Single-Family Detached House

So fundamental is the single-family detached house to the morphology of American suburbs in the late twentieth century that we tend to forget how singularly this house type reflects current definitions of the family and its appropriate relationship to the larger community. Since the end of World War II, the separate, domestic structure, isolated from its neighbors and the street by a broad expanse of lawn and often differentiated from adjacent houses by its seemingly unique architecture, has become a principal icon of American middle-class urban life. Its historic precedents, however, accommodated different and mixed social classes and reflected varying definitions of the family. Earlier versions of the detached family house in America, in fact, represented interdependence and community values, rather than the blatant individualism that the single-family detached house has advanced during the twentieth century.

Seventeenth-century houses in America reflected the landscapes from which the settlers had come, as well as some regional characteristics of the new land. Throughout the North and South, seventeenth-century homes were detached, in that they were not connected to their neighbors’ dwellings. However, the arrangement of Puritan homes in New England around a village green that pastured common livestock emphasized the importance of community life and expressed a clear social hierarchy among the settlers. Strip fields surrounded the settlement, and at its center was the all-important meetinghouse.

This expression of the shared control of the landscape and a community focus fundamentally differed from the tradition of aristocratic country houses in England, which was to become extremely influential in America. The most important British precedent was the eighteenth-century country house, which was typically surrounded by picturesque gardens that emphasized the landscape’s aesthetic, rather than its productive, potential. These large mansions were often designed in a so-called Neo-Palladian style, a revival patterned after the work of the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio as translated in the work of the British architect Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and such significant treatises as Colin Campbell’s *Vitruvius Britannicus*.

In the United States, the classical villa in a picturesque landscape was at the center of Thomas Jefferson’s utopian visions for the new nation. The American version of the Neo-Palladian villa, however, had a completely different relationship to its context. Jefferson’s own home, Monticello, constructed near Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1768–1782 and remodeled in 1796–1809, differed from any English precedent in its effort to reach beyond the confines of its immediate site. It also showed an early near-obsession with technological efficiency, which as several scholars have noted marked a distinction between British and American domestic ideals.

Through his architecture and his writings, Jefferson put forth his powerful vision of an agrarian society of white farmers controlling individual plots of arable land. He realized many of these ideals with passage of the national Land Ordinance of 1785, which subjected most of the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River to a regular grid, ignoring the natural topography and encouraging both an agricultural economy and the speedy occupation of the West. Square townships six miles on each side were subdivided into sections of one square mile, which were then divided into quarter-sections. This uncompromising grid was adopted for all new towns in the West and for the expansion of existing cities. It was a perfect setting for the proliferation of isolated domestic architecture.

This notion of the detached house was in direct opposition to the tradition of row housing in large European cities. In contrast to the multifamily housing on the continent, the houses of English cities largely consisted of attached dwellings, built either with party walls or with walls constructed side by side, and with little setback from the street to accommodate an area well with the service entrance.

Row housing was also a significant American building type that flourished in crowded cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore where high land values favored high-density residential development. The popularity of the row house began to diminish after about 1850 when wealthy city dwellers moved to the outskirts of cities in their attempt to escape industrialization and the attendant crowded city living, increased racial strife, and spreading diseases like tuberculosis. In subsequent decades, the row house was largely replaced in the English-speaking world, particularly in North America, by the single-family detached house. Although less efficient in terms of land use, heating and cooling, and the use of building materials, the freestanding house emphasized the nuclear family and sanctioned homeownership, factors that had been obscured by row housing and apartments.

Whereas row housing had been built mostly of brick or masonry due to fire regulations, the single-family detached house in America was constructed of wood. This was not the heavy timber, hand-tooled construction of the seventeenth-century house built by housewrights; rather, Americans built
their houses using the "balloon frame" that developed in Chicago in the 1830s after machine-made nails became widely available. The balloon frame meant that relatively unskilled workers could erect houses quickly, and it was the system used to construct most housing in North America until it was replaced by platform framing.

The individual family as the center of moral reform, facilitated by the popularity of the detached house, was touted both by the professional architectural press and the women's press in the second half of the nineteenth century and received particular emphasis in the evangelical movement. Ladies' magazines praised the home and institutionalized the wife and mother as its queen. The house itself, beginning at mid-century, took on important didactic nuances. It was widely believed that a woman could instill virtue in her husband and children, for example, through careful choice of architecture and furniture. In this way, the detached house became the symbol of proper family life.

In the architectural press, the most powerful supporter of the isolated middle-class family dwelling was Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852), whose books *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850) and *Cottage Residences* (1842) featured plans and perspectives of cottages in various architectural styles, mostly Gothic Revival, invariably set amidst mature trees and gardens. Downing's books were a widely read and codified domestic ideology for architecture. Perhaps his most lasting contribution to American domestic architecture was his suggestion that residents could express their own personalities in their houses. This notion has been widespread from Downing's time to the present, and since then a plethora of architectural forms and materials has been employed to express the individual tastes and personal territory of the family.

Catherine Beecher (1800–1878), too, promoted the single-family detached house in her book *The American Woman's Home* (1869). She detailed the moral superiority of women based on their highly developed capacity for self-sacrifice, suggesting that the detached house was the primary sphere in which to express this characteristic. She hoped that her radical reforms to the middle-class house, including the omission of servants' quarters and a rational reconfiguration of the kitchen, would raise the status of American women working at home to professional.

The late nineteenth century witnessed several formal changes to house plans that foreshadowed the modern suburban house. Many of the so-called Shingle Style houses, for example, introduced open, flowing plans. The well-known architects of these houses—firms like Henry Hobson Richardson and McKim, Mead & White—emphasized the individual needs of their clients by responding directly to the physical and cultural contexts of the sites.

