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An enclave of modernism

Denver developer copied Eichler's contemporary homes in 1950s, much to the delight of today's residents

By Sally Stich
Special to The Denver Post



(Post / Kathryn Scott Osler)

Drive west through the Virginia Village neighborhood in southeast Denver, and you will most likely be underwhelmed by the uninspired architecture. You'll find row after row of small boxy brick houses, punctuated by the occasional half-empty strip mall or neighborhood church.

But a quick turn south off Florida Avenue onto Jasmine Street, or north onto Eudora Street, and the landscape changes dramatically.

Who would suspect that two pockets of midcentury modern homes lie hidden inside an otherwise solid but uninspired neighborhood?

Krisana Park, to the north, and Lynwood, to the south, were built in the 1950s, when Joseph Eichler's contemporary tract houses were popping up across California. They were known for their low-pitched roofs, open floor plans, single-car carports and walls of glass doors that opened to side yard or backyard living space.

In the mid-'50s, Denver developer H.B. Wolff & Co. copied the Eichler plan to a T, and today those homes are wildly popular with California transplants and other buyers who appreciate the lean, retro aesthetic in these enclaves.

Thirty-year-olds Andrea Russell and David Smetana live in Krisana Park and still can't believe they own a 1,550- square-foot Eichler look-alike.

"We thought it would be another 10 years before we could afford a midcentury modern home," said Smetana, a currently unemployed geographer.

Had they stayed in Los Angeles, where they had lived the past three years, he would probably be right. But Russell, a sustainability manager for Rio Tinto Minerals, got transferred to Denver, and their California dream became a Denver reality.

"In California, this house would have been a minimum of \$800,000," said Russell, which is clearly out of their price range. They hit paydirt when they discovered Krisana Park and the \$387,500 house they now call home.



Elaine and Val Senter, both 78, raised four children in their 1,260-square-foot Krisana Park home, which they purchased in 1955 for \$5,950. They were lured by the home's open floor plan, mahogany walls and two bathrooms.
(Post / Kathryn Scott Osler)

Desirable as Lynwood and Krisana Park are today, they also were a hit 50 years ago when they were unveiled to the public on what was essentially farmland.

Val and Elaine Senter, both 78, bought their Krisana Park home in 1955. They remember falling in love with its open floor plan, the mahogany walls, the indoor/outdoor living possibilities, even the two bathrooms (one at either end of the hall).

"There were no trees out here," said Val Senter. "The story goes that the subdivision was named Krisana Park because the farm on which it was built was owned by a couple named Kris and Ana."

The Senters raised four children in the 1,260-square-foot house they bought for \$5,950 after looking at a home in nearby Virginia Village with a \$9,800 price tag. Today their home is worth approximately \$325,000.

The 175 houses in Krisana Park came in four models and were followed by 80 houses in Lynwood, east of Holly Street. The latter development offered a couple variations on the former - carports as well as a one-car garage, slightly more square footage and the introduction of an A-frame model.

Both areas attracted buyers who were considered "progressive" - people in academia or the arts. **Craig Mayer, a Realtor with Mile Hi Modern and Distinctive Properties Ltd.**, guesses that 25 percent to 30 percent of the original owners still live in their homes.

Like many neighborhoods that have been around for a while, these developments eventually went from "way cool" to "no way!" in the '70s, '80s and '90s. Recently, they have re-emerged as desirable gems. Prices for homes in Lynwood, for example, have gone up 20 percent in the last year; in Krisana Park, 28 percent.

Homes in both neighborhoods tend to be on the market fewer days than in the surrounding neighborhoods where prices have flat-lined.

Russell and Smetana say they love their home's modular construction. "You can move walls or take them out to either open up or define space," Smetana said. In the wake of that kind of updating and renovation, few houses still look the same on the inside.

There's also a dark side to these 50- year-old homes. Under-insulated roofs are problematic, and their low slopes leave little room for more insulation without some pricey modifications. Original single-pane windows are not uncommon, nor are they energy-efficient.

And forget replacing details such as the tongue-and-groove boards or the redwood siding original to the houses. "Exact replacements aren't made anymore," said Val Senter.

Still, the chance to live in an Eichler look-alike makes the downside bearable. Russell and Smetana, like many young professionals in the area, are working to fix what doesn't work and are loving what does.

Lynwood and Krisana Park

Who lives here: Older couples (many original residents), young couples, single professionals, artistic types (floral designers, interior designers, theater people).

Main attractions: Midcentury modern homes with open floor plans and great indoor/outdoor living spaces; 10 minutes to Cherry Creek and/or the Tech Center; appreciating value of a limited commodity

Common complaints: Small houses (typically under 1,700 square feet); one-car garages or carports; no basements; original single-pane windows or under-insulated roofs.

Schools: DPS: Ellis Elementary, Place Middle School and Thomas Jefferson High School

Average home sale price in Lynwood: \$309,000

Average home sale price in Krisana Park: \$362,000

Price per square foot: \$210 in both neighborhoods

Back to the future: For a look at some interiors while benefiting the arts programs at Ellis Elementary, take the Krisana Park Modern Home Tour on Sept. 10 from 1 to 5 p.m. For information, call Dana Miller at 303-300-3547 or visit www.krisanapark.com.

