

Revved up by a Modernist masterpiece

The Indiana family home of the man who built diesel-engine maker Cummins Inc. is a time capsule built for entertaining



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The little engine that could? How about the big diesel engine that did. Bring Modernism to the little city of Columbus, Ind., that is.

When Joseph Irwin Miller, the man who helped make Cummins Inc. synonymous with diesel engines, decided to build a cottage on the Muskoka island his family had enjoyed since the late 1800s, he turned to his friend, architect Eero Saarinen.

Mr. Miller had met the future Modernist leader – and fellow Yale graduate – in the late 1930s when Saarinen's father, Eliel, was chosen to design a church in Columbus, Ind., where Mr. Miller ran the family business; in fact, it was Mr. Miller, an architecture enthusiast, who persuaded the senior Saarinen to accept the commission.

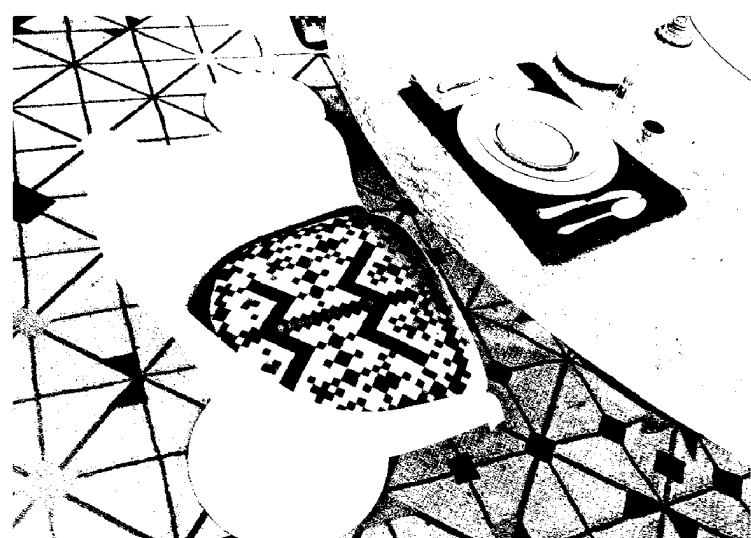
Fast-forward to the early 1950s, and Saarinen-the-younger is supervising completion of the Irwin Union Bank (now the Irwin Conference Center), which he described as a building “without any pompousness, absolutely no intention to impress.” Soon after, Mr. Miller showed him 13 acres on the outskirts of town and asked him to create a family home for himself, his wife Xenia Simons Miller, and their five children.

Completed in 1957, it was, and still is, one of the most breathtaking examples of residential Modernism yet created.

And, thanks to the Miller children, who put the 6,800-square-foot home in the hands of the Indianapolis Museum of Art when Mrs. Miller passed away in 2008, visitors have been left breathless since 2011, when it opened to the public for the first time.



The Miller house, built by architect Eero Saarinen with interiors designed by Alexander Girard, has barely changed since its completion in 1957.



Like Saarinen's bank, the Miller house isn't designed to impress on the exterior; sure, a trained eye can spot the expert workmanship and deluxe materials, but it's only once inside the unceremonious front door (beside the carport) that the incredible light show from a network of narrow skylights, the creamy-yet-textured marble walls alternating with sheets of glass, and the warmth of the Alexander Girard-designed conversation pit send your eyes straight to, well, Pleasuretown.

And that's how the unpretentious Millers wanted it, says Erin Hawkins of the Columbus Visitors Center. “The main purpose of this place was to entertain,” she says, with a sweep of her arm that takes in the massive living and dining areas. “Columbus, at that time, didn't really have any hotels or restaurants.”

(While Columbus did have a few small hotels and restaurants, the industrialist was welcoming Lady Bird Johnson, Rockefellers, world leaders and fellow captains of industry to a place that, back then, had a population of just 20,000.)

The home is much as the Millers left it, too: Pictures hang on the walls; a ceramic jar on the kitchen counter reads “Xenia's Kitchen”; beneath a Venini chandelier a Saarinen-designed, marble-and-terrazzo dining table is set for dinner; beds are dressed; and knick-knacks, many by Girard, still populate shelves. There are slots behind one of the storage-wall doors that bear the imprint of Mr. Miller's “fiddle” (a Stradivarius), and a custom-size piano sits at the ready (the bottom is painted red so that it looks more interesting from the conversation pit).

