



# Magic in a Box: Aladdin Bungalows

The Bay City, Michigan, company was the first to offer a true "kit house" with pre-cut and numbered parts.

BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER

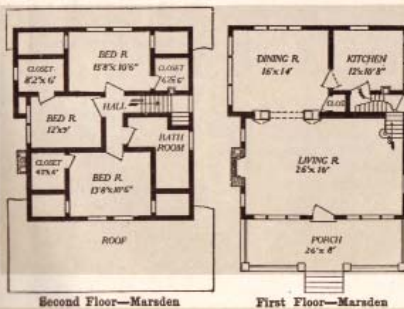


## The Marsden \$1,536.15

Price, \$1,617  
Cash discount, 5%  
Net price, \$1,536.15

**E**ACH year the sales of this attractive semi-bungalow far exceed the preceding year, and best of all its rapidly increasing number of owners are invariably delighted with their new home. We wish you could read some of the entertaining letters, without solicitation, received from scores of Marsden owners. They will of course be sent on request. Just study the lines of this bungalow and note how artistically appointed is every part,—the straight line dormer with exposed eaves in exact keeping with the eave of the front porch—the extended bay window with roof and brackets, breaking the gable end—the windows of different sizes and styles and location—these and many other points make the exterior of the Marsden truly artistic.

In interior planning and arrangement, this modern bungalow presents what might well be said to be the last word in designing. On entering the large living room, 26x16, extending across the entire front, one is attracted by the beautiful bookcase arch separating the living and dining rooms. Beautiful in itself, yet this arch by means of its glass doors and adjustable shelves forms at once a convenient, attractive and useful piece of house furnishing. Notice the abundance of light in living and dining rooms. A well arranged kitchen with stairs leading to grade landing complete the first floor. Ascending to the second floor by the semi-open stairs at the end of living room, one enters a central hall from which easy access is gained to each of the three large bedrooms and the bath. Please note the clothes closet with each bedroom—a most appreciated adjunct for every sleeping room. The price includes everything above the foundation to complete the bungalow. Front steps, grade entrance and cellar stairs. Siding can be substituted if desired for wall shingles at no additional cost. See Terms on page 2 and General Specifications on pages 12 and 13.



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IN THE MICHIGAN THUMB TOWN OF BAY CITY IN THE SPRING OF 1904, AN advertising man named Clifford Brooks was watching his wife cut out dress parts from a pattern on the kitchen table. She was able to make several dresses from the same pattern and was even able to adapt parts of other patterns to make new dress styles. Brooks took this idea and adapted it on a much larger scale. He began offering “knock-down,” pre-cut boat kits for sale by mail. The next year, two brothers—Otto and W.J. Sovereign, also of Bay City—took that notion even further and pooled their meager resources of \$200 to form the North American Construction Company. Otto, a marketer by trade, came up with the idea to advertise their new product, a knock-down boat house, in sporting magazines. They made enough money in 1905-1906 to expand their line and offer a catalog of buildings that included summer cottages. They next gambled on a pricey ad in the widely circulated Saturday Evening Post.

**The rest, as they say, is history.**

By 1911, the company had been renamed Aladdin Homes and had a catchy advertising phrase: “Built in a day.” The company offered 47 different homes advertised in a lavish 56-page catalog, and by 1917, when more than 3,000 homes were sold, the company had sales of more than \$1 million. While Sears, Roebuck and Company bungalows may be more familiar, Aladdin was the first company to offer a true “kit house” with pre-cut and numbered parts—at least eight years before Sears did. Major corporations such as DuPont and Standard Oil bought Aladdin homes by the train load. The Sovereign brothers boasted of more than 300 corporate clients in 1918. In an astounding figure from that same year, Aladdin accounted for 2.3 percent of all new housing starts in the country.

