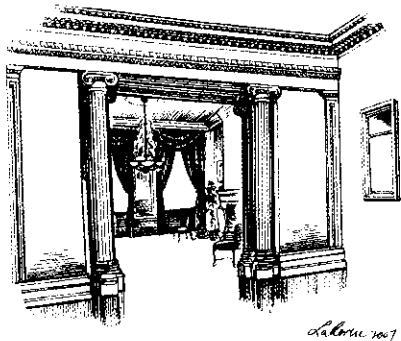


New York Row Houses: Greek Revival Interiors

CORCORAN
corcoran group real estate

The Greek Revival Style in architecture was a culmination of interest in Classical Antiquities which emerged in New York during the middle of the 18th century. Increased interest in classical building was mainly influenced by two factors: Archeological discoveries from the excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum during the mid 18th century as well as America's identification with the principles of Ancient Greek democracy. The enthusiasm for this period of western history propelled the trend in Greek Revival architecture and spread nationwide with American cities taking on ancient Greek names such as Ithaca, Athens, Sparta and Troy.

Greek Revival homes added a new level of comfort and grandeur to townhouse construction. The basic floor plan was the same as in Federal Style homes, however Greek Revival homes became larger. The width increased from seventeen or eighteen feet to twenty or twenty one feet on average. The layout remained the same with a ground floor dining room in the front facing the street and a kitchen in the back looking out to the garden.



The ceiling height of the ground floor increased from 7 1/2 to 8 or 9 feet. This raised the parlor level further from the street while ceilings on the parlor level rose to 11 or 12 feet. In grander homes, ceilings soared to heights of up to 14 feet. Ceilings were decorated with simple molding or two moldings which enclosed a rounded cove. A heavily sculptured centerpiece varied from a simple circular molding to very stylized foliate forms that extended from a central rosette to an outer edge. Moldings were either plain or elaborate arrangements of circular and polygonal forms within each other.

Inside walls were plaster and painted a light color that descended into simple baseboards. Chair rails at waist height replaced wainscoting and paneling. Floors were either oak or pine wood planks finished in a light color.

The parlor doors were the most elaborate feature of the homes, utilizing rich woods such as Mahogany and Rosewood. By the late 1820's these intricately carved doors rolled on metal tracks allowing them to slide into the walls. One deeply set panel ran the full length of the door with applied classical Greek detail such as the anthemion. A horizontal entablature over the door also displayed the anthemion, or other classic



Greek ornamentation such as the Greek Key, several rows of egg-and-dart, or dentilated moldings. Ionic columns decorated the enframement of the doors and separated the two parlors.

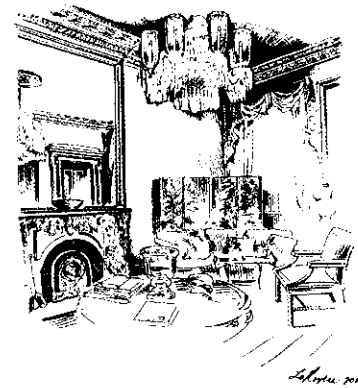
The fireplace mantels were massive with designs resembling the usual doorway motifs. Mantels in finer homes had columns or caryatids rather than flat pilasters. Preferred materials on the parlor level were black marble veined with gold or yellow and gold.

In occasional homes, French doors led from the splendid back parlor to an open or windowed porch known as the tea room.

The stairs which previously ran along one side of the house with windows at each half landing were moved to the center of the house where natural light cascaded down from a large oval skylight in the roof. Plaster work surrounding the molding was decorated with detail such as egg and dart.

Upper floors retained the same layout as Federal period homes. The increased width of the house allowed the rooms to feel more spacious. Between the two main chambers of the upper floors, fitted closets and drawers were added. The scale and level of finishes diminished on the upper floors which were usually private family quarters. Fireplaces on upper floors typically had simply painted wood mantels. The most elaborate details and materials were saved for the parlor floor where entertaining took place.

An additional change in townhouse construction came with the increasing competition among New York's socially elite of the 1830's & 40's. This created an environment where architects were challenged to build elaborate showy parlors while keeping cost as a consideration. This led to the innovative use of less expensive yet high quality machine made ornament. Handsome ceiling plasterwork was often machine made rather than hand crafted. Paper Mache or stucco was used instead of plaster to reduce costs. Factory made cast iron replaced hand wrought iron for outside stoop railings and arcway fencing.



The best example of Greek Revival architecture can be found at 29 East 4th Street, at the Scabury Tredwell House. Built in 1831, it is a transitional house utilizing elements from both the Federal and Greek Revival styles. It was purchased in 1835 by the merchant Scabury Tredwell and is currently a museum maintaining the interior treatment and furnishings original to the period. Another model example of the period is the Andrew S. Norwood House, which can be found at 241 West 14th Street. This exceptional 30 ft. wide house possesses some of the more unusual proportions and remarkable craftsmanship of the Greek Revival and Italianate periods.

Bibliography:
The Buffalo Free Net: Buffalo Architectural Index
Bricks and Brownstones, New York, McGraw Hill, 2003, Charles Lockwood
The American Townhouse, New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2004, Kevin Murphy

Tatiana Comes, Vice President
The Corcoran Group, 636 Sixth Avenue, New York, New York 10011 • 212.444.7833 • tcc@corcoran.com