

'Ornaments to the city'

Late Victorian architecture changed the look of New Orleans

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"Victorian," in the strictest sense, refers to the years of Queen Victoria's lengthy reign over the United Kingdom, 1837 to 1901. By extension, it implies the society, mores and tastes of that period.

In New Orleans and elsewhere, however, the adjective usually describes architecture, particularly the building styles of the late 1800s.

To understand the influences that shaped their appearance, let's back up a bit.

Throughout the 1700s, local craftsmen generally built homes and other buildings by adapting traditions from France, the Caribbean, West Africa and Spain to the swampy conditions of subtropical Louisiana. The architecture was called Creole, and it was fundamentally functional.

During the early 1800s, New Orleans Americanized, its population diversified, and its building arts reflected the new order. Professional architects from out-of-town pushed aside old Creole customs in favor of new forms reflecting Enlightenment philosophies inspired by ancient Greece and Rome. The dignified architecture that resulted came to be known as classical or neoclassical, most prominently Greek Revival, and it heralded rationalism, order and genteel aristocracy.

But by the 1840s and 1850s, majestic Greek temples and townhouses started to look dour and passé. Too much aristocracy and order stirred a counter-reaction, called romanticism, which valued emotionality, beauty and the spirit of the individual. Architects rediscovered medieval and Renaissance influences and breathed new life into them—and found plenty of nouveau-riche clients eager to display their wealth through houses so designed.

What resulted were more luxurious aesthetics primarily Italianate in design, including segmented-arch doorways and windows, heavy molding and an abundance of paired volute-shaped brackets lining roof eaves and galleries. Such architectural exuberance flourished later in the Victorian period, and it's probably the sundry panaches from those years, 1870s-1900s, that most New Orleanians picture when they think of Victorian architecture.

Among those styles were Stick, with its emphasis on wooden detailing ("stick work"); its variants Queen Anne, distinctive for its towers and turrets, and Eastlake, with its



Built in 1896, this house on Exposition Boulevard is designed in the Queen Anne style.

Photo by Richard Campanella.

panoply of brackets, quoins, railings, spindles and skin-like shingling.

There was also stony Romanesque with its stout rounded archways; francophile Second Empire and its mansard roofs; imposing Gothic, with its pointed arches; Tudor with its nostalgic rusticity; and a flamboyant expression of classical and Renaissance motifs known as Beaux-Arts.

Architecture blossomed in this era, almost literally, with florid embellishments and cornucopias of fruit banded all over exteriors and interiors. It was not a time for understatement.

The trend did have some democratizing aspects. Mass production made woodworking cheap, which enabled builders and owners of otherwise humble houses to spruce them up into charming mini-manses: thus our thousands of gingerbread-encrusted Victorian Italianate shotgun houses.

Similarly, homes with modest adornment were featured in pattern books ("catalog houses") and mass-constructed for middle-class families, creating appealing neighborhoods, such as today's Bayou St.

John and Mid City. Algiers Point particularly abounds in late-Victorian homes because a terrible fire laid waste to its 10 core blocks at precisely the time — 1895 — when these styles peaked in popularity for new construction.

It was the housing stock built for the upper classes that would become the iconic specimens of late-Victorian residential architecture: huge, vertically massed frame houses with busy roofs, deep-set wrap-around porches and detailing galore. Architects peddling such blueprints found the right clientele in Uptown neighborhoods, which boomed in the years following the 1885 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial in present-day Audubon Park.

"The present season in New Orleans has been one of exceeding activity in...building and improvements," reported the Daily Picayune in an 1888 real estate article subtitled "The Sound of the Saw and Hammer is Heard in the Land." "The architecture," noted the journalist, "is much more elaborate and original than formerly, the prevailing style for cottages and residences being the Queen Anne,



The New Orleans Cotton Exchange, built in 1871 in the Victorian Second Empire and Italian Renaissance styles, was razed in 1920.
Photo from the Library of Congress



Late Victorian design is common in Algiers Point, with many houses built after an 1895 fire. The style peaked in popularity at that time.
Kathleen Flynn / staff archive

the Eastlake, old colonial, etc.) all of which will prove to be ornaments to the city.”

Victorian ornamentation also was applied to new commercial and institutional buildings, causing parts of downtown to shed their antebellum scale and distinction for the latest look of other American cities. The Mercier Building on Canal at Dauphine streets (built 1887 and home to the original Maison Blanche) and its rival Godchaux’s (1899) on Canal at Chartres streets, visually splendid as they were, nevertheless could be picked up and dropped seamlessly into Cincinnati or Boston or Detroit. Most New Orleanians did not see this as a problem; they saw it as progress.

A number of factors drove late-Victorian exorbitance. Raw materials, such as lumber, quarried stone and coal for calefaction, were inexpensive, given the largely unregulated extraction of natural resources at this time. Mechanized mills and expanded rail lines brought down production and transportation costs.

Skilled labor and domestic help were cheap; federal income tax did not yet exist; and real estate taxes were minimal, all of which freed up household income to sink into a house. There were no zoning regulations limiting size or style, and because municipal water, gas and electrical services were either nonexistent or nascent, utility bills were hardly an issue.

Furthermore, this was the Gilded Age, when industry and economic expansion swelled the ranks of the upper classes and yielded a new American elite. Unlike its counterparts from earlier times, this generation proudly displayed its wealth, and there was no better way to do so than one’s residence. Motifs got mixed and matched ad nauseam, and home sizes grew ever larger.

And that’s what drove the counter-reaction. It began in England in the 1880s, and took root in the United States by the early 1900s. Its

philosophy was, by its very nature, low-key and understated, eschewing machine production and frivolous detailing in favor of hand-crafted natural simplicity. The movement came to be known as Arts and Crafts, and at its core, it held that less was more, and too much was not only more than enough, it was vulgar.

To be sure, the extravagance continued even after Queen Victoria died in 1901, and Prince Edward ascended to the throne. The Modernist movement, emerging since the 1870s and intensifying after World War I, probably played a greater role in killing Victorian and Edwardian architecture, as did the rising costs of owning a big drafty wooden house.

The shift in taste got underway locally around 1910, when more and more architects and homebuyers found refreshing charm in simpler, earthier designs. The styles arrived not from the Northeast or England, nor from medieval or ancient precedents, but rather from 20th-century California. (More on this in next month’s Cityscapes.)

Yet late-Victorian architecture has left a lasting impression throughout the nation, becoming almost the archetype in many Americans’ minds of what beautiful houses and idealized domesticity are “supposed” to look like. Christmas cards, children’s books and toys, such as doll houses and model train layouts, feature Victorian houses with striking regularity, and cinema has used them as props to evoke everything from hope (“It’s a Wonderful Life”) to horror (“Psycho”).

The Victorian period left a considerable structural mark on the New Orleans cityscape. Despite the fame of the city’s Creole legacy, far more extant buildings date to the late 1800s than the 1700s and early 1800s combined, and late-Victorian stylistic specimens substantially outnumber those of Creole or Greek.

The aesthetics of that era also live on in the façades of new construction. A study I conducted of hundreds of residences built

after the 2005 Katrina flood revealed that nearly three out of every four façades had a historical pastiche — and of those, most paid homage, either partly or largely, to late-Victorian tastes.

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