

THE SUBURBAN RANCH HOUSE IN POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICA:  
A SITE OF CONTRAST IN AN ERA OF UNEASE, UNCERTAINTY, AND INSTABILITY

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The post-World War II period in American history was a period of increased suburbanization. Security, abundance, and normalcy had eluded families since the onset of the Great Depression. Although mobilization and wartime production had catapulted the economy into recovery, many Americans had anticipated a postwar relapse. But, the economy remained strong after the fighting ceased. Domestic production refocused on civilian markets, rationing was rescinded, and servicemen returned home to reunite with their families and reintegrate into American society.

A postwar population boom accompanied the economic boom and aggravated the housing shortage which had persisted from the 1930s and early 1940s. Since European immigrants, rural migrants, and veterans inundated urban centers, the federal government and private housing industry allocated undeveloped tracts outside city limits to be used for housing construction. Builders channeled technological advances, developed during the Depression to stamp out costly construction and during the war to house defense workers, into the mass-production of postwar residences. Government measures, such as the Federal Housing Administration and Servicemen's Readjustment Act, backed builders and enabled Americans to purchase single-family homes.

White Americans stampeded to the suburbs. Because owning a home became cheaper than leasing an apartment, postwar renters primarily consisted of minorities who were ostracized from suburban communities. Segregationists esteemed racial homogeneity a contribution to suburban appeal. Moreover, suburbia catered to the informal, private, and child-centered lifestyles which young parents pursued in the postwar period. Ridding such couples of the quotidian obligations of extended family and ethnic community, relocation permitted them to

direct their focus inward on their own nuclear families and homes. And yet, although suburbanites relished their autonomy, they also engaged in a broader-reaching rhetoric of postwar nationalism, which linked their status as Cape Cod and ranch house owners to a greater American good.

The economic, demographic, and social conditions which sired the accelerated spread of suburbia after World War II also led to the proliferation of the single-story ranch house. Ranch houses met postwar needs; they augmented living and storage space, ensured privacy, fostered informality, allowed parents to cosset their children, and were receptive to a nationalistic overlay. But, how did the postwar ranch house reflect the emotional climate of the postwar period?

The late 1940s and 1950s marked an era of anxiety-provoking doubt and precariousness. Politics unnerved Americans, as the United States pitted itself against the communist Soviet Union and plunged into the Cold War. Nuclear armament and the contention for outer space functioned as daily reminders of mortality and potential atomic annihilation. Race relations also threatened to boil over. The Great Migration of southern African Americans to northern cities, along with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* to desegregate public schools, corroded white segregationists' sense of security; as African Americans seeped into formerly white communities, white residents recoiled to the suburbs. In addition, publicized incidents of racial tension like the Montgomery bus boycott and murder of Emmett Till vitalized the Civil Rights Movement. Consumerism and family dynamics further undermined postwar ease, certainty, and stability. Americans engaged in consumerism to catch up or keep up with the elevated standard of living, but such spending caused guilt. Husbands and wives grappled with their economic, as well as their occupational and familial roles. And,

politicians morphed such personal matters as sexuality, parenting techniques, and religious faith into matters of national concern.

In terms of structure, few more stable styles could have dominated post-World War II domestic architecture than the squat single-story ranch house. However, postwar ranch houses embodied the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the period because they were rife with contrasts. These contrasts included generality and particularity, modernity and timelessness, masculinity and femininity, and lastly, expansion and retraction.

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY**

An investigation of the ranch house in postwar America tapped into two broader schools of scholarship—architecture and the cultural, social, and political climate of the period. Secondary literature on architecture chronicled the rise of the American ranch house, compared the style to its predecessors and contemporaries, and, identifying the late 1940s and 1950s as its heyday, situated the ranch house in its postwar context. Roger A. Clouser applied this formula to his dissertation “The Ranch House in America,” which, along with Clifford Edward Clark, Jr.’s volume *The American Family Home*, were the secondary sources I relied upon most. Clouser traced the roots of the postwar ranch house to Spanish colonial mission architecture, detailed the birth and development of the ranch house as vernacular architecture in post-World War I California, compared its design to that of the bungalow, and related the popularity of the post-World War II ranch house to nationalism and the myth of the western frontier.

Like Clouser, Clark explicated the circumstances, attitudes, and emotions which enabled the mass production of the postwar ranch house and accounted for its popularity. However, whereas Clouser honed in on the relationship between the ranch house and American identity,

Clark honed in on the relationship between the ranch house and the middle-class American family. Premising his social history of the ranch house on a postwar idealization of the American family, Clark contended that journalists, advice-administering experts, and builders promoted ranch houses as homes which created the ideal family and catered to the family ideal. Although *The American Family Home*, “The Ranch House in America,” and other architectural sources acknowledged that circumstances particular to the postwar period contributed to the popularity of the ranch house, they did not treat the ranch house as an embodiment of Americans’ emotional response to these circumstances.

Secondary literature on the cultural, social, and political climate of the late 1940s and 1950s approached the ranch house as a contribution to postwar material culture, rather than an embodiment of the postwar climate. Although these sources addressed material culture, they prioritized other aspects of the postwar period. In *Homeward Bound*, Elaine Tyler May presented postwar America as an interaction between Cold War fears and family life. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson delineated the ongoing suburbanization of the nation. And, in *A Troubled Feast*, William E. Leuchtenburg punctuated the anxiety and prosperity which characterized America after World War II. Such scholarship recognized the familial and societal tensions present in postwar America, but did not exhume the corresponding tensions present in postwar ranch houses.

Although my research was at first contained within the history of the ranch house and the history of post-World War II suburbia, it expanded as I progressed, reaching into additional areas of scholarship and proving them relevant to the ranch house. An amalgamation of previous approaches to architecture, suburbia, and the postwar period resulted. Postwar ranch houses did not just tie into the suburban neighborhoods where they were constructed, but also into the Cold

War, race relations, class, consumerism, gender roles, sexuality, employment, visual culture, and religion. These facets of postwar America imbued the period with the unease, uncertainty, and instability the ranch house embodied. Therefore, readers cannot fully understand the climate of postwar America without understanding the ranch house and cannot fully understand the ranch house without understanding the postwar climate. The primary sources which most enhanced my understanding of the postwar ranch house as it related to the climate of postwar America were newspaper and magazine articles. Pieces which ran in national publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, local newspapers such as the *Hartford Courant*, and periodicals such as *House and Garden*, *Sunset*, and *Harper's* granted access to the rhetoric journalists and editors drew upon to analyze and advertise the ranch house. Quotations from ranch house owners and prospective buyers suggested that American families internalized this rhetoric. And, the quantity of articles on ranch houses and on American anxiety, as well as the array of newspapers and magazines these articles spanned, underscored the prominent place ranch houses and anxiety occupied in the postwar American conscience.

### **SUBURBANIZATION AND THE RANCH HOUSE**

By the late 1940s, Americans were ready for change. World War II had severed 16 million husbands and fathers from their spouses and children. Housing shortages, accrued from the Depression-era housing drought and exacerbated by the wartime monopolization of labor and resources, coupled with inadequate government allowances, had compelled servicemen's wives to take in boarders or "double up" with friends and relatives.<sup>1</sup> Postponing home ownership, the war left families stewing in a pent-up desire for normalcy, independence, and privacy. Single-

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 156.

family suburban houses represented a realization of the material prosperity which Americans believed they deserved after a decade and a half of depravity.<sup>2</sup>

The United States burgeoned after World War II; between 1945 and 1950 alone, the population increased by twelve million.<sup>3</sup> Cities brimmed with migrants and immigrants; blown from the Dust Bowl, farmers retired their overalls to don blue-collar shirts in urban factories. Mechanized agriculture and the consequent decrease in demand for unskilled labor “pushed” sharecroppers off southern plantation, while higher wages and the myth of superior race relations “pulled” African Americans to northern urban centers like Chicago.<sup>4</sup> And, immigrants who fled the devastation in Europe poured into American ports. Faced with the uncertainties of an impending war, young couples had rushed into marriage and childbirth. Returning from duty, soldiers reunited with their wives and children or formed new families. Politicians, psychologists, advertisers, writers, and magazine editors deemed matrimony and childrearing indispensable to personal and societal wellbeing, fulfillment, and security. The marriage rate rocketed to an unprecedented high, while the marriage age plummeted to an unprecedented low. As wives bore more children in closer succession, the birthrate also surged, approximating the population growth rate to that of India.<sup>5</sup>

Because of a postwar economic boom, the middle class expanded even faster than the general population. In the fifteen years following the war, the gross national product more than doubled, and, by 1960, approximately 60 percent of Americans belonged to the middle class.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Ockman, “Mirror Images: Technology, Consumption, and the Representation of Gender in American Architecture Since World War II,” in *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith L. Eggner, 342-351 (New York: Routledge, 2004), 345.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Martinson, *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 2000), xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 70.

<sup>5</sup> Mintz and Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 2:937.

Government support for first-time and veteran homebuyers compounded the benefits of a strong economy, so more Americans could afford to purchase their own homes. However, a housing shortage exacerbated the satiety of urban centers. In his introduction to *American Dreamscape*, Tom Martinson depicted the dingy Chicago apartment where he and his family resided after World War II. Although his parents had enough money for nicer lodgings, no such lodgings were available in the city.<sup>7</sup> The year 1945 marked the sixteenth consecutive year that housing construction fell short of the demand.<sup>8</sup> Since mature cities in the East and Midwest were unable to accommodate an influx of inhabitants, the extensive and inexpensive housing construction needed for fledgling families took root in undeveloped tracts of suburban land.

No longer constrained by economic depression or world war, the late 1940s yielded the most extensive housing construction in two decades.<sup>9</sup> Although the Great Depression and World War II had contributed to the housing shortage, they also contributed to the mass production of suburban housing in the postwar period. The need to curtail construction costs in the 1930s and to throw up large-scale defense housing developments in the early 1940s engendered new building materials and processes for the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>10</sup> Postwar houses donned “stressed skin” plywood wall panels, laminated roofs, and painted aluminum siding.<sup>11</sup> Eliminating weather conditions and skilled labor as variables of production, prefabrication enabled the industrialization of home construction.<sup>12</sup> Mass-produced units quickly eclipsed customized, crafted homes. And because large developers offered a limited number of house

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<sup>7</sup> Martinson, *American Dreamscape*, xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 131.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 194.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Hess, *The Ranch House* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 244.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 121.

designs in exchange for simplified construction and reduced costs, monotony characterized the vast suburban developments which materialized.<sup>13</sup>

Besides economic prosperity and mass production techniques, government intervention also brought home ownership within reach for a larger portion of the American population. Sanctioning the construction of 41,000 miles of highway, the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, in conjunction with cheap gasoline and assembly-line automobiles, spurred suburban growth in previously unreachable areas along its routes and, so, paved the way for suburban commuters.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), born of the 1934 National Housing Act, and the Veterans Administration (VA), born of the 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act or GI Bill, guaranteed long-term mortgages issued by private banks for house construction. Federal insurance moreover diminished down payments and interest rates.<sup>15</sup> From 1946 to 1953, FHA and VA-backed banks doled out loans to cover the erection of ten million homes.<sup>16</sup> And, between 1949 and 1950, young servicemen with families composed half of all new American homeowners.<sup>17</sup>

Eager to profit from the housing shortage, the private housing industry pressured Congress to stick with subsidization and steer clear of public housing construction. Conservatives like Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy equated public housing with un-American socialism. Presiding over the public hearings of the U.S. Senate Joint Committee Study and Investigation of Housing from 1947 to 1948, McCarthy excoriated the housing policy set forth in the 1945 Taft-Ellender-Wagner bill. As he and other conservatives preached

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-5.

<sup>16</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 155.

privatization, master builder William Levitt advocated FHA-insured “production advances” to private builders as the only viable resolution to the housing deficiency.<sup>18</sup> And, the government listened. By 1950, large builders produced two-thirds of all new American homes.<sup>19</sup>

Americans channeled their desire for a new start after the Great Depression and World War II into housing. At the close of the war, according to a poll conducted by the *Saturday Evening Post*, only fourteen percent of the population were willing to live in apartments or “used house[s].”<sup>20</sup> Because they hankered after change, postwar homebuyers were satisfied with suburban houses that fell short of their dreams. Cele Roberts, one of the 92 women Brett Harvey interviewed for her compilation of oral histories, *The Fifties*, recalled her transition from a one-room apartment on Manhattan’s Lower East Side to an 800 square-foot ranch house in Levittown, Long Island: “The house was surrounded by a lake of mud. But I was thrilled—it was a very exciting thing to have a house of your own. And everything you dreamed about was there, everything was working, brand-new, no cockroaches.”<sup>21</sup> Even with its flaws, suburban tract housing afforded former urbanites more space, comfort, and autonomy.

Owning a home became cheaper than leasing an apartment and afforded residents tax breaks, stable investments, and freedom from landlords. Postwar renters, therefore, predominantly comprised minorities who were excluded from the suburbs. As Columbia Professor Charles Abrams bemoaned in 1955, “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.”<sup>22</sup> Backed by the FHA, William Levitt balked at diversification in Levittown: “If we sell one house to a Negro family... then 90

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<sup>18</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 253.

