

POST WAR MODERN

Minimal Traditional, Split Levels, & Ranch Homes: 1940-1960

Architectural Style and Sensitive Rehabilitation

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The conclusion of World War II signaled a new period of domestic building in the United States and new modern styles gained popularity. During World War II, domestic production of houses ceased as labor and materials aided the war effort overseas. Popular mail-order house companies, such as the Aladdin Read-Cut Company, dedicated themselves to producing military use buildings and worker housing for war-related industries. At the end of the war, soldiers returning home were in great need of cheap, affordable housing. A post-war building boom swept across the nation as Americans moved to suburbia to purchase houses in sprawling tract developments. This post-war period in America witnessed the rise of a suburban nation with fourteen of the fifteen major cities shrinking between 1950 and 1960.

From roughly 1945 to 1975, the United States experienced an unprecedented building boom with more than forty million postwar residences constructed during this period. Returning veterans took advantage of President Franklin Roosevelt's Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill) and purchased low-mortgaged homes. This increased need for new middle-class homes revitalized the stagnant housing market. Prefabricated materials, streamlined assembly methods, and large-scale production enabled developers and builders to meet the widespread demand for new housing in suburban neighborhoods.

Many of Nashville's historic neighborhoods developed as streetcar suburbs in the early twentieth century. The streetcar system officially ceased operation by 1940 with the advent of automobiles. This transition from streetcar to automobile contributed to the outward spread of residents farther from the nucleus of the city. By the 1950s, an estimated three out of every four families owned an automobile in the United States. This rise in



automobile ownership as well as home ownership allowed for the massive suburban movement that took place in the 1960s and early 1970s. The post-war landscape emerged as a collection of expansive planned subdivisions with single-family homes, infill houses in pre-World War II neighborhoods, and more modest housing developments.

In the 1950s and 1960s, urban renewal reshaped Nashville's built environment as blocks of historic homes were demolished to make way for new post-war housing. In newly created suburban developments, the Ranch style with wide facades and built-in garages signified America's growing dependence on automobiles. Rambling designs and large lot sizes replaced the compact houses of the pre-war period.

Houses of the post-war era were designed to accommodate modern conveniences. Utility rooms and attached garages allowed for automatic washing machines and other appliances to be housed on the ground-floor. Prospective post-war homeowners sought out inexpensive, informal houses with traditional elements that accommodated automobile and other accoutrements of modern life; hence, the immense popularity of small Minimal Traditional houses in the years immediately following World War II.

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IDENTIFYING STYLES

Minimal Traditional

A simplified version of traditional styles, the Minimal Traditional style features a medium-pitched gable roof and a plain façade without traditional detailing. Elements of the Tudor Revival style can be seen through the use of front-facing gables and large chimneys. Traditional elements from other styles, such as English Cottage and Colonial Revival, are also often exhibited in Minimal Traditional style homes.



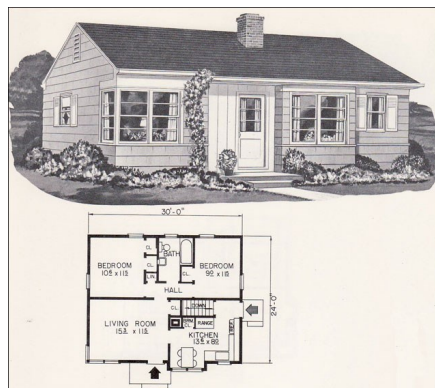
“The Bristol” was a design of Minimal Traditional home available from Aladdin Kit Houses in 1951.

First appearing in the 1930s, this low-cost style eventually dominated American architecture in the 1940s and early 1950s. Minimal Traditional houses were mostly small, one or one-and-one-half story houses. Stylistic features of Minimal Traditional houses include a rectangular or L-shape plan, small inset entrance or exterior stoop, asymmetrical fenestration, and an unfinished upper story if present. Common building materials for Minimal Traditional houses include wood, brick, and stone.

The Minimal Traditional style evolved out of the Great Depression’s need for a low-cost home. The struggling house building industry found innovative ways to improve the design and efficiency of houses. The cost-effective Minimal Traditional house offered a flexible, compact design to accommodate both

family needs and budgetary restrictions. The simplicity exhibited in the Minimal Traditional style is a defining feature in an otherwise unassuming form. Typically encompassing 1,000 square feet or less, the compact Minimal Traditional house lacks exterior ornamentation. The 1936 *Principles of Planning Small Houses* noted that the simplicity of design maximized the appearance of the small house.

