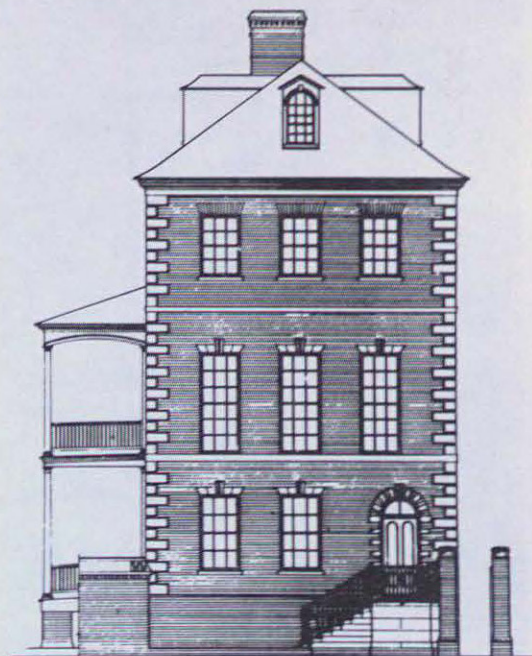




90-92-94 Church Street (built between 1730-1805)



The "single" house

Learning From Charleston

by Derek Drummond

Il y a de cela deux cents ans, une forme particulière de maison fut développée à Charleston, en Caroline de Sud. Celle-ci était ingénieuse puisqu'elle répondait très bien au climat côtier de la Caroline, la culture et au style de vie des constructeurs.

Cette forme de maison fut reproduite à Charleston pendant les cent vingt cinq ans qui suivirent.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, in Charleston, South Carolina, an unusual house form was developed. Ingenious in its response to both the sub-tropical climate of the Carolina coast and the culture and life-style of its builders, this house form was reproduced for the next one hundred and twenty-five years. Its negligible influence on house design outside Charleston and even within Charleston from the civil war to just recently, is as real as it is surprising.¹

Due to the efforts of groups of interested citizens including the Preservation Society of Charleston, the Historic Charleston Foundation and individual owners, many of the original homes have been preserved. Together with some impressive public buildings and churches they form a concentrated historical urban environment that has, since 1970, attracted thousands of tourists.² Hundreds of architects have also studied the houses but the form has remained indigenous to Charleston.

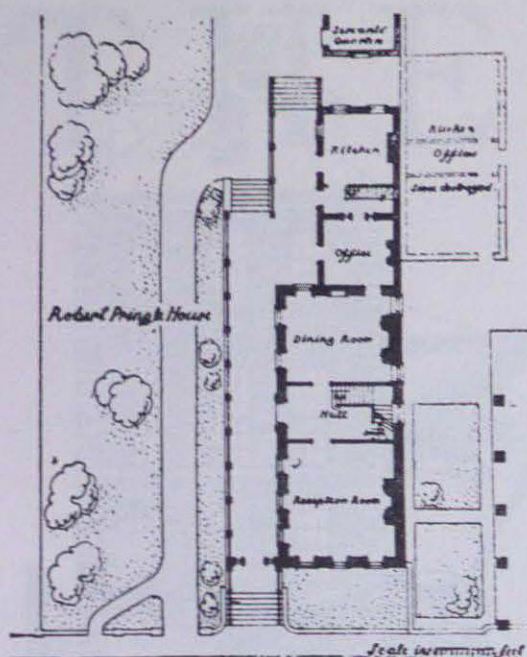
Perhaps it has been felt that both the climate and the culture of this southern town were such that any house form closely associated with it would have little or no application elsewhere. Or perhaps there has been a lingering reluctance to build a form closely associated with the South and its distinctive social and cultural values. Nevertheless there are as-

pects of this house form that could or should have had a serious impact on housing design — particularly the design of detached single family dwellings.

