CULTURAL IDENTIFICATIONS IN ARCHITECTURE: 
THE CASE OF THE NEW ORLEANS TOWNHOUSE

JAY D. EDWARDS

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the question of the identification of architectural traditions with specific ethnic or social groups or historic cultures. Such designations often do not accurately reflect cultural reality, so other processes must be at work. Sociocultural identifications are of particular interest in ethnically complex communities where cultural diffusion and acculturation have played a major role in the makeup of the architectural landscape. In this article I trace the history of the “Spanish” patio townhouse of New Orleans in relation to its socially defined cultural image.

What do we really mean when we describe a building as Spanish or Italian or Georgian? Do we mean that the people who built it derive from a particular homeland, or that the building has stylistic attributes which derive from that culture? Or are more subtle and complex social processes at work? In ethnically complex communities the use of cultural labels is one of the most popular methods for classification of buildings and architectural styles. In Louisiana, for example, buildings are referred to as “Cajun style,” referring to the rural architecture of the descendants of the immigrants from Nova Scotia; or “Creole style,” referring to forms derived from French and Spanish colonial culture; or “Anglo style,” referring to forms derived from the eastern United States and the upland South. Each of these identifications carries important associations, either positive or negative depending on one’s perspective and social allegiances or on the context in which they are employed.

In everyday popular speech, ethnic identification is used to separate the architectonic landscape into in-groups and out-
groups. In rural areas the “shotgun” house is associated with the Afro-American culture, while the “dog-trot” house carries connotations of the upland South “Bible belt.” Many identifications carry historical connotations. The term “Greek Revival” evokes those few decades — 1830–1850 — when Anglo-American affluence and influence reached their pinnacle in antebellum plantation Louisiana. It also invokes a unique set of social values adopted by those who selected that style. Every style in some way represents both a rejection of previously popular architectural and social values and a positive prospective statement which announces ethnic and class affiliations, or at least aspirations. Ethnic identifications may also symbolize cultural revivals. After a hiatus of more than half a century a whole new generation of Cajun-style suburban houses and “Cajun banks” is rising in the prairie towns of southern Louisiana, the result of the newly enhanced pride associated with Cajun identity.

While these principles are generally well understood, the manner in which ethnic associations and labels are acquired by architectural forms is often less well appreciated. The process through which certain types come to be identified with specific cultural groups may be complex and covert. It may, for example, have more to do with the character of the marketplace during the introduction of a particular type than with architectural provenience. Moreover, once cultural associations have been acquired, new social processes may take over, further complicating the picture. A romantic image, reflecting the supposed glories of the culture of the past, may become a preeminent force, actively shaping later generations of renovated or derived buildings and defeating any attempt by purists to return them toward cold historical authenticity. Such a movement may stimulate disagreements between proponents of the academic and the popular perspectives. Nor are professionals immune from fenc-jumping. Even architects and architectural historians may buy into a popular image, helping to perpetuate anti-historical values.

The architecture of the American South is not without its romantic legends. Some are well known, such as the aura which surrounds Greek Revival, antebellum plantation life. Others are less well appreciated. Because of its complex culture history, Louisiana provides an excellent testing ground for the investigation of the ethnic and cultural associations of long-standing architectural forms. For example, the Spanish governed the area that is now Louisiana between 1765 (effective control 1769) and 1803, when most of it was returned to France and immediately sold to the United States. Thirty-four years is sufficient time for architectural influence to have been introduced, particularly in light of the considerable amount of rebuilding which was required under the Spanish regime.

It is popularly believed by both laymen and architects that the Spanish exerted considerable influence during that period, not simply through the introduction of barrel roofing tiles, paving tiles, and wrought-iron balustrade work, but also more profoundly in the introduction of new architectural types and landscape forms.

Despite this assumed influence, actual Spanish architectural influence in the Gulf Coast South and Mississippi Valley has not been dealt with at a satisfactory level of specificity by architectural historians. One reason may be an overreliance on antiquated and overly narrow paradigms. Based on what has been published, the dominant interpretation of the colonial architecture of New Orleans has remained heavily weighted towards the visual and the stylistic; but a theory of architecture derived from academic art history, or any such specialized field, may blind the student to other useful perspectives, particularly those based on formal and constructional evidence.

In the study of vernacular architectural history it is particularly important that the broadest possible range of evidence be assembled and evaluated. Architectural traditions transmitted through folk-based methods of communication do not behave historically in the same way as high-style architectural traditions. Oral transmission places severe limitations on the design freedoms available to the vernacular designer/builder. Though the rules of a vernacular tradition may at first appear complex — one is immediately reminded of Glassie’s generative-transformational grammars and of the shape grammars of George Stiny and James Gips — vernacular traditions behave as if they are more severely constrained than the traditions of academic architecture. The essential point is that traditions of American vernacular architecture, and low-level polite traditions which function like them, are formulated principally from the perspective of shared geometric regularities rather than that of stylistic attributes. Such traditions are implicitly recognized and understood by their designers, and are identified by their users primarily in terms of consistent geometric forms and spaces and the conventional relationships which obtain between them. Other aspects of a vernacular tradition remain variable and even expendable.

