

Race, Space and Architecture: an open access curriculum

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The full and final version of this chapter can be found at:

Harris, Dianne. 2012. *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1 -25.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

Reprint Authorization

Reference #20062303

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For: Dianne Harris, "Introduction." In *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) pp. 1-25

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Introduction

Between 1945 and 1960, a pervasive iconography of white, middle-class domesticity circulated widely in various media and became instantiated in millions of new homes across the United

States. This book examines the ways textual and visual representations of those houses continuously and reflexively created, re-created, and reinforced midcentury notions about racial, ethnic, and class identities—specifically, the rightness of associating white identities with homeownership and citizenship. By looking carefully at house form and at representations of house form, I seek to understand the ways in which postwar domestic environments became poignant ciphers for whiteness, affluence, belonging, and a sense of permanent stability. The house and garden, and their representations, there-

fore appear as the material dimensions through which racial and class identity and difference are recursively constructed, assumed, and negotiated.

Much (but not all) of the material that forms the basis for the analysis in this book is utterly commonplace, ubiquitous, and accessible: mass-circulation magazine and catalog articles and images; builders' architects' and trade journals; advertisements; ordinary household objects and artifacts; and the kinds of ordinary houses and gardens seen in nearly every suburb and small town in the United States. They constitute an enormous body of seemingly mundane representations and material forms that are (or were) often encountered, viewed, and experienced as part of the ordinary activities of everyday life—"seamlessly sutured into the material

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An ordinary postwar house, Urbana, Illinois. Date and architect unknown. Photograph by the author.

practices of ordinary life,” as Robert Hariman and John Lucaites put it.¹ And because they are so pervasive and seemingly ordinary as to become critically unobserved, these representational and material forms constitute powerful ideological devices. They have much to tell us, not only about the ways such representations, objects, and sites constructed and reinforced specific national policies and economic and social structures, but also about how they served as justification and substantiation for ways of imagining Americans of various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds at midcentury.

I am particularly interested here in understanding how these familiar images, words, objects, and sites operated—and perhaps continue to operate—to construct a sense of the raced and classed past, present, and even future. As W. J. T. Mitchell wrote nearly twenty years ago, we must ask not simply what representations *mean* but “what they *do* in a network of social relations” in order to understand more fully the ways representations “work in our culture.” Mitchell urges us to understand all representations as “relay mechanisms in exchanges of power, value, and publicity” and to consider in our analyses the roles played by the knowledge industries that produce these representations.² That is one particular goal of this study.

This book focuses exclusively on houses and representations produced during the fifteen-year period bracketed by the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1960s. Many of the issues I examine—concerns

for domestic privacy, cleanliness, order, and family togetherness, to name a few—are not unique to this period. In fact, most have roots that can be traced to at least the nineteenth century if not earlier, and numerous architectural historians have indeed studied those issues in relation to American house form in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ However, significant changes in the economy and culture of the immediate postwar period make this fifteen-year span ripe for a focused study that examines the particular ways in which those concerns were renewed and played out within the context of the private single-family home. The postwar economic boom and the federal financing and mortgage insurance programs that made that housing available to millions of first-time homeowners created fertile ground for a renewed and often rearticulated focus on the links among homeownership, citizenship, and racial and class identity. They also led to a significant rise in the production of representations related to the iconographic field that is my focus here. In the chapters that follow, I examine the houses made possible by those federal programs, and I also examine the reasons behind the rearticulation of specific values and ideals.

The fifteen-year period that frames this study is also especially well suited to an examination of the links among houses, representations, and race, for this was a time of significant shifts in racial thinking. Throughout this book, I use the term *race* to indicate a set of

socially constructed categories that are, like the built environment, based in human experience, historically contingent, and rooted to questions about the formation of identities. In examining these issues, I join a growing number of scholars who study the connections that exist between the spatial world/built environment and the construction of race and white identities. Like them, I seek to understand the ways in which power and injustice operate so that I can contribute to dismantling them. I do this for several reasons. First, I believe, as does Matthew Jacobson, that “racism, as Alexander Saxton writes, is ‘fundamentally a theory of history’ . . . It is a theory of . . . who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what.” If, as Jacobson insists, it is the historian’s task “to discover which racial categories are useful to whom at a given moment, and why,” then we might productively ask ourselves what whiteness meant, what it stood for, and what it embodied in the postwar housing market.⁴

Like Jacobson, I also believe that because “race is a public fiction” (in the sense that it is a highly fluid social construction) that is also “a kind of social currency,” evaluations of the ways race is defined, expressed, and represented in the public sphere become crucial to an understanding of the persuasive power and influence of the iconographic fields that pertain to race and whiteness.⁵ To borrow the words of Michael Orni and Howard Winant, it is not possible “to acknowledge or oppose

racism without comprehending the sociohistorical context in which concepts of race are invoked.”⁶ I seek here to elucidate one such sociohistorical context. I will say more about this in the text that follows.

Second, I engage these very charged questions about race and whiteness because I believe that architecture and the visual world always belong to and circulate within—indeed construct—the political, economic, and social worlds in which we live. Architecture is not benign, even (and sometimes especially) when it is spectacularly beautiful or when it is so ordinary we hardly notice it. And architecture is about race even (and perhaps especially) when it is situated in an all-white suburb—a fact that architectural historians have tended to overlook completely. I therefore write against these beliefs, but also against the strong current of discourse that continues to be produced in many professional schools of design that encourages future architects, planners, and landscape architects to ignore issues pertaining to social justice and the built environment and to relegate questions about race and its social, economic, and political implications to the outer peripheries or completely outside their classrooms, studios, and practices. If it seems to some readers that I see race everywhere in this study, perhaps my view can serve as a necessary corrective to the extensive body of architectural histories that have seen race nowhere.

