

Change Over Time: The Irwin Miller House in the Photography of Balthazar Korab

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ARCHITECTURE ASSEMBLED

This paper begins with the premise that architecture is assembled through photography, as photographers necessarily play a crucial role in the documentation, dissemination, critical assessment and historical analysis of architecture. Though commonly assumed to traffic in *factual* reflections of reality, photographers – by the very nature of their devices – more accurately extract selections *from* reality and produce images that inevitably record less (though, sometimes more) than *the thing itself*.¹ It is crucial to keep in mind, then, that while designers, educators, historians and consumers of architecture often ascribe a calculated *objectivity* to the photographs thereof, it is undeniable that photographic images of designed environments (be they buildings, landscapes, cities, etc.) are always *inflected* by the sensibilities and practices that photographers bring to bear on their subjects. For when it comes to architecture, the material, spatial, temporal and cultural realities are so complex and interrelated, photographers have no choice but to make choices; choices that are never neutral and are made to negotiate between the actual characteristics of a particular context and the aspirations for a meaningfully-constructed representation.

What transpires, then, in the translations between things, their representations, and our interpretations thereof, amounts to matters of difference; the difference in the *sensibilities, practices* and *intentions* of individual photographers. And, as it happens, these differences make all the difference. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be concerned primarily with the experiences and influences that

activate a photographer's *sensibilities*, the ways in which those sensibilities impact a photographer's individual approach to their *practice*, and how such sensibilities and practices combine with specific circumstances to body forth a photographer's world view through the medium of photography.

With this in mind, this paper will examine a single case study; the design and representation of the J. Irwin Miller House in Columbus, Indiana (1953-57) through the architecture photography of Balthazar Korab – one of the most prolific and celebrated photographers of mid-century Modern architecture. This examination of Korab's Miller House portfolio is important and timely for several essential reasons. Due in large part to the private nature of the Miller family, the published photographic legacy of the Miller House remains relatively inadequate for the kind of comprehensive analysis befitting one of the most unique collaborations for the design of a Modern dwelling – Eero Saarinen (architect), Kevin Roche (project architect), Alexander Girard (interior architect), Dan Kiley (landscape architect), with J. Irwin and Xenia Miller (clients). Furthermore, the Miller House – notable for its extraordinary integration of architecture, interiors and landscape – has more often than not been the subject of disciplinary-centric studies that tend to prioritize singular, disciplinary inclinations² and often source their images from a single portfolio produced on a single day by a single photographer, Ezra Stoller.³

The Stoller portfolio, produced at the request of the Saarinen office in 1958⁴, no doubt presents a distinctive selection of views captured throughout the house and gardens. However, with respect to a

more comprehensive understanding of the project, Stoller's single portfolio is rather inadequate for illustrating one of the most *fundamental* characteristics of the Miller House as intended by the team of designers – the expression of *change over time*.

By comparison to other professional (and amateur) photographers who have photographed the Miller House and landscape, Balthazar Korab maintained a nearly fifty-year relationship with the project ever since his participation as a young designer working in the Saarinen office (1955-58). Over the course of his career as a photographer of architecture, Korab developed and nurtured a close personal relationship with the Miller family and was given nearly "open access" to the house and landscape during his frequent trips to Columbus, Indiana for over forty years. As the "photographer of choice" for numerous projects supported by the Cummins Foundation – a foundation established by J. Irwin Miller for the promotion and development of innovative, Modern architecture in Columbus – Korab was given unprecedented access to the Miller House and landscape and never ceased to take advantage of an opportunity to photograph if regardless of the climate, time of day or season. In fact, the Korab portfolio of the Miller House is so unique in its approach and expansive in its breadth that it may very well be the most definitive representation of mid-century Modern dwelling that you have likely never seen.⁵

KORAB: ARCHITECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY⁶

Examined in a broader context, Korab's Miller House portfolio summons forth numerous critical directives and lasting principles of photography that has distinguish his work and career. First, Korab candidly presents the creative and productive capacities borne out of an *active* exchange between architecture and photography. Photography, as practiced by Korab, has the authority to do far more than simply re-present architecture; it can, and does, activate productive transactions in the *making* of architecture.⁷ Second, through Korab's photography we are witness to the full and complex lives of the built environments we create and inhabit. Architecture, Korab asserts, is hardly stable and never complete and is always entangled in the dynamic tensions between the *natural world* and the *human condition*. And third, his images prompt us to take full measure of the *unique cultural time-*

zones within which we live, and upon which we act. More precisely, they are all about *context*, a critical countermeasure to the otherwise "narrowly selective transparency" of photography.⁸

