



HISTORIC PRESERVATION DIVISION

## **The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House**

**Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Ranch Houses in Georgia**

### **PART II: THE RANCH HOUSE IN AMERICA PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II**



**September 2011**

**Richard Cloues, Ph.D.**

*The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House* is about the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Ranch House in Georgia. It is presented in six parts.

**Part II (this part) explores the origins and early development of the Ranch House in American prior to World War II.**

Other parts of *The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House* tell other parts of the Ranch House story.

2



How did these remarkable new mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Ranch Houses come to be, in Georgia and elsewhere?

What is their history, their lineage, their architectural pedigree, so to speak?

3



Well -- the inspiration for the *mid-20<sup>th</sup>*-century Ranch House ...

4



was the *early 19<sup>th</sup>*-century vernacular residential architecture of California and the Southwest.

In other words, “real” ranch houses.

5



In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these old southwestern ranch houses were “discovered” (if you will) by artists, architects, photographers, writers, and tourists.

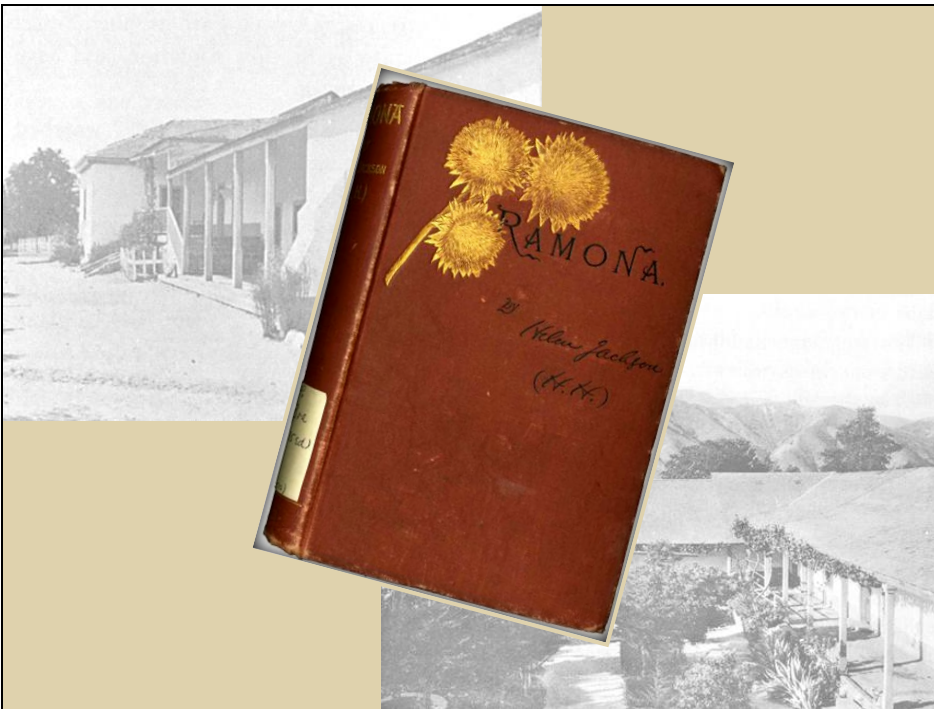


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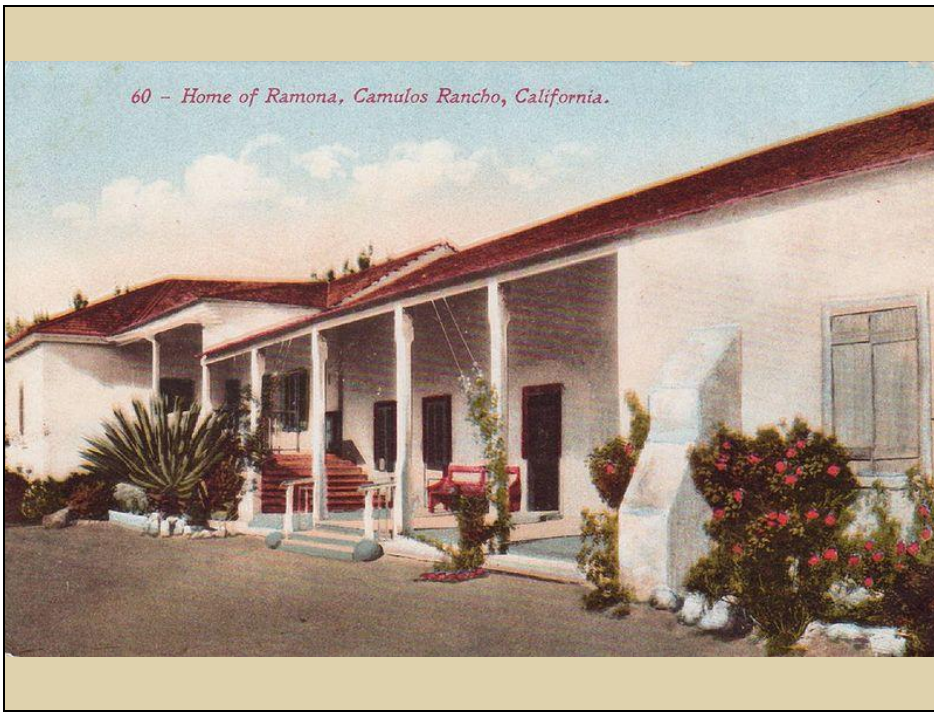
For example, this early 19<sup>th</sup>-century southern California courtyard ranch house ("Camulos Rancho") was "discovered" by the American novelist Helen Hunt Jackson ...

7



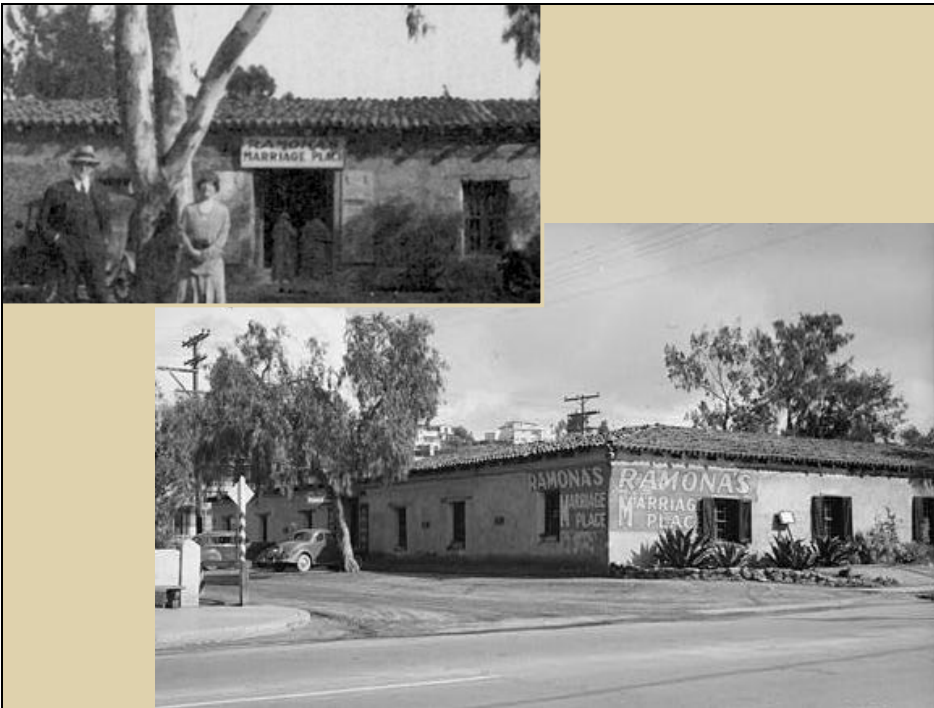
who then used it as the setting for her popular 1884 novel ("Ramona").

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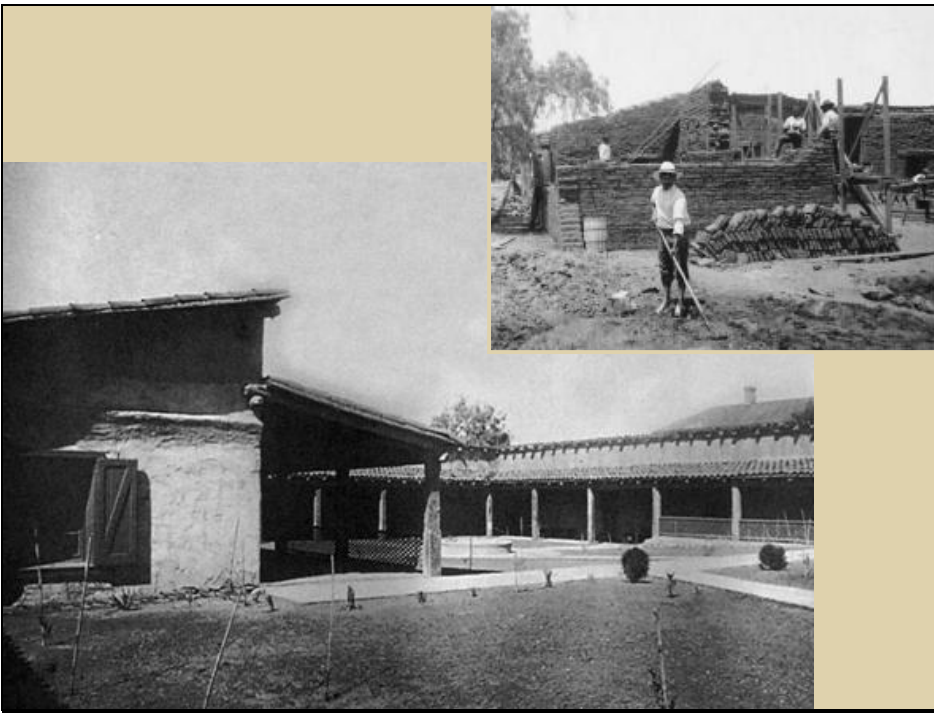
The novel's popularity brought tourists to the ranch who wanted to see the place where the fictional lead character was married.

9



In an interesting precursor to the "Gone with the Wind" phenomenon here in Georgia, where everyone wants their antebellum house to be the fictional "Tara," owners of other old California ranches self-declared theirs to be the "real" setting for Ramona's wedding.

10



This one (“Casa Estudillo”) was rather famously restored and re-opened for tourists in 1910 ...

bringing yet more attention to the old California ranch houses ...

11



and in the mid-1930s it was the subject of one of the first Historic American Buildings Survey recordation projects in California.



12

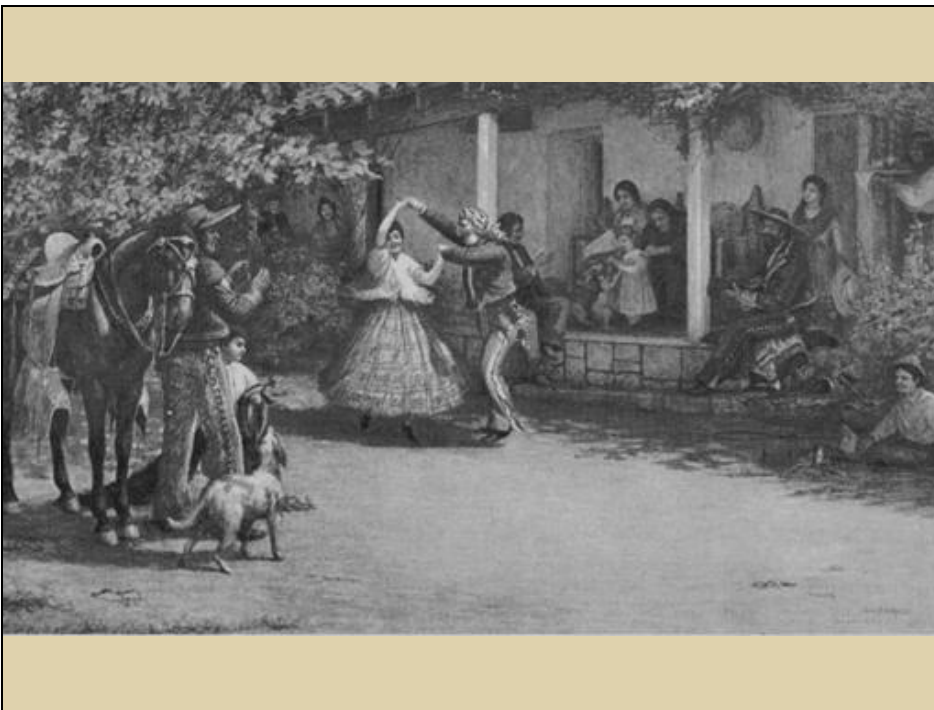


As these traditional Southwestern ranch houses were being “discovered,” the very term “California Ranch House” came into general circulation.

Here you can see it used on a postcard postmarked dated 1906 ...

and it was used by Henry Saylor, editor of “American Architect,” in his 1925 review of current trends in western architecture.

13

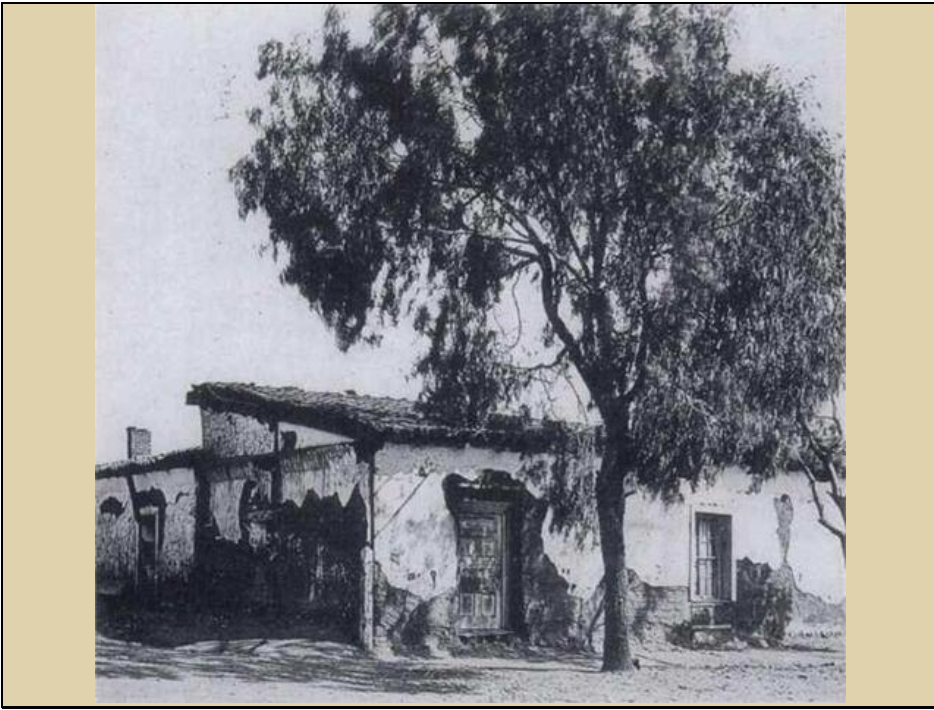


Something else that was “discovered” was the traditional southern California lifestyle --

casual, sociable, unpretentious, and to a large degree outdoors --

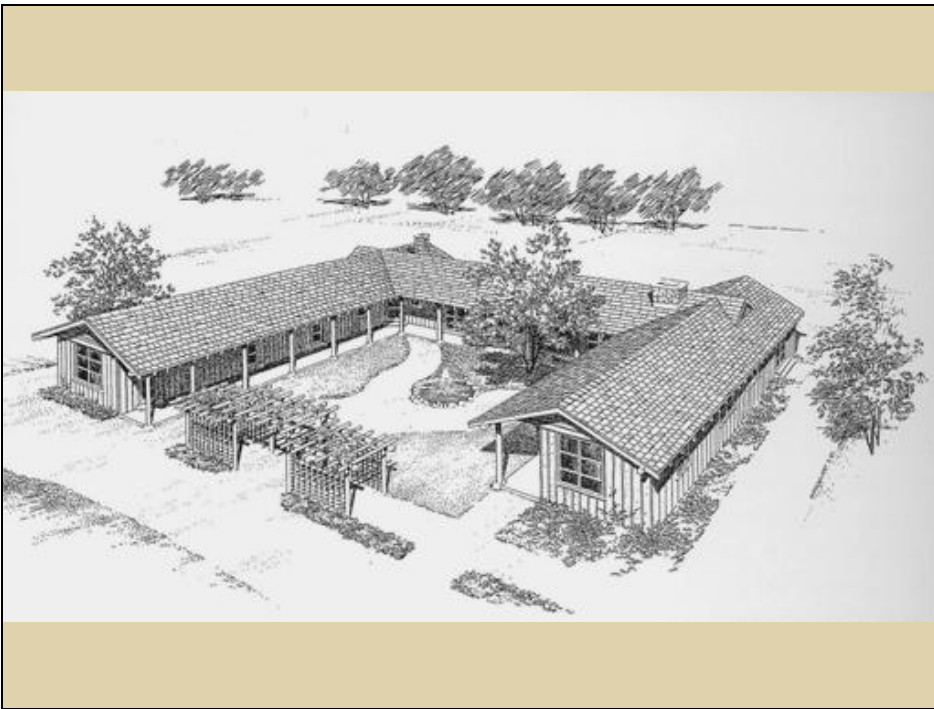
captured here in this turn-of-the-century painting.