A geometrically based interpretation of traditional architecture provides insights not available from other perspectives. One benefit is a more reliable basis for the evaluation of cultural relationships under conditions of long-distance architectural diffusion (colonial settlement). Only a minority of colonial-period American vernacular buildings were direct copies of prototypes in the Old World. This is doubly true for Creole architecture, which was quite unlike contemporary European domestic architecture both functionally and ge-
metrically. While a basic geometric and stylistic essence may have survived the Atlantic passage, American vernacular traditions underwent a process of simplification, experimentation, and later elaboration along new lines, which involved principles different from those of their Old World progenitors. The redefined structures continued to appear European, however, because they were dressed up in European patternbook decor. Nevertheless, to refer to an American tradition with a foreign name (e.g., Queen Anne Revival) has the effect of denying what is uniquely American about it — and that may be very close to its central defining attribute. Dell Upton, for example, in referring to the “Georgian” vernacular houses of Virginia, states that “While . . . [pattern-book] influences are undeniable . . . the use of international models in Virginia was closely controlled by local intention.”

It is for these reasons that we use samples of dated floor plans of historic buildings as the principal line of evidence for identification of historic types and, thereby, for evaluating the degree of cultural similarity between widely separated architectural traditions. The internal geometry of the house is sufficiently detailed, complex and covert that the probability of groups of buildings with similar plans and similar philosophies of layout being constructed by accident alone in widely separated locations is low. People who grow up sharing strong social ties also share highly specific preferences about the geometries of their vernacular houses. The relevant geometric principles may be discovered and employed as evidence of cultural sharing, and thereby of cultural origins. Should buildings of identical geometries be discovered in remote locations, for example, a presumption of cultural diffusion should be investigated and hopefully supported by other evidence. On the other hand, from a formal comparative perspective, groups of buildings which share stylistic features, but which do not share underlying geometric principles, do not deserve to be classified together.

With these precautions in mind, we now turn our attention to an examination of the New Orleans patio townhouse. This historic tradition is one of several which have flavored much of the popularly accepted image of Spanish influence in the architectural history of the Gulf Coast.

THE PORTE-COCHÈRE HOUSE AND ITS PATIO

Perhaps the most romantic aspect of the architecture of the Vieux Carré in New Orleans is the patio. The buildings of the old European center line the sidewalks, providing only occasional glimpses of the lovely spaces set at the rear of these well-defended houses (FIG. 1). The rear courtyards of these residences may be small and intimate, or large and designed for luxurious living in the heart of the city. They may accommodate private families only, or they may be employed as semi-public space — for example, as garden dining areas for hungry passers-by (FIG. 2).

To understand the place of the patio house in the history of New Orleans we must briefly return to the colonial period. Before 1765, and indeed before 1794, there was no such thing as a patio or courtyard house in Louisiana. French colonial urban architecture developed as free-standing structures which generally faced outward from the front portion of the properties of the French Quarter (FIG. 3). Most houses stood back from the front edge of the property ten to fifteen French feet. The interior spaces of each block were filled with ornamental parterre gardens and with orchards and arbors. Also placed behind the principal houses were individual service buildings: kitchens, privies, mazás (storehouses), stables, and slave
quarters. Plans of the city taken from surveys by the engineers Adrien de Pauger (2nd Engineer of the colony, 1720—26), Le Blond de la Tour (Chief Engineer under Bienville, 1720—23), and their successors document the evolution of the urban pattern between about 1728 and the 1760s. Note the extreme emphasis placed on formal gardens in what is now the French Quarter in the early decades of the French regime (FIG. 4).

A near photographic-quality ink sketch of the riverfront of the city in 1765 by the British military engineer Philip Pittman recalls the appearance of the city at the time of the transfer of New Orleans to Spanish sovereignty (FIG. 5). It shows many free-standing French Creole-style structures and nothing of the appearance of the patio house which was to follow. Unfortunately, the city was not permitted to continue with its inherent plan of urbanization through the period of Spanish sovereignty. On Good Friday, March 21, 1788, and again on December 8, 1794, two huge fires consumed the majority of what is now the French Quarter (FIG. 6). High winds defeated the crude fire-fighting methods then available. Most of the structures between Bienvenue and Dumaine Streets (center of the city) were destroyed. Of course, they were soon replaced by new structures, but many of the postconflagration houses bore little resemblance to their predecessors. Tulane-trained architectural historian Sam Wilson writes:

After the fire of 1794 laws were passed to prohibit the use of shingle roofs or wood construction unless protected by at least a one-inch thickness of plaster. Roofs of tiles were required and many roofs were built almost flat, as terraces and the architecture of the rebuilt city began to take on a somewhat more Spanish appearance. The architects and builders for the new buildings, however, were all

French — Guillaume, Bartolomé Lafon, Hilaire Bouillé, Charles Trioncin, Claude Gorée, Joseph Guillot and others, though some of these, like Guillaume, had long been in the service of Spain.

