

Sam's North Boulder Home, 2006-2011

Reflections, 2024



For a few years I lived on a three-acre country estate style property in Niwot, attempting to realize dreams of building an international community of artists, especially dancers and musicians. Beginning in 1997, for several years ending with the tragedy of 9-11 in 2021, I sponsored visas for more than two dozen artists from Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. For a few years 1997 to 2006 that huge house was residence for many guests and several international artists. It was fun and exciting. I built a huge room as a dance studio and performance venue. Being in the country with no neighbors to disturb we had dance parties with live bands, and it was a location where we filmed instructional videos and taught private lessons.

By 2006 the southside location of our Boulder dance studio seemed cramped and old and I decided that I'd try a different style of life. In that year I purchased a space in a new developing commercial area in North Boulder that integrated business with residence. I decided that to live the principle I should also take residence in North Boulder as near the new studio as possible. Then I could walk to my studio, take the bus to teach at CU, and support the vision of the integration of work and living. Of course, over the next six years that turned out to be a financial disaster and an abject failure of my vision forcing me to abandon that dream in 2011 suffering heavy financial and psychological losses.

Now over a decade later, the endless triggers (a word I hate) that still spark strong negative emotions, something like PTSD, have finally subsided enough that I can pay more attention to my frequent passing thoughts, and regrets, regarding building and having to sell a house in North Boulder. I was 63 when I built the house and the studio. Now I can't quite comprehend why at that age I was

so bold, foolishly bold, as to engage in such high-risk ventures, but then it seems such risk-taking has been a prominent feature of my identity. I loved the excitement of the building and I sought to create a living space that would be, within the limits of a semi-custom home, the result of my ideas and dreams of what such a home should be. I have no idea how I financed all this (I remained teaching at CU until age 76 partly to financially recover from these disasters), but I mostly disregarded budgetary concerns and opted to try to realize my dream as much as possible. I think that the results were close to what I had imagined. Over the years I have frequently remembered that home wishing that I still lived in a space so close to what I think a home should be.

As an exercise in nostalgia (I suppose) I want now to focus on a few photos of the house for reflection, to recall the ideas I had in mind when I created the space and to reflect on them a bit from the perspective gained after more than a decade has passed. I don't expect that what appeals to me should be shared by anyone else. That is, of course, why we all live in different spaces.

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The neighborhood near the studio location that was being built at that time featured large bulky houses that nearly filled the lots. I was not thrilled that one could pretty much lean out of a window and shake hands with a neighbor. I rationalized that it was an efficient use of land and I never enjoyed lawn work anyway. The specific house I chose was a large gray cube, yet with a rather modernistic curving area on the street-facing profile. The deck railings were painted a dark red which I thought gave a bit of relief to the modern industrial feel of the house.

My freedom on shaping the home was limited to the interior finishes and minor adjustments to the interior design. The main change I made to the physical shape was to replace a large area filling much of one wall in the living room for television and entertainment equipment with a corner fireplace and a mantle I designed.



The theory I settled on for selecting colors and fixtures throughout the home was to bring the industrial feel inside with certain material and design choices while modulating the harshness of these materials with rich wood trims and floors and a selection of vibrant colors.

I chose gray concrete countertops for the kitchen and designed heavy but sleek stainless steel stair railings to set the industrial tone. The concrete countertops have the wonderful quality of changing with age, responding to grease and cleanings by developing variations in hue and darker veins enriching the beauty of this material. The dark gray color also tempered my choice of more vivid colors on the walls. The stainless-steel stair rails as well as the long stainless bar door and drawer handles on all the cabinets echoed the industrial feel. I chose gray metal high bar stools to continue this feel. And the kitchen appliances were stainless as well.



To balance the industrial with the natural, I used wood extensively throughout the house. I have never much liked wall-to-wall carpeting. I selected site-finished Brazilian cherry wood flooring throughout the house other than in the bathrooms, where I used ceramic tile. This wood has a tight grain and a medium dark natural color. It is a hard wood not easily damaged. I knew that we would be dancing on all these floors and wanted a wood that would hold up without fear of damage. The cabinets throughout were of a medium light colored (close to natural) American cherry wood. I upgraded the cabinets so the grain would match across the whole cabinet front. I designed the upper wall cabinets as well. Rather than crowding the wall above the range and oven with cabinets, I chose a single stainless vent hood with minimal and open-fronted cabinets to either side. I wanted these cabinets open and backless to display the dishes as well as the wall color. On the wall opposite the range, I designed cabinet doors with opaque glass to hint at the contents while carrying across the wall cabinet design. To continue the American cherry further I purchased a large Shaker style Amish hand-

built dining room table. To minimize the tendency for appliances to overwhelm and to retain the modernist simplicity, I placed the microwave inside the corner pantry.



