

## The Charms of an American Queen Anne: Rediscovered *a-lá* COVID-19

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### Abstract

*This moment, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, has provided an opportunity—sometimes forced via crisis, or via moments of quiet reflection—to consider the inside, interior time and space, in new ways. In America, like other countries, architectural styles have come to us from foreign lands. Numerous domestic structures were influenced by British events from the 1700s–1800s. These styles—these architectures—were transformed by local/regional/national influences and events—events like this current international pandemic—that push the proverbial pause button, and cause us to re-think design. The author, who now resides and works (along with his family) in an 1886 Queen Anne style home, contemplates the various attributes and transformations of domestic architectures and the influences that shape them over time, asking: Why Queen Anne in America? How was it Victorian? And why is it relevant today? Empirical methods include observations and precedents-analysis, design work, the study of technological advances and interior-architecture history of the Victorian era. Emphasis on domesticity acknowledges both past and present by recognizing the importance of domestic architecture from the late 1700s through the 1800s, and into the present. Thus, we better understand how/why the Queen Anne style became ubiquitous in New England, and how its attributes of innate flexibility may help us today.*

*Keywords: architecture, domestic, Queen Anne, flexibility, COVID-19*

## Introduction

Recently, I revisited my architecture firm's humble beginnings. This forced me to consider the inside—interior time and space—in more ways than one. Specifically, two recent events and a subsequent study of history have allowed me to ponder the flexibility of interior Queen Anne domestic space.

First, when we began this year's spring college-term in pre-COVID early January 2020, an academic colleague asked me and my business partner if we would like to meet with his students and give a brief talk about our design office—discussing how we got started and developed our practice. This opportunity allowed us to see our design firm's history, and our professional trajectory, in our minds' eyes. It forced us to step back, step into our memory banks, and visualize both our individual and our shared timelines and projects. It allowed us to reconsider both the role of domestic architecture within our business model—our early portfolio having a significant number of home renovations—and, it also afforded us an analytical lens to better understand domestic architecture's spatial sequence and organization.

Second, once our state's governor in the New England region of North America announced a COVID stay-at-home order, my business partner and I agreed to shutter our shared work-space and work remotely from our individual homes. This forced me to, once again, physically occupy the domestic space where—many years ago—I first decided to hang the proverbial shingle and go it alone, working as a freelance design consultant from the Queen Anne style home my wife and I had purchased. That was nearly two decades ago!

## American Queen Anne: Contextualised

Many past American architectural styles, and many modern innovation, have come to us from foreign lands. That is rather appropriate when you think about America as—at least traditionally—a land of immigrants. My own experience, as a Caribbean-Hispanic re-planted in New England, makes this especially significant. Ever since I moved to New England, it fascinated me that much of the Georgian and Victorian homes where I—and many of my neighbours from around the globe—now live, came from styles that originated in Great Britain centuries ago. Add to that the fact that we also inherited many of the town, city (or state) names from places across the pond; think: *Essex, Cambridge, York, or New London*, and yes, even *New England*.

As immigrants, and as designers, we bring to the built environment our own past—personal and collective. Many North American structures, like the home I sit in as I write this, were influenced by British events dating from the 1700s through the 1800s; and inevitably, these styles—these varied architectures—have been transformed via various local/regional/national influences and events. Even international pandemic events, like COVID-19, cause us to re-think the design and organising principles of what we make, what we build, and the spaces we inhabit. While the current Coronavirus situation has caused much pain, suffering, and even bouts of irrational chaos around the world, there is also great comfort in the broader notion of *home* as safe-haven and in knowing that we are all inter-connected by this—our individual and collective past, present, and future. So what is important about the domestic architecture of Queen Anne homes in America? And what was so Victorian about this style? Why is any of this even relevant? To begin answering these questions, we need some context.