A major Spanish contribution was the splendid wrought iron work of Marcellino Hernandez, a Canary Islander, whose excellent craftsmanship is to be seen in the balconies of the Cabildo and of the rebuilt Orne-Pontable house, now Le Petit Théâtre de Vieux Carré (FIG. 7).

Supposing that the fires had not destroyed most of the Vieux Carré, what would New Orleans have looked like in the year 1800? We can never know for certain, but a pretty good model is provided by the larger contemporary cities in the French colony of Saint Domingue. Fortunately, some excellent scenes and plans of these most French Creole of all cities prior to the Haitian Revolution (1791—1803) survive (FIG. 8). Cap François (“Le Cap,” later Cap Haitien) had much the
appearance of old New Orleans, with many of the same architectural types and much the same pattern of urban development. Port-au-Prince was laid out and urbanized in similar fashion. The peripheries of the cities’ blocks were gradually filled in with houses, shops, and other structures, while the interiors of the blocks remained more open, used for gardens and other amenities.

In New Orleans the pattern of development of the city block was set on a new course by the fires. By the time of the Louisiana Purchase a new pattern of house-lot utilization had been established. Houses, one to three stories tall, now lined the streets of many blocks solidly, right at the edge of the banquieres, or sidewalks. Instead of common open centers within each block, much of the area behind the townhouse was filled in with a complex melange of structures, consisting of commercial, industrial and service buildings, together with rental properties — advantageous in the rapidly expanding and overpopulated city. Many of the early post-fire, Spanish-period houses were single-story Creole cottages of the type still found today in the French Quarter and Faubourg Marigny (FIG. 9). A distinguishing feature of these small banquieres cottages is the cabaret vent roof extension which protected passersby from the sun and rain.
Almost immediately following the fire of 1794 a new architectural type was introduced — the two-story townhouse. This type was well suited to the commercial nature of the new city. Stores or shops could be placed on the ground floor to attract pedestrians, while the living apartments were located above on the cooler premier étage (FIG. 10; REFER TO FIG. 7). Townhouses were generally located on bifurcated lots. Many of the older French lots, originally sixty French feet wide at the street, had been subdivided into thirty- or forty-foot-wide segments. Access to the rear was often via a narrow passage set between the buildings. Alternatively, it could be gained through a porte-cochère which penetrated the building itself (FIG. 11). This solution provided a more economical use of premium space, as it permitted the apartments on the second story to expand to full property width. Townhouses with flat or gabled roofs could be placed side by side, forming a continuous facade at the street. The early courtyard house was generally two stories tall on the street facade (commercial forms reached three and even four stories by the 1830s). A porte-cochère wide enough to admit a carriage led past a front block of rooms into an expanded rear patio (FIG. 12). The passage was often capped with a semicircular arch. The other openings at the street level were either arched or flat topped. The second-story living apartments spanned the entire width, covering the carriageway. Originally the roofs were flat, but soon Spanish-style barrel tiles were imported from Pensacola to cover improved, low-pitched roofs.10

The rear courtyard was partially surrounded by stables, a kitchen and wash building, a privy, and a one- or two-story
garçonnière (young men’s house) or slave quarter which extended straight back behind the house on the side opposite the porte-cochère (FIG. 13). In New Orleans this building was generally roofed with a single-pitch shed which sloped in towards the patio. Full-length galleries provided access to the first and second stories. The courtyard was protected from the view of neighbors by a tall brick wall. Clearly, this house is an adaptation to increasing density of population in the Quarter in the decades following 1794. But it is something else as well: it was a highly conventionalized model which became the symbol of a successful commercial and administrative class.

Why did the courtyard house develop as it did? A great deal of imprecise and misleading information surrounds the question of Spanish origins and Spanish influence. Many architectural historians accept a hypothesis which recognizes strong Spanish influence. Although the Spanish in New Orleans were never very numerous in the last half of the eighteenth century, their surveyors (Don Carlos Trudeau) and other government officials were responsible for zoning, housing surveys, property taxes, and compliance. Many of the early porte-cochère houses, such as the Bosque house (617–621 Chartres St.; 1795–present) and the Quiñones house (623 Bourbon St.; 1795–present), were specifically associated with prominent Louisiana Spaniards. For example, Vincente José Nuñez, who constructed the Bosque house, was the State Treasurer of Louisiana (1788–89); Don Bartolome Bosque, a native of Palma, Majorica, was a merchant and ship owner (1795–ca. 1810); and Don Estaban de Quiñones, a native of Cuba, was Secretary to the Archbishop and Notary Public.

Of the Bosque house, Wilson has written:

The original parts of the house which remain are of such fine quality and unusual Spanish character as to make it one of the most significant examples of that period when the city was rebuilding after the disastrous fires of 1788 and 1794.

