

History Of Architecture Baltimore County, Maryland

EARLY 20TH CENTURY STYLES

About 1895 a number of styles appeared that were neither varieties of Victorian nor Colonial Revival. Many houses were built in frame in the form of bungalows, chalets, Dutch Colonials, and Spanish Colonial Revival villas; other designs sprang from the Arts and Crafts movement. Almost every week, some house design by out-of-town architects appeared in the county papers and the construction plans could be ordered by mail. In addition, a variety of pre-cut house kits could be ordered from Sears-Roebuck. All of these designs tended to blur regional differences in building. Baltimore County had not experienced any authentic Dutch houses in colonial times and there was no awareness of what the Spanish and Mexicans had built in the Southwest until those areas were acquired following the Mexican War and the illustrated magazines made their designs familiar. Today, speaking of the 48 contiguous States, there are surviving Spanish missions in Texas that outrank all Baltimore County churches in antiquity. Now architectural historians put the Spanish styles at the front of the book, but the Eastern seaboard's early inhabitants knew nothing of the West nor did anyone travel to the urbanized French stronghold at Quebec. Seafarers would have been more familiar with the Caribbean and with the British Isles. Not even a Creole cottage has been found in local illustrations of that era. Only the rich, such as the Carrolls, traveled on the European continent, visiting France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. No builder in the colonies could have constructed a chateau or palazzo had any client wanted one.

Bungalows were an import from Bengal province of British India, now Bangladesh, where houses had to be open and airy, equipped with broad porches for sleeping. The compactness of the bungalow was probably its best selling point, with usable bedrooms overhead in the half-story. In some neighborhoods, entire developments consisted of identical bungalows. Bungalows were rare enough to report in the papers:

This Will Be the First Bungalow—Contractor V. E. Young, of Hereford, is erecting a one-story-and-a-half bungalow at Glencoe, N. C. Railroad, for Mr. William M. Gorsuch. All the rooms will be on one floor and there will be every feature of a typical bungalow, including exposed joists, a rough stone fireplace, wainscotted walls, large porches and modern plumbing and heating. It is in the woods on the southeast corner of Gorsuch Retirement, the old Gorsuch estate on the part known at “The Sign of the Panther.” Mr. Gorsuch recently came into possession of the tract as a gift from his father, Mr. T. T. Gorsuch. This is supposed to be the first bungalow in that section of the county and is attracting considerable attention. (*Baltimore County Union*, September 4, 1909)

Some neighborhoods contained low-slung chalets of wood and stone designed in the Arts and Crafts tradition that sprang from out-of-state. These houses featured exposed timber and stucco surfaces, occasional colored glass window lights and scattered opalescent windows and transoms; they might resemble Swiss hotels or Adirondack resort homes. They were more likely to be individually designed. The Arts and Crafts movement had various roots and was a continuation of Queen Anne and Eastlake ideas in smaller, simpler houses. Various theorists and back-to-nature idealists were involved in the trend, in Britain, William Morris, John Ruskin, and Charles Locke Eastlake. In the United States, Elbert Hubbard and his Roycraft artisans at East Aurora, New York, were involved, especially in designing country furniture. The elaborate timbered houses of California’s Green brothers and the Chicago School’s Prairie House made no appearance locally.

Spanish Colonial Revival was an import in the region and examples are hard to find. There are the four pseudo-Spanish store fronts in Edgemere, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Essex, and two Charles Street homes, The Maples and Villa Madrid. None of these structures were commissioned by Spanish or Hispanic clients. The Maryland Training School of 1905 near Towson resembled the buildings acquired by the United States on taking over the French installations in Panama. Other ethnic styles are even more rare, in spite of the varieties of immigrant families across the line in Baltimore City. Opera diva Rosa Ponselle, a born American from Connecticut, built the only authentic Italian villa in the county in 1941. There is no Greek, Russian, Lithuanian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, or Serbian reproduction known in the entire region. The row houses of Dundalk are somewhat like early 20th century suburban houses built in Germany.

A whole world of drive-in business places followed the proliferation of the automobile; Lord Baltimore and Betholine-Richfield gas stations were probably locally designed, but examples of that genre rarely survive and have become the subject matter of “commercial archaeology” along with Little Taverns, diners, milkshake parlors, and the produce stand made out of a defunct semi-convertible trolley car that stood for over 40 years at McDonogh and Reisterstown Roads.

OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL CHURCH

The design of the county’s only Spanish Colonial Revival church is credited to the Rev. Nicolai Jaselli, who became pastor of a small frame, rural Gothic chapel in 1919 and the following year built a flat-roofed basement auditorium that served as the parish until 1938 when the upper church design was executed. This stuccoed church at 1704 Old Eastern Avenue has a round-arched center entrance and a square, domed bell tower on the right. Along the sides, the windows are round topped. The model was said to have been a colonial church at El Paso, possibly the Yselta Mission, but the resemblance is not exact. (*Catholic Review*, December 31, 1986)

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel



ART DECO/MODERNISTIC

Art Deco was a style that grew out of the 1925 Paris Exposition of Decorative Modern Arts and should not be confused with Thirties Modern which had a distinct vocabulary, although in some buildings the two styles became fused or confused. Art Deco is essentially the style of decorating Modernistic buildings. Almost forgotten, Art Deco was rediscovered in the 1970s and examples were found in every major city, in office buildings, bank lobbies, and in the external decorations of many tall buildings including Baltimore's Maryland National Bank Building of 1929. Art Deco is often glimpsed in movie re-runs, and the magic city of Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* (1939) is an amalgam of Art Deco and Thirties Modern. The style was barely four years on the scene when the stock market crash and subsequent Depression discouraged construction of brave new buildings. Very much a city form, this sophisticated style usually only appeared in suburbs in the guise of movie houses in Baltimore County represented by Catonsville's Alpha Theatre.

ALPHA THEATRE

The Alpha Theatre on the north side of Frederick Road in Catonsville opened on March 1, 1928, with *Sorrell and Son*, a film accompanied by Stanley Boswell on the "Kilgen Wonder Organ." This cinema was in Modernistic style, at least on its street front, its architect John Henry Steinacker. The visible architecture was a tall parapet of concrete with four prominent parallel ribs rising above the marquee to terminate in a number of rounded ceramic decorative forms probably derived from Antonio Gaudi of Barcelona. This bold parapet supported a rectangular sign with open letters reading "ALPHA." The entire facade had an unfortunate resemblance to the Mussolini style of public building. In contrast, Towson's first, and for six decades only, movie house had a neo-classical facade not much different from the pavilions at the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Alpha Theatre



MELVIN AVENUE WATER TANK

Art Deco was somewhat old hat when that type of decoration was added to a 4 million-gallon steel tank that replaced the old Catonsville reservoir in 1936. The aesthetic design apparently the work of Bethlehem Steel Company, who won the contract on July 8, 1936 and had the project 95% finished by the end of the year. The tank was placed in service in 1937.

