

Up-to-the-Minute Classicism

Architect Allan Greenberg and his clients for two recent houses in Connecticut believe there is plenty of room for creativity within the Classical tradition.

Allan Greenberg sees Classical architecture as a living tradition that must never stop evolving. Clients come to him, he observes, because Classicism enables them to enter into a dialogue with him, in which the terms are familiar and comprehensible. And for him, designing a house is a demanding kind of dialogue for those on both sides of the table. While not all his clients are initially sophisticated about design, they all have a commitment to expand their perspectives and the fortitude to pursue the process.

For both Greenberg and the clients of these two Connecticut houses, Classicism is seen as a link between buildings and their sites, their region, and the traditions of their country. Though born in South Africa, Greenberg has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of American institutions and a strong attachment to the "Republican simplicity" of our Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival houses.

The design freedom the architect finds within this tradition is visible in the strong differences between these two houses. The Palladian house (1) was designed for a bachelor client, as a retreat for himself and a setting for entertaining. He had visited some of Palladio's villas, as well as some American interpretations of them, and admired their five-part symmetrical compositions of central mass, links, and dependencies; such a compound of linked blocks also fitted his program.

The clients for the second house (2) – let's call it Georgian for convenience – had limits on their budget, within which they needed to accommodate a classic family of four. Fortunately, their tastes fitted their means: they liked the inherently economical, compact volume of the familiar tall "Colonial" and understated elegance found in the burghers' houses of the Georgian period, both in Britain and in America. While even this house as built is hardly "affordable" for most Americans, it could be adapted to upper-middle means (and is less costly than some spec-built houses in its vicinity).

Greenberg feels the give and take with clients enriches his work. In the Palladian house, for instance, the client's insistence on attic bedrooms for guests contended with the architect's vision of a one-story central block, producing the little round-topped dormers that, Greenberg feels, "make the house." In the Georgian house, some key decisions

were made after construction began. Designed for wood siding, the house acquired its brick veneer when additional funds became available, requiring some adjustments to foundations already in place. Also during construction the full-width terraces at both the front and the back were added, superseding a scheme that adhered more closely to the site's original steep contours.

As a meticulous designer, Greenberg would love to have more to say about the interiors of his houses, where decorators sometimes undermine his intent. He is particularly pleased about the rooms in this Georgian house, not because he had control, but because the clients shared his preference for spare furniture and undraped windows, allowing a full appreciation of his room proportions and details. Ideally, he would orchestrate a "dialogue between building, room, and furniture," designing some of the latter himself.

While Greenberg's design innovations adhere closely to Classical canons of proportion and detail, his construction technology is strictly contemporary. While the brick walls of this Georgian house display bond patterns developed for bearing walls, he has no qualms about applying the brick as a mere veneer over wood framing. Such a superficial reference to historical building methods might offend purists such as the British Classicist, Quinlan Terry, but Greenberg praises this impure system – a time-honored practice in American homebuilding – for its superior durability and dimensional stability. Freed of masonry masses, Greenberg uses the thicknesses of Classical *poché* to enclose today's ducts and conduits; his ample chimneys on these houses contain few fire-place flues, but carry numerous plumbing vents, thus keeping the handsome slate roofs clear of them.

