



About a third of Chicago's single-family housing stock consists of bungalows like these, built by the tens of thousands in the early 20th century. *Photographer: Justin Olechiw/Chicago Bungalow Association*

CityLab | Design

Chicago's Bungalows Are Where the City Comes Together

Transplanted from afar, these modest-but-stylish brick homes embodied the middle-class dreams of a blue-collar boomtown.

By Zach Mortice

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(This article is part of Bloomberg CityLab's ongoing series exploring the iconic home designs that shaped global cities. [Read more from the series and sign up to get the next story sent directly to your inbox.](#))

In Chicago, there are plenty of reasons for South Side residents to keep Northsiders at arm's length. This includes the North Side's nonsensical lack of numbered streets, opposed baseball fandoms, and the outsized power of the city's wealthier half – an imbalance that has created one of the most

striking geographic divides between rich and poor, white and Black, in American urban life.

But for Chicago historian and native Southsider Sherman “Dilla” Thomas, there’s a quick way for a Northsider to break through this legacy and offer at least one piece of common ground: Say that you live in a bungalow.

“We have bungalows on the South Side too,” Thomas says. “If you’re good enough for a bungalow, then you’re cool with me.”



Designed to fit in the city’s narrow lots, bungalows offered an affordable housing solution for Chicago’s booming population. *Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab*

All over the city, these humble houses are a remarkably consistent presence. It’s estimated that Chicago boasts 80,000 original bungalows – a third of the city’s single-family housing stock – located across a U-shaped band four to seven miles from the city center called the Bungalow Belt.

In a city riven by inequality and resentment, bungalows are one of the few things that white, Black and Latino Chicagoans all love together. “The Chicago Bungalow is a unifying thing,” says Thomas.

