

Florida bungalows the stars in Historic Kenwood

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One of many small creative gardens in Historic Kenwood.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The Historic Kenwood district of St. Petersburg boasts 125 blocks of 1920s-era American Craftsman bungalows, one of the highest concentrations of this distinctly Florida architecture in the state. The best way to get the full effect is by participating in the annual BungalowFest, held the first weekend in November, during which a dozen or so residents open their homes to the public. But monthly walking tours, festivals, and art events provide opportunities throughout the year to enjoy this distinctive neighborhood, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

A bungalow is really a building type, not an architectural style, says Robert Jeffrey, an artist, historic preservation specialist, and Kenwood resident. Bungalows are relatively small and typically one or one-and-a-half stories. Popular in Florida and California, they are designed for a warm climate, with “big overhanging eaves to shade walls by day, an abundance of windows to provide cross-ventilation, and big front porches that are essentially outside living rooms,” Jeffrey said. American Craftsman is the best-known style, but Kenwood also

includes Spanish mission-style, Colonial revival, and midcentury ranch homes.

The Kenwood neighborhood was initially developed by Charles R. Hall, who in 1913 built 10 houses on Central Avenue for a combined cost of \$30,000. At that time, the neighborhood abutted an avocado grove. Most Kenwood homes were built on site during the early 1920s. In the mid-1930s, approximately 170 bungalows were moved from downtown St. Petersburg to Kenwood. Today there are more than a thousand properties in the district.

Kenwood remains a tranquil, cohesive neighborhood of modest homes on small lots that are similar in architectural style but distinctive in the ways homeowners have personalized them. Shade trees line the streets, which are paved with brick cobblestones. Sidewalks are made of locally manufactured hexagonal concrete pavers. Soft Florida colors — sage, coral, lemon, and aqua — abound. Anchoring the neighborhood is Seminole Park, with shaded benches, picnic areas, and a Craftsman bungalow-style pavilion.

The homeowners we met during BungalowFest 2016 exhibited a reverence for architecture, history, and art, as well as an affection for offbeat touches, such as unexpected pops of color. Small spaces inside and

out seem to challenge these owners to create beautiful interiors and creative gardens to provide privacy.

Many of the homes we visited had undergone a massive renovations, largely to uncover architectural features of the period — such as coffered ceilings, hardwood floors, and fireplaces — that had been hidden by years of “updates.” In one, even the artwork was hung in a historically correct style, from a picture rail rather than mounted on the walls. In another a turntable played vintage records.

A striking 1924 Spanish mission-style home featured a smooth stucco exterior, rounded roof parapets and arcaded entry porch with wrought iron work. Inside, dark woods, tall arched windows, and rustic Spanish-style furniture completed the look. Another mission-style structure we visited was an apartment building, one of 14 or 15 in the district, Jeffrey said.

One of the surprises on the tour was a 2014 Craftsman bungalow — that is, a new build designed to fit in with the historic neighborhood. Inside, the owners have created a gorgeous high-end look, mixing antiques, glass, silver, coastal accents, flowers, and textiles. Outside, the home is virtually indistinguishable from the 1920s Craftsman homes surrounding it.

As well as being a historic district, Kenwood is an official “artist enclave,” a municipal designation that allows artists in the neighborhood to teach classes and sell artwork from their homes. There are about 60 artist members, Jeffrey said, most working in home studios in renovated historic buildings. Several times a year these artists open their studios to the public. The next Historic Kenwood Artist Tour is March 18-19.

Adjacent to the Kenwood neighborhood is the Central Avenue shopping district, which contains 28 restaurants and shops, most of which have opened in the last three years.

St. Petersburg Preservation hosts guided walking tours of Historic Kenwood on the fourth Saturday of the month, October through April. The tours typically include a peek inside one of the neighborhood’s restored bungalows. For more information, visit historickenwood.org.

One Kenwood resident has turned her love of historic houses into a business. Kathy Young buys distressed properties in the neighborhood, puts in modern kitchens and baths, restores the historical features like fireplaces, wood floors, and keyhole entrances, and then sells. She has lived in Kenwood for 20 years, restoring two or three houses a year,

and was part of the group that launched the initial BungalowFest 19 years ago.

Despite the fact that Young has had a hand in the restoration of more than 40 bungalows, she says it never gets old. “I still love to buy a house — the worse the condition, the better — renovate it, and make it beautiful. I really love that.”

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