14



Once these old southern California ranch houses had been "discovered," they inspired *new* house designs.

15



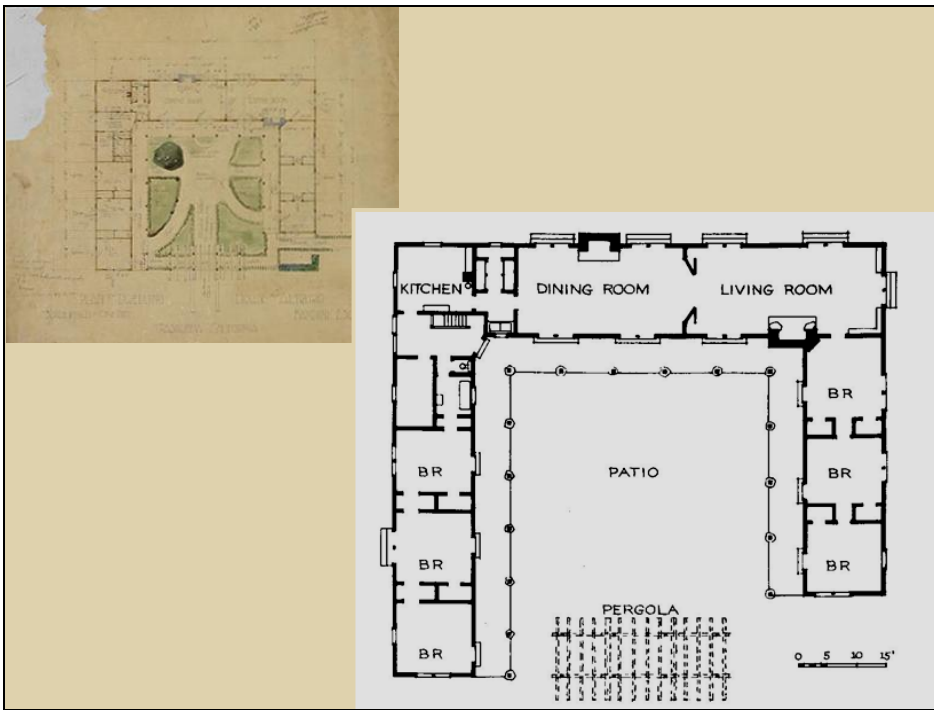
One of the first reincarnations was the 1903 Arturo Bandini House near Pasadena:

a brand-new Ranch House along the lines of the old courtyard ranch houses on California ranchos.

It was designed by the Greene Brothers, of Pasadena, who are better known for their Craftsman-style houses.



16



The owner, a retired electrical engineer whose family had lived in California for decades, wanted a new house reminiscent of his family's traditional southern California houses.

Here's the plan of the house, showing how the traditional courtyard arrangement was adapted for 20<sup>th</sup>-century living ...

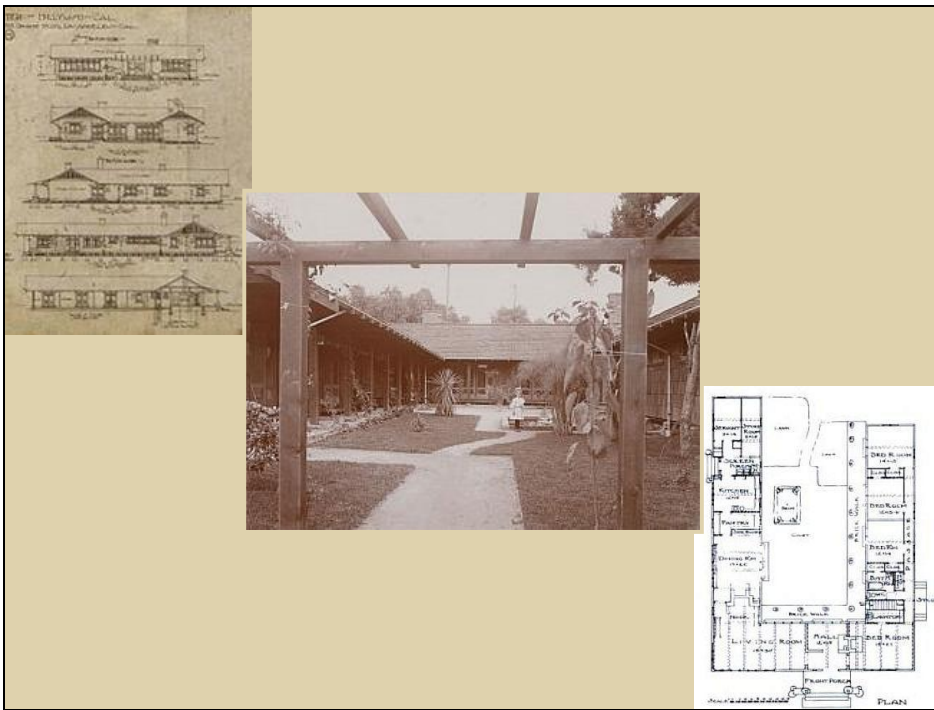
17



and here's a historic view of the courtyard with the new house owner in the hammock enjoying the California lifestyle.

(The Bandini house was demolished in the 1960s for a parking area, presaging the lyrics from Joni Mitchell's song: "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.")

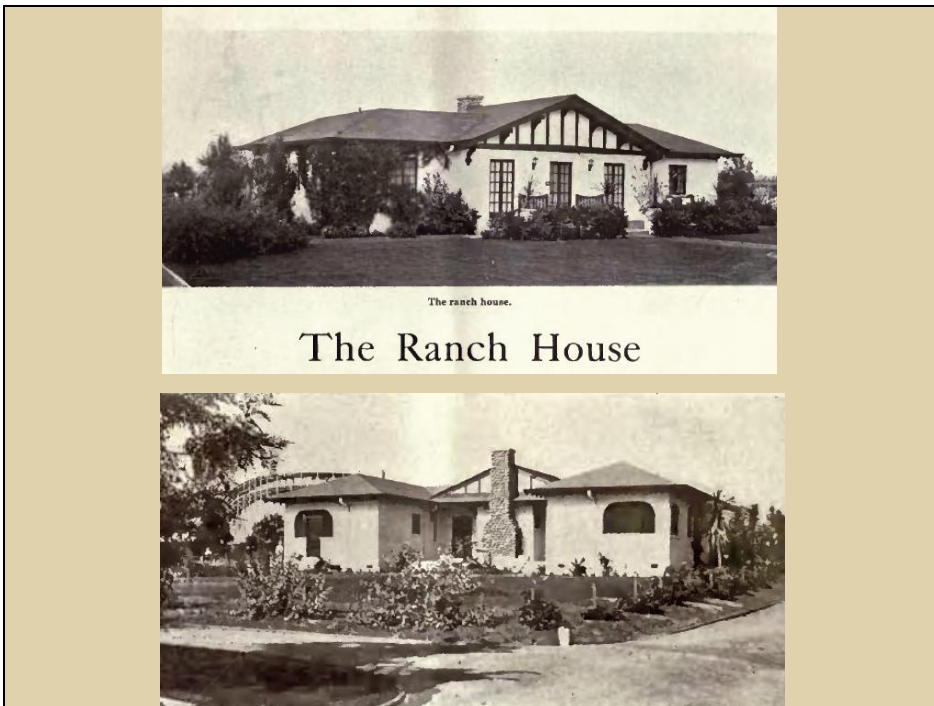
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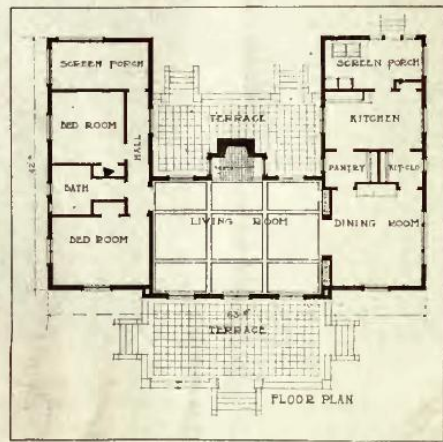
The Greene Brothers designed other California courtyard Ranch Houses before focusing on the Craftsman style houses for which they are best known today.

This Ranch House, also in Pasadena, was designed in 1904 for Mrs. Cora C. Hollister.

19



In 1915, a smaller version of the new California courtyard Ranch House was featured at the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal.



Although draped in the architectural details of the emerging Craftsman style, the house was designed around a truncated version of the traditional California courtyard.

# KEITH'S MAGAZINE

VOL. XXXIV

NOVEMBER, 1915

No. 5



The ranch house.

## The Ranch House

Model Farm Bungalow Shown at the Panama-California  
Exposition at San Diego

This new Ranch House received *national* attention when it was featured on the cover of this popular homebuilder's magazine.



22



The Gregory Farmhouse in central California is another well-known ranch-house reincarnation.

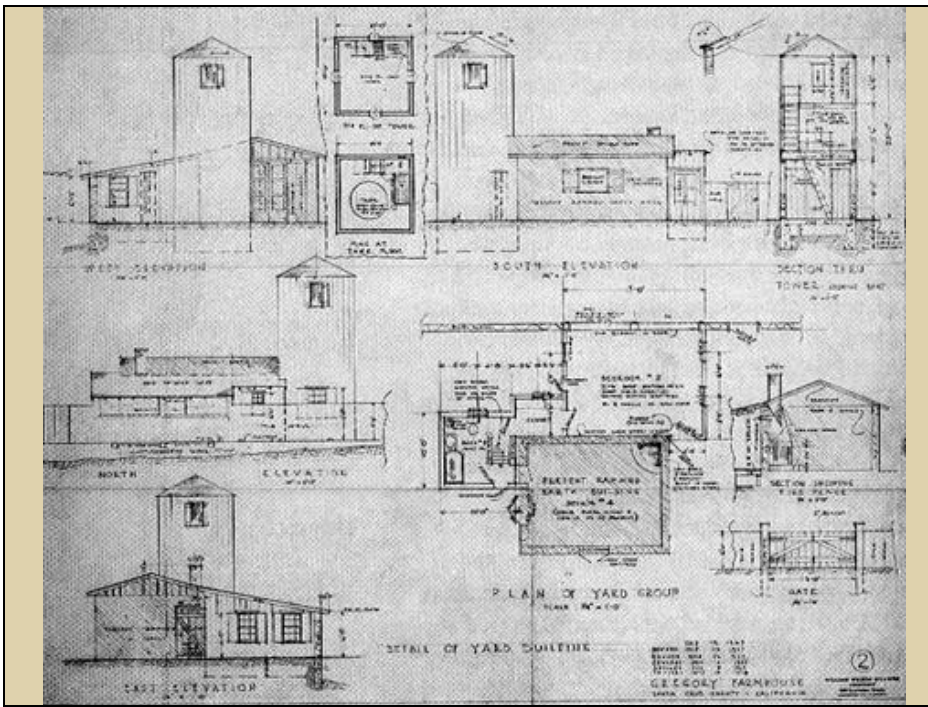
Designed and built in the late 1920s, its rustic qualities were quite intentional.

23



It was designed by a prominent San Francisco architect, William Wurster, as the home for a wealthy woman, Sadie Gregory.

24



Wurster prepared highly detailed architectural drawings specifying the exact degree of rusticity for this new Ranch House.

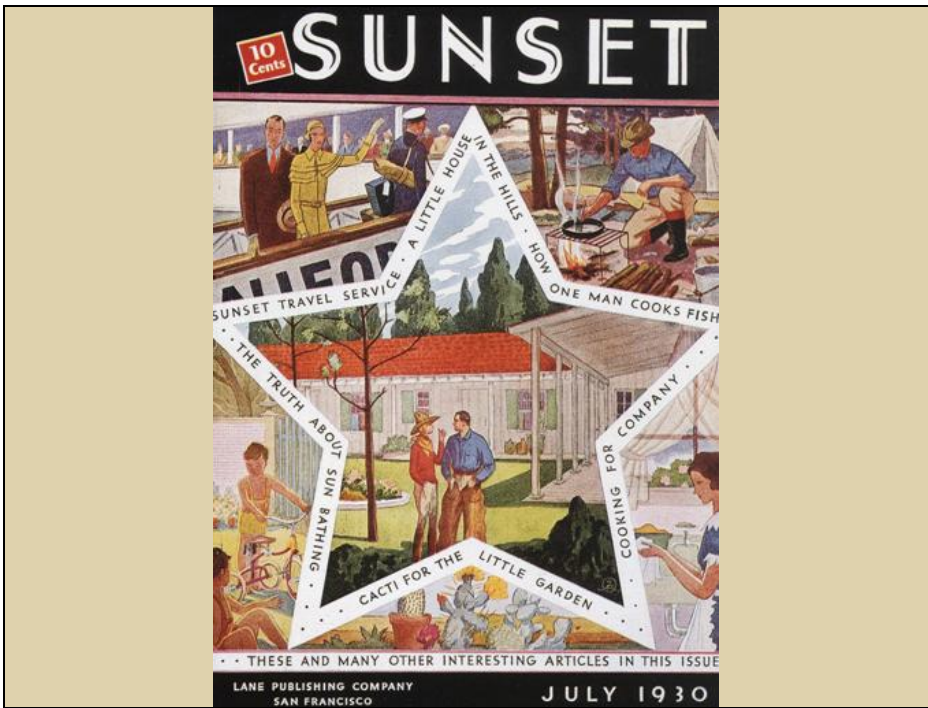
He called it “carpenter architecture.” Some disbelieving architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, dismissed it as nothing but “shacks and shanties ...”

