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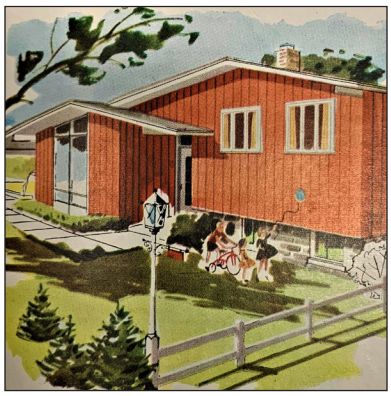

Leveling Up:
Split-Level Houses in Post-War Suburbia

by Laura Clifton

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"Merely reducing the size of the pre-war house did not provide an appropriate post-war living environment. Living space had to be re-evaluated in order to identify the essential spatial requirements of a small structure. The design strategy was straightforward: to accommodate the greatest amount of functional space within a small, low-cost structure. For this reason, the split-level design was an instant success" (Friedman, 1995, p. 141).

In the years directly following the Second World War, both the physical and social landscapes of the United States changed dramatically. This period was marked by explosive growth in new suburban areas, as millions of new homes were constructed and eagerly purchased by predominantly white, middle-class families seeking a thoroughly modern way of living in the post-war economic boom. Myriad factors, from governmental policies to consumer expectations, shaped the size, form, and style of houses built during this unique time in American history.

The types of homes being built in newly developed neighborhoods were also brand new: the architectural forms springing up on the suburban landscape did not draw on or adapt existing residential designs, but rather were unique creations born out of a clear social and economic context. Like the ranch style house, split-level house designs were immensely popular and came to dominate post-war suburban neighborhood developments. Unlike ranch houses, however, split-level designs fell out of popularity nearly as quickly as they rose to prominence.

Because of their distinctive plan, split-level houses are immediately recognizable, instantly dated to their time period of origin, and often looked down upon as an odd blip on the American architectural timeline. However, as this brief explores, split-level houses are ripe for a comeback, as they are both an affordable and highly livable housing option for today's social and economic context, just as they were when first built.

Suburban Mania

America's post-war period generally is identified as the 15-20 years directly following the end of World War II, or the years 1945 to 1965. A number of factors influenced the suburban housing boom that characterized this time period: a nationwide housing shortage, federal mortgage programs accompanied by stringent housing guidelines, the relationship between builders and consumers, and new mindsets for residential living popularized in print media. Of all these factors, the government-sponsored mortgage programs—along with the strict housing limitations these programs required—ultimately had the greatest impact on the post-war housing industry and the kinds of homes that industry produced.

In recognition of the immediate need for a nationwide increase in housing and as part of programs for returning veterans, both the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans' Administration (VA) oversaw subsidized lending options that enabled millions of nuclear families to become homeowners for the first time. Indeed, without the implementation of these federal mortgage programs, the majority of Americans could not afford to purchase a home, even amidst the post-war increase in working-class Americans rising towards the middle class.

Builders recognized this fact and sought to capitalize on the needs of eager consum-

