Shotgun Houses
by John Vlach

So obvious in its architecture as to often go unnoticed, this building’s evolution reveals much about those who dwelled in it.

Old buildings can tell us a great deal. In many cases, they are the only records left of the aspirations and experiences of those who lived before us. If we care at all about the day-to-day life of the past in which our present society began to take shape, we should examine those unpretentious, often derelict structures that sit beside seldom-traveled roads. Should we be sensitive enough to regard these castoffs as the products of effort and hope, we might discover a new pathway to an understanding of ourselves.

The rich insights that may reward further searching are illustrated by the story of a humdrum little house often called a “shotgun shack.” An architectural saga that began centuries ago in Africa lies enfolded in its shingles and tar paper. Shotgun houses are rather common in the United States, and for this reason, do not usually attract the attention of the passerby. In their most basic form, they are small, usually rectangular buildings, one room wide (no more than 12 feet across); three rooms deep, all connected to each other; and with doors at each end. One supposed reason for their name is that pellets from a shotgun fired through one of the outside doorways could allegedly pass through the entire building without doing any damage.

Today, shotgun houses, common in both rural and urban areas, are most often seen in mill towns, cotton and sugar plantations, lumber camps, railroad construction sites, and around oil fields. Traditionally built in this country to house large numbers of workers, they are found from Chicago to the Gulf coast and from North Carolina to California.

Their wide distribution during this century makes their history difficult to unravel. Several clues in the American cultural pattern, however, point to Louisiana as the place of origin, in this country, for the shotgun house. Along some stretches of the Mississippi River in Louisiana and in the state’s bayou country, no other house form exists. Large numbers of these buildings, many dating back to the last century, are also found in New Orleans, Vicksburg, Memphis, Saint Louis, and Louisville, all river towns first established by settlers as they penetrated the country’s interior along its larger waterways.

Architectural historians have thought that the long, narrow form of the New Orleans shotgun house was a reflection of nineteenth-century land pressures, which shaped city lots into narrow, rectangular sections. While it is true that the shotgun plan fit well into the city’s urban context, houses of other shapes were also built on these lots. Indeed, the shotgun was not as wide as the usual city lot and was therefore not so restricted by lot size as were some of the large French Creole dwellings. Thus the boundaries set by the city surveyor cannot entirely account for the form of shotgun houses. The proliferation of shotguns in New Orleans suggests an earlier origin based on motivations other than functional ones.

The basic shotgun form is very adaptable. A number of alternate designs in New Orleans suggest that the shotgun house had a long formative period. Such variations were probably a response to conditions not anticipated when the basic shape was first used.

One variant, the double shotgun, developed as early as 1854 and was composed of two single shotgun houses built side-by-side under one roof. Builders also expanded shotgun houses vertically to create “camelback” or “humpback” houses. In these buildings the last rooms were two stories high, thus producing a hump. The double shotgun was also modified by the creation of a second-story rear addition. The development of porches produced yet another variation. Dwellings known as “north shore” houses had wide verandas on three sides. Most of these were built in the piney woods region along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, where many wealthy white residents of New Orleans spent the summer months.

Shotguns of this latter type were built in New Orleans as early as 1832. In addition to early dates of construction, variations on the basic shotgun design also suggest antiquity by the very fact of their existence. The long history of the double shotgun, the single and double camelbacks, and the north shore houses provides strong evidence for assum-
ing that the basic single shotgun originated in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Sporadic documents provide evidence that shotgun houses were sold in the 1830s. These houses were probably built at least fifteen or twenty years earlier.

The origin of the shotgun house lies in the history of New Orleans's black community. In 1803 there were 1,355 free blacks in the city, many of whom were active and successful in a variety of trades. The size of the community was greatly increased in 1809 by the immigration of approximately 2,100 Haitian mulattoes, who first emigrated to Cuba but were later forced off the island by anti-French sentiment. At the same time, a like number of slaves arrived from Haiti, including many who were relatives of free blacks. By 1810, blacks outnumbered whites in New Orleans, 10,500 to 4,500. Such a population expansion necessitated new housing. As many of the carpenters, masons, and inhabitants were Haitian, it was only natural that they modeled their new homes on those they had left behind.

