

The Dormer

Architectural Elements

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This installation of *Elements* discusses an architectural component associated with the roof of a building: the dormer or dormer window. A dormer is broadly defined as a vertical projection from the slope of a pitched roof. Dormers always have roofs, and they typically include a window. In some cases, a dormer may also have side walls. The purpose of a dormer is to add space to a loft or attic area; when that dormer includes a window, it also allows for light to enter the attic story, punctuating the solid surface of the roof.

Etymologically, the words dormer and dormitory are related, as both are rooted in the Latin word *dormitorium*, which translates to “a place for sleeping.” Dormers date as early as sixteenth century Europe, gracing the steeply-pitched roofs of Tudor cottages and French chateaux. The dormer regained popularity during the reign of Napoleon III, when the Second Empire style ruled as the dominant

architectural mode of France, eventually spreading to America in the 1850s. The double-pitched Mansard roof of the Second Empire style lent itself especially well to the use of dormers, as it created a full upper story that required natural illumination.

Around Reno, dormer windows are commonly found in buildings that have livable attic space, as opposed to attics that function solely as storage areas. Several examples of buildings with dormers exist on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. The University’s first building, Second Empire-style Morrill Hall (1885-1886), exhibits pedimented dormers with gable roofs in its upper story. The Eclectic-style Lincoln Hall (1895-1896) also features dormer windows. The dormers have a gabled roof set behind a parapet reminiscent of the Richardsonian Romanesque style.

Certain architectural styles in Reno are associated with the use of dormer windows, especially revival and arts-

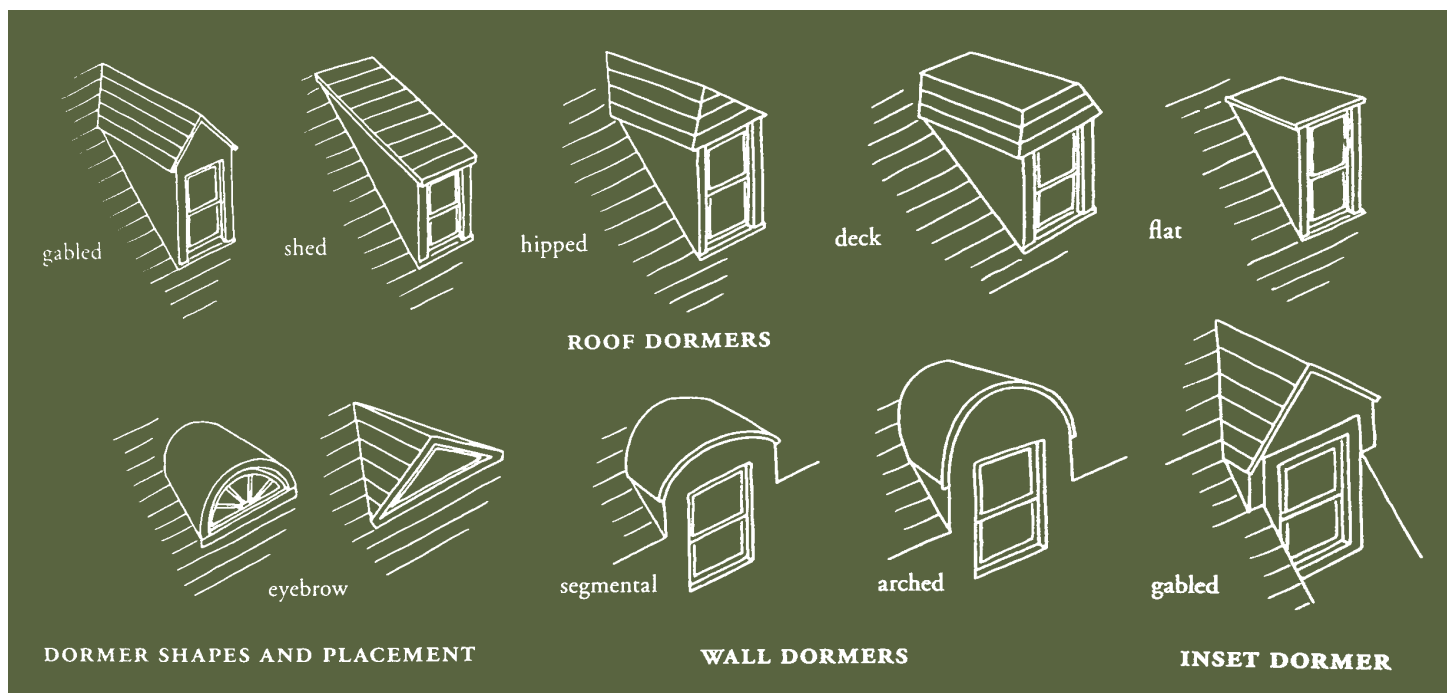
and-crafts styles. In addition to the Second Empire style, dormers pepper the roof planes of Craftsman bungalows and Queen Anne cottages. Dormers are also associated with the Colonial, Gothic, Tudor, French Eclectic, and Mission revival styles.

