

glitter stucco & dumpster diving

reflections on building production
in the vernacular city

JOHN CHASE



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knocking off the knock-offs

The last chapter discussed large period revival houses designed by architects for wealthy Southern Californians. This chapter profiles small developer-built bungalows from the 1920s that middle class Southern Californians remodeled, as part homage and part original invention, inspired by the large period revival houses. These remodels in turn influenced other genres of consumerist vernacular architecture, such as apartment houses and storefronts.

What is so astonishing about anyone taking this remodel seriously is the attitude that absolutely anything can be transformed into architectural history.

—Reyner Banham, in a book review in the *London Times Literary Supplement* of *Exterior Decoration*, from which this essay is excerpted

The Swiss modernist architect Le Corbusier observed that a dream times one million equals chaos. In Los Angeles it is the millions of dreams of its citizens that make up the face of the city. If Southern California is often accused of having no public urban amenities in the traditional sense, it may be because they come disguised as private visions such as the Watts Towers, or at the very least, privately owned visions like City Walk, Forest Lawn and Disneyland.

West Hollywood is a small 1.9-square mile city nestled in between Hollywood and Beverly Hills, a section of Los Angeles where the contributions of private fantasy to the public realm come in the form of tiny stucco



8834 Rangely Avenue, West Hollywood. Benjamin and Betty Heiman's 1968 remodel of their house. Designed by Benjamin Heiman. This facade was removed in 1999.



8488 Carlton Way, West Hollywood Hills, c. 1946. The remodeled Frank L. Anderson house. It is the first published West Hollywood remodel that uses a screen wall placed in front of the street facade for added privacy. Photo by Maynard Parker.

bungalows remodeled by interior decorators and decorator wannabes. The blanked-out exteriors of these miniature mansions became inside-out interiors: urns and finials were placed on rooftops like bibelots on a fireplace mantel; windows and panels of trellis were arranged as though they were pictures hung on a wall.

In the early 1950s a mania for transforming Spanish Colonial Revival mutts into French Regency pedigreed poodles swept West Hollywood. The Regency style craze of the Camelot years of the early 1960s saw the height of the box-in-the-old and tack-on-the-new movement; in its wake were left miles of garlands, a forest of pop-up mansards and enough carriage lamps to render the street lights redundant.

The decorator shops that grew up around Beverly Boulevard shortly after World War II attracted a colony of interior designers who worked in the neighborhood. Many of them would have loved to have owned a mansion in nearby ritzy neighborhoods like Brentwood, Beverly Hills or Hancock Park. But most couldn't afford to and made do with what they could. West Hollywood had been settled as the community of Sherman in 1895, built around a repair yard for the interurban street car lines. As a result many of the houses were built for residents with moderate incomes. Both lots and houses were small, a precedent that continued when the community saw its real period of growth in the mid-1920s as a bedroom community to surrounding cities.

Real estate speculation, aided by wild booms such as the bull market of 1975 to 1978, was a key motive in the remodeling fad. Speculators (including some gay couples who were returning from military service in World War II) would move from house to house, fixing each one up, selling it for a profit and then starting in on the next candidate. By the late 1970s houses that sold for \$15,000 or less in the early 1950s were going for \$180,000.

Despite the assumptions made by some observers that these decorator remodels are a campy in-joke, the little buildings reflect the anxieties produced by the city's many levels of wealth and status. With the exception of a few truly idiosyncratic buildings, the remodels are attempts to conform to accepted notions of upwardly mobile social standing, rather than to shock.

The typical remodeling project follows a relatively unvarying formula. Openings in the front of the house are closed off to screen out the street. Openings in the rear are enlarged to create spatial and visual flow between

the indoors and outdoors. The kitchen and bathroom are modernized, light switches and door hardware are replaced and the master bedroom and living room are enlarged. Usually the exterior of the little houses become more formal to suit the social ambitions of their new owners, and more secluded to separate them from increasingly urban surroundings.

Expedience is everything in the remodels. The designers of the remodels, many of whom worked in the movie industry, never built if they could achieve the same effect by draping fabric and never ripped out a facade if they could cover over it or adapt it.

In the broadest sense, the West Hollywood remodel genre is an outgrowth of the Hollywood Regency style. The earliest remodels were in this style, and the idea of the remodels themselves was made possible by the style's appeal to the designers.

