

SurveyLA

Los Angeles Historic Resources Survey

LOS ANGELES CITYWIDE HISTORIC CONTEXT STATEMENT

Context: Architecture and Engineering, 1850-1980

Theme: The Shotgun House, 1898-1929



Prepared for:

City of Los Angeles
Department of City Planning
Office of Historic Resources



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PREFACE

This historic context is a component of Los Angeles' citywide historic context statement and provides guidance to field surveyors in identifying and evaluating shotgun houses. The context provides a historical overview of the building type and then focuses on geographic areas associated with extant resources in Los Angeles. Refer to www.HistoricPlacesLA.org for information on designated resources associated with this theme as well as those identified through SurveyLA and other surveys.

CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

The theme "The Shotgun House, 1898-1929" examines the origins of the shotgun house in America and its occurrence in Los Angeles. The house is most common in the American South, and it occurs in perhaps the largest numbers in New Orleans. There are differing theories as to the origins of this residential building type. Some scholars¹ trace the shotgun house back to the Caribbean. Its closest progenitor appears to have been the Haitian *ti-kay*, or small house, which was influenced by West African and Native American building traditions. During the Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century, many Haitian refugees migrated to New Orleans. Some argue that it was during this period that the shotgun house made its way to the American South. Others argue that the shotgun house did not appear as a building type until the 1840s and was largely a response to the narrow lots of New Orleans. A third theory contends that the shotgun house was a descendent of several earlier housing forms found in New Orleans beginning in the 1790s. These included Creole, Haitian, and French building traditions. Though the shotgun house is commonly linked to African Americans and their contributions to architecture, this was not the only group that constructed and utilized the building type. Though it was often constructed by African Americans, it was also built for and by working- and middle-class Anglo Americans as well as European immigrants. These examples were larger and more elaborate in design, often utilizing architectural details from the Georgian, Italianate, and Queen Anne styles.

When the shotgun house first began to be constructed in Los Angeles is unknown. There are few extant examples in the city and there is no existing scholarship to indicate whether the house type was always relatively uncommon or if there are simply few examples remaining.

¹ Anthropologist John Michael Vlach is the primary proponent of this theory, though Jay D. Edwards' theory about the shotgun house deriving from earlier house forms acknowledges Haitian influence as well.

Evaluation Considerations

The Shotgun House theme may have some overlap with other SurveyLA themes as follows:

- Properties significant for their architectural quality may also be significant under themes within the Architecture and Engineering context.
- Properties representing early development in an area may also be eligible under the Early Residential Development theme within the Residential Development and Suburbanization context.
- Examples of the property type arranged in a bungalow court configuration may be eligible under the Bungalow Court subtheme within Multi-Family Residential Development theme of the Residential Development and Suburbanization context.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The shotgun house is characterized by its long, narrow appearance and lack of hallway. Most are a single room wide and two or more rooms in depth, with the main entrance set into the narrow end of the building facing the street. Rooms are typically connected on the interior by doorways aligned along a single axis. Both the origins of the shotgun house and the name itself are uncertain. The most common theory refers to the fact that if a shotgun was fired on one side of the house, it could pass through all doorways and out the back without obstruction. Variations on the building type can be found throughout the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Haiti, and Barbados. Within the United States, the shotgun house was widely constructed in cities such as New Orleans, Louisville, and Miami, and examples can also be found in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas.² Although they were constructed elsewhere, scholars typically use New Orleans as a case study for the shotgun house because the building type was both widely constructed there and survives there today in larger numbers than perhaps anywhere else in the country.



Haitian ti-kay houses, circa 1729 (Jay Edwards, "Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America," 67)

There are three prevailing theories about the origins of the shotgun house. The first argues that the building type originated in West Africa and then traveled to the Caribbean, most notably Haiti, from which it was taken to New Orleans in the early nineteenth century by refugees of the Haitian Revolution, many of whom were free blacks. Between 1791 and 1809, more than 12,000 refugees of the Haitian Revolution arrived in New Orleans. This included white French citizens, slaves, and free blacks. This drastic population increase caused a shortage of

² Lillian McRae, "The American Shotgun House: A Study of its Evolution and the Enduring Presence of the Vernacular in American Architecture" (undergraduate honors thesis, University of Arkansas, 2012), 17.

housing. The free black population, now more than double its size in 1803, was able to construct housing on its own terms to meet their needs.³ They began building temporary housing to address their immediate needs, modeled after the housing they had known in Haiti (called the *ti-kay*, or small house). Houses remarkably similar in form, massing, and design to the shotgun were constructed in Haiti in the late eighteenth century.⁴ These *ti-kay* may have started in the mountainous regions of Haiti, then known as Saint-Domingue, and were constructed by “maroons” (escaped slaves). As the French settled in the island in the second half of the seventeenth century, the *ti-kay* began to be constructed in the island’s towns and cities.⁵ They were likely influenced by both West African building traditions and architecture of the island’s Native American population.⁶ This temporary housing of the Haitian refugees evolved into the shotgun house that became common in the city by the middle of the nineteenth century.

