

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES FOR COUNTRY HOUSES

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND MERITS OF
VARIOUS TYPES OF ARCHITECTURE AS SET
FORTH BY ENTHUSIASTIC ADVOCATES

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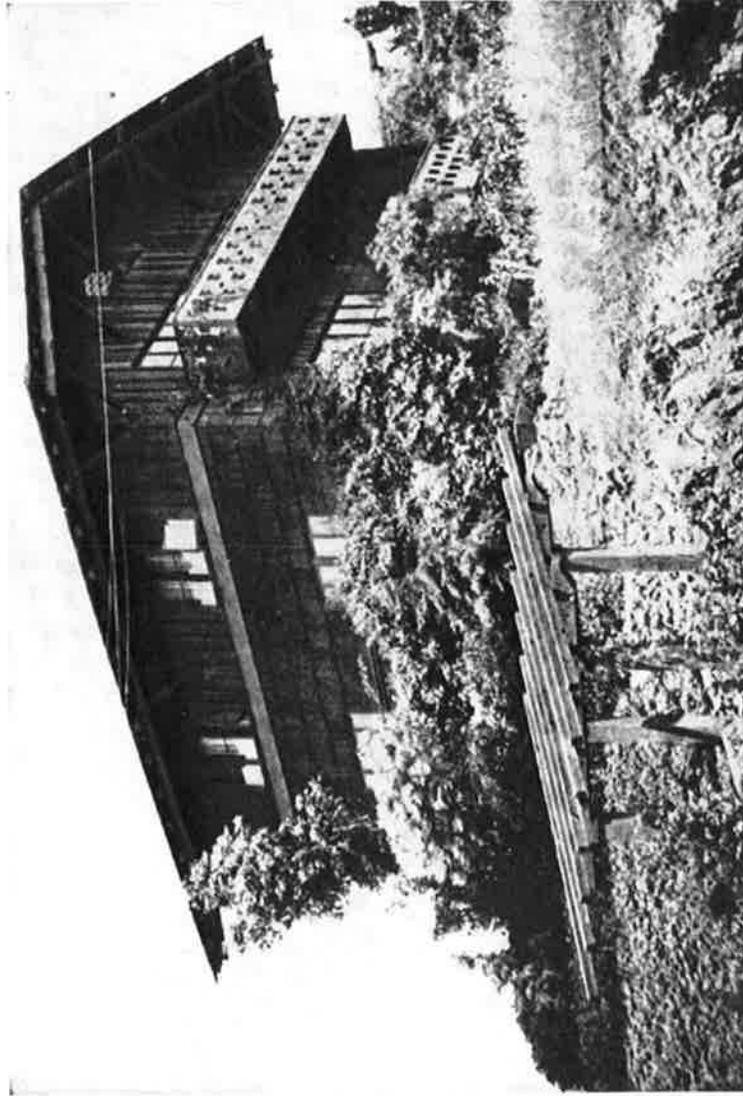
The Swiss Chalet Type

By

Louis J. Stellman



A modern Swiss chalet near Grisons which shows the recent use of stone and concrete in connection with wood



Maybeck & White, architects

A pure type of the lowland chalet, providing a good example of the use of projecting roof supports—a common feature in the original type. The home of R. C. Hutsinpillar

The Swiss Chalet Type

ANY type of architecture which has a genuine appeal to the public, must appeal to the heart as well as to the mind. I have heard it said that the appeal of architecture is through a combination of memory and symbolism: that is, it either reminds one of something one has seen or it stands for the traditions which the advancement of civilization has developed.

