

# The Historic Dimension Series

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## Architecture with a Capital A: The Importance of Preserving the A-Frame

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*“... it is hard for most of us who partied hearty in the A-frames to think of them as ‘old’ enough to be historic”*  
– Barbara Baraw,  
President of the Stowe Historical Society  
(Stowe, Vermont)

For anyone who has ever taken a trip to the beach, mountains, or any such vacation destination, the A-frame is a familiar yet eye-catching sight. Whether considered tacky or sophisticated, outdated or forever modern, the arresting shape of this structure has always stood out and drawn attention. The striking triangular form of the A-frame, both simple and versatile, can also be found beyond the vacation spot, serving as everything from fast food restaurants to places of worship, along with fulfilling more utilitarian functions such as barns, sheds, and stripped-down cabins. Given the adaptability, structural stability, and attention-grabbing nature of the A-frame, one would think that these buildings are the subject of many preservation projects and that several might be found listed on national and state registers. In reality, though, A-frames are often grouped together with other postwar architecture that has yet to gain full acceptance as “historic.” One enthusiast and architect, Steven Izenour, claims the A-frame is “the most under-appreciated architectural form” (Randl, 175). In this brief, I seek to create an overview of the architectural and cultural significance of the A-frame in the United States, demonstrating that they are more than worthy of preservationists’ attention.

### Defining the A-Frame

Before beginning an in-depth discussion of the A-frame’s history and cultural significance, it is important to define the architectural characteristics of the form, along with

the perceived positive and negative attributes of this unconventional structure. Chad Randl, an architectural historian and author of the only book solely dedicated to the A-frame, defines the form thus: “An A-frame is a triangular structure with a series of rafters or trusses that are joined at the peak and descend outward to a main floor level, with no intervening vertical walls.” And while there are many variants, “most A-frames have roof rafters and floor joists of the same length, connected at sixty-degree angles to form an equilateral triangle.” Randl also highlights the prevalent use of horizontal collar beams that create the cross line of the “A,” both strengthening the frame and serving as joists for a second floor (11).

Virginia and Lee McAlester’s *A Field Guide to American Houses* classifies the A-frame as a “contemporary folk” style of building, a category that also includes mobile homes, Quonset huts, and geodesic domes. While they laud the A-frame’s simple construction and adaptability, the “awkward interior spaces created by the design” are considered a drawback to the form (497). Lester Walker’s *American Shelter* similarly notes the form’s simplicity, yet also highlights various configurations of the “basic A-frame style.” These include the arched A-frame with a curved roof to create more space in the top (see Figure 2), the gambrel roof variant with slanting exterior walls instead of one big roof, and the flat top, which cuts the top off of the “A” to further eliminate unusable space. Those modified by additions include the standard A-frame with wings added to the sides, or the “double” A-frame in which



Fig. 2: The Arched or Gothic A-frame is one variation that seeks to create a more spacious second floor.

two standard models have been joined to create four end walls, allowing in more natural light. For the sake of this discussion, the only relevant variations are those in which the roof indeed forms an “A” shape that goes all the way to the ground, ruling out the gambrel-roof style and the flat top, yet still including those with dormers for more space. Walker’s perceived advantages of the A-frame include low cost, “the rustic, woodsy Swiss Chalet aesthetic,” and the independently strong structure of the triangle. A *Sports Illustrated* article from 1963 points out another, less desirable, attribute—heat tends to build up at the peak of the building, instead of at floor level, where it would be more useful. In spite of its flaws, the A-frame has found enough adherents to have a long history—one that precedes the postwar leisure boom by hundreds of years.

### History of the Form

The triangular form is so simple that it does not necessarily lend itself to a defined history within a certain culture, region, or time period. A 1961 *Time* magazine article put it this way: “The A-frame is not a new idea; the first man who leaned two poles together and threw a skin over them had a rudimentary version of it” (56). This leads to a search for the A-frame’s supposedly “ancient” origins, as advertisers made claim to in the postwar leisure boom of the 1950s and 1960s. In his in-depth research of the form, Randl traces the A-frame as far back as Neolithic China and Japan, where it likely originated before the advent of vertical walls as a roof for “pit dwellings ... part cave, part structure” (16). From these ancient Asian settings, to the triangular Pacific tribal abodes of Oceania, and across the globe to northern Europe, Randl finds a wide variety of A-frame structures serving numerous purposes, from cruck-based (using naturally curved timbers) medieval cottages in England to nineteenth century farm buildings in Sweden.



