

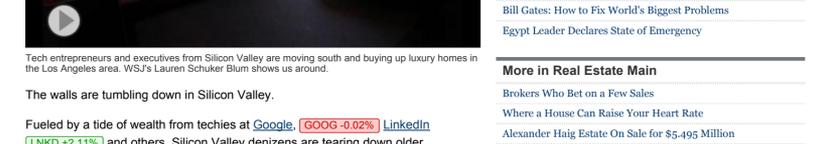
# Silicon Valley Reboots

As a new generation of techies moves up, ranch houses are coming down. Replacing them: contemporary homes of glass, stone and steel

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By **PUI-WING TAM** and **NANCY KEATES**

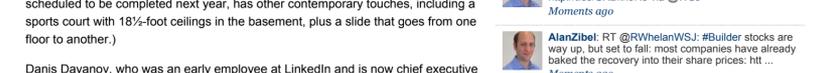


Tech entrepreneurs and executives from Silicon Valley are moving south and buying up luxury homes in the Los Angeles area. WSJ's Lauren Schuker Blum shows us around.

The walls are tumbling down in Silicon Valley.

Fueled by a tide of wealth from techies at [Google](#), [GOOG -0.02%](#) | [LinkedIn](#) [LNKD +2.11%](#) and others, Silicon Valley denizens are tearing down older properties and constructing new multimillion-dollar homes. But instead of copying the Craftsman, Mediterranean or other traditional styles that were the rage among the digerati last decade, many are trying something different: modern-contemporary architecture.

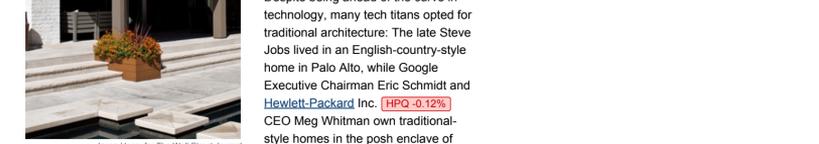
**Photos: Modern Homes in Silicon Valley**



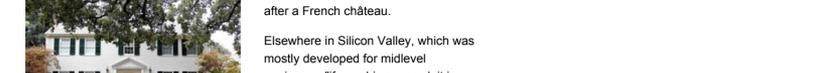
Jeff Aalfs, 43, remodeled and added to a 1,600-square-foot cottage to create this 3,100-square-foot home in Portola Valley, Calif.

scheduled to be completed next year, has other contemporary touches, including a sports court with 18½-foot ceilings in the basement, plus a slide that goes from one floor to another.)

Danis Dayanan, who was an early employee at LinkedIn and is now chief executive of start-up Talktone, plans to break ground next spring on a five-bedroom, 5,000-square-foot modern-style home in Los Altos Hills, Calif., which cost over \$2.1 million for the land and the tear-down. And venture capitalist Jeff Clavier of SoftTech VC earlier this year moved into a minimalist wood-and-glass home in Palo Alto.



THE NEW: Google's Jim Miller and his wife, Leslie, tore down an older house and built a modern home in San Jose, Calif.



THE OLD: Hewlett-Packard chief Meg Whitman has a traditional-style home in nearby Atherton.

Elsewhere in Silicon Valley, which was mostly developed for middle-level engineers, "if you drive around, it is ranch house after ranch house after ranch house," says Bob Swatt, a high-end modern architect based in Emeryville, Calif.

Modern-style homes have been out of favor in Silicon Valley for about half a century, architects and builders say. In the 1950s and 1960s, modern homes went up in towns like Palo Alto and Menlo Park, developed by Joseph Eichler. The midcentury moderns, called "Eichlers," have interiors with high ceilings, simple lines and wide expanses of glass.

But between then and now, modern-style homes were few and far between. James Witt, a Palo Alto developer who has constructed around 60 high-end houses over the past three decades, created a modern-style angular home in 1985—but it sat unsold for weeks, even though his traditional-style properties were typically snapped up before they were completed.

