



Modern design took off after World War II, as young suburbanites outfitted their new tract homes in a way that reflected their contemporary lifestyle. More than 70 years later, the decor they loved continues to attract admirers and fervent collectors. In these pages, we explore five elements of this revolutionary style.

# HOW WE LIVE NOW

BY  
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COURTESY OF KNOLL



**COORDINATING FLOORING** and drapery patterns delineate rooms in this open-concept plan from 1956.

## FORM AND FUNCTION

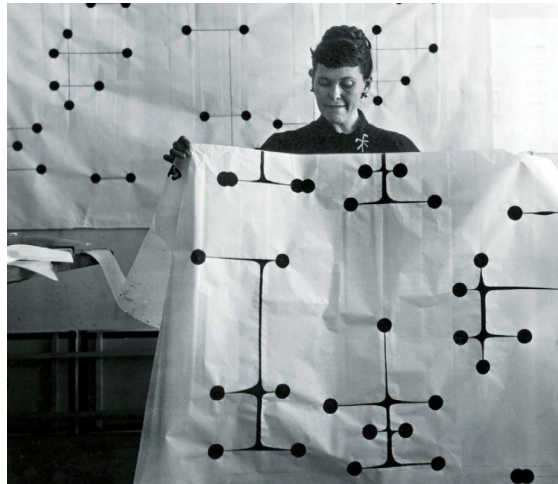
A graceful steel-and-leather chair, left, by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and shown at the 1929 International Exposition in Spain, sets the tone: Nothing interferes with function. Forms are pared down with few adornments. Essentials—legs and surfaces—are slim for a sleek, airy look.

**Scaling Up**  
Simpler forms can be made faster. Mass-production strategies adopted in WWII position industry to realize the American dream on a large scale.

**Finely Crafted**  
Detractors may rue the lack of old-master features such as hand-turned legs, but craftsmanship still rules in carefully chosen materials and polished finishes.

APIC/GETTY IMAGES

**RAY EAMES** shows her Dot Pattern, which is now iconic.



## PATTERNS AND SHAPES

Bold patterns and large geometric shapes lend character to linear pieces. Artists such as Ray Eames create graphic accent fabrics. Meanwhile, architect Florence Knoll of Knoll Associates, unhappy with the Victorian chintz dominating textiles in the mid-1940s, turns to men's suiting for her line of custom office furniture. Soon the understated "Knoll look" influences the home market. Somehow the dynamic alchemy of loud and subtle works in harmony.

**Earth and Sky**  
Organic shapes such as amoebas—known as bioforms—soften the futuristic look, bottom left. At the same time, atomic designs such as starburst clocks soar.

**Complete Decor**  
Walls, once only white or beige, become another focal point in the whole-house approach to design that took hold at midcentury, right.



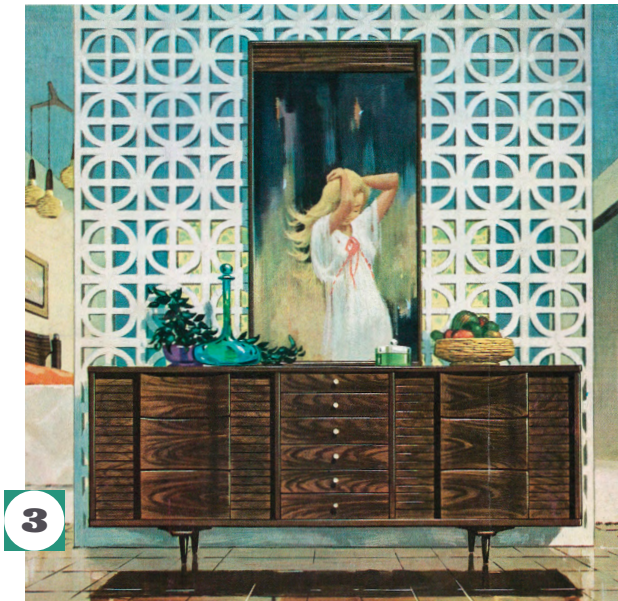
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FLORENCE, COURTESY OF KNOLL



AN INTELLIGENT INTERIOR PLAN GOES FURTHER THAN THE FURNISHINGS ... IT STRIKES AT THE ROOT OF LIVING REQUIREMENTS AND CHANGING HABITS. —FLORENCE KNOLL



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**A 1961 Delray furniture ad hits several trends: gleaming wood, plastic or metal room screen, porcelain tile and decorative glass.**

**Wood**  
Oak, maple, cherry and teak are polished to a glossy finish to show off the grain. Amber shellac pine panels are a kitchen mainstay.

**Ceramics**  
Russel Wright sculpts earthenware into smooth teardrops and other shapes for his American Modern dinnerware.

**Lighting**  
Metal and other materials are used in task and pendant lights. The iconic Arco floor lamp by Achille Castiglioni has a steeply arced steel arm and thick marble base.

## NEW MATERIAL, NEW USE

Technologies and factory processes perfected during the war mean that artfully molded furniture by Arne Jacobsen and Charles and Ray Eames are readily available and affordable. Inexpensive plastic, fiberglass and plywood turn into pieces that convey casual luxury.

In their eternal quest to find the ideal balance of practical, affordable and beautiful, designers use familiar materials in new ways—wood paneling, slate walls, plate-glass doors and tabletops. And they give traditional construction materials refined treatment for interiors: concrete blocks for room dividers, chrome-plated steel for furnishings, enameled cast iron for cookware.