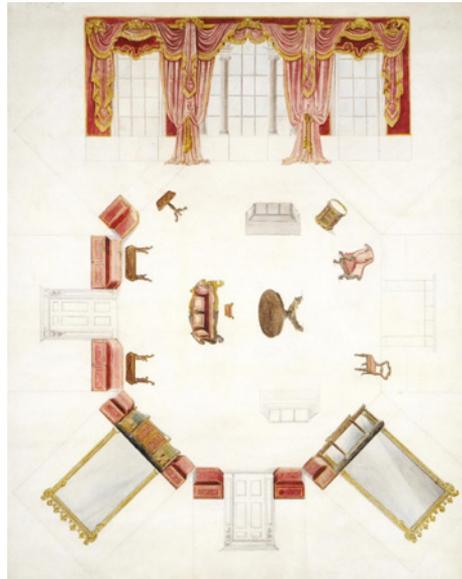
Queen Anne (1665–1714) was the first English queen to reign over a united Great Britain and Ireland. Even though she herself suffered from poor health, during her reign the kingdom enjoyed political stability and a revival of the classic arts; as such, she had a great influence on European and global trends and fashions. She set a precedent of sorts for the next great female bearer of the crown, Victoria (1819–1901), whose reign began 100 years after Queen Anne.

Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901; and the time-lapse between her and Anne (from George I to George IV, and William IV) contained within it significant events, the British Industrial Revolution and the loss of 13 colonies in America to name just two. Victoria's grandfather, George III, reigned from 1760–1820 during which America won independence in its Revolutionary War. Her reign went on to witness the American Civil War from afar. Shortly thereafter, the British had their own era of reform; nevertheless, Great Britain became stronger, achieving great power and influence with significant advances in national infrastructure and in the arts—much like those seen during the time of her predecessor Queen Anne. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the so-called “Queen Anne style” came to be an aesthetic inclination within the broader umbrella of the Victorian Era. Moreover, given advances in transport and communications, Victorian tastes—including notions of domesticity and propriety—continued to have a global reach as far as North America, the Caribbean and West Indies.

The Victorian era saw telling advances in architectural representation as well. Here I am indebted to the work of scholar Robin Evans

(1944–1993), specifically for turning me on to *developed surface* drawings—from the work of Sir John Soan (1753–1837) in the early 19th century, to the colourful studies and advertisements of *Gillow & Co.* (a.k.a. *Gillows of Lancaster and London*, and later *Waring and Gillow*) during the height of Victorian fashion (Evans, 1997). Please note the depiction of portable furniture pieces, as well as the number of doors to enter and exit the space, as we will come back to that momentarily (see Figure 1).

Figure 1  
Example of a  
*developed surface*  
drawing by Gillow  
& Co. (1806–1831).  
Design of  
furniture and  
interior elevations  
of an octagonal  
room with details  
of the woodwork.  
Drawing in  
pen, ink and  
watercolour  
(Image provided  
by V&A Museum,  
Department  
of Prints and  
Drawings. Public  
domain)



Robin Evans's research and in-depth analysis of architectural sequence—namely passages versus corridors, and matrices of connecting rooms versus more linear sequences—are inspired. In his 1978 essay *Figures, Doors, and Passages* (republished in Center, 1995), the closing paragraph of the section on *Passages* reads “these thoroughfares were able to draw rooms at a distance closer, but only by disengaging those near at hand. And in this there is another glaring paradox: the corridor facilitated communication and in so doing reduced contact” (Evans, 1995, p. 51). One cannot help but draw parallels between Evans's reference to “reduced contact” and “facilitation of communication” with our own current COVID-19 situation: virtual/distance work/learning of several individuals, deploying numerous devices, while inhabiting various rooms throughout the home. He goes on, “Yet here too the paradox is superficial since what this meant was that purposeful or necessary communication was facilitated while incidental communication was reduced” (Evans, 1995, p. 51).

In describing architectural space and representation from the Enlightenment to the 20th century, Evans draws parallels between literature, art, and architecture, all the while referencing gorgeous drawings of Italian renaissance villas, classic domestic works by Soan and Nash, and works from the modern canon. However, in my readings of Evans, I have always yearned further study of design trends in more common, working-class spaces. Whereas on the one hand he illustratively describes homes of the upper classes, with their multitude of servants, and on the other hand describes the hyper-efficiency priorities of high modernism; somehow, the middle ground is left out. So too, for the most part, are the decades between 1870–1900. Here, our beloved Victoria and Anne come back into the picture, specifically our very own Queen Anne, built in 1886 for a family that was part of America’s growing middle-class.

