

A Model for Identifying and Evaluating the Historic Significance of Post–World War II Housing

EMILY PETTIS AND CHRISTINA SLATTERY

Pettis is Senior Historian, Mead & Hunt, Inc., Madison, Wisconsin, and chair of the TRB Historic and Archaeological Preservation in Transportation Committee. Slattery leads the Cultural Resources Business Unit, Mead & Hunt.

The built environment along major transportation corridors typically includes subdivisions and neighborhoods of similar homes built from the mid-1940s through the 1970s. Following World War II, vast numbers of these homes were built in response to a significant housing shortage and population boom. Post–World War II residential development was a national trend—large urban areas, smaller cities, and formerly rural areas experienced significant growth and development.

These ubiquitous resources pose a challenge for transportation project planners. Many of the houses are now or soon will be more than 50 years old and may be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. According to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, agencies seeking federal dollars or permits must take into account the potential effects of a project on properties eligible for listing in the National Register. As a result, postwar residences increasingly are being considered as part of a transportation project's Section 106 compliance.

Relevance and Concerns

The postwar housing boom started shortly after World War II, and more than 40 million new homes were constructed between 1946 and 1975. As vast numbers of postwar residences meet the National Register's 50-year age guideline, state departments of transportation (DOTs), state historic preservation offices (SHPOs), and cultural resource professionals are struggling to evaluate the significance and integrity of these resources efficiently and consistently.

Example of a 1960s split-level house in Omaha, Nebraska.



PHOTO: MEAD & HUNT



PHOTO: WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, IMAGE ID 66696

Many postwar subdivisions were modest residences set back along curvilinear streets, as in this Westport, Wisconsin, neighborhood circa 1960.

The increasing numbers of postwar properties eligible for the National Register in the next decade and beyond present a major challenge to decision makers. Most states use traditional survey methods and current National Register guidance to identify and evaluate historic resources. A major concern is that surveying and evaluating the large number of similar resources—postwar houses—according to long-established practices will increase project costs. An effective framework is needed for determining National Register eligibility in these instances.

In addition, a lack of contextual information often complicates the evaluation of individual postwar residences and neighborhoods. Project planners and reviewers have scant information for making decisions. A historic context for postwar residential development would aid in supporting consistent outcomes.

Developing Guidance

To solve this problem, the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) funded a project to develop national guidance for working with postwar residences. NCHRP Report 723, *A Model for Identifying and Evaluating the Historic Significance of Post–World War II Housing*, presents a national historic context and a survey and evaluation methodology for single-family postwar residences.¹ Mead & Hunt, with assistance from the Louis Berger Group, formulated and tested the context and methodology.

¹ www.trb.org/Main/Blurbs/167790.aspx.



PHOTO: MEAD & HUNT

Unaltered Ranch house in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, displays many character-defining features.

The project objective was to develop a historic context for postwar housing and a methodology for identifying and evaluating the National Register eligibility of single-family postwar residences. The report includes three distinct components that provide a standard framework for transportation and cultural resource professionals to use in evaluating postwar housing judiciously and efficiently: the national historic context, the survey methodology, and the evaluation methodology.

National Historic Context

The national historic context supports an understanding of the social, economic, governmental, and political influences on the development of these resources nationwide. The context also considers the development of housing during the postwar period and covers national trends that influenced residential development.

This provides transportation and cultural resource professionals with a succinct history of postwar housing trends and influences. This general background, therefore, does not need to be developed for a specific transportation project that may

affect postwar residences. Instead, professionals can focus on developing the local historic context and its relationship to the national trends.

Project historians conducted extensive research to address such topics as transportation trends; government programs and policies; social, economic, and cultural trends; subdivision planning and development; and advances in building materials and construction techniques. The report describes popular architectural forms and styles of the period in detail, such as the Minimal Traditional, Ranch, and Colonial Revival, including the evolution and the character-defining features of each style.

This illustrated discussion provides a clear and wide-ranging definition of the residential housing popular during the postwar period. Few architectural style guides cover the postwar period in detail, and NCHRP Report 723 may prove beneficial in providing a consistent terminology for use nationwide.

