



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Shingle Style

Historians assign names to architectural styles that the best architects have been creating and revising for years, if not decades. Nonetheless, there are characteristics that help define an architectural style, and naming styles creates a shorthand that allows us to discuss buildings in fewer words. The Shingle Style took quite a while to earn its name because Shingle Style houses were more often called Queen Anne, Stick Style, or simply suburban, cottage, or resort houses between 1879 and 1916 when they were most popular. The term “Shingle Style” was coined by Vincent Scully, a Yale University professor who wrote his thesis on this topic in 1949 and the first scholarly book about it in 1955. Since then, academics have been elaborating on this phenomenon, adding other precedents and finding examples of the style nationwide.

After the Civil War, an era of eclecticism set in, and architects and patrons freely chose whichever style or groupings of elements they thought most closely represented their building ideal. This period saw such a variety of styles as to make the term “style” almost anachronistic. However, a perusal of architectural journals like the *British Building News* and *American Architect and Builder* reveals patterns in the designs. From the Queen Anne evolved a simpler, more fluid version with “sweeping continuities of surface, line, and space.”¹

Notice the difference between 717 Amberson Avenue (below)—which, while its second story is covered with shingles, still has the massing and ornament of a traditional Queen Anne style house²—and the mirror image houses at 501 and 517 South Highland Avenue (right, and following page).³ The Highland Avenue houses are shorn of any excess ornament; they have simple window surrounds and recessed entries sheltered by integral porches, but no wavy wood paneling, no chimney crawling up the façade, no wooden columns turned on a lathe. That is why the Shingle Style was considered a subset of the Queen Anne style.

Locally, the best example of a Shingle Style house is Wilpen Hall in Sewickley Heights (p.13). Architect George Orth designed the perfect summer home perched on a hillside with massive sheltered porches to catch the summer breezes. The gambrel roof shape, often seen on rural barns and Dutch farmhouses in New Jersey, evokes a relaxed, summer feeling. Multiple bedrooms and large servants’ quarters hearken to an era when summer homes were like bed and breakfast hotels, with guests staying for long periods, often bringing their own maids and valets.

Scully pointed out that the intention

**717 Amberson Avenue,
Macbeth House, 1884,
Bartberger and Dietrich
architects.**

Photo by Lu Donnelly.





501 South Highland Avenue, c. 1895, for Stewart Johnston.

Photo by Lu Donnelly.

and use of Shingle Style houses was generally different than the city versions of the Queen Anne. Most Shingle Style houses were built as summer places, often a wealthy family's second home. They needed a more open plan and a multitude of windows for cross ventilation; the openings between rooms were wider and, if able to be closed off, used sliding doors so that the rooms could more readily flow between each other; porches were integral and sheltered, providing shady seating areas. These houses were covered with shingles over their

frames since wooden shingles were readily available, easily replaceable, and had been used since the 1700s in coastal villages as a tighter, more secure covering in wet climates.⁴ Scully describes a fine Shingle Style house as "gently warm and sheltering."⁵

Architectural historian Leland M. Roth further enumerated the cross-section of influences. He points out that in 1874, Charles Follen McKim began publishing *The New York Sketchbook of Architecture* and included many representations of early 18th-century

American architecture, beautifully sketched by famous architects. Many of these colonial buildings had shingled wall surfaces and simple ornamentation. He made use of the wealth of journals kept by his employer, Henry Hobson Richardson; many of the best early Shingle Style houses were designed by architects trained in Richardson's office.

At the same time, a leisure class was developing in the United States. Wealthy individuals were proud to show off their success by building second and third homes on a larger and larger scale. Some found the excess of these Renaissance palaces pretentious and instead desired houses "that connected with an ancestral past but was not held in check by it."⁶ They chose the less ostentatious Shingle Style for their cottage mansions. The popularity of "World's Fairs" such as the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia also brought the latest architectural ideas to the masses.⁷

Another source of inspiration was George William Sheldon's (1843-1914) *Artistic Country Seats*, published in 1886-87. Sheldon wrote two volumes using excellent photographs and floor plans of nearly 100 houses dating from 1878 to 1887. Scully used these volumes to help define the Shingle Style in 1949.

In Pittsburgh, most Shingle Style houses were built with sandstone bases and first stories. This may have been inspired by Richardson's courthouse or the availability of inexpensive sandstone plus masons experienced in its use, but it is clearly a common characteristic of the Pittsburgh Shingle Style. Despite the

517 South Highland Avenue, c. 1895,
for Valeria M. Johnston Pears.

Photo by Lu Donnelly.

emphasis on studied geometric shapes and flowing surface materials, some Shingle Style houses do have a variety of embellishments, like the lively ornament on the c. 1889 William Henry Hays house at 5200 Westminister Place in Pittsburgh's East End, which includes floral and gilded plaster panels, consoles and dentilled cornices.⁸ (see opposite page) The assemblage of ornament on this house again indicates why it was hard to separate the Shingle Style from the Queen Anne, although the oversized, rounded turrets covered with shingles and the heavy sheltered porches push this house further into Shingle Style.

Shingle Style reached the height of its popularity in the late 19th century, but it has never died out. The image it evokes lends itself to the design of country clubs, hotels, railroad stations, and beach houses being built today. ☀

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, the 14th book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States* (see review, page 63). She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

¹ Leland M. Roth. *Shingle Styles: Innovation and Tradition in American Architecture: 1874 to 1982* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), p. 37.

² Walter C. Kidney. *Pittsburgh's Landmark Architecture* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, 1997), p. 390. This is the Macbeth house designed in 1884 by Bartberger & Dietrich. Kidney declares the house is Shingle Style and that its use connects the house to the architectural sophistication developing on the east coast, but I



**Wilpen Hall, built 1899-1900,
designed by George Orth.**

Photo by Mary Jane Bent.

prefer to think of it as transitional, marking the move toward the Shingle Style, while maintaining most of the hallmarks of the Queen Anne style.

³ The 1895 *Blue Book* and 1899 G. M. Hopkins map show 501 South Highland Avenue (6117 Howe Street in the *Blue Book*) in the name of S[tewart] Johnston and 517 South Highland in the name of V. M. Pears [Valeria M. Johnston Pears]. All the houses on the east side of S. Highland Avenue between Howe and Kentucky streets appear to belong to members of the Johnston family and several more in the vicinity as they intermarried with the Pattersons and Pears.

⁴ Vincent J. Scully, Jr. *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 41.

⁵ Robert A. M. Stern. *The Architecture of the American Summer: The Flowering of the Shingle Style* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, Inc., 1989), p. 3.

⁶ Leland M. Roth. *Shingle Styles: Innovation and Tradition in American Architecture: 1874 to 1982* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), p. 13.

⁷ Ibid, p. 20. Nearly 10 million people in Philadelphia saw early Colonial houses and a traditional Japanese house with its open plan divided by sliding shoji screens, shaded by broad overhanging hipped roofs and trimmed with latticework.

⁸ Stern. *Flowering of the Shingle Style*, p. 5.



**5200 Westminister Place, built c. 1889, for
William Henry Hays, head of Iron City Tool Works.**

Photo by Lu Donnelly.