

"The front door at Beechwoods is a sophisticated reworking of 17th-century Connecticut River Valley carpenters' interpretation of high architecture," Greenberg says, referring to the entrance (this page) to the home he designed in the late 1980s. "They interpreted classical ideas with great freedom." Greenberg flanked the door with Ionic columns ("very close to Renaissance pilasters, though a bit thinner and flatter because I used wood instead of stone"); a scrolled pediment with an urn resting on a keystone; and on the urn a pineapple—a traditional symbol of hospitality. All with a practical modern convenience: "There's a mahogany screen door as well, to keep the mosquitoes out," he says.



The Ionic Man

Allan Greenberg is the American champion of classical architecture. His forte: Harmonizing a centuries-old building tradition with modern life.

By Arthur Lubow

"Last year I decided to make my wardrobe match my architecture," says Greenberg, "so I started wearing Prada. It suits me perfectly. Miuccia Prada is doing with fashion what I'm doing with houses and public buildings—pushing a classic genre to the edge without going over." Here, Greenberg wears Prada's Tecno Gabardine Stretch Suit, which, he says, "you can sleep in and it won't crease."



If you commission a house from Allan Greenberg, be warned: You are signing up for an education. Because Greenberg wants his clients to be actively involved in the design of their house, he often showers them with scholarly articles and suggests tours of historic landmarks, to teach them the language of classical architecture.

"They know they are not architects, but they know what they want," he says. "They need me to translate it into something that is economical and effective. My clients must learn to read drawings, to articulate ideas, resolve family differences over territory and aesthetics, by always going back to the drawing board. Many people don't like this—they want their architect to tell them what to do. That kind of client doesn't come to me. My clients are strong, demanding, and fun to work with."

Greenberg's clients actually come to him because he is unsurpassed at what he does. "I don't think there's any architect concerned with classicism as an idiom for building today who's better than Allan," says Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture. "I think he's the leader, the best of that particular group."

His fascination with dentil moldings and Ionic columns notwithstanding, Greenberg has a very contemporary sensibility: It surprised me to discover he collects Issey Miyake dresses (and did so even when he was between marriages) and considers Jackson Pollock to be "one of the greatest painters of all time." Most contemporary exponents of classical architecture are antimodernist zealots. Greenberg, on the contrary, has a breadth of vision that takes in the best modern architects, including Frank Gehry and Richard Meier. "I'm a great admirer of Norman Foster," he says. "I can draw from memory Mies van der Rohe details—I've seen all his buildings. I've seen all of Le Corbusier's buildings."

"Greenberg's commitment to classicism comes out of a search for quality, not out of an ideological belief that this is the only true way," says Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic for *The New Yorker*. "An awful lot of these people are the architecture world's equivalent of fundamentalists. Allan is a committed intellectual who happens also to practice the religion, but from a standpoint of liberal enlightenment." He adds that Greenberg is "unusual and distinctive as much in the way he thinks as in his actual work."

Although he lives in Washington, D.C., and has received important commercial, university, and government commissions, it is the residential work that has won Greenberg a loyal following among clients who can afford to build whatever house they want. He has designed homes in D.C., Massachusetts, and Ohio, but most of his houses are located in the well-manicured Connecticut suburbs of New York City.

"We went looking for a country house, which we envisioned as an old farmhouse: clapboard and stone," says Charles Decaro, director of the New York-based fashion ad agency Laspata/Decaro, who with his partner, Rocco Laspata, recently purchased Huckleberry House, a New Canaan residence Greenberg designed in the eighties. "It had the sensibilities of an old house—without the plumbing problems."

With its classical temple front, symmetrical wings, and central rotunda, Huckleberry House immediately evokes Palladio. When I asked Greenberg about it, however, he said that his inspiration was not the 16th-century villas of the Veneto, but a residence closer to home: Tudor Place, a house in Washington, D.C., designed by William Thornton, the early-19th-century neo-Palladian architect of the U.S. Capitol. You might say Huckleberry House is neo-neo-Palladian, but that would be missing the point. For Greenberg, what is important is the continuum.

