

Louisiana Architecture 1945 – 1965

The Past as Inspiration

BACKGROUND

The lure of the past did not completely fade, even in the full glare of the Modernist Movement in architecture. In the 1940s and '50s, there were still well established architects who could turn out a perfectly respectable Colonial Revival country house, a Greek Revival-looking plantation home, or a Gothic style church. And there were still moneyed clients who wanted them. Collectively, these were the still glowing embers of historicism.

The evangelical modernist attitude toward all of this has been neatly summed up, to wit: “the artistically valueless imitation of old, and therefore irrelevant, architectural styles for the gratification of the predatory, philistine rich by sentimental or dishonest architects who ignore their duty to create a vital twentieth century architecture at the service of the people.” The severity of this view moderated somewhat as the mid-twentieth century advanced. But there was still something in the background – the notion that a self-respecting modern architect would simply not practice in a historic revival mode, more or less, as a matter of conscience. Despite this censure, the period 1945 to 1965 produced at least a modest architectural flowering – striking and evocative buildings that paid homage to the past and made no pretense of being modern or progressive.

High end historicism, in the post-war years, fell to a small but productive band of professional architects. Their collective product is a relatively small, but significant, legacy of homes designed with a profound feeling for style. Whether Spanish Mission, Colonial, Georgian or half- timbered Tudor, these houses are artfully and skillfully composed.

Custom builder jobs in the historicism mode were not always as pleasing. Some are well composed; some are not. Indeed, some are merely collections of features of a particular style with little or no thought for the overall composition. And one sees mistakes -- for instance, the portico that is too squat, the over-size dormers, or upper story façade window openings pressed up directly against the cornice line. To be sure, some historical styles are more forgiving than others. It is harder for a design to go awry in an irregular style, such as a picturesque half-timbered Tudor house, than in a disciplined classical style, such as Georgian or Greek Revival, in which proportion and correct sizing and placement of architectural elements are all important. Indeed, assembling a successful design in a classical mode required something of a deft hand.

On the national level, the most obvious and prolific product of mainstream post-war historicism was the Colonial-style Cape Cod cottage. Indeed, it was second only to the ranch house in terms of popularity. It was certainly a favorite of William Levitt and was much in

evidence in the various Levittown developments. A Cape Cod cottage has a more-or-less symmetrical front, a paneled door, shutters, and a high pitch roof that would have been familiar to New England's Pilgrim Fathers. Its practicality recommended it to Levitt and his fellow developers. Its square footprint meant the greatest amount of interior space for the least amount of materials. And its high pitch roof was easily, and cheaply, convertible for additional bedrooms or a study.

THE ARCHITECTS

The mid-twentieth century saw a profound shift in the architectural profession as it relates to historic revival styles. In the era "between the wars" it was perfectly respectable for an established architect to practice in both the modernist and the historical modes. The distinguished and prodigious Philadelphia architect George Howe comes to mind. In 1931, he and his partner William Lescaze made history by completing the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (PSFS) Building, lauded as "the most dramatic example of high-rise modernism yet achieved in the United States." Yet only a few years earlier Howe created a picturesque imitation old Normandy farm house for his client Arthur Newbold, "complete with pre-sagged roof."

All of that changed after World War II as the modernist morality took hold, some might say "stranglehold." Virtually all the new talent went into the European Modernist School. Older architects simply converted their practices, having found the "true way." That said, there were still a small but noteworthy band of historic revival style practitioners. These tended to be regional architects, socially well-connected, with a loyal and upscale clientele. As years passed, many achieved the status of "grand old man" of the genre within their particular states or locales. Most also practiced modernism - at least occasionally.

In their more traditional approach to design they seemed to have valued taste and decorum above originality (precisely the opposite of the modernists). They were well established men with busy lucrative practices. And their work was much appreciated and admired by persons of consequence in society.

