

**BELLCOURT CIVIC ASSOCIATION
THE ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER OF THE HOUSES OF BELLCOURT**

For the following observations, I borrowed heavily from the book called *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia Savage McAlester and *The Dutch Colonial House* by Aymar Embury II. I also borrowed from our own website, bellcourt.org, as well as some descriptions of the Broadway-Flushing Historic District designation from the National Register of Historic Places.

Bellcourt was originally developed by the Rickert Finlay Development Company in 1904. The company set up the street and block grid, installed the sewer and water supply lines, paved the roads and sidewalks, and planted street trees such as American Elms, Sycamores, London Planes, Norway Maples, and Linden. They also provided the restrictive covenants: Bellcourt has 9 restrictive covenants (refer to the BCA website). Rickert Finlay also designed Broadway-Flushing (1906), Douglaston Manor (1906), and Westmoreland (1907). From the National Register of Historic Properties' designation report for Broadway-Flushing we noted the following excerpt: "Rickert-Finlay did not dictate architectural style."

Bellcourt, in Bayside, began with simple improvements and restrictions similar to other contemporary developments in Queens. Several hallmarks of those deed restrictions were evident even at that time, including setting a minimum cost for construction to ensure higher quality of buildings; peaked roofs to ensure a more varied and less urban roofline; no fences or walls in front of the buildings to ensure a continuous streetscape, and deep minimum setbacks to give the impression of an open rural landscape. Unlike other deed restrictions of the time, there were no restrictions on ethnic or racial background." Note that this parklike character is a common theme in all of Rickert Finlay developments.

It is worth noting that the original 1906 Bellcourt real estate brochure, (again please refer to the BCA website) states that.. "over 25,000 feet of California privet hedge have been set out and about 2,500 shade trees, which gives 4 rows of trees on each street and avenue." So to make a long story short, Rickert-Finlay set out to ensure an overall park-like character while encouraging diversity in the architecture. Styles such as Dutch Colonial and other Colonial Revivals, Tudors, Mediterranean, and Arts and Crafts were developed with that idea in mind, so that the houses do not dominate its park-like setting but complement it.

These houses are all characterized by typical architectural principles which include, similar:

a- scale (the size of the house relative to the size of the lot).

- b- void to open ratio (size and disposition of windows relative to the wall surface).
- c- massing (the shapes of houses and their roofs).
- d- materials.

By observation of the different house styles one could discern the following principles that make up a Bellcourt house:

- 1- Emphasis on a “park-like” setting, therefore the house is background for the protagonist: the trees.
- 2- Simple primary overall shape with secondary shapes subservient to it. There are no “repeating” gables on the same façade.
- 3- Exterior materials are wood, shingles, brick, stucco, and painted metal or wood railings. (Sometimes plastic replaces wood, but always in imitation of wood).
- 4- Roofs are gabled, (with a typical slope of 7:12) - whether Dutch Colonial, Cape-Cod, Center Hall Colonial, Federal, Tudor, Craftsman.
- 5- Facades are symmetrical, or balanced with elements arranged in dynamic and interesting compositions; openings and masses are in proportional relation to each other.
- 6- The only architectural elements above the second floor are dormers, chimneys, or “widow’s walks.” Dormers are proportioned as dormers, not gables.
- 7- Entrances are always one story and protected from rain and/or snow with a roof that is proportioned to the stoop it covers and architecturally related to the rest of the house.
- 8- Stoops are never more than 3 or 5 steps above the grade. Columns or pilasters that support the roof over entrances and/or stoops are always 1 story in height.
- 9- There are few second-floor balconies and these are always minor appendages or within the house’s overall shape and never “add-ons”.
- 10- Windows are always perceived as vertical; even when ganged together with mullions. Their glass lights are always divided with muntins and the muntins are painted in a color that contrasts with the glass instead of blending with the glass.
- 11- Houses have chimneys that are made of brick and are located either in the center of the house or at the gable’s end.

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CRAFTSMAN (1905-1930)



This style seems to have originated in California by the Greene and Greene brothers at the turn of the 19th to 20th century. Their designs were popularized in magazines such as: House Beautiful, Good Housekeeping, Country Life in America and the Ladie's Home Journal, among others. As a result, pattern books began to appear selling kits of those homes (Sears? Perhaps?). This was THE dominant style of house built from about 1905 to the early 1920s in America. It rapidly faded after the mid 1920s and very few were built after 1930.

