

Old Mail-Order Homes Find New Life

By Erin Hynes

It's only 11 a.m. and already Arlene May's email inbox has 13 inquiries about vintage mail-order homes.

Most want help figuring out if their house really was built from a kit ordered from a catalog, and who manufactured it. One person wonders what paint colors came with a particular model. Another asks for advice on adding heating/cooling ducts without compromising the home's integrity.

From Arlene's vantage point as official archivist for Sears, she sees the upsurge in interest in kit houses—homes that owners ordered from a catalog and put together themselves. The appeal of these homes today is pretty much the same as when kit homes hit the market nearly 100 years ago: they have clean, simple designs that are easy to live in and care for. Back then, kit homes were a big change from the huge, ornate houses of the Victorian era. Now, they are a big change from the huge, personality-less houses of the McMansion era. Many have touches that were cutting edge then and are charming now, like breakfast nooks and built-in bookcases. Best of all, they were—and often still are—very affordable, giving young families a chance to grab a chunk of The American Dream.



Vintage Chic

Why is a new generation embracing these compact, efficient homes, which were sold by Sears, Aladdin Homes, Gordon-Van Tine, Montgomery Wards, Pacific Ready-Cut Homes, and other companies?

“Our lives are so busy now, that we’re fascinated with the idea that people could put together a home like TinkerToys,” says mail-order home expert and author Rosemary Thornton. “It’s hard to imagine getting a kit with 30,000 pieces and a 75-page instruction book.”

But the attraction goes beyond novelty. “People are excited about owning and preserving part of America’s architectural history,” Sears archivist Arlene May says.

It Takes a Village to Identify a House

That excitement has created a community of aficionados, linked through books and internet forums. Not all of them own kit homes—many are just fans who enjoy tracking them down. The kit home community is about more than just chatting about the coolness of old houses that someone put together. It serves an important function: sharing the know-how needed to identify whether a house was made from a kit, and who sold that kit.

The task is anything but straightforward. Mail-order houses didn't stand out—they were designed in the popular styles of 1920s and '30s. And owners could easily customize them by moving the location of distinguishing features like doors and windows, so few exactly match the illustration in the catalog. Add to that several decades of remodeling, and you have a challenge worthy of obsession.

One well-known member of the kit home community is historical architectural researcher Rebecca Hunter (<http://www.kithouse.org>), who has made a career of helping people figure out whether they own a kit home, and who sold it. According to Rebecca, the first step to identifying a kit home is to find the manufacturer's markings that the builders used to match pieces together.

“The easiest place to look is on ceiling joists in the basement,” Rebecca advises. “Also check the underside of the treads and risers of the basement stairs.”

Less accessible points are rafters in the attic and walls studs. The next step is to analyze the markings—are they handwritten? stamped?—and the numbering system, which varied among manufactures. Many books on the market help with that job.

Quick Facts about Sears Modern Homes

- When Sears, Roebuck and Co. launched Sears Modern Homes in 1908 to create demand for its building supplies, it sold only house plans.
- In 1915, Sears began offering kits that included everything needed to build a complete house. Indoor plumbing was optional on some models).
- Sears wasn't the first company to sell kit homes, but it was the most successful. Sears sold an estimated 65,000 kit homes between 1915 and 1940.
- Sears made homeownership easy by financing the mortgage for no money down.

Even if you never go so far as looking for marks under a staircase or sitting in your car across from a stranger's house while rifling through a catalog to find a match, it's fun to do a little digging into the history of kit homes by checking out any of the several books and websites on the topic. As author Rosemary Thornton notes, “It's a backward glance to a simpler time when people were comfortable and children played on the streets.”

To learn more

Here are just a few of the many resources available:

- The **Sears Archives** website <http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/index.htm> gives a detailed history of Sears Modern Homes and includes drawings from the catalog (be sure to click the image to read the catalog's sale pitch). Links let you register as an enthusiast and request for information.
- **Downers Grove**, Illinois, includes floor plans and current photographs on its website <http://visitor.downers.us/searshomes/index.htm> and hosts an annual trolley tour of Sears kit homes in May (call 630.729.0380).

- Rosemary Thornton (www.searshomes.org) has written three books, including *The Houses that Sears Built* (2nd edition) and *Finding the Houses that Sears Built* (Gentle Beam Publications, 2004)
- *Houses by Mail: A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company* Katherine Cole Stevenson and Ward Jandl (Wiley, 1996)
- Rebecca Hunter's two titles are *Putting Sears Homes on the Map* and, with coauthor Dale Patrick Wolicki, *Sears Roebuck Book of Barns: a Reprint of the 1919 Catalog* (R.L Hunter Press. Available through amazon.com.)
- Dover Publications has reprinted several manufacturers' mail-order home catalogs. <http://store.doverpublications.com/>

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