

Shifting Formality

How the Conventional Single-Family Home Created Class Distinctions in Middle-Class
America

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This paper originally began as an examination into the everyday spaces of the conventional American home. The end product is a result of four months of dedicated work, intended as an exploration into a possible future career path in Architecture history and theory. I would like to thank Professor Dianne Harris for her feedback and suggestions during the writing process, which ultimately lead to a more focused work. I would also like to thank all of the friends and families who allowed me to study and analyze their homes during the research. Their interest and enthusiasm in my work has helped me to continue pursuing my passions. Most importantly, I would like to thank Professor Kenny Cupers for working on this project with me over the last semester. His guidance and support led to the completion of this project, pushing me to succeed and produce something I am very proud of. Lastly, thank you to anyone who took an interest in my work, from reading drafts to discussions on the research.

Everyone in America grows up with the dominant idea that everyone should want their own home. It's an idea that we are raised to believe, one that we don't often question, and many of us dream to achieve. A place you can call yours, raise a family, grow old; a place where you can spend your life. I was raised in an old farmhouse in the suburbs of Chicago. While my house is now situated in the middle of a suburban neighborhood, it once stood alone, separate from anything else, surrounded by fields. I did not experience this gradual transition myself because when I was born my house was already surrounded by an eclectic mix of conventional homes, ones you can find all across America. But none of these everyday houses were the same. There is a tendency to perceive American homes as all the same, containing the same elements, reflecting the same ideals. However, each friend's house I would go to was different from the next, in size, age, style, layout, etc. I always felt like they were different from my own because some of them had rooms my house didn't have, or architectural elements that mine lacked. My house consisted of only one living room, with no other public space for social gathering. Some other homes I was familiar with had additional rooms, such as a family room instead of just a living room. This made me feel like the families of my friends were different from my own. I would spend almost every week of my childhood at my best friend's house because his had a family room and we could have fun and play around in it when his parents would be upstairs in the living room. But we wouldn't spend much time at my house because my house only had a living room, where every member of my family would fight over who got to spend time in there on a daily basis. I didn't question it much as a kid. It is just how we behaved, because those were the houses we lived in. Not just our families, but also the architecture of our homes shapes our childhood.

The homes I was surrounded by as a kid were almost all built during the last century. The twentieth century is known in America as the century of progress. Drastic shifts occurred within the societal values of Americans, with advancing social reform in women rights, the rights of minority groups and immigrants, as well as a shift in the overall definition of what constituted an "ideal" American family. During what Matthew Lasner describes as the Suburban Century, the 1900s saw an increase in the emergence of families living outside the model of the nuclear family. This increase directly impacted the amount of people of different class status being able to afford homeownership¹. While these changes were occurring with the structure of the American family, the conventional single-family home was also being significantly altered. Scholars have analyzed a dominant evolution in the ordinary home, a process of informalization

¹ Matthew Lasner, *High Life: Condo Living in the Suburban Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 10-11.

during the twentieth century. Informalization is identified as the process of spaces within the home shifting from a more formal setting, to that of informality; areas that were once designated as holding a higher level of importance and status shifting to a more casual setting within everyday dwelling culture. In this paper, I will argue that despite this dominant trend, reverse processes of formalization occurred within the ordinary home. Furthermore, I argue that these shifts in formality led to distinctions within the American middle class. During the twentieth century, most architects and contemporary observers began to consider the American single-family home as a stable entity, one in which the “programme became in a sense the background or continuo against which architects and clients could play out claims of originality on aesthetic terms.”² While many scholars have examined the history of conventional housing in America throughout the last century³, relatively little scholarship exists on the shifts in usage and layout of single-family houses since the post-war era. Publications by authors such as Dianne Harris and Sandy Isenstadt focusing on American housing since the post-war era have viewed the conventional middle-class home as having shifted to a more informal setting, specifically within the public areas of the home. However, these works tend to generalize these spaces as one area, the public realm within the home, overlooking the changes that have occurred on a smaller level. However these changes are important in understanding the changes that took place within the last half of the twentieth century. The research presented within this paper focuses more closely on those individual spaces, analyzing the changes that occurred within each of them, resulting in a different understanding of the public socializing area in the homes. Furthermore, I explore how, over the course of the second half of the century, single-family homes in middle-class America experienced an important shift in their patterns of use, resulting in areas of formality occurring throughout the homes. Contrary to the generalization of the conventional home shifting toward informalization, I argue that these formal spaces within the home did not disappear, but were re-articulated during the post-war period and beyond to shape class distinctions between what most people continue to understand as a single type of house for the middle-class American family.

Due to shifts that occurred within conventional home during the twentieth century in America, single-family housing became a subject of reformalization within the spatial organization of the home. These areas of formalization continue to exist due to spaces that

² Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

³ Books on American housing or featuring issues related to housing include Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1986); Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

were once considered in the home as being informal shifting to a higher level of significance to the family, becoming areas of prominence and authority. These spatial elements that were once deemed relevant have since been replaced by newer informal additions to the home, emerging as the dominant focus of everyday life. Examples of this include the shift in the living room with the introduction of the family room. The introduction into conventional houses of these informal spaces allowed for these small areas of formality to exist. These formal spaces are more typical of homes belonging to those in upper classes, since they can afford these extra spaces, as well as the culture of upper classes being more acceptable to their usage. However, is it possible that these spaces are becoming more common within middle-class America?

