

## SHAPES OF TRADITION

Accessing Insider Vision to Understand Architecture



**FOR 175 YEARS, MIGRANTS HAVE Poured INTO HOUSTON CARRYING** within them the unseen shapes of what a building should look like and what a neighborhood should be. When they first arrived, nothing—and everything—stood in the way of their creating homes and surroundings as similar as they desired to the ones they'd left behind.

Houston's early identity, like its population, was in constant flux. A letter written in 1838 by a displaced (and apparently seriously homesick) Hungarian describes a small population of enormous fluidity, in more than one sense: of some seven hundred citizens, the Hungarian writes, only "one-half were engaged in any regular business ... unless drinking and gambling may be considered such." Drinking "was reduced to a system, and ... the Texians ... not only fought but drank in platoons." He adds, "Most of those who might be considered citizens were mere adventurers, who had pitched their tents for a time upon the prairie, to see what advantages might be seized upon in the combinations which were forming from the new elements that were about to create a new nation; with a view to depart should fortune prove unkind."

Yet they stayed long enough to house themselves. "Houses could not be built as fast as required," the Hungarian wrote on. It is not claiming too much to say that this new village existed only for and in the imagination of its first inhabitants, who were free to make anything they wanted of it.

Local government did little to prevent the future from taking the shape of the newcomers' dreams; one of Houston's best known traits—the most enduring aspect of its Wild West heritage—was its lack of zoning regulations. The stranger down the street could not tell you what, or what not, to put on your lot.

The dream builders' imaginations were unhindered by the law, yet severely challenged by their means and their environment: what they could afford in their new town and what they could find there. Lack of money was one thing, but for many, scarcity of funds seemed less problematic than the absence of any signpost that might even remotely suggest "home" or "neighborhood," or hint at how to make one. The early immigrants were largely of Irish and German background. The climate, ecosystem, and natural building materials in the Houston area rendered most of the traditional building styles that they had brought with them, in their minds, incompatible with what they now saw.

How do you make what's at hand respond to the notion of a distant home? The first settlers' inner pictures of how a house should look were part of their folkloric make-up, their organic understandings of themselves and their communities. But in folk culture or vernacular culture, what is most familiar is commonly what is least often spoken.

BY CARL LINDAHL

OPPOSITE: Barn with long eave to protect pulley to lift bales.

As a teacher I came to learn early on that I don't know exactly what I do know until I try to speak it; then I suddenly realize that my understanding is much greater, or less or different, than I had earlier thought. I have learned as a student and teacher of folklore that most people tend to express their aesthetics much less often with their voices than with their hands. The artifacts that they create are infused with thoughts that we never see. A vernacular building can't tell us from the road how to experience it. If we do not dwell in a space, we will not know how to feel it, and can only guess what it does for those who do.

When you live inside a building, the building will eventually become the shell and mirror of your thoughts — gradually and paradoxically reshaped from the inside out by your memories of where you lived before. Your tradition remembers where you came from and ensures that your past is more than a memory. Structured material space is negative spiritual space: we see another's space before—sometimes long before—we know how to experience it. Yet we do know from experience how hard it is for us to change spaces without changing our minds, and how easy it is for our minds to work upon our surroundings to shape them to the power of our traditions. Tradition will spring out as we build or live within a building, no matter what we do.

**M**y great folklore teacher, Warren Roberts, once told me about running into a farmer in the Indiana countryside as the man was putting the final touches on his newly-built barn. Roberts complimented the farmer on his work, and the farmer smiled with visible pride as he pointed to the face of the structure. Sticking out from the front was an extended eave, the kind typically built to protect the tongs, pulleys, ropes, and chains that hung from the ridge beam protruding far past the barn wall: a contraption to lift hay bales from a wagon below into the loft and in the process greatly ease a farmer's work. But this new barn was also built with a large window-like opening on the side of the roof, and below that opening was a piece of farm equipment: a bale conveyor, a newer means of lifting the bales into the loft.