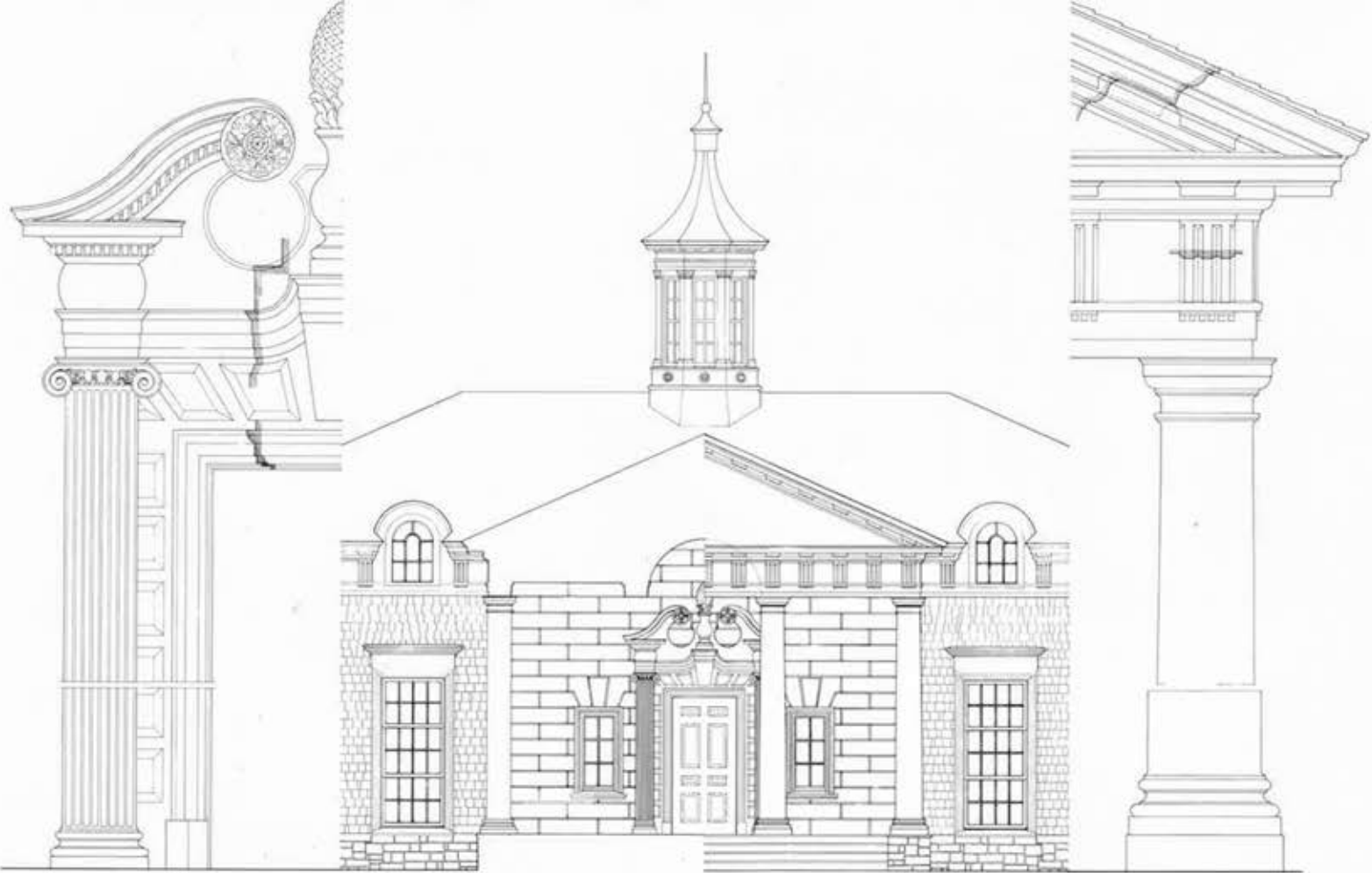
Above all, Greenberg wants his work to be clearly of his own time; he wants these houses to say they were completed in the 1990s. Without indulging in Post-Modernist irony, he hopes it is apparent that these buildings are by an architect who has learned from Wright and Corbu, as he has from Hawksmoor and Lutyens. The specifics of these two houses, explained on the following pages, demonstrate Greenberg's way of grasping the Classical tradition and "making something new and immediate within it."

John Morris Dixon



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One of two houses recently completed in Connecticut, is based on a five-part Palladian composition (1). The low-eaved central block is made to seem smaller than it is by its massive portico and cornice. The two dependencies at the ends of the composition are equal in volume but totally different in functions. The focus of the house on a graveled auto court with stable-like garage doors projects a rural image, which is reinforced by fieldstone foundations, shingled walls, and rugged slate roofs. The compact Georgian house (2) is a more consistent rendition of a historical prototype, in this case Virginia burgher's house. Mediating between the Classical structure and the steeply sloping terrain are formal terraces to the front and rear, supported by brick retaining walls.





