

WHAT IS A BUNGALOW?



Twycross House

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At the turn of the last century bungalows took America by storm. These small houses, some costing as little as \$900, helped fulfill many Americans' wishes for their own home, equipped with all the latest conveniences. Central to the bungalow's popularity was the idea that simplicity and artistry could harmonize in one affordable house. The mania for bungalows marked a rare occasion in which serious architecture was found outside the realm of the rich. Bungalows allowed people of modest means to achieve something they had long sought: respectability. With its special features – style, convenience, simplicity, sound construction, and excellent plumbing – the bungalow filled more than the need for shelter. It provided fulfillment of the American dream.

The bungalow was practical, and it symbolized for many the best of the good life. On its own plot of land, with a garden, however small, and a car parked out front, a bungalow provided privacy and independence. To their builders and owners, bungalows meant living close to nature, but also with true style.

But what is a bungalow anyway? Where does the term come from? And what is so great about this architectural style?

Most dictionaries are explicit: a bungalow is a one or one-and-a-half story dwelling. Good enough, except that since the period when most bungalows

were constructed - roughly 1880 to 1930 in the United States - literally every type of house has at one time been called a bungalow. Two-story houses built on the grounds of hotels are still called bungalows, for example. And to further muddy the definition, the great Southern California architect Charles Sumner Greene went out of his way to call his Gamble house (1909) in Pasadena, Calif., a bungalow. Instead, the Gamble house is a sprawling two-story residence with a third-floor pool room.

Low profile, high foundation. A bungalow's distinction is its low profile. There are no vertical bungalows even though in a few cities such as Sacramento, Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, the basically horizontal house type is raised on high foundations. Promotional literature in the early 20th century almost always noted the chief purpose of the bungalow: to place most of the living spaces on one floor. The advantages are obvious - the absence of a second story simplifies the building process. Utilities can be installed more easily than in a two-story house. Safety is at a premium because, in the event of fire, windows as well as doors offer easy escape. Best of all, the bungalow allows staircases to be eliminated, a boon for the elderly and also for the homemaker, who can carry out household tasks without a lot of trips up the stairs.

The origin of the bungalow has its roots in the Indian province of **Bengal**. There, the common native dwelling and the geographic area both had the same root word, *bangla* or *bangala*. Eighteenth century huts of one story with thatched roofs were adapted by the British, who used them as houses for colonial administrators in summer retreats in the Himalayas and in compounds outside Indian cities. Also taking inspiration from the army tent, the English cottage, and sources as exotic as the Persian verandah, early bungalow designers clustered dining rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms around central living rooms and, thereby, created the essential floor plan of the bungalow, leaving only a few refinements to be worked out by later designers.

Almost inevitably, this economical, practical type of house invaded North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first American house actually called a bungalow was designed in 1879 by William Gibbons Preston. Contrary to the usual definition, it was a two-story house built at

Monument Beach on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. It was probably called a bungalow because it resembled resort architecture.

From the East the idea spread westward. Naturally, California - in everyone's mind the ultimate resort - was a promising locale for bungalows. Land was relatively cheap, and the possibility of affordable and comfortable housing was attractive to the young on the make, the sick on the mend, and the old on modest pensions. The first California house dubbed a bungalow was designed by the San Francisco architect A. Page Brown for J.D. Grant in the early 1890s. A true bungalow, this one-and-a-half story residence was set on a high foundation and located on a hillside. It was a strange blend of Bengalese, Queen Anne and Swiss chalet architecture.

The bungalow craze took off after the turn of the century, during an era in which Americans were obsessed with the notion of health or simply attracted to economic opportunities in the booming West. Before World War I, a small bungalow could be built for \$900. A good-sized bungalow cost maybe \$3,500.

Ironically, the bungalow that had once been the symbol of retreat to the countryside became the architecture of the city and its suburbs. Yet the bungalow did not lose its identification with the rural idyll and a better, golden day. Be it ever so humble, it embodied an ideal for the majority of Americans - the free-standing, single-family dwelling set down in a garden - an ideal that clings to us today.