A NEW APPRECIATION

In 1979, the preeminent American architectural historian Vincent Scully wrote a forward to a new book on Texas historic revival architect John F. Staub. In it he recalled his younger days in the mid-twentieth century when traditionalist architecture was held in "deep contempt." "In those years, even James Gamble Rogers' spectacularly successful Gothic and Georgian colleges at Yale were regarded as embarrassments by everyone with pretensions to architectural

culture – by everyone, that is, but a few aging Beaux-Arts holdovers, and they were the enemy, despised and feared.” “But now, thirty years later . . . the whole thing has turned right around: Beaux-Arts good, Bauhaus bad. But it can be said that the present intellectual stance . . . is not a paranoid one. Instead, it is based upon an inclusive rather than exclusive view of architectural truth.” (Here the term Beaux Arts does not refer to the style, but the French *Ecole des Beaux Arts* method of teaching historicism.)

When Scully wrote these lines, in the late 1970s, the historic revival styles of the 1920s were beginning to be taken seriously as legitimate works of architecture. Today, thirty years later still, it seems that Scully’s spirit of inclusiveness sets the right tone. For now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, we have come to value both the Beaux Arts *and* the Bauhaus.

THE LOUISIANA STORY

Architects:

The two seminal historical revival architects in 1945-65 Louisiana were undoubtedly A. Hays Town of Baton Rouge and William King Stubbs of Monroe. Both were trained in the traditional Beaux Arts approach to architectural historicism, and both were fairly deep in middle age at the moment European Modernism seemed to sweep all before it.

Town’s immensely productive career spanned much of the twentieth century. Born in Louisiana in 1903 and educated at the Tulane University School of Architecture, Town practiced in Mississippi in the 1920s and ‘30s (mainly in the Art Deco style). He returned to Louisiana in 1940, opening a practice in Baton Rouge. In the 1940s and ‘50s Town’s firm produced mainly commercial and institutional buildings, both modern and traditional in style. Residences, a type now synonymous with his name, were something of a sideline until roughly the mid-1960s. At that time Town made the conscious decision to turn his hand entirely to residential design. Over the next thirty or so years, he designed hundreds of homes. While most of these are in Louisiana, Town had clients in other states as well (chiefly but not entirely in the Deep South).

Thus far A. Hays Town’s work has not received wide scholarly study and appreciation. The notable exception is David H. Sachs’ *The Life and Work of the Twentieth-Century Louisiana Architect A. Hays Town*, published in 2003 (and researched while Town was still living, including interviews with the architect). Most regrettably for the scholar, there has never been a comprehensive inventory of Town’s work. His career spanned seven decades and embraced several states. His records are scattered and incomplete. Immensely helpful to the authors was an on-going project of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana to identify, authenticate and landmark each of Town’s residences with a plaque. To date, the Foundation has files on seventy-four houses. Only thirteen of these date from the 1945-65 study period of this document.

Town designed in several historical revival styles in the 1945-65 period, including French Creole, Federal, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, and Georgian Revival. (See photos 1-6.) Later, he was drawn exclusively to Louisiana's native French Creole architecture, with which, notes Sachs, he was "most familiar and facile."

Sachs observes that Town had a "real understanding" of the traditions from which he borrowed – that he borrowed from them to create the feeling of earlier houses. In particular, Town had an exquisite sense of proportion and massing. Like the best of his fellow American historic revival architects, his compositions simply "look right." The architect himself, in interviews with Sachs, explained that to him, proportion was "a matter of feeling rather than formula."

As noted previously, most of Town's residential historicism is relatively recent – the 1970s onward. With the passage of time, it may well be that the body of his residential work, at least the best examples, will come to be regarded as one of Louisiana's great architectural legacies of the twentieth century.

Equally well, Monroe's King Stubbs (as he was known) left his mark in northern Louisiana, as well as Arkansas and Mississippi. Born in 1909 (just six years later than Town), he too was a product of the Tulane School of Architecture. Upon graduation in 1932, Stubbs returned home to Monroe to practice. In 1947 he opened a firm of his own, and over the next almost forty years, produced some 600 projects. Stubbs was best known for his residential designs. Stubbs and/or his clients looked to the Georgian and Greek Revival styles. Some are big two story houses, while others are galleried cottages (for the latter, see photo 7). Time and again Stubbs was able to achieve an element of stateliness in relatively small houses.