My analysis on the conventional home is based on historical research into American housing, as well as research involving case studies and interviews. The research consisted of historical scholarly studies on American social family life and housing patterns during the twentieth century, in addition to dwelling culture magazines. These magazines, such as *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens* give a unique insight into how the average American family was having Architectural practices and thoughts mediated to them during the twentieth century. These magazines have had a large impact on current day academic studies, with several scholars arguing for their usage as a legitimate source⁴. I believe that the same argument made towards dwelling culture magazines can be applied to the case study homes surveyed during the research process. Case study houses can be used to compliment the research presented in academic sources and dwelling culture magazines, showcasing actual lived experiences within the ordinary American home. The foundation for the case studies was based on existing spatial relationships between the public realm within the homes and the inhabitants' patterns of use of these spaces. I chose these case studies from a network of family and friends, with the aim of creating a representative sample of conventional homes built between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The homes were studied through a survey method process as well as interviewing the inhabitants. The survey method process focused on the location of rooms in the public areas of the homes (typically only on the ground floor), and the relationships that exist between them. The interviews with the families of these homes focused on identifying trends in usage within the rooms studied in the survey process. The houses chosen for the case studies were also selected based on the region; the Midwest. The Midwest has historically been a center for single-family housing, as well as suburban housing. When looking at data provided by the

⁴ Dianne Harris, "Magazine Lessons: Publishing the Lexicon of White Domesticity" in *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013).

United States census, the states comprising the Midwest⁵ tended to have higher percentages of single-family housing than the national average over a sixty year period (1940-2000)⁶. I asked every family residing in the case study homes to share their thoughts on why they chose to buy/own a home, instead of living in a multi-family unit. Several of the families commented on not really thinking about it, instead just believing that everyone bought their own home. They didn't question this choice, it was just something they grew up expecting, and they believe was expected of them.

When studying all 10 of the Case Study homes, it became evident that they each range slightly in size and cost. While the economic stability of each of the families may be different from one another, a relatively consistent underlying social class exists between them through their homes. This is what has typically been referred to as the middle class of America. However, within recent years, there has been discussion as to whether or not the middle class still exists within America, due to income disparity being higher than what has historically been noted⁷. Through studying the conventional American home, a pattern can be observed in the usage and occupation of the spaces within them; that although there is a divergence in social class, there seems to be a consistency in domestic culture. In writing about class distinctions, Pierre Bourdieu argued in his 1984⁸ book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, that how people depict themselves and their cultural tastes are based upon the social classes they belong to. At the end of the introduction, Bourdieu argues that this "is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences."⁹ This theory can be applied to the historical evidence, as well as the case studies. Through the historical research, there is evidence to suggest how these formal spaces came about within the conventional middle-class American home. The case studies helped depict average usage of these rooms, and how the typical American family was choosing to use these spaces. I believe that this research, as well as the case studies presented here, starts to depict a different view on the middle class of America; that the conventional single-family home typical to the Midwest starts to show distinctions within what

⁵ The U.S. census bureau defines the American Midwest as comprising of the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

⁶ "Historic Census of Housing Table," United States Census Bureau, last modified October 31, 2011, <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/units.html>.

⁷ Recent publications include Leicht, Kevin T, and Scott T Fitzgerald, *Middle Class Meltdown in America: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Johnston, David Cay, *Divided: The Perils of Our Growing Inequality* (New York: The New Press, 2014).

⁸ First published in France as *La Distinction* in 1979, republished in the U.S. in 1984

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7.

was once considered the American middle class, based on the usage and continuing formalization of the public realm within these homes, resulting in a more diverse social class structure in America.

The Open Plan and the Public Realm

First introduced to mass consumerism in *Ladies Home Journal* of 1901 by Frank Lloyd Wright, the concept of the open plan in conventional houses soon became a common feature in ordinary American homes. While the term itself is open to interpretation, what it represented in American housing as a sense of space; family members being able to occupy one space while engaging in different activities¹⁰. Although the open plan can be found in earlier forms of house designs¹¹, early twentieth century technology allowed for an even larger implementation of the open plan into conventional housing. This popularity in home design was also triggered by an increase in pre-cut, fabricated houses and mass production by companies such as Sears, Roebuck & Company throughout the first half of the twentieth century. These companies helped bring modern architectural thought into ordinary, conventional American housing during the early part of the twentieth century, linking individualization with standardization¹². Before the induction of the open plan, most middle-class conventional houses featured a public realm made up of a three room grouping, living room, kitchen, and dining¹³. The relationship between these three rooms was generally consistent with socializing patterns of the late nineteenth century. The kitchen was a center of pure production, while the dining room was a space for eating and gathering, with the living room being reserved for the cultural and socializing events within the homes. Examples of this three way relationship are identified in the first four Case Study houses. In Case Study 1, (Figure 1) there is a clear division between these spaces, with no form of the open plan evident¹⁴. By the 1920s and Case Studies 2 & 3, (Figures 1) the open plan is more evident, but divisions between the rooms still exist. Small portions of walls are used to indicate the separation of these rooms, acting as reminders that they are individual spaces

¹⁰ Sandy Isenstadt, *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle-Class Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 174-175.

¹¹ Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 116-117.

¹² Gwendolyn Wright, *USA* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008) 32-68.

¹³ Thomas C. Hubka, *Houses Without Names: Architectural Nomenclature and the Classification of America's Common Houses* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013)

¹⁴ The relationship of the dining room and kitchen in Case Study 1 has been altered with the expansion of the wall between them, allowing for an open plan between these rooms. This was not original to the design, and was an alteration made sometime during the middle part of the twentieth century.

within the homes. This step towards a more open plan within the houses first exists between the living and dining rooms, with the kitchen still being enclosed and separate from the other spaces. Case Study 4 from 1955 (Figure 4) is the clearest example of the open plan up to this point. There are no separations between the living and dining rooms; the spaces are fluid with each other. With the simultaneous introduction of the open plan and the shifts in domestic cultural values within American families, the formalization and usage of these rooms shifted.

