

1940s House Styles: Simple Layouts That Still Make Sense Today

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1940s House Styles | What Made Homes in the '40s So Practical (and Still Kinda Cool)

1940s Homes: What Made These No-Frills Styles So Smart

This guide on the 1940s house style is part of a [hands-on project documenting 500 years of home design](#)—covering interiors, exteriors, layouts, materials, and the real reasons people still love these homes.

“ 1940s House Design: Practical, Efficient, and Totally Underrated

1940s House Floor Plans and Styles: What We Still Love About Them

We’ve lived it, renovated it, and yes—argued about which tile patterns are worth saving. The 1940s style has way more going for it than people give it credit for.

Below, we’ll show you what makes it so smart, how it still works today, and why it might be exactly what your next home project needs.

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Quick Look: What Was Happening in the 1940s

▫ **Post-War Simplicity** → Everything was about doing more with less.

Homes were smaller, more efficient, and built fast.

▫ **Government-Backed Housing** → GI Bill and FHA loans made it easier for veterans to buy homes—so builders focused on affordable styles.

▫ **Shift Toward Suburbs** → Big cities were expensive, so families moved to suburbs and needed homes that worked for everyday living.

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Guide to Mid-Century Homes

Mid-century homes didn't just pop up in the 1950s—they started gaining shape in the **1940s**, laying the groundwork for what became one of the most iconic design eras ever.

What you'll find in this guide:

- ▫ How **1940s Minimal Traditional** and **Cape Cod** styles set the stage
- ▫ The rise of **Ranch homes**, open layouts, and indoor-outdoor living
- ▫ Clean lines, warm woods, and functional floor plans

- ■ What still works today—and what to skip

Think of this as your quick-start map to one of the smartest (and still livable) home styles in modern history.

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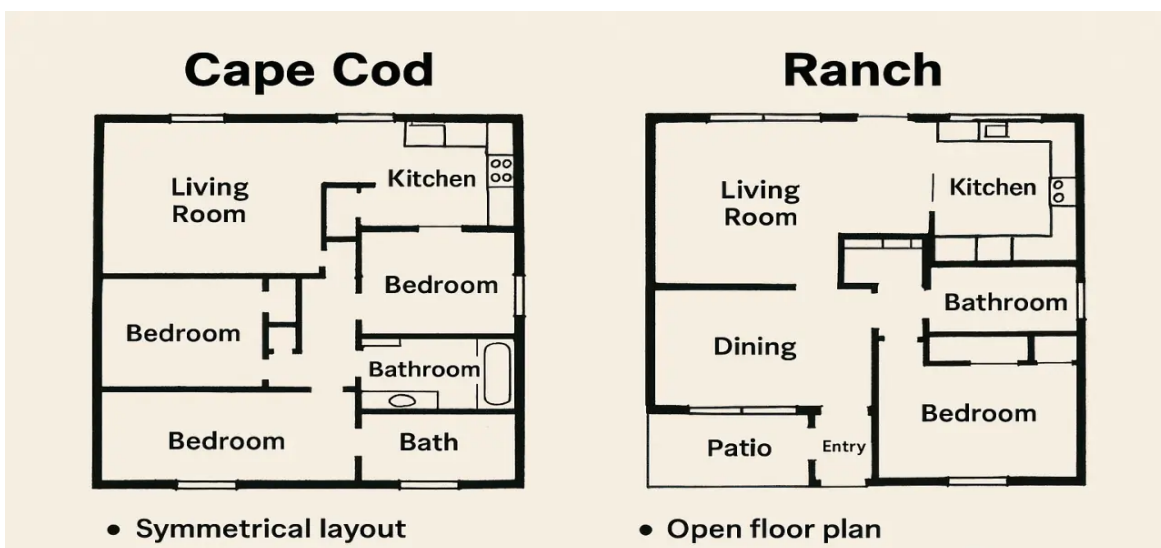
Cape Cod Homes: Small, Smart, and Built to Last

Cape Cod homes were **simple, efficient, and charming**—born from New England roots but revived in the 1940s for returning soldiers and growing families.

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What They Are:



- Central entry, simple rooms
- Living room anchored by fireplace
- Easy indoor-outdoor flow
- Patio access from living area

Image: A side-by-side comparison sketch of Cape Cod and Ranch-style homes, illustrating distinct design features.