Greenberg, who is 60, was raised in Johannesburg and benefited, in one way at least, from the city's backwardness: During the late 1950s, when most architecture schools thought that life began with Mies, he studied classical architecture for two years, then modern for two at the University of Witwatersrand. The six-hour semi-annual exams required him to reproduce to scale the buildings he was discussing. "At the end of that time you had a vocabulary of buildings that you'd learned half by heart," he says. "It gave you a great feeling for the size of buildings. You had to know that a building was fifty feet high, with windows three feet off the ground."

In the third year he fell in love with Le Corbusier and resolved to work for him. Through a friend of a friend of a friend, he wangled a lunch in Paris with the modernist master, who said to him, "I admire your tenacity, it's an essential component of the character of every successful architect." However, the only position Le Corbusier could offer him was unsalaried, so Greenberg decided instead to study further at the Architectural Association in England and then, at Le Corbusier's suggestion, to go to Denmark to work for Jørn Utzon, who was at that time designing the Sydney Opera House. In retrospect, the principal repercussion of Greenberg's meeting with Le Corbusier, whose work he still reveres, was a paradoxical one. "I looked at the convent courtyard outside Le Corbusier's offices and thought I was in heaven," he says. "I never imagined that anyplace could be so beautiful."

Johannesburg is a new city, founded after the discovery of gold in the 1880s, and so its architecture is of recent vintage. When Greenberg moved to London in 1959, he was horrified to meet architects who were planning to raze historic dis-



tricts of three-story "slums" and working-class buildings and replace them with modern housing blocks. "I said, 'You want to turn London into Johannesburg?' It was absurd," he says. "I visited architectural projects where they were telling people how to live and not paying attention to how people related to their environments." Still, when he went to study at Yale in 1964, and later as a faculty member, he remained a modernist. For an ambitious young architect, there was no alternative.

Greenberg's conversion occurred in 1973 when he received a plum commission: a



The inspiration for the 5,000-square-foot, three-bedroom Huckleberry House (1982–85; above), in New Canaan, Connecticut, came partly from Tudor Place, a Washington, D.C., home designed by 19th-century Federal architect William Thornton. The rotunda (top) is a two-story ballroom: “The clients loved disco dancing,” Greenberg says. The dome consists of a wood frame covered in copper and crowned with a lantern “to let light in and keep rain out.” The 11-foot-tall loggia (right), inspired by Palladio and Thomas Jefferson, opens off the living room and library, making it a “perfect place to take shade in summer.”





"There are a few 17th-century English houses with fascinating staircases formed by separate, solid pieces of carved stone cantilevered from the wall. I wanted to do something similar here, but in mahogany," Greenberg says, referring to the staircase in this just completed waterfront house in Greenwich, Connecticut. He designed the staircase's curves (above) freehand, then had Eisenhardt Mill in Easton, Pennsylvania, execute his plan. "It's really a monument to the woodcrafter's skill," he adds. The steel and glass cupola above the center hall (left), was also inspired by a traditional British motif—the conservatory—whereas the living room fireplace mantel (opposite) alludes to ancient Greece, with its guilloche circular motifs and rosettes, Ionic volutes, and denticulated mantelpiece.



West Wing addition to the State Library and Supreme Court Building, a handsome Classical Revival limestone building designed by Donn Barber in 1908, in Hartford, Connecticut. Greenberg's West Wing defers to the older edifice but, he now believes, fails to relate to it.

"The old courthouse had enormous free-standing columns," he explains, "whereas my structure had a two-inch-deep vertical recess between each set of windows. Barber's building was rectilinear, mine was curved. His windows were deeply recessed and symmetrical, mine were near the skin and asymmetrical. There were all these contrasts, and although they enhance your understanding of new and old, they don't expand the language of architecture."

Against that he offers the example of a

famous corner of Harvard Yard, in which four buildings (Sever Hall, University Hall, Emerson Hall, and Widener Library), each designed by a different architect in a different style over a period of decades, stand gracefully beneath a canopy of trees connected by axial footpaths. It's that kind of harmony that Greenberg was seeking.

"You can only do that by talking, not contrasting," he says, by which he means having a dialogue with the past. Speaking with the Enlightenment cadences of an American architect he greatly admires, Thomas Jefferson, he says, "The goal is to stand on the shoulders of all the architects of the past and see further." And as with all good architects, he carefully considers his relationship to the site. When he constructed a flagship store for Tommy Hil-

figer in Beverly Hills, he experimented with 22 shades of white before arriving at a cream-colored aggregate with blue and black stone, to complement yet contrast with the adjacent Museum of Television and Radio, designed by Richard Meier.

