The American Ranch House: Traditional Design Method in Modern Popular Culture

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The ranch house, as it developed in American suburban communities after World War II, is a distinct hybrid. On the one hand, it represented an embodiment in physical form of the traditional values of those middle-class Americans who freely chose it for a living environment, and for whom it represented the fulfillment of social ideals. On the other, the ranch house cannot be said to be a "traditional" building type in the historical vernacular sense. It owed much to both modern aesthetic ideas and modern means of production. At a time when single-family homeownership is becoming an increasingly global aspiration, it is important to understand how the ranch house provided a reconciliation between the forces of vernacularism and modernism.

Vernacular design has broadly been interpreted as a method of translating traditional values and ideas into architectural form. In order to accomplish construction projects, vernacular builders, past and present, work primarily within local or regional traditions, and only initiate change within the framework of preexisting solutions. Although change is continuous in vernacular architecture, the idea of change is not elevated or sanctified as a goal in the design process, as it frequently is in contemporary modern design. The maintenance of tradition in vernacular architecture and its popular culture should be seen as the pragmatic bedrock and dominant ideology underlying the process of vernacular building.

In this article I examine the American ranch house as a product of a traditional design method conducted within the socio-cultural framework of the modern suburban commu-
nity. The findings are primarily derived from examples of American suburban housing constructed between 1950 and 1970. During that time the ranch house constituted the model for a major portion of new American housing. While demonstrative of both recent and current American attitudes toward residential living, the study of the ranch house is also revealing of major global trends, for better or worse, toward single-family residences. An attempt will be made to demonstrate that, in the case of the ranch house, much of the normal vernacular commitment to tradition in the design and building process has been maintained, but it has been transformed by the advent of modern, non-vernacular ideas and techniques. I will first analyze the suburban American ranch house by emphasizing those characteristics which mark its vernacularism. Then I will analyze the ranch house by emphasizing those characteristics which mark, for lack of a better word, its modernism.

THE AMERICAN RANCH HOUSE

The ranch house is also known by several regional names, such as the “suburban tract house” or the “contractor’s ranch,” but the word “ranch” captures the essential ideas behind this house type. The name is derived from the Spanish word rancho, or small farm. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the concept of the ranch was popularized at all levels of American society as one aspect of a widespread fascination with the culture and myth of the American west. By the early twentieth century the image of the western ranch had become embedded in a popular American ideal of romantic outdoor living. Even though suburban ranch-house living was quite different from the reality of working-ranch life, it was this image of western outdoor living that became associated with suburban, one-story housing following World War II.

Ranch houses were built in all regions of the U.S. from the late 1940s, and such houses continue to be built today in various forms (FIG.1). They have become one of the most common forms of American popular architecture, estimated to number between 5 and 15 million units depending on which of the various definitions and sub-categories of this house type one uses. Except for the clear image of the western ranch, the historical sources for the suburban ranch house, like most recent examples of popular American housing, are not easily summarized. The builders of ranch houses borrowed and combined ideas and traditions from a wide range of sources. These included previous American vernacular housing like the bungalow and the original western ranch, World War II mass housing designs (and particularly the industrial building techniques associated with them), housing examples of the American Prairie School (particularly the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright), the image and mythology of the American west, and the various ideas concerning mass housing associated with international modernism. In blending these complex sources, the ranch house emerged in the late 1940s out of a residential building context which included several competing, premodern house types (such as the American colonial house) to become the most popular form of American housing by the 1950s. Although there were a variety of plan types and regional styles, most ranch houses shared basic similarities, so that it is today possible to discuss an archetypal model.

THE PLAN AND THE ORGANIZATION OF ROOMS

The spatial organization of the ranch house followed a strict three-part plan, being divided into areas for the car, for living, and for sleeping (FIG.2). On the exterior, however, the ranch was usually designed to minimize the expression of interior function, so that the whole unit was most often expressed as a continuous volume. While projections from this main volume were not unusual and occurred more frequently after 1960, the majority of first-generation, pre-1960 ranch houses appeared low and box-like, as if cut from a unified mold.

