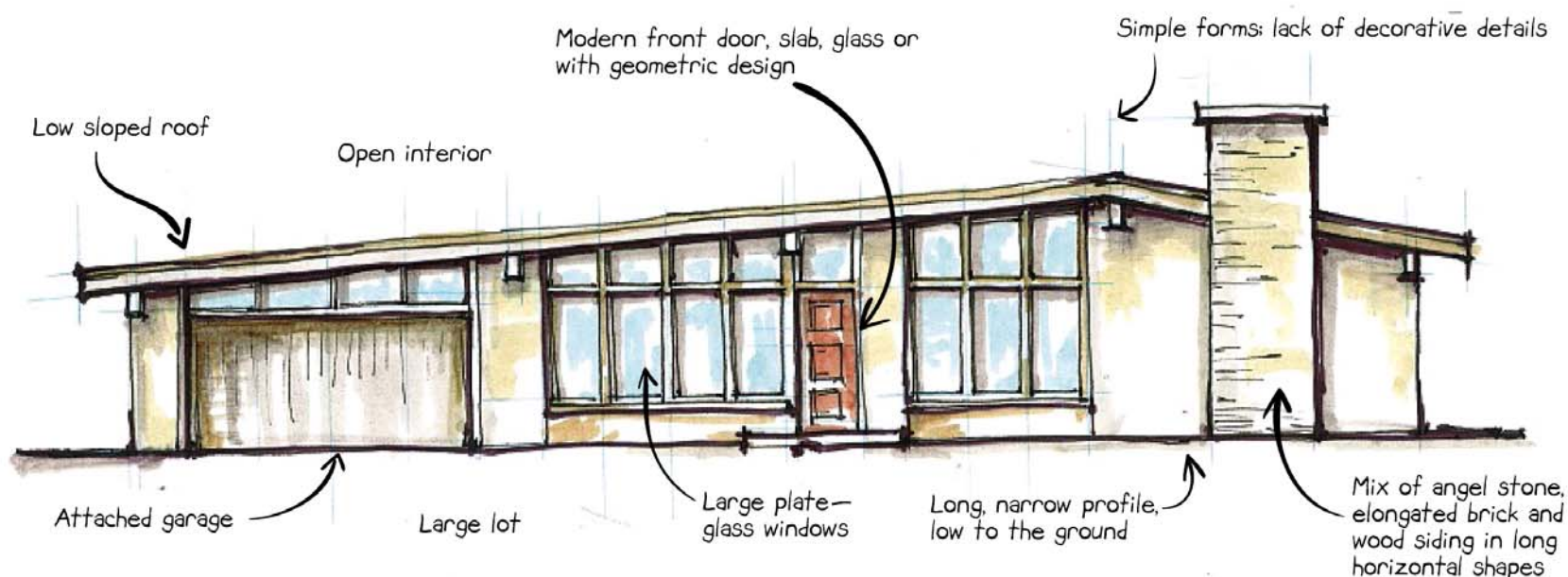


*With the arrival of television, an entire generation was inspired by Hollywood's version of a California ranch lifestyle, as it was portrayed in the films of Doris Day and Rock Hudson*



## WHAT LIES BENEATH



*The children of the first quarter of the 20th century desired space and tranquillity*

# A ranch for the suburbs

The grace of a small, elegant house is a wonderful thing. The pressures placed on a house by dense populations in and around it are enormous and constant; materials erode and finishes wear away. Over a lifetime, a house can lose everything that once made it elegant and interesting, as homeowner after homeowner tries to make it larger, warmer, easier to maintain and brighter. After a century or more of this piecemeal — albeit well-intentioned — alteration, what began as a beautiful exterior is often left shrouded under a thick disguise. This is the final instalment in our series about the architecture of Toronto houses.

BY SCOTT WEIR

Modernism has never really been a driving force behind house building in Toronto. Scottish-Anglo Toronto found the sharp-edged crispness of what had taken hold in Europe to be strangely foreign, somewhat gauche and unrelated to anything it understood as having value. Value in architecture had everything to do with recognizable elements, little to do with innovation on a grand scale.

Although the city never truly embraced art deco, there remain some fine examples of the style. In the 1930s, Eaton's College Street (now College Park) with its beautiful seventh floor (now the Carlu) and the old Toronto Stock Exchange represented the pinnacle of design and refinement, unencumbered by Anglo-Tudor references. But these buildings, designed by architects brought in to create a transformative space, remained exceptions. It would be the 1950s before the "machines for living" beloved of European modernists in the 1920s would gain any relevance here.

