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Mad About Modern

Montgomery County architecture isn't all colonials and Cape Cods. The sleek lines of midcentury modern abound—if you know where to look.

BY DAVID FREY

PHOTO BY MICHAEL VENTURA

A wall of windows, such as this one in Mike Lecy and Kit Yeoh's Rockville home, is a signature feature of midcentury modern design.

MICHAEL SHAPIRO SWINGS OPEN

the front door and crosses the threshold into what seems like a bygone age of clean lines, cool design and atomic-age style. The door is cerulean blue, and as he closes it and steps across the hardwood floors, the theme song to *Mad Men* plays, as if on cue.

"That's my cellphone," he says sheepishly, and silences the ringer.

In Silver Spring's Hammond Wood, the house could be a set from the popular TV show, which took place in the 1960s and popularized the sleek designs of midcentury modern style. The house, like this entire neighborhood, was designed by architect Charles Goodman, the foremost midcentury modern architect to work in the Washington, D.C., area, and it has Goodman's signature touches. A wall of windows illuminates the living room. A broad fireplace, made with recycled bricks from a demolished Baltimore brewery, anchors one end of the room. The house has a low-pitched roof, broad eaves and sits slightly off-kilter on the property to fit into the contours of the land.

"To me, this is perfection," says Shapiro, 43, of Bethesda. "It's very modern, clean. I like things neat."

Shapiro—colleagues call him "Mid-century Mike"—is a real estate agent who specializes in midcentury modern homes. He and friend Michael Cook, an architect who does a lot of midcentury remodels, bought the home in May 2015 and renovated it in the spirit of the original style. When they put it on the market in April, it went under contract for the full asking price of \$599,000 in two weeks. "There's a huge explosion in awareness," Shapiro says. "The homes are now 50, 60, 70 years old, and people are trying to save them and restore them."

When you think about the architecture of the capital region, stately colonials come to mind, but midcentury

modern, more famous in Palm Springs, abounds here, too—if you know where to look. As the suburbs expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, new homes and entire neighborhoods were built by modern architects whose designs won awards for their pioneering styles.

"There are thousands and thousands of these kinds of homes in the area," Shapiro says. "Some are in neighborhoods like this. Some are custom homes. If you look beyond the colonials, there are lots of pockets of midcentury modern here around D.C. Way more than people think. You just have to delve into it."

Driving through neighborhoods such as Mohican Hills, Bannockburn and Glen Echo can leave you feeling like you're in a time warp as these so-called "atomic ranches" drift past, retro and futuristic at the same time.

"There's something really special going on here," says Scott Willets, who moved to Bethesda's Carderock Springs, a neighborhood of more than 400 midcentury modern homes, in 2007. Scott, 54, is an architect. His wife, Melissa, 50, is a graphic designer. They were planning a family, so they were drawn by the "schools and pools" that bring many to Carderock, which feeds into Walt Whitman High School and has its own swim and tennis club. But they also loved the neighborhood's architecture. Like Hammond Wood and Rock Creek Woods in Silver Spring, Carderock Springs is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. An architectural review committee makes sure any changes to the homes are in keeping with their original style. Trees can't be removed without permission.

"We like the windows and the strong connection to the outdoors," Scott says while sitting in his airy living room, a wall of glass providing a view of the backyard where Scott built a modern-style treehouse for the couple's son, Nathan. "The flow of the house is a really nice feature."

For a long time, the qualities of these homes were overlooked by historic preservationists and the public, says Clare Lise Kelly, architectural history specialist for the Montgomery County Planning Department. Midcentury modern homes were too old to be modern anymore, but too modern to be historic.

"It's kind of a conundrum," Kelly says. "How could modern be historic?" Until recently, the county hadn't conducted a survey of historic sites since 1976. Therefore, the most recent buildings considered historic—at least 50 years old—were from the 1920s. In 2013, Kelly set out to document what the last survey left off: what she calls "Montgomery Modern."

PHOTO BY MICHAEL VENTURA



Real estate agent Michael Shapiro, who renovated this Silver Spring home with a friend, says, "If you look beyond the colonials, there are lots of pockets of midcentury modern."

The decades from the 1930s through the 1960s were a busy time for the county, says Kelly, whose 2015 book *Montgomery Modern* documents the county's modern architecture. New Deal and World War II programs brought visionary architects to the D.C. area, she says, as government agencies were building and the suburbs were expanding. The county's rolling hills and forested landscapes had discouraged previous developers, she says, but they inspired modernists who liked to nestle homes into nature. And lots of homes were needed. From 1950 to 1970, Montgomery County grew from 50,000 to 500,000 people, Kelly says. "That was a mind-boggling increase in a very short

time. The modern design really spoke to this time period," she says. "People wanted to start afresh. A new page. It was a very optimistic time."

