



## The Evolution of California's Residential Architecture 1500s-1900 and the Societal Values Behind it

Agrima Ranjan

### Introduction

Architecture in the state of California has had many stages throughout the eras of its history. As many unique groups had control of the land over the years, they each brought their own aspects to the architecture in California. Both the internal and external aspects of the houses of the Californian residents has reflected their needs and values over time. Native American, Spanish Colonial, and gold rush period architecture are all major points of architectural change. Factors such as available materials, religious goals, and influences from other areas have shaped California's architectural style.

### Native American

California has been home to various Native American groups. Similarly to the diversity of tribes in the area, there have also been many different housing styles used by them. The styles between the regions of California differed based on what best suited the needs of the residents of those areas.

In Northern California, some of the prominent tribes were the Yurok tribe and their neighbors, the Hupa. One of the major influences on the architecture of these tribes was spirituality. The Yurok tribe believed in the Woge—pre-human supernatural spirits who could share wisdom and good luck if one was in the right mental state to call upon them. The pit houses of the Yurok were modeled after the ones they believed the Woge left. The sweathouses, common in many Yurok residences, were modeled after the sweathouse they believed to be at the center of the universe. The buildings of the Yurok were also constructed with redwood which was sacred to them. (Bowers, Carpenter) (Nabokov, Easton 1989)

The structures of the houses of the northern California tribes were built with wooden planks and had two to three pitched roofs, though the Hupa preferred cedar to redwood. Cedar and redwood are both extremely common in the area allowing it to be an abundant resource for the tribes. Redwood is also resistant to rot and infestation making it well suited for construction. The houses were largely rectangular in shape. Some larger houses were twenty five by thirty feet, but more common were houses with dimensions of eighteen by twenty feet. The houses were built into pits, three feet deep in the case of the Yurok, and deeper in the case of the Hupa. Building them in pits allowed for resistance against harsh winter weather by providing insulation and protection against rain and fog. The houses stood less than eight feet high from ground level. The entrance to the houses was shaped like a circle that could be closed by a plug or a sliding door. (Nabokov, Easton 1989)

Inside the houses, one of the main facets was a fire pit settled at greater depth into the ground. This pit allowed for heating, as well as providing a place to cook. The inside of the house also had a sleeping pit and storage areas. A notched ladder allowed for access into and out of the dwelling. Throughout northern California, the pit like structures fit well into the environment of the area.

In the central areas of California, housing varied further between tribes. The houses of the Maidu and Miwok people were pit houses with a different structure than those of the Northern Californian tribes. While the Northern Californian structures were rectangular, those of the Maidu and Miwok were circular. The houses were ten to fifteen feet in diameter and eight to

ten feet high. Furthermore, the structures were constructed out of cedar wood posts layered with tule mats which were mats made out of local grass and shrubbery tied together with cord. They used flexible willow wood as support for their structures. The portion of the building that was above ground was dome shaped. The entrance and exit of the dwelling was a smoke hole with a notched ladder for access inside. (Lafayette Historical Society 2024)

Within the house, sleeping pallets and mattresses made with pine needles and tule mats were present. There was a fire pit at the center of the houses, once again used for cooking and warming the house. Ventilation was provided by side shafts that could also be used as a means of exit if necessary. (Nabokov, Easton 1989)

The Pomo people's houses varied depending on the location of the specific tribe. Those near Clear Lake and the Russian River Valley built elliptical, multi family homes. They were approximately forty feet in length on the major axis. The houses used saplings bent into shape as support for the roof. The roof would then be covered in tule, in the case of those from the Clear Lake area where reeds were abundant, or brush and grass in the case of the people near the Russian River. They were once again dome in terms of their shape.

