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HOW TO BUY A MIDCENTURY MODERN HOME

ADRIAN KINNEY, a polymath of midcentury design, is well versed in the ins and outs of buying, selling, renovating, and restoring Denver's modern masterpieces.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ATOM STEVENS; PORTRAIT BY JON ROSE



Adrian Kinney is something of a numbers guy. Perhaps that's what drew him into the real estate business in the first place. However, he also knew that wasn't his endgame when it came to a career plan. He's been a property manager, an assessor, and a tax specialist. Through it all, he kept his real estate license, but it wasn't until he purchased his own Cliff May home in Harvey Park that the inklings of a specialty came to mind.

WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT?

"We'd always had an eye for this kind of modern design," he says. "A lot of glass and open living. Luckily, my partner and I have the same design taste. We finally found that when these wood elements got added into the steel and glass, it felt warmer. It felt more inviting, more Colorado." Still, a 65-year-old house is going to need some work, so they set about renovating with an eye toward honoring the era (the project won a Mayor's Design Award in 2016).

Harvey Park is one of Denver's midcentury modern (MCM) enclaves, and as such, neighbors began to recognize Kinney's love of and expertise in this type of design. Requests for help in selling their own Cliff May homes began rolling in, and because of his passion for the style, Kinney developed a knack for marketing these residences to buyers who appreciated them—and who were willing to pay a premium for authenticity and awesome style.

After a second successful renovation and subsequent flip, Kinney realized he was building a design portfolio to match his real estate proficiency. "It's this passion that I have," he says. "I've scoured so many old magazines and figured out, like, what was the design like back then? What did everyone do? How can I recreate it today? What's authentic? What maybe didn't work back then? Carpet in the bathrooms—probably not the best idea."

In the midst of this, the Harvey Park home was sold, and they bought a larger place in Lynwood, an MCM area adjoining the similarly styled Krisana Park. Kinney's intention was again to restore it to its midcentury glory, but this home had been extensively remodeled. He had to ask, "How do I preserve something that's non-existent? The only thing that's worth preserving is the bones of the house, the windows and the layout."

A Not-so-Bygone Era

Both Kinney's current Lynwood home and his former residence in Harvey Park (inset) feature the hallmarks of MCM design, such as wood paneling and lots of glass.



It was with this project that Kinney solidified his true design style, which he defines as “a re-creation purist. How do I recreate a 1950s house with materials that are available today or even sourcing original materials? And where the heck do I find these original materials?” They

gutted and rebuilt the house. “But I rebuilt it as a 1950s time capsule with today’s nuances.” There are new appliances and old-school wood paneling. They added more windows and doors, staying true to what modernism was all about. “At the end of the day,” he says, “it still

was a semi-tract home. So I learned what really makes these cool modernist houses cool. And I was able to put that into this house.”

Now, three primary residences and four fix-and-flips later, he’s settling into his status as a renaissance man: real estate, design, ed-

ucation, historical preservation—“I mean, I live and breathe it,” he says, “I’m not in this for the trend. I’m not in this because it was a passing fancy. It’s been a completely learned style, and if you haven’t noticed, I’m just crazy passionate about this.”



High Overhead

Post-and-beam construction and clerestory windows are key features of midcentury modern homes that are well worth preserving.



OK, I WANT ONE.
NOW WHAT?

With the help of an on-staff historian, Kinney has cataloged roughly 7,000 MCM homes in the Denver area, which is impressive considering the city's relative cowtown status in the 1950s and '60s. So how do you know if you've found one of these treasures?

"The true midcentury houses have lots of floor-to-ceiling windows," Kinney says. "They have many connection points to the outside and typically have a courtyard. Often, they have clerestory windows that let the light in but keep the privacy. They'll have a lot of wood elements." Those classic pink, blue, or yellow bathroom tiles are an obvious clue.

But, he says, it's the low-profile roofline that's the biggest giveaway. "Again, it's that nod to modernism, which is all about connection to the land," he says. Look also for floor-to-ceiling windows and post-and-beam construction—that type of build was used very commonly for modernist houses because it allowed little to no true load-bearing walls, and you could have more full glass walls in the property."

Then there's the classic ranch. "There's a finite supply of the true midcentury moderns," Kinney says. "But there are some really good ranches, and they have a good spine on them. If you decide to open them up to make them a little more like today's open living, you can do that. But then they might have a sweet wood paneling wall, it might have an original bathroom, you have little telephone nooks—you get those original characteristics that, again, differentiate from the tract home of today."