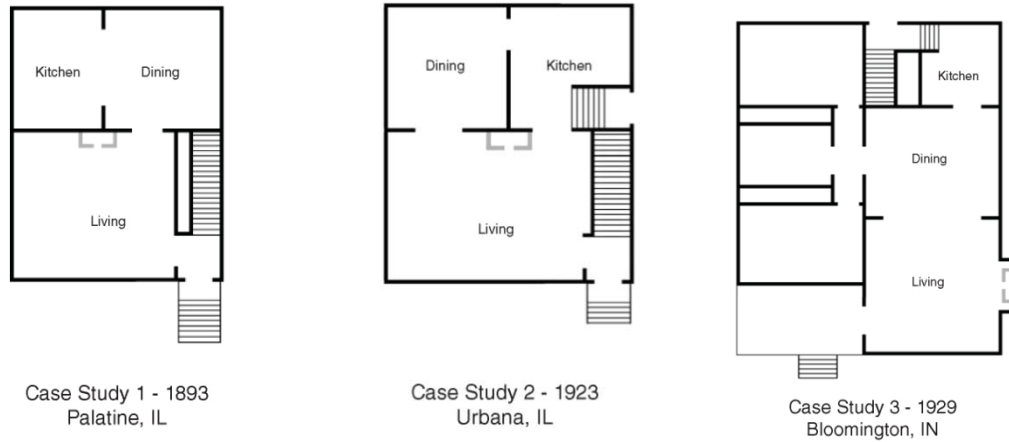


Figure 1 – Case Studies 1-3.



Figure 2 – Case Study 4.

The evolution of the kitchen and its role in the shaping of the social spaces of American houses began during the early part of the twentieth century. During this time, kitchens were still viewed as areas of pure utility, spaces dedicated solely to the preparation of food. Domestic reformers at the time argued that industrial training for domestic work must be a starting point for women reform. Her thinking led to further industrial education by others such as Emily Huntington, founder of the Kitchen Garden movement, which looked to supplement kindergarten teaching with industrial education, allowing for children to learn about the production process of

a kitchen in order to prepare food faster¹⁵. A refrigerator ad in Figure 3 from *Better Homes and Gardens*, 1929, depicts a housewife and servant preparing a meal in the kitchen. A shift was already starting to take place during this time, as a similar ad is shown in the same magazine a month later in Figure 4. The introduction of a telephone to the kitchen is advertised as a “convenience of the modern kitchen”. The ad continues to add that “The kitchen of the modern home is not alone a place for the preparation of food... it has emerged into something of an office for the household.” With the inclusion of the open plan into middle-class housing, the kitchen became to open up to the dining room, allowing for a shift in the formalization of the dining room. These changes were not happening immediately, they occurred over time, allowing for houses to begin being distinct from each other. Some kitchens began to encompass spaces for eating and socializing, allowing for more family members to interact and inhabit the room. Figure 5 depicts family children partaking in different activities in the kitchen, from cooking to decorating, while in the foreground, a kitchen table for eating can be seen, complete with desserts and decorating materials. In Figure 6, the kitchen is described as a space “planned for use by domestic help and for serving dinner parties as well as family meals”. Once again a table can be seen to the side of the kitchen, most likely used as a place for everyday meals within the family. The kitchen has been opened up and seen not just as a space of production but as a family space, a place to entertain and socialize during the everyday.



Figure 3 – *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, July 1929, 67.

Figure 4 – *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, August 1929, 9.

¹⁵ Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 124-125.

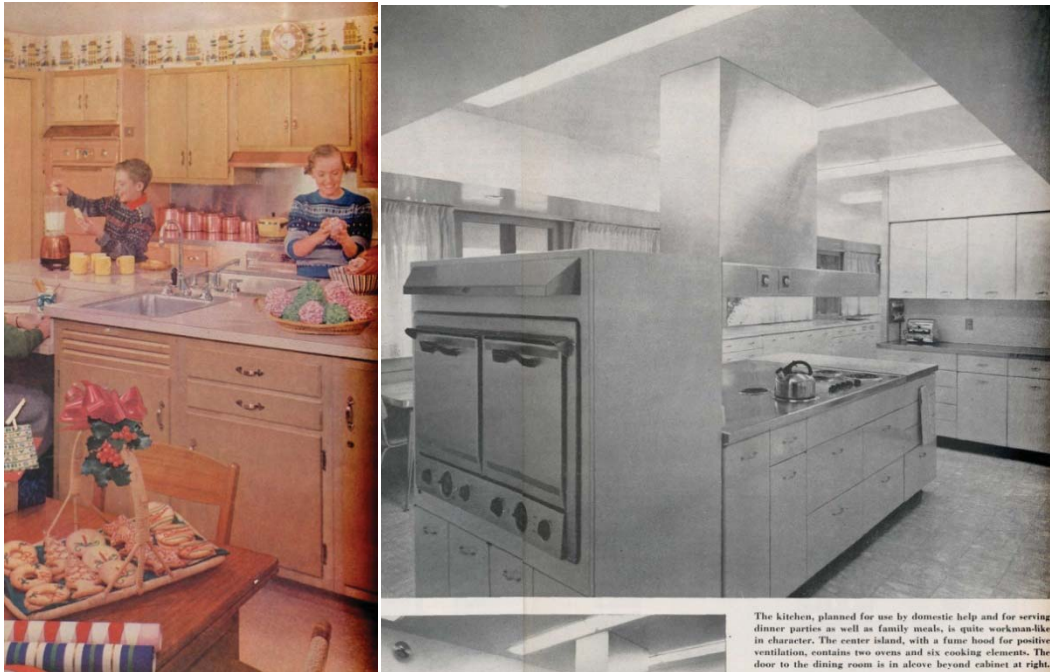


Figure 5 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, December 1957, 64.

Figure 6 – House Beautiful magazine, September 1962, 134.



Figure 7 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, January 1977, 2.

Figure 8 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, February 1989, 77.

This shift continued to expand during the second half of the twentieth century, as seen in Figure 7, allowing for parties of guests to use the space. The open plan by this point had already become a prominent design feature of most middle-class single-family houses in America by the post-war era, and it continued to alter the kitchen up to present day. An article featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1989 titled “The After 5:00 Kitchen: Bringing the Family Together in Style” showcased “state-of-the-art” kitchen designs. The front image of the article, Figure 8, doesn’t seem out of place by this point in time, depicting a mother and child in the kitchen, conversing casually while preparing a meal.

