Book Review

Shingle Styles

by Gail Leggio

Shingle Styles: Innovation and Tradition in American Architecture 1874 to 1982. Text by Leland M. Roth. Photography by Bret Morgan. 202 illustrations, including 172 plates in color. Norfleet Press for Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999. $49.50 (hardback)

Wilson Eyre, Charles Lang Freer House, Detroit, Michigan, 1890

The post-Civil War economic boom sparked a building craze in America. At the same time, the increased population density of major cities such as New York, largely due to swelling immigration, exacerbated the basic human need for breathing space and contact with nature. This need was satisfied in part by urban oases such as Central Park. As early as 1851, A. J. Downing had advocated the creation of a centrally located park in Manhattan. In 1856 Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux won a public competition for their design, an inspired fusion of picturesque landscaping and architectural elements.[1] Leisure became an industry, and urbanites flocked to new resorts springing up along the Atlantic beaches and in the mountains. The wealthy chose to build summer or country homes that were sumptuous but less formal than their city residences. Some of America's most inventive and talented architects and designers worked on those country houses, which continued to be built for decades across the United States. Although the Depression and modernism phased them out in the 1930s, interest revived when architectural historian Vincent Scully published *The Shingle Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Richardson to the Origins of Wright* (1955). Today, Shingle Style houses are prized, both as a significant part of American architectural history and as a viable contemporary building style.

This splendid new book traces the durable Shingle Style tradition from Henry Hobson Richardson to Robert Venturi, in superb photographs by Bret Morgan, with lively text by Leland M. Roth, Marion Dean Ross Professor of Architectural History at the University of Oregon and author of the definitive book on McKim, Mead & White.

Roth's story begins with Charles Follen McKim (1847–1909), just before he became a founding partner of McKim, Mead & White in 1879. The firm is most often associated with the American Renaissance, which disseminated a fresh classicism across the United States. Indeed, when McKim, Mead & White issued a monograph on their work in 1915–20, they omitted the hundred or so shingled structures that had helped make their reputation.[2] In 1874, however, McKim was more interested in picturesque than classical models. The first issue of *The New York Sketchbook of Architecture* featured a rear view of Whitehall, the Bishop George Berkeley house in Middleton, Rhode Island (1728–29). Instead of the typically formal symmetrical Georgian façade of the house, the photograph showed an irregular back view. McKim's text stressed the importance of documenting America's early buildings, which he feared were fast disappearing.[3] According to Roth, the publication of this photograph signals "a new approach to domestic architecture that capitalized on the lightness and flexibility of wood," motivated by a search for "a spaciousness and clarity of form that were indeed truly American."[4]

While the architects who worked in Shingle Style intended to develop a distinctly American idiom, they were hardly isolationists. Indigenous Colonial style was a crucial component, but it was melded with Old English, medieval French, Arts and Crafts and Japanese elements. As the shingle aesthetic traveled across the United States, architects gave it a regional flavor by incorporating local building materials and motifs. But the original impetus came from a rediscovery of early American domestic buildings, with wooden shingles used as sheathing for exterior walls. On a walking tour of New England, McKim hired a photographer to document seventeenth- and eighteenth-century shingle houses.

Shingle Style buildings vary considerably in form and material, but certain elements recur: asymmetrical facades; textural interest, provided not only by shingles but also by rough stone and brick; whimsical but organic compositions, in which the parts of the whole might include towers with conical or bell-cast roofs and wraparound porches. This hodgepodge was often given geometric unity by the dominance of a triangular gable; vertically and horizontally, the long roof line ties everything together. The geometry of modernism is implicit in some of these structures, but always softened by cottage-style intimacy and sensuous surfaces.

Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio in Oak Park, Illinois (1889–1914) is a prime example of how stylistically flexible and progressive the Shingle Style could be. Wright's bold triangle of shingled gable, with a strip of windows, hangs over an inviting, asymmetrical brick entrance with bay window. Inside, the house seems more radical. The interiors of these buildings are frequently as asymmetrical as their facades, and axial arrangements are avoided. Roth remarks: "interiors were thought of not as individual rooms in the sense of closed boxes but as spaces that organically opened and flowed into each other."[5] Wright's interior has the flow of a Japanese house with the screens pushed back.

