

Shotgun Houses

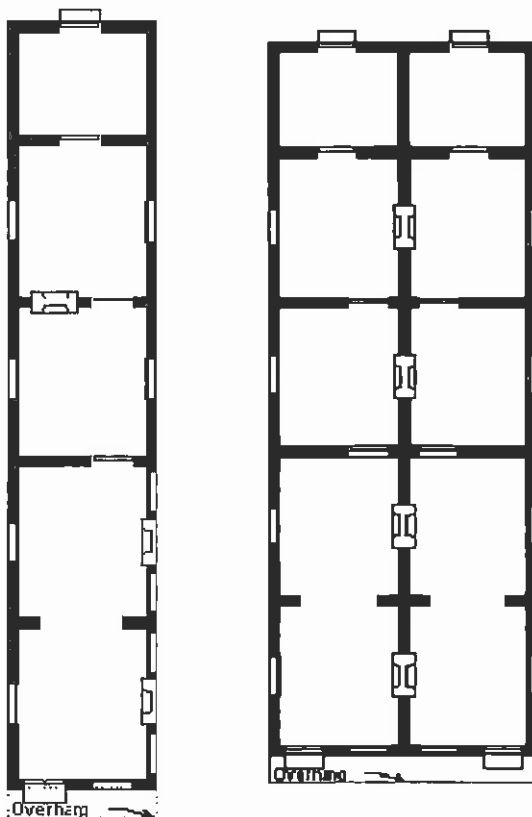
A fact sheet from the New Albany Historic Preservation Commission

What is a shotgun house?

A shotgun is a narrow dwelling – typically only one room wide – where the rooms are aligned one behind another with no hallway. The term "shotgun house" is often said to come from the saying that one could fire a shotgun through the front door and the pellets would fly cleanly through the house and out the back door (since all the doors are on the same side of the house).

Several variations of the basic shotgun form exist, including the “camelback,” which has a two-story section at the rear of the house, and the double shotgun, where two shotguns are joined and share a central wall. Shotgun houses were built most commonly from the 1850s to the 1920s, and may have elements of any architectural style popular at the time applied to the basic shotgun form. For example, a shotgun built in the 1870s may have Italianate window hoods, while a 1920s version may have a Craftsman-influenced porch.

Basic shotgun form (left), double shotgun (right)



Why are they important?

Shotgun houses make up a substantial portion of New Albany’s stock of historic homes: Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana estimates that approximately 500 of these houses are still standing in the city. While few of those examples are historically or architecturally significant on their own, collectively they form an important part of the fabric of our community, and the loss of a shotgun leaves a hole in that fabric.

The houses were built throughout hot urban areas in the South, since the style's length and interior arrangement allowed for excellent airflow, while its narrow frontage maximized the number of lots that could be fit along a street. Because of their southern origins shotgun houses are found throughout the Ohio River valley but are relatively uncommon in other parts of Indiana.

What should I do with my shotgun?

If you're planning work on a shotgun house, the following suggestions are designed to help you maintain the character of the house while making it compatible with today's needs.

Don't forget: if your home is located within one of New Albany's locally-regulated historic districts – Mansion Row, East Spring Street, Cedar Bough Place and Downtown – you will need a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the Historic Preservation Commission prior to the start of any exterior work. More information on the local districts, maps showing the boundaries of each, and a copy of the design guidelines for work in the districts is available on the Commission's website, at www.newalbanypreservation.com.

Exterior -

Doors: If an historic entrance will no longer be used, particularly the entrance on the front elevation of the house, avoid removing the door and filling the opening. Instead, leave the door in place and fix it shut. Be sure that any changes are as reversible as possible, so that the doorway can be used again in the future with minimal work. (Design Guideline #D10)

Roofs: Maintain the original roof pitch, form and shape. Alterations to roof form should not be undertaken unless they can be demonstrated to have existed at some point in the structure's history. (#R1) The addition of extra stories to residential structures is discouraged due to the structural and design difficulties presented by such additions. (#Ad16)

Porches: Historic porches or stoops are often significant design elements on a shotgun and should be retained and repaired, even if they are no longer in use. (#Po4) Generally, a new porch or stoop should only be added to a main elevation if physical or photographic evidence is being used to recreate one found there historically. (#Po12)

However, if a porch is to be added to increase outdoor living area, its design should be compatible with the scale, design and architectural details of the house.



The unusual brick shotguns at 1918 and 1920 Elm Street were both constructed in 1900 and feature the Eastlake-style details popular at that time.



Siding: The majority of New Albany’s shotgun houses had clapboard siding: historic siding and trim should be retained and preserved. (#ST1) Artificial siding is not appropriate for use on a historic building, not only because it changes the appearance of the building, but because it also limits the wood’s ability to ‘breathe,’ trapping moisture that will eventually lead to rot. (#ST2, 3) If artificial siding or trim has already been added, removal is encouraged. Remove later siding carefully, to avoid damage to the original materials beneath. (#ST7) Because siding was often applied without any sheathing behind it, blown-in or foam insulation is not recommended for use on shotgun houses. (#ST14)

Windows: Shotgun houses traditionally had large, double hung windows to maximize airflow and light through the house. The size, placement and materials found in these original windows are important design features. Original windows and any decorative or functional features – i.e. window hoods, shutters, sills and hardware – should be retained and repaired, and original window sizes should not be reduced. (#W1, W14) Vinyl and aluminum windows and other artificial materials are not recommended: they can dramatically alter the appearance of the home, and generally do not provide the durability or energy savings promised. (#W2) The use of storm windows is recommended instead, and can help achieve energy efficiency comparable to replacement windows. (#W11)



The “camelback” is a traditional shotgun form, as seen in this example on East 11th Street. If sensitively designed, a two-story addition at the rear of a shotgun could greatly increase living space while maintaining historic character.

Additions: If a shotgun house is to be expanded for more living space, an addition should generally be attached to a secondary elevation and set back from the front façade, so as not to damage, destroy or obscure character-defining features. (#Ad4) An addition should not dwarf the original building. Generally, additions should not exceed half of the original building’s total floor area or building footprint. (#Ad5)

Interior –

The traditional shotgun floor plan may require some adaptations to accommodate modern needs. The Historic Preservation Commission does **not** review interior alterations, but provides the following suggestions as guidance in planning interior work, so that the value and character of the house can be maintained.

Ceilings: Shotgun homes typically had tall ceilings – 9’ or 10’ – in order to assist with ventilation. Installing dropped ceilings may dramatically change the character of the house, making the rooms appear much smaller and more cramped. If desired, vaulting the ceiling into the attic space can create additional living space or create the illusion of a larger room.

Tall ceilings and large windows – including a transom over the exterior door – help to give this living room in a shotgun house an open, airy feel.



Transom windows: Transoms above the interior doors were also frequently used to increase airflow and light between rooms. Retain and preserve existing transom windows.

Closets: As is the case in many historic houses, shotguns often do not have substantial closets: small, 1’ deep closets were the norm. If additional storage is desired, think creatively about built-ins or adding more storage above existing closets.

Fireplaces: Historic fireplaces and mantels should be preserved and can be creatively utilized. If additional wall space is needed for furniture in a bedroom, for instance, consider incorporating the mantelpiece as a headboard.

Flooring: Retain and reuse historic hardwood flooring, if at all possible. Many times, even flooring that looks beyond salvaging can be repaired and refinished, helping to maintain the home’s character and value.



Got questions?

Visit the New Albany Historic Preservation Commission’s website at www.newalbanypreservation.com or contact Commission Administrator Laura Renwick at 812/284-4534 or south@historiclandmarks.org.