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The House That Shaped Us

On a typical day, regardless of what year in the past six decades, dozens of people in pick-up trucks have waved as they pass by my family sitting on the front porch of my grandparents' home. Edwin Perry, my grandfather, always ascribed to the idea that one should say hi to everyone because, "It's the southern way." When he would ride in his own pick-up truck, he followed this rule religiously. Today, a drive down Carrollton Street, one of the main residential streets in Buchanan, Georgia, suggests that not much has changed in this one-stop-light town since the mid-20th century when ranch home style, made its way to rural Georgia. Although the physical shape of the built environment along Carrollton Street has not been changed, the social landscape has shifted a lot, and the Perry family has altered the uses of the traditional ranch home to accommodate new realities formed by cultural and economic factors.

The ranch home in itself is a symbol. Barbara Miller Lane notes that the ranch home form was a part of "houses for a new time and for a different style", because these homes reflected the changing geographic preferences and economic realities of many Americans. This was a form designed for the white, suburban, middle-class nuclear family. Lane also identifies a few key design elements of these new styles that include street-facing construction, relatively homogenous floorplans, and often combined living and dining functions closely to the kitchen area. From Carrollton Street, the single-story ranch homes of Buchanan look similar to the day they were built in the 1950s. Fast forward to 2020 and there is no new development to be seen

and the peeling paint is not immediately apparent, so a quick assessment of the situation suggests that much has remained the same in the past seventy years. Beyond the facades, the social and economic situations have in fact changed even as the ranch homes remain diligent at doing what they were designed to do - portray a comfortable middle-class image to the world while concealing the private lives of the inhabitants behind picture frame windows with drawn curtains.

It feels as if the street is frozen in a time when young couples who grew up on nearby farms were looking to modernize their life and climb in both social and economic status. My grandparents, Edwin and Miriam Perry, fell into this category. Both grew up in rural Alabama down dirt roads. Miriam learned to work out in the fields as young as age thirteen, and Edwin walked miles to school each day as a child. The two had dreams beyond the realities of farm life that they grew up in, although they valued family and desired to stay close to their families. The two became socialites in Fruithurst, Alabama, a town that has recently grown to just under 300 residents. Edwin became mayor of the tiny town, and later dabbled in entrepreneurial investments like owning a used car lot. These two faced many obstacles and struggled to work their way into the middle class, and with a growing young family at the end of the 1950s they were looking to settle down and enjoy living the American Dream that they were creating for themselves. When they heard about an opportunity to live in town in Buchanan, they immediately liked the idea.

The Perry couple's story and desire for a single-family home is not unusual and Diane Harris states in *Little White Houses* that, "For those who were leaving behind blue-collar and/or immigrant backgrounds, the house became a potent symbol of acceptance and an instrument of aspiration to a broader range of opportunities," (21). This was true for the

young Perry couple. Real estate developers also knew this and that there was profit to be made from catering to this desire for security and acceptance. Buddy Kimbell, a local entrepreneur and contractor, took advantage of federal tax initiatives and seized the opportunity to develop rural land near the courthouse in Buchanan and develop a cluster of ranch homes, split levels, and craftsman style homes. The plots were large at around an acre each, which still appealed to the desire of many in the area to own land, while providing close proximity to grocery stores, a post office, and other conveniences of being intown. The intent for most of the houses was that a nuclear middle-class American family with two or three children would inhabit them, and the appeal of living in a nice community surrounded by similar families was attractive to Kimbell's target market.

The homes Kimbell designed, including the Perry family's house on Carrollton Street (Figure 1), were built with "The American Dream" of economic progress, family values, and consumerism in mind. For many of the people moving into these homes in Buchanan, it also was a symbol for a new lifestyle, one that did not involve plowing the fields but did include a power grid. Like many families in the neighborhood, the Perrys placed heavy importance on the way in which they presented themselves to others. Edwin wore a suit and traveled for work, while Miriam kept a clean house and cooked the most wonderful meals. They could have easily posed for a Sears magazine ad that they regularly received in their mailbox. Diane Harris makes the argument that Americans were aware of the fact that houses and their contents signaled information about race, class, and status. I think my grandparents actively tried to create a home that others would aspire to, because of the importance of appearances in their rural southern community. Everyone knew everyone, and gossip traveled quickly in a small town. As a result of many of their efforts to achieve status, their house was one of the most popular in the town. Kids

from neighboring families would pile into the Perry family's living room to watch one of the first colored televisions in the area, eat candy, and play in the front yard together.