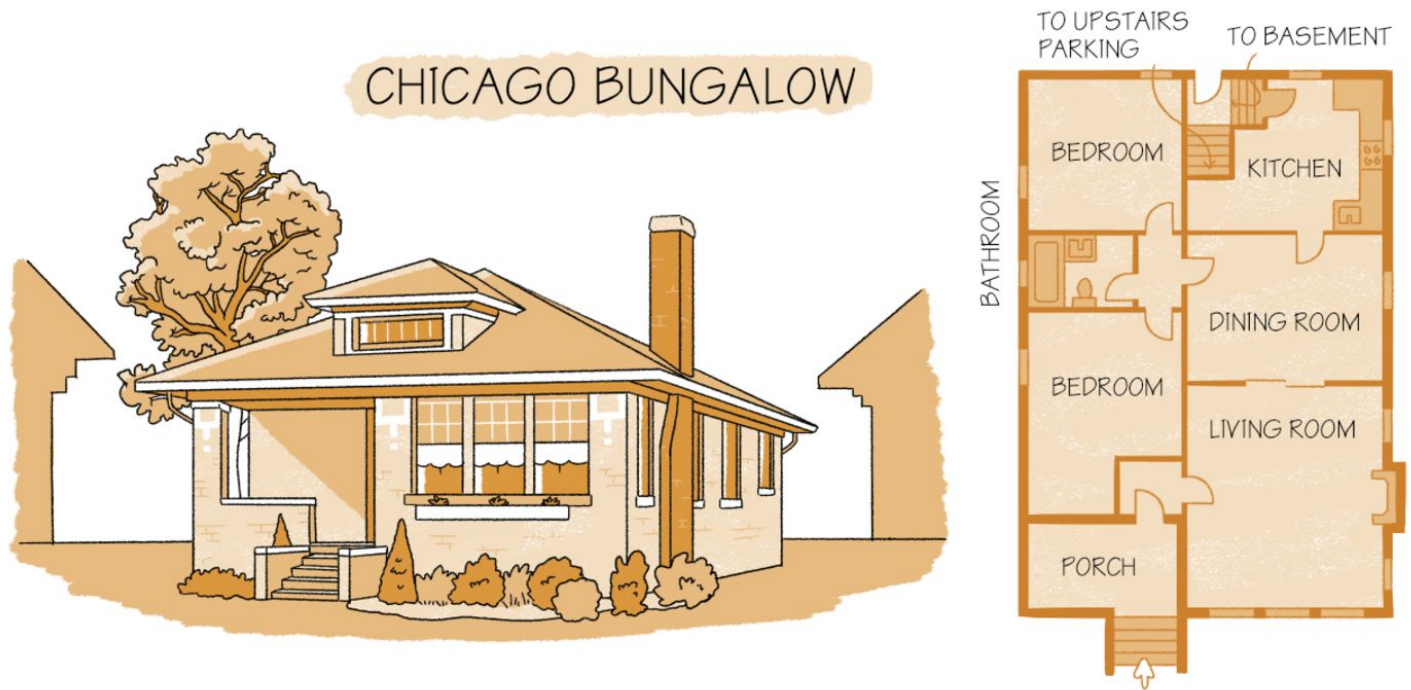


Illustration: Josh Kramer/Bloomberg Citylab

Featured in Thomas’ indispensable [TikTok videos on history and urbanism](#), Chicago bungalows share several characteristics. Made of brick with Arts-and-Crafts-style detailing, the standard example is a one or one-and-a-half story home with a low-pitched or hipped roof and dormer windows. Steps ascend from street level to a front porch or sometimes a side entrance; large windows and a prominent front bay face the street. The houses have a rectangular footprint, with long sides to match Chicago’s narrow lot lines. Inside, the front door leads to a large living room, with kitchens and dining rooms tucked toward the back, often across the hall from a bathroom wedged between two bedrooms.

Chicago’s surfeit of bungalows remains because their rise coincided with an explosion of growth. The city’s population doubled in the first three decades of the 20th century, and half of city’s housing stock was built from 1910 to 1930, with bungalow construction tapering off through the Great Depression. Their signature brick was a response to the 1871 Chicago Fire, which tore through timber-frame neighborhoods, as well as a sop to the city’s massive brick industry.



Many bungalows boast ornate front bay windows. *Photographer: Justin Olechiw/Chicago Bungalow Association*

The uniformity of bungalows – often the first home a family owned – helped to moderate the sectarian identities of the immigrants pouring into the city. No matter if they were from Italy, Ireland, Poland, or Ukraine, once you’ve trimmed your hedges and lofted a spare bedroom into the attic, “the bungalows really did help people to feel like Chicagoans,” says Mary Ellen Guest, executive director of the Chicago Bungalow Association.

Built for a Middle-Class Boom

Chicago’s bungalows came a long way from their roots in India. The word is derived from “bangla,” referring to a house in the Bengali style. These houses were huts with mud walls and thatched roofs; encountered by Westerners via British colonialism and adapted, they became sprawling country estates. Once in Britain, bungalow-style houses were typically built as seaside holiday homes for the burgeoning middle class.



Size 29'0" x 46'0"

5 Rooms, Bath and Solarium

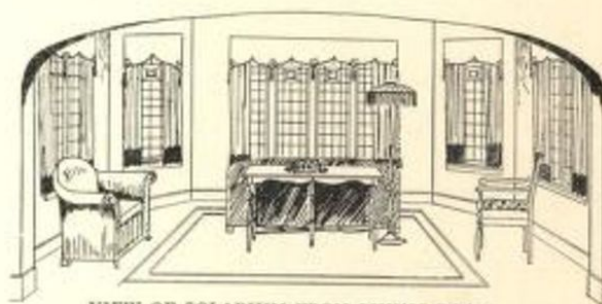
The CHERAW

FACE brick, stone trimming, leaded glass, tile roof, all are used in the correct relation to produce an harmonious whole. The architect has exercised good taste on the inside as well.



DIMENSIONS

Width over all	36' 6"
Depth over all	59' 6"
Ceiling height	9' 0"
Height of basement	7' 0"



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A 1920s home building catalog touted several bungalow variations. *Courtesy Chicago Bungalow Association*

When it came to North America, the bungalow landed first in California before spreading eastward – likely the first architectural trend to blaze such a path. In Chicago, the style succeeded the Workers Cottage, most built from 1870 to 1910, and recognized by their gabled roofs and wood frame construction. These were more utilitarian structures that often lacked not only plumbing and electricity but amenities like parlor rooms for entertaining. “The Workers Cottage was based on a need. Bungalows seemed to be more aspirational,” says Chicago architectural historian Elizabeth Blasius of Preservation Futures.