**opposite**

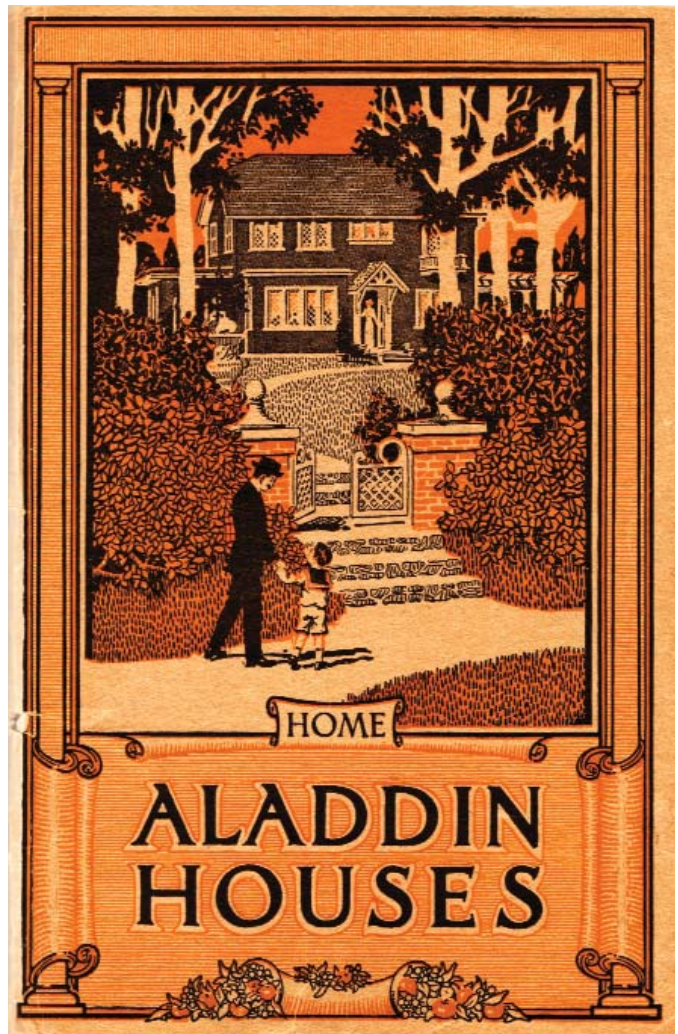
*The Marsden bungalow was one of the most popular Aladdin models produced.*

**above right**

*Aladdin was the first true kit-house producer. This 1913 catalog cover depicts the calm suburban family home desired by many Americans in the early years of the 20th century.*

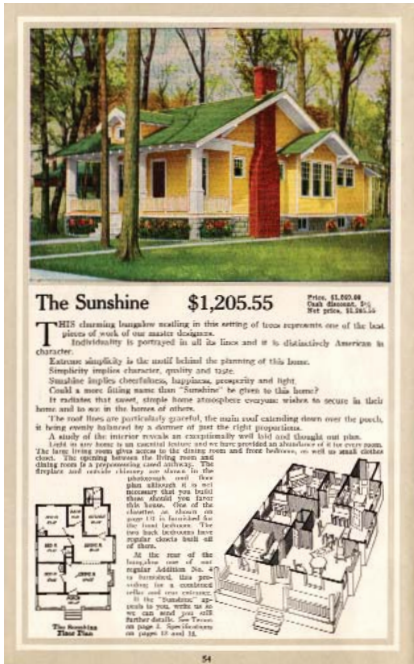
**right**

*Aladdin provided interior views to show homeowners how to furnish their new bungalows.*



INTERIOR ALADDIN PRIZE BUNGALOW



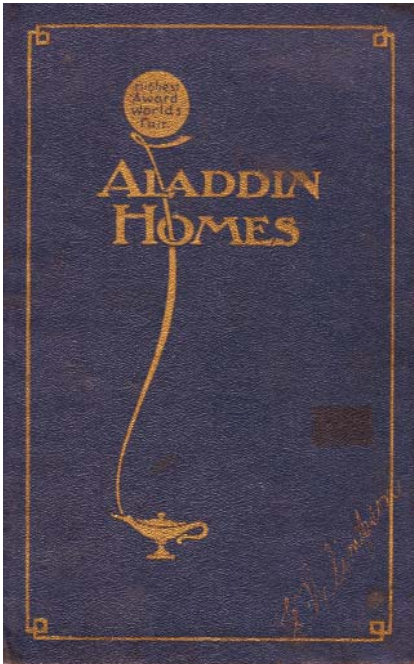


**above**  
This catalog page from 1917 shows the Sunshine model bungalow appropriately colored bright yellow.

**above middle**  
Aladdin knew that cheaply made catalogs were soon discarded. They had theirs bound in a tough leatherette finish, and even had the prospective customer's name handwritten in gold ink on the front cover.

