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Dissertation

**THE DECORATED TENEMENT: WORKING-CLASS HOUSING IN BOSTON
AND NEW YORK, 1860-1910**

by

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ABSTRACT

During the Gilded Age, the use of elaborate architectural ornament extended to the facades of tenements built for the working class in Boston and New York. Yet these lavish “decorated tenements,” which used industrially-made ornament, did not represent the established view of how a tenement should look. Elite architects, prominent citizens, and housing reformers almost universally created spartan buildings when designing for these classes. In contrast, most of the decorated tenements were built by immigrant entrepreneurs, who remade the landscape of their communities in a way that challenged the notion of tenement districts as sites of unmitigated austerity. The dominant narrative on housing in this period derives from a reform literature that has focused on elite experiments in building and on regulating architecture for the poor. This study, instead, utilizes extensive vernacular architecture fieldwork methods and documentary research to put the more common decorated tenement at its center. The immigrant builders of these structures demonstrated their accommodation to an American landscape of material prosperity by using ornament to tap into longstanding associations with stability, power, and surplus. In doing so they created an identifiable building type that represents an intersection of European sensibilities, industrial production, American material surplus, social striving, and cultural aspiration.

As chapter one demonstrates, the antebellum period saw the rise of explicitly

classed landscapes for the working class. Full of worn-out buildings these neighborhoods were dismissed as 'slums.' Chapter two examines the complex web of people who built the decorated tenement, immigrant builders, and architects who largely wiped away the physical severity of the slum. Chapter three explores the design and decoration of the tenement, describing the ways in which ornament was used on these buildings, its production, cost, availability, and meanings. The decorated tenement was part of a wider phenomena described in chapter four in which forms formerly associated with the working class were replaced with industrially-made goods in styles associated with the elite. Chapter five details how the Arts and Crafts movement for aesthetic purity corresponded to the social and cultural simplicity manifested in the housing reform movement.