

The Lure of the Bungalow



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In 1910 John Wiley Link formed the Houston Land Corporation to acquire 165 acres of dairy farm land two miles southwest of downtown Houston. Link's choice of this acreage was not casual or accidental. The land was bought for the express purpose of residential development. Already other tracts had been assembled for smaller subdivisions (Hyde Park, Westmoreland Place, and Courtlandt Place) in the area, but none of these were quite on the scale of Link's purchase. Link proceeded to "improve" the T-shaped tract with streets and paved boulevards and gave his development the name Montrose, after a town immortalized in the writings of Sir Walter Scott.

On the esplanades of the wide boulevards – Lovett, Montrose, Yoakum, and Audubon – Link planted seven train carloads of palm trees. Grand, stately houses, homes for the growing upper middle class whose fortunes were being made in the local oil, timber, agricultural, and shipping industries, were built on generous lots facing the boulevards.

However, Link never intended Montrose to develop as a garden suburb for the rich alone. The majority of his property was laid out in blocks of tree-lined streets between the boulevards. Lots 50-by-100 feet sold for \$1,700 or 34 cents a square foot. And it was along these streets that the bungalow appeared, a new, modern house type easily within the economic reach of Houston's working and middle-class populations. Between 1905 and 1925, the bungalow became one of the predominant house forms in Houston's turn-of-the-century suburban neighborhoods.

The rise of the bungalow in Houston was part of a nationwide movement. In fact, many newly platted suburban neighborhoods in cities throughout the United States came to be characterized and dominated by the bungalow. Although the bungalow carried on the tradition of the 19th-century wood-frame cottage, its origins came from the Bengali region of northwest India. The term *bungalow* is derived from *bangala*,

a Bengali word for the typical native dwelling of the region. The *bangala* was a one-story, thatch-roofed rural house surrounded on all four sides by a covered verandah. During the Raj the British adaptation of the native dwelling became the preferred type of colonial house. It was characterized by a low-pitched, thatched, or tile roof overhanging the verandah, with a central arrangement of rooms on one floor. This was the progenitor of the bungalow. From colonial India, the designation *bungalow* spread to Europe where versions of this small house were built in England and on the continent. Around 1890, the bungalow was introduced into the growing vocabulary of the small American house.

The term *bungalow* is first mentioned in A.W. Brunner's "Cottages or Hints on Economical Building" to describe a Queen Anne New England cottage. Although the bungalow first may have been associated with the popular Queen Anne style, it was in Southern California that it achieved its identity and its particular American form. The California Bungalow, as this distinctive type came to be called, was the favored small house form in the Los Angeles basin. From Los Angeles the bungalow spread across the country from the West to the Midwest to the East. It was one of the earliest examples in the history of American architecture of an indigenous building type moving from west to east rather than in the other direction.

The bungalow became the perfect speculative house for the new suburban cities. The electric trolley and the automobile moved the living place from the city center to the undeveloped foothills of Los Angeles or farm prairies of Houston. The bungalow was idealized as the appropriate small house for a natural garden setting, far from the dense industrial and mercantile center city.

The bungalow was quickly accepted and received critical praise from the architectural journals of the day including *The Architectural Record*, *American Architect and Building News*,

and *The Craftsman*. It was embraced and romanticized by such popular magazines as *Ladies Home Journal* for providing an efficient and affordable, yet cozy, modern home. *Radford's Artistic Bungalows* of 1908 promoted the bungalow by advertising plans for sale from \$8 to \$12, and the bungalow was further promoted in the popular Sears Roebuck and Company catalogue.

Architects too began to favor the style, notably the architects Charles and Henry Greene, easterners who had migrated to the resort town of Pasadena, California. In the early 1900s Greene and Greene took up the style and idea wholeheartedly, legitimizing the bungalow as a successor to the Shingle style of the 1870s and 1880s and as a topological innovation parallel to the Prairie houses of Frank Lloyd Wright. The Greene brothers, who were influenced by Japanese buildings, expanded and refined the vocabulary of the California Bungalow with exquisitely crafted wood detailing.