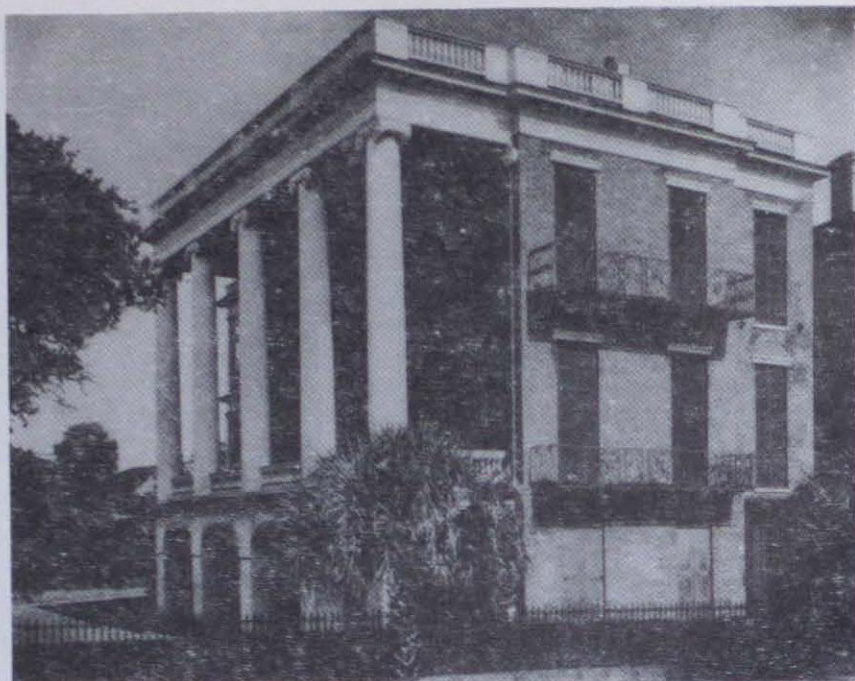
The first of the Charleston "single" houses were built in the 1730's to provide plantation owners and their families a house in the town.³ The "single" house was narrow, only one room wide, with two major rooms on each floor. Rectangular in plan, the house was located in the front corner of its lot with its narrow end toward the street. The majority of the "single" houses had two or three storey galleries of piazzas along the south or west sides of the house, providing protection from the summer sun and a pleasant outdoor space for use during the summer evenings or warm winter days. The lots were narrow but deep, providing enough space for sizeable side and rear gardens which were surrounded by walls. The formal door abutting the sidewalk was actually an entry not directly into the house but into the piazza and the property as a whole. Entry to the house was through a door off the lower level of the piazza and was secluded from the street.

As it has been built for over one hundred and twenty-five years, examples of the Charleston "single" house can be found in styles popular at various times. From Colonial through Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival to Victorian, the style of decoration changed but the fundamental planning and architectural concept did not. As well as variations in style, there were variations in size — from the very modest two storey to the elaborate three storey mansions of East Battery Street on the waterfront.

However fascinating the historical development of the "single" house might be, what is of greater importance for us today is the uncanny manner in which the concept of the house form and its planning implications provide possible solutions to some contemporary problems of sub-division



The Pringle House



Roper House (built after 1845)

planning and detached house design. Specifically the "single" house provided a solution, unparalleled since, to elegantly entering a house other than through the principal street facade, to minimizing lot size while maximizing possible use of outdoor space, and to making the house liveable in sub-tropical climatic conditions without benefit of electricity. These solutions, almost totally disregarded for over one hundred years, are relevant today and should be studied in detail. Fortunately, many "single" houses remain, some restored and turned into museums, but many as private homes. Since the kitchens of the original houses were located, along with the servants' quarters, in separate buildings at the rear of the lot, the houses have had to be renovated.

Cultural and architectural history should be studied coincidentally in order to understand a building form, and to properly comprehend the physical form of the "single" house, some understanding of the social values and lifestyle of the original builders is necessary. These values and patterns of behaviour played a vital role in determining the architectural concept which, although conditions have changed, is still appropriate today. However, today's use of the "single" house is an indication that an architectural solution to a given problem can be an appropriate answer to a different set of cultural and social conditions.