Survey Methodology

A methodology was developed to assist with surveying postwar single-family residences. Because of the sheer volume of these resources, applying the traditional survey methodologies that require a field survey of every building 40 or 50 years old was not practical or prudent. The task often requires the repetitive documentation of similar or identical houses.

For a project that may affect a large postwar subdivision, this house-by-house approach could result in a significant expenditure of time, resources, and budget. Therefore the project team developed a survey methodology that provides a streamlined and consistent approach to identify and evaluate postwar residences nationwide according to National Register criteria.

The approach surveys concentrations of similar postwar residences as a single grouping or potential district, instead of documenting individual resources.



PHOTO: MEAD & HUNT

This collection of nearly identical Minimal Traditional homes in Detroit, Michigan, would benefit from documentation using the new survey methodology.



Example of an unaltered Minimal Traditional house in St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

Appropriate to a neighborhood or subdivision in which postwar homes display similar forms, massing, and materials, the approach reduces survey efforts, which in turn reduces the associated project costs and schedule.

When the grouping approach is not applicable, the approach allows for a selective survey of individual residences that retain integrity and character-defining features. Although all properties within the survey area are reviewed, only those with the most potential for listing in the National Register are documented.

The report offers specific guidance on the popular architectural forms and styles of the postwar period, including illustrated examples of properties that meet and do not meet the selective survey criteria. Project team members tested this selective approach in several areas around the country to confirm the streamlining benefits and the appropriate consideration of intact examples of postwar residences.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology guides the consistent application of the National Register criteria to postwar residences, for consideration of individual significance and as historic districts. The methodology also includes detailed and illustrated examples of common alterations that may compromise the integrity of individual residences and districts and result in a recommendation of not eligible.

Application of the methodology achieves consistent and streamlined National Register evaluations of postwar neighborhoods, subdivisions, and individual residences across geographic areas. In addition, the outcomes of Section 106 reviews become more predictable, so that transportation planners can provide timely project delivery. The guidance is illustrated with case studies of postwar residences and historic districts that have been listed in or determined eligible for the National Register.

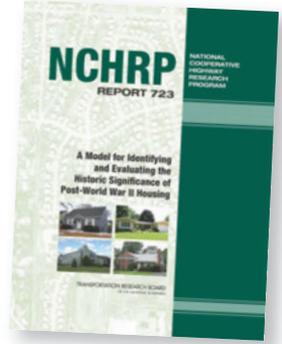
Practical Approach

The historic context outline and methodological tools developed through this NCHRP project provide first-of-its-kind national guidance for transportation projects that involve postwar residential housing. This practical approach helps ensure that the model context and survey methodology are useful to state DOTs, SHPOs, cultural resource professionals, and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

Application of the recommended methodology will lead to more effective and efficient practices in addressing postwar housing during transportation project development. To quote FHWA Federal Preservation Officer MaryAnn Naber, a member of the NCHRP project panel, “Ultimately, the use of the national context and streamlined survey methodology is expected to lower project costs and help expedite schedules, assisting state DOTs and FHWA in fulfilling their missions to deliver transportation projects.”

Another benefit of the project is that a consistent, credible approach to surveying and evaluating postwar residences can help change the perception that postwar houses are not important to understanding U.S. heritage. Although few postwar residences will be individually eligible for the National Register, the postwar period introduced a major residential building boom that transformed community planning and development, architectural standards, and social history. Postwar residences tell a unique story of these trends, both in the distinctive architectural styles and forms that developed in response to the technologies and societal preferences after World War II, and in the larger subdivisions that met the explosive demand.

NCHRP Report 723, *A Model for Identifying and Evaluating the Historic Significance of Post-World War II Housing*, includes the survey and evaluation methodology, the national historic context, and the model context outline. The report is available for download or purchase from the Transportation Research Board website at www.trb.org/Main/Blurbs/167790.aspx.



NCHRP Report 723 is available online at www.trb.org/Main/Blurbs/167790.aspx; to order a print copy from the TRB Bookstore, go to <https://www.mytrb.org/store>.



A promotional photograph of houses included in the 1955 Parade of Homes in Madison, Wisconsin. The postwar building boom transformed the American neighborhood as well as the architectural, planning, and transportation landscape.