



1 APRIL 6, 2024

EGAN HOUSE



1500 LAKEVIEW BLVD E | SEATTLE | BUILT IN 1958 | DESIGNED BY ROBERT REICHERT



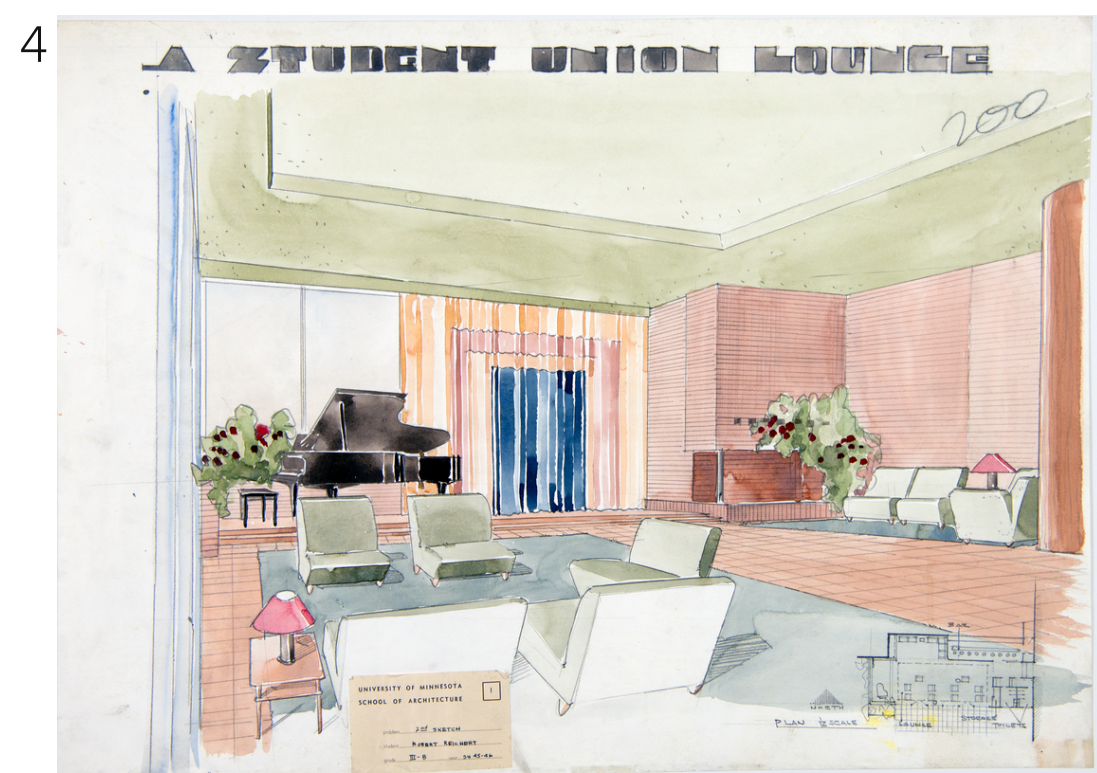
ARCHITECT ROBERT REICHERT: A REMARKABLE YOUTH FOCUSED ON MUSIC AND ARCHITECTURE

Robert George Reichert was the only child of Bernard and Matilda “Tillie” Reichert. Born in Fargo, ND in 1921, Robert and his parents soon settled in Minneapolis. Recalling an isolated childhood spent with his older parents, Reichert showed an appreciation for music and architecture from an early age. His mother taught piano lessons from their home, and Robert excelled in his study. He recalled as a boy riding along on his father’s sales routes through the Midwest, where they would sometimes stop in at revival style churches. Reichert was taken by the experience of hearing the great pipe organs play in the soaring liturgical spaces: “The churches would be so quiet and vacant, being weekdays and dimly lighted, only a few beautiful sun rays and an occasional person sitting in the cloisters and ambulatories. Then, best of all would be the time when the sounds of strange wonderfulness from within the whole cavern of the building itself. . . At times it would roll and increasingly roll and grind like incomprehensively vast machinery. Like the whole building in motion, like the voice of the building, it was all so wonderful.”

