



City Hall at the western edge of Buffalo's Niagara Square

# Reinventing Buffalo

Want a glimpse of the future? See what local preservationists are doing to burnish wonders from this city's past

BY LOGAN WARD

I had assumed that two days would be plenty of time to take in the historic architecture of Buffalo. I'd start my visit with Martin Wachadlo, a local architectural historian who has a boyish enthusiasm for great design and a brain full of facts. We'd survey the sweep of the city from atop a skyscraper, stroll the downtown, grab a leisurely lunch, and buzz through the outer neighborhoods in my rental car. This was Buffalo, after all, not Chicago or New York—right?

Wrong. Like a lot of newcomers who put too much stock in the city's Rust Belt reputation, I arrived woefully uninformed about New York State's second

most populous city. I underestimated the breadth and significance of the treasures to be discovered there, and I failed to anticipate Buffalo's remarkable preservation stories.

Case in point? Our first stop: City Hall, the 32-story sandstone landmark looming over Niagara Square in the heart of downtown. Even more impressive than the massive scale of the Art Deco government center were its fascinating details. Taxpayers and public servants streamed past stone entry columns designed to resemble industrial pipes bound in cable, resting on plinths shaped like eight-sided nuts. In the frieze above the colonnade, the blue-collar theme continued with burly workers—stevedore, riveter, aviator—plying their trades. Filling every inch of the lobby and main floor hallway were other

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references to Buffalo's rich past: an intricately patterned tile ceiling inspired by a Native American headdress; florid murals depicting the construction of the Erie Canal and the region's peaceful relationship with Canada; and countless allusions to the area's natural riches in the form of stylized corn, fish, rivers, and lakes.

Completed in 1931, the National Register-listed building has never undergone a major restoration, or even needed one, for that matter. Even though it's immensely difficult to maintain—it has 1,520 windows, and just seven years after it was dedicated, crews discovered water seeping behind granite facade panels that had not been anchored correctly—the city has kept the building functioning and historically intact. In fact, City Hall is emblematic of many of Buffalo's landmarks. It's both a stunning legacy of the city's industrial past and a financial burden, given the declining tax base. But by hook and by crook, the people of Buffalo have managed to preserve it impeccably.

As we waited for the elevator to take us to the rooftop observation deck, I couldn't help enthusing about City Hall's condition and the sheer exuberance of the building's architectural expression. This was nothing, assured Wachadlo, vowing to show me an unrivaled collection of Tiffany and LaFarge stained glass, towering grain elevators that inspired Europe's most famous Modernists, and masterpieces by the three great American originals—Henry Hobson Richardson, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

"For people who haven't been here," he said, flashing me a knowing smile, "Buffalo means three things—hot wings, cold winters, and Super Bowl losers. But when it comes to architecture, Buffalo is one of the great American cities."

**Buffalonians like to point** to their city's three distinct design influences: Mother Nature, Joseph Ellicott, and Frederick Law Olmsted. To the area's first inhabitants, the lakeshore location meant abundant timber, farmland, and fresh water. Onto that blank but verdant slate, Ellicott laid out an ambitious radial street plan in 1804. (The layout resembled Pierre L'Enfant's plan for the nation's capital, which Ellicott and his brother had helped survey a decade earlier.) Though Buffalo had only a few dozen inhabitants at the time, it grew rapidly

and in a controlled fashion thanks to Ellicott's meticulous plan. By the time Olmsted arrived in 1868, the population exceeded 100,000. Smitten by the bustling city, he and his partner, Calvert Vaux, designed a coordinated system of public parks and parkways—the country's first—that dovetailed with Ellicott's plan. Olmsted famously called Buffalo "the best planned city ... in the United States, if not the world."

Those layers of planning, says Robert Shibley, dean of the school of architecture at the University of Buffalo, set the stage for the important and innovative architecture that followed. "It's a city of great bones that demands a great response."

