

From Slave Cabins to “Shotguns”: Perceptions on Africanisms in American Architecture

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Too often our view of architecture is focused solely on the unique monumental structures designed in large part to display the wealth and power of the elite... while the greatest part of the built environment—the houses that most people live in—goes unnoticed. —John Michael Vlach

The transportation of African slaves to the New World from colonial to antebellum periods had a profound affect on the creation of not only a distinctive African-American culture, but also on the formulation of the dominant American culture in North America. Many African cultural traits, or “Africanisms,” that traversed the Atlantic Ocean with the slaves have influenced our culture over time through music, dance, language, folk crafts, and architecture.

This essay examines the varying opinions and arguments presented by historians, architectural historians, ethnographers, and folklorists on the topic of African contributions to architecture in the United States. It briefly discusses theories from the first half of the twentieth century that revolved around the transference of African cultural traits to the United States through the slave trade, or lack of it. Then, with the “new social history” during the 1960s, we probe into the emergence of more inclusive forms of historical inquiry and the reformulation of the older theories, focusing on theories involving possible Africanisms in building materials (including construction techniques) and overall form. Finally, this essay discusses how historians and folklorists have interpreted the Shotgun House, with an emphasis on the works of John Michael Vlach and the use of the Shotgun as a symbol, or icon, of African-American culture.

Theories from the first half of the twentieth century show definite ethnocentric interpretations of the evolution of African-American culture. Perhaps influenced by previous social-Darwinist mentalities from the late nineteenth century, most of the historians in the early twentieth century remained quite biased in their interpretations on African-American history. These scholars perpetuated theories that African-Americans lost their indigenous culture. Many of them believed that the servile status and inherent inferiority of the African slaves, forced them to be absorbed into the dominant Anglo-American culture upon arrival through the slave-trade, which resulted in little, if any, cultural transference. A typical journal article from 1919 suggests that,

when he (the African slave) landed in the United States, [he] left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament.... [C]oming from all parts of Africa and having no common language and common tradition, the memories of Africa which they brought with them were soon lost.”

Melville Herskovits, one of the foremost authorities on African-American culture before the rise of the “new social history,” once commented that “it is apparent that African forms of technology ..had but a relatively slight chance of survival.... [T]echniques [such] as weaving and iron working and wood carving were almost entirely lost.” Even folklorist and material culture expert Henry Glassie once stated that “more African elements survive in musical, social, or kinesthetic traditions than in material culture,” but he does admit some material survivals.

The emergence of the new social history during the 1960s created a massive shift in perceptions of early African-Americans and also created new methods, along with new areas of research, within the field of history. The Civil Rights Movement and the establishment of specific preservation acts led to a revolution in history. More “democratized” methods of historical inquiry emerged, where groups previously ignored by historians (mainly the commoners and minorities) became the primary focus. One important sub-field that evolved was African-American history. In addition, with excavations of slave cabins, African-American archaeology emerged within the field of historical archaeology to provide a more objective glimpse into the life of early African-Americans (since many of the early African-American histories were based on the biased accounts of white plantation owners). By delving into two distinct areas—building materials and techniques utilized, and overall form—we can observe an obvious shift in perceptions through the emergence of the new social history and through the new forms of inquiry it created.

In regards to the building materials and construction techniques employed in the construction of early slave houses, historians and folklorists have argued many different angles. Those focused on the deep south and the Caribbean colonies, emphasize the mud-walled, thatched-roofed slave cabins on the sugar and rice plantations. These cabins usually consisted of a 10 to 12 foot square floor-plan, a high-pitched roof, one to two windows, and a chimney of stick-and-clay construction. Excavations of early slave houses at the Curriboo and Yaughan sites in South Carolina led many scholars to conclude that

West African architectural traditions traversed the Atlantic through the minds of the slaves. The archaeologists that excavated the site speculated that “evidence for such a technique or a similar technique, rammed-earth architecture, is common throughout Africa, the presumed origin for some if not all of the inhabitants and probable builders of the structures at Curriboo and Yaughan.” Rammed-earth techniques represent one of many mud-wall methods, including “cob”-walls, pise walls, and wattle-and-daub. Excavations of other southern sites, such as Canon’s Point Plantation (1794-1860), also revealed mud-walled slave cabins. Leland Ferguson, Theresa Singleton, John Michael Vlach, and others have used the data from these excavations (along with historic documents) to argue that African (primarily West African) building traditions did survive in the New World. Singleton actually goes as far as saying that architecture provides the best documentary evidence of enslaved Africans influencing their material world. They all illustrate that dirt floors, mud walls, and thatched roofs existed in regions of West Africa during the slave-trade era and the continuation of those distinctive African traits in America provided excellent proof of cultural transference and persistence.

