



THE BRIC-A-BRAC STYLES

by

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This is the third in a series of five Tech Talk articles on Minnesota's architectural styles. The next one is scheduled for the Nov. 1999 issue of *The Interpreter*.

All properties pictured in this article are listed on the National Register of Historic Places or in National Register Districts. The latter are noted as (NR District).

The years following the Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia in 1876 were marked by a change in architectural tastes. The Italianate and French Second Empire styles gave way to a more picturesque, and at times exotic, expression that emphasized highly ornamental design.

The styles that rose to popularity during the next 20 years, the Queen Anne, Eastlake, Shingle and Stick styles, were labeled "romantic," "bric-a-brac," and "free-classic." For the most part, this was because of their exuberance and their unprecedented non-traditional profusion of design features, which were extracted and interpreted from a wide variety of sources. These sources included such diverse bits of architecture as the English cottage, the Moorish mosque and the classical temple. They were translated into three-dimensional architecture by the creativity and technology-based ingenuity of the architect/artist/craftsman of the day. Paradoxically, the standardization produced by the machine, coupled with its ability to produce what seem to be countless variations, resulted in highly individualized buildings. This characteristic is obvious even when two seemingly identical houses were constructed next to each other.

Events such as the Centennial Exposition were important. We might now call them "media" events, for through them, new ideas, technological advancements and an exposure to the outside world could be experienced by a wide audience. Visitors to expositions took their experiences home, often translating them into expressions of "tasteful" design and lifestyle. Other cultures, architectural styles and decor mixed with the features of common, middle class living. The result set the theme for the last era in the Victorian Era, an era of architects and authors as taste-makers. The Bric-a-Brac styles epitomize the American Dream.

Stick Style

The first to emerge was the Stick style. Loosely based upon the English Elizabethan half-timber cottage, the American version was popularized in illustrated books. It is important to note that "picturesque" styles are a result of the transition from builders' guides to pattern books. Builders' guides often contained only plates of classical orders and structural details, whereas pattern books concentrated on plans and designs for houses and out-buildings.

Andrew Jackson Downing had hinted at the Stick style in his publication *Country Houses* (1861), and many Stick style buildings are often also called Gothic. Their primary design characteristic is the use of exposed stick work, which is more often applied than structural in nature. Proliferation of the Stick



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The C.P. Noyes Cottage in White Bear Lake, an example of Stick style architecture. (1879)

style was due largely to pattern books such as *Country Houses*; by the mid 1860s it had achieved its place as fashionable architecture. This status was insured by the popularity of the New Jersey Building, one of the main attractions at the Centennial Exposition.

Stick style buildings usually are disproportionately tall, with steeply pitched roofs. With a profusion of gables and porches, they form a complex and irregular massing and silhouette. During the period, and particularly in regions such as Minnesota where

Editor's note:

TECH TALK is a bimonthly column offering technical assistance on management, preservation and conservation matters that affect historical societies and museums of all sizes and interests. Comments and suggestions for future topics are welcome.



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lumber is readily available, they are mainly of frame construction. The frame is sheathed with clapboards, and overlaid with horizontal, vertical or diagonal boards dividing the wall surface into panels. Eaves at the roof lines project considerably and are usually supported by large brackets, which, together with the stick work, sometimes give the building the appearance of a Swiss chalet. The open porch or verandah is a common feature; roofs are supported by posts (rather than the more common column) with diagonal braces. Polychromatic paint schemes are employed to enhance the stick work patterns.