By the end of the twentieth century, modern kitchen design had taken over every area of domestic architecture thanks in large part to the introduction of the open plan within middle-class housing. This shift towards a more informal kitchen design allowed for the shift in a more formal dining room setting. Of the ten case study interviews conducted which featured eat-in kitchens¹⁶, every single family commented on using the kitchen as a place for everyday meals, instead of the dining room. Even in the earliest Case Study example featuring an eat-in kitchen design, the occupants chose immediately to eat around the kitchen table, no matter the size of the eating space. Once these eat-in kitchens were introduced to conventional housing, they were embraced by families immediately. As eat-in kitchens became more popular, the amount of space designated for the family eating area became larger. The earliest found example in the Case Studies is No. 4 (Figure 9). The kitchen of this 1955 home features a very small cramped kitchen table, where the family raised the children and ate most of their meals. In the Case Study 8 house (Figure 9), the kitchen features a much larger table, allowing for a more comfortable eating environment for the family. This expansion of the kitchen in the home is important to note for later, when discussing the relationship between the kitchen and family room.

¹⁶ Case Study houses 4-10 all feature eat-in kitchen designs, with the earliest, Case Study 4, dating from 1955.

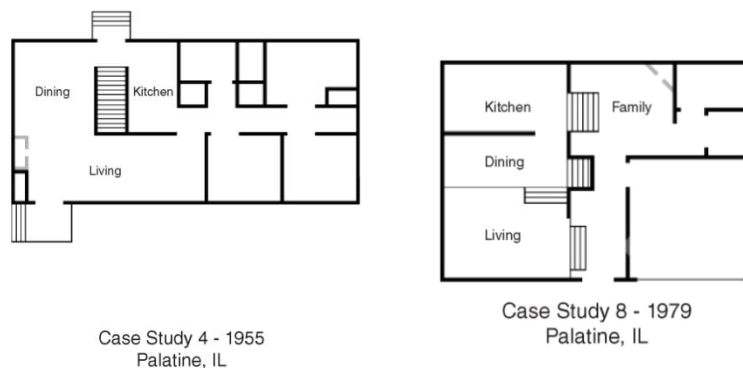


Figure 9 – Case Study homes 4 & 8.

Nonetheless, size of the kitchen table didn't matter to the families interviewed. It was the importance of eating meals together that mattered, still a very important aspect of family culture in America. Because families were choosing to eat most of their meals in the kitchen, now that this was a viable option and one that seemed very heavily supported by our media, dining rooms began to take on a more formal role than they already had¹⁷. Middle-class Americans began to see the dining room more as a special room for gathering and socializing on holidays, or special family events. Through the twentieth century, with the shift in usage and informalization of the kitchen, the dining room began to take on the role akin to that of the parlor in early European housing design; a place meant for special events, highly ornate to display the family heirlooms and belongings. An article in *House Beautiful* in 1957 suggested some decorating ideas with "traditional flavor" to put the forgotten dining room back into use¹⁸. Two different images from *House Beautiful* magazine, one in 1942, the other 1962, depict the dining room as a very formal place (Figures 10 & 11). The caption to the 1962 image reads "Planned for more formal family meals and entertaining". But the dining room wasn't the only room to shift to a more formal setting during the twentieth century. The living room also underwent a similar evolution, in large part to the introduction of the modern family room.

¹⁷ It is important to note that this shift in formalization of the dining room occurred only in houses containing an eat-in kitchen instead of a kitchen meant for pure production. Case Study 1-3 feature no form of eat in kitchen and the families of these houses still regularly use the dining room as it was originally intended.

¹⁸ Florence Byerly, "Dining Rooms: New Look of Tradition", *House Beautiful*, November 1957, 73.

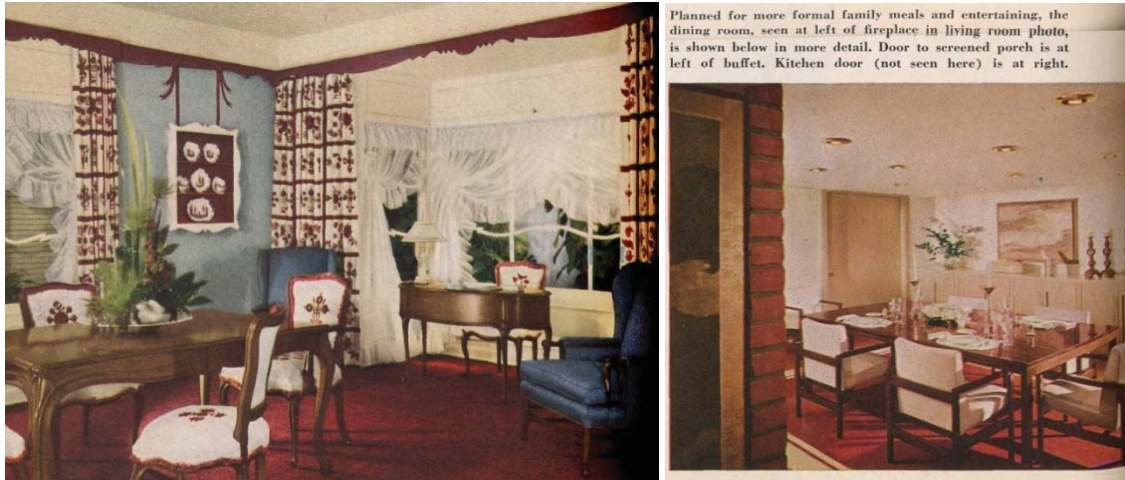


Figure 10 – House Beautiful magazine, November 1942, 60.

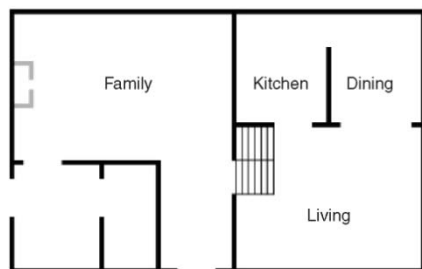
Figure 11 – House Beautiful magazine, November 1962, 84.