Fig. 3: The Haddenham Cabin at Fossil Butte National Monument, Wyoming is listed on the National Register.

In late nineteenth century Sweden, Randl notes, the A-frame was employed as a supposed throwback to “a pure Scandinavian building tradition,” and across Europe, surviving A-frame outbuildings fed inspiration to repurpose this building form. This was seen most influentially in post-World War I Switzerland, where architect-designed triangular “chalets” meant to evoke an earlier era were erected without evidence of previously being “a prominent part of the Alpine building heritage” (21-23). The A-frame’s simplicity clearly lends itself to any number of architectural heritages, authentic or fabricated.

This same sentiment may also be applied to North American architecture, as Randl points out, since hunters drew inspiration for temporary quarters from Native American log tents and teepees. As in Europe, American A-frames were often used as outbuildings such as “pump houses, field shelters, and chicken coops” (24). A prominent example of the practical A-frame can be found in what appears to be the only example of the form on the National Register of Historic Places—the Haddenham Cabin at Fossil Butte National Monument in Wyoming (see Figure 3). Constructed ca. 1918 by fossil hunter David Haddenham, this vernacular structure served as a shelter for the Haddenham family when they came to this remote area to search for fossils each summer. This cabin is considered “a rustic reminder of [the] colorful past” of fossil quarrying in the area, according to its National Register application. The cabin’s A-frame form is given little to no emphasis in contributing to its significance by the National Register. Nevertheless, that Haddenham chose to construct an A-frame and that it was used continuously for decades contributes to three points about the A-frame: their ease of construction, durability, and the intuitiveness of the design, which appears in even the most remote locations.



Fig. 4: Long Island potato barns serve as an example of the traditional utilitarian uses the A-frame fulfilled.

An additional example of an important vernacular American A-frame is the potato barn, especially those that came to dominate the farmland of Long Island, New York in the early twentieth century (see Figure 4). The New York State Barn Coalition website notes that these structures are usually banked into a berm or hillside, with the lower portions generally being made of concrete, while the upper wood A-frame portion, which in reality is just the roof, is covered with wooden shingles or clapboard. A-frame structures were useful for storing potatoes due to their closeness to the ground when the angle of the roof is expanded beyond the conventional sixty degrees. Furthermore, the Barn Coalition notes that despite their semi-recent origins and modern building materials, "... potato barns are an aesthetically distinct and historically important part of New York State's built heritage and agricultural history." In addition to this, the potato barn form was claimed as inspiration for an early architect-designed A-frame—Andrew Geller's 1955 Reese House (Gordon, 23). Cutting-edge architects would soon be embracing this simple form.

### Architect-Designed Getaways

Twenty years before Andrew Geller pointed to the Long Island potato barn, architect Rudolph Schindler, who worked under Frank Lloyd Wright, also built an A-frame that he claimed had traditional inspiration (Sarnitz 9). Schindler's Gisela Bennati Cabin, designed in 1934, was intended for the planned community of Lake Arrowhead, California, where all new houses were required to conform to the Norman Revival style (see Figure 5). Architectural historian Rachel Carley notes that Schindler got around this stipulation by implying similarities between the "Norman" roof of the cabin and steep-roofed houses in France. Randl highlights this tendency to portray the A-frame "as vernacular-inspired, traditional rather than radical or modern" (71). Indeed, Schindler's cabin was largely a modernist structure, with



Fig. 5: The Gisela Bennati Cabin, pictured here in 2007, was the first American vacation home in A-frame form.

its plywood interior, large glass-paned gable, and open floor plan (Carley, 229). The Bennati cabin was the forerunner of the A-frame boom, which was dominated by young, mostly west coast architects, including Wally Reemelin, John Campbell, George T. Rockrise, Henrik Bull, and the previously mentioned Andrew Geller (Randl, 47-75). Randl conveys the importance of this first wave of architect-designed, modernist A-frames: Each of these structures "... distinguished itself by foreshadowing what was to come: the rise of the second home that through efficient design and modern materials and manufacturing, was affordable and maintainable" (48).