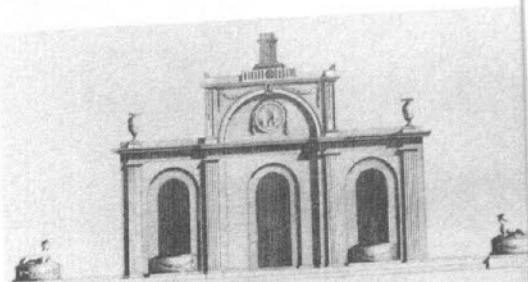
Few styles are more difficult to define than the Hollywood Regency. The Regency half of the name is itself confusing, as the affinities between the architecture of the English Regency period of the years 1790 to 1830 and the architecture of the Hollywood Regency style of the 1930s are limited. The Hollywood Regency is a revival of features drawn from the early 19th-century architectural styles of England, the United States and, to a lesser degree, France. The style strayed even further from English Regency during World War II and in the following years, when both architects and decorators galvanized it with the addition of a mansard roof.

Because the American Federal style and later the French Second Empire influences were as important as the English Regency precedents, it is more accurate to categorize the Hollywood Regency style as a descriptive term rather than as a literal revival of pre-Victorian 19th-century English architecture.

Even the English Regency style is ambiguous. It might be more correct to speak of a Regency era in English architecture than a single, well-defined Regency style. "Strictly speaking there is no Regency style. There was no universally accepted formula for design," wrote Douglas Pilcher in his 1940 book *The Regency Style: 1800-1830*. "There is, however, a tendency towards establishing an individual style which resulted from the balancing of these distinct points of view." Among these points of view was the belief that a building should suit the individual personality of its occupant. During the Regency era the cult of the Picturesque had a wide following. Derived from Romantic fiction, the Picturesque endowed the physical world, including



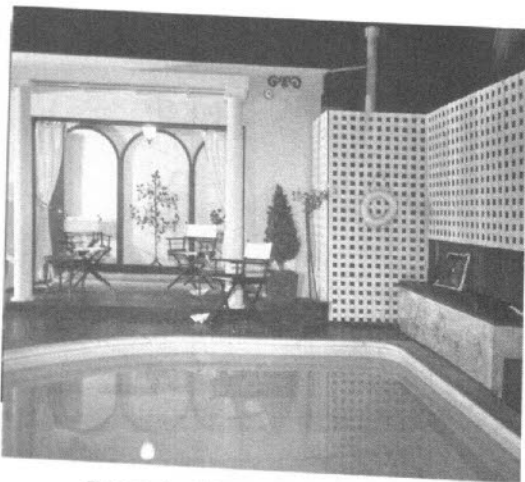
The interior of the Anderson house is styled in the modern Georgian Hollywood Regency style of the 1930s. Photo by Maynard Parker.



One of the ultimate sources for the Hollywood Regency style were English Regency era designs such as this pavilion by John Sloane published in his 1778 *Designs in Architecture*.



The back yard of 8984 Lloyd Place, West Hollywood, before glamorization struck. Photo by Harold Davis.



The same view of 8984 Lloyd Place after glamorization. Remodeled by Alden Thomsen, 1959. Photo by Harold Davis.

architecture, with the ability to inspire emotions such as awe, terror and enchantment. Regency architecture was eclectic, but may generally be characterized as a highly abstracted version of neoclassicism. Toward the end of the period, Gothic Revival became popular, as did exotic motifs from Islamic architecture, the Far East and India.

Wrought-iron balconies and entrances were widely used in Regency England, and exterior walls were frequently covered with a stucco finish. The neoclassic primary geometric forms, together with the attenuated wrought-iron trim and the smooth stucco walls, gave much Regency architecture qualities of insubstantiality and brittle elegance. Forms reminiscent of tents were employed in building form were common, and fabric was sometimes draped on interior walls to create tentlike rooms. The stucco walls, the use of French doors to link outside and inside, and the frequent employment of trellis and balcony were all features that made Regency styles attractive to California designers.

