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This presentation is about a new type of historic house that has been identified in Georgia: the “American Small House.”

It was identified through our office’s broader interest in mid-20th-century buildings in the state.

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It all started from a vague sense that there was a kind of house “out there” that was not well understood — something that seemed to “fit” between two well-recognized house types:

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The early 20th-century bungalow on one side ...

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... and the mid-20th-century ranch house on the other.

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But it was something quite different from either of them.

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And it was being called by a variety of names including:

“minimal traditional” house;

“Depression-era” cottage;

“War Years” cottage;

“Victory” cottage;

“economical small house”;

and the “FHA House.”

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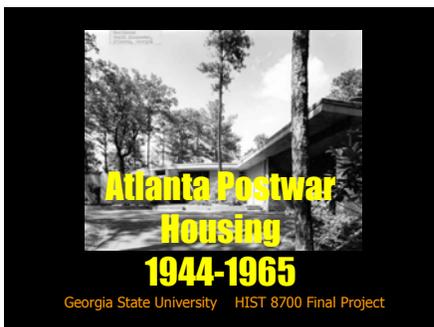


As an office, we first encountered this type of house several years ago in some National Register nominations for neighborhoods in the Atlanta metropolitan area: Oakland City, South Atlanta, Berkeley Park, and the Emory area.

It also kept coming up in Section 106 environmental review projects, most involving highways.

But this was all on a case-by-case basis with no overall sense of what we were dealing with.

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The first real attempt to come to grips with this type of house in Georgia was in a 2001 report on mid-20th-century housing in Atlanta prepared by graduate preservation students at Georgia State University working with our office and the Atlanta Urban Design Commission, the city’s historic preservation office.

This study was later augmented by a local historic preservation consulting firm working with the city through a grant from our office.

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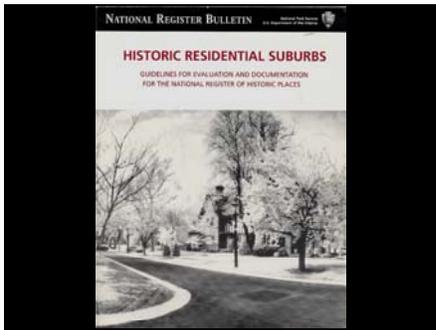
Included in these reports were examples of a kind of house with no agreed-upon name -- what we now call the American Small House.

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Our office followed up by researching architectural plan books and design catalogs from the 1930s into the 1960s in which this house type was well represented.

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At about this same time, the National Park Service issued a new National Register bulletin about suburban development in America which documented in general terms a mid-20th-century housing phenomenon described as the "small house movement."

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At that point, those of us who had been working with these houses had an epiphany of sorts:

All these small houses we had been looking at, from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s, were part of a larger housing phenomenon characterized by attention to the design, construction, and marketing of “small houses,” in Georgia and across the country.

This movement had its origins in the Great Depression, spanned World War II, and reached its climax during the post-WWII nationwide housing shortage and recovery.

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Three factors unite all these houses and this period of time:

One was the need for low-cost housing during a succession of desperate economic times: the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war housing shortage.

The second was an unparalleled national response to these housing needs, which involved unprecedented collaboration on the part of the federal government, the building industry, the architectural and engineering professions, the building trades, university “extension” programs, building code officials, and home-loan finance institutions.

The third was a clear national goal of providing well-designed, well-built, affordable, small single-family houses.

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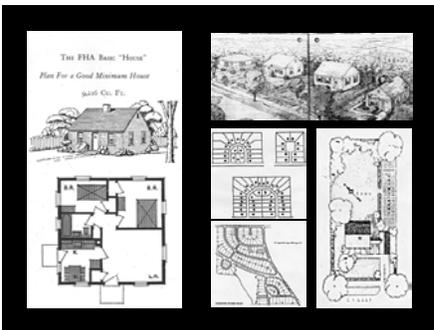


These efforts, and their results, are something unique in American history and something uniquely American — no other country in the world has ever focused on small single-family houses to such a degree.

They came together, quite literally, in the invention of a new type of house, and in new ways of building and financing it:

The American Small House.

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Specific historic events relating to the origins of the American Small House date from the 1930s, when desperate economic times had crippled the housing industry and had made it impossible for many families to afford houses, and when the federal government first became involved with small, economical houses.

Federal involvement began in 1931 when President Herbert Hoover convened a White House conference on house building and home ownership. Over the course of a year, its various committees made “recommendations” regarding design, construction, mechanical systems and utilities, site planning and landscaping, and financing. In doing so, they laid the groundwork for the American Small House.

