



Buffalo by architecture: Greek Revival

EARLY (AND ALMOST FORGOTTEN) MEMORIES OF BUFFALO

by Kelly Hayes McAlonie

greek Revival Style was the predominant style for residential housing in the United States from about 1820-1860. And, as Buffalo was an up-and-coming city then, many of these homes popped up downtown, and on Delaware and Elmwood Avenues during that time. Sadly, it was not a style that survived the city's later boom.

Several things contributed to Greek Revival's popularity, which was so great at that time that it was also called the National Style. First, there was a widespread interest in the antiquities of Europe and North America. This interest began with Classical Roman architecture but, as archeologists discovered that Grecians had actually influenced Roman design, the focus shifted to Greece.

Second, the Greek War of Independence, which was waged through the 1820s, garnered the empathic attention and sympathy of Americans, who were not long out of a war for independence themselves. And, as a result of the War of 1812, Americans—for a time—disavowed anything British and sought to establish an aesthetic that was separate from the UK. They looked up to the newly democratic Greece, and adopted its architecture as a symbol of independence.

The War of 1812 had a direct effect on Buffalo and its future. Due to its proximity to Canada, which was then a British colony, Buffalo was ransacked and burned during the fighting, much of which occurred along the Canadian border. As a result, the town was reconstructed just as the Greek Revival style was taking hold in the United States. For a time, the vast majority of buildings constructed here were of that style, but with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Buffalo began to grow rapidly. With that expansion, new residential styles became popular and Greek Revival lost its hold on Buffalo. Today, the

few remnants from this era herald a time when Buffalo was a frontier town with the promise of prosperity in its future.

Inspired by the Greek temple, Greek Revival Style—whether residential, institutional, or commercial—is easily recognized by its characteristic portico, or porch, which is supported by Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian columns. Those who couldn't afford a pillared porch substituted plaster pilasters. The oldest standing building in downtown Buffalo—110 Franklin Street, originally the First Unitarian Church once attended by newly elected President Abraham Lincoln—has these pilasters. When the building was converted to office space and expanded, details were added, but the façade is still clearly Greek Revival.

The buildings were most often rectangular, with low-pitched triangular gables or hip roofs that housed windows. Floor plans and construction were very simple, but embellishments occurred in the architectural details. The roof and the porch hosted a cornice of wide bands of trim, composed of the frieze above and the architrave below; these were often deco-

rated. Eaves were adorned with modillions that ranged from simple to ornate. Large doorways also featured specialized trim, and were often framed with transom lights. Windows were double-hung six-over-six, with trim to match the doorway. White paint helped wooden structures mimic Greek marble.

Memories before 1901

The Ansley Wilcox Mansion at 641 Delaware Avenue is one of the best surviving examples of the Greek Revival style in Western New York, though the home was not originally built in this style. The Mansion was built in 1838 to be used as officers' quarters in the newly constructed garrison for the U.S. Artillery. In 1847, the garrison—called Poinsett Barracks—was vacated and the house was purchased by Buffalo's mayor, Judge Joseph G. Masten, who hired architect Thomas Tilden to design the Greek Revival façade. In 1883, Dexter P. Rumsey bought the house as a wedding present for his newly married daughter and her husband, the Wilcoxes. It was during this family's ownership that the house became the site of the inauguration of Theodore Roosevelt following the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901; as result, the Mansion is now a National Historic Landmark.

The Wilcox Mansion has a front-gabled roof with a full-width colonnaded porch. With six Doric columns, and architrave-frieze-cornice trim that closely mirrors



ancient entablature, the house indeed resembles a small Greek temple. The Palladian window in the gable and the arched transom are slightly atypical, as classic Greek Revival has no arches. Nonetheless, the simplicity of the window trim around the classic six-by-six windows, the structure, and the façade exemplify the style, and emphasize the elegance and majesty of the house.