Edwin and Miriam's five kids all grew up, and none graduated from college though two briefly tried. After becoming empty nesters briefly, Edwin and Miriam did not nestle into retirement in the early 2000's as easily as they would have imagined. Credit card debt and unexpected life events dwindled their savings. Although they lived comfortably, and from the outside quite fashionably, the reality was slightly less stable. At the same time, their home designed for the nuclear family transitioned into multi-generational housing as a result of a changing America. This is an America that meant the once middle-class town has been replaced by a town facing rural poverty. Once boasting incomes more comparable to other areas in the United States, the median household income for Buchanan, Georgia in 2017 was \$36,645, which is roughly half of the United States' median household income (DataUSA). Financial insecurity is the new normal in areas like Buchanan, Georgia, but that reality crept in slowly and without many people taking notice.

One thing that provided a great deal of security for the Perry family was the fact that they owned their house outright by this time, so they only had to pay for bills and maintenance. The physical home stability at their home on Carrollton Street is something that played a huge factor in many of the Perrys' lives as all of Edwin and Miriam's children and many of their grandchildren would move into and out of the space during times of financial and personal struggle. As the economic context of Buchanan and surrounding areas changed, the social composition of the family inside also changed, yet the physical structure of the house and the values governing the home remained mostly constant.

Multiple cars often line the two driveways at my grandparents' house, and this has been the case ever since Miriam and Edwin moved in after its completion in 1959. The full driveway makes it difficult to tell who lives in the house and who is just stopping by to visit, especially since Miriam and Edwin's five children and eleven grandchildren like to pop-in to eat some of Miriam's cooking and say hi regularly. This is a simple picture that highlights how strong the social ties are within the family, and how it is common for one member to rely on another and vice versa. Although these relationships are strained as a result of many of the problems that are associated with high unemployment and poverty, the house on Carrollton Street still serves as a haven for anyone who wants to stop by.

The ranch house has three bedrooms and one den that is used as a fourth bedroom (Figure 2). The master bedroom where Miriam now sleeps alone after Edwin's death in 2013, and the three other rooms serve as temporary rooms for family members who are "down on their luck", as Miriam would say. When Edwin realized that the Buchanan area was facing hard times starting around the late 1980s, he lifted the roof and expanded the attic and garage with the idea of creating a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment (Figure 3). This addition was meant to provide temporary private space for whoever needed it, while still preserving his traditional ranch-style home below. This addition was framed and insulated, but never completed due to lack of funds, so the Perry children and grandchildren moved into the traditional ranch house instead. Each of the three rooms in the ranch house likely has 50 layers of paint that chronicle the history of occupation for each room. As they stay temporary amounts of time, the potential of the addition and an alternative vision for the physical house literally hangs over their heads as a reminder of dreams unrealized.

This type of activity that happens at the Perry household is not uncommon, but more recently the home has also been used to accommodate living arrangements between four generations from grandparents to great grandchildren. Americans have become accustomed to envisioning young-adult children living with their parents for a time before moving out. In 2016, 33% of 25-29-year-old Americans lived with their parents and approximately 28% of households included grandparents, adult children, and grandchildren (Pew Research). These adapted scenarios result in a very different use for the ranch home than was initially envisioned. A brief walkthrough of the 1566 square foot home reveals how the physical structure of the house remained unchanged, yet the members and uses for specific spaces were altered as a result of the context in which different members of the Perry family found themselves in. Traveling toward the left of the entrance and through the living room, a visitor will end up in a small hallway with a heater that provides heat to the two bedrooms, one full bathroom, and keeping room that all have entrances into this hallway.

The first bedroom has a window facing the front yard and a secondary window facing the left side of the house. It is a small room with oak floors and no molding or ornamentation of any kind. This is where three of Miriam and Edwin's children, James, Mikey, and Jamie; three grandchildren, Kevin, Amy, and I; one daughter in-law, Jocelyn, and one son in-law, Tim, have lived at separate times but each for an extended period of time, defined as longer than one month. There is an entrance to a small closet that is shared between this bedroom and the bedroom next door. As children, many family members would play hide-and-seek here since the space allows kids to flow easily from one room to the next without entering into the hallway.

The second room that is connected to the first via the closet has one window facing the left side of the house and one window facing the backyard. This bedroom is smaller than the

previous bedroom, but similarly has stained oak flooring with no ornamentation. Two grandchildren, Amanda and Brandon and one great grandchild, Maddux, have lived in this room for an extended period of time. While the inhabitants, paint colors, and position of furniture have changed in these two side rooms, the furniture itself has been shared by each new resident over the years and is a timeless constant that occupies and shapes the space regardless of other factors.

If the viewer instead veers right from the main entrance, and away from the living room and wing of the house with two bedrooms that was previously explored, a viewer would leave the living room space and enter a dining area. There is no separation between the dining room and kitchen area, and both share similar design elements unified by the presence of wood details. The main division that is apparent in this open space is the gender split. Buchanan, Georgia is a conservative and very traditionally southern location, and women are typically found in the kitchen cooking and cleaning, while the dining area is a place for the men to talk business and play card games before and after dinner. The dining area at the Perry's home is covered in dark-stained pine wood paneling from floor to ceiling with a type of brownish grey linoleum flooring. The flooring is continued into the kitchen where there are the original pine wood cabinets stained similarly to the dining room. The kitchen countertops are made of butcher block wood and both the countertops and the cabinets wrap three walls.

