

Colonial Revival With A Spanish Accent

BY LISA CRYE

Mention Colonial Revival architecture in Arlington and most people will have an idea what you mean. Examples are around every corner. After all, people living in the Washington metropolitan area who are only mildly interested in their surroundings can guess the difference between Federal and Georgian styles. But Colonial Revival is more diverse than that. What happens, for instance, when you turn a corner and see a little hacienda?

In a neighborhood of cottages and brick colonials, these Spanish bungalows have much the same effect as Disney's castle would if it sprouted on a corner lot. There has been very little research on these houses, probably because people view them as anomalies. They are dotted around the Washington area, but Lyon Village in Arlington has what might be called a concentration of them.¹ A historic neighborhood of quirky gardens and traditional lawns north of the Clarendon metro stop, it is better known for Sears bungalows, an early twentieth century version of prefabricated houses sold by the Sears Roebuck Company, than for anything exotic. But on closer examination, the haciendas are really no more exotic than the average Federal Revival brick with a fan light doorway. They too are Colonial Revival houses, and have their place in the rich vernacular of American architecture.

The Clarendon area was developed beginning in the teens and twenties, and Frank Lyon was one of the big players. Lawyer, newspaper owner, and anti-vice activist, he knew that if people were to begin moving to Arlington its Rosslyn gateway had to be cleaned up. Using his *Monitor* newspapers, he crusaded against the bars, bordellos and gambling joints that populated Rosslyn and he eventually won. He began development of Lyon Park in 1919 and Lyon Village in 1923.²

Lyon was no stranger to Spanish colonial architecture. Between 1907 and 1912 he traveled extensively in the western United States as an examiner for the Interstate Commerce Commission.³ He would have seen not only the mission style houses Californians began to build in the 1890s, but the mission style railway stations and resort hotels of the Santa Fe and Southern Pacific Railways.⁴ Mission-style architecture has been called the California counterpart of the Georgian-inspired colonial revival that gained popularity in the east at the same time.⁵



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Missionhurst on 26th Street N. has some classic mission-style details, including the shaped roof parapet, arched windows, and overhanging eaves.

During his time at the ICC, Frank Lyon built a large mission style home near Glebe Road and 25th Street North and called it Lyonhurst.⁶ Now owned by the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, it is called Missionhurst and serves as headquarters for a worldwide organization that sends Catholic priests to areas in need.⁷

The mission style that Frank Lyon saw in his travels fell out of favor after World War I, to be replaced by what Virginia and Lee McAlester call "Spanish Eclectic" in their *Field Guide to American Houses*.⁸ Before 1920, Spanish houses were generally adaptations of the mission style, which employed simplified forms and minimized architectural detail. Under the influence of architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, architects and builders began to incorporate decorative details that ranged over the entire history of Spanish architecture to include native, Roman, Moorish, Gothic, and Romanesque influences.⁹

An American architect, Goodhue trained with James Renwick and entered into practice in a Boston firm. A noted designer and draftsman, he

began an independent practice in 1914. Among Goodhue's noted buildings are the churches of St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew in New York City, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC. His most discussed building in recent years has been the restored Central Library in Los Angeles, completed in 1924. A mix of Art Moderne, Byzantine, and Spanish Colonial motifs, the building embodies much of what defined Goodhue's later period.¹⁰

Goodhue used the Panama-California Exposition, held in San Diego in 1915, to emphasize the Spanish styles found throughout Latin America. Inspired by the wide publicity given to the exhibition, other architects began to look to Spain for inspiration. The combination of styles they discovered melded into one that is still called Spanish Colonial Revival, but that has broader roots and more exuberant details than the Mission style.¹¹ In the Washington metropolitan area, architect Frank Upman was a major proponent of the Spanish style in commercial buildings and apartment houses, most notably the Woodward in the District.¹²

Examples of Spanish Eclectic houses had appeared in national building magazines and builder's pattern books by the late teens and early twenties, and from there made their way into neighborhoods all over the country, including Lyon Village.¹³ Because of the style of Lyonhurst, many



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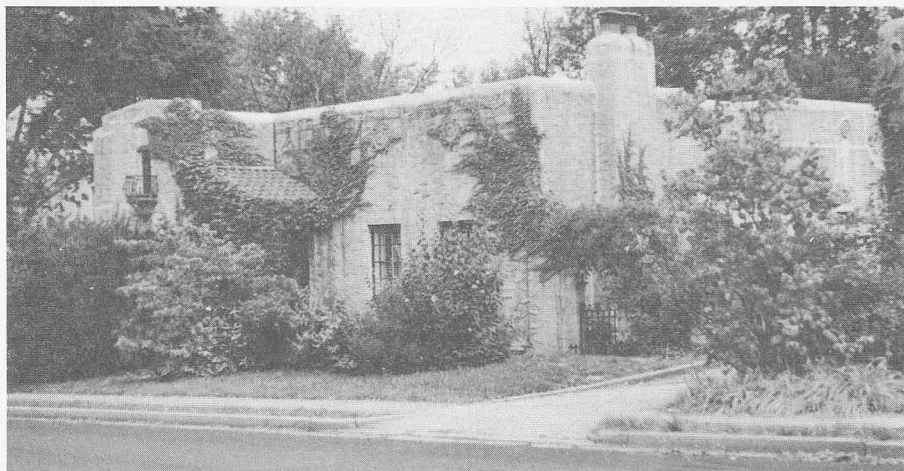
The Bannon/Derderian house on North Hancock is one of a number of Spanish bungalows on that street built by the Brumback firm.