**above right**  
An advertisement in Good Housekeeping for an Aladdin Sunshine model home. The company used national circulation magazines to gain the majority of their clients.

**opposite**  
The large full-color advertisement presented the dilemma of many families in the early 20th century—whether to buy a home or an automobile since they both cost about the same amount.



The company had been renamed Aladdin Homes and had a catchy advertising phrase: "Built in a day."

Today, the most enduring part of this remarkable story are the company's many homes built in 49 of the 50 states and treasured by those who know the fascinating history of how their house originated. With their Genii door knockers and Aladdin logo door knobs, many of the company's most popular models were bungalows. It was estimated that in the 1920s more than 2 million people lived in Aladdin homes. Unlike Lewis Homes or Sears, the Aladdin models were simpler, catering to the lower end of the housing market in its early years. But by 1911, the Bay City company had caught on to the bungalow craze and was expanding its line. In that year's catalog, a section entitled "Bungalowville" offered 15 new models with many more architectural details and upscale styling. While people could still buy a simple house kit for \$334 and have it shipped to them by rail, they could also purchase a stylish bungalow, such as the Detroit model, for \$990. These houses were substantially less expensive than conventional built homes, had more style options and could be erected much faster by less-skilled labor.

Aladdin was so proud of its quality that it offered to send the home buyer a dollar for every knot found in any of its siding materials. Testimonials by customers often commented on the quality of the kit-house materials that were far superior to anything found locally. The company became so popular that in 1918 it received more than 500,000 requests for its catalog. Insightful advertising was the Aladdin trademark, illustrated by a colorful full-page ad comparing the purchasing decision between buying a new car or a new house is one prime example (see page XX). The company was equally adept at providing prospective customers with interior images that created the perfect mood. Aladdin even of-

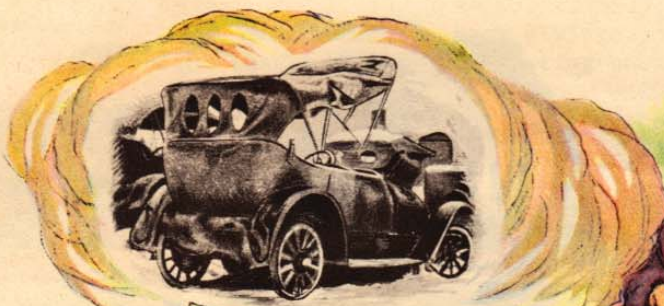


# A New Home --- or, A New Car

## The Home

Aladdin house cost erected .....	\$1,000.00
25% increase in value as soon as erected .....	250.00
Six year's rent at \$12.50 per month (saved).....	900.00
<b>TOTAL .....</b>	<b>\$2,150.00</b>
Less six year's taxes .....	180.00
Less six year's insurance .....	36.00
<b>Net value and net earnings at the end of six years</b>	
— <b>TOTAL SAVED .....</b>	<b>\$1,934.00</b>

and Peace, Happiness and Comfort



## The Car

New automobile .....	\$1,000.00
First year's depreciation 40% .....	400.00
Second year's depreciation 20% .....	200.00
Third year's depreciation 15% .....	150.00
Fourth year's depreciation 10% .....	100.00
Fifth year's depreciation 10% .....	100.00
Sixth year's depreciation 5% .....	50.00
Figures of depreciation taken from Industrial Digest	
<b>TOTAL depreciation six years .....</b>	<b>\$1,000.00</b>
Average upkeep including gasoline and oil for six years	
at \$20.00 per month .....	1,440.00