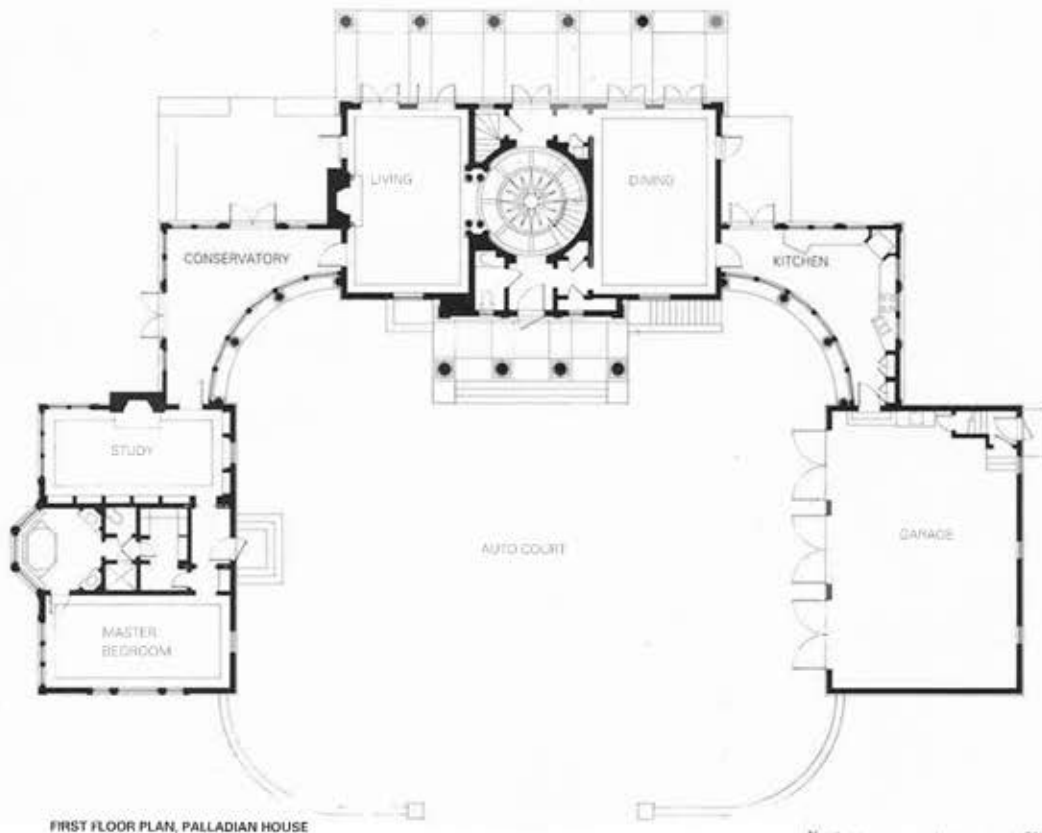
DOORWAY DETAILS
PALLADIAN HOUSE

SECTION THROUGH PORTICO

FRONT ELEVATION

PORTICO
DETAILS

1/8"=1'-0"