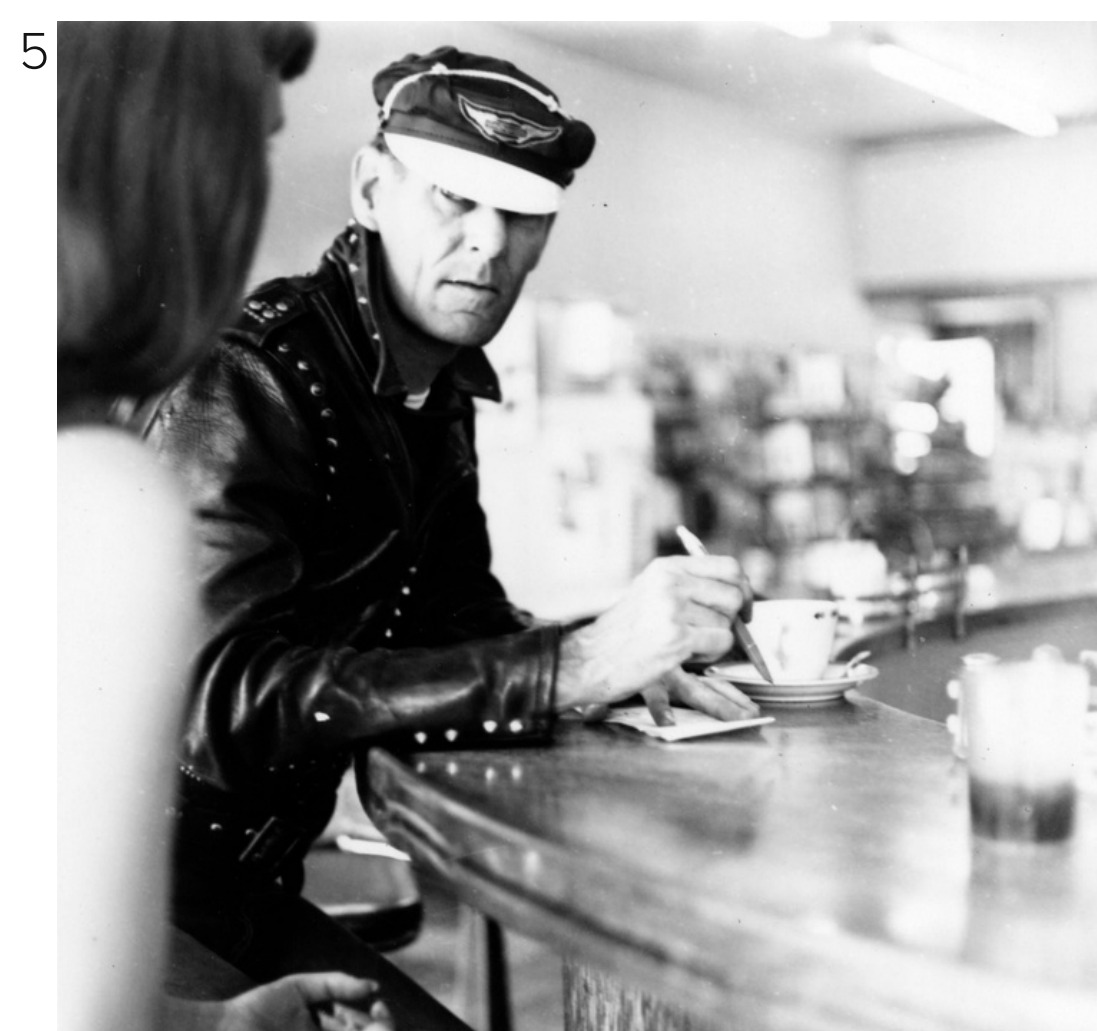


Robert asked his mother for permission to begin organ lessons. Tillie reluctantly agreed and he began organ study at age 12. Satisfying the young scholar’s desire for an architectural education was less straightforward. He began drawing and building scale models of important buildings. As a middle school student, Reichert enrolled at the MacPhail School of Music in Minneapolis; by high school, he was working as a draftsman in the architectural office of Clyde W. Smith, a fellow member of the Christian Science religion. As the office grew, Smith assigned Robert smaller residential projects, which he completed with a high degree of independence.