The Greek Revival farmhouse

In 1995, when Tim Kipinski, AIA, purchased his Greek Revival farmhouse in the Elmwood Village, he knew that he wanted to make changes. Built in the 1840s, the farmhouse had at one time stood



Photos by 7

alone. Over time, the city grew up around it and it now rests on a cozy lot in a relatively dense neighborhood. This farmhouse was a modest version of the Greek Revival home with just a few of the style's distinguishing characteristics. It is a front-gable version with a less-than-full-height porch supported by Doric columns.

As an architect and educational planner for Resetarits Construction Company, a design-build firm, Kipinski spends a great deal of time thinking about how people live, and he wanted to ensure that his home reflected his personality while respecting the original design. One of the concepts that Kipinski wanted to explore was the relationship between public and private space. He accomplished this, in part, by replacing the typical front door and parlor windows with five French doors that provide a direct relationship between the living room and the front yard, which is defined by a low wood fence that represents an extension of the house itself. (Above, three symmetrically-placed second-floor windows continue to the attic.) Likewise, the living room's slate floor continues to the porch.


This exploration of public and private layers continues inside the house with a floor plan more open than was customary in the Greek Revival two-parlor interiors. Instead of having rooms separated by panels or columns, areas are defined with furniture, material, and changes in ceiling height. Moving to the back of the house—where the kitchen and dining areas are—the openness and connection to the outside give way to more privacy and the feeling of a small den. The upstairs progresses in the same manner, with a TV room/sitting area at the top of the stairs, followed by a small design studio and two bedrooms.

Kipinski took inspiration, in part, from the work of Mies van der Rohe, in particular the Barcelona Pavilion. In his work, van der Rohe defines space and directs



