

Benjamin F. McAdoo's lasting legacy as an architect and activist

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After returning to Seattle from work as the chief housing adviser for the U.S. Agency for International Development, Benjamin F. McAdoo Jr. told The Seattle Times in 1964,

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ENID McADOO WAS ONLY 6 when her family of five moved from the apartment above her dad’s Capitol Hill office to a brand-new custom home in Bothell. It was an impressionable age, an influential era and an exceptional place, and so her kaleidoscope of early memories reflects the still-vivid images of childhood.

The sweeping backyard pasture that sure seemed perfect for a horse. The worrisome sump pump in the basement. Warm summertime sleepovers out on the deck. And an entire ingrained guest book of grown-up visitors — so many grown-ups, and so many grown-up conversations.

Interior designers chatted in the sunken living room, wall-to-wall white wool carpet underfoot. Delicate, sliding shoji screens served as stage curtains for the concerts her mom put on, starring local schoolkids and church friends.

“My parents would entertain quite a bit, and not necessarily just personal friends,” McAdoo, now 70, recalls. “I was aware when politicians would come over, and hearing all the politics discussed.”

McAdoo remembers her parents hosting dignitaries from a newly independent Ghana, and meeting Washington Gov. Albert Rosellini — but it wasn’t until after her dad’s death (at age 60, in June 1981) that her youthful awareness grew into a profound understanding, tinged with awe.

Enid is the youngest child of Thelma and Benjamin F. McAdoo Jr., the first Black architect registered in the state of Washington. A 1946 graduate of the University of Washington's architecture program, McAdoo designed his family's distinctive 1958 Bothell home, along with dozens of other enduring and architecturally significant residences, churches and (mostly later in his career) commercial and industrial buildings. He was an influential architect *and* activist: a prominent civic leader and prolific author of issue-driven letters to the editor who served as president of the Seattle chapter of the NAACP for four years; a dedicated public servant who moved his family to Jamaica to design modular homes (and then to Washington, D.C., where he worked on the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts before returning to Seattle); and a social justice powerhouse and KUOW radio host who fought for affordable housing and racial inclusion and against redlining.

As an architect in midcentury Seattle, "He bought property on behalf of other people in situations where they would have been excluded," Enid McAdoo recalls, citing one specific parcel in Seward Park destined for a doctor. "When it turned out the [clients] were Black, [the Realtor] was very angry: 'You didn't tell me!' And my dad said: 'Well, you didn't ask me.' And of course, the sale went through."

"I didn't fully appreciate how varied his career was and all the exceptional things he did until I was clearing out his office," she says. "It's interesting; you learn later on the hurdles that he had to overcome to do those things. He ran for state representative in the mid-'50s. When I think about, 'Here's a Black person in Seattle in the mid-'50s, and he's running for state office?' That's kind of a *whoa*."

Benjamin McAdoo bought his office building in the 1950s, and it remained a family touchstone until after Thelma's death in 2013 — as well as a repository of insight into the first Black architect to maintain a practice in the state.

"I thought that shortly after his death, everything had been donated to the UW; I just happened to walk into the basement of the building and saw all of these drawings, and tons and tons of books," she says. "He read everything. He was very attuned to the Civil War and World War II and Germany and the Holocaust. Architecture wasn't the only thing, although he was interested in it, obviously. I remember that we went to the World's Fair in Montreal specifically to see this apartment building that was made of prefab concrete — sort of the same technique he had used in Jamaica. Everything he was interested in, he followed up on."

Now retired from her own influential career, in human services and criminal justice (like her dad, she's "pretty good at letter-writing to bureaucrats" and has no trouble going over people's heads to get results), Enid McAdoo lives in her own midcentury home in Des Moines (like her dad, she has an excellent eye for good design). And she also follows up on her interests. Decades after ending up with a beloved donkey named Jackson instead of her dream backyard-pasture pet in Bothell, McAdoo saw this enormous yard and thought, "Oh, I could have a horse *here*." And she does: Ebony, whom she now boards.

Time also has gifted McAdoo six more decades' worth of awareness and perspective into her architect/activist dad — and his lasting, multilayered legacy.