The average bungalow of the 1920s cost about \$6,000 to build, and sold for \$8,000 to \$9,000. In the South Shore neighborhood, you could buy a bungalow for a few hundred dollars down and secure your stake in homeownership with monthly payments of \$20. Bungalows “were the first homes that were built for the emerging middle class in the city,” says Guest.

Though the factory line workers and slaughterhouse unionists that moved in lived urban lives, bungalow designers still promoted a rural ideal. In his 1911 book *Bungalows: Their Design, Construction, and Furnishing, with Suggestions also for Camps, Summer Homes, and Cottages of Similar Character*, Henry Saylor wrote that the bungalow is “far better suited to employment for the temporary home, the shooting-lodge and the weekend retreat in the woods or along the shore, than it is to use for permanent homes in suburban communities.” Homebuilders kept up this pretense. Drawings in contemporary bungalow catalogs never showed two bungalows next to each other, showing them instead surrounded only by trees and lawn.

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An ad from 1923 targeted real estate agents and developers. *Courtesy Chicago Bungalow Association*

Certainly, the inside/outside elements of bungalows (their small yards, porches, and large front windows) that gave residents passing connections to the land were key to their appeal. But in practice, these houses were deployed in a purely urban way to maximize saleable volume on narrow lots.

Lots of Savings, a Bit of Style

The bungalows' materials and detailing were equally tied to economic and industrial realities. Their brick and stonework accents are less premium flourishes than evidence that mason labor was cheaper than now. "If you were to build something affordable today with [similar] intent, a lot of the details in the bungalow wouldn't exist," says Manuel Hernandez, of Design Seed, a Chicago architecture firm that specializes in bungalow renovations. "You can go to the suburbs to find perfect examples of what a speculative, affordable, mass-produced house looks like, and it looks nothing like a bungalow. It's wood-framed, there's no decoration. It's very minimal."



A bungalow living room offers space for entertaining and a commanding view of the street. *Photographer: Justin Olechiw/Chicago Bungalow Association*

The building process was similarly pragmatic and piecemeal. A few architects were fairly prolific at designing bungalows, such as Ernest Braucher and F.A. Fielder. But most bungalows didn't get the level of consistent detail you find in, say, the delicate terracing surrounding Fielder's front doors in the Chatham neighborhood's Yale Avenue. Builders would more typically construct using book-building kits by Sears and Roebuck or Montgomery Ward, and might build a half-dozen homes on one block and a half-dozen on the next.



Art-deco details around doors and windows reflect the middle-class aspirations of 1920s homebuyers. *Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab*

Concern about austere repetitive designs rattled neighborhoods from time to time. One group of neighbors in the Morgan Park neighborhood offered to pay builders a premium if the new bungalows looked less uniform. Only a few high-minded design ideals got wrapped up into bungalow building. The style was a meeting place for the remnants of the Arts and Crafts reverence for bespoke detail and the Chicago-centric and Frank Lloyd Wright-led Prairie Style, as both emphasized the flat horizon of the Midwestern landscape, seen in the compact horizontal layering of single-story bungalows. (Early boosters praised bungalows' "low earth-hugging masses" and horizontality, as if they were Wright houses themselves.)

The Bungalow Grows Up

When the post-WWII housing boom took off, it did so without bungalows at its forefront. Price increases for building material meant other housing styles (like Georgians and Cape Cods) could be built with fewer materials and more efficiency. Stylistic preferences began to shift, too, as American

home buyers became more comfortable with streamlined Modernism. Bungalows' art glass windows and fireplaces came to look old-fashioned and fussy, an image they have never fully shaken.

The now 25,000-member Chicago Bungalow Association (CBA) was founded to make sure that bungalows weren't, according to Guest, discarded as "your grandma's house," but still relevant to the city. Their durability is one asset. Because they're made of brick, these houses age well. "There's no planned obsolescence," she says.



Many modern bungalow owners add second-floor bedrooms — to the dismay of some preservationists. *Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab*

But bungalows can be energy hogs, offering so little insulation that residents sometimes added their own homemade solutions. "To this day, bungalow owners will find a couple of layers of newsprint in their attics," she says. Much of the CBA's programming is focused on making bungalows more

weatherized.