The rear part of the house has a very distinct Spanish feeling and reflects its owner’s [Bosque’s] Majorican origin. Two-story outbuildings enclose the courtyard on one side and the rear. These also have a rather Spanish feeling in the molded rafter ends which support the roof overhang.
KEY TO FRENCH ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>FRENCH TERM</th>
<th>ENGLISH MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Porte-Cochère</td>
<td>Entrance (main door)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESC</td>
<td>Escalier</td>
<td>Stairway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT</td>
<td>Patio</td>
<td>Patio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAG</td>
<td>Magasin/boutique</td>
<td>Shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUI</td>
<td>Cuisine</td>
<td>Kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAL</td>
<td>Galerie</td>
<td>Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAR</td>
<td>Garçonnière</td>
<td>Young Men's Apartments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SER</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAL</td>
<td>Salle</td>
<td>Living Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAN</td>
<td>Salle à Manger</td>
<td>Dining Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHA</td>
<td>Chambre</td>
<td>Bedroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOI</td>
<td>Toilette</td>
<td>Toilet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECU</td>
<td>Écurie</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REM</td>
<td>Remise</td>
<td>Carriage House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td>Rez-de-Chaussée</td>
<td>Ground (first) floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>Premier Étage</td>
<td>Living (second) floor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other architectural historians concur in Wilson's vision of the new architectural form: William Cullison III, former director of the Southeastern Architectural Archive at Tulane, refers to the Bosque house as "a still extant New Orleans Spanish-type townhouse of about 1795." And in a popular architectural history of the city we read:

As the old French buildings in New Orleans deteriorated, new ones were built in the Spanish manner. Doors and windows were usually arched and roofs were covered in Spanish tile. In the stables, larger L-shaped houses were built, with the short side facing the street and a courtyard in the angle.

Tulane University Professor of Architecture Eugene Cizek also attributes many Spanish characteristics to the architecture of the Vieux Carré and particularly the porte-cochère house: "It could easily be an image found along a street in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, or Old Havana, Cuba." Was the new style of patio house Spanish Creole in origin? Certainly there was no dearth of models in Spanish Caribbean architecture to select from.
THE SPANISH CARIBBEAN

When Spaniards began permanent settlement in the New World, they quickly turned their attention to the problems of colonization — farming, mining, ranching, and the construction of cities. Finding the early settlement areas on the north coast of Hispaniola inhospitable, they established their new American capital, Santo Domingo, on the south coast near the mouth of the Ozama River in 1502.\(^9\) They constructed churches, forts, houses, and curtain walls around the city. The Indians supplied the labor while they survived, but beginning in 1518 they were quickly supplanted by African slaves. In this new land the colonists reconstructed the styles of vernacular architecture common to their homelands. The early Spanish engineers at first designed houses in a severe Gothic style, embellished with Isabelline (1474–1504) and later Plateresque (sixteenth-century) details.

The early urban houses were of several basic styles. One of these was the southern Spanish patio house (FIG. 14). Many of these houses survive today in old Santo Domingo, some from the early sixteenth century. Their evolution may be traced from the plans of buildings constructed along Las Damas Street, which runs parallel to the banks of the Ozama, and intersecting streets as well (FIG. 15). The restoration architect Eugenio Pérez Montás writes:

\[\text{El Adelantado (Governor) Don Rodrigo de Bastidas (1460–}1527\text{) arrived in Santo Domingo in 1502, and began the construction of his memorial house in those first years. It was laid out turning around a central patio — almost a cloister. This beautiful ancestral house whose restored exterior is now in eighteenth-century style, nevertheless manifests original interior details of the sixteenth century, particularly in the forms of its interior doors.}\]

The early-sixteenth-century patio house consisted of a set of rooms partly or completely enclosing an open courtyard. The buildings were either one or two stories tall. Those of the wealthier settlers were built of stone. The plan was based around a sala, or reception and living room, shaped like an elongated rectangle. In the smallest houses this was reduced to a square.\(^23\) Beside and behind the sala were various recámaras or dormitorios (bedrooms), oficinas or gabinetes (offices), perhaps an oratorio (chapel), and other cuartos (rooms). Entrance to the patio was via a zaguán (vestibule) or, in the smallest houses, by way of the sala itself.

Between the sala and the patio of all but the smallest houses was another space, open to the patio. This was the corredor or galería (gallery or loggia), which provided a shaded zone for daily living. It was generally considered the most pleasant part of the house, particularly in the warmer months. Meals would often be taken there. As the house expanded, it was extended in an “L” or “U” pattern around a patio. Two, three, or all four sides of the patio would be encircled by corredores. Beside the patio were placed the bedrooms and service rooms, with the cocina (kitchen) and despensa (pantry) usually located towards the rear. Larger houses also boasted a traspatio or service patio behind the first.\(^22\)
A comparison of the patio houses of the Zonas Coloniales in Santo Domingo (FIG. 16) with those of Vieux Carré of New Orleans (FIG. 17) offers a striking impression of similarity not shared by other American cities east of San Antonio and Santa Fe. Yet, although they appear to be much alike, this appearance is an illusion if it is taken to imply a direct historical relationship. Their evolutionary histories and, on close inspection, even their forms differ both structurally and functionally. One discovers no "L"-shaped porte-cochère townhouses of the New Orleans type in the zonas coloniales of Havana, Santo Domingo, or old San Juan. While horses might have been ridden through the zaguan of the larger Spanish houses, these entrances were generally too narrow to accommodate a carriage. Shed-roofed garçonnières or slave quarters of the type extending back from the corps de logis, common in New Orleans, are uncommon in the Spanish Caribbean — or, for that matter, in Spanish cities. The stairways to the second floors of the Spanish houses are not consistently located at the rear of the zaguan, as they would be if this house was the model for the New Orleans form. The plan of the Spanish house is variable, resulting from its evolutionary patterns of expansion. The French Quarter houses were constructed much alike, based upon a single, authoritative model.

