

New York Row Houses: Italianate Facades

The Italianate style first appeared in New York in the late 1840s and remained the city's dominant architectural fashion through the mid-1870s. Inspired by the monumental, richly ornamented fifteenth-century Italian "palazzo" (city palace), the Italianate style reflected the Romantic Movement's fascination with flamboyant architecture, picturesque decoration, and expressive light and color. The unparalleled grandeur of scale and ornamentation of row houses during this period mirrored appropriately the city's growing affluence and influence as the Nation's leading commercial and financial center.

The row houses of the late 1840s and early 1850s reflected a transition between the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, often expressed by superimposing more elaborate Greek forms or specific Italianate forms and motifs on Greek Revival facades. Transitional late 1840s examples include Nos. 58-62 Morton Street and No. 16 and No. 20 on East 10th Street, which introduce features of the style on the doorways, stoop ironwork, and cornices.

An important architectural theme of the distinctly urban Italianate period was the monumental streetscape. Emphasis on the individual row house, customary in the Federal period, was subordinated to an impressive uniform block-front of row houses several-hundred feet long. The facades formed a continuous plane that was equi-distant from the street, uniform in design, and with only occasional variations in the level of the cornice line. Leroy Place at Bleecker Street, Colonnade Row at Lafayette Place, and the row on Washington Square North are very early examples of the streetscape vista.



Major changes in construction materials, building proportions and the architectural decoration of row houses contributed to the period's heightened sense of monumentality. Brownstone, an inexpensive substitute for marble or limestone from nearby quarries, soon came to epitomize luxury and dignified refinement. Many Italianate examples in Greenwich Village retained the traditional brick facade, while the rusticated basement level, doorway enframements, and window details were executed in brownstone. When applied to the entire front of a brick house in large four- to six-inch thick slabs of veneer, every effort was made to minimize the seams to give the appearance of one single sheet of stone. Admired for its rich brown color and smooth close-grained surface, it gave visual unity to a row of houses and enhanced their monumentality by calling attention to boldly protruding stoops and elaborate doorway, window, and cornice treatments. By the 1850s and for many

years to come, the rage for "brown sandstone fronts" had become so prevalent that, even today, any New York row house is popularly termed a "brownstone."

A dramatic change in row house proportions during the 1850s and 60s was the direct result of a sharp increase in the cost of building lots in fashionable locations. To compensate for narrower lots, most row houses were built several feet taller and deeper than comparable earlier examples. The finest brownstone-fronted houses in the Fifth Avenue and Madison Square districts rarely exceeded twenty-two and twenty-five feet widths. As a result of higher ceilings overall and the frequent addition of a fourth or fifth floor, they often rose from fifty to sixty feet tall,

or a height twice their width. Middle class row houses shrank from the twenty-five feet width of earlier nineteenth century row houses to twenty, eighteen, and sixteen feet with a height of two and a half to three times their width. More modest houses shrank to twelve and fourteen feet widths.

Builders often magnified the awkward narrow, tapering proportions of the Italianate row house by designing longer windows than in preceding years. Floor-length front parlor windows, in the tradition of Greek Revival precedents, were surmounted by windows and ceilings that were successively shorter with each ascending floor, consistent with Italian Renaissance ideals. However, when seen as part of a long horizontal row of similar dwellings, the visual impression was stunning.

The other striking feature of the Italianate style at mid-century was its emphasis on bold projecting forms and elaborate carved ornament, which reflected a newly fashionable love of circular forms and resulted in a highly picturesque play of light and shadow. Windows gained projecting lintels and sills and, in some cases, vertical side jams creating a full four-sided enframing. Large panes of glass, about 15 x 30, replaced the small six over six double-hung windows of the early nineteenth century. By the mid-1850s, single sheets of plate glass became the fashion in street-front windows of fine Italianate and up-dated Federal and Greek Revival dwellings and previously popular blinds or outside shutters were rarely used. At the roofline, boldly protruding cornices of wood, pressed metal, or occasionally stone, supported by rectangular brackets or rounded consoles, cast deep shadows on the facade.

The most important element of the facade was the front doorway. Rounded consoles faced with carved acanthus leaves, supported a heavy protruding "door hood" or "door cover," either a simple arched form, flat-headed entablature, or triangular pediment. To either side of the deeply recessed doorway, pilasters decorated with panels, circles, or leaf forms rose full length to the consoles. The occasional substitution of two detached

columns was more directly inspired by the Renaissance "palazzo." Round-headed double doors with deeply molded circular panels on the lower half and windows on the upper portion, replaced the single front door. Modest houses were designed instead with simple rectangular door hoods, supported on unornamented or modestly decorated consoles, with flat-headed double doors with circular panels.

The Italianate brownstone stoop was several feet higher and wider than on earlier examples, which pushed the facade back from the street by several feet, creating expanded areaways in front for plantings. Cast-iron stoop and areaway fences evolved from the simple oblong forms with rounded ends of the late 1840s into the elliptical loop ironwork of the early 1850s, which often resembled a twisting rope or adornments of foliate or circle-inspired forms. Large brownstone-front dwellings of the mid-1850s employed thick handrails and round balustrades in keeping with the Italian Renaissance style. By the 1860s most row houses had abandoned guard railings or low window balconies on parlor windows for interior wooden shutters. Windowsills became deep shelves supported by stone or cast-iron consoles with a foot-high balustrade around their perimeter.

The finest Italianate style mansions between lower Fifth Avenue and Madison Square have all been demolished, with the exception of the 1853 Salmagundi Club at No. 47 Fifth. A few examples exist between 9th and 12th Streets off Fifth and on West 16th Street. A row of 1850s' red brick-front houses with brownstone trim along St. Luke's Place in the West Village, Nos. 3-17, are unusually attractive and well preserved. No. 462 West 23rd Street, ca. 1860, is a good example of the Italianate brownstone-front row house.

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