The left wall is strictly cabinets with storage and a countertop dividing the upper cabinets from the lower storage, but it also has a door that leads into what was originally designed to be a keeping room. This keeping room, according to Jocelyn's account, has always been used as an extra bedroom. Family members that include three of Edwin and Miriam's children, James, Pam, and Beverly; three of her grandchildren, Jennifer, Brandon, and I; and one daughter-in-law, Jocelyn, have all called that room our own space at one point over the past thirty-eight years. The

back wall of the kitchen has a double window with a sink that allows a view into a sunroom that is not permitted and loosely constructed from extra material that Edwin found. Miriam can peer into that space as she washes dishes, and the wall to her right has some cabinets and countertop space, but is more importantly her domain where the stove, oven, and refrigerator are placed.

The evolution of the house on Carrollton Street from an idealized southern family home into a safe haven for family members facing troubling economic or personal situations was likely a result of larger evolutions occurring outside of the four brick walls of the home. According to the city's website, just over half of the Buchanan population earned a high school diploma. To make matters even more challenging for those graduates, the public high school in the area ranks in the bottom 40% of all high schools in Georgia, a state where education is already lacking compared to other states in America (US News cite). As a result of low levels of educational or technical training, most of the workers can only work unskilled labor jobs and the number of these jobs in the area has been decreasing over the last few decades. When people are able to find work, typically in construction, production, or administrative support occupations (DataUSA) their wages remain low and 24.9% of the population lives below the poverty line, which is roughly double the US average (City of Buchanan).

Whenever Perry family members could not obtain or maintain jobs that paid enough to cover food and rent, many relied upon Edwin and Miriam's unwavering generosity to shelter themselves and their children. Miriam was often in the kitchen where she cooked three meals a day, often also baked something sweet, and hand washed all the dishes. The Perry house, regardless of who exactly was residing under the roof, was rooted in southern traditions that emphasized traditional American gender roles. In Dolores Hayden's *Redesigning the American Dream*, she emphasizes that the kitchen was often seen as a woman's space whereas the yard

was the man's space. The separation of spaces for women and men and interiority and exteriority mostly held true at the house on Carrollton Street. Edwin always kept the lawn trimmed and the porch looking nice, which was a signal to the outside that they were doing well for themselves. From inside the house, Miriam diligently kept a home that exemplifies Hayden's Haven Model because it has created, "a physical and spiritual shelter" for Perry family members of multiple generations from the hardships of the outside world (87). When the capitalist world that many poor southern republicans, like most of the Perrys, strongly support is a main driver in leaving them socially and economically behind, there always seems to be faith and food in Miriam's house.

When staying in Edwin and Miriam's house, family members were strongly encouraged to attend church on Sunday and always abide by strong Christian morals. Perry family members living in the house at any given time could find these personal and family values at odds with their economic struggles. More often than they would like, this tension would lead family members to engage in activities in discord with their outwardly held values. While Edwin and Miriam never drink alcohol or use illicit substances, one of their children and many of their grandchildren turned to drug usage to cope with their difficult situations and drug dealing to attempt to lift them economically from those situations. This introduced a whole new set of uses for the home originally designed for wholesome functioning of a nuclear family. The ranch was created with family closeness in mind, and while close family ties were what was keeping members of the family from being homeless, this closeness was not ideal for participating in illegal activities while trying to maintain the appearance of being a morally upstanding member of the family. As a result, windows once only opened to let in the smell of Magnolias and

Jasmine blooming were utilized as exits and entrances, and rooms once used as nurseries were converted to boxes that concealed illegal activities.

Drug usage created fissures in the picture frame window-perfect Perry family. Things like prison, pregnancies out of wedlock, parole, unemployment, and depressions lead to Miriam and Edwin being asked to take care of grandchildren at one point or another. As of recent and after Edwin's death, Miriam now helps care for one of her great grandchildren. This means that the uses for the ranch house had to transform again. If one were to enter the living room today, the fashionable furniture mostly from the 1980s is now used as forts and launchpads for kids. The backyard has been adapted for an above ground swimming pool that quickly collapsed, a summer garden, a playground graveyard, a chicken pen, and more recently an area to ride small electric four wheelers. All this activity has been safely contained behind the structure facing Carrollton Street.