The other absolutely essential ingredient was money, and for the hundred years straddling 1900, Buffalo had gobs of it. The city grew exponentially after the 1825 opening of the 363-mile-long Erie Canal. The audacious waterway, punctuated by scores of locks, linked the eastern seaboard to the Great Lakes, positioning Buffalo as the crossroads in America's westward expansion. Hand-in-hand with shipping, great industries

rose up—grain processing, steel, chemicals, manufacturing. And the Buffalonians who got rich commissioned churches, clubs, commercial buildings, and mansions in all manner of styles by some of the best-known architects of the day—Stanford White, Richard Upjohn, and Daniel Burnham, among others.

At the turn of the 19th century, Buffalo was one of the country's busiest inland ports, the eighth largest city in America, and a metropolis enjoying rapid population growth. By 1950, its population peaked at more than 580,000 residents.

But a mere six decades later, Buffalo's population is half that and shrinking; the 2010 U.S. Census showed a greater than 10 percent decrease since 2000, and no one I spoke with predicted that the falloff would slow any time soon. Many factors brought on the city's decline, one of the sharpest in U.S. history. As in other Rust Belt cities, much of Buffalo's industry either dried up or moved to the Sun Belt, helped inadvertently (and ironically) by Buffalonian Willis Carrier, who invented modern air conditioning in 1902. The opening of the much wider and deeper St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 sounded the death knell for the Erie Canal. Not only did shipping peter out, but the decline of the canal meant Buffalo no longer benefited from the need to "break bulk," industry lingo for the lucrative processes of turning grain into flour, timber into lumber, and iron ore into steel in order to accommodate small canal barges.

In a 1977 *New York Times* article titled "Writer Uncovers Pearls of Architecture Among Blight of Buffalo" (sound familiar?), the venerated critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote that there is "more good architecture in Buffalo—major buildings at the top of their stylistic form—than anyone seems ready to recognize or acknowledge." But while admiring the buildings, she worried openly over their fate.

Her fears were well founded. Lamentably, much has been lost. Parking lots, known locally as "shovel ready development sites," stand in place of historic buildings. The Old Custom House, circa 1858, is gone, as are several 19th-century cast-iron buildings and the former Gothic Revival mansion of President Millard Fillmore. Since the 1960s, attempts at urban renewal, including a downtown mall called Main Place and a sprawling convention center, have chopped up Ellicott's radial street plan. The residential areas beyond the commercial center have also taken a hit due to Buffalo's sputtering economy and shrinking population. When the jobs go, so do the people. "Disinvestment, deterioration, and demolitions have reduced the architectural integrity of some neighborhoods, especially on the east side," said Henry McCartney, executive director of Preservation Buffalo Niagara.

Buffalo may be down, but it's not out. It didn't earn a

reputation as a burly city of doers for nothing. "We're not cash rich, but we're people rich," sixth-generation Buffalonian Catherine Schweitzer, founding chair of Preservation Buffalo Niagara, told me. "It takes someone really creative to make adaptive reuse projects work. In Buffalo, you've got to make the dollars stretch."