The original "single" houses were built by the owners or masters of the large plantations located along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers west of the town.⁴ In making decisions about the design of a townhouse, the plantation owner was, no doubt, influenced by the physical design of the plantation itself, as well as the lifestyle that the new home was expected to support. There would be a natural desire to duplicate plantation conditions although obviously at a smaller scale. The typical plantation consisted of a considerable number of buildings, the most important being the manor house or, as it was often referred to, the Big House. The Big House was the showpiece of the plantation. "Because it was the most visible symbol of the slaveowner's wealth and status, it was usually as grand and lavish a monument as the planter could afford."⁵

It has been said that "a more hedonistic, pleasure-oriented society never lived on the North American conti-

nent."⁶ But most of the pleasure was reserved for the slaveowner himself. Not only the slaves but the poor-whites as well lived a substandard existence in substandard housing.⁷ The planter's wife had an extremely difficult life. She "was in charge, not merely of the mansion but of the entire spectrum of domestic operation throughout the estate from food to clothing to the spiritual care of both her white family and her husband's slaves."⁸

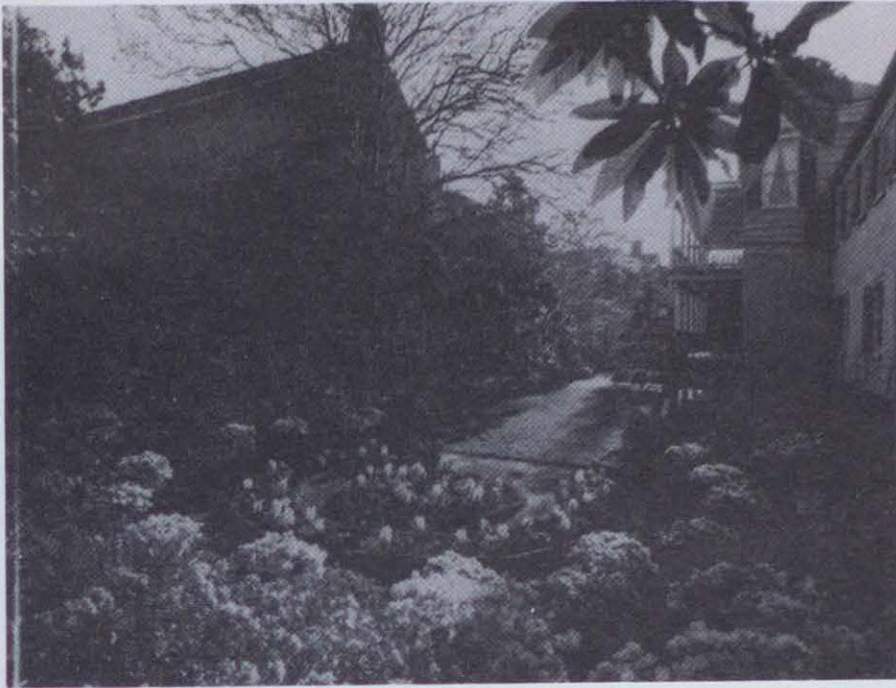
Forced to abandon the plantation during the summer months (May until November) in order to escape yellow fever and malaria, social pressures dictated that the plantation owner provide, in town, a home as impressive as the plantation, including a manor house and out-buildings to provide accommodation for his slaves.

Hence, the townhouse was a scaled down version of the plantation complete with manor house, which became known as the "single" house, and quarters behind the manor house for the slaves. "The slaves' quarters had their own kitchens, storerooms and stables. Rooms were small, frequently lacking windows, and furniture was minimal."⁹ In contrast, the Big House on the street, where the master's family lived, had generously sized rooms, was often lavishly furnished and was planned more for entertaining than for everyday living.

