

Wright and the Kaufmanns

Members of the Kaufmann family were patrons and personal friends of Frank Lloyd Wright's; they supported his work for 25 years through architectural commissions, gifts, and legal assistance. Of the roughly one dozen projects the family commissioned from Wright from 1934 to his death, only 3 – Fallingwater, its guest house, and Edgar Kaufmann's private office in the department store – were realized. In addition, Edgar Kaufmann, Sr. supported the creation of Wright's Broadacre City model, which toured the United States in the 1930s.



The Kaufmann office can be seen today in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In the store, it occupied the northwest corner of the tenth floor, adjacent to a conference room lined with sixteenth-century German paneling. Wright planned the room using a 4-foot square module, and the major elements, such as the 8-foot ceiling height and the two-foot high cabinet doors, correspond to the full or the half module. Edgar Kaufmann's desk and the plywood relief mural above it were the focal point of the room.

The office was constructed of carefully matched grains of cypress veneer by a Nicaraguan-born cabinetmaker, Manuel J. Sandoval, who had worked for several years with the Taliesin fellowship. Loja Saarinen, the wife of architect Eliel Saarinen, wove the fabrics for the carpets and upholstery. The office was substantially complete in January 1938.

As the Kaufmanns' interests and needs evolved at Bear Run, they turned to Wright for other buildings. They asked him to design two projects for gate lodges, a farm cottage, and a private, non-denominational chapel. They also commissioned several schemes for additions to the main house and guest house. For various reasons, none of these was realized.

Throughout the Kaufmanns' long association with Wright, they sought opportunities to secure public commissions for him in Pittsburgh. Some were related to the store – for example, a planetarium, and later a parking garage on the same property. Edgar Kaufmann also asked Wright's assistance in addressing broader urban design issues in Pittsburgh. Wright eventually prepared two grand schemes for a civic center at Pittsburgh's Point, where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers meet to form the Ohio River. He also produced two designs for an apartment building on Mt. Washington, a promontory overlooking downtown Pittsburgh. Again, none of these was realized.

In 1946, Edgar Kaufmann, Sr. commissioned modern architect Richard Neutra to design a house in Palm Springs, California. When Wright learned of this commission, he angrily broke off their friendship. With Edgar, jr.'s tactful intercession, however, the rift was mended, and the family assisted Wright in the formation of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

In the early 1950s, the family commissioned Wright to design another house in Palm Springs for them. Named Boulder House, this commission, more than any of Wright's other work for the family, was intended for Lilliane Kaufmann. Her death the following year put an end to the project.