Categorized as an American Small House, the Minimal Traditional style was a product of the 1934 National Housing Act and subsequent creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). In addition to insuring 20-year mortgages, the FHA promoted the development and circulation of standardized house designs. A FHA design from the 1940s incorporated the major elements of the Minimal Traditional style into a compact, single-family house; thus, Minimal Traditional houses are occasionally known as FHA houses. Other common names for the Minimal Traditional style include Post-War Minimal, GI House, Minimal Modern, and Cottage-Style.



Minimal traditional plan published by Weyerhaeuser Designs in 1961.

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Nashville contains several neighborhoods with Minimal Traditional houses. For example, Nashville's Inglewood Place Historic District is home to numerous Minimal Traditional residences dating to the mid-twentieth century. Clusters of the homes can be found along Golf Street, Riverside Drive, Shelton Avenue, and Stratford Avenue. Inglewood Place's Minimal Traditional houses showcase the compact sizes, simple exteriors, and one to one-and-a-half stories indicative of the style. Developed as a subdivision by the Branford Realty Company in 1929, the Bluefields Historic District in Donelson showcases many excellent examples of post-war housing. In the 1930s, Minimal Traditional homes with Tudor Revival, English Cottage, and Colonial Revival stylistic influences were constructed in Bluefields. Thirty-seven percent of the residences in this district are categorized as Minimal Traditional and comprise the most common form.

Ranch

The Ranch style replaced the Minimal Traditional style as the dominant architectural style in the early 1950s. The hallmarks of Ranch homes include asymmetrical one-story shapes, low-pitched roofs with modern to wide eave overhang, and broad, rambling facades. Carports, picture windows, and cast iron column supports distinguish the Ranch style. Developed in the mid-1930s, this style was influenced by Spanish Colonial, Craftsman, and Prairie modernism styles.



Aladdin Kit Houses provided plans for ranch homes, like this one promoted in 1954.

Cliff May, a Californian architect, is attributed with designing the first Ranch form in 1931. His refined Ranch models inspired other architects to design similar forms throughout the country.

An early, basic form of the Ranch style, known as the Transitional Ranch house, shared characteristics with the Minimal Traditional style. Also known as the Compact Ranch house, the Transitional Ranch form featured one-story horizontal massing, asymmetrical fenestration, low-pitched roofing with wide eave overhang, recessed entrance or small stoop, and an attached carport/garage. For Transitional Ranch houses, the length-to-width ratio is defined as less than two to one. Small and rectangular in form, the first Ranch houses typically contained a living-dining room, open kitchen, two to three bedrooms, and one bathroom.



An example of a Transitional Ranch house, ca. 1955, in the Inglewood Place Historic District

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Transitional Ranch houses gave way to Traditional Ranch houses that embodied the full linear form of the style. Later adaptations of the Ranch style introduced additional interior space with the family room gaining popularity in designs. The 1960s Ranch Rambler separated the private master suite from the children's rooms with public living, dining, and kitchen spaces. This reflected the importance of functionality in Ranch style houses and also created the signature rambling, elongated form. Innovative design elements, including patios with sliding glass doors, picture windows, and built-in planter boxes, were incorporated into the plans of Ranch houses. These elements emphasized

The linear form of the Ranch style can be seen in this Golf Street residence dating to 1951.



outdoor living in the Ranch style.

Nashville's Bluefields Historic District features fifty-one Ranch houses, with eighteen Transitional Ranches and thirty-three Traditional Ranches. Five of the houses reflect Colonial Revival influences in their door surrounds and façades. Another fine neighborhood example of Ranch style houses is Inglewood Place Historic District. Inglewood Place contains forty-eight Ranch houses, many of which fit into the category of Transitional Ranches. These

muted versions of the style mostly lack the attached garages and ornate elements usually associated with the Ranch house. Seventeen Ranch style residences in this historic district are small, modern duplexes with compact plans. Inglewood Circle North and South contain some typical examples of these compact Ranch houses popular in Nashville residential areas.

Split-Level

A multi-story modification of the Ranch style, the Split-Level style emerged full-fledge in the mid-1950s and remained popular through the 1970s. Commonly constructed of brick or a brick-and-wood combination, the Split-Level style contains a two-story wing attached at mid-height to a one-story section. A division of space based on function gives this house its distinctive multi-level appearance. These levels typically include a family den and garage on the lowest level, a kitchen, dining area, and living room on the middle level, and sleeping quarters in the upstairs level. In lieu of the carports often attached to Ranch homes, the Split-Level style includes enclosed garages with decorative doors facing the street.