- **Symmetrical design** – steep roof, central chimney, dormers
- **1 to 1.5 stories** – compact and easy to heat
- **Wood siding and shutters** – no fuss, just function

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Why They Worked in the 1940s:

- ✓ **Easy to build** – mass housing needed fast solutions
- ✓ **Affordable** – perfect for GI Bill homebuyers
- ✓ **Adaptable** – unfinished attics often became extra rooms

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What Stage Were They In?

By the 1940s, Cape Cods were in **full revival mode**—adapted from Colonial homes but simplified for efficiency.

- Not fancy, but practical.
- Less historic detail, more about making homeownership possible.

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Why Study Them Today?

- They represent a **critical shift in home access** for average Americans.
- They were part of the **foundation of suburban expansion**.
- They helped redefine what a "starter home" could be.

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Part of Human Development Because:

- These homes symbolized stability after war.
- They reflect how **design met real human needs**—shelter, affordability, and growth.
- Still popular today, proving that **good design holds up** over time.

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The Rise of Ranch Homes & Indoor-Outdoor Living

By the late 1940s, something new was brewing—**ranch homes** that

turned away from the tight, vertical box and embraced space, flow, and connection to the outdoors.

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What They Are:

- **Single-story homes** with low-pitched roofs
- **Long, horizontal layouts** with open rooms
- **Sliding glass doors and patios** to extend living outdoors
- **Attached garages** – for the car-loving postwar family

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Architects & Movements:

- **Cliff May** – often called the “father of the ranch home”
- Influenced by **Modernism and Spanish Colonial styles**
- Part of the broader **California Modern** movement

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What Stage in the 1940s?

- Just starting to gain traction—**especially on the West Coast**
- Post-1945: builders were testing it out as a modern alternative to Cape Cods

- By 1950, it exploded nationwide

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Why They Mattered:

- ✓ First time homes were **designed around lifestyle**, not formality
- ✓ Brought the **outside in**—big shift from inward-facing homes
- ✓ Encouraged open living, casual dining, and movement across space

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Why Study Ranch Homes Now:

- They helped redefine how homes could feel—**casual, connected, unpretentious**.
- They marked a shift in architecture from hierarchy to flow.
- Still one of the most popular home styles in the U.S. today.

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Part of Human Architecture Because:

- Reflects a moment when people wanted **space, freedom, and flexibility**
- Aligned with the postwar mindset of **reinvention and optimism**

- Proved that architecture could grow with how people actually lived—not just how it looked on paper

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Modernism in the 1940s: A Quiet Turning Point in Architecture

While suburban homes of the 1940s leaned traditional, **modernism** **was quietly gaining ground**—especially in architectural circles that were less about mass housing and more about experimentation.

