ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Has Mansard Mania Reached Its Peak?

The post-vacation trip back to New York from New England is through trauma and mansardland. Reentry into the "real" world is not easy. There are emotional displacements.

The false mansard mania has spread over the nation. It is clearly epidemic in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The top floors of perfectly ordinary and conventional structures have been boxed in and covered with shingles to suggest cozy mansard roofs on everything from service stations to supermarkets. It seems that no built object is immune. There are mansarded old age homes, fast-food joints, fire stations, shopping centers and housing developments. All is fake tops and false nostalgia, regardless of use, size or scale.

Condominiums vie to out-mansard each other. They lower the shingled boom from one, to two, to three stories, the windows sliced in vertical strips through the overhang. One development in Connecticut has achieved the ultimate mansard: The entire building is "top," with a crumb of plain wall near the ground.

These mansards aren't structural, of course, in the sense that mansard roofs always have been; the original faceted, double-sided roofs with the lower surface longer and steeper than the upper, made it possible to enclose unused attic space for an extra, livable story. Today's mansards are decorative, put on like slipcovers over standard construction, drawing visually on a rather extensive system of perverted references to the past. This mansard is merely an applied evocation or, more literally, a nailed-on effect. The shingles that cover it are usually precut crooked, for a higgledy-piggledy or "handhewn" look. There is a trend now for larger structures to use channeled aluminum on brick.

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No architect devised this style. No architect, with the restraint of correct historical knowledge and design propriety, could do so. Architects' eclecticism is something else again. This is builders' bowdlerization, with its combination of historical naiveté and esthetic expediency. It has touches of myth and fantasy and symbolism. It is a spontaneous happening—pure, or rather, impure invention, speculator-standardized.

The mode is legitimately in the American tradition of false-front architecture, from the fake cornices of the Main Streets of the Old West to Disneyland. Ludicrous to the educated eye, this kind of thing has an instant popular appeal that makes it a universal success. It strikes a real cultural chord. Neo-Mansard is today's genuine vernacular.

Like most vernacular architecture in its own day, it tends to be ignored by the cognoscenti. But the only way to ignore it is to keep one's eyes resolutely closed. And to do so would be to miss some extraordinary experiences.

A correspondent, William Webster, on a 4,000-mile trip through the Rocky Mountain West this summer, made frequent detours to small town Main Streets to admire rows of brick, stone and iron Victorian fronts. In the post-World War II wave of "modernization," plastic and metal panels were used to cover many of the old ground floors. Now, he writes, "someone must have hit on the idea of a phony shake roof as being fashionable since many of these roofs jut out at the first-floor level." Another generation, another mutilation.

The mansard from which all this derives—the 19th-century American version of an earlier French original—was just as universal in its fashionable applications in its own day. Even the classic New England clapboard house was not unaffected by the Victorian mansard craze.

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I would guess that about 50 years after the Greek revival taste was in vogue, someone with a taste for stylish modernization put bracketed cornices over the doors and added mansards—in this area quite a marvelous New England hybrid that might be called a hipped-roof mansard. I love these houses. They stand on quiet corners, looking as if they are about to sink into the ground under their stylish hats. They range from modest structures to mansarded mansions—all with an equally heavy-headed and cockeyed charm.

The mansard roof, of course, goes back a good deal further than the 19th century and Victorian taste; it is believed to be the 17th-century invention of the great French classicist, Francois Mansart.

Mansart's building style, according to "A Dictionary of Architecture," by Nikolaus Pevsner, John Fleming end Hugh Honour, was "extremely French in its elegance, clarity and cool restraint." His personal style, according to the same authorities, ran to arrogance and slipperiness in his business relations, which left him without many clients in his later years. But his heritage has proved to be ubiquitous.

And while the mansard roof never actually died out in the attic stories of France, its big revival came with the High Victorian styles of the 1850's through the 1870's, particularly in the United States. It was one of the chief features of the Second Empire Style, named for the period of Napoleon III in France, which was given to much building and ostentation, and was more widespread outside of that country than in it.

According to historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the style "carried something of the Parisian and the palatial" wherever it was used in the non-French world, and it was employed with equal enthusiasm for mills, country villas and major public monuments. That zeal is being paralleled in its applications today. Now, however, only the appearance, the free recall, of a mansard is sought. And the image is cheerfully employed for both domestic and commercial purposes in the suburban and exurban scene.

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Neo-Mansard has not yet taken over the city, perhaps due to exigencies of scale, but a vestigal version has come along with fast-food and other franchise structures. It has probably reached its final, absurd reduction, and most outrageous symbolism, in Burger King's red plastic appliqué across the lower fronts of tall buildings.

It is a long and tortuous trip from the architecture of 17th-century France to that of 19th-century America and 20th-century New England, and a long and involved chapter in art and cultural history. But it was the ride back to New York this fall that revealed what may be the ultimate example of the genre, or *le dernier cri du mansard*, so to speak.

Somewhere in Connecticut there is a new development with the absolutely inspired touch of mansarded area lights. On top of the tall steel poles are square glass shades, and the upper half of the glass shade has a fringe of shingles. Echoes of Francois Mansart; this must be the end of the line. ■