



GEORGIA  
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

HISTORIC PRESERVATION DIVISION

## **The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House**

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

### **PART I: INTRODUCTION TO THE RANCH HOUSE**



**September 2011**

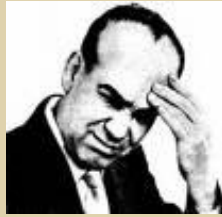
**Richard Cloues, Ph.D.**

*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 I (this part)** is an introduction to the Ranch House. It describes the character-defining features of the Ranch House and places this new house in the broad historical context of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century America.

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

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Some of you may be wondering: the Ranch House?

What's with *that*?!

It's so ... *ordinary*. It's so ... *everywhere*.  
And it's *not even very old*.



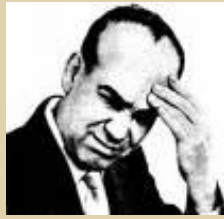
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Let's take a closer look.



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The question “why Ranch Houses” begs a larger question: *why houses at all?* Why do we value the history and the architecture of houses, Ranch Houses or otherwise?

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Well, for one obvious reason, there are *a lot of them*.

In fact, houses make up about three-quarters of all our historic buildings. If we’re really serious about appreciating the history of our built environment, and preserving it, we’ve got to understand houses.

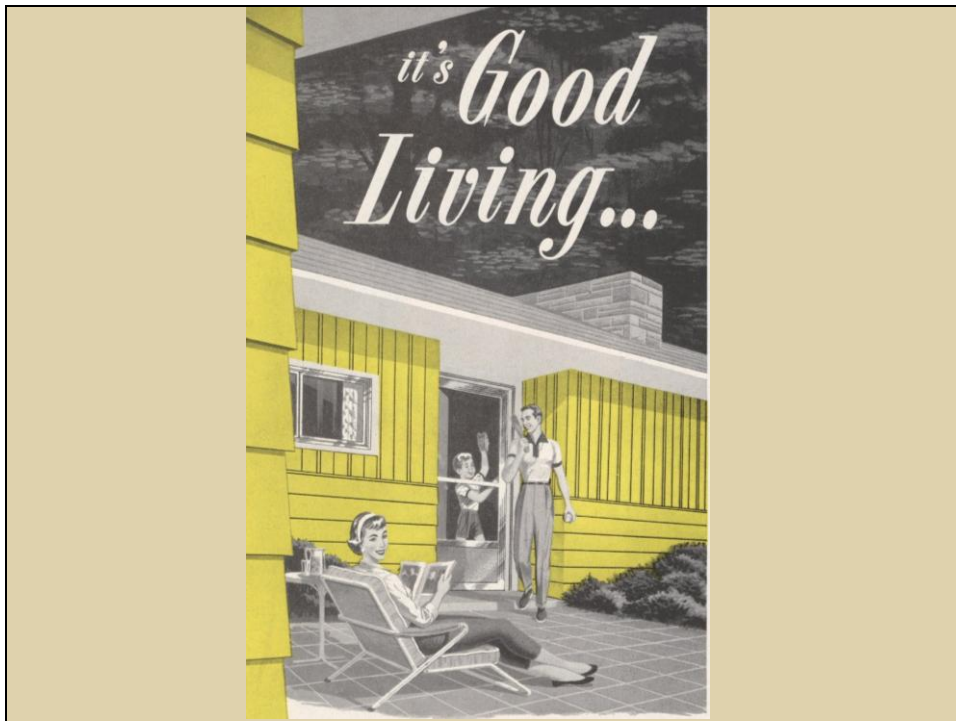
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Another reason: Houses, more than any kind of building, bring us up close and personal to what *people* wanted in residential architectural design.

More so than any other kind of building, houses reveal *popular* as well as *professional* preferences in building types and architectural styles.

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Houses also tell us about *historical lifestyles and domestic trends* – stories about how we lived in the past, and how we used our houses to live those lives.



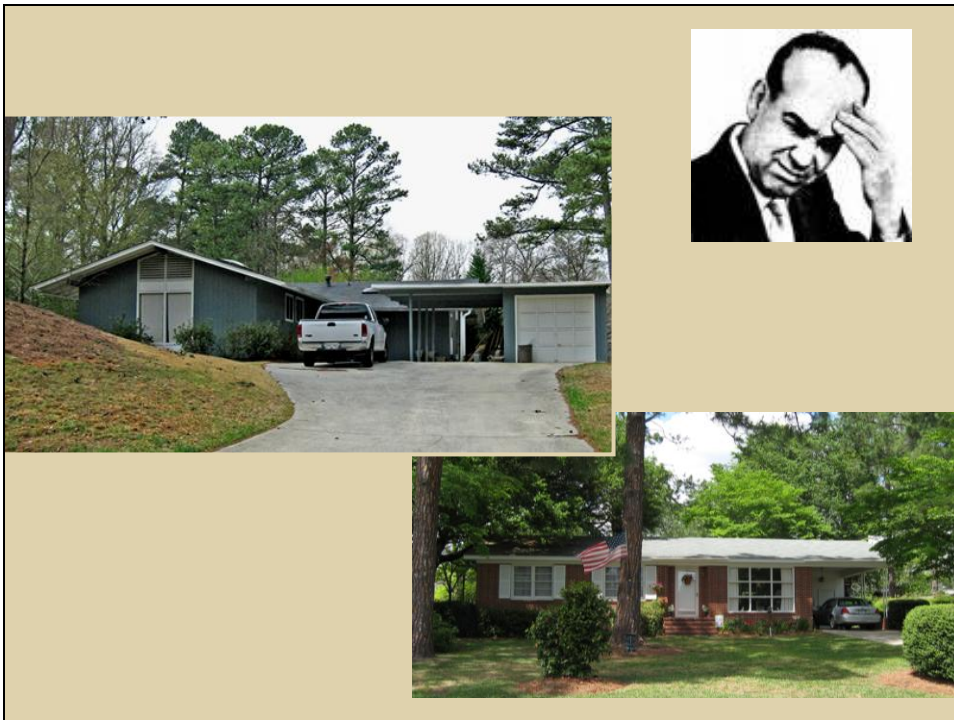
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And, lastly, houses – especially single-family houses – are to a great degree a distinctly *American* phenomenon. No other country in the world has invested so much time, money, and energy in designing, building, and living in individual houses.