Shingle Style architects, heirs of the Arts and Crafts and Aesthetic Movements, believed in designing every aspect of the living environment and worked closely with craftsmen to create innovative interiors. Furniture, fixtures, space and light were deployed in ways that were both dramatic and livable. Like the British practitioners of the Aesthetic Movement, the Americans learned much from the Japanese, who had been exhibiting at international expositions since around 1860. The London-based American expatriate James McNeill Whistler incorporated Japanese aesthetic principles

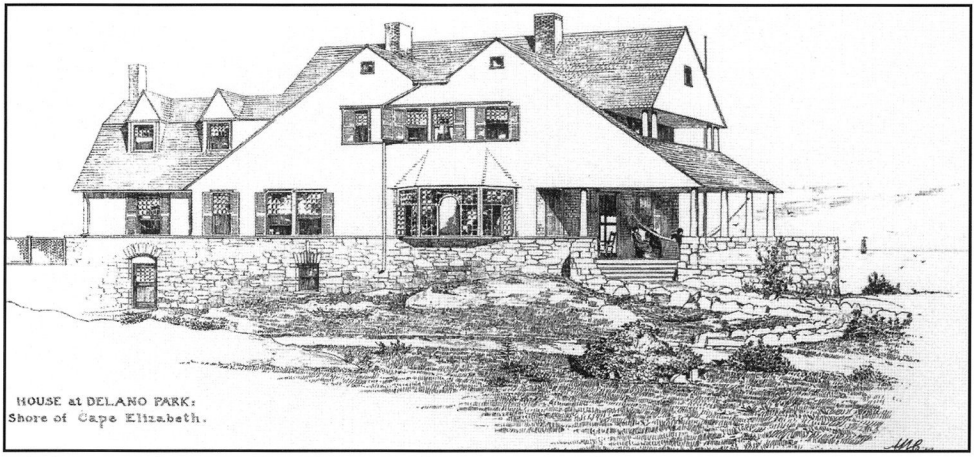
into his decorative schemes as well as his paintings. Boston was an important center of American japonisme. For architects, the publication of Edward S. Morse's *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (1886) was significant; Morse discussed such pragmatic matters as design, construction and uses. Morse lectured around America in 1890, notably in Chicago, where Frank Lloyd Wright worked. In addition, Wright was a close friend of Ernest Fennelosa, the foremost American expert on Japanese culture.

Charles Lang Freer was another enthusiast. His superb collection of Asian art is housed on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in a classical-style building by Charles Adams Platt. The Freer Gallery also includes Whistler's celebrated Peacock Room. Freer was a great patron of contemporary artists. He bought editions of every etching Whistler produced, in addition to paintings by Whistler, Thomas Dewing and Abbott Thayer. When Freer built his own home in Detroit in 1890, he hired Wilson Eyre of Philadelphia as architect. The result is a fine example of creative collaboration between client and architect. The rather somber exterior of the handsome house has brown-to-purple stone on the lower register and cypress shingles above. The more lyrical interior features a dramatic oak-paneled two-story stair hall that incorporates references both to an Italian courtyard and to basketweave Japanese screenwork.[6]

Another kind of collaborative spirit is apparent in Teddy Roosevelt's house, Sagamore Hill, in Oyster Bay, Long Island, built in 1883. New York City architects Hugo Lamb and Charles Alonzo Rich—who created a handsome block of bay-windowed townhouses on West End Avenue in Manhattan—constructed a sprawling, colorful house for Roosevelt, using brick, mustard-yellow shingles and red-and-green trim. The wraparound porches were requested by Roosevelt, who wanted "a big piazza, very broad at the N.W. corner where we could sit in rocking chairs and look at the sunset."[7] The client also specified the spacious living hall, open through sliding doors to parlor, dining room and library. While there are Aesthetic Movement touches, such as carved sunflowers, the jumble of books, comfortable furniture and hunting trophies makes Sagamore Hill a clear reflection of Roosevelt's personality. The atmosphere is very different from the hushed aestheticism of Freer's house.

The first building Roth describes in *Shingle Styles* is by Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–86), one of the principal progenitors of the movement. Trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Richardson developed his own massive American Romanesque style. Charles McKim and Stanford White were among his pupils, and Richardson exposed them to the work of English architect Norman Shaw, whose Domestic Revival style featured gabled roofs, half-timber and tiles. The Shingle Style architects would replace Shaw's heavy ceramic tiles with wooden shingles. Richardson's Watts Sherman house (1874–76) uses a characteristically earthy palette of stone, brick and wooden shingles. But an interior stair hall is awash in light from tiny-paned windows painted with Aesthetic Movement sunflowers. Richardson's last country house, Stonehurst (1883–86), is the cover subject of Roth's book. The façade has a rustic heroism, with massive borders surmounted by weathered shingles, but the overall effect is lightened by a Palladian window. Inside, in the enormous central hall, a broad staircase rises in stages, made cosy by built-in seats along the way. The deep coffers and exposed beams of the ceiling suggest a Norse banqueting hall, but the thin spindles of the stair railing have a Japanese delicacy.

