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## Vernacular Architecture Forum Syllabus Exchange



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**instructor:** Gretchen Buggeln  
**course title:** The American Home  
**institution:** Valparaiso University  
**date offered:** Spring 2005

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**CC 325C: The American Home**  
**Spring semester 2005, MWF 11:50-12:40, MUH 109**  
**Professor Buggeln**  
**464-5152, [Gretchen.Buggeln@valpo.edu](mailto:Gretchen.Buggeln@valpo.edu)**  
**Office Hours: 1-3 Mondays; 2-4 Thursdays**

In this course we will study American homes past and present and consider what they say about the lives of those who built and lived in them. The goals for the course are:

1. Develop a vocabulary for understanding changing American house types and interiors and recognize a progression in architectural style.
2. Become familiar with the tools of material culture analysis—questions about materials, construction, form, and meaning of objects
3. Link American material life to questions about social organization and cultural values

Course requirements:

1. Attend class meetings prepared to discuss the readings
2. Short paper
3. Take-home midterm
4. Complete a portion of class research project on Linwood House
5. Short (10-15 page) individual research paper (topics TBA)

Field Trip: One optional (attendance strongly encouraged!) Saturday field trip to Oak Park, IL: Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio and Hemingway Birthplace

Grading:

Short paper	5%	Due 1/18, 5 p.m.
Midterm	20%	Due 2/25 in class
Linwood House Project (a group study of the former VU president's residence, currently used for offices, blt. 1959)	20%	Written portions due in class, 4/20
Final Paper	30%	Due 5/6, 5 p.m.
Class Participation	25%	

## **Buggeln/American Home**

### **Week One:** Introduction

1/5 Introduction to course

1/7 Why study houses, and how?

Read: Carson, "Doing History with Material Culture"  
Ames, "Victorian Hall Furnishings"

### **Week Two:** The Seventeenth Century

1/10 European roots, sources for studying homes

Read: Home ch. 2 "Intimacy and Privacy", ch. 3 "Domesticity"

1/12 The Early South

Read: Robert Cole's World, pp. 90-117 (instructor will provide)

1/14 New England

Read: Building the Dream ch. 1, "The Puritan Way of Life"

### **Week Three:** Colonial Development

1/17 MLK Jr. holiday/no class

Read: Home ch. 4 "Commodity and Delight," and ch. 5 "Ease"

1/19 Georgian Style

Read: Jan Gilliam, "The Evolution of the House in Early Virginia" (reader)

1/21 Georgian Society

Read: Rodris Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its etiquette and equipage" (reader)  
Billy Smith, "Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians" (reader)

### **Week Four:**

1/24 Monticello and Mt. Vernon

Read: Upton, "An American Icon," pp. 20-38 (instructor will provide)

1/26 The Plantation Landscape

Read: Building the Dream ch. 3, "The Big House and the Slave Quarters,"  
Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" (reader)

1/28 Cities and Factories

Read: Building the Dream, ch. 2 "Row upon Row in the Commercial City,"  
ch. 4 "Housing Factory Workers"

**Week Five:**

Read: Home ch. 7 “Light and Air”

Building the Dream, ch. 5 “Independence and the Rural Cottage”

American Family Home, ch. 1 “Reforming the Foundations of Society”

1/31 Greek and Gothic Revivals—style and meaning

2/2 A. J. Downing and the Rural Cottage

2/4 Beecher and Stowe, American Woman’s Home, ch. II “A Christian House”  
[http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book\\_26.cfm](http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_26.cfm)

**Week Six:**

2/7 Domestic Technology

Read: Home ch.8 “Efficiency”

2/9 Suburbs

Read: Building the Dream, ch. 6 “Victorian Suburbs and the Cult of Domesticity”

American Family Home ch. 3, “The Suburban Neighborhood Ideal”

2/11 The Ideal and the Real

Read: American Family Home ch. 2, “Dreams and Realities

Fred Peterson, “Vernacular Building and Victorian Architecture: Midwestern American Farm Homes” (reader)

**Week Seven: Nineteenth-Century Interiors**

2/14-16

Read: Grier, Culture and Comfort ch. 2, “The Comfortable Theater: Parlor Making in the Middle-Class Victorian Household, 1850-1910” and ch. 3 “Orthodox as the Hymn Book: The Rhetoric of Parlor Furnishing, 1850-1910” (on reserve)

American Family Home, ch. 4 “The House as Artistic Expression”

2/18 Read: Building the Dream, ch. 7, “Americanization and Ethnicity in Urban Tenements”

Lizabeth Cohen, “Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of Working Class Homes, 1885-1915” (reader)

**Week Eight: Modernizing**

2/21 Read: American Family Home ch. 5 “Modernizing the House and Family”

Karen Halttunen, “From Parlor to Living Room: Domestic Space, Interior Decoration, and the Culture of Personality” (instructor will provide)

2/23 The Bungalow

Read: American Family Home ch. 6 “The Bungalow Craze”

Building the Dream, ch. 4 “The Progressive Housewife and the Bungalow”

2/25 Take home midterm due

SPRING BREAK

**Week Nine:** Towards the Modern Suburban Home

3/14 Ken Burns’ FLW (selections)

3/16 Discussion of F.L. Wright, *The Natural House*

3/18 Levittown

Read: Building the Dream chs. 11 and 13 “Planned Residential Communities” and “The New Suburban Expansion and the American Dream”