In Bellcourt, most Craftsman Style houses are side-gabled or hipped-roof two-story buildings. All of the ones on 212 street between 38th and 39th Avenue are side gabled; the one shown in the photo above on 210th Street is a hipped roof type.

The style's identifying features are:

- 1- A low-pitched or hipped roof with wide eave overhangs and typically exposed roof rafters under the roof.
- 2- Decorative beams or braces added under the gables.
- 3- Full or partial width porches with a roof supported on tapered or square wood columns.

The porch roof supports typically rise from the ground past the porch level and forming part of the porch railing wall upon which the square and usually tapered columns rest.

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GEORGIAN (1700-1780) OR FEDERAL (1780 - 1820)? COLONIAL REVIVAL (1880-1955)



Even though during the Colonial Revival period people (and architects) were interested in providing true period details for their houses, sometimes both the Georgian and the Federal styles ended mixed on the same house.

Some Georgian houses also had gambrel roofs but more typically above a second story (some of these are on 211th near 39th Ave). The one above is at 36-21, 210th. Their identifying features were:

- 1- Paneled front door capped by an elaborate entablature supported by pilasters.
- 2- A small rectangular row of glass panes above the door (beneath the entablature) or within the door.
- 3- A building cornice emphasized with by decorative mouldings, most commonly with dentils (teeth-like).
- 4- Double-hung windows with 9/9 or 12/12 sashes and glass panes separated by thick muntins.
- 5- Windows were usually 5 ranked and never in adjacent pairs.

The Federal Style is similar but more refined. In America some historians call it the “Adam” Style. Asher Benjamin’s – the American Builder’s Companion contributed to the spreading of this stile. It’s identifying features are:

- 1- Semicircular or elliptical fanlights above the door (rarely rectangular ones were used).
- 2- An elaborate door surround (sometimes with sidelights).
- 3- A full entablature over the door surround (sometimes with dentils – teeth-like moldings).
- 4- Double-hung windows with 6/6 sashes.
- 5- Five-ranked windows, never in adjacent pairs.
- 6- Sometimes three-part Palladian Style windows.

Federal houses many times are modified by projecting wings or attached dependencies. The side-gabled roof is the most common roof form occurring in over 40% of the surviving examples.

In the southern colonies (such as Virginia) the preferred building material was brick with chimney placed at the gable end (the house at the corner of 38th and 212, may have been built for a southern client). In New Holland (or New Amsterdam) and in New England we preferred clapboard siding with a central (or interior) chimney.

The exterior of Federal houses tend to be more refined than Georgian houses. So modillions replace the blocky dentils at the building cornice. The few elaborations of the façade are usually around the entrance. Windows have keystone lintels with prominent sills below, dormers typically have arched windows.

Brick Georgian houses tend to have wooden casings around windows, whereas in Federal houses built after 1800 these are omitted.

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SIDE-GABLED COLONIAL REVIVAL (1880-1955)



The term “Colonial Revival” refers to the entire rebirth of interest in the early English and Dutch houses of the Atlantic Seaboard. The Georgian and Federal Style form the backbone of this Revival with secondary influences from Post Medieval English (Tudor) and Dutch Colonial prototypes. Many times, details are freely combined therefore, pure Colonial Revival houses are uncommon versus eclectic mixes and that is what we have in Bellcourt- eclectic mixes!

Identifying features of the Side-gabled Colonial Revival:

- 1- Accentuated front door normally with a decorative crown (entablature) or pediment supported by pilasters (square columns) to form an entry porch.
- 2- Doors may have overhead fanlights (as in the Federal Revival) or sidelights (or both).
- 3- Windows with multi-paned sashes in the upper sash (cottage style) or in both.
- 4- Windows are laid-out frequently in adjacent pairs.

Principal subtypes:

- 1- Hipped-roof with Full Width Porch- About 1/3 of Colonial Revival houses built BEFORE 1915 are of this subtype, which is sometimes called the “Classic Box”. These have a one-story full-width porch with classical columns, which is added to a symmetrical two-story house of square or rectangular plan.
- 2- Side-gabled roof – About 30% are simple two-story rectangular blocks with side-gabled roofs. This type predominates AFTER 1915 and was widely built after 1930.



