

# Houston: Becoming the Ranch House City

By Stephen James

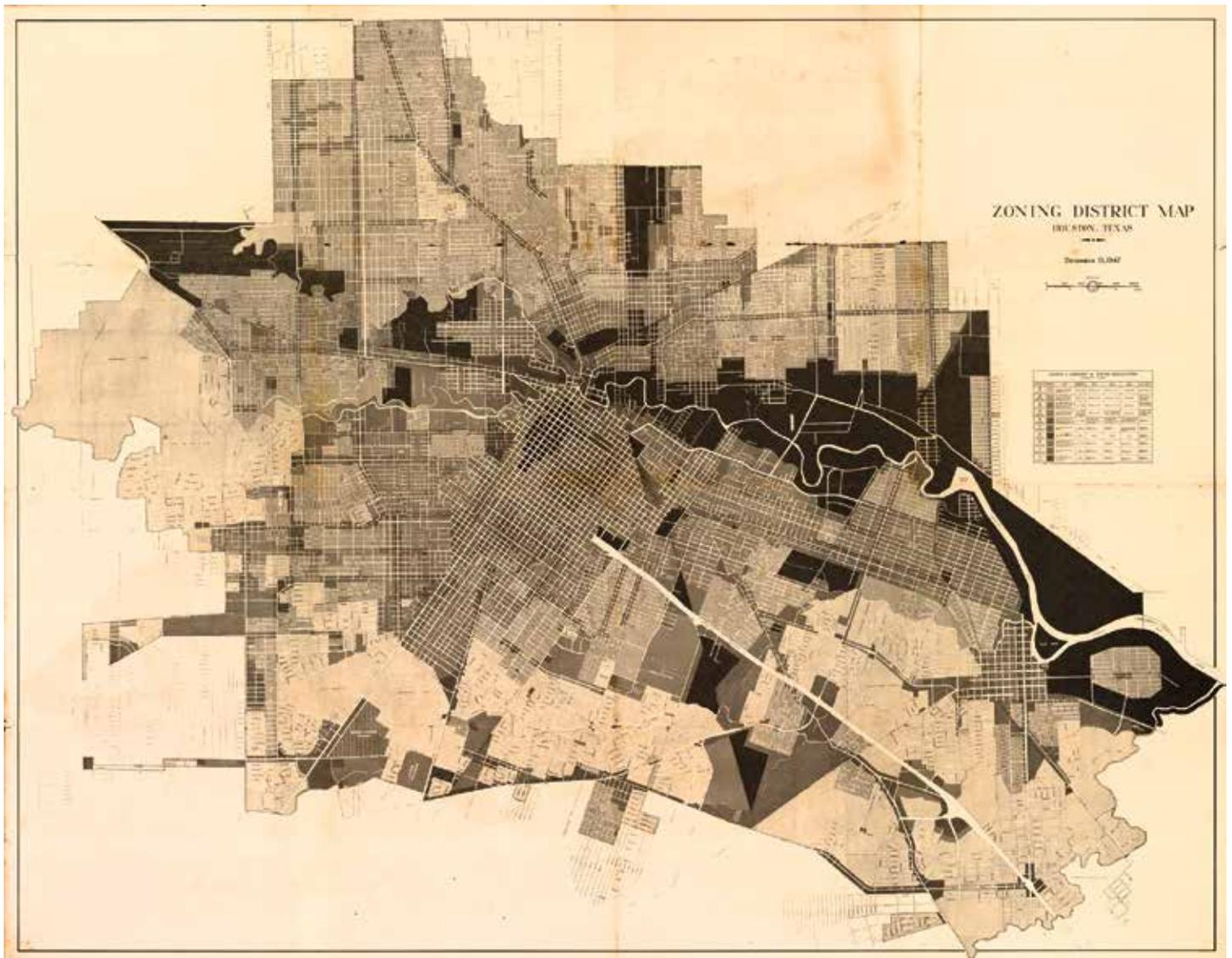
Houston is a vast city that spreads to the horizon in all directions. Gleaming commercial districts punctuate its sprawl, but the landscape is a blanket of residential neighborhoods. They define its architectural character. They tell us how and when the city grew.

