

ISSUE NUMBER 68
THE MAGAZINE PUBLISHED
IN THE INTEREST OF
PRESERVING AND
RESTORING THE
MODEST AMERICAN
20TH CENTURY HOME,
THE BUNGALOW,
AND THE RICH LIFESTYLE
THAT IT AFFORDS

AMERICAN BUNGALOW

RESTORATION
ACCESSORIES
HISTORY
FURNISHINGS
EVENTS
ARTS AND CRAFTS
UPGRADING
PHILOSOPHY
GARDENS
PROJECTS
LANDSCAPING



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HOMING IN ON THE HEIGHTS

Residents and developers vie for the heart of a historic Houston neighborhood.



BY ANNE SLOAN

IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY, people are often surprised to find a large historic subdivision nestled in a tree-shaded area just over two miles from the chrome-and-glass skyscrapers of downtown Houston. After all, Houston has a reputation (especially, perhaps, among those who have never been here) as a city dominated by freeways and sprawl.

In 1891, though, Houston was a small, swampy town, surrounded by countryside that was, then as now, prone to flooding when the flat landscape of southeast Texas allows the ample rainfall each year to quickly swell bayous and creeks. Oscar Martin Carter, a self-made millionaire and president of the Omaha & South Texas Land Company, and D.D. Cooley, a company official (and grandfather-to-be of heart-transplant pioneer Dr. Denton

Cooley), somehow saw potential for tremendous growth in the countryside that surrounds the town. The land company, and Carter as an individual, jointly and wisely purchased 1,796 acres situated a few miles away and 23 feet above the “utter flatness” of little Houston, naming the new venture Houston Heights.

A native of Massachusetts, Carter designed Heights Blvd., a replica of Boston’s Commonwealth Blvd., to be the grand entry to the new development. Heights Blvd. is a divided street 150 feet wide, with a 60-foot-wide esplanade down the middle, that spans White Oak Bayou over twin bridges. The first homes, imposing Victorian structures, were built along the boulevard for investors, but Houston Heights was not planned for the elite. The developers’ promotional brochures stressed affordability, and

lots were sold on the installment plan for as little as \$250. Carter’s purchase of Houston’s mule-drawn streetcar system, which he soon electrified, ensured that the suburb would be attractive to working-class people who daily rode the streetcar to the city.

Carter directed the platting of 10,000 residential lots, a retail center and a manufacturing district with rail access. He donated land for parks, schools and churches, making Houston Heights the first mixed-use planned community in Texas. In 1896, when his company went bankrupt, Carter became the sole owner of all unsold land, and residents voted for incorporation and organized

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

their own municipal government with mayor, aldermen, assessor, tax collector and marshal. A little over a decade later, in 1918, lacking an adequate tax base for schools, the residents requested and were granted annexation to the City of Houston.

A Bungalow Town

Buyers from all over the U.S., attracted by the prospect of inexpensive living in an attractive developing community, came to settle in Houston Heights, and new homes were quickly built “along bungalow lines” (to borrow a phrase common in the early 20th century) to house them. Heights



THE ONLY SPANISH MISSION-STYLE BUNGALOW IN HOUSTON HEIGHTS (OPPOSITE) IS KNOWN TO HOUSTONIANS AS THE “ALAMO HOUSE” BECAUSE OF ITS FACADE PAYING HOMAGE TO THAT OF THE 1724 MISSION IN SAN ANTONIO. IT IS THE MOST ELABORATE HOME OF ITS KIND IN THE CITY. DOUBLE-JERKINHEAD-GABLED DUPLEXES LIKE THE ONE AT LEFT ARE COMMON IN THE HEIGHTS.

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historic homes ranged from Victorian cottages to the two-story Prairie Style, but bungalows dominated every block.

Generally, these simple, affordable homes were constructed from ready-cut kits by carpenters and contractors who, for the most part, were unaware of the bungalow philosophy. The Crain Ready-Cut Company, Houston's largest supplier of kits, claimed in 1940 to have constructed 10,000 bungalows in the city. Rice University history professor Margaret Culbertson has noted that despite the widespread use of ready-cut material, Houston Heights does not look or feel like a "prefab" community. She suggests that stylistic variations of the area's homes were introduced by local contractors, who often worked from bungalow illustrations without ordering the plans.

Still, Heights homes generally lacked the elaborate bungalow exteriors seen in other Houston neighborhoods and elsewhere in the nation. One exception is the "Alamo house," as Houstonians call it. The only Spanish Mission-style bungalow in the Heights, it is the most elaborate and unique of its kind in the city.

THE BEFORE (BELOW) AND AFTER (BOTTOM) PHOTOS OF 816 ARLINGTON ST. ILLUSTRATE THE ABILITY OF HEIGHTS REMODELER GILBERT PEREZ, OWNER OF BUNGALOW REVIVAL, TO ENLARGE A BUNGALOW WHILE PRESERVING ITS INTEGRITY.