Overall, the physical space at the house on Carrollton Street has not changed much to reflect the new realities of the world it sits within. The ranch-style house with a big yard serves as a constant reminder of an outdated-American Dream. It provides a visual suggestion that the Perrys can still live like middle class Americans and maintain hope that their situation will improve. But with the additions to the house that will likely never be finished, at least not by any of the current generations of Perry family members, the house also reminds them of the limitations that a small town with little resources creates for dreaming of new realities. Hayden proclaims that, "Humans need nurturing, aesthetic pleasure and economic security," (31) and the Perry household is a nurturing place, but the Buchanan area and much of rural America finds itself in a place of economic insecurity which also makes aesthetic pleasure difficult.

She goes on to say, “Homes can contribute to the satisfaction of these factors, or frustrate them” and in many ways the house on Carrollton Street has been adapted, and though not often physically changed, the social changes have been attempts at utilizing the home as a way to satisfy the three key factors that Hayden outlines. When multiple generations of Perry family members find themselves under the same roof, there is the added economic benefit that a collection of people receiving checks, regardless of where they come from, makes it easier to pay bills and feed children than any one of them alone. Each time someone moves into one of the three rooms in the main house, they paint the room as a way of defining their space and seeking individual aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic pleasure is also found in moments at the exterior of the house, like time spent on the front porch or in the backyard, because the setting of Carrollton Street makes it possible to experience Georgia nature. There are constantly life lessons being taught at the Perry house, where older relatives teach younger ones how to do things from writing their letters to mowing the lawn. There is a spirit of nurture along the laughter that can be observed from their front porch and the kindness that pours out of the Perry house in acts of service to their community. It is quite amazing how even in changing and difficult social and cultural environments, the physical environment at the Perry house on Carrollton Street that was built for one specific use has been adapted socially as a result of humans’ desire to make the most of their situations.

Appendix



Figure 1
260 Carrollton Street, exterior. Buddy Kimball, Developer. 1959 Buchanan, Georgia, USA. Image shows attic additions 1980.
Source: Haralson County Public Records, "Report - 206 Carrollton Street: Photos"

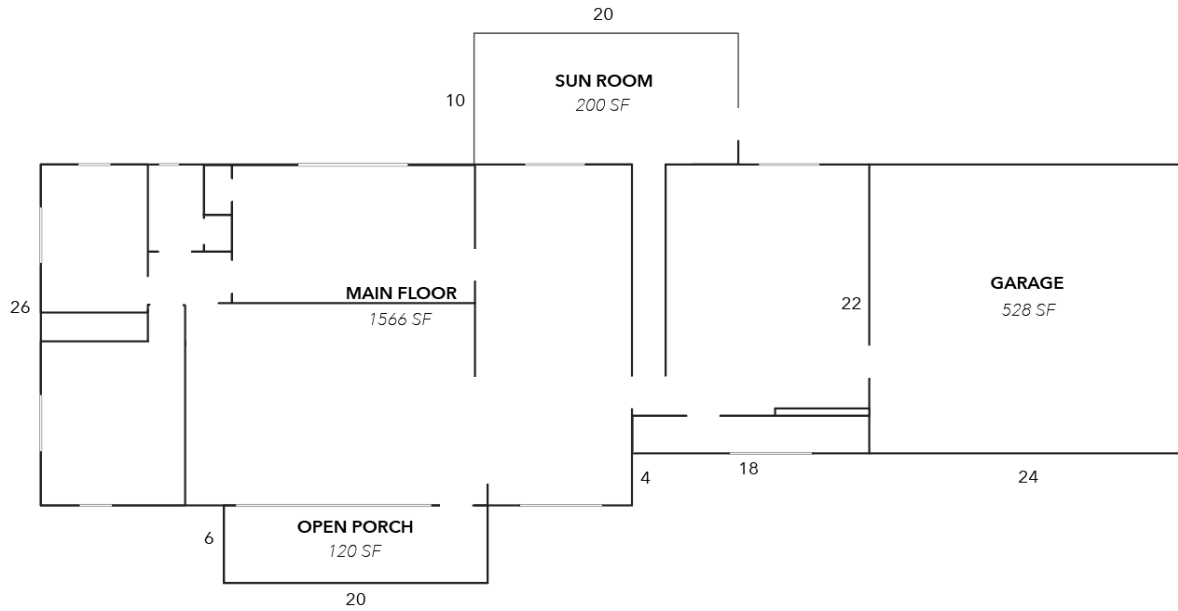
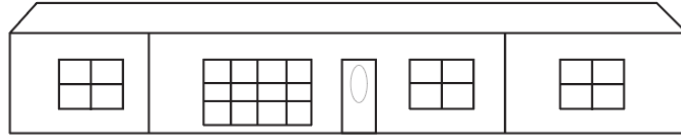


Figure 2
 Perry, Kyra. Floor Plan of 260 Carrollton Street. History of Art and Architecture Assignment, Brown University, 2018.

1959



1980



Figure 3
Perry, Kyra. "Facade Changes", History of Art and Architecture Assignment, Brown University, 2018.

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