

Transitional Spaces: Blurring the Line Between Interior and Exterior

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Abstract

This paper examines the transition spaces for homes between inside and outside designed by architects during the early twentieth century in the United States. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the plan book became a readily available option for those wishing to build their own home in the U.S. Following a shortage of single-family houses after World War I, the design of small, single-family houses were distributed primarily through the plan book vehicle. One such plan book-producing group was the Architects' Small House Service Bureau (ASHSB). The bureau was composed entirely of registered architects and produced multiple folios of small house plans between 1914 and 1942. This paper focuses specifically on the relationship between the interior spaces and outdoors through the use of loggias, pergolas, sun porches, bay windows and other devices. The ASHSB was unique in that they promoted customization of their mass-produced house plan designs to each individual site. Thus, unlike many other plan book creators, ASHSB members determined that the relationship to the site was important to the overall design and the use of these transitional indoor/outdoor spaces, a necessity.

The plans designed by ASHSB members fell into one of three sizes—four-room, five-room or six-room plan types. The maximum number of principal rooms was six. All small house designs were presented within a rendered landscaped setting showing trees, bushes, benches and other landscaping features. At least one of the following— porticoes, porches, dormers, bay windows, picture windows, port coheres, and sun porches—was used in every design produced by the ASHSB architect members.

This work examines the range and type of spaces as well as the written recommendations and specifications that accompanied plan sets distributed by the ASHSB across the U.S and Canada during the early twentieth century.

Background

A Brief History of the ASHSB and Publications

A group of licensed architects from Minnesota formed the Architects' Small House Service Bureau (ASHSB) in 1919 to combat what they perceived as shoddy single-family house designs. The group expanded rapidly to include seven regional offices across the U.S. The architect members disseminated their designs for small single-family houses through the print media in plan books, a monthly magazine—*The Small Home*, and a weekly syndicated newspaper column. By 1943 when the organization officially disbanded, the members had distributed thousand of house plans throughout the U.S., Canada, and other countries.

The best known plan books published by the ASHSB included: *Your Future Home: How to Plan, Finance, and Build Your Home* (1920, 1922), *Your Future Home: A Collection of Plans for Small Houses* (1923) and *Small Homes of Architectural Distinction* (1929). In addition, the *Small Home* monthly magazine relayed important information about the designs, relationships with contractors, materials and construction and landscaping to would-be homeowners.

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A Context for the ASHSB

The ASHSB rose to prominence following World War I and in response to the housing shortage as veterans returned home. Government programs and the creation of the Federal Housing Administration promoted home ownership as a part of the American Dream. Although many were already in existence, plan book agencies erupted in response to the need for house designs. Many of these agencies did not include licensed architects on staff. What makes the ASHSB unique is the architect-only membership, focus on good design, and ability to customize the design to the site with an architect's assistance. The ASHSB members actively engaged the site and the relationship between the inside and the outside.

At the time when the architects of the ASHSB designed their house plans and did their renderings, Calvin Coolidge's administration formed the Advisory Committee on City Planning and Zoning that led to legislation permitting the proliferation of the subdivision. The Standard State Zoning Enabling Act (1926) and the Standard City Planning Enabling Act (1928) allowed for the subdivision of lots, zoning and the agencies to create and oversee zoning. Within this context, architects and landscape architects alike were first facing the challenge of the suburb and their roles within this new typology.

The rise of Landscape Architecture during this time also impacted the designs for ASHSB properties. A frequent contributor to the *Small Home* magazine included Francis Asbury Robinson, ASLA who also served as an editor in 1927 and 1928. References to landscape design and architecture were frequent in the publications of the ASHSB. A

contemporary text of the period, Samuel Parsons Junior's *The Art of Landscape Architecture* describes the thinking of that day with regard to landscape design. "The intimate way of treating the small home will really comment itself to everyone who is not led away by the influence of caprice or fashion. It gives the surest way of securing the most comfort and pleasure for the dweller under his own vine and fig tree." Parsons provides advice about fences, plantings, building placements and many other of the topics included in the materials of the ASHSB. Like the ASHSB architects, he also provides a statement of need for a trained professional "Architects' advice is not sufficient, landscape architects should be called in to study the shape of the ground and to select the place where the lawns and shrubbery will make the surroundings of the house most convenient and comfortable and secure the best landscape effect." Of particular importance to the rendering style and contextual placement of ASHSB designs is the notion of "free nature" Parsons describes when discussing gardens. "There should be no evident dividing line between the park and garden where one passes into the other. There should be, however, a distinct contrast established, it may be by plantations of trees or by changing frequently and radically the character of flowers and shrubs, yet the division line should be nowhere formal and rigid." This lack of demarcation of a transition from the wild wooded surroundings of a site to the more manicured nature of the house gardens is found throughout the designs and renderings of the ASHSB. This "law of contradictions" or contrast results in a more successful landscape solution. "It is a question of the rhythm of low and high, of broad and narrow masses of vegetation, and the overflow of one arrangement into the other...In a word it is too unnatural, and fails to give the suggestions of blending as well as contrast found so characteristic of the natural scenes of field and forest."