THE ORDINARY POSTWAR HOUSE

Although numerous studies have focused on the history of housing segregation and the history of suburban planning in which those practices are embedded, no previous studies have addressed the specific ways in which ideas about the racialization of such houses were communicated and circulated or their potential impact on the construction of American culture. This book does so, by examining a range of published texts, images, media forms, and houses themselves, mining the wealth of information embedded in such sources. Unlike the typical narratives of architectural history, which normally include well-known architects, wealthy clients, and sensational houses, this book takes an approach that is far less glamorous but certainly more relevant to a broad spectrum of American lives. I focus here primarily on ordinary houses—that is, houses that were not designed by architects as custom homes but were instead designed and built by merchant builders or developers for a mass audience or by homeowners for themselves. Instead of adopting a regional focus, I have chosen a national scope for this study, using a set of broad themes to structure my analysis. I do this because, as stated earlier, I am interested in understanding the formation of an American iconography of race and class as it related to postwar houses and homeownership and as it circulated in various forms of mass and

popular media. This iconography, as I will show, was not regionally specific, but existed and circulated in media intended for a nationwide audience.

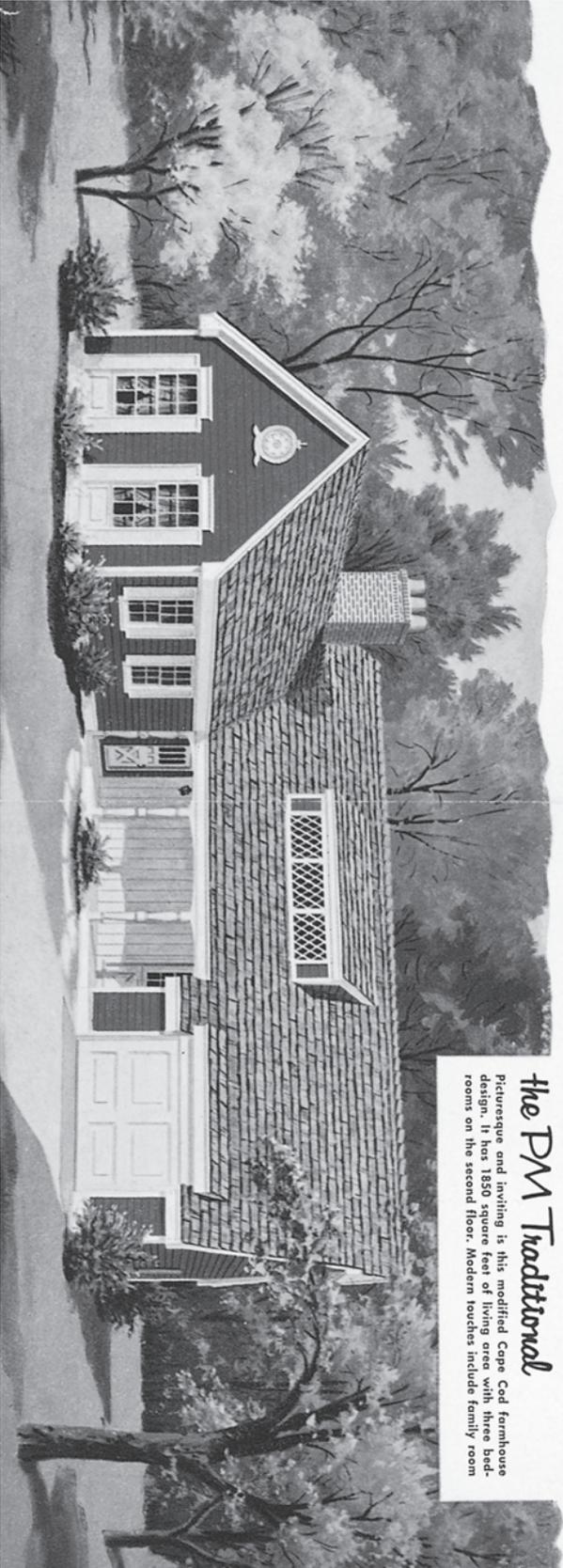
Certainly, a regionally specific study would yield important findings. It might engage the ways in which specific local immigrant communities influenced house form and housing markets, and it might also elucidate some important ways in which racial categories—including whiteness—might be inflected by regional histories. But that is not my task here. Although California, for example, was a veritable laboratory of experimentation in postwar house and garden design, new housing appeared nationwide after 1945, and some of the most interesting developments that were truly intended for a mass audience (as opposed to experiments in high-style design, paid for by wealthy patrons or museum sponsorship) happened all over the country. The Midwest, for example, was an important location for the development of new housing ideas for the average buyer. The participants in the University of Illinois Small Homes Council produced an extraordinary number of experimental houses and studies of postwar dwellings, and they disseminated plans both locally through circulators and nationally through magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*.⁷ As a result, experimental houses were constructed throughout Chicago's hinterlands, and readers across the United States purchased plans from magazines and followed their do-it-yourself construction

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Popular and shelter magazines
promoted a range of home styles
as acceptable for their readers.
Courtesy of *Popular Mechanics*; originally
published in the October 1957 issue.



the PM Modern

This contemporary home with low-slung roof and sweeping lines provides 1344 square feet of living area. It has three intriguing courts. The facade gives no hint that it is a split-level home



the PM Traditional

Picturesque and inviting is this modified Cape Cod farmhouse design. It has 1850 square feet of living area with three bedrooms on the second floor. Modern touches include family room

guides. Moreover, research villages constructed in Illinois and Michigan and publicized in national shelter and women's magazines spread innovative construction ideas throughout the region, and early suburbs such as Park Forest, Illinois, gained acclaim and publicity for a range of innovations that received coverage in the national media, including television.