He adds that it's an interesting time in that many of these homes have never been resold, and the original owners, now in their 70s



Smaller Spaces

These homes are not large, and they force a minimalist approach. Color, however, is always front and center.

or 80s, are deciding it's time. "The next 10 or 15 years will be a really optimal time. We're seeing a lot of houses that are 50, 60 years old that have stayed with the family. Now they're ready to release them, but they're perfectly preserved."

MAYBE AN OLD HOUSE ISN'T FOR ME...

"There's always the issue of materials with age," Kinney says. "There's a good chance there's asbestos, a good chance there's galvanized pipe, a good chance there's been DIY structural renovations." Key is knowing the construction style of your house. "Midcenturies are either going to be the classic frame stick built, or they're going to be post and beam. Post and beam is a lot more forgiving on the structural side—as long as you don't touch the post and beam, obviously."

There are also the typical things one looks for in any home: structural issues, foundation issues, roof issues. There could be DIY

surprises that could compound the costs, but he says, "There's also the possibility that someone could have hidden something super nice behind the wall just for you to find."

Another note, check the pedigree. "Obviously, if it's a claimed, known architect, make sure they have the docs to prove it. Don't just buy it because it's advertised as such. We know some lookalikes. Check with an expert. Check with me. We've found some houses that were not notable when they were first advertised, and we've found some actual notable history about them."

Size is a factor as well. Although the general market has shifted in favor of midcenturies, they are smaller homes. "When they were built, the average home was hovering at 1,000 to maybe 1,800 square feet. And that was big. With the original Cliff May



homes, the average house was a 1,000-square-foot shotgun with three bedrooms and one bath," Kinney says. "But I think we've really come back to this single story, easy living, smaller footprint. Especially if you've got a courtyard and a backyard and a side yard and doors everywhere, it doesn't feel like 1,200 square feet. I've had clients who are leaving a 3,000- to 4000-square-foot house, and on the first showing, they say, 'This is not going to happen.' These homes force you to be a minimalist. It's just paring down. It's living

simpler. And I think people are starting to really enjoy that again. I show them a 1,200-square-foot midcentury that's got all the glass windows and outdoor living space, and they say, 'This isn't 1,200, this is like 3,000 because I've got all these outdoor spaces.' It's fun to see their eyes open."

YOU HAD ME AT "POST-AND-BEAM."

The next step is often renovation. Depending on how invasive you're going to be, a structural engineer might be in order if you're looking



at moving walls. “From there,” he says, “It’s really figuring out what your design aesthetic’s going to be. Again, I’m super opinionated: There’s only two paths—full purist or 99% purist.”

He says, “Keep in mind that you’re a traveler in this house. It does have a history, a design aesthetic that works best in it. If you try to shove country modern into some of these midcenturies, it may work, but it will ultimately always feel not quite there. You could have spent the same amount and had a really cool true midcentury.” He also recommends taking time before diving in. “I tell clients, live there for three to six months. Just figure out how the house works. It’s got a personality. It has quirks. It has its own flow, its own energy.”

Authenticity Reigns Supreme

Kinney calls himself a “purist” in relation to time period—evident in the details of his home.

Certainly, he realizes that homeowners are free to do as they please, but that makes him no less opinionated about how these homes should be stewarded. “When you’re doing a renovation today, you’re at least trying to pay attention to the period,” he says. “When you put a bathtub in a Victorian, you don’t put in this giant jetted tub. You put in a clawfoot tub. It’s just what you do. Maybe do a really cool glass shower as well, but the nod to the era is this very elegant clawfoot tub. And I think the midcenturies have finally

reached the point where we’re having conversations about what was correct and right in these houses. I think the pink, teal, yellow bathrooms have finally reached that point where it’s not just a cool feature that’s different, but it was *correct*. And, yes, maybe keep the pink walls, take out the floor, and put in a white shiny floor to modernize it. But for heaven’s sake, don’t take out all of it.”

The next phase is research. “I don’t spend more money than the average flipper, typically,” he says. “I spend way more brain capital. I go through old magazines. I look at the historical aspects of the house. I figure out how I can best, on a tight budget, find the pieces that are either original or close to original to fit the house. There’s

a whole bunch of amazing online resources. There’s local experts. Facebook Marketplace has actually been great. Especially if you’re going full-on vintage, there’s amazing toilets and sinks and showerheads and knick-knacks and furniture. Also, if you’re terrified of old stuff, some companies are reproducing the pink, blue, and yellow toilets now, too.”

He adds, “Giving as much of a nod to the house that you’re in just makes the remodel feel more authentic. Then you’re doing a timeless thing. If you do it authentically, it’ll always be correct.” +

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