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HOME FRONT

Wright, Neutra and ... Al Beadle?

Unknown '50s, '60s Architects Get Big Push From Brokers; Rising Prices, Leaky Roofs

By AMIR EFRATI Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL December 23, 2005; Page W8

When Michele and Tim Juengst went house-hunting in San Diego earlier this year, they didn't know much about the midcentury modern school of architecture. But after visiting a 1965 home with a V-shaped roof and open floor plan -- and flipping through a book about the era's architects -- the Juengsts were hooked.

So were four other bidders. Mrs. Juengst, a 50-year-old decorator, turned to her husband and gave instructions: "Don't say a word, just give them an offer," she recalls. When bidding hit \$1.1 million, \$80,000 over the asking price, the Juengsts were the winners. "Everything is real simple but very functional," says Mrs. Juengst. "You gasp at how pretty it is."

THOROUGHLY MIDCENTURY MODERN



See a guide to some midcentury modern figures who brokers say were influential in five major markets.

The real-estate boom hasn't just been good to homeowners fortunate enough to cash in on it. It's also helped the reputations of a crop of architects and developers who until now were pretty obscure. Robert Rummer, a builder who brought the

flat roofs of California to Oregon in the 1960s and '70s, is becoming a bold-faced name in the Portland area, as real-estate agents trumpet him on the Web. In Denver, a house by the 1950s developer H.B. Wolff sold in March for \$274,000 -- \$40,000 more than the same home had fetched six months earlier. In Cincinnati, brokers are promoting brothers Abrom and Benjamin Dombar, known for houses in mahogany and cyprus, as apprentices of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Most of these characters never became as famous as their contemporaries, Richard Neutra and John Lautner, who were known for free-flowing spaces and avant-garde theatrics (the living room of one Lautner house was built to rotate on a turntable and become a patio). That's mostly because "midcentury modern," or MCM, was cutting-edge in the 1950s and '60s but dated quickly and lost its popular appeal as buyers returned to more traditional features. Moreover, its sleek, futuristic look was widely copied and

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over time became associated with cheap cartoonish knockoffs. Then, a new wave of architects came along who considered modernism "bland and boring," says Thomas Hines, a professor of history and architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles. "They wanted to make allusions to the past."



Sarasota, Fla., home by Paul Rudolph

Now, real-estate brokers and preservationists are resuscitating the reputations and homes of some lesser-known mid-century figures. Robert Searcy, a broker in Houston, is pushing Glenbrook Valley, a 1950s neighborhood with homes by native son William Floyd. He's launched [glenbrookvalley.com](http://glenbrookvalley.com)<sup>1</sup> to promote the area and started advertising the subdivision as an enclave of forgotten modern treasures. In Denver, a new Web site, [MileHiModern.com](http://MileHiModern.com)<sup>2</sup>, offers visitors a downloadable driving tour of MCM neighborhoods and does cross-promotions with modern furniture retailers.

Some brokers and sellers are banking on the resurgence of the midcentury modern aesthetic in furniture design, as showcased by companies such as Design Within Reach and West Elm. Others are hoping for a Neutra and Lautner trickle-down effect. Homes by the Los Angeles architects have seen their prices skyrocket over the past decade, with fan/owners including fashion designer Tom Ford and actresses Courteney Cox Arquette and Kelly Lynch. Last month, a 3,000-sq.-ft. Neutra home in the Pacific Palisades sold for approximately \$4 million, about 50% higher than when it sold a year and a half ago, according to Jan Horn, a local broker. That's \$1,300 a square foot, about double the neighborhood average. There is some evidence that the marketing of the second- and third-tier midcentury modern developers and architects is working. According to Phoenix brokers, for example, some buyers are willing to pay a premium for homes by such architects as Al Beadle, known for homes on stilts, or "Beadle Boxes." Likewise, prices for homes in Arapahoe Acres, a Wright-inspired subdivision in Denver rose 16% this year, according to the multiple-listing service. Median-home prices in Denver rose 4%, according to the Board of Realtors. "After 25 years of McMansions, people are looking for unique homes," says broker Craig Mayer, founder of MileHiModern.com.

In Houston's Glenbrook Valley area, where broker Mr. Searcy is promoting the MCM connection, sales prices are up 15% this year, after three years of decline, and inventory has fallen to three months' worth, from five. That's in contrast to Houston's median price for existing single-family homes, which is up 5%, according to the Houston Association of Realtors. In Cincinnati, prices for homes by the Dombar brothers have also gotten a boost: In the last year, four of their homes sold after an average of six days on the market, 10 times faster than the city average, says Susan Rissover of Huff Realty, which is handling many of the Dombar sales.

### **A Brand Name**

The push to create a "name" architect to help sell a single-family home mimics a successful market tool for condominium developers -- creating a brand building by enlisting famous architects like Richard Meier to sign onto projects. It also comes against the backdrop of a prolonged real-estate boom, where average U.S. home prices rose by more than 50% in a five-year period. While houses in many cities haven't needed an aid to promote sales, in more sluggish markets, adding a brand name, even a relatively unknown one, can help a property stand out. Brokers say that approach will become even more important if the real-estate market nationally slows down.

