

The Ranch House, Reinvented

By Katy
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The exterior of Mr. Ballard's home. While the Houseplans.com design is modern inside, the exteriors have a modified farmhouse look, in keeping with the area's agricultural traditions. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

A custom home built for Amy and Matt Ross in Scottsdale, Ariz. The couple wanted an open, airy feeling and lots of space for entertaining on one floor. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

A view of the open kitchen and living area of the Ross home. The house was built by Calvis Wyant, a luxury builder in Scottsdale and Phoenix. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

The Rosses' dining area. While sunken living rooms and steps to the dining room used to be popular, today buyers want 'no changes in level on the primary story' of their homes, said Tony Calvis, president of Calvis Wyant. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

A fireplace and sitting area in the Ross home. Modern style and views of the outdoors are popular in single-story homes today. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

A bedroom in the Ross home. A sense of integration with the outdoors was important to the couple, Ms. Ross said. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

The Ross home would likely sell for about \$3 million were it listed today, said Joan Levinson, an agent whose eponymous firm sells top-end property in the area. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

Homeowners Matt Ross, 44, and his wife Amy, 45. They co-own a small business. *Mark Peterman for The Wall Street Journal*

A house built in 2008 by architect Kevin O'Sullivan in Amagansett, N.Y., for himself and his husband. Mr. O'Sullivan believed, contrary to the local style, that a modern single-story home would be a good investment. *William Abranowicz*

The pool and back view of the house Mr. O'Sullivan designed. Five years ago, he sold the house for \$5.5 million. He has since had several commissions to build similar houses for clients, he said. *William Abranowicz*

Jeff Benedick and Duane Vajgrt's home in a new development, Escena, in Palm Springs, Calif. They closed on the vacation home for \$832,000 two years ago and recently moved in. *Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal*

The living and dining area in the Benedick/Vajgrt home. Architect Anthony Poon and his partner, developer Anthony Adler, studied the architecture of mid-century and modernist masters and then created their own version of a modern home. *Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal*

The pool and view at the Escena house. Mr. Poon said he offers buyers a narrow range of colors and materials to choose from, opting instead to 'curate' the living experience for them. *Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal*

A view of the golf course behind the Benedick/Vajgrt home in Escena. When sales launched at the end of 2012, the houses were priced between about \$450,000 and \$525,000. Today, they are selling for between about \$750,000 and \$950,000, Mr. Adler said. *Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal*

On the left, Duane Vajgrt, a 62-year-old radiologist, and his husband Jeff Benedick, 64, an interior designer, by their pool. *Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal*

Sliding pocket door made from reclaimed wood from a winery in Greg Ballard's modern farmhouse in Glen Ellen, Calif. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

Mr. Ballard's kitchen and dining area. The house was built for \$1.8 million by Katie Currie, who planned to move in herself. When it was done, she put it on the market and is currently building a similar home for her own family. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

The modern kitchen. Ms. Currie built the house using designs created by Houseplans.com, which is building its own spec houses in the wine country. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

Mr. Ballard liked the furniture used in staging the home so much, he bought all of it. He closed for \$2.48 million in May. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

Greg Ballard, 61, a videogame executive in San Francisco. He uses the Glen Ellen home on weekends. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

The exterior of Mr. Ballard's home. While the Houseplans.com design is modern inside, the exteriors have a modified farmhouse look, in keeping with the area's agricultural traditions. *Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal*

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When Amy and Matt Ross decided to build their dream home in Scottsdale, Ariz., they wanted modern style, high ceilings, indoor-outdoor integration, energy efficiency and vast family gathering spaces—all on one floor.

The result was a [5,900-square-foot rambler](#) with walls of windows.

"We like a sprawling floor plan and not just a box on top of a box," said Ms. Ross, a 45-year-old small-business owner.

The Rosses are among a new breed of home buyers who want a single-story house for reasons unrelated to creaky knees. To capture these buyers, architects and builders are reinterpreting one-story living and putting a modern twist on the [classic midcentury ranch house](#).



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Architect Kevin O’Sullivan designed this Amagansett, N.Y., home that sold four years ago for \$5.6 million. Photo: William Abranowicz

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The [ranch house, a single-story home](#) typically with low ceilings and overhanging roof lines became “prototypical of suburban development in the 1960s and ’70s,” especially in the West, said Stuart Gabriel, director of the Ziman Center for Real Estate at the University of California, Los Angeles. It later fell out of favor, as buyers eschewed its association with mass-produced tract housing and higher land costs made it uneconomical for developers.

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Today, as luxury developers revisit the ranch, they’re [keeping some aspects of the style](#), such as long, sleek lines and abundant access to the outdoors. But they’re replacing the ranch’s characteristic low lines, simplicity and darkness with high ceilings, walls of glass, sanctuary-like master suites, loft-like great rooms and patios as elaborately designed as the interior space.

The Rosses’ floor plan allows them to host Thanksgiving gatherings of 35 to 55 guests, seated at tables spread throughout the living room and back patio. They installed a commercial-grade Japanese teppanyaki grill outside and host parties in which a Benihana-style chef tosses food into the air. When guests stay over, they have their own space without being “shunted upstairs,” Ms. Ross said.