A recent fascination with those days has made midcentury modern hip again. The popularity of *Mad Men* helped, aficionados say, but it was more than that. Even though the mention of midcentury modern on a real estate listing can drive up prices, Shapiro says, these houses are often less expensive than other homes, in part because they tend to be smaller. Many of Goodman's homes, built to be affordable, are less than 1,000 square feet.

"It's a reaction to McMansionization," says Shapiro, who was a Middle East expert

at a D.C. lobbying firm when he started a blog in 2005 chronicling midcentury homes in the area. "You have people saying, 'I'd rather be in something a little smaller but that has history and character.'"

Thousands of readers a month started visiting the blog, Modern Capital, sometimes peppering Shapiro with questions. Eventually he decided that maybe he ought to get a real estate license. Soon it became a full-time job.

Shapiro acknowledges that tastes change and, for some, the midcentury madness will pass. But for those like him, the clean, sharp style will always call. Here's a look inside three local midcentury modern homes.



LINES AND PANES

Born in Sweden, Jonas Carnemark loves Scandinavian furnishings. His wife, Wendy Ann Larson, was born in Japan and leans toward Asian pieces. The two styles dovetail in their Carderock Springs home.

"Jonas and I sort of blended our taste," Larson says, "and as our taste grew together, we noticed the similarity of the lines of Swedish things and Asian things and midcentury things. It's sort of fun to play with."

Carderock Springs was built by developer Edmund Bennett in the early 1960s, with homes designed by Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon, an architectural firm inspired by Charles Goodman. The homes have lots of glass to let in light, but wide eaves to block the summer sun. They are tucked into hillsides and forests along winding streets. The neighborhood was designed without sidewalks, and it's considered the first subdivision in the country to have underground power lines, all in an effort to let as little as possible get between the homes and the natural setting.

"You drive in and it's like magic," Larson says. "You're sort of transported."

Carnemark, 55, owns an eponymous Bethesda design/build firm. When he and Larson bought the home in 1994, they set out to open its open floor plan even more. The couple renovated the living room in 2000, removing the dark wood paneling, adding skylights and knocking down a wall. They took on the kitchen in 2009, bringing down a wall that divided it from the living room. A bathroom remodel was done in 2012.

"I enjoy clean lines," says Carnemark, who then invokes



the philosophy of late German architect Walter Gropius by adding, "the deliberate lack of arbitrary ornamentation."

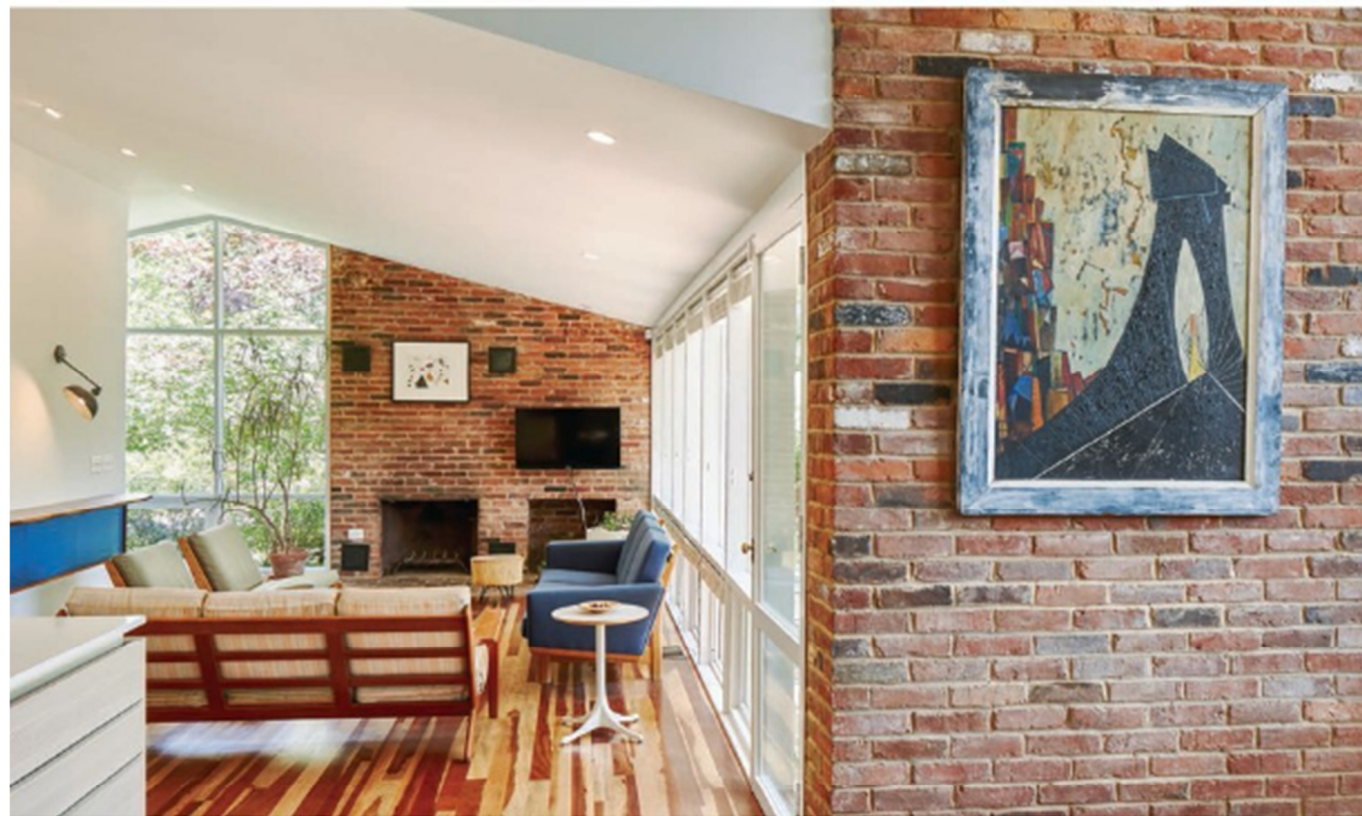
"I like that," he says. "And the views."