As soon as it was polite to do so, Roberts asked the farmer the obvious question: "You've got a bale conveyor to get your hay into the barn, then why did you build that long eave on the

front end?"

The farmer shot back without having to consider, and seemingly surprised by the words that came so quickly: "Because that's what a barn's supposed to look like."

Why is this the way a barn is supposed to look, and why is it pride-inducingly beautiful to its maker? Apparently, many other Midwesterners think that this is the way a barn should look, because in great numbers they now buy metal storage sheds with dummy loft doors and eaves that seem to serve no other earthly purpose than to show us what a barn is supposed to look like.

We could easily take the farmer's words to mean that vernacular beauty or folk beauty is nothing more than familiarity. There are some

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who say that folklore is only habit — a mixture of necessity and failed imagination. In architectural writing, such familiar, old-fashioned, seemingly functionless details are often dismissed as "post-modern pastiche." But to the farmer, this barn was, in the words of another great folklorist, Henry Glassie, "unnecessarily beautiful."

We know about tradition from experience, but we seldom articulate our knowledge. In the first week of my folklore classes, while my students are grasping for an intellectual sense of folklore and vernacular culture, one or more of them is likely to share a story, often set in Houston, that according to some proves that the folk mind is like an empty barn, simply retaining the old shapes without real content or purpose simply because that's the way a barn is supposed to look.

This is the story: Every Thanksgiving, as a young mother, the grandmother would cook the family turkey. Every year, before slipping the turkey in the oven, she would cut off the tail and the legs. When grandmother's daughter became a mother, she did the same thing. When her children asked her why, she would answer, "That's the way my mother always did it." Grandmother had lived overseas for decades and had never been present when mother made Thanksgiving dinner. But finally, after long years, she had a chance for a holiday visit. She stared in awe at mother's

modern kitchen and giant range, but then gasped loudly when mother lopped off the turkey's tail and legs. Mother blurted in defense: "But I'm just doing what you always did, every Thanksgiving when I was a girl." Grandmother answered, "But I had to mangle those turkeys. Remember how poor we were and how small the oven was? I could never find a turkey small enough to fit in that damn oven."

From this anecdote, students most often infer the message that folk tradition is passed on mindlessly, without reflection, by those who now practice it to those who will. The tale of the tailless turkey is, in one way, about the mindless repetition of custom. But it is also at least as much about communication, discovery, and the dynamic interdependence of environment and tradition.

As a girl, mother did not watch grandmother closely enough to see why grandmother hacked off the turkey's extremities. Folklore is not about frozen ideas, it's rather about context and adaptation, and about sizing up one's circumstances and environment in ways that had not been perceived before. It's about how we must think about where we live now and what we bring here from our past, how our acts are forced to take the shape of our environment and how we can creatively reshape our actions in response.

Folklore, like the turkey, has to change with the size and shape of the practitioner's surroundings. You can't have a folklore without a creative folk. If folklore were simply the mindless repetition of some past habit, all the world's folk would be long dead, victims of their failure to adapt. It is important to note that the man who added the "unnecessarily beautiful" eave to the front of his barn also made the rest of the barn and adapted it to contemporary technology: that is folklore too. And the mother who mangled the shape of the Thanksgiving turkey, still, presumably, got the recipe right: that is folklore too.

When we look closely at vernacular structures, which indeed do not always speak to us in terms that we feelingly understand, we tend to find that folklore in general, and vernacular architecture in particular, are both public and private. Folklore embraces both shared images and interior imaginings, as in the barn made by a man who has never told us but rather shows us with his hands what a barn is supposed to look like. The public and the private mix together in patterning a building or a neighborhood. In order to access the visions of those who inhabit vernacular structures we need

to watch how their actions articulate their inner understandings and, most of all, to listen for the stories that help us tease out the unseen knowledge and make its complexity easier for outsiders to understand.

