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SUNDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2011 09:05 RON BECHTOL FEATURES

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It's a generational thing. Ask someone of a certain age what aspects of Japanese culture have influenced them most over the well-lived years, and they might answer films, especially those of Akira Kurosawa — and most especially the 1950 classic *Rashomon*. Pick a somewhat younger audience and you might get either sushi or Sony. And the current generation? Animé, no doubt about it. (You might have noticed I'm trying to ignore the '70s scourge, Hello Kitty.)



1018 W. Craig

PREV 1 of 15 NEXT

But it was neither kitties nor cartoons that swept the West upon the re-opening of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1854. Insular in all respects, the nation had kept its art, fashion, theater and architecture all but hidden from the outside world for centuries, and a romantic fascination for everything from ceramics to screens and kimonos quickly emerged.

The popularity of international exhibitions at the end of the 19th century, most especially Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, brought Japan into even sharper focus and exposed thousands of Americans to Japanese architectural styles of several centuries via the pavilions constructed on the Wooded Isle at the exposition's heart. (The event also introduced the Ferris Wheel, the hula and the hamburger into the American mainstream — not necessarily in order of lasting cultural importance.)

The Isle, laid out by Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmstead, was intended to contrast with the "formal splendor" of the White City buildings that comprised most of the Exposition. (Also on the island was the Hunter's Cabin, a tribute to Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, perhaps a reflection of Olmstead's visit to San Antonio in 1854, the same year as Perry's adventures in Japan.) The Exposition's dominant Neoclassical architecture came to dominate American public building in the decades to follow as well, but many architects, among them California's Greene and Greene and Chicago's own Frank Lloyd Wright, appear to have found a more sympathetic source of inspiration in the fair's Japanese structures. Wright would later return the favor in Tokyo with his designs for the famed Imperial Hotel.



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Neoclassicism's popularity may have been due in part to its adaptability; it could be applied to structures as small as cottages (one is tempted to say outhouses) and as large as civic centers. Not even the emergent skyscraper genre was exempt. Asian-influenced design, on the other hand, seemed more domestic in scale, relying in its most scrupulous forms on exquisite craftsmanship, fine materials, and elegant proportions. The beautifully built and detailed residences built by the brothers Greene in Pasadena, often held out as the epitome of the Craftsman Style of residential building, testify eloquently to their Asian roots (the Greenes may also have been inspired by a Japanese tea garden exhibit at a San Francisco exposition held in 1894). The Prairie Style homes of Wright and others such as Purcell & Elmslie, with their horizontal lines, broadly overhanging roofs, and handsome woodwork and stained "art" glass, are no less elegiac. But it wasn't long before respectful homage became short-cut style.

Plan books had been extremely popular in the decades preceding the exposition era, with how-to instructions for replicating Victorian cottages, elaborate brackets, spindlework and all, being especially popular. (Dover has reprinted several of these for *This Old House* buffs and their ilk.) The advent of factory-built wooden components also meant that not only could a prospective homeowner purchase the plans for his dream cottage, in any of several styles with no cantankerous architect required, but he could also buy an entire pre-cut and bundled kit that would both save money and assure faithful replication. Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were among the enterprises that could supply materials for an entire home, but they were by no means the only ones. A business based in California, where the Japanese style was especially popular, boasted in the 20s that "distance is no barrier in shipping a Pacific Home" and claimed to have delivered as far east as Philadelphia and as far south as southern Texas.

It would take a more scholarly tome than this one to determine if any of those kit homes made it to San Antonio and if among them were any with a Japanese signature. But we do know — even if we aren't sure of its influence on local, residential architecture — that San Antonio had an example of the stylistic genre close at hand in the Japanese Tea Garden. Built with prison labor, starting in 1918 at the site of a quarry that had supplied the Alamo Cement Company, the rustic pavilion dominating the gardens attempted to express "Japonisme" in its massive roof form with upturned rafter ends. A flanking structure, built to house Japanese artist Kimi Jingu and his family, became a tea room in 1926 (recently restored, it is scheduled to reopen to the public on October 14), and its more restrained style could easily have exerted an influence on cottages and bungalows of the era, many of which freely combined stylistic elements from different cultures. (Japo-Swiss was one such unlikely coupling; if you can imagine an Alpine cottage mated to an Asian pagoda, a picture may begin to emerge. Or not.)

So where does the weekend scholar and cultural voyeur look for such structures in San Antonio? Valuable information from Elizabeth Porterfield at the city's Historic Preservation Office and architectural historian and consultant Maria Pfeiffer was followed up by several neighborhood drive-arounds, and the winner is (a Rank Organisation gong, please): Beacon Hill. For reasons owing at least in part to the era in which much of it was developed, this area, coupled with a few examples in the western portion of neighboring Monte Vista, is the trove; it yielded 17 houses exhibiting varying degrees of influence — and we could easily have missed some.

