

## MID-CENTURY-STYLE HOMES

# Who the developer shines in Lone Star State

A development of smaller houses with 1950s designs with 1950s designs is proving popular in — of all places — Dallas. When will Ontario see something similar?



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It's almost as if real estate developer Matt Holley read this column on Feb. 11 — headlined "Why aren't small, stylish houses being built?" — and decided to turn my little fantasy into reality — down in Dallas.

Kessler Woods is the first of Mr. Holley's projects as a developer and the first in Dallas to advertise itself as a neighbourhood of "mid-century-style" homes with "state-of-the-art technology and design." And the project is exactly what I chided in a column in the Greater Toronto Area to offer up in my open letter that day.

It was it was serendipity that brought him to his current venture, not Globe Real Estate. About three years ago, the now 41-year-old Mr. Holley woke up with an ulcer and decided a career change was in order. Shortly after, he bought a beautiful piece of rolling property in an already established, high-end neighbourhood complete with mature trees, a creek and a spectacular view of Dallas's skyline across the Trinity River. Then, while mulling over just what to do with it, he visited a friend who just happened to be in the process of restoring a large, architect-designed, 1950s-era home.

"I became really intrigued by it," he told me on the phone. "I had always lived in very traditional homes, and was just blown away by the feel of this mid-century home."

Needless to say, after securing a few like-minded architects, Kessler Woods came to life.

"I know what you're thinking: Dallas is not Toronto. It's warm, south and west, and they're already tuned in to that sort of architecture."

But Mr. Holley hopes to differ: he thinks Dallas and Toronto have much in common. They're both not geographically and flat in their thinking when it comes to new-home design.



Developer Matt Holley's Kessler Woods features clean-lined homes, such as the ones above and below, that range from 1,800 to 4,200 square feet in size. Unlike monster homes, they complement the landscape rather than dominate it.



KESSLER WOODS

In Dallas, they're known as McMansions (would you call a condo yard with that?), and here we call them monster homes, but they're one and the same. "I kinda get a toothache, they're just so ornate and busy," he jokes.

"It's cyclical and people are cycling out of that, and there's an interest in a simpler, more sophisticated kind of design that's about indoor and outdoor spaces and warmth, which is why mid-century is appealing."

At first, financing was a problem

since bankers are a conservative lot and it was impossible to "post to another project like it," he explains. In a state where bigger is better, Mr. Holley was proposing small, clean-lined homes ranging from 1,800 to 4,200 square feet with generous yards.

Clad in wood and stone, with plenty of glass, and painted in earth tones, they'd complement the landscape rather than dominate it. To alienate the project further, advertising would blatantly tout it as the marriage of mid-20th-



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century aesthetics (a la Frank Lloyd Wright and Joseph Eichler) with the technology of the 21st.

The solution was to conduct what he calls "road shows" to the site, bringing representatives from six different financial firms to his outdoor classroom. Lesson one: Modernist architecture works well on hilly, problematic sites. Lesson two: the target demographic of Kessler Woods is the young professional, an altogether different market than "the typical Dallas family looking for the McMansion with a

huge game room, six bedrooms and a big yard for three dogs and five kids." Lesson three: Research bears out the project. Retro design is hot.

It worked — he got offers to finance his neighbourhood from all six. Even better, he's been proven right, as everyone who's purchased thus far are professionals who range in age from 31 to 45 and have few or no children. Less than a year into construction, Kessler Woods has expanded from its original 13 homes to 30, with prices averaging

around a very affordable \$250 (U.S.) a square foot.

But could it work here? "I think there's a market for this all over," Mr. Holley answers. "You look at high-rise design. It's all of this modern thinking in terms of the layout and the light and the finish — when builders or developers like myself can bring that into single-family home construction, it's opening up a whole new market."

"I think it's a bit edgy and a bit bold, but it's not going to be viewed like that in the next few years," he continues. "Once you see projects like mine be successful, then I think a lot of builders are going to jump in."

Already there are two copycat neighbourhoods in Dallas, and it won't be long before the idea spreads even further. Like the Southren Ontario, perhaps?

If it does, I certainly won't say I told you so... that would be rude.

For more information, visit [www.kesslerwoods.com](http://www.kesslerwoods.com).

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