

Talking Points

Two AD 100 Architects Discuss Prefab, Sustainability and More



AD May 2005

Hugh Newell Jacobsen (right) and Allan Greenberg, both AD 100 architects, discuss some of the concerns affecting both design pros and homeowners. ABOVE: A Jacobsen house in Tennessee.

HUGH NEWELL JACOBSEN

AD: *The recession dealt a major blow to most architects, and many say they're continuing to feel hard hit. How has your residential practice fared?*

HNJ: This office, thank God, continues to be busy, with 14 projects under construction and several in construction drawings. We like designing houses.

The biggest buzzword in the industry now is sustainability. How does today's call for an ecologically sensitive architecture differ from that of the 1970s?

Scale, proportion and the order of light continue to be most important. Being green is more than having grass on a roof. Our buildings, like those of any responsible member of this glorious profession, are sustainable.

You design houses for some of the world's most well-connected individuals. Is "environmental impact" a topic that generally comes up in your discussions with clients?



Q&A

I have always maintained that good architecture does not shout at the neighbors—let alone the environment.

Is the building industry ready to absorb the kind of environmentally focused change people are talking about?
My experience is that they are not. A shift in habit is always difficult.

What do you think of prefab as a building alternative? Does prefab lend itself to your wholly customized approach?
I have been interested in prefab all of my career. The American building industry has attempted this path many, many times and has, to my mind, abandoned it.

Name one building type that you've always wanted to do but has thus far eluded you.
A high-rise building—anywhere.

What is the biggest design lesson you've learned since building your first house?
There are no absolutes, other than gravity, water and budget.

What are the most challenging demands that a residential client has made of you?

To listen and interpret their program and not repeat your previous approach. Architectural administration has resulted in the impression that this office is practicing law and not architecture.

Lastly, what current project on your boards, residential or otherwise, most excites you?

I've been working on a very complex program for a house with spectacular views. The time-honored discipline—i.e., “the architect must make the site better, not worse”—is extremely challenging, given this large and hilly site. Each site has a unique quality of light. To take full advantage of this and enhance the architecture, not as an intrusion but as a modifying complement and reason, is the direction that is driving the design. While the owner's program is complex and thorough, it has presented terrific challenges to tie it all together in architecture. Architecture without order is not architecture.

ALLAN GREENBERG

AD: The recession dealt a major blow to most architects, and many say they're continuing to feel hard hit. How has your residential practice fared?

AG: Our practice has not changed much. Our residential practice remains constant, and, as usual, we have one building for an educational institution.

Are you seeing a turnaround?

Yes, we are seeing a renewal of interest in building new houses. Our recent projects in Texas, Virginia and California pose exciting challenges for us involving historic restoration and new design and construction.

The biggest buzzword in the industry now is sustainability. How does today's



A leading proponent of classical architecture and interiors, Allan Greenberg (above) is the author of *Architecture of Democracy*.



For a 100-acre horse farm in New Jersey, Greenberg conceived a design in a mode for which he is renowned, Georgian Revival. The architect says it is inherently sustainable.

continued from page 60

call for an ecologically sensitive architecture differ from that of the 1970s?

Classical architecture has always been environmentally sound and sustainable. Materials from ancient Roman buildings, for example, were plundered (i.e., recycled) for new construction for a millennium. The classical approach has always sought ways to maximize human comfort through thoughtful design.

You design houses for some of the world's most well-connected individuals. Is "environmental impact" a topic that generally comes up in your discussions with clients?

All our clients are interested in being good neighbors: They want more than a house that easily fits into an existing neighborhood; they want homes that enhance their surroundings. Environmental concerns are also taken very seriously, including the use of local trees and plants, geothermal-based heating and cooling systems, and recyclable materials. Many of these concerns have always been an integral part of classical architecture.

Is the building industry ready to absorb the kind of environmentally focused change people are talking about?

I believe that it is already well on the way to this goal. It is part and parcel of the way builders and engineers talk and think.

What do you think of prefab as a building alternative? Does prefab lend itself to your wholly customized approach?

Our Brooks Brothers store on Rodeo

Drive in Beverly Hills has a completely prefabricated exterior. It looks different from typical prefab construction because of the very different approach to the design of the prefabricated panels. Too often, prefab buildings look constipated (housing projects of prefab panels), temporary or cheap. The Ray and Charles Eames House in Los Angeles is a masterpiece of standardized and prefabricated design.

Name one building type that you've always wanted to do but has thus far eluded you.

An art museum.

What is the biggest design lesson you've learned since building your first house?

A happy builder builds well! The architect has to provide clear and complete documentation of the building. The architect's and engineer's drawings should present information so that it is simple and easy for the contractor to use and find, and related to the sequence of construction.

What are the most challenging demands that a residential client has made of you?

The integration of architecture, interiors, gardens and furniture as part of the same approach to design.

Lastly, what current project on your boards, residential or otherwise, most excites you?

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, you never really understand the design on which you are working until you know how beautiful it can be. This is why I find all projects equally exciting. □