

THE JAMAICAN BUNGALOW , 1914-1950 : REPOSITORY OF SOCIAL HISTORY ON CONTEMPORARY TERRAIN

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Abstract

To date unprotected, the terrain occupied by the distinctive historic housing typology known as the Bungalow in Kingston, Jamaica's capital city, warrants attention. This paper will be concerned specifically with the bungalow neighbourhood of Vineyard Town, which is valuable in itself, as a repository of a housing type which emerged with the expansion of the Jamaican urban middle class in the early twentieth century. This site is also valuable because it forms part of the "connective tissue" so to speak, which relates to the historic Downtown of Kingston, which has recently been declared a protected area. Thus, Vineyard Town may be regarded as a "double-setting" so to speak, as the setting of the Bungalow, and as part of the wider environs of lower, downtown Kingston.

The Bungalow is part of a global typology, with a rich history spanning Indian origins, British colonial adaptation and global re-export. In Kingston, it was the primary domestic vernacular of the emergent middle class, and in terms of materials represented a transition between traditional vernacular and modernity. The Bungalow neighbourhood represented a typology that sought to respond to local climatic conditions, as well as to shared understandings of familial, social and community relations. The Bungalow neighbourhood represented a particular set of understandings concerning the location of housing in relation to the city centre.

At present, the Bungalow neighbourhood and all it represented faces severe threats. Vineyard Town is an area under transition, ranging through refurbished housing occupation, commercial conversion, and rundown housing. In general, the social status of its residential occupants has declined relative to the time of inception in the early twentieth century. The area is vulnerable to criminal and violent elements associated with the inner city, to physical degradation due to the occupancy of lower income or impoverished residents. It is threatened by the lack of sensitivity to past urban and suburban fabrics.

In the light of current concerns regarding housing stock, and the life of lower Kingston, Vineyard Town and its historic residential fabric requires assessment and attention.

Work in this paper explores new areas in an ongoing exploration of the Bungalow by the author.