

THE ORDINARY POSTWAR HOUSE

It can sometimes be difficult to imagine that very ordinary, ubiquitous aspects of the built environment hold rhetorical power. The field of spatial rhetoric, in fact, is a fairly new one, emerging since the 1980s along with the ascendancy of semiotic theory and its movement into humanities disciplines outside English. The idea that visual and textual productions hold rhetorical and persuasive power is a much older and well-accepted one, and despite several decades of scholarly investigations into the social and political history of architecture, it still does not go without saying that buildings, landscapes, and city spaces may also be persuasive and rhetorically powerful. Darryl Hattenhauer posited a semiotic approach to the analysis of architecture in 1984 when he wrote: “Architecture is rhetorical

because it induces us to do what others would have us do. Architecture, then, is a persuasive phenomenon.”¹ And in her study of apartment plots in film and television, Pamela Wojcik has pushed Hattenhauer’s statement further, asserting that, “like props, characters, and other semantic elements, space and place are more than just one lexical choice among many; they are imbricated in signifying structures that are historically determined and that carry tremendous connotative and ideological weight related to issues of sex, gender, class, race, the body, individuality, family, community, work, pleasure, and more.”² So, too, the particular characteristics of ordinary postwar houses matter in the signification of ideas about race, class, gender, and belonging, just as I have already asserted is true for



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View of the “California style”
house (detail, see p. 52).



The home of Rudolf and
Eva Weingarten, circa 1955.
Collection of the author.

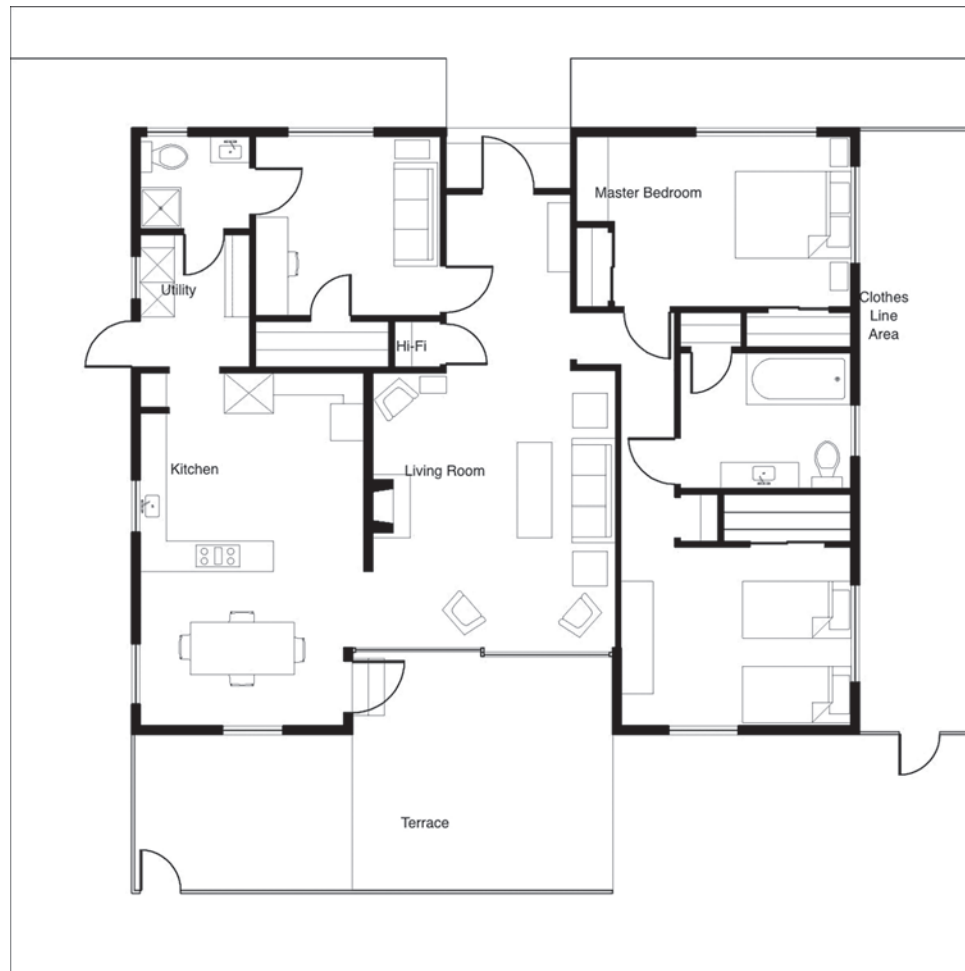


visual and textual representations of those houses. Understanding the basic forms and spaces of such houses lies at the core of this investigation, so I begin here with a description and assessment of the configuration of a typical postwar dwelling. Once again, I look to my grandparents' house as a point of departure, since

it was, in many respects, a typically modest postwar ranch house. My grandparents' experience as homeowners also provides an entrée into a more detailed examination of the political, cultural, and economic forces that shaped the racialized housing market of the postwar era.

CONSTRUCTING WHITE NEIGHBORHOODS

When Rudy and Eva Weingarten purchased their home in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles in 1955, it was the first and last piece of real estate they would ever own. With both of their daughters attending college and their own hi-fi and electronics store successfully launched, Rudy and Eva joined the vast ranks of Americans who were able to cease living their lives as renters by purchasing a small, single-story house. Situated at the corner of two side streets in Van Nuys, the house sat on land once occupied by citrus orchards and was conveniently located near major arterials and freeways that conveyed traffic in numerous directions but most importantly to the south, toward Los Angeles's primary business districts. Part of a tract development, the neighborhood appears to have remained unrestricted to Jews, Italians, and some other immigrant Americans (though I don't remember any blacks or Latino/as in the neighborhood in its early years). As Laura Barraclough's recent study of the San Fernando Valley indicates, the rapid construction of housing developments in the Valley in the 1950s meant that developers and merchant builders followed the racially exclusive practices required to qualify for federally insured financing. As Barraclough notes, "Only 3.3 percent of federally subsidized suburban housing units constructed in Southern



A plan diagram of the Weingarten residence.
Drawing by Matthew Zelensek.

California's 1950s housing boom were made available to nonwhites.”³

The Valley was intentionally constructed as a white region where developers exploited rural myths and pastoral aesthetics in an attempt to create exclusive neighborhoods of privilege. But it also seems to have been a welcoming environment for Jews, who by this time were already becoming an accepted ethnic group in suburban developments nationwide, even as their presence could cause concern about the nature and construction of white identities. As George Sanchez has reported, about twenty-two thousand Jewish families lived in the San Fernando Valley by 1950; only five thousand black families lived there at that same time. The new color line in the Valley “placed Jews decidedly into the ‘white race’ but continued to exclude Blacks, Asians, and probably most Mexicans,” and Jewish builders also began to construct homes for this market.⁴ In 1955, a client of my grandfather’s informed him about a new Valley development that was under construction, and my grandparents quickly made an offer on the house, happy to be able to pick the interior and exterior paint colors, the carpeting and linoleum, the Formica for countertops, and fixtures for the not-yet-completed home. If they worried about finding a neighborhood that would accept them, they did not openly speak about their fears. Instead, as my mother remembers, they simply understood which neighborhoods to avoid because they would not be welcome there.

Neither the fact of my grandparents’ Jewish identity nor their understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics of the region’s housing market is incidental to this narrative. To be a Jewish immigrant in search of housing was to possess a highly specific (if largely unspoken and unacknowledged) sense of one’s status as a newly (and provisionally) white individual in the United States. But if my grandparents and others like them understood the factors that shaped their opportunities in the 1950s, architectural historians have tended to overlook whiteness as a critical factor in the shaping of spatial histories.

Notions of the social construction of race have been in currency for some time, and “whiteness studies” emerged as a field around 1988 with the appearance of key studies by Richard Dyer, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Peggy McIntosh, and David Roediger, among others.⁵ In this field led by ethnic studies, scholars of whiteness explore the idea that whiteness, like all other racial categories, remains a social construction. Examining white culture and the ways it asserts its dominance while essentializing, minoritizing, and discriminating against all others, scholars in a range of disciplines have directed our attention to that which is so pervasive it is almost invisible: the apparent ineffability of white privilege in its myriad forms—what Roediger calls the ability of white identity and white privilege to hide in plain sight.⁶ He claims that whiteness is manifestly “able to hide in plain sight” because it “remains at times inef-



fable and multiple. . . . Our task is thus almost never to say that something ‘is really all about race.’ It is to show how whiteness exists in a complex history and a multiply inflected present.”⁷ Moreover, whiteness itself is constructed variously and is never monolithic, so that even those considered irrefutably “white” have multiple experiences and backgrounds.

