Kit and Catalog Houses
The Language of Home

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What’s New?


- De Stijl / Modrian colors first used in architecture, 1924 (Rietveld Schroder House).
- Rudolph’s Walker House, 1952.
Lustron Corporation: A New Standard for Failure.

- 12.5 million in investments, plus additional loans of 10 and 7 million, all from RFC.
- 20 months of production, closes June 6, 1950.
- $9,000/unit
- Total of 2,680 units sold.
Did Kit Houses Work?

Sears - 70,000 units
Aladdin - 100,000 units
Montgomery Ward 30,000 units
Lewis/Liberty - 60,000 units
Sterling - 35,000 units
What Did Work?

Gunnison Housing Corporation / U.S. Steel Homes, Inc., 1938 – 1974

- Produced tens of thousands of affordable housing units (Total number unknown, over 1,500 in Indiana are documented).
- Wartime housing creates completely new communities.

National Homes, 1940 – 1974

- Over 200,000 units of affordable housing.
- 7,500 units alone during WW II.
Mobile Homes

- Mobile Homes account for 166,000 housing units in Indiana, 6.6% of housing stock.
- Nearly 9 million nationally, 7.6% of housing.
- In 1950, mobile homes were .7% of national housing stock.

“New Moon” model by Redman Trailer Co., in survey-identified Aukenbruck Tourist Camp/Mobile Home Historic District, Fort Wayne.
What is the legacy of catalog, kit, and prefabricated housing?

- Since they were intended to create profit, they predictably follow, rather than set, the trend for popular taste in house design.
- Tendency toward nationalization of housing tastes, regardless of region or climate.
- They often contrast with houses offered by local builders, in ways not obvious.
- Use of “modules” to design and create variation in housing.

Sears Mitchell, in West Lafayette (above) and Fort Wayne, highly similar designs were offered by Gordon Van Tine, Wardway, Aladdin, Bennett Homes and as a catalog plan by Home Builders. Variants are located in Charleston, WV; Atlantic Highlands, NJ; St. Louis, MO; and Erie, PA as well as Indianapolis.
There’s always an exception.

Carlos and Anne Recker House, Indianapolis

As it appeared in 1996

Plans from The Craftsman, 1905
Recker House

c. 1940 color photo, from Hartsock family, courtesy of Irvington Historic Society.

Craftsman magazine rendering, 1905
Recker House

Carlos and Anne Recker House, as restored by Brian & Emily Mack following hailstorm in 2006.

Your knowledge of housing in your community can bring about preservation outcomes.
Local Builders

• What is the neighborhood context of the kit house?
• Irvington – local builders favor porches, which were going out of fashion.
• New newspaper research tools allow us a deeper look into local building trends.

Below, Sears Stratford model, 800 N. Campbell Ave., at right, local designer-builder houses nearby. Both are from about 1929.
Aladdin’s Magic Trick
Aladdin’s Victoria model, first offered in 1920.
*Indianapolis Star*, 1915 article about 331 N. Webster Ave., Indianapolis.
National Taste in Architecture

House in Veedersburg, Indiana, c. 1935

Modules

- Local builders and catalog designers tended to use certain rooms and relationships between rooms as modules.
- Foyer block
- Living – dining room “L”
- Chimney and relationship to living room

Gunnison Homes catalog, showing optional additions, c.1950.
“…mark seven times and cut once.”

Benvenuto Cellini, 1560

If possible, measure the rooms and match them to the plan.

Remember, some kit house elements and even rooms, like porches, could be customized.

Jones House, 236th St., Sheridan. Curtis Better Built Homes, 1919 catalog. “Pop-up” is an original customization.
Jones House, Sheridan

Detail of pop-up, possibly a sleeping porch.

Interior plans match, casework differs.
Lastly –
Use the “Hive Mind”
Some kit house blogs and sites

http://kithousehunters.blogspot.com/
https://www.cmich.edu/research/clarke-historical-library/explore-collection/explore-online/michigan-material/alladin-company-bay-city
https://searshousesinohio.wordpress.com/2022/07/31/a-gordon-van-tine-no-104-in-richmond-indiana/
“I do not seek. I find.”
Picasso

When you look for kit and catalog housing in your communities, historic districts, and neighborhoods, you’re telling the story of how people sought housing.

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