

## **‘Spanish craze’ of 1920s left imprint on area architecture**

American residential architecture has long favored dominant English-inspired styles. When most folks conjure up their ideal of an attractive, marketable home, they’re more often than not thinking along the lines of a gingerbread Queen Anne, a cozy Arts & Crafts, a stately Colonial Revival or other “respectable” styles rooted in the Anglo-American tradition.

That said, there was a time in the early 20th century when Spanish Revival architecture—featuring textured or stuccoed walls, low-sloped or flat barrel-tiled roofs, arcaded porches and patios, decorative parapets and other “exotic” elements—had its day in the sun. The popularity of this architectural style was but one manifestation of the “Spanish craze” that swept the U.S. in the 1920s, influencing everything from furniture to literature and fine art to fashion.

In architecture, this craze for all things “Spanish” took off when Bertram Goodhue wowed visitors to the 1915-1917 Panama California Exposition in San Diego with his collection of Spanish Revival buildings.

Yet “Spanish” Revival is somewhat of a misnomer, as a case can be made that this style originated centuries earlier in Mexico, which at the time encompassed much of California and what’s today the American Southwest.

Calling such architecture “Spanish” was a way for Americans to sidestep its Mexican and indigenous origins. After all, Europeans borrowed heavily from indigenous construction methods and styles, as they were wont to do. To put it bluntly, Spanish was seen as “white,” making its exoticness safer in the eyes of many American homeowners who would’ve otherwise balked at embracing the cultural heritage of darker complexioned Mexicans and native peoples.

To confuse matters even more, Spanish Revival is often used as a general term for a range of closely related architectural styles, including Mission, Pueblo, Monterey and Territorial Revival.

Locally, the Spanish craze in homebuilding was given a boost with the May 1926 grand opening of the new seven-story Ensenberger Furniture Store building on the west side of the courthouse square in downtown Bloomington (now the Ensenberger Condominiums). The entire seventh floor showcased a fully furnished six-room “Spanish bungalow” and surrounding “Spanish garden” (see accompanying image).

Strange though this elaborate display may seem to us today, Ensenberger’s was simply mimicking similar promotions staged by other furniture and department stores in other cities. In

1923, to cite one example, Wanamaker's in Manhattan unveiled its own "Spanish house" and line of corresponding furniture and "antiques."

Although there were already Spanish Revival homes popping up in the Twin Cities, Ensenberger's seventh floor "exhibit" clearly boosted local interest in such architecture. In late December 1927, The Pantagraph noted that a majority of new homes built in Normal the previous twelve months were "either of the Spanish Colonial type or of the modern bungalow design."

The Briarwood neighborhood northeast of the corner of Linden and Emerson streets has a small collection of Spanish Revival homes. One of the more prominent, 38 Norbloom Ave., was completed in 1928 and put on the market that October. In the nine decades that have followed, the exterior of this eye-catching residence has remained relatively unchanged.

One of the finest Spanish Revival homes in the Twin Cities can be found at the corner of Mercer Avenue and Taylor Street on the east edge of Bloomington's Founders' Grove neighborhood. Completed in the spring of 1927, it first served as the community's model "Home Beautiful" to promote residential construction and dependent businesses, including local builders, contractors, furniture stores and the like.

Constructed of Haydite concrete block (said to be "fire-proof, damp-proof and light in weight") and clad in Portland cement stucco, this two-story beauty represented a striking departure, architecturally speaking, from its more traditional neighbors.

Home builders and mail order catalog giants embraced the middlebrow popularity of Spanish Revival architecture. Sears Roebuck and Co. had a line of such homes, including the "San Jose," "Del Rey," and the popular two-story "Alhambra." Wardway Homes, the Montgomery Ward line of cut-and-fitted kit homes, featured "The Sonora," a five-room bungalow, as well as the similarly styled "Barcelona."

In addition to residences and apartment buildings, there are a few Spanish Revival commercial buildings in the Twin Cities. In the late 1920s, L.G. Nierstheimer opened his stucco-sided drug store at 1302 N. Main St. Today, this building, which still features distinctive red barrel-tiled trim atop the parapet, is occupied by Reverberation Vinyl record store.

There are also unexpected Spanish Revival treasures scattered throughout the Twin Cities, such as the small but lovely home at 1110 Colton Ave. featuring, among other marvelous details, scalloped parapets over the porch and main roof.

The harsh Midwest climate posed various challenges and costly problems to Spanish Revival homeowners. Flat roofs, for example, make sense in an arid or semi-arid climate, though much less so in regions with considerable precipitation—be it rain or snow or both. And airy patios were wonderful in the late-summer, but not so much in the dead of winter.

This helps explain why many such homes have undergone significant alterations in the nearly century since they were built. Many tiled roofs, it almost goes without saying, have been replaced with asphalt shingles. Likewise, 1920s stucco took a beating in colder climes, and some area buildings are now slathered in more substantial concrete. Most regrettably, though, a few stucco-sided homes in the area have been covered in aluminum or vinyl siding.

And not surprisingly, some local Spanish Revival residences have been lost to the wrecking ball, such as a five-room bungalow on the 1300 block of Franklin Avenue near the Illinois Wesleyan University campus.

There was the inevitable pushback against Spanish Revival. Architect Howard Major argued that the “Spanish” style “was totally at variance with our Anglo-Saxon temperament” and the “national character.” Of course, as historian Richard L. Kagan has noted in his recent work, *The Spanish Craze: America’s Fascination with the Hispanic World, 1779-1939*, this style was “less of a foreign import” than Major imagined, given its roots in the American Southwest, California and Florida.

By early 1944, for a story on housing in the coming post-World War II years, *The Pantagraph* detailed the planned conversion of 710 Normal Ave. from a two-story “Spanish” home to one with mid-century modern styling. The plan, drawn up by the local architectural firm of Archie Schaeffer and Philip Hooton, was featured in *American Home* magazine. This soon-to-be-converted Spanish Revival house, noted *The Pantagraph*, “is typical of many in Bloomington-Normal which have been outdated by architectural trends.”

What was once popular had now fallen out of fashion. Yet in the years afterward, plenty of folks have rallied around this architectural moment to preserve and restore these homes.

Space prohibits a complete listing of all such residences still standing in the Twin Cities. But that gives you an excuse to take a walk or drive through some of Bloomington-Normal’s pre-World War II neighborhoods and discover anew our Spanish Revival heritage.