



# *Wilcox Gardens*

*preserving the past*

Staying true to the land's original intent, a team of new property owners and designers are fashioning a distinctive new community on East Grand Rapids' last buildable home sites.

BY LISA M. JENSEN

*Introducing Part Two of Wilcox Gardens,  
a Grand Rapids Magazine Design Home presentation.*

Those who toured this year's Grand Rapids Symphony Showhouse found their way to the intriguing residence by turning onto Laurel Circle Drive off of Lake Street in East Grand Rapids. This subtle street that wraps into a quiet cul-de-sac first passes an historic, European-inspired home on the right – the former Wilcox family manor, built in 1888.

**N**ext-door is 2010's Showhouse – which goes by other names as well.

It's called "home" by the family of Nyal Deems, who owns it now. But it was first known as the Wilcox family community house, designed by nationally-renowned, Grand Rapids architect Kenneth C. Welch in the mid-1920s, at the request of Caroline Wilcox.

Left to raise five children after the sudden death of her husband, 55-year-old Frederick, Caroline reserved land for each on which they could build their own homes and remain close. She also wanted a shared space she and her children's families could gather for recreation and with friends on the Wilcox estate.

Comprised of reclaimed brick, the spacious community house enclosed a squash court, indoor pool and courtyard that could be entered beneath romantic arched entries framed by decorative stone columns.

The community house was also surrounded by formal gardens fashioned by the Wilcoxes' son, Raymond, who became a landscape architect.

Years after the last Wilcox family members died or moved away from the estate, a subsequent owner bought the community house, along with nearly eight landlocked acres surrounding it. Deep off of Lake Drive in its almost secret wooded setting, the stately compound gained a magical aura of sorts.

And its two adjoining neighbors – fami-



lies who lived in homes built by two of the Wilcox children, on the other side of and across from the Wilcox Manor – named it The Castle.

### *Preserving A Legacy*

Before the recent creation of Laurel Circle Drive, the only way back to The Castle and Wilcox Manor was down a long gravel path through the woods off Lake Drive. Curious about what he'd find at the end of the mysterious two-track in the midst of this well-groomed East GR neighborhood, builder/designer Jeffery Roberts ventured onto it one Sunday afternoon.

"I was so intrigued by the architecture of the community house I needed to learn more about it," Roberts said. "Really, I just fell in love with it."

Consequently, Roberts learned that the community house, along with the remaining Wilcox estate property, had been purchased by the neighbors. The two families had partnered up to preserve the integrity of the distinctive land Caro-



line had intended be future home sites for her other children.

"They began brainstorming," shared Grand Rapids architect Jim Karczewski, whose wife, Katie, had become the property's broker through Keller Williams Realty.

As one of the neighbors was a former client of Jim's, the architect was engaged to fine-tune their plan: the creation of a new street off Lake Drive derived from giving up some of their own land, and of a new community inspired by the Wilcox family legacy.

### *Creating Wilcox Gardens*

"Beyond saving The Castle, the new owners – who formed TDG, LLC – wanted

to maintain the feel of the Wilcox estate in terms of space and gardens and distinctive homes architecturally unique in their own right, but compatible with one another," Jim said.

While Excel Engineering constructed Laurel Circle Drive, which the City of East GR accepted as a gift and made a public street, Jim divided vacant land remaining on the former Wilcox estate into six new home sites – the last buildable lots remaining in East Grand Rapids.

"Wilcox Gardens is a site condominium project," Jim explained, "which ensures that quality homes of a unique, yet compatible design are built."

After touring the vacant community house with Jim and learning about the new Wilcox Gardens concept, builder/