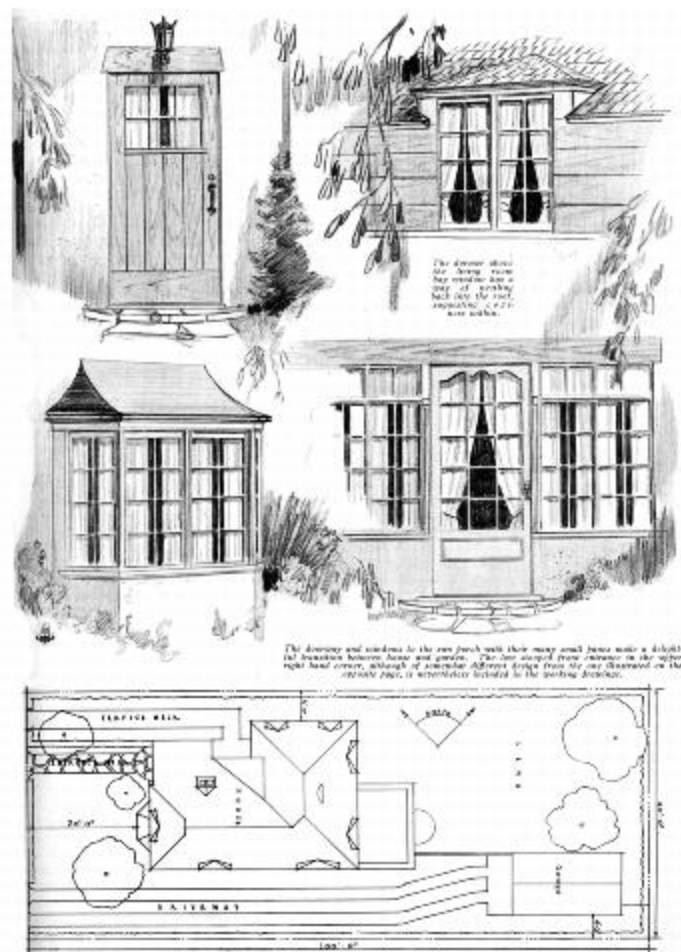


Figure 1

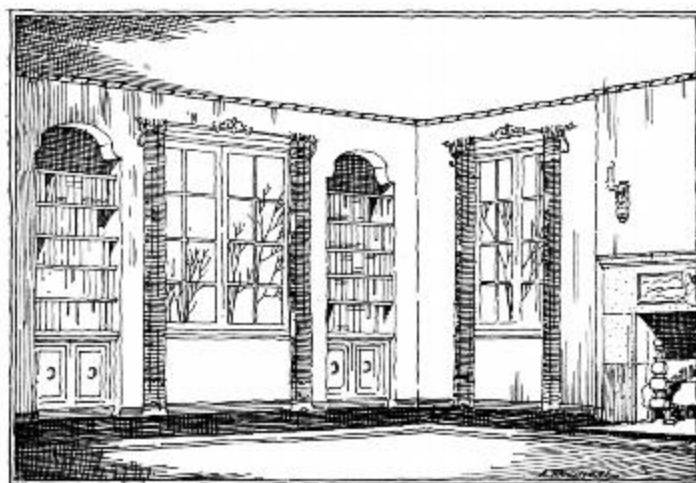


Figure 2

Overview of Plan devices

One of the most important features that the members of the ASHSB brought to bear was the ability to customize their designs to specific plots of land. As a part of this process, architect members frequently wrote about landscape design, site arrangement and access and how to best place a home on a piece of property. The designs of the houses themselves included many features that created a connection to the outdoors. The primary design devices that architects used to connect the indoor and outdoors fell into three basic categories: viewports, thresholds, and projections.

