

The evolution of Creole architecture



Building traditions from Europe, Africa and the Caribbean influenced New Orleans architectural forms

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“Creole” is a famously complex facet of Louisiana culture, whether as a noun implying an ethnic identity or an adjective describing anything from tomatoes to cooking. Ask 10 New Orleanians to define all of the above, and you’ll likely get 30 different answers.

So, too, with Creole architecture: Explaining what makes a house Creole defies one unequivocal answer. As an emergent tradition rendered by experimentation and adaptation rather than an inscribed order, Creole architecture is better understood through its evolution and transformation. One thing is certain: Most buildings in colonial New Orleans, at least until the 1790s, epitomized Creole architecture, and they exhibited an inventory of signature traits and construction methods.



Above: The Lombard House in Bywater (seen here from the backyard) was restored by S. Frederick Starr. The house includes Creole building traits that were typical in the 1700s.

Left: Norman trusses fill the Lombard House’s attic.

Photos by Robert S. Brantley



Madame John's Legacy, now part of the Louisiana State Museum, was built in 1788. *Staff archive*

They included walls made of brick or mud mixed with moss (bousillage) set within a load-bearing timber frame covered with clapboards; an oversized "Norman" roof, usually hipped and double-pitched; and spacious wooden galleries supported with delicate colonnades and balustrades, which served as intermediary space between indoors and outdoors.

Staircases were located outside on the gallery, chimneys were centralized, all apertures had French doors or shutters, hallways and closets were all but unknown, and the entire edifice was raised on piers above soggy soils.

Such buildings were distributed across today's French Quarter by the hundreds in the mid-1700s and grew to more than a thousand later in the century. Roughly half were set back from the street, and nearly all had open space around them, used for vegetable gardens, chicken coops and rabbit hutches and surrounded by picket fences.

It was a rather bucolic environment, with the appearance of a French West Indian village. Wrote English Capt. Philip Pittman during his 1765 visit, "most of the houses are...timber frames filled up with brick," and "one floor, raised about eight feet from the ground, with large galleries round them. ... It is impossible to have any subterraneous buildings, as they would be constantly full of water."

The best surviving examples of this early phase of Creole architecture in the French Quarter are Madame John's Legacy at 632 Dumaine St. and the Ossorno House at 913 Gov. Nicholls St., both of which date to the 1780s. On Bourbon at St. Philip, Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, whose construction perhaps dates to the 1770s, also has the Creole roof and center chimneys, but lacks a gallery and raised construction probably because it was built for commercial and not residential purposes.

A dozen or so similar buildings survive elsewhere in the city, including the Old Spanish Custom House (1784) and Pitot House (1805) on Bayou St. John and the Lombard House (1826) in Bywater. (The Old Ursuline Convent at 1111 Chartres St., completed in 1753 and now the city's oldest structure, represents a French Colonial institutional style typical of France during the reign of Louis XV. It embodies many Creole traits, including the steep double-pitched hipped roof.)

Where did Creole architecture originate? Researchers generally agree this tradition was not "invented" locally in response to environmental conditions (hot weather, heavy rain, wet soils), as is often supposed. Rather, it arrived courtesy of newcomers who brought with them all their cultural baggage, including building know-how, and modified their customs to local conditions. But by what routes and from which source regions?



The Ossorno House, at 913 Gov. Nicholls St., is an example of 18th-century Creole architecture. It was moved from Bayou St. John to its French Quarter location in 1784. *Chris Granger / staff archive*

One theory views Louisiana Creole architecture as a derivative of French Canadian houses and later modified to local conditions and needs. This proposition suggests Creole architecture diffused from France to Canada and then down the Mississippi Valley to Louisiana. Another theory emphasizes influences directly from France to Louisiana.

A third and favored explanation sees Creole architecture as an extraction from a West Indian cultural milieu, itself a product of European, indigenous and African influences, such as the Arawak Indian Bohio hut and possibly West Africa's Yoruba hut. This hypothesis suggests that Creole architecture diffused primarily up from the Caribbean to the Mississippi Valley and beyond. It thus situates New Orleans at the nexus of the "Creole Atlantic" and the North American interior.

Louisiana State University anthropologist Jay D. Edwards viewed West Indian influence as "another major cultural hearth for the domestic architecture of eastern North America," along with England, France, Spain, Germany, West Africa, Holland, Scandinavia and other places.

Circumstances changed in the late 1700s, and so would Creole architecture. A massive fire in 1788 destroyed 856 of New Orleans' Creole housing stock, and a second blaze in 1794 destroyed another 212.

Spanish administrators responded with new building codes designed to prevent fires, mandating, according to Cabildo records, new houses to be "built of bricks and a flat roof or tile roof," while extant houses to be strengthened "to stand a roof of fire-proof materials," their beams covered with stucco. "[All] citizens must comply with these rules," the dons decreed.