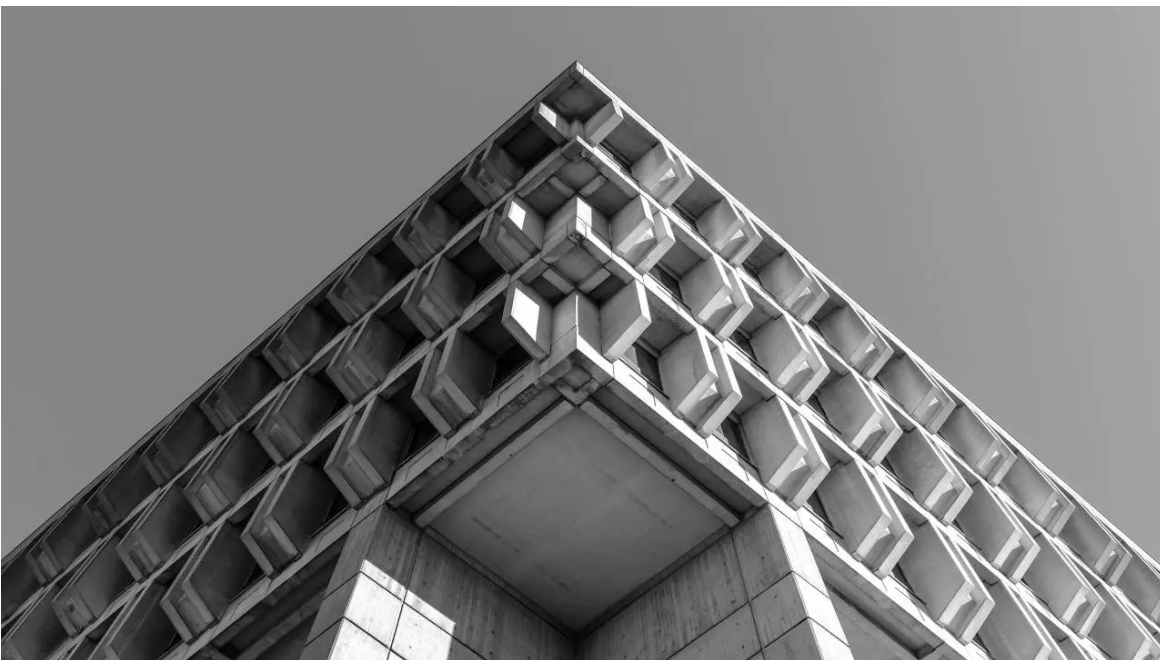


Image: A modern 1940s concrete building in Boston, showcasing mid-century architectural design and urban aesthetic.

◆ What Stage Was It At?

Modernism wasn't brand new in the 1940s—it had already been bubbling in Europe since the 1920s and '30s. But in America? The 1940s marked the point when modernist ideas really started to **cross over from theory to practice**.

- Think fewer columns, more clean lines.
- Less ornament, more function.
- Materials that matched the machine age: steel, glass, concrete.

◆ **Key Architects Making Moves**

▪ **Richard Neutra** – His California homes blended modern forms with nature and blurred indoor-outdoor living. ▪ **Rudolph Schindler** – Built quiet-but-bold modernist homes in Los Angeles, focused on function and flow. ▪ **Walter Gropius** – Fled Nazi Germany, taught at Harvard, and built the iconic Gropius House in Massachusetts (1938). It shaped what students—and the industry—thought modernism *should* look like.

◆ **Major Accomplishments in the '40s**

✓ The rise of the **International Style** in the U.S.—flat roofs, glass curtain walls, no frills. ✓ The **Case Study House program** (launched in 1945)—modern homes built to respond to the needs of postwar life. ✓ **Public housing** and institutional buildings began adopting modernist forms for affordability and clarity.

◆ **Was the 1940s Important for Modernism?** Absolutely—but in a *foundational* way.

It was the decade modernism went from being a European import to a serious American movement. It shaped everything that would explode in the 1950s and 60s—Midcentury Modern, brutalism, even corporate glass towers.

Bottom line? The 1940s were the warm-up act. The quiet beginning. The era when modernism stopped being “weird” and started being “the future.”

“ 1940s Home Design Ideas: Layouts, Interiors, and Remodel Tips

1940s Residential Architecture: Style Guide for a Smart Renovation

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The Big Styles of the 1940s (Still Worth Copying)

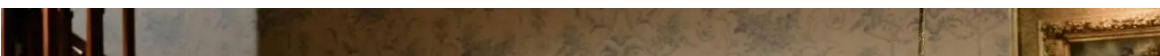




Image: Exquisite 1940s home office featuring original mahogany wood furniture, showcasing true craftsmanship and vintage elegance.

Let's break down the styles that defined the decade. Nothing flashy—just solid, well-thought-out homes.

- **Minimal Traditional**

- Low-pitched roofs, small porches, no extra fluff
- Usually 1 to 1.5 stories
- Simple layouts with square rooms and short hallways

- **Cape Cod Revival**

- Steep roofs, central chimneys, wood siding
- Symmetrical front and small dormers up top

- Easy to build and even easier to heat

- **Early Ranch Style**

- Started popping up in the late '40s
- Single-level homes with long layouts
- Attached garages were a big deal

- **Gable-Front Cottages**

- Compact footprint, great for small lots
- Gable faces the street, small entry porch
- Think cozy, not cramped

These styles focused on practicality first—but left enough room for personality.

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Exterior Features That Still Make Sense

✓ **Compact Footprints** → Homes were smaller but laid out smartly. No wasted space.

✓ **Simple Rooflines** → Gable or hipped roofs with minimal angles made them cheaper to build and easier to maintain.

