

## THE TWO-FLAT HOME IN BUFFALO, NY: LANDSCAPES OF THE INDUSTRIAL VERNACULAR

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**ABSTRACT:** *Buffalo, New York, known for its famous architecture and designed landscapes, is in large part a landscape of uniform tall, wooden, balloon frame two flat (double) houses. Built from 1890-1929, these houses represent an addition to the built-up city in their time in terms of a lower middle class industrial architecture. They provide a great proportion of the still existing housing stock and characterize the perceptions of an expanding city for middle class people who grew up in them as well as for those for whom they are attractive today.*

The City of Buffalo, New York, has finally begun to appreciate and use its prominent historical, planned landscapes and unique architecture as foci for future planning. Formerly neglected, unappreciated works by masters such as Fredrick Law Olmsted, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright are now seen as civic assets. Restorations, based on interest by all too few enthusiasts, proceed grudgingly; the critics can point to monstrous failures of the past: a deeply dug out expressway which invaded the shaded Olmsted parks and parkways; Wright's buildings torn down with little awareness; crude urban cliches which now disrupt the 1801 baroque street patterns.

These famous landscape elements, however, have not been the city of "the people" of Buffalo: not many natives of the city have lived in the upscale neighborhoods where Wright's houses cluster. Most frequent users of Olmsted's Delaware Park probably care little about whether or not the golf course was what Olmsted intended. More people play golf than would have taken time to appreciate his bucolic design. While driving the expressway, cut through the park "to avoid congestion," current residents do not reflect much on the bifurcation of Olmsted's park.

So the formal landscapes and high-quality residences are not really characteristic of any city in a democratic sense. Where and how do the "people" of the city live? This is a much more immediate question in describing the city as landscape. The jewelry should not blind us to the actual clothing of the city. How do the people, the democratic voting, working people, live in a city such as Buffalo? What are the people's landscapes; how did they get that way, i. e. why were they built the way they are, and what is the future of the city built in this way? Implied here are questions about past, present and

future ways of life in this city, constrained within measured boundaries of today's "inner city".

The permanence of the city is implied in its buildings. Home remains, if only in memory, a permanent feature. What is the city of memory? In Buffalo many of the memories are of neighborhoods of good people and good times. It is about a Buffalo ethnic neighborhood that Verlyn Klinkenborg writes in *Last Fine Time*, (Klinkenborg, 1991) a view shared by the "baby-boom" population, who now have time to read books, or more likely, to discuss the past in glowing terms. It is also about a future that did not happen as planned, or did not sustain itself in a quintessential neighborhood of ordinary people. Its impermanence is underscored by the absolute obliteration of the family bar and restaurant at the center of Klinkenborg's dream. The ethnic group, indeed the principal characters of the story, have moved away; the churches that were social centers have emptied and closed. A successor ethnic group, feared in their unfamiliarity, has moved in, and they do things, and live life, differently.

The ordinary buildings of Klinkenborg's "fine time", and indeed of much of Buffalo, are physically tall wooden two and a half story two-flat, balloon frame buildings on narrow lots. A trip into nearly any ordinary neighborhood in the city, as in many other cities (Cleveland, Toledo, South Bend, Chicago come to mind) reveals this type of construction and land use.

Built physical characteristics in the landscape of Buffalo, New York, can clearly be seen as a kind of shorthand to describe the entire city. Urban geographers, the policy makers, and the public can read their city's built characteristics for clues to understand how people in the city live, have lived and will live in the future. Observation of the housing in Buffalo, New York reveals

*Two-flat Home in Buffalo, NY*

a characteristic pattern, a two-family, two-unit building. It is a "two-flat" or "double" house, two identical floors with a steep gable roof above.

The two-flat house is the modal house in the city of Buffalo, making up about one third of the housing stock, built in a standard pattern, block by block. Once filled with the original buyers and tenants of a particular ethnic, economic and social level, these houses' first owners/tenants have moved on with time, as ideas of housing and income have changed. The houses remain in use by newer occupants. The present city is a social and economic landscape created by a particular house type as it has lasted and changed in the context of a city that has moved beyond the neighborhoods.

Two elements common to the cities of the Great Lakes basin characterize the landscape of the city of Buffalo: the ethnic concentrations that moved to the city at the height of the "new" immigration of one hundred years ago, and the wood frame construction of housing. Coffey and Noble hypothesized a connection between the two as early as 1850, in a city absorbing German and Irish immigrants who lived in log houses (Coffey and Noble, 1996). The filling in of Buffalo with Polish and Italian immigrants and the building of a city of balloon frame wooden, two-flat, i.e. ,double houses, awaited the last decade of the nineteenth century, as Buffalo achieved its highest rank among U. S. cities (eighth) in 1890. This immigration promoted the growth in housing as well as the establishment of several streetcar suburbs, all characterized by wood frame construction. The two-flat house was built as a house, not an apartment. Produced in a variety of locations, some are more architecturally individual than others, but similarities outnumber the individual differences in most neighborhoods: rows of tall, narrow balloon-frame double houses on long, narrow lots. They are the industrial vernacular houses of the city's most prosperous period, 1890 to 1929. Buffalo has never had great numbers of tenements or apartment buildings; the builders and client-residents apparently preferred the idea of a double or two-flat house, perhaps for its homelike character, to buildings in multiples greater than two families. Like all housing in the industrial vernacular, the fundamental structure of these houses was uniform--("pre-cut" in the terminology of a major local supplier) while allowing no individual house to be exactly like another.

