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MISSION STYLE

Richard Campanella
explores California's
influence on
New Orleans
neighborhoods



CITY PARK GARDEN FESTIVAL IS THE CURE FOR FALL FEVER

Mission style architecture at Trianon Plaza in the Fontainebleau area. Michael DeMocker / mdemocker@nola.com



California, here it came

Mission style added Spanish accent to New Orleans neighborhoods



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In the early 1800s, the United States gained a new coast, along the Gulf of Mexico, and it beckoned to thousands of migrants. By the early 1900s, it was the Pacific Coast that beckoned, and to California's golden shore arrived migrants by the millions, their dreams in tow.

What followed was a westward shift in the engine rooms of American cultural innovation, away from the older Eastern cities and into places like Los Angeles and San Francisco. These metropolises would become disproportionately influential worldwide; think how much Hollywood and Silicon Valley affect our daily lives today.

One of California's most significant early cultural exports was not entertainment or technology, but architecture. Two forms would predominate: one was the California Bungalow, which was both an architectural "style" (fashion) and a residential building "type" (spatial design). The second was more purely stylistic, applicable to residential, commercial or institutional uses, and its variations would become known as Mission, Spanish, Moorish, Churrigueresque and Mediterranean.

The primary originators of the California Bungalow were the brothers Charles S. and Henry M. Greene. Born in Ohio and educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the twosome launched their careers in Boston but sensed their destiny was in Cal-



Balboa Park in San Diego, site of 1915 Panama-California Exposition, helped popularize Spanish Revival architecture. Photo from the Library of Congress

ifornia, where in Pasadena they established Greene and Greene Architects in 1894.

Dazzled by the region's sunny, mild climate and intrigued by Japanese and Indian building customs, Greene and Greene created distinctive residences with a horizontal, low-slung massing, somewhat like a ranch house. Interiors featured sedate wooden finishing, sparse but tasteful detailing, mantels and chimneys made of uncut stone, and an abundance of doorways, windows and porches with overhanging eaves.

They called these sprawling yet cozy houses "bungalows" (from "Bengali," referring to the region in India), and they embodied the ideals

of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, which favored hand-crafted simplicity over machine production and gaudy extravagance.

Booming southern California formed perfect terroir for these appealing homes, which could be scaled up or down and adapted to any environment, including neighborhoods designed for automobiles. The bungalow came to be associated with halcyon California, and its appeal soon diffused across America.

Around the same time, California began to discover its own past and found inspiration in its crumbling Franciscan missions from Spanish colonial and Mexican times. The buildings' native materials and august aura befit California's environment and history, and, in 1893, the state designed its pavilion at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition to look like a giant Spanish mission.

A revival of "Mission" architecture ensued, and it soon expanded into a Spanish revival, which in turn broadened into a Mediterranean revival, drawing inspiration from Spain and its Baroque (Churrigueresque) and Moorish elements, as well as from southern France, Italy, Greece, Persia and beyond.

In 1901, architect Bertram Goodhue, known in New York City for his Gothic Revival work, toured these regions with a California client in what proved to be a transformative journey. In the words of urbanist Wade Graham, the two men "drank in the architecture and gardens of this prelapsarian Oriental dream world," and brought home what they saw. Goodhue later completed

for that client a villa outside Santa Barbara called El Fureidis, “arguably the first ‘Mediterranean’ house in California.”

The style caught on in California, largely for the region’s Spanish heritage but also its geography. The Golden State’s dry, sunny landscape of woodlands, scrub, orchids and vineyards resembles those of the Mediterranean Basin, and buildings of that region look at home in California.

Goodhue would become the supervisory architect of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, which showcased California’s emerging architectural idiom to the nation. Soon, Americans everywhere were falling in love with terracotta, ironwork, tiles, heavy stucco walls with rough-hewn wooden doors and windows, loggia with Solomonic (spiral) columns and rounded arches, and courtyards with fountains.