A 1939 issue of *Interior Decorator* credits a major exhibition of Regency furniture by Lenygon and Morant in London just after World War I for kindling interest in Regency furniture. In *The Glass of Fashion*, fashion designer Cecil Beaton credits the revival of the Regency style to the English playwright Edward Knoblock and its propagation to John Fowler and the socialite decorator Sybil Halsey.

By May of 1919, *Upholsterer and Interior Decorator* magazine could inform its readers that "both the Regency and the Louis XVI are meeting with renewed favor." This favor reached an "almost nauseating popularity," according to English decorator David Hicks. "In the late 1930s it had begun to be revived, and this was continued in the late 1940s," he wrote in *David Hicks on Interior Decoration*. Reproduction and reinterpretation of furniture by Regency designers such as Thomas Hope were much in demand in the United States just before World War II. The Regency influence in domestic architecture and home furnishings remained strong through the mid-1960s.

Regency details began to appear in Southern California in the 1920s, with buildings such as Marston, Maybury & Van Pelt's Dudley house in Pasadena of 1925-27. Regency elements were found on buildings in Georgian, Federal, and French Provincial manor house styles. During the 1930s Regency designs from architects across the nation, as well as from California, were published in national architectural magazines. But the

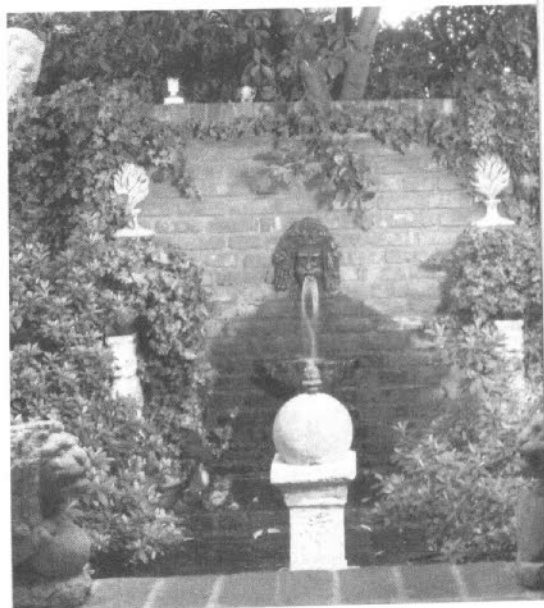
Regency style has been most closely identified with interior decorators, in Southern California and elsewhere. It was the decorator, as much as the architect, who helped popularize the stylistic code of the Regency as found in Southern California. This fondness of the decorators for Regency architecture is probably linked to the revival of Regency furniture and interior design in England and America between World War I and II.

The strongest reason for the popularity of Regency architecture in California during the 1930s was its compatibility with the American Colonial Revival style that dominated American residential architecture at the time. Colonial American architecture of the Federal period was an important influence on Southern California architecture in the 1920s and 1930s. Buildings such as the Ruges house, Columbia Falls, Maine, were widely reproduced in books and national periodicals. The Hollywood Regency adapted features from late Colonial Revival architecture, particularly from the early 19th century Federal architecture, which is the American counterpart of the English Regency period.

American architecture of the Federal period had a similar light, delicate appearance. The houses usually had very simple boxlike volumes, and flat or low-pitched roof lines. The boxy shapes might be varied by polygonal or curved bays. Some Federal period buildings have semicircular porches supported on slender columns. Federal architecture was generally more conservative than Regency architecture, simpler in form, lacking the dramatic black and white interiors and the sometimes exotic imagery of English architecture. Wood construction, employing clapboarded walls, was more frequently used in Federal, rather than Regency, architecture.

The Hollywood Regency stylistic mix of Regency, Georgian, Federal and, to a lesser degree, the French Provincial manor house revival styles were influenced by the emergence of the International style in the 1920s and 1930s. Several features of the International style affected the period styles: horizontality, strip and corner windows, pipelike poles, flat roofs and port-hole windows.