"It's like you grow up with somebody and you know they're doing a lot, but I never had a full appreciation until becoming an adult," she says. "I used to complain when I was in school: After church, frequently we would end up with a tour, like, 'Oh, I designed this building and that building,' and it used to drive me crazy, because I would be like, 'Can we go home and eat?' But now I wish I'd paid attention, because I can't remember most of the buildings or where they were."

SHE'S NOT THE ONLY ONE interested in that impressive portfolio: At the University of Washington, an inspiring project called [The Benjamin McAdoo Research Collective](#) has been gathering and sharing information on McAdoo's work since its initiation by architecture associate professor Tyler Sprague in 2021. It's academic by nature, yes. It's also collaborative and public (leads are welcome and appreciated); purposeful; and, for senior architecture student/researcher Sierra Miles especially, intensely personal.

Miles joined the project during another influential era: at the peak of the pandemic, and during the trial in the Ahmaud Arbery case, which she followed closely.

"I was really interested in how to celebrate Black artists and creators and architects in my own field, and as we started researching, that's where I really got attached," she says. "Seeing [McAdoo's] involvement in the social justice movement, not just in Seattle, but also globally, and how he looked to shape Black people ... That really stuck with me."

Miles has presented their findings at local architecture-minded forums such as a [Docomomo US/WEWA](#) public meeting (the preservation advocacy group is part of the collective, along with [BOLA Architecture + Planning](#)), and [AIA Seattle's Diversity Roundtable](#). They've shared materials with the [Capitol Hill Historical Society](#); worked with owners of homes designed by McAdoo; and, over the summer, contributed research to Guided Methods and Seattle architecture firm [Studio TJP](#), which are conducting a [survey of Black historic sites](#) for the [Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation](#).

As Miles and Sprague unpack the wide-reaching UW Special Collections archive of McAdoo's journals, drawings and documents, they're also hoping to identify all the homes he designed — and alert the owners that they're living somewhere very special. "Streets have changed, and housing numbers have changed," Miles says. "It is definitely a hunt to find some of the locations. We're still in the process of looking for more."

One positively for-sure McAdoo-designed residence they've researched and photographed extensively — the Kenneth Ota house in Rainier Beach — holds what Sprague calls "a combination of significance." Following the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans, McAdoo worked to help them return to Seattle and rebuild equity and wealth. So the Ota house, built in 1956, Sprague says, "encapsulates a lot of what he was about: a beautiful house, sensitively designed, but then it embodies all this complexity through the midcentury period of racial discrimination and internment and redlining."

This is historic, insightful, contextual research grounded in deep respect and driven by a compelling mission to seed and spread appreciation for a man whose work has been severely underappreciated.

"What we hope to do is bring [McAdoo's] legacy into the homes of everyone living in Seattle, because his work is all around us. His work is so vast that it really does cover many areas in Seattle that we walk by quite frequently — to be honest, I live very close to his office and didn't realize it until I started working on this project," Miles says. "For me, his legacy would be to show the intersectionality of architecture and not just praise for his midcentury-modern homes, which were quite phenomenal, but also where he stood socially and politically, and how that informed his designs."

Already, insights into McAdoo's principled designs have informed Miles' own evolving architectural style (simple, elegant, changing elevations, local materials) — and likely always will.

“It's been very profound, looking at Benjamin McAdoo's work and his legacy, what he cared for throughout his life ... which my cohort's having to think about in terms of climate change, how we would like to build in the world, and what exactly that would be, and who it'd be for, and how long it would last,” she says. “With this research, I've been able to look inside myself and what I care about, and look at [his] life and draw some parallels to my own.”

Miles is set to graduate in 2023. The collective, like McAdoo's legacy, will continue to expand. “There's no end date,” says Sprague, who plans to include more students in the future. “We're just collecting more and more partners and sharing as much as we can along the way. It's such a vital contribution to the architectural history of our region, which needs to have this story told. There's a legacy that exists, but certainly in my opinion, it needs to be celebrated much, much more.”

LISA MODISETTE CELEBRATES McAdoo's legacy every single day — also very personally. She lives in a classic midcentury-modern home in Normandy Park that he designed in 1958 for Mr. and Mrs. Walter Binz.

