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Kamrath House, 8 Tiel Way, Karl Kamrath, architect, 1953.



courtesy Reagan Miller

Lloyd Lewis House, Libertyville, Illinois, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, 1939.

S . R e a g a n M i l l e r

# The School of Frank Lloyd Wright



Karl Kamrath and Frank Lloyd Wright in 1949.

When Frank Lloyd Wright, the 79-year-old dean of American architecture, received the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal, he said: "[Such an honor] has reached me from almost every great nation in the world. . . . It has been a long time coming from home. But here it is at

last and very handsome indeed. I am extremely grateful."<sup>1</sup> The silver-haired American icon, who was not a member of the American Institute of Architects, received his medal nearly 50 years ago on March 18, 1949, at a ceremony in the overflowing banquet hall of Houston's Rice Hotel. At the convention, the theme of which was "American Architecture in the Atomic Age," Wright's acceptance speech was not only immodest but full of his usual candor. On architecture: "in the gutter." On democracy: "We profess it but where do we see it?" On civilization: "We have no civilization — it's a state of mind."<sup>2</sup> But he saved his most pointed barbs for the Shamrock Hotel, the recently completed Moderne structure financed by legendary oilman Glenn McCarthy, which was celebrating its grand opening that same evening across town. Referring to the Shamrock, Wright declared that "it ought to be written in front of it, in great tall letters, in electric lights —

"Why, Why?"<sup>3</sup>

In the audience for the award ceremony were Karl Kamrath (1911–1988) and Fred James MacKie (1905–1984), two architects who had established the Houston firm of MacKie & Kamrath in 1937. Under the design leadership of Kamrath, the firm promoted Wright's principles of an organic architecture, producing some of their finest work in Houston between the end of World War II and the time of Wright's death in 1959. The term "organic" was broadly defined by Wright as a natural method of interrelated and coordinated design in which "the part is to the whole as the whole is to the part." A number of local architects joined MacKie & Kamrath to explore for a brief period the tenets of Wright.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, at times these architects seemed more influenced by MacKie & Kamrath than by the master himself. This second generation of Wright devotees not only rode the wave of Wright's popular appeal during the 1950s but also tapped into the individualism and economic determinism that characterized Houston during that era.<sup>5</sup> The romanticism and nationalism of Wright's architecture appealed to many Houstonians who cherished and promoted their self-made independence, seeking to express themselves through the individualism that Wright represented.

The suburban house was an experimental laboratory for Wright and his followers. The publication of Wright's so-

called Usonian houses during the 1950s in such popular magazines as *Life*, *House Beautiful*, and *House and Home* met a broad audience. In Houston the postwar housing boom provided ample opportunity for local experimentation. While Frank Lloyd Wright designed only one house in Houston, the William L. Thaxton House of 1955 at 12024 Tall Oaks Road, his influence was reflected, if not replaced, in the work of local architects and home builders who perpetuated modern residential design primarily through consumable features such as redwood siding, the barbecue patio, the family room, the picture window, the pass-through, the carport, the deck, the storage wall, ranch house styling, the split level, and so on, appropriated as the bywords (or rather buywords) of the builder.<sup>6</sup> Spatial and stylistic innovations introduced by Wright quickly were diluted and ultimately became oppressive in the hands of the builders. Among architects who distinguished their work as influenced by Wright, subtle stylistic variations, use of materials, and manipulation of clichéd features marked most projects. A notable exception to these tendencies, however, can be found in the work of MacKie & Kamrath.

Frank Lloyd Wright's work was the singular force guiding the firm's design leader, Karl Kamrath. Throughout his career Kamrath felt an ethical imperative to uphold Wright's principles of architecture, and he aspired to the high level of

Schlumberger Well Services Headquarters, 5000 Gulf Freeway, MacKie & Kamrath, architects, 1953.



M. D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor & Research Center, 1515 Holcombe Boulevard, MacKie & Kamrath, architects, 1954.



Hilversum Town Hall, The Netherlands, Willem M. Dudok, architect, 1930. Dudok's work influenced MacKie & Kamrath's large-scale projects.

