

## Ranch Houses Are Not All the Same

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### Introduction

With nearly constant rumbling and clattering sounds of construction, much of American suburbia was transformed during the bustling postwar period. Vast acres of land were subdivided for a multitude of new housing tracts. Their varied patterns of streets, yards, and detached single-family houses rapidly changed the appearance of the semi-rural and rural landscape beyond most downtown areas. Residential building for much of the period between 1945 and 1970 was characterized by a competitive sales market for such “tract” houses, since the demand for affordable housing remained relatively steady and public and private financing was offered at reasonable rates.<sup>1</sup> By far the most predominant design, especially in California, was the one-story ranch house and the informal way of living that it sought to project.

Tracing its architectural heritage from adobes and wood-frame-and-sheathed ranch buildings built during the more rugged nineteenth century, the postwar California ranch house quickly attained national appeal, just as the bungalow had previously. An observation made in the late 1950s by the cultural historian Russell Lynes suggests why the ranch house appeared so popular: “Nobody could mind it. It was not experimental enough to be considered ‘ugly’ by even the most conservative, and it was not tricked-up enough to be considered ‘ugly’ by the experimental. It was merely ‘nice.’ It was ‘unobjectionable.’ It was ‘homey,’ and it was said to be ‘practical.’”<sup>2</sup>

The rather benign character of a ranch house also led to other comments at the time, many of a more critical nature. For example, the architectural historian and preservationist James Marston Fitch apparently felt uncomfortable with its sweeping popularity when he wrote: “... there was at first, a tendency to dismiss it as too exotic: ‘It’s all right for California but it wouldn’t work here.’ Now we are at the other extreme-- building ‘California-type ranch houses’ in every state of the Union regardless of their fitness to the site and the climate.”<sup>3</sup>

Even the name itself has been broadly identified over the years. Ranch-style, ranch bungalow, ranchette, rambler, California colonial, and less than flattering names like ranch burger are just a sampling. Whether embraced or ridiculed, the immense number of ranch houses built in California and elsewhere clearly conveys a widespread popularity after the Second World War. While the expected context for a ranch house was its snug appearance on a landscaped parcel in the suburbs, the ranch house was portrayed in other ways, too, such as a child’s playhouse or doll house, as the setting for advertisements or for the entertainment industry, or as a popular icon in the museum and collector’s world of 1960s painting.

Today the ranch house is less popular than it was in the postwar years. In fact, reactions of increased disdain have become somewhat predictable. A couple of general factors help explain why such views have been expressed: first, it is essentially out-of-fashion except for a small contingent of admirers; and second, some studies tend to perceive the ranch house as being representative of a socially less enlightened period in our history.<sup>4</sup> Yet throughout the twentieth century, the ranch house has been like a chameleon, adaptable to almost any condition of design, materials, and method of construction, while still maintaining its low horizontal scale and recognizable image.

### General Characteristics and Overview

In defining the characteristics of a ranch house, it is not surprising that *Sunset Magazine* took the lead since it has been the long-established voice of western living. Following much coverage of the modern ranch house and its predecessors in the magazine prior to the Second World War, *Sunset Magazine* subsequently published its first of two books on the topic in 1946, titled *Western Ranch Houses*.<sup>5</sup> It was assembled as an architectural pattern book, with an emphasis on illustrations, photographs, and a selective amount of text. The examples were primarily designed before the war by prominent California architects like Cliff May of Los Angeles and the San Francisco architect William W. Wurster (Wurster, Bernardi, and Emmons).<sup>6</sup> May,

who was the collaborative author with the magazine's editorial staff, continued throughout his life to be the figure most closely associated with the ranch house, in part because of his close association with *Sunset Magazine*.<sup>7</sup> The book was among many publications at the time that promoted the ranch house as suitable for postwar housing.

