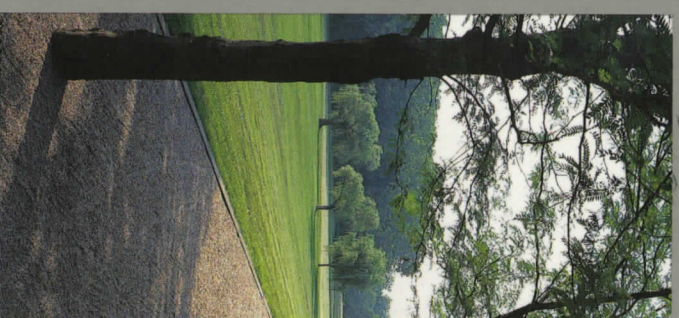


THE MILLER GARDEN

ICON OF MODERN

FA-OVERSIZE
SB
470
.K55
H54
1999



09



L A N D M A R

A Place No One Knows

by David Dillon

Visitors to Columbus, Indiana, can pick up a pocket map at the chamber of commerce and in a matter of hours get a short course in modern American architecture. With churches by Eliel and Eero Saarinen, a fire station from Robert Venturi, schools by Harry Weese, Richard Meier, and Edward Larrabee Barnes, the community is dotted with significant buildings by distinguished architects. A Henry Moore sculpture stands in front of I.M. Pei's public library, while a kinetic Jean Tinguely construction anchors a downtown shopping mall designed by Cesar Pelli. For a small prairie town known for corn and diesel engines, Columbus (pop. 33,000) makes a remarkably cosmopolitan impression.

But one stop not on any tour is the house and garden belonging to the town's preeminent architectural patron—J. Irwin Miller. Tucked away on a narrow side street among conventionally eclectic Georgian and Tudor mansions, the Miller House is discretion itself. No porte-cochere or

an identifiable front door. Instead of imperiously straddling the driveway, it stands quietly to one side—more edge than object.

Designed between 1953 and 1957 by Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche, the Miller House is a refined period piece of the same vintage as Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and the Glass House by Philip Johnson—clear, transparent, structurally expressive objects in luxuriant natural settings.

But the Miller Garden, designed by Dan Kiley, seems outside of time, a modernist icon that is as fresh and provocative today as when it was new. Every contemporary landscape architect has read about it, heard about it, seen photographs of it. Yet few have actually set foot in it. The reasons for this paradox range from Columbus's geographical isolation—50 miles south of Indianapolis—to the Millers' insistence on privacy. As the wealthy parents of five young children, they were understandably concerned about security. And as native Hoosiers, they were constitu-

an identifiable front door. Instead of imperiously straddling the driveway, it stands quietly to one side—more edge than object.

Designed between 1953 and 1957 by Eero Saarinen and Kevin Roche, the Miller House is a refined period piece of the same vintage as Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and the Glass House by Philip Johnson—clear, transparent, structurally expressive objects in luxuriant natural settings.

But the Miller Garden, designed by Dan Kiley, seems outside of time, a modernist icon that is as fresh and provocative today as when it was new. Every contemporary landscape architect has read about it, heard about it, seen photographs of it. Yet few have actually set foot in it. The reasons for this paradox range from Columbus's geographical isolation—50 miles south of Indianapolis—to the Millers' insistence on privacy. As the wealthy parents of five young children, they were understandably concerned about security. And as native Hoosiers, they were constitutionally incapable of display and self-

promotion. To others they may have been Columbus's first family, but in their own eyes they were "just folks." No Columbus building bears the Miller name; nor does it appear on Irwin Miller's office door or his stationery. For decades, requests to visit and photograph the house were politely denied, sometimes with an apologetic note from Mrs. Miller explaining the family's uneasiness about publicity. On the few occasions when the house did show up in print it was identified only as "a residence in the Midwest," with no mention of the owner or the location.¹

With their children grown and gone, the Millers have become more accommodating. The garden has appeared in several recent landscape histories, and the 1994 Pritzker Prize dinner was served in Dan Kiley's celebrated Honeylocust allée, with its sweeping views of the meadows and the Flatrock River. Yet in spite of its iconic status, the Miller Garden remains surprisingly elusive and enigmatic, like a tantalizing rumor



Main entrance to the house