This quality of “hiding in plain sight” pertains equally to a range of ideologies that are embedded in the spaces that surround us. Landscapes are particularly well suited to the masking of such constructions because they appear to be completely natural, God-given, and therefore neutral and because they serve as unnoticed background to our everyday lives. But landscapes, and indeed architecture, are never neutral. They are always powerful symbols and containers of cultural values, just as they simultaneously work to construct culture. Given this equivalence of invisibility between the ideologies of constructed space and constructions of race, domestic form and ideologies of whiteness become more than usually complicit in the manufacturing of societal norms. Again, however, we must remember Žižek’s theoretical framework: the masking is complete only if the participant/viewer truly does not see it. Instead, I propose that ideological postwar cultural landscapes were effective precisely because their ubiquitous and quotidian qualities could render them simultaneously invisible and visible: they could be seen and seemingly ignored even as Americans completely

understood and inhabited their economic, political, and cultural logics.

The idea that white privilege comprises a spatialized set of practices is becoming more widely examined, and scholars have formed significant consensus around this notion. In the past fifteen years, scholars have begun to outline clearly the indelibly drawn connections between race and space and between white identities and access to land, freedom of geographical movement, and property rights—something the legal scholar Cheryl Harris has called “whiteness as property.”⁸ The monetary value attached to whiteness has been measured significantly in terms of homeownership, which in turn is linked to notions of citizenship and national belonging.⁹ I will examine these connections in some detail in later parts of this book, but I will also focus on the more general notion put forth by David Delaney that “race is what it is and does what it does precisely because of how it is given spatial expression.”¹⁰ Far from being tangentially connected, the construction of race and the built environment that surrounds us are joined by ties that are in fact fundamental to the constitution of racial and ethnic categories.

The stakes surrounding ideas about who is and is not white were significant in the postwar period, and they remain so today: white identities afforded homeownership, access to good schools and health care, proximity to outlets selling varieties of healthful foods, relative distance from toxic factories and other dangerous sites,



and varying degrees of financial security. In the postwar era, and in recognition of those stakes, the occlusion of ethnic identities became essential for social conformity, and the images of postwar homes that were reproduced everywhere in the mass media instructed viewers about containing ethnic difference and attaining class status. The images were remarkably consistent—clean, tidy, orderly, shiny, brightly lit, and uncluttered. Taken together with magazine and newspaper articles, television programs, advertisements, and even the houses themselves, they defined for viewers and inhabitants the contours of residential conformity: how to look like everyone else and, essentially, how to be white. Still, as Karen Brodtkin notes, Jews of the 1950s were identified as “somewhere between wannabes and nouveau arrivistes, accepted as white, but not securely.”¹¹ Like some other nonwhites and those recently of the lower economic classes, they were out of the ghetto and into the suburbs, but seldom “to the manor born.” Worse still, their presence as potential “passers” generated specific concerns for some homeowners.

Matthew Jacobson has focused specifically on questions related to neighborhood belonging for postwar Jews, citing an indeterminacy to their sense of belonging that is linked to what he also calls “the vicissitudes of whiteness—the cultural and historical contingencies of looking Jewish and seeing Jews.”¹² Because some racial categories became new categories of ethnicity, and because Jews could be newly categorized as white, per-

ceptions of whiteness became ever more pressing, ever more destabilized, generating greater levels of concern than may have existed previously for whites who sought (for various reasons) to establish their own identities more definitively. The probationary whiteness of Jews and some other ethnic groups at midcentury created tensions over race among other groups whose differences were not always visible or easily discerned. Films such as *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959), and *I Passed for White* (1960) all took “passing” as their central subject, and their popularity and/or critical acclaim indicate the extent to which the topic occupied a significant degree of public attention in this period.

As a group, then, Jews became a specific kind of register for racial anxiety in the United States at mid-century. Jews were dispersed geographically during the postwar era with increased U.S. industrialization and suburbanization, and they had access to housing in some newly constructed postwar suburbs even as they were restricted from purchasing in others and in many urban areas. In restricted areas, Jews could also sometimes “pass” if they wished to do so.¹³ But if Jews became white, Jewishness also persisted as a visual category, something many Americans believed could be seen and recognized in the physiognomy of individuals. It could also, by extension, be seen and recognized in house design and material culture, and in decorating and design preferences, as I will explain in later chap-



ters. After World War II, Americans were perhaps more keenly attuned to these perceptual differences than ever before. Novels such as Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and Arthur Miller's *Focus* (1945), and later Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), emphasized the visual and perceptual bases of Jewish identity and connected them (to varying degrees) to allegories that could be detected in the design and decoration of the home. The erasure of race as a category attached to Jews led, perhaps inevitably, to a greater awareness and focus on the visual and perceptual bases of white identities. This, then, is another important reason to study these issues at midcentury.

I have asserted above that the landscape of postwar housing was one marked by segregation and inequality, but to what extent was this the case? U.S. census data demonstrate with some precision the situation vis-à-vis the distribution of housing as it related to race. The 1950 "Census of Housing" included categories for both "Occupancy Characteristics" and "Race and Color of Occupants." For the latter, households were categorized as either white or nonwhite, with nonwhites including heads of households who were identified as "Negro," "Indian," "Japanese," "Chinese," or "Other." Heads of households of Mexican ancestry or birth who were not Indian or another nonwhite race were classified as white. The Census Bureau noted, "The concept of race as it has been used by the Bureau of the Census is derived from that which is commonly accepted by the general

public."¹⁴ The housing census of 1950 counted primarily occupancy of dwellings. It did not collect detailed information about dwellings or their design characteristics, and it recorded only sketchy information about condition. The census data indicate that in 1950, 39,043,595 whites occupied dwelling units (with a total U.S. white population of 134,942,028); the total number of occupied dwellings owned by nonwhites for that same year was 3,782,686 (with a total U.S. nonwhite population of 15,755,333). According to the Census Bureau: "About 1 out of 11 occupied dwelling units in the United States in 1950 was occupied by a nonwhite household. A great majority of these were Negro. . . . Since 1890, the number of nonwhite households increased at a slower rate than white households, dropping from 11.3 percent of all households in 1890 to 8.8 percent in 1950." Occupancy statistics, however, do not indicate ownership. More telling are those statistics that indicate that in 1950, 22,240,970 U.S. whites owned their own homes, compared with 1,252,103 blacks. The total number of houses owned by all "others" was a mere 66,893. The proportions varied by region and state, but the key here is that nonwhites owned significantly fewer residences everywhere in the United States.¹⁵ It should also be noted that only about one-third of all dwelling units occupied by nonwhites in 1950 had both hot and cold piped running water inside the structure, and another third had no running water at all. Close to 2,000,000 of these had no access to either a shared or private



conventional toilet in the dwelling, and more than 2,000,000 had no bathtub or shower.¹⁶

By 1960, black household occupancy numbers had increased and the Census Bureau noted that in terms of occupancy, “between 1950 and 1960, the number of nonwhite households increased at a faster rate than white households.” However, the increase in occupancy (not homeownership) for nonwhite households occurred entirely within central-city areas that the Census Bureau designated as Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Outside the urban core, in the newly built and growing suburban areas, nonwhite households experienced a slight decrease in occupancy for the same period. By 1960, nearly 31,000,000 U.S. dwellings were owned by whites; only about 2,000,000 were owned by nonwhites. The rates for nonwhite homeownership were highest in the West and lowest in the Northeast.¹⁷ But overall, the differences in both rates of homeownership and the quality of house amenities (if we consider indoor plumbing an amenity rather than a necessity) were stark, demonstrating the vast economic, political, and social disadvantages accorded to those identified as nonwhite.

Despite the fact that some groups were finally admitted to the postwar housing market through racial reassignment or because they could pass for white, blacks, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos were largely excluded from homeownership in most of the nation’s new neighborhoods. The primary responsibil-

ity for this condition lies squarely on the shoulders of the federal government, which institutionalized racist housing policies and practices in the offices of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) with practices initiated by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933.¹⁸

The FHA consistently acted to reinforce racially exclusive neighborhoods and to create urban ghettos through the application of a policy of “minority containment.” Using justifications related to market and developer demands, the FHA cloaked its actions in the verbiage of good intentions and compliance with federal law while consistently restricting access to housing by refusing to insure mortgage loans to any but white Americans. Its well-known redlining practices created cartographies of spatial inequality that mapped housing injustice into the American landscape. As a result, between 1932 and 1964 the FHA and the Veterans Administration (VA), through the GI Bill, “financed more than \$120 billion worth of new housing, but less than 2% of this real estate was available to nonwhite families, and most of that small amount was located in segregated areas.”¹⁹ As Clarence Mitchell of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) declared in a 1951 speech, “What the courts have forbidden state legislatures and city councils to do and what the Ku Klux Klan has not been able to accomplish by intimidation and violence, federal policy is accomplishing through a monumental program of segregation



in all aspects of Housing which receive Government aid.”²⁰ Such indictments begin to tell the true history of postwar housing: a history that was controlled to a large extent not by architects and their fashions, or even necessarily by consumer desires, but instead by extremely conservative and powerful government agencies, banks, and real estate agents.