people believe Frank Lyon must have had the haciendas built. He did construct a number of Spanish style houses near Lyonhurst, but most people bought lots rather than existing homes in Lyon Village.¹⁴ “Frank Lyon didn’t have anything to do with those houses,” Carolyn Boaz, Arlington historian and Lyon Village resident told me. Some of them, she added, were built by the Brumbacks in the twenties.¹⁵

The Brumback firm was headed by T.J. Brumback, who with his sons Keith and Clyde built Woodlawn Village and Country Club Hills.¹⁶ Keith brought his family from Missouri in 1925, his daughter June Brumback Verzi remembers. As for the haciendas, “People wanted them,” she said. “They were all the rage for a while.”¹⁷

While they were all the rage in the twenties and early thirties, they passed from favor by the mid-forties.¹⁸ Mary Bannon, who has lived in one of the houses for four and one half years, told me that when a realtor first showed it to her and her husband, James Derderian, her reaction was amused disbelief. She was familiar with Spanish style houses because she had relatives in San Diego. But she never expected to see one in Arlington.¹⁹

Built in 1927, the house is small by today’s standards. Nonetheless, its high ceilings and crafted details create a gracious space. Roofers, Bannon says, have commented on the sturdiness of the walls and the people who



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The Benjamin house on N. Highland has many of the exuberant details of the Spanish eclectic style. Note the balcony and the decorative lozenges near the roof line.

installed central air-conditioning “told us the floors were twice the thickness of what would be put in today.”²⁰

While 1920s craftsmanship has its advantages, such as cedar-lined bedroom closets and built-in bookcases, it overlooked modern staples like the hall coat closet and the linen closet. Bannon and Derderian were charmed, however, and decided to decorate its interior in keeping with the Spanish style. This meant not only attention to furnishings and color, but “taking down the brass chandeliers and using iron instead,” said Bannon.

They also landscaped for a more Mediterranean look. The house had all the typical plantings of Northern Virginia, including azaleas, and “it looked odd.” Changing the plantings “has improved the look of the house,” Bannon said, by providing a setting in keeping with the architecture.²¹

Around the corner, Gwen Benjamin also landscaped in keeping with the style of her house, with particular attention to the patio between the house and the garage. Built in 1926, Benjamin’s house has many of the exuberant details of the Spanish Eclectic style, including a tiny iron balcony, spiraled columns framing windows, a coat of arms on the garage, and decorative lozenges pressed into the stucco of the upper outside walls.²²

Like Bannon’s house, it is not large, but has high ceilings and arched doorways creating spaces that provide views from one room to another. It also has crafted details like iron curtain rods with the coat of arms motif for the living room. Another detail familiar to anyone who has seen *Zorro* is a small door behind a grill in the front door for identifying callers.

Most of the Spanish style houses built locally have matching garages, but Benjamin’s garage has an upper story with water and heat piped out



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Detail of balcony on the Benjamin house; note decorative columns framing the window.

from the main house. Benjamin said this was because the first owner, a doctor, had a child with tuberculosis of the spine. He and his wife had the room built over the garage to separate the boy from the other children.²³

When Benjamin and her family moved into the house thirty-eight years ago, her neighbor across the street described watching builders grind oyster shells to make the decorative pillars that accent the windows and frame the entry to the living room. The only house of its style on the block, it periodically attracts attention. Benjamin has a lithograph of the house covered with snow by local artist Jean Herons who used to walk by it on her way to the Metro. And, Benjamin says, "Some kids came by one time and asked 'What did this used to be?'" She smiles, a teasing glint in her eyes. "I told them it was a jail."²⁴

You, however, know better now. So the next time you turn a corner in a nearby neighborhood and see a hacienda, remember it was never anything but a Colonial Revival house, one with a long Spanish ancestry. And that once, in the twenties, it was all the rage.

Lisa Crye, a 19-year resident of Arlington, studied American history at Georgetown University. She wondered about the Spanish bungalows for years, before beginning an investigation into their origins in the summer of 1998.

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- ⁴ Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 409-410.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* See also Rexford Newcomb, *The Spanish House for America* (New York: JB Lippincott Company, 1927), pp. 14-20.
- ⁶ Rose, "The Role of Frank Lyon," p. 51.
- ⁷ Interview with Elaine Reavey, Special Assistant, Missionhurst, July 17, 1998.
- ⁸ McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, p. 417.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.
- ¹⁰ Daniel B. Wood, "The Last Word in Libraries," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 1993, p. 10. See also Suzanne Muchnic, "This Project Isn't By the Book," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1993, p. 5.
- ¹¹ McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, p. 418. See also Newcomb, *The Spanish House for America*, p. 29.
- ¹² Leach, "Arlington's Lawyer's Row," p. 42.

¹³ Conversation with June Brumback Verzi, July 16, 1998. Mrs. Verzi is the daughter of Keith Brumback. See also pattern books from the time such as Henry Atterbury Smith, *The Books of a Thousand Homes* (New York: Home Owner's Service Institute, 1923), and the *Modern Homes* series by the American Builder Publishing Corporation (Chicago).

¹⁴ Reavey interview, July 17, 1998.

¹⁵ Conversation with Carolyn Boaz, July 16, 1998. See also Boaz, "Lyon Village," p. 19.

¹⁶ Willard J. Webb, "The Waycroft-Woodlawn Neighborhood," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 3, October 1983, p. 40.

¹⁷ Verzi conversation, July 16, 1998.

¹⁸ McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, p. 418.

¹⁹ Interview with Mary Bannon, July 21, 1998.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, pp. 417-423.

²³ Interview with Gwen Benjamin, July 23, 1998.

²⁴ Ibid.