# Public Spaces

Planbooks of the 1840s emphasized the importance of dividing houses into public spaces, used for family gatherings and for entertaining visitors, and private spaces, used for sleeping, bathing, dressing, and cooking. The main floor of a Washington Park house would have had, at minimum, a formal hall with its steep staircase, a parlor, and a dining room. The larger houses had double parlors, of which the back parlor might be used as a more informal but still public sitting room. At least a few of the houses—notably 195 Second Street—had a drawing room large enough to double as a ballroom.

### The 1840s: Neo-Classical

In looking at a Washington Park house, it is important to remember that many were built before the era we think of as "high Victorian." The original detailing still followed the styles of the preceding Federal era: rectilinear fireplaces, dentil molding, designs with acanthus leaves or Greek keys, and paneled walls (or wallpaper imitating paneling and architectural detail). Compared to the Rococo Revival that followed, Neo-Classical styles seem almost austere.

**Floors.** Hardwood floors are unlikely to be original. Wide softwood boards were the norm, even in the home of the wealthy. These floors were never left visible in public rooms, but were covered with carpets. Carpet, now mass-produced, was bought in strips and sewn together to cover the entire floor. A Washington Park house would have had expensive Brussels carpets, with a raised nap—or perhaps, in rooms receiving harder wear, a three-ply ingrain, with a three-colored pattern in a flat weave similar to today's Aubusson carpets.

**Walls.** Wallpaper was used almost universally. The fashion was to run a single pattern from baseboard to cornice, with a narrow, darker border just below the cornice. High-style patterns included landscapes, scenes of battles, faux architectural details (including blocks of ashlar), and patterns of plants or animals. (Extravagantly high-style wallpaper might be flocked.) Woodwork was to be painted a darker tone of the dominant color in the wallpaper. (Do not count on finding gorgeous mahogany under layers of paint—woodgraining on softwood was popular even among the wealthy.)

**Windows.** Look for deep window recesses in the front parlor. These once held wooden shutters (with slats) or blinds (with flat faces). Curtains in public rooms should be relatively simple panels of cotton velvet or silk (no fringe!), hung on rings without pinch pleats, that can be swagged back. Windows can be finished with a gilt cornice or with an artfully arranged swag of fabric on a fancy rod.

**Colors.** Harmony came from contrast, leading to an emphasis on red and green rooms. The dominant color of the carpet must contrast with the dominant color of the wallpaper. Due to paint-mixing technology, colors are somewhat more muted than they will be after the Civil War.

### The 1860s: Rococo Revival and Renaissance Revival

Renaissance Revival was a relatively straight-lined style that was considered masculine, and thus appropriate for dining rooms and libraries. The more curvy, feminine Rococo Revival was the preferred style of the front parlor.

**Floors.** Softwood covered by carpet remained the norm, especially in the more modest houses constructed at the south end of Third Street. Decorating reformers decried carpet patterns depicting realistic flowers and fruit, suggesting that such patterns were common. Encaustic tile floors became popular for front halls.

**Walls.** Wallpaper remained popular, again with more elaborate and realistic patterns coming to the fore. Painted woodwork also remained common, but design reformers increasingly recommended using walnut or oak wainscoting and woodwork.

**Ceilings.** The elaborate "Troy ceiling" with curlicued cornice and enormous ceiling rose probably dates from this period, as the detailing contained vents to remove fumes from gas lights.

**Color schemes.** "Harmony by contrast" continued to be recommended, and colors became more intense with the availability of new dyes.

**Windows.** Window treatments became more elaborate. This is the era of fringes, and of elaborate schemes for draping the curtains. If a pier mirror was centered between the two tall parlor windows—as it usually was—the windows would be equipped with gilt lambrequins that coordinated with the crest of the mirror, creating an uninterrupted flow of ornamentation across the wall.

### The 1880s: Reform

High-style taste aggressively rejected three-dimensional representation patterns in favor of a flatter, more stylized look. Rococo curves were largely replaced by straight lines.

**Floors.** The Centennial exposition of 1876 created a new fashion for floors—one that was embraced by the wealthy, but by no means universally followed. The Exposition was the first appearance in the U.S. of "Turkish carpets"—the Asian rugs that cover only a

portion of the floor, leaving a wide strip of polished wood visible around the edges. This look started a fashion for replacing softwood floors with hardwood. Those who wished to economize used hardwood only around the edge of the floor! The fashion for hardwood floors was by no means universal in Washington Park: there are houses where the floors were never altered, and others that got their hardwood floors as late as the 1920s.

**Walls.** This is the era of the tripartite wall, with coordinating patterns for dado, fill, and frieze. The dado and frieze were to be relatively dark, the fill correspondingly light. Do not count on finding tripartite wall coverings or William Morris wallpapers under layers of later paper: again, some houses did little updating during this time. Although there was a fashion for ceiling wallpaper, often depicting stars on a ground of sky, again this fashion seems to have missed Washington Park. A fashion for hardwood woodwork intensified during this period, though it's more likely to be seen in houses that were first built at this time, such as 169 Second Street.