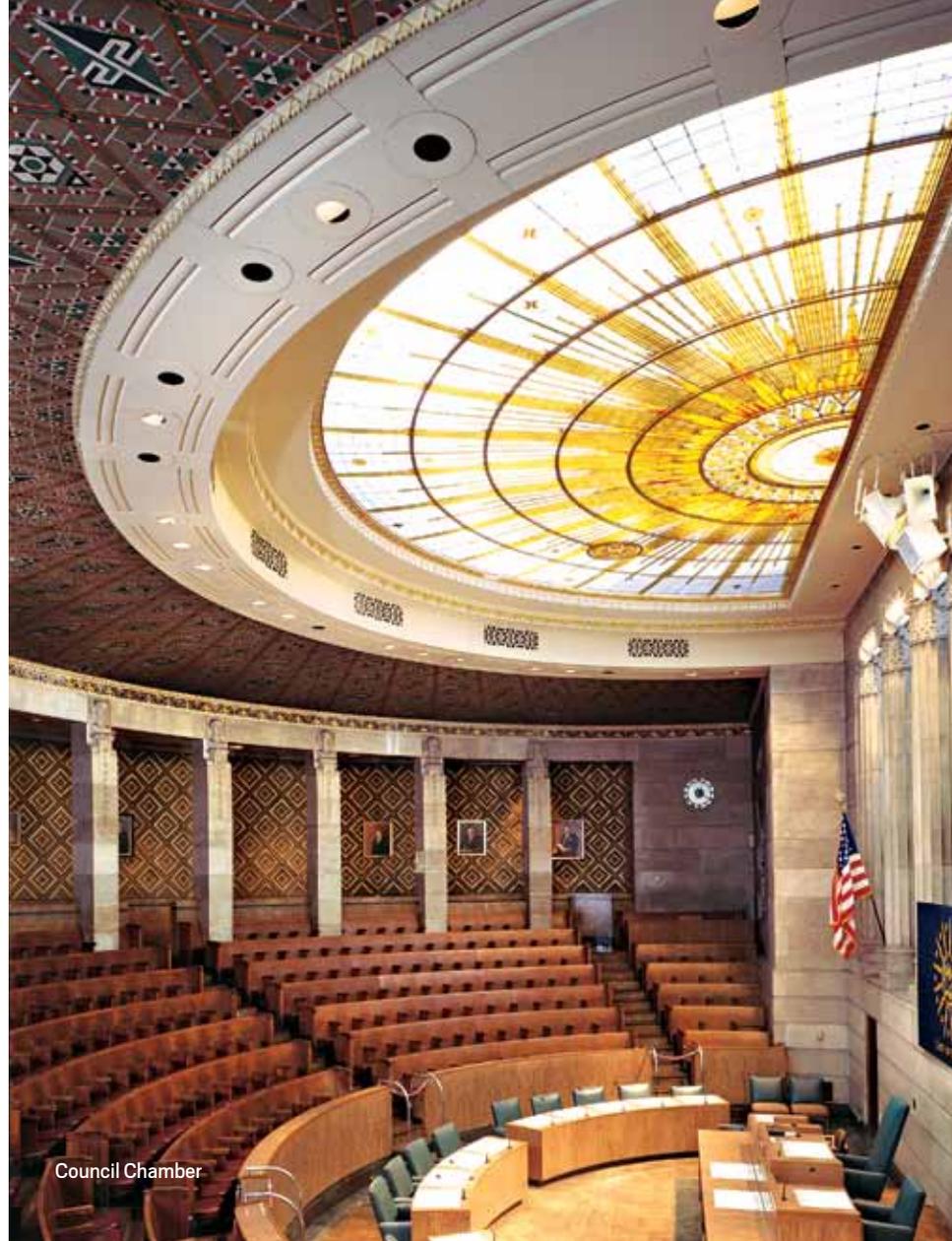
Slowly but surely, it's happening. During my visit, I saw examples of creativity and hard-won preservation battles. The singer Ani DiFranco rehabilitated a huge Gothic Revival stone church completed in 1876, turning it into a multipurpose venue with state-of-the-art geothermal heating. A team of developers converted the abandoned Larkin Soap Company site into the mixed-use Larkin District and persuaded a major bank, First Niagara, to become the anchor commercial tenant.

On our way to the roof of City Hall, historian Martin Wachadlo and I stopped at the Council Chamber on the 13th floor. Golden light poured in through an art-glass sunburst in the ceiling. The room could be a Hollywood movie set from a 1930s period piece, down to the wire hat racks under each of the 300 auditorium seats. "It feels like we're in a time capsule," I said. "In Buffalo, you are," he answered.

Thanks to heroic grassroots efforts by groups such as the West Side Community Collaborative (WSCC), some of Buffalo's residential neighborhoods are coming back after decades on the skids. Since 2001, with no budget and no paid staff, WSCC has rallied residents to paint abandoned homes, mow vacant lots, and drive away drug dealers. Residents bought several abandoned lots and converted them into a thriving garden center and bakery by helping to form a cooperative; more than 700 members invested \$100 each. "We've eliminated blight and created our own real estate market," says Harvey Garrett, the group's volunteer executive director. According to the Buffalo Niagara Association of Realtors, over the past decade, their efforts have helped triple the area's average property value, from \$25,000 to \$79,000.