An Architect First

It is important to note that Balthazar Korab has always considered himself to be "an architect who produces photographs rather than a photographer who is knowledgeable about architecture."⁹ In short, he was trained as an architect and became a photographer through the practices of architecture and design, a fact that is not insignificant to a broader understanding of his work and the unique contributions he has made to the production, representation and critical assessment of Modern architecture.

Born in Budapest, Hungary in 1926, Korab began his architecture education at the Polytechnic in 1945, shortly after the end of World War II. Following the occupation by the Soviet Union and major political upheavals (which led to the imprisonment of his father) Korab left the city with his brother and friend on New Year's Day, 1949 "in search of freedom." He traveled through war-torn Europe (mainly Austria, Germany and France) before arriving in Paris, where he enrolled at the *École des Beaux-Arts* to complete his architecture training and obtain a diploma of architecture (1950-54).

Always transitory and on the move, Korab began his earliest experiments with photography using a hand-held, 35mm Leica camera and developed his instincts through first-hand experiences in a manner akin to that of a documentarian. With a fast and *reflective* approach to photography he was continuously searching, digging and rummaging through the accumulations and wreckage of architecture, and his camera became more than a mechanical apparatus, it was a means to help reconcile and make sense of his often fractured and chaotic existence during and after the war. In Korab's own words, "photography is a very important way of creating some record of the transformations experienced throughout the cultural life of a place."¹⁰ Thus, architecture, for Korab is intimately connected to the material, cultural and historical circumstances within which it is created, and it acts as a nexus through which those circumstances flow. In order to capture the range of these complex reali-

ties, Korab learned to approach the photography of architecture not as an *idealist*, but as a *realist*, one who strives to account for the full measure of his subjects.

In this respect, Korab's early experiences have shaped and influenced his sensitivity to the effects of time and change on the life architecture and other designed environments, a distinct sensibility that would be instrumental in developing his approach as a photographer when charged with documenting the development, construction and occupation of such dynamic projects as those he would encounter working in the office of Eero Saarinen and Associates.

Eero Saarinen and Associates

Upon the completion of his studies in Paris, Korab moved to the United States to spend a month in Michigan with his American newlywed before pursuing more long-term plans in Brazil. Shortly after their arrival to Michigan, however, Korab was surprised to discover that the office of Eero Saarinen and Associates was only miles away, in the town of Bloomfield Hills. He cold-called the office and was granted an interview with Eero Saarinen to whom he presented a series of photographic reproductions of his *Beaux-Arts* drawings from Paris. Eero conferred with his junior partner Kevin Roche and they immediately offered Balthazar a cigar and a job with a starting wage of \$2.75 an hour.¹¹ He was asked to return after lunch to begin working and was immediately given design responsibilities on several projects in the office, including the J. Irwin Miller House in Columbus, Indiana and the TWA Flight Center at Idlewild Airport in New York City (later John F. Kennedy International Airport), among others.

Because the Saarinen office designed through the use of large-scale models, full-scale mock-ups and iterative prototyping, Korab was given the responsibility of documenting the design development processes through photography. At the time he joined the office, he did not yet consider himself to be a "photographer," per se, but he willingly accepted the responsibilities to photograph the models and prototypes used to explore various alternatives for each project. Throughout his tenure in the office (1955-58) Korab's photography became an indispensable tool for design which also gave him a tacit

knowledge of the designers' intentions underlying the completed projects he was eventually assigned to photograph.

Therefore, it is not without reason to contend that Korab's academic and professional training as an architect provided him with a heightened sensitivity to the material, spatial, technical and conceptual maneuvers by which architects infuse architecture with rhetorical and symbolic value. In fact, Korab himself has said of his approach, "what affected my photography most is the fact that I knew about architecture because I had designed and drawn it," and that "architects know how to interpret space, because they understand how a building works."¹² So, what did he know about the Miller House and how did he go about interpreting the space and the intentions of the designers?