Houston's climate made the California-style bungalow a perfect fit. Architect Edwin M. Wyatt, who built a bungalow in the Heights in 1911, called this style most suitable for Houston. Noting that there was "little justification" for basements or "storm-sheltering" entry halls, Wyatt advocated the use of "breeze-inviting large windows, open interior archways and usually a large screened living porch," features that helped residents endure Houston's sweltering summers. Wyatt's 1940 plan book begins with a "brick on slab bungalow," a design that moved the bungalow toward the future Ranch-style home.

A historic bungalow clubhouse, a repurposed bungalow church and a lovely bungalow court, all still in use today, are representative of the variety of bungalows constructed in the Heights. In 1912, using a \$1,500 loan from the builder, Purdy Guinan Lumber Company, the Houston Heights Woman's Club, which had been founded in 1900 as a literary society, built a one-room clubhouse on a lot donated to the club by Helen Cooley, wife of D.D. In 1921, two Heights bungalow churches were erected; one, the Second Church of Christ Scientist, is now a handsome home.

IN 1900, 16 COMMUNITY WOMEN FOUNDED A LITERARY CLUB THAT MET IN HOMES UNTIL IT GREW TOO LARGE. IN 1912, RENAMED THE WOMAN'S CLUB, IT FINANCED THIS ONE-ROOM CLUBHOUSE WITH A \$1,500 LOAN FROM THE BUILDER ON LAND DONATED BY THE WIFE OF D.D. COOLEY. IT OPENED THE FOLLOWING YEAR AND IS STILL IN SERVICE.





A VIEW, TOP, OF A HANDSOME BRICK HOME IN NEIGHBORING WOODLAND HEIGHTS GIVES A HINT OF ITS MODEST 23-FOOT ELEVATION OVER THE SURROUNDING AREA. THAT ROBERT HARDIN'S 1921 BUNGALOW COURT (ABOVE) IS STILL OCCUPIED BY RENTERS AFTER 89 YEARS UNDERSCORES THE ENDURING APPEAL OF HIS BUNGALOW DESIGNS.

In 1921, Robert Augustus Hardin (1884–1978) built a bungalow court at 531 E. 20th St., on land his wife's family had owned since 1897, that is a rental property still owned by his descendents today. Hardin studied architecture at the University of Chicago, apprenticed to Frank Lloyd Wright and babysat for the Wright family as part of his job. Offended by Wright's marital infidelities, Hardin took off for California, where he recognized the simplicity and practicality of the California bungalow and bungalow courts. He came to Houston Heights, where he worked at his brother's lumber company and then as an architect.



THE OWNER OF THIS BUNGALOW ALSO OWNS JUBILEE, AN ECLECTIC BOUTIQUE IN THE HEART OF THE HEIGHTS'S 19TH ST. SHOPPING DISTRICT. HER HOME EXHIBITS THE SENSE OF ARTISTIC WHIMSY THAT CHARACTERIZES MANY OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S ARTISTS' HOMES.

A PRESERVATION ORDINANCE WITH TEETH?

Since June of this year, a task force of preservation enthusiasts and industry representatives appointed by Houston Mayor Annise Parker has recommended, and the City Council has acted on, several steps that would strengthen the city's 15-year-old historic preservation ordinance. Probably the most meaningful was the temporary suspension by the City Council, on June 1, of a provision that has allowed a property owner to move ahead with plans to demolish or relocate historic properties despite the rejection of those plans by the Houston Archeological and Historic Commission. All the property owner has had to do is wait 90 days after the commission's rejection before proceeding.

On July 21, Mayor Parker proposed the permanent elimination of the 90-day waiting period. Doing so would ban developers and property owners from tearing down historic buildings in the city's historic districts if the Archeological and Historic Commission denies their requests for demolition permits.

Homeowners will have more confidence that their neighborhood will stay the same if they know that someone cannot tear down a neighboring historic house and turn it into condos, said Lynn Edmundson, co-founder of Historic Houston, which advocates for the preservation of Houston culture and architecture.

"There needs to be protection," Edmundson said. "If you go through the process of being designated, then you want protection."

Councilwoman Sue Lovell, who chairs the council committee that deals with preservation matters, predicted such consistency will raise or maintain property values.

"The only way we can preserve the character of our historic neighborhoods is to ensure that the historic buildings in those districts are not torn down," Lovell said.

In recent years, issues of historic preservation in Houston have tended to become intertwined with the fact that the city has no zoning code, and thus no means of prohibiting, for example, building apartments in the middle of a neighborhood of bungalows.

Annie Sitton, author of the blog "The Bunny Bungalow: A Life Less Ordinary in a Tiny Texas Bungalow," writes:

"Houston is the only major city in the U.S. without a zoning code. Some, like historic home owners, see this lack as a detriment to historic preservation. To zoning opponents, zoning infringes on an individual's property rights; they say that zoning takes away the rights of the property owner. Zoning advocates feel that zoning protects property rights. Houston voters have rejected zoning three times: in 1948, 1962 and in 1993."

