The Rowhouse Plan

In theory, rowhouse plans can be infinitely varied, as the long windowless side walls provide all of the structural support, leaving the internal walls free to be placeed as the owner pleased. In practice, rowhouse plans were a highly standardized expression of the Victorian distinction between public and private spaces.

The Troy Three-Bay

The typical Troy rowhouse is three "bays" wide, with a bay being the width of one window or door unit and its surrounding structure. A modest house would have bays six or seven feet wide; a grand house might have bays 10 to 12 feet wide. One bay is the width of the hall and stair; the remaining two bays is the width of a single room. A house is then two or three rooms deep, and three or four stories high (including the basement). The plan of each floor is a near-copy of the other floors, a feature that would later make it easy to divide a four-floor rowhouse into a four-unit apartment building.

While the plans of each floor were similar, the contents were utterly unlike. The main floor—elevated from the street about four feet, and approach by a short stair—was for receiving and entertaining guests. For the sake of both light and space, the receiving rooms were usually designed to be thrown open into each other, though the sequence might include both a formal drawing room and a less formal family space. The upper floors were private spaces, devoted to bedrooms. The basement level was the service level, where the kitchen and laundry were sequestered.

To the Victorian mind, this layout was eminently logical and practical. Cooking was a messy, smelly task—so messy that no person of refinement would ever think of entertaining in the kitchen. For bedrooms to be visible from the main rooms would be almost indecent, especially as the common practice was to bathe in the bedroom. A few steep flights of stairs were a small price to pay for proper division of spaces, especially as servant help was cheap, and the servants would be doing more of the stair-climbing.

Between 1890 and 1940, all but a handful of the rowhouses in Washington Park became multi-family residences or institutional buildings. The features that had made rowhouses a sensible single-family home design in the middle years of the 19th century now made them less desirable as single-family homes but adaptable as apartments.

The Gritty City

One reason for the fall of the rowhouse was the sheer dirtiness of the city. In today's era of stringent clean air laws, it is difficult to fully grasp how sooty, smelly, and noisy Washington Park must have been in 1880. Heavy industry—including bell foundries—was located just three blocks away, where Adams Street met the Hudson River. The river was heavily used for shipping, while a train line ran just a block beyond Adams Street. Coal and wood were still the primary heating fuels; most houses had two or more working fireplaces. The horse railway down Third Street could only add to the dirt and smell.

Improved urban transit made the cleaner, greener “suburbs” up Pawling Avenue accessible for the bourgeoisie at about the same time that Troy’s wealthiest business owners moved away and/or sold their businesses to companies that were not based in Troy.

The Efficient Home

A second reason came from the confluence of several trends after WWI. First, servant help was no longer so easy to find, making it more difficult to run a large house.

Second, education for women had become widely enough accepted (thanks in part to the earlier work of Troy's Emma Willard) that middle-class women no longer believed that running the house, or participating in an endless round of gossip and social calls, should be their only source of satisfaction.

Third, technology changed. The outhouse had to be replaced with a bathroom; the heating system had to be updated; the gas lights had to be changed to electric; and the smoky, old basement kitchen had to be replaced with an all-electric kitchen that could be managed by a "bride who does her own work."

The multi-story house needed substantial renovations just to be seen as livable, and the result was a single-family home that hardly anyone wanted. It made much better sense to convert the houses into single-floor apartments for the many who could not afford to move out to the "country" and commute, or who preferred city living.

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"Taste" and the Victorian

A third reason came from shifts in tastes. With the rise of modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century, the lavish Victorian details that we admire today seemed fussy, outdated, and utterly contrary to good taste. While a certain amount of architectural detail could, if painted white to match the walls, add panache to the Regency-influenced Art Deco style, it had no place in the ranch-house aesthetic of mid-century. Details that survived apartment conversions and utility improvements in the 1920s were likely to be hacked apart or paneled over in the 1950s, despite a minor fashion for a simplified "Victorian" look. It would be another 20 years before Victorian style became desirable.

Flexibility for Survival

While the mid-century apartment conversions now strike us as "desecration"—especially the destruction of interior details at 193 Second Street when it was made part of the Italian Community Center—it is likely that the apartment conversions were critical to the neigbhorhood's survival. As architect Anne Vernez Moudon points out, rowhouses are ideally suited for apartment conversions. The three or four stacked near-identical storeys of a single-family rowhouse readily become three or four stacked near-identical apartments, with the living room in the front parlor, the bedroom in the largest of the available rooms, the bath in the smallest (behind the stairs), and the kitchen tucked in wherever it fits (including on a back porch extension).

Sources

While the analysis above is our own, it inevitably starts from a number of sources. Information on nearby industries comes from Troy city directories. Several other useful starting points for the researcher are:

Colleen Stanley Bare, *The McHenry Mansion* (Modesto, CA: McHenry Mansion Foundation, 1985). This book, devoted to a Victorian mansion in a mid-sized California city, is unusual in covering how the mansion was converted into elegant apartments in the 1920s.

Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home: 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1986). The development of the ideal of efficient living in a smaller, often single-storey, house is discussed in chapters five and six.

Anne Vernez Moudon, *Built for Change* (Cambridge: MIT, 1986). Analysis of a San Francisco neighborhoods' Victorian rowhouses allows Moudon to make a case for adaptability.

Frank Alvah Parsons, *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1922). Parsons' high-style approach focused on Colonial and Renaissance styles. Probably few Washington Park residents were in a class to follow Parsons' advice, but he expresses the normative anti-Victorian and pro-simplicity feeling of the time.

Anna Hong Rutt, *Home Furnishing*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1948). This college home economics text gingerly approves limited use of Victorian furniture in a modern setting. Like most decorating books of the period, it strongly approves Colonial styles.

Research Questions

- How much interior detailing survived the modernism of the 1920s, when designer Frank Alvah Parsons advocated tearing out Victorian plaster ornamentation and decorative ironwork, though painting it old ivory or gray would do (232), only to be destroyed in the 1940s, when Victorian furniture became acceptable against "plain colorful walls and plain-colored carpets" (Rutt, 83)?
- Since the original apartment conversions were aimed at a moderately affluent class, how much of the neo-classical detailing seen throughout Washington Park is actually Colonial Revival work from the 20th century?

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