

Architectural styles

Studying architectural styles is an exciting way to make history come alive and to help students feel a part of their community. Styles provide clues to what people were concerned about during previous time periods, and how people adapted to new ideas and environments. The size and location of a building, for example, can explain its role in a community. Architectural details, materials, even the placement of doors and windows can explain a building's role by implying messages like "authority", "prosperity", or "welcome". Certain kinds of buildings (e.g., town halls, skyscrapers, the home) have become metaphors for the beliefs, values, and aspirations of society.

The following activities will help your students understand what a style is, and what can influence the development of a style.

1. As a first step toward understanding style, have each student write his or her own definition of style. Discuss the definitions. Does style mean fashion? The latest thing? How does the dictionary definition compare with students' definitions of style? Make a list of the kinds of things that can have or be in style (for example, clothes, music, furniture, movies), then make a second list showing what's stylish in each of these areas. Does everyone agree with what's currently in style? Would students like it if styles never changed? Ask the class to note styles on the list that reflect values, customs, or new technologies. Can students identify a style that is popular only in their region because of its geography or climate?
2. Have students bring in pictures of haircuts that are easy to recognize (for example: new wave, punk, crew cut, pigtails), then identify the styles by name. Does naming styles make it easier to describe and identify the haircuts? What other purposes do style names serve?

Show the class examples of three or four different styles of an object (like pictures of shoes, chairs, cars, or telephones). Point out that while each object has the same function, it differs in other ways, especially visually. Have students discuss some of the basic (generic) elements that can be changed to create the different styles (for example: shoe color, shape and height of heels, shape of toes).

Talking walls (and ceilings and floors...)

Just as styles of haircuts or shoes are classified by labels so we can recognize them, scholars have classified architectural styles. Once students have seen enough examples of crew cuts or Victorian architecture, when given another example they haven't seen before, they should be able to identify it using the correct label.

Have each student draw a building. What elements do all of these buildings have in common? Explain that just like the "families" of objects they've been studying have

generic elements, buildings too, have generic elements that can be changed to create different styles.

Because one of the elements of a building students will be looking at – its plan – involves symmetrical and asymmetrical arrangements, and because buildings are often designed to appeal to our sense of order (for example, the Greek style during the Nationalist Period), try the following experiment: Ask students to arrange the contents of their desks so they form a pleasing design, then choose the designs that look the best. (Students will probably choose designs that are arranged in a symmetrical and balanced manner.) Point out that we all have a natural sense of order and symmetry, and architects have repeatedly revived symmetrical designs throughout history.

Ask students to collect pictures of buildings and bring them to class. Divide the class into small groups, and have each group do the following:

- categorize all the buildings according to function (for example, residential, civic, commercial, ecclesiastical)
- sort the buildings by common (generic) visual characteristics within each of the categories
- make a list of the common characteristics that make up each category, and invent a name for each category (style).

Have the class discuss why they gave styles the names they did. (Did different groups of students who ended up with buildings in the same style give the styles similar names?) Ask each group to choose one style from among those they've been working with, investigate it, and prepare a report. The report should include the name that the architectural historians have given the style; a discussion about the style's form, massing, materials, ornamentation, and construction; information about transportation, technologies, or major historical or political events of the time that may have influenced the development of the style, and examples of contemporary music and art styles. Students might also want to include a comparison of building styles and town growth in various U.S. regions during the period being researched, and information about how problems like heating, lighting, and ventilation were solved.

Using "doors" as a theme (or another building element), have students prepare an exhibit of photographs and illustrations showing the different "messages" doors can communicate. (For example, a large door can reinforce the high rank of a person.) Students will enjoy drawing doorways for people in different professions (a politician, a key maker, a rock singer) and for buildings with different purposes (a bank, sports arena, fast-food restaurant).

Have each student "adopt" a building in the community to study (the city or town hall, a fire station, your school, a student's home, or any building with a clear style). Ask students to report on the building by identifying its function, style, and

architectural elements. Remind students to include a photo or drawing of the front of the building with their reports.

To provide a more complete view of the building, students can also draw a floor plan (aerial view), a section (view of the inside of the building after a vertical section of it has been cut away), exterior elevations (views of how the building looks from the front, back, and sides), as well as details of windows and doors.

Ask students to close their eyes and imagine their dream house. Encourage students to be imaginative and picture the house in as much detail as possible. What is the form and massing like? Is the house shaped like a dome? A pyramid? What's the house made of? Feathers? Plastic bubbles? Where is the house located? In a tree? In outer space? Floating in the air? What can be seen outside the house – that is, how does the house fit in with its environment or with other houses nearby? Follow up by asking students to draw what they have visualized.

Ask students to invent their own architectural style, then make models of the buildings. When all the models are finished, have the class put them together to form a neighborhood.