Merchant builders such as the Levitts published their designs in both popular and trade magazines. Their designs and construction ideas circulated rapidly throughout the country, and they were used and adapted by builders nationwide.⁸ Indeed, builders relied on these magazines to help them learn about the most significant housing trends in various regions, which they then replicated in their own locales. The houses they produced may not have appeared as identical replicas of those they aimed to copy, but the ideas about houses circulated nationally. Those ideas—those rhetorical strategies—are my focus in this book. Because interesting developments in ordinary house construction occurred nationwide, I avoid concentrating on any particular region.

My criteria for including houses in this study are as follows: they had to have been at least intended for an imagined mass audience of middle-class homeowners, and they had to have been priced within reach of most middle-class Americans during the fifteen-year period examined. The price ranges for such ordinary houses varied to some extent and depended primarily on loca-

tion, just as they also increased over the period of the study. The U.S. census for 1950 found that the national median value of urban and rural nonfarm dwellings was \$7354. By 1960, the median value of a similarly located home owned by whites rose to \$12,900, but the median value for a “nonwhite” home in the same period was only \$6,700.⁹ The Census Bureau's figures can serve as a fair guide for the price ranges for the houses considered in this book, except for those built by architects as part of special developments or projects that were meant as experiments that would eventually translate to a mass housing market. The census figures also bluntly indicate the vast disparity in property values that existed between homes owned by whites and homes owned by anyone identified as nonwhite.

Instead of avant-garde plans and dramatic settings, I examine plans for common houses and dwellings intended to be common houses. I look at the clever ways ordinary builders and homeowners found to store all the new items families acquired for their modest dwellings and the cultural dimensions and significance of taste and display as upwardly mobile citizens adapted their living conditions to the new and largely optimistic consumer world of the 1950s. Instead of high-style design, then, I largely examine the ways ordinary house form and its representations served as an index of identity, authenticity (however constructed), and belonging during a time of cultural transition vis-à-vis notions of race/ethnicity and middle-class identity.



An ordinary postwar house, Urbana, Illinois. Date and architect unknown. Note the picture window and the storage wall that supports the shed roof of the carport. Photograph by the author.

Although I intend this primarily as a study of ordinary houses, this book also includes some examples of dwellings that were designed by well-known architects and that were a cut above what could be strictly designated as ordinary. Custom-designed houses were and still are the exception in the American cultural landscape, and most Americans of the postwar period

could not afford them. However, the ideals presented in popular publications, on television, and through tours of custom-designed houses affected the ways Americans considered and understood their own, more ordinary dwellings and their own racial and class identities. Custom-designed houses thus have a place in this book, especially those that were intended to serve as models

Concrete block house, 1949. Immediate postwar models frequently included less than 1,000 square feet of space and had traditionally configured plans. Courtesy of *Popular Mechanics*; originally published in the May 1949 issue.



for mass community builders. But I also examine houses built from stock plans that could be purchased through the mail from magazines or lumber companies. Occasionally, therefore, the names of well-known architects appear, especially those who were truly and persistently interested in building homes for the masses.

Despite the suburban locations of most of the houses

and gardens that form this book's subject, this is not a history of suburban planning and development; that subject has received significant scholarly attention elsewhere.¹⁰ I also largely avoid the usual subjects of suburban vernacular histories simply because they too have already received the attention of scholars of midcentury domesticity: William Levitt's housing tracts thus re-

ceive less attention here, but houses by unknown developers, lawns, television programs, magazine advertisements, and questions about the storage and display of material artifacts receive more.

Ubiquitous though they may be in the North American suburban landscape, postwar houses have been the subject of very few studies, especially from the perspective I take here. The corpus of scholarly literature that examines the specific material qualities of ordinary postwar houses is surprisingly small, and studies that include analyses of the race and class dimensions I privilege here are virtually nonexistent.¹¹ Indeed, the real paucity of rigorous scholarly studies that focus on the history of ordinary postwar houses posed a significant challenge as I conducted research for this book. Because so little scholarship exists on ordinary postwar dwellings, I have made efforts to elucidate the forms and spaces typical of so many of these homes. Although recent scholarship by historians has included extensive discussion of the social production of space, few historians have actually looked at the concrete nature of space itself in that production process. In this book I examine the spaces, surfaces, materials, forms, and enclosures of our everyday lives and the ways they, along with their representations, contribute to cultural constructions of racial and class identities. Moreover, in examining the visual culture related to postwar housing and interiors, I have found that issues related to class, race, and gender are central. Identity politics is a hallmark of post-

war American life, and to ignore this issue within the context of the midcentury house seems, at least to me, impossible.

THE CULTURAL WORK OF REPRESENTATIONS

This book examines the cultural work performed by houses and domestic artifacts intended for a middle-class audience and by textual and visual representations of those houses that entered mainstream culture between 1945 and 1960 in the United States. As such, it is intended as a contribution to various fields of inquiry that examine the production of American (U.S.) cultural iconography and its impact on American cultural formations. Questions about residential architecture remain at the book's core, but this is not a traditional architectural history of postwar houses in the United States, although I hope it might point to some new directions for the production of scholarship in that field. Instead, this book examines the roles of the visual and material fields related to postwar houses in constituting and reinforcing ideas about race, ethnicity, and class in American postwar culture as they related to ideas about homeownership.