Three years later, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, these “recommendations” were strengthened into national “standards” and, for the first time, funding mechanisms were provided, through the passage of the **1934 National Housing Act**.

Among other things, this act created the **Federal Housing Administration (the “FHA”)**. This new agency not only coordinated further activities of the national housing consortium but also

promulgated standardized house designs and construction techniques. A good example was the FHA's 1936 "*Principles of Planning Small Houses*" (excerpt shown here), which were based on this guiding principle: "a maximum accommodation within a minimum of means." These "principles" would be re-issued several times through 1940s, becoming the "gold standard" for American Small Houses across the country.

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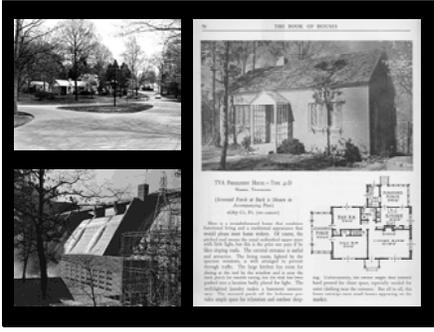
The 1934 housing act also expanded the market for affordable, privately financed mortgages by guaranteeing mortgages issued to qualified homebuyers for approved houses. This guarantee resulted in much smaller down-payment requirements, lower interest rates, and longer payback periods — making it possible for many more people to qualify for home mortgages.

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In 1938, the federal government further strengthened the private home-mortgage market by establishing the **Federal Home Loan Bank Board**, a federalized regional "banker's bank" system, and the **Federal National Mortgage Association** ("Fannie Mae"), which was authorized to buy and sell privately issued mortgages.

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And in the mid-1930s the federal government led the way in building some of the first American Small Houses through its federally funded public works projects. Here is one example of the new houses built in the new town of Norris, Tennessee, associated with the construction of the Norris Dam, the first Tennessee Valley Authority hydroelectric project.

Further advances in housing were interrupted by World War II, however ...

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During World War II, when the national housing market was again crippled, this time by shortages of construction materials and labor, the new American Small House helped meet the need for defense-related housing across the country. It was a quick and economical solution to the pressing need for housing workers near new and expanded industrial and manufacturing centers.

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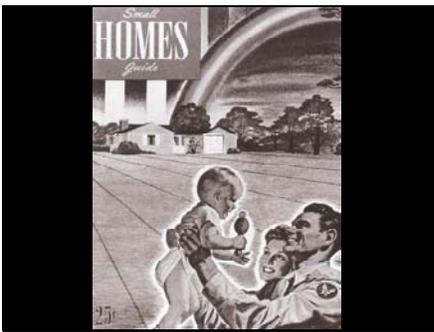
Here is an example of defense-worker housing built in Cleveland, Ohio.

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A good example here in Georgia is the housing built near the Bell Bomber plant in Marietta.

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Following World War II, the nation faced yet another housing crisis: pent-up demand for new housing, a shortage of available housing, and a shortage of building materials.

To stimulate the market, the federal government expanded financial incentives for new homebuyers, particularly for servicemen returning to civilian life. In 1944, Congress passed what was commonly known as the “**G.I. Bill**” which authorized the **Veterans Administration** to guarantee private, low-interest, low down payment home loans (mortgages) for veterans. And in 1946 the **Veterans Emergency Housing Act** authorized the FHA as well as the Veterans Administration to guarantee these mortgages for veterans.

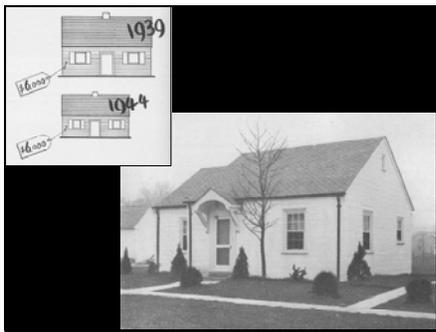
Once again, for many, the American Small House was the house of choice.

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Many prospective homebuyers at the time perceived the American Small House to be a modern, contemporary, up-to-date house — a house looking ahead to the future rather back to the past — as represented by these new houses at Hillside Terrace on Long Island.