### **American Queen Anne: For the Working Middle-Class**

The Open-House advertisement, in the real-estate section of the December 2002 Sunday Boston Globe, described this house as a “rambling Queen Anne.” It went on to list two specific items on our wish-list: 1) a yard, and 2) a washer and dryer. Well, that settled it; it was certainly worth a visit. We came, we saw, and after a somewhat stressful 48-hours of negotiating, we signed the dotted line and purchased our first home, as newly-weds with a dog (see Figure 2).

Still, we must be indulged in a brief analysis of the elements of interest which Architecture possesses for the human mind...demanded by the inquiring mind and the expanding taste of our people; and the Domestic Architecture itself, which, amid the louder claims of civil and ecclesiastical art, had been too much neglected, seems to demand a higher consideration. (Downing, 1852, p. 3)

In his 1954 article titled *American Villas: Inventiveness in the American Suburb from Downing to Wright*, first published in Britain’s *Architectural Review*, the art and architecture historian Vincent Scully attributes America’s preoccupation with the importance of domestic architecture to Andrew Jackson Downing as early as the 1840s. Downing spent a significant part of his career extolling the virtues of small-scale wooden domestic construction; and the likes of Downing and his contemporary Owen Jones (1809–1874), made names for themselves via the production and publication of popular pattern books.

Figure 2  
A New England  
"Queen Anne"/  
author's home.  
Wood-frame  
and siding on  
brick and stone  
foundation,  
built 1886 in  
Cambridge, MA,  
USA (Image by  
author)



Of course, our Queen Anne home, and many like it—these exemplars of what Downing would call *Domestic Architecture*—is more than a mere stylistic label. It can be seen as a product of American ingenuity, a by-product of its time, a collection of pine and fir from regional New England forests—neatly packaged, shipped off, then caringly assembled as one of many mail-order catalogue homes typical of the late 1800s. It seems, as Downing suggests, to “demand a higher consideration” (Downing, 1852, p. 3). The history that made a home like ours possible is fascinating and certainly multi-faceted. Moreover, by actually living in this piece of history, I’ve come to appreciate the imbedded flexibility of this old house, and better understand its ability to adapt with the times. At present, it has been adapted for my family of five, along with our second dog—cohabitating 24/7, working, cooking, learning, caring for one another, and trying to stay healthy *a-lá* best-practices of COVID-19 social-distancing and stay-at-home orders.

First, it was just the two of us (my wife and I), then came our firstborn. Two years later, I registered a business certificate with my home town, the City of Cambridge, and staked out 65 square feet in the back of our bedroom as my very first “office” (Figure 3). Two, one-inch thick, contemporary-Victorian style screens were all that separated this humble design-headquarters from the rest of my life. Additionally locking merely three doors allowed us to rent out half the house. During office-hours, I focused on the two projects that helped launch my fledgeling office, and after-hours and weekends my father-in-law and I began our ongoing renovation of this home.

In phase-one of remodelling, while removing an original door-frame for replication, we discovered the original Vermont wood-mill’s stamp on the reverse side, and after additional digging around concluded that is where the house is most likely from. More research into the VT wood-mill confirmed that indeed they were the source

of many structures like our home, peppered throughout the North East United States, and maybe even further out across the land.

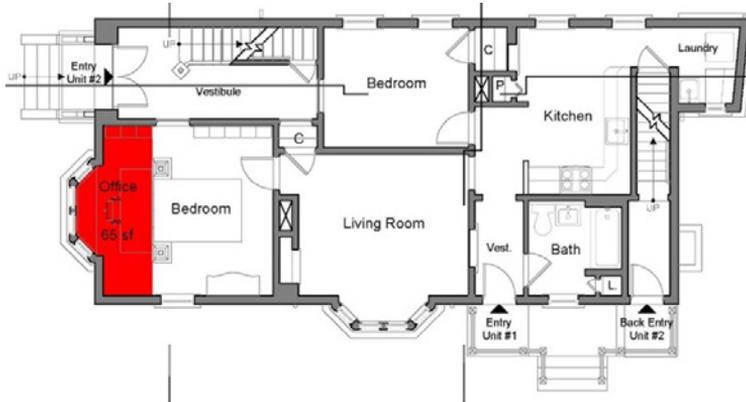


Figure 3  
Plan of a New England "Queen Anne"/author's home, showing author's first home-office (Image by author)

