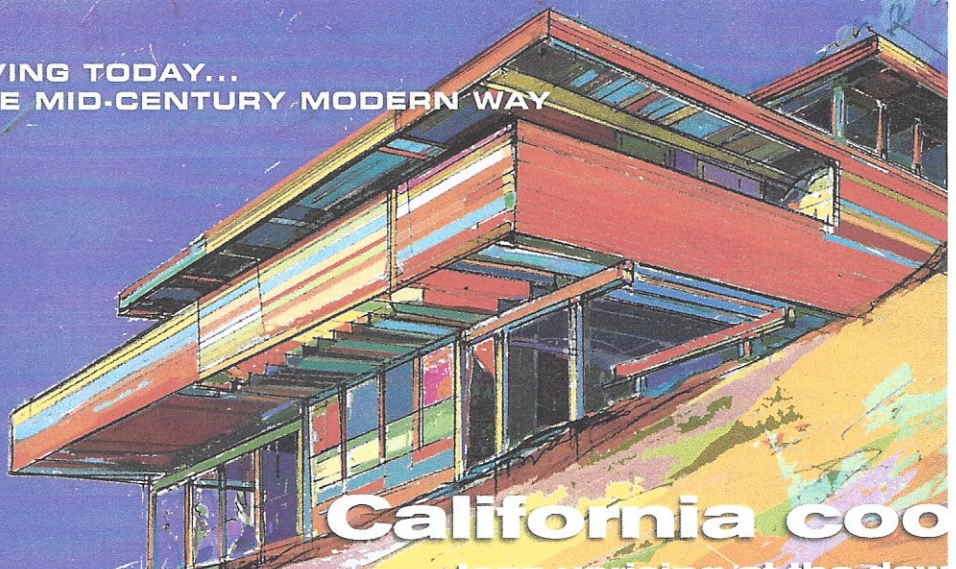


SUMMER 2006

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California cool

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EICHLER
NETWORK

Eichler 'copycats'

Mystery, rumor, and loyal fans converge at Denver's Krisana Park

Story: Dave Weinstein

AN AIR OF MYSTERY, even chicanery, swirls about Krisana Park—177 glass-walled, post-and-beam homes in south-east Denver that emit more than a whiff of Joe Eichler's California subdivisions.

Randy Sorter, a psychotherapist and artist who lives in the neighborhood, which was built between 1954 and 1957 by H.B. Wolff & Company, recognizes the truth. "These houses," he says, "look like they are at least brothers and sisters of Eichlers."

For years rumors have circulated that Wolff 'stole' plans from Eichler, that Eichler sued, that the final homes in Krisana Park and subsequent homes in nearby Lynwood differ from earlier models because Eichler obtained a cease-and-desist order.

None of that is true, says Brad Wolff, who at 81 splits his time between summers in Littleton, Colorado and winters in Palm Desert, California. The company, which he ran with his father H.B. (Hiram) Wolff, did nothing wrong, there was no lawsuit, and he never heard from Eichler. "I doubt Eichler even knew about it," Wolff says.

But he doesn't dispute the chief contention. "We flat copied them," he says of the Eichler homes.

Unlike Eichler and the architects with whom he worked, neither the Wolffs nor their architect, Frenchie Gratts, were firmly committed to modernism. They built close to 300 modern homes from 1952 to 1959 in the two neighborhoods, but when the FHA and VA decided it was too risky to insure mortgages for modern homes, the Wolffs retreated. "We weren't that bent on doing contemporary to argue with our lenders," Wolff says.

Gratts went on to win fame as the designer for HO-scale homes and other buildings for model railroad set-ups. The Frenchie Gratts Collection remains popular among model railroad hobbyists.

Nonetheless, the Wolffs gave Denver two modern tracts, neighborhoods that are attractive, distinctive, well loved, and worthy, many residents say, of historic designation.

And especially in their later houses, which included split-levels, the Wolffs were not bound by their Eichler roots. They produced split-levels and some



RUMORS COME ALIVE. Krisana Park's homes, like the one above, are "brothers and sisters of Eichlers."

two-story models. The look of their houses did change on the final streets in Krisana Park and in Lynwood, Wolff says, but not because of a court order. They were trying something new.

Where would Wolff homes have gone if father and son had stuck with it? Would California modern have morphed into something distinctively Denver?

"It was fun building them," says Wolff. "We mixed it up," he says. "There were a lot of variations in the windows, the turning of the houses. They didn't all look alike at all. It was hard to tell it was only a few floor plans."

