

The “Romantic Picturesque” and the Multiplication of Styles

The multiplication of styles in the first half of the 19th century:

- reflects the growing influence of the picturesque aesthetic
- often seen as the interest in creating “views” in which architecture functions more as an evocative image of some other period or place than as functional architecture
- at times the term has a derogative quality, implying that the effect is essentially one of a stage set, with as little attention as possible to structural details

But this condemnation of the revival and of the picturesque seems to be the influence of postmodernism; was it as frivolous to people in the 19th century as it may seem to us today? What actually led to this interest in styles of the past, of the orient, of Egypt, of almost any period whatsoever?

Influences on the picturesque revivals:

- the Enlightenment belief in the relativity of all periods and culture
- the English picturesque movement in landscape architecture
- the distrust of industrialization and growing urbanization
- American romantic or sublime landscape paintings

Industrial landscapes:

- because the Industrial revolution began in England, the earliest influences on American factories are British
- small scale and domestic in their image and nature until ca 1800
- after 1800, the scale changes
- for the period in question, this is one of the first forms of architecture which will be more oriented toward utilitarian goals than most other architecture of this period
- it will also have an impact on ideas about the development of towns since early industries often developed housing for their workers but at the same time, as the separation between worker and manager increased, architecture manifests this separation
- changing attitudes toward land, as it becomes something to be exploited for industrial development

Rejecting the Machine: the Picturesque Landscape of Suburbia

the cemetery as an influence on the picturesque town:

- deliberately planned burial grounds which often treated the tomb and site of burial as picture and sculpture gallery to honor the dead and educate the living
- As one writer observed, "the cemetery has become a garden, where Grace, Beauty, and Light render less somber the solemn associations of the tomb," while others viewed the goal of creating beautiful cemeteries as the "promise of the coming resurrection."(18) Between the rural cemetery and the suburban house and family, heaven could be experienced and anticipated on earth.
- Apart from this religious imagery, the model for the cemetery itself was paintings, the

landscape tradition of the French landscape painters such as Claude Lorrain, the picturesque tradition of English landscape painters, and the American fusion of idealized and localized landscapes seen in the paintings of artists such as Thomas Cole, Asher Durand (*Landscape Composition*, 1848) and the Hudson River School painters. Even into the 20th century, landscape architects were writing that cemeteries "should be, as the name implies, sleeping-places, places of rest and freedom from intrusion. It seems natural that one should seek for such a place the very best production of landscape-art." The cemetery was to be park, painting, and memorial, but a memorial created without the presence of memorials. A park for the living and for the dead--an ambiguous or contradictory duality unless the park is seen as a sanctuary and alternative to the increasingly non-edenic life in cities.

- The design of such a cemetery would be a deliberate creation of the type of vistas seen in one of Thomas Cole's paintings of the American landscape as well as the natural vistas one might find in rural America.

John Notman, Laurel Hill cemetery, Philadelphia, 1836

stylistic variety seems to have been his keyword: a Roman Doric gateway led into the cemetery; inside one could see monuments in Gothic style, classical Greek, Egyptian, statues, iron fences, and of course, trees, plants and flowers

Examples of the Gothic revival in houses:

Washington Irving's house, Sunnyside

- not far from Tarrytown, Irving bought a 17th century Dutch colonial farmhouse
- the stepped gable roof was his transformation, making it look more like a townhouse in New York
- created a lane which itself was picturesque to lead to the cottage; he then planted more shrubbery and trees around the house to create privacy which he had until about 1850 when railroad tracks cut across his lawn

Housing, Morality and the Picturesque

Housing in the early 19th century had been dominated by the use of the classical orders (the application of the columns and composition of Greek and Roman temple architecture to family houses). As the century progresses, other European styles of architecture are added to this but the method is the same: the relatively superficial application of a style from another period in time and another country to a single family house, without considering the visual context for the house or the needs of the people who will be living in it. Many of these houses were built according to instructions which were found in builders' guides; this means that they were not actually designed by architects.