### **American Queen Anne: Ubiquitous via Technologies of Her Time**

Much of the domestic architecture in North America, between the mid-1850s through the last quarter of the 19th century, was not the work of Architects per se. In fact, and according to preservation expert Nigel Hutchins, the first builders of domestic structures on this continent fell into one of two camps: the first camp consisted of trained craftsman, and the second camp included, as Hutchins puts it "the homegrown, itinerant builder, who, with some talent, constructed ... N. America" (Hutchins, 1985, p. 27). Hutchins goes on explain that by the end of the 18th century, these designers/builders were primarily inspired by three things: memory (think: immigrant), precedents (think: probably European and/or English works), and architectural handbooks. That last one is of special interest to us, given the wide breadth of handbooks, catalogues, and pattern books that became increasingly disseminated and available throughout the 1800s and well into the 20th century; two of the more influential authors in this genre being the aforementioned Downing and Jones.

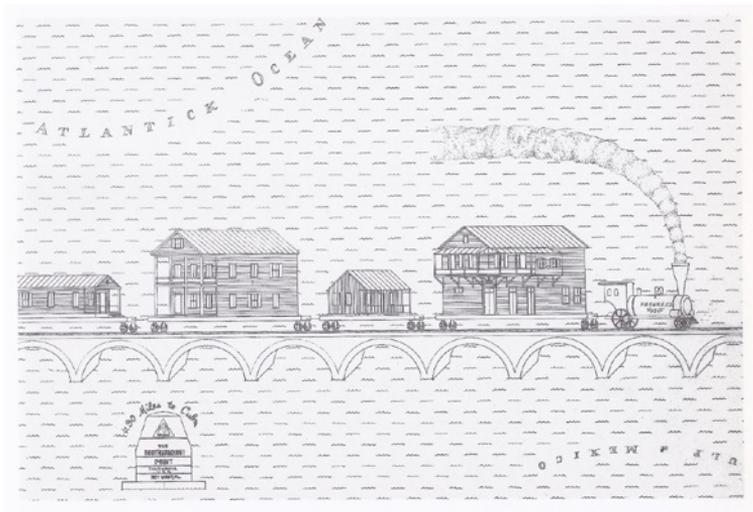
In fact, there were several technological developments regarding mobility, as well as the distribution and dissemination of information and popular imagery, which not only influenced early American builders, but also shaped the aesthetics and tastes of the growing middle-class throughout the 1800s. These key technologies of the Victorian era included: 1) the locomotive, 2) advances in printing (of newspapers, books, and other print media), and 3) advances in furniture fabrication techniques. Of course, there were other relevant communication and education advances, like the telegraph

and increases in literacy. But these three: locomotive, printing, and furniture fabrication are primary for our purpose here: explaining how/why the Queen Anne style became ubiquitous.

On May 10, 1869, America's railroad system connected the entire country—literally, from coast to coast—with the completion of the Pacific Railroad in Utah. President Ulysses Grant received the official telegraph dispatch announcing its completion at 2:47 PM EST. As historian Eric Rutkow aptly explains in his 2012 book, *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*, the railroad not only had a symbiotic relationship with the nation's lumber industry, it also made possible—and helped distribute—cartons and crates of building materials, and reams of newsprint made with cheap wood pulp—itself a by-product of America's increasing number of lumber mills (Rutkow, 2012). These same mills supplied miles of railroad ties for the many locomotives providing all this new transport—transport and distribution of not only pattern books, but products of all sorts and of varied scales, from individual furniture pieces to entire home-kits.

