The Kaufmanns of Fallingwater

MODERN TASTEMAKERS
Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright’s icon of the modern movement and one of the world’s most acclaimed houses, celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. Construction began in 1936, and by 1938, when the Museum of Modern Art honored it with a special exhibition, the house was already famous, regarded as a masterwork by both the international architecture community and the general public. *Time* magazine put the house, along with Wright, on its cover, proclaiming it the architect’s “most beautiful job.” In 1964, Fallingwater opened to the public as the first house museum of the modern movement, and ever since has attracted thousands of visitors annually from around the world.

While Fallingwater is Wright’s creation, the design would never have materialized without the Edgar J. Kaufmann family, owners of Kaufmann’s department store in Pittsburgh, who commissioned the house as their weekend retreat. In the Kaufmanns, Wright discovered imaginative clients with the financial resources and the willingness to support his vision and stretch conventions. They enthusiastically embraced Wright’s philosophy of organic architecture, which harmonized nature and design through daring engineering, modern materials and delicate site planning.

In the early 1930s, commissioning Wright was a somewhat bold choice. Although the architect held a position of intense respect, and was designing and teaching, he had not built a major commission in almost a decade. This
was partially due to the Great Depression; new building was almost at a standstill. However, Wright’s naturalistic architecture was also being displaced by European Internationalism, which promoted a more industrialized style.

The credit for the Kaufmanns’ choice of Wright is often given to Edgar Kaufmann Jr., son of Edgar J. Kaufmann Sr. and Liliane Kaufmann. Returning to the United States after several years in Europe studying painting and graphic art, the young Kaufmann Jr. read Wright’s recently published autobiography in mid-1934 at the recommendation of a friend and absorbed it with a deep sense of personal discovery; he was so impressed that he enrolled in Wright’s apprenticeship program at Taliesin. Apparently, his father was equally taken with the architect’s ideas and began corresponding with Wright about civic improvements for Pittsburgh. Kaufmann Sr. invited Wright to the city in December 1934 to discuss building a planetarium and to advise on a public-works program for the city. During this trip, they visited the waterfalls of Bear Run, a mountain stream along which the Kaufmanns owned approximately 1,600 acres of rugged forest.

After this visit, Wright began the design for Fallingwater at Bear Run. Taking cues from the landscape, Wright conceived of a house designed “to the music of the stream,” with cantilevered living spaces vigorously projected over the falls and into the forest, much like the rock ledges along the cliffs and beneath the water. A creation of reinforced concrete, native stone, glass and steel, Fallingwater was planned to grow from the boulders of its site with a rhythm of horizontal lines and planes that complemented nature and expressed architectural freedom and expansive space.

Any initial fears over the house’s unusual placement and plan were displaced by excitement, and the Kaufmanns embraced the design. The Fallingwater commission reignited Wright’s career and established the family as lifelong patrons. While Fallingwater was being constructed, Kaufmann Sr. also asked Wright to design an office for him in the department store. The office, constructed in 1937 and built of cypress plywood, featured an elaborate geometric wall relief and carpets and textiles woven by Loja Saarinen, head of the weaving workshop at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. The Kaufmanns
approached Wright with other commissions throughout his career, from Pittsburgh apartment buildings to Fallingwater additions, but none were realized.

Wright and Kaufmann Sr. cultivated a strong personal and professional relationship based on mutual admiration and respect. As Wright’s chief draftsman, Jack Howe, recalled, “they had a great rapport from the start, each with genuine admiration for the other.” Kaufmann Jr. described his father as “magnetic and unconventional,” qualities that paralleled the architect’s own. But Wright most admired Kaufmann Sr.’s passion for building and design, which he shared with his wife and son. In an effort to distinguish themselves from the Mellons, Heinzes and Fricks of Pittsburgh, who made the collecting of old world painting and sculpture a symbol of their financial success, the Kaufmanns wanted to be known for their interest in modern, progressive thought. Furthermore, as Jews, they often encountered boundaries that restricted their entree into traditional Pittsburgh society. These limitations were offset by the Kaufmanns’ involvement in creative and intellectual circles that nourished an open-minded approach to art and architecture. Frequent travel and exposure to retailing circles afforded them a cosmopolitan outlook that embraced the most fashionable and contemporary tastes.

As merchants, the Kaufmanns understood the marketing power of a glamorous, modern lifestyle, and the luxuriousness
of their private life carried over into the department store. In 1928, Kaufmann Sr. had begun the process of remodeling the store’s ground floor, commissioning a scheme from acclaimed designer Joseph Urban. Kaufmann was attracted to Urban’s high-status clientele and elegant brand of modernism. Urban proposed cladding the exterior of the store with dark polished stone and opening up the façade to create an arcade of shop windows and small boutiques. For the retail floor, sleek glass display cases and sales counters were organized around columns clad in faceted glass.