Within the houses there were separate hearths for each family living in the residence. Each hearth was surrounded by beds for the members of the family so they could sleep by the fire. The building also had separate entrances for each family. In the center of the housing was a communal pit for baking. (califa.org 2019)

The Pomo people who lived near the ocean had conic houses that were eight to fifteen feet in diameter. These houses were covered in slabs of redwood which were more common near the coast. These houses, unlike those in the Russian River Valley or Clear Lake area, were single family homes. (Nabokov, Easton 1989)

The Yokuts of the San Joaquin Valley were another group with multiple types of housing. Large triangle shaped houses which bordered main streets provided multi-family living. There were no physical dividers within the houses, similar to those of the Pomo. Wooden pillars supported the house while the outside was made with tule. Five lighter poles would be leaned against a more solid center crotched piece to create the framing. The people also had smaller tule houses of similar structure for single family dwelling. Additionally, the Yokuts also had cone shaped dwellings made with poles tied to a hoop and then covered with tule or grass. Two more unique structures of the Yokuts—constructed out of practicality—were their overnight and floating shelters. The overnight shelters would be cut out of tule on the banks of the lake. The reeds would then be bound together and serve as a living roof providing shelter for the night. Floating shelters, made because of overcrowding in main settlement areas, would be fifty feet long and strong enough to house multiple families with hearths and sleeping areas for each of them. They were constructed out of multiple platforms put together. (Southern Sierra Adventure Team 2019)

One of the main tribes of Southern California was the Chumshuh. The tribe built fourteen feet tall domed houses using willow and sycamore tree branches as support. The wooden support was then covered with the native grass of the area. The thick stringers—support beams— of wood at the bottom served to keep animals and anyone unwanted out. Panels of the building were left open to serve as windows and a door. A layer of tule mat served as a closure for the windows and doors. Tule mats were also used on the interior to create partitions. Further south, the Cahuilla tribe had similar houses on a slightly smaller scale. The houses were also more reinforced on the inside with posts. They also had slightly differing materials with arrowwood stringers and california palm thatching. The floors of these dwellings were also

slightly deeper underground and more scooped than those of the Chumash. (Nabokov, Easton 1989)

While the house structures between tribes differed, there were many commonalities between these houses as well. All of the houses utilized materials that were common to the area. Almost all of the houses were rectangular with pitched roofs or domed, based on what worked best for the environment the houses were in. The majority of them also had a place for a hearth, where the family could gather and could cook, reflecting both the practical and familial values of the people.

### **Spanish Colonial**

In 1492, Columbus and his Spanish crew arrived in the Americas for the first time. The first journeys into Alta California were made by Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542, though Spain did not attempt to fully colonize California until the Seven Years War (1756-1763). Spain's colonization efforts were carried out by using missions and forts along the California Coast. The missions often housed the clergy and any Native Americans who were to convert to Catholicism. Small towns tended to be built around the missions. When Mexico gained independence from Spain, California experienced a twenty-five-year period under their rule, however, the architecture in this period stayed largely the same. (Library of Congress)

A commonality between all the residential buildings of the time, be it missions or private houses, was the materials used. The buildings all used bricks for a majority of the walls, stone for those that were important structurally, and adobe for the less important walls. Stucco or plaster, consisting of a mixture of lime, water, and fibrous material like hair, coated the walls. This plaster added extra protection from weather conditions as well as making the houses seem more finished aesthetically. The roofs of these buildings were shingled with wooden shingles, in areas where wood was abundant, and clay shingles, in areas with good mud. (Howlett 2013) (Califa.org 2025)

The overall shape of the missions was rectangular, though there was a bell tower in the majority of the buildings. The tower generally had three tiers with a domed roof at the top. A majority of the missions had a semicircular shape to the wall above the main entrance, as well as over some of the other entrances, but with shorter walls. The missions that did not have this shape had a triangular shape to the top of the walls, akin to a house. The missions had large pillars beside the entrance to the mission. The doors and windows of the missions were constructed in an arched shape and were made of wood. Some of these doors were very ornate with designs carved into the wood. The shapes of these buildings were inspired by those of ancient Roman architecture. Aside from the main building, the missions consisted of long, skinny buildings around a central plaza. The walls of the longer buildings had a small patio area along them, with more arched supports along the edge of the patio. The missions' campus contained an area for the main chapel, a convent, housing for the clergy and natives, gardens, a laundry, and a cemetery. (Newcomb 2012)