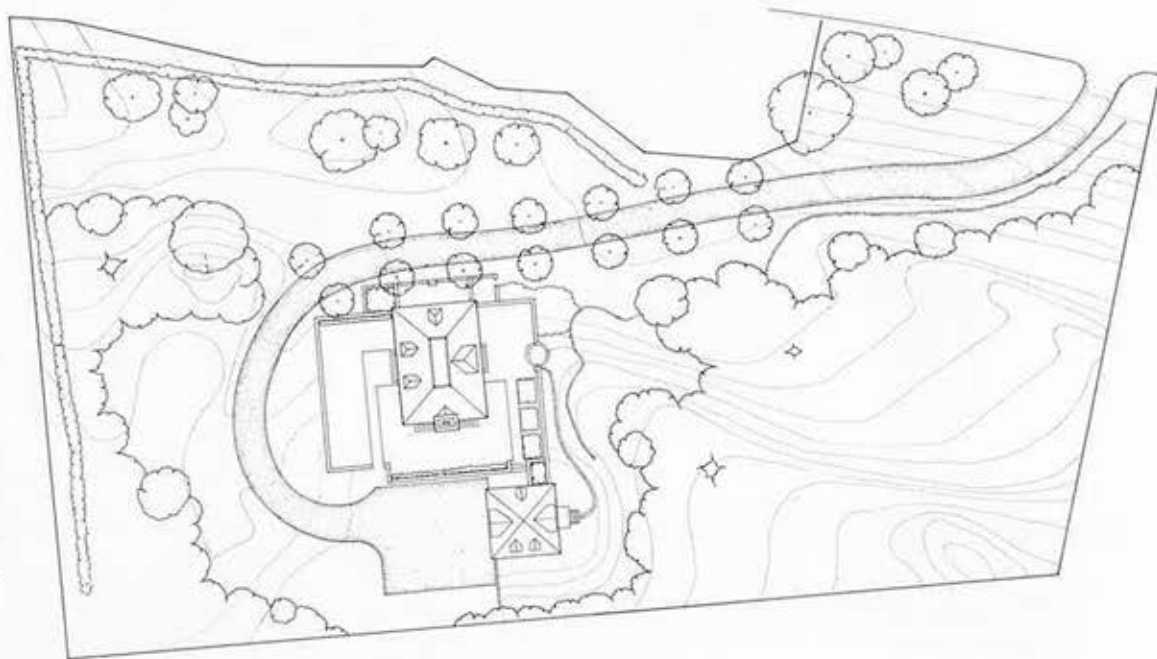


FIRST FLOOR PLAN, PALLADIAN HOUSE

N → 20' / 661'

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 Composite drawings of the Palladian house façade (facing page) show the elaboration of details at the entrance portico and around the eaves; the extravagance of the front door frame is tamed somewhat by its background of white-painted false rustication and by the constant shade of the portico. The plan shows how the main rooms of the central block slip behind the oversized portico; to the rear, a full-width porch overlooks a pond at the foot of a long slope. The curved "hyphen" links have been squared off to make actual rooms - a possibility suggested by an unbuilt scheme of Venturi Rauch & Scott Brown.

The Georgian house has been fitted onto a site previously thought unbuildable by slipping a steep driveway up to an artificial platform aligned with the house's symmetrical mass. The two main floors follow a time-tested center-hall plan, with contemporary adjustments: a kitchen larger than the formal dining room and an expansive master dressing-bath suite. The top-floor studio has a skylight and a big, ahistorical dormer that admits ample daylight to the central stairwell.

