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# Telescope Houses in Buffalo

BY DAVID SCHALLIOL



*B*uffalo, New York, has a remarkable collection of great buildings from its late 19th-century and early 20th-century expansion: monumental buildings designed by the likes of Louis Sullivan, Fellheimer and Wagner, and later, Frank Lloyd Wright. Many of these architects were the period's leading designers, outsiders from Chicago and New York City hired to announce the arrival of this forward-looking city at the connection of Lake Erie and the Erie Canal. These noteworthy buildings and the grain elevators that financed them have been thoroughly documented and praised, but another, vernacular building type is less noted—the Buffalo telescope house.

Telescope houses were also products of the city's rapid development and designed—at least initially—by outsider











designers and architects. Often started as wood-frame worker cottages, the buildings were typically produced from designs in pattern books or other standardized development tools by German and Polish immigrants or the companies that employed them.

They did not stay as designed for long. The combination of small residences, narrow but deep lots, growing families, and limited resources led to a distinctive expansion pattern: buildings that were enlarged through rear additions that were incrementally reduced in scale. The result was houses that seemingly could be collapsed into themselves, like a telescope or “spyglass.” The old joke is that every time the family had another child, the family would tack another room on the end of the house. When the extensions were not bedrooms, they were kitchens, workrooms, and even separate apartments.

Of course, telescope houses are not located only on Buffalo’s East Side, or even

only in Buffalo. Such houses are a building tradition dating back at least to the early 1800s, but they are so concentrated on the city’s East Side that they are the predominant building type on many blocks there.

Although Buffalo is undergoing a concentrated resurgence, the common maladies of Northeastern and Midwestern American cities, including deindustrialization, institutional racism, and limited social services, continue to linger on the East Side. These problems are plainly visible in the built environment. Once dense streets are now full of derelict lots, and small fields now flank many of the deep houses. The resulting wide open views make the special design of Buffalo’s telescope houses more visible, but they also reveal the tenuous condition of many of the buildings—and the neighborhoods as a whole. How they and their occupants will weather the city’s future is unclear. ▼

*All photos by the author.*

An assistant professor of sociology at St. Olaf College and principal with Scrappers Film Group, David Schalliol is interested in the relationship between community and place.



His writing and photographs have appeared in such publications as *MAS Context*, *Social Science Research*, and *The New York Times*, as well as in exhibitions including the 2015 and 2017 Chicago Architectural Biennial, the inaugural Belfast Photo Festival, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography’s Midwest Photographers Project. He is the author of *Isolated Building Studies* (Utakatado 2014) and regularly contributes to documentary films, including *Almost There* and *Highrise: Out My Window*, an interactive documentary that won the 2011 International Digital Emmy for Non-Fiction. His directorial debut, *The Area*, premiered at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in April 2018. David earned his BA from Kenyon College, and his MA and PhD in the Department of Sociology at The University of Chicago.

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