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The Bungalow and Other 20th Century Residential Architecture in Huntsville: An Overview

Harvie P. Jones, FAIA

Introduction

Harvie P. Jones turned his attention to distinctive architecture of all kinds and eras. His own architectural practice encompassed contemporary buildings in contemporary styles as well as historic preservation.

In 1985, he attempted to “whet our interest” in Huntsville’s 20th century houses. His article, initially published in the *Historic Huntsville Review* (reprinted with permission of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society), surveys these relatively recent buildings from a late-20th century vantage point, as he noted, “only about 15 years” from the century’s end (*Historic Huntsville Quarterly*, Vol. XI, Nos. 2 & 3, Winter/Spring, 1985).

In the last years of the century, his comments are still valid. Harvie cast his remarks in the form of a brief introductory overview followed by a “picture story” of interesting examples. From his vast files of photographs, we located Harvie’s original black and white photographs so that the images would be as clear as possible.

In September 1998, when Harvie was reviewing the picture captions he had written thirteen years earlier, he noted “Almost every caption begins with ‘this.’ Too bad, but no editor was available to point out this stylistic defect.” For this republication of Harvie’s article, *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* Editor Margaret J. Vann has made the changes Harvie would have wanted.

Harvie’s picture story is especially rich in its consideration of bungalows, that quintessentially 20th century American building type. Many readers have had some experience with bungalows, for they are found across America at every income level and in every geography. Harvie’s appreciation of bungalows is infectious: an article on a mid-century Madison County bungalow will be featured in a forthcoming issue of *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*.

The turn of the 20th 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 Valkenburgh house at 501 Franklin Street 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* that denoted the typical 17th century native dwelling of that region of India (Winter 19). Historic 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 (Winter 21). 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 expression is the use of irregular low spreading forms with wide, exposed-rafter roof eaves,

usually half-timbered roughcast 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 that 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 16th century Italian architect. Many of the Ranch-Colonial houses are, except for their low, spreading proportions, very similar to the porticoed, hipped-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 1960-1985 Huntsville houses could fairly be called *Ranch Palladian* (see Fig. 14, page 31).

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



*Fig.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 invisible mortar joints, for the objective of brickwork of this period was for the wall to appear monolithic. The architect is unknown. A nearby church with similar brickwork has recently had its joints gouged out and wide, white mortar joints installed, as a sad revision to the original beauty of the walls.
Courtesy Lynn Jones.*



Fig.2 The architect Herbert Cowell designed this 1901 Dutch Colonial house at 603 Franklin Street, using a Dutch-Colonial 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 that support the porch columns. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



*Fig.3 Architect Herbert Cowell designed this finely-detailed, well-constructed, circa 1902 house at 501 Franklin Street. 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 that might best be called Free Classic in style, a recognized term of the period.
Courtesy Lynn Jones.*



Fig. 4 A free adaptation of the Colonial Revival style is represented in this 1907 house at 418 McClung Avenue. While the basic design is technically Colonial Revival (boxy shape, hipped roof, fanlighted and 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 gargantuan 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. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig. 5 In 1909, Huntsville architect Edgar Love designed this fine early bungalow at 531 Franklin Street. Notice the kick of the roof-ridge ends—a refinement found in at least one other Huntsville bungalow. The zigzag roof and bay window give this bungalow an informal and welcoming air. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig.6 The 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 (Smith 52,53). 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. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig. 7 Huntsville has two examples of the Prairie Style. One of them is the 1919 house at 709 East Randolph Avenue—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" (Brooks 123). There seems little doubt that this house was derived from Wright's design, the only significant difference being the large entry porch rather than Wright's trellis and terrace shown beside the entry. The contractor was J. Nathan Williams. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



*Fig.8 This pair of small identical bungalows at 430 and 432 Locust Avenue were built in 1923. They were probably built from stock plans on speculation, as many houses were in the 1920s boom period. The front porches were likely enclosed later, for screened front porches are not common in this period. The builder of these houses is unknown.
Courtesy Lynn Jones.*



Fig. 9 The Swiss influence was strong in many bungalows. The 1922 bungalow at 418 Locust Avenue exhibits the Swiss influence (long, low swooping roof, large dormer, stucco, false half-timber), but not in a literal manner (Smith 52,53). 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. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig. 10 These mill-worker's rental houses on north Meridian Street were probably built in the early 1920s by Lincoln Mills. While small and modest, the houses 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. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig. 11 The pair of nearly-identical stuccoed houses found at 136 and 138 Walker Avenue represent the Spanish Colonial Revival style, rare in Huntsville but very common in some other cities. The houses 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. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



*Fig. 12 The sculptural chimney, dark brick, and steep roof denote this house as being of the English Cottage style. This house at 609 Randolph Avenue was built circa 1930. 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.
Courtesy Lynn Jones.*



Fig. 13 A large subdivision of houses similar to this house on Sewanee Road was built in the early 1940s 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.

Courtesy Lynn Jones.



Fig. 14 The 1960s 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 builder's favorite plans). This neighborhood has several houses of nearly identical plans, but with exterior variations and reverses. Courtesy Lynn Jones.



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Credits:

Historical data on individual structures (dates, architect, contractor) are from the City of Huntsville Planning Department, Linda Bayer Allen, Historical Planner. All photographs were taken by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA.



Remembering Harvie

...I know of no single individual more important to the progress of Judson College in this decade than [Harvie]...His work...[is] invested in the lives of young women....

David E. Potts, President Judson College

Marion, Alabama

Shortly after moving into an old house, I had the privilege of seeing Harvie P. Jones give one of his famous slide presentations. On the screen suddenly appeared a picture of our banister. I nudged the lady next to me and proudly announced, "That's our banister!" just as Harvie said: "Now this is an example of poor workmanship."

Dot Johnson, Huntsville