Every urban area reflects the architectural styles that prevailed during the years of its greatest growth. The industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, which boomed in the nineteenth century, are known for their many neighborhoods of narrow row houses wrapped in picturesque brownstone, brick, or wood clapboard. Houston, less charming but more modern, is the ranch house city.

Houston is a new city, and its urban fabric seems remarkably homogeneous because so much of it was built over a

relatively short period of time. Houston grew at a phenomenal rate during the decades immediately after World War II. Its population soared from 384,514 in 1940 to 1,595,138 in 1980.<sup>1</sup> A booming economy fueled the growth, which city leaders guided through an aggressive annexation policy.

As late as the 1940s, Houston was a compact city of seventy-five square miles. Its boundaries extended no farther than Kirby Drive on the west, Brays Bayou on the southwest, and Sims Bayou on the southeast. The Heights, Rice Institute, and the new Texas Medical Center were on the edge of town. Today, this area defines the urban core, a central business district ringed by the city's earliest suburbs. A 1947 land use map (below) shows that most residential areas—highlighted in shades of gray according to density—developed on a grid pattern with small compact lots.<sup>2</sup> An informal survey of these areas today shows that architectural types varied according to income. Prosperous neighborhoods featured brick homes of two stories, while one-story cottages and bungalows predominated in more modest districts. There were very few ranch houses within the city limits.



*Before the Boom—In 1947 Houston's boundaries extended to Kirby Drive on the west, Brays and Sims Bayous on the south. Residential areas are highlighted in shades of gray according to density.*

Map courtesy of Paddock Greater Houston Convention & Visitors Council Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Nineteen forty-eight marked the beginning of Houston's rush to the suburbs. On December 31 with the city's first automobile expressway—the Gulf Freeway—under construction, the city council approved an ordinance annexing a large swath of territory that more than doubled Houston's area to 189 square miles.<sup>3</sup> With future expressways and future annexations, the city pushed rapidly outward and by 1980 encompassed 556 square miles.<sup>4</sup>

Houston's experience with suburbanization was not unique; it was a nationwide phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, however, 1950 to 1980, a time of explosive growth for Houston's suburbs, were the years the ranch house dominated residential architecture. Thus the architectural character of much of the city is defined by the neighborhoods of postwar ranch houses, which cover a large part of its incorporated area.

Today's suburban ranch house can trace its roots to the Old West, but it bears little resemblance to its namesake. In the nineteenth century the term described a rustic western farmhouse. It was an example of vernacular architecture—functional owner-constructed buildings without pretense. Often seen in Hollywood “Westerns,” the vernacular ranch house was a simple one-story structure, usually of wood-frame construction, often with board-and-batten siding, although Spanish colonial precedents were built of adobe brick and sometimes finished in stucco. Early ranch houses were often L-shaped or U-shaped with extended wings. A common feature was a deep porch supported by a colonnade of posts, called a *loggia*, a *portal*, or a *corredor*. Functional and unpretentious, the house suited the austere realities of ranch life.<sup>6</sup>

Formally, the ranch house has always been distinguished by its low profile. It is a one-story building with a simple shape and a low roofline. Although gable roofs are common, many postwar ranch houses feature the hip roof, which slopes back to meet the ridge line, minimizing the roof's apparent height. When combined with wide eaves at the edges, a hip roof visually extends the length of the house and imparts a strong horizontal appearance. Postwar ranch houses are also known for their large front windows, often called “picture windows.”

These inherent formal characteristics—what makes a ranch house a ranch house—have contributed to its enduring popularity. Its “lowness” gives the ranch house a human scale. The foundation is on or close to the ground and the eaves of the roof are barely above a person's head. This small, domestic scale provides a sense of shelter and refuge—some would call it coziness—not found in more imposing house types. Moreover, all ranch houses have an open floor plan, where functions such as living and dining share space without partitions dividing them. Living areas communicate directly with the outside through large glass doors.

The ranch house has retained its appeal because modern life in the suburbs in some ways shares the informality of life on a western ranch of the nineteenth century. But it is possible to make this connection only because, in the interim, the nation experienced a profound change in the notion of leisure. The Old West ranch house became the familiar suburban ranch house shortly before World War II. The link between them is the California ranch house of the 1930s and 1940s.