Maintaining both the bungalows' suitability as contemporary housing and their original form can prove a challenge. Accommodating new growth and consumer demand within historic buildings is always fraught, hence the CBA's #StopthePop campaign, which took aim at the second-floor additions many owners build. These usually arise when residents, or speculative developers, desire larger kitchens, which requires the deletion of a downstairs bedroom that often get a relocated to a new second floor.

To the CBA's eyes, these alterations are awkward aesthetic violations of bungalows' most iconic elements, and a tool used by house flippers to usher in top-dollar buyers. They're often built with low-quality materials, says Guest, adding contemporary frame construction onto legacy brick – a clumsy seam that can invite water infiltration.

Pop-tops can be emblematic of the home-renovation-show-inspired churn of bathroom remodels and blown-out walls, but some preservationists are less concerned about the trend. "It's likely better to pop a top on a bungalow than to demolish the whole thing and build a new single-family home," architectural historian Blasius says. "I'm happier to see someone living in a bungalow and enjoying the neighborhood and less concerned with what they do to an individual property. I think that preservationists should look at residential architecture in different ways than it looks at governmental or commercial buildings."



Fanciful pop-tops designed by Could Be Architecture take the bungalow to new heights. *Source: Could Be Architecture*

That's also the view of Joseph Altshuler, a Chicago architect whose 2017 exhibition "Bungalow Futures" looked for mischievous ways to make bungalows flexible and exuberant. The design guidelines suggested by the CBA warn against any changes perceptible from the street, preserving the "scenography of historic character," says Altshuler. His question: Can we respect the historical precedent of the bungalow while still embracing change that retains essential bungalow-ness?

"Maybe the typology gets violated by addition, but the character doesn't have to be," he says.

With his partner Zack Morrison at Could Be Architecture, Altshuler designed mutated bungalows with elements exaggerated to the point of hilarity: stacks of dormers as tall as lighthouses, second-story porches crowned like grand atria. The exhibit coined an alternative hashtag for this campaign: #OnceYouPopYouCantStop.

For Thomas, the Chicago historian, pop-tops can also be the lesser of two evils. "If blowing out the top of a bungalow keeps you on the South Side and keeps you giving back to the neighborhood that raised you, then blow the top out of the bungalow," he says.

Certainly, neighborhoods on the South Side have struggled to keep people in buildings and historic buildings intact, and there's evidence that bungalows here and elsewhere have been particularly vulnerable. According to data from the [DePaul Institute of Housing Studies](#), a quarter of all foreclosures during the 2007-2011 real estate collapse and recession were single-family homes in Bungalow Belt neighborhoods, hinting at overrepresentation of urban bungalows in foreclosure rolls.



The Bungalow Belt continues to serve new generations of Chicagoans. *Photo: Zach Mortice/Bloomberg CityLab*

Thomas' Auburn Gresham neighborhood had nearly 2,000 single-family-home foreclosures between 2007 and 2011. He's lived in a bungalow there for most of his life; first the one his parents bought, then his own. Those Baby Boomers were among the first Black Chicagoans to live in bungalows, which were built far from the South Side lakeshore [Black Belt](#), the [only place](#) the city's first Black residents could live. In the 1960s, African-American households moved into the

Bungalow Belt, becoming the caretakers and de-facto preservationists of historic homes that they were explicitly barred from buying when they were new.

Thomas' family watched white flight unfold around them, marveling at those who decided to leave their bungalows behind. "They left brick structures to go to the suburbs to buy [wood-]frame structures," says Thomas. "It was really silly to give up." For him, bungalow preservation is a way to "rekindle and reach out to the white flighters that left Chicago," he says. "That's something that they remember and cherish – their upbringing in that bungalow."

The reasons such people give for having fled the city – crime, vacancy, ruptured social fabric – often have relatively few outward signs in bungalow neighborhoods today. The presence of bungalows may not guarantee against creeping systemic deprivation. But as the Thomas' South Side is endlessly exoticized by stories of wrath, precarity and perseverance, its bungalows remain, as they always have been, images of home and middle-class propriety.