

Retro Renaissance

The mid-century modern home is back in style

By Jane Hodges



Light from inside sets this Joseph Eichler home, in Marin County, aglow.



Real estate, like people, follows fashion trends. One year historic bungalows and cottages sell like hotcakes, the next everyone's moving to a downtown condo. But during the past decade, modern homes—those minimalist, open-air residences that came of age in the middle of the 20th century—have experienced a renaissance. These days, mid-century modern homes are stylish and architecturally hip places to live.

What's spawned this interest in mid-century homes is open to debate. For starters, there's the issue of quantity: An estimated 75 percent of all homes built in the United States from 1948 to 1968 were constructed in some variation of the ranch architecture, according to *Realty Times*.

Then, there's the issue of proximity. That the majority of these homes were built during roughly the same period as the national highway system means they're often found on large lots in suburbs with good school districts, and typically feature garages or carports. Perhaps, though, such homes attract buyers because of the lifestyle they promote—the open layouts are ideal for entertaining and relaxed family gatherings.

Architecturally, the mid-century home runs the gamut from custom-built to what once seemed the most ubiquitous of all housing styles: the boxy mid-century modern ranch, constructed en

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masse between the end of World II and the late 1960s.

Mid-century homes were original and informal, with rooflines consisting of multiple gables, slight or flat slopes, or the “butterfly” style with two gables dipping at a midpoint. They incorporated split-level architecture, or the occasional “sunken” area, to play with the traditional notion of “upstairs” versus “downstairs.”

Indoors, they featured open floor plans, often centered around a living, dining and entertainment space, with narrow hallways leading off to the bedrooms. They merged the best of both worlds: An abundance of windows and walls of glass brought in light and blurred the boundary between indoor and outdoor space—this is where the current fondness for outdoor rooms got its start.

With their garages and carports, these homes celebrated American mobility. They also celebrated American technology by incorporating new building materials—such as terrazzo tiles, aluminum windows



and man-made flooring.

Who are the stars of mid-century modern? That depends on whether you’re looking at custom architecture or mass-developed mid-century housing, such as the roughly 11,000 homes—often ranches with zigzagging roofs—that developer Joseph Eichler is estimated to have built in

A soaring gable roof, and stained and polished concrete floors accent the main living room of this Beaverton, Oregon, home by Pacific Northwest builder Robert Rummer.

Characteristic Eichler paneling, a George Nelson clock, and furnishings from IKEA and Design Within Reach adorn this 1959 Eichler home in San Jose.



JIM BROWN / ATOMIC RANCH MAGAZINE (2)

California and beyond, or the 18,000 homes that Cliff May was responsible for building in the 1950s. These single-story homes had floor-to-ceiling windows, multiple outdoor entries, pools and decorative ponds, and an easy feel.

During the past decade, preservationist groups have fought to uphold the era's architecture, nominated mid-century properties to the National Register of Historic Places, and prevented classic homes from being flattened beneath builders' bulldozers.

In Seattle, the most recognized project of this sort might be the Egan house, set between Eastlake and Capitol Hill. Built in 1958, the house—one of architect Robert Reichert's most famous designs—spent much of the 1990s under threat of demolition until Historic Seattle, in partnership with the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department, acquired it in 1998.

Another factor contributing to mid-century modern's recent appeal may be, as some real estate agents have termed it, the "dwell effect." Contemporary architecture publications are showcasing the breadth of décor possible—and available—to outfit these homes, all while mainstream furniture stores, such as IKEA and Design Within Reach, are offering an array of furniture styled after mid-century designs.

In addition, real estate agents around the United States have begun specializing in the era to differentiate themselves professionally among buyers and to help sellers realize their property's hip allure.

"Realtors didn't always know how to describe these homes, but that's changing," says Michelle Gringeri-Brown, the Portland-based author of *Atomic Ranch: Design Ideas for Stylish Ranch Homes*. "Now there can be an architectural cult around mid-century in some communities."

Gringeri-Brown and her husband, Jim Brown, a photographer, grew up in



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mid-century homes thinking that their style and spaces were nothing unique, but now, she says, they're among the converted.

"We wanted to call people's attention to this style of architecture," she says. Together she and Brown created the quarterly magazine *Atomic Ranch*, which profiles mid-century modern homes, and features decorating and remodeling resources and ideas.

Mid-Century Modern Thrives

"Palm Springs is the capital of mid-century," says Ralph Haverkate, an agent

Hip interior accents, paired with bright colors around the pool outside, give this Eichler home, in Marin County, an up-to-date and contemporary feel.

This San Jose home features hallmark Eichler details: clerestory windows, post-and-beam construction and an open-air central atrium connecting most rooms of the house.



JIM BROWN / ATOMIC RANCH MAGAZINE



The pool is visible from the dining area of this 1961 prefab, all-steel house designed by Donald Wexler and built by Alexander Construction.

Keeping it Modern

with Tarbell Realtors, who estimates that between 30 percent and 40 percent of the city's housing stock consists of mid-century architecture. "And the mid-century homes here have gone up in price even though the market is growing slower."

