

"Magisterial . . . The illustrated story of why our houses—great and humble and everything in between—look the way they do." —*The New York Times*

A Field Guide to American Houses

The best-selling classic by Virginia and Lee McAlester was revised and expanded to include houses built after 1940 and a new section on how to "read" a neighborhood.

The Definitive Guide to Identifying
and Understanding America's
Domestic Architecture



Virginia Savage McAlester

A Field Guide to American Houses (Revised): The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture

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A Field Guide to American Houses (Revised): The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture Virginia McAlester

Now in paperback: the fully expanded, updated, and freshly designed second edition of the most comprehensive and widely acclaimed guide to domestic architecture: in print since its original publication in 1984, and acknowledged everywhere as the unmatched, essential guide to American houses.

This revised edition includes a section on neighborhoods; expanded and completely new categories of house styles with photos and descriptions of each; an appendix on "Approaches to Construction in the 20th and 21st Centuries"; an expanded bibliography; and 600 new photographs and line drawings.

A Field Guide to American Houses (Revised): The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture Details

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Evie Hutchinson says

awesome architectural reference for house geeks

Diana says

An incredibly useful, accessible guide to American architecture. Bonus: the book even includes examples from Kansas.

Jeff says

Absolutely indispensable for when you want to just walk around and look at some houses and talk about them.

Abby says

This book is an endlessly fascinating dream (for anyone who is even mildly interested in domestic architecture). I pored over its excellent collection of photographs and line drawings for hours. I kind of want to buy it now. For what purpose, I am not sure, but I feel like I need to own it.

Vicki Slabaugh says

I read this book years ago and still refer to it. I moved to Tulsa Ok from Ohio in the late 70's into a neighborhood that was built in the early 1900's. My home was an old stone Tudor build in 1924. The oil boom here in the early teens and 20's gave rise to a city that hosts fabulous Art Deco buildings downtown, and a mix of everything from arts and craft cottages to neo-classical mansions to adobe ranches. Frank Lloyd Wright designed an office building and residences in this area. A boom town with eclectic architecture to match. If you like to take a walk and look up and around when you do, you need this book.

Julie says

I marked this as "read," but this is a book that I enjoy savoring in small bites. I'm so sad I lost my copy :(

Tom Mackie says

One of the best field guides for Human Geography projects. I have often assigned this work to my students or suggested it for projects in historic architecture.

Matt Guttosch says

Great point of reference. Would probably have to re-read at least a dozen times before I could categorize American home architecture properly.

Andrea says

Though the section I needed most, Dutch Colonial styles, is shorter than I would like, it still proves useful as a handy everyday reference.

Holly says

I thought I was the only house geek.....but now I know I'm not alone. There are others, and look, now we have a book to encourage our obsessions. I have always wondered how my old house would be classified; I now know that I own a gable-front and wing Folk Victorian. This is even better than my Victorian Houses Coloring Book!

kris says

Someday, I might like to own a house. And if I own a house, I want to be able to say with some certainty what style it is. So with those Very Important Dreams in hand, I purchased my very own copy of *A Field Guide to American Houses*.

The behemoth that arrived on my doorstep was intimidating: 800-odd pages, black-and-white photographs, and so very many houses. And I read. And I peered at the pictures. And I began to understand the development and evolution of housing in America. How the stately houses in the south, all sprawl and living porch, faded into the snug two-story shingle-style houses of the north. How to use window panes to date a house. How technology made housing easier, and faster, and less unique.

My one wish--and perhaps this is completely out of line with the scope of the book--is that there could have been some examination and discussion about interior architecture and how that was evolving along with the exterior. There's some very brief touches on it: the use of a central receiving hall disappearing from early Colonial and Federal styles, only to reappear with the Millennium Mansion; how back elevations changed with the normalization of refrigerators and washing/drying machines; how 'living spaces' were defined by the

activities therein (bedroom vs. formal living rooms vs. rec room).

Overall: highly recommended for anyone who wants a broad and dirty rundown of American domestic architecture.

Glenda says

Reposted from my blog review: <http://www.evolvingenglishteacher.blog...>

My response to "A Field Guide to American Houses" is that of a lay person. However, the guide is the definitive reference book for architectural students. A lay person such as myself doesn't read the guide with the close reading strategies of an English teacher; rather, I read the book, and will continue reading it, through the lens of "place" and its rhetoric function in American homes and American literature.

The guide is a visual and textual mapping of American home designs from the 1700s to the present. Simply, by referencing the guide, both professionals and lay people such as myself can place our homes and those of our communities, states, and nation in their historical and geographic contexts.

I became keenly interested in the rhetorical function of home and architecture years ago, but my interest really came to life when I discovered a resource about the representation of homes in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." I still have a printout of the document in my filing cabinet but can't seem to locate it on the internet now. The juxtaposition of geography and the structures of homes in UTC resonated with me.