So yes, we should definitely be paying attention to houses!

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And so we come back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century *Ranch Houses*, and why we should be studying *them*.

Let's start by putting the question in another context: by looking at some *earlier* 20<sup>th</sup>-century houses.



From early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the familiar Craftsman Bungalow represents a prosperous time characterized by an interest in the arts and crafts and quiet domestic life.

It was largely a reaction to what was perceived at the time as the “excess” of Victorian architecture.



From the 1920s, the English Cottage and Colonial Revival or “Cape Cod” houses speak to a decade preoccupied with domesticity after the horrors of the first world war ...



12



And the "Five-Room House" shows the influence of new thinking about floor plans and room arrangement ...

and about how new services and utilities such as electricity, gas, central heating, and indoor plumbing could be incorporated into affordable middle-class houses.

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The small but efficient American Small House tells a subsequent story of coping with desperate economic times in the housing market during the Great Depression and World War II ...

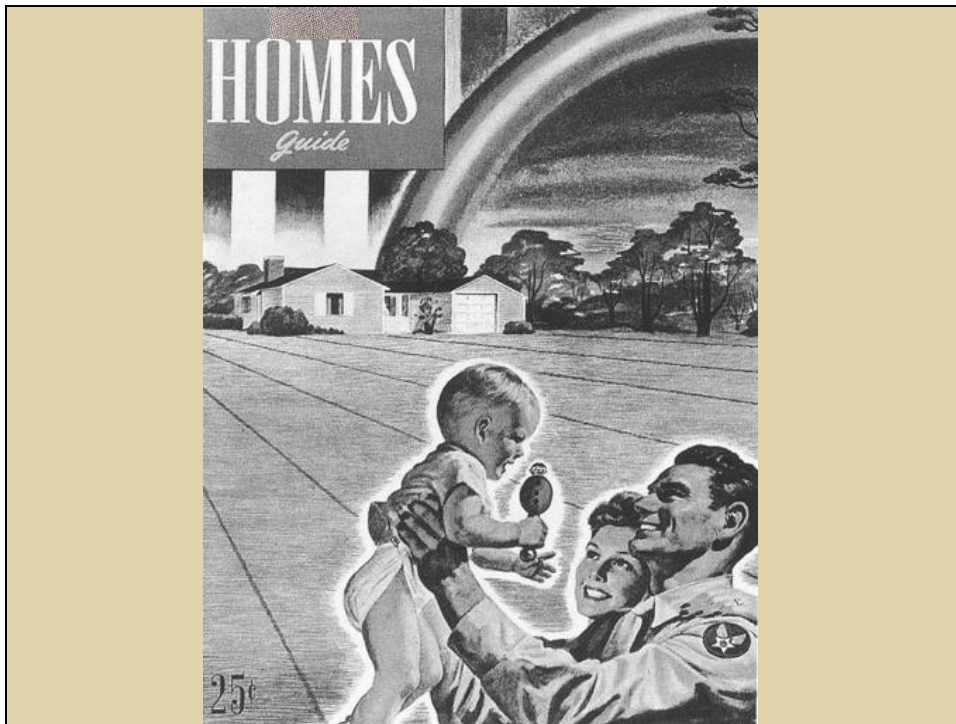
by applying scientific design principles and standardized construction techniques to provide affordable single-family houses.

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So -- when we get to the *mid-20<sup>th</sup>* century, what “big” stories like these need to be told? And what houses might best tell them?

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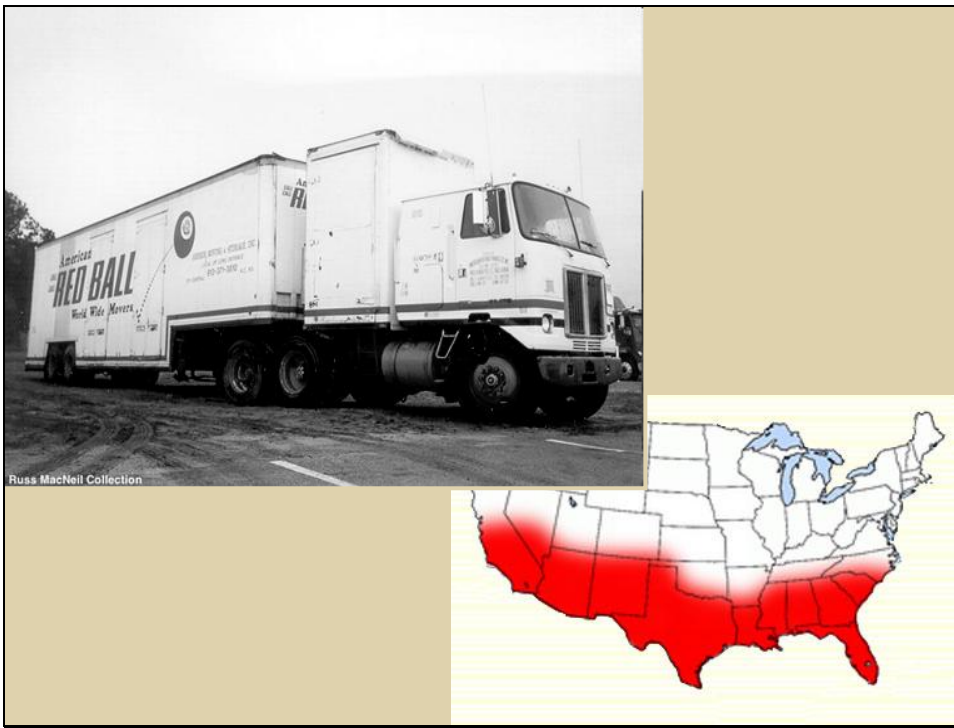


In Georgia, one story would have to be *unprecedented population growth*:

Soldiers returning to civilian life after half a decade of world war, settling down and raising families ...



