Anthony D King
The Bungalow: the production of a global culture

There's a jingle in the jungle, 'Neath the juniper and pine,
They are mangling the tangle
Of the underbrush and vine,
And my blood is all a-tingle
At the sound of blow on blow,
As I count each single shingle
On my bosky bungalow.

O, I think with bungaloathing
Of the struggling social swim,
Where they wrangle after bangles
Or for some new-fangled whim;
And I know by Bungalogic
That is all my bungalow
That a little bungalotion
~endeth every mortal moan!

For I oft get bungalonely
In the mingled human drove,
And I long for bungalofing
In some bungalotus grove,
In a cooling bungolocation
Where no troubling trails intrude,
'Neath some bungalowly rooftree
In east bungalongitude.

The stanzas above are from a popular poem published in about 1910.(1) The bungalow craze was just beginning in Australia and its consummation followed in the 1920s and 1930s. In all, perhaps 250,000 of the California version and another 300,000 of other varieties were built in Australian suburbs or rural areas.(2) The voguish house-type began in the late nineteenth century in Britain as more or less a second home, a vacation house (as the poem suggests). By the turn into the twentieth century it had gained acceptance in Britain, Australia and North America as an inexpensive house ideal for suburban living.

In Bangladesh where the house form - and word - originated it was also an inexpensive proposition but one of necessity. In a real sense the adaptation of the bungalow in the Western world was a response to increasing demands for more, inexpensive housing in ever-growing and expanding urban areas. That reply is studied expansively in Anthony D King's new and important book.

King is not interested in the house simply as a physical product. Rather, he sees it exemplifying certain societal functions and aspirations, much as the poem implies. They are defined in his introduction and it is obvious that he sets himself a task of arbiter of many and diverse disciplines, a generalist. He states that the book is about the historical forces-economic, which, in producing the bungalow, have also shaped much of the modern world: colonialism, industrialization, capitalism and socialism, urbanization and suburbanization, and the emergence of a global economy and culture. Yes, well...having set such an almost outrageous task, does he cope?

The multi-directed attack is best experienced and uses his own research about India and the United Kingdom. Obviously he is very confident about his material and resulting observations. He quite properly relies on informants and on publications by others as the basis for his evaluations of Australia and North America. The process reveals his physical and intellectual distance from these diverse places. While respectfully if tentatively applying the second-hand material, he too often makes vague assumptions and generalities, such as, the Australian settlement had always been the cottage ideal of a rural setting. A more serious problem, though, is not so much with content but intent. The daunting task inherent in his desire to unite the world under the umbrella of the humble bungalow phenomenon leads to a confused presentation. For instance, King restates his major issues, tasks, and definitions often, but each varies from introduction to chapter to chapter. An uneasy feeling settles in a reader's mind that the focus of King's intentions is unclear, and indeed this proves to be true. Each country is treated...
somewhat differently as is the structure of each chapter. Further, the unresolved complexity of his approach can be measured by a pleasant aspect of the book, its illustrations. Statistics, charts, suburban plans, drawings, cartoons, verse, billboards, songs, house plans, products (cottage butter), photographs old and new are haphazardly scattered throughout the text rather than neatly integrated in a manner which would increase the authority of his already convincing speculations. Sadly, there are many ambiguous and/or trite captions. For example: sawmill suburbs: San Antonio, Texas 1920s or World economy and cultural sphere: the bungalow in the Pacific, Honolulu 1854. These are cleverly confusing. Also, the obvious differences between the Texan and Hawaiian bungalow illustrations are not explained.

King's interpretation of the evidence is that Australia did not play a role in the maturing of the bungalow phenomenon but rather, that Australia participated as a consumer, initially (in a colonial situation???) and then as a nation caught by international capitalism. In any event, while he does include a short and interesting chapter on colonial Africa he is in fact not concerned with a global culture but with North American, selected British colonial, but mainly English contributions to their own cultures. The fact that the Australian bungalow looks either subtly or dramatically different to other bungalows elsewhere in the world needs further attention.

It is not difficult for a specialist or an architectural historian to challenge King (after all, his subject is the history of a building type). This should be avoided. The job of knitting together particular and fussy specialist information is difficult enough without fear of readers' nitpicking. The book should be enjoyed as a social and economic history of the bungalow phenomenon. The architectural historian will gain considerably from this presentation of a non-monumental building type. It is a book to study and browse through - but the Australian price ridiculous.