A Room to Please Everyone: The modern family room in the conventional home

Before the introduction of the family room into American houses, the living room was seen as the focal socializing space in the home. This was the area in which the family entertained guests, children played during their time off from school, and families spent time together around the fireplace. The earliest known examples of the modern family room idea stem from both the editors of *Parents' Magazine* and the authors of *Tomorrow's House* around 1946-47. These pieces suggested the room as a space for children and teenagers, closely associated with the kitchen, a place for the All-American family to be together¹⁹. Although the earliest of the Case Studies to feature a family room wasn't until No. 5 in 1960 (Figure 12), the media was already very keen on the idea and promoted it heavily. A full page article in the Sep. 1957 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* labeled the newly invented room as "A Room to Please Everyone"²⁰. The article describes the attractiveness of the room as a place for everyone, pertaining to all informal aspect of everyday life, for both the parents and the children. Images from the article (Figure 13) display the family in different activities throughout the room. The media was already trying to promote the room as a very friendly environment, allowing for the mess and clutter of having kids and a family to be controlled into one room.

¹⁹ Gwendolyn Wright, *USA* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008), 168-169.

²⁰ Ann Peppard White, "A Room to Please Everyone" *Better Homes and Gardens*, September 1957, 112.



Case Study 5 - 1960
Palatine, IL



Figure 12 – Case Study 5

Figure 13 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, September 1957, 112.

Because of the open plan, and the promoters of the family rooms' idea to have it situated near the kitchen, housewives and parents were able to keep watch of their kids in the family room while they were in other rooms throughout the house, without the barrier of walls to block their view. This is shown prominently in Figure 14, where the kitchen is overlooking the family room, full of children's toys and activities. When the open plan was first introduced to conventional middle-class homes, allowing for fluidity between the kitchen and family room, it received mixed reviews by the public, mostly regarding the issue of privacy within the home²¹. But over the years, families have become very keen to this concept, with every family interviewed for the Case Studies commenting on how much they loved both the open plan and the family room. The inhabitants Case Study No. 8, as well those of Case Study No. 5 mentioned their admiration for the open plan when raising kids, which allowed them both to do housework and be in multiple places in their house while the kids played in the family room during the day. This relationship between the kitchen and the family room is very important, because it directly impact the previously mentioned relationship between the dining-living-kitchen. Families with children could now spend more time in other areas of the home while still feeling a sense of security, being able to watch their children play while not having to be directly in the same room as them.

²¹ Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 140-141.

This shift in the introduction of the modern family room allow for a rapid formalization of the living room within some middle-class homes. In Figure 15, the living room is described as space where “special occasions to the children are not made” where “the cultivation of social know-how is encouraged”²². Because of the introduction of the family room to the conventional American home, children started to become removed from the formal public spaces of the home such as the living and dining room. The living room began to take on a more formal role within the house, just as much as the dining room had with the shift in the usage of the kitchen. This was a time period when creating separate zones for children and parents was viewed as a means to control disorder often associated with children, who were being seen in media representations as a polluting presence to the home²³. With the introduction of the modern family room, adults were now able to have these separate areas within the home, one where the children could play and continue to be messy, and another for them to entertain their guests without feeling scattered or dirty. Looking at the case studies, families with homes that featured both a living and family room tended to inhabit the family room on a more consistent basis, opting to fill the living room with fancier furniture, or fancier belongings. Because of the introduction of the family room, living rooms became a place of formal gathering, one intended only for adults. Children were not welcomed within these spaces, as clearly indicated by a full spread ad in *Better Homes and Gardens* from 1977 (Figure 16). The child sitting on the stairs looking out into the living room perfectly represents this shift in formality of the living room. These informal changes in both of the family room and kitchen led to a significant drop in the daily usage of both the living room and dining room. Since these rooms were becoming areas designated for special events and holidays, they were no longer being used on an every day-to-day basis. Their place within the home became ghostly, as depicted by the two most recent Case Studies. In the case of the 1999 house, the family dog even has a rule that forbids it from walking past a certain point in their home, excluding it from the formal dining and living rooms as to not dirty them. In Case Study10, the formal dining room/living room doesn't even have a set of permanent furniture due to its seldom usage.

²² *House Beautiful* magazine, November 1962, 84.

²³ Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 146-151.



Figure 14 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, April 1977, 135.

Figure 15 – House Beautiful magazine, November 1962, 84.



Figure 16 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, May 1977, 22-23.



Figure 17 – Better Homes and Gardens magazine, May 1977, 28.

What was most important about the family room was the imagery of American ideals that it brought to single-family housing. Scattered across the media were scenes (Figure 17) of a family being connected with one another in a unifying space, with the freedom to do as they saw fit. There was no longer the need to keep the room clean or tidy for guests. This was a place for only the family and close friends, a place where the children could play around and have fun without worrying about damaging or destroying the living or dining rooms. This was a place where the family could curl up together next to the fire and tell stories to one another. Its name alone gives it significance within the household. The fact that in every single Case Study featuring a family room was also the location of the fireplace signifies its strong moral values. Americans immediately tried to represent the family room as something nostalgic, a place long held within the home. This was becoming the room that turned the house into a home, the room that tied that family together and let them be whoever they wanted to be within the confines of their home. Over the course of the last 7 years Americans have already situated the family room into the mythology of the all-American single-family home.