On one level, folkloric pattern may seem to be, like the unreflective mother at Thanksgiving, both repetitious and dull. But folkloric pattern is like a picture frame: it seldom exists simply to replicate, but often also to surround and call attention to what's new and different. Folkloric beauty is more than familiarity. Its patterning provides both comfort and tension—like yoga or blues, it constrains you with simple, repeating formulae precisely for the purpose of setting you free. The familiarity of the pattern helps make every slight change stand out in high relief, rendering every restatement a blend of the old and the new.

Consider the case of Frenchtown, Houston, a community that takes its name from the Creoles who first settled there, a largely French-African-American population that migrated to Houston from south Louisiana.

Frank Broussard keeps an altar in his home; it shows us what a Creole soul is supposed to look like. The map of Frenchtown hangs next to a wooden cross clustered with photos of his forebears who settled there and images of angels, black and white, that hover above a nativity scene displayed all year round.

There had been Creoles in Houston in the nineteenth century; sometime around 1900, they began settling in Houston's Fifth Ward. They had come from towns like Opelousas and Natchitoches, but mainly from outlying, deep-country farms. Many of the first migrants were railroad workers who settled conveniently close to the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks that run through Fifth Ward. The earliest migrants came more or less voluntarily, but they found ways of maintaining much of their former rural world even in the midst of the biggest city that many of them had ever seen.

In 1927 the voluntary population was joined by former neighbors from the farmlands fleeing the Great Mississippi Flood, the natural disaster that forced the sudden displacement of more people than any American storm before Hurricane Katrina. Frank Broussard's father rescued neighbors from their Louisiana rooftops and helped bring them to Houston. Nearly 80 years later, Frank, at age 68, participated in a second rescue mission when a storm even more murderous than the Mississippi flood once again drove country

Creoles into Frenchtown. At one point about a dozen of his displaced relatives—including Angela Trahan of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and her husband and children—were living in Frank's Frenchtown house. Some of them, the newest wave of Creole settlers, remain today.

The evacuees of 1927 did not exactly choose to be urbanites. To survive, to make the shapes of their traditions work for, and not against, them they transformed their corner of the city into a suburb of the country. There is still a rural air to Frenchtown: even at the turn of the millennium Frenchtowners wake up to crowing roosters, plant giant country-sized plots of corn and okra on their lots, ride horses through their neighborhood, and—at least as late as 1997, when I was invited to one—use their garages to stage that most rural of all Creole rituals, the home boucherie, in which several families get together to slaughter a hog and transform, as the proverb goes, “everything but the squeal” into something good to eat.

And the migrants also brought with them their inner vision of what a house should look like. Louisiana's Creole prairie-scape is architecturally diverse, but one house shape tends to dominate. Any Creole carpenter can make it, and most have. It looks like Frank Broussard's home: a long, simple shotgun shape, with the roof extending past the front walls to form a galerie, or porch, facing the road. It's a pervasive shape for Creole homes, in the countryside as well as the town. The same shape dominates in the Creole neighborhoods in and near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi,

where relatives of Frank Broussard and Angela Trahan built houses in the 1930s.

In Opelousas, Louisiana, the capital of prairie Creole culture, you can still order a house, designed by contemporary architects, to be built in this same seemingly ageless shape. The same shape molds public buildings, even Opelousas's Jewish temple, though the temple's front bay is no longer a galerie and the walls are made of unfamiliar brick. It was perhaps the most common shape to go underwater near the Gulf Coast when the Great Mississippi Flood drove Creoles from their homes and down the train tracks toward Houston. It was a shape that the evacuees carried in their heads—a traditional understanding of what a house should look like, but it had to be adapted in a corner of the city where many lots were square and where many of the homes had already been built for earlier city dwellers with different ideas of what a house should look like.

For the Frenchtown newcomers, some of whom arrived with no possessions and no material wealth, how to shape any home, no matter what it looked like, proved a monumental problem. One solution was to appropriate the broken-down abandoned boxcars from the Southern Pacific Railroad yards and convert them into houses. Some of these boxcar houses are still around—their origins well disguised. They sometimes take the shotgun shape. But whatever the builders' hopes, their material resources were often so limited that they could build only one room at a time, in an adding style that seldom allowed them to

Our Mother of Mercy, based on photograph taken after construction in 1929.