## TEXTURES GALORE

Typical rec rooms feature pine paneling, slate flooring and nubby fabrics. A Lane Acclaim coffee table has contrasting dovetails.



BASEMENT FOUND IMAGE HOLDINGS INC/GETTY IMAGES; LIVING ROOM FOUND IMAGE HOLDINGS INC/GETTY IMAGES

## OTHER TRENDS

Modernism isn't the only design game in town. These styles also come into play in the 1950s and 1960s.



**Early American:** Its chief inspiration is the 18th-century Philadelphia school, but it also borrows from other new-world ideas, such as the Shaker movement. Modernists like Shaker, too—notice its influence in a Heritage furniture ad at right—but the Early American interpretation leans to sturdy woods and traditional shapes.



**Tiki Culture:** With dubious links to a 1930s California bootlegger, Tiki style took off after Thor Heyerdahl's famous trip across Polynesia aboard the balsa raft *Kon-Tiki* in 1947. Rattan and bamboo furniture with bright cushions adorns home bars, where guests sip fruity drinks out of carved wooden cups.

BEDROOM: CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM/GETTY IMAGES; TIKI FOUND IMAGE HOLDINGS INC/GETTY IMAGES



**A MIX OF TONES**  
provides a sense of fun.

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## SPLASHES OF COLOR

With a pared-down silhouette, color pops. Complementary tones, including clay red, teal blue and ocher, make living rooms warm and inviting, while pastels or bright primary colors rule the kitchen. Bathroom tiles are soft tones of pink, green or blue.



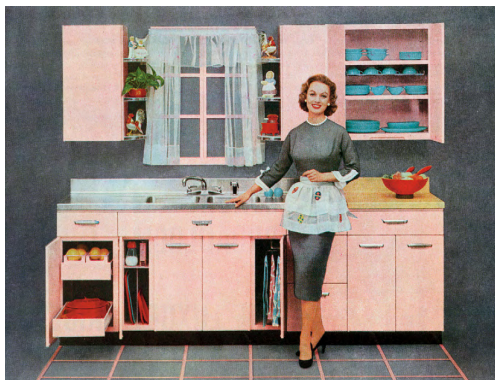
**Entertaining**  
Open floor plans allow ample room for entertaining, a key pastime of 1950s suburban living.

**Art at Work**  
Abstract art does double duty—it ties colors together and shows off the owners' taste.

**Indoor Plants**  
Botanicals are another source of color and mute the linear austerity.

## PRETTY IN MAMIE PINK

The first lady glows in a pastel pink rhinestone gown at President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration in January 1953—and in no time “Mamie Pink” becomes the color of American domesticity. A skilled hostess who catered to dignitaries at home well before her husband became the president, Mamie famously quips “Ike runs the country, I turn the lamb chops.” Pink kitchens are suddenly everywhere. All are equipped with the latest technology, from built-in blenders to slide-out storage, to help homemakers mimic the first lady's seemingly effortless entertaining style.



**SAMPLE ROOMS** like this one in magazine articles and advertising give vital styling cues. Home publications enjoy high circulations in the '50s.



## SUNNY OUTLOOK

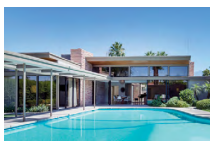
California developer Joseph Eichler worked with several architects to build 11,000 tract homes—now prized for their distinctive features.



A-frame peaks, above, or butterfly roofs, top, have roofline windows for light while maintaining privacy.



Atriums and courtyards hark back to classical Greek and Roman styles.



Sliding glass doors and walls of windows mark this Palm Springs gem designed in 1947 by E. Stewart Williams for Frank Sinatra.

KITCHEN: GRAPHICARTS/GETTY IMAGES; BEDROOM: UNIVERSAL IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; BUTTERFLY ROOF: A. DENZERA/AMY STOCK PHOTO; A-FRAME: MARK KANNING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ATRIUM: ANNE CUSACK/GETTY IMAGES; POOL: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/LC-DIG-HIGH-RES-2566



I OPERATE ON THE THEORY OF INNOVATION. I DEVELOP WHAT I BELIEVE TO BE GOOD. AND THEN I OFFER IT TO MY CUSTOMERS. —JOSEPH EICHLER



**AN INSTANT CLASSIC** in 1956, this house was designed by modern-ranch pioneer Cliff May.

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## BRINGING THE OUTSIDE IN

Several factors drive the trend to blur the line between indoors and out: Many tract houses are in high-density developments, so architects use every inch of square footage and create the illusion of more with glass and open-air living areas; with fewer architectural flourishes on the house itself (to save costs), the natural landscape is a ready adornment; and by turning their faces to the bright western sun, modern designers assert a distinctly American style that reflects the optimism and prosperity of the middle class at midcentury. ●

**Historic Tracts** Enclaves across the country offer different examples of midcentury architecture. They include Arapahoe Acres in Englewood, Colorado; Windemere in Phoenix, Arizona; Snake Hill in Belmont,

Massachusetts; Hollin Hills in Alexandria, Virginia; Parkwyn Village in Kalamazoo, Michigan; Glenbrook Valley in Houston, Texas; and the Hillcrest area of Boise, Idaho.