25



and the architect’s wife, the famous city planner Catherine Bauer, joked that her husband was the only architect she knew who could make an \$80,000 house look like an \$8,000 house.

But it was just what Ms. Gregory had ordered.



The Gregory Farmhouse was featured dead-center on the cover of the July 1930 issue of *Sunset* magazine (a popular Southwester lifestyle magazine).

The magazine editors famously characterized its design as “*sophisticated rusticity*.”



Wurster went on to design a number of new Ranch Houses in a similar rustic mode. This one, from 1931, was the Santa Cruz home of the soon-to-be-famous landscape architect Thomas Church ...



28

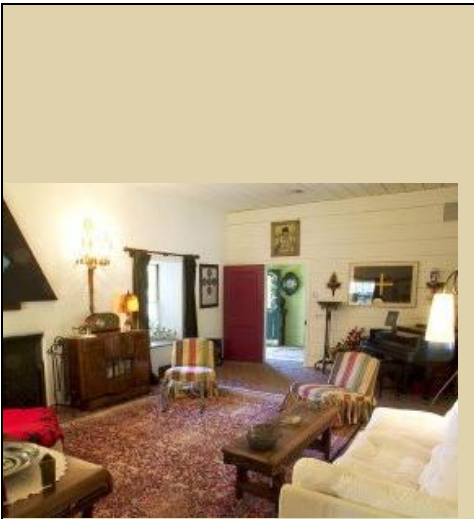


and this one, also from 1931, was the home of Marion Hollins, nationally renown woman golfer, who not only built this house but also a golf course and a golf course community known as Pasateimpo Estates outside San Francisco.



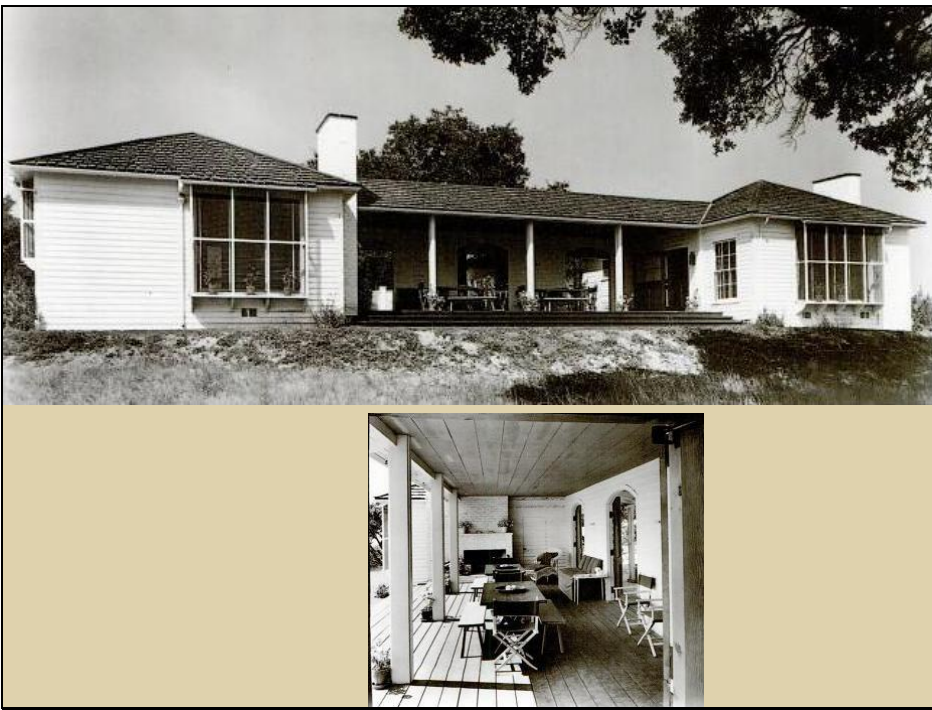
Photograph by Julian P. Graham

29



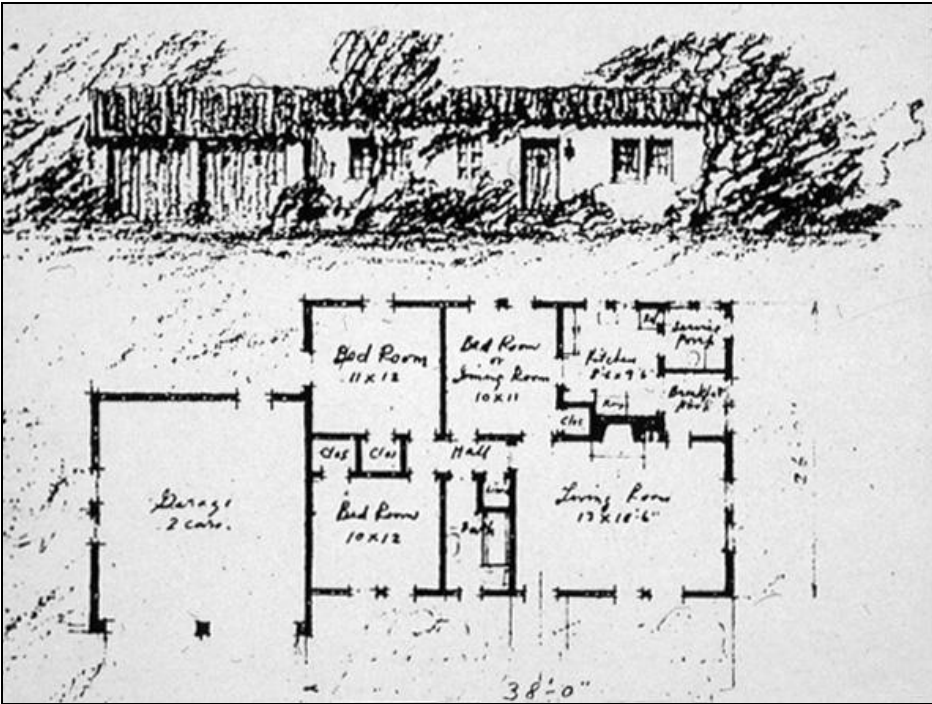
Here are two contemporary interior pictures of the Hollins house showing the rustic wood paneling and hardware.

30

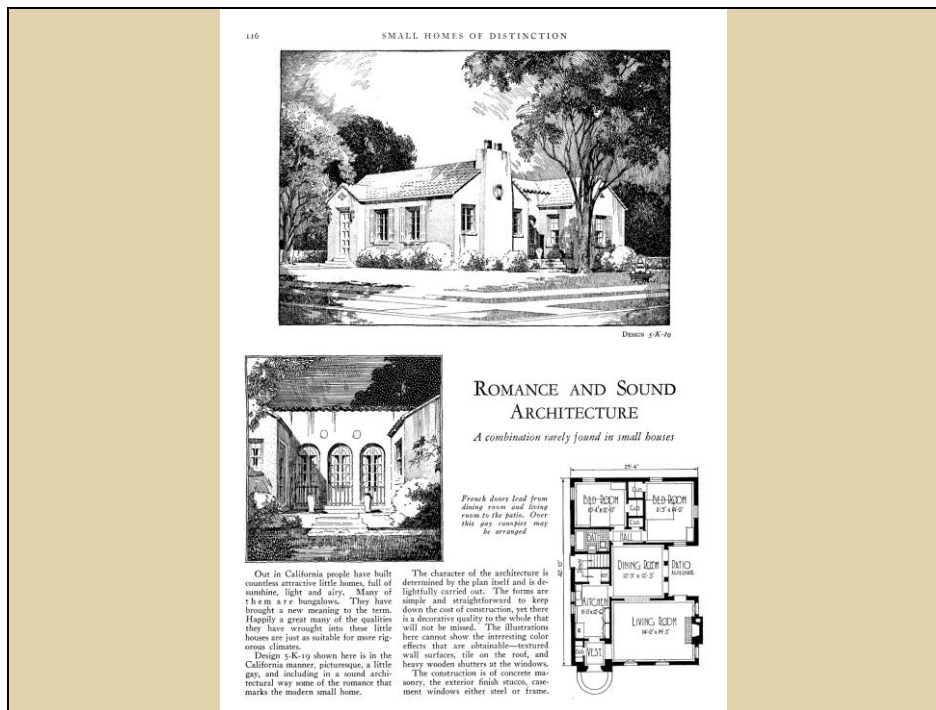


This is one of the houses that William Wurster designed for Marion Hollins' Pasatiempo Estates in the early 1930s.

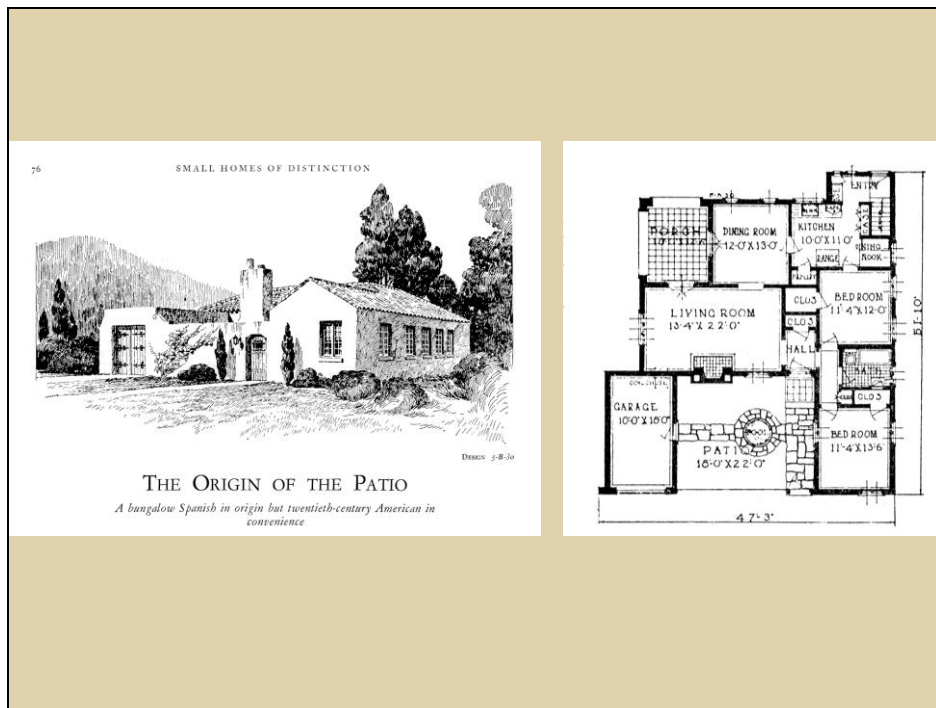
31



Other California architects of the time drew up plans for much smaller versions of the new Ranch House at other locations. This one, designed by H. Roy Kelley, dates from 1930.



In another part of the country, in 1929, the Minneapolis-based Architects Small House Service Bureau published its second catalog of house plans for economical small houses. Included were a number of houses like this, which show how the idea of the Southern California courtyard ranch house was beginning to catch the attention of homebuyers and house builders nationally.

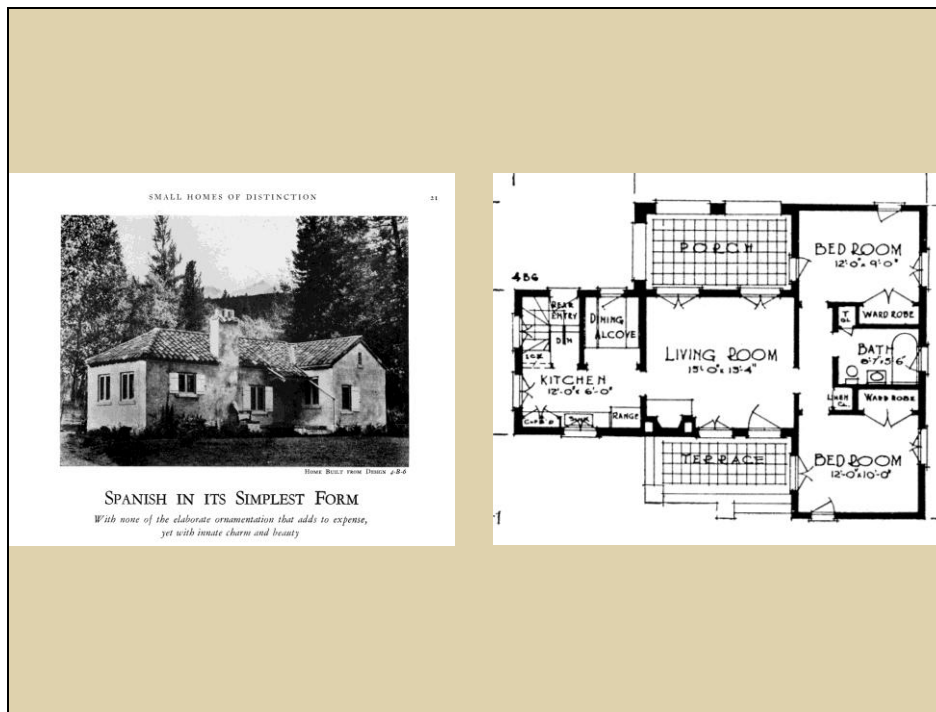


These houses had four of the emerging "ranch house" character-defining features:

They were one story high and low to the ground; they had irregular, rambling plans; they featured a courtyard (here on this smaller scale called a "patio"); and they promoted indoor-outdoor living.

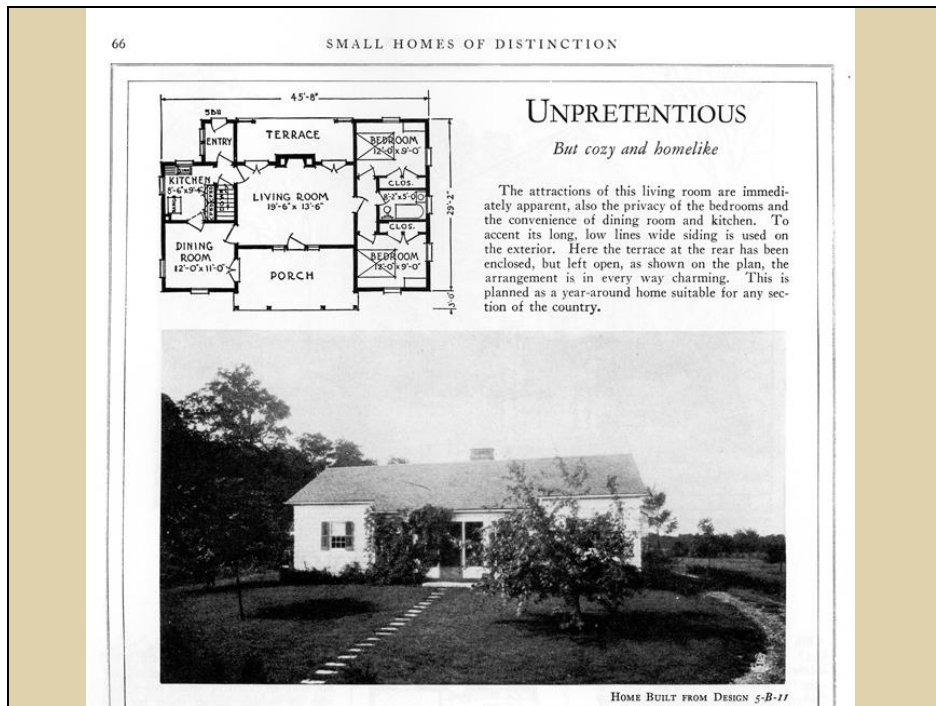


34



In this case, the plan foretold that of the mid-century Ranch House with its zoned functions, cluster of bedrooms, open living spaces, and integral porches and terraces.