The boldness of the stainless-steel stair and loft railings was grounded by the cherry wood floors as well as the vibrant colors. I also topped the steel handrail with American cherry wood to continue that design motif. I designed the long horizontal face of the mantle using American cherry wood with a stainless-steel strip running across the middle. This echoes the strong design of the steel railings. The surround trim on the fireplace was stainless.





For the wall colors on the first level I wanted something cool and calming in the living space, so I selected a pale green that, to me, had some gray and blue tones. The boldness of the space called for accent walls in the kitchen and stairwell that would also add the richness of nature and fruit. I chose a darker berry purple color limited only to the kitchen walls, one dining room wall, and two walls in the stairwell. In the kitchen I had bone white dishes on the open shelves which were set off nicely by the berry walls in the backs of the cabinets. Viewing the stairwell from the living room the darker berry walls gave contrasting background to the steel and light cherry wood stair railings.

I chose rich red leather furniture for the living room that was on the small size, knowing that we would be moving them often to use the room as a dance space. I also chose antique wooden tables—one African the other Indian—to give a cultural and artisan element to the space.

Above the island in the kitchen, I placed simple modern clear glass pendants with deep blue interiors. Over the dining table I selected five long clear glass pendants that I hung at different levels to form a spiral.

The small room in the front corner of the first floor, typically used as an office, became a small dance studio. I installed a mirror to fill one wall and equipped the space with a sound system. I taught many private dance lessons in this space and we often rehearsed there.



The upstairs wall colors drew on other complementary primaries: rich bright yellow for the two west bedrooms, deep red for the master bedroom, and medium blue for the master bath. A fireplace with a stainless surround faced both the bedroom and the master bathroom. Of course, pure white ceilings throughout the house gave the feeling of lofty space. The ceiling height in the first level was 9 feet. Eight-foot ceilings were throughout the second level except for the master bedroom which had a high peaked ceiling. An 8-foot-wide covered deck spanned the full south side of the master bedroom with double French doors giving access.



A stainless modern style ceiling fan and a steel framed bed echoed the modernist industrial theme on this floor.



The master bath featured a large jetted soaking tub with added warmth from the fireplace at one end. At the other end was a heavy glass (no metal trim) modern style shower. The blue tile was intended to give the feeling of sky and water, adding again the touch of nature to the house. The toilet room and a large walk-in closet were accessed from the bath.

The two westside yellow bedrooms were joined by a Jack-n-Jill bathroom. I used the north bedroom as my study. The south one I turned into a bedroom for my granddaughter, Fatu, who spent one night a week with me all the years I lived there. That room had a walk-in closet.

The loft area at the immediate top of the stairs was a sitting and television area. It had a small deck facing northeast. Off the hallway leading to the double-door access to the master bedroom, was the laundry room with washer and dryer as well as a sink.



Consistent with my audacity, perhaps better described as unbridled foolishness, I had the builder excavate the back yard to provide an external entrance to the basement. I had the basement finished with two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a full kitchen with large pantry. I had based the affordability of this house on my being able to rent the basement as a two-bedroom apartment. I was able to consistently find renters making my mortgage payment almost within my budget. Were it not for the almost immediate financial failure of my dance studio I might have been okay.

The double car garage was accessible from the alley in the back of the house. I have never liked the look of the gaping garage taking up most of the front of a house.



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In the fall of 2011, I was finally able to sell this house. I had to take a significant loss. By this time my daughter, Jenny, had moved to a new condo in Erie, east of Boulder. With the dance studio an extremely costly failure including allowing that property to go into foreclosure, and with Jenny and her family a 30-minute drive away, I decided to locate near her. In Broomfield I found an area building new townhomes that had a nice design. The one I was able to get had two bedrooms, so Fatu could have her own bedroom. The master bedroom had a lovely fireplace and a sitting area that served nicely for reading and writing. The small room with double doors just inside the front door became my study. I built a dance studio in the basement which we used constantly. The townhome had an attractive kitchen and the small living room that opened to the second floor with the loft overlooking the living room. There was a view of the north back range from the living room and front porch.