A second theory contends that the shotgun house was largely a response to narrow lots in New Orleans and did not appear until the 1840s, though some argue that this does not take all available evidence into account. This theory traces the origins of the shotgun house to the Creole cottage, constructed in New Orleans beginning in the 1790s. The Creole cottage was found in working-class neighborhoods and was constructed as a long, narrow building one and a half stories in height with a side-gabled roof. Since French law dictated that children receive an equal division of an inheritance, lots were subdivided into increasingly narrow strips with each generation. By the early nineteenth century, it was common to find lots between 15’ to 30’ wide by 120’ or 150’ deep. The Creole cottage was initially a good answer to these narrow lots, but they became problematic as parcels became smaller. The only option for the expansion of a residence of this type was to the rear. However, Creole cottages were expensive and difficult to expand in this manner due to their roof forms. The shotgun house, according to this theory, was a result of simply reorienting the roof form of these Creole cottages to a front-facing gable, making expansion to any length easier.⁷

The third prevailing theory about the origins of the shotgun house contends that although the building type as it was known in the latter part of the nineteenth century did not appear until the 1830s, it had its origins in earlier housing forms constructed in New Orleans beginning in the 1790s. Jay D. Edwards, in his article “Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America,” notes that while the narrow city lots of New Orleans likely contributed to the shape of the shotgun house, it was not the only factor in its formation. He points to four earlier building types that may have contributed to the development of the later shotgun house. All of these proto-shotgun houses were a single room wide and two or more rooms in depth. They had main entrances on their street-facing elevations. They include *appentis* cottages, *cabannes* (or shanties), Creole *maisonettes* (or small house), and early single shotguns.

³ John Michael Vlach, “The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy Part I,” *Pioneer America* 8, no. 1 (January 1976): 54; Jay D. Edwards, “Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America,” *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 65-66.

⁴ John Michael Vlach, “The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy Part II,” *Pioneer America* 8, no. 2 (July 1976):57-60.

⁵ Jay D. Edwards, “Creolization Theory and the Odyssey of the Atlantic Linear Cottage,” *Etnofoor* 23, no. 1 (2011): 62-63.

⁶ Vlach, “The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy Part II,” 64-65.

⁷ Edwards, “Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America,” 64.

Appentis cottages are the earliest of these proto-shotgun houses and were constructed prior to the turn of the nineteenth century. *Appentis* buildings, which refers to a shed roof in French, were constructed as service buildings behind a main residence in eighteenth century France. They were constructed as if they were one-half of a building on each side of a wall that separated neighboring properties. In New Orleans, *appentis* buildings were constructed as freestanding residences without its mirror half on the other side. They were popular in New Orleans into the 1840s.⁸ *Cabannes* were constructed as temporary housing for refugees of the Haitian Revolution in the first decade of the nineteenth century and were modeled after residences in Haiti.⁹

The Creole *maisonette* was similar to the shotgun house but had a hipped roof. They were constructed of brick, often had stylistic elements of Federal architecture, and typically had two pairs of double doors on the street-facing elevation. These were fairly common in the early nineteenth century in Creole parts of New Orleans. They are more typically classified as a type of Creole cottage than a forerunner of the shotgun house due to their roof type and construction techniques, though Edwards argues that they have more in common with the latter than the former.¹⁰ The single shotgun, namely a narrow house with a gabled roof, began to be constructed in small numbers in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

While some historians argue that the shotgun house was associated with the city's African American population, Edwards points out that shotgun houses were not only constructed by blacks. Afro-Creole and African American builders specialized in its construction, and it was then disseminated into other segments of society. By the time they became popular in the 1830s, shotgun houses were constructed by



Camelback shotgun house in the Bywater neighborhood, New Orleans, photograph taken between 1980 and 2006 (Carol M. Highsmith Collection, Library of Congress)

both blacks and whites, often as rental properties. The owner lived in the front, while the tenant lived in the back and had a separate entrance. In these instances, the residence was designed with a side hall that ran the length of the building under the roof eaves to allow renters to access their rooms without entering those of the landlord.¹¹ By the late 1840s, shotgun houses were popular with working class and middle class American businessmen, as well as German, Irish, and other European immigrants.¹² They became longer and more elaborate in their design. Some were two stories in height. Side-hall, side-gallery, and double shotguns were popular during this period. They were constructed with detached

⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

service buildings to the rear; later in the century, these service spaces were built as a two-story attached portion in a sub-type known as the Camelback.¹³ The table below summarizes the five shotgun sub-types.