<sup>21</sup> Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 214.

or 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community.”<sup>23</sup> Even in 1967, after a lawsuit coerced Levitt to sell his houses to African Americans, *The Levittowners* author Herbert J. Gans identified “the presence of Negro families” as “[t]he one element missing on most Levittown blocks.”<sup>24</sup> But, segregationists perceived such homogeneity as an additional advantage, rather than a disadvantage, of postwar suburban homeownership.

Optimism factored into the proliferation of the post-World War II suburbs. As the war wound down, Americans had feared that the ten million war industry workers and twelve million servicemen would swamp the economy after fighting and production desisted.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, the desire for consumer goods accrued during the 1930s and early 1940s kindled postwar spending and warded off another depression. Economic reassurance, ample employment, and high wages incited couples to build large families and to engage in consumption. Architect and architecture scholar Norbert Schoenauer attributed suburban development above all to the “rosy outlook with respect to future conditions.”<sup>26</sup> As citizens of a postwar superpower, Americans considered an heightened standard of living a fruit of victory.<sup>27</sup>

Young Americans who transplanted their families to the suburbs identified independence and informality as essential to their new and improved postwar lifestyles. Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen categorized such informality as “a break with the past” and offered “The Mass Produced Suburbs,” a 1953 *Harper’s* article, as proof: “Slacks or shorts are standard wear for both men and women at all times... Visiting grandparents invariably are shocked and whisper,

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<sup>23</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 946.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 169.

<sup>25</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Norbert Schoenauer, *6,000 Years of Housing* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 415.

<sup>27</sup> Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 87.

‘Why nobody dresses around here!’ ”<sup>28</sup> Purchasing a Cape Cod or ranch house in suburbia meant a break from extended family. Many second generation Americans emigrated from urban ethnic neighborhoods, where kinship and community networks flourished, to the homogenous suburbs, where quotidian obligations and rituals associated with their extended family dissolved.<sup>29</sup> As Henderson reported, “Socially, these communities [had] neither history, tradition nor established structure, no inherited customs, institutions.”<sup>30</sup> When suburban couples established their own single-family households, they instituted their own routines and traditions and directed their focus inward on their own homes. Accordingly, the children they reared had less interaction with non-nuclear family members.

In the midst of the Cold War, Americans looked to the family and the home as sources of hope and aspiration, venerating home ownership and domestically directed consumerism as investments for the future.<sup>31</sup> In *Surfeit of Honey*, “[a] friendly, if somewhat skeptical excursion into the manner and customs of Americans in this time of prosperity,” Russell Lynes confirmed, “The family is, of course, the ultimate measure of success—its solidarity, its community of interest, the well-being of the children.”<sup>32</sup> Suburbanization reinforced a privatized, family-oriented society. Early marriage, child rearing, and home ownership attempted to quell the insecurity, instability, and discontent which lingered from the 1930s and early 1940s. Because her father’s unemployment had forced Jill Morris, another of Brett Harvey’s interviewees, into vagrancy during the Depression, purchasing her own home in the postwar period came as a relief: “I had tears in my eyes as I watched all this stuff being delivered to *my house*...All I’d

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<sup>28</sup> Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 145.

<sup>29</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 145.

<sup>31</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 147.

<sup>32</sup> Russell Lynes, *A Surfeit of Honey* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), 109.

ever wanted was to be brought up in one house with a little picket fence around it. With stability and security and family, which I never had.”<sup>33</sup>

The child-centered family became the nucleus of the postwar aspiration for prosperity and security, which the home symbolized.<sup>34</sup> Cele Roberts justified her move to Levittown in terms of children: “I was twenty-five and pregnant...and though I liked the city streets, the hurly-burly, I couldn’t envision raising children there. I wanted that suburban dream life.”<sup>35</sup> Magazine advertisements and articles reinforced Roberts’s resolution to prioritize the needs of her future children. “Children Make the Plan,” published in a 1948 issue of *House and Garden*, endorsed such a filial-centric approach to suburban living: “In the life of a child, the most predictable fact is change. So, if you are building or buying a house for children, look for an arrangement of rooms that can stretch at the points of greatest strain.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, responses to a 1946 survey economist Walter Adams conducted in conjunction with *Better Homes and Gardens* indicated that American families heeded child-centered advice; like Cele Roberts, a majority of the 11,428 survey participants planned to build new houses in the suburbs, on larger plots of land, to ensure that their children would have ample space to play.<sup>37</sup> Levittown abounded with so many children it earned the nicknames “Fertility Valley” and “The Rabbit Hutch.”<sup>38</sup>

Suburban parents and children confined their energy and leisure to their homes.<sup>39</sup>

Importing the exterior world into domestic interiors, television and radio made it less essential for suburbanites to leave.<sup>40</sup> When families did go out, they oriented their activities to the

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<sup>33</sup> Harvey, *Fifties*, 124.

<sup>34</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey, *Fifties*, 113.

<sup>36</sup> “Children Make the Plan,” *House and Garden*, November 1948, 196.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, Jr., *American Family Home*, 201.

<sup>38</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 153.

<sup>39</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 279.

<sup>40</sup> Clifford E. Clark, Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Larry May, 171-191 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 172.

neighborhood, rather than to neighboring cities. As a child, Tom Martinson rarely ventured from the suburbs into downtown Chicago, even though his family lived a few miles outside, because “Chicago was big, fast-moving, and run by people you didn’t know. Lombard, on the other hand, was an easy place in which to live.”<sup>41</sup> Ruminating about his experience of suburban localism, Martinson posited, “[T]he postwar American suburbs [were] less physical places than a state of mind.”<sup>42</sup> Domesticity was an integral component of this state of mind.

Privacy and security were also integral components of this state of mind. Although the conception of the detached home as a haven from the hectic world dated back to nineteenth century housing reformers, the postwar period enabled less affluent Americans to secure such havens for their families.<sup>43</sup> Americans who moved to the suburbs favored single-family houses over row housing because distinct units permitted lower-density communities.<sup>44</sup> As Norbert Schoenauer maintained, “It stands to reason that the single-family self-sufficient freestanding house ha[d] an isolating influence upon its occupants.”<sup>45</sup> Separation from neighbors proved conducive to the privacy suburban families relished. To bait potential homeowners, the editors of *Architectural Record* infused their 1954 folio *A Treasury of Contemporary Houses* with photographs and instances of “privacy”—outdoor areas “closed off for privacy,” an enclosed patio “provid[ing] a sheltered area for outdoor living as well as privacy from the driveway,” floor plans with “equal demands on space and privacy” and a balance between “safety for children” and “privacy for adults.”<sup>46</sup> Americans who had fretted over national and international concerns

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<sup>41</sup> Martinson, *American Dreamscape*, xviii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>43</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 154.

<sup>44</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239.

<sup>45</sup> Schoenauer, *6,000 Years of Housing*, 421.

<sup>46</sup> Editors of *Architectural Record*, *A Treasury of Contemporary Houses* (New York: F.W. Dodge Corporation, 1954), 10, 18, 26, 106.

during the Depression and World War II seized the opportunity after 1945 to recede from the public realm.

Although suburbanites retreated to the privacy of their homes after World War II, the suburbs engaged in a broader-reaching rhetoric of nationalism. Developers alleged that the act of purchasing and furnishing a suburban house elevated working-class American to middle-class status.<sup>47</sup> And, as David Potter put forth in *People of Plenty*, his 1954 study of abundance and American character, social mobility ranked among the features and qualities which rendered the nation distinct: “The American idea and practice of equality...did not mean uniform position on a common level, but it did mean universal opportunity to move through a scale which traversed many levels.”<sup>48</sup> According to developers, therefore, suburban homeownership allowed blue-collar Americans to express this American ideal. Philip Klutznick, president of the American Community Builders, also held suburban communities responsible for the social dynamic of the nation. “Better communities,” he insisted, “ma[de] for better human relations.”<sup>49</sup>

Although Park Forrest, Illinois, Klutznick’s FHA-insured GI suburb, intermingled buyable houses with rental units, the FHA pitched suburban homeownership as the ideal way of life for families with children. And, as President Harry S. Truman articulated at the 1948 White House Conference on Family Life, children were considered “as necessary to the welfare of this country as...Wall Street and the railroads.”<sup>50</sup> The federal government, accordingly, cast child-centered homes as protectors of the American way of life. The FHA orchestrated National Home Week, which *Hartford Courant* contributor A. Raymond Ellis characterized as “an effort to brief

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<sup>47</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 146.

<sup>48</sup> David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), 91.

<sup>49</sup> “Builder Calls Homes Key to Better Life,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 11, 1954, <http://klutznick.lib.uchicago.edu>.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *Building the Dream*, 246.

the prospective homeowners of the nation on the importance and advantages of home owning.”<sup>51</sup> Infusing prefabricated houses with patriotism, Lesco Homes disseminated the agency’s message; the manufacturer offered models from their “line of the presidents,” including a three bedroom, two bath “Harry Truman” ranch house, to aspiring homeowners and nationalists in nine states.<sup>52</sup>

Postwar suburbanites bought into the nationalism they were fed. Questioning the morality of affluence and materialism, parents concentrated their consumption on the home because they reasoned that consumer products purchased for the domestic sphere fostered traditional family values and, so, bolstered Americanism.<sup>53</sup> Russell Lynes reassured, “[Americans] can be satisfied that their role as consumers is essential to the national well-being.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, as a widely purchased commodity, television broadcasted paradigms of an ideal American existence which unfolded beyond the urban fringe; in *Building Suburbia*, Dolores Hayden even titled her chapter on postwar suburban communities “Sitcom Suburbs.” So, minorities who watched the suburbs on their television screens, but, were shunned from suburban communities in real life perceived suburban homeownership as a marker of acceptance and success in America.<sup>55</sup>

As a juncture of domesticity and consumption, the suburban home also was supposed to inoculate the nation against communism.<sup>56</sup> William Levitt assured, “No man who has a house and a lot [in Levittown] can be Communist. He has too much to do.”<sup>57</sup> When Vice President Richard Nixon squared off against Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the 1959 Kitchen Debate, he summoned the affordable suburban home, trapped with timesaving commodities, to

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<sup>51</sup> A. Raymond Ellis, “Architects Aid Program to Stress Advantages of Home Ownership,” *Hartford (CT) Courant*, September 11, 1949, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>52</sup> *Manufactured Homes: The Magazine of Prefabrication*, April 1958, 41.

<sup>53</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Lynes, *Surfeit of Honey*, 131.

<sup>55</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 149

<sup>56</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 135.

articulate the superiority of American capitalism over Soviet communism. This fusion of suburban domesticity and anti-communism diffused from politics into mainstream American culture. In an effort to depopulate domestic enclaves near potential targets of nuclear attack, a 1951 issue of *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* goaded city residents to relocate to the suburbs. Similarly, President Dwight D. Eisenhower figured the suburb-spawning Interstate Highway Act as a Cold War precaution: “[In] case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net must permit quick evacuation of target areas.”<sup>58</sup> Child-centered homes, moreover, designated the postwar suburbs as sites of savior in the Atomic age because children connoted a propitious future and a means to repopulate a war-ravaged world.<sup>59</sup>

The circumstances which begot the postwar suburbs also installed the ranch house at the forefront of American domestic architecture from the end of World War II until the 1960s. In his article “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” Jules David Prown averred, “Having been built for human occupancy, [architecture] responds in very direct ways to people’s needs.”<sup>60</sup> The ranch house fit the “needs” of postwar suburbanites. One such need was space. As the *Hartford Courant* recognized, the elongated layout of the ranch house maximized living and storage space and, so, accommodated larger families and their inclination to shop for consumer goods: “The trend towards ranch-type house design is not only due to the exterior attractiveness of such homes, but also to the American family’s urge for more elbow room and spaciousness.”<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, although the Americans who participated in Walter

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<sup>58</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 151.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>61</sup> “Ranch House Gives More Elbow Room; Exterior Beauty,” *Hartford (CT) Courant*, August 21, 1949, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Adams's *Better Homes and Gardens* survey found Cape Cod houses appealing, they favored ranch houses because they were roomier.<sup>62</sup>

The single level, rambling style of the ranch house allowed residents to enhance their living space by merging the interior and the exterior. In "The Ranch House in America," Roger A. Clouser ascribed the popularity of the ranch house in large part to this indoor-outdoor union, which, through picture windows, sheltered patios, and groomed gardens, combated the space constrictions of consecutive suburban lots.<sup>63</sup> *House and Garden* magazine promoted its ranch-style "1953 House of Ideas" as having "achiev[ed] a lot of living in small space" because "outdoor living space double[d] as indoor living space for at least three months of the year."<sup>64</sup> The March 1949 issue featured a similarly space-sensitive Oregon ranch house: "[the owners] felt a sense of space and openness was...important.... [They] enjoy precious days of sunshine on terraces which open directly off most of their rooms. The rooms themselves make use of the outdoors by taking in generous areas through walls of glass."<sup>65</sup> Since families withdrew to the home in the postwar period, ample domestic space became a priority, and ranch house design prioritized space.

