

James Bronkema, 1954

Posted on [16/Feb201222908/2012](#)

Settled on a quiet side street in East Grand Rapids lies a time-machine from 1954. It is nighttime, perfect for gazing into the inner architecture of this unit. With its interior lit up like a showroom, there is little to stop an admiring gaze through the long curtain glass façade. What meets the eye is a transparent jewelry box of forms and materials. Exposed brick, lounge furniture, wood veneer, and atomic light fixtures all evoke a sense of the future past. Trees growing from a planter bed inside of the house dissolve the visual barrier of interior and exterior. The separation between the living room and the outdoors becomes nearly indistinguishable.



Little is known about James Bronkema, the man who built the home. However, his legacy is rich in Grand Rapids, having designed and built nearly 200 buildings around the city. (His work is most concentrated in the Fultonwood and Riverside Park neighborhoods.) After creating a modern collection of private residences and sleek office buildings around Grand Rapids, Bronkema moved his design practice to California. There he joined the league of west coast modernists who were rapidly changing the look and lifestyle of post-war America through clever design and modern construction methods. There, Bronkema played an important role developing San Francisco's Embarcadero Center.

Built in 1954, this four-bedroom home was commissioned by the president of a fire sprinkler company, whose special touch lives on in one of the unusual features of the house: a sprinkler system in the basement. Set into a hill, the house is comprised of four tiered, flowing volumes. The main level contains a large living room, library

corner, kitchen, dining room, and breakfast nook. At the top of a set of stairs connecting the three main volumes of the house lies a landing, illuminated by a clerestory window. From here, doors which seem to blend in with the birch-veneered walls, lead to the sleeping arrangements and an office. Below the main floor is a long entry foyer which lies alongside the garage. This entry hall is flanked by built-in closets and cabinetry also covered in birch veneer, a common material throughout the main stairway. “You can tell this house was extremely well built,” remarks the current owner, David. “There has been little to no settling,” he mentions as he pops open one of the tightly-fitted cabinets, which swings out on hidden hinges. This entry hall, dubbed “the mud room” leads into the lounge and bar, which continue out onto the back yard. A descent from this lounge leads to the lowermost level, a true basement which houses a spare bedroom and utilities.



“I’ve always loved this style, even when it wasn’t in style,” David mentions. David, a classically trained architect, studied at Carnegie Melon University. “I was a student at a time when architectural education was split between the International style and Postmodernism. My education was rooted in the modern style, and I just loved it. I have always loved it.” Therefore, it is no wonder that he was drawn to this home’s modern design when he purchased it. David is now the third owner of the house. It was first sold in 1962 to an owner of an auto parts dealership, and then purchased by David and his wife in 2004. “It’s good to live with someone who also understands this style,” he chuckles in reference to his wife Elaine, who is responsible for much of the interior decor. Elaine is a master scout of local estate sales, having years of practice. Along the way, she has scored some important period finds, including a pair of signed C. Jeré brass sculptures, and an original production Verner Panton floor lamp. This lamp illuminates David’s reading corner, where an Eames lounge chair and ottoman sit. The Eames lounge was a gift to David from Elaine. It is here where David prefers to relax and read.



“This was an executive-level home when it was built, and it’s perfect for entertaining. It even has central air. When we found it, it was preserved and had never been remodeled” David explains from the living room. What is remarkable about the interior of the house are the varying architectural elements. On the main floor, redwood, exposed brick, flagstone, cedar, birch, carpet, and linoleum all act in harmony with proportion and volume to demarcate areas meant for different uses in this largely open floorplan. A central brick “core” houses many of the utilities, including the fireplace, indoor barbecue, and ovens. This wide core, typical of Bronkema’s work, pierces through the roof as a solid structure. The main wall of floor-to-ceiling glass creates a sense of vastness. The foundation of the house lies several feet inside of the living room, allowing two

Norway Spruce’s to take root and reach the ceiling. Commenting on the condition of the house when he bought it, David recalls, “The neighbors used to call this the Chia Pet house because the indoor planting bed was so overgrown that the windows were completely blocked off. Elaine and I wondered for years what to do about curtains. After a while, we realized the windows are perfect *without* curtains.”