**THE CHURCH IS BUILT NOT ONLY IN THE WAY A CREOLE HOUSE SHOULD LOOK, BUT ALSO IN THE WAY A CREOLE LIFE DOES LOOK.**

follow a master plan. The size and shape of each room depended on the lumber you could afford, or find.

When Creoles built public structures they tended to look like barns. The Continental Zydeco ballroom, when first built, was a general store attached to a house. Some Creole public buildings, like the shallow-eaved Silver Slipper zydeco dancehall, shared the favored shape of the prairies. In choosing to shave the galerie off the front end of the Silver Slipper, the Cormier family — the same family that has run the Silver Slipper since its establishment — may well have had in mind the same thing expressed to me by a country store owner in Louisiana: “I don’t want people hanging around in front of my store. I want them inside, doing business.”

The new arrivals brought their Catholic faith with them, but, it seems, felt at least a little lost inside the broad brick walls of St. Nicholas, officially the oldest black Catholic church in Houston, unfamiliarly soaring and monumental. In 1929, when they undertook to build their own Frenchtown Catholic church, the Creole carpenters, including Herbert Trahan, uncle of Frank Broussard and grandfather of Angela Trahan, settled on a shape that they all knew; a supremely humble shape for the new urban landscape, but created in the Creole way, by neighbors working together. As you look at one of the later photos from before it was torn down, you see a structure that, except for its size, could easily be a Creole house—if the front porch weren’t enclosed to serve as a church foyer, and if that cross weren’t standing on top of the roof.

I discovered an older photo of Our Mother of Mercy—and I was both astonished and, on further thought, unsurprised to see that it had indeed first been built to simulate a country home, with the galerie out front: a house of God assuringly like the house just down the road from where its builders once had lived. This shape, which unites worship, commerce, privacy, and partying, is simply a solid realization of the shape of Creole culture.

The church is built not only in the way a Creole house should look, but also in the way a Creole life does look. In the Creole countryside in the 1920s, a family dwelling served nearly all institutional purposes. The neighborhood would crush itself into a



**TOP:** Front of Frank Broussard's house.  
**MIDDLE:** Frank Broussard.  
**ABOVE:** Frank's altar.

single home—a different home—every Saturday night and every Sunday after church and every Mardi Gras evening; on Saturday, so the young people could dance and court; on Sundays to share the day of rest with people too long separated by their diverse work; on Mardi Gras, to feast like there was no tomorrow.

When the Creole carpenters gave Our Mother of Mercy a galerie, they were saying with their hands that the old neighborhood ties still bound, that all their lives would still be shared, here as before, neighbor to neighbor. This gesture is not failed imagination; rather, it invigorates an old design with a creative and necessary flourish. It was a radical act to give a church a house-style galerie when churches were among the very few structures without one, and a second radical act to forego the rooftop cross for the sake of homey familiarity. The Creole carpenters made of one church a common home to serve in the place of the separate homes that many in the community still lacked the material resources to fashion for themselves.

Angela Trahan, a Mississippi Creole who had once lived in Houston, was forced to return to Frenchtown after Hurricane Katrina literally blew away the roof over her head. She had been minding children huddled in the dormitory of a Catholic boys’ school when the storm surge crashed through the walls and threatened to drown them. As they struggled toward the safety of a sounder building the dormitory’s elevator flew by them.

But a few blocks away was Sycamore Street, where Angela’s grandfather had built four Creole-style houses, and they were the only four structures on that street that were still fully intact when the waters receded. Now back in Mississippi, Angela enjoys their galleries, and her relatives have given them new paint. The galerie is focal and festive. The Creole carpentry has proved its ability to survive. The survival of these houses is not just the habit or the job of survival. It is clearly the art of survival that the Trahans celebrate and practice with the flourishes of the double columns and pointed rafters, the mullioned entryway, and the festive acts and reflective moments that they live on that front porch, which serves as the perfect stage for how a Creole life should look. **c**