

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION

Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.

(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Barbara Kernan Dept. Women's Studies

Course Number and Name WMNS 434: Design and Domesticity Semester completed Fall '04

Title of Nominated Work "Remodeling My Dream House"

CATEGORY:

~~Sampson:~~

Undergraduate Research Paper _____

Undergraduate Project _____

Graduate _____

See _____

Olson _____

Kessler _____

Turell _____

Belter _____

STUDENT INFORMATION:

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

"Remodeling My Dream House"
Alison Michelle Ongna

Remarks regarding nomination of this paper
submitted by Barbara Kernan
Women's Studies

This assignment was the culminating project for the Women's Studies 434 course called "Design and Domesticity." Students were provided with an actual house design from an American plan book from the late 1800's. An exterior view and a floor plan with some description provided the basis for student research and synthesis of course discussion and readings. In addition to the house itself, a photograph of an actual room from the period featuring period decor was provided. While this room was not actually in this particular home, it could have been and offered a way for students to analyze gendered space via decorating detail. Each student's house and room were different from the others distributed. Some homes reflected the occupants' wealth while others reflected a more modest middle class income.

Alison's project was particularly successful, I feel, because of her familiarity with the work of Gwendolyn Wright, Daphne Spain, and Foy and Schlereth. Alison has studied these important texts and applied them to her analysis of her particular house and room. Her prose is clear and easy to follow and makes the narrative appealing. She has internalized Thorstein Veblen's theory of the leisure class, the Victorian interest in all things medieval, and the Victorian desire to categorize, classify, and display from class readings, discussions, and field trips. The concepts of private and public space and spheres comes through in this analysis. She demonstrates an awareness of the privilege such a home exudes often at the expense of those servants who kept it functioning. She notes how the domestic practices of the past have influenced those of today. Limited to an eight-page analysis, she wasted no space in getting to important concepts. This paper reveals a solid understanding of the material culture lessons offered in American Victorian architecture and home decor.

Remodeling My Dream House

Women's Studies 434 Design and Domesticity

Final Project 12/14/2004

Alison Michelle Ongna

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

When I was in fourth grade, one of my assignments was to write an essay that described my dream home (I miss the days when assignments were that easy). As an inspiration for *this* paper, I actually searched through my “archives” and found what I had written. Many components were similar—we had to walk our readers through the house and describe it as best we could. I dreamed of a grand, Victorian style abode with towers and turrets, fine, intricate detailing, bay windows, and the biggest front porch you could imagine. Inside, I imagined huge, elegantly decorated, stylishly adorned rooms reflecting the finest things money could buy—heavy drapery, artwork on the walls, gorgeous furniture, and beautiful details. I based many of the features of my dream home on the gorgeous, Victorian houses that still stood in the older sections of my town. I was fascinated by big old houses, and my dream house reflected this. However, the construction of my house was purely superficial. At that age, it didn’t occur to me that all of the different details I was dreaming of had a story behind them—that the features characteristic of these types of homes represented the past and helped define a culture different from the one I was living in, thus providing a basis for understanding the time period in which they were built. It never occurred to me that houses served a purpose other than a living space—a place to hang your hat, so to speak. Now I realize that studying the spaces that people lived in and the things they utilized allow us to experience life as they might have. For example, Gwendolyn Wright (1981) asserts that “domestic architecture illuminates norms concerning family life, sex roles, community relations, and social equality. Of course, architecture itself does not directly determine how people act or how they see themselves or others; yet, the associations a culture establishes at any time between a ‘model’ or typical house and a notion of the model family do encourage

certain roles and assumption.” Daphne Spain (1992) agrees with this, saying, “homes serve as metaphors—they show how spatial and social relations reinforce and relate to one another. They are not just shaped by materials, but by ideas, values, and norms as well.” The home I was given to analyze is actually quite similar to the one that I imagined back in fourth grade. But, unlike my fourth grade assignment, as I walked through this house—its exterior, floor plan, and interior—I paid special attention to what the different details reflected about the culture of time period in which it existed; specifically what the different aspects of the home meant in terms of economic, gender and class relations.