Like some scholars working in the fields of American studies, visual culture studies, material culture studies, communication, and rhetoric (among others), I am particularly interested here in the symbolic practices,

iconographic formations, and rhetorical strategies embedded in the visual field created between 1945 and 1960 that included houses as a primary subject. The idea that the visual and material fields possess constitutive power related to the formation of identities (personal, family, community, national) that are deeply linked to the construction of race, class, and gender has become an acknowledged commonplace among scholars in the above-listed fields during the past decade.¹²

As with other rhetorical forms, such as public discourse, I use the evidence marshaled herein to understand—as have scholars such as Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites—the ways that cultural ideals circulate through “structures of representation that can be labeled rhetorical, ideological, aesthetic, political, and more. Public texts are complex mediations of experience. In every case the focus is on how the material practice enables and constrains actors and audiences alike as they try to acquire knowledge, apply values, and otherwise do the work of making agreements and building public consent.”¹³ In short, this book aims to understand how these images, texts, objects, and sites functioned in the creation and substantiation of specific forms of U.S. culture and cultural life in the second half of the twentieth century.

Studies that link visual culture to rhetorical suasion are, in general, more easily found and perhaps more well-known than studies that include analyses of buildings and designed landscapes as rhetorically powerful

tools that actively shape history and culture. However, studies of the latter type are not absent, and a significant corpus of scholarship on the architectural history of all periods, produced in the past thirty years (and even earlier), points toward the importance of the built environment in shaping public opinion, perception, and belief about a range of cultural conditions. We might profitably call these studies in “spatial rhetoric(s),” but they all fall neatly within the purview of the increasingly methodologically capacious field of architectural history. The approach I take in this book builds on and contributes to this tradition of scholarship, using ordinary houses and gardens as the focus for understanding the rhetorical work performed by the built world instead of examining more elite spaces such as palaces, villas, grand estates, churches and cathedrals, national capitals, and municipal and government buildings. I do not contend that buildings/houses are experienced in the same ways as visual or textual representations—indeed, they are seen, experienced, and understood in highly complex and multiple ways that are likewise historically contingent—but I examine them here as material facets of a complex iconographic field that also includes visual and textual representations of houses. Given this focus, readers will rightfully ask questions about the specific ways various audiences may have received and understood these multiple forms. How much can we really assume or know about the impacts of sets of images (for example) on specific or even

vaguely defined audiences of midcentury Americans? As Hariman and Lucaites note: “This issue will always remain a matter of debate . . . [one] that should be happening continually. Healthy democracies are those where citizens are accustomed to arguing thoughtfully about how they are influenced.” Multitudes of individual responses may be impossible to recover, but they are also not necessarily relevant to my task. Instead, I seek to understand the operation of the evidence I have herein marshaled in the formation of a U.S. public culture. I want to know, as do Hariman and Lucaites, how these multiple forms

reproduce ideology, communicate social knowledge, shape collective memory, model citizenship, and provide figural resources for communicative action. . . . What is important in this view is to recognize how the dominant codes articulate dominant social relationships and that the distinctive ideological effect is the formation of subjective identity consistent with that social structure. . . . the combination of mainstream recognition, wide circulation, and emotional impact is a proven formula for reproducing a society’s social order.¹⁴

Midcentury Americans may or may not have questioned the pervasive whiteness of the subjects portrayed in association with mass-circulated images of houses, for example, and they may or may not have embraced

the various practices that resulted in a largely segregated midcentury housing market. But they certainly viewed those images within the complicated historical context of the pre-civil rights United States. My point is not that all viewers shared a common perception of these images, but that, as Martin Berger has recently noted, “they built their distinctive visions on a shared racial bedrock that few whites questioned.”¹⁵ Americans most certainly viewed their world variously, yet it was also commonplace at midcentury (as it in some respects remains) for them to construct their world around the then accepted social, economic, and political constructions of race. It is therefore safe to say that the ways Americans read images of all kinds was influenced not just by what they saw on the page or on the television screen but also by their own racial values and by the historical circumstances of their moment.

I am, therefore, specifically interested in the mechanics of the operation of this ideological field. Instead of the more common theoretical formulations that posit the necessity for unveiling or unmasking ideologies that are imagined to be hidden in completely naturalized, and therefore invisible, cultural forms, I adopt instead Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ideological cynicism. Žižek essentially formulated a critique of Marx’s well-known statement about ideology from *Capital* (“They do not know it, but they are doing it”). For Žižek, Marx’s ideological framework depends on a subjective naïveté that can neither see nor recognize the supposed reality

that is being manipulated or distorted. He claims that later critics of Marx, such as members of the Frankfurt School, productively complicated Marx's formulation by emphasizing the importance of not simply "throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology"; the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification. The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence."¹⁶ Žižek, however, takes this one step further in his formulation of ideological cynicism, which is based, in part, on the writings of Peter Sloterdijk. Žižek writes:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it." Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind the ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.¹⁷

And he later states: "Belief supports the fantasy which regulates social reality."¹⁸