Western Ranch Houses stressed three basic concepts about the ranch house rather than discussing its style: livability, flexibility, and an unpretentious character. Coupled with the importance of using climate as an element of design, these concepts were applied to conditions of the site and orientation of the house. Outdoor living areas extending beyond the house on the same level were also emphasized, so that interior space merged with the exterior, separated merely by large areas of glass and sliding glass doors. Other typical characteristics included a linear arrangement of rooms, elevations composed asymmetrically, and a telescopic effect of low wings spreading out from the rectangular core of the plan. And additions and alterations to a ranch house were foreseeable since they were part of its architectural tradition.

By the 1950s, the ranch house had become the predominant choice for detached, single-family residences; a position it held well into the 1960s. Seemingly its range of imagery, informal plans, and inclusion of the latest household equipment satisfied contemporary preferences and requirements. Such owner satisfaction was especially true of the work of Cliff May. His design for the Robert Power residence (1962-1963) in the coastal city of Camarillo, north of Los Angeles, illustrates how traditional and modern architectural elements were skillfully combined to create a design that recalls the past instead of simply replicating it. By using post-and-beam construction and an open floor plan, generous amounts of light and space are captured under a low-pitched gable roof.<sup>8</sup> Works by other practitioners like Wurster, Bernardi, and Emmons often achieved similar results. The firm's Williams residence (1956) was designed as a light-filled, airy ranch house set in the rural hills of Portola Valley, near San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> Similar in design to these California examples, the Albert Goldmon residence (1957; Goldmon and Rolfe, architects) in Houston, Texas, also illustrates the visual effect of setting a ranch house comfortably low on its site.

Even though the widespread popularity of single-family ranch houses peaked by the late 1960s, examples are still built in California today, primarily at new subdivisions where the style is offered among a selection of period revival houses. In addition, the growing demand for condominiums and retirement housing since the 1970s has led to the construction of multifamily complexes of ranch houses, adding to their ever-increasing number.

### Historical Development

The essential ingredient of a traditional nineteenth century adobe (often called a ranch house) was its informality of design and functional relationship to the outdoors. A single-story adobe was typically constructed with one or more long porches (corredors), which provided covered external circulation between the rooms in lieu of hallways. It also served as a transitional layer of living space between the exterior and interior of the building, and it was oriented toward a private courtyard. Since the late nineteenth century, subsequent interpretations of this architectural element have repeatedly influenced a romantic image of California architecture and its relationship to the environment.

Writers and architects among others began to recognize the cultural value of California adobes in the late nineteenth century, simultaneous to their fascination with the buildings of the Franciscan missions. Similar to activity elsewhere in the country, architects in California visited and sketched the region's architectural past as a means of finding inspiration for new design.<sup>10</sup> This interest continued to develop in the twentieth century; initially apparent in the work of many Arts and Crafts practitioners who recognized the utility and simplicity of traditional ranch houses and the informal character of design that they provided. Architects like the Pasadena-based Charles and Henry Greene designed some of their wood-frame Craftsman bungalows as low single-story houses oriented around two or three sides of a commodious landscaped courtyard.<sup>11</sup> The residence they designed for Arturo Bandini (1903; no longer extant) in Pasadena was conceived specifically to recall qualities of a California adobe. Other architects and builders designed comparable low-cost versions of ranch houses, which were meant for mass distribution through building companies, plan services, and pattern books.<sup>12</sup>

The ranch house continued to broaden in form and characteristics during the 1920s and 1930s, when period revival architecture in California embraced Mediterranean and Hispanic architectural traditions, and the

tradition of its American colonial past. Adding to this mix of imagery, the influence of modern architecture on the design of ranch houses became more apparent by the late 1930s and continued thereafter. Throughout these decades, such changes were motivated by the sense that ranch houses should be up-to-date in terms of design and function; meanwhile, apparent connections to the past gradually decreased.