Architects remained largely outside these sociopolitical debates, but the federal government did have an impact on the profession of architecture by influencing the kinds of houses that were built. The failure of architectural modernism as a style to be adopted on a mass scale was in large part the result of FHA conservatism: the modernist aesthetic held little appeal for an agency insuring mortgages for loans to builders whose construction estimates were based on traditional house types and forms. Anyone who wished to build less conventional homes quickly discovered that the FHA refused to provide mortgage insurance for their loans, since untested house types and forms were deemed high-risk investments. The FHA frowned on difference of any kind, whether in house form and style or in the identities of houses’ occupants. Still, a frank analysis of the inequalities of the postwar housing market cannot excuse architects and their profession. Despite the fact that architects and design critics of the period emphasized avant-garde solutions and even the search for a “democratic architecture,” very few postwar building professionals engaged consistently or deeply with issues

of social, economic, and political justice. Then as now, design professionals tended to imagine the consideration of race and class as falling outside the purviews of their respective professional realms. At a 1949 conference titled “Building for Modern Man,” none of the environmental design professionals who participated explored the possibilities of changed social conditions. In fact, Thomas Creighton, who was the editor of *Progressive Architecture* during the period, openly acknowledged this point in the conference’s published proceedings, stating that “we must operate within our existing social structure.”²¹ The “progressiveness” indicated by the title of Creighton’s magazine referred to stylistic and formal inventions rather than a commitment to progressive social reforms. Despite their vanguard design rhetoric, the majority of postwar designers imagined the domestic realm within the existing social box, one that accepted racially restrictive covenants and the social, political, and economic armature of the pre-civil rights era.

Despite the 1948 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kramer* that outlawed racially restrictive covenants, the FHA and the real estate industry continued to enact segregationist policies and practices such as redlining for decades. The covenants and the practices based on them constituted a sometimes subtle, pernicious, and (at least to whites) invisible form of racism that “hides behind a color-blind rhetoric of privatism and free-market advocacy.”²² Charles Abrams wrote as



early as 1955 that the “FHA adopted a racial policy that could well have been culled from the Nuremberg laws. From its inception FHA set itself up as the protector of the all white neighborhood. It sent its agents into the field to keep Negroes and other minorities from buying houses in white neighborhoods.”²³ And, as Karen Brod-kin and others have demonstrated, FHA underwriting manuals openly insisted on racially homogeneous neighborhoods. The FHA insured mortgages on loans only in white neighborhoods, using a rating system in which the highest ratings were assigned to all-white neighborhoods, second-grade status was given to Jewish and white working-class areas, and the third and lowest grade went to racially mixed neighborhoods (this situation has changed little over the past fifty years).²⁴ Attempts at integration frequently resulted in riots and other forms of hostility. Clearly, the stakes were high for those who would and could pass or assimilate, although exclusion could be preferable to the violence they were likely to experience if their true identities were discovered.

Moreover, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) was also complicit in the racialization of the housing market throughout the postwar era. Formed in reaction to governmental intervention in the housing industry in the postwar period, the NAHB became a strong economic force and a powerful lobbying organization for the massive development of single-family dwellings. Public housing was not among the

NAHB’s interests, and the organization interfered with the construction of such housing whenever possible. Renowned for its annual convention and trade show, with massive exhibit halls that sometimes included model home designs that were featured on television programs, the NAHB communicated with the trades through its own publication (*House and Home* magazine). Members of the NAHB included real estate lobbyists, merchant builders, and groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the United States Savings and Loan League, the National Association of Retail Lumber Dealers, and the Mortgage Bankers Association. The NAHB exerted significant power in the world of private real estate development. Although it was not a governmentally supported organization, it formed strong alliances with construction industry executives and with civic organizations such as the New Face of America program and the American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods. Working together, these groups advocated urban renewal and the remodeling of older inner-city housing, thereby keeping nonwhites in older unrestricted neighborhoods while simultaneously appearing to do the “good work” of saving areas from becoming “slums.”²⁵ Even the market for remodeled houses in older urban neighborhoods was highly discriminatory; whites could buy such houses with no down payments, yet nonwhites could get nothing better than fifteen-year loans with down payments of 50 percent.²⁶ Linked to the FHA, on which its members



relied for mortgage insurance on loans to developers and builders, the NAHB was therefore complicit in the redlining and racist practices of the FHA.²⁷

Not only were postwar houses available to and therefore intended primarily for whites, but they were also built primarily by whites. As Thomas Sugrue has demonstrated, the construction industries were substantially dominated by white workers from 1945 through 1969. Ironworkers, plumbers, pipe fitters, steamfitters, sheet metal workers, electrical workers, roofers, and elevator construction workers were nearly all white. Although some housing developers, such as the Levitts, refused to hire union workers and therefore heavily relied on immigrant laborers who were willing to pick up work wherever they could, much of the construction industry was dominated by union labor. Blacks could not gain entry into the unions that regulated labor in the construction trades, and those who worked in construction ended up in only the lowest-level jobs, which were most vulnerable to layoffs; this was particularly true for construction in suburban and rural areas. As a result, Sugrue notes, the construction industry was “notorious for racial homogeneity.”²⁸

As noted above, the U.S. Supreme Court made housing discrimination illegal in 1948, but the practice quickly went underground and remained widespread. In some cases, the embedded codes were explicit, as in the activities of real estate boards and agents, and financing and mortgage insurance agencies. In others, they were

hidden or rendered “invisible,” as in the vocabulary used by tastemakers, who seldom overtly intended racist discourse but engaged in it unconsciously because whiteness and WASP culture were the acknowledged standards. For example, real estate industry literature drew explicit connections between racial stereotypes and property values. Kevin Fox Gotham notes:

In many property deeds, racial minorities frequently found themselves described as nuisances and threats because of their perceived negative impact on a residential area. . . . [Stereotypes] associated black residence with declining property values, deteriorating neighborhoods, and other negative consequences. . . . This segregationist real estate ideology was buttressed by local housing reformers and social workers who equated black neighborhoods with violent crime, disease, and other negative vices. . . . [The image of black neighborhoods was that they were] pathological, disorganized, and deviant. . . . [In FHA and real estate industry rhetoric] race became coded as culture . . . [and the industry used] various racially coded symbols and imagery to circumvent accusations of racism while maintaining the racial homogeneity of settlement space.

Homogeneous neighborhoods were called “secure” or “stable” and were noted for possessing “integrity.”



Other racial code words included “culture,” “crime,” “school quality,” “property values,” and “private.”²⁹

The cultural currency of these codes was both powerful and pervasive, such that a distinctive set of adjectives came to possess racial corollaries. For example, black spaces were typically imagined as cramped, crowded, dirty, unhygienic, and not private. In the white imagination, black residential life included multigenerational and mixed-gender sleeping arrangements and social activities carried out on the front stoop, in the street, and in the alley instead of inside the private home or in the private backyard. Deteriorating and ramshackle construction marked by unglazed window openings, furnishings assembled from salvage sites, and unkempt surroundings might complete a stereotypical and essentializing image of black domestic life. It was an image white Americans experienced in sections of nineteenth-century cities; it was what they saw and read about in New Deal photographs of urban poverty; what they read about in fiction such as Flannery O'Connor's midcentury depiction of Atlanta in “The Artificial Nigger” (1955). As the white grandfather and grandson who are the main characters in that short story wander lost through the city streets, O'Connor describes their experience: “They walked on for some time on streets like this before he remembered to turn again. The houses they were passing now were all unpainted and the wood in them looked rotten; the street between was narrower. Nelson saw a colored man.

Then another. Then another. ‘Niggers live in these houses,’ he observed.”³⁰

Likewise, the spaces depicted at the beginning of the film version of *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969) provide an interesting example that correlates residential spatial characteristics with the racial/ethnic identities of occupants. When the main character, Neil Klugman, leaves the house he shares with his aunt Gladys and his uncle Max in their working-class New Jersey neighborhood to see his assimilated Jewish girlfriend in the affluent suburbs, the architectural contrast is striking. Gladys and Max live in what we are to presume is an urban ethnic neighborhood; their wood-frame house is small, crowded, and worn, and the front porch supports furnishings that would never be found in front of a house in the affluent suburb (the nouveau riche decor of the suburban affluent Jews in this film is equally instructive). These contrasts—clean/dirty, spacious/crowded, private/public, tidy/cluttered—facilitated the establishment of white identities by creating their opposite.

