

detour

D E T R O I T

Detour is the email newsletter for the Detroit community.

ONE MORE THING

Behold, the glory of Detroit's Gilded Age mansions

By Kate Abbey-Lambertz



The Hecker-Smiley mansion in 2007. Credit: Liza Lagman Sperl via [Flickr](#)

HBO Max's "The Gilded Age," which wrapped up its first season this week, has plenty of overacting, cheesy dialogue and cliched story arcs. But who cares?! The sets are so stunning you could watch it with the

sound off (and, well, some of us [don't mind the cheese](#)). The drama [takes place in 1882](#) among New York City's upper crust and their servants, with some characters modeled on [real-life figures](#) amid plenty of [historical inaccuracies](#) that don't interfere with enjoying the series.

Go elsewhere for reviews and plot summaries — I'm here for the absurdly lavish fashions and interiors with [flourishes like](#) "ceiling murals, Greek columns and ornate gilt detailing."

And I'm also here to bring it back to, where else, Detroit. A recent Wall Street Journal article details how and why NYC's Gilded Age (roughly 1870-1900) mansions were [nearly all demolished](#) during and beyond the city's 1920s building boom, reminding me that we've still got a few Gilded Age mansions of our own. Here are a few that are still standing:

The Freer House: Built in 1892 in the American shingle style for **Charles Lang Freer** (with later additions to house his growing art collection), the Freer House is now home to Wayne State University's [Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute](#). It once held the splendid turquoise Peacock Room exhibit, which was moved to the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution after his death.

Keep exploring: Attend a virtual talk on the women who helped establish Freer's museum [next Thursday](#), take a [virtual tour](#) of the Peacock Room, and read [more about the home's history](#).

The Whitney: Completed for lumber baron **David Whitney** in 1894, the mansion is built of rose-colored South Dakota jasper [in the Romanesque Revival style](#) and is 22,000 square feet, with "52 rooms (including 10 bathrooms), 218 windows, 20 fireplaces and numerous stained-glass windows crafted by Tiffany's of New York," according to Historic Detroit.

Keep exploring: Now a restaurant, you can just go [visit the Whitney](#) for dinner or a weekend tea — ball gown not required.

Hecker-Smiley mansion: Noted Detroit Gilded Age architect **Louis Kamper** designed the French Renaissance mansion for **Col. Frank J. Hecker**, with [construction completed in 1892](#). The mansion was modeled after a French chateaux and included 49 rooms, a 12-foot-high stained-glass window, matching three-story towers and interiors including wood carvings, painted ceilings, Italian Siena marble, mosaic flooring, white oak paneling and more than 12 fireplaces. Now owned by Wayne State and home to its [Tierney Alumni House](#), the building is on the National Register of Historic Places and hosts an art collection.

Keep exploring: Unfortunately, the mansion isn't open for tours. However, you can see photos of the interior in this [Detroit News collection](#) and see more of Kamper's work at the Book Cadillac building and [many others](#).

Even more: Check out [this feature on the Ransom Gillis mansion](#) and its wealthy Gilded Age neighborhood, Brush Park, then catch a glimpse of the [William Northwood House](#) in Woodbridge and the [William H. Wells Manor](#) on East Jefferson.

Written by Kate (with the TV sound off); edited by Erin and Sarah.

Choose which newsletters you want to receive [here](#)

 [Subscribe](#)

 Follow us: [IG](#) | [FB](#) | [Twitter](#)