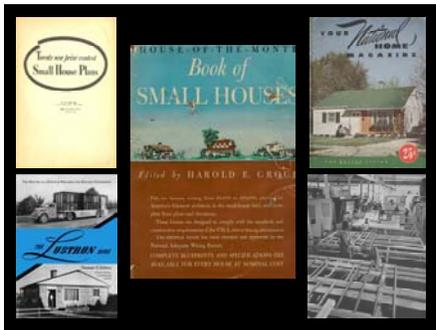
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Others — perhaps more realistically — saw the American Small House as an affordable solution to the daunting post-war problem of dramatically increased costs of construction materials and labor ...

Possibly the only solution that would permit widespread single-family home ownership at the time.

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All these federal incentives were intended to stimulate the private housing industry, with the goal of providing affordable single-family houses, and they did -- possibly beyond the wildest expectations of even their most ardent promoters.

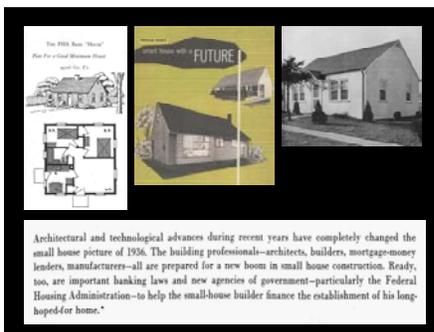
The private sector responded with an immediate outpouring of small-house plans and construction innovations and, eventually, with hundreds of thousands of new single-family homes, helping to end nearly two decades of crisis in the American housing market.

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A distinctive type of new house resulting from this unprecedented public-private partnership was what we're now calling the American Small House.

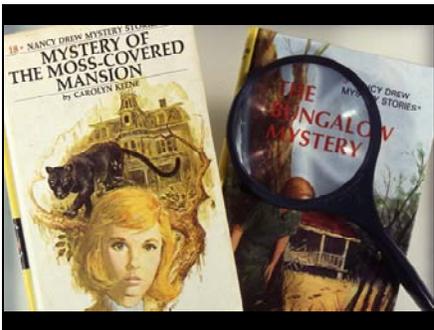
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And in doing so -- in calling them by this new name -- we would note that while these houses may have been “minimal,” there was nothing “traditional” about them: they were new, innovative, and untraditional in virtually every respect.

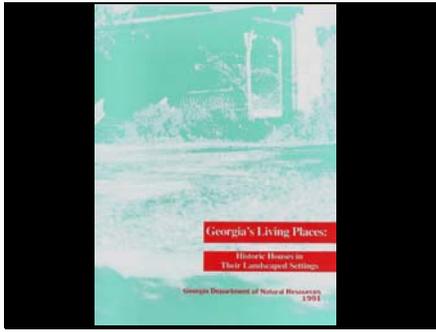
They were perceived this way at the time, and we believe they should be seen this way today.

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Before we go on to look at the American Small House in more detail, this might be a good place to review some fundamentals of residential architecture that have guided the identification of historic houses in Georgia: the concepts of architectural “style” and house “type.”

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House types and residential architectural styles were first defined for our office's work in Georgia in our 1991 "Georgia's Living Places" project.

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Architectural "style" is perhaps the more familiar of the two fundamentals.

It has two definitions: one more obvious, but more superficial; the other less obvious, more subtle.

The first and more obvious definition of style is "the decoration or ornamentation that has been put on a house in a systematic pattern or arrangement."

The second, more subtle, is "the overall design of a house including proportion, scale, massing, symmetry or asymmetry, and relationship among parts such as solids and voids or height, depth, and width."

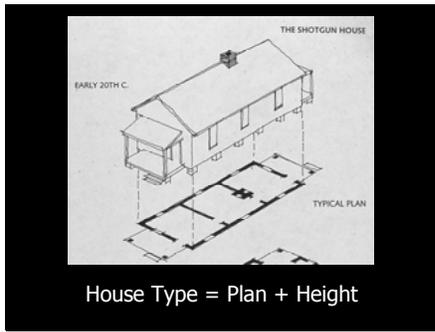
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Here are examples of three well-known residential architectural styles:

Greek Revival
Queen Anne
Craftsman

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House “types” are defined by a seemingly simple architectural formula: Plan + Height = Type.

Because of this, house types are sometimes referred to as “plan-forms.”

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Here are three examples of common house types:

Shotgun
Plantation Plain
Georgian Cottage

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With these two architectural concepts in mind, it should be clear that what we decided to call the American Small House is a new *type* of historic house that can appear in various architectural styles or no style at all.



So: What is it, architecturally? What is this “American Small House?” Let’s take a closer look:

The American Small House is a small, detached, single-family house.