As my family discovered, our very own piece of New England Queen Anne lore did not come by way of the Mayflower; instead, it came by way of train, from Vermont. Numerous similar mail-order homes were shipped all across the country, as shown by architect/planner Kevin Storm in his 1994 ink drawing poetically depicting the distribution of wood-frame vernacular buildings on Henry Flagler's (1830–1913) East Coast Railway to the Florida Keys (Figure 4).

Figure 4  
*Overseas Highway*.  
Ink on paper  
(Image by Kevin  
Storm, 1994. Used  
with permission  
of the artist)



Advances in transport undoubtedly helped the spread of news too. Newspapers, and publishing in general, benefited from the aforementioned cheap pulp, transport, and advances in printing press technology, such as R. M. Hoe's 6-cylinder press of the 1860s. Together with more affordable raw-material for paper production, new presses churned out affordable books and newspapers for all. The so-called penny-press (1830–70s) allowed people of all incomes to stay up on the latest news and events while giving advertisers a vast audience. In his seminal course *Modernization in the Built U.S. Environment since 1890*, Professor John R. Stilgoe underscores the important role newspapers played in disseminating popular imagery of all things fashionable; including, but not limited to, idealized drawings of clothing (think: the *Gibson Girl* of late 19th and early 20th century), and domestic fashions—including architecture, and home-furnishings (personal communication, February 1997).

Penny-newspapers depended on their advertisers as part of their business model. This included advertisements produced by companies like *Gillow & Co.*, and *Hampton & Sons*, in Great Britain, or the likes of *Sears, Roebuck & Co.*, and *Montgomery Ward & Co.* in the U.S. Many of their advertisements offered free catalogues, which in turn spawned the catalogue and mail-order businesses (Figure 5). In their heyday, these “books” of consumption even sold houses—houses like ours. Of course, Sears would eventually go on to dominate this market, shipping out over 75,000 homes by the early 20th century (Rosenberg, 2018).

No discussion involving the Queen Anne style would be complete without discussing the furniture of the period. As Effa Brown (1967) describes, in her synopsis of the period's furniture and how it reflected the social-life of the time, “card-playing was a popular pastime during the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne... beautiful small tables were designed for this game, and for the tea drinking that went along with it” (p. 499). This pastime carried through into the Victorian parlour room as well; as seen in *Hampton & Sons* catalogue illustrations of 1869 (see Figure 5d). Brown goes on to remind us that China collecting was a popular hobby too. This helps explain the various designs for China Cabinets of the time. The taste for this “hobby” certainly travelled across the pond—and across social classes—as reflected in the built-in China Cabinets incorporated in many Dining Rooms of New England's middle-class Queen Anne homes decades later.

Brown continues by underscoring the efforts of furniture design-houses to make chairs much more comfortable during Anne's reign. Backs were carved out, corners were rounded (see Figure 5c), and



## American Queen Anne: an Endearing Endurance of Popular Attributes, Then and Now

The Queen Anne was one of the Victorian era's most popular styles. Her champions were many, ranging from H. H. Richardson (upon return to the USA from his studies in France, after the Civil War), to the continent's early builders (Hutchins, 1985), and the many anonymous designers working up home designs for mail-order catalogues such as *Montgomery Ward's The Radford Ideal Homes*, published in Riverside, IL, USA, from the late 1800s into the 20th century.

According to James Massey and Shirley Maxwell (2018) of *Old House Journal*, the popular Queen Anne style symbolized prosperity, community, and an appreciation of family. Indeed, during the post-Civil War Victorian era, much of the American family's social life revolved around home-life; and often, that was a multi-generational family. Fortunately, for us, the previous owners of our Queen Anne kept it mostly intact. In fact, the kind women we bought it from was actually born in the house; and in her own words "this probably influenced (my) care for the home" (Author's notes, 2002). Although she, and her relatives, maximised its flexibility by temporarily converting it into a boarding house, there were never unsympathetic renovations, additions, or demolition. As such, our beloved Queen Anne still offers us the many comforts that appealed to her family and the typical family of the late 1800s and early 20th century, namely a variety of interior spaces, an entry hall with prominent wooden staircase, fireplaces, dining room with built-in China Cabinet, large windows providing abundant light and ventilation, a back staircase, and an ample kitchen area.