Thus white immigrants were deemed “clean” and “thrifty,” in opposition to the definition of blacks as “shiftless, indolent, lazy, criminals, immoral, pleasure-seeking, negligent, ignorant, careless and unsanitary.”³¹ Cleanliness and ideas about hygiene held particular currency as codes, just as they had for decades in both Europe and the United States, resulting in what Anne McClintock has called the “soft-soaping of empire,” in which imagined and visualized cleanliness and clean-



ing products and practices are deeply intertwined with images of and ideas about race.³² Immigrants to the United States had been regarded as dirty and in need of an assimilating cleanse since at least the nineteenth century; indigenous peoples and anyone else identified as nonwhite were believed not only unhygienic but also possibly diseased. Nineteenth-century handbooks that focused on the idealized home focused specifically on hygienic principles, as such handbooks continued to do for decades.³³ Postwar notions of the connections that bound white identities to specific norms of hygiene and in turn to ideas about domesticity—and the intricate if not always subtle codes that conveyed these ideas—must therefore be seen as outgrowths of these historically bound yet continuous notions.

So widespread were these ideas that connected white identities to specific house forms and codes that the popular literature on housing used them extensively and without question. Integrated into narratives that were intended to assist working-class and middle-class Americans who hoped to own their own homes, these publications rehearsed the rhetoric that articulated specific residential forms and codes as linked to white, middle-class identities. For example, a 1946 book by Mary Catlin and George Catlin titled *Building Your New House* reveals the life that postwar homeowners were leaving behind and the range of class concerns that were embodied in homeownership. Written for families of modest means who wanted to build homes of their

own, the book tells the story of a couple who lost their livelihood during the Great Depression, detailing the hardships they endured as they suffered without electricity on an Iowa farm. Though they longed to build their dream house, it remained just that through the Depression years of 1933–37. When George decided to return to college to earn a degree, they sold the farm and bought what Mary called a “depression-born house on wheels, the trailer.”³⁴ She writes of the terrible cold they endured during the Iowa winter in the trailer, heated as it was by a tiny coke-burning stove that did little to combat the frigid temperatures, so that a thick layer of ice accumulated on the interior walls for weeks at a time. This passage is significant, because it rehearses a strong prejudice against trailer living, long identified as lower-class, nonwhite (or “white trash”), and to be avoided whenever possible.

When the Catlins had built their first and smallest house, two college boys roomed with them, reducing their privacy at home, and they continued to take in college boarders to help cover costs. Mary complained about these boarders, “two strangers waiting for the meal I was going to cook for them for money. I had never sold a meal in my life before.”³⁵ Again, this work signaled lower-class conditions, especially the “menial” task of cooking meals for others in the home for pay, work that was typically relegated to nonwhite workers in upper-class homes.

Over the years, Mary and George steadily improved



their living accommodations by buying lots in ever more affluent neighborhoods and building larger homes. They moved from campus cottage to Cape Cod colonial to Sunset Drive to Wood Street to Country Club Boulevard, moving “up in the world” with each house change.³⁶ Mary recommended that her readers build Cape Cod houses because they are compact, efficient, stylish, and tasteful and because the plan “rates excellent on privacy.”³⁷ The Catlins’ story was a fairly common one for white families, a tale of upward mobility that emphasized what they had left behind—a lack of privacy, noise, crowding, and Depression-era privations—conditions that no Americans wanted to return to if they could help it.

In keeping with FHA guidelines, Mary advised that a new home builder find as exclusive a neighborhood as possible:

For peace of mind all around, don’t buy in a neighborhood which is socially “spotty,” with some undesirable families mixed in with desirable ones. This is especially true if you have children, for it is almost certain that there will be some roustabouts with whom you don’t want your offspring to play. . . . Children’s playmates have an important bearing on later life as well as present happiness. The mother who has been reading the latest figures on juvenile delinquency and who wants her children to grow up

to be a credit to the community will certainly pay attention to the neighbors she will have.³⁸

Furthermore, Mary warned her readers that when building “an attractive home in an absolutely undeveloped section, a person sometimes finds that those who follow throw up tar-paper shacks, leave the jalopy sitting alongside the house as a permanent feature, and build smelly chicken pens and rabbit hutches out back.”³⁹ Her meaning is not difficult to discern; to avoid these lower-class problems that signal nonwhite identities, she once again advocated buying in restricted districts and in subdivisions that had deed restrictions that accompanied the purchase of the lot and that stipulated setbacks, hiding clotheslines from view, and so on.⁴⁰ Thus the Catlins communicated the consequences of not conforming to middle-class norms of behavior. Their book, compared to others of the period, is not unusual. Indeed, its contents were completely unremarkable to readers of the day, appearing as yet another helpful guidebook for the construction of one of the most desirable and rare postwar necessities: a house of one’s own.

I examine these codes and rhetorical strategies in greater detail in the chapters that follow, but given the cultural currency they enjoyed, the tastemaking and design literature from the postwar era must be viewed in an entirely new light. Reception of these codes cannot

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A composite of illustrations of the houses built by the Catlins. From Mary Catlin and George Catlin, *Building Your New House* (1946).



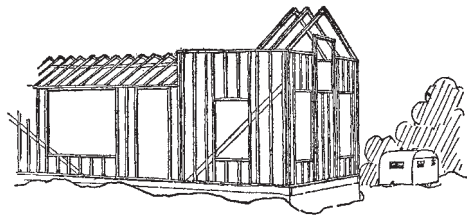


FIGURE 1. "We Were Actually Building"

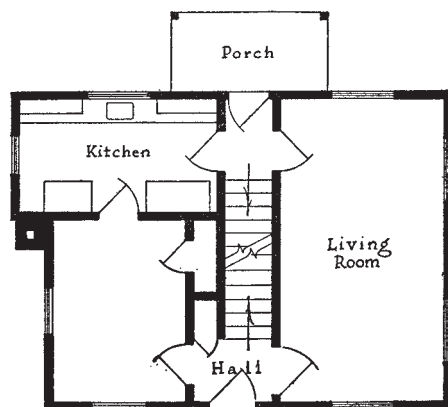


FIGURE 5. First-floor Plan Campus Avenue Cape Cod

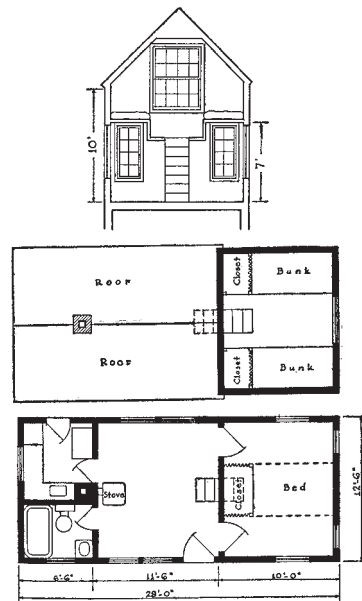
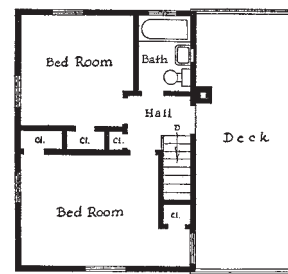
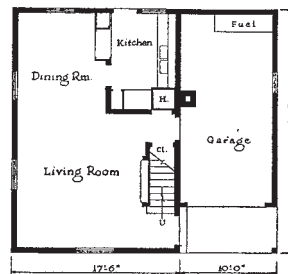


FIGURE 2. Campus Avenue House



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

FIGURE 10. Original Plan—Beech Avenue House



FIGURE 4. Our Campus Avenue Houses



FIGURE 9. Beech Avenue House



FIGURE 8. Our Country Club House



FIGURE 7. Our Sunset Drive House

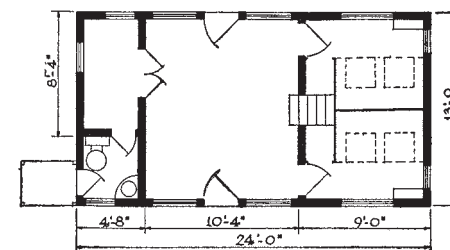


FIGURE 3. Original Plan of Campus Cottage

be strictly quantified, and I am not asserting that they were uniformly received. Instead, they must be seen as constituting a set of broadly dispersed social practices that were adopted in mass media, by the building trades, and by the design community in their efforts to address an audience they associated already with a white imaginary. These practices instructed the audience in and reinforced a set of dominant cultural values

that likewise circulated in visual and textual representations of and about housing. The codes were part of the broad, ideologically charged discourse about housing. As such, media and market obsessions with household order and cleanliness become not simply an aesthetic or health preference; rather, they are equally significant as part of the constellation of signifiers for whiteness. Terms such as *privacy*, *ease*, *luxury*, *freedom*, *informal-*

Hiding clotheslines from view became a common design trend in the postwar era, and the requirement to do so was even written into some development covenants. Here a laundry line is hidden by a fence to create a separate drying yard not easily seen by guests or neighbors.

Photograph by Maynard L. Parker.
Courtesy of the Huntington Library,
San Marino, California.



ity, order, cleanliness, and spaciousness (among others) appeared consistently in the sales and advertising literature—in print and on television—related to postwar house design and decoration. Federal and private interests were therefore involved, delivering a seamless message predicated on text and images that together worked to restrict the availability of new housing while simultaneously reinforcing the notion that homeownership was largely a privilege for middle-class whites. In the chapters that follow, I examine the spatial and material ramifications of these codes to reveal their significance as tools for identity formation.

