Sleeping Around
A History of American Beds and Bedrooms

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COUNTRY LIFE IN AMERICA MAY, 1909

If you prefer it, a simple tent in the back yard is excellent

Or you can raise it above the ground and make it more elaborate

Or a special house may be built of wood and canvas. This cost $50

Outdoor sleeping tents; from C. M. D'Enville, "Sleeping Outdoors for Health: Outdoor Sleeping for the Well Man," *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909).

In the late 1970s Peter Banham was Professor and Chairman of the Design Studies Department in the School of Architecture and Environmental Design at the State University of New York in Buffalo, a position which I was hired to fill after Peter left in 1980. While I had not then met Peter, his books *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* and *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* had had a major role in shaping my thinking about twentieth-century design, and I had no illusions about replacing someone of his international reputation. So I didn't follow in his footsteps, but I do think that my work has been affected by the openings he created within architectural and design history.

Peter's work provided the valuable model of design history that was not obsessed with style questions and did not take aesthetic issues to be more important than all kinds of other issues. For me, his work provided the necessary counter to the tendency among architectural historians to focus on geniuses and styles as self-justifying objects of study. Peter's interest in popular culture and in the mentalities of particular eras made a scholarly space in which those of us who follow can take the world of common design as proper grounds for scholarship and tackle its history seriously.

My paper tests this claim that we should take common design seriously by looking at some aspects of the most familiar household space, the bedroom, and its contents. The bedroom suggested itself as a starting point in a larger project of mine on the history of American domestic space, because beds present themselves as the most obvious, the most transparent of any household object, and the meaning of a bedroom seemed the most taken for granted of all the rooms in a house. But the bedroom is the site for many other activities and cultural expressions besides the obvious ones. The bedroom also provides me with a chance to break down some of the boundaries between design history and architectural history, since

architectural space, the activities in that space, and the designed objects that enabled those activities all enact their meanings in concert.[1]

Life in the bourgeois American home of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could hardly have proceeded without the bedroom. Everyone needs to sleep and most people prefer to have some privacy while doing it. The sleeping aspect of household life is supported by the house's spatial structure, and as that structure changes, the location of sleeping and the relationships between sleeping and other activities change too. I will begin my decoding of the bedroom by looking at changing attitudes towards the space that contains the bed.

THE SPATIAL LOCATION OF THE BED

When we look back to the English or Dutch colonists' houses of seventeenth century America, we find that 'bedrooms' as such are among the missing features. Of course people slept then as now, but whert they did it in the house shows our seventeenth century predecessors to have had a very different conception of how space can be divided.

The 1680s house of Parson Capen in Topsfield, Massachusetts, had two rooms on the ground floor. One was a hall or multi-purpose room. There, cooking and eating, light household production, and a host of other activities were done by all the members of the household. The other ground floor room was the parlour in which the 'best' things, people, and occasions had their places. In the parlour we find the best bed; along with it the best tea table and chairs, the mirror, the turkey work table covering and other, fine quality, possessions of the household. The parlour served as the sleeping place for the heads of the household, since they, like the tea table and mirror, had the most elevated in status in this house. We are here in a world that divides space up according to the meaning and value of its contents, not strictly according to the uses and functions that it serves.

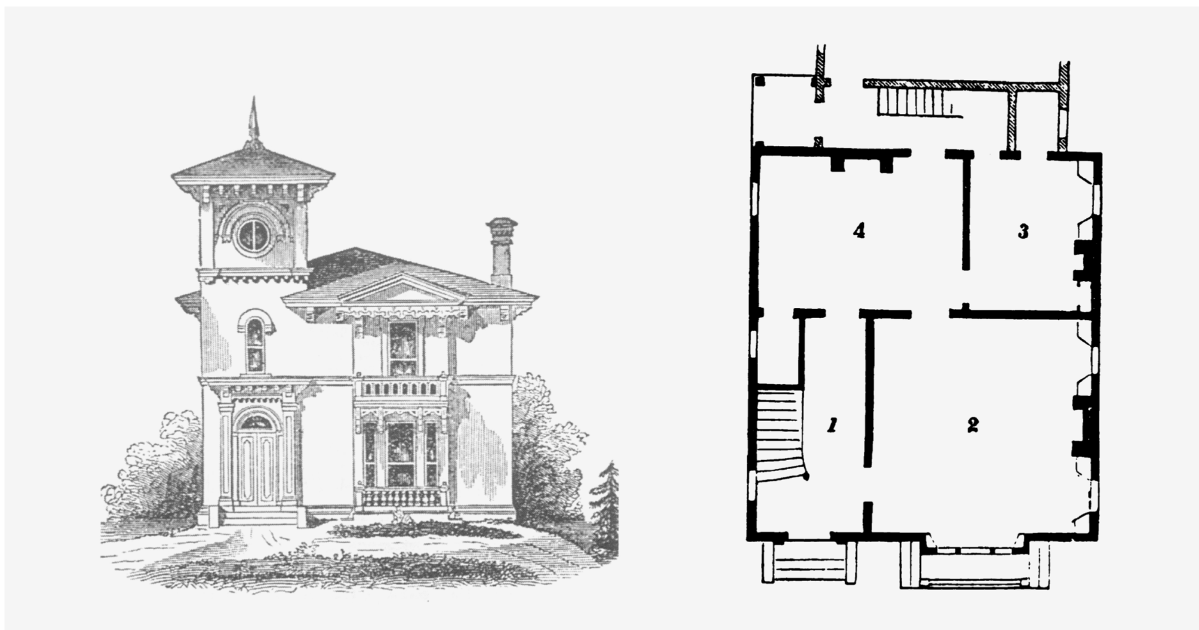
Left: The parlour from the seventeenth-century Jan Martense Schenck House with a built-in box bed, as installed in the Brooklyn Museum. Photo by the author, 1990.
Right: The parlour of the seventeenth-century Abraham Browne House in Massachusetts with a curtained high-post bed. Photo by the author, 1990.

1 Office of Advanced Studies, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, for a Forman Fellowship under which much of this research was done. I also wish to thank my student assistant Don O'Leary for preliminary bibliographic research, and Tom Carter for comments on an earlier version of this paper. A shorter version of this "bedroom history" will appear in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV*, University of Missouri Press, 1990.

In the well-to-do New England household of the mid-eighteenth century, a clarification of room uses accompanied an expansion in numbers of rooms and in circulation space.[2] Generous passages and stairways createdra system of movement paths through the bourgeois house. In the houses of this era we find fully developed bedrooms, with elaborately furnished bedsteads. Valances and bed curtains, chair seats and window curtains used matching textiles. These canopied beds revive for New England householders some of the authority signified by the hangings on royal beds or the roof-like terminations of pulpits and thrones.

The earlier seventeeth century merger of activities in the best parlour is reduced in the eighteenth century bedroom. Other specific activity spaces free the bedroom of competing uses. Now its inhabitants use bedrooms simply for sleeping and dressing activities, for quiet retirement, and for socializing with their nearest friends and family members. By the eighteenth century, then, a specific room for sleeping becomes common and continues to be available to house builders throughout our period.

