

KECK AND KECK



ROBERT BOYCE

FOREWORD BY NARCISO G. MENOCAI

Robert Boyce

PRINCETON ARCHITECTURAL PRESS

Published by
Princeton Architectural Press, Inc.
37 East 7th Street
New York, NY 10003
212.995.9620

©1993 Robert Boyce
All rights reserved.
96 95 94 93 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Canada.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner
without written permission from the publisher except in the
context of reviews.

Book design: Ken Botnick
Cover design: Kevin Lippert
Text editor: Andrea Kahn
Production editors: Joseph Cho, Stefanie Lew, Clare Jacobson

Special thanks to: Judy Blanco, Antje Fritsch, Laura Mircik, Erika
Updike, and Ann C. Urban—Kevin Lippert, Publisher

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:
Boyce, Robert.

Keck and Keck/Robert Boyce.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-878271-180 (cloth). —ISBN 1-878271-17-2 (paper).

1. Keck & Keck. 2. Architecture, Modern—20th century—
Illinois—Chicago. 3. Architecture, Modern—20th century—
Middle West. I. Title.

NA737.K4B69 1993

720'.92'2—dc20

92-26846

CIP

TO MY WIFE JEAN

For Dorothy Tredennick who first excited my interest in art history,
Roy Sieber who introduced me to a passion for African art, and
Narciso G. Menocal who guided me through the process of a PhD.

I thank them for their humanity, scholarship, and counsel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts made it possible to purchase numerous illustrations for this publication.

Many of the photos were purchased from Hedrich-Blessing Photographic Archives, Chicago.

William Keck graciously allowed me to make copies of his own photographs, and gave me copies of others.

Architectural Record, published by McGraw-Hill, granted me permission to reproduce illustrations from their journal (March 1933, May 1933, and January 1934).

The Architectural Review (The Architect's Journal) granted me permission to reproduce images from the July 1935 issue. I am most appreciative of their assistance in this project.

Also, I wish to thank Trish Harrell-Ayers and Andy Shupe, who assisted by printing illustrations for this book.

The lists of awards and honors of individual projects, the names of the clients, their addresses, and the project dates were gathered from records in William Keck's office and from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

CONTENTS

- 5 Foreword, *Narciso G. Menocal*
- 7 Introduction
- 9 From Watertown, Wisconsin to Chicago, Illinois
- 15 Chicago's Expansion During the Decade of the Twenties
- 21 Apprenticeship, North Shore Houses, and the New Bauhaus
- 29 The Century of Progress: Chicago, 1933
- 43 The House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House
- 57 Keck's Art Deco and Art Moderne Residences
- 71 Development of a Passive Solar House
- 83 Prefabrication and Building the Solar House
- 109 The Solar House Refined
- 135 Beyond the Single-Family House: Commercial, Community, and Urban Scale Design
- 149 Conclusion: George Fred Keck, 1895–1980
- 153 Awards and Honors
- 154 Client List
- 161 Bibliography
- 169 Illustration Credits
- 171 Index

FOREWORD

The story of modern architecture of the 1920s and the 1930s in America has come of late under scrutiny. Scholars no longer accept a simplistic differentiation of a *moderne* skyscraper sponsored mainly by the Architectural League of America and an "international style" championed by the Museum of Modern Art. We are learning that the development was complex and the crosscurrents rich. A number of books recently published, or about to be published, wisely choose to follow a monographic pattern, studying architects and even buildings individually. We still need a few years of such work before anyone can attempt a summation of those crucial inter-war decades.

George Fred Keck was probably the first architect to design in "the new manner" in Chicago. Regretfully, the Miralago Ballroom of 1929, "catering to the young set of automobiling, jazz-dancing nite lifers," is no longer standing; neither is the stunning Crystal House of the Chicago Century of Progress International Exhibition; its companion, the House of Tomorrow, was floated on a barge across Lake Michigan to a new location where it still stands altered and almost forgotten last time I saw it. But happily the story is not so universally grim. Countless other Keck buildings still stand—including his own apartment building in Chicago—and it is a wonderful story they tell.