Over the last two decades, research in the Chesapeake Tidewater region has unsettled theories based solely on slave housing in the deep South. Large plantations did not emerge in the region until the “Golden Era” of tobacco production. As the plantations materialized, slaves grew in numbers and separate slave housing emerged. There have been many theories devoted to these slave structures and whether they exhibited definite Africanisms or not. Ferguson, for instance, has argued that even though these earthfast houses looked European in design, they were altered to suit African lifestyles. Most of the first settlers of the Chesapeake (white and black) built impermanent earthfast housing, utilizing materials and techniques that were quite familiar to West Africans, such as “prepared clay floors, wattle-and-daub walls, and thatched roofs.” Ferguson argues though, that unlike the other methods, log construction “was an exclusive European import.” Here, like in Georgia and the Carolinas, one can observe similarities in the emphasis of “typical” African traits in slave housing (mud walls, dirt floors, and thatched roofs).

George McDaniel has provided a much different perspective on Chesapeake slave and free black housing, in regards to building materials and technologies. In his book, *Hearth and Home: Preserving a People’s Culture*, McDaniel argues that African slaves did not enter an alien environment, where their skills had no application. Skilled in many diverse building traditions and familiar with many of the same materials utilized by white settlers in the region, Africans contributed a lot to the built environment. In Maryland, Africans more likely retained traditional construction methods rather than traditional house types. Wattle-and-daub, for example, represented an ancient technique developed in both Europe and Africa. Other African techniques that may have blended with the Anglo-construction methods included “cob” walls and pise walls—both of which utilized clay or mud—and even log and frame construction practices. His main emphasis rests on cultural diversity in African building traditions, while many earlier and contemporary scholars arbitrarily designate all African slaves as being one within West African (Kongolese or Angolan) culture.

Historians differ as to the overall form (including spatial arrangements) of the early slave cabins. Vlach asserts that small room sizes, gable roofs, and rectangular floor plans (often consisting of two or more rooms), like thatched roofs and dirt floors, represent clear Africanisms in early slave houses on the plantations. To support his arguments, he provides the dimensions of free black and slave houses (18th- and early-19th century) from Massachusetts to Georgia, all of which correspond to the African norm to a degree. In the Chesapeake region, Vlach argues that the “key difference between Virginian and West African houses was the size of the rooms.” He continues explaining that “slave housing manifested what can be considered an African proxemic quality.” Vlach also presents the argument that the porches built onto the African slave dwellings throughout Colonial America were not only an African architectural trait, but were adopted by the dominant white culture and can be found on many American houses today. The front porch reveals a subtle and pervasive retention of African architectural traditions.

Although many scholars have adopted Vlach’s and McDaniel’s theories, some differ. Mark L. Walston adamantly opposes cultural transference theories. Although he admits that slave houses have remained an “enigma,” his research on slave houses of the Chesapeake region (1600s-1700s) reveals that slave housing “appears to be a continuation, with slight spatial modifications, of older English practices of housing domestic servants and agricultural laborers.” He contends that Vlach and McDaniel “struggle” to find Africanisms in vernacular architecture. They have focused exclusively on areas, such as the Sea Islands, Louisiana, and southern Maryland, where “significant concentrations of Africans ...[may have] allowed these isolated expressions to be created.” Cultural survivals may have been present in certain study areas (language, music, the decorative arts), but as far as slave housing is concerned, the argument is at best tenuous. Walston proceeds by comparing the slave houses with possible English antecedents, rather than with African dwellings, in which he presents many similarities in room sizes and overall form.

Walston’s theories are also contested by McDaniel, who argues that log construction traditions were common to the river basins and savannah regions of Africa, where many Africans were captured and shipped to the British Atlantic colonies. Even though African techniques did not include hewn logs or joined corners, but instead the use of whole logs tied by vines, McDaniel theorizes that African construction methods syncretized with European techniques in the Chesapeake. By the late eighteenth century, the single room log cabin became the traditional house type of black Marylanders. The log cabin that

many traditionally think of as a representation of early white pioneers also had a long African-American heritage. Walston, however, argues that one room, dirt floored, log cabins were typical white and black house types throughout the frontier of early America and into the established plantations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Often, the only difference was size (also, white settlers would sometimes have more than one room). Also, whites had a choice in style, while slaves did not; it was imposed on them. Rather than these single room quarters exhibiting African characteristics, Walston contends that they were based on “the minimal housing unit traditionally accepted in English culture,” dwellings associated with peasants and laborers in England.