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This visually rich interior space is the perfect setting for all of the mid-century modern furniture and fixtures found throughout the home. Many of the pieces came with the house, such as the Saarinen-inspired tulip table by Burke, which is located in the kitchen's breakfast nook. Of the few changes made to the interior, the most were made here in the kitchen. Naturally, David and Elaine took great care and sensitivity to preserve the vintage look when they remodeled. For example, original features remain, such as the original double-ovens built into the brick wall. (Shortly after the photo shoot, the ovens were updated.) Also set into this wall is the indoor barbecue grill with commercial grade exhaust hood. David chose to update the grill with a gas flame. The cabinetry was also updated with vintage metal Geneva cabinets electro-statically repainted in their original pink color. "With all this metal, this kitchen just gleams at night," David adds.



Outside of the home, David and Elaine have added a deck, ponds, and a waterfall. They also took great care to subtly incorporate these improvements using the natural slope of the hill. These additions have added dynamic spaces to the outdoor environment. Below the added deck lies the original patio area which enters into the lounge on the lower level. These two separate areas give the backyard a sense of demarcation, effectively creating outdoor "rooms," which act as extensions of

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the house. They flow freely into the interior through vast expanses of glass, further blurring the lines of interior and exterior.

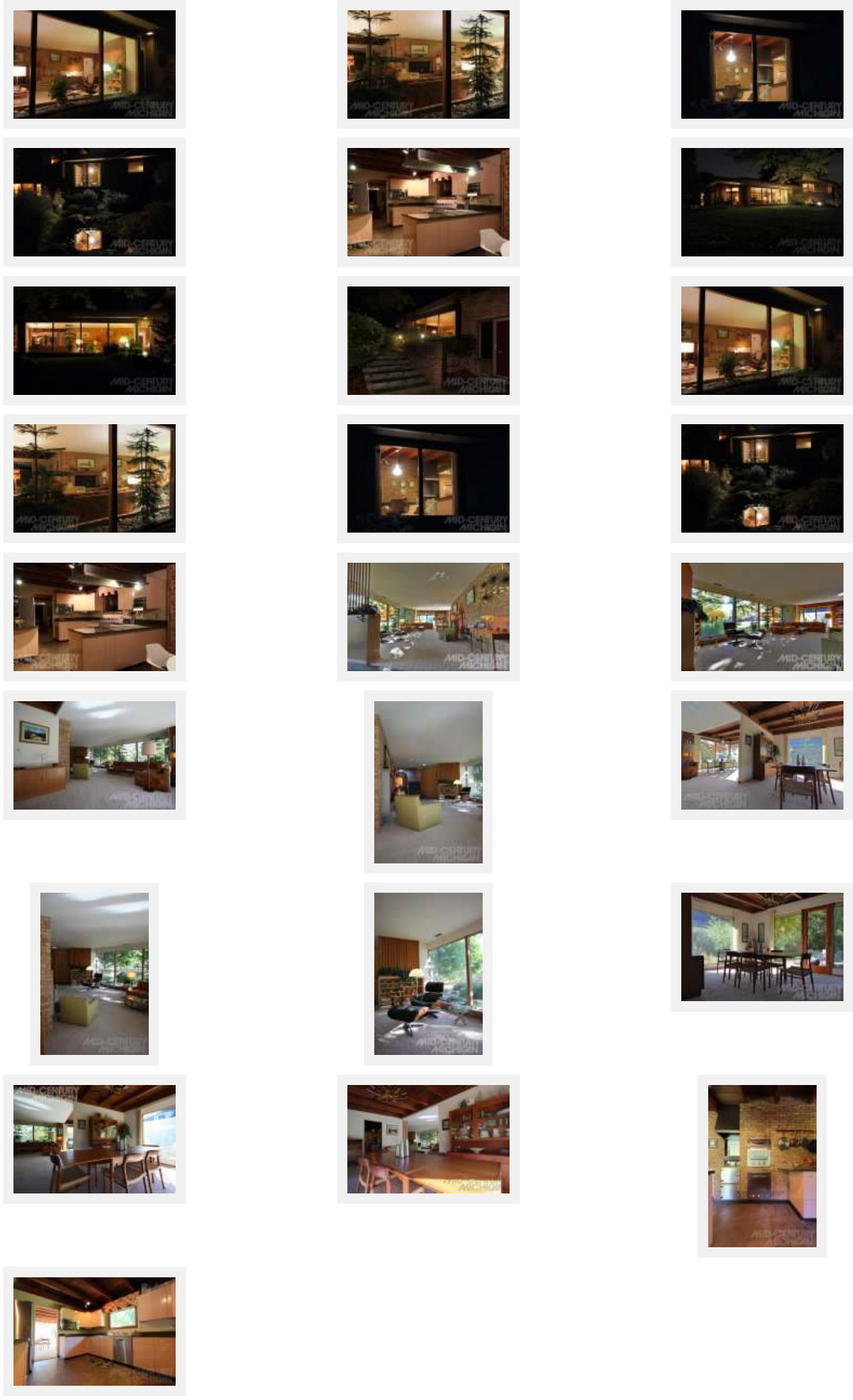
It is fortunate that this home has been so well cared for during its lifetime. David and Elaine clearly have a great appreciation and understanding of why such exemplary models of modern architecture need



