

Sweet Home, Again

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Chicago's bungalows, long neglected, are going green—and enjoying a massive revival.

From a plane descending into Chicago's Midway Air port, it appears as a swath of countless specks dotting the city's edge. This is Chicago's bungalow belt, and its 80,000 houses look, at first glance, commonplace: one-and-a-half-story single-family homes, rectangular and made of brick, the roofs low-pitched with wide overhangs. It's easy to see why the bungalows have often been derided for their monotonous regularity. Chicago was, after all, the home of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan and the site of the world's first skyscrapers, which rose above the city in the late 19th century as a testament to man's vertical mastery of his environment.

But the bungalows are themselves a testament to progress—of immigrants striving for the American dream. Most were built for the working class in the 1920s, between four and eight miles from downtown, as an escape from the squalor of city living. They were mass produced, yet the craftsmanship was superb and the details were stunning—limestone accents, art glass windows, oak trim, slate roofs, checkerboard face brick. Now, after years of apathy and neglect, Chicagoans have once again embraced the bungalow belt. Six of its neighborhoods were recently listed in the National Register, and owners in two other neighborhoods are now applying for the designation. The Chicago Architecture Foundation has added two bungalow tours to the more than 80 tours it already gives and has organized an exhibition devoted to the houses. And middle-class families are once again moving in, restoring them with ecofriendly features, greening the bungalow belt for the new century.

Because bungalows represent about one third of Chicago's single-family houses, their renaissance is vital to the continued health of the city's infrastructure. They were in danger of deteriorating beyond repair when Mayor Richard Daley—who himself grew up in a bungalow in Bridgeport, a South Side neighborhood—formed the Historic Chicago Bungalow Association in 2000. The group's goal was to tout these homes' historical importance and show how they could be turned into modern-day residences. More than just a question of historic preservation, reviving the bungalows has become a means of providing affordable housing, creating a green housing stock, and revitalizing Chicago's neighborhoods.

“The initiative started with virtually no knowledge on the public front about what a bungalow was—it was an old house that your grandmother used to live in,” says Jim Peters, director of preservation planning at Landmarks Illinois. “Now, a bungalow is a desirable thing to have. People have seen the quality of these buildings, have seen how they can be adapted and upgraded. That wasn't the case 15 years ago.”

The bungalows have emerged as a model for the convergence of historic preservation and sustainability, not only because of their ecofriendly restorations, but also because they're an alternative to new construction in the sprawling exurbs. The only remaining question

is whether the initiative can sustain its momentum.

On a crisp fall morning, I am driving near downtown Chicago with Tom Drebenstedt, a docent with the Chicago Architecture Foundation who helped create the bungalow tours and who owns one of the houses himself. Drebenstedt explains that concentric rings of development surround the city and that by heading west toward the bungalow belt, we can see the progression of architecture that influenced and led to the bungalow boom. It is, in a sense, a drive through history.

We pass through zones of business and industry and enter an area with both industrial buildings and cottages. Before the bungalow belt was developed, many working-class families in the late 19th century lived in dismal conditions. We pull to the side of Grand Avenue not far from downtown, across from a row of wood cottages with crumbling factory buildings behind them. “Where’s the green space?” says Drebenstedt. “There isn’t any. These buildings are right up to the sidewalk line. There’s no front yard. There’s no back yard. Are there alleys? Yeah. Is there a sewer system? Maybe, if you’re lucky. How do you heat your house? You have a stove; you’re burning coal. Just look at these cottages slammed up against each other.”

Derived from the Hindi word for hut, *bangla*, the bungalow emerged in India in the 18th century as a one-story thatched hut with a large porch, a form later modified in New York and California as a home for the affluent. Drebenstedt drives me to the Villa, a neighborhood dating to 1907 that is lined with California-style bungalows. He points out the huge porches, ill suited for the Chicago winter, and the large lot sizes, which prevented developers from squeezing the houses into tight rows. The more typical Chicago bungalow, set on a long and narrow lot, emerged soon after, influenced by both the arts and crafts and prairie school movements. The boom officially began in 1910 and lasted until the start of World War II, although most building took place before the Great Depression. “You had a real strong economy in the ’20s, and a huge wave of immigrants—people working in factories, coming to this country, trying to become Americans,” says Drebenstedt. Indoor plumbing and heating systems were becoming commonplace, and rail lines and the automobile made settling on the outskirts of Chicago possible. “And you start to see people buying houses and taking out mortgages. All these forces just came together.”

We park on a tree-lined street in Irving Park, one of the first bungalow neighborhoods to be listed in the National Register. In 1917, Albert J. Schorsch, a Hungarian immigrant and real estate entrepreneur, broke ground on a development of about 1,000 bungalows. “There’s a lot of variation,” Drebenstedt says as we walk along a street where some of the first bungalows were built in the neighborhood. “Even though you have one floor plan, you can flop it over and change the exterior a little bit. You pull this brick out here, switch the color scheme.”

We pause and enjoy the shade of the large tree canopy and the pleasing symmetry of the endless rows of bungalows. A few people are walking dogs or running errands, but it is quiet, remarkably so for our proximity to downtown. The first owners must have

cherished this calm, the sense of being a world away from the bustle of the city. “This,” says Drebenstedt, “is your classic Chicago bungalow neighborhood.”

The Historic Chicago Bungalow Association helps bungalow owners in a variety of ways. Owners first certify their houses with the group for free. (Frame structures or those with a compromised historic integrity are not eligible—even in a neighborhood of gems, you can see why the bungalow association was for med: vinyl siding, inappropriate dormers, modern picture windows, and other evidence of ill-advised restorations.) Owners can then apply for low-interest loans or grants of up to \$5,000, depending on household income, to help green or restore their homes. So far, 9,000 people have certified their bungalows, and more than 4,000 have used the loans and grants. The association has also restored six bungalows as green model homes, which are featured during an expo held each October, and has compared their energy usage with that of conventional restorations. In two of the original models, energy savings since 2002 have averaged more than \$1,100 a year.