35



The American Small House Service Bureau made its point perfectly clear: these houses were presented as unpretentious architecture for unpretentious lifestyles.

## The Man Behind the Ranch House

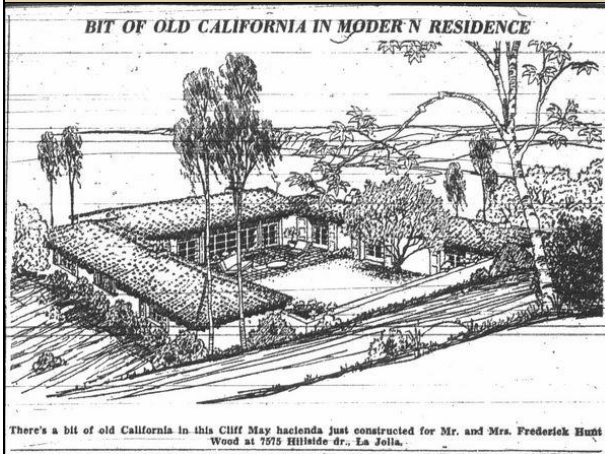
By JOSEPH GIOVANNINI

**T**HE ranch house in America was so popular after World War II that, in retrospect, it seems to have been a grass roots development. But architectural historians trace its invention to a single architect — and he is alive, well and living in his own sprawl.

Designer built his first in 1931.

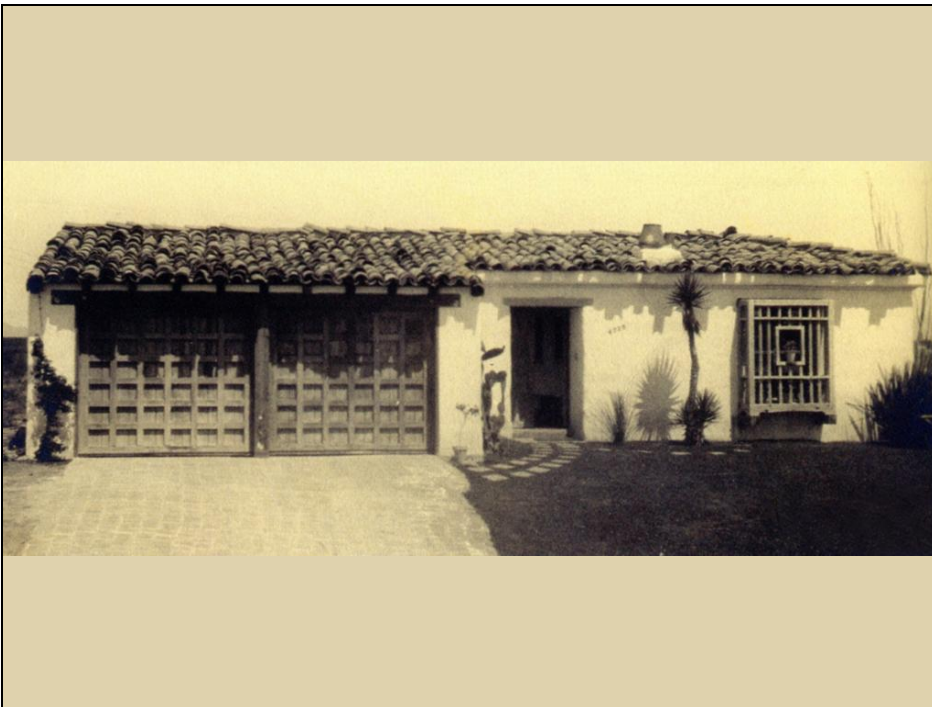
"Ramona" set Ramona's wedding. "I rebelled against the boxy houses being built then," says the architect, who still practices. "The ranch house was everything a California house should be — it had cross-ventilation, the floor was level with the ground, and with its courtyard and the exterior corridor, it was about sunshine and informal outdoor living."

The first house sold easily, for \$9,500 de-



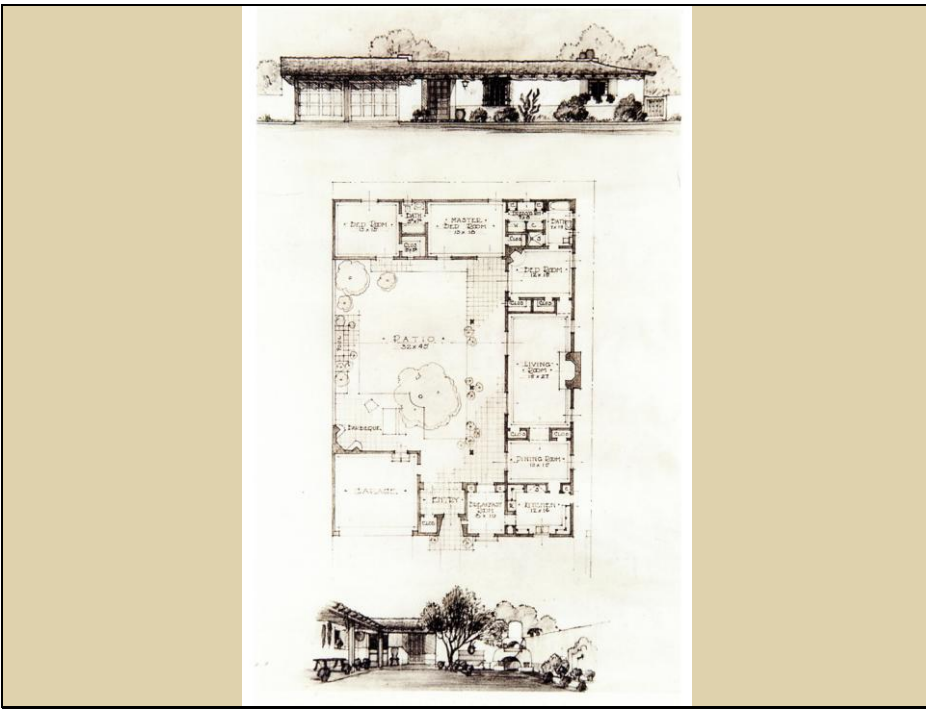
In the early 1930s, *Cliff May* began a life-long career of re-interpreting the traditional California ranch house. He was the *first* to design, build, *and promote* the new Ranch Houses for a broader market in California.

May was an unlikely candidate for ranch-house stardom: he was a jazz musician with a business degree who first earned his living making custom-crafted furniture.



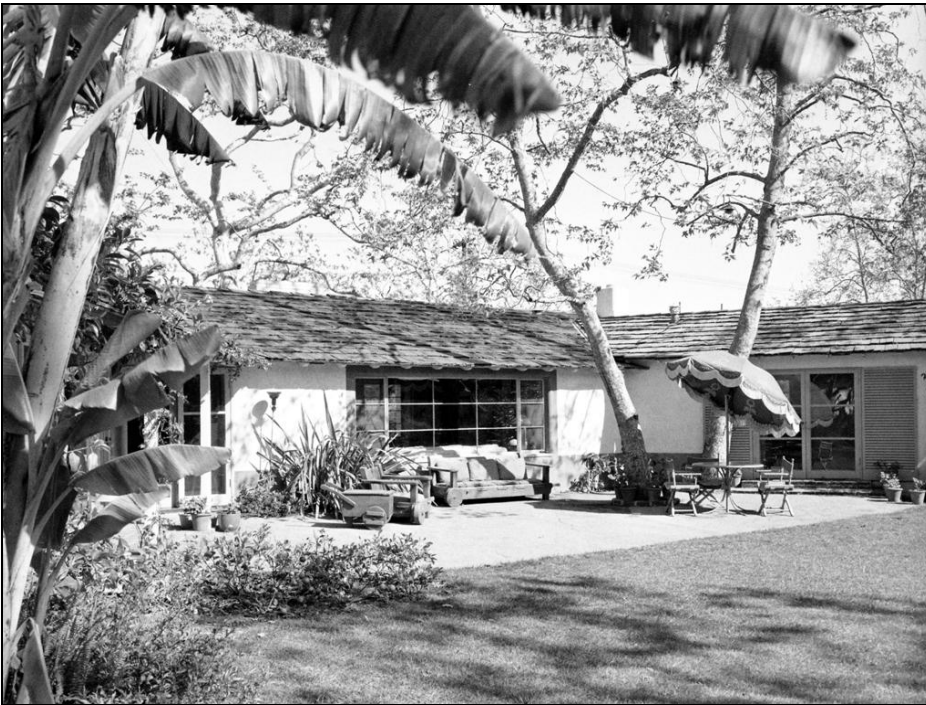
But in 1932 he designed and built his first "new" Ranch House, in San Diego, inspired by the traditional southern California ranch houses.

38



Emboldened by its success, he went on to design and build several more along the same lines – deceptively small from the front, but extending back across their lots, and organized around a secluded courtyard.

39



Here is a historic view of one of those secluded courtyards, showing the backyard orientation of the house.



40



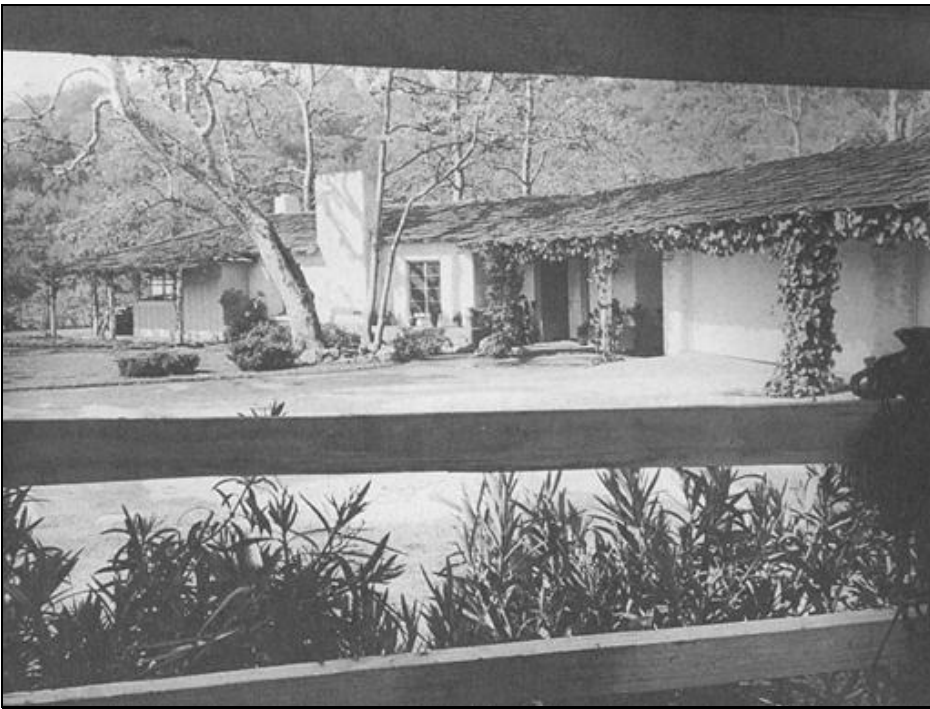
May then went on to achieve fame and fortune with his designs for large courtyard Ranch Houses like this in San Diego and Los Angeles.

41



Many of his early Ranch Houses were big “estate” houses ... real ranches!

42



Others were sited on large suburban lots on the outskirts of Los Angeles and other southern California communities.

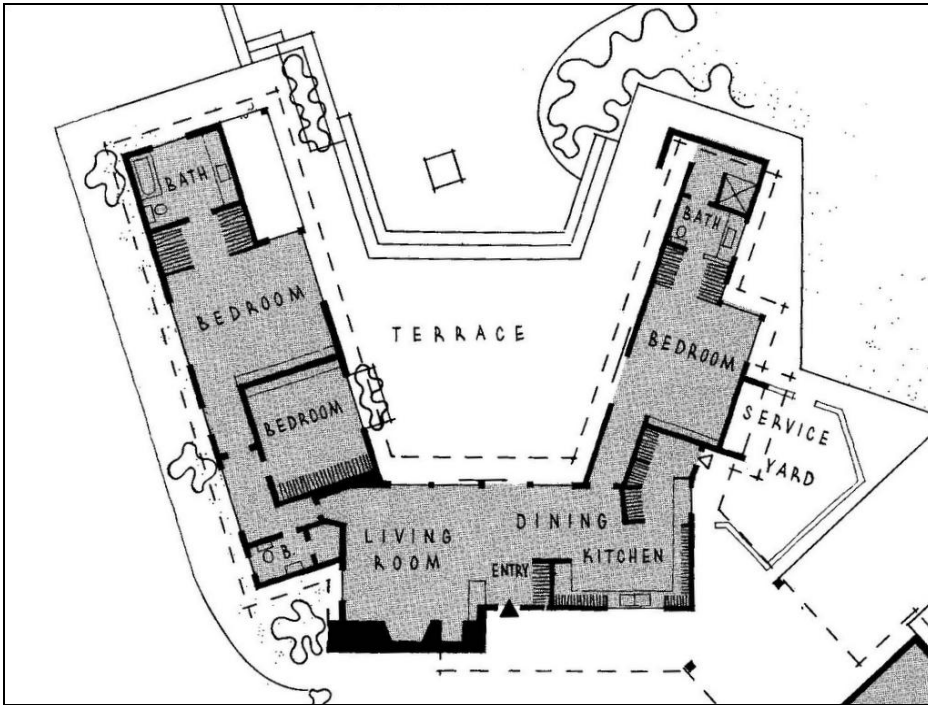
43



All of them were based on historical California ranch-house precedents.



And with good reason: several generations of Cliff May's extended family had owned and lived in those 19th-century ranch houses, and May had often visited there while he was growing up.



But May's interior layouts were anything but historical, with their clear zoning of functions, their open living areas, and their integration of the kitchen into the dining and living areas, along with their courtyard orientation.

And May often gave his new houses a "contemporary" look by angling the wings of the courtyard.



46



Here's a view of the front of one of Cliff May's 1930s houses, with the traditional relatively blank wall facing the street ...

47



and the interior courtyard opening onto every room.

48



Here's a view of the one of those interior rooms, with its large windows opening onto the courtyard.

49



May also continued to address the design of smaller, more affordable Ranch Houses, again with strong historical allusions.



50



Evidencing the growing popularity of the “new” Ranch House in southern California, in 1939 Cliff May began developing his first-ever Ranch House *subdivision*: Riviera Ranch, in Los Angeles ...

one of the first ranch-house subdivisions anywhere.

51



Although located just one block off West Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, it featured spacious lots to accommodate families with horses.