16



and people moving into the state from other parts of the country:

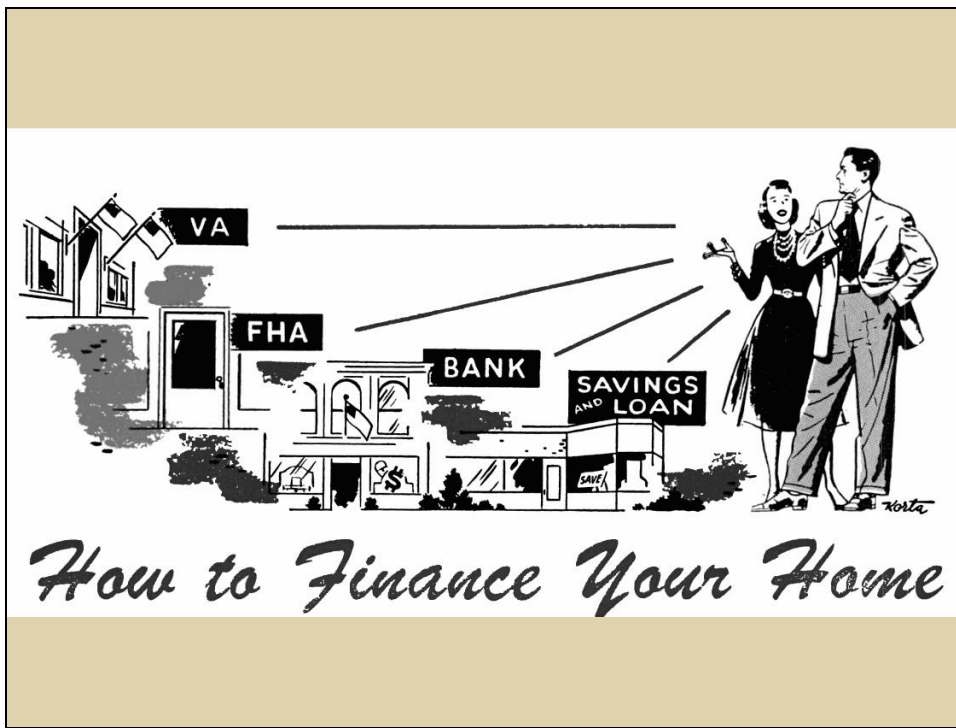
the beginning of what came to be called the "*Sun Belt*" phenomenon.

17



Another story would be *heightened interest in homeownership* rather than renting ...

and in owning *new* homes.

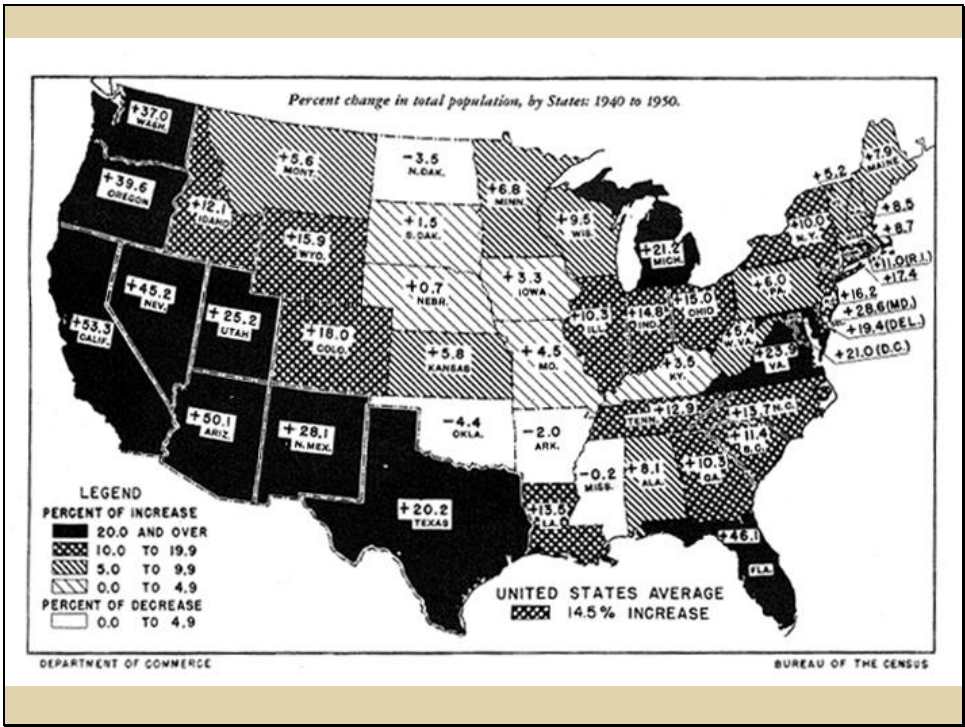


And yet another would be a dramatically *increased ability* to buy those new homes, made possible in part by unprecedented federal government assistance in the form of FHA- and VA-backed home mortgages ...

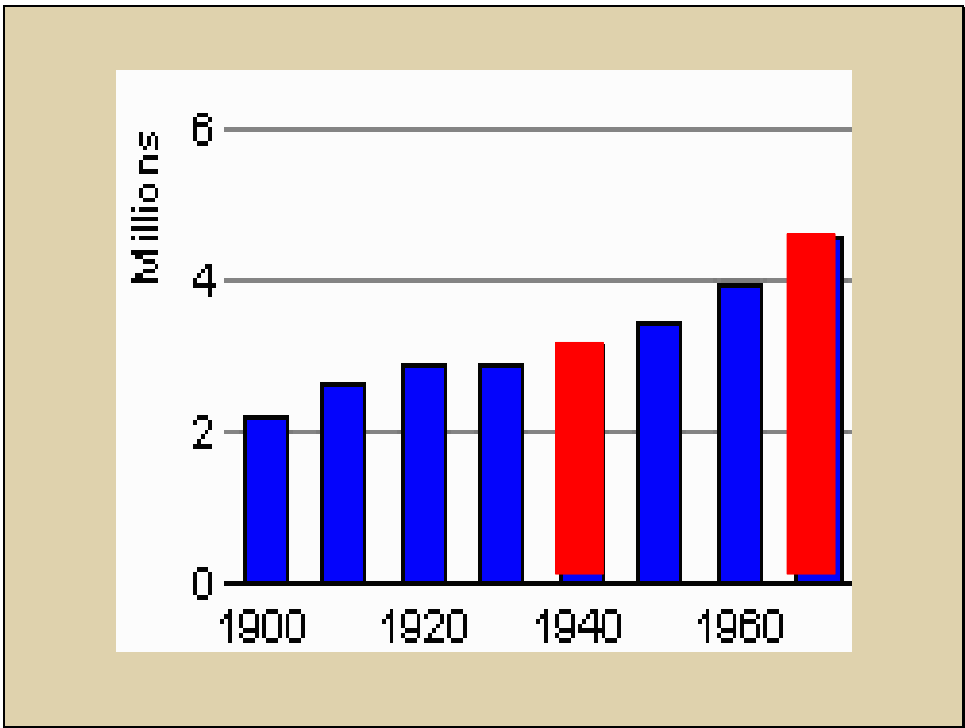


and by *post-war economic prosperity* that made it possible to build and buy those *new* family homes -- on a scale never before seen in America or anywhere for that matter.