Gustav Stickley, a leading designer of the American Arts and Crafts movement best known for his handcrafted furniture and an exponent of the Crafts movement, made revealing comments on the phenomenon of the bungalow in his *Craftsman Homes* of 1909:

... a house reduced to its simplest form, [one that] never fails to harmonize with its surroundings, because its low broad proportions and absolute lack of ornamentation give it a character so natural and unaffected that it seems to sink into and blend with any landscape...built of any local material and with the aid of such help as local workmen can afford, so it is never expensive unless elaborated out of all kinship with its real character of a primitive dwelling. It is beautiful, because it is planned to meet simple needs in the simplest and most direct way...¹

Stickley emphasized the unpretentious nature of the bungalow, a dwelling that underscored economy in plan, ingenuity in the use of materials and in detail, a house that is at peace with its "natural" surroundings.

The plan of the bungalow is clearly derived from its straight-forward organization. The plan of the one-story, two-bedroom bungalow shows an arrangement characteristic of dozens of Houston bungalows of this size. From the arrival point at the porch and front door there is a sequence of rooms: living room - dining room - kitchen on one side of the house, with two bedrooms and a bathroom occupying the other. Rooms are efficiently arranged so that one leads to another without the interruption of extensive hallways. There is an almost democratic equality of spaces, without compromising the separate and formal nature of the individual rooms. Often the living room or dining room is separated from other rooms by pocket doors or a screen that incorporates bookshelves into its design. A fireplace with an articulated surround and mantle is almost always part of the living room, and the public rooms are often enhanced with wainscoting, paneling, corner shelves, or window seats.

Besides efficiency and openness the compact plan yielded further benefits in the hot, humid Southern climate. Because the rooms join one another without interruption, the house can be naturally ventilated, with air freely circulating from one room to another. Built on a raised-pier foundation, the bungalow is typically lifted two or three feet off the ground, allowing air to circulate under the house as well, and an attic provides insulation between the interior and the roof. The rooms are well-protected and shaded from the summer sun by the wide, overhanging eaves.

The personality of the bungalow is almost always established by the covered porch which faces the street. The porch creates a threshold between house, yard, and street and gives the bungalow its dominant, sometimes eccentric, architectural presence. A side entrance *pôrté-cochère* for the automobile reminds us that this is a house approached by automobile as much as on foot. It is the first small house in America designed with the family car in mind.



A typical Montrose bungalow features clapboard siding with skirted base, exaggerated brick columns at the front porch, generous eave overhanging with carved wood bracketing, and side entrance porte-cochère

Bungalow floor plan shows the efficient and economic room arrangement with a minimum of corridor space

Detail and craftsmanship singularly express the architecture, with greatest emphasis at the porch where sturdy, almost exaggerated, brick columns support a stylized gable. Double-hung wood windows, grouped closely at the porch, add to the expansive feeling from within and from without. The carpenter's hand can be seen at every turn, from the skirted base which gracefully carries the house to the terra-firma, to the elegantly carved, exposed beams and fascia. The craftsmanship is integral with the structure, expressing a sense of the materials and the craft of construction.

While the wood clapboard bungalow with brick porch columns is typical of the Houston bungalow, it by no means illustrates the only combination of materials. Bungalows clad entirely in brick or in stucco were not unusual and there are often combinations of materials used, each dependent upon its own sense of craftsmanship and material expression. Bungalows are not necessarily limited to one story – in fact many are actually two stories, even when they appear to be one story. The term “airplane” bungalow was used to describe some two-story bungalows because they resembled in an off-beat way the biplanes of the day.

