



Image Credit:  
Brad Angelini

# Gilbert House

2659 Heather Way

## ARCHITECT:

Robert Metcalf, 1967

## Brad Angelini

Sitting in the dining room at the Gilbert House with Lois Verbrugge, I quickly understood the joy that it brought her to talk about the house and the 50 years that she shared the home with her husband, Elmer Gilbert. Gilbert loved the outdoors, taking canoe trips in northern Michigan waters and going on long walks along the shores of Lake Michigan and wooded trails in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.<sup>1</sup> It was this love of the outdoors and his interest in modern architecture that attracted him to the work of Robert Metcalf, whose houses reflected the importance of incorporating light, openness, and nature into a home. It was Metcalf's intention to create "a serenity about a house."<sup>2</sup> In the mid-1960s, Metcalf was very busy with his practice and as a professor at the University of Michigan, but

Gilbert was so committed to having Metcalf design his home that he was willing to wait two years for the design to be completed. This began a lifelong friendship that included a second project, a design for a vacation home on Crystal Lake near Beulah, Michigan, in 1989.

At the time of the house commission, Gilbert was a professor of aerospace engineering at the University of Michigan and a bachelor in his late 30s. His requirements for his home were very simple. He needed a space to cook and eat, a living room, a study, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The design included two undefined rooms, a laundry, a storage room at the basement level, and a detached two-car garage. A few changes were made by Metcalf, in 1973, when Gilbert married Dr. Lois Verbrugge, a social demographer and professor

at the University of Michigan. Metcalf added an office and an exercise room on the lower level for her and pushed the garage forward to accommodate additional storage.

The Gilbert House is unique in Metcalf's portfolio as his homes tend to be long and rectangular with low profiles. But the Gilbert House is a simple cube, three stories high, its verticality articulated by the division of the front façade into four tall panels and reinforced by 1 x 4 cedar siding. Directly to the east of the house is the detached garage with strong horizontal lines that contrast with the vertical lines of the house.<sup>3</sup> The site slopes down from the street to the house, exposing the three glazed levels on the north elevation, then rises again.

The entry to the home, centered in the south façade, is recessed and adjacent to a stair tower that projects forward from the massing of the home. The visitor is welcomed by a bright, Amarillo yellow, solid wood door that contrasts with the dark, cordovan brown cedar siding. This front façade has only one window, a sliding glass door that opens to a small, top floor balcony. The balcony extends over the front door for protection from the weather when entering the home.

Upon entry, your eye is drawn to the daylight admitted by an all-glass, north-facing wall that frames a view of the heavily landscaped, private yard. It is this rear elevation that reveals the building program: spaces to socialize, eat, sleep, and work. The glass is divided into a 3 x 3 grid with the center bay narrower than the flanking bays. The living room and the dining room occupy the full width of the plan along the glass wall on the middle (main) level. A full-width deck on the north elevation extends into the landscape, reinforcing the connection between the interior and exterior, and so that activities are on display, sectionally, as in a Wes Anderson movie set. The kitchen is the typical, Metcalf galley kitchen, shielded from the dining room by a cabinet and lighted by a square window facing west. The dining room is screened from the living room with a mahogany "visual filter."<sup>4</sup>

A switchback stair illuminated by a large skylight provides access to the top floor and the basement. The top floor includes the primary bedroom, a modest bathroom, a clothes closet, a study, and a general storage closet. Elmer liked to work as soon as he got up, so the study was located adjacent to the bedroom.<sup>5</sup> This floor is held back five feet from the north-facing glass wall, creating an overlook that views down into the main floor. This unifies the upper two floor spaces and maximizes the penetration of daylight into the main floor. A bridge spans the gap to a top floor exterior balcony. The bridge and balcony complete a north-south axis that runs through the home beginning at the front entry and culminating in the narrow, central glass bay at the rear. The underside of the flat roof that projects from the rear is painted creamy white to help bounce light into the house. Lois Verbrugge describes the quality of light in the home saying, "The house is not bright; it glows warmth."<sup>6</sup>

Upon completing the home, Elmer Gilbert asked Metcalf to help him with the selection of furniture. The architect specified mid-century modern furniture by Eero Saarinen, Charles and Ray Eames, and Harry Bertola, designers whose furnishings exemplify mid-century design at the scale of the interior.<sup>7</sup> The original furniture remains in the house today. The north-facing glass has been fitted with full-length, sheer curtains, not for privacy, but to protect the furniture from daylight. Similarly, there are also shoji screens located throughout the home to protect the furnishings from sunlight.<sup>8</sup>

In the years since the original design, there have been minor changes. What appears to be a two-car garage now accommodates one car, ample storage space, and a pool spa that Lois swims in every day. The east wall of the spa room has a wave pattern of glass block. A deck was added to the rear of the garage by architect Tivadar Balogh in 1983.

Elmer Gilbert lived in the home until he passed away on June 16, 2023. Lois Verbrugge continues to live in and maintain the home, making improvements to the yard and landscape. ●

3 Review of blue-line prints of the original Metcalf drawings provided by Lois Verbrugge. The plan of the Gilbert House is 32 feet wide by 26 feet deep. The front elevation is 16'-10" tall and the back elevation is 25'-6" tall. The front façade is divided into four vertical planes that make the front look taller than the 16'-10".

4 Grace Shackman, "Robert Metcalf—Mid-Century-Modern Architect Extraordinaire," *Awards 2*, 2019, page 19. This description is from Metcalf's architectural and UM teaching colleague, Bill Werner.

5 Shackman, "Robert Metcalf..." page 19.

6 Interview with Lois Verbrugge at the Gilbert House, July 21, 2023.

7 Grace Shackman, "Metcalf Modern—Architect's designs back in fashion," *Ann Arbor Observer*, April 30, 2011, <https://annarborobserver.com/metcalf-modern/>

8 Interview with Lois Verbrugge at the Gilbert House, July 21, 2023.

1 *The University Record*, August 9, 2019, <https://record.umich.edu/articles/obituary-elmer-grant-gilbert/>

2 Robert C. Metcalf quoted in "Metcalf built a rich mid-century design legacy," *Ann Arbor Business Review*, June 2007, page 15.