Architectural History: As Connecticut Grew, Buildings Reflected Changing Styles

Styles and building materials -- whether brownstone from Portland or brick from Windsor -- tell only part of the story of Connecticut's architectural heritage, which stretches back even before the country was born. The structures erected, those torn down and replaced and those still standing reflect the evolving social and economic fabric of the state, from buildings clustered around a town green in Colonial times to bringing back pedestrian-friendly downtowns in the 21st century. The Courant asked experts for their list of "must-see" building. From dozens of the suggestions, the first 12 structures in this gallery were selected, with the help of Essex architect Michael J. Crosbie, a professor of architecture at the University of Hartford who occasionally writes about architecture and design for The Courant. Some selections may surprise, but all were intended to give the sense of place that is Connecticut. Keep clicking after the first 12 for more historic architecture around Connecticut. SOURCES: Avon Old Farms web site; cthistoryonline.org; "Structures and Styles" by David Ransom; Tyler Smith, Smith Edwards McCoy Architects, Hartford; Andrew Walsh, historian, Trinity College; the glasshouse.org; connecticuthistory.org; Michael J. Crosby; "Beauty & the Beast, 300 Years of Connecticut Architecture" by William Hosley.

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Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum — the country's oldest public art museum — positioned itself at the vanguard of Modern architecture in the 1930s with exhibits and visits by the movement's leading proponents.

But the Wadsworth took it a step further: the interior spaces of the Avery Memorial addition, opened in 1934, embraced the Modernist movement: little ornamentation, wide open exhibit areas and skylights flooding the space with light.

Outside, however, the tension between old and new is clearly evident. The design is far more traditional, fitting in with the original museum structures — and sensibilities of the times.

"In the early 20th century, modern architecture was not loved in the U.S.," said Michael J. Crosbie, an Essex architect and professor of architecture at the University of Hartford. "American tastes tend to be more conservative and, of course, modernism was associated with Socialism."

Connecticut's architectural heritage rarely follows well-defined periods. But experts say its evolution has followed a half-dozen or so larger social, economic and technological changes. Even Modern architecture would finally gain acceptance in the 1950s, as Connecticut — and the rest of the country — looked to build cities of the future after World War II.

"The reality beneath all the aesthetics are non-aesthetic drivers: the natural world, technology and social conditions," Duo Dickinson, a Madison architect and writer, said. "There isn't a state in the U.S. that has more stark evidence that reflects changes in those realms."

Alan J. Plattus, a professor at the Yale School of Architecture and founder of the university's Center of Urban Design, said the pace of change hasn't been consistent over time.

"The landscape in Connecticut transformed slowly, at first, in the years before the Civil War," Plattus said, "and then, more dramatically afterwards with the coming of steam power and the Industrial Revolution."

Early Architecture

Most of the early structures in Connecticut — homes and meetinghouses built before the mid-1700s — were wood-framed houses covered with clapboard or shingles. Many of the homes were two-stories, with steeply-pitched roofs to handle heavy New England snowfall.

Not many of the oldest homes survive, but among those that do is the Thomas Lee House in East Lyme, dating back to about 1660. The original building — it later had several additions — has the typical timber frame and pitched roof. It was saved from demolition by an early preservation effort in the early 1900s and one descendant of the Lee family operated the first submarine, "The Turtle" during the Revolution.

"Our stuff wasn't grandiose," William Hosley, a historian who lectures on state architecture in the program "Beauty & the Beast: 300 Years of Connecticut Architecture," said. "Remember these people were Puritans. They were reluctant to show their wealth in flashy ways."

In New Haven, the first planning of a town green began even earlier, in 1638, with a grouping of churches and homes. (They were embellished in the early 1800s, with the grouping of three remarkable churches: Center Church, United Church and Trinity Episcopal Church, according to Christopher Wigren, of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.)

As trade flourished in the late 1700s and early 1800s, especially by river and harbors, merchants did erect larger residences. The Joseph Webb colonial-style house in Wethersfield, built in 1752, is evidence of the growing prosperity that many merchants enjoyed in the Connecticut River Valley in this period.

Thriving trade around harbors is famously depicted in John Stobart's painting of Hartford's waterfront looking up State Street with the Old State House at the top of the hill. The brownstone-and-brick Old State House, constructed in 1796, points to the larger and more grand public spaces that also began to appear in cities. Tellingly, the Old State House faced the waterfront, then the major thoroughfare of transportation and trade.

"This was the beginning of building impressive, monumental structures," said Andrew Walsh, a historian at Trinity College in Hartford. "It was the biggest

building in Hartford, by far, and probably in the state. That's a pretty snazzy building."