In this book, then, I employ Žižek's theoretical framework to examine the ways a specific ideological

and rhetorical field regulated the social realities of race and class as they intersected with the realm of postwar domesticity and the residential sphere. I assert and attempt to demonstrate in the pages that follow that a pervasive iconography of white, middle-class domesticity that circulated widely in various media and that became instantiated in thousands of houses nationwide served to reinforce and to continuously and reflexively create and re-create midcentury notions about racial and class identity, and specifically about the rightness of associating white identities with homeownership and citizenship. Like Sloterdijk and Žižek, I do not presume that Americans were naïve or completely unable to see

or recognize the exclusionary rhetoric that was embedded in these cultural forms. Instead, I work from a belief that the vast majority of midcentury Americans knew and deeply understood the economic value, political authority, and social clout invested in white identities; that white Americans of European descent were likewise so committed to the national formulation of whiteness that they saw it everywhere, acknowledged it only in exceptional instances, and participated in the privileges it conveyed largely without question; that they understood the racial logic of the segregated housing market and its long-term implications for themselves and their families; that, in short, "they knew very well what they were doing, and still, they were doing it."¹⁹

I do not state this as an indictment, or as an assumption that all Americans were or are openly or even con-

sciously racist, although many scholars who study race claim that to live as a white person in the United States is to be unable to escape a range of fundamentally racist practices. What I do assert, following the work of those same scholars, is that white Americans have tended not to see, think about, or acknowledge their unearned privileges, nor have they tended to examine the ways in which their white identities are socially constructed and culturally reinforced. In short, white Americans have seen themselves as entirely unracialized, their spaces as race-neutral. This book aims to contribute to the literature that examines the social construction of white identities and the vast and complicated implications that dismantling whiteness holds for the attainment of social, economic, and political justice in the United States.

RACE/ETHNICITY AND SPACE

It may seem strange to search for the spatial cues of racial/ethnic construction in the banal, and seemingly benign, setting of the ordinary house. Moreover, some historians will find the analysis of racial and class formation that I attempt here uncomfortable, as much of what I examine is, to some extent, literally invisible, as with the absence of nonwhites in mass-media images of newly constructed postwar houses. Yet that very invisibility, as I have mentioned above, is one of the key signals that indicates the operation of racialization in the

popular consciousness.²⁰ If historians have too rarely examined space and the built environment as critical agents in the formation of culture, architectural and landscape historians have far too seldom considered race in the development of their historical narratives. That space is constitutive of culture is now a widely accepted notion among scholars in the humanities; by extension, space is equally significant in the construction of ideas about race and identity, since these are cultural products as well. This line of inquiry has become the focus of important works by geographers and by scholars in the fields of American studies and ethnic studies. Scholars in all fields who study race now follow the model for understanding racial formation that is perhaps best known from the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who assert that race must be understood as

an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. . . . race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called “phenotypes”); selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. . . . there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines

of race. Indeed, the categories employed to differentiate among human groups along racial lines reveal themselves, upon serious examination, to be at best imprecise, and at worst completely arbitrary.

Omni and Winant posit their theory of racial formation “as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”²¹

Geographers such as David Delaney, Audrey Kobayashi, Linda Peake, Laura Pulido, Richard Schein, Owen Dwyer, Laura Barraclough, James Duncan, and Nancy Duncan have all contributed to our understanding “of how space works to condition the operation of power and the constitution of relational identities . . . [and to] help to highlight the critical importance of racialized space to other aspects of American life.”²² These scholars have examined at multiple scales the complex relationships that exist between space and the construction of race, but it is more usual to see such studies conducted at the scale of the nation, the state, or the city. This book aims instead, and somewhat unusually, to focus on both the microscale of the house and its material artifacts and the macroscale of the nationwide circulation of ideas about race and housing.

Although my focus here is on houses of the postwar era, by 1945 the connections forged among homeownership, white identities, and citizenship had existed for decades in the United States, with the precise align-

ment of white identities and ideas about home shifting according to both time and locale. A fairly large body of multidisciplinary scholarship already exists that links design, construction, homeownership, and home furnishing to identity formation. Scholars in fields such as cultural geography, anthropology, and environment/behavior research acknowledge that, as James Duncan and David Lambert have written, “homes . . . are primarily sites in which identities are produced and performed in practical, material and repetitively reaffirming ways.”²³ The representations I examine here both announced and replicated these. And the idea that residence is a crucial site for racial identity formation is borne out by the work of scholars such as David Freund, who has examined the links between homeownership and white identities, and Karyn Lacy, whose middle-class black subjects in her ethnographic study all believed that “black social spaces and residential places [are] crucial sites for the construction of black racial identities.”²⁴ With the increase in popular media directed at new and prospective homeowners, the media and homeowners became mutually related actors: media informed and homeowners/builders performed ideas related to race and class that were recursive and mutually constitutive.

If homeownership was historically the single most important symbol of achievement and belonging, it was not always or necessarily symbolic of middle-class

identity, but was instead more deeply connected to notions of security for earlier immigrants and working-class Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Homeownership served as a safeguard against the vicissitudes of unfair landlords, unpredictable rents, and homelessness. A home of one's own could also serve as a predictable and safe bank, an investment that represented security against uncertain times. Owning a house was the surest way to cement one's (and one's family's) inclusion in the nation.²⁵ But the race riots that took place in cities such as Detroit and Chicago in the 1910s and 1920s indicate that ideas about homeownership as an exclusively white privilege were already deeply embedded in the American consciousness by those early decades of the twentieth century; indeed, Americans were by that time willing to resort to violence to protect that notion.²⁶ As David Roediger has indicated, racially restrictive covenants that barred anyone not identified as white from purchasing homes in specific neighborhoods existed from the 1870s. They arose largely from

a specific fear of black residents and exempted new immigrants from restrictions. . . . Under law, the vast majority of new immigrants were secure in their Caucasian identities. . . . The principal exception in this regard was the exclusion of Jews, especially from some new suburban developments and

rental properties. . . . By far the most important feature of the covenant was its firm linking of white racial status with property. . . . It was precisely in the automatic connection of white and neighbor that restrictive covenants, and Jim Crow housing generally, most poisoned new immigrant attitudes regarding race.²⁷