Architecturally, it is compact, nearly square although sometimes rectangular in plan, one story high, and usually gable roofed, simply and tightly massed, and simply detailed.

It contains at a minimum three major rooms (living room, kitchen, and bedroom, and with a bathroom and utility closet) and generally a maximum of five rooms (living room, dining room — usually a “space” more than a separate room -- kitchen, and two bedrooms, along with the bathroom and closet).

There may be some three-bedroom (six-room) versions of this house type, but they appear to be rare. The two-bedroom version is most common since it was the smallest house for which FHA would guarantee mortgages.

As far as we’ve been able to determine, there were always just two rooms across the front, in the main mass of the house, under the main roof, although additional rooms or porches under smaller roofs often extended the house at either end.

Hallways are non-existent or very small.

The front door is often but not always centered; it also can be off-center or even on one side of the house.

Windows tend to be traditional in form and placement, but innovative corner windows or the occasional picture window may be present, especially in later examples.

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Interior configurations vary:

Unlike other house types, the exact configuration of the interior is not as important as the distinctive compact “constellation” or cluster of the character-defining rooms. This house, for example, has the common, almost standard arrangement of living room and kitchen across the front and bedrooms across the back ...

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While this house has a transverse orientation, perhaps to better fit a narrow lot, with the living room and kitchen along one side and the bedrooms along the other side ...

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And this house has an unusual “diagonal” floor plan (not to mention unusual styling) with the bedrooms occupying opposed corners of the house.

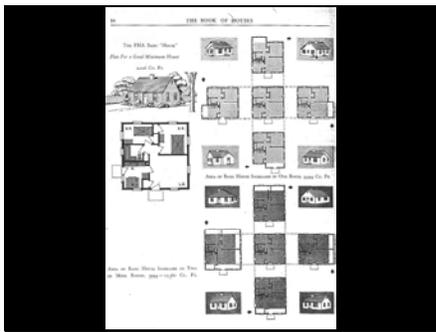
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The exterior form and appearance of the American Small House also varies, sometimes corresponding to the floor plan, other times just for the sake of appearances.

Here, for example, are two different exteriors for the same interior layout (the FHA “minimum” or “basic” small house).

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This diagram shows how the plan of the basic or minimum “FHA” small house could be adjusted to meet different family needs and means, and how the exterior form and appearance could vary as well.

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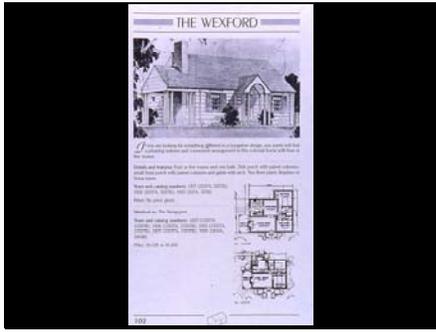
And this diagram — a little easier to see — shows how the basic American Small House plan-form could be adjusted to create two additional and slightly larger versions which appear to be quite common here in Georgia:

The “basic” small house is shown on the left ...

In the middle is a variant with a combination living-and-dining room that projects forward slightly and has a corresponding front-facing gable ... (and also with a slightly smaller kitchen without the eat-in area) ...

And on the right is a variant with the standard living room but also a separate dining room projecting forward from the smaller kitchen, forming a small ell.

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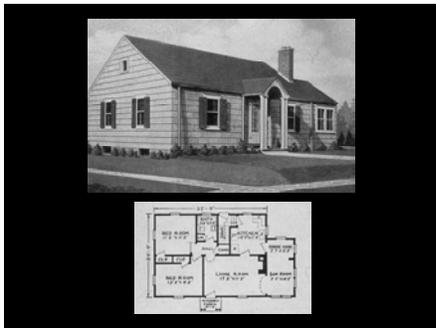


“Options” on all these small-house variations include small porticoes or stoops, porches, dormers, fireplaces, and side garages.

These were generally extra-cost items that could be incorporated into the basic design and construction of the house by the developer, builder, or buyer.

They should not be confused with “additions” made at a later time, although additions looking exactly the same could have been made at later time — it’s hard to tell, sometimes, without close examination.

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Other common options include small “extra” rooms under diminutive gable-roofed extensions at one or both ends of the house — in this case, the extra room is an enclosed sunporch and a place for the family to have its meals (the “dining nook”). These rooms extend the length of the house but not the main roof.

In many instances, these extensions are original to the house. But again, something very similar-looking could be a later addition.