But where a sleeping room should go in relation to other rooms in a house is a complex question with changing answers. In houses of the nineteenth century there were often bedrooms on the ground floor of the house, linked to the parlour. I will use designs from Gervase Wheeler's 1855 book *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country* as my examples, since Wheeler included houses for all classes, and both urban and rural settings. He proposed an addition to a farm house, placed on the front of the old house in order to give it an up-to-date villa appearance. On the ground floor is the parlour, the dining-room, and a chamber. The chamber has a door communicating with an entry in the old house, a door into the dining-room and, from there, immediate access to the living-room. On the second floor, which Wheeler calls "the chamber floor," there are three more family bedrooms.[3]



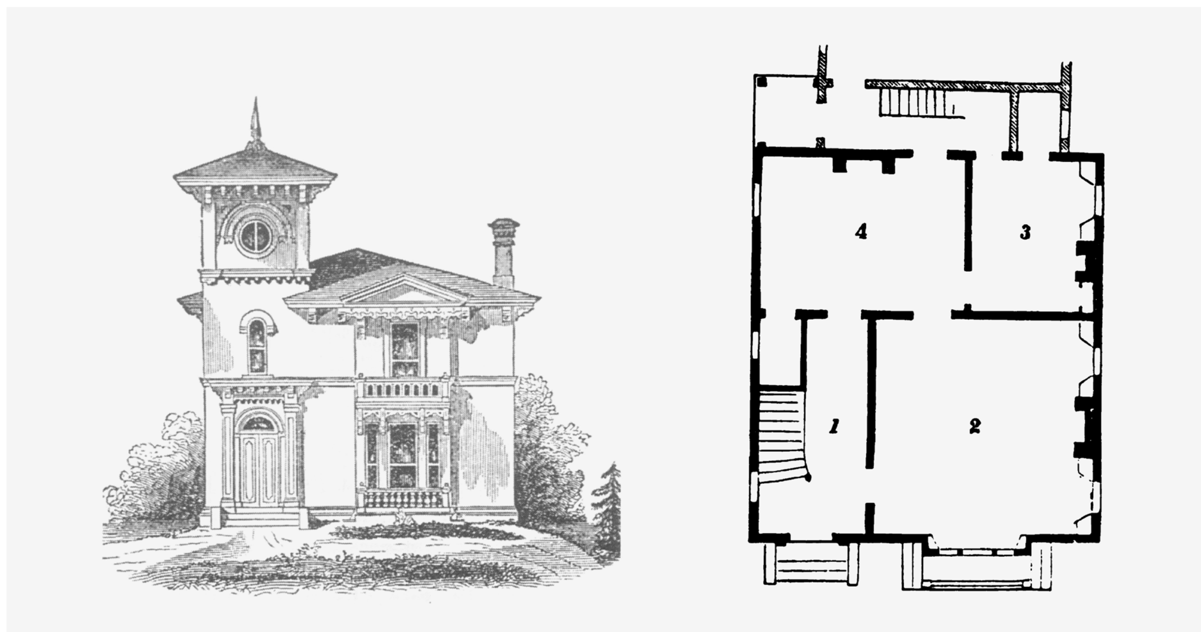
Elevation and Plan of a proposed addition to an old farmhouse by Gervase Wheeler.
1. hallway 2. parlour 3. chamber 4. dining-room
From *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, 1855.

2 David Henry Flaherty, *Privacy in Colonial New England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1972), 39-40. In Suffolk County, Massachusetts, between 1675 and 1775, the average number of rooms was: 1675-1699, 4.3 rooms; 1700-1749, 5.7 rooms; 1750-1775, 6.0 rooms; yet the poor could still only afford a one-room house.

3 Gervase Wheeler, *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 389-91.

A detached cottage for a suburban or country location published by Wheeler has a ground floor centre hall plan with a parlour at the front, a sitting-room across from it, a dining-room at the rear, communicating with the kitchen in the wing, and in the corner of the ground floor: a bedroom. This room is linked to the dining-room through an entry fitted with built-in drawers and a 'wardrobe. This chamber is also linked to the parlour by one door. Above, on a chamber floor, are four large sleeping-rooms plus two small ones.[4]

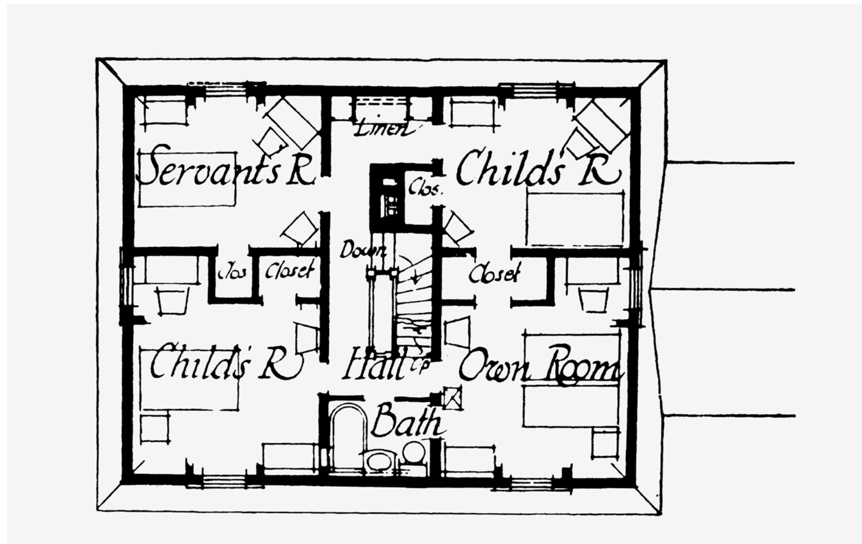
Both of these designs provide a separate chamber floor for the majority of family bedrooms, but significantly include a chamber on the ground floor attached to the most important reception rooms in the house. While a ground-floor chamber was sometimes appropriated as a guest-room, or as a sickroom to save invalids and their caretakers from climbing stairs, often this ground floor chamber belonged to the heads of the household. The master and mistress had their room linked to the principal reception rooms of the house, asserting their authority through spatial location.



Elevation and Plan of a proposed square cottage design for a suburban setting by Gervase Wheeler.
1. centre hall 2. sitting-room 3. dining-room 4. principal bedroom 5. parlour 6. pantry 7. kitchen
From *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, 1855.

Linking reception rooms and master chambers fades away from advanced early twentieth century house design. The *Delineator* magazine held a competition for a $3000 house in 1909, in which the first three prize-winners deployed all their bedrooms on second storey, separate chamber floors. An architect, Claude Bragdon of Rochester, designed the third prize winning house. Its ground floor has kitchen, dining- and living-rooms. The chamber floor has four sleeping-rooms: one a servant's room, two chambers each marked child's room, and a third chamber labelled "own room." [5] The bedrooms tend to have a single door from a corridor, or at most one other door that links a parents' room with a child's. This plan clarifies room location by function rather than by status of occupant, placing all household members' sleeping-rooms together on the second level.

4 Gervase Wheeler, *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country*, 321-27.
5 *Delineator's Prize $3000 House*, B. W. Dodge, 1909, 26.