No study of postwar domestic environments in the United States should exclude race, even if racial difference is seldom actually pictured in representations of domesticity from the period. Its very absence speaks remarkably loudly, once we begin to look and read more carefully. Anyone who spends any time at all examining the literature from the period must come away with a powerful sense of the consistent character of the subjects depicted. Over and over, the houses and gardens are peopled by well-dressed, well-groomed whites. This is, of course, not surprising since, with relatively few exceptions, whites were the only people with access to new suburban housing in this period. Advertisers and publishers understandably targeted the market they understood to be cultivable, expandable. As advertising specialist Arthur Dix wrote in 1957, "Advertising should be directed at those who buy."²⁸ And those who bought new houses were largely white. Some new housing did exist for inner-city nonwhites as the result of slum clearance associated with urban renewal

programs. These programs led to large-scale minority housing displacement across the country and the subsequent “solution” of new housing in high-rise public housing projects. Moreover, examples existed of black housing developments that were constructed during the postwar period, along with scattered developments that were unrestricted.²⁹ But the spatialized American Dream of the single-family detached home remained primarily, to use Roediger’s terms, “white, unless marked otherwise.”³⁰

HOUSING AND RACE

The fifteen-year period that frames this study is especially well suited to an examination of the links between housing and race. The years leading up to the civil rights movement saw the emergence and ascendancy of the idea of ethnicity as at least a partial replacement for some racial categories, specifically those pertaining to Jews.³¹ As Omni and Winant have noted, ethnicity theory emerged in the 1920s, challenging the then prevailing notions of race that were based in biological arguments and in social Darwinist theories.³² But the postwar period saw the decisive shift toward ethnicity as a substitute for these older models of race thinking, resulting in part from U.S. reactions to the Holocaust.³³ Ideas about race and ethnicity are fluid, but this specific shift is significant because it resulted in what Matthew Jacobson has called “a compelling



An advertisement for Ranger homes in 1954 features white homeowners and their guests. Courtesy of the D'Arcy Collection of the Communications Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

indeterminacy” to some racialized questions. Instead of a United States shaped exclusively by a black/white binary, Jacobson’s work proposes a more complicated, nuanced, and fluctuating white/other binary. Indeed, the production and constitution of racial binaries in the United States is both ongoing and messy, but what matters for this study is the role played by houses and the material and visual culture attendant to houses in the production of racial thinking. As recent scholarship indicates, whiteness is not defined by skin color alone, since appearance has not always determined racial identity in the United States or elsewhere. For example, members of the working classes and immigrant European workers were once regarded as other than white and as biologically different. Moreover, as Karen Brodtkin has demonstrated, Jews were not considered “white” in the United States until sometime after the immediate postwar period. The ability to own a home in the suburbs was a sign of belonging to the middle class, and to belong to that class was to be further bleached. Indeed, Brodtkin positions the suburbs as the site in which Jews learned “the ways of whiteness” through the help of “radio, magazines, and the new TV.”³⁴ But they also learned those lessons from the spaces of the houses and gardens in which they lived every day. Houses, and the literature and media representations surrounding them, coached immigrants in the assimilation and whitening process. They defined expectations to live by

through the spaces of daily domestic life and the objects and surfaces that filled those spaces. Representations of houses joined the houses themselves to provide articulations of the expected and hoped-for occupants for postwar housing. That Jews and some other ethnic groups were newly identified as white during the 1950s was not the result of any broad societal acceptance of difference; rather, it was related to the groups’ ability and desire to assimilate and blend—to become white.³⁵ As I show in the chapters that follow, the issues that resulted from this identity shift were clearly legible in the literature, marketing, and forms of ordinary houses and gardens.

If the formulation of whiteness varies according to time and space, it is nearly always constructed against and through a set of imaginary notions of what it might mean to be “other.” As Stuart Hall has written, racism is a “structure of knowledge and representations” that are based on ideas about and that are used to generate understandings of a fixed “us” in opposition to and in a separate space from “them.”³⁶ Identity construction is a complex process, but it relies, at least in part, on “negotiations with representational economies” and determinations about what one is not.³⁷ Since all identities remain in flux, any such determination depends on the creation of stereotypical images, of an “ethnic absolutism” that defies individuation and ultimately defies rights to human dignity.³⁸ For example, for cen-



An ordinary postwar house,
Urbana, Illinois. Date
and architect unknown.
Photograph by the author.

turies blackness was both imagined and represented in specific ways (described in chapter 1) that were likewise linked to material, spatial, and of course corporeal attributes.³⁹ My point is that the spectrum of signifiers through which whiteness is created and re-created depends on the ability of whites to identify what they are not in equal measure to deciding what they are, and that these signifiers have existed in the spatial and visual realm for centuries.