Let there be no confusion: The houses Greenberg designs, though not modernist, are modern. They have spacious bathrooms, display kitchens, large windows, and roomy closets, elements that were not part of an 18th- or a 19th-century house. They have efficient plumbing and sophisticated, low-velocity air conditioning systems. Beyond that, though, the classical details that at first glance might seem authentic aren't—and aren't meant to be.

Consider Greenberg's design signature—his moldings. Greenberg loves moldings.



them that the computer has no more intelligence than a pencil," he says. Sometimes he employs a master craftsman to manufacture moldings by hand (and always does so when he needs a mantelpiece, cabinet, or ceiling medallion). But even when the work is performed in the traditional way there is a telltale difference. "When you carve something now," he says, "you want to see the chisel marks; eighteenth-century clients wouldn't have liked to see the expression of how it was done."

The desire to manifest the process in the product suggests why he is so enamored of Pollock, one of three artists on his short list of favorites. (Masaccio and Picasso are the other two.) Indeed, he sees moldings as a type of abstract art: "It's odd that in a century in which abstract art has come into its own,

moldings are not recognized as being the interesting abstract shapes that they are."

Certainly in his black shoes, gray Prada pants, and gray Armani jacket, Greenberg appears thoroughly modern, as austere as Mies van der Rohe. One might even argue there's no essential difference between a house by Greenberg and one by Mies, since both are supported by a steel frame and covered with a decorative skin. (Notwithstanding the modernist credo "form follows function," the skin of a Mies building, such as the Seagram Building in New York, is ornamental, not structural.)

"The way to build well today is to build a steel frame that is completely covered by exterior walls, so it is not subject to expansion and contraction," he says. "This supports the roof. The walls are self-supporting, but they never touch the roof, and the interior walls never touch the exterior walls. They all expand and contract independently. You minimize contraction and expansion, so you never see a crack."

As for the old-fogey Classical Revival architects who eschew steel-frame construction and insist on obsolete building techniques, Greenberg isn't buying it. "This is a twentieth-century way of building," he says. "If Palladio came back, he would be fascinated by it. The frame goes up very quickly. With the frame up, you are doing the roof, the floor, the walls, the stud partitions, and the interior plumbing at the same time. That



The family room of this Fairfield County, Connecticut, residence (1990-92; above) is a classical architectural symphony—Doric columns, modillion brackets, and *Serliana* window; the denticulated ceiling cornice; late-17th-century painted wood carvings on the fireplace overmantel, which the client found and Greenberg built into the wall; and the mantel itself, which, Greenberg says, took him a week to sketch. "It's very elaborate," Greenberg explains. "There are seashells, ribbons, intertwined vines, flowers, and ancient Greek Acanthus plants. Dennis Collier carved it, and he's the best." Left: A "cousin of this fireplace with shell and floral motifs" can be found in the living room, beyond an archway bearing a lunette with lead rays painted white and adorned with gold-leaf flowers.

fluted ceiling molding in the living room a strip of bead-and-reel, an ancient Greek decorative pattern, because he thought that something was needed "to catch the eye, to give shadow and a syncopated rhythm."

Modern technology allows Greenberg to produce easily the long moldings he prefers. "What would take an eighteenth-century plasterer months to do you can do quickly with a four-bladed shaper," he says. "You give a floppy disk to the mill shop, and they do the drawings on their computer, which tells their equipment what to do. It's like making pasta—it just comes out." He doesn't understand the prejudice some classical architects have against up-to-date techniques. "Architects feel this equipment is dehumanizing, and I keep telling

He draws them on transparent overlays on graph paper, or on his computer, modifying the previous version until he gets it just right. His moldings are generally larger—sometimes by five to 10 percent—than the ones that you'd find in a house built at the turn of the last century. They're also more complicated. In the entrance hall of a just-completed waterfront house in Greenwich, Connecticut, he took the fluting that you would see on a Doric column and adapted it for the ceiling and baseboard molding. To top himself he then added to the



The Beechwoods circular stair hall, capped by a lantern atop a flattened dome, is testimony to Greenberg's dedication to rendering classical motifs (the Doric column), using local materials (the floor is inlaid with mahogany, maple, and quarter-sawn white oak), lighter and loftier than ever. "Circular stair halls are infrequent in American architecture," Greenberg says. "Here I wanted to make the staircase as thin and weightless as possible." (The mural, an early-20th-century image of the Hudson River Valley, was done on commission by Gracie, Inc., in New York City.)