That story is not linear, however. Stylistically, it expresses the modern at times, the *moderne* at others, and even a Wrightian organicism at some others. The expression of a universal idea through a consciously sought stylistic continuity was never an artistic aim for Keck, but as it makes him interesting it defines him as an American architect. Asked why he never wrote "about architecture," he was quick to answer that he was "no Hemingway, just an architect," a pithy statement worthy, in fact, of a Hemingway character.

Boyce's work is the final, comprehensive link in a chain of events pertaining to the Keck literature. That chain of events began in 1974 with Stuart Cohen and Stanley Tigerman's *Chicago Architects* exhibition; continued with Jeffrey Dean's interest in the firm's archives (which led to the deposit of the firm's archives in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin); and led, in 1980, to my own Keck and Keck, Architects exhibition and catalog at the Elvehjem Museum of Art of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the subsequent bequest to the museum of the furniture of the "House of Tomorrow," which, unfortunately, has never been exhibited. Boyce became my student shortly afterwards, and chose the architecture of George Keck as his dissertation topic. Out of that exercise issued this book, which, I hasten to say, is by no means a "published dissertation." Boyce's effort is a most welcome addition to the literature of this area. It brings a fresh midwestern dimension to a field dominated geographically by New York, California, and Miami Beach, and typologically by the skyscraper. Boyce casts new light on midwestern modern residential architecture and on the relationship of that architecture to the wider American and international picture as well. I am confident that, besides making new knowledge public, it will open new avenues of research in the history of American modern architecture and its ever-present, exciting dialectic of the autochthonous and the foreign.

Narciso G. Menocal
Buell Fellow, Columbia University
Professor of Architectural History
University of Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

George Fred Keck, principally a residential architect, consistently incorporated technical experimentation that forced new solutions to building and made improved ways of living. Frequently, technical innovations and new materials almost completely dictated the appearance of his projects, but for the client to be satisfied and comfortable, Keck believed the innovations had to be livable. He engineered functional innovations into his designs with such developments as large-scale fixed windows in south walls, adjustable ventilating louvers beside those windows, an evaporating sheet of water on a flat roof to cool the house during summer months, forced hot water or air in radiant heating floors, a compact built-in kitchen, and extensive built-in storage throughout the house. Keck proposed that an architect ought to abandon emotion and tradition, and attack the facts and needs of contemporary construction; only by so doing would he give the client the best possible living accommodations.

The Century of Progress International Exposition, 1933–34, was instrumental in introducing modern architecture to the American public, as was the 1932 traveling exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art, International Exhibition of Modern Art. During the 1930s and especially at the Century of Progress, Keck built buildings that were influenced by the formal sophistication of Art Deco and the International Style. Reduction of form, emphasis on surface planes, and interest in open interior volume indicated Keck's link with European architecture. While European architects sought societal transformations with their work, Keck was more interested in engineering the modern house as an architecture that organically fit the individual client's needs, not as a cold impersonal universal machine for living.

In the major twentieth-century architectural surveys—*Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William*

Morris to Walter Gropius by Nikolas Pevsner (1936) and *Space, Time and Architecture* by Sigfried Giedion (1941)—only the Chicago School and Prairie School in American architectural development merited discussion; Pevsner and Giedion proposed that during the twentieth century America had nothing to offer the architectural student until Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe came to the United States. The office of George Fred Keck (who formed a partnership with his younger brother William in 1946) should have been included in these two surveys. This small office gave America its first glass houses—the House of Tomorrow and the Crystal House—at Chicago's Century of Progress International Exposition of 1933–34. These houses were based on the concepts of prefabrication, which had been a major focus in expositions since the Great Exhibition of Industry of All Nations of 1851, and which played a primary role in Keck's residential architecture during the 1940s.

Keck and Keck's International Style technology and aesthetics were later merged with an American organic vernacular—stick, shingle, and prairie style residential architecture. The combination of these two styles was based on construction and aesthetic principles that Keck examined, analyzed, accepted, and then incorporated into an eclectic but highly personal architectural statement.