The spatial order of public rooms in the ranch house, including the living room, dining room and kitchen, were influenced by an “open plan” concept, about which much has been
written in the American architectural literature. In actual practice, the degree of openness in the ranch-house plan was quite restricted, and was usually limited to a degree of open connection between the kitchen and dining room, or between the dining room and the living room (FIG. 3). Still, this sense of openness in the plan of the major living areas was significantly different from the previous housing experience of many of the early inhabitants of this house type. What made the openness of the ranch especially different was the stark, stripped-down appearance of the living areas, which offered minimal trim, wall-to-wall carpeting, and low ceilings. In comparison to previous traditions in American vernacular housing, these minimalist qualities came to be associated with the image of efficient, sensible, modern living that was the overwhelming choice of Americans buying new homes after World War II. This quality of minimalism should be considered one of the chief aspects of modern thinking in the design of the ranch house.

Despite the influence of the open plan, the pattern of living for the inhabitants of ranch houses followed a traditional, kitchen-dominated life-style and emphasized the separation of formal and utilitarian spaces. Both these features of the ranch house were consistent with the life patterns of lower-and middle-class Americans historically and presently. The key component of spatial usage was a family room, or TV room, which adjoined the kitchen and provided a dual focus for family activities. The family recreation room allowed most daily activities to be removed from the seldom-used living room, which became the place of formal order for the entertainment of guests. While this separation of the formal living room and the utilitarian family room was not always achieved in earlier or smaller ranches, it represented one of the major societal goals of the occupants of later ranch houses. Such an ideal of separation had appeared in the patterns of spatial organization and family usage in American vernacular housing at the beginning of the twentieth century. But it was only fully achieved for many Americans in the ranch house after World War II.

Another key feature of the ranch house was the place it accorded the automobile. This was clearly evident in the large garage each house contained and in the visually dominant garage door which faced the public road (FIG. 4). Before 1960 the ranch-house garage was a smaller, more modest structure, built for one car; but in later versions it expanded greatly, often being sized for two large cars, and including additional areas for storage. The full mass of the garage was often incorporated within the major volume of the house, and its size (approaching one-third of the total house volume) attested to the physical and symbolic importance of the garage to the inhabitants of the ranch house. Even the path from the street to the front door, long a distinct feature in the landscape pattern of American vernacular houses, was bent toward the all-important car and its driveway. From a historical perspective, the accentuation of the ranch-house garage marked the elevation of the garage from the subordinate role it had played in the early twentieth century (when it was normally a detached structure) to a space of central importance in the lives of suburban Americans after World War II.

On the inside of the one-story ranch house a basic division of space took place between sleeping and living areas. Bedrooms were organized for privacy, and were always strictly separated from more public rooms. Frequently, a small corridor led to the bedrooms from the living room. The plan of the bedrooms clearly reflected both the most widespread pattern of family structure in the post-World War II era and the prevailing attitudes toward raising children. Thus, the largest bedroom was allocated to the two parents; it received the major closet...
spaces, occupied the most desirable location (usually facing the private back yard), and, if possible, was given a separate bath or lavatory. The remaining bedrooms were divided among the children, and although a separate bedroom for each child was a widely shared societal goal, separation by gender into two children’s bedrooms was the most typical arrangement.

In terms of siting, the ranch house was conceived as a one-story structure whose entire volume sat low to the ground and assumed a stiffly ordered, frontal position in relation to the street. The basic rectangular form of the ranch sat by itself on a machine-graded landscape, scraped clean of existing vegetation and then replanted and renaturalized with grass and shrubs. In early ranch houses, the basic relationship between the house and its landscape was one of strict control, emphasizing the desire of its inhabitants to live in natural surroundings yet dominate and control the setting. This followed a long-established American folk tradition of strict control and regulation of nature, although after the 1960s the emergence of greater landscape variety and abundance became more widely accepted.

**PATTERNS OF AESTHETICS**

Although the prototypical ranch house may be analyzed from a number of perspectives, I will here examine one in particular: that of aesthetics—or why the ranch house looks the way it does (FIG. 5).

The exterior of the typical ranch house was visually modest compared to previous and subsequent twentieth-century American vernacular house types. It relied on simple, repeatable rules to create an aesthetic vocabulary. For example, windows were frequently sized according to the importance of the room and were often centered or evenly spaced on interior walls. Architectural detail or style was sparsely applied, usually only to the formal entry and major windows of the living room. A variety of local and regional architectural stylistic details were commonly employed: Tudor, Spanish, colonial, etc. (FIG. 6). It is interesting that this seeming eclecticism of style consistently evokes cynicism and wrath from architects and critics of popular house styles. But these objections are usually more evident of a disdain for popular culture than any actual analysis of ranch houses. Such critiques almost always disregard the value systems of the people who lived in such houses. The variety of styles applied to ranch houses should, in any case, not be overemphasized. In point of fact, the differences between one ranch house and another were never so great as to conceal a basic desire for visual and social conformity on the part of both owners and builders. Despite small differences in stylistic ornament, most ranch houses shared a uniform, minimalist, folk aesthetic, with applied touches of architectural style to express a minimum of occupant individualization.