I discovered other reasons for optimism. Olmsted's park and parkway system is largely intact, as are historic neighborhoods, such as Allentown, with its eclectic mix of turn-of-the-century houses and funky commercial thoroughfares. Grand mansions line Delaware Avenue—a stretch known as Millionaire's Row—though most have been adapted for commercial use, including the hotel (aptly named The Mansion on Delaware Avenue) where I stayed. Its 28 rooms occupy a beautifully rehabilitated 1870 Second Empire home with 12-foot-tall bay windows.

And visiting more than 30 years after Huxtable, I was happy to find that every threatened major building she men-



Council Chamber

ANDY OLENIK



➔ Buffalo is the site of the 2011 National Preservation Conference, Oct. 19-22. See [PreservationNation.org/conference](http://PreservationNation.org/conference) for complete details.

tioned was either fully restored or in the process of a thoughtful restoration. One of those was the colossal Buffalo State Hospital.

Designed by Henry Hobson Richardson in 1870, the eleven-building complex was surrounded by an Olmsted and Vaux landscape. Through the design of the main building, made of red, Medina sandstone and dominated by two massive copper-roofed towers, Richardson first explored his own personal take on the Romanesque, a style that would become synonymous with his name and bring him international fame. But by the 1970s, the land had been divided and redeveloped and the original buildings abandoned. For decades, the costly white elephant sat empty as feasibility studies and reuse recommendations piled up. In 2004, crews began emergency repairs and stabilization work, after New York State lost a lawsuit filed by the Preservation Coalition of Erie County among others, and coughed up \$5 million. Then, in 2006, further pressure by preservationists paid off when then-Gov. George Pataki dedicated \$76.5 million to rehabilitate the site into a public-private, mixed-use campus that will include a visitors center, conference center, and hotel. Buffalo attorney and civic leader Christopher Greene, secretary of the Richardson Center Corporation's board of directors, sees the Richardson Center as a linchpin in the community's preservation-as-economic-driver effort. "At one time, Buffalo had all these great architectural gems," he said. "Our job as Buffalonians is to bring them back one at a time. It's an engine for cultural tourism."

*If there is one vantage point* that encapsulates the significance—and historical trajectory—of downtown Buffalo's architecture, it's the southwest corner of Church and Pearl streets. Wachadlo took me there to admire Louis Sullivan's 13-story Guaranty Building, one of the first buildings to rise above the city's church spires. I asked him to remind me why—apart from being a drop-dead gorgeous Art Nouveau landmark covered in filigreed terra cotta—it was so important in the annals of world architecture.

"See that building?" Wachadlo said, pointing down Pearl Street to the handsome 10-story Dun Building, Buffalo's first

