

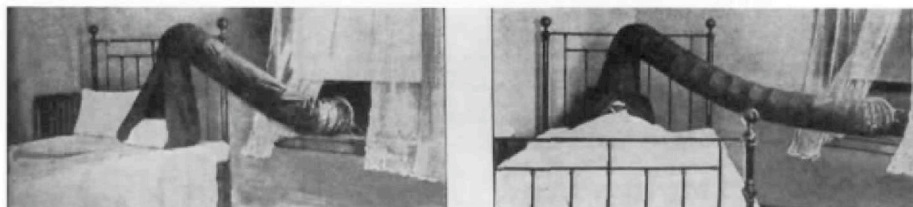


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Sleeping Porches

and the Turn-of-the-Century

Fresh-Air-Sleeping Movement

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In a world of air pollution and air conditioning, sleeping porches have almost disappeared from our houses as well as from memory. Nonetheless, they were a common and much-enjoyed feature of American domestic architecture during the first 40 years of this century. My grandparents' sleeping porch made bedtime an adventure during my childhood visits. Deliciously cool and filled with the nighttime sounds and smells of their farm outside Waxahachie, it was such a marvelous means of making Texas summer nights bearable that I was surprised to learn that sleeping porches were originally meant for year-round use, for snowy nights as well as sultry ones. They were in fact the architectural manifestation of a widespread health movement of the early years of the 20th century, when the age-old fear of night air gave way to a fascination with fresh-air sleeping.

Fresh air had been considered healthful at least as far back as the time of the ancient Greeks, and 19th-century scientists sought to improve health by improving the circulation of fresh air within buildings. However, fresh air at night was another matter. It was thought to contain poisonous atmospheres called miasmas, formed by rotting vegetable matter or sewage, that could carry diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever. The dampness that often accompanied night air was believed to cause colds and chills. A well-known physician and educator echoed accepted medical thought when he wrote in 1850 that "in summer or autumn, it is right to let down the sash, or otherwise close up the windows, before we go to sleep. . . . This rule is especially necessary in the south, and along our great watercourses, where bad air and fogs so much abound."¹

Florence Nightingale was in the vanguard of medical opinion in 1859 when she called the dread of night air an "extraordinary fallacy." Her popular book *Notes on Nursing* laid the new idea before the public: "What air can we breathe at night but night air?" she demanded. "The choice is between pure night air from without and foul night air from within."² Enthusiastically received on both sides of the Atlantic, *Notes on Nursing* went through several editions in America. Catherine Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe echoed Nightingale's ideas in their 1869 book *The American Woman's Home*, where they wrote, "Tight sleeping rooms, and close, air-tight stoves, are now starving and poisoning more than half

of this nation."³

However, the widespread use of sleeping porches would never have come about without the specter of tuberculosis, for which the medical establishment prescribed fresh air as both a treatment and a means of prevention. Tuberculosis had reached epidemic proportions in the 19th century and was popularly referred to as the White Plague or the Great Killer. In 1900, when the death rate had already begun to fall from its high in the mid-1800s, tuberculosis killed in the United States at a rate three times that of cancer, striking young and old alike, not just in tenements but in the homes of the middle and upper classes as well.⁴ Scientists struggled to find a cure, but antibiotics were not available to treat the disease until the 1940s. For nearly a hundred years, fresh air, night and day, was one of the most widely accepted treatments.

Some of the first sleeping porches in the United States were created for the treatment of tuberculosis. An early example was the small porch added to the home of a patient in Hanover, Massachusetts, in 1898.⁵ It is a minimal, very obvious add-on, but soon sleeping porches became an essential element in the planning of sanatoria, most of which were distinguished by extensive verandas or multiple balconies used for outside sleeping. The cure cottages at the famous Lake Saranac sanatorium in New York State featured "sitting-out porches" where ambulatory patients took the air in cure chairs during the day, and sleeping porches for use at night, usually on an upper floor, with at least two sides that could be fully opened. Glass storm windows could be installed in winter, but the sleeping porches were unheated.

By the early 20th century, a nationwide movement to cure tuberculosis and prevent its spread was under way, using publicity and propaganda to an unprecedented extent and reaching the public through magazines, newspapers, posters, speakers, and programs in the schools. A major component of the message was that fresh air, day and night, was as important in the prevention of the disease as in its cure.

Around the same time, the earlier fears of night air were finally being banished as scientists proved that mosquitoes were agents in the transmission of malaria and yellow fever. When window screening became available at reasonable prices in the late 1890s, all the elements were in place for a full-scale fresh-air-sleeping movement.