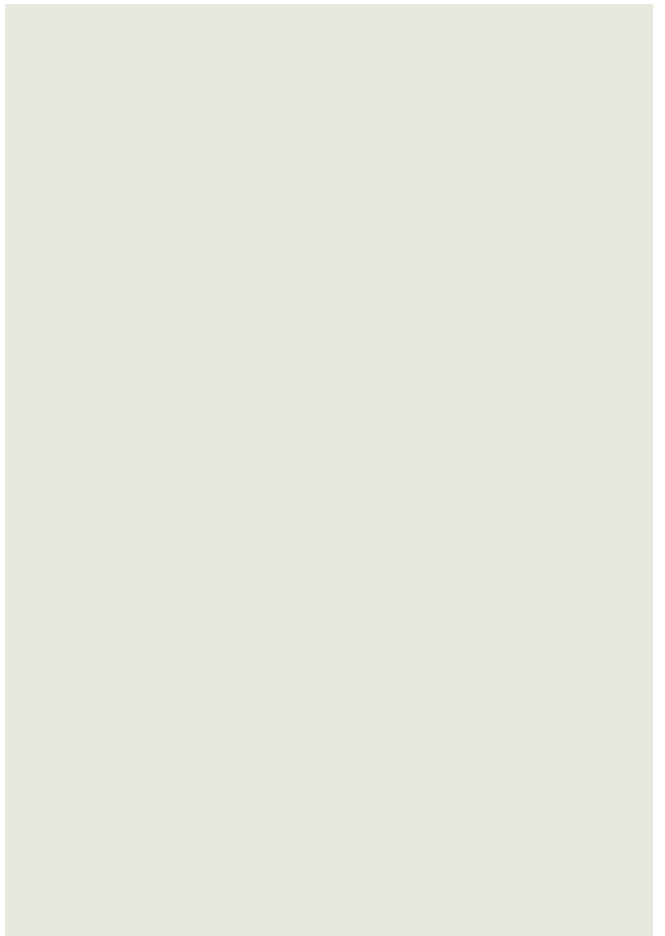
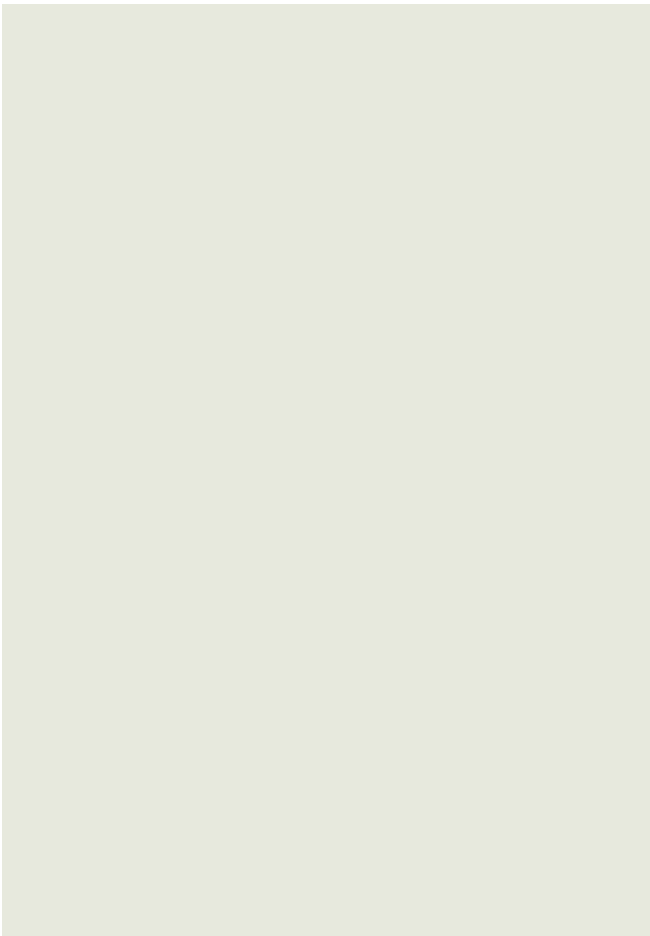
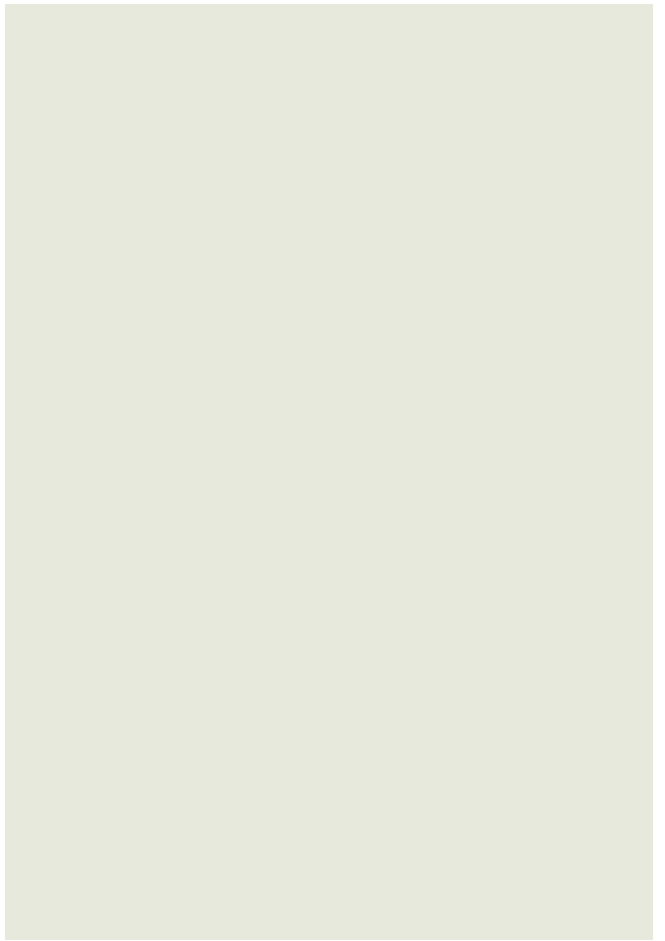
