

Show me the midcentury love

Just saying No to McMansions lands a Missouri neighborhood on the National Register

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photography Bruce Daye

For 50-plus years, the ranch homes in a Creve Coeur, Mo., subdivision have stood essentially unaltered because it says so in writing. While teardown developers have pockmarked surrounding areas, generations of Ladue Estates residents have respected the original neighborhood covenants, making it a St. Louis County rarity: a fully intact Atomic Age neighborhood. Love of place has always been the motivation for preserving their community, but at the conclusion of a three-year historic registry process, the homeowners are also pioneers of midcentury preservation in Missouri and beyond.





Westward Ho!

In the 1950s and '60s, St. Louisans enthusiastically embraced modern architecture. Eero Saarinen's Gateway Arch was going up in downtown, and other new construction also reflected this desire for a clean, fresh look. The place where Charles Eames was born and educated also nurtured renowned hometown architects Harris Armstrong, Isadore Shank and William Bernoudy.

During this fertile design era, urban dwellers moved west some 20 miles into mid-St. Louis County for suburban elbow room. Low-slung, clean-lined ranch homes were the preferred look; a stark contrast between the old, vertical city and the new, horizontal county was fully intended.

The Creve Coeur (rhymes with 'Steve Door') area remains a highly desirable ZIP code, and when the housing climate clamored for McMansions, it also achieved "Teardown Capital" status. While original ranch homes were razed all around them, Ladue Estates remained intact primarily because the original vision of developer/builder Ben Goldberg was so perfectly executed.