Reviewed by DONALD LESLIE JOHNSON

REFERENCES

1. First published in Good Housekeeping Magazine, c.1910, with the title 'Bungalow Ode', by Burgess Johnson.

The (History and Design of the) Australian House. Compiled by Robert Irving: Oxford University Press. $50.

This important book completes the trinity of basic references to our built background.

It has arrived within three years of the first, Heritage of Australia and within three months of the second, Victoria Illustrated.

Although each differs greatly from its companions in scope, emphasis and scholarship all have in common great physical presence, size, weight and technical excellence (Does it go without writing that this latest treatise on our industrial progress was set and printed in Hong Kong).

As regards scope; Victoria Illustrated of course makes no attempt to record life after Wodonga but the other two are stoically dedicated to a seven-state coverage (or at least six or five).

The Australian House (the correct title has been ignored since publication day) is the work of eleven contributors with a total of fourteen articles. The book is divided almost to the page into two sections (the lead page in each section is similarly and inappropriately divided, but of this, more later).

The book's first section - Two Centuries of Change - is a history of our house-designing habits. It commences with a survey by Robert Irving of British (English in the main, little Scottish, no Irish) influences.
Charnwood, St. Kilda (1855). Architect: Samuel Jackson (from The History and Design of the Australian House)

Our influence is given a grand start, but perhaps the Palladian bridge at Prior Park (beautifully illustrated) influenced our building practices less than the mining cottages of the Black Country (not shown).

This section progresses, by courtesy of a host of eminent contributors through the nineteenth century (Miles Lewis) and quite a bit of this century (Richard Apperly, Maisy Stapleton and Jennifer Taylor), but it breaks down somewhere about 1954.

The Fifties, that rich period so long despised by my generation (which after all, did it) is only now coming in for the respect it deserves. This was the period following the depression caused by the Korean War, the year when wool was a pound a pound, then one-tenth of that for a long time thereafter. Were the contributors too young or too old to appreciate the period's highlights like the timber curtain wall, the multi-coloured spandrels, pergolas and garage doors, the skewed plan-forms and the M, W and V roof shapes, all supported on hair-pin legs?

That was, in the main, a period dominated by Melbourne and logistics could be the reason for its exclusion. The rest of our history is handled superbly.

But any serious study with a seemingly unlimited photographic budget cannot be taken seriously if it does not illustrate Seidler's first house and Peter McIntyre's own house ('a Paul Klee butterfly on a hill' was a contemporary description). Plenty of prints of both houses are readily available; descriptions, however graphic, are just not graphic.

The historic survey concludes with Future Directions by one Sydney Baggs. Ever the sceptic and suspecting a spoof, I naturally turned to page 312 for the Notes on Contributors, as promised by the table of contents. It is that table which is the spoof; their being no such notes on page 312. I concluded that Mr Baggs must be an architect because he wrote feelingly on energy conservation, the need for trees around houses, the dangers of what he tellingly calls 'architectural vanity' and the delights of pise construction. Future Directions also pointed to pole construction as a way of utilizing a 'renewable resource'. Try that one on a building economist.

The book's second section - Aspects of Design - could perhaps have been more accurately entitled, Some Aspects of Construction, Planning and Decoration and Equipping with Special but Completely Justified Emphasis on Queensland Vernacular Architecture. Or some such pithy nomenclature.

The seven articles are all by experts; Robert Irving, Suzanne Forge, Phyllis Murphy, Peter Watts, David Saunders, Miles Lewis and Ray Sumner. The Saunders piece is a nostalgic harking back in both forms (to a time when the word 'terrace' meant only a house-form and not a sun drenched corner) and content (to a time when architects were believed to have had little involvement in terrace-house design). All are renowned people, practical and erudite, calmly setting down authoritative statements on what are in some cases hitherto unexplored areas of our social history.

There are no footnotes. All references are grouped in the current, and inconvenient, arrangement at the back. In most cases the references are thorough; in some (notably and not unexpectedly from Miles Lewis) outstandingly so.

Photographic references are missing and this is doubly disappointing because almost every author has unearthed new (at least to this reviewer) illustrations. These are a joy and how anybody can still produce, in 1985, a fresh Burley Griffin photograph must amaze and delight the reader/looker.

The book's designer, Susie Agoston O'Connor has served the compiler and his contributors well, but must lose a half-mark. The title of each article is set in the body of the text, halfway down the lead page. One tends therefore to start each article 400 words into the text. This is especially the case where the second half of the text begins with a new sentence. Certainly one has fourteen chances at picking up the knack but it is a layout trick which risks losing 400 by 14 very important words, perhaps forever.

Reviewed by NEIL CLEREHAN

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