

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 offers an in-depth look at the diverse architectural styles that have shaped the residential landscape of the United States. From the colonial homes of the early settlers to the sleek lines of modern architecture, each style reflects the historical, cultural, and environmental influences of its time. This guide serves as a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in understanding the evolution of American domestic architecture and recognizing the characteristics that define various house styles.

Historical Overview of American Architecture

The architecture of American houses is a rich tapestry woven from various influences, including

Indigenous designs, European styles, and modern innovations. The evolution of these styles can be divided into several key periods:

1. Colonial Period (1600-1776): Early American houses were heavily influenced by the European settlers. Styles such as Colonial, Cape Cod, and Georgian emerged during this time, characterized by symmetrical facades and central chimneys.
2. Federal Period (1776-1820): Following the American Revolution, the Federal style became popular, marked by its elegant proportions and decorative elements such as fanlights and sidelights around doors.
3. Victorian Era (1830-1900): This era brought a surge of creativity in design, leading to styles like Gothic Revival, Italianate, and Queen Anne. These houses were often adorned with intricate details, asymmetrical shapes, and vibrant colors.
4. Early 20th Century (1900-1940): The Arts and Crafts movement encouraged simplicity and craftsmanship, leading to styles like Bungalow and Prairie. This period also saw the rise of Colonial Revival homes.
5. Post-War Era (1945-1970): After World War II, there was a housing boom that introduced Ranch-style homes and Mid-Century Modern designs, emphasizing open spaces and integration with nature.
6. Contemporary Trends (1970-Present): Modern architecture reflects current trends in sustainability and minimalism, with styles such as Neo-Eclectic and Sustainable homes gaining popularity.

Key Architectural Styles

Understanding the distinct characteristics of each architectural style is crucial for identifying and appreciating American houses. Below are some of the most significant styles:

1. Colonial

Colonial houses are one of the earliest styles in America, originating from the 1600s to the mid-1800s. Key features include:

- Symmetrical facade
- Central front door
- Gabled roof
- Dormer windows
- Use of brick or wood siding

2. Cape Cod

This style emerged in the 17th century and is known for its simplicity and practicality. Features include:

- One or one-and-a-half stories
- Steeply pitched roof
- Dormer windows
- Symmetrical facade
- Wood siding, often painted in muted colors

3. Federal

The Federal style, popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is characterized by:

- Rectangular shape
- Elegant proportions
- Decorative elements like pilasters and cornices
- Fanlight above the front door
- Symmetrical windows, often with shutters

4. Victorian

Victorian architecture encompasses several sub-styles, each with unique characteristics:

- Gothic Revival: Pointed arches, intricate woodwork, and steep roofs.
- Italianate: Tall windows, wide eaves, and decorative brackets.
- Queen Anne: Asymmetrical facades, turrets, and a mix of materials.

5. Bungalow

The Bungalow style gained popularity in the early 20th century, characterized by:

- Low-pitched rooflines
- Wide front porches
- Exposed rafters
- Built-in furniture
- Craftsman details

6. Ranch

Post-World War II, Ranch homes dominated suburban developments. Features include:

- Long, low profile
- Open floor plans
- Attached garages
- Large windows and sliding glass doors
- Simple rooflines

7. Mid-Century Modern

This style, prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasizes:

- Integration with nature
- Flat planes and large glass windows
- Open spaces and minimal ornamentation
- Use of new materials like plywood and steel

8. Contemporary

Contemporary homes reflect modern design principles and sustainability. Key aspects include:

- Eclectic mix of styles
- Use of sustainable materials
- Energy-efficient designs
- Open floor plans
- Integration of indoor and outdoor spaces

Identifying Architectural Styles

Recognizing the architectural style of a house involves observing various elements. Here are some tips to help identify different styles:

- **Roof Shape:** Look at the pitch and style of the roof. Steep pitches are common in Gothic and Colonial styles, while flat roofs are often found in Mid-Century Modern homes.

- **Windows:** Examine the window shapes and placements. For instance, double-hung windows are typical in Colonial homes, while large glass panels are characteristic of contemporary designs.
- **Materials:** The materials used in construction can also indicate the style. For example, brick is common in Colonial and Federal homes, while wood and stone are prevalent in Bungalows and Craftsman styles.
- **Decorative Elements:** Look for unique features such as columns, cornices, and moldings. Victorian homes are often rich in intricate details, whereas Modern homes tend to favor minimalism.
- **Overall Shape:** The overall layout and shape of the house can provide clues. Traditional styles often have symmetrical designs, while modern styles may be more asymmetrical and abstract.

The Importance of Preservation

As American architecture evolves, many historic homes face the threat of demolition or neglect. The preservation of these structures is vital for several reasons:

- **Cultural Heritage:** Historic homes reflect the cultural and historical narratives of their communities. Preserving them helps maintain a connection to the past.
- **Economic Value:** Restoring historic homes can enhance property values and attract tourism, contributing to local economies.
- **Sustainability:** Preserving existing structures is often more environmentally friendly than new construction, reducing waste and resource consumption.

Preservation Organizations

Numerous organizations work to preserve American architectural heritage, including:

- **National Trust for Historic Preservation:** Advocates for the protection of historic places across the country.
- **Local Historical Societies:** Many cities and towns have local societies dedicated to preserving their unique architectural heritage.
- **State Historic Preservation Offices:** Each state has a designated office that provides resources and guidelines for preservation efforts.

Conclusion

A field guide to American houses not only helps enthusiasts and professionals identify architectural styles but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the diversity and history embedded in American homes. By understanding the various influences and characteristics of these styles, we can better appreciate the narratives they tell about our society, culture, and environment. Whether you are an architect, a historian, or simply a curious homeowner, this guide serves as a valuable resource for exploring the fascinating world of American architecture. Preserving these homes ensures that future generations can enjoy and learn from the rich architectural heritage that defines the American landscape.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary purpose of the 'Field Guide to American Houses'?

The primary purpose of the 'Field Guide to American Houses' is to serve as a comprehensive resource for identifying and understanding the various architectural styles and elements of residential buildings in the United States.

Who is the author of the 'Field Guide to American Houses'?

The 'Field Guide to American Houses' was authored by Virginia Savage McAlester, a prominent architectural historian.

What are some key architectural styles covered in the guide?

The guide covers a wide range of architectural styles, including Colonial, Victorian, Craftsman, Mid-century Modern, and Contemporary, among others.

How is the information in the guide organized?

The information in the guide is organized by architectural style, providing detailed descriptions, visual aids, and historical context for each style and its features.

Why is it important to understand the architectural styles of American houses?

Understanding the architectural styles of American houses is important for appreciating cultural heritage, historical significance, and the evolution of design in American residential architecture.

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

Yes, the 'Field Guide to American Houses' is suitable for beginners as it is written in an accessible manner, with clear illustrations and explanations that make architectural concepts easy to understand.

Can the guide be used for restoration or renovation projects?

Yes, the guide is an excellent resource for restoration or renovation projects, as it provides insights into the original architectural features and styles that should be preserved or replicated.

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