One of the triumphs of McKim, Mead & White's Shingle Style is the Newport Casino in Newport, Rhode Island (1879–81), the first country club in the United States. The exterior has a brick ground floor but is otherwise covered in shingles, and



J.C. Stevens and A.W. Cobb, C.A. Brown house, Delano Park, Portland, Maine, 1889

the composition includes a playful bell-capped clock tower, provided so people on the grounds could keep track of the time. The piazzas are screened with Japanese-style spindle lattice-work. In addition to sports facilities and lounges, the casino included a theater, with sprightly décor incorporating classical, Colonial and Japanese references, along with scallop shell and seahorse motifs. To see how these designers could seamlessly meld diverse influences, look closely at Stanford White's treatment of the dining room at Kingscote in Newport, Rhode Island. In 1880–81, remodeling a pre-Civil War house by architect Richard Upjohn, White and his team incorporated Colonial, Art Nouveau and Japanese motifs in the ballroom-sized dining room. Paneled in mahogany to a height of seven feet, the room glows, the color scheme enriched by sections of honey-colored cork and pale green Tiffany tiles near the ceiling.

While most Shingle Style buildings are private homes or resorts, there is one significant ecclesiastical architect who worked in the tradition. Born and trained in England, Ernest Coxhead designed twenty-five churches, bringing his High Church Anglican style to California. Coxhead's Church of St. John the Evangelist (1890–91) in San Francisco was demolished in the chaos following the earthquake, but photographs document a massive squat Byzantine pile, topped by a fortress-like conical-capped tower covered in shingles. Fortunately, the unusual combination of wooden shingles and medieval forms is preserved in Coxhead's stunning St. John's Church (1890–91) in Petaluma, California. The entire structure, Roth notes, is "sheathed externally in undulating and sinuous shingle surfaces."[8] Equally removed from the stone neo-Gothic and the Colonial wooden church idioms, Coxhead's startling structure is exhilarating. Compositionally, it resembles a fairy tale castle with turrets and conical roofs, but the soft gray shingles—some rows are diamond-teeth-cut—have an almost jazzy graphic energy. The interior seems vaster than it is, the space distended under wide, low arches. *Shingle Styles* also includes Coxhead's own house in San Francisco (1893). Built on a steep narrow lot in Pacific Heights, it is a shingled English cottage, arranged as a maze of odd, charming spaces with windows offering great views.

Another fine architect working in the San Francisco area was Bernard Maybeck. Born in New York City and trained as a cabinetmaker, Maybeck went to Paris to study

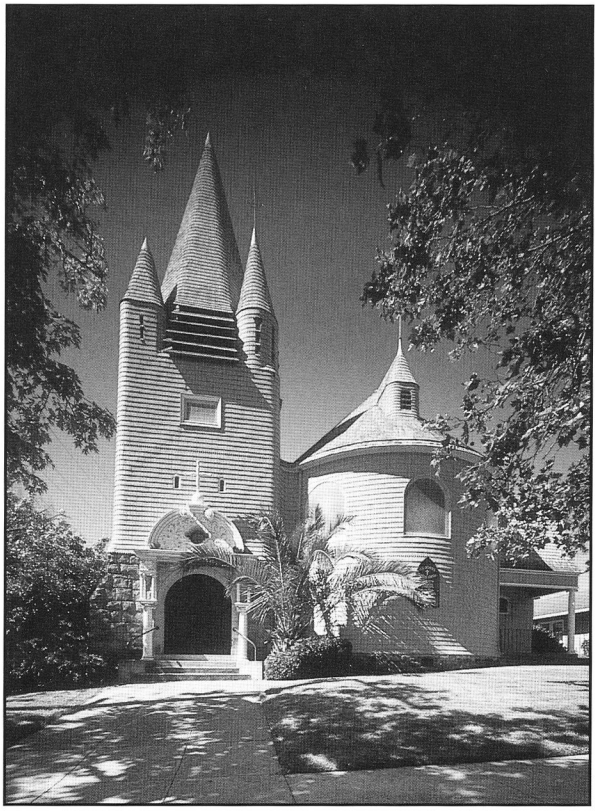
furniture design and was admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He started practicing architecture in New York, then moved to California. His sensitivity to wood is everywhere apparent in Grayoaks, Ross, California (1906), the country home of J.H. Hopps, a lumber baron. The wood used in Grayoaks is redwood, and Maybeck plays subtle variations on its color, texture and grain. The paneling and cabinetry of the interior are soft, warm and sensuous, with abstracted Gothic details, and the grain itself provides patterning, the way marble does in grander schemes. The exterior is sheathed in coarser elongated redwood shingles; the punctuated spacing establishes a striking visual rhythm. The house itself is a free version of a chalet, a simple box with enormous overhanging roof, the eaves supported by over-sized brackets. Equally striking is Maybeck's 1914 Guy Hyde Chick house in Oakland, California, again an imaginative variation on the Swiss chalet. Floor-to-ceiling windows integrate the oak trees and wisteria vines of the landscape outside with the glowing redwood-paneled interior. The openness of the floor plan, the mix of sumptuous and humble materials (such as concrete) and the continuity between the natural and built environments anticipate the regional modernism of the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto.

