

Five Chapters in the Geography of New Orleans Architecture, 1700s-2000s

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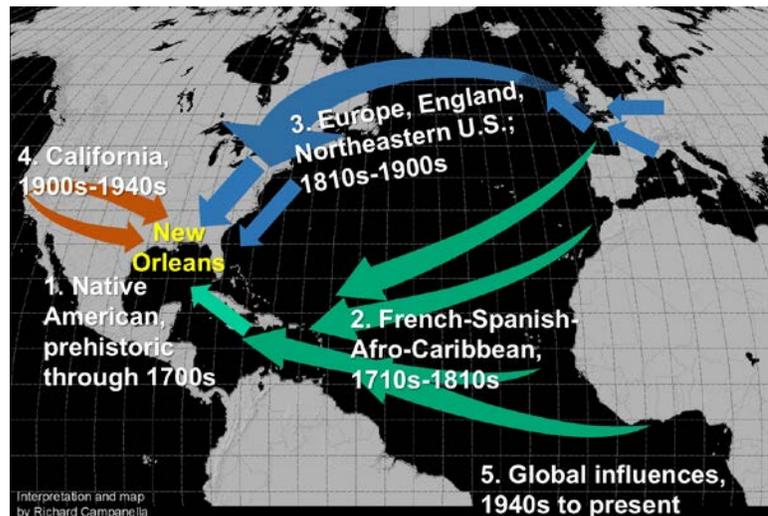
Throughout 2016, this “Cityscapes” column traced three centuries of architectural influences in the Crescent City. To start 2017, we look at the larger geographical patterns behind that epic diffusion. I see five main chapters in New Orleans’ architectural geography, beginning with Louisiana’s indigenous peoples.

Native Louisianians occupied the delta conditionally, moving to higher ground when floodwaters came and designing their structures accordingly. Some villages were more permanent than others, among them one visited in 1699 by Pierre Le Moyne, sieur d’Iberville. Iberville’s description of the Bayogoula encampment near present-day White Castle provides an idea of the way indigenous people built their homes. The village of 250 people, Iberville explained, had “107 huts and 2 temples...surrounded by a palisade made entirely of canes...ten feet high.”

Outside were cornfields; inside were “dome-shaped (abodes), 30 feet in diameter and round, daubed with mud.” Many had a “lean-to adjoining(,) roofed with split canes,” illuminated by a 2-foot-wide closeable skylight. The most impressive structure was the temple, “a lean-to 8 feet wide and 12 long” and filled with “figures...bears, wolves, birds” and opossums. Ominously, Iberville noted, “the smallpox...had killed one-fourth of the people. They place the bodies of their dead on platforms around their village....”

Disease and violence would radically reduce the native population, and their original architecture, including palmetto huts with thatched roofs once ubiquitous along bayous, would disappear from the landscape. Their legacy deserves recognition as the first chapter of this region’s geography of architecture, in which designs and materials stemmed from local minds and local resources.

That would change in the early 1700s, as French settlers, bent on colonialism and commerce, introduced their own building customs. The architecture arrived at New Orleans from a southeastern direction, across the Gulf of Mexico from the French West Indies, with a taproot in France and branches ranging from French Canada to West Africa. It was called “Creole.”



In this initial phase, Creole architecture entailed walls made of brick or bousillage (a mixture of clay and grass or Spanish moss) set within timber frames and raised on piers; oversized Norman roofs, usually hipped and double-pitched; spacious wooden galleries with outdoor staircases; centralized chimneys; and French doors and shutters. Typically, there were no hallways or closets. Roughly half such houses were set back from the street, with vegetable gardens and picket fences. French colonial New Orleans had a rather bucolic air, like a French West Indian village, even after dominion shifted to Spain starting in 1763.

New Orleans would become more like a Spanish city after the Good Friday Fire of 1788, which destroyed most French-era buildings, and a second blaze in 1794, which impelled authorities to mandate new houses be built of brick and covered in stucco. Creole builders thus began designing sturdier and more urban edifices exhibiting Spanish influences.

What once felt like a Caribbean village was now starting to look like a Mediterranean city—or perhaps Havana, Cartagena or Port Au Prince, Haiti, whose recent insurrection sent over 9000 refugees to New Orleans in 1809. They likely brought with them the concept of a “long house,” itself possibly originating with the Yoruba peoples of West Africa, and it would evolve into our “shotgun house.” If so, it would be the last major architectural import to travel in that southeastern pathway.