Wally Reemelin's 1948 A-frame duplex in the hills of Berkeley, California supposedly drew inspiration from the Swiss chalet, according to a 1950 article in *Architectural Record*. More importantly, Reemelin sought to apply his engineering expertise to the residences intended for the steep hillside. *Architectural Record* noted, "The fact that engineering in residential architecture had largely been relegated to considerations of necessity and convenience ... long bothered Wally Reemelin." He chose the simple, strong triangular form of the A-frame for his project, bolting the structures to steel angles anchored to reinforced concrete foundational columns. Like later A-frames, Reemelin included no insulation at the roof and made use of dormers to create more space. Its appearance in *Architectural Record* speaks to the A-frame's initial rise in the professional world of architecture, and it was only years later that a San Francisco newspaper portrayed the duplex as a "vacation cabin" (Randl, 51).

Another early A-frame to receive architectural press was the Leisure House, designed by John Campbell of Campbell and Wong, based in San Francisco. The minimalist design of this early 1950s A-frame was promoted in the California-based design magazine *Arts and Architecture*



Fig. 6: Henrik Bull's 1953 Flender A-frame in Stowe, Vermont was probably the first to appear on the east coast.

as a weekend getaway or second home. One article from this publication calls the Leisure House an informal "weekend retreat designed for ... completely relaxed living," ("A Small Hill Camp") while another states that it was "designed to be built by amateur labor ... [for] below a thousand dollars under favorable conditions" ("A Leisure House"). While this may not seem like professional architecture, Campbell believed that the "fusion of arts and architecture" in this A-frame would "express the inventiveness and warmth of human beings and not the present cold, commercial crassness." Clearly, the form had not yet been utilized by fast-food restaurants and cheap motels, but Randl notes that the simple design and pitched roof (as opposed to flat-roofed box) of the Leisure House brought modernism to a more accessible level: "Like other Bay Area style designs, it warmed and lightened modernism by framing it in natural materials, emphasizing human scale, and asserting that architecture and fun need not be mutually exclusive" (53).

A-frames had made their mark on the west coast in the immediate postwar years, so it was not long before the form was adopted by east coast architects, particularly Henrik Bull in Vermont and Andrew Geller on the beaches of Long Island (see Figure 6). Their vacation homes, despite being built in the harsher climate of the Northeast, continue "the Bay Area architectural sensibility," which allows architecture to be "a natural and unobtrusive extension of what are often stunning landscapes" (Randl, 69). Their designs proved so popular that both men ended up with careers in vacation home design. Although they moved on from designing A-frames, the form had already received enough exposure to become a cultural phenomenon in the subsequent years.

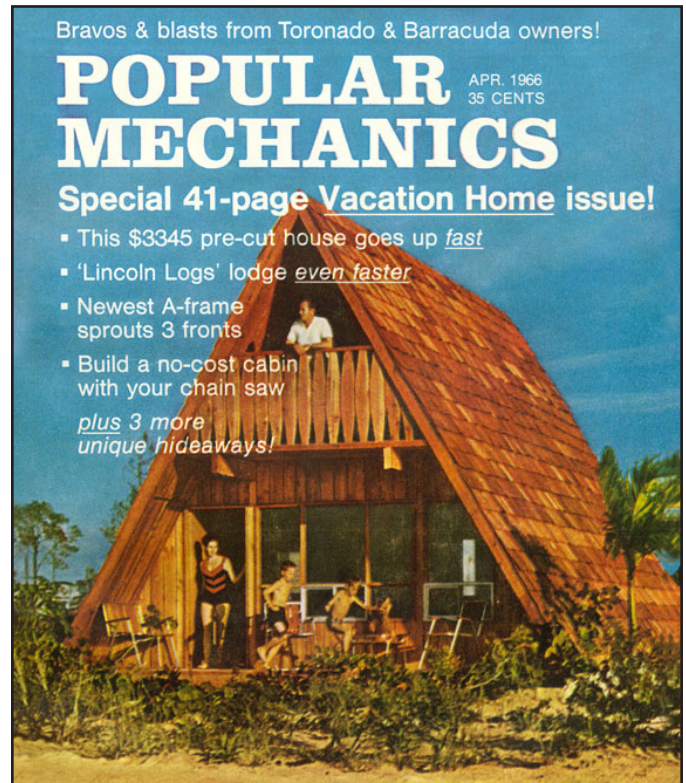


Fig. 7: The rise of the do-it-yourself movement encouraged middle-class families to build their own A-frames.