"Frenchie, he could sense what it was about and grasp the idea and run with it."

With their vertical redwood siding, walls of glass facing the backyard, flat roofs or low gables, courtyards and carports, entry courts and overhangs and lack of basements, Wolff houses stand out in the suburban Denver landscape. Interior walls are Philippine mahogany plywood, plans are open, beams exposed. Homes were generally 1,200 to 1,300 square feet, plus carport,

with three bedrooms and two baths and an outdoor dining terrace. The original homes resembled Eichlers "exactly," Wolff says.

There were changes—additional roof insulation for the cold climate; a concrete foundation supporting floor boards over crawlspace, instead of slab-on-grade construction. There are no atriums.

The Wolffs' affair with modernism in the early 1950s began when H.B. Wolff heard about Eichler homes and dispatched Brad to California to learn more. H.B. himself may have visited an Eichler neighborhood earlier, his son says. Brad visited Eichler job sites with an assistant, but says he never met Eichler or his architects. "You didn't need to," Wolff says. "It was a pretty simple concept to copy." Wolff believes he may have returned with plans from an Eichler brochure.

"At that time people didn't copyright their houses," he says. "That was the style for builders in those days. We got together and shared everything. There



LOOK-A-LIKES. "We flat copied them," says Brad Wolff (above), recalling the Eichler homes, which we design 'inspirations' for him and his dad Hiram.

weren't very many secrets among builders, at least around here."

In 1954 Gratts and his partner, Edwin Warner, designed a model 'X-Ray house' (because you could see through it) that was erected at a home show at Denver University and immediately attracted attention—and 23 orders. "We had a pretty good feeling that the market was ready for that house," Wolff says.

"No phony gables, no sham shutters offend your sense of good taste,"

the Wolffs' 1954 brochure promised. "Instead, a variety of simple lines please the eye."

Eichler got wind of the Wolff operation, and Joe was concerned, says his

some that seemed to be very close to the Eichlers," he says. Joe spoke of a lawsuit, but Ned believes nothing came of it.

"We would have had a hard time in a lawsuit," he says. "How is Eichler

"A lot of the stuff we do on our own homes," he says, "we look to the Eichler Network to see what people are doing to their homes in California."

Some neighbors hope to win local

such a success, Miller says, that the neighborhood is now looking to put together a 'Celebration of Modern Living' home tour every year.

The high point of the 2005 event was an appearance by Brad Wolff.



ORIGINAL FLAVOR. One of Krisana Park's authentic-looking specimens, the home of Lou Landwirth (left). Below: Dana Miller, spearhead of the 50th anniversary celebration.



EYEING THE WEST. When it comes to home maintenance, says Krisana Park's Randy Sorter (above), "we look to the Eichler Network to see what people are doing to their homes in California."

son, Ned, who was an executive, beginning in 1954, with Eichler Homes. Over the years many builders would visit Eichler sites and inquire about plans. "We would refer them to the architects," Ned says. And sometimes a builder would knock off a few Eichler designs here or there.

But the Wolff development struck Joe as more serious, Ned says. "As far as I can remember the Wolffs were the only merchant builders who actually built



STEP BACK IN TIME. A month before their memorable July 4, 1955 move-in date, original owners Val and Elaine Senter (above) posed alongside their new Wolff home under construction. The couple still lives there today. Admired by artists, architects, and other professionals, these homes now sell for \$300,000

Homes harmed by someone building homes in Colorado?"

Charges that the Wolffs copied Eichler don't bother Wolff loyalists in Krisana Park. In fact, they are upholding the tradition by copying Eichler fans in California who have restored their aging thomes to pristine, mid-'50s condition.

"It's really becoming a step back in time," says Sorter, who says artists and architects and other professionals are moving into the neighborhood, where houses can be had for \$300,000, and restoring them.

recognition for the neighborhood, or even a spot on the National Register. "The neighborhood still has a very unique, original flavor to it," says Dana Miller, who spearheaded the neighborhood's 'Celebration of the '50s' in 2005, which marked Krisana Park's 50th anniversary. Most homes appear original.

More than 300 people attended the celebration, which involved open houses, historic displays, classic '50s cars, greeters dressed up like Roy Rogers and Ozzie and Harriet, and TVs tuned to the *Lone Ranger*. The celebration was

"All I can say, I built a lot of subdivisions," Wolff says. "That's the only modern one I built. That's the only place I've been treated like a king."

"It was heart-warming. It really was." ■

Photography: Randy Sorter, Randy Morris, Tom Torgove; also courtesy Val and Elaine Senter.