Some of these stories -- for example, Georgia's unprecedented mid-century population growth, or the baby-boomer generation -- have been well documented by historians.



For example, between 1940 and 1970 -- the 30-year period corresponding to the era of the Ranch House in Georgia -- Georgia's population increased by more than 1,400,000 people -- a 47% increase.



This was the greatest increase ever in the state's population in a 30-year period.



But what *housed* that phenomenal population growth -- what provided the places for all those people to live -- has not been so much noticed.



24



It was a brand-new type of house -- the ***Ranch House*** -- that housed many of those new families -- by some estimates, two-thirds of all those new families in Georgia ...

25



providing them with new places to live and places to call their own.

26



In satisfying this unprecedented demand for home ownership, as many as 200,000 Ranch Houses may have been built in Georgia between 1940 and 1970.

27



At no other time in Georgia's history has a single new type of house housed so many people in such a short period of time.





In Georgia, as elsewhere, the new Ranch House was clearly the house of choice for the post-war generation.



So, in light of all this, why has the Ranch House in Georgia been so overlooked?

The answer, ironically, may lie in its very nature:

its commonness (it does *seem* to be “everywhere”);

and its intentionally unpretentious character (to many people, it *seems* to be just “ordinary”).



*But --* the unassuming Ranch House is, in fact, a remarkable work of residential architecture:

innovative, precedent-setting ...

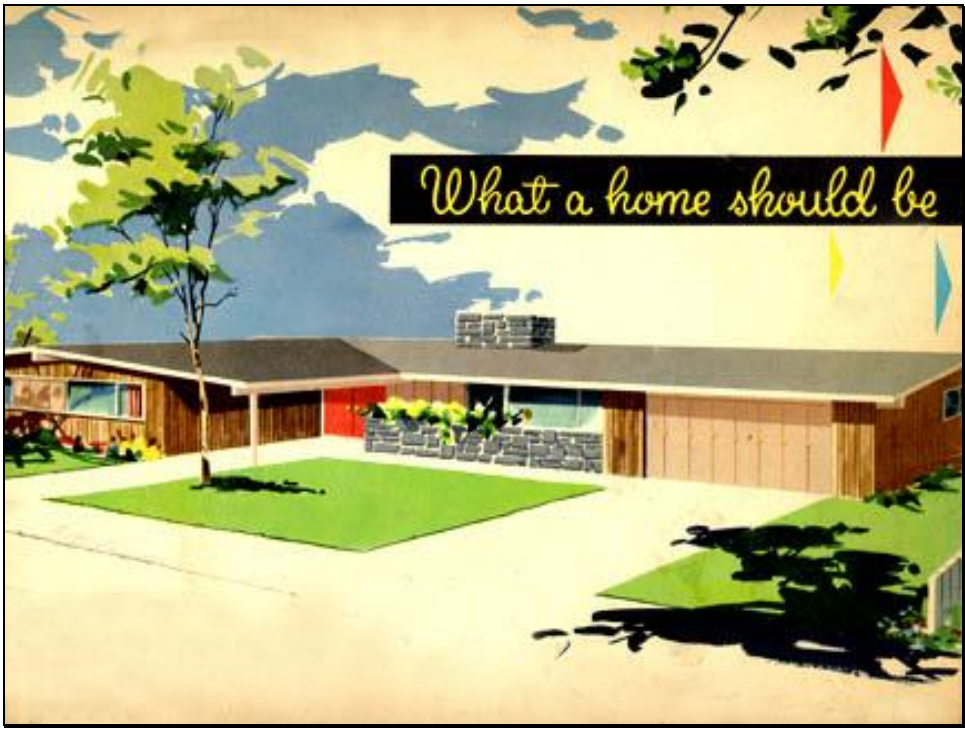
like nothing that had come before it.

It was a new kind of house for new ideas about family living ...

a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century house with mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century stories to tell.

