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A Field Guide To American Houses: The Definitive Guide To Identifying And Understanding America's Domestic Architecture

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

A Field Guide to American Houses

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

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



Virginia Savage McAlester



Synopsis

For the house lover and the curious tourist, for the house buyer and the weekend stroller, for neighborhood preservation groups and for all who want to know more about their community -- here, at last, is a book that makes it both easy and pleasurable to identify the various styles and periods of American domestic architecture. Concentrating not on rare landmarks but on typical dwellings in ordinary neighborhoods all across the United States -- houses built over the past three hundred years and lived in by Americans of every social and economic background -- the book provides you with the facts (and frame of reference) that will enable you to look in a fresh way at the houses you constantly see around you. It tells you -- and shows you in more than 1,200 illustrations -- what you need to know in order to be able to recognize the several distinct architectural styles and to understand their historical significance. What does that cornice mean? Or that porch? That door? When was this house built? What does its style say about the people who built it? You'll find the answers to such questions here. This is how the book works: Each of thirty-nine chapters focuses on a particular style (and its variants). Each begins with a large schematic drawing that highlights the style's most important identifying features. Additional drawings and photographs depict the most common shapes and the principal subtypes, allowing you to see at a glance a wide range of examples of each style. Still more drawings offer close-up views of typical small details -- windows, doors, cornices, etc. -- that might be difficult to see in full-house pictures. The accompanying text is rich in information about each style -- describing in detail its identifying features, telling you where (and in what quantity) you're likely to find examples of it, discussing all of its notable variants, and revealing its origin and tracing its history. In the book's introductory chapters you'll find invaluable general discussions of house-building materials and techniques ("Structure"), house shapes ("Form"), and the many traditions of architectural fashion ("Style") that have influenced American house design through the past three centuries. A pictorial key and glossary help lead you from simple, easily recognized architectural features -- the presence of a tile roof, for example -- to the styles in which that feature is likely to be found. This eBook edition has been optimized for screen.

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Customer Reviews

If you are an old-house fan, this book is the equivalent of a college education. Here are some reasons this book is both entertaining and useful: It starts with chapters on basic structure: shapes of houses, style of construction, ornamentation, etc. There are simple, remarkably clear drawings accompanying all this that will serve to give you a kind of 'vocabulary' to interpret houses when you run across something new (for example, a dozen different types of dormers - what are they all called?). (These involve almost entirely external elements, for detailed interiors you will need another book.) Lots of delicious historical background about how history and technological advances changed housing. For example, the authors divide folk housing into "pre" and "post-railroad" because not until railroads made building materials nationally accessible did a national set of housing styles develop. Following this, there are a series of chapters describing different styles (i.e., Victorian, Tudor, etc.), starting with the characteristic details, when and where the style is found, etc. The McAlisters do a particularly good job on regional variations; there are some remarkable maps showing the prevalence of different styles in different states. The graphics are fantastic and plentiful. The simple stylized drawings of building elements (rooflines, doorways, windows, etc.) clearly distinguish one detail from another, while the photographs make you want to pop into the car and drive all over to see the real houses themselves. One note: there is a table, starting around p. 55, that will make the book much easier to use as a 'field guide' (i.e., driving around looking at houses the way birders look at birds).

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