



By giving her papers to the Smithsonian, Florence Knoll Bassett teaches us a thing or two about design.

PAUL MAKOVSKY

When I heard last year that Florence Knoll Bassett ("Shu" to her friends and colleagues) had donated her papers to the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, I was thrilled. The historian in me was anxious to review the life and work of this legendary interior space planner and designer, who at the pinnacle of her career in 1965 gracefully withdrew from the design world after completing the interiors of the CBS headquarters, in New York. The Knoll archive is a revelation.

There are beautifully illustrated letters written to her by Eero Saarinen; photographs and sketches of her most important interior-design projects; the first house plan she did as a student at Kingswood, the girls boarding school at Cranbrook. Bassett has carefully organized all the material in color-coded files, creating special boxes to contain them.

Best of all, there are short handwritten anecdotes accompanying many of the photos and sketches. On a photo of Nelson Rockefeller's desk (he was her first major client), she has circled an odd-looking inkwell. When you flip the photo over and read her explanation, you learn that the inkwell was made by her friend Isamu Noguchi.

On the reverse side of a photo of the Knoll Planning Unit office, she writes that staff member Peter Andes called it "Shu U." because its young designers were being recruited by architectural firms, who had begun to start their own interior-design divisions. Bassett also produced a little illustrated book for the archive laying out her life and work—education, projects, awards, even some details of her personal life.

Liza Kirwin, curator of manuscripts at the Archives of American Art, says that before the papers even arrived Bassett sent drawings and photos of the boxes she was fabricating to hold the archive. "Often people send us their papers, but they don't design the containers into which the papers will fit," Kirwin says. "She very methodically organized her papers and gave very special context for a lot of the documents. That's what made it an extraordinary gift."

In a rare interview, I talked to Bassett about the archive and her remarkable life—the Cranbrook years, her relationship with the Saarinens, the influence of Mies van der Rohe, her breakthroughs in space planning, her favorite projects (such as the Knoll showrooms), the threatened demolition of the Connecticut General building, and even her fight in the 1980s against billboards, an issue that has recently resurfaced.

Only Bassett—who absorbed both the warmth and humanity of Eiel Saarinen at Cranbrook and the rigorous purity of Mies—could put together such a perfect archive. Her creative process is reflected in the way she has assembled the collection: organizing, reducing, and clarifying = Mies; personal explanations and handwritten anecdotes = Cranbrook. Although Bassett never formally became a teacher like her mentors Saarinen and Mies, by managing to fit her life and work into one neat package she shows us that her papers are more than just a personal history—they are a lesson in design.

Kingswood/Cranbrook Academy of Art

I learned about Kingswood shortly before the time that I was to be sent to boarding school. My guardian offered me choices. Kingswood was the first school I visited. It was such a unique and beautiful place that I had no trouble making an immediate decision. When I arrived for the school year in 1932, I met Rachel de Wolfe Raseman, the art director of Kingswood and a graduate architect from Cornell University. She guided me into the world of architecture and design. I learned the basics of planning and drafting, and my first project was to design a house. The project took as much time as I could spare away from my other studies to draw the plans and elevations and make a model. The interiors were a part of the project.

After graduation from Kingswood in 1934, Eiel Saarinen suggested that I spend some time at the academy before attending an accredited architectural school. This offered a great opportunity to live and work in an atmosphere of creativity and serious work with great artists like the Saarinens and Carl Milles and advanced students. It also provided me with time to concentrate on design.

Letters from Eero Saarinen

Eero Saarinen spent a year in Helsingfors working for an architectural firm. It is obvious from his illustrated letters that he preferred drawing to the written word. We all enjoyed the results. The letter about a skiing weekend in Lapland is an example. He refers to Marianne Strengell, who later came to the United States to become director of the weaving department at the Cranbrook Art



After Cranbrook

After two years at the Art Academy, it was time to move on for a more formal education at a qualified architectural school. I spent the next two years at the Architectural Association, where the work of Le Corbusier was very influential. At the outbreak of World War II, the American ambassador mandated that all students return to the United States. I called Marcel Breuer, and was apprenticed with Gropius and Breuer in Cambridge until I entered Illinois Institute of Technology to complete my training and receive an architectural degree. Mies van der Rohe had a profound effect on my design approach and the clarification of design.

After my return to New York I worked in several architectural offices, and being the only female, I was assigned to do the few interiors required. That was how I met Hans Knoll, who was beginning his furniture business. He needed a designer to do interiors, and eventually I joined him. This was the beginning of the Planning Unit. Our major work was for government commissions related to the war effort.