During the Depression, home ownership programs sponsored by the federal government and various organizations frequently promoted the ranch house as an appropriate design for low-cost housing in California and the West. For one of its projects in the area of Los Angeles, the U.S. Farm Security Administration (FSA) constructed, in 1935, a group of ranch houses on a tract of subsistence homesteads, which was laid out to respect the existing character of a former walnut grove. The architect Joseph Weston designed four different houses based on the number of bedrooms, each type having multiple plans and elevations to ensure variation for the entire development.<sup>13</sup>

In comparison to this effort by the FSA, some contemporaneous, privately developed subdivisions in Los Angeles consisted of larger ranch houses built on small estate-like parcels that were promoted to middle-class buyers. Rolling Hills (1934 and later; A.E. Hanson, developer/landscape architect) on the Palos Verdes peninsula and Riviera Ranch (1939 and later; Cliff May, architect/builder) in West Los Angeles were among the more prominent examples that were constructed.<sup>14</sup> The promotion of each subdivision emphasized the connection to its respective historical land grant made in the nineteenth century, along with the pleasures of the semi-rural landscape and outdoor recreational activities like horseback riding. The proximity of their locations to office and commercial developments was pointed out as well. Stables, paddocks, motor courts, and multicar garages were all carefully designed as integral components of the typically sprawling, suburban residences.

When the federal government imposed limitations on building materials during the Second World War, new housing construction throughout the country was restricted to projects for defense workers. In California where employment opportunities in the aircraft and shipbuilding industries attracted masses of people, defense housing tracts were often constructed with ranch houses, albeit minimal in character. Noted examples like San Lorenzo Village (1944 and later; David D. Bohannon, developer/ builder), located south of Oakland, took the basic features of a ranch house and achieved variation through the different orientation of plans, treatment of elevations, and selection of materials. Construction of the project was well organized, taking advantage of precut lumber and staging areas at the site to ensure timely completion and cost efficiency.<sup>15</sup> While the standardization that resulted from such examples was a necessity at the time, this approach to design and construction remained viable and practical for tract developments after the war as well. However, this approach also contributed to criticism of ranch houses, both at the time and subsequently.

The wartime limits on construction caused many American architects, designers, and builders to focus their attention instead on predictions about the design of houses for the postwar period. Discussions about appearance, materials, construction techniques, and furnishings were frequently included in the programs and publications of the American Institute of Architects and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), founded in 1942 in Washington, D.C. In addition, books such as Elizabeth B. Mock's *If You Want to Build a House* (New York, 1946), published by the Museum of Modern Art, and the complete guide for *Tomorrow's House* (New York, 1945) by George Nelson and Henry Wright were among numerous publications that were available at a modest cost. And broad coverage of the topic in professional and popular periodicals was also nearly continuous.

In terms of the popular press, home shelter magazines continued their devoted sponsorship of affordable residential design during the 1940s and subsequent decades. *Good Housekeeping*, *House Beautiful*, and *Better Homes & Gardens* were among the main publications that solicited work from leading architects and builders across the country. Ranch houses designed by Cliff May and others were among scores of designs that were prominently featured in print and usually built for public viewing as model houses, fully furnished and landscaped. Ideally, such examples conveyed the benefits of a collaborative effort, in which architects, builders, landscape architects, and interior designers pooled their talents to achieve quality products for sale.

Activity in the field of low-cost house design intensified even further during the early 1950s. Amid this activity, Cliff May collaborated with the Los Angeles architect Chris Choate in designing a low-cost ranch

house that was marketed by the organization Cliff May Homes, initially in California and then nationwide by the mid- 1950s. The “Magic Money House” (1952-1953), was based on a five foot, four inch modular plan, and used post-and-beam elements with precut wooden wall panels for the structural components.<sup>16</sup> The standard 831 square foot, two bedroom design was priced at approximately \$8,000; larger plans were adapted from this basic scheme. All of the designs were available for construction on individual lots or in multiples at tract developments. The design, materials, and method of construction of the Magic Money House were adroitly handled to create an up-to-date modern ranch house; yet the simplicity of its rectangular form and low-pitched gable roof still conveyed a traditional image. The Magic Money House joined May’s commissioned work in having a substantial impact on the postwar popularity of the ranch house. After the war as before the war, May’s work appealed to a wide audience that varied both economically and geographically.