Even today, many Haitian dwellings closely resemble the single shotgun houses of New Orleans; in some cases, they are identical. More importantly, they share the same set of secondary characteristics. Room sizes are comparable: dimensions average 12 by 14 feet in New Orleans and 12 by 12 feet in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Ceiling heights are about 12 feet in both cities. Patterns of internal partitioning are also shared. The first two rooms may be converted into, or treated as, one large room. House façades in Port-au-Prince and New Orleans frequently have two tall frontal openings that serve as either doors or windows. Furthermore, shotgun houses in both
cities carry a large amount of decoration on their fronts, while the sides are neglected.

In Port-au-Prince, shotgun houses were an alternative to Creole houses. This latter type of building was based on Norman houses and was used primarily by French colonials. Although there are some similarities in plan to a Creole house type, the shotgun appears to have developed independently, occurring in those areas that were formerly under the exclusive control of the free blacks. Consequently the shotgun house is most frequent in southern Haiti near Port-au-

Prince and rarely appears in the north, the area dominated by the former colonial capital, Cap-Français (now Cap-Haïtien).

The long association of free Haitian blacks with the shotgun house type is suggested by the way in which they clung to the design in the late nineteenth century. Even when the Neo-Gothic style—with its spires and lacy trim—was brought to Port-au-

Prince from Europe, the narrow shotgun house design was retained as the core of the new architecture, with the new elements draped over the outside of the older form. This tenacious conservatism indicates that Haitian blacks had become accustomed to the shotgun form, retaining internal familiarity while bowing to stylish fashion.

The shotgun houses of Port-au-

Prince, however, have as a local antecedent the dwellings constructed by slaves brought from Africa to Haiti in the early eighteenth century when a strong plantation economy began to develop.

The architectural style of plantation housing in Haiti developed from the interaction of the indigenous Arawak Indians, the French colonials, and the slaves. The Arawaks lived in both round and rectangular houses. The rectangular type, called a bohio, was very much like the shotgun in form, but was significantly different in that it had only one room. In the seventeenth century, French settlers copied this building for their own dwellings. The first Frenchmen in Haiti were groups of vagabonds who for almost a century lived a hunting-and-gathering existence while plundering and raiding the sea lanes of the Caribbean. They had no need for a more substantial house form than the bohio; thus it remained a familiar dwelling long after the settlers had killed off the Arawaks.

When the slaves built their plantation dwellings, they used the form of the bohio, but made it a two-room structure. These houses, constructed of wattle and daub with thatched roofs, were one story high, one room wide, and two rooms deep, had a frontward-facing gable, and usually measured 10 by 20 feet. Today, parts of the southern Haitian countryside are dotted with similar buildings. The stable size of these rural dwellings represents more than two centuries of building custom. Urban shotguns and their rural prototypes can thus be linked in a continuum since they are of the same type. But for the origins of this house form, which evolved after the eighteenth-century influx of slaves, we must look to west Africa.

During the entire slave period, many of the Africans who were taken to Haiti came from southwestern Nigeria, an area dominated by the Yoruba. The houses of the Yoruba, like those in most of western and central Africa, are extremely similar, in spatial terms, to rural shotguns in Haiti. The basic Yoruba house is a two-room module measuring 10 by 20 feet. This unit is variable in its orientation; either the long side or the gable may face the front. With the doorway on the gable end, the house is a true shotgun. The Yoruba slaves probably continued to use their customary buildings after they arrived in Haiti; they had only to make a minor

The south Haitian countryside is dotted with these wattle-and-daub shotgun houses almost identical to the slave quarters of mid-eighteenth-century plantations. Occupied by a single family, the rear room is usually used for sleeping; the front room for storage and cooking. Construction materials—crushed sugarcane stalks for the roofing, split laths or small saplings for the wattle, and mud and clay for the daub—are salvaged from any available sources. Other materials, such as nails, screening, and whitewash for the walls, cost about $30, a high price for many peasants.
Shotgun houses first appeared in this country in the early nineteenth century. Probably brought here by Haitian immigrants, shotguns were inexpensive to build and could quickly provide housing for large numbers of people. Now of several types, the basic structure for all shotguns is exemplified by this single shotgun. The size of each building is similar—three or four rooms deep, each room measuring twelve by fourteen feet. Most shotguns in this country have some adornment under the overhanging eaves; the front of the house being the only part visible from the street. Formerly, shotguns may have had two front doors. Now, virtually all of them have one door at the front and one at the back, leading to a yard that once served as an outdoor kitchen.
adjustment to preserve their preferred house form and simultaneously satisfy the demands of plantation owners. Furthermore, the similarity between Yoruba houses and other houses in western Africa allowed other African peoples to accept the Haitian shotgun as their own.