Realistic Homes provided plans for Split Level style homes as early as 1956.

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The Split-Level style offered both builders and homeowners some advantages over the Ranch style. Often built into sloping land, Split-Level houses took up less property than their horizontal Ranch counterparts. The multiple levels allowed for larger houses on standard-sized lots. Although intended to efficiently divide spaces based on function, the up-and-down plan of Split-Levels complicated the use of the home. Architects largely disfavored the appearance and inefficient layout of Split-Level houses. Suburban developers, however, found this style of house helped create a spacious feel to neighborhoods while being a cheaper alternative to the Ranch style house.

The Cornell split-level house appeared in the 1961 Aladdin catalog.



Split-Level houses proved to be hugely popular in the Northeast, particularly in New York and New Jersey. They were far less common in southern cities like Nashville. The Split-Level form was widely discarded with the return in popularity of the two-story house form.

Shed

Referred to sometimes as a “Sea Ranch,” this geometric architectural style simultaneously developed in the early 1960s on both the West Coast of California and the East Coast of New York.

A multi-directional shed roof with secondary gabled roof forms creates a distinct geometric effect of colliding building blocks and lends the style its namesake. This style of house commonly features asymmetrical fenestration, natural wood siding or stone veneer, and prominent rooflines with minimal eave overhang.



Above is an example of a Shed Style home from Layson Group realtors.

Contemporary

This popular architect-designed house style, circa 1940 to 1980, is divided into subtypes based on roofs. The flat-roofed subtype is commonly known as the American International style. The other subtype, the gabled style, contains modernist influences from both the Craftsman and Prairie styles. Overhanging eaves and exposed roof beams distinguish the gabled style from its flat-roofed counterpart. The Contemporary style is a plain style without ornate traditional detailing. Wall cladding ranges from wood and brick to stone. Most Contemporary style houses tend to be one or one-and-one-half story.

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IDENTIFYING STYLES



The Martin House exemplifies the Contemporary style in Nashville.

The Contemporary style displays simple, geometric massing. De-emphasized entrances combine with unadorned facades to create a plain exterior. Exposed post-and-beam construction mixed with natural building materials integrates the house into the surrounding landscape. The use of large windows and sliding glass doors on the rear elevation further unifies the indoor living space with the outdoors.

SENSITIVE REHABILITATION

The general idea when rehabilitating a post-war house, or any house, is to create a comfortable, livable environment, compatible with the lifestyle of the present, while retaining its architectural character – that which makes it and its neighbors an important document of our past. The National Park Service defines rehabilitation as a “process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features, which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.”

While the terms “restoration” and “reconstruction” imply a somewhat rigid depiction of a specific period, as with a historic house museum, rehabilitation simply suggests sensitivity to the historic integrity of the property.”

For most people, a period restoration is neither financially feasible nor practical. What makes sense in most cases is a sensitive, careful rehabilitation. Homeowners within historic and conservation zoning districts must apply for permits through the Metro Historical Commission and follow specified design guidelines.

In planning a rehabilitation, one must determine the architectural character of the house. This is largely a matter of architectural style but goes beyond style alone. Character also involves the relationship of the house to the street, its yard, and to surrounding structures. These relationships combine with architecture style to create the character of the street, and streets form the character of the entire neighborhood.

ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

In determining architectural character, it is helpful to look at a house as two layers. The first is the structure itself: the walls, openings for windows and doors, the configuration of the roof and chimneys. These constitute the basic form of the house. They form the core to which finish materials are applied. The final appearance of the house depends heavily on its basic form. In planning rehabilitation, priority should be given to maintaining the basic form or returning to the original form if alterations have been made.

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ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

The second layer consists of finishing materials, both functional and decorative. This includes visible masonry, siding, roof materials, doors and window sashes, and all sorts of decorative trim. The entrance, whether defined by a porch or a simplified decorative surround, is also of importance to the character of the house.

Finishing materials are of secondary importance only in that they are applied to the basic form and are in that sense dependent upon it. If lost or altered, finish treatments can usually be returned to original configuration with a great deal less trouble and expense than can the basic form, yet their importance to the character of the house should not be underestimated.