By this time, the Americans controlled New Orleans, and to its riverbanks arrived increasing numbers of English-speaking Anglo-Irish migrants. They brought with them their own architectural tastes—and their own architects. Classicism, namely Greek Revival, was all the rage in the Northeast, having developed from Enlightenment thinkers’ fascination with classical antiquity. The American migration to New Orleans would open a third major chapter in our geography of architecture, as styles began arriving from points north and east—from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and previously from places like England and Germany.

That northeastern pathway would continue for decades, even as the Enlightenment and its veneration of ancient civilization gave way to the Romanticist movement and a penchant for the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Romanticism birthed an ebullient style inspired by the villas and vistas of the Italian countryside. After appearing in England in the early 1800s, “Italianate” diffused to New Jersey and New York in 1839-1840s and to New Orleans starting in 1850.

Victorian Italianate, with its decorative moldings, segmented arches and bracketed eaves, would become the dominant façade style in late-Victorian New Orleans, though by no means the only one. Among the other panaches of this era were Stick, with its emphasis on wooden “stick work,” including its variants Queen Anne and Eastlake; Richardson Romanesque, with its sturdy, stony countenance; francophile Second Empire and its mansard roofs; imposing Gothic with its elegant ogives (pointed arches); Tudor with its nostalgic rusticity; and a flamboyant expression of classical and Renaissance motifs known as Beaux Arts.

In time, Victorian detailing and Gilded Age excess would provoke a counter-reaction. It came to be known as the Arts and Crafts Movement, and it eschewed ostentation and machine production in favor of an earthier, handcrafted look—the Craftsman cottage. The change of taste laid the groundwork for a fourth shift in the geography of architectural influence, this time from a new direction and source: westward, from California.

Golden State architecture found good terroir in early-1900s New Orleans. The city had just drained its backswamp, the automobile was on the rise, and modern utilities were revolutionizing domesticity. New

subdivisions were being built in places like Lakeview and Gentilly, and residents wanted “the latest” in both style and lifestyle. Los Angeles in particular, and California in general, represented all this to many Americans, as the West Coast would increasingly supplant the Northeast as the engine room of the nation’s cultural production.

Starting around 1909, California Bungalows, designed by Greene and Greene Architects of Pasadena and sold nationwide through catalogs, starting appearing locally. They would be built in such density in places like Gentilly Terrace and Broadmoor that both neighborhoods would be explicitly billed as “Little California.”

California’s appeal also shined light on the Golden State’s own legacy of Mission architecture, which stirred a nationwide revival of similar Spanish, Moorish and Mediterranean styles. Stucco walls, terracotta tiles, rough-hewn wooden doors and loggia with Solomonic columns started appearing in New Orleans houses in the 1920s, not to mention on theaters, funeral homes, schools, churches, municipal markets and pumping stations.

Greater changes were afoot. Modernism, an intellectual challenge to Western cultural assumptions, gained momentum after World War I, and Modernist architects, working with new materials like steel frames and sheet glass, increasingly experimented with openness, horizontality, minimalism and function over form. In New Orleans, Modernist sensibilities at first intermixed with traditional styles, rendering the Streamline Moderne and Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s. But the catastrophe of World War II drove Modernists to reject those and other allusions to the past, and embrace taut surfaces of aluminum and glass, crisp edges and smooth curves. The International Style became a premier motif of the new design thinking, and boxy skyscrapers would soon reshape the New Orleans skyline. The suburbs, meanwhile, were developing with tract housing, usually of the Ranch variety and built on grade-level concrete slabs, similar to what could be found anywhere else in the nation.

By this time, the geography of cultural diffusion had radically changed. Ideas that once flowed—quite literally, via ships—in slow and deliberate vectors (between metropole and colony, for example, and from port to port) were now disseminating faster and multi-directionally. Modernist architecture, as well as the counter-reactions of Post-Modernism and neotraditionalism, did not appear in New Orleans via local development (as did Native American customs), or from points southeast (as did Creole), or from the northeast (as did classicism), or from California (as did Mission), but rather as a worldwide propagation via the wavelengths of modern media. I see this as the fifth and current chapter of the geography of New Orleans architecture, ongoing for 70 to 80 years now: the era of global influences.

Might there be a subsequent chapter in which localism once again takes center stage? Indeed, there is a growing movement to produce food locally, support local businesses and revive local traditions. Architecturally, New Orleanians in recent decades have preferred locally inspired façades in new residential construction, such that faux 19th-century styles may now be found in 21st-century subdivisions.

But, alas, these trends, toward localism and retro-revival, are themselves national and international ideas, circulating in a globalized geography.

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