While I lived there Jen's family grew and they moved into a big new home in a nearby Broomfield neighborhood called Anthem Highlands. I had noticed that some of the lots in that area had amazing unobstructed back range views, something I coveted. In 2016 I noticed that some of the last lots in

the area, the ones with the best views, were beginning to come on the market. I stopped by the builder's sales office and asked about them, learning that they had just been released. I quickly jumped on the opportunity to build yet another house.

This too was in many ways a seemingly foolish choice. It is a large two story four bedroom, two and a half bath home with a full walkout basement. It has expansive unobstructed views. As a single older man, this large family home seemed the exact opposite of what I should call home. It is however just down the same street as my daughter's house, a 5-minute walk. And, I rationalized, a larger more expensive house with a leveraged investment should create considerable wealth, which it has. Convenient and a good investment. I had the chance to select finishes for the house. I did my best within the builder's narrow limitations and the house is, and I believe many would agree, a beautiful home. I have used the space fully with the rooms all designated effectively. One bedroom remains Fatu's bedroom although I think in the many years I've lived here she's maybe spent only one night in it. One bedroom is for my two younger grand kids. They come over for an evening and sleep over now and then. One bedroom is used as a cozy television viewing room with bookcases covering one entire wall. The upstairs loft (something like 16 x 20 feet) is my study where I spend most of my days. It has unobstructed views of the back range with Longs Peak in the center and the Boulder Flatirons prominent as well.

The main floor has a small formal living room near the entry. At the back of the house is a large space with a sizeable living room area, a huge kitchen with an island as big as a king-sized bed. It has a huge space between the island and the rest of the kitchen where I do daily online Zumba classes. It also has a dining area where my large Amish dining table fits nicely. All but the living rooms on this floor have sight-finished walnut floors. The rest are carpet. The deck, dining room, and living room all have the unobstructed views. The unfinished basement is used as a photo studio.

The endless wall space has served well to display the dozens of framed photographs I have made. My home is something like a photography gallery. I add and replace photos as I continue to make new images.

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It is clear I loved the process of making the North Boulder home and that I was proud of the results. I have often thought of it as my "art house." I often felt I was living in a painting of sorts. Clearly it has been a joy to do a virtual visit to this place and to the person I was when I made it. Having made something of a physical retrospective I now come to more personal reflection. I ask why it has taken a dozen years to finally return, mentally at least, to this house. It seems such a happy place, such a joyful accomplishment. As I've been remembering and reflecting, I've begun to realize how sad and regretful I am that I do not still live in this home. Among the things in my life that I consider achievements that fully express myself and in which I might have engaged something of my potential, this house is among the few. Yet, no one knows it. Few would remember I lived there. I realize that I have long suppressed even thinking about it. Why has it taken a dozen years for me to even allow myself to remember?

Having these stirrings in my subconscious for the last several days I awoke last night with some insight. The phrase that was on my silent midnight lips were those of Dickens, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The storyteller in me wants to write pages and pages explicating how this adage so aptly expresses my experience during the nearly six years I lived in the North Boulder home, but I must discipline myself to a quick survey. It now seems tragic that I have suppressed my memories of "the best of times" because of the pain I experienced as "the worst of times."

Beyond the design of this house as a thrilling creative experience, at the same time I designed the new North Boulder dance studio. That too was thrilling and exciting, with the objective to create a space for music and dancing and joyous living. It was a time when I was dancing and teaching dancing

more than ever. While my teaching was necessitated because of the failing of the business I loved teaching the several salsa classes at various levels every evening. I had a dance partner with whom I was becoming a better dancer including our public performances. I was teaching dancing at CU as well. Jen and I were making dance instructional videos. We had a *rueda de casino* (a style of salsa) performance group that met regularly. Every year we performed at the Boulder Creek festival (14 years in a row I think) and at a few other events. This group rehearsed at my house often. I wrote *Dancing Culture Religion* (2012) during this time, the academic product of my nearly two decades of dancing and teaching dancing. Two years during this time I was selected by the YWCA to be a “professional dancer” for their annual fundraisers. I was paired with a local non-dancer with whom I prepared a performance piece for their big show. Votes for dances were dollars for the charity. All the rehearsals for these shows were done in my house.