Within the postwar ranch house, an open floor plan upped the square footage of functional space. The first Levittown house model, a four-and-a-half room Cape Cod, was criticized for its cramped quarters and branded a "pinched, poor man's look."<sup>66</sup> Prospective buyers and architects, however, praised Levitt's subsequent ranch design, which furnished residents with twelve percent more living space.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, the editors of *Architectural Record*

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<sup>62</sup> Clark, Jr., *American Family Home*, 201.

<sup>63</sup> Roger A. Clouser, "The Ranch House in America," (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1984), 58.

<sup>64</sup> "1953 House of Ideas," *House and Garden*, January 1953, 25.

<sup>65</sup> "This Oregon Ranch House Looks as Well as it Lives," *House and Garden*, March 1949, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Baxandall and Ewen, *Picture Windows*, 131-2

<sup>67</sup> Schoenauer, *6,000 Years of Housing*, 416.

lauded the Frederic Wieting ranch house in Swampscott, Massachusetts for its “corridorless” layout, “which revolve[d] around the playroom-kitchen-laundry-family dining area.”<sup>68</sup> Trading in walls for the space they consumed, ranch house rooms bled into each other. However, sliding doors provided privacy when necessary.

Postwar ranch houses not only combated cramped quarters, but also tackled suburbanites’ concern for privacy. As Elaine Tyler May affirmed in *Homeward Bound*, “The style exude[d] a sheltered look of protection and privacy, surrounded by a tamed and controlled natural world.”<sup>69</sup> The low-slung structure emitted an aura of security, almost like an aboveground bomb shelter. Capitalizing on this aura of security, architects, journalists, and advertisers publicized ranch houses as privacy-conscious. *House and Garden* referred readers to the “[o]penness” which the Oregon ranch house featured in March of 1949 “achieved without sacrifice of privacy.”<sup>70</sup> The editors of *Sunset* magazine littered *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, their 1946 collection of celebratory case studies, with the term privacy. “Life,” they crooned, “is best where living is free and easy, but good living also needs privacy.”<sup>71</sup> Ranch house privacy was prevalent enough to prevail in the memory of a childhood occupant half a century later. After reading the *Los Angeles Times* article “The Once and Future Ranch House” printed in 2005, Richard Nisley composed a letter of response and verified, “As kids, we lived in a Cliff May ranch house, which our parents commissioned in 1948.... The house did indeed turn its back on the street, which gave us perfect privacy.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Editors of Architectural Record, *Treasury of Contemporary Houses*, 56.

<sup>69</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 154

<sup>70</sup> “Oregon Ranch House,” 105.

<sup>71</sup> Editorial Staff of Sunset Magazine, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* (Santa Monica: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1999), 153.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Nisley, “Spoiled by a Special House,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2005, [http:// www.proquest.com/](http://www.proquest.com/).

Aspiring to a more comfortable and bountiful existence than the “austere and antiseptic” bungalow of the Progressive Era, the postwar suburban ranch house also “turn[ed] its back” on formal living.<sup>73</sup> The simple, one-story structure reminded Americans of the relaxed West Coast lifestyle.<sup>74</sup> *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* highlighted informality as a fundamental ingredient in ranch house living: “The ability to move in and out of your house freely, without the hindrance of steps...makes living in it pleasant and informal...a ranch house has many roots.... It was shaped by needs for a special way of living—informal, yet gracious.”<sup>75</sup> In her 1951 article “Family Affair,” Martha B. Darbyshire, too, identified informality as intrinsic to ranch houses, but then related this ranch house informality to the preoccupation with informality which parents and children harbored in postwar America: “Inside, the house is completely charming—gay and informal as you might guess: first because informality ‘goes steady’ with ranch houses; and second, because informality dovetails with the way the family likes to live.”<sup>76</sup> Ranch houses slaked suburbanites’ desire for informal abodes.

As informal abodes, ranch houses catered to child-centered families. Domestic periodicals esteemed a properly designed ranch house as capable of satisfying every family’s need for a practical, convenient, and agreeable home environment. Parents who adhered to the permissive approach to childcare, championed by such postwar experts as Dr. Benjamin Spock, manipulated the ranch house style to facilitate their sons’ and daughters’ development. Carving the open plan into three zones—housework, family living, and private—allowed children to play freely, without disturbing the adults.<sup>77</sup> Parents found in ranch houses the adaptable, expandable living environment they necessitated during the baby boom. As a commentator exclaimed in

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<sup>73</sup> Clark, Jr., *American Family Home*, 171, 216.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

<sup>75</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, IX.

<sup>76</sup> Martha B Darbyshire, “A Family Affair—From Start to Finish,” *American Home*, May 1951, 117.

<sup>77</sup> Clark, Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 179-180.

1956, “Thirty years ago [the Average Family] somehow had to fit themselves into the house, now the house is planned to fit them.”<sup>78</sup>

The ranch house rose to prominence not only because it took on familial needs of the postwar period, but because it took on national needs of the period as well. Newborn nationalism factored into Roger Clouser’s explanation of the popularity of the ranch house after World War II. Because the United States emerged from the war as a superpower, Clouser deduced, “it seemed logical for the post-war building boom to reach back in history and venerate something uniquely American.”<sup>79</sup> Although the ranch house predated the war, the style was resurrected post-war to promote an all-American identity. Architects, advertisers, and homeowners recast the ranch house as a product of the western frontier and, accordingly, the epitome of a uniquely American aesthetic and lifestyle. Endorsing the ranch house in the late 1940s and 1950s enabled Americans to espouse a cultural and historical identity distinct from Europeans. As Clouser concluded, “The ranch house allowed America to show its pride in both its history and its present.”<sup>80</sup>

### **POSTWAR UNEASE, UNCERTAINTY, AND INSTABILITY**

Apprehension clouded the pride which Americans exhibited after World War II. In her 1957 article “The Banishment of Anxiety,” Dorothy Thomas posed a rhetorical question to *Ladies’ Home Journal* readers: “If we try to describe to ourselves the outstanding characteristic of the western mind in this mid-twentieth century, could we not truthfully say that it is anxiety— anxiety and fear?”<sup>81</sup> As Thomas observed, unease, uncertainty, and instability characterized the

<sup>78</sup> Clark, Jr., *American Family Home*, 216.

<sup>79</sup> Clouser, “Ranch House in America,” 124.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>81</sup> Dorothy Thompson, “The Banishment of Anxiety,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, July 1957, 11.

postwar period, when suburbia and the suburban ranch house proliferated. Even seemingly advantageous developments in American society proved doubled-edged swords, which eroded Americans' sense of ease, certainty, and stability and, consequently, implicated the contrast-laden ranch house as an artifact of material culture particular to the postwar period.

The postwar political climate constituted one such force of erosion. Weapons employed to defeat the Axis Powers during World War II had barely cooled when the nation plunged into cold war against its former ally, the Soviet Union. President Truman cultivated fear of a national and international communist takeover. When Great Britain, economically incapacitated from the war, entreated the United States to assume its role as benefactor to Greece and Turkey, Senator Arthur Vandenberg counseled Truman to “scare hell out of the country” in order win public and congressional support.<sup>82</sup> Heeding Vandenberg's advice, the 1947 Truman Doctrine presented the communist insurgence in Greece as a constituent of the Soviet scheme to seize the free world: “If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world—and we shall surely endanger the welfare of this Nation.”<sup>83</sup> Americans internalized Truman's caveat; in 1949, when Mao Zedong triumphed in the Chinese civil war, Republicans inculpated the Truman administration for “losing” China to communists, and in 1950, the administration dispatched American soldiers to thwart North Korea's invasion and attempted communization of South Korea. Communism in Asia seemed noxious to the democratic existence Americans savored after World War II.

Cold War hysteria also infected internal affairs. In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee conducted hearings on communist allegiance in Hollywood. Ten witnesses

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<sup>82</sup> Carl N. Degler, *Affluence and Anxiety: America Since 1945*, 2nd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975), 24.

<sup>83</sup> “Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey, March 12, 1947,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, D.C., 1963), 176-80, quoted in Eric Foner, ed., *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 2:176.

who invoked the First Amendment and refused to incriminate themselves or others were charged with contempt of court and blacklisted, along with some 200 additional screenwriters, directors, and actors.<sup>84</sup> The following year, *Time* magazine editor Whittaker Chambers professed to HUAC that, during the New Deal, State Department official Alger Hiss had slipped him secret government documents to relay to Soviet agents. Despite his alleged innocence, Hiss was convicted of perjury. A red scare circus was set in motion, and Joseph McCarthy stepped right up as the self-appointed ringleader. Addressing the Republican Women's Club in Wheeling, West Virginia on February 20, 1950, the Wisconsin senator vociferated, "I have here in my hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."<sup>85</sup> Although McCarthy never corroborated his list with solid evidence or convictions of disloyalty, his allegations torpedoed individuals and government agencies until 1954, when the televised Army-McCarthy hearings exposed his folly. The hearings derailed McCarthy's anticommunist crusade, but did not counteract the damage he wreaked on assurance, as Americans continued to worry who would face accusations next—a neighbor, a coworker, or a relative?

Technology, like the backlash against communism, corroded Americans' sense of security and equilibrium. Because Cold War military spending buoyed up scientific research in such beneficent fields as air travel, computers, and medicine, postwar technology stimulated and enlightened Americans.<sup>86</sup> However, as the United States and the Soviet Union "raced" for domination of outer space and superiority in armament, scientists also tinkered with nuclear annihilation. Yanking world security father from reach, technological advances achieved in

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<sup>84</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 919.

<sup>85</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 31.

<sup>86</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 917.

association with the arms race, therefore, disillusioned and frightened Americans.<sup>87</sup> Dorothy Thompson's exposé on American angst captured this unsettling contradiction between enlightenment and disillusionment: "We praise the blessing of science, but shrink from its implications."<sup>88</sup> Nostalgia for and faith in a pre-technological and pre-scientific America appeared as symptoms of the anxiety Cold War technology fomented.<sup>89</sup> Such symptoms, accordingly, substantiated the unease, uncertainty, and instability which technology, along with the domestic and foreign policies of the Cold War, injected into the postwar period and which the postwar ranch house, as a site of contrast, represented in architectural form.

Nuclear technology and the Cold War, moreover, inundated American minds with reminders of mortality. As William E. Leuchtenburg argued in *A Troubled Feast*, "The post-Hiroshima generation felt a special awareness of impermanence and premonition of doom. Infants imbibed Strontium 90 with their morning milk, and pupils hunched under their desks as air raid sirens wailed during drills...students at San Francisco State reported that nuclear bombs had exploded in their dreams, and young children expressed Doomsday anxieties."<sup>90</sup> In addition to the consequences of atomic warfare, peacetime conscription, introduced in 1946, abandoned, and subsequently reinstated in 1948, threatened American men with death and their families with loss. Dorothy Thompson underscored mortality as a key component of postwar anxiety: "We are afraid of illness and are constantly reminded to watch for symptoms prefacing the onset of chronic and usually mortal diseases, and to change or modify our habits of life to prevent or postpone them. We are afraid of death and abandon the rituals that remind us of it."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 28.

<sup>88</sup> Thompson, "Banishment of Anxiety," 11.

<sup>89</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>90</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Thompson, "Banishment of Anxiety," 11.

Preoccupation and consternation with mortality distressed and daunted Americans in the late 1940s and 1950s and, therefore, contributed to the emotional tumult which postwar ranch houses materialized.

American inferiority likewise distressed and daunted the nation. When the Soviet Union launched two satellites, *Sputnik I* and *Sputnik II*, in October and November of 1957, they not only gave rise to fear of a missile attack from space, but also crippled American confidence.<sup>92</sup> The Soviet lead in the space race was attributed to superior education. As the *Chicago Daily Tribune* recorded that November, head of *Sputnik* moon-watch Dr. Fred L. Whipple prescribed improved education as an antidote to America's grave shortcomings: "Until the time comes when the Phi Beta Kappa has the same social standing as the football player, we are going to fall behind in our technological race with the U.S.S.R."<sup>93</sup> Ratifying Dr. Whipple's appeal, Congress passed the 1958 National Defense Education Act, which poured government money into science, mathematics, and foreign language programs at institutions of higher education. Students were championed as antidotes to the threat of inferiority.

The Cold War educational system, however, did not coddle all students indiscriminately. White supremacy raised a contradiction; education was heralded as the answer to the space race riddle, but potential scientists, mathematicians, and linguists were shunned from schools on account of their race. Racial anxiety compounded with political and technological anxiety to cripple postwar America. In the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of desegregated public education, overturning the "separate but equal" mandate of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Southerners flouted the court's decision. Virginia Senator Mills Godwin warned, "[I]ntegration, however slight, anywhere in Virginia, would be a

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<sup>92</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 108.

