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Kamphoefner: His Years at OU and Beyond, Part 1

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by Lynne Rostochil

Before Bruce Goff reigned supreme at OU, there was Henry L. Kamphoefner, who began his teaching career at OU in 1937 and became the chairman of the School of Architecture there in 1944.



Kamphoefner arrived in Norman with an impressive academic pedigree. Born in 1907 in Des Moines, Iowa, he graduated from the University of Illinois in 1930 and received his Masters in Architecture from Columbia University, as well as a Certificate of Architecture from the Beaux Arts Institute of Design in New York, two years later. After attempts to set up his own private practice, Kamphoefner began to feel that his traditional Beaux Arts education had been woefully lacking in covering modern architecture in its curriculum and completely inadequate for preparing graduates for practicing their vocation in the real world. Through his subsequent travels and personal research, the ever curious Kamphoefner began to embrace modern architecture and its infinite possibilities and would share his passion with several generations of students over the next five decades.

After a year working as an architect for the Rural Resettlement Administration, Kamphoefner found himself at OU in 1937 in his first-ever teaching position working under chairman Joseph Smay. When Kamphoefner arrived at OU, “studio courses during these years followed the Beaux Arts Institute of Design’s tradition,

which was commonly taught in other American schools of architecture at the time. The objective of this teaching style was to gain national recognition for the School by winning design awards for student work from the Beaux Arts Institute's New York juries"* just as Kamphoefner himself had done back in 1932.

Young, ambitious, opinionated, and a die-hard devotee of modern design, Kamphoefner was a real breath of fresh air at OU and quickly became a favorite among students and fellow professors alike. Within months of his arrival, he had also become a popular speaker and his name began appearing regularly in local newspaper articles as he travelled all over the state to speak about modern architecture. Here's an excerpt from a speech he gave in Oklahoma City in 1940 about good design in modern homes, which was covered by *The Oklahoman*:

"Many times the house with glass blocks, corner windows, and a flat roof is not only not modern, but it is hideous. The house with the most used rooms, the best view, and the most desirable position of the sun would be modern.... (Homes need harmony and comfort because) modern architecture represents a very definite, a very vital, and a very just reaction to chaotic confusion."

Obviously, Kamphoefner carefully ruminated about modern home design and once fermented in his mind, he was eager to put these very ideas into practice just two years later when he built what surely must be considered one of Oklahoma's very first mid-century modern homes:



Located just a few blocks from the OU campus on a large lot, the 1,700 sf house combined what would become staple materials for modern homes for decades to come — redwood, flagstone, and plenty of windows — in its L-shaped design. I found a spread about the in the May 1944 issue of *Pencil Points* magazine, which became *Progressive Architecture* just a few months later. Here's the article with a very snobbish introduction and photos by Truman Pouncey:

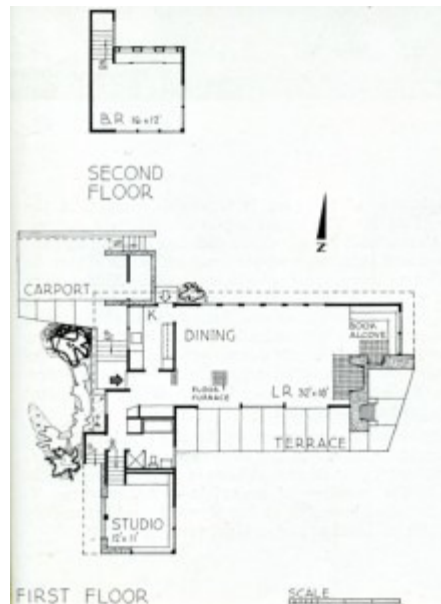


It is encouraging to publish an example of contemporary residential architecture from a State so infrequently represented in the architectural press. That the architect and owner is also Professor of Architecture at the State University is reason to hope for more frequent opportunities in the future.

Are Oklahoma clients more than others fond of "stylish" architecture? Or are Oklahoman architects less interested than their brethren elsewhere in regional architectural development of a contemporary character? Frankly, we don't know why the situation seems to exist — but we're willing to be told.



Sun control is handled by broad roof projections.