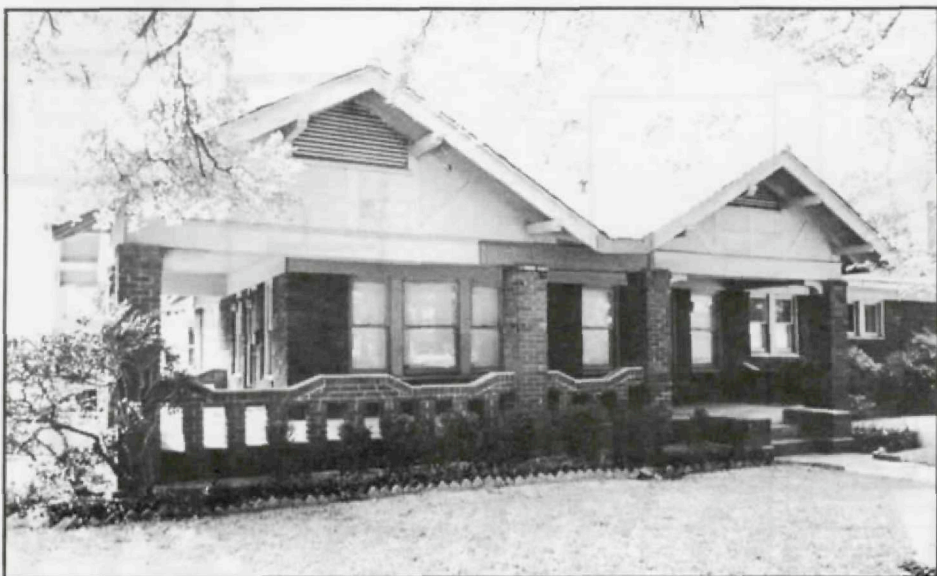
Although the majority of bungalows seem to be the invention of builders and carpenters, Houston architects during the 1910s began to employ the bungalow vocabulary in designing houses. A particularly fine architect-designed bungalow was built by the architect William A. Cooke at 1724 Alta Vista Avenue (1912) in the southeast Houston neighborhood of Forest Hill. Stylistically, this bungalow is reminiscent of the California Mission style stucco bungalow. Another fine, architectural design of bungalow derivation is the Block House at 5120 Berthea (1920) in the Turner Addition south of Montrose, designed by the prominent Houston architect Alfred C. Finn (architect of the Gulf Building, San Jacinto Monument, and many large houses on Montrose Boulevard). This house also shows the influence of the 19th-century English cottage style



This California Mission style bungalow at 1724 Alta Vista in Forest Hill was designed by the architect William A. Cooke for his family in 1912



An airplane bungalow, so called because it resembles the profile of a biplane of the early part of the century, was designed in 1923 by E. A. Lightfoot and is located at the corner of Audubon and Marshall in Montrose



Brick bungalow at the corner of Morrison and Bayland in Woodland Heights



Double porch, two-story bungalow at 912 Heights Boulevard in Houston Heights



Wood bungalow at the corner of Eastwood and McKinney in the subdivision of Eastwood



Stucco bungalow with prominent porte-cochère at West Alabama and Yupon in Montrose



A "cottage" on Sylvan Street in Idylwood, 1936, Ainsworth and Irvine, architects

popularized by the English architect, C.F.A. Voysey. Two others of note are The Cottage by the Fort Worth firm of Sanguinet and Staats at 2204 Baldwin Street (1910) near the Fourth Ward and a bungalow by E.A. Lightfoot designed and built for his family at 3702 Audubon Place (1923) in Montrose.

Link's Montrose development was one of several neighborhoods platted in the early part of the century in which the bungalow was the favored type of house. The general area now known as Montrose is made up of assorted subdivisions, each of which originally, had its own identity and deed restrictions. Surrounding Link's Montrose are the neighborhoods of Westmoreland Place, Courtlandt Place, Avondale Addition, James Bute Addition, Fairview, Hyde Park, Waugh, Cherryhurst, Rossmoyne Place, Lancaster Place, Mandell Place, Turner Addition, and Winlow Place. Ultimately these neighborhoods became incorporated into the city, as Houston city limits began to spread out.

Perhaps the best-preserved neighborhood of bungalows is in Woodland Heights, located northwest of downtown and developed at the time of Link's Montrose. Woodland Heights was the creation of the William A. Wilson Realty Company, which in 1907 acquired land just east of Houston Heights, an older community that was until 1918 a separately incorporated city. Just as Link realized the value of land within a trolley car ride of downtown, so did William Wilson anticipate the suburban growth and the future need for housing when he acquired the land for Woodland Heights. Wilson publicized his vision of the new neighborhood in a promotional brochure of 1910:

...to show with convincing accuracy the growth and development of this piece of picturesque woodland, in all its stages, from a state of nature to a charming suburban park dotted with comfortable artistic homes.