SIDING & FINISHING MATERIALS

During World War II, the rationing of certain materials led to the development of new, non-traditional materials. The post-war construction boom then incorporated these new fireproof and energy efficient materials into residential architectural design. Aluminum, concrete block, fiberboard, fiberglass, glass block, simulated stone, plywood, and plastics were all new types of materials employed in post-war construction.

In addition to innovative new materials, traditional building materials continued to be used. Wood exterior treatment remained popular in the post-war period; however, by the

mid-1950s, brick veneer and stucco surpassed wood siding as the most popular material used on houses. Brick and stucco proved to be particularly popular in the South.

Aluminum

The war-time production of aluminum resulted in a large stockpile and manufacturing facilities that boasted its use in post-war residential design. This lightweight material, marketed as weather-proof, fireproof, and vermin-proof, became a popular medium for siding as well as doors and windows. By 1960, over three million homes contained aluminum clapboard siding.

Simulated Stone

This imitation stone material mimics the look of masonry. Simulated stone often appeared as a façade treatment in post-war houses. This type of material could be manufactured on-site and applied to the exterior of houses for a quick cosmetic update. Relatively inexpensive, simulated stone appealed to middle-class Americans desiring to make their houses look more prominent and grander. Different simulated stone products, such as Perma-Stone, peaked by the 1950s and were eventually replaced by aluminum and vinyl siding.

Brick Veneer

As an expensive building material, brick was often only used as an accent or veneer for Minimal Traditional homes. Ranch style houses commonly featured brick veneer among other cladding materials to achieve a certain aesthetic appearance.

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SIDING & FINISHING MATERIALS

Fiberboard

This sheet building material, frequently referred to as Masonite, combines wood fiber with vegetable fiber to form a wood building material. Insulation board, medium density fiberboard, and hardboard are three types of fiberboard. Asbestos, asphalt, and additional materials were often mixed with the fibers to create stronger, more resistant fiberboard. Fueled by the post-war housing crisis, fiberboard manufacturers mass-produced their products to meet the high demand. The reveal of the lap siding was often greater, typically 7” to 10” reveals, than earlier styles that had only 3” to 5” reveals.

REMOVAL OF MATERIALS

Removing features of a house that are not original is usually an appropriate treatment and often, but not always, a desirable course of action. Careful thought should be exercised before removing anything. Consider, for example, rooms that have been added to the rear of a house in recent years. The addition is not especially compatible with the style of the original house, but it is not visible from the street and does little to compromise the character of the house. If the space is needed inside and the addition is structurally sound, it would be foolish to remove it.

REPLACING WHAT’S MISSING

It is always appropriate to restore missing parts of a house if two things are known: first, that the feature being restored was indeed there originally, and second, what the feature looked like. Ideally, everyone would have an old photograph or original architectural plans as a guide in replacing missing parts of the house. This is rarely the case, however, and some degree of educated guesswork is often necessary in replacing what is missing. Because of the simplicity of much of the post-war housing designs and their lack of front porches, property owners are often tempted to add conjectural features such as a Craftsman style porch or Victorian decorative trim. This would be inappropriate. Since the forms of these eras are different, the post-war home often looks like a poor imitation of an earlier style rather than proudly speaking for its own time period when elements of another era or added.

Any rehabilitation, no matter how careful, will involve not only changing the present appearance of the house but also making some changes from what is known or believed to be its original appearance. This is fine if changes are made in a way that is sensitive to the architectural character of the house. Change is not inherently bad, but it is important to avoid insensitive change.

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WINDOWS

In 1950, wood window framing comprised nearly 70 percent of new house window types. Steel windows, the second most popular window frame material in 1940, had dropped behind aluminum in popularity by the mid-1950s. Aluminum became a popular building material used in horizontal slide, awning, and jalousie windows of the Post-War period. Two types of windows, double-hung and casement, continued to be mainstays in house design.

Long bands of windows framed in wood, steel, and aluminum echoed the horizontal form of the Ranch style house. The iconic three-part picture window with a large central pane of fixed glass and flanking sidelights stood as a character-defining feature for Ranch houses. Sliding glass doors and large windows units in post-war housing styles bridged the divide between indoor and outdoor living. Clerestory panels or bands under rooflines also promoted a sense of privacy for occupants. This use of windows reinforced the schism between private and public space.

Shutters and Awnings

Both shutters and awnings were common during the post-war period. Shutters appear in Minimal Traditional, Ranch, and Split-Level style houses. The type of shutters used in mid-century houses served a purely decorative function. Often they were applied directly to the wall, had no hinges and were too narrow to cover the window opening. Masonry accents often took the place of shutters to enhance mid-century facades. Lacking significant roof overhang, Minimal Traditional style homes often incorporated awnings of metal or fabric to shield against the elements.