The interior of the missions had an arched threshold above the support columns and entrances into interior areas. The wooden support structure in the interior often also had ornate designs, containing both religious symbols and decorative designs, carved into them. The floors were made of terra cotta tile, made of adobe, straw, and water. Wooden rafters along the

ceilings provided more support for the building. The internal walls of the buildings were covered with plaster, like the external ones. (Howlett 2013)

Outside of missions, one of the largest forms of residential building were large cottages. These cottages were rectangular in shape with a double-pitch roof. They had chimneys made of brick to serve the fireplaces. The space between the eaves and top rafter was left open to provide additional ventilation in addition to the windows.. Similarly to the missions, the houses were made of brick with plaster covering them and wooden or clay roofs. The doors and windows to these houses, unlike those of the missions, were rectangularly shaped. The doors were made of wood, and the windows were made of glass with a wood frame containing a rectangular pattern (Hannaford, Revel 2015)

. The houses had verandas on the bottom level and balconies on the second level that spanned the length of at least one of the walls. The balconies either had supports going from the ground to the roof, a cantilevered balcony with supports going to the roof, or a cantilevered balcony and roof with no support posts from floor to ceiling. The balconies tended to have some lattice work along them to give more privacy and some shelter from the wind.

The internal space of the house consisted of many rooms that the residents could use for their daily purposes. The supports of the internal rooms were often made of pine, local to the area, and consisted of planks on the ceilings and walls. The internal walls were plastered white, or in some cases papered. At times, the ceilings of the house would be painted a light green or gray. Woodwork would be white, cream, or grey-green, and mantles were often painted in shades of cream, grey, or black. This is an indication of valuing aesthetics rather than pure practicality, a shift from the more practical houses of the natives. (Hannaford, Revel 2015)

The nature of the Spanish dwellings were largely different from those of the natives. The dwellings had more aesthetically focused aspects to them such as the painting of walls and carvings in the pillars. The houses were also less focused on the environment they were in. Although they were still largely made with materials in the area, the designs of them were less relevant to the conditions of the environment they were in. Furthermore, this era marked a larger divide in the houses of the wealthy and the poor, with the wealthy living in much larger and much more ornate houses.

### **Late 19th century/gold rush**

In 1846, the Mexican-American War started as the United States sought to annex more land as a result of border disputes in Texas. Outside of Texas, the United States sought to gain New Mexico and California as states. In California, troops led by Larkin and Frémont fought to gain land. The hostility in Alta California, north of the Mexican border, ended with the Treaty of Cahuenga in 1847. The Mexican-American War ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, giving the United States ownership of Alta California. In January of 1848, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, located near Sacramento, causing a large influx of immigration to California between 1848 to 1855. They took a variety of routes, over sea and over land, to get to California. People came to mining camps at extraordinary rates, creating boom towns that many lived in. (Library of Congress)

At first, architecture was limited to tents and shacks, built for basic housing, made with only the supplies the migrants to California brought with them. However, as the population of California grew so did the scale of the architecture. The economy increased in prosperity so the Californians could import more supplies from other places. Additionally, more migrants with

building skills came to California. With an increase of lumber production, wooden structures started to become more popular than adobe ones. (Day 2024)

Many of the less wealthy people in these settlements still tended to live in smaller, shack-like houses. These houses were made out of wood, with wood paneling on the sides and roofs of the houses. The houses were usually one story and rectangular shaped. They had gabled roofs on top of the structure. In most settlements, these houses tended to be very close to each other. (California History)

