An American Classic: The Magical Midcentury Modern Homes of The Disney Streets

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The home at 11016 Pinocchio Dr. in Dallas' Disney Streets is a Midcentury Modern time capsule.

What does real estate have to do with Walt Disney? In the Disney Streets neighborhood of Dallas, it all comes down to timing.

On October 16, 1923, Walt Disney and his brother Roy started the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. It was quickly renamed Walt Disney Studio. Steamboat Willie, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon, was released in 1928 and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937. By 1955, half of American homes had televisions, The Mickey Mouse Club TV series aired, and Disneyland opened. Disney was, and still is, deeply embedded in the fabric of American culture.

11016 Pinocchio Dr.

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So it is frankly not surprising that in the mid-1950s two clever gentlemen decided an expanse of cow pastures could become their own magical kingdom. When developers Gump and Gaynier platted Midway Hills they figured naming the neighborhood streets after Disney characters would garner some attention.

Did it ever!

“It was cutting-edge marketing and a stroke of genius, ” Realtor Ed Murchison of Coldwell Banker said. Murchison has been selling homes in the Disney Streets for many years and his depth of knowledge about the neighborhood is unparalleled.

“It was definitely connected to Disney,” said Jean Hartley, 86, whose husband, Robert Gump, was one of the developers of the streets in the 1950s. “He wrote a letter to Walt Disney asking if that was OK, and got a very nice letter back.”

DAVID FLICK FOR D MAGAZINE, 2009

11116 Pinocchio Dr.

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Creative marketing was a given with these developers. In 1954 and 1955, they participated in the Dallas Parade of Homes sponsored by the Dallas chapter of the National Association of Home Builders. This was a new way of showcasing homes, begun in 1952. Remember there was no such thing as an MLS service. Developers and Realtors had to be inventive to attract potential buyers so this event was a sensation, drawing over 100,000 people.

The star of the 1955 parade at 11116 Pinocchio is known as Rhapsody House. Two of the key players that made the Disney Streets what they are today were builder Wes Gordon Nichols and architect Thomas Scott Dean. Dean designed the Pinocchio house and had it constructed out of pre-cast concrete frames. This was a cutting-edge technique and the home took just seven weeks to build.

The mid 1950s were the high point of the Midcentury Modern architectural movement. California architect Cliff May is considered to be the father of the Midcentury Modern Ranch.

> ”The ranch house was everything a California house should be -it had cross-ventilation, the floor was level with the ground, and with its courtyard and the exterior corridor, it was about sunshine and informal outdoor living.”
>
> **“THE MAN BEHIND THE RANCH HOUSE” JOSEPH GIOVANNINI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, *1986***

10347 Rosser Rd.

“Cliff May met Leslie Hill, a builder in Dallas, who was intrigued by what May was doing,” Murchison said. “They formed an exclusive agreement to build 1,200 homes in Dallas. However, the economy took a turn, and only about 40 were built. Most of them are in far East Dallas and are smaller 1,200- to 1,400-square-foot houses. In the Disney Streets, there are only two and they are around 3,000 square feet.”

“There was a move to make it a Conservation District years ago and it kind of became a divide between those with midcentury homes and those that did not have them,” Murchison said. “These homes are on large lots close to the private school corridor, in a great location, with easy access to everything so it was divisive and did not happen.

“However I do see that the care is being put around the midcentury homes,” Murchison continued. “Increased construction costs and interest rates have combined to actually encourage preservation.”

I think Gump and Gaynier would be pleased at the immense success of their post-war neighborhood concept. The Disney Streets have only grown in popularity with buyers now scrambling for those coveted Midcentury Modern ranch homes the moment they hit the market and some taking the time and expenses to completely renovate them like Robert Baldwin and Paul Echart.

10807 Cinderella Ln.

All photography of 10807 Cinderella Ln. courtesy of Stephen Karlisch Photography

Compass Realtor John Weber is a midcentury enthusiast. “When I find a cool midcentury, I want to do the right thing with it.” He took friends and clients Baldwin and Echart to look at it as an investment property to appropriately flip. “We came out of the house and they had decided they wanted to buy it for themselves. They had wanted a midcentury but were not really looking until they saw this house."

Baldwin and Echart went the distance and completely renovated this 1954 show home, rebuilding it to stay true to its origins with the help of architect Manolo Banda of Manolo Design Studio. "They even flew in tile from California," Weber said. "It's probably one of the best remodels I've ever seen."

"It was an undertaking, " Echart said. "Working with Manolo Banda, we paid attention to every minute detail. We ordered siding from California to match the original siding and we recreated elements at the same dimensions and angles. We wanted it to be as true to Thomas Scott Deans's design as possible. We did an addition to the rear of the house but the front of the house looks exactly like it did when Dean built it."

This is how you do the right thing in the Disney Streets.

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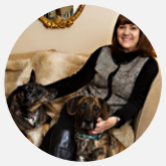

Karen Eubank

Karen is an award-winning writer and professional home stager who covers multimillion-dollar properties and historic preservation.

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