Victorian houses reflect a time in America when citizens were becoming quite self-conscious about where they lived and how their homes appeared to other people. Architecture, which was previously considered to be private in nature was becoming quite public and houses were now coming to reflect the owner’s social conditions and class status (Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992) . This striving for showing off and presenting a picture of wealth to others, along with advancements in technologies that facilitated mass production, lower cost of materials, and the ability to create fine, detailed ornamentation are reflected in the grandness, the uniqueness, and the intricacy of the exterior of Victorian homes. The outsides of these houses told something about their inhabitants, and how you were viewed depended quite a bit on what your house looked like and what is said about you ((Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992). The first thing I noticed about the exterior of my house was the front porch. Its one of the most prominent features of the exterior of the house as it is large, grand, and wraps around the entire front. It has many columns to support its overhanging roof and protrudes from the

rest of the house. This porch serves many functions in reflecting the social class of the family who inhabits it (Wright, 1981). First, it exemplifies a connection with nature. The people who lived there could sit on the porch and enjoy the outdoors. More importantly, they had the *time* to sit on the porch and enjoy the outdoors. They had enough money for a life of leisure and didn't have to be constantly working to make ends meet. This was especially the case for women, who, according to Daphne Spain (1992), were relegated to the domestic spheres of life rather than the economic ones--thus the ability to sit on the front porch was tied to the fact that her husband's job allowed her to do so--having a front porch symbolized that their husbands were economically stable enough so that they didn't have to be cleaning and maintaining the home--they had servants to take care of their dirty work for them, thus they could sit on the porch and drink lemonade and appreciate nature. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the front porch protrudes from the rest of the house. This is an added expense as bump outs were harder to build and therefore indicates that money wasn't really an object when the home was built. Furthermore, the little details, such as the columns on the porch, the steeped roof of the turrets, the dipped shingles on the third story, and the intricate beveling around the windows show that no expense was spared. These features make the house distinct and unique, which was important in those times, and reflect little concern for money (Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992). Variance in ornamentation showed that many possibilities were open for the family and brought to mind elegance and expensive handiwork and materials--"more is more" was the motto of the day, and therefore, if it could be done, why not do it? Additionally, according to Jessica Foy and Thomas Schlereth (1992), the exterior of the house had to evoke a feeling of home to the outside observer--it should

feature details that everyone regarded as symbolic of the comforts of their own home. Since the home was generally identified with the woman of the household, to the outsider, whether or not it served this purpose reflected the ability of the woman inside to make her house feel like a home (Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992; Clark, 1992). My house featured several chimneys, roofs that overhung above windows, and steep, deep eaves, all of which are considered to be symbols of the comfort of home (Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992). An additional feature of the exterior of this house that I paid special attention to were the towers and turrets that protruded from the side. Castle-like structures similar to these were very popular in Victorian homes. Medieval tales and legends were becoming popular again, and this was evidenced in architecture as well as on library shelves. Medieval structures also reflected the social status of the house's inhabitants--they live like kings and queens. However, the popularity of these structures also symbolizes the view of women that was widespread during the time. Thus, the towers on my house seem to reflect women's dependence on men. Women were damsels, waiting in their towers for their knights in shining armor to come home and provide the means for them to live like the queens they were.

Like the exterior make-up of Victorian homes, the interior floor plan of these houses also reflect the times in which they were created. However, unlike the outside of the home, which reflected a concern with appearances, the structure and floor plan of the inside reflected functional purposes. Each room had a purpose, as did its location in the house. Much like each member of the household had a designated function and place, so did each room in the house. Order in the house paralleled order in society, which was becoming more and more important in the world, as distinctions between gender and

social class were becoming more and more distinct (Spain, 1992). Thus, the floor plans of Victorian homes played a key role in perpetuating gender and class relations, probably even more so than the exterior of the house. According to Gwendolyn Wright (1981), each home needed separate areas for family life, personal privacy, household production, and social relations. Victorian homes were divided into many rooms--the openness that is common in houses today was frowned upon, and the divisions between rooms reflected divisions in society between men and women as well as division between servant and master (Spain, 1992). For example, various rooms in the home, like the library, were thought to be more male than female, while rooms like the parlor were associated with women (Spain, 1992). Where these rooms were placed in the home, as well as whether or not they were open for outsiders also played a role in perpetuating the gender and class relations of the time (Spain, 1992). I paid particular attention to these factors as I looked at the interior floor plan of my home. On the first story, one entered the house from the veranda, into the front hall, which was quite large and probably allowed the residents of the home to determine whether or not guests were worthy of being allowed in. This is where they accepted (or rejected) guests. The other principle rooms of the house, namely the library, the dining room, and the reception room, all thought to be more "public" spaces stemmed off the hall. However, in the description of the design that accompanied my floor plan, it was stated that the principle rooms were all connected by sliding doors, thus the rooms could become private if need be. There was a main staircase off the hall as well. As the staircase led up to the second story, it curved, keeping the upstairs, where the bedrooms were, off limits to the public. The reception room, which I equated with the parlor, is a space traditionally associated with the woman of the household, and in my