Viewports

Windows providing views to the landscape on all facades served to connect the interior experience with the outside landscape. Picture windows framed the outside surrounds in many of the designs several



Figure 3

of which illustrate the use of windows to provide a seamless transition to the outside. (Figure 1) For example, interior photographs often focus on large windows and French doors opening onto the garden such as seen in Figure 2. Similarly, interior sketches include views of the landscape

beyond and the relationship of the landscape to windows and doors in exterior vignettes as seen in Figures 3 and 4.

Thresholds

The threshold provided a point of entry and transition from outside to inside and held a particular importance in the designs. For example, the ASHSB design committee stressed the importance of including porches in their set of basic design instructions to architect members as developed for the first plan book, *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home*. The Sketch Committee produced a list of nineteen instructions, two of which related to connections to the outdoor. Instruction seventeen recommended "A wide variety in the inclusion of open porches, sun porches, sleeping porches and entrance vestibules is desirable to accommodate all the possible different conditions in the way of demand and climate." Instruction eighteen then added "In locating porches and



Figure 4

entrances, keep in mind flexibility of orientation and frontage. That is, a given design should be such that the house may be placed with its entrance either at the side or toward the street; and so with porches." As a result of these early instructions, the majority of designs included either a porch or covered stoop to provide a transition from outside to inside at the main entry.

Projections

Projections of various types reached into the landscape. These included outward opening casement windows, bay window projections, attached

window boxes and second floor balcony projections as well as sunrooms and side porches. In many cases, a design would include all of these devices at the same time. (Figure 5)



Figure 5

Pictorial Rendering Style: Setting and Boundaries

Although the ASHSB designs were intended for use on narrow suburban lots, the houses themselves are rarely shown in the context of a neighborhood. Hand drawn renderings show each house in a pastoral context with mature landscaping on all sides—a “field next to the woods.” When a neighboring house is indicated, well-manicured hedges and picket fences separate the property from the adjacent property and help to define specific boundaries. Sidewalks and streets rarely show in the renderings. Most renderings depict lushly overgrown lots in either the summer or spring season. Only occasionally are houses shown in the fall with fallen foliage and only rarely is a house shown with snow in the surrounds.

The following gives an overall context of how often the scene varied. In the first plan book, *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home* (1920),

only forty-three of the 102 designs are shown with neighboring houses and three of the 102 with snow. Twenty-two renderings show front porch benches, ten show window boxes and twenty-one others illustrate house mounted trellises or front porch planters. The house design blended with a landscape that was often naturalistic in appearance—both mature and engaging. The Mountain Division’s version of *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home* (published two years later) showed a very different landscape from the earlier version of the book and includes watercolor renderings. Neighboring houses were not shown in any of these fifty-two images. The style of the house tended more towards a Spanish revival influence than a colonial revival one and this had an impact on the use and type of front porch or stoop. Twelve of the fifty-two designs included a traditional porch; twelve others had a recessed alcove type approach that often concealed the front door from the street view. Stoops provided shelter to the front of nine designs and only one front stoop bench was included in all fifty-two designs. Fifty of the renderings showed the house in the context of spring or summer and only two included trees missing leaves—presumably illustrating fall. None of the renderings illustrated winter or snow. Lush window boxes were added to the front façade of

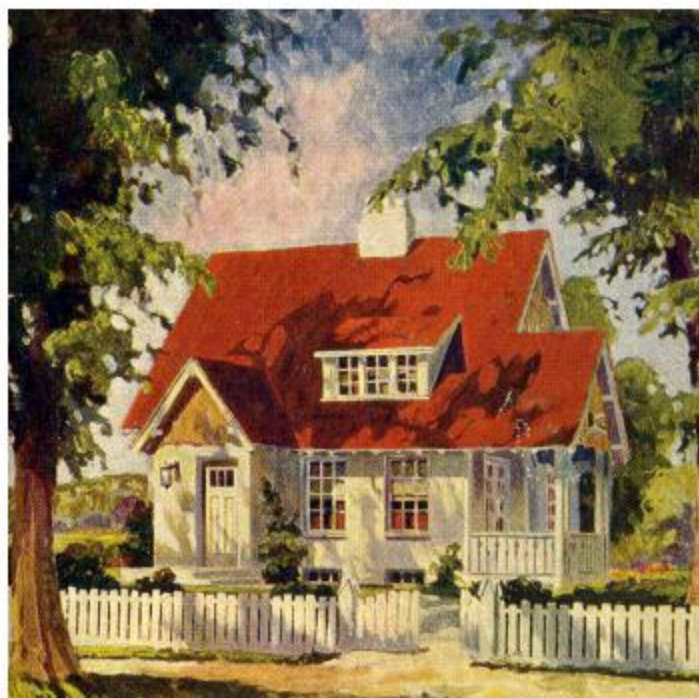


Figure 6

eight of the renderings. Thus, the designers for the ASHSB took the local flora and fauna and weather conditions into account when rendering their promotional materials. Depending on the intended audience—east or west—the styles of the house and corresponding landscapes varied. See Figure 6 for an east rendering and Figure 7 for a west rendering.