The Spanish aesthetic spread into the same milieus as the California Bungalow. Both forms celebrated clean, simple lines and natural materials, eschewed frilly ostentation and made good use of light and ventilation. Importantly, they exuded California — where the future lay.

That’s where New Orleans comes in. The Crescent City had just drained its vast backswamp, allowing for new development all the way to Lake Pontchartrain. Middle-class New Orleanians were eager to move out of the cramped old riverfront neighborhoods and into modern subdivisions. Developers, homebuilders, mortgage-lenders, public utilities and city officials all had vested interests in making it happen.

Folks wanted “the latest” in these spaces, and California Bungalows fit the bill. They had curb appeal, scalability, ample porches for hot summer nights and lots of windows to make up for the low ceilings (something new for locals). They could be built with “New Orleans raised basements” or on piers, fitted with modern appliances and set among auto-friendly streets and driveways.

This was the era when the shotgun house, long the vernacular residence of the working class, was becoming passé on account of its lack of privacy and awkward linearity. Bungalows offered a superior alternative — with the cachet of California instead of the stigma of Southern poverty.

Starting around 1909, California Bungalows would be built citywide by the thousands, in places such as Broadmoor, Lakeview and Gentilly Terrace, which was billed as “Little California” when it launched in 1909.

“THIS IS A REAL CALIFORNIA BUNGALOW IN ALL ITS BEAUTY — Make It Yours,” proclaimed a 1912 Times-Picayune ad for a Music Street house built by the Gentilly Terrace Co. Its copy bespoke the style’s attributes: “The interiors are finished in natural woods, polished wood floors... white enameled woodwork...all such refinements are handsome. City water and electricity are in... . Pay \$250 and move in!”

Broadmoor developers erected so many California Bungalows on either side of Napoleon Avenue, from South Claiborne to Broad



A California Bungalow in the Irish Channel. Photo courtesy Richard Campanella

Street, that the area gained the same nickname, “Little California,” used earlier for Gentilly Terrace.

“Justification for the name,” explained the Time-Picayune in 1920, “was the fact that most of the new homes...were bungalows... built close to the ground, after the California practice. The Louisiana modification adds a basement, which yields all the advantages of the two-story model.”

At the same time, Mission, Spanish, Moorish, Churrigueresque and Mediterranean Revival façades started to appear on everything from auto dealerships to theaters, funeral homes, schools, churches, municipal markets and pumping stations. The styles also lent themselves to opulent new homes along Uptown boulevards, particularly in Fontainebleau, and lakefront neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most charming local example is an unusual one: Palm Terrace, a specially cut block between St. Charles Avenue and Carondelet Street near Marengo Street. Designed by California architect William E. Spink and landscaped by Swiss designer Sigmund Tarnok, Palm Terrace comprised 12 “architectural gems (in the) beautiful Spanish and Moorish” style, nestled together amid tiny sloped lawns and driveways — “a slice of paradise (be)neath the shade of the palms,” according to ads.

Opened in 1926, Palm Terrace is arguably the only place in New Orleans with an integral Mediterranean streetscape. A stroll down its narrow confines is a trip to Los Angeles in 1926. It also feels a bit like a Hollywood movie set, as do many of southern California’s Spanish villas and estates.

Spanish Revival and its affiliated idioms waned after World War II, though they remain fairly popular for new residences today, especially in the Southwest. California Bungalows, on the other hand, took the brunt of the Depression-era decline in new construction, and found themselves superseded by the slab-at-grade ranch house in the decades after World War II.

Recent decades have seen renewed appreciation for this sturdy and staid style, here and nationwide. When you see bungalows in our cityscape today, anywhere from Old Arabi to Old Metairie, Marrero to Mandeville, they testify to local aspirations of a century ago, to the philosophies of architecture and urbanism in that era, and to California’s nearly mythic allure in the early 1900s as a new American promised land.

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