

Guide to Styles

The "Why" of Styles

A house is a visual expression of values. Popular styles express the values of a particular age or generation. An educated observer can "read" the values of a society from its buildings and houses.

Individuals use housing styles to announce and shape their self-concept. This is why buying or building a house is so difficult. The choice is more than a consumer decision; it is also part of the answer to the lifelong question, "who am I?"

American houses have three main sources of inspiration: the Middle Ages, ancient Greece and Rome, and contemporary ideas that seek to break ties with the past. By far, most houses are inspired by the past with contemporary styles remaining a minority choice. In general, inspiration from the Middle Ages produces houses that are quaint, cozy, or romantic in feeling. Classical inspiration often means formal, orderly, and impressive structures.

Tudor

This style was extremely popular from 1920 to 1940, especially in upscale suburbs. Many Tudor style houses are still built today.

The style is based on 16th Century English designs. Roofs are steeply pitched. Sharp gables (sometimes with a chimney) dominate the front. Half timbering is visible on outer walls. These heavy timbers once held the structure together; today they are usually a design element.

A mixture of materials is used including brick, wood half timbers, stucco, and patterned stone. Sometimes these are mixed in a single wall. Chimneys are ornamental and often topped with chimney pots. Narrow casement windows are often grouped in bands. Bay windows are common in Tudor houses, sometimes protruding from the second floor.

Neo-Classical

From the 1850s to the 1860s, almost anything Greek was popular in the United States. Many cities founded in these decades were named for Greek towns from Sparta or Athens to Memphis. Greek Revival style was nearly a fad. In fact, the style was not called Greek Revival by its contemporaries. It was known simply as "the national style." Its influence can be seen in banks, public buildings, and southern mansions. Greek pillars ruled facades. The pillars often supported a portico modeled after those found on Greek temples.

Classical ideas again took hold from 1895 through 1920 and remain strong today. This second life for classical ideas included inspiration from ancient Rome (especially in arches) as well as Greece. A key concept in Classical design is symmetry; formal balance so that one side of a facade perfectly mirrors the other.

Neo-Classical today is more a design motif than a style. In other words, people do not build Greek revival houses. But they do build simple rectangular boxes with formal symmetry and pillars. Many colonial revival styles have classical design elements. Even contemporary, post-modern architects borrow classical designs.

Queen Anne

The Queen Anne house is one of a number of popular styles during the Victorian era. It is a romantic style often with towers and turrets reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Although named after the 18th Century Queen Anne, it has little to do with styles of 18th century England. Porches, balconies, and bay windows were used to add variety and "bring the outside in."

Queen Anne was the style of choice for the wealthy from 1875 to 1895. It is marked by long sweeping porches. Many surviving Queen Anne houses are painted white, the originals were multi-colored. Half of all Queen Annes have a bay window beneath a steep gable. Other common design elements include painted wood shingles, turrets, and elaborate trim. Elaborate exterior woodworking, today called "gingerbread," showed off the "tricks" of the new power saws.

Queen Annes were among the first houses built using "modern" construction methods called balloon framing. The new methods were used to build many nooks and crannies and turns in walls. Other popular Victorian styles included Second Empire and Gothic revival.

Bungalow

The bungalow was a simple house adopted by the Arts and Crafts movement partly as a reaction to "Victorian excess." From 1910 to the Great Depression, bungalows were the style of choice of the Arts and Crafts movement. A handful of California builders/architects believed materials should be left as close as possible to their natural state. Wood was to be left natural or stained rather than covered with paint. This idea of respect for the natural state of building materials still remains popular in contemporary architecture even though bungalows are rarely built. Exposed rafters or braces could often be seen beneath roof overhangs.

The bungalow features a long low-pitched roof often with a gable dormer or a shallow "shed" dormer.

Ranch/Split Level

Ranch style houses arrived on the American scene in the mid 1930s and remain popular today. The ranch is partly shaped by the automobile.

The most popular styles previous to the ranch often featured large porches. These porches were important gathering areas for the family and the neighborhood. With the arrivals of television, air conditioning, and the automobile, the front of the house was given to the garage while a less public rear patio served some of the porches function.

Early ranch houses have a front dominated by a large, usually fixed, "picture window," today's ranch style houses are often dominated by a garage. They are single story houses influenced by Spanish adobe designs. They became popular in California and spread eastward, as have many architectural styles of the 20th Century.

Split levels are related to ranch houses, but with three levels of living areas. They represent an economical way to build the most living space for the least cost.

Prairie Style

Frank Lloyd Wright is credited as the founder of the Prairie style, but he was one of many architects striving to build a uniquely American style house. He saw houses as "organic" structures that seem to grow on their sites and harmonize with the land.

Horizontal lines rule the Prairie style, accented by wide eaves. Windows are grouped in horizontal bands, and often the bricks themselves are narrow to further accent the horizontal.

Prairie style houses are rare today, but its ideas are very influential in contemporary architecture. The Prairie School rejected applied ornamentation for its own sake, preferring to let the natural textures and lines of the structure speak for themselves.

Colonial Revival

The most popular housing style in America. Ideas are borrowed from houses built in Colonial times.

Dutch Colonial -- Easily recognized by its unique "gambrel" style roof.

Spanish Colonial -- Popular today in Florida and California. These houses feature nearly flat roofs often of red tiles. Walls are white stucco and have arched entries, walled courtyards, carved wood doors, and decorative ironwork and balconies.

New England -- The Cape Cod is a one and a half story house often covered with wood shingles. It was very popular during the 1920s and 1940s. A New England saltbox is so named because its shape resembled wooden sheds used to store salt.

Georgian -- A simple rectangular two story with symmetrical detailing. The Georgian style often features classical styling and a temple-like portico. Georgian style houses illustrate the house as formal and impressive while a Cape Cod illustrates the more romantic or cozy.

International School and Contemporary Styles

The International School influenced commercial buildings. Its imprint can be seen in the glass towers that dominate large city skylines. The International School after World War II saw architecture in a state of confusion and set about to be to the twentieth century what the Greeks were to an earlier age. Under the idea that "less is more" they rejected Victorian gingerbread and strove for simple, almost geometrical designs. Buildings were functional, geometrical, and simple.

The International School made little impact on residential housing. Americans today build houses some describe as "Neo-Eclectic." Much like the Queen Anne style of Victorian days, today's houses borrow bits and pieces from the past. Today's architect designed houses might feature the suggestion of a turret borrowed from the Middle Ages, a set of Palladian windows from the 16th Century, a front door with a Greek pediment, arched windows from the Romans, and sharp gables and chimneys from the Tudor style. Today's residential styles announce "less is a bore."