Natural-stained oak floors fill the living room. Danish modern chairs that used to belong to Larson's parents sit by the window wall. "Every family picture we have, they're in those chairs," Larson says. The blue upholstered sofa and ottoman come from Thrive Home Furnishings, a Los Angeles company that specializes in midcentury modern reproductions. The house is ringed by a wraparound deck where the couple hosts Swedish summer crayfish parties. Downstairs, Carnemark, a guitarist, has a professional studio where his band HüsBand records.

When the couple remodeled the kitchen, they added German Konst cabinetry, porcelain tiles on the floor and walls and Caesarstone countertops. "It's been a journey," Larson, 55, says of the couple's merging of tastes. "And a nice one."

PHOTOS BY AMICE HONCHLANDER





MODERN THEN AND NOW

Book a stay at Michael Cook's Airbnb listing in the Hammond Hill neighborhood of Silver Spring and prepare for a trip back in time, with a twist. Cook and business partner Steve Wheeler bought the house in 2012 and spent a year renovating it. The 1950 one-story Charles Goodman home features the stunning wall of windows and recycled brick fireplace that Goodman houses are known for. But Cook nearly doubled the size of the original 880-square-foot home with an expansion that is invisible from the front and jaw-dropping from the back.

Cook duplicated the height of the original windows and the style of the brick to pay homage to Goodman. He also added redwood siding and a contemporary butterfly roof, which honor midcentury style without mimicking it. "To be honest, I don't think Goodman or his contemporaries would be really happy if 60 years down the road in modern architecture nothing's changed," Cook says.

Because he planned to rent the house on Airbnb rather than sell it, Cook, 50, says he got to flex some architectural muscle. He calls it an "anti-Realtor-driven design." "Curb appeal is not so high on the priority list," he says, "but rather the internal space drives the design."

The house rents for \$203 per night. Since they listed it on Airbnb two years ago, it's often been rented by tenants looking to stay for weeks, even months at a time. In addition to design-savvy tourists, tenants have included couples who were relocating to the area and politicians passing through. This past summer, a neighbor's parents rented it while waiting for the birth of their grandchild. (It's also attracted some high school kids looking for a cool place to party for the weekend, but Cook says he turns down those requests.)

Inside the house, Cook has cobbled together vintage furnishings he's gleaned from yard sales, flea markets, dealers and a little dumpster diving. Some of the lighting fixtures are original to

neighboring Goodman homes. Herman Miller and George Nakashima chairs sit at the kitchen island. The living room is furnished with couches and chairs by Danish designer Hans Wegner.