Haverkate says that more than three-quarters of the calls he gets from prospective buyers come from out-of-towners interested in mid-century homes. In Palm Springs, they can find a wealth of options among the more than 2,000 properties constructed between the late 1940s and mid-1960s by Alexander Construction—a Palm Springs-based residential developer known for 1,200-square-foot ranches, often with pools and expansive outdoor space—and those built by Meiselman Homes.

Today, mid-century homes in Palm Springs can cost \$400,000 for a "fixer," though most start at \$600,000 or more. True aesthetes can also seek out a custom-built mid-century property by architects such as Albert Frey or William Cody.

Preservation groups in cities around the United States are working to advance interest in mid-century modern homes via educational events, tours, and rescues of "endangered" modern properties, and by nominating mid-century residences and commercial buildings to The National Trust for Historic Preservation. Here's who's doing the work:

Chicago: Preservation Chicago (www.preservationchicago.org) and **Bauhaus and Beyond** (www.chicagobauhausbeyond.org) work to preserve mid-century style.

Dallas: Preservation Dallas (www.preservationdallas.org) works to preserve mid-century moderns through its Dallas Modern Committee, which offers local outings, lectures, exhibitions and study tours, and runs the Dallas Modern Expo each year.

Denver: Arapahoe Acres Preservation Network (www.arapahoeacres.org) celebrates Arapahoe Acres, the first post-World War II housing subdivision to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Los Angeles: PreserveLA (www.preservela.com) and **The Los Angeles**

Conservancy's Modern Committee (www.modcom.org) both work to preserve and showcase mid-century architecture.

Palm Springs: The Palm Springs Modern Committee (www.psmodcom.com) works to preserve endangered mid-century properties and promote awareness of key architects within Southern California.

Phoenix: Modern Phoenix (www.modernphoenix.net) offers modern enthusiasts an online community and organizes tours of local modern homes.

San Francisco: A local branch of the international organization **Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement**—otherwise known as **DoCoMoMo**—offers education, tours and preservation initiatives (www.docomomo-us.org/chapters/northern_california).

Seattle: The Western Washington branch of **DoCoMoMo** (www.docomomo-wewa.org) offers tours and educational events, and advocates for preservation of modern buildings, objects, neighborhoods and landscapes in Western Washington.

“There’s a lot going on with this architecture,” Haverkate says. “People who come out here really go for this ‘cool’ look that’s also kind of simple. There’s light in the home, and seamless access to the outdoors. Many of these homes were designed with the idea that you’d spend 70 percent of your time outdoors.”

While Palm Springs may be the hub for mid-century modern, the look also draws interest in Northern California.

Renee Adelman, an agent with Keller Williams Realty, specializes in selling mid-century modern homes in Marin County—particularly those developed by Eichler. Eichler homes featured the post-and-beam architecture common to the period, and flat roofs. They also attempted to blur the line between indoor and outdoor space with features such as atrium entries.

“The interest in mid-century homes began around 2000, and they’ve just gotten more and more popular since then,” Adelman says. “In the 1980s and 1990s, no one liked Eichlers. It’s been in this decade that the interest emerged.”

In Marin County, it’s hard to say if it’s the availability of mid-century homes or the growing population of design-conscious buyers that is driving mid-century homes’ popularity.

“These are affordable homes for families. A lot of other homes in Marin are close to \$1.5 million,” Adelman says, noting that many mid-century homes in areas north of San Francisco—such as Lucas Valley and Terra Linda—cost less than that.

“The people who seek out these homes are often a little bit more on the creative side professionally. Many of them work in creative fields like advertising.”

Suburban Savvy

“People know that there are a large number of mid-century modern homes in Seattle



JIM BROWN / ATOMIC RANCH MAGAZINE

proper,” says Richard Corff, an agent with 360 Modern in Seattle. “What they don’t know is that there is a huge chunk of them in the suburbs, including the eastside.”

In fact, he’d argue that nearly half of Seattle’s mid-century modern homes can be found in the suburbs. While architects such as Paul Kirk, who built homes in the 1940s and 1950s—often in Bellevue—frequently created custom modern homes for buyers, Corff says many of the mid-century homes on the market were conceived by builders who created five to 10 house models and replicated them until entire neighborhoods emerged.

Alexander Construction built only about 15 of these “Swiss Miss” homes, which feature A-frame gables.

These three-story residences in Denver were designed to reflect a contemporary, minimalist mind-set, yet complement the vintage architecture of a turn-of-the-century landmark home next door.



RON POLLARD / MEIZ DEVELOPMENT

This means that families whose priorities are affordability, a good commuting location or a strong school district, but who are also attracted to modern design elements, are likely to find mid-century homes among the inventory available in the suburbs. Singles and childless couples interested in a home with a retro design are also venturing into the suburbs to examine mid-century homes for sale.

In environmentally conscious Seattle, Corff says, mid-century properties carry an additional appeal in that they're easy to retrofit with "green" features—ranging from solar panels and passive solar heating to renovations that blend eco-friendly building materials with the property's modern bones.