California is often a leading indicator of social trends soon to be adopted by the rest of the country; the ranch house is an example. In the 1930s, just as Colonial Williamsburg inspired a national passion for boxy colonial houses, architects and builders in California began to use the vernacular ranch house as a model for middle-class dwellings in the new suburbs of Southern California. The original ranch house was associated with living outdoors—life on a ranch—and the new ranch-style houses captured this quality. Taking advantage of the ranch house's extended wings, builders turned the resulting courtyard into an outdoor living room, complete with furniture. A house built around a patio was ideal for the mild climate of the area, where people were accustomed to spending time outdoors. The open floor plan seemed less confining than those of earlier house types.

The builders romanticized the ranch houses of the Old West, updating them for modern living but retaining their rustic character. Californians discovered that, in these new ranch houses, the living was easy: The rambling design lent itself to an informal, casual way of life, one that eschewed



“Western Ranch House,” 1888.

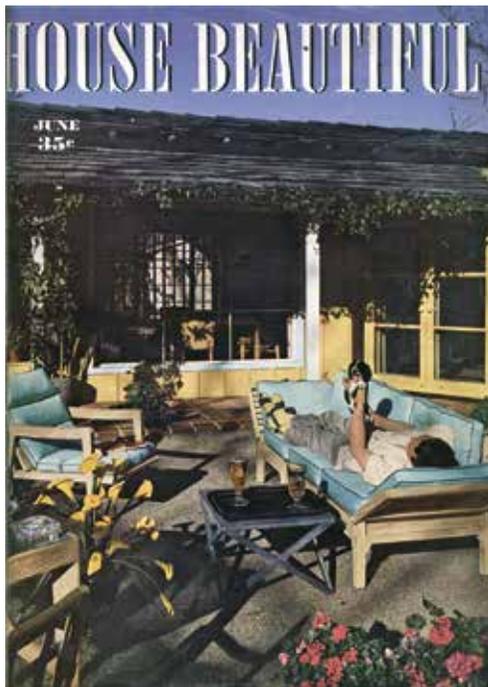
Photo by John C. H. Grabill. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-pmsc-02597.

servants and social ritual. By the late 1930s *Sunset* magazine and other western regional publications were full of examples of this new house type, which were popping up across Southern California. The magazines recounted the ranch house's humble origins but recognized that the new California ranch houses were a modern adaptation with an identity distinct from the original.<sup>7</sup>

In the East, the editors of national magazines took note. They saw the California ranch house as an important development, not because it was great architecture but because its layout encouraged the leisure-oriented lifestyle that their readers envied. Home building and other nonessential activities stopped during the war, but by 1944 the magazines were already thinking ahead. Postwar home planning became the primary focus of popular women's magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and the domestic architectural publications, known as "shelter magazines," which included *Better Homes & Gardens*, *House Beautiful*, and *House & Garden*.<sup>8</sup>

As they shaped their readers' expectations of postwar life, the editors seemed infatuated with the new ranch-style house. Through the end of the war and beyond, these popular domestic magazines published countless features on the ranch house, not just reporting it as news but actively promoting it as the way their readers could achieve the casual California lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>

The seductive appeal of the ranch house was apparent in June 1944 when the cover of *House Beautiful* (above) featured the home of builder Cliff May, often called "the father of the California ranch house." It was an evocative image of May's son, Mike, reclining on the patio, and it clearly associated the ranch house with a life of leisure. Only



*Magazines associated the ranch house with a life of leisure. House Beautiful, June 1944.*

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Photo by Maynard L. Parker, by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

a small part of the house was visible, but it had all the hallmarks of the new California ranch house—low roofline, rustic board-and-batten siding, French doors opening to the patio, and large windows. The view through the windows showed the house was only one room deep. One could see right through it! This house blurred the boundaries between life indoors and leisure activities outside. With the end of the war fast approaching, this was how Americans wanted to live.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1940s the shelter magazines introduced the California ranch house to America, and the public reaction was unprecedented. Before the war this house type was a novelty outside the West, and during the war there was no residential construction, but by the end of the decade the ranch house had become the most popular house type in the country.<sup>11</sup> From 1946 to 1950 a national consensus developed in favor of the ranch house, driven by its promise of a casual lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> This was clear from the title of a popular book of the time—*Houses and Plans 1950: 55 New Homes Construction-Tested for Today's*