Numerous other architects, builders, and prefabrication companies took advantage of the nationwide demand for ranch houses after the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> Scholz Homes, Incorporated (Donald Scholz, builder) in Toledo, Ohio, and the National Homes Corporation, a successful prefabrication firm in Lafayette, Indiana, were among many that were actively designing and building ranch houses in the Midwest and other areas of the country.<sup>18</sup> Most examples were essentially composed and sited as one might find along a typical postwar suburban street in California. On the East Coast, the prominent firm of Levitt and Sons even switched from its popular Cape Cod models to ranch houses for the Goldenridge tract (1951) in Levittown, Pennsylvania.<sup>19</sup>

Generally, these and other ranch houses revealed how various interpretations over the years had broadened its image in terms of design. This breadth of imagery also integrated details from regional as well as medieval variations of the Colonial Revival, the Prairie School and the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Asia and the Pacific Islands, and elements from other architectural periods and traditions. Yet, the essential features of a ranch house, especially its low rectangular form and sense of informality, remained dominant.

The popularity of the ranch house extended beyond residential architecture as well, long before the postwar period. Since the ranch house was typically low in scale and had a linear plan, it was easily adapted for almost every building type. Schools, public buildings, club buildings, small office buildings, and health care facilities were among the many nonresidential types that were designed to resemble single-family ranch houses. Designs for motels, restaurants, supermarkets, shopping centers, and other automobile-related buildings achieved similar results as well. And by the 1960s, many of the major gasoline companies embraced the compatible suburban image of a ranch house for their neighborhood service stations. A Union Oil Company service station (circa 1965) in Thousand Oaks expresses how it and other service stations in California tried to convey an appropriate fit with their setting.

## Conclusion

Following the initial popularity of the ranch house during the first half of the twentieth century, its prevalence after World War II secured its status as a major element of American culture. It seems somewhat puzzling, however, that the current retrospective interest in design, music, and fashion of the 1950s and 1960s has approached the ranch house primarily with apprehension, if at all. Perhaps for now it’s just too ordinary and common. Recently though, a hint of its significance was suggested when a brief history of the ranch house appeared in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of the *Old House Journal*.<sup>20</sup> And just last year, *Sunset Magazine* once again acknowledged its long association with the ranch house. The magazine’s annual Idea House for 1999 (Frank Stolz of South Coast Architects; and The O’Brien Group, developer/builder) was promoted as the “ranch house of the new millennium.”<sup>21</sup> Built near San Jose, south of the magazine’s offices in Menlo Park, the design illustrates that the concept of a ranch house still continues to be explored and broadly interpreted.

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## Notes

1 For a selection of the vast literature on postwar housing, see: Barry Checkoway, "Large Builders, Federal Housing Programs, and Postwar Suburbanization," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 4, no. 1 (March 1980): 21-45; Joseph B. Mason, *History of Housing in the U.S. 1930-1980* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1982); Ned Eichler, *The Merchant Builders* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982); and Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

2 Russell Lynes, *The Domesticated Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 266-67. See also: T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbins, *Homes of the Brave* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 77-81.

3 James Marston Fitch, "The New American Architecture Started 70 Years Ago," *House Beautiful* 92, no. 5 (May 1950): 258.

4 See, for example: Barbara L. Allen, "The Ranch-Style House in America: A Cultural and Environmental Discourse," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49, no. 3 (February 1996): 156-165.

5 See also the later edition: *Sunset Magazine*, ed., *Western Ranch Houses* by Cliff May (San Francisco: Lane Publishing Co., 1958). It was reprinted in 1997 and the earlier edition (1946) was reprinted in 1999, both by another publisher.

6 David Bricker, "Cliff May," in *Toward a Simpler Way of Life: The Arts & Crafts Architects of California*, ed. Robert Winter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 283-90; and Daniel Gregory, "William W. Wurster," 245-254.

