

# Too Much Is Just Enough Life of the Victorians

Whether architecture mirrors culture or culture mirrors architecture is a moot issue. In the case of the San Francisco Bay region, the two had hands firmly clenched from the start. With the rise of a substantial leisure class came a wave of intellectual and scholarly activity, a craning of elegant, well-to-do necks towards the traditions and prejudices of Europe. When applied to the subject of the home where one's heart was going to be, this led to a renewed interest in the Gothic: the attention to form, the significance of both majestic breadth and minute detail.

No question about it, George: the new generation of homes that followed was outrageously indulgent. But so was everything else that the monied populace surrounded itself with: satin curtains, furlined carriages, Chinese screens and silver tea sets. Domestic bliss was in. For all its unforgivable excess and extravagance, it's difficult to wholly condemn a society to which real happiness was only a Turkish cupola or two away.

Victoria would not be amused. We have taken her solid, honorable name—better suited for ships and gold coins and the like—and slapped it quite carelessly across a slew of architectural styles that don't even come close to resembling stiff upper lips. But too bad: the title is convenient and it's not going to go away. Still, it does one well to examine just what we're talking about when we invoke that grand queen after passing through certain neighborhoods.

A good rule concerning the cataloging of Victorian variations is to suggest, not insist. Towards the end of the period, an eager blending of

## Dave Barber

themes and influences was prevalent, producing many examples that defy easy pegging. The common denominator that runs through all of them, like bass beneath a melody, is an obsession with revivalism, an urge to find security through the reconstruction of the past. The wealthy always want things to stay how they are, of course, and the perpetuation of archaic decorative motifs is a favorite method of attempting to put time in a bottle.

The decade of the 1870s was the heyday of the Italianate style. The name is appropriate, though it's difficult to imagine Michaelangelo dangling from the roof of one of these. In the spirit of Roman renaissance design, verticality was the dominant guiding principle. The ubiquitous heavy cornice sat across each top, ornate scroll-work embellished the sills and eaves and sidings, but eye-catching as these facades could be, they were more often than not false fronts, hiding away ordinary slanted roofs behind them.

By the last half of the decade, various innovations were coalescing into another major pattern: the Stick row-house. Stick as in "stick with it"—which is exactly what San Francisco's entrepreneurial-minded architects and contractors did. Borrowed liberally from the mid-west, Stick construction was predicated upon the newly invented balloon-frame and the application of stylized patterning on the exterior facing. All the old jokes about multiplying rabbits would be relevant here: Stick houses sprang up from hillsides faster than any merchant in Chinatown could have rattled the beads on his abacus.

In a terrain where space was something you climbed up into rather than sprawled out over, the Stick concept was almost a foregone conclusion. Besides, building them was a snap. First and foremost, it should be stressed, the style was initiated with the bulk of society in mind not its crust. They were dedicated, as one of their early propagandists boasted, "To the Toiling Millions, Whose Means are Small, yet Whose Desires are Great to possess a Home."

Well, not quite. There was hardly room on the peninsula for Millions, much less Toiling ones, and the practicality of the row house was soon corrupted by the embellishment and ornamentation that only accompanies a citizenry with deep pockets. The crisp angularity of the Stick style was retained, as well as its superior framework design, but by the mid-1880s it had been largely swallowed by the florid pretensions of a class whose Means were anything but Small.

It is this period that saw the rise of the most regal forms of Victorian: the Eastlake, Shingle and Queen Anne. What champagne is to wine, these styles are to the rest of the era's architecture. It is their image that is being conjured up when you envision a half dozen roofs where one would have done just fine and turrets so classically Gothic that all they're missing is the winsome princess.

Unlike the more humble row house, these rambling, immodest mansions had no intention of conserving space. Practical considerations, such as where the chimneys would go and how the staircases would be supported, were tended to dutifully then dispatched in favor of exhaustive decorative additions.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but affluence was at least a coy mistress to the bewildering repertoire of adornment and ostentation architects came up with at the zenith of the Victorian period. A house, after all, is one thing, but a blatantly unashamed declaration of privilege is another. However questionable the motivations, you still have to be impressed by the remarkable variety of trappings these zealous builders created that were completely devoid of any constructive function whatsoever.

To a culture that revelled in tassels on the ends of capes and waxed curls at the tips of mustaches, the inclusion of such items as quoins, pilasters and modillions was a must. A pilaster was a pseudo-column that projected a foot or so away from the face of a wall. Quoins and modillions were both wooden block forms which had

PHOTO: JOE DANIELS



**HOTEL MCCRAY, 80 FRONT ST.**

Not everyone welcomed the arrival of that new breed of house that looked like a castle and was named after a queen. "It is a great misfortune," wrote architect/journalist George H. Wolfe of its perpetuators in 1882, "that these ingenious gentlemen cannot all be skewered . . . upon one of their monstrosities and sent spinning down the illimitable reaches of eternal bosh."

