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THE BUNGALOW AND OTHER 20TH CENTURY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN HUNTSVILLE AN OVERVIEW

By Harvie Jones

The turn of the twentieth century found several styles of residential architecture being built in Huntsville, including late-Victorian versions of Eastlake and Queen Anne. As a result of the 1876 National Centennial celebrations, Colonial Revival was also an influence. These influences were sometimes freely intermingled in a "Free Classical" style as in the 1902 Van Valkenburg house at 501 Franklin St. and Williams Avenue. Within the first decade of the century a number of houses—frequently fine examples designed by architects—of the Bungalow style were built. By the 1920s the Bungalow style had become the predominant one for houses, and it even had an influence on larger buildings such as Rison School and the YMCA on Greene Street. By the 1920s, surviving Huntsville houses indicate that the major house styles were Bungalow, Tudor or English Cottage, and Colonial Revival, with a few examples of Spanish Colonial Revival and other styles.

The word "bungalow" is rooted in the Bengali (India) word "bangala" which denoted the typical seventeenth century native dwelling of that region of India. (1) Historical drawings indicate that a "bangala" had wide, low, spreading hipped roofs covering open verandahs surrounding the enclosed part of the dwelling. The English in India adopted both the word and the dwelling type as an actual and a symbolic retreat to the simple rural life. The type was eventually transplanted to England and then to America with its symbolism, if not its pure form, intact; a return to the simple, rural life (even when built in rows in streetcar subdivisions). The architectural historian Clay Lancaster found the first known American reference to the word "bungalow" in an 1880 issue of "American Architect and Building News" regarding a Cape Cod summer place. (2) Perhaps due to its symbolism the bungalow

found enormous popularity in newly-developed California. Hundreds of “bungalow books”—stock designs—were published and the style became popular nationwide. Regional types developed, such as the Prairie Style in the Chicago area (Huntsville has two examples of this house style).

The dominant expression of the bungalow is one of easy informality. Remarkably, this comes across whether the bungalow is large or small, expensive or cheap. The means of the expression is the use of irregular low spreading forms with wide, exposed-rafter roof eaves, usually half-timbered rough-cast stuccoed walls, large porches, bay windows, etc. The roof usually slopes down to the front to keep the form low. Sunlight picks out the dot-dot-dot rhythm of the rafter ends and highlights the texture of the rough stucco and the deep shadow of the wide porch.

The bungalow’s strongest period here was the 1920s, until the 1929 financial crash brought a halt to virtually all construction. The next significant period of residential construction in Huntsville was in the early 1940s when hundreds of small “Cape Cod Cottages” were built to house workers for the new Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals which were producing chemical warfare munitions in World War II. These houses were covered with cement-asbestos shingles or clapboards and had a simple rectangular gabled form without roof eaves. They were fast and economical to build, which was what was needed at the time.

This “Cape Cod Cottage” type persisted after World War II until the type the real-estate ads call “Ranch-Colonial” became strong in the 1960s. With occasional exceptions, the Ranch-Colonial is the type still most commonly built today. It combines the informality and low, rambling form found desirable in the bungalow, with the tradition, reserve and formality of classicism. Its classical ancestor is the architecture of Andrea Palladio, the sixteenth century Italian architect. Many of the Ranch-Colonial houses are, except for their low, spreading proportions, very similar to the porticoed, hip-roofed 16th century villa designs of Palladio. Palladio’s work was revived in England in the early 18th century and his 1570 book “The Four Books of Architecture” was republished and had a great influence in England and consequently in the American colonies. The Georgian and Federal period American architecture owes much to Palladio (as well as to the

Baroque period in the case of Georgian and to the work of the 18th century English architect Robert Adam in the case of Federal). Many of the Tuscan-porticoed 1960-1983 Huntsville houses could fairly be called "Ranch-Palladian."

Huntsville has a wide variety of 20th century houses which will become ever more interesting to us as we realize that the 20th century is now drawing to a close (only about sixteen years remain in the 20th century). It is time we study them more seriously. Perhaps this brief overview will help to whet our interest.



1. This 1899 house at 308 Eustis Avenue illustrates that the Victorian styles held sway right up to, and partly into the 20th century. This Eastlake-style house is of unusually fine detailing and workmanship. The pressed-brick walls have extremely tight, barely visible mortar joints, for the objective in brickwork of this period was for the wall to appear as monolithic. The architect is unknown.

A nearby church with similar brickwork has recently had its joints gouged out and wide, white mortar joints installed, a sad revision to the original beauty of the walls.



2. This 1901 house at 603 Franklin Street by the architect Herbert Cowell has a Dutch-Colonial Revival gambrel roof combined with late-Victorian massing (vertical, narrow, irregular). A small "Gothic" vent is in the gable. The windows are quite wide and squarish in proportion, unlike those in the Victorian styles. A balustrade once ran along its porch roof, as evidenced by the base for it, and there may have been a balustrade also at the porch floor level that ran between the masonry piers which support the porch columns.