house, this room was located right at the very front of the home and was very open to public display. The library, on the other hand, was located toward the back and at some distance from the public, “women’s space” of the reception room. This allowed the man of the house to remove himself from the family and have his own, private sanctum and “male territory (Spain, 1992).” Also, the library had more than one entry, while the reception room only had one. This allowed business dealings to occur without interrupting family life and removed the woman of the house from contact outside the home. The library also “protected” the lady of the home from scandalous talk, smoking and other male debauchery (Spain, 1992). I thought it was interesting to note that the library was a room intended strictly for male use (i.e. women weren’t allowed) while there were no rooms intended specifically just for the woman--the patriarch of the home could come and go as he pleased in any room, but this was not the case for the matriarch. Additionally, there was no room that served as a sanctum for women--she had no place to retire to or collect her thoughts.

In between the library and the reception hall was a sitting room. According to Wright (1981), the sitting room is more for intimate family relations. This is evident in my floor plan because there is no direct entrance from the hall to the sitting room, thus it is kept private from guests. Also, because it is situated between the reception hall and the library, it connects the two sexes and reflects a place for the family to come together.

My floor plan shows an obvious distinction between the “masters” of the household and the servants and exemplifies how Victorian homes separated the two different social classes. The rooms where servants performed their main duties, such as the kitchen and the pantry, were located at the rear of the house, and there was no direct

access from the front hall to these rooms, thus, the servants were kept away from the family as well as visitors (Wright, 1981). There were several sets of rear staircases that led from the cellar to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the upstairs and the upstairs to the attic. These staircases were straight up and down, rather than curved, and limited the amount of contact the family had with their servants. Additionally, the kitchen and the dining room were connected by a butler's pantry, which facilitated preparing the food and then serving it, without having to interrupt the family. Additionally, the house featured a back porch, which was probably used predominately by the servants and served as a separate entrance for workers.

The upstairs of the home consisted mostly of bedrooms. The staircase leading up to it was curved, which reflected the private nature of the rooms. There were two rooms in the back of the upstairs that probably served as servants quarters because they seem to be separated from the rest of the rooms. The rear staircase from the kitchen led directly to these two rooms, and they were close to the linen closet and the bathroom. Also, the hall at the top of the main staircase led to the front bedrooms rather than the back two, which marked a separation between the social classes. However, the house did have an attic with two finished rooms, and the attic was commonly where maids lived (Spain, 1992). It is possible then, that the rooms on the second story were for a nanny or someone who was above the level of a servant, but still performed duties for the residents of the home.

Although the structure and make up of the interior of Victorian homes were functional and purposeful, the decorations in those rooms were far from it. Display of material possessions and personal taste in detail and decoration became very prominent in

this era (Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J., 1992). Much like the exterior of the house, how the rooms in the house were decorated reflected the family who dwelled there--adornments in rooms were all about appearances and putting on a show for others (Wright, 1981). Not only did home furnishings display to other people how wealthy you were, but they also reflected the woman's ability to make home a place of comfort and rest after returning to work. A woman's role was no longer tied to economic production, so she was supposed to redirect her efforts to creating a sense of home for her husband and family (Spain, 1992). Decorations depicted her ability in doing this, as well as whether or not her husband's career provided her the leisure time to do so. The reception hall in my home probably served such purposes, and therefore, I think its décor would look very similar to the picture I have. According to Gwendolyn Wright (1981), the parlor, or reception hall in Victorian times contained a large variety of pieces and style and was supposed to evoke a festive air. Because it was used to spend time with guests, the décor was strictly for display purposes, and it was the woman who was predominately responsible for decorating it, thus it was pretty much the woman on display. According to Jessica Foy and Thomas Schlereth (1992), everything should be cheerful, elegant, delicate, and ladylike. Also, every space should be adorned with ornamentation. These descriptions certainly seem to fit my room. It is pretty much obvious that a woman decorated it and that it is considered a "woman's space." For example, the piano is a prominent piece in the room, and playing musical instruments was predominately a female activity. The room is also full of items, like the pictures and art on the wall, the pieces on the mantle, the upholstery on the furniture, and the curtains on the window, that evoke an attention to detail and a sense of domesticity that could only be attributed to women (Wright, 1981).