Queen Anne and Eastlake

The Queen Anne and Eastlake styles were popular in Minnesota from the early 1880s to the turn of the century. The two styles are similar in massing and picturesque quality, and differ primarily in type of ornamentation. A Queen Anne building is noted for its extensive use of curvilinear, slender profile forms, whereas the Eastlake is often noted for its geometric, more massive forms. The Queen Anne style was developed by English architect Richard Norman Shaw as a picturesque style reminiscent of the medieval

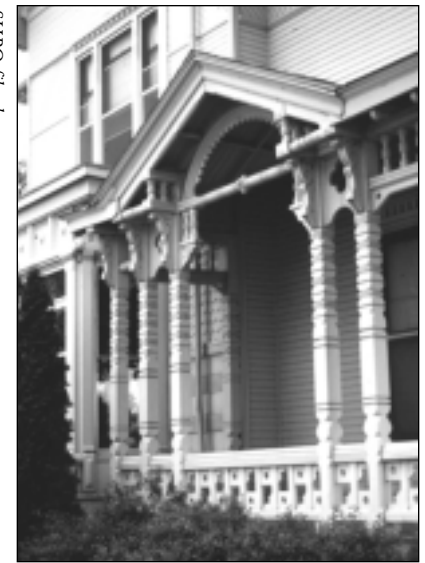
cottage or manor house. Its introduction in America attracted much attention from architects and the general public alike. Ironically, acceptance was based on the fact that, while Queen Anne buildings supposedly revived vernacular English architecture of centuries past, they stirred in Americans an association with their own colonial past.

The earliest American Queen Anne buildings were strongly reminiscent of Dutch colonial houses, though more abstract and ornamental. By the 1880s any design that evoked nostalgia for the past was loosely labeled "Queen Anne." A similar analogy may be made for the Eastlake style. Although it had roots in the earlier Gothic style, Eastlake was so named for its association with English architect Charles Locke Eastlake. It made its debut in his book, *Hints on Household Taste* (1868). We see again that the popularity of both the Queen Anne and Eastlake styles was definitely the result of pattern books.

The common design characteristics that identify the Queen Anne and Eastlake styles are: irregularity in plan, volume and shape; a variety of surface textures, roof and wall projections; steep roofs with multiple or intersecting gables; and bay windows, towers, wrap-around porches and tall chimneys with intricate caps. The Queen Anne also often uses patterned shingles in gable areas, towers and bays. Porches have classically inspired columns and spindlework railings; eaves are decorated with dentils (small square blocks along the underside of the eaves) and brackets. Windows are tall with large panes of



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Above, left: front of the George W. Taylor house (1890) in LeSueur, an example of the Eastlake style; right: a detail of a side porch in the Taylor house.



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*(Above)
The F.D.
Sargent
House, St.
Paul (1890),
a Queen
Anne-style
house. (NR
District)*



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The Martin Gunderson House in Kenyon, a house in the Queen Anne style. (1895)



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glass, and stained glass is a trademark feature. The complexity and placement of ornamentation makes the Queen Anne an ideal candidate for polychromatic color schemes.

On the other hand, Eastlake ornamentation is more geometric, being the product of the scroll-saw rather than the lathe. Although turned elements are used, they are decidedly massive—in stark contrast to the Queen Anne. Towers are often square in plan and capped by pyramidal roofs rather than the conical roofs found in the Queen Anne. Colors are more

Right: Detail of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Depot in Fulda (ca. 1890). An example of Eastlake ornamentation.



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subdued, similar to those found in Victorian Gothic buildings.

Architect/author Henry Hudson Holly said that the Queen Anne was the “natural building style for America.” In his article in *Harper's* of May 1876, he makes the following argument:

“In what is loosely called the ‘Queen Anne’ style we find the most simple mode of honest English building, worked out in an artistic and natural form, fitted with the sash windows and ordinary doorways, which express real domestic needs, and so in our house-building, conserving truth in design far more effectively than can be done with the Gothic. One great practical advantage in adopting this and other styles of the “free-classic” school is that, in their construction and in the forms of the mouldings employed, they are the same as the common vernacular styles with which our workmen are familiar... Nevertheless, they are very genuine and striking buildings, which are certainly some of the most beautiful and suitable specimens of modern cottage architecture in England; and exemplified by the cottages erected by the British government on the Centennial grounds at Philadelphia.”