Hipped Roof with a Full Porch



Cape Cod type

- 3- One-story Colonial Revival- These are also called Cape Cods (also refer to the Minimal Traditional Style) and are patterned after wood Cape Cod folk houses of eastern Massachusetts, usually with added Georgian or Federal type doorways. As an aside, the architect Royal Barry Wills who designed many Cape Cod houses in Massachusetts, won a design competition in 1938 sponsored by Life Magazine against none other than Frank Lloyd Wright! Will design was praised for its charm and livability. How many of us knew of Royal Barry Wills until today?

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DUTCH COLONIAL (1625 – 1840) DUTCH COLONIAL REVIVAL (1880-1955)



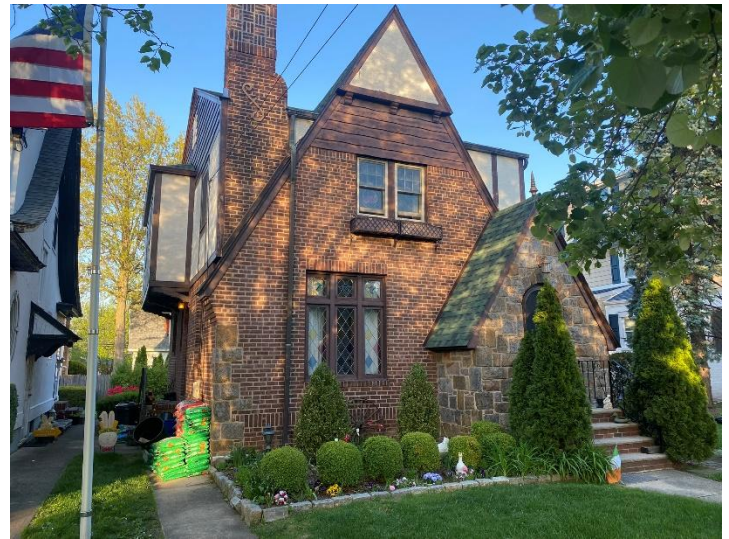
The three areas where settlers came to America were New England, New Holland (or New Amsterdam) and Virginia. Dutch Colonial Revival houses are based on Dutch Colonial houses built by the original settlers of New Holland (or New Amsterdam). Settlers to the north and south developed other types of Colonial buildings as their European traditions suggested.

Arguably, the Dutch Colonial is the ideal form for small houses. The typical gambrel shaped roof seems as if it is growing out of the earth. These houses are low in appearance making them ideal for a fitting-in with a “park-like” setting. The second story neatly fits under the shape of the gambrel shaped roof. The entrance is typically on the hip side, not on the gable side, but there are some exceptions for picturesque arrangement.

Originally few examples, if any, had deep overhanging eaves on the gable end (my neighbor’s house at 36-38 is like that). Flared eaves, though very characteristic, are not the defining feature. This belongs rather to the gambrel roof. The overall size of the house, its chimney location and entrance location will determine the location of the stairs. Obviously if the chimney is located on the gable and the entrance is on the center of the eave side, then we have a “center-hall-colonial”.

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TUDOR (1890-1940)



The Tudor style may sometimes be confused with the Craftsman style particularly in its simpler or severe versions that use stucco as a cladding material. Tudor is actually a misnomer as it comes from a book which popularized the style after 1911 called: *The Domestic Architecture of England During the Tudor Period* by Thomas Garner and Arthur Stratton.

It's identifying features are:

- 1- Steeply pitched roofs which are typically side gabled.
- 2- Façade dominated by one or more prominent front facing off-center gable.
 - a. This gable may include a small gable nested inside where the main door is located.
 - b. Other gable roof variations are:
 - i. One eave shorter than the other.
 - ii. One eave curving or sweeping outward.
 - iii. Clipped gables (a.k.a. jerkin head).
 - iv. Overlapping gables.
- 3- Tall narrow windows, usually in groups of 3 or with multi-paned glazing.
 - a. American Tudor houses may combine casement and double-hung windows. They have simple or no surrounds.
 - b. Where half-timbering occurs, windows are integrated into its pattern.
 - c. Casements may have small rectangular or diamond-shaped glass panes held in place by thin strips of lead.
- 4- Big chimneys expressed on the building exterior.

- 5- Front door with a round Tudor arch or simply a rectangular door with a small window within the door itself.
- 6- Decorative half-timbering with stucco infill.
- 7- Chimneys with decorative masonry patterns, multiple chimney shafts and ornamented chimney pots.
- 8- Upper stories or gables may overhang lower stories.

