

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

*American Architecture as a  
Settler Colonial Project:*

*Andrew Jackson Downing's Cottage Residences*

## Participants:



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## Links and References:

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### Episode Music

Umlungu by John Bartmann

[https://freemusicarchive.org/music/John\\_Bartmann/Public\\_Domain\\_Soundtrack\\_Music\\_Album\\_One](https://freemusicarchive.org/music/John_Bartmann/Public_Domain_Soundtrack_Music_Album_One)

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## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Andrew Jackson Downing's Cottage Residences*

### Transcript

Lisa:

Hi! I'm Lisa, and I'm Chris, and we're two Master's of Architecture students here at Princeton University. This podcast is about a book called *Cottage Residences* written by Andrew Jackson Downing in 1842.

Chris, before we started researching for this podcast, had you heard of Andrew Jackson Downing?

Chris:

I think I had heard his name from one of my friends in Landscape Architecture, but that's really about it.

Lisa:

That's about the same for me. So then why are we spending the time and energy thinking about this book written in 1842 by a white guy for other white middle class people?

Chris:

No, I mean, I think that's a good point. Downing is usually mentioned in architectural education as a predecessor of Frederick Law Olmsted and has even been called the founder of American Landscape Architecture, but usually discussions don't go far beyond that.

Lisa:

So let's dig a little deeper and challenge the narrative in which Downing's book is typically placed. By paying equal attention to what is made explicit and to what is intentionally omitted, we will situate the book in a context of intersecting forces of settler colonialism, imperialism, and post-colonialism.

Chris:

*Cottage Residences* is actually not the full title of the book. Including an impressively long subtitle, the full title reads: *Cottage Residences; or a series of designs for rural cottages and cottage-villas and their gardens and grounds adapted to North America*. In this case we appreciate the 19th century practice of extensively titling because it provides a perfect framework for breaking down what this book is and why we think it is important to revisit today. In the first section, 'a series of designs for rural cottages and cottage-villas' we'll discuss the architecture of *Cottage Residences*, next in the 'gardens and grounds' section, we'll discuss property and landscape, and finally, in the 'adapted to North America' section, we'll critique the rhetoric that Downing uses to discuss style.

Lisa:

Before we dive into it, though, let's establish some definitions up front for terms like colonialism, imperialism, and post-colonialism that we will be using throughout the podcast. These definitions are based on Ania Loomba's book, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*.

Loomba defines Colonialism as "the conquest and control of other people's land and goods". Settler Colonialism is a specific type of colonialism in which colonizers move to the colony in large numbers, take control of the land, and typically decimate indigenous populations. In the United States, colonists' relentless westward expansion that forced Native Americans off the land, is an example of Settler Colonialism. As Loomba outlines, Imperialism and colonialism are often used interchangeably, but we can think of imperialism as what happens in the country that is doing the colonizing, and colonialism as what happens in the colony. Finally, we shouldn't think of post-colonialism as only what happens after colonialism in a linear timeline, but rather that postcolonialism is a contestation of colonial domination. This is an important distinction because these concepts do not always happen exclusively or one right after the other. As we will see as we dive into mid 19th century America, the influence of these forces often overlap and intersect.

Chris:

Okay, so now back to the book. The first part of the subtitle is a series of designs for cottages and cottage villas. The book includes designs for 10 residences that range in style, size, and price. The cheapest option is called "the Suburban cottage for a small family". The most expensive and complex option is called "A villa of the first class, in the Pointed Style".

What Downing referred to as a "series of designs", can be categorized as a pattern book. Pattern books were architectural publications that were marketed to potential homeowners. They provided images, plans, and descriptions of house designs. As Adam Sweeting outlines in his book *Reading Houses and Building Books*, pattern books replaced 'builder's guides' that contained primarily technical information and were not marketed to the masses.

Pattern books were wildly popular during the 19th century as a way to disseminate taste and social values to the masses. In other words, they helped frame a collective understanding of what was desirable. Additionally, they focused on cultivating domesticity as a cure for societal ills created by industrialization and urbanization. As Sweeting writes, they reflected the "belief that efforts to reform the world began at home, that beautiful and clean houses produced morally beautiful and spiritually clean people".

Lisa:

Downing co-opted the use of the term "cottage", as it previously referred to a "substandard house". Downing reappropriated the term and turned it into a national craze by establishing it as part of the picturesque. He frequently used terms like "little", and "fine" in a positive way to conjure an image that is both desirable and achievable.

Downing's book captivated the imagination by providing details not just about cottages, but also about the supposedly superior lives lived within them. He writes for example, "I wish to awaken a quicker sense of the grace, the elegance, or the picturesqueness of fine forms [to] not only refine and elevate the mind but pour into it new and infinite resources of delight".

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Throughout the book, Downing makes romantic claims about the transformative power of architecture on the lives of all men. Glaringly missing, however, is any explicit mention of slavery. As is the case with most 19th century pattern books, race is marked by its absence.

William Gleason offers a reading of *Cottage Residences* that activates this absence by demonstrating the fact that Downing's narrative had a far-reaching effect both on those that had access to such a cottage and those that did not. In his book, *Site Unseen*, Gleason discusses the *Bondwoman's Narrative*, a book written from the perspective of Hannah, an escaped slave. Throughout the book, Hannah encounters a series of cottages, from the one on the plantation in which she was taught to read, to a derelict cabin in the woods in which she and another fugitive are able to hide for a few months. Her descriptions of the cottages reveal an intense desire for the safety and comfort of a home in which she can feel safe and secure. Hannah's experience reflects an inextricable link between black self-ownership and homeownership.