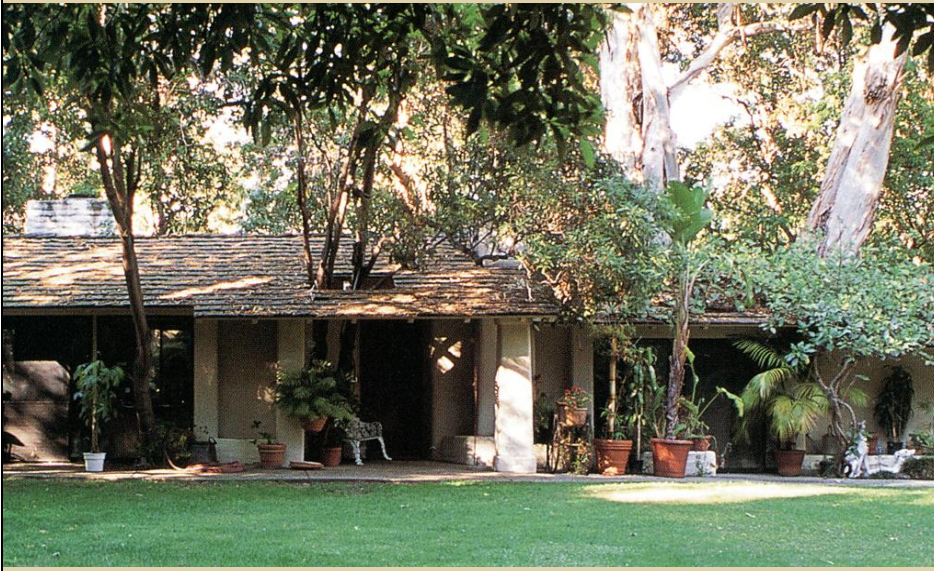
52



He also designed and built a house for himself in his new subdivision ...

a long, low, stucco Ranch House ...

53



with an interesting new detail for integrating the inside and the outside of the house that would be copied in many other high-end Ranch Houses:

*cutouts* in the roof to allow trees to grow up and through the house!



54



Recognizing a good thing when they saw it, other Southern California architects emulated Cliff May's new house designs. One was Lulah Maria Riggs (1896-1984), the first woman "Fellow" of the American Institute of Architects in California.

55



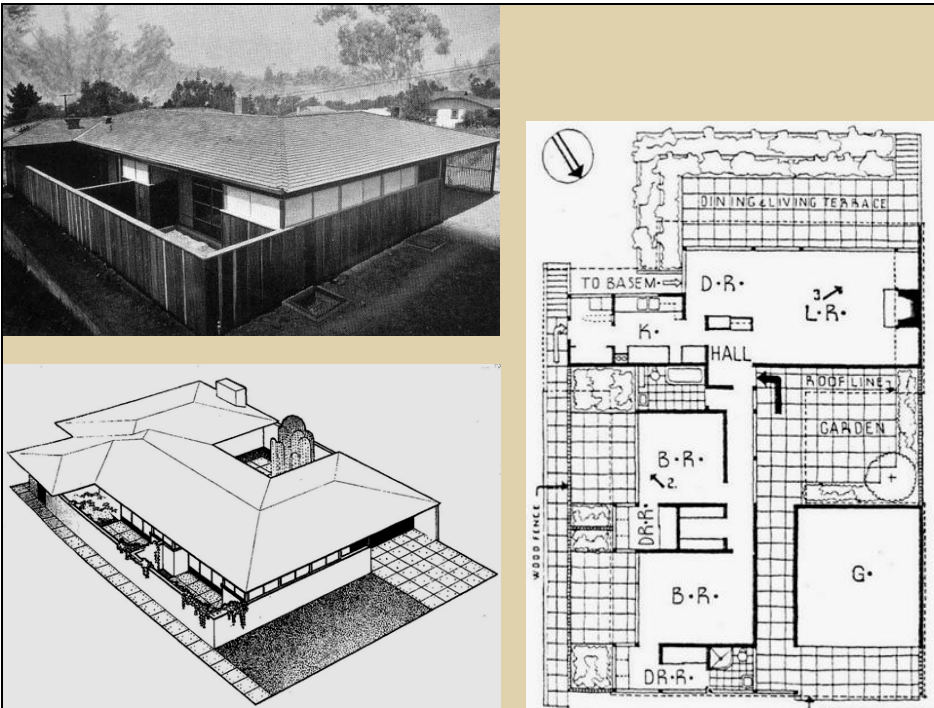
In this 1939 design, Riggs featured what would become a ranch-house staple: the backyard patio and barbecue.

56



Her design also featured a detail that would become common in many 1950s Ranch Houses: the brick skirt wall, reminiscent of the ground-stained adobe walls of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century California ranch houses.

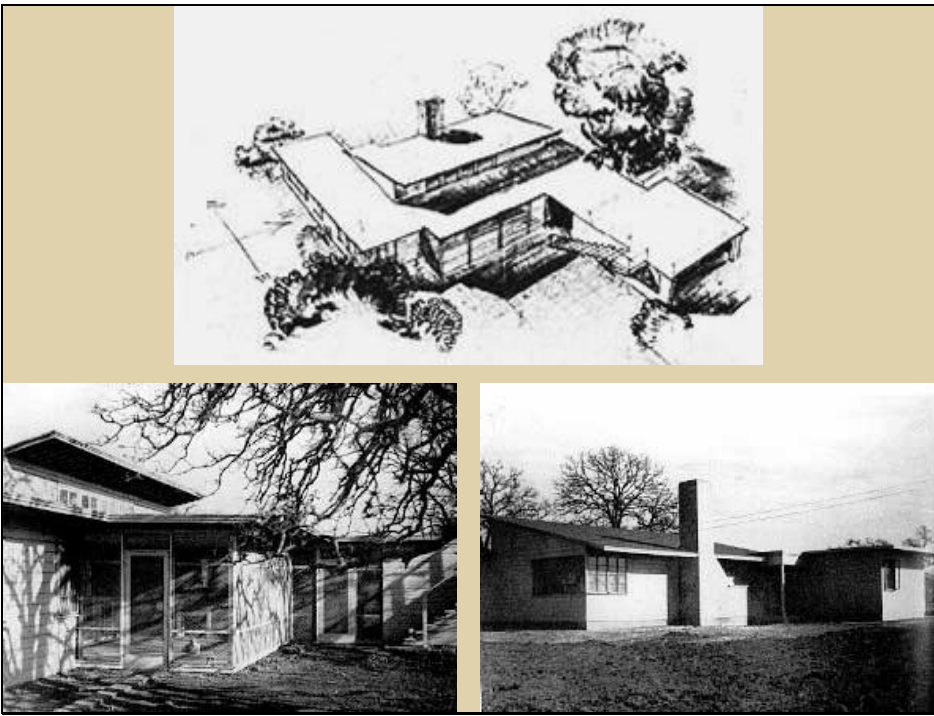
57



Other architects, took a more modern approach to re-interpreting the Southwestern ranch house, with stark, abstract forms, an absence of historicisms, and radically new courtyard floor plans which quite literally integrated the inside and the outside of the house -- quite unlike anything seen before. This Pasadena house was designed for Miss Pauline Lowe by Harwell Hamilton Harris, a protégé of the famous modernist architect Richard Neutra.



58



Still others went the other way, so to speak, and found inspiration in vernacular ranch buildings like sheds and chicken coops.

O'Neil Ford, the architect of this 1939 Ranch House in Denton, Texas, called it his “Chicken Coop Gothic.”

59



Ford also designed a much simpler new Ranch House in Denton that same year.



The influence of Modern architecture on the emerging Ranch House took an interesting turn in Palm Springs in 1940.

The architect, Albert Frey, was known for his ultra-Modern designs.

But design guidelines in the Smoke Tree Ranch subdivision in Palm Springs dictated one-story “ranch” houses based on traditional California designs.

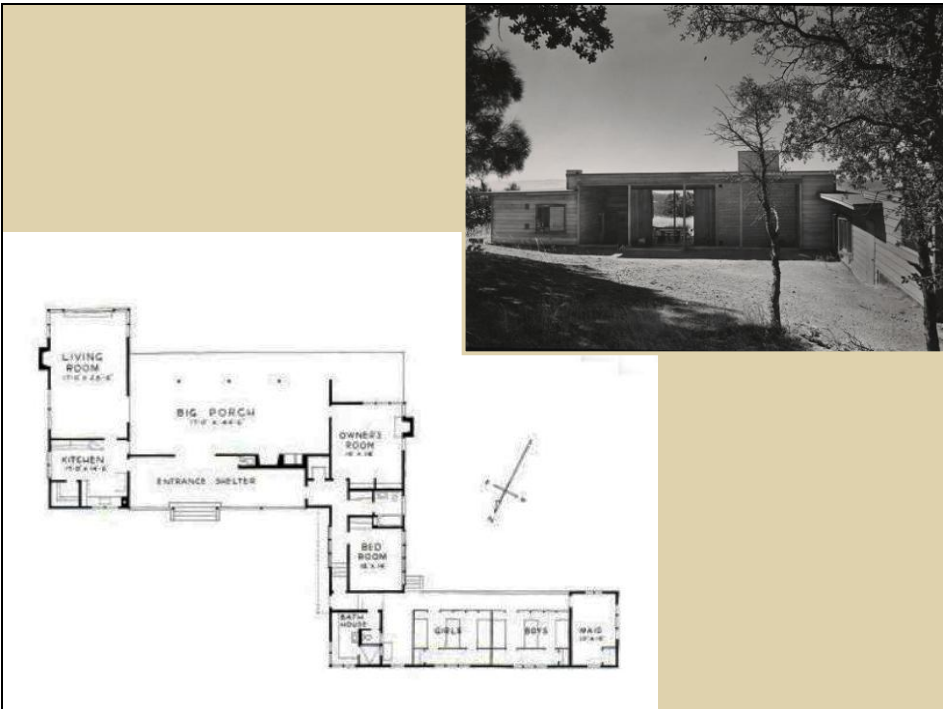
This is Fry’s compromise between “ranch” and “modern” -- traditional ranch-house forms, presented in a simplified, abstracted way, with a minimum of detail.

61



At about this same time, William Wurster, designer of the rustic 1920s Gregory Farmhouse, gave the new California Ranch House an up-to-date flat-roofed contemporary appearance in his Green Camp/Mt. Diablo house (1938). In doing so he forever blurred the distinction between the “ranch” house and “modern” or “modernist” architecture.

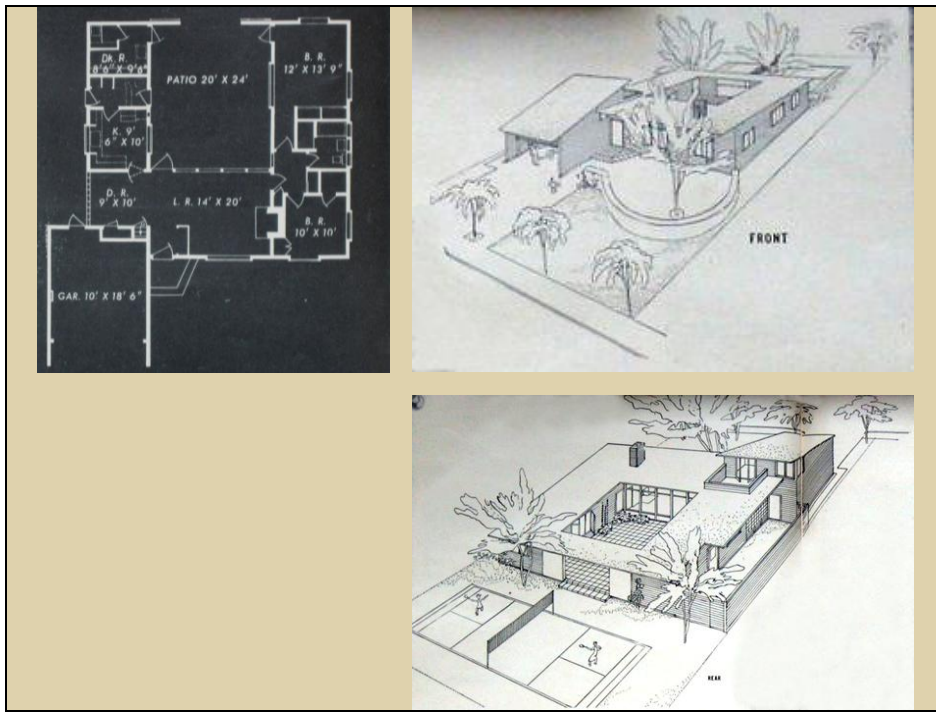
62



He also broke free from the traditional courtyard arrangement of the large 1930s Ranch Houses, introducing (advertently or inadvertently) the concept of the “rambling” Ranch House.



63



At the same time, and along the same lines, Wurster took the traditional California courtyard form and gave it an up-to-date contemporary appearance.

The editors of LIFE magazine, who had commissioned this demonstration design in 1938, celebrated Wurster's houses as "the most gracious and livable houses now being created in America."

64



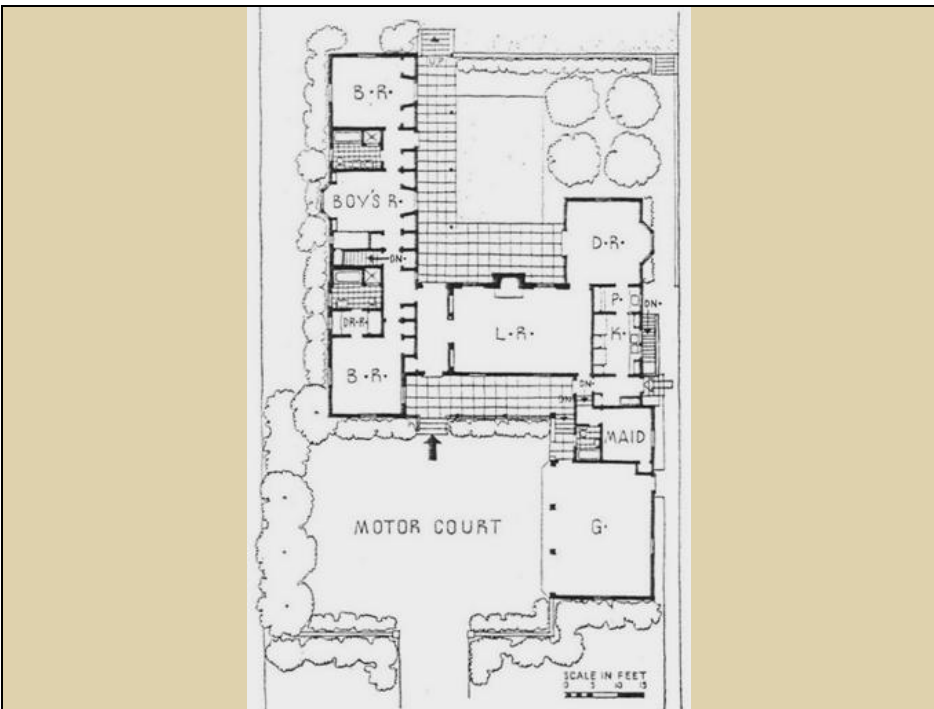
Here's another example of the kind of Ranch House that Wurster was designing at the end of the decade – still rustic, but not overly so, and rambling in overall form, but unified by a broad hipped roof.

65



Throughout the 1930s, many California architects such as H. Roy Kelley strived for a middle ground with the designs of their new Ranch Houses by combining the traditional look of Cliff May's houses on the outside ...