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MINIMAL TRADITIONAL (1935-1950)



This was “The Little House that Could.” During the Great Depression, construction virtually stopped. The government stepped in with the creation of the FHA (Federal Housing Administration) as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. They created a bulleting called “Principles of Planning Small Houses” Builders who followed their principles could get a loan easier than those who did not. So they practically created the Minimal Traditional Style which supplied houses for 2.3 million Americans who relocated to work in the wartime production industries between 1940 and 1945 and then 5.1 million Americans (many of them Veterans) between 1946 and 1949.

The style’s identifying features are:

- 1- Low or intermediate (4:12 to 6:12) roof pitch, usually one story.
 - a. The “gable and wing” roof type has a low pitch front facing gable added asymmetrically to a side-gabled roof.
 - b. The side-gabled roof type with dormers is commonly known as a “Cape Cod”. – Refer to the Colonial Revival style for more on this Cape Cod description.
- 2- Double-hung multi-pane or 1/1 windows.
- 3- Little detail.
- 4- Cladding with one material or if two, of similar color.
- 5- Porches, bay windows or platform steps were the only additions suggested by the FHA bulletin.
- 6- Occasionally they had a scalloped detail across the base of the gable (see houses on 211th Street near 40th avenue) or some Tudor or Colonial Revival details.

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RANCH (1935-1975)



Ranch houses started being built around 1935. Emphasis on factories producing standardized sizes of sheetrock, 2 x 4 lumber and windows encouraged them. The FHA discouraged modern houses so builders added traditional details based on Spanish, French or Colonial precedents. According to Virginia Savage McAlester, this style is “very loosely based on early Spanish Colonial precedents in the American Southwest- primarily the larger pitched-roof homes that featured private courtyards and covered inward-facing porches”.

Cliff May, an innovative Southern California builder, designer, and promoter joined with California-based Sunset Magazine to introduce Ranch Homes to a larger audience. In 1946 he and the editorial staff of Sunset wrote and published “Western Ranch Houses”. This featured a history of Spanish Colonial houses and a number of plans and diagrams on how to build new Ranch houses based on them.

About 40% of one-story Ranch houses have a cross-hipped roof. About 10% have a side gabled roof (like the one illustrated above). These are more common in neighborhoods with smaller houses. About 40% have a broad side gabled form with the long roof ridge parallel to the street and a prominent front-facing gable extension (similar to the illustration above).

Frequently two or more materials were combined such as cladding in the top of the gable ends or in horizontal sections (such as between the bottom third of a wall and the upper two-thirds).

The Ranch house type identifying features are:

- 1- Broad one-story shape, typically built low to the ground.
- 2- Low pitched roof without dormers.
- 3- Moderate to wide roof overhangs.

- 4- Front entry usually located off center and sheltered under the main roof.
- 5- Garage typically attached to the main façade.
- 6- A large picture window is generally present.
 - a. Windows tended to be manufactured in standard sizes and newly regulated by the trade associations. Usually double-hung, casements, sliding, awning or jalousie (in Florida). Patterns could range from 1/1, 2/2, 3/3, 6/6, 8/8 9/9 or 12/12. Corner windows were sometimes used.
- 7- Asymmetrical façade.

The popularization of Ranch houses increased with the use of the automobile. Houses could sprawl on wider lots since you did not need to walk to your house.

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SPLIT-LEVEL (1935-1975)



Split-level houses are considered a variation of the Ranch house type. In northern states developers tended to favor split-levels perhaps due to having more expensive land or heat savings for having a more compact house. This house type was popularized after WWII. There are 2 primary types: the tri-level split with 3 distinct living stories – each a half level apart (similar to the house above) and the bi-level split with 2 distinct stories and an entry/foyer in-between.

The houses above are at 35-21, 209th and 36-09 209th street. You can easily tell it is a tri-level split. Splits take less room on a site and this is ideal where land is more expensive as in NYC. A theory of interior zones developed in relation to splits whereby the lower level was thought ideal for noisy family activities such as the car and the family or TV room, the intermediate for more quiet family gathering activities such as cooking and dining; and the upper for sleeping. Splits are ideally suited for sites that slope.

The disadvantage of splits (vs Ranch) is that they are not ideal for the elderly or people with disabilities.

Roof forms can offer more variety than Ranch Houses as they can take advantage of the various levels. Split-levels started a trend in modern houses towards having multiple levels.