

Once scorned, Doelger homes now prized for their midcentury design

Sturdy, iconic houses of western S.F., Daly City sought by collectors, as well as value-seeking homebuyers

By Larry Rosen
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Native-born San Franciscan, Henry Doelger quit school in the eighth grade, then sold bathtub gin and tamales from a stand outside Golden Gate Park. In 1927, at the age of 31, he scraped up enough money to build a few houses on the 1400 block of 39th Avenue, on what was then sand dunes stretching out to the ocean.

By the time he died, in 1978, Doelger had built more than 80,000 homes in San Francisco and Daly City. With his vision, Doelger reinvented the American suburb.

Doelger homes sit almost unnoticed in San Francisco's Sunset district, maybe because of their ubiquity. "A Doelger is the epitome of the 'normal' Sunset home," says Zuba Muzichenko, an agent with Zephyr Real Estate and owner of a Sunset Doelger home. "I'm pretty familiar with Doelgers, but even I often can't recognize whether a home is a Doelger or a knock-off."

Beginning in the late 1920s, Doelger built in an area bordered by 27th and 89th avenues to the east and west, and Kirkham and Ortega

streets to the north and south. Doelger, along with the Gellert Brothers' Standard Building Company, built most of the Sunset. Unlike later Doelger neighborhoods in Daly City, "Doelger City" does not stand out architecturally.

"Doelgers in the Sunset are simple, more of a blank canvas," Muzichenko says. "Few homebuyers try to keep a Doelger in its original condition. I have to say that more people today actually recognize a Doelger-style home than ever before," she adds, "but they're mostly Sunset and Parkside residents getting in touch with the area's history."

Doelgers are attractive, she says, for simple reasons: they are sturdy — Doelger framed his San Francisco homes with redwood — functional and still offer "a home with a garage and a yard in a safe and family-oriented neighborhood."

"I have a portfolio buyer," says Heather Stoltz, of Prudential California Realty. "He buys [Doelgers] in the Sunset. He rents them out, because he feels the purpose was to rent them out to the working class."

"Doelger City" homes sold for a median price of \$818,000 in 2007, consistent with other homes in the Sunset but somewhat lower than the \$898,000 San Francisco median.

Henry Doelger's biggest dream came to life a few miles south, in Daly City. In 1945, he purchased a huge tract of land from the Spring Valley Water Company. Here he created Westlake: 6,500 homes, 8,000 apartments, plus schools, parks, offices, shopping and restaurants.



In 1962, folk singer Malvina Reynolds lampooned Doelger's "city within a city" with her anti-suburbia song "Little Boxes." However, Doelger is getting the last laugh. His Westlake homes have become iconic representations of midcentury design, with a growing following of design-conscious fans.

"Some people are Doelger collectors," Stoltz says. "That's all they'll have. The reason they like them, they tell me, is because [Doelger] had a big vision and he went out and did it."

For many years, Westlake Doelgers mainly drew people looking for value. Like their San Francisco cousins, the Daly City developments are sturdy — built of redwood Doelger milled on-site — and functional, many with three or more bedrooms. Lately, though, Stoltz has noticed a new breed of Doelger enthusiast.

"I'm noticing this kind of hip, young buyer, into a specific design style. They like the furniture from that era [midcentury] as well."

Still, a Westlake Doelger is a good value.

Homes sold in November 2007 averaged \$519 per square foot. Median sales price for the same month was \$687,000, compared with \$628,890 for all of Daly City and the above-mentioned \$898,000 in San Francisco. At present, there are seven Westlake Doelgers on the market for more than \$800,000.

Stoltz points out that many of the Westlake sellers are original owners, their homes blank canvases for new buyers wishing to continue the tradition of upgrading the homes or restore them to their post-war glory. "The one I'm selling [at 89 Fieldcrest Drive] is original," Stoltz says. "They bought it from plans in 1950."

"It seems that the people who've owned for 40 or 50 years aren't budging on price," she adds. "First, because [the houses] are Doelgers, and second, because they created the neighborhood. They'd rather not sell."

That last point would sit well with Doelger, whose goal all along was to create a tight-knit community in Daly City.

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Top left, Doelger's utilitarian designs are a common sight in the Sunset district. Above and bottom left, almost 60 years later, Henry Doelger's vision for Westlake has become iconic. —All: Mike Kozminski/Special to The Examiner