## THE ROMANTICISM AND NATIONALISM OF WRIGHT'S ARCHITECTURE APPEALED TO MANY HOUSTONIANS WHO CHERISHED AND PROMOTED THEIR SELF-MADE INDEPENDENCE, SEEKING TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES THROUGH THE INDIVIDUALISM THAT WRIGHT REPRESENTED.

excellence established by Wright. Kamrath thus assumed a great responsibility in representing Wright in Texas.<sup>7</sup> While the majority of MacKie & Kamrath's work before World War II was residential, the firm's post-war work included commercial and industrial projects. From 1949 through 1959 MacKie & Kamrath designed more than 20 houses, 7 churches, 24 office buildings, and facilities for the University of Texas, Dow Chemical Company, Borden's, and the State of Texas. The breadth and scale of this work exceeded not only that of most Houston firms but also of other Wright protégés. MacKie & Kamrath's extension of Wrightian principles to larger projects distinguishes them from the vast number of architects influenced by Wright.

MacKie & Kamrath's residential, ecclesiastical, and small suburban office buildings were influenced by Wright's Usonian houses, whereas their large-scale work looked to European modernists, particularly the Dutch architect Willem M. Dudok, whose best-known project is the Hilversum Town Hall of 1930.<sup>8</sup> Wright, in turn, influenced Dudok's

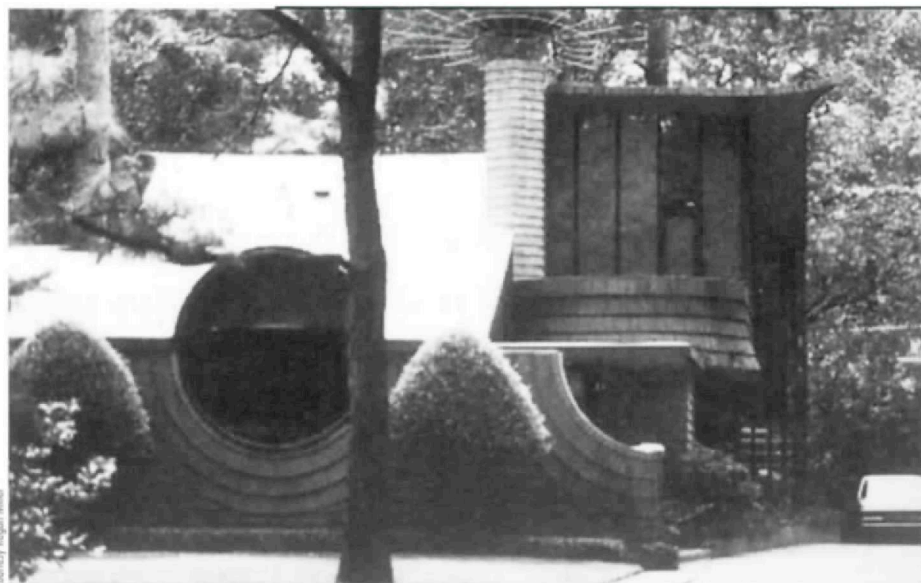
work, which combined the formal attributes of the De Stijl movement with the spatial and material qualities of Wright. Not surprisingly, Kamrath gravitated toward the work of Dudok both stylistically and theoretically in such projects as the 1949 Phyllis Wheatley High School, 4910 Market Street, and the 1953 Schlumberger Company Headquarters Building, 5000 Gulf Freeway. Indebted to Dudok for their articulated massing, these buildings also reflect Wright's organic principles. In both cases, the elongated brick buildings emphasize horizontality, reinforced by ribbon windows, canopies, and copings that contrast with strong vertical massing. Neither building, however, manifests the integrated spatial order characteristic of Wright. For MacKie & Kamrath this integration was typically limited to the lobbies, where materials, light, and plantings are skillfully composed to dissolve spatial boundaries.

Unfortunately, one of MacKie & Kamrath's finest buildings, the M. D. Anderson Tumor & Research Institute (1954) at 1515 Holcombe, has been obscured by additions and alterations, some designed by MacKie & Kamrath

themselves. The original design of M. D. Anderson marked a stylistic synthesis for the firm, thoughtfully combining organic and modern influences in a programatically and technically difficult building. The program for M. D. Anderson included areas for teaching, research, and patient care. MacKie & Kamrath separated these functions into three tall, slablike buildings that were extruded from one another. The broad face of the inpatient wing faced south, providing abundant light; the medical services wing was connected on the north side of the patient wing; and the smaller research wing extended from the west side of the medical services wing. The vertical masses rose from a flat, horizontally spread base, and each façade was designed to take advantage of its orientation. On the south, deep balconies were faced in bronze aluminum panels that acted as sunscreens. Eyebrow overhangs and tiny planted balconies cast shadows and reduced the scale of the large building. A dramatic roof overhang unified the adjoining wings. The building was clad in Georgia Etowa pink marble, a material suggested by the hospital director, Dr. R.