The plan of the smaller patio houses of Santo Domingo is entirely consistent with the vernacular patio houses of Cádiz and Sevilla in Andalucía. The patios, and particularly their surrounding corredores, are devoted to social living as well as work space. No analog of the corredor exists in the New Orleans patio, though when one stands in the carriageway of a New Orleans townhouse and views the patio area through its arched opening, the effect is much the same. If a service space or corral was present in the larger Spanish houses, it was located in the traspatio, as in Spain.

The proportions of the rooms of the houses (sala and salón), and the social functions of many of them, are very different in the two regions. The New Orleans house is basically a two-module unit — the corps de logis and the garçonnière — separated by a stairwell with a winder stair. The Spanish house is entirely variable, expanding room by room depending on the wealth and needs of the owner. The New Orleans house was

---

**KEY TO SPANISH ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>SPANISH TERM</th>
<th>ENGLISH MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZAG</td>
<td>Zaguan</td>
<td>Foyer/Vestibule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAL</td>
<td>Sala/Salon</td>
<td>Living/Reception room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT</td>
<td>Patio</td>
<td>Patio (used as a room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR</td>
<td>Corredor</td>
<td>Open-sided room (facing patio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAL</td>
<td>Galería</td>
<td>Gallery (facing patio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM</td>
<td>Comedor</td>
<td>Dining room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAB</td>
<td>Habitación</td>
<td>Bedroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAB</td>
<td>Gabinete</td>
<td>Office/Service room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Accesorias</td>
<td>Restroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAL</td>
<td>Balcón</td>
<td>(Exterior) hallway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COC</td>
<td>Cocina</td>
<td>Kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SER</td>
<td>Servicio</td>
<td>Toilet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TKA</td>
<td>Traspatio</td>
<td>Rear Patio/Corral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>Planta Baja</td>
<td>Ground floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>Planta Alta</td>
<td>First floor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 15.** (ABOVE) Plans of six typical Spanish West Indian patio houses from the colonial period, Santo Domingo and Havana.

**FIGURE 16.** (LEFT) The patio of a reconstructed house on Las Damas Street, with typical Tuscan column-supported arches supporting the roof of a corredor. View towards the street. (Photo by author, 1992.)
limited to the upper-middle and upper classes of the colonial city, while the Spanish patio plan evolved to accommodate all social levels. The patios of the larger Spanish Creole houses were much larger than any found in New Orleans. Neither in form class nor in plan type do we find sufficient resemblance to support a hypothesis of cultural diffusion.26

In stylistic detail the houses of the two areas are almost as different as they are geometrically. New Orleans townhouses were characterized by the use of semicircular grills or fanlights over the top of their front doors. In commercial townhouses, these windows provided light for an entresol, or low mezzanine-type floor, which was used for storage. It is unusual to find houses with entresols, or, for that matter, semicircular door and window tops facing the streets in the sixteenth-century Spanish towns in the Antilles. Flat lintels or occasionally segmental Isabelline arches are the usual pattern.27 Arches of various types, including semicircular ones, are found within the house, particularly surrounding the patio (REFER TO FIGS. 14, 16).28 The principal portal of the Spanish house was protected by a heavy paneled door (portón) which swung inward, rather than by the outward-turning, double-leaf, three-batten external shutters of the type found in the French Caribbean and in New Orleans. Windows on the ground floors of the Spanish houses were generally protected by external reja grills of wood or iron of the type common in the vicinity of Cádiz. In high-style Isabelline and Plateresque colonial architecture, arches supported on stone Tuscan columns occur commonly in the patio areas, supporting the roof of the corredor. Wooden columns were employed in the humbler examples. One important feature is shared by the houses of both areas. Narrow iron or wooden balconies, cantilevered over the street, are common in both Spanish and French architecture, and are probably north-Iberian or general alpine-European in ultimate origin. They are common to the vernacular architecture of Salamanca and further north on the Iberian peninsula.