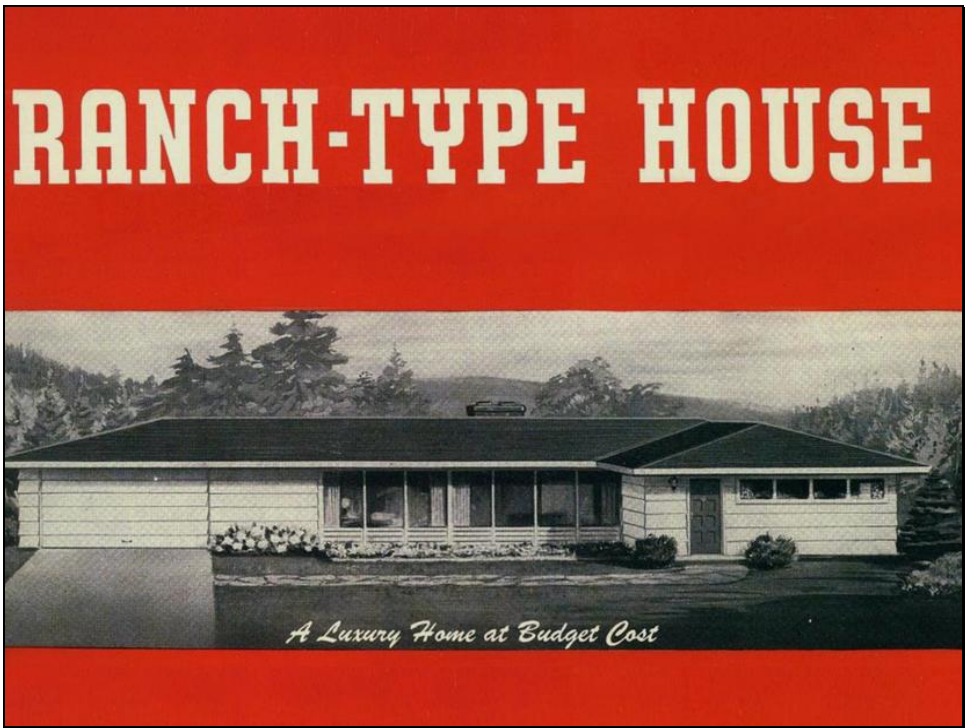


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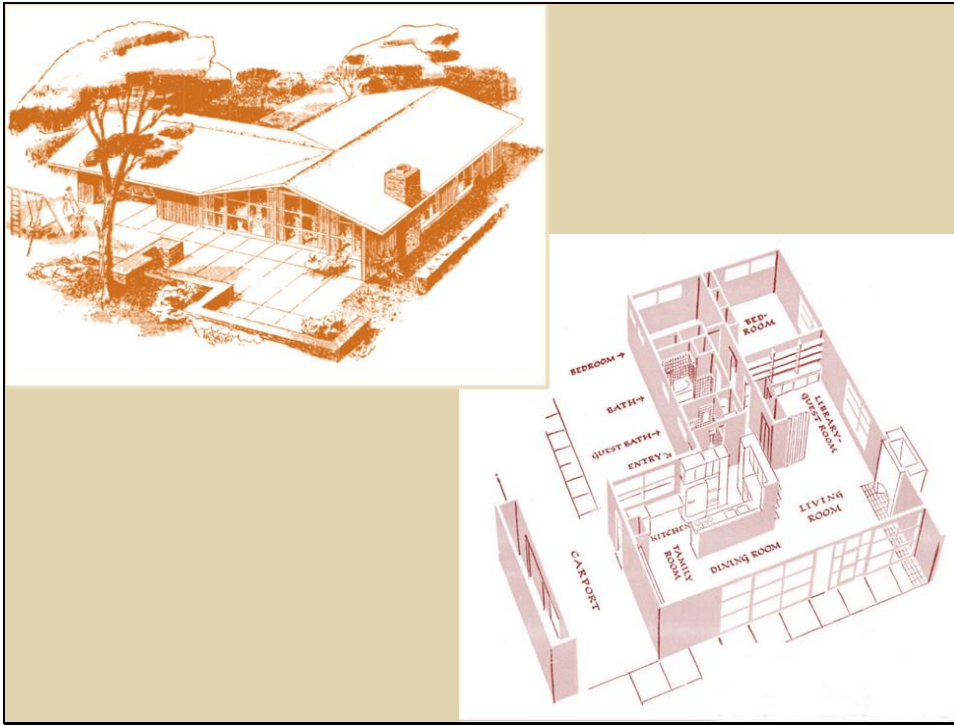
Let's take a closer look at some of the distinctive *architectural characteristics* of this wildly popular new kind of house.

32



The Ranch House was a brand new “type” of house ...





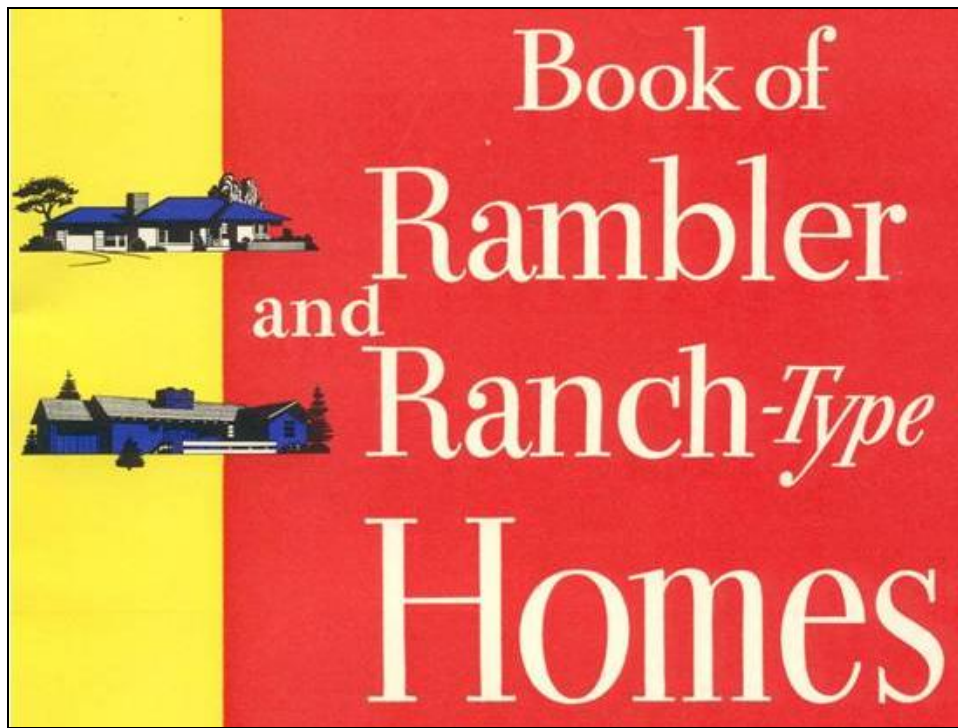
a new “plan-form,” if you will.

This concept of house “type” is based on distinctive patterns of interior spaces and exterior forms rather than stylistic conventions.