<sup>93</sup> "Education Put Russia Ahead, Scientist Says," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 24, 1957, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

cancer eating at the very life blood of our public school system.”<sup>94</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower was loath to intercede, insisting, “The fellow who tries to tell me you can do these things by *force* is just plain *nuts*.”<sup>95</sup> When Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus summoned the National Guard to preclude nine black students from attending Little Rock’s previously all-white Central High School, Eisenhower did send an armed detachment to escort the students through the mob of protestors to class. But, integration so horrified Faubus and his constituency that he retaliated upon the federal government and shut the school altogether.

The anger, alarm, and insecurity which reverberated from *Brown v. Board of Education* transcended the realm of education. America’s battle to uphold democracy during World War II had thrown into relief the lack of democracy on the home front and, so, imbued the civil rights movement with a sense of exigency.<sup>96</sup> Proponents of equality chafed at the racial and regional chasm which bifurcated the country. In the summer of 1955, Emmett Till, an African American teenager from Chicago, was mutilated and murdered in Mississippi for allegedly accosting Carolyn Bryant, a white grocery store attendant. Shipping his body back to Chicago for burial, Till’s mother insisted on an open casket service to expose the atrocity of her son’s racially motivated murder. That December, a yearlong bus boycott erupted in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks was incarcerated for refusing to cede her seat to a white passenger. And, on February 1, 1960, four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University staged a sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter because they were denied service. Inspiring subsequent sit-ins, the Greensboro demonstration manifested the dissatisfaction with the rate of progress in the struggle for equality, which added to the atmosphere of apprehension,

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<sup>94</sup> J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court And School Integration: 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 71.

<sup>95</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 93.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

doubt, and precariousness postwar ranch houses embodied.<sup>97</sup>

White supremacists, in turn, resisted attempts to procure civil rights and implement integration. When Henry A. Wallace, the 1948 Progressive Party presidential candidate, took his anti-segregation campaign to the South, incensed whites assaulted him. As *Washington Post* reporter Edward T. Folliard related, “A crowd of 500 angry citizens had gathered on the main street of Burlington [North Carolina], and as Wallace got out of his automobile the eggs and tomatoes began to fly. A rock and a loaded ice cream cone also were aimed at the Iowan.”<sup>98</sup> Likeminded southern Senators conducted a 125 hour-long filibuster against the Second Civil Rights Act in 1960.<sup>99</sup> Feeding off each other’s frustrations and fears, protestors and proponents of civil rights polluted the postwar period with their interplay.

Housing conflicts epitomized the tensions associated with postwar race relations. The prospect of interracial coexistence, which the Great Migration of southern African Americans occasioned, so unnerved northern whites as to propel them from the cities to the suburbs.<sup>100</sup> Because white urbanites feared white flight and neighborhood decay, they participated in white flight and, in turn, hastened neighborhood decay. Quashing racially restrictive housing covenants, the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kramer* divested residents of the legal means to prevent integration and, so, exacerbated panic among whites.<sup>101</sup> Real estate brokers known as “panic-peddlers” capitalized on white fear; they installed African American families in white communities, warned white families to move out, chopped white apartments into kitchenettes, and, reselling these kitchenettes to Africans Americans at an inflated price,

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<sup>97</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 979.

<sup>98</sup> Edward T. Folliard, “Egg Barrage Hits Wallace on N.C. Tour,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 1948, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>99</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 96.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>101</sup> Lemann, *Promised Land*, 72.

transformed communities into slums.<sup>102</sup> Blighting the housing market, racial tension branded the late 1940s and 1950s as a period of unease, uncertainty, and instability, and the ranch house, a site of internal tension, as the embodiment of this brand.

Issues of class unsettled Americans in the postwar period as much as issues of race. A 1961 *Time* article entitled “The Anatomy of Angst” probed the relationship between race, class, and anxiety: “An upsurge of anxiety has begun, and more is predicted, among Negroes, for whom possibilities of social and economic advancement, to a degree undreamed of at war's end, are now developing.”<sup>103</sup> Although African Americans who joined the ranks of the middle class after World War II could afford suburban homes, they were barred from suburban home ownership because of their race. Suburban outcasts were, however, free to engage in consumerism. With their growing discretionary incomes, African American families purchased television sets, exposing themselves to depictions of the white middle-class lifestyle they could not access.<sup>104</sup> Approximating minorities to a lifestyle which nonetheless remained out of reach, prosperity kindled angst. Lower-class minorities did not have to contend with the frustration of a buying power they could not exercise, but insufficient income triggered anxiety across racial lines. Although the middle-class population mushroomed after World War II, class disparities remained profound.<sup>105</sup> So, while the postwar economic boom increased the standard of living, it also exacerbated Americans’ awareness of class disparity, as well as their apprehension of being left behind on a low rung of the economic hierarchy, which other Americans effortlessly scaled.

Ascending the class hierarchy enabled postwar Americans to address, but not necessarily resolve, feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety. New members of the middle class who

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<sup>102</sup> Lemann, *Promised Land*, 81-2.

<sup>103</sup> “The Anatomy of Angst,” *Time*, March 31, 1961, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872203,00.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 149.

<sup>105</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 50.

exchanged their cramped city apartments for more spacious single-family suburban houses struggled for a sense of stability and community.<sup>106</sup> Social climbing likewise alarmed social critics. In *A Surfeit of Honey*, Russell Lynes verbalized the perceived downside to economic abundance: “The trouble with prosperity is too much money.... People get to thinking that they had better pluck the fruit while there is still time, and having plucked it, they happily squirt its juices into other people’s eyes. They worry about getting more money until they get it.”<sup>107</sup>

William Leuchtenburg pointed to the proliferation of psychoanalysis, mental illness, and related medications as indicators of a postwar “age of anxiety.” He provided convincing statistics; between 1940 and 1956, the number of mental hospital patients nearly doubled, and, during the second half of the decade, one out of three prescriptions contained a tranquillizer. As Leuchtenburg admitted, the growth of the middle-class population could have accounted for these statistics.<sup>108</sup>

In his 1957 article “Happiness Doesn’t Come in Pills,” Arthur Gordon reprimanded Americans for over-expenditure and pill-popping: “[Tranquilizers] are being gobbled at an ever-increasing rate by people fleeing from ‘anxiety’ and ‘nervous tension’.... Here in the land of the free and the home of the brave, with more security than any other nation, with the highest standard of living in the world, we spend 100 million dollars a year trying to run away from something.”<sup>109</sup> *Time* magazine concurred that overexposure to anxiety treatment bore negative consequences: “Psychologists report that 30 years ago the U.S. was in an ‘age of covert anxiety.’ It is now in an age of ‘overt anxiety.’ People tend to believe that it is wrong and ‘sick’ to feel

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<sup>106</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 104.

<sup>107</sup> Lynes, *Surfeit of Honey*, 130-1.

<sup>108</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 104-7.

<sup>109</sup> Arthur Gordon, “Happiness Doesn’t Come in Pills,” *Reader’s Digest*, January 1957, 60.

anxious or guilty; they are beset by guilt about guilt, by anxiety about anxiety.”<sup>110</sup> Larger expendable incomes, therefore, contributed to American anxiety, which in turn contributed to more anxiety. And, this sequence factored into the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the period, which ranch houses personified because they were sites of contrast.

Arthur Gordon berated Americans for pouring money into anti-anxiety medication, but how were families supposed to spend their money? Postwar consumerism caused Americans to have qualms. Middle-class suburbanites were torn between conformity and competition. Suburban living subjected residents to what William M. Dobriner termed the “visibility principle,” or increased access to each other’s behavior and lifestyle.<sup>111</sup> In an attempt to replicate the lives they saw on the television screen and through the picture windows of their neighbors’ houses, suburbanites turned to consumption. Severing ties to extended family likely reinforced community conformity, since, surrounded by neighbors rather than kin, suburbanites no longer automatically fit in. Elaine Tyler May confirmed, “[T]hose of ample as well as modest means exhibited a great deal of conformity in their consumption attitudes and behavior.”<sup>112</sup> Buying into artificial obsolescence, Americans replaced household objects with later makes before the older models deteriorated, and, so, converted consumption into an unrelenting endeavor. Based on their 1959 study of hospital admissions in Englewood, New Jersey, Dr. Richard E. and Katherine K. Gordon diagnosed “tension-related psychosomatic disorders” as symptoms of “suburban jitters.” Austin C. Wehrewin recapitulated their findings in the *New York Times*: “couples in suburbia felt they needed a new car every few years.... ‘For the already overstrained couple,’ the

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<sup>110</sup> “Anatomy of Angst,” 3.

<sup>111</sup> William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1963), 9.

<sup>112</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 148.

report said, ‘conspicuous consumption can help cause bad tempers and high blood pressure.’<sup>113</sup> Suburbanites literally worried themselves sick over compliant consumption.

Neighbors worried not just about keeping up with each other’s lifestyles, but also about outdoing each other. Monotonous tract houses challenged residents to stand out. Brett Harvey’s interviewee Carol Freeman recalled how conformity and competition tinged her life in the suburbs: “We did a lot of backyard entertaining—big brunches, swimming parties, barbeques. You were trying to live out this ideal of life in the suburbs, in a way, that you saw in *Life* magazines. But you always considered yourself just a little above it. You know, you had the Eames chair.”<sup>114</sup> Competition carved consumption into a double-edged sword. Because domestic superiority yielded satisfaction, consumption became a pressured pursuit, which unsettled the climate of the postwar period.

The consumer-oriented lifestyle of suburbia also troubled Americans who lived outside the suburbs. In his 1956 reproof of suburbanization entitled *Crack in the Picture Window*, John Keats described housing developments as “conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch.”<sup>115</sup> Curiously, a photograph of Levittown, Pennsylvania Margaret Bourke-White snapped for *Life* magazine in 1957, before the entire tract had been landscaped and the houses decked with consumer goods, resembles documentation of atomic bomb destruction.<sup>116</sup> On the one hand, consumer spending pumped money into the economy and eased trepidation of a postwar depression. However, in the midst of the Cold War, many Americans questioned if “greedy” consumerism would stunt the nation’s technological and intellectual advancement. Sociologist C. Wright Mills lamented, “In our time, must we not face the

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<sup>113</sup> Austin C. Wehrwein, “Crab Grass, Taxes and Tension Breeding Ailments in Suburbs,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1959, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>114</sup> Harvey, *Fifties*, 127.

<sup>115</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 76.

<sup>116</sup> Photograph printed in Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 77.

possibility that the human mind as a social fact might be deteriorating in quality and cultural level, and yet not many would notice it because of the overwhelming accumulation of technological gadgets?”<sup>117</sup> Critics moreover stigmatized “technological gadgets” as enemies to the institution of family.<sup>118</sup> One month after the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik II*, *Chicago Daily Tribune* columnist Larry Wolters cautioned, “Disputes between husband and wife or between parents and children frequently are laid to quarrels over which TV channel shall be turned on. Fights that started over TV frequently have wound up in the divorce courts, we are told.”<sup>119</sup> Because Americans deemed family a sacred institution in the postwar period, misguided consumerism posed a grave threat; rather than satisfy Americans, consumption made them suspicious and uneasy.

As Elaine Tyler May articulated in *Homeward Bound*, American consumers “contained” their spending within the home to ease their uneasiness. Accordingly, they cast consumption as a buttress to domesticity: “The commodities that people bought were intended to reinforce home life and uphold traditional gender roles. After all, American women were housewives.”<sup>120</sup> But, consumption strained familial roles. Lower and middle-class men felt pressure, as breadwinners, to maintain their families’ standard of living. Dolores Hayden analyzed *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* as a literary illustration of the pressure consumption exerted on men; in Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel, Betsy Rath nags her husband, protagonist Tom Rath, to earn more money because she is dissatisfied with their home and possessions.<sup>121</sup> Other women who internalized the pressure to consume entered the labor market in order to supplement the family wage.

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<sup>117</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1959), 175.

<sup>118</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 103-4.

<sup>119</sup> Larry Wolters, “Can Television Be Cause of World’s Woes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 8, 1957, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>120</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 148.

<sup>121</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 147.

The tremendous pressure placed on women offers another window into the unease, uncertainty, and instability which afflicted families after World War II. Women had to juggle roles as mothers, wives, consumers, and, often, employees. The struggle to uphold a certain standard of living propelled many women into the work force, while society urged them to remain at home and protect the “moral fiber” of their families and nation.<sup>122</sup> Nancy Woloch elucidated this predicament in *Women and the American Experience*: “the decade had a split character; or rather, it had an overt agenda, the return to domesticity, and a hidden one, a massive movement into the labor market.”<sup>123</sup>

More women felt torn between their jobs and their families. In his 1955 commencement address at Smith College, Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson informed graduates that their political assignment was to “influence man and boy” in the “humble role of housewife.”<sup>124</sup> Dr. Benjamin Spock devoted a chapter of *Baby and Child Care*, categorized under “special problems,” to working mothers: “Some mothers *have* to work to make a living. Usually their children turn out all right.... But others grow up neglected and maladjusted.... You can think of it this way: useful, well-adjusted citizens are the most valuable possessions a country has, and good mother care during childhood is the surest way to produce them.”<sup>125</sup> Because children were exalted as hope for the grim-looking future, mothers were especially worried about rearing deviants in the late 1940s and 1950s. Dorothy Thomson, author of the article “The Banishment of Anxiety,” included childrearing in her inventory of postwar anxieties: “We are afraid for our children, lest they grow up ‘maladjusted,’ and, again, we are advised by innumerable psychiatrists and educators (many of them contradicting one another) on

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<sup>122</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 103.

