



NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

The metro area is full of great neighborhoods. Every month, we profile two of them in this space. If you have an area you'd like to see profiled, Contact: teri.driskell@westword.com

Arapahoe Acres

In Englewood, what goes around, comes around.

BY KAREN BOWERS

In 1949, Harry Truman was president, World War II had been over for four years, and the Baby Boom was under way. Former GIs were settling down and buying homes, thanks in large part to generous federal housing loans that offered no-down-payment mortgages to returning veterans.

It was a good time to be a builder, and in the Denver area, construction raced to keep up with demand: Subdivisions were sprouting up like dandelions in spring.

It was around this time that builder Edward B. Hawkins bought a thirty-acre parcel in Englewood, just south of the Denver County line. (The neighborhood is east of South Downing Street and north of Dartmouth Avenue). He hired Czech-born architect Eugene Sternberg — a member of the faculty at the University of Denver's School of Architecture — to design the homes.

Sternberg had studied in Prague, where, following the Bauhaus movement, design emphasized minimalism and the efficient use of space. He was interested in designing affordable homes. That, and his fondness for Japanese style, is evident in the first homes he built in the Arapahoe Acres subdivision.

Compared to the Denver Squares and Arts and Crafts bungalows populating other parts of the metro area, the houses in Arapahoe Acres were wildly modern. Sternberg incorporated sliding interior wall panels, living-room fireplaces and kitchens with all the modern conveniences. He added car ports, paved terraces, radiant floor heating and lots of glass. He gave the homes low-pitched roofs and open interiors. They ranged in price from \$10,000 to \$20,000.

The subdivision was an unqualified success. The first nine homes built there were all sold before construction was completed, and thousands of people attended the opening of the show house. And, according to Diane Wray's *The Arapahoe Acres Historic District*, *Life* magazine featured Arapahoe Acres in an article titled, "Best Houses under \$15,000."

Despite the initial success, Wray notes, "it became evident that Hawkins did not share Sternberg's interest in low-cost, affordable homes." A rift developed, and, after building approximately twenty homes together, the two men parted ways.

Hawkins then took over the design reins. He had studied Frank Lloyd Wright's work and based his own plans on that architecture. With each new design, Wray writes, the homes were increasingly larger and more luxurious.

The subdivision, 124 homes in all, was built out by 1957. Because several architects were involved in the construction (architect Jerry Dion designed more than thirty of the

homes), each house was different. Over the years, as happens with most neighborhoods, residents added onto their homes, enclosing carports, adding garages and changing landscaping, making the character of each home more unique. All of them, however, remain irrevocably modern in design.

And it will remain that way. Arapahoe Acres has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places, the first post-World War II subdivision to be recognized as such. It is covenant-controlled, and residents must adhere to a strict standard when remodeling.

It's fair to say however, that after the initial hubbub over its modernism, most people tended to forget about Arapahoe Acres. But with a renewed interest in mid-century modern design in furniture and dress, the neighborhood is once again the hip place to be.

Realtor Craig Mayer is an expert on such things. A former landscape architect, he operates Mile Hi Modern, a real estate service dedicated to the sale and preservation of mid-century "atomic and space-age" homes.

That interest is a trend, not a fad, Mayer stresses. "When I hear the word 'fad,' I think that's something that will pass," he says. "But in architecture, everything that's been around comes around. The modern style is experiencing a renewed interest. If you look at movies and TV commercials and look at the houses that are being featured, you're seeing an awful lot of visual imagery of mid-century modern homes.

"It's the next look in modern design." There are approximately 500 such homes in the Denver-metro area, he says, which means they're in short supply. And the homes are scattered around town, so it can be hard to know precisely where to find them.

Arapahoe Acres, Mayer says, "is highly desirable, and the homes rarely sit on the market very long. It's one of best-known modernist neighborhoods. In the public's mind, that's like the A-list of modern neighborhoods."

The '50s contemporary-style architecture appeals to people who enjoy a certain lifestyle, Mayer says. "The houses, certainly for their time, have very contemporary, modern floor plans, usually open living and dining areas and lots of glass that emphasizes an indoor-outdoor lifestyle."

The size of the homes in Arapahoe Acres varies considerably.

The largest houses in the area, Mayer says, are about 2,000 square feet. "The median is around 1,300 or 1,400. The smaller ones are around 1,000. And there are a couple that are just 800 square feet."

And the prices? "The median sales over the past three or four years were \$257,000," he says. "The highest was \$335,000."

"They're starting to go for a little more, because the demand is high and the supply is relatively small," he says. "The prices are creeping over the \$300,000 mark now."

The buyers tend to be younger, he says, although because of the prices, they generally are not first-time home purchasers.

"They tend to be more urban than suburban," he says, "and oftentimes they want that style of house, but they're not sure they want to live in the suburbs. Of course, Arapahoe Acres is not so much in the suburbs now, certainly by most standards, but a lot of my clients view this neighborhood as on the periphery of where they want to live."

"Some of those people might be much happier in some ways living in a loft downtown or in Cherry Creek, but you're not going to find '50s-contemporary there. So," he says, "I take them on an adventure to the wild unknown: the '50s suburbs." ■