In Palm Springs, Calif., architect Anthony Poon, founder of Poon Design, and his partner, developer Andrew Adler, CEO of Alta Verde Group, are building 132 modern single-story houses in a community called Escena that are

currently selling from the mid-\$700,000s to the mid-\$900,000s. They are also designing another community, called Linea, of 14 larger houses that will be listed for roughly \$2.5 million to \$3 million, Mr. Adler said.



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The pool at Jeff Benedick and Duane Vajgrt's home in Palm Springs, Calif., that they bought for \$832,000 two years ago. Photo: Lisa Corson for The Wall Street Journal

After studying homes built by modern masters, the team figured out how to recreate iconic design elements using less-expensive materials, Mr. Poon said. For example, they made heavy, oversize doors by filling hollow fiberglass doors with cement; "stone" exteriors were made of textured, pre-cast concrete.

They banished other design features popular in classic ranch houses. Instead of sectioned-off rooms, the homes feature loft-like great rooms with 10- to 14-foot ceilings. To mitigate the darkening effect of deep, overhanging eaves, they designed exterior walls with 40- to 80-foot spans of glass.

Jeff Benedick and his husband, Duane Vajgrt, just moved into one of the Escena homes, which they bought for \$832,000 in late 2013. They were drawn to the "open, airy, clean lines," said Mr. Benedick, a 64-year-old interior designer. "You have this sense of being outside as well as inside whenever you're in the home."

Mr. Benedick said he and Mr. Vajgrt, a 62-year-old radiologist, contemplated buying an old house and renovating it themselves. However, midcentury homes tended to be "more compartmentalized" and less energy efficient than Escena houses, he said.

Luxury single-family homes—the top 5% most expensive houses—are a hot commodity today, according to data examined by realtor.com, a San Jose-based listings site. The median sale price for a luxury single-story last year was

\$510 a square foot, 18% more expensive than during the peak of the housing bubble in 2006. Multistory luxury homes are selling for a median price of \$350 a square foot, realtor.com data show. Transactions of single-story homes are 20% higher than in 2009, while multistory homes are selling 3% more frequently than in 2009.

To meet demand for single-story living, architects are reinterpreting the all-American rambler for a new era, offering designs with high ceilings, walls of glass, and indoor-outdoor integration. Photo: Drew Kelly for The Wall Street Journal

Nearly 9 out of 10 luxury single story houses are located in the West or the South, according to realtor.com. Luxury single stories are a rarity in the Northeast, where only 4% of them are located. ([News Corp](#), owner of The Wall Street Journal, owns Move Inc., which operates realtor.com.)

Knowing how hard it is to find a single-story house in his area, architect Kevin O'Sullivan believed a modern ranch would be a good investment in Amagansett, N.Y., a Hamptons resort town where multistoried, shingled beach houses are ubiquitous. He persuaded his husband to help finance a 5,100-square-foot house with a 2,200-square-foot basement, completed in 2008. He built "one large space that has a kitchen, dining and living room all together." He declined to disclose the building costs.

Five years ago, Mr. O'Sullivan said his risk-taking was vindicated when he sold the house for a profitable \$5.5 million and was asked to almost copy it for another Amagansett client. He has since garnered several more commissions for one-story houses.

In California wine country, where two-story Tuscan style homes "were everything 15 years ago," today modern, one-floor houses are in high demand, said Donald Van de Mark, an agent at Sotheby's International Realty in Sonoma.

Houseplans.com, a Petaluma, Calif.-based company that both sells architectural blueprints and builds speculative houses, is currently building its 10th single-story "modern farmhouse" in Sonoma and Glen Ellen, Calif., said chief executive Jamie Roche. The houses, which feature traditional exteriors with modern interiors, have sold for between \$1.4 million and \$4.5 million, he said.

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Mr. O'Sullivan, the architect, designed this ranch-style home, also in Amagansett, for a client. Photo: William Abranowicz

Katie Currie, who lives in Greenwich, Conn., says she'll eventually move with her family to California. She spent \$1.8 million to build a modern farmhouse in Glen Ellen using [a Houseplans.com design](#). The house was completed in February.

"I want a single story because I want our family together," said Ms. Currie, a 45-year-old part-time real-estate developer. The other motivation was "indoor-outdoor living," she said.



Once the house was finished, Ms. Currie realized that others might want the same things she did. So she put the house on the market and it sold for \$2.48 million. Ms. Currie is now spending around \$2.3 million to build a nearly identical house on a larger lot in Glen Ellen for her family.

Greg Ballard, a 61-year-old videogame executive in San Francisco, bought Ms. Currie's spec house in May. "You can stand in one end of the house and look to the other. There's a complete absence of clutter," said Mr. Ballard, who uses the house on the weekends.

Not every single-story home buyer wants full-blown modernism. Rick Bell, president of Landmark Custom Homes in Southwest Ranches, Fla., is currently building an 8,600-square-foot, one-story spec home he plans to list for about

\$3.8 million. The home will have a “rear wall of glass, 20-foot ceilings, and the outside and inside will feel like they are together,” Mr. Bell said, though the look won’t be completely modern or “cubist,” he said. His bet on a contemporary look and single-story construction adds proof to the popular theory in the building community that the Mediterranean-style mansion, once so popular, has jumped the shark.

“They say ‘Med is dead,’ but I think Med is just resting a bit,” said Mr. Bell. Meanwhile, he’s focusing on modern finishes and long, clean lines.

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