Not surprisingly, the first examples of sleeping porches not strictly associated with the treatment of tuberculosis can be found in houses designed for locations where fresh air had long been held to be beneficial, such as the seaside and the mountains. Since "porch" traditionally referred to a projecting, covered entrance, these earliest structures were called "loggias" or "balconies." Two second-floor loggias appear in a design for a house in the Adirondacks published in the July 1903 issue of *The Craftsman*, the popular magazine that featured the designs and philosophy of the American Arts and Crafts movement. The accompanying text clearly states that the loggias were intended for use as "sleeping porches," indicating that the term was already in common usage.

After 1903, rooms labeled as sleeping porches can be found in a growing number of house plans. Many of these houses were built in southern California, a center for health-seekers at the turn of the century. The Pasadena-based architects Greene & Greene began including sleeping porches in their house designs in 1904; the Pasadena home they designed for David B. Gamble, of the Proctor & Gamble Ivory Soap empire, has three. Sleeping porches continued to be an important element in southern California houses well into the 1920s and 1930s, with R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra both designing notable examples.

Frank Lloyd Wright was another sleeping-porch pioneer. The Westcott House of 1904 included two, balancing the symmetrical garden façade. Wright's drawings for the Robert D. Clark House of 1904 presented a split-level plan with a large porch accessible by short flights of stairs from both the dining room and the bedrooms. In the text accompanying this design in the Wasmuth portfolio, Wright stated that the porch could be used for outside dining or as a sleeping porch.⁶ Other Wright houses of the period, such as the Little House of 1902, also include porches connected to bedrooms; these were probably intended for use as sleeping porches, although this was not specified in the plans.

By 1908, such popular periodicals as *Country Life in America*, *House Beautiful*, and *Collier's*, as well as general health manuals, began to extol the benefits of outdoor sleeping. *Country Life in America* correspondent Thomas McAdam bore enthusiastic witness: "I can truly say that outdoor sleeping is the greatest luxury of my life, because it has made a new

man of me and enables me to enjoy life as never before."⁷ Another article described a father who reluctantly slept outside with his baby when the doctor recommended outdoor treatment for the child's throat infection. Converted after the first night, he soon moved his whole family onto the sleeping porch.⁸

The magazines provided practical advice for surviving winter nights on a sleeping porch without freezing to death, such as the use of double mattresses, multiple down comforters, nightcaps, and carefully wrapped blankets. A properly wrapped bed for winter sleeping was referred to as a "Klondike bed."⁹ Sleepers bothered by the early morning sunlight were advised to rub their eyelids with burnt cork.¹⁰

The sleeping porch of the Staiti House in Houston, as photographed in 1920, embodies all the features of a proper sleeping porch, as recommended in periodicals and health manuals of the period. A sleeping porch should be roofed, and open on at least two sides. Those sides should be solid for three to five feet up to keep drafts from reaching under the beds and to give some privacy, then screened to the ceiling. Canvas blinds could be installed for use during rainstorms, preferably to be raised from the bottom up. Furnishings were to be kept simple due to exposure to the weather. Some later sleeping porches, much more elaborate in their decoration and correspondingly more enclosed to protect the interior, began to look like rooms with multiple windows rather than porches.

For those who could not afford a sleeping porch, inventors devised low-cost alternatives. The *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1908 featured several versions of "window tents," essentially awnings attached

Illustrations opposite page:

1. Bundled children on a family sleeping porch, 1909. *Country Life in America*, May 1909, p. 45. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

2. Window tent developed by Dr. S. A. Knopf. *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1908, p. 27. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

3. The Porte-Air, 1908. *Ladies Home Journal*, September 1908, p. 27. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

4. Henry T. Staiti House, Houston, Alfred C. Finn, architect, ca.1920. Courtesy Harris County Heritage Society, Houston.

5. Dione Neutra, wife of architect Richard Neutra, reading on her sleeping porch at the VDL Research House, Los Angeles, ca.1940. Courtesy Dion Neutra, Architect.



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to the inside of a window and fitted over the head of a bed to separate the sleeper from the tainted interior air. In another version, the head of the sleeper is pushed outside the window and protected by the tent. Cross-ventilation from open windows would have worked as well as either arrangement. The strangest variation, called the Porte-Air, actually reduced access to fresh air; luckily, its claustrophobic appearance probably discouraged most would-be purchasers. Designed for rooms where the bed could not be placed directly against a window, it connected the sleeper's head to the outside air by means of a long cloth tube stretching to the window.