✓ **Materials**

- Wood siding or clapboard
- Brick or stone veneer if you had a little extra budget
- Stucco in warmer areas

✓ **Colors**

- Natural tones (white, gray, tan)
- No bold or trendy colors—just stuff that aged well

✓ **Functional Porches**

- Tiny front stoop or covered porch—just enough to keep the rain off while you fumbled for keys

✓ **Small Windows, Big Function**

- Windows were modest in size, double-hung, and placed for cross ventilation
- Function > fancy. But that gave them a clean look that's aged well

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Inside the Homes: What's Worth Saving (and What's Not)



Image: Interior of a 1940s-style house in Pretoria, South Africa, featuring vintage furnishings and period-accurate design details.

Here's the thing: the insides weren't huge—but they were clever. Builders made the most out of every inch.

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Inside the Homes:

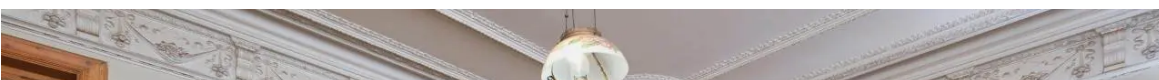




Image: Authentic 1940s dining area showcasing an exquisite original dining table, reflecting the craftsmanship and style of the era.

▫ **Living Rooms**

Centered around a **fireplace or large window**, the living room in a 1940s home was built for comfort and straightforward function. No weird angles. No wasted corners.

What to Learn:

- ✓ Keep it simple. Layouts were clear, and furniture fit without needing a measuring app.
- ✓ A central focal point (like a fireplace) helps anchor the space—still works today.

What to Avoid:

- ✗ Overcrowding. These rooms weren't made for three sectionals and a 75" TV.

✗ Removing the fireplace just to “open it up.” Leave the charm!

What to Embrace:

- **Crown molding and basic trim**—classic, clean, and timeless.
- Use vintage-style sconces or light fixtures to highlight character.

Cancel This:

🚫 Wall-mounted fake electric fireplaces that scream 2020 YouTube influencer. Doesn't fit here.

Real Tip:

One homeowner left their original hearth alone but added a sleek wood mantle and painted brick white—keeping the old, freshening the look. Perfect balance.

▫ Kitchens

Often **galley-style or L-shaped**, 1940s kitchens were compact but cleverly laid out. You could actually reach everything without walking a mile.

What to Learn:

- ✓ Built-in cabinetry wasn't just stylish—it saved space and looked polished.
- ✓ Breakfast nooks near corner windows? Pure genius. Still cozy, still useful.

What to Avoid:

- ✗ Tearing out all the uppers just to be “modern.” You’ll miss the storage.
- ✗ Converting it into a massive open-concept island temple—doesn’t match the home.

What to Embrace:

- **Metal handles, laminate counters**, and clean lines. You can update materials while keeping the bones.
- Warm wood tones or soft pastels to reflect the vibe.

Cancel This:

- ⊘ Faux-rustic barn doors on a 1940s galley kitchen. Nope. Wrong decade, wrong look.

Real Tip:

A client used butcher block countertops, mint cabinet paint, and left the original nook intact. It felt like 1947—but with a dishwasher.

▫ Bathrooms

Tiny, colorful, and functional—these bathrooms made the most out of 5’x7’. Somehow they fit everything.

What to Learn:

- ✓ Color can be fun. Embrace tile shades like pink, green, or powder blue. It’s not “dated.” it’s bold.

✓ Compact can still be luxurious with the right lighting and finishes.

What to Avoid:

✗ Gutting the whole thing for gray-on-gray mediocrity.

✗ Tossing a cast-iron tub just because it looks “old.” Re-glaze it. It’ll outlast your new one.

What to Embrace:

▪ **Tile halfway up the wall**, built-in medicine cabinets, hex floor tiles.

All winners.

▪ Brass or polished chrome fixtures work great in these spaces.

Cancel This:

⊘ Overly modern vanities with glowing LED strips and waterfall faucets. Keep it classic.

Real Tip:

A homeowner swapped a cracked mint sink for a vintage replica and matched the tub glaze. Now people compliment the bathroom first when touring the house.

