From Portable to Notable

The Story of the Airplane House on Juniper Point and How It Grew

From the journal of William Gray Purcell.

The material fact of this building on the surface of the earth is the result of the most astonishing sequence of wish-thinking.

When a telephone call to Minneapolis had brought me to Madison, Wisconsin, Mr. Charles R. Crane, who was Mrs. Bradley's father, said, "Come along with us to look at a $600 portable house. We wish to order one for the place at Woods Hole."

Well, there was the portable—three bare rooms—three doors—nine windows—that was all!

Said his daughter, "But we must have a bathroom."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Crane. "Can we have a bathroom?"

I said, "Certainly."

"But, Father, there is no porch."

"We can easily add a porch."

"Certainly."

"But if this room is going to be the kitchen, there must be a sink and chimney."

"Yes, indeed," said I.

"Well, then, there should be a back porch," said Mrs. Bradley.

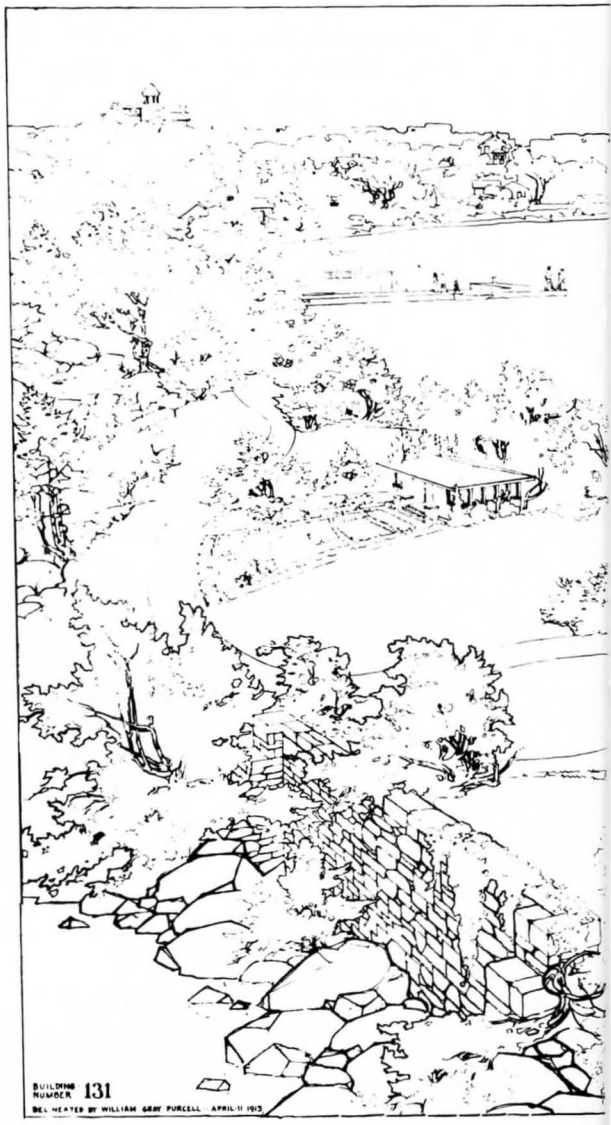
"Well, that should be easily managed," said Mr. Crane.

