



CALIFORNIA
RAY

MODERNIST

ARCHITECT
KAPPEMADE FURNITURE AS RADICAL AS HIS MODULAR HOUSES.
A SELECTION OF 10 PIECES IS FINALLY BEING PRODUCED.

MODULAR



MASTER

WORDS DAISY WOODWARD

THE LATE American architect Ray Kappe is celebrated for many things: his pioneering contribution to California modernism, a movement defined by its embrace of open-plan design, indoor-outdoor living and rectilinear forms; his radical experimentation in modular, prefabricated building methods, which went hand in hand with his equally ahead-of-the-curve dedication to sustainability and social concerns; his role as an educator and founding director of the influential architecture school, SCI-Arc.

What he's not known for is furniture design. But that's something that Lars Triesch, the owner of vintage furniture store Original in Berlin, is looking to change. Inspired by a documentary that featured Kappe's highly regarded Pacific Palisades home, Triesch contacted the architect about the possibility of commissioning a house in Berlin. After establishing that Triesch was serious and had the know-how to pull it off, Kappe, then 89, gave the green light for what will be the only Kappe building outside the United States once it is completed later this year.

Triesch visited the architect in his revered Rustic Canyon residence, a multi-storey masterpiece in wood and glass that levitates over a steep slope on six concrete towers. At the house Triesch, a long-time mid-century furniture specialist, was struck by the designs that furnished it. "There were so many pieces that I'd never seen before: credenzas, coffee tables, sofas," he recalls. "So I asked Ray, 'Who made all these?' And he said he had. I was amazed. They were really strong, with a Charlotte Perriand quality, but very solid, in beautiful colours. And they were so timeless, not typically mid-century."

Kappe explained that the pieces had been made to meet his or his clients' needs, using leftover building materials and, while each boasted a typically Kappe modularity, he'd never thought to mass-produce them. Triesch had recently started working with California furniture designer Dan Wenger to revive a collection of pieces that he had first produced in the 1960s and 70s and saw an opportunity.

He suggested that Kappe and Original in Berlin work together to create a special furniture line.

Swayed by Triesch's enthusiasm and dedication to craftsmanship, Kappe agreed. Now, four years on and almost a year since Kappe's death at age 92, the collaboration is complete. "First we picked our favourite pieces, most of which came from the Kappe residence and the house he built for Anne Keeler in 1991," Triesch says. "Then we looked at the original drawings and measured the pieces down to the last millimetre before recreating them in the same solid wood materials (American red oak, teak, pine and maple). We also scanned all the coloured detailing to ensure a perfect Kappe palette."

The result is a celebratory array of 10 stand-out pieces, from geometric, glass-topped coffee tables that evoke Kappe's fondness for interlocking wooden beams, to a sleek, 250 kilogram sofa in red oak, with electric blue upholstery, and a brilliantly concise construction in the form of a letterbox. "This is the next best thing to owning a Kappe house," Triesch laughs.

There's no doubt that Kappe's furniture embodies his singular architectural approach. "Kappe was above all a problem solver and dedicated to usability so these designs are very functional, while structurally they're all about lines and levels, just like his buildings," Triesch explains, gesturing towards an elegant sideboard made up of poetic lines and rectangles.

Kappe's younger son Finn, who has been closely involved in the collaboration along with the rest of his family, sums up this synchronicity: "His houses were like one big piece of furniture, because there's no covering up anything; your structural materials become your finished materials. Although he didn't aspire to be a great furniture designer, it turns out that these pieces, which grew from the larger to the smaller scale and not the other way around, are beautiful and extremely special, carrying the unique kind of power and resonance of Kappe's architecture."