J. IRWIN MILLER HOUSE: COLUMBUS, INDIANA (1953-57)

In 1953, when design work commenced for the Miller House in Columbus, Eero Saarinen had already designed a lake front cottage in Ontario Canada for the Millers in collaboration with interior architect, Alexander Girard (1950- 52). However, this house in Columbus was to become the Miller's primary residence in their home town, wherein Saarinen and associates had recently designed a new branch bank for Miller (Irwin Union Bank & Trust, in Columbus, 1950-54).¹³ New to the Saarinen office, Korab was first tasked with designing and modeling multiple proposals for the sculptural fireplace that was to punctuate the main living area in the center of the house and screen the front door from the conversation pit, a circular dining table and a built-in storage wall. (Figs. 1 &2)

While designing and photographing numerous interior models for the development of this space, Korab cultivated a keen awareness of Saarinen's and Girard's intentions to create what amounts to an artificial, *interior landscape* comprised of sculptural furniture, a rich tapestry of upholstery and fabrics (designed by Girard), and the Miller's extraordinary art collection. (Fig. 2)

How to Design a Modern House

Prior to their collaboration on the second Miller House, Girard and Saarinen had explored the no-

tion of an *interior landscape* composed of an array of materials, textures, spaces and objects in previous collaborations. In 1952, concurrent with the completion of the Miller Cottage in Canada designed jointly by Saarinen and Girard, *House & Home* ran a feature article highlighting two houses designed by Girard that lends further insights into some consistent themes later developed at the Miller house.

The article, entitled "Here is How Alexander Girard Goes about Designing a House," was illustrated with photography and drawings by Girard's friend and Herman Miller colleague Charles Eames, who also designed the layout for the article.¹⁴

There are many insights into Girard's approach to the design for a modern dwelling that provide tangible evidence of other likely design ideas that he contributed for the design of the Miller House. Most notably, is the description that begins the article; "The first house is really four separate houses linked by glazed passages: A service house with kitchen and utilities; a living-dining house; a house

for guests; and a house for the owner's bedrooms. Between these houses are paved and planted terraces."¹⁵ And in other sections of the article, the author describes Girard's affinity for the whimsical and eclectic use of colors, textures and objects on display in his domestic interiors. "Girard has a real and often humorous tolerance for such human failings as knickknack collecting, trophy displaying, untidiness within reasonable limits and general, aimless puttering around."¹⁶



Figure 1: Miller House fireplace models, c. 1955, photograph by Balthazar Korab.

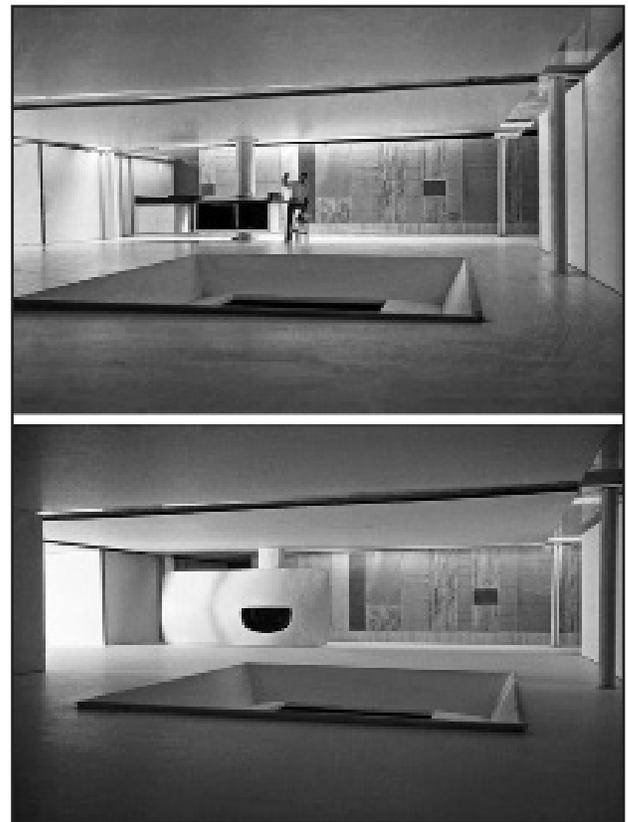


Figure 2: Miller House interior models, c. 1955, photograph by Balthazar Korab.

