

Saturday, July 26, 2003



Photos by Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News
Greek Revival houses are noted for their long, thin lines, temple porticos and symmetry.
The Huffs included a three-stall, attached garage.

Revival of the fittest

Couple uses antiques and inspirations from books to build their dream home

By Marge Colborn / *Detroit News Design Editor*

COMMERCE TOWNSHIP -- Michigan's lakes, both great and not-so-great, boast lakeside homes that are lavish and contemporary or modest and cottage-y. Mackinac Island even has some Victorian beauties, complete with gingerbread trim.

Then there's Matt and Karen Huff's mustard yellow Greek Revival house tucked into the tip of a peninsula that juts into Lake Sherwood in Commerce Township.

"We've always loved the stateliness and symmetry of Greek Revival houses," says Matt Huff, who with his wife and two grown children have lived in four homes in the area during the past 20 years.

"Unfortunately, the vintage Greek Revival houses that were available in these parts are located on busy Pontiac Trail or Grand River, and they required work and lots of it."

When the peninsula property went on the market three years ago following sewer installation, the Huffs jumped at the opportunity to build their dream house -- a brand-new-but-looks-old 3,000-square-foot Greek Revival -- on the desirable site which has 700 feet of lake frontage.

"Building new spared us having to replace wiring, plumbing and heating that had been retrofitted 100 years ago in a house that was already 60 years old at the time," adds Huff, who sells jet engines for Williams International. "And by designing our own house, we could tailor it to our lives instead of tailoring our lives to the rooms laid out by a 19th-century farmer."

The timing was ideal too. The Huffs were becoming empty nesters as Laura, 23, was about to be married, and Ian, 20, was going off to college.

Still, these handy homeowners, who admit to a passion for houses in general, needed design inspiration. They found it in Christopher Alexander's "Pattern Language" (Oxford University Press, 1977) and Sarah Susanka's "The Not So Big House" (Taunton Press, 1998).

Both volumes show that residential architecture connects people to their surroundings in an infinite number of ways, most of which are subconscious. For this reason, it's important to discover what works, what feels pleasant, what is psychologically nourishing, what attracts rather than repels.

The Huffs also turned to architect Michael Blanek of Stucky-Vitale in Royal Oak to put their plans on paper.

"Our design incorporates many of the features from the books, most notably the idea of a long, thin house, flooded with light and breezes, outdoor rooms and temple porticos," Huff says. "The design is also specific to us in that it fits the way we live with many of the spaces serving more than one purpose." (For example, there's a second-floor laundry room and exercise room, and a table in the foyer that is used for craft projects.)

Constructed of quarter-sawn clapboard from a Vermont company in business since 1865 and reddish-brown brick with four elegant porch pillars, the house conjures up images of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello or the White House -- certainly not your typical beach-front abode. And yet this house is eminently livable and a joy in which to entertain -- so much so that the Huffs held their daughter's wedding reception at the house last summer.

The facade of a Greek Revival house recalls the design skill of builders who toiled centuries ago, long before the invention of calculators, sliding glass door walls and vinyl siding. Building with wood and stone taught them what stood the test of time and what did not. And distinguishing the beautiful from the unbecoming taught them what shapes, proportions and perspectives lift one's spirits.

One's spirits are certainly lifted upon entering this modern-day Greek Revival. The light-filled foyer is open to the kitchen, dining and living rooms. An open staircase winds to the second floor's three bedrooms and two bathrooms. The den or TV room, originally designed to be a dark room, is instead filled with light and southern and western views of water.



Inside, the Greek Revival home is flooded with light and breezes and is open from end to end.



In the spacious kitchen, Matt Huff designed and built the cabinets. The center island is an antique store counter that came from Paris.

Floors throughout the house are pine, although the salvaged heart pine on the first floor is more dense and special than the painted pine floors upstairs. Six interior Fiberglas columns repeat the columns on the exterior. Karen Huff faux-painted the columns to resemble aged stone. She also used decorative paint techniques on walls and floors throughout the house.

The Huffs' one-of-a-kind kitchen blends the best of old and new. Matt Huff built the kitchen cabinets on-site after learning custom-made cabinets would cost more than \$35,000. The floor is cork, which is easy to keep clean and easy on the feet. Countertops are poured concrete. "Corian was just too shiny for this house," says Karen. The kitchen's aged wood center island, where the cooktop is located, is actually a 19th-century store counter from Paris.

Devotees of antiques and salvaged architectural items, the couple have creatively filled their home with treasures. A 9-foot-tall mirror, for instance, dictated the first-floor ceiling height and 18th-century French armoire doors hide electronics in the living room.

"We're regulars at the Ann Arbor-Saline antiques show," says Karen, pointing to an old bureau that was turned into a bath vanity. "As often as not, vintage items cost the same or less than new items, but the older pieces have so much more character." Salvage 1 in Chicago is another frequent haunt.

Matt Huff is tickled with the limestone steps he created for the house. He found the Indiana limestone slabs at a stone yard near the Palace of Auburn Hills.

"I'm not sure whether this house is truly timeless," says Huff, "but I do know that after two years of living here, I still smile every time I enter."

A house on a lake needn't deliver more than that.

Not-so-big house insights

Matt and Karen Huff turned to Sarah Susanka's book, "The Not So Big House," for insights on building their Greek Revival home. Here, from the author's subsequent book, "Creating the Not So Big House" (Taunton, \$34.95), are tips on how to achieve a comfortable home for today's informal lifestyle:

- * **Make a space moonlight.** For example, a built-in eating area adjacent to the kitchen can serve formal and informal occasions.
- * **Vary ceiling heights.** High ceilings are considered more desirable than low ones, but high ceilings are often more impressive than comfortable. What's important is not the overall ceiling height; it's the proportion of the ceiling height to the other dimensions of the room that makes it comfortable or not.
- * **Compose interior views.** We spend a great deal of time looking within the house, so interior views should be just as important as outside views. In an open floor plan, frame a view of a room with furniture, artwork or plants.
- * **Find a place to be alone.** Create a small area for each adult to make his or her own. It can be a place for writing, painting, meditating or to display items that have special personal meaning.
- * **Build an outdoor room.** Extend your living space into the surrounding landscape, Define the space with a trellis, columns or pillars.
- * **Pay attention to details.** Skylights, window seats and built-in bookcases enhance a home without adding great cost.



In the den, a Fiberglas column was split in half to anchor floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.



The master bath is a blend of old and new, including a glass-enclosed shower and a vintage bureau that holds the sink.



A view from the dining room toward the front door shows off the distinctive columns that define spaces.

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Although Matt, above, and Karen Huff found a vintage staircase to fit their home, it did not meet a building code, so the couple had this new staircase built.

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