Only within recent years is his huge body of work beginning to be catalogued and studied. In 1996, North Louisiana architect F. Lestar Martin published a catalog of the architect's work entitled *The Louisiana Architecture of William King Stubbs*. And like Town, Stubbs, with the passage of more time and analysis, will be more fully appreciated for his skillful interpretation of the past.

Styles Revived in Mid-Twentieth Century Louisiana:

By far, most of the historic revival style buildings in Louisiana from the 1945-65 period are in some form of the Colonial Revival or Georgian Revival. (However, the Colonial Cape Cod look in houses, so popular in the East, was not seen much in Louisiana.) Other styles revived include Greek Revival, Federal, French Creole, and Tudor Revival.

Associated Property Types

Complexes:

In 1946, President Joseph J. Mickle of Centenary College in Shreveport announced a long-range building program and capital campaign for the campus. In the ensuing years progress on the expansion was followed closely in the local press and in Chamber of Commerce promotional pieces. It was a large and costly endeavor, one that essentially gave us the campus we see today. But it was hardly unusual. In the post-war years, colleges across the country were expanding their facilities to meet the demand of a burgeoning new generation of students, many attending college courtesy of the G. I. Bill.

President Mickle commissioned the campus architects, Peyton-Fisher-McKelvy, of Shreveport, to develop a master plan for a greater Centenary. In those years, the school billed itself as “the oldest college west of the Mississippi.” So perhaps it is not surprising that Centenary turned to its past for inspiration – specifically to its original campus, Old Centenary in Jackson, Louisiana, a Federal-Greek Revival complex of rouge brick buildings with white columns.

The architectural style for the new campus would be mainly Georgian Colonial, with stately red brick buildings and light limestone grey columns. (See photos 8 & 9.) A local journalist compared the design favorably with Thomas Jefferson’s landmark University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville. It is interesting to reflect that a campus whose style would have looked old-fashion in Lincoln’s time was being built in an American city in the middle of the twentieth century.

Centenary’s expansion program outlasted Mickle, who retired in 1964. Although in the end it deviated considerably from the master plan, it certainly fulfilled his vision of a handsome and venerable-looking Centenary College in the Colonial style.

Colonial, too, is Louisiana’s other major complex of historic revival buildings of the period -- the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. In November 1947, seminary President Roland Q. Leavell announced plans for “a new Seminary home on our new 75-acre campus” in what is now called New Orleans East. It would contain four quadrangles with buildings ranging from music, to religious education, to a library, to student housing, “all dominated by the chapel in the center.” The new campus would be “in beautiful French Colonial architecture, so typical of New Orleans.” The designated designing architect was A. Hays Town of Baton Rouge with New Orleans architects Favrot and Reed supervising daily construction.

Construction proceeded apace, as fundraising permitted, throughout the 1950s and beyond. The well-proportioned red brick and white trim campus that emerged can be seen as a tasteful mélange of Old New Orleans, Louisiana Creole, American Colonial and American Greek Revival. (See photos 3-5.) There is lacey iron work, decorative wrought iron (looking) balconies, Creole galleries with round stucco pillars below and delicate turned wood colonnettes above, broad hip roofs, and elliptically arched openings.

There are also some interesting design sidelights. For instance, the Music Building (1952-53), with its husky Greek Revival columns and broken pitch roof, is an unmistakable reference to Destrehan Plantation House just upriver in St. Charles Parish. Then there is the chapel, with its elegant pedimented portico, three-stage English Baroque tower, and spire. Its design is very similar to James Gibbs' St. Martin in the Fields in London (1722). St. Martin was widely published in the eighteenth century and became the model for most of the great American Colonial churches from Boston to Charleston. The New Orleans Seminary Chapel is a remote but worthy descendant. It was also the last building completed from the old campus plan. Indeed, its crowning spire, although in the original design, was not in place until 1975.