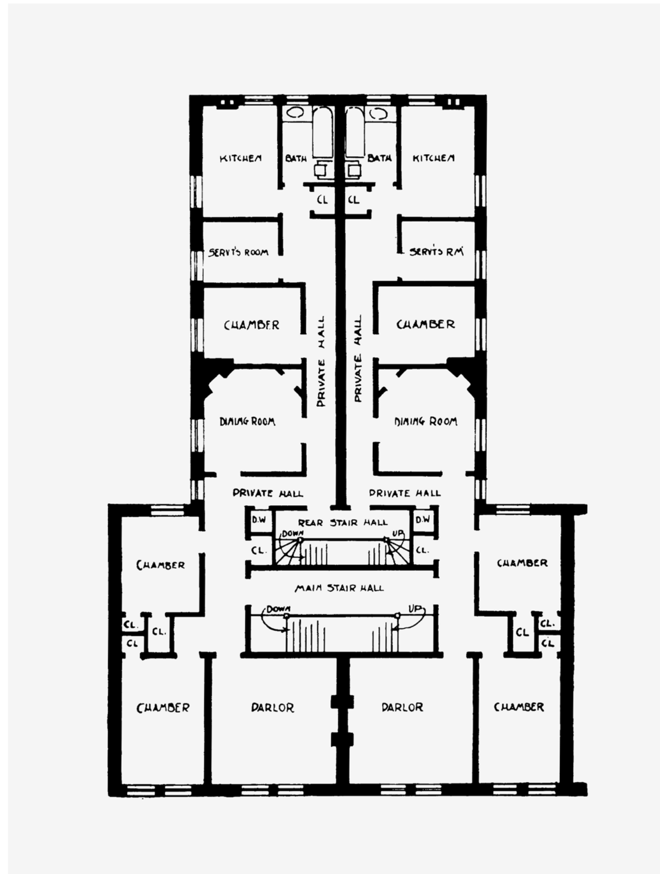
Plan of third prize house design by Claude Bragdon. All the bedrooms are segregated on a 'chamber floor' where everyone sleeps—parents, children, and servant.
From Delineator's Prize 3000 $ House, 1909

These two and three story examples show a movement from bedrooms located on the ground floor, linked to a parlour or dining-room, and having several means of access, to bedrooms segregated on upper floors with access limited usually to one door into a passage. We see another shift from locations determined by the status of occupants, where a master bedroom is linked to social zones in the house and servants are separated from other family members, to functionally determined placement that defined all chambers as sleeping-rooms and created a sleeping zone that included owners and servants on one floor. That is, by the early twentieth century, the category 'sleeping zone' prevails over competing categories such as 'servants' zone' and 'family zone'.

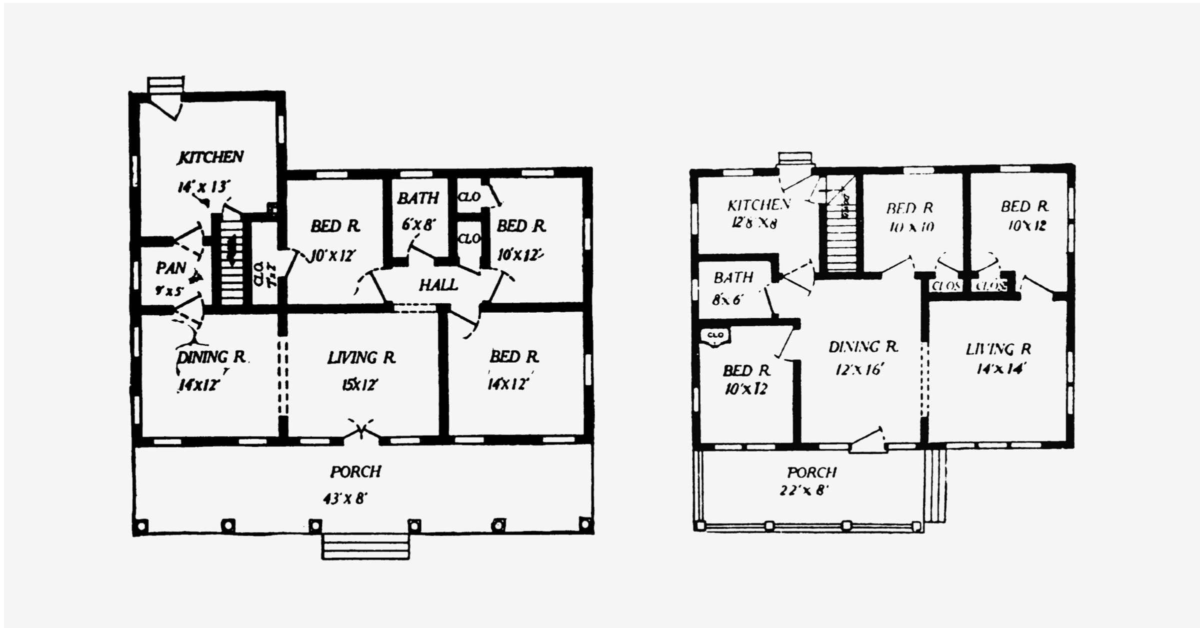
Additional problems in locating the bedroom confronted designers of single storey homes. Early New York city apartment building plans often mixed sleeping-rooms for the family with the family's other more social rooms, as seen in Richard Morris Hunt's Stuyvesant Apartments of 1869. Here a chamber is linked to the parlour at the street front of the building, while other family chambers fall between the dining-room and the kitchen to the rear. By the first decade of the twentieth century, apartment designers preferred grouping all family bedrooms together in a sleeping zone, as seen in Israels & Harder's apartment house on Irving Place where all reception rooms are grouped in plan at the front, and all bedrooms segregated at the rear.

Bungalows, two and three family flats, and modern houses of the ranch style also laid all rooms out on one floor and had to manage the relation of bedrooms to social spaces. A single-storey plan forces us to ask what functions could go next to a sleeping-room and which ones had to stay apart. Two Aladdin Redi-Cut houses of 1918 answer this question in radically different ways. One deploys its bedrooms all around the social spaces with doorways directly opening into living- and dining-rooms; the other groups all its bedrooms off a little hallway which completely buffers the bedrooms from the social spaces. One plan enhances privacy while the other house preserves opportunities for intra-familial surveillance. Single-storey house plans, like two- and three-storey models, show a variety of responses to the problem of bedroom placement, sometimes grouping the bedrooms by their sleeping function, but sometimes locating them according to other family demands.[6]

6 *Aladdin Redi-Cut Homes* (catalogue, Bay City, Michigan, 1917-1918).



Typical floor plan of the Stuyvesant Apartments by Richard Morris Hunt, 1969, on East 18th Street in New York (demolished). A parlour and a chamber are interconnected in the plan. Rerawn by the author.



Plan of two pre-fabricated houses from the Aladdin Redi-Cut Co., Bay City, Michigan, catalogue, 1916-17. The one on the left has a small buffer corridor protecting the bedrooms from the social areas, the one on the right's all bedrooms opening directly into dining and living-rooms.

Although this history of the spatial location of bedrooms at first seems to develop towards a clarification of room use, towards a room that was pure 'bedroom', and towards an isolation of all bedrooms in a pure zone of privacy, the bungalow examples return us to the complexity of the question. Bedroom locations and their relationship in space to other rooms of the house remains problematic.