What this minimal aesthetics of the ranch house expressed was a widely accepted attitude within popular culture toward the limitation of individual self-expression and the representation of a shared system of values within middle-class American society. Expressions of individualism in such an architectural context were certainly not out of place, but generally, self-expression was limited and channeled to specific, community-sanctioned areas of the composition: for instance, the style of the front door, the house color, the architectural details around windows, and the planting arrangements near the formal entry.

The issue of stylistic conformity in the ranch house and its relation to individuality and individual expression in popular culture needs to be carefully evaluated. The architectural style of the ranch house was minimal, but it was not unimportant. The ranch house expressed enough architectural style to demonstrate that its owners had made a choice of style, and therefore had knowledge of alternative aesthetics. But the severity of this expression and the overall tightness of its control also demonstrated that the owners had not adopted the rules of high-style aesthetics.
The aesthetic idea of the ranch house provided a concise ethical statement about the need to maintain a utilitarian attitude toward living. For example, the basic American vernacular characteristic of simplicity and repetition was conveyed in the ranch house's single, massive roof. The strict framework of the boxy volume and the overall minimization of architectural detail produced a similar effect. While such uniformity of expression was, and still is, criticized in architectural circles, it is evidence of an attitude toward aesthetics that characterizes most traditional vernacular environments. The critical difference between historic vernacular and current popular environments lies in the degree of choice manifest in the building decision process. In modern, popular environments such as ranch-house suburbs, the inhabitants had more freedom to choose a degree of minimalist individuality or self-expression. Yet there was never so much individuality as to challenge the consensus desire for collective unity.

THE MODERN, POPULAR RANCH HOUSE

Up to this point, I have explored some ideas and characteristics that mark the vernacular quality of the ranch house. But this is not the only framework from which one can analyze this example of modern popular architecture. The ranch house is also a modern house and a product of a civilization that has fully exploited industrial, capitalistic, commercial and democratic opportunities.

From a broad historical, architectural and cultural perspective, the ranch house can be seen to mark an important stage in the development of the American middle class. Among the environmental goals of this class are to achieve an egalitarian, self-supportive environment and a self-actualizing life-style. At the same time, single-family homeownership within a natural setting has long been a cherished ideal of American life at all economic and social levels. It was not until the 1950s that these ideals became fully feasible for the vast majority of nonfarm American families. It was with the modern ranch house that the twin goals of individual homeownership and life within a natural setting were achieved by the majority culture.

The ranch house was clearly the people's choice (FIG. 7). It is revealing of the elitist nature of most ranch-house critiques that evidence of the degree of such choice has been, and continues to be, denied. Indeed, there has probably never been a type of popular housing that has been so freely chosen by so many people. Certainly, there have never been so many inhabitants of a culture with so many real housing choices and so much real control over the built and natural environment. As a freely chosen product of modern American suburban culture, the ranch house accurately embodies the most sought-after characteristics of American residential environments. These reflect the following principles: 1) a detached, single-family dwelling; 2) homeownership by the occupant; 3) the location of the building in nature (or the illusion of nature); 4) the separation of the house from the workplace; and 5) owner participation and control of local schools and government.

All these principles — except perhaps for the long-standing American preference for a home in a natural setting — are present in the ideals of residents of suburban developments worldwide. And it would be interesting to compare these American criteria with the criteria of other population groups. Of course, the ultimate wisdom and environmental consequence of suburban, single-family housing — including problems of energy and material waste, low density, and lack of cultural diversity — may justifiably be of concern. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the ranch house for the choice it represented, because such analysis may provide insights into the problems and possibilities of building within modern popular culture — for all peoples.

At the same time that the ranch house represents the embodiment of the vernacular ideals of its inhabitants, however, it should also be recognized as a highly modern form of housing, principally because its construction vocabulary and design methods were substantially different from historical vernacular houses worldwide. The components of the ranch house were almost all mass-produced, with practically no local contribution. As such, the house was clearly a product of a modern commercial-industrial economy, despite the persistence of local builders who assembled it in traditional piecemeal vernacular fashion.