Of course, not all midcentury markets are hot. Chicago, for

example, was home for years to early modernist Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who taught at Illinois Institute of Technology and inspired a generation of students to create homes locally using modernist principles. Yet the look hasn't yet caught on with local buyers because the homes are relatively small. "You can get a good bargain," says broker Joe Kunkel, who specializes in midcentury homes.



A 1950's house in Seattle

What's more, though the homes in many places are fetching record prices, brokers say they have plenty of shortcomings. Many were built as inexpensive builder-homes, not one-of-a-kind architectural works, and the workmanship doesn't always hold up well over time. Others weren't constructed for their

surroundings: Flat-roofed homes built by Mr. Rummer, the Oregon developer, are now as noted for their leaks as their architectural style. As for size, many of the homes are small by contemporary standards, around 2,000 to 3,000 square feet, and have little garage space, if not just a carport.

Those kinds of issues made it challenging for Houston rocket engineer Tim Glover to get his 1955 home appraised at what he thought was a fair value. Smitten by the brick exterior, low-pitched roof and terrazzo floors -- a look he says was popular the same time he got "fired up about the space program" -- Mr. Glover bought the house in August for \$245,000. That was twice what the home sold for two years earlier, and Mr. Glover had to go through three appraisers before getting the results he sought. "It was definitely the worst part of the whole house-buying process," he says.

In Seattle, Microsoft managers Larry Wall and Claudia Filipoaia have a different frustration with their Lyndon B. Johnson-era home. They bought the 1965 home in September, in part to showcase two modern collector's items -- a Charles and Ray Eames chair and George Nelson clock. And though they love the design, they didn't take into consideration that their \$800,000 home's garage, a converted carport, would only be 16 feet deep. Now, they're shopping for a car that can squeeze inside. "A Subaru won't fit," Mr. Wall says.



Architect Ben Dombar's former home in Cincinnati

The original modernists, like van der Rohe and Wright, made their names in the early 1900s building houses that reacted against classical architecture -- simple designs without arched windows, moldings and other ornamentation. With their low-pitched or flat roofs, sharp lines and large expanses of glass, these homes became fairly easy to identify and copy for architects who followed. In many cases, the midcentury modernists took the early modernists' ideas and developed them for the masses, often on the cheap for tract homes.

### Enter the Preservationists

But with the boom in homes by Lautner and Neutra, preservationists have started focusing their attention on their local contemporaries. Greenway Parks, a neighborhood in Dallas that is known for houses built between the 1920s and 1950s, recently passed restrictions to discourage the demolition of original homes. Earlier this year, Scottsdale, Ariz., designated two 1950s modern neighborhoods as historic districts, and gave the city the ability to delay the destruction of any homes for as much as a year. There's even a new group in Cincinnati that is working to

find "end-use" buyers for "endangered" homes.

The price run-ups for the lesser-known architects are making happy customers of early adapters like Bill Stuart. A medical researcher in Cincinnati, Mr. Stuart last month bought a 1953 two-bedroom home by Benjamin Dombar, who apprenticed under Wright. Although he didn't know about Mr. Dombar before purchasing the home, he immediately got two offers to resell from fans who hadn't bid fast enough. One person offered \$325,000, or \$55,000 more than Mr. Stuart paid. While Mr. Stuart says he never considered taking the offers, they were an eye opener. "The house might be worth a lot someday," he says.

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### Thoroughly Midcentury Modern

Cities around the country each have their own crop of home-grown midcentury architects and developers, most of whom are little known outside the region. Here's a guide to some MCM figures who brokers say were influential in five major markets.

CITY/ARCHITECT	HOME CHARACTERISTICS	COMMENTS
Dallas/Howard Meyer	Brightly painted front doors, window shades	People here knock on doors to see if owners of homes by this architect are willing to sell, says broker Douglas Newby. There are around 20; some can sell for 25% more than comparable properties.
Phoenix/Al Beadle	Steel frames, foundations on stilts	Beadle designed around 40 single-family residences, as well as multifamily housing and tract developments in the Phoenix area. Price appreciation for his projects is outpacing the rest of the local market, says broker Scott Jarson.
San Diego/Homer Delawie	Hillside homes on posts, floor-to-ceiling glass-walls	Multiple offers for homes by this architect and others like Lloyd Ruocco and Russell Forester are increasingly common, says broker Elizabeth Courtier. "It's nice to be recognized again," says Mr. Delawie, 78 years old.
Sarasota, Fla./Paul Rudolph	Covered porches, flat roofs	Rudolph was part of a group of architects who flocked here after World War II. There are about 100 midcentury homes in good condition in the area, but they don't usually carry a premium in resale, says agent Martie Lieberman.
Seattle/Paul Hayden Kirk	Japanese-influenced design like Shoji screens, courtyards	Houses by this Northwest modern architect can fetch 10% to 15% more than comparable homes, but in the current hot real-estate market some are being torn down, says broker Tom Holst.

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