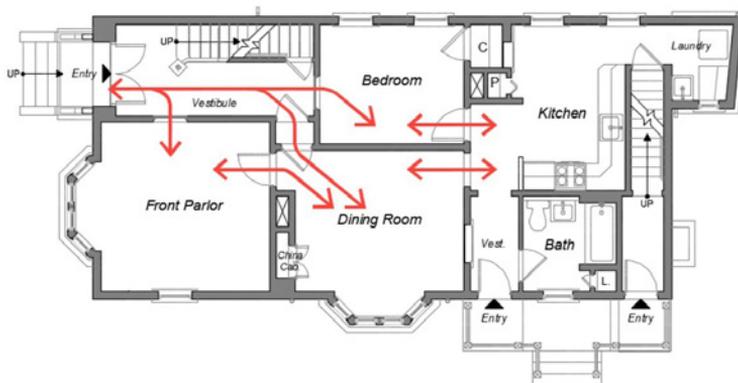
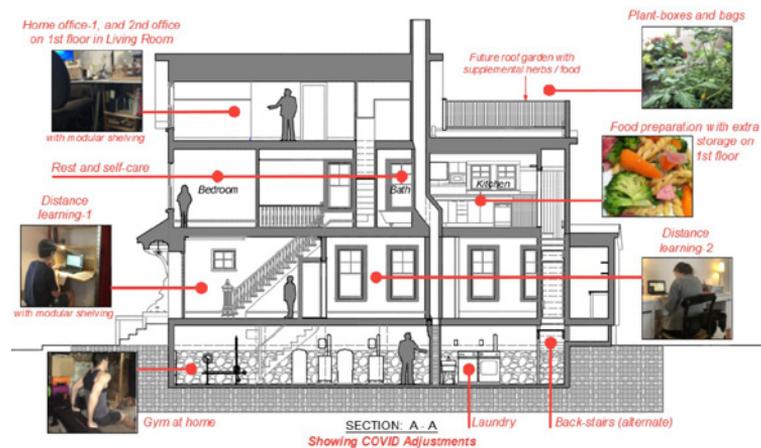


Figure 6  
Plan of a  
New England  
"Queen Anne"/  
author's home  
showing ease-  
of-circulation  
diagram (Image  
by author)

These characteristics, among the most salient and broadly shared with other Queen Anne homes, remain most useful to us today—especially adjusting to life *a-lá* COVID-19: 1) Many doors and

windows, allowing for ample ventilation and ease of circulation; 2) Most rooms have multiple entrances/exits (compare/contrast with Figure 1). Of our five public rooms on the first floor, one has four adjacent doorways, three have three doorways, and the last, the *Front Parlor*, has two doors (see Figure 6). The resulting circulation *desire-lines* (shown in orange) work best with smaller, more *mobile* furniture analogous to Victorian-era furnishings. 3) Multiple access points to basement areas allow for temporary/supplemental program (ex: home-gym), or alternate “short-cuts/pass-under” options, should certain 1st floor rooms be needed for temporary quarantine (see Figure 7).

Figure 7  
Longitudinal section of a New England "Queen Anne"/author's home, showing COVID-19 adjustments diagram (Image by author)



### American Queen Anne: Flexibility Transcending Time, from Post-Civil War to COVID-19

To attempt to build up theories of art, or to form a style, independently of the past, would be an act of supreme folly. It would be at once to reject the experiences and accumulated knowledge of thousands of years. On the contrary, we should regard as our inheritance all the successful labours of the past, not blindly following them, but...as guides to find the true path. (Jones et al., 1865)

In summary, my family and I have observed, and come to appreciate our Queen Anne's lessons from the past. As my business partner and I move forward consulting and advising our clients, we bear these lessons in mind regarding architecture, interior architecture, and furniture:

- Keep multiple points of entry and egress. If you have extra staircases, keep those too; unless you have a lot to gain by removing them.