Later, I meet with Annette Conti, the association’s executive director, and she shows me a green model home currently being restored in Belmont-Cragin, a neighborhood on the northwest side. Conti, formerly a project manager at Neighborhood Housing Services in Chicago, unloads six or seven bundles of tiles from the trunk of her car so that workers can start laying them in the bathroom. Inside, she leads me to a table in the living room, with two bathtubs stacked nearby, and reviews the results of a blower test conducted on the house before the restoration began. A large fan stationed at the front door forced 20-mile-per-hour wind into the house as inspectors used meters to determine where air was leaking. In total, the bungalow had more than three square feet of cracks and gaps, many of them in the attic and basement.

Conti leads me up the wood frame of a staircase to the attic, where workers have already started to cover the exposed walls, from floor to ceiling, with BioBase, a soy-based ecofriendly insulation. In the basement, she shows me where they have sealed large gaps between the subfloor and exterior wall with fiberglass sheets.

The bungalow’s original windows, which one might expect to be the main energy culprit, are actually rather efficient. “The Chicago bungalow window is just an exceptional window,” says Conti. “When it was built, the trees they were cutting down were old growth lumber. For that reason alone we don’t want to throw these away.” In this house, as in many of the model bungalows, the association will install wood storm windows to help contend against the Chicago winters.

In the kitchen, workers have uncovered the original wood floor, though dozens of protruding patent nails still need to be removed. Conti says she will lead neighbors through the house in a few days so that they can see the ongoing renovation. “We’re encouraging people to understand why we are not demolishing the interior and are selectively making repairs to the house,” she says. She waves her arm around. “I want this house to live on for another 100 years.”

Bungalow by bungalow, block by block, the strategy is simple: Get the neighbors talking and watch the neighborhood blossom. The message is certainly spreading. One morning, Cory Williams sits on a couch in the living room of his green model bungalow in the South Side neighborhood of Auburn Gresham, as his two-year-old daughter, Kennedy, wraps her arms around his neck. Williams is the off ice manager at a nearby church, and when he and his fiancée (now his wife), Evelyn, were looking for a place in the fall of 2006, the pastor told them about the model home. “A good friend of mine, the maintenance guy at the church, came down and was like, ‘Wow, look at this, look at that,’ ” says Williams. Solar panels on the roof heat water for the house, helping the furnace run more efficiently. In the back yard, rainwater runs into an underground hose that keeps the lawn green. Kitchen cabinets are made of wood from rubber trees, an ecofriendly option.

Williams confesses he knew little about Chicago bungalows or green technology when he moved in, only that the alternative was a cramped condo in the city. But his appreciation for the house has grown considerably. “We’re committed to maintaining our bungalow,” he says, “because it is an architectural treasure for the city.”

Victor Harbison, a teacher who bought a green model bungalow in the neighborhood of Chicago Lawn, echoes that sentiment. His main motivation for buying his bungalow, which has a geothermal system that uses ground water to help heat and cool the structure, was the price: \$148,000. But he, like Williams, has since come to appreciate the historical significance of the bungalow and how his house, abandoned before the association restored it, is part of a larger neighborhood revitalization effort. “If every block was like ours,” he says, “imagine the transformative power that would have on the civic and cultural life of this city.” Living in a restored bungalow instead of building a new house in the exurbs not only obviates the waste and environmental costs of new construction but also saves gas by reducing one’s commute. The bungalow neighborhoods “are not rootless communities built on the edge of sprawl-land,” says the University of Virginia’s Daniel Bluestone, who helped the first few bungalow neighborhoods with their National Register applications. “They have great value because they are tied into the existing infrastructure of mass transit, schools, and community buildings.”

Not surprisingly, the bungalow initiative has inspired the founding of another organization in Chicago: the Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative, targeted at century-old houses in the North Lawndale neighborhood. Which is not to say that the bungalow association doesn’t face challenges. In fringe neighborhoods, the real estate loan crisis will bring foreclosures and dampen revitalization efforts. There is, moreover, the simple challenge of getting homeowners to buy into the program. The Greater Southwest Development Corp. has helped hundreds of homeowners certify their bungalows, says Livia Villarreal, the group’s deputy director of counseling services. But some homeowners dismiss the program as too good to be true or don’t follow through with the application process. And then there is the question of funding. The bungalow association’s five-year partnership with the Illinois Clean Energy Foundation may end this fall. Conti says the association—which receives \$2 million each year from such

sources as Chicago's Department of Housing and Department of Environment, and an array of other community development and environmental organizations—is looking for more funding sources to keep the momentum going.

Not far from Harbison's home in Chicago Lawn, I learn, is another model bungalow. It was built in 1925 on a corner of West 64th Street as part of the Better Homes in America initiative, of which President Calvin Coolidge was the honorary head. "We decided to build a house and to furnish it in a way that would be an inspiration and an education to those who already own their homes and to those who should some day achieve this forward character making ambition," reads the Better Homes pamphlet about the house.

It could be the bungalow association's mission statement, lacking only a few words about historic preservation and sustainability, and it's hard not to be struck by how things have come full circle. If history has taught us anything, it's that the bungalows—their bricks sturdy, their bones solid—are scrappy survivors, much like the working-class men and women who once called them home.

[For a profile of Dennis Scott and Thom Day and the house they transformed, log on to www.nationaltrust.org/preservation.]

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