

# The Swiss Architecture of Murren

Rustic homes in the Alps were the precursors to today's cottages.

BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER



SWITZERLAND'S BERNESE OBERLAND REGION IS HOME TO majestic mountains, stunning views, fascinating architecture—and happy gnomes. In and around the tiny village of Murren is the prototype of what in America we call the Swiss Cottage architectural style. A traditional Walser-style mountain village, Murren sits at 5,500 feet on a mountain terrace. No other villages are built higher in this region that boasts 12 mountain peaks over 13,000 feet. It began as a farming village back in the middle 13<sup>th</sup> century. Located just below the largest glacier in the Alps, agriculture is still its main activity in the summer months. The first hotel opened in 1858, and in the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century guesthouses began to open for the new tourist

**Left:** Likely the first Swiss house plan in an American pattern book, this Swiss cottage from Andrew Jackson Downing's *Architecture of Country Houses* appeared in 1850.

The bucolic architecture of the Lauterbrunnen Valley and upland towns like Murren provide a link to the American Arts and Crafts movement.



trade. Ski clubs were soon formed, and beginning in 1911 the first races took place in the area. These continue today with the "Inferno" the longest amateur ski race in the world.

Murren cannot be reached by car; you need to ride a series of cable cars up from the Lauterbrunnen Valley below. From there you can venture further into the Alps, to the famous Schilthorn observation platform to view what are arguably the most stunning views in Europe, including the famous three peaks of Monch, Jungfrau and Eiger. The platform itself is a bit of a celebrity as it is the cinematic home to the evil Spectre group from the James Bond films.

The architecture of Murren and the surrounding valley is recognizable as Swiss Chalet style. Known for its wooden construction, employing logs or sawn boards on a rubble foundation, homes are typically two-and-a-half stories in height. Wide eaves, exposed roof rafters at the eaves and a lower pitched roof to support the snow load were common on a design where the house gable faced the street. Extensive porches and galleries/balconies are decorated with massive displays of flowers in the summer months. Tucked into hillsides, this mode of construction is based on vernacular mountain architecture from the German, Swiss and Austrian past. The area's building traditions have been little affected by time and technology. Many homes look as they did centuries ago. Homes were mainly used in the summer for keeping animal herds—the famous cows with bells—in the upland pastures. When the ski-recreation business arrived, they became year-round residences. In fact, the term "chalet" is originally defined as a hut for a

**Top:** From the 1911 book *Bungalows*, this Swiss chalet cottage was built in Hollywood, California, nestled in a steep hillside, just as it would have been in Switzerland.

**Middle:** In 1912, *Bungalow Magazine* published this image of their interpretation of a Swiss chalet bungalow. It lacks the gabled roof but does have rustic siding and exposed roof rafters in the Swiss style.

**Left:** A typical Swiss house of the Lauterbrunnen Valley region. Its low, sloping roof helps distribute the snow load.



**Above:** This 1920 bungalow has several Swiss elements, including the front-facing gable, knee brackets at the eaves and a large front flower box.

**Below:** Natural wood homes of log or sawn boards are common in the Alps. Also common are the wide eaves and brackets that were seen on American bungalows of the early 20th century as well.



herder. Countless homes have knee brackets, scalloped bargeboard and wood carvings. These traits caught the eye of international travelers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first appeared for American audiences in A.J. Downing's book *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850). His design XV even has the ubiquitous cows lurking in the front of the cottage. Swiss architecture was never widely popular in the Victorian era in the U.S., however, a few plans for vaguely Swiss-looking buildings in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were available.

The style had a second flowering in the Arts and Crafts bungalow era in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A large number of house pattern books show designs they claim to reflect Swiss design. Mass circulation publications such as *Bungalow Magazine* also pictured newly popular Swiss bungalows as well. If you look closely at the design elements of any standard Craftsman bungalow of this period you will see the eave brackets, wide eaves, low pitched roof and a general sense of Swiss architecture. While popular opinion credits the bungalow as coming from India, it is not too much of a stretch to see its details coming from the Alps. One popular book published in 1913 by William S.B. Dana, *The Swiss Chalet Book*, attempted to bring the Swiss style to a wider audience. Dana

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**Above:** Some chalets have extensive carving on the exterior boards that help break up the rustic look.

**Below:** The only way to get to Murren is via cable cars.



wanted American homes to be rustic and unpainted, with wooden walls and an overall feeling of the house and landscape uniting.

The bucolic architecture of the Lauterbrunnen Valley and the upland towns like Murren provide not only a quaint, romantic look into the past, but link to the American Arts and Crafts movement and its rustic bungalows. **CB**

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## For the Reference Library

For more history on Swiss chalets,  
consider these books and Web sites.

- *The Swiss Chalet Book* by William S.B. Dana, published by Watchmaker Publishing, ©2009; [watchmakerpublishing.com](http://watchmakerpublishing.com). [reprint of 1913 edition] ISBN-10: 1603861882.
- *New Wood Architecture* by Ruth Slavid, published by Yale University Press, ©2005; [yale.edu/yup](http://yale.edu/yup). ISBN-10: 0300107943.
- *Ski Style: Alpine Interiors, Architecture & Living Style* by Alexandra Black, published by Thomas Dunne Books, © 2001; [us.macmillan.com/thomasdunne](http://us.macmillan.com/thomasdunne). ISBN-10: 0312275218.
- *The Architecture of Country Houses* by Andrew J. Downing, published by Dover Publications, ©1969, [doverpublications.com](http://doverpublications.com). [reprint of 1850 edition] ISBN-10: 0486220036.

For more information on Murren, visit these sites:

- <http://euroalps.eu/countries/switzerland/Muerren/muerren.html>.
- [jungfrauregion.com/murren/index.htm](http://jungfrauregion.com/murren/index.htm).
- [alpinetraveler.com/murren.html](http://alpinetraveler.com/murren.html).
- [myswitzerland.com/en/home.html](http://myswitzerland.com/en/home.html).





**Top:** A typical farm cottage in the Murren area with wide footprint and front garden.

**Above left:** The term “chalet” was originally defined as a hut for herders. These small abodes were perched in a meadow overlooking a pasture of cows.

**Above right:** Wood is the preferred heating source in many Alpine buildings. These hardy gnomes seem to guard the wood pile. Nearly every house in the area has a collection of these friendly fellows.