Some rugs, designed by Girard in his playful, colourful style, document Miller family milestones – Yale, the home's floor plan, its “bowtie” logo, an elephant because the Millers were Republicans, etc. – while other, more traditional ones, serve to soften and define areas. Brass details are everywhere.

Mr. Girard, who is remembered as a textile and graphic designer but was also an archi-

tect and artist, created an interior for the Millers where both progressive and conservative folk could mingle and feel comfortable; in the rather small children's bedrooms (colour-coded by Girard, of course), carpeting and woody walls offered escape from this adult world.

Of course, despite all of this domestic warmth – or perhaps because of it – the architecture aficionado's eye is drawn to Saarinen's 16 slim, white-painted steel columns, which open like steel flowers as they reach the ceiling's racetrack of slotted skylights, and the perfect-yet-craggy travertine floors underfoot.

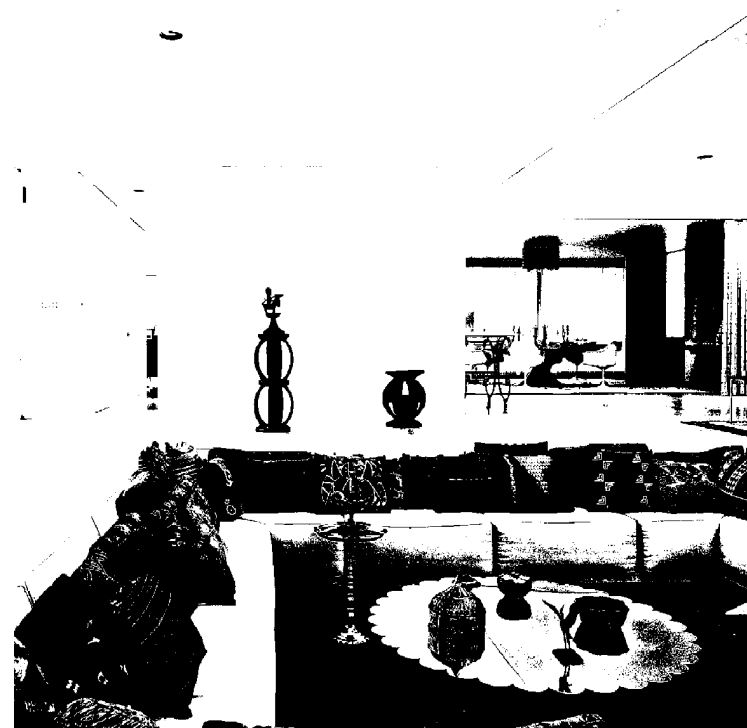
Also hard to miss: the seamless circular fireplace, and the groupings of sleek Saarinen Tulip chairs along with those designed by his Cranbrook classmate and friend, Charles Eames, out on the patio (chairs that would eventually become Eames' Aluminum Group). Beyond the Eames chairs, ordered and meticulous landscaping by Dan Kiley, another famous Modernist, is so precise, seams in the home's floor line up with seams in his walkways, which then line up with the placement of a distant fountain.

It's this tension between the crispness of Saarinen (and his assistant Kevin Roche) and the soft, folk-art humour of Girard that makes the Miller residence so fascinating. Like Lennon and McCartney, egos were balanced to produce something timeless; those same egos, it should be noted, came together again in Columbus to produce the striking North Christian Church.

Like the famous Eames house in California, the Miller house proves that Modernism can be as warm and welcoming as a Victorian.

And, as more and more people discover this treasure, perhaps the engine of Modernist preservation will begin to hum more loudly in other cities.

For more information on tours of the Miller house and other Modernist buildings in Columbus (I.M. Pei, Harry Weese, Cesar Pelli, Richard Meier), visit www.columbus.in.us. Reservations are strongly recommended.



The living room was designed as a conversation pit, and hosted such people as Lady Bird Johnson and the Rockefellers.