

SPECIAL CHARACTER ESSAY

Oberlin Village Historic Overlay District possesses architectural significance for its unusually wide variety of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century house types for a small district. The styles and types include Queen Anne, vernacular tri-gable, shotgun, Craftsman bungalow, Tudor Revival, Minimal Traditional, Ranch, and Split-level. Unlike the standard versions of these popular styles and types in white neighborhoods, those in Oberlin tend to be vernacular versions not present in plans distributed in popular publications, whether catalogues, magazines, newspapers, or mail order outlets. African American historic districts in North Carolina often present more vernacular versions of popular house types than are found in white historic districts.

The street design and landscape of Oberlin Village has a special character quite distinct from the surrounding more affluent white neighborhoods of West Raleigh. Because it was planned piecemeal over decades rather than designed as a planned community, its streets evolved over time and have differing characters. The wide main street of Oberlin Road, a long-time country road along the highest ridge in west Raleigh before being developed as an African American rural village, constitutes the district's spine. Its sidewalks serve many pedestrians and bicyclists; its bus stops are heavily used. The narrow side streets include through-streets, cul-de-sacs, and unpaved lanes, none with sidewalks. A canopy of oaks, pecans, magnolias and cedar trees create a lush atmosphere. Lots are quite small, with 50 x 150 foot lots of one-fifth-acre being the norm. Driveways are generally unpaved and often shared between neighbors. Many rear yards have high board fences for privacy.

Oberlin's porches constitute one of its most characteristic and picturesque architectural elements. The wraparound porches of the Willis Graves House and John and Mary Turner House have painted blue ceilings, a folk tradition said to keep away flies. Many of the district's porches contain alterations that are particularly

characteristic of African American neighborhoods, such as replacement concrete floors, often paved with terra cotta tiles, replacement decorative metal porch posts, even for the upper sections of bungalow porch posts, installed in the mid-twentieth century, and vintage metal awnings that add to the shade of the porch roofs.