Men would probably consider these items to be frivolous and fluffy. Everything about this room evokes femininity, intricacy and elegance. Also, it is quite obvious that the family who uses this room is quite wealthy. The moldings on the ceiling are heavily detailed and intricately carved, as is the large mirror on the wall, the table, the piano and bench. They are a reflection of modern technology, and the more modern, the better the family's place in society. The furniture is elegantly upholstered in velvets and brocades, and the wallpaper is rich and elegant looking, both of which are markers of wealth. The prominent place of the piano shows that the female of the household was granted enough leisure time to learn how to play a musical instrument. Additionally, there are many objects in this room that reflect a tie to nature, which presents a sense of worldliness and sophistication to the outside observer. For example, there is a large window to let in natural sunlight, several huge plants (I think one is actually a tree), and many of the pieces on display look like they were brought back from travels to other parts of the world. There is even a globe standing in a corner. These also presented a sense of leisure time to guests--the people of the household were able to travel and enjoy nature because they were financially stable enough to do so.

Modern homes have come a long way from those being built in Victorian times and, in many ways, have evolved quite a bit. For example, most homes no longer have servants quarters or back staircases. The medieval-style structures that were so common on Victorian homes are no longer popular. However, there are many Victorian trends that have influenced modern day homes. Home builders and architects today share the same "more is more" mentality. Houses today are, like Victorian homes, sprawling and grandiose, almost to the point of being ostentatious. They are still representative of status

and class, even though people today aren't as conscious of this distinction. The same intricate detailing featured on Victorian homes are often shown on modern houses-- columns, porch railings, and detailed trim are as popular today as they were back then. Large, wrap around porches similar to the ones on Victorian homes are extremely common as well. Inside the modern home, rooms still have a purpose and a function, and most rooms have the same function today as they did back then. For example, the modern family room shares the same functions as the sitting room, and the modern computer room is similar to the Victorian library. Additionally, rooms in a modern home tend to exhibit a gendered "feel". Most computer rooms are decorated in masculine tones and are often delegated to the patriarch of the family. Finally, like Victorian families, modern families use their houses to put themselves on display. Souvenirs and artifacts from vacations take up shelves and cabinets putting the many places they've been on display, family pictures adorn the walls, showing off the various experiences the residents of the home have been involved, and fine paintings and elegant furniture still are used to show off good taste and an appreciation for culture. These are all placed prominently in rooms designated for guests, for the purpose of public display--people today want others to be as aware of their lifestyles as those in the past.

As stated before, architecture reflects a great deal about the social, economic, and political climate of the times. While I examined the interior and exterior of my home, I tried to imagine myself living and experiencing the house the same way that the people who actually may have lived in it did. I tried to reconstruct my thinking about the features of the house--rather than looking at them for their surface value, I looked at what those features meant. The dream house I wrote about in fourth grade was very similar to

the one I wrote about today, but it was missing these components. To me, this assignment was a way of “renovating” the dream house of my younger years and including details that I had never considered before. It was fun to put together the pieces of the puzzle, to attempt to find out the secrets of the past, and to rebuild the house. Therefore, after all these years, I think my dream house is finally complete.

