Architecture—Louisiana Style

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In the lower delta region of our state, there developed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries a truly original architectural style, native to the region, which can be seen nowhere else in the world. Most of the remaining examples can be found within a few hours drive of Baton Rouge.

The Louisiana style is easily recognizable, being characterized by its symmetrical plan, large windows and door openings, high ceilings, wide galleries on one or more sides, a high roof, usually hipped, with wide overhangs and the raising of the living floors to some distance above the ground. A frequent feature is the broken roof, designed to place the eave drip line farther from the house.

Although there was a certain amount of borrowing from other styles, most of the design features of these early houses had their origins in practical necessity and economy. The main factors contributing to the development of the style were three: (1) the climate, (2) availability of local building materials and (3) the plantation economy.

The first of these buildings were relatively simple raised cottages, built of hand hewn cypress, with mud and moss walls and shingled roofs, raised above the ground on foundations of homemade brick. Examples are the Prince Murat house in Baton Rouge (c.1780) and Parargue at False River (c. 1790).

Even in these earliest examples, the basic elements of the style can be seen: The central hall, with rooms to either side, to facilitate cooling in an era before air conditioning; the wide eaves and deep galleries; the main floor raised well above the damp and unhealthy ground; the high pitched roof, which permitted the use of cypress shingles without leaks.

Almost all of the materials were produced locally, with the possible exception of a mantel or chandelier, imported at great expense for "Maman's" parlor.

Because of the fire hazard (and the ready availability of domestic help), cooking was relegated to a separate building, out back.

As the plantation owners gained in wealth and influence, their houses became larger and more elaborate. Neighboring planters competed keenly in the construction of more and more extravagant country seats until, at mid-century, the bubble burst in a civil war. the collapse of the cotton and sugar markets and, inevitably, the industrial revolution.

Yet even in the largest of these later houses, we can see the same design elements which produced the early raised cottages: the dependence on locally available materials, the climate control devices, the planning for plantation life. Excellent examples of these later houses can be seen in Oak Alley, Bellevue, and Belle Helene (c. 1841), just south of Baton Rouge.

In their basic concern with the materials of construction, climate control and function, the designers of the Louisiana style presaged the development of modern architecture by almost a century and a half and have left with us a record of design achievement which would be difficult to equal in this or any other time.