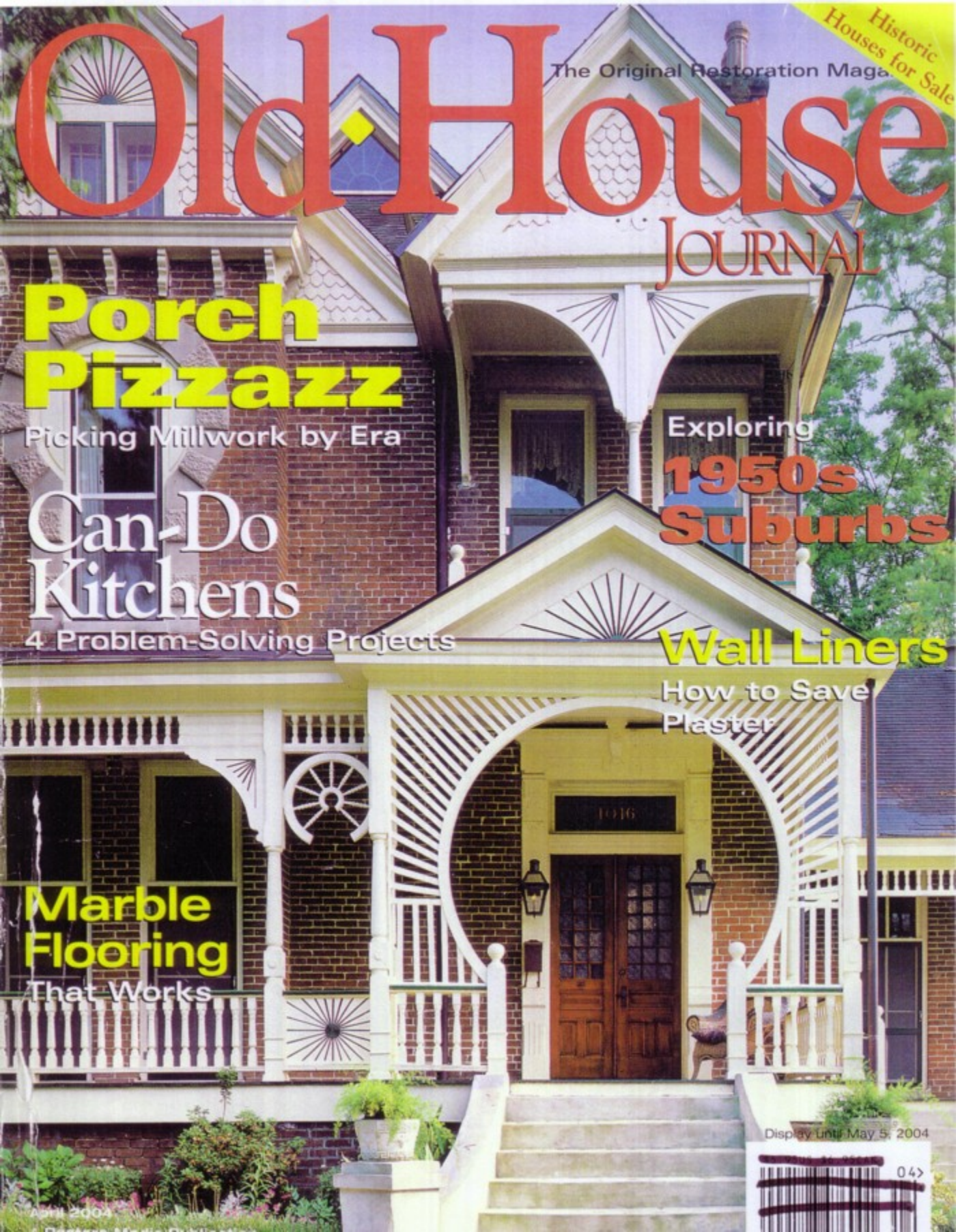
