The Development of the Shotgun House

By Phoebe Tudor

Perhaps because of its evocative, rather humorous name, the shotgun house is dear to the hearts of many Louisianians. Those of us who have lived in shotgun houses often have love-hate relationships with them, the hate manifesting itself when out-of-town guests or in-laws have to trek back through the bedroom and the kitchen to get to the bathroom at the very rear of the house. The shotgun house is a bona fide southern folk building, with lots of folksy explanations of its name and shape, and maybe that’s why we like it.

The truth is that even among experts in the fields of architectural history and cultural geography, no one is exactly sure how the shotgun house came to look like it does and get that funny name. This article will examine several theories about the shotgun’s development, possibly debunking a few of the commonly heard “myths” and shedding some light on a few ideas not so well known to most of us.

The characteristics of a shotgun house are very straightforward: the structure is one room wide across the front and at least three rooms deep. There is a long, front gabled roof. It is usually two stories and raised a few feet off the ground on piers. It may or may not have a porch on the front or the back. The service areas, kitchen and one or more bathroom rooms, are almost always in the rear. A variation on this theme is the double shotgun, which is two rooms wide across the front and at least three deep, divided down the middle into two separate living units.

Probably the favorite story of how this simple house type got its name revolves around the idea that if someone fired a gun from the front porch through the house, the shot could go straight out the back door without hitting anything. A less-told tale that rivals this one associates the name to the fact that many early buildings of this type were used as hunting camps in the country, therefore “shotgun house” related more to its former use than its configuration.

Some very interesting studies of the development of the shotgun form have been done by cultural geographers at the Museum of Geoscience. Cultural geographers seek to “read the cultural landscape” in a way that combines archaeological and historical concerns with the study of the built environment.

According to an article by Milton Newton, Jr., associate professor of geography at LSU, the earliest shotguns in Louisiana seem to have been "water-oriented dwellings" or "camps," urban lots. In fact, Newton cautions in the same article that students of the built environment should not fall prey to "functionalist fallacies" by believing that origins of forms were necessarily caused by their functions. We know that earlier solutions to the long narrow lots in New Orleans had been found in the Creole cottage and townhouse types, so it should be clear that lot configurations did not function to determine the form of the shotgun. Once introduced around the 1830s, however, shotguns certainly did fit well into the city layout and proliferated widely. So, if the shotgun did not take its long narrow form just to fit city lots, why did it develop as it did? Numerous theories come into play concerning the development of this distinctive shotgun form. One explanation has linked it to the shape of palmetto-covered cabins of Louisiana Indians, and another to the shape of African dwellings.

The use of double shotguns in the Uptown district displays the curved front porch and deep siding of the Creole style.

John M. Vlach, cultural geographer, claims that prototypes of the shotgun can be traced directly to Haiti and southwestern Nigeria. He even suggests that the etymological origins of the word shotgun may come from the word to-gun, used in western Africa for house, meaning “place of assembly.” Vlach seems to have a wealth of research to support his assumptions, but they appear to be either largely unknown in the architectural community or simply not well accepted.

Some say that the plan of the shotgun resembles nothing so much as the plan of a service wing, which can be found projecting straight back from many a townhouse in New Orleans. Service wings consisted of one room behind another, two or three deep and usually two stories tall. Perhaps that layout was the precedent for the configuration of the one-story shotguns. In support of the house-evolutionary idea, it should be noted that although the earliest extant shotgun in New Orleans dates from 1848, there are a few remaining examples of the modest two-story brick houses from the 1830s which have linear room layouts. They look somewhat like service wings without their main buildings, and just as much like a two-story forerunner of the wooden shotgun.

Although its true origin may never be known, let’s consider that early 1848 shotgun, located at 937 St. Andrew Street in New Orleans. It was documented by researcher Lynn Adams of the Historic New Orleans Collection based on notarial archives and drawings: it is wooden, one room wide, raised slightly off the ground on piers, and displays characteristics of the Creole Revival style, including a classical entablature with dentil molding that hides the roofline. Some claim that one reason the shotgun was so widely used even into the 1950s was that it conformed easily to prevalent Greek Revival stylistic dictates. Though not many Greek Revival shotguns remain, the validity of this argument seems clear.