*Trends towards the Ranch House and Ease of Living*.<sup>13</sup>

When home building resumed after the war, builders moved quickly to offer popular ranch house designs.<sup>14</sup> Builders liked the ranch house because the simple shape made it inexpensive to build and easy to adapt to different tastes. Unlike earlier house types, the ranch house had a chameleon-like ability to be whatever the buyer wanted: A ranch house plan could be dressed in any number of popular styles, from Colonial Revival to Old English. Within a few years the public's perception of the ranch house had changed from a rustic western farmhouse to something that was a blank canvas for one's dreams.

The magazines may have sparked the ranch house revolu-



*Whelan House, Bonita, California, 1936, designed and built by Cliff May. The Whelan House illustrates the California ranch house style promoted by the shelter magazines in the 1940s. It is notable for its low roofline and extended wings, which enclose a patio.*

Photo courtesy of Max A. van Balgooy.



*Builders simplified and mass-produced the ranch house in the 1950s. Also called a tract house or a rambler, this example has the popular hip roof with wide eaves and a prominent picture window.* Photo courtesy of the author.

tion, but the nation's home builders completed it. In the late 1940s with residential construction stalled by almost two decades of economic depression and war, the nation suffered from a severe housing shortage. The home building industry responded to the crisis by constructing new housing on a very large scale. Real estate developers created larger subdivisions—covering hundreds and even thousands of acres—by focusing their efforts on rural and suburban areas where land was cheaper. Within many of those neighborhoods, large home building companies known as merchant builders used industrial techniques of mass production to satisfy public demand.

In the process, the ranch house underwent a transformation as home builders simplified its form and details. Often called tract houses (or sometimes, rambles), these simplified ranch houses sacrificed rustic charm for cost savings. Tract house floor plans were often a simple rectangle. The early ranch house could have an extended linear shape because it was located in a rural setting. The tract house is more compact to fit a suburban lot. As the name implies, a tract house is one of many similar or identical houses built closely together on a tract of land. Though purged of its charm, the tract house retains the spirit of the original ranch house. Today, people associate the ranch house with these mass-produced tract houses, but they differ considerably from both the California ranch house of the 1930s and 1940s and the original western ranch house of the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Houston's open prairie presented few natural obstacles to development, and large-scale suburban subdivisions proliferated. Real estate developer Frank Sharp was legendary in the decades after World War II for creating Houston's largest residential developments. His first postwar project was Oak Forest, which opened in 1947, northwest of the Heights. The largest neighborhood in the city at the time, the development covered over 1,100 acres and eventually contained almost 5,000 homes. Oak Forest marketed to returning veterans and offered small, economical ranch houses, many financed with loans guaranteed by the Veteran's Administration (VA) or the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). At the same time, another of Sharp's companies developed the upscale Royden Oaks neighborhood on the western edge of River Oaks.<sup>16</sup>

In 1955 Sharp unveiled his biggest project, called Sharpstown—a sprawling mixed-use development of 4,000

acres and 15,000 homes. Until the late 1970s it was unchallenged as the largest residential development in the city. Sharp located his eponymous community on the far southwest edge of Houston in the path of a new city expressway, the Southwest Freeway (US 59). Although Sharp provided for schools, libraries, and commercial areas, his centerpiece was the large Sharpstown Shopping Center, for many years one of the city's most popular indoor shopping malls.<sup>17</sup>

As the city's boom continued through the 1950s and 1960s, other developers followed the same formula. In the mid-1950s Ira Berne's Westbury Corporation developed the large Westbury neighborhood at the end of South Main. Covering three square miles and containing 5,000 homes, Westbury rivaled Oak Forest and Sharpstown in size. Consistent with the social conformity of the 1950s, all of Westbury's homes were ranch house designs, but they featured a remarkable amount of stylistic diversity. Like Sharpstown, Westbury offered a retail shopping area, but Westbury's shopping center was unique. Instead of an