- Further capitalise on various entry/exits in rooms by allocating appropriately scaled furnishings and retaining (or adding) numerous areas for virtual/distance work/learning.
- Incorporate contemporary best-practices of space planning, such as ample (ADA) clearances, to provide room for navigation (i.e. 36"–42" clear pass-through circulation + 60" turning radius for wheelchair turnaround) or proper social-distancing entry/exit.
- The above three points dovetail nicely with a smaller-scale, more mobile furniture strategy. Remember Oxford's relevant definition (cited previously), one that applies here and now; mobile as an adjective: able or willing to move easily or freely between occupations, places of residence.
- When selecting furniture elements, consider placing a variety of elements along the outer edges of a room. Those pieces can later be moved or re-positioned depending on varied occupant needs.

We have kept these points in mind as we adapt our family work/learning areas. For example, the pinewood work-station boxes and shelves are adapted to a tension-point storage system, and by mixing old and new with the period-piece wicker-seat open-back chair and new ottoman and desks (Figure 8 and 9). Various smaller furniture pieces allow for adaptability depending on the needs of varied occupants/ uses (Figure 10).



Figure 8  
Lessons from the past: precedents of Ottomans' shelves/boxes (Image by Hampton & Sons, 1869. Public domain)

Figure 9  
Lessons from the  
past adapted to  
the current home  
(Image by author)



Figure 10  
The homes  
original  
dining room is  
converted into  
a study-parlor  
(Image by author)



In short, there is evidence, and a valid argument made for keeping and deploying Queen Anne strategies of multiple doors and stairs, as well as supplying smaller-scale furniture and furnishings that can easily move from room to room, from point A to point B—i.e. a new quarantine-ready space.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Beyond This (COVID-19) Moment and for Future Generations**

“We are what we make ourselves. The art of the future will be what we have become. It is reasonable to take a pessimistic view... But experience shows that the artist is incurably optimistic” (Scully, 1981, p. 53). As an architect living in a 150+-year-old house, one has

an intrinsic sense of stewardship. That, together with this renewed appreciation of domestic architecture and our rediscovery of an American Queen Anne's innate flexibility and versatility, reminds me of my former professor, the aforementioned Vincent Scully. He not only inspired us to appreciate the history of natural and built environments around us, many, if not all, of his lectures espoused the importance of stewardship, along with an informed appreciation of—and the responsibility we all share to fulfil—good citizenship. As we face these difficult times, adjusting to an ever-evolving reality of public/private/civic and domestic space, we can all use those virtues as guiding principles.

The prolific architectural critic and educator Paul Goldberger, in his 2013 *Metropolis* "Game Changers | History" essay dedicated to Vincent Scully, reminds us what Scully taught us: The very idea of Architecture reflecting society and life at large. Indeed, it seems much of Scully's career was dedicated to establishing a lineage of responsible urban design and architecture—humanistic and environmentally conscientious, with an economy of means. As Goldberger reminds us, the closest definition for architecture ever offered by Scully is that of "a continuing dialogue between the generations which creates an environment across time" (Goldberger, 2013, p. 3). That very dialogue indeed continues as we re-use, and rediscover the charms of, this American Queen Anne we call home.

In conclusion, by contemplating the various attributes, and the historical context of the Queen Anne style, we can better appreciate the period's spatial paradigm—sequences, and organization, of both its domestic architecture and interior furnishings—thus imagine meaningful transformations of historic domestic interior spaces to suit our present-day needs. By rediscovering these nimble and flexible elements, we can further enjoy home. As designers, perhaps what is most relevant for us in this exemplar is: the adaptation of spatial virtues from the past to better deal with the present and the future.

### **Acknowledgement**

The research that informed this article was made possible by the support and encouragement of the Boston Architectural College, the Rhode Island School of Design's Department of Interior Architecture, and the University of Miami School of Architecture; and by the support, mentorship, and encouragement of the following individuals: Amy Van Lauwe, Kevin Storm, Karen Nelson, Professors G. Bruno, J. F. Lejeune, N. Levine, V. Scully, and J. Stilgoe; and by Emily Mueller De Celis.

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