At the 1991 New Orleans Architecture Symposium, Stephen Hand, Director of the Vieux Carré Commission, presented a valuable historical outline of the use of New Orleans courtyards.29 He pointed out that prior to the Civil War, French Quarter patios were primarily utilitarian rather than decorative. They were paved with blue river flagstones or square Spanish pavers, and contained obis and cypress stave cisterns for washing and drinking. Fountains were rare, as pressurized water was not available before 1860. Neither was the patio lushly planted, though some plant materials might have been present. New Orleans patios were really service courts, employed as work space for the owner’s family and servants. They provided direct access to slave quarters, privies, washrooms, kitchens and stables, with all of the sensory discomforts which would be associated with these in the heat of summer.

Between the beginning of the Civil War and the end of the World War I, little development effort was expended on the portocachère house or, for that matter, on the French Quarter itself. Trends towards suburbanization and problems of disease (yellow fever) rendered the Quarter little more than an
urbanism, filled with decaying rental properties. But in the third and fourth decades of this century the long period of decay was arrested. Courtyards began to be planted with succulents and other decorative tropical plantings. Gutters were added to the eaves of houses, and a new artistic-intellectual population began to discover the old European center. Electricity had been introduced to New Orleans in 1900, about the same time as the internal combustion engine. The new technologies in plumbing, cooking, lighting, refrigeration and transportation, and the conveniences these made possible, combined to revolutionize the townhouse and to transform the old utilitarian garçonneries and patios into more elegant living spaces.

Hand credits the architect Richard Koch with reviving the courtyard. Koch, trained at Tulane University, travelled in Spain and Mexico in the early twentieth century and was inspired by the fountains and other pleasing decorative features of the Andalucian patio. He introduced octagonal fountains, plantings, and other decorative elements to New Orleans patios for his French Quarter clients beginning in the 1920s. These took root on preadapted and fertile ground. With increasing gentrification of the Quarter, and particularly with the onset of tourism in the 1960s, considerable sums have been expended to transform the courtyards of the French Quarter into a kind of Spanish-revival citiescape. But if it is not Spanish or Spanish West Indian, where does the porte-cochère house derive from? While no formal study of the origins or diffusion of this house type has been conducted, anyone familiar with the domestic architecture of eighteenth-century Paris will be able to point out many similar examples. The private, formal patio garden surrounded by high walls was then popular in the city. Many French noblemen at the court of Versailles constructed porte-cochère garden houses for themselves.

The popularity of the Parisian courtyard house is clearly revealed in the large-scale 1739 Plan de Paris, housed in the Southeastern Architectural Archive of the Tulane University Library. This marvelous document depicts every permanent structure in the city and reveals much of the history of the urban courtyard townhouse of the Ile de France (FIG. 18). Like their cousins in New Orleans, the eighteenth-century courtyard houses of Paris consisted of a multistory main building (corps de logis) set apart from one or more narrower service structures which lined the sides and rear of the patio. Parisian patios were still called cours d’honneur, after their use in châteaux. The front and rear buildings of the townhouse were often separated by a stairwell. Winder stairs were popular. A high wall protected any side(s) of the rear patio not otherwise built-up. The cour was entered through a porte-cochère, sometimes through the main building, at other times through a rear wall if street access was available there (it was not in New Orleans). As in New Orleans, the narrow service buildings which lined the sides of the patio were often capped with a single-shed roof, sloped towards the patio. These structures are generally referred to as “slave quarters” in New Orleans. Like their New World cousins, some of these structures also had open galleries facing the courtyard. Other documents reveal greater details and views of the interiors of these buildings. In general, they were far more elaborately decorated than the houses of New Orleans (FIG. 19).

While the Spanish patio house of Andalucía derives directly from Roman prototypes and from the Moorish vernacular architecture of the Mediterranean littoral, the most probable genesis of the Parisian courtyard house lies in the closed-court farmsteads common in the rural regions around Paris. The courtyard house is fully indigenous to France and completely appropriate to French colonial settlement in the New World without reference to Spanish culture. Various stages of formalization and incorporation of this plan into the Parisian urban landscape may still be traced in the Plan de Paris. Less elaborate examples of patio houses are still common in the small towns of northern France, many of which also have carriageways (FIG. 20). There, as in New Orleans, townhouses are also associated with various forms of abat-vent-style coverings which project over the sidewalk. A recent study traces the development of the porte-cochère townhouse in Paris between 1637 and 1789. In the eighteenth century many of these buildings boasted wrought-iron balconies with decorative ironwork remarkably similar to that fabricated by Marcellino Hernandez (REFER TO FIG. 7). In the case of New Orleans, then, Spanish culture provided an inspiration, French culture a model.

