HOW MODERN HOMES EVOLVED

By DAVID G. BAREUTHER

The evolution of the modern American home from crude shelter to today's planned comfort is a story of "the pursuit of happiness."

Today's homes are as different from America's first houses as the new automobile is from the Conestoga wagon. From primitive log walls and a roof, the American home has evolved into its modern happy combination of indoor and outdoor living because people want much more than pure utility.

Ask any owner why he has this or that embellishment on his house and his honest answer will be: "Because I like it." Whatever it is, it makes him happy.

This has resulted in many interesting architectural changes in houses through the years. In one generation it brought a rash of Grecian columns. In another period only Gothic decoration was considered beautiful. In later periods houses had to look like Mediterranean villas or Tudor English mansions to be rated up to date.

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Sometimes you'll hear houses criticized for being copies of historic prototypes. But even the first houses in this country were copies. Homesick early settlers built their houses to look like the homes they loved in the old world.

New Englanders copied the overhanging upper stories which had added extra space above crowded streets of English towns, even though such construction was not needed in the wilderness. The Dutch of New Amsterdam reproduced stone homes of Holland and established a style that remained in New York even after the English took over.

Scandinavians knew how to build log houses and found a rich supply of material in the woods of Delaware. The French set the architectural tone that still prevails in Louisiana and Quebec. In the southwest the Spanish found native building techniques that could be blended with their own heritage.

Old world ties were so strong in Virginia that the first building of William and Mary college in Williamsburg was erected from plans by Sir Christopher Wren. Wren's Georgian influence marked homes throughout the colonies. Until kilns could be built, bricks were imported from England. But wood was so plentiful that even designs for stone houses in Europe were imitated in wood.

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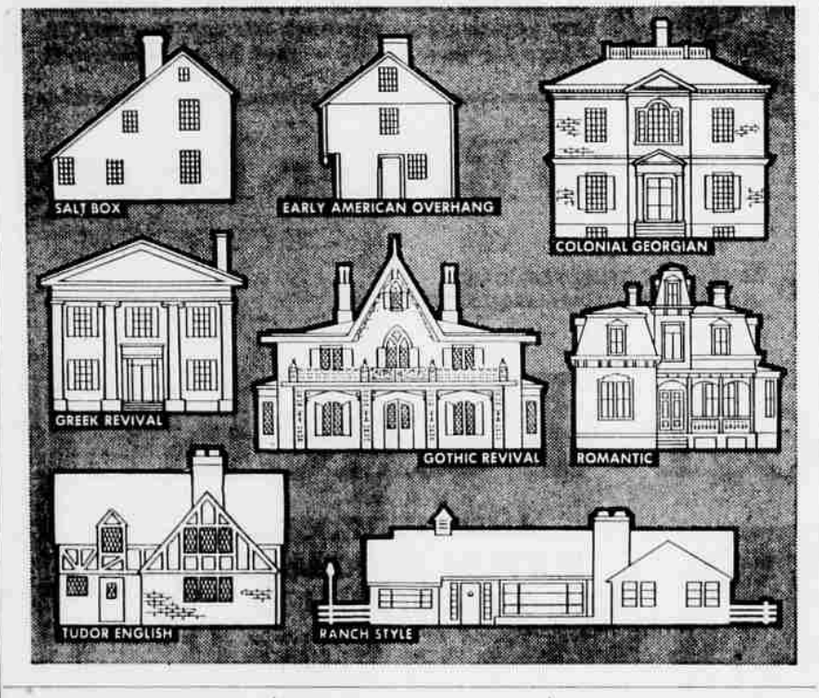
As prosperity increased, homes became more ornate. Fanlights appeared above doorways. Pediments were added, and by the time "the pursuit of happiness" was written into the Declaration of Independence, the influence of the Georgian era was being replaced by classical trends.

In those days window panes were small of necessity, but such windows were happy ideas. The panes were grouped so attractively that the idea has lived through the centuries. Shutters or blinds closed such windows at night, for there were no window shades or Venetian blinds. The shutters survive today merely as decorations. Many a modern picture window is a copy of a small-paned Colonial shop window.

After the American Revolution, homes began to grow elegant. Greek columns caught popular fancy by 1820. Wealthy plantation owners and northern merchants liked homes that looked like Greek temples. This wave of Greek revival swept the country until the 1860s. The columned porticos of the south and throughout the Finger Lakes region of New York state are relics of that period. The style penetrated New England, the midwest, and it remains today in old houses that face Washington Square in New York City.



Then came a Gothic revival with long, narrow pointed-arch windows extending to the floor. High pitched roofs had gables decorated with ornate wood carvings. Intricate bargeboards draped houses like frosting on a cake. Even smokestacks of locomotives and river boats blossomed with filigree trimming.

This style was becoming to Victorian customs and dress. Lace and ruffles were the vogue, so houses were lacey. Such gingerbread cost money and served no useful purpose, but it was considered cultured.

It was cultured to have a home library. No bookcase of that period was complete without a copy of "The Last Days of Pompeii," and when "Ben Hur" was published in 1880 it not only became a best seller, but did its bit to set the mood for Romanesque architecture. Chicago's lakefront grew up in this massive pretentious style. Italian villas were a logical by-product until the pendulum began to swing toward stark simplicity.

Mission furniture seemed to incite this change, and before World War I so-called California bungalows followed the mission fad. Almost any house with a wide roof overhang was called a California bungalow. But the wide roof overhang proved to be a real contribution that would be remembered by home designers.

Through all these styles, basic interior layouts changed little. Aside from the development of central heating, which displaced the gorgeous coal stoves in living rooms, you'd have a hard time telling interior of a house built in 1900 from one built in 1800.