▫ **Bedrooms**

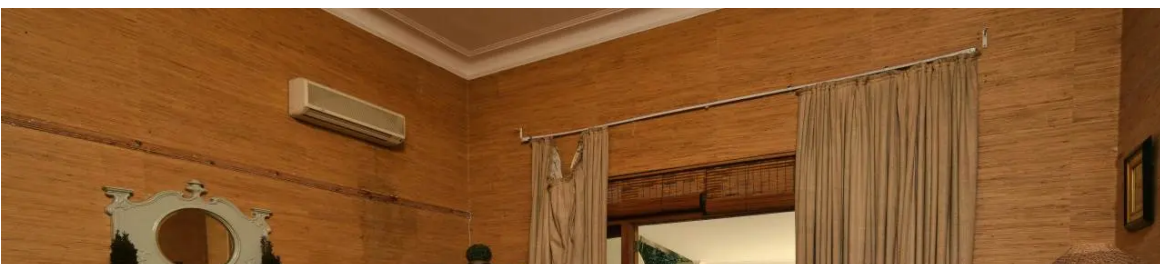




Image: Beautiful classic bedroom from the 1940s featuring a cozy fireplace, period furnishings, and timeless vintage charm.

Modest in size (often **10x12 or smaller**) with **tiny closets**, these rooms kept things efficient.

What to Learn:

- ✓ Scale matters. Smaller rooms don't need king beds and giant dressers.
- ✓ Embrace layered lighting—one ceiling fixture isn't enough anymore.

What to Avoid:

- ✗ Thinking bigger is always better.
- ✗ Shoving in oversized furniture—it'll feel cramped and awkward.

What to Embrace:

- **Wood floors**, clean trim, and vintage dressers or armoires.
- Soft lighting, roman shades, and a warm-toned color palette.

Cancel This:

🚫 Trying to recreate a hotel suite in a 1940s bedroom. The charm is in its simplicity.

Real Tip:

One family added two wall sconces, re-stained the floors, and put in a fitted wardrobe system. It now feels bigger without touching the walls.

▫ Basements & Attics

Image: 1940s basement interior featuring a large metal machine, reflecting vintage industrial design and historical utility spaces.

- Many homes included a full basement (unfinished)
- Attics were small and often only for storage

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Renovating a 1940s Home (Without Ruining It)

You don't need to gut a 1940s home to make it livable. Most just need thoughtful tweaks.

✓ What to Keep

- **Original hardwood floors** – They're usually oak or maple. Sand, refinish, done.
- **Simple trim and built-ins** – Clean lines, classic proportions.
- **Masonry fireplaces** – They were built solid. Sometimes all they need is a new mantle.

✓ What to Upgrade

- **Electrical & plumbing** – If it hasn't been updated, it probably needs it.
- **Insulation** – 1940s homes weren't exactly cozy. Blow-in attic insulation = instant comfort.
- **Kitchens & baths** – You can modernize without going full Pinterest farmhouse. Keep the layout. Just freshen materials.

🚫 What to Avoid

- Ripping out walls just to make it “open concept”
- Using ultra-modern materials that clash with the house’s age
- Painting every surface white “for resale” – it's boring and makes charming details disappear

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Do & Don't List: Renovating Right

Do This ✅

- Keep original doors and knobs if they're in good shape
- Use light fixtures that *feel* vintage (but are new)
- Add insulation wherever possible—it makes a bigger difference than granite countertops
- Keep the home's proportions in mind when remodeling

Don't Do This 🚫

- Don't install a giant island that overwhelms a small kitchen
- Don't cover real wood with vinyl plank “because it's easier”
- Don't raise the roofline unless you absolutely have to

- Don't rip out closets thinking they weren't useful—people just used space better back then

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How to Modernize a 1940s Home (Without Losing the Charm)

It's totally possible to make these homes feel current *and* classic.

▫ **Smart Modern Touches**

- Use neutral tones but add warm textures (linen, wood, stone)
- Replace tile with matte finishes in soft whites or earthy greens
- Integrate built-in storage where it feels natural (hallways, under stairs)

▫ **Modern Layout Tweaks**

- Widen doorways between rooms—just a little
- Combine two tiny bedrooms into a better-sized primary with a walk-in closet
- Add French doors or a big window to the backyard to create indoor-outdoor flow

💡 **Pro Tip:** Don't over-design it. 1940s homes have a quiet confidence—your updates should match that vibe.

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Real Stories: Wins, Regrets & Lessons

Let's keep it real.