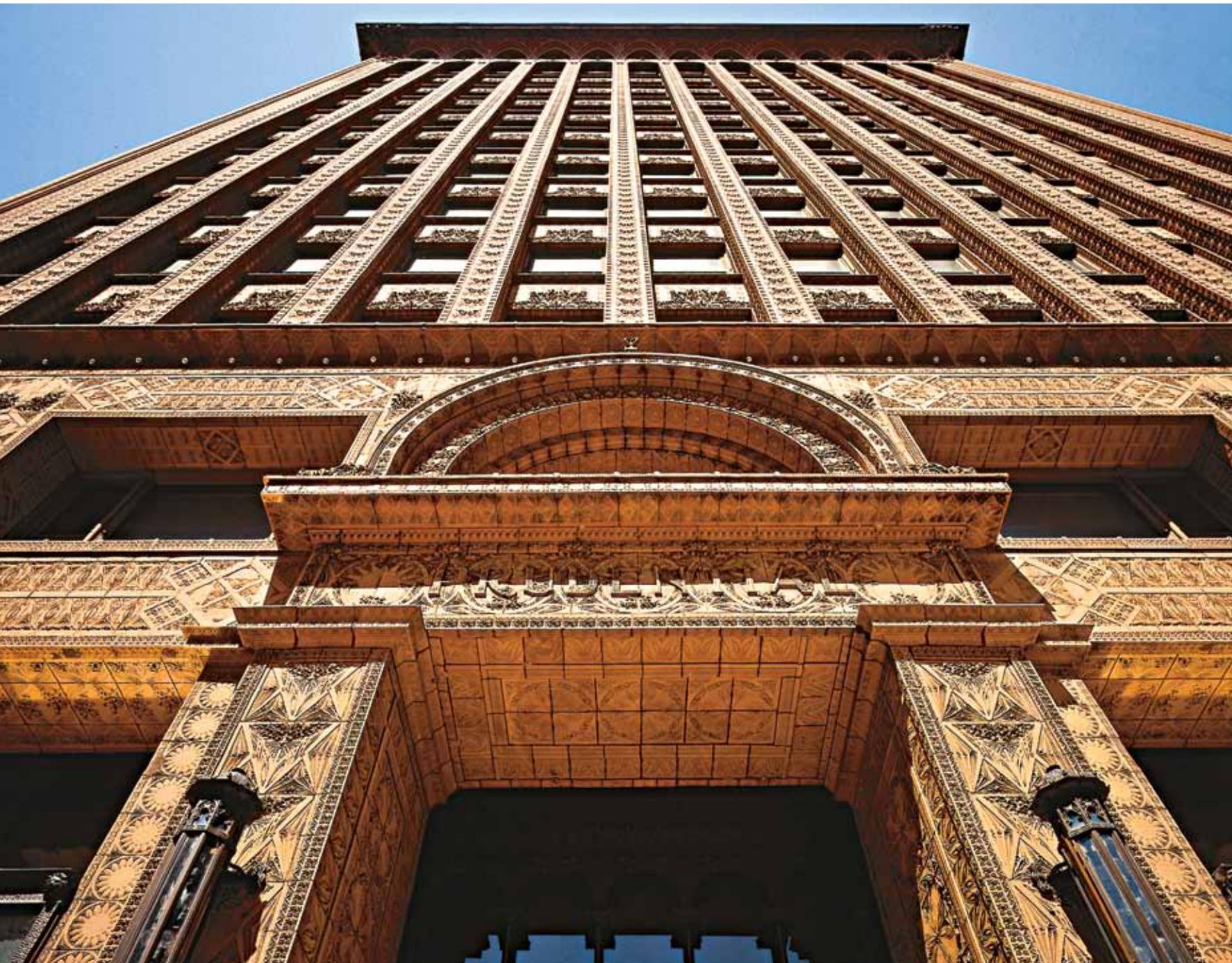
H.H. Richardson designed the Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane (opposite) with Frederick Law Olmsted. Now called the Richardson Center, it is a National Historic Landmark. Olmsted's innovative plan for Buffalo's parks and parkways included Delaware Park (above), shown c. 1900.

highrise, finished two years before the Guaranty in 1894. "Even though it has a steel frame, it was designed to look like a masonry building." I saw what he meant: Its Italian Renaissance facade was divided into a series of horizontal bands stacked on top of each other, like a Mediterranean villa ashamed of its height. The Guaranty, on the other hand, reveled in its modernity and verticality, prominently expressing its steel frame with a grid of identical office windows. "The Dun squats on the ground," Wachadlo said. "The Guaranty goes *whoosh!*" He continued, explaining that "Sullivan's great contribution to architecture was the skyscraper, and the Guaranty Building is considered his masterpiece."



Incredibly, in 1977, a mere two years after it was named a National Historic Landmark, the Guaranty was nearly demolished, but a group of civic leaders, led by the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, raised money for a restoration that was completed in 1982. Two decades later, when the owner went into bankruptcy, the Guaranty Building was once again in trouble. And for a second time, community-minded locals saved the day. This time it was Hodgson Russ, the city's oldest law firm (founded in 1817, not long after Buffalo itself). Instead of moving to a cushy suburban building with ample parking, the firm bought the Guaranty Building out of foreclosure, spent nearly \$20 million on a meticulous restoration, and moved its entire legal operation there. "Hodgson Russ to the Rescue," read the headline of a 2001 *Buffalo News* article.

