

# Remodeling a Bungalow

## Tips for enhancing single-story bungalows without adding on

**B**ungalows are the original “affordable” house. Built primarily for the middle and working class, they were ridiculed by the architectural establishment. Nonetheless, they had enormous popular appeal from the turn of the century well into the 1930s.

by Doug Walter

Bungalows were a reaction to Victorian excesses and the machine age. John Brinkman writes in *American Bungalow* magazine: “What popularized the bungalow was its basic honesty.... It was small and of manageable size, efficient, yet cozy. It was a do-it-yourself affair that did not require servants and often came with fruit trees and a vegetable garden to supply the family table. Simple Craftsman lines made the bungalow easy to build and

maintain — and the style lent itself to precut kit houses that could be shipped anywhere near a railroad spur.”

### The Bungalow Plan

The bungalow’s most recognizable characteristic is its low profile. The advantage of a home all on one floor was widely touted.

The bungalow plan was brilliant: open and informal in the front public spaces, designed to encourage interaction, while the bedrooms are private, off a closed hall (see Figure 1). The layout is compact, efficient, and casual. The living room is always at the front, and almost always has a fireplace. You enter directly into this space: There is no transitional entry, no superfluous spaces as were found in Victorians. The bungalow provides essential living space only.

The dining room forms an ell off the living room. Often there are Craftsman-style columns and woodwork framing the opening between the two rooms. The dining room always has a grouping of two or three windows, and almost always faces south. This serves to bring enormous amounts of light right into the center of the plan and makes the eating space more inviting.

### Living Room

Having both a living room and a family room is a contemporary indulgence that I don’t recommend for my bungalow clients. This is because there is usually precious little backyard to work with in inner-city bungalow neighborhoods, and I hate to see it all eaten up with back additions. What I recommend instead is to remodel the





living room so that you actually can live there, instead of leaving it as a formal space. This is perhaps more of a lifestyle and decorating issue, but it needs to be addressed. I see so many living rooms in newer houses where no living goes on: These rooms are typically furnished with impressive furniture you're not allowed to sit on unless you're dressed in your Sunday best, and empty of anything that would encourage you to stay awhile, like books, music, or (gasp!) television.

In bungalow living rooms I often recommend refurnishing with more casual pieces and reworking the built-ins to accommodate television and audio comfortably. As a last resort, there is usually a large basement space directly below the living room, which can be remodeled as a family room if people cannot get used to the living-room-as-family-room concept.

### Improving the Kitchen

The typical bungalow kitchen is located right behind the dining room, connected by a swinging door. Cabinets were



usually built in and painted sanitary white. Early bungalows had wood floors in the kitchen, then linoleum started appearing in the late 1920s. Publications of the time raved about the "efficiency" of the bungalow kitchen, how labor-saving it was to not have to take many steps between cabinets and appliances. Today we would just call it too tight. Part of the problem was that two other important functions were usually squeezed into this same space — the breakfast nook and the back basement stair.

Large family-style kitchens were not a consideration in bungalow design. Given modern lifestyles, the back of the bungalow, especially the kitchen, is where many of our remodeling clients need the most help. Two problems —



not enough square footage and a poor connection to the backyard — are ones easily solved by eliminating the back stair, in bungalows equipped with two stairways. This allows you to pick up much-needed square footage without going outside the existing walls, and to open up the back with new windows and French doors that lead onto a new outside stair or deck (Figure 2).

**The illusion of space.** But what about the smaller bungalow that has only that

one stair in the back that goes down four or five steps to the back door, then doubles back down to the laundry room? One simple but effective solution is to cut down the full-height walls surrounding this stairway to railing height, then consider cutting in new windows above the back door to visually open up the space to the outside. This instantly creates the illusion of a much larger room and relieves the claustrophobia.

If you wish to pick up square footage,

you may want to consider a small addition on the back, in which will be a new and improved back stair, a new mudroom, and possibly an enlarged breakfast area. This way, the old breakfast and stair areas can be thrown into the kitchen square footage.

## Cooking as Performance Art

Another way to open up the bungalow, if expanding the footprint is not in the budget, is to open up the wall between kitchen and dining room. You may lose a little wall space, but you'll gain an unexpected vista from the front all the way through the back of the bungalow, and make the cook part of the action for the first time. For the faint of heart, we've also done a conservative variation on this where we just cut a 4-foot-wide pass-through into the kitchen that gives a tantalizing hint of the space beyond, while adding some real function for serving and clearing the dining table.

