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Two words—three, depending on how you feel about hyphens—have changed my life and net financial worth: “mid-century modern.” If you’re a fan of *Mad Men* or martinis, you probably already know about mid-mod, the rekindling of love for all things fifties: sunburst wall clocks, dinette sets, tail fins, Tang, and, most significantly, the suburban ranch house. This infatuation with the brawny, ebullient time following World War II, when America was in love with space travel and clam dip, was not in play when we were house hunting twenty years ago.

I was pregnant and therefore in the thrall of intractable cravings for salty food and real estate. Two seconds after the stick turned pink, the walls of our once cozy eight-hundred-square-foot bungalow began closing in on me. Far worse, the formerly charming elementary school down the street morphed into a scene out of *Deliverance*. The second I imagined my offspring enrolled there, all the children devolved into six-fingered throwbacks picking head lice off one another. Desperate to save my only begotten from marrying his cousin, I hit the Multiple Listing Service with a vengeance.

Fortunately, my mental implosion coincided with the late-eighties collapse of the Austin real estate market. This allowed a couple of sorry subprimers like us to obey the realtor’s credo—“Worst House, Best Neighborhood”—and weasel our way into a topflight school district. The house itself, a suburban Ranchburger of dun-colored brick, was almost beside the point. Two distinguishing features barely saved her low-slung anonymity from total invisibility: She had been built by a Melville scholar who’d equipped her with nearly 150 linear feet of built-in bookshelves, and she was in our price range (i.e., insanely cheap). This helped us ignore the gold-flecked Formica counters,



Ranch Blessing

Over time, our house went from bleak to chic, from slipshod to mid-mod—and became everything we ever wanted.

the ancient venetian blinds, and the Sputnik-inspired light fixtures.

Once our son was born and the house hormones had flushed out of my system, I realized that I should have been paying a lot more attention to potty training than TAAS scores, since he was five years away from having to worry about schools of any quality. I also noticed that I had exiled us to the kind of neighborhood that looked as if it had been hit by one of those bombs that kill the people but leave property values intact. The only humans I ever saw were operating leaf blowers. This was in vivid contrast to Bungalow Land, where we always knew when the bars had closed from the sounds of alfresco fighting and retching.

On our first night in Ranchburger, I discovered that, even with all the *I Love Lucy*-era venetian blinds shut tight, our house still glowed like a | **CONTINUED ON PAGE xxx**

DESIGN OF THE TIMES: All those ancient architectural elements are no longer signs of neglect.

bad nuclear rod. I turned to El Hubbo and asked, “What’s that?”

“I don’t know. The midnight sun?”

We peeked out. Crime lights blazed from tall poles beside our nervous neighbors’ houses, lighting the block up like a prison yard. (This in spite of the fact that the only crime that ever occurred on the street was when our Clinton, then Gore, then Kerry signs got stolen.)

Ranchburger came to seem like a mistake. Behind her back, we started to see other houses. It’s not as if we didn’t try to make it work; we ripped up the speckled linoleum and put down tile the exact color of the fawns that capered through our yard. We battered down a wall and the galley kitchen—named for the galley slaves who’d died in similar cramped conditions—opened into a space large enough for a counter that a grown man could lie down and make snow angels on. The paint we slapped up was always in the neutral tones that realtors advise for maximum resale value, and the tile we covered the mammoth counter with came from the low end of the spectrum. Still, faithful Ranchburger never complained or even asked us to go into counseling with her.

Gradually, though, something changed. As the original owners on our block left, they were replaced by groovy young couples: de-

signers, architects, music producers. Stylish individuals who had been to Italy, they immediately ripped out the déclassé Saint Augustine and replaced it with the sorts of grasses and ground covers that my old neighbors would have treated with Round-up. They painted the brick siding of their ranch houses goulash brown and Army-jeep-olive drab with kicky splashes of battleship gray. They chipped out Saltillo tile, stained and buffed the exposed concrete floors, threw in fiberglass and vinyl furniture, and invited us over for a highball. If only they’d added a Ping-Pong table and a meat freezer, they would have duplicated exactly the look my mother was going for with our garage when I was in high school. At any moment, I expected them to import a hi-fi, some swag lamps, and Chex Mix and have Hugh Hefner’s ultimate, cool daddy-o bachelor pad.

Overnight, property values began to skyrocket. Realtors specializing in mid-mod asked if we were interested in selling. Secret suitors were eyeing Ranchburger? Like the straying husband who finds out that the little missus is getting some on the side, I took a whole new look at our domicile. For the first time, I saw that Ranchburger, asking nothing in return, had given us everything. I needed not to feel trapped in a suburban neighbor-

hood, and she gave us patio doors across the entire back side of the house that faced a greenbelt where squirrels, raccoons, armadillos, foxes, doves, blue jays, cardinals, waxwings, owls, and whip-poor-wills cavorted among cedars fuzzy with shaggy bark and towering live oaks twisted into exquisite bonsai shapes. Our son and his friends needed a house that wasn’t cherished, that they could colonize and slosh Big Red on, and Ranchburger offered herself without reservation. My husband needed never to eat a weed, and Ranchburger supplied an untendable thicket of scrub oak and herds of deer that would have gobbled AstroTurf.

Most of all, we needed to be lazy slobs, and Ranchburger has ended up enabling that too. All those Sputnik-inspired light fixtures and ancient venetian blinds—the stuff we were too out of it to update? They’re no longer signs of neglect. They’ve been transformed into highly sought-after “original architectural elements.” Magically, we’re no longer slipshod. We’re mid-mod!

Since we owe it all to you, Ranchburger, let me put it in terms you’ll understand: You’re a real gone chick, and we dig you the most. 🍷

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A podcast of Sarah Bird reading her column.