

Architecture

Greek Revival Is Making a Comeback—But This Time With Modern Twists



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From left: Eric Piasecki; Gil Schafer



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One of America's most enduring architectural styles has reemerged, looking more modern than ever.

By Ted Loos on October 09, 2020

A Greek-Revival (<https://www.departures.com/travel/travel/greek-revival>) revival is underway. “In a time of uncertainty, there’s always a pull toward the classical,” says designer Steven Gambrel, who has been a longtime proponent of the “rigor and stateliness” of the 19th-century architectural style. “It represents longevity and consistency.” After years of hiding in plain sight, Greek Revival is making a comeback because of its ability to be both noble and intimate at the same time. Aesthetic arbiters are not only appreciating the historic examples but also cleverly channeling its principles into new designs. “The more architects I talk to, the more I am hearing about its resurgence,” says Peter Lyden, the president of the Institute for Classical Architecture & Art, who happens to live in an 1820 Greek Revival house in upstate New York (<https://www.departures.com/travel/hudson-valley-berkshires>).

The pandemic (<https://www.departures.com/travel/future-luxury-travel-after-coronavirus>) has, oddly and unexpectedly, accelerated Greek Revival’s resurgence: As city folks look for ready-made country escapes, what they’re finding—in the Hudson Valley, the Hamptons, and the South—are well-preserved houses in that style.

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As its name suggests, the Greek Revival looked to ancient Greece for its cues. The idea at the time was that the United States, then a new democracy, could use aesthetics to invoke the original democracy. The buildings often looked like miniature Greek temples, and the form spread to many civic structures, bringing elegance to courthouses and post offices. (To be sure, the style was often used in places where the ideals it celebrated were denied to many.) Wood

frame construction was painted to look like stone. Houses were decorated with motifs and details that referenced ancient precedents: a low-pitched gabled roof, often with a heavy triangular pediment; Doric or Ionic columns; prominent front porches; and even a frieze or other echt-Greek detail.

Decorator Thomas Jayne, who frequently writes about the history of design, notes that the best examples tended to have a center hall, with parlors on either side. Architects applied the style to windows, door frames, and nearly every other detail. Looking at it now, it has a Goldilocks appeal versus other older styles. Federal is pretty but a little wan; Gothic too busy; and Victorian too, well, Victorian. "Greek Revival has a robustness to it," says architect Gil Schafer, a devoted classicist.

He designed a grand Greek Revival style home for himself in the Hudson Valley (<https://www.departures.com/travel/hudson-valley-resort-living>) with the classic triangular pediment and a front porch held up with big, fluted columns. "Architects just love the shapes," he continues. "They feel solid." Schafer uses the elements frequently: Doric columns for a Lake Placid home, for instance, in a house that otherwise doesn't scream Greek Revival.





The living room in the South Carolina home has millwork and trim inspired by the Greek Revival parlors typically found in the South. *Eric Piasecki*

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"It's almost more of a spirit than a style," says designer Andrew Cogar, the president of Historical Concepts, a studio based in Atlanta and New York; he frequently molds the style to his own uses. "It doesn't have to feel like you're living in a house museum."

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Cogar recently completed a house near Savannah with several layers of Greek Revival detail. The 4,800-square-foot structure has a portico with fluted columns and pilasters in the same style flanking the front door. There's even a pierced-frieze Greek key detail above the windows, whose triangular pediments echo the portico. It seems formal, but inside it's much more of an open plan.

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"For us, it never went away," says Clay Rokicki, another principal at Historical Concepts. "With the resurgence of the modern farmhouse style, the Greek Revival lines up very well. It can be modernized and abstracted more easily than other styles." Working with Historical Concepts, Gambrel used pared-down versions of the motifs at the guesthouse at the Captain Overton House in Sag Harbor, with Greek pilasters and fireplace mantels that look like classical temples.

Ironically, technology has also boosted Greek Revival's profile, in that computers help today's architects modify its lines. In the 19th century, the style was disseminated through pattern books, and that didn't change much until about 20 years ago, says Cogar. Given the way moldings are made today, "it's just easier with CAD software," he says.

Jacques Levet Jr., an architect in the Atlanta firm D. Stanley Dixon, recently worked on a home in South Carolina with many Greek Revival elements. His boldest move was to take the idea of a Doric column and turn it into a chunky newel post at the bottom of a staircase, chamfering the sides for a crafty look. It doesn't look old, but it also doesn't look new, and that's precisely the point. "That's why it's so popular," he adds. "You can do a lot with a little."

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