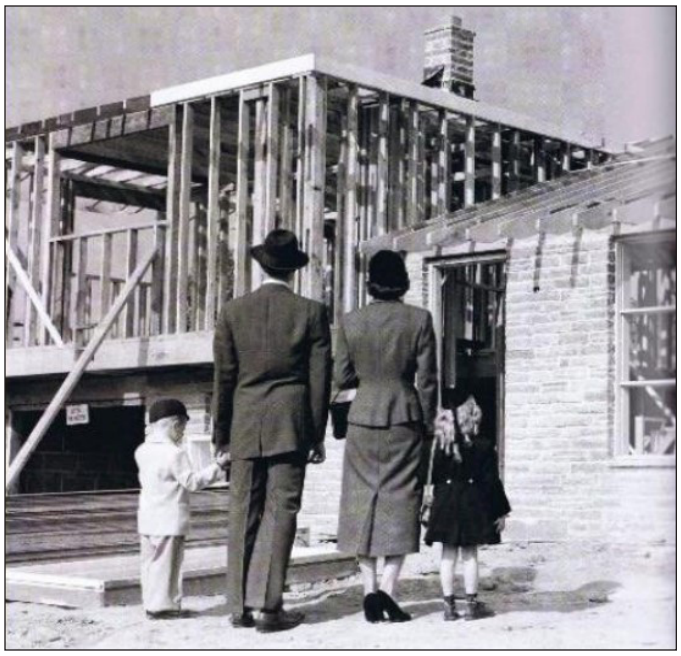

Fig. 2: A post-war family checking in on construction progress at their new split-level home

ers. However, because the federal mortgage programs enabling this new class of consumers created eligibility guidelines restricting both house size and price, builders and architects were required to change their practices to conform to what consumers could actually buy. As a result, builders, architects, and designers collaborated to create innovative housing types that would meet the federal guidelines. The urgent need for rapidly constructed houses also meant that standardization of building practices, materials, and house plans became the norm.

Under the federal guidelines that limited house price and size, traditional two-story homes were both too large and too expensive. However, consumers with growing families still wanted as much house as they could afford, and new ideas about residential lifestyles and family living influenced what they expected from a new house. The rise of the nuclear family as the predominant familial living arrangement fostered ideas about the importance of togetherness, meaning that new ways of family interacting required innovative spaces in the home. Likewise, lifestyle magazines celebrated and encouraged casual living, defined primarily by socializing with friends and colleagues at home amidst modern material comforts.

Therefore, simply reducing the size of pre-war, two-story houses or returning to small, turn-of-the-century bungalow styles would not adequately provide for a new lifestyle requiring both livability and modernity. House plans which maximized efficient use of space and offered rooms serving multiple purposes were necessary, as were styles incorporating all that was novel and innovative about post-war consumer culture and

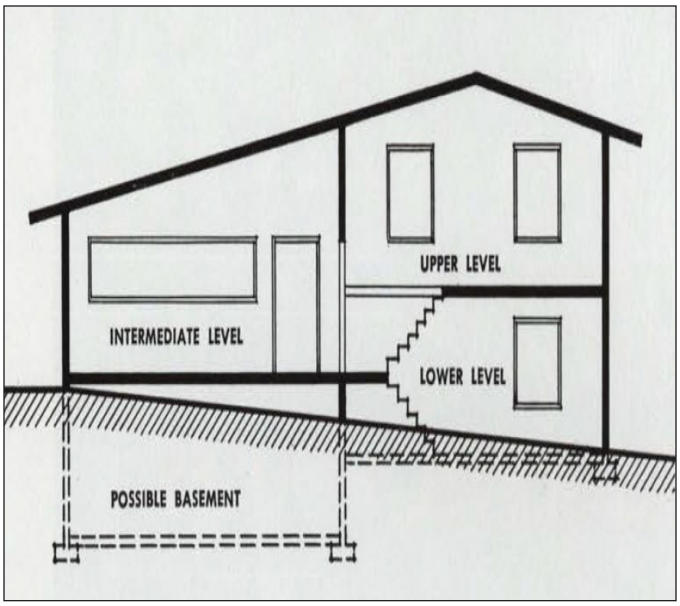

Fig. 3: Diagram from 1960 informational brochure explaining the split-level plan

technology. A new kind of house was needed, and the split-level offered the perfect solution to this demand.

A New House for a New Era

The split-level house is not so much a style as it is a specific plan. Characterized by its staggered levels connected via half flights of stairs, the split-level plan offers a unique way of subdividing living areas within the home. In addition to appealing to post-war middle-class homebuyers for its modern layout accommodating nuclear family living, the plan's multi-level structure made the house look larger than it really was—making it attractive to families who wanted the appearance of a two-story house but could not actually purchase one under the housing guidelines attached to FHA mortgage loans.

