



Waddell House, 2404 Caroline, ca. 1901 (demolished), with design no. 2 from George F. Barber's *Modern Dwellings* (1901).



From Mail House To Your House

Choosing a dream house from the pages of a mail-order catalogue is no longer common, but from 1880 to 1930 catalogues and journals offering house plans to the public flourished in America. More numerous than the catalogues that sold building materials pre-cut and ready to assemble (Sears, Roebuck & Company was one of many companies that produced ready-cut houses), the catalogues of mail-order plans were widely marketed to prospective homeowners as well as carpenters, developers, and contractors. The catalogues' popularity helped spread design ideas and architectural styles across the country. Not only middle-class houses and workers' bungalows but also some of the more distinctive and impressive houses of the period were drawn from their pages.

Catalogue Sources of Houston Domestic Architecture 1880-1930

A number of Houston houses, some demolished but some still surviving, were built from catalogue designs. The Cotton House at 1018 Travis (1882) was based on a design published by George and Charles Palliser in 1878 in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The Pallisers were the first producers of mail-order house plans to meet with success on a large scale. George Palliser published his first catalogue in 1876, and his brother Charles joined the firm by 1878. Two more catalogues were published in 1878, and Palliser publications continued to appear until 1906. The Cotton House is not an exact replication of the Palliser design, but enough details correspond to indicate that the catalogue was the design source. Nevertheless, Houston architect George Dickey listed the house as an example of his own work.

Dickey also claimed credit for the 1889 Dillingham House, 1214 Rusk, which is clearly based on a design published in 1887 by Robert W. Shoppell, an early competitor of the Palliser brothers. Shoppell, based in New York and with a background in publishing rather than architecture, published several catalogues of house plans in the 1880s and also produced the first mail-order architectural periodical, *Shoppell's Modern Houses*. He credited the designs he published to a group of architects called the Cooperative Building Plan Association.

Although it is surprising to find an architect such as Dickey borrowing designs from mail-order catalogues — such a practice runs counter to our conception of an architect's creative role — we do not know how Dickey actually used the catalogues in his practice. The Pallisers and Shoppell advertised widely to the general public, so clients may have brought the catalogues to Dickey and requested that he adapt specific designs for them. It is also possible that Dickey kept a selection of catalogues in his office to help clients decide on the type of house they would like. However the catalogues may have been used, Dickey's long and productive career in Houston indicates that he did not have to depend on them.

The popularity of the Palliser and Shoppell catalogues inspired competitors, some of whom met with considerable success. George Franklin Barber was a self-trained architect who grew up in the Midwest and



Cotton House, 1018 Travis, 1882 (demolished), with "View of F. Egge's Cottage" from *Palliser's Model Homes* (1878).



practiced primarily in Knoxville, Tennessee. In Knoxville he published at least nine catalogues of house plans between 1888 and 1907 and a periodical, *American Homes*, from 1895 to 1901. Barber's publications were probably the most popular sources for mail-order house plans in Texas during those years. His catalogues presented a full range of houses, from grand mansions to modest cottages, in a variety of styles. The designs indicate that he was conversant with both professional architectural trends and popular, vernacular preferences in domestic architecture. For example, his 1902-1903 catalogue *Art in Architecture* contains designs for houses in the colonial revival style, which was appearing in professional architectural journals at the time, and in the Queen Anne style, which the *Architectural Record* of 1902 referred to as a style of "freakish and meaningless eccentricities"¹ but which was nevertheless popular with the general public. The same catalogue includes design number 580, entitled "Rustic," which, with its broad, overhanging eaves and horizontal emphasis, presents the basic elements of what would become known as the American bungalow, still in the process of development, primarily in the Los Angeles area, during this period.

Barber's 1891 catalogue, entitled *The Cottage Souvenir Number Two*, was evidently owned by the developers of the Houston Heights and either used by them or made available to purchasers of lots. Of nine houses presented in woodcuts surrounding a map on a promotional brochure for the development, six are based on designs from *The Cottage Souvenir Number Two*. In fact, some of the woodcuts were probably drawn from the plates in Barber's catalogue rather than the actual houses, for vegetation and shadows duplicate those found in Barber's illustrations. Two of the Barber houses on the brochure are still standing, the Milroy House at 1102 Heights Boulevard and the Mansfield House at 1802 Harvard.

