



Image Credit:  
Brad Angelini

# Muschenheim House

1251 Heather Way

## ARCHITECT:

William Muschenheim, 1954

## Anne M. Cox

The Muschenheim residence was a “thoroughly modern home...entirely different from the ‘typical in the city home’”<sup>1</sup> when it was built in 1954. William Muschenheim, a modernist architect, had come to Ann Arbor, in 1950, to teach modernist principles to a new generation of students at the University of Michigan College of

Architecture. To design and live in a home that reflected his modern ideals of color, space, and materiality, enabled him to share his ideas in built form. A comfortable home that Muschenheim lived in until his death in 1990, it was an inspiration and learning tool for anyone that came to visit.

1 “Home on Split Levels Utilizes Extreme Modern Trends,” *Ann Arbor News*, January 15, 1955, Ann Arbor District Library news archive, accessed July 24, 2023, [https://aadl.org/aa\\_news\\_19550115-home\\_on\\_split\\_levels](https://aadl.org/aa_news_19550115-home_on_split_levels)

In 1989, Muschenheim, long retired, co-taught a summer course on theater design at the UM College of Architecture with Professor Thomas Hille. As a student in that course, the treat at the end of the semester was a trip to the home and I was able to experience it first hand. In discussions regarding his design ideas, his house was cited as an example of form that followed function. Muschenheim’s dedication to the expression of form through the clarity of function was evident in the layout, with split levels separating private family areas from public living and dining areas, and a clear differentiation between the mostly closed front (public) side and the openness of the house to its rear garden.

As you approach the house, you are struck by the gentle rise of the roof line that mimics the incline of the site. Working with the landscape, the entry point and garage are at the lower side of the sloping site, while the rest of the house rises up the hill. This west street face or public side has some windows, but a concrete block wall is a wedge that rises up the hill. Upon entering the house, the inside face of this wedge is a vast wall of bookshelves such that the supportive spine for the house also supported the owner’s impressive collection of books.

Color continued both inside and outside of the home, and was very important in the planning and design of the house. Muschenheim color-coded and painted directly on his blueprints<sup>2</sup> as he was designing the house, a process that enabled him to render, for construction and finishing, what was in his mind’s eye. Color was used intentionally to convey a feeling. I still remember the bright orange door that welcomed us into the house. That 40-foot-long bookcase, just inside the door, held his books on shelves that were carefully multi-colored: each shelf was painted a different color.<sup>3</sup> The feeling of contemplation and change, as you

looked at the books and colors together, made you think about how much he must have enjoyed pulling the books from the shelves to read and ponder. The east (rear) side of the home, visible from the private garden, was a series of windows and splashes of color. Yellow highlighted the garden room, and the doors were accented with bright red and blue.

The inside face of the east façade is the showpiece of the house. This expanse of living room windows looks out to the back of the property and into a verdant green tree line, captured and brought inside. A pegboard panel in his living room was an experimental surface where artwork could be moved around as pieces were acquired, rearranged, and contemplated.

The home is no longer in the Muschenheim family. It was sold after his death and slight modifications have been made by successive owners. In 2016, the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places<sup>4</sup> and details in the report note the items that have been preserved as well as those that have been changed. Sadly, the inexpensive and playful, living room pegboard wall has been covered in drywall, but the “Colorbestos” colored-cement exterior siding and the “Wescolite Sky Domes” used in the windowless interior bathrooms remain. The colorful bookcase has been painted over, so the interior color project that was Muschenheim’s canvas is no longer in play.

The Muschenheim residence is a classic architect’s house in that it reflected the designer’s principles and acted as a showcase for his ideas. His papers, archived at the Bentley Historical Library on the UM campus note that “The purpose of architecture is to move us.”<sup>5</sup> His house was just that, a home that had a purpose of form and color that created delight. ●

2 Kent Kleinman, “William Muschenheim: A Brush, with Prefabrication,” in Joan Ockman, editor, *do.co.mo.mo* #31, September, 2004, pages 76-80

3 Ibid.

4 “Muschenheim, William and Elizabeth (Bodanzky) House,” *National Register of Historic Places – Single Property Listings – Ann Arbor, Michigan, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service*, National Register Information 16000911, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3w3vb78z>

5 William Muschenheim Digital Archive, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhl2ic>