American Family Home ch. 7-8 “Ranch House Modern” and “The Suburban Complex”

**Week Ten:** Research methods for Linwood House project

3/21 Continue discussion of last Friday’s reading

3/23 Plans, oral histories, building records, archives

3/25 **Good Friday Holiday**

**Week Eleven**

3/28 Early Colonial Revival

Read: Rodris Roth, “New England Kitchen Exhibits” (instructor will provide)

3/30 Later Colonial Revival

4/1 Housing the Poor

Read: Building the Dream ch. 12 “Public Housing for the Worthy Poor”

James C. Curtis, “Race, Realism, and the Documentation of the Rural Home during the Great Depression” (reader)

**Week Twelve:** Linwood House research

4/4-4/8 Meet with instructor in teams

**Week Thirteen: Contemporary America**

4/11 Building the Dream ch. 14 “Preserving Homes and Promoting Change”

American Family Home ch. 9 “The American Family Home and the American Dream”

4/13 Duany et al., Suburban Nation, 39-57, 124-127, 205-212 (Instructor will provide)

Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia, 181-197, 216-229 (Instructor will provide)

4/15 Today's model homes  
*Bring assessment of model home to class*

***Saturday, April 16: Class Field Trip to Oak Park, IL***

**Week Fourteen**

4/18 Class Project—presentations to group

4/20 Class Project—presentations to group

4/22 TBA

**Week Fifteen: At Home in Disneyland**

4/25 Andrew Ross, *The Celebration Chronicles* , chs. 1-5

4/27 chs. 6-9

4/29 chs. 10-13

**Week Sixteen:**

5/2 Presentations on independent research projects (5 minutes)

5/5 ca. 11 am (Exam Hour); presentation on Linwood House for faculty and students  
***Research papers due***

**Buggeln/American Home seminar  
Spring 2005**

Guidelines for house research:

Each house will have a story to tell, and the focus of your paper will depend on your particular building and where your research leads. Think of this assignment as writing a *biography* of the house, not an architectural history. Remember: your main source material is right in front of you, the fabric of the house itself. Visit the house often, explore rooms, basements, attics, porches and patios. Walk around the house and neighborhood to get a sense of the way it fits into the landscape. Gather as much information as you can about past owners and their lives; collect images of the house over time. Record everything you see: take pictures and keep good notes. I'm not looking for sophisticated knowledge of styles and building techniques, but you should be able to *describe* the house in detail.

Categories of questions:

*You will not need to answer all of these questions, but pursue as many of them as you can.*

1. Who built the house? Was it part of a development or individual construction? What was the original lot size? How many times has it changed hands, and when? Unless you luck out and find a knowledgeable informant, you will need to do research in city or county records. This will differ by place, but offices to check might include the auditor, county assessor, or city planning commission. Also, check with the local historical society as well as the reference desk at the local public library.
2. How is the house constructed (balloon frame, masonry, etc.)? What materials were used? What kind of windows and how many? What is the architecture of the roofline and the roofing material. If the house is sided, is it old or a later addition? Is there a basement and if so how is it constructed? What kind of decoration adorns the outside of the house? Is there any built-in furniture? What is closet space like?
3. Which systems are original, or added later? Was this technology progressive or conservative? (Heating systems, appliances, plumbing, a/c, etc.) Any interesting or quirky technologies?
4. If you don't have original plans, draw measured floor plans for each floor of the house. Also, if applicable, measure ceiling heights, window heights, and the width of door openings.
5. Look at surfaces. Floors: wood? vinyl or linoleum? carpet over original flooring? Walls: paint, wallpaper? wood moldings or cornices? plasterwork?

Look in crannies, edges, closets, behind baseboards for evidence of earlier treatments.

6. Investigate the kitchen. Which appliances are original/later additions? How much storage space is there? What kind of counter/work space is available? How is this critical workroom lighted?
7. Describe the bathrooms. Are they purely functional spaces? How many bathrooms are there, and how big are they?
8. Talk to the present owners and any previous owners you can identify. What are their memories of the house? What do/did they like/dislike about it? What did/would they change? Do they have any photographs of the house over time? How are the rooms currently being used?
9. Are there/have there been ongoing maintenance issues with the house that reflect poor design or a poor response to climate?
10. Look at the yard, its landscaping and use. Is there a porch or patio? What household activities take place outside? Are there any outbuildings, such as a shed? What type of garage does the house have?
11. Is this house like its neighbors? How does it relate to other architecture in its community?
12. Anything else you can think of!

Once you have some data, you can start asking larger questions. What are the most interesting features of this house? Is it typical? Why or why not? Is it a self-consciously “styled” house, a mass-produced clone, or a haphazard original? Is it representative of a design movement? If so, what are the characteristics and driving values of that movement? Does it reflect the lives of individuals who live(d) there? (Note: you do NOT need to have met the owners to answer this question. Many houses suggest individuality simply by their departure from the norm.) Let the house suggest its own questions: a bungalow with a chimney stack projecting through the center of a second floor bedroom, for instance, should make you wonder... As you write, make sure you ask a version of this question: *what does this house tell us about American life and culture?*

Finally, make sure your paper has an argument. For instance: “This house reveals that its inhabitants value...”; or “This house epitomizes the lives of Chicago suburbanites in the 1950s because...” Be certain that you build your argument upon observable details of the house itself, recorded in your field research.