

Post Tudor and Bungalow, the Modern is Home to Hip

Flat-roofed, airy, they're hot properties in Denver

By Christine Tatum
Denver Post Staff Writer
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As she house hunted late last year, Susan Goddard realized she wasn't buying what most of Denver was selling. The city's vast array of bungalows, Denver Squares and Tudors didn't appeal to Goddard's modern sensibilities. "A lot of them were beautiful on the outside," she says. "But the insides felt so small to me, as if the walls are closing in."

Goddard settled on a flat-roofed, mid-century modern house with three bedrooms and two bathrooms in the 1500 block of South Flamingo Way. The open floor plan, featuring windows that blur the boundaries between inside and outside, wraps around a private, sunny courtyard. Goddard paid \$300,000 for the 1,730 square foot house, which has seen few upgrades since it was built in the late 1950s.

"I paid more than I wanted to, but I am happy," Goddard says. "People who want modern will pay a premium to get it."

The mid-century modern aesthetic is popping up everywhere. Decorate on a dime TV shows highlight the beauty of sleek, simple furniture and finishes. Bigbox retailers such as Target are introducing the masses to a modern style once affordable only to those with deep pockets. The more upscale Design Within Reach offers well attended How To sessions on "modern floral design." Even those lovable, animated superheroes in "The Incredibles" live in a rad modern pad.

The resurgence of modern design is rumbling through residential real estate and paying handsome returns to investors in houses long ignored for being too boxy, too plain, too weird. Brokers across the United States have watched prices for mid-century modern or MCM properties soar. In Phoenix, buyers are paying top dollar for homes by architects such as Alfred Beadle, whose "Beadle Boxes" were built on stilts. In Los Angeles, homes by Richard Neutra and John Lautner are hotly pursued. In Chicago, the mod squad reveres houses designed by brothers George and William Keck. MCM fans have zeroed in on Arapahoe Acres in south Denver, a subdivision inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, where 2005 home prices jumped 27 percent over the previous year. Similarly sized traditional homes on adjacent blocks in Denver and Englewood appreciated 10 percent in the same period, according to Metrolist Inc., a provider of Multiple Listing Service data.

In southeast Denver's Krisana Park, another enclave of MCM architecture, home prices jumped 6.5 percent in 2005 over the previous year, and properties sold on average in 23 days. Throughout the rest of Virginia Village, comparable homes appreciated 4.9 percent in the same period and took an average of 57 days to sell.

"Those numbers prove that design and individuality matter," says broker Craig Mayer, founder of MileHiModern.com, Denver's largest online listing of modern residential real estate. "People have been fed stucco McMansions for years now, and they're finally getting tired of them."

Mayer is one of the few metro Denver real estate agents specializing in modern home sales likely because a relatively few modern properties are in the area. He has amassed a database of roughly 1,200 MCM homes built between the early 1930s and early 1970s, and estimates his collection could soon grow by another 800 properties. Identifying the homes is laborious, he says, largely because MetroList doesn't allow agents to search only for modern homes.

"You can search for bungalows, Tudors and ranches, and the results pop right up," he says. "But modern homes? No. It just shows that a lot of agents don't appreciate mid-century modern."

Goddard agrees. She says she did most of her own research and identified the property she wanted after consulting with local agents who "didn't seem to understand modern," she says.

Perhaps, one day, there will be. Some local builders appear to realize that those mid-century architects who pushed simple and open floor plans were on to something. (continued on back)

Their light, airy designs, typically accompanied by custom built-ins and generously sized courtyards that invite the outdoors in, are conducive to today's wireless lifestyle.

"The way we use our homes is constantly evolving, so why shouldn't our homes change to meet those needs?" asked Denver architect Arlo Braun of Braun & Yoshida. Braun is heartened by the modernist inspiration he sees creeping into new homes. He points to contemporary designs such as Infinity Home Collection's Sky Terrace, townhouses with floor to ceiling windows under construction on East 29th Avenue in Denver's Stapleton neighborhood. A few blocks away, Harvard Communities is building "The Architect Collection," a series of single family houses "organized to fit virtually any lifestyle today," according to sales brochures.

"We're always going to have huge, publicly traded builders who have their formulas for doing things and are resistant to change," Braun says. "But when builders see competitors having success, they make changes. "Finally, finally, the wind is blowing in a more modern direction."

Staff writer Christine Tatum can be reached at 3038201015 or ctatum@denverpost.com.