After the war we were asked to design government projects and produce furniture and fabrics in Europe using counterpart dollars. Hans always had plans for Knoll in Europe, and this project eventually gave the impetus to form European companies--and finally Knoll International. In 1955 a tragic accident happened in Cuba when he was on a business trip. After his death I became president of the company, with my usual emphasis on all phases of design leaving the business matters to others. In 1958 I married Harry Hood Bassett and divided my time between New York and Florida until my resignation in 1965.



Hans Knoll Office

The 12 x 12 office was designed for Hans Knoll in 1950 when we moved to 575 Madison and space was at a premium. The parallel or L-shaped plan made sense, and it saved square-footage. This convinced our corporate clients who were satisfied to move from the diagonal plan, with a solid desk in front and a table behind. Having the storage in a cabinet freed the design to become a conference table. The designs emerged in many shapes--round, oval, boat-shaped, and oblong--according to the plan. When computer equipment arrived on the scene the workspace switched to having the cabinet behind--a complete evolution of design--which began in the late forties, more than fifty years ago. Private offices came first and then the open office areas with the development of paneled workstations.

Nelson Rockefeller Project

I was fortunate to be chosen to design the floor for the Rockefeller brothers in Rockefeller Center, in about 1946. It was one of my first early projects, and they were wonderful clients. The furniture was custom-made of fine woods and materials, but everything was low-key. Nelson had one request, and that was to keep his existing inkwell because he liked the pen. The problem was that it was made of some plastic like Bakelite and looked very out of place. I solved the problem by calling on my friend Isamu Noguchi to carve a cover for the offending inkwell, making a small sculpture of solid English oak. Everyone was happy with this unique piece.



Knoll Planning Unit

The Planning Unit began when I joined Hans Knoll at 601 Madison. In spite of the size of some of the projects, such as Connecticut General, the group never exceeded six to eight designers. We somehow managed to get the job done on time. I don't think I could have worked with a larger group. Heino Orro, Joe Whited, and Lou Butler were with the P.U. until I resigned in 1965. Peter Andes, also a P.U. member, called it "Shu U." as other young designers were siphoned off by architectural firms who began to start their own interior-design divisions. SOM New York was the first, after our collaboration, when I was hired by Frazar Wilde of Connecticut General to do the interiors. He said he wanted an "independent voice."

Knoll Graphics

Herbert Matter was the graphic designer for Knoll. He gave it visual identity in all phases of the printed material. His design for the Knoll "K" became an international symbol. His advertisements were striking, and clearly gave the visual message at a glance with minimal text and occasionally with wry humor. He loved to use our Old English Sheepdog in his photographs, and Cartree happily cooperated as he enjoyed being the center of attention. On one occasion we went to a party at Herbert and Mercedes Matter's house. I found myself sitting next to a man with huge dark-rimmed glasses who was staring intently at Cartree lying in the middle of the room. He finally turned to me and asked "Is that your dog?" When I said yes, he paused a few seconds and said, "You should buy him a zipper so he can take off his coat when he comes in the house." It was Saul Steinberg, and we were friends thereafter.



Knoll Showrooms 1945 to 1960

The spaces for Knoll showrooms were as diversified as their locations—from commercial buildings on Madison Avenue in New York and the Merchandise Mart in Chicago to a small house in Dallas and a restored nineteenth-century broom factory in San Francisco. The design problems with each varied as much as their locations. The most difficult was the Madison Avenue high-rise, and the most fun was the broom factory in San Francisco. The object was to maintain a Knoll identity with different solutions in interior architecture.

New York Showroom 1951

Working with the problems of a poorly proportioned space complicated by two levels of low ceilings and unfortunately placed columns was a serious challenge in the design of our new showroom at 575 Madison Avenue. The answer was a black metal "cage" that delineated and redefined the space. It also supported the colored panels for the display areas. The blue ceiling also within the framework gave the illusion of height to the existing ceiling. The abundance of natural light from the outer walls was softened with fiberglass panels and mesh.

Chicago Showroom 1953

The Chicago showroom in the Merchandise Mart was visually the opposite of New York. There was no natural light, and the ceilings were high, with exposed ducts and pipes with the front glass wall facing the busy corridor. The walls and ceilings were painted in matte black, and the space was delineated with a white frame—a negative to New York's positive. The lighting accented the displays with pools of light, so the surrounding black walls disappeared. The wall panels were of cherry wood or translucent fiberglass with cherry-wood frames. The floor was oak. The materials gave warmth and created a special atmosphere within the black void.