Urban’s concept would have created a distinctive Art Deco image for the store, but Kaufmann ultimately scaled back the project and placed the remodel in the hands of Pittsburgh architect Benno Janssen, who had designed an earlier store expansion and the family’s suburban house, La Torelle. The result, completed in April 1930, set the store apart, and Harper’s went so far as to proclaim, “Edgar Kaufmann . . . has just completed what is perhaps the most beautiful department store in the United States, if not in the world.” Dramatic black reflective marble and Carrara glass covered interior surfaces. Lighting was concealed behind glass moldings that began at the top of the columns and continued onto the ceiling, creating an effect that Kaufmann described as “alive with reflected motion.” Blond mahogany display cases, also with hidden lighting sources, were organized with an innovative diagonal layout. To decorate the walls, Kaufmann approached progressive New York designer Eugene Schoen, who recommended the American artist Boardman Robinson. Along with Thomas Hart Benton, Robinson worked to develop a new style of mural painting with blocky, sculptural forms influenced by Cubism. The ten monumental murals that Robinson painted for Kaufmann’s illustrated the history of commerce and helped define the direction of 1930s American mural painting.

At the opening ceremony for the remodeled department store, a series of speeches highlighted the importance of art, with Robert Lamont, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, speaking on “Art and Commerce,” James J. Davis, U.S. Secretary of Labor, speaking on “Art and Labor” and Kaufmann addressing the theme of “Art and the Merchant.” In his speech, Kaufmann revealed his opinion that “the development of art should be the cultural goal of America . . . As a general appreciation of beauty grows, we are prompted and inspired to cherish more and more zealously the principles of art and the laws of harmony.” His speech reflects an affinity for ideas promoted by figures like designer Paul Frankl, who was a close friend of Kaufmann and spoke at the store in 1929 on the importance of modernism to business. Frankl defined “modern” as “creations in art that come nearest to expressing the ideal of beauty in their own time” and promoted an aesthetic of simplicity that balanced the complexities of industrialized society. Kaufmann made it his mission to establish the store as a vehicle for the modern movement and sought to offer “the simple and beautiful in all types of merchandise and commodities.”
Though less visible in the public realm than her husband, Liliane Kaufmann also championed the arts and used the department store to foster public interest in design and fashion. In 1933, she took over the store's unprofitable eleventh floor and opened the Vendôme shops to offer sophisticated customers a high-quality selection of tasteful goods. Rather than homogeneity, Liliane stressed a casual attitude toward style, offering a creative mix of high-end products and craft, from modern to antique. While Liliane embraced modern living, she did so with notions of flexibility that encouraged comfort and relaxed elegance. This was an aesthetic popular in Viennese circles, in which the Kaufmanns moved freely through their friends and retailing associations.

Edgar Kaufmann Jr. played a significant role in his family's Viennese connections. As part of his artistic pursuits, he attended the Kunstgewerbeschule (school of arts and crafts) in Vienna in 1929, followed by a three-year apprenticeship with Viennese painter and printer Victor Hammer, a member of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, who had set up an artists' workshop in Florence. Kaufmann Jr. returned to the United States in 1934, and after briefly attending Wright's Taliesin Fellowship, assumed his long-deferred position in the family store as the home department's merchandise manager. Working with his parents, Kaufmann Jr. helped friends in Austria immigrate to the United States. Many were Jewish, facing discrimination from the spread of anti-Semitism, and as practitioners of modernism, they were regarded as suspect by the political right. László Gábor, former secretary of the Austrian Werkbund, was the first artist the Kaufmanns ushered into the United States, bringing him to Pittsburgh in 1935 to become the store's art director.

Above The “Organic Design in Home Furnishings” exhibition, a collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, at Kaufmann’s in 1941.

Top Window display from one of Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s Good Design exhibitions, organized for the Museum of Modern Art, early 1950s.
His work became renowned in retailing circles, and his shop windows and store displays for Kaufmann’s often challenged conventions. Other immigrant designers from Austria with a Kaufmann connection included architects Bernard Rudofsky, who was briefly employed at the department store in 1936; Walter Sobotka, who received a teaching position at the University of Pittsburgh’s Research Bureau for Retail Training, founded by Kaufmann Sr.; and Hans Vetter, who was invited to join the Carnegie Institute of Technology’s architecture faculty in 1948, likely through the recommendations of Gábor and Sobotka. Gábor also sponsored designer Josef Frank’s immigration, and in 1951, Frank displayed his furnishings for the Swedish firm Svenskt Tenn at Kaufmann’s.

While working as merchandise manager, Kaufmann Jr. advanced the department store’s role in promoting progressive design, primarily through exhibitions. He helped his father organize a show of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City, an idealized vision for suburban life. With his mother, he presented “Below the Rio Grande,” an exhibition of Mexican antiques and folk art. The Kaufmanns’ interest in Latin American culture grew from numerous trips to Mexico, and their wealth and connections led to friendships with Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and architect Juan O’Gorman. In 1938, Kaufmann Jr. enlisted the department store as a site for the Museum of Modern Art’s newly instituted program of traveling exhibitions, and hosted shows like “Useful Objects Under $15” and “40 Prints by Modern Artists.” He approached MoMA’s director, Alfred Barr, in early 1940 with the proposal of a collaborative furniture design competition, judged by the museum and exhibited at the department store. MoMA expanded the concept into the exhibition “Organic Design in Home Furnishings,” organized by director of industrial design Eliot Noyes, which opened simultaneously at MoMA and Kaufmann’s in 1941. Kaufmann Jr. served on the exhibition’s jury and helped secure contracts with other department stores to offer the winning pieces, by designers like Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, for sale.