Other books have informed my interest in homes as rhetoric: "Rebecca," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," "My Antonia," "The Tragedy of Macbeth," "The Great Gatsby," "The Fountainhead," "A Raisin in the Sun," are among these. Even some YA has piqued my interest in the rhetoric of home, most recently "Reality Boy" by A.S. King. Of course, gothic literature, such as Poe's short stories, most notably "The Fall of the House of Usher," succeed in no small part because of their grounding in this place we call home. Of course, I'd be remiss in not mentioning Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

I mention these texts because "A Field Guide to American Houses" is a resource that I'll use in constructing lesson plans, particularly those texts that rely so much on place. From elevation design and influence to the way homes are grouped geographically to how designed is influenced by economics and war, "A Field Guide to American Houses" is chalk full of information I'd thought little about.

Even the New Millennium Mansion (McMansion) in its obnoxious existence on too small lots took on new meaning as I read about its origins and its response to economic conditions. These homes, says McAlester, are part of the New Traditional Architectural movement that has at times been critiqued as "derivative." McAlester defends the movement as having unique features and its creators: They understand classical principles and architectural style well enough to subtly alter or rearrange elements to create New Traditional home designs, not copies--houses instantly familiar yet subtly different from the homes that inspired them. Architectural historian Vincent Scully describes this as a 'conversation across the generations.'" (725)

Thinking about home design as "conversational" makes me think about how these topics can become conversations in my classroom. Additionally, the NCTE 2014 convention theme "Story as the Landscape of Knowing" resonates with me as I think about landscape as place, home as places where we create stories, and design that grounds us in a sense of nostalgic longing for the past as we simultaneously look to the future.

Throughout the book one finds images of homes in a variety of geographical locations. Thus, looking at the home styles in states where I've lived became a fascinating scavenger hunt. The images of homes sent me searching for information so that my reading took a non-linear trek, as though I was journeying across the blue highways marked by squiggly lines on maps. Idaho, unfortunately, is woefully underrepresented in the book, probably because it has had no real influence on home design, unlike Illinois and California.

If I were to criticize the book in any way, it would be in its absence of color photography. I imagine the utilitarian purpose (to inform) of the guide justifies the inclusion of only black and white photographs. Still, our cultural and architectural heritage is quite colorful, and "A Field Guide to American Houses" is a fun way to learn about the vernacular of our homes.

Samuel says

Virginia and Lee McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses* is a very useful tool for understanding (both in describing and dating) common American houses. For many people, houses seem to be so common that they are not worth describing or thinking twice about, but I think when houses are observed with a more critical eye, they can reveal a wealth of information about the people who built, bought, and lived in them. They are documents from which history can be extracted. With similarly held beliefs but only a minimum of interpretation, the McAlesters set out to chronicle and period-ize the diverse (though often overlooked as less than diverse) range of American houses. Although this book has since been criticized for its heavy focus on style—focusing chiefly on reading housing exteriors and largely ignoring their interior variations and relations—it does well to introduce a working framework for grouping houses built in similar style and period together in order to better understand why and how they came to be built when they were.

The book begins with a generic look at style, form, and structure and furthermore provides a pictorial key and glossary that illustrates many of the slight variations among basic house forms and materials. It then moves on to talk about folk houses (Native American, pre-railroad, and national varieties) before moving into the bulk of the subject matter: American house styles from the 17th century onward. With broad overview headers—Colonial Houses (1600-1820), Romantic houses (1820-1880), Victorian Houses (1860-1900), Eclectic Houses (1880-1940), and American houses Since 1940—the authors group the houses built in those time periods into styles and then through a combination of illustrations, descriptions, and photographic examples, explain what the identifying features are for each housing type with a fairly impressive attempt to address both its common varieties and where they are most commonly found in American regions. This book is a treasure for anyone trying to improve their historic preservation vocabulary or sharpen up on their house style/periodization skills.

Lydia says

Excellent reference source for tracking changes in architectural styles by region and time. Pictures from across the country document influences and combinations. It is amazing how many of the styles easily transferred from Chicago to Texas to Oklahoma to Pasadena. Each pilaster identified. So glad to have found this. It is a good source to keep going back to until you have the differences between "Gothic" and "Prairie" firmly in mind. Not so useful for 1980 and after, but starts with earliest American structures.

Sarah Gustafson says

Ok, I admit it. I cherish a sick pride in having read each of the 850 pages in Virginia McAlester's magnum opus.

Unfortunately, I still can't tell the difference between many of these house styles, even with the author's patient guidance. Italianate or Italian Renaissance? Classical revival vs. Greek revival vs. Neoclassical? And please, I need help with mullions, muntins and lintels - aren't those small shellfish, not parts of windows?

Even after slowly digesting this book over the course of four years, I'm lucky if I can spot an architecture gimme, like half-timbering or a Tudor gable.

However, eating all these architectural veggies has its payoff: the dessert course, aka the chapter on McMansions. After following the author on a tour of thousands of houses, you learn enough to snark along with her. "Look at that Millenium Mansion. What a beauty. Multiple cascading hipped roofs?! You gotta be kidding me!!"
