French, Spanish Architecture of the 1700s Had Close Kinship

Two hundred years ago, American colonists sat amidst brick and clapboard buildings in Philadelphia to write and sign the Declaration of Independence — but way down yonder in New Orleans, the surroundings were a little different.

Spanish, French and the settlement’s few English residents enjoyed balconies, wrought-iron work, arches, and elaborate wood carvings on their structures. Today, these legacies from more than two centuries ago characterize New Orleans’s unique French Quarter architecture.

According to New Orleans architect and restoration specialist Samuel Wilson Jr., the hands of each country’s architects worked to mold the city in similar directions.

“There wasn’t much difference between local French and Spanish architecture in the 1700s,” Wilson points out, “even though everyone thinks that any building with an arch or wrought-iron balcony on it is Spanish.”

Wilson, who teaches a Tulane University course in the history of Louisiana architecture, has restored several French Quarter houses dating from the Spanish Colonial period (1766-1803) and has written numerous books on the subject.

Fort Maurepas, built by the Frenchman D’Iberville in 1699, was the first example of architecture in the settlement, and from that point on, the French built mostly simple frame structures that often deteriorated rapidly in the damp New Orleans soil, the architect points out.

The oldest building in the city, the Ursuline Convent, was built in 1745, but it was made of brick and thus survived weather raves.

When the Spanish governors came in 1768, after a secret treaty in which Louis XV of France gave the colony to his Spanish cousin Charles III, they did as much as they could to keep things as they were. Wilson says.

French language was spoken, children went to French schools, and the first Cabildo building, built in 1769 to house the Spanish counterpart of a city council, was designed by a French architect at the request of the Spanish governor.

The architect speculates that even some of the balconies and wrought-iron work common today were found in French buildings prior to the Spanish colonization, although massive city fires in 1788 and 1794 destroyed most of the structures.

“There’s not too much left except records about what the French did,” he says.

The fires also changed the Spanish reluctance to erect structures of their own in the colony because almost four-fifths of New Orleans’s buildings were destroyed, Wilson explains.

Even as they labored to rebuild on their own, the Spanish felt a heavy French influence, the architect notes, pointing out that another Frenchman by birth, Don Gilberto Guillemand, was chosen to make plans for the new cathedral, the Presbytere, and the Cabildo.

“But Spain and France shared a cultural unity, and it is difficult to extricate one style of architecture from the other in New Orleans or even in Europe,” observes Wilson, who has been active in renovating several Spanish Colonial houses in the French Quarter, including Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre, the Cabildo, and the Merieult House, now the Historic New Orleans Collection.

After 1794’s destructive fire, the Spanish rulers passed a law that required walls to be built of brick or stucco rather than wood and roofs to be made of tile instead of wooden shingles, the architect explained.