

The Miller House: Blue-chip Midcentury Modernism in America's Heartland

Industrialist and architecture patron J. Irwin Miller commissioned a trio of designers—Eero Saarinen, Alexander Girard, and Dan Kiley—for his home in Indiana. It's since been cemented in the canon as a masterpiece of midcentury residential design.

By **Kelsey Keith** Updated Aug 29, 2019, 11:40am EDT



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*Editor-in-chief **Kelsey Keith** first visited the Miller House in Columbus, Indiana, back in 2011. She returned for another peek this summer, while in town for **Exhibit Columbus**, a **biennial** that activates public space as an entree to all the town's architectural treasures. The original post has been updated throughout.*

American modernism is typified by three midcentury homes glorified in equal part by architecture geeks and tourists: Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, Mies

Van Der Rohe's Farnsworth House, and Philip Johnson's Glass House. Since it opened as a house museum in 2011, another home in small town Columbus, Indiana, has been welcomed into that lofty club.



The main entry to the Miller House. Legend has it that the Millers spotted these unusual pavers in Switzerland, couldn't source anything like them in the United States, and so had them shipped to Indiana directly from Lausanne to pave their driveway. Kelsey Keith

Designed by Eero Saarinen with interiors by [Alexander Girard](#) and landscaping by Dan Kiley, the Miller House was commissioned in 1953 by wealthy industrialist and modern architecture patron J. Irwin Miller and his wife Xenia.

Among other feats (the house boasts what may be the world's first [conversation pit](#), for one), Miller House was the first National Historic Landmark to receive the honor while one of its designers was still living and while still occupied by its original owners. The widow Miller died in 2009 and left the estate to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which undertook a detailed \$2M restoration before opening it to the public eight years ago.