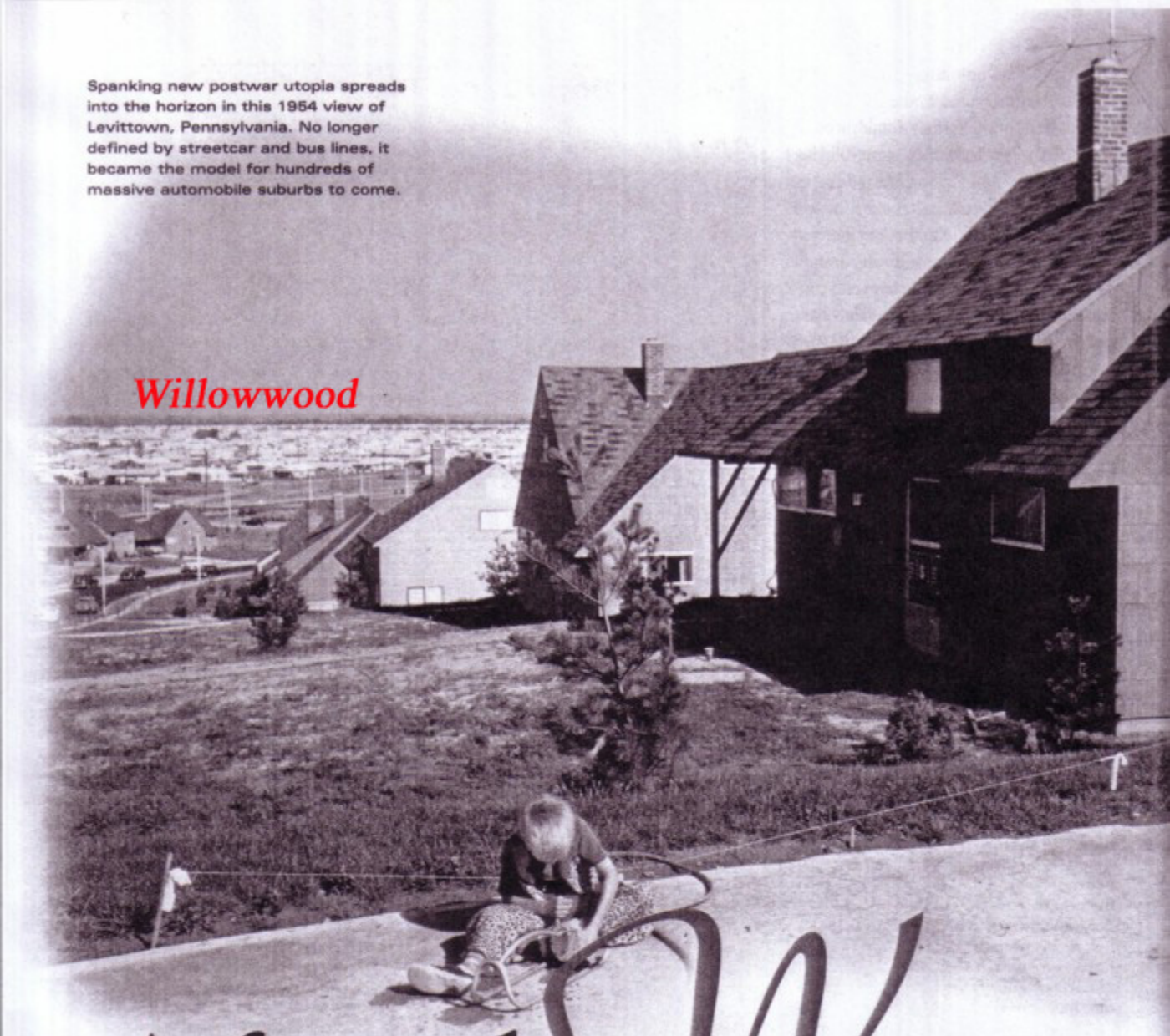