### The A-Frame Catches on with the Middle Class

By the mid-1950s, the baby boom was well under way and the U.S. economy had reached new heights, producing a prosperous middle class. Alastair Gordon, discussing the career of Andrew Geller, comments on the rise of a market for "little beach houses" and other second homes like those designed by Geller, saying, "... they represented a kind of everyman modernism that was accessible to people with middle-class incomes" (31). Gordon remarks that while Geller's designs were the products of a professional architect who custom-made each home, they were "more in the spirit of pop culture than high culture—orbiting outside the refined aesthetic of Architecture with a capital A... It didn't take an education in art history to understand their appeal" (114).

Similarly, the A-frames that quickly began to dot the landscape across the nation were the products of a leisure culture that was the opposite of serious business. Witold Rybczynski, an architect and professor, traces the historical beginnings of the vacation home in his book *Waiting for the Weekend*, commenting that the idea of a second home in the country probably arose as soon as people started living in cities as "a reaction to the constraints of the rules and regulations that governed behavior in urban society" (171). He also notes that, like the A-frame, "early versions of weekend cottages were not intended to be serious, and their freedom from architectural conventions was ... a reflection of their owners'



Fig. 8: The California chain *Der Wienerschnitzel* utilized a false A-frame structure with a center drive-thru.



Fig. 9: Grace Episcopal Church in Kirkwood, Missouri is an example of a suburban A-frame place of worship.

temporary liberation,” even as early as the sixteenth century (172). A-frames fulfilled an age-old human desire to get away from it all.

The A-frame was the “The Right Shape at the Right Time,” as Randl calls it, lasting in widespread popularity from about 1950 to the early 1970s. During this era, the middle class began to embrace a burgeoning leisure industry, of which the second home was paramount (31). William J. Hennessey comments in his 1962 publication *Vacation Houses*, that judging by then-current vacation house growth (70,000-100,000 a year), by 1970 the second home “will be as popular and as necessary as a second car. It may well be the status symbol of the future.” Hennessey attributes this phenomenon to higher family incomes, longer weekends and vacations, faster cars, and more developed highway and interstate systems, “making it a cinch to reach lakes, seashore, and mountains.” Furthermore, he believes that trips spent at resort hotels have become “a heavy drain on the budget” and “too often result in little more than fast-fading tans and fleeting memories,” while the vacation home provides quality leisure time as well as a possible investment in renting or retirement (vii). Of the forty vacation house designs featured in Hennessey’s book, three A-frames are included—Geller’s Reese House, Cambell’s Leisure House, and a larger form with a four-bedroom wing (revealing that as early as 1962, the stand-alone triangle proved too small for some families). Randl remarks that the A-frame was often seen as the “entry level” vacation home, reinforcing the idea that the simple triangular structure served as the introduction to the good life for thousands of American families (34).

Looking beyond the booming economy, the second home phenomenon in postwar America was largely the product of two differing yet interwoven beliefs that dominated middle class thought: the need for self-improvement and the right to relaxation. These two ideologies combined in the do-it-yourself movement that arose in the 1950s, culminating in the idea that families could construct their own vacation houses. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said in 1957 of this cultural development, “The do-it-yourself-movement is not just a hobby. It is often a pleasant and meaningful contribution to family life” (Gelber, 268). By building their own second home as Thoreau did his cabin in the woods, working people could achieve “the satisfying feeling of individual identity and measurable accomplishment” not to be found in an office cubicle (Gelber, 292).