WHOSE BEDROOM IS WHICH?

While everybody sleeps, different members of the household have different claims to a bed or a room of their own. Who it is who gets a bedroom varies according to the size of the house, the numbers of inhabitants and the decade. Bedrooms are for husbands, for wives, wind for married couples. While the married couple's bedroom is almost invariably called the 'master' bedroom, most nineteenth- and twentieth-century descriptions assume bias towards the wife's needs, listing dressing-tables, mirrors to see the hem of a dress, and comfortable seating on which to rest during the day as necessary elements in the couple's bedroom.

In a humorous 1872 article, Matthew Browne suggests that it is taken to be a rule that married couples must sleep together, and if anyone wanted to try sleeping alone it would become the talk of the neighbourhood, although he maintains that sleeping alone is good for everyone at least once in a while.[7] Other medical advisors asserted that a double bed is always unhealthy and that married couples should each have their own beds. No two people can comfortably and naturally sleep on the same mattress and under the same bedclothes, asserted a doctor in Appleton's Journal of 1880: "they disturb each other by wiggling, dragging at the bedclothes, and shock their partners with bad breath!"[8]

In Dr. Alcott's 1859 medical advice book we find that when pregnant, women should sleep in a separate bed from their husbands, or even in a separate room. This allows them to get good air, and helps prevent their having sex (which might damage the health of the foetus). The husband may sleep in the same room in his own bed, or in an adjoining room with the door open between them.[9]

In a modern design where 'his' and 'hers' suites of rooms are used, the house at the 1934 Chicago 'Century of Progress' exhibition, his and her rooms serve basically the same purpose but are furnished differently. Her room has its own bathroom with a bathtub and no shower, while his bedroom has a shower and no tub. His room has his bed, her room has their bed.[10]

Bedrooms are also for sons and daughters and many home decorating books advise parents on the role of a room for the boys and girls of the family. One of the high points of a girl's life, wrote Martha Cutler, a journalist, in 1906, is acquiring a room of her own. Such a room is for a person "who has reached that longed-for period in life when her needs are worthy of consideration, when a quiet, retired spot is deemed a necessity for [her] study and work…her sense of individual possession is coupled with a delightful sense of importance and newfound dignity, which renders her association with 'the children' unworthy to her seriousness."[11]

There is another category of offspring called children, who in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were not yet gendered. As Sally McMurry has shown in a recent paper, nurseries as special rooms for infants and children were being promoted by the 1830s to aid in the discipline and education of the young. But by the early twentieth century, rooms and

7 Matthew Browne, "On Going to Bed," *Every Saturday*, August 1872, 250-5.
8 Benjamin Ward Richardson, MD, "Health at Home," *Appleton's Journal*, n.s. 8 (1880), part 2, 521-26, 524.
9 William Alcott, *Physiology of Marriage* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1859), 176.
10 Dorothy Raley, ed., *A Century of Progress Homes and Furnishings* (Chicago: M. A. Ring Co., 1934)
11 Martha Cutler, "Girls' Rooms," *Harper's Bazaar*, 40 (October 1906), 935-40, 935.

furnishings distinguished numerous stages in a child's tastes and activities, from the nursery to adolescence to independence. The youngest of these, the infant, should have its own bedstead, according to many advice columns in nineteenth-century magazines, so it won't have to share air with its mother, a very impure practice. In its own bed it will also be protected from the mother who rolls over on her infant, crushing its limbs. When it gets older, it should have its own chamber. When children are put to sleep with their grandparents, the aged bodies rob the children of "vital warmth" and enfeeble them; so sleeping in single beds is best to assure a child's healthy growth. An American doctor advised young mothers in 1838 not to let the child sleep with dogs, cats, or younger persons, either.[12]

Another important inhabitant of the nineteenth-and early twentieth-century household was the servant, who needed a room of her own. Every family who keeps more than one servant should provide her with a single bed, advised the Beecher sisters in 1869, so she 'might not be obliged to sleep with all the changing domestics, who come and go so often'. A too narrow room can use a truckle-bed pulled out at night to sleep the second servant. Mr. and Mrs. Stockton's *Furnishing the House* (1872) advises that one of the best ways to retain a good servant is to give her own comfortable room. Even if a servant is a poor one, giving her a good room may help to make her better at her work.[13] In a small house the servants' bedrooms are often neglected, cautioned Candace Wheeler in 1903, but householders make a mistake:

> good surroundings are potent civilizers, and a house-servant whose room is well and carefully furnished feels an added value in herself, which makes her treat herself respectfully in the care of her room.

Finally, bedrooms are for invalids, who may spend a day feeling a little under the weather, weeks at a time being cured of an illness, or whole lifetimes with other more permanent complaints. For the type of room suitable for a chronic invalid,[14] "create something that is half bedroom, half boudoir," recommend Mr. and Mrs. Stockton. Supply the invalid with an easy chair, a carpet in a single sober tone with a bright border, curtains in lace, light-coloured wood furniture and a cool-toned picture on the wall. For invalids of the moment, writes Ella Church in 1877:

> A little gem of a tête-à-tête service on a small corner table in the sleeping-room is pleasantly suggestive of a day or so of invalidism, when one is just sufficiently out of sorts to be waited on and 'made a fuss of'.[15]

The standard bourgeois house of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has probably at least two if not many more bedrooms, but who gets a bedroom of her or his own is an open question. Children are grouped together, and may get their own single beds but not yet their own bedrooms. Servants, if lucky, are treated the same as children. Boys and girls, understood to have individual selves, can have their own beds and bedrooms. But one of the things you may lose upon marriage is a room of your own.

12 Benjamin Ward Richardson, MD, "Health at Home," *Appleton's Journal*, n.s. 8 (1880), part 2, 521-26, 525; William Andrew Alcott, *The Young Mother* (Boston: George W. Light, 1838), 268, 273.

13 Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Elizabeth Beecher Stowe, *American Woman's Home* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869), 370; Frank Richard Stockton and Marian Stockton, "The Home: Where it Should Be and What to Put in It," in *The American Home Book with Directions and Suggestions for Cooking, Dress, House Furnishing*, ed. Charles Dudley Warner, George Cabot Eggleston, Frank Richard Stockton, et al. (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1872), 84-85.