San Francisco Showroom 1954

The building was basically simple and a delight to work with. I loved its straightforward construction. The shoe-box shape was divided into pleasant proportions by adding the balcony area. San Francisco's atmosphere suggested something light and airy, while the basic structure suggested something informal. This was a departure from the formal designs of New York and Chicago. Note: Planter box on balcony used instead of a railing. I doubt I would get away with it years later.

Corporate Design

From the early days of the Planning Unit, there were many types of projects for universities, hospitals, hotels, and other institutions. The major work, however, was for corporate offices. One of our principal clients throughout the years was CBS, starting with remodeling their executive offices on Madison Avenue in 1952 and continuing to their corporate headquarters building designed by Eero Saarinen in 1965.

Connecticut General

Connecticut General was completed in 1956. It was built on 280 acres in a rural setting on a lake with recreational areas and several service buildings grouped around an interior courtyard designed by Isamu Noguchi. We were called upon to design interiors for the entire complex, which was designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Architects. "The board room without a board table" was a successful experimental idea of Frazar Wilde's (on the top floor of the executive building).

CBS

In reviewing my work over the years, I find that I really enjoyed the challenge of difficult design problems found in older buildings as opposed to more modern modular construction. A case in point was the renovation of the CBS offices on Madison Avenue. They were located in an older building that presented innumerable problems, such as awkward structural situations, poor fenestration, and other disadvantages. Struggling with them created interesting design results.



The office (designed in 1952) of the president of CBS, Frank Stanton, resulted in a simple design with complex requirements. The teak panel wall stored TV and other mechanical equipment. The constraints of the existing building dictated some of the design solutions. The fiberglass-and-bamboo wall concealed unattractive windows and view. The strip-line air-conditioning made a pattern in the ceiling relating to the plan. This was one of the first times that air outlets were considered a design element. Of course doing this sort of experiment requires a great client with imagination and design intelligence. I have worked with many wonderful clients, and he tops the list.

Heinz Research Center in Pittsburgh

The plan of the office suite of Jack Heinz showing the presentation method using actual fabrics. It was extraordinary how small swatches of fabrics and wood could convey a feeling of the space. I always felt the need to employ this system, which eventually was used by design offices as a standard. I actually started to do this at the Architectural Association in London and developed it further when the Planning Unit was formed at Knoll. The conference room of the suite.

My fight against Billboards in Miami

When I learned about an ordinance that would permit billboards along I-95, SR-112, and SR-836, I knew some action had to be taken. I began by calling upon my friends--architects, designers, lawyers, and CEOs. I also involved environmentalists, former commissioners (honest ones), and the media. Both TV stations and the Miami Herald were very supportive and produced editorials against the ordinance.

Many organizations joined in the effort as well. I produced a card with a cutout addressed to the CAEB at a private postal box. We had the cards distributed by volunteers at the exits of supermarkets and malls. The response was huge--these were presented to the commissioners at city hall the day of the vote. The place was packed to full capacity for the CAEB. Many prominent citizens of the Miami community gave very convincing arguments against the ordinance. As there were obvious payoffs involved we didn't win completely, but cut the number of billboards about 80 to 85 percent. At a later date some of those commissioners were indicted and jailed for fraud. We had a victory of sorts. The effort took about one month. I got an ulcer--but it was worth it. It was my one and only venture into politics.

Paul Makovsky: Mrs. Bassett, why did you decide to give your papers to the Archives of American Art? Florence Knoll Bassett: I got a letter from them years ago asking whether I would like to give them my papers. All those years, I didn't know what they were talking about. [Laughs.] So when other institutions began asking, I found that old letter and decided to go with them.

PM: One great thing about the archives is that you put them together in a very methodical way. And the little book you did as a small part of it is fascinating.

FKB: I did it because I wanted to put my career at Knoll in context. The coffee-table Knoll book jumps all over the place and doesn't really give the development of the company.

PM: I never realized how important the Knoll showrooms were in terms of your design. FKB: They were important because we had to do a lot of convincing. At the time there were very few clients who were interested in these ideas. They thought they had to have traditional furniture from Grand Rapids [Michigan]. These showrooms were what really convinced them. Hans Knoll's office, for example, was a big sales tool. By doing it we showed the way to save square-footage.

PM: The Chicago Knoll showroom was a dramatic space.

FKB: It was incredible. That space was the negative of the New York showroom, which was full of light, windows, and color. But the one in Chicago was a miserable thing, with pipes and all that stuff going on in the high ceilings. So I painted the whole thing black, except for the floor. Then everything was delineated in light colors within the showroom to show the product. We used floods of light on all the things that we were supposed to show. Do you know how we photographed it? I didn't do it. Idaka, the photographer, did it. What he did was set up a shot, using an extremely long exposure, and then we went out to dinner for an hour or so. That was a brilliant idea of his.