Overwhelmingly, the evidence collected and examined by historians in a range of fields now indicates that the private single-family home on its own lot in an exclusive suburb signaled a specifically formulated kind of racial and class identity that was likewise inextricably linked to cultural authority. As David Freund has demonstrated, “advocates of racial exclusion regularly used the terms ‘homeowner,’ ‘citizen,’ ‘voter,’ and ‘white’ interchangeably,” and this conflation of the terms came

about in the postwar United States as a result of carefully constructed government housing and economic policies.⁴⁰

HOUSES AND CLASS

Although questions about the formation of racial/ethnic identity are central to this book, questions about class structure and development are equally significant. In his important 1963 text on suburbia, sociologist William Dobriner took class as a given—indeed, as the central category for analysis of postwar suburban life. He asserted that suburbs are highly variable communities and that the only meaningful analysis to be constructed is one based on class. Significantly for this study, he also noted that “hardly any aspect of material culture or social relationships escapes the omnipresent and searching eye of evaluation. Religions, races, cities, names, neckties, families, occupations, neighborhoods, colleges, accents, manners, cars, haircuts, speech—all are ranked on a subjective continuum of social values.”⁴¹ What Dobriner’s generation of scholars had yet to realize or articulate fully was the extent to which race and class are deeply intertwined. Indeed, as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy have written, “race is the modality in which class is lived,” and “gender is the modality in which race is lived.”⁴² Race, class, and gender are mutually constitutive categories in identity formation,

and each can serve as an amplifier for the others. Being poor, or female, for example, frequently amplifies and multiplies the racist practices enacted against persons of color.⁴³ In this book, I show how houses and the visual and textual representations about houses served these modalities that continuously and reflexively linked race, class, and gender. As Susan Ruddick has written, shifting our

view of gender, race, and class as separate and distinct systems to intersecting systems has moved scholarship away from arid, endless debates that attempted to identify which system was predominant in the final instance. Scholars in black and cultural studies and black feminist writers have moved this analysis one step further, from an understanding of how gender, race, and class *intersect within* individuals in the structuring of social identities to an analysis of how these positions *interlock between* individuals, as notions of the appropriate roles and behaviors of different social groups have evolved in relation to one another, in what they call *interlocking systems of oppression*.⁴⁴

Gender constructions are highly racialized, and in my analysis of space I aim to consider them consistently as such. The gendered aspect of domestic environments has received far more attention than issues pertaining

to class and especially to race, and this book's focus is not specifically on gender. However, women were the primary daytime occupants of postwar houses, and, as such, they are implicitly key players throughout this book.

Much like race, class is an inherently unstable category for analysis. U.S. census data suggest that social class and occupation (blue-collar versus white-collar) are equivalent and correlated to income. However, class formation and definitions of class in the postwar United States were far more complex and fluid than these data might suggest. Although occupation, income, and homeownership serve as significant markers of both class and race in the United States, none of these constitute determining factors for class identity, because both class and race were and are social constructions forged through a range of complex everyday practices and group relationships, economic structures, and material artifacts that serve as indexes of social status. In the postwar era especially, definitions of what it meant to be “middle-class” changed along with a general increase in economic security for whites, an increase in disposable income that led to greater access to material possessions that conveyed social status, and increased access to homeownership.⁴⁵ Homeownership alone constituted a specific means for establishing status, and though it did not necessarily provide an immediate ticket to middle-class identity, it certainly conferred

a strong connection to at least the promise of upward mobility and of acceptance into the dominant and growing economic majority.⁴⁶ For those who were leaving behind blue-collar and/or immigrant backgrounds, the house became a potent symbol of acceptance and an instrument of aspiration to a broader range of opportunities. The configuration, decor, possessions, and maintenance of the house (and the labor involved in that maintenance) all provided opportunities to convey a range of images and lifestyles. Inner-city apartment dwelling, noise, crowding, smells, and manual labor all spoke of a working-class past and ethnic origins. Little proclaimed whiteness, class stability, and citizenship quite like a house of one's own in the suburbs.

In this book, then, I also examine the ways ordinary houses were intended to transcend and even sometimes obscure middle-majority Americans' lower-economic, working-class, and ethnic or racial roots, and/or their efforts never to return to their prewar lives and conditions. By looking carefully at house form and at representations of house form, I seek to understand the extent to which postwar domestic environments were a poignant cipher for whiteness, at least modest affluence, citizenship, and a sense of permanence. The house and garden, and their representations, therefore appear as the material dimension through which racial and class identity and difference are recursively constructed, assumed, and negotiated.

Because class is an inherently fluid category—one that is constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured by individuals and by the societies and cultures in which they are immersed—it is also inherently difficult to discuss or analyze in concrete terms. As Barbara Ehrenreich has indicated in her study of American class formation:

Class is a notion that is inherently fuzzy at the edges. When we talk about class, we are making a generalization about large groups of people, and about how they live and make their livings. Since there are so many borderline situations, and since people do move up and down between classes, a description like middle class may mean very little when applied to a particular individual. But it should tell us something about the broad terrain of inequality, and about how people are clustered, very roughly, at different levels of comfort, status, and control over their lives.⁴⁷

Class also tells us about aspirations, about how people conceptualize their identities, and about the distribution of power at various scales. Martha Gimenez theorizes that it is “the connections between class and experiences that gave rise to identity politics,” and she notes Weber’s emphasis on property ownership as key to “class situations” and the importance of “status situ-

ations.” Of Weber’s theory, Gimenez writes that it is at the level of appearances and practices that “people spontaneously become conscious of their place in the structures of inequality that produce and reproduce those appearances and shape their lives. Most people in the United States seem to be Weberians from birth, understanding class differences mainly in terms of ‘lifestyles’ made possible by their socioeconomic status . . . and membership in status groups such as gender, race, and ethnicity.”⁴⁸ In this book, by focusing on the house and its representations, I hope to elucidate some essential aspects of class formation and its links to these lifestyles and appearances, along with its links to racial and ethnic identity at the scale of the individual (though this is treated generically), the neighborhood, and the nation.