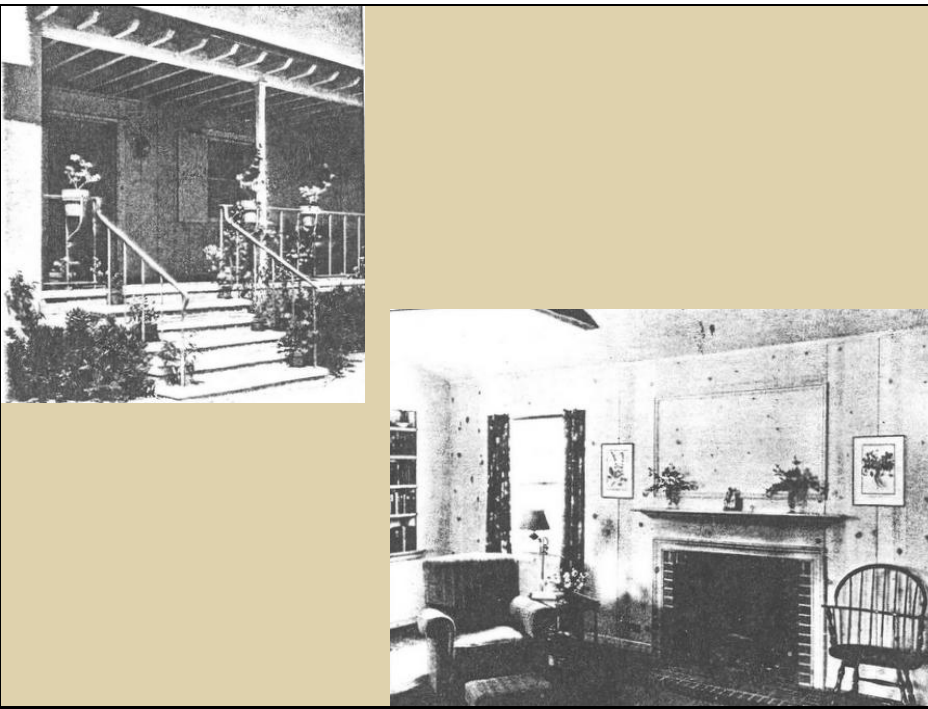
66



with the new, modern, zoned and open floor plans on the inside.

(This house was designed for Paul Pulliam in Pasadena.)

67



These houses also tended to feature traditional or rustic materials such as board-and-batten siding on the recessed porches and knotty pine paneling on the inside.

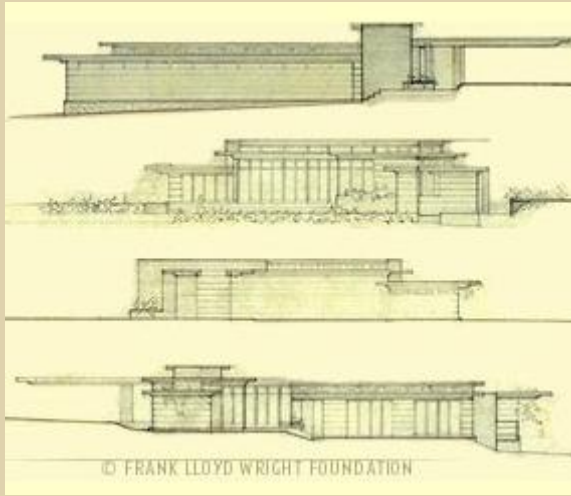
68



Here's an example of a smaller Ranch House designed in this way.



69



In another part of the country, the formerly well-known but then down-on-his-luck architect Frank Lloyd Wright was working on his own to reinvent the American house -- what he called the “Usonian” house.

70

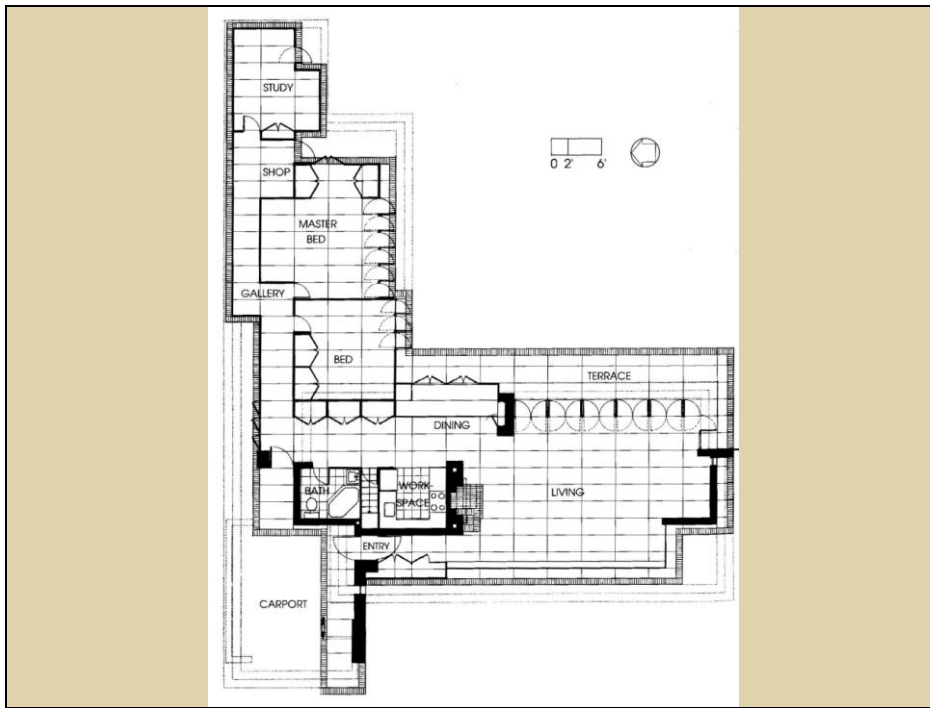


These houses had unconventional exterior designs ...

with bold geometric shapes and flat roofs ...

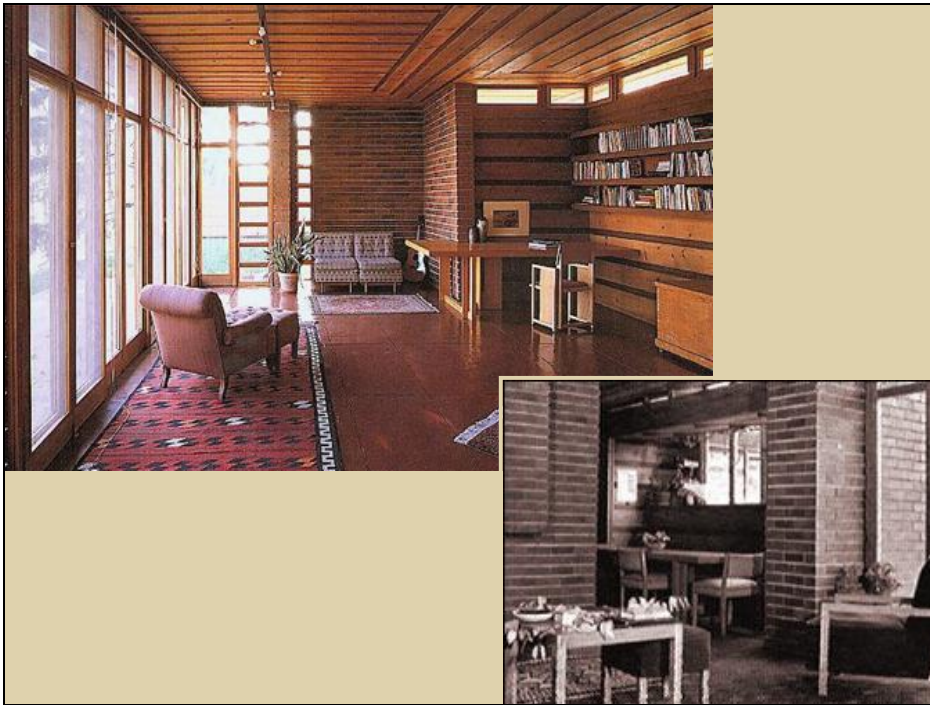
although they made use of traditional building materials.

71



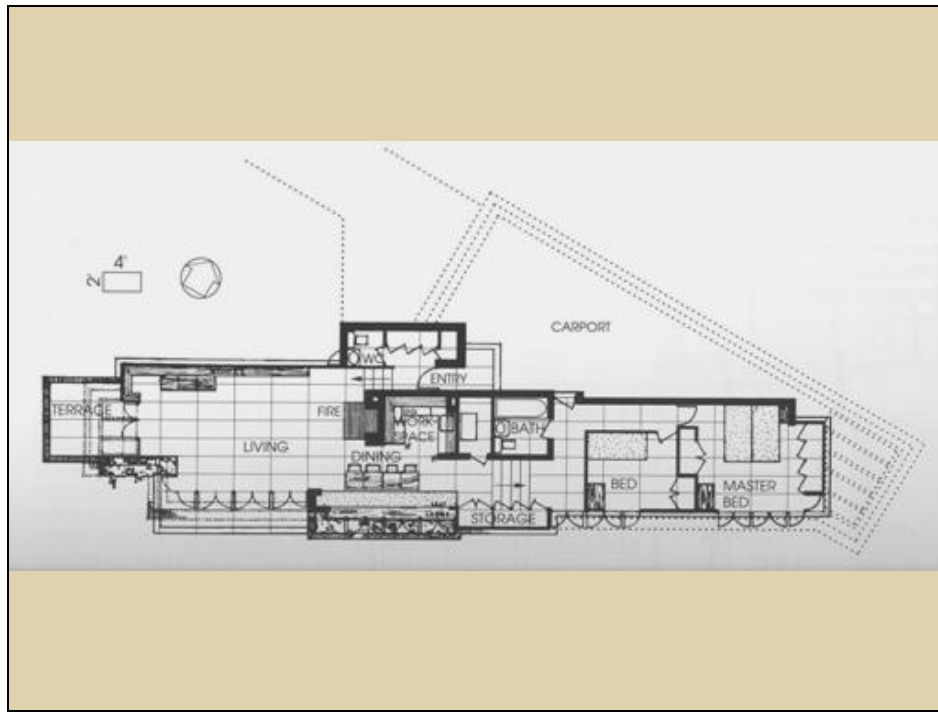
They also had equally unconventional interior layouts, with clear *zoning* of interior spaces ...

72



and dramatic *open-space* floor plans.

73

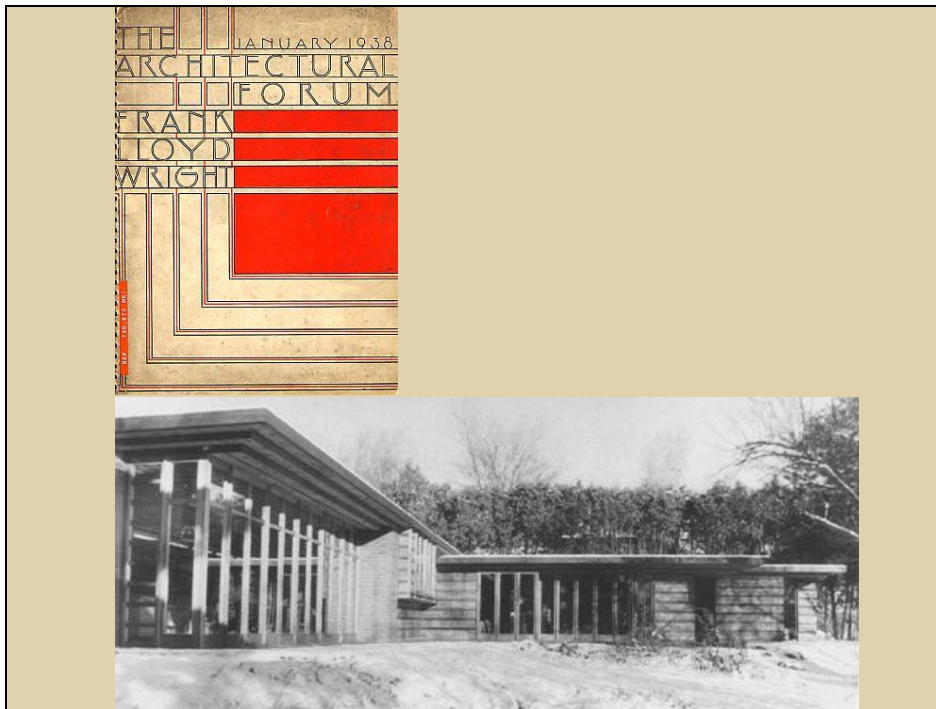


Wright also developed a linear Usonian prototype ...

essentially straightening out the L-shaped plan ...

with a cluster of bedrooms at one end, open living spaces at the other end, and the kitchen (now called a "work space") in the middle.

74



After being promoted nationally by *Architectural Forum* magazine in 1938, these radically new house designs were destined to become templates for the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century suburban Ranch House.



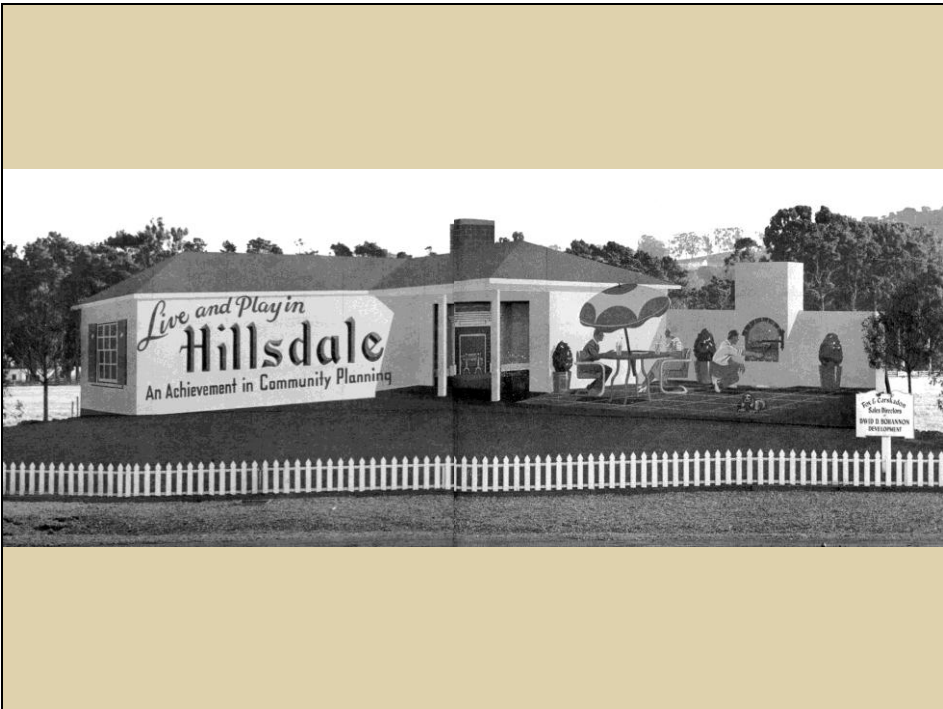
75



Starting in the late 1930s, *builders and developers* in California and the Southwest began to adopt the trendy new Ranch House designs.

They were downsized, simplified, and standardized for this new broader market, but they were still new "Ranch Houses," and they were marketed as such -- along with the new, casual, outdoors "California" lifestyle.