The Shotgun House & Its Sub-Types¹⁴

Single Shotgun House	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long, narrow residence • Main entrance facing the street • Front-gabled roof • Front porch • Typically lacking a hallway, with rooms laid out one behind the other and opening onto each other • Doors aligned along a single axis • Variations within this sub-type include two-bay and three-bay • Three-bay variations typically have a hallway along one side that provides access between rooms • Two-story single shotguns were constructed in the late nineteenth century • L-shaped variation appeared in the early twentieth century
Double-Wide Shotgun House	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two single shotgun houses joined together • Typically four bays wide (two windows and two entrances) • Interior partition wall dividing the house length wise into two equal halves (each half was a single room wide and several rooms deep) • Became more popular than single shotguns in the late nineteenth century
Camelback Shotgun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shotgun house with two-story addition to the rear • Can be found on both single and double-wide shotgun houses • The two-story portion appears as a camel’s “hump” • The two-story addition typically housed the kitchen on the first story and a bedroom on the second story • Common from the 1860s to the early 1900s in New Orleans
Side Gallery Shotgun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could be single or double wide • Often seen on residences constructed as rental properties • A side passage set under the roof eaves provided access to rental rooms at the rear of the residence
North Shore Shotgun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L- or T-shaped in plan • Gallery porch envelopes the house and can be accessed from every room in the house • Primarily found in the summer resort areas outside New Orleans along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain • Typically constructed by African Americans in the nineteenth century

¹³ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79, 83; McRae, "The American Shotgun House," 19-21, 33-34.

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Architecture and Engineering/The Shotgun House, 1898-1929

By the late nineteenth century, more elaborate Victorian-era style shotgun houses were being constructed. The Italianate, Eastlake, and Queen Anne styles were applied to the type. Two-story shotgun houses, both single and double-wide, were built during this period. The building type was adapted to the Craftsman style at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵ It remained popular in the 1920s and 1930s and then fell out of popularity by the post-World War II period as other housing types became more prevalent.

Today, shotgun houses can be found throughout the country, in both urban and rural environments, though they are most common in urban areas of the South. A smaller number of extant examples can be found throughout the West, including Utah, Nevada, and Colorado. It appears that the type was relatively common in mining towns and working-class neighborhoods in the West and was constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



3747 W Seneca Avenue, Northeast Los Angeles (SurveyLA)

The Shotgun House in Los Angeles

There is no scholarship on the shotgun house in Los Angeles and prevalence of the building type historically is not known. What is known is that there are relatively few intact examples remaining today. Research suggests that the shotgun house was once somewhat common in the Ocean Park neighborhood, in the nearby city of Santa Monica, although few examples survive there today. Too few examples remain to speculate as to whether or not this building type represents a particular pattern of development in the Los Angeles neighborhoods in which they are located.

Today extant examples are scattered throughout the city in neighborhoods ranging from Venice to Southeast Los Angeles and Westlake to San Pedro, all areas of early development. They do not appear to have been constructed in response to lot size limits since, in some cases, two or more shotgun houses were constructed on a single parcel. Nor do they appear to have been linked to residents from a particular geographic area; research on original owners of these properties, when found, does not suggest that they necessarily came from Southern states where the shotgun house was most common. In many instances, owners appear to have constructed residences for themselves rather than as a rental property.

Below are examples of shotgun houses identified through SurveyLA within the city limits of Los Angeles. The majority represent the single shotgun house sub-type with influences from various architectural styles, including Craftsman and Vernacular Victorian. Most remaining examples are single-family residences, though one example of a bungalow court was recorded.

¹⁵ Edwards, "Shotgun: The Most Contested House in America," 83.



7014 N. Eton Avenue (SurveyLA)

The shotgun house located at 7014 N. Eton Avenue in Canoga Park was constructed in 1929. The single-family residence displays Craftsman style influences and has a partial-width front-gabled porch.



2921 S. Pacific Avenue (SurveyLA)

The single-family residence at 2921 S. Pacific Avenue in San Pedro was constructed in 1922. The vernacular house has alterations including the removal of the porch and replacement of some windows. Despite the alterations the building's massing and front-facing gabled roof place it within the shotgun type. Its neighbor, 2917 S. Pacific Avenue, was also recorded as an example of a shotgun house.