Other architects were also involved with Americanizing the International Style and making it palatable to the public. Gropius, William Lescaze, Marcel Breuer, Richard Neutra, and Rudolf Schindler, all naturalized Americans, were but a few involved with this transition. It was Keck, however, who consistently designed and built residences that combined a European machine aesthetic with Wright's organic aesthetic to accommodate the tastes and pocketbooks of post-Depression and post-Second World War Americans.

This eclectic style was incorporated in the Usonian projects developed in the 1930s by Frank Lloyd Wright, but it was Keck's mass-produced Green's Ready-Built that made a Usonian-type product available to a wider public.

Passive solar heating was an idea discussed and employed by Europeans during the 1920s and 1930s; Wright was also aware of its merit. However, it was in the design of the Chicago Housing Project (1932) and during the construction of the House of Tomorrow (1933) that the effects of passive solar heat were first observed by Keck. The use of large windows

facing south, which trapped solar heat and light, became an integral part of Keck's residential work and made him the leading American involved in solar architecture.

Though in later years Keck designed and built commercial buildings and very large public housing projects, it was in designing high-quality solar residences, which combined the aesthetics and engineering of the International Style and organic architecture, and in laying the ground work for their acceptance that he most influenced American architectural design.

1

FROM WATERTOWN, WISCONSIN TO CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

At the turn of the century Watertown, Wisconsin was a small rural community settled predominately by German Lutherans who farmed the fertile rolling terrain of the Rock River Valley northwest of Milwaukee. The town was characterized by simple buff-colored brick and timber houses. Because of abundant water-power, Watertown became the center of a lumber industry that shipped goods to Milwaukee and Chicago by rail during the mid- and late-nineteenth century. The lumber industry attracted the town's most prominent nineteenth-century citizen, John Richards, who built the famed Octagon House (1854) using Orson Fowler's architectural concepts.¹

George "Fred" Frederick Keck was born to Fred George and Amalie Henze Keck in Watertown on 17 May 1895, the oldest of five sons.² The Keck home stood on Water Street at the banks of the Rock River and its yard afforded a view of the Octagon House. George Fred Keck's grandfather, John, was a cabinetmaker who had fled Germany during the German-Prussian War of 1848. He settled in Watertown and began a furniture-manufacturing business, which is still partly owned by the Keck family. From the time he was a youngster, Fred was interested in construction. As a boy, he built a canoe and a small sailboat from packing crates salvaged from the family store. At home he and his brothers worked in the kitchen and the family garden. Amalie Keck taught her sons about the simple pleasures—good food and nature—and introduced them to Froebel Kindergarten education. This German pedagogy was first introduced to America in Watertown in 1856 by Margarethe Meyer Schurz, a pupil of Froebel.³

The Kecks were financially secure and determined to educate their children. Their five sons completed primary and secondary schooling in Watertown, where they received a standard turn-of-the-century academic

education; their high school manual training classes taught them drafting and a knowledge of and respect for tools. With his father's encouragement, Fred decided to attend college for an engineering degree. After his 1914 high school graduation, Keck enrolled for a year in the civil engineering program at the University of Wisconsin, but in 1915 left Madison to attend the architectural engineering program at the University of Illinois, where he could better exploit his aesthetic and artistic temperament.⁴ In 1918 Keck's college education was interrupted by his enlistment in the army. He served as a lieutenant in the United States Coastal Artillery stationed in France during the last part of the First World War.⁵ Upon returning to the Champaign, Illinois campus in the fall of 1919 he took courses in the practical aspects of building construction and completed his degree. Keck was a member of the Alpha Rho Chi Fraternity during his years at the University.

After graduating in 1920 as an architectural engineer and while preparing for his architectural licensing exam, Keck worked six months as a designer/draftsman for the Gypsum Company in New York City. An enthusiast of the arts, he partook of the city's theatre, opera, and architecture. Illustrations of Prix-de-Rome and Beaux-Arts buildings fill Keck's sketchbooks from this period and show his interest in classical details. His drawing style is similar to that found in contemporary periodicals, especially *Architectural Record*.⁶

While in New York Keck proposed to Lucile Liebermann, a hometown girl who was working at the New York Public Library. Lucile, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Albert B. Liebermann, was a childhood friend whose German-Jewish family had settled in Watertown in the late 1800s. Her mother's family, the Bellacks, had come from Vienna and owned and operated a men's clothing store in Milwaukee. She received her training in library science from the University of

Wisconsin, where she won numerous scholastic and honorary awards. In 1920 Keck returned to Wisconsin and passed his licensing examinations in Madison and Chicago. In 1921 he married Lucile and the young couple moved to Chicago.

