



THE LEENHOUTS LEGACY IN FOX POINT

Lillian (1911-1990) and Willis (1902-1992) Leenhouts were important local architects. Of the 19 North Shore Leenhouts' designed residences, Fox Point hosts eight.

The Leenhouts practiced through their Milwaukee architecture firm from 1945 to 1990. Their designs were distinctive: mid-century modernist with regional and environmental sensitivities. Most of their projects were single-family homes, although their work included apartment buildings, libraries, and churches. The structures exhibit sensitivity to site, functional planning, and solar design.

The Leenhouts almost never included basements in their designs. "The floods will getcha," Willis would say. The firm excelled at site planning earning a reputation for designing homes on lots that were considered difficult.

Even without basements, Leenhouts' homes have a lot of storage space, built-ins, and sliding doors. Other common Leenhouts' elements are garden solariums and radiant heat from the floors that typically consist of gravel, copper pipes, and a slab on top.

Willis was the son of well-known Milwaukee architect Cornelius Leenhouts. When Willis was a young man, Cornelius and his wife Jenny built a summer cottage on Beach Drive in Fox Point just north of the Beach Club (near the lift station) that they called "the shack." They eventually expanded it and moved there year round. Robin Leenhouts, Willis and Lillian's daughter, remembers many happy occasions at that house. "We are going to Fox Point!" her parents used to say.

Willis apprenticed at Leenhouts & Guthrie and eventually became a partner. Lillian earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in architecture from the University of Michigan and in 1942 became Wisconsin's first licensed female architect.

The couple met and married in 1943. Two years later they formed their own firm, Willis and Lillian Leenhouts Architects, and in 1948 set up their office in a wing of a house they built for themselves at 1204 E. Concordia in the Riverwest neighborhood. (Robin still lives there today.)

Lillian was a friend of the artist and Beach Drive resident Mary Nohl. They once went on a sketch trip together. The Leenhouts' home features Mary Nohl-created tile work. Each Leenhouts home in Fox Point is known by the name of the resident who built it:



Mary Nohl bathroom tiles in Leenhouts bathroom



Gardener Friedlander residence



Ted Friedlander residence

Ted Friedlander residence, 6970 N. Barnett Lane – Built in 1952, Ted and Beth Durant recently purchased and updated this L-shaped plan with spectacular views of Lake Michigan. In 2006, Milwaukee County designated the home as a landmark.

Maxwell residence, 7135 N. Barnett Lane – The Maxwells built this house in 1949 just a short distance away from the Friedlander home. The house is set to the rear of a large front yard.

Alschuler residence, 7026 N. Lake Drive – This is a split-level home built in 1948 with views of the adjacent ravine and trees.

Kops residence, 721 E. Daisy Lane – This home was built in 1952 and features a circular driveway and woods in the rear.

Willetts residence, 7252 N. Beach Drive – The Willetts built this house in 1949 and includes several small Leenhouts remodelings and additions. Mr. Willetts had grown up very close to the spot on which the house was built.

Melamud residence, 1107 E. Lilac Lane – The Melamuds built this house in 1950.

Gardner Friedlander residence, 7837 Regent Court – Gardner Friedlander was the brother of Ted Friedlander. This home is larger than it seems. It merges into a spacious wooden lot that was part of the Bacon Estate.

Kaufman residence, 7926 Fairchild Road – The 1954 Kaufman residence has a simple street façade with an open and glassy private side. Like many Leenhouts homes, the rear-facing windows look on to showcase a spectacular tree.

A common Leenhouts' motif, typical of the Fox Point homes they designed, is a modest street presence--while other sides open to expose the most interesting features of the site: a wooded yard, a ravine, or a view of Lake Michigan.

The UWM School of Architecture and Urban Planning, together with the Golda Meir Library, has collected and today curates the Willis and Lillian Leenhouts papers and drawings. UWM prides itself as the steward of the Leenhouts Legacy, whose expression is subtly, but importantly, captured by their homes in our village.

Douglas H. Frazer is a trustee on the Fox Point Village board. The views expressed are his own and not necessarily those of the village, the village board, other village board members, or Best Version Media, LLC.