The artistic home Wilson's brochure refers to is none other than the bungalow, a house he praises with entrepreneurial enthusiasm, saying:

It is just as easy to build a beautiful, cozy, convenient, artistic home as the other kind... While as much money may be expended in the construction of a bungalow as one may choose, it is a fact that there is no other form of construction that lends itself so readily to moderate-priced homes, because there is no other that gives so much beauty and grace and solid comfort for the amount of money.²

The neighborhood of Woodland Heights fulfilled Wilson's dream of the ideal suburban community. As in Montrose, the streets are laid out on an orthogonal grid. The finest street of the neighborhood, Bayland Avenue, is today an oak-lined thoroughfare of bungalows interspersed with larger wood-frame houses.

To further enhance the value of its development, the William A. Wilson Company produced *Homes*, a monthly magazine ostensibly published to advocate the ideals of American families living comfortably and modestly in bungalows. In fact *Homes* was a rather clever instrument of real-estate promotion for Wilson's Woodland Heights and Eastwood, another subdivision of bungalows that he platted to the east of downtown in 1911. Each month a new house, invariably a bungalow, was featured in photographs and an article entitled "What We Have Done for Others." The articles gave lengthy descriptions of the warmth and hominess of the rooms as well as the conveniences found in the modern bathrooms and kitchen. Other articles were written to give helpful suggestions in home financing, home improvements, gardening, decorating, and even recipes. Essays on family life in obvious imitation of the popular house journals of the day such as *Good Housekeeping*, gave further testimony to Wilson's suburban developments.

To the north and west of Woodland Heights, Will C. Hogg, later the

developer of River Oaks, and Henry W. Stude created a suburb equally rich in artistic bungalows. The neighborhood, called Norhill, was platted in 1922 and features a series of block-long, park-like esplanades at three-block intervals on the major north-south thoroughfare, Norhill Street. To the southeast of Wilson's development, Eastwood, further out along the tracks of the Interurban line, are the neighborhoods of Forest Hill (1909) and Park Place (1912) where bungalows also were favored.

These suburban neighborhoods were built during the heyday of the Progressive era, a time that stood for family life, temperance, equality at the workplace, and a more equitable distribution of the country's great wealth. It was also the era of the City Beautiful movement, when cities across the United States built great parks, boulevards, public monuments, and parkways out of a desire to transform the squalid industrial city into a place of grandeur and beauty where nature could coexist with man's environment. Indeed, such men as William A. Wilson, John W. Link, Henry W. Stude, and Will C. Hogg personified the spirit of their times. While they were obviously real-estate entrepreneurs, they also returned to the community neighborhoods replete with a multitude of affordable, sensible, and appropriately planned houses built on abundantly landscaped streets.

With the end of the Progressive movement and the demise of the era of Wilsonian democracy after World War I, the bungalow's popularity in Houston and other cities began to decline. By the mid 1920s popular social values had changed. The United States was undergoing a period of prosperity that placed greater emphasis on material wealth and comfort. Somehow the bungalow represented a humbleness no longer valued by American society. And yet small houses continued to be built in the ever-growing suburban communities of Houston. To the south of Montrose and its surrounding additions, in the newly platted community of Southampton Place (1923), to the

southeast of downtown in the neighborhoods of Idylwood (1928), or further towards Galveston in Garden Villas (1926), and to the west of town in the city of West University Place (1925), the suburban cottage took the place of the bungalow as the favored small house. While the cottage was designed for the same 50-by-100-foot lot as the bungalow, with approximately the same size and a similar plan diagram, there is very little in common on the exterior. The cottage was a small version of the larger period revival houses then being built in the exclusive neighborhoods of Shadyside and River Oaks. Invariably the cottage was faced with stucco or brick and was reminiscent of Georgian or Colonial revival styles. Steeply pitched gables and charmingly quaint windows and doors replaced the expansive porch and overhanging eaves so dominant in the bungalow. Like the bungalow, the cottage continued the tradition of the small, single-family, detached house as a commodious and affordable house type. With its romantic gabled forms, the cottage presented another sort of picturesque image for the neighborhood, an image that by the middle 1920s seemed more substantial than the humbler image of the bungalow.