There are also precedents for the Hollywood Regency style in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, which enjoyed great popularity in California during the 1920s. Elements that are related in the two styles are the isolation of ornament, blank walls and, in some examples, abstracted window placement. This trend toward smooth surfaces and unadorned walls was an



Many remodels privatized the front yard. In this West Hollywood house remodel by William Chappell and Paul Rich, the front yard is walled off from the street and linked by French doors to the interior. Remodeled by William Chappell and Paul Rich. Photo c.1981.

important ingredient in the Hollywood Regency style. This style was concocted by mixing modern and historically inspired elements with quintessential Southern California nonchalance. The style was a modernized version of Georgian/Regency/Federal/Second Empire architecture and was Southern California's own version of the Modern Georgian style popular nationally. The Hollywood Regency style was theatrical—its walls exaggeratedly blank, its columns impossibly thin. This architecture of glamour required a seemingly effortless balancing of the formal and the casual, as well as a knack for well-placed exaggeration and well-chosen omission. In short, the Hollywood Regency had much in common with the best of Southern California's sophisticated period-revival architecture of the 1920s and 1930s.

Primary forms were favored in Hollywood Regency architecture for the configuration of buildings. Walls were emphasized, rather than roofs, which were usually low-pitched or hidden behind a parapet wall. The building mass might be a single volume, or it might be broken into groupings of pavilions. Flattened or gently curving bays sometimes divided the facade. The detailing of Hollywood Regency buildings often had a flattened, two-dimensional quality, in order to match the sleekness of the wall surfaces. Hollywood Regency was the perfect architecture to represent the Hollywood that had brought "a world of silken underwear, exotic surroundings, and moral plasticity to the United States, through the medium of film," as William C. De Mille wrote in his 1939 book *Hollywood Saga*.

After World War II, the Hollywood Regency style was altered by the addition of the mansard roof. This roof, as originally popularized by the French architect Francois Mansart, was a steeply sloping, double-pitched roof enclosing a habitable upper story. Out of this modernized pastiche of English, American and occasionally French adaptations, the West Hollywood remodelers and Southern California interior decorators were fondest of those houses with specifically French references. The prototype for these houses as 1930s California homes with mansard roofs; tall, narrow window openings or French doors; and a symmetrical facade articulated as a set of pavilions or as one mansarded block. Buildings such as S. Charles Lee's Oldknow house of circa 1936, and George Vernon Russell and Douglas Honnold's alteration of a Topanga beach house of 1938-39 for director Anatole Litvak were precedents for the horizontal one-story mansarded

houses of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the Litvak house a mansard roof has been placed over one section of the house, while adjoining sections are lower and the roofs are flat. This arrangement gives the impression that the mansard is sitting as a lid on the boxy body of the building, in the manner so prevalent in later years in the West Hollywood remodels. Without being inconsistent in his choice of architectural vocabulary, Honnold was able to use a period facade on the street and a beachfront facade at the back that suggested the European modernism of the 1920s. This independence of the two facades foretold the architectural tastes of the 1950s and 1960s in Southern California, where an otherwise standard tract-house design might have a mansard roof slapped on its facade as a false front.

By the end of the 1930s, one-story houses by architects such as Paul R. Williams, Ralph Flewelling and Roland Coate, Sr., combined high-hipped roofs set back from the walls with a symmetrical street facade. Concealed behind the facade was often a stretched-out, horizontal floor plan with long side wings extending to the rear. The layout of these houses was eclectic, combining the sprawling floor plans and horizontality of the California ranch house with more formal arrangements of axuality and symmetry in the public spaces. Wrought-iron Regency porticoes, or columned Federal porticoes, and a mixture of high French roof silhouettes and low Regency roofs show up in these houses. Their articulation as a series of pavilions was French in derivation. The houses beloved by the decorators were later versions of these 1930s models. The post-World War II houses had mansard-ed rather than hipped roofs.

These high, hipped roofs were generally used in Southern California buildings of the 1920s and '30s to suggest late medieval and renaissance chateaux. In the 1930s and '40s the mansard roof had been employed on a handful of houses such as Roland Coate's Niven house of 1939 in Beverly Hills or Jim Dolena's house of circa 1937 for actress Constance Bennett in Holmby Hills. In the Bennett house a hipped-roof central pavilion was flanked by projecting end wings, also with hipped roofs.

