

The esthetic aspects of Victorian houses that people today tend to value most — their color and elaborate decoration — were the products of technology. Prior to the Victorian era, almost everything that went into a house had to be made by hand, even the nails. It is not an accident that the houses of earlier ages tended to be square and sober. It was too expensive to build anything else. But the availability of cheap machine-produced nails, cheap and uniform lumber produced by steam sawmill, and rail transport to bring it all to market, revolutionized house construction. Throw in mass-produced banisters, cornices, and other such decorative items, and the stage was set for an explosion of detail. The finishing touch was the new premixed paints, available for the first time in a wide variety of colors and machine-ground to uniform consistency.

In other words, the Victorians built houses riotously alive with color, decorative details, and elaborate architectural complexity, primarily because they could. Like children let loose in a candy store, the well-to-do of post-Civil War America could build houses like nothing the world had ever seen before, and they did.

By the middle of the 1870's, it was expected that a fashionable house would have running water and an indoor bathroom. This was generally accomplished by placing a large water tank in the attic (usually lead lined — one reason the average life span was shorter back then). So, the decorative towers much favored by the Victorians often served a double purpose: exterior drama, and a place to put the water tank. Frank Lloyd Wright disdained attics in general, proclaiming them to be "useless", but with all due respect to this doyen of American architects, go fly a kite. The attic in an 1875 Second Empire house was not "useless". Without electric pumps, how else could you have running water on demand?

One water pipe usually ran down to a boiler in the kitchen, where it could be heated. Victorian bathrooms were virtually always located on the second floor and near the back of the house. This served an esthetic purpose — Victorians definitely believed that bathrooms should be neither seen nor heard — and also placed the bathroom so that water pressure from the attic could conveniently supply the bathtub by pushing hot water up from the kitchen boiler. The flush toilets of the era also worked off gravity, utilizing flush compartments that were placed as high as eight feet above the toilet, and activated by a long pull chain.

How did they fill the attic water tank in the first place? Well, with a little luck, from rain water. Gutters were used to funnel rain water into the tank (which were built to hold as much as 600 gallons), and if the weather failed, the well-to-do could always depend upon wells and servants with buckets or hand pumps.

Central heating in a 1870's house was accomplished by placing a coal- or oil-fired furnace in the basement. Natural convection would lift the hot air through floor vents located near the center of the house and take the cooler air back down through other floor vents arranged around the outside perimeter. This natural convection was not as efficient as modern forced-air ventilation, so the Victorians still built plenty of fireplaces for extra heat when needed.

For a fashionable Victorian house located in a city, it was of course necessary to have it plumbed for gas lights. These were much brighter and more convenient than kerosene lamps or candles,

and in fact, gas lights were so bright that they were actually brighter than the early electric lights.

(In fact, Edison initially sold his lamps primarily on the basis of safety. Imagine living in a house packed with heavy *non*-fire-retardant drapes and carpets and piano shawls and everything else the Victorians loved to pack their houses with. Then imagine tall gas flames leaping from wall sconces and hanging gasoliers, and you can see why Edison could sell his electric lamps on the basis of safety alone.)

Gas lights could be dangerous in other ways besides fire. If you were lucky, the gas flowing from your city gas works was natural gas. If you weren't so lucky, then the gas might well be a lethal concoction known as "coal gas". This was an artificial mixture generated by passing live steam over red-hot coal in an evacuated chamber, and consisted of a toxic mixture of hydrogen, methane, carbon monoxide, and sulfur. In case it has been a few years since your high-school chemistry class, hydrogen is so ultra-flammable that it is practically explosive (the Hindenburg was filled with hydrogen gas when it exploded and burned in 1937), and carbon monoxide is that odorless, colorless, poisonous stuff that automobiles exhaust. Carbon monoxide does burn, with a hot blue flame, to form harmless carbon dioxide — but you had better have *plenty* of air in the air-and-gas mixture for your gas light, lest any of the carbon monoxide remain unburnt and suffocate everyone in the house.

Edison's gas-lighting opponents tried to convince the public that electric lights were too dangerous to use, by staging exhibitions wherein small animals and birds were electrocuted, and by making hay out of the numerous electrical accidents that occurred in the early days of electric power, before the systems were adequately tested and safety-proofed. But in the long run, they were fighting a lost battle. Short of building it on top of a live volcano, it is hard to imagine how you could have made a Victorian house more dangerous than by plumbing it for coal gas.

Central heat, running hot water, an indoor toilet, plenty of artificial light — this is what makes a house a house, instead of a barn. The Victorians were the first to build them. The sad part is, within a single generation these houses were already obsolete. Technology was moving too swiftly. By the time World War I rolled around, people wanted houses that were better insulated and fully wired for electricity, and which had more water faucets and fewer drafty fireplaces than even the finest houses built in 1875. Also, by this time, a severe esthetic backlash had set in against the elaborate decoration of the late Victorian period. It is precisely the same cornices and mansard roofs, the fantastic array of towers and wrap-around porches that we so admire today, that made the Edwardians scorn Victorian architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright once savaged the glorious Victorian mansions along St. Paul's Summit Avenue as "the worst mile of architecture ever built". (So much for his supposed expertise in architecture.) Last but not least, as any homeowner can tell you, after 30 or 40 years any house is going to be due for some major repairs. Routine maintenance and another coat of paint can only take you so far. The job only gets worse if the house is covered with elaborate, badly decayed, decorative gingerbread.

So, think about it. If given the option of either (1) spending a small fortune on renovating an outlandishly unfashionable, rickety old house in need of major repairs and a near-gutting for technological upgrading, or (2) just demolishing it and starting over with bare dirt, what would you have done in 1927? Answer: you would have torn down that decrepit 1870's mansion with

its peeling paint and useless gas lights, and built a sparkling new home. In 1927, a house built in 1875 was too old to bother fixing up, but not old enough to be treasured.

History has never seen anything like it. The rapidly industrializing America of 1870 to 1900 put up vast numbers of new houses, enough to hold tens of millions of people, and built with the style and color that only the Victorians could achieve. And then the next generation tore them all down. In one massive wave of destruction, lasting roughly from 1900 to 1940, our Victorian housing stock was almost completely obliterated. Today, even cities renowned for their surviving Victorian houses are not likely to have more than a few hundred in a city the size of Evanston, and no more than maybe ten thousand in a city the size of Chicago. This represents at best 2% to 5% of the Victorian housing that existed in these cities circa 1890.

The carnage was especially terrible in large eastern cities, where the economic pressure to bulldoze and rebuild was the worst. In Manhattan, there is exactly one free-standing Victorian mansion left — a nice but relatively minor Romanesque Revival mansion which was the home of James Bailey, of Barnum & Bailey Circus fame. All the rest are gone. The fabulous mansions of the Vanderbilts, the Carnegies, of Louis Tiffany and all the rest, were demolished to make way for skyscrapers. In Cleveland, the former Euclid Avenue (now called Route 20) was lined with mansions so magnificent that it was favorably compared to the Champs Elysées in Paris. Today, not a shadow remains. Euclid Avenue gradually turned into an commercial district as Cleveland expanded, and the great houses, one by one, were bulldozed and replaced by utilitarian buildings. There is nothing left from its Victorian glory days.

I treasure the survivors, the lucky few who weren't sold by disinterested descendants to parking-lot developers, or partitioned into squalid rooming houses and condemned by HEW. The photos in this Web site are my way of sharing some of the houses I have found with other Victorian house fans.

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