Chicago in the 1920s was a major metropolitan center and the site of prolific building. Keck wanted to be a part of the construction boom. Working in Chicago kept him close to his family and free to enjoy the opera, theater, and other fine arts that were vital to the city's life.⁷

After working as a draftsman for a number of Chicago architects, Fred Keck opened a private practice at 612 North Michigan Avenue in 1926. Keck was "very much the romantic image of an architect. Tall and lean in his white linen suits replete with white shoes, white shirt, and black bow tie" he was an imposing, successful, charming, and attractive man who enjoyed life and even took vicarious pleasure in the family lives of his young clients.⁸ He made the initial client contacts and preliminary design sketches, personally signed office correspondence, escorted clients to job sites, and even entertained them when they visited Chicago. But as his practice grew he found he needed assistance in the daily running of the office.

During the 1930s, Keck's office grew. His brother William joined in 1931, after completing his architectural degree at the University of Illinois; Robert Bruce Tague, Fred Keck's chief draftsman, was in the office from 1934–44, 1946–57, and intermittently during the 1960s; Ralph Rapson came from Cranbrook in 1938 and stayed until 1945, when he left for private practice; and Robert Paul Schweikher (the most Wrightian of the associates) worked with Howard Fisher on the General Houses projects of 1933–34 and collaborated with Keck on war housing during 1941–42.

William Keck was responsible for keeping the office running smoothly. He also would "sweat out the design details" so that Fred's ideas could be realized in built form. William did most of the on-site inspections, wrote follow-up site reports and specifications, and kept up with newly marketed construction products. After World War II, William returned to the office in March 1946 to become a full partner with his brother in May of that year. The practice, known as

George Fred Keck, William Keck, Architects, continued to employ a stream of young draftsmen. After 1948, William's initials and those of young drafting apprentices appeared on the plans. Fred Keck "was glad to get young sympathetic draftsmen who could draw up what he wanted, [but then] he was one of the only architects in Chicago who was doing modern architecture." For his young employees "it never was like working but was almost like Fred Keck was subsidizing them,...paying them for having fun." One of the most important draftsmen and designers was Robert Bruce Tague. "Fred could believe in Bob and Bob reinforced Fred's own thinking."⁹

Tague (1912–84) joined Keck in May of 1935, while William was in Phoenix, Arizona helping construct an adobe house for a fraternity brother's parents, the A. E. Chapmans. As far as Tague was concerned, "Keck was the only major architect in Chicago doing modern. There was nothing else modern to look at except the Art Deco office buildings of Holabird and Root. The other good work being done in America was mostly by Lescaze, Neutra, and a few other Europeans."

Tague began his M.F.A. thesis (a housing development layout and site plan) after receiving a postgraduate scholarship at the Armour Institute and requested Fred Keck as a consultant.¹⁰ With William in Arizona, Fred asked Tague to be the office boy. He accepted the offer using the drafting tables for his independent thesis, answering the phone, and keeping the office open. He began drawing on Keck projects during that summer, but in the fall of 1935 went to Texas in an unsuccessful attempt to find a job.¹¹ An invitation by Keck brought him back to the Chicago office where he assisted with the 1936 Bertram J. Cahn House. He stayed on as draftsman until he was called into the army in 1944. According to Tague, "Ideologically, Fred Keck was absolutely the designer, but as far as process was concerned, Keck did less and less work on the drafting board. All the rough parts [of the design] were mine."¹²

After viewing Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's traveling International Exhibition of Modern Architecture in 1932, Tague became an International Style enthusiast. In that show he discovered a "style" broad enough to be universal and adaptable over