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Photo by Sue Waldron

Photo by John Clement

THE 80,000 BUNGALOWS IN CHICAGO REPRESENT ONE-THIRD OF ITS SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES AND ARE AS ICONIC TO THE CITY AS SHOTGUN HOUSES ARE TO NEW ORLEANS.

Bungalows: Early 20th-Century Dream Homes

By Kim Bookless

“THESE STAINED GLASS windows don’t really belong to us. They’re a piece of history and we’re just the caretakers,” Leslie Ramyk Conforti says of her 1929 Chicago bungalow. Leslie and her husband Michael bought the property in 2002 after falling in love with the Arts and Crafts details and abundant space. Leslie’s eyes shine with pride as she tells what the home means to her family, which includes twin toddlers. “We had a tiny condo before we bought this place and the living room alone is half the square footage of our old condo. Some of our friends bought small places then had two kids and now they have to move. We don’t have to move to have the house we want. We’re going to be here forever.”

Most of Chicago’s bungalows are found in the Bungalow Belt, a large crescent-shaped swath of land lying between downtown Chicago and the city’s northern, western, and southern suburbs. The word “bungalow” dates from 1676 and is derived from the Hindi word *bangla*, which referred to homes in the style of Bengal. These *bangla*, native to India and adapted by British colonists, were usually one-storied with a low-pitched roof and wide veranda. American bungalows are generally rectangular one and one-half story structures with low-hipped or gabled roofs, wide front porches under projecting eaves, simple interior layouts with a minimum of hallways, unique window designs and creative interior detailing.

Bungalows were the housing of choice for the working class across America from the late 1800s through the 1940s. The homes were in such demand that Sears, Roebuck and Company and The Aladdin Company sold kits via mail order complete with building plans and materials. Bungalows combined Arts and Crafts design with the solid, sturdy functionality desired by America’s working class. Bungalow style merged the artistry of Frank Lloyd Wright and Gustav Stickley with the need for affordable, modern housing.

As with all things Chicago, bungalows in the Windy City have a style all their own. Most were built between 1910 and 1940 and were made of brick, rather than wood frame or stucco, for fire protection and to withstand the city’s frigid winters. Decorative but pricey face brick was used on the front elevation while less expensive common brick, often manufactured in the area, was used on the side and rear walls. Each bungalow sat on a single narrow lot with as little as five feet separating it from its neighbor. The large front porches common to other bungalow styles were usually reduced to small sheltered entryways on the side of the home. Many Chicago bungalows were built with a beautiful round or octagonal bay on the facade featuring limestone sills, lintels and window boxes.

Traditional Chicago bungalow interiors were characterized by a full basement and attic, usually unfinished, and windows accented with Prairie School-style stained glass. Most homes had a small vestibule, separate dining room, a brick fireplace and built-in cabinets and bookshelves. A bungalow built in 1927 and purchased by Beth Burger Martin and her husband Ken Martin in 1997 has a feature rarely found in other Chicago bungalows: the remnants of a Prohibition-era speakeasy in the basement. Clues to the basement’s speakeasy past include a sweeping Art Deco bar, a drinking ledge that rings the room, antique liquor bottles and a dry-ice beer tap. “Several Chicago gangsters lived in this neighborhood at that time. If walls could talk...,” muses Beth. “I would love to have been a fly on the wall listening to the conversations in this basement.”

Recognizing the uniqueness of its bungalow neighborhoods, the City of Chicago created a program to help people buy and restore historically significant bungalows and adapt them to meet current needs. In 2000 Mayor Richard M. Daley launched the Historic Chicago Bungalow Initiative, which is administered by the nonprofit Historic Chicago Bungalow Association (HCBA, www.chicagobungalow.org). "The bungalow was not the housing of choice for many people; it was associated with an older generation. The initiative helped make it a housing type cherished by people of all ages," says Faith Foley, assistant director of the association, which has more than 10,000 members. Approximately 4,000 households have taken advantage of its programs. "In the current economy more people call us to inquire about grants than to request technical or design help," notes Foley.



LEGISLATION to protect historic bungalows from demolition or significant alteration has been largely unnecessary here. "There have not been a lot of teardown issues because most bungalows are in areas that are zoned for single-family housing," explains Brian Goeken, deputy commissioner of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks. "Only a few neighborhoods have even inquired about becoming a Chicago Landmark District. There have been a few alteration issues and the Historic Chicago Bungalow Association helps address that."

Although funding for the various Chicago bungalow programs has been impacted by the recent economic crisis, the bungalow association and the



City of Chicago remain committed to historic bungalow preservation. This unique architectural style allowed working class America to have a home that was both sturdy and attractive, and bungalows' resurgence in popularity ensures that they will be cherished by future generations. "We love the house so much that everything we did was a labor of love," says Sue Waldron. Leslie Conforti echoes that sentiment: "We are invested in this neighborhood and in this house. It is a privilege to live in a historic home."



CHICAGO BUNGALOW INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

ENERGY\$AVERS

Grant money is available for energy-efficient doors, windows, heating and cooling systems and insulation. Beth and Ken Martin used an energy\$avers grant to replace their inefficient gas furnace and saw a 50 percent drop in their heating bills. The program helped Sue and Ron Waldron, a retired couple, to cut their energy bills by 40 percent. More funding for the energy\$avers grant was recently secured.

CHICAGOLAND HOME ENERGY SAVERS (CHES)

The Historic Chicago Bungalow Association has partnered with Peoples Gas on a pilot project to determine the most cost-effective ways of making bungalows more energy efficient. The association will coordinate energy audits and contract work to make energy-saving changes to the 52 pilot households then facilitate a two-year analysis of homeowners' gas bills. "It's about educating the homeowner on behavioral changes they can make to reduce energy costs," explains Faith Foley, assistant director of the bungalow association. Through this program, interior designer Donna Bracey received an energy audit, a new furnace and insulation in her crawlspace and back porch for her historic bungalow.

ILLINOIS HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

This grant provided funds to low-income homeowners for code-compliant rehabilitation work. The Waldrons used this to install a new roof and copper gutters on their bungalow. All funding was allocated by the end of 2009, and the bungalow association has reapplied.

ENERGY-EFFICIENT APPLIANCE VOUCHER

Historic Chicago Bungalow Association-certified bungalow owners who spend at least \$5,000 on a rehabilitation project can qualify for a \$500 voucher to purchase an energy-efficient appliance for the home. The association is in the process of applying for program funds for 2010.

HISTORIC DISTRICTS TAX FREEZE

Historic Chicago Bungalow Association-certified bungalow owners in National Register Historic Districts can qualify for an eight-year property tax freeze if they spend 25 percent of their home's assessed value on rehabilitation projects. Leslie and Michael Conforti, whose home is in the Rogers Park Manor Historic District, are enjoying the benefits of this tax freeze.

BUNGALOW TAXSMART

First-time buyers of Historic Chicago Bungalow Association-certified bungalows can qualify for a federal income tax credit in the form of a mortgage credit certificate. The certificate reduces the annual interest paid by 20 percent for the life of the mortgage. "We have a strong commitment to the TaxSmart program and we want to make bungalow owners aware of it. Preserving historic homes is as important as building new ones," explains Molly Sullivan, director of Communications for the City of Chicago's Department of Community Development.

For more information visit www.chicagobungalow.org