The 19th- and 20th-century pattern of high-style designs percolating into the vernacular is fairly predictable. First, the architectural geniuses—who either trained at the Ecole des Beaux Arts or traveled extensively—incorporated fresh ideas into their design canon with elements from other cultures. Gifted architects who brilliantly used Spanish elements included Charles Allerton Coolidge, designer of Stanford University’s original quadrangle, and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, known for his Gothic Revival but also a student of Spanish Colonial architecture in Mexico and architect for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego.

Regional architects such as Samuel McClarren, Henry D. Gilchrist, and Ralph Reutti studied the works of these masters in journals and imaginatively adapted the ideas into their designs. Finally, contractors and builders used elements of these designs to “freshen up” or “modernize” storefronts and tract homes as seen in Mt. Lebanon and Hempfield Township. While this is a simplification of the process, it does explain the evolution of the Spanish Revival style from the warm weather fringes of the country to Pittsburgh’s middle class neighborhoods.

The several terms used to describe Mediterranean themes in architecture look interchangeable but are necessary to denote differences.

Western Pennsylvania has many fine examples of the style in residential neighborhoods. The earliest known is in Thornburg, where homes were individualized...
for the upper middle class. As the official Thornburg architect, Samuel Thornburg McClaren designed three houses and an addition to the local school in the Mission Revival mode. The earliest is at 1124 Cornell Street, a house built for Conrad Pfohl in 1903. Gustav Stickley’s *Craftsman* magazine did not begin to publish California houses until 1904, making the Thornburg house a curiosity at the time, even to those knowledgeable about architecture. Perhaps he was influenced by his cousin Frank Thornburg, who often traveled to Los Angeles and returned with photos of houses he found attractive.

In 1912, William McKennan Smith of Washington, Pennsylvania, commissioned a graceful hacienda on Wilmont Avenue designed by Henry D. Gilchrist, an architect active in Pittsburgh and Sewickley. The house opens to patios and balconies overlooking its hillside site and the town of Washington.

The most beautiful of the local Spanish Revival houses is at the corner of South Dallas Avenue and Reynolds Street, built in 1924 for PPG executive James Selden. It is a skillful adaptation of the style by local architect Ralph Reutti. He had several prestigious commissions from the Mellon family but was forced by the Depression to take a government post and confine his architectural talents to small projects. None came close to the intricacy of this design with its tiled porches, interior patio, stucco exterior, and interior ornamented with beautiful ironwork and inlaid tiles.

A Mission Revival house on Bigelow Boulevard in the Schenley Farms neighborhood also dates to the 1920s. Like Thornburg, this area’s homes were designed by architects for the upper middle class. The Arts and Crafts style dominates, but the lone Mission Revival house complements its neighbors.

In Hempfield Township, Westmoreland County, glass worker-turned-real estate and insurance agent Morris Kelley commissioned a small development that clearly illustrates the earlier point about the co-mingling of Bungalow and Spanish Revival styles marketed in the same pattern books. The houses along Old Spanish Villa Drive and Dorothy Louise Drive are either Mission Revival, with their stucco exteriors and tiled roofs, or wood-shingled bungalows. Kelley’s daughter says the Spanish styles were inspired by his trips to Florida where, by the 1920s, developers working in Miami and Coral...
Gables called the style “Venetian” to highlight the canals and lagoons they provided in their new neighborhoods.

Two adjacent Spanish Revival houses with white stucco walls, red tiled roofs, and recessed porches can also be found in Mt. Lebanon. The floor plans of this pair have little to do with the California or Florida precedents; they are standard-issue Pittsburgh houses that drop to three stories at the rear, without internal patios or atria. Their architects are unknown, but the original owners, the Esposito and McMillan families, had them built about 1930. They are among thousands of pre-1950 homes being documented in a Cultural Resource Survey funded by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Municipality of Mt. Lebanon.¹

The next time you see a “hacienda,” you'll realize that they are more than very expensive fantasies brought back from sunny vacations. They may be proto-modern domestic designs whose smooth walls, subtle ornamentation, communion with the outdoors, and open plans were closer to the modern houses of the 1950s than to the Victorian housing against which they reacted. They show a yearning for a simpler way of life and a prayer for sunny weather in this customarily gray-skied climate.

² Readers are encouraged to send further information about these houses by contacting Susan Morgans, Public Information Officer at the Municipality, smorgans@mtlebanon.org or (412) 343-3780.
Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. 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 Carnegie Museum of Art.