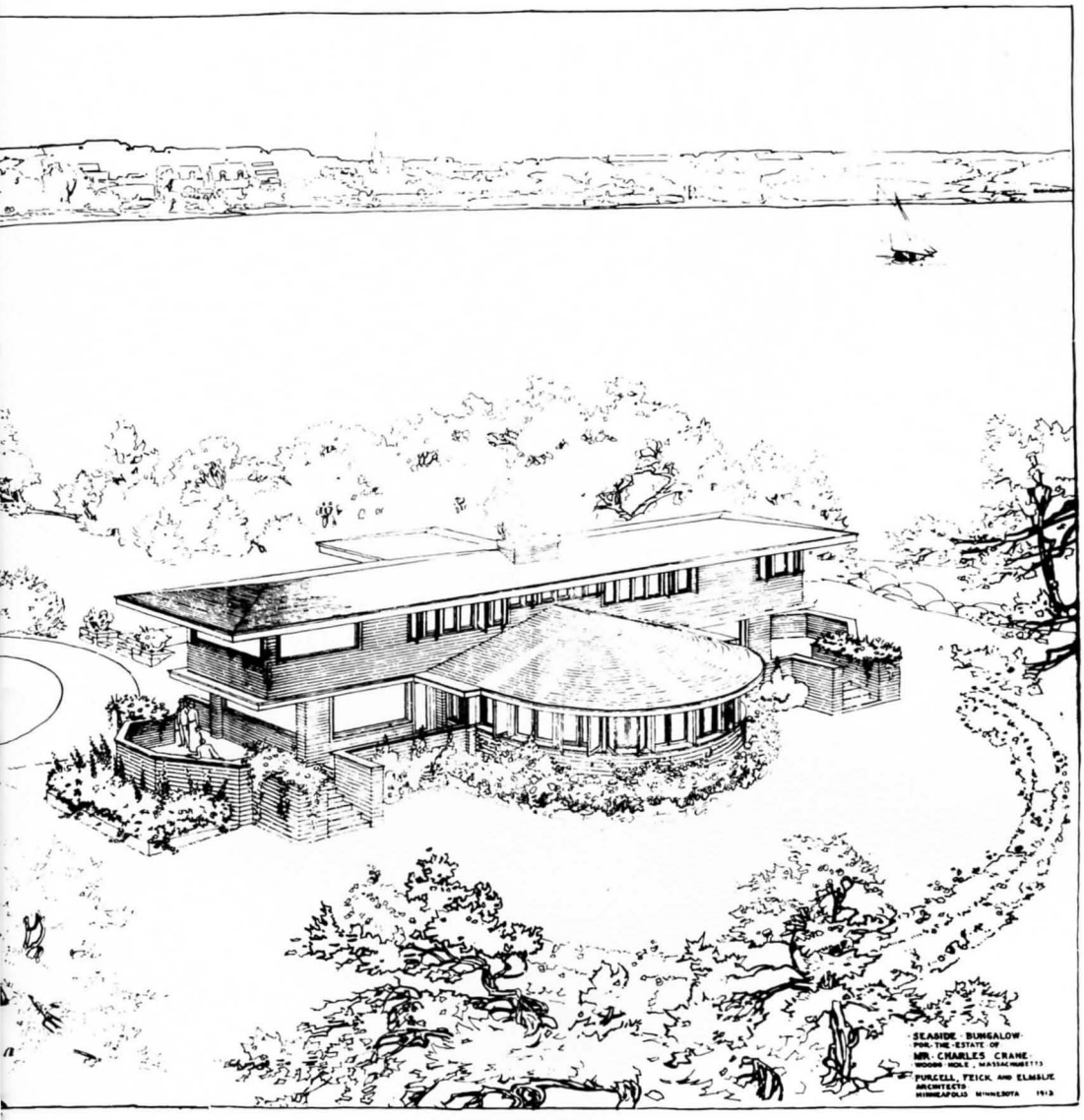
So then I said, "Why do you wish a portable house? Is there a great hurry in this matter, or do you wish later to take it away?"

"No, no hurry, but we thought it was inexpensive."

"No," I said. "The portables can be had promptly and quickly erected, but the same amount of house can be better and more cheaply built by carpenters, from material out of the local lumber yard.

"Well, then, that's what we will do."





Seaside Bungalow drawing, Purcell, Feick and Elmslie architects, 1913. Courtesy Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

Charles R. Crane playing patience at his home on Juniper Point. Photo from a painting by Sakarov, 1919. Courtesy Camilla Meigs.

Back at home from the visit of inspection, and gathered about the study fire in the home that Louis H. Sullivan and George Elmslie had built for this Mrs. Harold Bradley, who was Charles R. Crane's daughter, we talked more about this portable house which had "cost only $600 all ready to use" but apparently was not usable in anyone's view.

Said the daughter, "With our two children, we should have a place for the nursemaid."

Said Mr. Crane, "Yes, that is true. And she should have a bath. Could you manage that?"

"Certainly," said I.

"But," said Mrs. Bradley, "way off there down on the Point at Woods Hole, where are we going to put the cook? She cannot walk half a mile from the other house many times a day."

"Well," said Mr. Crane, "we must have a room for the cook."

After an evening's discussion in Madison about this $600 portable house, I returned to Minneapolis and laid the ideas on the draughting board. Mr. Elmslie smiled and said, "Leave that to me. I know just what they want."

After a week's work, he produced three projects—a simple one representing an ample country home based on three principal bedrooms and two servants' bedrooms with two baths; a more elaborate one considerably enlarging this project; and a third scheme with four principal bedrooms, two large sleeping porches, two principal baths, servants' baths, and so on. This last scheme was more than 100 feet from tip to tip in one direction, and 80 feet in the other.

I returned to Madison with these projects under my arm; Mr. Crane came up from Chicago and we spent an evening over them. I say "them" but the simple scheme and the more elaborate one were smoothed out, casually enjoyed and pushed to one side. All of the discussion centered about the most elaborate of the three schemes.

Cornelia Crane with her grandson, Joe Bradley, ca. 1920. Photo by John Rea Wooley. Courtesy Camilla Meigs.

The plan built was so complete a breakaway from the other more or less conventional arrangements we made and submitted, that we always admired the sensibility of their approach and decision, which was not based simply on their ability to buy what they chose. At that time Mr. Crane's income was reputed to be $1,000,000 a year.