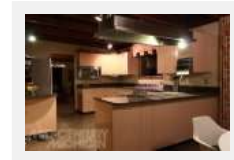
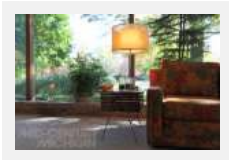
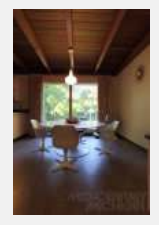
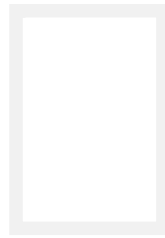
to be preserved and enjoyed, and their domestic lifestyle attests to their enthusiasm for mid-century modernism. While Bronkema may not be well known in the history of modern architecture, his contribution to Grand Rapids' local architectural history is compelling and needs to be further explored. Mid-Century Michigan looks forward to reviewing more of his work and legacy.



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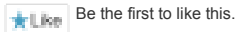
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9 Responses to *James Bronkema, 1954*



WestMichiganModern says:

17/Feb201222901/2012 at 01:23

Thank you for sharing these beautiful photos and wonderful story.

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Linda Humphrey says:

17/Feb201222907/2012 at 07:05

What a beautiful design! Thank you for sharing this history with us.

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Liz says:

17/Feb201222908/2012 at 20:52

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Gorgeous house..and furniture to die for! I own a mid-century ranch on the other side of town and my only problem with it is I wish it had MORE of the original features! Someday I hope to bring it back in the right direction and this house is the perfect inspiration. Thank you for sharing!

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Jessica Puff says:

01/Mar201233104/2012 at 16:14

I'm very much interested in hearing more of what you know regarding Bronkema and talking to you about another property that may have been designed by Bronkema in GR.

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tylermerkel says:

01/Mar201233105/2012 at 17:45

I know of a few other Bronkema buildings. In fact, he designed some of the modern office buildings on Cherry St. hill. If you know of these cubic brick and glass buildings with exposed interior staircases you can see from the street, you may have seen more of his work. I'm hoping to continue exploring and presenting his work, so if you have a lead, please share!

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Brian Kane says:

01/May201253112/2012 at 12:57

There are quite a few houses in East Grand Rapids, Michigan that were designed by James Bronkema. There is a vertical file ,that is very informative, on Bronkema at the main library downtown GR.

[Reply](#)



tylermerkel says:

03/May201253111/2012 at 11:30

Thank you for this useful information, Brian. Since the posting of this article, I have been in contact with James Bronkema and his wife Sharon, who also shared with me some other good resources for research. I hope to cover more on his work in the near future!

[Reply](#)



Rebecca Kalinowski says:

31/May201253107/2012 at 19:25

In 1958,James Bronkema's office was at 425 Cherry Street in Grand Rapids. He lived at 55 Fultonwood.I am lucky enough to live 2 blocks away, so I get to see this amazing street almost daily.

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