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#### Features ▶

## The Central genius

Whether or not you agree the Central branch library is worth saving, you can't deny that its architect, Marcel Breuer, is a giant in the world of modern design.

Beth Quinn

[write the author](#)

03/22/2007

- You might be thinking: What's the big deal over Central's



Marcel Breuer's modern architecture and furniture gave the Grosse Pointe Public Library Central Branch's reading room an open and airy feeling.

architecture? Who the heck is Marcel Breuer? If he was so world renowned, how did he end up designing Grosse Pointe's library?

Breuer was a Hungarian-born architect and designer who is considered to be one of the fathers of Modernism. Known among his peers as an innovator, he showed a great interest in modular construction and simple forms.

Grosse Pointer W. Hawkins Ferry, an architect, art historian and

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collector of modern art, got Breuer involved in the Grosse Pointe Public Library project in 1951. The two met at the Harvard University School of Architecture where Breuer taught and Ferry studied.

Ferry was also a major art benefactor whose legacy continues to support the Detroit art scene today. There is the W. Hawkins Ferry Collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and the W. Hawkins Ferry Chair of Modern and Contemporary Art at Wayne State University. The W. Hawkins Ferry Fund purchases and donates art to museum collections at the University of Michigan and the DIA.

While the Central branch is smaller than most of Breuer's public buildings, many of the library's features reflect his other designs. It is a simple linear structure accented with a series of tall windows to allow a seamless transition of exterior and interior spaces.

Breuer diverged from having the library made of his favorite building material, concrete, for brick as a nod to a common building material in Grosse Pointe.



Marcel Breuer

The Ferry family was also responsible for Breuer's involvement in the Dexter Ferry Cooperative, a women's dormitory at Vassar College which was completed in 1951. W. Hawkins Ferry's Grosse Pointe house was designed by William Kessler, a Detroit architect who studied under Breuer.

According to the Modern Architecture Protection Agency (MAPA), Breuer "is probably better known for two key projects, the Wassily Chair, at the start of his career, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1963 - 66, towards the end of his career."

In 1920, Breuer, at age 18, became a student at the Bauhaus, an art and architecture school in Weimar, Germany. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, Germany, four years later, he became a master in its furniture workshop.

When he moved to Dessau, he bought his



first bicycle to get around town. He became impressed by its light weight and strength.

Breuer was fascinated by the tubular steel which formed the



The ubiquitous Cesca is one of the most copied chairs ever produced.

handlebars. He saw that the material could be bent into different shapes and could easily support the weight of one or two riders. He started drawing designs of furniture made out of the material.

Breuer approached the Adler Co., the bicycle's manufacturer, with the idea of producing tubular steel furniture, but the company rejected the plan.

Undeterred, he started working on his design at the Bauhaus's workshops. He purchased the steel directly from the manufacturer and hired a plumber who helped him weld the steel tubes together.

After much trial and error, Breuer constructed his first tubular armchair. Its frame is a complex structure of bent tubing with a stretched canvas seat, back and armrest. The chair, now known as the Wassily lounge chair is consider a classic of the modernist movement.

While working on designing office and school furniture, Breuer saw the need for chairs that were lightweight and could easily be pushed and pulled along the floor. He started working on furniture

that utilized a runner or a sled design rather than four separate legs. While another designer, Mart Stam, is accredited with producing the first cantilevered chairs in 1927, the Breuer Cesca Chair produced a year later proved to have the most staying power.

The Cesca with its highly polished steel tubing, and caned seat and back is one of the most famous and copied chairs ever produced.

Breuer's architectural accomplishments included designing avant-garde private homes and modernist public buildings. His big break came in 1953 when he was commissioned to design the UNESCO building in Paris. The curvy sculptural building stands out in stark contrast to the traditionally romantic architecture of the surrounding Parisian neighborhood.

One of Breuer's more controversial designs was the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Once again, he created a strong, modernist building jutting out over a neighborhood of traditional brownstone and brick row houses. In 1966, critics considered it to be "somber, heavy and even brutal," now it is recognized as being "daring, strong and innovative." The museum now has landmark status insuring Breuer's designs will continue to stand guard over the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street.

In recognition for his contribution to the world of architecture and design, Breuer was awarded the American Institute of Architect Gold Medal in 1968. He died in 1981 in New York City at the age of 78.



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