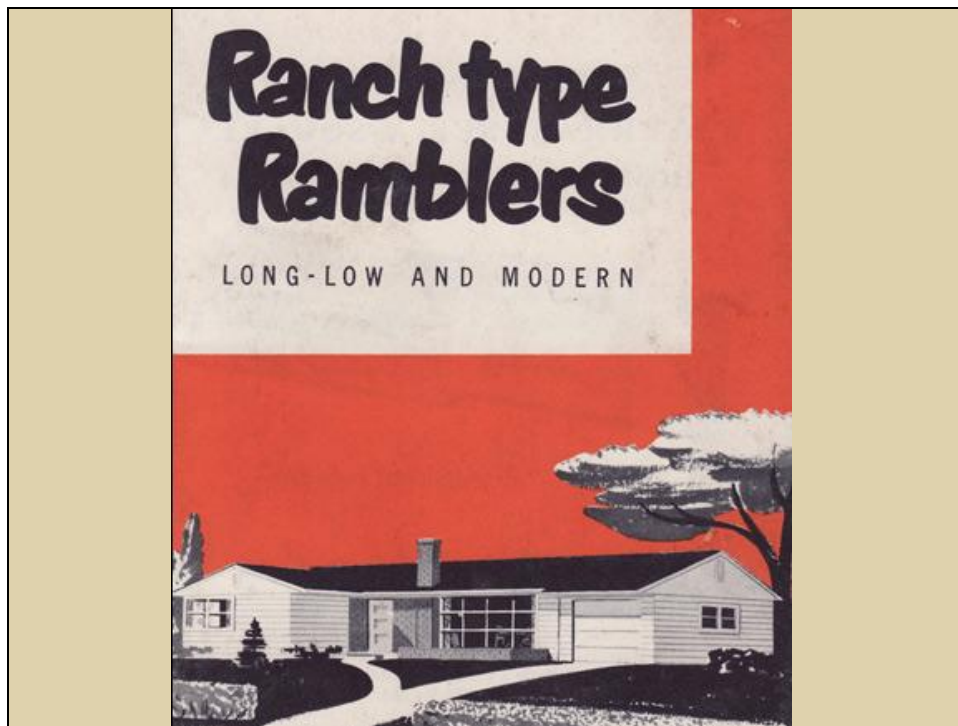
The new Ranch House appeared in Georgia, as elsewhere, in a variety of architectural “styles” as well as in a plain “style” devoid of architectural embellishment.

35



Overall, the Ranch House is one story high -- always.

36



It is generally long, always low, and close to the ground, with a simple *or* complex plan form (massing).

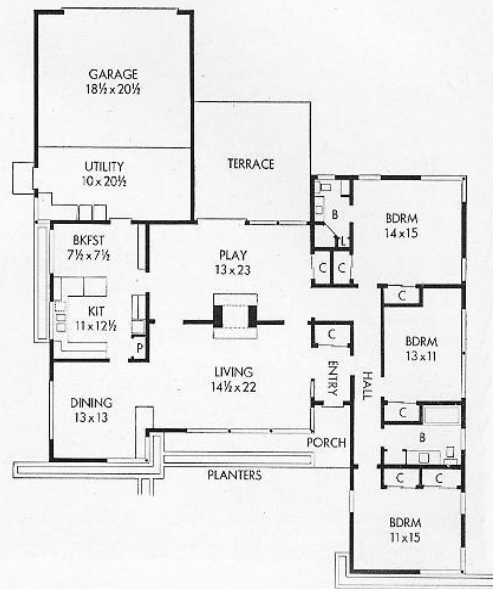
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It often has a variety of exterior materials, and it almost always has a variety of window sizes, shapes, and types.

38

Spacious and well zoned, this home adapts easily to an active family

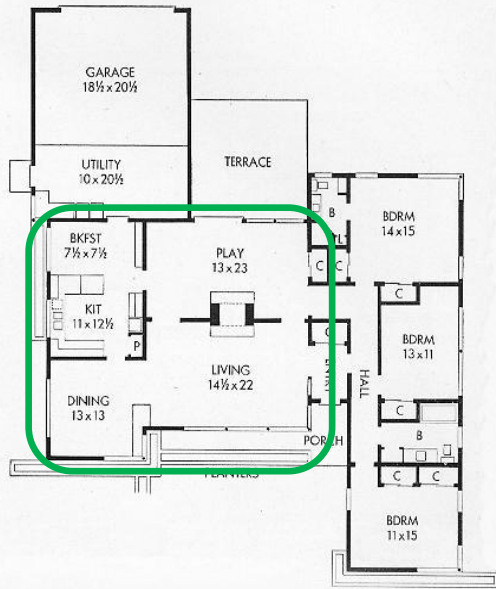


The interior of the Ranch House is “zoned” (which was a relatively new concept in floor plans) ...



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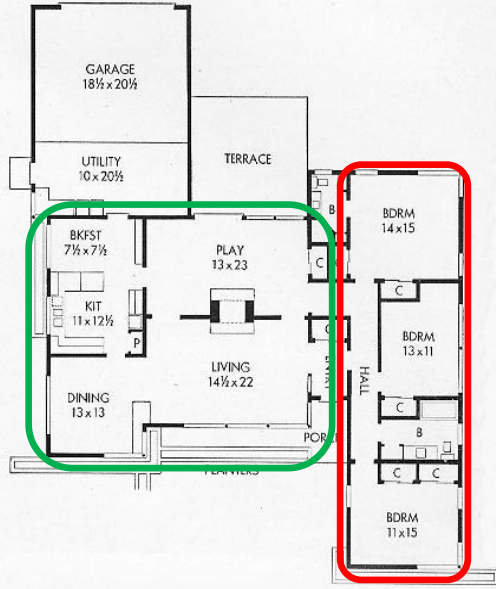
Spacious and well zoned, this home adapts easily to an active family



with “family” activity spaces (like the living room, dining room, family room or den) in one zone ...

40

Spacious and well zoned, this home adapts easily to an active family



and “private” or “individual’s” spaces (like bedrooms and bathrooms) in another.

41



The family living spaces are generally (but not always) “open” ...