There is also a small cluster of houses based on Barber designs on Hawthorne Street. Barber's proto-bungalow, design number 580, was built at 303 Hawthorne circa 1905. The house next door, 219 Hawthorne, as well as the one across the street, 304 Hawthorne, are also derived from Barber designs, suggesting use of the Barber catalogue by a small-scale developer.

Much grander Houston houses were also based on Barber designs. The Hackney House, at 2210 Main Street, was derived from design number 1 in the 1901 edition of Barber's *Modern Dwellings*, and the Waddell House, at 2404 Caroline Street, was based on design number 2 of the same catalogue. Both of these designs were featured in the October 1901 issue of Barber's periodical, *American Homes*, where the design used in the Hackney House was described as "one of the most elegant house designs we have ever had the pleasure to present our readers," and the design used for the Waddell House



Dillingham House, 1214 Rusk, 1889 (demolished), with design no. 485 from *Shoppell's Modern Houses* (1887).



429 Bayland, ca. 1910, with design no. 397 from Henry Wilson's *Bungalow Book* (1908, 1910).



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as one that "would make a delightful home in any of the Southern States."² The scale and complexity of these houses confirm the use and influence of house plan catalogues among the prosperous and upwardly mobile during this period, even in Houston, where architects were relatively plentiful.

By 1906 a new housing type, the American bungalow, had become established in California as a popular, economical form of middle-class housing; mail-order bungalow catalogues, or "bungalow books," helped spread the new style across the country. Bungalows were ideally suited for the Houston climate, with broad overhanging eaves, wide porches, and no basements. Houston's population was mushrooming, and bungalow books provided developers and individuals with easily accessible, inexpensive plans for moderately priced houses in the latest styles. Bungalows sprouted by the dozens in Montrose, the Heights, Norhill, Woodland Heights, and Eastwood, many undoubtedly based on designs in the bungalow books.

Henry L. Wilson, who called himself "the Bungalow Man," enthusiastically endorsed the bungalow as an ideal house type in five editions of his *Bungalow Book*. His well-produced catalogues contained approximately 75 house designs per

volume, together with advice concerning decoration and furnishing, as well as historical and descriptive essays about bungalows. Wilson even published his own magazine, *The Bungalow Magazine*, in 1909 and 1910 as an additional means of promoting his favorite house style and selling his plans. The house at 429 Bayland in Woodland Heights matches plan number 397 in the 1908 and 1910 editions of Wilson's *Bungalow Book*. With two full stories it does not precisely fit the definition of a bungalow, but it includes many of the bungalow's stylistic and decorative elements, including wide eaves, decorative beams under the gable, and shingle siding. The double dormers of the Denton W. Cooley House, 737 Heights Boulevard (now demolished), may have been influenced by design number 400 in the 1908 edition of Wilson's *Bungalow Book*, and the Gus G. Heyne House, 4002 Austin, was also close to a Wilson design.

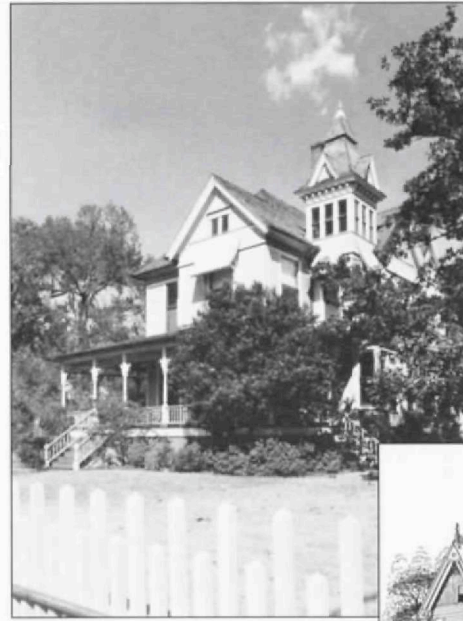
An interesting airplane bungalow in Eastwood at 4400 McKinney is closely related to design number 717 in *Beautiful Homes*, a catalogue produced by the Dallas firm Ye Planry in 1914. This particular catalogue was heavily promoted in the trade publication *Gulf Coast Lumberman* for use by retail lumber yards. By offering a variety of design choices and inexpensive plans in bungalow books and other catalogues, the retail lumber trade hoped to encourage consumers to select house plans and buy building materials in the same lumber yard.