Robert enrolled at the University of Minnesota in 1939 to study architecture, while continuing to work in the Smith office. Reichert played organ professionally at several churches to fund his tuition. With a growing American focus on the World War, Reichert was unable to remain in school and accepted a job in Seattle working as a draftsman for the Boeing Company. Robert and his parents moved to Seattle in 1941. He continued to play organ for various Seattle churches, took occasional freelance architectural jobs, and enjoyed riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle around the region. Reichert returned to Minneapolis in 1945 to complete his undergraduate degree. After graduation in 1947, believing there were better prospects for a young architect in the burgeoning West, he returned to Seattle and took a job in the office of Bebb and Jones.

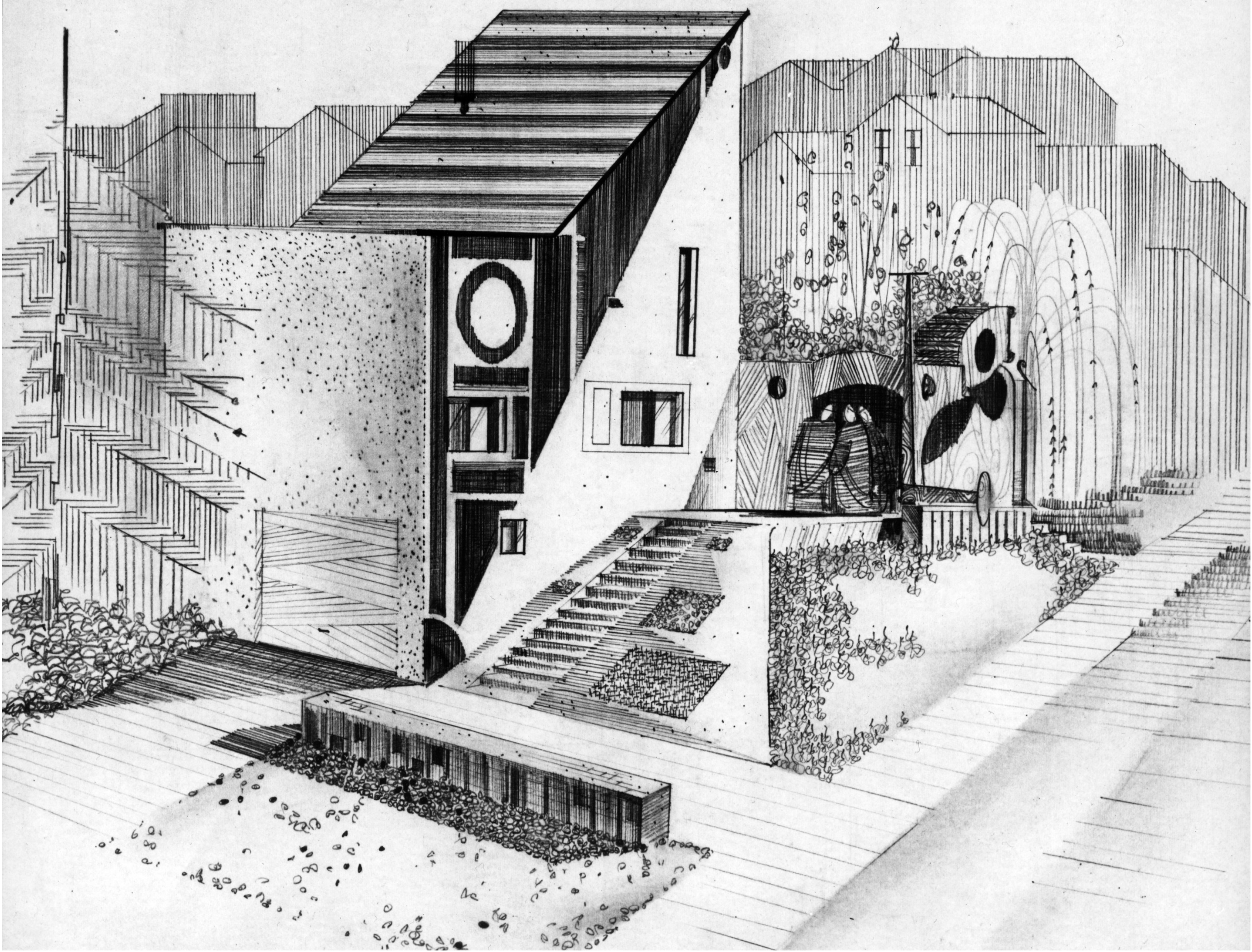


Reichert was invited to teach architectural design at the University of Washington for the first time in autumn, 1948. He noted that “the school had undergone a metamorphosis in changing from a traditional outlook to the then new and modern one; the entire staff was on the modern bandwagon all at once. . . I was left to feel as an unwanted, self-styled dissenter.” If Reichert did not fit in with the faculty of the College of Architecture, he proved popular with the students. He was most remembered for regularly showing up after midnight to offer desk critiques to his design students, rolling up on his massive Harley Davidson motorcycle, dressed in full steel-studded leathers, a