As evidenced by the models that Korab made and photographed for the development of the interior (Fig. 2), he was keenly aware of the importance of the contrast between the fixed elements of the house and the more fleeting, or applied details that were the purview of Girard's designs. Korab also knew that many of these interior *design elements and details* were intended to be moved about, swapped and rotated based on the different seasons of the year and the varying levels of formality required by the Millers. In other words, set against the white



Figure 3: Miller House view of interior structural system, photo by Balthazar Korab.

formal purity of the fixed, sculptural elements of the house was a constantly-changing interior *landscape* that would bring a warmth and vibrancy to the otherwise austere interior.

No doubt, other important effects that add to the dynamic nature of the interior are the diurnal fluctuations of natural light that result from the innovative skylight system integrated into the structural scheme devised primarily by Kevin Roche. This innovative approach to structure creates both an ordering principle for the house (in the form of a nine-square grid) while also delivering a naturally-occurring modulation of light to the interior spaces of the house that tracks with the light quality outside.¹⁷ (Fig. 3)

A Modern Landscape Befitting a Modern House

While Girard's collaborations with Saarinen provided an array of influences during the design develop-

ment of the Miller House, Dan Kiley was entrusted with turning the logic of the interior *landscape* outward into the thirteen acre site. The house had been largely designed and positioned on the gently sloping site by the time Kiley was to begin his designs for the project. Though Kiley and Saarinen had collaborated numerous times before – most notably on the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (1947), and the Miller's Irwin Union Bank & Trust, in Columbus (1950- 54) – Kiley considered the Miller House to provide his first opportunity to “produce a fully integrated modern work of coherent scale.”¹⁸

Taking direct spatial and visual cues from the architecture, Kiley designed a landscape that challenges the legibility of where architecture ends and landscape begins. As Kiley himself has noted, “the sense that the house reaches from its centre out to the land is facilitated by Eero's use of devices



Figure 4: Miller House aerial view of exterior and landscape, photo by Balthazar Korab.



Figure 5: Miller House view of interior, photo by Balthazar Korab.

such as glass walls and skylights, which allow phenomena of nature (light, shadow, breeze) and the qualities of interior space (volumetric definition) to co-mingle... Much like Eero's concept for the house, each area, or 'room', has its own programme (orchard, children's lawn, recreation) yet all are bound together in a loose, dynamic order of spatial flow."¹⁹ Kiley's landscape is expansive and monumental, yet intimate in its scale and organization of space. And similar to Girard's theatrical arrangement of colors, textures and materials in the interior, Kiley's selection of species for his planting plan provides a dynamic counter to the white enameled and slate clad exterior of the house. (Fig. 4)

CHANGE OVER TIME

Full disclosure: I have never seen the Miller House in person, nor have I experienced the sounds, sights and smells of its landscapes (few have, really). Therefore, I fully contend that this entire study is positioned on questionable ground with respect to its implied authority on the relationships between image and reality. Certainly, the images produced by Korab can never fully contend with *actual* experiences of the ever-changing landscapes (both interior and exterior) of the Miller House, but in this particular case the question of a photographer's authority over *reality* seems to miss the point. Surely, any one of these images, viewed in isolation, will always deliver *less than the thing itself*, photographs always do. However, Balthazar Korab, with his restless sensibility as a documentarian and his relentless approach to the practice of photography has assembled a new reality for the Miller House, one that expands our knowledge and understanding of its most *fundamental* characteristic – the expression of *change over time*.

So what transpires, then, in the translations between things, their representations, and our interpretations thereof? In the case of Balthazar Korab, it amounts to matters of difference; differences in his experiences and influences that have activated major differences in his *sensibilities* and approach to the *practice* of photography. And these differences, it turns out, continue to make all the difference. (Fig. 5)

ENDNOTES

1 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: MoMA, 1966), 6-11.