The observant reader will have picked up on the "varying degrees of influence" phrase. The aspects of Japanese architecture that, in the hands of giants such as Wright and the Greenes, were transformed into entirely new vocabularies, were rendered in less subtle ways in most by-the-book construction — and the original inspirations are often very hard to pin down. A search of my own bookshelves turned up two tomes: *Ise, Prototype of Japanese Architecture*, and *Kura, Design and Tradition of the Japanese Storehouse*. The *kuras*, which were used for the storage of everything from grain to

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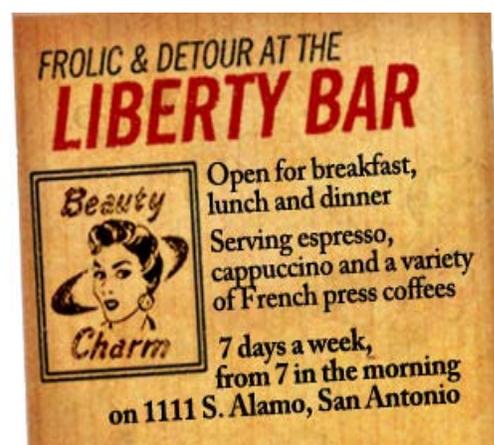
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precious documents, were far from the metal shed in the backyard of their day; they reflect traditional Japanese building in microcosm and remind us that this was a wooden architecture almost exclusively. Stone, when it appeared, was most often associated with fortified castles and even then is generally confined to massive plinths supporting perimeter walls. For reasons of availability (cypress, with its long, straight grain, was abundant) and integrity (earthquake resistance was a requirement), wood, sometimes plastered, dominated all other construction. Yet, there are few historical details that directly suggest San Antonio bungalow.

We do, however, begin to see the slotted rafter ends (*chigi*) that often extend, decoratively, above the gabled peaks of roofs like chopsticks in a geisha's lacquered hair. The ends of gable-roofed structures frequently were supported with a latticed scaffolding, or cribbing, from which supporting rafters projected. In keeping with the hair theme, the flipped-up bouffant ends that, along with exaggerated gable-end peaks, typify tile-roofed pavilion architecture, begin to appear in the more ceremonial kuras that replace those with modest thick-thatch or shingle cladding. More formal architecture tended to favor pyramidal, hipped, or hip-and-gable, roofs over the simple gable, with the stacked and flipped multi-story pagodas, many of them showing considerable Chinese influence, reigning as the almost cartoonish culmination of the genre. (One local structure apparently inspired by stacked pagodas is the tower at the old Kronkosky estate in Boerne, now home to the Benedictine sisters.)

In San Antonio, however, one prevalent style seems to appear nowhere in Japanese architecture per se but rather to have its sources in furniture, perhaps, or in portable screens. There being nobody to tell me otherwise, I'm calling this the tongue-depressor style. In its simplest form, it's characterized by stacked horizontal members, with rounded and upturned ends, that act as a kind of screen in the open gable ends of porches. The best examples uncovered to date are spread out around the city at 1018 W. Craig in Beacon Hill, 910 Cambridge Oval in Alamo Heights, and 201 Mt. Vernon off of S. Presa. A variation of this theme that begins to introduce projecting members, both structural and decorative, can be found at 834 Iowa in Denver Heights and, in similar form, at 218 S. Zarzamora. The exaggerated epitome of this double-depressor style is located at 936 W. Mulberry. It's a bungalow that also shows many of the other elements that characterize the genre: an infilled, gable-end grid and stone piers surmounted by short, clustered columns supporting the porch roof.

If we take this last example, or parts of it, to its stylistic extreme, we arrive at the amazing house on 843 Rigsby in the Highlands neighborhood. It's got everything from massive stone piers (the castle effect — or maybe our own Tea Garden) topped by clustered columns and stacked beams that are mini-pagodas in their own right, to elaborate, projecting brackets that support the broad overhangs of a porch with a decided pagoda-esque profile. Without these flamboyant touches, the house would otherwise be a pleasant example of a shingled, Craftsman Style, right down to the window details.

But for each exuberant avatar, there are dozens of variations on the theme. A modest cottage at 1013 S. Pine could easily have been influenced by the Rigsby example. An abstraction of several styles can be found at 927 Hammond. Still recognizable, yet beginning to stray are houses at 1010 W. Agarita and 1005 W. Mulberry. Other details such as flat-arched portals reminiscent of ceremonial gates or even samurai helmets can be observed applied to bungalows that otherwise betray no overt Japanese influence. The drooping eyelid look, a kind of mini-hip that may or may not suggest pavilion architecture, apparently proliferated like crazy in the '20s and '30s. An example of the Eastlake style that is known to have evolved from furniture and interior design can be found at 413 Fourth Street in the old Irish Flats neighborhood; here it evokes a Chinese moon-gate look.

As for perky peaks and flipped ends, their numbers are legion, and a contemporary bench, installed across from the old Friedrich facility on E. Commerce and celebrating Japanese elements in residential architecture in the Denver Heights neighborhood, testifies to the style's lingering, nostalgic popularity. Once you begin looking for influences, it's hard to know where to stop.

We, however, are going to stop right here with a suggestion to check out the accompanying slide show in the hope that it will inspire windshield historians to take to the road — with one caveat: it's good to have at least one person riding shogun to avoid incidents caused by stopping short or absently turning when something has been spotted down a side street. No accidents here, but a couple of close calls for sure.

Ron Bechtol is an architect and food critic.

Ed. note: This article was inspired in part by The Orient Expressed: Japan's Influence on Western Art, 1854-1918, [which opens at the McNay October 5.](#)



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