

# A Field Guide To American Houses

"Magisterial . . . The illustrated story of why our houses—great and humble and everything in between—look the way they do." —*The New York Times*

# A Field Guide to American Houses

*The best-selling classic by Virginia and Lee McAlester now revised and expanded to include homes built after 1940 and a new section on how to "read" a neighborhood*

The Definitive Guide to Identifying  
and Understanding America's  
Domestic Architecture



Virginia Savage McAlester

**Field Guide to American Houses** is an essential resource for anyone interested in the diverse architectural styles that define the United States. From the colonial charm of New England to the modern lines of West Coast homes, understanding the evolution of American houses provides insight into the cultural and historical influences that have shaped the nation. This guide will explore various architectural styles, their characteristics, and notable examples, making it easier for homeowners, architects, and enthusiasts to identify and appreciate the rich tapestry of American residential architecture.

# Understanding American Architectural Styles

The architecture of American houses has evolved significantly over the centuries, influenced by various factors including geography, climate, and immigrant traditions. Here, we'll delve into some of the most prominent styles that have emerged across the country.

## Colonial Styles

Colonial architecture refers to the styles of homes built during the early years of American settlement, predominantly from the 1600s to the 1800s. These styles often reflect the European origins of the settlers.

- **Colonial Revival:** A movement that began in the late 19th century, Colonial Revival homes often feature symmetrical facades, gabled roofs, and decorative entryways.
- **Georgian:** Characterized by its symmetry and classic proportions, Georgian homes typically have brick exteriors, multi-pane windows, and prominent doorways.
- **Federal:** Similar to Georgian but more refined, Federal-style homes often include decorative elements such as elliptical fanlights and columns.

## Victorian Styles

The Victorian era, spanning from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, brought about a wide variety of architectural styles characterized by ornate details and eclectic influences.

- **Queen Anne:** Known for its asymmetrical facades, wrap-around porches, and intricate woodwork, Queen Anne homes often feature a mix of materials and textures.
- **Gothic Revival:** These homes are distinguished by pointed arches, steep roofs, and intricate detailing, drawing inspiration from medieval architecture.
- **Italianate:** Featuring low-pitched roofs, tall windows, and decorative brackets, Italianate homes are reminiscent of Italian villas.

# 20th Century American Architecture

As the 20th century progressed, American residential architecture began to reflect modern societal changes, including technological advancements and shifts in lifestyle.

## Craftsman Style

Emerging in the early 1900s, the Craftsman style is known for its emphasis on handcrafted details and natural materials. Key features include:

- Low-pitched gable roofs with wide overhanging eaves
- Exposed rafters and decorative beams
- Built-in furniture and cabinetry

## Modern and Contemporary Styles

The modern movement, which gained momentum in the mid-20th century, sought to embrace minimalism and functional design.

- **Mid-Century Modern:** Characterized by open floor plans, large windows, and integration with nature, these homes often feature flat planes and organic forms.
- **Contemporary:** Contemporary homes are constantly evolving, often featuring a mix of styles, sustainable materials, and innovative designs.

## Regional Influences on American Houses

The geographical diversity of the United States has resulted in distinct architectural styles that cater to local climates and cultural influences.

## New England

New England architecture often showcases colonial styles, with a focus on practicality and durability. Common features include:

- Wooden clapboard siding
- Gabled roofs with dormers
- Chimneys centrally located for heat distribution

## Southern Architecture

Southern homes often reflect a blend of colonial influences, with an emphasis on outdoor living. Notable styles include:

- **Antebellum:** Known for grand columns, expansive porches, and symmetrical designs, these homes are reminiscent of the plantation era.
- **Shotgun Houses:** A narrow, rectangular home style popular in the South, shotgun houses feature a long hallway connecting rooms from front to back.

## Western and Southwestern Styles

Homes in the West often incorporate elements that reflect the natural landscape and cultural heritage.

- **Adobe and Pueblo:** Common in the Southwest, these homes are built from adobe or mud bricks, characterized by thick walls and flat roofs.
- **Ranch Style:** Originating in the mid-20th century, ranch-style homes are characterized by single-story layouts, open floor plans, and large windows.

# Identifying Architectural Features

To appreciate the diversity of American houses fully, it's essential to recognize some of the key architectural features that define different styles.

## Common Architectural Elements

Here are some architectural features that can help identify various American house styles:

- **Windows:** The shape, size, and arrangement of windows can indicate a particular style. For example, double-hung windows are prevalent in colonial homes, while large picture windows are common in modern homes.
- **Rooflines:** The pitch and shape of the roof can signify style. Gabled roofs are typical in many traditional styles, while flat or shed roofs are often seen in modern designs.
- **Entryways:** The design of the front door and porch can reveal much about a home's style. Elaborate pediments and columns often indicate a Colonial Revival or Victorian style.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the **field guide to American houses** serves as a valuable resource for understanding the rich architectural diversity of residential buildings in the United States. By exploring various styles, regional influences, and key architectural features, homeowners and enthusiasts can deepen their appreciation for the history and culture reflected in American homes. Whether you are an architect, a homeowner, or simply an admirer of architecture, this guide will empower you to recognize and celebrate the unique characteristics that define the homes across this vast nation.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What is 'A Field Guide to American Houses' primarily about?**

It is a comprehensive reference book that categorizes and describes various architectural styles of American houses, providing insights into their

history, design features, and regional variations.

## **Who are the authors of 'A Field Guide to American Houses'?**

The book is authored by Virginia Savage McAlester and Lee McAlester, who are both notable figures in the field of architecture and preservation.

## **What types of architectural styles are covered in the guide?**

The guide covers a wide range of styles, including Colonial, Victorian, Craftsman, Mid-Century Modern, and many others, detailing their characteristics and historical context.

## **How can 'A Field Guide to American Houses' be useful for homeowners?**

Homeowners can use the guide to better understand the architectural style of their own homes, which can inform restoration, renovation, or preservation efforts.

## **Is 'A Field Guide to American Houses' suitable for beginners in architecture?**

Yes, the guide is written in an accessible manner, making it suitable for both enthusiasts and professionals, as well as beginners interested in American architectural styles.

## **What unique features does the guide offer to identify house styles?**

The book includes detailed illustrations, photographs, and diagrams that help readers identify key architectural elements and styles, along with a glossary of terms.

## **Can 'A Field Guide to American Houses' assist in historical research?**

Absolutely, the guide provides valuable historical context and information about the evolution of American residential architecture, making it a useful resource for researchers.

## **What edition of 'A Field Guide to American Houses' is currently available?**

The latest edition is the revised and expanded version published in 2015, which includes updated information and additional styles not covered in earlier editions.

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