Historic Houses for Sale
Old-House
The Original Restoration Maga
JOURNAL
Porch Pizzazz
Picking Millwork by Era
Can-Do Kitchens
4 Problem-Solving Projects
Exploring 1950s Suburbs
Wall Liners
How to Save Plaster
Marble Flooring
That Works
1916
Display Until May 5, 2004
04>



Spanking new postwar utopia spreads into the horizon in this 1954 view of Levittown, Pennsylvania. No longer defined by streetcar and bus lines, it became the model for hundreds of massive automobile suburbs to come.

After the War

How the rush to house returning vets recast suburbia.

By James C. Massey & Shirley Maxwell

What do you see when you look at a post-World War II suburb? An ocean of "little boxes made of ticky tack?" A trove of retro treasures waiting for the tender hand of a restorationist? An inviting bundle of tear-down/make-over opportunities? Whatever you see today, it probably doesn't come close to what most postwar families saw: their own piece of heaven.

In 1946 nearly 13 million servicemen (and women) came home from war. Most of them had the same destination in mind—a nice house in a grassy suburb, a bright, open place far from hectic, crowded cities, where happy couples could grow a family and bask in the sunshine of home ownership.

They weren't alone. Civilians had the same idea. For 16 years, the housing supply had been tightening around a growing population, and pent-up demand was near the bursting point. First the Depression pushed housing starts downward, from 937,000 in 1925 to 93,000 in 1933. Then wartime shortages of building materials wiped out a housing boomlet that began around 1940 and ended when the United States entered the war in December 1941. At the war's end in 1945, there were 3,600,000 American families needing homes.

Something had to be done, and quickly. Fortunately, in the robust postwar economy, almost everyone had cash in the bank, and returning GIs had the government's promise of low interest rates, long mortgages, and plenty of houses. The Federal Housing Authority, established during the Depression to insure 20-year mortgages, was joined in 1945 by an even more generous program for veterans. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act—the GI Bill of Rights—authorized the Veterans' Administration to oversee a slew of benefits (later extended to Korean War vets as well) that included federally insured mortgage loans with no down payment and 30 years to maturity.

The Look of Auto America

So, what kind of houses did that easy mortgage money build? Mostly small ones. Peacetime salaries were high, but so was inflation, nearly doubling the prewar cost of building a home. Consequently, most postwar houses had less room than those of 1940.

While houses were expensive, land was

Today, carports and picture windows still stand out as the signal features of these postwar houses in Hagerstown, Maryland. Economical construction and simpler lifestyles made large houses uncommon after 1945.

cheap—if it was far enough from the city. Fortunately, home buyers wanted nothing more than to live away from town. Distance was no problem once the United States committed itself to the massive highway building program that characterized postwar America. Potato fields and cow pastures yielded quickly to interstate highways, roads, subdivisions, and shopping centers.

House size wasn't the deciding factor for most buyers in that house-hungry era. When questioned during the war about their postwar housing intentions, most families said they wanted something like the most popular houses of the prewar era: "traditional," sort of "Colonial"—but not too expensive—and no stairs, please. The ideal house was also informal, with space indoors and out where the statistical average of 3.51 children could play under the eye of their stay-at-home mother—who would, of course, be quite busy cooking and cleaning up after her growing family.

Thus buyers wanted modern conveniences—electric or gas ranges, big refrigerators, automatic washing machines, clothes dryers, and clean, modern oil furnaces. A utility room to hold the washer, dryer, and furnace would be good—but not in the basement! Maybe in a garage, especially if the garage was attached to the house, which, naturally, would make the house appear much larger. Besides, Dad would need a car to get to his office or factory miles away, so a garage would be perfect—or maybe one of those new carports.

Home on the Ranch

You can see where all that was headed. Small house, one level, open plan, big yard, garage, carport—yep, the suburban ranch house.

So, although plenty of Cape Cods and Colonials of various sizes and complexity, as well as some architect-designed contemporary houses, were built after the war, it was the economical ranch house that came to symbolize American home life in the late 1940s and 1950s. Taking its name and simple form from the 19th-century rancho of the far West (but influenced also by Frank Lloyd Wright's strongly horizontal Prairie School designs), the ranch house had been around since the 1930s. It took the high-volume housing demand and inflation-enforced spatial constraints of the '50s to bring it to center stage.

Especially in the early postwar period, the basic ranch house was a small, unelaborate rectangle with a flat or low-sloped roof (okay, a box), just big enough for a living-dining room combination, possibly L-shaped; a small but open kitchen; one bath; and two or three bedrooms. Big horizontal

The traditional half-Cape turned up as far from its vernacular soil as this Jacksonville, Florida, example with a picturesque one-car garage. Thoughtful details make this a probable Royal Barry Wills design.