Spatial Division within the Public Realm

The shifts in formality and introduction of new rooms to the average conventional middle-class home eventually led to a shift in the relationships between the areas of the home that were more open to the public. As previously discussed, in the earlier Case Study homes, a direct three-way relationship can be found throughout the floor plans. This relationship between the kitchen, living, and dining rooms is common through Case Studies 1-5, with Case Study 5 being the first of the homes to include a family room in the design. Although Case Studies 5 & 6 feature a very similar design, separated by 14 years, the largest distinction between the two is the introduction of a circulation passage through the kitchen into the family room in No. 6 (Figure 18)

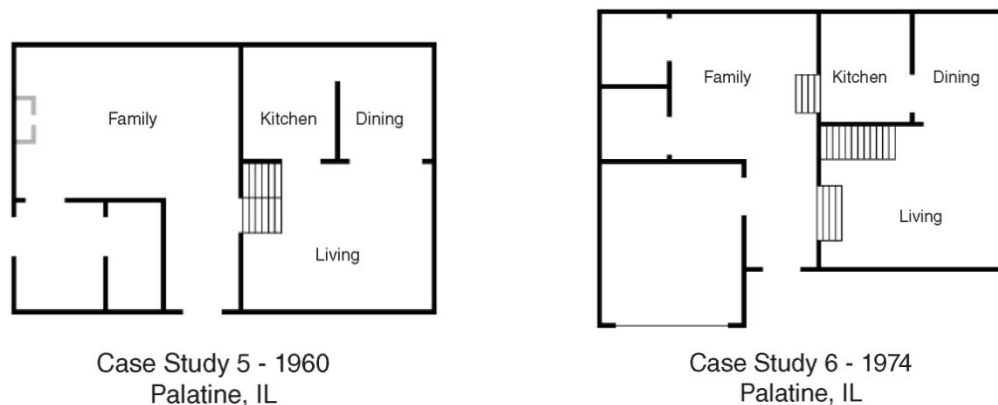


Figure 18 – Case Studies 5 & 6

This unique circulation through the kitchen starts to alter the relationship between the kitchen and the family room in some middle-class homes. Promoters of the family room always planned for a connection between their ideal new room and the kitchen. This relationship can be found more directly in Case Studies 7 & 8 (Figure 19). In No. 7, there is a eating bar separating the kitchen from the family, but no direct wall. The dining and living rooms feature a more definitive separation of space than the kitchen or family room. In No. 8, the dining and living room are now open to each other, separated only by a level change of a couple feet. A more connected relationship exists now between these two rooms, while the family room and kitchen start to take on a similar relationship. Stairs once again connect these two rooms, but the walls on either side of the stairs feature cut-outs, allowing for anyone in the kitchen to see those in the family room, as well as the reverse.

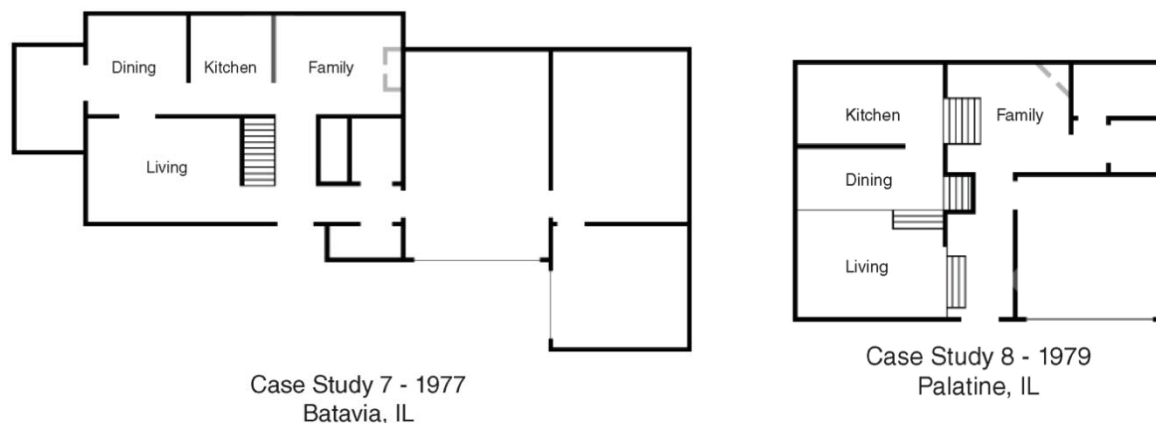


Figure 19 – Case Studies 7 & 8

When looking at these two houses, the relationship between the kitchen-living-dining is not as strong as it was in the earlier case study houses. Instead of the three-way relationship that existed in homes during the first half of the twentieth century, these newer homes started to feature two distinct public relationships, those of the kitchen-family room, and that of the dining-living rooms. While some may say this is contributed to an increase in size, all the homes featured in the case studies were of similar scale. The separation of these two can be viewed as two realms within the home; an “open realm” and a “family realm”. Because of the decrease in usage of the living-dining rooms on an every day-to-day basis, the “family realm” started to emerge as the informal space within the home. The “open realm” on the other hand, consisting of the now formal living and dining rooms, operates only in the event of guests or special events. This is clearest in the plans of the last two Case Study homes, 9 & 10 (Figure 20). In No. 9, there is an identifiable divide between these two new realms, created through a large structural wall in the middle of the home, as well as another smaller wall on the right side. The dining and living spaces are once again fluid with no separation between them, as is the same with the family room and kitchen. In the case of No. 10, the dining room no longer exists within the home, being combined with the living room to create one formal room at the front of the home. The staircase separates this formal space from the more informal “family realm” located towards the back of the house. This division of the public realm of the house into two distinct realms, the family and open, allowed for the continued formalization of the public spaces through the now defined “open realm”. Although the opinion of most scholarly work focusing on this time period argues for a continued increase in the informalization of the public spaces of the home, small areas of formalization still occur throughout the home as a result of the new relationships between the rooms.