Kaufmann Jr. left the store in 1942 to serve three years in Army Air Force intelligence in Australia, New Guinea and the Philippines. He explored the region’s art during his enlistment and published several articles highlighting artists like Australian painter Donald Friend. When he returned to the United States, Kaufmann Jr. abandoned his position in the family store and moved to New York. Furthering his connections at MoMA, he eventually succeeded Noyes as head of the museum’s industrial design department and later became the director of the Good Design program of 1950-55. Under the auspices of “good design”
and the tastemaking authority of MoMA, Kaufmann Jr. headed juries to select items for exhibition at Chicago’s Merchandise Mart and MoMA. Products meeting the requirements of good design, according to Kaufmann Jr., “merged form and function” and demonstrated “an awareness of human values expressed in relation to industrial production for a democratic society.” The exhibitions were a unique fusion of design and the marketplace, bringing together collections of consumer products of high design quality that could be studied, handled and ultimately purchased by the public. Many designers, such as Scandinavians Bruno Mathsson and Finn Juhl, benefited from Kaufmann Jr.’s position at MoMA, as he helped introduce their products to the American market.

During this period, Kaufmann Jr.’s parents also remained active in their patronage of modernism. They commissioned Richard Neutra to design a house in Palm Springs, California, with the goal of experimenting with new technologies to demonstrate modern architecture’s adaptability to desert living. Once completed in 1946, the house was highly publicized and came to epitomize glamour and fashionable resort living in the postwar era. Back in Pittsburgh, Kaufmann Sr. maintained his commitment to civic projects. He became a founding member of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, which oversaw downtown Pittsburgh’s resurgence in the late 1940s and 1950s. An instrumental figure in the creation of the city’s Civic Arena, designed by the architecture firm of Mitchell & Ritchey, Kaufmann Sr. provided the project’s seed money and influenced the revolutionary domed design which incorporated the world’s largest retractable roof.

Both Kaufmann Sr. and Liliane Kaufmann died in the 1950s. The department store had merged with the May Company of New York, leaving Kaufmann Jr. with few ties to Pittsburgh. The Good Design exhibitions kept him at MoMA until 1955, and after leaving the
Celebrating Fallingwater

Throughout 2011, Fallingwater is hosting a series of exhibitions, symposia and special events to celebrate its 75th anniversary. The house is located about 90 minutes from Pittsburgh, in Pennsylvania’s Laurel Highlands. To plan your visit and view the schedule, see fallingwater.org.

On April 5, 2011, Fallingwater, the University of Pittsburgh and the Carnegie Museum of Art will present Private Domains/Public Displays: The Modern House Interpreted, a symposium exploring the unique challenges of preserving and presenting modern domestic architecture. An international gathering of directors and curators from iconic houses like Philip Johnson’s Glass House, Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House, Eero Saarinen’s Miller House and the Gropius House will discuss the architecture, collections and landscapes of these seminal landmarks and their stewardship and interpretation. This day-long symposium is open to the public and will be held at the Carnegie Museum of Art Theater in Pittsburgh.

For more information, visit fallingwater.org.

If you are planning a visit to Fallingwater, be sure to explore the other historic sites in the region including Kentuck Knob, a Frank Lloyd Wright Usonian house built in 1956 for the I.N. Hagan family. Located only four miles from Fallingwater, the house is open for tours. See kentuckknob.com.

You may want to consider spending the night in the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Duncan House at Polymath Park Resort about 30 minutes from Fallingwater (the house was transported from Illinois); lodging is also available in houses by Wright apprentices. See polymathpark.com.

Justin Gunther is curator of buildings and collections for Fallingwater, a property entrusted to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

museum, he decided to stay in New York. He continued an influential career, writing and advising extensively on architecture and design, and in 1963 became an adjunct professor of architectural history at Columbia University. He also cultivated his love of fine and decorative art, and at Fallingwater and his New York apartment, Kaufmann Jr. surrounded himself with works by modern masters, many of them close friends from his work at MoMA and his scholarly pursuits. Until his death in 1989, Kaufmann Jr. devoted his life to academic and philanthropic work, giving to museums and organizations that promoted the arts.

In commercial, social and artistic spheres, the Kaufmanns’ impact on modernism was widespread. They embraced the modern movement with an entrepreneurial spirit, impeccable taste and progressive views, and firmly believed in the power of art to transform and enrich individual lives. Underlying their art patronage and civic generosity were strong convictions about the educational and public value of art, motives that inspired Kaufmann Jr. to donate Fallingwater to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy in 1963. Fallingwater, as an inspiring symbol of 20th-century creativity, will always be recognized as the Kaufmanns’ most distinguished contribution to the modern movement. As a museum, Fallingwater also offers an intimate view into one of modernism’s most dynamic and influential families.