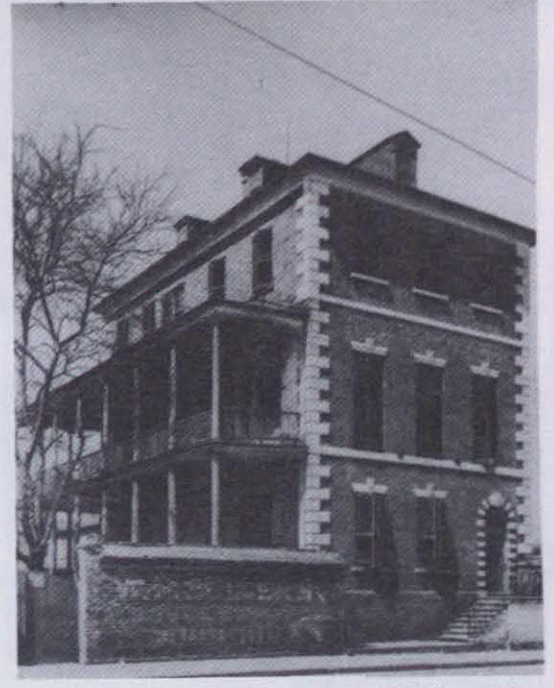
"By law the slave had to reside on the master's property unless he had a ticket giving him permission to reside elsewhere." In order to better control the slaves, "high thick walls" surrounded the entire lot and "gave the house and grounds a prison-like atmosphere" and "Slaves could be watched more easily that way since the only exit was past the master's house."¹⁰

Today, only the "single" or Big House remains. Virtually all vestiges of the slaves' quarters have disappeared. What remains is merely a house set in a walled garden. Little thought is given to the fact that the walls which today keep unwelcome people out were originally designed to keep slaves captive.

But besides containing the slaves, the walls surrounded magnificent gardens. "No American city has a richer horticultural tradition. Talented botanists and landscape architects of the 17th and 18th centuries were drawn to Charleston by the rich variety of native flora."¹¹ The 18th century walled



Single house garden, 64 Meeting St.



The Glasden House

gardens were a tropical profusion of fig trees, pomegranates, peaches, oranges, acacias, roses, oleanders and yellow jessamine, the whole shaded by giant live oaks and magnolias.¹²

Although the original gardens have disappeared along with most of the out-buildings, the walled lot has been re-landscaped in accordance with most 20th century needs and tastes. Without the out-buildings and with the "single" house in the corner of the lot against the sidewalk, there is a generous amount of space available for a garden. In some instances provision has been made for one or two automobiles in the side yard beside the piazza, but the area is treated more as an entry court than a parking space. Access to the courtyard is through a gate thus reducing the visual impact of the automobile from the street. Since the entry level of the house is usually raised well above the level of the street and entry court, the automobiles are barely visible from the principal rooms of the house.

As in the past the gardens are generously planted. Along with a rich variety of flowers including the rare camellia, introduced into North America at the nearby plantation, Middleton Place, by André Michaud,¹³ azaleas abound, all beneath the live oaks and crepe myrtle trees. It would be difficult to imagine a more exquisite and urbane resolution of the problem of designing a private open space on a restricted city lot. The space is as visually private as is possible in an urban pattern of multi-storeyed dwellings. Views of the entry court from the sidewalk are, in some instances, possible but most are effectively blocked by walls and gates.

The relationship between the "single" house and the private open space is as effective as it is unusual. Unlike the typical North American house, the principal rooms "enfront" the side yard rather than the street.¹⁴