dramatic contrast from the formal dark suit, white dress shirt and narrow black tie he wore during the day. Reichert completed the week-long Washington State Architect Registration Examination in 1949, one of twelve who passed out of 120 who sat for the exam.



Frustrated by his teaching experience and the architectural climate in Seattle, Reichert considered attending graduate school. He was awarded a spot at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, the epicenter of modernist architectural education, led by Walter Gropius. Reichert drove to Boston in his Oldsmobile convertible and matriculated in fall, 1950. He described his time at Harvard as “very busy, nervous, overloaded, fantastically interesting.” Having traded his Olds for a Harley, Robert’s daily routine included taking early morning rides before class and trips throughout the Northeast during his internship with Glaser & Gray. His rigorous daily routines would continue when he returned to Seattle: A morning ride to a greasy spoon or coffee shop, meetings with clients or site visits, home to work, then out for a late-night ride and stop for coffee.

(1) Egan house, c. 1961. Photograph by Charles Pearson, UW Special Collections UW 39944, (2) Robert Reichert and his parents, c. 1939. Photographer unknown, UW Special Collections UW 38909, (3) Robert Reichert on his Harley Davidson, photographer unknown. UW Special Collections, (4) Student project by Robert Reichert, University of Minnesota, 1946-47. UW Special Collections UW 39864, (5) Reichert meeting with students in a local café. UW Special Collections.