The historiography on the shotgun house, an existing house type exhibiting clear Africanisms, also shows similar shifts over time. The shotgun house suggests many of the distinctive Africanisms in building materials and overall form mentioned. Vlach has commented that the shotgun house may be the “most significant expression of Afro-American material culture.” Henry Glassie described it as a house type that “breaks the American pattern in size and orientation.” Yet, for most of the previous century, the shotgun house had been ignored as a specific house type, as well as existing evidence of African cultural transference. The actual significance of the shotgun was not truly uncovered until recently, by folklorist Vlach, who has become the authority on shotgun houses in America.

Research on the origins of the shotgun as a distinct house type did not truly begin until the 1970s. During most of the twentieth century, the shotgun remained obscure and anonymous among many different types of vernacular structures covering the American landscape. Then during the 1930s, Fred Kniffen finally designated the shotgun as a specific house type defining it as “a long, narrow house..., one room in width and from one to three or more rooms deep, with [a] frontward-facing gable.” Kniffen though, did not delve much into the history or origins of the shotgun, but only characterized it as a regional peculiarity. He did speculate that the shotgun had possible Haitian or Native-American antecedents. Further attention was not given to the shotgun until the 1950s, when William B. Knipmeyer, a student of Kniffen, completed an analysis of settlement patterns within Louisiana. Like Kniffen, he treated it as a regional phenomenon, attributing its possible origins to local Native-American tribes. Knipmeyer, as well as others working in the field at the time, believed that the shotgun was a recent manifestation, dating back to the 1880s at the earliest.

Although those previous works provided some information of the shotgun house, it was not until Vlach’s works (beginning in the 1970s) that an in-depth analysis of shotguns emerged. Working from the findings of Kniffen and Knipmeyer, and through extensive field research Vlach linked the shotgun to the historic African-American communities of Louisiana. He traced the origins of the shotgun first to New Orleans, where a large black community had existed since the early eighteenth century. The origins went further back in time though. The majority of the New Orleans black community migrated from Haiti (around 1800), where presumably African, French, and Arawak architectural elements combined to create the precursors of the Louisiana shotguns. Vlach remarks that “the links to Africa are not simple and direct. The story behind the shotgun involves long migrations, the conduct of the Atlantic slave trade, the rise of free black communities, the development of vernacular and popular traditions in architecture, and the growth of American industrial needs.”

The shotgun “prototype,” or the *caille* that developed in Haiti, exhibited many key African architectural characteristics. The wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roofs of the rural Haitian *cailles* definitely exhibited African retentions. Vlach points out that most of the Haitian slaves were taken from the Yoruba region of West Africa, where similar materials and building techniques were utilized. More importantly though, Yoruba contained a variety of house types, all of which were based on a rectangular, two-room form. The 10 x 10 foot room size was also a key characteristic. The Haitian houses exhibited these main African architectural traits and Vlach reveals that the “repetition of the 10 x 20 foot dimensions represents the impact of a West African architectural concept” in Haiti. The *caille* was not a pure African building type. As the building type moved from rural regions to urban areas, features from French and Arawak building traditions were incorporated. For instance, the gable door probably came from the Arawak *bohios*. The French added construction techniques, primarily clapboarding, framing methods, mortice-and-tenon system of joints, half-timbering, and decorative features in urban *cailles*, to assimilate, as Vlach says, the African form to a European setting (urban areas, such as Port-au-Prince).

The Haitian *caille* house type was then transported to New Orleans during the first half of the nineteenth century, where it became the shotgun house. Large black populations migrated to New Orleans, and, by 1810, outnumbered whites two to one. With the migrations came the transference of the shotgun house to New Orleans. Through historic documents, Vlach has been able to date the first known shotgun in New Orleans to the 1820s. His research reveals that the shotgun did not appear until the massive migration of blacks to the region, thus refuting earlier accepted theories that the shotgun was derived from local, native architecture. Vlach documented this through the comparisons of Port-au-Prince houses with New Orleans shotguns, which included similarities in ceiling heights, floor plans, facades, internal partitioning, and framing techniques.