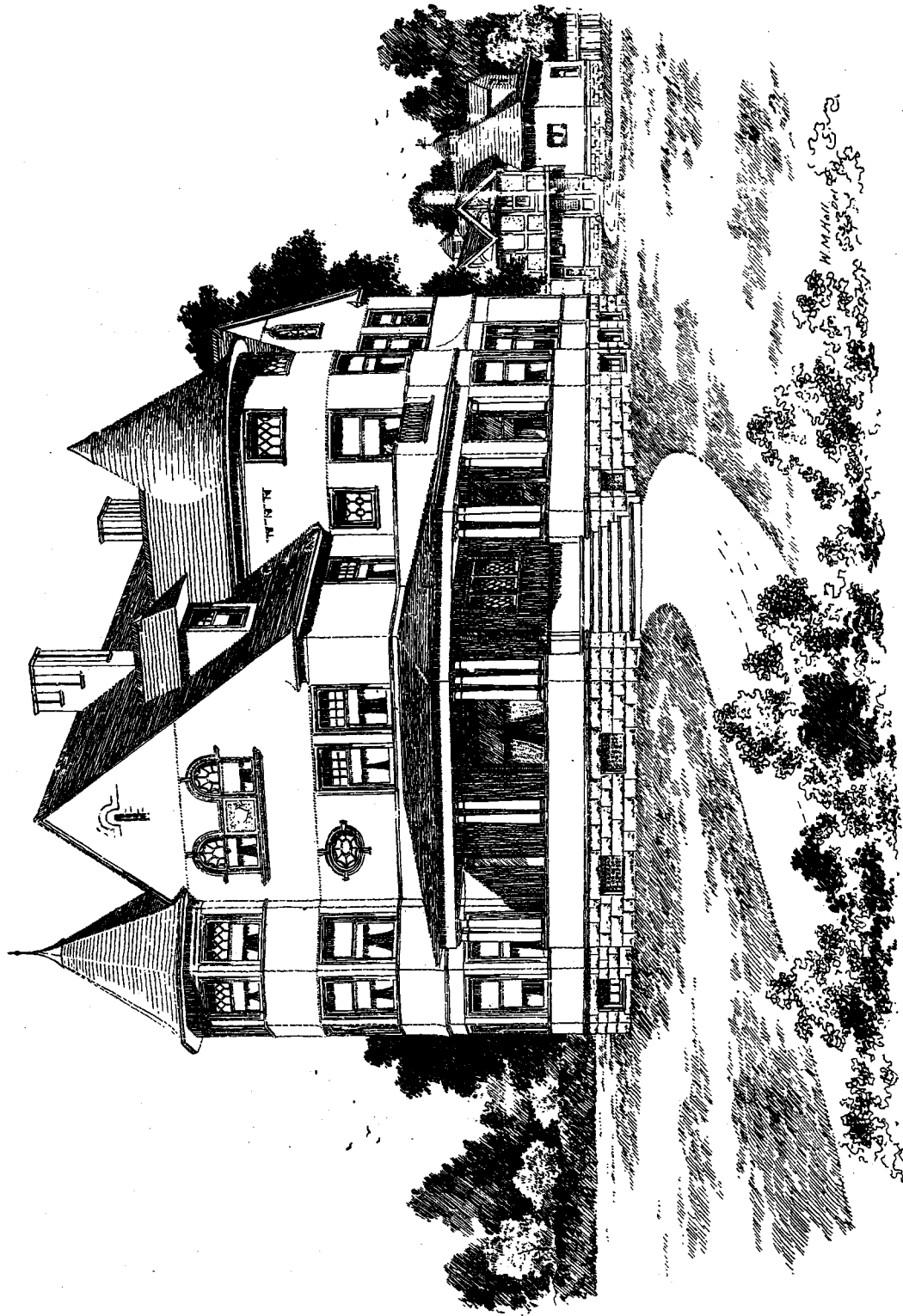
References

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Foy, J.H., & Schlereth, T.J. (Eds). (1992). *American home life, 1880-1930: a social history of spaces and services*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press

