BOOK REVIEW

Enduring Legacy

Newport Shingle Style
by Cheryl Hackett
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Reviewed by Nancy E. Berry

In Newport Shingle Style, author Cheryl Hackett explores the history, influences and evolution of the Shingle Style in Newport, RI, through 15 houses – both old and new. In the 1880s Newport gained momentum as the holiday hot spot for the country’s well-heeled, and today, some of the best examples of this uniquely American style continue to pop up there. Beginning with the earliest influence of the style, Hackett focuses her first chapter on Whitehall, a 1728 Georgian built for Bishop George Berkeley in nearby Middletown. Although the house is a striking example of the Classical building type, Hackett explains that it was not the symmetrical front that captured the attention of late-19th-century architects, but rather its long sloping gable. Architect Charles Follen McKim is credited with publishing the side view showing the sloping gable in the New York Sketchbook of Architecture in 1874 — and in doing so gave a renewed interest to the country’s Colonial building styles. As the U.S. was celebrating its centennial, Stanford White, William Mead and William Bigelow began documenting these early shingled structures to create a new American architectural style based on the country’s built past. It would come to be known as the Shingle Style.

Hackett goes on to research another great influence on the Shingle Style in Newport – the Stick Style, which “emphasized interior structure through exterior detailing consisting of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal members found of the exterior.” Richard Morris Hunt, considered the “dean of American architecture,” designed several Stick Style houses in Newport. Hackett focuses on one of Hunt’s lesser-known commissions, the stables at the Chateau Estate. Although the structure was bastardized over the years by a series of renovations, preservationist John Grossmor discovered Hunt’s original drawings and restored the façade to its original form.

The Queen Anne Style was also a significant influence on the Shingle Style. The William Watts House, built by Henry Hobson Richardson, features half-timber designs, large living halls and bay windows. Hackett explains that the vertical structure features an impressive central gable cut with a horizontal band of windows accented by an elaborate shingled upper story with undercut porches and balconies. Richardson pushes the architectural envelope to a new art form; although based on English designs, the house is distinctly American.

In Chapter Four, Hackett reveals the Shingle Style in its earliest inception. The Samuel Tilton House, designed by McKim Mead and White, is an informal, rambling cottage that retains much of its unique detailing to this day. The firm incorporated an array of ornamentation on the house in the way of stucco panels embellished with a shield and a sunburst mosaic. The façade also features rough-cut granite, half timbers and patterned shingles. For the interiors, the firm drew from several cultural sources, including Japanese, Indian and British precedents. Newport’s Isaac Bell House, also designed by McKim, Mead and White, is considered the finest example of the Shingle Style in the U.S. Hackett explains that is was the innovative combination of historic features that impressed architectural critics. The firm combined Colonial American, Medieval European and Far Eastern influences under one roof. Pattern shingles in fish scales and wave motifs reflect the seacoast just beyond its doors.

After exploring the style’s origins and influences, Hackett showcases examples from the 20th century, such as Irving Gill’s 1901 Wildacre, a sprawling Shingle Style home built for Fredrick Law Olmsted, Jr., where “a variety of angular shapes, gables dormers, and cobblestone chimney work in tandem to echo the Shingle style.” Another 20th-century masterpiece is Seabright, designed by architect William Burkin in 1987. The home’s dramatic sweeping gable, circular porch and stone chimneys draw their inspiration from the Isaac Bell House, designed a century earlier.

Interest in the Shingle Style has been renewed in the current century with such firms as Shope Reno Wharton Architects continuing the tradition in new and inspired forms. Architect Bernard Wharton has cultivated his interpretation of the style in his own getaway home called Blackwatch, where black shingles, Japanese rooflines and fieldstone chimneys create a captivating design on the coast. With many more examples of the 21st century’s take on the Shingle Style, Hackett has captured the spectrum in this elegant coffee table book, shot beautifully by photographer Kindra Clinef. It is a must have for the architect’s library.

Nancy E. Berry has written extensively about architecture and interior design for a variety of publications. She is also the author of Architectural Trim: Adding Wainscoting, Mantels, Built-ins, Baseboards, Cornices, Castings and Columns to Your Home (Rockport Publishers, 2007).