PM: I look at the picture of the Hans Knoll office—even though it was designed in 1952 it still looks modern.

FKB: We made it logical and functional, but at the same time we tried to make it human. I did it with my husband in mind. Because he was light-skinned with golden hair, the colors were a good background for him.

PM: In the archive, the pairing of the perspective sketch and the photo of the office helps explain the process you were developing.

FKB: I always believed in using actual fabrics in plans, even if they were thrown together in a rough sketch like that. For some reason it worked, even though the scale was wrong.

PM: What's great about the layout of the Hans Knoll office is that you reversed the traditional layout of using a desk in front of a chair. There's a table in front of a chair and a cabinet in back.

FKB: Of course, that was the whole point. The traditional layout was the absolute norm when I started designing offices. They had a big box in the middle of the room. They had a table behind it, and it was always full of stuff. "That doesn't make sense," I said. "We should make the storage behind and make the front a table." That's how it got started. I was architecturally trained to think logically about space.

PM: What was the reaction when you showed this to your clients?

FKB: Oh, they got the idea. In those days the boss usually had a decorator. They did his office and maybe some of the other senior executives, but the people further down the line had offices designed by the purchasing agent, who ordered furniture out of a catalog. So when I came along with my questionnaire, I wanted to know what they needed. It was kind of a radical idea, but it was also logical and obvious.

PM: You often think of Knoll furniture in domestic spaces. Yet when I was looking through the archive, aside from your own private work, most of the projects that the Planning Unit did were for larger spaces.

FKB: If you think about it, it's only recently that architects do the buildings and the interiors. What started architects doing that was the fact that I worked on Connecticut General with Gordon Bunshaft and SOM. We were in the same office building. So it was almost like one office—the drawings went back and forth. They learned from the Planning Unit how to set up an interior-space-planning team. When I started out, there was Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto. They were exceptions to the rule. Because I was working in architectural offices, if anything came along that involved an interior, they turned it over to me.

PM: How did the Planning Unit come about in the 1940s?

FKB: I was working in New York. Hans Knoll came in and was trying to sell a chair design that he had bought. That's how I met him. He had a request to do some interiors and asked me to do them for him. That's when the Planning Unit got started. So I went to work with him in a tiny little office at 601 Madison and, as we grew, we got the penthouse. At that time I started to collect all of the people I really admired, like Saarinen, Bertoia, and Rapson, who were at Cranbrook when I was there. That's how the Knoll designers happened. Except for Jens Risom, who had already worked with Hans. Risom was a very good designer and he was doing this Danish thing. Not that it wasn't good, but it was different from what was coming from the architectural world. I'd studied with Mies and was very interested in that form of design. I was responsible for convincing Mies to allow us to do his furniture.

PM: Was that hard?

FKB: Yes, it was. He was a silent man—very private. I told him, "I promise you we will never allow any outrageous colors or materials to be used on your furniture." I think that convinced him. But it was a new experience for him to have his furniture go into production. It had been in some kind of limited production in Europe, but it was quite limited.

PM: By this time, you had other designers working for you?

FKB: Oh yes. I never considered myself a furniture designer, and still don't. I designed furniture because it was needed for a specific plan. It was really people like Saarinen and Bertoia who created very sculptural pieces. Mine were architectural.

PPM: How did you decide to do the classic pieces by Mies?

FKB: It all started from a need: we had projects of a certain scale that needed pieces like that. The chairs Eero Saarinen did were developed that way. We wanted a big comfortable chair; we needed an office chair. That's how those things got started. Eero designed a series of molded chairs and made models for three or four of them. "Which one should we start with?" he asked. "Let's start with the biggest one, just for fun," I said. We didn't know where to go. Finally we found a manufacturer over in New Jersey—a fiberglass-boat builder. We walked into this place with these great big holes in the floor, which were the mock-ups, or molds for the ships. We came with a model of the chair [laughs], and he looked at it and thought maybe we were a little crazy, but he was a nice guy. We sold him on the idea of making this chair, and then it became a very good part of his business.

PM: Was it hard to find good people to work at the Planning Unit?

FKB: No, it wasn't. I had a small but excellent staff. Peter Andes, who worked there, called the Planning Unit, "Shu U." As a critic I would say, "What do you think about this?" or "Why do you think it should be that way?" It was a learning experience—sometimes both ways.