Perhaps the acme of interior wood design, the work of Charles Sumner Greene (1868–1957) and Henry Mather Greene (1870–1954) is represented here by the Gamble house, in Pasadena, California (1908–9). The exterior is handsome, with shingled walls under the broad horizontal lines of the roofs and generous sleeping porches. The interior, however, is simply one of the finest Arts and Crafts ensembles in the United States. Born in Cincinnati and trained at MIT, the Greene brothers worked with a few Boston architects before moving to California in 1893. During a 1901 visit to England, Charles became committed to Arts and Crafts ideals. The Japanese pavillion at the 1893 Columbian Exposition was another important catalyst. The Greenes designed every element of a house, from gardens to furniture, rugs, fixtures and stained-glass windows. The great British designer Charles Robert Ashbee, today best known for his elegant silver, visiting Greene & Greene in 1909, had high praise for the furniture workshop: "they were making without exception the best and most characteristic furniture I have seen in this country. There were beautiful cabinets and chairs of walnut and lingnum vitae, exquisite doweling and pegging, and in all a supreme feeling for the material...."[9] Ashbee's admiration for the Gamble house is easy to understand. The wood staircase is superbly crafted, with curved joints and detailing borrowed from Japanese sources. The "cloud lift" motif, taken from Japanese screen painting, in which the line shifts and rises, appears throughout the house, in open beams and furniture and light fixtures.[10] The stained glass above the sideboard in the dining room smolders with amber light.

From the beginning, the Shingle Style was historically resonant but not enslaved by the past, regional but not provincial. For architects in the mid-twentieth century, looking for a way out of international modernism's cul-de-sac, the appeal is obvious. *Shingle Styles* ends with five examples from the postmodern revival of the idiom. Robert Venturi's Petrie house in Wainscott, New York (1982) is designed to blend in with older structures, referring to the local Hamptons vernacular of shingle and clapboard. The shingled gambrel roof has cantilevered eaves to shelter long porches. Stanford White built a similar house for the painter William Merritt Chase in nearby Shinnecock Hills in 1891.[11] A distinctly contemporary touch, however, occurs in the Pop Art waves painted on the dormers of the Petrie house. Instead of brick for chimneys, Venturi used sheet metal. The interior is handsome but informal, with a big

cross-ventilated living room. Sturdy construction is an important factor in an area beset by violent storms. As theorist and builder, Venturi has championed vernacular idioms, such as carpenter gothic, and avoided stylistic purity. The Shingle Style provides a model.

There is nothing simplistic about the Shingle Style phenomenon. These architects built for affluent clients seeking a refuge from the bustle of New York or Boston (and, later, cities in California). They cobbled together, from a variety of sources, architectural and design elements that coalesced in a highly sophisticated cottage style. Academically trained and knowledgeable about every period and national style of the builder's discourse, they stayed fresh, responding to the circumstances of each commission, to everything from the topography of the sites to the personalities of the people who were going to live there. This book is a social history as well as an architectural one, and the stories of how buildings are conceived and executed can be as compelling as the physical evidence of the finished work. What may be most striking is how livable these houses look, how the interior layouts invite daydreams of curling up in an inglenook with a book or watching the sunset from a porch.



Ernest Coxhead, St. John's Church, 1890–91
Petaluma, California

The thirty buildings featured in *Shingle Style*—in magnificent color photographs of exteriors, grounds, interiors and details—offer a compendium of American architecture and design at its liveliest and most inventive. The way these structures, most of them private homes, harmonize with their natural settings, the way the interiors unfold as dynamic spaces, the way light itself seems to move through these environments—all this is captured here (as much as it can be) in these remarkable two-dimensional images. You recognize the skill and wit of the designers, but you feel the life of the house. Maintaining continuity with the past, yet freely innovative, Shingle Style structures seem organic, a natural product of the human need for shelter and delight in beauty.

(notes on page 47)

(continued from page 13) **Shingle Style Houses**

Notes

1. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmer, The *Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
2. *The Architecture of McKim, Mead & White in Photographs, Plans and Elevations 1879–1915*, reprint, introduction by Richard Guy Wilson (New York: Dover, 1990), p. xi.
3. Roth, *Shingle Styles*, p. 10.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
7. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 67.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
9. Cited, Isabella Anscombe and Charlotte Gere, *Arts & Crafts in Britain and America* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978), pp. 43–44.
10. Roth, *Shingle Styles*, p. 161.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 216.