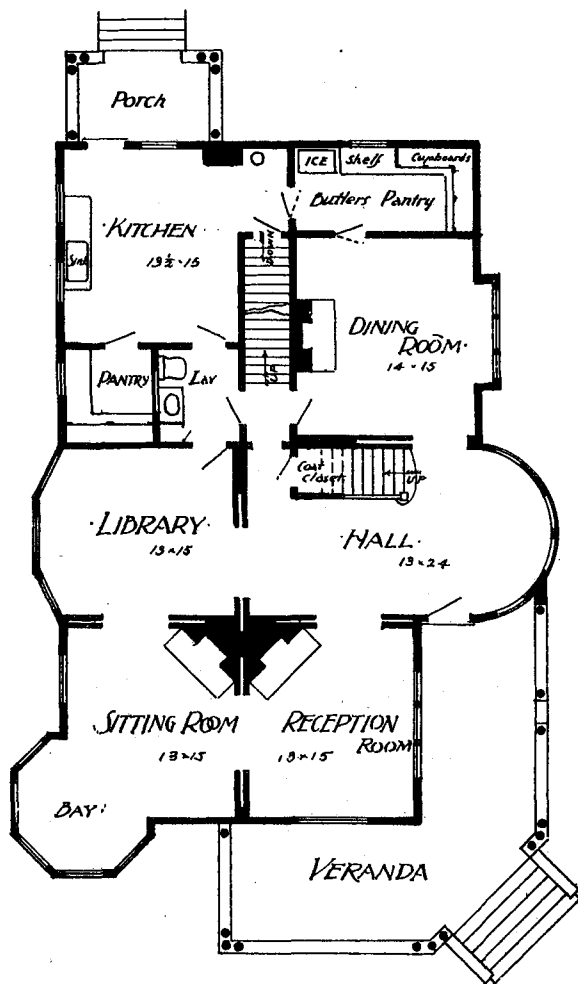
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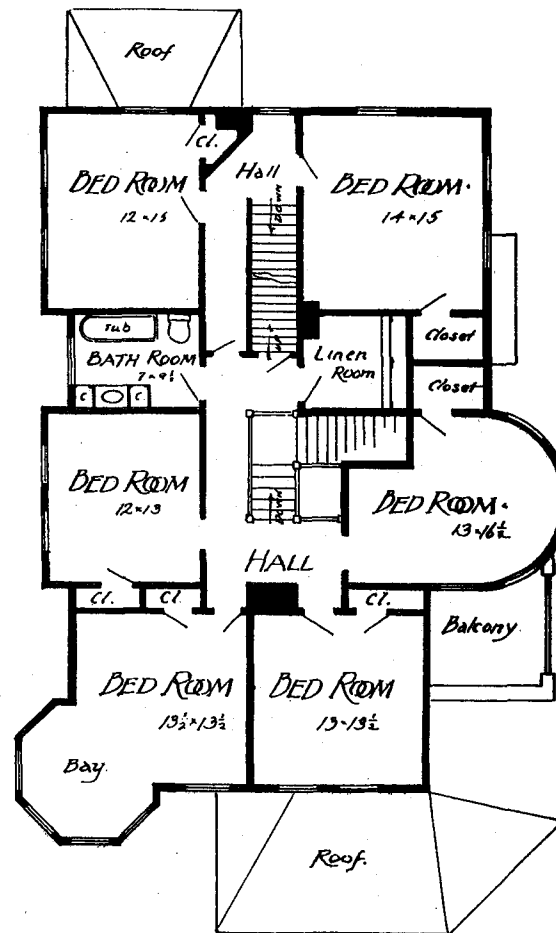


DESIGN No. 379.

Cost \$7,800, without Plumbing, Heating or Mantels.



FIRST STORY PLAN.



SECOND STORY PLAN.

DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN No. 379.

GENERAL DIMENSIONS.—Length, 64 ft. over front veranda; width, 41 ft. Height of stories: cellar, 7 ft. 6 in.; first story, 9 ft. 6 in.; second story, 9 ft.; attic, 8 ft. 6 in.

EXTERIOR MATERIALS.—Foundation, brick; four courses of 9-inch ashlar above grade. Whole house sheathed with 7/8-inch matched sheathing and building paper, and covered with 3/2-inch lap siding on first story and dipped shingles on second story, dormers and roofs; chimneys of pressed brick with stone trimming; paint, three coats.

INTERIOR FINISH.—Three coats of plaster, with rough hard finish in hall, dining room, kitchen, pantry, lavatory and hall of second story; balance of plaster with white hard finish; floors of hall and dining room of quartered oak; floors of kitchen, pantry, lavatory and bath room of maple; hall and dining room finished in quartered white oak; reception room and sitting room in cherry; library in quartered sycamore; kitchen, pantry, lavatory and bath room in Georgia pine; balance of house in pine or whitewood; all finished natural in four coat work, with hard wood rubbed to a dull finish.

ACCOMMODATIONS.—Cellar under entire house, with cement floor, divided by brick division walls into the necessary rooms, such as vegetable and fruit cellars, laundry, furnace room, drying room and coal bins. Cellar ceiling plastered one coat; mantels in reception room, sitting room and dining room. Principal rooms in first story are all connected with each other by sliding doors; cove ceilings in reception room, sitting room and library; closets under main stairs; large pantry off kitchen, also butler's pantry connecting kitchen with dining room. All bed rooms have closets fitted with shelves and drawers; large linen room fitted with linen cupboard and drawers; rear stairs from cellar to kitchen, from rear hall to second story, and from second story hall to attic; two rooms finished in attic; windows and doors all of good size and special design; windows of all main rooms in first story and front bed rooms in second story glazed with plate glass; front door glazed with beveled plate glass.

Cost.—Contract cost, \$7,800, without plumbing, heating or mantels.

Price of working drawings, specifications, etc., all in duplicate, all details and license to build, \$85.00.