Both Centenary and the Baptist Seminary represent important shows of power for the continuing strength of historicism in Louisiana through the middle years of the twentieth century. And it should be underlined that the state possesses no comparable modern architectural complexes from this period.

Houses of Worship:

The immediate post-war years were a rich period for the construction of houses of worship in Louisiana. In 1950, *Shreveport Magazine* (a monthly publication of the Chamber of Commerce) hailed the "biggest church building program in city's history," with 29 new or expanded churches and almost \$4 million in construction. (And each year thereafter the magazine chronicled a large number of construction projects for houses of worship.)

Research conducted for this series of essays on Louisiana architecture, 1945-1965, indicates that the majority of new houses of worship in the period were modern in style. (The percentage split may be as high as 70/30.) But although in a minority, historic revival style houses of worship from this period are a sizable and distinguished minority.

The continuing force of the medieval Gothic Style as an emblem of faith produced at least two major churches in Louisiana: St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Shreveport (completed 1959 by local architects Annan & Gilmer) and Emmanuel Baptist Church in Alexandria (1950, Favrot and Reed, Architects, New Orleans). As noted at the time, St. Mark's in Shreveport (photos 10 & 11) was an archaeologically correct design, having been modeled after English parish churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The climax of the design is a tower created in the likeness of Magdalene College Chapel tower at Oxford University. Gothic was perhaps an unusual choice for a Baptist congregation, but Emmanuel Baptist church records indicate the building committee's strong support (photo 12).

Classical architecture was a greater source of inspiration for historic revival churches in the period. Perhaps the most notable is First Baptist Church of Baton Rouge (1955, A. Hays Town, architect, photo 6). This fully rendered and highly convincing Doric temple has a monumental presence in the Capital City's downtown.

Finally, here and there throughout Louisiana are brick and wood, or brick and limestone, Colonial style churches with portico and spire, a la St. Martins in the Field, in varying degrees of success.

Commercial:

Research and fieldwork conducted for this essay would indicate that there were very few historic revival, or traditional style, commercial buildings built in Louisiana in the period 1945-65. Modernism swept all before it. Exceptions include the occasional traditional style bank here and there.

Institutional:

Almost all government buildings in the period 1945-65 were in a modern style. A notable exception is the antebellum-looking Vermilion Parish Courthouse (1953, A. Hays Town). Likewise, the large number of public school buildings from this period are modern. (The two higher education complexes profiled above are important institutional exceptions.)

Residences:

While there are many residences in Louisiana from the 1945-65 period that are modern or contemporary in character, there are also many that are traditional. These include: (1) “minimal traditional” houses; (2) ranch houses with traditional details; (3) one story slab-on-grade French Creole houses; (4) custom “builder jobs”; (5) architect-designed historic revival houses.

“Minimal Traditional”:

At the bottom of the ladder so-to-speak, because they are only vaguely historic revival, are “minimal traditional” houses. This is a term coined by Virginia and Lee McAlester in the widely used *A Field Guide to American Houses*. In both one and two stories, “minimal traditional” houses are generally traditional in form only (i.e., have traditional shapes). They typically have little in the way of details. A popular model is a one story rectangular house with a front-facing gable and perhaps a prominent chimney.

Traditional Ranch Houses:

A traditional look is acquired in a ranch house typically via a red brick body with white trim and shutters (photo 13), or perhaps red brick with a white clapboarded gable and/or lacey ornamental iron posts. Some, but only a small minority, have columns. Only occasionally does one see a ranch house with an applied portico.

One Story French Creole Slab-on-Grade:

In terms of local variation, within the 1945-65 period, and even later, one finds a rather distinctive-looking new interpretation of Louisiana’s native French Creole tradition. This

popular model (mainly in South Louisiana) is a one story, fairly wide rectangular house with a massive Louisiana Creole-style hip roof, sometimes complete with a broken pitch. Windows are typically regularly placed sash windows (almost never French doors). In actual Creole residences, the hip roof would have sheltered a front gallery. But these mid-century examples generally (though not invariably) lack galleries. (See photo 14.)