The Written Word: Articles and Descriptions

The written word accompanies all imagery in the ASHSB publications. While the early plan books include descriptions for each design and accompanying articles of interest to the homeowner, later plan books omitted this information since it was now presented in the monthly magazine of the ASHSB, the *Small Home*. The text that accompanies the images provides additional cues to the relationship of house and landscape.

Ways to Plant your Grounds

In addition to designs, the ASHSB publications also included a lot practical advice for homeowners and builders. In *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home* (1920), an article entitled "Ways to Plant Your Grounds" distinguishes a poorly planned landscape from a well-planned one in hopes of advising homeowners on how to properly make a connection between the house design and the surrounding landscape.

"Planting your Home Grounds" involved six primary objectives according to the Bureau. First, the client needed to consider things that influence home planting; second, the art of planting must be included; third, a planting plan was required; fourth, "some don'ts that may help you" were extolled; fifth, the yard should be treated like a room; and finally, planting should be permanent.



Figure 7

Things that Influence Home Planting included the type and character of the home, the size of the lot, climatic conditions and the physical requirements of one's family. According to the Bureau, *The Art of Planting* was significant in the following manner: "Because of the art the architect puts into the design of the home, he doubles the sales value of the home

and property at no added expense" through artful planting. Furthermore, "it is the art you put into your landscape treatment that assure beautiful results and increased values." *The Need for a Planting Plan* was considered by Bureau members to be "the easiest and most direct way to make clear the home gardening principles." These principles were provided to potential clients as a list of don'ts. In one of these lists of *Don'ts [that] May Help You*, ASHSB members advised clients as follows: don't forget to observe nature's way of arranging shrubs, trees and flowers; don't overlook the soft edges and strong contrasts of nature; don't needlessly cut and prune trees; don't put flower beds in the middle of the lawn; and finally, don't forget that gardening success aims to tie the house and landscape into a beautiful picture. In *Treat Your Yard Like a Room* the ASHSB advised people to think of their yards as outside rooms. *Planting could be made Permanent* through integrating fruit and vegetable gardens in an ornamental way. Homeowners were also cautioned to use only good topsoil, to buy their supplies from "reputable

Two Ways to Plant Your Home Grounds

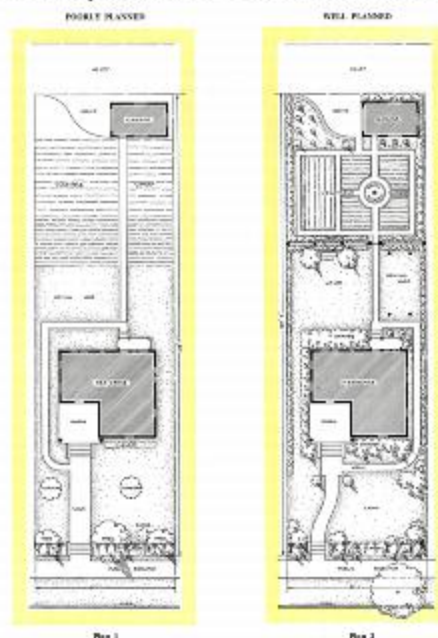


Figure 8

nursery men" and not to crowd their shrubs. Finally, a comparison between two plans—labeled Plan 1 and Plan 2—outlines some of the key features that made Plan 1 inferior to Plan 2. Plan 1 demonstrated a "hit or miss" approach to a poorly planned yard. It lacked pleasing vistas, rooms, borders and a "natural" approach. Plan 2 improves the site through the integration of all six principles of advice given by the ASHSB. Thus, the garden landscape served as an extension of the house—another room or series of rooms. Further, nature provided its own design cues as to how to prune bushes and trees. A homeowner was asked to exercise restraint in pruning in order to maintain a more natural appeal. (Figure 8)

The 1922 version of *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home* included a different article on design for the site. Unlike the earlier essay, this one does not include a comparative plan but does provide some principles of good design based upon the profession of Landscape Architecture, according to the article. Principle one advises a would be homeowner to treat the grounds like "Caesar's Gaul" and divide it into three sections—the street front, the service yard and the garden. A second principle instructs the homeowner to relate the garden with the rooms of the house as an outdoor living room and extension of the living spaces of the interior. Preferably, the interior living room should look out onto the exterior one making an overt connection. The article continues with advice about plant type, color, and bloom structure as it relates to the architecture of the building. Too many plant varieties will "spoil the picture we are trying to make." Most importantly "the successful completion of the small home, and the grounds surrounding it, can only be accomplished by keeping all planting and planning in direct relation to, and in harmony with, the house in mass, color and form."