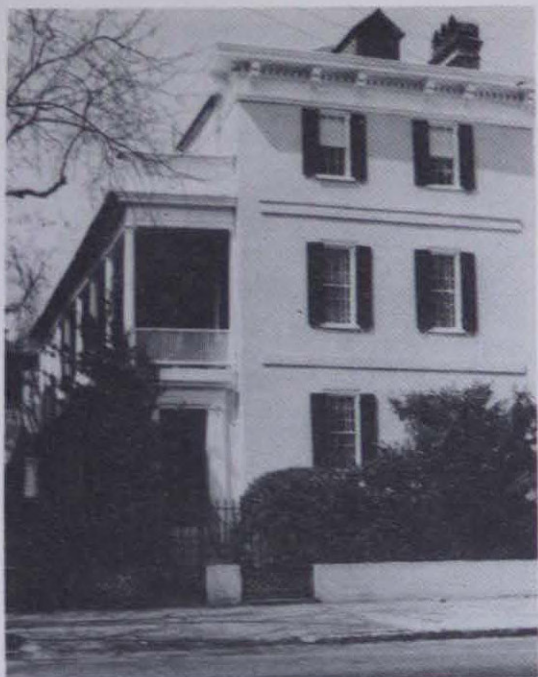
Effectively serving as an intermediary or transition space between the rooms and the garden is the piazza. Unique in North America the piazza may have been introduced from the West Indies.¹⁵ Although historians feel that the piazzas were not added to the original "single" houses until late in the 18th century, the word *piazza* first appeared in legal documents in 1700 (before the introduction of the "single" house) and with increasing frequency after 1750. But definite reference to the two-storey piazza does not occur until the

end of the 18th century.¹⁶ Unlike the galleries or front porches of the early American homes which were essentially semi-private spaces enabling social and visual contact with neighbours and others in the street, the piazza is a private space hidden from the street end on the upper levels, views to the street are almost completely blocked.

The decision to orient the piazza toward the garden rather than the street was, in all probability, influenced by the typical plantation owner's desire to keep separate the activities related to his household and those one would expect to find in the street. In such a structured society as that of the anti-bellum south (when the vast majority of piazzas were built) the home, which included the Big House, the garden, slaves' quarters and other out-buildings, was a contained unit. It was assumed that those living in the master's house would, or should, have little interest in the activities taking place in the street. Contact with neighbours was frequent but formal. One suspects that the informal or spontaneous contact associated with the front porch of other house forms neither existed nor was encouraged in 19th century Charleston. That the piazza was conceived as a private space is therefore understandable.

Throughout North America, detached single family dwelling design indicates a similar attitude on the part of the owners towards the street and towards their neighbours. The disappearance of the front porch from new houses — except in the occasional summer home — and the walled-in rear yard are both clear indications of changing social attitudes. More emphasis is placed on privacy than on opportunities for spontaneous social interaction.

Recent patterns of detached housing are neither as elegant nor as economical in terms of land use as the "single" house pattern. Much of this is due to regulations controlling the siting of buildings. To maintain a legal right-of-way, houses are required to be set back from the street. It is not unheard of for forty percent of a building lot to be required to satisfy these zoning requirements. It is the authorities' concept of street rather than that of the owners that has dominated planning decisions regarding detached house patterns.



19th century Charleston house



Edmonston-Alston House (built 1829)

One specific feature of house design has remained consistent since the inception of the "single" house. The importance of the principal street facade, as a symbolic gesture to others, remains as strong today as it was in 18th century Charleston. Even in the most modest house today special attention is given to the design of the street facade. Use of more expensive materials exclusively on the street facade, an embellished front door, lavish landscaping and front lawn decorations are all signs of a desire to impress others. While the entire "single" house was required to be a visible symbol of the slaveowner's wealth and status, and although the interior rooms and piazza were oriented toward the side garden, the street facade nevertheless received special attention and detailing.¹⁷ A more elaborate cornice on only the street facade, window pediments exclusively on the front windows, and the often ornate doorways to the piazza are some of the features used specifically to enhance the principal facade. This embellishment of the principal facade is extremely subtle given the major orientation to the side garden and the fact that the narrow end of the house faces the street.

Historically an important feature of any principal facade, the front door or main entrance is interpreted in an ingenious manner in the "single" house. By simply incorporating two "front doors" into the design, one into the entire site and one into the house, the inconsistency between degree of formality and amount of use present in the entrance in today's detached houses, was never a problem. By not having to locate the formal entry into the house in the street facade, it was then possible to enter anywhere along the long side of the house. Architects and homeowners alike appreciate the advantage of entering a long narrow house on the long side rather than on the narrow end. It provides the opportunity for an easily understood and economical circulation system — economic in the sense of percentage of total area used by the halls, corridors and stairs. For the original "single" house which had family rooms on the first floor, and bedrooms above, it provided the opportunity to have, on the ground floor, two large reception rooms, one on either side of a spacious entry hall — ideal for entertaining, a prime requirement of its original owner.