Chris:  
Another way to understand Gleason's reading is through the lens of whiteness. One of the effects of colonialism was the framing of white Europeans as the default unmarked category and those encountered in the colonies as racialized others. As a legacy of this practice, we do not often think or talk about whiteness as a race. This is clear in the way that Downing can write about "a country like ours, where the population is comparatively sparse, civil rights equal, and wages high". He is obviously writing for and about white people, because civil rights were far from equal for all people. And yet whiteness is assumed rather than said explicitly. Confronting such assumptions, helps to illuminate the ways that whiteness impacts the built environment. Downing's focus expanded past these cottages, to the next part of the subtitle: gardens & grounds. In addition to being an architect, Downing was also a landscape gardener and a prolific writer on the subjects of nature and horticulture. In addition to *Cottage Residences*, in 1845 he wrote the book, *Fruits and Fruit Trees of America*, and was the founder and editor of *The Horticulturist* magazine from 1846 to his death in 1852. Nature was important to Downing as an untouched site for the creation of culture and civilization. After Downing's sudden death in a boating accident, his friend Nathaniel Parker Willis, an author, poet, and editor wrote that Downing "was the one person who could be sent... to look at fields and woods and tell what could be made out of them." There are a couple important aspects we need to keep in mind as we think about Downing's landscapes. First, instead of positioning nature as a threatening, violent space, Downing portrayed it as a peaceful and serene gift from God to man. Landscape gardening could take this gift and improve upon it, as Downing himself puts it [in a different book], the process can remove all of "the accidental and extraneous" aspects of nature.

Lisa:  
Second, the act of "ordering nature" was political. Shaped landscapes were portrayed as symbolic spaces that represented the highest forms of civilization and culture. As David Wall points out in his essay, "Andrew Jackson Downing and the Tyranny of Taste", "The ideology of taste would essentially create a republic of individuals all of whom would police themselves and their own behavior and conform to emerging standards and values of middle-class respectability." Central to these middle-class standards were strictly defined gender roles that barred women from owning land or participating in political and professional life. Downing's book is an example of the way that these binary gender roles were constructed and enforced. Downing writes, "The mistress and her daughter, or daughters, we shall suppose to have sufficient fondness for flowers, to be willing and glad to spend three times a week, an hour or two, in the cool mornings and evenings of summer, in the pleasing task of planting, trying to neat stakes, picking off decaying flowers, and removing weeds from the borders, and all other operations that so limited a garden may require". Downing establishes tasks for the domestic environment that he deems appropriate based on gender, and uses carefully pleasing language to frame his standards as desirable. Standards for respectability were not just based on gender, they were also based on race. This becomes clear when we consider who had access to land in the mid 19th century and who was defined as an uncivilized other. As we discussed previously, settler colonialism functioned by exercising control over other people's land and goods. By labeling specific groups as others and as non-citizens, settler colonialists barred slaves from owning property and expelled Native Americans from the land. As a way to justify these actions, they established an Anglo-Saxon American mythology.

Chris:  
And that brings us to the last part of the subtitle, "adapted for North America". In discussing what he calls the 'style' of the cottages, Downing references greek temples, Swiss chalets, english cottages, and Italian and Flemish architecture. He claims that domestic architecture should be an adaptation of a given style and that nearly all modern architecture has evolved from two original styles, Grecian, identified by horizontal lines, and Gothic, defined by vertical lines. Applying the concept of evolution to architecture was typical of architects in the 19th century. Irene Cheng, in "A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present" illustrates the way that this thinking was intertwined with theories about race. To 19th century theorists, "style" referred to the characteristic elements of buildings that could be attributed to different races and cultures. Furthermore, these styles could be arranged hierarchically as an indicator of which races had evolved or progressed more than others. By adapting European styles, Downing sought to establish American architecture as a direct progression from or evolution of European architecture.

Lisa:  
Specifically, Downing used the Anglo-Saxon identity as a way to legitimize American architecture. Reginald Horseman's book, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, explores the relationship between American identity formation and the Anglo-Saxon race during the early and mid 19th century. The Revolutionary War, ending in 1783, established the United States as a postcolonial nation, technically independent from British imperialism. Americans' success as settler colonialists, revolutionaries, and republicans were fuel for the creation of a national identity that was optimistic and founded on a belief in progress. As Horseman notes, this optimism ignored the realities of chattel slavery and the expulsion of Native Americans from the land by positioning them as necessary evils that would be able to be solved in the future. By the mid 19th century, however, as Westward expansion reached limits and a solution for slavery had not been found, people turned to science about racial hierarchy to dispel their guilt and anxieties. Reaching back to their Anglo-Saxon lineage, white Americans sought to establish themselves as, to quote Horseman, an "innately superior people who were destined to bring good

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government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world". Thus, at the same time that American's were trying to forge an independent, postcolonial identity, they were also leaning into their relationship as a previous colony of Britain as a way to justify the genocide of Native Americans and the practice of slavery. Downing reveals these overlaps when he states that, "The very great interest now beginning to manifest itself in rural improvements of every kind, leads us to believe and to hope, that at no very distant day our country residences may rival the 'cottage homes of England,' so universally, and so justly admired".

Chris:

Cottage Residences widely influenced the culture of mid 19th century America. Downing activated collective fantasy about homeownership to establish a uniform and exclusionary narrative about what American culture was and who it was for. The influence of the book continues to reverberate today. By understanding the context in which the book was written, and by paying careful attention to what Andrew Jackson Downing specifically wrote and omitted, we can construct a history that accounts for architecture's role in slavery, settler colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonialism. Thanks for listening, and that's all for this episode.