<sup>123</sup> Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994), 493.

<sup>124</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 74.

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin Spock, M.D., *The Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care* (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1946), 475.

the care and training of children.”<sup>126</sup> Familial roles filled women with the unease and uncertainty that postwar ranch houses embodied.

Dr. Spock and Dorothy Thompson’s discussions of anxiety and maladjustment raised the issue of experts. As Woloch indicated, “In postwar America professionals assumed new authority.... Femininity itself was now defined by specialists, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts, whose messages filtered into magazines, movies, and marriage manuals. The drift of such messages was inescapable. Women, said the experts, found fulfillment in passive roles.”<sup>127</sup> The abundance of experts in the postwar period indicated that Americans were open to the advice of others. If parents had felt confident in their abilities to raise well-adjusted children and manage their own lives, they would have made for a less receptive audience. Furthermore, the advice women heeded from experts often obfuscated their understanding of their familial and social roles. As Betty Freidan disclosed in *The Feminine Mystique*, frustration and anxiety haunted housewives who carried out expert-recommended “passive roles.” Yet, disagreeing with or disregarding the advice of experts caused other women to feel insecure and guilty.

Mothers, moreover, teetered between neglect and overprotection. Between nine o’clock in the morning and five o’clock in the evening, suburbia was supposed to function as a matriarchal society in which fathers attended work and mothers tended to the children.<sup>128</sup> However, too much attention from at-home mothers was thought to foster delinquency, or worse, sexual deviance. Juvenile delinquency widened a rift in generational conflict, which further destabilized American families after World War II. A distinctive teen culture emerged in the postwar period, as high school-aged children, armed with money from part-time employment and increased allowances, engaged in consumerism. Anxious parents were unable to suppress

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<sup>126</sup> Thompson, “Banishment of Anxiety,” 11.

<sup>127</sup> Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 497.

<sup>128</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 243.

teenage trends, such as rock 'n roll music and cruising, which seemed to undermine family togetherness and endanger the nation.<sup>129</sup> As William and Nancy Young recounted in their exploration of popular culture, *The 1950s*, “For the doomsayers lamenting the evolving teen ethos, it came as no surprise that crime statistic rose throughout the decade, especially violent crime involving young people. Statistically, the arrests of people under age 18 doubled between 1950 and 1959, so there existed some truth in people’s fears.” Along with negligent mothers, “permissive courts” took the blame.<sup>130</sup> Americans feared a nation soft on communism and soft on crime. In 1955, the perceived juvenile delinquency epidemic prompted the Senate Judiciary Committee to examine teenage crime, diagnose the causes, and recommend a cure.<sup>131</sup> Perhaps juvenile delinquency was an expression of the anxiety teenagers experienced from the pressure placed upon them to redeem American society after World War II and during the Cold War.

Sexual deviance was considered a more extreme threat to the family and the nation. In his 1956 “Study of Excessive Dependency in Mother-Son Relationships,” Leo Rattner held overbearing mothers responsible for the neuroses of his three case studies—a scatterbrained twenty-five year old bachelor, an aimless thirty-four year old bachelor, and an indecisive twenty-two year old bachelor. Rattner compared these misfits: “All are shy, inhibited and rather effeminate...all of them had some heterosexual contacts.” He concluded, “[T]his was the principal problem. All three mothers had kept the children attached to themselves and prevented the growth and maturing of their social interests. All three had been overprotective, shielding their youngest children from contacts with the outside world...all three mothers were forceful,

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<sup>129</sup> William H. Young and Nancy Young, *The 1950s*, American Popular Culture Through History (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 23-9.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

domineering personalities.”<sup>132</sup> And, the implications of being outed as sexual deviants such men made easy prey for communists.<sup>133</sup>

Sexual anxiety was entangled with Cold War anxiety. Although conscription entailed the threat of death, dodging duty during the Cold War was likely perceived as emasculating. Similarly, protection of pornography under the First Amendment was among the decisions which turned Americans against the Warren Court and prompted Congressmen Rivers to excoriate the Justices as “a greater threat to this Union than the entire confines of Soviet Russia.”<sup>134</sup> And, when biologist Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953, he confronted Americans with the discrepancy between their sexual mores and sexual habits and was in turn confronted with charges of aiding communism.<sup>135</sup> In an attempt to abide by these mores and abstain from premarital sex, some couples scurried to the alter before they turned twenty.<sup>136</sup> A premarital sexual experience with her future husband troubled Betty Moran long after they exchanged vows: “it carried with it for me a high sense of guilt which still bothers me after all these years.... This feeling of guilt may be why I am unable to respond sexually as I wish I could.”<sup>137</sup> And, such a lack of sexual gratification purportedly poisoned families, leaving the nation vulnerable to infiltration and attack. “The matter...of sexual adjustment between the parents,” a professor of education at Whittier College averred, “was found to be related to the children’s difficulties and maladjustments to a very important degree.”<sup>138</sup> Rattling individual Americans, families, and the nation as a whole, sexuality constituted a source of unease, uncertainty, and instability, which the

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<sup>132</sup> Leo Rattner, “A Study of Excessive Dependency in Mother-Son Relationships,” *American Journal of Individual Psychology* 12 (1956): 173, <http://pao.chadwyck.com/>.

<sup>133</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 103.

<sup>134</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 102.

<sup>135</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 88.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

ranch house then embodied.

Employment constituted an additional source of postwar American anxiety. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* dissected bureaucratization and competition in the increasingly impersonal white-collar work world. Self-employment dwindled. In 1940, only twenty-eight percent of employed Americans worked for organizations with over 500 men and women on the payroll, but by the 1950s the statistic had jumped to thirty-eight percent.<sup>139</sup> Technology threatened job security, as 'automation' replaced autonomy. Leuchtenburg quoted one writer who identified "[t]he worker's greatest worry" as being "cast upon the slag heap by a robot."<sup>140</sup> Workers were not alone in fearing the effects of American bureaucratization. C. Wright Mills portrayed office work as sterile and inhuman: "At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper."<sup>141</sup> And, inhumanness was presumably an especially uncomfortable notion during the Cold War, when atomic warfare threatened to eradicate humanity.

Visual culture both contributed to and commented on the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the postwar era. The *Time* magazine article "The Anatomy of Angst" identified artists as one of the "forces that might be counted on to reduce anxiety in U.S. life" but instead "contribut[ed] to it." The author rebuked abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock, for neglecting their social duties: "[the modern artist's] traditional role is to assume the burdens of guilt and anxiety freely, transforming them in his own soul into works of art that can offer the audience catharsis or clarity.... More and more today, he rejects that function and insists on dragging his audiences into his own neurosis, shifting the burden of guilt and anxiety on to

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<sup>139</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 79.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

them.”<sup>142</sup> Even the work of more visually accessible artists like Andy Warhol confounded Americans. As Leuchtenburg noted, pop art made viewers “[wonder] uneasily whether they were...being ‘put on.’”<sup>143</sup> Film also partook in the anxiety of the postwar period. Science fiction films released after World War II, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *War of the Worlds* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* (1956), acted as a lens into the cultural paranoia of the Atomic Age.<sup>144</sup> Nicholas Ray’s 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause* attempted to allay American anxiety. The generational centerpiece reaffirmed normalcy, sensitivity, and masculine strength in the face of nuclear annihilation, juvenile delinquency, and broken families. As a psychologically unsound character of unspecified ethnic origin with a dysfunctional family life and homosexual tendencies, John Crawford, nicknamed Plato, represents abnormality. Because Cold War America stigmatized abnormality as a weakness and, therefore, a vehicle through which communists could infiltrate and contaminate the country, Plato, the real “rebel of the film,” must die. And his death regenerates the underpinning of suburban life—the nuclear family. *Rebel Without a Cause* might not have enjoyed the same popularity and iconicity if postwar audiences had not identified with the characters’ sense of apprehension and confusion.

The religious resurgence in America after World War II, likewise, pointed to and added to the postwar climate of apprehension and confusion. Americans sought solace and clarity through faith. Evangelist Billy Graham harnessed television and radio as a means to infuse American society with religion. Marketing religiosity, television commercials reassured, “The family that prays together stays together.”<sup>145</sup> Congress inserted “under god” into the pledge of allegiance in 1954 and the following year printed, “In God We Trust” on the dollar bill.

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<sup>142</sup> “Anatomy of Angst,” 7.

<sup>143</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 63.

<sup>144</sup> Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>145</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 71.

Immersed in the Cold War, the federal government fostered religiousness in order to differentiate the democratic American way of life from the godless communism of the Soviet Union. But, religion also contributed to anxiety because it failed to offer all Americans security and stability. As Dorothy Thompson lamented, “We are exhorted to turn to religion. The popular evangelist is also a phenomenon of our times. Yet, for many, the organized churches hold inadequate answers for the human malaise.”<sup>146</sup> Religion could not solve the problem; the postwar period remained a period of malaise, which the postwar the ranch house, as a site of contrast, embodied.

### **RANCH HOUSE CONTRASTS**

Postwar ranch houses embodied the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the postwar period because they were rife with contrasts. One such contrast was between generality and individuality. Ranch houses participated in and contributed to a greater American agenda. The architectural style gave material form to the notion of democracy, which the nation had fought to uphold during World War II and was fighting to uphold during the Cold War. The rhetoric employed to describe and discuss ranch houses in the postwar period was varied. In his 1955 assemblage of single-story houses entitled *Living on the Level*, Boston architect Royal Barry Wills referred to the vernacular style as the “so-called Ranch House.”<sup>147</sup> An advertisement in the September 1958 issue of *Manufactured Homes* magazine tempted subscribers with a 1,050 square foot “rambler.”<sup>148</sup> *American Home* described one of the “Two Modern Colorado Homes” featured in the October 1950 issue as a “ranch-type home.”<sup>149</sup> And, in 1946, the *New York Times*

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<sup>146</sup> Thompson, “Banishment of Anxiety,” 11.

<sup>147</sup> Hess, *Ranch House*, 14.

<sup>148</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, September 1958, 44.

<sup>149</sup> “Two Modern Colorado Homes,” *American Home*, October 1950, 43.

announced construction of a community of “ranch-style” houses in North Roslyn, Long Island.<sup>150</sup> Such variety made the ranch house seem open-ended and, therefore, democratic.

Ranch house enthusiasts presented the ranch house as an indefinable architectural style. In his 1949 article “House-Hunting Expert Keeps Sanity With Help of Three Psychiatrists,” Saul Pett satirized the process of purchasing a home. “Be careful,” he jested, “practically everything these days is called a Ranch house. All some builders need is a small, high window in the bedroom and they think they’ve got a home on the range.”<sup>151</sup> *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* embraced the inclusivity of ranch house style: “In your mind you may have a clear picture of the ranch house you would like to build. Architecturally, however, no such clarity exists. Today, almost any house that provides for an informal type of living and is not definitely marked by unmistakable style is called a *ranch house*.”<sup>152</sup> Specificity evaded more recent scholarship on the ranch house as well. In his 1996 compilation of “classic TV home” blueprints, Mark Bennett labeled Wilber and Carl Post’s residence in “Mister Ed” and Frances “Gidget” Lawrence’s residence in “Gidget” as “two-story rancher[s].”<sup>153</sup> However, since both these California homes had full-sized second stories, they were not real ranch houses. As architecture critic Alan Hess confirmed, “The definition of the Ranch has been malleable.”<sup>154</sup> And, a malleable style was a generalized style.

Historians have also applied “ranch house” as a blanket term for postwar suburban tract housing. In reference to the first Levittown, William Leuchtenburg wrote,

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<sup>150</sup> “Builder Starts Ranch-Style Dwellings in a New Development on Long Island,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1946, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>151</sup> Saul Pett, “House-Hunting Expert Keeps Sanity With Help of Three Psychiatrists,” *Hartford (CT) Courant*, October 19, 1949, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>152</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, IX.

<sup>153</sup> Mark Bennett, *TV Sets: Fantasy Blueprints of Classic TV Homes* (New York: TV Books, 1996), 25, 107.

<sup>154</sup> Hess, *Ranch House*, 12

“[B]ulldozers...cleared the way for ranch houses to be plunked in Long Island potato fields.”<sup>155</sup>

Yet, Levittown, New York consisted of both Cape Cod and ranch houses. Similarly, Warren Susman noted in *Recasting America*, “Perhaps, many thinkers speculated, the developing consumer marketplace could eliminate gross social inequalities and create conditions where we could all love automobiles, have refrigerators, and own ranch houses (which could be big or small, but, above all, similar).”<sup>156</sup> Broadening the definition of the ranch house to include other postwar suburban styles ensured that the ranch house would remain democratic because a generalized style left room for choice. As Nixon vocalized during his 1959 Kitchen Debate with Khrushchev, the notion of democracy, in contrast to communism, dominated the postwar American ethos: “To us, diversity, the right to choose...is the most important thing.”<sup>157</sup> Keeping the ranch “style” unspecific might have been an effort to keep the ranch house lifestyle open to a broader portion of the American population.