14 Frank Richard Stockton, "The Home: Where it Should Be and What to Put in It," 52-53.

15 Ella Rodman Church, "How to Furnish a House," *Appleton's Journal*, n.s. 2 (February 1877), 157-62, 161-62.

INDIVIDUALITY AND GENDER

Bedrooms, among all the rooms in a house, are known for their ability to convey individuality, wrote Ella Rodman Church in her 1877 home-decorating for *Appleton's Journal*:

> one can tell at a glance the mother's room from the brother's room. In the mother's room one finds an extra-large and comfortable bed, an easy chair, and a table- things used for accommodating numerous inmates. The bachelor's room (the uncle or brother) is full of newspapers, pipes and cigar boxes, and photographs of actresses. The young lady's room has muslin flounces on everything—usually either pink or blue; the grandmother's room has an old-fashioned four-poster bedstead, three-tier bureau, and her favourite easy chair. The boys' room and the children's room, have each a separate look of their own.' Only in the children's room, with its 'snowy-draped' bed for the six-year-old Alice and a swinging crib for Floy, the two-year-old, are sexes combined, and individual identity statements blurred.[16]

At the turn of the century, many writers gave the bedroom power to express the self:

> Every opportunity should be given for the development of individuality in a room which is pre-eminently the corner of the home which is truly home to the occupant, where the taste of no one, either guest or relative, need be considered.[17]

The other rooms must reflect the life of the whole family and their various occupations, but the bedroom "is the place for one's personal belongings, those numberless little things which are such sure indications of individual character and fancy the one room where purely personal preference may be freely exercised."[18]

In E. C. Gardner's entertaining 188s book, *The House that Jill Built After Jack's had Proved a Failure*, an uncle of the family espouses the 'individuality position in regard to separate husband's and wife's bedrooms:

> The personality of human beings should be respected. The chief object of home is to give each individual a chance for unfettered development. Every soul is a genius at times and feels the necessity of isolation. Especially do we need to be alone in sleep, and to this end every person in a house is entitled to a separate apartment.[19]

Bedrooms are also individualized for children. Home decorating books advised parents on the proper decorations for the boys and girls of the family. One such advises making furniture of railway sleepers for a boy's room. Girls' rooms had junior dressing-tables as well as space for artistic and intellectual development.[20]

Bedrooms test the understanding of the 'mother or house-ruler' in so far as she allows each occupant some space for self-expression, asserted Candace Wheeler in her 1903 book *Principles of Home Decoration*. "Characteristics of the inmate will write themselves unmistakably in the room", Wheeler continued. If you put a college boy in the white and gold bedroom, soon sporting elements and out-door-life atmosphere will creep

16 Ibid., 160.
17 Martha Ann Cutler, "Hygienic Bedrooms," *Harper's Bazaar*, 41 (January 1907), 78-82, 80-81.
18 "The Bedroom and its Individuality," *Craftsman*, 9 (February 1906), 694-704, 595-96.
19 Emily Caroline Gardner, *The House that Jill Built After Jack's Had Proved a Failure*, 246-47.
20 Clarence Benjamin Walker, "Railroad Tie Furniture to Furnish a Boy's Den," *Women's Home Companion*, 32 (October 1905), 48.

in: "Banners and balls and bats, and emblems of the "wild thyme" order will colour its whiteness …" She continued, "In the same way, girls would change the bare asceticism of a monk's cell into a bower of lilies and roses…"[21]

What has been represented in these quotations as the expression of individuality was often, however, an expression constructed out of markers of gender roles. This is made clear by the keeper of a boarding house who wrote advice on decorating young men's rooms. What might be seen to be "individualizing" in a private setting is revealed to be generic and gender-related in the boarding house.[22]

This boarding-house keeper advises on the pictures in the boys' bedrooms and sitting-rooms. In a sitting-room the pictures should be "strong, bordering on frisky," with appropriate images including bulldogs, baseball players, college scenes, and horses. The pictures in the young man's sitting-room should represent his "workaday life—that of a man among men." But in his bedroom he should have works "prophetic of his home life... His pictures there should be soft and inspiring like the caress of a good woman... The young man has no mother, sister, wife or child to keep his life sweet and clean, his ideals high and true."[23]

The "influence of his landlady" is all he has. So give him an American flag to cultivate his patriotism; hang a madonna in his room, and also a picture of 'the Master.' One or two photographs of the mother or best girl should be neatly framed and kept nice—moreover they should be looked at every day.

The sincerity of advice books urging each bedroom's occupant plenty of latitude in self-expression through the choice of objects and furniture must be questioned. All this advice assigns predictable gendered signs to those presumed individuals. All girls should have ruffled dressing-tables; all boys need to decorate their rooms with baseball bats or make their furniture of railway sleepers. Young men all need to declare their individuality through "frisky" pictures of bulldogs; all mothers' rooms must express the idea of nurture. It looks more like the bedroom's décor shapes its occupant into correct gender roles, rather than that the occupant expresses individual taste in shaping the bedroom.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE BEDROOM

Although there may be disputed meanings in the furnishings of bedrooms, it's clear enough what the function of a bedroom is. A turn-of-the-century columnist for *Canadian Magazine*, Ms. Helliwell, documented that in the 'old days' each room had an unambiguous function: she quoted Webster's dictionary, defining "bedroom" as "a room or apartment intended for a bed," or "a lodging room," and that's all. The generation of our grandmothers, Helliwell stated, used bedrooms in this single-minded way, and their rooms were "chilly, stately." [24] In grandmother's sleeping-room, besides the bed, were her washstand, her chest of drawers, her dressing-table, and a mahogany 'wardrobe' in which grandfather's apparel hung. But the easy chair was more likely found in the library, because bedrooms were for beds, a place to be only at night. Grandmother would never have received friends in her bedroom.

However, in the modern era the purely bedtime function of bedrooms has been thoroughly questioned. Now the modern girl of 1902, says Helliwell, lives by herself in one room and tries hard to make it into everything but the lodging room it really is. Her bed becomes by day a "cozy corner." Gay cushion covers hide night-time pillowcases. Toilet articles are hidden behind the mirror in a bag, while the jug and basin are concealed by a

21 Candace Wheeler, *Principles of Home Decoration* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903), 61.
22 Tekla Grenfell, "Renting Rooms to Young Men: How I Have Successfully Done it for Years," *Ladies' Home Journal*, 25 (September 1908), 24.
23 Ibid., 24.
24 Margaret MacLean Helliwell, ed., "Woman's Sphere," *Canadian Magazine*, 20 (1902-1903), 281-83, 281.

screen. Curtains hide "my lady's wardrobe." Even the turn-of-the-century girl who still lives in her parents' home "regards her room less as a sleeping place than as a sort of combination boudoir, library, reception and sitting-room. Here she sews, reads, studies, writes her letters and club essays, receives her feminine friends, and frequently brews herself a private pot of tea."[25]

The architect D. N. B. Sturgis speculated in 1904 for *Architectural Record* on how to make a bedroom serve the additional 'living' needs of the modern woman. Such a room needs a fireplace and some attractive *objets d'art*, a toilet table and full-length mirror, a little stand with drawers that can easily be moved around, and a little writing table for sending hasty notes without going to the library below. Twin beds, Sturgis notes, have been much in fashion for the past dozen years for bedrooms intended to serve also as sitting-rooms, because they can more easily be disguised as something besides a bed during the day. Arranged thus, the bedroom becomes "a pleasant place in which to sit and, indeed, to live."[26]

These turn-of-the-century writers portray bedrooms as multi-functional places which serve complex purposes. The seventeenth-century parlour with its merged social and sleeping project is not so different after all from the merged uses of Helliwell's 1902 modern girl's bedroom. In fact, a bedroom with a single use turns out to be a historical rarity.