Among the houses of the wealthier residents of California, Victorian Gothic Revival architecture was very popular. These houses had multiple floors and often had towers, both cylindrical and rectangular, for practical use and to add more visual interest to the houses. Both brick and wood were popular materials to use in the construction of gothic revival houses. The roofs of the houses were usually steep gabled roofs. They often had dormer roofs, which jutted out from the main roof facade. The cylindrical towers had cone roofs, while the rectangular towers had pyramid shaped roofs. The houses usually had a covered porch area near the front door. These houses contained many windows, windows in some houses being rectangular while windows in others being arched. Many of these houses had spires at the top of the roof. The houses had very intricate wood carvings and mouldings on the pillars and walls on the exterior of the houses. (Kirkir 1960)(Geoffrey 2021)

In the interior, the houses usually had a symmetrical floor plan. The houses generally had wooden floors, though tile could be used in some rooms. The wood was usually stained a darker color. There were three main ways the walls in the houses were decorated. Some walls had intricate wooden moulding on them, some were plaster and were painted, and others were covered with wallpaper. Wooden built-ins inside the houses were very common as well. Crown moulding along the tops of walls was very popular. Stained glass was used in some windows and most windows had intricate frames. Many of the living rooms had alcoves in them. (Kirkir 1960)

The houses of this period had more variety in their designs than that of previous periods. They were more intricate in their designs. A focus on aesthetics also increased with having the paint and carvings on the building have more of an aesthetic purpose than a religious or practical one.

### **Conclusion**

The shift from the houses of the Natives to those of the late 19th century was large, the houses being larger and more aesthetically focused than those of the Natives, with carvings, stained glass, and a variety of paint colors for the walls. The floor plans and structures were also more intricate than those of the natives. The structures of these houses were less focused on the environment they were in, and more on the preferences and grandiosity of the owners..There was a larger European influence on the houses in this time period than there was in Spanish colonial times, with greater inspiration from Gothic styles. In this time period the materials used shifted largely from those used in Spanish Colonial times. Wood and brick, materials more common in European architecture, became more common building materials than adobe as the style of the buildings shifted. Additionally, as the style shifted, houses were more focused on aesthetics than previously. The divide between the extravagance of the houses of the rich and poor also increased greatly through these periods. While the changes throughout the periods were large, each type of dwelling clearly showed the values of its residents and the society of the time.



