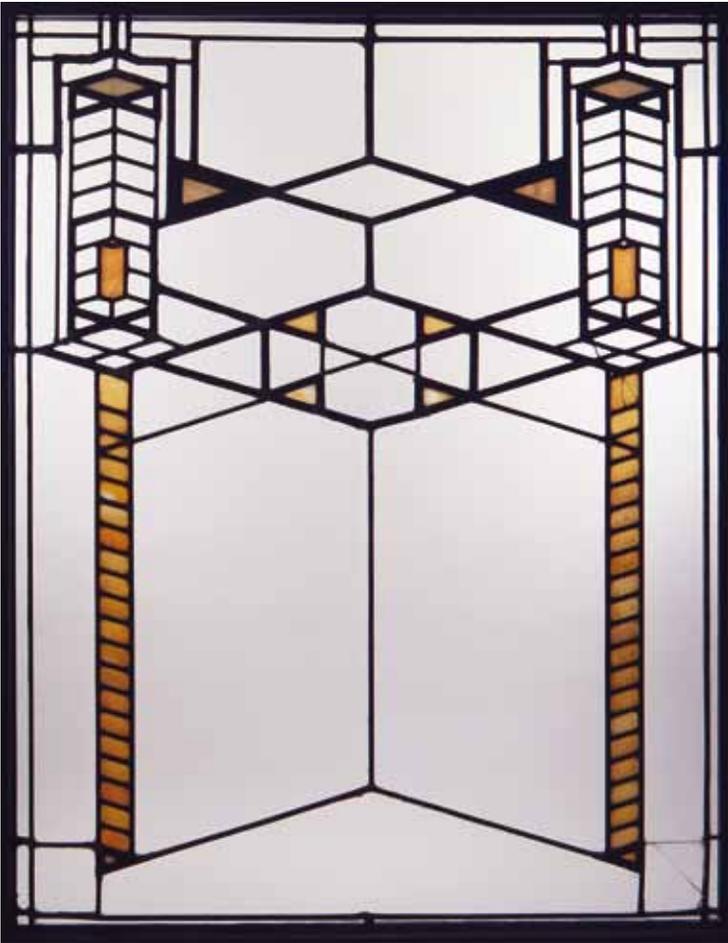
**Figure 1**

William Morris for Morris & Co., *Cray*, 1884, block-printed cotton. Collection of Crab Tree Farm. Photograph by James Prinz. Courtesy of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Chicago.

debate over evolution and “intelligent design”; the turn-of-the-century divisions that Eisenman explored provide some alarming, and thought-provoking, parallels with the present.

### **Catalog**

Eisenman, Stephen F. with Granof, Corinne. 2008. *Design in the Age of Darwin: From William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright*. Chicago: Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University.



**Figure 2**

Frank Lloyd Wright, Window, Frederick C. Robie Residence, Chicago, Illinois, c. 1909, wood and leaded glass with metal hardware. The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago; University Transfer, 1967.89. Photograph © 2008 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, and the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Chicago. © 2008 Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, AZ/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.