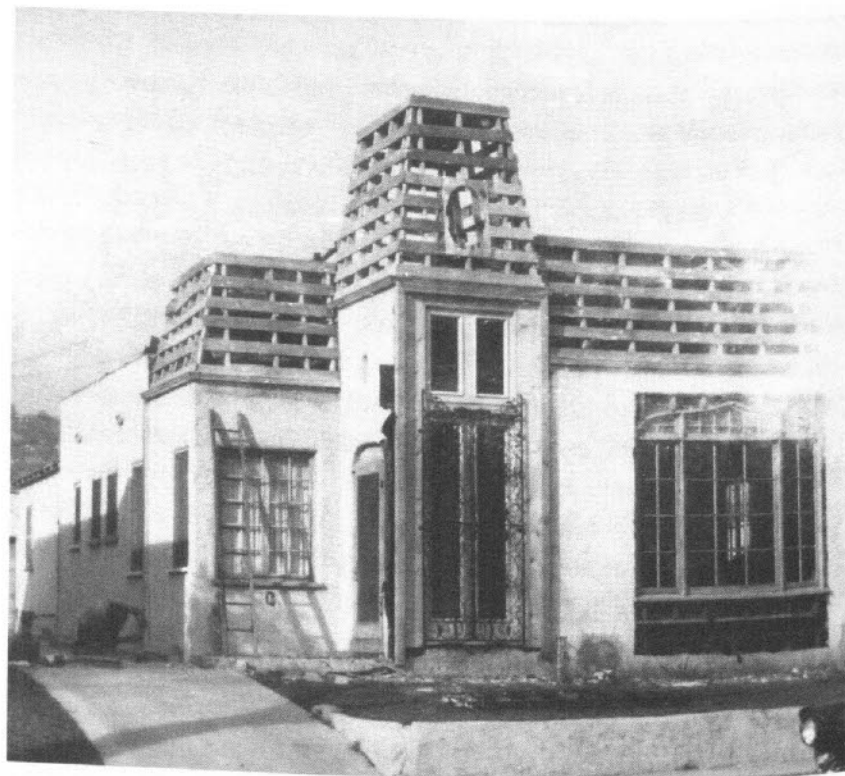
The popularity of the mansard roof for commercial structures in Southern California began just after World War II with buildings such as L. G. Scherer's Thatcher Medical Clinic (1948-49) in Pasadena, Paul R. Williams' Perino's Restaurant of 1948 in the mid-Wilshire district of Los



8937 Ashcroft Avenue in West Hollywood, remodeled by Larry Limotti and Ross Worsley in 1961-62. The framing for the mansard roof goes up on the 1920s bungalow. Photo by Larry Limotti.

Angeles and Jack Woolf's office building on Melrose Place in West Hollywood. Right from the start of its widespread use in Los Angeles, the mansard was accepted as an indicator that a business catered to an upper-class or upper-middle-class clientele. Williams's free handling of the mansard at Perino's is significant because it is so similar to the manner in which the mansard would later be used. Its heyday came during the 1960s when it was often employed as a cheap and easily made false front for commercial strip architecture. The mansard roof was used as though its were carpeting, unrolled as a horizontal band to whatever length was desired. The canopy of Perino's appears as a dropped mansard. The broken pediment, or the front gable, is extruded as a roof form, and the circular window carries approximately the same compositional value as the neon Perino's sign.

The studio office building that John Woolf designed and built for himself at 8450 Melrose Place in 1946-47 was widely admired and frequently emulated by the decorators. This was the first building in which Woolf used his Pullman door surround and projecting extruded doorframe that rises just

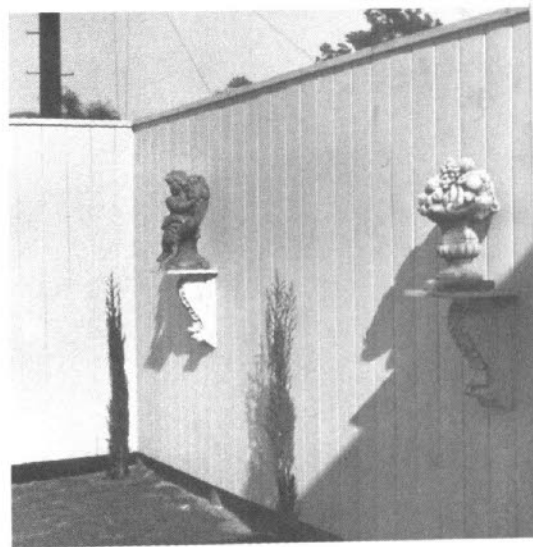


Roof framing complete at the Limotti-Worsley house.
Photo by Larry Limotti.

above the roofline. The building was further added to in two installments. The Mason Building at 8446 Melrose Place was built in 1950, and the Campbell Building was built at 8436 Melrose Place in 1956. Woolf's use of this Pullman door and pop-up mansard was immediately adopted by the decorators.