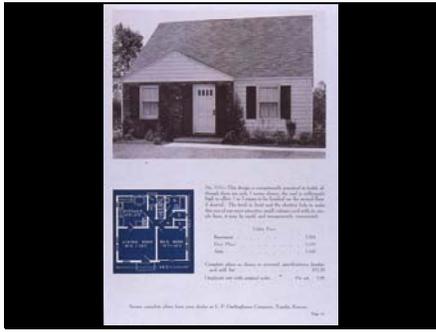
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Another feature of some American Small Houses was the capacity for future expansion within the body of the original house — by going up, into the attic, via a small, narrow stairway. Two small bedrooms could be fitted into the attic, divided by the stairway and a closet or two; sometimes room would be made for an upstairs bathroom. These “extra” attic rooms aren’t reflected in the overall form or mass of the house, but they can often be detected by the presence of larger gable-end windows or roof dormers.

These houses are still considered to be “one-story” houses because the “upstairs” is entirely contained under the roof of the house — in the attic -- with no vertical extension of the main walls.

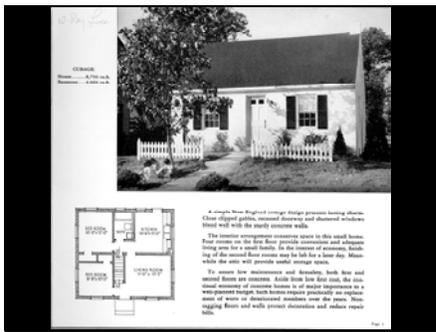
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This is about the smallest of the American Small Houses: a three-room, one-bedroom version.

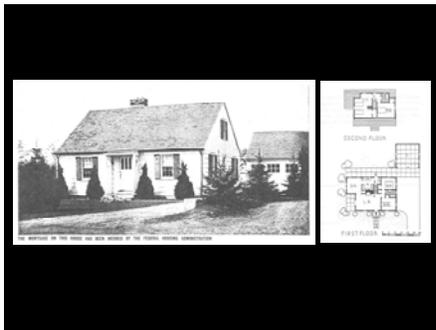
This extremely small house conforms to the “small house” typology but would not have met FHA standards for mortgage guarantees (two bedrooms were required). It appears to be quite rare.

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This is a version of the FHA “basic” or “minimum” small house, the smallest house for which the FHA would guarantee mortgages, and likely the most common small house, with its mandatory two bedrooms.

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Here is an example of the largest “small” house, with a dining room along with the living room and kitchen, and with the two extra bedrooms tucked into the attic.

Much bigger than this and we’ve left the realm of the strictly “small” house — although there’s no absolute size limit -- and we do encounter these larger “small” houses all across the state — houses whose design and construction were strongly *influenced* by the American Small House but which are too big to be considered “small.”

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As for the outward appearances of the American Small House — their architectural style, so to speak — many American Small Houses are plain and simple: no architectural style.

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By far the most common architectural style is the “Cape Cod.”

Technically, the “Cape Cod” is a subset of the broader “Colonial Revival” style, but it is so distinctive here as to warrant a special name, and this name was in fact used in the literature promoting the American Small House. Sometimes it is incorrectly applied to just the plain basic American Small House because of its simple, tightly massed, gable-roofed form. Look for Colonial Revival-style architectural details such as a paneled front door, multi-paned windows, and window shutters.

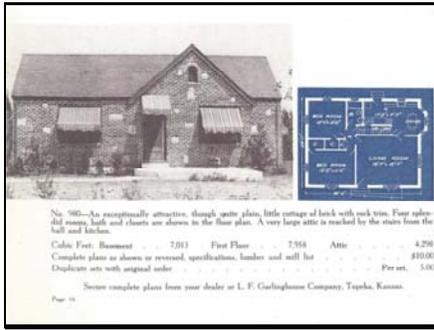
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Another prevalent architectural style is the “English Vernacular Revival,” somewhat loosely or minimally applied.

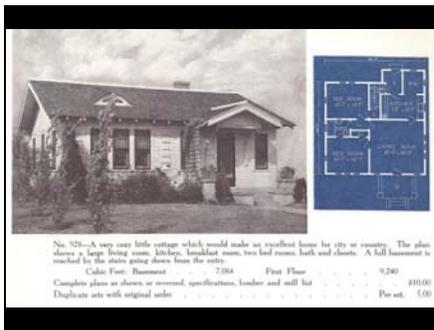
It is usually represented by an asymmetrical and picturesque front entry and perhaps a slightly higher, more steeply sloping gable roof.