Although much of this study examines the ways in which houses and their representations worked to produce white, middle-class subjectivity, it must be acknowledged that large numbers of Americans who were identified as white were equally excluded from the suburban housing market. As Thomas Sugrue cautions, the untold stories of “poor whites, migrant farmers, . . . displaced industrial workers, and intellectual and cultural dissenters” remain outside the suburban narratives typically constructed for the postwar era.⁴¹ Working-class whites, he notes, had become newly assertive with so much at stake, and this group fought integration especially fiercely. Moreover, the population on which I focus in this book—middle-class whites who purchased new homes that were largely in suburban locations in the fifteen years that immediately followed World War II—was actually a small but highly visible segment of

the American population; the people who make up this group cannot be taken to represent all of American culture in that period or monolithically to represent whiteness as it is understood in the United States. Despite the consumer surges that characterized the enormous economic expansion of the immediate postwar era, we must remember that the period also saw up to one-third of the population living below the poverty line, especially in the South.⁴² We also have to remember that whiteness meant many things, that as a category it is multiple, and mutable, its complex definitions continually reformulated through time. The postwar affluence signaled by the houses discussed herein was therefore a restricted affluence, if one that nevertheless significantly changed the appearance of the U.S. cultural landscape. And the whiteness of its imagined and intended occupants was one largely formulated through a range of cultural forces that included the house and its representations.

It is also important to note that developers, builders, and government officials were not oblivious to the problem of minority housing. The federal Housing and Home Finance Agency produced pamphlets for builders and developers to inform them about the ramifications of the Housing Act of 1949 (Title I), which called for integrated residential neighborhoods and stated the goal of providing decent housing for all Americans. Aimed at slum clearance and urban renewal projects, the act recognized slums as a national problem and addressed



the need to replace homes lost to removal efforts.⁴³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a major increase in attention to this issue starting in 1954, when the housing market experienced a slight slump. In 1955, for example, *House and Home* noted: “More builders are starting to build for the biggest untapped market. They are still hobbled by land, financing problems, but spurred by the threat of compulsory open occupancy in FHA, VA projects.” The NAHB saw minority home construction as a way to forestall what the organization’s 1955 president, Dick Hughes, called “the worst crisis we’ve ever had.” By 1954, groups such as the NAACP (with its attorney Thurgood Marshall) and the National Urban League were successfully pressuring the government to bar FHA and VA loans to houses not for sale to blacks and other people of color. As a result, a significant, if still relatively small, group of articles on the topic of housing for nonwhites began to appear in the shelter magazines after this date.⁴⁴

Although the postwar era is largely regarded as one of economic prosperity, the 1954 slump was not the only recession experienced in the period. The housing market dipped during four brief recessions in the fifteen-year period of this study, the longest of which lasted only eleven months, and all were fairly mild economic downturns. However, the housing market was so robust during this time and the economy so dependent on new housing starts that even relatively modest downturns caused the kind of alarm noted above. The ten-month

recession that lasted from July 1953 until May 1954 resulted by the end of 1954 in an increase in government-assisted expansion of the housing market. As one economist wrote, housing starts increased by the end of that year, owing mainly “to the general easing of credit and to an unusually strong response by the financial system to that policy.” And when a more significant economic downturn occurred in 1958, *Time* magazine credited housing starts with leading the economy out of the recession.⁴⁵ Clearly, powerful ties bound the U.S. economy to the iconography examined herein.

THE SPATIAL CONTOURS OF WHITENESS

The house my grandparents purchased was stylistically nondescript, completely unobtrusive. Nothing about its cream-colored stucco exterior was remarkable or memorable for passing strangers, which made it absolutely ideal for a couple who wanted to quietly fit in. But a careful analysis of their home and its spaces provides an understanding of some of the key physical as well as social dimensions of ordinary postwar domesticity.

At about 1,250 square feet, Rudy and Eva’s house was comfortable and remarkably well built: the modest one-story structure sat over a crawl space and included two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a wood-paneled den, a living room, a kitchen with a dining area, and a small pantry/utility room. A detached garage created the edge



for a modest courtyard/garden space. A narrow space along one side of the lot contained a clothesline, carefully concealed from both street and neighbors by a tall fence so that drying underclothes could not be seen—a design device intended to eliminate from view the appearance of this form of labor and the lower-class appearance of the laundry line, an aspect of middle-class houses examined in some detail in later chapters.

The rear garden itself was divided into three spaces: a paved patio, a rectangle of lawn bordered by shrubs and small trees, and the clothesline along the side. Despite the house's corner location, and despite the fact that it had entrances off both streets, the visual focus was inward—either to the internal life of the house or to the garden, which was completely enclosed by a tall fence and (originally) shaded by an overhead lattice that spanned the distance between the garage and the house over the paved patio. Mowed, edged, and clipped, the front and rear gardens never had a leaf out of place or a weed invading the borders. Hypermaintained first by my grandparents and later by a hired gardener, the yard could only be described as “clean.” So fastidiously maintained were its lawns that a small strip of dirt frequently showed between the strenuously clipped edge of the lawn and the sidewalk paving. Like fingernails trimmed to the quick or a severe military haircut, the tidy lawns and hedges seemed to reveal a self-conscious desire to appear neat, groomed, upstanding.

Inside, the house combined traditional forms with

the emerging, if modest, fashions of postwar domesticity. Although it was not an open-plan configuration, only the range countertop separated the kitchen and dining area, and an opening allowed movement to flow from dining room to living room, from which entry to the garden could be gained through sliding glass doors. The window over the kitchen sink looked out onto the street, as did larger windows in the den and in the master bedroom on the other side, but these were usually partially covered with blinds, sheers, or drapes. Only the kitchen window remained frequently uncovered, serving as the primary aperture to the street.

Like so many first-time homeowners, my grandparents lavished care on their modest home. They selected linoleum patterned with multicolored flecks to cover the kitchen floor. Boomerang-patterned Formica covered the kitchen countertops, surrounding the built-in stainless steel electric stove, with its four burners and built-in griddle (for cooking pancakes, but my grandmother used it for making matzo brei and latkes—each time she did so, she may have been reminded that her house was designed for a generically conceived white, non-Jewish occupant). The matching oven was mounted in a nearby wall (I discuss this important postwar invention in a later chapter). The original house plans called for an indoor barbecue located next to the oven, but my grandparents eliminated this feature during the construction phase. Given their background, they doubtless had little experience at that time with grilled



foods (in later years they appreciated their outdoor grill and used it frequently), and the idea of cooking over an open flame indoors must have seemed to them a bit foreign. The pantry/utility room eventually contained both washing machine and dryer (though it would be some years before my grandparents could afford the dryer), as well as cabinets for food and small appliance storage. It was here that my grandmother kept her extra set of dishes (some were also stored in other closets) and cooking implements for use when family members who kept kosher came to visit—a storage requirement not anticipated by the home builder and one that cost her much-needed storage space, and that again perhaps reminded her that she was not the designer/builder’s imagined occupant.

The living room was the most spacious room in the house. The floors were originally covered by wall-to-wall carpet (thereby eliminating the “old-fashioned” need for waxing floors), but my grandparents eventually pulled the carpet away to reveal the hardwood beneath throughout the house. Since my grandparents favored the modernist designs my grandfather had seen generated by the Bauhaus in Germany, and because they had a friend who worked for the Herman Miller furniture company from whom they could purchase furnishings at a discount, their house contained chairs and cabinets designed by Charles Eames and George Nelson—decorating choices that marked them as stylish but also, and

perhaps unknown to them, as both Jewish and foreign, as I will explain in the following chapters. From my grandfather’s point of view, the living room was little more than a personalized space for listening to chamber music on his elaborate high-fidelity sound system, and the hardwood floors improved the acoustical setting. He spent many hours listening to recorded music played through an excellent and carefully made speaker system of his own design. His elaborately outfitted stereo system was housed in a hall closet that he had customized to become a hidden chamber of technological wizardry. That the components of his hi-fi system were not displayed to guests is not incidental, and analysis of the ways in which such luxuries were concealed or displayed—and the reasons for such determinations—serves as the subject of a later chapter.

In the den, which doubled as a guest room, my grandfather constructed a desk with a special cabinet that would eventually contain a color television. He also built a television into the wall of their bedroom, high above my grandmother’s closet. It was the first remote-controlled television I had ever seen, and watching TV from their bed, changing channels with the remote control, seemed the height of luxury to me as a child. Eventually, my grandfather would wire the entire house (all 1,250 square feet of it) for an intercom system that allowed communication between the rooms (a rather absurd addition, since it was easy to hear voices calling



between spaces) and connected to the two porches at both house entrances to provide security from outsiders. If the editors of *Popular Mechanics* had known about Rudolf Weingarten, they would certainly have considered his house for a feature article on one of their favorite topics: electronic gadgetry built into the home.