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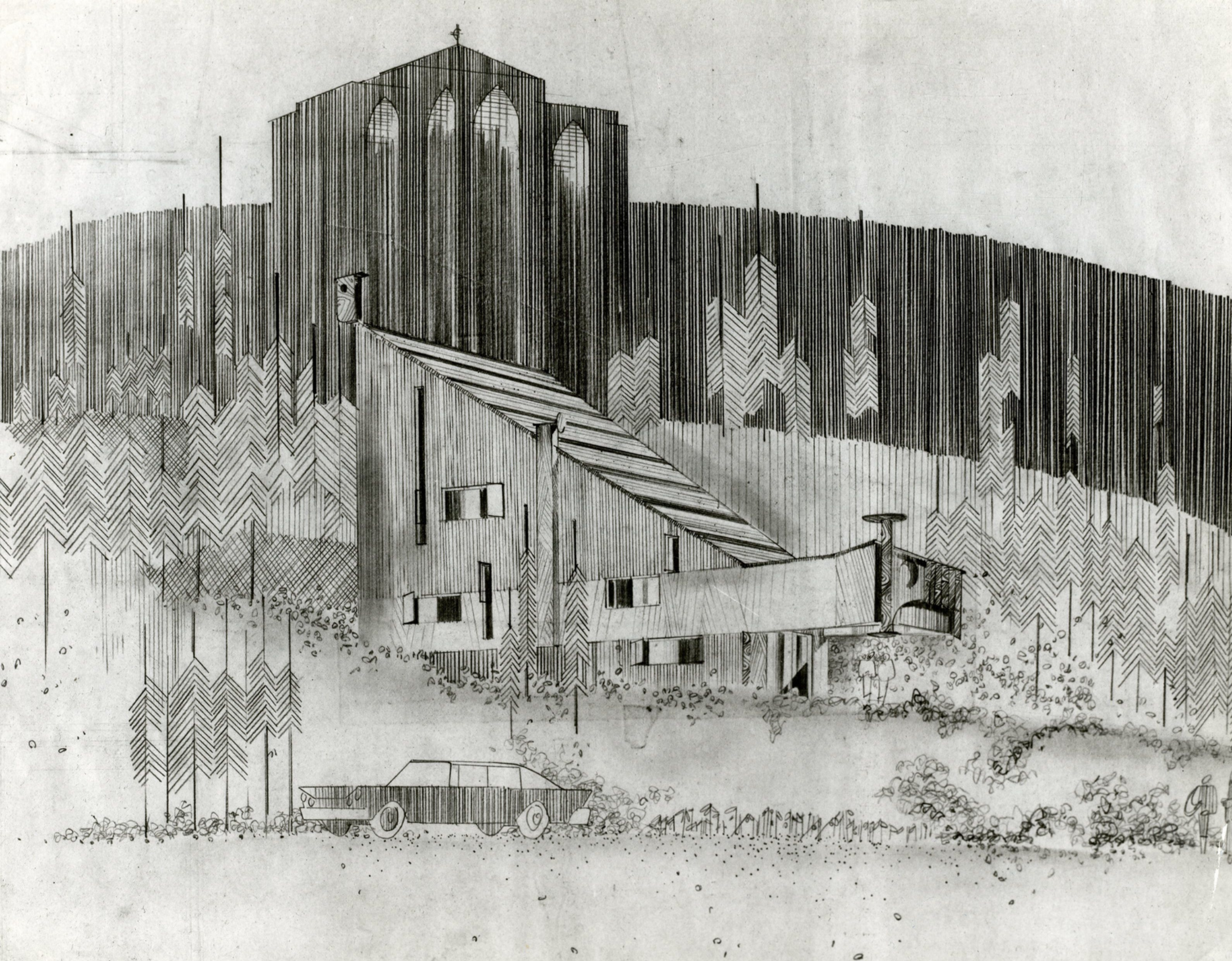
ROBERT REICHERT: SOLE PRACTICE AND THE NOTORIOUS HOUSE-STUDIO

On his return from Harvard in summer 1951, Reichert joined the office of J. Lister Holmes, an architect who became noted for transitioning from the Beaux Arts to modernism. He worked on several large projects, and became known for his rendering skills, taking on freelance work from other offices including Naramore, Bain, Brady & Johanson (now NBBJ), Bindon & Wright, and others. Robert's father died in September 1952, and so Reichert began to plan a house for himself and his mother on the north slope of Queen Anne Hill, which would also accommodate his design studio, motorcycles, and a large pipe organ. While building this house, Reichert was approached by the First Church of Christ, Scientist in Bellevue, to design a new church for the rapidly growing congregation. The signing of this contract in 1953 marked the beginning of the office of Robert George Reichert, Architect. Unfortunately, Reichert would learn that he was not equipped to design for a conservative church building committee. While Reichert's proposed design for the church was surely ahead of its time and could have altered the course of his career, the church terminated his contract in 1955. From 1953 until his death in 1996, Robert Reichert would work in sole practice, focused mainly on residential designs.

The completion of his house on Queen Anne was provocative in the community. Largely designed in section, the peak of the triangular form accommodated a twenty-foot-tall space for his organ pipes. Reichert called the black and white ornament on the south façade a "shadow painting," noting that "the building does not depend on sunlight but. . . is expressive at all times." Its paneling and shapes recall the Italian Renaissance, particularly the wall designs of the Florence Cathedral and Della Salute in Venice." Imagery of the house-studio appear on graphic designs by Reichert, including holiday cards and organ recital programs. The house was not popular but was popularly discussed. A contributor to the *Queen Anne News* called the building a "Freudian Nightmare." Reichert recalled neighbors throwing tomatoes at the house while he played organ late at night, with other neighbors yelling profanities at him. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* critic Don Canty recalled that the house "hit the neighborhood with some force. A triangle festooned with huge circles, precursors of 'supergraphics,' it was nothing like the neighboring bungalows and Victorians. Nor did it have any affinity to the crisp wood forms of Postwar Northwest Regionalism. It was more like the other visual arts of the 1950s, a kind of pop architecture."