While different configurations of the split-level plan exist, the tri-level plan was the most popular version in the post-war building period and is therefore now the most common type found. It consists of three distinct levels: the first at ground level, the second adjacent to the first and set a half-level below, and the third directly above the second. The second and third levels are accessed from the first level by adjacent half-flights of stairs, which each have six to eight steps instead of the usual twelve to sixteen steps found on a full flight of stairs.

Typically, the main level—located mostly flush with the ground—contains the public spaces: entry, living room, dining room, and kitchen. The upper level houses bedrooms and bathrooms, and the lower level usually contains a recreation room and utility areas, such as the laundry room, mechanical room, and perhaps a garage. Sometimes, an additional bedroom and bathroom are located on the lower level, or the garage or carport is found attached to the main level instead. Some split-

Fig. 4: Split-level house with carport

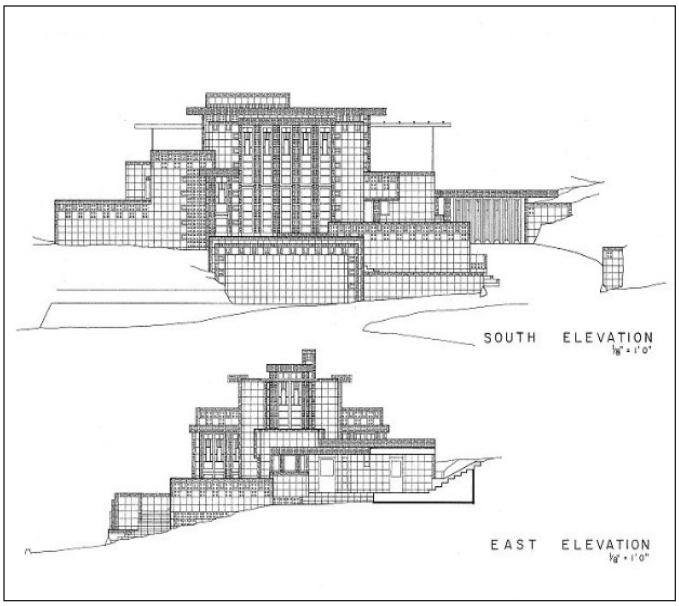

Fig. 5: Frank Lloyd Wright's 1923 design for the Storer House

level homes lack a garage or carport altogether. In this multi-level arrangement, public and private spaces are distinctly separate from each other.

On the exterior, a large picture window is usually found on the façade of the main level, while windows on the upper and lower levels are of small to medium size. The three levels are typically distinguished by different materials. The lower level is often clad in brick or stone, while the upper level features plywood, wood clapboards, or shingles made of wood or asbestos-cement. The main level's cladding often matches either the lower or upper level. Varying stylistic treatments and material combinations were often originally applied as a means of differentiating between identical split-level plans appearing multiple times in the same neighborhood or on the same street.

Not So Humble Origins

While the split-level plan—like the ranch style house—was a brand new type of single-family home appearing on the American residential landscape after World War II, the split-level was not actually invented during this post-war building period. Research conducted by various architectural historians suggests that the split-level plan has its origins in designs by Frank Lloyd Wright dating to the early decades of the 20th century.

According to historian Richard Clouse, Frank Lloyd Wright's 1923 Storer House in California is likely the origin of the split-level's stepped floorplan. Designed to accommodate a sloping site without dramatically leveling the landscape, the Storer House features staggered floors accessed via half-flights of stairs. In the years immediately following the Storer House's design and construction, as architects designing for wealthy clients looked to innovative designs like Wright's for building on sloping sites, the idea of using staggered floors separated by half-flights of stairs gradually spread.

Some of these high-end, custom-designed homes utilizing Wright's plan for a sloped site were featured in design magazines prominent at the time. Eventually, Wright's idea made its way to middle-class house plans promoted by popular design catalogs, where plans for emerging versions of split-levels can be seen as early as the 1930s. According to historians James Massey and Shirley Maxwell, the Sears, Roebuck and Company's Modern Homes catalog began featuring split-level homes starting in 1933.