The era of the bungalow in Houston left a remarkable legacy. The bungalow was the first small, inexpensively priced house of the automobile suburbs, anticipating patterns of urban expansion that have continued to dominate Houston's growth. Although the car has allowed Houston to expand ever further across the plains many leagues from the neighborhoods of Montrose, Woodland Heights, and Eastwood, there is today within these early suburban neighborhoods a repository of well-preserved bungalows, as appealing to the present generation as they were in the early part of the century. The bungalows and their neighborhoods speak of a popular utopian vision of a society where shelter in a natural setting, and in an artistic, well-planned dwelling was made available on the simplest of terms and at a price affordable to the working man and woman. ■



A Montrose bungalow at 3310 Yupon, restored by the Houston architect, John Kelly



The coherence of early bungalow neighborhoods is preserved in these examples; Above: on Byrne Street in Woodland Heights; Below: on Polk Street in Eastwood



Interior of bungalow at 3310 Yupon shows spacious open-plan arrangement of the living and dining rooms, beamed ceilings, and bookshelves that serve as room dividers

For further reading, the author recommends the following books:

Clay Lancaster, *The American Bungalow, 1880-1930*, New York: Abbeville Press, 1985

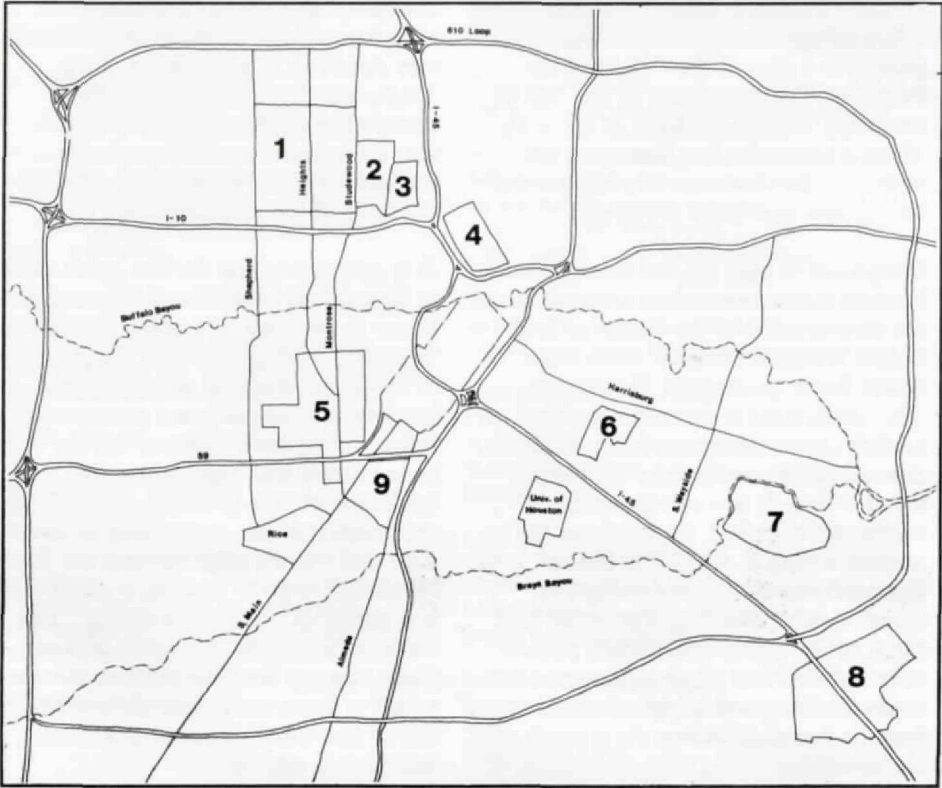
Robert Winter, *The California Bungalow*, Santa Monica: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1980



Above, left: Feature house from Homes, April 1912, published by the William A. Wilson Company to promote the subdivisions of Eastwood and Woodland Heights. Above, right: The same bungalow as it appears today

Notes

- 1 These remarks are taken from "Bungalows: Mail Order Craftsmanship," *Preservation News*, November 1984.
- 2 Woodland Heights brochure, William A. Wilson Realty Company, 1910.
- 3 The author wishes to thank Stephen Fox and the staff of the Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library for their assistance in the research of this article.



Bungalow Neighborhoods

- 1 Houston Heights
- 2 Norhill
- 3 Woodland Heights
- 4 Fifth Ward
- 5 Montrose and Montrose Subdivisions: Westmorland, Avondale, James Bute, Lancaster Place, Fairview, Hyde Park, Waugh, Cherryhurst, Rossmoyne, Mandell Place, Winlow Place and Turner
- 6 Eastwood
- 7 Forest Hill
- 8 Park Place
- 9 Southmore Addition (Binz)