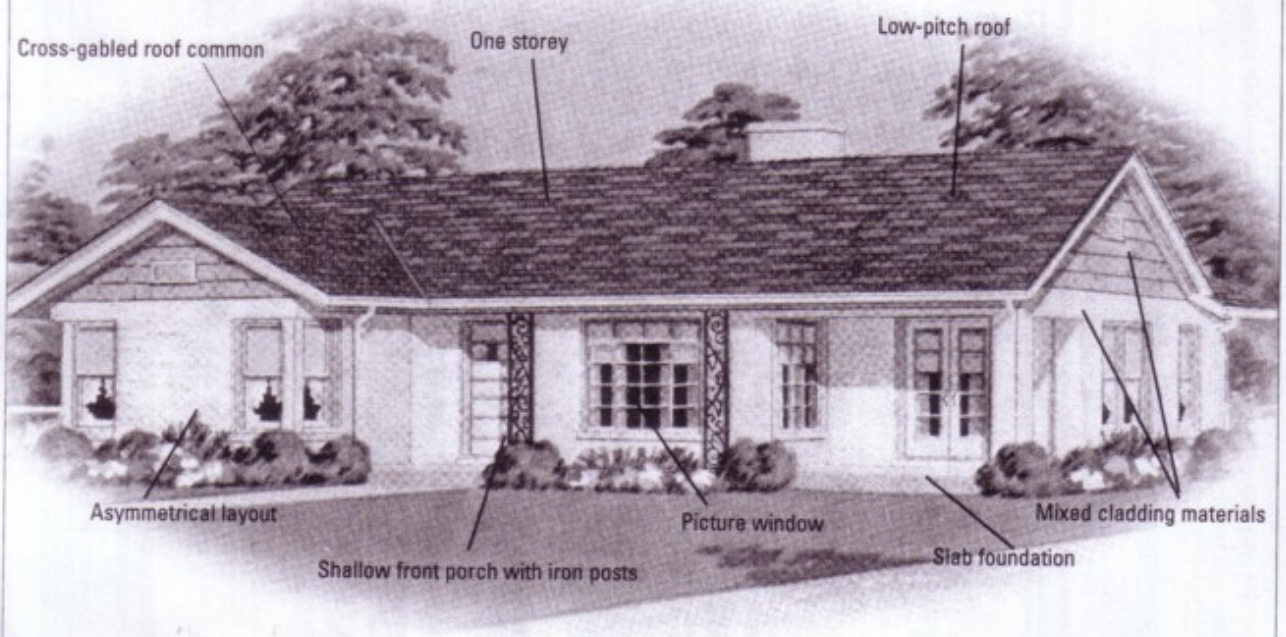
Basic, hip-roofed postwar houses with a "modern" slab door were a common alternative to the gable roofed "Colonial" and its six-panel door. Visitors entered directly into the living room lit by the gridded picture window.

The ubiquitous postwar Cape more often looked like this Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, house with nontraditional dormers and brick siding. Compact and convenient to a fault, these houses have also proved to be easily expanded over the last 50 years.

A wave of the future that never quite made it to shore, the Lustron porcelain-steel house was a factory-produced answer to the housing crunch packaged in a basic gable-roof dwelling. This Arlington, Virginia, model is among some 2,000 extant examples.

Reading the Ranch

A low, wide, rambling house form to fit mobile lifestyles.



Typical of the early postwar period is this wide ranch in Union, West Virginia, with attached, one-car garage and a mix of materials (brick, stone, horizontal siding) on the front.

Turning the gable to face the street produced a clearly modern feel in this ranch with its cathedral clerestory of glass above the picture window.

Right: The hipped roof gives this Ormond Beach, Florida, ranch a sleek look while it unites the sets of paired windows and single-auto carport.

windows set in aluminum frames borrowed light and visual space from the out-of-doors. It included an obligatory "picture window" (one large horizontal pane flanked by smaller awning or casement sections) in the living room, small windows set high in the bedroom walls, and sliding glass patio doors. Inside, the 8′ ceiling became standard, and three-sided fireplaces were popular. Front doors were no longer paneled, but "designed," with a pattern of small diamond-shaped or rectangular glass inserts at eye level.

The façade frequently displayed a mix of materials, from wood siding or plywood panels to cement asbestos shingles, and the main element of the front wall might be a prominent broad chimney.