(1) Presentation drawing of Reichert house-studio. UW Libraries Special Collections UW40056, (2) Robert Reichert's holiday card, 1960. UW Special Collections UW 39890, (3) Reichert working in his studio. UW Collections UW 39860, (4) Reichert playing the pipe organ in his house-studio. UW Special Collections UW 38903, (5) Reichert's house-studio, c.1960. UW Special Collections UW 40100.



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EGAN HOUSE: DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION, STEWARDSHIP AND PRESERVATION OF AN ICONIC RESIDENCE

One Seattleite who did appreciate Reichert's house-studio was retired Rear-Admiral Willard Egan, who made an unannounced visit to Reichert's studio. He informed the architect that he had purchased land at 1500 Lakeview Boulevard E and wanted to construct a house like Reichert's for himself and his wife, Mary. The Egans were not musicians, so designing a house with a form emulating Reichert's may seem arbitrary. But Reichert was inspired by the highly forested location and the prominence of St. Mark's Cathedral on the top of the ridge. The steeply sloping site, located on the east side of Lakeview along the base of Capitol Hill, was a difficult one. Just west of Lakeview, construction of the new Interstate 5 freeway was underway.

Reichert's initial sketches depict an abstraction of an ancient hill town cascading down the slope. The first presentation drawing indicated a curving roofline, reminiscent of the wedge shape of Reichert's house-studio but freed of the constraints which determined the tight form of the studio. Reichert conceived of the Egan house as a sweeping white graphic element against the nearly vertical, dark green background, a two-dimensional composition. Initial bids to construct the house were over \$20,000, nearly double the Egans' budget. Consequently, Reichert simplified the design to a wedge shape, with the layout of thin, vertical windows balancing the horizontal ones, and providing interplay against wood textured surfaces and the striped torch down roof. A birdhouse adorns the peak of the roof, and a chalice marks the end of the cantilevered base.

In May 1958, Egan signed a contract with Sanford Moklebust, the builder of Reichert's house-studio, to complete the building shell for \$10,762, with the client completing most of the interior. Reichert's project notes indicate that the project progressed quickly, "too fast," and he noted that the client's daily interactions with contractors and changing design elements "on the fly" was disruptive to the project. By July 1958, Reichert noted that the birdhouse had been installed.

Having learned from the experience of his own house, Reichert desired to control the discourse regarding the Egan house construction. He asked his contractor to refer any press inquiries to Reichert, himself, and did not hang a sign on the project. However, word traveled quickly. In late July, the architect pulled his Harley into the driveway to find students sketching the building, reporters, photographers and members of the public milling around the site. On August 8, 1958, Moklebust informed Reichert that he had heard radio host Al Cummings talking about the house on his program. Listeners described the house as a giant ski slide, or possibly a work shack for the freeway. Another story called the building a giant wedge of cheese.