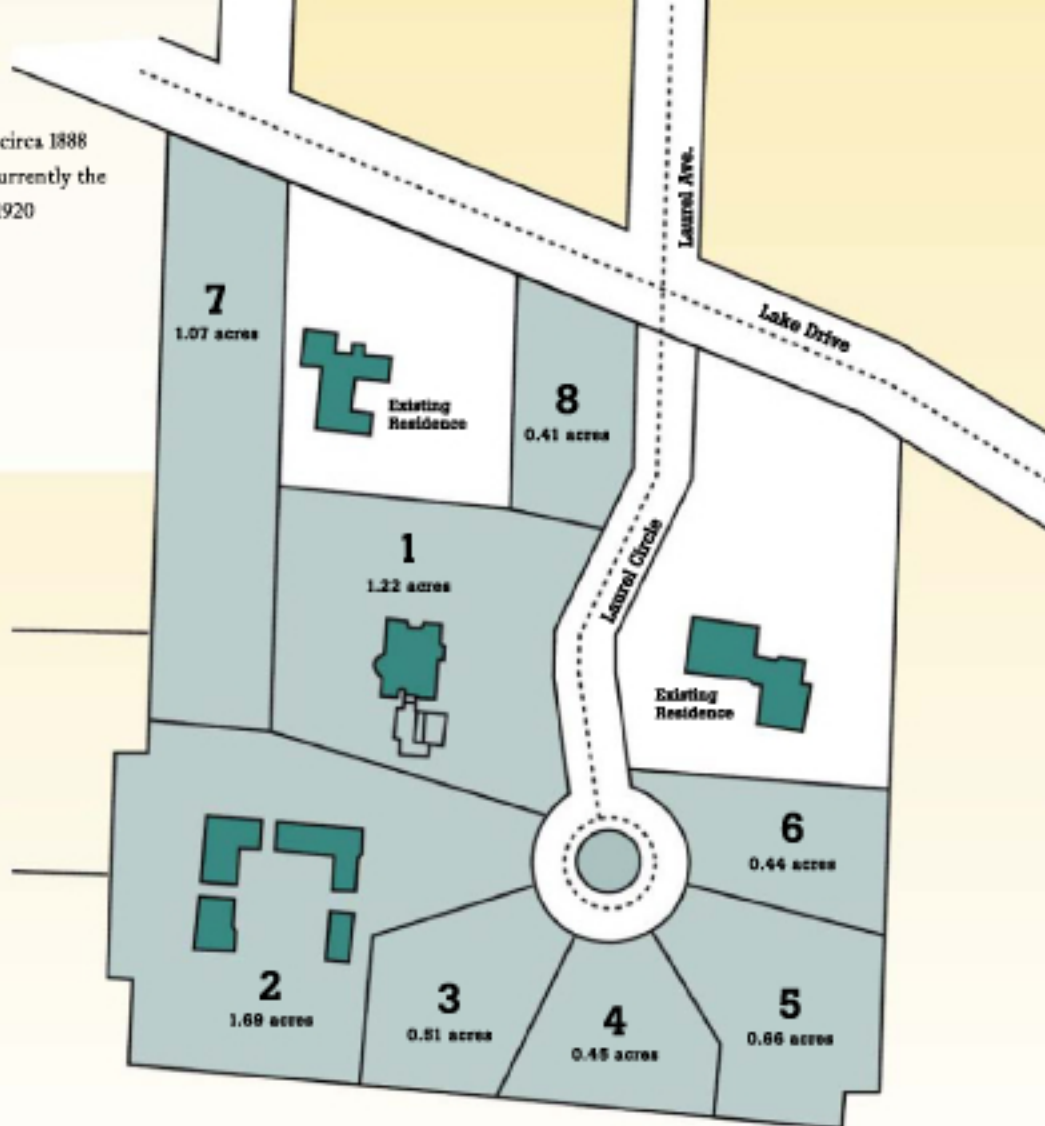
1. Original Wilcox Manor, circa 1888
2. Community House — Currently the Symphony House, circa 1920
3. Lot Available
4. Lot Available
5. Lot Available
6. Lot Available
7. Lot Sold
8. Lot Available

designer Jeffery Roberts — based in Chicago as well as Grand Rapids — was instantly drawn to the project.

"Caroline Wilcox wanted for each of her children's homes to represent their individual styles, but be united through use of quality materials and landscaping," Roberts said. "And to begin we have a great colonial next to a Tuscan-inspired villa, next to the Showhouse, a brick Revival-inspired structure."

Homes in East Grand Rapids, he added, are renowned for having different architectural points of view.

"The property owners want to ensure this at Wilcox Gardens, too: They want to honor history and create a sense of belonging, of family and community."



Inspired by the community house's European architecture, Roberts immersed himself in a photographic study of historic Chicago parks buildings built during the same era. To the estate's new owners, TDG, LLC, he expressed his vision of merging these architectural details as well as reclaimed architectural artifacts — such as a bronze balcony from the Chicago Opera House — into the new home designs.

"Incorporating salvaged finds like this is a significant way to reuse pieces from the past and give these new homes character — a story —

that allows their owners to feel a personal connection," said Roberts, who was also formally trained in the arts.

Pleased with this approach, TDG, LLC tapped Roberts to take plans for Wilcox Gardens to the next level. To do so, Roberts teamed up with award-winning, Grand Rapids-based Wayne Visbeen, designated architect for Grand Rapids Magazine Design Home 2010. Together, this innovative design team is journeying to the past to create the first distinctive new home in this exclusive new community — and a new legacy.

Architectural designs will be featured in the August issue of Grand Rapids Magazine. To learn more about Wilcox Gardens, visit [grmag.com/wilcox.com](http://grmag.com/wilcox.com).

*Look for Part Three of Wilcox Gardens in the August issue of Grand Rapids Magazine.*

**L**OCATED WITHIN immediate proximity to schools, shopping and recreation, Wilcox Gardens will offer the rare opportunity to build within the land-locked community of East Grand Rapids. This site-condominium development will be a combination of existing and new single-family homes. Visbeen Associates, Architects, in conjunction with Jeffery Roberts Homes, has developed several design concepts for these exceptional historic home sites. Don't miss this opportunity to build in one of America's most livable communities. To inquire about available lots in Wilcox Gardens please contact Katie Karczewski at (616) 575-0119.

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