OPPOSITE: ANDY OLENIK; RIGHT: BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



“Sometimes we struggle to run a law firm with so many people trying to see the place,” the firm’s president and CEO, Gary Schober, told me. “We have to work our way through a busload of tourists just to get in the building. But I think everyone sort of likes it. We got more out of this than anyone thought we would.”

With Richardson and Sullivan leading the charge, Buffalo became something of a breeding ground for cutting-

edge design. Even the towering concrete grain elevators and silos lining the waterfront fired the imagination of a new age of architects. Profoundly inspired, the German avant-garde architect Walter Gropius published photographs of Buffalo’s Washburn-Crosby and Dakota grain elevators to accompany his influential 1913 article, *The Development of Industrial Buildings*.

Although Frank Lloyd Wright didn’t see eye-to-eye with

many European counterparts, he also had a deep association with Buffalo. The city served as his springboard to national and international prominence. In 1904, early in his career, the Chicago-based Wright designed his first commercial building for Buffalo’s Larkin Soap Company. The executive who discovered him was Darwin Martin, who would become Wright’s lifelong friend and supporter, commissioning several Wright-designed homes and recommending him to colleagues. Though the groundbreaking Larkin Administration Building, with its open floor plan, succumbed to the wrecking ball in 1950, six of the homes Wright designed in and around Buffalo still stand.

During my second afternoon I drove through the Olmsted-designed Parkside neighborhood for a hard-hat tour of Wright’s c. 1905 Darwin Martin House. It’s actually a five-building complex—the architect once referred to it as his opus—with a stunning 100-foot pergola linking the main house to a leafy conservatory. Though the historic property is in the final stage of a 15-year, \$50 million restoration (hence the hard hat), the nonprofit Martin House Restoration Corporation leads up to six tours per day, offering a fascinating in-progress glimpse of one of the country’s most extensive (and expensive) residential preservation projects.

In the living room, speaking over the intermittent whine of circular saws, the group’s executive director, Mary Roberts, told me the sad tale of the Martin family and their house. Once one of America’s highest-paid executives, Martin lost much of his fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, and died soon after of a stroke. Insolvency forced his widow to walk away from her home—legend has it she didn’t even lock the door—and for 17 years one of Wright’s finest Prairie houses sat empty, suffering the ravages of time. A broken skylight leaked. Five-foot snowdrifts piled up in the living room. After the magnificent wisteria mosaic on the four-sided central hearth crumbled, most of its 80,000 decorative tiles were swept up and discarded. But as we ambled through the com-

plex, I learned about the home’s resurrection. The pergola, conservatory, and carriage house, which fell to make way for apartment buildings in the 1960s, have been painstakingly reconstructed on their original sites. The 15,000-square-foot main home’s roof and exterior have been restored and crews have begun restoring its interior, including 394 pieces of art glass and 8.5 miles of white-oak trim on structures around the property. The architects even sifted through the ash pit and found enough original tiles to reconstruct the one-of-a-kind fireplace mosaic.



Opposite: Louis Sullivan’s soaring Guaranty Building, once known as the Prudential Building. Above: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Darwin Martin House, now a house museum.

“This complex has become a symbol of pride and victory,” Roberts told me. “It shows what a community can do when it rallies around its assets.”

Her words echoed a message I heard over and over during my visit to Buffalo. In 1932, during the dedication of City Hall, which coincided with the hundredth anniversary of Buffalo’s incorporation, architect John Wade told the crowd: “What we have tried to do is express in stone and steel and glass something of Buffalo, just as the Greeks expressed in stone and timber their life and philosophy.” The same could be said of Buffalo’s architectural legacy as a whole. It speaks of a purposeful, industrious people striving for excellence, a people who, even in the face of hardships, have not lost their dignity and pride. □

*Logan Ward is the author of See You in a Hundred Years.*