The Ionic Man

saves ten to fifteen percent on construction time, which pays back much of the extra cost of the steel frame."

Greenberg prides himself on designing houses that, while undeniably comfortable, are also intellectually challenging. "I think all good architecture is a little confrontational," he says. As Paul Goldberger points out, "For a long time, the classicists had a lock on comfort and the modernists had a lock on challenge. Allan thinks architecture should do both. It's not simply feel-good architecture."

In the Greenwich house built in 1995 for Charles Steven Cohen, a New York commercial real-estate developer, Greenberg looked to the turn of the century, to Edwin Lutyens and to early Frank Lloyd Wright, for an X-shaped or "sun trap" plan. The major rooms—some with acute-right-angled corners—boast windows on three sides, affording views of the pastoral site and admitting huge amounts of daylight. "I told him I'd love to have rooms that have some shape to them," says Cohen. "Why do all rooms have to be rectangles or squares?" Cohen is enchanted by the uncompromising attention to detail, such as the exquisite exterior stone masonry (he lived through two years of work but has no complaints); the elaborate moldings of modillions with a dentil band below; the dramatic curve in many rooms (echoing the exterior curve of the main facade); and the curved, massive cherrywood doors. "The clients said they wanted a house that wouldn't be obvious," Greenberg recalls. "Even if you came here four or five times, it would still be full of surprises."

Greenberg doesn't reproduce old houses. For instance, Huckleberry House differs markedly from Tudor Place. He expanded Thornton's domed and columned portico into an enclosed, two-story rotunda with Palladian windows, and flattened Tudor Place's freestanding Tuscan columns into Ionic pilasters. Sometimes, he uses a classical form in a completely new way: To keep the roof silhouette low at the newly built waterfront house in Greenwich, he employed large semicircular thermal windows (so named because they were featured in the vast public baths of ancient Rome) as dormers. "This lets more light in and gives the third floor a more architectonic

feel," he says. "The entire room behind it has a curved ceiling. The room is the shape of the window."

For a Cape Cod beach house for Martin Peretz, the editor in chief of *The New Republic*, and his wife, Anne, an artist, Greenberg mediated the conflicting tastes of his clients. (Perhaps he was aided by the fact that his own wife, Judy Seligson, is also an artist.) "My wife wants a log cabin, and I want the Petit Trianon," Peretz says, laughing. What they got is a house reminiscent of the grand summer "cottages" built at the turn of the century, but hunkered low to hug the dunes.

A Greenberg house is expensive, with costs often running \$400 a square foot, and sometimes more. Since the houses are not small, the bill normally exceeds \$5 million for 10,000 square feet. While some of his clients are people who usually shun modernism in favor of traditional design, for Greenberg that distinction is not the most important one. "In the end, the only thing that matters is quality," he says. "If you're really passionate about architecture the style doesn't matter. Schools are a category of architectural history that work for historians, but the client is interested in the quality of the artifact."

I talked to David Childs, senior designer at Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, who as the heir to Gordon Bunshaft might be considered the high priest of modernist architecture. "I have always been intrigued by Allan's approach because he has rigor," Childs says. "He understands the classical discipline, finding ways to use solid geometrical forms and play them against each other. I think that Allan is the best example of someone who formally learned the language. This is not someone who is a modern designer who has picked up a few classical ideas. Allan learned how to really play the music. He learned the scales. And then—as great architects always have—he took those classical forms and used them in his own way.

"Allan taught us a lesson in style. When we thought style was all-important, he taught us that it isn't so important. Style doesn't matter if it's great architecture."

ARTHUR LUBOW WROTE ABOUT JACKSON POLLOCK IN THE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1998 ISSUE OF *DEPARTURES*. ■
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