Modern "wasn't accepted," recalls Mr. Witt, who was so bruised by the experience that he didn't attempt another contemporary-style home until

Other attempts to go modern were beaten back by preservationists. Apple co-founder Mr. Jobs's plans to tear down a historic Spanish Colonial Revival home in Woodside and rebuild a modern home were snarled for years after preservationists objected to any wrecking ball. The historic home was eventually demolished, but no new building plans are on file with the city, says Woodside Town Manager Kevin Bryant.

Now, however, a confluence of demographics, aging housing stock and—of course—new technology is driving a shift. Many Silicon Valley homes built after World War II are nearing the end of their natural lives. The homes were "not well-built or insulated and they don't meet the space and quality demands of today," says architect Mr. Swatt. That is spurring many homeowners to tear down instead of remodel, clearing the way for new architecture styles.

At the same time, a younger generation of techies is flooding Silicon Valley. Often in their 20s and 30s, the group is embracing a spare, clean look influenced by the home page of Google's search engine and the minimalist aesthetic of Apple gadgets.

"I'm a fan of straight lines—it's as simple as that," says Sanjukta Mathur, a 27-year-old Google software engineer who with her husband purchased a 3,200-square-foot contemporary-style home in Palo Alto for \$2.8 million last year. Her husband, Gaurav Mathur, a 30-year-old who founded a start-up now owned by Google, adds: "We grew up in the modern age and like contemporary."



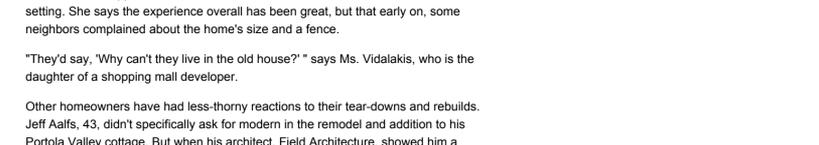
James Doty's house in Mountain View.

Beyond techies, other Silicon Valley professionals are also turning to contemporary-style residences. Steve Simpson, a local architect who designs both traditional and modern homes, says his business has flipped over the last five years to become dominated by clients—including finance executives and doctors—asking for modern styles.

"Before, 70% wanted traditional styles and 30% asked about modern, but now it's 60% who want modern and 40% traditional," Mr. Simpson says.

It isn't only residential properties that are going modern. Apple is building a new corporate campus in Cupertino which has been dubbed iSpaceship by some for its futuristic design. When Mr. Jobs unveiled the plans for the campus last year before his death, he boasted there would not be "a single straight piece of glass in the building" and that architecture students would come to see the spectacle. This August, Facebook announced it is working with modernist architect Frank Gehry on a new section of its headquarters.

The trend of Silicon Valley tear-downs leading to modern homes has gathered steam since 2010. In Atherton, which has only about 2,500 homes, city data show that demolition permits rose to 56 last year from 29 in 2009. Thirty new residences were completed last year, up from 11 in 2009. Officials in towns such as Woodside, Palo Alto and Los Altos say they see similar trends.



Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

The Millers with son Beck in San Jose.

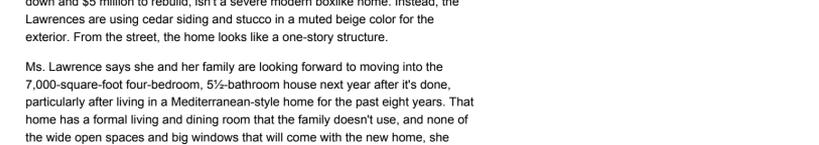
climbing again.

"Homes are getting 15 deEs each just to be torn down, with many bids \$400,000 over asking," says Ken DeLeon, a Palo Alto broker. In terms of styles, he adds, "Mediterranean homes are now very out, and contemporary overall is in."

Nicole Vidalakis, a 42-year-old psychologist, is building a 7,000-square-foot, \$15 million modern house with a 75-foot-long infinity swimming pool in Portola Valley that is 73% glass and is set to be finished next year. Her goal was a piece of art that reflected her love of modern architecture, something that "looks like a house of art that someone happens to live in." But at the same time, she wanted to be in a rural setting. She says the experience overall has been great, but that early on, some neighbors complained about the home's size and a fence.