If Rudy and Eva Weingarten's house was unremarkable to outsiders, it was also a fairly typical model for 1955. Indeed, its primary features varied little from the examples recommended in a 1951 *Life* magazine article that included eight house designs commissioned with the magazine's cosponsor *Architectural Forum*. According to the article, the key new features of postwar homes were "open floor plans, sliding partitions, radiant heat, large windows, fine details and workmanship." In addition, many included carefully planned outdoor terraces and landscaping that accommodated activities for specific family members of varied age groups.⁴⁶ Despite the magazine's claim, most tract houses were not notable for their fine craftsmanship, given that they were constructed rapidly and with inexpensive materials to reduce costs. My grandparents' house was, however, surprisingly well constructed (one of the reasons they purchased it), but it was also somewhat more expensive than homes of comparable square footage built elsewhere in the Los Angeles basin in the mid-1950s. Although they had forced-air rather than radiant heating, they did possess the requisite sliding glass doors and

large windows, and the house's plan configuration was a bit more open than earlier models might have been. As we will see, these features could be interpreted variously, and inclusion of even a few served as a mark of class distinction and modernity. I will detail the significance of each in the chapters that follow.

For the most part, ordinary postwar houses were very small, though they steadily increased in square footage over the fifteen-year period that is the focus of this book. Many Americans who had struggled to find housing in the immediate postwar market were thrilled to find affordable houses, even if they often did not exceed 1,000 square feet of living space and were sometimes as small as 750 square feet. The FHA "minimum house" standard, after all, required only that a house be approximately 540 square feet in order to qualify for government-backed financing.⁴⁷ A common configuration included two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room, and a kitchen that might include a small area for dining. Compared to today's "McMansions," these houses seem even smaller than they might have to their original inhabitants—families that often included at least two children and who were accustomed to apartment dwelling. Even if they were happy to be housed in homes of their own, many families were nonetheless concerned with the image, if not the fact, of the cramped living they experienced every day. Cramped quarters conjured lower-class and nonwhite lifestyles



and Depression-era conditions, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow. Decorating to increase at least the appearance of space, if not the spatial reality of the home, became a central concern expressed repeatedly in popular magazines.

A *Life* magazine article that featured William Levitt's 1952 houses for his Pennsylvania development (which cost \$9,000 each) called attention to the problem of house size, noting that the average home had shrunk by 200 square feet since 1942.⁴⁸ By 1953, an article in the same magazine optimistically proclaimed that "the square footage in the average development home has increased from 700 in 1948 to almost 1,000 square feet; that two-thirds of builder houses now have three bedrooms; that storage space is ample, averages 10% of the area of the house."⁴⁹ Correlating this change in house size with the baby boom and the increasing numbers of families with three and four children, the author's rosy view of what must certainly have been a very cramped situation indicates, to some extent, the degree to which American spatial expectations have changed since mid-century. Although the article was no doubt intended to boost housing sales, it also likely represented the different expectations that postwar families had for their spatial needs. Still, customer satisfaction with small houses was short-lived, and the market-driven pressure to increase house size was both practically and socially motivated.

The split-level house gained in popularity as de-

velopers sought house forms that allowed more living space without substantially increasing construction costs or lot sizes. Although initially designed to accommodate sloping lot conditions, split-level houses soon appeared on flat lots across the country, looking a bit like two-story houses that had been cut off at the knees. Although they required more excavation than houses constructed at grade, they allowed for multilevel living that still conformed in appearance with the majority of the ranch houses then under construction. Although less common than other forms, the split-level became synonymous with the stereotypical discontent, anomie, and hyperconformity of suburban postwar life, primarily because of the 1960 publication of *The Split-Level Trap*.⁵⁰ That book's generalizations may have had little to do with the actual conditions of the specific split-level house form, but as Alan Ehrenhalt has described, lack of privacy was a problem in a 1957 split-level; its owners liked the modern look of the house, but there was no wall separating the bedroom corridor on the second floor from the living area below, so that acoustics were a constant source of irritation to inhabitants. Nonetheless, the split-level became an icon of middle-class aspirations and resulted in larger dwellings. As Ehrenhalt notes: "In 1953, 88 percent of the new houses built in America had still been ranch houses, many of them Levittown-style slabs or slabs plus a crawl space like those in Emery Manor. Three years later, split-levels had overtaken them. . . . Because of the trend to





A split-level house, Urbana, Illinois. Date and architect unknown. Photograph by the author.



split-levels, the average size of the newly built American home was increasing rapidly. In 1950, the average had been 983 square feet—12 percent less than before the war. By mid-decade, as the split-levels came in, the average grew closer to 1,200 square feet.”⁵¹

Between 1945 and 1960, ordinary houses grew incrementally larger, their plans responding to a range of social and technological changes.⁵² Every room of the American house would expand to accommodate changes in family needs and structure, to allow for new technologies, to encompass increasing numbers of

material possessions, but also to conform with a range of social pressures that were linked to emerging values. For example, bathrooms became larger in postwar houses because Americans began to spend more time in them than ever before. Certainly bodily requirements had not changed, nor had fixtures and plumbing changed enough to warrant enlargement of spaces rarely occupied by more than one person at a time. But the 1950s witnessed increased levels of societal interest in personal hygiene and body smells, perhaps a result of increases in the televised marketing of hygiene and



personal grooming products. Wini Breines sees the bathroom as the site where family members assuaged their fears about being socially acceptable.⁵³ In this sense, the bathroom too becomes a crucial space of conformity, since it is the site where physical appearances are modified, tamed, or transformed.

A key structural and spatial difference between houses constructed previously and many newly constructed postwar houses was the absence of basements and attics in some parts of the country. Data from the 1960 U.S. census indicate that although 54 percent of all housing units nationwide included basements, 46 percent were structures built on concrete slabs or with foundations that included crawl spaces. But some of this varied regionally, such that many more structures in the Northeast included basements than did structures in the West.⁵⁴ For example, 1960 census figures indicate that 89 percent of units in the Northeast were constructed with basements, while only 74 percent of houses built in the North Central Region had them; in the South, only 19 percent of structures included basements, and in the West only 27 percent had them.⁵⁵

Although many houses in some geographic regions continued to include basements, it was cost-effective for developers to eliminate these spaces, and they could do so because of the invention of the small, clean-running furnace that could fit into a compact space on the ground floor of a house. Manufacturers also began

to produce water heaters that were greatly reduced in size, so these utilities could fit neatly into ground-floor closets, often located next to kitchens or in hallways. By eliminating the need for basement excavation, these technological advances allowed builders to construct houses on concrete slabs on grade or over crawl spaces, which was far less costly and far more efficient. Slab-on-grade houses could also be quickly mass-produced, much in the manner of the Levitts' houses.⁵⁶ Eliminating attics also reduced construction times and costs, though unfinished "expansion attics" were commonly found in mass developments such as those produced by the Levitts. Thus many postwar houses became vertically compressed, without the deep roots of the basement or the lofty reaches of the attic. The fact that many of these houses lacked basements and attics is significant. Basements and attics are typically spaces that contain artifacts that trigger memories, nostalgic longings, and clues to ancestral origins. Without these spaces, families in the postwar era were less likely than their predecessors to retain those artifacts, and even if they did so, those spaces, so keyed to literary notions of memory, were absent. Many postwar houses therefore became (though perhaps incidentally) more efficient frameworks for forgetting past lives—a fundamental requirement for assimilation.⁵⁷