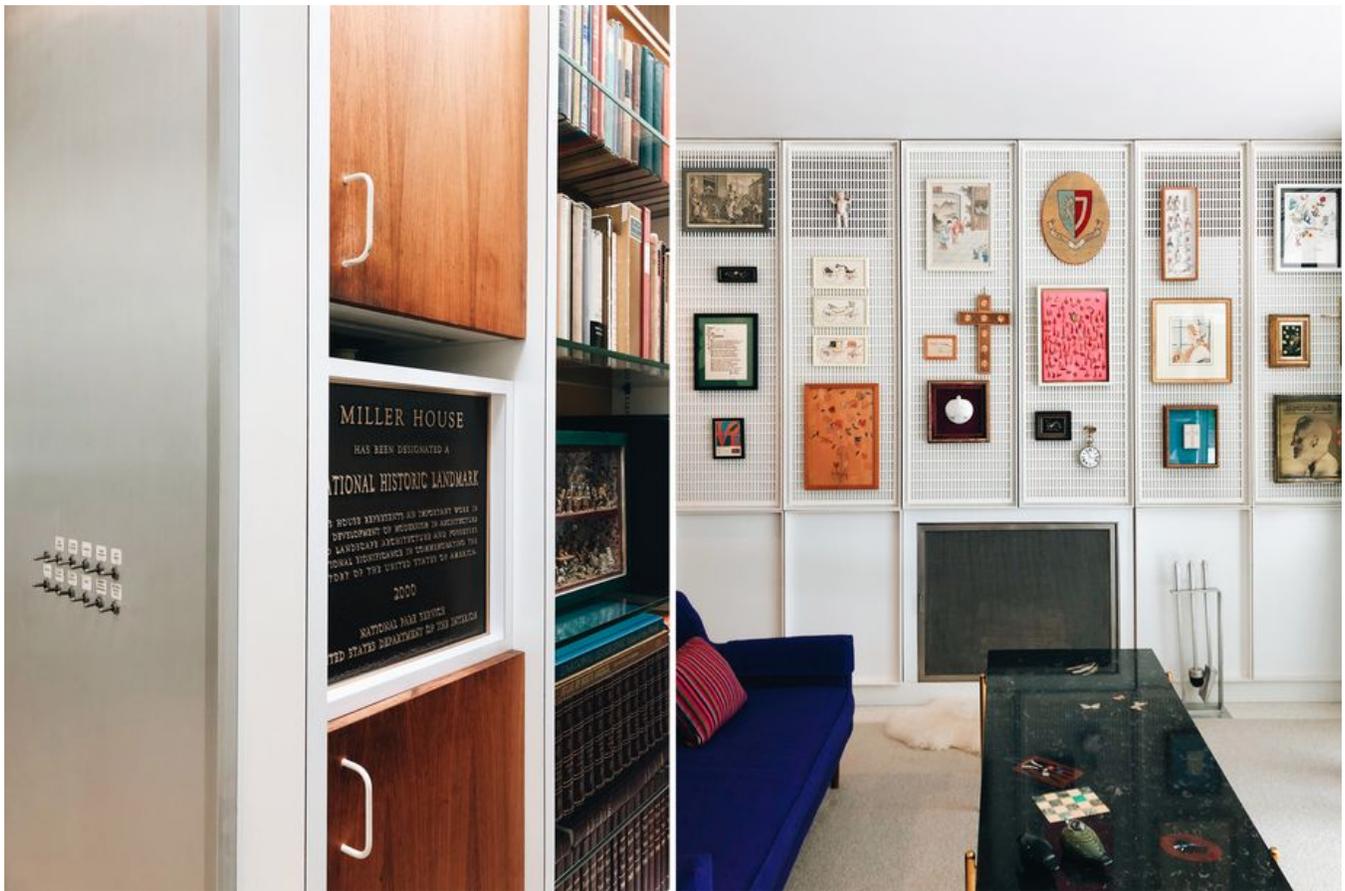


A custom Saarinen-designed dining table that predates his later collection for **Knoll**. Above the table, a more classical Venini chandelier picked out by Xenia Miller.

Spend half an hour in Columbus and it will become evident just how much J. Irwin Miller—whose modernist architectural tastes informed the commissions given by the Cummins Foundation, a branch of the engine manufacturing company Miller made successful after taking over from his uncle in the 1930s—used his wealth and power to encourage a new architecture for heartland America. (A rarity then; still a rarity now.)

If the city of Columbus selected an architect for its civic projects from a shortlist provided by Miller, Cummins would pay the design fees. **Examples include** a newspaper building designed by SOM (now home to Indiana University's first graduate program for architecture), elementary schools by Gunnar Birkerts and Eliot Noyes, a postmodern fire station by Robert Venturi, and Indiana's own Centre Pompidou—aka, a mirrored building for AT&T by Paul Kennon.

By 1953, when the family built its own modernist manse on 14 acres off Highland Way, Miller had engaged Eero Saarinen on two smaller projects: One, a bank anchoring Washington Street in the middle of downtown Columbus, and the other, a private lake house for the Millers in Muskoka, Ontario. (Saarinen, the architect of the St. Louis Arch, typically took on larger-scale commissions, only designing a handful of homes in his career.) Saarinen's touch is also evident in Columbus within buildings for two congregations: **North Christian Church**, circa 1964, and **First Christian Church**, for which Eero designed the interiors two decades earlier (1942) alongside his architect father, Eliel Saarinen.



L: Miller House was recognized as a national historic landmark in 2000—one of seven such designations in Columbus, population 50,000. R: Another Girard-curated storage wall, this one in the home's master bedroom. Note the printing plate from J. Irwin Miller's *Esquire* magazine cover at bottom right. Kelsey Keith

Onto the house: It is chock-full of interior delights, from the concrete tulip-shaped table that was the early prototype for Saarinen's now-iconic furniture, to the floating fireplace, to the piano whose underside is painted red. The 50-foot-long storage wall designed and curated by Alexander Girard references another mural by the designer residing in the John Deere Indiana headquarters—it's modular, but pieced in sections deviating in color and depth as if a piece of art as much as storage.



The home's 50-foot-long storage wall mixing built-in cabinetry with open shelving that held the Miller family's library, along with art and objets picked by Alexander Girard.

The conversation pit is, of course, the most notable feature of the main living space: sunken below the floor and accented with scores of bright pillows, changed according to the season but all handpicked by Girard and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen. Between that, a Girard rug decoding family symbols, and the dining chairs, hand-embroidered by Mrs. Miller's sewing club based on custom patterns by Girard, the cheery textiles warm up a space that could be accused of cold modernity (skylights, marble walls, white floors).



L: The Miller House's now-iconic conversation pit, underneath one of the skylights traversing the main living space. R: Detail of the cushions on Eero Saarinen's tulip chairs, embroidered by Mrs. Miller's sewing circle based on Alexander Girard patterns.

The outdoor living space is equally refined, but with design features that accommodate family life. Kiley is known for his uniform planting, a method that rejects fussy flower beds in favor of carefully plotted trees and shrubs. The back allée, perpendicular to the rear facade looked over by the living room, children's area, and master suite, are two rows of honey locust trees (which have been replanted *en masse* three times—if several fall ill, the entire tree colonnade must be replaced according to the design).



A composite image from August 2019 showing the exterior application of Saarinen's x-beams, steel columns, and skylights, shown on the side patio with Dan Kiley landscaping in the background. Kelsey Keith

This might sound Draconian, but consider the effect as you look past the plantings onto a massive, 10-acre lawn bounded by a tree line and a few thoughtfully placed weeping willows—the perfect playground for the five children of Indiana's most forward-thinking modernists.



The old playroom for the five Miller children, which Mrs. Miller converted into her office after they were grown. Note the Girard-curated folk art collection framed on the back wall.