By the mid-century, builders' guides are being replaced by pattern books, with the difference being that a pattern book was not an instructional guide for building the house. In Downing's case, the pattern book might be called a manifesto about how to create a home which would be the site of family/home religion. His aesthetic preferences were influenced by the English picturesque landscape, a landscape which would be characterized by irregularity, freedom,

imperfections rather than classical balance and order.

In his early writing, A.J. Downing, the author of more than one pattern book, contributed to the discrediting of the use of the classical orders in domestic architecture. The basis of his theory for doing this came from three principles: fitness, expression of purpose, and style:

(1) **fitness**: the house should have an appropriate plan for a house and it should relate to the site

(2) **expression of style**: beauty of form which comes from the symmetric use of asymmetric parts;

(3) **expression of purpose**: similar to fitness, but stated more in terms of the necessary parts of the house: a house should have a chimney, window size should reflect the importance of the room, certain colors were appropriate for certain building types and certain rooms.

Together, these principles would determine the style chosen for the house.

In his next work, he begins to refine these categories and elaborate on their meaning. He now discusses utility, beauty and truth:

Utility is similar to fitness but relates more to factors which directly affect the owner: what materials can he afford? How will the house support the lifestyle of the inhabitants?

Beauty seems to be an expansion of the earlier category of style.

- absolute beauty concerns universal values (proportion, symmetry, harmony, unity)
- relative beauty: the expression of the owner's character, values, and so on

Truth is the last category and has more to do with fitness although it touches on the other categories.

- *General truth*: a house should look like a house rather than a Greek temple;
- *local truth*: if it is a country house, it should look like a country house, which to Downing meant an emphasis on horizontality
- *specific truth*: be true to the type

Morality, for Downing, has been defined in terms of an architecture which does not hide its purpose and which facilitates doing what it's supposed to do. It is also part of the house in a more symbolic sense. If the style reflected the "touch" of the female hand and heart, it would be moral and beautiful. Downing was important because he promoted an aesthetic vision of the American home, but he showed much less interest in how the home functioned on the inside. He talks about function but it's not clear that he really considers function as an independent factor; one feels as though he believes that function will follow from the expression of purpose and fitness and beauty.

A. J. Davis: Llewellyn Park, NJ, 1850s: park and estate developed by a drug manufacturer, Llewellyn Haskell – a planned community of about 50 houses in a garden park – rambling roads, each house had its own stable, varying styles; obviously a select community or "romantic suburb" as it tends to be described today;

the Gatehouse – itself quite fanciful with the round, conical roof, the rustic and picturesque forms and surface of rubble masonry, creating a texturally rich entrance to the development
Nichols house or cottage, 1859: made by Davis for a landscape painter; suggests the type of

designs included by Downing in his book but more formalized and symmetric

- lancet windows
- vertical batten boards (narrow strips of wood, usually used to cover joints or cracks): Davis and Downing both began to use the batten siding when the client could not afford masonry
- two tripartite chimneys, a simple verandah
- picturesque quality probably comes more from the siting than from the house design which does not feature irregularity or asymmetry

several developments to take note of:

- in planned developments such as Llewellyn Park, and a few others at this time, we see the rejection of the more commonly used grid layout
- this rejection is a clear preference for the picturesque romantic, in both village layout and housing design
- the Gothic style, although not the only one at this time but certainly one of the most popular, is beginning to be associated with a goal of infusing morality into architecture. Gothic was associated with churches, a fact which might make it inappropriate for a house, unless people are beginning to think of houses as something more than a shelter (and they were).

By the middle of the 19th century, although neoclassical architecture was easier to build and describe, gothic was more popular. Its popularity was closely connected to the moralizing trend, or the popularization of moral values in and through architecture. Religion in this country had been “disestablished” by 1833, meaning that it was no longer state-supported. This did not mean the end of religion, but it did mean that priests, ministers, and preachers had to work harder to attract customers, a phenomenon which did contribute to both the domestication of the church, as they become smaller and located in countryside, rural villages, and the sacralization of the house, as it began to be thought of as a church. Architectural styles, as we have begun to see and will continue to see, become very similar for the house and the church, probably to the greater detriment of the house.