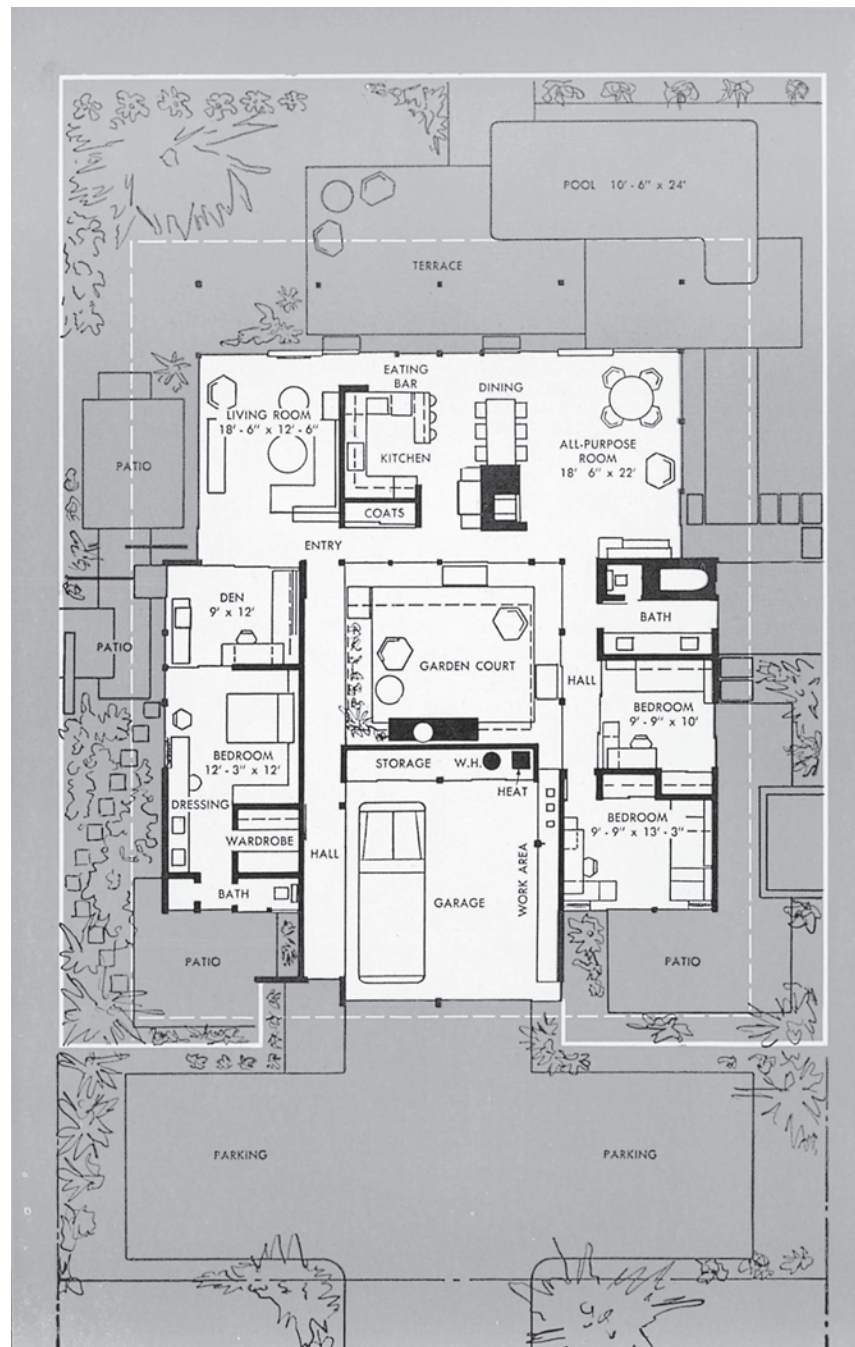
Another ramification of the disappearance of the basement and attic was a resultant lack of storage



space. In December 1952, *Life* magazine called space “the number one problem of the average household.”⁵⁸ All pieces of furniture were suddenly expected to do double or triple duty, to have fold-out or slide-out storage spaces. Room dividers doubled as bookshelves, and sofas appeared designed with storage shelves hanging off their backs. The problem was made even worse in houses with truly open plans, because partition walls that formerly accommodated shelf space were now absent and closet space was limited.⁵⁹ As a result, the garage began to perform double duty, housing the new automobile but also serving as a much-needed storage space for bicycles, scooters, games, garden furniture, lawn mower, power tools, rakes and other garden tools, and various supplies.⁶⁰ Since the houses were de facto designed to accommodate families presumed to be white, middle-class, Christian, and heterosexual, builders never considered a range of storage needs that might differ depending on race or ethnicity, or on the need to keep from view any objects that might reveal alternate sexual orientations or gender performances. As I will demonstrate in the chapters that examine consuming and displaying, storage became a primary concern for postwar homeowners, and the solutions they found and that were promoted in the mass media reveal a great deal about cultural identity, subject formation, and self-fashioning.

By October 1958, *Popular Mechanics* featured a

A “California style” house designed by A. Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons for *Popular Mechanics*. This plan includes all the elements for an idealized postwar house. Courtesy of *Popular Mechanics*; originally published in the October 1958 issue.



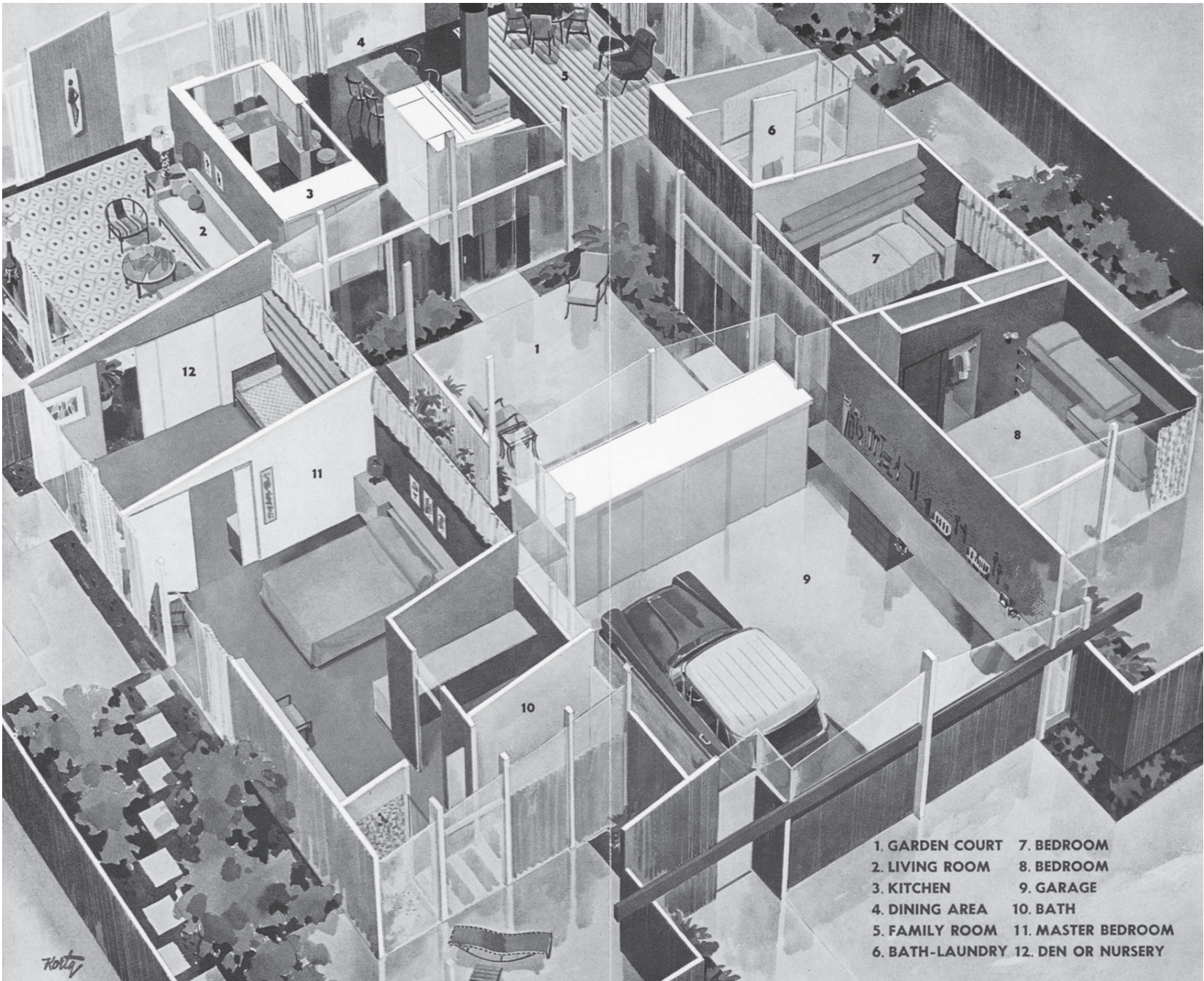
three-bedroom, two-bathroom house that can be viewed as paradigmatic for the times. The magazine's editors had asked the California architects A. Quincy Jones and Frederick Emmons to design a house for their readers "with all the best features of what has become nationally known as 'California Style' and that could be adapted for the rest of the country." Jones and Emmons were a natural choice, since they were the architects for some of merchant builder Joseph Eichler's renowned developments in California. With an open plan and organized around a glazed interior garden court, the \$25,000 house that Jones and Emmons designed for *Popular Mechanics* contained nearly every feature considered desirable at the time. The primary living spaces had an indoor/outdoor feeling, with views and access to the outdoors from every room, including the bathrooms; at the same time, there was privacy for the bedroom areas and for the family from the street. Outdoor areas included five "private" patios, a service yard, and a rear terrace. The family room and dining/living areas achieved connections with the outdoors through the use of glass walls and sliding glass doors. The kitchen was equipped with an island, built-in modern appliances, and a barbecue fireplace; a wall of the family room contained built-in TV and hi-fi cabinets. A private den offered a retreat for the parents. The master bedroom featured a walk-in wardrobe and built-in dressers, and the children's bedrooms were located on the opposite side of the house for additional privacy. The children's

compartmented bath contained a washing machine and dryer. This laundry-bath combination opened onto a service yard that allowed access to clothes-drying and play areas and was "handy for adult gardeners who may want to clean up before going into living areas of the house." The two-car garage was outfitted with a storage wall, accommodation for water heater and furnace, and a workshop with a pegboard wall above it.⁶¹