Therefore, the A-frame, considered one of the most easily built structures, joined the do-it-yourself phenomenon. The tireless promotion of the form by timber companies, building product manufacturers, plan book publishers, and magazine editors (see Figure 7) ensured that the A-frame could soon be found at scenic vistas throughout the nation (Randl, 77). While plan books and blueprints were the initial means by which middle class families sought to build their own vacation homes, A-frame kits soon became popular, providing the pre-drilled wood and other necessary parts to construct a simple A-frame. Nevertheless, Randl reveals that “putting together a kit was not always as easy as promoters claimed,” and while all the parts were (hopefully) there, usually the contents of such a kit ended up as “little more than a large wood tent,” as plumbing, heating, wiring, interior walls, and even glass were all left out unless more money was paid (101-3). Despite this



*Fig. 10: A-frames that still survive in resort areas such as this one in Aspen, Colorado are often largely altered.*

negative aspect of do-it-yourself A-frame construction, some kit producers were successful enough to suggest that their products were well-loved, most notably Lindal Cedar Homes, which is still in business and will be discussed again later. One final development in A-frame marketing was the pre-fabricated package, which was more “finish-it-yourself” than do-it-yourself, and mostly marketed through local dealers who had trained crews assemble the A-frames for the purchasing customer (Randl, 105-9).

### From Fast Food to Churches

With A-frame mania in full swing, it is not surprising that the form spread beyond residential architecture. Although not providing the room one would think necessary for a fast-food restaurant, A-frames were utilized by chains such as Whataburger, Der Wienerschnitzel, Wigwam Wieners, and Griff’s Burger Bar. Architecture writer Phillip Langdon includes A-frames within the trend of “treating modernism as a cosmetic device,” saying, “... flamboyant restaurants did constitute a tribute to the remarkable acceptance that a gymnastic brand of modernism had achieved,” a development made possible by the experimental design years of the postwar era. Texas chain Whataburger capitalized on this trend, painting their A-frames with orange-and-white stripes, using the eye-catching buildings to draw customers in. The A-frame was further used as a cosmetic device in that it often served no real structural purpose (Langdon likens them to McDonald’s Golden Arches). This is most explicit in California chain Der Wienerschnitzel’s false A-frames, which were built starting in 1964 (see Figure 8). Langdon notes that these A-frames are false because they are actually steep roofs covering conventional rectangular boxes that enclose the kitchen, office, and storage room (95-7). Randl details other commercial uses of the A-frame, including the motel, liquor store, and other



*Fig. 11: There are those who still choose to live in a house with no walls, such as this one in Anderson, SC.*

businesses like pet shops and motorcycle shops. While motels like Howard Johnson, which was probably the only major chain to use the form, have a clear connection to the structure’s roots in leisure, Randl comments that many A-frame businesses “turned up in areas not known for outdoor recreation opportunities, and the services they offered and the products they sold were totally unrelated to skiing, boating, or ‘getting away from it all’” (127-30). Clearly, the A-frame’s eye-catching design was considered as suitable for wooing customers as it was for gracing dunes and mountainsides.

One inception of the form that at first also seems unrelated to its roots, yet structurally makes sense, is the A-frame as a place of worship (see Figure 9). Like vacation home architecture, ecclesiastical architecture became much more experimental at this time, with new churches capturing the postwar spirit of “triumph and optimism, appropriate to a nation that considered itself blessed by God’s favor” (Randl, 136). The precursor to the A-frame church was probably Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1947 Unitarian Meeting House in Shorewood Hills, Wisconsin, which was not strictly a triangular design, but a prow-shaped all-roof form that Wright believed allowed the roof to take the place of the steeple. Indeed, many reasons emerged for choosing the A-frame as a place of worship (although the current fashion for A-frames was not mentioned)—the triangle three-dimensionally symbolizing the Holy Trinity, the “modesty and purity” of the simple design, the simplification of the gothic cathedral into its vital components, along with the A-frame’s resemblance to praying hands. Randl notes, “It was a testament to the A-frame’s broad appeal and adaptability that a form used along the roadside to sell hot dogs could, down the street, be a site of spiritual communion



*Fig. 12: The Hillside House in Aspen, Colorado was just recently made a local historic landmark.*

(135-45). Few other unconventional forms could work successfully in so many different scenarios.

