

What's Los Feliz Style?

by Richard Stanley

Did you know that about half the homes in Los Feliz are either “Spanish” or “Mediterranean” style? There’s a reason for that, and it has to do with the era in which most of the houses in our neighborhoods were built and the popular styles of architecture prevalent then. Sometimes I think that half the houses I’ve sold were built in 1923 alone--not surprising when one considers that the population of Los Angeles more than doubled during the ‘20s to nearly a million and a quarter persons. All those newcomers had to live somewhere, and that “somewhere” included the burgeoning neighborhoods in the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains such as Los Feliz and Silver Lake.

So why were the Spanish and Mediterranean houses so popular in the ‘20s? Let’s take a look:

Background

Spanish and Mexican era structures used indigenous materials and their simple application to solve the basic need for shelter. Adobe bricks, rough-hewn timbers, reeds and tar were used by the Spanish to build an everyman’s house that was relatively warm in winter and cool in summer. Scaled-up, these materials, along with clay tiles, were used for the famous chain of California missions. By the mid- to late-19th Century, the humble houses of earlier times were not sophisticated enough to meet the tastes of ambitious, self-made Angelenos, many of whom were transplants from the East and Mid-West. The preferred style then was what we generally call “Victorian” today--actually a melange of many historical revivals.

A California Style

By the late 19th Century, professional architects and local boosters were searching for a unique and appropriate style for California. Its debut was the California Building at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. This “Mission Revival” building was widely admired and copied, as in our own Herald Examiner Building downtown. Look for clean, white stucco walls; scalloped parapets that evoke the *campanario*, or bell towers, of the missions; arches and arcades, especially at entrances; low-pitched tile roofs or at least tile-capped low parapets and cast ornaments. This style lent itself to everything from humble “Mission” bungalow courts to train and gas stations and was popular from the 1890s to the 1920s. A good example is the c.1905 house at Kellam Avenue and Douglas Street.

Another exposition, this one, the San Diego Panama-California exposition in 1915, featured extravagant Spanish and Cuban architectural forms designed by Bertram Goodhue (of downtown library fame) and Carlton Winslow (who lived in Los Feliz)--

many of these buildings still stand in Balboa Park. The style proved so popular that not only were houses in new developments required to subscribe to gabled, tiled roofs (as in Moreno Highlands in Silver Lake) but whole cities were given over to this style, as when Santa Barbara, leveled by a major quake in 1925, rebuilt overnight into an old Spanish town.

Look for these traits: broad, white or creamy stucco surfaces (sometimes conspicuously textured) with few openings, usually deeply cut in; low, pitched, tile roofs; extensive use of arches, ironwork and glazed and unglazed tile flooring and ornamentation; much indoor/outdoor access via French doors; shallow upper-story balconies and, occasionally, Moorish influences. The whole effect is asymmetrical and flamboyant. This style lasted into the early 1930s, then fell out of favor. By the 1940s, through the 1970s, the Spanish style houses were distinctly *passé*. Fred MacMurray's line in 1944's film, *Double Indemnity*, about Barbara Stanwyck's Los Feliz Spanish house, "must have cost somebody about thirty thousand bucks," is, after all, said mockingly. This classic Spanish house stands at Quebec and Creston Drives in the Vine Hills.

Spanish Relatives

A first-cousin to the Spanish house, was the Pueblo Revival, or what we might call today, Santa Fe. This style, with its heavy stucco and projecting vigas, parapeted roofs, tree trunk columns and beehive fireplaces, was rare locally, but a good example exists on Avon Park Terrace near Park Drive.

A popular 1930s successor to the Spanish house was the Monterey Colonial style. Look for American Colonial influences especially around entrances; shutters; interior trim and built-ins. The most salient characteristics of the Monterey Colonial are the overall rectilinear form with the upper story projecting balcony that is often the full width of the house.

The Mediterranean house co-existed with the Spanish house, however, its inspiration came from Tuscany and Provence, not Iberia. Look for smooth stucco on clean, almost austere, facades. The symmetric, rectilinear form has a low-pitched tile roof. Casement windows often have shutters. The conspicuous entrance might bear the sole ornamentation. As the Spanish style is flamboyant, the Mediterranean is formal. Still, many so-called Mediterranean houses flirted with Spanish elements.

Market Importance

Today, vintage Spanish and Mediterranean homes are the gold standard of local buyer preference. Rarely do I hear a buyer tell me NOT to show them Spanish or Mediterranean houses. Even buyers of highly-styled Modern, or "Architectural", houses will buy a Spanish or Mediterranean house "with integrity", i.e., in authentic condition. Lately, I have heard West Side brokers say that their buyers are looking for a "Los Feliz

Spanish” house--proof that what was once in vogue, and then *passé*, really can be new and in demand again.

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