In the typical twentieth century detached single family

dwelling, the long side of the rectangular house usually faces the street and the rear yard. Lot dimensions are proportionally similar to those of Charleston — rectangular with the narrow end toward the street. The typical detached house, in a sense, acts as a wall between the street and the family garden in the rear. There is seldom a well planned relationship between the parking of the automobile and the formal entrance to the house, with cars parked beside, in the house, or under it.

By placing the shoulder or narrow end of the house toward the street, a paved entry courtyard can be incorporated into the design that relates directly to the main entry into the house. The number of rooms oriented toward the quiet garden and away from the potentially noisy street is maximized. As can be seen in Charleston, the street facade can be elaborate if the owner wishes to make a symbolic gesture. The entire lot can be designed as one integrated scheme as has been done for centuries in Japan and for a one hundred and twenty-five year period in Charleston — far preferable to a detached house in the middle of a landscaped lot, as has been the case in the rest of North America for over three hundred years.

Historian Samuel Gaillard Stoney has depicted the typical Charleston "single" house as a hot weather dwelling that is also habitable in the winter.¹⁸ There is an old saying that "Carolina is in the spring a paradise, in the summer a hell, and in the autumn a hospital."¹⁹ The summer heat, mosquitos and resultant malaria and yellow fever drove the planter and his family to the city and designers to create a house form receptive to the cooling summer breezes off the waters of Charleston. It is ironical that the black slaves were able to survive in this malaria producing environment because they had become immune in Africa, while Europeans, who had no such defense, died from the resultant fevers in great numbers.²⁰

The building of the piazza on either the south or west side of the "single" house, thus providing protection from the sun at the hottest times, is generally credited with keeping the house relatively cool. In addition, it provided an airy place to sit on warm evenings as its location took advantage of the prevailing summer breezes. However, since it was over

half a century before the piazzas were added to the original "single" houses, the initial design had to have other features to keep the house relatively cool in the summer.

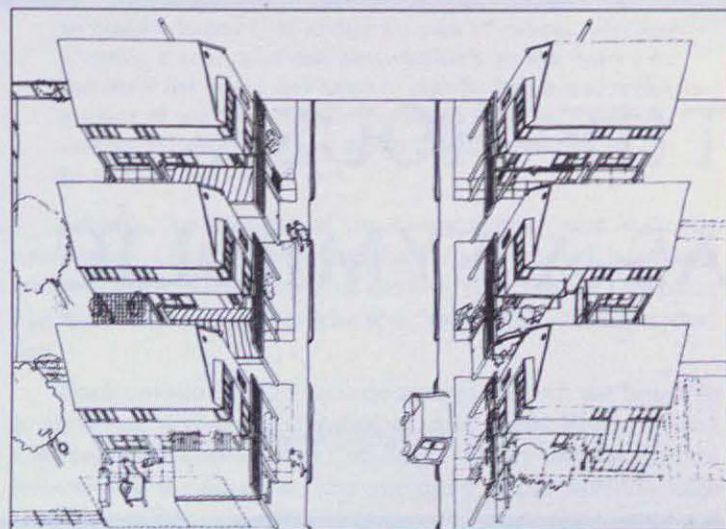
The most important cooling feature was that the house form was detached and was narrow, one room in width, enabling most rooms to have windows on three sides and to take advantage of the natural cooling effects of any breezes. From the "Shotgun" houses of the South to the 19th century cottages of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, there has been a tradition of narrow, detached house forms in North America. But unless combined with high ceilings and tall windows, they do not provide the natural cooling effect present in the "single" house.