The 600 block of Royal Street includes fine examples of the more urbanized, Spanish-influenced 'second generation' Creole architecture. The three-story common-wall townhouses at 612-624 Royal St. were built in the 1830s (left), and the Ducros-Ducatel House and its additions, at right, were constructed from 1805-1825.

Photo by
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The fires and codes largely ended that first phase of rustic, wooden Creole houses in New Orleans proper, though they would persist in rural areas. They would become even more unsuitable with the Louisiana Purchase and American dominion, after which the city's population quintupled by the 1820s. Land values rose, housing density increased, and picket fences and rabbit hutches disappeared from the inner city.

But Creoles — that is, locally born people, mostly Francophones — still predominated, and Creole builders continued to erect “creolized” structures now exhibiting Spanish and Anglo-American influences, programmed to the needs of a budding metropolis.

Thus, in the early 1800s, a second and more urban phase of Creole architecture emerged. For smaller residences, this meant the transformation of the more rural circa-1700s Creole abodes to the brick Creole cottages we have today. For larger residences, it meant the brick common-wall townhouses and storehouses we see on Royal Street today, featuring arched openings, wrought-iron balconies and a porte cochère leading to a rear courtyard, all behind an elegantly Spartan stucco façade.

What once felt like a Caribbean village was now starting to look like a Mediterranean city. Wrote Scottish visitor Basil Hall in 1828, “(w)hat struck us most (about New Orleans) were the old and narrow streets, the high houses, ornamented with tasteful cornices, iron balconies, and many other circumstances peculiar to towns in France and Spain.”

Contrast Hall's quote to that of Philip Pittman in 1765, above, and that's the difference between first-generation “country Creole” and second-generation “city Creole” architecture.

There are, by my count, 740 examples of this latter phase still standing in the French Quarter, mostly dating from the 1810s to the 1830s. We call them Creole today for two reasons: because they were adapted to local conditions and because folks regularly called them Creole back then.

Shotgun houses may have developed as local builders erected traditional Creole cottages in a rotated fashion, such that their roofline and bays, typically parallel to the street, became perpendicular to it.

Among the most splendid specimens of these second-generation Creole townhouses may be seen along 612-624 Royal St.

But Creole people in this era increasing found themselves competing with ever-growing populations of Anglo-Americans and immigrants, who imported their own cultural preferences. Architecturally, this meant the rise of Classicism and particularly Greek Revival, the topic of next month's Cityscapes column.

This was also the era when architecture developed into a specialized profession with standardized techniques, replacing the lay tradesmen and “house wrights” of old. “Card-carrying” architects such as James Gallier Sr. and Henry Howard, both from Ireland by way of New York, and the New York-born brothers James and Charles Dakin, all set up shop in New Orleans in the 1830s, and they weren't designing Creole buildings.

To some researchers, the new Classical trend set the old Creole customs on a trajectory of decline. “The truly significant period of New Orleans architecture was brought into jeopardy by the [Louisiana] Purchase and brought to an end by the Civil War,” wrote the late architect and preservationist James Marston Fitch. “The Americanization of the Crescent City has long been completed, at least architecturally; and the whole nation is the poorer for it.”

An alternative interpretation holds that, rather than wiping them out, the city's mid-19th-century Americanization drove Creole designs into yet another evolutionary phase, which brought forth our famous shotgun house.

Shotgun houses may have developed as local builders erected traditional Creole cottages in a rotated fashion, such that their roofline and bays, typically parallel to the street, became perpendicular to it. The idea of a long and narrow house likely got a boost from the more than 9,000 Haitian refugees who arrived at New Orleans in 1809, and brought with them the elongated vernacular house designs of that island, themselves traceable to West Africa. Later, they would be nicknamed “shotgun houses.”

After the Civil War, as population density increased and demand for rental stock rose, builders erected shotgun houses by the thousands — singles, doubles, camelbacks, whatever the market demanded and space allowed.

Those built in the late 1800s continued two key interior traits shared by circa-1700s Creole architecture: center chimneys and no hallways. Our shotgun houses today retain a striking resemblance to the Ti-kay (“little houses”) dwellings seen throughout modern Haiti, and the relationship is not coincidental.

Traditional shotguns went out of style in the early 20th century, by which time we can fairly say that Creole architecture had faded away. Yet certain traits endure today in the form of pastiche, such as the Norman roofs popular in many modern Louisiana subdivisions, and the ample porches and galleries seen in New Urbanist communities.

More so, Creole architecture survives in modern New Orleans through the efforts of the preservationist movement, which recognized its value long before most residents and leaders did. New Orleanians are deeply indebted to preservationists for keeping within our stewardship the nation's largest concentration of this beautiful tradition.

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