Postwar ranch houses germinated in suburbs across the nation. As Kenneth Jackson asserted in *Crabgrass Frontier*, “The ranch style, in particular, was evocative of the expansive mood of the post-World War II suburb and of the disappearing regionality of style. It was almost as popular in Westchester County as in Los Angeles County.”<sup>158</sup> The 1947 *House Beautiful* article “Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate” authenticated Jackson’s assertion: “The ranch house indoor-outdoor way of living needn’t be limited to the West...it can fit cold climates, too.”<sup>159</sup> *American Home* contributor Jessie Walker, likewise, predicted, “Our era will, of course, be remembered as the Ranch House Age, for all over the country more people pick this type of

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<sup>155</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Troubled Feast*, 75.

<sup>156</sup> Warren Susman, “Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America,” in *Recasting America*, 21.

<sup>157</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 11.

<sup>158</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.

<sup>159</sup> “Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate,” *House Beautiful*, January 1947, 61.

home than any other.”<sup>160</sup> The generalized ranch house, therefore, served as a common denominator for the vast, heterogeneous nation. The lack of regional specificity associated with the ranch house enabled journalists to reinforce the unity of the states and the population.

Although Alan Hess acknowledged, “In the 1950s the Ranch House could be found across the nation,” he did not accentuate the generality of the architectural style. Rather, he noted the regional variations in ranch house design: “[I]n Arizona, Ranch Houses were concrete blocks, while in Michigan, they were Colonial or Modern; in New England they were Cape Cod.”<sup>161</sup> Drawing attention to its southernness, Knox Homes, a prefabricated housing manufacturer based in Georgia, fashioned the “Atlantan” ranch house after a plantation house and framed the entryway with two aristocratic white columns.<sup>162</sup> The Atlantan participated in the generalized trend of postwar ranch house construction, but particularized the trend to fit the South. Because of this contrast between generality and particularity, the postwar ranch house was at odds with itself. And, being at odds meant being uneasy, uncertain, and instable, like the climate of the postwar period itself.

Magazine articles and advertisements marketed the ranch house as both specifically western and adaptable to distinct regions of the country. Ranch houses enabled Midwesterners, Southerners, and Easterners to recreate the California lifestyle.<sup>163</sup> Architect John Leonard Rush indulged his wife’s desire for a West Coast ranch house in the Midwest: “Mr. Rush says that Mrs. Rush was the inspiration behind the interior planning—she, being a California gal whose dreams of a truly western ranch house with lots of refreshing color, was not deterred by the

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<sup>160</sup> Jessie Walker, “East or West, Best by Test,” *American Home*, December 1951, 27.

<sup>161</sup> Hess, *Ranch House*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, May 1958, 91.

<sup>163</sup> Clark, Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 177.

Michigan traditions of a somber house.”<sup>164</sup> Moreover, the ideology of the western frontier associated ranch houses with the West, rather than with America in general. The editors of *Sunset* magazine narrated, “the form called a ranch house has many roots. They go deep into the Western soil. Some feed directly into the Spanish period. Some draw upon the pioneer years.”<sup>165</sup> Similarly, a kitchen furnishings advertisement featured in the March 1953 issue of *House and Garden* inquired, “Isn’t it odd that so many folks who build ranch style homes have a tendency to ‘go eastern’ when they get in the kitchen? Here is a Crane idea which proves a ranch style kitchen can be as practical as New England, yet as Western as Wyoming.”<sup>166</sup> Encouraging ranch house owners to play up the supposed frontier origins of their homes, the advertisement presented the ranch house as particular to the West, yet readily available to American homeowners in general.

Ranch house literature also emphasized a connection to American soil. Pietro Belluschi, architect behind the *House and Garden* “Oregon Ranch House,” related his design process as a communication between structure and surroundings: “‘The forms,’ he says, ‘developed naturally through an understanding of the region.’ As a result, the house seems to have grown right out of the land. Low horizontal lines, walls of weathered fir, blend into the landscape.”<sup>167</sup> Likewise, the *House Beautiful* article “Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate” represented ranch house construction in different regions of the country as “a method of planning house and site together skillfully.”<sup>168</sup> As single-story structures which hugged the ground, postwar ranch houses easily blended into the suburban plots on which they sat. Grounding ranch houses in American soil

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<sup>164</sup> “It’s Roomy, Ranchy, and Buildable on a 54 Ft. Lot: J. L. Rush House, Detroit,” *American Home*, November 1950, 74.

<sup>165</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, IX.

<sup>166</sup> “A Kitchen Can Go Ranch Style, Too,” *House and Garden*, March 1953, 40.

<sup>167</sup> “Oregon Ranch House,” 105.

<sup>168</sup> “Ranch Houses Suit Climate,” 61.

cast them as native to and representative of the country. But, it also made these houses site-specific, and, accordingly, sites of contrast.

As a form of domestic, privatized architecture, ranch houses were specific to the parents and children who inhabited them. However, families had difficulty achieving such specificity because the ranch house trend was so widespread and so many postwar ranch houses were built in bulk (*Manufactured Homes: The Magazine of Prefabrication* brimmed with ranch house articles and advertisements). So, Americans who resided in postwar ranch houses participated in a mainstream trend. Prefabricated models epitomized the contrast between generality and particularity inherent in postwar ranch houses; as part of its “Permabilt Homes” line, Manufactured Homes, Inc. offered “[t]he cosmopolitan”—“a modern colonial” ranch house “with warmth and charm that will always be in style. Available in six models, 3 and 4 bedrooms—with single or double garage.”<sup>169</sup> Such assembly-line ranch houses conformed to builders’ generalized plans, but, when customized, took on the particular characteristics their homeowners selected. Accordingly, the postwar ranch house became a site of contrast, and, as such, embodied the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the postwar period.

Ranch house residents engaged in consumerism to further counteract the monotony and impersonality of their abodes. In Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*, Mrs. Haze beautifies her home “[w]ith the authoress of *Your Homes Is You*.”<sup>170</sup> Her adherence to the dos and don’ts outlined in this manual draws attention to the veneer of individuality involved in domestically directed consumption. Ranch house owners consumed to particularize their homes, but, by consuming, they generalized their homes because postwar consumerism was a national pursuit. In addition, the western style of the ranch house spawned a market of ranch-inspired interior

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<sup>169</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, January 1958, 39.

<sup>170</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 78.

decoration. *American Home* journalist Gertrude Brooks Dixson hailed the arrival of such commodities on the domestic market: “The object of...national affections is the western ranch house with its air of friendly, casual living. Now comes the demand for furnishings that are as sturdily forthright, as adaptable and as functional as the house itself. Again, the West and the Southwest have come up with some of the best answers.”<sup>171</sup> Through consumerism, ranch house owners fused their individualized family identities with the generalized national identity and, consequently, implicated their houses as sites of contrast.

Consumption was not only presented as a national trend, but also as a national antibody to economic recession and communism. Because consumer spending sustained the postwar economy and helped ward off another depression, individual ranch house purchases availed the general population. A Scholz Homes, Inc. advertisement for the Mark 58 ranch house promised, “You can build the Mark 58 ‘house of the year’...and participate in the greatest program in building history.”<sup>172</sup> So, in terms of the economy, ranch houses represented a generality. But, in terms of communism, ranch houses represented a particularity because they were particular to the United States, as opposed to the Soviet Union. After a Soviet housing delegation purchased an American ranch house and set it on display in Moscow, the *Los Angeles Times* ridiculed, “It may seem a bit incongruous.... The living room strikes Soviet visitors as remarkably uncluttered and simple in its furnishings. It’s no wonder. Almost every Russian home is overweighted with bulky sofas, large tables and scores of vases, pictures and other knick-knacks.”<sup>173</sup> The columnist employed the ranch house, endemic in the United States and out of place in the Soviet Union, to demonstrate Soviet inferiority. During the Kitchen Debate, Nixon, too, couched the superiority

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<sup>171</sup> Gertrude Brooks Dixson, “Ranch-Style on a Wide Range,” *American Home*, January 1951, 42.

<sup>172</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, January 1958, 11.

<sup>173</sup> “California Ranch House on Exhibit in Moscow,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1958, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

of American democracy in terms of the suburban ranch house. His appropriation of the full-scale model ranch house to disseminate the national ethos not only nationalized the architectural style, but also particularized the style as American. Setting the ranch house in conflict with itself, this contrast between generality and particularity created internal tension.

Americans also entangled the postwar ranch house in their notion of the American way of life. “Ranch Houses Suit any Climate” insisted, “What [ranch houses] can offer is a better way of living—not just a fancier façade. Their concept of a house differs wholly from the compressed, box-like houses plunked arbitrarily in the middle of a lot facing the street, with porch or terrace tacked on as an afterthought. They use the whole lot as living space.”<sup>174</sup> Ranch houses conformed to the nation-wide penchant to put families first and conceive of family life in stages. In her *New York Times* article “Planned for the Whole Family,” Mary Roche diagramed the “four stages of family life: early years, crowded years, peak years and later years” and explained, “ ‘Family life’ usually lasts for forty years, about twenty-five of which are spent with infants, children or adolescents in the home. Each period has its own activities and its own space requirements. A house should be flexible enough in plan to change as needs change.”<sup>175</sup> A flexible design allowed ranch houses to accommodate “family life.” In one *Sunset Western Ranch House* case study, the editors boasted, “It is probably true that almost any plan can be enlarged without undue expense if the future addition is planned at the time of first construction. However, the rambling nature of the ranch house permits inexpensive additions without careful pre-planning.”<sup>176</sup> Because the postwar ranch house fit the needs of the family, which, in turn, fit the needs of the nation at large, it was characterized by generality.

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<sup>174</sup> “Ranch Houses Suit Climate,” 66.

<sup>175</sup> Mary Roche, “Planned for the Whole Family,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1948, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>176</sup> Editorial Staff of Sunset Magazine, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 68.

Ironically, another aspect of this nationalized, family-centered lifestyle was individualism. The western frontier was associated with individualism; in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner declared, “[T]he frontier is productive of individualism.”<sup>177</sup> Postwar ranch houses aspired to the same individualism. Magazines printed photographs of ranch houses in isolated country landscapes, not in suburban settings, sandwiched between neighboring structures.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, Americans purchased ranch houses with the help of government agencies, some, like the FHA, left over from the New Deal, but they feared that a social welfare state would create a class of Americans dependent on the federal government. Therefore, home ownership was restyled as a means to revive individualism, and individualism wrested the ranch house away from the notion of generality towards the notion of particularity. Because the ranch house oscillated between generality and particularity, it was at odds with itself, and thus embodied the feelings of anxiety, doubt, and unsteadiness which infested the postwar period.

Postwar ranch houses embodied a second contrast between modernity and timelessness. The myth of the West dislocated the ranch house from the postwar period. As Clouser expounded in “The Ranch House in America,” the ranch house was not a product of the nineteenth century western frontier, but rather of Spanish colonial missions and, subsequently, California architects of the 1930s: “The ranch house, in its newly cloaked version of wood frame and board and batten siding, evoked in Americans the image of something unique to this country. It was the American western frontier symbolized in a clean-cut modern package. Folklore indicated the rancher was a product of ranches in the American west, and nobody saw a need to

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<sup>177</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *The Frontier in American History*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>.

<sup>178</sup> Clark, Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 175.

argue otherwise.”<sup>179</sup> *Harper's* editor-in-chief Frederick Lewis Allen acknowledged the western overtones of ranch house architecture in the October 1952 issue of the magazine. In response to the description of a “a dramatically authentic ranch house” he had encountered in the real estate section of his Sunday newspaper, Allen rejoined, “The prairies around New York are cluttering up.”<sup>180</sup> He accredited the western reputation of the ranch house with the success of the style in suburbia: “on a small lot, jostled by other ranch houses, it takes on the aspect of a dream that has been corked into a little bottle. It has no architectural style, but it has a romantic name, and an aroma of barbecued spareribs, and that, evidently, is the secret of its success.”<sup>181</sup> Allen, however, overlooked the significance of the West as an architectural and ideological model: “The ranch-house psychology is nothing new in American housing; there have been other romantic small dwellings designed to make a man feel he was something and somewhere he wasn't.”<sup>182</sup> As Allen inadvertently articulated, the western overtones classified the ranch house as timeless and as the essence of frontier living.

*Sunset Western Ranch Houses* framed the ranch house as timeless because of the lifestyle it represented: “It has lived through every fad of style and house design and yet shows no signs of becoming dated. Of course, the reason for its timelessness is the fact that most people who build a ranch house are seeking livability above all else. And livability doesn't go out of style.”<sup>183</sup> As the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 2005, the timelessness of postwar ranch houses continues to the present day: “The postwar icon is wooing a new generation. Yes, your folks’

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<sup>179</sup> Clouser, “Ranch House in America,” 128.