- *Sarah & Joe (Portland, OR)*

“Buying our 1947 home was the best decision we made. The hardwood floors and fireplace were untouched. We updated the kitchen but kept the layout. Only regret? Not checking the sewer line first—cost us \$9K two months in.”

- *Marcus (New Jersey)*

“I tried to go open concept and knocked out a load-bearing wall... expensive mistake. I ended up rebuilding a beam that looks original just to restore the feel.”

- *Tanya (Atlanta)*

“I kept the pink bathroom tile and added brass fixtures and warm lighting. Everyone said I was crazy—until they saw it finished.”

Biggest Takeaway?

Biggest Takeaway:

Stick to updates that feel respectful of the home's age. You're not flipping—it's not a game show.

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Common Problems in 1940s Homes — and How to Fix Them



These homes were solid, but they've had time to age—and not always gracefully.

⚠ Here's what to watch out for (and what you can actually do about it):

✓ Tiny Closets

- The average closet in the 1940s was about 2 feet deep.

Fix: Turn an adjacent linen closet into a shared wardrobe space. Or add a built-in wall unit that blends in.

✓ Old Electrical Systems

- Many still have outdated knob-and-tube or limited amperage.

Fix: Hire an electrician to upgrade the panel and rewire outlets—especially in kitchens and baths.

✓ Drafty Windows

- Single-pane windows + no weatherproofing = freezing winters.

Fix: Install storm windows (interior or exterior) if you want to preserve originals. Otherwise, replace with energy-efficient ones that mimic the old grid pattern.

✓ Low Ceilings

- 8 feet or under is common.

Fix: Stick to low-profile furniture and use vertical lines in design to trick the eye. Avoid bulky ceiling lights.

✓ Moisture in Basements

- Not designed for today's humidity levels.

Fix: French drains, sump pumps, and good old-fashioned sealing. And maybe don't store your vinyl collection down there.

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Weird (but Genius) 1940s Design Choices

Some things 1940s builders did will make you go, “Wait... what?”

💡 Phone Niches

- Tiny built-in shelves in hallways—just for landlines and notepads.

They were the “tech centers” of their time.

💡 **Laundry Chutes**

- Little doors in the bathroom that dropped clothes straight to the basement. Simple, smart, and weirdly satisfying.

💡 **Floor Vents with No Ducts**

- Some homes had fake or disconnected vents—just to “look” more modern. Yep, design faking existed even then.

💡 **Attic Fan Systems**

- Giant fans in the ceiling that pulled hot air up and out. No A/C, just physics.

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Facts About 1940s House Styles

- **The average 1940s home size was around 800–1,200 sq ft** – Small, functional, and easy to maintain.
- **Cape Cod homes made a major comeback** – Thanks to their simple design and affordability.
- **Minimal Traditional was the go-to style** – Builders could construct them quickly for returning veterans.

- **Attached garages became popular** – A sign of growing car ownership in postwar America.
- **Colorful bathrooms were the trend** – Mint green, pink, and baby blue tiles were *everywhere*.
- **Most homes had one bathroom, total** – Yep, just one. Usually no more than 5'x7'.
- **Closets were tiny** – Minimal wardrobes meant you didn't need much space.
- **Laundry chutes and phone niches were smart extras** – Fun and super functional.
- **Solid hardwood floors came standard** – Oak and maple were the most common choices.

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In Focus: Why 1940s Homes Handle Renovations Better Than You Think

Here's something most people overlook:

➔ **These homes were built with renovation in mind.**

Framing was solid. Layouts were simple. Materials were easy to work with. Unlike some styles, 1940s homes *aren't precious*—they're adaptable.

You can:

- Add square footage without ruining the shape
- Build up or bump out without odd proportions
- Open walls (if not load-bearing) without compromising the charm

This makes them *great bones* for remodelers who want flexibility without a teardown.

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Why 1940s Homes Are the Kings of Low-Maintenance

You know what's rare today? Homes that are actually **low-maintenance by design**. The 1940s nailed it.

- **Small footprints = fewer surfaces to repair**
- **Simple rooflines = fewer leak points**
- **Limited materials = lower renovation costs**
- **Natural airflow = less need for A/C**

Back then, people didn't design for Instagram. They designed so you could clean the place in an hour, heat it affordably, and go on with your day.