E. W. Stillwell was another publisher of bungalow books whose work met with acceptance in Houston. Based in Los Angeles, he produced several catalogues that concentrated on bungalow design between the years 1907 and 1926, including *West Coast Bungalows*, *Representative California Homes*, and *Little Bungalows*. Like other bungalow books, Stillwell's included testimonial letters from satisfied



Hackney House, 2210 Main, 1902 (demolished), with design no. 1 from Barber's *Modern Dwellings* (1901).

Houston Metropolitan Research Center,
Houston Public Library



Milroy House, 1102 Heights Boulevard, 1898, with design no. 30 from Barber's *Cottage Souvenir Number Two* (1891).



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customers across the country. One dated January 16, 1914, is from a J. L. Jones of Houston, Texas, who wrote: "I am more than pleased with the house. . . . the foreman told me the plans worked out better than any ordered plans he had ever handled. I have two more houses to build and would like to order more plans from you."³ J. L. Jones was probably the owner of John L. Jones Furniture Company on Travis Street; the locations of the houses he built have not been determined. However, a house based on Stillwell's R-951, in *Representative California Homes*, was built for J. J. Bruce at 3215 Morrison Street in Woodland Heights around 1911. Two more houses with the same design were also built in Houston, one in the 1400 block of Wrightwood, also in Woodland Heights, and another at 4524 Rusk, in Eastwood.

The repetition of the same plan in both Eastwood and Woodland Heights is not surprising, since both areas were developed by the William A. Wilson Company, but not all of the houses in these neighborhoods can be traced to Stillwell catalogues. In the Woodland Heights/Norhill area, catalogues from Stillwell, Henry A. Wilson, L. F. Garlinghouse, the Southern Pine Association, and Sears, Roebuck were

In spite of occasional repetitions, the range of design choices offered to the potential homebuilder through bungalow books and other mail-order catalogues was far greater than that available through most developers today. The pleasure we can find in the architectural richness of our surviving older neighborhoods is partly due to the pioneering efforts of small architectural firms marketing their designs through mail-order catalogues in the late 19th century, and to the anonymous draftsmen employed by bungalow book entrepreneurs during the first two decades of the 20th century. ■

Notes

- 1 "The Contemporary Suburban Residence," *Architectural Record* 11, no. 3 (Jan. 1902), p. 79.
- 2 Barber, George F. "Three to Choose From," *American Homes* 13, no. 4 (Oct. 1901), pp. 209-10.
- 3 E. W. Stillwell, *West Coast Bungalows* (Los Angeles, ca. 1919), p. [2].
- 4 "A Personal Talk About the Stillwell Service," *ibid.*, p. [1].

Special thanks go to Ellen Beasley for providing the original impetus for my involvement in this research. Some of the information in this article is included in a report we coauthored in 1986 for the Texas Society of Architects, *The Use of Published House Plans for Domestic Architecture in Texas, 1890-1930*.



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"Proto-bungalow" at 303 Hawthorne, ca. 1905, with design no. 580 - the "Rustic" - from Barber's *Art in Architecture* (1902-1903).

evidently used. Certainly numerous catalogues, as well as original designs or designs copied from books and magazines, must have been utilized as the Houston bungalow neighborhoods burgeoned.

Who actually designed the plans published in the bungalow books? Only a few publications credit the architect or designer, and sometimes drawings or photographs of the same house appear in the catalogues of completely different firms. E. W. Stillwell was an exception in admitting that not all of the houses pictured in his books had been designed in his office. The introduction to several of his books states: "We have combed the country for the very best designs and have increased the variety of our offerings by including some of these with our own. For those designs not originated by us we have made new, and we believe, better interior floor plans."⁴ Probably other bungalow book producers followed similar practices.

