

In perpetuum



Farmhouse in Connecticut  
Allan Greenberg, Architect



*RECORD* invited Paul Goldberger, *Architecture Critic of The New York Times*, to appraise what is, by any criterion, a major Classical design. Our article omits the usual complement of site and floor plans at the express request of the owners. D. B.

Classicism is a serious business for Allan Greenberg. His architecture has little to do with the ironic and witty plays on Classical themes that are so common in this age of Postmodern flamboyance—in its way, Greenberg's architecture is as far from Postmodernism as the work of Mies van der Rohe. Indeed, there is something not unlike Mies in Greenberg's work: it, too, is a kind of Platonic quest for perfection in a certain language, and it, too, emerges out of a deep conviction that there is a right way to make architecture. This sprawling Georgian house on a rural site in Connecticut exemplifies Greenberg's stance. It is an ambitious and grandiose house, larger by half than the Mount Vernon that inspired it, and altogether lacking in the curious mix of sophistication and provincialism that energizes Mount Vernon. This house is made all of knowledge, not of instinct; it is a measured, sober essay in Classicism, its every dormer and bracket emanating an erudite love of Classical architecture. But, for all its deliberate quality, this house is not "about" Classicism, as the classicizing designs of so many of Greenberg's peers might be said to be; Greenberg is more interested in practicing the Classical language than in commenting on it.

It is difficult, for all the importance of the architectural issues this house raises, not to speak first of its scale, for a house of this stature would be impressive in any mode today. The main wing is roughly 120 feet long, with attached side pavilions large enough to permit a full-size swimming pool to be within one of them. It commands its expansive, rolling site with self-assurance, presenting its grander facade containing a full-length portico to the open landscape and its more restrained front to the entry drive. The building is thus in the tradition of country houses that open primarily to their gardens and which, despite their rural or semirural settings, offer a formal, almost urban, face at their front door. But most direct, of course, is the connection between this house and Mount Vernon and, by implication at least, to such descendants of Mount Vernon as Stanford White and Theodore Pope Riddle's Hill-Stead. Greenberg did not copy Mount Vernon literally; he not only changed the scale significantly, he altered many of the details. The entry facade is cleaned up considerably, and made symmetrical. The most conspicuous result of both the increase in size and the greater order is to create a sense of vast, clean space; the white-painted facade with its false rustication seems to go on and on. But it feels as if it were pulled taut over this large form—there is a precision to Greenberg's detailing that keeps this mass from appearing bloated.

It is not hard to sense Greenberg's love of the Italian Baroque here; he has more than just acknowledged the relationship between Italian Classicism and American Colonial architecture, he has intentionally exaggerated it. And it is through all of this that the facade acquires the rhythms that bring it to life: such details as the molding around the oval window in the central pediment, the huge brackets that anchor each end of the pediment, and the composition of Ionic pilasters and sumptuous scrollwork over the front door together bring a rich texture, and create a kind of drama in a facade that, without them, could run the danger of being precise to the point of primness. The entry facade thus has a kind of positive tension; it is almost a dialectic between a precise and highly ordered version of American Colonial architecture and the more sensuous, brooding power of the Baroque. On the garden facade, however, there is no such tension—a colonnade of paired Tuscan columns sets a gentle rhythm, and the detailing is understated. The mood is quieter here; despite the grandeur of the columns, this facade is clearly a less formal front, a great veranda open to the landscape rather than a portico. Greenberg's decision to pair the columns was critical; it gives this facade a rhythmic proportion that it would otherwise lack, as well as looking back to Classical precedent before American Colonial architecture, as the Baroque allusions in the entry facade do.

The formality of the entry facade is enhanced by the presence of the two side wings, which are placed at right angles to that facade to form what is in effect a three-sided forecourt. Graceful curving arcades do

much to energize this outdoor space, which is defined and partially enclosed on its fourth side by careful planting of trees. The side wings are detailed in a manner consistent with the main house; they acknowledge their subsidiary status not only by their placement and scale, however, but by a slight understatement of detail. One side wing contains a garage and service functions; the other, essentially similar on the exterior, contains the swimming pool. It is not a little startling to find a swimming pool behind Palladian windows, though the barrel-vaulted space that it has been given makes a successful transition from the architectural themes of the structure itself to the mood of an indoor pool, for it gives the space a clear but unaggressive monumentality.

The plan is rigorously formal. A central hall spans the house from front to back, and on the rare occasions when the doors are left open, the view through the house from one landscape to another is an extraordinary one of nature placed securely within Greenberg's Classical frame. The rooms are large, but not overwhelming; if anything, they seem the result of an attempt to strike a careful balance between normal domestic scale and the rather larger scale of this house. Despite Greenberg's oft-professed affection for the work of Lutyens, he has kept all eccentricity of interior space far away from here. There are no double-height or round spaces or tricks of any kind. It is in tiny phrasings of detail rather than in grand gestures of space that Greenberg's ability to manipulate the Classical language is most convincing. (It is here, too, that the remarkable quality of workmanship in this house is most apparent.) The chimneypieces alone tell the story: In the sitting room used as an informal family gathering place, a mantelpiece emerges with utter restraint and control from walls paneled in the same wood. In one of the two more formal living rooms, the voltage is turned up a bit in a somewhat more elaborate mantel with dentil moldings, while in the library, the main living room, the mantel is supported on brackets and the chimneypiece decorated with a band of circles. In another room, meanwhile, the mantel is Adamesque.