7 Daniel P. Gregory, "Visions and Subdivisions: *Sunset Magazine* and the California Ranch House," *Architecture California* 13, no. 1 (February 1991): 32-35.

8 "Residence of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Power, Camarillo, California," *Architectural Digest* 2 1, no. 2 (Fall 1964): 20 23.

9 Alan R. Michelson, "Bernardi, Emmons--and Wurster: Focus on the Younger Partners," in *An Everyday Modernism: The Houses of William Wurster*, ed. Marc Treib (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 222 223.

10 David Gebhard, "Architectural Imagery, The Mission and California," *Harvard Architectural Review* I (Spring 1980): 139-40; Karen J. Weitze, *California's Mission Revival* (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1984), 26-28; and Richard Longstreth, *On the Edge of the World: Four Architects in San Francisco at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 279-286.

11 Randall L. Makinson, *Greene and Greene, Architecture as a Fine Art* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1977): 70-72, 88-89; "Wooden Dwellings in California on the Lines of the Old Spanish Adobe," *Craftsman* 13, no. 5 (February 1908): 568-71; and Seymour E. Locke, "Bungalows, What They Really Are. The Frequent Misapplication of the Name," *House and Garden* 12, no. 2 (August 1907): 48-50.

12 See, for example: *Garden City Company of California, Ideal Homes in Garden Communities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1916), 11, 14, 19, 26, 37-38, 43.

13 "Subsistence Homesteads Are Planned for Economy and Comfort," *Southwest Builder and Contractor* 84, no. 19 (19 November 1934): 26-28; and "Rurban Homes Project Near El Monte Now Nearing Completion," *Southwest Builder and Contractor* 86, no. 6 (9 August 1935): 12-13.

14 A.E. Hanson, *Rolling Hills: The Early Years, February 1930 through December 7, 1941* (Rolling Hills: City of Rolling Hills, 1978); "Riviera Ranch Tract Being Opened Today," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 October 1940, pt. V, p.3; and Cynthia Castle, "The Times Home Hunter," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 November 1940, pt. V.

11 "Bohannon Building Team," *Architectural Forum* 82, no. 6 (June 1945): 133-136, 138, 142, 146; "Big Dave Bohannon, Operative Builder by the California Method," *Fortune* 33, no. 4 (April 1946): 144-47, 190-

200. See also: Donald Albrecht, ed., *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

16 David Bricker, "Built For Sale: Cliff May and the Low Cost California Ranch House." (MA thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983), 8 1-100. The design was renamed the "Magazine Cover House" in 1954.

17 See, for example: A. Quincy Jones, Jr. and Frederick E. Emmons, *Builders' Homes for Better Living* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1957); Royal Barry Wills, *Living on the Level: One-Story Houses* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1955); and John Hancock Callender, *Before You Buy a House* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1953).

18 "Look at What's Selling in Ohio!," *House and Home* 3, no. I (January 1953): 144-15 1; "How Merchandising on Local and National Level Builds Volume," *American Builder* 75, no. 21 (February 1953): 137-138. See also: John A. Jakle, Robert W. Bastian, and Douglas K. Meyer, *Common Houses in America's Small Towns: The Atlantic Seaboard to the Mississippi Valley* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 182-195.

19 "\$9,990 Levitt Houses Boast 70' Lots," *Architectural Forum* 95, no. 4 (Oct. 1951): 217-219.

20 Patricia Poore, "The Ranch House," *Old House Journal* 26, no. 5 (September/October 1998): 75-80. See also: Esther McCoy and Evelyn Hitchcock, "The Ranch House," in *Home Sweet Home: American Domestic Vernacular Architecture*, eds. Charles W. Moore, Kathryn Smith, and Peter Becker (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1983), 84-89; and Alan Hess, *Rancho Deluxe: Rustic Dreams and Real Western Living* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000).

21 Daniel Gregory and Ann Bertelsen, "Sunset Magazine's 1999 Idea House," *Sunset* 203, no. 3 (September 1999): 110-129.