<sup>180</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, “After Hours,” *Harper's*, October 1952, 98, <http://pao.chadwyck.com/>.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 62.

house is cool again.”<sup>184</sup> Today, the ranch house retains its popularity because it evokes not the 1850s, but the bygone era of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Yet, postwar ranch houses were inescapably modern. Kenneth Jackson insisted that the style “represented newness.”<sup>185</sup> Some ranch house builders and residents embraced this newness. Tom Riley raved that the ranch house he erected from a *Popular Mechanics* blueprint was “modern in every way.”<sup>186</sup> Similarly, in a collaborative advertisement for Bell Telephone System and Scholz Homes Incorporated, Don Scholz, photographed in front of one of his “Mark 58” ranch house prefabs, maintained, “New homes have to be more attractive and more modern than what the public has had before, or they won’t sell.”<sup>187</sup> Technological advances, which the housing industry harnessed for postwar production, such as radiant heat, situated the ranch house in the postwar period. But, postwar technology also connoted warfare, bloodshed, and obliteration. Published in *House and Garden* magazine in December of 1947, “A New Ranch House with an Old Tradition” captured the ranch house as a contrast between old and new: “The ancient pueblo of San Ildefonso is three miles away; the atom bomb site of Los Alamos a short drive further.”<sup>188</sup> *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon perpetuated the connection between modernity and destruction by deeming modernism synonymous with communism.<sup>189</sup> So, for homeowners who cowered in the face of modernity, associating the ranch house with the nineteenth-century western frontier made the modernity of their domestic space easier to digest. As Hess suggested, ranch houses proved that modern technology and the past could coexist;<sup>190</sup> but, although modernity and timelessness coexisted within the ranch house, they remained in

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<sup>184</sup> Scott Timberg, “The Once and Future Ranch,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2005, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>185</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.

<sup>186</sup> Tom Riley, “How I Built the Popular Mechanics Ranch House,” *Popular Mechanics*, May 1951, 154.

<sup>187</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, January 1958, 3.

<sup>188</sup> “A New Ranch House with an Old Tradition,” *House and Garden*, December 1947, 117.

<sup>189</sup> Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 268-9.

<sup>190</sup> Hess, *Ranch House*, 12.

opposition and, therefore, marked the ranch house as a site of anxiety-provoking internal opposition. And, as such a site, the ranch house embodied the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the late 1940s and 1950s.

Like technology, the harmonious relationship which ranch house owners cultivated between their homes and their yards distanced the postwar ranch house from the nineteenth century western frontier. As Clark Jr. described, “[T]he 1950s designs conceived of the natural world in a simplified and controlled way that eliminated anything that was wild or irregular. Photographs of the suburban ranch house invariably showed a broad expanse of perfect lawn without weeds or dandelions.”<sup>191</sup> Accordingly, the 1949 *Washington Post* article “Gay Flower Beds Give Sparkle to Ranch House” counseled suburbanites how to manicure nature so as to assuage their needs: “Landscape planting about a house should be a decoration, carefully planned to enhance the beauty of the building, completing an attractive picture as it is viewed from the street. When tall trees dwarf the house and over-large shrubs and evergreens hide it, and prevent occupants from seeing out of the window, the planting has not achieved its purpose.”<sup>192</sup> The suburban landscape of shorn shrubbery, plotted plantings, and tamed trees diverged from Theodore Roosevelt’s conception of the western landscape as an arena of the “strenuous life.” Although the myth of the West, like the ranch house lifestyle of the late 1940s and 1950s, entailed living close to nature, the postwar suburban manifestation of nature weakened the link between the ranch house and the frontier and, therefore, weakened the link between the ranch house and timelessness. The contrast between modernity and timelessness, which pervaded the postwar ranch, contributed to its status as the embodiment of postwar unease, uncertainty, and instability.

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<sup>191</sup> Clark, Jr. “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 179.

<sup>192</sup> “Gay Flower Beds Give Sparkle to Ranch House,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 1949, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

The postwar ranch house also embodied a contrast between masculine and feminine space. As Joan Ockman maintained in “Mirror Images,” domestic architecture perpetuated “gendered social division” between “male production” and “female consumption.”<sup>193</sup> Domestic and consumer ideology feminized the ranch house. As a house, the postwar suburban ranch was conceived of as a feminine space. When describing the benefits of the single-story design, Kenneth Jackson reasoned, “Mothers with small children did not have to contend with stairs,” but omitted fathers.<sup>194</sup> Likewise, D. J. Waldie, author of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*, remarked of the ranch house open plan, “It seems to have pivoted on the labor of housewives.... It only works if the housewife is standing in the kitchen and can survey her realm from the command center.”<sup>195</sup> In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan found ranch houses, as feminine spaces, problematic: “the women to whom they are sold almost *have* to live the feminine mystique. There are no true walls or doors.... She can never feel alone for a minute.... The open plan also helps expand the housework to fill the time available. A man, of course, leaves the house for most of the day. But the feminine mystique forbids the woman this.”<sup>196</sup> So, familial and gender roles, which idealized women as housewives and caregivers, feminized the ranch house.

Advertisers, furthermore, appealed to women as the primary consumers of their nuclear families. Wives who lived in ranch houses and shopped to accessorize the interiors bought into their predetermined family and gender roles and imposed these roles on their ranch houses. Toy manufactures and sellers targeted ranch-style dollhouses to female children. Thomas W. Holland divided advertisements from the Sears, Roebuck and Company Christmas “Wishbooks” into two

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<sup>193</sup> Ockman, “Mirror Images,” 348.

<sup>194</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.

<sup>195</sup> Timberg, “Once and Future Ranch.”

<sup>196</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 246.

volumes—*Girls' Toys of the Fifties and Sixties* and *Boys' Toys of the Fifties and Sixties*. The gendered rhetoric of a 1961 advertisement for a five-room ranch-style dollhouse classified the toy as unquestionably feminine: “All the joys of home-ownership! Your little miss can rearrange furniture to suit her whim. Completely furnished in modern style. Scale-to-size, high-impact plastic furniture.”<sup>197</sup> The language of the advertisement not only specified the dollhouse as a girl’s toy, but, emphasizing the life-like quality of the ranch house, also seemed to coach girls for their future roles as ranch-house housewives and consumers.

“Do-it-yourself” ranch houses, however, transplanted the architectural style from the female to the male sphere because construction constituted a male hobby. Russell Lynes justified this postwar hands-on trend in *A Surfeit of Honey*: “‘Do it yourself’...is a byword of our day...it describes a frame of mind that typifies the new husband better than anything else. Doing it ourselves is our answer to the machines which had assumed so many of the functions that we have always considered to be our own.”<sup>198</sup> In 1951 Tom Riley teamed up with *Popular Mechanics*’ magazine to build their “do-it-yourself” ranch house. Riley’s wife figured into his recapitulation of the building process: “[S]kyrocketing labor and other costs made our savings for a new home look mighty insignificant. Vinita suggested we build it ourselves—she would help with the lighter work.” However, because “building a house is 90 percent sheer physical labor,” Vinita was relegated to the sidelines. She appears in two of the drawings which illustrate Tom Riley’s article, but was figured as secondary; as the Rileys look over the floor plan, Vinita stands slightly behind Tom, his arm casting a shadow across her body. And, as they build the roof, Vinita, sporting a skirt and blouse rather than work clothes, stands on the ground and hands a roof truss up to her husband, who toils on scaffolding above her head. All actual photographs

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<sup>197</sup> Thomas W. Holland, ed., *Girls' Toys of the Fifties and Sixties: Memorable Catalog Pages from the Legendary Sears Christmas Wishbooks 1950-1969* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Windmill Press, 1997).

<sup>198</sup> Lynes, *Surfeit of Honey*, 61.

of the process feature Tom alone or in the company of other men.<sup>199</sup> Accordingly, ranch house construction masculinized the otherwise feminine domestic space.

The frontier mythology Americans superimposed on the postwar ranch house further masculinized the abode. The nineteenth century American west was steeped in masculine rhetoric. Theodore Roosevelt cast the territory as a homosocial breeding ground for virility. As Gail Bederman posited in *Manliness and Civilization*, Roosevelt purchased a ranch in the Badlands “to transform his image from effeminate dude to masculine cowboy.”<sup>200</sup> The future president esteemed cow-punchers for their independence, in particular from women: “The whole existence is patriarchal in character: it is the life of men who live in the open, who tend their herds on horseback, who go armed and ready to guard their lives by their own prowess...and who call no man master.”<sup>201</sup> Harvard classmate and comrade Owen Wister shared Roosevelt’s preoccupation with a male-oriented American west. Dedicated to Roosevelt, Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian* reveals his reverence for autonomous and feral western men. As an eastern “tenderfoot,” Wister’s narrator venerates the cunning cowboy protagonist, referred to as the Virginian, whom he encounters in the wide-open Wyoming Territory. So, whereas domestic and consumer ideology feminized the ranch house, associations with the western frontier masculinized the architectural style. And, because this contrast pitted the ranch house against itself, the unease, uncertainty, and instability which existed in the external environment of the postwar period also existed in the internal environment of the postwar ranch house.

Lastly, a contrast between expansion and retraction pitted the ranch house against itself. The myth of the West related to the notion of expansion. In his frontier thesis, as articulated in

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<sup>199</sup> Riley, “How I Built,” 154-165.

<sup>200</sup> Gail Bederman, “Theodore Roosevelt: Manhood, Nation and ‘Civilization,’ ” in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>201</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (New York: The Century Co., 1896), 6.

“The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner theorized that the existence of free land and the advance of settlement explained American development. The perennial rebirth involved in forging the frontier, therefore, promoted democracy and individualism. Linking the postwar ranch house to the frontier consequently linked the ranch house to the notion of expansion. The significance of western mythology in post-World War II America expanded beyond architecture. Walt Disney incorporated the idealization of the American West into Disneyland. As Karal Ann Marling suggested in *As Seen on TV*, Frontierland, a themed subdivision within the park, “set forth the story of how the West was made safe for homesteaders—and future suburbanites with ranch houses.”<sup>202</sup> Marling, as well as Kenneth Jackson, presented the suburbs as the new domestic frontier, which American families forged while the nation forged international frontiers to stave off communism. Postwar ranch houses, therefore, participated in an expansionist movement from the cities to the suburbs, amidst an era of expanded anti-communist foreign policy.

In his article “Cowboys and Free Markets,” Stanley Corkin probed the popularity of western films following World War II: “The western commonly marks the transitional moment when social upheavals result in the coming of a reelaborated Anglo-Saxon civilization, when the social structures and values usually associated with American nationalism are reborn and reinvigorated in a western locale.”<sup>203</sup> At the end of World War II, one such “social upheaval,” American democracy triumphed, and Americans employed the cinematic genre of westerns to process this success. Corkin argued that western films stress the importance of “settlement and nationalism.”<sup>204</sup> In postwar America, ranch houses, too, stressed the importance of suburban

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<sup>202</sup> Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 118.

<sup>203</sup> Stanley Corkin, “Cowboys and Free Markets: Post-World War II Westerns and U.S. Hegemony,” *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 3 (2000): 69, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

settlement—the expansion of domesticity beyond the city—and nationalism—an expansion of pride and faith in American ethos. So, postwar ranch houses were themselves expansive.

Ranch houses were also expansive because they permeated different regions and social classes. Since the postwar housing market mushroomed along with the population, middle class, and consumer lifestyle, more ranch houses were built and bought. As Alan Hess contended, the vernacular style appealed to both “movie stars in San Fernando Valley and aerospace factory workers in Lakewood.”<sup>205</sup> Accordingly, “[T]he Ranch House reflected a mass taste that cut across social class”<sup>206</sup> Elvis purchased a suburban ranch house for his parents after he achieved fame and economic success.<sup>207</sup> Although Cliff May, father of the California ranch house, preferred to design ranch houses for wealthy families, he permitted mass producers to replicate his designs for middle-class families.<sup>208</sup> And, when Nixon stood in front of the model ranch in Moscow, he boasted, “[A]ny steel worker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on contract running twenty-five to thirty years.”<sup>209</sup> To the vice president, the affordable ranch house symbolized the expansion of democracy in America, at a time when the nation was expanding its reign of democratic influence abroad.

The manageable proportions of the ranch house furthered the illusion of its classless nature; one-level ranch houses had no stairs to climb, and most Americans did not have to climb the class hierarchy in order to afford one. But, the accessibility of the ranch house in the postwar period was partially an illusion. As Hayden noted in *Building Suburbia*, suburban communities where ranch houses were constructed hosted families of comparable age, race, and income.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Hess, *Ranch House*, 11.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>207</sup> Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 40.

<sup>208</sup> John Mack Faragher, “Bungalow and Ranch House: The Architectural Backwash of California,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2001): 25, <http://www.historycooperative.org/>.

<sup>209</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 145.

<sup>210</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 128.

Although ranch houses were relatively inexpensive in the late 1940s and 1950s, they were still too expensive for some young couples to afford; in Levittown, ranch houses cost \$2000 more than Cape Cod models.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, families who moved from city apartments to suburban ranch houses had to factor into their budget the added expense of a car. Such financial restrictions beat back the expansiveness of ranch house accessibility, creating a contrast.