By this time, however, split-level houses had become a style all on their own, separated from the context of a uniquely sloping site: advertisements show the structures on flat lots excavated to accommodate the plan's staggered floors. While further research conducted by Massey and Maxwell suggests that builders near Chicago—where Sears, Roebuck and Company was based—experimented with the plan in the late 1930s, it remained a mostly obscure idea until the post-war housing boom, when the social and economic factors described previously brought this house plan to the forefront of middle-class suburban design.

Rise and Fall

Split-level houses rose to popularity in the early 1950s and fell out of favor by the early 1970s. The reasons for the split-level's rapid rise to prominence and equally rapid fall out of it were both practical and aesthetic and also tied to the specific economic and cultural realities of each decade. In a sense, split-levels served to bridge the gap between the smaller houses required by the FHA's

Fig. 6: Split-level featured as one of four "idea houses" in September 1958 issue of Better Homes & Gardens

housing guidelines after World War II and the return to more traditional two-story housing a few decades later.

The 1950s and 1960s were the heyday of the split-level. This time period is considered the second wave of the post-war housing boom, when houses were beginning to be built a bit larger than the tightly compact homes of the first housing wave that occurred in the 1940s. During this time, homebuyers with growing families increasingly wanted houses with more space than those early post-war houses could provide, but still needed something affordable that would meet the FHA's housing requirements. Additionally, land prices were rising every day as more neighborhoods were developed, so a creative solution was needed to combine affordability, a smaller footprint, and the modern aesthetic and amenities homebuyers had come to expect.

The split-level plan offered the perfect solution to this problem. Because of their staggered plan, split-level houses often had a footprint up to fifty percent smaller than a ranch style home of similar square footage. Therefore, split-levels could be built on smaller lots while still offering the same or more interior space as the immensely popular ranch house, providing both builders and buyers a more efficient use of limited lot space. Additionally, with less area needing to be roofed and a smaller foundation to be poured, tremendous cost savings could be used either to pay for the excavating and grading of the lot required by the staggered plan or passed along to upgrading amenities elsewhere in the house.

Also, the fact that the split-level plan still emphasized a ground-hugging façade meant that it appealed to buyers who liked the ranch style aesthetic but needed the same

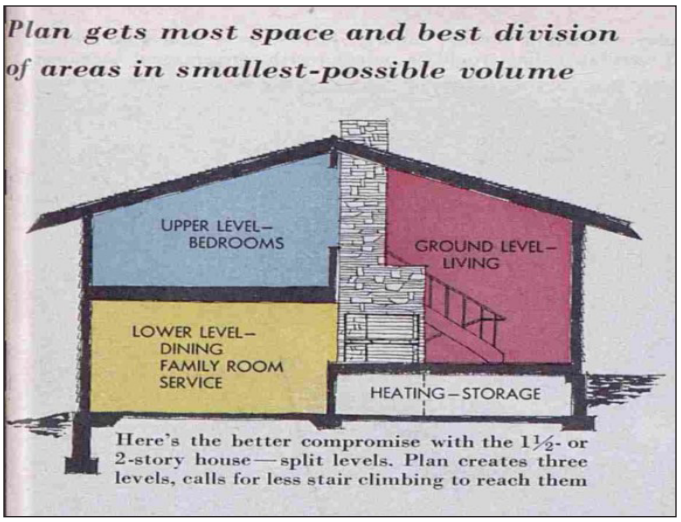

Fig. 7: Diagram from April 1955 issue of Better Homes & Gardens praising split-level plan design

or more square footage on a smaller lot. Similarly, the house had the advantage of looking larger than it really was, fooling the eye into seeing a two-story house despite the lower level being below grade. The split-level plan offered multi-story living without the traditional two-story cost, appealing to buyers who preferred a more traditional look but could not afford a typical two-story house.