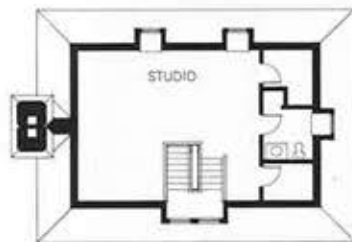


SITE PLAN, GEORGIAN HOUSE

N ← 40/12m



FIRST FLOOR PLAN, GEORGIAN HOUSE



ATTIC FLOOR PLAN



BASEMENT FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



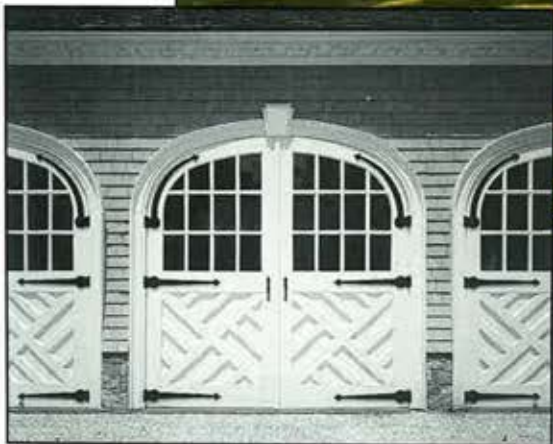
SECTION LOOKING EAST, GEORGIAN HOUSE

10/3m

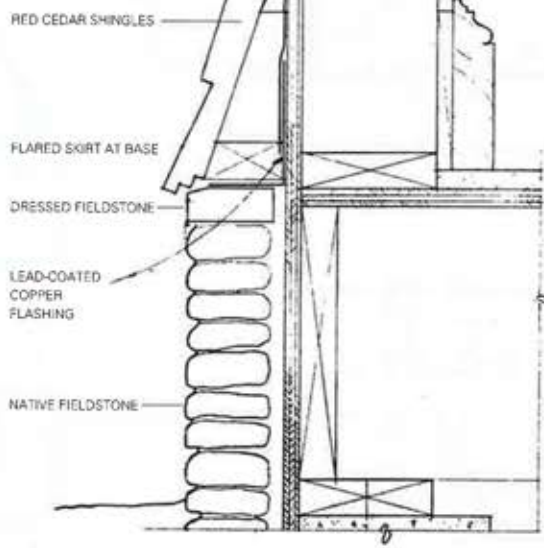
N ↑ 20/6m



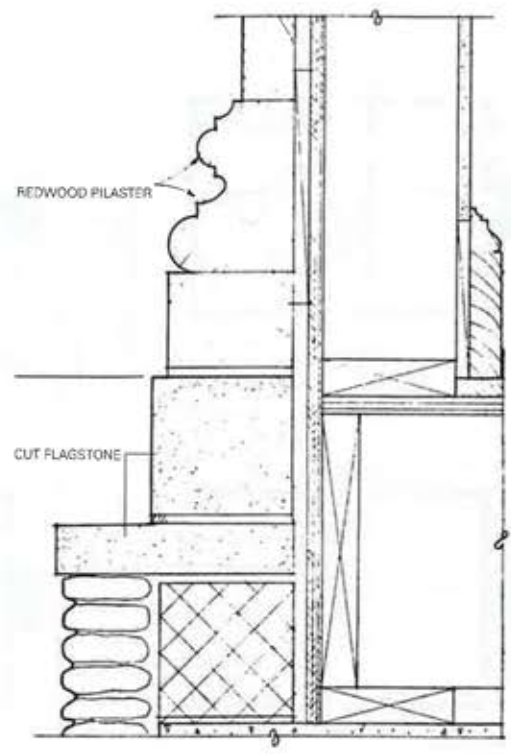
3



4



WALL SECTION AT BASE, PALLADIAN HOUSE



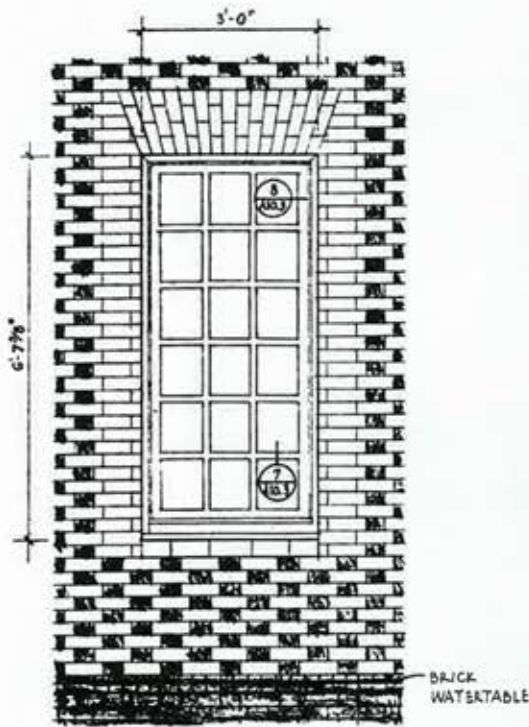
SECTION AT BASE OF PILASTER, PALLADIAN HOUSE

At the back of the Palladian House (3), rough-textured materials and studied asymmetry are juxtaposed to the turned concrete columns and elegant cornice of the colonnaded porch. The small-paned glazing of the low-roofed conservatory (right in photo) continues around much of the master suite wing (see floor plan). Garage doors (4) have meticulous proportions, paneling, and hardware befitting their position on the entry court. Wall details show how all exterior materials are applied as veneers.