PM: Throughout your career you had a knack for picking the right school and the right client. How did you know to go to the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago?

FKB: When the war broke out, I came back from Europe. I hadn't finished my education. I heard that Mies was out there, so I went out to see him.

PM: Were you part of the first graduating class?

FKB: I'm not quite sure.

PM: And the AA in London?

FKB: That was the oldest architectural school in the world practically. I got to go there because I'd been traveling for a year in Italy and went back to Finland, where I spent summers with the Saarinens. While I was there Eliel said, "Well, it's time you got back into school." Alvar Aalto was there for lunch one day, and he said, "I just came back from London, and I think the Architectural Association is a terrific school."

PM: You cite Eliel Saarinen and Mies as your two most important teachers. What did you learn from each of them?

FKB: The atmosphere at Kingswood and Cranbrook, with its warm brick building and beautifully planned landscape with Carl Milles sculpture, was a great learning experience. The message from Mies for clarification of planning and details was a totally important influence on my work.

PM: Were there times when you had to compromise?

FKB: I never felt a sense of compromise, because both approaches were compatible to the planning process.

PM: Let's talk about Connecticut General in Bloomfield, Connecticut. My sense is that Frazar Wilde, the president of the company, had a seminal role in the project.

FKB: Frazar Wilde's background and that of his staff was New England Colonial. However, he was a very bright, progressive man with imagination and conception for the future of his company. He wanted to move to open space from the restrictive quarters in Hartford. He hired SOM and asked them to suggest an interior designer because he wanted a "second opinion." I was hired. His success in swaying the staff to modern design came about by arranging regular meetings for each step in the design and engineering program to include all concerned.

PM: There's a great picture of you surrounded by all these men in suits at the boardroom table...

FKB: The photograph is at one of the meetings, where I am explaining the model showing the open office plan.

PM: Do you remember how that meeting went?

FKB: Yes. We met every month. I got invited because Frazar said, "I want a second opinion, other than Bunshaft's." [Laughs.] This was for the interiors. Frazar came up to see me once at 575 Madison, and, again, Hans's office was a great sales tool. He tripped over my dog on the way in and said, "Any woman who has an Old English Sheepdog can't be all bad." It was very amusing. Frazar was a tremendous organizer.

PM: As you know, Connecticut General is being threatened with demolition by its present owners.

FKB: That's what happens to corporations when they get bigger and bigger, and get sold and resold. It's sad that they're doing it, but I really don't know too much about it.

PM: Over the years you worked with some great clients--the Nelson Rockefeller Foundation, Frank Stanton of CBS, and Frazar Wilde.

FKB: I was fortunate to have good clients. The success of a good project depends upon the compatibility of client and designer.

PM: Another thing that stood out in the archive was your 1985 antibillboard campaign in Miami.

FKB: I got an ulcer doing that one.

PM: To me that was the only time in the archive that I sensed anger in you.

FKB: We got a law passed that reduced the number of billboards. But now it's starting all over again.

PM: Didn't you recently speak at the city council about the same issue?

FKB: No, I got someone else who's much better doing it, someone well known to them. The billboard issue is up in the air right now. It's gone to the state legislature in Tallahassee. I just finished working with my assistant to get the word out.

PM: What do you think of the situation this time around?

FKB: Heaven only knows. It may be up to Governor Bush to veto the bill allowing the billboard industry unlimited access to our highways and cities. This is just one shot, but it's so important because all they want to do is put up more and bigger billboards--they want 950-square-foot billboards.

PM: In New York it's a problem, of course. I feel that maybe in Times Square it's fine.

FKB: Confining to an area like Times Square is acceptable as a "show," but using our cities and highways for their purpose is aesthetically horrible and dangerous.

PM: One of the things I loved from the archive was the letter from Charles and Ray Eames when you got married to Hood Bassett.

FKB: Weren't they nice? I included a varied mix of letters from professionals to unlikely ones from Indira Gandhi, Nancy Reagan, and a small boy who wants to be an architect. My life wasn't just design. I've had an extraordinary life when you think about it. Growing up at Cranbrook, living as part of the Saarinen family.

PM: I loved the way you ended the book with the picture of you and Hood.

FKB: I experienced a new and extended life when I married Hood, as well as continuing my work in the design world. He was a banker, a rancher in Florida, a dairy farmer in Vermont, and a pilot. We had an interesting life.

PM: Mrs. Bassett, I want to thank you for speaking to me.

FKB: Oh, you can call me Shu. I know when people call me Florence, I know they don't know who I am. I don't remember how I got the nickname Shu, but you can call me Shu.

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