In an attempt to take even greater advantage of cross-ventilation and to improve on the quality of the air, the principal floor was raised well off the ground. (Early "single" houses were raised only two feet above the grade, but by the 19th century they were often raised more than three feet.)²¹ This had the advantage of both catching more on-shore breezes and avoiding the *miasma* or infectious or noxious emanations from the damp ground and vegetation of the garden.²²

The "single" house has remained indigenous to Charleston, precursor to few, if any, contemporary housing patterns. Some of the features described above can occasionally be detected in new house forms but rarely are more than one or two of the features present. Robert Stern, for the 1976 Venice Biennale, designed a housing pattern in which the houses, rectangular in plan, had the narrow end toward the street.²³ Lawrence Speck of Austin, Texas, in 1979, published designs of houses with their shoulders to the street that even included piazzas.²⁴ Terry Montgomery of Toronto, in an entry for the 1979 National Housing Design Competition in Canada, developed a pattern closely related to that of the "single" house.²⁵ Shoulder to street, located in the front corner of an enclosed lot, the house was narrow (17 feet wide) and one room wide on the ground floor. Due, no doubt, to zoning regulations, legal requirements, and need for privacy, there are no windows on the elevation facing the neighbours property. The upper floor has stairs and service spaces against this blank wall and hence none of the bedrooms have the type of cross-ventilation prevalent in the "single" house.

The concept of the domain of the house including the garden and garage, and the house being entered through one gate is present in the Montgomery design. The usual suburban house design problem of dual entries, one of which (the "front" door) is never used, has effectively been solved in this plan.

The historic reference is clear but the true potential of the precedent is still unrealized, and so it has been since the last of the "single" houses which were built. Perhaps because they are considered monuments to a period of American history (anti-bellum South) which many Americans do not admire, considering the conditions under which slaves had to exist and the hedonistic nature of the slaveowners' lifestyles, many of the ideas present in the "single" house have remained indigenous to Charleston. The increased interest in the history and architecture of Charleston shown by tourists and architects, could, however, result in a renewed appreciation of a house form, two hundred and fifty years old. It would be a well deserved tribute to the graceful and appropriate "single" house.



Images of the Charleston house.

Submission of architect Terry Montgomery, National Housing Design Competition, 1979.

NOTES:

1. Michael J. Crosbie, "Gentle Infill in a Genteel City," *Architecture: The AIA Journal*, (July 1985), pp. 44-48. Article describing Charleston's scattered infill housing of 113 units begun in 1979 and influenced by the existing housing.
2. Robert N. Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston* (San Francisco: LEXIKOS, 1982), p. 151.
3. Albert Simons, "The Development of Charleston Architecture, Part I, Dwelling Houses," *The Architectural Forum*, Vol. XXXIX (October 1923): pp. 153-160.
4. Rosen, *Charleston*, pp. 26-27.
5. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 32.
6. Rosen, *Charleston*, p. 32.
7. James Marston Fitch, *American Building, The Historical Forces That Shaped It*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1964; Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1966), p. 93.
8. Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, p. 18.
9. Rosen, *Charleston*, p. 67.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
11. Evangeline Davis, *Charleston Houses and Gardens* (Charleston: Preservation Society of Charleston, 1975).
12. Hugh Morrison, *Early American Architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 415.
13. Davis, *Charleston Houses and Gardens*.
14. Charles Moore, Gerald Allen and Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses* (New York: Holt, Rinegard and Winston, 1974), p. 195.
15. Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, p. 171.
16. Beatrice St. Julien Ravbenel, *Architects of Charleston*, (Charleston: Charleston, Carolina Art Association, 1945), pp. 4-5, quoted in Morrison, *Early American Architecture*, p. 171.
17. Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, p. 18.
18. Davis, *Charleston Houses and Gardens*.
19. Rosen, *Charleston*, p. 25.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
21. Simons, *Architectural Forum*, (October 1923), p. 154.
22. John W. Linley, *A Comparison of Charleston and Savannah Domestic Architecture, 1810-1860*, (ACSA Conference Paper, Savannah, 1979), Abstract.
23. Robert Stern, ed., *The Anglo American Suburb* (London: Architectural Design 1981), p. 92.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
25. *National Housing Design Competition 1979*, (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1979), pp. 34-39.

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