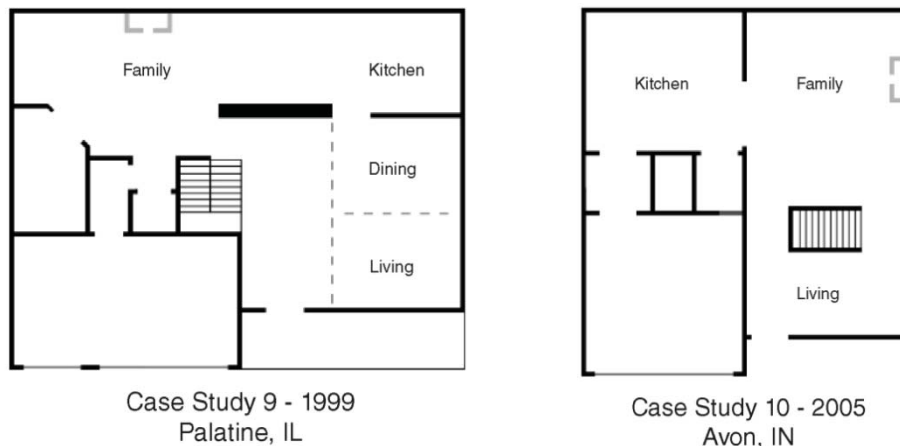


Figure 20 – Case Studies 9 & 10

Now that two different realms existed within the public spaces of the conventional middle-class American home, families started to inhabit the formal spaces of the “open realm” in a similar manner to those of older European parlors. With the shift in usage within the home, these areas start to represent hot-spots of cultural differences; areas where the middle-class family can separate itself from this label, and display themselves in a fashion more typical with that of upper classes. Many of the Case Study families agreed that they inhabited the now formal spaces of their homes differently than the more informal areas, even referring to them as more formal areas within their homes. They view these spaces as distinct from the rest of the home, allowing them to act in ways that are not necessarily suited for the rest of the house. While the family room can be filled with the mess and clutter of the typical everyday busy lifestyle of middle-class families, the “open realm” starts to become the opposite, allowing for a very fancy formal space within the home. It was clear within the families of the case studies that those who used these spaces in a formal setting tended to occupy them in this manner. These areas are very unique within the social middle-class American homes, because this form of lifestyle is not customary for this form of social class. Social patterns in middle-class America do not usually consist of this type of living. This starts to lead to a new possibility about class distinctions based on the average middle-class American home. Since the beginning of the twenty first century, our homes have doubled in size while our average household has shrunk.²⁴ Perfect models of this increase are the newer forms of middle-class housing, typically referred to as McMansions. Scores of these housing subdivisions can be identified throughout the region. While this label generally refers to the largest of these housing developments, consisting

²⁴ Matthew Lasner, *High Life: Condo Living in the Suburban Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 8.

of homes belonging to members of upper classes, similar subdivisions of smaller scale (but still larger than other examples of conventional housing) are just as prevalent throughout the region. Both case studies 9 & 10 fall under this description. Middle-class families are able to distinguish themselves, through these formal areas of their homes, from a monolithic middle-class identity, instead presenting themselves as members of a higher class.

Ironically, it is the usage of these spaces that starts to show a conflict within this argument towards usage and class distinction. Americans are not typically using these spaces as someone in upper classes might. These spaces almost act as just a façade for the lifestyle of these families. All of the families commented on only using these formal spaces (if their houses consisted of them) in the event of family gatherings, special events, or holidays. They aren't used within the everyday life of the families. So while families made decorate these spaces with fancier objects, and treat them in a manner similar to that of the upper classes, these spaces are not actually used in the same way, acting instead as a mask to distinguish themselves from other families belonging to the same class as them. Because of the range in middle-class single-family housing across the country, as evident in the differences within the case studies, families are given options as to what type of house that they want to live in. Although the families of the case studies range of incomes, the houses themselves do not differ in any significant degree economically. Some families chose to live in houses that did not contain these differences in formal/informal spaces. I grew up in the first Case Study house. We took the spaces that existed and adapted them to our living. There was no separate space for the children or the parents. There was no separate eating area in the kitchen. We still used our dining everyday just as middle-class working Americans have historically done. Over time, as discussed, these formal spaces eventually shifted in their usage and role within the family, allowing for other pockets of in-formality to occur, which in turn allowed for these formal spaces to endure. But this happened over the entire course of the twentieth century, leading to variations within middle-class single-family housing. In the case of my home, there were no additional family rooms, or informal spaces within the home to allow for the more formal spaces to continue existing. But my home wasn't typical to the conventional home of today, or any of the homes of my friends growing up. This was a home that predated the second case study by thirty years, being built before the turn of the century. This resulted in an old, Midwestern farmhouse, which would have originally been filled with formality, shifting into a completely informal setting. This was not the case for any of the other homes studied in the research, all of them constructed after the beginning of the twentieth century.

Social Distinctions in Middle-Class America

“According to critics, distinctively designed houses were far more desirable because they could affirm the individuality of the occupants’ identities, but it is important to recognize that the stereotype of the homogenous suburban house (the houses “made of tacky-tacky” all in a row) was, to an extent, just that. Developers may have mass-produced houses that had little variation in plan arrangements and materials, but home owners nevertheless became expert at creating subtle variations and distinctions that could be read by neighbors and friends.”²⁵

“The house is an image of the body, of the household, and of the household’s relation to society; it is a physical space designed to mediate between nature and culture...”²⁶

The choice of my parents to live in a historic house, one that didn’t feature the changes in formality discussed through the paper, distinguished them from other members of their social class. Some other families chose to live in these modern homes, featuring these formal settings. It is the choice in housing that begins to separate families, all belonging to the same middle class, into separate social classes. The homes themselves represent the social classes in which the inhabitants present themselves as, even if this isn’t the same class to which they actually belong. These alterations within recent American single-family housing has allowed for these differentiations to occur. Growing up surrounded by the majority of the case studies presented in this research, I didn’t understand these differences. As a kid, I understood that the differences within the homes and our families were present, but I did not understand what they represented. All I knew was that our families were different, because our homes were different. Over the course of the twentieth century, family social patterns have altered our dwelling culture, as well as our housing designs, allowing for patterns of formality to persist, despite the enduring historical process of informalization within the American suburban home. These areas have allowed for families to distinguish themselves within the middle class, either as members of it, or instead of members of upper classes, while still maintaining their families’ identity and everyday culture within the middle class, through the usage of these rooms. Contrary to the continuing belief in a generic middle class, a more divided social structure begins to emerge within the middle class, depicted through the inhabitation of the homes by the families. Although we tend

²⁵ Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 126.