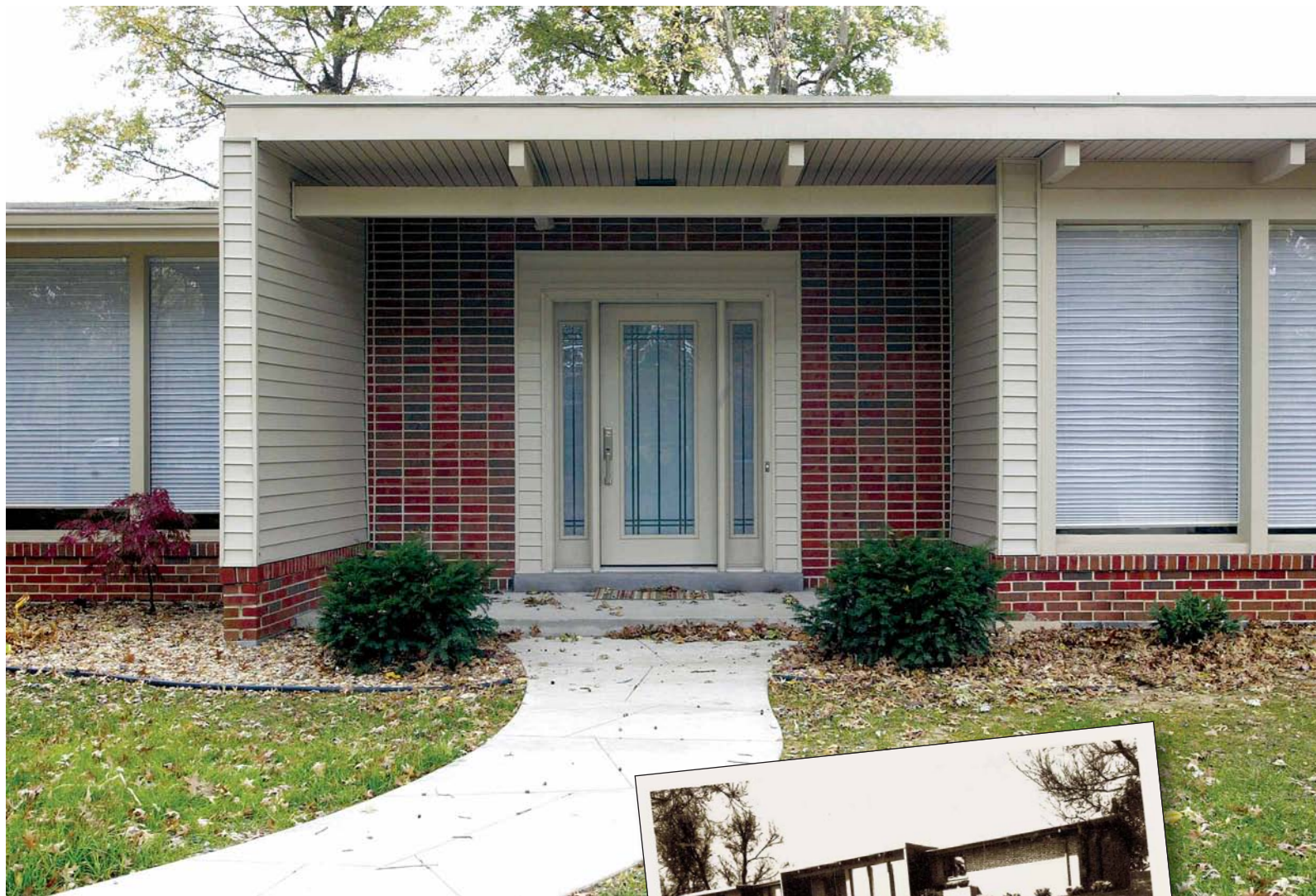


This 1958 model has exterior wood detailing accentuated with gray-blue paint and a largely original kitchen complete with aqua-colored metal cabinetry. Between the GE ovens are two wall-hung refrigerators and a freezer; (see page two for a closer view).

The divider wall in the foyer of the same house, owned by Mario Conte, has original grass cloth and parquet wood flooring.

On the previous spread; One of three plaques designating the neighborhood as historic; the home in the background was built in 1963.

The original hardwood floors and fixed-pane windows of the dining room in the brochure house opposite. The homeowners have updated the entry wall and floor with new slate tiles.



The front entrance of the home shown in the 1958 sales brochure as it looks today.

Keys to Gracious Living

The St. Louis Jewish community faced instances of relocation discrimination during the postwar building boom. Goldberg's purchase of 85 acres of farmland to create what he called "Country Living, Luxury Style" facilitated the westward movement for wealthy Jewish friends and business associates who longed for a home that epitomized the suburban ideal.

With an investment of \$42,500 to \$58,000, buyers gladly signed up for a "ranch-type one-story dwelling with no less than 1,500 square feet" on an average of .89 acres of land. From 1956 to 1965, Goldberg & Company built homes designed by local architect Cay George Weinell that were rectangular in shape with attached side-entry garages, minimal ornamentation and full basements.

All Ladue Estates homes share similar floor plans, with



open public spaces radiating out from a central fireplace, while on the outside, each facade is unique. Roofs range from hip or gable to butterfly and shed. An abundance of large fixed-glass, sash, casement and clerestory windows flood the houses with natural light. Decorative stone and extruded brick are laid in bonded or stacked patterns on walls and built-in planters, sometimes all on the same elevation.

"Every home is about the play of asymmetry conveying a strong sense that the builders had fun and asked, 'OK, what can we do differently on this one?' " observes resident and architectural designer David Connally.

Cohesion and Quality

Within the subdivision's 10-year building span, one sees a full arc of midcentury design trends. Beginning in 1956 with a standard ranch style, followed by a burst of adventurous Jetsons-esque motifs in the early '60s, the plans mellowed and returned to more traditional architectural when the last homes were built in 1965. Although the designs varied over the period, the builder worked with the same basic palette, making the neighborhood impressively cohesive.

Each home came with an electric GE kitchen with metal cabinets in the homeowner's choice of white, yellow, pink or turquoise. Just two original kitchens remain, complete with wall-hung refrigerators and freezers flanked by two ovens and a countertop range—all still working just as efficiently as when first installed.

The gable roof on this 1960 model has a playful trifold plate section on the front facade.

The quality craftsmanship shows in these homes' excellent present condition: most walls are still perfectly plumb, and because of a patented drainage system invented by Goldberg's son-in-law, Harold Kessler, the basements remain dry and the thick foundations sturdy.

Through the decades, original bathrooms and kitchens have been remodeled, and many homes have rear additions hidden from the street view. Each alteration to an original plan had to be approved by the subdivision's trustees to assure that the bylaws were respected. This steadfast adherence to original architectural intent creates a beautiful time capsule, but it in no way cramps the lifestyles of those who have gladly chosen to maintain this mid-20th-century way of life.