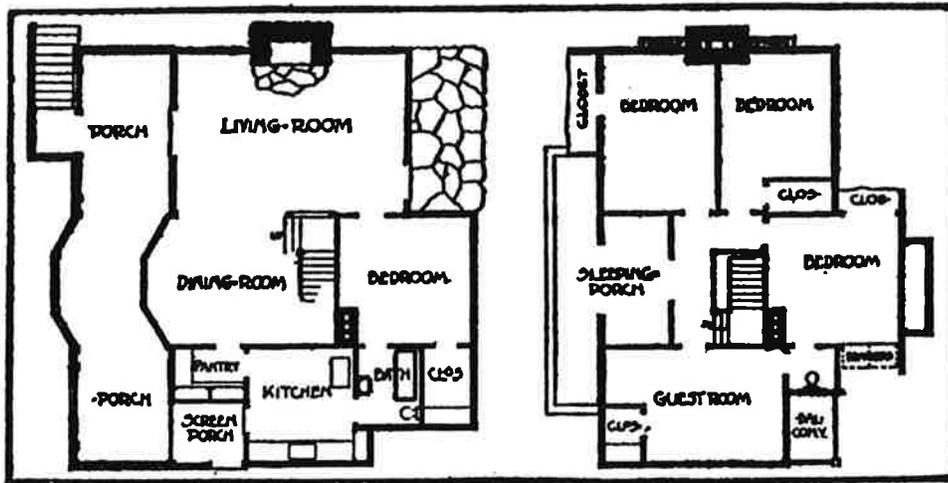
If one accepts this, architecture is removed from the sordidness of mere practicality and the commonplacery of pure expediency. A structure must be both wholesome and attractive; it must serve our needs well and, at the same time, remind us of something pleasant. In short the ideal house must simultaneously protect the body and uplift the mind.

Perhaps this may seem unnecessarily long a prologue for an appreciation of the Swiss chalet style in American architecture, but it is because this style satisfies so peculiarly my demands in the above connection, that I have gone to some pains in order to make them clear enough to serve as a working hypothesis.

There is about the Swiss chalet a rugged, honest picturesqueness, a simple, candid strength that I find in no other

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type of habitation. Because of this impression, I mention the sentimental consideration first. It seems to typify — as plainly as a house can ever hope to represent a man — the hardy, fearless, simple mountaineer — whose life is spent



First and second floor plans, the home of C. W. Robertson, Nordhoff, Cal.
Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey, architects

among the heights and broad vistas and who lives a simple frugal, happy, sincere life.

It is too much to suppose that the Swiss chalet will become extremely popular outside of its Alpine home. There is too much complexity in the vastly predominant and populous lowlands to give it great vogue, too much tendency to improve on nature instead of coöperate with it, to scatter Swiss chalets through the land. And yet, in America, especially along the Western coast, the Swiss chalet is becoming more and more observed.



The home of C. W. Robertson, Nordhoff, Cal. The sawed-out board balusters around the porch and the sawed eaves-board
Myron Hunt & Elmer Grey, architects
are the most characteristic forms of Swiss ornamentation in building.



Maybeck & White, architects
The Reese house at Berkeley, Cal., was built from a model executed in Switzerland



Frank May, architect
The Buckham chalet, California, showing the typical use of balconies

Probably there is no place outside of its native land where the Swiss chalet may be more advantageously used than along the Pacific coast hills, particularly those around San Francisco Bay, where many interesting examples are to be found.

Of course there is little snow in California except in the extreme northern portions. This brings us to a consideration of the fact that climate alone did not produce the Swiss chalet. Perhaps, indirectly, it did, after all, for the Swiss mountaineer is the product of the invigorating climate which the Alps provide. But, out of his rugged, honest, sham-hating, art-loving heart and brain has come that picturesque style of habitation which is as nearly distinctive as architecture may be. His love of out-door life produced the broad veranda (forerunner, undoubtedly, of the modern winter-and-summer sleeping-porch), the wide eaves to protect this veranda and the court below, where he sat of an evening with his pipe. He courted the open at all times possible, this old Tyrolese, and the Californian is in agreement with him, as far as that goes.

But, more than all else, the Swiss chalet coöperates with nature. How many times does one see a house that seems a part of its general surroundings? Usually the surroundings are fitted to the house with the inevitable result that an incongruity, more or less blatant, is produced.

Man cannot hope to compete with God as a landscape

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gardener or architect. The Swiss mountaineer felt this, even if he did not know it. He made no attempt to terrace the eternal hills, to create false and artificial plateaus upon which to build a conventional dwelling. He made a partner of Nature and worked to their mutual advantage. Out of it came an architecture which, if primitive, was big, harmonious and wholesome to a wonderful degree.