These features became standard in many houses after 1960, and they indicate the degree to which houses had grown since the first years after the cessation of the war. The features are also essential in that they form the basis for an understanding of the houses discussed in the chapters that follow. Each feature signified (or was intended to signify) an important, new, and distinctly American form of dwelling. The exception, of course, is the look of the house, its style. Jones and Emmons designed houses for Eichler that were stylistically modern, but acceptably so, the soft modernism that maintained signs of the traditional (hipped roofs, the use of wood and stone) but combined them with new, more open spatial configurations. Despite the popularity of their Eichler houses, most ordinary postwar houses did not include even this moderate or middling form of modernism. As Philip Nobel has written, the design and housing market in the postwar United States is best described as "stubbornly inertial" when it came to accepting the forms of stylistic or high-style architectural modernism.⁶² The reasons for this are varied, and

FACING
A view of the "California style"
house designed by A. Quincy
Jones and Fred Emmons for
Popular Mechanics. Courtesy of
Popular Mechanics; originally published
in the October 1958 issue.





some explanations appear in the chapters that follow. Still, despite the stylistic variable, the features found in the Jones and Emmons house were the same as those desired by thousands of American families for their postwar homes, no matter the external appearance. In the outlines of those houses, we see the shadows of the houses constructed in the United States today. They also provide a blueprint for the spatial requirements of white, middle-class, and heteronormative domesticity.

POSTWAR HOUSES AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Inside and outside their home, my grandparents lived a contained life. The only outwardly displayed sign of my grandparents' Jewish identity was the carefully placed mezuzah at the front-door threshold; inside, a large silver Seder plate hung prominently over the fireplace mantel in the living room. Many Jewish homes in the United States similarly displayed Seder plates as prominent items of household decor, not only because such plates were often exceptionally large and attractive, but also because, as one scholar has postulated, Seder was the most accessible aspect of Judaism for American gentiles, since it could be understood as analogous to the Last Supper.⁶³ The dining room cabinet held a few pieces of Judaica. Still, their house always looked European to me, somehow not American. Despite their clear desire to assimilate, their proclivity for modern-

ist furnishings alone marked them as different. Yet all the other signs of their Jewish identity remained largely concealed: the matzo in the cupboards, the rendered chicken fat in the refrigerator, the meat grinder used for making chopped liver stored in the cabinet, my grandfather's yarmulkes and tallis kept in a drawer, and, of course, that extra set of dishes. Like most Jewish homes of the period, theirs was "essentially devoid of explicitly Jewish markers, especially when compared to earlier tenements." According to Jenna Weissman Joselit, the shelter and women's magazines played a role in this, since the average Jewish woman "had read one full year's back issues of *House Beautiful* and *American Home*. She knew what she wanted. . . . Making do with inherited Judaica, few homes had anything but the barest of Judaica collections: Brass candlesticks and perhaps a menorah and mezuzah appear to have been the norm." Although Judaism flourished in some of New York's postwar suburbs, it was an increasingly secularized, personal form of observance.⁶⁴

The programmatic and design disjunctures that existed between my grandparents' house and their daily requirements were slight compared to some. Recent studies of immigrant housing clearly indicate the range of cultural differences that American house form tends to negate. For example, a study of Chinese immigrants who purchased suburban houses in Madison, Wisconsin, found that expectations for accommodation of multigenerational and extended kinship living styles are



thwarted by American house form.⁶⁵ Chinese houses typically have less room specialization, such that a single interior space may serve multiple functions. The spaces therefore accommodate greater capacity, defined by Renee Chow as the flexibility inherent to the design of a house that allows its residents a variety of uses and living patterns without necessitating structural changes.⁶⁶ Moreover, Chinese houses are generally enclosed by high walls for privacy and protection, and gardening in China is geared primarily to food production, whereas American yards typically focus on ornamentals, particularly in front yards, where growing vegetables is considered forbidden. American kitchens are not well suited to Chinese cooking practices, which rely on gas ranges more powerful than typical American ranges to cook traditional Chinese food well; these ranges also require more efficient exhaust hoods to ventilate fumes and smoke. Moreover, typical American kitchen cabinets are not big enough to store the very large bags of rice many Chinese families purchase. Therefore, many Chinese immigrants in the United States convert their laundry rooms or garages into auxiliary kitchens to prevent oily fumes and smoke from entering the main living spaces of their houses and to store additional food products. Because of their desire to conform, Chinese immigrants tend not to alter the exteriors of their homes, instead maintaining signs of their ethnicity only on the inside.⁶⁷ What is significant here is the rhetorical and persuasive power the house

holds over its occupants. In order to accommodate cultural differences, homeowners must frequently subvert the social order imposed by the forms of their houses and by the designers of those houses.

My grandparents were not alone in their understanding of the relationships that existed between their identities and their house, its maintenance, and its furnishings. To the contrary, postwar Americans were keenly aware of the ways in which their houses and furnishings signaled specific clues about their race, class, and status. In addition to sociologists, cultural anthropologists, cultural geographers, and urban historians, the authors of suburban fiction have deeply understood and explored the connection between suburban house form and identity formation, and their texts have likewise reinforced specific cultural norms.

Richard Yates's 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* provides an excellent example. The book begins with a young couple searching for a new home. They consider themselves too urbane and sophisticated for suburban living, yet they are unable to afford the space their family requires in the city. In a series of passages, Yates clarifies the psychological discomfort the couple experiences as they deliberate about the selection and purchase of their first home—an ordinary postwar house. As they drive toward the suburban location of the new house, Yates describes their dismay and the manner in which they justify the move to themselves: "Economic circumstances might force you to live in



this environment, [but] the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were.” The real estate agent who leads them to the house identifies each neighborhood with a specific class of occupant:

“Now of course it isn’t a very desirable road down at this end,” she explained. . . . “As you see, it’s mostly these little cinder-blocky, pickup-trucky places—plumbers, carpenters, little local people of that sort. . . . *eventually* it leads on up and around to a perfectly dreadful new development called Revolutionary Hill Estates—great hulking split levels, all in the most nauseous pastels . . . but the place I want to show you has absolutely no connection with that. One of our nice little local builders put it up right after the war, you see, before all the really awful building began. It’s really rather a sweet little house and a sweet little setting. Simple, clean lines, good lawns, marvelous for children.”

As Frank and April first glimpse the house, April notes that it is

small and wooden, riding high on its naked concrete foundation, its outsized central window staring like a big black mirror. “Yes, I think it’s sort of—nice, don’t you darling? Of course it does have the picture window; I guess there’s no escaping that.”

“I guess not,” Frank said. “Still, I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities.”

Frank and April later decide that

their solid wall of books would take the curse off the picture window; a sparse, skillful arrangement of furniture would counteract the prim suburban look of this too-symmetrical living room.⁶⁸

If a picture window could destroy a personality, and bookshelves could be imagined as the antidote to such identity destruction, it is not hard to imagine the extent to which houses and their representations constituted essential elements in the establishment of personal and family identities. At the very least they were *imagined* as essential to the process. A bookcase, a set of properly displayed artful objects, the correct number and placement of tasteful furnishings—all these signaled very specific and widely understood markers of race and class that likewise conveyed specific notions of privilege and belonging.

The chapters that follow provide further examination of the connections that existed then and now between specific objects, residential forms, texts, images, and notions of identity. But novels such as Yates’s demonstrate the ways in which domestic space and its representations created a spatial and visual rhetori-



cal framework for citizenship as it was linked to specifically configured notions of property. Along with the houses occupied by Americans like my grandparents, they served to reinforce and continually restate the presumed whiteness of postwar residential property owners in the United States.

That postwar suburbs became racially segregated is not news, and numerous excellent studies have traced the phenomenon of uneven social and economic development in cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and Kansas City, to name a few.⁶⁹ As Kevin Fox Gotham observes, the conjoining of race and space “continues to underlie the construction of knowledge and social reality among many Whites at the same time that racial ideologies, beliefs, and institutional practices have become more

invisible and covert.”⁷⁰ But it is exactly this invisibility that signals its significance. Excluding individuals and families that appeared nonwhite was only a small part of the housing story, only a fraction of the means by which new housing was made to seem inherently and exclusively the domain of whites who were likewise middle-class. The rest of the story—or a significant portion of it—belongs to the everyday encounters Americans had with their stove tops, their curio cabinets, their bookshelves, their gardens, and their neighbors; it belongs to the books they read, the magazines they browsed, and the television programs they watched. It is a story that belongs—whether or not we wish to claim it—to all of us.





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