Sometimes the houses are well-executed in terms of proportions; sometimes not. In the latter, the builder (or architect) scaled the Creole-style hip roof out of proportion to the slab-on-grade house below. (One must remember that in French Creole architecture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these roofs topped houses that at minimum were one story, with high ceilings, and resting above the ground on brick piers.)

Some of the above described houses are architect-designed. In fact, A. Hays Town designed several in the 1940s and '50s. It is tantalizing to wonder if he invented the genre, but such a comment is only in the realm of speculation.

Custom “Builder Jobs”:

These are generally merely collections of features rather than a coherent, convincing overall design. And, as noted earlier, one sees mistakes – particularly in matters of proportion.

Architect-Designed:

The most impressive residential showing of historicism in the 1945 to 1965 period was via architect-designed homes, particularly high end. While some of the moneyed clientele in Louisiana sought contemporary “high art” houses, more preferred something traditional. It would be a virtually impossible task to inventory these houses – if for no other reason than the fact that even a trained eye can’t tell if a good historic revival house is from 1940 or 1960, or even later.

As noted previously, A. Hays Town and William King Stubbs were the most noted historic revival architects in Louisiana in the 1945-65 period. But Town’s residential output was fairly small in this period. In north-central and northeast Louisiana are a handful of King Stubbs houses from the 1945-65 period. (Many of his houses are earlier.)

The Colonial, Georgian, and Federal styles easily dominated high-end historic revival residential designs. Notable exceptions identified by the authors to date are a few two-story French Creole houses designed by A. Hays Town (Photo 2) and two huge English Tudor manor houses in Shreveport dating from the late 1940s (side-by-side in estate-like settings, Photo 15). One of the two is complete with distressed wood accents (to give it that ancient feel), including a large porte-cochere designed to resemble an ancient open market in “olde” England.

National Register Guidance (Criterion C):

National Register Criterion C reads in part: **“Properties may be eligible for the National Register if they embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction.”** The preparers of this document, based on decades of experience with the National Register, have found this statement to be interpreted to mean that a candidate should generally be a good example of its “type, period [style], or method of construction” within a given geographical context.

Broadly speaking, the authors suggest that the overall context for Criterion C evaluation should be the broader subject of the survival of historicism into the mid-twentieth century (within a given geographical context) – rather than, for example, only comparing traditional churches with other traditional churches. Nor do we believe that rarity is a particularly compelling argument -- for example, a traditionally styled branch bank being eligible under Criterion C for its rarity in a type of building (commercial) where modernism swept all before it.

In evaluating historic revival buildings from the period 1945 to 1965, we suggest employing the same thought process one would in dealing with eclectic revival buildings of the early twentieth century. In any community there will be various mid-twentieth century traditionally styled buildings that make, at best, a very modest architectural statement. But there may also be, in any given town, architectural “gems” from the period – substantial, strongly and correctly styled historic revival buildings.

In comparing and contrasting examples to identify the most noteworthy, the evaluator, by definition, must have a good understanding of the various historic genres to which reference is made. Issues of proportion, accuracy of detail, and sophistication in composition come to the fore. There is no way to quantify this. At the risk of stating the obvious, first understand the style being revived, then determine if a given mid-twentieth century example is any good. Does it have numerous character-defining features, or perhaps only one or two? If the character-defining features are few in number, perhaps they are quite visually dominant. On classically-derived buildings, did the architect get the proportions right? Does the building look like a hodge-podge of features or a cohesive design?

Easily the highest probability candidates for individual listing under Criterion C would be the small minority that are architect-designed. But a word of caution, for even some of these are not particularly notable. The best of the architect-designed buildings are convincing compositions that are true to their correct rendering and crafting, massing and proportion. Their convincing portrayal of a particular style, rendered in three dimensions, sets them apart, for example, from the “facadism” one frequently finds in custom “builder jobs.”

