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'50s-style homes strike a chord
"Midcentury modern" coming back into its own among a segment of buyers
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Peter Blank, 48, a design consultant with a minimalist aesthetic, never envisioned himself in a tract house on a quiet street in a sedate neighborhood.

"I was looking for a loft downtown or a townhouse in Cherry Creek," said Blank, a Realtor with Distinctive Properties. The problem was that nothing grabbed him.

He got tired of seeing exposed ducts, which seemed to be a loft cliché. The places in Cherry Creek were OK but nothing extraordinary. So when friends told him about the Lynwood development (bounded by South Monaco Parkway, South Holly Street, East Jewell and East Mexico avenues), he agreed to look.

"I walked into one house," he said, "a midcentury A-frame with clerestory windows, a wall of sliding glass doors and an open living room/dining room, and I thought, 'This is it. This is too cool.'"

"Midcentury modern" homes have been pleasing a certain group of homeowners since the 1950s. Known for their horizontal lines, open floor plans, floor-to-ceiling windows in the rear (to integrate indoor and outdoor living) and small, high windows at the front (for privacy), they were modeled after the sleek homes of California developer Joseph Eichler, who believed that good design should be affordable to the masses.

In Denver, those homes ranged from 1,000 to 1,500 square feet, rarely had basements and often came with just a carport or a one-car garage. They were marketed to middle-class families who could afford the $10,000 to $20,000 price tag and were looking for areas that, in the 1950s, were considered the "edge" of town. Today, these neighborhoods are called central Denver.

Because midcentury modern homes are small by contemporary standards, they are often advertised as great opportunities for expansion or to be scraped off. They are rarely seen as a great opportunity for the kind of sensitive rehab Steve Castellari has in mind.

Buying a 1956 California Contemporary was not part of Castellari's game plan, but the Raytheon software engineer fell in love when he saw a house with a slightly sloped roof and floor-to-ceiling windows hidden behind a mature tree on a lot in Crestmoor.

"I wanted to be in a neighborhood with appreciating home values," he said, "and this neighborhood is a winner."

Though his new house was listed as a "scraper," he plans to resuscitate it. "I'm looking forward to restoring it to its midcentury roots," he said, "and to learning about the period's aesthetic as I go." He and his girlfriend now spend

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free time poring over issues of Dwell magazine and studying photos in "Mid-Century Modern" by Cara Greenberg (Harmony Books, 1984).

Realtor Craig Mayer is another fan of the genre, so passionate that he now specializes in selling them with Re/Max of Cherry Creek. "I want to be the go-to guy for the segment of the market that loves midcentury modern homes," he said.

To that end, he has created a website that shows homes of that era that are on the market.

The 40-year-old Mayer wasn't familiar with the designs until he moved to San Francisco after college. He was introduced to fans of Eichler's tract homes near the Bay Area and officially started his informal education.

Two years ago, he moved to Denver and eventually switched from an environmental planning career to a life as a Realtor. Along the way, he decided he wanted a midcentury modern home for himself. (He's still looking.)

"Suddenly I realized what a challenge it was to find one, based on inadequate descriptions in the Multiple Listing Service," he says. Although listings noted Victorians, Four Squares or Tudors, for example, they listed midcentury moderns as "contemporary" or "1950s ranches."

Mayer began his own database, culling the listings for metro Denver homes that fit the midcentury modern description and writing down addresses of any he spotted while driving. To date, he has about 600 on his list, and he believes there are at least 600 more, many located in unexpected places.

"Everyone seems to know about Arapahoe Acres," he says, "and many know about Lynwood (where Peter Blank lives) and Virginia Village, but I was out near 80th and Federal, and suddenly I spotted that roof line that screams midcentury modern." It has now been inventoried.

Advantages

1. They tend to be undervalued. The median sale price is $260,000, well below Denver's median sale price of $300,000.

2. Many are tucked into well-established neighborhoods in Denver, near Cherry Creek and downtown. Not only are the locations attractive, but these houses are also appreciating assets.

3. The homes tend to have "good bones." The layouts are open, often in an H, U, T or L floor plan that encloses outdoor space.

4. They're a limited "product," so they have a certain cachet.

Disadvantages

1. They tend to be around 1,500 square feet - perfect for a couple, but small for a growing family.

2. They usually offer only a one-car garage or a carport, reminiscent of the California lifestyle but not always practical in snowy Colorado.

3. They rarely have basements.

4. Many require extensive remodeling. (It's not uncommon for original residents to be selling after living in one for 50 years.)

In addition to whole neighborhoods of these homes, Mayer adds, you can find one or two scattered about in neighborhoods that otherwise boast fairly pedestrian 1950s brick homes. Eichler look-alikes are tucked among small ranch homes in Crestmoor and Hilltop.

"These homes are not for everyone," he says, "but there is a market out there." These midcentury modern homes reflect a uniquely American vision that, at its core, revealed the post-World War II hopes and dreams of a triumphant nation.

"Developers like Joseph Eichler built homes that expressed an indigenous vision - a vision of the future," Mayer said.