

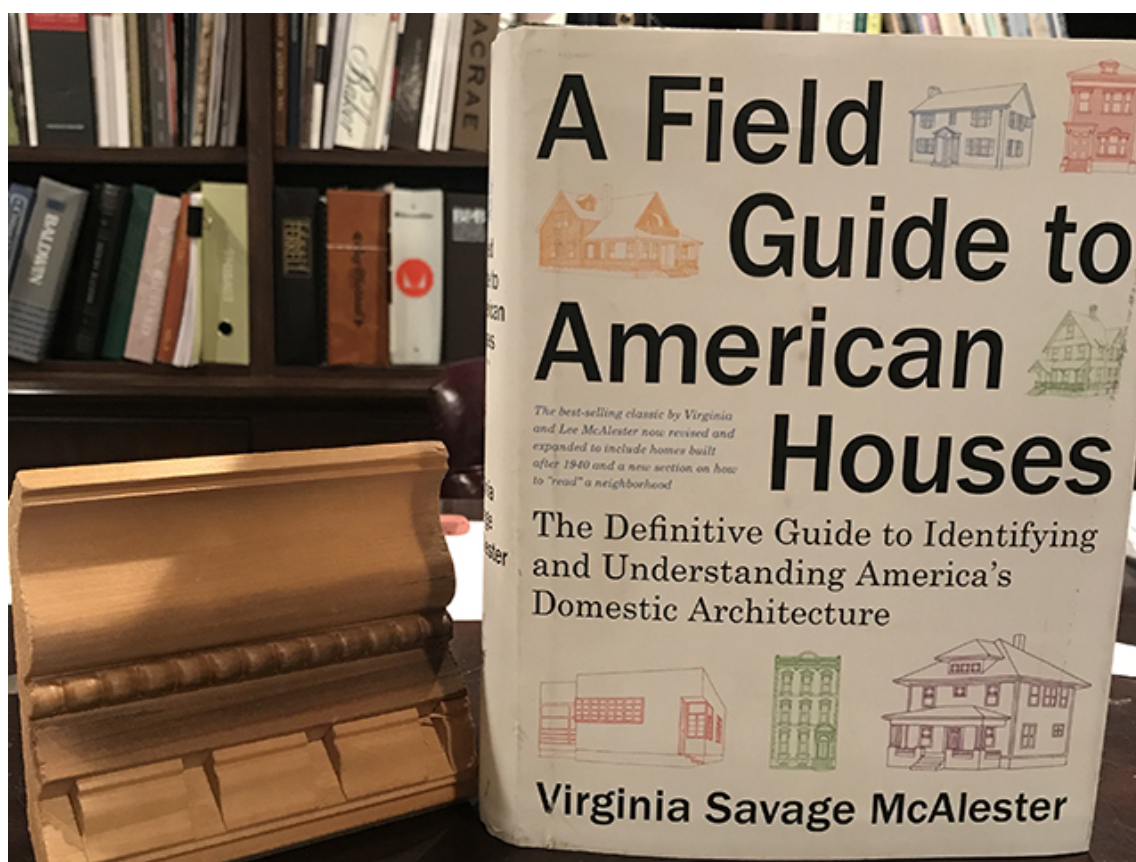
chestnut hill local (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com>)

Donate now to CH Local (<https://charity.gofundme.com/o/en/donate-widget/8415>)

Virginia Savage McAlester wrote the definitive guide to American architecture

Posted on May 13, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/05/13/virginia-savage-mcalester-wrote-the-definitive-guide-to-american-architecture/>), updated on May 13, 2020

(<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/05/13/virginia-savage-mcalester-wrote-the-definitive-guide-to-american-architecture/>) by Pete Mazzaccaro (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/pete/>)



The architectural style guide by Virginia Savage McAlester.

We are all lucky to live in this area of Philadelphia. Our natural landscape, rivers and streams, gardens and parks create an oasis rarely found within large cities. I suspect many though, like me, find a major reason for loving this area is its abundance of historic architecture and the wide and varied architectural styles that make up our communities.

As a board member of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, and having a profession that allows me to interact with the owners of these significant structures, it is so helpful to have the resources that can give guidance to the preservation and maintenance of these important buildings. For this reason, I was saddened recently to learn of the passing of Virginia Savage McAlester. She was a lifelong advocate of historic preservation who held degrees from Harvard and Radcliffe and positions with "Preservation Dallas" and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as being an expert author.

One of the books by Savage McAlester that always provided a wealth of information is "A Field Guide to American Houses, The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America's Domestic Architecture." For professionals, lay people or anyone interested in dwellings built over the past 300 years, this guide provides in-depth information on the elements of domestic architecture with clear documentation, illustrations and hundreds of photographs depicting more than 50 architectural styles and their variants, spanning seven distinct historical periods.

For the professional, the book's arrangement provides clear design styles and specifications through myriad examples of doors and pediments, roof lines and cornices, fenestration and moldings, materials and construction methods, just to name a few.

For the lay person, the book's vastly informative text teaches you not only to recognize architectural styles but also to understand their historical significance. What does a specific style tell us about its builders and the era in which it was built? What were the social and political influences that created the architectural "quatrefoil," for example, or the presence of a slate roof and the styles in which that feature is likely to be found.

Originally published in 1984, it was revised in 2013 to include contemporary styles, like "Millennial Mansions" (her term for McMansion), and is now an easily referenced 900 pages that cover styles ranging from native American Folk Houses to the humble ranch. There is even a chapter on the development and evolution of American neighborhoods.

As my interest in the psychological aspects of design never wanes, how a specific cornice design or a porch size reflects the personalities of the architect or the inhabitant is always a fascinating piece of information when it comes to design. And if you are curious about a specific door shape or window trim, you will be sure to find several examples and how those elements are incorporated within a specific architectural style.

Virginia Savage McAlester will surely be missed within the field of preservation, but her important contributions through her work and her writings will serve as imminent resources for many, many years to come.

Patricia Cove serves as Vice President for Preservation of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, and she is Principal of Architectural Interiors and Design, in Chestnut Hill. She can be reached through her web site www.patriciacove.com (<http://www.patriciacove.com>).

Please take the time to support our journalism. You can do that with a subscription (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/subscribe/>) or with a tax-deductible donation to the Chestnut Hill Community Fund, which launched a support fund for the Local (<https://charity.gofundme.com/o/en/donate-widget/8415>) to help us remain funded during this pandemic. Thank you for your support!

This entry was posted in By Design (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/category/by-design/>) and tagged By Design (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/tag/by-design/>). Bookmark the permalink (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/05/13/virginia-savage-mcalester-wrote-the-definitive-guide-to-american-architecture/>).

← GFS grad, pandemic victim, now brilliant YouTube maven (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/05/13/gfs-grad-pandemic-victim-now-brilliant-youtube-maven/>)

Hill artist/photog 'channels' Picasso during pandemic → (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/05/13/hill-artist-photog-channels-picasso-during-pandemic/>)