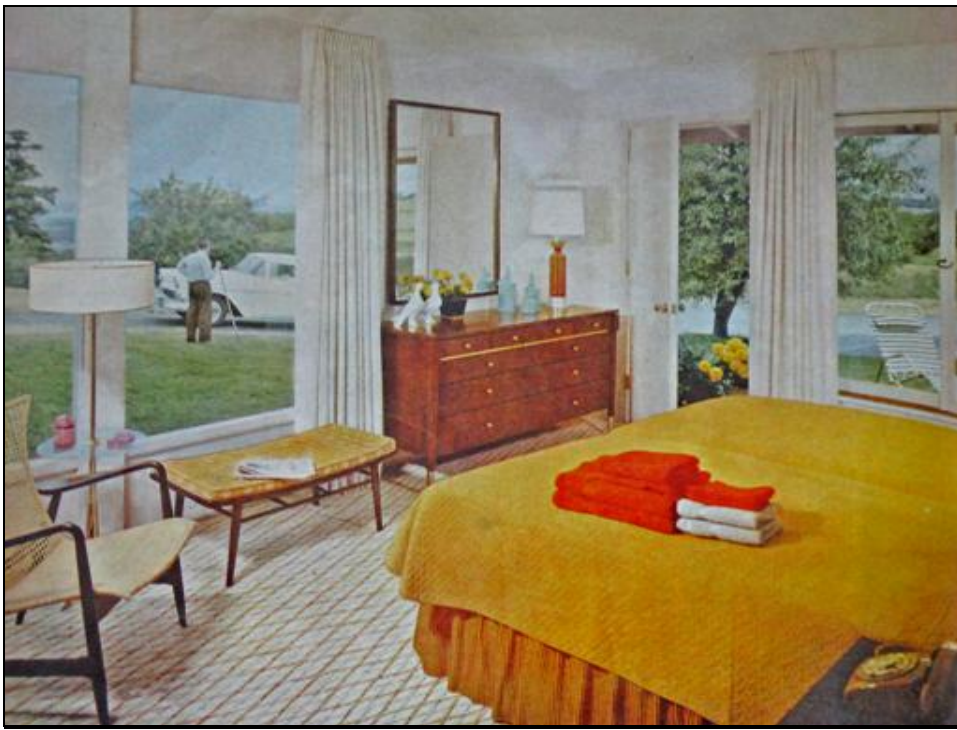
with the living and dining areas opening into one another --

42



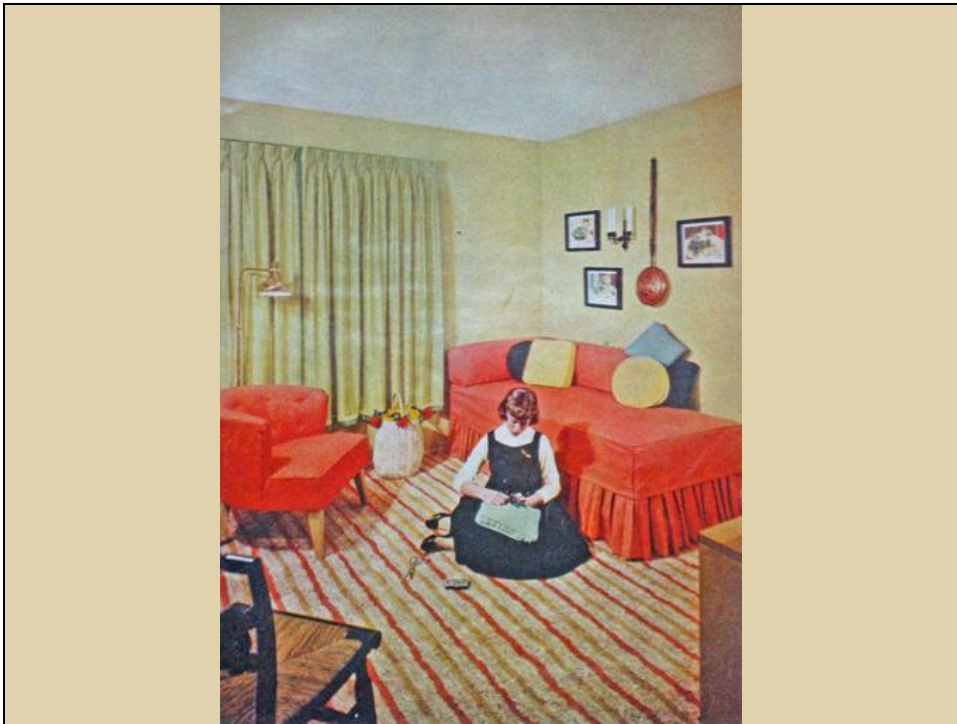
this was another relatively new interior design concept characteristic of Ranch Houses --

43



while the private individual spaces such as bedrooms are “closed” (enclosed) --

44



what we think of as traditional "rooms."





And a new kind of "room" appears with the Ranch House -- the "family" room -- an informal "living room" for the immediate family.



The kitchen in the Ranch House is no longer a utility room isolated in the back of the house.

It is now part of the "family" living space.

47



Architecturally, it is an integral part of the living and dining areas.

48



The kitchen also is integrated into the family's day-to-day life in the house -- indeed, becoming the hub of family activity in a way that it never could when it was relegated to a separate utility room in the back of the house.



49



The chimney with its fireplace -- no longer a functional necessity -- often becomes a major architectural element, defining interior spaces ...

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and, on the exterior, standing as a bold architectural feature.



51



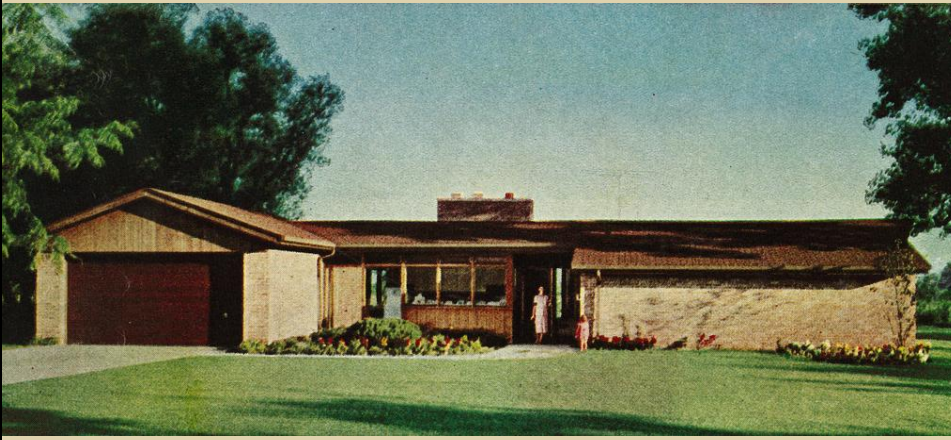
Also on the exterior, the family car moves from its traditional place in a freestanding garage in the back yard to the side or front of the house itself, in an attached garage or carport (both new ranch-house features) ...

52



and sometimes it moves right *into* the house, where it truly becomes a member of the new suburban family.