CONCLUSION

Historical circumstance plays a very large role in the assignment of ethnic or cultural identifications in vernacular architecture. Each case must be investigated before general conclusions are warranted. No North American city was more like those of the old Spanish Caribbean than New Orleans. Not only did the cities of both areas share a great deal of human contact, but the climates of both areas supported a basic similarity of life-style in which open air domestic living was promoted. Houses in both areas abound in transitional spaces which straddle northern-defined boundaries of house interior vs. exterior. Corridores, galleries and patios (as living, rather than work areas) are liminal architectonic spaces, alien to
visitors enculturated in temperate-zone models of domestic architecture. But, in comparing the plans of patio houses of Santo Domingo, Havana and San Juan of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries with the patio houses of late-eighteenth-century New Orleans, one cannot help but be impressed with the fundamental differences in the geometric solutions to similar climatic conditions. While the houses of the Spanish colonial Caribbean share a basic philosophy of layout with those of Andalucía, the patio houses of New Orleans share essentially all of their basic geometric features with the porte-cochère houses of the affluent eighteenth-century Parisian faubourgs (neighborhoods). Following such a survey, one wonders just how the preponderant weight of both popular and scholarly opinion in New Orleans could have arrived at the conclusion that the townhouses of the Vieux Carré are predominantly Spanish.

The answer appears to lie in the process of the social interpretation of these buildings and in a set of historical coincidences. Constructed immediately following the great fire of 1794, mostly for powerful Spanish clients, French architects (probably without much detailed knowledge of Spanish Caribbean Creole architecture) developed a new model based on their own previous experience with domestic architecture.
suitable for the gentry. The model which they collectively selected was the popular courtyard house of the affluent faubourgs of Paris. Walled gardens, portes-cochères, wide stairs, double-leaf, multipane doors and windows, wrought-iron balconies, and shed-roof garonnieres were among its features. The Parisian model was down-sized and fitted into the more restricted lots of the French quarter. It was also constructed of less durable materials. In order to make French forms more palatable to Spanish clients, and also to comply with the new fire codes placed in effect following the great fires, the architects of New Orleans dressed their townhouses in low-pitched roofs covered with Spanish tiles, cantilevered balconies decorated with “Spanish” wrought-iron balustrade work, and semi-circular arches over the portals, or at the very least over the carriage way. Such features were all generally known to merchants and government officials familiar with southern Spain and with service experience in Santo Domingo and Havana. One wonders whether their Spanish clients knew they were being offered Parisian forms? Many French Creole features were also retained, including the interior decor (FIG. 23). Once established as a high style, the New Orleans patio townhouse immediately entered the vernacular as a popular local form in a rapidly expanding commercial city. More steeply pitched roofs were added in later years due to problems with leaking.

Beginning 120 years later, under the influence of a popular and strongly Hispano-filistic restoration architect, these same townhouses and their vernacular successors underwent an extensive round of renovations which further fitted them into the Spanish mold by introducing new Andalusian-derived trappings such as patio fountains. This is the image which was sold to a new round of wealthy clients who had begun to invest in the old and long-neglected quarter. This same restoration architect, who also directed the Historic American Building Surveys of these buildings during the 1930s, later headed the most successful architectural firm in the city specializing in restoration. Historic architects associated with Tulane’s school of architecture, and with his firm, helped to perpetuate the image which this visionary had rejuvenated. Perhaps because the Parisian urban model had become submerged and lost to most Americans with foreign travel experience, while the Spanish model still bore the familiar romantic image of the Alhambra, of the Alcazar of Sevilla, of the patio houses of Santa Cruz (the old Jewish quarter of Seville), and their numerous domestic imitations from Mexico, it was natural that a Spanish image should be favored by the architectural community and by their clients in this most Creole of all American cities.

![Figure 20. Sketch of a small parsonage house in the village of Le Pouit, roughly halfway between the cities of Chartres and Orleans. This building illustrates something of the commonplace relationships between architectural components in quite humble homes of rural France. (Sketch by Mary Lee Eggard after drawing in F. de Billy-Cristiani and H. Nef, L’architecture rurale française: Il-de-france, Orleans. Paris, Berger-Levrault, éditeur pour le Musée national des arts et traditions populaires, 1986, pp. 178–81.)](image-url)
REFERENCE NOTES

The author gratefully wishes to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Formusa Plastics Corp., 1983, the Program for Cultural Cooperation Between Spain’s Ministry of Culture and United States’ Universities, and Louisiana State University. Without their help, this project would not have been possible. The author also wishes to express his thanks to Mary Lee Eggert, to providing illustrations; to Sally K. Reeves, Archivist of the New Orleans Notarial Archives, for providing historic illustrations; and to Abbye A. Guerrin, Curator of the Southeastern Architectural Archive at Tulane University, for bringing the Plan de Paris to his attention and for obtaining permission for him to photograph it.

1. An international conference was held in 1991 to review this topic, sponsored by the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, the Tulane University School of Architecture and the New Orleans Hispanic Heritage Foundation: Latin Urban Traditions: Plazas, Courtyards and Townhouses, the New Orleans Architecture Symposium: Oct. 30—Nov. 5, 1991, Tulane University, New Orleans. Many of the papers supported the notion of Spanish affiliations in New Orleans architecture. Several papers on the same topic were delivered at the 47th International Congress of Americanists, July 7—11, 1991, also in New Orleans.