Almost no changes were made in Mr. Elmslie's design and recommendations. The ideas for the new home were enjoyed by Mr. Crane, his daughter, and Professor Bradley, her husband. We were told to proceed with the work at once and have the building ready for occupancy October first. As this was the first of April and the working drawings had yet to be made, the time was exceedingly brief.

An excavating crew of fifteen men and many teams with wheeled scrapers were put on the job by telegram to the Crane Estate superintendent, indicating in a general way where to begin digging, leveling and rock-blasting. I jumped on the train and headed for Boston, Mr. Elmslie feeding me excavation and foundation drawings as fast as the draughtsmen could prepare them.

The work was naturally a high pressure job all summer. We all made several trips, and Mr. Feick and Mr. Elmslie spent several weeks there in superintendence.

Interior view of the Bradley Bungalow showing the Japanese influence: simplicity of line, generous use of natural woods, exposed structural elements and built-in furniture. Courtesy Northwest Architectural Archives.

One of the more interesting aspects of this job was that Mr. Crane was in Europe, and Mr. and Mrs. Bradley in California all summer, and none of them ever saw the work from the time the preliminary sketches were approved until they walked into the completed building October first. We not only constructed the building, developed the landscaping complete, but on my last trip to Boston in August, we placed local orders for all the equipment for the house, furniture, rugs, linen and bedding all monogrammed, correspondence paper, and minor gadgets of every kind, kitchen equipment, curtains, and so on, no end.

In May the superintendent marked off lawn areas in other parts of Woods Hole and kept them in condition so that they were available for perfect sodding. At completion of the building operations large quantities of shrubbery which had been set in knockdown boxes and kept in condition all summer for group shrubbery effects, and flowers which had been similarly established for flower-box plantings, were put in place in a few days time. The general grading operations with a large crew of men and teams were carried on for several months over the several acres of the peninsula on which the house stood. As landscape architecture, it was a very difficult job on a very rocky site.

On the evening of September 30th, the Cranes and the Bradleys walked up to a house that looked as if it had always stood on the site, and found within a complete establishment ready to live in to the last detail. A few days later, Mrs. Crane's sister was married in the house, and we received a very cordial and appreciative letter, indicating how delighted everyone was with the result.

From start to finish we were never asked, nor was there any comment about the amount of our fee, cost of the work, or what was paid or to be paid for the whole or any item. We used our own judgment as to what was needed, what to pay for it, O.K.'d the bills, and Mr. Crane's secretary paid them and paid us by return mail. The total cost of the $600 portable bungalow was $30,000, and everyone was happy and satisfied.

Sequel:

The great storm of 1938, which was of unheard-of violence for that part of the world, swept across New England from the south, destroying property of every kind, and the full force of this storm hit Cape Cod and the peninsula on which this particular bungalow was situated. George Elmslie and I had no misgivings with respect to our engineering on this building, for we had been warned of the heavy gales to be expected. We were, however, pleased to receive a letter from Mrs. Bradley a few weeks later, stating that though few houses near Woods Hole had escaped damage, no matter how well protected by location, none of the buildings we had built for the Crane Estate, probably in the most exposed section of all Woods Hole, was damaged in any way and none had taken in any water, although they stood high on a peninsula exposed to the elements on its four sides.

Of course, our results rested on some very definite measures of protection. This "bungalow" building is a wooden frame structure, but we carried steel rods from roof rafters down through the supports and anchored them into the solid rock.

The roof is only a 4½ to 12 pitch—very low for such a location, but we used hand-split and smooth dressed cypress shingles with a butt as thick as a fence board and laid only four inches to the weather. The roof was underlaid with rubberoid roofing, and in some portions of the roof a curved cut sheet of rubberoid was laid between every course of shingles one-half inch back from the edge, the whole nailed with copper nails. It is a one hundred year roof without any question.

Rumors of savage comments, by neighbors and others, clear up to Boston, on this outrageous and radical departure from New England tradition led Mr. Crane, at one period, to take a special trip to Woods Hole to see what the furor was all about. He wired Mrs. Crane his pleasure in stating that the house took its place beautifully.

In twenty-six years of occupancy not a thing was ever done to the house except incidental painting.

When Mr. Elmslie was combing the United States for 75 Roman brick to fill an opening in the chimney where a vent had been, Mrs. Bradley told me just that. We can say this—that house had no ancestor, and as Dave Bradley said, "It is the best place to live in I know of."

Ocean-front facade of the Bradley Bungalow showing the projecting bay of the living room, the lateral terraces and porches overhung by long, cantilevered balconies, and the integration of the house with its natural setting. The low-angled roof line with overhanging eaves is typical of the Chicago or Prairie style of the time. Courtesy Northwest Architectural Archives.

William Gray Purcell, in 1912, with his partner George Grant Elmslie, designed the Bradley Bungalow for Charles R. Crane's daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Harold C. Bradley. Reprinted with the permission of Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.