A number of dormer types have developed over time. These types are generally named for their shape or roof form and are selected to suit the architectural style of the building on which they are located.

Eyebrow, or eyelid, dormers are named for their shape. They have a rounded roof and short façade creating a form that resembles an eyebrow. Architectural styles associated with this type of dormer include the Shingle and Richardsonian Romanesque.

Shed dormers are topped with a shed roof. Some are small in scale, forming a narrow attic nook, while others

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Dormer types from McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses*.

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run much of the length of the roof, effectively creating an entire interior room. Styles associated with this type of dormer include the Dutch Colonial, Craftsman, Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival, and Shingle.

Gable dormers feature a front-gabled roof. They are associated with the Craftsman, Colonial Revival, Federal, Georgian, Shingle, Queen Anne, Stick, Gothic Revival, Tudor, Chateausque, and French Eclectic styles. A subtype of this style is the Pedimented dormer, which features a triangular pediment in the dormer's gable end. These typically adorn styles that call back to America's earliest history—which in turn call back to Greek and Roman precedents: the Colonial Revival, Georgian, Federal, and American Vernacular modes.

Hipped dormers have a hipped roof and are associated with the Prairie School, French Eclectic, Shingle, and Tudor Revival styles.

Rather than projecting outward from the roof, wall dormers are flush with the wall surface and are positioned entirely in the roof plane. The lower edge of the dormer sits in line with the cornice. Styles associated with this dormer type include the Gothic Revival, Chateausque, Richardsonian Romanesque, Mission, French Eclectic, and Mansard.

Through-the-Cornice dormers are also flush with the wall surface. However, unlike wall dormers, through-the-cornice windows are positioned partially in the roof plane and partially on the wall plane, breaking the cornice line. These windows are commonly associated with the French Eclectic, Mission, Colonial Revival, and Mansard architectural styles.

Round, oval, and arched dormers all correspond to their respective curved roof shapes. These dormers are associated with more ornate styles, including the French Eclectic,

Second Empire, and Beaux Arts.

In addition to the more common dormers described above, there are also varieties of special dormers. These typically echo the roof styles of their larger buildings, such as a gambrel roof on a Dutch Colonial building or a clipped gable (jerkinhead) roof on a Tudor or Craftsman style building. Alternatively, special dormers might mirror other dominant elements of a building, such as a flared roof to match the Asian influences of the Craftsman style, or a bay dormer on a Stick style townhouse in San Francisco. In Mission style buildings, a dormer might be shaped to emulate the parapetted roof of the building.

We see many of these dormer elaborations on the buildings of Reno. The next time you find yourself cruising around one of our historic neighborhoods, take a moment to look up and recognize these interesting and varied elements. 

Sources for this article include *American Vernacular Buildings and Interiors: 1870-1960* (Gottfried and Jennings 2009), *A Field Guide to American Houses* (McAlester 2013), and the *Old House Dictionary* (Phillips 1989).

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Shed dormer on a Craftsman style residence on Ridge Street.



Unique double gable dormer on a Craftsman style residence on Reno Avenue.



Gabled dormers are common to the Colonial Revival style, like this cottage on Donner Drive.



Jerkinhead dormers on a Period Revival residence on Nixon Avenue.



This Colonial Revival style residence on Manor Drive features interesting through-the-cornice dormers with segmental heads.



An example of a hipped dormer on a Craftsman cottage.



Gable dormers may be indicative of the Tudor style, such as this residence on La Rue Avenue.



This Colonial Revival style residence on La Rue Avenue features through-the-cornice gable dormers.

HRPS Endangered Property Watch List

ENDANGERED PROPERTIES *(Listed Alphabetically)*

- Buildings in the University Neighborhood
- Caughlin Ranch House
- Center Street Homes (Gateway)
- Freight House on Evans St.
- Hillside Cemetery
- Lear Theater
- Mid-century Motels
- Nevada Brewing Works on 4th St.
- Sinai Building/Howell House
- Sundance Books/Levy House
- Two El Reno Apartments at 1461 Lander St.

LOST PROPERTIES *(Listed by Date of Demolition)*

- Mapes Hotel (1947-2000)
- Virginia Street Bridge (1905-2015)
- Downtown Motels Block (c. 1940-2018)
- Ralston Avenue 300-block homes (c. 1875-2018)
- Masonic Mercantile Building at Sierra and Commercial (1872-2019)
- Flick Ranch House (1942-2019)