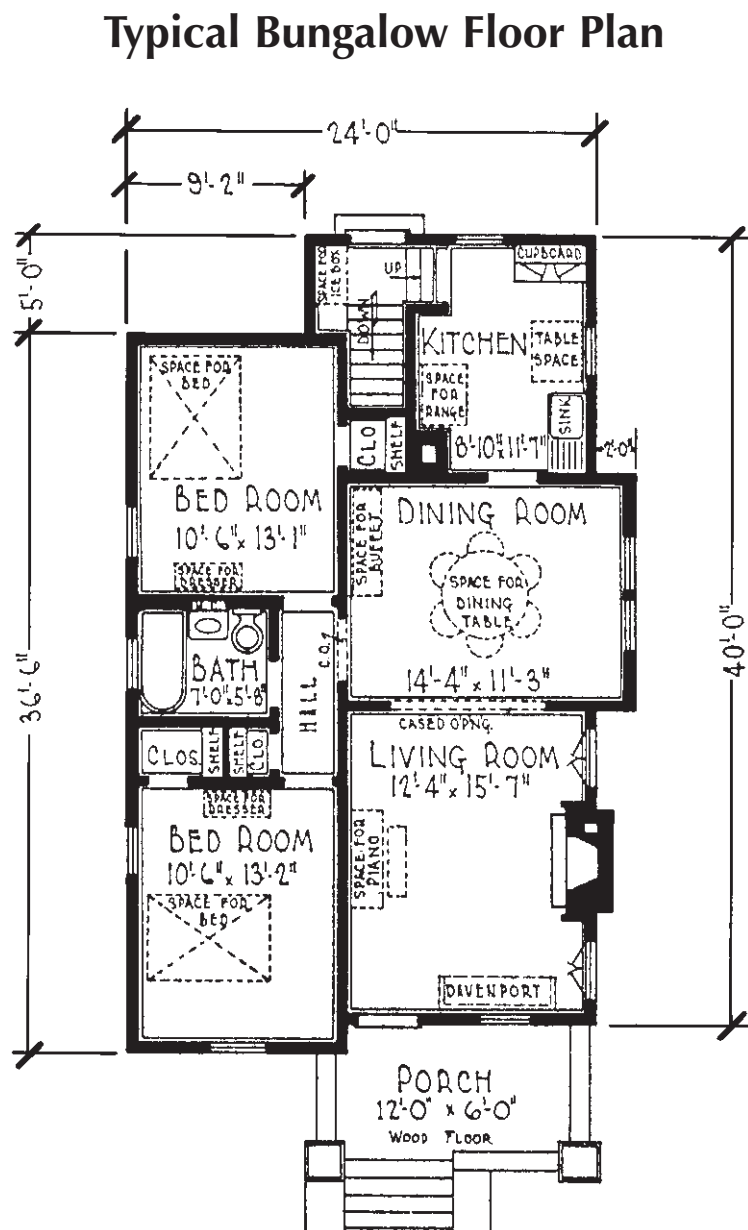
## Bedrooms

Perhaps the most difficult remodeling challenge in a bungalow is the bedrooms. They are usually landlocked, with nowhere to expand except to the outside, which is often blocked by setback limits.

For a large, modern bedroom suite, sometimes the only real possibility is to go up (or down). What we encourage instead is to look at using the existing space better, to take advantage not only of square footage but of cubic footage. The photos in Figure 3, last page, show how we maximized use of a secondary bedroom as the owners' suite. This is a case where the extra-high ceilings of bungalows come in particularly handy.

## Letting in the Daylight

Daylighting in bungalows is spotty. The kitchen and dining room are typically bright, usually located on the sunny south side. The living room often has small south windows, up high on either side of the fireplace, as well as large windows opening out to the front, where they are shaded by the porch. Bedrooms, typically on the north side of the house, usually have two large win-



**Figure 1.** When they were built in the 1920s and '30s, single-story bungalows offered affordable, efficient, compact plans for the working and middle class. By today's standards, though, the kitchen and bedrooms are cramped.



