

were a godsend because they were affordable and could be purchased on contract.

As a university town, Iowa City had additional housing needs. Former university president Howard Bowen and his wife rented a Moffitt house for a year or two after a trip abroad. "We enjoyed living in it and thought it was a bargain," said Bowen. "I often remarked to friends that Mr. Moffitt was indeed a benefactor to those of us who were fortunate enough to rent his houses — and that he was indeed a benefactor to the University as a whole by supplying low-cost but habitable homes for young faculty."

Howard Moffitt remained active until his death at eighty-nine in McAllen, Texas on November 25, 1982. The homes he built in Iowa City reflect American architectural trends of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s and his own vision, set within the context of local community needs.

Today, when someone refers to a "Moffitt house," most Iowa Citians can immediately visualize these characteristic small homes. They are favorites for renters and owners. The vital essence of a Moffitt house — what makes it so attractive — is the interplay between the intimate scale of the interior and exterior, and between the structure's shape and texture and the shapes and textures that occur in nature. These small gems, with their inventive designs built to a comfortable human scale, continue to lend an invaluable charm and sense of the past to the Iowa City landscape. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

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The Shift to Small Homes

Moffitt Houses in a Local and National Context

by Jan Nash

IT IS NO MYSTERY why Howard Moffitt went into the business of building small rental houses, when one considers the local context of a college town and national context of changing socio-economic conditions. The presence of the University of Iowa in Iowa City had, and continues to have, a profound effect on residential property use. There is a ready need for rental housing because married students and the young faculty and staff with families represent a dynamic and transient housing market with limited financial resources. According to local historian Irving



Built by Moffitt in the Rundell Addition, this small home has a Craftsman feature of exposed rafters (on dormer and porch). Moffitt houses often included a garage (many have been converted to living space).

Weber, students at the University of Iowa have been housed as boarders in private homes, in rooming houses, in dormitories (after 1913/15), and in sorority and fraternity houses. Married students were unusual before World War I. Apartment building did not become an established building tradition in Iowa City until the 1960s, when the new-construction orientation of urban renewal was strongest. The relatively stable economy created by the university attracts supporting retail businesses and professionals and infuses the community with additional new faces and families.

The university's influence on the housing market in Iowa City was especially strong during the tenure of university president Walter Jessup (1916 to 1934), the period during which Moffitt built many of his houses. Jessup orchestrated the university's expansion, including several new departments and colleges, construction of thirty-three new buildings, and rising student enrollment (from 3,300 in 1916 to 10,000 in the Thirties).

Nationwide the country was experiencing a severe housing shortage, publicly acknowledged by Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover in 1920 when he wrote: "I am convinced that this country is short fully a million houses." Hoover blamed this situation on a prewar population increase of a million new families, and a wartime diversion of labor and materials away from home building. Failure of postwar construction to recover and meet the demand was the fault, he believed, of those in the building trades — both suppliers of materials and labor — who increased prices and wages unfairly. Builders were thus inhibited from building even if they could afford the high cost.

Today the great demand for housing in the 1920s is understood more broadly in terms of changing family customs and ideas about single-family home ownership. During the Victorian period, family life was more prescribed, and those families that could afford it lived in large homes filled with relatively small

rooms. Specific functions were assigned to domestic space; the formal front parlor, for example, was reserved for receiving guests while the family relaxed in a rear parlor; the front porch and yard were both family and

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public space, while the rear yard was a service area. The basement of a large nineteenth-century home was the industrial center of domestic life, and architectural plans often label the functions of these basement spaces. Separate rooms were earmarked for washing clothes, line-drying laundry, canning fruits and vegetables, storing garden produce, housing the furnace, and storing coal.

Non-rural Victorian families of more modest means lived more often in rented quarters — apartment buildings and tenements; small houses; and rooms or apartments within large houses. When a young couple married, they might choose to live with parents for the first few years of their marriage, or rent an apartment if they lived in an urban area. If financially able, the parents might build the couple a house, often smaller and located next door or on land nearby.

IN THE EARLY twentieth century, however, relaxed social standards and rising incomes dictated a new kind of housing. The post-Victorian family of the early twentieth century was more informal and did not seek large houses with public and private spaces. Likewise, women were allowed and expected to broaden their interests beyond the realm of the home. The burden of running a

large, complicated home seemed antiquated in a time of rapidly developing household technologies. Also, largely as a result of late-nineteenth-century reformers' activities aimed at improving the health and standard of living for urban tenement dwellers, the tenements became equated with poor health, and crowded, unsanitary conditions. The big and aging Victorian houses also became tainted as unhealthy, poorly ventilated, and filled with sewer gas and other foul airs.

At the same time, the goal of home ownership had become deeply embedded in the American psyche by the 1920s. Owning a home was a secure investment for the future and the fruit of the American dream. It was democracy in action. Urban tenement living was associated with an ethnic, immigrant past. To move out of the rented flats and tenements was to move ahead. An expanding middle class with rising income levels could buy or build homes for less than \$3000 through mail-order companies like Aladdin Company, and Sears, Roebuck and Co. New homes in the new suburbs became the American ideal. The best of all worlds was the small home, usually defined as a three- to six-room structure, snug and compact

do more
By the 1920s, the best of all worlds was the small home, a three- to six-room structure, snug and compact appearing on the exterior. It was affordable, efficient, and healthy.

appearing on the exterior. Interiors often included built-ins such as a breakfast nook. Small homes were affordable, efficient, and healthy.

Use of the term "small home" in the early twentieth century is somewhat confusing. It did not always mean simply small-scale, or a limited number of rooms. In fact, rather large homes were often touted by their builders and designers as "small homes." Their use of the popular terminology — whether it applied to

actual size or not — probably reflected the sales tactics necessary to market houses to a buying public that had rejected the large Victorian home. The rental houses built by Moffitt, however, were truly homes small in size.

HOWARD MOFFITT began his building career during this time of a severe national housing shortage, major expansion at the University of Iowa, and rising popularity of small homes for the expanding middle class. While other builders in Iowa City responded to the demand for new owner-occupied houses, Howard Moffitt saw and responded to the need for rental houses. In this college town, some families could not afford to build to own; others were too transient to own a home; and others, with prospects for relatively swift and certain economic improvement (new faculty members, for example), rented until they could build larger, more prestigious homes.

Moffitt was not only sensitive to what market he could serve in Iowa City, he understood what image appealed to his renters. While the small houses Moffitt built were rooted in the popular styles of the day, the eccentric spin he put on them may have found an especially appreciative audience in the university community. He built bungalows with Craftsman styling, and Period houses in Tudor Revival, Colonial, Spanish Colonial, and English and European vernacular styles. Snug, cozy, charming — all terms originally applied to the ideal small houses of the Twenties and Thirties — still describe Moffitt houses. □

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