The original Swiss chalet does not seem to have been built against a hillside. Apparently it was a crude log cabin, not unlike the huts of our pioneer ancestors, erected by Alpine cowherds for more or less temporary shelter. It differed from the American log cabin in the mortising or notching of the log ends and the rudimentary attempts to square and dress the timbers. Out of this, undoubtedly, developed the present elaborate system of dovetailing and fitting together the timbers and framework of Swiss houses, a practically nail-less construction scheme.

From the rough habitation of the cowherd was evolved the village house, slightly more pretentious but still of the block-house construction; and being adapted to the exigencies of hillside construction, it was so modified as to present the progenitor of what is now generally known as a chalet.

Following this came two evolutionary phases of building development in Switzerland, characterized respectively as the *Standerwand* or "stand-wall" and the *Regal-bau* or masonry construction. The latter, however, is only an am-

plification or elaboration of the former. One, if not both, of these unquestionably inspired the steel-frame method of modern construction.

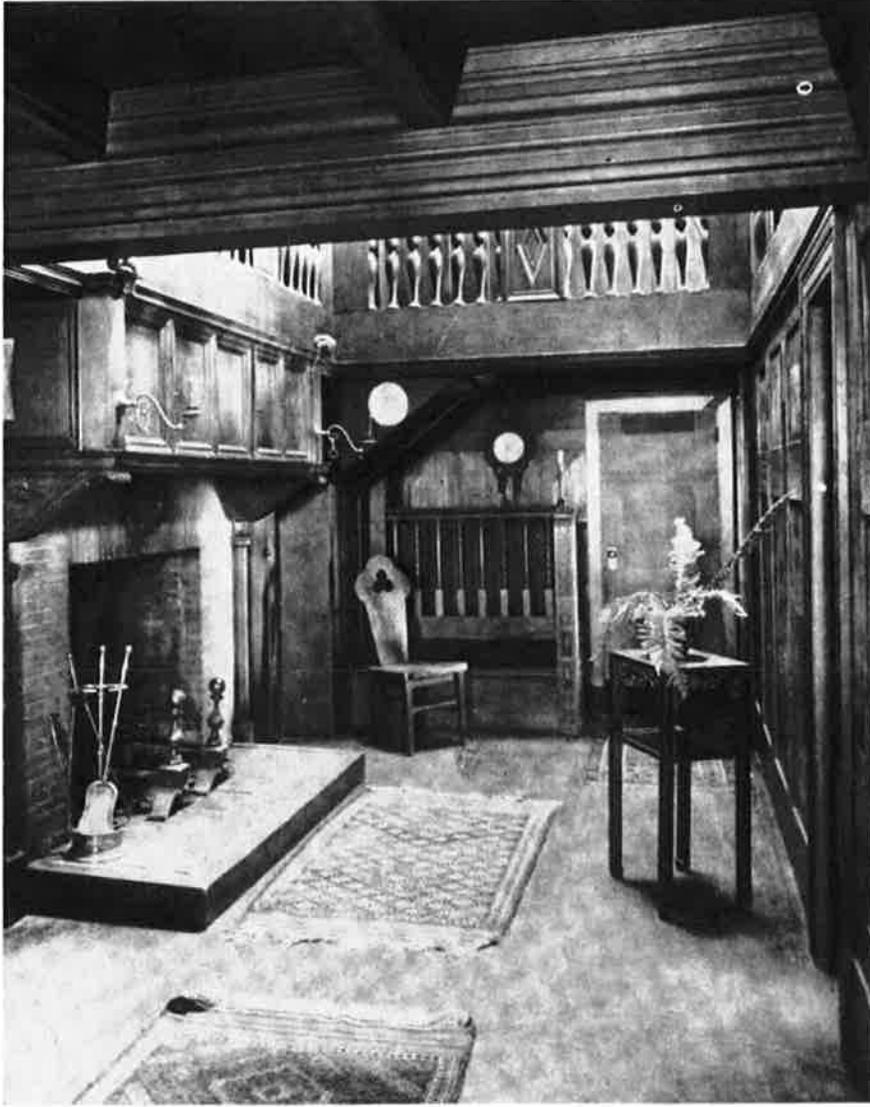
The "stand-wall" style of construction differs from the old block building and, for that matter, from most other methods of building, ancient and modern, in that the frame of the entire house is outlined by corner-posts and a skeleton roof before the walls are built. The original chalet, therefore, was built from the ground up, one timber being laid on top of another and dovetailed into a nice contact with ends that protruded beyond the intersecting unions. The second type of chalet was completed in outline and then filled in, as to walls and roof, with wood, plaster, stone or a kind of light brick, as fancy or necessity might indicate.