After the Second World War, an enormous building boom began both in the bombed-out cities of Europe and in North America, where new housing was required for returning soldiers who were eager to start families. Building materials were in short supply and specialized craftsmen were scarce. Instead of the highly detailed and crafted home designs of the '20s and '30s, houses were stripped to their basics and Cape Cod, ranch and colonials proliferated. The exception were houses influenced by the art deco and international style, called "contemporary" or "ultra-modern," with large plate-glass windows and flat or low sloped roofs.

By the 1950s, a mixture of these elements had emerged in the form of long, low three-bedroom houses with large picture windows. Learning from the Japanese and the early European modernists, house builders developed a taste for long walls of plate glass and open-concept spaces that flowed with minimal divisions. They'd discovered that they could create beautiful façades by paying careful attention to proportions and the relationships between voids (continuous bands of windows) and solids. Texture was brought into the composition through layering of brick, wide board siding and new materials such as angel stone, a cast cement-based material. Decorative elements were limited to modernistic front doors and unusual door handles. This substantial shift in house design was most evident on the outskirts of North American cities where new housing developments were springing up on what had until then been farmland.

It is hardly surprising that the chil-



GRAPHIC AND PHOTO BY SCOTT WEIR

Many of these mid-century houses still remain in Toronto, though they are threatened by the teardown phenomenon.

dren born in the first quarter of the 20th century would crave the suburbs. After all, many of them had experienced the influenza pandemic of 1918, which had killed between 20 million and 40 million people, particularly in the close quarters of the cities. The Great Depression taught them that if you had a plot of land, you could always grow food, and that more land equals more food. Meanwhile, a rising

culture of violence, crime and drugs had begun to ravage beautiful, booming cities like Detroit. People wondered, "Could this also happen here?" City centres became polluted and unhealthy as older buildings still relied on the burning of dirty fuels. And two World Wars had demonstrated what could happen to a civilian population when cities like Dresden were targeted. Battle-scarred and shell-shocked, returning war veterans craved peace and tranquillity.

With the arrival of television, an entire generation was inspired by Hollywood's version of a tranquil California ranch lifestyle, as it was portrayed in the films of Doris Day and Rock Hudson. This was the dawn of the two-kids-one-dog-two-Fords family for whom the new architecture was ideally suited.

In the mid-'50s, after buying, renovating and selling a series of older houses, my parents bought a "to-be-

their signatures, doodles and florid prose. In the late '90s, my parents sold the house to a couple who, of course, promptly put in the swimming pool I'd always wanted.

Newly built homes of this era, set on curvilinear streets for privacy and variety, often came with a choice of trees. In my neighbourhood, every house had a flowering magnolia, plum, cherry or crab that burst forth in amazing

buildings. Still, many of these mid-century modern homes have not suffered as much as earlier house types did when windows needed replacement, as the newer plate-glass windows really suit these homes. On the other hand, a flood of neo-Victorian stained-glass entrance doors have ruined the look of some of these homes. They really could be vastly improved by re-installing a more geometric and modernist slab door or one of plate glass.

The challenge these buildings pose for their owners is how to survive them. Due to their suburban location, it is often next to impossible to get anywhere without a car. As a result, an under-exercised and frequently obese population has become dependent on ever-dwindling and polluting fossil fuels. As pressure builds to conserve our resources, some cities have begun levying road tolls and higher taxes on those who choose to live in the suburbs, as a way of paying for expensive services, such as road maintenance. It's likely that a densification of these areas will eventually occur to make them more workable. That will certainly create some challenges and interesting opportunities.

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National Post

*Learning from the Japanese and European modernists, builders developed a taste for walls of plate glass and open-concept spaces*

constructed" home. The style they chose was the "Glenwood," a three-bedroom, two-bathroom ranch on a large lot, with an L-shaped living/dining room, a modern kitchen (with a dishwasher!) and shuffleboard in the basement. Not long after, my dad built an addition at the back of the house — a family room with a massive fieldstone fireplace. One of my bedroom walls was left unpainted and served as the guest book, where, over the next four decades, our house guests left

whites, pinks and purples each spring, as well as a clump of birch and fir trees. A perfectly tended lawn was a point of pride, and homeowners maintained it by means of chemical warfare.

Although most of these houses have endured, the teardown factor has managed to eliminate quite a few in the Lawrence Park and Don Mills areas of the city. As was the case in earlier development phases, the most interesting houses on the most beautiful lots are often demolished to make way for new