Depreciation of automobile and cost of upkeep six years  
 — **TOTAL SPENT .....** **\$2,440.00**

and Worry, Fear and Debt



## Own a Home First --- Then Indulge in the Luxuries

As shown above, instead of having spent \$2,440.00, you will have saved \$1,934.00 --- a difference of \$4,374.00





**The Detroit \$1,088.70**

**A**n enthusiastic owner of this attractive combination house writes: "The more I see the Detroit and the longer we live in it, the greater becomes our love for it. After a year, we cannot suggest how our neighbors could make it more attractive as you gradually improve the arrangement. This I believe you will admit is exceptional because usually after giving a house that most are not of actually living in it, you have some suggestions or changes you would make. We have none."

Who will not agree that actually living in a home is the best test? We believe that the better one studies the design and arrangement of the Detroit, the more fully you will realize why this owner has no improvements to suggest. Without being glibly it is attractive, without being elaborate it is simple. The attempt has been made to combine, yet you could not add anything without really destroying it, so that the interest seems to stand completely with nothing to add or leave off.

Notice how the porch extending the entire width of the house has been made not a merely attached part, but a real part by carrying over the main roof line, while the double porch columns seem to give just the right stability for this step of construction. Artistic grouping of different style windows, new or old, exposed rafters, straight line chimneys, and an especially artistic porch wall construction seem to have nothing to be desired.

In exterior arrangement the Detroit is equally pleasing. (See Detroit illustration on page 47.)

The planned living room has opening off from the dining room. Complete model Plan The Detroit detailed specifications, listing in full the complete list of material, are on file in our office. Also copies of plans and a book for detailed case of material are placed in hand files. They will be sent to you upon request. See General Specifications pages 12 and 13. See Terms on page 2.

**First Floor Plan—The Detroit**

**above**

The Aladdin "Detroit" model bungalow. An owner of this kit house wrote the company to say that after living in it for some time they could not think of any improvements to the overall design as the house was perfect.

**right**

Aladdin sent its customers a magazine covering topics of "Home Life." It provided hints and suggestions on cooking, landscaping and even stain removing.

ferred its customers a magazine, The Wedge, which was packed with useful homeowner information on topics that ranged from gardening to cooking and decorating. One interesting Household Hint from 1914 stated, "A cloth dipped in ammonia will often remove stains from the collar of an overcoat"

Aladdin's bungalows were not lavish by industry standards. The Oakland model is a single story 32- by 32-foot home with five rooms that sold for \$975 in 1913. By the mid teens, the most popular model was their story and a half Marsden that was pictured in a color fold-out and sold for \$1,536. Aladdin continued selling kit homes much longer than any of its competitors. Montgomery Ward ended production in the 1930s; Sears stopped selling homes in 1940. But the family owned and run company started by small-town boys kept going until 1982, a tribute to great design and even better quality. [end bug]

[Itals] Robert Schweitzer has taught architectural history and historic preservation for more than 25 years. He performs exterior color consulting for a wide range of historical and modern buildings. E-mail him at robs@umich.edu or visit his Web site at [historichousecolors.com](http://historichousecolors.com). **CB**

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

**PUT IT TOGETHER**

For more on Aladdin kit homes, see these books and Web sites.

- Aladdin "Built in a Day" House Catalog, 1917, Reprint, Dover Publications. Visit <http://store.doverpublications.com/>
- America's Favorite Homes by Robert A. Schweitzer and Michael W. A. Davis, Wayne State University Press, 1990. Visit <http://wsupress.wayne.edu/catalog>.
- [antiquehome.org/House-Plans/1916-Aladdin/](http://antiquehome.org/House-Plans/1916-Aladdin/)
- [archive.org/details/aladdinhomes191800cacluoft](http://archive.org/details/aladdinhomes191800cacluoft)
- [lib.umd.edu/NTL/kithomes.html](http://lib.umd.edu/NTL/kithomes.html)
- <http://bjmi.us/bay/1pi/aladdin/intro.html>
- <http://aladdintown.com/>
- [neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-09/aladdin.html](http://neh.gov/news/humanities/1998-09/aladdin.html)