

# Historic Denver

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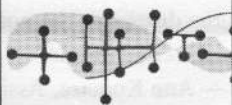


Addition to ranch house in Lynwood

## High-Style Ranches Up, Up and Away

by Melissa Baldrige

### MODERN WORKS



Melanie Short and her husband, Greg, were like a number of first-time homebuyers who wanted to live in the city — in 1999, they bought a historic house for \$115,000 in the emerging Cole neighborhood. The house needed lots of work, and they spent the next two and a half years restoring it.

“It was an 1890 two-bedroom Victorian, 900 square feet,” recalls Melanie. “We pretty much spent the first days pulling up carpet and staples. It [the house] hadn’t been touched since the 1930s. The fridge was on the back porch.

We gutted the kitchen and put in a completely modern kitchen. We took out the wall between the two front bedrooms to make a master bedroom, and we redid the floors.”

But when the time came to trade up in 2002, she and her husband, both architects, were hard-pressed to find bigger digs in an affordable area.

“We had very simple requirements — brick, with a garage and more than one bathroom,” she says. “We ... drew a circle and didn’t want to be farther than 20 minutes from downtown. We believe in carpooling and the urban thing. That was what we loved about it [the Cole house] before.”

After looking at a number of neighborhoods, the couple settled on a 2,400-

square-foot ranch house for \$239,000 in Virginia Vale, a post-World War II neighborhood near Cherry Creek Drive.

“Basically we felt like we got a lot of house for the money there for staying in as close as we wanted to. We’re [what used to be] first-tier suburbs,” says Short. “They [the realtors] told us we could afford a more expensive house than that, but when we looked at a lot of the hipper neighborhoods, we weren’t getting a lot more house for the [extra] \$150,000.”

For homebuyers like the Shorts, what was once suburban is now urban and better yet, a good deal. Also, magazines like *Dwell* and *Atomic Ranch* have made neighborhoods from the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s cool again, and design-savvy buyers are gravitating to the clean lines, ground-hugging designs and open, spacious floor plans of Mid-century Modern.

“I think it’s nostalgia,” says Karen McWilliams, a preservation planner for the City of Fort Collins who helped secure a local landmark designation for 11 architect-designed ‘50s houses in the Sheely Drive neighborhood there. “I think it’s very much the baby-boomer generation looking back at its roots.”

In Denver, Professional Home Mortgage loan officer and realtor Charles Brown agrees. “I live in a 1960 [Arapahoe Acres] home that is really cool and modern. There’s definitely a subculture that demands it, wants it,” he says.

Brown suggests that while this boutique housing stock is gaining cachet, costs are commensurate with demand, and he’s noticed a recent spike for homes in 50-year-old neighborhoods like Arapahoe Acres, Lynwood and Krisana Park. Observing that buyers have no hesitation in paying \$400,000 to \$500,000 for property in nearby Wellshire and then

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scrapping the houses, Brown attributes these price gains to the high-style houses themselves.

"In Arapahoe Acres, the whole pricing has radically changed in the last few months.... A guy sold a house for \$188,000 [in September 2004], and he put it back on the market for \$308,000 [in March 2005]. Another home listed for \$459,900, and it didn't make it a day before it sold. An eight-hundred square-foot home with an 800-square-foot basement sold for \$309,000. Also, I sold a house for \$291,000 in Virginia Village about a year ago. If I were selling it now, I would sell it for \$350,000."

Despite price appreciation in these neighborhoods, sale figures are still below the Denver average, but barely. According to the Denver Board of Realtors, the average price of a single-family home surpassed \$290,000 in 2004. A survey of Multiple Listing Service listings for the period from April 2004 to April 2005 shows average "sold" prices for the three neighborhoods — Arapahoe Acres, Lynwood and Krisana Park — squeaking in below that number: \$289,250, \$289,286 and \$275,000. Also, houses in these neighborhoods move quickly, averaging 20, 27 and 21 days on the market respectively, which handily beats the Denver Southeast term of approximately 80 days from list to sale.

Docomomo USA, a Modern architecture watchdog group, says this phenomenon isn't unique to Denver but is happening all over the country. "A lot of these neighborhoods are stable neighborhoods," says Theodore Prudon, FAIA and Docomomo USA president. As original owners die or leave, "these neighborhoods are all in this transitional space where real estate values are being realized. Although they're seeing changes, they're seeing generational change."

Even though Brown says he is unaware of someone buying in a Mid-century Modern neighborhood and scrapping the house, James Hewat, historic preservation planner for the City of Boulder, says that he sees three to five requests per week for demolition permits, and many of those residential and commercial buildings are from the mid-20th century. In 2000, the city finished a survey of architect-designed Modernist buildings built from 1947 to 1977 and is scrambling to inventory important structures of the period. Another survey of significant Boulder residential architecture is in the hopper.

An additional threat to good Mid-century Modern architecture, and historic architecture in general, is careless additions. In Fort Collins, McWilliams sees well-intentioned people moving into neighborhoods like Circle Drive, who, by adding two-car garages, forever alter the character of such '50s developments. Unfortunately, she says, the Fort Collins City Council is unwilling to cross homeowners to stop unsympathetic alterations. "A lot of people are buying them [Circle Drive houses] up. It's one of those things that they love the neighborhood, but they're making alterations that change the ranch aspect," she says.

Craig Mayer of RE/MAX Cherry Creek says that for now, Modern devotees are sticking to Denver's core, but that may change. "People are not willing to move out too far from central Denver, Cherry Creek," he says. Still, he notes a number of lesser-known neighborhoods tucked away throughout the metro region, including a "neat enclave" in Northglenn at 104th and Huron Streets, Dream House Acres near Centennial, and Valleyview Street with 50 to 60 Modernist homes under \$200,000.

"There are a lot of these houses in Denver," he says. "You just have to be willing to go for the best deals." ■