Properties may also be eligible under Criterion C if they **“represent the work of a master.”** **“A master is a figure of generally recognized greatness in a field, a known craftsman of consummate skill, or an anonymous craftsman whose work is distinguishable from others by its characteristic style and quality.”** This section of Criterion C also states:

“A property is not eligible as the work of a master, however, simply because it was designed by a prominent architect. The property must express a particular phase in the development of the master’s career, an aspect of his or her work, or a particular idea or theme in his or her craft.”

A figure of “generally recognized greatness in a field” does not equal a nationally (or even statewide) significant person. For example, within the context of Louisiana, A. Hays Town would be considered a “master.” But that does not mean that a given building is Register eligible simply because Town designed it. One must demonstrate “specialness” within their work along the lines defined above.

Assessment of Integrity:

Per National Park Service guidance, determining when a candidate has “lost integrity” must be done on a case-by-case basis. As for any style, the evaluator must first identify those features that make the candidate a good example of a given mid-twentieth century revival style and assess the visual impact of alterations on those character-defining features.

Bibliography:

Barnstone, Howard. *The Architecture of John F. Staub, Houston and the South*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1979.

Howe, Claude L. *Seventy-five Years of Providence and Prayer: An Illustrated History of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary*. New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997.

Martin, F. Lestar. *The Louisiana Architecture of William King Stubbs*. Ruston, Louisiana and Lafayette, Louisiana: Louisiana Tech University in conjunction with Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1994.

Morgan, Lee. *Centenary College of Louisiana, 1825-2000: The Biography of an American Academy*. Shreveport, Louisiana: Centenary College of Louisiana Press, 2008.

Sachs, David H. *The Life and Work of the Twentieth-Century Louisiana Architect A. Hays Town*. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.

Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. *Shreveport Magazine*. 1945-1965. This monthly publication was invaluable because of the many, many articles on construction projects in the city (individual residences excepted). It provided the authors an inventory of much of what was built in Shreveport of a commercial or institutional nature.

Town, A. Hays Files. Foundation for Historical Louisiana, 502 North Blvd., Baton Rouge, LA.

This document was prepared for the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation by:

Jonathan and Donna Fricker
Fricker Historic Preservation Services, LLC

First Draft: September 2009

Final Draft: February 2010

PHOTO GALLERY



Photos 1 & 2. Houses designed by A. Hays Town in Baton Rouge. Above, in the Georgian style (1964). Below, in the French Creole style (1955).





Photos 3 & 4. Construction began on the new (and present) home of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in the late 1940s. Most of the traditionally styled buildings are from the 1950s. Although part of the original design, the spire was not placed on the chapel until 1975. A. Hays Town, design architect, with Favrot and Reed supervising daily construction.



Photo 5. Destrehan Plantation House in nearby St. Charles Parish was clearly the inspiration for this building on the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary campus.



Photo 6. First Baptist Church,
Baton Rouge, A. Hays Town,
architect, 1955.



Photo 7. Barham House, Oak Ridge, 1961,
William King Stubbs, architect.



Photos 8 & 9. Centenary College, Shreveport. Almost all of the present campus dates from a building program launched in 1946 and continued into the early 1960s. Local architects Peyton-Fisher-McKelvy gave the campus an overall red brick “colonial” look.



Photos 10 & 11. While most churches built in the 1945-1965 period were modern in design, a distinguished minority looked to the past for inspiration. The architects of St. Mark's Cathedral in Shreveport (Annan & Gilmer) looked to English parish churches of the 13th and 14th centuries. The church was completed in 1959. At the rear (see photo below) is a tower in the likeness of that at Magdalene College Chapel at Oxford University.





Photo 12. Alexandria's Gothic Revival Emmanuel Baptist Church, 1950, Favrot and Reed, architects.



Photo 13. A "colonial" style ranch house in New Orleans.



Photo 14. A new interpretation of Louisiana's native French Creole architecture, built between 1959 and 1961, per city directories. A. Hays Town, architect.



Photo 15. One of two side-by-side English manor houses in Shreveport, both from the late 1940s.



The ever popular “colonial” look continued into the 1950s. This Baton Rouge example was constructed between 1948 and 1949, per Baton Rouge city directories.