3. This finely-detailed, well-constructed ca. 1902 house at 501 Franklin Street was designed by the architect Herbert Cowell. It is an amalgam of mostly classical elements such as Ionic fluted columns, Adamesque frieze, modillioned cornice, balustrades etc., with some holdover influence of the Victorian period as seen in the broken flowing massing and the chimneys with vertical inset ribs - a Queen Anne device, as is the pebble-finish tympanum and use of stained glass. This house is a very free, unacademic expression of predominantly Colonial Revival elements which might best be called "Free Classic" in style, a recognized term of the period.



4. This 1907 house at 418 McClung Avenue is a free adaptation of the Colonial Revival style. While the basic design is technically Colonial Revival (boxy shape, hipped roof, fanlighted & sidelighted entry, modillions, Palladian dormer, sash-blinds, etc.) the proportions are vastly different from the late-Georgian ancestors of this fine house. The roof eaves are about three feet wide-over three times as wide as those of an 18th century Georgian house. The modillions at the eaves are gangantuan in comparison to 18th century ones. On the other hand, the clapboards are extremely narrow, about one-third as wide as in the Georgian period. All this disregard for academic "correctness" comes off splendidly, and the result is an excellent early 20th century house instead of a pale copy of an 18th century one.



5. This fine early bungalow at 531 Franklin Street was designed in 1909 by the Huntsville architect Edgar Love. Notice the "kick" of the roof-ridge ends - a refinement found in at least one other Huntsville bungalow. The zig-zag roof and bay window give this bungalow an informal and welcoming air.



6. This 1914 house at 612 East Holmes Avenue could be termed a "Swiss style bungalow". It bears a strong family resemblance to many 17th and 18th century Swiss rural houses, with its use of fieldstone, natural wood shingles, and steep gabled roof. The wide, low shed-roofed dormer is also found on old Swiss houses.(3) These Swiss forms, including the use of rough-cast stucco and false half-timber, are found on many bungalows and it would be fair to say that old Swiss houses were a major influence on the bungalow style.



7. This 1919 house at 709 East Randolph Avenue is one of Huntsville's two examples of the Prairie style- a bungalow substyle developed in the Chicago area. Not only that, but it is closely patterned after a house designed by the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, published in the April 1907 "Ladies' Home Journal" as "A Fireproof House for \$ 5,000". (4) There seems little doubt that this house was derived from Wrights' design, the only significant difference being the large entry porch rather than Wrights' trellis and terrace shown to be beside the entry. The contractor was J. Nathan Williams.



This pair of small identical bungalows at 430 & 432 Locust Ave. were built in 1923. They were probably built from stock plans on speculation, as many houses were in this boom period. The front porches were likely enclosed later, for screened front porches were not common in this period. The builder of these houses is unknown.



9. This 418 Locust Avenue 1922 bungalow exhibits the Swiss influence (long, low swooping roof, large dormer, stucco, false half-timber) but not in a literal manner.(3) Notice the "missing" porch columns - a deliberate design feature. It would be an error to "replace" them. This house was built by Fisk & Hopper, contractors. Its design probably came from a "bungalow book" of stock plans.



10. These mill-worker's rental houses on north Meridian street were probably built in the early 1920's by Lincoln Mills. While small and modest, they display the bungalow characteristics of wide, low eaves with exposed rafter-ends, wide front porch and rough-cast stuccoed walls. In its squarish hip-roofed form, these bungalows are actually closer to the original Bengali "bangala" than most of the more elaborate Swiss-influenced versions.



11. This pair of nearly-identical stuccoed houses at 136 & 138 Walker Avenue represent the Spanish Colonial Revival style, rare in Huntsville but very common in some other cities. They were built in 1929 by Harold Riggins. The ceramic pan-tile roofs are probably the 56 year-old originals. These small houses are unusually good examples of their style.



12. This house at 609 Randolph Avenue was built in circa 1930 and is of the English Cottage style. Note the particularly sculptural chimney which gives the house a large measure of its interest and character. This style is frequently referred to as "Tudor". The "Old House Journal" feels that this term should be restricted to half-timber versions of this English Renaissance Revival style.



13. A large subdivision of houses similar to this one on Sewanee Road were built in the early 1940's during World War II to house Redstone and Huntsville Arsenal workers. Its style is derived from old New England cottages, except with a front porch added, and thus could be called a "Cape Cod Cottage" revival style.



14. This 1960's house on Lucerne Drive is one of Huntsville's many latter 20th century "Ranch-Colonial" examples. This one unwittingly relates very closely to the designs of the 16th century architect Andrea Palladio (see text) and thus is a good candidate for the term "Ranch-Palladian". The design may be from a stock plan, or from a "house-plan service" (local drafting companies that work up plans for speculative builders, usually as modifications and variations on the builders' favorite plans). This neighborhood has several houses of nearly-identical plans, but with exterior variations and "reverses".

NOTES

- (1) Winter, Robert, "The California Bungalow" - Los Angeles, Hennessy & Ingalls, Inc., 1980, pg. 19
- (2) Ibid., pg. 21
- (3) Smith, G.E. Kidder, "Switzerland Builds", Stockholm, Ahlen & Akerlunds, 1950, pg. 43,52,53
- (4) Brooks, H. Allen, "The Prairie School", University of Toronto Press, 1972, pg. 123

CREDITS:

1. Historical data on individual structures (dates, architect, contractor) - City of Huntsville Planning Commission, Linda Bayer, Historical Planner.
- (2) Photographs - Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A.