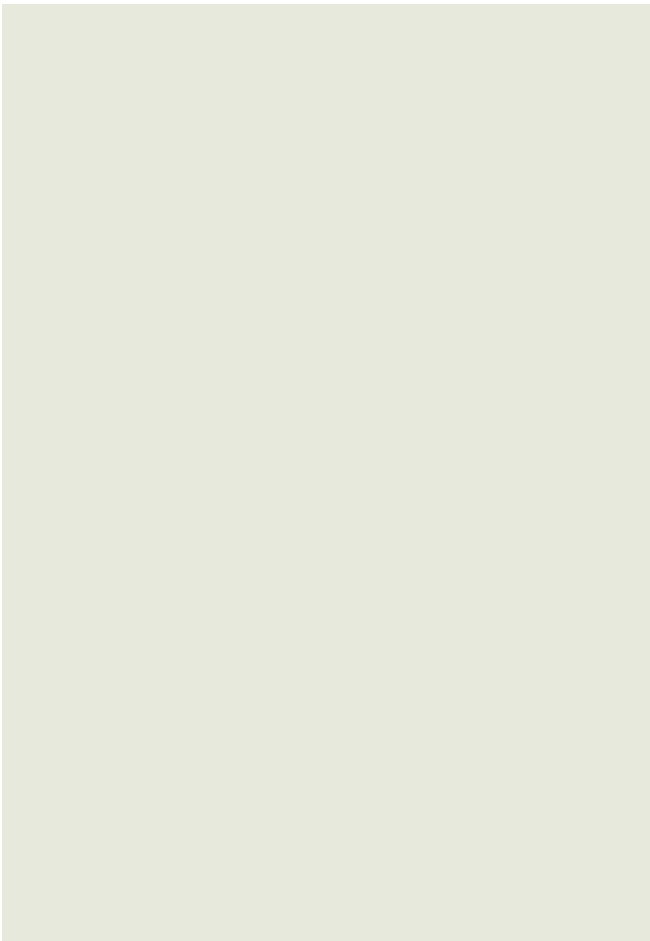
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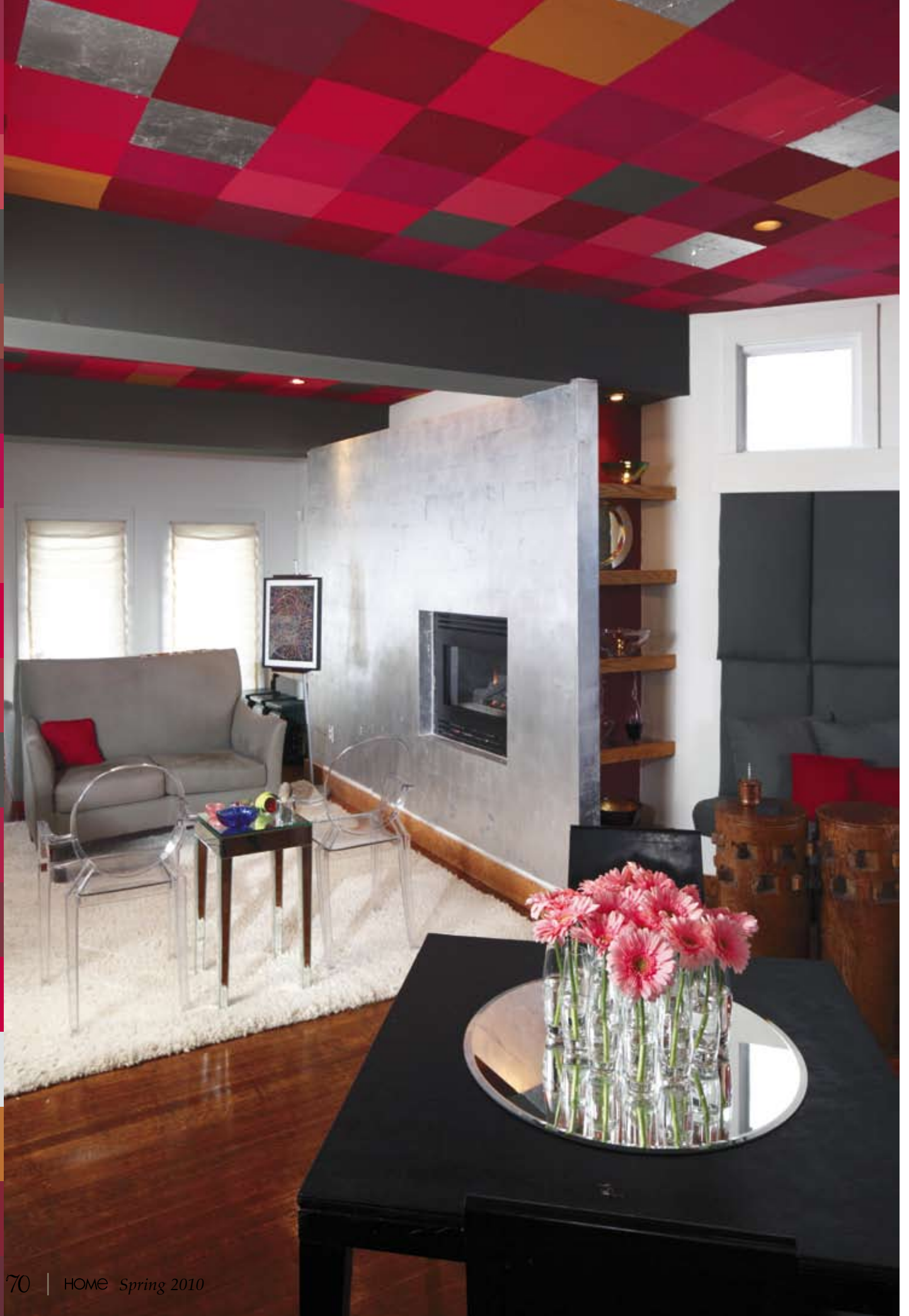