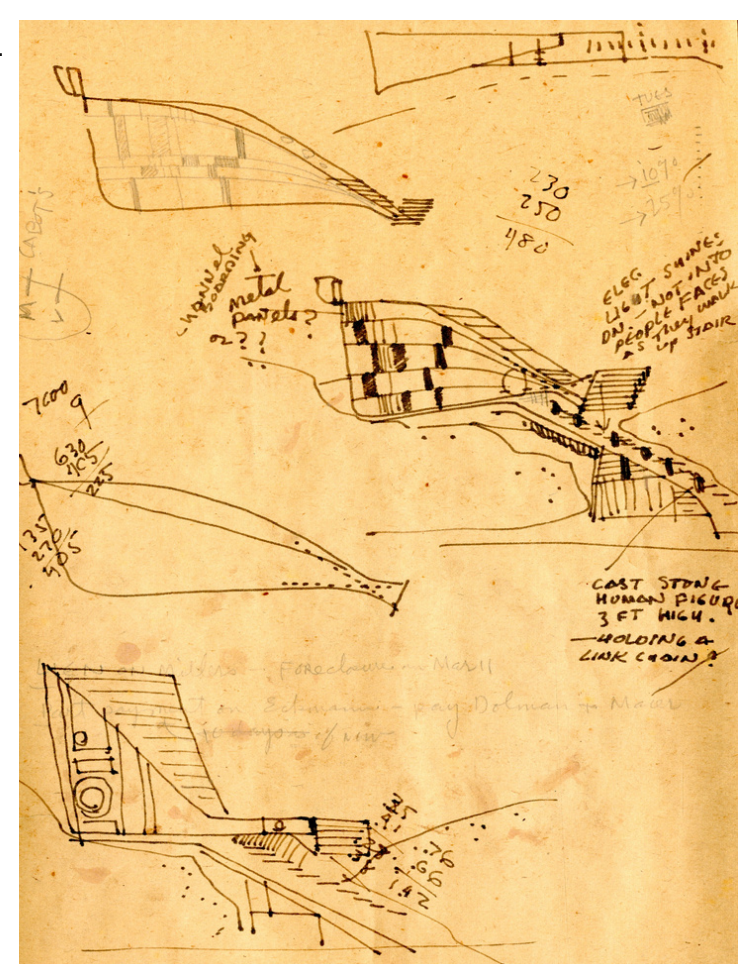
Project notes indicate that the house was nearly finished by October 1958. White marble for the open stair treads had arrived, and the black "hood mace and ornamental pieces" were waiting in the living room for installation. The character of the house retains the feeling of Reichert's initial sketches. Rooms are stacked and terrace up the hill, within the house, and the sloping ceiling provides a consistent datum over the terraced spaces. Egan lived in the house for about thirteen years, selling the property in 1967.

By 1989, the Egan house owner brought a proposal to demolish the Egan house in order to construct new townhouses to his architect, Jeffrey Hummel. Hummel convinced the owner that the house was an important work of residential design and that he should not pursue demolition. The house subsequently changed hands three times over the next decade.

In 1998, to preserve the large swath of green space along the east side of Capitol Hill, Seattle Parks and Recreation purchased several parcels, including the one containing the Egan house. Property owner Gary Ernsdorff facilitated this sale, helping to ensure the long-term preservation of the Egan house. With the advocacy of Council Member Peter Steinbrueck, the City provided for Historic Seattle's acquisition of the building and the right to use the land under and around the residence. Historic Seattle then rehabilitated the house, upgrading the roof, electrical and plumbing systems, reinforcing structural elements, and painting the building in its original black, white and red scheme. To recognize the Egan house as an outstanding and original example of mid-century modernist residential design, Historic Seattle nominated the Egan house to be a City of Seattle Landmark, and it was designated in 2010. Historic Seattle recently elected to provide "double protection" for the property by placing a permanent preservation easement on the deed, which will ensure best preservation practices are used to maintain the property. Under Historic Seattle's stewardship for the past 26 years, the Egan house has provided rental housing to tenants who have appreciated the residence's unusual open plan interior and "supergraphic" exterior. Now, Historic Seattle is ready to pass this important work by one of Seattle's most iconoclastic designers to its next owner. Proceeds from the sale of the Egan house will allow funds to go toward preservation of our other historic properties.

LIFE CYCLE OF A HISTORIC SEATTLE PROPERTY

The Egan House is an example of the real estate life cycle of a Historic Seattle property. As a preservation development authority, Historic Seattle develops real estate to save meaningful places. We often engage in advocacy and pursue real estate development concurrently. After acquiring a historic property, we renovate the building following best practices in rehabilitation standards. We engage with the community to find good uses that benefit the local neighborhood and the city, providing affordable rents to tenants. We derive rental income from the property which is then used for maintenance and operations. We protect all our historic properties through our own stewardship, landmark designation, and preservation easements. We often own our properties for decades. We sometimes sell a property and reinvest the income into the continuing stewardship of our other properties or use the funds to acquire another historic property that needs saving.



(1) Egan house presentation sketch, UW Special Collections, UW 39943, (2) Reichert at top of stairs with crisscross railing, (3) Egan house early design sketch, UW Special Collections UW 39940, (4) Egan house early design sketch, UW Special Collections UW 39941, (5) Egan house before restoration, 1990s, Historic Seattle Archives, (6) Egan House, c. 1961, Charles Pearson, photographer, UW Special Collections UW 39945.