

A Brief History

The house at 1075 Chestnut was built in 1960-61 for Dr. Lyle Elliott and his mother Pauline. The architect was Robert C. Metcalf. After training at the University of Michigan, Metcalf started his practice in 1953 by building a home for himself and his wife not far from 1075 Chestnut (1052 Arlington) and by 1961 had already designed homes for a number of prominent Ann Arborites. He went on to design 68 houses in Ann Arbor and serve as Dean of the UM School of Architecture. A collection of his designs (including 1075 Chestnut known as the Elliott Residence), as well as those of many other Ann Arbor architects in the tradition often called Mid-Century Modern, can be seen at <https://www.a2modern.org/architects/>; several of them are in the immediate neighborhood of 1075 Chestnut.

In addition to the main structure, there was constructed behind the house, a quite large greenhouse. Dr. Elliott grew orchids as a hobby and the greenhouse had room for many of them.

Dr. Elliott died in March 1987 (Pauline had died earlier) and the house came on the market in November 1987. We (Peter Hinman and Elizabeth Young) saw an early notice of the listing, made a quick offer, and closed in March 1988. As part of the research into the property, we invited Bob Metcalf to visit and give his opinion of its state and the viability of the planned renovation of the kitchen. The existing kitchen was a so-called galley kitchen, quite cramped, and wholly unsuited to our two-person cooking style. Bob grudgingly agreed that it could be improved; despite his superb taste in most elements of design, he was not a great kitchen designer. He always said that his kitchens suited his wife (his own house had a similar one) and I doubt that he was often in the room. So before we moved in we did a total reconstruction of the kitchen, removing a half-bath and a breakfast area, installing all new cabinets and converting it to its current state.

One of the more amusing stories of that project concerns the tile flooring. Pauline Elliott was a potter, and working at the Ann Arbor Potter's Guild she made and glazed the tiles which cover the floors of the kitchen and dining room. One can still see etched into a few of the tiles the initials J.T.; these refer to J.T. Abernathy, a legendary potter with the Guild who as I understand it did the initial firing of the tiles leaving the glazing to Pauline. When parts of the original kitchen were removed, there remained gaps in the tile flooring. What to do? I was then a young member of the faculty of the Department of Mathematics and by pure chance happened to mention the tiling problem in a group of my colleagues which included George Piranian, a quite senior member of the department. He said immediately that his wife Louise was a potter and that she had worked with Pauline at the Guild and he believed she had made some of the exact same tiles. It turned out that the Piranians had indeed a stock of some 300 of these tiles left over which they were happy to sell very cheaply to me. There were enough of these not only to fill in the gaps in the flooring but also to provide a backsplash behind the sink and stove. As a bonus, it seems that Louise was a much better glazer than Pauline — there is an evident difference in quality. There are still a few of these tiles remaining which have been left in the house.

The first major project we undertook was renovation of the yard and patio. Although Dr. Elliott was apparently an avid gardener in his greenhouse, it seems that he had not paid much attention in his last years to the outside plantings. The perimeter plantings were very overgrown, the lawn was in terrible shape, partly due to greatly increased shading, and the patio was in a shambles. After some gardening experiments which led Elizabeth to become very eager for more garden space, by 1991 we had cleared most of the overgrowth, repaired and enlarged the patio, and engaged a landscape designer (Charles Cares, who had done a lot of work with the Nichols Arboretum) to create the garden areas much as they are today. Over the next years we populated the gardens with large collections of rhododendrons, roses, daylilies and other perennials. Over the last ten years the daylilies have suffered greatly from the increased deer population and do not flower in anything like their former profusion, but the

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rhododendrons still provide a beautiful show throughout the month of May. Other additions include an irrigation system, a pond with waterfall and garden lighting. Certainly also the daylilies would greatly benefit from being all dug up, divided and replanted.