From a bidding-war perspective, Modisette really shouldn't have gotten the house. But she fell in love with it immediately, understandably, and especially after its owner shared its story (he and his wife had bought the house from the Binzes and lived there more than 60 years) — and McAdoo's.

“What's important to me is his legacy,” she says. “I wrote [the previous owner] a very heartfelt letter about how I felt about the house and how I would try to take care of it after learning about Benjamin McAdoo. And we got it, even though we didn't think we had the highest offer. They wanted us to have it.”

Instantly inspired and still true to her promise, Modisette built her own personal archive on this particular McAdoo project — she has all the original notes and architectural drawings (some now framed on her living-room wall); copies of the 1958 Seattle Times article about the house; and a direct line to Miles, the UW student researcher, who came over to take it all in and take some pictures.

Which means, when it was time for some select updates to this special place, Seattle architect Sheri Olson had access to all of that, too.

Olson redrew McAdoo's drawings, but she did not rethink McAdoo's thinking.

"It was pretty much a refresh and restore with an emphasis on the kitchen" (which had been redone before, in the late '80s/early '90s), Olson says: new finishes, new appliances, new fixtures. An energy-efficient induction cooktop replaces an electric stove, smoothly incorporating the other emphasis: the environment. Farewell, old oil-guzzling Thermo Pride furnace; there's a new heat pump in town. No more fluorescent or incandescent lighting lingers, either; it's all LED from here. A workshop, storage area and laundry room with custom cabinetry evolved from unfinished space on the lower level.

"The amount of work was significant to bring the six-decade-old house into the future, but when you walk in today, all you will see is McAdoo's simple yet stunning design," Olson says. "I just wanted to stay out of his way."

Truly, too much is too special to change:

- The original wooden front doors, and that view-revealing entry.
- The elegant central stairway backed by a Columbian basalt wall.
- The silky shoji screens dividing the entry hall from the dining room and kitchen. ([Olson's own midcentury-modern house in West Seattle](#) has shoji screens, too, which got Modisette's attention when Olson's house was part of the West Seattle Garden Tour.)
- The windows, site-built by hand. ("Even though they're not energy-efficient, the outstanding energy-efficiency of the heat pump makes up for it," Olson says.)
- The downstairs bedrooms (the previous owners raised three kids here) with original built-in desks and Formica tops.

And there was no way anyone wanted to raze that roof: a genuinely distinctive Swiss Cross butterfly design that starts high over the carport, slopes down toward the entry and then slopes up again over the living room toward stunning panoramic views to the south.

“It is so amazing,” Olson says. “If you look at Google Maps, it just stands out. It’s like this beautiful object in the rest of the landscape.”

In turn, the landscape is a beautiful part of the house. “It has a lot of wood, and rock elements. I also love the Asian aesthetic that’s incorporated,” says Modisette. “It has a combination of that Pacific Northwest feel plus the midcentury-modern aspect. I just fell in love with both of those things.”

Fitting, then, that it was a heartfelt letter that brought Modisette here, to a house whose steady McAdoo presence carries across decades and homeowners and architects.

“I’m so impressed by his subtlety and a certain humbleness of materials; it’s not a fancy house, but it’s much better designed than a lot of fancy houses,” Olson says. “It didn’t need a huge addition. It just needed some love. Lisa really knew what she had. She knew from Day One: This is an amazing house.”

ENID McADOO WAS ONLY 10 when her family of five moved from its unforgettable custom house in Bothell to Jamaica. Among her encyclopedic kaleidoscope of memories, McAdoo recalls that her family’s home was sold to two sisters — one perhaps a teacher.

She is correct, of course, and now she knows the rest of that story, very nearly firsthand. On a pleasant July day perfect for nostalgia, 60 years after moving out, Enid McAdoo is visiting her childhood home and meeting two of the current residents — who themselves are descendants of the previous owners, who bought this special place directly from the architect who’d designed it for his family.

