

The Geography of the Shotgun House

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published on nola.com on February 12, 2014 and in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut Section on February 14, 2014

Few elements of the New Orleans cityscape speak to the intersection of architecture, sociology and geography so well as the shotgun house.

Once scorned, now cherished, shotguns shed light on patterns of cultural diffusion, class and residential settlement, social preference and construction methods.

The shotgun house is not an architectural style; rather, it is a structural typology—what folklorist John Michael Vlach described as “a philosophy of space, a culturally determined sense of dimension.”

A typology, or type, may be draped in any fashion. Thus we have shotgun houses adorned in Italianate, Eastlake and other styles, just as there are Creole and Federalist townhouses, and Spanish colonial and Greek revival cottages.

Tradition holds that the name “shotgun” derives from the notion of firing bird shot through the front door and out the rear without touching a wall. The term itself postdates the shotgun’s late-19th-century heyday, not appearing in print until the early 20th century.

The shotgun’s most striking exterior trait is its elongated shape, usually three to six times longer than wide. Inside, what is salient is the lack of hallways: occupants need to walk through private rooms to move through the house.

According to some theories, cultures that produced shotgun houses (and other residences without hallways, such as Creole cottages) tended to be more gregarious, or at least unwilling to sacrifice valuable living space for the purpose of occasional passage.

Cultures that valued privacy, on the other hand, were willing to make this trade-off. When they arrived in New Orleans in the early 19th century, for example, privacy-conscious peoples of Anglo-Saxon descent brought with them the American center-hall cottage and side-hall townhouse, in preference over local Creole designs.

In the 1930s, LSU geographer Fred B. Kniffen studied shotguns as part of his field research on Louisiana folk housing. He and other researchers proposed a number of hypotheses explaining the origin and distribution of this distinctive house type.

One theory, popular with tour guides and amateur house-watchers, holds that shotgun houses were designed in New Orleans in response to a real estate tax based on frontage rather than square footage, motivating narrow structures. There’s one major problem with this theory. No one can seem to find that tax code.

Could the shotgun be an architectural response to narrow urban lots? Indeed, you can squeeze in more structures with a slender design. But why then do we see shotguns in rural fields with no such limits?

Could it have evolved from indigenous palmetto houses or Choctaw huts? Unlikely, given their appearance in the Caribbean and beyond.

Could it have been independently invented? Roberts & Company, a New Orleans sash and door fabricator formed in 1856, developed blueprints for prefabricated shotgun-like houses in the 1860s to 1870s and even won awards for them at international expositions. But then why

do we see “long houses” in the rear of the French Quarter and in Faubourg Tremé as early as the 1810s?

Or, alternately, did the shotgun diffuse from the Old World as peoples moved across the Atlantic and brought with them their building culture, just as they brought their language, religion and foodways? Vlach noted the abundance of shotgun-like long houses in the West Indies, and traced their essential form to the enslaved populations of St. Domingue (now Haiti) who had been removed from the western and central African regions of Guinea and Angola. His research identified a gable-roofed housing stock indigenous to the Yoruba peoples, which he linked to similar structures in modern Haiti with comparable rectangular shapes, room juxtapositions and ceiling heights.

Vlach hypothesizes that the 1809 exodus of Haitians to New Orleans after the St. Domingue slave insurrection of 1791 to 1803 brought this vernacular house type to the banks of the Mississippi. “Haitian émigrés had only to continue in Louisiana the same life they had known in St. Domingue,” he wrote. “The shotgun house of Port-au-Prince became, quite directly, the shotgun house of New Orleans.”

The distribution of shotgun houses throughout Louisiana gives indirect support to the diffusion argument. Kniffen showed in the 1930s that shotguns generally occurred along waterways in areas that tended to be more Francophone in their culture, higher in their proportions of people of African and Creole ancestry, and older in their historical development.

Beyond state boundaries, shotguns occur throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, correlated with antebellum plantation regions and with areas that host large black populations. They also appear in interior Southern cities, most notably Louisville, Ky., which comes a distant second to New Orleans in terms of numbers and stylistic variety.

If in fact the shotgun diffused from Africa to Haiti through New Orleans and up the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, this is the distribution we would expect to see.

Clearly, poverty abets cultural factors in explaining this pattern. Simplicity of construction and conservation of resources (building materials, space) probably made the shotgun house type equally attractive to poorer classes in many areas.

Indeed, it is possible that we may be artificially yoking together a wide variety of house types, unrelated in their provenance but similar in their appearance, by means of a catchy moniker coined after their historical moment.

Whatever their origins, shotgun singles and doubles came to dominate the turn-of-the-century housing stock of New Orleans’ working-class neighborhoods. Yet they were also erected as owned-occupied homes in wealthier areas, including the Garden District.

New Orleans shotguns in particular exhibited numerous variations: with hip, gable or apron roofs; with “camelbacks” to increase living space; with grand classical façades or with elaborate Victorian gingerbread. The variety can be explained as a strategy to address market demand with a multitude of options in terms of space needs, fiscal constraints and stylistic preferences.

New Orleanians by the 20th century, as part of their gradual Americanization, desired more privacy than their ancestors, and increasing affluence and new technologies, such as mechanized kitchens, indoor plumbing, air conditioning, automobiles and municipal drainage, helped form new philosophies about residential space.

Professional home builders responded accordingly, some adding hallways or ells or side entrances to the shotgun, others morphing it into the “bungalow” form. House-buyers came to disdain the original shotgun, and it faded from new construction during the 1910s and 1920s.

A *Times-Picayune* writer captured the prevailing sentiment in a 1926 column: “Long, slender, shotgun houses,” he sighed, “row upon row[,] street upon street...all alike... unpainted, slick-stooped, steep-roofed, jammed up together, like lumber in a pile.” Architectural historians also rolled their eyes at prosaic shotguns, and did not protest their demolition, even in the French Quarter, as late as the 1960s.

In recent decades, however, New Orleanians have come to appreciate the sturdy construction and exuberant embellishment of their shotgun housing stock.

Thousands have since been renovated, and the shotgun has experienced a recent revival. Some homes in the Make It Right project in the Lower 9th Ward, for example, were inspired by the shotgun (although rendered in Modernist style), and some pre-fabricated “Katrina Cottages” and New Urbanist homes in recently rebuilt public housing complexes are made to look like the shotguns of old.

It’s revealing to note, however, that among the renovations New Orleanians now make to their shotguns is something completely alien to their original form.

They add a hallway.

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