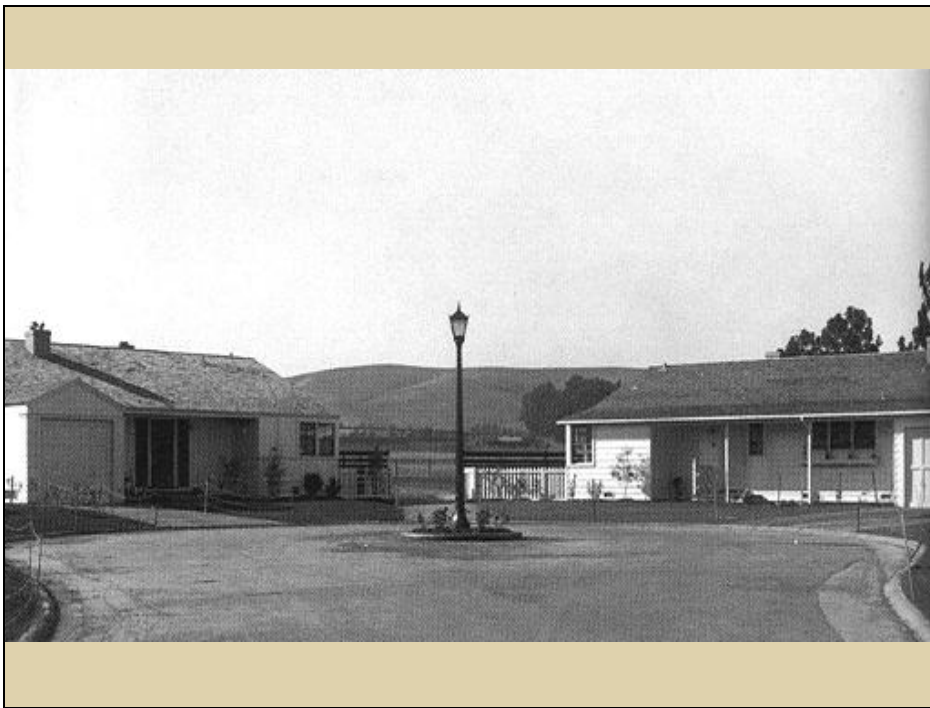
76



In places like Hillsdale, south of San Francisco, they could not be built fast enough to meet the demand.

Developed by California merchant-builder David Bohannon, Hillsdale was more than just a subdivision -- it was an entirely new *planned suburban community* with stores, schools, parks, and a variety of housing.

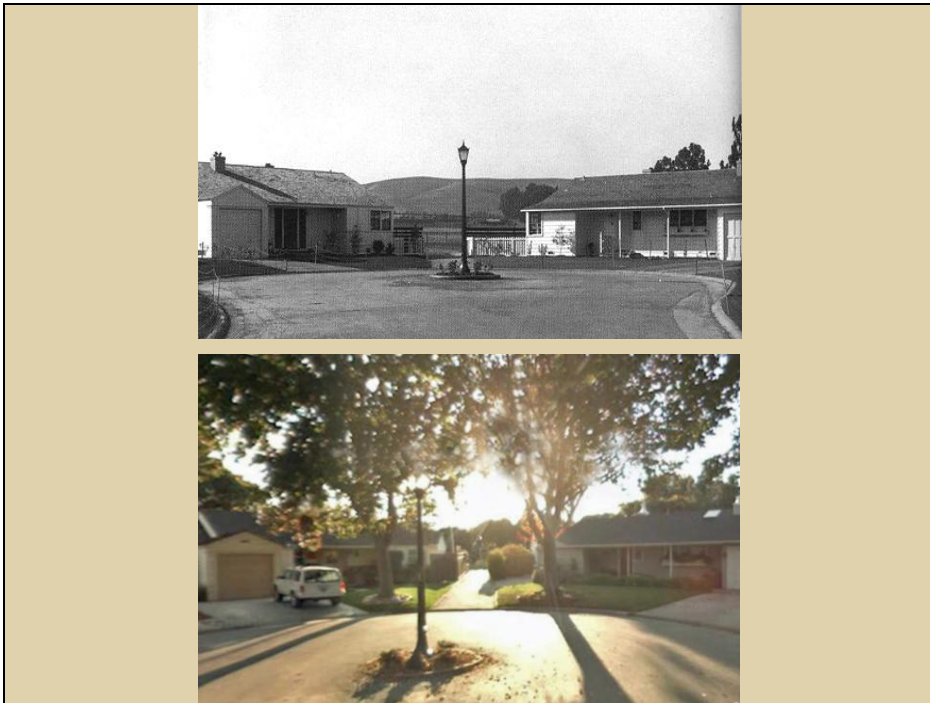
77



In this new community, the new Ranch House was prominently featured.

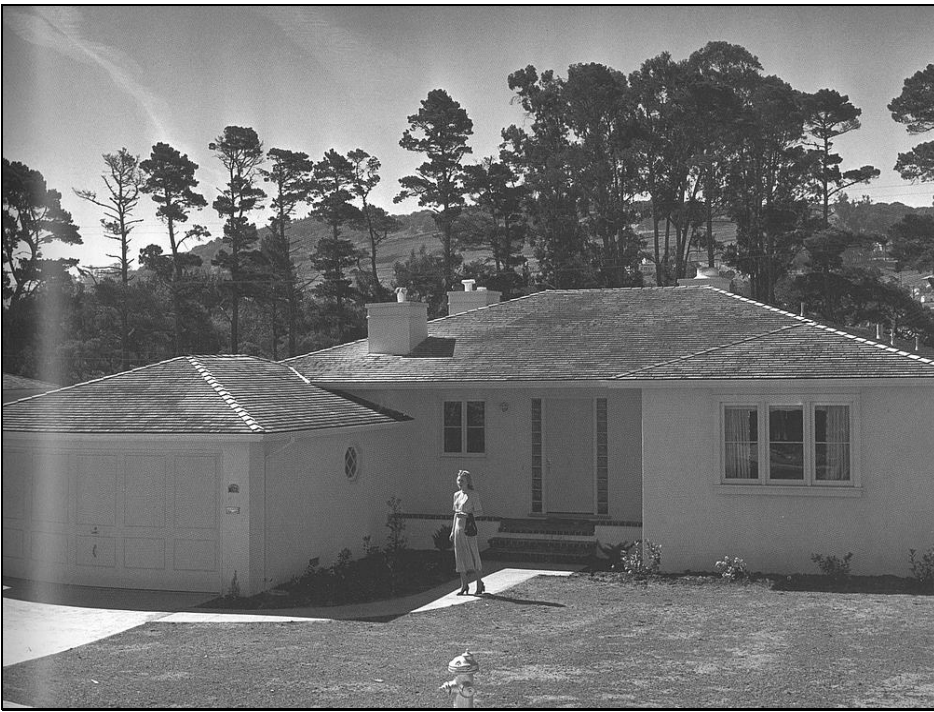
Here are two of the first sixteen "model homes."

78



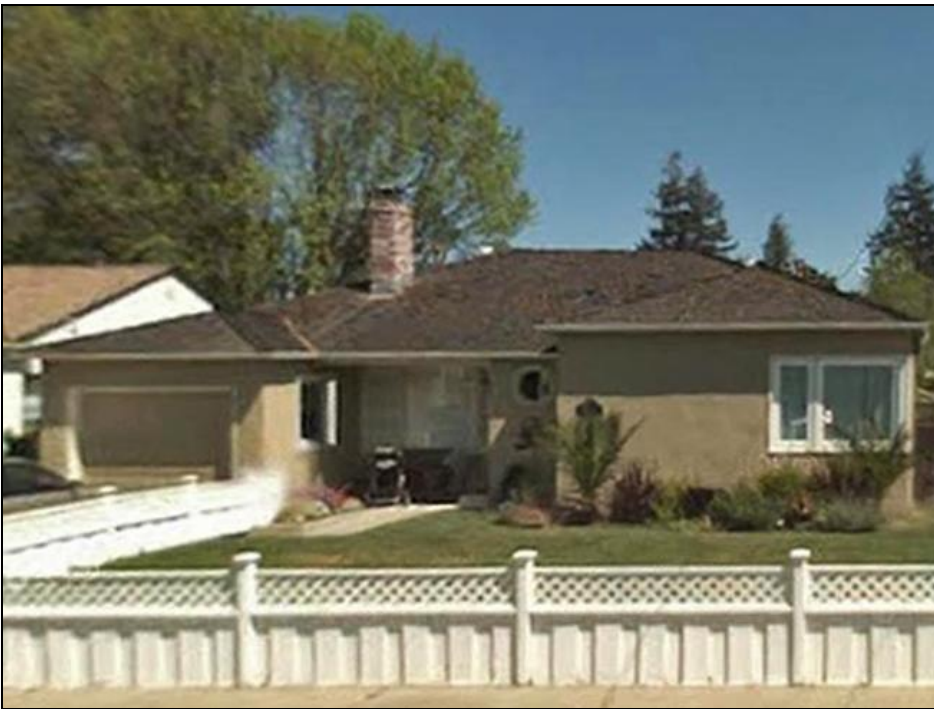
Thanks to the magic of Google maps, we can see those two model homes today, looking very much the way they did when they were first built.

79



Developer David Bohannon also promoted what was called the "bungalow ranch" (or the "California Colonial") – a more compact form of Ranch House.

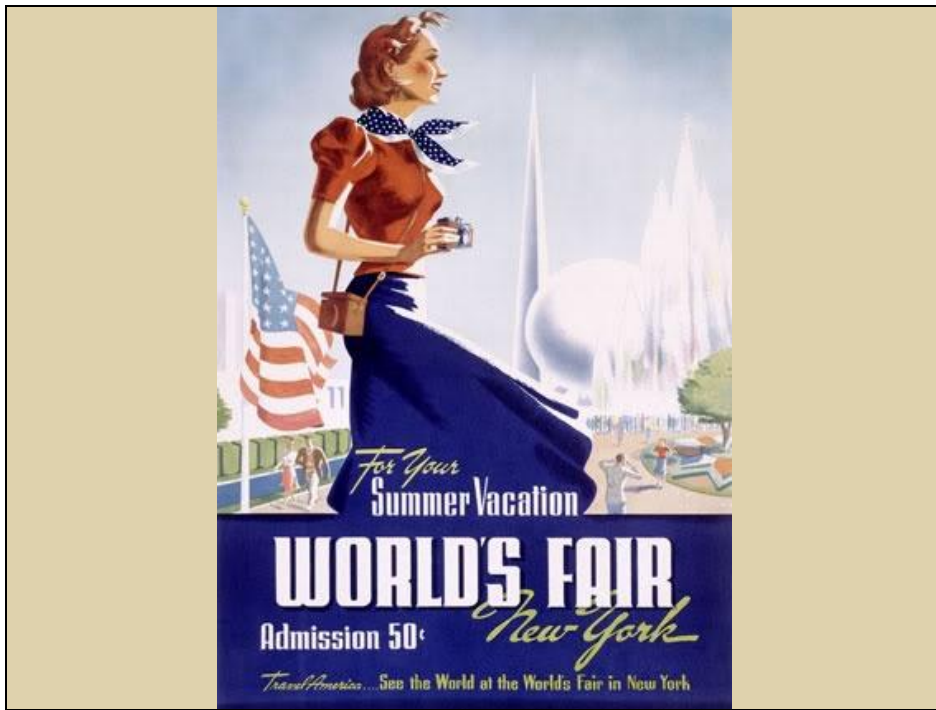
80



Here's what one of them looks like today, again thanks to Google maps.

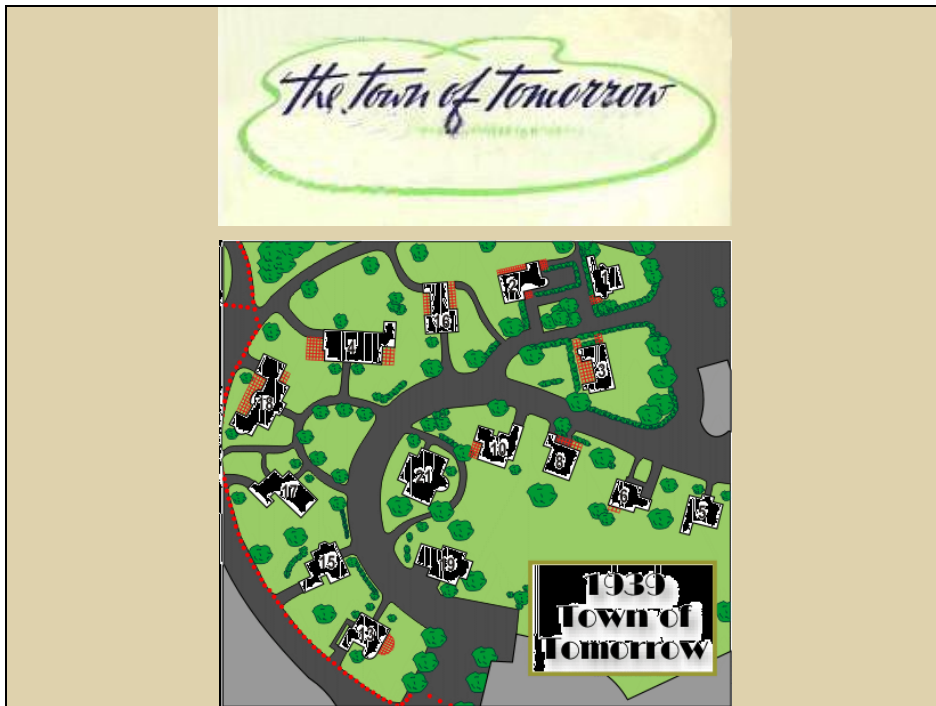


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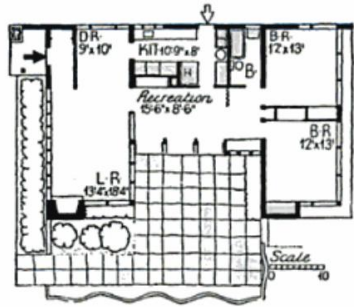
At the very end of the decade, the new California Ranch House received *national* and *international* attention at the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

82



One of the attractions at the fair was the "Town of Tomorrow," laid out in the latest curvilinear pattern, featuring 15 demonstration houses.

83



Among the featured houses was a fully developed California courtyard Ranch House.

It was voted the *favorite* of the 15 houses on display.

84



One can only imagine the impact that this brand-new kind of American house had on the 44 million visitors to the World's Fair.



Just as the new Ranch House was getting all this attention, World War II put the brakes on the housing industry.



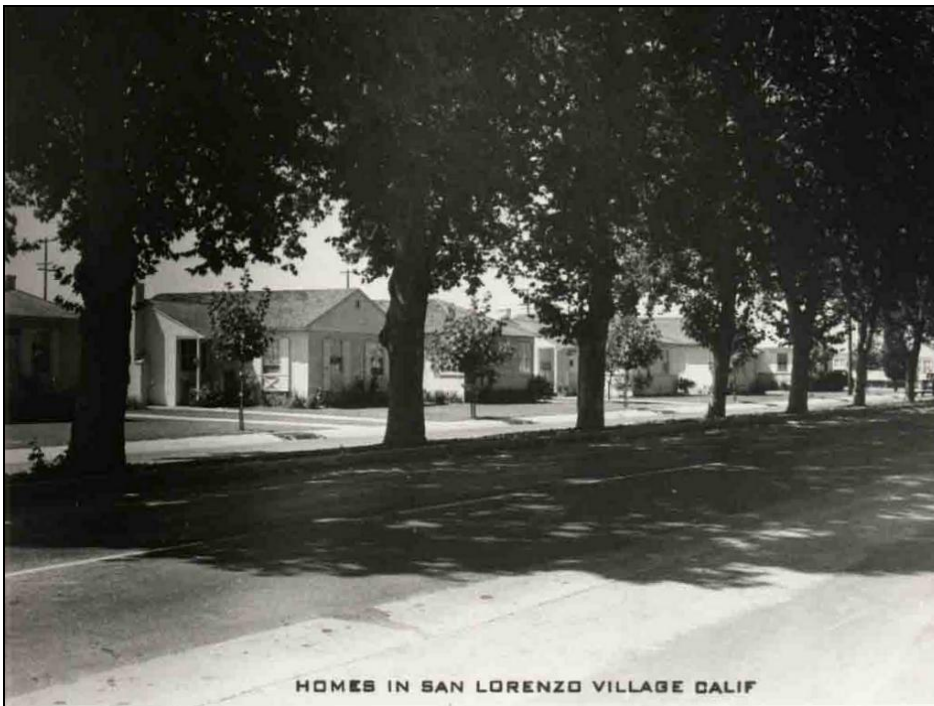
Construction materials were devoted to the war effort, and few new single-family homes would be built for the next half-decade.