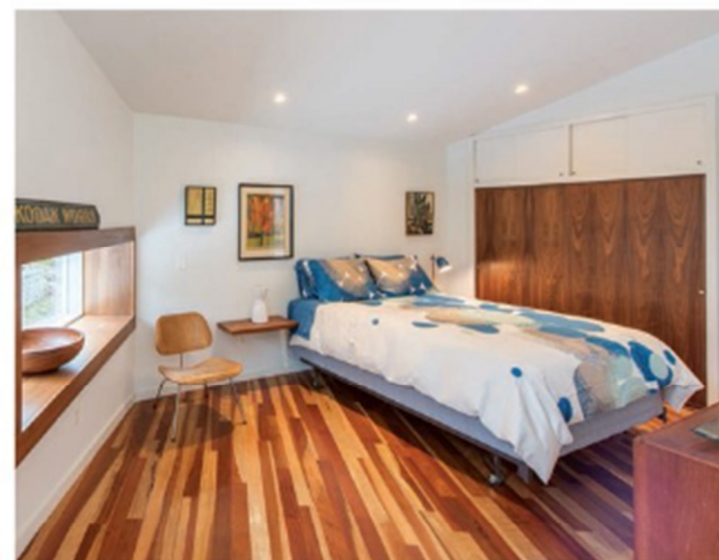
While the furnishings feel retro, many of the home's touches are contemporary. Cook knocked down walls and added recessed lighting. The kitchen is lined with sleek cabinets from the German company Poggenpohl. The counters and island are a light-colored Silestone. The Brazilian cherry floors almost look striped. "We wanted to have this organic cabin kind of feel to it," says Cook, who lives in another Goodman home in Hammond Hill, a neighborhood of 20 homes built in 1949. In *Montgomery Modern*, Kelly writes that homes in Hammond Hill were originally priced at \$10,750, and often sold within a week of going on the market.

They're still hot properties. Cook says this house has been almost completely booked since March. "It basically pays for itself," he says.

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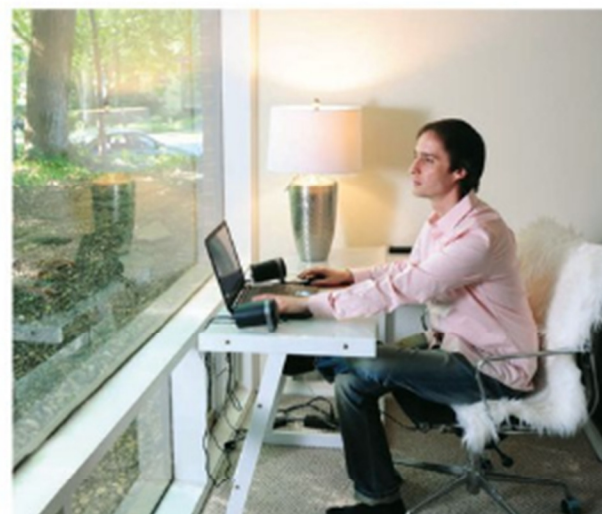


This expansion on the back of a Silver Spring home, originally designed by architect Charles Goodman, nearly doubled its size.





Mike Lecy, left, and Kit Yeoh, spent a year house hunting before finding their midcentury modern home in Rockville.



TURNING 50

When Mike Lecy and Kit Yeoh began looking to buy a home, they knew they wanted something midcentury modern. But they didn't expect to find it in Rockville. The surrounding neighborhood of ramblers and split-levels gave no hint it was there. The real estate listing made no mention of it. But when Lecy saw the photos online, he had his suspicions.

Built in 1966, the home is in the Oak

Spring neighborhood, in the Manor Woods area of Rockville near Rock Creek Park. Deigert & Yerkes, a prominent midcentury architectural firm in the D.C. area, designed the neighborhood's 85 homes.

"Contemporary homes designed for family privacy on wooded lots" is how the original marketing materials described the neighborhood. Lecy, 39, a personal banker at Sandy Spring Bank,

tracked down the brochure from the builders, Miller & Smith, a McLean, Virginia, firm that is still in business.

Yeoh, 39, says he knew nothing about midcentury modern style until he started working as a buyer at the Bethesda furniture store Urban Loft in 2009. "Mid-century modern is what our customers come for," Yeoh says. He hooked Lecy on the style and they set out to find a home that matched their taste. They spent a

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL VENTURA

year searching before spotting this one in 2015: a 2,000-square-foot split-level at the top of a hill on a quarter-acre lot.

Large windows look out from an open living room and dining room, which is divided only by a brick fireplace and chimney. Lecy and Yeoh are furnishing it with contemporary takes on midcentury style. Eames chairs sit at the sleek dining room table. A bold blue sofa and patterned armchair sit by the glass coffee table.

The neighborhood turned 50 this year, making it eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places—something Lecy is hoping to accomplish. To do so, he'll need to prove to historic preservation officers with the National Park Service, which oversees the register, that the neighborhood is old enough, well-preserved and historically significant. Lecy thinks Oak Spring meets the criteria.

"You just look around this neighbor-

hood and you can tell something is different about it," he says. "I think it's significant. I think it's important. This neighborhood should be protected. I don't want this character to go away." ■

David Frey lives in Gaithersburg and has written for Sunset magazine and other publications. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesda-magazine.com.