In terms of space, postwar ranch houses connoted both an expansion and a retraction. The sprawling horizontal aesthetic, which designers conceptualized as a welcome rebellion against the compressed, boxlike aesthetic of the bungalow, made the ranch house seem expansive.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, as the editors of *Sunset Western Ranches Houses* emphasized, the structure was easily expanded: “The spread-out plan of this type offers possibilities for expansion and growth not found in more compact arrangements. Bedrooms or guest rooms could be added directly to the bedroom wing or built beyond it and connected with a passageway.”<sup>213</sup> Journalists and advertisers of the late 1940s and 1950s fixated on the notion of ranch house spaciousness. The *New York Times* article “Builder Starts Ranch-Style Dwellings in a New Development on Long Island” asserted, “Every detail of the floor plan of the house has been developed to provide...maximum use of all space.”<sup>214</sup> *American Home* admired “a small house that pack[ed] a real wallop in 875 square feet.”<sup>215</sup> Designers and residents manipulated the layout of their ranch houses to overcome the limited square footage and make the interiors seem more expansive.

However, as *American Home* acknowledged, the square footage of postwar suburban ranch houses was limited. Whereas ranch house proponents in the postwar period insisted size

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<sup>211</sup> Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 134.

<sup>212</sup> Clark, Jr. “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 175.

<sup>213</sup> Editorial Staff of Sunset Magazine, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 52.

<sup>214</sup> “Builder Starts Ranch-Style Dwellings.”

<sup>215</sup> “The Extras Made It Special,” *American Home*, April 1951, 43.

was no barrier to spaciousness, ranch house proponents in recent decades have embraced the postwar ranch house as a retraction in living space. In *Cape Cods and Ramblers: A Remodeling Planbook for Post-WWII Houses*, published in 1998, real estate broker Danese Anderson explained, “We’ve seen a trend to bigger and bigger houses, further and further out. Once someone has experienced bigger, they’re going to want smaller. They’ve ‘achieved’ that big house, and now they realize the expense, the maintenance, the amount of furniture required. They want to come back and scale back to a more manageable situation.”<sup>216</sup> Similarly, in a 1999 article on the struggles over house size in the Massachusetts suburb of Newton, *Boston Globe* correspondent Caroline Louise Cole referred to the ranch houses in a 1948 tract community as “cozy.”<sup>217</sup> Accordingly, the expansiveness of the postwar ranch house was relative to living standards at the time. Postwar ranch houses were expansive because they were described as spacious for their size. Although the rambling design suggested a newfound spaciousness, postwar ranch houses did not constitute an outsize from previous styles of domestic architecture.<sup>218</sup> *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* presented ranch houses as the antithesis to “more compact arrangements.” But, in 1949, the *Hartford Courant* gave local architect A. Raymond Ellis positive press for his “ranch type house marked for compactness.”<sup>219</sup> Forced to squeeze onto suburban plots, postwar ranch houses, therefore, represented a retraction. The fact that many American homeowners today appreciate this retraction illuminates its existence amidst the postwar rhetoric of spaciousness.

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<sup>216</sup> Robert Gerloff, Kristi Johnson, and Peter J. Musty, *Cape Cods and Ramblers: A Remodeling Planbook for Post-WWII Houses* (Fridley, MN: Housing and Redevelopment Authority, 1998), 6.

<sup>217</sup> Caroline Louise Cole, “Oak Hill Neighbors Eye Control of Development New Houses Overshadow Post-War Homes,” *Boston Globe*, January 17, 1999, <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/>.

<sup>218</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 240.

<sup>219</sup> “Ranch Type House Marked for Compactness,” *Hartford (CT) Courant*, August 28, 1949, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Ranch house residents' hunger for space extended beyond the interior of their homes to the exterior. Sources from the postwar period did not construe the relationship between the ranch house and its environment as passive. Rather, ranch house literature urged occupants to take control of both their interior and exterior environments. *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* treated the exterior as part of the interior. "A terrace outside a living room," the editors reasoned, "extend[ed] the living beyond the walls of the house." Likewise, they referred to gardens as exterior "rooms."<sup>220</sup> The *House Beautiful* article "Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate" exclaimed, "[T]he exciting thing about ranch-house planning is that it offers a way to have outdoor living anywhere by meeting the weather conditions and gaining advantage over them. In doing so it creates a more spacious home and way of living."<sup>221</sup> In addition, "picture" windows, a common feature of ranch houses, implied that the view through the windows existed for the pleasure of those inside, looking out on an environment they controlled. This confident attitude and proposed conquest of nature may have stemmed from the confidence Americans reaped as citizens of a superpower. For postwar ranch house residents, nature presented no obstacle. This approach to the environment was entitled and imperialistic, and made the ranch house an expansive space.

But, while ranch houses represented an expansion in their treatment of the outdoors, they represented a retraction in their focus on family life within the home. As Clifford Clark, Jr. explained, proponents of the ranch house focused not on the specifics of the exterior, but on the "function and convenience of the interior plan."<sup>222</sup> Accordingly, ranch house literature honed in on life within the home, analyzing decoration and division of space. Such concentration on the interior correlated with the postwar preoccupation with psychology (looking inward) and what

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<sup>220</sup> Editors of *Sunset*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 26-7.

<sup>221</sup> "Ranch Houses Suit Climate," 61.

<sup>222</sup> Clark, Jr., "Ranch-House Suburbia," 177.

David Riesman termed “inner-directedness.” The article “Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate” even employed clinical language: “Much as a doctor’s x-rays show conditions you can’t see, a floor plan reveals actual workings of a house. It permits you to diagnose how good a house is, not only how good looking it is.”<sup>223</sup> The emphasis on the interior space of the ranch house revealed the desire of American families to retreat to the home.

Ranch houses took on the task of isolating families from the outside world. The architectural style catered to nuclear families in the nuclear age. For a suburban subdivision in North Roslyn, Long Island Ranch, Cy Williams designed and mass produced a ranch house kitchen which “overh[ung] the garden, providing a vantage point for the watching of children during the outdoor play hours.”<sup>224</sup> Based on *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, children who lived in ranch houses formed the nucleus of their family unit and enjoyed many privileges: “It’s unfair to the children to deny them the use of the pool ‘when company comes.’ ” Louvers offered a solution: “Any time you feel the patio should be shut off from the rest of the world...just lower the louvers.”<sup>225</sup> The layout and amenities of ranch houses enabled parents to work their leisure time around their children, who were encouraged to spend time at home. The child-conscious design of ranch houses also factored into postwar family dynamics because it enabled parents to heed Dr. Spock’s advice and “[allow children] freedom to develop independence,” without neglecting their safety.<sup>226</sup> Since ranch house residents isolated themselves within their homes, the ranch house represented a retraction. But, because ranch house residents looked outside the home for the guidance and advice of experts, the ranch house represented an expansion. This contrast between expansion and retraction set the ranch house in conflict with itself. And, as a

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<sup>223</sup> “Ranch Houses Suit Climate,” 62.

<sup>224</sup> “Builder Starts Ranch-Style Dwellings.”

<sup>225</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 153.

<sup>226</sup> Spock, *Baby and Child Care*, 313.

site of internal conflict, the ranch house embodied the unease, uncertainty, and instability of the postwar period.

Privacy also engendered a contrast between expansion and retraction. Kenneth Jackson described suburban neighborhoods as “a mass of small, private islands; with the back yard functioning as a wholesome, family-oriented, and reclusive place.”<sup>227</sup> Ranch house literature from the postwar period supported Jackson’s description; articles and advertisements offered ways to separate from, rather than integrate into, the larger community. The editors of *Sunset* urged future ranch house owners to “[r]emember, in checking plans of house and garden, that only space that has privacy should be considered as *living space*.”<sup>228</sup> Because of their horizontal design, ranch houses formed a barrier between the street and the backyard. Before World War II, front porches served as a site of interaction between neighbors, but after 1945, when families withdrew from the community, ranch houses relocated porches to the rear.<sup>229</sup> *Sunset Western Ranch Houses* warned, “Wide, protected porches immediately suggest outdoor living—lazy summer afternoons, informal entertaining—but if those porches face the street and are, therefore, without privacy, you merely have a house that *looks* like a ranch house but does not function as one.”<sup>230</sup> The isolationist attitude of ranch house families emphasized their participation in the anxiety-ridden society of America during the Cold War. While the country as a whole broke from its prewar policy of isolationism, ranch houses fostered a contradictory trend—retraction.

Within the home, ranch houses fostered privacy, and therefore retraction. Floor plans sectioned off personal space for individual family members. The *House Beautiful* article “Ranch Houses Suit Any Climate” praised ranch houses for the privacy they afforded: “Much of the

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<sup>227</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 280.

<sup>228</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 87.

<sup>229</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 280.

<sup>230</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, IX.

better living of the ranch house kind of plan is due to the privacy it gives. The bedrooms are in the wing on this page [to the west]. Service wing veers out nearest the street. Living-entertaining wing is center, handy to each of the others. Each wing enjoys its own privacy.”<sup>231</sup> Such an emphasis on partitioned space implied that families who resided in ranch houses during the late 1940s and 1950s spent an abundance of time at home, indoors, and formed tight-knit units, while placing a premium on personal space.

Interior space of the postwar ranch house was both open and closed. In a case study labeled “Spaciousness by the division of space,” the editors of *Sunset* magazine explained, “One wing, such as the nursery, can be closed off with sliding doors which divide it into a playroom by day and bedroom by night. This arrangement allows the children to retire early, come and go without disturbing the rest of the household.”<sup>232</sup> A Semico, Inc. advertisement for a ranch house design also demonstrated this contrast between family togetherness and privacy: “The kitchen and family room merge into one huge room with plenty of space for informal meals and other family activities. The formal dining area at the end of the living room can be separated with a screen or room divider.... The master bedroom has its own entrance to the compartmented bath.”<sup>233</sup> Separate master suites and additional bathrooms allowed parents added privacy in their open and spacious ranch houses.<sup>234</sup> Therefore, individual family members could retreat to isolated quarters within the expansive interior of an open plan. The contrast which ranch house residents created between expansion and retraction designated the ranch house as a site of contrast and, consequently, as an embodiment of angst.

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<sup>231</sup> “Ranch Houses Suit Climate,” 62.

<sup>232</sup> Editorial Staff of *Sunset Magazine*, *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*, 49.

<sup>233</sup> *Manufactured Homes*, November 1958, 88.

<sup>234</sup> Clark, Jr., “Ranch-House Suburbia,” 188.

## CONCLUSION

Dominating domestic architecture in the late 1940s and 1950s, the post-World War II ranch house was a site of contrast. Within the walls of its sprawling design, generality contrasted with particularity, modernity with timelessness, masculinity with femininity, and expansion with retraction. These contrasts set the postwar ranch house at odds with itself, breeding internal tension amidst a tense period in American history, when unease, uncertainty, and instability characterized the nation's emotional climate. Accordingly, readers cannot fully understand the climate of postwar America without understanding the ranch house and cannot fully understand the ranch house without understanding the postwar climate.

The postwar period was a period of growth. The population swelled, as Americans married younger and bore more children in closer succession. Rather than collapse, as many citizens had anticipated, the economy flourished along with the population and upgraded masses of families to the middle class. Having scrimped throughout the Great Depression and the war, Americans were ready to engage in consumerism, improve their standards of living, and invest in their own homes. But cities, which brimmed with repatriated servicemen, European immigrants, and rural migrants, lacked sufficient housing. Consequently, the government and private housing industry turned to the suburbs for housing construction. And, white families followed.

With the support of the Federal Housing Administration and Servicemen's Readjustment Act, affordable houses sprang up and were bought up in tract communities outside city limits. Suburban living afforded families the informal, private, and child-centered lifestyle they craved. Segregationist practices also afforded suburban homogeneity, which residents embraced as an additional advantage to suburban homeownership. Although suburbanites shunned racial

minorities, they espoused the rhetoric of postwar nationalism, which linked their Cape Cod and ranch houses to the American ethos.

The economic, demographic, and social conditions which factored into the increase in American suburbanization after 1945, also factored into the rise of the suburban ranch house. The ranch house rose to popularity because it provided ample living and storage space, mastered the informal, private, and child-centered lifestyle of the suburbs, and allowed Americans to express their newfound nationalism. But, the ranch house did not simply respond to needs which homeowners brought to the postwar period. As a site of contrast, it also reflected the emotional climate of the period—a climate of unease, uncertainty, and instability.

The Cold War threatened Americans with nuclear annihilation, the collapse of democracy, and the triumph of communism. African Americans battled inequality and were answered with violence and exclusion. Racist whites feared desegregation in their neighborhoods and schools. Engaging in the postwar consumer lifestyle, families vacillated between conformity and competition and questioned the morality of abundance and indulgence. Husbands felt pressured to earn a family wage in an increasingly impersonal work environment, while wives felt torn between the workforce and the home. Sexual anxiety and generational conflict plagued families, and, accordingly, the nation as a whole. Outlets of emotional expression, such as art and religion, addressed American anxiety, but failed to provide a cure. The postwar period remained a period of unease, uncertainty, and instability, which the ranch house, as a site of conflict, embodied.

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