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Here is another example of how the English Vernacular Revival style might manifest itself in the American Small House: exterior brickmasonry with embedded stones, giving the house a medieval touch.

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Occasionally the American Small House appears in the Craftsman style, with wider eaves and exposed rafter ends being the most common stylistic elements. Other stylistic details might include “cottage” windows and front door.

In spite of the fact that the Craftsman style persisted into the 1950s in Georgia, there appear to be relatively few examples of Craftsman-style American Small Houses -- most Craftsman-style houses are bungalows. But there are a few, just enough to complicate the picture . . . and they are somewhat of a contradiction in terms, since the “true” American Small House was engineered for construction efficiency and would not have featured wide eaves with exposed rafter ends that would have been considered a waste of material and effort.

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Touches of “modern” styling also appear on some American Small Houses, particularly in the location and design of the windows, as in the corner windows on this house, although these appear to be relatively rare, especially in Georgia.

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Sometimes a contemporary design transforms the appearance of the small house.

This mid-century example might easily be confused for a small ranch house, but apart from a few trendy angled walls and roofline, it has the classic American Small House floor plan and massing.

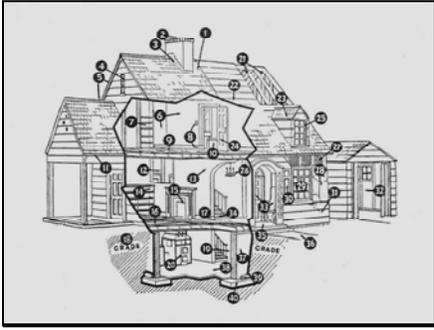
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Here’s an early 1950s American Small House unabashedly masquerading in a national magazine as a contemporary-style ranch house.

And yet, when you look at the floor plan and the form of the house — and overlook the huge two-car attached garage -- it too is clearly a latter-day American Small House.

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Most American Small Houses are wood-framed using dimensioned lumber (2 X 4s) and platform construction.

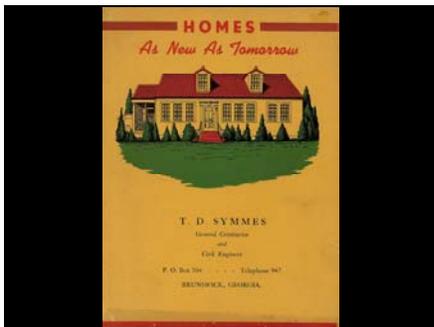
Many are wood-sided, generally with wide-exposure weatherboard, sometimes shingles. Also common is asbestos siding (in the form of “shingles”). Some are brick-veneered (but still wood-framed structures). A few have stuccoed walls. A very few have stone veneers. And fewer still have artificial stone (“Permastone”) veneers.

Some were built of concrete (mostly in experimental developments) or load-bearing brickmasonry.

Most American Small Houses would have had composition (asphalt) shingle roofs and concrete or concrete-block foundations. In Georgia, most were built on shallow crawl spaces; very few had excavated basements.

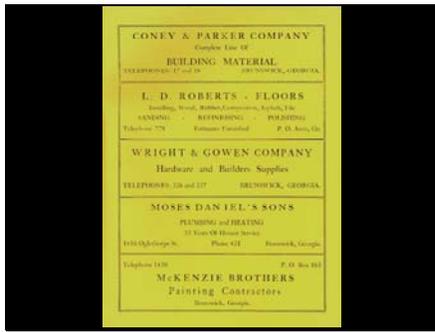
An important construction feature is the use of standardized building materials and components -- dimensioned lumber, windows, doors, etc. — and standardized engineering and construction techniques. This permitted these houses to be built quickly and economically.

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Standardization also made it possible for local builders as well as large-scale developers to “design” their own versions of American Small Houses ...

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And for local builders and building material suppliers to more easily construct them.

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In some parts of the country, American Small Houses were built using experimental construction materials and techniques. This house was built using plywood for the exterior sheathing ...

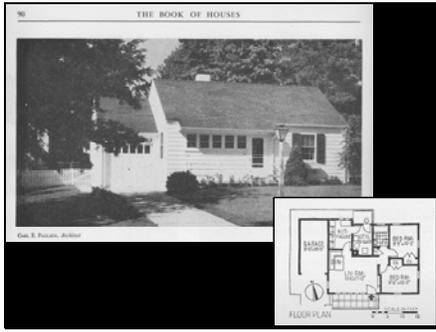
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While this “cemento” house was built with prefabricated cement-and-asbestos panels.

