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TRIPLE DECKER

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The Three-decker, or triple-decker, is a vernacular type that emerged in Boston in streetcar suburbs of the late 1800s. It is part of the typology of the French apartment, prominent in downtown Boston at the same time, but designed for the lower and middle classes. Therefore, the Triple-Decker and the Apartment Hotel are part of the same type but reflect a social and therefore architectural hierarchy (Shand-Tucci, 121).

The common proportion of the three-decker is 1:2, 25ft to 50ft, and it is a free-standing wood-framed building of the same three (typically, but could be more) identical residences stacked on top of one another, where each family occupied one level. Two types of triple-deckers emerged in Boston (pitched roofs in Roxbury and flat roofs in Dorchester) in different areas and as they spread southward, the types eventually mixed as builders started sharing more knowledge. The flat roof was initially a strategy for building an extra floor because the gabbled roof had limited habitable space, but some triple-deckers also had three levels with a gabbled roof. The three-decker type was diffused across the city near streetcar lines. The separate buildings were conceived to (1) allow light and airflow throughout the apartment (2) prevent from the spread of fire and disease, but also (3) for the aesthetic purpose of looking like a single-family large house. The room facing the street was the parlor, and the back room is the kitchen. The porch is the true invention of the triple decker, as it gives it its distinct character.

The triple-decker was the speculative house of the 1890s, designed to maximize rental capabilities. They presented the opportunity for home ownership as one family owned one level and rented out the other two. The three-decker therefore allowed the middle-class citizens to become homeowners and to generate income from their home. In this sense, the triple-decker was considered as “democratic architecture. Built for the average family to have the benefits of suburban life while living close to the city jobs.”

The building of three-deckers was competitive and did not require large amounts of capital so that the builders themselves tended to be drawn from the ranks of local tradesmen. Most of the three-deckers were built by immigrant groups. This set up provided affordable housing to families while keeping the government out. The family that owned the property would maintain it often by its own labor, marking a move away from the paternalistic models of the company town. The triple-deckers were well situated next to mills, sometimes even anticipating the construction of a new mill, so the density of the triple-decker and the mill were linked – axially, economically, politically, and socially such that the triple decker cannot be considered outside of this context [of distributed workplaces such as the mills that scattered Boston].

The end of the triple-decker was marked by a local architect in Boston, Kilham, who advocated for keeping the city more open to air and to sunlight thus “champion[ing] a Massachusetts zoning statute which permitted local governments to outlaw wooden tenements higher than two and a half stories”. The type also suffered as construction costs for three-levels went up. Today, triple-deckers exceed the density, setbacks, and height of current zoning regulations. They currently make up 14% of the building stock in Boston (this does not include Cambridge and Somerville) but also 21% of the foreclosed property in the city. While Boston is trying to preserved them as a valuable affordable housing units, owners often do not maintain them and allow them into disrepair – or they are rented out as rooms to students, who drive up the rents and take them off the affordable housing market.

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