Lee Clark, Jr., who admired buildings at Emory University faced with the same material.<sup>9</sup> When completed the M.D. Anderson Tumor & Research Institute presented a striking modern silhouette rising from the canopy of trees below it.<sup>10</sup>

Although much of MacKie & Kamrath's work during the 1950s was large in scale, both members of the firm most enjoyed designing houses. The best of these Kamrath produced for his own family at 8 Tiel Way, a circular street off Kirby Drive bordering Buffalo Bayou, where five other houses designed by MacKie & Kamrath were constructed. Taken together, this collection of MacKie & Kamrath houses proposes a vision of suburban life in Houston influenced by the design principles of Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>11</sup> The site for the 1953 Kamrath House fronts a steeply sloping ravine, which led Kamrath to stretch the plan along an undulating east-west ridge. Constructed of a light pinkish-colored brick and lapped redwood siding, the house bridges the unevenness of the site with its persistent horizontality. The elongated spine of the four-bedroom house is ordered with a six-by-six-foot grid, interrupted by a rotated square containing a family room, dining room, kitchen, and service core. The entry, concealed in shadows beneath the deep eaves at the intersection of the wings, is approached by ascending to a compressed outdoor vestibule that leads into an intimate, low-



Robert C. Durst House, 323 Tynebrook Lane, Bruce Goff with Joseph Krakower, architects, 1958–60.



3611 N. Braeswood Boulevard, Herb Greene with Joseph Krakower, architects, 1957.

ceilinged wooden hall. Leaving the seven-foot-high entry, the ceiling rises to reveal dramatic views of the site from the glass-walled living room, which projects over a landscaped terrace facing the bayou. The living room is anchored by a massive stone fireplace that interrupts the glass exterior wall. Beneath the children's bedrooms, which are elevated above the terrace facing the ravine to the south, is a game room built into the slope of the site at the terrace level. The secluded master bedroom, firmly planted in the ground, feels like a pavilion in the woods bordered by dense plantings on the south and a serene clearing on the north. Kamrath, with the assistance of landscape architects Eckbo, Royston & Williams, was also responsible for the extensive exterior hardscape, including wooden decks, planters, and retaining walls. The house engages the site with both drama and intimacy, convincingly demonstrating Kamrath's understanding of organic architecture.

While MacKie and Kamrath chose to work within Wright's formal and philosophical vocabulary, other architects sought to expand these ideas. One of Houston's most unusual houses was designed by the Oklahoma architect Bruce Goff (1904–1982) for Robert C. Durst at 323 Tynebrook in 1958. Goff also worked on subsequent additions to the Durst House: in 1970 a bedroom was added above the garage; in 1976 another room was added and interiors were reno-

vated; and in 1981 Goff completed another set of interior renovations. Bruce Goff was a legendary University of Oklahoma teacher who sought to reconsider the language of modern architecture. He assimilated a variety of sources, particularly the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, yet he developed his own idiosyncratic language and approach to architecture. Goff delighted in exploring unusual geometric compositions and used the circle as the guiding geometry in the Durst House in plan, elevation, and section. The exterior, clad in cedar shingles, conforms to the barrel-shaped rooms, which are capped by thin floating roofs. The interior is a mixture of faceted windows, shag carpet, mosaic tile, and off-the-shelf items from the hardware store. It is a sincere combination of camp and culture and demonstrates why Goff was such an original.

Supervising the construction of the Durst residence was a young architect named Herb Greene who was then working in the architectural office of Joseph Krakower. Greene studied architecture under Goff and E. Fay Jones at the University of Oklahoma and, before graduating in 1952, worked briefly for the Los Angeles architect John Lautner. Greene moved to Houston in the early 1950s and worked from 1954 to 1957 with Joseph Krakower, whose small firm gave Greene considerable design responsibility. His hand is evident in a number of buildings that display a playfulness absent