²⁶ Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 40.

to generalize our housing and our families as belonging to one social class, that structure may no longer exist. There are enough variations within the conventional single-family home, as well as within the middle-class family to create distinctions; diverse enough to form a different social class structure. The range in these two variables allows for more combinations of social structure to emerge, creating separations within what was once the American middle class. The inability to classify families by a generic social structure allows for more variation within our culture. The families of these homes, as well as the dwellings themselves can no longer be grouped within a set of labels due to their amount of variations.

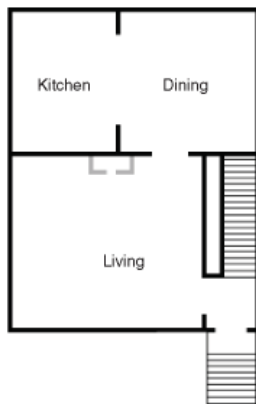
During the twentieth century, shifts in the usage and significance of the public realm within the conventional middle-class single-family home lead to the endurance of formality within these spaces. These shifts helped to create distinctions within what has been commonly referred to as the middle class of America. If the labels associated with these common dwellings, as well as their inhabitants, have been altered to a degree in which we can no longer classify them so easily, designers are then left in a unique situation; the ability to design for smaller, more individualized groups. While some may argue that this leads to less standardization within housing, and a challenge to accommodate the desires of the masses, it could be argued that this allows for more variation within our housing, creating a more diverse and unique living condition within our country; one more focused on the needs and desires of a variety of people. Because of the disappearance of the middle class social structure, as well as enough variations within what these classes prefer in their homes, designers are left with the ability to create a new diverse set of conventional single-family housing in America. This mode of thinking allows for not only stronger individualization of housing within different classes, but also for the individualization of housing based on differences in cultural and ethnic groups. The history of conventional single-family housing in America over the last couple centuries, with more emphasis on the twentieth century, has been heavily geared towards the needs and desires of a specific set of individuals, namely the middle-class white American nuclear family. But the changes presented in this paper, as well as in countless other academic studies, start to show a shift in what people desire within their homes. If designers begin to analyze these changes more directly, we have the potential to create a new form of dwelling culture within our country; one that is more diverse and accommodating to the unique collection of cultures that make up America.

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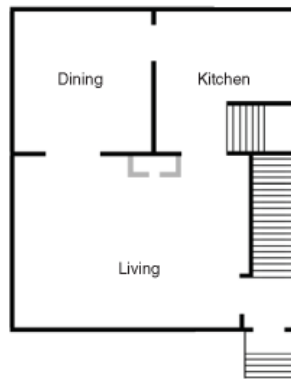
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Case Study Homes

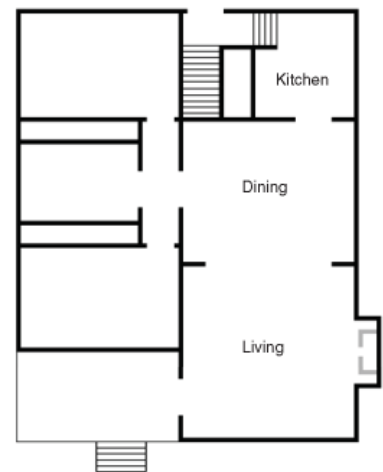
The concluding pages are diagrams of the ground floors of the Case Study houses. Rooms discussed within the paper are labeled in each drawing. The plans have been modified to illustrate the spatial relationships and proportions. Windows and other architectural elements were excluded since they are not relevant to this study. Fireplaces are drawn in a lighter grey. These were originally drawn while the fireplace was part of the original study. This research was later removed when the study took form, being irrelevant to the final result.



Case Study 1 - 1893
Palatine, IL



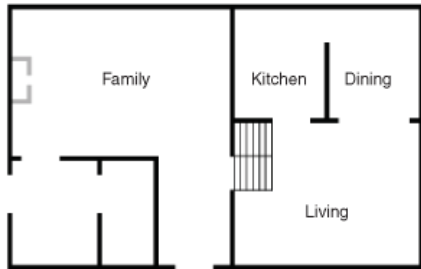
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Urbana, IL



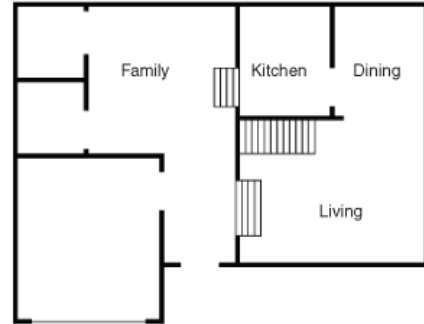
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Bloomington, IN



Case Study 4 - 1955
Palatine, IL



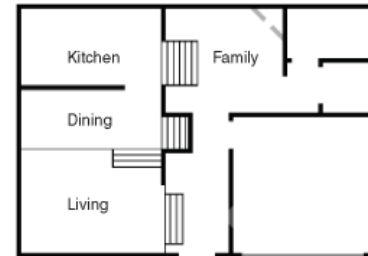
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Palatine, IL



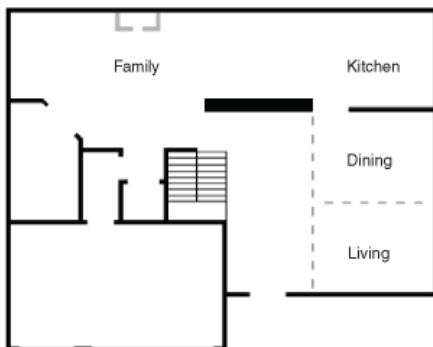
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Palatine, IL



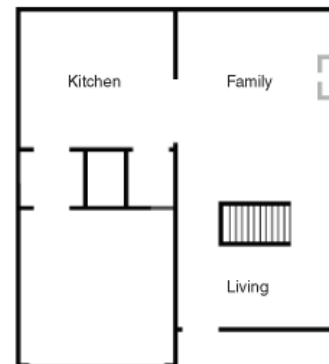
Case Study 7 - 1977
Batavia, IL



Case Study 8 - 1979
Palatine, IL



Case Study 9 - 1999
Palatine, IL



Case Study 10 - 2005
Avon, IN