Of particular note concerning the 1848 drawing is an exterior gallery down the right side of the house. This brings up the question of the relationship of the early shotgun houses to the Creole buildings already existing in Louisiana in the early nineteenth century. Creole style buildings were characterized by the lack of interior halls, with circulation occurring via exterior galleries. (See last month’s article.) Most early shotgun houses also lacked halls, and this example shows that at least in this case circulation could have taken place via the side gallery. This of course not only relates it to Creole-style building but also reinforces the connection with the service wing plan. The plot thickens.

Bernard Lemann, noted architectural historian, author, and retired professor at Tulane University, revealed a more direct link between the shotgun house and French precedents, based on a little-known, unpublished manuscript from sixteenth-century France. A volume of writings and sketches by
Italian architect Serlio contains one plan and elevation, labeled simply "a citizen's urban house," which has many of the same elements as our familiar shotgun! If these simple house types were used in medieval France, it would certainly explain more clearly their appearance in Louisiana, in the same way that French farmhouse prototypes were also used in what we call Creole-style buildings. This idea is scintillating, and the connection warrants further investigation.

Having discussed the many theories about the development of the shotgun, we can now examine its predominance and distribution in the state by looking at the makeup of several National Register Historic Districts.

The St. Paul's Bottoms Historic District in Shreveport contains a number of architectural types which form a good example of a typical working-class neighborhood in the Deep South from the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. It is the largest historic working-class area in the state outside of New Orleans. The Bottoms is significant because of its collection of shotgun houses, which make up 71 percent of the buildings in the district and remain largely unaltered. Unlike certain areas in New Orleans, most of the shotguns in the Bottoms are singles, not doubles. Also, many of them have no architectural styling, or just a sparse application of stylistic details. In that sense these shotguns remain much closer to the rural antecedents of the type than do the more developed diversity in New Orleans. Over one hundred of these buildings have been restored as tax act projects by a development group in Shreveport.

The Central City District in New Orleans is comparable to the Bottoms, though much larger. It has over 2,800 shotguns; the Bottoms has around 560. Central City was also a poor working-class area, referred to simply as "the back of town" until 1952. It has about the same percentage of shotguns as the Bottoms (71 percent), and like the Bottoms it has a predominantly one-story scale which is seldom broken. However, almost all of the shotguns in Central City are four bay doubles, chosen in this instance because they required less land and building material per unit than single shotguns.

Shotgun houses were built throughout the state during the nineteenth century in areas such as Alexandria and Baton Rouge. Although in poor working-class areas they remained simple in form and style, many took on the stylistic ornaments of the various architectural trends during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some developed a certain degree of pretension, expanding from four bays wide to six bays wide in the double shotgun category, and sometimes increasing the space even more by adding a "camelback" or two-story area in the rear, usually for bedrooms.

The area with the largest example of these "upgraded" shotguns is the Uptown Historic District in New Orleans. Although Uptown is often thought of as being comprised of more large scale, architect-designed buildings, it is important to note that shotgun houses, in various guises, make up 52 percent of the district.

Unlike most other areas where shotguns appear, in Uptown the house can be associated with the middle and even upper middle classes, and so we find some of the largest and most elaborate manifestations of the type anywhere. Shotgun houses appear in all the various styles popular from the 1860s through around the 1930s. The shotgun house was perhaps the building type most commonly used during long periods of our state's history, but in spite of, or more likely because of that fact, its significance is often overlooked. Since it was used in broader areas, many concentrations of shotguns have now disappeared, with highways, subdivisions or shopping malls replacing them. Luckily, the historical and architectural significance of the buildings is now recognized by the designation of areas such as the Bottoms in Shreveport, and Central City, Holy Cross, the Irish Channel and Uptown in New Orleans as National Register Historic Districts.

We may never know for sure exactly how they developed their unique form or why they are called what they are, but we can weigh the merits of the many theories about this, while we continue to hold the shotgun dear to our hearts. Maybe next time you have out-of-town visitors, you can tell them a different story about the shotgun.