

Some are big fans of house plans

By Leslie Mann | Special to the Chicago Tribune - *July 18, 2008*

Marianne Fasano admits she may never have a chance to build her dream house, and isn't sure if she would build it here or in her native [Ohio](#). But, in the meantime, she delights in collecting house plans that help her zero in on her perfect place. In addition to the dozen plans she has collected from builders' open houses, she has plan books.

"I know what I want [in a new house] but I haven't found it, exactly," says Fasano, whose [Batavia](#) home doubles as an office for her public relations firm. "The closest I found was a one-story that was being built in Batavia, but I'd remove the fireplace, add a screened porch and give it a more dramatic entry."

Rebecca Hunter of Elgin collects house plans for a different reason. When shopping for her 1923 bungalow, she fell for the arts-and-crafts style of that era and started collecting pre-war blueprints, plan books and catalogs of kit houses. That led to her second career as a historian, lecturer and author of houses sold by catalog. Her prized possessions are catalogs of plans (some original, some reprints) from kit-house manufacturers including Sears Roebuck and Co., Harris Brothers, Montgomery Ward, Aladdin Co., Lewis Co. and Pacific Homes.

"I think in a previous life, I was a 1920s architect because those are the houses I have such an affinity for," jokes Hunter. "They are charming, yet have the open floor plans that the Victorians didn't."

Unlike Fasano, though, Hunter says she'll never use her collection of house plans to build a dream house. "I'd rather see old houses rehabbed than new ones built," says Hunter. "But if I did build, I'd give the builder one of the Pacific Homes bungalow plans and tell him to build it just like this and not to change a thing. Pacific Homes' [California](#) bungalows are like the Midwestern bungalows but with even more wood."

Fasano and Hunter aren't alone, says Toby Israel, author of "Some Place Like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places." Although they don't hold collectors' conventions, house-plan collectors are common.

"For some, looking at plans brings back happy memories of their past, such as grandparents' homes where they were spoiled," says Israel, who has a doctorate in environmental psychology and consults with architects and homeowners. "For others, it's about imagining houses where they would like to live or houses that offer what their current houses don't.

"We all long for a place that feels like home, and that's not necessarily what developers are building. McMansions, especially, often give people the house they think they should have, but it never feels like home so they keep searching."

The housing slowdown hasn't affected this longing. "Even since housing has taken a downturn, our site's traffic has increased steadily," says Diane Hardwood, marketing director for houseplans.com, which claims to have the largest online collection of plans. "We get about a half-million visitors a month, and many visit repeatedly. Maybe they aren't going to build soon, but they don't stop looking at plans."

"It's a pretty common thing among people in my profession," says Chip Wagner, a [Naperville](#)-based real estate appraiser. "In fact, we trade them. [House plans] help us in our work, but they are also just fun to look at." His collection contains thousands of house plans dates back to the 1950s. It covers houses built mostly in the western and southwestern suburbs of Chicago. He also has some reprints of some 1920s catalog house plan books, he says.

"You can see how today's houses evolved from those built after World War II," says Wagner. "You see the master bedroom and bathroom getting bigger, for example, and the laundry room moving to the first floor, then to the second floor."

Rikki Nyman combs flea markets, antiques stores and [eBay](#) for old-house plan books and home magazines that featured plans, including a 1920s series in *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine.

"When I was a kid, I drew floor plans," says Nyman, a Web site designer in Hillsboro, Ore. "I considered becoming an

architect but knew too many starving architects." Now, she networks with other old-house fans through sites she manages, www.antiquehome.org and www.arts-crafts.com.

Nyman says she looks at her plan collection the way other people window-shop or frequent open houses. "I can look at a plan and visualize it in 3D," she says. "I'll never build it, but if I could, I know just what plan I would use — the Radford Maryville cottage," says Nyman. "It's from the 1920s — those are the houses that had soul."

Like Nyman, Mark Bennett of [Los Angeles](#) has a specific era in mind when he shops for old house plans and plan books. For Bennett, it is "1940s to 1960s ranchers with carports — those are the houses of my childhood." He recently bought a 1956 specimen in his home state of [Tennessee](#), where he plans to live after he retires from his job as a postal carrier.

"I don't care about going to Paris, but to imagine living in an original, unchanged '50s rancher; that's my Utopia," says Bennett.