While Woolf was the most important architect for the decorators and the West Hollywood remodelers, there were other architects they admired. Buildings with period references by architects, such as Paul R. Williams and Wallace Neff, have been models for the interior-decorator architectural demimonde of Southern California, both in West Hollywood and elsewhere. In their eyes, buildings by Jack Woolf and other society architects constituted a distinct, cohesive body of work, representing the discriminating taste of the wealthiest and most famous residents of exclusive Los Angeles neighborhoods such as Bel Air and Holmby Hills.

Their reverent contemplation of the successful often took the form of a grand tour of Los Angeles' plusher districts. Interior designer Larry Limotti,



Outside as inside. A back yard detail of the 1961 Limotti-Worsley remodel, West Hollywood. Photo by Larry Limotti.



The completed remodel of the Limotti-Worsley house as it was in 1981. The landscape has since been altered.



Interior Limotti-Worsley house. Photo by Harold Davis.



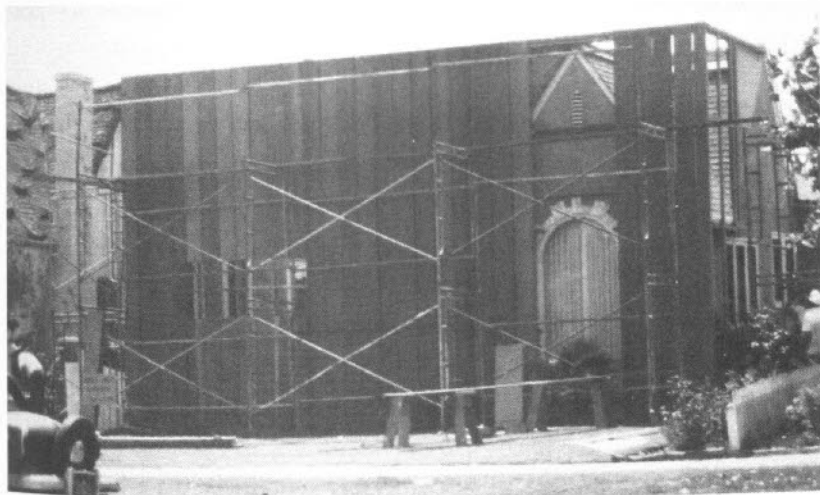
525 Crescent Heights Boulevard in West Hollywood, prior to a regime of beautification. Photo by Larry Limotti.

who was responsible for several West Hollywood remodels, made just such a series of reconnaissance missions in the early 1960s. Among the buildings he photographed on these trips were Caspar Ehmcke's Bernstein house of 1954 in Bel Air, early 1960s Regency-style apartment houses in Pasadena, Jack Woolf's LeRoy house and the mansarded Brentwood Hamburger Hamlet. Limotti also included existing West Hollywood remodels among his subjects.