The two-room dwelling is the core of many Yoruba houses, and the continuous use of the 10- by 20-foot unit suggests that it is a basic premise of design in Yoruba architectural traditions. Entire compounds are fashioned by grouping two-room units together. The compound, the domain of the extended family, is a large rambling structure with many rooms arranged around an open courtyard or a small impluvium.

Compounds are called *agbo ile* in Yoruba, literally “a flock of houses.” This term suggests something of the process by which these houses evolved. Compounds, some of which are said to be more than 300 years old, are the conglomerate result of individual family segments building all their dwellings in one place, using the same kinds of housing units they would have built separately, but in this case, constructing the units in accordance with a communal living pattern.

The odyssey of the shotgun house from Africa to the United States is long and complex. African architectural concepts provided the central, formative influence for plantation houses in Haiti. These concepts, together with features borrowed from house forms used by Indians and Europeans, were incorporated into the rural Haitian shotgun. The long association of blacks with the house form was not severed when slaves were granted their freedom. The mulatto class took the mud-and-thatch house and, by changing the techniques of construction, transformed it into a stylish city dwelling. But their changes did not alter the plan of the building. The internal pattern remained familiar. The shotgun form became for the free Haitian black a physical symbol of independence. And when Haitian blacks were forced to migrate to New Orleans, they retained the basic form.

The importance of the odyssey from the Caribbean and western Africa lies in the African influence that the shotgun house displays in this country. Here, the shotgun is common in black areas and hence is Afro-American by virtue of its users. But in some regions, like Bayou Lafourche in Louisiana, it is the dominant house type used by whites. Although there may be two shotgun traditions—one black and one white (in the latter, the buildings are wider)—both are clearly derived from a single house form.

Although the term shotgun may be related to the door arrangement of the houses and the idea that shotgun pellets fired through the house will meet no obstruction, the name may have also originated from western African languages. Several words commonly used in New Orleans came from western Africa. *Voodoo*, derived from the Fon word for the god Vodun, is a prominent one. In southern Dahomey, the Fon area, the term used to describe houses is *to-gun*, “place of assembly.” The description, probably used in New Orleans by Afro-Haitian slaves, was misunderstood and then reinterpreted as shotgun.

But what significance could this house type have for the black community? We are only now beginning to understand that humankind possesses an internal architecture of ideas, that we have architecture without buildings. With space as our only medium, we are constantly constructing invisible barriers, walls, and fences behind which we conduct our daily rituals of conversation, greeting, intimacy, and personal encounter. In black neighborhoods there is often a

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About 15 percent of the housing in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, consists of this type of shotgun house, although none have been constructed since the 1900s. Formerly occupied by single families, the severe housing shortage in the city has resulted in many shotguns becoming multiple dwellings. Although this cutaway shows an interior wall of brick, the walls of many such buildings were usually constructed of rubble. Tin roofs were introduced in the latter part of the nineteenth century by French colonialists.
great degree of tactility in the way people interact. Touching—hands on shoulders, slapping of knees, extensive ritualized handshakes—is common. There is a type of physical intimacy that is measurably absent in the face-to-face encounters in many white communities.

A tradition for this physical closeness is implicit in the shotgun house plan. The series of small rooms, usually joined without hallways, forces family members in one of two directions—into contact with each other or out to the porch and street. When many shotguns are put side by side, as in a plantation arrangement or a city block, interaction with neighbors is as frequent as involvement with one's family. I once asked a group of black women in New Orleans to define a shotgun house. Their collective reply was, "A shotgun house is a house without privacy." But in positive terms, it is a house in which there is a focus on communal activity; it is an architecture of intimacy.

This attitude has its counterpart in western Africa where the communal compound is generally dominant. The many rooms of this building type provide a spatial realm in which a hundred or more family members can interact communally or where small segments of the family can be together. In this way priorities for public and private intimacy are satisfied. While the shotgun house differs greatly in form from a Yoruba compound, in philosophy, a neighborhood of shotgun houses is identical to a compound. The shotgun house thus serves today as a vessel in which an alternative black tradition, an etiquette of involvement, has been maintained. The shotgun house is a physical expression of an Afro-American state of mind.