On the interior, the split-level plan provided efficiency, privacy, and multi-purpose space-planning solutions. The location of the entryway on the main level, typically in close proximity to the stairs, meant that every part of the house was easily accessible from this point. This resulted in more efficient circulation patterns, eliminating the cross-traffic issues sometimes present in single-story homes. Likewise, the half-flights of stairs reduced the number of steps required to move from floor to floor. The house's staggered, multi-level nature also separated public spaces from private ones (and noisy pursuits from quiet pastimes), allowing for increased privacy and supporting varied activities by multiple family members at the same time, in the same house.

The rec room, located in the lower level of the house, was a large part of the split-level's immense popularity. Essentially just a large open space, families could define this area to suit their needs; it could become a television room, a workshop, a playroom, or anything else that the family might need it to be. The presence of this open space also meant that expansion of the house's usable square footage was possible without the expense of constructing an addition. This appealed to owners with growing families who might need another bedroom and bathroom but who could not afford to move to a larger house.

While the split-level succeeded in solving the problems unique to the post-war housing boom, it quickly fell out

Fig. 8: Interior image of split-level & half-flights of stairs from August 1964 issue of Better Homes & Gardens

Fig. 9: Interior of split-level house with cosmetic updates

of favor when that boom dissipated in the mid-1960s; the plan type peaked in popularity by the early 1970s. Both economic and cultural factors contributed to this swift decline. First, land prices had continued to grow steadily, so the need for even smaller lots meant the two-story house came back into favor as the most prudent and feasible plan type. Second, designers and consumers began to reject the ground-hugging features of ranch style houses, and by extension split-level houses, in favor of larger and more visually prominent styles. The split-level house rapidly became a dated reminder of a previous era, out of sync with current lifestyles and design sensibilities. While it has remained an unpopular house type since falling out of favor fifty years ago, the characteristics that contributed to its initial rise in popularity can bring it back to homeowners' attention again.

Making a Comeback

In the same way that newly constructed split-level houses served as an affordable option for post-war, first-time homebuyers seeking a house with an efficient layout and ample space, so can historic split-level homes provide today's millennial, first-time homebuyers with an affordable house in a suburban setting that meets the needs of a 21st-century lifestyle.

Because the split-level plan has remained an unpopular house type, split-level houses continue to be more affordable per square foot than other houses similar in age with comparable square footage. Also, the characteristics that made the split-level so popular in its heyday are features which readily apply to twenty-first-century lifestyle needs today. Specifically, the division of space between public and private areas is conducive to homeowners who work remotely, as well as remaining helpful for families with children, because of the noise control provided by the house's staggered levels.

Additionally, the lower level continues to provide flexible space for creative uses—a home gym, a small rental apartment, or an in-laws suite—while remaining separate from other private areas in the house. Likewise, the half-flights of stairs still offer multi-story living without the hassle of a full flight of steps. As homeowners tire of the noise, lack of privacy, and visual chaos of open plan homes, some realtors predict that house trends will return to the separated plans of split-level houses.

Similarly, interest in vintage styles and designs may eventually come the way of the split-level plan. Because the split-level's unique floorplan is both difficult to reconfigure and already efficiently allocated, homeowners can avoid costly renovation fees and instead make less expensive cosmetic updates. This also bodes well for preservation efforts: in discouraging reconfiguration, the split-level's plan also encourages its preservation.

Conclusion

Now that post-war suburban neighborhoods have reached or are close to reaching the fifty-year mark of eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as well as designation by local historic preservation commissions, it is important that houses like the split-level are recognized for their tremendous impact on the American architectural landscape, as well as for the role they can continue to play in providing housing that is affordable, efficient, and attuned to modern lifestyles.

Fig. 10: Split-level house with exterior updates

Fig. 11: Split-level house with lower level garages

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Image Credits

Figures 1, 6-8: Better Homes and Gardens magazine archives

Figure 2: Georgia Department of Natural Resources: Historic Preservation Division

Figure 3: University of Illinois Bulletin.

Figure 5: Library of Congress Historic American Buildings Survey

Figure 9: Instagram

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