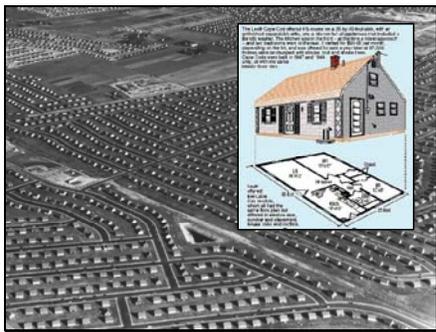
No such experimental houses have been documented to date in Georgia.

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A very few American Small Houses were custom-designed by architects. This one was designed by an architect for his own residence.

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Others, like those at Levittown on Long Island, were designed for mass production on a scale previously unimaginable.

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This and the following views illustrate some of the American Small Houses that were built in Georgia from the late 1930s into the early 1950s (most were built in the late 1940s).

Here's a pretty plain, basic version, dating from the late 1940s.

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Here's a slightly more elaborate design with a gable-end porch entry and with just a hint of differentiation on the front façade with its slightly projecting bay and contrasting horizontal and vertical siding.

It also features asbestos shingles as the principal exterior siding -- a commonly used material.

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This house, with the more common central entry, has more pronounced differentiation in its massing, clearly evident in the roofline ...

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While this house features a front-facing gable over a slightly projecting front room (most likely either a bedroom or a dining room).

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Here is a pretty good rendition of the “Cape Cod” style applied to the American Small House type.

It relies for effect on the overall form of the house plus a few strategic architectural details: paneled door, multi-paned windows, and shutters.

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This small house reflects the English Vernacular Revival style with its brick veneer, stone detailing, and multiple front gables.

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This is a somewhat unusual example of a Craftsman-style American Small House.

Although elements of the Craftsman style persisted into the 1950s in Georgia, they are more commonly associated with the bungalow or side-gable-cottage type houses.

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Here's a very unusual use of artificial stone ("Permastone") on the exterior of an American Small House in Georgia.

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We've been looking at these houses as individual buildings. And many were built that way, individually, or as infill in established neighborhoods with older houses all around.

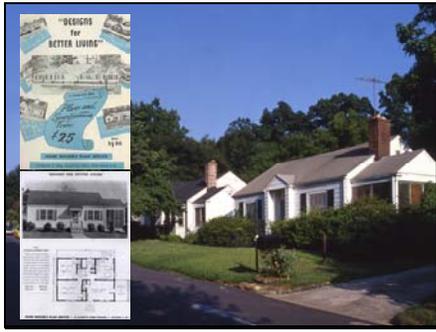
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Many would likely have been built under contract by individual builders for specific homebuyers, with the builder supplying the plans.

Here are a couple of 1939 newspaper ads for a Marietta builder (actually a lumber and building supply company) soliciting jobs from prospective homeowners.

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Others might have been based on designs taken from commercial plan books, like those published by the Home Builders Plan Service in Atlanta.

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Still others might have come from well-known local architects, like these from one of the many plan books published by Leila Ross Wilburn.

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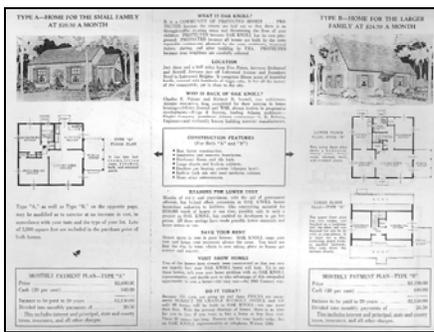
Many American Small Houses in Georgia were built in small subdivisions or neighborhoods in the state's larger cities.

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One is “Oak Knoll” in the Lakewood area of south Atlanta, built in the mid-1940s, right after World War II: a new subdivision of nearly 100 homes, most of them American Small Houses.

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Oak Knoll was developed by two prominent Atlanta real estate developers, Charles Palmer and Richard Sawtell, whose other residential initiatives range from public housing projects to high-end custom housing.

The houses were designed by the Atlanta architectural firm of Burge & Stevens (soon to become Stevens & Wilkinson, proponents of Modern architecture in Atlanta). Site development was engineered by C. R. Roberts. The principal contractor was the Flagler Company, a large southern construction company.

Promotional literature pointed out that all the houses in Oak Knoll would meet FHA standards and would thus qualify for FHA-insured mortgages.

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Oak Knoll still exists today.

Here is one of the entrances into the subdivision.

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And here's a closer view of that first house on the street.

