



Early Architecture of Floral Park

# THE VICTORIANS

by David Ko

*Residential architecture reflects a myriad of influences, to include technology, environment, economics, aesthetics, and day-to-day life. In this ongoing column, neighbor and architect David Ko looks at the architecture of Floral Park, starting with Victorian, a few of which still exist in Floral Park and the broader Orange County community.*

**T**he antebellum era, as depicted in *Gone with the Wind*, was a prelude to the significant late 19th century agricultural expansion in the United States. During this time, farmhouse plans designed by creative rural men and women, regularly appeared in farm journals, inspiring the early settlers farming on expansive agricultural fields in Old Town Orange, Tustin, Floral Park, and neighboring Park Santiago. These farmsteads once

seamlessly unified a broad community without the freeways and heavy trafficked thoroughfares which divide it into separate enclaves today.

These early floorplans reflected the work patterns, social interactions, and cultural values of the time's farm families. The architecture depicted ingenious ways in which rural Americans designed dwellings in keeping with their visions of a dynamic, reformed rural culture, including concerns ranging from efficient workspaces

to self-contained rooms for adolescent children. The evolution of these progressive farmers' homes provided flexibility and sheds light on rural Santa Ana's efforts to adapt to significant changes brought by industrialization, urbanization, consolidation of capitalist agriculture, and the consumer's rise in society.

The earliest architectural styles to emerge in this town were Victorian for the affluent and Transitional for the working class. The fancy, decorative

adornment of Victorian houses once lined our most prestigious street—not Victoria in Floral Park but Broadway. These stately homes for the wealthy once afforded a team of handymen year-round work, attending tirelessly to unrelenting wood exteriors which continuously required new wood claddings, stripping, painting and varnishing. The Great Depression affected even the wealthiest residents who could no longer afford deferred maintenance of these impressive structures. Unfortunately, when uncared for, these delicate beauties deteriorated into a state of disrepair. Even Alfred Hitchcock selected this architecture genre as the haunting backdrop for his films, further accentuating their negative stereotype.

These elaborate and elegant homes were seen as eyesores to mid-century urban renewal planners and were razed, rezoned and replaced with modern commercial buildings and apartments. Fortunately, three modest Floral Park Victorian houses known as Transitional avoided the wrecking ball and survive to this day (1819 and 2033 Greenleaf Street as well as 2402 Flower.) A magnificent Victorian on Valencia in Park Santiago was restored in the late 1980s by a well-known merchant home builder who had an appreciation for vintage homes. A dozen spared eclectic Victorian homes are under a strict preservation covenant in Old Town Orange and numerous Old Tustin Victorian mansions have been repurposed as businesses.

The less ornate Transitional homes escaped the ill fate of their fancier cousins. By default, fewer ornamentation meant that they weathered much better and were more cost-effective to upkeep, thus lasting over a century. Academia has other names for these two homes, such as Four Square or Transitional style.

The primary form of these homes appeared taller than wide due to the extra high ceilings for both floors. This functioned to induce an eternal cycle of convection airflow where the lighter hot air rises and expels out through transom windows and is replaced by the

heavier, cooler, fresh air drawn in from the lower windows. The unique design of these late 19th century houses, built before the widespread use of electricity, allowed air flow to function as a form of natural air conditioning.

Gas or fuel-lit chandeliers occupied the upper high ceiling zone leaving the lower zone flame and fume-free. The primary cause of most house fires during this era was windblown sheers ignited by flame lighting. Thus, the light fixture hung high from the ceiling. To create a sense of human scale for the tall interior walls, crown molding, picture rail, wainscoting, chair rail and tall baseboard were used to articulate proportion and texture.

Early Transitional style homes in Santa Ana and Floral Park were built on a raised foundation and elevated above ground level because of frequent, severe flooding. Civil engineering projects did not occur until the mid-1930s during FDR's Work Progress Administration, when the construction of storm drains

appear plain and rather ordinary. Thus the use of multiple paint colors on the exterior of many Victorian homes.

Lumber companies published numerous plan books during the Victorian era featuring designs that were basic yet neat, modern, and comfortable. Many migrants to the West brought an East Coast "vernacular" architectural vision characterized by a steep pitched roof from a snowy climate to sunny Southern California.

However, architecture was a relatively new profession then and only the wealthiest could afford an architect to design a pedigreed Victorian mansion. In fact, few architects designed houses during this era as most were involved in civic projects where engineering, safety, and code compliance were paramount. And since architects took large fees on a house commissions, the rest of the population had to resort to homes made in the factory, transported by railroad, and assembled on location. Most owners either bought plan

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and flood channels alleviated torrential flooding.

The transom window above a regular window looked disproportionately tall. Therefore a single-story porch was used to conceal the transom window under the porch roof. The shaded patio also cooled the air before being drawn into the homes.

Victorian houses have exposed trusses, “stickwork,” and other details. The most important features are on the exterior wall surfaces. Instead of three-dimensional ornamentation, the emphasis was on patterns and lines. Because the decorative elements are flat, they are often lost when homeowners remodel. If the decorative stickwork is covered up with vinyl siding or painted a single solid color, Victorians may

book blueprints or ordered a house kit from companies such as Sears (think Craftsman) or Montgomery Ward (Wardway Homes).

These essential Transitional boxes allowed for cosmetic upgrades to transform them into Victorians, sort of like vehicles today. But those add-ons rarely seemed to look proportional and integrated with the scale of the homes. Other features include prominent brackets, rafters, and braces. These details were not structurally necessary but, rather, merely exterior decoration. The brackets and corbels looked too flimsy to support roof overhangs; the thin turn posts, spindles, and braces did not look sufficiently structurally to hold up the porch. The dishonesty of the surface treatment was short-lived and lasted no more than





*Photography: (page 14) the Frank Greenwald House at 1810 Greenleaf Street, built in 1894, is the oldest remaining Victorian home in Floral Park; (above) the historic Gustlin house built in 1907, still stands in Floral Park at 2033 Greenleaf; Sears sold kit homes in their catalogs like this modest farm house from 1908; the Dr. Raymond Smith House built in 1901 still stands at 1315 N. Broadway; (below) North Broadway, once lined with elaborate Victorian homes, was one of the most exclusive streets in Santa Ana;*

three decades. People much preferred a stripped-down version where the exterior exemplified honesty and details were pertinent to the structural integrity and weather protection.

Farmer folks could afford these more modest homes built between 1870 and 1900. Life was simple before the age of railroads. In the vast, remote stretches of Orange County, families built no-fuss, square, or L-shaped houses in the transitional style. But the rise of industrialization made it easier and more affordable to add decorative details to otherwise

simple homes. Decorative architectural trim could be mass-produced. As the railroads expanded, factory-made building parts reached far west to Orange County. Also, small pioneer towns could now obtain sophisticated woodworking machinery. A crate of scrolled brackets might find its way to Santa Ana or Orange, where carpenters could mix and match the pieces according to personal whim or according to what happened to be in the latest shipment. Many modest Victorian houses were adorned with flat, jigsaw cut trim in a variety of patterns.

Others had spindles, gingerbread, and detailed porches.

The dry, hot, and sunny climate of Southern California was a constant threat to Victorian houses. Weathering and deterioration caused by Mother Nature required attentive maintenance to sustain the exterior finishes. As homes changed hands from one generation to another, the care they required was rarely sustainable. Only a few Victorian houses survived to this day, avoiding water or fire damage, and the biggest threat, "progress."