A photograph of a living room with a high ceiling, wooden beams, a bookshelf, a sofa, and a chair. The room features a high ceiling with exposed wooden beams. A large bookshelf is filled with books and decorative objects. A grey sofa is positioned in the background, and a black leather chair with a chrome frame is in the foreground. The floor is made of wood. The lighting is warm and focused on the bookshelf area.

circulation by the manipulation of walls as though they are separate planes in the floor plan. In the Greek Revival farmhouse, this strategy is utilized to create special focal points in the house and vital private and storage spaces behind the protruding walls. This helped to resolve an issue that invariably occurs when implementing a minimalistic approach to renovation—where to locate clutter.

When Kipinski meets with his clients, he asks them to channel their personal memories and, above all, not to choose colors that they wouldn't wear themselves. He follows this rule in his house with the exception of the ceiling over








the dining room. Here, he has created a quilted pattern of pinks and reds, which reminds him of the tin ceilings that were prevalent in the houses he saw while living in Harrisburg, Virginia. The colors provide a nice contrast to the neutral tones surrounding it—hues that are more in line with his personal palate—and help provide a sense of intimacy in this room.

While the house is very modern, the farmhouse’s original design is still apparent in structural elements, like the Doric column located in the living room that establishes a relationship with the original columns on the porch. But Kipinski’s own memories abound in the details, e.g. in the kitchen, special order stainless steel medical cabinets are accented with animal-shaped handles from France. It’s unrealistic to believe that the caretakers of these vessels from Buffalo’s past won’t inhabit them with their own personalities, but when—like Kipinski—they are interested in preserving the history of the homes they live in, we’re ensured that these historical examples will survive for future generations to see. ■

Kelly Hayes McAlonie, AIA, is a Buffalo-based architect and frequent contributing writer to Buffalo Spree and Buffalo Spree Home.

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