Now, now. There was nothing to be gained by anathema, George. You, of all people, should have known that the shapes we live in always reveal more about us than we usually like to admit, that the sudden spawning of spires and porticos and carved scrolls was but the gaudiest manifestation of deeper social forces at work. Public skewerings would hardly have helped much.

Today, we call them Victorians. The term refers to a period, not a style, yet it has come to be the generic tag for any one of those looming structures that take up whole city blocks and seem to have enough porches to accommodate the changing of any number of guards. Some of us here in Santa Cruz still live in them—the rest watch their formidable facades slide by from the insides of cars and buses and accept them as one would a grandfather's nostalgic stories.

Goethe enjoyed saying that architecture was "frozen music." If this is true, then the many variations on the Victorian theme resemble grand, soaring arias, dramatic Wagnerian chords and a whole

corps of racing violins. Jaunty piano rags they ain't. To understand how the San Francisco peninsula became so enamored of Victorians after being reared in the modest chamber music of Spanish adobe and rustic wood dwellings, you have to press your fingers to the pulse of late nineteenth century life on this most golden of coasts.

It was a time when great cities were made and great fortunes with them. It was a time of invention: the telephone, the phonograph, the sewing machine. It was a time when young men went West, went West. Mark Twain was chasing down jumping frogs and John Muir feverishly was scaling mountains as if their leases were about to expire. On May 10, 1869, magnate Collis Huntington drove a gold spike into the last railroad tie that Chinese chain gangs had laid, thus joining the Union Pacific with the Central Pacific and transforming the once imposing Sierras into turnstiles for an invasion of easterners who could never have braved a trip by covered wagon.

There were no rules and plenty of exceptions. Wealth and status were up for grabs. San Francisco, formerly one large, hilly halfway house for gold prospectors, became a hub of business and culture with astonishing quickness. At one of his sumptuous dinners for the social elite, millionaire Leland Stanford had a silver platter delivered to the table and lifted off its lid to reveal his three-week-old son nestled comfortably in a bed of roses.

It was that kind of era.



PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

**DEMING HOUSE, 417 CLIFF ST.**



served crucial supportive purposes in Classical and Renaissance architecture, yet by this juncture of history were about as instrumental and necessary as human appendixes.

But no matter. Once these extraneous frills were installed, there was even more icing for the cake: flutings on the columns, carved sunbursts and spirals in the centers of pediments, intricate lattice work webbing the arches.

Porches, towers and balconies are not exactly imperative to the livability of a dwelling, but Victorian design would be unthinkable without them. It is their aesthetic that lends a relentless fugue and counterpoint to the entire composition of the style. And rightly so: one of the intrinsic reasons for these structures in the first place is to allow for external appearances without relinquishing attachment to the interior, an exhibition and extension of that prestigious inner realm for all to see. It is a rare opulence that keeps to itself.

Queen Victoria died peacefully in 1901, as aged and ripe as they come. The architectural persuasion that bears her name succumbed far more violently. There was, for one, the devastating San Francisco blaze of 1906 that torched many a fashionable, quoin-peppered neighborhood like so much firewood. Earthquakes took their toll. But the natural elements alone could not have brought the Victorian era to its knees. That accomplishment has to be credited to those who were wielding the intellectual axes as the twentieth century made the scene.

With its hostile new stable of Dadaists, Cubists, Fauvists, *et al.*, Europe was ushering in an age of artistic rebellion which had the professed goal of pulling the elites' velvet-cushioned chairs out from under them. The artist was now meant to tap a conduit to the masses, not the ruling class. This applied, of course, not only to how you flung paint on a canvas, but how you threw up walls and ceilings as well. Enter a whole vanguard of architects who couldn't look at a Queen Anne without spitting on their hands and rolling up their sleeves.

Such sentiments emigrated to America in no time at all. Tom Wolfe, in his recent expose of the birth of modern architecture, offers this explanation: "The bourgeoisie had always been great ones for false fronts . . . and every manner of grandiose and pointless gesture to create a dishonest picture of what went on inside. All this had to go."

And it did. Oh, but didn't those young architectural lions love dismembering every principle upon



PHOTO: JOE DANIELS

### PALAISE MONTE CARLO, 924 THIRD ST.

which the neo-Gothic aesthetic had been built! The Transamerica Pyramid might have been a twinkle in their eyes. For the defenders of the spire-and-pilaster approach, it was not the best of times. Those previously suggested skewerings would almost have been less painful.

