

BY JON VARA

Ornamental ranch-house dovecotes run the gamut from ornate cupolas (1) and wall-hung structures tucked beneath a gable-end roof peak (2) to simple “pigeonholes” that might also help provide attic ventilation (3). In its most pared-down form, a dovecote may consist of a few decorative holes bored into finish blocking between rafter ends (4).



## For the Birds

**From the early 1950s** into the '60s, ranch houses—especially in California—often included ornamental dovecotes. They were a common feature on so-called Rustic- and Storybook-style homes, which were also characterized by windows with diagonal muntins, scalloped bargeboards, and other Disneyesque details.

But the roots of the ranch-house dovecote seem to lie in medieval Europe, where freestanding masonry dove-cotes, often in the form of cylindrical towers, were used to attract wild pigeons (which were identical to the feral pigeons that now infest cities worldwide). Once they'd taken up residence in the cote, the birds could be harvested for meat as needed, and their manure spread on fields to improve crop yields.

The right to a dovecote, however, was limited to the nobility. Commoners were barred from raising pigeons of their own, even though their grain crops provided much of the food that fattened the free-ranging birds for the local nobleman's table.

In 1950s America, of course, those old rules no longer applied. The owner of even the humblest ranch house was now free to assume the trappings of nobility by keeping pigeons himself or herself—or at least to seem to keep them.

In reality, few suburban home buyers had a taste for roast pigeon, and fewer still wanted to share their homes with live pigeons. To deny the birds themselves any sort of a foothold, the seemingly inviting openings in housing-development dove-cotes either were closed off with screening, led to impossibly small cavities, or were simply painted-on imitations of actual holes.

But they weren't always completely nonfunctional: Some resourceful builders found that screened pigeon-holes were a fine way to provide code-required attic ventilation.

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Photos: 1 & 2, Atomic Ranch; 3, Tiki Lisa; 4, Coco Owen