



Image Credit:
Brad Angelini

Forsythe House

500 Barton Shore Drive

ARCHITECT:

Robert Metcalf, 1955

Grace Shackman

“The house is most desirable for its fine stand of evergreen trees and view over Barton Pond,” wrote Robert Metcalf, describing the home he designed in 1955 for the Forsythe family. It was only his seventh house, but already he had developed the skill of siting buildings on difficult pieces of land. “Sloped up quite steeply from the street in a rough bowl shape, the area where the building was possible was quite small,” Metcalf explained. He decided to nestle the house up against the trees with a view down to Barton Pond to make it seem like a “lake cottage year around.”¹

His clients, Franklin and Jessie Forsythe, founders of the Forsythe Gallery, the first art gallery in Ann Arbor, had very specific ideas of what they wanted. The living room, dining room, and kitchen, which flow into each other and look out on to Barton Pond, were designed as a dignified, gay, open space for casual entertaining. The master bedroom looked out onto a patio. Throughout the house, the walls were painted white to show off the Forsythes’ personal art collection of paintings, ceramics, and sculpture.

The two sons’ basement bedroom had direct access to the carport so they could pursue their hobby of working on cars. Since Jessie had originally wanted

to have her art gallery in the house, Metcalf created space for one, also in the basement, with a separate entrance. (When zoning laws prohibited this, she opened it in Nickels Arcade.)

In contrast to many of the mid-century residences, privacy at the front of the house is not enforced with an essentially opaque façade; but instead by a combination of its distance from the street and elevation up the hill above street level. As a result, nearly all of the front of the house, at the upper floor, becomes a window to the river. The one solid panel in this band marks the two-story entry volume and is painted bright red. This spare use of a primary color to signal an important point (such as a door) is common to mid-century houses. The living areas at the second floor take advantage of the openness and elevation to capture views of the pond, not the road below. The floor-to-ceiling glazing is protected from high summer sun by a deep roof overhang that also shades a building-length balcony.

The exterior materials include cedar siding, painted concrete block, and painted exterior plaster.²

¹ “New Local Home Highlights Today’s Living Habits,” *Ann Arbor News*, January 7, 1956, Ann Arbor District Library news archive, accessed July 24, 2023, https://aadl.org/aa_news_19560721-local_home_offers_prime_example_of_suburban_life

² Ibid.