1162 E. 45th Street (SurveyLA)

The single-family residence located at 1162 E. 45th Street in Southeast was constructed in the Vernacular Victorian style. Built in 1898, the residence is the oldest shotgun house recorded during SurveyLA. The windows have been replaced, but otherwise the residence has seen few alterations and retains the essential character-defining features of a shotgun house. An identical (though altered) example is located next door at 1164 E. 45th Street.

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Architecture and Engineering/The Shotgun House, 1898-1929



137 N Avenue 25 (SurveyLA)

The shotgun house at 137 N Avenue 25 in Lincoln Heights was built 1913 and has unusual fish scale shingle decorative elements. Alterations to this rare example of a shotgun house include a rear addition, some window replacements, and some infilled side windows.



30 E. Fleet Street (SurveyLA)

The single-family residence at 30 E. Fleet Street in Venice was constructed in 1925 in the Craftsman style. The porch has been altered, but the property retains most of the character-defining features of its type.



5143 W. La Vista Court (SurveyLA)

The single-family residence at 5143 W. La Vista Court in the Wilshire area was constructed in the Craftsman style. Alterations since its construction include the replacement of some windows and the main entrance door. However, the building retains the essential character-defining features of its type.

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Architecture and Engineering/The Shotgun House, 1898-1929

There are two shotgun houses on a single parcel located at 323 N. Laveta Terrace in Westlake. Both were constructed in 1908 as single-family residences. One appears to be minimally altered aside from the addition of a security door over the main entrances; on the other the primary door was replaced and security bars were added over the windows.



321-323 N. Laveta Terrace (SurveyLA)

The residences at 3982-3984 S. Brighton Avenue in South Los Angeles are one of the few examples of the type arranged in a bungalow court. There are four separate buildings on the property: two Craftsman shotgun residences with neoclassical elements that face Brighton Avenue that are separated by a landscaped path; a two-story residence at the rear of the property, and a detached garage located on the north side of the property. The shotgun houses have distinctive, prominent porticos with pediments supported by columns and narrow arched windows flanking the main entrances. Aside from the addition of security bars over the windows and doors, the property appears to be essentially intact.



3982-3984 S. Brighton Avenue Bungalow Court (Google Street View, 2016)

ELIGIBILITY STANDARDS FOR THE SHOTGUN HOUSE

Summary Statement of

Significance:

A resource evaluated under this sub-theme is significant in the area of Architecture as an excellent example of the shotgun house building type in Los Angeles. Some may also be significant examples of their respective architectural styles. The shotgun house, like other relatively simple residential building types from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, represents the construction of modest housing for owner-builders. Some examples may also be significant in the area of Community Planning and Development for their association with early residential development in a neighborhood or community.

Period of Significance:

1898-1929

Period of Significance

Justification:

The period of significance encompasses the range of years associated with the construction of known examples of shotgun houses in Los Angeles.

Geographic Location:

Although rare, shotgun houses may be found citywide in areas of the city with the earliest period of residential development.

Area(s) of Significance:

Architecture; Community Planning and Development

Criteria:

NR: A/C CR: 1/3 Local: 1/3

Associated Property Types:

Residential - Single-family Residence, Multi-Family Residence

Property Type Description:

Associated property types in Los Angeles are most frequently single-family residences, though a small number of multi-family residential examples can be found as well. Examples are one story in height and represent a range of architectural styles, including Vernacular Victorian (Hipped Cottage and Gabled Cottage) and Craftsman.

Property Type Significance: See Summary Statement of Significance above.

Eligibility Standards:

- Was constructed during the period of significance
- Represents a good to excellent example of the Shotgun building type

Character Defining/Associative Features:

- Retains most of the essential character-defining features from the period of significance
- Typically one-story in height
- Front-gabled roof; hipped roof examples are less common
- Long, narrow building footprint
- Wood-frame construction
- Rectangular or L-shaped plans
- Often full- or partial-width front porch
- Typically have minimal ornamentation
- May have an important association with early residential development within a neighborhood or community
- May also be evaluated as a good to excellent example of its architectural style, including Craftsman and Vernacular Victorian
- May also be significant as a good example of a bungalow court (rare)

Integrity Considerations:

- Should retain integrity of Location, Design, Materials, and Feeling from its period of significance
- Integrity of Location is not a required aspect of integrity if evaluating only under Criterion C/3/3
- Since few examples of this building type remain, a greater degree of alteration may be acceptable
- Some original materials may have been altered or removed
- Setting may have changed (surrounding buildings and land uses)

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