Safeguarding the Future

Each of the three current neighborhood trustees cites the Ladue Estates covenants as a factor in his or her decision to move here. Mario Conte and his wife wanted to live in a single-level home. When they found their house in 1992, they loved the fact that the neighborhood still had about 50 percent of its original residents (two remain). “The indentures sealed the deal. We were assured that no one could build a two-story monstrosity next door,” says Dr. Conte.

Suzanne Walch recalls the first time she and her husband, Rick, drove through the neighborhood. “We were taken by the fact that there were no teardowns, and it was like being back in the ‘50s. Especially at night, it was like stepping back in time because of the lit lampposts in the yards.”

And when Lea Ann Baker came in 2002, she also appreciated the originality of Ladue Estates. “We first saw our house with a For Sale By Owner sign, and after reading the sales brochure felt it could work for us. Driving through the subdivision, we noticed no teardowns. We stopped to ask a resident out tending his front yard about this. He said, ‘Well, it’s because of the indentures. You

could tear down one of these and build new, but it has to be a single-story ranch home. Why build something new when you can just take care of these?’ I knew immediately that this was where we needed to be.

“The beauty of these homes is the sustainability factor,” continues Baker. “They sustain older folks because the houses function on one floor. They sustain families because they’re large homes in which to spread out, with yards for the kids to run in. Finally, they appeal to and sustain a large mix of people, making it a 75-home village.”

The bylaws also provide a sense of investment security. “Before we bought, we did read the indentures, and knew we would have to honor that,” says 10-year resident David Connally. “But it didn’t feel heavy-handed, and it’s never been overbearing. We soon realized that’s what makes this a place where people care about the neighborhood—the way it was and how it is now.”

Opposite, top: An early home in the subdivision, this more traditional model dates from 1956. Opposite, bottom: Stacked limestone, brick and wood detailing in the entry of a 1961 home.



Valuing Their Treasures

Several years ago when the indentures were challenged, the neighborhood decided they liked things exactly as they were. Wondering if there was another way to help preserve their community (Creve Coeur has no preservation ordinances), Lea Ann Baker discovered the National Register of Historic Places. She began filling out the application, unaware that people paid professionals to handle this detailed process or that it would take three years to complete.

Luckily, she found expert help from St. Louis County Parks Preservation Historian Esley Hamilton. “I had no

idea what I was getting into,” Baker says. “I’d complete a step and ask Esley about the next step. It was always another challenge, a winding path of detective work. At one point, to prove a former resident’s religious affiliation, I ended up in a cemetery in Arizona looking for a grave!”

Baker also credits Missouri State Preservation Reviewer Michelle Diedrich for “tough love that made a strong application.” In May 2010 the National Parks Service granted Ladue Estates National Register of Historic Places status for meeting three criteria: architecture, community planning and development, and ethnic heritage. It is the very first postwar neighborhood in Missouri to achieve this honor, and National Parks Service Historian Barbara Wyatt has used the groundbreaking application as a template for training national staff in the still-developing area of midcentury preservation. Considering that St. Louis is home to the icon of American Modernism—the Gateway Arch—it is a proud achievement that Ladue Estates reflects and promotes Atomic Age preservation.

Trustee Mario Conte still marvels at Baker’s dedication and determination when working on the application, pointing out that the Missouri Preservation Board gave her an award that recognized “a grassroots movement spearheaded by one woman. The rest of us did help, but the correct analogy is this: Lea Ann pulled a three-year all-nighter, and we made the coffee and cookies to keep her awake.” ☼

Toby Weiss is an architectural writer and photographer documenting St. Louis midcentury modernism at the B.E.L.T. blog (beltstl.com) and Modern StL (modern-stl.com). St. Louis photographer Bruce Daye’s images have been published in magazines, books and commercial advertising projects; visit digitalbruce.com. Learn more about the neighborhood and access their National Register application at ladueestates.org.

Suzanne and Rick Walch’s 1960 home has a clerestory over the front door and strong modern lines. The fireplace, floors and windows are all still original.