from other Houston architecture of the period. The Southwestern Bell Telephone Company Building (1958) at 3333 Fannin Street was built for short-term (five years) use by the telephone company. Consequently Greene designed a windowless concrete-block building with "knock-outs" for a future glass storefront that might be desired by later tenants. This imposing two-story structure is anchored by a dramatic entry, delightfully relieved on the upper floor with a variety of U-shaped concrete blocks reminiscent of Wright's Barnsdall House in Hollywood.<sup>12</sup> The Houston Typewriter Exchange Building (1956) at 2201 Caroline Street exhibits the same inventiveness with a peculiar sculptural plaster soffit that marks the corner entry. The now demolished Long Point Clinic (1957) at 7410 Long Point Road was the one project in which, in Greene's words, he had a "willing" client.<sup>13</sup> The one-story brick building featured ribbon windows set high in the wall beneath an overhanging roof shaded by insectlike sunscreens made of tubular aluminum frames and green corrugated fiberglass. Like his mentor, Goff, Herb Greene delighted in using cast-off or mass-produced items in unusual ways and contexts.<sup>14</sup> Greene also designed three notable houses while in Krakower's office: 3615 N. Braeswood Boulevard (1957); 3611 N. Braeswood (1957); and 7 Pine Forest Circle (1956). Like his office buildings, Greene's houses conform to conventional rules of architec-

tural planning and design, but upon closer inspection they stand out because of their quirky detailing. Greene's only solo project in Houston was the now demolished Catherine Lyne House at 3605 Meriburr Lane. The Lyne House, built around a tree, was triangular in form with a thin carport roof supported by cables forming one corner of the triangle. Exterior walls were surfaced in barrel roofing tiles.

Leonard Gabert (1894–1977) and his partner W. Jackson Wisdom also produced a number of Wrightian buildings. Gabert was a graduate of the first architecture class at Rice University in 1916 and opened his office in 1922. His early work was primarily residential and traditional in style, with a notable exception — the streamlined Eldorado Ballroom (1938) at 3206 Dowling Street. After World War II his work expanded to commercial and religious projects. As primary designer, Gabert was responsible for a number of office buildings, including the now-demolished Triangle Refineries (1951) at 2600 Nottingham Road and the former Meyer Bros. Department Store (1950) at 2525 University, described at the time as "ranch style architecture."<sup>15</sup> Both projects used thin, horizontal Roman brick with raked horizontal joints, ribbon windows, stone copings, planter boxes, and projecting roofs. Gabert and Kamrath had great respect for each other's work. Fred MacKie was quoted as saying that "Len was one



Dr. Ray F. Wilson House, 3502 Arbor Avenue, John Chase, architect, 1959.



Triangle Refineries Building, 2600 Nottingham Road, Lenard Gabert and W. Jackson Wisdom, architects, 1951, demolished.

architect who could give Karl advice without Karl biting back."<sup>16</sup>

John Chase was the first African-American member of the Texas Society of Architects (1954) and the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (1957), which had denied him membership four times. He attended Hampton University and received his masters' in architecture from the University of Texas in 1952. Chase moved to Houston after graduation only to discover that no one would hire him because of his race, so, as a result, he opened his own firm. Chase's early work was decidedly influenced by the formal and spatial qualities of Wright's architecture. Examples in Riverside Terrace include his own house at 3512 Oakdale Court and the house at 3502 Arbor Court, both completed in 1959.<sup>17</sup> For his family, Chase designed a taut two-story brick house with an expansive north-facing glass wall. The thin, flat roof has wide eaves articulated with a pronounced dentil course that recalls detailing found in Wright's Usonian houses.

After 1959, the work of architects influenced by Mies Van der Rohe came to dominate progressive architectural design in Houston, leaving MacKie & Kamrath to represent the indigenous organic school of Frank Lloyd Wright. In a 1959 exhibition entitled *Ten Years of Houston Architecture*, mounted at the Contemporary Arts Association (designed by MacKie & Kamrath in 1949), Henry-

Russell Hitchcock acknowledged the exceptional Wrightian work of MacKie & Kamrath.<sup>18</sup> It was that firm's commitment to Wright that allowed organic architecture to take root in Houston and be nurtured by many other architects who quietly perpetuated the promise of Wright's vision. ■

1. "Wright Given Highest Award," *Houston Chronicle*, March 18, 1949.

2. "Wright Still Shows His Old Fire," *Houston Post*, March 18, 1949.

3. "Wright Given Highest Award," *Houston Chronicle*, March 18, 1949. Fay Jones recalls his tour of the Shamrock Hotel with Frank Lloyd Wright in the monograph *The Architecture of E. Fay Jones*, FAIA (Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects Press, 1992).