Agitated silhouettes, asymmetrical plans with variously shaped rooms, and spacious living "halls" brought back memories of colonial houses in the area and the dramatic seacoast that many of them faced. Vincent Scully has suggested that these houses were the first examples of a truly American architecture.

The form of the typical Victorian detached dwelling, however, was far more conservative. Set back from the street, these houses were enclosed by lawns, hedges, and fences with gates. The front porch, entry lobby, and corridor of the house functioned as part of an elaborate filtering system that underlined the class and gender differences in the family and its relations to the outside world. The front parlor, one of a series of specialized rooms in the house, was usually expressed on the building's facade by a bay window; the large, undifferentiated kitchen, the heart of the servants' quarters, was located in the rear of the house. Servants were essential to the proper functioning of the household and were accommodated spatially by separate stairways, sleeping quarters, and entrances.

The architect most frequently credited with the proliferation of single-family detached houses is Frank Lloyd Wright (1869–1959), mostly because of the revolutionary houses he designed for the suburbs outside Chicago just before World War I. These "prairie houses," ground-hugging dwellings sheltered by hipped roofs and illuminated by bands of ribbon windows, reflected what Wright described as the total "destruction of the box." Rather than a series of specialized rooms accessible from a corridor, Wright's houses featured a pinwheel-like plan where rooms spun off from a central living room and massive hearth. A classic example of a prairie house is the Frederick C. Robie House of 1906–1909 in Chicago. These houses were widely copied and influenced, to a great extent, the ubiquitous ranch house after World War II. Wright's faith in the family as the ideal living unit and the detached house as its proper architectural expression were confirmed in his utopian "Broadacre City" of 1931–1935. This project revealed his deep-rooted, decentralist tendencies and foreshadowed postwar suburbs in many ways, particularly in its vision of small houses on one-acre plots.

Catherine Beecher's pleas for more rational, smaller, servantless houses were answered, to some extent, by the popularity of the bungalow in the Progressive Era. Distributed by companies like Sears and Aladdin, the bungalow was a relatively modest, detached single-family dwelling—the first to exclude any provisions for servants. For the first time, the kitchen became an integral part of general living spaces in the middle-class house. To a great extent, bungalow kitchens were inspired by methods of efficient factory production, like Taylorism. The development of home economics as a discipline, too, had encouraged the use of factories and
laboratories as models for middle-class kitchens. In general, bungalows were less formal and smaller than their Victorian predecessors.

The single-family detached house was thrust to the front rank of American middle-class culture in the suburbs that developed after World War II. In response to the postwar housing crisis, automobile suburbs were constructed on the edges of cities, farther away from the central city than they had ever been. Since they were mostly developed by tract or "merchant" builders, the houses showed great stylistic conformity, which distinguished them from both nineteenth-century suburban houses and those constructed during the 1920s. Most postwar suburbs comprised streets of detached houses on clearly defined lots, with spacious front and back yards and driveways leading to double garages. The isolation of these suburbs and the pro-family sentiments that were common after World War II encouraged many women to stay at home and raise families, rather than working in the labor force as many of them had during the war. The planning of many detached houses reflected this era of the "baby boom," particularly in California where the hundreds of modern ranch houses constructed by the developer Joseph Eichler featured open plans with central kitchens at the core of large, multipurpose rooms (living and dining). This design of the kitchen as the technological control center of the home was intended to allow stay-at-home mothers to cook and watch their children simultaneously, since the kitchen provided views of both an enclosed atrium and a spacious backyard, in addition to the multipurpose room. The sleek, undecorated surfaces of the modern house comprised a showcase for housekeeping standards, which were raised considerably by the concurrent mania for domestic appliances.

Despite environmental and feminist concerns about the single-family detached house, it continues to be the preferred house type as the twentieth century reaches its close. An emphasis on family values, personal freedom, and anti-urban living remain a powerful index of American middle-class culture and urban life.

—Annmarie Adams

See also
Balloon Frame Construction; Bungalow; Homeownership; Lawn; Suburban Ideal.

References


Skid Row

The origin of the term skid row is murky, but it may have come from the logging industry of Seattle. The street on which logs were skidded to the sawmill (Skid Road) became associated with the loggers who went on drunken sprees after their isolation in the woods came to a temporary end. The term stuck, eventually becoming associated with seedy areas of the city known for public drunkenness, the presence of disreputable men, general rowdiness, prostitution, and poverty.

Skid row has been a constant irritant to moralists, social reformers, and the more genteel citizens. It has been viewed as a center of vice, a threat to morality, and a stain on a city's reputation. Sociologists who studied skid row in the 1950s and 1960s found that it was functional for its inhabitants. Much less disorganized than it appeared to outsiders, skid row provided institutions that met the needs of the downwardly mobile: a low-rent district with stores that sold secondhand goods, pawn shops, cheap bars, barber colleges, day-labor offices, blood banks, and rescue missions.

By the late 1970s, the land on which skid row was located had become too valuable to ignore. With the onslaught of national urban renewal programs, skid row began to disappear from cities in the United States, and its residents were dispersed instead of clustered into a single area.

Some analysts thought that skid row was destined to become only a memory of the past, but the area was counted out too soon. By 1990, its reappearance was evident—but with a changed face. Today's isolated, urban homeless are younger and as likely to be addicted to crack or other drugs as to alcohol, to be minority rather than white. Today's skid row is more dispersed and more violent.