It features a recessed corner porch sheltering the main entry to the house, a hallmark of a number of the houses in this subdivision.

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Here's an example of what might be called the "classic" American Small House in the neighborhood — based on the FHA "basic" or "minimum" house.

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And here's another, but with a side extension over what was originally a depressed garage (a somewhat unusual feature for an American Small House in Georgia).

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This is one of the smallest houses built in the subdivision, but still large enough, apparently, to win FHA approval.

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And here's one of the largest "small" houses in the neighborhood, with its "Cape Cod" (Colonial Revival) styling, and with a higher gable roof suggesting attic bedrooms.

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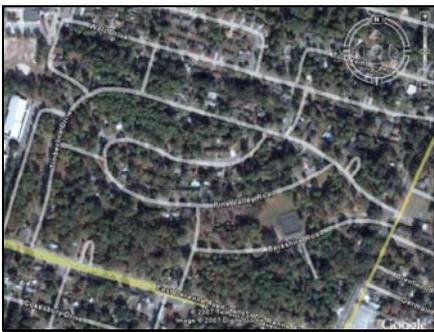


Another American Small House subdivision is Forrest Hills in Savannah.

It was developed in 1947.

In addition to its collection of American Small Houses, this subdivision is significant for its layout:

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It has a modern, curvilinear street plan, the first in Savannah to break with the 18th-century Oglethorpe plan.

This arrangement was based on the principles of neighborhood planning being promoted by the FHA (which was underwriting the mortgages for these houses).

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This neighborhood also featured new-fangled cul-de-sacs, a planning feature also promoted by the FHA as a way of creating safe and secure neighborhoods for families with children.

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And of course Forrest Hills also has a great collection of American Small Houses -- including some relatively rare examples featuring the latest in picture windows -- all conforming to FHA standards.

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Another big, intact collection of American Small Houses in Georgia is at Bibb City, a mill village in the north part of Columbus.

Located just east of Second Avenue at 40th Street, the houses are contained in a single subdivision laid out in a “D”-shaped plan.

The neighborhood was built right after World War II to provide additional worker housing for the expanding Bibb Manufacturing Company.

It was one of the last mill villages to have been built in Georgia.

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The Bibb City houses come in two versions:

A centered-front-doorway version, shown here ...

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And an offset-front-door version, shown here.

Both versions feature the characteristic small-house floor plan.

Most approximate the FHA “minimum” house plan with just a living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms, along with a bathroom.

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Here is a view of the back of one of these houses.

All the houses were built of brick, with solid, load-bearing brick walls inside as well as out -- reportedly in response to continuing post-war shortages of building materials including lumber.

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Also of interest is the fact that these houses were designed by Ellamae Ellis League, one of the first women architects in Georgia, who had her office and home in Macon.

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By way of contrast, here's the write-up in an Atlanta newspaper about a single American Small House built in Marietta at about the same time.

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The largest collection of American Small Houses in Georgia may be in Augusta, where small houses were built by the hundreds from the late 1930s well into the 1950s, all across the western and southwestern parts of the city, mostly in a number of small but often contiguous subdivisions.

Here's one of the earliest "classic" American Small Houses in Augusta, and in the state, from the late 1930s.

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And here's an example of the variant with the projecting front gable and end wings.

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This is an unusual example of a front-gabled American Small House in Georgia.

A number of these are found in Augusta but not many anywhere else.

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And here's another somewhat unusual example with an offset front door.

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This small house is unusual because of its brick construction — most American Small Houses in Georgia were made of wood. Moreover, the brick is not just any old brick ...

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But a very large brick ... possibly a terra-cotta block.

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This small house is also unusual because it seems to not have a front door.

However, the front door is on the left end of the house, just inside the side porch ...

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Which you can see a little more clearly in this neighboring example.

Augusta has a number of these side-entrance American Small Houses. Not many have been found anywhere else in the state.

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And here's one of the later examples of an American Small House, dating from the early 1950s, which shows the consistency of American Small House design in Augusta and throughout Georgia from the late 1930s into the 1950s.

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We hope this presentation has told the story of the American Small House:

A new type of house ... with a distinct floor plan and form ... invented in the 1930s by an unprecedented collaboration of private interests, public agencies, and non-profit organizations ... and built throughout Georgia well into the 1950s ... to meet critical needs for single-family houses during a period of prolonged economic distress.

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We also hope it explains how and why we came to name this new house type the "American Small House" ... reflecting something truly American ... the invention of a new type of single-family house ... an American phenomenon.

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THE END

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