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Bicycle Bungalows Renovates the Heights

Bicycle Bungalows | Houston, Texas



Bicycle Bungalows Renovates the Heights

By Kathy Bowen Stolz

Most people don't picture bicycles when they're picking a builder, but for people in the Houston Heights, it's a natural connection.

Bill Riley, who has lived in the Heights since 1991, purchased a bungalow to renovate as a speculative project on Key Street in 2008. Bill typically jumped on his bicycle to check on progress at the work site. When Bill was looking for a name for his new company, he simply had to look out the window.

His company, Bicycle Bungalows, restores, remodels and builds new homes in the Heights, usually tripling the size of the typical bungalow from 1,200 sq. ft. to as much as 3,800 sq. ft. by adding two-story additions to the original one-story entry.

However, Riley said restrictions from the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission now tend to limit the size of the additions for a total of about 3,000 sq. ft. Other restrictions require homeowners to keep the original windows, siding, trim and front door to maintain the historic

ambiance of the neighborhood.

However, the prices these bungalows command isn't rooted in history. Riley noted that the cost of a lot in the Heights is now about \$450,000. With remodeling costs ranging from \$400,000 to \$600,000, purchasing and renovating a house in the Heights can easily cost \$1 million and take anywhere from six to 11 months to complete.

"I love seeing the transformation, especially with old houses, during a building project. I get a lot of satisfaction from being able to turn a project into a thing of beauty," Bill noted.

According to Riley the demographics in the neighborhood have really changed since he and his wife Cathie and their 10-month-old daughter moved into a fixer-upper of their own in 1991. During the 1990s and early 2000s, most of their neighbors were retirees, and he and Cathie had to transport their kids across town for good schools and for play dates. During those years many houses in the Heights were demolished and replaced by bigger, newly constructed



Before



After

These before and after photo show dramatic changes while staying within the historical restrictio guidelines.

homes to meet the demands of modern families.

Nowadays most of their new neighbors are young professionals, such as doctors, attorneys and engineers, moving into their second homes.

Most of the houses that Bicycle Bungalows have renovated have been speculative projects. The mix is now about 80 percent remodeling vs. 20 percent new construction, he said. Bicycle Bungalows usually has four projects underway at any given time.

“But we’re not going to buy any more spec houses



Before photo of home pictured on cover.



the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) at the Greater Houston Builders Association, Bill is now credentialed as Graduate Master Builder, Certified Graduate Builder, Certified Graduate Remodeler and Certified Green Professional through the NAHB.

During the years Riley worked as a marine engineer, “all the ships I worked on were older than me and needed a lot of work. I was used to dealing with old ships and making them work. Comparatively, houses are a piece of cake and fun to work on.”

A graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Bill took a job after college where he worked on a cruise ships sailing around Hawaii. Later he worked on an oil tanker. When sailing, he worked 72 days onboard, then 72 days off. He noted that he did a lot of construction projects during his down time. He earned his chief engineer license but decided to quit sailing after five years because he couldn’t advance any higher and didn’t want to make a career of going to sea.

He then entered the University of Texas MBA program, where he met his wife. He then worked for a couple of energy companies in their marine departments, achieving increasing levels of responsibility.

But he couldn’t shake his innate desire to build a house; “the interest has always been there.” He and Cathie bought a 1902 house in the Heights to renovate. It had been in the same family for 90 years and needed a lot of work. But Bill said he enjoyed the process.

In 2004, his employer sold off its petroleum assets, with Bill staying around long enough for the last asset to disappear. At that time he knew he didn’t want to continue in a corporate career. He tried starting an asphalt shipping and terminal company with some friends, but fortunately that endeavor didn’t work out. During the economic downturn in 2007, he bought that first house in the Heights as a spec project, more as hobby than a business, and made a bit of money on it. He started buying more houses, and his projects evolved into a business.

Now, 11 years later, the company has a second-generation

in historic districts. The future is too uncertain [with constantly changing restrictions]. We’re pushing more for new construction projects in the fringes just outside of the historic districts.”

He gets frustrated by some of the historic restrictions because they don’t allow energy-efficient replacement windows, for example. And he’s learned that blowing insulation between the original section of a bungalow and the new section lets condensation build up, to the detriment of the house. “There’s building science involved. It’s generally better to leave the old part alone to let it breathe.

“We prefer to gut houses, but I have no problem tearing down houses without any charm. Our goal is to find more lots with houses appropriate to tear down. It’s almost more cost-effective to replumb and rewire houses than to work with the original,” Bill said.

“We focus on sustainable materials and energy efficiency in all of our projects to create beautiful, comfortable, livable homes for the long run,” Riley stated.

Bill piggybacked his training as a marine engineer with his lifelong interest in building. “When I first started building seriously, I tried to find courses that would fill in the gaps of my knowledge.” By taking many courses offered by



Before



After

Riley involved. His son Jacob joined Bicycle Bungalows as a project manager in January after six years of working in New York City as a fashion model. He's learning the business from his dad and deciding if he wants to refocus his career from art to building. He says he's gone from Fashion Model to Remodeler. (His sister and brother are both engineers.)

Despite his years on the sea, Bill Riley doesn't miss it. He doesn't even go boating to relax. Instead, he spends his time reading, taking advantage of his Kindle Unlimited membership.

"I love doing this [building]. I feel it's something I can do 'way past retirement age." In the meantime his wife Cathie is ready to redo their house once again. Bill may not be able to read as much as he'd like.



For more information about Bicycle Bungalows, contact Bill Riley at 832-786-1609 or bill@bicyclebungalows.com or by visiting www.bicyclebungalows.com.

The company is located at 1717 Yale St., #206, Houston, TX 77008.

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