If you're tired of high-effort houses, this decade was ahead of its time.

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Expert Tips: What We've Learned After Dozens of 1940s Projects

Here's what actually works in the field—not just on Pinterest:

✓ **Keep your palette muted.**

These homes don't need neon kitchens or all-black bathrooms to feel modern.

✓ **Think in zones, not just rooms.**

Instead of adding big additions, create better flow between spaces.

✓ **Respect the structure.**

Don't fight the layout—work with it. These homes weren't meant to be sprawling. They were meant to be smart.

✓ **Budget realistically.**

You'll spend more on fixing the guts (plumbing, wiring) than on flashy

finishes. Plan for that from day one.

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1940s House Styles: Quick Reference Guide

▪ [Cape Cod](#)

- **Look for:** Steep roof, central chimney, wood siding, small dormers
- **Vibe:** Symmetrical, cozy, compact
- **Key Feature:** Dormered attic often used for expansion

▪ **Minimal Traditional**

- **Look for:** Low-pitched roof, small front porch, little ornamentation
- **Vibe:** Streamlined take on Colonial and Tudor homes
- **Key Feature:** Built quickly and cheaply for postwar buyers

▪ **Early Ranch**

- **Look for:** One story, long horizontal lines, attached garage, large windows
- **Vibe:** Casual, modern, sprawling
- **Key Feature:** Sliding glass doors leading to patio = early indoor-outdoor living

▪ **Gable-Front Cottage**

- **Look for:** Narrow front, gabled roof facing street, small porch
- **Vibe:** Compact and charming
- **Key Feature:** Good for small lots; often seen in wartime worker housing

▪ **Colonial Revival (Late-Phase)**

- **Look for:** Symmetrical facades, multi-pane windows, shutters
- **Vibe:** Traditional and stately but simplified
- **Key Feature:** Often built with cheaper materials due to wartime rationing

▪ **Tudor Revival (Waning)**

- **Look for:** Steep roofs, decorative half-timbering, brick or stone exteriors
- **Vibe:** Old World-inspired, fading out by mid-1940s
- **Key Feature:** Arched doorways and leaded glass still showed up early in the decade

▪ **Art Deco / Streamline Moderne (Urban Only)**

- **Look for:** Curved walls, smooth stucco, glass block windows, flat roofs

- **Vibe:** Sleek, urban, futuristic (for its time)
- **Key Feature:** More common in apartments and city buildings than homes

▪ **International Style (Architect-Driven)**

- **Look for:** Flat roof, open plan, no ornament, horizontal bands of windows
- **Vibe:** Minimalist, modernist, very “architect” not builder
- **Key Feature:** Rare in suburbs—mostly seen in custom homes and public buildings

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Final Thoughts: Still Practical. Still Cool.

The 1940s weren't flashy. These homes weren't about showing off. They were about working hard, living simply, and making smart choices with limited materials.

And honestly? That's why they've lasted.

If you're renovating or buying one, here's the bottom line:

- **Start with what works.** Don't assume it needs a total gut job.
- **Update with intention.** Don't chase trends—match the tone of the house.
- **Appreciate the scale.** Not every home needs 4,000 square feet to feel good.

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Our Advice?

Don't jump in headfirst—take it room by room. Starting small gives you room to experiment and learn what fits your lifestyle. You don't need to erase the past to make it livable. These homes were designed to last. Treat them with a little respect, and they'll return the favor.

So if you've got a 1940s house—or want one—you're not stuck in the past.

You're sitting on something timeless, practical, and (with the right touch) still incredibly cool.

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References & Resources

Here's where you can find solid info for going deeper:

- **National Park Service (NPS)** – Preservation briefs and historic home restoration guides

<https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm>

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** – Info on post-war housing development

<https://www.hud.gov>

- **Library of Congress – Historic American Buildings Survey**

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/>

- **National Trust for Historic Preservation** – Practical guidance on saving and updating old homes

<https://savingplaces.org>

- **Book: "Cape Cod Modern" by Peter McMahon & Christine Cipriani**

– A look into modernist versions of 1940s home styles

- **Book: "Atomic Ranch: Midcentury Interiors" by Michelle Gringeri-**

Brown – Great inspiration for late-'40s and early-'50s styling

[Home Improvement](#)

[History](#)

...