PATENT FURNITURE AND FOLDING BEDS

In order to advance the multiple uses potential in the bedroom, a special kind of furniture was marketed in the mid-nineteenth century. It enabled a single room to do duty as a parlour and as a bedroom, reminding us of the tip-up beds once found in the multi-functional Colonial hall. This patent furniture took various forms, but generally was marked by its disguised identity: it looked like a piano, a desk, a bureau, a fireplace or a wardrobe, but it converted into a bed.

In an illustration in an 1891 *Decorator and Furnisher*, the principal piece of furniture is a Parlour Bed in mahogany with a full-length mirror, carving, and two drawers at the base. This is shown being unfolded into a bed by the mistress of the house who moves it with no effort.[27] In their catalogue of 1884, Boyington's recommended their folding beds because they can change more quickly from a cabinet to a bed and back to a cabinet:

> A distinguishing feature of these Beds is the fact that, when closed, they are an exact representation of some piece of furniture other than a bed, such as Bureaus, Dressing Cases, Cabinets, Writing Desks, Side-Boards, Secretaries, etc., and there is nothing about their exterior suggestive of a bed, as there is in all other Folding Beds made.[28]

Folding beds of this kind were reported to be a market success according to the Decorator and Furnisher in 1885, because they do away with the need for extra rooms in apartment houses. An advertiser promoted his wares by claiming:

> A family that wants to economize, can do so by hiring small tenements and using Boyington Folding Beds in their living room.

25 Ibid., 282-83.
26 Dwight Nathaniel Bellamy Sturgis, "American Residences of Today: Part IV, The Bedroom," *Architectural Record*, 16 (October 1904), 372-83, 382.
27 *The Decorator and Furnisher* (New York), v.18 (April 1891), 19.
28 Boyington's Folding Beds, 1884 (Trade Catalogue in Winterthur Museum Collection), 2.

Folding beds owe their acceptance to the "attractive cabinet work, by which they not only simulate but serve as cabinets, secretaries, etc., in striking contrast with the clumsy and awkward concerns that at one time loomed up and disfigured the entire apartment."[29]

Scientific American in 1896 reported a patent to Thomas Langdon of Los Angeles for a piece of furniture that combined in one item a single bed, a double bed, a sofa, and a detachable crib. The seat and back of the sofa are upholstered and hinged. With the hinged back upright, it is a sofa. With the hinged back down and resting on hinged folding legs it becomes a double bed. The single bed and the crib are made by detaching various parts of the frame.[30] Another *Scientific American* of 1898 described a bedstead made of metal that can be adjusted in both length and width by sliding rails:

> Among the many advantages claimed for this bed are its structural firmness and its ready adjustability to conform with the accommodations afforded by various rooms.[31]

This suggests that the size of rooms and not the sizes of mattresses, sheets and blankets (or of people's bodies) controlled the dimensions of beds, at least for this inventor.

In the twentieth century, wall (or portal) beds make extra bedrooms unnecessary and "practically eliminate[s] the servant problem." The portal bed drops from a closet or dressing-room into the living-room. They are recommended for any setting in which "convenience receives serious consideration" including apartments and apartment hotels, mansions and bungalows.[32] But technological inventions have cultural reverberations, as observed by a journalist in 1908:

> A *woman* likes a folding-bed, she likes a washstand that shuts up into an imitation sewing table; she likes to keep the chinaware out of sight. A man cannot see that; he argues that everyone knows that he has a bed and uses a washstand, and why should he be ashamed of them?[33]

These mechanical, adjustable, fold-up, or hideaway beds provided a welcome solution to living in constrained spaces. The extraordinary disguising of beds as pianos, fireplaces, or secretaries is no longer deemed necessary, but most small American apartments and many houses today still include a bed concealed inside the living-room couch. As bedrooms can turn into living-rooms, so the reverse.

HEALTH AND THE BEDROOM

Sleeping of course is essential to health, but many other health concerns occupied authorities on bedrooms in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Catharine Beecher wrote on keeping the bedroom dust free and bug free in her 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy*. The subsequent decades continued her concerns for maintaining a clean bedroom.

An article by Harriet Martineau in *Harper's Monthly* in 1850 gave mock serious instructions on how to make an unhealthy bedroom. Cover the fireplace up so foul air cannot escape during the night; likewise shut the window. Don't use perforated zinc panelling: if you do, foul air will escape. Pull closed the curtains around your bed, which will be especially

29 Leonard Chandler Boyington, *Automatic 'Chiffonier' Folding Beds*, 1885 (Trade Catalogue, Winterthur Museum Collection), 10-11, 15; *The Decorator and Furnisher* (New York), v.6 (June 1885), 81.

30 "A Combined Bed and Sofa," *Scientific American*, 74 (20 June 1896), 3.

31 "A New Extension Bed," *Scientific American*, 5 October 1898, 22.

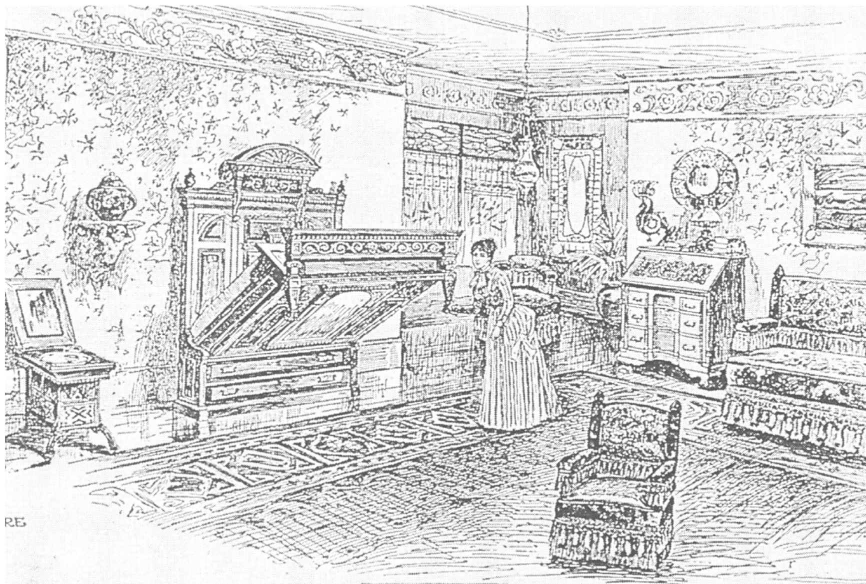
32 VanDame Portal Wall Bed (pamphlet, New York Public Library, 1918), 2.

33 Tekla Grenfell, "Renting Rooms to Young Men: How I Have Successfully Done it for Years," *Ladies' Home Journal*, 25 (September 1908), 24.

effective in containing the "poison vapor bath" if they are of a thick material. Cover yourself with a featherbed so the skin can't transpire. Likewise wear a tight night-cap.[34]

The bedroom "is really the most important room in the house by far and far again," advised Dr. Richardson in his home health magazine articles of 1880. But it is often the room that is least considered in building or furnishing a house. People often turn any unused space, closet, attic, or dressing room into a bedroom, ignoring the true needs of sleepers.[35] Instead he urged that designers of houses make sure that the bedroom faces south-west for the best breezes, and that the sleeper faces east so the body is lined up with the sun's path for greatest health.

