

Private Spaces

Private spaces include bedrooms and an assortment of “little rooms” that might be used as sewing room, boudoir, sleeping porch, sun room, or bedroom as the family's size and fortunes changed. Bedrooms could be remarkably tiny by today's standards (8 feet by 11 feet in some of the smaller Washington Park houses), and it was not uncommon for bedrooms to lack closets. The typical “Troy bay” is usually attached to one of the smallest bedrooms, where it adds a precious few feet.

The Early Days: Undecorated Bedrooms

“Undecorated” is probably an overstatement. But the bedroom was not a major concern in decorating advice of the 1840s through about 1900. The bedroom had largely lost its status as a secondary sitting room and had not yet gained much status as a refuge or den. Bedroom suites appear in the late Renaissance Revival style, and frequently in golden oak, but not in Rococo Revival. An elaborately decorated bedroom might still double as a boudoir, but reformers recommended simpler, more hygienic rooms.

Floors. Even if the floors of public rooms were redone in hardwood after 1876, bedroom floors were likely to remain softwood. Bedroom carpets were expected to be lower in price and quality than parlor carpets. A particularly wealthy and ostentatious family might have Brussels carpeting in the bedrooms, but a three-ply or even two-ply ingrain was far more likely. A family of modest means (and there were some) might even have striped Venetian carpets in the bedrooms, especially in children's rooms.

Walls. Wallpaper was so affordable that it was the norm upstairs as well as down. Look for fewer layers of wallpaper upstairs, as bedrooms were a lower priority for redecorating than public rooms. In some houses, there was no repapering from 1865 to 1920! Woodwork was painted softwood. Detailing on woodwork and ceiling was much simpler than downstairs (and expect ceilings to be slightly lower).

Sources

While the analysis above is our own, it inevitably starts from a number of sources. Several useful starting points for the researcher are:

Elsie deWolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: Century, 1916). The self-proclaimed “first interior decorator” explains the norm of simplicity in the early 20th-century bedroom.

Roger W. Moss and Gail Caskey Winkler. *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986). Our hypotheses on the most likely interior decorations in Washington Park houses were developed from Moss & Winkler's extraordinarily well-researched description of upper-class interiors of 1830 to 1870 and middle-class interiors of 1870-1900.

Bedrooms that faced south or west were to be decorated in cool blues, greens, and grays; while bedrooms that faced north or east were to be decorated in warm tones. Recommended bedroom colors were generally softer and lighter than the colors used for public rooms, and recommended patterns were simpler. (However, given the norms of the time, this simplicity and restfulness is only by contrast to downstairs.)

Windows. Bedroom window treatments were to be simpler than those used downstairs. Again, the private areas of the house were a lower priority for spending money.

The Twentieth Century: Attending to the Bedroom

In the early twentieth century, bedrooms become a decorating issue. The emphasis was on a functional place for sleeping and dressing, not a refuge of comfort. Unsurprisingly, recommended styles tended to be Colonial Revival, for its noble simplicity. Painted furniture was seen as appropriate for spaces that were still considered private, and bed coverings were relatively tailored. The norms of decorating the bedroom more simply than the public spaces, and of using cool tones for south- or west-facing rooms, and warm tones for north- and east-facing rooms continued.

The late 20th century preference for the “master suite” creates a problem for some of the smaller Washington Park houses. The typical three-bay plan allows for no more than four bedrooms to a floor (assuming one small bedroom has not been taken for the bathroom). The bedrooms over the parlor and dining room are fairly large--what we would consider bedroom-sized today--and the bedrooms in line with the stair hall are about half that size and usually lacking a closet. Rebuilding to accommodate today's standard of luxury, while retaining a reasonable number of bedrooms, can be difficult.

Research Questions

- How far back do today's closets date?
- How often was the "bay room" used as a bedroom after the addition of the bay?
- Is the bay addition related to socio-economic class? Bays are not added to the largest houses in Washington Park, but they do appear on the more affluent rowhouses in working-class South Troy.