Fatu, my granddaughter, born in 2003, spent one night a week with me all the time I lived in this house. We had glorious times together and I took her to school the mornings after our time together. My times with her are some of my favorite memories in this house. Jen, my daughter, ran the business with me. We taught classes together, choreographed dances together, and made instructional videos.

I had several romantic relationships during this time and some good times were associated with them. With one of these women, we hosted a free salsa night in Longmont a couple times a month that was well attended and included whole Hispanic families from kids through grandmas. With a couple of these women, I travelled on vacation to Mexico. With one I regularly went out to eat and to frequently spend happy hours in bars in good conversation while drinking wine and munching on appetizers. I remember this experience as novel in that it made me feel like a “real adult.” Dancing was central to all these relationships, with many a night dancing at the various dance venues available at that time.

In such a short period of time—less than six years—it seems remarkable that I had so many wonderful times, so many engaging relationships, such a diversity of activity, and such a period of personal growth and realization and creativity.

How could this time possibly be at once “the worst of times”?

The City of Boulder attempted to shut down our new dance studio the day we opened due to a neighbor’s noise complaint. While we struggled to continue much of our teaching schedule—all things African which was much of our schedule—had to be eliminated. I continued teaching salsa constantly to pay the bills, yet the city continued to threaten us. They took us to court, and it was clear that we would not survive. While there were contractual grounds to fight the city, those without money for legal costs are not equal under the law. Closing the business I attempted to sell the space. It was impossible because the complaining neighbor contacted every prospective buyer and threatened them. I eventually had to let the mortgage foreclose. I lost the \$80 K in the buildout, the down payment, and had to come up with \$50 K just to get the mortgage company to settle the foreclosure. I paid attorney’s fees on top of that. Oddly, most of those people in the African community that taught for us and for whom I had sponsored visas as well as the many students that took their classes, simply went on to other situations and I never even heard from most of them again. We are not equal under the law. We are not supported by the city administration even when trying to contribute art and culture to the community. Those we think of as our friends and associates probably are so only when convenient for them.

I had started teaching religion in 1983 with a group of colleagues who had ambitions and plans for the future of the academic study of religion. We worked together to build a department that would reflect these values and to contribute nationally to our vision. It was during the time I lived in North Boulder that the character of the faculty changed as well as that of the university, at least from my perspective. While I loved teaching, I became increasingly disenchanted with all of my faculty colleagues and with the shift in the university’s understanding of its mission. During this time my

colleagues regularly marginalized me in any way possible. It was not a fun place to be and during this period I increasingly distanced myself from the faculty while emphasizing my teaching.

While the several romantic relationships I had during this brief period had positive and joyous aspects to them, they all were fraught with tension and ended in my sadness and regret. I think that the failure and disappointment of these relationships led me to the point of feeling that the effort and pain of trying to have a romantic relationship was simply not worth it. By that time, in my late 60s, I think I faced the reality that a successful romantic relationship was not going to happen.

My dad died in 2007 at age 92. With both my parents dead I experienced a stark and depressing reality. The sense that one's parents are always there for you, even if in practicality they are not, ends with their death. The result of my dad's death (my mom had died years earlier) was my experience of a kind of aloneness I had not known before. My dad, even in his advanced age, was one I called regularly and could tell him anything. He didn't give advice. He simply listened and affirmed me by doing so. I clearly recall standing at my dining table, tears streaming down my face, talking to him on the phone on the morning of the day he knew he was dying. A bittersweet, yet treasured, memory I have of that house.

Then, of course, my enormous financial loss in the dance studio made it financially impossible to continue to stay in my home. I was forced to sell it at a considerable financial loss. Only now am I realizing that it was an even greater personal loss to my vitality, to my sense of life.

Now, a dozen years on, I finally have the numbing distance to return to those North Boulder years. What I've discovered by doing so is considerable surprise that so much happened during such a short period in my life, really great things as well as some tragically and emotionally horrible ones. I'm rather shocked and disturbed that the accumulated impact of my experience of that North Boulder period had the effect of suppressing important aspects of who I was/am. The trauma of the "worst of times" caused me to distance myself in unhealthy ways from life itself from which I'll never recover. I am now able to remember how wonderful were that house and the "best of times" I had there that expressed a certain creativity in me that I think no one knows. I desperately wish I still lived in that house and that I was still living the active dancing and teaching and social life I so loved.

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