But perhaps what was most modern about the ranch house was the complete absorption of the car and its attendant life-style.
into the living space and fabric of the house. On the exterior, the ranch house conveyed the dominant expression of the car through a large, aggressive garage opening. But the most important impact of the car in the lives of the residents of ranch houses was not aesthetic but social. The car culture of the suburban ranch house has been blamed for many societal ills, such as the isolation of the family from social contact. But the car, aided by the telephone and the television, in fact, initiated many new forms of cultural communication. Critics may debate the quality of that communication, but they should understand that the inhabitants of ranch houses were not an isolated folk. As many commentators on American life have observed, the car has been, for better or worse, one of the principal facilitators of self-expression, communication, and self-actualization in modern American society, and this effect was certainly evident in ranch-house suburbs. However repugnant it may be to American urban reformers, and to many of my architectural colleagues, the car, with all its attendant problems, has played a major role in the development of individual freedom and economic opportunity in modern American society. The ranch house is a clear product and summation of that process.

There are many further important characteristics of ranch houses that demonstrate the influence of modern, nonvernacular ideas. Unfortunately, space prevents me from developing them here. However, one significant issue should be noted. This is the relationship between the owner/purchaser and the builder/maker of the ranch house. At first glance, it might appear this relationship was radically different from owner-builder relationships in traditional vernacular environments. Many ranch houses, especially those in large housing developments, were made without direct contact between the future owner and the builder, and many ranch houses were constructed according to economic and industrial principles that served the interests of commercial speculation.

The general faults of this modern type of distribution system have been widely and justifiably criticized. They have, for example, resulted in many types of design failure and client disenfranchisement. But such failures were largely avoided in the case of the ranch house for several important reasons. Most significantly, the builder/developers of most ranch houses largely emerged from the same middle- to lower-middle-class culture as the owners, and they had similar value systems. Consequently, the houses they built were generally designed with a very high degree of owner-builder awareness, if not direct feedback. There is certainly no "modern" clash of values between the architect and the client in the ranch house.

Thus in the ranch house, even though the actual future owners may not have been known, the traditional vernacular commitment to close owner/builder cooperation was maintained. This was conducted, however, in a new mass-cultural manner. Such a modern/vernacular method did not depend on face-to-face contact between owner and builder. It did require, however, that builders kept a close eye on the housing market through a variety of modern communication methods such as surveys and magazines. Most importantly, it required that they cultivate a genuine respect for their clients’ values. Similar to vernacular builders, modern ranch-house builders shared a conservative approach to change, but they were also very alert to popular shifts in user tastes and to technological improvements. The key that has sustained this system of modern/vernacular communication remains shared values. Client and builder mutually reinforced each other, not by direct dialogue, but through modern, reciprocal communications leading to all-important mutual consensus.

**The Product of a Confident Culture**

This paper has not been intended as a justification for — or, worse, a glorification of — American values (FIG. 8). It is, I hope, an analysis of what happened and why it happened. That’s history. Whether the development of the ranch house as a building type was wise or not, or should serve as a model or not, is a matter that may be disputed. But it is always important to understand what happened and to be accurate about what happened from the perspective of the people who lived in a particular environment.

I hope I have presented a portrait of the ranch house that is not quite modern and not quite vernacular. In the ranch house, the traditional vernacular building wisdom remains, but much of the structure reflects the processes and products of a modern, industrialized civilization. Such a process is certainly
not evidence of a historic vernacular architecture or society. But the ranch house is also not modern in many of the standard ways that have come to be associated with the advent of modernism in Western capitalist, democratic societies.

This last important issue could be emphasized in many ways, but I will close with a final, perhaps controversial, thought. Despite elite polemics to the contrary, there did not seem to be a significant loss of confidence, spirituality, or traditional values on the part of the modern folk who inhabited these simple ranch houses. To their modern critics, these inhabitants may be labeled boorish, or unthinking, or just (interesting enough) common and middle-class. But the fact remains that the frequent anguish and loss of values associated with Western intellectual modernism does not seem particularly applicable to the original owners of ranch houses. Although the buildings and their communities were modest by most high-cultural standards, the ranch house was, internally and socially, a highly confident, self-assured house. It was also a product of confident, internally unified communities — however difficult this description may seem to those who, for various reasons, can only observe these communities from a great social and cultural distance.

REFERENCE NOTES

9. Because the modern construction characteristics of the ranch house might be widely known to readers of this article, I have not expanded upon this issue, although it is of extreme importance to the success and evaluation of the ranch house.