Through all the literal and symbolic batterings Victorian dwellings were subjected to (the wrecking ball claimed droves of them), it can now be safely said that their lingering influence endures. Not in the form of frieze-banded cupolas, certainly, but in the far more subtle essences of angle and pattern. The bay window, while not a Victorian invention, owes its still-esteemed image to its prominent use in the high Queen Anne style. Ditto the gabled roof. Such touches as decorative glass and fishscale shingling are presently as attractive in moderation as they were unbearable in excess.

But the true legacy (as it is tirelessly called) of Victorian architecture is nothing so tangible as a hunk of roof or a fanciful fitting of glass. Instead, it is the potential to trace a certain set of cultural attitudes and assumptions at a given moment in our history by way of the external structures left behind. There is always more to form than function: design implicates condition. It is common among serious students of architecture to refer to a particular native style as a "vernacular," a term that does perfect justice to the way a building can speak of specific time and place and circumstance.

If there was ever a question of whether Victorian design was a worthy contribution to our landscape, it has long since been laid to rest. The eyes have it.

**S**an Francisco, of course, saw the true flowering of West Coast Victorian architecture, but seeds were also scattered to the north and south. It should come as

no surprise that Santa Cruz was one of these outcrops. The terrain was gentle here, the shorelines sun-drenched and the hopes high. And the view! The perfect panorama to gaze out at from behind a mullioned bay window.

So up went the towers and the balustrades, gingerbread carving on the roof, sir, and gables fit for a king. No dramatic innovations came to fruition here, no major breakthroughs in design. It was all strictly a perpetuation of an elegance and affluence earned elsewhere.

Santa Cruz, you must remember, was quite the place to flock to in those horse-drawn days if you were one of the idle rich—or even one of the active rich, for that matter. A *Harper's Monthly* article of 1895 elected the town as the West's most popular resort community, the fair hamlet where everybody who was anybody invariably dropped by.

Some stayed. They had names like Hihn and Weeks and McLaughlin and Johnston and Rennie and believed that if a man's home was his castle, it better damn well look like one. Thus you have the sprawling Hihn mansion and its grounds which once annexed the entire area now bounded by Chestnut, Church, Locust and Center Streets. You have the fortress-like Palaise Monte Carlo perched atop Beach Hill. You have the Weeks house towering over California Street, whose construction demanded a \$9,000 investment even back in the days when a dime got you dinner.

Many, needless to say, have since been dismantled. The survivors are just that: refugees from a state of mind and grace that won't be entertained again. In Santa Cruz, like just about everywhere else, Victorian dwellings endured an extended artistic purgatory of sorts before it became socially and aesthetically acceptable to undertake their rescue and restoration. Piecing together old balustrades and bracing sagging porches might not compare with such noble pursuits as plucking condors from the brink of extinc-

tion or adopting unwanted orphans, but it is a cause in its own right and has been gaining more and more converts as of late. After all, if we don't somehow maintain contact with the old patterns, the old ways we worked and walked and kept the rain out, we will be much the poorer for it.

The City of Santa Cruz most likely approached the situation on more pragmatic grounds, but it arrived at a commendable conclusion anyway. That conclusion, Ordinance 75-25, was drafted six years ago, complete with the revelation that the "economic, cultural and aesthetic standing of the City will be enhanced by respecting the heritage of the City." What it also did was form the Historical Preservation Commission, which is entrusted with the task of overseeing and encouraging restoration projects and the ever-important "fostering of civic pride."

The fostering has gone well. Just listen to noted San Francisco architect Charles Page Hall. "Santa Cruz," he has said, "has as comprehensive a set of preservation tools and as staunch a commitment to historical preservation as exist in any urban area in the United States."

And why not? There's a whole lot here worth preserving. Between Lincoln and Chestnut Streets downtown, broods of Stick, Eastlake and Shingle styles are holding their own. Over on the East Side, Ocean View Avenue provides one of the more memorable slices of Victorian scenery around, just like it must have done at the turn of the century when it marked the outskirts of town and huge lawns with gazebos and carriage-houses came with the package. Transecting the summit of Beach Hill, practically every address on Third Street is a lesson in Victorian design—crowned by the aforementioned Palaise Monte Carlo, which is arguably our finest local example of the exalted Queen Anne style.

Simply by standing outside of the Palaise on the sidewalk, your neck

thrown back to take in the sharp lintel of its formidable tower, you can get a good idea of what the Victorian era was all about. In that spacious porch, the welter of shingled roofings and the sheer masses of shape, one confronts a declaration of the unrestrained optimism that rippled and, yes, even rampaged through the last quarter of the nineteenth century in these climes.

The age of plenty, it was widely presumed, was upon us: everyone was to have his or her own private Versailles, her Alhambra, his Byzantine palatial suite. You look at the Palaise tower and you can almost hear the clink of slender claret glasses toasting just about anything on a moment's notice.

It was that kind of an era. □

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