### **The Future of A-Frames**

The A-frame's meteoric rise abruptly ended in the 1970s, as the U.S. economy began to falter, formerly idyllic vacation spots began to reflect the damage that came with their discovery and development, fuel prices rose to new heights, and American culture and imagination experienced an overall change. The middle-class was no longer seeking to engage in productive leisure like it once had, and the A-frame itself had become a tired concept. Randl remarks that condos, timeshares, and vacation rentals, not second home ownership, began to appeal to families with moderate means. In addition, recent construction of second homes has revealed that they do not differ much from permanent homes aesthetically anymore (164-5). In more affluent areas, such as the Hamptons, where Andrew Geller built the Reese House, or Aspen, Colorado, where A-frame ski lodges and huts used to dot the hills, small vacation homes like the A-frame no longer fit in with the "McMansion" type structures that are now the norm.

Sadly, Randl notes in his conclusion that, "It is increasingly the rule that [A-frames] are bought for the land beneath them and promptly demolished or enlarged beyond recognition" (see Figure 10). Nevertheless, many postwar A-frames still exist, and there are those who appreciate these structures and seek to preserve them, even if most of them are not preservationists. Randl points to a few examples of "tenacious owners," or new buyers who are A-frame enthusiasts seeking to rehabilitate the structures "with a mix of mid-century modern and contemporary furnishings" in California towns such as Idyllwild and Lake Tahoe (173-74). Andrew Geller's Frisbie House, which is almost a direct replica of the no-



*Fig. 13: Lindal Cedar Homes, once a prominent A-frame manufacturer, now produces green "modern A-frames."*

longer extant Reese House, still stands in Amangansett, Long Island, as the Frisbie family has chosen to not alter the original form, which has stood the test of time on the windswept dunes (Gordon, 121-3). In addition to vacation homes, there are also A-frames that house families year round, although these usually have at least minor additions to create more space (see Figure 11).

The absence of a strong preservationist presence is not uncommon when dealing with mid-century architecture. Most A-frames are not quite at the fifty-year mark yet, but more and more will soon reach this age. Again, from my research it appears that the Haddenham Cabin is the only A-frame officially listed on the National Register. One recently protected A-frame is the Hillside House in Aspen, Colorado, designed by Frederic Benedict, who, like Rudolph Schindler, studied with Frank Lloyd Wright (see Figure 12). According to Amy Guthrie, Historic Preservation Officer of the City of Aspen, this "high-style A-frame," designed as a prototype ski chalet, was recently made a local landmark. In another mountain town, Stowe, Vermont (site of the now-demolished Flender A-frame), Stowe Historical Society President Barbara Baraw commented that the dozen or so remaining A-frames in town will not be added to their historic inventory until 2015, "as it is hard for most of us who partied hearty in the A-frames to think of them as 'old' enough to be historic." Preservationists seem to be aware of the importance of A-frames, but feel as if it is not the time to deem them "historic" just yet, an issue that often occurs with architecture from the recent past. The future holds several options for the postwar leisure era A-frame. One is the unfortunate reality that many will be demolished because of the high value of the land upon which they are built. Conversely, there is the opportunity to nominate A-frames to the National Register and State Registers, ensuring that they will

continue to allow a glimpse of the good life for future generations. Finally, a reinterpretation of the A-frame is now occurring, as seen with the previously mentioned company Lindal Cedar Homes. Once a prominent A-frame producer, Lindal now seeks to reinvent their first successful design as a “modern green home,” according to an article on inhabitat.com (see Figure 12). These new designs do not take on the triangular form exactly but draw inspiration from the floor-to-ceiling windows, lofts, pitched roofs, and open floor plans of traditional A-frames. These homes are to be constructed of sustainable materials, keep construction wastes to a minimum, and essentially bring the A-frame into the new century.

## Conclusion

It seems as if the postwar A-frame is finally reaching what might be called maturity—it is starting to gain credibility as a significant part of the built environment and not as a tacky, outdated fad. This form appears to have come full-circle, once drawing inspiration from “traditional” vernacular outbuildings and now providing inspiration for thoroughly modern green architecture. The simplicity, strength, and aesthetic appeal of the triangle design have caused it be utilized for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. It is important that we preserve the postwar American chapter in the A-frame’s life for future generations to enjoy.

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