

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

THE SHORT AND THE TALL OFF

**American Design
Ingenuity at Every Scale**

plus: Good Design is Good Business

All in the Family

Where there's an architect, there are probably a few more—from the same gene pool.



BY LAURA RASKIN

ARCHITECTS BEGET architects, so it seems. Eliel Saarinen had Eero Saarinen. Two of Frank Lloyd Wright's sons, Lloyd and John, became architects. Walter Gropius's father was an architect. And if not begotten, then nearly so: Maya Lin's architect aunt, Lin Huiyin, helped conduct the first comprehensive study of architecture in China. Charles Eames was the nephew of architect William Eames. Henry Smith-Miller, of Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects, could (and perhaps should) write a book about his family of architects, which stretches back, with baroque twists and turns, to Silas Smith, an engineer and carpenter who left for Chile

after the Civil War. Smith-Miller discovered this history after his architect father's death. "My father was extremely progressive. He thought family history was totally unimportant," he says.

While joining the family trade isn't unique to architects, their proliferation raises the question: Is architecture in your blood? Lee Silver, a molecular biologist and professor at Princeton University, doubts we'll ever be able to fully answer that. "It's a very complicated network of genes that influence personality and behavior," he says. "It's clear to geneticists that there is no such unified entity as creativity or intelligence." That said, there is a

Moshe Safdie and his daughter Taal observe the construction of Moshe's Habitat 67 in Montreal. Taal, now an architect, lived in the apartment complex.

genetic context for talent, but it's taboo to talk about it. "It's part of the American educational system to say, 'You can do anything you want if you just try hard enough!' It turns out, that's not true," says Silver. "Most people are pretty disappointed about what they accomplish in life."

Annabelle Selldorf is relieved not to count herself one of them, given that she "wanted to do pretty much anything but become an architect." The German-born principal of her eponymous New York City firm overheard her architect father Herbert Selldorf's conversations with clients and contractors and thought, "That must not be fun." When her best

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friend suggested they become interior designers, Herbert told his daughter that architecture would be more practical. She acquiesced.

Selldorf now understands that she wanted to please her parents and relate to them more than she acknowledged—her mother, Dorrit Selldorf, was an interior designer, and her grandmother founded the interior design studio Vica in the 1950s. “I think there’s the conscious and the unconscious,” she says. “The conscious side said, ‘Way too much work, way too little pay,’ and the unconscious part knew that’s what I really wanted to do.” Besides, architecture was inseparable from her life.

Silver believes that environment, perhaps even more so than genetics, is responsible for success in a chosen career: “I am sure there are kids born every day around the world who could have been brilliant architects, if they only had the right mentors and had gone to the right schools. But their talent was never expressed.”

Taal Safdie, daughter of Moshe, was “breathing architecture”—a heady mix of job sites, client dinners, and office flurry—from a very young age. She spent part of her childhood living in Habitat 67, the Montreal apartment complex designed by her father. She didn’t realize then how special it was, irritated instead by its distance from her friends’ houses. “But when I go back there now, and show our kids, I think, ‘I cannot believe this was built then,’” she says. Safdie and her husband, Ricardo Rabines (whose parents were *not* architects), had already established San Diego-based Safdie Rabines Architects when she and her father collaborated on the design of Eleanor Roosevelt College at the University of California, San Diego. She enjoyed that experience. “But I didn’t want to go work for him,” she says. “I took some pretty conscious steps to find my own way.”

Victorian scientist Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s cousin, was the first to study whether



Rob Rogers strikes a cool pose with his architect parents during a visit to the University of Texas School of Architecture in June 1973 (above). Andrea Bucher Rogers, 19, Rogers’s daughter (right), is studying architecture.

genius could be inherited—he coined the term “nature versus nurture.” After examining families of renowned scientists, he determined that creative genius was innate. Scientist Alphonse de Candolle refuted his claim almost immediately: Genius was the product of one’s environment. Renowned psychologist Dean Keith Simonton recounts the history of this lasting debate in his 2008 article “Scientific Talent, Training, and Performance: Intellect, Personality, and Genetic Endowment” in the *Review of General Psychology*. Simonton, who studies the concepts of genius and talent, asserts that every human variation, from eye color to personality, is attributable to genetic influence, and concludes that there must be some genetic foundation for talent.

He adds that there is reason to believe that artistic talent is more heritable than scientific talent. So if architectural talent is an unusual mix of science and art, then children of architects may be more likely to be architects—but

that’s just his guess.

Rob Rogers’s daughter Andrea Bucher Rogers, an architecture student at Rice University, could be an example of this special inheritance. Her father says she didn’t show an interest in the subject until he and his wife, Alissa Bucher, an architect, talked to a friend of Andrea’s about their jobs. Rogers says Andrea then asked, “Why don’t you ever talk to me that way?” But from an early age, she exhibited a unique spatial awareness. “That’s the classic distinction of architectural thinking and other kinds of problem solving, that spatial and temporal understanding of places. For sure, she’s got it,” says Rogers, partner of Rogers Marvel Architects (partner Jonathan Marvel’s father is an architect). Rogers’s parents were architects, but he wanted to be a lawyer until a high school art teacher “threw a fit” about his intentions and told him to consider his parents’ profession. Like Taal Safdie, he purposely never worked in his father’s Colorado firm. “I think the distance let us

be closer in other ways,” he says.

Ah, fathers. Or, “the father problem,” as Stefan Behnisch calls it. “It’s a heavy burden on the children of architects because they always feel they have to please the father or compete with the father. But I never had that,” says Behnisch. His father, the architect Günter Behnisch, was a German submarine commander captured by the British during WWII. A fellow prisoner of war suggested Günter study architecture in Stuttgart when he was released. He later designed the Olympic Park (completed in 1972)



in Munich and helped Stefan get his start by allowing him to open a branch of the firm in 1989, which became independent two years later. “One of the reasons why it worked with us was that there was not too much affection,” says Behnisch. “But we shared the same humanistic ideals, which are the basis of architecture.”

The reasons for a child’s proclivity for his parents’ profession may never be fully unpacked. The mystery, in the meantime, is a delight. “I think that architecture is as much a choice of a lifestyle as it is a profession,” says Rogers. “My father died a little over a year ago. He was at the office Friday and he died Sunday. He loved what he did, even as his role changed. Believing that the love of life and place was one’s personal and professional responsibility—I think that’s instilled in you.” ■