The *Bungalow Magazine* of 1913 presented more elaborate alternatives to sleeping porches. The "modern fresh air bed" required that a hole be cut in the bedroom wall so that the bed could be pushed onto a platform outside. Another variation provided a metal canopy that could be swung out over the sleeper to protect him from rain, a screen to keep insects away, and a curtain to "shield the occupant from the sun or from prying eyes." When it came time to make up the bed, it could be rolled inside.¹¹

Real sleeping porches were far preferable to such labored alternatives, and they were added onto existing houses as well as included in new houses, large and small, all over the country. There was no universally recommended location for the porch other than on an upper floor for greater purity of air, privacy, and security. There were sleeping balconies above front entrances and sleeping porches on the sides and the backs of houses. They perched like proud cockpits on top of the wide-spreading roofs of bungalows that consequently became known as airplane bungalows, and were tucked discreetly in the far back corners of small, one-story cottages and bungalows. They were even incorporated in avant-garde modern architecture when R. M. Schindler included them in several of his projects of the 1920s, including the Lovell beach house and his King Road house, where he referred to them as "sleeping baskets."¹²

By the early 1920s, a sleeping porch was an important component of any proper, middle-class home. Sinclair

Lewis's Babbitt was as proud of the porch in his up-to-date home as of his ability to sleep there on all but the coldest nights. But Americans of the 20th century have tended to look for comfort in their daily lives, even at the expense of health; and, in truth, many of the health claims made for sleeping porches were overblown. As a result, the sleeping porch eventually became the province of summer sleepers. The availability of powerful attic fans and then air conditioning led to its demise. Today, "fresh" air has begun to seem less healthful. We now install air filters to combat pollen and pollution, and proceed to work, play, and sleep in protected interior environments. Most sleeping porches in older homes have been enclosed and incorporated as full bedrooms or sun rooms.

For 40 years sleeping porches provided a welcome alternative to stuffy bedrooms, probably improved the health of some people who slept on them, and made summer nights more comfortable for many. Their special atmosphere of protected freedom — derived from their hybrid character, neither indoors nor out — meant that sleepers could enjoy the sense of exposure to nature while maintaining easy access to domestic comfort and technology, incorporating a taste of the natural world into a civilized daily routine. Those of us who experienced the pleasures of sleeping porches owe a large debt of gratitude to the turn-of-the-century health-seekers who popularized them. ■

1 Daniel Drake, *Malaria in the Interior Valley of North America* (reprint ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 681.

2 Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing* (1860; reprint ed., New York: Dover, 1969), p. 19.

3 Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (1869; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1971), p. 49.

4 *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 58.

5 S. Adolphus Knopf, *Tuberculosis: A Preventable and Curable Disease* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1909), p. 62.

6 Frank Lloyd Wright, *Studies and Executed Buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 19.

7 Thomas McAdam, "Outdoor Sleeping and Living," *Country Life in America*, January 1908, p. 334.

8 C. M. d'Enville, "Outdoor Sleeping for the Well Man," *Country Life in America*, May 1909, p. 44.

9 Knopf, *Tuberculosis*, pp. 76-77.

10 Irving Fisher and Eugene Lyman Fisk, *How to Live: Rules for Healthful Living Based on Modern Science* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1916), p. 23.

11 Albert Marple, "A Modern Fresh Air Bed," *Bungalow Magazine* [Los Angeles], October 1913, pp. 42-43; and C. L. Edholm, "Outdoor Bed With a Swinging Canopy," *Bungalow Magazine* [Los Angeles] November 1913, pp. 45-46.

12 David Gebhard, *Schindler* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), pp. 47-51, 80-86.

Illustrations

6. Airplane bungalow with sleeping porch. *The Draughtsman*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Deluxe Building Co., 1913).

7. House, Hanover, Massachusetts, with sleeping porch added for tuberculosis patient, 1898. Knopf, *Tuberculosis*, p. 62.

8. Airplane bungalow with sleeping porch. *Modern Home* (New Orleans: Southern Pine Assn., 1921).

9. Agnes Memorial Sanatorium with sleeping porches, 1909. Knopf, *Tuberculosis*, p. 62.

10. Sleeping porch, The Pines. *Gabriel Moulin's San Francisco Peninsula*, from the archives of Gabriel Moulin Studios, San Francisco (Sausalito: Windgate Press, 1985), plate 136.

11. David B. Gamble House, Pasadena, California, Greene & Greene, architects, 1908. *Courtesy Gamble House*.