

# Mid-Century Modern Architecture- Design that Shaped America

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Before WWII ended in 1945, Michigan was already on the way to becoming the epicenter of design and architecture thanks to its manufacturing capabilities, which proliferated the pioneering creations of such artists as Charles Eames, Alden Dow, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. As the war came to an end, thousands of men returned home looking to find a home and start a family, which presented the opportunity for modern design to take root and make its historical mark.

Young artists flocked to Michigan to work with legendary visionaries who were leading groundbreaking design efforts in furniture, architecture, and education in response to the pressing need for new homes. It was during this period, roughly 1940-1970, that Mid-Century Modern design materialized. This style, noted for its simplicity and use of steel and natural elements such as wood, encompasses both organic expressionism and the clean lines of international architecture.

While examples of Mid-Century Modern architecture exist throughout Michigan, Kalamazoo boasts a plethora of public buildings, homes, and other structures reflective of this era.

One community fixture from this period is the Fountain of the Pioneers, a cast concrete structure designed by Marcelline Gougler in 1936 that was created to replace Bronson Park's McColl Fountain. Gougler won the redesign competition over 22 other contestants who coveted the prize.

The James and Sarah Kirkpatrick House, a rectangular two-story structure with a wood and steel frame built in 1958, is also an architectural staple of the Kalamazoo community. Designed by Herman Miller's George Nelson, its signature flat roof and deep overhangs draw viewers' eyes across the horizontal design rather than up and down—another mark of this classic architecture. This house and many other designs by Nelson, such as his coconut lounge chair, are just as popular today as they were when originally manufactured. Nelson was employed at Herman Miller from 1945 to 1972.

Kalamazoo is unique in that it hosts several homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. These rep-



resent his vision to create tasteful, affordable dwellings for America’s middle-class family, what he referred to as “Usonian” communities. Parkwyn Village, which exemplifies Wright’s Usonian style, consists of six homes designed in 1947 in the Winchell neighborhood, with six others near Galesburg. Michigan Modern, a project of the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, began in 2008 after receiving a grant from the National Park Service and oversees much of the state-wide work of restoration.

Brian Conway has led these efforts for several years, funneling his experience as an architect into the re-creation and preservation



of historical homes and buildings. In September, the organization will publish a book titled, *Michigan Modern—Design that Shaped America*. It will outline Michigan’s role in the development of modernism, which provided the foundation for design that continues today.

Conway notes that Michigan is a manufacturing state, which played a significant role in the architectural impact Michigan has made throughout the US. Whatever kind of structure was designed, manufacturers delivered, making it accessible to the masses regardless of location.

Today, contemporary design uses more natural elements -- wood, brick, and stone -- but adheres to the overall scheme of Mid-Century Modern architecture. In more industrial

spaces, this includes exposed piping and earthy tones, letting the natural colors speak for themselves. These clean lines and natural hues are a contemporary twist on the iconic color palettes of 60s and 70s design.

Homeowners have also started to rely on the subtlety of thoughtful craftsmanship to contribute to their Mid-Century Modern interior design, such as eliminating extraneous legs on a table or scattering various knick-knacks to embellish a space. There is also a growing emphasis on unique and vintage décor to accent earth tones and to provide texture.

From the boom of Michigan’s furniture industry at Herman Miller to the University of Michigan’s first course offerings in design and the manufacturing expertise of auto industry engineers, Michigan has drawn national talent to create what continues to be the pioneering force behind meaningful and compelling design.

To learn more about the preservation of historical structures around Michigan and the rich heritage behind them, visit [MichiganModern.org](http://MichiganModern.org). □

