

Theme: Ranch

Ranch style architecture first appeared in Southern California in the 1930s. Inspired by the Spanish and Mexican-era *haciendas* of Southern California and the vernacular, wood-framed farmhouses dotting the landscape of Northern California, Texas, and the American West, the style projected an informal, casual lifestyle that proved to be immensely popular among the American public. Early iterations of the Ranch style tended to be large, sprawling custom residences that were designed by noted architects of the day. However, after World War II, Ranch style architecture was pared down and also became a preferred style for economical, mass-produced tract housing. By some estimates, nine of every ten new houses built in the years immediately after World War II embodied the Ranch style in one way or another. The style remained an immensely popular choice for residential architecture – and was occasionally adapted to commercial and institutional properties as well – until it fell out of favor in the mid-1970s.²⁶⁰

Cliff May, commonly referred to as “father of the Ranch house,” propelled the style into the public consciousness and, although he did not invent the ranch house, he is the figure most closely associated with the typology’s early popularization. May developed his own distinctive aesthetic that was characterized by open and free-flowing interior plans, a blending of interior and exterior spaces, and a hand-hewn character. Early designs were custom and sprawling, but in the early 1950s, May, in collaboration with the architect Chris Choate, devised a much smaller, scaled-down interpretation of his trademark California Ranch house that was based on a modular plan and could be replicated on a much larger scale. Averaging 950 square feet, these houses are notable for their innovative manufacturing and distributing system; whereas May and Choate designed the models and determined their specifications, the houses’ construction was franchised out to individual builders. Marketed as the “Cliff May Homes,” these economical Ranch houses were constructed in residential tracts across the nation, with notable concentrations in the Tustin area.

Sub-Theme: Traditional Ranch

²⁶⁰ “Architecture and Engineering, The Ranch House, 1930-1975,” Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, prepared for City of Los Angeles, Office of Historic Resources, December 2015, 3-5.



Example of the Traditional Ranch style: 150 Pasadena Avenue.

Traditional Ranch style architecture made its debut in the 1930s and is what is generally considered to be the “quintessential Ranch house.” Buildings designed in the style were awash in historical references associated with the vernacular architecture of 19th century California and the American West, and generally took on a distinctive, rusticated appearance. Examples of Traditional Ranch architecture were prominently featured in general interest publications, notably *Sunset* magazine, which perpetuated the style’s popularity and led to its widespread acceptance among the American public.

The Traditional Ranch style is almost always expressed in the form of a one-story, single-family house, although the style was occasionally adapted to commercial and institutional properties in the postwar era. It is distinguished from other iterations of the Ranch style by the application of elements associated with the working ranches of 19th century California and the American West. Features such as low-pitched roofs with wide eaves, a combination of wall cladding materials including board-and-batten siding, large picture windows, and brick and stone chimneys were commonly applied. Subsets of the Traditional Ranch style include the American Colonial Ranch, which features elements associated with the American Colonial Revival style (symmetrical façades, cupolas, classical details); the Hacienda Ranch, which loosely resembles the *haciendas* of late 19th century California, incorporating clay tile roofing and textured stucco exteriors; the Cinderella Ranch, distinguished by their highlighted and often exaggerated details including scalloped bargeboards and Swiss Chalet details; and the Minimal Ranch, which is a pared down version of the Traditional Ranch, featuring simple floor plans and restrained ornamentation.

Character-defining features of Traditional Ranch style architecture include:

- One-story configuration (two-story Ranch houses are rare)
- Asymmetrical composition with one or more projecting wings
- Horizontal massing
- Low-pitched gable or hipped roof, originally clad with wood shakes
- Wide eaves and exposed rafters
- Brick or stone chimneys
- Combination of wall cladding materials (wood board-and-batten siding is most common)
- One or more picture windows
- Multi-light wood windows, often with diamond panes
- Decorative wood shutters
- Dutch and/or French doors
- Attached garage, often appended to the main house via a breezeway

Sub-Theme: Contemporary Ranch



Example of the Contemporary Ranch style: 13661 Fairmont Way.

Contemporary Ranch architecture emerged after World War II. Buildings designed in the style took on the basic form, configuration, and massing of the Traditional Ranch house, but instead of historically-inspired treatments and details they incorporated the clean lines and abstract geometries associated with Modernism. The Contemporary Ranch style offered an alternative to the Traditional Ranch house and was applied to scores of residential buildings constructed between the mid-1940s and 1970s.

Like the Traditional Ranch houses from which it is derived, the Contemporary Ranch style is almost always expressed in the form of a one-story, single-family house. In lieu of the historicist references and rusticated features that are associated with the Traditional Ranch style, Contemporary Ranch houses exhibit abstract geometries and contemporary details that are most often seen in Mid-Century Modern architecture. Post-and-beam construction was common; carports often took the place of garages; exterior walls tended to be clad in a more simplistic palette composed of stucco and wood; roofs were of a lower pitch and were often more expressive or flamboyant in form; and ornament tended to be more abstract in character and was applied more judiciously. Oriental and Polynesian-inspired motifs were often incorporated into the design of Contemporary Ranch houses.²⁶¹

Character-defining features of Contemporary Ranch style architecture include:

- One-story configuration (two-story Ranch houses are rare)
- Asymmetrical composition with one or more projecting wings
- Horizontal massing and abstract form
- Post-and-beam construction
- Low-pitched gable or hipped roof, sometimes with expressionist qualities
- Combination of wall cladding materials, generally including stucco and wood siding
- Windows and doors are generally treated as void elements
- Abstract ornamental details
- Incorporation of Oriental and Polynesian motifs is common
- Carports are common and often take the place of an attached garage

²⁶¹ "Architecture and Engineering, The Ranch House, 1930-1975," 17-20.