With the appearance of the shotgun, came some variations. These included the double-shotgun, consisting of two shotguns built next to each other under one roof; the camel-back (or “hump-back”), a shotgun or double-shotgun with a two-story rear section; and numerous variations enacted by whites to make them more acceptable by European standards, like the addition of jigsaw-cut “gingerbread” decoration or interior hallways. The latter alterations further obscured the ethnic history of the shotgun. These variations proved, as Vlach illustrates, that there was a long “acquaintance” of New Orleans with the

shotgun and that it probably radiated across the countryside from that specific location. Nevertheless, most shotguns retained the characteristics of their Haitian predecessors. Over nearly 150 years, the shotgun has remained a dominant house type within the South, and today, over one million shotguns can be found throughout the American landscape. They are “encountered in cottonfields in Mississippi and Arkansas, in oil fields in Texas, in coal fields in West Virginia, in mill towns in the Carolinas,” and in predominantly African-American neighborhoods across the country.

Vlach has not been the only one to comment on the origins and use of the shotgun house in America. Sylvia Ann Grider, for example, reveals that “in the oil boomtowns of the Texas Panhandle, the shotgun house took precedence over all other types of company housing.” In her research, she states that the origin of the term “shotgun” remains obscure, but does illustrate its acquired “folk etymology” stating many claim that if you fired a shotgun through the front door, it would go straight through and out the back. She also explains the origin of the shotgun house type is obscure, but that it may have antecedents among Haitian house types or Indian huts of the Louisiana coast. The shotgun was popular in the oil boomtowns in Texas (beginning around 1919) because of the fact that they were easy to construct, fit well on railroad cars, and because the position of the front door (located at the narrow, gabled end) allowed them to be closely spaced in rows, thus maximizing the potential of the land. Interestingly, Grider explains that many of them measured 12 x 24 foot, very similar to the African spatial arrangements proposed by Vlach, but she does not make the connection. Most of these shotguns were built in haste and were only temporary shelters (even though some survive today), and thus have been deemed “shacks” by locals.

Others have documented the history of shotguns in many different areas of the United States, revealing its extensive diffusion among industrial and low-rent regions throughout the country. For instance, Ron Taylor analyzed shotguns in Macon, Georgia, where they were adopted as low-income housing during the first half of the twentieth century. He states that “like log cabins and sharecropper shacks, they (shotguns) have become part of the American legend linking success to humble beginnings.” John S. Sledge, in his research on Mobile’s shotgun houses, commented that “one of the most common house types of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban South was the shotgun.” Vivian Williamson-Johnson goes as far to say that the shotgun “further shows the retention of Africanisms within the material culture of three continents, amid small hamlets and large cities.”

The shotgun house has become a symbol of African-American culture within the United States. John Biggers (an artist and professor at Texas Southern University) has elevated the shotgun house to a level of symbolic importance to the African-American community through his paintings (coincidentally deemed the “Shotgun Series”). Biggers has brought out significant African cultural symbols. The direct connection between rooms, the front porch, and the placement of shotguns in tightly spaced rows in urban areas (as discussed by Vlach and others), represent features associated with close interaction and community. Biggers utilizes the symbolic importance of these features along with other areas that others have not examined thoroughly, such as the triangle of the shotgun’s pediment and its rectilinear facade, which “represent sacred forms whose esoteric meaning came from Africa, symbolizing, according to the artist, fire and earth.” As Kristin Schreiber explains, the shotgun house then “refers to the African past through its communal space and design but also through the sacred connotations of its form,” thus creating a “domestic temple” that provides spiritual protection, along with family connectedness, for African-Americans. In addition, since Vlach and others have noted that the spatial arrangements and overall form of the shotgun house has remained consistent over time, the research and these paintings have illustrated that African-Americans have “retained the group-oriented social climate of Africa.”

With the emergence of the new social history during the 1960s, came more inclusive and objective studies into the vernacular architecture of African-Americans and the reformulation of earlier ethnocentric interpretations. This can be observed in the recent illuminations on the shotgun house and how it has become not only an important artifact in the study of African-American history, but how it has also become a symbol of the retention of African traditional social and cultural traits within the United States. African-American cultural history has been denied any attention (or has been subjected to biased interpretations) for many years. A new emphasis has been placed on the material culture, which includes vernacular architecture, to provide more objective interpretations and to allow light to be shed on the more obscured segments of American history.