4. Many architects experimented with organic architecture in Houston whose work is not explored in this article. They include Michigan architect Alden Dow (Dow Chemical Headquarters, Freeport, Texas, 1940; Lake Jackson town plan, 1943; and the Reed House, 111 Carnarvon Drive, Houston, 1960); Travis Broesche (Faith American Lutheran Church, 4600 Bellaire Boulevard, Houston, 1959); David Red (Red House, 1802 Sunset Boulevard, Houston, 1951); and Wylie Vale (38 Tiel Way and 40 Tiel Way, both 1951, and 3723 Knollwood, 1955). See also John Kaliski, "The Wright Stuff: Houston's Natural House," *Cite* 7, Fall 1984, pp. 16-18.

5. Stephen Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide* (Houston: Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects and Herring Press, 1990), p. 13. Fox describes the tendency for Houston architecture to reflect current trends in part due to the lack of an "old guard charged with perpetuating the proprietary myths of an established elite, or at least appropriately indoctrinating newcomers." See also Stephen Fox, "Googies, Mies, and Mainstream: '50s Tendencies," *Texas Architect*, July-August 1985, pp. 46-53.

6. William Jordy, "The Domestication of the Modern," *American Buildings and Their Architects*, (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 174. See also Gary Hildebrand, *The Wright Space: Pattern and Meaning in Frank Lloyd Wright's Houses* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991). Hildebrand suggests this type of "renaming" was a means of "conceptual liberation" for Wright.

7. "Karl Fred Kamrath," *Who's Who in America 1988-89*, p. 1622. "As an architect I have endeavored to carry out, in the Texas area, the principles of Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture, since few of my colleagues, if any, are doing so."

8. Kamrath first met Dudok in November 1953, when Dudok addressed the Texas Society of Architects. He later visited the Dutch architect in Hilversum in October 1954, while reviewing the postwar reconstruction of Europe. The last meeting between the architects was in Houston in 1958 when Dudok received an honorary AIA medal. There are relatively few publications on Dudok, the best still being *Willem M. Dudok* (Amsterdam: Bussom, 1954).

9. Karl Kamrath to Dr. R. Lee Clark, October 25, 1978, written on the occasion of Dr. Clark's retirement. MacKie and Kamrath were introduced to Dr. Clark by the vice-president and dean of the University of Texas Dental Branch, Dr. Frederick C. Elliot. Dr. Elliot had recently commissioned MacKie & Kamrath to design the new Dental School in the rapidly expanding Texas Medical Center and hoped to architecturally unify the Dental School, M. D. Anderson Hospital, and the proposed University of Texas School of Public Health.

10. M. D. Anderson earned MacKie & Kamrath a great deal of recognition. It was featured in *Time* ("Anderson Hospital," December 13, 1954, p. 47), *Architectural Forum* ("The Hospital Behind the Gun," December 1954, p. 141), and *Architectural Record* ("M. D. Anderson Hospital," September 1958, p. 209) and received a Medal of Honor from the Houston Chapter, American Institute of Architects in 1955.

11. The other houses are 2 Tiel Way (1961), 48 Tiel Way (1957), 59 Tiel Way (1951), 67 Tiel Way (1951), 950 Kirby Drive at Tiel Way (1952).

12. Greene undoubtedly visited Wright's Barnsdall House during his tenure in Lautner's Hollywood office in 1951.

13. Herb Greene, telephone interview with author, September 3, 1997.

14. *Ibid.* Greene's only expressed regret about this period of his career was his lack of "technical skills." This has particular relevance for Goff and his followers because buildings using experimental materials and forms were often exceedingly difficult to construct.

15. Fox, *Houston Architectural Guide*, p. 135.

16. Leonard Gabert, Jr., telephone interview with author, September 15, 1997. As a member of the Temple Emanu El building committee in 1947, Gabert recommended MacKie & Kamrath, who were chosen to design the new synagogue at 1500 Sunset Boulevard, completed in 1949. W. Jack Wisdom first met Gabert while working on the synagogue as an employee of

MacKie & Kamrath.

17. John Chase, telephone interview with author, September 6, 1997. In addition to the influence of Wright, Chase cites the African-American architects Paul Williams of California and William Moses of Virginia, the latter Chase's instructor. Chase's early work consisted primarily of churches for African-American congregations, including the neo-Romanesque Greater Zion Missionary Baptist Church (1955) at 3201 Trulley Street.

18. Gerald Moorhead, "Wright Face: The Work of MacKie & Kamrath," *Cite* 21, Fall 1988, pp. 19-20.



Jacobs House, Madison, Wisconsin, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect, 1936. The Jacobs House was the first of Wright's Usonian houses.