

The American House: A Guide to Architectural Styles

Summary and Objectives

The American House: A Guide to Architectural Styles is a 23 minute live action video that teaches viewers how to identify the most common styles of American houses. The video gives a vocabulary to enable viewers to speak intelligently about the styles of houses they live in and see everyday. The program will help viewers realize the richness of architectural variety and see meaning in residential design. The program deals with styles commonly found in today's cities and suburbs including:

Tudor

Neo-Classic (Greek Revival)

Queen Anne

Bungalow (Craftsman)

Ranch/Split Level

Prairie School (Frank Lloyd Wright)

Colonial Revival (Dutch, Spanish, New England, Georgian)

Neo-Eclectic Contemporary (International School, Post Modern)

The video is intended to enhance the cultural literacy of the average student. It is not a technical program for students in architectural studies nor is it comprehensive in scope.

Consultants

Mark and Linda Keane served as consultants for the video. Mark Keane is an architect and educator at the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee. Mr. Keane also photographed many of the illustrations used in the video. Linda Keane is also an architect and professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Using this Guide

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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."

Glossary/ Vocabulary

Bay window -- A set of two or more windows that protrudes out from the wall. The window is moved away from the wall to provide more light and wider views.

Casement window -- A window that opens by swinging inward or outward much like a door. Casement windows are usually vertical in shape but are often grouped in bands.

Clapboard -- Also known as weatherboard or siding. Long, narrow boards overlapped to cover the outer walls. Used in Colonial style frame houses.

Classical -- Refers to the architecture and design ideas of ancient Rome and Greece.

Dormer -- The setting for a vertical window in the roof. Called a gable dormer if it has its own gable or a shed dormer if a flat roof. Most often found in upstairs bedrooms.

Eaves -- That portion of the roof that projects beyond the wall.

Facade -- The front or "face" of a building.

Fanlight -- A semicircular or arched window above a door.

Gable -- The triangular section of a wall formed by the end of a pointed (gabled) roof.

Gambrel -- A roof with two slopes on each side, the lower slope having the steeper pitch. Often found in Colonial revival houses in the "Dutch" style.

Hipped roof -- A roof with slopes on all four sides. The "hips" are the lines formed when the slopes meet at the corners.

Palladian window -- A three part window with a large arched center and rectangular sidelights.

Pediment -- A triangular crown used over doors, windows, or porches. A classical style.

Portico -- A large porch usually with a pedimented roof supported by classical columns or pillars.

Rafter -- A roof beam sloping from the ridge to the wall. In most houses, rafters are visible only from the attic. In craftsman bungalows and some "rustic" contemporaries, they are exposed.

Sidelights -- Windows on either side of a door.

Stucco -- A mixture of cement, sand, and lime applied to exterior walls as a covering.

Turret -- A small tower, often at the corner of a building. Common in Queen Anne styles among others. A turret is a smaller structure while a tower begins at ground level.

STYLE NOTES



Neo-Eclectic

This contemporary house features a Palladian window motif, decorated front gables suggesting a Queen Anne style, and a front porch.



Colonial Revival – Cape Cod Cottage

Note the large central chimney, gabled dormers, and shingled façade. The front door uses wood trim to hint at classical pillars.



Queen Anne

Drawing of an 1892 Queen Anne style. Note the many gables, a turret, large porch, decorative shingles, and elaborate wood decoration.



Greek Revival

This is a drawing of an 1853 Texas Governor's mansion. Note the four columns forming a Classical portico. The façade is symmetrical.



Colonial Revival – Dutch

Gambrel roof with front shed dormer.
This house was available by mail order
from Montgomery Ward in 1927.



Bungalow

This bungalow of five rooms and one
bath was offered by Sears as a mail order
house from 1911 through 1920. Note the
front shed dormer, full width porch, and
exposed roof rafters.



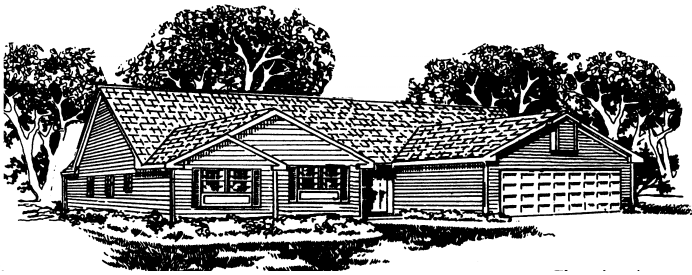
Prairie Style

This Frank Lloyd Wright design was to be available for the average person. Note wide overhangs, hipped roof, and bands of casement windows.



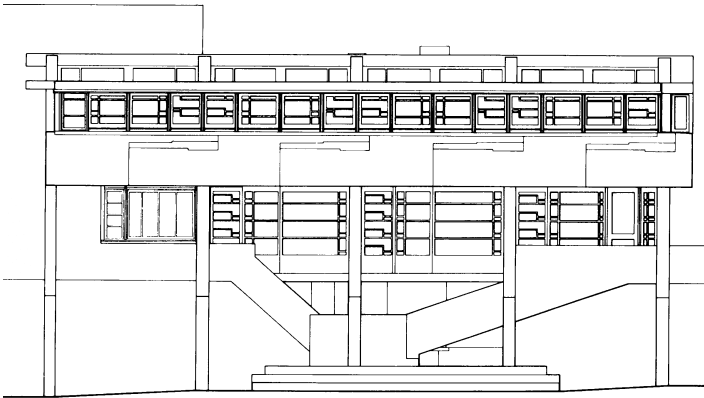
Colonial Revival – Georgian

This 20th Century Georgian demonstrates a symmetrical façade spoiled only by the attached garage. Note the front door surround with its suggestion of pillars and the sidelights. This style lacks a central chimney.



