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Modernist movement catching on

By Michael Perrault

Craig Mayer and Peter Blank are passionate about modernist architecture, but even they're surprised by the flurry of interest in metro Denver's modernist homes.

Many younger couples looking to start families in closer-in burbs come into their Distinctive Properties offices, and are knowledgeable about the architects and builders responsible for metro Denver's modernist architecture. Home buyers of all ages relocating from other cities log onto their Mile Hi Modern Web site (www.milehimodern.com) to see what's available before arriving in Denver.

Because supply is somewhat limited, home price appreciation in some modernist neighborhoods has reached nearly 16 percent in the past year, compared with 4 percent marketwide.

"It's so interesting," said Blank, a longtime real estate broker. "We deal with a lot of 20-somethings now who are buyers actively seeking modern architecture."

Although modernist homes account for only about 2 percent of Denver's overall housing market, Mayer and Blank recently teamed up to focus solely on the modernist architecture niche. They created the Mile Hi Modern Web site, where prospective buyers can take virtual driving tours of modernist neighborhoods such as Lynwood and Krisana Park. Some 200 homes are located

in the southeast Denver neighborhoods just east of Colorado Boulevard near Florida Avenue.

Other interested home buyers prefer to actually drive. One destination is Arapahoe Acres, a neighborhood in Englewood where developer Edward Hawkin teamed with architects Eugene Sternberg and Gerry Dion in the 1950s to build 124 modernist homes.

Initially, when Mayer and Blank began tallying the number of local modern homes, they weren't sure what they'd find.

"So far, we've inventoried more than 1,200 homes, and we discover new ones almost every day," said Mayer, a fourth-generation Denver native and real estate broker with degrees in landscape architecture and environmental design. He said although Denver may not be widely known as a "modern town," there is a rich and varied modernist tradition with roots in the work of well-known architects Frank Lloyd Wright, Joseph Eichler and Cliff May.

Rollie Jordan, a real estate broker with Kentwood Company Cherry Creek, also has received a lot of attention recently regarding the futuristic Sculptured House at Genesee Mountain. She's been on CNBC, for instance, after The Wall Street Journal featured a brief article noting that her \$4.85 million listing was still on the market after nearly three years.

The five-bedroom, 7,644-square-foot so-called "Sleeper" house that was made famous in a Woody Allen movie was designed by modernist architect Charles Deaton and is perhaps "the best example of modern, organic architecture in the world," Jordan said.

John Huggins, Denver's director of economic development, owns the home and spent several years renovating it before putting it on the market. He even hired Deaton's daughter to redesign the interior.

It's a "stunning house -- for the right buyer," Mayer said, but certainly atypical in that most modern homes range from about \$300,000 to \$450,000 in local neighborhoods. Many fixer-uppers go for less than that. Exceptions are newer custom-built, modern-style homes, such as the \$2.9 million home that architect Harvey Hine built in the Hilltop neighborhood.

Mayer estimated there are about 50 local modernist-style homes on the market at any given time. Some are in predominantly modernistic neighborhoods, while others are in small pockets where two or three modernist homes blend in.

Blank believes clients often are looking for a simpler, more stylized and uncluttered way of living, and that they're attracted to the clean architectural lines, low-slung roofs and well-designed floor plans, among other features.

The trend toward modernist homes isn't unique to Denver. In Dallas and Seattle, for instance, modernist and contemporary-style mid-century houses that were once a tough sell have regained popularity, real estate agents said.

Modernist architect David Jameson, who is based in Alexandria, Va., and is on the American Institute of Architects' Northern Virginia board of directors, said he can't remember a time when the American public was more receptive to design. So clients now seem to be much savvier.

That's something Mayer has noticed as well. He has helped downtown Denver loft dwellers who want to get married and raise families, and who've begun hunting for single-family homes.

"They're starting to look for something cool and interesting out in the suburbs, but they don't want to go way out in the burbs," Mayer said. "They want something modern and fun, and they already know about the architecture, so they seek us out."

Some home buyers come in knowing about the styles of Frank Lloyd Wright, notable West Coast architect Eichler and others whose work has influenced designers and architects in Denver, such as Victor Hornbein, Joseph and Louise Marlow, and Gerry Dion.

Local architects and designers such as William Buyers and Bill McDonald have taken on new projects to meet the increased demand. Buyers is remodeling an Eichler-style home in Lynwood that will open this March, and McDonald is remodeling and adding on to a Frank Lloyd Wright-style home near Park Hill, Blank said.

Interest in modernist architecture and a relatively limited supply have boosted local modernist home prices in the past year. In the Krisana Park and Arapahoe Acres neighborhoods, median home prices have risen 15 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Median prices of the modernist homes in those two neighborhoods now

range between \$275,000 and \$318,000 -- ahead of the \$247,000 overall median price in metro Denver.

One Krisana Park modernist-style home on South Fairfax Street sold last March for \$274,000, only six months after the previous buyer paid \$234,000, Mayer said. That was a 17 percent appreciation rate in six months.

Oftentimes, sellers aren't aware they have modernist-style homes. They typically bought a home in the 1950s or '60s and chose it because of the neighborhood and perceived value. Mayer and Blank often help educate sellers about how to market their homes.

Some prospective buyers who are just learning about modernist homes are taken aback by the small amount of interior space, which can often be 1,500 square feet or less. Although tiny by today's standards, Mayer said many of the mid-century homes are designed more efficiently with little wasted space.

Blank was looking for a home for himself awhile back when he stumbled onto a modernist-style A-frame -- and had to have it. "I'm a true convert, if you will," he said.

Mayer used to see all kinds of modernist architecture and homes as a real estate agent in California, but admitted he now has a soft spot for all things modern in Denver.

"I've always had this sort of altruistic idea of trying to raise the level of consciousness in Denver so people would appreciate the history and great examples of modernism that we do have," Mayer said.

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