ENTRYWAYS

The post-war period witnessed the large-scale removal of front porches from residential design. Given the new emphasis on the back and side yards, elaborate front doors and large porches were uncommon in post-war housing. Rear patios instead became popular as the porch shifted to the rear of the house. As hyphens between the carports and houses, breezeways were enclosed with screen and used as side porches in mid-century houses. These houses generally featured small entry-way stoops, inset entrances, or partial-width porches. The plain façade of Minimal Traditional homes maintained simplicity through the use of stoops and inset entrances. Elements of the Tudor Revival style could be seen in the popularity of arched doorways with steeply pitched porch rooflines.

With the introduction of the Ranch style, slab-on-grade, thin columns, and narrow metal supports became popular entry features in the South. Ivy patterns and geometric-shaped designs often adorned wrought iron porch supports. Stoops also allowed for more decorative design with the incorporation of small terraces and floral planters. The most common material used for mid-century porches was poured concrete.



This 1971 Sterling House showcases hallmarks of the Ranch style, including ornamental porch columns and a picture window.

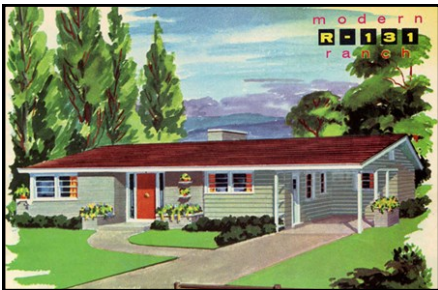
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GARAGES

The carport and garage evolved in house design to accommodate mid-century automobile culture. Whereas garages had once been detached from the main house structure, architects started to incorporate the garage into house designs. The horizontal appearance of Ranch style houses allowed for the addition of garages or carports attached to the side façade. First used in Prairie School architecture, carports did not become common until the post-war period. Carports blended well with modern house styles and tended to be a cheaper alternative to garages. Two types of carports, attached and freestanding, appeared throughout the nation. Attached carports connected at the house's end. Both types of carports used materials that blended with the house design.



An attached carport appears in this 1956 National Plan Service Catalog illustration.

The location of new garages and carports varies based on the style of house. For Minimal Traditional houses, a detached structure at the rear of the house is appropriate. For Ranch style houses, they can either be detached or attached to the side façade. It is important to place new garages or carports in a

location appropriate to the historic setting of the house. Architectural style, orientation, setback, and relationship to the residence should all be considered.

ROOFS

The roof is functionally one of the most important elements of the house and often the first to need rehab attention. Little can be done to the rest of the house if the roof is not sound. The roof is also of great visual significance. The plan, outline, pitch, and height of the roof make the framework to which roofing material is applied and are basic to the visual character of the entire house. In most cases, the roof configuration is original and should be retained. Any additions to the house or changes made in the roof itself should not seriously interfere with the roof configuration as seen from the street.

Roof Materials & Shapes

During the Post-war period, asphalt shingles accounted for the most common roofing material in the United States. Post-war housing styles contain a variety of roof shapes. The most common roof style for mid-century homes is a low-pitch hipped, or side-gabled, roof. This creates the signature long, low roof profile often associated with mid-century houses. Minimal Traditional style houses often feature cross-gable or cross-hip roofs. The roof overhang varies based on style with Minimal Traditional houses containing closed overhangs and Ranch style houses having open overhangs. The roofs of Contemporary style houses typically featured flat or gabled forms with wide overhanging boxed eaves. The sloping, multi-directional roofs of Shed houses contained minimal eave overhang.

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ADDING ON

At times it is necessary to add on to an old house to create more space or to make existing space more functional. All through history, houses have grown in successive stages as changing needs demanded. Many old houses in Nashville already have one or more additions, some dating from early in the history of the house. There is nothing harm in adding on if it is done with care and sensitivity to the architectural character of the original design.