**Colors.** Color schemes were increasingly attached to specific rooms. The Pompeiian hall, in terra cotta red with accents of olive, red, and yellow, was widely popular. Parlor colors were to be more delicate than in the preceding era, using only tertiary colors such as drab, peach, ashes of rose, or soft blue. The dining room was to contrast with the parlor. Thus a salmon or apricot parlor would be matched with a dark olive or sage dining room, and a pale blue parlor might be adjacent to a chocolate-toned dining room.

**Windows.** While reformers recommended plain tapestry curtains hung from loops, fashionable window treatments became ever more fringed and more elaborately draped. Portieres also became popular.

### The 1920s: Colonial Revival and Modernism

It is important to keep in mind that the removal of Victorian detailing, which we now regard as desecration, is not a sign that a building went down-market. In the teens and twenties, Victoriana was regarded with loathing. Replacing Victorian cornices and molding with simpler Colonial Revival details—or hacking it off in favor of sleek modern lines—was a sign that there was money for modernization. Retaining original details under a uniform coat of neutral paint was as likely to mean that money was tight as to indicate respect for the past.

**Floors.** Hardwood covered with an Oriental rug remained popular as a "traditional" look, but wall-to-wall carpeting in a single tone gained in popularity.

**Walls.** Wallpaper had become so widely affordable that it was considered downscale in new homes. However, painting required stripping layers of wallpaper and adding a new finishing coat of plaster, while wallpaper in a sufficiently violent pattern could be hung over existing wallpaper. So Washington Park homes, as they became more conventionally middle-class, tended to pick up a layer or two of the boldest and most vibrant patterns of the Art Deco period. Woodwork was painted a solid, neutral color even if it was a hardwood.

**Colors.** High-style color schemes before WWI emphasized muted two-color combinations, such as mauve and sage green or deep rose and Wedgewood blue. The post-war Art Deco style emphasized cream and gold, with a soft, harmonizing scheme. However, Washington Park had slipped a bit on the social scale, and its residents were as likely to prefer a louder pattern-on-pattern look in orange and deep green or mustard and crimson.

**Windows.** The look for windows was straight, plain panels with a coordinating plain cornice.

### The 1950s: Modernism on the Cheap

After WWII, the socio-economic status of Washington Park dropped precipitously, even as local professors were picking up deals on houses. This is the era of cheap fixes such as dropped ceilings, masonite walls, and paneling over crumbling plaster.

It's worth noting that these fixes, while cheap, were not necessarily seen as tacky when they were made. Ornamentation of any sort had lost what little status it had during the early years of modernism, and a drop ceiling of acoustic tiles may have seemed considerably more appealing and up-to-date. Skilled workers who could repair plaster were also few in number, making repairs to the original plasterwork even more expensive than they are today. Turning old mansions into pseudo-ranch houses, complete with rustic paneling, may have seemed like the only way to keep the neighborhood going.

It's also worth noting that cheap fixes did not necessarily happen all at once. There are at least two distinct drop ceiling technologies used in Washington Park houses. One, the earlier of the two, is a series of tiles attached to lathes directly below the original (usually damaged) plaster ceiling. The later version is the more familiar acoustic panels mounted with visible metal dividers.

## *Sources*

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

Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room & Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992). An entertaining and useful source of insight into Victorian decorating quirks, from embroidered mottoes to sideboards carved with dead animals.

Elsie deWolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: Century, 1916). The self-proclaimed "first interior decorator" dictates high style norms of simplicity as well as discussing, in chapter four, how to update a Victorian brownstone.

Mary Gilliatt, *Mary Gilliatt's Period Decorating* (London: Conran Octopus, 1980). Although this book is about how to achieve contemporary "revival" interiors in various styles (of which Victorian gets short shrift), it is a useful source of illustrations of neo-Classical motifs.

Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). Modern and Colonial styles, as interpreted in the 1950s, appear in chapter four.

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.

Frank Alvah Parsons, *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1922). Parsons' high-style approach focused on Colonial and Renaissance styles. Probably few Washington Park residents were in a class to follow Parsons' advice, but he expresses the normative anti-Victorian and pro-simplicity feeling of the time.

## *Research Questions*

- When does the typical Troy rowhouse stop updating its decorations with changing decorating trends? We know that at least some houses were not significantly updated, even in their public areas, between the 1860s and 1919. Given that wealth held steady or declined slightly in the 1870-1900 decades, was updating generally minimal?
- How much of Washington Park is properly neo-Classical rather than Victorian in style? It seems that even some Italianate houses were built with neo-Classical, rather than neo-Rococo, details.
- Did Washington Park houses ever follow high-style designs at all? The neighborhood was sufficiently distant from centers of style like New York City and Boston that its wealthy class may have been less influenced by fashion.

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