Councilwoman Lovell would seem to agree. Back in June, she said the preservation ordinance in its proposed altered form has been shown to be an effective economic development tool, raising property values in the Old Sixth Ward historic district, the only area in the city where drastic changes to historic properties, including demolition, actually can be prevented.

John Luke

This summary is based on reporting by the Houston Chronicle's Bradley Olson and on blogging by Kate Delias in the Chronicle blog "OHCite: Design, Architecture, Houston," produced by the Rice Design Alliance. For news updates on the Houston preservation situation, visit the American Bungalow Web site at americanbungalow.com/HoustonHeights.

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Aging Gracefully

Houston Heights prospered until the 1960s, when it suffered the same decline that affected inner-city neighborhoods across the country. In 1973, hoping to preserve their historic neighborhood, residents and business leaders organized the Houston Heights Association (HHA). Their efforts now bring more than 4,000 visitors to the Heights each year for home tours, runs and bike rallies. The association also owns and maintains two parks and the historic 1914 City Hall and Fire House that serves today as both an unofficial city hall and as an event facility.

Heights Boulevard has been called the spine of the Heights community or—as former resident and CBS News anchor Dan Rather dubbed it—“our Champs-Élysées.” At the entrance to the boulevard is the sparkling aluminum-clad ArtCar Museum, and at the end is a large traditional Victorian gazebo and park. In between are a bungalow coffee house, a bungalow art gallery, two World War II memorials and several lovely plazas, all of



IN PLANNING THE CENTRAL ESPLANADE OF HEIGHTS BLVD., CARE WAS TAKEN TO PRESERVE ALL NATIVE TREES, GIVING THE NEIGHBORHOOD A PARK-LIKE AMBIENCE. OPPOSITE, TOP: NEW CONSTRUCTION NEXT TO AN ORIGINAL BUNGALOW.



which testify to the amazing variety of this neighborhood. The popular three-mile trail on the boulevard's esplanade is maintained by HHA volunteers.

The Heights's 12,000 residents are an economically, ethnically and politically diverse concentration of artists, actors, musicians, architects and professional educators mixed in with the more affluent energy-company employees who desire proximity to downtown. Responding to the regenerated prosperity of the neighborhood, business owners, many of whom are Heights residents, operate avant-garde galleries, antiques stores, top-notch native-plant nurseries, quirky gift shops and a variety of restaurants, two of which are housed in bungalows. As was true in 1897, the Heights once again has its own opera company, Opera in the Heights, a 15-year-old, well-respected regional company that annually performs four fully staged operas at a historic church building on Heights Blvd.

Somewhat surprising has been the numbers of older couples moving into historic Heights bungalows, dwellings half the size of the suburban homes they leave. They choose bungalows because the simple, single-story floor plans and efficient use of space suit their needs and because they fall in love with the verdant setting. Moving to the Heights because of the nearby museums, theaters and—in some cases—their downtown jobs, these empty-



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nesters are delighted by the tree-shaded streets, front porches and welcoming atmosphere. All are impressed by the sense of community and connection with history that living in Houston Heights provides. As one resident said, "with its unique, well-chronicled history and rich 'Americana' architecture, this energetic neighborhood thrives on a small-town, close-knit vibe."

Hope for the Future

Unfortunately, the fact that this vibrant community sits in the middle of the fourth-largest city in America, a city still growing that provides relatively little protection for historic structures, means that the two historic districts recently created here are endangered. The Heights's simple bungalows, with their mature trees, are especially vulnerable to demolition because of their relatively low value apart from the land they sit on. The bank-driven decision to replace a bungalow with a two-story, 4,000-square-foot home on a 6,000-square-foot lot underscores Houston's failure to recognize that when it comes to construction, "old is greener than new."



JIM McHILLEN



DAVIS TUCKER

THESE HOMES ILLUSTRATE THE DIVERSITY OF STYLISTIC INTERPRETATIONS THAT ABOUND IN THE HEIGHTS.

901 W. 14th Street →



DAVIS TUCKER

There is some hope, however. Recently elected Mayor Annise Parker has assembled a task force to put some teeth into Houston's "toothless preservation ordinance." Many Heights residents hope that the city council will adopt a strengthened ordinance so that they will continue to be able to enjoy their diverse, historic small-town community in the heart of this modern cosmopolitan city. 🏠

Writer and Houston Heights resident Anne Sloan is the author, with the Houston Heights Association, of *Houston Heights* (Images of America), Arcadia Publishing, 2009.



JIM McHILLEN

THIS TREE-SHADED STREET, STILL LINED WITH HISTORIC BUNGALOWS, IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT THE HEIGHTS PRESERVATIONISTS ARE TRYING TO SAVE.