

**'FOLDEROL ARCHITECTURE' OR THE ARCHITECTURE OF ETHNICITY
ASCENDANCY? MEANINGS OF SHEET METAL CORNICES AND OTHER
DECORATION IN BOSTON APARTMENT HOUSING, 1890-1920**

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As the population of Boston, like most eastern cities, swelled at the turn of the century, new apartment buildings, intended for all classes of residents, began to take over center-city landscapes formerly dominated by traditional single family housing forms. As that more intimate landscape passed away, speculative builders sought ways to mitigate the visual impact of their buildings and demonstrate the propriety of these structures both as homes and as investments. They did so, in large measure, by making facades which approximated their vision of both American architectural taste and ethnic urban sensibilities. This was a process both constrained and enabled by the appearance of mass-produced architectural decoration: cornices and paneling stamped out of sheet metal and a host of other elements of cast concrete.

This paper explores sheet metal cornices and other forms of mass-produced ornament on multiple family housing in the context of the social, cultural and aesthetic landscape of late 19th century Boston. The paper will approach an interpretation of the cultural meanings of these materials for architects, mortgage holders, neighbors, tenants, reformers, but particularly the mostly Eastern European immigrant developers who adopted it enthusiastically.

In these contexts the cornice and sheet metal bay window panel take on diverse and often conflicting meanings: a symbol of a new-found prosperity or a depreciation of the cityscape; a sign of taste and propriety or a tasteless sham; a symbol of material improvement or of the passing away of the authentically American city in favor of a foreign vision. At the heart of these conflicting meanings is the tension caused by the rapid transformations – both social and cultural – that were facing urban America.

To elucidate these meanings, this study examines a sample of over 500 extant, decorated apartment buildings in contemporaneous but economically and culturally diverse neighborhoods, analyzing the ways in which these materials were employed. This field study is augmented by an examination of city building department records which begin to illuminate the relationship between architect, builder, neighborhood status, project cost, and the decision to employ mass-produced architectural decoration. The results reveal the way in which a fairly small group of recent immigrant developers rapidly transformed large sections of the city and in the process developed a culturally-specific language of ornamentation.