"Modern architecture is not constrained by defined axioms of architecture. It's open-ended and can be revised and modified," says Corff. Mid-century modern homes invite updating without making a homeowner feel that doing so ruins the home's tradition, he says. If anything, the breadth of style variations among mid-century modern homes may make a buyer feel more free to alter and adjust a home's look or systems than if they were working with more formally designed architecture.

Mile-High Modernism

In Denver, buyers drawn to mid-century homes are often young, hip, first-time or second-time homebuyers, according to Craig Mayer, a real estate agent with Mile Hi Modern at Fuller Towne and Country Properties.

They come, he says, with a vision for creating an informal and social home environment, or perhaps an entertaining space that takes advantage of the architecture's open layout.

While Mayer estimates that such homes account for less than 2 percent of the total housing stock in Denver, homes in areas such as Arapahoe Acres and Krisana Park are selling faster—sometimes twice as fast and for up to 20 percent more—than homes of similar size and location built in other eras. The trend piqued Mayer's interest, and he began working primarily with mid-century homes in 2003.



Differentiating his real estate practice by representing mid-century modern wasn't merely a strategic business decision for Mayer; it was also motivated by his observation that many classic examples of custom-built mid-century residences were being razed by builders eager to put multiple buildings on the homes' typically large lots.

"I realized agents didn't know there was a demand for this particular style," he says. "A lot of my sellers are retirees who bought their homes in the 1950s and 1960s, and they never thought of their homes as a kind of architectural model."

New Retro

Many who follow the fate of mid-century design note a feedback loop between certain aspects of new construction—open interior architecture reflected in the "great room" concept, a renewed emphasis on "outdoor rooms"—and mid-century's original emphases.

Saddleback Southwest Homes, a residential developer in Newport Beach, California, is overseeing construction of an entire community of new California-ranch-style homes at Almond Grove Estates outside Bakersfield. With walls of glass and sprawling layouts on large lots, the ranches evoke the family-style living celebrated in the 1950s.

Meanwhile, in Palm Springs, Lennar Homes has teamed up with The Empire Companies to develop more than 1,400

Fluid, gallerylike spaces offer pure lines and rich natural light, while walls of steel-wrapped glass open this Seattle home to a sweeping view of West Seattle, the Olympic Mountains and Puget Sound.

Is Your Home an "Atomic Ranch"?

Michelle Gringeri-Brown, author of *Atomic Ranch: Design Ideas for Stylish Ranch Homes*, acknowledges that the term "mid-century modern" has many interpretations. Generally, she says, homes thus categorized were built between World War II and the late 1960s and feature some (or all) of these traits:

Varying rooflines: Among the roof formats common at mid-century were "butterfly roofs," in which two gables dip at midpoint and arch upward; flat roofs; and sawtooth roofs with multiple sets of gables.

Private front facades: While the mid-century home often opens up to face the sun in back, the front of many homes use stucco, brick, stone, siding or other materials to create a private and flat front entry, with minimal windows.

Open floor plans: Mid-century homes employ many different designs, but most include an open living/dining/kitchen area, often accented with a fireplace as a kind of gathering point.

Windows and walls of glass: Many mid-century homes use windows exten-

sively to bring in light. These homes often feature floor-to-ceiling windows and lots of sliding doors. They may also include “clerestory” windows that are set high in the walls of a home to let in light while preserving privacy.

Post-and-beam architecture: Instead of interior walls functioning as support walls, they serve more as room dividers or for appearance. In many homes, “pony walls” extend from the floor to just below the ceiling, separating rooms while allowing them to share light.

Extensive “outdoor room” space: Multiple rooms open onto a large patio or atrium, designed to extend square footage and blur distinctions between the indoors and outdoors.

Garages: With many mid-century homes built around the time the national highway system was expanding, most homes feature an attached garage—often below the main floor—or carport.

Creative use of interior space: Mid-century homes played with their use of space, with floors divided on split levels or through “sunken” spaces designed for conversation or lounging.

Materials: Many mid-century modern homes blended established materials such as wood and brick with then-newer materials such as man-made floorings. They also incorporated new technologies—such as radiant floor heat—and building techniques such as construction atop slab concrete foundations.

new mid-century-style homes and condominiums in a golf-course community called Escena Palm Springs. The design applies a contemporary interpretation to a look that borrows from the “visual essence of the Palm Springs vernacular”—Spanish revivalism of the ’20s and ’30s and mid-century desert modernism.

“They’re building what seem like replicas of Alexander homes,” says Haverkate. “It really makes a strong statement about mid-century’s appeal when new construction starts to embody this style.”

Residential builders are using the knowledge of real estate agents familiar with the genre—such as Bernice Artzer-Mills, an agent with Re/Max, Inc. of Cherry Creek in Denver—to design new homes. Artzer-Mills is currently working with a developer who is trying to integrate more modern elements into new home designs.

“The layout is open, and has floor-to-ceiling glass windows,” she says. “People love the glass. They love the overall look.”

Ultimately, what buyers may love is the way a mid-century home requires its owners to live: “It’s a cleaner, simpler lifestyle,” says Artzer-Mills. “You just can’t have a lot of clutter.” **R**

Jane Hodges is a freelance business and real estate writer in Seattle. She recently moved into a 1966 brick home and is at work on a book about single-women homebuyers.