## Bibliography

1. "Architectural Styles: Gothic Revival." *Noehill.com*, 2024, [noehill.com/architects/style\\_gothic\\_revival.aspx](https://noehill.com/architects/style_gothic_revival.aspx).
2. "Bay Miwok People - Lafayette Historical Society." *Lafayette Historical Society*, 27 Jan. 2024, [lafayettehistory.org/baymiwok/](https://lafayettehistory.org/baymiwok/).
3. Bowers, Amy, and Kristen Carpenter. *Challenging the Narrative of Conquest: The Story of Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association*.
4. Britton, Karla Cavarra. "Overview of Religious Art and Architecture: Native American." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15 Aug. 2022, [oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-973](https://oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-973).
5. "California Indians." *Califa.org*, 2019, [factcards.califa.org/cai/pomo.html](https://factcards.califa.org/cai/pomo.html).
6. "California Mission Life." *Califa.org*, 2025, [factcards.califa.org/mli/adobebricks.html](https://factcards.califa.org/mli/adobebricks.html). Accessed 13 June 2025.
7. Day, Linda L. "Vernacular Houses in Nineteenth-Century California." *California History*, vol. 101, no. 3, 1 Jan. 2024, pp. 27–60, [online.ucpress.edu/ch/article-abstract/101/3/27/202773/Vernacular-Houses-in-Nineteenth-Century?redirectedFrom=fulltext](https://online.ucpress.edu/ch/article-abstract/101/3/27/202773/Vernacular-Houses-in-Nineteenth-Century?redirectedFrom=fulltext), <https://doi.org/10.1525/ch.2024.101.3.27>.
8. Edward, Geoffrey. *Portals West; a Folio of Late Nineteenth Century Architecture in California*. Hassell Street Press, 10 Sept. 2021.
9. Hannaford, Donald R, and Revel Edwards. *Spanish Colonial or Adobe Architecture of California, 1800-1850*. Stamford, Architectural Book Publishing, 2015.
10. Howlett, Catherine. "Plaster and the California Missions." *Construction Specifier*, 5 Jan. 2013, [www.constructionspecifier.com/plaster-and-the-california-missions/](https://www.constructionspecifier.com/plaster-and-the-california-missions/). Accessed 13 June 2025.
11. Kirker, Harold. *California's Architectural Frontier*. Peregrine Smith, 1960.
12. ---. "Eldorado Gothic: Gold Rush Architects and Architecture." *California History*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1 Mar. 1959, pp. 31–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25155226>. Accessed 8 May 2020.
13. "Konkow Maudi Tribe | California Trail Interpretive Center." *California Trail Centre*, 22 Oct. 2021, [www.californiatrailcenter.org/konkow-maudi-tribe/](https://www.californiatrailcenter.org/konkow-maudi-tribe/).
14. Kroeber, A.L. "Yurok Myths." *Cdlib.org*, 2025, [oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb7x0nb84s&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire\\_text](https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb7x0nb84s&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text). Accessed 13 June 2025.
15. Masson, Katherine. "The California House." *Google Books*, 2025, [books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=DTnMURsPtIsC&oi=fnd&pg=PA6&dq=Spanish+architecture+in+california&ots=E9UruEtW5Q&sig=DR7K3XXBWGXZYefZHag2TOGtgAk#v=onepage&q=Spanish%20architecture%20in%20california&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=DTnMURsPtIsC&oi=fnd&pg=PA6&dq=Spanish+architecture+in+california&ots=E9UruEtW5Q&sig=DR7K3XXBWGXZYefZHag2TOGtgAk#v=onepage&q=Spanish%20architecture%20in%20california&f=false). Accessed 13 June 2025.
16. Nabokov, Peter, and Robert Easton. *Native American Architecture*. 1989.
17. Newcomb, Rexford. *Spanish-Colonial Architecture in the United States*. Courier Corporation, 31 Dec. 2012.
18. "Preserving Interior Plaster in Your Historic Building | Wisconsin Historical Society." *Wisconsin Historical Society*, 18 Sept. 2014, [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4161](https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4161).



19. "Pueblos." *California Missions Foundation*, [californiamissionsfoundation.org/pueblos/](https://californiamissionsfoundation.org/pueblos/).
20. "Spanish California | Early California History: An Overview | Articles and Essays | California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900 | Digital Collections | Library of Congress." *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*,  
[www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/spanish-california/](https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/spanish-california/).
21. "Spanish Influence on American Architecture and Decoration." *Google Books*, 2025, [books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7W3qAAAAMAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Spanish+architecture+in+california&ots=zvfM\\_eh-19&sig=1k7jM3KXs6fMGNQZY9pNPZphBFk#v=onepage&q=Spanish%20architecture%20in%20california&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7W3qAAAAMAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Spanish+architecture+in+california&ots=zvfM_eh-19&sig=1k7jM3KXs6fMGNQZY9pNPZphBFk#v=onepage&q=Spanish%20architecture%20in%20california&f=false). Accessed 13 June 2025.
22. "The Miwok People." *CA State Parks*, [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=935](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=935).
23. "Yokuts Dwellings." Southern Sierra Adventure Team, [www.bsahighadventure.org](http://www.bsahighadventure.org/www.bsahighadventure.org/indian_lore/yokuts_dwellings.html),  
[www.bsahighadventure.org/indian\\_lore/yokuts\\_dwellings.html](http://www.bsahighadventure.org/indian_lore/yokuts_dwellings.html).