'Cathedrals Of Industry'

The aftermath of the Civil War would prove to be a critical juncture for the state.

Connecticut and most Northeastern states long had modest factories, but the Industrial Revolution that followed the war led to construction of massive factories. There were the Cheneys in Manchester, with silk manufacturing; Sam and Elizabeth Colt in Hartford, with gun making; and the Tafts at Ponemah Mills in Norwich, with textile production.

The scale of operations was enormous — Ponemah Mills once was said to be the largest textile mill in the world, with 4,000 looms.

The factory complexes made an equally strong statement with their architecture. Ponemah's main mill building had two belfries, cupolas and a mansard-style room. Colt topped its factory with a blue, onion-shaped dome.

"I call them the cathedrals of industry," Hosley said.

The factories spawned entire communities, including worker housing, schools and places of worship. The wealth generated allowed owners to build lavish homes that were showpieces of these neighborhoods — an era marked by what experts call a blending of enlightened paternalism and capitalism.

In Manchester, the Cheneys had Colonial Revival-style mansions lined up along what is known as "The Great Lawn." According to the Manchester Historical Society web site, "The Cheney family opened the lawn to the public, who came to pick dandelions for cooked greens; to find worms for use as fish-bait; and in winter to ski, sled, and toboggan."

Colt's famous "Armsmear" was easily the largest mansion in Hartford, once including a large glass atrium "with an ogee-shaped dome of the Armory, thereby linking the two Colt structures with a common design feature," David Ransom writes in his book on Hartford architecture, "Structures and Styles."

Cutting Both Ways

Until the mid-1800s, city downtowns looked very much like neighborhoods outside the city, populated mostly by homes. But by the 1890s, downtowns were transformed with more dense commercial development. Taller buildings were possible with the introductin of elevators and structural steels. In Hartford, there was growth in working class neighborhoods, with "Perfect Sixes", apartment buildings that could house six families were in plentiful supply.

Connecticut architecture was heavily influenced by Europe, with Victorian, Queen Anne and Beaux-Arts styles enjoying widespread popularity. But, at the same time, there was a pushback amid a more complex, industrial society. That led to the rise of the Colonial Revival movement, which gained so much traction that insurer Aetna Inc. built the world's largest office building in that style in 1931 in Hartford.

After World War II, Connecticut — and the rest of the country — looked forward to a future that was increasingly dependent on the automobile. The Urban Renewal push of the 1950s and 1960s led to the construction of the interstate highway system that cut through cities such as Hartford, New Haven, New London and others, eliminating entire neighborhoods.

In New Haven, the Route 34, or Oak Street, connector cut a wide swath through the city, with the idea of making it easier to bring visitors into the city. And while that may have happened, at least initially, it also made it easier to avoid cities — with the rise of suburban shopping malls, office parks and subdivisions.

Urban Renewal also sought to clear entire neighborhoods for redevelopment. Hartford's Front Street neighborhood was razed to make way for Constitution Plaza, a project where Modern, spare architecture found acceptance. The plaza, built above street level was intended to give visitors and office workers, a raised refuge above the every day life on the streets below.

Constitution Plaza ultimately suffered from the decision to eliminate apartments from the development and a ramp connecting it to Main Street.

Preserving The Past

In 1971, there were a dozen buildings in Hartford on the National Register of Historic Places, including ones you might expect: the Old State House, the state Capitol building and the Wadsworth Atheneum.

A decade later, there were 4,000.

The 1980s ushered in the era of the preservation movement and redevelopment sensitive to existing structures — something that was largely ignored during Urban Renewal.

"It was a reaction to the idea that anything old is bad," said Tyler Smith, a Hartford architect and founding member of the Hartford Architecture Conservancy, launched in 1973.

Smith remembers well the fight to save the old YMCA building in downtown Hartford, a battle that was lost. But there were other high-profile victories, including saving the city'sCongress Street neighborhood from demolition.

The preservation movement morphed into New Urbanism, the idea that what cities once were — pedestrian-friendly, more densely populated and with things to do — could be the prescription for the long-elusive economic revitalization of cities. The mixed-use development — a combination of residential, retail and office space — has come to the forefront.

Hartford and New Haven are both using the mixed-use approach to try to repair damage done by Urban Renewal-era highway projects. The area of the Route 34 connector is now in the midst of redevelopment; city officials in Hartford are now seeking proposals to rebuild an area north of I-84, cut off from the rest of downtown for decades.

And on Constitution Plaza, a former, long-vacant hotel is being converted into apartments, with hopes of bringing residents to the development.

"In recent years," Platus said, "Connecticut has rediscovered the value of compact cities and neighborhoods."