Ranch

This contemporary ranch style illustrates how the attached garage often dominates the design. Note gable decoration above the garage door. Many garages still feature small doors or designs suggesting doors. These are “leftovers” from the days when the “garage” was the barn complete with hay loft door.



International School

This house “floats” on pillars and is an exercise in geometrical lines and space.



Tudor

This Tudor revival house features wood trim to suggest half timbers, a double gable front, and a decorative chimney. The front door wall is stone, the half timbered front is brick, and the rest of the façade is stucco.

NAME THAT STYLE



1. _____



2. _____



3. _____



4. _____



5. _____



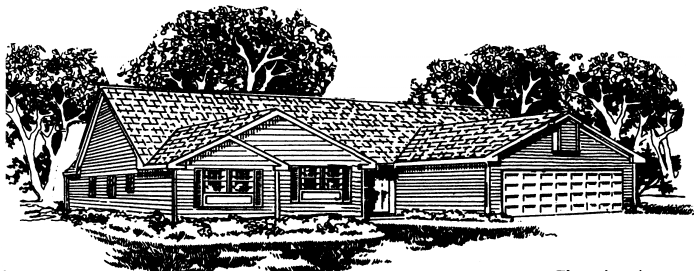
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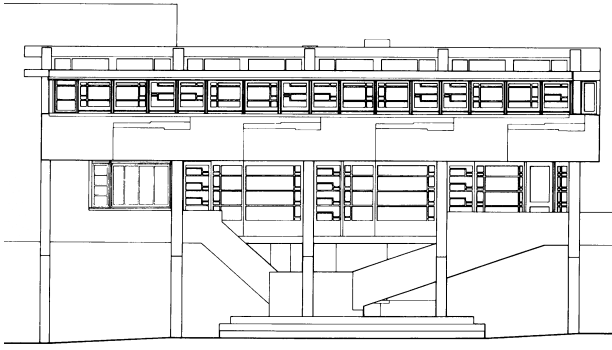
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9. _____



10. _____



11. _____

Bibliography

The following books are all suitable for the general reader. All are well illustrated guides to styles of American housing.

The American House by Mary Mix Foley (Harper & Row, NY, 1980)

A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia and Lee McAlester (Alfred A. Knopf, NY)

House Styles At a Glance by Maurie Van Buren (Longstreet Press, Marietta, Georgia, 1991)

What Style Is It? A Guide To American Architecture by John Poppeliers, Allen Chambers, Jr., and Nancy Schwartz (Preservation Press of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C., 1983).

Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945 by John J.-G. Blumenson (W.W. Norton, NY, 1981)

Clues To American Architecture by Marilyn Klein and David Fogle (Starrhill Press, Washington, D.C., 1985).

Answers for "Name That Style"

1. Queen Anne
2. Neo Eclectic
3. Bungalow
4. Neo-Classical (or Greek Revival)
5. Dutch Colonial
6. Tudor
7. Colonial Revival – Cape Cod Cottage
8. Prairie Style
9. Ranch
10. Colonial Revival - Georgian
11. International School

Teaching Ideas

1. What style house do you live in? Take a photograph of your house and explain its style and decorative details.
2. Survey your neighborhood and describe the styles of houses.
3. Find houses that illustrate each style described in the video. Make a sketch or photograph of each house and assemble them into a stylebook. Point out the clues that help identify each style.
4. Prepare an illustrated report on a style of American housing NOT mentioned in the video. Possible styles include Neo-gothic, Beaux Arts, Art Moderne, Stick, Shingle, Chateausque, Richardsonian Romanesque, Second Empire, Italianate, or Post-modern.
5. Prepare a detailed report on any one style mentioned in the video. Include sketches or photographs of local houses that illustrate this style.
6. Conduct an architectural scavenger hunt. Form teams assigned to find examples of as many items on the list as possible. Each team should have at least one camera (photo, instant, or video) to record proof of success. The winning team is the one which finds the most examples in the given time limit. Note that one picture can contain more than one item on the list. A suggested list appears on a separate page in this guide. A few of the items on the list were not mentioned in the video so will require additional research.

Architectural Styles Scavenger Hunt

Find as many examples of the items on the list below as possible. Prove your finds by taking a picture or making a videotape. You must actually find the item in existence. Pictures from books or magazines are not acceptable. One picture or house can show more than one item.

Shed dormer
Wood shingles on a wall
Pediment
White portico
Split level house
Tudor style house
Georgian style house
Turret
Exposed rafters
Band of casement windows
Symmetrical facade
Neo-gothic style house
Palladian window
Gable dormer
Garage with suggestion of a hayloft door in gable
Porch running the full width of the house
Prairie style house or a building with prairie style designs
A post-modern building
Neo-classical or Greek Revival building
Clapboards
A gambrel roof
A house of the Second Empire style
House built within the last ten years with Classical details
House built within the last ten years with Queen Anne details
New England saltbox
A chimney pot
Queen Anne style house
Pilasters
Fanlight
Front door with side lights
A hipped roof
House influenced by Arts and Crafts Movement
House in the Spanish Colonial style
An American Foursquare