Right: the Elizabeth Gilbert House, St. Paul (1883), an example of the Shingle style of architecture. (NR District)

The Queen Anne style was also adapted for use in commercial architecture during the period from 1885 to 1900. For the most part, these buildings were constructed of brick. They had tall, rectangular or segmentally arched windows, parapets embellished with corbels or dentils, decorative inset panels of patterned brick or terra cotta, and on occasion, false gables or corner towers with prominent roofs. The Queen Anne superseded the Italianate as the standard design for commercial buildings. Examples survive throughout the state.

Shingle Style

Whereas the Queen Anne and Eastlake styles were considered nostalgic and ornamental, the Shingle style is decidedly modern and uncluttered. It, too, owes its popularity to the Centennial Exposition, and to architects like Henry Hobson Richardson and the firm of McKim, Mead and White, who distilled its pure forms from the exuberant Queen Anne and Stick styles. Like its contemporaries, the Shingle style utilizes an irregular plan with complex roof lines and chimneys, but a skin of shingles is its distinguishing design feature.

The use of shingles to create patterns, textures and the play of light and shadow signifies an integral ornamentation rather than a reliance on applied ornamentation. The result is a refined composition that exhibits a quality of timelessness. (For this reason, the Shingle style remains popular in contemporary architecture.) Its strong association with colonial architecture is due in part to its early years of popularity in New England, exemplified by large seaside “cottages” and country estates with gable or gambrel roofs, sweeping porches, massive chimneys, and dormers. In Minnesota, the Shingle style was introduced in the early 1880s (some



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The U.S. Fisheries Station/Limnological Research Station in Duluth (1885), an example of Shingle style architecture.

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architectural historians attribute its introduction to Cass Gilbert) and remained in fashion through the turn of the century.

Characteristics of the Midwestern Shingle Style are exterior walls—most often upper stories—with a covering of

shingles (lower stories are usually either masonry or wooden clapboard); window sashes divided into small panes; irregular hip, gambrel or gable roofs that are usually lower in pitch than the Queen Anne; and broad roof lines, which often extend over open porches or verandahs to create a feeling of penetration into the interior space. Minnesota examples are rarely totally sheathed with shingles, although shingles form the prominent feature of the design.

Exotic Influences

Another influence on late 19th-century architecture that can be traced to the Centennial

Exposition was a taste for the exotic, in particular Middle Eastern and Oriental motifs. New buildings were designed to incorporate such features, while older ones were remodeled in response to fashion. Popular motifs included metal onion-like domes, spiral-turned posts, keyhole arches, vivid colored stained glass and pagoda-like roofs. For the most part, the exotic influence was felt in matters of decorative arts and interior design such as wallpaper, furnishings and treatments. Those instances where the exotic was expressed in the exterior were considered outdated within a few years after the turn of the century. Fortunately, a few examples of this period remain, such as the Bardwell-Ferrant house at 2500 Portland Ave. in Minneapolis, constructed as a simple Queen Anne residence in 1883 and transformed into a “Moorish fantasy” by architect Carl F. Struck in 1890.

Preservation Considerations

Since ornamentation is integral to bric-a-brac style buildings, retention and restoration, or replacement, of this design feature poses the greatest challenge to their preservation. Changes in taste and the effects of harsh climate have contributed to the demise of these fragile buildings. Cost of appropriate replacement materials and availability of original technology are also factors. In recent years, a renewed interest in Victoriana has spurred a number of

manufacturers, suppliers and craftspeople to focus on the restoration of late 19th-century buildings.

As a result, virtually everything in the way of design elements from the last century is again available. It is difficult for the amateur restorer to resist the lure of the popular market, which always tends to embellish beyond the original design. Before undertaking a project, one must become thoroughly acquainted with all aspects of the time, tastes, and social and economic circumstances of which the building is a product. Only then can the project be put into perspective and judgments be made with credibility. A good rule is, “Resist the temptation to create a historical image that never existed.”



An example of exotic influences: the Bardwell-Ferrant house in Minneapolis (1883, altered in 1890); above, front view; right, detail of tower.

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