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Another characteristic of the Ranch House is its siting or orientation.

In a break with traditional siting, the Ranch House is usually situated laterally across the width of its lot, rather than front-to-back ...

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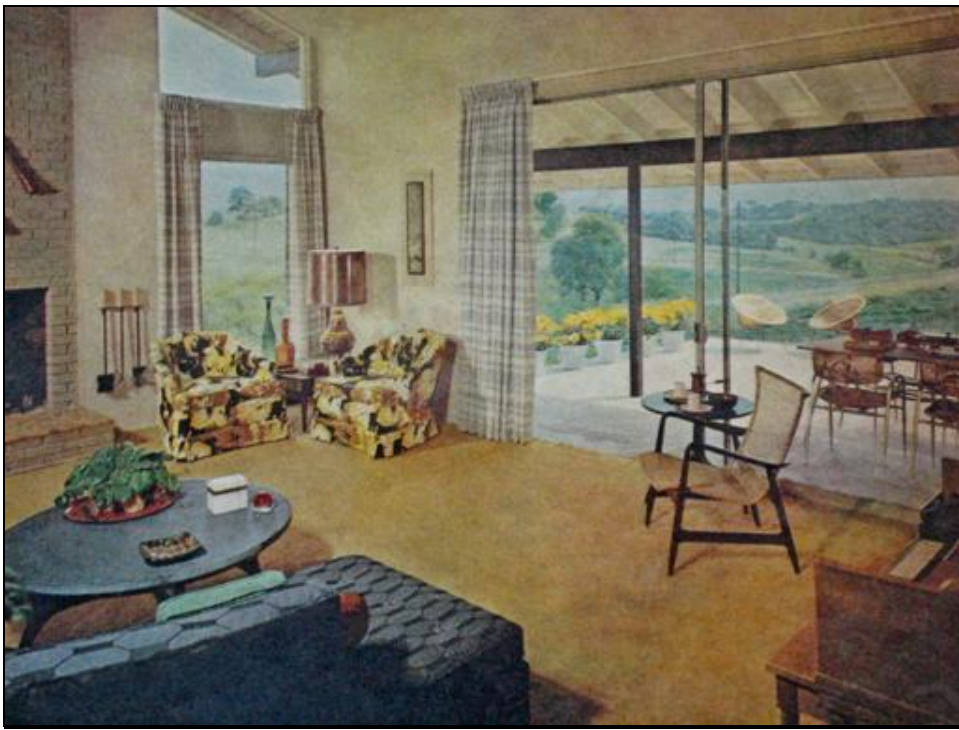


and the back of the house is usually open to the back yard and family activities.

The back yard is no longer a place of work but instead an extension of the family's living space.



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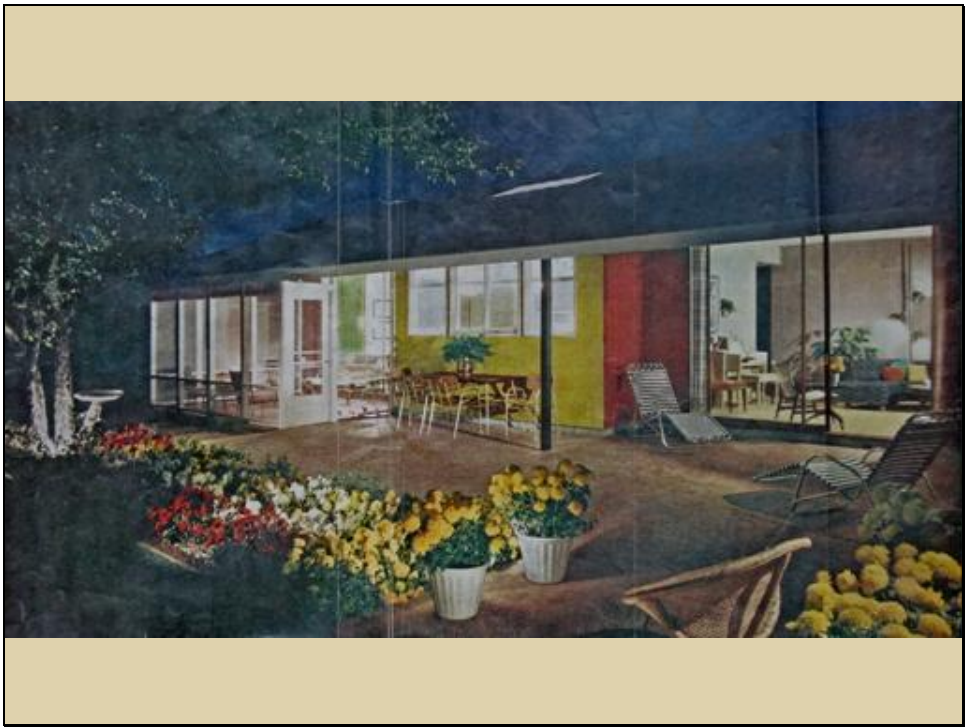
The “inside” and “outside” of the new Ranch House are “integrated” through the ground-hugging form of the house and through a variety of architectural features such as picture windows and sliding glass doors, and porches, patios, and terraces ...

56



which “merge” the inside and the outside of the house into a single family living space ...





clearly seen in this dramatic nighttime view of the back yard of a 1950s model Ranch House.

You have come to demand four features in a new house: a close link between indoors and outdoors; a plan that encourages informal entertaining; a lack of hills that makes housekeeping easy; and good construction within the limits of ever-mounting building costs. You'll find all these features in this house, designed by Cliff May and Chris Chase. Few walls—many of them glass—create a sense of relaxation. Walls are built only where privacy is important—several bedrooms, bath, and kitchen. Ridge and rafter construction makes this openness possible at a reasonable price for the specified 1,016 square feet of space. Framing consists solely of wall studs, roof rafters, and a 4x10-inch spaced ridge beam that runs from gable to gable. Almost all ceiling joists are eliminated.

Room  
Overall width, depth  
Square footage  
Bedrooms  
Bathrooms  
Bunkroom  
Dining  
Living  
Kitchen  
Porch  
Total  
1,016 sq. ft.  
2004

All these characteristics of the new Ranch House were embodied in the 1952 *Better Homes & Gardens* “demonstration Ranch House.”



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