By the turn of the century the most pressing health worry shifted to the prevention of tuberculosis, which experts believed could be combated by means of fresh air. In order to avoid the 'Great White Plague' (tuberculosis) some people have even given up kissing their kin, reported *Scientific American* in 1909. "Fresh air and plenty of it is the best preventive for consumption, the grip, bronchitis, common colds, and pneumonia." They even advised using tissue-paper handkerchiefs.[36]



The fold-up parlour bed is easy to operate and looks like a wardrobe when not in use; in "Parlour Bedroom," *The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 17 (Jan. 1891).

For the early twentieth-century germ-conscious sleeper, fresh air for sleeping is critical. Some people build screened porch bedrooms just outside their sleeping rooms. They get patent sleeping bags to use on the porch that leave only the head exposed, which is then covered with a hood. Even so, one gets cold going from the warm changing room to the cold outdoor bed.

34 Harriet Martineau, "How to Make Home Unhealthy," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 1 (June-November 1850), 618-19.
35 Benjamin Ward Richardson, MD, "Health at Home," *Appleton's Journal*, n.s. 8 (April 1880), part 1, 311-21, 314
36 Katherine Louise Smith, "Indoor Bed Tents," *Scientific American*, n.s. 101 (December 1909), 423.

Left: A hooded sleeping costume for outdoor sleeping, from Katherine Louis Smith, "Indoor Bed Tents," *Scientific American*, n.s. 101 (Dec. 1909).
Right: A sleeping-porch accessible from the bedroom in C. M. D'Enville, "Sleeping Outdoors for Health: Outdoor Sleeping for the Well Man," *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909).

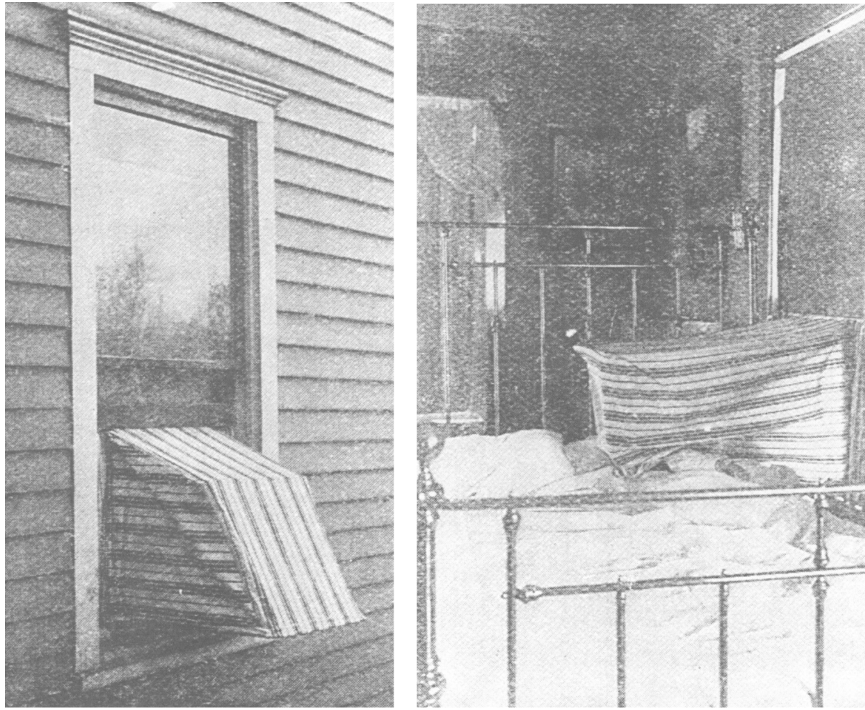
There are two solutions to this difficulty of keeping the body warm yet sleeping in the outdoor air. One uses a window bed, where the head of the bed extends over the window sill at night, and the sleeper pulls an awning over his head to protect himself from rain. When above the first floor, however, this method makes one feel the possibility of falling, and worse yet the 'bed shows from the outside of the dwelling.[37] The other method is a fresh air tent, which is inconspicuous. It fits around the open window and extends inward over the head of the bed and the head of the sleeper. This tent has a window on the bedroom side so the sleeper can converse with others in the room, and it can be used in a double bed where only one person wants the air.

This tent protects the rest of the body from draughts and colds. If the weather is too cold, one can use a hood with a shoulder cape that leaves eyes, nose and mouth only exposed to the air:

> Fresh air allays sweating, provides good sleep- these tents are capital for insomnia-and helps the appetite. The cold air increases resistance to disease, purifies the blood, and prevents consumption… On a cold night one can move at least twelve inches from the window and still be under the tent, get perfect circulation, and be sure of getting up in a warm room in the morning.

Although much specialization had gone on inside the normal house design, so that the many family members each had its own personality and room, in sleeping-porches they all come together again. Another contributor to *Country Life* in 1909 cited an example of a porch sleeping-room 12 feet square used by two adults in a double bed and three strong healthy children on three cots, all enjoying a bedroom together.[38]

37 Ibid., 416.
38 Charles Martin D'Enville, "Sleeping Outdoors for Health: Outdoor Sleeping for the Well Man," *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909), 43-46.



An indoor awning allows the tread of the sleeper to be exposed to the fresh outdoor air.
From Smith "Indoor Bed Tents," *Scientific American*, n.s. 101 (Dec. 1909).

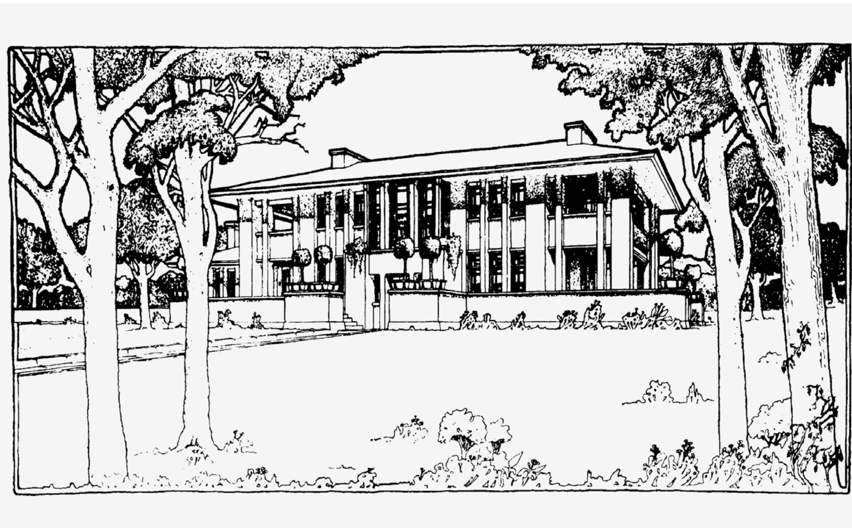
Outdoor sleeping has become immensely popular in the past year for everyone, observed a 1909 contributor to *Country Living in America*. Formerly known as part of the treatment of tuberculosis, now it is seen to be good for everything from colds to insomnia and nervousness. In this magazine, a doctor from Philadelphia speculated that future generations will sleep in the open air, and the architecture of houses will change to make night outdoor life possible.[39]