2 For example, in publications on the work of Dan Kiley, most of the photographic images understandably emphasize the landscape features of the project without much of the architecture or interiors included in the imagery ad analysis. See: Reuben M. Rainey and Marc Treib, eds., *Dan Kiley Landscapes: Poetry of Space* (Richmond, CA: William Stout Publishers, 2009); Dan Kiley and Jane Amidon, *Dan Kiley: The Complete Works of America's Master Landscape Architect* (Boston, New York and London: Bulfinch Press, 1999). While Gregg Bloom contextualizes the house and garden in historical arc of classical and modern theories of space-making, and persuasively presents the links between the architecture and the landscape, his analysis is illustrated largely through drawings. See Gregg Bleam, "Modern and Classical Themes in the Work of Dan Kiley," in *Marc Treib, Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review Cambridge* (MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), 220-239; See also: Gary Hilderbrand, "Dan Kiley's Miller Garden," in William Saunders, ed., *Daniel Urban Kiley: The Early Gardens* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 65-77. Hiderbrand situates the design community's reception of the Garden in this essay.

3 In a phone conversation with a representative from Esto, Inc. on September 13, 2010, the archival numbering for the Irwin Miller House confirms that Stoller photographed the house in 1958. Though it is conceivable that he visited the house on more than one occasion (his archiving system only registers the year of assignment, not the number of shoots per project), the archivist in the office, "at that time, more often than not, he would have conducted only one shoot for the house." For example, in "A Contemporary Palladian Villa," *Architectural Forum* (September 1958), 126-31 and "H&G's Hallmark House No. 3: A New Concept of Beauty," *House and Garden* (Feb 1959), 58-77, all of the images are credited to Ezra Stoller. In Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Donald Albrecht, eds., *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), of the thirteen images of the Miller House, all but three images are credited to Stoller, the other three are credited to Will Miller, son of J. Irwin and Xiena Miller. In Jayne Merkel, *Eero Saarinen* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), there are only 3 images of the Miller House, two credited to Balthazar Korab and one to Stoller.

4 Saarinen's second wife Aline (b. Aline Louchheim), was an art critic for *The New York Times* and had met Eero during an interview in 1953. It is widely agreed that Aline was instrumental in many of the decisions regarding the promotion of the Saarinen office as she was well-connected in media circles in New York. Stoller, the architecture photographer of choice on the East Coast at the time was chosen by Aline's for many photography commissions. See In Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Donald Albrecht, eds., *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 3. This was corroborated in a conversation between the author and Cesar Pelli on November 4, 2009.

5 In the recent Library of Congress catalog by David DeLong and C. Ford Peatross, eds., *Eero Saarinen: Buildings from the Balthazar Korab Archive* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), there are numerous previously-unpublished images of

the Miller House by Balthazar Korab, although there is no accompanying text to assess or contextualizing the images. Furthermore, this selection (98 total) represents a fraction of the overall Miller House portfolio in the Korab archive.

6 This biography is written from interviews between Balthazar Korab and the author unless otherwise indicated. Some details have been gleaned from an unpublished interview between Balthazar Korab and Marlayna Schoen.

7 "In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1973), 23.

8 Sontag, *On Photography*, 6.

9 Interview with author

10 Interview, November 1997

11 Interview with author

12 Interview with the author, November 13, 1997

13 see Christopher Monkhouse, "The Miller House," in *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*, eds., Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Donald Albrecht (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 236-241.

14 "Here is How Alexander Girard Goes about Designing a House," *House & Home* 2 (November 1952), 120-129.

15 *ibid.*, 121 & 123.

16 *ibid.*, 123.

17 see Jayne Merkel, *Eero Saarinen* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2005), 155-54; and Gregg Bleam, "Modern and Classical Themes in the Work of Dan Kiley," in Marc Treib, *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), 220-239.

18 Dan Kiley, "Miller Garden," *Process Architecture* No. 33, *Landscape Design: Works of Dan Kiley* (October 1982): 21; as quoted in Gregg Bleam, "Modern and Classical Themes in the Work of Dan Kiley," in Reuben M. Rainey and Marc Treib, eds., *Dan Kiley Landscapes: Poetry of Space* (Richmond, CA: William Stout Publishers, 2009), 79.

19 Dan Kiley and Jane Amidon, *Dan Kiley: The Complete Works of America's Master Landscape Architect* (Boston, New York and London: Bulfinch Press, 1999), 22-23.