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A TOUCH OF SPAIN IN ALBANY

Enclave of Spanish-style homes continues to draw buyers, appreciative tourists

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The Mediterranean style of Spain is an ocean away from upstate New York, unless you happen to be standing in a small pocket of Albany's Pine Hills neighborhood.

Bungalows in the Spanish revival style, complete with red tile roofs, stucco walls, and square or octagonal towers, are sprinkled on Woodlawn, South Main and South Manning, standing in stark contrast to the brick and white-paneled homes more common to the Northeast. The greatest concentration of Spanish-style homes is on Hansen Avenue, where visitors turning onto this short street from South Main are greeted by a cluster of half a dozen shades of pink and beige stucco that seem to whisper "ole" with Old World flair.

"It's like a little village out of the Southwest, and it looks so out of place," said Bill Brandow, an architectural preservationist with John G. Waite Associates. "It seems funny because it was a historical revival 2,000 miles from here."

Remnants of a development called Winchester Gables, these homes -- 27 in all -- are a reflection of a Spanish revival fad that swept the nation in the late 1920s and early '30s, influencing architecture in Florida and the Southwest in particular. Steel casement windows, heavy wooden doors and pitched ceilings are prominent features of these typically one-story houses. Inside, the living rooms have pitched ceilings, tiled fireplaces and niches. Arched doorways keep light and air flowing freely through each room. Oddly, brass plates framing some of the doorknobs in the homes are in the art deco style, not in keeping with the Spanish-mission style but indicative of the 1920s era in which they were built.

Storied history

Dan H. Winchester, son of Charles M. Winchester, was the developer responsible for Albany's Spanish enclave. Winchester followed his father, the president of JB Lyon, into the printing business, but he was interested in real estate and architecture, according to grandson G. Steven Draper.

"My grandfather was a real perfectionist," Draper recalled. "I've heard stories about him working with the contractors. He was very meticulous about details."

Winchester lived in the development's model home at 130 South Main Ave. He planned to build 60 Spanish-style homes, but only completed about half of them, parceling off the remaining land. Draper suspects the homes were built by Willig and Acker, who constructed some non-Spanish homes for his grandfather on South Main.

The homes were exclusive, priced at \$10,000 and up "according to location, size of lot, design, number of rooms and equipment," an original advertisement said. Buyers could choose between stucco or brick exteriors and would receive brass water pipes, De Luxe radiators, waterproofed concrete foundations and copper flashings. Winchester was building a community that he hoped, as indicated on the ad, would become the "beauty center of Albany and the Capital District."

Focus on preservation

While some changes have been made to these homes, most owners have done little to change the aesthetic -- sometimes spending more money to keep the Spanish look alive.

John Toolan and Michael Howard of 237 Hansen Ave. updated their kitchen, added insulation to the walls and replaced the front window, which features an arched pane at the top. The arch is elongated, a shape that is not typically manufactured anymore.

"We had to pay a lot and go to three different places to see who still made it," said Toolan, who also replaced the stucco after insulation was added and kept the two original glass-paned cabinets in the kitchen. "Everyone has gone through great pains to redo the houses completely in the same style," he said. Homes now sell from \$220,000 to \$240,000, according to Howard, who purchased his bungalow 15 years ago from the original owner.

Many owners of the Spanish-style homes also praise the sturdy construction. Georgianna Heller's home at 256 Hansen has original double-oak floor and foundation and, like others, also has the original tiles on the roof. The last home built before the Depression halted the development, it was photographed for a book on Albany architecture.

"Probably the most amazing aspect is that these are the original tiles that are 78 years old," said Heller's partner, Kimberley Williams. "And it's a good thing, because they would be \$45 to \$50 apiece if you had to buy them today."

Community builders

Brandow said these houses, though well-constructed, need more maintenance because of their age. Owners seem more than willing to accept the task. Many of them share information on how to maintain their homes and keep the style.

Newcomers Nathan Powers and Brenna McLaughlin, who moved into 260 Hansen in May, received a warm welcome from neighbors eager to tell them the history of their homes, even pointing out their house's unique details.

"We're still learning everything," McLaughlin said. Neighbors have told her that the wrought-iron sconces that frame her front door must be originals and she thinks the decorative blue tile lining the steps leading from the sunken living room are, too.

Sloane Bullough used to lead walking tours to Hansen and nearby Spanish houses with the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway.

Meanwhile, the charm continues to draw people to Hansen Avenue. Residents say they see architecture students and random people wander around the neighborhood, taking in the character and history of the homes that drew them.

"They're kind of magical," McLaughlin said as she recalled her first encounter with the Spanish homes. "It was the first day we went out scouting neighborhoods, and we turned the corner and these houses just appeared."