Since over the 1990s the focus was largely on the exterior, the interior got less attention. During the Elliotts' time, the basement had served as a pottery studio for Pauline Elliott; a 240 volt outlet powered her kiln and very sturdy shelves had been installed to hold her pottery. My interest was for a wine cellar and one of the early projects was the building of the redwood wine bins. Otherwise not much changed in the interior until 1997. At that point Bob Metcalf was in his 70s and no longer designing new homes but willing to do changes and renovations to his existing ones. We engaged him to design an addition to the master bedroom to encompass two dressing rooms with greatly expanded clothing storage. Although it was of less interest to us, the natural concomitant was a similar expansion of the room below it (which in the Elliott's time had been Pauline's bedroom). While the house was torn apart for construction we also added recessed light fixtures to the bedrooms and kitchen; the original bedroom lighting, both upstairs and downstairs, was a very inadequate single fixture in the center ceiling. Also the bedroom balcony was enclosed with screening, which made it much more usable — and safer, since the original design had two open sides protected merely by planters.

In 2006 we did a fairly major upgrade to the basement laundry room and a complete reinstallation of the garden lighting. In 2008 we finally addressed a feature of the house that had bothered us from the beginning. The outside surface was natural wood — redwood, I believe — that had been so heavily stained that it looked painted a rather dull brown color. We wanted to restore this to a surface that showed the wood grain and had a natural wood finish. This turned out to require sandblasting the entire outside surface to remove the thick stain, then sanding and refinishing. It was a big job but greatly improved the external view of the house.

Not really a part of the history of the house, but definitely relevant is that in 2009, my wife Elizabeth Young died of leukemia at the age of 59. By 2012 I had acquired a new partner, Karen Snyder, and the next changes to the house were done jointly with her.

The first came very early in our relationship when she introduced me to a sculptor friend, Renate Fackler (chrysalisculpturestudio.com) in her Long-time home town, Columbus, Ohio. I was taken with a small bird sculpture of hers and eventually commissioned her to make a version with several birds to mount on the street-side of the garage. Although this is certainly a work of art, cost over \$5000 and could be detached, I consider it a part of the house and have left it for the next owner. Among these papers is a flyer showing other work by this sculptor.

Over the years 1988 - 2014 we had done several repairs and updates to the greenhouse and made some use of it, but it was not really a key part of our lives and by 2014 it was showing great signs of age. We decided to make a major investment by replacing the greenhouse with a more solid living structure, essentially a 3-season living/dining room with an attached small greenhouse. The new Garden House, as we called it, was built on the footings of the old greenhouse with a small new excavation for the new greenhouse.

We would have liked to have had this designed also by Bob Metcalf, but by now he was over 90 and no longer able to work. However we were very fortunate to get the services of one of his disciples, Craig Borum, by now a senior member of the UM Architecture faculty. Together with the extremely talented builders Jim Neal and Paul Allen, the new structure took shape over 2015 - 2016.

At roughly the same time we undertook two related projects. The first was a restructuring of the hallway between the kitchen and the garage to include a very small half-bathroom. When the

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kitchen had been renovated in 1988, the space behind the island was reclaimed from a similar half-bath. We were now able to reconnect the existing plumbing from this bath to serve in the back hallway.

A much bigger project was the installation of the underground piping to enable us to convert the natural gas furnace to an electric geothermal unit combining winter heating and summer cooling. The high-capacity geothermal allowed us to put radiant floor heating in the Garden House and redo the radiant heating of the back hallway and the garage. The original greenhouse, along with the back hallway and garage had been serviced with a separate boiler in the garage.

In the summer of 2009 when Elizabeth was quite sick and spending much of her time indoors, we installed a whole-house generator and air conditioner to make sure that a power outage would not make the house unlivable. After installation of the geothermal unit, we replaced the original generator with a higher capacity unit (20kW) sufficient to run both heating and cooling.

Sometime in 2014 we found in our mailbox an odd message from someone claiming to be on the design faculty of MSU who was starting a project to provide some Ann Arbor houses in the Mid-Century Modern style with street-side mailboxes that matched the design of the house. It felt at first a bit like a scam, but worth an interview. It turned out to be completely legit; Kelly McArthur was all she claimed to be and this was a sabbatical project aimed at a publication. We worked together to fine-tune the details of the box, her design work was free, and our expense was for the construction and installation of the box. There are a number of similar boxes around the neighborhood.

One aspect of the main bedroom still needed attention. The shower was dark and unappealing and we had always wanted to have a second washer/dryer unit nearer the bedroom. We again engaged Craig Borum to do the design and Jim Neal and Paul Allen to do the construction. This was accomplished in 2017.

Many other smaller projects were done over the years; these are detailed in the Capital Investment spreadsheet.