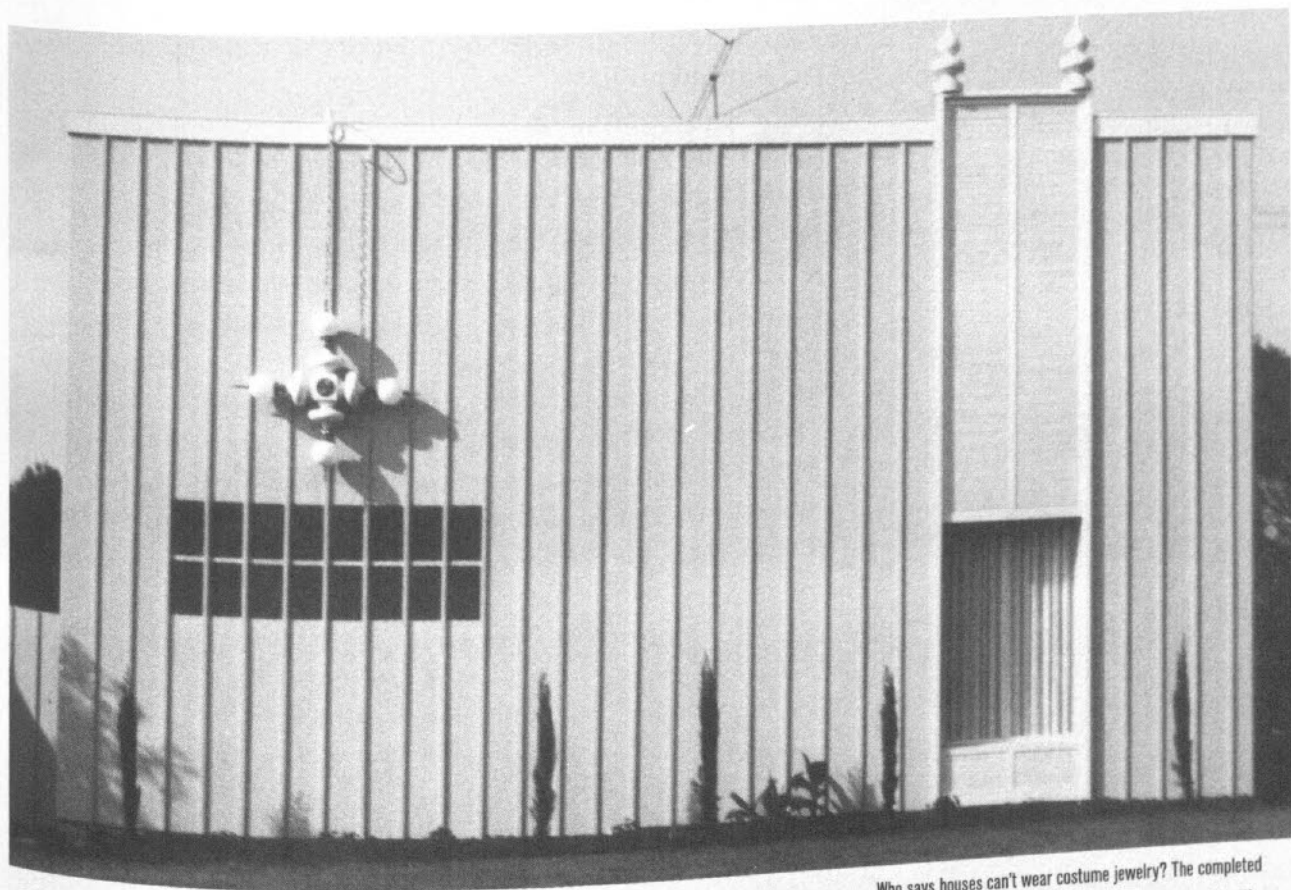
The influence of these studies is evident in the house that was Limotti's first design, built in conjunction with his partner, Ross Worsley. In the backyard of the house, the fence was adorned with urns corbeled forward on scroll-like brackets. The immediate precedent for this treatment could have been found in Limotti's photograph of a West Hollywood remodel by the Tishman Company for Eloise Hardt. In this 1961 remodel the facade was transformed into a billboard backdrop for urns and busts framed in recessed niches.

While Limotti's photograph album included shots of Regency-style apartments under construction, it is possible that the developers of these apartments were also photographing the West Hollywood remodels, and other buildings designed or influenced by decorators. Many of these developer-built apartment buildings of the early and mid-'60s resemble overscaled West Hollywood remodels. In the La Bon Vie apartments of 1963, the Pullman door has become a blank panel with a regulation plate-glass, aluminum-frame door stuck into one side. On either side of the door, three-story-high blank windows are suggested with applied trim. In K. Hyosaka's Mansionette apartments of 1966, the superscale clip-on and applique elements determine the character of the facade. The same motifs are found in Robert Duncan's Chateau Laurelle apartments of 1965 in Studio City.