Here it may be pertinent to remark that the foregoing refers to the characteristic *holzbau* or wood construction of Switzerland. In a country so prolific in stone, however, it is inevitable that the latter be used to some extent as building material. Therefore the stone chalet is by no means a rare or illegitimate type, and, contrary to the popular belief, a chalet is not necessarily a wooden house. But the American adaptation of Swiss Chalet architecture so closely adheres to the popular conception that we may confine ourselves largely to this very characteristic sort.

While on the subject of American adaptation, it is interesting to note that the architects of this country seem so thor-

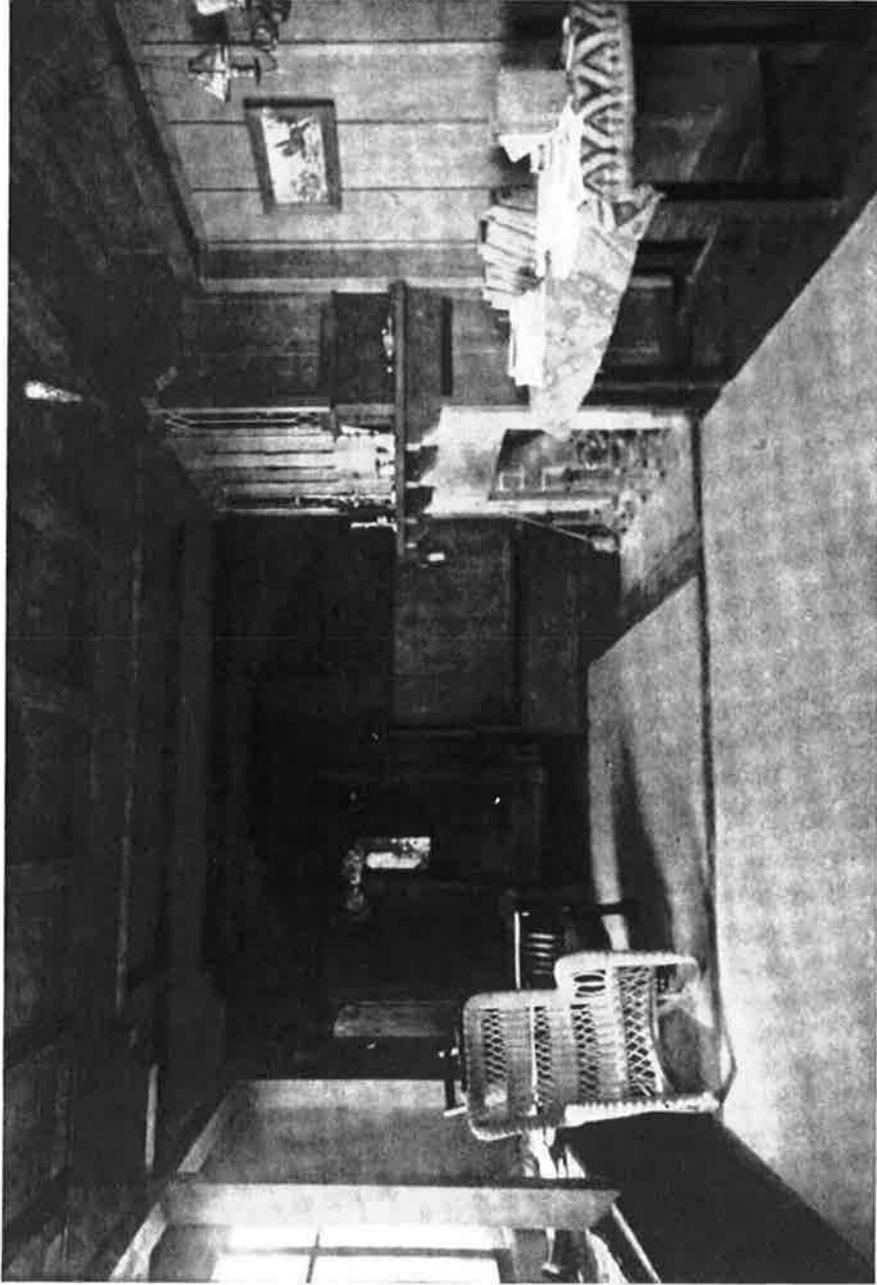
oughly to have understood the motif of Swiss architecture. Simplicity, strength, economy and picturesque harmony with natural surroundings, mark the chalet in American architecture even more perhaps than they do, nowadays, in Switzerland, where the bizarre influence of foreign builders has added much intricate and fussy elaboration in the trimming of houses. For instance, one sees on most Swiss houses of this and several past generations, much "ginger-bread" ornamentation. Porch roofs, cornices, doors, windows, often the entire front of a chalet, will be encrusted with jig-sawn fret, grill and scroll work, incorporating religious or family mottoes, intricate designs and every sort of distracting embellishment. It reminds one not a little of a wonderful wedding cake or one of the marvelous performing clocks for which Switzerland is famous. But under it all is the solid worth, the wholesome, nourishing delicious product of the baker's skill, the exact and reliable chronological instrument, the house that satisfies body and soul.

