

Home Sweet Home, Part Two:
Four-squares and bungalows

Takoma Park began in 1883 as a Victorian suburb. But by the turn of the century, the fashionable Queen Anne houses that marked the first wave of building were giving way to smaller, cheaper styles.

The new designs grew out of the Arts and Crafts movement, which was led by British architects who rejected Victorian ostentatiousness in favor of a simpler lifestyle. They advocated homes "as small as necessary" and built from materials at harmony with nature.

The idea also appealed to the middle-class and working- class folks, particularly in America, for a different reason: simplicity meant houses they could afford. The rise of the suburbs had encouraged the notion of the American dream of owning your own home, and these new houses brought the dream within their reach.

Two styles in particular, "four-squares" and bungalows, began to appear In Takoma Park on the blocks further away from the train station (current site of Metro) as the trolley lines expanded into the neighborhoods. Cheaper versions of the American dream, these houses drew new arrivals to town, many of them immigrants from Europe.

The "four-square," named for the main rooms in each corner of the house, stripped off the gingerbread, turrets, and bay windows that signified Victorian and reverted to the box-like Georgian (or Federalist, to call it by its American name) buried inside. The central hallway also was eliminated, moving the front door off-center.

The four-square was soon eclipsed by a style that was even simpler, derived from one-story buildings with an overhanging thatched roof that had served as temporary guest shelters on the roads of the British Empire in India. The name morphed from "bengaloo" into bungalow, and the style morphed from an English summer cottage to the most popular housing profile in America.

The rise of suburbs encouraged the notion of the American dream of owning your own home, and these two new house styles brought the dream within reach.







The simple, affordable bungalows and four-squares that were built following Takoma Park's Victorian era have once again surged in popularity.
Top: ***Bungalow on Park Avenue***
Above: ***Four-square on Cedar Avenue.***
Right: ***Four-square on Maple Avenue.***

Appearing first in California, oddly enough, the bungalow almost overnight became the American definition of "classic" and "comfortable" and filled the huge demand for a modern house that was cheap enough for most employed people.

Stylistically, ths large, lofty rooms of the Victorian were replaced by the cozy porches and combination living/dining rooms of the bungalow. A proper bungalow had no basement, and the prominence of its roof gave the appearance of a one-story

BZA
Case No. 17349
Exhibit No. 45
Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 17349
EXHIBIT NO. 45

house even when there was a second-story bedroom tucked under the massive roofline.

(Of course, some folks couldn't resist creating a super-sized version, often referred to as "bungaloid.")

What really spurred the housing boom was the simultaneous appearance of a novel way of marketing new houses: the mail-order catalog, which originated with Sears. By 1908, Sears and several other companies had figured out how to market assemble-it-yourself housing kits. The same railroad network that provided the backbone for the suburbs became the delivery system for the kits containing ready-cut lumber along with all the necessary nails, hinges, windows, and doors.

Sears was savvy enough to also include pictures of options for furnishing each room, items not-so-coincidentally also available by mail order.

These houses were proudly advertised as "Modern," meaning they included electricity, indoor plumbing, and furnaces (available as options, of course, in case you lived in an area of the country where such utilities were not yet available).

And buyers had endless possibilities to individualize their houses: reverse the floor plan; order the second floor of one style and merge it with the ground floor of another style; add a porch; eliminate a window. Sears would send you what you needed.

Plus, Sears made home-owning easy—you could purchase your house in installments and even borrow money toward purchase of the land.

Then came the stock market crash of 1929. Loans became a liability. Sears and the other companies tried to reconfigure their marketing scheme to avoid foreclose on new homeowners, but the mail-order business proved untenable in the long run. In 1934 alone, Sears was forced to liquidate $11 million in mortgages. By 1940, Sears no longer offered any mail-order house.

For the rest of the 20th century, the Sears bungalows and the four-squares sat quietly on Takoma Park streets. Owners changed with the generations, but these houses stayed affordable. Even when a revived passion for Victorians drove up the price of Takoma Park's surviving stock of Queen Anne houses in the 1990s, the simpler-style houses here attracted little fanfare.

But now it is once again the turn of these unassuming family-centered homes. They are the gems sought after by a new wave of homebuyers in Takoma Park. The only difference is that a Takoma Park bungalow purchased for $729 in 1925 now sells for at least 500 times that price.



At right: *Sears, Roebuck and Co. started a housing revolution when it introduced the do-it-yourself home in its mail-order catalog. From 1908 to 1940, Sears sold house kits that contained ready-cut lumber, instructions, and every necessary nail, hinge, window, and door. Today, the "Sears Home" is prized by a new generation of homebuyers.*