These houses were distinctly lower middle class, representing a step up in accommodation for several ethnic groups from older housing closer to the historic city center. While offering the advantages of home ownership, typically the second flat provided the owner

with an income to defray the purchase.

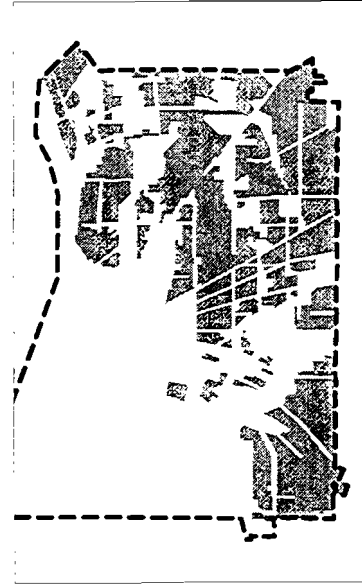


Figure 1 R-2 double family residential zoning in Buffalo.



Figure 2 Buffalo two-flat double home.

Before 1890, Buffalo existed well within its 1854 city limits; the built up area comprised the 1832 city, and stretched out along the Niagara River north and northwest on the Erie Canal, the former Village of Black Rock, and along railway and road routes east and northeast from the center, extensions of Ellicott's 1801 radial street pattern and of Iroquois trails.

Not unlike Chicago, Buffalo on the eastern end of the navigable Great Lakes was also at the time a lumbering center. The Goodyear Lumber Company, a local firm, exploited the forest resources of northern and western Pennsylvania. Their Buffalo and Susquehanna Railroad from Galeton, Pennsylvania terminated in the alluvial meanders of South Buffalo. Down the canal to the north, the new city of North Tonawanda became the "Lumber City" because of the canal-based lumber mills lining the Niagara River there.

Buffalo never had a fire to provoke a fireproof brick building code, unlike nearby Toronto. Perhaps the local clay was not particularly suitable for brick making.

In the 1890's speculators like William Fitzpatrick bought up farms on the edge of the built up city, subdivided them into twenty-foot wide, long lots, laid out streets and built tall narrow balloon frame houses, usually two and a half story two-flat buildings. The workings of the speculator-building-realtor are not easily appreciated by the scholars of today. The actual transactions were possibly intentionally obscured, motivations mixed, leaving few clues or accessible historical records.

South Buffalo, which was the south eastward extension of the Irish first ward, mostly beyond the lowest swampy meanders of the Buffalo River, across the railroad tracks south out of town. Fitzpatrick, upon his sudden death in 1932, was eulogized in the local papers as the founder and developer of South Buffalo. He had become an important local Democrat on the state level. Objective information about him is not easily available. His son carried on the business, and the firm moved away from South Buffalo and appears to have been in business in the northeast suburb of Amherst until the mid eighties, following the son's death. (*Buffalo Courier-Express*, 1932). Fitzpatrick's reputation lives on in the published description of a neat two-flat home off Seneca Street as a "well-built Fitzpatrick double" in 1985 (Greater Buffalo Board of Realtors, 145). His son is immortalized in Paul Street, also lined with doubles in South Buffalo.

The Hamlin Park area in what is now the central part of Buffalo was developed at the turn of the century. Almost exclusively double houses, this area represented the movement out of the near east side for the Jewish

community. It was a realtors' development, filling in an old horse racing track area with doubles, built speculatively by a number of developers. Sprinkled with Jewish houses of worship, it was a substantial Jewish neighborhood by the 1920s. (Adler and Connolly, 1960 pp. 323-326, and Preservation Coalition of Erie County, 1995)

Today Hamlin Park is an attractive and still desirable middle class African American community, as the Jewish residents have moved to the suburbs in the post- World War II period. While Hamlin Park has been studied in historic detail, surrounding neighborhoods are also largely doubles, a bit more Victorian in flavor, and in worse condition on the west and south, toward the center of the city. Others, newer and larger, line the expressway which bounds the area east and north. Many of these buildings have been destroyed, by neglect or fire or both, in recent years. Many others are now owned by absentee landlords, sometimes the families of previous owner-occupants. Nevertheless, a considerable number of these houses represent a desirable life style for people who prefer to rent and live in the central city.

A single block of Buffalo doubles, very close to the center of the city, was refurbished some 25 years ago, the only accomplishment of a plan for a medical center development area. These houses were re-plumbed, rewired and re-sided, and the short street was closed off and landscaped with trees. This remains a small sample of the potential for these houses today. Other neighborhoods have retained value, and though ordinary in appearance, are still quite acceptable rental housing. Values vary depending on ownership and upkeep, the now fashionable and desirable Victorian detailing, and proximity to middle class sources of employment, e.g. colleges.

The two-flat house in Buffalo is an example of industrial vernacular housing still useful in the present to new occupants. These solid houses remain, though lifestyles have changed. Future patterns of occupancy will depend on the economics of rebuilding and updating the basic structures, and on the perceptions of their value to the community at large.

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