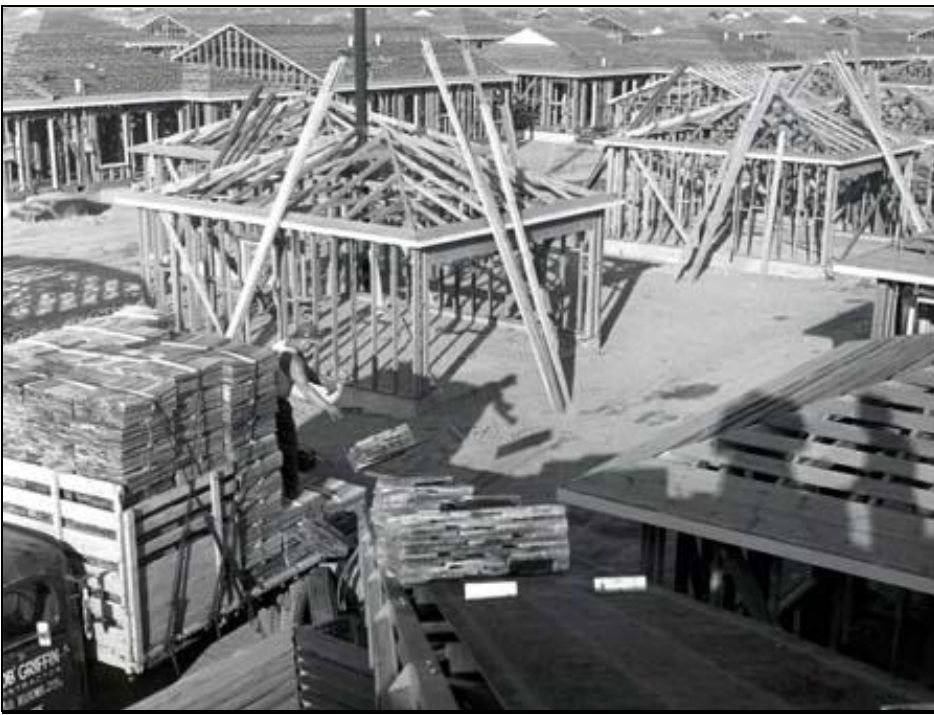
The one exception was housing associated with the war effort -- for example, housing around military bases and war-related industries -- and some of this housing included the new Ranch Houses.

This housing development was built for workers at Ford Motor Company's Willow Run factory which built B-24 bombers.



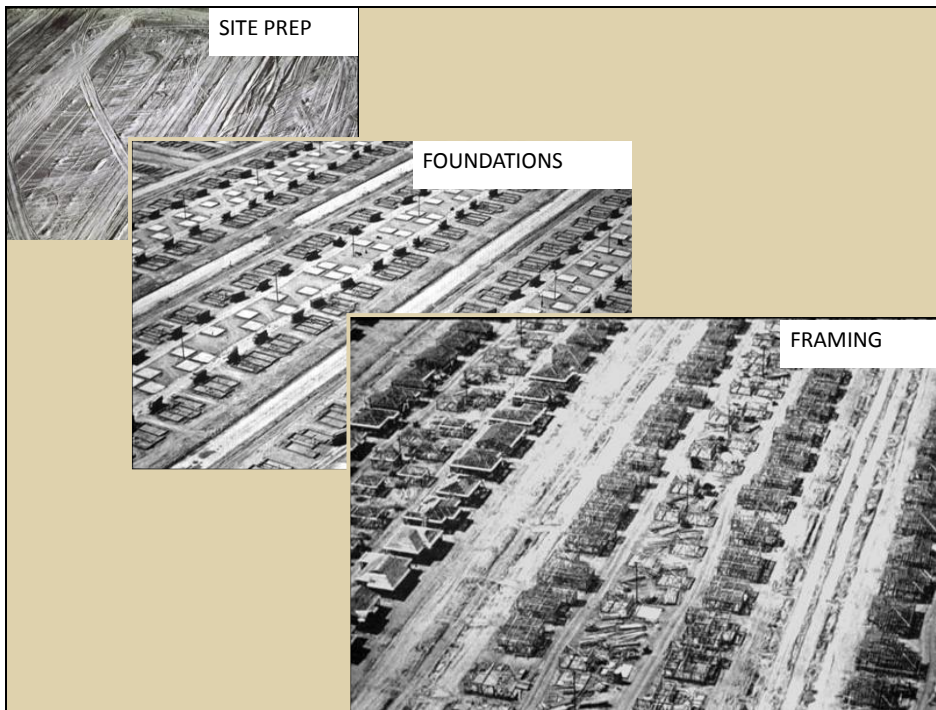
Another good example of military-industrial housing is San Lorenzo Village, south of Oakland, California. Between 1944 and 1951, some 3,000 houses were built by David Bohannon's Greenwood Company. The community was built initially to support the war-related industries on the east side of the San Francisco Bay area.

Most of the houses were small Ranch Houses, seemingly not all that unremarkable.



But it was *how they were built* that would be so important to the future of the Ranch House.

To cope with shortages of materials and tight schedules, the builder perfected methods to quickly and inexpensively mass-produce houses on site.



Key developments included:

construction across the entire site at one time, from site preparation to foundations to framing,

the use of standardized house designs and framing plans,

and slab-on-grade poured-concrete foundations.

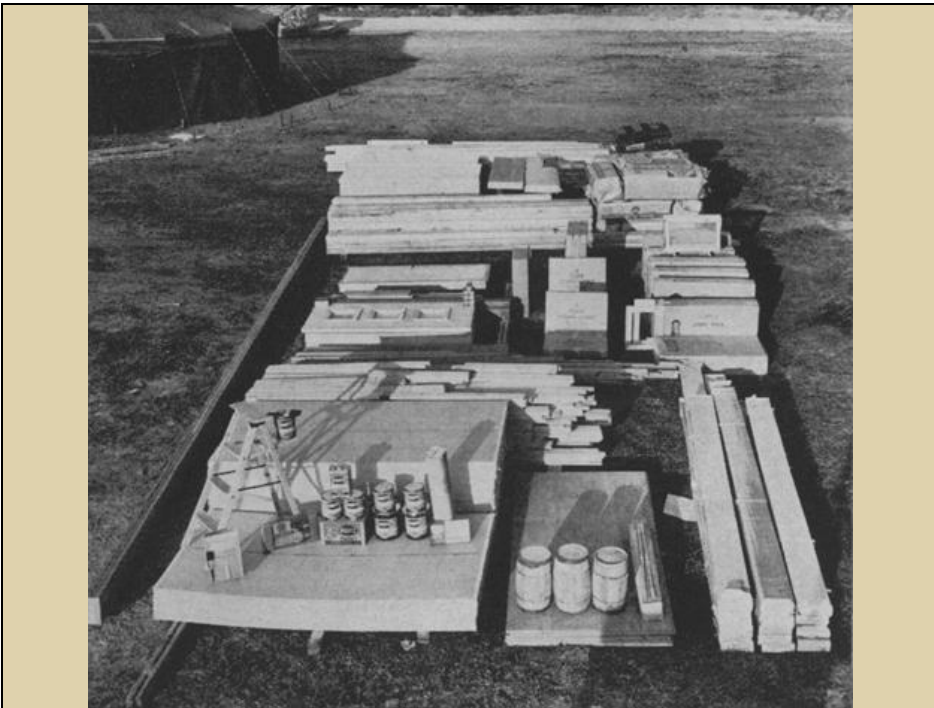


91



Bohannon also purchased building materials at low volume prices and stockpiled them on site ...

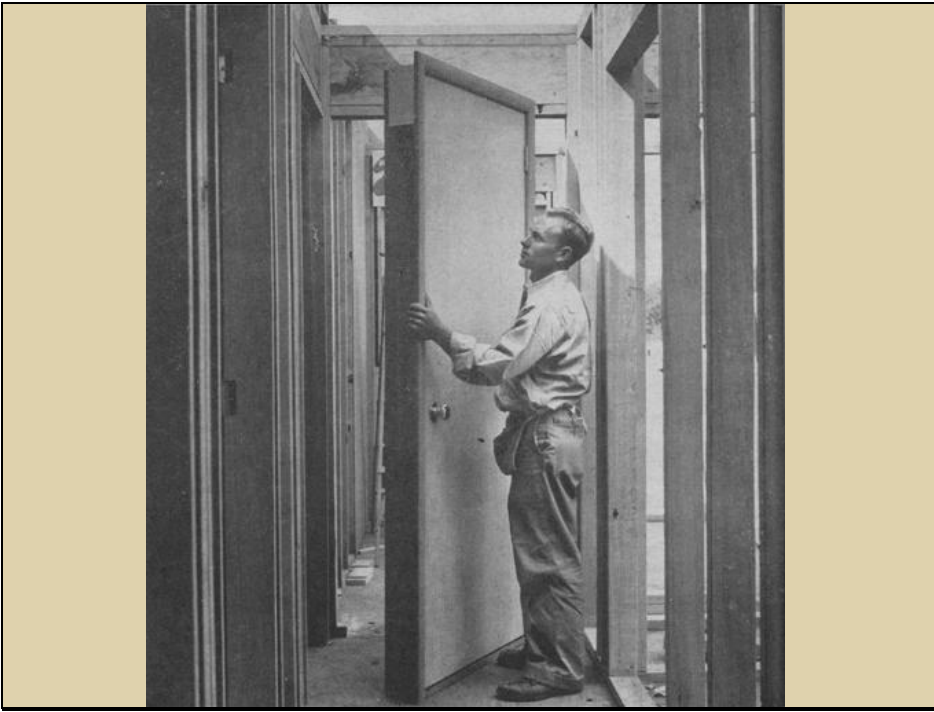
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and he pre-cut lumber to standard lengths and delivered it, along with other building materials, to each job site.



93



He also adopted standardized dimensions for interchangeable building components such as windows and doors.

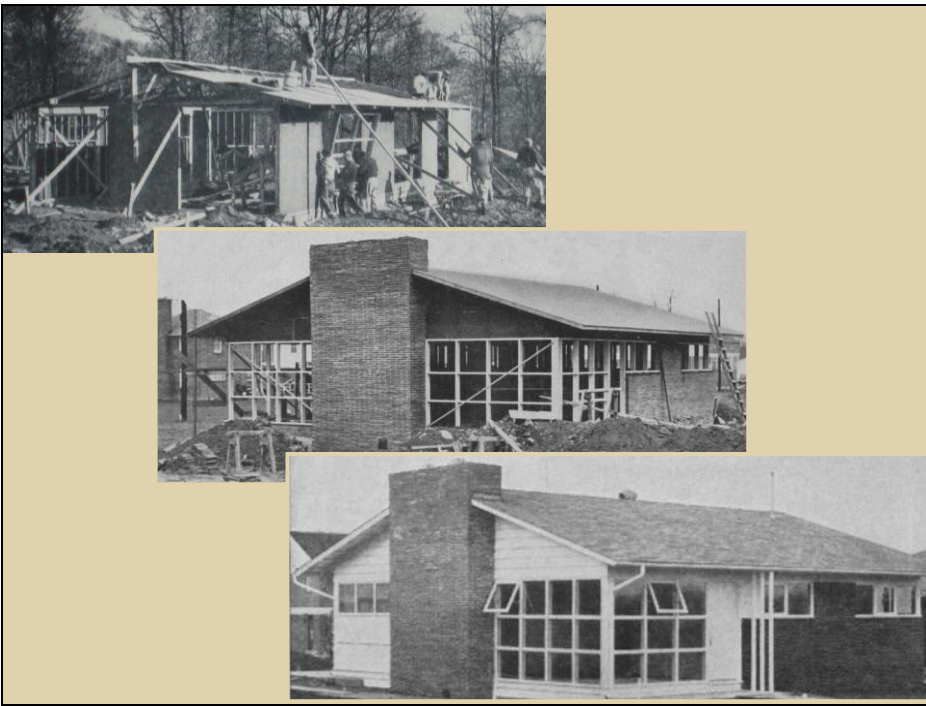
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Bohannon also made use of specialized construction crews (what we would today call “subcontractors”) moving sequentially around the site, from house to house, doing one specialized job, until the houses were finished ...

and his work crews were among the first to use electric hand tools on the job site.

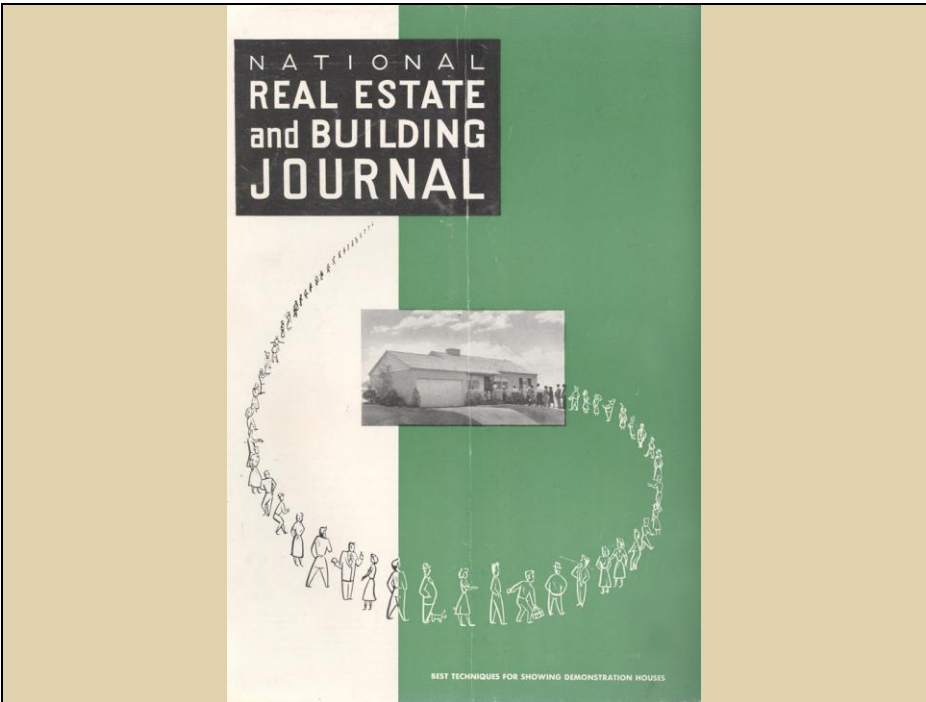
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These construction practices became known nationally as the “California Method” of house building [Faragher p.17] ...

directly attributed to David Bohannon ...

96



and after the war they were written up in national real estate and business publications including *Fortune* magazine (April 1946) and *The Wall Street Journal* (1949).



HISTORIC PRESERVATION DIVISION

## **The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House**

**Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Ranch Houses in Georgia**

### **PART II: THE RANCH HOUSE IN AMERICA PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II**



**September 2011**

**Richard Cloues, Ph.D.**

This concludes Part II of *The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House*. The story of the Ranch House in Georgia continues with Part III, "The Ranch House in America after World War II."