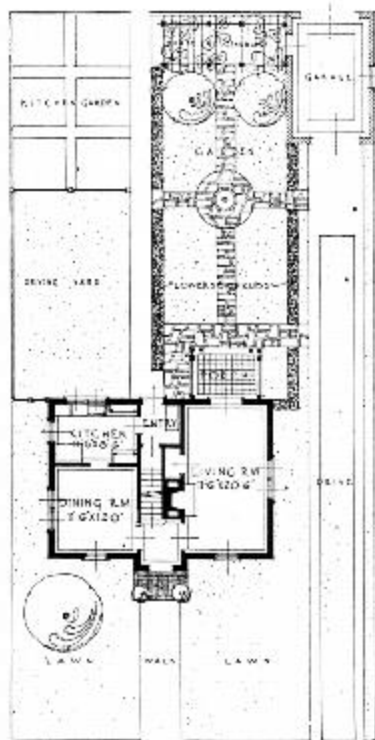


Figure 9

In the June 1927 issue of the *Small Home*, William Gray Purcell, AIA made another set of recommendations. "The Out of Door Living Room" article describes eight rules to increase one's pleasure of the landscaped garden. The site plan described as an "excellent example" includes a front lawn bisected by a central walkway and a series of exterior rooms in the back yard. These rear rooms include a driving yard, a kitchen

garden, a back porch that opens onto a garden with stone walks on axis, a birdbath/fountain, and a surrounding hedgerow and a rear arbor. (Figure 9) The eight rules of good design are as follows:

1. remember plants grow big
2. assist nature
3. make the indoors and outdoors belong together
4. don't place the house too high above the ground
5. have a dominant theme
6. avoid too much and too many
7. the Golden Rule (do unto your neighbors as you would have them do to you)
8. make clear and interpersonal distinction between what you desire to accomplish and how to do it (leave the "doing" to experts and maintain your dominant vision).



Figure 10

The resulting photograph of a porch and the landscape that integrate all of this advice also clearly depicts a site that seems much larger than a typical suburban lot. (Figure 10)

The last publication of the ASHSB, *Two-Story Homes* (1941) continues in the tradition of the earliest ASHSB plan books of the 1920s. Pen and ink renderings of the exteriors accompany plans, a written description and an occasional interior sketch. By 1941, publication had ceased on the *Small Home* monthly, thus eliminating this venue for text descriptions of the designs. As with earlier renderings, these designs also show lush, mature landscapes, a lack of neighbors, streets and sidewalks. Front porches, stoops and benches—often covered in vines—adorn the front facades. Several of the designs reference the potential site for the design: 6-A-78 "Equally Suited to Wide or Corner Lot;" 6-B-35 "Especially Designed for a Lot Facing North;" and "T-Shaped Plan for Wide or Corner Lot." Many of the designs reference the house landscape relationship. Plan 6-A-57 has a hooded and trellis screened entrance and a living room



Figure 11

with "3 Outside Exposures." 6-A-75 features porches for "pleasure and comfort." Similarly, 6-A-97 contains a "Porch at Rear [that] Gains Quiet and Privacy." In a new addition to the typical design presentation, a view of this rear porch is shown as a vignette detail. (Figure 11) Design 6-B-32 has living and dining rooms at the rear opening onto a terrace "Living Quarters Open on Garden Views at the Rear." Throughout the last plan book, there are multiple examples of porches as summer living spaces and their relationships to gardens at the back of the house.

The Landscape and House Relationship: A Case Study

The relationship between the house and landscape held a great importance to the success of a project. Every room illustrated the mutually beneficial arrangement. Even the perspective sketches of the inside utilitarian spaces were rendered to show the bucolic surroundings seen through the window. Casement windows opened out to the landscape. Each window provided a vista into the surrounding site highlighting the natural beauty. A breeze blows aside the window treatment through the kitchen window above the kitchen sink with a view to the yard. One can imagine standing at the window gazing out into the beauty of the yard while being touched by a cool summer breeze.