The early 20th century house still had its front parlor, closed off in reservation for formal callers—the minister, or funerals. Many of those houses that remain today have had partitions knocked down to merge parlor, front hall and sitting room into one L-shaped living room, setting the pace for modern open planning.

But other forces soon revolutionized the house. The automobile knocked off the old front porch. The automatic refrigerator and other electrical equipment remade the kitchen. National advertising and industrial enterprise tiled the bathroom, wired the house, and aided and abetted the revolution in all design.

Architects and builders who served in World War I came home with ideas of cubistic designs they had seen in France, Germany and Sweden. They gave the flapper era its first samples of modernistic houses. At the same time the Florida boom of the 1920s got under way and Spanish styles, competing with importations of Tudor English and French provincial theories succeeded at least in proving that stucco could be used satisfactorily.

It looked like a free-for-all race for a while, but American Colonial styles won out. During the 1930s anything with green shutters was labeled Colonial—when out of the west rode a new Lochinvar on a rodeo maverick, introducing the ranch house.

This is not where we came in, but everybody now seems happy. The ranch house arrived in the nick of time to exploit broad picture windows, double glazing and all that, indoor-outdoor gardens, city apartment convenience with all rooms on one floor, scotching the basement for new radiant heating.

Because of its true American background, the ranch house brought a combined heritage of New England shutters that had emigrated westward, a Spanish patio that came up from Mexico, a corral fence picked up in Texas, colors from the Pacific coast and materials from virtually every state in the union.

And the modern home is still evolving. Kitchens are veering away from sterile white. You can buy a pink refrigerator. Dining rooms which had shrunk to dinettes with the loss of Diamond Jim Brady appetites, are staging a comeback. Television is luring the family back to the living room—some architects think it may displace the fireplace. Heat pumps can warm your home in winter from the bowels of the earth and, when reversed, they can cool the house in summertime.

Where do we go from here in this pursuit of happiness? Let's just stay home where we like it.

Frills Were Cheap In Good Old Days

If you have any doubt about building costs influencing house design, consider a "Builder's Portfolio" published in 1887, in the midst of the gingerbread era.

You could get a big two-story house built in those days for anything between $3,258.10 and $3,516.74. Itemized costs ranged from $9 for excavation, and $37.50 for foundation and basement, to $25 for "kitchen wainscoted and dresser built, materials and labor."

A gorgeous bay window cost $50 installed, complete with trimming. And it meant trimming, too. It was nothing in those days to allow $100 for "20 carved brackets, 33 small brackets, and 100 rosettes."

The plumbing estimate included "range boiler, sink, tubs, bath, etc., hot and cold water service, complete with tank in attic, $375."

Color Favored For Fixtures In Bathroom

Demand for colored bathroom fixtures has increased sharply since the war, says American Builder magazine.

"Not only are colored plumbing fixtures more popular today than ever before but there has been a decided change in color preferences," the magazines says. "Before the war, ivory was the most popular color. Today, tans, greens and blues are at the head of the list."

American Builder explains that the plumbing fixtures now available do not differ radically in design from those made before the war. However, styling and health-protective features have been improved and faucets and valves have been made easier to operate.

"Attention has been given to the ability of separate fixtures to blend together and to fit harmonizingly into any decorative scheme," the building magazine adds. "Furthermore, this harmonizing of designs has been stepped down to even the moderately priced fixtures."

A safety measure adopted in recent years is the elimination of china faucet handles which are a hazard if they become broken or chipped. New fixtures have metal handles instead.

The preference for colored plumbing fixtures in the bathroom does not hold true in the kitchen. American Builder says plumbing dealers and builders have learned that the white kitchen sink is still favored.

Two-Way Switches

A two-way electric switch at top and bottom of a flight of stairs to control hall lights is a convenience and reduces the danger of falls on dark stairways.

Is It a Man's Castle?

By CHARLES HONCE

Girls, if you want to keep a man happy, one way is to keep his home looking as attractive in the summer as in the winter.

By an attractive summer home I mean this: One where the rugs have not been rolled up and stashed away, and where the window curtains and drapes are intact. One where furniture covers, sometimes made out of old sheets, have not obscured the beauty of your chairs, and where windows have not been nailed down or dismally shuttered.

Most of the summer habitations I have seen, particularly in the city, have the dreary appearance of wreckage left by an atomic bomb.

No man I know likes it, but why he doesn't get up on his hind legs and yell his head off is beyond me.

Of course I know why this atrocity is committed. The woman of the house is afraid of the summer sun and of dust.

But what of it?

Homes were made to live in, not to suffer in; and the average man, after living all summer in the barren wilderness of a miniature Madison Square Garden, should be ready for the dotty house.

I take pride in the fact that I have successfully resisted any attempt to change the summertime appearance of my home. I like it the way it is the year round and I would suffer if it went the way of some summer homes I know.

Of course dust and dirt come in! But so does the air, and air is far more important than dust. Anyway, why not give up a bridge game occasionally in favor of the dust cloth and broom?

As to sun fading, I think that point has been vastly overstressed. The sun streams into my place all summer long and I can't see that it does any appreciable damage.

I wouldn't be surprised that the main reason for the summer blitz is the fact that in some quarters it is considered fashionable. Mrs. Tom, Dick and Harry, wishing to keep up with the Joneses, aren't going to be caught with their rugs down! Then, again, it may just be habit.

Perhaps I shall rile the women folk with this heretical program, but maybe also it will produce a declaration of independence by a few more males.

I repeat: A home is a place in which to live, relax and enjoy yourself.

It should be that way over twelve months and not just when the sun is Decemberly pale and windows necessarily are closed to keep out the chill.