# Reinventing a Bungalow Kitchen

Before

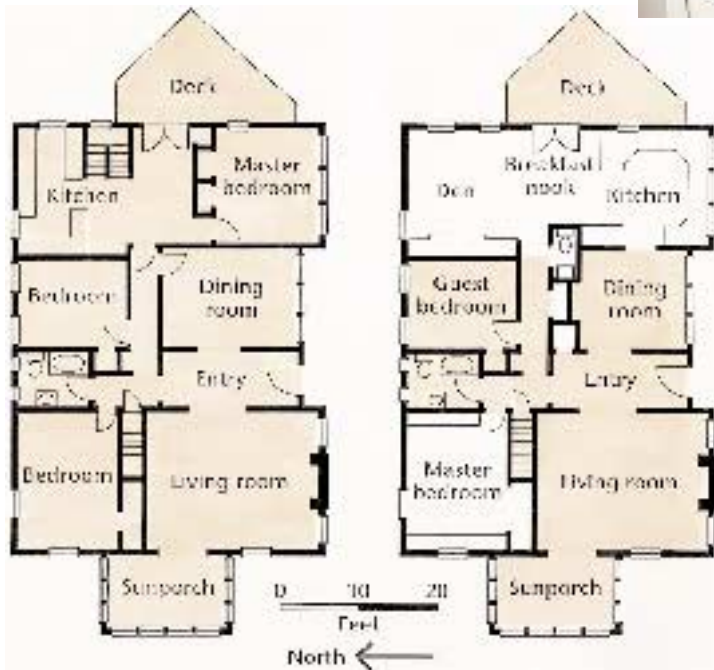


DON RILEY

Before



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**Figure 2.** This bungalow had been previously remodeled, with the kitchen moving to the northeast corner. The author's design team returned the kitchen to its accustomed location next to the dining room, and by giving up the back stairway, were able to combine the three rooms at the rear of the house into one great room. They also deliberately opened a sight line from the kitchen to the front door, helping to create a sense of flow through the house.



**Figure 3.** When there is no way to increase a bedroom's square footage, the author maximizes cubic footage by adding floor-to-ceiling built-ins.

dows each, but the only daylight they get is cool north light, plus whatever sun is reflected off the neighbor's south wall.

Carefully placed skylights can work wonders for dark hallways, bathrooms, and kitchens. I try to avoid placing skylights on the front, street-facing roof plane, however, so as not to disrupt the bungalow's period look.

The kitchen and back stair are two areas where you may want to consider

cutting in new windows or expanding existing ones. In particular, the window over the kitchen sink is one I most often find stingy, and often benefits from the sill being lowered or the width doubled to bring in more daylight and a better view at this critical workstation. And the whole back wall, in most bungalows I've seen, is almost an afterthought compared with the carefully arranged front and side elevations. There are few bun-

galow backs that wouldn't be improved by carving out new windows, doors, or a small addition or porch.

## The Porch

The broad, welcoming front porch is almost an absolute requirement of the bungalow style. The sense of openness and shadow is an important part of the appeal of the bungalow; it lightens up the foreground and relieves the sense of mass beyond. Potted or hanging flowers, a hanging swing, a couple wicker chairs turn the summer porch into an outdoor living room, reminiscent of an earlier, less hurried time. Whenever bungalow clients are searching for more living space, I almost always recommend against enclosing the porch.

One very real concern we have about bungalow porches is that they are usually the least structurally solid part of the house. You very often see porches sagging, cracking, and out of plumb on an otherwise very solid bungalow. The reason is that the porches were usually built on shallow footings on uncompacted soil after the full basement was backfilled. In addition, since the bungalow is all about broad horizontal lines, the builders often pushed the envelope when it came to beams and roof spans, and sagging in the middle of the porch roof is very common. Finally, the porch floor is often concrete slab on rubble fill — not the best floor system to build over.

In spite all of that, many people will insist on capturing some of that space, since it is already under roof. If you absolutely, positively have to grab that space, consider taking only half of it, to leave a portion open. Or enclose it with as much glass as possible, to preserve the openness and lightness of the original porch. Detail the wall infill to match the house, whether it is brick, stucco, or siding, and match the windows precisely.



*Doug Walter, AIA, is an architect in Denver, Colo. Architect Karin Taylor and interior designer Nancy Heller also worked on the project featured in this article. Phil Brooks was the contractor on the project.*