The plan of the best-selling design of any of the ASHSB publications—model #669—encompasses many of the common features connecting the inside with the outdoors—viewports, thresholds, and projections. Windows are located on all sides providing natural lighting into all rooms as well as views to the outside. A front stoop provides a place to sit and enjoy the front yard and a side porch reaches into the surrounding yard "rooms." (Figure 12)

A Creative Interpretation of the Context

Although these houses were constructed in suburban subdivisions, they are frequently photographed and rendered as if no neighbors or other houses exist. Virtually all of the houses include all three nature-house connecting devices—thresholds, viewports, and projections—in features such as stoops, window boxes, casement windows and porches.

The designs show the clear preference for a more natural surrounding verging on the untamed. Like the true colonial setting for the colonial period house, the colonial revival house is shown in an untamed landscape visible through large picture windows with somewhat primitive interior furnishings. A person buying this plan could conjure a vision of their colonial life through the promotional materials of the ASHSB. The ASHSB sold a lifestyle to those wishing to own their own piece of the American Dream replete with a single-family house and their own yard surrounded by a hedgerow or white picket fence all set within a mature landscape that served as an extension of the home. The closer to the



Figure 12

house, the more tailored the landscape. Kitchen gardens, driving yards, hedgerows and fence lines served to define the property immediately around the house. This likely also conforms to the actual property lines associated with a suburban lot. The "beyond" consisted of a more rugged natural almost unexplored context.

Of particular interest is the use of untamed surroundings in both renderings and actual photographs of ASHSB houses. Both often illustrate vines growing up the side on the house in a manner that appears overgrown and lacking a manicured quality as seen in both Figure 13 and Figure 14.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Significance

The approach taken by the architects as to how these designs are depicted reveals a clear need to be "in nature" with a preference for a site without neighbors and a dominant desire for landscaping, large yards and mature trees. Taken to the extreme, the sites at times depict an ultimately unrealistic reality. This apparent dichotomy between the actual site and the artistic construction of reality underscored the tension of the designer versus the very nature of the subdivision. The standardized quality of the planned community with regular lot sizes and repetitive

houses was not a comfortable fit for the architects creating the designs and renderings of the houses for the ASHSB. The entire goal of the ASHSB to customize for the client was seemingly at odds with what was being designed—a repeatable house design purchased through the plan book to be set within a typical suburban tract. Rather than embrace this reality, the architect designers created fictional landscapes within which to place their designs.

Lessons Learned

The ASHSB has multiple lessons to teach designers today about the relationship between site and house. The notion that the suburban lot is a designed extension of the house would revolutionize the appearance of today's typical neighborhood. Imagine a subdivision where each house has been customized for the owner and then placed within a designed landscape that serves as an extension of the interior living spaces. A second important lesson is the need for a plan. Without a plan for the house and yard, the resulting house-landscape relationship and proper interaction is lost or left to the uninformed amateur. Thirdly, the ASHSB demonstrates the tension between the standardization of housing and lot and the need to personalize design for each person or family. The mechanism by which the ASHSB members accomplished their work was through artistic license (in renderings) and education (through their writings) in the hopes of having well-designed neighborhoods of beautiful small houses. The realities of this type of design for the masses do not fall easily within the traditional oeuvre of the American Architect.

Endnotes

1. For more detailed information on the history of the ASHSB see LM Tucker "The Small House Problem in the U.S.: 1918-1945: The American Institute of Architects and the Architects Small House Service Bureau," *Journal of Design History*, Fall 2009.
2. American Planning Association website www.planning.org/growing-smart/enablingacts.htm, viewed 2/23/12.
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4. Ibid, 103.
5. Ibid, 238.
6. Ibid, 230.
7. R.V. L Haxby, A.R. Van Dyke and Roy C. Jones, Chairman of the Committee on Sketches. (ca. 1919). Unpublished notes from the archives of the ASHSB, Minnesota Historical Society.
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9. ASHSB, *How to Plan, Finance and Build Your Home*, Mountain Division: ASHSB, 1922, 61.
10. Ibid, 62.
11. William Purcell, "The Out of Door living Room," *the Small Home*, July

1927, 10.

12. ASHSB, Two-Story Homes, St. Paul, MN: ASHSB, 17.

13. Ibid, 25.

14. Ibid, 40.

15. Ibid, 5.

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17. Ibid, 21.

18. Ibid, 24.

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