Later ranch houses often had two-car garages, as well as more and larger rooms (even two bathrooms!), perhaps arranged in an L- or U-shape to encompass an outdoor living space. A "family room" sometimes freed up the living room for mostly adult use. By 1960, sprawling "ranch ramblers" often placed the living, dining, and kitchen areas between the master suite and the children's rooms.

Because of its horizontality, the ranch house was wide but not deep, with its long side parallel to the street. This created many large front and rear yards (and lots of lawn-mowing) with narrow side yards. Instead of having many separate rooms, the ranch house was divided into "zones." In the "quiet zone"—the bedrooms and baths—walls and doors provided privacy. In the multifunctional "activity zone," the living, dining, and kitchen areas formed one large space shared by children and adults for work, play, and socializing. Openness forced a level of togetherness that was not always comfortable, but yielded an illusion of space.

Suburbs on Assembly Line

After 1946, houses like these little ranches almost seemed to spring up of their own accord, as savvy developers found there was plenty of buildable land just waiting to be turned into overnight villages. In 1950 alone, more than 1.5 million homes were added to the nation's housing stock.

Two of the savviest developers were William and Alfred Levitt. The Levitts utilized William's Seabees construction experience and Alfred's architectural training to produce mammoth residential developments in rural areas of Long Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Each Levittown, as these mass-produced villages were named, was not just a subdivision but a community built around a "village green," with curving streets and cul-de-sacs, schools, parks, recreational facilities, shopping areas, meeting facilities—everything but offices and factories.

Buyers liked the quality of life in the new villages, but they *loved* the low prices. Canny use of prefabricated house parts produced in the Levitts' own factories, rigid standardization, and assembly-line methods pioneered in the automobile industry resulted in astounding economy and speed of production. Levitt crews finished one

Split-levels, which spread rapidly across the country, were the new houses of the 1950s, and were designed to offer three living areas without the large lot needed for ranches. Here, the enclosed garage is probably in the rear.

More typical of the split layout is this Richmond, Virginia, house with common garage opening in the front. Bedrooms are above the garage level, while the kitchen, dining room, and living room are at left behind the three-part picture window.

house every fifteen minutes, and William Levitt bragged that his company was "the General Motors of the housing industry."

Houses in the first Levittown contained only 800 square feet and cost a mere $7,000. Each included a picture window, a fireplace, radiant heating in the concrete slab floor, and a built-in television set, as well as an unfinished "expansion attic."

Levitt's methods were widely copied—usually on a smaller scale—and hundreds of huge subdivisions of spec-built, nearly identical houses sprouted around cities from Boston to Chicago to Portland, Oregon, and Los Angeles. Critics sneered, but the public kept on buying.

The new suburbs tended to be socially homogeneous, populated by families of similar income, age, and educational levels. Until Civil Rights legislation in the 1950s made race discrimination in housing illegal, most of these suburbs were also racially segregated.

In time, land became scarcer and more expensive, and the split-level (or tri-level) house gave the ubiquitous ranch some competition, particularly in the Northeast. The split-level often required less foundation work than a similar-sized ranch and accommodated more house on less land. It also enabled the use of difficult sloping lots. Its main disadvantage was the up-and-down nature of the plan, with the entrance at one level, the living area down a few steps, and the bedrooms up, above a grade-level garage.

Two old standards, the two-storey Colonial and the one-and-a-half-storey Cape Cod, never entirely faded from the housing scene. Their gabled roofs, dormers, and shuttered façades remained familiar features of many subdivisions, though their "Colonial" trim became less and less distinctive over time.

The postwar suburb has always had its detractors—for creating sprawl, for encouraging mediocrity, for sheer monotony. Yet, in certain locations, those "little boxes" sport impressive price tags nowadays. And some of those "tacky" suburbs, wreathed in respectable old age, are even listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Not bad for ticky tack.

MORE FROM OLDHOUSEJOURNAL.COM

For a related story online, see "The Cape Cod Revival." Just click to "The Magazine" section, and go to the alphabetical list of recent features.

A full Colonial Revival of the era might look like this house built with Flemish bond brickwork and a neat entry porch with elliptical arch. Note the blind arches over the first-floor windows and the paired windows above them.

All through the postwar period, the popularity of the two-storey colonial continued unabated, albeit in sometimes altered forms. What this modest yet comfortable Madison, New Jersey, example saves on detailing the veneer stone façade or front entrance, it lavishes on the essential attached garage.