According to Richard Popenberg, 1950s critics of suburban life such as William Whyte believed that the suburbs were places where “class distinctions dissolved and ethnic attachments evaporated.” Popenberg notes that “class distinctions did not disappear in the suburbs. The range of classes was considerably narrower, however, and the means of telling them apart somewhat more difficult.” Although “suburbs exhibited no single pattern with respect to ethnic adaptation . . . [they were] typified by a narrowing of the range of ethnic groups but not by any diminution of an awareness of differences within that range.”⁴⁹ Indeed, and contrary

to Whyte's assertion, awareness of differences could be categorized as acute in the suburban postwar context, whether that awareness extended to class, gender, sexuality, or ethnic and racial distinctions.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Despite my inclusion of descriptions of my grandparents' house, which I use to provide a detailed sense of one particular postwar house and because I believe my grandparents' experience adds a degree of nuance to the black/white binary that characterizes many studies of race and housing and helps to illustrate the contingencies of Jewish identities with regard to whiteness in this period, this book should not be mistaken for an ethnographically based study, nor is it an economic analysis of postwar housing. Trained as an architectural historian, and having spent much of my career analyzing prints, drawings, and photographs as well as spaces, I have reached into a range of disciplines—as noted above—to obtain answers to the complex questions I have formulated about postwar houses and the iconographic field attendant to those houses. We certainly need ethnographic studies of postwar houses, just as we could benefit from some rigorously conducted economic analyses of houses and the housing market in the same period. However, I am trained neither as an ethnographer nor as an economist, and my skills are

best put to use in the examination of the visual, material, and built worlds. I therefore rely here primarily on those forms of evidence and leave it to future scholars with expertise that extends beyond my own to create studies based on ethnographic and economic data.

Ordinary house plans and documents about such houses rarely find their way into archives, so the traditional sources on which architectural historians typically rely are seldom available for those who wish to study these forms. As examined in detail in the chapters that follow, a range of nationally circulating publications intended for both specialized and mass audiences serve as important sources for this study, especially since I am concerned with the construction of an American iconography of race and class and its impact on the formation of U.S. culture. Although those primary sources are important to this study, I have also made use of a wide range of archives and other resources for this project, including papers and collections maintained by the National Association of Home Builders; the Museum of Television and Radio/Paley Center for New Media, New York; the National Museum of American History Archives Center; the Horticultural Division of the Archives of American Gardens at the Smithsonian Institution; the Chicago History Museum; the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives/NBC Collection; the College of Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley; the

Huntington Library Photographic Collection; the Francis Loeb Library Special Collections at Harvard University; the Sackler Museum Archives; the Ryerson and Burnham Archive at the Art Institute of Chicago; the U.S. Gypsum Corporate Archives; the A. Quincy Jones archives in the private collection of Elaine Sewell Jones (consulted before her death); the Clare Barrows papers (in the private collection of her family); government documents related to trading stamp regulation; and the Building Research Council Archives at the University of Illinois. Some of these collections contain drawings, pamphlets, and clippings related to postwar houses; others contain documentation about editorial processes at shelter magazines; some house rare film (now converted to video or to digital formats) of early television programming concerning postwar houses and gardens; still others contain information about the intersection of corporate interests and the building industries with the questions I ask here.

The inaccessibility of the corporate archives for some of the journals used in this study, such as *House Beautiful* and *Popular Mechanics*, made answering some questions a real challenge. Fortunately, I was able to locate some important primary source documents pertaining to editorial and managerial decisions in alternative locations. *House Beautiful*'s editor, Elizabeth Gordon, for example, corresponded with photographers such as Maynard Parker and with landscape ar-

chitects such as Thomas Church, so their archives also contain limited Gordon correspondence. Gordon left a very small collection of her papers to the archives of the Sackler and Freer Galleries of Art/Smithsonian Institution, and these also proved useful.

Houses themselves constituted important sources of information as well, and I have drawn on built examples whenever it made sense to do so. Although cultural and social historians are accustomed to regarding textual documents alone as authoritative sources of evidence, historians of visual culture and the material environment also regard buildings, artifacts, and visual representations as key forms of evidence. House plans, for example, have much to tell us about cultural values; so do household objects, gardens, advertisements, and the myriad products of the shelter and advertising industries. Moreover, the ubiquitous and ordinary forms of the visual and material world convey an enriched dimension to the histories of housing inequality and segregation in the United States. Through these forms of evidence, we can begin to understand not only the more commonly studied historical structures that governed the postwar housing market (banks, government agencies, real estate boards, construction industries) but also—and equally important—the everyday forces that shaped and reinforced the ongoing acceptance of a system marked by deep inequality. By looking closely at what some might consider the detritus of everyday life,

we learn about the ways in which everyday acts of participation in a dominant culture are formulated, taken for granted, rehearsed, and enacted, and how the structures are reinforced.

I wrote this book while working and living in Urbana, Illinois, which is a virtual laboratory of postwar house design. Every trip to the grocery store or walk to

my office became an opportunity to look at and ponder the variations displayed along the roadside. Writing this book has helped me see that cultural landscape differently. I hope the readers of this book will patiently consider the history I present here, even if it offers an uncomfortable view of their own neighborhoods, and perhaps even of their own houses.