"They'd say, 'Why can't they live in the old house?'" says Ms. Vidalakis, who is the daughter of a shopping mall developer.

Other homeowners have had less-thorny reactions to their tear-downs and rebuilds. Jeff Aalfs, 43, didn't specifically ask for modern in the remodel and addition to his Portola Valley cottage. But when his architect, Field Architecture, showed him a very contemporary plan that would add 1,500 square feet by cascading the house down a hill, ending at the bottom with a family room with 17-foot ceilings, he loved the way it looked. After it was finished, he was appointed to the Architectural & Site Control Commission, in Portola Valley, where he says about half the new homes in the town are modern-contemporary.



The exterior of the Aalfs home.

Mr. Aalfs adds that when people have trouble with a project, it is almost always because of the size and placement of a house on a lot, and not about the style and design. Modern homes tend to draw more complaints because they have so much glass that people worry about what they call "light pollution"—neighbors being affected by all the light coming from the homes.

James Doty, 56, a Stanford University neurosurgeon and occasional entrepreneur, moved into a \$5 million-plus four-bedroom modern home three months ago in Los Altos Hills after knocking down a ranch-style home on the lot. While the new home—with a metal roof and an exterior of Venetian plaster stucco, glass and stone—took 18 months to build, the neighbors were "supportive," he says.

With so many neighbors in their 70s, "this area is just about to start undergoing a transition to new homes," he adds. Down the street, another modern home is under construction, says Mr. Doty.

There are so many new modern homes in the area that some people worry about being accused of imitating their neighbors. Diana Desbard, a 50-year-old designer who works on commercial building projects for tech companies including Google and Facebook, and her husband, Michel Desbard, a venture capitalist, are building a 2,800-square-foot modern home in downtown Palo Alto that's adjacent to a modern home designed by the same firm, Joseph Bellomo Architects. Though both homes will have a tubular steel frame and a flat roof, she was careful to make sure there were enough differences from the house next door—she opted for thermal-plastic siding and a beige concrete exterior, while her neighbor's exterior is wood—so "it wouldn't be a copycat," she says.

Cenni Lawrence, the wife of Google executive Steve Lawrence, says their new modern home could have been a cause of concern for neighbors because the couple tore down the existing ranch-style home and dug a 20-foot hole in the ground to accommodate the basement sports court. But after fielding questions about what the hole would turn into, most neighbors appeared satisfied, she says.

It helps that the house, which Ms. Lawrence says cost \$2 million to buy and tear down and \$5 million to rebuild, isn't a severe modern boxlike home. Instead, the Lawrences are using cedar siding and stucco in a muted beige color for the exterior. From the street, the home looks like a one-story structure.

Ms. Lawrence says she and her family are looking forward to moving into the 7,000-square-foot four-bedroom, 5½-bathroom house next year after it's done, particularly after living in a Mediterranean-style home for the past eight years. That home has a formal living and dining room that the family doesn't use, and none of the wide open spaces and big windows that will come with the new home, she says.

"It didn't match our lifestyle," she says. "We like things very simple and clean and not fussy."

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**\$4.5 Million**

**848 Southampton Dr., Palo Alto, Calif.**

This 4,700-square-foot, five-bedroom home on a 8,079-square-foot lot is a contemporary designed by Maydan Architects in 2008. It has walls of glass, white interiors and a modern kitchen.

*Listing Agent: Jennifer M. Buenrostro, Alain Pinel Realtors*

**\$1.6 Million**

**2461 Ramona St., Palo Alto, Calif.**

The three-bedroom single-story home is typical of the ranch-style homes that dot Silicon Valley. The 1,885-square-foot house is in the Midtown section of Palo Alto and has been remodeled.

*Listing agent: Erika Enos, Keller Williams Realty*

**\$3 Million**

**869 Seale Ave., Palo Alto, Calif.**

This four-year-old home was custom built in a modern Craftsman style, with five bedrooms. The 2,677-square-foot home in the Leland Manor neighborhood of Palo Alto has an open-concept layout.

*Listing agent: Ken DeLeon, DeLeon Realty*

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