



## The Next Neutras?

Neutra, Schindler and Lautner command major cachet and cash. So savvy architecture buffs are now on the house hunt for works by their under-the-radar, mid-century contemporaries | *By Marisa Gluck* |

In Santa Monica Canyon not far from the ocean sits the Sten-Frenke House designed by Richard Neutra. Commanding a double lot, the house has been meticulously restored and was designated a Los Angeles Historic Cultural Monument. Across town, adjacent to Griffith Park, sits a mid-century home designed by the relatively unknown African-American architect Clyde H. Grimes, a former Tuskegee Airman.

Both houses have three bedrooms, large pools, and a spacious, open floor plan. Both are on the market. The difference? The Sten-Frenke residence is listed at almost \$6 million while the Grimes house clocks in at just \$1.8 million.

That's the silver lining of today's tumultuous real estate market. The mid-century top tier still commands premium sales prices—take, for example, Neutra's Singleton Residence in Bel Air owned by Vidal Sassoon, with its \$15 million price tag; or Schindler's concrete, redwood and glass How House in Silver Lake, listed for \$4 million. But many of the lesser-known mid-century modern architects are now a relative bargain.

Looking for a classic mid-century with a pool and library in Beverly Hills? There's a Buff & Hensman for sale for \$1.9 million. Or perhaps a four-bedroom, three-bath gated estate with a pool, multiple fireplaces and large yard designed by Edward Fickett in 1959? It's listed at less than \$2 million.

These lesser-known (but clearly talented) mid-century architects offer prospective buyers the opportunity to live in homes that embody the aesthetic hallmarks of that era—a strong sense of proportion, a connection to exterior spaces and ample sources of light—and draw on the same architectural vocabulary as their better-known counterparts like Richard Neutra, Gregory Ain and John Lautner. Artist Paul Zelevansky, who owns the Buff & Hensman currently for sale in Beverly Hills, notes that the advantage of owning a house designed by that second generation is “they took the hard-edged, disciplined modernism of Schindler and Neutra and made it work for people. The vocabulary of their architecture was opened up to living.”

Many of these underappreciated architects emerged out of the University of Southern California, including Paul Edward Tay, Edward Killingsworth, Thornton Ladd and Fickett, as well as Conrad Buff and Donald Hensman. Like Rudolph Schindler before them, these L.A.-based designers focused on smaller residential commissions, shunning the spotlight while creating open, elegant spaces for middle-class families, using low-cost materials. These men had agile creative minds, but unlike their lauded brethren, few were savvy businessmen or self-promoters. It's taken a new generation of enterprising architecture enthusiasts to resurrect their names.

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### BOAST AND BEAM

Clockwise from left: The zenken living room of Darryl Wilson's Greta Grossman house; the unassuming front door; a nighttime view of the restored exterior; an entryway and occasional room.

...CONTINUED Savvy buyers aren't limiting their search to that downtown coterie. Architects who worked further outside of the midcentury mainstream, such as Greta Magnusson Grossman and Eugene Kinn Choy, are also finding new appreciation. Grossman was a woman, and Choy was an émigré, two strikes that denied them entrée to the almost exclusively white boys' club of USC—but that didn't keep them from absorbing the same midcentury influences. Grossman, primarily known as a furniture designer, built her own house in Beverly Hills on Waycrest Drive. A relatively simple brown box that was extensively remodeled, the house sold for \$3.7 million in January 2009, more than double its sales price four years earlier.

The seller, Darryl Wilson, is a designer, real-estate developer and habitual renovator who has turned dozens of neglected homes into architectural showpieces. For Wilson, pedigree is less important than the architecture itself. "I buy [houses] that inspire me, and try to improve and enhance the spirit of the house," he says.

Choy was only the second Chinese-American to join the American Institute of Architects. In addition to the distinctive Cathay Bank in Chinatown, Choy designed several buildings in Los Angeles, including his own home in Silver Lake. Most recently, his four-bedroom, five-and-a-half bath house in Los Feliz sold for close to its \$1.85 million asking price.

In an uncertain marketplace, the challenge is valuing these "hidden gems." According to Doug Kramer, a broker who specializes in architectural properties, the sales prices for these homes are more often impacted by location and comparable neighborhood sales prices than by the architect. For instance, a two-bedroom, one-bath post-and-beam home in Mt. Washington, designed by Buff & Hensman, recently sold for \$575,000. In contrast, a similar but slightly larger post-and-beam by the same architects in the Hollywood Hills is for sale for \$1.995 million. These homes, like any others, are "subject to market factors, and the most important factor is what has sold recently in the neighborhood," says Kramer. Increasingly, design-savvy buyers seeking a timeless post-and-beam are looking at neighborhoods with a high concentration of these homes that are still somewhat under the radar, such as Long Beach, Mt. Washington and parts of the Valley.

However, buyers looking to make a quick buck flipping an unknown gem may be sorely disappointed. Architect Ron Radziner, who has won numerous awards for his firm's sensitive restorations of midcentury homes, advises buyers to find a house "you can fall in love with." Real estate broker Brian Linder agrees. He recommends buyers ask themselves one very simple question when considering any home: "Is it delightful?" 