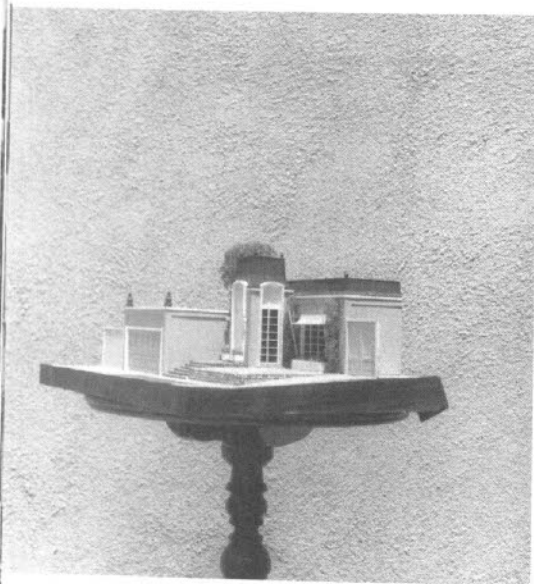
The utilitarian stucco-box apartment house was perfected in the 1950s when its garnishings were modernistic. In the 1960s it became clear that with a few changes the dingbat stucco apartment could just as easily accept ersatz Regency ornament, which was itself replaced in a new wave of enthusiasm for Spanish Colonial Revival imagery at the end of the decade. By then the Regency's upper-class associations had been blurred by the use of mansards for everything from hamburger stands to laundromats. The Regency disappeared into the common pool of imagery drawn on by the developers and building designers responsible for Los Angeles' pop commercial architecture. By the late 1970s, a mansard roof was often finished in red Spanish tiles over a Tudor half-timbered wall.



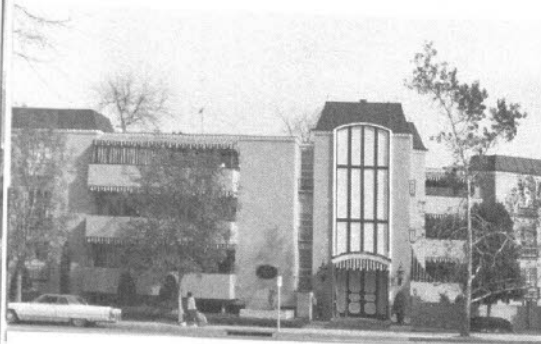
In 1961–62 decorator Larry Limotti encased the 1920s cottage in a new shell. Photo by Larry Limotti.



Who says houses can't wear costume jewelry? The completed Limotti redo of 525 Crescent in 1962. Photo by Larry Limotti.



Possibly the only model ever made of a West Hollywood remodel is this one of furniture designer Herman Schlorman's 1961 remodel. Note the similarity of spirit to the Chateau Laurelle Apartments below.



The Chateau Laurelle, 4200 Laurel Canyon Boulevard, Studio City, Robert Duncan, 1965. The Chateau Laurelle is simply a West Hollywood house remodel in the Woolf style, blown up to super scale.

In an interview with the author in 1980, entertainer/interior designer Terence Monk, who was responsible for several West Hollywood and Beverly Hills remodels, commented on the changes that had occurred in his own remodels: "The interesting thing is, I've taken all those old Spanish houses and made them into something else—disguised them as a French townhouse or a chichi decorator-type thing. Now I'm dedicated to taking Spanish houses and making them more so." In the 1970s the mansard-roofed remodels seemed vulgar to the decorators. The fussiness and pretentiousness of the style marked an obsequious observance of social conventions that no longer existed in the same form.

By the late 1970s, the influences of minimalism, high-tech design and the contrasting fashion for rough-textured natural materials had replaced the imitation Second Empire references in the interiors of the remodels. The newer remodels were furnished in gray industrial carpeting, Levelor blinds and tall, potted cacti, rather than with chandeliers and black-and-white checkered floors.

By the time the disco era of the '70s arrived, the remodels had more to do with the East Coast revival of the 1920s modernism of Le Corbusier, as practiced by architects such as Richard Meier, Luis Barragan and Frank Gehry, than it did to the work of the Mansarts. The constant that has held for each era of miniature remodel has been the replacement of an outmoded or non-descript facade with a design that clearly conveyed that the occupant had made a conscious design choice to live life elegantly, by their own lights. Even if the results may not be to everyone's taste, surely the remodelers deserve credit for that all-American attempt to construct an identity by choosing among alternatives, to be self-made individuals by living behind a self-made facade. In West Hollywood, clothes alone do not make the man or woman. The house facade does.