“My great-grandma, my grandma, my great-aunt and -uncle, and my dad and his two sisters were looking for a house,” says Amber Rusike, who in turn bought the house from her relatives 11 years ago and lives here with husband Simbarashe Rusike, daughter Evayla Braxton, son Tashinga and doggy Beau. “My grandma owned a house in Central

Seattle at the time, but it wasn't big enough for all of them to live in. My dad is Black, and his family is Black, and they were all professionals — they were all educators — and so they had the money, but because of discrimination, they wouldn't sell her any of the houses there that were in these bigger, nicer neighborhoods with big houses. This was where they were able to buy a house that was big enough so they all could live together. ... McAdoo ... didn't have any problem selling it to another Black family.”

With 3,700 square feet of flowing space, five bedrooms between two levels, plus huge closets and loads of room for storage, the house worked for Rusike's ancestors much as it did for Enid McAdoo's family.

“This was a gathering place,” says Rusike. “This was the place where the birthdays were. All the Christmases, all the celebrations. They really used this house to host people. I've heard they had people over like Jesse Owens and Thurgood Marshall. ... It's interesting that that's what I heard later that McAdoo did, too — this house being a place to bring people and host people. I grew up seeing the house like that.”

It's still like that. Rusike has her own extended family now, and this house “is where all the gatherings take place,” she says. “We love to host. That is really significant. That's what [McAdoo] meant the space for, and that's what he used the space for. I also have that love for bringing people together for enjoyment and connection. That's really important to us as a family, and something we do often.”

Her most recent guest, original resident Enid McAdoo, has arrived in the driveway. Rusike and Evayla greet her. A passing neighbor stops to chat. McAdoo mentions the backyard horse — nay, donkey — pasture, some of which has been sold and built on. The Japanese maple at the entry is now towering, alongside enduring bamboo. McAdoo notices Rusike has repainted the previously red front door, and then they tour the remodeled kitchen.

Rusike's relatives took exceptional care of this house, she says, but it did need some strategic updates. “We wanted to make sure we kept it structurally pretty much the same; the architecture is beautiful, and we didn't want to change that. We focused on restoring it in a way that kept the integrity of the house. That was really important to us.”

The sliding shoji screens were in perfect condition when Rusike and her family moved in, she says, but Tashinga was an active little 1-year-old then, and so the screens still slide, but now with a couple little active-kid holes. The wall-to-

wall white wool carpeting is gone, and the summertime-sleepover deck has been updated, but the original skylight stretching down the hall, the massive sliding-glass doors, the wood ceiling, the bathroom tile all remain. In the primary bedroom, the original custom built-in cabinetry/headboard is designed for two separate beds — “It *was* the ’50s,” McAdoo says.

McAdoo’s childhood bedroom (now Tashinga’s) had custom built-ins, too (she remembers all her friends had their own chest of drawers). As the youngest child, McAdoo’s room was closest to her parents’; her brother and sister — Benjamin F. McAdoo III, now living in Oregon, and Marcia Greenlee, now living in the Bellevue home where their parents once lived (designed by McAdoo contemporary Paul Hayden Kirk) — had bedrooms downstairs, by the worrisome sump pump.

So much is so familiar. “Apparently this place did mean a lot to me,” McAdoo says. “Amber filled in holes I couldn’t fill in.”

In Evayla’s room, originally a library with a sofa and chairs for overnight guests, another time-space coincidence arises: Evayla, home for the summer after her first year of college, used to compete — quite successfully — on equestrian teams. “I always wanted to have a horse here,” she says.

“This is tripping me out,” Rusike says to McAdoo, laughing. “It’s fascinating to me that you were horse-crazy, and she is, too.”

Rusike shares family photos she recently unearthed in the house’s lower level, much like McAdoo discovered her father’s treasure trove of mementos in his office basement.

What they’ve discovered here today, together, is connection — between families, between generations, between memories and stories and time — all grounded in one midcentury-modern home designed by Benjamin F. McAdoo Jr. There are so many more homes, and stories, left to discover.

“This has been wonderful,” Enid McAdoo tells Rusike.

“It’s been an honor to have you here,” Rusike replies. “What your dad has done — it’s such a beautiful legacy, for my family to have all that because of your dad.”

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