7. Pierre Baron (Chief Engineer 1728—31), Ignace François Brunin (“Engineer of the King”) under Bienville during the retrocession, 1731—751; Gomichon (Brunin’s draftsman, 1728—32; and Bernard Deverges (1720—Ca. 1765). See S. Wilson, The Architecture of Colonial Louisiana (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1987), pp. 41—68.


11. For example, in the popular names of such houses as “The Spanish Custom House” (1900 Moss St., New Orleans, Ca. 1789) and “The Old Spanish Fort” (Pascagoula, Mississippi, Ca. 1725), but also in vague attributions to Spanish influence on the part of many architectural historians (see below).

12. The same house was owned briefly by Don Joseph Xavier de Pontabla (between 1789—795).


18. By way of contrast, the American architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe specifically identified the type as French in 1919:

The old English side passage house with the stairs at the end also gaining ground and is taking the place of the French Porte-Cochère, or corridor, which carrying you quite through the house, leads to the staircase at the back, where it takes up no room from the apartments and is protected by a broad and convenient gallery (Southern Travels, 1919, p. 106).

19. E. Pérez Montás, Casas Coloniales de Santo Domingo (Santo Domingo: Museo de las Casas Reales, 1980).

21. In commercial-type, two-story houses an almohcacta or tienda (shop), a bodega (storeroom), oficinas (ofices), and habitaciones or accesories (apartments) opened onto the street on the ground floor, with the sala above or behind. Similar houses were constructed in Old Havana. See E. Pérez Puig, El Pre-Barroco en Cuba: Un Estudio Criollo de Arquitectura Morisca (La Habana: Burgoy & Cia, 1974), and J. E. Weiss, La Arquitectura Colonial Cubana, Siglos XVI, XVII (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1972, 1979).

22. This form of Spanish domestic architecture has a long and honorable history in the circum-Mediterranean. It derives ultimately, perhaps, from the Roman atrium and peristyle villa, and was strongly reinforced by Moorish architecture in southern Spain. Through the millennia it had become carefully adjusted to life along the Mediterranean littoral. Not only was it suitable to the climate, it was also fitted to a system of social values in which proper women were largely sequestered and protected from access to public life. Aristocratically oriented Spanish pioneers coming from Andalucía adopted it quickly, and it became a standard of the new colonial cities.

23. There is also much which is parallel in the history of the development of the two cities and their patio houses. The history of the Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo is in many respects parallel to that of the Vieux Carré. Even as early as 1871, when it was visited by the North American journalist, Samuel Hazard, the old walled center had become a neglected and decaying shambles (Santo Domingo Past and Present, with a Glance at Hayti (3rd ed. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), pp. 60, 220–32). This is pretty much how it remained until the 1960s. However, with the support of President Juan Auteg Balaguer, and under the direction of such gifted architects as Eugenio Pérez Montáis, the old Spanish colonial quarter of Santo Domingo is being reborn.


26. “Form class” refers to groups of houses which appear generally alike and are often thought of as a single type. The American I house is an excellent example. “Plan types” and “plan families” are groups of houses which share the same principles of layout, including room proportion and room placement. Plan Families are all of those houses which have evolved through various stages of expansion out of a common base modular type. Examples include the Louisiana French Creole Cottage, based around a salle-en-chambre core of rooms (see J. Edwards, Louisiana’s Remarkable French Vernacular Architecture, 1700–1900 (Baton Rouge: Geoscience Publications, Louisiana State University, 1988).

Plan types and families are more useful tools in tracing cultural relationships because, being covert, their principles must be learned through long familiarity with the architecture of a community. Form Classes are overt and relatively easily imitated by the casual observer. Under the appropriate circumstances house types deriving from different plan families may come to resemble one another superficially, thus belying their more remote origins.


30. Richard Koch became Sam Wilson’s boss during the days of the 1940 surveys in New Orleans between 1934 and 1941. Wilson joined the firm of Armstrong and Koch, which eventually became Koch and Wilson, the name it bears today. Koch died in 1971.

31. From a recent handout distributed by the owner of the Quinones house:

The Creole garden had its roots in the 18th Century France. Following the ordered pattern that characterized all aspects of the “Age of Reason,” the formal French garden, perfected by the genius landscape-architect, Andre Le Notre, and epitomized in the famous gardens of Versailles Palace, exerted an influence throughout Europe that seeped down to all levels of society for several generations. Design and scale were essential; gardens were planned to include patierrres, alleys, terraces, bridges, fountains, pavilions, arbors and galleries. Noblemen at the Court of Versailles built fine small houses, flush with the street, with great porte-cochères leading back to the courtyard where the garden was surrounded by high walls, totally in keeping with the Frenchman’s absolute penchant for privacy. It was only natural that the Creoles, who were always looking to France as home, should follow this tradition (Anonymous, n.d.).


33. F. Contet, Les Vieux Hôtels de Paris, 15th Edition, Tomes 1, II, IV (Paris: Chez Changes Moreau, 1938). See, for example, the plans of the Hôtel d’Avaray, on the rue de Grenelle #85, as a good example of an eighteenth-century Paris townhouse.