Mediating between the Georgian house and its steep site (5), the back terrace is a miniature formal garden; its circular pool has a simple splash fountain. The garage (background) is topped by an attic study for the husband. Flemish bond (6) walls are built of standard brick units; soft-contoured brick in sills and in stair treads contribute an almost primitive austerity, while the front door treatment counters with a note of opulence (7).



5



TYPICAL WINDOW, GEORGIAN HOUSE

2"/0.6m



6



7



8



9

At the center of the Palladian house is a circular stair (9) that Palladio would not approve of, but it provides house guests with a dramatic approach to their rooms under the eaves; note the graceful S-curve at the balcony's end. From this cupola-lighted rotunda, a portal with clustered columns (10) leads into the living room; entry to the equally large dining room is by smaller-scaled doorways (see plan). Linking the living room to the master suite is the conservatory (9), occupying a somewhat unsettling scooped-out square of floor area, equal to that of the kitchen on the opposite side of the house.



10



11



12



13

Inside the Georgian house, the central hall (13) is lit by a large south-facing window, plus an ample dormer and a skylight in the wife's studio on the third floor (11). Details throughout are understated but distinguished from the merely conventional by careful proportioning and alignments. The dining room (13) is represents Greenberg's ideal of a chaste, well-proportioned room; he is gratified that these clients have left the windows undraped and chosen furniture of the same restrained Classical character.

Project: Beechwoods ("Palladian house"), Connecticut.

Architects: Allan Greenberg, Architect, Washington, D.C. and Greenwich, Conn. (Allan Greenberg, Kurt Dubbe, Defne Verol, Sandra Vitthum, project team).

Site: 5-acres of rolling terrain; house sited on flattened knoll, overlooking several ponds.

Program: private residence, including conservatory, master bedroom/study suite, three-car garage, 5,000 sq ft, including basement and garage; 700 sq ft, porticos.

Structural system: concrete foundations; wood frame.

Major materials: native stone base, cedar shingles, slate roofs, with standing seam copper on "hyphens," wide-plank oak and mahogany floors, marble floors in bathrooms, linoleum in kitchen; mahogany paneling in study and vestibules; plaster and gypsum board walls and ceilings (see *Building Materials*, p. 106).

Mechanical system: Multizoned hydronic V.A.V. HVAC, oil-fired boiler.

Consultants: Thune Associates, structural; Tucker Regis Associates, mechanical; landscape by architects.

General contractor: Grunow Construction Corp.

Costs: withheld.

Photos: Tim Buchman.

Project: "Georgian" house, Connecticut.

Architects: Allan Greenberg, Architect, Washington, D.C. and Greenwich, Conn. (Allan Greenberg, principal; David Parisi, project manager; Thomas Noble, project designer).

Site: wooded, steeply sloping 2-acre tract, requiring major excavation for access drive.

Program: conventional 3-bedroom family accommodations; studio in attic; guest suite in basement; detached garage with study above, 3,800 gross sq ft, house; 700 gross sq ft, garage/study.

Structural system: concrete foundations, wood frame.

Major materials: handmade brick, slate roofs, gypsum board interior walls, red and white oak floors (see *Building Materials*, p. 106).

Mechanical system: gas-fired boiler, fencoids.

Consultants: Martin-Horton & Associates, structural; Lois Roberts, mechanical; landscape and interiors by architects.

General contractor: Meinke Associates.

Costs: withheld.

Photos: Tim Buchman.