

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The French House is set amid the green lawns, parking lots, and the modern Mission-Italian Renaissance buildings of the Louisiana State University campus. It contrasts with the rest of the buildings on campus being built of brick and being a French Renaissance style structure. The building is fundamentally evocative in its design rather than archaeological, so elements from medieval and Renaissance residential French architecture are loosely mixed. Medieval or essentially early elements include the asymmetry of the design, the steep flared hip roof, the tall chimneys, and the octagonal tower with its conical roof and narrow embrasures. Renaissance or essentially late elements include the modular articulation of the fenestration, the segmentally arched windows, the roof top urns, the Baroque oculus dormers, the quoining, and the entablatures with keystones over the lower doorways.

The building is constructed of brick bearing walls with concrete quoining which is roughened to resemble cut stone. The building is roofed with mauve and gray slate. Major partitions are of hollow tile, while minor partitions are merely stud walls.

Interior appointments were never extensive, and most of these have been lost to decay and vandalism. They are currently being reworked for offices and are not considered significant for purposes of this nomination.

As part of a 1980 renovation, a fire tower addition was placed on the south side of the French House. The tower, which contains a fire stair and elevator, was mandated by fire codes and federal handicapped access requirements. It is designed in a style compatible with the original structure. However, it is readily distinguishable from the original building because the surface is stucco rather than brick and the coloring is different. The new tower does not significantly interfere with the original massing of the building because its placement is secondary to the core structure and because rooflines and shapes coordinate well with the original portion. The interiors have been immaculately restored as a result of this renovation.

SPECIFIC DATES	1935
BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Weiss, Dreyfous, & Seiferth

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The French House epitomizes one of the leading tendencies in eclectic architecture, i.e. the use of historic "styles" for symbolic purposes. In this case the building to house a program of the LSU Dept. of Romance Languages was constructed. In a style reminiscent of a French chateau. The French House is a loose and evocative version of the chateau idiom which is very probably unique in the Central cuff States. It is also highly unusual for the chateau idiom to be used in the design of an American institutional building. The French House is therefore of national significance.

The French House is also significant in the area of education because off and on for a period of twenty-three years (1936-1958), it was the scene of an educational experiment that was rather unusual for the times. The French House was built to serve as a special kind of center for the study of the romance languages, in which students would live together in one building and incorporate French language, literature, customs, and architecture directly into their lives.

Dean Joseph F. Broussard, at that time head of the "apartment of Romance Languages, conceived the idea after having seen a similar chateau on a visit to France. He worked out the details with an architect and spearheaded a drive for a legislative appropriation of \$75,000 for the construction of the house.

The building was designed by the architectural firm of Weiss, Dreyfous, and Seiferth. It was built in 1935, and dedicated and opened in 1936. During the first seven years about 40 to 50 students, both male and female, lived there each semester speaking French (and sometimes Italian), studying French, and eating French meals. During these early years and until 1958 Mrs. Anita Olivier Morrison resided there as "Chatelaine," which means "keeper of the castle." The house held an international quality in that languages other than French, for example Italian and Spanish, have been spoken there. Italian, Spanish, and French meals have been served and

students from various countries have stayed there.

In 1945 the house was used as a club for the officers of the U. S. Army Administration School which was located at LSU during World War II. During the war years the building housed servicemen's wives, as well as foreign and graduate students. !

In 1947 the language majors again lived in the house. It remained that way until 1958 when it was decided that it was too expensive to maintain at the level at which it was operating. Various classifications of students were housed there until October, 1968.

During its heyday the French House had been the scene of elaborate meals, formal and informal social gatherings, and educational meetings. In its more recent history, however, the building has suffered from fires, vandals, and neglect. In 1952 a fire broke out damaging the library, and in 1974 vandals broke in and damaged several pieces of furniture and decorations. From 1968 until July 1979 it stood in disuse, deteriorating.

At the present time the French House is being renovated. The Louisiana Legislature appropriated \$1.2 million and work began on July 9. Under the proposed plan, the French House would serve campus as a cultural center, emphasizing, but not limited to, international relations and foreign cultures, especially that of France and French-speaking areas, such as Louisiana and Canada. The plan is designed with a two-fold purpose: first, to bring people, not only from the university but from the general community, to the building; and second, to provide some revenue which would aid in covering the expense of operating and maintaining the building. The revenue generating aspects of the building would include a bookstore, a terrace cafe, and office rental.

In the fall of 1980 the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office conducted a nationwide survey to find buildings comparable to the French House. Of the thirty-four states which replied to our inquiry, only fourteen had surveyed institution buildings which had some chateau-like features. In most cases, however, these could equally well have been called Romanesque Revival. Overall, the survey revealed ten institutional buildings in which the design made clear intentional references to the chateau idiom. Clearly then, the French House is nationally significant in the area of architecture as a member of that very limited architectural group.

In addition, the building has outstanding architectural significance as a specific example of a twentieth century building designed in the chateau idiom. The chateau style was a distinctive part of early-twentieth century American architecture. Most of the "chateaux" which were built were residences. Of the institutional building designed in the chateau style, most were courthouses, main halls of schools, or hotels. More than any of these other buildings, the French House epitomizes the twentieth century tendency to choose historic styles of architecture for their symbolic value. In most cases the decision to erect a "chateau" reflected the taste of the architect or the owner. But in the case of the French House the style was clearly dictated by the function of the building. It was designed as a direct and evocative reference to French culture and history, which the occupant (LSU French Department) was attempting to purvey.

The cultural ties between Louisiana and the mother country crested in the 1930's with the construction of this chateau on the new LSU campus. That one of the early structures on the new campus (occupied in 1925) would represent the Gallic building tradition underscores the intimate affiliation Louisiana's government felt for France and significantly illustrates the ever-present trend in Louisiana educational history to retain the state's French heritage. The French House was simply symbolic of Louisiana's Gallic legacy, and continues so today as much as any French-associated structure in the state. It must be viewed in the continuum of the French architectural tradition in Louisiana, beginning with the first poteaux-en-terre hut and perhaps terminating with the New Orleans Rivergate Building (1968), an organic concrete structure reminiscent of LeCorbusier's later work,

#### BLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES ~

Byrd, Judy, "La Maison Francaise: "Old World of France Exists on Campus," State-Times, 17 April 1964.

"Carter, Anita, "La Maison Francaise," Environmental Design (March 1971) p. 11

"House History: French House Study," prepared by students in the Department of Architecture at LSU, copy in National Register file for French House, State Historic Office, Baton Rouge.

"Proposal for the Restoration of the French House as a Cultural Center for the LSU Campus," prepared by the Committee to Restore the French House, LSU Student Government Association, 17 May 1975, copy in National Register file for French House.

Quigley, Ro, "Undetermined Amount of Damage Done to French House by Vandals," The Daily Reveille, 7 Feb. 1974.

Redfern, James D., "A Leading Center of French Studies," LSU Alumni News Vol. 47 (Dec. 1971), pp. 12-13

Russell, Nanette, "The French House: Renovations Now Under Way," The Summer Reveille, 19 July 1979.

Thaxton, Leonora, "French House Patterned After Chateau in France," The Daily Reveille, 10 Jan. 1952.