Organization of the plan is extremely simple, in the form of an L. The longer leg is essentially a general living area, with a book alcove added at one end and the kitchen and entrance area screened off at the other:



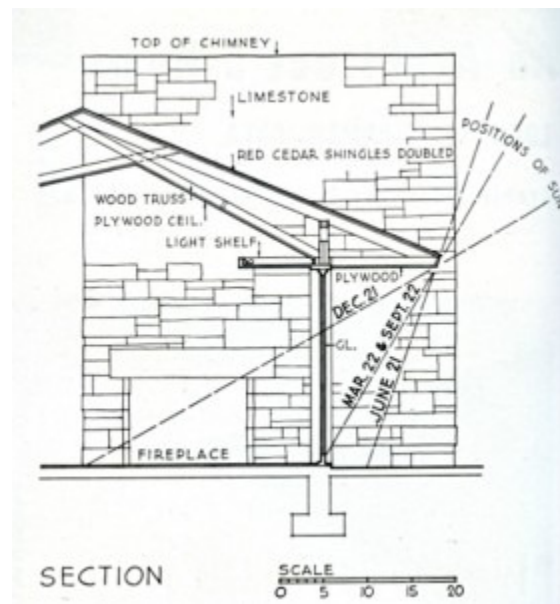
A screen of ivy shields the front door



Living area

In the shorter leg, a two-floor scheme is used — half a flight down to a studio, half a flight up to a bedroom. For so small an area as the alcove, introduction of a second fireplace seems a bit whimsical. But if it serves the owner's pleasure, it calls for no other defense. On the exterior, in combination with a third — outdoor — fireplace, the chimneys join to form a strong re-entrant angle built of local stone.

Careful thought was given to the sun's habits in this region, and roof overhangs were designed to keep it under advantageous control:



There is a refreshing frankness in the handling of materials — whether stone, V-joint redwood boarding, or the plywood used extensively for interior finishes and cabinetwork.



The redwood-colored siding remained a part of the house for decades — here's a tax assessor website photo of the home from early in 2014:



Last summer, however, a new owner bought the place, which sits at the back of a beautifully wooded lot, and did some painting and light remodeling. Here's the exterior now:



Due to all of the rain this spring and summer, the new owner hasn't had a chance to landscape the yard, but that's in the works. Here's the outdoor fireplace the Pencil Points article mentioned:



The entire back (or side, or front — I don't know) of the house is made up of floor-to-ceiling windows and doors that run the entire length of the common areas on the first floor:



While I was very fortunate to be able to photograph the interior spaces of the house, I was asked to shoot only the architectural elements inside. That was fine because there are some great details that I can't wait to share with you, like the interior two-sided flagstone fireplace mentioned above:



The left side of the fireplace faces the reading alcove/office area, while the right side looks over the living room. Along the back wall of the living/dining areas is this series of perfectly spaced windows that are large enough to let in a lot of light but small and high enough to impede the view of the neighboring home:



Although no longer covered with ivy, the divider between the common and more private areas remains intact:



Here's a vintage color photo of the divider against the original wood panelling in the home (from the NCSU Library collection):



The story that has passed from one owner to the next is that dividers like this are a Kamphoefner trademark. The three columns on this one indicate the three stories of the home — the basement level study, the main floor, and the upper level bedroom. I don't know if that's true or not, but there is a divider very similar to this one in Kamphoefner's second home in North Carolina — here's a photo of the divider in his North Carolina house, which is on the National Register:



The entire upstairs is a window-lined treehouse — I mean, bedroom — that is a true haven from the chaotic world outside, while the basement level is home to a sweet, flagstone-anchored and window-wrapped study that might just be my favorite, very cozy room in the house:



Soon after the home was completed, journalists came to call and declared that this design was “an outstanding example of southwestern regional architecture.” The venerable Frank Lloyd Wright appeared to agree.

When the master visited Norman in 1946, he stayed in one of these lovely rooms at Kamphoefner’s house and later commended the OU architect’s creation as a “social missionary” in an OU newspaper article. I’m pretty sure that’s a really good thing, but you can see what you think by reading the article [here](#).

Finally, I thought you might enjoy looking at a few color photos of the Kamphoefner home taken in 1946 — they are part of the North Carolina State University collection:





The one-bedroom home provided ample space for Kamphoefner and his wife, Mabel, who never had children and always looked upon his fellow staff and students as their family.

Stay tuned for more about Henry Kamphoefner and his fascinating career....

Thanks to the North Carolina Modernist group for allowing me to use the color photos of the Kamphoefner House.

Also, the quote about OU's adherence to the Beaux Arts Institute of Design's tradition came from the Architecture Program Report, Division of Architecture, 2008.

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