*Ranch house reverie—A Sharpstown ranch house was on many a wish list. Houston Post, January 1, 1956.*

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*Conformity and diversity—In ranch house developments such as Westbury, a common one-story house type featured many stylistic variations. Houston Chronicle, June 19, 1960.*

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indoor shopping mall, Berne built an outdoor European village called Westbury Square, which drew shoppers from all over the city.<sup>18</sup> On the northern edge of Westbury, developer George Meyer created Meyerland, a large 1,200-acre subdivision that straddled Brays Bayou just west of Post Oak Road. As with many large residential developments, Meyerland featured a large regional shopping center surrounded by acres of parking.

Several miles to the north, along San Felipe Road, the Tanglewood Corporation catered to more affluent buyers. Its Tanglewood neighborhood teemed with over-sized ranch houses on large lots.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, in the 1960s this prosperous neighborhood attracted developers whose focus was retail, not residential. Not far from Tanglewood's boundaries, the intersection of Westheimer and Post Oak became the center of a new luxury-shopping district. Joske's, Sakowitz, and Neiman-Marcus department stores each anchored a corner, joined in 1970 by Gerald Hines's glitzy extravaganza called the Galleria.

In hindsight, the opening of the Galleria was a watershed, the beginning of the end of the ranch house suburbs and their regional shopping malls. It marked a change in American society, which now valued wealth and conspicuous consumption over the populist conformity of the postwar suburbs. Some were more affluent than others, but there was a sameness to the ranch house neighborhoods because they all featured the same one-story house type. The suburban ranch house enforced a form of social leveling. It was ubiquitous and was one of the few constants across socio-economic levels. In the 1950s and 1960s it seemed that everyone lived in a ranch house. Having more money meant that one lived in a bigger ranch house, not a mansion.<sup>20</sup>

Every corner of the city had a large regional shopping

mall, and there was little to distinguish one from the other. The Galleria was not just another shopping mall. It was not about shopping; it was about *expensive* shopping. For such an elitist enterprise to become the standard by which all shopping malls are judged suggests that something profound was happening in the larger society.

Seventy years after America fell in love with the ranch house, times have changed and its popular appeal may be hard to understand. But just as the Galleria serves as a metaphor for social change, the declining popularity of the ranch house shows more than a change in tastes; it shows a change in social values.

The prosperity of the last fifty years has made us insensitive to the austerity of the 1930s and 1940s. Hardship was a shared experience and those who were more fortunate refrained from announcing it to others. Social pressure discouraged ostentatious displays of wealth. The popular press used the word "unpretentious" approvingly, and it appeared everywhere, even in celebrity profiles such as one article that asked, "Who wants to live in a pretentious house? Certainly not Olivia de Havilland." In *House Beautiful* Cliff May

expressed the same values when he said of his ranch house, "We don't like pretentious architecture. . . . Our friends come to enjoy themselves—not to be impressed."<sup>21</sup>

After the war, the sudden and universal popularity of the ranch house was a social phenomenon. Everyone wanted one and no one cared that, as a reworked farmhouse, it was inherently modest and unpretentious. Indeed, that was its appeal. It captured the egalitarian spirit of an era of economic hardship. Then, over the next few decades, it served as the stable foundation for a society in transition to a period of great prosperity. Now, of course, the goal of most residential architecture is to impress the viewer with tall facades, grand entryways, and historical allusions.

Beyond its social implications, the ranch house can be viewed more pragmatically. Ranch houses are rarely built today, but the older ranch house neighborhoods are still popular with home buyers because the houses offer a lot of space and are easily updated with modern amenities.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the legacy of the ranch house can be seen in its influence on residential design. The suburban ranch house is the beginning of the modern American house. It popularized the open floor plan, which is now the basis for all residential design. Today, the typical house, with its high gable roof and red brick exterior, may recall an English country manor, but on the inside it looks much like a 1950s ranch house. The interiors are very open and space flows through glass doors on to a patio. Though their aspirations outgrew it, the ranch house transformed the way Americans lived.

**Stephen James** is Curator, Architecture & Planning Collections, University of Houston Libraries, Special Collections Department. He holds a Ph.D. in Architectural History from the University of Virginia.