It is this underlying theme that American architects have exemplified in Swiss chalet adaptation. And, for the most part, the chalet has retained its individuality to a great extent. A number of Western houses are exact copies of existing Swiss chalets, notably the Reese house in Berkeley, California, which was designed by Maybeck & White from a small model of the Swiss prototype which Reese himself brought across the ocean. It is, as will be seen by observing



Willis Polk, architect

An interior in Mr. Polk's own house, San Francisco, showing a clever adaptation of the Swiss sawed-wood balusters



Boke & Maybeck, architects

The redwood of California is peculiarly well adapted for this bold type of interior treatment. A room in the Boke chalet, Piedmont, Cal.

the accompanying illustration, of the old *block-bau* style, with protruding timbers at the corners.

Alameda county, which includes Berkeley, Alameda, Piedmont and Oakland, and which abounds in hills, furnishes many fine examples of Swiss chalet architecture and a much larger number of less distinctive ones which are, nevertheless, of more than passing interest and display quite perceptibly their relationship to the architecture of the Tyrol. All of these follow the initial style more than the later ones, probably because the former is original and more picturesque than those which came after, and also because the redwood of California is peculiarly adaptable to chalet building.

Especially is this true of interior furnishing. For interior paneling there is nothing more attractive, all things considered, than redwood, and to the interior plans of American chalets, architects have given fancy full play. It is a difficult matter to preserve the artistic simplicity of the Swiss interior and yet to harmonize it with the requirements of modern convenience. Yet this has been done by many builders and has made the American chalet delightful both inside and out.

In our money-governed world one must not forget the matter of expense, which enters very largely into the building plans of so many people. Economy was necessary to Swiss people; consequently their architecture was of a style that cost little. And the same is true in America. One can

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build a Swiss chalet for a third less money than it will cost to erect a house of similar pretension in other styles. Of course one may also put a great deal of money into a chalet, so that it really satisfies all classes; but to such as want an inexpensive home that will be homelike and picturesque and will not look cheap in that worst sense of striving for an elegance one cannot afford, the Swiss chalet is, to my mind, the ideal habitation. It is a happy, light-hearted style; it is capable of an infinite variety of treatment without radical departure from its central and fundamental principles of advantage and excellence; it is strong; it costs little and endures. What more can one ask of architecture?