The cornice moldings are one of Greenberg's favorite variations on Classical precedent. Unlike most cornices, in which brackets along each side stop short of the corner, which remains a void, some of Greenberg's cornices have an extra bracket on the diagonal, to visually bring the molding around the corner. So, too, above the arched window on the main landing has he topped pilasters and architrave with diagonal modillions. It is not exactly an earth-shattering event—but it is a significant reminder that Greenberg remains committed to using Classicism as a vocabulary within which he can invent, not as a source that he must only take literally. What also prevents this house from becoming cloyingly "Colonial" was the decision of the owners, who are noted collectors of postwar American art, to display their collection here amidst American antiques. Thus there are such startling presences as an Andy Warhol portrait of Marilyn Monroe above one of the fireplaces, a Lichtenstein in the entry hall, and Warhol's *Mona Lisa* sharing a wall on the main stair with a grandfather clock. These juxtapositions work in part because of the high quality of the collection—just any modern art would hardly be at home in a setting of this caliber—and in part because the leap over time they represent helps this house to transcend the limits of any period design. So, too, with the important Art Deco furniture that the owners brought from their previous residence (a Robert Venturi house completed in the early 1970s), which fills a sitting room in this house, entering into easy, if unusual, dialogue with the architecture that enriches both. The modern art and the Art Deco furniture in effect make more conspicuous and easier to understand the point made by Greenberg's inventiveness of detail—that this is not a piece of colonial Williamsburg, but a structure built in the 1980s. It was not only made in our time, it was conceived for our time: Allan Greenberg's belief is not that Classicism is something of the past that our age would do well to return to, but that it is as much a living and changing style as any other. *Paul Goldberger*

The ancestry of Greenberg's parti, a great central block with flanking pavilions attached by quadrants, reaches back to Mount Vernon and beyond, to Palladio. As in the Italian villas and English country houses that embody this lineage, the symmetrically spread mass extends a gesture of dominion over the surrounding landscape (a cupola originally proposed for the center of the roof would have made this

gesture even more emphatic). Barrel-vaulted arcades (center photos) and a portico on the main garden front (top photo) ease the transition between architectural order and its natural environs, as do, at more intimate scale, elegant ranges of picket fence, matched allées of lindens bounding the entry forecourt (preceding pages and bottom right), and stone terraces reminiscent of collaborative designs

by Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Pavers and plinths are the same red Indian sandstone that Lutyens used in his Viceroy's House at New Delhi. Facing the house from the courtyard, the pavilions to either side of the main frontispiece enclose a garage and service areas to the left and an indoor swimming pool, to the right.





*Farmhouse in Connecticut*

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H. Jorgenson, project architect;

Richard Wies, Robert Orr, Jacquelin

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design team

**Engineers:**

Tor & Partners (structural); Harold

Mindell (mechanical)

**Interior consultant:**

Johnson Wanzenberg & Associates

**Woodwork:**

Eisenhardt Mills, Inc.; Lititz Planing

Mills, Inc.; Breakfast Woodwork

**Landscape:**

Deborah Nevins; Russell Page

**General contractors:**

Thomas P. Maguire, Inc.; Hayes

Creative Woodwork

**Photographer:**

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When they are open, the doors at both ends of the broad center hall frame a vista through the house from entry court to portico and lawn. The contrast between the broken-pedimented tabernacle of the garden-front portal (top, this page) and the simpler surrounds of other doorways in the hall exemplifies Greenberg's creative manipulation of Classical ornament to define architectural hierarchies. The intensity and finesse of his invention are epitomized in the open-newel staircase, a virtuoso turn of design and joinery that deserves to be admired as a work of sculpture. Characteristic details, grounded in the Classical canon but unmistakably original, are the many-layered overlap of stringers, risers, and nosing, and the polygonal finial that terminates the curve of the railing above a fluted newel post. A subtle refinement that recurs elsewhere is the angled corner modillion, introduced in the cornice of the arched landing window (bottom, this page). Though the detailing applied to other rooms varies according to decorum and use, it sustains the same degree of fastidious articulation (see, for example, the bathroom illustrated on pages 172-173). **Overleaf:** A small parlor (1) is one of the few rooms in the house where furniture and art combine with interior architecture to compose a thorough period piece. The dining room (2) brings together 18th-century wallpaper and antiques with bold new cabinetwork by Greenberg. Another chamber (3) is a relatively spare showcase for some of the owners' museum-quality Art Deco furniture and decorative objects. In the cherry-paneled sitting room used for informal family gatherings (4), as throughout the house, contemporary American art engages in a dialogue with Classical architecture. Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe adorns the library chimneypiece (pages 118-119). Part of the cornice molding above a flanking wall is hinged to release a retractable movie screen. Behind correctly Georgian facades, the barrel-vaulted swimming pool (pages 120-121) has the air of a Beaux-Arts public bath. Triple-sash windows give onto a terraced garden.