The "model house at moderate cost" recognized the new taste for outdoor sleeping and living. Designed by the Ohio architect, W. K. Shilling, in 1909, the dining-room and living-room each have an outdoor counterpart attached. On the second floor four chambers have three attached sleeping-porches. These have screens in the summer and canvas shields in winter, with floors of reinforced concrete. The outdoor spaces are incorporated under the main house roof, so do not read as porches, but as part of the body of the house.[40]

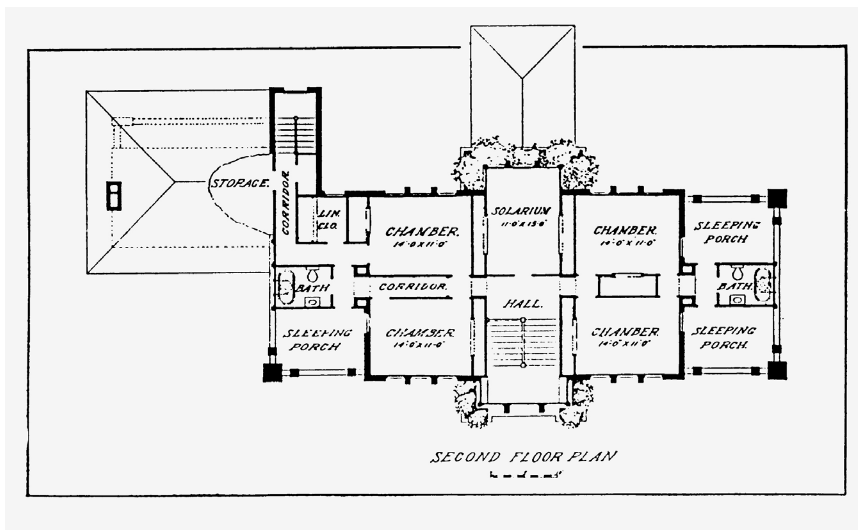
In the same year, a Mr. Hog described a little wooden house for sleeping out, created as an adjunct to his and his wife's permanent summer cottage. They called it their 'sleeping machine' because it produced a lot of sleep. At 8 by 5 feet, it cost $20.

The house had a shed roof and flaps that opened up on its south and west sides, lined with mosquito wire. The head faces south-west to catch the prevailing breezes.[41] Here, and in other examples, the bedroom has broken entirely free of the house and lives a life of its own in the backyard.

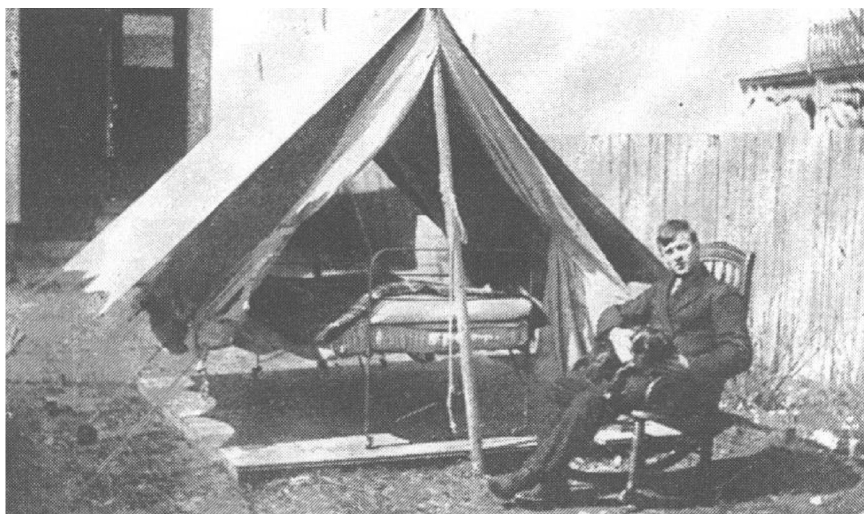
39 Ibid.
40 Charles Kent Shilling, "A Country Home with Outdoor Sleeping," *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909), 71-72.
41 Charles Garrett Hoag, "Sleeping Outdoors for Health: Part VI. A Sleeping Machine," *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909), 102.



Elevation of a house designed by C.K. Shilling. From “A country Home with Outdoor Sleeping, Living and Dining Rooms,” *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909).



Second floor plan of a house designed by C.K. Shilling. From “A country Home with Outdoor Sleeping, Living and Dining Rooms,” *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909).



Outdoor sleeping tents; from C. M. D’Enville, “Sleeping Outdoors for Health: Outdoor Sleeping for the Well Man,” *Country Life in America*, 16 (May 1909).

FANTASY AND THE BEDROOM

Bedrooms may literally break free of houses, but more usually they are places where freedom is situated in dreams and fantasies. I conclude with three fantasies of the bedroom. A journalist of 1902 recollected how mysterious it was to go to bed in her grandmother's huge, canopied, mahogany bedstead; to a child it was so high, its interior cavernous and darkened by curtains. She remembers imagining fairies, gnomes, elves, and angels as inhabiting the space enclosed by the room-like bed.[42] Hers is a fantasy of pure interiority, where enclosure is so complete that the inhabitant of the bed advances into a world of imagination.

A young man recalled his hall bedroom at the top of a city boarding-house as the site for imaginary travel. Although his room was the size of a closet, it had a window which broke through the roof to the sky and looked upon the stars. Dangling ropes controlled a skylight in the young man's hall bedroom. When he opened his skylight and turned out the gaslight the moon and stars seemed as near as if he were in a meadow in the country. His room is so small and compact he likens it to a ship's cabin, and the muffled city sounds to the sea. Covered in snow, the skylight gives a greenish light and he imagines he is in a cave rather than on a ship, "primitive man in the early wilderness." He says his room is possessed of genius for freeing his imagination to such adventures. The temptations of the Hotel St. Regis are nothing to him; he prefers his imaginary voyages in the boarding house hall bedroom.[43]

In the cavernous four-poster, the little girl is visited by goblins and angels; in the hall bedroom, the young man sails out toward adventure. Both have their imaginations liberated by their bedrooms.

The third fantasy is one concocted by a wedding-cake baker in New Orleans: the chocolate marital bed. Here the sexes join in a miniature, edible wedding night, in my favourite flavour.

A journalist speculated in 1902: "Perhaps another generation will see the total disappearance of the bedroom proper, and weary individuals, when night falls, will merely sink to rest on the hygienically-covered floor of their library or sitting-room."[44] This has not happened for most of us yet. But while we has not happened for most of us yet. But while we still have beds and bedrooms, let us not assume that we know them. An exploration of beds and bedrooms shows a remarkable wealth of meanings hovering over the innocuous word 'bedroom' on the architectural plan.

First published in: *Journal of Design History*, vol. 3, n. 1 (1990), 1-17.

42 Margaret MacLean Helliwell, ed., "Woman's Sphere," *Canadian Magazine*, 20 (1902-1903), 281-83, 281.
43 "The Contributors' Club: Cave-Dwellers, or the Hall Bedroom," *Atlantic Monthly*, 96 (July-December 1905), 574-75, 575.
44 Helliwell, "Woman's Sphere," 283.

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ISSN 2813−8058 burning.farm