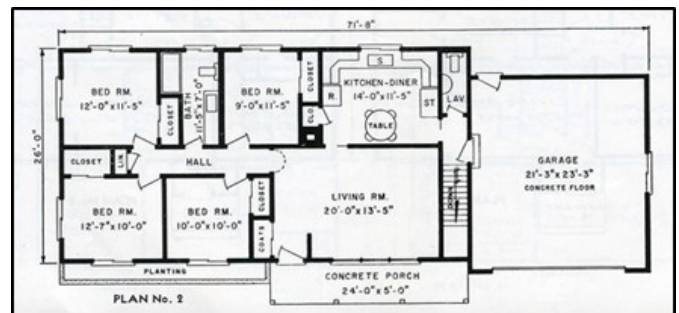
There are two general rules to follow. First, the addition should not compromise the integrity of the principal façade of the house. The principal façade is architecturally the most important and is a vital component of the character of the entire street. It should be preserved if possible. In most cases, this means an addition should be at the rear of the house, not visible from the front. In the case of a corner house, an addition to the rear would of course be visible, but the principal façade need not be affected. In the case of post-war housing, however, many of the home designs were kits or pattern book designs with different “add-ons” available. Additional lateral wings, usually just one room and shorter than the main form of the house, were available and therefore can sometimes be appropriate as additions for Minimal Traditional or Ranch styles.

Second, the addition should be a contemporary design distinguishable from the original structure. Additions that imitate the design of the original house blur the line between old and new. Perceiving successive stages of a house is important today and

will become more so as those who come after us will study our ways of life by looking at our buildings. The historic value of an old house is best protected when the addition is readily distinguishable from the original. With the careful use of materials, scale, and color, such an addition can be a harmonious partner of the older parts of the house.

INTERIOR

The primary focus of this pamphlet has been the exterior of post-war houses. The exterior, especially the street façade, is the part that is seen by the public and that the owner, in a sense, shares with the public. It is generally held, therefore, that maintaining historical accuracy is much more important on the exterior of a house than on the interior, the private preserve of its occupants.



House plans from mail-order catalogs offer a glimpse into the interior layout and design specifications for post-war housing. The illustration above features the Clinton.

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INTERIOR

The interior layout of Minimal Traditional houses followed the two-zone distinction between public/communal areas and private areas (bedrooms). Ranch style houses introduced a new three-zone layout that distinguished among private areas, formal living space, and informal living space. Bedrooms remained removed from public areas by hallways. Living rooms and other public areas were arranged at the front of the house while less formal spaces were situated at the rear.

Open concept planning reduced the amount of interior walls and led to houses with fewer rooms. Post-war housing interiors often assigned multiple purposes to rooms, such as the family room (i.e. recreation room, game room, den). Given the importance of the living room, formal entry ways were largely abandoned to increase the living space available. A visual separation was achieved between the entrance and living room with the strategic placement of decorative shelves, planters, and interior screens.

The kitchen proved to be an important room and selling point in post-war houses. The design of post-war kitchen emphasized efficiency, lighting, and modern appliances (e.g. dishwashers and garbage disposals). In order to open up the kitchen, designers added a dining room space in the kitchen area. The combination dining room – kitchen eliminated the need for a formal dining room area in post-war houses.

The bathroom also gained attention in post-war housing design. Innovations, such as fluorescent lighting, towel warmers, in-wall hampers, and vanities with storage, were incorporated into the

standard design of post-war bathrooms. The addition of second bathrooms or powder rooms enabled homeowners to keep their personal bathrooms private from guests.

The general rule for interiors is not to do anything to a room that would seriously hamper a period restoration in that room if an owner should desire one. This means retaining, or repairing if necessary, original wall surfaces, doors, woodwork, mantels, floor surfaces and hardware. All this may not be possible in a given room, but it should be the goal. This approach allows for any style of decorating, but retains the basic features of the room necessary for an accurate period restoration.

LANDSCAPING

Though the average old house owner cannot logically be expected to maintain a period restoration of the grounds of his or her house, a few historic notes about landscaping may be of use.

The post-war housing period witnessed the widespread development of suburban planned neighborhoods. Since developers planted grass to enhance the landscaping of new subdivisions, the manicured lawn became a potent symbol for post-war communities.

Around the mid-twentieth century, backyards took on new meaning as recreation space. Backyard gardens, patios, and planters helped extend the indoor living space into the backyard. The horizontality of the Ranch style house produced large front and rear yards; this, combined with large picture windows and other architectural elements, helped bridge the indoors with the outdoors.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This pamphlet is designed to acquaint the owner of a historic Nashville house with the basic considerations involved in a careful rehabilitation, rather than to provide detailed technical information on the rehabilitation process itself. The Metropolitan Historical Commission has a long list of information on rehabilitation-related topics. The staff is willing to make site visits and offer additional advice. For further assistance, call 615-862-7970.

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